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# Was The Buddha a Reductionist About The Self?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines whether a reductionist view of the self can be found in the *Suttas* of early Buddhism. I will argue that the views of the self exemplified in the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* and the *Abhidhamma Commentaries* are similar to reductionist views of the self put forward by Western philosophers such as David Hume and Derek Parfit. I shall argue that the views of the *Visuddhimagga* can be seen as a legitimate development of the ideas of the *Suttas*. I will also argue however that an opposing view, namely the rejection of a 'realist semantics', can be found in nascent form in the *Suttas*. I will demonstrate that, when legitimately developed, this view can be seen to contradict the reductionist view of the self.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, reductionism, Parfit, Buddhaghosa, Nāgārjuna, chariot simile, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, conventional truth, ultimate truth, *Abhidhamma*, semantic realism, *papañca*.

Reductionism in regards to the self is the view that all facts about a person can be reduced to a set of more particular impersonal facts (Parfit, 1984 p. 210). In Western philosophy these impersonal facts may be facts about the operation of the brain and body. In Buddhism, in particular the Buddhism of the *Abhidhamma Commentaries* of Buddhaghosa, these facts are the operation of the five aggregates (*khandhas*). On this view a 'person' or 'self' is merely a convenient label for this set of deeper facts and a comprehensive account of ultimate reality could be given without reference to 'persons' or 'selves' at all. In this paper I will take the reductionism of Derek Parfit as a standard for what a reductionist position looks like. I will then attempt to address a number of sub-questions before returning to the overarching question of whether the Buddha held a similar reductionist view of the self. I will first outline the standard account of the Buddhist No-Self (*anattā*) doctrine as enumerated by Buddhaghosa and show how this is similar to Western reductionist views of the self such as that of Derek Parfit. In section two I will discuss the objection that the Buddha was not a philosopher at all but rather was a pragmatist attempting to make a soteriological point by teaching *anattā*. I shall argue that this view is mistaken and that the *Suttas* display clear evidence of systematic philosophy. I shall then explore, in section three what some scholars, notably Ronkin, (2005) have taken to be the Buddha's view of language, through a close analysis of the *Madhupinḍika Sutta*. I will show how in this *Sutta* seeds of the notion that language is a mere convention are present, I shall argue along with

Ronkin (2005) that this rejection of a 'realist semantics' has analogues in the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna. I shall take the position of Parfit as a benchmark for what a reductionist position looks like and shall argue that the position of Nāgārjuna is ultimately different in content -- the differences hinging on divergent accounts of language, truth and reality. In the final section I shall fully expound the view of the self found in the *Abhidhamma Commentaries*. I shall show how the seeds of this view can be found in the *Suttas*, particularly the *Vajirā Sutta* and I shall show how the view of the self here is closely analogous to the reductionism of Parfit. I will conclude by arguing that both the 'reductionist realist' position of Buddhaghosa and the 'semantic anti-realism' of Nāgārjuna are supported in the early tradition and that, depending on the text analysed, it is possible to conclude that the Buddha both was and was not a reductionist about the self.

## 1. The Standard View

The standard understanding of the Buddha's teaching of No-Self (*anattā*) as enumerated by Buddhaghosa is as follows: in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (PTS: S iii 66)* the Buddha explains that there are five aggregates (*khandhas*) which make up a human being: matter or form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), apperception / conceptualisation (*saññā*), volition (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The Buddha asserts that these aggregates are not fit to be regarded as Self (*attā*), this is because, ultimately one cannot absolutely control them, one cannot say 'let my material body be this way!' or 'let me feel this way!' and because they are impermanent (*anicca*) and lead to suffering (*dukkha*).

In brahminical thought it was believed that one could attain universal power through the realisation that the microcosm of the true Self (skt. *ātman*, Pāli: *attā*) and the macrocosm of the universe (*brahman*) were identical. Control over the Self would lead to control over the universe with which it is identical (Collins, 1982 p.97). The Buddha, taking aim at this philosophy argues in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* that there is no 'inner controller' and that one ultimately does not have control over the constituents of the self. One cannot say 'let my body be thus', 'let me feel thus' rather there are aspects of the body and the self that are beyond conscious control. The two other prongs of the Buddha's argument in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* are directed against the Upaniṣadic notion of *brahman* as 'being', 'consciousness', and 'bliss' (*satcitānanda*). The Buddha argues that there is no element of the self that is permanently existent and blissful and that all five of the

*khandhas*, including consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are impermanent (*anicca*) and tend towards suffering (*dukkha*). In doing so the Buddha rejects Upaniṣadic concepts of being and the corresponding notions of *ātman* and brahman. Indeed the three hallmarks of existence (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and Not-Self (*anattā*) betray Upaniṣadic reasoning in that they are in direct opposition to the triad of *satcitānanda* (Gombrich, 2009 pp. 69-70).

On this standard view of the No-Self doctrine, exemplified in the teachings of Buddhaghosa the five *khandhas* are seen as constituting an exhaustive list of the series of processes which we conventionally designate by the term 'person': 'it is only these that can afford a basis for the figment of a Self or of anything related to a Self' (*Visuddhimagga* XIV. 218) (translation from Siderits 2007, p. 37). Accordingly the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* gives a philosophical analysis of the five *khandhas* as an exhaustive list of the individual and asserts that within the individual no permanent, unchanging essence (*attā*) is to be found.

According to the *Abhidhamma* the only ultimately existing phenomena are those which possess 'intrinsic nature' (Sanskrit: *svabhāva*; Pāli: *sabhāva*). What is only conventionally real disappears under analysis but what is ultimately real cannot be broken down into further parts. To take a well known example a chariot is conventionally real, a conceptual fiction, because upon analysis one can see that a chariot is composed entirely of parts, such as the axle, the spokes, the ropes, the wheels etc. which in turn can be broken down into further parts. Parts which are elementary and cannot be further broken down are termed *dhammas*. This category includes a variety of non-material (mental) *dhammas* and matter (*rūpa*) which can be further analysed in terms of the four primary elements (*cattāri māha bhūtāni*) of solidity (earth), adhesion (water), heat (fire) and motion (wind) (Mendis, 1985 p. 23). Whilst this theory may resemble atomism it is important to note that a fire *dhamma* is merely a momentary occurrence of the property of heat not an atom. Likewise an earth *dhamma* is not a very small substance but rather an 'occurrence of solidity in a very small region of space' (Siderits 2007. p. 15). The *Abhidhamma* asserts that the person can be reduced to a bundle of *dhammas*: matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), apperception (*saññā*), volition (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and that the 'self' as a conceptual fiction borrows its existence from these five more basic elements. Take away the five *khandhas* and nothing of the 'self' remains. The person is therefore a collection of mental and physical *dhammas* which themselves are impermanent, causally conditioned and subject to dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). According to the parlance of everyday language it is true that 'persons' exist. We can refer to persons, predicate things of them and describe their actions. Nevertheless at the ultimate level of reality, the level of the *dhammas*, it is the case that there are no persons and there is no *attā*. There are only the five *khandhas*. Persons are not 'in the language of "ultimate" truth, ultimately real Existents' (Collins, 1997, p.478). Hence the statement of Buddhaghosa:

'Just as when trunk, branches, foliage, etc., are placed in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage

"tree," yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no tree. ...so too, when there are the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "a being," "a person," yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no being as a basis for the assumption "I am" or "I"' (*Visuddhimagga*, XVIII, 28) [Trans. Nānamoli (2010)].

This view is a type of mereological *reductionism* (Siderits 2007, p.54). This is the view that parts are real but wholes are not; wholes consist entirely in their parts and can be reduced to them. It is also a version of *realism*, as it assumes that there are ultimately real phenomena (*dhammas*) that can be described using language. Just as we use the word 'chariot' to designate an assemblage of parts (to use an example from the *Vajirā sutta*), so too we use the term 'self' to designate the *khandhas*. A 'self' is ultimately unreal and all that exists is the psychophysical continuity of the *khandhas*. We use the word 'self' only as a conventional shorthand for this deeper truth.

This *reductionist realist* view of the self has been compared to the views of Western philosophers such as Derek Parfit and David Hume. Parfit argues that a 'person' just consists in the existence of a brain and body and the occurrence of certain mental and physical events and processes such as thoughts, actions and experiences. To use an analogy a 'person' is rather like a 'nation'. A nation consists entirely in a body of people inhabiting a certain territory united by a common history, culture, or language, and is nothing over and above this. Likewise, for Parfit, a person consists entirely in the mental processes of brain and body and is, ontologically, nothing extra (Parfit, 1984 pp. 199- 218). We conceive of persons (or 'selves') as permanent entities above our thoughts and experiences only because of language, which imposes a stable concept of 'person' upon multiple transient processes. Hence:

'Even Reductionists do not deny that people exist. And, on our concept of a person, people are not thoughts and acts. They are thinkers and agents. I am not a series of experiences, but the person who *has* these experiences. A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is *what has* experiences, or the *subject of experiences*. This is true because of the way in which we talk. What a Reductionist denies is that the subject of experiences is a *separately existing entity*, distinct from a brain and body, and a series of physical and mental events' (Parfit, 1984 p. 233).

Parfit asserts that the Buddha would have agreed with this reductionist realist view of the self (Parfit, 1984 p. 273). Likewise Hume saw persons as a 'bundle' of different perceptions with no enduring substance.

'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.' (*Treatise*, I.4.6.3)

As such both 'Hume and the Buddha were unable to find a self when they looked within' (Siderits, 2007, p.45). In the following sections I will examine a number of challenges to this standard understanding and some responses.

In the next section I will first address the question of whether or not the Buddha was a philosopher. I will argue against the view of Thanissaro (2011) that the *anattā* doctrine is a purely practical strategy and I will seek to demonstrate that it is not misleading to characterise the Buddha as a philosopher.

## 2. Was the Buddha a Philosopher?

As reductionism is a philosophical position it will be first necessary to establish whether the Buddha was interested in presenting a philosophically coherent doctrine in regards to the self. There are a number of scholars who argue that he was not. Gombrich (2009, p. 60) argues that to compare the words of the Buddha to philosophers such as Hume is to remove them from their historical context and to potentially obscure them. For Gombrich the Buddha's approach to the problem of suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation (*nirodha*) is pragmatic. As a consequence the Buddha was not interested in philosophical questions for their own sake (Gombrich, 2009 p. 67).

Gombrich asserts that the Buddha 'condemned all theorising which had no practical value' and 'tended to be quite hard on those who indulged in metaphysical speculations' (Gombrich, 2009 p. 166). Furthermore he 'was not interested in presenting a philosophically coherent doctrine' (Gombrich, 2009 p. 164) but was rather focussed on providing pragmatic advice which was nonetheless underpinned by systematic thought.

Support for the view that the Buddha was not interested in purely philosophical speculation is to be found by considering the unanswered questions (*avyākata pañhā*). As explained in the *Cūlamāluṅkyovada Sutta* (PTS: M i 426) the Buddha refused to comment on metaphysical questions such as:

- 1.) Is the cosmos eternal?
- 2.) Is the cosmos not eternal?
- 3.) Is the cosmos finite?
- 4.) Is the cosmos infinite?
- 5.) Are the soul and the body the same?
- 6.) Is the soul one thing and the body another?
- 7.) Does the Tathāgata exist after death?
- 8.) Does the Tathāgata not exist after death?
- 9.) Does the Tathāgata both exist and does not exist after death?
- 10.) Does the Tathāgata neither exist nor does not exist after death?

These 'ten indeterminates' (*dasa avyākatavattūni*) 'formed a kind of questionnaire with which the ancient Indians used to confront any religious teacher of note' (Ñāṇananda, 1971 p. 17). The Buddha rejects the questionnaire *in toto* and advises that the questions are the outcome of wrong reflection and hence do not warrant a reply (Ñāṇananda, 1971 pp. 17- 18). The questions are unhelpful and are compared to a man shot with a poisoned arrow enquiring as to the name, height and town of origin of the man who shot him, instead of receiving the necessary treatment. Spending time in speculation, rather than attending to the immediate problem of *dukkha* is of no benefit and will not lead to *nibbāna*. A similar point is made in the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* wherein the Buddha

repudiates the same list of questions as 'a thicket of views' (PTS: M i 483. Trans: Bodhi [2009]).

This view that the *anattā* doctrine is not philosophy is more radically taken up by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Thanissaro (2011) states that 'the Buddha in teaching not-self was not answering the question of whether there is or isn't a self. This question was one he explicitly put aside' (Thanissaro, 2011 p. 1). Thanissaro argues that the Buddha's teaching just covers two issues, how suffering is caused and the path to its cessation (*ibid.*) Thanissaro also draws upon the unanswered questions and the simile of the poisoned arrow to assert that the Buddha was only concerned with providing a pragmatic answer to the problem of *dukkha* and nothing further. For Thanissaro the *anattā* doctrine is not meant to answer questions such as 'do I have a self' or 'do I exist' (Thanissaro, 2011 p. 3). Thanissaro argues that this view has some textual support: in the *Ānanda Sutta* (PTS:S iv 400) the Buddha refuses to answer Vacchagotta's question of 'is there no Self?' Similarly in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* it is stated that the brahmins falsely misrepresent the teaching of the Buddha stating 'the recluse Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being' (PTS: M i 141: Trans. Bodhi [2009]). Thanissaro presents the Buddha not as enquiring philosophically into the nature of the self but rather attempting to answer the question of whether it is beneficial and skillful (*kusala*) to regard anything as 'mine' or 'my self' (Thanissaro, 2011 p. 4). To view the world as 'not-self' is therefore a strategy for helping one avoid unskillful action and put an end to suffering. Thanissaro argues that the Buddha was not attacking the Upaniṣadic notion of the self, nor any other philosophical conception of self rather he completely put aside the philosophical question of whether or not there is a self and in its place recommended that one practically view the world as 'not mine, not myself' as a therapeutic means to eliminate suffering (*dukkha*) (Thanissaro, 2011 p. 10) as a consequence 'the Buddha is not interested in defining who you are or what your self is' (Thanissaro, 2011 p. 13). To support this view Thanissaro refers to the *Simsapā Sutta* herein the Buddha states:

'Bhikkhus, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, bhikkhus, have I not taught those many things? Because they are unbeneficial...and do not lead to cessation... to Nibbāna... And what, bhikkhus, have I taught? I have taught: 'This is suffering'; I have taught: 'This is the origin of suffering'; I have taught: 'This is the cessation of suffering'; I have taught: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' (PTS: S v 437. Trans. Bodhi 2000)

Ruegg (1995) notes that the view that the Buddha was not a philosopher claims support from within the *Suttas* themselves, (as already noted) particularly the *Cūlamāluṅkyovada Sutta* (PTS: M i 426) wherein the Buddha refuses to answer the questions put to him by *Māluṅkyaputta* (Ruegg, 1995 p. 149). The Buddha is the true doctor who pragmatically removes the poisoned arrow rather than dwelling fruitlessly on what sort of person shot the arrow. The Buddha's teaching is therapeutic and questions which do not serve this therapeutic need are

to be excluded as irrelevant. Ruegg notes that the question of whether the Buddha was a philosopher, unsurprisingly, hinges on the definition of philosophy. If philosophy is understood as a pure analysis of concepts, language and meaning, Buddhism as a practical soteriology would not be considered purely philosophical (Ruegg, 1995 p.151). Nevertheless in Buddhism epistemology and metaphysics are closely bound up with the soteriological schema of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariya saccāni*). Ruegg contends that what the Buddha was rejecting was 'disputing for the sake of disputing rather than useful discussion and analysis' (Ruegg, 1995 p. 154). The Buddha rejects disputation and contentiousness for its own sake but not philosophical reasoning *per se*.

I would contend that the Buddha was a philosopher. Van Inwagen notes that a useful definition of metaphysics is as such: 'metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality' (Van Inwagen, 2015, p.1). Perhaps to avoid the ambiguities inherent in the word 'ultimate' we could define metaphysics as 'a general picture explaining the relation between human thought and the world' (Ronkin 2005, p. 247). Though the Buddha was concerned with providing pragmatic advice to realise the cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering (*dukkha*) this does not necessarily discount him from being categorised as a philosopher. This is particularly evident in light of the fact that a sceptic such as Pyrrho (c. 360 – c. 270 BC) who emphasised indifference, impassivity and tranquillity in light of the fact that we must not trust perceptions (Svavarsson, 2010 p. 47), and was perhaps 'an unsystematic moral sage' (Svavarsson, 2010 p. 37), is treated as a philosopher *par excellence*. Similarly Sextus Empiricus, who emphasised the suspension of assent to any belief (advising that tranquillity would ensue as a result), (Pellegrin, 2010 p. 125) is undoubtedly categorised as a philosopher within the Western tradition. If we are to take Ronkin's definition of metaphysics here of 'a general picture explaining the relation between human thought and the world' (Ronkin 2005, p. 247) we can see that some of what is written in the *Suttas* contains what could be termed metaphysics. This is particularly evident when examining the schemas of the aggregates (*khandhas*) and dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). The *khandhas* are an attempt to provide a general picture of human experience by dividing it into matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), apperception (*saññā*), volition (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and analysing these elements of experience to demonstrate that no permanent self can be found. This, according to Ronkin and Van Inwagen's definitions, would certainly constitute metaphysics. Similarly dependent origination which explains the arising of old age and death (*jarāmaraṇa*) from ignorance (*avijjā*) seems to be in its most basic sense a picture explaining the relation between human thought (and action) and the world.

In addition I would also assert that Thanissaro's (2011) assessment of the *anattā* doctrine is mistaken. In addition to being a practical strategy the *anattā* doctrine is a philosophical position which asserts that a substantial self cannot be found in reality. The Buddha's silence in regards to the unanswered questions can be understood by carefully analysing the texts. In regards to the 'unanswered questions' it is plausible that questions one to four were dismissed purely as pointless speculation but it

seems that there must be a further reason for the Buddha's refusal to answer questions five to ten, particularly in the light of the Buddha's teaching of No-Self. Collins notes that in the Commentaries *Tathāgata* is glossed once as *attā* (UdA. 340) which suggests that the questions regarding the state of the *Tathāgata* after death are rejected because they assume the existence of an *attā*: 'they use personal referring terms, which according to Buddhist thinking have no real referent' (Collins 1982 p. 133). Philosophically this is a case of 'presupposition failure'. The presupposition here is that there 'ultimately' exists an entity denoted by the word *attā*. This presupposition in Buddhist thinking is false and hence the sentence 'does the *Tathāgata* exist after death' cannot be meaningfully decided because the terms employed 'relate to null subjects' (Ruegg, 1977 p. 2). At the ultimate level the *Tathāgata* does not exist, it is therefore not meaningful to ask whether he exists after death. In the same way as the 'soul' does not exist, it is not meaningful to ask whether it is identical with the body. 'The *attā*' is like the son of a barren woman in that there is nothing in reality to which it actually refers.

The No-Self doctrine is therefore a middle way (*majjhimāpaṭipadā*) between the extreme positions of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*sassatavāda*). As explained in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the core of the eternalist position is that the Self and the world are eternal (PTS: D i 1 ). Eternalism comprises, among others, the view that the true Self (Skr: *ātman*) and the macrocosm (*brahman*) are identical and change is an appearance (a belief found in the Upaniṣads, notably the *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and in later Advaita Vedānta) (Bodhi 1978 pp.16-19). Annihilationism, in its common form, teaches that death is the destruction of a substantially existing being and that death brings an end to all individual experience. One form identifies the self with the body and its elements which are dissolved upon death and as such death involves the annihilation of an existent being (PTS: D i 1 ). The No-Self doctrine is not annihilationism because there is no 'Self' to destroy. Nor is it eternalism, as an eternal Self (*attā*) is repudiated. It is rather a middle way between the two, a conventional self is accepted which is nonetheless ultimately a conceptual construction.

The Buddha's refusal to answer Vacchagotta's question of 'is there no self?' in the *Ānanda Sutta* (PTS:S iv 400) can be explained as a refusal to side with the annihilationists. The Buddha refused to reveal the metaphysics of the *anattā* doctrine to Vacchagotta on this occasion because he was already confused. The same *Sutta* states: 'if...I had answered, "There is no self", the wanderer Vacchagotta, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, "It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now."' (PTS:S iv 400. Trans. Bodhi [2000]). Bhikkhu Bodhi commenting on the same *Sutta* argues that the reason the Buddha does not state outright that 'there is no self' is because such terminology was used by the annihilationists and he wished to avoid aligning his teaching with theirs in front of the bewildered Vacchagotta (Bodhi, 2000 p. 1457). This point is made more plausible when it is taken into account that some variants of the annihilationist teaching were accompanied by moral nihilism. This is true of the teaching of Ajita

Kesakambalī who taught the extermination of the existing being upon death with the result that there is no karmic fruit of good or bad deeds (Collins, 1982, p. 36). Indeed later in the same *Sutta* after the confused Vacchagotta has left, the Buddha states to Ānanda 'all phenomena are non-self' (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) which is a restatement of the metaphysics of the No-Self doctrine. Far from being a purely practical strategy the anattā doctrine is a metaphysics which states that no enduring, substantial self can be found in reality.

Siderits (2015) notes that the Buddhist *Suttas* were written down several centuries after the Buddha's death and are in a language (*Pāli*) that he is unlikely to have spoken. It is therefore theoretically possible that the Buddha in person rejected metaphysics and that the *Suttas* of the Pāli Canon are not faithful to his original intentions. Nevertheless the *Suttas* are the only comprehensive account we have of the earliest teaching of the Buddha and the only way to identify the 'historical Buddha' is through the lens of the *Suttas*. It cannot be fruitful therefore to speculate on theoretical possibilities such as the *Suttas* being unfaithful to the Buddha's original intentions. I would argue along with Siderits (2015) that the best way to understand the 'original' teaching of the Buddha is to engage with the *Suttas* via the medium of the later Buddhist philosophical tradition. In the remainder of this paper I will discuss two philosophical interpretations of the anattā doctrine: that found in the *Abhidhamma*, and that espoused by Nāgārjuna. It is to the latter that I will turn first.

### 3. The Buddha's View of Language as Interpreted by Ronkin, Nānananda and Nāgārjuna

In this section I shall explore the view that the Buddha rejected a 'realist semantics' and how this view conflicts with the reductionist realism of Parfit. I will discuss the works of Gombrich (2009) who has argued that the Buddha rejected the brahminical theory of language and Nānananda (1971) who has argued that the *dhamma* can be conceived as a schema for the 'deconceptualisation of the mind' (Nānananda, 1971 p. 27). I shall also analyse the work of Ronkin (2005) who has argued that the views of Nāgārjuna are closer to the Buddha's original message than the writings of Buddhaghosa. I will show how support for this thesis can be found in the *Suttas*. Finally I shall demonstrate how the view of Nāgārjuna is similar to that of Parfit at the level of conventional (Skt: *saṃvṛti*) truth, but significantly different at the level of ultimate (Skt: *paramārtha*) truth.

Gombrich (2009, p. 149) posits that informing the teaching of the Buddha was a fundamental rejection of the brahminical theory of language *Mīmāṃsā*. *Mīmāṃsā* as one of the six schools of orthodox (skt: *āstika*) philosophy upheld a 'robust form of linguistic realism' (Arnold, 2011 p. 138). For the *Mīmāṃsaka* the Vedas are authorless, uncreated and eternal, and consequently the Sanskrit language from which they are composed is of an eternal nature. In addition, according to this theory the relation between the Sanskrit word and the state of affairs denoted by the word is non-conventional. The word 'tree' (Skt:

*vrkṣa*) for example describes an object that embodies a real and objectively existent universal: 'treeness'. The relation between the word and the universal is not arbitrary but is rather a timeless and objectively real relation (Arnold, 2011 p.143). Gombrich argues that, in light of the feature of the Buddhist worldview that all phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*), it is the case that there are no fixed and unchanging entities that can be captured by words. Indeed Gombrich states 'the Buddha concluded not merely that languages were conventional, but that it is inherently impossible for any language to fully capture reality' (Gombrich, 2009, p. 149). It is the case that conceptualisation (*saññā*) which necessarily operates via fixed concepts such as 'man', 'woman', child and 'Buddha' cannot fully capture a reality which is radically transient. Indeed in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* the Buddha explicitly states that the process of conceptualisation (*saññā*) is impermanent and unsatisfactory. It stands to reason that such an impermanent (*anicca*) and unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) process could never fully capture the reality of the world (*loka*) which is also impermanent and unsatisfactory.

This theme of the inadequacy of conceptualisation (*saññā*) is taken up by Ronkin who argues that the teaching of the early *Suttas* emphasises the inadequacy of the process of thought and by extension language. The point here is that the naming process itself is a product of apperception (*saññā*) and 'making manifold' (*papañceti*) and hence dependently originated. To rely on language to convey ultimate truth is therefore to grasp at conditioned reality (*saṃsāra*) which will result in suffering. The rejection of all speculative opinions by the Buddha therefore amounts, according to Ronkin, to a rejection of the human cognitive apparatus itself and an assertion that mental proliferation (*papañca*) and the process of making manifold (*papañceti*) are the root of the disease of suffering (*dukkha*). (Ronkin, 2005, pp. 246-247). Similarly Gombrich, states 'the very act of conceptualizing, the Buddha held, thus involves some inaccuracy. His term for this was *papañca*' (Gombrich 2009 p.150). Language can point to reality but can never fully capture its fluidity.

Of particular relevance to this point is the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*. Here it is asserted that:

'What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates (*papañca*). With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present mind-objects cognizable through the mind...Bhikkhu, as to the source through which perceptions and notions [born of] mental proliferation beset a man: if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome, and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, . . . of the underlying tendency to ignorance...here these evil unwholesome states cease without remainder,' (PTS M i 108: Trans.Bodhi [2009])

In order to understand this *Sutta* we must first understand the notion of *papañca*. *Papañca* conveys such meanings as 'spreading out', 'expansion', and 'manifoldness' (Nānananda, 1971 p. 4). It is a comprehensive term 'hinting at the tendency of the...imagination to break loose and run riot' (Nānananda, 1971 p. 4). It can mean 'mental proliferation', 'prolific conceptualisation' or 'mental rambling'.

Papañca tends to obscure subjective experience by giving rise to obsessions. As in the legend of the resurrected tiger who ate the magician that brought it to life, concepts and linguistic conventions overwhelm the man who has evolved them (Ñāṇananda, 1971 p. 6). Language assumes an objective character due to its stability and assails the individual with a tangled net of views (*diṭṭhijāla*). According to Bodhi *papañca* is 'the propensity of the worldling's imagination to erupt in an effusion of mental commentary that obscures the bare data of cognition' (Bodhi, 2009 p. 1204). Necessarily bound up with mental proliferation is the separation of the world into self and non-self and the accompanying views 'this is mine' (*etaṃ mama*) and 'this is my self' (*eso me atta*). From this matrix of superimposed ego arises views (*diṭṭhi*), thirst (*taṇhā*) and conceit (*māna*). (Ñāṇananda, 1971 pp. 6-12)

The *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* asserts that in order to end the obsessions of views and the suffering that it entails one must dis-identify with the process of prolific conceptualisation (*papañca*). The argumentative thrust of the *Sutta* therefore suggests that thinking itself is fundamentally a product of *samsāric* conditioned existence and intimately bound up with suffering (*dukkha*). According to Ñāṇananda the *dhamma* can be seen as a schema for the 'deconceptualisation of the mind' (Ñāṇananda, 1971 p. 27): wholesome thoughts are used to drive out unwholesome ones just as a carpenter would use a small peg to knock out a larger one (PTS: M i 118). Yet wholesome thoughts are ultimately to be replaced by wisdom (*paññā*) which is not characterised by discursive thought and is 'immediate and intuitive' (*ibid.*). Indeed in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* the stages of *jhāna* meditation are described until the summit of consciousness is reached – the cessation of conceptualisation (*saññā*).

As he remains at the peak of perception, the thought occurs to him, 'thinking is bad for me. Not thinking is better for me....so he neither thinks nor wills, and as he is neither thinking nor willing, that perception ceases and another, grosser perception does not appear. He touches cessation. This, Poṭṭhapada, is ... the ultimate cessation of perception [saññā]. (PTS: D i 178. Trans. Thanissaro [2013])

Ñāṇananda argues that the nature of sense experience is such that as soon as one conceptualises the raw sense data of experience one is led astray. The Goal is being able to correctly perceive sense data without being misled by their implications in terms of mental proliferation. According to Ñāṇananda the sense data that enters the mind of the arahant does not reverberate as conceptual proliferation by way of thirst, conceit and views (*papañca-taṇhā- māna- diṭṭhi*). Rather the emancipated sage is characterised by inner stillness, having gone beyond all speculative views (*diṭṭhi*) (Ñāṇananda 1971 pp. 31-39) and particularly having gone beyond the notion of the self (*attā*).

In opposition to the Commentaries which take *diṭṭhi* to mean the sixty-two false views (*micchā- diṭṭhi*) as opposed to the right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) of the path (*magga*) Ñāṇananda defines *diṭṭhi* as a 'deep seated tendency.... to be beguiled by concepts' (Ñāṇananda 1971 p. 40). As per the simile of the raft in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* even the *dhamma* as right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) is

only a raft for the purpose of crossing over to the far shore of *nibbāna* not for grasping on to. As such one 'should let go even of right mental objects (*dhammas*), to say nothing of wrong ones' (PTS: M i 130. Trans: Ñāṇananda ). Right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) therefore contains 'the seed of its own transcendence as its purpose is to purge the mind of all views including itself' (Ñāṇananda 1971 p. 43). As the purpose of this practice is to purge the mind of all views (*diṭṭhi*) even those views which are of great help to the practitioner must eventually be expelled. (Ñāṇananda 1971 p. 44). The state of the one who has attained *nibbāna* (as described in the *Nibbāna Sutta*) is such that:

There is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of dukkha. (PTS: Ud 80. Trans Thanissaro [2012])

The liberated sage who has attained unbinding sees through the concepts of the phenomenal world and experiences emptiness (*suññata*) (Ñāṇananda 1971 p. 73). The arahant therefore attains 'the utter cessation of the world of concepts' (Ñāṇananda 1971 p.109). The early Buddhist attitude was to 'realise the imperfections of language and logic by observing the internal and external conflict it brought about' (Ñāṇananda 1971 p. 108). It was not necessary to counter every thesis with an antithesis rather the general principle of *dukkha* and its cessation was advanced 'which provides the true impetus for the spiritual endeavour to transcend all theories by eradicating the subjective bias' (*ibid.*). Ideas of permanence (*nicca*) and Self (*attā*) are what the mind imposes upon objects. The *attā* therefore is something experienced within the mind, it is not a phenomenon 'out there'. The Buddha is primarily attacking the tendency of the mind to subjectively superimpose the notion of an *attā* upon experience. (Ñāṇananda 1971 pp. 103- 108).

From this view of language and reality a radical metaphysics can be discerned – that is if we take metaphysics in its broadest sense to mean 'a general picture explaining the relation between human thought and the world' (Ronkin 2005, pp. 247). The Buddha rejects the notion that the world is composed of existing substances and that language can refer to these substances (Ronkin, 2005, pp. 244-247). This entails a rejection of *semantic realism*. Semantic realism is the view that a statement has an objective truth value in virtue of its relation to an independently existing reality and statements are true or false independent of our means of knowing them (Hale, 1997). This view is to be contrasted with semantic anti-realism which denies that statements are true or false in an objective or ultimate sense. This distinction can be made clearer by examining the realism/anti-realism debate in the philosophy of mathematics: the realist about mathematics would accept the existence of numbers and sets which exist objectively, independent of the human mind. The anti-realist on the other hand would deny the mind-independent ex-

istence of numbers and may assert in its place a constructivist theory in which numbers, sets and the like are fundamentally the product of human thought and do not have a basis in 'mind-independent' reality (Hale, 1997). Likewise the Buddhist semantic anti-realist asserts that truth and language are fundamentally a product of the human mind. Sentences are true or false depending on how they accord with commonly accepted conventions. They have no 'ultimate' or objective truth value independent of the human conventions of language. This semantic anti-realism is the position of the Buddha according to Ronkin, for the Buddha 'reality' is subjective experience and it is not meaningful to speak of a mind-independent reality: 'It is in this fathom-long body endowed with perception and mind that I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world' (PTS: A ii 49: Trans. Bodhi [2012]). According to Ronkin 'the awakened mind breaks up the apparently solid world that we construct for ourselves' (Ronkin, 2005 p. 246) and realises that words and concepts do not ultimately name anything. This is the silence of the eschewal of all views. Hence the statement of the Buddha "speculative view" is something that the Tathāgata has put away'. (PTS: M i 487. Trans. Bodhi [2012]).

Ronkin posits that by the time of the Abhidhamma Commentaries this view of the nature of language had been lost and the No-Self doctrine had become one of reductionist realism. The *dhammas* becoming phenomena which exist in mind independent reality (in virtue of possessing *sabhāva*) and the 'self' being a convenient label for a bundle of mental and physical *dhammas*. This assumes a realist ontology (the *dhammas* being ultimately real) and a realist semantics in which words bear an objective relation to ultimate reality (Ronkin 2005 p. 249). For Ronkin the *Abhidhamma* dissects experience and brings it within our conceptual and linguistic framework, yet 'this conceptual delineating or giving of boundaries is exactly what the verb *papañceti*, "making manifold" means' (Ronkin 2005 p. 249). The practice of taking concepts to accurately reflect reality and clinging to them as views (*diṭṭhi*) is precisely what the Buddha had warned against in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*.

According to Ronkin 'the earliest Buddhist teaching discloses tenor analogues to Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka' (Ronkin, 2005 p. 248). Key to understanding the thought of Nāgārjuna is the notion of the two truths: conventional (Skt: *saṃvṛti*) and ultimate (Skt: *paramārtha*). In *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)* Nāgārjuna states 'the dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth' (MMK, 24.8) (Siderits and Katsura, 2013 p.272). At the conventional level Nāgārjuna accepts a non-substantial self which can be reduced to the functioning of the five aggregates (Pāli: *khandhas*, Skrt: *skandhas*): matter (Pāli: *rūpa*, Skrt: *rūpa*), feeling (Pāli: *vedanā*, Skrt: *vedanā*), apperception (Pāli: *saññā*, Skrt: *sañjñā*), formations (Pāli: *saṅkhāra*, Skrt: *saṃskāra*) and consciousness (Pāli: *viññāṇa*, Skrt: *viñāna*). This 'self' can persist over time, be reborn, perform skilful and unskilful actions and can reap the karmic fruits of past deeds. Yet unlike Buddhosa, for Nāgārjuna this 'truth'

of a self which can be reduced to the five *khandhas* is only assertable in virtue of the commonly accepted linguistic practices of human beings. It is a conventional truth not an ultimate truth. At the ultimate level there is only the truth of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

According to the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) nothing in the world exists with inherent existence or 'substance' (*svabhāva*). Objects possessing *svabhāva* constitute the 'ontological rock bottom' (Westerhoff, 2017) of the world, and are those entities which exist in their own right. This notion is best understood by use of example: one may assert that 'tables' do not exist in reality but only the atoms which make up the table, the 'table' itself being a conceptual construct. In this example the atoms would possess *svabhāva*. Nāgārjuna asserts that ultimately nothing in the world exists with *svabhāva* and hence asserts that nothing exists objectively or in its own right – everything is empty. For the Mādhyamika, ultimately, there is no 'way things objectively are', there is no inherent and objective structure to reality independent of the human mind. The Mādhyamika will not therefore accept semantic realism, this being the theory that statements are objectively true or false in virtue of their relation to independently existing reality. What is asserted in its place is a conventional theory of truth in which statements can be asserted only if they agree with commonly accepted practices and conventions (*ibid.*). For Nāgārjuna even the ultimate truth of emptiness is itself empty – it is not ultimately true in the sense that it corresponds to the way reality 'really is' independent of human conventions. There are not objects in the world which have the property of being empty. Rather the doctrine of emptiness is rather an attempt to stop the mistaken ascription of *svabhāva* to phenomena by the human mind (Westerhoff, 2017).

This can be investigated by exploring the Dispeller of Disputes (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*) of Nāgārjuna. Herein Nāgārjuna states 'I do not have any thesis...while all things are empty... free from substance, from where could a thesis come' (Westerhoff, 2010 pp. 29-30). According to this passage Nāgārjuna states that ultimately he does not have any substantial thesis, that is any thesis which can be described according to a realist semantics – a semantics wherein statements can capture real and objectively existing entities in the world. All statements are conventional as the very notion of a realist semantics is ruled out by the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*) (Westerhoff, 2010 pp. 64-65). Propositions are only applicable to those entities which are a product of mental proliferation (*papañca*, Skrt *prapañca*) (Ruegg, 1977 pp. 12). In *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)* Nāgārjuna states 'independently realised, peaceful, unobsessed by obsessions, without discriminations and a variety of meanings: such is the characteristic of truth' (MMK 18.9) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 270). Nāgārjuna here is making an epistemological point, according to the Buddha, man searching for permanence misses the impermanent nature of experience. In referring to 'peace' (Skt: *śānta*) and 'obsession' (Skt: *prapañca*) (MMK 18.9) in this context Nāgārjuna is referring to the peace of mind attained by one rid of the delusion of permanence, free from the obsession (Skt: *prapañca*) of the search for ultimate truths in terms of existence or non-

existence (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 272). This notion mirrors Ronkin's interpretation of the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* which warns against the same 'obsessions' or mental proliferations (*papañca*) and the misleading nature of conceptualisation.

When we assess the view of the No-Self doctrine as presented by Nāgārjuna in this light we can see that there are key differences between this doctrine and reductionist notions of the self as espoused by philosophers such as Derek Parfit. Parfit claims that the facts of personal identity 'just consists in the holding of certain more particular[ that is more basic] facts.' (Parfit, 1984, p. 210). This view is firmly *realist*, it assumes that there are certain facts about the way the mind-independent world is and that these facts can be fully described using language. Parfit states: 'we could give a complete description of *reality* without claiming that persons exist' [emphasis added] (Parfit, 1984 p.212).

At the conventional level the views of Parfit and Nāgārjuna are similar, both accept a non-substantial self which can be reduced to either the processes of brain and body or the *khandhas*. Yet at the ultimate level Nāgārjuna does not accept reductionism as he rejects a realist semantics. For Nāgārjuna concepts can only conventionally, not factually describe the world. This is in contrast to the view of Parfit (and as I shall more fully demonstrate later, Buddhaghosa), who assumes that ultimately the external world can be described objectively and factually. Parfit describes the reductionist position as such: 'the *fact* of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular *facts*' (Parfit, 1984 p. 210). With this in mind we must conclude that at the ultimate level (as opposed to the conventional level) Nāgārjuna is not a reductionist about the self. At the ultimate level Nāgārjuna rejects the notion of an objective 'factual' reality, he therefore does not accept the key tenet of reductionism that 'the fact of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts'. For Nāgārjuna ultimately there are no such facts, there is only emptiness: 'for the Mādhyamika not only is there no substantial self, there is also no substantial basis on which a nonsubstantial self could be built' (Westerhoff, 2009, p. 163). This is in opposition to the reductionist view of Buddhaghosa –who holds the *khandhas* to be the substantial basis upon which a non-substantial self is built – and Parfit who holds the processes of brain and body to be such a basis. It is the case therefore that Nāgārjuna accepts the No-Self doctrine but rejects the reductionist No-Self doctrine of Buddhaghosa as an ultimate truth.

A strong case can be made that the views of Nāgārjuna can be traced back to the early *Suttas*. Kalupahana presents Nāgārjuna not as an innovator but rather as a grand commentator on the early Pāli *Suttas* who did not try to improve upon the original teachings of the Buddha but rather explicated them in their original form (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 5). For Kalupahana Nāgārjuna's philosophy is a restatement of the original philosophy of the Buddha (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 8). According to the Pāli *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* "everything exists" ...is one extreme' and "everything does not exist" ...is the second extreme' 'without approaching either extreme the Tathāgata teaches you a doctrine by the middle' (PTS: S ii 16. Trans. Kalupahana, 1986, pp. 10-11). This middle way is the teaching

of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) which is the view that phenomena (that is elements of experience) give rise to other phenomena under certain causal conditions and these phenomena cease when the relevant causal conditions are absent. This is the mechanism by which the Buddha was able to explain phenomena without resorting to the concept of a permanent entity (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 34). Nāgārjuna wrote the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* both as a commentary on the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta* (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 5) and as an attempt to discredit 'heterodox' schools particularly the Sautrāntikas and Sarvāstivādins (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 26). In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* the key themes of early Buddhism are taken up not, according to Kalupahana, to reject them but rather to rid them of metaphysical explanation in terms of absolute existence (eternalism) or non-existence (annihilationism) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 29) these are the same views that the Buddha was rejecting in the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*.

For Nāgārjuna belief in substantial entities such as the Self (Skt: *ātman*) gives rise to grasping, possession and in turn obsessive mental proliferations (Skt: *prapañca*). This process can be stopped by the recognition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in regards to the *ātman* and all phenomena (Skt: *dharmas*) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 56). Antecedents to this emptiness doctrine can be found in the *Suttas* of the Pāli canon, notably the *Phena Sutta*. Herein it is said:

'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it...it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?' (PTS: S iii 140 Trans. Bodhi [2000]).

'Form is like a lump of foam, Feeling like a water bubble; Perception is like a mirage, Volitions like a plantain trunk, And consciousness like an illusion, So explained the Kinsman of the Sun. "However one may ponder it and carefully investigate it, it appears but hollow and void when one views it carefully"' (PTS: S iii 140 Trans. Bodhi [2000]).

Commentating on this *Sutta* Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that the imagery relating to the empty nature of conditioned phenomena was taken up by the Mādhyamikas (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1085-6). The emptiness doctrine of Nāgārjuna is therefore to be found in a nascent form in the early *Suttas*. The seeds of this doctrine in the *Suttas* giving rise to the fully grown sprout of the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness.

It is also interesting to note that the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭī*) found in the *Cūḷamāluṅkyovada Sutta* (PTS: M i 426) was taken up by the Mādhyamikas 'to establish the inapplicability of any imaginable conceptual position...that might be taken as the subject of an existential proposition' (Ruegg, 1977 p. 9) and therefore become the basis for a set of doctrinal extremes. The tetralemma is as follows:

- 1.) Does the Tathāgata exist after death?
- 2.) Does the Tathāgata not exist after death?



- 3.) Does the Tathāgata both exist and does not exist after death?  
 4.) Does the Tathāgata neither exist nor does not exist after death?

For Nāgārjuna the Buddha rejected the tetralemma in regards to the state of the Tathāgata because his existence was asserted in a 'real and absolute sense' (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 309) it is a substantial view of the self which leads to speculations as to the state of the Tathāgata after his death and this in addition to any corresponding speculations should be rejected. Hence according to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 'when he is empty in terms of self-nature, the thought that the Buddha exists or does not exist after death is not appropriate' (MMK 22.14) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 309). Just as the Tathāgata is devoid of self-nature so too 'the universe is also devoid of self-nature' (MMK 22.16) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 310). Nāgārjuna asserts "empty", "non-empty", "both" or "neither" -these should not be declared. It is expressed only for the purpose of communication' (MMK 22.11) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 307). Here Nāgārjuna rejects any theorising regarding emptiness, using the four cornered logic of the *catuṣkoṭi*. The terms 'empty' or 'non-empty' are only used for the purpose of communication and should not be reified and taken as something possessing essential nature (Skt: *svabhāva*) (Kalupahana, 1986 p. 308). This should be seen as the rejection of concepts as 'incorruptible reals' (*ibid.*) and as an assertion of a conventional and pragmatic theory of truth and language.

Based on the above it can be surmised that the views of Nāgārjuna can be traced back to the *Suttas* of the early Canon. At the very least it is possible to assert that the seeds of the Madhyamaka emptiness doctrine and corresponding theory of language can be found in the *Suttas*, particularly the *Phena Sutta* and the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, seeds which bore their fully developed fruit in the Madhyamaka philosophy. For Nāgārjuna as the world is empty of *svabhāva* there is no fixed way the world ultimately 'is'. This worldview results in a rejection of a realist semantics. As I have previously asserted this view is very different to the reductionism of Parfit, who accepts a realist semantics, or at the least assumes it in *Reasons and Persons*.

I would assert that it can be maintained that there is an element of reductionism in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna at the level of conventional truth. This is because Nāgārjuna accepts a conventional self which can be reduced to the functioning of the five *khandhas*. Nevertheless for Nāgārjuna at the ultimate level all *dhammas* are empty including the *khandhas*. This doctrine of emptiness has the implication of the rejection of a realist semantics rendering the position of Nāgārjuna very different to that of reductionism as espoused by Parfit. Parfit asserts that the self is unreal (or, more specifically, real only in virtue of the way we use language), whereas the parts, that is the psycho-physical processes of brain and body are ultimately constituents of reality. Nāgārjuna on the other hand asserts that all of reality is empty of *svabhāva* and hence there is no fixed structure to 'reality' at all. Whereas there is a conventional self which can be reduced to the *khandhas* ultimately even the *khandhas* do not possess 'reality' or inherent existence (*svabhāva*).

In the next section I will examine the reductionism of the *Abhidhamma* and the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries of Buddhaghosa. I will show how this view of the self is reductionist in the truest sense. I will assert that the view found in the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries displays more similarities to the reductionism of Parfit than the views of Nāgārjuna.

#### 4. The Position of the Abhidhamma and its Commentaries.

In this section I will outline the view of the Buddhist doctrine of No-Self (*anattā*) as exemplified in the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* of Buddhaghosa and the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries. I will show how this view is similar to reductionist views of the self put forward by Western philosophers such as David Hume and Derek Parfit.

The *Abhidhamma* which can be translated as 'about (*abhi-*) the *dhamma*' (Anālayo, 2014 p. 78) can be seen as growing out of the early followers of the Buddha's psychological need to make the teachings of the Buddha as comprehensive as possible (Anālayo, 2014 p. 169) and to clarify any ambiguity or incomplete aspects of the original teaching. This drive to give a complete picture of all aspects connected with the Buddhist Path grew interdependently with the idea that the Buddha attained omniscience upon his awakening (*ibid.*). The tradition of the Commentaries holds that the *Abhidhamma* was expounded by the Buddha to an assembly of deities (*devas*) in the *Tāvātimsa* heaven, and hence is the authentic word of the Buddha himself (*buddhavacana*) (Bodhi, 2000A p.11). Yet the *Abhidhamma* may have had more mundane origins and Anālayo asserts that the *Abhidhamma* seems to have had its origin as a communally recited commentary on the *Suttas* which gradually evolved into a 'higher' teaching: 'abhi-' itself taking on the meaning of 'higher' rather than simply 'about' (Anālayo, 2014 p. 116).

The Theravādin *Abhidhamma* is comprised of seven books the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* (Enumeration of Dhammas), the *Vibhaṅga* (Analysis), the *Dhātukathā* (Discourse on Elements), the *Puggalapaññatti* (Designation of Persons), the *Kathāvatthu* (Points of Discussion), the *Yamaka (Pairs)*, and the *Paṭṭhāna* (Causal Conditions) (Ronkin, 2017). They are treatises in which the doctrine of the *Suttas* have been systematised, tabulated and meticulously organised (Bodhi, 2000A p. 2). The cornerstone of the *Abhidhamma* is the *dhamma* theory which maintains that the 'fundamental components of actuality' (Bodhi, 2000A p. 3), that is the building blocks of ultimate reality are *dhammas*, 'momentary mental and material phenomena which constitute the process of experience' (*ibid.*). Reality is constructed upon the foundation of the *dhammas* which possess, ultimate reality and determinate existence (*svabhāva*) 'from their own side' (*sarūpato*) (*ibid.*). Bodhi notes that in the *Abhidhamma* the *dhamma* theory is not 'expressed as an explicit philosophical tenet' (*ibid.*) but is rather implicit in the texts. This implicit doctrine being expressed as a fully fledged theory in the Commentaries of Buddhaghosa. These Commentaries are the *Atthasālinī* (The Expositor) the commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*;

the *Sammohavinodanī*, (The Dispeller of Delusion) the commentary on the *Vibhanga*; and the *Pañcappakaraṇaṭṭhakathā*, the commentary on the remaining five treatises (Bodhi, 2000A p. 13). In the *Atthasālinī* it is written 'there is nothing else [but *dhammas*], whether a being, or an entity, or a man or a person' (*Atthasālinī* 155) (Trans. Ronkin 2017). The principle here being that the phenomenal world at the ultimate level is a world of *dhammas* and there is no other ultimate reality apart from the reality of the *dhammas* (Ronkin, 2017). Bodhi maintains that such a conception of reality is already present in nascent form in the *Suttas* (Bodhi, 2000A p. 3), particularly in the Buddha's analysis of the five aggregates (*khandhas*) (PTS: S iii 66), the analysis of the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) (PTS: M iii 215), and the enumeration of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) (PTS: S ii 2). Here there is a tendency to analyse experience into its fundamental building blocks and from this foundation explain the arising of suffering causally.

In a statement that resembles Parfit's reductionist view of the self Bodhi describes the *Abhidhamma* project as attempting to drive a wedge between ultimately real entities, that is the *dhammas*, and those entities which exist only as conceptual constructs, such as the self (Bodhi, 2000A p. 4). The *Abhidhamma* primarily seeks to comprehend the nature of experience and the reality that is the focus of the *Abhidhamma* is the conscious reality of human experience (*ibid.*). Nevertheless by the time of the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries *dhammas* come to be taken to exist in mind-independent reality and are invested with ontological significance, the *dhammas* being those entities which comprise the ultimate constituents of reality in virtue of being invested with *sabhāva* (Ronkin 2005 pp. 248-249). Ronkin asserts that the worldview of the Commentaries resembles Leibniz's monadological metaphysics (*ibid.*) which is the view that everything in the world is composed of simple substances, which form the foundation of reality (Look, 2017). This latter view present in the Commentaries is therefore a fully fledged reductionism with the acceptance of a realist semantics. The self does not exist in reality but is rather a conceptual fiction. Just as a 'nation' can be reduced to those entities which exist in reality e.g. human beings located in a certain geographical area acting in certain ways, so too the 'self' can be reduced to those entities which actually exist in reality: for Parfit these are the psycho-physical processes of brain and body, for Buddhaghosa it is the *dhammas*.

As the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries accept the position that there are ultimately real entities, that is those entities possessing *sabhāva* a strong case can be made that the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries accept a realist semantics. The *Abhidhamma* Commentaries accept that there is a way ultimate reality is and that language can describe this ultimate reality. Statements about the self will be true or false depending on their relation to this ultimate reality of *dhammas*. Ronkin asserts that the Commentators 'endow the final products of their analysis with the status of ultimate facts', the *dhammas* are understood as the building blocks of reality and to understand that reality is composed of *dhammas* is to understand the way things really are (Ronkin, 2005 p. 119). The *Abhidhamma* metaphysics paves the way for the acceptance of a realist semantics (Ronkin 2005, p. 153): the theory that a

statement has an objective truth value in virtue of its relation to an independently existing reality. The position of the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries is therefore a reductionist realism that is similar in structure to the view of Parfit. Just as for Parfit the 'self' or a 'person' can be reduced, ultimately to facts about the brain and body (Parfit, 1984, p. 210) and presumably further to a set of deeper facts about atoms, electrons, quarks etc. In the same manner in the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries all facts about the self can be reduced to impersonal facts about the *dhammas*. The *dhammas* can be understood conceptually and can be described using language with sentences which are ultimately true or false. This is reductionism in the truest sense and the views of the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries and of Parfit display striking similarities in this respect.

Bodhi asserts that the *Abhidhamma* does not proclaim a new doctrine not found in the *Suttas* (Bodhi, 2000A p. 5). The difference between the *Abhidhamma* and the *Suttas* is one of scope and method (*ibid.*). In the *Suttas* the Buddha makes use of conventional parlance for pragmatic reasons in order to guide his audience which had differing capacities for understanding his message. The *Abhidhamma* on the other hand 'rigorously restricts itself to terms that are valid from the standpoint of ultimate truth' (*paramatthasacca*) (Bodhi, 2000A p. 6) -- though this distinction is not absolute and the *Suttas* themselves contain discourses strictly relating to ultimate truth. Bodhi, in opposition to the views of Ronkin asserts that whilst it is tempting to trace some historical development of ideas between the *Abhidhamma* and the Commentaries this line of thought should 'not be pushed too far' (Bodhi, 2000A p. 14). This is due to the fact that the *Abhidhamma* requires the Commentaries to give context and provide a unified and systematic meaning to the material. Bodhi contends that without the Commentaries important elements of meaning would be lost and as such the *Abhidhamma* and the Commentaries should be taken as a whole (Bodhi, 2000A pp.13-14).

The reductionist realism which is to be found in the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries is not necessarily a novel development not found in the *Suttas*. Rather it is the case that the seeds of the reductionist realist position can be found in the *Suttas* themselves, as even Wynne, (an opponent of the reductionist realist position) notes (Wynne 2010 p. 157). These seeds developed into the fully fledged reductionist realism of the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries.. In the *Vajirā Sutta* the nun Vajirā exclaims to Māra, the Evil One:

Why now do you assume 'a being'? Māra, is that your speculative view? This is a heap of sheer formations: Here no being is found. "Just as, with an assemblage of parts, The word 'chariot' is used, So, when the aggregates exist [*khandhesu santesu*], There is the convention 'a being.' "It's only suffering that comes to be, Suffering that stands and falls away. Nothing but suffering comes to be, Nothing but suffering ceases (PTS: S i 134 Trans. Bodhi 2000)

Here the reductionist realist view is stated explicitly: it is conventionally true that there is a self as a collection of *khandhas*. Nevertheless it is an ultimate metaphysical truth that 'no being is to be found'. The statement of Vajirā here implies that there is a way reality is ultimately

structured and that language is capable of describing this reality: the '*Vajirā Sutta* is both reductionistic as well as realistic, for it speaks of the aggregates “existing” (*khandhesu santesu*) and of the failure to “find” an essential being in them (*na yidha sattūpalabbhati*)' (Wynne 2010 p. 157). The presence of such a clear statement of reductionist realism in the early *Suttas* calls into question the view that a radical shift in metaphysical outlook can be traced between the philosophy of the *Suttas* and the philosophy of the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries of Buddhaghosa. Indeed Buddhaghosa echoes the sentiment of the *Vajirā Sutta* precisely in the *Visuddhimagga*:

'Therefore, just as when the component parts such as axles, wheels, frame poles, etc., are arranged in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage “chariot,” yet in the ultimate sense when each part is examined there is no chariot... —so too, when there are the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging, there comes to be the mere term of common usage “a being,” “a person,” yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no being' *Visuddhimagga* (XVIII, 28) [Trans. Ñāṇamoli (2010)]

In addition antecedents of the *dhamma* theory can be traced back to the *Suttas*. The *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* (PTS: M i 184) provides an exhaustive list of the human being in terms of the earth, wind, fire, water and space elements. Whilst asserting that these basic elements exist it concludes that no independent *attā* can be found upon analysis of the constituents of a human being. The *Sutta* therefore espouses a realist ontology, the elements ultimately existing whereas the *attā* does not (Wynne 2010 p. 159). This echoes the later *dhamma* theory in which form (*rūpa*) is further analysed in terms of the four primary elements (*cattāri māha bhūtāni*): the *dhammas* of solidity (earth), adhesion (water), heat (fire) and motion (wind) (Mendis, 1985 p. 23). These elements constituting the fundamental building blocks of material reality. The *Sutta* also accepts a variant of a realist semantics: 'the ultimate truth of things is here captured in words, and is not something beyond logic and the conceptual construction of consciousness' (Wynne, 2010 p. 159-160). Similarly the statement all phenomena are not Self (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) found many places in the canon, such as in the *Dhammaniya Sutta* (PTS:A i 286), and the *Ānanda Sutta* (PTS:S iv 400) is most readily interpreted in line with the later *dhamma* theory of the *Abhidhamma*. Rahula notes that by the phrase 'all *dhammas* are not Self' the Buddha is explicitly claiming that the *attā* is nowhere to be found in reality (Rahula 1959, p.58) – a statement which seems to assume that there is a fixed external reality which is ontologically composed of the *dhammas* but in which ultimately no *attā* is to be found. On the evidence of the *Vajirā Sutta* we must accept that the reductionist realism of Buddhaghosa can be traced back to the early *Suttas* themselves – although this position may be explicitly stated rarely and may not be as fully developed as in the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries. This view of the self found in the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries shares a great deal of similarities with Western reductionist views of the self such as Parfit's.

Like the Buddha Parfit is arguing against substantialist views of the self. In Western philosophy perhaps the most

famous proponent of the substantialist view of the self is René Descartes. Descartes in his Book 6 of the *Meditations* asserts that the mind and body are of different substances, because it is possible to imagine the existence of the mind without the body (Descartes, 2008 pp. 73-83). The essence of the human being is intellect and the mind is a purely thinking substance separate from the body. Hence the famous Cartesian slogan '*cogito ergo sum*' (I think therefore I am) (Descartes, 2008 p. 13). Parfit claims that the notion of a Cartesian Ego is intelligible only if this Ego were to manifest itself empirically, but that no such Cartesian Ego is to be found upon empirical investigation (Parfit, 1984 p. 227). In addition Parfit argues that it is not intelligible to argue that Cartesian Egos exist but are not empirically observable (Parfit, 1984 p. 228).

This line of reasoning is similar in style to the reasoning of the Buddha in the Second Sermon (PTS: S iii 66). The Buddha asserts that if the Self (*attā*) existed it would be observable, yet upon examining the entirety of human experience through the schema of the five *khandhas* the Buddha demonstrates that no permanent blissful *attā* is to be found, rather all phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*) and unsatisfactory (*dukkha*). Furthermore it is unintelligible to assert that the *attā* exists but is not connected with human experience in any way. This notion is expressed in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* here it is stated 'where nothing whatsoever is sensed (experienced) at all, would there be the thought, "I am"?' (PTS: D ii 55. Trans Thanissaro, [2013]). This passage is interpreted by Harvey to be rejecting the possibility of a transcendent *attā* above and beyond the empirical experience of the five *khandhas*. (Harvey, 1995, pp.31-33)

According to the *Abhidhamma* Commentaries what the Buddha asserts does exist is a conventional self which is dependent upon and can be entirely reduced to the *dhammas* of the five *khandhas*. It is the *dhammas* which are, ontologically, ultimately real. What guarantees personal identity across time according to this view is that the *khandhas* of one conventional self at time x-1 stand in the appropriate causal relation to the *khandhas* of the same conventional self at time x. This continuity of karma is compared in the *Milindapañha* (3.2.6) to the fruit (in this case a mango) arising from the seed planted in the ground. Though the mango and the seed are not physically identical it is the case that, conventionally, they are the same mango because the fruit stands in the appropriate causal relation to the seed. In the same manner the karmic seeds sown by one conventional self at time x-1 produce causal conditions which produce the karmic fruit for the same conventional self at time x.

Parfit also accepts the existence of a conventional self which ultimately can be reduced to a set of impersonal facts about the brain and body. He states 'though persons exist, we could give a complete description of reality without claiming that persons exist.' (Parfit 1984 p.212). This apparent paradox is resolved by appealing to the way we use language: 'facts about people cannot be barely true. Their truth must consist in the truth of facts about bodies, and about various interrelated mental and physical events' (Parfit, 2011 p. 424). He illustrates this by means of example. Suppose I have detailed scientific informa-

tion about a group of trees growing on a hill. I then learn the further piece of information that this group of trees can be referred to as a 'copse'. In this instance I have not learnt any new factual information about external reality but a fact about the way we use language. The case is similar for persons, all the non-linguistic facts about a person can be reduced to psychological and physical facts about the brain and body. The fact that we call this bundle of psychological and physical processes a 'person' is only a fact about language. (Parfit, 2011 p. 424). This resembles the already quoted passage of Buddhaghosa: just as when the axles, wheels and frame are arranged in a certain way there is the linguistic convention to call this aggregation a chariot, so too when there are the *khandhas* there is a person *Visuddhimagga* (XVIII, 28). Indeed Parfit makes explicit comparison of his view to that of the Buddha stating:

'I claim that, when we ask what persons are... the fundamental question is a choice between two views. On one view, we are separately existing entities, distinct from our brain and bodies and our experiences.... The other view is the Reductionist View. And I claim that, of these, the second view is true. As Appendix J shows, *Buddha would have agreed* [emphasis in original]. The Reductionist View is not merely part of one cultural tradition. It may be, as I have claimed, the true view about all people at all times.' (Parfit, 1984 p. 273)

Parfit goes on in Appendix J to quote among other texts the *Visuddhimagga* (XVIII 3 31): 'The mental and material are really here, but here there is no human being to be found' (Parfit, 1984 pp. 502-3) and the chariot simile in the already quoted *Vajirā Sutta*. Thus stressing himself the similarities between Buddhist reductionism and his own position.

Nevertheless the notion of karmic continuity is alien to much of Western philosophy and it is here that key differences arise between the reductionism of Buddhaghosa and the reductionism of Parfit. For Parfit personal identity over time is established by the degree of psychological continuity between entities over time. Parfit terms the relation of psychological continuity 'relation R'. Collins notes that in Buddhism by contrast relation R need not hold. Sentient beings may be reborn in a manner that is completely psychologically disconnected from their previous life. One who is reborn may (and frequently does according to the tradition) have no memories of their past life. In addition to this a being who was a human may be reborn as an animal with strikingly dissimilar cognitive capacities (for example a human and an ant) and hence any psychological continuity from one being to the next must be ruled out (Collins, 1997 p. 482). From this we may conclude that what matters in Buddhism is not Relation R, psychological continuity, but rather *karmic* continuity, what Collins terms Relation K (*ibid.*).

It is the case that there are large similarities between the views of Parfit and Buddhaghosa and it can be said that both are reductionist realists about the self. Parfit claims that all facts about persons can be reduced to impersonal psychological and physical facts about the world: 'the *fact* of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular *facts*' (Parfit, 1984 p. 210). This view accepts semantic realism – it ac-

cepts that there is a way 'ultimate reality' is structured and that language can refer to this reality with statements that are true or false. Similarly for Buddhaghosa ultimately reality is structured by the *dhammas*, those entities possessing *svabhāva*. As the *dhammas* can be described using language and sentences containing propositions about the *dhammas* will be true or false depending on how they relate to ultimate reality, the view of Buddhaghosa also accepts semantic realism. Similarly both Parfit and Buddhaghosa accept a conventional self. In both views a self is a conceptual fiction that is superimposed upon more basic elements of ultimate reality: for Parfit this reality is the processes of brain and body, for Buddhaghosa this ultimate reality is the *khandhas*.

Nevertheless, as is to be expected, there are some key differences between the two views, for Buddhaghosa the criterion for determining personal identity over time is karmic continuity, whilst for Parfit it is relation R, psychological continuity. As I have shown however the two views are close enough in character to warrant informative comparison and the reductionism of Parfit can be meaningfully used to elucidate the reductionism of Buddhaghosa. Finally, I have argued that the reductionist position of the *Abidhamma* Commentaries can be traced back to the *Suttas* themselves. This is particularly true of the *Vajirā Sutta* which is explicitly reductionist in content, using the well-known chariot metaphor which was later taken up by Buddhaghosa. On the evidence of this *Sutta* therefore it is possible to conclude that seeds of the fully developed reductionist position are already present in the *Suttas* and therefore that the Buddha was a reductionist about the self.

## Conclusions

I have argued that it is correct to categorise the Buddha as a philosopher and that the *Suttas* contain elements of moral philosophy and what could be termed metaphysics. Explicitly metaphysical doctrines being those of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the five aggregates (*khandhas*). I have asserted that the No-Self doctrine itself is a middle way (*Majjhimāpaṭipadā*) between the philosophical positions of eternalism (as found in the Upaniṣads) and annihilationism. I have raised the common objection that the Buddha shuns metaphysical speculation as counterproductive as in the *Cūḷamālukkyovāda Sutta* and have responded that the Buddha rejects disputation and contentiousness for its own sake but not philosophical reasoning *per se*. I have explicitly argued against the views of Thanissaro (2011) who has put forward the position that the *anattā* doctrine is a purely practical strategy with no metaphysical implications. In response to this position I have argued that the Buddha's silence in response to certain metaphysical questions must be understood in the context of the situation. In the *Ānanda Sutta* the Buddha refuses to answer Vacchagotta's question of 'is there no self?' because a denial of the self here would be mistaken for annihilationism by the already bewildered Vacchagotta. Similarly the Buddha refuses to answer questions relating to the state of the Tathāgata after death because such questions are a case of presupposition fail-

ure. They assume the existence of a substantial entity denoted by the term *Tathāgata* and 'use personal referring terms, which according to Buddhist thinking have no real referent' (Collins 1982 p. 133).

I then went on to discuss the views of Gombrich (2009), Ronkin (2005) and Nānananda (1971). I noted that Gombrich (2009) holds that the Buddhist philosophy of language constitutes a rejection of *Mīmāṃsā*. I discussed the notion of mental proliferation (*papañca*) found in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* and argued that this idea could be interpreted as pointing towards the inadequacy of conceptualisation (*saññā*). *Papañca* for Ronkin points towards a rejection of semantic realism. For Ronkin 'The awakened mind breaks up the apparently solid world that we construct for ourselves' (Ronkin, 2005 p. 246) and realises that words and concepts do not name anything. I then explored the thesis that the rejection of *papañca* found in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* anticipates the philosophy of language of Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna asserts that the 'characteristic of truth' (MMK 18.9) is free from mental proliferation (Skt: *prapañca* Pāli: *papañca*) and Westerhoff (2017) interprets Nāgārjuna as rejecting a realist semantics. As no entities possess *svabhāva* there is no way 'things objectively are' hence language and truth are only conventions. I then argued that the views of Nāgārjuna can be traced back to the *Suttas* of the early Canon and that the seeds of the *Madhyamaka* emptiness doctrine and corresponding theory of language can be found in the *Suttas*, particularly the *Phena Sutta* and the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*. I concluded by demonstrating that whilst conventionally Nāgārjuna is a reductionist he is ultimately not a reductionist about the self as he rejects semantic realism. Parfit states the definition of reductionism as such: all facts about a person can be reduced to a set of more particular impersonal facts (Parfit, 1984 p. 210). Whereas Nāgārjuna accepts a conventional self which is constituted by the five *khandhas* Nāgārjuna does not accept that there is ultimately a fixed structure to reality which can be described using language. Nāgārjuna therefore rejects the view that there is a set of 'more particular impersonal facts' that the conventional self can ultimately be reduced to. He does not assent to the existence of such facts and asserts in its place the view of emptiness. It is the case therefore that Nāgārjuna accepts the No-Self doctrine but rejects the reductionist No-Self doctrine of Buddhaghosa and Parfit at the level of ultimate truth. I concluded by arguing that if we are to follow Nāgārjuna's interpretation of the Buddha's teaching it would be legitimate to assert that the Buddha was not a reductionist about the self at the level of ultimate truth.

I then examined the view of the self found in the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* of Buddhaghosa and the *Abhidhamma Commentaries*. I demonstrated that in the *Commentaries* there is an acceptance of a realist semantics: The *dhammas* can be understood conceptually and can be described using language with sentences which are ultimately true or false. All facts about the self can be reduced to impersonal facts about the *dhammas* which are ultimately real and possess *svabhāva*. I then argued that this view is strikingly similar to that of Western reductionists such as Parfit. Just as for Parfit all the facts about a person can be reduced to psychological and physical

facts about the brain and body so too for Buddhaghosa all conventional facts about the self can be reduced to deeper facts about the *dhammas*. In addition both Parfit and Buddhaghosa accept a conventional self based on how we use language. Whilst there are some differences between the two positions such as between karmic continuity and relation R the positions are fundamentally similar. I also argued that this reductionist realism can also be traced back to the *Suttas* particularly the *Vajirā Sutta*.

Was then the Buddha a reductionist about the self? I have argued that seeds of both the reductionist realist position of Buddhaghosa and the semantic anti-realism of Nāgārjuna can be found in the early *Suttas*, specifically the *Vajirā Sutta* and the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* respectively. When taken in their fully developed form these ideas are in contradiction to one another, or as Nāgārjuna would assert, express different levels of truth. For Nāgārjuna reductionism is true at the conventional level but ultimately there is only emptiness. For Buddhaghosa reductionism represents the way reality 'really is' and hence is an ultimate truth. There is therefore a tension within the early tradition, there are seeds of certain ideas which when developed in certain ways yield mutually incompatible fruits. The Buddha of Buddhaghosa is a reductionist and a realist. The Buddha of Nāgārjuna ultimately rejects semantic realism and refuses to speak of an 'objective reality'. This former position would be recognisable to a Western reductionist about the self such as Parfit whereas the latter position would not. Both interpretations have textual support within the tradition and therefore it is possible to conclude that the Buddha of the *Suttas* was both a reductionist and not a reductionist about the self depending on which *Sutta* is focused on.

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