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Comparing Ontologies

Emotion, Reason, and the Good Life

I, Anthony Kroytor, hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that all direct or indirect sources used are acknowledged as references. I further declare that I have not submitted this thesis at any other institution in order to obtain a degree.

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A note on terminology and abbreviations

One of the two major primary sources referenced in this work is the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon. It is, unlike the works of Aristotle, not well-known among Western philosophers; it is therefore hoped that a brief introductory statement will prove helpful. The Pāli words for Buddhist terms that have become commonplace in Western countries will be preferred over their Sanskrit counterparts, for instance, *nibbāna* rather than *nirvana*. The Pāli terms will be used for two reasons: firstly, because the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism play a major role in this work. Secondly, Theravāda departs to a significant degree from today's popular Buddhism-inspired movements (most of which contain the word *mindfulness* in their names), so it is perhaps better to avoid confusion by presenting Theravāda thought in its original language.

The word *sutta* may sound somewhat familiar to the reader; it is not so different from the Sanskrit *sutra*, a word common enough to have become assimilated into American English, as its entry in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary attests¹. The discourses contained in the Sutta Piṭaka, or collection of teachings, are preserved both in the Pāli Canon and in translation in the Chinese Buddhist Canon. Hence, the texts that will be referenced are regarded as authoritative in all the schools of Buddhism. The Sutta Piṭaka is the most important of the three main divisions (lit. "baskets") of the Pāli Canon because it contains the teachings themselves. The subjects of the remaining divisions are monastic discipline (the Vinaya Piṭaka) and an extensive interpretation of the principles expounded in the suttas (the Abhidhamma Piṭaka—"beyond the Dhamma"). The Pāli Canon is therefore also known as the Tipiṭaka, *the three baskets*. The Sutta Piṭaka is divided into five collections called *nikāyas*, in which suttas are organized according to formal characteristics such as length, subject, and the mention of numbers. The names and abbreviations of these collections are:

The Dīgha Nikāya (DN), or the collection of long suttas.

The Majjhima Nikāya (MN), or the collection of middle-length suttas.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN), or the collection of suttas related by subject.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sutra>

The Anguttara Nikāya (AN), or the collection of numerical suttas.

The Khuddaka Nikāya, (KN), or the collection of shorter (little) suttas, which consists of eighteen smaller collections. The following are relevant: the Khuddhakapatha (Khp), Dhammapada (Dhp), Udāna (Ud), Itivuttaka (Iti), and the Suttanipāta (Sn).

Every sutta will be referenced with the name of its collection, sub-collection, and verse number according to the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana CD edition of the Tipiṭaka (<https://tipitaka.org/>). For example, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, also known as the Pañcavaggiya Sutta, is cited as SN 22.59—verse fifty-nine of the twenty-second collection in the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

This work favors the use of *she* as a generic pronoun; human beings of all genders are referred to.

Foreword

As I began work on this thesis, a little over a decade had passed since, while suffering from a stubborn bout of depression, I discovered the practice and philosophy of Theravāda Buddhism. My first tentative readings of translations from the Pāli Canon were accompanied by an awareness that the things troubling me at the time had already been causing a great deal of worry for millennia. A feeling of disgust at the world in which I found myself had become an unwelcome and constant companion. This feeling had a name: *saṃvega*, and Buddhism began with it; it is the state of mind that had originally goaded the Buddha into abandoning his palace and his wife and child. *Samvega* was not a disease to be rid of, but the impetus to investigate the world. Or rather its shortcomings. Had the Buddha's chariot ridden through the working-class and impoverished neighborhoods of Brooklyn, I am certain he would have been convinced of the world's deficiency. The Three Sights that the Buddha was confronted with during his ride beyond the palace walls—a person bent over with age, a sick man, and a corpse—must have been unnerving, but I think the sight of the homeless drug addicts, the thugs, and the permanently exhausted and depressed minimum-wage workers inhabiting my old neighborhood would have sufficed to incite *saṃvega* in the young prince.

In the West, Buddhism is presented as somehow more scientific than Christianity, free of the latter's dogmatic and superstitious trappings. This is, of course, not at all the case. When I first came in contact with Buddhist teachings, I decided to regard their mythical episodes as metaphoric, as perhaps didactic or rhetorical devices; a way to embellish texts that were formulaic and repetitive by design—they were originally meant to be learnt by heart, recited, and heard, not written down. Several extended stays in Theravāda monasteries in both Southeast Asia and the United States eventually disabused me of this notion. In one US monastery I recall hearing university-educated Americans earnestly discussing how the head monk had managed to expand the monastery's territory only after promising the local *devas* (forest spirits) that no harm would come to their land. The *devas* were presumably able to exert some manner of influence over the recalcitrant landowner. Whether there are indeed forest spirits and whether they are able

to influence landowners does not concern me so much as the gravitas with which this entirely unverifiable story was told and the credulity with which it was heard.

Buddhism is a religion built upon (1) a philosophical system: an ontology, a logic, an ethics; (2) a system of meditation with the purpose of bringing about certain mental states in the practitioner. The end goal is enlightenment, or, quite simply, experiencing the world and oneself as they really are: impermanent and empty of a *self*.² But like any other religion, it also requires faith in unverifiable claims. Disentangling the supernatural from the philosophical and the psychological is not always easy. The circumstances of your birth, for instance, depend on how you led your previous lives, the memory of which are inaccessible to you. For that matter, you do not have a soul, or an essence—so what was it that was reborn? A traditional answer: desire, and not anything like a soul, persists after the disintegration of the body. We can liken the transmigration of desire to the flame of a dying candle being used to light a fresh one. The candles (bodies) are distinct, but is the flame the same one?

Did my depression lead me to so readily accept Buddhism? Although my infatuation with it has cooled in the past decade, I nevertheless hold that, as a philosophical system, it is unassailable. If you accept the premises of Buddhist thought—that the world is essentially unsatisfactory, that suffering befalls everyone without exception, and that there are no selves to be found—then its conclusions are undeniable. There are no lacunae in its reasoning. But I was led to the solution offered by Buddhism by *feelings*. By emotion. Were my circumstances and disposition different, then I would have perhaps turned to another philosophy and likewise found its conclusions as irrefutable as those of Buddhism. My circumstances have changed a great deal, but I am not prepared to jettison Buddhist philosophy; it reveals to me something essential about the world. But so does Aristotelianism, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and various other schools of thought. I must admit that emotional

² The use of the term “self” in this context may sound unusual to those unfamiliar with Buddhist philosophy. I attempt to provide the proper context on pages 14–26 (*From saṃvega to emptiness*).

affinity is at the heart of my engagement with any philosophy, and I suspect, for various reasons, that the same is true for everyone. What follows is an attempt to reconcile a plurality of philosophical viewpoints while granting primacy to the emotions pushing us to adopt one or the other. They, and not reason, are the impetus that sets the tone and establishes the course of a given school of thought. To put it succinctly, the purposes of this work are to: (1) state why emotions ought to be privileged in philosophy, and (2) outline how this may lead to a tenable approach to philosophy.

Aristotle and the Buddha: wonder and shock

Aristotle was astonished by the world, the Buddha—dismayed. The former declared that the universe came into being through the act of an *unmoved mover*, a universe filled to the brim with substances. For the Buddha, questions concerning the creation, purpose or goal of the universe were pointless: what we call *existence* is in truth only suffering. The word *suffering* fails to capture all the nuances of the Pāli word *dukkha*, which possesses a wider and more subtle range of meaning: disquiet, unrest, discomfort, stress. We are never truly at home in existence, hence all attempts at a final explanation of the comings and goings of things are made in vain. A person wounded by a poisoned arrow ought to have it removed immediately rather than first insist on knowing the details of the arrow's construction, the archer's provenance, and the principles of archery in general. But if, on the other hand, existence presents itself as a sublime puzzle rather than an injury, then a sense of wonder accompanies every discovery of yet another of the world's mysteries. Wonder, as Aristotle said, and then wonder again—at the thought that things could ever be other than the way they are.³ Natural philosophers believed that the world could be deciphered, as do their modern-day counterparts, who today work in the *hard* sciences. But the Buddhist's gaze is directed inward; she seeks to decipher her self by dismantling it until, in a moment of astonishment, she discovers that her seemingly permanent self—her soul—is a pernicious illusion, an *aggregate of suffering*, as the Buddha called it.

S.N. Goenka, known in the West as a popularizer of vipassanā meditation—which is nothing other than a form of meditation described in the canonical texts of early Buddhism—claims that vipassanā is a “science of mind and matter.”⁴ The everyday achievements of technological advances, banal through their omnipresence and the shortness of our memories: mobile phones, cars, immunizations—all pale in comparison to ultimate knowledge of reality itself. What could be more important than the attainment of the one

³ *Metaphysics* 983a15–20, trans. Tredennick

⁴ This claim was made in a speech recorded in 2016:
<https://youtu.be/uhqSuAIDV34>

thing that is eternal, subject neither to decay nor death, the Truth itself: nibbāna? (Or, if you prefer: nirvana, the equivalent Sanskrit word.) A mobile phone, a car or even an immunization may indeed seem to improve life. And a leper might improve his life by cauterizing his sores over a fire, but the cause of his disease will remain untreated, as the Buddha remarked. (MN 75) And who does not today feel chained to a mobile phone or forced to post on social media?

Antonio Damasio claims that our decision-making process is largely led by emotions. Were it not so, then we would be incapable of initiating any action, much less carrying it through. In *Descartes' Error*⁵, Damasio describes the case of a man, “Elliot,” who, due to a brain injury, became unable to experience emotion despite retaining his cognitive abilities. Elliot could count, plan, weigh pros and cons, but could not decide whether to use a blue or a black pen. He was unable to begin his work because there was no rational reason to prefer one color over the other. Damasio claims that the greater part of actions potentially available to us are excluded without our even suspecting it. Logic serves intuition, surfacing in the wake of feeling: “the intuitive spirit is a divine gift and the rational spirit a faithful servant,” remarked Einstein. Everyone’s personal world is composed of affective resonances; everything one comes in contact with evokes some kind of emotional reaction, and whatever lacks emotional significance remain unacknowledged and unseen. And if everything should become wholly bereft of meaning and no emotional resonance felt at all, the conviction of one’s own death (despite all rational evidence to the contrary) may set it—a rare delusion called Cotard’s syndrome, which occasionally manifests in cases of extreme depression.

Aristotle set human flourishing—*eudaimonia*—as the highest human good. The achievement of an ultimate good is integral to Buddhist thought as well, albeit this good is articulated in negative terms. Negative is here meant in the sense of *a lack of*: “What I teach now as before, O Monks, is suffering and *the cessation of suffering*.” (Majjhima Nikāya 22, trans. Nyanaponika, emphasis mine) Freedom from suffering, a synonym for *nibbāna*, constitutes

⁵ Damasio, Antonio. 2005. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. 10th ed. New York: Penguin Books.

the good life for the Buddhist, in contrast with the Aristotelian view of eudaemonia:

[...] it follows that the Good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue. (Nicomachean Ethics 1098a15)

The basic principles of both Aristotelianism and Buddhism are reflected in their respective component parts. The fullness of being, its substantiality, is mirrored in eudaemonia—a life *full of* virtue, of activity, or simply: a life of flourishing. On the other hand, experiential knowledge of the insubstantiality of being, of its fundamental emptiness yields the ultimate good of a radical lack of suffering: the all-consuming fire goes out. *Nibbāna* is a word adapted by the Buddha to express a philosophical concept; in a literal sense it simply means *blown out, extinguished*. One of the Buddha's first discourses, which also served as T.S. Eliot's inspiration for the third part of *The Waste Land*, is called *The Fire Sermon*.⁶

The good life, in either its Aristotelian or Buddhist expression, occupies a place of central concern in this work. I seek to privilege neither presence nor absence, fullness nor emptiness, substantiality nor insubstantiality. My intent is rather to examine the implicit emotional foundations lying beneath the irreproachable logics of opposing philosophies in order to let them complement one other. Aristotle's concept of substance and the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned arising are both entirely justified worldviews, but neither ought to be taken as an ultimate description of the world. I believe that an acknowledgement of the primacy of emotion over reason in the construction (or selection) of a philosophical system can serve as the basis of a pluralistic approach. We should allow our choice of philosophies to be based on our changing emotional needs, and we should state this explicitly. Otherwise, we are forced to choose between this or that one-dimensional conception of the world, that is, to choose which lacunae we happen to prefer.

⁶ *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, SN 35.28

The whole seen from two angles—or better yet, three or four—grants a more complete view.

An etymological aside

As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.
(Emerson 1844)

Every word can be read as a poem. The name of each thing, carefully examined, reveals the meaning given to it. In German, a *Gegenstand* is something that quite literally *stands before me*, not unlike the Russian *npedmem*, a calque of the Latin word *objectum*: “cast before.” Our language delivers us words ready-made, many of them with thousand-year histories. As children, we have learned these words without a second thought, ignorant of their etymologies. Only when a concept lacks a fitting word do we either use a familiar one in a new context or try to come up with something entirely novel. *Nibbāna*’s literal meaning, *blown out*, is an instance of the former category. Another is Aristotle’s term *to ti en einai* (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), literally the what-it-was-to-be, which in English, via Latin, is rendered as *essence*. Whereas single essences take pride of place in Aristotle’s philosophy, a network of mutual conditionality stands at the center of Buddhist thought: *paṭiccasamuppāda*. *Paṭicca*, “having depended” + *samuppāda*, “arising”; hence the various English translations: *conditioned arising*, *conditioned origination*, *dependent arising*, *dependent co-arising*, or *dependent origination*.

When confronted with the inevitability of old age, disease, and death, the young prince Siddhattha (Siddhartha) was beset by *saṃvega*, a feeling of “shock, dismay, alienation that comes with realizing the futility and meaninglessness of life as it’s normally lived.” (Thanissaro 1997) *Sam* is an extremely common prefix in Pāli, meaning *coming together*, *joining*, *intensifying*. *Vega* is derived from *vij*—to tremble. Socrates and Aristotle were astonished, and this, both claim, marks the beginning of any philosophy. Yet astonishment, though distinct from *saṃvega*, still has something in common with it: A synonym of *thauma* is *thambos*, a word having the same root as the Sanskrit *stabh*—to stand still, to stiffen. Both *saṃvega* and *thauma* contain

an element of terror, both are evoked by an encounter with something that stops you in your tracks.

From *saṃvega* to emptiness

The four sights

Although the traditional account of the Buddha's renunciation of worldly life has become familiar in the West, it is nonetheless sensible to sketch out the essentials in order to establish a starting point in our investigation. Prince Siddhattha (meaning *one who has accomplished his aim*) of the Sakya clan was born in what is today known as Lumbini, Nepal, a region which then lay at the cultural and geographical edge of India. Upon his birth, sages were sent for and foretold that Siddhattha would either become a great ruler or an ascetic sage—except for, as one version of the story would have it, one brahmin, who claimed with certainty that the young prince would attain enlightenment. Enlightenment may well be a worthy aim, but kingdoms don't rule themselves; and so Siddhattha's father locked him away in a walled pleasure garden cleared of any reminders of the shortcomings, disappointments, inadequacies, and pain that every human life is subject to. At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhattha convinced his father to let him survey what lay beyond the palace walls. The ill, elderly and otherwise flawed were swept out of sight while the young prince enjoyed a chariot ride through the lands he would one day rule. Civic projects were evidently then as now never flawlessly executed: Siddhattha happened upon a man withered with age, a man unable to stand from illness, and a corpse borne on a stretcher to its burial. These sights, never before seen within the immaculately kept royal grounds, deeply distressed the young prince, who turned in dismay to his charioteer for an explanation: "You have seen old age, illness, and death. None who live escape them."

It is not necessary to accept this story as literally true, and it is doubtful whether many people today could even do so. The story imparts a deeply unsettling truth about being human: harsh reality inevitably seeps into any life, no matter how well it may be sealed off. Siddhattha, who by all accounts ought to have been satisfied with his life, gazed, bewildered, "[...] straight down into the abyss of his personal existence [...]". (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 3) Just as we all do at certain times in our lives, at the funeral of a loved one, in the

wake of yet another failed enterprise, or upon realizing that life simply won't accommodate most of our dreams. The story of a young prince's realization that living means aging, falling ill, and dying, is a literary depiction of an *existential crisis*. Ñāṇavīra speaks of the connection between Buddhism and existential philosophy's starting point of the first-person experience of cognitive dissonance, be it when the familiar self suddenly reveals itself to be a complete stranger, or when the familiar world becomes unrecognizable, though its outward appearance remains the same as it ever was:

Existential philosophies, then, insist upon asking questions about self and the world, taking care at the same time to insist that they are unanswerable. Beyond this point of frustration these philosophies cannot go. The Buddha, too, insists that questions about self and the world are unanswerable, either by refusing to answer them or by indicating that no statement about self and the world can be justified. But—and here is the vital difference—the Buddha can and does go beyond this point: not, to be sure, by answering the unanswerable, but by showing the way leading to the final cessation of all questions about self and the world. (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 6)

The last of the Four Sights was an ascetic wanderer making his way through the crowd, unperturbed by the frailty and pain which accompanies human life.

Leaving the palace; finding liberation

And so, abandoning a life of luxury in pursuit of the serenity promised by the Fourth Sight, Siddhattha would spend the next six years of his life engaged in practices of meditation and self-mortification. Neither states of meditative absorption in the *realm of nothingness* or in the realm of *neither-perception-nor-non-perception* nor willful near-starvation would lead to the permanent cessation of suffering: the meditative trance would sooner or later come to an end; the body, pushed to its utmost limits, would violently protest. The extreme of asceticism proved to be a dead end, just as a life of wealth and privilege had. Siddhattha then instead chose the *middle way*. He allowed

himself a simple meal and sat at the root of a pippala tree to meditate, recalling the soothing meditative state of *jhāna*⁷ he had once spontaneously entered as a child:

“Could that be the path to Awakening?” Then, following on that memory, came the realization: “That is the path to Awakening.” I thought: “So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful mental qualities?” (MN 36, trans. Thanissaro)

His mind thus relaxed and steadied, Siddhattha witnessed Truth directly, experiencing the impersonal cosmic law governing the coming-into-being and passing away of all things—the *Dhamma*. Siddhattha became a Buddha, literally an *awakened one*. The pippala tree he sat under became henceforth called the bodhi tree—the tree of awakening. As the *Dhamma* is a principle that holds true in all times and under all circumstances, one who is able to discover it unaided is *a* Buddha; Siddhattha is, for us, *the* Buddha because of historical reasons: he was the first in our world to experience the *Dhamma* and to decide to expound it despite his reservations, despite being troubled by the question: who would be willing to listen to a truth that so strongly went against the grain of our everyday intuitions?

Awakening, not enlightenment

The Pāli term *bodhi* has traditionally been translated as *enlightenment*, understood to mean *spiritual illumination*. Illumination, however, implies an outside source; the light of truth shines upon one from without, ultimately, in the context of Christian tradition, emanating from God. *Bodhi* is derived from the root *budh*, meaning “to awaken.” The Buddha has not only awakened to reality but has gone a step further, attaining *anuttara sammāsambodhi*—*incomparable perfect awakening*, and hence bears the title of Awakened One. In the Theravāda tradition, *bodhi*, the awakening that one may achieve in this life, is the result of the practice of Buddhism: ethical action, meditation, and

⁷ The names of the Chinese *Chan* and Japanese *Zen* traditions are derived from *dhyāna*, the Sanskrit word for *jhāna*.

study. Let us, as an example, consider meditation: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Teaching on the Foundations of Mindfulness, MN 10), the phrase “thus does he train himself” is the refrain uttered after every set of instructions. Correctly applied mindful attention is necessary for awakening, and this is a matter of training. One learns to figuratively take a step back from one’s body and mind and observe the processes taking place in each. At first, simply observing the breath proves to be a challenge; novice meditators are often surprised at how quickly and imperceptibly their focus slips from breathing into elaborate fantasies. With enough practice, attention can be sustained for ever longer periods of time, feelings may be allowed to come and go:

[The monk] remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to feelings, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to feelings, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to feelings. [...] And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on feelings in & of themselves. (MN 10, trans. Thanissaro)

The meditator notices that bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings arise and dissipate by themselves. She is taught to reflect: “But where do they come from; where do they go? If they come and go without my willing them, *are they mine?*” In the Ānāpānasati (Mindfulness of the Breath) Sutta (MN118), in-and-out breathing acts a starting point, a simple object lesson in inconstancy. The crucial step is shifting attention to the inconstancy itself lurking in something so simple, intimate, and taken-for-granted, something that was always undoubtedly *mine*. The final object of focus in the Ānāpānasati Sutta is *relinquishment (paṭinissaggā)*—an act of radical letting go far removed from inhalation and exhalation. This last step is ignored by the popular mindfulness movement. Perhaps because it is supremely impractical and difficult—after all, the purpose of holding an in-company meditation course during the lunch break is to calm stressed workers and thereby increase efficiency. The first tetrad of the Ānāpānasati Sutta begins with observing the breath and ends with calming the body. These initial steps are meant to prepare one to let go of all the mental and physical processes previously

thought to either be the self or under the control of the self, which happen to be *all mental and physical processes bar none*. This leads to awakening, to the experience of *nibbāna*. Mindfulness, like cardiovascular health or deductive reasoning, is inherently neither good nor bad but a tool. It is possible to mindfully cause harm to a fellow human being; this is why the Buddha insisted that only right mindfulness leads to awakening—*sammā sati*, the seventh element of the Noble Eightfold Path. Mindfully unclogging a drain or sending emails to the Sydney office at 1 am certainly ameliorates the unpleasantness of both tasks to some degree but will never, without further contemplative practice coupled with theoretical understanding, lead to *bodhi*.

The Buddhist does not hope for a revelation from without; rather, she depends on waking from delusion by dint of her own efforts on the path laid out by the Buddha. The practice of Buddhism culminates in *bodhi*, experiential first-person knowledge of things as they really are.

[A]wakening is clearly not an end divorced from its means, nor a realization separate from practice; rather it is the sum and the perfection of practice. This fact is often explicitly acknowledged in Buddhism—in assertions of the unity of realization and practice or in the variously formulated insistence that practice is essential to realization. (Gimello 2004, 50)

The three marks of existence

But how can we describe things as they are? All things are characterized by *three marks of existence*, as repeatedly mentioned in the Pāli canon⁸:

sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā: all put-together-things (variously termed conditioned things or fabrications) are impermanent;

sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā: all saṅkhāras are unsatisfactory;

sabbe dhammā anattā: all things are not-self.

⁸ See: AN 3.134; Dhṛp XX, 277-279.

The Pāli canon's many recurring phrases and tropes serve a practical function: the entire corpus was originally meant to be preserved and transmitted by rote memorization and recitation. As a consequence, those approaching the teachings, the *suttas*, for the first time must learn to unpack their formulae. Let us consider the *three marks of existence*, unfolded into a more easily comprehensible, albeit more verbose, dimension: All things that depend on other things (*saṅkhāras*) are impermanent and unsatisfactory. Everything whatsoever (including the Unconditioned) is not-self, lacking a permanent self or soul. *Saṅkhāras* do *not* exist, the world is *not* nothing. In the last of the *three marks*, *dhmma* is said in place of *saṅkhāra* because *nibbāna* is not conditioned by anything at all. Clarification is here needed concerning the difference between **the** *Dhamma* and a *dhmma*, any *dhmma*. The former is, as mentioned, the fundamental principle of the arising and passing away of all things:

In Buddhism the whole of the knowledge discovered by the Buddha is called [the] dharma. The Sanskrit root is dhr, which literally means hold, arrange. From the point of view of the Brahmanists, or rather Hindus, the dharma is the cosmic principle behind the origination of everything that is. For them [the] dharma can correspond to Brahma. It is nonetheless interesting to note that in Buddhism [the] dharma remained entirely as an impersonal understanding. (Hashi 2014, pg.37, trans. mine)

A *dhmma* in the latter sense is simply a thing—something that can be distinguished from other things. And *nibbāna* is the only thing that does not depend upon anything else.

Paṭiccasamuppāda

The *Dhamma* is unalterable—the Latin word *firmus* is related to its Sanskrit root. It is an unshakable ontological principle. What we term *existence* is neither wholly stuff nor ideas, nor some combination of the two, but a complex, mutually interdependent arising and passing away of all things. Let us consider the thought experiment of a tree falling in the woods: with no one around to hear it, does the tree make a sound? Can there be sound without

its being heard? We may consider a variation on this theme: if an object is moved, what happens to the space it occupied? Is the space still there, waiting to be inhabited by something else? The Buddhist approach to these impasses is to consider whether one element can be said to exist apart from the other. I ought to reflect, for instance, on whether the pen I am holding in my hand can exist without space, and, conversely, whether space can exist without containing some object. An object and space mutually condition one another. Kant's point of view differed. He declared that he could think of space unoccupied by any objects⁹—but was he not at the very same time thinking of himself, in the first-person perspective, at the center of it? The mutual interdependency of all phenomena rebukes the charge of annihilationism leveled against Buddhism. *Nibbāna* is indeed the end of existence, *but of existence as we know it*—unsatisfactoriness punctuated by transitory, imperfect pleasures. For the unawakened, the further shore of *nibbāna* is as unimaginable as dry land is for a fish.¹⁰

The mutually interdependent arising and passing away of all things is conceived of in terms of *idappaccayatā*—or, to use Thanissaro's rendition: *this/that conditionality*. It is an abstract principle of causality employed when particular cases of what we call existence are examined. In its complex, expanded form it becomes a network of mutually dependent variables: dependent origination, or *paṭiccasamuppāda*. The most well-known formulation consists of twelve links. Each is dependent on the other(s), forming, in the Buddha's words, a tangled skein.

⁹“One can never represent that there is no space, although one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it.” (Kant 1998, A24)

¹⁰ The Buddhist fable of a sea turtle recounting his visit to the seashore to a fish illustrates the inconceivability of awakening to those who have no inkling of it. As the sea turtle attempts to describe dry land, the fish grows incredulous: what can possibly be dry, a-thing-that-cannot-be-swum-through? As the turtle can only give negative answers to the fish's question, the fish concludes that dry land is *nothing*. In the absence of experiential knowledge of *nibbāna*, one can, in a similar manner, conclude that Buddhism is nihilism on the basis of claims that *nibbāna* is the end of all suffering and is the one thing that does not depend on anything else. The whole story may be read here:

https://www.budsas.org/ebud/budtch/budteach33.htm#_edn4

Thus have I heard: on one occasion the Blessed One [the Buddha] was staying at Uruvelā [...] for seven days, attending to the bliss of liberation. With the passing of seven days, in the last watch of the night, the Blessed One contemplated dependent arising thus, both forwards and backwards:

*when this is, that is; [these four lines: idapaccayatā]
with this arising, that arises;
when this is not, that is not;
with the cessation of this, that ceases.*

Therefore:

<i>avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā,</i>	<i>from ignorance as a condition come</i>
	<i>fabrications [put-together things],</i>
<i>saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ,</i>	<i>from fabrications—consciousness,</i>
<i>viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ,</i>	<i>from consciousness—name-and-</i>
<i>nāmarūpapaccayā salāyatanaṃ,</i>	<i>form,</i>
	<i>from name-and-form—the six sense</i>
<i>salāyatanaṃpaccayā phasso,</i>	<i>bases,</i>
<i>phassapaccayā vedanā,</i>	<i>from the six sense bases—contact,</i>
<i>vedanāpaccayā taṇhā,</i>	<i>from contact—sensation,</i>
<i>taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ,</i>	<i>from sensation—desire,</i>
<i>upādānapaccayā bhavo,</i>	<i>from desire—clinging [attachment],</i>
<i>bhavapaccayā jāti,</i>	<i>from clinging—becoming,</i>
<i>jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ</i>	<i>from being—birth,</i>
	<i>from birth—aging-and-death</i>

Evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhassa samudayo hoti.

Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

(Ud 1.3, trans. Thanissaro)

What is, is conditioned. It is senseless to ask whether the universe is limited or limitless—one could run to its edge and still find only *dukkha* there.

The interpretation of dependent origination is contested among the various Buddhist schools. In one traditional Theravāda exegesis,

paṭiccasamuppāda is divided up over the course of three lifetimes. Ignorance of the *Dhamma* in a prior life results in consciousness (*viññāṇa*) forming in a mother's womb, and desire and clinging (*taṇhā, upādāna*) condition rebirth and future death. Although this interpretation stays true to the Buddhist emphasis on conditionality, I am inclined to agree with both Thanissaro and Ñāṇavīra that it is not only severely deficient but also inaccurate in light of many canonical passages. It misses an essential point: everything that is, is of an *immediately apprehensible conditioned nature*. The *Dhamma* is not only timeless, it is *evident in the here-and-now* (*sandiṭṭhika*). We find this repeated so often in the Pāli canon that it acts as a refrain, a standard locution chanted countless times in Theravāda monasteries and in the homes of devotees. With its implicit fatalism, the three-lives interpretation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* further does violence to a fundamental idea in Buddhism: that a person is able to attain liberation from suffering by dint of freely chosen actions. If every circumstance—a feeling (*vedanā*), for instance—is only the result of prior circumstances, one then becomes unable to bring about a change in one's feelings by intentional reflection. And then we stand in direct conflict with one of the foundations of Buddhism.

Before proceeding to explain the unfamiliar terminology of *paṭiccasamuppāda* in detail, a brief paraphrase of its essential meaning: *If you are born, you will die. If you take yourself to be somebody, you will cease being that person. Whatever you take yourself to be will change and you will suffer at the thought that you have become diminished, that you are no longer sovereign over yourself. As long as you persist in the delusion that you have a permanent, unchanging self, being will be unsatisfactory and lacking.* At first glance, it seems that the self ought then to be destroyed. In Buddhism, the path of self-annihilation leads to the same place as its seeming opposite, the affirmation of an eternal soul: unsatisfactoriness. Self-destruction assumes that there is a self to destroy: "I will unmake myself, I no longer wish to be (a permanent and unchanging self)." Once an animal has been caught in a trap, it makes no difference whether it attempts to bolts to the left or the right. Desire remains desire regardless of its object. The wish to exist (as something) and the wish to not exist are not opposites but merely opposite desires.

Vedanāpaccayā taṇhā—One can crave only the things one can be said to feel: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and intellectual sensations.¹²

Phassapaccayā vedanā—Feeling can be said to result only if there is contact between an object and the corresponding sense.

Salāyatanapaccayā phasso—Contact cannot be made without a site for contact. One cannot smell without a sense of smell or with an obstructed nose.

Nāmarūpapaccayā salāyatanaṃ—*Nāma* (name) designates phenomenal qualities: feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. It is the manner in which things appear to me. *Rūpa*, although translated as “form,” should not be confused with Platonic or Aristotelian form, instead referring to the four elements, which are “[...] the general modes of behavior or matter: *earthy*, or persistent and resistant, or solid; *watery* [...]; *fiery* [...]; *airy* [...]

 (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 61) In the absence of phenomenal appearance and matter, the senses cannot be said to exist.

Viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ—*Consciousness* is used here is a sense different from the usual use in both Western philosophy and everyday speech. Buddhism conceives of consciousness as being of six different types, corresponding to the six senses. Consciousness of a sight is, for instance, awareness of something visible. There cannot be said to be phenomenal appearance and matter without awareness of their presence.

Saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ—A putting-together, a making, a fabrication, a determining conditions presence. *Saṅkhāras* may be of three different kinds: bodily, verbal, or mental. Breathing in and out is considered a bodily *saṅkhāra*. If the body is not breathing, one cannot be aware of breathing.

Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā—*Avijjā* denotes ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, that birth, aging and death are suffering; that suffering is born of desire; that there is an end to suffering; and that there is a path to its attainment.

¹² The intellect is considered a sense. Its objects are ideas, analogous to the objects of the other senses, as sights are to the eyes, scents to the nose, and so on.

Paṭiccasamuppāda is not a process, but a description of the atemporal structure of what we, the unawakened, call existence. In the case of an *arahant* or a Buddha it is regarded not from the viewpoint of arising or coming into being but of ceasing. With the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of determinations. *Nibbāna* is the only thing, the only *dhamma*, that isn't dependent on anything else. It is permanent and deathless; it is reality itself, unlike the thing we call existence, which, when regarded with a sober gaze, melts away into insubstantiality.

Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.

"Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?"

"On the western wall, lord."

"And if there is no western wall, where does it land?"

"On the ground, lord."

"And if there is no ground, where does it land?"

"On the water, lord."

"And if there is no water, where does it land?"

"It does not land, lord."

"In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair."

(SN 12.64, trans. Thanissaro)

From θαῦμα to abundance

Wonder

It is because of wonder, in the beginning as now, that human beings begin to philosophize. (Aristotle, Metaphysics 982b10–15)

For the Buddhist, being—or, again, what we refer to as being—is conceived of as a mutually dependent structure; its deficient, unsatisfactory nature is evident. As long as one *is*, that is, as long as one is the outcome of dependent origination, one remains a slave, or, said otherwise, a victim of circumstance. Existence is likened to being shackled; in the Pāli canon *unbinding* is another name for *nibbāna*. Radical freedom, the freedom from having to be—which for the Buddhist is synonymous with freedom from suffering—does not at all enter Aristotle’s deliberations on the origin and purpose of philosophy. Being qua being is the subject matter of his *Metaphysics*, and a necessary precondition for its investigation is an entirely conventional sort of freedom: the freedom from having to daily eke out an existence: “for speculation of this kind began with a view to recreation and pastime, at a time when practically all the necessities of life were already supplied.” (*Metaphysics* 982b20–25, trans. Tredennick)

The liberal arts are those studies worthy of being undertaken by a free human being, and the preeminent liberal art is philosophy. In the medieval European university curriculum, the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) had to be mastered as preparation for the study of philosophy. Aristotle describes the object of his search as divine knowledge and remarks that “although all other sciences are more necessary than this, none is more excellent.” (same, 983a10–15)

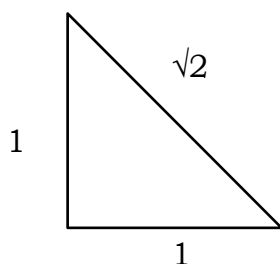
Wonder serves as an occasion to investigate the object that evoked it. That same wonder, when the matter at hand has been properly understood, is inverted—if things were otherwise than they had been discovered to be, then that would be a marvel:

All begin, as we have said, by wondering that things should be as they are, e.g. with regard to marionettes, or the solstices, or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square¹³; because it seems wonderful to everyone who has not yet perceived the cause that a thing should not be measurable by the smallest unit. But we must end with the contrary and (according to the proverb) the better view, as men do even in these cases when they understand them; for a geometrician would wonder at nothing so much as if the diagonal were to become measurable. (Metaphysics, 983a15–20)

Aristotle's words echo Plato's: "For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy [...]", (*Theaetetus* 155d, trans. Fowler) and are, much later, emphatically recapitulated by Heidegger: "Das Erstaunen trägt und durchherrscht die Philosophie." ("Wonder bears and fully holds sway over philosophy." Heidegger 1966)

In his lecture *Was ist das—die Philosophie? (Philosophy—What is It?)*, Heidegger insists that amazement—or astonishment, or wonder—was not merely the preparatory stage for philosophy in the same way that handwashing is for surgery. (same, 25) It is rather a mood, a *Stimmung*. In the lecture Heidegger approaches language as he believes the ancient Greeks did, placing thought in its service and in correspondence with the mood of the situation. He contrasts this approach with the modern take on language, that it is a tool to be used in the process of thinking. (same, 29) *Stimmung* turns into a play on words. It is primarily translated as "mood," then as "sentiment," "atmosphere," "feel," "vibe." The verb *stimmen* means "to tune," as one tunes a musical instrument until it is *gestimmt*, "tuned." The same verb also means

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Aristotle refers to the following: If we assign a unit of one to each of a right triangle's two equal sides, the hypotenuse will not be exactly measurable in our unit length because an irrational number will always be generated.

“to vote” and “to be correct:” *das stimmt*—“that’s right.” A voice is, of course, a *Stimme*, and to determine is *bestimmen*.

Philosophy does not merely originate in wonder, then dispose of it once it has served its purpose as a catalyst:

Wonder is the Stimmung within which correspondence with the being of being itself was disclosed to the Greek philosophers. (same, 26)

The question *bestimmt* (determines) the answer; perhaps we could say that it *sets the mood* for the answer. When a philosopher in ancient Greece sets himself the task of discovering what truly is, what being itself is, the guiding question is far from neutral, it rings in a certain key. Being itself was understood as having to fulfill two requirements: it must be both independent and simple. (Wolf, introduction to *Metaphysics*, ii) *Independent* in the sense of something that persists even when I am not looking at it or thinking about it—in the everyday sense. *Simple* meaning unitary and not subject to division or change.

*ὄντα: being as form*¹⁴

Aristotle’s solution to the problem is to take a thing’s essence as the cause of its being both what it is and the sort of thing that it is. My essence makes me what I am as an individual and makes me a human being, and, as the species entails its genus, an animal. What it is to be me includes being a human.

[...] a particular thing is considered to be nothing other than its own substance, and the essence is called the substance of the thing. (Metaphysics 1031a15–20)

Substance is the usual translation for *οὐσία* (ousia), which twice appears in the above excerpt. *Essence* is the translation of *τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι* (*to ti en einai*), which can be literally rendered in English as “the what it was to be.” *Substance* comes to us from the Latin verb *substare*, “to stand under.” All of the ways in which being is said depends on substances; they are the basis for

¹⁴ Note to German speakers: In this context *form* refers to *εἶδος* and not simply to outward appearance.

quality, relation, quantity, and so on. No quality is ever found apart from the thing that supports (stands under!) it. In this world there are black coffees and old cobblers, but blackness and oldness cannot be present alone. Both translations of *to ti en einai* lose the immediacy once available to Greek speakers. *Substance* and *essence* both have the ring of technical terms far removed from the immediately apprehensible meanings communicated by *what-stands-under* and *what-it-is*, however odd these locutions may sound. *To ti en einai*, we are told¹⁵, must also have sounded unusual in the ancient world.

Individual substances are concrete particulars, or simply *things*. When we point at something unfamiliar and ask, “what is this?”, we implicitly ask: “what kind of *thing* is this *thing*?” The answer indicates the sort of thing under consideration, its species form. This is a record player, this is a coffee mill, this is a notebook, and so on. Determining the what-it-is, the essence of inanimate objects is often a simple enough manner. Although my record player is one particular thing, I regard it as generally interchangeable with record players of the same model. Stradivari violins, on the other hand, are regarded *primarily* as individuals. They have names and, if violinists are to be believed, personalities.¹⁶ This is Ruby, this is Lady Harmsworth, this is Strauss. They are Stradivari violins (and not just any violins!). Ruby’s primary ousia—Ruby’s being Ruby—entails its being a violin. “By form I mean the essence of each thing, and its primary substance [ousia].” (*Metaphysics* 1032b1) Individual form determines and organizes matter and is hence the cause of a thing’s being what it is and also the kind of thing it is. Nietzsche’s primary substance—and not Aristotle’s or Plato’s—his individual form is also the form of a human being. *Human being* is Nietzsche’s species form or secondary substance, which we may also call a universal.

¹⁵ “‘Essence’ is the standard English translation of Aristotle’s curious phrase *to ti ên einai*, literally “the what it was to be” for a thing. This phrase so boggled his Roman translators that they coined the word *essentia* to render the entire phrase.”

¹⁶ The Stradivari Society lists several:

<https://www.stradivarisociety.com/instrument-collection/>

I've deliberately compared mass-produced record players with Stradivari violins and Nietzsche to illustrate the confusion that seems to have perplexed Aristotle and remains unresolved to this day. The dispute over the correct interpretation of *paṭīccasamuppāda* has its parallel in Aristotelian philosophy: The inconsistency of Aristotle's view on universals in Book Zeta of the *Metaphysics* has produced two main camps of scholars, each attempting to respectively show that Aristotle was, or was not, of the view that species form (*human being, dog, and so forth*) is substance. I find that Lesher sums up the conflict best:

Aristotle commits himself to the following propositions: (A) No universal can be a substance (B) The form is a universal (C) The form is that which is most truly substance. (Lesher 1971, pg. 169)

The position, fully in line with Aristotle's work in the *Categories*, that universals are not substances is the one taken in this work. As indicated by Lesher, the inconsistency of several passages in the *Metaphysics* forces one to draw a line somewhere in the sand. I find Lacey's account to be the most sensible:

What Aristotle ought to be saying in the Metaphysics is that terms like "man" are not the name of an ousia in the sense in which one can talk of an ousia as an object, but are used to say what the ousia of an object is. (Lacey 1965, pg.66)

Although human beings are the cause of human beings in principle, individual human beings are the cause of individual human beings in actuality: "For while man is the cause of man universally, there is no universal man; but Peleus is the cause of Achilles, and your father of you [...]." (Met. 1071a27-28) In any event, even if one were inclined to take a Platonic view of Aristotle by attributing true being to universals, the crucial point remains: this world is full of being. But in the Buddhist world, existence is the result of ignorance.

In light of the two requirements for being *qua* being mentioned earlier—*independence and simplicity*—it becomes apparent why concrete objects, that

is, physical things stand at the center of the Aristotelian conception of being: they are bar none the most accessible and easily discernible manifestations of form as an organizing principle. The Aristotelian universe is a plenum. It does not contain any non-things. It is seamless, containing no gaps of non-being—even a hole is *something*. I can imagine, make, and take one (or several) with me: my glasses and keyring are portable, and very useful, holes. We say that Swiss cheese has holes, and claiming that its holes are just a lack of cheese still expresses the being of something (...*are* a lack of...). Non-being can perhaps be thought of—but never found in the world—as matter: there is no wood unless it is present in the form of a wooden door, a plank of wood, or sawdust. Aristotelian ontology is thus described as *hylomorphic*; everything is a compound of form and matter, a compound in which the form is that which truly is. It organizes matter and is thereby the cause of this or that thing. A ukulele is not a ukulele by virtue of the materials used in its construction, but by virtue of possessing the form of a ukulele. Certain kinds of matter are, however, better suited than others for the construction of, for instance, houses. Nonetheless, houses made of water (ice hotels and igloos) are not impractical in certain climates.

To sum up the foregoing: Trees, insects, shoes, Wiener Melanges, Aristotle, potholes, and copper pipes are all things. All are made out of some informed material which cannot exist in a formless state; a thing therefore is its form. As a consequence, the universe is a plenum. When I open a fresh tub of ice cream and scoop out a spoonful, I make something: a hole. If I change my mind and put the scoop back, filling in the hole, it is no longer actually there, but it could be—potentially.

The two previous sections outlined how emotions determined the development of Buddhism and the philosophy of Aristotle. Disgust with the world and wonder at it led to two chains of thought advancing in opposite directions—to an ontology of emptiness on the one hand and one of abundance on the other. In neither case were any errors of thought committed. The conclusions reached were entirely reasonable, the result of discursive thought put into motion by a certain emotional state, or to perhaps put it more accurately, as emotions are notoriously transient, a tendency toward a

certain taken-for-granted emotional state. The pessimist may at this point remark the manner of making ultimate sense of the world—one's conceptual system—is nothing more than a complex psychological mechanism for the justification of our characteristic feelings (whatever they may be) and for consoling ourselves. In short, stories we tell ourselves so that we may sleep better at night. Stories with the prerequisite of logical rigor, but fictions nonetheless. Although justification and consolation do play a crucial role, I propose that legitimate philosophical systems reveal, each in their own way, some features of the world, with the criterium of reason ensuring that the conclusions a given school of thought draws are coherent. The next step is establishing the criteria for a given conceptual system's legitimacy. Let us take a roundabout approach via an examination of Buddhism and Aristotelianism's respective definitions of reality alongside more modern views.

An ontology by any other name

Aristotle is the preeminent essentialist. What is, is simple and independent: the particular form of a thing. The Buddha is the consummate anti-essentialist. The world is empty:

"It is said that the world is empty, the world is empty, lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?" "Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty [...]." (SN 35.85, trans. Thanissaro)

There is no thing that has a permanent, unchanging essence; only *nibbāna* is what truly is because it is neither conditioned nor impermanent. If what we call existence is deficient, unsatisfactory, *dukkha*, then we arrive at an impasse, forced to declare the cessation of all conditioned things—*nibbāna*—as ultimate reality.

There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; [...] neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support. This, just this, is the end of [dukkha]¹⁷. (Ud 8.1, trans. Thanissaro)

I propose that the early Buddhist approach be called *negative ontology*, which relates to Aristotelian ontology as negative theology does to its traditional, affirming counterpart. God is neither love nor justice nor mercy; these are attributes. God cannot be said to *be* anything at all and ought instead to be regarded as *no thing*. The monk starting on a path of mysticism—the intended reader of the *Cloud of Unknowing*—is told to concentrate on God as He is in

¹⁷ Thanissaro translates *dukkha* as “stress,” a term which I find both much too weak and misleading—I have substituted it with the original Pāli word in brackets. One runs the danger of confounding the quotidian stress of sending text messages in an area with poor network coverage with the stress of realizing that one has, over many lifetimes, shed more tears than there is water in all the oceans.

Himself, rejecting all positive attributions to God until an impasse is reached. Then, only by the grace of God, does one experience the divine as it is in itself, beyond categories of being and non-being. Just as negative theology *as a mystical practice* nonetheless remains a form of theology, albeit one that starts from the other end, negative ontology is a form of ontology.

But how is a plenum to be reconciled with emptiness? Perhaps an analogy drawn from the hard sciences might be helpful: the opposition of classical physics to quantum physics, despite the experimentally proven validity of both. The claim that there are indeed objects on a macroscopic scale is uncontroversial; there are planets, stars, house keys, sloths, and so on. These things interact with each other on the basis of certain principles, which we call the laws of physics: force, for example, increases in proportion to speed and mass. Some version of the claim that everything, including space itself, is made of irreducibly small and indivisible ultimates (to borrow a term used by Galen Strawson) has become uncontroversial as well. Whether these ultimates are one-dimensional oscillating strings or grains of spacetime or something else remains contentious; the leading theories all posit a granular reality. The world is quantized (hence the term *quantum*). As you zoom in on a digital photograph, all gradations of color and form vanish, resolving into square, uniformly colored pixels. At the quantum level, things are unruly: particles vanish, reappear, and we are confronted with a generally unsettling uncertainty. The quantum and macroscopic worlds remain at present scientifically irreconcilable despite the discovery of their respective governing principles. The behavior of electrons and billiard balls must, it seems, be described in different terms. It seems as if physics offers us two different worlds. Does it make sense to ask which of the two is (more) real? “There are only ultimates and their interactions, nothing more. There is really neither ice nor water nor steam, only the behavior of masses of H₂O molecules under certain conditions.” Ice, water, and steam as we know them in the everyday sense are useful fictions. Indeed, the only thing that is worthy of the title of actual existence is a configuration of ultimates. And yet there are ice cubes, bowling balls, and sloths, all of which, in their stubborn substantiality, resist

any attempts to be written off as *just* emergent phenomena—as not *really* real in the sense that their quantum constituents are.

The insubstantiality of modern physics

In the introduction to his 1927 Gifford lectures, Eddington distinguishes everyday and scientific conceptions of reality and concludes that the latter is ultimately the true one. The commonplace attitude is a form of shorthand occasioned by our inability to see the world as it really is. Using the example of the table before him, Eddington states that he is in fact sitting at two tables, not one. The first is a table in the everyday sense, an object designed to create a flat plane that is convenient to write on or eat at and which is well-suited to support smaller, lighter objects, such as vases or tablecloths.

How shall I describe [the table]? It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all it is substantial. By substantial I do not merely mean that it does not collapse when I lean upon it; I mean that it is constituted of “substance” and by that word I am trying to convey to you some conception of its intrinsic nature. It is a thing; [...] (Eddington 1928, ix)

When Eddington says that his table is “constituted of ‘substance,’” he does not use *substance* in a strictly Aristotelian sense but rather refers to the properties of the matter that constitutes the table. However, according to Eddington, his table is actually mostly empty space inhabited by a cloud of oscillating forces. Eddington declares that the second table is the real one, at last revealed to us by science: “[...] modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific table is the only one which is really there [...]” (same, x)

I have never seen an electron, nor has anyone, but great numbers of people—and I count myself among them—are convinced that electrons are as real as the tables we sit at and the coffee we drink. By his own admission, Eddington could not help but imagine electrons as hard, red, tiny balls despite knowing that they are abstract entities necessitated by the operations of physics. An electron is not directly observable, but its properties have been

deduced. Curiously enough, all electrons have the same mass, which led Feynman and Wheeler to playfully theorize that ours is a one-electron universe: All the electrons in the universe are actually one electron moving between the past and the future. The present is like a thin film perforated a near-infinite amount of times by the untiring oscillations of a tiny (possibly red) ball. Are subatomic particles then not useful fictions? The belief in them is indeed justified by the predictive success of modern physics. Eddington seems almost reluctant to concede that there is a world *out there* which is the source of our measurements, remarking that “[t]he external world of physics has thus become a world of shadows.” (same, xi). If we further pursue this train of thought, could it not be said that everyday tables are realer—to the vast majority of human beings at the very least? Nonscientific tables can be picked up, moved around, and are directly observable. And contrary to Eddington’s claim, a common wooden table’s catching fire and going up in smoke is not a “miraculous” metamorphosis (as contrasted with the scientific dissolution of a scientific table) but an unremarkable property of wooden objects. The quantity of tables in the world, along with the observation that no two have an exactly equal mass, speaks for their realness as well; unlike, as noted above, in the case of electrons. Incidentally, the Rutherford-Bohr model of the atom my generation grew up with—a miniature solar system with electrons orbiting a nucleus—has been scrapped on grounds of inaccuracy. In spite of the changing depiction of this invisible force, or *influence*, to use Eddington’s term, my faith in electrons is resolute. I simply have no idea what they are, unlike tables, coffee, vases, and windows.

Eddington was astonished by the dual nature of the world, its conceptualization in the terms of fundamental physics on the one hand and by means of everyday metaphysical intuitions on the other: “[...] above all it is substantial.” The *world of shadows* and the familiar world are however not separate but the latter occasions access to the former, and the two worlds are superimposed over one another in the mind of the observer, who, upon reflection, is surprised that the two, though originating from the same source, seem to be radically different in nature. It is for this reason that the battle of the two tables can, in my opinion, have no decisive winner. Neither table is

realer; it is a matter of what each table is for. It is an everyday table when I move my chair closer to it to better get at the plate of pancakes it supports at eating-level. I have never moved mostly empty space containing abstract entities to mostly empty space containing abstract entities. However, the theory of physics that has played a significant role in yielding my computer's CPU compels me, by virtue of its predictive successes, to believe in the billions of invisible influences that make up my table.

Although Eddington is not in his example explicitly thinking in Aristotelian categories of form and matter, it may be claimed that the everyday table is *implicitly* an Aristotelian table—informed matter, a hylomorphic compound. It can be safely assumed that Eddington recognizes his table as such because it has the form of a table. Let us, in a roundabout way, examine the justification for this claim by posing a question: Why has the Aristotelian view proven to be so persistent? Pascal Boyer's work on evolved metaphysics strongly suggests, in my opinion, that the reasons are not purely historical¹⁸: Aristotelian ontology is the explicit and systematic development of intuitive human ontology. I hold that a crucial reason for Aristotelian ontology's continued relevance is that it so clearly speaks to our "[...] early-developed, intuitive, category-specific, incomplete, and stubborn metaphysical presumptions." (Boyer 2000, pg. 277) If, as Boyer argues, human intuitive ontology is the product of evolution, then we are, among other things, essentialists by default, by virtue of metaphysical intuitions that have evolved in the course of natural selection. Boyer goes on to assert that research suggests the acquisition of concepts most likely requires "[...] some robust metaphysical prejudices, supporting quasi-theoretical inference processes that are in principle defeasible but in practice extremely stubborn." (Same, pg.

¹⁸ Scott Atran's work on folk biology similarly concludes that belief in the essences of living thing is an evolved mechanism, and as such is remarkably stable across cultures. See: Atran, Scott. 1998. "Folk biology and the anthropology of science: Cognitive universals and cultural particulars." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21. One may, with practice, suspend this conceit while engaging in research, theorizing, or the like, but disabusing oneself of this essentialism in daily life is simply not possible—and perhaps not even desirable. It remains a tacit assumption by virtue of being one of the ways in which we have evolved to perceive the world.

292) Eddington's, and following Boyer, everyone's everyday table, that is, our commonsense concept of a table, is shaped by our evolved metaphysical intuitions; the genius of Aristotle lies in his systematically working out these intuitions into hylomorphic ontology. In other words, everyday concepts of tables, chairs, plants, and cats may thus be termed *proto-Aristotelian*: this is simply a consequence of being human. Eddington defeats intuitive ontology, at least on a theoretical level, by appealing to the account of matter given by fundamental physics. Counterintuitive though this account may be—by Eddington's own admission—it is nonetheless, in his opinion, true. A parallel with Buddhism may be drawn here: the stubborn metaphysical assumption of essences—the self foremost among them—are overcome by *delicate test* and *remorseless logic* of a different sort than what Eddington had in mind: meditation and reflection on the Buddha's teaching. This parallel permits S. N. Goenka to declare Buddhist teachings to be a “science of mind and matter,” as mentioned on page nine of this work. This is the justification used by adherents of various modern mindfulness movements to equate Buddhism with science; it is what leads university-educated Western Buddhist converts to emphasize their newfound religion's compatibility with science. One defeats intuitive (proto-) Aristotelian notions and arrives at the true nature of things by suspending the default attitude and investigating reality, *in the manner of a scientist*. If science deals with objective truth and if Buddhist ontology resembles the conception of reality formulated by modern physics—the very hardest of the hard sciences—then, so claim modern converts, Buddhism must deal with objective truths as well, albeit in its own language. Stated as simply as possible, their argument runs like this:

Premise A: Science is true

Premise B: Buddhism reaches the same conclusions as science.

Hence, Buddhism is true.

The Buddha's *scientific* conclusion concerning the nature of reality is that it is insubstantial. There are no substances in the Aristotelian sense, no essences, just an atemporal, agentless network of interacting forces: *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

Paṭiccasamuppāda is what we, who have not yet attained *nibbāna*, call existence. If you accept the premises of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, then it demonstrates with remorseless logic that reality is fundamentally empty of self. No errors of reason are committed in the formulation of *paṭiccasamuppāda*; it is the dry writ of the cosmos. All objects fall toward the center of the earth. What we name existence is suffering. Both are simple statements of fact, fundamental laws of the universe which are simply dumbly there. *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, however, tells only half of the story. Theravāda Buddhists hold that *arahants* cannot have any wish for sex: desire's roots reach back to ignorance, and how can there be sex without desire? Confucian China was initially appalled by this aspect of Buddhist doctrine—if all realize the Truth, then family lines and eventually all of civilization would die out. Buddhism pursued to its logical extreme would end all human endeavors, snuffing out all sources of meaning apart from *dukkha* and its cessation. When Eddington's hypothetical physicist is busy employing the methods of physics, he remains "[...] detached from the world familiar to consciousness, until after he has finished his labors upon it." (Eddington, x) He returns from a world of shadows to a familiar realm of old tables, favorite vases, coffee, relationships, pleasure, happiness, and sorrow. But does the *arahant*? Upon attaining *nibbāna* the Venerable Udayin declared, "just that is the pleasure here, my friend: where there is nothing felt." (AN 9.34)

The inexhaustibility

—of things

All that is admits of conception as both insubstantial (in the scientific and Buddhist sense of the word) and substantial—in the everyday sense of solidity as well as in its Aristotelian definition. Why is this so? The feature of reality that accounts for a spectrum of diversity so broad that it culminates in polar opposites may be called the *inexhaustibility of things* or the *coincidence of opposites* (*coincidentia oppositorum*), according to taste and perhaps whether one has read Graham Harman or Nicolas of Cusa first.

Object-oriented ontology is one of the more recent philosophical frameworks to lay claim to reality or, at the least, to delimit it. According to Graham Harman, neither the everyday nor the scientific table is the real one. The real table lies between the two. The reality of objects does not depend on our subjective experience of them, nor on deductive empirical evidence of their minute constituent forces. Things simply exist as themselves, hidden and withdrawn from the Aristotelian's, Buddhist's, and physicist's gaze. Graham calls both of Eddington's tables "[...] utter shams that confuse the table with its internal and external environments, respectively." (Harman 2012, pg.6) The commonplace table, or to perhaps put it more flatteringly, the humanist's table *overmines* the table, reducing it "[...] upward to a series of effects on people and other things." (same, pg.6) The scientist's table is reduced downward to the opposite extreme, to a swarm of shadowy entities. Both reductions, claims Harman, bypass the object itself, which possesses an irreducible reality. As evidence we may consider that one of the table's broken legs can be repaired or outright replaced with a leg of a different color or design without destroying the table as itself. If electrons, muons, or grains of spacetime are regarded as the causes of the table, then its scientific dissolution into these component parts does not, in just the same manner, touch the object's independent existence. The third table, the reality of the object as itself can only be alluded to. This is the artist's table—but not the one stacked high with half-used tubes of paint; it is the table he paints—the aesthetic object.

The real is something that cannot be known, only loved. This does not mean that access to the table is impossible, only that it must be indirect. [...] [A]nd just as jokes or magic tricks are easily ruined when each of their steps is explained, thinking is not thinking unless it realizes that its approach to objects can only be oblique. (same, pg.12)

The real yields, in the language of object-oriented ontology, the *inexhaustibility of things*. A table, a cup, a vase, a landscape can all be aesthetically depicted in infinite ways. And this is only one broad avenue of access to the object. Moving a table or placing an object on it grants some hint of the thing as well. And what of non-human modes of access? When a cat rubs against the table leg, something of the table is revealed to the animal, but this domain will remain forever closed to human experience.¹⁹

Harman remarks that object-oriented ontology finds an ally in Aristotle, “[...] provided that he is given a properly weird interpretation.” (same, pg.11) I don’t find the following interpretation particularly weird (or even much of an *interpretation*) but rather an unavoidable consequence of thinking Aristotelian ontology all the way through. For Aristotle, individual (primary) substances exist apart from the effects they have on human minds; they possess an autonomous existence. Inherent in every primary substance—this particular chair which I am sitting on, that particular hairless cat, Aristotle—is a secondary substance, a universal form that belongs to many things, such as chairs, cats, and human beings in general. Since, according to Aristotle, knowledge is limited to knowledge of universals, the individual thing itself, the primary substance, remains beyond our grasp. And as already noted, our access to objects is limited to a human mode—there are others. However, the

¹⁹ In object-oriented ontology, a dimension of each thing remains hidden from more than just object-human or object-animal relations. According to Harman, a consequence of the *inexhaustibility of objects* is *vicarious causation*; objects withdraw not only from us (some of their properties remain inaccessible to us) but from other objects as well. Harman often uses the example of fire burning cotton—the fire cannot burn certain properties that the cotton possesses. It does not burn the cotton’s odor, for instance. Things-in-themselves can never come into direct contact with other things-in-themselves.

sensory and cognitive configurations of human beings admit a significant degree of variation. People who have a certain gene variant find the smell of beets unpleasant; tetrachromats, who have an additional type of cone cell in their eyes, are able to perceive hundreds of hues invisible (and unimaginable) to the rest of us. Hence, on the level of sensory perception, we experience some version of this particular chair, cat, or person; but none of us is able to experience something in its entirety, see from all possible angles, in the entire electromagnetic spectrum, and so on. Our intellectual and emotional capabilities vary greatly as well: I can distinguish various stages of middle age, but most young children are unable to accurately guess the age of anyone between twenty and fifty or so. The adult in question is simply a grown-up and thirty years' worth of gradations are imperceptible. Con artists have an ability to spot easy mark (I can't), and dishonest sales staff disliked a certain relative of mine on sight—she had an uncanny ability to recognize swindlers, and they seemed to recognize this before a single word was exchanged. A ten-year-old child with red-green colorblindness introduced to a middle-aged televangelist wearing a green-and-orange shirt would, by the standards of most adults, have missed a great deal of essential information. Even among close friends or spouses the phrase “I thought I knew you” is heard from time to time when the autonomy—the independent reality—of one person violates the model of him or her constructed in the partner's mind. For instance, when one discovers that a friend has secretly been writing a novel for years or sees one's allegedly sweet-tempered spouse dressing down subordinates during an unexpected visit at her workplace.

—*of being*

Rather than putting individual things under the microscope, what if we were to instead take a step back and consider everything in all its depths all at once—the real—under the aspect of inexhaustibility? The inexhaustibility of things extends into the inexhaustibility of being. Only by allusion, metaphor, and love can we carve out a space for the real, but the real itself is unfathomable, a darkness (or a *world of shadows*) offering up this or that aesthetic notion, some hint of the mystery perpetually withdrawn from us.

Object-oriented ontology is categorized as a variant of speculative realism, a broader philosophical movement which, in spite of the word *realism* in its name, in the last instance traffics in mysteries. The real only reveals itself partially and in fleeting glimpses. If we replace “the real” with “God” in the Harman quote above, the result is a sentence that easily have been taken from the *Cloud of Unknowing*: “God is not something that cannot be known, only loved.” God may, however, through an act of divine grace, directly answer the calls of the seeking mystic in a nondiscursive manner. The connection between mysticism and object-oriented ontology perhaps ends here—things-as-things will never answer our calls, nor does an ineffable experience of their realness seem to be a concern for object-oriented ontology. It is sufficient for the purposes of this work to show that both object-oriented ontology and negative theology depend on a darkness, a *mystery* at the heart of everything. What if we were to no longer confine our speculations to the unfathomable depths of individual things and instead shift our gaze to the reality that all things have in common? If any individual thing is endlessly deep, then the reality all things share—being itself—must be, in the same manner, inexhaustible, its depths forever hidden from view:

Therefore, the essence of things, which is the truth of being, is unattainable in its purity; though it is sought by all philosophers, it is found by no one as it is. (Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* I.10, trans. Hopkins)

We will never strike the bedrock of things, of being as it is in itself, but depending on our life circumstances and capabilities, we may apprehend one or another aspect of it. Nicolas of Cusa was struck by a realization of this sort while looking at the ocean. Its waves, endlessly chasing each other, do not in their individual restlessness suggest that they are part of a harmonious whole. Object-oriented ontology shares a great deal of common ground with Nicolas of Cusa, except that the latter took the decisive step of granting faith a central role in his philosophy. Faith, in this case, in a divine principle that reveals itself to those souls who, having admitted that they have reached the limits of

their understanding nonetheless strive toward the unreachable truth lying beyond the limits imposed by their ignorance:

Hence, the mind's simple vision is not a comprehending vision, but, rather, the mind elevates itself from a comprehending vision unto seeing the Incomprehensible. For example, when it sees, comprehendingly, that one thing is greater than another, it elevates itself to seeing That than which there cannot be anything greater. (Cusa, De Apice Theoriae 11, trans. Hopkins)

Although Nicolas of Cusa's manner of expression is a far cry from the decidedly secular (if the arts are secular) lexicon of object-oriented ontology, he essentially makes the same point: the apprehension of any thing points beyond itself to something which ultimately exceeds our understanding, something that cannot be conceptualized but simply demarcated as unknowable territory. This process of partial emergence from the inexhaustible real need not be relegated to some rarefied realm far removed from daily life: the existence of the unconscious, for instance, has long become commonly acknowledged in many parts of the world—we take it as a given that our true motives and the reasons for our mental distress are inaccessible to us from our everyday first-person point of view. The suspension of the usual attitude and the interventions of a third party, that is, a psychotherapist or perhaps simply an insightful friend, are necessary for us to make sense of seemingly irrational behavior. There are admittedly still people in westernized countries who believe that certain unacceptable behaviors and thoughts are caused by demonic possession, but such beliefs have been discredited in light of psychology's efficacy. Its models, or in other words, different conceptions of, the psyche have enabled the treatment of certain kinds of mental illness by means of structured conversation alone. The psyche—let us not forget that the word originally meant *soul*—has been demystified, at least to a certain extent. Both *mystery* and *mystic* come to us from the Latin, originally “[...]borrowed from Greek *mystikós*, from *mýstēs* ‘person initiated (into a religious cult)’[,] probably from *mys-*, variant stem of *mýein* ‘to close, shut [the

eyes]’.”²⁰ Demystification is then the act of metaphorically opening one’s eyes, letting something emerge from the darkness, a term that we have already equated with the inexhaustible real. It must be noted that something does not emerge by itself, but co-emerges with our help, with our subjective shaping of the thing-as-it-is. The less concrete the thing in question, the greater the degree of variation that its (co-emergent) conceptualizations admit of. The thing we call *psyche* is not in the least concrete—it can neither be seen nor picked up and placed on a bookshelf—therefore, the concepts of it that we have are different but nonetheless legitimate if their structure is informed by the psyche as itself. The test, in this case, is the efficacy of a given model in understanding and treating psychological problems. The conceptual model employed by Freudian psychoanalysis, consisting of the id, ego, superego, and so forth, has permitted the psyche to emerge as a system governed by its own set of rules (suppression, sublimation, transference, among others). Manipulations of this system, pushing the buttons and pulling the levers of the unconscious, so to speak, has resulted in measurable results, as for instance the remission of a neurosis. The Freudian psyche is not the only choice; Adler and Frankl substituted feelings of inferiority and existential meaning respectively for the libido as the psyche’s driving force. Their systematic conceptualizations work, at least according to clinical studies.²¹ No single psychological model can get to the bottom of the psyche. The latter can, however, be conceived in myriad ways, systematized and tested, but the thing itself—and I see no reason to not simply call it the soul—remains unfathomable in its depths. Just as particular system of psychology is a view of the soul, so is an ontology a view of being, and both admit of a view from infinitely many angles. One of the criteria for a conceptual system’s legitimacy has been explored above: internal consistency and efficacy in the description of the real. Another is:

²⁰ *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*. Accessed Oct. 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mystic#etymology>

²¹ Far too numerous to mention here, many are accessible in the US National Library of Medicine’s *PubMed* database: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>

The good life

Eudaemonia

What is the best sort of life for human beings? And as perhaps an extension of this first question, what is, or rather should be, the ultimate goal of our striving? What should we aim for? The Buddha and most ancient Western philosophers, including, of course, Aristotle, gave us two separate accounts. Both, I believe, have their origins in the same spirit but differ in their execution and emphasis. *There is a best way to live* is their essential shared claim; both likewise agree that this highest good either is or results in true happiness.

In his discussion of ancient ethics, Karamanolis (forthcoming) brings to the reader's attention the "overriding concern of ancient philosophers with the good life or happiness." (Karamanolis, pg.1) Karamanolis goes on to note that in the ancient world, eudaemonia was understood as the ultimate aim of human life. In the words of Aristotle:

To resume, inasmuch as all studies and undertakings are directed to the attainment of some good, let us discuss what it is that we pronounce to be [...] the highest of all the goods that action can achieve. As far as the name goes, we may almost say that the great majority of mankind are agreed about this; for both the multitude and persons of refinement speak of it as Happiness, and conceive 'the good life' or 'doing well' to be the same thing as 'being happy.' (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1095a14–20)

Aristotle regarded eudaemonia as the successful practice of life. It is dynamic, an activity and not a static end state in which, once reached, one dispassionately abides. Living well is not a conclusion but simply the correct way to live one's life in the same sense as there is a correct way to walk (upright) and sit (on one's hindquarters). However, just as suffering from Parkinson's disease makes walking well impossible, lacking the proper internal and external conditions hampers living well. Quite simply, being born poor and ill severely constrains the possibility of true happiness: "[...] the

happy man requires in addition the goods of the body, external goods and the gifts of fortune, in order that his activity may not be impeded through lack of them.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1153b17–20) It is, I think, an uncontroversial statement that living well depends both on personal effort and circumstance. It is an unfortunate fact of life that the latter may, through no fault of one’s own, sabotage the former. In the ideal case, a person who has developed (through the study of philosophy) a soul governed by reason wholeheartedly engages in virtuous action for both personal and civic benefit—good people, in other words, are simply in the habit of doing good things.

More than two thousand years after Aristotle, *eudaemonia* remains a subject of deep concern—not, however, for most academic philosophers but certainly for everyone else. We are haunted by the good life; the multitrillion dollar health and wellness industry asks us at every turn whether we are living our best lives (we aren’t) and offers half-decent solutions at (usually) affordable prices. Several self-help bestsellers, a yoga mat, and perhaps a meditation course later, we might find ourselves feeling slightly better. Perhaps our muscles are more relaxed or we are aware of the “power of now” (we occasionally manage to fully inhabit the present moment), yet something that we can only call *true happiness* remains out of reach. I purposefully conflate Aristotelian eudaemonic ethics with the modern wellness patchwork of pseudo-Eastern spirituality, calisthenics, diet, and repackaged platitudes because both are driven by the same desire. The wish to live well was not a historical event that concluded in the distant past; it remains very much relevant today. Then as now, happiness was a self-evident goal. Even books with titles such as *Against Happiness* fail to exorcise this need: the goal of the anti-wellness subgenre is nonetheless well-being. In what follows, *eudaemonia* will not be used to refer exclusively to Aristotle’s definition of the good life but will instead be used to mean *living well*—there is more than one version of the good life.

Theravāda happiness

What is, from the Theravāda Buddhist point of view, true happiness, and how is it to be attained? What does it mean to live well? What counts as a successful life? In Buddhism, ontology, psychology, and ethics converge on a single point: *nibbāna*—this is reality, happiness, and the good. A link may be established between Aristotle’s ontology and his ethics: things which are good *are*; privation, on the other hand, is bad and deficient, as in the case of an illness, which is, in Aristotelian terms, a lack of health (*Metaphysics*, book VII). Aristotle’s ontology and ethics do not radically coincide in a single concept, as is the case with Buddhism. It cannot be said that what truly is and the ultimate goal of life is *ousia*. In the Buddhist view, existence itself—again, what we call existence—is irredeemably deficient. Illness is not a lack of health but our default mode of existence. Not attaining the object of one’s desire is as painful as attaining it. If it does not quickly become a disappointment, then it is coveted, obsessed over, finally becoming the cause of sleepless nights when it is lost, damaged, or simply worn out by use and the passage of time. Or one experiences the distress of being separated from the object of affection by the inevitability of death.

To attain *nibbāna* is to truly be, to flow into reality. As mentioned, this state is beyond description. Reality begins where language and existence break down. In answer to the first of our two questions, the Buddha remarks:

Freedom from disease: the foremost good fortune.

Unbinding: the foremost ease.

*The eightfold: the foremost of paths
going to the*

Deathless,

Secure. (MN 75, trans. Thanissaro)

By “disease” the Buddha has a specific meaning in mind. After speaking these verses, he clarifies: [t]his body, Magandiya, is a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction.” (same) In this sutta, Magandiya the wanderer asks what freedom from affliction is. The Buddha begins by describing a leper cauterizing his sores over a fire. The man feels some relief, but if he were to be cured of the disease, he would have no wish to singe his body over a pile

of glowing embers and would resist if made to by force. The Buddha makes use of a favorite metaphor for existence and all it entails: fire. In this particular case, fire represents sensual pleasure and craving. Contact with it is always painful, just as one's fingers are always burned when touching a flame, but if one is deluded (that is, ill), then it affords a modicum of relief. The paragon of health is the arahant, who knows that the alleged pleasures of the senses are nothing but suffering and that the body itself is an affliction. How does one then attain perfect health?

When you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, you will know & see for yourself: "These things are diseases, cancers, arrows. And here is where diseases, cancers, & arrows cease without trace. With the cessation of my clinging comes the cessation of becoming. With the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. With the cessation of birth then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering & stress."
(same)

A successful life culminates in the attainment of *nibbāna*. "Judge no one happy until he is dead" still holds true, for an arahant can no longer be said to exist despite the persistence of her body. Since our naïve state of being is incorrigible, a disease of the mind resulting from ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, the greatest good is its annulment. *Mettā* meditation, the practice of mentally projecting loving-kindness to all sentient beings is a favorite preliminary to concentration meditation in Theravāda monasteries. Loving-kindness allows the practitioner to relax and enhances her ability to maintain mental focus on a single object of meditation. It is skillful, not *good*. The same goes for compassion—it is expedient (for attaining awakening, or at the very least for securing a fortunate rebirth). *Mettā* lies at the heart of Theravāda ethics:

Ethics, in the Buddhist context, is right conduct, which brings happiness and peace of mind, and never gives rise to remorse, worry or restlessness of mind. This is the immediate psychological benefit. Right conduct also

leads to a happy rebirth, enabling an aspirant to progress further on the onward path to spiritual liberation. It is also the basis for progress in Dhamma here and now. In other words, right speech, right action and right livelihood of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path constitute right conduct in the best sense. (Buddharakkhita, ch. 4)

The evident psychological and purported spiritual benefits of adopting an attitude of universal benevolence are not an end in themselves but serve as a stepping-stone on the path to unbinding. Viewed under the aspect of *nibbāna*, nothing which exists (in the conventional, deficient sense) has any value—nothing apart from *nibbāna* itself is even ultimately real—and there is neither good nor bad, only actions favorable or unfavorable for awakening. These are referred to as skillful and unskillful, respectively. One ought to refrain from murder because it leads to an unfavorable rebirth, and the anger it entails is a defilement of the mind which obscures one's ability to glimpse cessation, not because it is inherently wrong. Matter cleaved apart is just that, and nothing more. Killing sentient beings has consequences in the same sense that dropping a rock has consequences: the rock falls; the murderer sooner or later suffers—this is just the way things are; *dhamma* is no more personal than gravity. However, the timeless reality of *nibbāna* ultimately strips being and becoming of all worth, as the Buddha remarks: “Monks, just as even a tiny amount of feces is foul-smelling, in the same way, I don't praise even a tiny amount of [being and becoming]—even as much as a finger-snap.” (AN 1:329, trans. Thanissaro)

Ethics in Theravāda Buddhism can have no intrinsic worth because they are rooted in the realm of deficient existence and in no way transcend it. The life of a householder will remain inferior to the life of a renunciant because the former will, as a rule, be more burdened by *dhamma* (in this case: the cosmic law). The slaughter of an animal, even with the intention of feeding one's children, brings with it some negative future consequence which will, in a small way perhaps, impede one's progress on the Buddhist path. The compounded effect of these actions, unavoidable for a householder, can be offset by skillful action—providing a monk with as meal as he goes for alms,

for instance. Nonetheless, there simply are not enough hours in a day to both manage a household and pursue the highest good of *nibbāna*. The reader may be surprised to learn that in countries where Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant religion, most laypeople do not meditate at all—this is left to the monks, who have the luxury of time and whose minds are uncluttered enough to reach a state of concentration. Meditation retreats for laypeople are a visible exception rather than the rule.

The good life was a self-evident goal for both Aristotle and the Buddha. Their accounts of it and the paths they lay out for its attainment are, I believe, opposites, inseparable from their respective ontologies. To make this evident, we could attempt to imagine a philosophical system consisting of Aristotelian ontology and Theravāda ethics, which would leave us with the untenable position of asserting that substance is what truly is while at the same time declaring that all our efforts must be directed to its transcendence. This would amount to self-annihilation, a charge that Buddhism deflects via the doctrine of no-self: *sabbe dhammā anattā*, all things are not-self (that is, there is in actuality nothing that can be fixed to a substantial categorial unity such as one's own self). Combining the other two elements instead, mixing Buddhist ontology with Aristotelian ethics would not yield a more tenable position; a dedication to acting in accordance with virtue in the face of life's essential deficiency would be just as absurd.

If suffering is the problem of life, then the cessation of suffering is the reasonable goal to pursue. A life well-lived is one in which all suffering has been extinguished. As in the case of their respective ontologies, Aristotle and the Buddha begin with the same problem (what is the best life?) but vary their approaches. The end goals we are presented with are opposites: the activity of living and doing well; the end of one's flawed existence, which is nothing other than the end of suffering. All ethical concerns are viewed in light of these goals—the question of why one should do or abstain from doing so-and-so is given a definitive answer: because it leads to living well; because it leads to the cessation of suffering. We are presented with two broad options to choose from, according to our temperament.

A good death

[...] *let me brush away from his eyes the darkening cloud of thoughts of matters perishable.*

—Lady Philosophy

(Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. I)

Ñāṇavīra

After the conclusion of his military service in World War II, dissatisfied with life, Harold Edward Musson left for Sri Lanka, ordaining there as a *bhikkhu* and taking the name Ñāṇavīra in 1950. Ñāṇavīra Thera—the latter part of the name is an honorific meaning “elder”—found the practice of *mettā* (universal benevolence or loving kindness) challenging, as he remarks in a letter to his physician, Dr. M.R. de Silva:

If you found mettā bhāvanā²² relatively easy, it is quite possible that you were doing it wrong (mettā bhāvanā is notoriously easy to misconceive) [...] I have, myself, never practiced mettā bhāvanā, but the Ven. Kassapa Thera has made a success of it. (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 228)

Ñāṇavīra’s exegetic as well as his personal writings are marked by precision and coldness. He does not concern himself with compassion; his writing is dominated by an intellectual contemplation of the *Dhamma*. This emotionally detached attitude naturally extended to himself: several of his letters display an indifference to his own life. The amoebiasis, and, later, satyriasis that he suffered from were a subject of concern insofar as they hindered his progress on the path to *nibbāna*. After one failed attempt, Ñāṇavīra Thera committed suicide by self-asphyxiation. His frank and occasionally flippant discussion of suicide with de Silva has been a source of some revulsion to defenders of the traditional exegesis of *paṭiccasamuppāda* discussed earlier (the three-lives interpretation) despite the compatibility of his act with the Buddha’s teaching—both the Venerable Channa and the Venerable Vakkali “used the

²² In this case *bhāvanā* means practice or cultivation.

knife,” as the suttas euphemistically say. The sole purpose of Ñāṇavīra’s life had become the attainment of liberation. We owe the existence of the controversial yet undeniably prescient *Notes on Dhamma* to Ñāṇavīra’s efforts to clarify the *Dhamma* to himself: “[i]t is my own experience that there is nothing like sitting down and putting one’s ideas on paper to clarify them, and, indeed, to find out what those ideas really are.” (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 243) To put things in plain, unflattering terms, Ñāṇavīra was an uncaring intellectual pursuing his personal salvation. In the previous letter to de Silva, he writes:

No, I have not discussed the matter [suicide] with anyone else. As far as Dhamma goes, I am quite well aware of the situation: I know that to kill oneself is an act of weakness, but also that, for me, it is better than disrobing; and I know what I risk and what I do not risk by such an act. [...] As regards discussing it with a friend, not only do I have nobody by whom I can possibly make myself understood [...] but, precisely, I do not feel the need to make myself understood (I am one of those people who think of other people as ‘they’, not as ‘we’). (same, pg. 220)

Drawing conclusions about the character of a person from his letters is fraught with difficulty; at least some degree of interpretation, the discovery of the true intentions lurking behind the author’s words, of which he may not have been aware, is necessarily involved. For instance, in a previous letter Ñāṇavīra remarks that if he were to disrobe, he would have to either marry a rich widow or “take up with some lady of easy virtue who could earn enough to support us both.” (same, pg.215). This is a joke—Ñāṇavīra’s family was well-off—but a careless reading could, however, lead to one’s adducing certain desperate motives to Ñāṇavīra’s suicide which he did not have, although the irreverent, sarcastic tone of the entire letter should make that clear enough. Some knowledge of the larger context of Ñāṇavīra’s life and work is vital to avoiding serious misunderstandings. As this context is fairly well documented, I think that a reasonably accurate understanding about Ñāṇavīra’s character, albeit one open to a degree of second-guessing, can be reached by examining his correspondence. What sort of person was Ñāṇavīra? The last sentence

from the above-quoted letter provides an important clue. A loose paper with a copy of an excerpt from one of Schopenhauer's essays was found among Nāṇavīra's effects after his death:

*This is the only type of man of whom it can be said that his centre of gravity is entirely in himself; which explains why it is that people of this sort—and they are very rare—no matter how excellent their character may be, do not show that warm and unlimited interest in friends, family, and the community in general, of which others are so often capable; for if they have only themselves they are not inconsolable for the loss of everything else. This gives an isolation to their character, which is all the more effective since other people never really quite satisfy them, as being, on the whole, of a different nature: nay more, since this difference is constantly forcing itself upon their notice they get accustomed to move about amongst mankind as alien beings, and in thinking of humanity in general, to say they instead of we. (Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life*, ch. 2)*

Concerning human personality, Schopenhauer divides people into three broad categories: ordinary folk, dilettantes, and geniuses. The deciding factor is where one finds her center of gravity—externally, in the case of the ordinary person, internally (the genius), or tending toward an internal center of gravity but unable to wholeheartedly commit to it (the dilettante). The term “center of gravity” is used to describe the source of meaning in one's life, whether from external goods such as property, friends, professional success, and so forth, or from the striving of one's intellect “[...] to express its peculiar conception of the world, whether it contemplates life as the subject of poetry or of philosophy.” (same) The Schopenhauerian genius cares little for anything apart from his area of interest. This is not meant to be a judgmental statement but rather an observation. A sculptor acquaintance who had earned some renown once remarked to me that if his sculptures were sinking and his daughter were drowning, he would first drag his works to dry land. I very much doubt he values his sculptures over the life of his daughter, but his saying so expresses the singleminded devotion which comes with the territory

of being, or aspiring to be, an artistic *genius*. The bhikkhu's singlemindedness—which Ñāṇavīra embodied—is directed toward his own welfare, the pressing problem of his personal suffering. As we read in the Dhammapada:

The welfare of oneself should not be neglected for the welfare of others, however great; recognizing the welfare of oneself, one should be devoted to one's own welfare. (Dhp. 166, trans. Ñāṇavīra)

This is yet another verse that may rub modern Buddhists in both the East and the West the wrong way; it lacks the compassion that we readily ascribe to Buddhism. But, as discussed earlier, compassion is, for the Buddha, simply a means to an end.

Ñāṇavīra contracted amoebiasis²³ shortly after arriving in Sri Lanka and suffered from the condition, in varying degrees of intensity, for fifteen years. A side effect of the drugs used to treat it was an intolerable increase in libido and intrusive sexual thoughts, making the practice of *samādhi* (concentration meditation) impossible. Suicide became a viable and, within the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, permissible option for two main reasons: firstly, Ñāṇavīra was a *sotāpanna*, “one who had entered the stream,” a person who had caught a glimpse of *nibbāna* and thus become freed of the view that one has or is a self.²⁴ Not yet fully awakened, the *sotāpanna* is inevitably bound for liberation either in her present lifetime or within seven lifetimes at most. The speed of one's progress depends on personal effort and, alas, on factors beyond one's control, such as one's intestinal health. Having beheld true existence, the stream-enterer can no longer devote himself to *matters*

²³ This may, according to his doctor, have been a misdiagnosis. (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 620, fn.) Ñāṇavīra was in any event particularly unfortunate with regard to, as he puts it, “the principal occupational hazard of the Bhikkhu”—having to accept food whatever food one is offered when going for alms.

²⁴ *Sakkāyaditthi*, the first of the three delusions leading to rebirth which are dissolved upon the attainment of stream entry. The other two are *sīlabbataparāmāsa*, an attachment to rules and rituals; and *vicikicchā*, skepticism regarding the truth of the *Dhamma*. The *stream* symbolizes the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads to liberation.

perishable and will, sooner or later, be freed of the cycle of endless rebirth. To enter the stream is to no longer be able to return a state of ignorance. A fleeting experience of unbinding exposes the vanity of attachment to impermanent things—and this is all that life consist of before experiencing the *Dhamma*. This is the second reason for Ñāṇavīra's suicide: he found himself in a dead end. His illness frustrated his efforts in pursuing the attainment of *nibbāna*, and returning to state of ignorance was impossible. It is as if the leper in the parable had, rather than painfully cauterizing his wounds, at last found a means to treat the cause of his disease—and the supply of medicine ran out before he was fully cured.

Ñāṇavīrism

Ñāṇavīra's Buddhism meets the two criteria for a conceptual system's legitimacy discussed earlier: it was efficacious—Ñāṇavīra had glimpsed *nibbāna*; and it was eudaemonic—Ñāṇavīra's life had acquired an ultimate goal. Ñāṇavīrism is suitable only for Ñāṇavīra and those of a similar psychological constitution. Anyone with an average need for compassion, affection, and friendliness would do well to look elsewhere for an all-encompassing philosophy. We may, in considering the life and death of Ñāṇavīra, gain an intellectual understanding of his manner of approaching, as Nicolas of Cusa would put it, the unreachable; but this understanding should be regarded only as a scaffold erected at the threshold of *coincidentia oppositorum*. The crucial experience of what Buddhists call the Deathless, or authentic being, eludes us. Ñāṇavīra serves as a guide in its demarcation—unless we are able to practice what he preached. The Buddha claims that becoming an arahant is possible for any human being, regardless of age or caste (we may today substitute the latter with *social standing* or *class*). Yet Ñāṇavīra's reading of Buddhism has an aftertaste of elitism:

And, in the last analysis, the Buddha's Teaching is for a privileged class—those who are fortunate enough to have the intelligence to grasp it (the Dhamma is [...] 'to be known by the wise, each for himself'), and they are most certainly not the majority! (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 393)

A wholehearted commitment to Ñāṇavīrism is insufficient to attain the first stages of awakening. If one does not share Ñāṇavīra's temperament, an engagement with his reading of Buddhism will remain at the level of an academic exercise undertaken by an enthusiastic reader, it will consist of a listing of Ñāṇavīrism's central tenets, the arguments advanced in their support, along with references to the relevant passages in the Pāli Canon. My use of the term *Ñāṇavīrism* is not meant to suggest that it is a departure from Theravāda orthodoxy but rather to refer to those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that Ñāṇavīra emphasizes, often at the expense of others. This is done by necessity, as the *Dhamma* is to be known *each for himself*, which I take to mean *in the mode of knowledge commensurate with his disposition*. In the Pāli Canon, the monks who attain awakening are skillfully brought to it by various means, according to their character and abilities. Ñāṇavīrism is then not an unorthodox variant of Buddhism, but rather its ultraorthodox formulation, stripped of the life-affirming and compassionate qualities that are attributed to it in popular culture. Based on the principle of the inexhaustibility of being discussed earlier, I recognize that Ñāṇavīrism is a legitimate conceptual system which may lead people of a certain temperament to catch a glimpse of *nibbāna*, the Deathless, authentic being, God, or however such a thing may be called. Ñāṇavīra has left a record of his experience—which should by no means be confused with the experience itself. It serves the dual purpose of aiding those who are in a position to profit from it and saving those ill-suited for its practice from pursuing a dead end.

Ñāṇavīrism goes against the grain of mainstream Theravāda Buddhism. This is ironic; the Buddha himself declared that his doctrine goes against the grain of common sense. He hesitated to disseminate the *Dhamma* for the very reason of its gut-level unacceptability for ordinary human beings. Ñāṇavīra's exegetic writings are, at least in part, owed to his digestive misfortunes. The inability to attain the mental concentration necessary for meditation led him to a meticulous study of the suttas under the assumption that the Buddha meant exactly what he said. Ñāṇavīra avoided the mediation of traditional commentary, which at times went to great lengths to not take the Buddha at his word. The result, his *Notes on Dhamma*, is a systematic exposition of the

key ontological concepts encountered in the Pāli Canon. It is, apart from its analytical rigor, distinguished by the connections it establishes with twentieth-century philosophical systems, existentialism in particular. The relationship between Buddhism and the latter is their shared fundamental impetus: *saṃvega*—shock and disgust at or at the very least alienation from what the vast majority of human beings considers ordinary life.

Nibbāna for aristocrats

Ñāṇavīra was born privileged, was something of an aristocrat in character, had a contempt for life and right-wing leanings; he commented that there is “[...] a general inadequacy in modern European thought—the growing view that the majority must be right, that truth is to be decided by appeal to the ballot-box.” (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg. 393) However, such a person need not make life worse for his fellow human beings; he is not fated to become a member of an extreme right-wing party. The life and work of Ñāṇavīra represents, in my opinion, the best-case outcome for someone of his temperament. He did not simply take Buddhism as he found it but, in “clearing away a mass of dead matter which is choking the suttas,” adapted it to his needs. I have for this reason begun to use the term “Ñāṇavīrism” in the past several pages. The Pāli Canon is the basis for all the schools of Buddhism. It is, however, unsystematic and notoriously poorly organized. The task of forming a coherent conceptual system falls to the ardent and oftentimes troubled seeker. The flaws in Ñāṇavīra’s thinking are, I think, exclusively ones of omission, namely (1) his inability (or unwillingness) to address the importance of *mettā*, and (2) his dismissive attitude toward any forms of Buddhism that did not match his ultraorthodox revisions, not to mention his abject contempt of Christianity and conviction that Western philosophy, although it had finally, as existentialism, begun to ask the right questions, was nevertheless wrong about the structure of reality.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the English translation of *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*. It is quite a literal rendition: each of the English terms appears in the same order as its Pāli equivalent. *Magga* means *path*, *aṭṭhaṅgika* *eightfold*,

and *ariya noble*. *Ariya*²⁵ may be used as a substantive, referring to one who has attained experiential knowledge of the *Dhamma*. Here is the definition of the term in two senses given in the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*:

[Vedic ārya, of uncertain etym. The other Pāli forms are ayira & ayya]
1. (racial) *Aryan* [...] 2. (social) *noble, distinguished, of high birth.* —
3. (ethical) *in accord with the customs and ideals of the Aryan clans, held in esteem by Aryans, generally approved. Hence: right, good, ideal.*
*[The early Buddhists had no such ideas as we cover with the words Buddhist and Indian. **Ariya** does not exactly mean either. But it often comes very near to what they would have considered the best in each].*

Any word which leads, no matter how circuitously, to uttering *aryan* is haunted by Nazi, Neo-Nazi, and white supremacist connotations, as an unfortunate consequence of the latter's pervasiveness. Rather than sidestep these associations—which are, after all, not at all accidental but the products of a perverse effort²⁶—we can instead investigate them at their root—the idea that there is an innately superior class of human beings. An obvious point of departure is Julius Evola's *La Dottrina del Risveglio*, originally published in 1943, which Musson (as Ñāṇavīra was then known) read during a hospital stay in Sorrento. The book made such a strong impression on Musson that he would translate it into English over the course of the following three years. It was published in 1951 under the title *The Doctrine of Awakening*. Evola's goal in writing the book was to “emphasise the true nature of Buddhism, a doctrine which had undergone much distortion, both in most of its later forms—when, following its revelation and spread, Buddhism had turned into a religion—and in the perception of Buddhism prevalent in the West.” (Evola 2009, pg. 158) This sentiment, as we have seen, is almost exactly echoed by Ñāṇavīra in his *Notes on Dhamma*. Quite unlike Ñāṇavīra, however, Evola

²⁵ *Arahant* is derived from a different root: *arh*, meaning *to deserve* or *be worthy of*.

²⁶ The idea of an aryan master race can be traced back to Arthur de Gobineau, whose work inspired Alfred Rosenberg, one of the chief Nazi ideologues.

believed that the “original” Buddhism he had unearthed was “a comprehensive and universal ascetic system that is clear and undiluted, well tried and well set out, in tune with the spirit of Aryan man and yet prevailing in the modern age[.]” (Evola 1996, pg.4) Evola’s definition of *aryan* is, in contrast with the one given by the *Pali-English Dictionary*, above all racial. In this manner he is able to be grateful for his salvation without injuring his European pride; it came from an Aryan, and not an “Asiatic” tradition:

We have to remember that behind the various caprices of modern historical theories, and as a more profound and primordial reality, there stands the unity of blood and spirit of the white races who created the greatest civilizations both of the East and West, the Iranian and Hindu as well as the ancient Greek and Roman and the Germanic. Buddhism has the right to call itself Aryan [...] The asceticism proclaimed by Prince Siddhattha is suffused throughout with an intimate congeniality and with an accentuation of the intellectual and Olympian element that is the mark of Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Roman Stoicism. Other points of contact are to be found where Christianity has been rectified by a transfusion of Aryan blood that had remained comparatively pure—that is to say, in what we know as German mysticism [...]. (same, pg.14)

Given the general tone of Evola’s work, it is unsurprising that it found an enthusiastic audience in Nazi Germany. Evola was himself never a member of the Fascist nor the National Socialist parties, but it may be assumed that his views, disseminated among the Nazi elite—Evola was invited to Germany to discuss his ideas—provided the totalitarian regime with additional ideological support.

Evola found himself unable to return to civilian life after serving in the First World War. Neither art—he had, for a time, attached himself to the Dadaist movement—nor experiments with drugs eased his existential unrest. Evola was saved from suicide by a passage from the Pāli Canon which convinced him of the vanity of a desire for self-destruction. Evola wrote *The Doctrine of Awakening* and thus, as he put it in his autobiography, repaid his debt. (Evola 2009, pg.157) Evola was, however, no Buddhist but instead

belonged to a certain breed of Western spiritualists who treated Eastern religious practices as a sort of open buffet, heaping together a plate of the most esoteric doctrines they could find and declaring it humanity's ur-religion. Conspiracy theories and belief in the paranormal are the norm in such circles; the ur-religion is inevitably either lost or secretly passed down through the generations, waiting to be rediscovered and taught anew by the likes of, for instance, Madame Blavatsky. In Julius Evola's case, his study on Buddhism—albeit in many respects a lucid explanation of its basic doctrines—was but one ingredient in a belief system characterized by occultism, antiliberalism, misogyny, and antisemitism. He also, for example, believed in “a primordial, Hyperborean tradition [...]” and “the telluric, lunar civilisation of the Mothers [...]” (same, pg.138)

Ñāṇavīra would later admit that he would not recommend Evola's book without significant reservations, but it can nevertheless not be denied that it played an important role in his becoming a Buddhist monk, much as it did for Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu, who was closely acquainted with Ñāṇavīra—the two men travelled together to Sri Lanka and were ordained in the same monastery. Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu would later become known as a prolific translator of the Pāli Canon and its commentaries. Ñāṇavīra terminated their correspondence when he became a *sotāpanna*.

Evola and Ñāṇavīra share certain unflattering features, namely an aristocratic arrogance and the conviction of belonging to a privileged class. Tracing the evolution of their thought and their person illustrates two of the possible outcomes for such personalities: one *skillful*, the other *unskillful*, in the language of Theravāda Buddhism. Evola embodies perhaps the worst outcome: his conceptual system is ineffectual, incapable of offering a coherent view of being. We have established that the first criterium of a conceptual system's legitimacy is the degree to which it is internally consistent. Evola's thought is a dismal failure in this regard; no one could even determine with certainty whether Evola was a fascist. When he was put on trial for instigating the formation of a neo-Fascist party in 1951, Evola declared, presumably in his defense, that he was a “superfascist.” Ñāṇavīra on the other hand represents, in my opinion, the best, *most skillful* outcome for a person of his

disposition. Buddhist philosophy not only gave direction and structure to Ñāṇavīra's thought but provided him with an ultimate answer to his existential crisis, an answer lying beyond discursive thought, settling (for Ñāṇavīra) the issue of what really is once and for all. *Notes on Dhamma* and Ñāṇavīra's letters, many of which serve as explanatory addenda, will likely serve the modern Buddhist and philosophers in general for a long while yet. Ñāṇavīrism is internally consistent, efficacious, and eudaemonic—not in an Aristotelian sense, but rather in the sense that it encourages a certain kind of personality to flourish. And if not a Ñāṇavīra to pursue a course of radical exegesis, then who? (Someone like him, of course.)

At one time the monk Ñāṇavīra was staying in a forest hut near Bundala village. It was during that time, as he was walking up and down in the first watch of the night, that the monk Ñāṇavīra made his mind quite pure of constraining things, and kept thinking and pondering and reflexively observing the Dhamma as he had heard and learnt it. Then, while the monk Ñāṇavīra was thus engaged in thinking and pondering and reflexively observing the Dhamma as he had heard and learnt it, the clear and stainless Eye of the Dhamma arose in him: "Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ceasing." (Ñāṇavīra 2010, pg.145, trans. Bodhesako)

In lieu of a conclusion: On the uses of anattā, or, the minimal self for well-being

Branch-bending and blinking lights

In explaining the minimal self, Galen Strawson cites Shoemaker: “an experience is necessarily an experience by a subject of experience and involves that subject as intimately as branch-bending involves a branch.” (Shoemaker 1986, pg.10) There cannot be an experience without an experiencer; in order for a branch to be bent, there must be a branch subjected to bending. There can be no bending without something that is bent. A minimal self is therefore, claims Strawson, a conceptual truth: experience necessarily entails a subject of experience. The minimal self also has a sense of itself, that is, all experience is self-experience—as Strawson shows via his property argument:

from the necessary truths that

i. experience is a property of a subject of experience

ii. a subject of experience experiences (sive has) its experience

iii. experience is a property of the subject that experiences it

iv. experience of a property of a thing is experience of that thing it

follows that

v. in all experience, it follows that a subject of experience experiences itself. (Strawson 2018)

When you have the experience of bending a branch, you necessarily experience yourself—or else there wouldn’t be anyone having an experience, thus, per our above definition, there simply wouldn’t be any experience at all. It follows that any experience is for some subject of experience. Strawson holds, along with Kant, that there is no distinction between an object and its properties.²⁷ It may be further said that a conceptual separation of an object and its properties is a feature of the way our minds work, and this is the

²⁷ “In regard to substance, however, they [properties] are not really subordinated to it, but are rather the way substance itself exists.” (Kant 1998, A414/B441)

distinction that leads us, in the first place, to believe that experience is actually separable from a subject of experience.

In addition to regarding experience and (minimal) experiencer as an inseparable unit, Strawson regards it as existing in discrete intervals, much in the same way that William James regarded the self as a series of “I-pulses,” each appropriative of the prior ones. (James 1890/1950, i. pg.400-1) Consciousness (and necessarily self-consciousness, as mentioned) flashes into being, then almost instantly vanishes, replaced by the next iteration. As Strawson puts it:

[...] *Experience comes in discrete units of a neurophysiologically detectable size [...], say 25ms.* (Strawson 2013, pg. 266)

We believe that the self is an enduring thing because of the rapidity with which it blinks into and out of existence. In much the same manner, as Strawson mentions, we think that text scrolls across our computer screens—it doesn’t—a series of LEDs blink on and off in rapid succession, creating the impression of motion. The minimal self is an impermanent, flickering thing. It can be diagrammatically represented like this: - - - - - -, with every dash representing an I-pulse. If a series of dashes were to race quickly enough across the page we would see this: —————, mistaking a broken line for a solid one.

To succinctly sum up Strawson’s minimal self: The experience is the experiencer, and experience is, in reality, evanescent.

Paramattha sacca

There is, here, no creature to be found.

Just as for an assemblage of parts there is the term “a chariot,”

So, when there are the aggregates, convention says “a creature.” (SN 5.171 [Bhikkhunī Samyutta 10])

The word “car” denotes an assemblage consisting of four wheels, seats, an engine, a steering wheel, and quite a few more parts—all put together in the right way, of course. The *paramattha sacca*, or highest truth, of the matter is

that in *ultimate reality* there aren't even parts of a car, but only a multitude of vibrating strings, branes, or whatever ultimates are posited by the latest theory of physics. Strawson is a materialist, but, as he says, a real materialist, one who acknowledges that matter is not as simple or substantial as is commonly thought, as Eddington's remarks on the matter amply demonstrate. The thing that we call a car is really a bewilderingly complex arrangement of the building blocks of reality. What if, while maintaining the viewpoint of *paramattha sacca*, we were to step back from the subatomic level and watch a film? We would find that the motion we observe is illusory; films consist only of still images succeeding one another at twenty-four frames per second. There are *really* also no Wiener Melanges, tables, or enduring selves. And yet there are—in a conventional sense, in the everyday attitude we must by necessity adopt in order to go to the movies, order coffee, find a place to rest the cup, and talk about ourselves. There are of course in this sense cars, films, cups of coffee, tables, and enduring selves. Human minds impose their particular order on the world, and no one can help but conventionally think in terms of objects and properties, an attitude only occasionally suspended while sitting in meditation or engaging in philosophical thought. *Paramattha sacca* is here invoked as one half of an analogy, as a parallel of quantum physics, whereas the everyday truth of solid, persisting objects corresponds with classical physics. In order to make sense of these two vastly different physical aspects of the world, both theories are needed despite being contradictory—the deciding factor is knowing when it is appropriate to apply one or the other.

The Pali term *attā* means self, but the minimal self is not a minimal *attā*! When considering one's self, the unawakened person thinks that an enduring self, an I, is present. The I who desires, strives, tells stories, the I who suffers:

What he does not see is that the creature is an assemblage [...], and thus for the reason that he regards it as a self. For [him] the creature exists as a self exists, that is to say, as an extra-temporal monolithic whole.
(Ñānavīra 2010, pg. 37)

My *attā*, my I, is an extra-temporal monolithic whole. An arahant also refers to herself in the first person, but only for lack of a better term. For the arahant, *I* is simply a designation for this particular aggregate of mental and physical goings-on²⁸. (For real materialists, the mental poses no problems—matter has mental properties.)

An arahant has had the firsthand experience, the realization of *ultimately* being a complex aggregate, and no longer has any pretense of having an enduring, substantial self. But how does the notion of an enduring self arise in the first place? The Buddha, anticipating James's I-pulses, declared:

But what's called "mind," "intellect," or "consciousness" by day and by night arises as one thing and ceases as another. Just as a monkey, swinging through a forest wilderness, grabs a branch. Letting go of it, it grabs another branch. (SN 12.61, trans. Thanissaro)

Said otherwise, a rapid succession of experiences leads one to posit a long-lasting substantial entity, which we can diagrammatically depict like this: - - - - -; the same ultimate conception of the self held by Strawson and James.

The question of why we don't all attain awakening after having become familiar with not-self naturally follows. In the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (discourse on the characteristic of no-self), the meditator is led to contemplatively regard her mental and physical constituents as impermanent and subject to change. With enough practice, she has (in the ideal case) a realization, an "aha" moment, when it becomes clear that her I, her enduring self, can neither be her body nor her thoughts, and that, hence, she does not have an enduring self at all—it is a phenomenon that arises and passes away, not unlike the breath entering and leaving the body. The resulting state of dispassion would, at long last, allow her to let go of identifying with a series of rapidly succeeding states of mind and know the movie for what it is: a series

²⁸ This is reminiscent of Epictetus's words: If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies. (Enchiridion, iii)

of still images. She would no longer suffer nor wish to inflict suffering upon others. How this happens is unclear; we once again reach the impasse that is *nibbāna*. How can one experience a film as a series of still images while the film is playing? Analogies fall apart at this point, and we can only recall the Buddha's description of an arahant: one who has reached the further shore, one who cannot be said to exist in the conventional sense. *Nibbāna* is inaccessible to discursive thought.

Not-self is theoretically explained in Theravāda Buddhism exclusively to the extent that it can be put into the service of human well-being. It is a concept meant to lead to that ultimate reality which Buddhists seek to experience. It must not be forgotten that the whole of the Buddha's teaching is characterized as *opanayika*, "leading or bringing to *nibbāna*." It seems that the standard answer concerning the value of the minimal self is its promise of serving as a foundation for larger, more robust theories of the self, for perhaps showing how such a thin subject is not up to the task of describing what a human self is. Strawson refuses to define a limit beyond which something is no longer a minimal subject, that is, no longer having mental experience. Humans certainly have minimal selves; dogs—most likely; Strawson makes mention of chickens, spiders, and worms. I believe that he refrains from committing himself to any sharp distinction because panpsychism is entailed by materialism. (Strawson 2006) He denies the possibility of radical emergence—consciousness cannot emerge out of stuff that does not have something of consciousness already in it. Proto-consciousness must thus necessarily be an elementary property of matter. Proto-subjective stuff arranged in the right sort of way yields a subject of experience, although it remains indeterminate what the minimal configuration necessary to yield a minimal subject might be.

The responsive world: panpsychism

We have so thoroughly internalized a mechanistic materialism that any thoughts we may have in adulthood about the mental life of animals and inanimate objects is reflexively viewed as suspect or childish at the least and insane at the worst. This societal prohibition is, however, not absolute: we

may permit ourselves to speculate about what our pet cat thinks and feels but are likely to dismiss attributing a mental life to our houseplants. An idle thought about what the door feels would alert us to a change in our state of consciousness, to inebriation perhaps, but would seldom trouble a sober mind. Two tacit fundamental ideas of our modern, Western worldview are that things are inert, passive, and devoid of mental properties; and that nature is *out there*, separate from us and totally unlike us. This way of looking at the world is, from a historical point of view, a novelty that has become commonplace only within the past three or four centuries. It has become exceedingly difficult to think outside these particular boundaries of our lifeworld. Or rather, *lifeless world*; alternative worldviews are marginalized and not taken seriously. Children are humored, of course, when they talk about the desires and thoughts of their soft toys but are expected to eventually outgrow their infantile animism. Stubborn cases are cause for concern and may require the intervention of a parent, therapist, or mocking classmates. Seemingly without instruction, children see the world as alive, full of nonhuman subjects with a capacity to engage with human beings. This default “childish” view is opposed to the “mature” adult’s conception of the world as consisting of inert matter moved by purely physical mechanisms and being a storehouse of resources. The philosophical term for the view that the world is alive and that everything in it—people (of course), animals, soft toys, cars, teacups, trees, doors—possesses some kind of mental qualities is *panpsychism*. The anthropological term denoting the practice of panpsychism is, following Vetlesen, *animism*. Should my descriptions strike the reader as too wishy-washy or literary, Strawson may aid us in being a bit more hard-nosed about mental properties: Strawson draws a distinction between physicalism, *real physicalism*, and what he terms *physicism*. (Strawson 2006) The former position grants that matter is all that there is but that it is not as simple as our mechanistic worldview has led us to suppose—it possesses mental as well as nonmental qualities. If this were not the case, Strawson claims, mental experience of any kind would be impossible because the radically different property of the *mental* cannot emerge from the nonmental. In the view of real physicalists,

[...] *everything real and concrete is physical [...] and experiential phenomena are real and concrete, on their view, and none of them will I think want to throw away the conservation principles and say that brand new physical stuff (mass/energy) is produced or given rise to when experiences are emergent from the non-experiential, i.e. all the time, as we and other animals live our lives. That is magic again, and I am assured that nothing like this happens with liquidity and Benard convection cells.* (Strawson 2006, pgs. 69–70)

PhysicSalism is the mocking name Strawson gives to the “mature” belief that a mechanistic explanation without reference to elementary mental properties can give an adequate account of the nature of the world. Although panpsychism is usually written off as childhood (or perhaps tribal) silliness on par with fairy tales about talking animals, the *scientific* belief that a mechanistic physics can coherently explain mental experience seems to Strawson to be far more magical. This is so because a physicSalist explanation must at some point introduce the concept of radical emergence, the appearance of properties not possessed by the building blocks of the phenomenon in question. Unless one goes to great lengths to deny the existence of conscious experience, an appeal to radical emergence will be made; it will be claimed that somehow mental properties emerged from decidedly nonmental components. The property of liquidity is referred to in the quote above. Strawson agrees that it is an emergent property of a suitably large amount of H₂O under the right conditions of temperature but denies that it is radical. The macroscopic property of liquidity is not something over and above H₂O molecules, not the appearance of an unrelated substance, but is rather a mode of behavior. The radical emergence of mental phenomena from lifeless matter requires the addition of *res cogitans* to *res extensa*.

One of the chief architects of our taken-for-granted mechanistic worldview is Descartes. Cartesian mind-body dualism has become so deeply entrenched in the way we conceive of ourselves and the world that it takes more than some effort to think outside its confines. It has become *common sense*. In separating mind from body, Descartes reduces life to a mechanical

bodily function: animals are alive because their hearts beat. Living bodies are compared to automata and watches. Mental life is a property of the soul, an unextended substance which is unrelated to material and not subject to its laws.

The mind-body dualism that now comes so naturally to us was ridiculous to many of Descartes's contemporaries. Indeed, he provided humorists with enough material to mock him after his death, as Gabriel Daniel's 1691 *Voyage du monde de Descartes* testifies, depicting Descartes's soul taking an agreeable trip around the world.

The *how* of Descartes's argument is well known, but since we are here primarily concerned with the emotions and intuitions behind conceptual systems the *why* is of greater concern. I believe an answer can be found in Descartes's obsession with his health, as noted by Leder:

[...] biographical material bears testimony to the personal nature of Descartes's concern. A sickly youth, condemned by doctors to die young, Descartes sought in later life to postpone death beyond what was considered humanly possible. (Leder 1990, pg. 140)

In Aristotelian philosophy, living beings are informed matter, hylomorphic compounds. But in Descartes's view it is unclear whether the soul can survive the death of the body, but it may well be that this question is, perhaps as a result of our Cartesian common sense, inappropriately formulated. Aristotle considered the issue differently:

It would appear that in most cases soul neither acts nor is acted upon apart from the body: as, e.g., in anger, confidence, desire and sensation in general. Thought, if anything, would seem to be peculiar to the soul. Yet, if thought is a sort of imagination, or not independent of imagination, it will follow that even thought cannot be independent of the body. (De Anima 1.1, 403a7-10)

For this reason, Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that God will resurrect the *bodies* of the dead and grant them eternal life. If any need for the body could be dispensed with, that is, if it could, in Leder's words, be made into an

animated corpse and all mental experience transferred to a nonspatial substance mysteriously attached to it, then one gains a disembodied immortality. One's mental, experiencing self will never die—it cannot. It is not unreasonable to assume that substance dualism was, perhaps at least partially, Descartes's means of consoling himself. But what does Descartes propose in exchange for a bloodless immortality? What must be given up?

The Aristotelian ascription of telos to the natural world and the neoplatonic attribution of occult sympathies and antipathies are equally expunged by the Cartesian worldview. No longer is nature conceived of as fundamentally subjective and alive. It is simply res extensa, a plenum of passive matter moved by the operation of mechanical forces. The human soul is a small corner of experience dwelling within the vast inanimate universe. The modeling of the human body on the corpse is part and parcel of this larger shift to the primacy of the lifeless within modern cosmology. (Leder 1990, pg. 143)

According to Leder's thesis, the price is high indeed: the presence of life around us and even in our bodies sharply diminishes; our *lifeworld* becomes lifeless. The consequences of this draining of life from the body are far-reaching: in *The Absent Body*, Leder goes on to show the connection between Cartesian dualism and Western medicine's conception of the body as a mechanism, a kind of walking corpse (same, pgs. 145–147)—albeit a complex one that does not betray its secrets easily. This may be clearly observed in Silicon valley's burgeoning obsession with longevity and mind uploading.

Dualism in Silicon Valley

In spite of centuries of counterarguments and occasional mockery, substance dualism is very much alive and well—in Silicon Valley, where Descartes's Latin terms have been replaced with the lexicon of information technology. Death will soon be *disrupted*, then *solved*, if Google and the like have their way.²⁹ The general attitude is that human beings are meat-based computers:

²⁹ I refer to Calico (California Life Company), which, strictly speaking, is a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc., along with Google.

our minds are the software, and our bodies—especially our brains, the hardware. Our minds, particularly our consciousness, are thought of as *organizational invariants*, that is, systems consisting of “patterns of causal organization [which] have the same states of consciousness, no matter whether that organization is implemented in neurons, silicon, or in some other substrate.” (Chalmers 2014, pg. 5) In the information technology sector, it is something of an unquestioned truism that what we truly are is cross-platform software. The obstacles to uploading and running our minds on silicon-based hardware consist of mere technicalities which will soon be overcome; it is taken for granted that the process itself is possible in principle. Inventor-*cum*-futurist Ray Kurzweil, one of the most notable proponents of a disembodied future immortality in *the Cloud*, has long been announcing the coming of the Singularity, the merging of human and artificial intelligence and its attainment of godlike powers. Kurzweil, like a doomsday prophet in reverse, predicts with stunning precision that the Singularity will take place in 2045. He is attempting to survive until then by means of a strict regimen of diet, exercise, and supplementation, daily consuming ninety or so pills. (Friend 2017) Kurzweil’s boundless optimism, perfectly reflected in the title of his 2004 book *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever*³⁰ has not waned; in his 2017 interview for *The New Yorker*, the then almost sixty-nine-year-old tugged at the skin of his forearm to demonstrate its suppleness to the interviewer—proof that the supplements were doing their job. The gesture seems to have been motivated by the same sentiment that prompted Descartes to write in a letter that, as a result of his health-preserving measures, “[death] could not now surprise me unless it threatened my hope of living for more than a hundred years.” (Vrooman 1970, pg.142) Kurzweil believes that in a decade or so nanobots capable of repairing the aging and ailing body from the inside out will become a reality—but then why bother with mind uploading if the survival of the body may be indefinitely prolonged? Because, according to Kurzweil, those same nanobots will interface with an enormous data cloud, boosting our cognitive capacities to unimaginable levels:

³⁰ Cowritten with Terry Grossman, M.D., published by Rodale.

For a time, we'll be a hybrid of biological and nonbiological thinking, but, as the cloud keeps doubling, the nonbiological intelligence will predominate [...] And it will be anachronistic, then, to have one body.
(Kurzweil, interviewed by Friend 2017)

The similarities with Descartes are astounding: longevity is to be extended to near-immortality, and failing that, refuge is ultimately sought in an eternal disembodied existence in the clouds, or in the Cloud. Kurzweil used to refer to the coming panacean nanobots as a *killer app*, later realizing that the term was a malapropism. (same)

As of April 2021, the Cloud is neither operational nor, as far as I can tell, on the horizon. The question of what disembodied thinking might even be has not been answered by brain-preservation services, whose affluent clientele are putting money down on having their brains frozen³¹ under the assumption that our selves are data which should be as easy to back up as our holiday selfies.

The soul of AIBO

In my opinion, the consequences of a panpsychist worldview are at least as plausible as those described above, and certainly preferable. Once we grant that consciousness or at least proto-consciousness is distributed everywhere as a fundamental property of *stuff*, the link between panpsychism and animism is easy to trace:

Animism is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations

³¹ Nectome (<https://nectome.com/>) charges 10,000 U.S. dollars for this service, with the caveat that chemical preservatives must be pumped into a still-living body. It is hoped that California's euthanasia laws would permit such an end-of-life procedure, under general anesthesia, of course. See: Regalado, Antonio. 2018. "A startup is pitching a mind-uploading service that is '100 percent fatal'." *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2018/03/13/144721/a-startup-is-pitching-a-mind-uploading-service-that-is-100-percent-fatal/> Accessed Dec. 2020.

within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation. (Ingold 2011, pg.67, fn.)

The reader is asked to bear the term “field” in mind while reading the following; we will return to it later. The above quotation illustrates why Vetlesen terms animism *panpsychism in practice*. (Vetlesen 2019, pg.150) If animacy is ontologically prior to the differentiation of subjects of experience, then it must be an innate part of the stuff that the world is made of. We may speculate as to how mental experience came to be concentrated in this or that being, whether there are different degrees of it, and so forth—but, following Strawson, we must assume, if we are to avoid magical thinking (radical emergence), that it was always there in some form.

Animism has been swept under the rug in the West by the spectacular successes of science and Descartes’s tenacity in separating the soul from the body. This shift in thinking was not global; Japan remains a notable exception. There is a considerable body of literature on animism in nonmodern societies: among the Amerindians and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, for example. Japan, however, presents the intriguing case of a wholly modern, technology-embracing society that has nonetheless retained its animistic tradition.

Technological modernization in the West was a long, laborious process occasionally beset by dramatic setbacks, such as the Luddite protests in 19th-century England. Attitudes toward technology changed gradually, over the course of generations. Japan, however, forced by Matthew C. Perry’s gunboat diplomacy into the then modern world, managed to master technology on par with Western nations within a half-century. A navy and military incapable of offering any meaningful resistance to battleships and artillery shells would, so thought Japanese elites after Perry’s intrusion, likely leave their country open to further coercion by Western powers, turning Japan into a “second China.” China had suffered defeat only a few years beforehand in the First

Opium War and been forced to make numerous concessions, ceding Hong Kong Island to the United Kingdom in 1842. The social policies of the Meiji Restoration had explicitly linked Japan's survival—indeed, its projected future dominance—with technological modernization. Japan's success was astounding: a navy that had been completely outclassed by Perry's warships emerged victorious in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War.

Fifty years' time to modernize leaves little time to reflect on the process. Rather than a gradual co-development of technology and society, in the case of Japan the former was taken from an outside and, in many respects, alien source and grafted onto the latter. Modernization required the invention of novel terms to define Western concepts, such as: "*shakai* (society), *tetsugaku* (philosophy), *risei* (reason), *kagaku* (science), and so on." (Kitano 2007, pg.4) But what were the fundamental, tacit concepts underpinning Japanese society? Two such concepts, according to Kitano, were animism and *rinri* (倫理). *Rinri*, originally a Confucian term imported from China, can be translated to mean "the reasonable way of creating order and harmony in human relationships." (Kitano 2007, pg.2) The human agent is seen as a priori embedded in a network of relationships and subordinate to it. The individual is expected to know her role in society. The transgression of social boundaries disturbs the harmony of society and is therefore harshly condemned. An illustrative example, according to Kitano, is the 2005 abduction and murder of Japanese student Shosei Koda in Iraq. When Koda's parents received news of their son's death, their first public statement was an apology for upsetting social harmony—Koda had disregarded the Japanese government's advice to not enter Iraq. His parents' anger and frustration with the inability of the government to negotiate the release of their son was second to restoring social peace. *Rinri*, however, extends beyond the human agent to manmade objects, which, akin to human beings, have spirits on account of being employed by and existing in harmony with the latter.

Specifically, the material and spiritual were internally related so as to form a continuous field wherein the human and the natural, both animate

and inanimate, were in an interactional, even communicative relation.
(Kasulis 2019)

This animistic *interactional relation* goes hand-in-hand with the ethical concept of *rinri*, which permits the integration of nonhumans into society on the basis of their close relation with human beings, a relation possible because of the spiritual field permeating all things. This sense of social harmony was so deeply ingrained in premodern Japan that tools were often inscribed with the owner's name and "the date of first use, which was the date the tool took its own spiritual existence." (Kitano 2007, pg.2) Even in present-day Japan, objects of particular emotional significance—things that have become part of one's life—are not simply thrown out with the trash when they are no longer usable but given a ritual burial. This may be clearly observed in the funeral services held for broken-down pet robotic dogs. Sony released the first model of their AIBO (Artificial Intelligence Robot) series of robotic pets in May 1999; the name was chosen because *aibo* is a homonym of the Japanese word meaning "fellow" or "pal." New models were introduced every subsequent year until production was halted in 2006. Sony continued providing repairs for the phased-out models until 2014. A short New York Times-produced documentary from 2015, *The Family Dog*, details the relationships aibo owners had with their robotic companions; when Sony announced that it would halt aibo repair services, they knew that their pets would eventually break down permanently, *die*. In the opening scene, a priest kneels before a row of broken-down aibos and solemnly intones:

The meaning of this aibo funeral comes from our realization that everything is connected. The inanimate and the animate are not separated in this world. We have to look deeper to see this connection. We have to look deeper to see this connection. We pray for the spirit which resides inside aibo to hear our prayers and feelings. (Canepari and Cooper 2015)

The Japanese have an affinity for robots. The typical Western science fiction nightmare scenario of robots rising up against their creators (and perhaps

even enslaving and *farming* them, as depicted in the *Matrix* series of films and graphic novels) is not a cliché in Japanese culture. In Japan, robots of all kinds, from industrial robots—of which Japan boasts the highest percentage in the world—to artificial companions, are allowed to harmoniously integrate into society. According to Kitano, robots become identified with their owners and thus act ethically, in tune with the rest of society. The mainstream attitudes of Americans and Japanese to robots may be summed up in the following:

Given that Japanese culture predisposes its members to look at robots as helpmates and equals imbued with something akin to the Western conception of a soul, while Americans view robots as dangerous and willful constructs who will eventually bring about the death of their makers, it should hardly surprise us that one nation favors their use in war while the other imagines them as benevolent companions suitable for assisting a rapidly aging and increasingly dependent population.
(Mims 2012)

Perhaps a self-fulfilling prophecy is at work in the West, where armed forces are investing in the military application of artificial intelligence robots—Japan, on the other hand, is focusing on the industrial and social applications of robotics.

Minimal mysticism and an ethics of universal caring

Panpsychism provides a robust philosophical theory that can be used to reverse-engineer animism. By robust I mean that, following Strawson, panpsychism offers an explanation of mental experience that is arguably more coherent than any theory of substance dualism or radical emergence from inert (that is, devoid of mental qualities) material. A further benefit of panpsychism in this age of environmental crises is that it entails an ethics of interdependence. How can we give our theory an ethical, eudaemonic dimension? Our ontology, based on animism—panpsychism in practice—is a monist one. There is only one substance which has both mental and

nonmental qualities. The logical justification for this statement has been provided by Strawson's rejection of radical emergence; we have analyzed his argument above and concluded that a monism wherein the mental, or at least the proto-mental, is a fundamental property (as, for instance, mass) is coherent. If we accept the premises, our ontology yields no lacunae; it is as internally consistent as *paṭīccasamuppāda* or Aristotelian ontology. Too often, however, contemporary philosophy stops at theory and neglects the practical, ethical dimension. Neither panpsychism nor minimal selfhood are schools of thought, unlike Buddhism or Aristotelianism—and I argue this is to their detriment. Panpsychism is relegated to the halls of academia, animism is openly scorned, yet one in three adults in the UK still sleeps with a soft toy.³² This chapter is meant to be a practical exercise: how then do we turn rarefied theory into a life philosophy, or perhaps better said, *a school of thought*, that is both internally consistent and eudaemonic? The reader was asked to note the term “field” when it was first mentioned in the quotation from Ingold. It appeared again in Kasulis. It provides a good entry point to developing a contemplative practice upon panpsychism and the universality of minimal selves. If we agree that material is all that there is (real material, which also possesses mental qualities), we are bound to say that experience and minimal selves (since they are the same thing) are wholly material affairs. But material is something we don't quite understand; for instance, the troubling issue of why all electrons have the same charge and mass³³ becomes settled when we dispense with a particle-based materialism and instead adopt quantum field theory, claiming that there is only one electron field. The details remain unsettled, but in any case, we are dealing with a unity or the instantiation of a unity. Why should the (material) minimal self not function similarly? Would it not be both efficacious and eudaemonic to claim that there is only one

³² As reported in *The Guardian*: “My bears are my lifeline’: the adults who sleep with soft toys.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2020/jan/05/bears-lifeline-adults-who-sleep-with-soft-toys>

³³ This led the physicist John Wheeler to speculate that there is only one electron moving backwards and forwards in time. He did not take his one-electron universe theory seriously, but the thought has led to interesting developments in quantum physics.

minimal self field? My minimal self is the same as yours, the same as a dog's, a cat's, or even a chicken's or a spider's. But let us agree with Strawson that mental experience is unevenly distributed, just as some patches of the universe (coffee mugs, for instance) are denser than others (the air in this room). We can regard the mental as a field which is more densely concentrated in some areas, forming nodes of experience—human beings would be prime candidates—and is more diffuse in others, such as rocks, rivers, and plush wombats. Even if we do not grant things in the latter category full-fledged subjecthood (Strawson does not), it becomes nonetheless easier to feel more of an affinity with rivers and soft toys than prevailing physicalism allows. We would perhaps allow ourselves to be kinder. Our treatment of the environment, rather than being regarded as disinterested self-destruction, would become abhorrent.

Hence, the problem of the differentiation of minimal selves finds its solution in a manner congruent with real physicalism while giving us an intimate connection with all experience—our selves become subsumed into a self expanded to a cosmic scale. Our second criterium fulfilled; the minimal self has become eudaemonic.

It has been suggested that looking through a telescope can replace church services in our secular age, since much like an imposing cathedral, the seemingly endless expanse of space evokes in us a sense of awe and humility. Our problems appear insignificant when compared with an inconceivably large universe—perhaps our selves may become less burdensome when they are shared with everything.

Final note: Possible objections

Nietzsche's perspectivism

One possible objection to the approach of complementary pluralism that has so far been argued for is its similarity to Nietzsche's perspectivism:

*There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival 'knowing'; the more affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity'. But to eliminate the will completely and turn off all the emotions without exception, assuming we could: well? would that not mean to castrate the intellect? . . . (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III:12)*

But which perspectives does Nietzsche admit? Which would he recognize as legitimate? Nietzsche's philosophy is consistently life-affirming. Asceticism is condemned as a denial of life, a resentful form of revenge directed at oneself. Theravāda monks relinquish not only material goods, but lifestyles and individuality. A monk can no longer define himself as a person who does so-and-so: "I'm a person who loves to travel and throw parties;" or as someone who has this or that: "I have dark hair, a master's in business administration, and an apartment in Barcelona." The act of shaving one's head and wearing the same robes as everyone else in the monastery emphasizes the dedication to erasing one's illusory sense of self. This naturally runs contrary to Nietzsche's affirmation of the individuality-against-all-odds of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche does not, in my opinion, go far enough in admitting a variety of perspectives. Whatever is deemed *abhorrent to life* is rejected and thus cannot be made a part of Nietzsche's polemical program. Christianity was for him a religion of slaves that turned nature inside out, offering a morality for the weak and resentful. The widespread, lowest-common-denominator Christianity of Nietzsche's time was his target. His commitment to the individual's inalienable right to self-affirmation did not—and as a component of his polemic could not—admit those aspects of Christian doctrine that were themselves life-affirming. The case can be made, for

instance, that Christianity represents the imposition of a teleology onto a world previously dominated by the cycles of nature. Cycles have no goal, they simply repeat endlessly; the phrase “going around in circles”—moving but getting nowhere— immediately comes to mind. Without the meaning imposed by a view of events as purposeful, human beings remain embedded in nature, party to the amoral hierarchy of mutual devouring that characterizes it. Those who admire the harmony and beauty of nature do not seem to overly dwell on some of its darker, crueller, and indeed more abhorrent aspects. The problem of wild animal suffering offers myriad examples: the deer botfly, for instance, lays its eggs in the nasal passages of deer; as the larvae hatch, the host animal could slowly suffocate if the infection is severe enough. The deer suffers immensely but senselessly. Nature is occasionally grand, but our glimpses of its vast, dark underworld are usually written off with platitudes: “let nature take its course.” ... Nietzsche did of course fiercely argue for the individual’s imposition of purpose onto the world, leading Pasternak to remark that Nietzsche had arrived at authentically Christian values “from the other end;” by dismantling the morality of resentment that had, in his time, rendered those values lifeless.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism is linked with his polemical agenda. The challenge, I think, is to set the criteria for a perspectivism that admits legitimate points of view from ideologically opposing philosophies. There are further similarities between Nietzsche’s comparative approach and the one proposed here. The following passage is especially relevant:

To-day the growth of the aesthetic feeling is decided, owing to the great number of [artistic] forms which offer themselves for comparison. The majority—those that are condemned by the method of comparison—will be allowed to die out. (Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human. 23.)

Byung-Chul Han remarks that Nietzsche’s *age of comparison* is actually an *age of selection*, an age in which aesthetics would be the decisive factor between the “lower” and “higher” forms of morality (Sittlichkeit). (Han 2005, pg. 37) Nietzsche wishes to impose a new teleology on the cultural (and naturally, philosophical) melting pot, one based on aesthetics, on *artistic*

styles (Stilarten der Künste). Han concludes a chapter in *Hyperkulturalität*—aptly titled *The Comparative Age*, just like section twenty-three of *Human, All Too Human*—with a question provoked by Nietzsche’s statement: Would not a higher morality in the age of globalization be based on the logic of inclusion rather than of exclusion, of the culling of what is deemed inferior? (Han 2005, pg. 39) Such a logic of *and* statements is characterized by, as Han puts it, amiability (Freundlichkeit). I would, however, add that exclusion in the service of the good life is not an unfriendly gesture but a matter of defining boundaries. Whatever fails to make our lives better in an eudaemonic sense ought simply be thrown out without too much ceremony, like an acquaintance who has overstayed his welcome at our house after ruining the sofa. Consider the *realm of hungry ghosts*, a Buddhist hell reserved for those who lived unskillfully, a plane of existence set aside for the particularly gluttonous and greedy. Hungry ghosts (*petas* in Pāli) are typically depicted with enormous bellies and tiny mouths; they are incapable of experiencing satiety. The idea of this hell makes life in no way better. It may reinforce the notion of a spiritual bank account which could act as a substitute for ethics: if you do *x* in this life, you will get *y* in the next. Adopting this manner of thinking may lead to the unfortunate result, not uncommon in Southeast Asia, of a poor village having a relatively opulent Buddhist temple, complete with video game consoles and air conditioning for the young monks. Donating food, money, and material goods to Buddhist monks is said to secure greater rewards in the next life than civic acts done for the benefit of laypeople. Those who have something to give naturally attempt to make the most on their spiritual investment. Perhaps, in times past, the threat of spending eons in the realm of hungry ghosts may have provoked the wealthy to help the less fortunate, but the idea has now become a confusing and useless anachronism. *Petas* are part and parcel of traditional Buddhism. Rebirth as a hungry ghost is entirely congruent with Buddhist ontology, that is, with *paṭiccasamuppāda*; all that is said to exist in an inferior, deficient sense, fettered by desire. It is not souls that are reborn, but desire that takes form; why not the form of a hungry ghost in a secret hell?

The exclusion of hungry ghosts from a valid conception of being is done on pragmatic, not aesthetic, grounds. Nietzsche's thought was in no small way reactive. Now that the dust has settled, a friendlier—but not uncritical—approach is called for. You should, after all, be able to rely on a good friend to tell you so when you've become obsessed with a pointless activity. Neither blind followers nor the enablers of your bad habits can rightly be called friends, no matter how much affection you may have for them.

Rorty's pragmatism

What does the approach outlined in this work offer that Richard Rorty's pragmatism does not? The term "conceptual system," often used in the forgoing chapters, maps quite well onto Rorty's *vocabularies*, systems of describing and making sense of the world. Rorty's view of truth can perhaps be regarded as distantly related to Nicholas of Cusa's view, to which I am particularly sympathetic. The latter claims that a human point of view can at best grasp some limited view of reality, but a view from infinitely many angles—God's-eye view—sees truth, *the real*. Rorty, however, discards *truth* in the sense of a correspondence between our beliefs and statements about the world and reality. In Rorty's vocabulary, the term "truth" is limited to endorsing statements within a belief system. Just as important, however: As this work does not privilege the logical component of a conceptual system over its affective dimension, attention should be drawn to the lack of vitality in Rorty's work, to the rather drab eudaemonia it promises. In a television interview, Rorty says:

The point of philosophy was to get you out of this mess and into a better place [...] there is no natural order, but the possibility of a better life for our great-great-great grandchildren—that's enough to give you all the inspiration or meaning or whatever that you could use." (Of Beauty and Consolation 2000)

As he speaks these words, Rorty's voice and posture communicate an almost tired resignation to his position. After all, one of Rorty's major regrets toward the end of his life was that he did not devote nearly enough time to poetry. It

was seemingly sacrificed to the matter-of-fact, deflationary discourse reflected in the above quotation. I cannot help but think that a pragmatism with more feeling and poetry would have made his life better. Rorty's statement would be compatible with my view with the caveat there is indeed some kind of natural order, albeit one which we will never fully know.

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Abstract

Comparing Ontologies: Emotion, Reason, and the Good Life

This work is an attempt to show that emotional affinity is at the heart of engagement with any philosophy. Taking Buddhist and Aristotelian ontologies as a starting point, I will try to reconcile a plurality of philosophical viewpoints while granting primacy to the emotions pushing us to adopt one or the other. Emotions, and not reason, are the impetus that sets the tone and establishes the course of a given school of thought. The purposes of this work are to: (1) state why emotions ought to be privileged in philosophy, and (2) outline how this may lead to a tenable approach to philosophy.

Aristotle's concept of substance and the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned arising are both entirely justified worldviews, but neither ought to be taken as an ultimate description of the world. It will be argued that the feature of reality allowing for opposing ontologies may be called the inexhaustibility of things or the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*). It is on this basis that philosophical systems are able to reveal, each in their own way, some features of the real. The function of reason is to ensure that the conclusions a given school of thought draws are coherent. It will be argued that the criteria for a given system's legitimacy are: internal consistency, efficacy in describing the real, and the degree to which a given system implies a eudaemonic ethics.

This work privileges neither presence nor absence, fullness nor emptiness, substantiality nor insubstantiality. Its intent is rather to examine the implicit emotional foundations lying beneath the irreproachable logics of opposing philosophies in order to let them complement one another. Lastly, an approach to modern theories of the self and consciousness (the concept of the minimal self as presented by Strawson and the panpsychism it entails) will be proposed: the ontological and eudaemonic implications of panpsychism in practice will be worked out in order to yield a conceptual system that fulfills the criteria set out above.

Abstract (deutsche Version)

Ontologien im Vergleich: Emotion, Vernunft und das gute Leben

In dieser Arbeit soll gezeigt werden, dass emotionale Affinität stets den Mittelpunkt einer jeden philosophischen Auseinandersetzung darstellt. Ausgehend von buddhistischen und aristotelischen Ontologien werde ich versuchen, eine Vielzahl philosophischer Standpunkte miteinander zu vereinen. Zugleich lege ich meinen Fokus auf Emotionen, die uns dazu bringen, diesen oder jenen Standpunkt anzunehmen. Denn es sind Emotionen und nicht die Vernunft, welche den Impuls für den Ton und den Verlauf einer bestimmten Denkschule geben. Ziele dieser Arbeit sind: (1) darzulegen, warum Emotionen in der Philosophie privilegiert betrachtet werden sollten, und (2) aufzuzeigen, wie dies zu einem haltbaren Ansatz für die Philosophie führen kann.

Die aristotelische Substanzlehre und die buddhistische Doktrin vom bedingten Entstehen sind beide durchaus berechtigte Weltanschauungen, aber keine sollte als ultimative Beschreibung der Welt verstanden werden. Diejenige Eigenschaft der Realität, welche gegensätzliche Ontologien zulässt, kann als die Unerschöpflichkeit der Dinge oder der Zusammenfall der Gegensätze (*coincidentia oppositorum*) bezeichnet werden. Auf dieser Basis können philosophische Systeme einige Merkmale des Realen offenbaren, jedes auf seine Weise. Die Funktion der Vernunft besteht darin, sicherzustellen, dass die von einer bestimmten Denkschule gezogenen Schlussfolgerungen kohärent sind. Die Kriterien für die Legitimität eines gegebenen philosophischen Systems sind: interne Konsistenz, Wirksamkeit hinsichtlich der Beschreibung des Realen und der Grad, in dem die gegebene Philosophie eine eudämonistische Ethik impliziert.

Diese Arbeit bevorzugt weder Anwesenheit noch Abwesenheit, Fülle noch Leere, Substantialität noch Substanzlosigkeit. Ihre Absicht ist vielmehr, die impliziten emotionalen Grundlagen zu untersuchen, welche den Logiken der gegensätzlichen Philosophien zugrunde liegen, damit sich diese Philosophien gegenseitig ergänzen können. Schlussendlich wird eine Herangehensweise an moderne Theorien des Selbst und des Bewusstseins

vorgeschlagen (das Konzept des minimalen Selbst nach Strawson und der damit verbundene Panpsychismus): die ontologischen und eudämonistischen Folgen des Panpsychismus in der Praxis werden herausgearbeitet, um ein konzeptuelles System zu entwerfen, das die oben dargelegte Kriterien erfüllt.