

A Buddhist Analysis of Affective Bias

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A Buddhist Analysis of Affective Bias

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Abstract In this paper, I explore a debate between some Indian Buddhist schools regarding the nature of the underlying tendencies or *anusaya*-s. I focus here primarily on the ninth chapter of *Kathāvatthu*'s representation of a dispute about whether an *anusaya* can be said to have intentional object. I also briefly treat of Vasubandhu's defense of the Sautrāntika view of *anusāya* in the opening section of the fifth chapter his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. Following Vasubandhu, I argue against the Thervādin Abhidharmikas that the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*-s) can be identified with their active manifestations (*pariyuṭṭhāna*). Etymologically, the notion of *anusaya* denotes a kind of latency, dormancy or otherwise 'below the surface' propensity. It can literally be translated as 'that which lies or dwells beneath or alongside'. I will translate the term as 'underlying tendency', but philosophically speaking, it is most important to understand that the notion of *anusaya* refers to dispositions that condition current experience in a tacit way. The task of a philosophical account of the *anusaya*-s is to explain how their implicit conditioning influence shapes occurrent mental activity. The Indian Buddhist philosophers exercised an enormous amount of energy in attempting to explain this relation. A thorough examination of this dialectic has two important fruits to bear. The first is that the Buddhists can help us explain in precise detail how the mind is affectively layered. That is, they have a plausible account of how the mind is both responsive in real time to the objects it encounters in the world, while at the same

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time being tacitly conditioned by its own history of affective bias. Indeed, as we will see, the Buddhists were deeply concerned with how processes of affective bias were operating at the deepest levels of the mind and how we ought to conceive of their influence on our ordinary processes of perception and cognition. Second, this local position within the Buddhist milieu is indicative of a wider propensity in Buddhist philosophy to blend analyses of affectively-biased intentions and causation. I submit that this blending could be helpful in a more global for contemporary discussions of the mind in philosophy and science.

Keywords Anusaya · Buddhaghosa · Affective bias · Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy · Consciousness · Sentience

Introduction

In this paper, I explore a debate between some Indian Buddhist schools regarding the nature of the underlying tendencies or *anusaya*-s. I focus here primarily on the ninth chapter of *Kathāvatthu*'s representation of a dispute about whether an *anusaya* can be said to have intentional object. I also briefly treat of Vasubandhu's defense of the Sautrāntika view of *anusāya* in the opening section of the fifth chapter his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*.¹ Following Vasubandhu, I argue against the Theravādin Abhidharmikas that the underlying tendencies (*anusaya*-s) can be identified with their active manifestations (*pariyuṭṭhāna*).

In “[The Pāli Buddhist View of Anusaya and its Context](#)” I provide some exegetical analysis of the Buddhist concept of *anusaya* outlining the different ways this notion is taken up in the sutta literature of the Pāli tipīṭaka. In “[Different Views on the Nature of Anusaya in the Kathāvatthu](#)”, I delve into the Pāli Abhidhamma literature.² As I mentioned above, I argue against the Theravāda view that *anusaya* can be identified with their *kammically* active expressions (*pariyuṭṭhāna*). The Theravādin motivations for affirming this thesis will come out as we proceed, as will my reasons for rejecting it. In “[Vasubandhu on Anusāya](#)” I note that a similar debate is reflected in the opening section of the fifth chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. The position I defend here is very close to the Sautrāntika position Vasubandhu endorses. Thus, in noting the overlap here I hope to extend the application of my reconstruction beyond the textual borders of the Pāli canon into a more wide-scope analysis of what Buddhist philosophers in both the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions have to say about *anusaya*-s. Finally, in “[Causation and Intention in the Making of the Buddhist Life-World](#)”, I offer some thoughts on how

¹ The Pāli is *anusaya*, the Sanskrit is *anusāya*. I use both depending on the context.

² The Abhidhamma texts are those that stratify the discourses in non-contextual terms. These texts represent an attempt to systematize the teachings contained in the suttas into an absolute philosophical system. One of the exegetical purposes of this paper is to explore the philosophical differences between how certain ideas are presented in the suttas and how those ideas evolve in the Abhidhamma. The main commentator on the tipīṭaka is a philosopher named Buddhaghosa who was a fifth century Indian Buddhist monk. His scholarly works form the intellectual backbone of Theravāda Buddhism.

the Buddhist conception of *anusaya*-s can help guide discussions of affect and subjectivity in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

A thorough examination of this dialectic has two important philosophical fruits to bear. The first is that the Buddhists can help us explain in precise detail how the mind is affectively layered. That is, they have a plausible account of how the mind is both responsive in real time to the objects it encounters in the world, while at the same time being tacitly conditioned by its own history of affective bias. Indeed, Buddhist philosophers have been deeply concerned with how processes of affective bias are operating at the deepest levels of the mind and how we ought to conceive of their influence on our ordinary processes of perception and cognition. Second, this local position within the Buddhist milieu is indicative of a wider propensity in Buddhist philosophy to blend analyses of affectively-biased intentions and causation. I submit that this blending could be helpful in a more global way for contemporary discussions of the mind in philosophy and science.

The Pāli Buddhist View of *Anusaya* and its Context

Etymologically, the notion of *anusaya* denotes a kind of latency, dormancy or otherwise ‘below the surface’ propensity. It can literally be translated as ‘that which lies or dwells beneath or alongside’. I will translate the term as ‘underlying tendency’, but philosophically speaking, it is most important to understand that the notion of *anusaya* refers to dispositions that condition current experience in a tacit way. The task of a philosophical account of the *anusaya*-s is to explain how their implicit conditioning influence shapes occurrent mental activity. The Indian Buddhist philosophers exercised an enormous amount of energy in attempting to explain this relation.

In the Pāli sutta literature, Buddhist philosophers distinguish between several different kinds of *anusaya*-s. They can be grouped in different ways. The most common is the sevenfold analysis, which I here cite from the opening sutta in the second section of the Book of Sevens in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN IV 9):

Bhikkhus, there are seven underlying tendencies. What are the seven? The underlying tendency to sensual lust, the underlying tendency to aversion, the underlying tendency to views, the underlying tendency to doubt, the underlying tendency to conceit, the underlying tendency to lust for becoming, the underlying tendency to ignorance. Indeed these, bhikkhus, are the seven underlying tendencies.^{3,4}

³ *Sattime, bhikkhave, anusayā. katame satta? kāmarāgānusayo, paṭighānusayo, diṭṭhānusayo, vicikicchānusayo, mānānusayo, bhavarāgānusayo, avijjānusayo. ime kho, bhikkhave, satta anusayā”ti.*

⁴ All translations from the Pāli are my own, unless otherwise indicated. I cite the PTS editions as is standard and to facilitate reference to extant English translations where necessary. I have included references to available English translations in my references at the end of the paper. I have also used the CST4 edition of the *tiṭṭaka* for the Romanized Pāli text in conjunction with the Digital Pāli Reader and suttacentral.net.

The different *anusaya*-s listed above represent different habitual reactions that keep the subject bound to the *saṃsāric* field of *kammic* relations. *Saṃsāra* is the world of existential misery (*dukkha*) that we are trapped in because of our entrenched habits (*saṅkhāra*) and ignorance (*avijja*). We react to the world with actions (*kamma*) that condition our futures (in this life and the next), thereby further entrenching us in habits of reaction. Only by completely overcoming these, can one attain liberating insight and escape the influence of *saṃsāric* conditioning. The conclusion of this overcoming is *nibbāna*. This narrative is quite straightforward from a Buddhist-philosophical perspective. What is important to note is that *anusaya*-s play an important role in keeping sentient beings imprisoned in conditioned existence. In order to make this connection clear, we must look at the various ways our philosophers sort the *anusaya*-s into different kinds of groups.

Another schema comes from the *Mahāmālunkya Sutta* (MN I 432) where discussion of the *anusaya*-s is paired with the lower five *samyojana*-s or fetters. The fetters are a group of ten ‘curtains’ or blockages, the removal of which is co-extensive with the attainment of different levels of nobility (*ariya*) on the path to *nibbāna*. In the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (SN II 17), *anusaya*-s are defined in terms of *adhiṭṭhānābhinivesānusaya* which Huong (2012, pp. 28–29) parses in terms of a distinction between an underlying tendency towards views or a fixed mental standpoint (*adhiṭṭhāna*) and craving, inclination, or, instinct (*abhinivesa*). Finally, in the *Cullavedalla Sutta* (MN I 299) discussion of the *anusaya*-s is confined to the propensity to react in different ways to feelings (*vedanā*), with craving or inclination for pleasant feelings, aversion to unpleasant feelings and ignorance to neutral feelings. These three reactions correspond to the three unwholesome roots of lust (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).⁵ These are the mental factors that cause us the most trouble as they tacitly condition our experience in myriad ways. In order to get clear about how these different schemas function in the Buddhist theory of mind, we need to have a basic understanding of what the mind is and how it functions.

Feeling or *vedanā* is one of the basic constituents or aggregates (*khandha*) of the person (*puggala*). There are five, of these basic constituents, of which four are mental and one, physical. They are physical form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), cognition (*saññā*) which is often misleadingly translated as ‘perception’, formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Form is the living and sensitive body. Feeling is the hedonic tone of all experience that arises in virtue of the living body being perturbed by experience. All sensory experience is accompanied by embodied affect and all cognitive experience is likewise accompanied by mental affect. Cognition is the part of the mind that recognizes and categorizes things according to past experience, similar to what psychologists call ‘working memory’.⁶ Formations are probably the most difficult aggregate to define because they are described in many different ways. In the context of the twelve-point formulation of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), formations (*saṅkhāra*) are the condition (*paccaya*)

⁵ This threefold schema is also found in the third sutta of the *Vedanasamyutta* (SN IV 205).

⁶ For a detailed reconstruction of Buddhaghosa’s philosophical psychology that is acutely sensitive to contemporary psychological categories, see Ganeri (2018).

for the arising of all consciousness (*viññāna*) (SN II, 2). By contrast, in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, we see formations individuated on the basis of the kinds of behavioral output they occasion, bodily, verbal, and mental (MN I 301). In both contexts we can characterize formations as kinds of reaction patterns in bodily action, speech, and thought that condition experience. These patterns are deeply entrenched in the subject's behavioral repertoire and constitute core habitual response patterns to the world. This kind of conditionality not only structures the contours of the current life, but one's subsequent rebirths as well. Indeed, according to our Buddhist philosophers, one's very life here and now is the karmic fruit (*phala*) of past action in previous lives (*kamma*). The *anusaya*-s are a kind of *saṅkhāra*. Finally, consciousness is the part of the mind that arises as a result of sensory receptors processing relevant sensory information, thereby giving rise to experience. This includes the functioning of a mind-base that is the basis of the arising of a sixth consciousness over and above those associated with the five canonical senses.

The causal interaction of these processes is what constitutes a person in Buddhist philosophy. Here's an example. When I smell freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, it is in virtue of my living body that my senses are poised with respect to those cookies. By smelling them, a moment of olfactory consciousness arises. I then remember the last time I ate such cookies and how delicious they were. I start to feel very pleasant and generate a desire to eat them. As I take a bite, a new moment of consciousness arises, as does a more intense feeling of pleasure, thereby reinforcing my evaluation of their deliciousness and my desire for more. According to the Buddhists, experience, even this pleasant one of eating cookies, is fraught with unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). Everything is changing and impermanent (*anicca*) and we are always reacting to what is happening out of a desire for things to stay the same (pleasant things should remain; unpleasant things should depart). These cravings are never satisfied but our reaction habits continue to be entrained on the basis of our wish that it be so and this creates a duress that enmeshes us in a matrix of conditional relations with our world that are fraught with misery. Therefore, we are always being affected and our deepest habit is to react to those perturbations in a host of subtle and not so subtle ways.

The process of affection (*vedanā*), categorization thereof (*saññā*), and reaction (*saṅkhāra*) forms a deeply ingrained habit of appropriation (*upādāna*) for that which is impermanent (*anicca*). The eventual change is a cause of deep existential frustration for us (*dukkha*). The engine of this cognitive economy is something called 'thirst' or 'craving' (*taṇhā*). We carve for the persistence of the pleasant (*sukha*), absence of the painful (*dukkha*), and this conditions all of our conscious experience (*viññāna*). This appropriation process is a constant source of duress. This point is put eloquently and succinctly by Bill Waldron in the following: "The paths our continued embodied existence take are directed by the accumulated results of our past actions, which are continually reinforced—which increase and 'grow'—by our afflictive activities in the present, which themselves are deeply informed by the underlying currents of our various dispositions" (Waldron 2003, p. 24). The reality of this conditioning process is obvious enough when something explicitly perturbs us, but it also happens tacitly beneath the surface of our ordinary powers of

attention, even in the absence of obviously intense experiences. It is in virtue of this tacit conditioning process that we are primed to react to explicit situations that might arise in the future. With every explicitly morally unwholesome defilement (*kilesa*) there is an underlying tendency (*anusaya*) that abides during periods of relative calm as an enabling factor for subsequent arising of explicitly valence states. When defilements are present within but latent they are called *anusaya*, when those propensities become actively manifest in thought, speech, or action, they are called *pariyuṭṭhāna*, which literally means 'outbursts'.

The soteriological centrality of *anusaya* for the Buddhist project of liberation could not be more plain. Indeed, the Buddha goes as far as to claim that the very purpose of living the holy life of the *Dhamma* (the law or teaching of the Buddha's dispensation) is to eradicate these *anusaya*. It is only once these latent defilements are fully eradicated that one can experience the fruit of liberating insight (AN IV 9):

Bhikkhus, the holy life is lived for the abandonment, the cutting off of the seven underlying tendencies. What are the seven? The holy life is lived for the abandonment, the cutting off of the underlying tendency to sensual lust...to aversion...to views...to doubt...to conceit...to lust for becoming...to ignorance...Bhikkhus, for these, the holy life is lived for the abandonment, the cutting off of these seven underlying tendencies.⁷

Even more telling, in this next passage from the same sutta, the Buddha then says that it is only insofar as one has eradicated the *anusaya*-s that one can be said to have made an end of *dukkha*:

Indeed, bhikkhus, because a bhikkhu has eliminated the underlying tendency to sensual lust, cut it off at the foundation, uprooted it like a palm tree, [accomplished] its utter cessation so that there is no more future arising; ... because a bhikkhu has eliminated the underlying tendency to aversion...to views...to doubt...to conceit...to lust for existence...to ignorance, cut it off at the foundation, uprooted it like a palm tree, [accomplished] its utter cessation so that there is no more future arising, this person is said Bhikkhus to be a bhikkhu who has cut off craving, stripped away the fetters, properly penetrated conceit, has made an end of *dukkha*.⁸

This language is further echoed in a key passage from verse 338 of chapter twenty-four of the *Dhammapada*: "Just as a tree which has been cut down, thus grows again, if the root is unharmed and firm, in this way this *dukkha* arises again and

⁷ *Sattannaṃ, bhikkhave, anusayānaṃ pahānāya samucchēdāya brahmacariyaṃ vussati. katamesaṃ sattannaṃ? kāmarāgānusayassa pahānāya samucchēdāya brahmacariyaṃ vussati, paṭighānusayassa ... pe ... diṭṭhānusayassa... vicikicchānusayassa... mānānusayassa... bhavarāgānusayassa... avijjānusayassa pahānāya samucchēdāya brahmacariyaṃ vussati. imesaṃ kho, bhikkhave, sattannaṃ anusayānaṃ pahānāya samucchēdāya brahmacariyaṃ vussati.*

⁸ *Yato ca kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno kāmarāgānusayo pahīno hoti ucchinnamūlo tālavatthukato anabhāvaṃkato āyatīṃ anuppādadharmo. paṭighānusayo ... pe ... diṭṭhānusayo... vicikicchānusayo... mānānusayo... bhavarāgānusayo... avijjānusayo pahīno hoti ucchinnamūlo tālavatthukato anabhāvaṃkato āyatīṃ anuppādadharmo. ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, bhikkhu accheccāni taṇhaṃ, vivattaṃ samyojanaṃ, sammā mānābhisamāyā antamakāsi dukkhassā"ti. dutiyaṃ.*

again, if the underlying tendency to craving is not rooted out.”⁹ The key point here is that without eliminating these underlying tendencies, there is no release from *dukkha*. The implication of this assertion seems to be that there is some kind of difference between the latent defilements that underlie our basic mental processes, and those manifest reactive attitudes which are explicitly in response to some prime from the world. However, getting clear on what this distinction amounts is hardly straight forward as I will show in what follows.

Even though many of the canonical passages on *anusaya* focus on the sevenfold schema, it is important to emphasize the role that *vedanā* plays in further establishing the connection between the *anusaya* and the eradication of *dukkha*. Most importantly, *vedanā* is the condition (*paccaya*) for the arising of craving or thirst (*taṇhā*), the latter of which is the second ennobling reality or noble truth (*ariya sacca*), the cause of *dukkha*.¹⁰ Our habit of constantly reacting to felt affect in a heedless way is the driving force behind the *saṅkhāric* reactions that cause the arising of afflicted sensory-cognitive consciousness (*viññāna*).

This point about the centrality of felt affect is put succinctly in the *Chachakka Sutta* (MN III 286) where the causal contact (*phassa*) of an object with its relevant sensory receptor and the consciousness that comes with that is seen as direct evidence for the presence of *anusaya*. Consider the following:

Bhikkhus, dependent the eye and visible form there is the arising of eye-consciousness, the association of these three is contact, with contact as condition there is the arising of either a pleasant, painful, or neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. When one is touched by a pleasant feeling, if one rejoices, welcomes, [and] stays attached to it, then the underlying tendency to lust underlies the person. When one is touched by a painful feeling, when one mourns, is wearied, and cries beating one's breast, laments and stays confused, then the underlying tendency to aversion underlies. When one is touched by a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, if one does not know clearly as it is in itself, the origination, passing away, the allure, the disadvantage, [and] the escape from that feeling, then the underlying tendency to ignorance underlies. Surely Bhikkhus, that one should be able to make an end of suffering not having abandoned the underlying tendency to sensual lust for pleasant feelings, not having dispelled the underlying tendency to aversion for painful feelings, not having uprooted the underlying tendency to ignorance regarding

⁹ *Yathāpi mūle anupaddave daḥhe, chinnopi rukkho punareva rūhati; Evampi taṇhānusaye anūhate, nibbataṭṭi dukkhamidaṃ punappunaṃ.*

¹⁰ My translation of *ariya sacca* follows Harvey (2013) who notes that, “The term *sacca* (Skt *satya*) is regularly used in the sense of ‘truth’, but, just as its adjectival use can mean either ‘true’ or ‘real’, so its noun meaning can be either ‘truth’ or ‘reality’...” (27). Harvey provides three reasons for going with ‘reality’ over ‘truth’ in the context of the *ariya sacca*. “Firstly, it is said that the second *ariya-sacca* (the origination of *dukkha* is to be abandoned (SN V 422): surely, one would not want to abandon a ‘truth’, but one might well want to abandon a problematic ‘reality’. Secondly, it is said that the Buddha understood ‘This is the *dukkha ariya-sacca*’ not ‘The *ariya-sacca* ‘This is *dukkha*’ (SN V 422), which would be the case if *sacca* here meant a *truth* whose content was expressed in the words in quote marks. Thirdly, in some suttas (e.g. SN V 425), the first *ariya-sacca* is explained by identifying it with a kind of existent (The bundles of grasping-fuel...), not by asserting a form of words that could be seen as a ‘truth’ (Harvey 2013, p. 28).

neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings, without abandoning ignorance and not having generated wisdom, that this will be the end of suffering in this very world—this is not possible.¹¹

The analysis here is penetrating and stark. At every moment of sensory contact there is a feeling that arises in response to the contact. This feeling generates a *saṅkhāric* reaction that not only has a direct causal upshot on subsequent moments of conscious experience, but also creates a habit that further predisposes the subject to react in similar ways to similar situations in the future. The habitual entrenchment thus moves in two directions, one up, the other down. The upward movement is the way in which reactions condition our immediate responses to whatever is happening at the moment of contact (*phassa*). The downward movement is the way in which our current reactions create a substratum of dispositional tendencies that lie ready to become active whenever we are provoked by the world in the appropriate way. The notion of *anusaya* is there to do the work of explaining this downward conditioning influence.

At this point, we still need some further motivation for understanding why the Buddhist soteriological project is in need of something like *anusaya*-s. The Buddhist position is one that claims that all sentient beings are beset by *dukkha* and that all beings are in some sense and to varying degrees, responsible for their own emancipation. Thus, it follows that even a newborn infant is in some way defiled by unwholesome mental states. If they weren't, then they would not have been reborn. This might seem like a ridiculous position to maintain. After all, what does a newborn child know about the obsessive agitation of sexual lust or the heated preoccupation of a focused and hateful resentment against an enemy? Surely nothing at all. The positing of a latent layer of mental functioning where the tendency towards such active emotional responses might develop is the functional role of the *anusaya*.

In a discussion with the monk Mālukiya-putta, the Buddha makes exactly this point in the following way (MN I 432–433):

Surely Mālukiya-putta, that wanderers of other faiths will censure and reproach you with the case of the young infant? Indeed Mālukiya-putta, for a child young in years, for a slow youngster, an infant, they do not have personality-view. Where could personality-view arise in them? Yet, the underlying tendency to personality-view underlies [their experience]. Indeed Mālukiya-putta, for a child young in years, for a little youngsters, an infant, they do not have [a sense of] 'The Dhamma'. Where could doubt in the Dhamma arise in them? Yet, the underlying tendency to doubt underlies [their experience] ... [Note: the

¹¹ *cakkhuñca, bhikkhave, paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvīññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassa-apaccayā uppajjati vedayitaṃ sukhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā. so sukhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati. tassa rāgānusayo anuseti. dukkhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno socati kilamati paridevati urattāliṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati. tassa paṭighānusayo anuseti. adukkhamasukhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno tassā vedanāya samudayañca atthaṅgamañca assādañca ādinavañca nissaraṇañca yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. tassa avijjānusayo anuseti. so vata, bhikkhave, sukhāya vedanāya rāgānusayaṃ appahāya dukkhāya vedanāya paṭighānusayaṃ appaṭivīn-odetvā adukkhamasukhāya vedanāya avijjānusayaṃ asamūhanitvā avijjaṃ appahāya vijjaṃ anuppādetvā diṭṭheva dhamme dukkhassantakaro bhavissatīti — netaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati.*

sequence continues for the remaining of the five lower fetters; *vicikicchā* or doubt, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* or attachment to rights and rituals, *kāmacchando* or sensual desire, and *vyāpādo* or ill-will].¹²

Furthermore, in the *Khemaka Sutta* (SN III 131) the influence of the *anusaya*-s is compared with the staining of a cloth that still has a pungent odour about it even after it is washed. This simile is then explained in the following: “Even so, friends, although a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, regarding the five aggregates affected by appropriation, there remains a residual conceit of ‘I am’, a desire ‘I am’, an underlying tendency, ‘I am’ that has not yet been eradicated.” (Huong 2012, p. 25).¹³ Thus, the picture on offer here is one where there is a bifurcation between explicitly morally valenced mental states that occur in causal dependence on their soliciting influence and the capacity, tendency, or disposition to be so affected. Call this the ‘bifurcation thesis’. This thesis asserts that it is possible to have the latter without the former, but not vice-versa. In some way, this is common sense. We are not always sexually aroused, but the tendency exists and without it, sexually appealing people and scenarios would not arouse us. Infants and young children are not defiled by the preoccupations of hateful resentment, but their aversion to not being fed on time can be seen as a natal seed from which this more complex emotion grows.

Different Views on the Nature of *Anusaya* in the *Kathāvatthu*

Not all Buddhist philosophers are in agreement about my parsing of functional role of *anusaya*-s. As we will see, Buddhaghosa argues, along with the Theravāda elders, that the *anusaya* and its *pariyuṭṭhāna* are identical. He would thus reject what I have called ‘the bifurcation thesis’. In this section I will explain the motivations the Theravādins had for identifying *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna* defilements (*kilesa*). I will also provide a reconstruction of a debate on this issue recorded in the *Kathāvatthu*, a text of the Theravāda Abhidhamma collection. I argue that the attempt to establish an identity claim between *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna* defilements (*kilesa*) is not successful.

¹² *Nanu, mālukyaputta, aññatitthiyā paribbājakā iminā taruṇūpamena upārambhena upārambhissanti? daharassa hi, mālukyaputta, kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyyakassa sakkāyotipi na hoti, kuto panassa uppajjissati sakkāyadiṭṭhi? anusettevassa sakkāyadiṭṭhānusayo. daharassa hi, mālukyaputta, kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyyakassa dhammātipi na hoti, kuto panassa uppajjissati dhammesu vicikicchā? anusettevassa vicikicchānusayo. daharassa hi, mālukyaputta, kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyyakassa sīlātipi na hoti, kuto panassa uppajjissati sīlesu sīlabbataparāmāso? anusettevassa sīlabbata-parāmāsānusayo. daharassa hi, mālukyaputta, kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyyakassa kāmātipi na hoti, kuto panassa uppajjissati kāmesu kāmacchando? anusettevassa kāmarāgānusayo. daharassa hi, mālukyaputta, kumārassa mandassa uttānaseyyakassa sattātipi na hoti, kuto panassa uppajjissati sattesu byāpādo? anusettevassa byāpādānusayo. nanu, mālukyaputta, aññatitthiyā paribbājakā iminā taruṇūpamena upārambhena upārambhissanti”ti?*

¹³ *Evaameva kho, āvuso, kiñcāpi ariyasāvakaṃ pañcorambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni pahīnānibhavanti, atha khvassa hoti yeva pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu anusahagato ‘asmī’ti, māno ‘asmī’ti, chando ‘asmī’ti anusayo asamūhato.*

From an Abhidhammic point of view, we can see a slight shift in emphasis in defining *anusaya*. For example, in the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa defines *anusaya* in the following way, focusing on the seven-fold schematization I outlined above: “For it is owing to their obstinance that they are called underlying tendencies since they inhere as the cause for the arising of greed for sense desires, etc., again and again” (*Vis*, 684, xxii, 60; cf. Jaini 1959, p. 239).¹⁴ And again, here is another passage found in several places in the Abhidhamma commentaries that defines *anusaya* in a similar way:¹⁵ “What is the meaning of *anusayā*? It has the meaning of *anusayana*. What is the meaning of *anusayana*? It has the meaning of not abandoning (*appahīna*). For these (*anusayā*) with the meaning of not abandoned, lie dormant in this or that continuity [of consciousness], therefore they are called *anusayā*. Regarding *anusenti* (= “They lie dormant”), “Having encountered a suitable cause they arise” is the meaning” (*Yam-a*, 52; cf. Jaini 1959, p. 242).¹⁶ Here the focus is on the tendency of certain defilements to remain present in the system rather than on a bifurcation between different levels of mental processing, as seems to be the case in the sutta literature. This choice of focus is part of the motivation for why Buddhaghosa and the Pāli compilers will opt to identify *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna* defilements (*kilesa*). Before getting into the details of this proposal and its relevant motivations, I turn to briefly note some structural features of the *Kathāvatthu* itself as a text of debate and logic.

The Logical and Dialectical Structure of the Kathāvatthu

The *Kathāvatthu* purports to represent a series of disputes that transpired just prior to the second Buddhist council which probably occurred sometime between 250 and 350 BCE (Matilal 1998, p. 32).¹⁷ Thus, the text represents a very early attempt of Indian philosophy to stratify the norms of debate in a philosophically sophisticated way. The *Kathāvatthu* is a highly structured text with fairly strict canons of argumentation. For example, in his important work *The Character of Logic in India* (1998), Matilal lays out a detailed formalization of the argument structure of the various debates that populate the text.

The argument begins by the Theravādin exegete getting their opponent to agree on a premise that accurately represents their view. They then proceed by way of questioning their opponent and attempting to refute them by showing that their initially assented to position logically entails the falsity of a core piece of Buddhist

¹⁴ Here I follow Nāṇamoli's (2000) masterful translation except I translate *anusaya* as ‘underlying tendency’ rather than as ‘inherent tendency’.

¹⁵ This passage is reproduced in three places: The commentary on the fourth section of the *Suttanipata* contained in the commentary on the *Mahā-Niddesa*, the *Suddhaṭṭhakasuttaniddesavaṇṇanā*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā*, and the *Yamaka-aṭṭhakathā*. Here I cite from *Yam-a*, 52–107. My thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing me towards these helpful texts.

¹⁶ *Kenatṭhena anusayā? Anusayanatṭhena. Ko esa anusayatṭho nāmāti? Appahīnatṭho. Ete hi appahīnatṭhena tassa tassa santāne anusenti nāma, tasmā "anusayā"ti vuccanti. Anusenṭīti anurūpaṃ kāraṇaṃ labhivā uppajantīti attho.*

¹⁷ See McDermott (1975, p. 424, fn 2) for more precise details on the composite nature of the *Kathāvatthu*.

doctrine that both parties agree on as Buddhists (see Matilal 1998, pp. 36–37 for a reconstruction of the argument form of the various debates that are given in the text). However Ganeri notes that focusing only on the formal features of the argument is problematic. This is because “...in presupposing that the only matter of interest is the extent to which a given text displays recognition of principles of formal logic, the methodology fails to ask what it was that the authors themselves were trying to do, and in consequence, is closed to the possibility that these texts contribute to logical studies of a different kind” (Ganeri 2001, p. 485). Ganeri contends that the different sort of contributions made by the *Kathāvatthu* to logical studies can be articulated by noting that its ‘leading concern’ is with ‘issues of balance and fairness’ (ibid). The question here is now what this fairness might consist in.

The *Kathāvatthu* is fair in that it represents both sides of a given dispute with equal formal weight. In the first two stages of the debate—*anuloma* or the way forward and *paṭikamma* or the way back—we see both sides of the debate reasoning with the same degree of formal precision. Thus, Ganeri contends that: “The whole pattern of argumentation, it would seem, is best thought of as presumptive, that is, as an attempt to switch a burden of proof that is initially evenly distributed between the two parties” (Ganeri 2001, p. 487). One way this evenness of distribution is maintained is that in most cases, the disputants have an agreed upon foundation of Buddhist doctrine.

However, it is worth noting that in attempting to shift this burden of proof back and forth, what it means to win or lose the argument changes. Here’s Ganeri once again (2001, p. 490):

The overall effect is to force the respondent into a position where he must retract at least one of the propositions to which he has committed himself. Indeed we can say that such a retraction is the primary goal of the way forward. The primary aim is not to *disprove* the thesis, but to force a *retraction* of commitment. So when we evaluate the argumentation used in this part of the dialogue, it is to be evaluated as good or bad with reference to how well it succeeds in forcing such a retraction, and not simply or only or even in terms of its deductive or inductive soundness.

At this juncture it is worth pointing out that there is another sense of fairness that the Theravādin compilers did not strive too hard to meet. If the disputes in the *Kathāvatthu* are *formally* fair, they are not *contentfully* fair. For example, the dispute between the Theravādin and Pudgalavādin that Matilal (1998, p. 35) reconstructs from the opening chapter of the *Kathāvatthu* attributes a problematic view to the Pudgalavādin. Namely, the Pudgalavādin assents to the claim that the person (*puggala*) is an ultimate (*paramattha*). However, as Lusthaus (2009) points out, fragments of the Pudgalavādin corpus preserved in classical Chinese make it clear that these Buddhists conceived of the *pudgala* as a *prajñapti* or conventional existent rather than something ultimate. Thus, the philosophical project of interpreting the *pudgala* is one of understanding how a conventionally existent

being might have causal powers over and above those constituents on which it depends.¹⁸ The relevance of this point to our current considerations is that the Theravādins were not shy about putting views in the mouths of their opponents that they did not hold. Thus, even if their aim was to be fair (Ganeri 2001), it's not clear that they succeeded in this aim, at least at level of attributing views, if not at the level of formal representation of those views. In the text we will examine presently, we cannot accuse the Theravādins of putting views their opponents would openly deny in their mouths. However, I will try to show that they are hardly charitable and that this obscures a line of argument about the nature of *anusaya* that is both doctrinally coherent within the framework of Buddhist philosophy more generally on the one hand, and philosophically sophisticated, plausible, and interesting, on the other.

The Context of a Debate

The Theravādin elders have a number of different opponents throughout the *Kathāvatthu*. These representatives of several different Buddhist schools identified by the *aṭṭhakathā*-s as Andhakas, Uttarāpathakas, Mahāsaṅghikas, and Sammitiyas (*Kath-a*, IX, 4, p. 144). There are three lines of debate that we encounter in the *Kathāvatthu* concerning the functional role of the *anusaya*-s. The first is about whether or not *anusaya*-s have sense objects (Book IX, Chapter 4), the second concerns whether they are morally indeterminate (Book XI, Chapter 1), and the third is about whether *anusaya*-s exist within subjects in a way that is dissociated from *citta*, or the *kammically* active mental framework in virtue of which the subject is in touch with some aspect of their sensory-cognitive world (Book XIV, Chapter 5).¹⁹ The argumentative structure of these three disputes are basically isomorphic. Thus, I will focus on the first of these chapters regarding sense objects (chapter 4 of Book IX of the *Kathāvatthu*), though I will return to the third of these contexts in the next section since this issue about the association of defilements with moments of *citta* is an issue of wide concern for a number of Abhidharma schools.

My reasoning for a selective focus on sense objects here is the following. In perception, causal commerce with perceptually salient objects both does and does not play a role in the conditioning influence of *anusaya* on the stream of consciousness. Causal commerce with objects *does* play a role in that being perceptually acquainted with objects of various sorts has a direct impact on the phenomenal character of one's experience of that object, what it's like to perceive it (Nagel 1974). This causal commerce with objects also does *not* have a conditioning influence on experience insofar as the phenomenal character of one's experience is

¹⁸ For primary sources on the Pudgalavādins that stress that the *pudgala* is a *prajñapti*, see Lusthaus (2009). For a remarkable essay that tries to reconstruct the Pudgalavādin position on the basis of the *Kathāvatthu*'s claim that the Pudgalavādins maintained that the *pudgala* was an ultimate existent, see Carpenter (2015). For detailed book-length treatments of the Pudgalavādin school see Priestly (1999) and Châu (1996).

¹⁹ For more on how the *Kathāvatthu* represents disputes between the Buddhist schools on the nature of *kamma*, see McDermott (1975).

also determined by things happening within the subject without any direct reference to what is happening in the world (like ruminating on an old memory, for example).

My reading of the Buddhist position offers a positive account of how different levels of mental functioning help to structure the phenomenal field in different ways. By 'phenomenal field' I mean a world of experience that is disclosed to a subject first-personally in virtue of their having an embodied perspective on that world (Bayne 2007). The world (*loka*) only shows up for us in virtue of our psycho-physical constitution (*nāma-rūpa*) being organized in a particular way. The Buddhist position I will reconstruct gives us a detailed account of how the conditioning influence of affect on behavior helps to construct a world of experience, even though the affective processes that help to constitute a meaningful world for us often operate on our experience outside the purview of our explicit attention, or what contemporary philosophers call 'cognitive access'—i.e. the capacity of an agent to utilize the content of their experience through intentional action, speech, and thought (Block 1995, 2007).

As Thompson notes, this kind of model is common to much of Indian philosophy more generally:

One way to think about the Indian yogic idea of subtle consciousness is to see it as pointing to deeper levels of phenomenal consciousness to which we don't ordinarily have cognitive access, especially if our minds are restless and untrained in meditation. According to this way of thinking [...] much of what Western science and philosophy would describe as unconscious might qualify as conscious, in the sense of involving subtle levels of phenomenal awareness that could be made accessible through meditative mental training. (Thompson 2015, p. 8)

It is with this framework in mind that we begin our foray into the subtleties of the *Kathāvatthu* of the Theravāda Abhidhammapiṭaka.

To state it briefly, the Therāvādin exegete wants to maintain that it is inappropriate to read the Buddha's parable of the infant as affirming that there are two different kinds of mental processes happening. The *anusaya* of a defilement (*kilesa*) and its outburst (*pariyuṭṭhāna*) are identical. In his commentary on the parable of the infant in the *Mahāmālukya Sutta* (MN I 432) cited above, Buddhaghosa defines the verb of *anusaya*, that is, *anuseti* in terms of *appahinatāya* or non-abandonment: "It lies dormant because of not being abandoned. That which lies dormant is called a fetter." (MN-a I, p. 129).²⁰ Thus, on this view, the only difference between *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa-s* is that the latter refers to the defilement as playing an immediate causal role and the former refers to the subject's state of not having abandoned the defilement. The key to this contrast is that the *anusaya-s* are characterized negatively in terms of the subject's attitude towards them.

Buddhaghosa's motivation for affirming the identity is twofold. First, he is committed to a general Abhidhamma principle of momentariness (Rospatt 1995; Karunadasa 2014, Chap. 17). This principle asserts that the basic temporal interval

²⁰ *appahinatāya anuseti. anusayamāno saṃyojanaṃ nāma hoti.*

of any mental event is an instant. Different schools of Abhidhamma thought disagree about the precise way to characterize a moment, but that need not concern us here (Frauwallner 1995). On this view, there is only one thing happening in the mind at a time. Thus, it is not possible for one who endorses momentariness to maintain a distinction between *anusaya kilesas* and *pariyutthāna kilesas*, except nominally. From the Theravādin point of view, both *anusaya* and *pariyutthāna kilesas* are defined by the kind of *kilesa* they instantiate and that is enough for them to be understood as type-identical. Another philosophical problem with the view that *anusaya* and *pariyutthāna kilesas* are separate is that it is difficult to understand what it means for a dispositional tendency to be actual. Potentials are precisely that, potentials, which seem to definitionally preclude them from being actual.

Buddhaghosa's argument for this is to claim that the distinction between *anusaya* and *pariyutthāna* that is assumed when the Buddha tells Mālukya that liberation is achieved when one abandons a defilement *along with its underlying tendency* (MN I 434)²¹ is like the saying that when one sleeps with their head covered, that the person and their head are two different things (MN-a, p. 144, from Jaini 1959, p. 241).²² Even so, Jaini notes that Buddhaghosa acknowledges that this counter-analogy does not speak against the parable that the Buddha gives to Mālukyaputta (ibid.). Thus, the motivations and arguments are clear, but whether they are fully convincing is not. I will argue that they are not.

A Reconstruction of the Debate

In spite of the twofold motivation I have just outlined in the previous section, here I will argue that identifying *anusaya* and *pariyutthāna kilesas* is philosophically and exegetically problematic. On exegetical grounds, I believe the non-Theravādins are right to claim that the identification of *anusaya* and *pariyutthāna kilesas* can't be squared with the textual evidence I canvassed above (see "[Different Views on the Nature of Anusaya in the Kathāvatthu](#)") where the suttas seems to affirm an important distinction between explicit defilements and their underlying tendencies. My view is that the dialogues we have already encountered make it clear that *anusaya*-s are not just negative concepts denoting a lack of a certain kind of attitude on the part of subjects who have them. On the contrary, *anusaya*-s play a distinct functional role that differentiates the state of the liberated person from the one who is not actively defiled but not yet entirely free from the conditioning influences of long-standing reactive habits. In this and the sections that follow, I will argue that *anusaya*-s have a distinct functional role must be understood in contrast with the causal influence that explicitly valenced mental events have on the structure of the current experience of a subject. My view is that this difference precludes an identification. As we saw with the parable of the infant, even small children can have tendencies towards certain kinds of outburst without yet having the cognitive abilities to fully manifest those outbursts. Consider another example. I might be in a perfectly pleasant mood today, but if someone were to cut me off while I was driving to the beach, my underlying tendency towards anger

²¹ *Sānusayo pahīyati*

²² *te "sasīsaṃ pārūpitvā"tiādīhi paṭikkhipitabbā*

might arise as verbal outburst of outrage and indignation. It is only in virtue of being predisposed to react in certain ways that situations come to solicit our responses in ways that those predispositions prime us for. There is a marked difference in these two states of mind.

The non-Theravādin interlocutors in the *Kathāvatthu* try to maintain that there is an important and principled distinction between *kammically* latent defilements and *kammically* active ones. I will argue in favor of the latter position and in so doing, provide comments throughout to offer clarification and contextualization of the various dialectical steps. Let's take a closer look at Book IX, Chapter 4 of the *Kathāvatthu*:

- Th:** Are underlying tendencies without a sense object?
- Mahāsaṅghika/Sammitiya (M/S):** Yes
- Th:** Then [*anusaya*-s are part of either] form, *nibbāna*, the eye, touch or the other sense bases?
- M/S:** Surely one should not speak that way.²³

It is important to understand why the Mahāsaṅghikas and Sammitiyas would want to deny an identification of *anusaya* with these various options canvassed by the Theravādin inquisitor. The list refers to form (*rūpa*) or the living body, *nibbāna* which is the final goal of an unconditioned deathless state (*amata*), and then a list of all the sensory systems that enable consciousness but are not themselves conscious. None of the available options are mental. It is true that *nibbāna* is something more interstitial in being both realized in the experience of a liberated person and having some form of existence that is beyond the divide of psycho-physical (*nāma-rūpa*) interactions with a causally conditioned world (*loka*). Nevertheless, it would be a trap to affirm such an identity because the point of positing the *anusaya*-s in the first place is to explain the problem of how minds can continue to be defiled and prone to defilement—and thus bound to the cycle of *samsāric* proliferation—without being occurrently overpowered by some explicitly manifest morally unwholesome state.

The questioning now shifts gears in a way that allows the Mahāsaṅghika/Sammitiya proponent of *anusaya* to explain the relation between its latent functioning and other more explicit defilements:

- Th:** Does the underlying tendency to sensual lust lack a sense object?
- M/S:** Yes
- Th:** Do sensual lust, its outburst, fetter, flood, bond, hindrance of attachment to sensual lust lack a sense object?
- M/S:** No, surely one should not speak in this way.

All of the different terms in the list are examples of *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa*, that is, *kammically* active mental events that arise in direct dependence on a soliciting cause in the world. Such states are morally valenced by being either wholesome (*kusala*) or in the case of the specific items in the above list, unwholesome (*akusala*). It is in

²³ *anusayā anārammaṇāti? āmantā. rūpaṃ nibbānaṃ cakkhāyatanam ... pe ... phoṭṭhabbāyatananti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe*

virtue of the *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa* having a sense object that they are said to be *kammically* active, or having a direct and discernible impact on occurrent mental functioning. By contrast, it is in virtue of the *anusaya kilesa* lacking a sense object, a direct occasioning cause, that they are said to be dormant, latent, underlying.

Th: Do sensual lust, its outburst, fetter, flood, bond, hindrance of attachment to sensual lust have a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: Does the latent bias to sensual lust have a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way.²⁴

To take the example of sensual lust (*kāmārāga*), we can now distinguish between two different ways in which this defilement is present in the system. The first is a *kammically* active manifestation whereby one is overpowered by the defilement because it is having a direct influence over one's apprehension of one's situation. In virtue of having that state, or being in it, one is morally culpable. In such cases, the defilement can be understood in terms of an outburst (*pariyuṭṭhāna*), a fetter (*saṃyojana*) etc. These cases are to be contrasted with *anusaya* cases of defilement in that the former but not the latter have occurrent sensory objects that occasion the arising of the consciousness that is so-defiled. In order for *anusaya*-s to have a conditioning influence over the structure of the stream of consciousness, it is not necessary for there to be a relevant object of perception that is functioning as the object-terminus for an occurrent intentional arc. It is not necessary that a sexually attractive person be present before me for me to have a propensity to react a certain way if they were to come by. I carry my lust with me in my body and mind in a way that primes me such that I am prone to react a certain way to the arrival of my lover when they do come by.

If it is the case that *anusaya*-s are not identical with any of the non-mental aspects of reality and it's also the case that in spite of being a mental function, *anusaya*-s also lack a sense object that causes them to arise, then it is a reasonable that the proponent of this reading of *anusaya* give an account of where in the mental economy these kinds of mental events arise. This line of inference is what motivates the next stage of questioning:

Th: Does the underlying tendency to sensual lust lack a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: In which aggregate is it included?

M/S: It is included in the formations aggregate

Th: Is the formations aggregate without a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way

Th: Is the formations aggregate without a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: Are the feeling, cognition, and consciousness aggregates without sense objects?

²⁴ *Kāmarāgānusayo anārammaṇoti? āmantā. kāmarāgo kāmarāgapariyuṭṭhānaṃ kāmarāgasamyojanaṃ kāmogho kāmayogo kāmacchandaniṅvaraṇaṃ anārammaṇanti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe ... kāmarāgo kāmarāgapariyuṭṭhānaṃ kāmarāgasamyojanaṃ kāmogho kāmayogo kāmacchandaniṅvaraṇaṃ sārammaṇanti? āmantā. kāmarāgānusayo sārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe*

M/S: Surely one should not speak this way.²⁵

At the end of this exchange the questioner has moved his opponent into a position of having to affirm that the *saṅkhāra* aggregate has a special status in that it, and no other mental aggregate (*vedanā, saññā, viññāṇa*), is able to arise without a sensory object to occasion it. Why would this be the case? The answer is that the *saṅkhāra* aggregate has a special status because it includes *anusaya*. Because *anusaya*-s do not have a sense object, it follows that *saṅkhāra*-s also lack a sense object. However, insofar as *saṅkhāra*-s also function as reactions to occurrent sensory-cognitive experience and provide the causal basis for the arising or occurrent moments of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), it is also true that *saṅkhāra*-s have sense objects. The position affirms that *anusaya saṅkhāra*-s lack a sense object while other *saṅkhāra*-s associated explicitly with occurrent moments of sensory-cognitive consciousness (*viññāṇa*) do have an object. Thus, being committed to having opposing answers to the same question isn't problematic on its own.

However, from here, the Theravādin questioner tries to show that the position under consideration entails an absurdity:

Th: Is the underlying tendency to sensual lust included in the formations aggregate without a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: Is sensual lust included in the formations aggregate without a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak this way.

Note the consistency here in the answers. The interlocutor affirms the lack of a sense object for *anusaya* but also maintains that the active defilements do have sense objects, even though both types of defilement are said to belong to the formations aggregate (*saṅkhāra*). This is what I referred to above as the bifurcation thesis, the view that the *saṅkhāra* aggregate is bifurcated into at least two types based on the kind of causal profile embodied by dispositional events and causally active ones.

The questioning continues as follows:

Th: Does sensual lust included in the formations aggregate have a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: Does the underlying tendency to sense lust included in the formations aggregate have a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way

Th: Does the underlying tendency to sensual lust, included in the formations aggregate lack a sense object, [while] sensual lust included in the formations aggregate have a sense object?

M/S: Yes.

Here we see the set up of an attempt to discredit the interlocutor's position. The questioner forms their previous query as a conjunct of the previous set of questions

²⁵ *kāmarāgānusayo anārammaṇoti? āmantā. katamakkhandhapariyāpannoti saṅkhārakkhandhapariyāpannoti. saṅkhārakkhandho anārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe ... saṅkhārakkhandho anārammaṇoti? āmantā. vedanākkhandho saññākkhandho viññāṇakkhandho anārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe ...*

in order to postulate a unity of a singular mental state with incommensurable parts, a position that the interlocutor must deny.

Th: [So,] a portion of the formations aggregate has a sense object [and] a portion is without a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way

Th: So, a portion of the formations aggregate has a sense object and a portion does not have a sense object?

M/S: Yes

Th: Do the feeling, cognition, and consciousness aggregates have a sense object in a portion and lack a sense object in [another] portion?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way.

Why might the interlocutor answer both 'yes' and 'no' to the same question here? The answer is subtle. One way to think about this is that there are different ways of reading *ekadeso*, in terms of a portion or part. One way to read it is to say that each *saṅkhāra* has multiple parts, one of which is *anusaya* another of which is *pariyuṭṭhāna*. One this reading of *ekadeso*, the interlocutor must answer 'no' on the grounds that it is not clear how a single momentary mental event could have two different causal profiles in its connection with other mental events and processes in the mental economy of the subject. However, insofar as we read *ekadeso* as a way of parsing types rather than tokens of *saṅkhāra*, then it is plausible to answer 'yes' to this question on the grounds that some *saṅkhāra*-s arise with an active causal profile and some do not. Further, the interlocutor denies that this line of questioning could apply to the other mental aggregates on the ground that they do not have the same causal profile as *saṅkhāra*-s. No feeling, cognition, or consciousness can arise in the system without some kind of occasioning cause on which it depends.

In the final question, we see the questioner generalize the line of inquiry we have been following thus far to include all of the other *anusaya*-s in the sevenfold formulation:

Th: Are the other underlying tendencies to anger, conceit, views, doubt, lust for becoming [and], ignorance without sense objects?

M/S: Yes.²⁶

The non-Thervādin defenders of the bifurcation thesis are forced to admit that there are different sorts of *saṅkhāra*-s operating and different times. In denying that *saṅkhāra*-s can be portioned out as having parts that do and do not take sensory objects, we introduce a distinction between latent *saṅkhāra*-s and explicitly active *saṅkhāra*-s. However, this should not trouble the proponent of the bifurcation view

²⁶ *kāmarāgānusayo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno anārammaṇoti? āmantā. kāmarāgo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno anārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe ... kāmarāgo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno sārammaṇoti? āmantā. kāmarāgānusayo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno sārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe kāmarāgānusayo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno anārammaṇo, kāmarāgo saṅkhārakkhandhāpariyāpanno sārammaṇoti? āmantā. saṅkhārakkhandho ekadeso sārammaṇo ekadeso anārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe ... saṅkhārakkhandho ekadeso sārammaṇo ekadeso anārammaṇoti? āmantā. vedanākkhandho saññākkhandho viññāṇākkhandho ekadeso sārammaṇo ekadeso anārammaṇoti? na hevaṃ vattabbe ... pe*

because the functional role of *saṅkhāra*-s is to *kammically* condition the stream of consciousness in different ways at the level of bodily action, thought and speech. The proponent of the bifurcation view is happy to take this on as it is an embodiment of their basic view. Thus, at this juncture, the Theravādin proponent hasn't made any inroads in refuting their opponent.

I look at two more brief exchanges from the end of the chapter before concluding this section. Here we see the line of questioning reversed (*paṭikamma*):

M/S: [You say that] It should not be spoken: 'underlying tendencies are without sense objects?'

Th: Yes

M/S: Should it be said of a worldling that 'they have an underlying tendency' when their mind is turned towards that which is indeterminate with respect to virtue?

Th: Yes

The motivation for this line of questioning is the same as that which underlies the Buddha's questioning of Mālukyaputta with the parable of the infant. We need to find a philosophically principled way to affirm that one can remain ensnared in *saṃsāra* without affirming that every moment one is actively defiled by unwholesome mental states.

M/S: That being the case with respect to underlying tendencies, do they have a sense object?

Th: Surely one would not speak this way

M/S: Because of this, underlying tendencies are without sense objects

The argument here is that insofar as one wants to deny that one goes through mental states that have no explicit moral valence, then one should affirm the reality of *anusaya* as a means of explaining how it is that one is not liberated from defilements every time they have a morally indeterminate mental state.

Note, again the questioning switches and we conclude with an attempted *reductio ad absurdum*:

Th: Should it be said of a worldling that they are 'lustful' when their mind is turned towards that which is indeterminate with respect to virtue?

M/S: Yes

Th: Then does lust have a sense object?

M/S: Surely one should not speak that way

Th: Therefore, lust does not have a sense object.²⁷

This latter conclusion, that lust does not have a sense object is being attributed to the bifurcation proponent. This would be a disaster as both parties are agreed that sensual lust, as an active *kammic* force, does indeed have a sense object. If the bifurcation position entailed that it did not, then this position would be absurd from

²⁷ *Na vattaḅbaṃ — "anusayā anārammaṇā"ti? āmantā. puthujjano kusalābyākate citte vattamāne sānusayoti vattaḅboti? āmantā. atthi tesañṃ anusayānaṃ ārammaṇanti? na hevaṃ vattaḅbe ... pe ... tena hi anusayā anārammaṇāti. puthujjano kusalābyākate citte vattamāne sarāgoti vattaḅboti? āmantā. atthi tassa rāgassa ārammaṇanti? na hevaṃ vattaḅbe ... pe tena hi rāgo anārammaṇoti.*

a Buddhist point of view. However, this conclusion is easily avoided. The attribution of an affirmative answer to the first question of this section is a radically uncharitable one on the part of the Theravādin compilers. The straightforward answer for the Mahāsaṅghika and Sammitiyas is to deny that worldlings are lustful when they are in indeterminate states.²⁸ By denying this, the bifurcation proponent avoids the *reductio* with ease and is able to maintain that there are two ways in which mental states can condition the structure of the stream of consciousness. The first is to say that mental states can be conjoined with intentional objects to actively shape the stream of consciousness and the second is to say that in the absence of explicit solicitations from the perceptual field, mental states can predispose the subject to behave in certain ways. This reading makes the most sense of the basic fact that we can be prone to behave in certain ways without actively doing so and it provides a straightforward reading of the infant parable examined previously.

However, even if the non-Theravādin interlocutors win the day, there are two problems that they need to reckon with. Those were the two that I mentioned at the beginning of this section. First, it looks like the non-Theravādin position must abandon the view that there is only one thing happening in the mind at any given moment and that the duration of such mental events are themselves momentary. This is because the non-Theravādin position maintains that there are always *anusaya kilesas* tacitly conditioning the *kammically* active functioning of the mind even in the absence of a *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa*. If that's right, then it is not possible that there is only one mental event happening at a time and it is unlikely that what is happening is only momentary as the need to maintain a diachronically extended affective bias is a key factor in the analysis.²⁹ Recall that we can put the second problem in the form of a question, namely: how might we make sense of the reality of a disposition? This second question is harder to answer and must be dealt with separately. I shall say something about this in "[Causation and Intention in the Making of the Buddhist Life-World](#)".³⁰

Vasubandhu on *Anuśaya*³¹

This sort of debate is not isolated to the compilers of the Pāli canon. The question of how to understand the causal profile of *anuśaya*-s was a vexing one for many Buddhist philosophers. Here I note that in his *bhāṣyam* on the opening verses of the fifth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu voices very similar concerns. In particular, Vasubandhu treats of the question of whether or not an *anuśaya* is distinct from the defilement of sensual pleasure (*kāmarāga*) or not. Before getting

²⁸ Thus, we can see here why at the level of attribution of view or content, the Theravādin compilers were hardly fair, regardless of the evenness with which they represent both sides of the debate formally (cf. Ganeri 2001).

²⁹ For more on this point, see Author [name redacted] (2018, Chap. 7).

³⁰ I treat of this topic in more detail in Author [name redacted] (2018). Space does not permit me to do so here.

³¹ In this section I refer to *anuśaya* rather than *anusaya* to track the difference between Pāli and Sanskrit uses of the term.

into the details of his analysis, I offer a few remarks on the distinctiveness of Vasubandhu's approach to *anuśaya* more generally.

Previously, I noted that in the Pāli texts, we see a number of different ways of categorizing *anusaya*. As noted by Mitomo (1973), Vasubandhu considerably expands the categorizing ambitions of the Abhidharma in his treatment of *anuśaya*.³² Vasubandhu begins with a six-fold classification and proceeds to expand until eighty-eight distinct *anuśaya*-s are enumerated. This kind of categorical proliferation mirrors the way in which these latent defilements are understood to corrupt the karmic trajectory of sentient beings. Here we see a kind of expansive outgrowth of various ways of minds being defiled, before those subtle states are even manifested actively in the mental economy of the sentient being who has them (Mitomo 1975, p. 497). As we will see, Vasubandhu's explanation of how this goes in terms of karmic seeds (*bīja*) will become especially philosophically relevant.³³

Let us now return to the specific claims Vasubandhu makes in defense of the Sautrāntika view of *anuśaya*. His view arises in the context of a widespread dispute amongst the various Abhidharma schools. In his monumental work on this subject, Dhammajoti (2015) explains this dispute in terms of a disagreement about two related issues. The first is the question of whether defilements (*kleśa*) are connected to the mind (*saṃprayukta*) or disconnected from it (*viprayukta*). The second is how to understand the distinction between latent (*anuśaya*) and karmically active (*paryavasthāna*) defilements (*kleśa*).³⁴ These two questions are connected in the following way: "...if the defilements are by nature disjoined from the mind, how can they affect the mind? On the other hand, if they are all conjoined with the mind, how can there be liberation from them at all?" (Dhammajoti 2015, p. 382). The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma's claim, like the Theravādin compilers of the *Kathāvatthu*, that there is no distinction to be made between *anuśaya* and *paryavasthāna kleśa*-s (Dhammajoti 2015, p. 384). However, several other schools take the other side, trying to maintain a strong distinction between them.³⁵ In defending his Sautrāntika position, Vasubandhu opts out of this dichotomy by rejecting both options.

In his attempt to escape this truncated dialectic, Vasubandhu makes the following claims: "How then should the notion *kāmarāgānuśaya* be understood? Does it mean that sensual pleasure is itself an *anuśaya* or is it rather that there is an *anuśaya* of sensual pleasure distinct from sensual pleasure? Why does this matter?" (*Abhk-b* v,

³² From what has been shown thus far, it should be clear that Mitomo is wrong to claim of the *nikāya* treatment of *anusaya* that, "...it is not an advanced theory" (Mitomo 1975, p. 500).

³³ See also Gold (2015, Chap. 2 and Appendix A) for a nuanced reconstruction of later parts of this chapter of the *Abhk-b*.

³⁴ We have already seen in the previous section how the second of these questions is addressed in the *Kathāvatthu*. See the second of three discussions in *Kv* XI, Chap. 1 for a reconstruction of a debate about whether *anusaya* are disconnected from (*vippayutta*) *citta*. The structure of this argument is precisely isomorphic with the one I reconstructed in the previous section.

³⁵ See the helpful chart provided by Dhammajoti (2015, p. 384).

2a).^{36,37} The reason it matters is clear from what has already been established; the question here is whether or not it makes sense to say that there are mental events that exercise a conditioning influence over the development of the mind even when the world is not actively soliciting an explicit karmic response on the basis of occurrent experience. The reason we want to maintain the distinctness of *anuśaya* and their expressions is because we have good scriptural reasons to think they are distinct.³⁸ The reason we would want to reject the view that they are distinct is that doing so would seem to lead to the claim that *anuśaya* are distinct from *citta*. This is undesirable because their very purpose is to explain the possibility of karmic influence even when active conditioning has subsided. But subtle influences are influences nonetheless. Therefore, complete dissociation seems incoherent.³⁹

By denying both horns of the debate, the Sautrāntika position Vasubandhu endorses strives for a classically Buddhist philosophical middle ground between identity and difference. He expresses this view in the following (*Abhk-b v*, 1d-2a):⁴⁰

On the other hand, the Sautrāntika view is a good one. And what is the Sautrāntika view? *Kāmarāgānuśaya* means ‘the *anuśaya* of *kāmarāga*’. But it is not the case that the *anuśaya* is connected with the mind, nor is it the case that the *anuśaya* is disconnected with the mind because it [the *anuśaya*] is not a substantially existing thing (*dravya*). Rather an *anuśaya* is the *kleśa* in a dormant state and the *kleśa* that is awakened is an outburst (*pariyavasthāna*).⁴¹

It’s worth noting here that the distinction between dormancy or sleep on the one hand and awakened action on the other is hardly clear. Therefore, Vasubandhu begins to spell out this metaphor more precisely in what immediately follows. He continues:

And what is dormancy? It is its [the *kleśa*] being bound along [with the mind-stream] to a seed-state (*bījabhāva*) when it [the *kleśa*] is not arising. And what is the awakening [state of the *kleśa*]? It is the arising [of the *kleśa*].⁴²

³⁶ For the Sanskrit, I have used Pradhan’s (1975) revised edition of the *Abhk-b*. I have also consulted Pruden’s (1991) English translation. For feedback, encouragement, and advice, I am indebted to Jesse Knutson and Sonam Karchu.

³⁷ *katham idaṃ jñātavyaṃ kāmarāga evānuśayaḥ kāmarāgānuśaya āhosvit kāmarāgasyānuśayaḥ kāmarāgānuśayaḥ kiṃ cātaḥ?*

³⁸ Here Vasubandhu cites the *Samyukta Āgama*. This parallels the discussion in the *Mahāmālukya Sutta* (MN I 432) discussed earlier. For extensive and meticulous work on the overlap of the āgama and sutta literature, see Ānalayo (2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017).

³⁹ This debate on whether or not *anusaya* are separate from *citta* is explored in detail in the first chapter of the ninth book of the *Kathāvatthu*. The debate that is recorded there is framed in terms of the Theravādin taking one horn of the debate and the non-Theravādin taking the other.

⁴⁰ Cf. Pradhan (1975, pp. 278–279), Pruden (1991, Vol. 3, p. 770), and Waldron (2003, p. 74). Waldron’s analysis of the connections between the *Kathāvatthu* and Vasubandhu’s treatment of the Sautrāntika theory of seeds (*bīja*) in terms of what he calls the ‘The abhidharmic problematic’ is exceptionally astute.

⁴¹ *evaṃ tu sādhu yathā sautrāntikānām. katham ca sautrāntikānām? kāmarāgasyānuśayaḥ kāmarāgānuśaya iti. na cānuśayaḥ saṃprayukto na viprayuktasyādravyāntaratvāt. prasupto hi kleśo ’nuśaya ucyate; prabuddhaḥ pariyavasthānam.*

⁴² *kā ca tasya prasuptiḥ? asaṃmukhībhūtasya bījabhāvānubandhaḥ. kaḥ prabodhaḥ? saṃmukhībhāvaḥ.*

We should understand this distinction in terms of a difference in causal profile between active and latent defilements. An *anuśaya* is something that accompanies the process of mental unfolding but exercises its conditioning influence in a way that is not immediately trackable by the subject. This is at least partly because in the case of an *anuśaya*, there is no active causal connection between occurrent states of affairs in the world and the processing of these by the sensory-cognitive coupling that forms the basis of the arising of consciousness. The causal influence is instead established on the basis of past habits conditioning present actions.

Vasubandhu continues to elaborate on this in terms of different capacities (*śakti*) embodied by sentient beings when they're in latent or awakened states of defilement:

Indeed what is called the seed-state (*bījabhāva*)? It is a capacity of a being to produce the *kleśa* on the basis of the arising of a [previous] *kleśa*, just like the capacity for memory arises on the basis of knowledge from experience and like rice is produced from the sprouts, stem, etc. because the capacity to produce the rice plant comes from the rice plant itself.⁴³

The important claim being made here is about the causal-temporal profile of a karmic seed (*bīja*). Namely, *bīja*-s exercise their conditioning influence on the basis of past karmic encoding. They play the functional role of maintaining dispositions in the system, further entrenching them so that when the world does provide an excuse, an active reactionary outburst will be poised for expression. However, Waldron helpfully notes in his commentary on this passage, that, “We must stress that this is not adding any new concept to Buddhist doctrine. *The metaphor of seeds is simply another way of talking about the karmic relationship between cause and effect.*” (Waldron 2003, p. 75 emphasis in the original).⁴⁴ Instead, we should understand this posit as a way of thinking more carefully about the relationship between causation and intention in the Buddhist model of the mind and how we can be in a continual state of biased influence from our past even though our present is not actively soliciting our reactions in an explicit way. I return to this point in “Causation and Affectively Biased Intention in the Sculpting of a Buddhist Lifeworld”.

The overlap in Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika position and the one I defended at the end of the previous section should be clear. Both views emphasize a bifurcated structure in the mind's responsiveness to its world. The first is an explicit, active outburst, a reaction to the charged and meaningful solicitations offered to us by conditioned existence. The second is a kind of poisedness that situates, primes, and biases the mind into a state of ever-ready reactivity. When the world gives an excuse to react with strong emotions, we are ready. For these Buddhist philosophers, it is on account of our *anuśaya* that we vigilantly and miserably maintain this readiness. Active outbursts cannot be identified with their underlying tendencies because their

⁴³ ko 'yaṃ bījabhāvo nāma? ātmabhāvasya kleśajā kleśotpādanaśaktiḥ. yathānubhavajñānajā smṛtyutpādanaśaktir yathā cāṅkurādīnāṃ śālīphalajā śālīphalotpādanaśaktir iti.

⁴⁴ I cannot hope to do proper justice to the nuance of this topic in this paper. For more on the Sautrāntika theory of *bīja*, see Jaini (1959).

causal profiles and phenomenal character are so different. However, to maintain that they are completely distinct is also philosophically problematic since we individuate *anusāya*-s in terms of their ability to keep us prone and poised to react in an explicit way (*paryavasthāna*).

Causation and Intention in the Making of the Buddhist Life-World

In this final section, I will do two things. The first is to make some explicit connections between the philological reconstruction of the previous sections with the philosophical task of providing a positive account of how the mind is affectively layered. Second, I will situate that account in connection with a general consideration of how Buddhist philosophy might inform contemporary philosophical and scientific discourse on the nature of mind and its relation to its world. While some have focused on the way in which the Buddhist theory of *anusāya* has important parallels with unconscious motivation in Freudian psychoanalysis (De Silva 2005; 2014; Huong 2012), I will focus more on contemporary affective neuroscience and the role that affective bias has on constructing a salience map for conscious perception (Barrett and Bar 2009; Todd et al. 2015; Lebrecht et al. 2012).

The Mind as Affectively Layered

The main motivation for our delving into the scholastic debates of the Theravādin Abhidhamma-piṭaka was to try and think carefully about the different ways that felt affect might condition our experience in various ways. The Buddhist position I have outlined here helps us shed light on the extent to which deep affective biases can be thought of as providing a tacit influence on the structure of our perspective on the world.

The relevance of the Buddhist conception of *anusāya* for contemporary discourse on the mind has been emphasized by De Silva (2005; 2014) in connection with issues of Freudian psychoanalysis and mindfulness based therapeutic models. In his earlier work, De Silva emphasizes a strong overlap between the Buddhist theory of affective bias and the Freudian unconscious. The concept he uses to tie these two discourses together is 'motivation'. This notion he divides into three emphasizing a cycle of, "...states that motivate behavior, behavior motivated by these states and the goals of such behavior" (De Silva 2005, p. 35). The key to this story is the powerful connection that exists between goals that are tacitly held by the organism and the actions it takes to achieve them. Because of this conviction, De Silva gives a rather reductive analysis of how different normative terms like 'need, want, motive, drive, etc, "...refer to some inner condition of the organism that initiates and directs its behavior towards a goal" (ibid). I have no qualms with this kind of story more generally, but I do object to the role that De Silva gives to *anusāya*-s in telling it. Consider the following: "Our attitudes and beliefs which have been in the past influence our present reactions to oncoming stimuli, and these attitudes are often rooted in dynamic personality traits. According to the Buddha, these attitudes are not the result of deliberation at a conscious level, but emerge on deep-rooted and

dormant proclivities referred to as *anusaya*” (De Silva 2005, p. 38). The problems with this view are the following. First, it is a mistake to think about *anusaya*-s as attitudes that have articulate goals. These kinds of states are not unconscious beliefs. Second, the categorical schemes by which they are organized suggest that it would be a mistake to think of them as dynamic aspects of individual personalities. Rather, these are sedimented regimes of attention that form on the basis of primitive emotional reactions to paradigmatic scenarios that are important for an organism (de Sousa 1990).

In later work, De Silva (2014), distances himself from the unconscious belief model of *anusaya* and instead focuses on the idea that they have a subliminal influence on our consciousness by motivating us towards concrete goals in a tacit way (2014, pp. 34–35). While I agree that it is a more nuanced reading of the notion of *anusaya* to jettison any connection it might have with an unconscious propositional attitude, I still disagree with the idea that these states provide articulate, goal oriented motivations to our conscious minds. I also think that De Silva’s motivations for the shift are worth criticizing. I address these two points in reverse order.

First, De Silva cites Ledoux (1998) for convincing him to model the process of *anusaya* conditioning as being, “...closer to the conscious level rather than buried at a deeper level” (p. 35). The ‘deeper level’ here is presumably a kind of unconscious belief reservoir akin to the Freudian unconscious. Even so, it’s not clear that Ledoux is a reasonable source for such a shift. This is because Ledoux is a higher-order theorist about affective life (Ledoux and Brown 2017). This means that what it is for an affective state to be experiential is for it to be the intentional object of a higher order thought. What it is to feel an emotion is to think about a first-order affective state. Any ‘survival circuit’ responses where “...the nervous system is hijacked by the amygdala” (De Silva 2014, p. 35) in a fear-response scenario will operate independently of any higher-order thought. Such processes are strictly unconscious on Ledoux’s view (Ledoux and Brown 2017, p. 2). Thus, it is not clear, at least on Ledoux’s view (Ledoux 2012), how the *anusaya* level of mental processing could be (Ledoux 2012) associated with a ‘threshold consciousness’ (De Silva, *op cit*).⁴⁵

Second, a better way to think about the role of *anusaya* in mental function that is resonant with contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science is through the lens of the neuroscience and psychology of affectively biased attention (Todd et al. 2015; Lebrecht 2012; Barrett and Bar 2009). On this view, what *anusaya*-s do is provide a conditioning influence on our salience map for conscious perception, influencing which objects show up as salient and relevant and which do not.

This approach claims that affect has a pervasive, though not occurrently active, conditioning force on our habits of attention, influencing the contours of the salience

⁴⁵ The idea that the amygdala is the ‘fear network’ is overly simplistic (Pessoa 2013). The amygdala is one of the most densely interconnected sites in the entire brain and is implicated in networks of activation that subservise a whole host of mental processes. A better characterization of the general function of the amygdala would be as a kind of salience centre that functions to render certain relevant stimuli present to the subject.

map that organizes our phenomenal field.⁴⁶ When I am walking down the street thinking about my philosophical ideas or the extent to which I am a philological dilettante compared to my Buddhist studies friends, I am not free from sensual lust and sexual arousal. Indeed, it is on account of those tacit tendencies being present in me, colouring my perceptual evaluations of the world in subtle ways, that when a sexually attractive person passes within my attentive purview, my cognitive musings on Buddhist soteriology evaporate and my visual perceptual attention is immediately recruited as I appreciate, in a respectful way, this beautiful person who is passing me by.

Affective biases of various sorts are operating constantly on my perception and its interfacing with my cognition. It is in virtue of these operations that the world shows up to me as seeming a certain way, that certain parts of it are more salient to my perceptual attention than other parts. It is in having a certain predisposition to be sexually attracted to certain sorts of people that such people attract my attention when they pass by, and others who do not, barely register as present at all. It is the push and pull of these affective biases that help to constitute my perspective on the world and the meaning of that world for me. These are the basic materials out of which the lifeworld is constructed. Thus, my proposal is that we should think of *anusaya* as exercising a conditioning influence primarily on the way objects of perception are apprehended within an evaluative network of norms rather than in terms of articulate, if subliminal motivations that have an explicit goal structure. It is in virtue of apprehended perceptual objects in a normatively thick way that we are able to formulate goals. Thus, on my view, the causal work of *anusaya* happens at an earlier stage of perceptual processing than the motivational-goal framework endorsed by De Silva, even when the view is shorn of its Freudian affinities. These remarks also help to further clarify why I reject the identification of *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna*. They differ in causal profile and phenomenal character, and this is enough to reject an identity between them.

Causation and Affectively Biased Intention in the Sculpting of a Buddhist Lifeworld

Buddhist philosophers have the interesting, and perhaps unique, tendency to individuate mental states on the basis of their causal role, but without using that functional analysis as a reason to explain away, reduce, or otherwise ignore consciousness. Buddhist philosophers persistently use categories that correspond to our notion of consciousness as fundamental relata in their causal analyses (e.g. *viññāṇa*, *vedanā*, *citta*). Insofar as moments of conscious awareness and their various cognitive elaborations are thought of as fundamental constituents of a causal order, it is reasonable to think about how those moments are causally related with other mental events that might condition them.

Here, it is useful to redeploy a few useful distinctions I mentioned earlier. First, distinguish between phenomenal and access consciousness, that is, between our

⁴⁶ For a dramatic example of how this process works in cases of trauma, see Todd et al. (2015) for a intriguing study of how affective biases work on perceptual attention in soldiers with PTSD.

experience, and our capacity to cognitively elaborate on and respond to the content of an experience with intentional action, speech, and thought (Block 1995; 2007). Further distinguish between those aspects of our phenomenally conscious experience that we in fact access and those that we do not access but remain, in principle, accessible (Thompson 2015, p. 8). To these, add a third, the distinction between dispositional and occurrent mental events. Dispositions are things we are prone to do. Occurrent mental events are those which are actually occurring in the present moment. The view I am proposing is that affectively biasing states like *anusaya*-s should be thought of as phenomenally conscious events that are often not *accessed* but are still cognitively *accessible*.⁴⁷ The Buddhist position I am trying to articulate endorses a kind of identity between dispositions and occurrent mental states but not the kind envisaged by Buddhaghosa. All occurrent mental functionality contains a kind of biased habitual poisedness or orientation that disposes the organism having that state to behave in the future in a way that is causally conditioned by the present. The arising of any mental event depends on the world being configured in a certain way. That way is spelled out causally in terms of an intentional relation between the organism and its world. In virtue of this causal commerce, the organism becomes habitually disposed to take up with the content of experience in ways that are in line with its personal and species-level history.

Insofar as the latent dispositions can be said to have a causal influence at all, then they must be real in some way. Thus, I submit that affectively biasing states like *anusaya*-s should be thought of as often not *accessed* by our capacities for intentional action, speech, and thought, but as still being cognitively *accessible* in principle with the help of contemplative training (*bhāvāna*). The ground for this suggestion is that if we individuate mental states (at least partially) on the basis of their causal profile (i.e. functionally), then it looks like deep affective states like *anusaya* can be understood as overflowing cognitive access as they have a different causal profile than kammically manifest defilements. The difference is specified in terms of the elements present in the causal system responsible for the arising of such states. For *anusaya*-s, no perceptual object need be present for the state to exercise an influence over the continuity of the mental life of the subject. Again, this is why we ought to reject the identification of *anusaya* and *pariyuṭṭhāna kilesa*-s; they differ with respect to whether or not the presence of an object is constitutive for their arising.

The particular interest of the Buddhist conception of a meaningful lifeworld for this current discussion is that it does not make a strong distinction between causation and intention. Put another way, the relevant kind of causation for the Buddhist is always mental or intentional causation (*cetanā*) and resulting in bodily, verbal or mental actions (*kamma*). Classical phenomenological conceptions of the lifeworld often attempt to bracket out any consideration of the causal origin of our mental lives. For example, Heidegger's (1927/1996) conception of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world conceives of human experience as only being adequately described using a phenomenological ontology that is to be strictly distinguished from the

⁴⁷ In the case of the infant or other beings who do not have the capacities of cognitive access, the phenomenal character of their experience is not cognitively accessible.

causal analyses of the relevant sciences (biology and psychology). Even Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2012)—which is novel in that it is one of the first phenomenological texts that engage directly with the relevant psychology of its time—is careful to adhere to a strong transcendental line of inquiry that brackets any discussion of the causal structure of experience, instead focusing on intentionality.

This distinction between intentional and causal analysis can also be framed in terms of a distinction between different images of the world. On the one hand, there is the 'scientific image' which focuses on the causal story of how the world *works*. On the other, there is the 'manifest image' which is concerned with how things *appear*. I interpret Buddhist philosophy as eschewing this distinction. As Christian Coseru (2015) points out, the Buddhist concept of a world or *loka* is one that is irreducibly tied up with the feelings and cognitions of the subjects living in that world (SN I 95). Yet the connections that unite the subject to their meaningful world are always specified in terms of causes. At the same time, these causes are always specified in terms of *kamma* which definitionally recruits the intentions (*cetanā*) of the subjects who are living within the causal matrix. Philosophical analysis for the Buddhist takes place within the intentional structure of a subject oriented lifeworld, but one that is always carried out in the language of causation. Thus, the Buddhist perspective emphasizes the importance of motivated intentional causation as being the only medium through which the world (*loka*) is intelligible to us. On such a view, the intentional level of analysis and the causal level of analysis thoroughly interpenetrate.⁴⁸

The Buddhist motivation for proceeding in this way is problem-oriented. There is *dukkha* and this pervasive problem needs to be dealt with. The only way to deal with it is to analyze it. This analysis is carried out by utilizing the concept of causation. Thus, my contention is that one of the most interesting contributions that Buddhist philosophy can make to contemporary discussions of the mind, and consciousness in particular, is twofold. First, Buddhist philosophy is not living in a world that requires it to overcome the allegedly insuperable gap between the manifest and scientific images. Because of this, it avoids certain metaphysical questions that detract from a more pragmatic philosophical project, namely the question of *dukkha*. This brings us to the second contribution. Buddhist philosophical analysis of the mind provides us with an account of consciousness that is constantly perturbed in various ways. Consciousness is always affected in some way, either tacitly or explicitly, and this colours our perspective on the world and ourselves. Because of this constant process of affective perturbation, and the biases in us that it constructs, we are often in error about what is good and bad for us, and because of this, we suffer. This suffering, this *dukkha*, is pervasive and often subtle, but its conditioning influence can be observed if we attend carefully enough. To do so skillfully, and thereby overcome the problematic influences embodied in these reactionary biases, is the heart of the Buddhist soteriological project.

⁴⁸ This is a point that phenomenologists later came to appreciate through their own phenomenological and existential analyses.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have gone into some depth in reconstructing a debate between some schools of Indian Buddhism about the nature of the *anusaya*-s. I have argued, against the canonical Theravādin interpretation, that the *anusaya kilesa*-s are identical with explicitly morally valenced counterparts (*pariyuṭṭhāna*). I have done so for two reasons. The first is to construe a maximally philosophically consistent version of the Buddhist position on the nature of *anusaya*-s. This first reason feeds into the second: it has been my intention to show that the Buddhist philosophers have much to teach about the affective depths of the mind. In particular, their analysis of the different levels at which affect organizes the stream of consciousness is instructive for approaching these questions from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

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