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MULTIMODALITY AND NO-SELF

abstract

The Indian Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu argued forcefully for the no-self view. Philosophers belonging to the Hindu Nyāya tradition disagreed: the self is required, among other things, to explain the existence of multimodal perceptions. Monima Chadha has recently responded to this multimodality argument on behalf of Vasubandhu. In this paper I argue that her response is problematic in two ways: it is not consistent with Vasubandhu's general ontology, and it proposes an unstable position.

keywords

no-self, multimodality, Vasubandhu, Nyāya, Chadha

1. Introduction Philosophers in the Hindu Nyāya tradition who oppose the Buddhist no-self thesis have offered various arguments for the existence of the self. Notable among these is the idea that the existence of multimodal experience requires a self capable of synthesising different sensory data. Against Nyāya's multimodality argument, Monima Chadha, in her recent book *Selfless Minds*, offers a defence of the no-self thesis as elaborated by the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (Chadha, 2023). She claims that there are indeed multimodal perceptual experiences, but that they do not require a self. In this article I argue that this defence is problematic. One reason is that it conflicts with Vasubandhu's ontology. But even leaving this problem aside, I suggest that Chadha's position either paves the way for the admission of the self as a basic entity, or ends up renouncing multimodal experiences.

Here is the outline of the paper. Section 2 gives an overview of Vasubandhu's no-self thesis. Section 3 presents the multimodality argument for the existence of the self put forward by Nyāya philosophers and Chadha's response to this argument on behalf of Vasubandhu. In section 4 I argue that this response is problematic for the reasons just suggested. Finally, section 5 briefly summarises the discussion.

2. Vasubandhu's no-self view Let us begin, then, with a (very sketchy) presentation of the doctrine of no-self as elaborated by Vasubandhu.

Vasubandhu is a Buddhist philosopher who lived between the 4th and 5th centuries CE, and wrote several works, including the monumental *Treasury of Metaphysics*.¹ In particular, in the ninth book of this work, Vasubandhu presents various arguments against the existence of the 'I', or the self.

The 'I', says Vasubandhu, does not exist: neither as a soul, nor as a person in the ordinary sense, i.e. as a unified psycho-physical complex that persists over time.

Vasubandhu denies the existence of the soul because, he claims, it cannot be known. There are three reliable means of knowledge, he says (in accordance with the philosophical tradition to which he himself belongs): perception – external and internal –, inference, and authoritative texts. None of them, Vasubandhu argues, supports the existence of the soul.²

The denial of ordinary persons – as I said: unified psycho-physical complexes that persist

1 In Sanskrit, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*.

2 On this topic see Kellner & Taber (2014).

over time – depends on some radical theses that are argued in a very subtle way. I will not go into these arguments here, and will content myself with stating the theses.³

Thesis A)

There are no substances, i.e. there are no property-bearers.

Thesis B)

Mereological nihilism is true: there are no entities composed of parts, only simple entities.

Thesis C)

Momentariness: nothing lasts longer than a moment.

Thesis D)

Reality consists only of *dharmas*.

“*Dharma*” is a Sanskrit keyword that can be translated in this context as “property” and also as “fundamental element”.

In particular, *dharmas* are occurrences of properties (tropes), simple entities (i.e. without parts), either mental or physical, of momentary duration, and causally dependent on other *dharmas*.

This particular wetness or this particular solidity are examples of physical *dharmas*; this particular pain or this particular perception of colour are examples of mental *dharmas*.

Vasubandhu’s metaphysics, as seen in the four theses just presented, crumbles the world of common sense, both synchronically and diachronically. For common sense, there are complex entities that persist over time (pots, trees, people...). For Vasubandhu there are only simple entities, the *dharmas*. They are occurrences of physical or mental properties of instantaneous duration, causally related to each other. There are no common-sense entities, such as pots or persons; when one thinks one is dealing with such things, what actually exists are misrepresentations (‘pot’, ‘person’): these misrepresentations are produced by conceptualising, as a synchro-diachronic unit, successions of simple and instantaneous entities which are precisely the *dharmas*. As Vasubandhu says: “Instantaneous conditioned factors [i.e. *dharmas*] whose succession is unbroken are considered by the ignorant as ‘Devadatta’ by taking a group as one being” (AKBh, p. 476).^{4,5}

One final remark. The metaphysics that I have sketched out very briefly is a means to the soteriological end of Buddhism. The goal of Buddhism is liberation from suffering, the first cause of which is ignorance; and the most serious ignorance is to assume the existence of a unified and persistent self/ego through time. This is a dangerous fiction created by mistaking certain multiplicities of simple and instantaneous *dharmas* for a synchro-diachronic unity. Metaphysical enquiry is necessary to free oneself from this error, which is the primary source of suffering, says Vasubandhu. Metaphysics will set you free, one might say.

³ But see Gold (2022), Siderits (2021, pp. 150-203), Tomasetta (2025, pp. 183-249), and Watson (2017).

⁴ “Devadatta” is a common Sanskrit name for a person.

⁵ The translation is mine. See also, Kapstein (2001, pp. 368-369).

3. Nyāya multi-modality argument for the self, and Chadha's reply

While the no-self thesis is something of a hallmark of Buddhism, the assertion of the existence of the self is characteristic of most non-Buddhist Indian philosophies. Here I focus on the Nyāya school (“Nyāya” means “method” or “logic”), which is about two thousand years old and still alive today.⁶

One of the traditional arguments for the existence of the self offered by the Nyāya philosophers is based on multimodal perception: the self is needed to explain the possibility of multimodal experience. Let us see.

When we experience a character speaking in a film, we see her mouth move and hear her words: the visual and auditory data appear to be parts of a single complex visual-auditory experience, a so-called multimodal experience, an experience that consists of perceptual data provided by two different sensory modalities, vision and hearing.

The canonical example of multimodal perception offered by the Nyāya philosophers – which, of course, does not refer to cinema – is that of a visuo-tactile experience: I now touch what I see – I feel with my hands the roughness of the fruit I am observing, let us say. In this case, the visual and tactile data seem to be part of a single multimodal, visuo-tactile perceptual experience.

But one might ask: how is such a complex experience possible? According to the Nyāya philosophers, the unity of this multimodal experience can only be explained by appealing to a conscious entity, a self, that is able to *synthesise* the different sensory data provided by touch and sight into a single experience.

In other words, the manifest fact of the existence of multimodal experience (assuming it is indeed a fact) needs to be explained. For the Nyāya philosophers, the only way to explain this fact is to admit an entity capable of synthesising the perceptual data provided by different sensory modalities into a single experience. This entity, this principle capable of synthesising the data provided by different senses, is the self or the ‘I’. The explanation of the unity of certain complex experiences therefore requires the existence of the self/ego/I. As Vātsyāyana writes:⁷

Some particular object is grasped by sight; the same object is also grasped by touch. “That very thing which I saw with my eyes, I am now feeling through my sense of touch”, and “That very thing which I felt through my sense of touch, I am now seeing with my eyes [...]”. These two perceptions of a single object are synthesised by a single agent [...] Thus the grasper of one and the same object [...] synthesises two perceptions about one and the same thing; [...] That one, in a special category, is the self (NSBh, p. 135/Dasti & Phillips, 2017, pp. 80-81, slightly modified).

One must therefore postulate the self as the entity that, by synthesising different perceptual data, explains the existence of multimodal perceptions.

Now, the multimodality argument for the existence of the self we have just considered was made by Nyāya philosophers who lived *after* Vasubandhu, and this explains why there is no reply in Vasubandhu’s texts. In her recent book *Selfless Minds*, Monima Chadha attempts, among other things, to respond on behalf of Vasubandhu to the argument for the existence of the self based on multimodal perceptions (Chadha, 2023, pp. 98-118).⁸

6 For accessible introductions see Dasti (2023) and Dasti & Phillips (2017).

7 Vātsyāyana (5th century CE) is one of the greatest philosophers of the Nyāya tradition.

8 Chadha’s focus is really on the phenomenon of what she calls “synchronic unity”. This certainly includes multimodal perceptions, but also such supposedly complex perceptions as seeing the table and the sofa at the same time (Chadha, 2023, p. 108), experiences that are obviously not multimodal perceptions. Since I believe that apparently

According to Chadha, we should indeed admit that multimodal perceptions – henceforth “MMPs” – exist. The point, she argues, is that there is no need for a synthesising self in order to have MMPs: visual and tactile (or other perceptual) data combine on their own to produce complex experiences.

This admission, Chadha insists, does no harm to Buddhist soteriology (Chadha, 2023, pp. 115-117). What is liberating for Buddhists is to know that there is no self; but the admission of multimodal perceptions does not threaten the no-self doctrine. There is no soul, and there are no ordinary persons: there are only successive momentary physical and mental *dharmas*; it is just that some of the mental *dharmas* form wholes made up of parts (these wholes are the MMPs); and that is all.

We have just considered Chadha’s response to Nyāya’s multimodality challenge. I think there are at least two problems with this response. The first problem is that what Chadha says does not agree with what Vasubandhu himself says about what exists – and since Chadha is responding on behalf of Vasubandhu this is significant. The second problem is that hers is an unstable position, in a sense that will be clarified. Let us start with the first problem.

4. Two problems for Chadha’s reply

4.1 Disagreement with Vasubandhu

According to Chadha, MMPs are to be allowed. And MMPs are, of course, wholes in the mereological sense. But we have seen that, according to Vasubandhu, mereological nihilism is true: there are no wholes composed of parts, only simple entities. So the existence of MMPs is obviously incompatible with Vasubandhu’s position. End of story.

Is it that simple? Here is a possible rejoinder. In Vasubandhu’s text there is no explicit affirmation of the *full generality* of the thesis that wholes do not exist. While there may be reasons to attribute a generalised mereological nihilism to Vasubandhu, this reading is not entirely uncontroversial. Exegetically, that is, it is not obvious that, for Vasubandhu, there are only simple entities. It could be argued that, for him, there are at least cases of composite entities, and these cases coincide with the MMPs.

Against this answer, I offer two considerations designed to show that the textual data most likely rule out a non-generalised mereological nihilism.

First note that Vasubandhu distinguishes between basic entities and entities ‘by convention’, and that this distinction is exhaustive. The basic entities are the *dharmas*, which are without parts (see AKBh, p. 334/Siderits, 2021, pp. 163-165). So MMPs, which have parts, are not basic entities. Since the distinction between basic entities and conventional entities is exhaustive, MMPs must be conventional entities.

Now, conventional entities include substances, past and future entities, absences and persons. And Vasubandhu says that these things do not exist – indeed, Vasubandhu’s denial of the existence of persons is one of the main theses of Chadha’s reading of Vasubandhu himself.⁹

Paradigmatic ‘conventional entities’ – such as substances, past and future things, absences and persons – are therefore, somewhat paradoxically, not entities. But it is not difficult to give an explanation for this: a fake painting by Rembrandt is not a painting by Rembrandt that is a fake; it is not a painting by Rembrandt. Similarly, a conventional entity is not an entity that is conventional: it is not an entity.

complex *mono-modal* perceptions raise quite different issues that deserve separate treatment, I will limit my discussion to multimodality – a move that is also justified by the fact that this is the only focus of the Nyāya argument under consideration here.

⁹ For the cases of substances, absences, and past and future entities, see, for example, Gold (2015, pp. 22-58), Guerrero (2023), and Watson (2017).

So, conventional paradigmatic entities are not entities: they are reduced to names/ concepts that are conventionally used in the presence of certain *dharmas*. For example, the word/concept ‘person’ – which purports to refer to a unified psycho-physical complex that persists over time – is used in the presence of certain organised ‘person-wise’ tropes. But if conventional paradigmatic entities are not entities, it is hard to see why MMPs, which are conventional entities, should be real entities instead. Vasubandhu does not explicitly mention any exception in this regard, which is odd, if he really believes that MMPs are real (conventional) entities.

What’s more, and this is my second brief consideration, Vasubandhu explicitly says that wholes, such as a carpet or a cloth, have no reality beyond the linguistic-conceptual one (see AKBh, 189/Siderits, 2021, p. 156). And he makes no explicit exception for perceptions. Which, again, is very strange, if he really believed that MMPs are real wholes.

To sum up. MMPs are incompatible with Vasubandhu’s mereological nihilism, at least as it is usually understood, as the negation, that is, of the existence of all wholes. But the possibility that the usual interpretation of nihilism is incorrect because of the existence of MMPs does not seem to be exegetically tenable. Then, if Vasubandhu’s mereological nihilism is indeed entirely general, Chadha’s admission of MMPs is incompatible with what Vasubandhu says about what exists.

4.2 Chadha’s position is unstable

Mereological wholes such as MMPs should be allowed to exist, says Chadha. But once set in motion, a snowball can cause an avalanche: if there are mental wholes of a certain kind, why not admit other wholes as well, even to the point of admitting those psycho-physical synchronic units that are ordinary people? Except that Chadha, along with Vasubandhu, certainly does not want to admit that the self exists, even in this ordinary version.

So, to stop this slippery slope – the slippery slope that leads from the admission of MMPs to the existence of wholes like ordinary people – Chadha needs an ‘asymmetrical mereology’, so to speak:

Yes, there are MMPs – a certain kind of whole.

No, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no (ordinary) persons.

Chadha seems to me to suggest two strategies for justifying the yes/no answer I have just formulated, and thus for stopping the slippery slope.¹⁰ I will now consider these two strategies and argue that they are both problematic. This will lead to the conclusion that Chadha’s position is unstable.

Strategy 1. Phenomenology

Chadha talks about “the manifest fact that conscious experiences often seem to be composed of multiple features, multiple modalities”. This is, she says, “the manifest fact of synchronic unity” (Chadha, 2023, p. 101). So, there is phenomenological evidence for MMPs: that there are MMPs seems to be a manifest phenomenological fact – MMPs appear to exist, and to exist as unified experiences composed of parts.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, they are two strategies for admitting MMPs; but it is clear that Chadha thinks they do not work for admitting the existence of other wholes (and in particular persons in the ordinary sense). I add that Chadha does not explicitly isolate these two strategies, but I take them to be her basic line of argument.

My reply to this phenomenological strategy begins with the following consideration: there also appears to be a unity of conscious experience as a whole at any given time; the experiences, the conscious mental states, appear as parts of a single phenomenological field. In this regard Bayne writes:

Consider the structure of your overall conscious state. I suspect that you will be inclined to the view that all your current experiences are phenomenally unified with each other – that they occur as components of a single phenomenal field; to put the same point in different terminology, that you enjoy a single phenomenal state that subsumes them all (Bayne, 2010, p. 75).

Here is an example of this single synchronic state, given by Bayne himself:

I'm sitting in the Café Cubana (47 Rue Vavin, Paris). I have auditory experiences of various kinds, I can hear the bartender making a mojito; I can hear the dog behind me chasing his tail; and there's a rumba song playing somewhere on a stereo [...] I am enjoying visual experiences of various kinds. I can see these words as they appear in my notebook; I can see the notebook itself; and I have a blurry visual impression of those parts of the room that lie behind the notebook. Co-mingled with these auditory and visual experiences are olfactory experiences of various kinds (Bayne, 2010, p. 5).

Now Chadha concedes that there is *prima facie* phenomenological evidence for the existence of a single unified phenomenal state, the parts of which are all phenomenal experiences at any given time. But she argues that this evidence is defeated on closer examination. Here is what she writes:

The unified conscious state he [Bayne] is in includes manifest experiences that are at the forefront of his awareness, and a host of other peripheral conscious experiences, which can perhaps be thought of as background states [...]. Given that there are many parts of any given conscious state, and we are not fully aware of all the parts, or not aware of all the parts to the same degree, it is hard to make sense of these states as part of the total conscious state at any given moment of time (Chadha, 2023, pp. 100-101).

There are different degrees of consciousness: not all conscious states are in the focus of attention, says Chadha. From this, she concludes that there is no composite, unified phenomenological field. But why should this be?

The very thought of a unified field with a centre and a periphery (the different degrees of consciousness) seems very straightforward. Bayne's description of the total experience in the Café Cubana – a description also reported by Chadha – is precisely that of a unified phenomenological field with different intensities. And not only is this unified field not difficult to think of, but it is rather easy to describe and 'understand', in the sense that everyone understands the meaning of Bayne's description.

So, the *prima facie* phenomenological evidence for the unity of consciousness is not threatened by Chadha's considerations. But then: if it can be said that there is phenomenological evidence for the existence of MMPs, then the same can be said for the existence of a total phenomenal field (the two evidences, if they are such, are of equal strength). Furthermore, the body as a composite entity also seems to be phenomenologically given (this evidence also has the same strength as the previous two). And the unity of the

mind-consciousness with the body also seems phenomenologically given.¹¹ Finally, the apparent mind-body unity is apparently a synchro-diachronic one. So, if (the impression of) being phenomenologically given is a good reason for admitting MMPs, then one should also admit the synchro-diachronic unity of mind-body, i.e. admit the existence of ordinary persons. But if so, then the self exists (at least as an ordinary person) and persists in time.

To conclude: Chadha had to defend these two theses: 1) Yes, there are MMPs, a certain kind of wholes, and 2) No, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no persons. But we have seen that by ‘phenomenologically’ admitting MMPs, she is also led to admit persons: 1) Yes, there are MMPs, and 2*) Yes, there are other wholes – in particular, there are (ordinary) persons.

Strategy 2. Indispensable explanatory role

The second strategy for admitting MMPs has to do with their indispensability as explanatory-causal factors: for Chadha, MMPs are indeed explanatorily indispensable.

A paradigmatic case she provides is the following: the viewer’s annoyance at an ‘out-of-sync’ film can only be explained by the existence of a previous audio-visual MMP; the disappearance of this MMP is precisely the cause of the viewer’s annoyance (Chadha, 2023, p. 107). But if MMPs have an indispensable explanatory role (IER), then they must be allowed to exist. So, yes, there are MMPs (a certain kind of whole), because they have an IER.

Then Chadha needs a “no”: “No, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no persons”, and this is true, one should say, because other wholes, including persons, do not have an IER. Let us just assume that this is true.¹² So it seems that we have our desired yes and no answer: yes, there are MMPs, a certain kind of wholes, because they have an IER and no, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no persons, because they do not have an IER.

But is that the case? I doubt it: I think Chadha is a bit overconfident about this thesis: “Yes, there are MMPs, because they have an IER”. Let me try to explain why. Consider “Case 1” and “Case 2”:

Case 1

For many months, a baby, like Pavlov’s dog, has had the experience of a bell ringing when food is brought to it, until at time *t* it hears the bell but does not see the food, and this surprises it.

Case 2

When a certain colour is perceived, a certain smell is also perceived. This creates a habit that is ‘contradicted’ at time *t*, when the colour is perceived but not the smell, causing discomfort.

In these two cases, the reaction of surprise or discomfort is explained without reference to MMPs – MMPs do not appear in the explanation. Therefore, in order to explain the observed effect (surprise or discomfort), it is not necessary to assume that the two sensory experiences involved form an MMP. Let us now consider a third parallel case:

¹¹ Even Descartes said something very similar: the difficult thing, he said, is to prove the mind-body distinction; their unity is a basic and primitive notion. See Shapiro (2007, pp. 63-65).

¹² Merricks (2001), for example, offers some standard arguments for denying the existence of wholes on the grounds that they are causally/explanatorily redundant.

Case 3

When a film viewer perceives the word *W*, she also perceives the lip movement *M*. This creates a habit that is ‘contradicted’ at time *t*, when *W* is perceived in the absence of *M*, causing discomfort.

Just as in Cases 1 and 2 the reaction (surprise or discomfort) is explained without the need for an MMP, so, in Case 3, the discomfort caused by the out-of-sync phenomenon is explained without the need for an MMP: it is not true that the viewer’s discomfort with an out-of-sync film can only be explained by the existence of a prior audio-visual MMP. Thus, it seems that one can avoid attributing an IER to the paradigmatic MMP considered by Chadha, i.e. the audio-visual MMP.

But what is true for a paradigm is, of course, also true for the other cases (otherwise, it would not be a true paradigm). That is, the conclusion generalises from the paradigm case to the rest of the MMPs: MMPs do not have indispensable causal/explanatory power. Thus, Chadha’s reason for allowing MMPs fails.

But there is more: we have assumed that there are no wholes other than MMPs, and in particular that there are no persons, *because they have no IER*. So, if an alleged entity *x* has no IER, then *x* does not exist.¹³ But if MMPs have no IER, then MMPs do not exist.

So: we had conceded that “No, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no persons”. But if MMPs do not have an indispensable explanatory role, then it is also true that “No, there are no MMPs”.

The instability of Chadha’s position

To sum up and conclude. Chadha wants to admit MMPs in order to answer the Nyāya philosophers’ argument for the existence of the self. To do this, she needs to have a justification for this pair of propositions:

Yes, there are MMPs, a certain kind of whole.

No, there are no other wholes – in particular, there are no persons.

She offers two justifications for this pair of theses: the phenomenological strategy and the IER-based strategy. But the phenomenological strategy is too weak: it allows us to admit the existence of MMPs, but does not prevent us from admitting persons. The IER-based strategy, on the other hand, is too strong: it allows us to deny the existence of persons, but ends up denying the existence of MMPs.

So, Chadha’s yes-and-no position (yes, there are MMPs; no, there are not persons or other wholes) is unstable: if it is justified in one way (via phenomenology), it ends up as a yes-yes position; if it is justified the other way (via IER), it becomes a no-no position.

Vasubandhu, as we have seen, rejects any form of self/ego. Nyāya philosophers disagree: they argue that the self is necessary to explain MMPs. Chadha replies on behalf of Vasubandhu: MMPs exist, but this existence does not require a self. But this reply has two problems: 1) Chadha’s thesis is incompatible with what Vasubandhu says about what exists, and 2) Chadha’s position is unstable, given the strategies of justification she offers.

5. Concluding summary

¹³ Indeed, according to the Vasubandhu read by Chadha – and by Gold (2015) – to exist is to have indispensable causal/explanatory power. Hence: no IER, no existence.

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