Ontological Pluralism, Abhidharma Metaphysics, and the Two Truths: A Response to Kris McDaniel

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1.Introduction

Kris McDaniel has recently proposed an interpretation of the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth, as that distinction is made within Abhidharma metaphysics (McDaniel forthcoming). According to McDaniel’s proposal, the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth is closely connected with a similar distinction between conventional existence and ultimate existence. What’s more, the distinction between conventional existence and ultimate existence should be interpreted along ontological pluralist lines: the difference between things which ultimately exist and things which merely conventionally exist amounts to a difference in the *modes of being* enjoyed by the things in question.

One noteworthy feature of McDaniel’s proposal is the fact that it connects Abhidharma metaphysics with contemporary work within analytic metaphysics, and in particular contemporary work in metametaphysics and metaontology related to ontological pluralism. This is a welcome development. Many of the metaphysical issues addressed by Abhidharma metaphysicians are also addressed by contemporary analytic metaphysicians, and this is true to some extent of work being done within the burgeoning subfields of analytic *meta*metaphysics and metaontology. I have no doubt that work in contemporary metametaphysics might help us interpret and evaluate Abhidharma metaphysics (and vice versa). But I have some concerns with McDaniel’s proposal. I do not have an alternative proposed interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction (as it occurs within Abhidharma metaphysics) which I would like to defend here. I also have very little to say about McDaniel’s objections to the other proposed interpretations of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction which he discusses.

I do not criticize McDaniel’s proposal on the grounds that it fails to reflect the manner in which the conventional/ultimate truth distinction was interpreted by Ābhidharmikas. Ābhidharmikas do not all speak with one voice on this subject, so it is difficult to make any very confident generalizations regarding how they would have reacted to McDaniel’s proposal. My concern is rather that McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction imposes limitations on Ābhidharmikas and their sympathizers which they should be hesitant to accept. For, first, McDaniel’s proposed interpretation of the distinction, if adopted, would prevent us from employing certain powerful argumentative strategies which have or could be employed on behalf of certain core Abhidharma metaphysical theses (in particular, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent). Second, given McDaniel’s proposed interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction, a core Abhidharma metaphysical thesis, namely the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, turns out to have less important implications than its proponents generally think it has.

Here’s my plan for the remainder of the paper. In §2 I summarize McDaniel’s proposal. In §3 I present my concerns. §4 concludes the paper.

2.McDaniel On Conventional vs Ultimate Truth

An important feature of Abhidharma metaphysics is its surprising ontological claims. Most notably, Ābhidharmikas contend that it is ultimately true that dharmas exist, but it is *not* ultimately true that persons exist, although there is some sense in which it is conventionally true that persons exist. What does this distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth amount to?

According to McDaniel, we should interpret the conventional/ultimate truth distinction (as that distinction was employed within Abhidharma metaphysics) in such a manner that that distinction tracks a similar distinction between conventional existence and ultimate existence. The latter distinction in turn should be interpreted along ontological pluralist lines, according to which the difference between things which ultimately exist and things which merely conventionally exist amounts to a difference in the *modes of being* enjoyed by the things in question.

What is ontological pluralism? What does it mean to say that some things enjoy different “modes of being”? One way to get a grip on what this thesis amounts to is by contrasting it with its competitor, according to which there is only one mode of being (i.e., monism with respect to being). This sort of monism vs pluralism dispute is similar to other monism vs pluralism disputes within philosophy -- e.g., the dispute between those who think that there is only one way for something to be a part of something else, and those who think that there are multiple ways for something to be a part of something else. Here the dispute is between those who think that there is only one way for things to exist, and those who think that there are multiple ways for things to exist.

As McDaniel conceives of ontological pluralism, a fundamental mode of being is had by those things falling within the range of the most fundamental or joint carving quantificational expressions. By contrast, conventionally existent things fall under the range of a non joint-carving unrestricted quantifier, but do not fall under the range of any fundamental quantifier (see McDaniel forthcoming: §4). Normally we might think of restricted quantifiers as being defined in terms of some restriction being placed on a general unrestricted quantifier – for example, when I say “there’s no beer,” I might be employing a restricted quantifier which is defined in terms of a general unrestricted quantifier, so that my statements means, in effect, that there doesn’t exist any beer, if we confine our attention only to those things which exist (unrestricted quantifier) in my refrigerator. McDaniel by contrast claims that fundamental (restricted) quantifiers are semantically primitive, and so not defined in terms of a restriction on a more general unrestricted quantifier.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The conventionally existent vs ultimately existent distinction, interpreted along these lines, claims that things which exist ultimately and things which merely exist conventionally both exist conventionally, although things which exist ultimately *also* enjoy a fundamental mode of being not enjoyed by things which merely exist conventionally. So, the Abhidharma claim that dharmas exist ultimately, while persons exist merely conventionally, amounts to the claim that dharmas and persons both exist, and they both exist conventionally, but dharmas also enjoy a fundamental mode of being not enjoyed by persons. In fact, McDaniel claims, merely conventionally existent objects, such as persons, enjoy a “deficient or attenuated” mode of being relative to those things which exist ultimately (McDaniel 2017: §4). Contrast this view with another (to my mind very natural) interpretation of the conventionally existent vs ultimately existent distinction: those things which ultimately exist really exist, while those things which merely conventionally exist do not really exist, although there is some useful fiction or convention according to which they exist (just as there is a useful fiction or convention according to which “the average dog” exists, although there isn’t really any such dog out there corresponding to the term “the average dog”). I don’t mean to endorse this competing conception of the conventionally existent vs ultimately existent distinction, but I cite it here to help give a sense for how McDaniel’s proposal differs from other natural interpretations of that distinction.

Some of the details of McDaniel’s proposal may be hard to follow for those not already steeped in contemporary analytic meta-ontology. Fortunately, as we’ll see, my concerns with this proposal do not turn on any of the particular details regarding the manner in which McDaniel conceives of ontological pluralism.[[2]](#endnote-3) The important point to note is that, for McDaniel, ultimately existent things and merely conventionally existent things all exist, and the main difference between them regards the *mode of being* they enjoy, or the *way* they exist.

How is the distinction between conventional existence and ultimate existence connected with the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth? Here McDaniel remains somewhat non-committal (see McDaniel forthcoming: §4). For example, according to one proposal, conventional truths (or falsehoods) are those truths (or falsehoods) which contain expressions denoting conventionally existing objects, or predicates which are possibly true of conventionally existing objects. Ultimate truths (or falsehoods) by contrast contain no expressions referring to merely conventionally existing objects, or predicates which are possibly true of merely conventionally existing objects.

While McDaniel does not unambiguously endorse any particular conception of the manner in which the conventional/ultimate truth distinction lines up with the conventional/ultimate existence distinction, we have enough to go on to see what I think is problematic about McDaniel’s proposal. McDaniel’s proposed reading of the conventionally existent vs ultimately existent distinction along ontological pluralist lines is the most important and novel part of his proposed interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction.[[3]](#endnote-4) It is *this* part of his proposal which I think is problematic – i.e., what I think is most problematic about McDaniel’s proposal is that it claims that the Ābhidharmika’s distinction between things which ultimately exist and things which merely conventionally exist should be interpreted along ontological pluralist lines, according to which ultimately real existents and merely conventionally real existents exist, albeit with more and less fundamental modes of being.

I’ll now move on to a discussion of some concerns I have with McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. Again, my concerns focus on McDaniel’s contention that the distinction between conventional and ultimate existence should be interpreted along ontological pluralist lines, of the sort discussed above. Before I present my concerns, I would like to pause to note the *standards* by which I plan to judge McDaniel’s interpretation. I do not think we should be very concerned by the question of whether Ābhidharmikas actually endorsed McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. For starters, of course, Ābhidharmikas did not *explicitly* develop that distinction along ontological pluralist lines. What’s more, the Abhidharma literature is both large and variegated, and the Ābhidharmikas do not all speak with one voice. McDaniel himself recognizes these points.[[4]](#endnote-5) I take it that McDaniel is primarily concerned to present a rational reconstruction of how Ābhidharmikas *should* interpret the conventional/ultimate truth distinction, given their other philosophical commitments. So, the question which concerns me is not whether Ābhidharmikas did or would endorse McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. Rather, what interests me is whether or not Ābhidharmikas, or philosophers sympathetic with certain core Abhidharma metaphysical commitments, *should* endorse McDaniel’s interpretation of the distinction.

In what follows I describe some of the limitations imposed on Ābhidharmikas (and their sympathizers) who adopt McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. There are two main limitations I would like to highlight. First, if we accept McDaniel’s interpretation of the distinction, we will no longer be able to endorse certain important arguments for distinctively Buddhist metaphysical theses. Here I focus in particular on arguments for the Buddhist thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. Second, if we accept McDaniel’s interpretation then certain core Buddhist metaphysical theses turn out to have less important implications than their proponents generally think they have. Here, again, I focus in particular on the Buddhist thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent.

3.Two Concerns

I’ve said that McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction imposes limitations on Ābhidharmikas (and their sympathizers), limitations which they should be hesitant to accept. The limitations I have in mind relate to certain core metaphysical theses commonly endorsed by Ābhidharmikas. One such core metaphysical thesis is the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent (i.e., the thesis that persons do not ultimately exist, although they do conventionally exist). According to McDaniel’s proposal we should interpret this thesis along ontological pluralist lines. So, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent becomes the thesis that persons exist, although they enjoy a less fundamental mode of being than their most basic or fundamental constituents (skandhas, which are a subset of the total set of dharmas).

The first limitation imposed by McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction regards the arguments we would have at our disposal in favor of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. Otherwise powerful arguments which might be offered on behalf of this thesis would no longer be available to us if we endorse McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis. I’ll give three examples.

Start with Vasubandhu’s refutation of the self (Vasubandhu 2003). Vasubandhu claims that we can know that there is no self (ātman) because we cannot establish the existence of the self by either inference or by perception (Vasubandhu 2003: Ch.2, §1.2). We might wonder whether Vasubandhu’s argument could be extended to show that persons (rather than selves) are merely conventionally existent.[[5]](#endnote-6) But if the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent is interpreted as the claim that persons do exist, albeit with a less fundamental mode of being than those things which fundamentally exist, then we cannot employ Vasubandhu’s argumentative strategy on behalf of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. We can see why we might be led to believe that something does not exist if we can neither infer that that thing exists nor perceive that that thing exists. But it’s completely unjustified to conclude that something exists with a non-fundamental mode of being from the fact that we can neither infer that the thing exists nor perceive that the thing exists.

As a second example: it is also hard to reconcile McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction with a classic argument for the non-self thesis attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon, adapted to become an argument for the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. The argument I have in mind is included in the Buddha’s discussion of the self in the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*. In this sutta the Buddha examines each of the five aggregates, and contends that none of them should be identified with the self. Again, we might wonder whether this argument could be adapted into an argument for the closely related thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. But if the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent is interpreted along the lines suggested by McDaniel, then the Buddha’s arguments in this sutta do not seem as if they could help support that thesis. The fact (if it is a fact) that I am not identical with *this* aggregate, and I am not identical with *that* aggregate, and so on, might eventually lead me to think that I do not exist, if we rule out each of the candidate things with which I might be identical. But to say that I am not identical with *this* aggregate, or *that* one, and so on, would have no tendency to lead me to think that I enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. So, if we accept McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, then it isn’t clear how we could employ this classic argument on behalf of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent.

Finally, one natural sort of argument we might give on behalf of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent is based on Ockham’s razor (i.e., is based on the relative simplicity of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent). An argument of this sort would look like this: it is simpler to suppose that there are no persons, and since (all other things being equal) simpler theories are more likely to be true, and we have no good grounds for believing in persons which might override our presumption in favor of the simpler thesis that persons do not exist, the relative simplicity of the thesis that persons do not exist gives us some reason to accept that thesis (see Siderits 2007: 44-45 for a presentation of an argument of this sort). But this sort of argument is not available to us if we accept McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. On that interpretation of the latter thesis persons exist, although they enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. The thesis that persons do not exist is, all other things being equal, simpler than the thesis that persons do exist, and so simplicity considerations might lead us to endorse the view that persons do not exist. But I don’t see why it would be the case that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, interpreted as the thesis that persons exist and enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being, is simpler than its competitors.[[6]](#endnote-7) So, given McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction, another major argumentative strategy we might employ on behalf of this distinctive Abhidharma metaphysical thesis (namely, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent) is foreclosed to us.[[7]](#endnote-8)

That’s my first concern with McDaniel’s proposed interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. On to my second concern. The concern is that, given McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, that thesis has less important philosophical implications than its proponents generally think it has.

One distinctive Abhidharma metaphysical thesis is, as we’ve seen, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. Within Abhidharma metaphysics, and within the Buddhist philosophical tradition more generally, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent is supposed to tell us something important about ourselves. The problem is that on McDaniel’s interpretation of this thesis (according to which we exist, but enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being), this thesis seems to tell us nothing very interesting about ourselves. For example, two of the central questions regarding personal identity which interest philosophers are 1.what are our persistence conditions (diachronic personal identity)? 2.what are we (personal ontology)? But the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, interpreted as McDaniel interprets it, tells us nothing about our persistence conditions, and nothing about personal ontology (it is, for example, entirely compatible both with our being simple immaterial souls, and with our being composite organisms). By contrast, coming to learn that we do not exist would provide surprising answers to both of these central questions regarding personal identity: it would show that strictly speaking we have no persistence conditions, and it would show that strictly speaking we are not anything (e.g., we are not immaterial souls).

Similarly, on McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, that thesis would seem to tell us nothing about what value we should assign to our projects or interests. By contrast, coming to learn that we do not exist would show that those of our projects or interests which aim to promote our own self-interest are defective, insofar as they rely on the false presupposition that there exist people who might have or fail to have their own projects promoted or interests satisfied.

What all of this tends to show is that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, interpreted as the thesis that we do not exist, is an interesting and substantive philosophical thesis, one with profound implications for how we should conceive of ourselves and our place in the world. By contrast, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, interpreted merely as the thesis that we enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being, seems to lack any of these interesting implications. It is hard to see why we should care whether we enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. None of this shows that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, interpreted in either way, is true or false. But what it shows is that, insofar as proponents (or for that matter opponents) of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent take that thesis to have important implications, they should reject McDaniel’s interpretation of that thesis. At the very least, if McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent does have any interesting implications for how we should think about personal identity, the values of our goals and projects, or anything else we might care about, it would be helpful if he made those implications explicit, so that we can see why the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent (as he interprets that thesis) is a thesis we should care about.

Interestingly, elsewhere McDaniel suggests that coming to learn that persons enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being would have a major impact on how we conceive of our own value and importance (see McDaniel 2017: Ch.6). For, first, things which enjoy non-fundamental modes of being are less worthy of attention than things which enjoy fundamental modes of being. Second, things which enjoy a fundamental mode of being have a sort of value (“a certain kind of metaphysical goodness” – McDaniel 2017: 174) which is lacked by things which enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. But it isn’t clear to me why McDaniel thinks that things which enjoy non-fundamental modes of being are thereby less worthy of attention. By contrast, if something (e.g., a person) does not exist, that might naturally lead us to think that that thing is less worthy of attention – why direct our attention to something which does not exist, if we can instead direct our attention to something which *does* exist? Similarly, it isn’t clear to me why McDaniel thinks that something which enjoys a non-fundamental mode of being thereby lacks some sort of “metaphysical value.” By contrast, something which does not exist lacks any sort of value, since it lacks properties altogether. (We might nevertheless find that it is valuable to employ a *fiction* or *convention* according to which something which does not exist (e.g., a person) does exist.) So McDaniel’s proposed reasons why accepting the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent might have a major impact on how we think of our own value and importance is better captured by an interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent which McDaniel rejects, namely an interpretation according to which persons do not exist (even if there is some sense in which there is a useful fiction or convention according to which they do exist).

I’ve suggested that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, as McDaniel interprets that thesis, would not have certain important implications which the thesis that we do not exist would have. I would now like to make a similar point regarding certain specifically soteriological and ethical implications which the Buddhist philosophical tradition has sometimes attached to the non-self thesis, as well as the closely related thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. It is important to remember that within Abhidharma metaphysics, and Buddhist philosophy more generally, the conventional/ultimate truth distinction is situated within a broader Buddhist soteriological and ethical project. Notably, one of McDaniel’s objections to Mark Siderits’s competing account(s) of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction is that, given Siderits’s interpretation of that distinction, we cannot derive surprising normative conclusions from metaphysics (McDaniel forthcoming: §2).[[8]](#endnote-9) I think that McDaniel’s interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction faces a similar difficulty, since, as I’ll now argue, on McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent that thesis doesn’t seem to have some of the important soteriological and ethical consequences the Buddhist might expect it to have.

Vasubandhu contends that our rejecting belief in the self (ātman) is crucial for our being liberated from suffering, in part because that suffering is a result of “self grasping” (ātmagrāha) (Vasubandhu 2003: §1.1). Similar sentiments are expressed by other Buddhist philosophers, and in discourses of the Buddha contained in the Pali canon (cf. the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*, the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*). It is natural to suppose that if these soteriological consequences follow from our rejecting belief in the self, something similar would follow from our rejecting belief in the existence of persons. But it is difficult to see how any interesting soteriological consequences of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent follow from that thesis, as McDaniel interprets that thesis – i.e., interpreted as the thesis that persons exist but enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. Why shouldn't we engage in “self grasping” if persons exist (albeit with a non-fundamental mode of being)? Why should the mere fact that persons enjoy a less fundamental mode of being than dharmas have any tendency at all to reduce our suffering?[[9]](#endnote-10) By contrast, as I’ve suggested above, if we came to believe that persons do not exist, this would have a profound effect on our goals and aspirations: it would show that those of our projects or interests which aim to promote our own self-interest are defective, insofar as they rely on the false presupposition that there exist people who might have or fail to have their own projects promoted or interests satisfied. This seems to me to be a natural way to interpret the idea that acceptance of the non-self thesis, or the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, would lead to less “self grasping” on our part. And insofar as so much of our suffering results from our self-interested goals and projects being thwarted, such suffering would be reduced if we no longer valued such goals and projects.

These points are related to a purported ethical consequence of the thesis that persons do not exist. While Śāntideva was not an Ābhidharmika, he presents an influential argument to the effect that the thesis that persons do not exist should lead us to reduce the suffering of others to the same extent as we aim to reduce our own suffering (Śāntideva 1995: Ch.8, §§101-103). The basic idea is this. My suffering is bad, and should be reduced. But if I should reduce my own suffering, then I should be equally concerned to reduce the suffering of others as well. You might respond that my suffering is, well, *my* suffering, and we each have a special obligation to reduce our own suffering. But the thesis that persons do not exist undermines this response, since it shows us that strictly speaking none of us exist, and so strictly speaking none of us “owns” any suffering for which we might have special responsibilities. Here is how Śāntideva makes the point:

“The continuum of consciousnesses, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong? Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this? If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone” (Śāntideva 1995: Ch.8, §§101-103).

The conclusion of Śāntideva’s argument, that we should care about the suffering of others to the same extent that we care about our own suffering, is endorsed by many other Buddhist thinkers. It is also in keeping with ethical teachings attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon which would have been endorsed by Ābhidharmikas (see the *Veḷudvāreyya Sutta*). It strikes me as a plausible normative consequence of the thesis that persons do not exist, or of the thesis that persons merely conventionally exist.[[10]](#endnote-11)

But I don’t see why any interesting ethical conclusions should follow from the thesis that persons merely conventionally exist, as McDaniel interprets that thesis. Take Śāntideva’s argument as a case in point. Śāntideva’s argument crucially relies on the claim that we *do not exist*, not merely on the claim that we exist with a non-fundamental mode of being. If we exist with a non-fundamental mode of being then we are free to contend that we should care more about our own suffering because it is *our* suffering, and we have a special obligation to remove our own suffering. Śāntideva’s response to this idea, that we do not have a special obligation to remove our own suffering because we do not exist, is not available to someone who endorses McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons merely conventionally exist.

An anonymous referee suggests the following response on McDaniel’s behalf. Normative facts are only grounded in facts regarding fundamentally existent entities (e.g., fundamentally existent persons). If that’s right, then we might be able to endorse Śāntideva’s argument after all. In response to someone who claims that I have special obligations to remove my own suffering, we can respond that normative facts of this sort cannot be grounded in facts regarding merely conventionally existent persons. In other words, the fact that I have a special obligation to remove my own suffering could not be grounded in the sorts of facts appealed to by the opponent of Śāntideva’s argument, namely this fact regarding a merely conventionally existent person, that this suffering is *my* suffering.

Here is my reply. It seems implausible to me that normative facts must be grounded in facts regarding fundamentally existent entities. And, more to the point, if McDaniel were to endorse the idea that normative facts must be grounded in facts regarding fundamentally existent entities, or that normative facts cannot be grounding in facts regarding merely conventionally existent entities, then he would still be blocked from endorsing Śāntideva’s argument. Consider a scenario in which I am suffering, and I am a merely conventionally existent person, where I am “merely conventionally existent” in the sense endorsed by McDaniel – i.e., I exist, although I enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. The fact that I am suffering seems as if it should ground a normative fact, namely that I have a *prima facie* motivation to act to remove my suffering. But if normative facts are only grounded in facts regarding fundamentally existent entities, then the fact that a non-fundamentally existent entity suffers cannot ground normative facts (such as the normative fact that I have a *prima facie* obligation to end my suffering). So, it seems like McDaniel still can’t endorse an argument of the sort presented by Śāntideva. McDaniel would be blocked at the first step of the argument, since he would have to say that my suffering cannot ground a *prima facie* obligation on my part to remove my own suffering.

4.Conclusion

To recap: McDaniel thinks that the conventional/ultimate truth distinction within Abhidharma metaphysics is closely related to a similar distinction between conventional existence and ultimate existence. What’s more, he thinks that we should interpret the latter distinction along ontological pluralist lines, according to which the difference between things which ultimately exist and things which merely conventionally exist amounts to a difference in the *modes of being* enjoyed by the things in question. I have two concerns with McDaniel’s proposal. The first concern is that some powerful arguments which might be employed by Ābhidharmikas (and their sympathizers) for certain distinctively Buddhist metaphysical theses (e.g., the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent) don’t seem to be available to us if we endorse McDaniel’s interpretation of those metaphysical theses. Second, given McDaniel’s proposed interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction, the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent turns out to be less philosophically significant than its proponents have generally taken it to be. Of particular importance is the apparent fact that the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent (on McDaniel’s interpretation of that thesis) does not seem to have some of the important soteriological and ethical implications Buddhist philosophers generally expect it to have.[[11]](#endnote-12)

References

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[8] Jason Turner. Ontological pluralism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 107:5-34, 2010.

[9] Vasubandhu. *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's “Refutation of the Theory of a Self”*. Routledge, London, 2003.

1. For more on ontological pluralism see McDaniel 2009, 2017; Turner 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. This is particularly fortunate because not all ontological pluralists conceive of ontological pluralism in the manner in which McDaniel conceives of it, and in fact McDaniel’s precise characterization of ontological pluralism has changed over time. (Thanks here to Peter Finocchiaro.) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Cf. McDaniel forthcoming: §4: “On my conception, the ontological distinction between ultimate and conventional existence is more important than a semantic distinction between ultimate and conventional truth. Moreover … this ontological distinction is by itself sufficient to render internally consistent the Buddha’s teachings.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See, e.g., the following passages from McDaniel’s paper: “I don’t claim to account for *the* distinction between conventional and ultimate truth as found in the Abhidharma canon. Perhaps there are many competing accounts rather than exactly one”; “In what follows, I focus on whether Siderits’s conception is philosophically sound rather than textually well-grounded” (here he discusses Siderits’s competing interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Vasubandhu’s argument discussed in the main body of the paper is directed against the existence of the “ātman,” usually translated as “self.” Notably, while McDaniel (forthcoming) discusses the Abhidharma thesis that persons do not ultimately exist, he does not discuss the related thesis that *selves* do not ultimately exist. That being said, McDaniel does not say whether he takes there to be an important relevant distinction between the thesis that selves do not ultimately exist and the thesis that persons do not ultimately exist. (Elsewhere, in McDaniel 2017: 174-175, he does run together the thesis that selves do not ultimately exist and the thesis that persons do not ultimately exist.) I will charitably assume that McDaniel thinks there is a relevant distinction between “selves” and “persons,” and so I will not assume that arguments against the ultimate existence of the self (such as Vasubandhu’s argument) are automatically directed toward the thesis that *persons* do not ultimately exist (as McDaniel understands the latter thesis). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. One way to develop a simplicity-based argument in favor of (McDaniel’s version of) the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent might appeal to what Jonathan Schaffer calls “the laser” (in contrast to Ockham’s *razor*) (Schaffer 2015). Schaffer thinks that, when it comes to ontological simplicity, we should only care about the simplicity of our *fundamental* ontology. A preference for simpler fundamental ontologies might lead us to eliminate persons from our fundamental ontology, and so might lead us to think that persons are not fundamental. I have two concerns with this argument. First, it is not clear that Schaffer’s concept of fundamentality (as that concept is employed in his “laser” methodological principle) lines up with McDaniel’s concept of fundamentality. For Schaffer, something is non-fundamental if its existence is grounded in something else. For McDaniel, something is non-fundamental if it enjoys a non-fundamental mode of being. These concepts are not obviously coextensional (i.e., such that if something is non-fundamental in Schaffer’s sense then it is non-fundamental in McDaniel’s sense). My second concern is that there are good reasons to reject Schaffer’s “laser” methodological principle (see Baron and Tallant 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. An anonymous referee suggests yet another Buddhist argumentative strategy which seems to be foreclosed to McDaniel, given McDaniel’s interpretation of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent. One common Buddhist argumentative strategy is the “neither identical nor distinct” species of argument. An argument of this sort could perhaps be offered in defense of the thesis that persons do not exist. If persons could be neither identical with nor distinct from some other sort of thing (e.g., dharmas), this might lead us to think that persons do not exist, since it would show that the supposition that persons *do* exist leads to contradictory results (i.e., that persons are both identical with, and distinct from, this other sort of thing). But it does not seem as if a neither identical nor distinct argument of this sort would show that persons *do* exist, although with a non-fundamental mode of being. So, an argument of this sort could not be offered on behalf of the thesis that persons are merely conventionally existent, if the latter thesis is interpreted in the manner in which McDaniel would interpret it. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. In fact, McDaniel here specifically alludes to a famous argument given by Śāntideva to the effect that the thesis that persons do not exist should lead us to care for the suffering of others to the same degree that we care for our own suffering. McDaniel suggests that Siderits’s competing account of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction is objectionable because Śāntideva’s argument would turn out to be unsound given Siderits’s conception of that distinction. But as I’ll argue below, Śāntideva’s argument is unsound given McDaniel’s own interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. In McDaniel 2017: 174-175, McDaniel notes that the Buddhist philosophical tradition has generally attached great soteriological importance to our coming to adopt the non-self thesis. (Here McDaniel runs together the non-self thesis, interpreted as the thesis that *selves* do not ultimately exist, and the similar thesis according to which *persons* do not ultimately exist.) McDaniel also suggests that the non-self thesis might be interpreted as the thesis that selves enjoy a non-fundamental mode of being. But McDaniel fails to say anything about why accepting the non-self thesis, or the thesis that persons do not ultimately exist, might have any soteriological ramifications, if these theses are interpreted in the manner in which he suggests they should be interpreted. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. This is not to deny that there are important objections to Śāntideva’s argument which should be addressed in any thorough defense of that argument. For example, as an anonymous referee suggests to me, we might wonder why we should feel compelled to reduce any suffering if there are not any *people* who suffer. I must leave a discussion of objections such as this one for another occasion. My point here is just that Śāntideva has this interesting and, to my mind potentially powerful, argument in favor of a philosophically interesting normative conclusion. What’s more, I suspect that many Ābhidharmikas (and those sympathetic to certain core Abhidharma philosophical theses) would endorse Śāntideva’s argument, not least because the conclusion of the argument is in keeping with teachings attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon. So, Ābhidharmikas, and those sympathetic to Abhidharma philosophical theses (and Buddhism more generally) have some motivation to endorse an interpretation of the conventional/ultimate truth distinction which does not prevent them from endorsing this argument. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Thanks to Peter Finocchiaro, Alexander Skiles, Louise Williams, and two anonymous referees for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)