Early Buddhist Teaching as Proto-śūnyavāda

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This article argues that the search for a metaphysical foundation to early Buddhist thought is futile. For if the world of experience is a cognitive construction, as implied in a number of early discourses, it follows that thought cannot transcend its limits, and cannot attain an objective picture of reality. Despite this sceptical anti-realism, the Buddha's focus on the causes of suffering also suggests that phenomena – although constructed and ultimately unreal – follow a regular order, and so are in some sense objectively real. Two orientations to the Buddha's Dhamma can thus be identified, 'anti-realism' and 'constructed realism', which are roughly equivalent to what the canonical teachings term 'no view' and 'correct view'.

1. In the ninth chapter of the *Perfection of Understanding in Eight Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*), the Buddha warns the Bodhisattva Subhūti of the dangers which face the exponents of emptiness:

> Well now, Subhūti, many obstacles will arise when this profound perfection of understanding is written down, expounded, learnt by heart, preached, mastered, disseminated, taught, instructed, and recited. Why is that? It is just so, Subhūti, that very precious jewels incite many enemies, the enemies being even more terrible according to the quality (of the jewel). And this precious jewel is unsurpassed

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> in the entire world, that is to say the perfection of understanding, which is put into practice for the benefit and happiness of the world, and which is established for the non-arising, non-cessation and non-defilement of all *dharma*s, because of their non-destruction.[1]

This short statement suggests that the problem with the perfection of understanding is not merely, or really, the contentious claim that it is the authentic teaching of the Buddha, but rather the fear generated by its core idea, that phenomena (*dharma*s) are not ultimately real since they are 'empty' (*śūnya*) of their 'own-being' (*sva-bhāva*). A similar warning is voiced in chapter IV of the *Ratnāvalī*, when after a series of typical Madhyamaka-style negations, the text describes the Bodhisattva's critics as follows:

> The Bodhisattva with this understanding is considered bound for complete awakening, although out of sheer compassion he continues in existence until then (66). The Tathāgatas have taught the Mahāyāna requisites of the Bodhisattva, but just these are reviled by those who are deluded and full of hate (67). The one who reviles the Mahāyāna is either unaware of what is virtue and what is vice, or regards virtue as vice, or simply hates virtue (68). Since they know that a person who harms another is full of vice, whereas the one who acts kindly towards another is full of virtue, the reviler of the Mahāyāna is said to hate virtue (69).[2]

Since the term 'requisite(s)' must refer to the dyad of compassion and wisdom, and occurs immediately after typical teachings on emptiness, this passage would seem to refer to the critics of the *śūnya-vāda*, and not just those opposed to the

[1] Aṣṭasāhasrikā IX (Vaidya 1960: 101): *api tu khalu punaḥ subhūte bahavo 'ntarāyā bhaviṣyanti asyā gambhīrāyāḥ prajñāpāramitāyā likhyamānāyā udgṛhyamāṇāyā dhāryamāṇāyā vācyamānāyāḥ paryavāpyamānāyāḥ pravartyamānāyā upadiśyamānāyā uddiśyamānāyāḥ svādhyāyyamānāyāḥ. tat kasya hetoḥ? tathā hi subhūte bahupratyarthikāni mahāratnāni bhavanti, yathāsāraṃ ca gurutarapratyarthikāni bhavanti. anuttaraṃ cedaṃ subhūte mahāratnaṃ lokasya yaduta prajñāpāramitā hitāya sukhāya pratipannā lokasya, sarvadharmāṇām anutpādāyānirodh āyāsaṃkleśāyāvināśayogena pratyupasthitā*.

[2] Rat IV.66-69 (Tucci 1936: 250): *bodhisattvo 'pi dṛṣṭvaivaṃ sambodhau niyato mataḥ, kevalaṃ tv asya kāruṇyād ābodher bhavasaṃtatiḥ* (66). *bodhisattvasya saṃbhāro mahāyāne tathāgataiḥ, nirdiṣṭaḥ sa tu sammūḍhaiḥ pradviṣṭaiś caiva nindyate* (67). *guṇadoṣānabhijño vā doṣasaṃjñī guṇeṣu vā, athavāpi guṇadveṣī mahāyānasya nindakaḥ* (68). *paropaghātino doṣān parānugrahiṇo guṇān, jñātvocyate guṇadveṣī mahāyānasya nindakaḥ* (69).

Bodhisattva ideal. Indeed, the text goes on to note the inability of these critics to comprehend the Mahāyāna path of merit and understanding,[3] and seems to state that these critics misconceive emptiness as nihilism,[4] an accusation also recognised – and refuted – in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*.[5] But if the critics of the *śūnya-vāda* were disquieted by its entirely negative dialectic, so too it would seem were the *śūnyavādin*s themselves, at least in the early steps of mastering the teaching. The *prajñā-pāramitā* corpus often describes the fear faced by those who encounter teaching of emtpiness, for example a short statement near the beginning of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, where Subhūti points out the lack of both an

[3]Rat IV.83 (Tucci 1936: 251): *puṇyajñānamayo yatra buddhair bodher mahāpathaḥ, deśitas tan mahāyānam ajñānād vai na dṛśyate*.

'Within the (Buddha-vacana), the great path to awakening, consisting of merit and knowledge, has been taught by the Buddhas, but this great way is not seen because of sheer ignorance.'

[4] See Rat IV.86-87 (Tucci 1936: 251): *anutpādo mahāyāne pareṣāṃ śūnyātā kṣayaḥ, kṣayānutpādāyoś caikyam arthataḥ kṣamyatāṃ yataḥ* (86). *śūnyatābuddhamāhātmyam evaṃ yuktyānupaśyatāṃ, mahāyānetaroktāni na sameyuḥ kathaṃ satāṃ* (87).

'Non-arising in the Mahāyāna, for others is emptiness, annihilation. But since the ultimate unity of annihilation and non-arising must be accepted, the great eulogy of the Buddha(s) must also be seen thus, correctly, in terms of emptiness. So how come the various statements of the Mahāyāna not accepted by the good?'

[5]See MMK XXIV.16-17. There is not sufficient space to consider in detail the contentious issue of whether the author of the Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā also authored the Ratnāvalī, but Walser's conclusion on the matter seems to be rather optimistic (2005: 278): 'Overall, then, the evidence supporting Nāgārjuna's authorship of the Ratnāvalī is strong. It is ascribed to Nāgārjuna by multiple sources beginning in the sixth century and shows an affinity for common Mādhyamika doctrine. Finally, the Ratnāvalī contains many of the peculiar stylistic elements found in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā that are not found in other authors of the early Mādhyamika school, such as Āryadeva, Buddhapālita, and the author of the Akutobhayā.'

In fact Walser's discussion shows that Candrakīrti, Haribhadra, Śāntarakṣita and Prajñākaramati all cite the Ratnāvalī without attributing it to Nāgārjuna (Walser, 2005: 278), and that stylistic correspondences between the Ratnāvalī and MMK are limited. Moreover, Walser does not consider the very important didactic difference that the overt Mahāyāna agenda of the Ratnāvalī is completely absent from the more conservative Sūtra-based approach of the MMK. It is partly true that both the Ratnāvalī and MMK refer to the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta (Walser 2005: 274). But this correspondence is more limited than Walser claims: although Rat I.38/46 refer to this discourse, Rat I. 42/71 do not, suggesting the more likely scenario that the Ratnāvalī expands upon the MMK's use of this Sutta, rather than the Sutta itself. It also goes without saying that the argument that Āryadeva et al. are less likely authors of the Ratnāvalī than Nāgārjuna is an argument from silence that proves little. If these sceptical remarks are closer to the truth than Walser's analysis, Nāgārjuna would have to be dated slightly earlier than the late 2nd century AD date assigned to the Ratnāvalī by Walser (2005). Schopen (2005: 7ff), in his typical, hectoring, fashion, makes rather a lot out of the problem of the Ratnāvalī's authorship without saying anything useful.

essential subject and the liberated goal (as ultimately real 'things', *dharmas*):

> Not finding, perceiving or seeing the Bodhisattva or his *dharma*, Blessed one, or even the perfection of understanding, what Bodhisattva and with regard to what perfection of understanding shall I instruct or teach? But if, Blessed One, while it is being spoken, pointed out and instructed thus, a Bodhisattva's heart does not sink or slump, does not become dejected or despondent, if his mind does not become disaffected or shattered, if he does not tremble, quiver or shake, this very Bodhisattva, great in essence, is fit to be be instructed in the perfection of understanding.[6]

The unease caused by the teaching of emptiness, recognised even within the community of *śūnyavādin*s, arises from its emphatic negation and almost complete avoidance of positive religious language; the complete denial of conventional reality (*saṃvṛtti-satya*) is generally not complemented by more positive definitions of ultimate truth or reality (*paramārtha-satya*). This negative approach is based on the idea that the entire content of consciousness – including basic structural aspects such as personal identity, existence and non-existence – are constructs which lack any essential reality outside a person's thoughts. Thus the teaching of emptiness was not exactly for the philosophically lighthearted members of the Buddhist community in India, and was viewed even less charitably by those outside the Buddhist fold. Śaṅkara, for example, in his commentaries on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and *Brahma Sūtra*, while happy enough to engage with various sorts of Buddhist realism and idealism, on the assumption that he can disprove their heretical ideas, is at something of a loss when it comes to the doctrine of emptiness, at which he can hardly hide his disgust:

> But the position of those who advocate emptiness is contradicted by all valid means of acquiring knowledge. Hence no care has been

[6]Aṣṭa (Vaidya 1960: 3): *so 'haṃ bhagavan bodhisattvaṃ vā bodhisattvadharmaṃ vā avindan anupalabhamāno 'samanupaśyan, prajñāpāramitām apy avindan anupalabhamāno 'samanupaśyan, katamaṃ bodhisattvaṃ katamasyāṃ prajñāpāramitāyām avavadiṣyāmi anuśāsiṣyāmi? api tu khalu punarbhagavan saced evaṃ bhāṣyamāṇe deśyamāne upadiśyamāne bodhisattvasya cittaṃ nāvalīyate na saṃlīyate na viṣīdati na viṣādamāpadyate, nāsya vipṛṣṭhībhavati mānasam na bhagnapṛṣṭhībhavati, notrasyati na saṃtrasyati na saṃtrāsam āpadyate, eṣa eva bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ prajñāpāramitāyām anuśāsanīyaḥ.*

> taken to refute it. Worldly usage, accepted in all valid means of acquiring knowledge, cannot possibly be denied without coming upon another truth, for the absence of the exception only proves the general rule.[7]

Quite apart from the debate between Buddhists and Brahmins over the existence or reality of the self (*ātman*), in this citation Śaṅkara seems to be more troubled by the *prāsaṅgika* method of negation, and the unsettling conclusion to which this leads – that metaphysical statements of truth are ultimately impossible. But in this respect, neither Śaṅkara nor the opponents of the *prajñā-pāramitā* were the first to object to a via negativa Buddhist dialectic.

2. In a number of Pali discourses the Buddha is accused of being a nihilist (*uccheda-vādo*, *venayiko*), without the reason for the accusation being made clear, and the Buddha's usual response – of adapting his critics' language of nihilism to his ethical ideals – does not help us understand what their problem was. Saying something like 'I am a nihilist in the sense of advocating the dispelling (*uccheda*, *vinaya*) of passion, hatred and delusion' does not explain the initial accusation.[8] While it might be assumed that it had something to do with the denial of self, when the Buddha reveals the content of his opponents' critique – in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* – he makes no mention of the *anātman* teaching, and instead focuses on the ineffability of the liberated person:

> In this very life, *bhikkhu*s, I say that the Tathāgata is untraceable (*ananuvijjo*). Speaking and explaining thus, *bhikkhu*s, some ascetics and Brahmins accuse me falsely, vainly, incorrectly and without foundation: 'The ascetic Gotama is a nihilist (*venayiko*) who proclaims the cutting off, annihilation and non-existence of an existent being'. Although I am not, *bhikkhu*s, and do not speak thus, even so those venerable ascetics and Brahmins accuse me falsely, vainly, incorrectly and without foundation: 'The ascetic

[7]Brahmasūtrabhāṣya II.2.31 (Bākre: 479): *śūnyavādipakṣas tu sarvapramāṇavipratiṣiddha iti tannirākaraṇāya nādaraḥ kriyate. na hy ayaṃ sarvapramāṇasiddho lokavyāvahāro 'nyattattvam anadhigamya śakyate 'pahnotum apavādābhāve utsargaprasiddheḥ*. The same text (up to … *kriyate*) is repeated at the end of section IV.3.7 of Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*. On the general content of this passage, which includes a number of arguments against Buddhist schools, see Ingalls (1954: 302-03).

[8]Vin I.235, III.2-3; AN IV.174-75, IV.183.

> Gotama is a nihilist who proclaims the cutting off, annihilation and non-existence of an existent being'. Both formerly and now, *bhikkhu*s, I only proclaim suffering and its cessation. If, therein, *bhikkhu*s, others abuse, revile, offend and harass the Tathāgata, therein, *bhikkhu*s, for the Tathāgata there is no anger, discontent or dissatisfaction.'[9]

A similar response to the accusation of nihilism is possibly contained in the *Vajjiyamāhita Sutta* (AN IV.189*ff*), where some wanderers query whether the Buddha is a nihilist 'who refuses to make declarations' (*venayiko appaññattiko*), in response to which the lay-disciple Vajjiyamāhita asserts that the Buddha teaches what is good and bad (*kusala*, *akusala*). While there is no comment on whether or not the Buddha was a nihilist (*venayiko*) in the sense of not making declarations (*appaññattiko*) on certain important metaphysical issues, such as the ontological status of the liberated person, the text suggests an aversion, on the part of some, similar to that found in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, to the Buddha's philosophical reticence.

Whatever the case, the alarmist reaction to the Buddha, suggested by a number of texts but only spelt out in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, seems to have been focused on a very specific philosophical orientation – the avoidance of ontology through the idea of ineffability – which was later conceptualised in terms of the *śūnya-vāda*. For the animating fear of the Buddha's critics in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* seems to have been that if any particular state of affairs cannot be conceptualised, then it cannot really exist; this seems to imply, in turn, the realistic presupposition that that concepts denote ultimately real things. The opponents of the Buddha thus emerge as philosophical realists reacting to a doctrine of non-conceptuality.

If this interpretation is correct, the Buddha could be regarded as a sort of proto-*śūnyavādin*, whose realisation of ineffability in the present was

[9]MN I.140: *diṭṭhe vāhaṃ bhikkhave dhamme tathāgataṃ ananuvejjo ti vadāmi. evaṃvādiṃ kho maṃ bhikkhave evamakkhāyiṃ eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā asatā tucchā musā abhūtena abbhācikkhanti: venayiko samaṇo gotamo sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpetī ti. yathā vāhaṃ bhikkhave na yathā cāhaṃ na vadāmi tathā maṃ te bhonto samaṇabrāhmaṇā asatā tucchā musā abhūtena abbhācikkhanti: venayiko samaṇo gotamo sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpetī ti. pubbe cāhaṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ c' eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ. tatra ce bhikkhave pare tathāgataṃ akkosanti paribhāsanti rosenti vihesenti, tatra bhikkhave tathāgatassa na hoti āghāto na appaccayo na cetaso anabhiraddhi*.

elaborated into a nominalistic doctrine, according to which existent things (such as 'consciousness') are equated with concepts which are then negated. Such a reading of the Buddha is at least consistent with Nāgārjuna's *śūnyavādin* interpretation of the canonical teachings, in which the notion of liberated ineffability in the present is similarly connected to an anti-realistic position, most strongly stated in one of the more difficult statements of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (XXV.17-20):

> Beyond death, it is not said that the Blessed One exists, does not exist, both exists and does not, or neither exists nor does not exist (17). Even while the Blessed One remains it cannot be said that he exists, does not exist, both exists and does not, or neither exists nor does not exist (18).
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> There is no deviation between *saṃsāra* and Nirvana, and no deviation between Nirvana and *saṃsāra* (19). Nirvana and *saṃsāra* share the same threshold: there is not even the slightest difference between them (20).[10]

Nāgārjuna's identification of *saṃsāra* and Nirvana makes sense on the basis that the phenomenal world is an illusion. For if the entire content of mundane consciousness (*saṃsāra*) is unreal, it follows that linguistic conventions and conceptual distinctions, including that between Nirvana and *saṃsāra*, are ultimately meaningless. Hence there is no meaningful sense in which Nirvana and *saṃsāra* can be spoken of as separate 'things': whether a person is entangled in the illusion that is phenomena, or released from it by realising it is an illusion, the locus, or 'threshold', of cognition – liberated or mundane – remains the same. This anti-realistic doctrine thus explains the Tathāgata's liberated state in the present, for if the Tathāgata has understood the illusory nature of phenomena, and is out of it, in the sense of realising the experiential deconstruction of ordinary awareness, his liberation must necessarily involve the negation of all phenomenal categories: ideas about being and non-being do not apply to him.

[10]MMK XXV.17-20 (on which see Wynne, 2015: 151-52): *paraṃ nirodhād bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate, na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate* (17). *tiṣṭhamāno 'pi bhagavān bhavatīty eva nājyate, na bhavaty ubhayaṃ ceti nobhayaṃ ceti nājyate* (18). *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam, na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam* (19). *nirvāṇasya ca yā koṭiḥ koṭiḥ saṃsaraṇasya ca, na tayor antaraṃ kiṃcit susūkṣmam api vidyate* (20).

It is easy to see why all this would be troubling to the philosophical realist. For Nāgārjuna expresses nominalistic ideas in a manner that apparently dissolves liberation into the world; both here and in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, the subject of religious truth seems to slip away through one's fingers. Perhaps to opponents of the *śūnya-vāda*, such as Śaṅkara and many Indian Buddhists, it seemed as if the metaphysical rug of reality was being pulled away from under their feet, leaving a vast, unforgiving void. The charge of nihilism is easy to understand.

The canonical discourses suggest the fear of annihilation evoked by negative, *śūnyavāda*-style teachings is significantly older than Nāgārjuna. Indeed, the case that early Buddhist thought should be regarded as a sort of 'proto-*madhyamaka*' has already been formulated by Gómez (1976), on the basis of the final two books of the *Sutta-nipāta* (*Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*): the fact that a similar tendency can be identified in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* suggests that the proto-*śūnyavāda* tendency is more generally applicable to the canonical teachings as a whole. Other teachings of a similar nature are not difficult to find, for example the Buddha's argument in the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta* that the notion of 'self ' is cognitively dependent:

> Therein, Ānanda, to the person who claims "my self (*me attā*) is beyond sensation (*na... vedanā*) and experience (*appaṭisaṃvedano*)," one should say: "Is it possible to have the notion 'I am' (*asmī ti*) when there is no sensation whatsoever (*sabbaso vedayitaṃ n' atthi*)?"
>
> 'It is not so, master.'
>
> Therefore, Ānanda, it is because of this reason that it is not suitable (*na kkhamati*) to think that one has a self beyond feeling and experience.[11]

The Buddha here points out that the idea of a transcendent self comes about under particular cognitive circumstances, and so must be a conceptual construct,

[11]DN II.67 (on which see Wynne 2010: 134): *tatr' ānanda yo so evam āha*: *na h' eva kho me vedanā attā appaṭisaṃvedano me attā ti*, *so evam assa vacanīyo*, *yattha pan' āvuso sabbaso vedayitaṃ n' atthi api nu kho tattha ayam aham asmī ti siyā ti*? *no h' etaṃ bhante*. *tasmā-t-ih' ānanda etena p' etaṃ na kkhamati*: *na h' eva kho me vedanā attā appaṭisaṃvedano me attā ti samanupassituṃ*.

a phenomenon without substance. While the *prajñāpāramitā* literature expresses this idea more directly, by stating that all things (*dharma*s) – including typical terms of Buddhist discourse – are 'empty',[12] the Buddha here undermines the idea of substance, or objective reality, by noting the phenomenal dependence of an idea on dependently originated states of consciousness. A subtler way of expressing the same idea is found in the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*, which uses a poetic allegory about the attainment of Nirvana – a tale on reaching the place where the material elements 'cease without remainder' – to indicate the dependence of substance on mind:

> 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 ceases, right here.[13]

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[12]For a typical statement see e.g. Aṣṭa (Vaidya 1960: 89): *na cānyatra skandhadhātvāyatanebhyaḥ prajñāpāramitā avaboddhavyā. tat kasya hetoḥ? skandhadhātvāyatanam eva hi subhūte śūnyaṃ viviktaṃ śāntam. iti hi prajñāpāramitā ca skandhadhātvāyatanaṃ ca advayam etad advaidhīkāraṃ śūnyatvād viviktatvāt, evaṃ śāntatvān nopalabhyate. yo 'nupalambhaḥ sarvadharmāṇām sā prajñāpāram itety ucyate, yadā na bhavati saṃjñā samajñā prajñaptir vyavahāraḥ, tadā prajñāpāram itety ucyate*.

It should also be noted that the relentless negation of the Aṣṭa also means that the idea of emptiness itself is also denied, e.g. Aṣṭa p.96, which denies the 5 aggregates (e.g. *sacen na vijñāne carati, carati prajñāpāramitāyām*), the typical Buddhist idea that they are impermanent (e.g. *saced vijñānam anityam iti na carati, carati prajñāpāramitāyām*) as well as the idea that they are empty (e.g. *saced vijñānaṃ śūnyam iti na carati, carati prajñāpāramitāyām*).

Even when the Aṣṭa uses canonical modes of expression, it does so alongside newer concepts, e.g. p.121: *uktaṃ hīdaṃ bhagavatā: acchaṭāsaṃghātamātrakam apy ahaṃ bhikṣavo bhavābhinirvṛttiṃ na varṇayāmi, sarvaṃ hi saṃskṛtam anityaṃ sarvaṃ bhayāvagataṃ duḥkhaṃ sarvaṃ traidhātukaṃ śūnyaṃ sarvadharmā anātmānaḥ*.

This passage differs from the canonical material in using the term *anātman* as a bahuvrīhi ('selfless') rather than *karmadhāraya* compound ('not-self'). On the general distinction between the two types of compound see Collins (1982: 95-96); such a distinction in the Aṣṭa probably does not indicate a philosophical change from not-self to no self (on which see Wynne 2010: 157*ff*), but perhaps reflects the formal use of the compound in Buddhist circles at the time.

[13]DN I.223: *viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ, ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati, ettha dīghañ ca rassañ ca aṇuṃ thūlaṃ subhāsubhaṃ, ettha nāmañ ca rūpañ ca asesaṃ*

The statement that the material elements cease in intransitive consciousness, taken literally, suggests the phenomenal world is a mental construct. This could mean that the verse implies idealism, a problem not properly understood in the Theravāda tradition, where consciousness – 'intransitive, infinite and luminous all round' – is believed to be an epithet of Nirvana.[14] But this possibility is ruled out by the cessation of consciousness in the final stanza, even if the referent of the final pronoun (*etaṃ*) is not clear (although the neuter case suggests *dukkha*). Nevertheless, the suggestion that things depend on thought, and the failure to declare any positive metaphysic, is typical of proto-*śūnya-vādin* teaching in its initial, canonical phase.

3. This brief sample of material, from the *Alagaddūpama*, *Mahā-nidāna* and *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*s, forms a coherent proto-*śūnyavādin* position which can be extended to much of the canonical Pali discourses. The evidence is, indeed, abundant: in the not-self teaching, the teachings on dependent origination and cognition, the discourses to Vacchagotta and Kaccāyana, and those of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* and *Pārāyanavagga*, as well as in subjects as diverse as cosmology, meditation and miracles, a *śūnya-vāda* sort of nominalism can be identified.[15]

Three fundamental *śūnyavādin* principles can thus be generalised to the teachings of the four principle Nikāyas, and the older portions of the Khuddaka Nikāya: that the world of experience is a cognitive construction which is essentially unsatisfactory; that there is no point in metaphysical explanations of the 'what', 'why' or 'how' of this construction, which are pragmatically pointless and philosophically impossible; and that Nirvana, the dissolution of construction, is necessarily ineffable since it consists of cognitive deconstruction, and thus transcends language. By this estimation the Buddha's Dhamma is profoundly anti-realistic, since the world as it appears in normal experience, including all things within the realm of space-time, is said to be unreal.

A positive metaphysic is not revealed in this negative dialectic: the nature of the system indicates that although a metaphysician might try to push beyond the phenomenal limits of language and knowledge, the endevaour is meaningless and to be avoided. No idealistic step is taken to say that cognitive construction

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uparujjhati. viññāṇassa nirodhena etth' etaṃ uparujjhatī ti.

Reading *pabhaṃ* for *pahaṃ* with Be; the two characters are easily confusable in Sinhalese script.

[14]Norman (1992)

[15]A fuller consideration of the material is presented in Wynne (2010, and 2015 chapters 2 & 3)

is all there is, and thus that the world consists of mind only. Nor is philosophical realism affirmed: there is no assertion that cognitive construction depends on, and is a sort of representation of, things that really do exist in space-time. The philosophical world of the *śūnya-vāda* thus culminates in a non-foundational silence, in which it is implied that the ultimate truth of things is ineffable and beyond articulation. This non-foundationalism is easy to as nihilism, as can be seen in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, in the criticism of the *prajñā-pāramitā* and in Śaṅkara's disdain. Douglass Smith's article (in the present volume) also shows that anti-realism can also be misconstrued as idealism::

> 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 … (p.157 above)

Even if anti-realism need not be essentially idealistic, one might reasonably object that the Buddha was surely some kind of realist. After all, did he not teach things he believed to be objectively true, and surely this assumes the objective reality of the realm of space-time in which individuals hear the teachings, and follow the eightfold way to Nirvana? It could thus be argued that an anti-realist interpretation of the Dhamma is based on reading Madhyamaka thought back into the canonical teachings, which are implicitly realistic, and that the Buddha's mission implies he had an 'inchoate metaphysics', essentially realistic, since realism must be the natural counterpart to compassion:

> "Compassion for beings" is an externally oriented, cognitive affect, as are the claims about those same beings caught within *saṃsāra*. (p.176 above)

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the Buddha's entire teaching career was not the action of a solipsistic idealist, for if this were the case the Buddha would probably have remained under the tree of awakening, enjoying the peace of liberation rather than re-entering a world which he had found to be unreal. At the least, then, the Buddha's teachings must be realistic in a semantic sense

(p.166ff), and one could be confident of speaking of the Dhamma as a system of 'contructed realism' (Wynne 2015: 30*ff*), that is to say, that the laws by which experience is constructed are objective real. But does this imply, in turn, that these teachings rest on ontological realism? Does the semantic truth that people can realise Nirvana through certain meditative procedures say anything about the ontology of Nirvana?

The fact that phenomena (*sabbe dhammā*) are characterised by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self proves nothing in this regard (p.172), for this teaching notes a phenomenological rather than ontological truth, 'unsatisfactoriness' being a comment on the experiential quality of things rather than an ontological property. Indeed, the Buddha nowhere states that the content of conditioned experience is a representation of substances that exist in the mind-independent realm of space-time. If so, the argument for an ontological reading of the Buddha's Dhamma requires more than teachings on experience, perhaps some sort of indication that either the sense objects or the material elements are real in the way they are perceived.

A simple argument for realism could be that in the early Buddhist analysis of cognition, the sense objects are distinguished from an individual's cognitive apparatus, both of which precede apperception or conceptualisation (*sañjānāti*). As explained in texts such as the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, apperception occurs after the coming together of the sense and sense object, with the implication that the two need not come together,[16] and so exist separately in the world. But this only implies that the laws of construction allow for an objective order with public objects; it does not necessarily follow that this order is situated in a realm of space-time beyond consciousness.

Sense objects could be explained in any number of ways – perhaps through the claim that the laws of karmic retribution allow for co-ordination between individuals, so that individual streams of consciousness interact resulting in common objects of experience; or perhaps by means of the Kantian idea that things in themselves (*noumena*) are beyond time and space, but assume such a form, as *phenomena*, due to the construction of sense impressions by the mind's categories; or even by claiming that objects are fluctuations in an energy field, which is situated in beyond the dimensions of space-time, and behaves differently in the various stations of consciousness (*viññāṇa-ṭhiti*). If one objects

[16]M I.111: *cakkhuñ c'āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti*…

that a Kantian metaphysic is not made clear in the canonical teachings, this only proves the point that the canonical teachings are not metaphysically grounded.[17]

The cessation of sense contact, brought about through the disjunction of sense and object – likened by the Buddha, in the *Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta* and elsewhere, to the separation of two sticks which had been rubbed together to produce heat and fire (p.160),[18] need not imply that the object exists 'out there' in the world of space-time. For the Buddha likens the friction between sticks to the quality of feeling – pleasant, unpleasant or neither – which suggests an experientially grounded, phenomenological metaphysic would perhaps be more suitable in this place. A similar point could be made about the Buddha's teaching to his son Rāhula that he should cultivate a meditation 'like the earth', which receives impurities passively. Since this instruction concerns the correct meditative attitude, a phenomenological rather than ontological reading would seem more appropriate.[19]

Other Suttas on meditation hardly seem a suitable starting point for metaphysics: the bodily contemplations of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*s, and the *Assuatavā Sutta* – which points out that the body endures changes less quickly than the mind, and so is a better candidate to be considered as the self (pp.161-62)– all assume that phenomena are public, and that experience is shared, but no comment is made on the true nature of this shared domain. Analogies which illustrate the quality of sensation, or from meditations and contemplations, thus go no further than emphasising the fact that the phenomenal world is public, not private, and are not a very convincing source for metaphysical speculation.

A different metaphysic is not only plausible in other teachings that could be cited in support of ontological realism, but is in fact much more likely. Thus the *Puppha Sutta* (SN III.138) does not make any statement about 'the ontological character of the *khandha*s, and in particular the *khandha* of form', and so does not help establish the bare existence of form 'as versus a more antirealist view of the dhamma' (p.165). This teaching states nothing more than the Buddha's agreement that the five aggregates exist 'in the world' (*loke*) when considered in the sense of 'impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self'

[17]A Kantian metaphysic has been suggested by Sue Hamilton, 1999. 'The "External World": Its Status and Relevance in the Pali Nikayas', in *Religion* (1999), 29, pp 73-90.

[18]MN III.242-43.

[19]M I.423: *paṭhavīsamaṃ rāhula bhāvanaṃ bhāvehi, paṭhavīsamaṃ hi te rāhula bhāvanaṃ bhāvayato uppannā manāpāmanāpā phassā cittaṃ na pariyādāya ṭhassanti*.

(*aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ vipariṇāmadhammaṃ*), but do not exist when considered as 'permanent, fixed, eternal and not liable to change' (*niccaṃ dhuvaṃ sassataṃ avipariṇāmadhammaṃ*), a very typical Buddhist statement about the unsatisfactory nature of experience.

This experiential point is made clear when the Buddha equates the five aggregates with 'worldly phenomena in the world' (*loke lokadhammo*),[20] a statement which suggests that the Buddha here deals with the world in a phenomenal sense (*lokadhamma*); indeed, the term 'world' (*loka*) often denotes the world of experience.[21] The Sutta's enigmatic conclusion on the Buddha's transcendence also seems to transgress the presuppositions of philosophical realism:

> Just as a waterlily, lotus or blue lotus, originated and grown in water, emerges from the water and stands tall without being daubed by water, so too is the Tathāgata born and grown in the world, and yet he overcomes it, and abides without being tainted by the world'. [22]

The notion of the Buddha's 'mastery' or 'overpowering' of the world (*lokam abhibhuyya*) does not completely rule out a realistic metaphysic. But it goes much further than merely noting the Buddha's therapeutic detachment from objects that are ontologically real: if the idea of mastering the world and abiding untouched by seems more than a statement of indifferent aloofness, the teaching can perhaps be more easily read as an apophatic statement about the Buddha's immanent transcendence.

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[20]S III.139: *kiñ ca bhikkhave loke lokadhammo yaṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti, abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti? rūpaṃ bhikkhave loke lokadhammo taṃ tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti …*

'And what, bhikkhus, is the worldly phenomenon in the world to which a Tathāgata awakens, which he comprehends, having awakening and comprehended (which) he explains, teaches, declares, establishes, reveals, analyses and makes clear? Form (and: feeling, aperception, constructions, consciousness), *bhikkhu*s, is the worldly phenomenon in the world to which the Tathāgata awakens, which he comprehends.'

[21]On early Buddhist teachings on the world 'out there' as 'worlds of experience' see Hamilton (2000, chapter 6).

[22]S III.140: *seyyathā pi bhikkhave uppalaṃ vā padumaṃ vā puṇḍarīkaṃ vā udake jātaṃ udake saṃvaḍḍhaṃ udakā accuggamma ṭhāti anupalittaṃ udakena, evam eva kho bhikkhave tathāgato loke saṃvaḍḍho lokaṃ abhibhuyya viharati anupalitto lokenā ti*.
In the final clause after *evam eva*…, Be reads *loke jāto loke saṃvaḍḍho* instead of *loke saṃvaḍḍho*.

All these teachings suggest that while there may well be 'nothing in the Nikāyas that 'forces' a phenomenological metaphysic upon the Buddha's teachings (p.162), there is far less which instead suggests ontological realism. Indeed, the most likely ontologically focused discourse – the *Mahā-hatthipadopama Sutta* (MN 28), in which the human being is compared to a house constructed in space – is attributed to Sāriputta, and generally seems to stand apart from the mass of Nikāya teaching in terms of its analytical style and method.[23] If the text's didactic peculiarity suggests it is a sort of proto-Abhidharma work, it should not be construed as a typical Nikāya teaching as follows:

> The flip side of analysis is reduction. Although Wynne (2010: 157ff; 2015: 85-6) locates "reductionistic realism" at a later stage than the Buddha, 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 *Mahāhatthipadopama 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. (p.161)

But there is no reason why analysis need be reductionistic, in an ontological sense, and in any case the analysis of form in terms of the four elements is not the issue in question. What matters is the text's application of the not-self teaching to an almost exhaustive list of bodily parts, along with the analogy between a house and the body, the constituent parts of both being said to enclose 'space'. There being such obvious differences between this teaching and, for example, the didactic style and content of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, an ontological reading of the Buddha's teachings would seem to lack foundation.

5. Apart from in their more recent strata, it would seem that the principal Nikāyas do not provide decisive support for ontological realism. Furthermore, the Buddha's focus on experience, and especially the experience of liberation in the present, must surely place philosophical limits on his teachings: while metaphysical silence necessarily stops short of explaining the ultimate way of things, it at least seems to negate certain philosophical interpretations of the

[23]On this text see Wynne (2010: 158ff).

Dhamma.[24] This can be seen especially in apophatic teachings which declare that the liberated sage is beyond reckoning. In such cases ontological realism seems far from the Buddha's mind, as can be seen in the following verse from the *Purābheda Sutta*:

> '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.'

One could perhaps interpret this verse to mean that the sage is 'unattached to anything in the present' or has 'no present states produced by greed, hatred, or ignorance' (p.156). On the other hand, the Buddha's words seem to be a rather strong way of stating non-attachment: one could object that the person who has no attachment or greed can still be measured, so why use the language of 'immeasurability'? Perhaps we can allow the Buddha some poetic license, but if so this would seem to have been a liberty he used rather freely, and even excessively, for example in the *Kalahavivāda Sutta*, an important text in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (*Suttanipāta* IV):

> Not cognisant of conceptualisation, not cognisant of misconceptualisation, not uncognisant but not cognisant of what is untrue: form disappears for the one who has reached this state, for the discernment of manifoldness (*papañcasaṅkhā*) originates in conceptualisation (*saññānidānā*).[25]

The context of this verse, rather than its content, is at least fairly straightforward: since the preceding verses (872-73) mention the compound 'name and form', the teaching must concern a person's psycho-physical being. The term *rūpa* cannot refer to a sense object, for this term only ever refers to the visible aspect of a sense object, rather than the sense object itself. If so, the verse certainly does not echo 'others within the Canon on the same topic of ending desire for sense objects'; does not assert that in order to 'escape dispute, one should engage in deep *jhāna* so as to overcome attachment to sense objects'; and does not come close to advising 'a meditative retreat from form' through the

[24]Sn 849: *vītataṇho purā bhedā ti bhagavā, pubbam antam anissito, vemajjhe nūpasaṃkheyyo tassa n' atthi purekkhatam*.

[25]Sn 874. *na saññasaññī na visaññasaññī, no pi asaññī na vibhūtasaññī: evaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasaṃkhā*.

attainment of the fourth formless meditation (p.153).

Taken at its own word, on the assumption that the Buddha means what he says, this verse states that a person's physical form can disappear if the cognitive conditions are altered, which means that matter depends on thought. This could perhaps mean that a person's perception of form ceases, in a transformed state of consciousness. But since the verse deals precisely with the perception of things, one could legitimately expect the Buddha to specify that the perception of form ceases, rather than form itself. A more likely interpretation is that the verse belongs to the collection of apophatic teachings on liberation – those charismatic utterances which typically negate certain aspects of mundane experience, such as the five aggregates, as a way of indicating the attainment of liberation, without making any positive statement about the liberated person's condition. A good example is the Buddha's claim, in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (p.217) that the liberated person is 'untraceable' (*ananuvijjo*) and cannot be found even by the Gods:

> Therefore, bhikkhus, I say that when the gods including Indra, Brahma and Prajāpati search for the bhikkhu thus released in mind, they cannot establish that 'the consciousness of the Tathāgata is located here.'[26]

The drama of this teaching is supplied almost entirely by the fact that it is gods who fail to find the liberated *bhikkhu*; it would not have the same impact if other beings without the gods' divine power were mentioned. Hence the teaching would not work if Māra was the protagonist, for Māra is the demon who in canonical stories habitually tries to tempt *bhikkhu*s back to the world of sensory pleasures, or else divert the Buddha from his mission. The teachings of the *Nivāpa* and *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*s, which describe how Māra cannot gain a foothold in a *bhikkhu* who attains various meditative states, such as the four *jhāna*s, four formless spheres and finally cessation (a state in which the *bhikkhu* is apparently liberated),[27] merely extend the teaching on being beyond sensual pleasure in the first *jhāna* (*vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*), and thus being beyond Māra's tempation, whose 'eye has been slain (so that it) lacks

[26]MN I.140: *evaṃ vimuttacittaṃ kho bhikkhave bhikkhuṃ sa-indā devā sabrahmakā sapajāpatikā anvesaṃ nādhigacchanti*: *idaṃ nissitaṃ tathāgatassa viññāṇan ti*.

[27]As indicated by the pericope *paññāya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti* (M I. 160, 175).

a foothold'.[28] This is entirely different from the idea of the gods being unable to locate the liberated *bhikkhu*'s consciousness.

These three teachings from the *Purābheda*, *Kalahavivāda* and *Alagaddūpama Sutta*s all articulate, in different styles and from different perspectives, the idea of the liberated person's ineffability in the present. The urge to explain such teachings away is easy to understand, for this idea might seem absurd in the modern age; a contemporary reader might reasonably object that the Buddha cannot have meant such teachings literally. But before rushing to claim that such statements do not mean what they actually say, we should first of all take them seriously, considering whether they have possible philosophical implications, and if so, whether these implications make sense within the wider context of early Buddhist teachings.

6. Rather than trying to second guess the Buddha, by formulating an inchoate metaphysic to fill in the gaps left by his enigmatic silence, it would be more useful to study his philosophical reticence and negations, and assess the extent to which, or even whether, these place limits on his system of thought. We can begin by noting that if the world is an unsatisfactory ontological reality – a painful realm of space-time that actually exists outside a person's head – then liberation from it would require a person to escape from the world, literally understood. But if so, the idea of liberation in life is logically impossible, and would have to be viewed as a poetic way of stating a person's anticipation of final liberation to be achieved at death, but guaranteed in life through a special type of realisation, in which the forces that bind a person to *saṃsāra* are temporarily stopped.

From this perspective the statement of the *Puppha Sutta*, that the Buddha is 'untainted' by the world, could just mean that he is no longer affected by the forces that bind him to *saṃsāra* after death. But we have seen that the *Puppha Sutta*'s statement that the Buddha 'masters' the world is a strange way of articulating such poetic realism; indeed, the image of a lotus emerging from water suggests the Tathāgata is out of the world right now, rather than in it until he dies and finally realises liberation. In a similar vein, the teachings of the *Kalahavivāda* and *Alagaddūpama Sutta*s do not suggest that the liberated person

[28] MN I.159: *kathañ ca bhikkhave agati mārassa ca māraparisāya ca? idha bhikkhave bhikkhu vivicc' eva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. ayaṃ vuccati bhikkhave bhikkhu andham akāsi māraṃ apadaṃ vadhitvā māracakkhuṃ adassanaṃ gato pāpimato*.

is poetically liberated, in the sense that he remains in a detached, aloof state until death, at which point he is actually liberated from the unsatisfactoriness that is existence in space-time.

All these teachings rather imply that something has happened to the Tathāgata which literally places him outside space-time in the present. This idea is incompatible with philosophical realism, according to which the liberated person should still be measurable, should still be embodied, and should still have a particular kind of detached consciousness. Apophatic teachings, negations and silence, on the other hand, only make sense according to the anti-realistic understanding that the things of experience and knowledge – bodies, brains, individual beings, objects, matter, the world – are merely ideas or concepts which can therefore be stopped, rendering the Tathāgata actually immeasurable and really lacking a body and consciousness.

Charismatic statements about the ineffability of the person liberated in the present (*diṭṭhe va dhamme*), taken literally, presume the nominalistic understanding that the world is essentially an idea, a construction in experience, that can therefore be dismantled.[29] Thus the idea of liberation in the present implies that the world is not real in the sense normally imagined, that is in an ontological sense, as a realm governed by the objectively real laws of time and space. It is of crucial importance, therefore, to understand correctly a couple of texts which seem to state exactly this. In the *Rohitassa Sutta*, a highly peculiar discourse found identically in both the Saṃyutta and Aṅguttara Nikāyas, the Buddha teaches that the origin and end of the world are not to be found externally, out there, but should instead be located in the body and cognition:

> Where indeed, sir, one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not fall away or arise – I do not state that the end of the world is to be known, seen or attained through 'going'. But nor do I declare, sir, the making an end of suffering without having reached the end of the world. Indeed, sir, I declare that the world, its origination, cessation and conduct leading thereto is to be in this very fathom-long body, endowed with apperception and mind.[30]

[29]It is highly relevant that the expression *diṭṭhe va dhamme* does not simply mean 'liberation in the present', but can be translated more accurately as 'when the truth is seen'; this more dynamic sense of the expression emphasises the immediacy, potency and transformative power of the liberating cognition.

[30]S I.62, A II.48: *yattha kho āvuso na jāyati na jīyati na mīyati na cavati na upapajjati,*

By speaking of the origination and cessation of the 'world', the Buddha equates the term *loka* with *dukkha*, and so appears to be talking about the world of experience. This looks like a very direct statement of the dependence of phenomena on a person's cognitive apparatus, and the attempt to explain it otherwise makes little sense:

> 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. (p.161)

It would indeed be odd if this teaching expressed the Vedic identity of micro- and macrocosm. Clearly, however, no such equation is made, and the text cannot be dismissed as a peculiarity not to be taken seriously. Instead, the text seems to present a variation on the teaching of the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta* (p.221): according to the *Rohitassa Sutta* the end of the world is found in the body (endowed with apperception and mind), whereas the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta* states it to be in intransitive consciousness. To make much of the difference would be unnecessarily literalistic.

The teachings of the *Rohitassa* and *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*s cannot easily be read in terms of philosophical realism. Both use the allegory of reaching the end of the world (or elements) as a way of indicating that liberation requires the cognitive deconstruction of the 'world' of normal experience. The teaching in the *Kevaṭṭa* Sutta probably indicates that this is enabled by attaining an advanced meditative state, in which consciousness first becomes radiant (*sabbato-pabhaṃ*) and intransitive (*anidassanaṃ*: without an object).[31] It is not obvious what sort of Buddhist meditation might lead to such a state, but one can at least rule out the formless meditations, which are not normally connected to the idea of radiance.[32]

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nāhaṃ taṃ gamanena lokassa antaṃ ñāteyyaṃ daṭṭheyyaṃ patteyyan ti vadāmi. na kho pan' āhaṃ āvuso appatvā lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi. api khv āhaṃ āvuso imasmiñ ñeva vyāmamatte kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake lokañ ca paññāpemi lokasamudayaṃ ca lokanirodhaṃ ca lokanirodhagāminiṃ ca paṭipadan ti.

Reading *upapajjati* and *sasaññimhi* with Be instead of *uppajjati* and *saññimhi*.

[31]It is also possible that the term *pabhaṃ* could be a misinterpretation of an older, underlying Middle Indic form; on this see K.R. Norman: "An epithet of Nibbāna".

[32]Smith (p.159 n.45) also cites AN I.10, but this has only a tangential connection to meditation.

A more likely identification is the 3rd 'release' (*vimokkha*), the object of which is the thought '(it is) radiant' (*subhan ti*), or the 4th *jhāna*, for the person who attains it is said to be as if completely covered by a pure white cloth. Whatever the case, it is plausible to assume that the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta* assumes a meditator on the threshold of liberation, a luminous state in which the conditioned realm of *saṃsāra* ceases. If an identification with the 4th jhāna is supposed, it could further be assumed that the person has 'no discursive consciousness whatsoever', although not necessarily that he has 'no clear contact with sense objects' (p.159), for this meditation is said to be 'the purification of equanimity and mindfulness' (*upekkhāsati-pārisuddhiṃ*), and mindfulness in Buddhism is always mindfulness of something.

The mode of expression preferred in the *Kevaṭṭa* and *Rohitassa Sutta*s is certainly 'poetic', and implies that the 'experience of *nibbāna*' is connected to 'certain jhānic states of consciousness' (p.159). But the use of allegory does not further entail that the Buddha does not mean what he says. There is no suggestion that the meditator has merely 'extinguished without remainder attachment to those elements', along with the 'unskillful states associated with such attachment: greed, hatred, and ignorance' (p.159). When the canonical teachings speak about something ceasing 'without remainder', they usually mean what they say; in any case, attachment to the material elements, rather than the objects made of them, is not normally how early Buddhist teachings imagine the cause of suffering.

7. The attempt to read ontological realism into the *Purābheda*, *Kalahavivāda*, *Alagaddūpama, Rohitassa* and *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*s requires complex hermeneutic manoeuvres: poetic license is presumed since what the texts actually say is apparently unacceptable, or else the immediate context of the teachings is often avoided, and is instead supplied by other teachings. This style of interpretation, in which a teaching's actual statements are interpreted from the perspective of other canonical material, even if no ostensible connection is apparent, or even overlooked in favour of one's doctrinal preferences, is exegetical rather than historical. From a text-historical perspective, however, and taking it at its word, the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is much closer in spirit to Gómez's impression of the *Mahāviyūha Sutta*, one of its most important dialogues:

> When I first read the *Mahāviyūha-sutta* of the Suttanipāta I was impressed not only by its freshness and directness, but also by its

> originality. Somehow its advocacy of abstention from disputes and arguments stood out as a unique stance that could not be easily reduced to a simplistic doctrine of abstention from disputes for the sake of the peace of noninvolvement. It also seemed evident that the pronouncements made in this sutta could not be reduced to other, more common teachings of the Pāli Canon without doing some violence to the text.[33]

Gómez's estimation of the *Mahāviyūha Sutta* is a fairly good representation of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* as a whole. The text reads quite naturally as a set of dialogues between a charismatic teacher and curious enquirers, and cannot easily be read as follows:

> [T]he *Aṭṭhakavagga* reads as though composed by a 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. (pp.150-51)

> … 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. (p.151)

While philosophical dispute is the ostensible subject of some of the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, its teachings are not confined to just this; nowhere is the Buddha depicted as a figure wearied by disputes, and nowhere does the text touch on the Buddha's difficulties in trying to gain support or be heard. But such an interpretation allows the *Aṭṭhakavagga*'s apophatic teachings to be downplayed, as advice encouraging detachment from a tiresome world, a perspective which inclines towards an entirely cataphatic reading of the text as a whole (pp.151-52).

Thus the denial that there is any apophatic tendency in the *Aṭṭhakavagga*, with its negative statements and pronouncements of ineffability explained away

[33]Gómez (1976**:** 139).

as poetic statements of therapeutic detachment, is taken to support the idea that the 'no view' strand of early Buddhist thought really indicates 'a non-attached attitude through the cultivation of rightview'.[34] This would mean, for example, that when the Buddha claims that he or the liberated sage has no views – for example the *Purābheda Sutta*'s claim that the liberated sage (*muni*) is not 'led into views' (Sn 851: *diṭṭhīsu ca na nīyati*) – what he really means is the sage has reached a state of therapeutic detachment through correct view. Is this plausible? Probably not. Explaining away the mystically charged aspects of early Buddhist teachings looks rather like an attempt to deny that there is any 'no view' dimension to the Buddha's thought – against the explicit testimony of the early texts themselves.

The Buddha claimed to teach suffering and its cessation, and avoided metaphysical subjects such as those contained in the list of ten questions. The teachings on suffering and its cessation encompass such things as ethics, psychology, meditation and spiritual practice, and although they could be said to be metaphysical in the rather weak sense of accepting karma and rebirth, they offer no positive metaphysic, that is to say, a comprehensive account of the human being's existence in and knowledge of the world. All this is correct view: no view, on the other hand, is the Buddha's metaphysical silence, which is partly pragmatic – since such speculation serves no soteriological purpose – but which also expresses the idea of liberation in the present, in which the negation of ontology is actualised through the cessation of cognitive conditioning.

From an anti-realist perspective, this means that the Buddha will give guidance on all aspects of constructed or conditioned reality that pertain to its undesirability and the way out of it, but will not say anything about what lies beyond the construction. This remit allows the Buddha to outline the cognitive and volitional forces which cause and maintain the construction, in a variety of 'stations of consciousness'; to talk about the correct ethical attitudes which lead towards the ultimate religious good that is deconstructed reality; and to give teachings on the meditative states in which constructed reality is unravelled, and Nirvana realised. On all of these points – *dukkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha* and *paṭipadā* – there can be correct (*sammā-*) and wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). But with regard to what lies beyond construction, the Buddha remains silent.

The Buddha's lack of views on the ultimate reality of the self or world is thus of a piece with his lack of view on the ultimate reality of the Tathāgata:

[34]See p.151 n.23; this opinion is based on Fuller (2012: 150).

in both cases he remains silent because his liberated state is the dissolution of the epistemological processes by which the everyday world of individual existence is constructed. Correct view and no view are therefore inextricably intertwined, and consistently expressed in a diversity of canonical teachings: correct view is structured in such a way that it leads to no view, in particular by avoiding aspects of enquiry – particularly ontology – which are realised to be ultimately unreal at the path's culmination in cognitive deconstruction. The Buddha's avoidance of ontology in positive teachings on correct view is thus complemented by his quiescent negation of ontology in apophatic utterances on the liberated being.

There is no conflict between these two didactic orientations, both of which place restrictions on how the Buddha's teachings are understood. This is most clearly expressed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, a discourse which shows how metaphysical doctrines depend on particular cognitive conditions, and also points out that liberation from conditioning must necessarily be the realm of no view. The text makes these points very clearly and explicitly: it states that when various ascetics and Brahmins expound their metaphysics, this is ultimately due to the fact that (*tad api*) their direct experience (*vedayitaṃ*) is subjected to 'trembling and quivering' (*paritassita-vipphanditam eva*), that is to say, it is cognitively distorted.[35] This means that the pursuit of metaphysical truth depends on the vagaries of 'contact' (*tad api phassapaccayā*), and that apart from contact, philosophers would not have the experiential constructions from which to formulate metaphysical theses (*te vata aññatra phassā paṭisaṃvedissantī ti netaṃ ṭhānaṃ vijjati*).

The analysis of the *Brahmajāla Sutta* extends the teaching of Dependent Origination, and as such comprises the correct view aspect of the Buddha's

[35]D I.41: *tatra bhikkhave ye te samaṇabrāhmaṇā pubbantakappikā ca aparantakappikā ca pubbantāparantakappikā ca pubbantāparantānudiṭṭhino*, *pubbantāparantaṃ ārabbha anekavihitaṃ adhivuttipadāni abhivadanti dvāsaṭṭhiyā vatthūhi*, *tad api tesaṃ bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ ajānataṃ apassataṃ vedayitaṃ taṇhāgatānaṃ paritassitavipphanditam eva*.

Translation from Wynne (2010: 147). Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation (2013, on Be para 117) is closer to this, for it recognises the difficulties surrounding *tad api* and does not claim that the views of ascetics and Brahmins are feelings: 'When those recluses and Brahmins … assert… that too is only the feeling of those who do not know and see; that is only the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving.' But this translation is still somewhat problematic in that it identifies the metaphysical formulations of the various ascetics and Brahmins as a sort of agitation or vacillation.

teachings, albeit in a form which makes clear the reason for the Dhamma's metaphysical silence. But the soteriological purpose of this analysis is also stated in a 'no view' culmination to the teaching:

> When, *bhikkhu*s, with regard to the six spheres of sense contact, a person understands their rise, fall, pleasure, danger and release (from them), he understands what lies beyond all these (views).[36]

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* thus points out the limits of knowledge and the need to go beyond it. Given the clarity with which the text expresses these ideas, it is surprising that it has been consistently misinterpreted. The grammar of the Pali text does not permit the notion that the 62 wrong views are all 'the agitation and vacillation of those who are immersed in craving' (*taṇhāgatānaṃ paritasitavipphanditaṃ*) which are 'kinds of "feeling" (*vedayita*).'[37] In Pali and Sanskrit, and even English, 'views' are not usually spoken of as 'feelings' or 'vacillations', and indeed cannot be. This passage thus does not state that 'contact conditions the feeling which constitutes each wrong view' (p.157), for nowhere does the text state that feeling and views are the same thing. A more serious misunderstanding is the confusion of correct view and no view:

> 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.

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[36]D I.45: *yato kho bhikkhave bhikkhu channaṃ phassāyatanānaṃ samudayañ ca atthagamañ ca assādañ ca ādīnavañ ca nissaraṇañ ca yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*, *ayaṃ imehi sabbeh' eva uttaritaraṃ pajānāti*.

The referrent of *imehi sabbeh'eva* is not entirely clear. In the text that follows, *te sabbe* refers to the ascetics and Brahmins who hold views, but it seems more natural to take it as a reference to the 62 views, as the commentator Buddhaghosa seems to understand (Sv I.127): *uttaritaraṃ pajānātī ti diṭṭhigatiko diṭṭhim eva jānāti*. *ayaṃ pana diṭṭhiñ ca diṭṭhito ca uttaritaraṃ sīlasamādhipaññāvimuttin ti yāva arahattā jānāti*.

'He understands what is beyond'. The person caught up in views knows only view. But this person understands (everything) as far as Arahatship, i.e. view and what lies beyond it – the release that results from virtue, absorption and understanding.'

[37]See p.157 above.. For the full Pali text see n.35.

The idea that the *Brahmajāla*'s teachings about *dukkha* and *nirodha* imply that early Buddhist teaching is entirely cataphatic is based on a misunderstanding, through mistranslation, of key terms which in this discourse demarcate the limits of valid discourse. This, in turn, allows a blind eye to be turned to the *Brahmajāla Sutta*'s culmination in an apophatic statement of the transcendence of views. Properly understood, the teaching expands on the Buddha's metaphysical silence, explaining why his teachings are limited to suffering and its cessation (correct view), and why he refused to comment on the liberation achieved through transcending the cognitive causes of suffering (no view).

8. The terminology 'constructed realism' and 'anti-realism' can be equated with what the Buddha taught and that which he left unsaid, respectively. 'Constructed realism' is thus an attempt to encapsulate the general worldview in which the teachings about *dukkha* and *nirodha* are situated: the objectively governed world of phenomena, that is to say, the realms of *saṃsāra*, regarding which the Buddha outlined the key facts of individual experience, its problematic nature and how to stop it. All this constitutes correct view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) without providing a metaphysical explanation of the world and a person's place within it.

'Anti-realism', on the other hand, refers to the culmination of Buddhist thought in Nirvana. Since numerous teachings indicate liberation is achieved not through actually escaping a really existent world of space-time, but through dissolving it as an experience, which requires the cessation of cognitive conditioning which fashions the world of *dukkha*, Nirvana must therefore be beyond description. Since language has meaning only within the realm of *dukkha*, concepts and apperceptions are not valid beyond it, meaning that the Buddha could only explain Nirvana – or merely point towards it – by means of apophatic teachings on the liberated person, many of which consist of quietistic refusals to provide a metaphysic as well as claims to have 'no view' (*no diṭṭhi*).

The Buddha's spiritual pragmatism directs his teachings on *dukkha* away from a metaphysical grounding; in the end, salvation is not a philosophical problem to be solved. But apart from this pragmatic non-foundationalism, the presentation of the order of *saṃsāra* in entirely phenomenological terms, and negative statements on the cessation of suffering, place philosophical limits on correct the interpretation of the Dhamma. Both ontological realism and solipsistic idealism are apparently negated: the former by teachings on dependent origination and Nirvana, which imply that language cannot offer an objective perspective from which the world can be known, and that a Tathāgata

has dissolved the world as an ontological fact; the latter by the fact that *saṃsāra* is governed by laws and is shared by individuals, for whom the Buddha feels compassion.

The Buddha's approach to teaching, which negates and implies rather than positively asserts, is characteristic of what in later times was termed *śūnya-vāda*, the 'doctrine of emptiness', a form of metaphysical quietism in which philosophical realism is negated, for philosophical and spiritual purposes. The idea of 'emptiness', although not used by the Buddha as such, denotes the ultimate insubstantiality of things, and hence the unreality of the world of normal experience, an unsatisfactory state of affairs from which liberation must be sought. All this means, in short, that it is philosophically impossible to read a metaphysic into early Buddhist teaching.

The early or proto-*śūnyavāda* phase, that of the canonical discourses, is marked by apophatic teachings on Nirvana and the liberated person, by arguments that negate the notion that the different aspects of conditioned experience are substantially real, and by positive teachings on the workings of *dukkha*. All this is taken for granted when the *śūnya-vāda* emerges proper, in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*s, a body of literature in which conventional terms are said to be 'empty' (*śūnya*), and which was formulated in opposition to two forms of realism, that of the Abhidharma and that of the mythic belief in Bodhisattvas. The mature, philosophical *śūnya-vāda* is heralded by Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, which probably emerged in the 2nd century AD, and attempts to prove the world's lack of substantial reality through a highly refined dialectic.

These three stages of *śūnya-vāda* development are a shorthand for a much more complicated intellectual history; many further developments could be noted within the canonical teachings, the *prajñā-pāramitā* canon and the philosophical works of Nāgārjuna's school. But this rough sketch at least provides the outline of a different approach to the history of Indian Buddhist thought, one which sees anti-realistic aspects of the canonical texts and for the first time places them at the heart of the Buddhist mission in India. Such a version of history provides a more insightful explanation of the subtle co-ordination of themes in the Buddha's teachings, in particular the relationship between correct view and no view.

While the Buddhist and non-Buddhist opponents of the *śūnyāvādin*s were frustrated by their non-foundationalism, and even fearful of a perceived nihilism, such reactions are obviously unnecessary in the modern philosophical world,

in which metaphysics has largely been bypassed by more rigorous forms of conceptual analysis. The *śūnyavādins*, starting with the Buddha, need no longer be regarded as the rabble-rousers and trouble-causers of Indian philosophy, and should rather be given credit for fashioning remarkably advanced forms of metaphysical scepticism, far ahead of similar developments which, in Western philosophy, have only been reached in the modern age, in the works of Hume, Kant, the logical positivists, Wittgenstein and so on.

It goes without saying that if any of this is even remotely true, the Buddha would seem to occupy a remarkable position in the history of philosophy. And this fact that should bring into sharp focus an even more significant achievement, that is to say, the highly curious fact that a form of philosophical scepticism lies at the heart of an unprecedented spiritual movement, one which inaugurated a major change in the religious life of mankind. To understand how peculiar the situation is, one need only remind oneself of the fact that a figure as important as Socrates did not establish any such movement, nor even a philosophical school, that has survived to the present. All this goes to show that the Buddha's religious programme – the working of his anti-realistic insights into a path of spiritual cultivation – is still in need of a careful reconsideration, even after so long and with so much already said about it.

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