LOGICAL CRITICISM OF BUDDHIST DOCTRINES

A Thematic Compilation

By **Avi Sion** PH.D.

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Website: www.TheLogician.net. E-mail: avi-sion@thelogician.net.

Logical Criticism of Buddhist Doctrines can be freely read online at avisionbuddhism and in various other locations.
It can be purchased, in print and e-book editions, in Amazon.com, Lulu.com and many other online booksellers.

The present document contains **excerpts** from this book, namely: The Abstract; the Contents; and Sample text (Chapters 6 and 9:1-2).

Avi Sion (Ph.D. Philosophy) is a researcher and writer in logic, philosophy, and spirituality. He has, since 1990, published original writings on the theory and practice of inductive and deductive logic, phenomenology, epistemology, aetiology, psychology, meditation, ethics, and much more. Over a period of some 28 years, he has published 27 books. He resides in Geneva, Switzerland.

It is very difficult to briefly summarize Avi Sion's philosophy, because it is so wide-ranging. He has labeled it '**Logical Philosophy**', because it is firmly grounded in formal logic, inductive as well as deductive. This original philosophy is dedicated to demonstrating the efficacy of human reason by detailing its actual means; and to show that the epistemological and ethical skepticism which has been increasingly fashionable and destructive since the Enlightenment was (contrary to appearances) quite illogical – the product of ignorant, incompetent and dishonest thinking.

Abstract

Logical Criticism of Buddhist Doctrines is a ‘thematic compilation’ by Avi Sion. It collects in one volume the essays that he has written on this subject over a period of some 15 years after the publication of his first book on Buddhism, *Buddhist Illogic*. It comprises expositions and empirical and logical critiques of many (though not all) Buddhist doctrines, such as impermanence, interdependence, emptiness, the denial of self or soul. It includes his most recent essay, regarding the five skandhas doctrine.

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6 "Everything causes everything"

One doctrine fundamental to Buddhism is the idea that 'everything causes everything', or 'everything is caused by everything'. This is the idea of universal codependence (or interdependence); it is the idea that nothing exists independently of anything else, that all things depend for their existence on *all* other things. This is, note well, a more radical thesis than the claim, commonly found in most Western philosophies, that 'everything has a cause (or a set of causes)'.

On the surface, the Buddhist notion of universal causation seems conceivable, if not profound. However, upon reflection it is found to be logically impossible – i.e. utter nonsense. This is made evident in the following excerpts from past books.

1. The idea of co-dependence

The Buddhist idea of 'co-dependence' might be stated broadly as *each thing exists only in relation to others;* and furthermore, since each other thing in turn exists only in relation to yet others, *each thing exists in relation to all the others*. The relation primarily intended here is causality, note. We tend to regard each thing as capable of solitary existence in the universe, and ignore or forget the variegated threads relating it to other things. We 'do not see the forest for the trees', and habitually focus on individual events to the detriment of overview or long view.

For example, consider a plant. Without the sunlight, soil and water it depends on, and without previous generations of the same plant and the events that made reproduction possible and the trajectories of each atom constituting and feeding the plant, and without the cosmic upheavals that resulted in the existence of our planet and its soil and water and of the sun and of living matter, and so forth *ad infinitum*, there would be no plant. It has no independent existence, but stands before us only by virtue of a mass of causes and conditions. And so with these causes and conditions, they in turn are mere details in a universal fabric of being.

The concept of co-dependence is apparently regarded by Buddhists as an inevitable outcome of the concept of causality. But reflection shows, again, that this doctrine is only a particular thesis within the thesis of causality. That is, though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence. Moreover, it is a vague thesis, which involves some doubtful generalizations. The above-cited typical example of co-dependence suggests three propositions:

- everything has a cause (or is an effect),
- everything has an effect (or is a cause);

and perhaps the more radical,

- everything causes and is caused by everything.

The first two propositions are together what we call '**the law of causality**'. It has to be seen that these propositions do not inevitably follow from the concept of causality. The latter only requires

for its formation that *some* regularity of co-existence between events be found in experience, but does not in itself necessitate that *every* event in experience be found to have regular co-existence with some other event(s). The *concept* of causality is valid if it but has particular applications; the *law* of causality does not automatically follow – it is merely a *generalization* from some experiences with this property to all existents. There may well be things not found to have regular co-existents, and thence by generalization assumed to have no cause and/or no effect. A universe in which both causality and non-causality occur is quite conceivable. Furthermore, the first proposition does not logically imply the second or vice versa – i.e. we may imagine things with causes but no further effect, and things with effects but no preceding causes.

"Early Buddhists", Cheng tells us, "believed in the principle of causality to be objectively, necessarily, eternally and universally valid." Many Western philosophers have concurred, though not all. Today, most physicists believe that, on a quantum level at least, and perhaps at the Big Bang, there are events without apparent cause. I do not know if events without effect are postulated by anyone. In any case, we see that even on the physical level "chance" is admitted as a possibility, if not a certainty. The law of causality can continue to serve us as a working principle, pressing us to seek diligently for causes and effects, but cannot in any case be regarded as an *a priori* universal truth. Causal logic has to remain open-minded, since in any case these "laws" are mere generalizations – inductive, not deductive, truths.

Furthermore, the law of causality just mentioned is only at best a law of *causation*. Philosophers who admit of *volition*[1] cannot consistently uphold such a law as universal to all existents, but only in the 'mechanistic' domains of physical and psychological events. With regard to events involving the will, if we admit that a human being (or equivalent spiritual entity, a higher animal or God) can 'will' (somehow freely produce) a physiological event (i.e. a physical movement in his body) or a psychological event (i.e. an imagination, a mental projection), or even another soul (at least in the sense of choosing to reproduce), we have to consider this as an exception to such universal law of causation.

Also, if we consider that the Agent of will is always under the *influence* of some experience or reason, we might formulate an analogical law of causality with reference to this. But influence is not to be confused with causation; it does not determine the will, which remains free, but only strengthens or weakens it, facilitating or easing its operation in a certain direction. Moreover, it is not obvious that will cannot occur 'nihilistically', without any influence; it may well be free, not only to resist influences but also to operate in the absence of any motive whatsoever. In the latter case, the law of causality would again be at best a working principle, not a universal fact that volition requires a motive.

Let us now consider the more extreme statement that 'everything causes and is caused by everything', which could be construed (incorrectly) as implied by co-dependence. To say this is effectively to say paradoxically (as Nagarjuna would no doubt have enjoyed doing!) that *nothing causes or is caused by anything* – for causality is a relation found by noticing regularities *in contrast to* irregularities. If everything were regularly co-existent with everything, we would be unable to distinguish causality in the first place. It follows that such an extreme version of the law

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[1] And at least some Buddhists seem to. For instance, the statement in the *Dhammapada* (v.165) that "by oneself the evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers: by oneself evil is not done, and by one's Self one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself: no man can purify another" – this statement seems to imply existence of a self with responsibility for its actions.

of causality is logically untenable. Causality cannot imply that 'everything causes everything' or 'everything is caused by everything' – and to deny the latter statements does not deny the concept, note well. The concept is not derived from such a law, but independently from observation of regularities in experience; our ability to discern such regularities from the mass of experience implies that there are irregularities too; whence, such an extreme statement cannot be consistently upheld. We must thus admit that things do not have unlimited numbers of causes or effects.

Although 'everything causes everything' implies 'co-dependence', the latter does not imply the former; so our refutation of the wider statement does not disprove co-dependence, only one possible (extreme) view of it. My criticism of co-dependence would be the following. For a start, the doctrine presented, and the illustrations given in support of it, do not use the term causality with any precision. First, as we have suggested above, *causality, is a broad term, covering a variety of very distinct relations*:

- causation or 'mechanistic' causality within the material and mental domains, and causation itself has many subspecies;
- volition, or action by souls on the material or mental or spiritual domains, and will has many degrees of freedom; and
- influence, which refers to limitations on volition set by material or mental or spiritual entities.

The doctrine of co-dependence glosses over the profound differences between these different senses of the terms 'cause' and 'effect', using them as if they were uniform in all their applications.

Also to be included as 'causal relations' in a broader sense are the *negations* of these relations. Even if some philosopher doubts one, two or all three of these (positive) relations, he would have to consider them. Concepts of 'chance' or 'spontaneity' are not simple, and can only be defined by negating those of causality; likewise, the concept of 'determinism' requires one of 'free will'. It is only in contrast to causality concepts, that non-causality can be clearly conceived. Furthermore, co-dependence ignores that *some* things are not (positively) causally related to each other, even if they may have (positive) causal relations to other things. *That something must have* some *cause or effect, does not imply that it has* this or that *specific thing as its cause or effect; there are still things to which it is not causally related*. If everything had the same positive causal relation to everything, and no negative causal relation, there would be no such thing as causality, nothing standing out to be conceived.

Secondly, if we consider chains (or, in discourse, syllogisms) of causal relations, we find that *the cause of a cause is not necessarily itself a cause,* or at least not in the same sense or to the same degree. For instance, with reference to causation, we can formally prove that if A is a complete cause of B and B is a complete cause of C, then A is a complete cause of C. But if A is a complete cause of B and B is a partial cause of C, it does *not* follow that A is at all a cause of C. Similarly, when we mix the types of causality (e.g. causation and volition in series), we find that causality is not readily transmitted, in the same way or at all. It is therefore logically incorrect to infer transmission of causality from the mere fact of succession of causal relations as the theory of co-dependence does.

Thirdly, those who uphold co-dependence tend to *treat both directions of causal relation as equivalent*. Thus, when they say 'everything is causally related to everything', they seem to suggest that being a cause and being an effect is more or less the same. But something can only

be regarded as a cause of things occurring after it in time or below it in conceptual hierarchy, and as an effect of things occurring before it or above it. Upstream and downstream are not equivalent. Thus, 'interdependence' cannot be taken too literally, using 'causal relation' in a too vague sense, without attention to the distinction between causal and effectual relationship.

Fourthly, the doctrine of co-dependence suggests or calls for some sort of law(s) of causality, and as already discussed higher up, no universal or restricted law of causality is logically necessitated by the concept of causality, although such a law may be considered a hypothetical principle to be validated inductively. The concept of causality only requires that *some* causality occur, without prejudicing *how much*. So, though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence.

Fifthly, the concept of 'co-dependence' is upheld in contrast and opposition to a concept of '*self-subsistence*'. Something self-subsistent would exist 'by itself', *without need of origination or support or destructibility*, without 'causal conditions'. Buddhism stresses that (apart perhaps from ultimate reality) nothing in the manifold has this property, which Buddhism claims ordinary consciousness upholds. In truth, the accusation that people commonly believe in the self-subsistence of entities is false – this is rather a construct of earlier Indian philosophy.

People generally believe that most things have origins (which bring them into existence), and that all things once generated have static relations to other existents (an infinity of relations, to all other things, if we count both positive and negative relations as 'relations'), and that things usually depend for their continued existence on the presence or absence of other things (i.e. if some of the latter come or go, the former may go too). What is doubtful however, in my view, is the vague, implicit suggestion of the co-dependence doctrine, that *while* a thing is present, i.e. during the time of its actual existence, it has a somehow only relative existence, i.e. were it not for the other things present in that same moment, it could not stand.

This is not essentially a doctrine of relativity to consciousness or Subject (though Yogachara Buddhism might say so), note well, but an existential incapacity to stand alone. This is the aspect of co-dependence that the Western mind, or ordinary consciousness, would reject. In our world[2], *once* a thing is, and *so long as* it is, *irrespective of* the causes of its coming to be or the eventual causes of its ceasing to be, or of other things co-existing with it in time and its relationships to those things, or of its being an object of consciousness, it simply exists. It is a done thing, unchangeable historical fact, which nothing later in time can affect. It cannot be said to 'depend' on anything in the sense implied by Buddhists, because *nothing could possibly be perceived or conceived as reversing or annulling this fact*.

What Buddhism seems to be denying here is that 'facts are facts', whatever their surrounding circumstances, and whether or not they are cognized, however correctly or imperfectly. It is a denial that appearances, whatever their content and whether they be real or illusory, have *occurred*. We cannot accept such deviation from the Law of Identity.

Such considerations lead me to the conclusion that 'co-dependence' is not easy to formulate and establish, if at all. Nevertheless, I regard it as a useful 'way of looking at things', a valuable rough and ready heuristic principle. Also, to be fair, I remain open to the possibility that, at some deep level of meditative insight I have not reached, it acquires more meaning and validity.

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[2] We can, incidentally, imagine a world where only one thing exists, without anything before it, simultaneous to it or after it.

2. Conclusions of first phase of studies

It must be understood that this research has not been idle reshuffling of information and symbols. It had *both practical and theoretical* purposes in mind.

The practical questions relate to everyday reasoning about causes and effects. One of the principal questions we posed, you will recall, was *whether the cause of the cause of something is itself a cause of that thing or not, and if it is, to whether it is so to the same degree or a lesser degree*. This issue of causal (or effectual) chains is what the investigation of causal syllogism is all about. What our dispassionate research has shown is that it is absurd to expect ordinary reasoning, unaided by such patient formal reflections, to arrive at accurate results. The answer to the question about chains is resounding and crucial: **the cause of a cause is not necessarily itself a cause, and if it is a cause it need not be one to the same degree**. Once the scientific impact of this is understood, the importance of such research becomes evident.

But this syllogistic issue has not been the only one dealt with. We have in the process engaged in many other investigations of practical value. The definitions of the determinations causation by means of **matrixes** can help both laypeople and scientists to classify particular causative relations, simply by observing conjunctions of *presences and absences of various items*. Generalizations may occur thereafter, but they should always be checked by further empirical observation (at least, a readiness to notice; eventually, active experiment) and adjusted as new data appears (or is uncovered).

Another interesting finding has been the clarification of the relationships between positive and negative, absolute and relative causative propositions: for instance, that **we may affirm partial or contingent causation, while denying it of a particular complement**. One very important principle – that we have assumed in this volume, but not proved, because the proof is only possible in the later phase of research – is that *(absolute) "lone determinations" are logically impossible*. This means that we may in practice consider that **if there is causation at all, it must be in one or the other of the four "joint" determinations**.

Another finding worth highlighting is that **non-causation is denial of the four genera (or four species) of causation**, and before these can be definitely denied we have to go through a long process of empirical verification, observing presences and absences of items or their negations in all logically possible conjunctions. It is thus in practice as difficult to prove non-causation as to prove causation! Indeed, to be concluded the former requires a lot more careful analysis of data than the latter. Of course, in practice (as with all induction) we assume causation absent, except where it is proved present. But if we want to check the matter out closely, a more sustained effort is required.

With regard to the theoretical significance of our findings, now. By theoretical, here, I mean: relevant to philosophical discussions and debates about causality. Obviously, so far we have only treated causation, and said nothing about volition and allied cause-effect relations, so we cannot talk about causality in its broadest sense.

What our perspective makes clear is that **the existence of "causation" is indubitable**, once we apprehend it as a set of experiential yes or no answers to simple questions, leaving aside references to some underlying "force" or "connection" (which might be discussed as a later explanatory hypothesis). If we look upon causation in a positivistic manner, and avoid metaphysical discussions that tend to mystify, it is a simple matter. *Causation is an abstraction, in response to phenomenologically evident data*. It is a summary of data.

It is not purely empirical, in the sense of a concept only summarizing *presences* of phenomena. It involves a rational element, in that it also summarizes *absences* of phenomena. Affirmation may only be acknowledgment of the empirically apparent. But negation, as I have stressed in my work *Phenomenology*[3], is a partly rational act (a question is asked: is the thing I remember or imagine now present to my senses?), as well as a partly empirical act (the answer is no: I see or hear or otherwise sense nothing equivalent to that image!). Absence does not exist independently like presence, but signifies an empirically disappointed mental expectation.

Reading debates between philosophers (for example, David Hume's discussions), one might get the impression that non-causation is an obvious concept, while causation needs to be defined and justified. But, as we have seen here, *non-causation can only be understood and proven with reference to causation*. Before we can project a world without causation, we have to first understand what we mean by causation, its different determinations, their interactions, and so forth. But the moment we do that, the existence of causation is already obvious. However, this does not mean that non-causation does not exist. Quite the contrary. Since, as we have seen, some formal processes like syllogism with premises of causation are inconclusive, we may say that the existence of causation implies that of non-causation! This finding has two aspects:

(a) The more immediate aspect is inferred from the fact that the cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of it: **taking any two things at random, they may or not be causatively related**. This implication is valuable to contradict the Buddhist notion that "everything is caused by everything". But the possibility of independence from *some* things does not exclude dependence on *other* things. Each of the two things taken at random may well have other causes and effects than each other.

(b) A more radical aspect is the issue of spontaneity, or no causation *by anything at all*. We can only touch upon this issue here, since we have only dealt with causation so far. But what our formal study of causation has made clear is that we cannot say offhand whether or not spontaneity in this sense is possible. **There is no "law of causation" that spontaneity is impossible**, i.e. that "everything has a cause", as far as I can see. Nothing we have come across so far implies such a universal law; it can only be affirmed by generalization. Spontaneity (chance, the haphazard) remains conceivable.

I think the point is made: that formal research such as the present one has both practical and theoretical value. Let us now explain why the research undertaken so far is insufficient.

3. Conclusions of second phase of studies

The universal causation doctrine predicts that every existent has *at least some causative relation(s)* to some other existents. This is usually understood in a moderate sense as *only some other things* cause each thing, but Buddhism understands it more extremely as *all other things* cause each thing. This 'universal universal causation' is referred to as the **interdependence** (or codependence) of all things.

We normally suppose that only the past and present can cause the present or future; and indeed, this principle should primarily be read that way. But some might go further and claim that time is transcended by causation, and that literally everything causes everything; I am not sure Buddhism

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[3] This final chapter of Phase One was written in 2003, after publication of *Phenomenology*.

goes to that extreme. Note also that, in truth, Buddhism intends its interdependence principle restrictively, as applicable only to *dharmas*, i.e. the transient phenomena constituting the world of appearances; in the higher or deeper realm of the quiescent and undifferentiated "original ground" there is no causation.

Be it said in passing, this version of "karmic law" must be distinguished from the narrower statement, which most of us agree with, that *actions have consequences*. The latter does not imply the former! More deeply, I think what the Buddhists really meant by their law of karma was that each human (or other living) being is somewhat locked within recurring behavior patterns, very difficult (or impossible) to get out of. This is another issue, concerning not causation but volition.

That is the sense of "the wheel": our cultural and personal habits as well as our physical limitations, keep influencing our behavior and are reinforced by repetition. Much meditation and long-term corrective action are required to change them; they cannot be overcome by immediate measures, by a sheer act of will. We are thus burdened by a "baggage" of karma, which we carry out through our lives with usually little change; it may be lightened with sustained effort, but is more likely to be made heavier as time passes.

If we logically examine the claim that "everything causes everything", we see that if everything is causatively connected to everything else, then nothing is without such connection to any other thing, let alone without causative connection to anything whatsoever. That is, this doctrine is effectively *a denial that relative as well as absolute non-causation ever occurs*, which no one in Western culture would admit. To evaluate it objectively, let us look back on the findings in the present volume.

First, in defense of the idea of interdependence, it should be recalled that when we discussed the significance of the "last modus" in any grand matrix (modus #16 for two items, or #256 for three, etc.), which declares any combination of the items concerned or their negations as *possible* (code 1 in every cell of the modus), we saw that there was an uncertainty as to whether this indicated causation (or more broadly, connection) or its absence. If the last modus could be shown on formal grounds to indicate causation in *all* cases, then all contingents in the universe would have to be considered as causatively related to all others (i.e. *any two contingents taken at random* could be affirmed as causatively related, specifically in the way of the partial contingent determination, **pq**).

However, since such formal demonstration is lacking, and the idea is anyway disagreeable to common sense (at least that of non-Buddhists), we estimated that the science of Logic had to keep an open mind and grant the possibility of the alternative interpretation, namely that two items may or may not be causatively related to each other (i.e. relative non-causation is possible), and moreover that spontaneity (i.e. absolute non-causation) is at least conceivable in some cases. However, in this context, the Buddhist thesis of interdependence, remains a legitimate formal postulate. But note well, only a possible alternative hypothesis; and not a very probable one for most observers (those of us who believe in freewill, for example; as well as physicists who reify the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle).

An important formal criticism we can level against the notion of interdependence is to ask what manner or degree of causation is meant by it. The term 'causes' in 'everything causes everything' is used very vaguely. Is only causation intended, to the exclusion of volition? And if causation is intended, surely this is meant broadly to include prevention? And are the different determinations of causation admitted, i.e. strong (complete and/or necessary) as well as weak (partial and/or contingent)? The definition of causation traditionally attributed to the Buddha is:

> "When this is, that is; this arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases."

This definition would suggest that only complete necessary causation is intended. But other discussions within Buddhism suggest that this definition is only intended as a paradigm, as the most obvious case, and partial and contingent causation is also in practice admitted, as use of the plural in the expression "causes and conditions" testifies. We may regard prevention as formally subsumed by all these concepts, by negation of an item. Some discourses also seem to accept volition, but this need not concern us here. Focusing, then, on causation in a broad sense, we may make the following criticism.

If everything is causatively related to everything else, then *the only conceivable kind of causation would be weak (both partial and contingent)*. For strong causation (complete and/or necessary) surely implies a certain exclusiveness of relationship between the items. If all items are involved to some degree in the existence of a given item, then none of those causes can be claimed to predominate. So finally, it seems to me, this Buddhist doctrine of multilateral causation requires all bilateral causative relations to be weak, and ultimately abandons strong determinations (including mixtures), and all the more so the strongest determination (which it originally rightly claimed as the definition of causation).

One way to show that the interdependence theory implies specifically a 'universal weak link' is as follows. If we claim interdependence to apply indiscriminately to *all* 'things', i.e. not only to experiential things (*dharmas*), but also to abstract things, we fall into *formal* difficulties as soon as we suppose some causative relations to be strong. For then such abstract relations (i.e. causations) also count as 'things', and are therefore subject to interdependence. We might thus ask how a cause can be complete or necessary when that relationship is itself dependent on some yet other cause: we are forced to contradict our premise and conclude that the cause is not as complete or necessary as it seemed.

I suppose the proposed state of affairs (universal interdependence) is formally conceivable, although I do not see on what grounds we could possibly allow such rejection in one fell swoop of a large number of moduses (i.e. all alternative moduses concerning the strong determinations). Unless a reasonable formal or empirical ground is provided, there is no justification in such a radical measure: it would constitute prejudice. The Buddhist claim is of course based on a meditative experience; but since this is esoteric, not readily available to all observers at will, we must remain critical and view it as speculative. We cannot categorically eliminate it on firm rational grounds, but we cannot just take it on faith.

It should be realized that causation is a conceptual object, not a percept. Before we can discern a causative relation between two or more percepts (and all the more so between concepts) we have to distinguish the percepts from each other (and conceptualize them by comparison and contrast of many percepts, in the case of concepts). Also, causation refers to negation, which is a product of rational as well as empirical factors. Thus, if we approach the issue of causation with respect to the phenomenological order of things, we must recognize that it is a rather high-level *abstract*, although of basic importance in the organization of knowledge. It is not something we just directly see or otherwise sense. For this reason, we may remain skeptical that there is some flash of insight that would instantly reveal the causal relations of all things in the universe.

Thus, while the interdependence doctrine apparently does not give rise to formal inconsistency, we have good reason to doubt it with reference to normal human knowledge development. Causation is ordinarily known only gradually, through painstaking observation and analysis of particular data, always subject to review and revision as new data makes its appearance and possible contradictions are encountered. Our minds are not omniscient or rigidly deductive, but cumulative and flexibly inductive: we proceed by trial and error, constantly adjusting our positions to match up with new input and logical insight. Therefore, we cannot rely on sweeping statements, like that about interdependence, without being very careful.

Of course, some philosophers would argue back that causation as such is a man-made illusion, since pure experience only reveals *undifferentiated presence*. Differentiation into 'distinct' percepts, and finding that some sought things are 'absent', and conceptualization on the basis of 'similarities and differences', are all acts of reason. Indeed, if all perceived appearances are regarded as mere wave motions in a single, otherwise uniform substrate of existence (the 'original ground' of Buddhists or the Unified Field of physicists), then the boundaries we think we perceive or conceive for individuated things are in fact mere fictions, and all things (including even our fantasies about causation) are ultimately One in a very real sense.

So let us keep an open mind either way, and cheerfully move on. I just want to add one more small set of reflections, which the Buddhist idea of interdependence generated in me. This idea is often justified with reference to causal chains[4]. I tried therefore to imagine the world as a large body of water, like Lake Geneva say. According to this theory, supposedly, a disturbance anywhere in the lake eventually ripples through *the whole* lake, to an ever-diminishing degree but never dampening to zero. I then translated this image into the language of causal chains, for purposes of formal evaluation.

Looking at the results of macroanalysis, one would immediately answer that the Buddhist expectation is wrong. As we have seen, a cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of that thing; and even if it is a cause, it may be so to a lesser degree. Many first figure syllogisms yield no causative conclusion, although their premises are compatible. Some do yield a conclusion, but that conclusion is often weaker in determination than the premises. Thus, we have formal reasons to doubt the idea of interdependence, if it is taken to imply that 'a cause of cause of something is itself in turn a cause of that thing'.

All the same, I thought, thinking of the movement of disturbances in the lake, there is some truth in the contention. I then thought that maybe we should conceive of '*orders of causation*' – and postulate that even "if A causes B and B causes C, but nevertheless A does not syllogistically cause C" is true in a given case in terms of first-order causation, it can still be said that A causes C in second-order causation. And we could perhaps continue, and declare that if the latter (meaning, causes a cause of) is not applicable in a given case, we could appeal to a third order of causation, etc. We might thus, in an attempt to give credence to all theories, explain the Buddhist notion as involving a diluted sense of 'causation'.

This idea seemed plausible for a while, until I got into microanalysis. In the latter approach, conclusions are given in terms of alternative moduses. There is no room for a fanciful, more abstract, additional order of causation: the result would be identical, still the same number (one or more) of legitimate alternative moduses. No useful purpose would be served in inventing new

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[4] See for instance Thich Naht Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*.

(narrower or broader) sets of alternative moduses, and giving such groups new names. We could only at best regard all moduses in a grand matrix (other than the first, composed of all zeros) as indicative of some 'causation' (in a maximal sense), and so say that any alternative modus found at the conclusion of a syllogistic intersection is '*residual causation*'.

But having reached this bottom line, we see how trite the suggestion is.

4. Conclusions of third phase of studies

We should also here mention the cognitive role of alleged laws of causation. We have already briefly discussed laws relating to space and time.

In times past, it seems that some degree of sameness between cause and effect was regarded as an important law of causation. Upon reflection, the proponents of this criterion for causation probably had in mind that offspring have common features with their parents. But apparently, some people took this idea further and supposed that the substance (and eventually some other characteristics) of cause and effect must be the same. But though this criterion may be applicable to biology or other specific domains (e.g. the law of conservation of matter and energy in physics could be so construed), it is not generally regarded as universal. Formally, I see no basis for it.[5]

The law of causation most often appealed to (at least in Western thought) is that 'everything has a cause'. But though it is evidently true of most things that they have causes, and the belief in this law often motivates us to look for or postulate causes (i.e. even if none is apparent, we may assume one to exist), we have not in our study found any *formal* grounds to affirm such a law as universal. Admitting the fact of causation does not logically force us to admit its universality. This does not prove that it is not empirically universal; and it does not prevent us from formulating such universality as an adductive hypothesis. In any case, today, as evidenced by quantum physics and big-bang cosmogony, it seems generally assumed by scientists that this law is indeed not universal (which does not mean it is not very widely applicable).

I wonder anyway if it was ever really regarded as universal. I would say that in the 19th Century, this law was assumed universal for physical phenomena – but not necessarily for mental phenomena; human volition was generally taken to be an exception to the rule, i.e. freedom of the will was acknowledged by most people. Paradoxically, in the iconoclastic 20th Century, while the said law of causation was denied universality for material things, every effort was made to affirm it as regards human beings and thus forcefully deny freedom of the will[6]. Intellectual fashions

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[5] If we want to go more deeply in the history of 'laws of causation', we would have to mention, among others, the Hindu/Buddhist law of karma, according to which one's good and bad deeds sooner or later have desirable or undesirable consequences, respectively, on oneself. It is the popular idea that 'what goes around must come around'. Though I would agree this is sometimes, frequently or even usually empirically true, we must admit that it does not always seem confirmed by observation – so it is at best a hopeful generalization (to a life after this one) intended to have positive moral influence. In any case, I see no formal basis for it. The same can be said concerning reward or punishment by God – though it might well be true, it is not something that can readily be proved by observation or by formal means; an act of faith is required to believe in it (I do, on that basis). In any case, the latter can hardly be called a 'law of causation', since the free will of God is thought to be involved in bringing about the effect.

[6] Actually, both these changes were (I suggest) consciously or subconsciously motivated by the same evil desire to incapacitate mankind. Their proponents effectively told people: "you cannot control matter (since it is ultimately not subject to law) and you cannot control yourself (since you have no freewill) – so give up trying".

change, evidently. But as far as I am concerned, while I admit the possibility that this law may not-be universally true of matter, I have no doubt that it is inapplicable to the human will[7].

Another alleged law of causation that should be mentioned here (because of the current interest in it, in some circles) is the Buddhist notion that 'every thing is caused by everything'. As I have shown in the present volume, this idea of universal 'interdependence' is logically untenable. It is *formally* nonsensical. Indeed, if you just think for a moment, you will realize (without need for complex formal analysis) that to affirm interdependence is to deny causation, or at least its knowability. Every concept relies on our ability to distinguish the presence and absence of the thing conceived; if it is everywhere the same, it cannot be discerned. I think the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna can be said to have realized that; and this would explain why he ultimately opted for a no-causation thesis. However, that does not mean that causation can logically be denied: as already explained earlier, it cannot.

Well, then. Are there any 'laws of causation'? Of course there are, a great many! Every finding concerning the formal logic of causation in this volume is a law of causation, a proven law. For instance, the fact that not all positive causative syllogisms yield a positive conclusion of some sort is an important law of causation, teaching us that a cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of that thing.

9. Impermanence

1. Impermanence: concept and principle

Buddhist meditators attach great importance to the principle of impermanence. They consider that if one but realizes that "everything is impermanent", one is well on the way to or has already reached Realization.

However, the principle proposed by Buddhism should (in my view) be approached more critically than its proponents have hitherto done. They have taken for granted that such a principle is immediately knowable, in the way of a direct experience, and have not given enough attention to the *epistemological issues* this notion raises.

To be sure, we can and do commonly have direct experience of *some* impermanence: that of present changes. Whereas we might rationally analyze change in general (when it occurs) as an *instant* replacement of one thing by its negation, many phenomena of change evidently occur in a present *moment* (an extended amount of time). If, for example, you watch a dog running, you are

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People who believed this nonsense (including its advocates) were *influenced* by it to become weaker human beings. Virtue was derided and vice was promoted. We see the shameful results of this policy all around us today.

[7] I argue this issue elsewhere, in my *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*. It should be mentioned that an analogue to the law of causation is often postulated, consciously or not, for the mind. We tend to think that every act of volition has a cause, in the sense of *being influenced or motivated*, by something or other. Though largely true, this assumption taken literally would exclude purely whimsical volitions; thus, I tend to doubt it, for reasons explained in my said book. In any case, do not confuse this 'law of influence' with the 'law of causation' here discussed. These are very distinct forms of causality, which cannot be lumped together.

not personally experiencing this sight as a series of successive stills of the dog in different positions, but as one continuous series of moves.

A good meditation on such evident impermanence is meditation on water[8]. One sits or stands calmly in front of a body of water (the sea, a river, a lake, a puddle), watching the movements on its surface – reflections on it, waves or wavelets, currents, droplets of rain, listening to the sounds. I find this practice both soothing and a great source of understanding about life.

But we must keep in mind that the concept of impermanence covers a wider range of experiences than that: it includes changes not sensible in a present moment, but only inferred over time by comparing situations experienced in distinct moments, whether contiguous or non-contiguous. Such inferences imply a reliance on memory, or an interpretation of other present traces of past events. Still other changes are known even more indirectly, through predominantly conceptual means.

Generally speaking (i.e. including all sorts of experience under one heading): we first experience undifferentiated totality, and then (pretty much automatically) subdivide it by means of mental projections and then conceptually regroup these subdivisions by comparing and contrasting them together. Buddhist philosophy admits and advocates this analysis: the subdivision and conceptualization of the phenomenological given is, we all agree, ratiocination (i.e. rational activity); it is reason (i.e. the rational faculty) that mentally "makes" many out of the One.

It follows from this insight (we may now argue) that *impermanence cannot be considered as a primary given*, but must be viewed as derived from the imagined subdivision and conceptual regrouping of the initially experienced whole. Even to mentally isolate and classify some directly experienced particular change as "a change" is ratiocination. All the more so, the "impermanence" of each totality of experience, moment after moment, is an idea, obtained by distinguishing successive moments of experience; i.e. by relying on memory, and comparing and contrasting the experience apparently remembered to the experience currently experienced.

The latter act, note well, requires we cut up "present experience" into two portions, one a "memory" (inner) appearance and the other a more "currently in process" (inner and/or outer) appearance. This is rational activity; so, "impermanence" is in fact never directly experienced (contrary to Buddhist claims). Unity phenomenologically precedes Diversity; therefore, the experience of diversity cannot logically be considered as disqualifying the belief in underlying unity.

This argument is not a proof of substance, but at least serves to neutralize the Buddhist denial of substance. It opens the door to an advocacy of substance[9] by adductive means, i.e. in the way of a legitimate hypothesis to be confirmed by overall consideration of all experience and all the needs of its consistent conceptualization.

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[8] The Greek philosopher Heraclites must have practiced this meditation, when he reportedly wrote "you cannot step into the same river twice". This meditation is commonly practiced, even unwittingly. Other similarly natural meditations consist in watching rain falling, wind blowing through trees, clouds shifting in the sky, candlelight flickering, or the sparks and flames of a camp or chimney fire. "Watching" of course here means, not just being aware of sights (shapes and colors), but also awareness of sounds, touch-sensations, temperatures, textures, etc.

[9] Note well that an issue within the thesis of substance is whether we advocate a single, undifferentiated substance, or a multiplicity of distinct substances. To admit of substance is not necessarily to uphold the latter, pluralist view. In Physics, the unitary substance view would be that matter is all one substance, vibrating in a variety of ways.

Note well that I am not here denying validity to the *concept* of impermanence, but I am only reminding us that "impermanence" is a concept. Being a concept based on experience of change, it is indeed a valid concept. This is true whether such change be considered as real or illusory: it suffices that such change appears phenomenologically for a concept of it to be justified.

The *principle* of impermanence is more than that the mere concept. It is a *generalization* of that concept. It is not a mere statement that change exists – it is a statement that only change exists, i.e. that everything is continually changing and there is no underlying rest. Now, s*uch a general proposition logically can simply not be validated with reference to experience alone*. There is no epistemologically conceivable way that, sitting in meditation, the Buddha would be able to *experience* this (or any other) principle *directly*.

This principle (like any other) *can indeed* conceivably be validated as universal, *but only* by adductive methodology. It must be considered as a hypothesis, to be tested again and again against all new experiences, and compared to competing hypotheses as regards explanatory value. The result is thus at best *an inductive truth*, not a pure experience or a pure deduction from experience.

Furthermore, in addition to the generalization from particular experiences of change to a metaphysical principle of the ubiquity of change, the principle of impermanence involves a second fundamental generalization. Since it is a negative principle, it involves the act of generalization inherent in all negation; that is, the generalization from "I found no permanence in my present experience" to "There was no permanence to be found in my present experience".

While the conclusion of negation by such generalization is not in principle logically invalid, *it is an inductive, not a deductive conclusion*. It stands ab initio on a more or less equal footing with the competing speculation that there might well be an underlying permanence of some sort. The latter positive hypothesis could equally well be (and sometimes is) posited as a postulate, to be gradually shown preferable to the negative assumption using adductive means.

Even within meditation, note, constancies do appear side by side with changing phenomena, if we pay attention to them. Thus, for instance, if I meditate on water, I may reflect on the inconstancy of its surface; but I may also reflect on the underlying constancy (during my period of meditation, at least) of the horizon or shoreline, or of rocks in or around it, or simply of the fact of water, or its color and consistency, etc. I may, moreover, later discover that water is uniformly composed of H_2O.

Seen in this light, the status of the principle of impermanence is considerably less sure. To present such a principle as an absolute truth knowable directly or obtained by some sort of infallible analysis of experience would be dishonest.

All this is not said to annul the important moral lessons to be drawn from observation of impermanence. A "principle" of impermanence may still be proposed, if we take it as heuristic, rather than hermeneutic – i.e. as a useful "rule of thumb", which helps us realize that it is useless to attach importance to mundane things, and enjoins us to strive for higher values. Beauty is passing; pleasures are ephemeral. Life is short, and there is much spiritual work to be done…

With regard to predication of impermanence, it is relevant to ask whether the concrete data (experiences, appearances) referred to are phenomenal or non-phenomenal, i.e. whether they can be physically or mentally seen, heard, felt, smelt or tasted, or instead are intuited. To indicate that the data at hand is phenomenal, and so particularly transient, does not in itself exclude that relatively less transient non-phenomenal data might also be involved behind the scenes. That is,

while current objects might be perceivably transient, it does not follow that the one perceiving them is equally transient.

Of course, whether the data is phenomenal or not, it may still be transient. However, transience has degrees. Data may be merely momentary, or it may appear more continuously over a more extended period of time. The issue here is not "transient or eternal", as some Buddhist philosophers seem to present it. The issue is "momentary or continuous" – with the eternal as the extreme case of continuity. It is analytically erroneous to ignore or exclude offhand periods of existence that are longer than a mere 'moment' of time and shorter than 'eternity'.

Moreover, as already pointed out, the underlying claim that all phenomena, or for that matter all non-phenomenal events, are transient is not something that can be directly observed – but can only be based on generalization. There is no *a priori* logical necessity about such ontological statements – they are epistemologically bound to be inductive. Even if all appearances experienced by me or you so far seem transient, there might still be eternal existents our own transience makes us unable to observe.

Conversely, only an eternal being could *experience* eternity – and it would take such a being… an eternity to do so (not a mere few hours, days or years of meditation)![10] This however does not exclude the possibility of ascribing eternity to certain things on conceptual deductive grounds. For example, I can affirm the laws of thought to be eternally true, since they are incontrovertible; or again, I can affirm all contradictions or exclusions of a middle to be eternally false.

Furthermore, Buddhists implicitly if not explicitly ascribe some sort of eternity to the existential ground in or out of which all transient phenomena bubble up. That is, although particular existents may well all be transient, the fact of existence as such is eternal. Therefore, their argument is not really intended as a denial of any permanence whatsoever (as it is often presented), but more moderately as a denial of permanence to particular existents, i.e. to fragments of the totality. And of course, in that perspective, their insight is right on.

2. Not an essence, but an entity

Buddhist philosophers have stressed the idea of impermanence, with a view to deny the existence of "essences" in both the objective and subjective domains. However, an impermanent essence is not a contradiction in terms. This means that the question of essences is more complex than merely an issue of impermanence. Several epistemological and ontological issues are involved in this question. We have indicated some of these issues in the preceding chapters.

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[10] I am not sure of the truth of this statement of mine. I have in the past argued (among other reasons so as to provide an argument in favor of the doctrine that God can tell the future) that this issue hinges on the span of time an onlooker can perceive in one go. The higher one is spiritually placed, the longer a 'moment' of time covers. God, who is "above it all", at the peak of spiritual perspective, can see all time (all the things we class under the headings of past, present and future) as the present moment. Proportionately, when we humans meditate, the present is longer, i.e. the 'moment' of time our attention can include at once is enlarged. Thus, one (conceivably) need not wait forever to experience eternity, but may ultimately do so through spiritual elevation. This may be the "eternal now" experience many people have reported having. Note additionally that, if we accept this hypothesis, we have to apply it not only to external events (i.e. phenomenal physical and mental experiences) but also to inner experience (i.e. intuitions of cognitions, volitions and valuations by self). The latter is more difficult, more problematic, because it implies that *one's own* being and experience is already consumed, i.e. all telescoped into the present. Still, why not.

With regard to the objective domain, comprising the material and mental objects of experience, i.e. the phenomena apparently experienced through the senses or in the mind – their reasoning is that we never perceive firm "essences" but only constantly changing phenomena; whence, they conclude, the objects we refer to are "empty".

In reply, I would say that it is true that many people seem to imagine that the "entities" we refer to in thought (e.g. a dog) have some unchanging core (call it "dog-ness"), which remains constant while the superficial changes and movements we observe occur, and which allow us to classify a number of particulars under a common heading (i.e. all particular dogs as "dogs").

But of course, if we examine our thought processes more carefully, we have to modify this viewpoint somewhat. We do "define" a particular object by referring to some seemingly constant property (or conjunction of properties) in it – which is preferably actual and static, though (by the way) it might even be a habitual action or repetitive motion or a mere potential.

Note too, there may be more than one property eligible for use as a definition – so long as each property is constant throughout the existence of that object and is exclusive to it. The defining property does not shine out as special in some way, and in some cases we might well arbitrarily choose one candidate among many.

However, defining is never as direct and simple an insight as it may at times seem. It requires a complex rational activity, involving comparison and contrast between different aspects and phases of the individual object, and between this object and others that seem similar to it in some respects though different from it in others, and between that class of object and all others. Thus, the property used as definition is knowable only through complex conceptual means.

Therefore, our mental separation of one property from the whole object or set of objects is an artifice. And, moreover, our referring to all apparently similar occurrences of that property as "one" property gives the impression of objective unity, when in fact the one-ness is only in the mind of the beholder (though this does not make it unreal). In short, the definition is only an abstraction. It indeed in a sense exists in the object as a whole, but it is only distinguishable from the whole through cognition and ratiocination.

The material and mental objects we perceive are, therefore, in fact nothing other than more or less arbitrary collections of phenomena, among which one or more is/are selected by us on various grounds as "essential". The "essence" is a potential that can only be actualized relative to a rational observer; it has no independent actual existence when no observer is present. Definition gives us a mental "handle" on objects, but it is not a substitute for them.

An entity is not *only* its definition. An entity is the sum total of innumerable qualities and events related to it; some of these are applicable to it throughout its existence (be that existence transient or eternal) and some of them are applicable to it during only part(s) of its existence (i.e. have a shorter duration). Although the defining property must be general (and exclusive) to the object defined, it does not follow that properties that are not or cannot be used for definition cease to equally "belong to" the object.

It is inexcusably naïve to imagine the essence of an entity as some sort of ghost of the object coterminous with it. In fact, the entity is one – whatever collection of circumstances happens to constitute it. The distinction of an essence in it is a pragmatic measure needed for purposes of knowledge – it does not imply the property concerned to have a separate existence in fact. The property selected is necessarily one aspect among many; it may be just a tiny corner of the whole entity.

We may thus readily agree with Buddhists that named or thought-of objects are "empty"; i.e. that it is inaccurate to consider each object as really having some defining constant core, whether phenomenal or non-phenomenal. But the Buddhists go on from there are apply the same reasoning to the Subject (or soul) – and this is where we may more radically disagree.

They imply that the Subject of cognitions is itself cognized by way of phenomena, i.e. like any other object. This idea of theirs has some apparent credibility due to the fact that they confuse the Subject with his 'inner', mental phenomena[11]. But though such phenomena are indeed internal *in comparison to* physical phenomena sensed in the body or further out beyond it, they are strictly speaking external in comparison to the "soul".

Anyone who reflects a little would not regard, say, the stuff of a dream he had as himself. His self-awareness is the consciousness of something more inward still than the stuff of imaginations. He is the one experiencing and generating the imaginations. The soul is not a phenomenon – it has no smell, taste, solidity, tune or color; it is something *non*-phenomenal.

The self is not perceived as an object in the way of mental phenomena (as the Buddhists suggest), but is intuited directly in the way of a Subject apperceiving itself (at least when it perceives other things, or when it expresses itself through volition or valuation). Our soul is not a presumed "essence" of our mental *phenomenal* experiences; it is an entirely different sort of experience.

Of course, it could still be argued that – even granting that acts of cognition, volition and valuation are non-phenomenal events, known by self-intuition – such acts are mere momentary events, which do not necessarily imply an underlying non-phenomenal continuity (an abiding self). Admittedly, the fact that we cannot physically or mentally see, hear, smell, taste or touch the acts of the self does not logically imply that the self is abiding.

However, note that this last is an argument in favor of the possibility that the self may be impermanent – it does not constitute an argument against the existence of a self (whether lasting or short-lived) underlying each act of cognition, volition or valuation. That is, these functions are inconceivable without *someone* experiencing, willing and choosing, even if it is conceivable that the one doing so does not abide for longer than that moment.[12]

To deny that cognition, volition and valuation necessarily involve a self is to place these apparent events under an aetiological régime of natural determinism or spontaneity. That subsumes willing under mechanistic causation or chance happenstance – i.e. it effectively denies the existence of freewill.

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[11] See the Buddhist doctrine of the Five Component-Groups. In this doctrine, the fourth and fifth groups, comprising the "determinants" and the "cognitive faculty", are particularly misleading, in that cognition, volition and valuation, the three functions of the self, are there presented without mention of the self, as ordinary phenomenal events. That is, the doctrine commits a *petitio principii*, by depicting psychic events in a manner that deliberately omits verbal acknowledgment of the underlying self, so as to seem to arrive at the (foregone) conclusion that there is no self. No explanation is given, for instance, as to how we tell the difference between two phenomenally identical actions, considering one as really willed by oneself, and the other as a reactive or accidental event – for such differentiation (which is necessary to gauge degrees of responsibility) is only possible by means of self-knowledge, i.e. introspection into one's non-phenomenal self, and they have dogmatically resolved in advance not to accept the existence of a cognizing, willing and valuing self.

[12] Note well that I am careful to say the *possibility* that the self is impermanent; which does not exclude the equal possibility that the self is permanent. The mere fact that the cognitions, volitions and valuations of the self are impermanent does not by itself allow us to draw any conclusion either way about the permanence or impermanence of the self. Additional considerations are needed to draw the latter conclusion.

Similarly, it implies that there is no more to knowing than the storing of symbols in a machine (as if the "information" stored in a computer has any knowledge value without humans to cognize and understand it, i.e. as if a computer can ever at all *know*). And again, it implies that valuing or disvaluing is no more relevant to a living (and in particular sentient) being than it is to a stone.

The effective elimination of these three categories (i.e. knowing, willing and valuing) by Buddhists (and extreme Materialists, by the way) is without logical justification, because in total disaccord with common experience.

The confusion may in part be caused or perpetuated by equivocation. Because we often use the word "mind" – or alternatively, sometimes, "consciousness" – in a loose, large sense, including the soul, it might be assumed that the soul is similar to mental phenomena in its substance. But the soul and mind are only proximate in a spatial sense, if at all. The soul is not made of mental stuff or of consciousness – the soul uses consciousness to observe mental and physical events (and, indeed, its intimate self).

The self or soul is not an abstraction from mental or physical phenomena. It receives and cognizes mental and material information (and it indirectly chooses and wills mental and material events) – but it is not identical with such information (or events).

Only intuited events of cognition, volition and valuation can be considered as truly parts of, and direct responsibilities of, the soul. And even here, it would be inaccurate to necessarily equate the soul to these functions. Such a positivistic approach is a hypothesis to be adopted inductively only if we find no good reason to adopt the alternative hypothesis that the soul is more than the evidence of its functioning.

Thus, the inevitable impermanence of the phenomenal world cannot be construed as necessarily implying a similar impermanence for the self. Even granting that material and mental objects are "empty", it does not follow that the self is a non-entity, i.e. non-existent as a distinct unit. The self is not a material or mental substance or entity – but it is a non-phenomenal substance and entity. We may legitimately label that distinct substance 'spiritual' and that entity 'soul'.

Note well that such labeling does not preclude the idea, previously presented, that the individual soul's individuation out from the universal spiritual substance or universal soul is ultimately illusory. We may thus well consider the soul as impermanent in its individuality, while regarding its spiritual substance as eternal.

Upon reflection, this is pretty much the way we view the phenomenal realm, too – as consisting of impermanent illusory individual entities emerging in a permanent real universal substratum. Their illusoriness is mainly due to the conventionality of their individual boundaries.

At this stage, then, we find ourselves with two 'monistic' domains – the one giving rise to material and mental phenomena and the other giving rise to spiritual entities (souls). Obviously, such double 'monism' is not logically coherent! We therefore must assume that these two apparently overlapping domains are really ultimately somehow one and the same.

So, we have perhaps come full circle, and our opinions end up pretty much coinciding with the Buddhists' after all. We ought perhaps to lay the stress, instead, on our difference with regard to *continuity*.

According to Buddhist theory, the self has no continuity, i.e. our self of today is not the same person as our self of yesterday or of tomorrow. In this perspective, they are causatively *connected*, in the sense that earlier conglomerations of phenomena constituting a self 'cause' later ones – but there is no *thread of constancy* that can be identified as the underlying one and the

same entity. It is not a case of mere succession of totally discrete events; but there is no essential identity between the events, either.

However, many (myself included) object to this theory on various grounds. While we may admit that one can logically regard selfhood (i.e. being a Subject and Agent) as punctual at every instant without having to assume its extension over a lifetime, we must realize that such an assumption removes all logical possibility of a concept of moral responsibility for past actions.

If one is no longer ever the same person as the person committing a past virtuous or vicious act, then no good deed may be claimed by anyone or rewarded, and no crime may be blamed on anyone or punished. Ex post facto, strictly speaking, the doer of any deed no longer exists. Similarly, looking forward, there is nothing to be gained or lost by any Agent in doing anything, since by the time any consequences of action emerge the Agent has already disappeared.

In such a framework, all personal morality and social harmony would be completely destroyed. There would be no justification for abstaining from vice or for pursuing virtue. Even the pursuit of spiritual realization would be absurd. Of course, some people do not mind such a prospect, which releases them from all moral obligations or responsibility and lets them go wild.

It is very doubtful that Buddhism (given its overall concerns and aims) supports such a nihilist thesis[13]. In any case, such a viewpoint cannot be considered credible, in the light of all the above observations and arguments.

Logical Criticism of Buddhist Doctrines can be freely read online at avisionbuddhism and in various other locations.
It can be purchased, in print and e-book editions, in Amazon.com, Lulu.com and many other online booksellers.

[13] Although the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna seems to relish it.