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The Buddha and the Cartesian Self: Why Is the Buddha's Argument a Philosophical Failure?

Ruiwen Guo[1]

Australian National University

Abstract

The kind of self that Descartes intuits in his Meditations is one that exists independently of experience, yet possesses and actively participates in it. The Buddha's argument against the "Cartesian Self" – which should be distinguished from his argument against the identification of the self with the totality or any component of the five aggregates – is that the Cartesian Self is both cognitively meaningless and morally harmful. However, as I will argue in this essay, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is grounded in his epistemology and soteriology, for which he offers no independent argument, and which his opponents may reject because of their own deeper convictions. The Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is therefore philosophically unsuccessful in the sense that it cannot persuade a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon this belief on the basis of the Buddha's argument; in fact, the argument would simply appear to such a person as a groundless assertion.

§ 0. Introduction: Descartes's Intuition of the Self

In his paper "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," Alan Tomhave argues that the Buddhist conception of human personality resolves the Humean Puzzle and maintains the Cartesian Intuition.[2] Both Hume and the Buddha conceive the continuity of human personality as an ever-changing stream of mental and physical events. This conception poses a problem of personal identity for Hume because he regards those events as existing separately, without a

[1] *Ruiwen is a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) program at the Australian National University. His research interests include philosophy of religion and Asian philosophy.*

[2] Alan Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," *Philosophy East & West* 60, no. 4 (2010): 443–57.

recognisable principle that links them with each other and integrates them all into a whole. Thus, according to Tomhave, Hume's conception refuses him the epistemic right to identify from among the perceptions the existence of a perceiver. This, however, contradicts what Tomhave calls the Cartesian Intuition, the intuition that some particular action entails that there is an agent performing that action. The Buddhist conception of human personality, on the other hand, resolves the Humean Puzzle by assigning the role of integration to the will. According to Tomhave, the Buddhist analyses the human personality in terms of the "five aggregates" – form, feeling, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness[3] – which are the five categories that encapsulate the entire range of experienced reality. The aggregate of volitional formations, which includes the volitional state of craving, is the aspect of human experience that preserves a person's existence in the present form, and renews her existence in the next rebirth.[4] Tomhave holds that the Buddhist conception can accommodate the Cartesian Intuition, since it affirms that some particular action is caused by a person – one that is made up of the five aggregates integrated by the will. The will, nevertheless, should not be identified as an unchanging self. In the Nikāyas, the Buddha argues against such an identification by claiming that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself.[5]

I think that Tomhave's definition of the Cartesian Intuition is both unnecessary because it simply expresses a tautology, and misleading because it misrepresents Descartes. First, I claim that it is tautological to state that some particular action requires an actor. Hume's problem does not seem to concern whether some particular action requires an actor, but the lack of a criterion to distinguish actions from subjectless events. G.C. Lichtenberg expresses the same misgivings when he comments on Descartes's *cogito*: "We know only the existence of our sensations, representations, and thoughts. *It thinks*, we should say, just as we say, *it lightnings*. To say *cogito* is already too much if we translate it as *I think*."[6] As the pronoun "it" in "it lightnings" is just a placeholder and does not refer, so too, Lichtenberg argues, and Hume would agree, when some particular conscious thought occurs, one is only epistemically justified to describe the thought as a subjectless event, without the epistemic right to attribute it to a single, first-person subject. Therefore, the real divergence of the Buddhist and the Humean conceptions of personality lies in how they respond to the question of whether an ostensible action is a subjectless event.

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[3] The translation Tomhave uses renders the five *khandhas* (Pāli) or *skandhas* (Sanskrit) as "matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness." In this essay, I follow Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the five aggregates.

[4] See Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," 453. Cf. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*SN*, henceforth), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 12:15, 544. When citing *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, I will note both the page number in Bodhi's translation (e.g. page 544) and the specific sutta and Saṃyutta to which I refer (e.g. Saṃyutta 12, sutta 15).

[5] See *SN* 22:12–20, 868–71.

[6] See Lichtenberg, *Waste Book K 76*, cited in Steven Tester, "G.C. Lichtenberg on Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 95, no. 3 (2013): 336.

Second, the Cartesian Intuition, as Tomhave defines it, does not represent Descartes's reasoning behind *cogito ergo sum*. In his Fifth Replies, Descartes denies that the antecedent of *cogito ergo sum* (i.e. I think) can be replaced by any bodily action – such as "walking" – because in the First Meditation, he already discredits all sensory perceptions by the dream hypothesis.[7] Therefore, it is misleading to label the intuition that the occurrence of *any* action entails the existence of an actor as peculiarly Cartesian. For Descartes, only "thinking" is certain because, regardless of its propositional content, the mental phenomenon of a particular conscious thought definitely exists. Even if what is thought is made illusory by Descartes's demon, it cannot be false that there is some particular conscious thought.[8] Descartes attributes conscious thought to a single, first-person subject, and identifies this subject as a thinking thing to which various conscious thoughts can be uniformly ascribed.[9] Since Descartes seems to provide no argument for ascribing different thoughts to a single, first-person subject, I think it is appropriate to regard this claim as an intuition – one that is peculiarly Cartesian.

In this essay, I aim to show that the Buddha's argument against what can be called the "Cartesian Self" – a single, first-person subject conceived as a substantive thinker existing independently of experience – is philosophically unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who accepts the Cartesian Intuition, as we define it, to abandon it, and would instead appear as a groundless assertion. As an Indian monk who lived several centuries before the beginning of Christianity, the Buddha could not, of course, have directly dialogued with the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes; nor did Descartes, to the best of my knowledge, ever address the Buddha's critique of the Cartesian Self. The aim of this essay, therefore, is

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[7] See Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (*PW*, henceforth), vol. 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13, 244.

[8] This, it seems to me, is the most accurate way to interpret Descartes's reasoning behind *cogito ergo sum*. See Descartes's Second Meditation, in *PW, vol. 2*, 16–17 and *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.7, in *PW, vol. 1*, 194–95. I acknowledge the complexity and diversity of interpretations concerning how Descartes himself understands the inference from "I think" to "I exist."

[9] In his second Meditation, Descartes makes two transitions without the support of arguments. First, he attributes the mere occurrence of some particular conscious thought to "I," a single, first-person subject: "In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if [a deceiver of supreme power and cunning] is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. [. . .] I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. See *PW, vol. 2*, 17. Second, he attributes various kinds and episodes of thought to "I," the single, first person subject he derives from the mere occurrence of some particular conscious thought: "Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer." See *PW, vol. 2*, 19.

to reconstruct the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self, and show that it is philosophically unsuccessful in the sense specified above. To this end, I will first clarify what the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self does *not* address. I will then reconstruct his argument and consider the grounds on which it may be accepted, noting that the Buddha's rejection of the Cartesian Self rests on his epistemology and soteriological concerns. I will argue that his argument ultimately fails philosophically in that it cannot convince a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon that belief, since she may well reject his epistemology and soteriology.

§ 1. What the Buddha's Argument against the Cartesian Self Is Not About

To begin, let me clarify what the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is *not*. First, it is not a rejection of the conventional sense of "self" as a practical referent. As Tomhave rightly observes, the Buddha affirms the convenience and usefulness of referring to others and ourselves as individual selves.[10] The notion of self that the Buddha seeks to refute is a metaphysical substance which exists independently of experience. As I will argue, the Buddha's refutation of this metaphysical self is unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who already adheres to such a view to abandon it, and would appear to such a person as a groundless assertion.

Second, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is not his often-made claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself – one that cannot refute the Cartesian Intuition. To better distinguish this claim from his argument against the Cartesian Self, let us consider the grounds on which the Buddha makes this claim. The Buddha supports this claim in two ways, either (i) treating suffering and nonself as the consequences of impermanence, or (ii) treating impermanence and suffering as the evidence for nonself. According to the first line of argument, the doctrine of nonself follows from the doctrine of impermanence, since the five aggregates – which make up the totality of human experience – arise dependently, are subject to cessation, and are therefore distinct from an unchanging self.

To grasp the second line of argument (i.e. that not only impermanence but also *suffering* serves as evidence for non-self), it is necessary to understand why suffering is another consequence of impermanence. The Buddha argues that suffering results from appropriating impermanent things and from identifying them with the self.[11] Appropriation causes suffering because the pleasant experience pursued, like food, becomes a necessity on which one's life depends, but never brings lasting satisfaction due to its impermanence. The gratification of the lust for form, the physical body, for example, is always accompanied by the danger that such gratification is subject to change, as when the loveliness of a young woman, which

[10] Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the Self," 450–51. See *SN*, 1:25, 102; 5:10, 230.

[11] See Bhikkhu Bodhi's introduction to the *Khandhavagga*, or the Book of the Aggregates; in *SN*, 843.

gratifies the lust of the eyes, fades away as she ages.[12] Thus, as the Buddha says elsewhere, form is like a lump of foam, void, hollow, and insubstantial; to seek delight in it is to seek delight in suffering.[13]

Identification, on the other hand, causes suffering because a person identifies as her unchanging self some component of the five aggregates, which are impermanent and subject to change. When the experience identified as the self ceases, her consciousness, preoccupied with the change, becomes anxious and sorrowful as if her self has been lost.[14] Thus, a hedonist, for example, who identifies pleasant feelings as his true self, would find sorrow and distress in the come-and-go of his feelings, not only because the gratification of his lust for youth and beauty is only transitory, but also because with the change of feelings, he loses his self and authenticity.

Having seen the connections between impermanence and suffering, we can now grasp the Buddha's second line of argument in support of his claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is nonself. According to this argument, the inseparability of suffering from the impermanence of the five aggregates shows that the self cannot be found among the five aggregates, since if any component of the five aggregates were the self, a person must have been able to free herself from suffering.

> Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, Bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus." But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus."[15]

Therefore, none of the five aggregates should be identified as the self, since (i) all aspects of experience are impermanent and (ii) a person lacks the self-controlling power to prevent suffering. Both arguments, however, *cannot* falsify the Cartesian Intuition, since the self that Descartes intuits is neither identical with nor reducible to any component or the totality of the five aggregates. It is rather a substantive subject conceived as a single, first-person thinker existing independently from yet possessing and actively participating in the experience of thinking. Just as the eyes are neither identical with nor reducible to the experience of seeing, yet possessing and actively participating in it, so too, the Cartesian Self is neither identical with nor reducible to the experience of thinking or any component of the five aggregates. The Buddha's claim that what is impermanent is suffering, and what is suffering is

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[12] See the *Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (*MN*, henceforth), trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Wisdom Publications, 1995), 123–27.

[13] See *SN*, 22:29, 95; 875–76, 951.

[14] See *SN*, 22:7, 865–66.

[15] The Buddha subsequently applies the same argument to the views that respectively identify feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness as the self. See *SN*, 22:59, 901–03.

nonself does not apply to the Cartesian Self, which exists independently from experience, yet possesses and actively participates in it.

§ 2. The Buddha's Rejection of the Cartesian Self

Does the Buddha address the Cartesian Self in the Nikāyas, rejecting it as he does the identification of the five aggregates as the self? In the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha criticises three conceptions of the self that associate the self with feeling: (i) "feeling is my self," (ii) "feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient," and (iii) "feeling is not my self, but my self is not impercipient, it is of a nature to feel."[16] We can generalise the Buddha's criticisms so that they challenge not only conceptions of the self associated with feeling, but also those that associate the self with other aspects of experience, such as form, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. Thus, three conceptions of the self are subject to the Buddha's criticisms: (i) some component of the five aggregates is the self, (ii) the self is not identical with any component of the five aggregates, and remains inactive while experience occurs, and (iii) the self is not identical with any component of the five aggregates, but actively participates in experience. The Cartesian Self – which regards the self as a thinking thing "that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions"[17] – most closely resembles the third conception of the self that the Buddha critiques: namely, the kind conceived as independent of but actively participating in experience. Just as the sense organs are distinct from and irreducible to feelings, so too, the Cartesian Self, which perceives the information received through the sense organs, is distinct from and irreducible to mental perception.

The Buddha argues that the first conception of the self is wrong because, as we have seen, the five aggregates – which make up the totality of human experience – are constantly changing, dependently arisen, and subject to cessation. The evanescence of feeling reveals the falseness of the views that identify feeling as the self:

> Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently-arisen, bound to decay, to vanish, to fade away, to cease – and so too are painful feeling and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on experiencing a pleasant feeling, thinks: "This is my self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think: "My self has gone!" and the same with painful and neutral feelings. Thus whoever thinks: "Feeling is my self" is contemplating something in this present life that is impermanent, a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is my self."[18]

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[16] See the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (*DN*, henceforth), trans. Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications, 1995), 226–27.
[17] See Descartes's Second Meditation; in *PW, vol. 2*, 19.
[18] *DN*, 227.

While the second and third conceptions of the self disagree with whether the self participates in experience, the Buddha rejects them on the same grounds that it is *unfitting* to posit a self existing independently of experience, regardless of its relations to experience.

> "If, friend, no feelings at all were to be experienced, would there be the thought: 'I am'?" [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, my self is impercipient."
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> "Well, friend, if all feelings absolutely and totally ceased, could there be the thought: 'I am this?'" [to which he would have to reply:] "No, Lord." Therefore it is not fitting to maintain: "Feeling is not my self, but myself is not impercipient, my self is of a nature to feel."[19]

In both passages, the Buddha appears to suggest that the self ceases to exist when experience ceases. However, when we consider what immediately follows his discussion of the nature of the self, it becomes evident that the Buddha rejects the second and third conceptions of the self on epistemological and moral, rather than ontological, grounds.

After rejecting the three conceptions of the self as unfitting, the Buddha goes on to claim that it is equally unfitting to assert either that the Tathāgata exists after death, or the Tathāgata does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.[20] The term *Tathāgata* – literally, "one who has thus gone" – refers to a Buddha who has attained *nibbāna* – literally, "blowing out" – that is, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, by following the four noble truths, which teach that craving leads to renewed existence, and the cessation of craving leads to the cessation of renewed existence.[21] The Buddha explicitly rejects the view that a person who remains within the cycle of rebirth – that is, who has not brought an end to craving – is annihilated after death, since renewed existence arises dependently on the craving of previous existence.[22] In contrast, he is silent on the question of whether the Tathāgata exists after death, since the answer is both unintelligible to those who remain within the cycle of rebirth and unconducive to attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth.[23] Just as knowing the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence is cognitively meaningless and morally harmful for attaining nibbāna, so it is cognitively meaningless and morally harmful to speculate about the nature of the self. In the next two sections, I will consider the grounds on which the Buddha rejects the speculations about the Tathāgata's existence after death and about the nature of the self, and argue that his

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[19] *DN*, 227.
[20] *DN*, 228.
[21] *SN* 12:15, 544; 56:11, 1844–45.
[22] See *SN* 12:15, 544.
[23] The Buddha insists that the Tathāgatas themselves – who have attained nibbāna – possess "super-knowledge" about the Tathāgata's existence after death, yet such knowledge is unintelligible to those who remain within the cycle of rebirth. See *DN*, 228.

argument not only cannot persuade a rational person who believes in the Cartesian Self to abandon that belief, but would simply appear as a groundless assertion.

§ 3. The Buddha's Epistemology

The Buddhist scholar David J. Kalupahana argues that from the perspective of early Buddhism, all speculative views about any "metaphysical" question – such as whether the Buddha exists after death and whether the Cartesian Self exists – are cognitively meaningless, since they cannot be judged intellectually to be true or false.[24] Following his teacher K.N. Jayatilleke, Kalupahana interprets the Buddha's epistemology as grounded in an empiricist principle that, in contrast with Hinduism and the later Mahāyāna Buddhism, limits the scope of knowledge to human experience.

> What, monks, is "everything?" Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odour, tongue and taste, body and tangibles, mind and concepts. These are called "everything." Monks, he who would say, "I will reject this everything and proclaim another everything," he may certainly have a theory (of his own). But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience.[25]

The metaphysical questions, which transcend the six spheres of experience (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), are unknowable by all the valid epistemic tools we have and therefore subject to endless disputations.

As we have seen, the Buddha claims that it is unfitting to assert either that the Tathāgata exists after death, or the Tathāgata does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death, or the Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.[26] In another sutta, the Buddha likens the Tathāgata, who has attained liberation from the cycle of rebirth, to the ocean, deep, immeasurable, and hard to fathom.[27] While the Tathāgata is said to have terminated the cycle of rebirth, it is wrong to apply "does not reappear" to the dead Tathāgata, as it is nonsensical to describe the fire as having gone to the east, the south, the west, or the north when the fire extinguishes. This is because the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence transcends human experience and cannot be understood through concepts derived from it, such as appearance and disappearance.

Kalupahana argues that the Buddha's epistemology aligns with logical empiricism, except that the Buddha includes the mind among the sensory faculties and

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[24] See David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (The University Press of Hawaii, 1976), 153–62.

[25] Cited in David J. Kalupahana, "A Buddhist Tract on Empiricism," *Philosophy East & West* 19 (1969): 66.

[26] *DN*, 228.

[27] See the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta*, in *MN*, 390–93.

recognises extrasensory perceptions – such as the retrocognition of one's past lives in the cycle of rebirth – as valid perceptions of the mind.[28] Logical empiricism, as A.J. Ayer explains in his influential book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, rests on the verifiability criterion of meaning (henceforth, "verificationism"), the criterion that a factual statement is cognitively meaningless if it is not in principle verifiable by sense-contents.[29] According to Kalupahana, since both the normal perceptions of what we ordinarily call the "five senses" and the supernormal perceptions of the mind are unable to detect the presence of a self which exists apart from experience, the self must not be an element of "everything" to which factual statements can meaningfully refer. I think that a criticism of verificationism would shed light on the inadequacies of the Buddha's epistemology, even if we do not accept Kalupahana's identification of it with logical empiricism.[30] I hope to show, therefore, through Ayer's failure of making a persuasive argument for accepting verificationism, that the Buddha's critique of the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology is insufficient for converting the Cartesian philosopher to the Buddhist conception of human personality.

Let us consider why Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* can hardly convince the opponents of verificationism. Ayer argues that there are only two kinds of meaningful statements: (i) synthetic statements which are in principle verifiable by sense-contents, and (ii) analytic statements which are necessarily true and await concrete applications in which their truths are proven by sense-contents. The truth or falsehood of any meaningful synthetic statement must, at least in principle, be able to be determined *a posteriori* by sense-contents. Since statements about a transcendent ego – such as the Cartesian Self – are synthetic statements unverifiable by sense-contents, such "metaphysical" statements are neither true nor false, but literally meaningless. But Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* is not so much an argument for verificationism and against what we may call the "transcendental metaphysics," as a clarification of some of the implications of verificationism concerning knowledge, ethics, and theology. Thus, the proponents of transcendental metaphysics would ask why they should accept those implications, given that they do *not* accept verificationism in the first place. To understand why Ayer cannot convince the proponents of transcendental metaphysics to accept verificationism, it is necessary to consider what some of its implications specifically are.

The first implication concerns the existence of other minds.[31] To avoid the undesirable conclusion that any statement about the existence of other minds is literally meaningless because they are inaccessible to observation, Ayer maintains that the truth or falsehood of such statements can be decided by a conceivably

[28] See Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, 16–24, 158–60.
[29] See A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Penguin Books, 2001).
[30] Some have argued against the identification of Buddhist epistemology with empiricism in general, and logical empiricism in particular. See, for example, Frank J. Hoffman, "The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 2 (1982): 151-58; and David Montalvo, "The Buddhist Empiricism Thesis: An Extensive Critique," *Asian Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1999): 51–70.
[31] See chapter 7 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 139–40.

accessible empirical criterion – namely, whether the object, which may either be an automaton or a conscious human being, behave in ways that a conscious human being would in fact behave. Since Ayer, who is himself a conscious human being, knows a lot about how a conscious human being would in fact behave, it is certainly conceivable that one can know all of the ways a conscious human being would in fact behave, and test the behaviours of an object – which may either be an automaton or a conscious human being – against the ways that a conscious human being would in fact behave. It is rational to reject such behaviourism, however, when one rejects verificationism from which it derives, and when there are no strong independent reasons for thinking that such behaviourism is true. It is very likely that there are no strong independent reasons for thinking that such behaviourism is true, since it only infers the antecedent from the consequent, and appears even more incredible when artificial intelligence unprecedentedly obscures the boundary between a machine and a conscious human being, by reducing their differences in outer behaviours and appearances.

The second implication concerns the nature of ethical statements.[32] Ayer argues that statements about moral facts must be literally meaningless because such facts cannot be proven true or false by observation. Thus, the statement that "it is wrong that you steal that money" is equivalent in meaning with the statement that "you steal that money," their only difference being that the former is uttered within certain emotions such as horror or disgust. However, since Ayer's verificationism is the foundation for his moral non-cognitivism, one who judges verificationism false would also reject non-cognitivism when no significant external reasons are available for thinking that non-cognitivism is true. But one may well consider non-cognitivism implausible, on the grounds that moral intuitions strongly indicate that ethical statements express not just emotions but moral beliefs which are capable of being true or false in accordance with the moral facts they purport to describe.

Another implication of Ayer's verificationism is that there is no meaningful statement about the spiritual realm – the realm of God, angels and demons, and Platonic ideas – because all such statements lack verifiability.[33] But one who judges verificationism false would not subscribe to the view that all religious statements, which cannot be verified by observation, are meaningless, unless there are strong reasons independent of verificationism for thinking that they are indeed meaningless. It is very likely, however, that one does not have strong external reasons to regard all religious statements as literally meaningless. For example, following Paul Tillich, one may argue that the meaning of a certain religious statement derives from the ways that it seeks to express one's ultimate concern.[34] The truth or falsehood of such a statement will not be decided by whether it can be verified by observation, but whether the ultimacy that it seeks to express is the true ultimacy rather than some finite idol which will eventually abandon its followers in

[32] See chapters 1 and 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 107–18.
[33] See chapters 1 and 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic*, especially 119–26.
[34] See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (Harper Torchbooks, 1958).

existential disappointment. Therefore, one who rejects verificationism may simply ignore the implications of verificationism, while adopting some other standard to determine whether a certain religious statement is meaningful or not.

What I have tried to show above is that the implications of verificationism lose their foundations when verificationism itself is rejected, and that it is rational to reject or simply ignore those implications when there are no significant reasons independent of verificationism itself for thinking that they are indeed true. In fact, one may appropriate the Moorean argument against the scepticism about material objects, and argue that those implications are false just because they have such-and-such contents.[35] For example, the moral realist who believes in moral facts and their relevance to our ordinary moral discourse may argue that non-cognitivism is false simply because it denies the relevance of moral facts to our ordinary moral discourse. In the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha denounces the Cartesian Self as unfitting because his epistemology requires that "everything" does not include the existence of such selves. However, the Cartesian philosopher who rejects the Buddha's epistemology may well believe that it is *not* unfitting to conceive the self as existing independently of experience, unless there are strong external reasons for thinking either that such a conception is indeed unfitting or that the Buddha's epistemology is plausible and ought to be accepted. But it is very likely that for those who accept the Cartesian Intuition, there is no sufficiently strong reason for thinking that such a conception of the self is unfitting. They may reasonably accept the Cartesian Intuition on the grounds of its phenomenological plausibility, as they regard moral intuitions as the primary source of moral knowledge.[36] Without sufficiently strong independent reasons for accepting the Buddha's epistemology and rejecting the Cartesian Intuition, the Cartesian philosopher may simply regard the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self as a groundless assertion.[37]

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[35] See G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), chapters 5 and 6. Moore's argument, simplistically put, is that if the scepticism about material objects is correct, then I do not know that this pencil – a material object – exists; but since I *do* know that this pencil exists, the scepticism about material objects must be false.

[36] Tomhave – who prefers the Buddha's explanation of human personality over Descartes's – concedes that Descartes's explanation appears to be intuitively correct. It is beyond my ability and the scope of this essay to define what "reasonableness" consists in and determine what counts as a good reason for accepting the Cartesian Intuition. My point is simply that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology makes no sense to those who reject his epistemology.

[37] Later Buddhist philosophers do develop arguments – which are independent of the Buddha's epistemology – against the self existing apart from experience and somehow possessing it. Candrakīrti, for example, argues that introspection merely reveals constantly changing psychophysical processes rather than a self existing independently of experience and possessing it. His argument seems unconvincing to me, as he only rejects the Cartesian Intuition on the grounds of his own intuition that introspection does not indicate the existence of a Cartesian self. For a discussion of Candrakīrti's argument and its similarities with Hume's argument against the Cartesian Self, see Jay L. Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 13-28.

§ 4. The Buddha's Soteriology

When the Buddha describes the speculative views about the existence or non-existence of the Tathāgata after death as unfitting, he suggests not only that those views are cognitively meaningless because they transcend the realm of the senses, but also that they are morally pointless because they are not conducive to attaining nibbāna. The *Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta* relates the story of a monk who insisted that he would abandon his discipleship under the Buddha if the Buddha refused to answer such "metaphysical" questions as whether the Tathāgata exists after death and whether the world is infinite and eternal. The Buddha likened this monk to a person who, wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, said to the surgeon,

> I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a khattiya, a brahmin, a merchant, or a worker […] whether the man who wounded me was tall, short, or of middle height […] whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow […] whether the bowstring that wounded was finer, reed, sinew, hemp, or bark […].[38]

Just as knowing the characteristics of the weapon and of the person who causes the wound will not save the wounded person's life, so answering the metaphysical questions is useless for terminating suffering and achieving nibbāna. The reason why the Buddha judges the Cartesian Self to be unfitting, as he does the speculative views about the post-mortem existence of the Tathāgata, is twofold: such a conception of the self is not only cognitively meaningless but also irrelevant to achieving the goal of Buddhist discipleship.

The goal of Buddhist discipleship is nibbāna, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and the necessary condition for achieving this is the cessation of craving and clinging, which are the ultimate causes of renewed existence and the suffering inherent in it. As the Buddha pronounces in his first sermon, the correct understanding of human personality that is beneficial to attaining nibbāna is to regard the person as "five aggregates subject to clinging."[39] One may cling to form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, or consciousness either by appropriation or by identification.[40] Such clinging is caused by craving, which seeks pleasure in the five aggregates but never seizes lasting fulfilment, since pleasure is only transient and always accompanied by suffering. To attain nibbāna is to eradicate craving and the concomitant pleasure and suffering altogether. Thus, the state of being liberated from the cycle of rebirth should aptly be described as a state of tranquility rather than a state of beatitude, since the Buddhist solution to unfulfilled desires, the root of suffering, is neither pursuing their lasting fulfilment – which the Buddhist deems as an impossibility – nor minimising the suffering which accompanies pleasure and

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[38] See *MN*, 352–54.

[39] See *SN*, 56:11, 1843–47.

[40] See my discussion of the relationship between impermanence and suffering in section §1, "What the Buddha's Argument against the Cartesian Self Is Not About."

happiness, but eliminating the desires themselves. With the cessation of desires, however, suffering ceases while many transient pleasures are lost. It is no longer possible to learn, to use a line from the film *Shadowlands*, that "the pain then is part of the happiness now."

Just as the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his epistemology appears groundless to those who reject his epistemology, so too, his argument for the moral harmfulness of the Cartesian Self cannot convince those who already adhere to an alternative soteriology, but would instead appear as a groundless assertion. For example, Thomas Chalmers, a nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, argued that it is not only unlikely but also inconsistent with human nature to seek the elimination of desire. Since we cannot and should not eradicate our desires, Chalmers maintained that wholehearted love for God does not arise from merely demonstrating the evanescence of worldly pleasures, for such a demonstration is always ineffectual unless our desires are given a new and more attractive object. Rather, love for God arises from shifting the object of our desires from worldly pleasures to the God of love.

> [If] the way to disengage the heart from the positive love of one great and ascendant object is to fasten it in positive love to another, then it is not by exposing the worthlessness of the former but by addressing to the mental eye the worth and excellence of the latter that all old things are to be done away and all things are to become new. […] We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our hearts than to keep in our hearts the love of God […].[41]

Chalmers might find the Buddha's soteriology unrealistic and misguided, since Chalmers attributes salvation to redirecting our desires to the proper object rather than eradicating them completely. For Chalmers and others who reject the Buddha's soteriology, the nature of the self may well be irrelevant to attaining salvation; it may well be compatible to adhere to the Cartesian Self while still achieving the goal of their own soteriology.

To strengthen our claim that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on his soteriology cannot convince those who hold different soteriological views, let us also compare the Buddha's soteriology with that of the Christian philosopher John Hick, who aligns himself with the "Irenaean" or "soul-making" tradition of Christian theodicy.[42] In his interpretation of Genesis 3, Hick construes the creation of humans not as a given fact but as a teleological movement which involves two stages. The first stage is the creation of the biological life of humans who are produced out of the long process of evolution and placed in a "religiously ambiguous universe," in which suffering abounds and God's presence and activities are not transparent.[43] The second stage of the creation, on the other hand, points to

[41] Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (Crossway, 2020), 47–48, 68.
[42] See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Macmillan, 1966).
[43] See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 318.

the fulfilment of human existence, as manifested in a Christ-like virtuous life which contains a perfected personal relationship with God. Whereas the Buddhist seeks to terminate the cycle of rebirth and thereby avoid suffering by eliminating the underlying desires, Hick understands suffering as an indispensable part of God's universe which is designed to be a suitable environment for cultivating moral virtues and developing relationships of love with our Maker and with fellow human beings.

Hick leaves unanswered whether the soul that strives to overcome difficulties and attain eternal bliss resembles the Cartesian Self which exists apart from experience yet possesses and actively participates in it. However, those who accept Hick's theodicy may well believe that the soul is indeed a substance which exists independently of experience yet possesses and actively participates in it. They may adhere to this belief because it helps them make sense of their place in God's universe and explain their personal connection with God. From their perspective, it is beneficial for their salvation to conceive the self as a substance existing independently of experience yet possessing and actively participating in it, and the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self based on *his* soteriology is simply groundless or even detrimental for their salvation.

§ 5. Conclusion

I have tried to argue that the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self is *not* sufficient to convince a rational person who adheres to the Cartesian Intuition to believe that it is unfitting to conceive the self as existing apart from experience while possessing and actively participating in it. The Buddha's argument, which should be distinguished from his argument that the self is not identical to the totality or any component of the five aggregates, is grounded in his epistemology and soteriology. For those who accept the Cartesian Intuition and reject the Buddha's epistemology and soteriology, the Buddha's suggestion that it is unfitting to conceive the self as existing independently of experience yet possessing and actively participating in it would simply appear to be groundless. Therefore, the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self – which is grounded in the Buddha's own epistemology and soteriology – is philosophically unsuccessful, since it cannot convince a rational person who rejects his epistemology and soteriology to abandon her belief in the Cartesian Self, and would appear to such a person as a baseless assertion.

It may be objected that it is inappropriate, perhaps uncharitable, to characterise the Buddha's argument against the Cartesian Self as a philosophical failure. After all, one might argue, many good philosophical arguments fail to persuade a fully rational person who holds opposing views on the basis of the argument alone. However, even if a lack of persuasive force is not sufficient grounds for deeming an argument philosophical unsuccessful, the reconstruction of the Buddha's argument against an intuition of the Cartesian Self remains an unsuccessful one. This is because his argument is grounded in epistemological and soteriological convictions

for which he offers no independent argument, and which interlocutors may reasonably reject.

It may also be objected that the success of a philosophical argument should not be defined in terms of its ability to convince a rational person who adheres to the opposing view that the argument in question is sound: such a criterion of philosophical success is too demanding. Philosophical success, according to this objection, is the success of persuading the members of an ideally rational agnostic audience that the argument in question is sound, after patient, meticulous disputations with an ideally rational person who is committed to the opposing view.[44] However, to attract the agnostic audience, the Buddha would need to provide positive, independent arguments for preferring his own epistemology and soteriology to their alternatives, *without begging the question* – a standard mark of a flawed philosophical argument.[45] Without such arguments, the Buddhist and her opponent can only talk past each other, whether an ideally rational agnostic audience is present or not.[46]

[44] For these two conceptions of philosophical success, see chapter 3 of Peter van Inwagen's *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[45] I am not aware of any such *philosophical* arguments in the Nikāyas. I do not deny that there might be *religious* reasons for preferring the Buddha's epistemology and soteriology to their alternatives.

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