

Was the Buddha an Anti-Realist?¹

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In the present article I look at some claims that a form of anti-realism about separate material and mental things can be found within early Buddhism. We will see that while such claims bear a certain prima facie force, particularly when isolated to particular passages in the Canon, taken in a broader context they become less convincing. In contrast I will suggest that in the service of his ethical system the Buddha propounded an incomplete or inchoate metaphysics, but one with at least the suggestion of realism.

Following Luis Gomez, Alex Wynne has recently pointed to a number of apophatic strands within early Buddhism which he takes to have anti-realist connotations². He says that “the Buddha was the first person in history to reject, let alone entertain, the notion that the external world apprehended through the senses is a mind-independent reality.”³ In this he appears to be in agreement with Noa Ronkin (2005: 245), who has argued that,

What the Buddha rejects is realism, conceptual and ontological alike:

¹Many thanks to Richard Hayes, John Holder, and Justin Whitaker for helpful commentary on previous versions of this paper.

²Gomez 1976, Wynne 2010, Wynne 2015

³Wynne 2015: 5

the notion that the encountered world is made up of distinguishable substances, and the linguistic theory that words refer to these substances which they represent.

We will look at the question as to whether the Buddha of the Pāli Nikāyas was an anti-realist.

Realism is typically identified in contrast to anti-realism. It might be a claim about the existence of universals as versus a nominalist claim about mere resemblances. It might be a claim about the existence of distinguishable substances or material objects as versus an idealist claim about mere phenomena. It might also be a claim about objective truths as versus a conventionalist claim about mere sentences.

In each of these cases the realist asserts the existence of something objective as against the anti-realist claim that the matter is only subjective. The anti-realist believes that in one way or another the items in question are constituted by, or directly dependent upon, the subject for their existence.

It is perhaps best to illustrate the distinction between realism and anti-realism through paradigmatic examples. A realist about material things will say that material things are not constituted by, nor persistently dependent upon, mental things, although they may be causally interrelated with mental things. Material things therefore exist objectively, “in their own right” as it might be put, and are not constructs formed out of mental things.

An anti-realist about material objects will say the reverse: that material things are constructs formed out of, or immediately dependent upon, mental things.

Similarly, a realist about truth will say that truth is not constituted by convention or opinion (which are themselves mental things), but that instead sentences or propositions may be true objectively, no matter what people may believe.

An anti-realist about truth will say the reverse: that truth is in some sense constituted by convention or opinion: that our beliefs about something make it true.

Sophisticated philosophical theories are generally constituted by a nuanced blend of realism and anti-realism. While they can be sharpened arbitrarily, for the purposes of the *Nikāyas* we will need relatively basic versions to do the work at hand. In the case of the Buddha, realist and anti-realist claims mainly involve issues regarding idealism about objects and conventionalism about truth. There is not much discussion in the *Nikāyas* that bears on the question of universals,

so we will not deal with that here.

The contemporary reconstructions we will be dealing with are apophatic in nature, in which reality is claimed to be ineffable or beyond all positive description.⁴ Taken as such, these theories do not explicitly constitute forms of anti-realism since they support the existence of a reality, albeit a reality which cannot be positively described. For the purposes of this paper therefore we will stipulate “anti-realism” to mean a theory that denies the objective existence of separate, sensible objects that admit of correct, positive (cataphatic) description: material and mental things.

A note about process philosophy

As regards “things”, Ronkin (2005) has ably argued for the position that the Buddha’s metaphysics should be described as a form of “process philosophy”, that is one involving “processes” rather than “things” or “substances”.⁵ She defines “substance” following Aristotle as “that which exists independently of any other thing, ontologically, epistemologically and linguistically.”⁶ Her anti-realist claim above is directed against a *substantival* form of realism, and this is no doubt correct in spirit. The Buddha taught that all compound things were in continual, interdependent flux, so insofar as we define substances as entirely independent and changeless, they would not belong within the Buddha’s metaphysical picture of the world. That said, this transcendental understanding of substance is at odds with a view attributed to W.V.O. Quine and others under the rubric of the “indispensability argument”, whereby we ought to have ontological commitment to all and only the entities that are indispensable to our best empirical theories.⁷ The argument against the Buddha having been a substantival realist does not touch the view that he may have been a different kind of realist.

⁴For more on the apophatic understanding of early Buddhism and its relation to ineffability see Gombrich 2009: 150ff

⁵E.g., “Underlying process metaphysics is the supposition that encountered phenomena are best represented and understood in terms of occurrences — processes and events — rather than in terms of ‘things’”. Ronkin 2009: 14

⁶Ronkin 2005: 55

⁷A dapted from Colyvan 2015. While the argument typically comes up in the context of mathematical realism, it applies equally to other forms of realism such as that of material objects. Cf. Quine’s argument about pennies, below

In any event, it is debatable whether the word “process” adds much more than nuance to the discussion. Vagueness infects all compound objects. We might say that as vagueness increases entities become more process-like, and as it decreases, as they become simpler to individuate, they become more thing-like. Then perhaps we can say processes are things, though at times with less precise identity conditions than those we ordinarily take ourselves to be referring to, such as chairs and mountains.

However we understand them, processes seem to play more or less the same ontological role that substances classically played within western metaphysics.⁸ They can be individuated from one another by their characteristics, and they must at least manifest a difference between essential and accidental properties responsible for their arising, persistence, and eventual demise.⁹ So for example rainstorms, heatwaves, famines, and symphonic performances are all paradigmatic processes.¹⁰ They also manifest certain changes which do not bring about their demise *qua* particular process, and other changes which do. So lowering the temperature during Beethoven’s Fifth does not change the identity of that particular performance, though changing the orchestra and conductor would. Hence *qua* performance, temperature is accidental but composition of the players is essential. (Though quite how many players is essential may be an irretrievably vague matter).

The difference, indeed, between processes and more traditional, substantial things appears somewhat obscure, and may simply amount to processes being rather vaguer and more event-like.¹¹ At any rate, as Nicholas Rescher (1996: 33) says, “process philosophers are not promoting a reformation or transformation of ordinary language.” Hence they have “no wish (and no need) for dispensing with the thing *concept*.”

⁸ “[A]ny of the characterizations of substances in the ontological tradition will, in fact, hold good of particular processes”. Rescher 1996: 30.

⁹ Cf., Rescher 1996: 66-67. He points to an awareness of vagueness as something that sets process philosophy apart from substance philosophy, however even so it will have to rely on (vaguely defined) essential and accidental properties to constitute the coming into being and passing away of processes

¹⁰ Rescher 1996: 52

¹¹ Cf. Ronkin 2005: 67-71. She outlines differences between processes and events, then says the difference between them “is epistemological, not ontological”. If, however, processes can be analyzed in terms of events, then while it may be correct to say that the Buddha rejected conceptual and ontological substance-realism, this would still leave open the question as to whether he also rejected conceptual and ontological event-realism.

As a result in this paper I will persist with talk about things and objects, trusting that it can be translated into process talk if that is so desired.

Anti-realism in the Nikāyas

Luis Gomez locates an apophatic strand within the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta* (Sn), perhaps one of the earliest books in the *Nikāyas*. He describes it in mystical terms, and as a form of “proto-Mādhyamika”:

These passages strike the reader as some of the most explicit and representative statements of an extreme apophatic tendency found elsewhere in Buddhist literature. ...

This tendency could be characterized in the theoretical realm as the doctrine of no-views, and in the practical realm as the practice of practicing no dharmas. ... [I]t stands on an ascetic discipline of silence which corresponds and leads to the higher goal of silencing the mind’s imaginative-discursive faculties, whereupon the mystic reaches the ultimate state of inner silence, considered to be itself beyond all possible theoretical description.¹²

The *Aṭṭhakavagga* contains critiques against “views” (*diṭṭhi*, e.g., Sn 889), “arguments and disputes” (*kalahā vivādā*, Sn 862-3), “truth and falsity” (*saccammusā*, Sn 886), and what Gomez translates as “apperception” (*saññā*, e.g., Sn 874); it is the word used for one of the five *khandhas*, often translated “perception”.¹³ On this theory, our apperceptions produce views and opinions in us by dividing up the world into illusory conceptual categories. These views incite disputes, which themselves only produce further suffering. Our proper response should be to abandon all views as inherently tainted and misleading, in order to directly experience reality for itself, which is beyond all views and concepts. Since this theory denies the separate existence of material and mental things, it qualifies as a form of anti-realism for purposes of this paper.

Ronkin (2005) and Wynne (2010) also find apophatic tendencies within the *Aṭṭhakavagga*. Ronkin (2005: 246) says that it “promulgates an ascetic discipline

¹²Gomez 1976: 140

¹³Cf., Gomez 1976: 144

of silence and repudiation of our very cognitive apparatus as based on linguistic and conceptual delineation”.

To support this claim she refers to a passage that she translates,

Neither conceptualizing, nor conceptualizing wrongly, nor lacking conceptualization, nor conceptualizing nothing — in one who has achieved this state sensory recognizable experience (*rūpa*) ceases, for what is called ‘verbal proliferation’ (*papañca*) has its origin in conceptualization. (Sn 874).¹⁴

Hence it is conceptualization itself that is the basic problem: our cognitive apparatus itself binds us to *samsāra* through our basic tendency to divide the world up into things. This leads to “verbal proliferation”, and *dukkha*. The complete abandonment of proliferation brings an end to *dukkha*, therefore realizing *nibbāna*.¹⁵ However absent proliferation, there is no intrinsic form to reality; it is strictly ineffable.

Wynne takes this apophatic approach to the entirety of the Buddha’s *dhamma*.¹⁶ Looking at the passage above (Sn 874), he says, “According to this enigmatic statement of the Buddha, a person’s physical being is not ultimately real, but depends on the tendency to conceptualise reality in terms of a manifold world of diversity.”

Wynne also takes a look at two other stanzas:

‘Devoid of thirst even before death,’ said the Blessed One, ‘not dependent upon the past, immeasurable in the middle, for him nothing is fashioned with regard to the future. (Sn 849).

He is without attachment for the future and does not grieve over the past. Perceiving detachment, he is not led into sense- contacts and views. (Sn 851).

¹⁴Ronkin 2005: 246-7

¹⁵E.g., MN 18.8/I.110-111. That the process there described constitutes *nibbāna* can be seen at AN 7.12/IV.9

¹⁶“The basic idea of [the Buddha’s] philosophy is relatively straightforward ... But the radical implications which follow from this have not yet been grasped. For if the perceived world is a conceptual construction, it implies that space, time and individual existence are not objectively real, and that Nirvana is the ineffable truth of phenomena, rather than an absolute reality beyond it.” Wynne 2015: 7.

These, he says, show “that the liberated sage is released from the very notion of time.” Taken together with the above passage (Sn 874), together they demonstrate for Wynne (2010: 163) that notions of existence, non-existence and time are said to be dependent on a person’s cognitive functioning, the release from which implies the cessation of a person’s awareness of individual existence in space-time.

Since notions of space and time are thus mind-dependent, there is no sense that can be made of material reality except as a kind of cognitive epiphenomenon. As Wynne (2015: 30) puts it, “... [T]he world’s existence somehow depends upon a human being, and not the other way around.” Insofar as release into *nibbāna* unbinds us from such notions, reality is strictly indescribable in temporal or spatial terms.

The drawback about using poetic verse to ground our philosophical understanding is that, to use Wynne’s word, it is “enigmatic”. However he identifies other anti-realist strands within the *Nikāyas*, particularly within the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN1). The *Brahmajāla* contains, among other things, a rejection of sixty-two wrong metaphysical views about the world. Wynne (2010: 148-9) takes it to constitute a rejection of realist ontology and hence realism generally, by formulating time, space, existence and non-existence as “epistemologically conditioned” conceptual constructs. In Wynne’s view this does not lead the Buddha into some version of idealism, however. That would amount only to another form of cognitive conditioning:

For idealism is still an ontology of sorts, and indeed one that can only be imagined under particular cognitive conditions ... [T]he *Brahmajāla Sutta*’s philosophy of epistemological conditioning implies that reality is ultimately ineffable, as is the state of the person who realises it by escaping his cognitive conditioning.

Wynne finds corroborating evidence for a generalized anti-realism in the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*, in the famous passage where, as Wynne puts it, “the ‘end of the world’ is to be found in consciousness”:

Consciousness, which is intransitive, infinite and luminous all round,

Here water, earth, fire and wind do not stand firm.

Here the great and small, the minute and gross, the attractive and unattractive,

Here name and form cease without remainder.

With the cessation of consciousness, this [i.e. name and form] ceases.¹⁷

This implies that the five *khandas* of name and form are directly dependent upon our conceptual apparatus for their existence as separate, identifiable entities.

Wynne finds further evidence for this view in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, where the Buddha tells his *bhikkhus* that the gods “cannot establish the location of the Tathāgata’s consciousness.”¹⁸ Wynne (2015: 62) explains,

Since this vital aspect of cognitive conditioning [a liberated person’s transitive consciousness (*viññāṇa*)] — and thus the mental construction of space-time — is not part of the awakened experience, it follows that a liberated being cannot be spatially located, even if he somehow remains mindful and fully aware.

The problem may be that for the Buddha all consciousness was necessarily transitive.¹⁹ Hence one might say that any sort of consciousness that were not transitive would ipso facto be ineffable.

Another look at the suttas

Wynne’s take on the *dhamma* is perhaps an extreme version of Buddhist anti-realism, however as we have seen it has support from interpretations of the early *suttas*. Most prominently these involve the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, however the anti-realism found there becomes more plausible when interpreted in the light of similar anti-realist passages in the *Kevaṭṭa* and *Alagaddūpama Suttas*, and given a particular understanding of the *Brahmajāla*. While there are a few other, similar passages elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*, these should suffice as a good base for investigation.

I. The Aṭṭhakavagga

Undoubtedly an early text, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* reads as though composed by a

¹⁷DN 11/I.223, in Wynne 2015: 30

¹⁸MN 22.36/I.140

¹⁹MN 38.8/I.259-260. Cf., “The Buddha is saying that consciousness is always consciousness of something.” Gombrich 2009: 120

teacher wearied of continual argument and dispute. This should not be surprising if we consider the environment in which it may have originated. Although the early period in the Buddha's teaching is not well documented, there can be no doubt that life for a young renunciant cannot have been particularly easy in ancient India. It was a time of great intellectual ferment, disagreement, and dispute.²⁰ Before the Buddha had assembled a sizable *saṅgha* he would have been one of the crowd, a likely target or mark for debate. While the *Nikāyas* preserve plenty of evidence of the Buddha's willingness to debate, one also senses that by the time the body of the *Nikāyas* had been composed, the *saṅgha* would have grown to a decent size. By then the Buddha was already a fully accomplished debater in his own right, and one who was looked upon with some regard even by his sometime opponents.²¹ And by that time those who wished to debate him would have had to do so on the Buddha's own terms. For example, Saccaka the son of Nigaṇṭha comes to the Buddha, into the Great Wood, to debate him in the Hall with the Peaked Roof.²² That is, Saccaka comes into the well-appointed territory of a respected sage, no doubt surrounded by many of the Buddha's own monks.

At the beginning of his career the Buddha could not have counted on such support, and one senses that a life of constant struggle to be heard above the crowd was at times wearying. This might have been the stage on which the Buddha composed his verses disdaining arguments and views.

It is important however not to take such verses out of context, even out of the context of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* itself. As Steven Collins (1982: 129) has said, "these poems represent the summation, in *Theravāda* literature, of the style of teaching which is concerned less with the content of views and theories than with the psychological state of those who hold them." The poems in this section of the *Sutta Nipāta* do, in fact, put forward any number of views, even while they disparage putting forward views.²³ For example, the Buddha describes Māgandiya's daughter as "full of urine and excrement" (*muttakarīsapuṇṇam*) in rejecting her hand in marriage. (Sn 835). He disdains calling people "fools"

²⁰E.g., Kapstein 2001: XVI

²¹E.g., by the Brahmins of Sālā, MN 60.2/I.401: "Now a good report of Master Gotama has been spread to this effect: ..." etc. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 506

²²MN 36.3/I.237

²³Cf. "[The *Aṭṭhakavagga* and the *Pārāyanavagga*] have struck many as sounding a silent teaching beyond words. However, these texts are explaining something very definite about views." Fuller 2012: 147

(*bāla*) for their beliefs while at the same time calling people “fools” for their beliefs. (Sn 887-893). He describes the path to *nibbāna*, through a practice of mindfulness, ethical behavior, and modesty. (Sn 915ff). He advises against violence, deceit, pride, and greed. (Sn 935ff). And so on. Insofar as there are apophatic passages within the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, they should be taken in this rather more cataphatic context.²⁴

As for the stanza from above in both Ronkin and Wynne (Sn 874), citing it in context illuminates the meaning. It appears at the culmination of the *Kalahavivāda Sutta*, which is a discussion about how to end disputes. The Buddha proposes an analytic formula similar to that of dependent origination:

disputes stem from our desire for this and that (*chanda*). Desire for this and that stems from the distinction between pleasant (*sāta*) and unpleasant (*asāta*). Pleasant and unpleasant arise from contact (*phassa*). And it proceeds:

‘Contact exists because the compound of mind and matter exists. The habit of grasping is based on wanting things. If there were no wanting, there would be no possessiveness. Similarly, without the element of form, of matter, there would be no contact.’ (Sn 872)

‘What pursuit leads a person to get rid of form? And how can suffering and pleasure cease to exist? That is what I want to know about.’²⁵ (Sn 873)

Now we come to the crux of the passage, which as we have seen Ronkin (and Wynne as well) translates in terms of “conceptualizing”.²⁶ The word at issue is “*saññā*”, which is one of the five aggregates often translated “perception”. Saddhatissa (1985: 102) translates the stanza with that term:

‘There is a state where form ceases to exist. ... It is a state without ordinary perception and without disordered perception and without no perception and without any annihilation of perception.

²⁴Here I am in agreement with Fuller (2012: 150) that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and the *Nikāyas* “both teach the same thing: a non-attached attitude through the cultivation of rightview.”

²⁵Saddhatissa 1985: 102

²⁶Wynne 2010: 162

It is perception, consciousness, that is the source of all the basic obstacles.’ (Sn 874).

Gomez (1976: 144) translates it in terms of “apperception”, which may be the more accurate if obscure concept. The point of the stanza is that our problem lies in how we perceive things in the light of previous experience, and in particular in the light of ignorance. This is a more conceptually mediated process than the bare, English word “perception” might suggest, and one that has connotations of naming or labeling, which is no doubt why Ronkin and Wynne chose to translate it in terms of “conceptualizing” rather than “perceiving”. But in reading it that way one may lose sight of the fact that this discussion echoes others within the Canon on the same topic of ending desire for sense objects.

The point of the *Kalahavivāda Sutta* is to end disputes by ending our grasping after pleasant and unpleasant forms. The *Nikāyas* present a well worked-out practice for ending grasping after pleasant and unpleasant forms: *jhānic* meditation, of which the fourth of the so called “formless” or “*arūpa*” *jhānas*, “neither perception nor non-perception” (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) fits particularly well.²⁷ It is a state one might say, using Sn 874’s formula, without ordinary *saññā*, without disordered *saññā*, without non-*saññā*, without annihilation of *saññā*. In this process, form ceases to exist for the meditator: any contact with form is broken. Being unaware of form, the meditator is no longer swayed by its pleasant and unpleasant aspects. Indeed, this is true for any perception whatever, since the state is one between perception and non-perception. Remaining unswayed, she does not dispute with the world.

If this is correct, and understanding *saññā* as referring to the fourth formless *jhāna* seems to fit Sn 874, then there is no need to interpret it as having any particular anti-realist connotation. It contains no repudiation of our conceptual apparatus, nor any claim about the subjectivity of material and mental things. It simply asserts that to escape dispute, one should engage in deep *jhāna* so as to overcome attachment to sense objects.

As an aside, assuming that the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is a particularly early text, this interpretation of the *Kalahavivāda Sutta* as privileging *jhānic* meditation lends support to Gombrich’s claim (1996: 96-134) that “insight worsted concentration in the Pāli Canon”. It might seem that the younger Buddha was perhaps still

²⁷I believe this interpretation is supported by the Mahaniddesa commentary. Viz., Thanissaro 2013

not so philosophically distant from his old guru Uddaka Rāmaputta as might otherwise have been expected.²⁸ Or perhaps not: at the end of the *Kalahavivāda*, the Buddha is pointedly elusive as to whether the state arrived at in Sn 874 is actually *nibbāna*.

Stanzas such as the two at the beginning of the *Purābheda Sutta* (Sn 849-851) are in a similar fashion more simply viewed as arguments against attachment to ideas of future and past rather than claims about the dependence of time upon our cognitive conditioning.²⁹ The above assertion in Sn 849 that the *arahant* is “immeasurable” (*nūpasamkheyyo*) in the present is one we will return to below.

II. The Alagaddūpama Sutta

This, one of the deepest and most rewarding *suttas* in the entire Canon, is also according to Gombrich (1996: 107) “one of the oldest”. As we saw with the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, it contains a complex blend of apparently apophatic and cataphatic teachings. The *sutta* begins with the Buddha’s scolding of the wayward monk, Ariṭṭha for his wrong view about sensual pleasures, and contains one of the Buddha’s best known parables, that of the raft, teaching us not to cling to the *dhamma* beyond its usefulness in crossing the stream of *saṃsāra*.³⁰

In the middle of the *sutta*, the Buddha gives a lengthy description of the *arahant*, which finishes with the rhetorical flourish mentioned above:

Bhikkhus, when the gods with Indra, with Brahmā and with Pajāpati seek a *bhikkhu* who is thus liberated in mind, they do not find [anything of which they could say]: ‘The consciousness of one thus gone is supported by this.’ Why is that? One thus gone, I say, is untraceable here and now.³¹

Much like the earlier passages we saw in the *Sutta Nipāta*, this passage is obscure and in need of exegesis. The point is that one who has attained *nibbāna* is “untraceable”, which Wynne (2015: 62) takes as an anti-realist claim that such a person has transcended “the mental construction of space-time”.

²⁸See e.g., Wynne 2007: 43

²⁹Indeed, it is not clear what such a claim could amount to, since cognitive conditioning itself is an essentially temporal process

³⁰It is a parable which also occurs in the *Sutta Nipāta*, at Sn 21

³¹MN 22.36/I.140. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 233

It may also be amenable to a different interpretation. Typically it is said that one escapes Māra through *jhānic* meditation.³² For example,

So too, bhikkhus, when, secluded from sensual pleasures ... a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the first jhāna ... on that occasion it occurs to the bhikkhu: ‘Now I am secure from danger and Māra cannot do anything to me.’ ...

When, with the complete surmounting of perceptions of forms, with the passing away of perceptions of sensory impingement, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, [perceiving] ‘space is infinite,’ a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the infinity of space, on that occasion he is called a bhikkhu who has blinded Māra, put out Māra’s eyes without a trace, and gone beyond sight of the Evil One.³³

And where is it that Māra and his following cannot go? Here, quite secluded from sensual pleasures ... a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first [second, etc.] jhāna ... This bhikkhu is said to have blindfolded Māra, to have become invisible to the evil one by depriving Māra’s eye of its opportunity.³⁴

The distinction between one in deep *jhāna* and one who has attained *nibbāna* is that the former is said to have blinded or blindfolded Māra, etc., and the latter is said to have blinded or blindfolded Māra, etc., and also to be “beyond attachment to the world”. But note that it is the same basic concept at work in both cases: one “blindfolds Māra” by being “secluded from sensual pleasures”. In that seclusion, one is also at least temporarily unattached to sense pleasures. The unbinding of *nibbāna* involves making this temporary state permanent. So the *arahant* is not merely temporarily devoid of sensual desire, but is permanently so. Thus to be visible to or discoverable by Māra is a metaphor for having an underlying tendency to sense attachment. This may be what the Buddha means with his obscure claim about being “untraceable” by the gods: he is beyond being located and tempted by their wiles.

³² E.g., Dhammapada 274-276

³³ AN 9.39/IV.434. Bodhi 2012: 1306

³⁴ MN 25.12-20/I.159-160. Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009: 250-252

This may also be the referent of the term that Wynne translates “immeasurable” (*nūpasamkheyyo*) in Sn 849, saying that the liberated sage is “immeasurable in the [present]”. Or, if that is the correct translation, it may refer to the “maker of measurement” (*pamānakarana*) in SN 41.7/IV.297: “Lust ... is a maker of measurement, hatred ... delusion ...” However the *Pali- English Dictionary* analyzes *nūpasamkheyyo* in terms of *na+upasankheyya*, or “unprepared, unproduced, uncontracted” in the present.³⁵ This is once again obscure, but arguably relates to the sage being unattached to anything in the present, or having no present states produced by greed, hatred, or ignorance.

Within the Buddha’s *dhamma*, *jhāna* acts as a key deterrent to sensual desire. At the Buddha’s first experience of *jhāna* as a young child he realized that it had “nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.”³⁶ Sense perceptions and sense pleasures are the domain of Māra, they are his “realm”, “domain”, “bait”, and “hunting ground”.³⁷ The metaphors are of a space of danger in which Māra has his home. This constitutes *samsāra*. To say that the Buddha is not localizable by the gods is at least to say that he does not dwell in that range. These metaphors may well have other connotations more directly associated with *anatta* or non-self. Those need not retain us here, since the point of this paper is to look into the Buddha’s realism or anti-realism generally. In so doing we may set aside the question as to whether the Buddha was an anti-realist when it came to the self in particular: this is a separate and perhaps less questionable thesis.³⁸

We should also say a word about the famous parable of the raft, since it may be taken in a similar anti-realist spirit to the sections of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* that pertain to views. While the raft is an apt illustration of the pitfalls of clinging to views, it does not therefore imply that there are no right and wrong views, nor that there are no true and false ones. After all, the raft parable occurs in the context of a *sutta* that begins with the Buddha castigating a wayward monk for wrong view, and includes parables illustrating the right and wrong way to grasp the *dhamma*.

³⁵Rhys Davids and Stede 1921: 147. “Vemajjhe” (“in the present”): 649

³⁶MN 36.32/I.246-7. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 340. Also see MN 13.32/I.90, 27.19/I.181

³⁷MN 106.2/II.262

³⁸Cf., “All such terms as soul, self, individual, etc., are mere conventional terms ... In due course this doctrine of essence-lessness came to be applied to everything, not just living beings, and Buddhism took an extreme nominalist position, ultimately to the point of paradox.” Gombrich 2006: 64

The *Alagaddūpama*'s cataphatic background may at times be lost in the glare of its most famous parable, but it is well to recall that one may believe a view true, or believe it skillful (*kusala*), without thereby clinging to it. Indeed, the Buddha tells us how within that very same *sutta*:

Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering. If others abuse, revile, scold, and harass the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no annoyance, bitterness, or dejection of the heart. And if others honour, respect, revere, and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no delight, joy, or elation of the heart.³⁹

In this paragraph we have the merging of a cataphatic teaching with the fruits of non-clinging to views. If we do not cling to views, we are not swayed by the worldly winds of debate, disagreement, and dispute. This demonstrates that we can hold views as truthful without thereby clinging to them; indeed, that is the very point of the teaching.⁴⁰

III. The Brahmajāla Sutta

At the end of the *Brahmajāla*, the sixty two wrong views listed are all said to be “the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving” (*taṇhāgatānaṃ paritasitavipphanditaṃ*). They are also labeled kinds of “feeling” (*vedayita*) with the formula, “that is only the feeling of those who do not know and do not see”.⁴¹ They are wrong view both in terms of their content and in terms of how they are held: due to craving. This *sutta* follows the same form as the *Kalahavivāda Sutta* that we saw before: it locates the key problem at contact (*phassa*). Contact conditions the feeling which constitutes each wrong view.

The *sutta* is directed at ending craving for views, following the formula of dependent origination; craving is responsible for producing all and only

³⁹MN 22.38/I.140. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 234

⁴⁰Cf., “The simile of the raft (M I 134-5) suggests that the teachings should not be grasped, not that the teachings are only of pragmatic value: the dhamma is both true and of value.” Fuller 2012: 19

⁴¹DN 1, I.40, Bodhi 2013

these views. “Outside of these there is none.”⁴² In a sense this can be seen as a meta-linguistic claim about the causes responsible for bringing about wrong or speculative views, particularly when we understand that right view does not arise in that fashion: right view is not similarly conditioned by craving.

I say this is similar to a meta-linguistic claim because the structure of dependent origination, which from an external perspective may be seen as a kind of ‘view’, is not seen as such from within the system. This may be because as Fuller (2012:157) says, “right view” involves a kind of “transcendence of views”, requiring a particular affective relation to truth claims, one that is without clinging. Nevertheless we can see that the *Brahmajāla* assumes the correctness of at least a certain portion of the formula of dependent origination insofar as it adverts to contact, feeling, and craving to explain the origin of speculative views. That is to say, the *Brahmajāla* cannot be a formula for an apophatic nor an anti-realist approach to the *dhamma* since it affirms this explicit process for the production of views.

As regards space and time, the *Brahmajāla* makes no positive claims outside of the formula of dependent origination; however since that formula is essentially diachronic, it requires at least that certain key concepts hold true: if contact conditions feeling, then there must be a before and an after, such that conditioning can take place. Further, if we are to take contact seriously, then there must be certain sense objects and sense bases in particular spatial relations, however that may be understood.

This raises the question as to a missing sixty third position, one that would not amount to another kind of “speculative view” but that would accurately describe the Buddha’s own metaphysical position. It is perhaps uncontroversial that a view which best describes the Buddha’s own does not appear among the sixty two: namely, a position based upon the three marks of existence, following the formula of dependent origination. I do not think that can have been an oversight. If the Buddha had wished to claim in the *Brahmajāla* that reality were ineffable, one would have expected him to include among the sixty two speculative views the very cataphatic position he appears to hold.

IV. The Kevaṭṭa (Kevaḍḍha) Sutta

The relevant portion of this *sutta* revolves around an unnamed monk who

⁴²DN 1, I.38

wants to know “where the four great elements cease without remainder.”⁴³ When the Buddha eventually answers this question, he does so in a particularly cryptic fashion, as we have seen above. The main thrust of his message to this monk appears to be that the cessation of the elements is achieved when we can achieve (as Ñāṇananda puts it)⁴⁴ “non-manifesting” or (as Wynne puts it) “non-transitive” consciousness. However consciousness for the Buddha was necessarily “manifesting” or “transitive”; it was always consciousness “of” something, due to contact with sense objects and sense bases. For there to be “non-transitive” consciousness is for consciousness to be stopped. And indeed that is what the Buddha says at the end of his cryptic utterance: “With the cessation of consciousness, this [i.e. name and form] ceases.” That is where the elements cease without remainder.

As we have seen in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, this appears to be a description of some form of *jhānic* state. Indeed, it is described as “luminous all round” (*sabbatopabham*); elsewhere in the *Nikāyas* luminosity of mind is associated with absence from defilements, and *jhāna* in particular.⁴⁵ Perhaps it refers to the state of “neither perception nor non-perception”, or even to the state of “cessation of perception and feeling” (*nirodha samāpatti*). In these states perception either becomes so refined as to be in a kind of liminal state, or it ceases altogether. There is no clear contact with sense objects, and no discursive consciousness whatsoever. Seen in this light, the passage does not set forth an anti-realist *dhamma*, but is instead an obscure and poetic description of certain *jhānic* states of consciousness surrounding the experience of *nibbāna*.

That works for the experience itself, but what of the claim that this cessation is “without remainder” (*aparisesa*)? What has ceased without remainder is not the “four great elements” themselves; those still exist for the Buddha after his attainment of *nibbāna* as much as they exist for the rest of us. What has changed is that he has extinguished “without remainder” attachment to those elements, and in particular the unskillful states associated with such attachment: greed, hatred, and ignorance.⁴⁶

⁴³D 11/I.215, Walshe 1987: 177

⁴⁴Ñāṇananda 1971: 61

⁴⁵AN 1.51-60/I.10-11

⁴⁶Cf., Madhupiṇḍika Sutta, MN 18.8/I.109-10

Realism in the Nikāyas

We have touched on the role of contact (*phassa*) within the exposition of *suttas* in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and elsewhere. Metaphysically, the concept of contact must be regarded as particularly interesting, since it involves three elements, only one of which is strictly mental. Contact is the meeting of sense object, sense base, and consciousness. In this formula, sense object and sense base appear to be external to, and hence distinct from, consciousness. If they were not, there could be no contact between them.

The formula therefore suggests, although it does not prove, that there may be objects external to consciousness: the reason we do not experience all perceptions at once is that certain sense objects are in contact with each sense base and sense consciousness, and other objects are not. The formula also seems to require a concept of spatial displacement so that sense objects may move into and out of contact with sense bases. As Gombrich (2009: 120) has put it, the Buddha's analysis and its implication that consciousness must always be of something outside of itself "separate[s] ontology from epistemology", in opposition to the Upaniṣadic doctrines of his day.

Although there is no detailed analysis of contact within the *Nikāyas*, the Buddha does provide an explanatory analogy:

Bhikkhus, just as heat is generated and fire is produced from the conjunction and friction of two fire-sticks, but when the sticks are separated and laid aside the resultant heat ceases and subsides; so too, these three feelings [pleasant, painful, neither-painful-nor-pleasant] are born of contact, rooted in contact, with contact as their source and condition. ... [W]ith the cessation of the appropriate contacts the corresponding feelings cease.⁴⁷

Contact is like the friction of fire sticks. The analogy is not perfect, in that it leaves out the role of consciousness; the friction appears to be between sense object and sense base alone. Nevertheless it suggests that even in the absence of contact there is some sense to be made of objectively existing material objects, in that they may be "separated and laid aside" when not in "conjunction and

⁴⁷SN 36.10/IV.215. Bodhi 2000: 1270. Also at SN 12.62/II.97, SN 48.39/V.212-213, MN 140.19/ III.242-243.

friction” with our sensory apparatus.

The notion that objects may exist separately even when we are not in perceptual conjunction with them may also be related to the contemplations of internal (*ajjhata*) and external (*bahiddhā*) body, element, and charnel ground contemplations in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Suttas*.⁴⁸ It is key to the awareness of non-self that one contemplate the various ways in which material form both internal and external to one’s body are identical in nature. While such contemplations could be restricted to those objects with which one was in direct sensory contact, there is no reason for believing such contact is necessary, nor that those objects were understood as mere aspects of one’s own phenomenal awareness. Indeed it is hard to see how one could contemplate one’s body as a mass of scattered bones in any way other than as an object separate from one’s perceptual apparatus.

This is not to say that such contemplations could not be modeled as (e.g.) examples of the perception of mental objects and nothing more; as simple exercises in imaginative construction. However insofar as they are supposed to be revelatory of the truth that “This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that,”⁴⁹ etc., they must be more than simply daydreams.

There is a sense in which the Buddha’s world was a “world of experience” in Sue Hamilton’s (2000: 109) phrase: our world exists and has its origin and cessation within “this fathom-long body”, focus of the Buddha’s ethical program.⁵⁰ One might say that the body is our domain, bait, and hunting ground. But note that the metaphor puts primacy on form: it is the body “endowed with perception and mind” that contains the world, rather than the mind “endowed with body” that does. While this claim echoes the Vedic notion of a correspondence between micro- and macrocosm, its oddity argues that perhaps it should not to be taken too literally.

Just as the Buddha analyzes the mind (not the self) into the five *khandas*, and lived experience into the formula of dependent origination, so too he analyzes form into the four elements. The flip side of analysis is reduction. Although Wynne (2010: 157ff; 2015: 85-6) locates “reductionistic realism” at a later

⁴⁸MN 10.5/1.56ff, DN 22.2/II.292ff. Cf.: “Practiced in this way, satipaṭṭhāna contemplation shifts towards an increasingly ‘objective’ and detached stance, from which the observed phenomena are experienced as such, independent of whether they occur in oneself or others.” Anālayo 2003: 98

⁴⁹MN 10.14-30/1.58-59

⁵⁰AN 4.45/II.48

stage than the Buddha,⁵¹ synchronic and diachronic analyses of all manner of causal processes is a hallmark of the Buddha's method throughout the *Nikāyas*. As we have seen, we even find analytic treatments of the origin of contention, quarreling, and violence within the *Aṭṭhakavagga* itself. Though the *Mahā-hatthipadopama Sutta* (MN 28) may be spoken by Sāriputta rather than the Buddha, the understanding of form in terms of the four elements is widespread in the *suttas*. We have seen it in the *Kevaṭṭa*'s cryptic search for where "water, earth, fire and wind do not stand firm". It appears in the *Brahmajāla*'s description of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*). We also see in the *Mahāgopālaka Sutta* (MN 33),

How has a bhikkhu no knowledge of form? Here a bhikkhu does not understand as it actually is thus: 'All material form of whatever kind consists of the four great elements and the material form derived from the four great elements.'⁵²

While it is possible to understand these elements merely as qualitative aspects of subjective experience, there is nothing in the *Nikāyas* that forces such an interpretation.

In the *Assutavā Sutta*, the Buddha makes an odd argument for taking the body rather than the mind as "self":

It would be better, bhikkhus, for the uninstructed worldling to take as self this body composed of the four great elements rather than the mind. For what reason? Because this body composed of the four great elements is seen standing for one year, for two years,

... for a hundred years, or even longer. But that which is called 'mind' and 'mentality' and 'consciousness' arises as one thing and ceases as another by day and by night.⁵³

⁵¹He suggests that this is particularly true of the analysis of form into the four elements, saying that the *Mahā-hatthipadopama Sutta* "considers the first aggregate of 'form' not as an aspect of experience, but rather in terms of the ontological factors of which it consists (the four material elements of earth, water, fire and wind)." Wynne 2015: 85

⁵²Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009: 313. (Also at AN 11.17/V.347). This passage is retained in the Chinese and Sanskrit redactions. See: Anālayo 2011: 216-7

⁵³SN 12.61/II.94-5. Bodhi 2000: 595

This is a remarkable passage. It is clear from the commentary that later exegetes had problems taking its claims of bodily persistence onboard.⁵⁴ This oddity makes it unlikely to have stemmed from a period heavily influenced by abhidhamma exegetics, and more likely to have been original to the Buddha.

It also makes the case that the text's author was not averse to considering form, as composed of the four great elements, to exist at least somewhat independently of our perceptions of it. The claim is that the body is more stable than the mind, since it may stand for a hundred years and yet the mind changes within a single day. The Buddha well knew that the body grows and changes regularly, that is hardly the point. If the body (or its elements) were understood solely as aspects of subjective experience, the body would not persist for as long as a few moments at a time: we see a hand out of the corner of an eye, then it moves behind a sleeve.

One can cram fourscore-year persistence into the procrustean bed of fleeting perception, but it makes better sense of the passage if we consider form to exist external to consciousness, changing slowly but constantly, rather than considering it to exist merely as an aspect of subjective experience.

There is a role for a basic realist ontology even within a generally empiricist picture of the world. W.V.O. Quine (1953:17) put it this way when discussing the advantages of talking in terms of external objects:

By bringing together scattered sense events and treating them as perceptions of one object, we reduce the complexity of our stream of experience to a manageable conceptual simplicity. ... [W]e associate an earlier and a later sensum with the same so-called penny, or with two different so-called pennies, in obedience to the demands of maximum simplicity in our total world-picture.

Quine is not the Buddha, but he helps illustrate the pitfalls of understanding the world solely in terms of subjective experience. It makes complexity out of simplicity, particularly when it comes to the appearance of persistence.

It may be said that the Buddha was talking only about uninstructed worldlings in the *Assutavā*, and that hence his claims bear no force with the wise. Yet the central portion of his claim is not stated with caveat: this body is seen standing for years. It may undergo constant change, indeed it must if we are to understand

⁵⁴Bodhi 2000: 770

anicca, but that change takes place before a background of rough constancy, a constancy that would be masked were we to consider the elements in fleetingly subjective terms alone.

Since we are considering the status of material objects in the Buddha's *dhamma*, it will also be instructive to consider the character of the Buddha's arguments against the thoroughgoing materialists of his day, in particular the hair-shirted ascetic Ajita Kesakambalī. The Buddha's epithets for his view did not have anything to do with the positing of material entities. Instead his view was termed either "annihilationism" (*ucchedavāda*) in the *Brahmajāla*, or "nihilism" (*natthikavāda*) in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*.

As one of the sixty two wrong views listed in the *Brahmajāla* (DN 1.3.10/I.34), Kesakambalī's annihilationism stems from the process of contact, feeling, and craving.⁵⁵ However the *Brahmajāla* itself contains no particular argument for why the view would involve craving, except the bare suggestion that annihilationism must involve a craving for annihilation of the self. This is an odd result, since ontologically speaking materialism appears not to require any kind of annihilation, although it is consistent with it.

It is in other texts such as the *Apaṇṇaka* and *Sandaka Suttas* (MN 60/I.400ff, MN 76/I.513ff) that we find arguments arrayed against this form of materialism.⁵⁶ Once again the arguments do not turn on Kesakambalī's ontology.⁵⁷ Indeed, much the opposite: they turn on his "nihilism":

There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and

⁵⁵Annihilationism in the *Brahmajāla* consists of seven alternatives (wrong views 51-57). However only view 51 corresponds to materialism

⁵⁶Neither of these suttas appears to have parallels within the Chinese Āgamas, although they do have fragmentary parallels in the Sanskrit. See Anālayo 2011: 339, 413. In addition to the *Brahmajāla*, Kesakambalī's annihilationist doctrine is expressed at DN 2.23/I.55, SN 24.5/III.206-7, SN 42.13/IV.348-351 (with a sketch of an argument akin to the *Apaṇṇaka*). Kesakambalī is also mentioned at MN 30.2/I.198, MN 36.48/I.250, MN 77.6/II.2, SN 3.1/I.68, and SN 44.9/IV.398, the last in a questionable context

⁵⁷They do turn to a certain extent on Kesakambalī's view of the self as made up of living matter, but that is something we can leave to one side in our investigation into the general question of realism and anti-realism

the other world. A person consists of the four great elements. ... Giving is a doctrine of fools. ... Fools and the wise are alike cut off and annihilated with the dissolution of the body; after death they do not exist.⁵⁸

“No this world” perhaps refers to the world of experience, which for the Buddha was gained through contact and conscious perception. Otherwise however the argument is ethical in character. (As it is in the *Apaṇṇaka*, but in more explicitly prudential terms). The argument appears to be that materialist wrong view implies ethical nihilism which leads to wrong intention (“giving is a doctrine of fools”), and eventually to bad rebirth.

We do not find any claim that Kesakambali’s view inappropriately requires belief in independently existing material things, nor any claim that his view would cause clinging to independently existing material things. While it is possible that the Buddha would have agreed that these were other problems with materialism, they do not appear to have been the primary concern in these texts. And perhaps this should not surprise us, since elsewhere we find the Buddha saying,

Bhikkhus, I do not dispute with the world; rather it is the world that disputes with me. ... Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And of that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists. ...

And what is it, bhikkhus, that the wise in the world agree upon as existing, of which I too say that it exists? Form that is impermanent, suffering and subject to change ... Feeling ... Perception ... Volitional formations ... Consciousness ...⁵⁹

This does not elucidate much about the ontological character of the *khandas*, and in particular the *khandā* of form, however it does help establish its bare existence, as versus a more anti- realist view of the *dhamma*. In other words, it sounds as though regarding the bare existence of form, the Buddha does

⁵⁸MN 76.7/1.515. Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 619

⁵⁹SN 22.94/III.138. Bodhi 2000: 949-950. This sutta is followed by the famous analogy of the lump of foam, which expresses much the same conclusion: the *khandas* are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change

not disagree with the annihilationist Ajita Kesakambalī. The claim is not that Kesakambalī is too profligate with his metaphysics (requiring separately existing material entities), but instead that he is too spare (not requiring minds, actions, *kamma*).

Interestingly, the Buddha appears to have held that annihilationism was “foremost” (*aggam*) among “outsider” (*bāhiraka*) views, “For it can be expected that one who holds such a view will not be unrepelled by existence and will not be repelled by the cessation of existence.”⁶⁰ Indeed, the Buddha’s peers seem at times to have believed that he himself was a kind of annihilationist.⁶¹

Perhaps the foregoing evidence goes some way towards establishing that the Buddha may not have been an anti-realist about material form, and *a fortiori* about the space and time that form inhabits. Indeed, the space element is, if rarely, added onto the list of *mahābhūtas*.⁶² These may be later, Abhidhamma-inspired interpolations, but since any conception of form requires a conception of space (form is at least extension into, or a shape carved out of, space), if it is an interpolation it is one that follows reasonably from previous *dhamma*.⁶³

Let us turn then to issues regarding semantic realism, which is separate from though related to ontological realism. One cannot avoid the fact that the Buddha’s paradigmatic statement of the *dhamma* was in terms of the Four Noble Truths, complete understanding of which constituted the Buddha’s attainment of *nibbāna*. Even if we do not believe that the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11/V.420ff) constitutes an accurate recounting of the Buddha’s first sermon, there is little doubt as to its status as a central exposition of the *dhamma*. So

⁶⁰AN 10.29.8/V.63, Bodhi 2012: 1383

⁶¹E.g., MN 22.20/I.136-7, MN 22.37/I.140, AN 8.11/IV.174, AN 8.12/IV.182

⁶²E.g., DN 33/III.247, MN 62.12/I.423, MN 140.8/III.239, SN 27.9/III.234. Apparently though only the first four are “mahābhūtas”; when the list is expanded to five or six they are “dhātus”. (Karunadasa 1967: 16)

⁶³It is not entirely clear how space (*ākāsa*) is defined in the Nikāyas. Perhaps the clearest definition is found at MN 62.12/I.423, as apertures, gaps, or holes in the body, although this passage is not found in the Āgama version. (Anālayo 2011: 348). It also plays a role related to lack of material obstruction in the first immaterial *jhāna*.

Significantly later, the *Visuddhimagga* provides a definition similar to that of a field of extension: “The space element has the characteristic of delimiting matter. Its function is to display the boundaries of matter. It is manifested as the confines of matter; or it is manifested as untouchedness, as the state of gaps and apertures. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited. And it is on account of it that one can say of material things delimited that ‘this is above, below, and around, that’.” (XIV.63). Nāṇamoli 1999: 448

while the precise definition of “Right View” in terms of the Four Noble Truths is recorded as stemming from Sāriputta (MN 9/I.46ff) rather than the Buddha himself, nevertheless this definition is in the spirit of the Buddha’s teaching elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*. Although I think Fuller’s claim that Right View is non-propositional is correct (Right View essentially involves non-attachment to all views), nevertheless it can be said to have propositional *content*, at the very least from an external perspective: its content is constituted by the Four Noble Truths.⁶⁴

There are other truth-claims the Buddha makes that are of similar importance, such as that reality should be seen according to the three marks of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta* (*tilakkhana*), and that beings undergo causal transformations according to the formula of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Both of these are said to hold whether or not there is a Tathāgata, and to which he “awakens and breaks through” (*abhisambujjhati abhisameti*) or which a noble disciple “has clearly seen with correct wisdom as it really is” (*yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya sudiṭṭha*).⁶⁵ These are skillful ways of looking at the world, but they are not *merely* skillful. As Paul Williams has said,

The teachings of the Buddha are held by the Buddhist tradition to *work* because they are factually *true* (not true because they work). ... The ‘ought’ (pragmatic benefit) is never cut adrift from the ‘is’ (cognitive factual truth). Otherwise it would follow that the Buddha might be able to benefit beings (and thus bring them to enlightenment) even without seeing things the way they really are at all. And that is not Buddhism.⁶⁶

It is not clear that this is compatible with a semantically anti-realist take on the *dhamma*. If our conceptual apparatus has no purchase on the way things really are, if reality correctly understood is simply ineffable, this calls into question the status of these conceptual and linguistic expressions as “factually true”.

It may be said in response that the Buddha’s realism in this regard is only contextual or pragmatic: that the semantic and ontological claims apparent in

⁶⁴E.g., “When right-view abandons wrong-view craving and greed are abandoned. It is the opposite to craving, not a correct proposition. Right-view is not essentially a type of knowledge, but a way of seeing that is free from defilement.” Fuller 2012: 116-7

⁶⁵ETilakkhana: AN 3.134/I.286. Paṭiccasamuppāda: SN 12.20/II.25-27. Bodhi 2000, Bodhi 2012

⁶⁶His emphasis. Williams, Tribe, and Wynne 2012: 28-9

the *Nikāyas* are only made in the service of ridding oneself of *dukkha*, and that separate from that purpose the Buddha makes no such claims at all. That may be, however to my knowledge the Buddha never explicitly deals with this metaphysical question, perhaps because it did not occur to him, perhaps because he did not believe it worthwhile. We are therefore left with little more than informed speculation. I would suggest however that his usage of expressions such as “*yathābhūtam*” (“as it really is”) mitigate against such an interpretation. He does not, for example, say that the noble disciple “has clearly seen with correct wisdom as is most skillful”, although most skillful such seeing would be.

It is banal to say that language cannot entirely encompass reality or our experience thereof. Someone with normal vision cannot completely describe what it is like to see a particular color to one who is colorblind, in the sense of being able to elicit the same qualitative experience in them that one has oneself.⁶⁷ Similarly, the Buddha realized that any merely conceptual understanding of the *dhamma* was insufficient to bring *nibbāna*. Instead he saw the process along the path as akin to physical training. When learning a sport or game, one typically takes verbal instruction first, but that is insufficient to learn properly how to play. Note that this does not imply that the verbal instruction is useless, nor that it is necessarily inaccurate. Instruction may be both useful and accurate, and yet in order to become proficient we must turn concepts and words into effortless and unselfconscious behavior.

We find a description of the path in very similar terms in the *Bhaddāli Sutta* (MN 65/I.437ff), where the Buddha compares a monk in training to a thoroughbred colt, who through guidance, repetition, and practice learns the skills necessary for the king’s service. In the *Gaṇakamoggallāna Sutta* (MN 107/III.1ff), he compares his instruction method to showing someone the road to Rājagaha. When his method works, it works because “Rājagaha exists and the path to Rājagaha exists”, and because his instruction was understood and followed correctly. When his method does not work, it is because the person “would take a wrong road”,⁶⁸ that is, misunderstand the instruction or follow it improperly.

As we have noted, Fuller (2012: 107) claims that Right View is non-propositional, in the sense that it is not another kind of view, but it is rather “that aspect of *paññā* that realises non-attachment from all cognitive acts.”

⁶⁷E.g., Jackson 1982

⁶⁸MN 107.14/III.5. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009: 878

That said, Right View *has propositional content*; it is simply that in order to be called “Right View” that content itself must be held with a particular mental attitude, one of non-attachment. This is a reasonable analysis of Right View in the *Nikāyas*, or at least a reasonable analysis of how an advanced practitioner would understand Right View, but not one that would support a semantically anti-realist interpretation of the *dhamma*.

Was the Buddha a realist?

Now that we have gone some way towards undermining the thesis that the Buddha was an anti-realist, it will be beneficial to turn to the alternative thesis, which is that the Buddha was a realist, either in the ontological sense (that he taught that there exist separate things that are not entirely constituted by nor wholly dependent upon the mind⁶⁹) or in the semantic sense (that he taught that sentences and propositions are true objectively, and not solely because of convention or opinion).

Of the two, it is easier to support his acceptance of something akin to semantic realism. Indeed, the Buddha famously believed that conventional opinion about certain words was wrong, in particular words involving the self, which he called “mere names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them.”⁷⁰ One might think that this would make him a kind of semantic anti-realist, however the better argument is on the other side: the fact that he did not extend this analysis to the rest of language, even though he was perfectly capable of doing so, gives some reason to take him as something of a semantic realist. He was not a *naïve*

⁶⁹Given the formula of dependent origination, form is causally dependent upon consciousness in some sense; the question is precisely what sense that is. This is explained as a result of prior-life consciousness causing the arising of name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*) in the new zygote through the *gandhabba*. E.g., MN 38.26/I.265-266, MN 93.18/II.157, DN 15/II.63-4. For more on the role of the *gandhabba* see Anālayo 2011: 254n243.

The process may indeed have Vedic connotations as Jurewicz (2000) has argued, however that does not demonstrate that it is anti-realist. As outlined in DN 15/II.63-4 the process is strictly causal and does not (e.g.) imply that form (*rūpa*) depends continually for its existence upon conscious attention. Rather the passage describes the growth and development of a particular individual (*nāmarūpa*) as dependent upon their remaining conscious

⁷⁰DN 9.53/I.202. Walshe 1987: 169. See also SN 1.25/I.14

semantic realist in the sense that the Vedic Brahmins were: the fact that this sound referred to that part of the world was a matter of sheer convention for the Buddha.⁷¹ But once the basic phonetic conventions were in place, the Buddha did not seem to have any problem with reference. As we have already seen, the Buddha unproblematically asserted the existence of the five *khandas*, so long as they were correctly understood to be “impermanent, suffering, and subject to change.” He did not, for example, say that words referring to them were “mere names”. And then there are the Four Noble Truths themselves, understood by very few and paradigmatically beyond mere convention or opinion: they express reality “as it really is” (*yathābhūtaṃ*).⁷²

Although the Buddha did elaborate an ontology of sorts, involving the aggregates (*khandas*), elements (*mahābhūtas*), sense bases (*āyatanas*), and realms of existence (*lokas*), ontology was not the point of his teaching, except insofar as it did not include a notion of self.⁷³ As Gombrich (2009: 36) said, “there is no suggestion that within this classification (or others) the number of kinds of things is finite.” I would prefer to say that it is pragmatically unbounded. It really did not matter very much if one included space or consciousness as one of the elements; four or six *mahābhūtas* made no real difference to the *dhamma*. Similarly the Buddha elaborated longer or shorter lists of feelings (*vedanā*) in different *suttas*: this is something that he expressly acknowledges.⁷⁴

Further, his analysis of contact, and of the sense object in particular, is incomplete. As we have already discussed, the Buddha’s understanding of the roots of perception in contact gives some weight to the idea that there are objects external to consciousness, and hence independent of mind altogether: they are (or may include) the sense objects. While these objects are formally separate from consciousness, and interact with it by contact, nevertheless they are also spoken of as aspects of direct awareness. For example in the *Bāhiya Sutta* the Buddha tells Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth,

[Y]ou should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there

⁷¹ Thus the Buddha saw no problem in people studying the dhamma in their own language. E.g., Ñāṇananda 1971: 43-46, Gombrich 2009: 195-6

⁷² E.g., DN I.83-4, SN 56.22-24/V.432-434

⁷³ We may, following Gombrich (2009: 85) and Hamilton (2000: 186-7), wish to claim that certain of the realms of existence were a later ontological accretion. That does not dispute the basic point

⁷⁴ E.g., MN 59.5/I.397-8, SN 36.19-20/IV.224ff, SN 36.22/IV.231-2

will only be the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. ... [T]hen, Bāhiya,⁷⁵ you will not be ‘with that’ ... This, just this, is the end of suffering.

This is a training in undoing mental proliferation (*papañca*), which can perhaps be better seen in a more detailed presentation of the same material in the *Samyutta Nikāya*.⁷⁶ There a *sutta* makes plain the role those sense objects play in disturbing the mind with various defilements related to greed and hatred. This disturbance is proliferation.

Proliferation amounts to mental conditioning that goes on under conditions of ordinary perception, conditioning that constitutes misperception. There are typically said to be four kinds of misperception: taking the impermanent to be permanent, taking what is suffering to be pleasurable, taking what is non-self to be self, and taking what is unattractive to be attractive.⁷⁷ The question is how the mechanism of this misperception works in terms of contact and the sense object. In the case of the unattractive, the form itself is unattractive, and yet there is a perception — a misperception — of an attractive form. It seems as though there are two different perceptions going on at the same time, or perhaps two levels of perception, one manifest and the other merely potential. It is not entirely clear how this distinction can be made simply in terms of the single sense object making contact with the sense base and an apperceptive consciousness. It would seem we need some other ontological category, for example something like a ‘way of seeing’ or an ‘intension’.

To put it another way, if we take the sense object to be some real, external form, then perception of that form cannot simply involve taking the form itself onboard into consciousness. If it were, there would be no misperception. The same, in fact, is true if we take the sense object to be a phenomenal object with an actually unattractive character.

There are various potential moves that could be made in response, but to my knowledge this is not the kind of question well worked out in the *Nikāyas*. It is clear on the Buddha’s picture that perception is very often mistaken; in this sense our world is “conditioned” or “constructed” (*saṅkhata*) by our minds; the

⁷⁵Udāna 1.10. Ireland 2010

⁷⁶SN 35.95/IV.72ff. Thanks to Jayarava Attwood for noting the parallel

⁷⁷E.g., AN 4.49/II.52

Buddha certainly was no *naïve* realist.⁷⁸ The anti-realist view is that this error runs so deep that literally nothing can be recovered: all perception is radically misleading. But to counter this it seems we can point to the many statements within the *Nikāyas* that explain precisely the mistakes we make, and describe what is involved in correct perception. For example, correct perception is to see the world as manifesting the three marks of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. One is able to see clearly, and to see clearly a world that is amenable to accurate, if incomplete, description.

That said, it is probably correct to claim, as Gombrich (2009: 134) does, that the Buddha “had no interest in the world as such”; in looking to refine perception he was not after anything like a kind of Vedic correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. Ontology or metaphysics for its own sake, by which we may understand grand theories of universal origination or grounding, were not his game at all. What he cared about was our experienced reality, how it led to *dukkha*, and how that *dukkha* could be overcome.

It is not only the case that the Buddha’s metaphysical picture was incomplete (any theoretical construct must reach an end somewhere), but rather that it was intentionally so.⁷⁹ Justin Whitaker and I have argued that the Buddha’s philosophical approach was first and foremost ethical, in the sense of illustrating the best sort of life to live.⁸⁰ While this theoretical approach did require (as one might put it) the internal mechanics that only metaphysics can provide, the point wasn’t the engine, it was the destination.

There is an important difference between being a pragmatic non-foundationalist and being an anti-realist. (I do not say the Buddha was an anti-foundationalist; I believe the program simply did not interest him). A pragmatic non-foundationalist will decide to leave the metaphysics inchoate, with things dangling out the ends, because the point isn’t to search for logical or rational

⁷⁸E.g., SN 22.79/III.87. This conditioning through ignorance is opposed to “seeing things as they really are” (*yathābhūta*). In a sense the entire *samsāric* world is conditioned. The question is precisely the nature of this conditioning, and if it nevertheless allows of an accurate, objective description of a world separate from (if interdependent with) subjectivity. The possibility of “seeing things as they really are” suggests accuracy may be achievable

⁷⁹Cf., “In my view, he did not see an object like a stone or a table as changing from moment to moment Nor did he hold the opposite view. Such an analysis of the world outside our minds was to him irrelevant and a mere distraction from what should be commanding our attention, namely, escape from *samsāra*.” Gombrich 2009: 67

⁸⁰Smith and Whitaker (Forthcoming)

foundations. Those may be of interest to the logician, or to philosophers of a certain rationalist stripe, but they are not essential to the ethical path that the Buddha saw as of paramount importance. Nevertheless a pragmatic non-foundationalist may admit that his system will allow of reasonable sharpening: if six elements works better than four, then go with six. An anti-realist may be opposed to such monkeying, since it simply substitutes illusion for illusion.

I also think seeing the Buddha as a pragmatic non- foundationalist with an incomplete or inchoate metaphysics may make better sense of later developments within Buddhist philosophy than viewing him as an anti-realist. On the former view, what had originally been left inchoate was reasonably sharpened in one direction by the ābhidhammikas, perhaps even beginning with Sāriputta himself. Later on this sharpening was rejected by philosophers like Nāgārjuna, perhaps aware that certain earlier sharpenings were not entirely in the spirit of the ethical pragmatism of the original teaching. They instead decided to sharpen the theory in another direction, taking inspiration from the apparently apophatic strands within the *Nikāyas*.

On the latter view, Sāriputta and the ābhidhammikas, great thinkers in their own right, and historically very close to the Buddha, were quite radically wrong about his teachings, in a way not understood until centuries later by thinkers like Nāgārjuna. While this latter view is certainly possible, I think on balance it is unlikely.

Indeed, the turn towards foundationalism was a general feature of all or nearly all later Buddhist philosophy. By “foundationalism” I mean an attempt rigorously to demonstrate the limit, source, or ground of thought or reality. Foundationalism is a project of great interest to scholars and philosophers, among whom were many in the Abhidhamma and Madhyamaka, although one may debate whether any of it is entirely in the spirit of the earliest tradition.

Conclusion

First and foremost the Buddha propounded an ethics to be acted upon in the world: “both formerly and now what I teach is *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*.” This involved a global attitude of non-attachment to all things, including our own views and opinions. In many texts he prescribed a practice of deep mental absorption, including the attainment of the formless *jhānas*, as a method for ridding ourselves of attachment to sense objects, and thereby for attaining final release into *nibbāna*. In particular he promoted this practice in the

Aṭṭhakavagga as a way to escape the dangers of hatred and violence occasioned by argument, quarrel, and debate. The text was perhaps composed around the time that the Buddha himself was contending with his own fierce intellectual competitors.

The *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Brahmajāla* both make incisive use of the concept of “contact” (*phassa*) to explain the arising of greed, hatred, and wrong views. “Contact” is a paradigmatically realist concept, since it involves an interaction between separable mental and physical things. Although contact is not given any detailed analysis within the *Nikāyas*, it is analogized as friction between fire sticks which may be separated and laid aside, suggesting some modicum of ontological independence for the components involved.

While in a sense all of reality is interconnected for the Buddha through the formula of dependent origination, interdependence is not in itself an argument for ontological anti-realism. Interdependence requires plural objects to interrelate: there is no contradiction in mutually interdependent objects being separate. Or put more simply, it takes two to tango.

We have seen that there is no particular reason to interpret key phrases or stanzas in the *Nikāyas* as anti-realist; indeed, to do so would take them out of a generally cataphatic context, as for example we saw in the case of the *Kalahavivāda Sutta*. Although taken in isolation they admit of apophatic or anti-realist readings, taken in context they do not. Instead they consistently argue for a complex causal picture explaining the arising of unskillful views and actions, and for an attitude of modesty and non-attachment in response. Non-attachment to views is not the same as having no views. Instead it is an affective attitude towards views as being “not I, not mine, not myself”, and hence an imperturbability in the face of the worldly winds of praise and blame.

We have also taken a quick look at Ronkin’s understanding of the Buddha as opposed to a substantialist form of realism. While the Buddha did not believe in substances as fully independent, changeless entities, that is only one form of realism. Ronkin’s anti-realist claims for the Buddha would not touch a form of realism involving causally interdependent events, nor a realist ontology derived from our best empirical theories of the world. Either of these is arguably a better rough fit for the Buddha’s own view than is Aristotelian substance theory.

In contrast to these anti-realist claims we have looked at some passages and features of the *dhmma* that seem to argue for a realist ontology and semantics, such as the claim that form tends to last longer than other aggregates, perhaps even years or decades. We have seen that although the Buddha disagreed with

materialist philosophers of his age, his disagreement appears to have been ethical in character rather than ontological. We have seen that insofar as his disagreement was ontological, his argument was for a fuller ontology rather than an emptier. This raises the possibility that the Buddha was not as averse to a realist ontology as is sometimes assumed.

Finally we have argued that the Buddha's attitude should be seen as in favor of a realist semantics allied to a kind of inchoate metaphysics rather than as one that was anti-realist. However this still leaves open the question as to whether that inchoate metaphysics was a version of inchoate *realism*, or whether it was left entirely open to either interpretation. Here I tend to follow Gombrich (2009: 197):

[T]he Buddha's theory of cognition does not settle the issue between realism and idealism, and indeed can be interpreted either way, that is only true when the theory is taken in isolation, ignoring the Buddha's soteriology — which for him is what really mattered! He would have agreed with modern psychologists in declining to accept idealism: there really is a world out there, even if we cannot know it precisely.

In this sense the Buddha could correctly be described as an *inchoate realist*, although with the caveat that that is a label he might not have accepted, for the simple reason that he might have viewed the distinction between realism and anti-realism as entirely theoretical, hence beside the point.

By throwing into doubt the existence of the external world, and even the existence of other minds, idealism and anti-realism complicate our attitude towards all that arises within consciousness. Hamilton (2000: 184-6) expressed well and at some length the problem of solipsism that dogs any subjectivist view of reality. As she notes, the farthest thing from the Buddha's mind was solipsism. Indeed we might say his entire public career was based upon an assumption of solipsism's falsity, or perhaps the simple failure to countenance it as a live possibility:

[O]ut of compassion for beings I surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and hard to teach, and some who dwelt seeing fear and blame in the other

world.⁸¹

“Compassion for beings” is an externally oriented, cognitive affect, as are the claims about those same beings caught within saṃsāra. While later philosophers have come up with sophisticated systems to model such externally directed cognitive states solely as subjective aspects of experience, or as mere aspects of a conventional reality, I do not believe that the Nikāyas support such a view.

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