

Candrakīrti and Hume on the Self and the Person
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Abstract

In the early chapters of *The Concealed Influence of Custom: Hume's Treatise From the Inside Out* (Garfield 2019a), I argue that Hume's skepticism and naturalism are connected by a rich account of the nature and normative force of custom, and of its role in determining human psychology, epistemology, ethics, and ontology. I also argue that his skepticism as Pyrrhonian in character, and that the Pyrrhonian fourfold prescription—prominent including the admonition to rely on custom—is central to Hume's positive program. In Chapters 4 and 10, I show that this requires us, when reading Hume on personal identity, to juxtapose the accounts of Books I and II, with the account in Book I providing the negative phase of the dialectic demonstrating that there is no *self*, and the account in Book II providing the positive phase explaining how custom generates real *persons*. Persons, on this account are real, but only conventional or customary constructions, with conventional identity conditions. Selves are things of which cannot even form ideas.

Candrakīrti (7th C CE) also distinguishes the person from the self. He also argues that persons are conventionally real, with customary identity conditions, but that they have no reality independent of customs (no ultimate reality). A self, he argues, is by definition something with non-conventional identity conditions. So, Candrakīrti, like Hume, rejects the claim that to be a person is to be a self. Candrakīrti's arguments for both the positive and negative side of this position are remarkably similar, but also subtly different. This essay will explore both the homologies and differences between this Indian Madhyamaka Buddhist account of the person and the self and Hume's account.

There are remarkable homologies between the Indian Mādhyamika Candrakīrti's (7th c) and the Scottish philosopher Hume's (18th c) accounts of the self, the person, and personal identity. Attention to those homologies can allow us to see more deeply into what is at stake in their respective accounts. This essay is thus not an exercise in *comparing* their accounts, although that will be part of the larger program, but rather in exploring the deeper issues that motivate each account. I will argue that while the most obvious idea at work in their respective accounts is the attack on the idea of a self, it is equally important to attend to the fact that each reconstructs a *person* the existence of which is not denied. This in turn Candrakīrti's and Hume's shared commitment to the importance of *custom* or *convention* in the construction of identity and the essentially social nature of personal identity. To understand this strategy also requires us to understand their shared skeptical methodology and concern with the normative force of custom, and to the naturalization of normativity.

1. Selves and Persons

We need to begin by drawing a distinction that may appear to be merely verbal, but is not: the distinction between a *self* and *person*, in Sanskrit between *ātman* and *puṅgava*. Candrakīrti gets at this distinction and its importance in the following verse from *Introduction to the Middle Way* and its autocommentary (*Madhyamakāvātāra-bhāṣya*):

141. Suppose that when someone has seen that a snake has come to live in the wall of his house.
He assures himself that there is no elephant in the house, and
Thereby tries to eliminate his fear of the snake.
How foolish such a person would be!

... In the same way, although there are the aggregates and the different kinds of consciousness, since there is no permanent self, it is impossible to eliminate grasping to the self that is the subject of the aggregates by focusing on these phenomena; one cannot thereby free oneself from samsara. This is why it is said that neither does the self have the nature of the aggregates, nor is it something different from them. (247-248, all translations from *Introduction to the Middle Way* are my own)

Candrakīrti's point is this: Before one starts to ask whether there is a self or not, or what that self might be, one must get clear about the target of one's analysis. This is what

was to become known in Tibet, following the work of Tsongkhapa. the 15th century commentator on Candrakīrti, as “the identification of the object of negation.” The man with the snake in his wall has two problems: a snake and his fear. He foolishly tries to eliminate the fear by assuring himself that there is no elephant around, neglecting to search for and eliminate the snake. Someone who thinks that he has a self, Candrakīrti claims, also has two problems: he posits the existence of a self, and he *grasps* it as the subject of his psychophysical processes, as the thing with which he is identical. It will do no good, he urges, to try to eliminate that conception and that self-grasping by focusing on the psychophysical processes themselves; one must identify the object that is both understood as a self and taken to be oneself; that is something taken to be other than and prior to psychophysical processes themselves.

This is different from a *person* (*pudgala*). The etymology of the English word *person* can help us here. It derives from the Latin *persona*, a *mask*, or a *role*, as in a drama.¹ A *persona* is conventional, constructed; it makes sense on the context of a drama. To ask who Hamlet was independent of the play, or what Romeo and Juliet were *really* like, as opposed to how they are portrayed by Shakespeare is to be as foolish as the man with the snake in his house. And to ask whether the Hamlet of the play is the same as or different from the real Hamlet makes no sense at all. The *person*, as I will argue below, is held by both Candrakīrti and by Hume to be a psychological and social construction, to be a conventional phenomenon. A self, on the other hand, is taken to be something substantial, and to be prior to and independent of such conventions. The self is the target of Candrakīrti’s and Hume’s critique; they each affirm the (conventional) reality of the person, and that conventional reality is as much reality as anything we ever experience can have.

Now, some people believe that they do not take themselves to be selves, or that the term *self* just denotes the set of psychophysical processes denoted by *person* or *pudgala*.² These people believe—*contra Candrakīrti* and Hume—that all of the deconstructive talk about the self is aimed at a straw man. I think that there is an easy way to show that they

¹ For more discussion of Candrakīrti on the person, see Garfield (2015, 108-109); for a discussion of Hume on the person, with some comparisons to Candrakīrti, see Garfield (2015: 66-70, 273-277).

² There are many, but take Strawson (1997) and Thompson (2007) as prominent recent examples.

are wrong, a way suggested by some of Candrakīrti's analysis elsewhere in *Introduction to the Middle Way*. Imagine somebody's body you would like to have, perhaps just for a short while.³ Speaking for myself, I would like Ussain Bolt's body, just for about 9.58 seconds. I would like to feel what it is like to run that fast. Now, when I imagine this, or form this desire, I do not imagine myself or desire to *be* Ussain Bolt. Ussain Bolt is already Ussain Bolt, and that does me no good at all. I want to be *me*, Jay Garfield, with Ussain Bolt's body. The very fact that I can form this desire, or imagine this situation shows that I do not identify myself with my body.

And we can do the same thing with our mind (or in a more Buddhist register, with any of the psychophysical aggregates). I, for instance, would have liked to have had Stephen Hawking's mind, at least for a few minutes. That way, I could understand general relativity and quantum gravity. Again, this is not a desire to *be* Stephen Hawking; it is a desire to be *me*, Jay Garfield, with Stephen Hawking's mind (once again, setting aside the coherence of the desire, which is irrelevant). Once again, the very fact that I can have this desire, or imagine its satisfaction, shows that I do not take myself to be identical with my mind.

These little exercises both give us a better fix on the intended denotation of *self/pudgala* and show us that we indeed are atavistically, even if not philosophically, committed to its reality. The self against which Candrakīrti's and Hume's analyses are each directed is not identical with our minds, bodies, or some amalgamation of the two, but is the thing that *has* a mind, and that *has* a body, "the subject of the aggregates." It is what we naively and immediately take ourselves to be, whether or not its existence is even coherent; this atavistic self-grasping, or taking of ourselves to be selves can be—and often is, both in the history of Indian and in Western philosophy—ramified into philosophical theory, but it need not be in order to wreak conceptual and affective havoc. It is the serpent in the wall, as opposed to the elephant in the room that is the person. And as we will see,

³ Leave aside the coherence of this desire; the nice thing about desire is that it doesn't have to take a coherent object. Cantor wanted to settle the continuum hypothesis; Hilbert wanted to prove the completeness of arithmetic. Nobody denies that these were genuine desires, despite their provable inconsistency. And note that Hume affirms both that we have no idea of the self and that it is the object of the passions.

neither Candrakīrti nor Hume thinks that there is even a coherent account of what such a thing could be.

2. Skepticism and Realism: the Ontological and Normative Force of Custom

Candrakīrti and Hume are each skeptics, and are also each realists. Their skepticism is for the most part Pyrrhonian, which explains, via the fourfold prescription, how they can also be realists about the conventional world.⁴ Essential to Pyrrhonian skepticism, as I argue in (1994) and (2019a), is its commitment to custom as the arbiter of justification and of ontology. The Pyrrhonians argued that it makes no sense even to ask how things are independently of how we experience them, or independent of our customs; the world we live in is a world of appearances and social constructions, and truth can be no more than by convention. We live not by measuring our beliefs against a reality to which we have independent access, but by the fourfold prescription: we follow our instincts, our appearances, the instructions of the arts and the customs of our cultures.⁵ The instructions of the arts include all of our practical knowhow, and the epistemic practices embedded in our practical lives; the customs of our cultures include religious, epistemic, moral, and political customs. Together, these four aspects of skeptical life constitute the reality we jointly construct and accept.

Mādhyamikas, such as Candrakīrti emphasize the importance of convention or custom (*samvṛti/lokavyāvahāra*) in the constitution of our shared reality. The two Sanskrit terms Candrakīrti deploys, each widely used in Madhyamaka literature, frequently translated as *convention/conventional*; *custom/customary*; *transaction/transactional* share a good deal of the semantic range of *custom* as it is used by Hume. In *Clear Words* (*Prasannapadā*), Candrakīrti offers two etymologies for *samvṛti*, generating an ambiguity in

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism in Madhyamaka, see Garfield (1990), and for the relation between Greek skepticism and Madhyamaka, Kuzminski (2008), and Beckwith (2017). For more extensive recent discussion of Hume's Pyrrhonism, see Garfield (2019a) and Fosl (2019). Fosl also explores in great detail the interplay between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism in Hume's thought.

⁵ This is one more reason to take seriously the idea that the primary meaning of *truth* is *that in which we can trust*, and that the more recent tendency to foreground the truth of sentences as the primary context in which the term is used (as opposed to locutions like *true friend*, or *true coin of the realm*) obscure the idea that the idea of truth need have nothing to do with correspondence. See Garfield (2019b).

the term. The first etymology, deriving from a root that denotes speech, generates three closely related meanings: *samvṛti* can mean *by agreement, or nominal*; it can mean *everyday or normal*; it can also mean *interdependent*, that is, dependent for its existence on causes and conditions and for its identity on conventions for individuation.

The second derivation is from a root that means *concealed or covered up*. *Samvṛti* in this sense means *deceptive, or concealing*. Candrakīrti links these two meanings when he says that conventional, or customary truth conceals its nature as merely conventional or customary, posing as ultimate truth. That is, we constantly confuse things that exist merely conventionally with things that exist independent of convention. The second term, *lokavyāvahāra* simply means *in virtue of mundane practices*, connoting things that are true simply in virtue of how we behave, or in virtue of social arrangements or practices, overlapping heavily with the first set of senses of *samvṛti*.⁶

Ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), by contrast, would be truth or reality independent of convention.⁷ To be real in this sense would be to have an identity independent of individuation practices, and a reality independent of all other things. Mādhyamikas, such as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, deny that anything exists in this way. The ultimate truth about phenomena on this view is their *emptiness* of any independent or non-conventional existence. Moreover, and the important point for our purposes, in this philosophical system, despite the important distinction between the two truths, in the end the two truths are identified. So, while Nāgārjuna argues in the 24th chapter of *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Garfield 1995; Katsura and Siderits 2013) in verses 8-10 that it is essential in order to understand Buddhist philosophy to understand the *difference* between the two truths,

8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

⁶ See Cowherds (2011) and Garfield (2015, chapters 2 and 3) for more extensive discussion of these terms and of Madhyamaka understandings of convention and of conventional truth.

⁷ The Sanskrit term *satya* is translated as *true/truth* or as *reality/real* depending on context. Its semantic range covers that of both English terms. See Garfield (2019b) for more on this term.

9. Those who do not understand
The distinction between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound teaching.
10. Without depending on the conventional truth,
The meaning of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the meaning of the ultimate,
Nirvana is not achieved. (Tsongkhapa (2006, 496-498)

in verses 18 and 19 of that same chapter he argues for their identity.

18. That which is dependent origination
Is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.
19. There does not exist anything
That is not dependently arisen.
Therefore there does not exist anything
That is not empty (*Ibid.* 504-505)

Tsongkhapa (2006) glosses this point by arguing that the two truths are extensionally identical but intensionally distinct (*ngo po gcig la ldog pa tha dad.*) Emptiness, that is, is only the emptiness of conventionally real things, and so is also interdependent, nominally designated, and so conventionally real. (Garfield 1995, 2015)

Everything, that is, including the ultimate truth of emptiness, is regarded in this philosophical system as existing only conventionally, or, as Mark Siderits has put it so aptly, "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth." (1979) So, all that exists does so only conventionally. Customary—or conventional—existence is therefore not *second-class* existence; to be customarily real in this system is the only way to be real at all. So, when reality is defined as conventional or customary reality, the skeptical doctrine that things have no reality independent of convention no longer appears to be nihilistic, or to deny the reality of the world, but rather to be a *kind* of realism: on this view, we and all of the objects of our experience have a conventional existence; to have such an existence is to be real; so, we can affirm the reality of ourselves, of our minds, and of the world around us without

committing ourselves to its *ultimate reality*. This is the skeptical realism to which Hume, Candrakīrti and the Pyrrhonian skeptics subscribe.⁸

And, in the context both of Madhyamaka and of Humean philosophy, what goes for ontology goes for normativity as well. To be a person is both more and less than to be a biological entity. Some *Homo sapiens* do not have the status of persons; some corporations, animals, and rivers do. It all depends on your jurisdiction, and so on the norms in force. The Cowherds (2015) argue that Buddhist moral philosophy must be regarded as having its bite at the conventional, not the ultimate level, and that the fact that values are “merely” conventional does not undermine their reality or binding status, that normativity, like ontology, is, from a Buddhist perspective, a conventional matter, and could be nothing more than that.

Hume, as I argue in (2019, c. 2) comes to his own analysis of custom through a consideration of its role in British legal theory, seeing custom as the very source of normativity. And, as I argue in (2019, c. 1), Hume uses *custom* to denote not only collective social practices, but also individual habits and regularities. My regular morning walk and my friend’s regular long morning sleep are each as much *customary* in this sense as is our practice of driving on the right in the United States and our practice of driving on the left in Australia. Custom is hence both psychological and social. This is no less the case for Buddhist understandings of *samvṛti*.

Regularity of behavior, on this view, constitutes the customs that make society possible. Customs generate expectations of one another, the expectations that make us legible to one another, and possible partners in cooperation and dialogue; those expectations generate the obligations that we regard as demands of justice and of morality more broadly. Custom provides the normative force that makes laws and moral principles binding and that causes us to respect them, and hence provides the normative framework in which personhood itself makes sense. We must bear this dual role of custom—metaphysical and normative—in mind as we examine the ways in which classical

⁸ Note that this is not only a realism, but a kind of *panfictionalism*, but only a panfictionalism in which the fact that *fact* and *fiction* are cognate is taken seriously, as it is by Hume. So, to say that something is a fiction in the relevant sense is not to say that it is *unreal*, but that it is *manufactured*.

Buddhists and Hume understand the reality of persons in the context of the nonexistence of selves.

3. The *Milindapañha* and Candrakīrti on the self and person

Let us now put this general Buddhist ontological perspective to work in order to read two classic discussions of the distinction between the self and the person in Buddhist literature before turning to Hume on the same subject. We will first consider the dialogue between the possibly apocryphal monk Nāgasena and the Bactrian King Menander (Milinda in the prakrit of the dialogue), *The Questions of King Milinda (Milindapañha)*, c. 100 CE-200 CE, Rhys-Davis 1890). We will then turn to Candrakīrti's slightly different version of the argument articulated in that dialogue.

Early in chapter 2 of the *Milindapañha*, the King, who has invited Nāgasena for philosophical discussion, asks Nāgasena his name. Nāgasena tells him his name, and the King, more interested in questions about personal identity and the ontology of personhood, replies as follows:

...If you say, "Fellows in the holy life, address me, sire, as Nāgasena," what here is Nāgasena? Is it, venerable sir, that the hairs of the head are Nāgasena? "Oh no, sire." "That the hairs on the body are Nāgasena?" "Oh no, sire." "That the nails... the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the sinews, the marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the membranes, the spleen, the lungs, the intestines, the mesentery, the stomach, the excrement, the bile, the phlegm, the pus, the blood, the sweat, the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva, the mucous, the synovial fluid, the urine, or the brain in the head" are any of them Nāgasena?"

"Oh no, sire."

"Is Nāgasena material form, venerable sir?"

"Oh no, sire."

"Is Nāgasena feeling... perception... dispositions or consciousness?"

"Oh no, sire."

"But then, venerable sir, is Nāgasena form-feeling-perception-dispositions-and-consciousness?"

"Oh no, sire."

“But then, venerable sir, is there Nāgasena apart from form-feeling-perception-dispositions-and-consciousness?”

“Oh no, sire.”

“Though I, venerable sir, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see this Nāgasena. Nāgasena is only a sound, venerable sir. For who here is Nāgasena? You sir, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no Nāgasena.”

It is worth noting here that for most of this interchange, the King is not *attacking* a Buddhist understanding of selflessness; he is using the pretty standard Buddhist decomposition of the person into the five piles, or aggregates (*skandhas*) of material form, sensation, perception, dispositions, and consciousness to argue that there is no self designated by Nāgasena. And Nāgasena, like any good Buddhist scholar, agrees with this analysis. It is only at the end that he advances what appears to be a *reductio* on the position, drawing the conclusion that if Nāgasena does not exist as one or more of the aggregates, since they are all that there is to his personal existence, he does not exist at all. This would be to confuse the denial of *ultimate existence* with the denial of *existence*, and would be to confuse the Buddhist insistence on the mere conventional reality of the person with nihilism. It is at this point that Nāgasena introduces the analogy of the chariot, an analogy designed to affirm the conventional existence—and hence the reality—of the *person*, despite the *unreality*—ultimate or conventional—of the *self*:

And the venerable Nāgasena said to Milinda the king: ‘You, Sire, have been brought up in great luxury, as beseems your noble birth. If you were to walk this dry weather on the hot and sandy ground, trampling under foot the gritty, gravelly grains of the hard sand, your feet would hurt you. And as your body would be in pain, your mind would be disturbed, and you would experience a sense of bodily suffering. How then did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?’

I did not come, Sir, on foot. I came in a chariot.

Then if you came, Sire, in a chariot, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?

I did not say that.

Is it the axle that is the chariot?

Certainly not.

Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?

And to all these he still answered no.

Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?

No, Sir.

But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?

And still he answered no.

Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot! You are king over all India, a mighty monarch. Of whom then are you afraid that you speak untruth? ... and said to the king: Now let your Majesty get out of that if you can?

And Milinda the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. It is on account of its having all these things—the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad—that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of “chariot.”

Very good! Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of “chariot.” And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about—The thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being—that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of “Nāgasena.” (Edelglass and Garfield 2009, 272-273)

The chariot, Nāgasena argues, is not identical to any of its parts. Nor is it something other than those parts that somehow possesses them: take away the parts and you have taken away the chariot. Nor is it simply the collection of the parts: a pile of chariot parts is not a chariot. Nor is it even the parts assembled properly: after all, one could replace a part and still have the same chariot. But the real point is this: the existence of the chariot is

vouchsafed by “the designation in common use,” and it supervenes upon on “all of these things....” The chariot, then, has a conventional, or customary, not an ultimate existence. The conventionally existent chariot is real, despite the fact that there is no ultimately existent chariot.

So it is with the person and the self: despite the fact that there is no self apart from the aggregates, and despite the fact that the person is neither identical with any of the aggregates, nor with their totality, nor even with them assembled correctly, the person, this dialogue suggests, supervenes on the aggregates, and has a conventional existence that justifies the application of a name, such as “Nāgasena.” And that is all of the existence than anything could have. To be real just is to be conventionally real. The dialogue then raises the question of identity over time, introducing another example that becomes central to Buddhist accounts of the person:

The king said, “He who is born, Nāgasena, does he remain the same or become another?”

Neither the same nor another.

Give me an illustration.

Now, what do you think, O King? You were once a baby, a tender thing, and small in size, lying flat on your back. Was that the same as you who are now grown up?

No, that child was one. I am another.

If you are not that child, it will follow that you have had neither mother nor father! Nor teacher. You cannot have been taught either learning or behavior or wisdom. ... Is the mother of the embryo of the first stage different from the mother of the embryo in the second stage, or the third, or the fourth? Is the mother of the baby a different person from the mother of the grown-up man?

...

Certainly not. But what would you, Sir, say to that?

The Elder replied, “I should say that I am the same person, now I am grown up as I was when I was a tender tiny baby flat on my back. For all these states are included in one by means of this body.”

Give me an illustration.

Suppose, O King, a man were to light a lamp, would it burn the night through?

Yes, it might do so.

Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night Sir, and in the second?

No.

Or the same that burns in the second watch and the third?

No.

Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second and another in the third?

No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through.

Just so, O King, is the continuity of a person or a thing maintained. One comes into being; another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus, neither as the same, nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness.

Give me a further illustration.

It is like milk which when once taken from the cow, turns, after a lapse of time, first to curd, and then from curd to butter, and then from butter to ghee. Now, would it be right to say that the milk was the same thing as the curd, or the butter, or the ghee?

Certainly not; but they are produced out of it.

Just so, O King, is the continuity of a person or a thing maintained. One comes into being; another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus, neither as the same, nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness. (Müller 2005, pp. 63-65)

The point is pretty clear. Even though a *self*, were such a thing to be possible, would be something that exists independently, and that continues to persist through changes, a person is not like that. A person exists as a conventionally identified sequence of causally interrelated psychophysical processes with no underlying persistent foundation, no *self*. This, once again, is not why the person is *unreal*; rather this is an account of its *mode of*

reality. Our continuity over time is just like that of the flame transferred from lamp to lamp. Both are continuous despite no underlying permanent substrate.

We now turn to Candrakīrti's slight twist on the *Milindapañha* account. His own analysis appears in the sixth chapter of *Introduction to the Middle Way*. Candrakīrti begins by rehearsing a version of the chariot analogy, arguing, as does the *Milindapañha*, that the chariot is neither any of its components, nor the collection of parts, nor the parts assembled. Candrakīrti concludes as follows (here I include only the central verses and the most important parts of the autocommentary):

150. Therefore, the basis of self-grasping is not an entity.
It is neither identical to nor different from the aggregates.
The aggregates are neither its basis nor does it possess them.
It exists insofar as it is established on the basis of the
aggregates.

How is it that it is said here merely to arise in dependence on the aggregates? We maintain that it exists insofar as it is not analyzed, within the framework of conventional truth. ... we say that the self is merely designated on the basis of the aggregates in the context of mundane convention. That is, the self is seen only in the context of convention.

Note a few things here. First, Candrakīrti—following the advice we considered at the beginning of this essay not to confuse snakes and elephants—emphasizes that he is talking about “the basis of self-grasping” in the negative phase of the argument, that is, the ultimately real self supposed to be distinct from and prior to the psychophysical aggregates. Nothing real corresponds to that intentional object. There is no self. Nonetheless, he argues, following the positive phase of the argument, we can say that something does come into existence in dependence upon the aggregates, but as a “mere designation... in the context of mundane convention.” It is important to take both parts of this description seriously. The person⁹ that emerges is not the aggregates, but is designated in dependence upon them; moreover, the designation itself is constitutive of the

⁹ Although the Tibetan translation of the text uses the term *bdag*, often used to translate *ātman*, it is clear that here Candrakīrti is referring to the conventional person, and not the self that has been the object of the negative dialectic. In Tibetan and Sanskrit, as in English, authors (including Hume) are often inconsistent about the way they use these terms.

identity and existence of the person. The aggregates alone do not determine its identity; that identity and reality supervene on the relevant social and linguistic conventions as well.

Just as the identity of a piece of paper as a one dollar note does not consist in any facts about the paper itself, but rather emerges in dependence partly upon those facts, including facts about its history (printed at the US Mint, and not in my basement) and partly upon the entire Federal Reserve system that constitutes currency in the first place, my identity does not supervene upon my current psychophysical aggregates alone, but also on a host of external facts about me, including naming and identity conventions in our culture. Candrakīrti next emphasizes that this analysis delivers not the *nonexistence* of the person, but rather its *mode of existence* in prereflective ordinary praxis.

158. Even though in the context of everyday life
Its existence cannot be established through sevenfold analysis,
In everyday life, without any analysis at all
It is accepted that it exists in dependence on its parts.

...In this context, on the basis of what is accepted in ordinary life, it is obvious that they exist, because one can refer to chariots, and that is all there is to it. Even though they are nothing but nominal referents, since, without any analysis they are accepted in everyday life, we maintain that they exist.

159. This very thing has parts and pieces;
This very chariot is called the agent.
According to ordinary people it is the appropriator.
Don't forsake the conventions of ordinary life!

The opposite of ordinary life is reality. Even though the conventional phenomena of ordinary life when analyzed are found not to exist, when not analyzed they are accepted, and therefore exist in that sense. ...

Since nothing actually exists in any way other than through convention, this is the only way a person can exist. Nonetheless, to exist in this way is not to have the definite and precise ontological status that one might expect from something for which one could provide a final conceptual analysis. In the final verses of this discussion, Candrakīrti emphasizes just these points: ordinary people talk about *themselves*, and we do not worry about these locutions in every day life. We do not, however, conclude from the fact that people talk this way, and think of themselves in this way, that there is any reality standing behind such talk,

or that the self to which they take themselves to refer has any properties. To say that there is such a thing can only be confusion.

162. In the same way, since they are accepted in ordinary life,
We even accept the self as the appropriator
In dependence on the aggregates, the elements
And the six sense faculties.
163. Nonetheless, since there is no such entity,
It is neither dependent nor independent;
Neither momentary nor permanent; neither arisen nor ceased.
It is neither existent nor non-existent; neither identical nor different.
164. The self is that to which beings constantly
Develop the attitude of grasping to 'I' and 'mine'.
The self arises from the grasping to 'I' and 'mine'
Taken for granted without analysis it exists only as a result of
confusion. (1992: 252-257 passim)

None of this, however, casts any doubt on the reality of the *person*. And as we have seen, Candrakīrti takes the person—that in was taken by Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha* to supervene merely on the aggregates (without being identical to them)—like dollar notes, to supervene broadly on our conventions. This suggests a broader supervenience base for the person than that defended the *Milindapañha*, and so denies that the person supervenes on the psychophysical aggregates themselves. It is, nonetheless, thoroughly realistic. Recall the analogy to currency. Dollars, for all of their broad supervenience and merely conventional existence, are *real*, and real despite the fact that nothing determinate needs to stand beneath them to guarantee that reality (think of the dollars in your bank account—they are not a stack of notes in a box). The point of the Madhyamaka Buddhist analysis we have been examining, then, is that custom, or convention, is both necessary and sufficient to determine reality; to think that the entities in our world are real in a deeper sense is only “a result of confusion.” We will see much the same strategy at play when we turn to Hume’s critique of the self and positive account of the person.

4. Hume on the Self and the Person

We have seen how, both in the *Milindapañha* and in *Introduction to the Middle Way*, Buddhist philosophers have used the rubric of the two truths to distinguish as *self*, the

existence of which is denied, from a *person*, the existence of which is affirmed. The self is argued to be an incoherent intentional object of grasping; the person is argued to be a real entity constituted by convention, or custom. Its identity conditions and persistence through time are bound up with our cognitive and affective habits, as well as with our social structures and language. We will now see that Hume's attack on the cogency of an idea of the self in Book I of the *Treatise* and his defense of the reality of the person in Book II follow a very similar strategy, motivated by similar concerns.

When Hume opens his well known discussion of the self in *Treatise* 1.4.6, he promises not to argue that there is no self, but rather that we have no idea of a self. This is in fact a stronger claim than would be the denial of the existence of a self that we could conceive: Hume argues not that those who affirm the existence of the self are simply wrong, but that they are talking sheer nonsense, using words, but meaning nothing by them. He writes:

There are some philosophers, who imagine that we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our *SELF*; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity....

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? This question 'tis impossible to answer without manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet 'tis a question which must necessarily be answer'd, if we wou'd have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible. [1.4.6.1-2, p. 251]

Hume, like Candrakīrti, grants that many speak of a self, and grants that this intentional object is *taken* to be permanent, and immediately available to introspective consciousness. There is no real metaphysical daylight between the *ātman* against which Nāgasena and Candrakīrti argue, and the *self* that Hume takes as his target. And just as Nāgasena and Candrakīrti argue that we have neither introspective evidence for the existence of anything that could answer to the identity conditions of a self nor any way of making that concept even cogent, Hume argues at 1.4.6.2 that we have no impression of any self in introspection and that absent such an impression, we can form no idea that corresponds to the word *self*.

Most strikingly, perhaps, Hume, like the Buddhist philosophers we have been considering, argues that what we *do find* in introspection is a loose bundle (*skandha?*) of impressions and ideas—of psychophysical processes—that are causally interconnected with one another (and with the external world), in a continuum that does persist through time, although no single entity does so, much like a chariot:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without perception, and never can observe anything but the perception....
[1.4.6.3, p. 252]

This territory is well-trodden, and I am far from the first to juxtapose Hume and Buddhist ideas regarding the self and the person. But it is worth noting here that Hume even agrees regarding the *skandhas*, or piles or stuff, he finds in the mind. We have sensations, perceptions, feelings, and dispositions on the psychological side, and in 1.4.6.5, he mentions the body, completing the standard Buddhist set of five, and even mentioning the momentariness of each of these (“nor is there a single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment” [252]).

Hume is also concerned to explain how it is that we come to the illusion that we mean anything by the word *self* and that we are in fact selves, and not mere continua of connected psychophysical processes (flames transferred from lamp to lamp, as it were). He poses the problem this way:

What then gives us so great a propensity to ascribe an identity to the successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives? In order to answer this question, we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves. [1.4.6.5, 253]

The first question concerns the ascription of identity to successive stages of causal chains in general, taking personal identity as an instance; the second concerns the special nature of the persons we are, and which we confuse with selves. That second issue is taken up in Book II, to which we turn shortly. But first, let us recall how Hume addresses the first question. He distinguishes *numerical* from *specific* identity—the strict identity of a thing

with itself, and the identity of *kind* between to similar or closely related things—and notes that we have a *custom* (in both the psychological and social senses of that term) of treating things we know to be merely specifically identical with one another (stages of churches, or of vegetables) as though they are numerically identical, calling them by the same name, for instance, as when we in Northampton say proudly, pointing at the 1960's A-frame brick and glass structure that houses the Edwards Church, that it is the same church where Jonathan Edwards preached in the 17th century (although the site on which he preached in a wooden structure is now occupied by an abandoned Catholic Church built from brick), relying on organizational continuity to vouchsafe specific identity, and quietly eliding the distinction between that conventional identity and numerical identity (as well as the relationship between Edwards' own theology and the rainbow banners now flown by his congregants).

And this is precisely what Candrakīrti had in mind in verses 162-164. Even though there is no such thing as a self, we take the constantly changing set of aggregates as a basis for designating the person, and then allow ourselves the illusion that that person is in fact a self. We confuse the elephant and the snake. Custom thus explains both the psychological confusion and the collective practice that both reflects and reinforces that confusion. So much for the negative phase of Hume's dialectic. We now turn to the positive phase, the reconstruction of the person, and a deeper account of the origin of the illusion that is the confusion of the person with the self.

In book II of the *Treatise*, Hume distinguishes the object from the cause of the passions, arguing that the causes of the passions are endlessly various:

A man may be proud of his beauty, strength, agility, good mien, address in dancing, riding, fencing, and of his dexterity in any manual business or manufacture. But this is not all. The passions, looking farther, comprehend whatever objects are in the least ally'd or related to us. Our country, family, children, riches, houses, gardens, horses, dogs, cloaths; any of these may become a cause either of pride or of humility. [2.1.2.5, 279]

But their object is always the self:

'Tis evident in the first place, that these passions are determin'd to have he self for their *object*, not only by a natural but also by an original property. Nobody can doubt but that this property is *natural* from the constancy and steadiness of its operations. 'Tis always self, which is the object of pride and humility; and whenever the passions look beyond, 'tis still with a view to ourselves... [2.1.3.2, 280]

Hume argues here that the passions are innate (*original*) structurally fixed features of our psychology (hence also *natural*). But, reflecting his view defended in Book III that in the case of persons, there is no boundary between nature and artifice [3.2.1.19, 484], and so that the fact that our passions are socially modulated does not, given that we are naturally (and originally) social beings, undermine their *natural* status, he has conceded that the passions reflect our social milieu and standards as well as our innate psychology. That is why our skill in dance, or our dogs' agility can give rise to passions.¹⁰

Nonetheless, Hume argues, whatever their causes, the passions always take the self as their object. But this must be indirect. For the self is not ready-made as an object for the passions, as we learned in Book I. It must be constructed. And it is constructed by the passions themselves, together with the social conventions the passions simultaneously reflect and enable. The passions are aroused by natural causes—sometimes original, but more often, socially constructed. But once aroused, as passions, they require an object. That object is in the first instance the *person* “ally'd or related” to the causes of the passions: the person who dances so badly, or who owns the marvelous dog in question. And that person is a conventional, or customary, object, whose origin is at the intersection of the biological/psychological and the social. But that person, once constructed as an object for the passions, is immediately *confused*—once again through the operation of custom—with a self, even though such a notion makes no sense.

If we are looking for the *real*, as opposed to the *notional*, object of the passions then, the individual we name, address, hold responsible, and re-identify through time, the individual to whom the causes of the passions are *in fact* related, we find not a primordially, or ultimately real self, but a conventional, or customary person. Just as if we want to know what Hamlet is really like, we inquire about the nature of the fictional

¹⁰ See Garfield (2019a, cs. 3, 4, and 11) for more extensive discussion of this issue.

character in the play, not into the personality of Sir Laurence Olivier or Benedict Cumberbatch, let alone into that of any historical Danish prince. Hume's point in Book II is that the person so conceived is constructed via custom, and—not despite, but because of that fact—real. The person is who we *are*; the self is what we *take ourselves to be*. And both the reality of the person and the confusion of the person with a self are matters of custom. Finally, this does not undermine, but instead explains, just why the person is a *natural* object, despite not having the kind of fantastic identity a self is meant to have.

5. Homologies, Differences, and what we Learn

There are, as I have been emphasizing throughout (and as I note in Garfield 2019a) a number of striking homologies between Hume's critique of the self and account of the person and those presented in the *Milindapañha* and by Candrakīrti in *Introduction to the Middle Way*. Each distinguishes a self to be rejected with a person to be accepted. Each locates the self to be rejected in an ontological domain that transcends convention or custom, and each suggests that the very idea of a self in that domain is incoherent. Each affirms both the conventional reality of the person, and each affirms that such conventional existence is the only existence we could possibly have. Each urges us to recognize a social and linguistic dimension to personal identity, and so the fact that our identity is not intrinsic, but extrinsic. Finally, each diagnoses the pervasive confusion of the person with the self as a kind of psychological reflex rooted in our affective life.

Nonetheless, there are also important differences to be noted between Hume and his Buddhist colleagues. First, the Buddhist account of the difference between the self and the person trades heavily on the doctrine of the two truths. This is a doctrine which, while perhaps consistent with Hume's approach to metaphysics, is never thematized by Hume. Indeed, the *Treatise* is not a metaphysical text at all, but a text about human nature. Candrakīrti, on the other hand, like many Buddhist philosophers, approaches human nature in the context of a much broader metaphysical picture.

Second, the Buddhist account of the drive to posit a self is grounded in what Buddhist moral psychology identifies as the three root pathologies—attraction and aversion grounded in primal confusion—and grounds these in turn in a pervasive fear of

death and impermanence.¹¹ Buddhist philosophers then take the impact of positing a self to be pernicious, issuing in self-grasping, egoism, and the mass of suffering known as cyclic existence, escape from which is the primary goal of Buddhist practice. Hume, on the other hand, takes this to be a relatively harmless confusion. And this, unlike the first difference I noted, is a more serious matter. Hume is generally optimistic about the social dimensions of our life, seeing custom not simply as constituting our identity, our epistemic and moral practices, and the societies that enable and that are enabled by those practices; he sees custom as a force for progress and for human well-being, albeit a force that always succeeds in concealing its own operation, rendering us opaque to ourselves.

Buddhist philosophers, such as Candrakīrti certainly see custom or convention as playing this constitutive role in our existence, and certainly as self-concealing. They, however, see that role not as beneficial, but as the root of suffering. They argue that the reification of persons as selves, and of the world as comprising phenomena that exist intrinsically, in virtue of that self-concealing power, render us not only opaque to ourselves, but render the very nature of reality and of our existence opaque, leading to lives of unremitting suffering.

Nonetheless, neither Nāgasena nor Candrakīrti recommends a transcendence of convention: like Hume, they recognize that as an incoherent fantasy. Instead, they recommend that we come to understand the role of convention in our lives, and by doing so that we free ourselves from the illusion that there is a world that transcends the customary world. This goes for our norms of conduct and epistemology, and for our ontology. Our lives, they argue, are entirely embraced by convention: there is no ground, only more convention. And that is the deepest level of agreement between the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition and Hume, and the insight from which we can learn the most.

¹¹ See Garfield 2011/2012, 2015: 299-310

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