

David J. Kalupahana **The Buddhist conceptions of “subject” and “object” and their moral implications**

Thomas Nagel begins his recent work, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986), with a criticism of the perennial search for objectivity not only in relation to our conception of the object, but also 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 and his perspective as well as the perspectives of others in a world that is generally looked upon as being neutral, objective, and perspectiveless. Nagel focuses on the second approach.

It is this second version of the problem that particularly interests me. It is the obverse of skepticism because the *given* 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 same time, allowing it to deteriorate into an idealism or a form of solipsism will certainly be in conformity with that of the mainline Buddhist tradition traceable to the Buddha and continued by such disciples as Moggalīputta-tissa (third century B.C.), Nāgārjuna (second century A.C.), Vasubandhu (fourth century A.C.), and Dignāga (fifth century A.C.). The reason is that the philosophical atmosphere in India before and during the sixth century B.C., against which Buddhism 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 Upaniṣadic 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 analyze 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 Upaniṣadic 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 (*ditṭhi*), like those of the Upaniṣadic thinkers, and some others which supposedly avoided any such individual perspective (*aditṭhi*), 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 nonsoul (*anatta*). It is intended to get rid of the “ghost in the machine” without, at the same time, 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 necessary condition for the objective identification of a human person, while at the same time 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 same time, 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 (*viññāna*), 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 (*abhisāṅkhatam*) 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 as 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” (*viññānasota*),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 (*sāṅkhāra*) 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 unanalyzable 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” (*saṅkham 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 article.

In the so-called Theravāda tradition, the continued tendency to reify the psychophysical personality into a metaphysical self or soul was countered by the Buddhist philosopher Moggalīputta-tissa when he criticized the theory of the personalists (*puḍgalavāda*).²⁰ His *Kathāvatthu*, compiled during the third century B.C., begins with a lengthy refutation of this theory.

The first century A.C. witnessed the finalization of the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāmitā*, generally regarded as a Mahāyāna text. The term *vajra* (diamond) occurring in the title expresses the basic theme of the work, namely, deconstruction. It is indeed the symbolism used by the Buddha in the early discourses. In fact, the process of deconstruction is immediately followed by reconstruction, and these two processes applied to the conception of a human person are presented as follows:

Personal existence, personal existence, as no-existence that has been taught by the Tathāgatas; for not, O Lord, is that existence non-existence? Therefore it is called “personal existence.”²¹

The process is presented in three steps and has led to much confusion and misunderstanding among Buddhist scholars. The three steps may be explained as follows:

1. Personal existence = ontological commitment or the attempt to reach ultimate objectivity.
2. No personal existence = deconstruction or the abandoning of that ultimate objectivity.
3. Therefore, “personal existence” (in quotes) = reconstruction or restatement without ontological commitment, that is, the recognition that it is mere conception.

Similarly, Nāgārjuna emphasized the appeasement of the methods of self and selfhood (*ātmātmani-naya*).²² So did Vasubandhu when he identified the objectivity-seeking faculty of mind (*manas*) as the generator of the four kinds of defilements: self-view, self-love, self-pride, and self-confusion.²³

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 es-

entially, but only instrumentally, so to speak: so that the form of our understanding would be specific to ours, *but its contents would not be.*"²⁴

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, and 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶

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 analyze 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 nonself (*anatta*), was, 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 nonself (*anatta*) to the objective world as well. The demystification of the self or the desolidification of the concept of self went hand in hand with the demystification and desolidification 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 (*nimitta*) and perceivable qualities (*anuvyañjana*). If he dwells with the faculty of sight uncontrolled, covetousness 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*.)²⁷

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, Bahiya, to adopt the following method:

Then, Bahiya, 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, Bahiya, you must train yourself. Now, Bahiya when in the seen there will be to you just the seen; . . . just the heard; . . . just the reflected; . . . just the cognized, then, Bahiya, 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.²⁸

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 (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), to which we shall return soon.

As it was with the conception of the subject, we observe in the literature of some of the later Buddhists, especially the Sarvāstivādins, an attempt to reify the object. The Sarvāstivāda conception of substance, denoted by the term *svabhāva*, a term that was utilized by the positivist Materialists of pre-Buddhist India, is well known to the student of Buddhism. The more prominent philosophers of the tradition mentioned earlier reacted against this conception of the object in the same way as they did with regard to the reification of the subject. Moggalīputta-tissa’s *Kathāvatthu* contains one whole chapter devoted to a criticism of the Sarvāstivāda notion of existence (*atthitā*).²⁹ The *Vajracchedikā* utilizes the method of deconstruction and reconstruction mentioned earlier in treating the problem of the object or “the element of the world” (*lokadhātu*).³⁰ Following the Buddha’s admonition relating to the restraint of the senses, referred to earlier, Nāgārjuna concludes his analysis of the objective elements (*dhātu*) encouraging the appeasement of the conception of the object (*draṣṭavopaśama*).³¹ Similarly, the psychologist Vasubandhu reminds his readers that here the subject of discourse is a “conception of the object” (*viṣaya-vijñapti*).³²

Reification of concepts, whether these pertained to the subject or the object, has been a pervasive tendency among most philosophers. The Buddhist doctrines of the nonsubstantiality of the person (*pudgala-nairātmya*) and the non-

substantiality of elements (*dharma-nairātmya*) served as two powerful fenders against the constantly emerging hazards of reification.

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, that is, “things as they have come to be” (*yathābhūtam*).³⁴

Vasubandhu’s characterization of the object as a concept (*viññapti*) is rather significant, for with it he is focusing attention on one of the most significant theoretical solutions to the problem of objectivity attempted by the Buddha. 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 daydreaming. Vasubandhu clarifies the status of conception thus: “The determination of mutually related concepts is based upon mutual domination (or dependence). In dream experience thought is overwhelmed by torpor. Hence the difference in fruit.”³⁵ A genuine concept is not simply the arbitrary creation of the individual’s mind; it is 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 (*diṭṭhi*) 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*.”³⁶ Unfortunately, James was unaware that the Buddhist psychologist of the fourth century A.C., Vasubandhu, had compiled a whole treatise entitled the “Establishment of Mere Conception” (*Viññaptimātratāsiddhi*), 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*).³⁷ Here again, Vasubandhu was preceded by his illustrious co-religionist, Nāgārjuna, 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 (*madhyamāpratīpat*).³⁸

If the negative doctrine of nonsubstantialism (*anātmavāda*) that represents a stepping outside of both subject and object may sound unfamiliar to the modern Western student of philosophy, more cumbersome 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.”³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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 the name of Jānussoni specifically on the problem of “all” (*sabbam*), the Buddha replied that as far as he was concerned “all” meant 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 Jānussoni 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*).⁴¹ 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 idaṃ*). Modern Buddhist scholars, misled by medieval Hindu

thinkers like Udayana Ācārya, have failed to realize the epistemological significance of this qualification. This qualification, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is faithfully followed by a disciple like Nāgārjuna.⁴² It is also clearly reflected in Vasubandhu's description of reality as "this is a mere concept" (*vijñaptimātram evaitad*).⁴³

The avoidance of any absolutistic notions of truth does not mean the whole-hearted 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 dutiyam atthi*).⁴⁴ 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*),⁴⁵ 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,⁴⁶ 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 *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (misinterpreted by K. N. Jayatilleke⁴⁷ 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 brahmins. 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.⁴⁸

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

1. I know p.
2. I do not know p.
3. I know and do not know p.
4. I neither know nor do not know p.

According to the Buddha, if (1) is true, then both (2) and (3) are confusions (*musā*) and (4) alone is false (*kali*). Compared with the term *musā*, the term *kali* expresses the heightened sense of epistemological sin. If proposition (2) were to be characterized as the contrary of (1), as is done by Jayatilleke, then even (3) would be a contrary, and (4) alone would be a contradiction.

The four propositions may be stated as follows:

1. p (true)
2. \sim p (contrary)
3. (p. \sim p) (contrary)
4. \sim (p. \sim p) (contradictory)

The question remains as to why the Buddha did not characterize (3) as contradiction (*kali*), even though Jayatilleke seems to interpret it as such. Jayatilleke formulates the propositions as follows, leaving room for assigning truth value to each one of them:

1. p (true)
2. not p (contrary)
3. both p and not p [?] (contradictory)
4. neither p nor not p [?] (excluded middle)

It is our contention that the conclusions derived by Jayatilleke from an analysis of the Buddha’s statement reflect 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 Jains for giving truth-value to it. For the Buddha, a truly con-

tradictory 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 (4) [$\sim(p. \sim p)$]⁴⁹ 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 (3), ($p. \sim p$), does not rule out the possibility of knowledge altogether and is therefore a contrary rather than a contradiction.

The foremost among Buddhist logicians, Dinnāga, who attempted to formulate the ideas expressed by the Buddha in more concrete logical language, was actually preserving the fundamental spirit of the Buddha's rationalizations when he presented the *hetu*, the probandum, before proceeding to work out the proof.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

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

What is most important in the preceding 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 article. 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*.⁵² *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, in both its concrete and its ideal forms.⁵³ Its negation, *a-dharma*, meant bad or evil. For the Buddha, good is what produces

good consequences (*attha*),⁵⁴ and such consequences are dependently arisen, that is, they 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷

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 materials 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 needs to be accounted for. These constitute the raw material that goes 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,⁵⁸ 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 to being one who is made up of morals or virtues (*sīlamaya*).⁵⁹ 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.

We have already seen how the *Vajracchedikā* avoided metaphysical assertion and metaphysical negation by explaining the status of conception relating to the self as well as the world. The same method is applied in the case of moral discourse, and in doing so the *Vajracchedikā* utilizes a quotation from the earlier discourse on the simile of the raft and the need to abandon the good (*dharmā*).⁶⁰ This is a more faithful philosophical explanation of the Buddha's moral discourse (*dharmakāya*), presented at a time when popular Mahāyāna was elevating it to the level of a transcendent or ultimate reality.

The relationship between the concrete moral situations and a moral ideal was explained by Nāgārjuna when he claimed that "without relying upon convention (*vyavahāra*) the ultimate fruit (*paramārtha*) is not taught."⁶¹ As pointed out earlier, the term *vohāra* (= *vyavahāra*) was used by the Buddha to refer specifically to moral conception or convention. Nāgārjuna's explanation here of the relationship between concrete moral situations and a moral ideal resonates with that of the Buddha and serves as a corrective to the ever recurring absolutism in ethics.

Finally we come to Vasubandhu, whose work is devoted primarily to the establishment of "mere conception" (*vijñaptimātra*). Even though he is utilizing different terminology, the ideas he expresses are those of his predecessors. According to him, in the sphere of moral discourse, as in discussions of factual truths, a "mere conception" is to be distinguished from "mental fabrication" (*parikalpita*), for a "mere conception" is the result of mutual dependence (*paratantra*); that is, it involves the subject, the object, and the context as well as agreement among different subjects. However, what is ultimately accomplished or achieved (*pariniṣpanna*) cannot, in any way, go beyond or transcend such mutual dependence, for "in the absence of any conception of the concrete (moral) situation, the (moral) ideal is also not perceived."⁶²

The understanding just presented of the subject, the object, and the 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.⁶³ 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 an 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 according to 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, and 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 in the Buddhist text, the *Śaddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*.

Rationalist Nagel believes that truth must lie either in skepticism or in heroism or in both.⁶⁴ Hence he is able to justify a position where the so-called moral life can override the good life.⁶⁵ 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 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.⁶⁶ This is a more enlightened form of ethical pragmatism.

NOTES

1. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 27.

2. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.1, in S. Radhakrishnan, ed. and trans., *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953).

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Conception of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), pp. 15–16.

4. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 1.2, in Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*.
5. *Sutta-nipāta*, ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith (London: Pali Text Society, 1913), 840.
6. *Samyutta-nikāya*, ed. L. Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1904), 3.86.
7. *Ibid.*, 3.68.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.86.
9. *Dīgha-nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter (London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911), 1.77.
10. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 3.87.
11. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 11.
12. *Dīgha-nikāya*, 3.105.
13. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 219–278.
14. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 1.15.
15. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 7.
16. James, *Principles*, 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. *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā*, ed. and trans. by Edward Conze (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957), p. 36.
21. *Kathāvatthu*, ed. A. C. Taylor (London: Pali Text Society, 1894–1897), I.1.1–1.23.
22. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XVIII.2 (hereafter cited as *Kārikā*); see David J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986).
23. *Triṃśikā*, 6; see Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987).
24. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 74 (emphasis mine).
25. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Dīgha-nikāya*, 1.70; *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.180 ff.
28. *Udāna*, ed. P. Steinthal (London: Pali Text Society, 1948), 8.
29. *Kathāvatthu*, I.6.1–6.4.
30. *Vajracchedikā*, p. 38.
31. *Kārikā*, V.8.
32. *Triṃśikā*, 2.
33. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.136.
34. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 2.17.
35. *Viṃśatikā*, 18.
36. James, *Principles*, p. 439.
37. *Viṃśatikā*, 10.
38. *Kārikā*, XXIV.18.
39. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 67.
40. Saul Kripke, “Counterfactual Theories of Knowledge” (Paper read before the University of Hawaii, Department of Philosophy Colloquium, 22–23 January 1987).
41. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 4.15; see David J. Kalupahana, “A Buddhist Tract on Empiricism,” *Philosophy East and West* 19, no. 1 (January 1969): 65–67.
42. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna*, pp. 326–328.
43. Kalupahana, *The Principles of Buddhist Psychology*, p. 273.
44. *Sutta-nipāta*, 884.
45. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.169.
46. See William James, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 89.
47. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 346.

48. *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy (London: Pali Text Society, 1885–1900), 2.25.
49. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory*, p. 345.
50. See Radhika Herzberger, *Bhartṛhari and the Buddhists* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986), p. 135.
51. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.262–264, etc.
52. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.11 ff.
53. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.415–417; *Theragāthā*, ed. H. Oldenberg and R. Pischel (London: Pali Text Society, 1883), 304.
54. See David J. Kalupahana, *A Path of Righteousness: Dhammapada* (Lanham: Maryland: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 39–40.
55. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.130–142; *Chung Ā-han Ching*, 54.1 (*Taishō*, 1.763b–766b).
56. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 1.135; *Chung Ā-han Ching*, 54.1 (*Taishō*, 1.764c).
57. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 153.
58. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 1.14–15.
59. *Majjhima-nikāya*, 2.27.
60. *Vajracchedikā*, p. 32.
61. *Kārikā*, XXIV.10.
62. *Triṃśikā*, 22.
63. *Samyutta-nikāya*, 5.420.
64. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 69.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
66. *Dhammapada*, 166, in Kalupahana, *A Path of Righteousness*.