

Ontological Pluralism and the Two Truths: Reply to Brenner

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1. Introduction

In McDaniel (2019), I argued that a version of ontological pluralism—the view that there are different modes of being—is a philosophically satisfactory account of the doctrine of two truths as found in Abhidharma metaphysics, and that it's superior to accounts in the secondary literature.¹ According to my account, the doctrine of two truths is best construed as a view that distinguishes between conventional and ultimate reality, the former of which is enjoyed by persons (and other composite objects) while the latter is enjoyed by only short-lived, impartite dharmas.² Conventional truth and ultimate truth understood as features of sentences, beliefs, or propositions are accounted for in terms of conventional and ultimate existence.

Andrew Brenner (forthcoming) argued that this account forecloses certain actual or potential arguments for core Abhidharma metaphysical theses; I respond in section 2 of this paper. Brenner (forthcoming) also argued that my account does not have the interesting normative consequences one might think that the doctrine of the two truths should have; I respond in section 3 of this paper. There are other interesting arguments in Brenner's challenging paper, but I lack the space here to respond to them.

2. No Foreclosure

Two preliminaries before I discuss Brenner's argument. First, let's note the alternative account that Brenner (forthcoming, p. 4) indicates sympathy for, namely, that to ultimately exist is to exist, while to conventionally exist is to not exist at all except according to a useful fiction. On this account, the only things that exist (in any way) are impartite dharmas. In what follows, I'll use "nihilism" to stand for the metaphysical claim that there are no composite objects, and "the nihilist account" to stand for the interpretation that ascribes nihilism to philosophers of the Abhidharma. I presume that on the nihilist account, conventional truths are not really truths but rather are only true according to a useful fiction. In McDaniel (2019), the nihilist account was not on the table, since an explicit constraint on my project was that conventional truth is really a kind of truth. Here, the nihilist account will serve as a kind of foil.

Second, as Brenner (forthcoming) notes, on my interpretation, *persons* are merely conventional existents, and I do not discuss any theses about *selves*. In this context, I don't take the terms "person" and "self" to be interchangeable. "Person" is a disposable covering term for each of us; instead of stating that persons are merely conventionally real, I could have simply said that I am merely conventionally real, Brenner is merely conventionally real, Obama is merely conventionally real, and so forth, without sacrificing anything of philosophical relevance.³ "Self" is not disposable in this way, since in the relevant literature, "self" has been given particularly metaphysical meanings that "person" has not been given. Here are several of them, subscripted for clarity: to be a self₁ is to be a person who is identifiable independently of his or her parts;⁴ to be a self₂ is to be a person whose existence does not simply consist in the existence of his or her parts; to be a self₃ is to be a metaphysically significant constituent of a person;⁵ to be a self₄ is to be a non-physical, simple, thinking substance.⁶ On the account I favor,

persons are merely conventional existents but there are no selves (of any sort) period. Selves are neither ultimately nor conventionally real, but rather there just ain't any.

Brenner's (forthcoming: 8-10) first objection is that certain "argumentative strategies" are foreclosed given my account. One such is represented by the argument Brenner cites from Vasubandhu (2003: 71-72), which is this: selves exist only if they are directly perceived or correctly inferred; but they are neither; and so selves do not exist.⁷ However, this argument is not foreclosed by my account, since my account concerned the conventional existence of persons rather than the non-existence of selves.⁸

Brenner suggests an interesting analogous argument for nihilism: persons exist only if they are directly perceived or correctly inferred, but they are neither, and so persons do not exist. Note though that Brenner's analogous argument also seems to be foreclosed by Vasubandhu himself, since Vasubandhu (2003: 74, 90) rejects nihilism. Rather, Vasubandhu's (2003: 74, 82-90) view seems to be that a person is ultimately real because she is (collectively) identical with her constituent dharmas, each of which is ultimately real.⁹ In short, the view defended in Vasubandhu (2003) appears to be a view in which many things can be numerically identical to one thing.¹⁰

I'm not giving an account of Vasubandhu's metaphysics, which, even though he is not a nihilist, is incompatible with the view persons merely conventionally exist. But Brenner's challenge is not that Vasubandhu's metaphysics is incompatible with the account that I propose, but rather that an argument analogous to Vasubandhu's is foreclosed by my proposal. I'll answer this challenge by presenting an argument consistent with my account of the two truths that is based on Vasubandhu's argument for the nonexistence of selves.

Here is that argument: persons are either merely conventionally real or ultimately real; persons are ultimately real only if there are selves; there no selves (as per Vasubandhu's argument); so persons are merely conventionally real. The justification for the first premise is the same as the justification for the background assumption that conventional truth is a kind of truth: if persons neither conventionally nor ultimately exist—if nihilism is true—then ordinary claims about persons are by and large false. The justification for the second premise is that ultimately real things must have something about them that makes them ultimately real. Dharmas have this—they have an “inherent nature”—but if persons neither are nor have selves, then there is nothing to make them more than a (conventionally real) heap of their constituent dharmas.¹¹ Since the argument I've just presented crucially builds on Vasubandhu's own argument, I conclude that the argumentative strategy Brenner invokes is not foreclosed by my account of the doctrine of the two truths.

In a footnote (#7, p. 20), Brenner discusses an anonymous referee's concern that my account cannot make sense of what Brenner calls the “neither identical nor distinct” species of argument”. I'm not sure that this is correct. Perhaps the proponent of such an argument does not intend to flout classical logic, but rather intends to disabuse a presupposition made by his interlocutor.¹² One can make sense of this intention given my account of the two truths. A “neither identical nor distinct” argument might be aptly directed at someone who falsely presupposes that persons have a particular ontological status, such as ultimate reality.

Here's an analogy. Suppose someone asks me whether the number 2 is hungry. This question is appropriate only if the number 2 is even the sort of thing which can be hungry. To disabuse the questioner of this presupposition, I might respond by saying that the number 2 is neither hungry nor satiated. I don't intend for my interlocutor to conclude that the number 2

doesn't exist at all, but only that it doesn't have the kind of existence that concretia have, and so is not the sort of thing that can even be hungry. I'll note in passing that my account, which invokes multiple quantifiers, is well-positioned to make sense of this kind of "category mistake" by invoking type restrictions.¹³

Since he has already been invoked, note that Vasubandhu (2003: 89-90) says something similar about why the Buddha refused to answer certain questions: Vasubandhu claims that Buddha did not answer when asked whether a person is identical with his body since the Buddha knew that the questioner presupposed that a person was a self, and that the Buddha did not disabuse the person of this presupposition directly since he knew that his interlocutor would then embrace nihilism.

If the function of a "neither identical nor distinct with" argument is to disabuse interlocutors of ontological presuppositions, an argument of this sort can serve this function even given my account of the two truths. My account does not foreclose this "argumentative strategy".

3. Normative Consequences of Ontological Views

I'll use "normative claims" capaciously to cover claims about rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, virtue and vice, and so forth. Brenner's second argument is that my account of the two truths does not have the normative consequences we might have thought (or hoped) that the doctrine of the two truths does.

Brenner (forthcoming: 12) claims that my account faces an objection that is similar to an objection I made to Siderits's (2007: 56-57) account of the two truths. Siderits's (2007: 56-57) account says that a proposition is conventionally true if and only if it is accepted by commonsense and is conducive to successful practice. I flatfootedly objected that Siderits'

account implies that no normative claims not accepted by commonsense could be true. The objection wasn't merely that we can't simply derive surprising ethical truths given Siderits's account; it was that there can't be non-commonsensical ethical truths given this account.¹⁴ The latter criticism is far more serious than the former, and Brenner has provided no argument that the latter criticism applies to my account. Moreover, the concern about conventional ethical truths is an instance of the more general concern that Siderits's account is unduly conservative across the board. For example, in McDaniel (2019: 442), I noted that Siderits's account implies that there are no non-commonsensical conventional truths in physics just as much as it implies that there are no non-commonsensical conventional truths in ethics. My account simply is not conservative in this way.

That said, although I believe that being conventionally real has, broadly speaking, evaluative consequences, I also grant that this is not obvious.¹⁵ In general, I do not think that there are obvious normative conclusions to be drawn from what seem to be non-normative premises—even when these are metaphysical premises.¹⁶

Consider once again nihilism. It's an interesting sociological fact that most contemporary defenders of nihilism do not argue that their view has interesting normative consequences. Far from it—most defenders of nihilism try to minimize the consequences of their view for ordinary thought.¹⁷ This fact alone should make us pause. How could we move from nihilism to a revisionary normative conclusion?

Here's a sketch of an argument to get us part of the way. The first premise is that there are some ultimate normative truths.¹⁸ The second premise is that all ultimate truths are about ultimately real entities. (Recall that, on the nihilist account, ultimate reality just is existence, and

conventional reality just is existence according to a fiction.) Given nihilism, no human person is ultimately real. And so no ultimate normative truth is about human persons.

What then might the ultimate normative truths be about? They can't be about the deontic properties of actions, or the virtuousness or viciousness of persons or their character traits, since none of these is ultimately real. Given Abhidharma metaphysics, dharmas are ultimately real. Dharmas have an intrinsic nature of their own, and so could be the bearers of intrinsic value.¹⁹ So it's plausible that the ultimate normative truths are truths about the intrinsic value of the things that are fundamentally real, dharmas.²⁰

This only gets us part of the way, because we need a bridge to move us from the ultimate normative truths about the intrinsic values of various dharmas to conventional moral truths about what human persons ought to do. And it's not obvious how to build this bridge, and it's not obvious that only one such a bridge is feasible: this bedrock of ultimate axiological truths might support different and competing systems of conventional deontic truths.

Building this bridge is a seriously difficult project. But note that a proponent of my account of the two truths can make at least as much headway on this project by offering an argument similar to the one made by the proponent of the nihilist account.²¹ The first premise is that there are some ultimate normative truths. The second premise is that all ultimate truths are about ultimately real entities. Now, on my account, ultimately real entities enjoy a fundamental mode of existence, while merely conventionally real entities exist but not in a fundamental way. Nonetheless, on my account of the two truths, no human person is ultimately real. And so no ultimate normative truth is about human persons. Dharmas, however, are ultimately real, and so there could be ultimate normative truths about their intrinsic value.

The only difference between the nihilist's partial argument for a revisionary ethical conclusion and the partial argument based on my proposed account of the two truths is our accounts of conventional and ultimate existence. The "argumentative strategy" is exactly the same. On both interpretations of the two truths, Abhidharma metaphysics supports the meta-ethical claim that the good is prior to the right, but whether it supports any first-order theory in the normative ethics of behavior is less clear. I don't think this is a defect of my account, since, in general, it's not a straightforward matter to derive ethical claims from metaphysical premises.

In what preceded, I focused on the beginnings of arguments for revisionary normative conclusions. Perhaps instead we should focus on which accounts of the doctrine of two truths could provide a basis for affective change in a person who comes to accept this doctrine so understood.²² This affective change in turn might be the basis for recognizing the correct normative theory, at least when conjoined with proper training. Whether this is so is a question too large to satisfactorily discuss in a short reply, and one that couldn't be settled by a purely philosophical argument anyways. But my account of the two truths is not obviously unsuitable as a basis for affective change. In McDaniel (2017a: chapter six), I argued that the view that human persons are ultimately real is an important (albeit implicit) part of our self-conception. If we are merely conventionally real, then we are not substances and we lack an essence in the strict sense. Learning that our self-conception is deeply mistaken—that our sufferings are more real than we are, and that, fundamentally speaking, they are unowned—might be profoundly disorienting.²³ Perhaps, with proper guidance and teaching, it might eventually be liberating.²⁴

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¹ See McDaniel (2017a) for discussion and defenses of various versions of ontological pluralism.

² In McDaniel (2019: 34, footnote. 44), I mention other putative candidates for ultimately real entities. I'll ignore them here.

³ This use of "person" seems common in the secondary literature. See, for example, Duerlinger's remarks in Vasubandhu (2003: 26), Meyers (2014), and Siderits (2007: 33).

⁴ See, e.g., Duerlinger in Vasubandhu (2003: 1-2) and Kapstein (1988: 244). Note that Kapstein (1988) discusses theories of the self in the Upaniṣadic tradition to which Buddhist philosophers are presumably responding. (Thanks to Father Philip Neri Reese for discussion here.)

⁵ See, e.g., Duerlinger in Vasubandhu (2003: 3), where the self of a person is that which makes that person a self₁ or a self₂ and Siderits (2007: 33-34), where the self of a person is that which is the essence of that person and which ensures that person's persistence over time.

⁶ See, e.g., Duerlinger in Vasubandhu (2003: 14-15) and Kapstein (1988: 249-250).

⁷ Compare with Kapstein (1988: 250).

⁸ Brenner does not cite Vasubandhu as a philosopher of the Abhidharma but rather as a proponent of an argument the type of which a proponent of the Abhidharma might wish to use as well.

⁹ This seems to be Duerlinger's take. See, e.g., his remarks in Vasubandhu (2003: 8).

¹⁰ I neither claim nor deny that this sort of view is endorsed by Vasubandhu in his other works.

For an overview of the metaphysics of many-one identity, see Wallace (2011a, 2011b).

¹¹ A similar consideration motivated numerous scholastics in the west to postulate substantial forms: if something neither has nor is a substantial form, it lacks an essence in the strict sense, and hence lacks what it takes to be a genuine being as opposed to a mere being by aggregation. As noted earlier, Vasubandhu would resist the need to posit selves or substantial forms to secure the ultimate reality of persons by collectively identifying each person with her “constituent” dharmas.

¹² Siderits (2015: 106) notes that “Indian Buddhists are logically conservative”. Interestingly, Nolan (2016) argues that Chrysippus also employed this style of argument even though he too accepted classical logical principles such as bivalence and the law of excluded middle.

¹³ See McDaniel (2017a: chapter 4) for a discussion of ontological pluralism and category mistakes.

¹⁴ As I noted in McDaniel (2019: 453, ft. 14), many philosophers have raised this sort of worry, though not specifically for Siderits’s conception of conventional truth. See The Cowherds (2010: 18-19, 152,161, 223-224) and Tillemans (2016: 47-48 & 55-56).

¹⁵ See McDaniel (2017a: chapter 6 and 2017b) for discussion.

¹⁶ See Gowans (2015: chapter 8) for a discussion of the difficulties in deriving Buddhist ethical claims from Buddhist metaphysical claims.

¹⁷ See Bennett (2009) for an extended discussion of this point.

¹⁸ Many contemporary nihilists will deny this premise, since many of them are not robust metaethical realists. And many Buddhist philosophers will as well, e.g., those of the Madhyamaka, since according to them all truths are conventional truths. But this premise strikes my amateur eye as part of the Abhidharma worldview.

¹⁹ See Goodman (2015: 127-130) for a discussion of whether “intrinsic value” is an apt phrase to use when characterizing Buddhist ethics.

²⁰ Compare with Goodman (2009: 126-128) and Siderits (2016: 270-272).

²¹ This argument is not the argument discussed by Brenner (forthcoming: 16-17).

²² Compare with Goodman’s (2009: 129-130) discussion of whether the kind of global antirealism he attributes to the Mahāyāna Buddhists could support affective change such as detachment.

²³ I would find it so. Probably some would not. C’est la vie!

²⁴ I thank Daniel Nolan and Father Philip Neri Reese for helpful comments and fruitful discussion.