THE BUDDHA'S CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY AND MORALITY
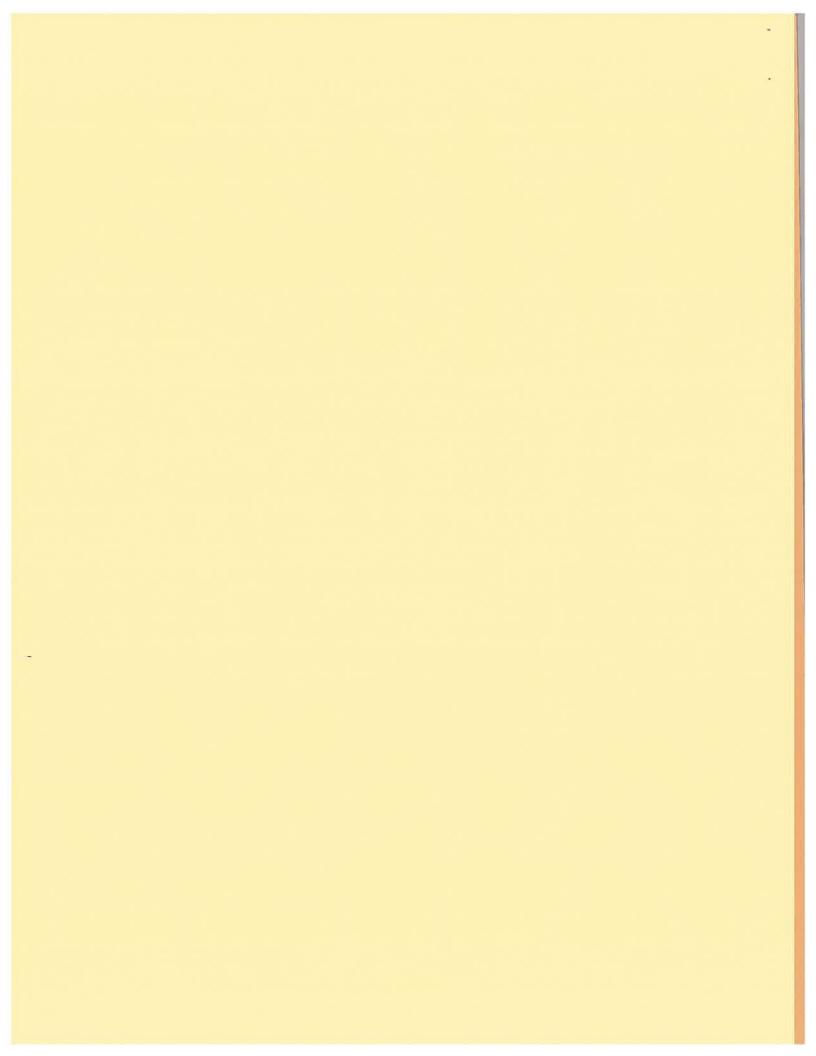
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Thomas Nagel begins his recent work, <u>The View from Nowhere</u> (Oxford, 1986) with a criticism of the perennial search for objectivity not only in relation to our conception of the object but also relating to our conceptions of the subject as well as the moral life. Philosophers, starting with the obvious distinction between subjective life and objective experience, have moved in different directions in formulating their views of the world. The pendulum has swung in different directions. If we start from the subjective side, we are said to be confronted with the problems of skepticism, idealism or solipsism. If we are to begin with the objective side, we are faced with a different set of problems. We need to accommodate the individual, his perspective as well as the perspectives of others in a world that is generally looked upon as being neutral, objective and perspectiveless. Nagel focusses on the second approach.

> It is this second version of the problem that particularly
> interests me. It is the obverse of skepticism because the <u>given</u>
> is the objective reality - or the idea of an objective reality -
> and what is problematic by contrast is subjective reality.
> Without receiving full acknowledgment this approach has been
> very influential in recent analytic philosophy. It accords well

with a bias toward physical science as a paradigm of
understanding.

But if under the pressure of realism we admit that there
are things which cannot be understood in this way, then other
ways of understanding must be sought. One way is to enrich the
notion of objectivity. But to insist in every case that the
most objective and detached account of a phenomenon is the
correct one is likely to lead to reductive conclusions. I have
argued that the seductive appeal of objective reality depends on
a mistake. It is not the given. Reality is not just objective
reality. Sometimes, in the philosophy of mind but also
elsewhere, the truth is not to be found by travelling as far
away from one's personal perspective as possible.[1]

Nagel's effort to resurrect the human perspective without, at the
sametime, allowing it to deteriorate into an idealism or a form of
solipsism will certainly be in conformity with the teacxhings of the
Buddha. The reason is that the philosophical atmosphere in India before
and during the sixth century B.C. to which the Buddha was responding was
not very different from the gestalt against which Nagel is reacting, even
though the former may not appear to be as sophisticated as the latter.
The search for ultimate objectivity and the need to accommodate the
subject within that objective perspective, as it was in the Cartesian
enterprise in Western philosophy, led some of the Upanisadic thinkers to

rely upon some form of intuition to establish the ultimate reality of the self (ātman).

> In the beginning this was only the self (ātman) in the form of a person. Looking around he saw nothing else than the self. He first said "I am." Therefore, even to this day when one is addressed he says that "this is I" and speaks whatever other names he may have."[2]

This does not look very different from the Cartesian enterprise. Here we find the ordinary self-awareness being placed inside a casket made of stainless steel and preserved as a permanent and eternal mental substance, a self that can be comprehended through an intuition that allows no room for doubt. However, in the Indian speculation, unlike in the Cartesian system, it was this very same ultimately real self that also constituted the reality of everything in the universe. The realization of the oneness or unity of the self (ātman) therefore implies an intuitive understanding that the mysterious entity within the individual is identical with the mystery that is inherent in all phenomena.

In more recent times, the Cartesian "ghost in the machine" came to be repudiated as a result of a landmark treatise by Gilbert Ryle entitled The Concept of Mind (Hutchinson, 1949).[3] The private metaphysical subject, the agent behind human experience and action came to be

abandoned in favor of a public concept which the community of
philosophers, leaving all their prejudices behind, were able to analyse
and for which they could assign publicly verifiable meaning. In that
process the ghost in the machine was eliminated along with certain parts
of the machine. This positivistic approach is what contributed to the
behavioristic model of explanation adopted by the psychologists with a
scientific bent of mind, and which is now being challenged by people like
Nagel. In the ancient Indian tradition, a similar attempt to eliminate
the Upanisadic version of the "ghost in the machine" led to an equally
positivistic doctrine propounded by the Materialists. For the
Materialists, the objective reality consists not simply of matter, but
also of the principle that governs the behavior of material bodies. This
mysterious principle is referred to as "nature" (svabhāva).[4] As in the
positivist tradition in the West, the Materialists were enthusiastic
about eliminating not only the "ghost in the machine" but even a part of
the machine, that is, the psychological and moral experiences of humanity.

Nagel would be pleased to learn that his problem was also the
Buddha's problem, even though the solutions are not the same. The Buddha
was confronted with theories, some of which were the results of
individual perspective (ditthi), such as those of the Upaniṣadic
thinkers, and some others which supposedly avoided any such individual
perspective (aditthi), like those of the Materialists.[5] No doubt, the
middle path between the two extremes of individual perspective and no
perspective is not an easily circumscribed perspective so long as our

attempt is to achieve ultimate objectivity. This means that there is something radically wrong with our search for ultimate objectivity itself.

The first attempt on the part of the Buddha was to avoid the search for ultimate objectivity regarding the subject. This is one aspect of his doctrine of non-self or non-soul (anatta). It is intended to get rid of the "ghost in the machine" without, at the sametime, abandoning any part of the machine. The machine is the psycho-physical personality consisting of the five basic constituents, the physical body (rūpa), feeling or sensation (vedanā), perception (saññā), dispositions (saṅkhāra) and consciousness (viññāna).6 These are not radically distinguishable ultimate elements. Instead, they represent five mutually dependent aspects of the conscious human personality.

The Buddha's definition of the physical body has objective as well as subjective features. Objectively, it is made up of the four primary elements (mahābhūta) and the derived elements (upādāya-rūpa).7 Subjectively, it represents the function of being affected. This function is explained by the use of the verb ruppati, "is affected," in the definition of the concept of rūpa or physical form.8 This twofold definition, objective and subjective, enabled the Buddha to retain the physical personality as a necessary condition for the objective identification of a human person while at the sametime allowing that objective personality to be related to the subjective aspects of human life. The Buddha seems to be reluctant to speak of a human person

independent of a physical organism. A purely immaterial (arūpa)
personality is a mental fabrication (manomaya).[9] Physical identification
is thus one of the important means of preserving the objectivity of the
human person. The sensations and perceptions, understood in a
non-reductive way, account for the shared experiences of human beings.
Being dependent upon the physical personality for their occurrence, these
sensational and perceptual experiences have their limitations. Such
limitations provide the occasion for the generation of what the Buddha
called dispositions (saṅkhāra), and these dispositions represent a
watershed between the subjective and objective aspects of the self.
Serving as the most important factor in the individuation of a human
personality, the dispositions account for the fact of subjectivity. At
the sametime, by placing its indelible impression upon the objectively
identifiable physical personality as well as the commonly shared
sensations and perceptions, these dispositions enable a human person to
reveal the objectivity of that subjective self. The Buddha's explanation
of this most significant aspect of the personality reads as follows:

> Disposition is so-called because it processes material form
> (rūpa), . . . feeling (vedanā), . . . perception (saññā), . . .
> disposition (saṅkhāra), . . . consciousness (viññāṇa), which has
> already been dispositionally conditioned, into its present
> form.[10]

In other words, the personality consisting of the five aggregates that has come to be as a result of past dispositional conditioning (abhisaṅkhataṃ) is continually provided with an individuality or unity by the activity of the dispositions.

According to Nagel, "We are in a sense trying to climb outside of our own minds, an effort that some would regard an insane and that I regard as philosophically fundamental."[11] For the Buddha, such stepping out can be achieved only by a careful examination of the dispositional tendencies that bring about the unity as well as the individuality of a person. The individual is not merely a "bundle of perceptions," but also a bundle that is integrated by the dispositional tendencies.

Finally, we are left with the problem of re-identification. The physical body certainly helps in the objective re-identification of the human personality. Yet that objective re-identification can turn out to be extremely superficial and could be even misleading if we are to ignore the re-identification that takes place subjectively on the basis of consciousness (viññāna). The Buddha characterized this constant process of re-identification as the "stream of consciousness" (viññāna-sota),[12] an idea that was to become the central theme of William James when he tried to dispose of the metaphysical conception of self.[13]

Once again, the dispositions (saṅkhāra) that are responsible for the individuation of the subjective stream of consciousness also turn out to

be the mirror through which the objectivity of that stream is reflected. It is for this reason that the Buddha combined the dispositions and the stream of consciousness to speak of the "stream of becoming" (bhavasota),[14] which is another way of explaining the psychophysical personality.

The doctrine of the five aggregates (khandha), therefore, represents two important aspects or processes, one of deconstruction intended to show the absence of a permanent and mysterious self or a ghost in the machine, and the other of reconstruction or re-integration that attempts to retain the entire machinery without leaving behind what Nagel calls the "irreducible feature of reality," namely, consciousness.[15] The manner in which these elements are defined, as explained above, eliminated the possibility of their reduction into ultimately further unanalysable constituents as material and mental substances.

It is significant to note that even though the five aggregates--physical form, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness--can be looked upon or are understood as concepts, that very function of conceiving is not included among the aggregates.

As pointed out earlier, the Buddha was willing to provide a subjective definition even of the physical body. However, he avoids doing so in the case of conception. Here one may notice an important point of comparison (or even contrast) between the Buddha and the

psychologist James. James, the psychologist, was reluctant to use the word 'concept' because it "is often used as if it stood for the object of discourse itself,..."[16] He therefore, speaks of the "conceiving state of mind."[17] If that were the case, in the Buddhist scheme, it could find a more appropriate place among the aggregates. Yet it did not. James himself proceeds to qualify his statement immediately, saying: "It properly denotes neither the mental state nor what the mental state signifies, but the relation between the two, namely, the function of the mental state in signifying just that particular thing."[18] The Buddha's definition of conception is less complicated and is couched in rather impersonal terminology. Instead of speaking about a conceiving state of mind or the individual act of conceiving, the Buddha speaks of "conception taking place" (saṅkhaṃ gacchati).[19] The reason for this definition will become evident as we proceed with the analysis of the various conceptions. This impersonal definition of conception will also have significant implications for the Buddhist philosophy of language which is beyond the scope of this paper.

With this explanation of the human personality or the subject, it will be possible to move on to the Buddhist conception of the object. The Buddhist view of the object bears little resemblance to what is available in the more recent philosophical traditions, and may even appear to be rather exotic especially after the Western tradition has come to bury the contributions of a philosopher like George Berkeley.

To return to Nagel: "The aim of objectivity would be to reach a conception of the world, including oneself, which involved one's own point of view not essentially, but only instrumentally, so to speak: so that the form of our understanding would be specific to ours, but its contents would not be."[20]

In spite of Nagel's attempt in the earlier part of the book to remain satisfied with limited objectivity, especially in the explanation of the human self, ethics as well as science, he seems to be determined to adopt an extremely rationalist approach toward the object. "What there is and what we, in virtue of our nature, can think about are different things,"[21] He says: "I want to resist the natural tendency to identify the idea of the world as it really is with the idea of what can be revealed, at the limit, by an indefinite increase in objectivity of standpoints."[22]

Indeed the tone in which Nagel began his work, namely, a criticism of positivist science that does not allow room for "the subjectivity of consciousness as an irreducible feature of reality," seems to change as he proceeds to analyse the nature of the objective world. While he was willing to let go the ghost in the human machine, he is not prepared to let loose the ghost in the world machine. The early Indian thinkers as well as Descartes were consistent in their philosophical enterprise in trying to retain the ghosts in every instance.

In contrast to these different theories, including Nagel's, the Buddha, who abandoned the ghost in the human machine with his theory of non-self (<u>anatta</u>), was, both for the sake of consistency as well as for epistemological reasons, equally prepared to renounce any conception of mystery associated with the objective world. According to him, just as much as stepping outside of oneself will enable one to understand and appreciate the truth about the individual subject, a similar stepping out of the object will be conducive to the better understanding and appreciation of the object itself. This is the reason for the Buddha's extension of the doctrine of non-self (<u>anatta</u>) to the objective world as well. The de-mystification of the self or the de-solidification of the concept of self went hand in hand with the de-mystification and de-solidification of the concept of the object.

In order to restrain the tendency toward solidification of the objective experience into incorruptible and ultimately real objects, the Buddha recommended the adoption of a perspective that resembles the Berkeleyan method in Western philosophy. According to Buddhism, in the meditations that eventually bring about more accurate knowledge and understanding, the initial as well as the most essential step is the avoidance of the substance/quality or primary/secondary distinction. Explaining the restraint of the sense faculties, the Buddha says:

> Having perceived a material form with the eye, a person remains
> non-grasping on to a substance or mysterious cause (<u>nimitta</u>) and

perceivable qualities (anuvyañjana). If he dwells with the
faculty of sight uncontrolled, covetiousness and dejection, evil
unhealthy states of mind, might predominate. So he fares along
controlling it; he guards the faculty of sight, he comes to
control over the faculty of sight. (This statement is repeated
with regard to the other senses as well, including mind, mano.)[23]

This does not mean the transcendence of sense experience, as some
interpreters of Buddhism make it out to be, for the restraint is called
for after the complete act of perception has taken place, not before. It
is only an admonition to give up the wild-goose chase, that is, the
search for a mysterious entity or cause (nimitta) to which the perceived
qualities (anuvyañjana) are supposed to belong. A Berkeleyan approach is
further reflected when the Buddha advised one of his disciples, Bāhiya,
to adopt the following method:

> Then, Bāhiya, thus must you train yourself: "In the seen there
> will be just the seen; in the heard just the heard; in the
> reflected just the reflected; in the cognized just the
> cognized." That is how, Bāhiya, you must train yourself. Now,
> Bāhiya when in the seen there will be to you just the seen;
> . . . just the heard; . . . just the reflected; . . . just the
> cognized, then, Bāhiya, you will not identify yourself with it.
> When you do not identify yourself with it, you will not locate

yourself therein. When you do not locate yourself therein, it follows that you will have no "here" or "beyond" or "midway between," and this would be the end of suffering.[24]

This Buddhist approach, however, differs from that of Berkeley in that the elimination of a mysterious substance to account for the identity and the re-identification of the object is not followed by the introduction of an equally mysterious conception of God. The identity as well as the continuity of the object is explained in terms of the principle of dependence (paticcasamuppāda), to which we shall return soon.

For the Buddha, the constant attempt to introduce a mysterious substance in the explanation of the subjective life as well as objective experience is the work of the tender-minded. The tender-minded are the victims of anxiety (paritassanā) in relation to things that do not exist either subjectively or objectively.[33] The tough-minded approach is to renounce the search for "things as they are" and confine oneself to what is given, i.e., "things as they have come to be" (yathābhūtam).[26]

The psychologist par excellence of the Buddhist tradition, Vasubandhu's characterized the object as a concept (vijñapti). We have already pointed out the manner in which the Buddha described a concept (saṅkhā) as something that is neither ultimately subjective nor ultimately objective. We also compared the Buddha's view of concepts with that of William James. A conception is thus distinguishable from

imagination or day dreaming. A genuine concept is not simply the
arbitrary creation of the individual's mind; it is also also dependent
upon the object of experience as well as recognition and agreement by a
community of intelligent human beings. Looking upon conception in this
manner the Buddha was able to step outside both the subject and the
object. It also enabled him to deal with new situations and new
perspectives without falling into any dogmatic slumber. Dogmatism
(ditthi) is the result of allowing the vehicle of conception, namely, the
concept to be solidified through a process of reification.

James struck a similar note when he maintained: "The facts are
unquestionable; our knowledge does grow and change by rational and inward
processes, as well as by empirical discoveries. Where the discoveries
are empirical, no one pretends that the propulsive agency, the force that
makes the knowledge develop is mere conception."[27] Unfortunately, James
was unaware that the Buddhist psychologist of the 4th century
A. C., Vasubandhu, had compiled a whole treatise entitled the
"Establishment of Mere Conception" (Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi), not to
justify any form of idealism, but to elaborate upon the Buddha's view of
conception as a means of stepping outside the metaphysical subject
(pudgala-nairātmya) as well as the metaphysical object
(dharma-nairātmya).[28] Here again, Vasubandhu was preceded by his
illustrious co-religionist, Nagarjuna, who equated conception (prajñapti)
with dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda), for it is a way of emptying
the subject and object of substantialist implications (=emptiness,

śūnyatā) and representing a middle standpoint between extremes (madhyamā pratipat).[29]

If the negative doctrine of non-substantialism (anātmavāda) that represents a stepping outside of both subject and object may sound unfamiliar to the modern Western student of philosophy, more combersome is the positive doctrine of dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda). Yet, it can be understood in terms of the more familiar category of causation provided one is prepared to shed the substantialist or essentialist perspectives.

Skepticism regarding causal explanations, especially in the area of perceptual experience, is rampant in the traditional Indian schools as well as in some of the modern Western philosophical traditions. Once again such skepticism is the result of the pursuit of excess objectivity that Nagel is complaining about. In the modern world, the most prominent advocate of such skepticism has been Bertrand Russell. Nagel expresses this dilemma when he says: "The same ideas that make the pursuit of objectivity seem necessary for knowledge make both objectivity and knowledge seem, on reflection, unattainable."[30] This dilemma is inevitable so long as we deal with an objectivity that is excessive to the point of being absolute, while human knowledge remains undeniably limited and relative. If objectivity is not as excessive and absolute, skepticism may not appear to be so troublesome.

Here the problem is created by the science of logic that derived its inspiration from the two-valued logic of Aristotle. In this particular system, which incidentally is not so alien to the traditional Indian logical system where absolutism reigned supreme in discussions relating to 'existence', it is possible to speak of the true and the false distinction appearing in the following form. If the statement: "All swans are white," is true, the statement: "Some swans are not white," is false in the sense that the latter contradicts the former. Here, the term "all" (sarvam) is used in an absolute sense. Thus, whenever there is a need to account for possibilities (which may be otherwise), it is necessary to introduce counterfactual after counterfactual, an attempt that some modern philosophers now look upon as being futile.[31]

The Buddha was clearly aware of the problems relating to the absolutist conception of "all" or "everything" (sabbam). His empiricism as well as his explanation of conception, as mentioned earlier, prevented him from absolutizing even the conception of "all". Questioned by a metaphysician by name Janussoni specifically on the problem of "all" (sabbam), the Buddha replied that as far as he is concerned "all" means the eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and tangible, mind and concept, that is, the six forms of sense experience. Pressed by Janussoni with questions regarding other definitions of "all", the Buddha insisted that he would avoid any such definition, the reason being that they would be beyond experience (avisaya).[32] It is for this reason that whenever the Buddha was

compelled to utilize universal terms, that is to use the conception of
"all", he, as far as we can know from the available discourses, always
qualified it as "all this" (sabbam idam). Modern Buddhist scholars,
misled by medieval Hindu thinkers like Udayana Āchārya, have failed to
realize the epistemological significance of this qualification.

The avoidance of any absolutistic notions of truth does not mean the
wholehearted sponsorship of skepticism, either in its absolute form as
reflected in a philosopher like Sañjaya or in its less severe form
portrayed in the Jaina logic of syādvāda where everything is a
possibility or a "maybe," until the attainment of "omniscience"
(kaivalya). The difficulty consists in discovering a middle path between
these extremes. In the first place, the Buddha had to admit that every
rational human being needs to recognize certain things as being true and
others as being false. Otherwise human life would be chaotic.
Therefore, to the question as to whether there is a variety of truths
(regarding the same matter), the Buddha declared that "truth is one and
there is no second," (ekam hi saccam na dutīyam atthi).[33] Secondly, it
was necessary to prevent this truth from deteriorating into an absolute
truth as reflected in the statement: "This alone is true, everything else
is false," (idam eva saccam mogham aññam),[34] which leaves no room for
change as well as possibilities. The Buddha realized the necessity to
account for change as well as creativity and novelty in the explanation
of experience. His conception of truth and the method by which that
truth is to be clarified, namely, logic, had to accommodate such
creativity and novelty.

This task was accomplished by the Buddha by dissolving the absolutistic true/false dichotomy and replacing it with a trichotomy: the true, the confused and the false, the first accounting for what is available in the present context, the second allowing for the possible, and the third explaining the impossible. The Buddha refers to truth as sacca, the confusion or the confused as musā and the false as kali.

This repudiation of the absolute true/false distinction, comparable to one unsuccessfully attempted by William James in Western philosophy,[35] seems to leave the Buddha with a method of providing truth-value to propositions that appears very different from the methods adopted in the essentialist or absolutistic systems.

An extremely interesting passage in the Anguttara-nikāya (misinterpreted by K. N. Jayatilleke[36] because of his careless handling of the terminology used by the Buddha) illustrates the Buddha's standpoint.

The passage reads as follows:

> I know what has been seen, heard, thought, cognized, attained, sought and reflected upon by the people including the ascetics and brahmans. If I know what has been seen . . . by the people . . . and I were to say: " I do not know it," that would be confusion (musā) on my part. And if I were to say: "I know it

and I do not know it," that too would be confusion on my part.
[However,] if I were to say: "I neither know it nor do not know
it," I would be committing a sin (kali) on my part.37

The truth-values assigned to he last three statements by Jayatilleke
seems to be inconsistent with the terminology used by the Buddha to
characterize them. The four statements may be summarized as follows:

I.   I know p.

II.   I do not know p.

III. I know and do not know p.

IV.   I neither know nor do not know p.

According to the Buddha, if I is true, both II ad III are confusions
(musā) and IV alone is false (kali). Compared with the term musa, the
term kali expresses the heightened sense of epistemological sin. If
proposition II were to be characterized as the contrary of I, as
Jayatilleke does, then even III would be a contrary, and IV alone would
be a contradiction.

The four propositions may be stated as follows:

I.   p (true)

II. $\sim$ p (contrary)

III. (p.$\sim$ p) (contrary)

IV. $\sim$(p.$\sim$ p) (contradictory)

The question remains as to why the Buddha did not characterize III as contradiction (kali), even though Jayatilleke seems to interpret it as such. Jayatilleke formulates them as follows, leaving room for assigning truth-value to each one of them:

   I.   p (true)
   II. not p (contrary)
   III. both p and not p [?]
   IV. neither p nor not p [?]

It is our contention that the conclusions derived by Jayatilleke from an anaylsis of the Buddha's statement reflects not only his failure to observe the important distinction between the two terms "confusion" (musā) and "sin" (kali) but also his enthusiasm to adopt the essentialist true/false dichotomy as well as the method of providing truth-value to propositions rather indiscriminately. For the Buddha the true/false dichotomy needs to be modified whenever the evaluation involves both knowledge and description, that is empirical statements. An empirical statement would be contradicted only by a statement that represents a total negation of both knowledge and description, and for the Buddha this would also involve a denial of all possibilities of knowing or describing, which is the effect of the fourth proposition. By describing the fourth proposition as "(epistemological) sin" (kali) the Buddha was probably condemning the Jainas for giving truth-value to it. For the Buddha a truly contradictory statement implies not only indescribability

as this or that but also the absence of any possibility of knowing
through empirical means. Therefore, Jayatilleke's attempt to give
truth-value to proposition IV [$\sim(p.\sim p)$][38] is based upon the
true/false distinction as well as the system of evaluation adopted in the
essentialist systems of epistemology and would not be appropriate in the
Buddha's anti-essentialist teachings. Proposition III, $(p.\sim p)$, does
not rule out the possibility of knowledge altogether and is therefore a
contrary rather than a contradiction.

With such a definition of existence or truth, the Buddha could
formulate a theory of causation or dependence and even utilize
counterfactuals without making them overwork. This fact is clearly
expressed in his general formulation of the principle of dependence:

> When that exists, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this
> arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be; on
> the cessation of that, this ceases.[39]

It may be noted that the second statement above serves the function
of a counterfactual.

What is most important in the above analysis is that the truth-value
of a concept, a statement or a proposition is determined on a contextual
basis rather than in an absolute way. This has important bearings on the
Buddhist theory of linguistic convention, a subject that is outside the

scope of the present paper. We will focus our attention on its significance in the area of ethics or moral discourse.

In the Upaniṣads, while the search for ultimate objectivity reached its culmination in the conception of ātman, the ultimate reality of the subject as well as the object, a similar search in the area of ethics gave rise to the conception of brahman.[40] Brahman was the source of the fourfold caste-system. The creation of the dharma or the moral law being subsequent to the creation of the caste-system, the latter is seen to take precedence over the former. Therefore, the caste specifies the duty which serves as the foundation of morality. This conception of duty came to be elaborated in the Bhagavadgītā where its ontological status is preserved leaving no room for the human perspective.

The Buddha was inclined to use the term dharma to refer to the moral ideal since he had very little sympathy with the Hindu caste-system which gave meaning to the Upaniṣadic term brahman. For him, the term dharma, used in an ethical sense, denoted good, both in its concrete and ideal forms.[41] Its negation, a-dharma meant bad or evil. For the Buddha, good is what produces good consequences (attha),[42] and such consequences are dependently arisen, i.e., depend upon various factors operating within each context. A pragmatic criterion of good, therefore, has to be contextual as well. For this reason, dharma as the moral ideal was never looked upon as an Absolute. Indeed, grasping on to any conception of good as the ultimately real, the universally valid and

eternally existent is criticized by the Buddha. This idea is clearly expressed by him in his discourse on the "snake-simile" addressed to a monk named Arittha available both in Pali and Chinese.[43] He insists that a person has to "abandon even the good, let alone evil." Utilizing an appropriate simile, the simile of the raft (kulla), the Buddha argues that a person builds a raft only for the purpose of crossing over a stream. If, after crossing over, the person were to carry the raft on his shoulders wherever he goes insisting that the raft was useful and, therefore, he should not abandon it, that person would not understand the function of the raft.[44] This means that the usefulness of the raft is contextual and concrete. Apart from the context, the raft has no meaning, and it is not possessed of absolute value. The pragmatist James struck a similar note when he said that "there is always a pinch between the actual and the ideal which can be gotten rid of by leaving part of the ideal behind."[45]

What does the Buddha mean by abandoning the good? Most scholars take this to mean the transcendence of both good and evil and the attainment of an ineffable state comparable to the brahman. If this interpretation is correct it would mean that the epistemology and the conceptual analysis which were adopted in determining the subject and object are inappropriate in the sphere of moral discourse, and the Buddha can be rightly accused of being inconsistent. Therefore, "abandoning the good" needs to be understood in a totally different way.

The raw material on the basis of which we arrived at a reasonable
conception of a human person were subjective as well as objective.
Similar facts served as the raw material for our conception of the
object. The very same epistemology and conception call for the
preservation of three factors in arriving at any conception of morality.
These are: (1) the conception of the individual human person, which we
have already arrived at as a viable philosophical concept without having
to sacrifice the human perspective; (2) the conception of the objective
world, including other human persons, for objectivity is not completely
abandoned, and (3) the reality of new and varying contextual situations
(that is, the possibilities) that continue to unfold before humanity as a
result of dependent arising and which need to be accounted for. These
constitute the raw material that go to produce a reasonable conception
whenever human beings are called upon to make moral decisions or
judgments.

Thus, a reasonable moral judgment will require a careful decision
regarding the manner in which we incorporate any one of these factors
whenever that particular factor becomes relevant to the situation without
ruling it out beforehand. This can be done only when we realize that, as
in the case of factual truths, what is involved in a moral decision is
also a conception. The Buddha used the term vohāra (=vyavahāra) to refer
to moral conception,[46] while he reserved the term saṅkhā, as noted
earlier, to refer to conception relating to facts. Realizing that moral
conceptions are more variable than conceptions relating to facts, the

Buddha was willing to speak of an ideal moral standard as a useful
guide. Thus, we have the term dhamma used in the plural to refer to
concrete conceptions of the good, while the same term used in the
singular as dhammo refers to the ideal good. It is only the need to
modify the ideal (dhammo) when that ideal comes into conflict with the
concrete good (dhamma) that is implied in the Buddha's admonition to
"abandon the good." It is not a call to renounce any and every
conception of the good. This is the reason for the Buddha's statement
that a person should aspire to be moral or virtuous (sīlavā) rather than
being one who is made up of morals or virtues (sīlamaya).[47] It is
another way of stating the fact that concrete moral situations are not
derived from ultimate and absolute moral laws. Instead, the so-called
absolutely objective moral laws are abstractions from concrete moral
situations.

The above understanding of the subject, the object and morals will
enable us to appreciate the contents of the Buddha's first discourse to
the world. In this discourse, popularly known as the "Establishment of
the Conception of Righteousness" (Dhammacappavattana), the Buddha speaks
of two extremes of behavior: self-indulgence and self-mortification.[48]
Self-indulgence is characterized as being low, vulgar, individualist,
ignoble and unfruitful (in the long run). It represents excessive
selfishness stemming from a perspective that leaves no room for the
objective reality of other human persons or of the world at large.
Contrasted with this form of behavior is self-mortification, described as

being painful, ignoble and unfruitful. This is the result of excessive
altruism that tends to ignore the objectivity of the human person, to
dissolve him completely in an excessively objective world. Selfishness
and altruism in their extreme forms therefore represent two different
extremes with which we perceive the individual and the world.

An extreme form of selfishness is easily condemned. Yet a similarly
extreme form of altruism is rarely denounced. The Buddha was aware of
this when he characterized selfishness as being low, vulgar,
individualist, and described self-mortification as being simply painful.
Excessive altruism may eventually be traced back to excessive skepticism
regarding human knowledge which, in turn, can feed heroism. In the
Indian context, this position is reflected in the Hindu religious text,
the Bhagavadgītā as well as the Buddhist text, the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-
sūtra.

Rationalist Nagel believes that truth must lie either in skepticism
or in heroism or in both.[49] Hence he is able to justify a position where
the so-called moral life can override the good life.[50] If by the moral
life Nagel means an excessively objective moral principle comparable to
one sought for by Kant, with whom he has great sympathy, the good life
would represent the concrete life of human happiness, whether it be of an
individual person or a specific community of persons. Indeed, it is the
excessive objectivity of that moral life that compels Nagel to favor the
overriding of the good life by the moral

life. The Buddha, who was less inclined to adopt such a rationalist position and favored the modification of the ideal when it comes into conflict with the concrete, looked upon both selfishness and altruism as being ignoble and unfruitful. For him, the noble and the fruitful way of life is represented by a carefully conceived middle path that will contribute to the welfare of oneself as well as of others.[51] This is a more enlightened form of ethical pragmatism.

ENDNOTES

1   Thomas Nagel, <u>The</u> <u>View</u> <u>From</u> <u>Nowhere</u>, New York & Oxford: Oxford
    University Press, 1986, p. 27.

2   <u>Brhadāranyaka</u> <u>Upaniṣad</u> 1.4.1 (edited and translated by S.
    Radhakrishnan, <u>The</u> <u>Principal</u> <u>Upaniṣads</u>, London: Allen & Unwin, 1953).

3   Gilbert Ryle, <u>The</u> <u>Conception</u> <u>of</u> <u>Mind</u>, London: Hutchinson, 1949, pp.
    15-16.

4   <u>Śvetāśvatara</u> <u>Upaniṣad</u> 1.2 (see Radhakrishnan).

5   <u>Sutta-nipāta</u>, ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith, London: Pali Text
    Society, 1913, 840.

6   <u>Saṃyutta-nikāya</u>, ed. L. Feer, London: Pali Text Society, 1884-1904,
    3.86.

7   ibid., 3.68.

8   ibid., 3.86.

9   <u>Dīgha-nikāya</u>, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, London:
    Pali Texts Society, 1890-1911, 1.77.

10 <u>Saṃyutta-nikāya</u> 3.87.

11 Nagel, op. cit., p.11.

12 <u>Dīgha-nikāya</u> 3.105.

13 William James, <u>The</u> <u>Principles</u> <u>of</u> <u>Psychology</u>, Cambridge,
    Massachuttes: Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 219-278.

14 <u>Saṃyutta-nikāya</u> 1.15.

15 Nagel, op.cit., p. 7.

16 James, <u>The</u> <u>Principles</u>, p. 436.

17. ibid.

18 ibid.

19 Dīgha-nikāya 1.202; Majjhima-nikāya, ed. V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, London: Pali Text Society, 1887-1901, 1.190.

20 Nagel, op.cit., p. 74 (emphasis mine).

21 ibid., p. 91.

22 ibid.

23 Dīgha-nikāya 1.70; Majjhima-nikāya 1.180 ff.

24 Udāna, ed. P. Steinthal, London: Pali Text Society, 1948, 8.

25 Majjhima-nikāya 1.136.

26 Samyutta-nikāya 2.17.

27 James, Principles p. 439.

28 Vimśatikā 10 (see Kalupahana, The Principles of Buddhist Psychology, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987)..

29 Kārikā XXIV.18 (see Kalupahana, Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

30 Nagel, op. cit., p. 67.

31 Kripke, Saul, "Counterfactual Theories of Knowledge," paper read before the University of Hawaii, Department of Philosophy Colloquim, January 22-23, 1987.

32 Samyutta-nikāya, 4.15; see Kalupahana, "A Buddhist tract on empiricism," Philosophy East and West, Honolulu, 19 (1969):65-67.

33 Sutta-nipāta 884.

34 Majjhima-nikāya 1.169.

35 See James, <u>The Will to Believe</u>, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 89.

36 <u>Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge</u>, London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, p. 346.

37 <u>Aṅguttara-nikāya</u>, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, London: Pali Text Society, 1885-1900, 2.25.

38 Jayatilleke, op. cit., p. 345.

39 <u>Majjhima-nikāya</u> 1.262-264, etc.

40 <u>Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad</u> 1.4.11 ff.

41 <u>Majjhima-nikāya</u> 1.415-417; <u>Theragāthā</u>, ed. H. Oldenberg and R. Pischel, London: Pali Text Society, 1883, 304.

42 See Kalupahana, <u>A Path of Righteousness</u> (<u>Dhammapada</u>), Lanham: University Press of America, pp. 39-40.

43 <u>Majjhima-nikāya</u> 1.130-142; <u>Chung A-han Ching</u> 54.1 (<u>Taishō</u> 1.763b-766b).

44 <u>Majjhima-nikāya</u> 1.135; <u>Chung A-han Ching</u> 54.1 (<u>Taishō</u> 1.764c).

45 James, <u>The Will to Believe</u>, p. 153.

46 <u>Samyutta-nikāya</u> 1.14-15.

47 <u>Majjhima-nikāya</u> 2.27.

48 <u>Samyutta-nikāya</u> 5.420.

49 Nagel, op. cit., p. 69.

50 ibid., p. 169.

51 <u>Dhammapada</u> 166 (ed. Kalupahana, <u>A Path of Righteousness</u>).