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COMIC BY JASON J. SAMPSON, CONTRIBUTING ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS



Daily OPINION

IN MEDIAS RES:

It's only ink

LOGO BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS



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Often, this column does not seek out personal thought or concern itself with personal identity. Yet when my good friend and editor, Gia Cassino, came to me confused about an English professor's allegory in a lecture, I knew that this column would have to deviate from its established norms. How could I pass up the opportunity to talk about zen metaphors in the classroom?

Take a look at this image, poorly replicated in Google Drawings from Gia's description of her professor's whiteboard.



GRAPHIC BY COLIN HAMILTON, WEEKLY COLUMNIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

What do you see? Coffee? Tea? Hot chocolate? A mug?

None of these answers are quite right. What you're looking at is a printed image in a college newspaper. In the words of Gia's professor, "it's only ink."

Gia was understandably taken aback by this analogy. If a drawing in an English class is only ink, what is a book? From there, what is a student? A person? I suspect she expected me to be similarly offended. How dare we rob an object of its usefulness, and its role and placement in our reality? Yet what I believe her professor may have been trying to represent was a philosophical concept often lost in our market-dominated world — one that bears recognition.

The question of ink is reflected in a Buddhist text dating back to somewhere between 100 and 200 CE, known as "The Questions of King Milinda." In the philosophical dialogue, the sage Nāgasena explains the teaching of anatman, or the non-self, to the Indo-Greek King Milinda.

Nāgasena is asked by the king, "Who are you?" to which he responds, "Nobody."

Similar to my friend with her professor, Milinda was affronted, and demanded the sage clarify. Nāgasena argued that while he was called "Nāgasena," his name did not refer to the body, the mind or the experience that encompassed him, nor did it accurately portray the sum of any of these parts. Therefore, he was "nobody."

This explanation did little to satisfy the king, and he demanded further clarification. Nāgasena, gesturing to the king's prized chariot, explained a person is not defined by any of its parts. The king's chariot does not draw its identity from just its axle, for example. Nor does it draw its identity from just a sum of its parts — a pile of axles, spokes, seats and rims would not make up a chariot. Similarly, replacing any of these parts would not make a radically different chariot. A worn rim in need of replacing would not suddenly rob the king's vehicle of its history or ownership.

The king nodded. The sage's explanation made sense. The "King's Chariot," as Nāgasena argued, existed as a designation without a determinate reference in reality. It was, as Gia's professor would have argued, "only ink," given meaning from the combined context of its being and environment.

"The Questions of King Milinda" exists in Buddhist literature as an explanation of the changing, composite nature of the self and why no name or label can fully define who a person is. Our conventional identities, as the sage Nāgasena explains, are not defined exclusively by the titles society brands us with. To believe otherwise is to have our own personhood reduced.

Too often, our commodity-based society shoves us into roles that swallow the person working them whole. Consider a mother, who has had her personhood robbed from her by the societal expectations tied to her motherhood. In our titular world, her pursuit of the self is deemed selfish for her abandonment of the societal role of a mother who must devote herself to her kids.

In reality, this mother may be named Jane. She may enjoy flyfishing and have a passion for philanthropy. Maybe she struggles with anxiety or depression. If we view her as no more than a "mother," we lose sight of everything else that encapsulates her being. As Nāgasena would have explained, Jane is more than her role and her personhood exists beyond just these expected responsibilities. We would be defining the chariot as the axle.

In the case of Gia's professor's whiteboard illustration, we limit our understanding of an ink drawing when we put the societal expectation of "coffee" on it. While the ability of the ink to represent coffee is a real part of its identity, it is just as important to consider the context: its placement on the whiteboard, the hand that drew it and so forth. Like a Rorschach test, the expectation that we superimpose on the ink tells us more about ourselves than it does the object. Applied to people, the same holds true.

For the sake of our personhood, we must recognize that we are all "only ink." We are not made up by any one of our parts or even defined by the sum of them. A person can occupy a role without being reduced to it. Recognizing Nāgasena's teachings in ourselves is the first step in recognizing that we contain multitudes, and that our personhood can never and should never be compressed to a single aspect of self.