

# Introduction



## Reason's Myriad Way: In Praise of Confluence Philosophy

Christian Coseru

Mark Siderits' confluence approach to philosophy, first sketched in his landmark monograph, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (2003), is emblematic of what has arguably become the most influential way of engaging historically and culturally distant Buddhist thinkers and texts systematically and constructively. For nearly half a century, and rather fittingly for someone enthralled by Madhyamaka, Siderits has successfully charted a middle ground between the text-based, exegetical approach to Buddhist philosophy still dominant in many parts of Europe and East Asia and the methods of contemporary Anglophone analytic philosophy. Indebted to both, yet unconstrained by either, the confluence approach represents Siderits' unique brand of historically-informed systematic reflection, delivered in the characteristically forceful and tightly argued prose that defines his inimitable style.

'Confluence'—it should be noted—replaces 'fusion', his initial word choice, which, as Siderits himself has recently admitted, failed to catch on, "perhaps because it is too reminiscent of the marketing techniques behind terms like 'fusion cuisine'" (Siderits 2017, 76). More importantly, 'confluence' marks a departure from the 'comparative' approach and the idea that the best way to do philosophy across cultural boundaries is by tagging arguments and theories in one tradition on the basis of their resemblance to, or difference from, those found in others. The problem with such comparisons is that they often stop short of critical engagement, something that even its champions acknowledge (although often less as a shortcoming, and more as pretext for claiming that historically and culturally distant figures and texts ought to be understood first in their own terms if one is to avoid the perils of one-sided comparisons, the sort that take one of the compared traditions to function as a

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C. Coseru (✉)

College of Charleston, Department of Philosophy, Charleston, SC, USA

e-mail: [coseruc@cofc.edu](mailto:coseruc@cofc.edu)

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*tertium comparationis*, a third, generic frame of reference for evaluating the other) (Chakrabarti and Weber 2016, 6).

As Siderits' exemplary work reminds us, the philosopher's task is first and foremost to show *that* and *how* we can make progress toward solving philosophical problems by pursuing certain lines of inquiry. For those working at the intersection of multiple spaces of meaning that means considering "what traditions different from our own have had to say about the issues with which we are concerned" (Siderits 2003, 1). But doing so requires that we adopt a dialogical stance and regard philosophical inquiry as an open-ended process of asking questions and pursuing knowledge, rather than as an exploration of fully developed doctrinal structures. The point here is not whether the Buddhist tradition offers any real solutions to our own problems (or vice versa), but whether adopting a broader frame of reference (premised on the binocular advantage principle that two eyes are better than one) can bring a greater measure of clarity about some philosophical problems no matter their origin.

## 1 Observations of a Life in Buddhist Letters

Like many others in his generation, Siderits encountered Buddhism during his high school years while exploring religious traditions beyond the familiar one in which he was raised. Drawn at first to Zen Buddhism through the works of Alan Watts and especially D.T. Suzuki, whose influential lectures at Columbia University in the 1950s ignited the American Zen boom and its celebration by the Beat movement, Siderits eventually realized that even a modest grasp of Buddhism's central tenets required proper philosophical training. Although D.T. Suzuki's work emphasized the compatibility of Buddhism with modern science, the popular image of Zen Buddhism in the 1960s was that of an anti-intellectual tradition extolling the value of non-conceptual intuition and of meditative practice as the sole path to achieving it. It was at Cornell, where Siderits began to study for an undergraduate degree in physics at first, that his attention turned to philosophy. While taking a class with Sydney Shoemaker, which had Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* among its assigned readings, Siderits first figured there might be a better way to make sense of the cardinal no-self doctrine than Zen's paradoxical answers, which had appealed to so many Westerners disillusioned with their institutions and traditional mores in the post World War II period. But whereas Cornell instilled in the young Siderits an appreciation for the rigors of analytic philosophy, the absence of offerings in non-Western philosophy left him hungry for just that. Thus came the decision to pursue an undergraduate degree at a place where he could study both Asian and Western philosophy.

Siderits' early journey into academic philosophy is emblematic of the rather tortuous path an enthusiastic student of non-Western philosophy had to follow half a century ago in order to succeed: leaving Cornell for the University of Hawai'i, Siderits would also take up the study of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy, eventually returning to the East Coast to complete his doctoral dissertation at Yale in 1976 on

the relation between compassion (*karuṇa*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in the works of Nāgārjuna and Nishida Kitaro. Of all his graduate school mentors, Siderits credits in particular his thesis advisor, John Edwin Smith, whose expertise in German idealism helped him understand Nishida's own forays into that tradition, and the Platonist Robert S. Brumbaugh, in whose effort to make classical Greek texts relevant to modern philosophical analysis he found inspiration for his own methodological problems.

If scholarship is concealed autobiography, one can well speculate that conversations with Kenneth Inada and Karsten Harries, among others whom Siderits acknowledges as influences during his formative years at Yale, might have had something to do with his decision eventually to abandon the East Asian angle of his studies. Inada's 1970 translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, emphasized the need for understanding Nāgārjuna's philosophy in its classical Indian context and with regard mainly to the teachings of the historical Buddha, rather than as the work of a dialectician or metaphysician (in the Western sense) committed to some version of absolute monism or nihilism (Inada 1970, 21). As a consequence, Inada may not have been particularly encouraging of a project dedicated to establishing whether Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* provides good ground for determining the scope of Nishida's conception of absolute nothingness. For his part, Karsten Harries is well known as among the first to reflect critically on Wittgenstein's transcendental stance on language in light of Heidegger's view about the inadequacy of everyday language as a source of meaning (Harries 1968). Hence, Harries (who took seriously Heidegger's appeal to poetry as more suitable for articulating our existential condition) likewise may not have found particularly promising a project dedicated to an unabashedly transcendental treatment of language, least of all one inspired by Nishida's claim that being and value are ultimately grounded in nothingness.

The final pivot away from East Asia, however, happened a few years after Siderits completed his Ph.D. and moved to California to take up a visiting position at Sonoma State University. In 1979 he attended an eight-week NEH summer seminar on Nyāya and its theory of epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) directed by J. N. Mohanty. This was a watershed intellectual moment, following which he decided to focus exclusively on the study of Buddhist philosophy in its original Indian context. A year later he accepted an offer from Illinois State University where he would teach for twenty-eight years until his retirement in 2008. In a felicitous and rather surprising, though not altogether unexpected, turn of events East Asia beckoned once more, this time with a professorship in philosophy at Seoul National University. Siderits welcomed the opportunities of this late career move, and the chance to strengthen connections with colleagues from across the region. Although his tenure at Seoul National University, where he taught until 2012, and occasional lectures at Kyoto University, where he remains a regular visitor, have not rekindled his early interests in Zen and Nishida, they have nevertheless led to many fruitful collaborations, most notably a landmark translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* with Shōryū Katsura, which won the 2014 Khyenste Foundation Translation Prize.

In an earlier attempt at sketching Siderits' intellectual biography, Jan Westerhoff (2016, 2) noted three conceptual strands that seem to anchor much of his work: first, a recognition that Buddhist philosophy in India is not an exclusively intramural affair but rather develops in close dialogue with its non-Buddhist critics, in particular the Naiyāyikas, who serve as their main interlocutors and whose descriptive metaphysical project provides sharp contrast for the characteristically revisionist metaphysics the Buddhists put forward; second, a preoccupation with some aspects of Wittgenstein's views concerning the limits of language, specifically about whether it is the form of propositions that determines the shape of reality rather than other way around, and what that might mean for the question of the independent existence of objects, states of affairs, and facts—an issue that is integral to Siderits' attempt to spell out anti-realism as a rejection of the very notion of independent existence (and its consequences for the Madhyamaka critique of the corresponding notion of *svabhāva*); and lastly, the adoption of a naturalist perspective that is in keeping with Siderits' view (also Mohanty's) that, unlike the internalism that has dominated Western epistemological inquiry in the West since Descartes, epistemology in India, particularly with regard to examining the nature of veridical cognition, developed on an externalist and reliabilist framework.

To these three conceptual strands we may add a fourth, centered on a set of inter-related questions about the compatibility of Buddhism' anti-essentialist metaphysics with its ethical teachings. Is the Buddhist no-self view simply a theoretical construct derived from metaphysical considerations about agency and causality or does it actually reflect our actual existential condition? Siderits has invariably claimed that reductionism about selves is compatible with the pursuit of a moral path even though he acknowledges that the conventional practice of morality (to which the Buddha offers precepts, inspiring tales, and rules of conduct) and Buddhist metaphysical doctrine are actually in conflict (Siderits 2008). Dubbed 'Buddhist Paleocompatibilism', this fourth conceptual strand is particularly noteworthy as an illustration of, as he puts it, "the sort of thing that can happen when we bring two distinct philosophical traditions into conversation with one another" (Siderits 2016, 249). What makes it noteworthy is that this is not a view any Indian Buddhist philosopher (as far as we know) actually held. Nor is it a view found in the Western tradition. Rather, it is one that *could have been held* had Buddhists confronted the (Western) problem of determinism and moral responsibility (that is, the problem whether the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility is compatible with determinism). As it happens, they did not. Instead, they faced the somewhat related problem of reconciling karmic justice with the no-self doctrine.

'Buddhist paleocompatibilism' functions as a strategy aimed at showing how holding persons morally responsible for their actions can be reconciled with a view of persons as reducible to their parts if: (a) 'moral responsibility' is taken to be a property of persons and (b) 'determinism' is taken to concern their parts. Siderits agrees with Locke and Rousseau that moral responsibility cannot operate without a conception of freedom as something that pertains to the person as a whole rather than their parts (e.g., it is persons rather than their hands, feet, hearts, lungs, and brains that form the objects of praise and blame). But unlike the classical

compatibilist who sees freedom as a property of agents rather than their constitutive parts (e.g., the heart's blood-pumping function is determined by the laws of nature), the paleocompatibilist thinks the idea of a free agent cannot be rescued if agent causation and event causation serve as competing explanations for the occurrence of an event. Why? Because—as Siderits claims—event causation is always poised to win given its ability to explain responsibility for an action as the effect not of the agent's will, but of a prior event pertaining to some aspect of the agent (her character, nature, upbringing circumstances, etc.). In keeping with the Buddhist two truths doctrine, Siderits thus locates agent causation at the conventional level and event causation at the level of ultimate truth. Semantic insulation between the two levels of discourse, he maintains, allows us to talk of persons as moral agents responsible for their actions. Ultimately, however, there are no such things as persons but only event causation consisting “in the relation of universal concomitance and ordered succession between elementary event-types” (Siderits 2016, 257).

As Siderits rather candidly acknowledges in a postscript to his essay on Buddhist paleocompatibilism, he is not actually sure whether the theory is true. Besides (and as with many of his other attempts to forge new concepts and theories by drawing on Buddhist materials), that is not his main concern. Rather, the point is whether the theory has some degree of plausibility, which, if it does, “should count as evidence that philosophical progress can sometimes occur when distinct traditions enter into conversation” (Siderits 2016, 263).

## 2 The Confluence Approach: Genealogy, Problem-solving, and the Challenge of Naturalism

What, then, are some of the distinctive virtues of the confluence approach that sets it apart from other attempts to do philosophy across cultural boundaries? And what lessons does Siderits' work and legacy hold for those weighing the merits of this approach over other ways of engaging Buddhist philosophy?

*First*, unlike comparing and contrasting, the confluence approach remains faithful to the dominant conception of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise centered on dialogue and argumentation, in which philosophers pursue unresolved problems by building on the achievements of their acknowledged forbears. The key term here is *acknowledged*, for philosophy, like other disciplines with a long and venerable ancestry, has its own canonical figures and texts. So, while the confluence approach recognizes philosophy's complex heritage, it also opens up the possibility that critical engagement with ideas from one tradition in light of another can have both illuminating and destabilizing effects (in much the same way that flow dynamics can take on both concordant and discordant forms where two stream join one another). Siderits' innovative and skillful deployment of the methods and conceptual tools of analytic philosophy in pursuing certain interpretive and reconstructive angles has had precisely such an effect: showing, for instance, how a seemingly intractable scholastic debate about the scope of Madhyamaka metaphysics can

benefit from a semantic interpretation, or how compatibilism can offer a solution to reconciling the reductionist view at the heart of Abhidharma Buddhism with the conventional practices of morality. But taking this approach also means that one possible consequence of adopting a semantic interpretation—for the doctrine of emptiness—is the rather startling notion that *the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth*. More challenges emerge: for a tradition of thought committed to the view that ultimately there are no (self-like) bearers of moral responsibility, Siderits' paleocompatibilist solution cannot rescue the Buddhist Reductionist from mereological nihilism.

This sort of outcome can be unsettling for those who cannot conceive of Buddhism as anything other than a source of benign insights or who regard its truth claims as valid because ultimately, they are said to be grounded in the transformative experience of the Buddha's enlightenment. Indeed, as Siderits himself has noted on more than one occasion, the confluence approach is not without its critics, in particular those who think that "Asian and Western traditions have their respective places in two distinct cultures, and that comparison and contrast are consequently the best we can hope for" (Siderits 2017, 76). Of course, it is perfectly understandable why some might worry that confluence can have this diluting and deflating effect if Buddhist ideas, arguments, and views become nothing more than prized items in the analytic philosopher's toolbox or, conversely, if science and scientific findings relevant to philosophy are treated (by Buddhist apologists) as somehow 'Western' or specific to the European tradition. For such interventions can end up treating the target tradition as a standing reserve of intellectual skill to be mined as one sees fit, typically in the service of one's scholarly interests (Coseru 2018, 9–12).

Language, of course, is another factor. The adoption of English as lingua franca (so to speak) for Buddhist philosophy *can* be (some might say, *has been*) alienating, no less and in some ways perhaps even more so than that of other non-Indic languages Buddhism has adopted as it spread beyond the Indian subcontinent. For such adoption often means operating with a new conceptual vocabulary, in the case of English one shaped by the Greek culture of first millennium BCE, the scholasticism of the Latin Middle Ages, and the predominantly French and German intellectual movements of early modern Europe. In short, one cannot write Asian philosophy in English without importing some of the tacit assumptions of Western conceptual schemas and their metaphysical underpinnings. That raises the complicated question whether the tenets of one tradition can be sustained in another, and at what cost to their original intent.

It is only natural to wonder, then, how a conception of philosophy as constrained by its own genealogy could possibly be open to, let alone handle, perspectives and argumentative strategies that are not part of its received canon or articulated in its own recognizable idiom. After all, the charge of parochialism, often levelled against Western philosophy more broadly, reflects this failure to acknowledge the degree to which the genus *philosophia* actually spans the globe. But the genealogical orientation at the heart of the confluence approach is not about retracing philosophy's diverse progression across the world, however worthwhile such a project might be.

Rather, in counterpoising different philosophical traditions the goal is to address (in the hope of solving) perennial problems of philosophy regardless of their mixed ancestry. As with step relatives, our philosophical forbears need not all carry the same genetic blueprint in order to serve as familial sources of wisdom, argumentative skill, and insight. Confluence philosophy thus offers an alternative path to the comparative approach. As such, it recognizes that no matter its geographical location, historical period, or language philosophical inquiry lays claim to universality, and that all its problems and solutions are therefore fair game for critical scrutiny and analysis. In short, when it comes to the confluence approach, there are no holy cows.

Of course, critical scrutiny entails self-scrutiny and willingness to forego, on pain of irrationality, presuppositions that are known to lack any evidence, reason, or justification. That such a boldly systematic approach has shaped the contemporary conversation on Buddhist philosophy in profound and significant ways comes as no surprise. One emblematic aspect of this type of work, clearly evident in his collected essays (Siderits 2016), is Siderits' resolve in brief but illuminating postscripts to set the record straight by separating those ideas, theories, and interpretations that have stood the test of time from those that have not—a true example of intellectual humility occasionally punctuated by brief moments of gleeful vindication.

*Second*, like blues rock and Tex-Mex, confluence philosophy implements a syncretic and creative approach to doing philosophy by drawing on, in this case, Indian and Buddhist sources while using the tools and conceptual resources of analytic philosophy. It is an approach meant to add flavor to an intellectual practice that, despite its rigor (or perhaps because of it), is often tedious, inexpressive, and for the most part bereft of existential concerns. If this approach is yet to garner widespread support in the academy that is because—and perhaps Siderits would agree—mainstream Anglophone analytic philosophy continues to source its ingredients from works produced under a strict set of constraints. They must (i) embrace a sort of Moorean 'common sense', (ii) use logical analysis as their main methodology, and (iii) consist of nothing more than—as Peter Unger puts it in *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy* 2014—"questions about whether or not certain conceptual connections hold, or certain semantic relations obtain, between certain words, or certain concepts, and certain other words, or concepts" (Unger 2014, 3). Siderits is mindful of these constraints, in particular the third, given his semantic interpretation of the Madhyamaka idea of emptiness. Yet, as his systematic and syncretic analyses demonstrate, *doing analytic philosophy with* Buddhist ideas and arguments (as opposed to merely *writing about* them) can sometimes cast perennial problems in a new light and lead to valuable insights.

Perhaps owing to him having encountered academic philosophy for the first time at Cornell—a place where proponents of scientific realism such as Sydney Shoemaker and Nicholas Sturgeon began to challenge the instrumentalist anti-realism prevalent during the positivist era—it is also important to recognize the extent to which Siderits' attempt to spell out both Buddhist Reductionism and the doctrine of emptiness is informed by a naturalist stance. Although his naturalist sensibilities, it seems, have always pulled in the direction of reductive physicalism, Siderits has

found anti-realist arguments against the possibility of capturing the structure of the world as it is independently of our conceptual activity, specifically those based on semantic considerations, to be more compelling. When I first met him—in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the winter of 1995—he was still hard at work disentangling the Madhyamaka and Advaita Vedānta systems, all the while pondering whether T.R.V. Murti—the author of an influential mid twentieth century book on Madhyamaka—had been right in his assessment that “the Mādhyamika does not deny the real; he only denies *doctrines* about the real” (Murti, 1955, 218). Incidentally, Murti’s extraordinary claim—that Nāgārjuna had profoundly revolutionized Indian thought in much the same way that Copernicus and Kant transformed astronomy and metaphysics—had gotten an entire generation of young American scholars in the 1960s and 70s off LSD and into the study of Sanskrit, the true gateway to antirealism.

In an essay from that period (“Madhyamaka and Naturalized Epistemology”), Siderits welcomes the naturalist turn in contemporary epistemology while contending that its critique of foundationalism and internalism does not go far enough. Against such influential interpreters of Indian philosophy as Mohanty and Matilal, who thought that something akin to a Cartesian internalist epistemological project is also part and parcel of the Indian epistemological tradition (as observed in certain strands of Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, and Yogācāra thought), Siderits offers a starkly different picture: “The very ideal of epistemology as *pramāṇavāda*—determining the number and nature of the *pramāṇas* or reliable means of belief formation—suggests a non-foundationalist and externalist project. Non-foundationalist because the project presupposes the existence of knowledge, instead of seeking to prove its very possibility. And externalist because it seeks to distinguish between veridical and non-veridical states of the subject in terms of causal factors, and not in terms of states that are necessarily accessible to the subject” (Siderits 2016, 238).

While Siderits’ assessment of the scope of epistemological reflection in India rings true for most scholars of that tradition, his claim that the veridical/non-veridical distinction is not premised on mental states that are accessible to the subject has been less warmly received, in particular by those who take the Dignāga and Dharmakīrti tradition to offer a more plausible explanation of our epistemic predicament. On this account, while it is true that, say, we can only visually comprehend what we are capable of attaining by means of sight, what we see (or, rather, the event of seeing) cannot be properly dissociated from the act itself and its sensorimotor contingencies. Hence, the Buddhist epistemologist’s contention that we sense not only the property particulars with which we come into contact but also apprehend ourselves (or—in keeping with the no-self view—our episodic cognitive states) as the locus of qualitative experience.

Siderits worries that even if it were true that cognitive states possess this unique reflexive property of making themselves (and not merely their contents) know as occurring within this or that mental stream, that can only tell us why we are justified in believing something to be the case, not how the justification for this belief was formed. In other words, veridical access to our own mental states is a function of cognition being a product of reliable causes, not of it standing in the right sort of relation to its mode of presentation (though, if the latter, merely as a byproduct of



the same impersonal chain of causation). As he puts it, “When I see water I may be said to perceive H<sub>2</sub>O even if I do not know the chemical composition of water and am thus unable to say that what I see is H<sub>2</sub>O, for being H<sub>2</sub>O is intrinsic to water” (Siderits 2016, 241). The claim here is that without understanding the atomic composition of things (or, in Abhidharma terms, their existence as mere trope occurrences), in other words without recourse to science, we are in no position to ascertain whether our justification for taking perception to be a reliable source of knowledge is warranted. Given that many, if not most, of our mundane experiences lack this sort of justification, can we claim to have any knowledge at all in these circumstances?

One cannot but wonder whether this view of knowledge is not somehow overly restrictive and perhaps a little impractical considering just how much of the skillful ways in which we navigate the world it rules out (e.g., while an understanding of atmospheric science is a bonus, it seems most Sherpas can successfully summit Everest on inherent adaptations and mountaineering skill alone). But Siderits does not think we should shy away from exploring the implications of this physicalist stance, even if a Buddhist reduction of consciousness might confront us with the spectrum of a Robo-Buddha—something that we must acquiesce to if we are persuaded that neither an experiencing subject nor an inner subjective realm can be part of the Buddhist’s ultimate ontology.

*Third* and last, and in keeping with the title of this volume in honor of his work, is an issue the confluence approach lays bare when the traditions brought into dialogue are on a diverging path on certain matters. Contemporary philosophy, at least in the Anglophone world and its satellites, is an avowedly secular enterprise, deferring to the sciences for its account of what can be said to exist at the most fundamental level and for its understanding of the brain-based processes that realize cognition. Given the preeminent role of perception in grounding basic beliefs (in keeping with the role that causal theory plays in Buddhist accounts of inferential reasoning), it would seem that Buddhism is actually friendly to naturalism, at least in a prescientific sense that reflects commitment to empiricism. But when it comes to its principles of reason (e.g., material implication, contraposition) it is not at all clear that they anticipate something like an analytical system of deductive principles and propositional laws. Certainly, in terms of both structure and strategy, these principles codify specific rules of debate for the purpose of settling intramural disputes on a variety of issues (e.g., whether one can know the minds of others, whether sensations follow one another continuously). But they work primarily in support of Buddhism’s soteriological aims, not of some open-ended method of inquiry. Consider the pattern of argumentation in such canonical works as *Points of Controversy* (*Kathāvatthu*) in which the burden of proof switches from one party to the next, and neither offers any positive thesis. This sort of *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, which is presumptive rather than demonstrative, simply says “I am right because not proven wrong”. And it finds its most obvious illustration in Nāgārjuna’s radical thesis—as embodied by his doctrine of emptiness—that it is not just questions about causation, action, the self, time, arising, dissolution, etc., that lack definitive answers, but rather that reality itself in some sense is beyond the reach of

thought. The radical thesis is that nothing can be revealed about how things are if how things are is to be understood in terms of ultimately real natures (Siderits 2015, 207).

This is one issue that Siderits has thought hard about: how can we make sense of the soteriological significance of emptiness? That is, if Buddhism at its core is a soteriological project concerned with overcoming suffering, how can a doctrine that treats persons as mere useful fictions provide an effective basis for cultivating virtues such as generosity, compassion, selflessness, and ultimately serve as conduit for achieving enlightenment? Furthermore, just what it means to say (with the *Mādhyamika*) that we can only make sense of enlightenment if we affirm the emptiness of all *dharmas* (i.e., the constitutive elements of existence and/or experience)? In his postscript to “On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness,” Siderits acknowledges the challenge his semantic interpretation faces: if philosophical rationality must be used to construct and defend a theoretical framework which affirms the truth of emptiness, then one must engage in the very sort of activity, namely, rational self-assertion, that hinders enlightenment.

Those of us who go back with Siderits a long way recall that it is his stance on physicalism, and its implications for theories of personal identity, that has anchored much of his philosophical agenda (even as Siderits has continued to ponder just what it is that one can coherently say on behalf of the *Mādhyamika*). My memories of our early conversations in Calcutta in the winter of 1995 are quite sketchy, but I do remember us debating the issue of personal identity quite a bit. Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons* (Parfit 1984)—with its robust defense of the idea that the unity of a person’s life could be accounted for in impersonal terms—had been in print for about a decade then and, like many other students of Buddhism in his generation, Siderits wondered whether the controversy its publication had stirred in Western philosophical circles was a good omen for the prospect of getting Buddhism a seat at the table. Since Parfit explicitly acknowledged that his view in some ways resembled what the Buddha said about selves, it seemed obvious that those laboring in the trenches to make Buddhist philosophy accessible to the uninitiated would suddenly find themselves thrust in the middle of that debate.

But nearly another decade passed before Siderits brought to fruition his major work, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, and made a compelling case for why it is that we should pay attention to the Indian debates if we want to advance the contemporary conversation on personal identity. By this time, and in response to developments in phenomenology and the mind sciences, the discussion had expanded beyond purely metaphysical considerations, to thinking, on the one hand, about the brain-based mechanisms that realize consciousness and cognition, and on the other, about how selves emerge out of the deep continuity between mind and life. In short, to many of those engaged in exploring the many facets of our embodied, social, and environmentally situated lives, the sort of substantive self-view targeted by Buddhists (and Humeans) seemed rather like a philosophical fiction. To take a cue from Metzinger’s *Being No One* (2003)—a book that landed on library shelves the same year as Siderits’ *Empty Persons*—nobody ever *was* or *had* the kind of full-blown immutable and enduring self that critics thought they were refuting. Certainly, a conception of the ‘soul’, ‘self’ (Gk. *psuchê*, Skt.

*ātman*) or ‘ego’ has informed philosophical speculation on personal identity from ancient times to the present. But, if the Socratic and Upaniṣadic traditions of self-scrutiny are any indication, these terms serve largely as placeholders for the innermost principles of subjective individuation. Whether such principles should belong in our ultimate ontology depends largely on whether their function is ineliminable, and if that function is intelligibility it is hard to see how even an anti-essentialist metaphysics could rule it out. In short, the no-self theorists might be targeting a straw man of their own making.

What about the phenomenal or experiential self, that pre-reflective self-consciousness that is inescapably perspectival? Although not immune to reductionist and fictionalist interpretations, the dominant question in this case is not whether the experiential self is a process rather than a thing, perhaps something that emerges under certain conditions of psychological development. Rather, the question is which model of the self is best suited to capture the rich repertoire of embodied, psychological, social, and ecological aspects of our conscious lives. Being a self in this experiential sense, as phenomenologists would put it, “is an achievement rather than a given, and therefore also something that one can fail at” (Zahavi 2009, 552). That failure to achieve selfhood could be a problem is, at least in principle, incomprehensible to the Buddhist, for whom selfhood (and any conception thereof) is something to upend rather than achieve. But it shouldn’t be. For the Buddhist too has a conception of consciousness as something that illuminates, discerns, and makes present. And while the Buddhists themselves debated whether taking conscious states to be ultimately impersonal means that one may fail to articulate their phenomenal and subjective character (or regard such articulation as a deceptive construct), they did not dispute that ‘conscious’ or ‘aware’ is something that one can fail to be.

Undeterred, and largely in response to these new developments, Siderits has spent a large part of the last decade and a half spearheading several collaborative projects aimed at addressing the range of problems to do with the nature of self and consciousness by drawing on expertise from across the Buddhist, analytic, and phenomenological traditions. In collaboration with Evan Thompson and Dan Zahavi, he brought together a group of philosophers and Buddhist scholars to consider not merely the range of classical and contemporary arguments for and against the existence of a self, but also debates about its nature and possible identification with certain dimension of consciousness or self-consciousness (Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi, 2011). More recently, he has championed efforts to understand whether the Buddhist doctrine of no-self could in effect be joined with a plausible theory of consciousness and cognition to address a range of perennial questions about personal identity (e.g., persistence, diachronic and synchronic unity), and the many possible connections these Buddhist debates have to recent controversies in the mind sciences. This is most evident in the recent collection of essays, *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness: Tradition and Dialogue*, co-edited with Ching Keng and John Spackman (Siderits, Keng, and Spackman 2021).

Equally noteworthy, and reflective of Siderits’ related and life-long preoccupation with what the limits of language mean for philosophical practice, is his

collaborative venture with Arindam Chakrabarti and Tom Tillemans in bringing together a leading group of scholars to examine whether the notorious *apoha* theory can explain our ability to use general terms without presupposing the existence of universals and other similar abstract entities (*Apoha: Nominalism and Human Cognition*, 2016). Similar concerns find articulation in another collaborative venture, this time with *The Cowherds* (2011), a group of eleven philosophers and scholars with a penchant for Madhyamaka attempting to make sense of the two-truths doctrine elaborated by philosophers in first-millennium India.

Last, but not least, Siderits' sustained commitment to challenging prevailing scepticism that Buddhism contains much by way of serious metaphysics and epistemology has resulted in two of the most lucid, accessible, and engaging volume-length introductions to Buddhist philosophy in the English language to date: the well-received and widely cited *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2005, second edition 2021, abridged version 2022) and the just released introduction to Buddhist metaphysics, *How Things Are* (2022). The latter offers ample evidence and compelling reasons to believe that Buddhist thinkers not only engaged "in serious and sustained efforts to work out what most fundamentally exists", but that they did so "out of concern to determine how things are *anyway*, independently of our interests and cognitive limitations" (Siderits 2022, 2). The idea is that unable to appeal to canonical texts an opponent would not regard as authoritative, philosophers with different doctrinal commitments eventually recognized the need for developing a common set of rules for debate. As a result, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike began "to work out and defend answers to questions that the founders of their systems may not have addressed" (Siderits 2022, 4). In due course, these answers would map the conceptual terrain of a philosophical culture of similar ancestry and equal breadth and depth to those of China, Greece, and the Latin West.

### 3 A Brief Outline of the Central Questions

This volume brings together twenty-two essays written by Siderits' friends, colleagues, and students as a token of admiration and acknowledgment of his influential work. They cover the core areas of philosophy to which Siderits has made substantive contributions: metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ethics. Most engage Siderits' work directly, building on his pathbreaking ideas and interpretations. Many deal with issues that have become a common staple of debates about the scope of philosophical engagement with traditions outside the West. Some focus on key conceptual strategies and interpretive positions: Did Dignāga really change the course of Indian epistemology by introducing the idea of pervasion (*vyāpti*) of the reason (*hetu*) by the target property (*sādhya-dharma*) or was this idea already implicit in the early strata of Indian thought? (Katsura) Can Buddhist accounts of mental causation be understood in terms of necessary causal connections between consciousness moments or are they

more akin to Humean accounts of causation as the constant conjunction of intrinsic natures? (Thakchoe)

Others address broader issues that lie at the heart of the confluence approach, showing how the project of rational reconstruction of positions in one tradition in light of another can lead to new and valuable insights. Are persons mere conceptual fictions or are they in some, however imperfect, sense real? (Arnold, Coseru, Ganeri, Sharf) Does Buddhist reductionism about selves also eliminate the person? (Chadha & Nichols). If not, and if Buddhist Personalism is at least partly correct in claiming that persons, although neither identical nor different from the aggregates, are nonetheless real, what are its implications for other issues in Buddhist philosophy of mind? (Coseru, Sharf, Strawson) What about the Madhyamaka critique of Buddhist reductionism: does that threaten not just the person but the entire framework of Abhidharma metaphysics? (Mackenzie, Arnold) Can we use the empirical findings and conceptual resources of cognitive science to unpack the Buddhist analysis of consciousness and cognition without distorting the latter or importing the prejudices and theoretical assumptions of the former? If so, what are some of the strategies and insights of this multidisciplinary research program? (Coseru, Dreyfus, Sharf, Thompson) Might this research program, for instance, also help to make sense of the Buddhist conception of rebirth? Specifically, might the sort of arguments in defense of constructivist accounts of mental continuity such as we find, for instance, in Nelson Goodman (1978), bolster Dharmakīrti's classical argument for mental continuity? (Westerhoff)

A number of essays focus on a cluster of much debated and still unresolved interpretive problems: Does the Madhyamaka claim that no phenomena ultimately come into being as ordinarily conceived mean that ultimate truth/reality (*satya*) is ineffable or that there is no ultimate reality and *a fortiori* no ineffable ultimate reality? (Garfield & Priest). Is an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's two truths doctrine as a form of dialetheism tenable in the Indian philosophical context or possible only in light of the many transformations that Buddhism underwent in China? (Tanaka) Can fictionalist formulations of Buddhist Reductionism explain how a conventional understanding of the world might be a fictional projection and yet still remain grounded in a more fundamental reality? (Guerrero) Should the *svabhāva*-presupposition—namely that there are entities that have *svabhāva*, an independent existence or intrinsic nature—be understood in pragmatic rather than semantic terms and, if so, what implications are there for Siderits' anti-realist interpretation of the Madhyamaka two truths dialectic? (Spackman) More generally, what are some of the ways in which Abhidharma Reductionism and the Madhyamaka two truths dialectic can help us advance the realism/anti-realism debate? (Arnold, Chakrabarti)

Still others ask whether a distinct moral philosophy can be discerned in the ethical teachings of Buddhism, and how best to articulate its principles. For instance, must moral thought be rooted in a conception of the inextricable relation between agency and moral responsibility, or does such a relation obscure the radical picture of the Buddhist ethical project? (Repetti) Is the path of moral and mental cultivation laid out by Śāntideva, for instance, best understood on a virtue ethical or

consequentialist theoretical model? (Goodman) Do Buddhist ethical practices share a common ground with the self-cultivation exercises of the Confucians and, if so, do they underpin a robust moral philosophical program or just a basic account of the good life? (Gowans)

Finally, some contributors put to the test received assumptions about whether there could be any common ground between Buddhism and traditions such as Platonism, Cartesian metaphysics, and even mathematical reasoning on such issues as conceptions of infinity. Carpenter asks whether in foregrounding the formation and re-formation of character around similarly ambitious ideals (e.g., the *bodhisattva* and the *philosophos*), Buddhism and Platonism might have more in common than meets the eye, their radically opposed metaphysical views notwithstanding. Likewise, Strawson wonders whether there may be less daylight between the Cartesian and Buddhist metaphysics of mind, given affinities between Descartes's view of the mind as wholly constituted of consciousness and Buddhist accounts of the persistence of awareness captured by such notions as *citta-santāna* ('consciousness-stream') or *bhavaṅga-citta* ('life-continuum mind')? Lastly, Read and Greiffenhagen ponder the extent to which Madhyamaka dialectics might help articulate the radical difference between the finite and the infinite by resisting the latter's reification.

The variety and breadth of these essays bear testimony to the legacy of Siderits' impact in shaping the contemporary conversation in Buddhist philosophy and its reverberations in mainstream philosophy, giving readers a clear sense of the remarkable scope of his work. They are offered here in celebration and heartfelt appreciation of the immense debt we owe to his outstanding scholarship, philosophical acumen, and indelible friendship.

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