Class Fifteen - Hume and Indian Buddhist Philosophy

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Hume on Personal Identity (Very Briefly)

- **The Same General Methodology, Applied:** Hume's argument against the self is quite similar to his argument against causal powers (and relies on it to some extent). Recall:
  - **Hume's Anti-Dogmatist Principle:** "When we entertain [. . .] any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion," (13).
- **The Supposed Idea of Self:** "It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner," (1).
  - **Note on the Word "Self" and Other Words:** Of course, there's a philosophically innocuous way of using the word self. For instance, when I say that "I invited myself to the party" there's not these metaphysical commitments that come with this ordinary usage. It is specifically when philosophers talk about "*the* self" that there are these metaphysical commitments built in. Other words you mind find playing the same role:
    - The subject
    - The "I"

    Once again, there are perfectly unproblematic ordinary uses of these word (well, maybe not "*the* 'I"' but certainly "I"), but they are often used in philosophical contexts to purport to designate something that's potentially philosophically problematic.
- **An Observation (or lack thereof):** "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 can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception," (1).
- **The Imputed Nature of the Mind and Its True Nature:** "The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies.' It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects. [. . .] [W]e suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity [. . .] [but] identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them," (4-5).

2 Some Context on Buddhism and Madhyamaka

- **Buddhism:** Buddhism began in India in either the 6th or 5th century BCE with Siddhārtha Gautama who was "awakened" (to the cause and way to end suffering) after sitting under a fig tree and meditating for a long time. The term "Buddha" just means "awakened one."

    - **Note:** For reference, this is probably about 100 years before Socrates.

  Like Socrates, Buddha didn't write anything himself (as far as we know), but his teachings were compiled in various texts known as the Buddhist *sutras*, which were then developed and systematized in different ways by different Buddhist philosophers.

- **Basic Buddhist Doctrine:** The most basic Buddhist doctrine is the *four noble truths:*
    - **First Noble Truth:** There is suffering or, more generally, unsatisfactoriness.
    - **Second Noble Truth:** The cause of suffering is the fact that we're attached to things.
    - **Third Noble Truth:** It's possible to end suffering through letting go of attachment.
    - **Fourth Noble Truth:** There's a particular path, taught by the Buddha, through which the cessation of suffering can be achieved.
- **Question:** What are we attached to that is causing our suffering?
    - **Answer:** Well, lots of things, but most fundamentally a conception of our *selves*, these things that each of us calls "I" and clings to as essentially our own.
- **Some Context in Buddhist Philosophy Presupposed by Garfield:** There's a lot of names that Garfield mentions that I imagine could be a bit overwhelming, given that they're going to completely unfamiliar to most people.
    - **Abidharma Buddhism:** Starting in the few centuries before the turn of the millennium, there was a movement in Buddhist philosophy (essentially the origin of Buddhist philosophy as such) called "Abidharma," which attempted to systemic the teachings of the Buddha into philosophically rigorous arguments.
        - **Nāgasena:** A Buddhist monk who (purportedly) lived around 150BC who had an influential discussion with king Milinda (Menander I, in Greek) recorded in the "Questions of King Milinda," a classic Abidharma text.
    - **The "Madhyamaka or "Middle Way" School:** In the 2nd Century CE, the views advanced in certain Buddhist sutras (especially the "perfection of wisdom" sutras) were philosophically developed and systematized by the philosopher Nāgārjuna, whose system became known as *Madhyamaka*, which means "middle way." Important figures:
        - **Nāgārjuna:** Widely regarded as the most significant Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha himself. His principle work, "Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way," systematically (though cryptically) lays out a complete system of Buddhist philosophy centered around the notion of "emptiness," which disagrees profoundly with previous Abidharma ideas.
        - **Candrakīrti:** A 7th century Indian Buddhist widely regarded as the most significant Madhyamaka philosopher after Nāgārjuna himself—both a brilliant commentator and an original philosopher in his own right.
            - **A General Point about Buddhist Philosophy:** Much of Buddhist philosophy is done through *commentaries* which go line by line and explicate either the Buddhist sutras or great works (such as Nāgārjuna's "Fundamental Verses").
        - **Tsongkhapa:** A 14th century Tibettan Buddhist philosopher
    - **Some Contemporary Context:** The Dalai Lama (the most recognized figure in Buddhism today) is a practitioner of the Geluk order of Tibbettan Buddhism, which is based on the teachings of Tsongkhapa, which, are, in turn, based on the work of Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna.
- **The Two Truths:** Central to Buddhist philosophy, of both the Abidharma and the Madhyamaka variety, is a distinction between two realities or *two truths*. As Nāgārjuna says:

  > The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths:
  > conventional truth and ultimate truth, (*MMK* 24.8)

  So, we have the following distinction:

    - **Conventional Truth:** The truths we accept in every life about such things as persons, chariots, and so on.

- **Ultimate Truth:** Varies depending on the school of Buddhism:
  - **Abidharma:** There is a level of ultimately real things—for instance, basic, momentary mental sensations and volitions—that aren't in any way dependent on conventions but underlie and explain the existence of those conventions.
  - **Madhyamaka:** There's really *nothing* that's ultimately real, nothing that's independent of other things and our conventions of thinking and speaking. As Mark Siderits puts it, "The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth."

  Garfield is principally considering Madhyamaka philosophy in his paper, but most of the points apply generally.

3 The Buddhist View on the (lack of) Self

- **The Common Target:** "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," (228-229).
  - **The Thought:** There are lots of things that we can pinpoint upon reflection or observation, for instance, particular mental states or events, arms, legs, fingers, and so on. The "self" is not identical with any of these things nor with some collection of them, but, rather, is said to *possess* all of them.
- **The Negative and Positive Point in the "Questions of King Melinda":**
  - **Negative Point: The Unfindability of Self:** The King investigates all of the things that are findable in Nāgasena, and can't find Nāgasena. There are four possibilities:
    - **Identical to Physical Stuff:** It seems that there's no part of the body that one can identify with Nāgasena (not the hair, teeth, skin, flesh, etc) nor all of these things combined.
    - **Identical to Mental Stuff:** It seems that there's no particular mental state (perception, volition, etc) or event that one can identify with Nāgasena, nor all of these things combined (for the reason below).
    - **Combination of Physical and Mental Stuff:** Is Nāgasena the combination of all the physical stuff and all the mental stuff? Nāgasena says "No."
      - **Quick Argument:** Intuitively, it seems that one could have different physical properties or different mental states and still be the person that one is. So one can't be identical to the total collection of physical and mental states.
    - **Something Other than the Physical and Mental Stuff:** Clearly, there *is* nothing else than the physical and mental stuff that can be found. So Nāgasena can't be anything other than the physical and mental stuff.

    Conclusion: The King concludes that there is no such individual as Nāgasena: "Nāgasena is only a sound."
    - **The Negative Point, Summed Up by Candrakīrti:** Candrakīrti sums up this negative point as follows (read "aggregates" as "mental and/or physical stuff"):

      "Therefore, the basis of self-grasping is not an entity.
      It is neither identical to nor different from the aggregates."
  - **Positive Point: The on Conventional Reality:** The King, however, accuses Nāgasena of *lying* when he says, for instance "I am known as Nāgasena."
    - **The Chariot Analogy:** Nāgasena asks the king if he came on foot or in a chariot. The king answers "in a chariot." Nāgasena then runs the same argument to show that there is no chariot (it's neither identical to its parts nor distinct from them), and accuses the king of lying right back!

    - **The Point:** Words like "chariot" and names like "Nāgasena" aren't *meaningless*—they conventionally designate things. It's just that these things they designate exist only conventionally—they don't hold up under philosophical analysis.
  - **The Positive Point, Summed Up by Candrakīrti:** "We maintain that [the self (and the chariot, for that matter)] 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."

4 Comparison to Hume

- **Question:** How do we think this sort of account of the self compares with the Humean account?
- **Other Comparison's Between Madhyamaka and Hume:** There are many other comparisons of Buddhist Philosophy to Hume to be drawn. Here's one:
  - **Causation:** The core Madhyamaka argument against causation actually contains the Humean argument against causation as one horn in a basic dilemma. The core argument basically goes like this:

    > If two things ever stand in a relation of cause and effect, then the effect is either contained in the cause or extrinsic to the case. The effect can't be contained in the cause. The effect can't be extrinsic to the cause [the Humean argument goes here]. So no two things can ever stand in a relation of cause and effect.