

# Buddhist Physicalism? Confronting the Obstacles

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# Buddhism ‘naturalized’

- To naturalize a phenomenon is to make our understanding of the phenomenon compatible with the approach and findings of the natural sciences
  - Buddhism as ‘mind science’
- Some embrace the project, others criticize it
- One common criticism: requires adoption of physicalism, which incompatible with key elements of Buddhist thought and practice
- Physicalism as an ontological thesis: everything that exists is physical
- Folk ontology vs. ‘serious’ ontology
  - Folk dualism
  - Folk physicalism?
  - Serious ontology as product of analysis: prescinding from the merely subjective, mere accommodations to our interests and cognitive limitations

- Physicalism as a serious ontological thesis
  - ‘physical’ = the value of a bound variable in logically regimented statements of laws final physics
    - e.g., if Newtonian mechanics had been final physics, *mass* would have been one of the entries in a serious ontology
  - ‘final physics’ as a promissory note—but one there is reason to believe will be redeemed based on the history of the natural sciences
  - physicalism understood as serious ontology claims that we need not suppose there is anything more to reality than the entities mentioned in the laws of final physics
  - everything else—what’s found in our folk ontology but not in a physicalist ontology—can be explained in terms of physical facts plus facts about how we conceptualize the world
- Naturalizing Buddhism in order to avoid Dharmageddon?
  - rise of folk physicalism?

# Buddhist anti-physicalism

- Indian Buddhist philosophical enterprise as serious ontology
  - Madhyamaka global anti-realism as the one exception
- Buddhist dualism, Buddhist idealism
  - ‘just doing phenomenology’?
- Cārvāka materialism:
  - only the four elements exist
  - mental states supervene on arrangements of the four atoms, as intoxicating power supervenes on arrangement of water, grain and yeast
- Buddhist critique: promotes immorality by calling karma/rebirth ideology into question
  - though note Vasubandhu’s claim: Cārvāka nonetheless conducive to liberation
- Role of karma/rebirth ideology in Buddhist practice
- Other reasons to be anti-physicalist:
  - meditation as ‘mind science’?
  - zombie-phobia?

# Ontology and the Buddhist project

- Why might Cārvāka be thought ‘conducive to liberation’?
- Nirvana as the cessation of existential suffering, belief in the ‘I’ as root cause of suffering
- Cārvāka like Buddhism in denying existence of a self
- Self as source of the ‘I’-sense; two possibilities:
  - simple: persisting subject of experience, agent of action (*ātman*)
  - composite: causal series of suitably arranged sets of psychophysical elements (*pudgala*)
  - Buddhists deny the (ultimate) existence of both
- Extreme counter-intuitiveness of coming to believe that ‘I’ do not exist
  - hence importance of using argumentation and analysis to establish that belief in an ‘I’ is a cognitive error superimposed on what exists strictly speaking
  - i.e., importance of doing serious ontology

# Establishing the non-existence of the ‘I’

- Non-self: two distinct denials:
  - denial of the existence of an enduring entity that is distinct from psychophysical elements and that serves as subject and agent (Cartesian ego, soul pellet, *ātman*)
  - denial of the existence of a person—the composite entity consisting of a causal series of impermanent psychophysical elements (*pudgala*)
- Self is unreal
  - arguments from impermanence, control
- Person is not *ultimately* real but is *conventionally* real
  - ultimately real = real from the standpoint of serious ontology
  - conventionally real = included in our folk ontology
- Not ultimately real because persons are composite—and there are no composite entities (mereological nihilism is true)

# The neither-identical-nor-distinct argument for mereological nihilism

- If there were such composite entities as chariots, they would be composed of, say, 27 parts.
- Supposing both chariot and parts to be real, chariot either identical with or distinct from its constituent parts.
- By Leibniz' Law, not identical: chariot lacks a property of its parts, being 27 in number
- If distinct, then either wholly located or partly located in each part.
  - not wholly located—a chariot is too big to fit in the region occupied by a cotter pin
  - not partly located—hypothesis leads to infinite regress of parts<sub>1</sub>, parts<sub>2</sub>, etc.
- Hence mereological nihilism: composition never occurs
- Conventionally real entities as things only believed to exist because of our use of convenient designators
  - words like 'chariot', 'forest', 'city', 'person' as opaque enumerative expressions, concessions to our interests and cognitive limitations

# The intrinsic nature test for ultimate reals

- Mereological nihilism | only simples are ultimately real
- But what are simples (*dharmas*)?
- Standard Buddhist answer: entities whose concept still applies after separation and analysis
- Separation: *chariot* no longer applies after disassembly of chariot parts
- Analysis: *water* no longer applies after analysis of indivisible water particle into occurrences of round shape, colorlessness, wetness, etc.
- *Dharma* as entity whose nature intrinsic (*svabhāva*)
- The *loneliness* test: a *dharma* is something that could exist in the lonely or unaccompanied state
- *Dharmas* as momentary trope-occurrences



# What kinds of *dharmas* are there?

- Classical Buddhist realists:
  - dualists:
    - five—corporeal, hedonic, perceptual, volitional, conscious
    - two—corporeal, conscious
  - idealists: one—conscious
- Buddhist physicalists: one—the values of the bound variables in logically regimented statements of laws final physics
- Buddhist physicalist can say that mental events are conventionally real: merely useful ways of conceptualizing what are in fact highly complex arrangements of ultimately real physical *dharmas*
- But still leaves karma/rebirth ideology highly implausible
- And meditation can't be understood as 'mind science'

# Looking ahead

- Does classical Buddhist internal-world realism face equally difficult challenges?
- Tomorrow morning's talk will explore the difficulties faced by classical Buddhist accounts of consciousness as an ultimately real *dharma*, something that satisfies the ontological scruples of Buddhist realism
- Then tomorrow afternoon the third talk will explore how a Buddhist physicalism might try to meet the challenges it faces as a Buddhist metaphysical theory:
  - the 'hard problem' of explaining away phenomenal consciousness
  - if meditation isn't a way of doing 'mind science', how can it be efficacious?
  - can there be a Buddhist path without the karma/rebirth ideology?