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No Self? A Look at a Buddhist Argument

William F. Vallicella

ABSTRACT: Central to Buddhist thought and practice is the *anattā* doctrine. In its unrestricted form the doctrine amounts to the claim that nothing at all possesses self-nature. This article examines an early Buddhist argument for the doctrine. The argument, roughly, is that (i) if anything were a self, it would be both unchanging and self-determining; (ii) nothing has both of these properties; therefore, (iii) nothing is a self. The thesis of this article is that, despite the appearance of formal validity, the truth of (i) is inconsistent with the truth of (iii).

I. THE ANATTĀ DOCTRINE

THE *ANATTĀ* (SANSKRIT: *ANĀTMAN*) doctrine lies at the very heart of Buddhist thought and practice. The Pali and Sanskrit words translate literally as "no self"; but the doctrine applies not only to persons but to non-persons as well.[1] In its extreme form, associated with the Theravādins, the "no self" claim is that nothing possesses selfhood or self-nature or "own-being," not even *nibbāna* "itself." It is this extreme or unrestricted form of the doctrine that will be under examination here. Is it true that nothing at all has self-nature? Is this even possibly true? These questions invite the logically prior question: What would it be for an item to have or lack self-nature?

If a substance can be defined as anything metaphysically capable of independent existence, then perhaps we can interpret the *anattā* doctrine as a denial of the existence of substances.[2] The claim would then be that in ultimate reality there are no substances: what we ordinarily take to be such are wrongly so taken. Accordingly, a pervasive ignorance (*avijjā*) infects our ordinary view of the world. It is not an ignorance about this or that matter of fact, but one about the world's ontological structure. We interpret what is impermanent (*anicca*) as if it were permanent and substantial, or at least as possessing a core of permanence. Thus if we admit change, as in some sense we must, we yet seek to "contain it" by interpreting it as a mere change in properties or states that leaves the "underlying" substance of a person or thing unchanged. So interpreted, change is mere alteration, a self-same thing's having incompatible properties at different times. But if there are no substances, and thus no

[1]Although "self" and "person" are sometimes used interchangeably, this is a usage we ought to avoid. Otherwise, "selfless person" in the sense of "person without a self" would be a contradiction in terms and our very terminology would beg the question against the *anattā* doctrine.

[2]See T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980) p. 17.

unchanging substrates of alteration, then change "cuts deeper," affecting not only the properties and states of changing things but also their very existence and identity.

In our own case, there is a tendency to contain the change that obviously affects our bodies, mental states, and fortunes in the world by ascribing to ourselves something like a soul-substance or ego-substance that remains the same through time and change. The postulation of such a substance is often held to be justified on account of its ability to explain a range of data: (i) it accounts for the unity of consciousness *at a time*, thus explaining how, for instance, seeing a bird and hearing it sing can come together in one act of consciousness; (ii) it accounts for personal identity *over time*, explaining how one can "reap what one sows" (that is, experience in the present the consequences of past actions and omissions), and thus how one can now be legitimately held responsible for past acts and omissions; (iii) it accounts for the free origination of one's actions and is thus their free (hence morally responsible) agent; (iv) it is that in one which knows when something is known, believes when something is believed, etc.; (v) it is that which makes one unique and distinct from everything else and "irreplaceable" and thus of moral dignity. In sum, the soul-substance is postulated to play the roles of unifier, continuant, doer, knower, and dignifier. If the *anattā* doctrine is right, however, this postulation of an ego- or soul-substance has no ultimate justification but arises merely from an ignorant craving for permanence that nothing can satisfy, nothing in the sense-world to be sure, but also nothing in any realms that might lie beyond it.

This putative ignorance about the ontological structure of the world is not a merely theoretical matter but a deeply practical one. On the Buddhist doctrine, suffering (*dukkha*) arises from the unavoidable frustration of our desire for permanence, a desire rooted in our ignorant taking of what is impermanent and "selfless" as the opposite. And for Buddhism, suffering is the primary fact, as the First Noble Truth attests. It is not only the primary fact but an all-pervasive one: *Sabbe dhammā dukkha*, all things are unsatisfactory. Thus even what is ordinarily taken to be satisfactory (*sukha*), a state of mental or physical pleasure for example, is ultimately unsatisfactory when correctly viewed. For one with right views, the opposite of *dukkha* is not *sukha* but *nibbāna*: the opposite of suffering is not a positive state, pleasure or satisfaction, but a privative state, absence or cessation of suffering.

To eradicate suffering, therefore, we must come to see the world for what it is: void of self-nature. If nothing in the world has self-nature, then the world is impermanent and unsatisfactory "all the way down," so that there is literally nothing to cling to and nothing in which to find lasting satisfaction. The worldling (*puthujjana*), who of course to some extent recognizes both impermanence and suffering, believes nonetheless that on balance he will escape from them and enjoy a life that, viewed as a whole, could be adjudged satisfactory. Or at least he believes that he has a good chance at achieving such a life and that therefore the effort to achieve it is well worth making. Buddha's doctrine, however, is that there is no escape for any sentient being from unsatisfactoriness no matter how fortunate or well-endowed: impermanence and suffering are ubiquitous. Not even death constitutes escape: there is rebirth to be reckoned with, and bad living might land one in a predicament worse than the present one. One who gains intuitive insight into the truth of *anattāta* (selflessness) will thus

be enabled to see deeply into the all-pervasive nature of impermanence and suffering, and so seeing, learn to renounce all craving, clinging, and attachment, thereby eventually becoming free of all suffering. As I see it, the *anattā* doctrine explains the manifest empirical features of impermanence and suffering but does so in such a way as to imply that they are more pervasive than they seem to the worldling, and indeed all-pervasive. Thus the worldling will admit that there is impermanence and suffering, but only by contrast with things he regards as permanent and satisfactory; what he cannot grasp until he grasps the truth of *anattāta* (selflessness) is that absolutely everything, even relatively permanent and satisfactory things, are in the end impermanent and unsatisfactory. A correct understanding of impermanence and suffering therefore requires insight into the *anattā* doctrine.

So, although Buddhism is first and foremost a soteriology—as the "poisoned arrow" parable makes unmistakably clear—the Buddhist way of salvation rests on a theoretical claim about the world, the *anattā* doctrine. If this doctrine is false or unsupported or perhaps even incoherent, then in equal measure so is its soteriology. But this requires a bit more discussion. We need to see that the soteriology is not merely practical or pragmatic, but rests on the Buddhist ontology.

For the Buddhist, the problem at the root of our uneasy and unsatisfactory predicament in this life is not misdirected desire, but desire itself. Whereas the First Noble Truth establishes, or at least asserts, the fact of all-pervasive suffering, the Second points to desire or craving (*taṇhā*) as its origin. We suffer, not because we desire the wrong things, but because we desire at all, and in desiring become attached to objects all of which are ultimately unsatisfactory or *dukkha*-inducing. If we could stop desiring, then we would stop suffering. Thus a solution to the problem of suffering is not to be had by a redirection of desire, from say transient objects to more lasting ones, but by its complete eradication. This is affirmed in the Third Noble Truth, which affirms the possibility of the complete cessation and utter renunciation of desire. How this is to be brought about is set forth in the Fourth Noble Truth, which outlines the Eight-Fold Path consisting of right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Paramount among right views is of course the teaching on *anattā*.

Buddha thus proposes a radical cure for our existential malaise: the extirpation of desire. Compare the Christian Platonist, St. Augustine. We know from his *Confessiones* that he lusted after bodies, male and female, after property and position, after name and fame.[3] But tasting these things, he could not be satisfied by them. For they are all corruptible and their enjoyment leaves us as empty and vain as they are. Platonist that he was, he took their corruptibility as an index of unreality and unsatisfactoriness. Arguably, he was as sensitive to impermanence as Buddha was. It would not be too much of a stretch to say that Augustine, too, took the sense world and its ancient lures to be devoid of self-nature. (Anything continuously dependent on God for its very existence cannot possess much by way of self-nature.) But the main difference between them is that Augustine had nothing like an *anattā* doctrine with respect to God

[3]The case for Augustine's having indulged in homosexual practices is made by Giovanni Papini, *Saint Augustine*, trans. Agnetti (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930) pp. 45–47.

and the soul. If anything is *attā*, God and the soul are.[4] (The marks of *attā* will occupy us in a moment.) Indeed, these were precisely the two ultimate realities he wanted to know to the exclusion of all else: *Deum et animam scire cupio*, "I want to know God and the soul." Hence for Augustine the solution to the problem of suffering was not through an eradication of desire but by the soul's redirection of its love from the sense-world to God, from this half-lit world of shadows to the Unchangeable Light.[5] The solution is through a *conversio*, a turning-around: "For I had my back to the Light and my face to the things illuminated."[6] For Buddha, ultimately nothing can satisfy desire; hence the cessation of suffering requires the eradication of desire. But for Augustine, desire can be satisfied, but only by union with God: "Our hearts will not rest until they rest in Thee." Hence the problem for Augustine is not desire as such but ignorantly and sinfully chosen *objects* of desire.

I think it is clear that these two different views about how salvation is to be achieved (whether by the eradication, or by the redirection, of desire) reflect different underlying metaphysical commitments and stand and fall with these commitments. Thus if Buddha radically interpreted is right and *nothing* has self-nature, then, given that only the substantial, permanent, and eternal can satisfy us, salvation is possible only by the uprooting of desire. But if Augustine is right that God and the soul possess self-nature, then salvation demands "merely" the soul's redirection of desire away from the false glitter of this world toward God.

To know which of these competing paths really works, we need to know which of the competing metaphysical commitments is really true. The Buddhist "therapy" is not a mere practice, but a practice resting on the *anattā* doctrine: we must eradicate desire, as the Second Noble Truth directs, precisely because only what has self-nature could satisfy desire, and nothing has self-nature. If the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine is false and something (Augustine's God, for example) has self-nature, then we ought to seek our salvation by a redirection of desire to this Something. The Buddhist way would then lead not to genuine salvation but to mere annihilation of desire. Buddhist practitioners might think that their practices "work for them," but if the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine is false, they would be living in illusion. We therefore see that, although metaphysical discussions such as the one to follow are not conducive to salvation in one sense—they may distract from meditation and moral ascesis and contribute to the ego-bloat found everywhere in the world but especially in academe—they are essential to understand what one must do to achieve salvation, and therefore essential to salvation in another sense.

II. AN ARGUMENT FOR THE DOCTRINE

To better determine what the *anattā* doctrine amounts to, we need to look at some of the Buddhist arguments for it. (The full sense of a philosophical thesis emerges

[4]To the extent that the soul is created by God, and thus (given a non-deistic conception of divine creation) continuously dependent upon God for its very existence, the soul is not quite *attā*. But it is close, and obviously more *attā* than the body.

[5]See *Confessions* 7.10.

[6]*Confessions* 4.16.

only on consideration of its grounds and its consequences.) On this occasion we look at only one early, but highly characteristic, text. Here are the words of Buddha according to the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, his second discourse, the Sermon on the Mark of Not-Self:

> The body [*rūpa*], monks, is not self. If the body were the self, this body would not lend itself to disease. It would be possible (to say) with regard to the body, "Let my body be thus. Let my body be not thus." But precisely because the body is not self, the body lends itself to disease. And it is not possible (to say) with regard to the body, "Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus."[7]

Buddha then goes on to argue similarly with respect to the rest of the five "aggregates" or categories of personality-constituents (*khandhas*, Sanskrit: *skandhas*), namely, feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*), and mental formations (*saṇkhārās*). All are claimed to be not-self. Thus we are told that feeling afflicts us and is not amenable to our control, whence it is inferred that feeling is not one's self, not one's own inner substance. The tacit premise of this enthymeme is that one's self would be something over which one would have complete control, something wholly active and spontaneous. And it is clear that something wholly active will not suffer: to suffer is precisely to be afflicted by something external over which one has no control.

After arguing that each of the personality-constituents is outside of our control and brings suffering, Buddha argues that each of the constituents is impermanent, and for this reason as well, is lacking in self-nature. The overall argument of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* may therefore be reconstructed in a generalized form as follows:

1. If anything were the self, then it would have two properties: it would not be liable to disease, decay, destruction or change generally, and it would be self-determining, that is, it would have complete control over itself.
2. But nothing in our experience has either of these two properties, neither the body, nor feeling, nor perception, nor consciousness, and so on. Therefore,
3. Nothing in our experience can be identified as the self.

I have structured the argument so that it is not only valid in point of logical form, but also has plausible premises. (A charitable reconstruction can aim at nothing less.) Thus the addition of "in our experience" in premise (2) makes this premise more plausible than without the addition. But this gain in plausibility exacts a price: the conclusion (3) cannot then amount to the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine according to which nothing at all is a self or has self-nature. It is one thing to say that nothing *in our experience* can be identified (veridically) as a self, and quite another to say that there is no self.

[7] *Samyutta Nikaya* 22.59.

For it may well be that the existence of a (transcendental) self that is not experienced is a necessary condition of establishing that whatever *is* experienced is *not* a self. After all, if I come to see that my body, feelings, perceptions, and so on cannot be identified as my very self, then it is presumably *I myself* who come to this insight. If I come to reject body-identification, feeling-identification, and so on as false self-identifications, then presumably there must be at least the possibility of a true self-identification, even if only of the tautological form, "I am I." If every self-identification were false, then "I am I" would be false. But that is either a contradiction, or implies that there is nothing that body, feelings, and so on are distinct from, which is again incoherent. For if "I am not this body" is true, then in some sense I must exist as that from which my body is distinct. Furthermore, if anyone needs and desires liberation, it is presumably in every case *I myself* who needs and desires it, and *I myself* who, if all goes well, achieves it, and indeed achieves it on the basis of *my own* insight into *my* non-identity with any of five *khandhas* or with the psychophysical complex composed of them. The self who needs, desires, and possibly attains liberation is obviously distinct from each of the *khandhas* and from the psychophysical complex. My body, obviously enough, cannot come to realize its non-identity with itself, for the simple reason that it is not distinct from itself. The same holds for each of the *khandhas*, and for the lot of them taken together. And to suppose that *no one* desires, needs, or attains liberation would appear to make hash of the whole Buddhist system of soteriology. Buddhism is an existentialist system in roughly Kierkegaard's sense: it is the salvation of the "existing individual" that is the *unum necessarium* and sole *desideratum*. It is therefore arguable that the existence of a transcendental self is a cognitive and soteriological presupposition: it is presupposed if there is to be insight that no object of experience is veridically identifiable as one's very self, and it is presupposed if there is to be something that is saved from the samsaric predicament. But to properly exfoliate and evaluate all of this would require a separate article.

Here we take a different tack. Rather than arguing that (2) could be true only if there is a (transcendental) self as cognitive/soteriological presupposition, we focus solely on the evaluation of premise (1), the truth of which is required not only for the soundness of the argument to (3) but also for the soundness of the further argument to the unrestricted *anattā* thesis, to wit: (4) Nothing is a self. Let us call the argument to (3) the *restricted* argument, and the argument to (4) the *unrestricted* argument. The problem of how to move validly from (3) to (4) will not concern us on the present occasion.

III. AN EXAMINATION OF PREMISE (1)

Premise (1) of the above argument says that anything that could count as a self would have to be both permanent and self-determining. But "permanent" here cannot mean *relatively* permanent: one's body and many of one's bodily features are relatively permanent as are one's attitudes and dispositions. Indeed, if one's body were not relatively permanent, one could not become attached to it and desire its indefinite continuance. The same goes for "self-determining." Since it is obvious that we do have some control over our bodily and mental states, "self-determining" cannot mean

relatively self-determining.[8] Properly understood, then, (1) says that for anything to count as a self it must be both *absolutely* permanent and *absolutely* self-determining. But given the soteriological context of Buddhist thought, we may immediately add that a self both absolutely permanent and absolutely self-determining will also be absolutely devoid of suffering: the state of such a self would be a wholly satisfactory and maximally desire-worthy[9] state. It would obviously be the ideal state for a self to be in.

What premise (1) does, therefore, is to set an exceedingly high standard for selfhood: to be a self, or to have self-nature, or to be veridically identifiable as one's very self, a thing must be absolutely permanent, self-determining, and desire-worthy. But the further course of the unrestricted argument makes it clear that nothing at all comes up to this standard: nothing is a self. Now if nothing is absolutely permanent, self-determining, and desire-worthy, then the idea or concept of self-nature invoked in the initial premise is fictitious in that it fails to apply to anything. This suggests the following questions. How could a fictitious idea be held up as an ideal or standard by which to denigrate ontologically the things we encounter? How could a fictitious idea be used to show that the things we naturally desire are fundamentally not worthy of desire?

Let us see if these queries can be transformed into an argument. I will try to establish the thesis that premise (1) is inconsistent with the *anattā* doctrine taken in its full scope, that is, as applying to everything, *nibbāna* included, and that (1) can be true only if there is something absolutely permanent, self-determining, and desire-worthy. In the majority of cases, of course, statements of the form "If something is F, then it has such-and-such properties" are logically consistent with statements of the form "Nothing is F." For example, "If x is the luminiferous ether, then x is the medium through which electromagnetic signals are transmitted" is logically consistent with "There is no luminiferous ether." It would be absurd to argue that the existence of the ether is a necessary condition of the meaningfulness of the concept of ether. There are plenty of uninstantiated concepts whose meaningfulness is in no way prejudiced by their being uninstantiated. But there are other concepts that cannot be coherently supposed to be uninstantiated. The supposition that the concept of truth[10] has no instances, for example, quickly succumbs to a *reductio ad absurdum*. For if the concept of truth is uninstantiated, then it is true that it is uninstantiated, which implies that the concept of truth *is* instantiated. If, on the other hand, the concept of truth is instantiated, then of course it is instantiated. Therefore, *necessarily*, the concept of truth is instantiated. Hence it is impossible that the concept of truth be uninstantiated. To show that the concept of the self cannot be an uninstantiated concept is not as easy a task, but that is what I

[8]This remains the case even if determinism is true and if our limited control over our bodily and mental states is not libertarianly free. Note also that to say that we have some limited control over our bodily and mental states does not beg the question against the *anattā* doctrine: "we" refers to us as persons—persons who could conceivably turn out to be selfless. See n.1 above.

[9]I often write "desire-worthy" rather than "desirable" because the latter expression is ambiguous as between "able to be desired" and "worthy of being desired."

[10]To be precise: true proposition.

propose to do. The basic idea of this section is that the concept of the self as it figures in the argumentation of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* cannot be an uninstantiated concept due to its specific normative content. To be precise, the concept of the self cannot be an uninstantiated concept if it is a standard relative to which ordinary objects of desire[11] are to be adjudged ontologically and desideratively substandard. Thus the project of establishing that nothing possesses self-nature can be successful only if there is something possessing self-nature. But that is just to say that the project must fail and that it is incoherent to maintain without qualification or restriction that nothing has self-nature. For all I will be saying on this occasion, however, a suitably restricted *anattā* doctrine may well be true. Thus nothing I will be saying casts doubt on the restricted argument, that is, the argument to (3) above.

It is crucial that the reader understand what I mean by "ontological denigration" as it figures in the question how a fictitious idea could be held up as an ideal or standard by which to denigrate ontologically the things we encounter. To denigrate something is to assert or imply that it fails to meet a certain standard or achieve a certain norm. To denigrate something *ontologically* is to assert or imply that *in its very being or mode of existence* the thing in question fails to meet a certain standard or achieve a certain norm. The relevant norm here is maximal satisfactoriness or desirability. Thus to denigrate ontologically the things of this world is to assert or imply that they lack the plenary being or existence they would have to have in order to be desire-worthy as ends in themselves. A lack of this sort, if it obtains, is obviously all-pervasive and irremediable: all-pervasive, because rooted in the very existence of each worldly being as such; irremediable, because the mode of existence of a thing is essential to it.

That Buddhism is involved in the ontological denigration of ordinary objects of desire is beyond question. The constant emphasis on impermanence has no other point than to establish that things are unsatisfactory and lacking in self-nature and that we must therefore stop clinging to them and detach ourselves from them. The existence and ubiquity of impermanence are not value-neutral facts about the world that we are invited to contemplate theoretically; impermanence is made much of because of its link with suffering or unsatisfactoriness that has its ground in selflessness. And this for the sole soteriological purpose of inspiring us to work out our salvation with diligence by fleeing from our enslavement to our passions, as one would flee from a burning building. If Buddhism is true, we are in a truly dire predicament made all the worse by the prospect of countless future lives in circumstances even worse than the one we are in now. Buddhism, to put it in a slogan, is "a path not a proposition"; but it is a path of salvation resting on the proposition that the pursuit of ordinary objects of desire, as ontologically substandard, is harmful to our spiritual health.

I should make it clear that I am not opposed to the ontological denigration of ordinary objects of desire; indeed I am all for it. Every genuine religion is involved in such denigration.[12] Thus the New Testament text that "the world is passing away

[11] I say "ordinary objects of desire," since presumably freedom from all desire, bringing with it liberation from the samsaric go-round and entry into *nibbāna*, is an object of desire for someone seeking liberation. But it is clearly extraordinary.

[12] I realize that this claim requires detailed defense; but it cannot be provided here.

and also its lusts" (1 John 2:17) is not a mere theoretical observation but a warning: the objects of lust and of the "boastful pride of life" are worthless and next-to-nothing; therefore, turn away from them at once if you value your spiritual well-being. My point, however, is that (i) a thing cannot be ontologically substandard unless there is a standard or norm relative to which it is substandard, and (ii) this standard must objectively exist. Thus in Plato's metaphysics, phenomenal particulars are ontologically substandard—but only by comparison to standard-setting Forms or *Eide*. Nietzsche was therefore quite right to point out that any denial of Platonism's "true world" is tantamount to a denial of its "apparent world."[13] For "true" and "apparent" are normatively charged terms. Deny the standard relative to which something is adjudged imperfect and you deny the imperfection of the thing hitherto so adjudged. Plato and Nietzsche agree in this, that the apparent and true worlds stand and fall together, such that it would be simply incoherent to say that the objects of the sense world are merely apparent while also maintaining that there is no true world of standards relative to which they are merely apparent.

To appreciate this, one must see that "ontologically substandard" and such cognates as "ontologically standard-setting" are not purely ontological designations but ontological-*cum*-normative designations. Since the days of Hume at least, philosophers have become accustomed to drawing a sharp distinction amounting to an "entailment-barrier" between facts and norms, between what is the case and what ought to be the case. The tendency is to view facts as objective but norms as subjective, as deriving from, and relative to, subjective acts of evaluation. But in many ancient modes of thought, Buddhism included, there is no such entailment-barrier. What is objectively the case can also be objectively normative. Thus consider this characteristic formulation from the Pali canon: "Dhammā aniccā: yad aniccam tam dukkham: yam dukkham tad anattā."[14] "Things are impermanent: what is impermanent is suffering: what is suffering is not-self." This means that what is objectively impermanent is by its very nature as objectively impermanent objectively unsatisfactory. The impermanent as such, in its very being, is unsatisfactory. It does not mean that impermanent things sometimes give rise to suffering or even that they always, as a matter of contingent fact, give rise to suffering. For Buddhism, suffering is *inescapable* so long as we cling to the impermanent. The plain sense of the formulation, therefore, is that impermanence metaphysically entails suffering, that suffering metaphysically entails lack of self-nature, and that none of this depends on subjective value-preferences. Because it does not so depend, failure to see the connections here amounts to ignorance and delusion. (Someone who does not share my subjective preferences cannot sensibly be taxed with delusion.) Thus the very nature of impermanence is such as to necessitate suffering, and the very nature of suffering is such as to necessitate lack of self-nature.

On the face of it, however, impermanence is a "factual" or non-normative property, the property of changing or being subject to change, while unsatisfactoriness

[13]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzendämmerung*: "Die wahre Welt haben wir abgeschafft: welche Welt blieb uebrig? die Scheinbare vielleicht? . . . Aber nein! *mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die scheinbare abgeschafft*!" in *Werke in Zwei Bänden* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1967) vol. 2, p. 341.

[14]*Salayatana Samyutta* 4.

is a normative property. How, then, can impermanence entail unsatisfactoriness? How can the non-normative entail the normative? This is a question we need to answer. But first we need to appreciate the difficulty.

It is a plain empirical fact that things change, a fact one can literally see and literally feel; but it is not an *empirical* fact, although I will assume that is a fact, that *all* changing things are unsatisfactory. That painful states are unsatisfactory is empirically obvious, but the Buddhist claim is that absolutely everything is unsatisfactory, including what we normally think of as states of pleasure: *Sabbe dhammā dukkha.*[15] Feeling one's pleasure grow, climax, and then subside, in the sex act for example, one is directly acquainted with impermanence, but one is not directly acquainted with unsatisfactoriness. Hugh Hefner is well aware that his pleasures are transient, but I rather doubt that he would admit that they are unsatisfactory. To the suggestion that they are, he would probably and quite plausibly retort: "Why should what is impermanent be unsatisfactory?" If he were a philosopher, he might defend the view that the impermanent can be satisfactory as follows. There is nothing in the concept of impermanence, or in the meaning of the term "impermanence," to require that an impermanent thing be unsatisfactory. Even if "everything impermanent is unsatisfactory" is true, it is surely not *analytically* true. Thus impermanence does not analytically entail unsatisfactoriness. But neither is the putative unsatisfactoriness of a transient pleasure an object of direct empirical acquaintance. While experiencing a pleasure, one is precisely not experiencing anything unsatisfactory. If one attends to the pleasure alone, no mark of unsatisfactoriness is empirically discernible as long as the pleasure lasts. Thus the truth-ground of "Everything impermanent is unsatisfactory" does not lie in experience. Physical and mental pleasures are impermanent but satisfactory as long as they last. Of course, it is unsatisfactory that they should come to an end; but they can be adjudged unsatisfactory in this regard only relative to the ideal of permanence as a mark of satisfactoriness. But then one has brought in a standard that is precisely not empirically given or empirically justifiable, and the question arises as to what justifies this standard. I shall return to this point in a moment.

The failure of analytic entailment, together with the nonobservability of unsatisfactoriness in the cases of sensory states that are pleasurable or else neutral as between pleasure and pain, show that there is a distinction between the ostensibly non-normative property of impermanence and the obviously normative property of unsatisfactoriness. Given this distinction, a worldling might naturally hold that it is merely arbitrary and subjective to evaluate transient pleasures and transient things generally as unsatisfactory. "Everything impermanent is unsatisfactory" would on this view be a subjective stipulation and thus not objectively true at all. Buddhism might be thought to rest on a purely subjective life-denying value-judgment, one that we are under no obligation to accept, and one that a Nietzschean might take to be little more than an expression of physiological decadence or excessive susceptibility to pain.[16] Or thus our hedonist philosopher might argue.

[15]"Yam kinci vedayitam tam dukkhasmin ti." Whatever is felt counts as unpleasure (suffering). *Vedanā Samyutta* 2:1.

[16]Although Nietzsche has some good things to say about Buddhism as compared with Christianity, he classes both as "nihilistic religions," "religions of decadence." See *The Antichrist*, sec. 20. Sec. 22 ties Buddhism to an excessive susceptibility to pain.

But, the Buddhist might counter-argue, from the fact that impermanence does not *analytically* entail unsatisfactoriness, it does not follow that the former does not *metaphysically* entail the latter.[17] The proposition "everything impermanent is unsatisfactory," though not analytically true, could still be necessarily true. Indeed, I think this is the clear sense of the Buddhist doctrine. Once one appreciates this metaphysical entailment, one is in a position to appreciate that impermanence is not a merely ontological property but a combined ontological-normative one. Clearly, the same holds for "no self": it too is an ontological-*cum*-normative property. To say that something lacks self-nature is not merely to describe it but to evaluate it. It is to say that it lacks being or reality, that it is not "really real" (*ontos on*) in Plato's sense.

But this still leaves us with the question as to the truth-maker of "everything impermanent is unsatisfactory." What makes this true? It is not an analytic proposition, and so if true, it is not true in virtue of the meanings of its constituent terms. Nor is its truth-ground to be found in experience. I may learn from experience that all pleasures, noble or base, mental or physical, pass away; but that this passing-away of pleasures is unsatisfactory—this is not something I learn from experience. No doubt both the *passing-away* of pleasures as well as the *pleasurableness* of pleasures are empirically detectable features. But the unsatisfactoriness of passing pleasures is not an empirically detectable feature. Note that the passing-away of pains is not unsatisfactory, but the opposite. Hence it is not passing-way *as such* that is unsatisfactory. Nobody complains when a migraine headache passes away. And of course the unsatisfactoriness of passing pleasures does not derive from their felt quality, that is, their pleasurableness. For their pleasurableness is quite obviously satisfactory. The unsatisfactoriness stems from the fact that something we want to last does not last. Thus the unsatisfactoriness derives from the *discrepancy* between what we want or desire, a permanent state of pleasure, and what we get, pleasures that subside. This discrepancy between the ideal and what is found in experience is obviously not something that can be empirically discerned since it involves a comparison, one of the terms of which is precisely not to be found in experience, namely, the ideal of absolute permanence as the criterion of satisfactoriness. We do not learn *from* experience that the passing-away of pleasures is unsatisfactory; we *impose on* our pleasurable experiences the stamp of unsatisfactoriness by comparing them with a standard of absolute permanence that neither has nor can have any empirical pedigree.

But that everything impermanent is unsatisfactory is *also* not an arbitrary stipulation or expression of subjective preference that we are free to accept or reject. Embedded in its Buddhist context, the proposition in question purports to be objectively true, so much so that anyone failing to grasp its truth is taxed with ignorance and delusion.

[17]Illustration: being water does not *analytically* entail being composed of H_2O molecules; but given that water is (identically) H_2O, and given Saul Kripke's doctrine of the necessity of identity, *x*'s being a sample of water *metaphysically* entails *x*'s being composed of H_2C molecules.

What then is the truth-ground of "Everything impermanent is unsatisfactory"? There is only one answer. What makes this proposition true is that there is an Ideal of absolute permanence and satisfactoriness against which the impermanent can be compared and with which the impermanent is in conflict. And what makes "everthing impermanent lacks self-nature" true is that there is an Ideal of absolute self-nature to which the impermanent can be compared and with which the impermanent is in conflict. These are presumably the same Ideal. If there were no such Ideal, there would be nothing in comparison to which worldly objects could be ontologically-desideratively substandard, and any judgment that they are thus substandard would be false.

IV. AN OBJECTION AND A REPLY

But does it follow that this Ideal objectively exists? For one might grant that there is, in some sense, such an Ideal, that it is necessarily in play in the various arguments for the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine, but that it is nonetheless *illusory*. One might argue that the Ideal is a mere projection of our human desire for permanence and security, a desire that is bound to go unsatisfied given that all is impermanent. As such, the Ideal would have no objective status but still could be used to argue the unreality and unsatisfactoriness of the objects of desire. According to Peter Harvey, "The not-Self teaching can in fact be seen as a brilliant device—a skillful means—which uses a deep-seated human aspiration, ultimately *illusory*, to overcome the negative products of such an illusion."[18] Thus the aspiration to permanence, though ultimately illusory, is employed as a standard against which to measure the objects of desire and attachment so that we may come to see that they are insubstantial and ultimately unsatisfactory and therefore to be shunned.

I submit that Harvey's suggestion is simply and irremediably incoherent. An illusory standard is not a standard relative to which anything could be *objectively* lacking in either desire-worthiness or self-nature. At best, an illusory standard would justify a merely subjective devaluation of the objects of desire, a devaluation that would be of no objective interest. A little parable may help convey what I am driving at. Suppose someone, call him Harry, goes spouse-hunting armed with an exceedingly exacting standard: a potential mate must be perfect, that is, must possess all of the perfections appropriate to human beings, and must possess the highest degree of such perfections as admit of degrees. Since nobody meets the standard, Harry's quest will end in frustration. Now is the problem that no one is objectively worthy of Harry's attention, or is the problem with the standard? Clearly the latter: since the standard is utterly illusory, there being nothing that could satisfy it, someone's failure to measure up is no argument against her suitability for marriage. What Harry must do is to throw out his unrealistic standard. It would be absurd for him to renounce his desire/need for a spouse on the ground that no one is suitable. For if his only reason for thinking a candidate unsuitable is her failure to satisfy a purely imaginary notion of perfection, then this is obviously no reason at all. Harry's fertile imagination is surely no basis for an objective evaluation or devaluation of anything.

[18] Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995) p. 45.

Similarly, if the Self-ideal is illusory, as the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine requires, then a thing's failure to measure up to it is no argument against it. There is of course a difference between the Self-ideal and Harry's spousal ideal. The Self-ideal is presumably as common to all human beings as is their insatiable desire for permanent satisfaction, whereas Harry's ideal is an aberration confined to him and perhaps a few others. But this is not a difference that makes a difference to my argument. An illusion's being shared by all does not make it any less of an illusion. And so again, if the Self-ideal is illusory, then a thing's failure to measure up to it cannot be taken to show that the thing in question should be renounced.

This is even clearer when we consider that if nothing is absolutely permanent, then this is necessarily the case. For if there were an absolutely permanent entity, it would be a metaphysical absolute whose possibility would entail its actuality.[19] Readers familiar with the modal versions of the ontological argument know that an existing metaphysical absolute is necessary, while a nonexisting one is impossible. An absolute is not the sort of thing that could have the modal status of contingency. So, if the Self-ideal is objectively nonexistent, then it does not just happen not to exist: it is metaphysically impossible. Now it is particularly difficult to see how a thing's failure to measure up to an impossibly existent ideal could count against its desire-worthiness and reality. If there *cannot* be a permanent entity, then the idea that anything ought to measure up to such a necessarily nonexistent standard on pain of ontological denigration in the event of failure to measure up is untenable. Why exactly? Well, just as *ought* implies *can* with respect to human actions, *ought to be satisfied* implies *can be satisfied* with respect to demands in general. Call this the generalized "ought implies can" principle. If the demand that things ought to be permanent to be desire-worthy cannot be satisfied by anything, then it is not a legitimate demand with binding deontic force. Everyone can see what is wrong with the following sentence: "You ought to have saved that child from the burning building even though you would have had to travel at the speed of sound to get there in time." If a person cannot perform a physical action, then it cannot be demanded of him on pain of ethical denigration in case of failure to perform it. One's ethical status cannot be lowered by one's failure to do what one cannot do. Similarly, a thing's ontological status cannot be lowered by its failure to meet an ontological standard that nothing meets and that indeed nothing can meet. So if nothing is permanent (and thus nothing is even possibly permanent), then a thing's failure to be permanent cannot be taken to argue its lack of full reality or substantiality or self-nature. Nor can it be taken to argue its lack of desire-worthiness.

My point can be summed up as follows. If human desire makes an impossible demand, a demand for permanence that nothing can satisfy, such a demand cannot be

[19] It might be argued that *nibbāna* is absolutely permanent without being a metaphysical absolute. For (1) if *nibbāna* were impermanent it would be as worthless as any impermanent state or thing, but (2) *nibbāna* cannot be an absolute since, lacking self-nature, it is not a substance. It would take a separate article to show wherein the error of this reasoning consists. The present article assumes that the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness stand and fall together. Thus nothing can be permanent without being non-suffering and a self.

legitimate: it cannot be employed as a standard for the ontological-desiderative denigration of ordinary objects of desire. If this were our predicament, the appropriate response to universal impermanence would not be the eradication of desire, but its scaling-back. One would only have to stop desiring what one cannot have. One cannot have an unlimited life-span, a maximally perfect spouse, or a house proof against every threat; but one can reasonably aim at a long healthy life of eighty years, marriage to a morally decent person, and possession of a reasonably durable house, and so on. Given that nothing is absolutely permanent, why could not one be satisfied with what is relatively permanent? If a thing fails to meet a standard that nothing does or can meet, why should this constitute a good reason for thinking that the thing in question is unreal or worthless? To reject as worthless all impermanent objects on the supposition that there are only impermanent objects would amount to total nihilism.[20] And I submit that to interpret the magnificent Buddha-Dhamma as a species of total nihilism[21] would be uncharitable in the extreme. But that it what we are committed to if we take the *anattā* doctrine to have unrestricted scope.

V. CODA

What I have shown is that the truth of premise (1)—the key assumption of the argumentation in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*—is inconsistent with the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine. Thus it is inconsistent to hold both that (i) if anything is a self, then it is permanent and self-determining, and (ii) nothing is a self. For this is equivalent to holding both that (iii) there is an ideal, the Self-ideal, that nothing does or can satisfy, and (iv) things must satisfy this ideal if they are to be desire-worthy. A standard that nothing can satisfy and that everything must satisfy is obviously a self-contradictory standard. For a standard that everything must satisfy is a standard that something can satisfy by the generalized "ought implies can" principle above; but this contradicts the unrestricted *anattā* doctrine according to which the Self-ideal is a standard that nothing can satisfy.

The unrestricted argument, the argument to the conclusion that nothing has self-nature, is therefore unsound. For its major premise is inconsistent with its conclusion. But this leaves open the possibility of a restricted argument to the conclusion that no object of our ordinary experience has self-nature and thus that no such object is ultimately desire-worthy. Such a restricted argument, however, requires the unconditioned existence of a supremely desire-worthy Object.[22]

[20]One response to this might be that (i) human desire does make an impossible demand, but (ii) we are powerless to scale it back: it is not possible for us to be satisfied with finite objects of desire. But if so, we would also be powerless to eradicate desire. Surely, if we have the power to eradicate desire, as Buddhism assumes, then we have the power to limit desire to impermanent objects. My point is that this is precisely what we ought to do if we are convinced that only impermanent objects exist. So the defense consisting of (i) and (ii) will not work.

[21]Total nihilism may be defined as the view that all finite objects of desire are ultimately worthless and that beyond the finite there is nothing at all.

[22]I thank John Maraldo, Horace Jeffery Hodges, and an anonymous *IPQ* referee for comments on an earlier draft. Address correspondence to BillVallicella@compuserve.com.