

The Negation of Self in Indian Buddhist Philosophy

The not-self teaching is one of the defining doctrines of Buddhist philosophical thought (Pāli: *anattā*). It states that no phenomenon is an abiding self (Vin I, 13 = SN III, 66) and that this negation is itself not a property that belongs to something (*attaniya*); in this way, it is claimed by Buddhists that all phenomena (*dhamma*-s) are ‘empty of self’ (SN IV, 54 and SN III, 33-4). The not-self doctrine is central to discussions in contemporary Buddhist philosophy and to how Buddhism understood itself in relation to its Brahminical opponents in classical Indian philosophy. In the Pāli suttas, the Buddha is presented as making statements that seem to entail that there is no self. At the same time, in these texts, the Buddha is never presented as saying explicitly that there is no self. Indeed, in the one discourse where he is asked point blank whether there is a self, he refuses to answer (SN IV, 400). Thus, the suttas present us with a fundamental philosophical and interpretive problem: if the Buddha denies the existence of the self, why does he not state this denial explicitly?

A striking discrepancy exists between Classical Indian Buddhist philosophers and contemporary scholarship on the suttas with regard to this problem. Whereas the Abhidharma and Mahāyāna thinkers generally argue that selves do not ultimately exist, a widespread view among scholars of Pāli Buddhism is that the suttas are agnostic about the metaphysics of selfhood. Instead, it is claimed that the concept of not-self (*anattā*) is only a pragmatic device for attaining liberation.¹ But if this metaphysically agnostic interpretation of *anattā* were correct, then a schism would be introduced into the Buddhist philosophical tradition. On the one hand, the sutta literature would be agnostic about, or even hostile to, the metaphysical question of whether selves exist. On the other hand, the Abhidharma and Mahāyāna traditions would be endorsing differing versions of metaphysical anti-realism about selves.

In this paper, I argue that the interpretation of the suttas as metaphysically agnostic about selfhood is incorrect, and therefore that there is no such schism. On the contrary, the sutta literature on *anattā* entails metaphysical anti-realism about selves. The reason that the Buddha does not explicitly state this entailment has nothing to do with metaphysical agnosticism; rather, such an assertion would pragmatically undermine the not-self teaching by reinforcing the underlying psychological tendency to fixate on self. In this way, I resolve the fundamental philosophical and interpretive problem arising from the Buddha’s apparent commitment to a not-self metaphysics along with his refusal to state explicitly that there is no self. In other words, I explain why and how the Buddha can argue in a way that entails metaphysical anti-realism about the self while also refusing to state explicitly that there is no self.

¹ Some representative examples include: Gethin (1986, 49), Hamilton (2000), Albahari (2002; 2006), Gombrich (2009, 145), and Davis (2016).

1 Arguments in the Sutta Literature that the *Khandha*-s are Not the Self

To comprehend the Buddhist teaching on self and its negation, I first analyze the five aggregates (*khandha*-s/*skandha*-s).² This analysis will provide us with a positive criterion for what kind of self is being negated by Buddhist philosophers. The aggregate model of the human being used in these arguments is widespread in Buddhist thought; it is especially prevalent with respect to the *anattā* thesis in the suttas. When Buddhist philosophers reject the existence of a soul or self (*ātman/attā*), they tend to do so by analyzing what we believe to be an abiding self into the activities of the aggregates.

The first of the five aggregates is *rūpa* or the physical form and bodily sensitivity that makes our body not just a physical object but also a living sensitive being that is differentially in touch with its world. Second is *vedanā*, translated variously as ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’. This aggregate makes things we encounter be experienced as having a hedonic valence; the contents of our experience are situated before us in a hodological space, one that solicits our action (Ganeri 2017, 123); we experience the world through a primordial *feel* of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. Importantly, these feelings themselves can also be an object of attention (Smith 2020a, 1127-29; MN I, 293; Vis 452, XIV.81 and 460, XIV.125). Thus, *vedanā* has the dual profile of both giving objects of experience their hedonic valence, while also itself being an object of experience, especially in the context of practicing meditative contemplation (*satipaṭṭhāna*). Third is *saññā/samjñā*, which is often translated as ‘perception’. However, this translation is misleading, because modern uses of ‘perception’ do not adequately capture the functional profile of this aggregate. Better is ‘recognition,’ ‘apperception,’ or even ‘categorization’: all of these terms denote the capacity of this aggregate to organize the contents of perception according to equivalence classes that allow us to perceive something on the basis of a mark or characteristic, thereby enabling identification and recognition as well as the possibility of error through misidentification. The fourth aggregate is *saṅkhāra/saṃskāra*, which is certainly the hardest to translate and define. I prefer ‘formations’ as this captures two important functions of this aggregate. The first is that this aggregate gathers the other mental processes together into a reactively functional unity; the various aggregates are organized in concert so as to respond to stimuli of various sorts. Second, this aggregate is karmically active and the result of actions. These *saṅkhāra*-s are both formed *and* forming. They are habitual and volitional reaction patterns, reactions to stimuli that condition subsequent moments of experience and further entrench those very reactions. Finally, there is *viññāṇa/vijñāna*, which is often translated as ‘consciousness,’ though ‘discernment,’ and ‘discrimination’ are also apt for they capture the *vi*- prefix as dividing and making distinctions, and the *ñāṇa* component, which roughly means knowledge (see Harvey 1995, 148-51).

² My references to Buddhist literature will be primarily to Pāli sources. This will be reflected in my use of parenthetical references to untranslated terms. That being said, there are a number of places where the Sanskrit will also be relevant and I will use those terms when and as necessary.

1.1 Two Arguments from the Anattālakkaṅga Sutta

Having briefly analyzed the functional profiles of these aggregates, we are now in a position to understand their place in arguments about *anattā* that show up in the Pāli suttas. The *Anattālakkaṅga Sutta* is said to be the second discourse given by the Buddha after he obtained final liberation (*vimutti*) from *dukkha* (Vin I, 13 = SN III, 66). This short discourse contains two important arguments. The first argument goes like this:

Form, bhikkhus is not self...Feeling is not self...apperception is not self...formations are not self...Consciousness is not self. For if, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible in regard to consciousness [to determine]: 'Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction, it is not possible in consciousness: 'Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.'^{3, 4}

The main theme of this argument is control. We do not control the aggregates, and this lack of control is reason enough to conclude that the aggregates are not an abiding self (*attā*). Formally, we can reconstruct it as a *modus tollens* argument:

1. If the aggregates were self, then the aggregates would be controllable.
2. The aggregates are not controllable.
3. Therefore, the aggregates are not self.

Embedded in the argument is a claim about what it would take for something to be a self. If something is to qualify as a self, then it must be subject to a special existential type of control that is preventative. If something is to count as a self, it must be controllable such that affliction (*ābādhā*) is avoidable.⁵

In the second argument the crux of the denial stems from the fact of impermanence (*anicca*) rather than control. The relevant passage is:

"What do you think of this, bhikkhus, is form permanent or impermanent?" - "Impermanent, venerable sir." - "Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?" - "Suffering, venerable sir." - "Is

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. I use suttacentral.net and the online Digital Pāli reader for the root text. I cite the PTS editions as is the scholarly standard. I include English editions in the bibliography.

⁴ *rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, anattā...vedanā anattā... saññā anattā... saṅkhārā anattā...viññāṇaṃ anattā. viññāṇaṃ ca hidāṃ, bhikkhave, attā abhaviṣṣa, nayidaṃ viññāṇaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya, labbhettha ca viññāṇe: 'evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ hotu, evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ mā ahoṣī'ti. yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, viññāṇaṃ anattā, tasmā viññāṇaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattāti, na ca labbhati viññāṇe: 'evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ hotu, evaṃ me viññāṇaṃ mā ahoṣī'ti.*

⁵ This argument is peculiar because there are plenty of instances where the Buddha seems to demonstrate precisely the kind of control that is denied here. For example, when he enters and leaves various *jhāna* states at will. For more, see Wynne (2009b). I think this worry is easily assuaged on account of the fact that the kind of control that is being denied here is a kind of ultimate control over the inevitability of impermanence (*anicca*).

what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change properly to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self?' - "No, venerable sir."⁶

Formalized, the argument might look like this:

1. The aggregates are impermanent (*anicca*).
2. What is impermanent is subject to suffering (*dukkha*).
3. What is impermanent and subject to suffering is not fit to be regarded as self.
4. Therefore, the aggregates are not fit to be regarded as self.

The reason that *dukkha* follows from *anicca* is that if everything changes, then nothing is stable. If nothing is stable, then there is no security in the world and this lack of stability and security is a deep existential misery.

Notice that there is a subtle difference between the conclusions expressed in these two arguments. The first claims that the aggregates are not the self (*anattā*). The second claims that the aggregates are not properly regarded (*kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ*) as the self. The second argument hedges a bit by adverting to the perspective of an observer who comes to regard the aggregates in a certain way, but does not say anything specific about what the aggregates *are*. The first argument is a bit firmer in its negation, but even so, neither argument concludes that *there is no self*.

1.2 From a Not-Self Teaching to a No Self View: Vajirā's Chariot

I turn now to two important texts in the sutta literature that explicitly reject the existence of an abiding self (*attā*). The first is the short but pithy *Vajirā Sutta* (SN I 135). Here is the most relevant passage:

Why now do you fall back on 'a being'?
Māra, is this the view you've arrived at?
This is a pure heap of formations:
Here no being is found.

Just as, with an accumulation of parts,
The word 'chariot' is used,
Thus, when the aggregates exist,
There is the convention 'a being'.

It's only suffering that arises,
Suffering that stands and disappears.
Nothing but suffering arises,

⁶ "taṃ kiṃ maññatha, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vā"ti? "aniccaṃ, bhante". "yaṃ paṇāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vā taṃ sukhaṃ vā"ti? "dukkhaṃ, bhante". "yaṃ paṇāniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ, kallaṃ nu taṃ samanupassituṃ — etaṃ mama, eso hamasmi, eso me attā"ti? "no hetāṃ, bhante".

Nothing but suffering ceases.⁷

These verses come in reply to a set of taunting questions posed to Vajirā by Māra the Evil One who is attempting to disrupt her concentration. All of Māra's questions assume the existence of a being (*sattā*), which Vajirā rejects completely. Notice here that it is not just the construct of selfhood (*attā*) that is being rejected, but the very idea of a unified individual of any kind. The view being expressed here is mereological reductionism; this is the idea that all composite wholes can be reductively explained in terms of the organized behavior of their parts.⁸ Here, all that is found is a heap of formations (*saṅkhārā*). This notion is being used in different way from how it figures in the five aggregate analysis. In this context, it refers to any conditioned element of existence, anything that has been constructed by *kamma*. This is how the term figures in the next relevant passage as well.

The second relevant passage comes from the twentieth chapter of the *Dhammapada* verses 277-9 and reads as follows:

‘All formations are impermanent’. When one understands this with wisdom, then one is wearied of *dukkha*. This is the path to purification.

‘All formations are *dukkha*’. When one understands this with wisdom, then one is wearied of *dukkha*. This is the path to purification.

‘All *dhamma*-s are not self’. When one understands this with wisdom, then one is wearied of *dukkha*. This is the path to purification.⁹

The subject of the first and second verses are conditioned things or formations (*saṅkhārā*). The third verse changes topics to *dhamma*-s. The term *dhamma* is used in a number of ways in Pāli literature. In this context, *dhamma* should be read as meaning *any particular existent*. If all *dhamma*-s are not self, it is unclear how to read this as anything other than a claim about (a) what there is and (b) that the self is not among the things that are.

Some scholars to contend that such claims, especially those of the *Vajirā Sutta*, should be considered as later additions to the canon that do not represent the earlier metaphysically agnostic

⁷ *kiṃ nu sattoti pacesi, māra diṭṭhigataṃ nu te / suddhasaṅkhārapuñjōyaṃ, nayidha sattupalabbhati / “yathā hi aṅgasambhārā, hoti saddo ratho iti / evaṃ khandhesu santesu, hoti sattoti sammuti / “dukkhameva hi sambhoti, dukkhaṃ tiṭṭhati veti ca / nāññatra dukkhā sambhoti, nāññaṃ dukkhā nirujjhatī”ti//*

⁸ Abhidharmikas of different schools, including the likes of Buddhaghosa and Vasubandhu will cite this passage with approval (Vis XVIII; Akb IX).

⁹ *“sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā”ti, yadā paññāya passati / atha nibbindati dukkhe, esa maggo visuddhiyā / “sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā”ti, yadā paññāya passati / atha nibbindati dukkhe, esa maggo visuddhiyā / “sabbe dhammā anattā”ti, yadā paññāya passati / atha nibbindati dukkhe, esa maggo visuddhiyā //*

position of the more core discourses (e.g. Wynne 2011, 106).¹⁰ However, I will show that this rarity of explicitness is consistent with metaphysical anti-realism about the self.

2 Different Versions of the No Self View

Buddhist philosophers who systematized Buddhist ideas in different ways on the basis of the suttas were quite firm in interpreting the not-self teaching as entailing, or even being equivalent to, metaphysical anti-realism about the self. This is an historical fact that we need to take seriously when interpreting the sutta literature in a philosophical register. Metaphysical anti-realism about the self is a way of reading the suttas that was widespread and represents how the Indian Buddhist tradition came to understand itself as it evolved. In this section, I briefly outline two approaches to systematizing the not-self teaching into a no-self view. I do this by way of foregrounding both the philosophical diversity and deep underlying unity that animate Indian Buddhist anti-realism about the self.

2.1 Not-Self as Soteriological Strategy

All schools of Buddhist philosophy agree that the not-self teaching is a sound soteriological strategy.¹¹ By cultivating an understanding of the aggregates as being devoid of self, one can make serious progress on the path to liberation from *dukkha*. Here I briefly outline several points of agreement on the soteriological benefits of selflessness among certain schools of Indian Buddhist thought.

The culmination of the *Anattālakkhana Sutta* is an analysis of the soteriological results of internalizing the conclusions of the arguments I reconstructed above (§1.1). Recognition that the aggregates (*khandha*-s) are not-self (*anattā*) inclines one towards estrangement (*nibbindati*) from all of the content of sensory and cognitive life, the fading of passion (*virāgā*) that comes with the distance established by estrangement, and finally liberation (*vimutti*) from suffering (*dukkha*), which results from the complete relinquishment of all craving (*taṇhā*).

Multiple schools of Abhidharma echo this point about the therapeutic value of understanding the not-self teaching. In his masterpiece *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa makes the point negatively by comparing a butcher who has slaughtered a cow and a bhikkhu who has analyzed their personhood into its constituents. Buddhaghosa says (Vis 348, XI.30):¹²

...so too this bhikkhu, while still a foolish ordinary person—both formerly as a layman and as one gone forth into homelessness—does not lose the perception ‘a being’ (*satto*) or ‘man’ (*poso*) or ‘person’ (*puggala*) so long as he does not, by resolution of the compact into elements, review this

¹⁰ It is not my desire to get embroiled in text-critical debates about historicity, nor to take sides in the fraught issue of what ought to constitute early Buddhism. Instead, I am happy to grant that the explicit denial of selfhood is rare in the sutta literature.

¹¹ The claim that *anattā* is at base a ‘soteriological strategy’ is one I borrow from Collins (1982, 12).

¹² When I cite the *Visuddhimagga*, I first cite the PTS page number followed by chapter and paragraph number. In this passage, I follow Ñāṇamoli (2000) verbatim.

body, however placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements. But when he does review it as consisting of elements, he loses the identification ‘living being’ and his mind establishes itself upon the elements.

The focus on ‘resolving the mind upon the elements’ is further echoed by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakosa-bhasyam*. In the opening chapter of the treatise, Vasubandhu begins by identifying wisdom (*prajñā/paññā*) with, ‘...knowledge of the *dharma*-s’ (Ch. 1, 2a). It is these *dharma*-s that function as the reduction base for composite wholes. It is only a proper understanding of this mereological state of affairs that alleviates the risks of foolishness and leads to the cultivation of wisdom.

Turning now briefly to the Mahāyana, we note that, in Ch. 18 of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (MMK), Nāgārjuna also puts a massive amount of soteriological weight on a proper understanding of the not-self teaching.¹³ In verse 4, we see Nāgārjuna claim that when one loses the sense of ‘I’ (*aham*) and ‘mine’ (*mamety*), appropriation (*upādānam*) ceases (*nirudhyata*). The cessation of appropriation then leads to the destruction (*kṣayaḥ*) of birth (*jānmanaḥ*).¹⁴ This verse is something all Indian Buddhists can agree with. However, in verse 5, things start to take on a distinctively Madhyamaka flavor (MMK 18, 5ad):

Liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualizations; Those arise from proliferation, but proliferation ceases in emptiness.¹⁵

It is this progression of reification and ossification in the mind that is the primary source of *duḥkha* (Pali *dukkha*) for Nāgārjuna. The tendency of the mind is to impose categories on the content of experience. It is our deep commitment to the validity of this imputation through an ignorance of its very occurrence that keeps us bootstrapped into *saṃsāric* continuity. By recognizing that *dharma*-s

¹³ It might seem superficial to focus on MMK Ch. 18 here as most of the chapters that precede this one are also focused on different ways that self-reification shows up in pre-Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophical psychology. Even so, this chapter is particularly important because it marks a transition point in the text from deconstructive argument to explicit soteriological reflection.

¹⁴ MMK 18, 4a-d: *mamety aham iti kṣīṇe bahirdhādhyātmanam eva ca / nirudhyata upādānam tatksayāj janmanaḥ kṣayaś //* I follow Siderits and Katsura (2013, 197) but have opted for ‘cessation’ for *nirudhyata* and ‘destruction’ for *kṣayaḥ*.

¹⁵ *karmakleśakṣayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ / te prapañcāt prapañcas tu śūnyatāyām nirudhyate //* Here I again follow Siderits and Kasura (ibid) but reject their rendering of *prapañca* as ‘hypostatization’. I incline towards ‘proliferation’ which follows Nāṇananda’s (1971/2012) approach to *papañca* in the Pāli canon. Conceptually, the term denotes the tendency of the mind to both reify and multiply that which is reified. Hypostatization captures the reification component but neglects multiplication. The inverse is true of ‘proliferation’. Even so, ‘proliferation’ is less cumbersome than ‘hypostatization’ and is closer to the etymological root. The root *pra-pañc* means, “...to extend, or spread out, the term connotes diffuseness, manifoldness, in contrast to the ‘one-pointed’ attention and wisdom of the sage” (Collins 1982, 141).

are empty (*śūnya*) of substance (*svabhāva*), one comes to understand the selflessness (*anātman*) of all phenomena (*dharma*-s). With nothing to cling to in such a realization, one quickly makes an end of suffering.

2.2 *Two Varieties of Buddhist Metaphysical Anti-Realism about the Self*

Having outlined some of the ways that Buddhist philosophers converge on the soteriological efficacy of self-negation, I turn to how this agreement underwrites pronounced disagreements about underlying metaphysical commitments.

2.2.1 Vasubandhu's Reductionism

In the *bhāṣya* of verse 2a of the first chapter of his *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu defines a *dharma* in the following way: “*Dharma* is that which bears (*dhāraṇa*) self-(or unique) characteristics.” (Pruden 1971 Vol I, 57). On this view, reality can be exhaustively explained in terms of the momentary arising and passing away of *dharma*-s; these are individuated on the basis of manifesting basic characteristics called *svābhava*. It is further claimed (in verse 3) that: “Apart from the discernment of *dharma*-s, there is no means to extinguish the defilements...” So, according to Vasubandhu's Abhidharma, *dharma*-s are the basic constituents of reality and proper knowledge of these is the only way to come out of *duḥkha*.

Vasubandhu's Abhidharma embodies a metaphysical commitment to mereological reductionism, the view that all composite wholes can be exhaustively explained in terms of the behaviors of their parts. There are no persons, tables, or chairs, there are only collections of *dharma*-s organized in person-like, table-like, or chair-like ways. It is conventionally true (*saṃvṛti*) that there are persons and objects, but the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) is that there are only collections of momentary *dharma*-s so organized. Our ordinary habits of perception and introspection disclose the world *as if* it were composed of persons and objects. But this is only an apparent reality. From an ultimate standpoint, there are only the *dharma*-s. Soteriological progress is made by cultivating an awareness of this mereological fact. Presumably, this awareness is not just abstract, but also a real-time, concrete, phenomenologically robust comprehension of reality as it is unfolding moment by moment. When the actual constituents of the person and its world are understood thus, there is nothing to grasp or hold onto. Why? Because the momentary fluctuating actuality of things precludes such grasping. When reality is apprehended in this way, then a profound transformation is brought about through detachment to those senses of self and world that were until that point erroneously understood as ultimately real composite entities.

2.2.2 Emptiness without Intrinsic Identity: The Madhyamika View

The Abhidharmic view of reality faces a profound and extended immanent critique from Madhyamaka philosophers like Nāgārjuna and his philosophical descendants. Here I restrict my remarks to two related points. First, I will demonstrate the extent of the disagreement between Madhyamaka and Abhidharmic metaphysics. Second, I will show that in spite of this difference, the soteriological upshot of Madhyamaka thinking is deeply motivated by its anti-Abhidharmic metaphysics.

In the first chapter of the MMK, Nāgārjuna utilizes the *catuskoti* – a fourfold logical schema comprising p , $\sim p$, $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$, $\sim(p \vee \sim p)$, often translated as the “tetralemma” - to argue against the possibility of causal relations obtaining between *dharma*-s that have *svabhāva*. The first verse of chapter 1 claims that a *dharma* could not self-cause, could not be caused by something other than itself, could not be both self- and other-caused, and finally could not be neither self-nor-other-caused (MMK 1, 1ad). It is the second of these options that is most relevant for it represents the Abhidharmic view of how causal relations obtain between *dharma*-s.

Nāgārjuna’s offers arguments against each of the four components of the Abhidharmic model of causation. Here I consider just one, the 9th verse of the first chapter of the MMK (cf. Siderits and Katsura 2013, 25-6):

Cessation does not obtain when *dharma*-s have not yet originated.

Thus, nothing can be called a proximate condition; if it has ceased, how can it be a condition?¹⁶

In Abhidharmic accounts of causation, a proximate condition (*anantaram*) is that which undergoes destruction in order for a cause to bring about its effect. If a proximate condition is that which ceases to exist when the effect arises, then before the effect arises, the proximate condition cannot have been destroyed. However, once the proximate condition is destroyed, it cannot do anything. A *dharma* either exists or doesn’t exist. So if the proximate condition cannot perform its function by existing or not existing, then the proximate condition cannot perform its function. Nāgārjuna’s point here is that the only appropriate referents for our causal concepts are conventionally existing composite entities, the kinds of entities that Abhidharmic reductionism aims to decompose. When we try to graft our concepts onto fundamentally existing, momentary, *svabhāva*-bearing entities like *dharma*-s - as is the explanatory pretension of Abhidharmic metaphysics – the explanations fall apart under analysis.

The Madhyamaka way of analyzing Buddhist categories constitutes a rather pronounced transformation of the Abhidharmic understanding of the two truths. The ultimate truth is not one that pertains to a stratum of reality composed of fundamentally existing particulars. Instead, the ultimate truth is that conventionally real entities lack the kind of nature they seem to us to have; that is, all phenomena, whether composite or seemingly punctate, are empty (*śūnya*) of *svabhāva*. For the

¹⁶ *anutpanneṣu dharmeṣu nirodho nopapadyate / nānantaram ato yuktaṃ niruddhe pratyayaś ca kaḥ* // This rendering of the verse follows Candrakīrti’s parsing of the last sentence (cf. PP 86; MacDonald 2015 Vol II, 331).

Madhyamaka, persons are not selfless because there is a layer of reality that is fundamentally real, but configured in a selfless way. Rather, there is no part of reality that could bear a self, because every particular facet of reality is devoid of that quality that is necessary for anything to be a self, namely *svabhāva*. It is the deflationary conventionalism combined with anti-realism that distinguishes Madhyamaka approaches to the not-self teaching from those of their Abhidharmic forebears. Even so, the soteriological benefits accrued to the practitioner from understanding emptiness accrue precisely because the subject's experience of the world accords with metaphysical facts about what is the case.

2.2.3 Metaphysical Facts and Soteriological Value

In spite of the differences of opinion about what the metaphysical facts *are* between various Buddhist schools of philosophy,¹⁷ there is a tight connection between the metaphysical facts and the soteriological value one stands to gain from practicing the Buddhist path. The soteriological strategy of self-negation gains its efficacy precisely in light of putting the practitioner into an appropriate and special kind of epistemic contact with the way things are (Bodhi 2017). For Buddhist philosophers, metaphysical facts concerning whether a person has an unchanging self or not determine soteriological value. This connection obtains across various schools of thought who disagree with each other profoundly about what the metaphysical facts are.

I emphasize this point to prime the reader to evaluate the costs of construing sutta-level Buddhist thought as metaphysically agnostic. It is an invariant feature of the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition that there is a tight connection between a careful understanding of the metaphysical facts (however construed) and a transcendent soteriological value derived therefrom. In arguing for metaphysical agnosticism about the existence or non-existence of the self in the Pāli suttas, one introduces a sharp division into this otherwise widespread pattern. In effect, one indirectly argues that the several schools of philosophy that have built on the sutta literature have ignorantly or willfully misunderstood its real message and that we now, some two thousand years later, have done a pragmatist end-run on the entire tradition. This is not yet an argument against metaphysical agnosticism, but simply a reminder of the hermeneutical costs of adopting such a position. The cost seems rather high.

¹⁷ Here I have only canvassed two. I chose them because the Madhyamaka view represents a sustained criticism of the metaphysics embodied by the Abhidharmic systems. Thus, my goal is to demonstrate a thematic unity amidst metaphysical diversity within Buddhist philosophizing. I could just as easily have delved into the idealism of Yogācāra but this would have taken us too far afield. I note also that in my analysis of the Abhidharma, I necessarily eschewed some serious differences of opinion about the nature of *dharma*-s. See Sharf (2018) and Dhammajoti (2007; 2015) for systematic treatments of Abhidharmic debates about the nature of perception and the bearing of such accounts on Buddhist metaphysics more generally.

3 Explaining Why the Suttas are Metaphysically Anti-Realist about the Self

I turn now to an articulation of my positive proposal, which comes in two parts. I begin with an extension of the arguments contained in the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta* (see §1.1). I show that these arguments when properly analyzed entail metaphysical anti-realism about the self. This is followed by an analysis of conceit (*māna*) and its role in conditioning proper cognition and speech. This latter piece of the analysis explains why the entailment derived in the first part is usually left unarticulated in the texts.

3.1 Extending the Arguments from a Not-Self Teaching to a No-Self View

Let us return to the two arguments of the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta* (SN III, 66; §1.1). Neither argument concludes that there is no self. In order to earn that conclusion, a further premise would be required, one that limits the possibility of a self's existence to the five aggregates. It might look something like:

E. If there were a self, it would be found among the aggregates.¹⁸

This premise combined with the conclusions of the two arguments from the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta* yield the conclusion that there are no selves. If the aggregates are not the self, or cannot be rightly regarded as the self, and the only place one might find a self is among the aggregates, then there are no selves.¹⁹

Some scholars think we can safely assume this premise in our parsing of the relevant sutta literature (e.g. Siderits 2007, 39; Adam 2010, 246-7) even though this premise is not supplied in the discourse. Others think the lack of an explicit statement of the premise is at least part of a reason to abandon metaphysical anti-realism about the self (Davis 2016). I propose a third alternative: this premise is provided explicitly in another discourse from the same collection called the *Samanupassana Sutta* (SN III, 46). It occurs just a few pages previous to the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*, both discourses being part of the *Khandha-Samyutta*. The relevant passage is the sutta's opening line which says the following: "Bhikkhus, indeed whatever recluses or brahmins (who) regard the self in different ways, in so regarding, they all regard the five aggregates subject to clinging or a certain one of these" (see Bodhi 2017, 33).²⁰ This passage is attempting an exhaustiveness claim; any recluse who

¹⁸ Siderits claims this is an implicit premise in reconstructing the argument from impermanence. He expresses this premise in the following way: "There is no more to the person than the five *skhandha*-s" (Siderits 2007, 39).

¹⁹ See also DN II, 66-8 for an argument that anything that would qualify as a self must have an accompanying sense of 'I am' and that having this sense is dependent on the existence of feeling (*vedanā*), which is not self. The sutta then reasons that anything that depends on what is *anattā* must itself also be *anattā*. This latter inference is suspect. It seems highly plausible to me that if there were selves, they would emerge from a realization base that was not the self. Thus, I have not focused on this argument due to the suspect nature of this particular inference. For a thorough reconstruction of this passage, see Harvey (1995, 31-3).

²⁰ *Ye hi keci, bhikkhave, samaṇā vā brāhmaṇā vā anekavihiṭaṃ attānaṃ samanupassamānā samanupassanti, sabbe te pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti, etesaṃ vā aññataraṃ.*

has any view of the self will actually be mistaking the self for one or more of the aggregates. This passage is logically equivalent to premise (E).²¹ It is also worth emphasizing that this passage occurs within the topically organized subsection of the *nikāya* that contains the original arguments. The various *saṃyutta*-s are organized by topic, which constrains relevance of comparison and justifies the inclusion of this passage as necessary context for interpreting the arguments of the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*. Therefore, premise (E), considered in conjunction with the conclusions of either of the arguments from the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*, entails that there are no selves.

Yet, this conclusion is not explicitly asserted. The closest we get to such a claim is ‘all *dhamma*-s are not-self’ (*sabbe dhammā anattā*). The claim ‘There is no self’ is never asserted and the one time the Buddha is asked this question (cf. SN IV, 400), he refuses to answer it (see §§3.2.2 and 5.1). This is curious because I have just shown that this conclusion is directly entailed by a consideration of the suttas contained in the *Khandha-Saṃyutta*. So the question that must now be addressed is this: why might a conclusion that is directly entailed by explicitly given arguments remain unasserted? To answer this question we must delve into the grammatical architecture of those more agnostic suttas that seem to dismiss questions of the self’s existence.

3.2 *Metaphysical Agnosticism about the Self?*

In spite of the entailment drawn out in the last section, there are a number of suttas that have been interpreted as being hostile to metaphysical questions about the self. Here I analyze three such texts.

3.2.1 Unwise Attention and Wrong Views

The *Sabbāsava Sutta* (MN I, 6) addresses a number of issues, the most important of which for our purposes is wise (*yoniso*) and unwise (*ayoniso*) attention (*manasikāra*). There are two key passages that are relevant to my interpretation of *anattā*. The first lays out a number of ways in which a person may attend unwisely²² through the asking of unskillful questions:

This is how one unwisely makes the mind: ‘Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What did I exist as in the past? How did I exist in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Will I exist in the future? Will I not exist in the future? What shall I exist as in the future? How shall I exist in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?’ Or he inwardly questions about the present thus: ‘Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?’²³

²¹ It could be argued at a stretch that this passage is only claiming that other teachers think that a) there is as self and b) it is to be found among the aggregates. This strikes me as unlikely in the extreme given that Buddhists are the only ones who theorize about human beings with the aggregates. Thus, it seems more parsimonious to take the passage at face value as critiquing any and all self-views through an identification of any candidate self with the aggregates.

²² The literal rendering of the Pāli here (*so evaṃ ayoniso manasi karoti*) means one unwisely makes their mind in a certain way.

²³ *so evaṃ ayoniso manasi karoti — ‘ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? na nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ*

The questions are framed explicitly to oneself in terms of the existence or non-existence of ‘I’ (*ahaṃ*) that may or may not exist (*bhavati*) in the past, present, or future. When one starts asking these sorts of questions, one inevitably fastens upon one answer or another. The discourse enumerates these answers in terms of six different views (*diṭṭhi*):

When he attends unwisely thus, one of six views arise in him as certain. The view ‘self exists for me’ arises in him as true and reliable; or the view ‘no self exists for me’ arises in him as true and reliable; or the view ‘I recognize self with self’ arises in him as true and reliable; or the view ‘I recognize not-self with self’ arises in him as true and reliable; or the view ‘I recognize self with not-self’ arises in him as true and reliable; or then he has some view thus: ‘It is this self of mine that speaks and feels here and there, undergoes the fruit of good and bad actions; and indeed, this self of mine is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, abiding like that for ever eternity.’²⁴

The six views that arise on account of unwise attention all share a single problem. They reflect a problematic reification of the mind into a self that either does or does not exist ‘for me’ or that ‘I’ recognize in some way or another. The individual adopts an explicit theoretical interpretation of that which has been unwisely attended and reifies it with the language of ‘I’ and ‘me’.

The Buddha’s diagnosis of these views is stark: they are dismissed as irrelevant to the path that leads to the ending of suffering (*dukkha*):

Bhikkhus, this wrong view is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a wriggling of views, a twitching of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views bhikkhus, the ignorant worldling is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.²⁵

This looks like a straightforward set of points in favor of agnosticism about the existence of the self. But notice that the points about self are put in terms of ‘I’ and ‘me’. The specific target here is not the existence of the self *per se*, but our deep habits of self-grasping through the reification of the ‘I’ in our self-talk and explicit view formation. I will return to this point below.

3.2.2 The Buddha Refuses to Answer the Question

atītamaddhānaṃ? bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ? na nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatamaddhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatamaddhānaṃ? etarahi vā paccuppannamaddhānaṃ ārabha ajjhataṃ kathaṃkathī hoti — ‘ahaṃ nu khosmi? no nu khosmi? kiṃ nu khosmi? kathaṃ nu khosmi? ayaṃ nu kho satto kuto āgato? so kuhiṃ gāmi bhavissatī’?

²⁴ *tassa evaṃ ayoniso manasikaroto channaṃ diṭṭhinaṃ aññatarā diṭṭhi uppajjati. ‘atthi me attā’ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; ‘natthi me attā’ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; ‘attānāva attānaṃ sañjānāmi’ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; ‘attānāva anattānaṃ sañjānāmi’ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; ‘anattānāva attānaṃ sañjānāmi’ti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; atha vā panassa evaṃ diṭṭhi hoti — ‘yo me ayaṃ attā vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇapāpakānaṃ kammānaṃ vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti so kho pana me ayaṃ attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tatheva ṭhassatī’.*

²⁵ *idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, diṭṭhigataṃ diṭṭhigahanaṃ diṭṭhikantāraṃ diṭṭhivissūkaṃ diṭṭhivipphanditaṃ diṭṭhisamyojanaṃ. diṭṭhisamyojanasamyutto, bhikkhave, assutavā puthujjano na parimuccati jātiyā jarāya maraṇena sokehi paridevehi dukkhehi domanassehi upāyāsehi; ‘na parimuccati dukkhasmā’ti vadāmi.*

In spite of its short length and concision, the *Ānanda Sutta* (SN IV, 400) is exceedingly subtle. Importantly, in this discourse the Buddha refuses to reply to the question of whether or not the self exists:

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta went to the Blessed one and having approached the Blessed One he exchanged friendly greetings with him. Having finished these friendly pleasantries, he sat to one side. Sitting to one side, the wanderer Vacchagotta spoke thus to the Blessed One: "What is the case, friend Gotama, is there a self?" When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. "Then, friend Gotama, is there no self?" A second time the Blessed One was silent. Then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed.²⁶

The meaning of this silence is ambiguous enough that Ānanda then asks the Buddha why he refused to answer Vacchagotta's question. The Buddha's answer comes in three parts. The first part begins by situating the question in the dialectical extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. The Buddha replies:

Now Ānanda, when the wanderer Vacchagotta asked, 'Is there a self?' had I answered, 'There is a self,' this would have been siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are eternalists. And Ānanda, when asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta, 'Is there no self?' had I answered, 'There is no self,' this would have been siding with those ascetics and brahmins who are annihilationists.²⁷

To engage in questions about the existence or non-existence of the self is to embroil oneself in the extreme views of an eternal soul or complete annihilation of self at death. Since Buddhist soteriology defines itself as a path that is the middle-way between these two extremes, it seems this passage is condemning metaphysical speculation about an abiding self's existence on soteriological grounds.

The Buddha then continues his answer to Ānanda by contrasting two perspectives, the perspective of final knowledge and the perspective of Vacchagotta's specific psychological predicament. From the perspective of final knowledge, the Buddha explains:

Now Ānanda, when the wanderer Vacchagotta asked, 'Is there a self?' had I answered, 'There is a self,' would this Ānanda have been in conformity on my part with the arising of the insight that 'all *dhamma*-s are not-self?' "No, venerable sir."²⁸

²⁶ *atha kho vacchagotto paribbājako yena bhagavā tenupasaṅkami; upasaṅkamitvā bhagavatā saddhiṃ sammodi. sammodanīyaṃ kathaṃ sāraṇīyaṃ vītisāretvā ekamantaṃ nisīdi. ekamantaṃ nisinno kho vacchagotto paribbājako bhagavantaṃ etadavoca — "kiṃ nu kho, bho gotama, atthattā"ti? evaṃ vutte, bhagavā tuṅhī ahoṣi. "kiṃ pana, bho gotama, natthattā"ti? dutiyampi kho bhagavā tuṅhī ahoṣi. atha kho vacchagotto paribbājako utthāyāsanaṃ pakkāmi.*

²⁷ *ahañcānanda, vacchagottassa paribbājakassa 'atthattā'ti puṭṭho samāno 'atthattā'ti byākareyyaṃ, ye te, ānanda, samaṇabrāhmaṇā sassatavādā tesametaṃ saddhiṃ abhavissa. ahañcānanda, vacchagottassa paribbājakassa 'natthattā'ti puṭṭho samāno 'natthattā'ti byākareyyaṃ, ye te, ānanda, samaṇabrāhmaṇā ucchedavādā tesametaṃ saddhiṃ abhavissa.*

²⁸ *ahañcānanda, vacchagottassa paribbājakassa 'atthattā'ti puṭṭho samāno 'atthattā'ti byākareyyaṃ, api nu me taṃ, ānanda, anulomaṃ abhavissa nāṇassa uppādāya — 'sabbe dhammā anattā'”ti? "no hetam, bhante".*

This looks like a return to a no self view, to the claim that from the perspective of final knowledge, all phenomena (*dhamma*-s) are not self. This part of the reply is then contextualized again with respect to Vacchagotta's capacities as a listener. To that end, the Buddha claims:

And Ānanda, when the wanderer Vacchagotta asked, 'Is there no self?' had I answered, 'There is no self,' the wanderer Vacchagotta, already bewildered, would have become more confused, thinking, 'It seems that the self I was in the past does not exist presently.'²⁹

The intriguing thing about this tripartite answer is that it fully embodies the schism between anti-realism and agnosticism about the self. On the one hand some strands of Buddhist soteriology seem to be anti-realist about the self. Further, it is only by cultivating a special kind of knowledge of this metaphysical fact that one can make soteriological progress. As we have seen, much of the Indian Buddhist philosophical tradition subsequent to the suttas takes this road (see §2) On the other hand, other parts of Buddhist soteriology seem to be metaphysically agnostic about the existence or non-existence of a self and to claim that one cannot make soteriological progress without abandoning such metaphysical speculations (see §4). This makes a proper interpretation of this discourse paramount to constructing a coherent interpretation of the Pāli suttas on the *anattā* teaching.³⁰

3.2.3 Rejecting Existence and Nonexistence

In the *Kaccanagotta Sutta* (SN II, 16), the Buddha is questioned by Kaccana about the nature of right-view (*samma diṭṭhi*). His explanation is intriguing in that it seems to reject *any* talk of existence and non-existence, not just existence and non-existence as it pertains to the self:

Indeed Kaccana, this world mostly relies on the duality of existence and non-existence. Kaccana, one who sees the arising of the world as it is with right insight, there is no nonexistence in the world. And Kaccana, one who sees the cessation of the world as it is with right insight, there is no existence in world.³¹

This passage claims that right view is at least partially constituted by a proper appreciation of how phenomena arise and pass away. And when this pattern of arising and passing away is clearly understood, the predilection of interpreting phenomena in terms of existence and non-existence begins to subside.

²⁹ *ahañcānanda, vacchagottassa paribbājakassa 'natthattā'ti puṭṭho samāno 'natthattā'ti byākareyyaṃ, sammūlhassa, ānanda, vacchagottassa paribbājakassa bhiiyo sammohāya abhaviṣṣa — 'ahuvā me nūna pubbe attā, so etarahi natthī'ti. dasamaṃ.*

³⁰ A full analysis of this sutta will have to wait until §5.1

³¹ *dvayanissito khvāyaṃ, kaccāna, loko yebhuyyena — atthitañceva natthitañca. lokasamudayaṃ kho, kaccāna, yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke natthitā sā na hoti. lokanirodhaṃ kho, kaccāna, yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke atthitā sā na hoti.*

We are then offered a further diagnosis of the psychological costs of adopting such views. Here an explicit connection is made between the presence or absence of these costs and one's taking a stand on the existence or non-existence of the self:

Kaccana, this world is mostly in bondage by attachment, grasping, and inclination. But if one does not get attached and does not grasp through attachment, grasping, determination, inclination and underlying tendency; he does not fix his attention on 'my self.' He has no doubt or uncertainty that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge here is independent of others. Indeed, Kaccana, this is the extent of right view. "All exists": indeed Kaccana, this is one extreme. 'All does not exist': this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle...³²

The 'middle' referred to at the very end of this passage is then explained in terms of the standard arising of the twelve links of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). The important point here is that when views of existence and non-existence dissipate, then so also do views about self (*attā*). When the reality of conditioned existence is understood as it is, then there is no need to take a stand on issues pertaining to the existence or non-existence of the self.³³ What replaces them is an understanding of the middle path of dependently originated phenomena.

3.3 *The Conditioning of Conceit*

The reason that the assertion that there are no selves is seldom explicitly stated is practical and concerns the psychological dynamics of right view (*samma diṭṭhi*) as well as the subtle and pervasive influence of the conceit 'I am' (*asmi-māna*). Metaphysical agnosticism does not come into it. Regarding views in general, and *samma diṭṭhi* in particular, we can note that the suttas portray the Buddha as very careful about one's becoming attached to such views.³⁴ The Buddha explains: "Bhikkhus, I will expound to you that the *dhamma* is like a raft: it is for the sake of traversing not for the sake of seizing" (MN I, 134).³⁵ Even the path that leads to the liberation from conditioned existence must be apprehended without attachment lest the deep underlying habits of self-grasping take hold and distort one's understanding of the emancipatory path.

³² *upayupādānābhinivesavinibandho khvāyaṃ, kaccāna, loko yebhuyyena. tañcāyaṃ upayupādānaṃ cetaso adhiṭṭhānaṃ abhinivesānusaṃyayaṃ na upeti na upādiyati nādhīṭṭhāti — 'attā me'ti. 'dukkhameva uppajjamānaṃ uppajjati, dukkhaṃ nirūjjhamānaṃ nirūjjhāti'ti na kaṅkhati na vicikicchati aparapaccayā nāṇamevassa ettha hoti. ettāvatā kho, kaccāna, sammādiṭṭhi hoti.sabbaṃ atthī'ti kho, kaccāna, ayameko anto. 'sabbaṃ natthī'ti ayaṃ dutiyo anto. ete te, kaccāna, ubho ante anupagamma majjhena tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti*

³³ Though, the parts of this passage that refer to 'only suffering' arising and ceasing would seem to indicate that there is no self.

³⁴ The *locus classicus* for erroneous views is the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN I, 1). More importantly for my purposes here is the simile of the raft from the *Alagaddupama Sutta* (MN I, 130).

³⁵ *kullūpamaṃ vo, bhikkhave, dhammaṃ desessāmi nittharaṇatthāya, no gahaṇatthāya.*

There are three relevant forms of self-grasping of which *asmimāna* is the subtlest and most pervasive. The first is the second noble truth of craving (*taṇhā*) – the way in which one appropriates the aggregates (*khandha*-s). When this self-appropriation invades one’s cognitive apparatus at the level of belief formation a number of erroneous views (*ditṭhi*) tend to arise. These are explicit theoretical convictions about the ways in which the aggregates constitute a self (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*). Finally, we have conceit (*māna*), a deep underlying tendency to feel one’s existence is organized in terms of an ‘I am’ (*asmi*). Think of *taṇhā* as the engine that creates *dukkha*, *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, and *māna* as different kinds of results that arise through this distorted cognitive economy. The emergence of various *sakkāya-ditṭhi*-s is the result of craving conditioning one’s higher-order cognitive functions, and the *māna* of *asmi* is the result of a pervasive underlying tendency (*anusaya*) that structures perception and our pre-reflective sense of reality.³⁶ This distinction between *sakkāya-ditṭhi* and *asmimāna* is most aptly embodied in the *Khemaka Sutta* (SN III, 126) where the elder Khemaka explains, through Dasaka to a group of questioners, that he is free from explicit beliefs about the self having anything to do with the aggregates but still remains subject to the subtle conceit ‘I am’ (*asmimāna*).

I now have the tools to properly analyze those suttas canvassed in the previous section that seem to dismiss metaphysical questions about selfhood. It’s not that we *couldn’t know* whether or not the self exists or that such views are incoherent or soteriologically problematic given our epistemic situation. *Rather, it is that making explicit assertions regarding the self and the world has the overwhelming (though, not inevitable) tendency to lead us towards the conceit ‘I am’ (asmimāna).* For example, to assert that ‘I am not a self’, ‘I will not exist in the future’, or ‘the self does not exist for me’ is still to psychologically affirm an ‘I’ or ‘me’. The propensity to frame one’s sense of reality in terms of an invariant grammatical subject is a deeply entrenched bias that is fully eradicated only with final enlightenment. Given the emphasis the suttas place on pragmatic steps towards emancipation from *dukkha* and the subtle relationship one must have to *samma ditṭhi*, there is a strong pedagogical reason to be exceedingly cautious in asserting the no-self view.

Compare the grammar of the kinds of questions that are denied in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (expressed in ‘I’ or ‘me’ language and indexed to the three phases of time) and the third-personal language of ‘all *dhamma*-s are not-self’. What is being avoided in the former case is *not* the view that there is no self. Such a view is logically entailed by the arguments explored earlier pertaining to the aggregates (*khandha*-s) and *dhamma*-s all being not-self (*anattā*). *The issue is that we are prone to a subtle and pervasive tendency to turn this very truth into a form of conceit (māna), one that ironically re-intrenches our self-appropriation through the reification of first-personal language (I, me, mine) in thought and speech.* It is this re-entrenchment that is being avoided when the suttas

³⁶ I cannot get into a careful discussion of the curious phenomenon of *papañca* or proliferation. Briefly, I interpret as a kind of self-proliferating cognitive feedback loop that arises when we become fully invested in the adequacy of our conceptual schemes. For more, see Ñāṇananda (1971/2012).

eschew views of self and no self. In all such cases, the problematic views are expressed in first-personal language and it is the conditioning imposed on the cognitive economy through the habitual and heedless use of this grammar that is being targeted. When the negation of self is properly framed in terms of *khandha*-s, *saṅkhāra*-s, or *dhamma*-s, the negation of self is expressed without lapsing into a grammatical form that actually re-embeds the problem in the individual's psyche through the language of thought they use to express that very truth. Therefore, it is perfectly consistent to embrace metaphysical anti-realism about the self and be wary of denying the existence of the self through thoughts and assertions that frame the denial in first-personal grammar.

4 Metaphysically Agnostic Approaches to the Not-Self Teaching

I have now explained both that the Buddha's statements in the suttas entail metaphysical anti-realism about the self and that he nonetheless refuses to say explicitly that there is no self because such a statement ("You have no self," "I have no self") would reinforce the conceit 'I am' (*asmimāna*). My interpretation has the additional benefit of not creating a schism between the suttas and the subsequent tradition of Indian Buddhist philosophy. I now review several other interpretations of the suttas that try to eschew metaphysical anti-realism and adopt metaphysical agnosticism about the self, and thereby create a schism in the Buddhist intellectual tradition. I argue that these alternatives are incorrect.

4.1 Hermeneutical Approaches to Suttas that seem Metaphysically Committed

Earlier I analyzed three texts that seemed to suggest that the Pāli suttas embraced metaphysical anti-realism about the self (SN III, 66; SN I 134; Dh 279). Here I consider how one might try to interpret those texts in a way that doesn't entail such anti-realism. This interpretive approach is embraced by the three views that I canvass in the next three sub-sections.

We begin with the two arguments of the *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*. Recall that neither of the two arguments in this text concludes that there is no self. They only go as far as arguing that the aggregates are not the self. Furthermore, Wynne (2009b) points out that the first of the two arguments that centers on control is rare. It is found in only two places in the entire Pāli canon (replicated at Vin I, 13 = SN III, 66 and MN I, 231).³⁷ The second argument is far more widespread (SN III, 66; SN IV, 1; AN

³⁷ Wynne goes on to claim that the first argument is both, "...conceptually odd and textually odd: not only is it a peculiar idea, it is also odd that the idea is expressed so infrequently throughout the early texts" (2009b, 88). The textual oddity is derived from the fact that the argument is rare and yet well-preserved; it occurs nearly verbatim in many non-Pāli sources (see Wynne 2009b, 85-6). It is conceptually odd because Wynne alleges (*pace* Collins 1987, 97) that there is no clear dialectical interface between this argument's claims and its supposed Brahmanical target. This leads Wynne to speculate that this argument represents a subtle attack by an early Buddhist school who value contemplation of *anattā* teachings against those who favor formal meditation practice. I am not convinced by this line of reasoning as it seems to me rather straightforward that the *Upaniṣadic* self is seen as something of an 'inner controller' by Buddhist philosophers of various stripes and that this is not an erroneous perception.

II, 52; SN III, 23-4; cited by Collins 1982, 98). And yet, Wynne (2009a, 64) notes that this argument does not actually feature the term ‘*anattā*’. He argues that, “Since the ‘no self’ idea is not expressed in the second *anātman* teaching, and since this teaching is a common feature of the early Buddhist literature, the ‘no self’ idea of the *Vajirā Sutta* would seem to be the more unusual teaching, and so is most probably to be understood as a later development” (Wynne, 2009a, 69-70). Unfortunately, this attempt to de-ontologize the relevant arguments runs afoul of SN III, 46, which clearly shows that the needed extra premise for extending the arguments into a metaphysically anti-realist register are provided by relevant texts contained in the same sub-section of the *nikāya* (Bodhi 2017, 33). Further, the rarity of the argument from control is not evidence in favor of discounting its conclusion. The text of this argument has been meticulously preserved in multiple traditions (Wynne, 2009a).

Regarding the passage from the *Dhammapada* (279) that states that ‘all *dhamma*-s are not-self’ (*sabbe dhammā anattā*), notice that the *Dhammapada* has just as many passages that seem to affirm the self as an ethical principle of transformation (see Collins 1982, 73 for analysis and ample citations). Furthermore, the ‘all’ (*sabbe*) is defined in terms of a correlative relationship between sensible objects and their sensory systems (SN IV, 15).³⁸ Thus, the scope of this universal quantifier seems to range over a world that is structured by human perception rather than things as they are in themselves. If that’s right, then it’s not clear that the statement of all *dhamma*-s being not-self amounts to a metaphysical claim about the self’s non-existence. Rather, it may be a statement about the organization of the phenomenological world, the structure of which tacitly presumes a subject of experience. I consider this point in detail below (see §4.4).

4.2 Soteriological Strategy with an Unstated Ontology Compatible with the Existence of a Self

Some scholars have argued that the Buddha did really believe in a self but for reasons of methodological pragmatism refused to answer questions about its existence. This way of interpreting things is as old as English scholarship on the Pāli canon.³⁹ The idea is that the *anattā* teaching is really just a clever surface-level ruse that only *seems* to be anti-realist about the self. In fact, the secret view is that there really is a self, but we just can’t talk about it. While some of the later Mahāyana thinkers may have gone in this direction,⁴⁰ I do not think we have good text-critical or philosophical reasons for putting such a view in the mouth of the Buddha as he is represented in the suttas.

A contemporary exponent of the view that the Buddha maintained that there is a permanent, luminescent consciousness is Miri Albahari (2002; 2006). She goes as far as to describe metaphysical

³⁸ See Hamilton (2000, 19) and fn. 3 on p. 31 for the following references: AN I, 286; Dh 5-7 and 277-79; MN I, 336; DN II, 157.

³⁹ See Collins (1982, 7-8) for a nice summary and incisive criticism of this tradition of interpreting the Pāli texts.

⁴⁰ Vasubandhu can be read as affirming something like this in his auto-commentary on the tenth verse of Vim. So also does the *Mahāpariṇirvāna Sūtra* and much of the *tathagatagarbha* literature that follows it. Even so, that certain traditions of Buddhism seem to take this route is not yet an argument that this is how we should read the Pāli suttas.

anti-realism as a ‘pernicious view’ (2002, 5). Her initial approach is to point out that Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedantic understanding of *ātman* seems to be quite different from the *attā* that is targeted by the Pāli suttas (2002). But this should come as no surprise as Śāṅkara was active in the 9th century of the common era and was responding mostly to Yogācāra Buddhism and other Mahāyāna influenced Buddhist doctrines. That he had a non-agential understanding of how to read the Upanisadic *ātman* is no argument at all against the fact that this understanding of *ātman* is widespread in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist thought. It makes little sense to use Śāṅkara as a lens to read the Pāli suttas while trying to strip the former of their alleged metaphysical ambitions. Advaita Vedantic non-dualism was not on the radar of Pāli compilers. As Gombrich discusses (2009, Chs. 2-4), much of what distinguishes early Buddhist doctrine, philosophical and otherwise, develops in direct dialog with and response to Brahmanism and Jainism. There are plenty of non-Buddhist sources against which to measure and evaluate the philosophy of the suttas. The choice of Śāṅkara is not historically or conceptually relevant. Further, Albahari goes as far as to claim that, “...there are no suttas which suggest that the Buddha cautioned against the ultimate Identity of one’s unconditioned *Ātman* with *Brahman*: on this and other metaphysical matters, he remained silent” (Albahari 2002, 10). Verses 277-79 of the *Dhammapada* seem to suggest a contrary conclusion. As I remarked above, the shift from *saṅkhāra* to *dhammā* in this triple of verses is meant to convey that the scope of the latter is beyond that of the former, and that *all* elements of existence, conditioned and unconditioned, are *anattā*.

In developing her view, Albahari claims that the non-dual, luminously unified, objectless consciousness is *nibbāna* itself and that this consciousness is identical with the mind of the liberated arahant (Albahari 2006, 36). Although Albahari defines the self as a bounded agent and argues that the self is an illusion (see Albahari 2006, Ch. 4), her description of *nibbāna* is a cosmic self in not-self clothing. As Collins (1982, 80-1) and Gombrich (2009, 36-40) rightly note, the notion of *attā/ātman* that is being refuted by the Indian Buddhists is not just a finite bounded agent, but also an infinite cosmic being composed of a pure luminescent consciousness.

Further, Albahari is selective in her use of commentarial literature, preferring to ignore Buddhaghosa and the Abhidhamma unless it serves her purposes. For example, although she follows Buddhaghosa in his etymological analysis of *nibbāna* (2006, 37) in terms of un- (*nir*) binding (*vāna*) (Vis 293, VIII.247), she glosses over the fact that Buddhaghosa identifies the luminous mind with *bhavaṅga citta*, a mind moment that is as impermanent and fluctuating as any other (Asl 140). She might reply that the Abhidhamma is not relevant here, given that her project is to understand early pre-Abhidhammic Buddhism.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the sutta passages on luminosity as regards *nibbāna* are scarce and pale in comparison to those passages that are decisively anti-luminous: I refer to the many

⁴¹ I remain doubtful that such an end-run around the entire hermeneutical tradition that sprung up in response to the suttas and their āgama parallels is plausible.

passages that describe *nibbāna* in terms of the going out of a flame (e.g. Albahari cites SN V, 6 on p. 37 without seeming to note the conceptual tension in the images being used). As for the pro-luminosity passages, Albahari (2006, 36) approvingly cites suttas 49-52 from AN's Book of Ones (AN I, 10). But there are two problems with the Pāli word for luminous (*pabhassara*) here. First, Anālayo (2017b) points out that this term does not occur in *any* of the āgama parallels. The Pāli suttas have no more claim to being early Buddhism than do the Chinese āgamas.⁴² Thus, it is only by comparing these texts that we can start to speculate about what the early teachings of Buddhism might have been. This absence of parallel representation of luminosity in the āgamas gives us reason to think that luminosity in the suttas is either a later addition from the Abhidhammic-aware compilers or a corruption. Norman (1992) opts for the corruption route, pointing out that *pabham* is likely an error from *pahaṃ* which means 'to give up'. Thus, the only recourse to salvage this emphasis on luminosity is to rely on the Abhidhammic gloss. But if we take this route, we must reckon with the entire Abhidhammic edifice, which is decidedly anti-realist about the kind of unity Albahari wants for 'nibbānic consciousness'. Furthermore, as noted above, for Buddhaghosa, the luminous mind is *bhavaṅga citta* and all such *citta*-s are (i) object-oriented and (ii) momentary (Vis 458, XIV 114).⁴³

4.3 Soteriological Strategy with an Unstated Ontology that is Irrelevant to the Problem of Dukkha

Sue Hamilton's (2000) way of motivating metaphysical agnosticism is to claim that questions about the existence or non-existence of the self are irrelevant to the Buddha's soteriological strategy. Indeed, on Hamilton's view, according to the suttas, metaphysical speculations, "...are both pointless and potentially misleading in the quest for nirvana" (Hamilton 2000, 5). Her interpretation of the suttas is that they are interested in *how* the *khandha*-s function in generating continuity across lifetimes rather than in explaining *what* a person is in terms of their being composed by them. In Hamilton's words: "The point of commonality of the teachings is that they are all concerned with how something works: none of them is concerned with what something is, or, indeed, with what it is not. Most crucially, they are focused on how all the factors of human existence in the cycle of lives are dependent on other factors" (Hamilton 2000, 21).

In my view, this statement sets up a false dichotomy. Buddhist philosophy in the suttas is content to talk about what there is and what there isn't in specific contexts in terms of both conditioned and unconditioned *dhamma*-s. How something works and what it is are not so easily separable when you live in a dependently-originated universe.

⁴² See Anālayo (2012; 2015; 2016; 2017a)

⁴³ This account is not without its difficulties. For a canonical treatment of *bhavaṅga citta* see Collins (1982, Ch. 8). See Gethin (1994) for some helpful correctives to Collins. See also Harvey (1995, 155-66). For a more recent exploration of these and related issues, see Smith (2020b).

Take, for example, the famous passages on the nature of *nibbāna* from Ud 8.3. These passages discuss the nature of *nibbāna* in terms of existence and non-existence:

There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. Bhikkhus, if there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, there would be no evident method of escape from the born, become, made, conditioned. And indeed Bhikkhus, because there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, there is an evident escape from the born, become, made, fabricated is discerned.⁴⁴

The counterfactual reasoning here is explicitly metaphysical. If there were not an unconditioned *dhamma* (*nibbāna*), then there would be no escape from conditioned *dhamma*-s. Such analyses are metaphysical in the sense that they are concerned with existence and non-existence as well as the soteriological consequences of the world being the way it is and what a possible world would be like if its metaphysical structure was different from the actual one.⁴⁵

Indeed, Hamilton acknowledges that in its analysis of conditioned existence (*saṃsāra*) the suttas embrace a totalizing ‘metaphysical doctrine’ (Hamilton 2000, 22) of reality in terms of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). She writes:

In the entirety of the experience that comprises one’s cycle of lives nothing, of whatever nature, exists or occurs independently of conditioning factors. All such things, therefore, are conditioned things. In contrast to the more overtly soteriological – one might say subject-focused – teachings, it is important to grasp the generic relevance of this: that it applies both subjectively *and* objectively. Not only is the state of any individual human being (who for explanatory purposes and not in a technical sense I take to be a subject) at any given moment dependent on conditioning factors, but so are chairs, trees, stars, the air we breathe, toenails, musical notes, ideas and thoughts (all of which I take to be objective in relation to the subject), and so on (Hamilton 2000, 22).⁴⁶

With a wide scope metaphysical thesis in place about the nature of conditioned phenomena, Hamilton reasons that, “If all things are dependently originated, then it follows that nothing has independent selfhood. The way human beings occur is therefore not as independent selves.” (ibid). But then she hedges in her claim that “...it does not necessarily follow that the teaching is concerned to establish that there is *no* self...its relevance lies not in the question of whether or not a (human) self exists but in how *whatever* there is exists” (Hamilton 2000, 23). However, this reasoning is unconvincing. If everything is dependently originated, and if what is dependently originated lacks the requisite property (*sabhāva*) for being a self, precisely because it is dependently originated, then there are no selves. It makes no

⁴⁴ *atthi, bhikkhave, ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam. no cetam, bhikkhave, abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam, nayidha jātassa bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇam paññāyetha. yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam, tasmā jātassa bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhatassa nissaraṇam paññāyati”ti.*

⁴⁵ I explored this connection between soteriology and metaphysics earlier (see §2.2.3). This connection is represented here as well in the passages just cited.

⁴⁶ For a contrasting view that tries construe dependent origination as being an analysis only of the subject, see Shuluman (2008).

sense to embrace a wide scope metaphysical thesis about the world in its totality that entails that its constituents cannot be selves and then deny that the texts that talk about *anattā* are not making metaphysical claims.

Hamilton suggests that much of the explanations in the suttas about the aggregates and their interactions are ‘representational’, by which she means that they do not commit the speaker to any underlying metaphysical claims. Consider the following sutta passage: “What conditioned phenomena do they [volitional activities] volitionally construct? They volitionally construct the body as body, sensation as sensation, apperception as apperception, volitional activities as volitional activities, and consciousness as consciousness” (SN III, 87).⁴⁷ Hamilton claims that, “To draw out and grasp fully what is being said here, the *khandha*-s that are described as being volitionally constructed need to be interpreted in the sense that together they represent the entire human being. So it is one’s volitional activities that determine one’s future coming-to-be in its entirety” (Hamilton 2000, 80). According to Hamilton, this idea of ‘representing the entire human being’ is to be strictly distinguished from a compositional relation (ibid). In other words, her claim is that detailing the *khandha*-s serves to describe the human being but not to give an account of what constitutes the human being.

This interpretation, however, seems arbitrary. It is better to understand the *khandha*-s compositionally, in line with Varjā’s rebuke to Mara that the human being is constructed by and of *saṅkhāra*-s (SN I, 134). That is, a sentient being is nothing but a collection of *saṅkhāra*-s. The passage just cited (SN III, 87) has a straightforward and literal meaning: conditioned reality is constructed through the collective *kamma* of sentient beings and those sentient beings are themselves so constructed. The *khandha*-s are the compositional components of sentient beings. They are not just the way a sentient being experiences reality, but are the reality of the sentient being. This is why each aggregate is qualified in terms of itself: the body *as body* is constructed by the *kamma* of *saṅkhāric* proliferation, etc. This is a claim about the metaphysics of sentient beings, full stop.

Another problem that Hamilton finds with the no *attā* view of *anattā* is that it is philosophically incoherent. She renders this complaint in the form of a rhetorical question: “How might this combination of understanding one’s experience, accepting personal responsibility, attending to one’s state of mind, and progressing from ignorance to acquiring some profound insight with which one can continue to live, accommodate a *goal* of experiencing that one has no self?” (Hamilton 2000, 21). This worry has been capably addressed by Mark Siderits’s idea that we should think of person as a ‘shifting coalition’ of aggregates (Siderits 2007, 49).⁴⁸ There is no deep contradiction between individuation by way of moral responsibility, self-awareness of the aggregates

⁴⁷ For the sake of clarity, here I follow Hamilton’s (2000, 80) translation verbatim.

⁴⁸ The problem Siderits is trying to solve here is slightly different from the one that Hamilton is concerned with, but the differences are superficial. Siderits is trying to reconcile three propositions: the compositional exhaustiveness of the aggregates with respect to persons, the fact of executive functioning on the aggregates themselves, and anti-reflexivity.

as objects of executive function, and the soteriological progress one makes through such self-observation. As Siderits points out, “...it need not be the same part of the person that performs the executive function on every occasion” (ibid). When we recognize that different parts of the system are capable of achieving executive function in concert with other parts of the system, the problem of assuming a central controller or experiencer evaporates.⁴⁹

A final issue for Hamilton is that she alleges that a no *attā* version of the *anattā* teaching, one that conceptualizes the *khandha*-s as compositional elements of the person, entails two intractable difficulties: “Understanding them [i.e., the *khandha*-s] as the individual physical and mental ‘parts’ of which a human being is comprised misses two crucial points. First, that it is collectively that they operate, and second, perhaps even more importantly, that what they represent is one’s cognitive system: the apparatus by means of which we have all our experiences” (Hamilton 2000, 78).

Neither concern, however, follows from the claim that the aggregates compose the person. It is perfectly consistent to say that what a person *is* is a collection of aggregates that dynamically relate and collectively operate to compose the sentient being. Further, if we live in a dependently-originated universe, in which causally dense reciprocal interaction are the means by which particular phenomena exist, then there is no strict separation between what something does and what it is. In such a world, we are perfectly at liberty to say that the aggregates compose the person while also maintaining that their operation realizes an embodied cognitive system with a meaningful relationship to its world.

For these reasons, I reject the dichotomy between function and composition as a strategy for dismissing the metaphysical pretensions of the sutta literature. Lastly, it is worth noting that the existence or non-existence of the self would be very relevant to the soteriological efficacy of contemplative practices that encourage one to view the totality of their lived experience as if it were not a self. As I explained above (see §2), claiming that the existence or non-existence of the self is irrelevant to Buddhist soteriology elides the deep threads of continuity that exist between Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology.

4.4 Soteriological Strategy with a Metaphysically Agnostic Phenomenological Ontology

The third and final view I will consider takes its inspiration from an important article written by Rupert Gethin. He claims that: “...the five *khandha*-s, as treated in the *nikāyas* and early *abhidhamma*, do not exactly take on the character of a formal theory of the nature of man. The concern is not so much

⁴⁹ Furthermore, it’s worth noting that these issues with which Hamilton is concerned – moral responsibility, present moment executive function, and soteriological progress - were precisely the one’s at issue in the dispute between pre-Mahāyāna Vasubandhu (Akb IX) and the Pudgalavādins (see Lusthaus 2009). I take this as a point about historical methodology: we can’t and shouldn’t try to do an end run on the rest of the tradition when we’re trying to do philosophy on the early suttas, there’s too much to learn by a careful study of the evolution of these philosophical concerns across the Indian tradition. I will return to this point briefly in §5.2

the presentation of an analysis of man as object, but rather the understanding of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject” (1986, 49). Jake Davis (2016) develops this view by claiming that if we understand early Buddhist theorizing in terms of a world of experience of a subject, this interpretation is at odds with the *anattā* teaching being metaphysically anti-realist about the self.

Like the previous two views we explored, Davis claims that, “...early Buddhist thought is committed to rejecting any claim for the existence of a self. However, it is not committed to the assertion that there is no self. The move is instead to reject the question of whether there is a self, and therefore also all answers to that question, negative as well as positive” (Davis 2016, 141). So, like those views previously canvassed, Davis takes the agnostic passages of suttas like the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (MN I, 6) at face value. One novelty is that Davis’s argues against metaphysical anti-realism by exploring the chariot image in a critical light. He writes: “In order to determine that a chariot is nothing more than its parts in a certain kind of functional relation, we adopt a perspective on these parts from outside of them. Similarly, in order to determine that the *khandha*-s are all that a person is, we would have to examine physical form, feeling, perception, conditioned volitions, and consciousness from outside of the person’s subjective perspective” (Davis 2016, 140). I think this is false. If it’s the case that the aggregates are, as Davis (and Gethin 1986) say, only an analysis of the lived experience of a subject, it does not follow from this that they cannot also be an analysis of *what a person is*. According to a compositional analysis of the aggregates and its attendant metaphysical anti-realism about the self, a person *just is* the organized functioning of a stream of embodied experience. I don’t need to step outside of that experience to know this or accurately assert it.

I agree with Davis and Gethin that the Buddhist position embodied in the sutta literature is that one must know, from within experience, that although experience is habitually manifest *as if* it were organized around an unchanging knowing witness and agent, it is not in fact so. But Davis apparently assumes that in order to make claims about what does or does not exist, we need to take a ‘view from nowhere’. But if there is no such view - and I agree with Davis that the Buddhist philosophers think there is no such view - this doesn’t mean that we can’t make existence claims about the self or metaphysical claims more generally. Indeed, the facts of dependent origination and there being no view from nowhere *are* metaphysical facts about what the world is like. These metaphysical facts circumscribe the scope of existence claims within a world of experience that is correlated with the structures of human perception and cognition. That is not yet enough to conclude that we can’t make existence claims at all. On the contrary, there is no reason to think that existence claims can *only* be made when we are metaphysical realists about things existing as objects (including selves) outside a world of experience.

Lastly, Davis misunderstands the purpose of the chariot analogy. He is worried about one not being able to take the chariot’s point of view (Davis 2016, 139). But the purpose of the analogy between

the person and the chariot is to show you that you must take up a relatively objective view of your own mental life to help undo the habitual entrenchment of craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*), and personality view (*sakkāya-ditthi*). That recommendation is perfectly compatible with the world (*loke*) being a world of experience. Experience is world involving and the *kamma* of sentient beings is the causal force which constructs and sustains *samsāra*. All of these claims are metaphysical claims and totally compatible with anti-realism about the self.

5 Eliminating the Schism

In this final section, I will complete my analysis of the discourse where the Buddha refuses to answer Vacchagota's question about whether or not there is a self (§5.1). This will complete my defense of interpreting the Pāli suttas as being committed to metaphysical anti-realism about the self. I will then conclude with some reflections on the challenges of interpreting the Pāli suttas philosophically (§5.2).

5.1 Refusing to Answer Vacchagota

This discourse between Buddha, Vacchagota, and Ānanda embodies the tension I have been working with throughout this paper. That tension is between those texts that seem to be straightforwardly anti-realist about the self and those that seem to be agnostic about the self's existence or non-existence. We are now in a position to fully resolve that tension in a way that favors anti-realism over agnosticism.

Recall that the Buddha's answer to Ānanda's request for clarification about why he refuses to answer Vacchagota's question about the self's existence comes in three parts. The first part situates the question in terms of the middle path between extremes: avoiding eternalism and annihilationism. Eternalism is the view that there is an unchanging eternal self (*attā*) that transmigrates from life to life. Annihilationism is the view that there is nothing after death and anything that we are in life is destroyed without remainder at the point of death. In this context, what is being denied is the existence of an entity that survives death and the view that there is no remainder or continuity after the end of the current life. As Bhikkhu Bodhi points out: "When the Buddha refuses to accept the annihilationist thesis that 'there is no self,' he refuses because he cannot consent to the consequences the annihilationists wish to draw from such a denial, namely, that there is no conscious survival beyond the present life" (Bodhi 2017, 31). This is a highly contextualized refusal rather than a wide-scope dismissal of self-negation altogether.

The Buddha then explains that to affirm the existence of a self would contradict the teaching that all phenomena are not-self (*sabbe dhammā anatta*). This is the final story that the Buddha wants to tell about phenomena (*dhamma*-s). It nestles well with the first part of his reply to Ānanda when we understand the bounded context of the opening dismissal of eternalism and annihilationism. In the third part of the reply, the Buddha offers a psychological contextualization. He explains that to deny the existence of a self would have confused Vacchagotta because he is already so ensnared by

speculative views that he would construe the denial of the self in a way that would be harmful to himself. This qualification about his interlocutor's cognitive capacities demonstrates that the reason the Buddha did not respond to Vacchagotta with a negative answer is specific to his ability to make use of a potential answer and not because of any principled worry he might have about the truth of *anattā*, here construed as universally applicable to all *dhamma*-s. The response's three parts are like a sandwich: a universal statement of doctrine (*sabbe dhamma anattā*) is contained between two points of context, one dialectical (the rejection of the dichotomy of eternalism and annihilationism), the other psychological (a recognition of Vacchagotta's incapacity to understand a straightforward answer). This contextualization is perfectly consistent with metaphysical anti-realism about the self as long as that truth is expressed in a way that doesn't do harm or run afoul of the middle path. Thus, the sutta literature on *anattā* is consistent with, and indeed, entails, metaphysical anti-realism about the self.

5.2 Conclusion: Getting the Choir In Tune

I have resolved the textual tensions between anti-realism and agnosticism about the self's existence by noting the logical entailments of the *anattā* arguments that fall out of considering them in their wider context (i.e. the *Khandha-Samyutta* as a whole) and by contextualizing agnostic passages in terms of conceit (*māna*). My view harmonizes all the relevant texts in a way that is philosophically consistent with how the tradition has tended to understand itself.

Those interpreters who try to construe the Pāli suttas as agnostic about the existence of the self face two profound hermeneutical difficulties. The first is that they introduce a massive philosophical schism into the history of the tradition: on one side we have the 'earlier' tradition, which is pragmatic and thus closer to the historical Buddha's soteriological mission to save lives rather than theorize. On the other, we have the speculative fancies of scholasticism, which potentially distort and abstract away from the pragmatic thrust of the early teachings. The second difficulty derives from the first. It amounts to a claim, implicit in all the pragmatic approaches, that one has understood the Pāli suttas better than the entire Indian tradition (Theravāda or otherwise) that has constructed itself in response to these texts. This is too high a hermeneutical price to pay. My view allow us to avoid paying those fees and to construe the early texts as consistent with metaphysical anti-realism while acknowledging the soteriological benefits of selective silence around the explicit assertion of the self's non-existence, especially where first-personal language is used to assert or deny views on self.

It is a risky hermeneutical business attempting an historical end run around the Indian Buddhist tradition when trying to do philosophy on the Pāli suttas. That is not to say that I do not think there is great benefit from engaging with these sources on their own terms. But avoiding the traditions that layer on top of these texts comes with perils. I have done my best to avoid them here. It

does not follow that one must always read the suttas through the lens of their commentators.⁵⁰ The point is rather that allowing the suttas to speak for themselves is a difficult business indeed and to do so in a way that is philosophically useful involves taking the readings of those that came after more seriously than the agnostic approaches to the *anattā* teaching seem to countenance.⁵¹

Works Cited

Primary Literature

- Akb – Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (1975) (ed.) Pradhan, P. Patna: K.P.. Jayaswal Research Institute. English: Pruden, L.M. (1991) *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, Berkeley, Asian University Press.
- AN - *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trans.) (2012) *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Āṅguttara Nikāya*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Asl – *Atthasālinī*, Tin, Maung Pe (trans.) (1999) *The Expositor: Buddhaghosa’s Commentary on the Dhammsangani*. London: Pali Text Society.
- CPR – Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, (trans.) Paul Guyer and Allan Wood *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Dhp – *Dhammapada*, Norman, K.R. (trans.) (1997) *The Word of the Doctrine: A Translation of the Dhammapada*. Oxford: PTS Society.
- DN - *Dīgha Nikāya*, Walshe, M. (trans.) (1995) *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- MMK – Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Siderits, M. and Katsura, S. (trans.) (2013) *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- MN – *Majjhima Nikāya*, Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trans.) (2005) *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- PP - Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*, (trans.) Anne MacDonald (2015) *In Clear Words, The Prasannapadā Chapter 1*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien
- SN - *Samyutta Nikāya* Bodhi, Bhikkhu (trans.) (2000) *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Ud – *Udāna*, Woodward, F.L. (1996) *The Minor Anthologies of the Pāli Canon*, Part II. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Vim – Vasubandhu’s *Viṃśatikākārikā and Viṃśatikāvṛttī*, Anacker, S. (trans.) (2013) *Seven Works of Vasubandhu the Buddhist Psychological Doctor*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

⁵⁰ See Smith (2019) for an analysis of *anusaya* that is critical of the Pāli commentarial interpretation of its functional profile in Buddhist philosophical psychology. For a similar approach to the notion of *bhavaṅga citta*, see Smith (2020b).

⁵¹ This paper was first presented at the Pacific Meeting of the APA in San Francisco in the Spring of 2018 at a panel organized by myself and Jake Davis. I am grateful to Jake for the opportunity to discuss these issues and to Martin Adam, our other panelist, from whom I learned much. It took me two years to write this paper up but I am grateful to the audience’s feedback at the initial meeting which encouraged me to deepen my work on this material. In particular, I thank Anand Vaidya for critical feedback about the meaning of ‘all’ and ‘*dhamma*-s’. I wish also to thank Jay Garfield for enthusiastic encouragement to continue working on these ideas. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Evan Thompson who has been steadily and patiently encouraging my research. He read an earlier draft of this paper in its entirety and provided invaluable feedback about framing and dialectic. I also would like to thank Bryan Levman for a careful round of feedback and for help and encouragement with all things Pāli.

Vis – Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga*, (trans.) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (2000) *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti.

Secondary Literature

- Adam, M.T. (2010) "No self, no free will, no problem: Implications of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta for a perennial philosophical issue" in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol 33, No. 1-2: 239-65.
- Albahari, M. (2002) "Against No-Ātman Theories of Anattā" in *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 1: 5-20.
- Albahari, M. (2006) *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self*. London: Palgrave.
- Anālayo Bhikkhu (2011) *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*. Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation, (2 vols.)
- Anālayo Bhikkhu (2012) *Madhyama-āgama Studies*, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation.
- Anālayo Bhikkhu (2015) *Samyukta-āgama Studies*, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation.
- Anālayo Bhikkhu (2016) *Ekottarika-āgama Studies*. Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation.
- Anālayo Bhikkhu (2017a) *Dīrgha-āgama Studies*, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation.
- Anālayo (2017b) "The Luminous Mind in Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka Discourses" in *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 13: 10-51.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (2017) "Anattā as Strategy and Ontology" in *Investigating the Dhamma: A Collection of Papers* (pp. 25-40). Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Collins, S. (1982) *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Davis, J.H. (2016). "'The Scope for Wisdom': Early Buddhism on Reasons and Persons" in (ed.) Shyam Ranganathan, *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics* (pp. 127-54), London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dhammajoti, B.K.L. (2007) *Abhidharma Doctrines and Controversies on Perception*. Hong Kong: The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.
- Dhammajoti, B.K.L. (2015) *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*. Hong Kong: The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong.
- Ganeri, J. (2017) *Attention, Not Self*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Gethin, R. (1986) "The Five Khandhas: Their Treatment in the Nikāyas and Early Abhidhamma" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 14: 35-53.
- Gethin, R. (1994) "Bhavaṅga and Rebirth According to the Abhidhamma" in (eds.) Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel, *The Buddhist Forum: Volume III* (pp. 11-35). London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Gombrich, R. (2009) *What the Buddha Thought*. Bristol: Equinox
- Hamilton, S. (2000) *Early Buddhism: A New Approach – The 'I' of the Beholder*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, P. (1995) *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness, and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* London: Routledge.
- Lusthaus, D. (2009) "Puḍgalavāda Doctrine of the Person" in (eds.) William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield, *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (pp. 275-85). New York: Oxford UP.
- Ñāṇananda, K. (1971/2012) *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*. Sri Lanka: Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bhāraya.
- Norman, K.R. (1992) "An Epithet of Nibbāna", in *Collected Papers: Vol. 3* (pp. 137-56). Oxford: Pāli Text Society.

- Sharf, R. (2018) “Knowing Blue: Early Buddhist Accounts of Non-Conceptual Sense” in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 68, No. 3: 826-70.
- Shuluman, E. (2008) “Early Meanings of Dependent Origination” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 2: 297-317.
- Siderits, M. (2007) *Buddhist as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Smith, S.M. (2019) “A Buddhist Analysis of Affective Bias” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 47, No. 1: 15-85.
- Smith, S.M. (2020a) “Paying Attention to Buddhaghosa and Pāli Buddhist Philosophy” in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 69, No. 4: 1125-51, review of Ganeri (2017).
- Smith, S.M. (2020b) “A Pāli Buddhist Philosophy of Sentience: Reflections on *Bhavaṅga Citta*” in *Sophia*, online first edition: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-019-00749-5>
- Wynne, A. (2009a) “Early Evidence for the ‘no self’ Doctrine? A Note on the Second *anātman* Teaching of the Second Sermon” in *Thai International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 1: 64-84.
- Wynne, A. (2009b) “Miraculous Transformation and Personal Identity: A Note on the First *anātman* Teaching of the second Sermon” in *Thai International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Vol 1: 85-113.
- Wynne, A. (2011) “The *ātman* and its negation: A conceptual and chronological analysis of early Buddhist thought” in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1-2: 103-71.