

DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

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I. Against Unity and Being: Śrīgupta's Metaphysical Indefinitism

It's easy to see how certain things depend for their existence on other things: a gaggle cannot exist without geese, nor a molecule without atoms. But what would the world be like if everything depended for its existence on something else? Is an unending dependence structure even coherent? Historically, Western philosophical traditions have predominantly endorsed metaphysical foundationalist positions, yet Buddhist philosophy provides a rich source of anti-foundationalist arguments that merit broader attention. I present a reconstruction and analysis of one such anti-foundationalist argument, the “neither-one-nor-many argument,” as formulated by the c. seventh century Indian Buddhist philosopher, Śrīgupta, in his *Introduction to Reality* (*Tattvāvatāra*). I argue that Śrīgupta's line of reasoning commits him to a form of metaphysical indefinitism, and I make a case for its internal consistency and identify its virtues.

As a Mādhyamika Buddhist, Śrīgupta's central commitment is that nothing has independent being (*svabhāva*), that is, everything is ontologically dependent on something else. He recognizes a tight connection between ontological dependence and mereological dependence: a thing is ontologically independent only if it is mereologically simple. That's because anything that has proper parts depends for its existence on the existence of those parts. Śrīgupta argues that nothing is ontologically independent because there are no simples. While someone like Leibniz rejects material simples only to appeal to mind-like simple substances to ground the multitude, Śrīgupta insists that the existence of any kind of simple—whether material or immaterial—is metaphysically impossible. In reconstructing Śrīgupta's argument, I focus on (i) his subargument against material simples (an attack on atomism), as well as (ii) his subargument against mental simples, which turns on an analysis of the relation between the mind and mental content.

But what would a world devoid of fundamentalia look like? I clarify that Madhyamaka dependence chains are indefinite rather than straightforwardly infinite inasmuch as they are potentially, mind-dependently, and structurally infinite, rather than actually, mind-independently, and quantitatively infinite. I delineate the structural properties of the Madhyamaka metaphysical dependence relation by contrasting it with the metaphysical grounding relation. Mādhyamikas like Śrīgupta are metaphysical egalitarians of a sort: in the final analysis, nothing is ontologically independent, and so, strictly speaking, there is nothing that is ontologically prior to, or more fundamental than anything else. Thus, Madhyamaka dependence relations do not honor the strict asymmetrical metaphysical priority of one relatum to the other, which is standardly characteristic of the metaphysical grounding relation. Yet, provided certain contextualist qualifications, I reveal how the metaphysical grounding relation can still serve as a useful model for understanding Madhyamaka dependence relations.

Śrīgupta's metaphysical indefinitism makes use of (at least) three kinds of dependence relations: causal, conceptual, and mereological. I flesh out a picture of this view focusing on mereological indefinitism as a subspecies of metaphysical indefinitism. I clarify how Madhyamaka mereological indefinitism differs from contemporary “gunky” mereological models and I argue that there are, in fact, a variety of reasons to endorse this admittedly unintuitive position. I demonstrate the payoffs of the view in terms of its ontological and ideological parsimony and its capacity to honor common sensical and pragmatic concerns. I further show how Madhyamaka mereological indefinitism offers promising strategies for resolving a variety of familiar metaphysical puzzles concerning identity, colocation, composition, and persistence.

II. A Relation-Interpretation of the Lockean Person

I argue that, for Locke, a person is a relation. There's a reason that this interpretation has been overlooked. It sounds odd to us today to say that a person is a relation. But Locke does not mean the same thing by "relation" that we do. And the structure of Lockean relations has not been well understood. Many of Locke's stock examples of relations—like friend, enemy, father, and son—appear to contemporary readers not to be relations at all, but things that stand in relations to other things. For instance, most of us take a father to stand in the relation of fatherhood to his child, without taking fathers themselves to be relations. Locke, however, claims just that: fathers *are* relations. A proper analysis of Lockean relations helps us see that—against the tide of past scholarship—a person for Locke is best categorized not as a substance (like a body or a soul) or as a mode (like a number or an activity), but as a relation (like a father or a friend). A relation-interpretation of the Lockean person not only makes the best sense of the text, but also yields an account of persons that delivers significant metaphysical and epistemological advantages.

I start with an analysis of the unusual structure of Lockean relations. I then present my relation-interpretation of Lockean persons, focusing first on how the idea of a person conforms to the structure of an idea of a relation, and next explaining how to understand a person as a relation ontologically. Along the way, I shed light on a historically overlooked distinction between the Lockean self and the Lockean person, which are standardly understood as first and third personal equivalents. The conflation of the Lockean self and person has led to confusion on the part of interpreters who have sought to condemn, revise, or rehabilitate Locke's seemingly circular account of personal identity. But for Locke, the self and the person are not strictly equivalent. It is the person—not the self—that is a diachronic forensic entity tracking moral accountability, and it is the self—not the person—that is the synchronic object of knowledge of the cogito. The person is a diachronic identity relation between past and present selves, which are its relata.

The metaphysics of persons has epistemic consequences. Locke famously endorses a strong form of privileged access when it comes to first personal judgments concerning one's own personal identity. He ought not, however, to endorse infallibility. Many interpretations of Lockean personal identity, including the popular "memory theory," commit him to infallibility. I argue that understanding the Lockean person as a relation affords an account of *qualified* privileged access in first personal judgments of personal identity. Lockean relations are (i) in some sense mind-dependent, yet they are also (ii) beholden to the existence of particular substances denominated by their relata, which act as their truth-makers. That persons as relations are mind-dependent accommodates the epistemic privilege of the first-person stance, and that persons as relations must answer to the existence of substances as their truth-makers provides a non-circular basis for excluding infallibility, thereby preventing false memories from constituting persons.

Understanding persons as relations also delivers metaphysical payoffs. I demonstrate how this metaphysically thin account of persons not only honors the non-substantialist spirit of Locke's account of personal identity, but also sidesteps Reid's failure of transitivity objection. That's because on the relation-interpretation, (i) persons *are* transitive relations, and (ii) they are relativized to the first-person, present perspective from which one makes judgments about one's own personhood. Moreover, I show how sameness of consciousness serves as a grounding criterion for persons without entailing circularity or resorting to a substantialist account of consciousness. A relation-interpretation, thus, yields the strongest reading of Locke's influential account of personhood.