Kumārila Bhaṭṭa on the First-Personal Pronoun

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Abstract
In metaphysical debates about the self, realist philosophers like Kumārila Bhaṭṭa must account for uses of the first-personal pronoun that seem to predicate properties inconsistent with the supposedly enduring, immaterial self. Responding to Buddhists like Vasubandhu, in his 'Position on the Self' chapter of the *Commentary in Verse*, Kumārila argues for an invariantist position, despite his well-known contextualist strategies for explaining the meaning of nouns like 'self.' I show how this strategy accounts for the problem sentences and resolves a further potential problem that might arise with the possessive pronoun 'my' when its complement is the word 'self.'

I

Introduction. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (ca 650 CE) is a Mīmāṃsā philosopher, concerned with the future-oriented actions of ritual participants. He is also concerned with the nature of the self, the importance of indexical thought for action, and the relationship between the first-personal pronoun and self-directed thought. In a section of his *Commentary in Verse* (*Ślokavārttika*, ŚV) devoted to the defense of an enduring self, 'Position on the Self' (*ātmavāda*), Kumārila argues that an enduring self must exist to benefit from its actions, and he defends the self's existence against his Buddhist opponents, who deny it.[1] In the course of this chapter, Kumārila explains how the first-personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' are used in everyday language and thought. This is because everyone, skeptical about a self or not, agrees that people take themselves to use pronouns on the basis of first-personal thought. These thoughts — or 'cognitions' — are momentary mental events with these features:

> *Pronominal basis*. I-cognitions are the basis for our use of the first-personal pronoun 'I.'
>
> *Agency*. I-cognitions represent their object as an agent of action.
>
> *Subjectivity*. I-cognitions represent their object as the subject of experiences.
>
> *Continuity*. I-cognitions represent their object as continuing through time.[2]

Kumārila argues a thinker's I-cognitions are about the same real entity. But his Buddhist opponent argues that this idea is unreal; it is an imaginary construct based on experiences of real things like momentary mental states and physical properties. We simply imagine agency, subjectivity, and continuity as belonging to some single thing. Thus, while the Buddhist may

[1] For existing translations of this section, see Jha (1983). Discussion in Taber (1990) and Watson (2020). I also consulted a draft translation of *ātmavāda* 107–139, prepared by Alex Watson and Suguru Ishimura for a forthcoming Kumārila reader. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine. The focus of this paper is primarily verses 125–36, which form a cohesive argumentative unit.

[2] Whether this continuity should be understood as perdurance, endurance, or something else is at issue in metaphysical debates about the self.

accept *pronominal basis* — we do use the word 'I' because we have an I-cognition, they deny that these uses demonstrate an enduring self. Rather, they think linguistic evidence shows that different objects are the basis for the pronoun in different contexts. To respond to this critic, Kumārila must demonstrate that the linguistic evidence is consistent with his claim that I-cognitions are about an enduring single entity, the self. He takes a somewhat surprising strategy given his background commitments, and he has more in common with his Buddhist interlocutor than may have been appreciated: a commitment to some stable meaning across all uses of 'I.'

Broadly Western, analytic philosophy's discussion about the meaning of 'I' and the essential indexical more generally is massive: for introductions, see Perry (1993), Perry (2019), García-Carpintero and Torre (2016) and — for a slightly more technical account — Ninan (2010). In addition to this Perry-Lewis tradition in analytic philosophy, there is a tradition in premodern Indian philosophy engaging with this topic. Modern philosophers working on (and with) this tradition typically focus on debates between Nyāya and Buddhist philosophers; see for example, Chadha (2021), Das (2023), and Taber (2012). However, when it comes to Mīmāṃsā philosophy, existing work primarily does not focus on but rather the epistemology and phenomenology of *recognition*, the ability of an individual to reidentify herself as the self-same subject of a previous experience or action (Taber 1990, Watson 2020). The referent of 'I' is discussed in this context, as when a person utters, 'Now I am experiencing this thing which I experienced earlier.'[3]

This expression verbalizes the speaker's self-recognition, their knowledge that the past and present experiencer are identical. However, although recognition and the possibility of direct awareness of the self are experiences that can be put into language, they are not essentially linguistic for Kumārila, since perception is a separate way of knowing; application of language to the content of our perception comes later.[4] Further, neither Kumārila nor his predecessors in his Mīmāṃsā tradition think that the first-personal pronoun's use is the main evidence for the existence of the self. The order of explanation goes the other direction: because we introspectively perceive ourself as a constant subject of changing experiences, we are able to talk about this object using coreferring pronouns.

II

Explaining I-cognitions and first-personal language. Still, realists who think 'I' refers to the self must explain why sometimes the first-personal pronoun seems to predicate the wrong properties of it. If the referent of 'I' is immaterial, how we can utter apparently true sentences that predicate material properties of the self? A skeptical opponent, like a Buddhist, must explain features of our pronominal use that seem consistent with the enduring-self position. It seems as if there is a stable object to which each speaker refers with their use of 'I' (and thinks with I-thoughts). As Kumārila puts it, unless an agent thinks of the future results as belonging to himself and as originating from his own present actions, their ability to engage in action could only be accidental:

> But one who does not think in this way: 'The result of this action will be mine,' because they are ignorant, for this person, there will be no activity except accidentally.[5]

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[3] *jñātavān aham evedam puredānīm ca vedmy aham*, ŚV, ĀTV v. 116. Sanskrit text from Tailaṅga (1898) unless otherwise noted. Watson (2020, 896) discusses this case.

[4] See Taber (2004, 118–26) for discussion of Kumārila's arguments on this topic.

[5] *nāvabudhyeta yas tv evaṃ mamāsmāt karmaṇaḥ phalam | bhaviṣyatīty avidvattvād daivād*

As Freschi (2013) has emphasized, Kumārila is interested in the self as an agent, closer to something like the self as *person*. Still, his conception of the self does have some metaphysical 'heft.'

Kumārila defends several claims about the self:

1. The self is distinct from the body, sense faculties, and mental faculty (verse 7).
2. The self is eternal: it cannot perish and does not essentially change (verse 7).
3. The self admits of changing states (verses 23–27).
4. The self as a substance is the bearer of mental properties, 'cognitions,' (verse 26).
5. The self's essential nature is being a cognizer (verses 29–31).

A person experiences many different cognitions during their life — momentary episodes of perceiving, learning, believing, knowing, doubting, and so forth. These momentary episodes are properties of an underlying, unchanging and eternal substance, the self. Kumārila's conception of self is not the 'mind' in the sense of a mental faculty, computational system, or set of processes, but like a 'mind' in the Cartesian sense of an immaterial substance. One potential point of tension in Kumārila's metaphysics is the relationship between the enduring, unchanging self, the *cognizer*, and its momentary, changing states, the *cognitions*. A cognition is what perceives, as it has the perceptual contents. So, how can the unchanging, enduring self be characterized as a perceiver?[6] One response, important for the linguistic cases discussed below, is to analyze the self as a single thing that has different aspects: the self-as-cognition and the self-as-substance.[7]

Each person's self is a single, eternal entity with two aspects: a substantial nature and cognitive properties. In Kumārila's metaphysics of properties and substances, there is no inherence relation, a third 'tie' between a substance and its property.[8] Rather, these are two aspects of an underlying reality, both of we accept as real since we experience them without contravening experiences. Further, Kumārila accepts that there is a sense in which the self can be called 'noneternal,' if that just means something that can change (verse 22). A person changes throughout their life, but the same (numerically identical) person experiences the results of earlier actions (verse 25). Ceteris paribus for smaller periods of time, moment to moment. Kumārila concludes the person does not remain entirely the same nor entirely change during their life (verse 28). The various cognitions become part of the self's general nature (verses 30–31).[9]

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evātra na kriyā || ŚV, Position on the Self, verse 17. Kumārila does not, like some other Indian philosophers, think understanding the nature of the self is itself a means to liberatory goals. Rather, the self's existence is a crucial presupposition for action. Kumārila takes the no-self challenge seriously because he thinks that if the enduring self is illusory, the entire Vedic ritual system could be rejected (ŚV, Position on the Self, verse 3).

[6] An opponent is presented as raising this question in Position on the Self, verse 20.

[7] See Watson (2020) for a discussion of different Mīmāṃsā approaches to this issue.

[8] See ŚV, Position on the Self, 5–11.

[9] 'And as a matter of fact, on the appearance of a new condition (of life), the former condition does not become totally destroyed; but being in keeping with the new condition, it merges into the general nature of the self. It is only the individual conditions that are contradictory to one another. Over all of them, however, equally pervades the general nature of the self,' *na cāvasthāntarotpāde pūrvātyantaṃ vinaśyati | uttarānuguṇatvāt tu sāmānyātmani līyate || svarūpeṇa hy avasthānām anyonyasya virodhitā | avirūddhas tu sarvāsu sāmānyātmā pravarttate* || ŚV, ĀTV 30–31, translation adapted from Jha (1983, 387). While this might

Kumārila considers several linguistic cases that are relevant to his claims about the I-cognition. I list them below, labeling them for ease of reference:

1. *Body-predicating sentences*. 'I am heavy,' 'I am fat,' 'I am thin.'
2. *Body-possessing sentences*. 'My body is heavy.'
3. *Sense-faculty-possessing sentences*. 'This eye of mine is like this.'
4. *Mental-faculty-possessing sentences.* 'My mind wanders.'
5. *Self-possessing sentences*. 'This is not known by my self.'
6. *Cognizing-action sentences*. 'I know.'

Body-predicating sentences attribute physical properties to the referent of 'I.' However, the self is not physical. Body-possessing sentences are evidence that body-predicating sentences are false, as we will see, since they involve a difference between the referent of 'my' (the self) and 'body.' For the same reason, sense-faculty-possessing sentences are evidence of the distinction between the self and sense faculties, as are mental-faculty-possessing sentences. However, if formulations like 'my body' and 'my eye' communicate a difference between the self and the body, the self and the eye, then it seems the expression 'my self' (not *myself*, the reflexive pronoun) do so, too. But this entails two selves exist, one which possesses the other, an issue Kumārila must address. Finally, cognizing-action sentences attribute mental activity to the self, which Kumārila argues even self-denying yogis and Buddhists must do. Kumārila's explanatory task is to account for these uses of the first-personal pronoun in a way that is consistent with *pronominal basis*, *agency*, *subjectivity*, *continuity*, and the reality of the self.

There are at least four strategies that available to explain the different uses of the first-personal pronoun. I'll list them, then explain them in turn:

Contextualism about the first-personal pronoun – relative to a speaker S, in different contexts, 'I' can have different, contextually salient referents.

1. Primary-meaning contextualism – relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' can have different referents on the basis of its context-invariant, single primary meaning.
2. Complete contextualism – relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' acquires different referents without depending on any single primary meaning.

Invariantism about the first-personal pronoun – relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' has the same referent.

1. Fictionalist invariantism – relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' refers to the same, unreal referent
2. Realist invariantism – relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' refers to the same, real referent.

Kumārila is what I'm calling an 'invariantist.' He thinks the referent of the first-personal

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sound like he's committed to something like four-dimensionalism, in which the self is a spacetime worm, and 'I' refers to the entire temporally extended entity, Kumārila extensively discusses the possibility that the self is a series (verses 35–50), arguing that his position is *not* that the self is a series reducible to its temporal parts. There must be some unified single entity that is the basis for relative correlative constructions like '*That* person who began this paper is *the one* who completed it' (verse 50). In terms of the four- and three-dimensionalist debate, Kumārila might be a three-dimensionalist, as it is not the part that bears properties, but the entire self.

pronoun is stable in an important sense. This is somewhat surprising, given how much he relies on context-sensitivity to explain how nouns have different referents relative to their context of utterance.

Given the different sentences involving the first-personal pronoun, one available strategy is *contextualism*. (All the views below take 'I' to be context-sensitive in that the referent of 'I' is sensitive to the speaker of the sentence in context. At issue is the possibility of context-sensitive meanings, relative to a speaker.) Contextualism about the first-personal pronoun holds that, relative to a speaker, 'I' has different referents in different contexts.[10] This view would account for the body-predicating sentences as much as the cognizing-action sentences. It's just that 'I' picks out something physical in the first kind of case and something mental in the second kind. Contextualism can be divided between two commitments about the different contextually available options.

Primary-meaning contextualism argues that 'I' has some basic meaning that shifts in different sentence contexts. In contrast, what I'll call *complete contextualism* denies that there is any primary meaning for 'I.' This could be cashed out in a variety of ways (maybe there is a cluster of meanings available and one is selected in context, for instance), but crucially, it denies the primacy claim.

Someone who denies contextualism thinks that, relative to a speaker, 'I' always has the same referent, but some sentences we utter turn out to be, strictly speaking, false. I'll argue this is Kumārila's view. Kumārila accepts that some sentences we utter about the self are just false, due to our mistaken metaphysical commitments. Where he differs from his Buddhist opponent is in the reality of the referent of the first-personal pronoun. The Buddhist thinks that 'I' refers to a fictional contrivance of our imagination, called *ahaṃkāra* in Sanskrit, which could be literally if awkwardly translated, 'the invented I.'[11] It is the ego, the idea we have of ourselves having agency, subjectivity, and continuity. This idea is based on real momentary things — a psychophysical bundle — but it has no metaphysical reality.

III

The Buddhist opponent's argument. Before turning to Kumārila's response, I'll explain briefly how his opponent, the fourth-to-fifth-century CE Buddhist Vasubandhu, uses body-predicating sentences as a criticism of the reality of the self.[12] I leave a fuller analysis of Vasubandhu's text to another paper.[13] Vasubandu thinks ordinary people have an idea of a single, enduring self, the ego (*ahaṃkāra*). This idea has two aspects: 'I' and 'mine,' but even

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[10] Here and in other definitions, I'll use 'I' as a placeholder for all forms of the first-personal pronoun, though I'll say more about 'my' in what follows.

[11] The *-kāra* in *ahaṃkāra* means 'created' or 'constructed' from the verb root √*kṛ* and could also just be a discursive tag for a term ('the sound produced, *I*').

[12] The literature on Vasubandhu (ca 300–400 CE), is large. His dates and works are contested by scholars, as well as the interpretation of his texts. Gold (2022) includes an overview and bibliography. For an English translation of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh), see Pruden and Poussin (1988). For discussion of his metaphysics, see Siderits (1997, 2015).

[13] That analysis is currently in draft form. The most thorough discussion of Vasubandhu's theory of the first-personal pronoun is given by Das (2023). While what I say below differs from his interpretation, since my main focus is Kumārila's view, I present only positive conclusions here and leave most critical remarks aside. But in summary: I interpret Vasubandhu to hold primary-meaning contextualism for nouns like 'self' (AKBh ad AK 3.18a, AKBh 474.5–6, chapter 9) and to hold fictionalist invariantism for the pronoun 'I,' which has a stable indexical component, even if it is a fictional one (AKBh 467.10–13, chapter 9).

though they correspond to distinct grammatical forms, they are essentially the same false idea about the self.[14] This idea arises because of a series of momentary, real fundamental entities that come and go across 'our' lifetimes. These are the 'aggregates,' a series of causally connected psycho-physical entities. But the idea we form based on them is a fiction, like our concept of other mereological wholes, like jars. Also like our concept of jars, the ego-fiction comes into existence based on things that fundamentally exist, unable to be further subdivided (an instantaneous conscious experience, bit of color, extension, et cetera). Part of this fictional 'ego' is the mistaken belief that indexical thought is necessary for action. Vasubandhu responds to brahmanical proponents of the self who argue for a link between the self and action:

> [OPPONENT:] If the self doesn't exist, what is the object of undertaking actions?
> [VASUBANDHU:] There is an object in this way: 'I would be happy, and I wouldn't suffer.'
> [OPPONENT:] What is it that we call 'I'?
> [VASUBANDHU:] The content of 'I' is the ego, whose content is the aggregates.[15]

Here, we see two levels: the thing people label with 'I' is the ego, and the ego has content, the aggregates. But doesn't this suggest that the *referent* of 'I' is the aggregates? No, because Vasubandhu next argues that the ego is the subject of predication in sentences. The opponent asks how Vasubandhu knows that the content of the 'I' is the ego, whose content is the aggregates. He replies:

> …because [the ego] has co-referentiality with cognitions like 'fair,' and so on. In cognitions such as 'I am fair,' 'I am dark,' 'I am fat,' 'I am thin,' 'I am old,' and 'I am young,' we observe the ego to be coreferential with cognitions like 'fair.' But we do not experience these as aspects of the self. On that basis, too, we know that that this idea of an ego arises with respect to the aggregates.[16]

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[14] AKBh ad 5.9ab. Sanskrit citations of the AKBh are from Pradhan (1975).

[15] *ātmany asati kim arthaḥ karmārambhaḥ. ahaṃ sukhī syām ahaṃ duḥkhī na syām ity evam arthaḥ. ko 'sāv aham nāma. yad viṣayo 'yam ahaṅkāraḥ. skandhaviṣayaḥ* (AKBh 476.4, emended to insert a stop after *nāma*.). This passage is translated differently by Das (2023, 35), Pruden and Poussin (1988, vol. 4, 1349), and Duerlinger (2003, 104). Das translates *ahaṃkāra* as 'I-awareness,' attributing the term's use to the opponent: 'What is this thing called 'I,' which is the intentional object of the 'I'-awareness (*ahaṅkāra*)?' (35). Pruden and Duerlinger, however, both attribute the relative-correlative to Vasubandhu, as do I, although Duerlinger fails to render *ko'sāv aham nāma* as the opponent's question. The term *ahaṃkāra* typically refers to the false idea of an ego (as Duerlinger observes, 119n76). Vasubandhu uses this term in the AKBh in the sense of a false construction. It's a term that a Vaiśeṣika or Naiyāyika would not use to refer to what they take to be a veridical cognition, though it is a Sāṃkhya term for a false ego-construction. (*Nyāyasūtra* 4.2.1 uses the term in reference to a mistaken idea of the self as being things which it is not.) For other uses of *ahaṃkāra* in the AKBh, see ad AK 1.39 and 3.29.

[16] *gaurādibuddhibhiḥ sāmānādhikaraṇyāt tu. gauro 'ham ahaṃ śyāmaḥ sthūlo 'ham aham kṛśaḥ jīrno 'ham aham yuveti gaurādibuddhibhiḥ sāmānādhikarano 'yam ahaṅkāro dṛśyate. na cātmana ete prakārā dṛśyante. tasmād api skandheṣv ayam iti gamyate.* AKBh 476.6–8. My translation again differs from Das (2023, 36) for reasons mentioned earlier. I understand Vasubandhu to be talking about two things, the ego (*ahaṃkāra*) and the self as posited by his

In these body-predicating sentences, properties like thinness are predicated of the same thing that 'I' refers to — they are coreferential. But the enduring self, defended by Vasubandhu's opponents, cannot have such a property. So, he uses this as linguistic evidence to show that 'I' cannot refer to an enduring, immaterial self.

For Vasubandhu, body-predicating sentences are ultimately false. The ego is not thin. It's imaginary. But he allows for a level of truth, 'conventional truth,' for useful talk about conceptual fictions like mereological wholes, ideas we have because of real entities. While the ego is a fiction, its being based in real things makes it useful, conventionally true. But the ego — not a bundle of aggregates — is the referent of 'I,' as the ego is said to be coreferential with the predicate in the sentence, 'I am thin,' and we take ourselves to be talking about some continuing single thing.[17] And that we speak this way suggests that our idea of the self is not based on an immaterial, single thing.

IV

Kumārila's reply. I'll now show that Kumārila's strategy is also a kind of invariantism. He simply disagrees about the status of this idea, taking it to be caused by a real object, the self. But he and Vasubandhu agree in a sense about the truth value of some sentences involving the first-personal pronoun: they are strictly false.

Another way to explain the varied uses of 'I' is to appeal to figurative language use, like metonymy or metaphor. Kumārila frequently appeals to both, and he has an influential account of how they work. Despite this, he does not use either to explain the referent of the first-personal pronoun. Recall that primary-meaning contextualism says that relative to S, in different contexts, 'I' acquires different referents on the basis of its context-invariant, primary meaning. This is close to how Kumārila explains the primary meaning of nouns, so we might expect the same approach for pronouns. Body-predicating sentences like 'I am thin' would be figurative, in which the primary meaning of 'I' is the self, but, since the self is closely related to the physical body, in context, 'I' can refer to the body.

A standard example of figurative language in Kumārila is:

(4) Devadatta is a lion.

For Kumārila, the primary meaning of 'lion' is the universal, *lionhood*, which we cannot predicate of an individual human being, Devadatta. First, through a process of metonymical shift, indication (*lakṣaṇā*) 'lion' means 'individual lion,' as the subject is a single individual. But, since equating a human person with a lion is impossible, there is another shift, from the particular person to his contextually salient properties such as ferocity, bravery, et cetera. This shift, qualitative transfer (*gaunavrtti*), is possible since individuals possess properties. As linguistically competent speakers, our knowledge of the lexical item 'lion' includes its properties.

We might expect Kumārila to reason similarly in the case of the first-personal pronoun, if he thinks nouns primarily mean universals.[18] After all, he employs this approach to explain

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opponents (*ātman*).

[17] Mark Siderits puts my point well in another context, when he says, 'there are ultimate facts on which our use of 'person' supervenes. But this is not to say that it is to these facts we refer when we use the word' (2007, 3).

[18] While Kumārila is clear in his discussion of this issue (Jha 1924, vol 1, 323ff) that he is discussing nouns, even otherwise careful philosophers characterize Kumārila's position as if he thinks that 'words' refer to universals: 'Kumārila appealed to this mode of reasoning to argue, for example, for the necessity of positing universals as the referents of words' (Arnold

how the word 'person,' in a Vedic command, can refer to the body rather than the immaterial self. He says, 'just like the universal is the basis for referring to the individual in the Veda, the person is the basis for referring to the body and senses.'[19] Kumārila is talking about a ritual instruction:

(5) The wooden post should be the same size as the person.[20]

While 'person' primarily means the self, it's not possible to cut a wooden post to the same size as an immaterial object. So, in context, 'person' refers to the body, on the basis of association.

Analogously, on the primary-meaning contextualism approach, we might think 'I' refers to a universal, *selfhood.* Take the utterance:

(6) I am Draupadī

spoken by a human woman. Perhaps the pronoun's meaning shifts from universal to particular, so 'I' refers to Draupadī's individual self by indication. In contrast, were Draupadī to utter:

(7) I am thin,

since her individual, immaterial self cannot have the property predicated, there would be a further shift by qualitative transfer. While the immaterial self is not, strictly speaking, thin, the body that possesses the self is, so that these properties might be available for extended reference. On this view, (7) 'I am thin' is metaphorical, like (4) 'Devadatta is a lion.'

However, this is not what Kumārila says about pronouns. Kumārila treats the meaning of pronouns and the nature of first-personal thought in the chapter on the self as well as his *Commentary on Ritual* (*Tantravārttika*). He has two key claims:

1. *Pronouns refer to individuals not universals*. The I-cognition is not about *being the cognizer*, nor is *being the cognizer* the referent of the first-personal pronoun 'I.'
2. *Pronouns can apply to multiple referents*. Pronouns communicate something that their referents have in common as their nature.

Because pronouns refer to individuals and not universals, the reference-shifting account that applies to common nouns like 'cow' does not apply to personal pronouns like 'I' (or demonstratives like 'this'). While early grammatical analyses, like Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*, do not especially focus on pronouns (the former does not define them, only giving a list of examples), that they refer to individuals seems to have been a shared assumption. For example, Bhartṛhari defines a substance in terms of its potentially being the referent of a pronoun.[21] Kumārila says similar things in his discussion of the first-

2024), and 'If the meaning of a word were something other than a universal…' (Taber 2017, 247). However, he analyzes the meanings of nouns and pronouns differently.

[19] ŚV, Position on the Self, 91. His commentator, Pārthasārathi Miśra, explains, 'Just as, even though it is commanded, the universal is the means for the individual, likewise, the self is the means for the body,' Tailaṅga (1890, 712).

[20] The command is alluded to verse 90, and discussed by Śabara in his commentary on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 3.1.6.

[21] Iyer (1971, 123–24). However, his autocommentary suggests that other things may be the object of pronouns, like universals, although he argues that the way universals are understood

personal pronoun. He argues — focusing on the I-cognition — that if this cognition were about *something that is a cognizer* in general, then memories, which include I-cognitions, could not be properly individuated. Assuming my memory of the past includes an I-cognition, this memory should be true only of me.[22] Kumārila's point is analogous to other discussions of the indexical in analytic philosophy: if 'I' simply means *something that is a cognizer,* then two different people could think the same thing thought by tokening 'I.'[23] But that would be a bad consequence.

This ability of the word 'I' to have different contents in different contexts is something that Kumārila discusses in the *Commentary in Ritual* (*Tantravārttika*). The issue under discussion is whether a mantra continues to be a mantra if a speaker modifies one of its words. A mantra is a ritual utterance, often in figurative language, that reminds priest what they ought to do. For example, while cutting grass, a priest might say, 'I cut the grass, the seat of the gods' (Taber 1991, 149). At least some mantras seem to be speech acts whose effects depend on the sequence of words, and although there are a number of paradigmatic mantras commanded for use in ritual contexts, sometimes these need to be adapted. Kumārila considers the case of *mantra*s whose explicitly enjoined form only contains a pronoun.[24] While his text gives no example, we can imagine a Christian baptism ritual that uses the third-personal rather than second-personal pronoun. A liturgical manual might direct the priest to say:

(8) I baptize *her* in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[25]

Kumārila observes that the possible referents of the demonstrative pronoun are innumerable, and they do not all exist at the same time. Therefore, it isn't possible for (8) to explicitly mention all possible referents by name, individually. But in the actual ritual, a priest might utter:

(8′) I baptize *Draupadī*…

The pronoun's purpose in mantras is to make all of these possible referents understood, Kumārila says. This suggests that there is some context-invariant meaning that the sentence communicates. Kumārila does not explain how, but he observes that the original demonstrative pronoun communicates of the *nature* of these possible referents, even if the individuals themselves are not explicitly mentioned.[26] The pronoun does not act as an empty

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through pronouns, as something having certain characteristics, makes them understood as substances, something definite.

[22] 'But were [the I-cognition's content] the general nature of being a cognizer, it would apply to other bodies also. When all of these people have this cognition, there would be the memory 'I' (for all of them),' *atha jñātṛtvasāmānyaṃ tat syād dehāntareṣv api || tatra sarveṇa vijñāte bhaved aham iti smṛti | ekasantānaje cāpi sa iti syāt kṣaṇe matiḥ ||* (ŚV, Position on the Self, vv. 122bc–123cd).

[23] For just one example, the well-known case of the mentally unwell Heimson thinking 'I wrote the *Treatise*' in Perry (1977) is to show that 'Heimson cannot think the very same thought to himself that Hume thought to himself, by using the very same sentence' (487).

[24] For full context, see English translation in Jha 1924, (vol. 1, pp. 573–77).

[25] For Vedic examples, see the *Āpastambhaśrautasūtra* translated in Thite (2004), for instance 4.12, 8.18, 11.19, and 13.17.

[26] ''Otherwise, because particulars are innumerable and they do not all exist simultaneously, it is impossible to explicitly mention them. But there is an, in fact, an explicit mention of their nature, by way of the pronoun. Therefore, because the mantra does not have an empty

slot in the mantra, but it licenses the substitution of an appropriate word when the sentence is uttered. We might conclude this is because there is a context-invariant pronominal meaning, what modern philosophers might call a pronoun's 'character.' However, for Kumārila, the character does not seem to be a function from a context to a content; it seems to include features like gender, number, and case, which in context enable the pronoun to refer to the correct referent.[27] Perhaps this is what Kumārila means by their 'nature.'[28] Kumārila does not say, generally speaking, how the actual referent in context is determined, though determining the referent of demonstrative pronouns was a common hermeneutic task for Mīmāṃsakas.[29]

In responding to Vasubandhu, Kumārila denies that sentences like (2) are true. But he explains why we might think they are. He appeals to closely related true formulations that involve the genitive first-personal pronoun, 'my' (Sanskrit, *mama*). And this raises a parity worry for him, that he must account for the meaning of that pronoun consistently. His solution appeals to different ways of representing our self in thought and language.

In the Position on the Self, Kumārila argues that the primary meaning of the first-personal pronoun is the self, qua cognizer. It is the self as a subject (and by extension, an agent) that the first-personal pronoun and attendant I-cognition pick out:

> The primary meaning that is understood from 'my' is nothing other than the self. (131ab)[30]

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slot, one is thus able to describe it: 'That which has a word that is to be inserted into it is a mantra.' For, otherwise, if the explicit mention of the particular is not understood by the pronoun as the means, then, because the nature of the mantra would be deficient in its part, the explicit mention of the pronoun would be meaningless, because it would not be suitable for its use, which is mentioning all the particulars,' *atha vā viśeṣāṇām ānantyād ayugapatkālatvāc cāmnātum aśakteḥ svarūpasya sarvanāmaprakāreṇāmnānam asty evety aśūnyasthānatvān mantrasya śakyam evaṃ nirūpaṇaṃ kartuṃ yad atra padaṃ nivekṣyat tadvān ayaṃ mantra iti. itarayā hi sarvanāmnām aprayogārhatvād yadi viśeṣāmnānam evaitat tenopāyeneti na gṛhyate tatas tadaṃśanyūnatvān mantrasvarūpasya vyartham eva sarvanāmāmnānaṃ syāt.* TV ad MS 2.1.34.

[27] Bryan Pickel (personal communication) suggests his view could be that the meaning of an indexical or demonstrative is given by its phi-features (person, gender, number, et cetera), and that the denotation shifts to the contextually salient property-bearer.

[28] A later philosopher commenting on this passage perhaps suggests that the nature is being the sacrificer. This suggests that for a demonstrative pronoun like 'she' or 'he,' the meaning is still acquired contextually, since that 'he' refers to the sacrificer (as opposed to someone else) depends on interpreting the sentence in its discourse context. Someśvara responds to the question of how the pronoun is able to express the nature. He says, 'Because it establishes what is stated with, 'This is what the sacrificer invokes,' it is called 'its part,' Shastri (2000, vol. 1, 373, lines 6–7). Essentially, this is a stock phrase that identifies Vedic material. If juxtaposed with a mantra, then it is clear that it is the *sacrificer* (whether Devadatta, Yajñadatta, et cetera) who is being referred to with the relevant demonstrative pronoun. See Mucciarelli (2015) on variations of this phrase.

[29] For example, see Jha (1924, vol. 1, 781, 885). Syntactical features of Sanskrit sentences (such as case, gender, and number) help in this interpretive project, as do a series of hermeneutical principles such as preferring literal over non-literal readings when possible. Further, demonstrative pronouns like 'he' and 'that' are taken to refer to salient objects. See Jha (1924, vol. 1, 41).

[30] *mamety etasya mukhyārtho nātmano 'nyaḥ pratīyate* ||

Kumārila's main argument for the existence of the self is not linguistic — he thinks that the self is introspectively perceived — but linguistic evidence must not contradict this purported evidence. Conflicting linguistic evidence would enable Vasubandhu to argue that Kumārila has latched onto a mistaken idea, unaware that it is contradicted by other experiences.

Applying this framework to the I-cognition, a second, inconsistent experience directed at the same putative object would constitute a defeater to the I-cognition. As this cognition is supposed to be of a single immaterial entity, if Vasubandhu can show that we predicate material properties of the self, this would show our thought and speech about the self is not always about something single and immaterial, the cognizer. Kumārila argues that the putative defeaters, cases like (2), are not genuine defeaters.

Given Kumārila's view of pronouns, we might expect him to try to account for how 'I' can have 'thin' as its predicate.[31] However, this is not what Kumārila does. Instead, he says that, interpreted literally, expressions like (2) are false, as they communicate mistaken ideas.[32] Unlike (4), in which properties that truly belong to the fire also belong to the boy, thinness does not truly belong to the self, since it is an immaterial substance lacking dimension.

Kumārila's solution, though terse, seems to be that (2) is shown to be false by our reflecting on of a different sentence,

(2′) What belongs to me is thin.[33]

A speaker who utters (2) communicates that there is something physical that is different than the self, that is the body, which is thin. This is what the self possesses, implicitly the body, the body that is 'mine,' which 'belongs to me,' is thin. But I also talk about my body as *belonging to me*, and these contradict talk about being my body. How to decide between these? Again, Kumārila is not primarily appealing to linguistic evidence for his metaphysical theory. His commentator Pārthasārathi appeals to the role of reflection, and as noted earlier, Kumārila concludes that the self is not the body or the sense faculties based on reasoning. What is directly experienced is just some stable, single thing.

At this point, however, Kumārila's appeal to the genitive results in a problem he must answer. His opponent has argued that sentences like (2) 'I am thin' should be understood as rebutting the I-cognition, since only physical things are thin, not the immaterial cognizer. Kumārila responds by arguing that sentences like (2′) 'What belongs to me is thin' are correct, and so we should understand that thinness belongs to my body: 'My body is thin.'[34]

Now, as it is a genitive form of the basic noun form of the first-personal pronoun, 'my,' also refers to the individual cognizer, while 'body' refers to a physical entity.[35] So it is the

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[31] Another approach he might take would be to give an account of how the predicate 'thin' acquires a new meaning, like Nunberg (1995) explains for utterances like 'I am parked out back,' talking about one's car. Since Kumārila explains metaphors like 'Devadatta is a lion' in terms of shifting predicates, this is easily available to him. However, he does not use this strategy.

[32] 'I am heavy,' 'I am fat,' or 'I am thin' — the cognition of I applied to the body is mistaken…' ŚV, Position on the Self, verse 127abc.

[33] '…we maintain that the statement, 'That which belongs to me is heavy,' expresses that the physical form is different,' (ŚV, Position on the Self, 127d.)

[34] Kumārila does not consider what a materialist response might be here, but someone like van Inwagen (1980, 291–92) might object that the expression 'my body' does not succeed showing such a difference.

[35] There are some important differences in English and Sanskrit grammar to note at this point. In Sanskrit, the first-personal pronoun is declined, so that the English word 'my' in the

body that *belongs to* the cognizer which has the property of thinness. That these two, body and cognizer, are different is part of what the genitive expresses, since its basic meaning is a relationship of some kind.[36] Kumārila goes on to explain that, by parity of reasoning, since 'my' expresses difference with the noun it modifies, we can also conclude that the self is not the senses nor the mind, given:

(9) *My* eye is like this

and

(10) *My* mind wanders.

Making the substitution of the possessive indexical explicit, we would understand these as

(9′) This eye *belonging to the cognizer* is like this

and

(10′) This mind *belonging to the cognizer* wanders.

However, if the argument is that the referent of 'my' must always be distinct from the nouns of which it is a complement ('eye' and 'mind'), Kumārila should say the same about sentences like:

(11) My self is content.[37]

If Kumārila applies his reasoning to (9) then, this sentence means

(11′) The self *belonging to the cognizer* is content.

However, we have accepted that the cognizer is the self, so this means

(11″) The self *belonging to the self* is content.

And this means we are talking about two selves. This challenge, accounting for the semantics of the genitival indexical, seems to appear for the first time in Kumārila's text, although it will reappear in the work of Advaita Vedāntin philosopher Śaṅkara.[38]

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following examples translates *mama*, a declined form of the stem *asmat*, from which 'I' (*aham*) is formed. In English, there is debate among linguists about how to characterize 'my' and 'mine,' whether as adjectives, pronouns, determiners, et cetera.

[36] The genitive's meaning, in fact, is a kind of catch-all category, introduced in the grammatical work the *Āṣṭādhyayī* 2.3.50 with a terse rule often interpreted as meaning 'The genitive is for expressing the rest of the meanings (that other cases do not)' (*śaṣṭhī śeṣe*). On this point, Patañjali writes that there are 101 meanings for this case (*Mahābhārata* 1.118.10). The many meanings a genitive can have in Sanskrit include: possession, the relationship between agent and object (either subjective or objective), the whole from which a part is taken, a period of time, and a cause or a reason.

[37] The original example in Kumārila's text is only 'my self' (*mamātmā*) with no explicit verb or predicate. His commentator, Pārthasārathi gives an example: 'This thing is not known by my self,' *nāyam artho' mamātmanā jñāta iti* (on ŚV 131ab).

[38] Thanks to Phyllis Granoff (personal communication) for pointing out some parallel

Kumārila's solution involves two claims: words can present their referents in different aspects and the unified, single self can be conceptualized in different ways. The first-personal pronoun itself does not change its referent: it picks out the specific cognizer in context. And 'self' also refers to this same cognizer. However, Kumārila argues that the possessive pronoun functions in a particular way here, which he calls ***designation***.[39] (He does not use the term corresponding to 'indication' or 'qualitative transfer.') A designation is the use of a term for some object when there is an option available due to different properties: for instance, I could be referred to as 'son,' combined with either the designation 'of Eugene' or 'of Doris.' Often, but not always, a designation involves different options for a genitive (as in the example of my parents).[40] Kumārila says about just the phrase 'my self,' that 'the idea of this expression designating a difference from the self is a conception based on a cognition's being different from the self as a state' (Position on the Self, verse 130).[41] Note that, in Sanskrit, the expression rendered as 'my self' (*mamātmā*) is not equivalent to the reflexive 'myself,' which would be formed in a variety of other ways.[42]

A later philosopher, Pārthasārathi Miśra, remarking on this point, says, 'For, because a cognition is to some extent different from the self, given its nature as a state, 'my'' designates a cognition as different.'[43] And further, he adds, 'Not just the cognition is designated, since with the word 'self,' one intends to communicate something not different from the self, thus there is no reductio to something other than the self.'[44] The idea is that, because the genitive expresses a relation, anything in the form '*x* of *y*' will convey that there is a relationship between two relata, *x* and *y*. However, the relationship need not be between two entirely distinct entities nor must it be between a whole and its part. On this interpretation, the word 'self' conveys the self *itself*, probably in the sense of being the unchanging substance. Thus, 'my' represents the cognition as different from the self-as-state and 'state' represents the self as nondifferent from the self-as-state.

A related (though not identical) example of this use of the genitive, discussed in Sanskrit-language philosophy, is the expression 'Rahu's head,' in which the decapitated god (personifying the eclipse) is just a head, *his* head. Strictly speaking, the head is not a part of Rahu, as he is coextensive with it. Despite the lack of absolute difference between Rahu and his head, the genitive is applicable: the head *of* Rahu. The same goes for 'my self,' especially once we understand the metaphysics of the self that Kumārila has defended.

Kumārila's metaphysics of the self allows that us to understand the unified self as having two aspects, allowing the application of the genitive to be apt, as there is a relationship possible, from some perspective. Recall that the immaterial self qua cognizer is an entity that can experience different conditions: the self can experience different emotions, entertain different thoughts, and so on. These emotions and thoughts are transitory — they

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passages in his corpus, especially his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, 9.5.

[39] Sanskrit: *vyapadeśa*.

[40] The Nyāya philosopher Uddyotakara talks about designation in the instrumental case, in his discussion at NS 3.1.1.

[41] *mamātmeti matir bhedavyapadeśena yātmanaḥ | tatrāvasthātmanā bhedaṃ jñānasyāśritya kalpanā* || 130

[42] Broadly speaking, in Sanskrit, reflexive pronouns can be formed with the indeclinable *svayam* ('self'), the adjective *svaḥ* ('one's own') that declines in all three grammatical genders, and the declinable noun *ātman* ('self') that is declinable, which in the singular number it can be deployed in a reflexive sense.

[43] *jñānaṃ hi kathaṃcid avasthārūpeṇātmano bhinnatvān mameti bhedena vyapadiśyate.* Tailaṅga (1890, 722).

[44] *na tad evātmābhedavivakṣayātmeti ato nātmānantaraprasaṅga iti.* Tailaṅga (1890, 722).

cannot be the object of our I-cognition, since this would not enable two instances of 'I' to co-refer in sentences expressing recognition like (1) 'Now I am experiencing this thing which I experienced earlier.'

In conclusion, Kumārila argues that 'I' refers to the specific cognizer of an utterance or thought. Rather than the first-personal pronoun being an automatic indexical that refers to the *speaker*, as is commonly supposed today, the pronoun refers to a *cognizer*. But both being a speaker and being a cognizer of some token sentence S involves the concept of responsibility for its production. Ordinarily, the speaker of S is the one by whom S is uttered. That 'I' refers to a *cognizer* of S points to the metaphysical interests of Kumārila's semantics. While the speaker and the cognizer may be the same person, being a cognizer — an agent with intentional mental states — is fundamental. It also points to the close connection between thought and speech: speech is an expression of inner thoughts. Finally, while people might mistakenly think the indexical's meaning is discretionary — that is, that the speaker's intentions can in some way influence its reference in context — Kumārila rejects this. Not only does he reject identifying the referent of 'I' with bodily properties like thinness, but he also criticizes practitioners of meditation who think they remove their sense of self, thus using 'I'-language without reference to a cognizer.

For example, the indexical in the utterance:

(12) I know

always refers to the cognizer, regardless of whether the utterer is a yogi or not.[45] Yogis may falsely believe that their practices allow them to stop producing ideas of a self corresponding to 'I' and 'mine,' but this is impossible, argues Kumārila. A yogi who claims, 'I know that the individual self is an illusion' continues to refer to a cognizer who knows. And yogis engage in action, teaching students their ideas about the illusory self; but teaching requires tracking what knowledge belongs to oneself and does not belong (yet) to a student, distinguishing between what is 'mine' and 'yours.'

The debate between Vasubandhu and Kumārila on the use of the first-personal pronoun (and the object of first-personal thought) turns out to involve significant agreement: relative to a speaker, the referent of pronouns like 'I' and 'mine' picks is singular and stable. Their main disagreement is about its metaphysical status. Even between realists and no-self-theorists, that ordinary people can be confused about what 'I' really refers to is common ground, coupled with the view that first-personal, indexical thought and speech have an invariant referent. Insofar as Kumārila can give a consistent account of how the first-personal pronoun refers to an immaterial self, even if he must accept that some sentences turn out to be false due to metaphysical confusion, he is able to return the debate arguments over metaphysics and the content of our self-directed experience.[46]

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[45] 'But this cognition in "I know" does not ever stop,' *jñānamy aham itīdaṃ tu jñānaṃ naiva nivarttate,* ŚV, Position on the Self, verse 133cd. His commentator, Pārthasārathi, says about this, in his comments on verse 134 'And it is impossible to use some cognition other than the I-cognition about oneself. Therefore, even yogis have the idea "I," so that they say, "I know,"' *na ca svātmany ahaṃbuddher anyā buddhiḥ sambhavati, ato 'sti yoginām apy ahaṃmānaḥ, tathā jānāmīty*. Tailaṅga (1890, 723).

[46] Thanks to participants at the 2024 Kumārila Conference, the Five Colleges Buddhist Studies Seminar, and philosophy colloquia at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa and University of Exeter, as well as Bryan Pickel and Stephan Leuenberger, for comments on prior drafts.

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