Soteriological Mereology in the Pāli Discourses, Buddhaghosa, and Huayan Buddhism

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Abstract

Extant discussions of Buddhist mereology give minimal attention to the soteriological significance of denying the reality of wholes. This is unfortunate, because the connection between mereology and soteriological is both significant and problematic. The connection is significant, because it supports an argument for the unreality of composite wholes that does not depend upon any claim about the nature of wholes. The connection is also problematic, because some Buddhists endorse the soteriological relevance of mereology despite admitting that composite wholes are real. I address these issues by reviewing early Pāli Buddhist attitudes toward the soteriological significance of mereology, developing an argument for the unreality of wholes from the work of Buddhaghosa, and explicating an alternative approach from the Chinese tradition of Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism that calls into question some common assumptions about parts and wholes.

Keywords Attachment · Inclusion · Net of Indra · No-self · Resolution of the compact

1 Introductory Remarks

Recent accounts of Buddhist mereology tend to focus on Buddhist views according to which composite wholes, such as persons and chariots, are realities of convention but not realities of the ultimate. For example, Mark Siderits maintains that Abhidharmikas endorse a mereology whereby "all wholes are ultimately unreal" and "only impartite things are ultimately real" (Siderits 2003: 76). Similarly, Nicholaos Jones argues that the Theravādin monk Buddhaghosa rejects the ultimate reality of composite wholes (Jones 2021). Jay Garfield interprets Mādhyamikas as maintaining

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that composite wholes are collectively constituted fictions—conventional realities that, despite being ultimately unreal, have whatever (fictional) properties the folk assign to them by convention (Garfield 2006: 3–4). Matthew Kapstein interprets the Yogācārin monk Vasubandhu as presupposing that wholes are mere logical constructions that do not exist in addition to their parts (Kapstein 1988: 33). Andrea Sauchelli, similarly, proposes that (all?) Indian Buddhist traditions treat composite persons as fictions (Sauchelli 2016: 1281–1282).

These accounts give the impression that denying the ultimate reality of composite wholes is a fundamental commitment of Buddhist metaphysics. Indeed, according to Paul Williams,

> the relationship of putative wholes to parts … is central to a great deal of Buddhist ontology. If it could be shown that it makes sense to include in one's ontology wholes (as such, or particular examples) as well as parts then Buddhist ontology would have problems (P. Williams 2000: 441).

Although Williams does not explain why endorsing the reality of wholes would be problematic, there is good reason to connect denying the reality of wholes with the Buddhist project of attaining liberation from *duḥkha*. According to the teaching of the 12-link chain of dependent arising, *duḥkha* arises from attachment to the objects of experience. Buddhist tradition often recommends overcoming attachment by attending to the objects of experience as empty, and it often recommends attending to objects of experience as empty by analyzing those objects into their component parts. For example, with respect to persons, Buddhist tradition recommends analyzing persons into the aggregates of physical form, feeling, perception, karmic formation, and discerning consciousness. Insofar as the aggregates are empty of persons, and insofar as one cannot have attachment to what is absent, such analysis helps to undermine attachment to persons. So, too, with experiences of other putative wholes: contemplating their unreality ameliorates the attachment that generates *duḥkha* and thereby fosters liberation.

Extant discussions of Buddhist metaphysics often presume that mereological considerations have the capacity to vindicate soteriological projects. Yet there is minimal attention to how Buddhist soteriology might vindicate denying the reality of wholes. This is unfortunate, because the potential soteriological vindication of mereology is both significant and problematic. It is significant because it supports an argument for the unreality of composite wholes that does not depend upon the claim that wholes are identical to neither their parts nor collections thereof. This argument is quite unlike anything that appears in contemporary literature about mereology, because it is neither conceptual nor empirical. (That is, the argument appeals to neither *a priori* claims about part-whole relations nor *a posteriori* claims about what there is.) The potential soteriological vindication is also problematic, because some Buddhists admit that composite wholes are real. Examining the connection between Buddhist mereology and Buddhist soteriology therefore promises novel insights and strategies for debate about the reality of wholes, as well as an improved understanding of the variety of metaphysical views from the Buddhist tradition.

For the sake of background context and familiarity, I begin by reviewing some fundamental aspects of the Buddhist tradition's soteriological project. Next, I explicate some strategies, from the early Pāli discourses, for achieving this project. Some of these strategies are neutral on matters of mereology. Others are not. For the sake of better understanding the connection between Buddhist mereology and Buddhist soteriology, I examine some shortcomings for strategies of the second kind. I then explicate a novel mereological argument, derived from work by the Theravādin monk Buddhaghosa (5th century), that avoids these shortcomings. After developing some objections to Buddhaghosa's strategy, I explicate an alternative approach to the Buddhist soteriological project from the Chinese tradition of Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism. This alternative demonstrates that denying the ultimate reality of composite wholes is not a fundamental commitment of Buddhist metaphysics and not essential to Buddhist soteriology. It also calls into question some common assumptions about the nature of and relations among parts and wholes. I conclude with some brief remarks about how the preceding considerations might help with reconceiving the relation between mereology and soteriology.

2 Buddhist Soteriology

Buddhism identifies the fundamental obstacle to living well as *duḥkha*. *Duḥkha*, according to Buddhaghosa, is a vile sort of badness associated with being empty of persistence, beauty, and pleasure (*Visuddhimagga* 3.16.16; Ñāóamoli 2010: 506). This sort of emptiness derives, in part, from precarity in the face of unavoidable change. It derives, as well, from experiencing that precarity with discomfort or uneasiness. Human bodies, for example, inevitably grow wrinkled and weak. Some respond to the inevitable with creams or paints, surgeries or medication. These responses cure the appearances of aging but not the causes, and resorting to such cures typically indicates discomfort with the causes. This discomfort is *duḥkha*.

The ultimate soteriological aim of Buddhism is liberation from *duḥkha*. Liberation from *duḥkha*, as Buddhists conceptualize it, is not liberation from the precarity of unavoidable change. It is, instead, liberation from experiencing that precarity with discomfort or unease—and liberation toward encountering change with blissfulness and equanimity. If *duḥkha* is the stress of driving home through road construction during rush hour, "fighting" with other drivers about who has a right to which lane, or who should let who merge and when they should (or should not) do it, or how close is too close—or not close enough—for following or shifting lanes, then liberation from *duḥkha* is driving through the same construction, during the same rush, without the fighting, without stressing about how drivers should drive or where their vehicles should be—perhaps a "zoned out" driving where the time and distance just sort of pass, the maneuvers just sort of happen, the journey home just sort of gets done.

Buddhism identifies the fundamental obstacle to liberation from *duḥkha* as clinging attachment, the effort to exert self-control against the precarity of change (see D. Williams 1974, Fink 2015). Clinging attachment manifests as an effort to remove

whatever one experiences as painful or not worthwhile, or as an effort to preserve whatever one experiences as pleasant or valuable. It has the effect of binding one's own interests to one's power to secure objects responsible for pleasure- and value-inducing experiences, and it generates *duḥkha* because exercises of such power are bound to fail.

Buddhism identifies the ultimate cause of clinging attachment as *avidyā*, a failure to penetrate through illusion and deception. But its key soteriological insight is that *avidyā* manifests as discerning consciousness, encountering the cognitive contents of experience as separate from that which has those contents.

avidyā → discerning consciousness → clinging attachment → *duḥkha*

Discerning consciousness cognizes the "haver" of consciousness as a self that owns its contents, and it discerns this self as separate and distinct from the causes of its experiences. Discerning consciousness generates clinging attachment through efforts to extend the sense of ownership from the self's internal contents toward the (putatively) external objects of experience. This insight, that clinging attachment depends upon discerning consciousness, supports a practice for removing or ameliorating *duḥkha*. This practice aims to remove the sense that there is a self that owns its experiences. Insofar as the clinging attachment that generates *duḥkha* arises from discerning consciousness in which the sense of self is present, removing the sense of self should facilitate liberation by inhibiting the causal pathway that produces *duḥkha*.

3 Soteriological Strategies from Pāli Buddhism

Buddhist strategies for removing the sense of self are many and varied. The strategies are often contemplative in nature, and they often involve specialized techniques that foster experiential insights that are either unavailable to, or relegated to the periphery of, the sorts of experiences that tend to occur in the course of daily living. Strategies from the Chan (Zen) 禪, such as meditating upon *kōans*, are relatively well-known (see Heine 2014). But perhaps the most foundational strategies appear in the early Pāli discourses, prior to the arising of sectarian differences within the Buddhist tradition. Four such strategies are especially relevant for understanding Buddhist views about mereology.

3.1 Strategy 1: Conceptual Disassembly

The simplest strategy from early Pāli Buddhism for removing the sense of self involves conceptually disassembling composite wholes into their component parts. A paradigmatic discussion of this strategy appears in *Discourse on the Lute* (*Vīṇā Sutta*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya*[1] 35.205; recited in Bodhi 2000b: 1253–1255). Buddha

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[1] Hereafter abbreviated as SN.

likens the sense of self to the intoxicating sound of a well-played lute. The likely context for Buddha's analogy is a view of the self from *Discourse with Potthapāda* (*Potthapāda Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya* 9; recited in Walshe 1995: 159–170), according to which the self coincides with a physical body that feeds on solid food and that is composed of the four material elements of air, earth, fire, water (see Walshe 1995: 163). Given this context, the lute is akin to the physical body, and the lute's intoxicating sound generates a clinging attachment to the lute that is akin to the clinging attachment the sense of self generates toward the physical body. Moreover, just as the sound of the lute depends upon the lute's component parts—belly, sounding board, arm, head, strings, plectrum—and the skillful efforts of a musician, the sense of self depends upon the components of the physical body and discerning consciousness. Because disassembling the lute, or reducing the lute to its component parts, eliminates the sound of the lute, Buddha recommends that those enamored with a sense of self contemplate disassembling their physical bodies in order to remove their sense of self, and that they likewise contemplate disassembling any other composite whole that might be taken to be the self.

The same strategy for removing the sense of self appears in *Discourse on Sentient Beings* (*Satta Sutta*, SN 23.2; recited in Bodhi 2000a: 985). Radha, one of Buddha's trusted attendants, asks about sentient beings. Buddha replies that sentient beings and the five aggregates thereof support clinging attachments that foster *duḥkha*. He likens the component aggregates of sentient beings to sandcastles. For just as children treasure their sandcastles and feel possessive of them, so too those afflicted by *duḥkha* treasure and feel possessive of the five aggregates. Because smashing and demolishing sandcastles renders them unfit for play and thereby unfit as objects of clinging attachment, Buddha recommends that those afflicted by *duḥkha* contemplate smashing and demolishing their aggregates, rendering each unfit to be a self and thereby unfit as an object of clinging attachment.

The strategy for removing the sense of self by conceptually disassembling composite wholes into their component parts neither affirms nor denies the reality of composite wholes or the parts thereof. That something admits decomposition into parts does not entail that it or its parts are real, because horned rabbits and other paradigmatically unreal individuals have parts. Nor does decomposability entail unreality, because real composite wholes are certainly real, and they certainly have real parts. This ontological neutrality risks allowing the sense of self to persist in those who follow Buddha's instructions from *Discourse with Potthapāda* and *Discourse on Sentient Beings*. Early Pāli discourses thereby recommend a second, slightly different strategy for removing the sense of self.

3.2 Strategy 2: Conceptual Disassembly with Self-Denial

The second strategy from early Pāli Buddhism for removing the sense of self involves conceptually disassembling composite wholes into their component parts and explicitly denying, of each component, that it is a self. The paradigmatic discussion of this strategy appears in *Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self* (*Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, SN 22.59; recited in Bodhi 2000a: 901–903). For the sake

of assisting his disciples in removing their clinging attachments, Buddha argues that none of their five component aggregates is a self because each is subject to change and has the capacity to produce *duḥkha*. Implicit in this argument is a conception of the self as that which persists through change and owns or controls its constituents in the way a ruler owns and controls their subjects. For that which persists through change is not subject to change, and that which owns and controls its constituents is secure against being harmed by those constituents (see also Gómez 1999).

Like the first strategy, this second strategy does not deny the reality of composite wholes or the parts thereof. This is explicit in *Discourse with Phena* (*Phena Sutta*, SN 22.95; recited in Bodhi 2000a: 951–953). Rather than characterize the five aggregates or composites thereof as unreal, Buddha characterizes them as empty, void, and lacking substance. He likens physical form to a lump of foam, feeling to a bubble, perception to a mirage, karmic formation to a banana tree (with a hollow core), and discerning consciousness to a magic trick. Each of these analogues has an appearance that diverges from reality. For those who are inattentive, the foam, bubble, and tree appear to be solid despite being mere shells, because the mirage and magic trick project the illusion of solidity. By analogy, the collection of aggregates appears to be or have a self despite being empty of self, and this is so regardless of whether the collection itself is real or unreal.

A series of early Pāli discourses develops a framework for explaining how that which is empty comes to appear as being or having a self. *Discourse on Emptiness* (*Suñña Sutta*, SN 35.85; recited in Bodhi 2000b: 1163–1164) extends the teaching from *Discourse with Phena* by specifying that the world, and not just the five aggregates, is empty of self and whatever belongs to self. *Discourse on the World* (*Loko Sutta*, SN 35.82; recited in Bodhi 2000b: 1162) conceptualizes the world as that which disintegrates, and in particular as the six senses, their objects, contact between the senses and their objects, and whatever arises with such contact. Moreover, according to *Discourse with Koṭṭhita* (*Koṭṭhita Sutta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.173; recited in Bodhi 2012: 539–540), the domain of the world coincides with the range of reification. Reification refers in general to the activity of conceptualizing something as real apart from convention, and in particular to the activity of conceptualizing something as self or belonging to self (see Ñāṇananda 2012: 2–15). According to *Discourse on the Root of All Things* (*Mūlapariyāya Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya*[2] 1; recited in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 83–90), those who lack skill in avoiding *duḥkha* reify that which is empty and thereby mistake appearances of self for the reality of self.

Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint (*Mahahatthipadopama Sutta*, MN 28; recited in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 278–285) applies this explanatory framework to an analogy between physical bodies and houses.

> [J]ust as when a space is enclosed by timber and creepers, grass, and clay, it comes to be termed "house," so too, when a space is enclosed by bones and sinews, flesh and skin, it comes to be termed "material form." (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 283)

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[2] Hereafter abbreviated as MN.

Like lutes and sandcastles, houses and physical bodies are composites of many parts. Yet just as houses are empty of self, so too the physical body is empty of self. Hence, according to this discourse, contemplating the physical body as self or belonging to self involves reifying the body, converting it into an object for clinging attachment by making it appear as though it is identical to, or at least belongs to, a self. Contemplating the physical body as akin to a house, both empty of self and composed of parts that are empty of self, facilitates encountering this appearance as empty of self and whatever belongs to self.

3.3 Strategy 3: Conceptual Disassembly with Naïve Mereological Antirealism

Encountering the physical body as empty of self and whatever belongs to self undermines the sense of self responsible for generating *duḥkha*. Such encounters are possible regardless of whether the bones, sinews, flesh, and skin enclosed within a space compose a real physical body. The third strategy from early Pāli Buddhism for removing the sense of self lacks this ontological neutrality. Like the second strategy, the third strategy involves conceptually disassembling composite wholes into their component parts and explicitly denying, of each component, that it is a self. Unlike the second strategy, however, the third strategy explicitly denies that composite wholes are real (see also Wynne 2011).

The paradigmatic discussion of this third strategy appears in *Discourse with Vajirā* (*Vajirā Sutta*, SN 11.4; recited in Bodhi 2000a: 229–230). Struggling against the temptation to consider herself as being a self, the eminent nun Vajirā contemplates herself as empty of self and whatever belongs to self. Her contemplation involves, first, conceptually disassembling herself into component parts and, second, denying that these parts compose a real whole.

> This is a heap of sheer formations:
> Here no being is found.
> Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
> The word "chariot" is used,
> So, when the aggregates exist,
> There is the convention "a being." (Bodhi 2000a: 230)

Vajirā's contemplation implicitly invokes a mereological principle according to which whatever admits decomposition into many parts is thereby unreal. This principle licenses the inference from *the convention "sentient being" refers to a heap of aggregates* to *the convention "sentient being" does not refer to something real*.

Neither *Discourse with Vajirā* nor any other early Pāli discourse offers an explicit justification for Vajirā's mereological principle. But the preceding first and second strategies for removing the sense of self support the following argument.

1. The term "whole" refers to something that admits disassembly into many components.
2. The term "whole" does not refer to any one of those many components.

3. Hence, the term "whole" refers to that which arises from many components and the activity of reification.
4. The activity of reification projects onto many components the characteristic of existing as a whole.
5. Projected characteristics do not exist apart from the reifying activity from which they arise.
6. Therefore, the term "whole" refers to something that is a reality of convention but not real in its own right.

The first premise of this argument derives from the first strategy for removing the sense of self, because that strategy presupposes that wholes—lutes, sandcastles, chariots, physical bodies, sentient beings, and so on—are collections of component parts rather than individuals that exist separately from those components. The second premise derives from *Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint*, which presupposes that earthen houses are numerically distinct from each of their component timbers, creepers, grass sheaves, and clay lumps. The third premise (fourth claim) of the argument derives from the demands of the intermediate conclusion (third claim), which maintains that the activity of reification makes many components appear as one whole. The fourth premise (fifth claim), finally, derives from the Buddhist contention that reifying activity is a source of illusion and deception.

For the sake of illustration, consider an application of this argument to the example of the lute from *Discourse with Potthapāda*. The term "lute" refers to a musical instrument that admits disassembly into a belly, sounding board, arm, head, and strings. Because the belly alone is not a lute, the term "lute" does not refer to the belly. Nor, for the same reason, does it refer to the sounding board, arm, head, or strings. Hence, although the term "lute" refers to something that depends for its existence upon many and diverse parts, it also (according to the argument) refers to something that further depends for its existence upon conceptual activity that gathers the many and diverse parts under the singular term "lute." This gathering together of many into one is reification, and reification projects onto the many and diverse parts the characteristic of *existing as a whole*. Hence, the term "lute" refers to something that is real by convention. Since, moreover, projected characteristics do not exist apart from the reifying activity from which they arise, the term "lute" does not refer to a real (convention-independent) lute.

This argument for the unreality of lutes should make evident why the reasoning strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā* supports denying the ultimate reality of composite wholes. Whereas other early Pāli discourses conceptualize reification as an activity responsible for appearances of self, the reasoning strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā* conceptualizes reification as an activity responsible for appearances of unity amidst plurality. This conceptual shift drives the inference from wholes being distinct from but dependent upon each of their many components (the intermediate conclusion in the third claim) to wholes lacking (convention-independent) reality. But the shift itself is problematic. Even if wholes are neither separate from their component parts nor identical to any one of those parts, they might be identical to the collection of those parts (or an arrangement of that collection). For example, even if the term "lute" refers to neither belly, sounding board,

arm, head, or strings, and even if the same term does not refer to something that exists apart from belly, sounding board, arm, head, and strings, "lute" might refer to a collection of these components that has certain musical characteristics and powers. *Zhuangzi* 莊子 makes a similar point.

> The different are joined into the same, the same are dispersed into the different. Now you can point to the hundred parts of a horse's body and never come up with a horse, and yet the horse is right there, tethered in front of you; it is precisely through establishing the hundred parts that we call it "horse." (Ziporyn 2020: 214; see also Qian 1998: 290–292)

If terms like "lute" and "horse" refer to functional collections of many components—that is, if lutes and horses just are certain collections of components—then the existence of lutes and horses does not depend upon the activity of reification. Hence, even if the term "whole" refers to something that admits disassembly into many components, and even if the term "whole" does not refer to any one of those many components, it does not follow that the term "whole" does not refer to some collection of those components. The reasoning strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā* thereby fails to demonstrate that there are no lutes (or other composite wholes) apart from the activity of reification.

3.4 Strategy 4: Conceptual Disassembly with Sophisticated Mereological Antirealism

The fourth strategy from early Pāli Buddhism for removing the sense of self remedies the flaw with the reasoning strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā*. Like the third strategy, this fourth strategy involves conceptually disassembling composite wholes into their component parts and denying that wholes are numerically identical to any of their parts. Unlike the third strategy, the fourth strategy explicitly denies that the wholes are numerically identical to the collection of their parts. The paradigmatic discussion of this fourth strategy appears in Chapter 1 from Book II of *Questions of King Milinda* (*Milinda Pañha*; recited in Rhys Davids 1890: 40–45). Following the nun Vajirā, the monk Nāgasena likens the self to a chariot. Nāgasena argues that the term "chariot," like the name "Nāgasena," is a mere empty sound, a conventional designation that refers to a reality of convention but does not refer to something that exists apart from convention.

1. The term "chariot" refers to something that admits disassembly into axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.
2. The term "chariot" refers to neither the axle, nor the wheels, nor the chassis, nor the ropes, nor the yoke, nor the wheel spokes, nor the goad.
3. The term "chariot" does not refer to the collection of axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.
4. The term "chariot" does not refer to something that is separate from the axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.
5. Therefore, the term "chariot" refers to something that is a reality of convention but not real in its own right.

Nāgasena's argument about the name "Nāgasena" is similar, replacing the term "chariot" with the name "Nāgasena" and the list of chariot components with a list that includes hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, nerves, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, abdomen, spleen, lungs, intestines, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, serum, saliva, mucus, oil, urine, brain, feelings, perceptions, karmic formations, and discerning consciousness.

Nāgasena does not justify the inference from his four premises to his main conclusion. But his reasoning likely follows the strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā*. The four explicit premises entail that the term "chariot" and the name "Nāgasena" refer to that which arises from many components and the activity of reification. Considerations about the activity of reification license the further inference to "chariot" and "Nāgasena" referring to realities of convention that lack (convention-independent) reality. Nāgasena also does not justify the novel premise (third claim) according to which "chariot" and "Nāgasena" do not refer to the collection of their component parts. Some contemporary commentators speculate that this premise follows from the indiscernibility of identicals and the fact that wholes are one in number while their parts are many in number (see Siderits 2003: 76; Siderits 2007: 107–108; Jones 2010b: 221). Recent work in analytic mereology suggests that such reasoning is fallacious by virtue of equivocating between a distributive conception of parts that treats them as many in number and a collective conception that treats them (collectively) as one in number (see Wallace 2011: 809–814; Payton, Forthcoming). This work, if sound, undermines the contemporary justification for the third claim in the preceding argument.

4 Buddhaghosa's Soteriological Strategies

Early Pāli Buddhism is ambivalent about whether composite wholes are ultimately real (apart from convention). Some texts, such as *Discourse with Potthapāda* and *Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self*, maintain an ontological neutrality about whether wholes are real, focusing instead on the idea that composite wholes are not selves and do not belong to selves. Others, such as *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda*, connect the denial of selves with the view that composite wholes are realities of convention that lack reality apart from convention. Recent accounts of Buddhist mereology tend to focus on this second set of texts, and they tend to follow those texts in supposing that the unreality of composite wholes follows from reductive analyses that conceptually disassemble putative wholes into their component parts. There is, however, a different strategy for rejecting the (convention-independent) reality of composite wholes. This strategy appears in *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*), a 5th-century Pāli-language text by Buddhaghosa.

Path of Purification is an authoritative commentary on Buddhist teaching and practice for the Sinhalese lineage of Theravādin Buddhism. It makes frequent reference to early discourses from the Pāli Buddhist canon. For example, Chapter 18, which provides instructions for achieving a correct view of the five aggregates, refers to both the chariot metaphor from *Discourse with Vajirā* and

the house metaphor from *Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint* to justify the view that there is no self or unitary person among the five aggregates (see Ñáóamoli 2010: 616–617).

4.1 Buddhaghosa's Reductive Strategy

Buddhaghosa extracts from the early Pāli discourses a reductive argument for the unreality of wholes.

> [J]ust as when the component parts such as axles, wheels, frame poles, etc., are arranged in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "chariot," yet in the ultimate sense when each part is examined there is no chariot—and just as when the component parts of a house such as wattles, etc., are placed so that they enclose a space in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "house," yet in the ultimate sense there is no house—and just as when the fingers, thumb, etc., are placed in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "fist,"— with body and strings, "lute"; with elephants, horses, etc., "army"; with surrounding walls, houses, states, etc., "city"—just as when trunk, branches, foliage, etc., are placed in a certain way, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "tree," yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no tree—so too, when there are the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging, there comes to be the mere term of common usage "a being," "a person," yet in the ultimate sense, when each component is examined, there is no being as a basis for the assumption "I am" or "I"; in the ultimate sense there is only mentality-materiality. The vision of one who sees in this way is called correct vision. (Ñáóamoli 2010: 617)

According to Buddhaghosa, those who endorse the (ultimate) reality of wholes maintain either that the self comes to be and passes away with the rising and ceasing of the five aggregates, or else that the self persists through changes of the aggregates and is therefore eternal. The result is clinging attachment to an illusory self, along with the *duḥkha* such attachment generates (see Ñáóamoli 2010: 617–618).

Buddhaghosa's reductive argument for the unreality of wholes is a variation on the fourth strategy from early Pāli Buddhism for removing the sense of self. Insofar as the self comes to be and passes away with the rising and ceasing of the five aggregates, the self is numerically identical to a collection of aggregates. This is akin to supposing that the term "chariot" refers to a collection of chariot parts. Insofar as the self persists through changes of the aggregates, the self is numerically distinct from the collection of aggregates. This is akin to supposing that the term "chariot" refers to something separate from the collection of chariot parts. The fourth strategy from early Pāli Buddhism rejects both of these suppositions as incorrect. Insofar as the justification for denying the first supposition is fallacious, so too is Buddhaghosa's reductive argument.

4.2 Buddhaghosa's Nonreductive Strategy

Although *Path of Purification* recommends the argument strategy from *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda* for removing the sense of self, it also offers a strategy that does not involve conceptually disassembling wholes into their component parts. This strategy is not explicit. But close attention to Buddhaghosa's analysis of correct view, and standard Buddhist considerations about the causes of *duḥkha*, support a nonreductive argument against the ultimate, convention-independent reality of composite wholes (see also Jones 2021: 176–180).

1. Any cognition that generates clinging attachment is misleading or deceptive.
2. Cognizing many components to have the characteristic of existing as a whole (and apart from convention) generates clinging attachment.
3. Hence, cognizing composite wholes as real (apart from convention) is mis leading or deceptive.
4. Misleading and deceptive cognitions are incorrect.
5. Therefore, no composite wholes are real (apart from convention).

The first premise of this argument derives from standard Buddhist teachings about the fundamental causes of *duḥkha*, according to which misleading or deceptive cognitions—cognitions that exhibit ignorance by virtue of succumbing to illusion or delusion—generate clinging attachment (see Ñáóamoli 2010: 533). The second premise derives from *Discourse with Vajirā*. When Vajirā removes her clinging attachment to self, she does so not by denying that her component parts are self but, instead, by denying that the aggregation of her parts compose something that is real apart from convention. Vajirā's contemplation is an instance of what Buddhaghosa refers to as resolution of the compact. Buddhaghosa's discussion of this practice is terse.

> When the resolution of the compact is effected by resolution into elements, the characteristic of not-self becomes apparent in its true nature. (Ñáóamoli2010: 667)

The notion of the compact is a picturesque way to refer to what Buddhist tradition elsewhere names *karmic formation*, that which arises when many are taken to be one (see Ñáóamoli 2010: 669, note 6). Resolution of the compact involves attending to the many components of the compact as not-self. The Theravādin monk Dhammapala, also known as Ācariya, explains in a commentary (*Paramatthamañjúsá*) that attending to many as not-self means attending to many as not one.

> [C]ompactness of object is assumed when, although differences exist in the ways in which states that take objects make them their objects, those objects are taken as one. But when they are seen after resolving them by means of knowledge into these elements, they disintegrate like froth subjected to compression by the hand. They are mere states (*dhamma*) occurring due to conditions and void. (Ñáóamoli 2010: 668, note 3)

Because resolving putative wholes into their many components is a technique for removing clinging attachment to those wholes, it follows that the source of clinging attachment to putative wholes is cognition that takes the many components of such wholes to exist as singular, convention-independent wholes. This is precisely the claim made by the second premise (third claim) of the preceding argument, and the second intermediate conclusion (fourth claim) of that argument follows directly from this claim and the first intermediate conclusion (second claim).

The third premise (fourth claim) of the preceding argument, that misleading and deceptive cognitions are incorrect, derives from Buddhaghosa's analysis of truth. Buddhaghosa endorses an epistemic conception of truth whereby true views are views that, when cognized by those capable of penetrating through illusion and deception, lack certain epistemic defects.

> [Truth] is that which, for those who examine it with the eye of understanding, is not misleading like an illusion, deceptive like a mirage, or undiscoverable like the self of the sectarians…. (Ñáóamoli 2010: 508)[3]

The main conclusion (fifth claim) of the argument follows directly from this conception of truth and the prior conclusion that viewing composite wholes as real (apart from convention) is misleading or deceptive.

5 Problems of Foundation and Fusion

Buddhaghosa's nonreductive strategy for denying the ultimate reality of composite wholes improves upon the strategy implicit in *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda* by avoiding the need to argue that wholes are not identical to collections of their component parts. Buddhaghosa's strategy also has the virtue of cohering with the soteriological strategy, from those discourses, for removing the sense of self. For insofar as the self is a composite of the four material elements, the five aggregates, or some other group of components, the unreality of composite wholes entails the unreality of selves, and contemplating selves as unreal (apart from convention) is a standard Buddhist technique for removing the sense of self. Yet, despite these virtues, Buddhaghosa's nonreductive strategy for removing the sense of self is vulnerable to two problems.[4]

The first problem with Buddhaghosa's nonreductive strategy for removing the sense of self is that denying the reality of composite wholes is liable to generate a subtler and more guileful form of attachment to self. Contemplating wholes as unreal apart from convention involves contemplating them as empty not only of self but also of convention-independent reality. However, according to *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* (*Cula-Suññata Sutta*, MN 121; recited in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 965–970), contemplating something as empty of reality always involves contemplating something else as present in reality—something that acts as a kind of

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[3] For Buddhaghosa's account of understanding, see Ñáóamoli 2010: 431–432.

[4] So, too, is the reductive strategy from *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda*.

foundation for that which is empty. Buddhaghosa notes, for example, that although livestock and treasure are absent from a certain Buddhist temple, a community of monks is present (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 965). He notes, similarly, that perceiving a space as empty of persons and forest involves perceiving the space as not empty of earth; that perceiving a space as empty of earth involves perceiving the space as not empty of infinite space; and that perceiving infinite space as empty involves perceiving infinite consciousness as not empty (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 966–967). Contemplating wholes as empty of reality, accordingly, naturally involves contemplating something else as not empty of reality.

In accordance with the reasoning in *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness*, Abhidharmikas posit the reality of *dharmas*, partless individuals that exist apart from convention (see Ronkin 2005: 34–50). But the same reasoning also admits the possibility of supposing that there is a partless self that exists apart from convention. (This is precisely the sort of self that, for example, the Hindu logician Udayanācārya posits when critiquing the Buddhist teaching of no-self. See Ram-Prasad 2011.) Buddhaghosa's nonreductive strategy for removing the sense of self offers no non-question-begging rebuttal to such a supposition.[5]

The second problem with Buddhaghosa's nonreductive strategy for removing the sense of self is that there is a tendency to extend a sense of self toward composites despite resolving those composites into their many components. *Discourse with Khemaka* (*Khemaka Sutta*, SN 22.89; recited in Bodhi 2000a: 942–946) reports on precisely this tendency. The monk Khemaka is speaking to a colleague about his difficulties in removing the sense of self.

> These five aggregates subject to clinging have been spoken of by the Blessed One…. I do not regard anything among these five aggregates subject to clinging as self or as belonging to self, yet I am not an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed. Friends, [the notion] "I am" has not yet vanished in me in relation to these five aggregates subject to clinging, but I do not regard [anything among them] as "This I am." (Bodhi 2000a: 943)

When his colleague expresses puzzlement about how the sense of self might remain despite Khemaka's efforts, Khemaka offers a simile. He likens the sense of self to the scent of a lotus. Just as those who smell the lotus' fragrance attribute the scent to the flower rather than the petals, stalk, or pistils, so too Khemaka finds himself attributing selfhood to the collection of aggregates despite denying, of each aggregate, that it is self.

Perhaps in deference to Khemaka's troubles, *Questions of King Milinda* explicitly denies that the collection of five aggregates is self. But even if the discernibility of the aggregates as many and the self as one precludes their identity, the indiscernibility of identicals does not forbid identifying the self with the *mereological fusion* of the aggregates. A mereological fusion is, roughly, a composite individual that has, as its component parts, all and only those components that

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[5] The reductive strategy from *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda* is vulnerable to the same problem, because it merely assumes that there is no self apart from the five aggregates. For an effort to justify this assumption, see Siderits 2007: 108–111.

satisfy a specific condition for the fusion (see Hovda 2009: 57–58). For example, when conceptualized as a mereological fusion, a chariot is a composite individual that has, as its component parts, the axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad that are arranged chariot-wise within an enclosed space. Similarly, when conceptualized as a mereological fusion, the self is a composite individual that has, as its component parts, the five aggregates arranged person-wise within an enclosed space. Insofar as each mereological fusion is one in number, identifying the self with the mereological fusion of its aggregates does not violate the indiscernibility of identicals. Insofar as the fusing relation obtains (or not) independently of convention and cognition, fusions do not depend upon the activity of reification. Hence, if there are mereological fusions, and if Buddhist tradition is correct that cognizing composite wholes as real (apart from convention) is misleading or deceptive, some misleading and deceptive cognitions—namely, cognitions of real and convention-independent selves—are correct despite Buddhaghosa's claim to the contrary.[6]

6 Soteriological Strategies from Huayan Buddhism

Buddhist tradition offers several strategies for avoiding the problems that beset Buddhaghosa's strategies for removing the sense of self. Perhaps the most well-known strategy, deriving from the tradition of Indian Madhyamaka, involves denying that anything is real apart from convention (see Westerhoff 2009: 29–46). If nothing is real apart from convention, then certainly there are no convention-independent selves, and so views that identify the self as a partless individual or a mereological fusion of many individuals are incorrect. This strategy, however, is liable to the objection that it (implausibly) entails that nothing at all is real. Forestalling this interpretation of Madhyamakan metaphysics remains a matter of lively debate (see Westerhoff 2016).

A less well-known strategy for removing the sense of self derives from the Chinese tradition of Huayan Buddhism. The Huayan tradition offers a metaphysics wherein each individual depends for its specific characteristics and powers upon every other. Specific characteristics are species-inducing, the basis for categorizing an individual as belonging to one kind rather than another. They also confer causal efficacy or power upon individuals, by virtue of determining what kind of effect an individual would produce if suitable other conditions were to obtain. For example, when individuals have the specific characteristic of solidity, their power is supporting others; and when individuals have the specific characteristic of wetness, their power is cohering to others.

Huayan metaphysics denies reality to two kinds of individual. The first is the sovereign individual, whose specific characteristics and powers depend upon no other.

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[6] For the same reason, if there are mereological fusions, and if each fusion is numerically identical to the collection of its constituents, the third premise in the reductive strategy from *Discourse with Vajirā* and *Questions of King Milinda* is incorrect. For a review of contemporary debate about whether fusions are identical to collections of constituents, see Wallace 2011 and Cotnoir 2014.

The second is the agential individual, whose specific characteristics and powers depend upon some but not all others. The specific characteristics of sovereign individuals are determinate or fixed, because they have those characteristics regardless of their relations to others. The specific characteristics of agential individuals are indeterminate or empty, because they have those characteristics by virtue of their relations to others. For example, if solidity is a necessary condition for being wax, then solidity is a determinate characteristic of wax and wax is a sovereign individual. By contrast, if wax has the characteristic of solidity when near ice and fluidity when near fire, solidity and fluidity are indeterminate characteristics of wax.

Paradigmatic candidates for sovereign individuality include the *Ātman* from the metaphysics of orthodox Indian traditions and perhaps the Abrahamic God. The partless *dharmas* from Abhidharmikan metaphysics are also sovereign individuals, because although they arise in dependence upon others, the characteristics with which they arise are determinate rather than empty. Some paradigmatic candidates for agential individuality include controllers as conceptualized in modern engineering control theory—components of a mechanism with a reference or set point as their specific characteristics, and which have their specific characteristics and associated powers regardless of their relations to other components in the same mechanism but not regardless of their relations to the designer or operator of the mechanism.[7] Other paradigmatic candidates for agential individuality include Cartesian substances, which depend for their specific characteristics and powers upon God but are otherwise independent of each other. Defining a *domain of control* as a nonempty collection of individuals relative to which an individual's specific characteristics and powers are independent, it follows that sovereign individuals and agential individuals have domains of control, and Huayan's contention about thoroughgoing interdependence among individuals is the metaphysical thesis that no (ultimately) real individual has a domain of control.

The Huayan tradition also offers a mereology wherein wholes and their component parts are equally real (apart from convention). It gives this mereology soteriological significance by denying that anything real has a domain of control. This denial entails that there are no mereological fusions (or, if there are, none have a domain of control). Insofar as selves own or control others, in the way rulers own and control their subjects, selves are individuals with a domain of control. Huayan metaphysics thereby accommodates the traditional Buddhist teaching that there are no selves—and it does so regardless of whether selves are partless individuals or composite fusions. Contemplating each denizen within the realm of ultimate reality as real but lacking a domain of control thereby facilitates removing the sense of self without succumbing to the problems that beset the strategies from *Discourse with Vajirā*, *Questions of King Milinda*, and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*, and without raising worries about whether such contemplation involves denying that anything is real.[8]

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[7] For a conception of the self as a controller in this sense, see Dennett 2019.

[8] Note also that denying the reality of controllers is consistent with endorsing the reality of conscious control. See Swearer 1973, Wegner 2005.

6.1 Dushun's Strategy

Intimations of the Huayan strategy for accommodating Buddhist soteriology with the reality of wholes appear in *Discernments of the Dharmadhātu of Huayan* (*Huayan Fajie Guanmen* 華嚴法界觀門, trans. Gimello 1976: 457–510). The monk Dushun 杜順 (557–640) often receives credit for authoring this work, and I shall follow this convention for the sake of expediency—albeit with the tacit understanding that perhaps the name "Dushun" refers to someone other than Dushun (see also Plassen 2020). Dushun offers three contemplations for the sake of illuminating a correct experience of reality. The first involves contemplating physical form—and, by extension, other aggregates—as empty. The second involves contemplating the relation between *li*, the boundless and ceaseless activity present during experiences that are free of clinging attachment and *duḥkha*, and *shi* 事, the myriad particulars that appear in experiences of reality. The third, finally, involves contemplating relations among the many individual *shi*.

Dushun's first contemplation is standard from the Indian Mahāyāna tradition, which extends contemplations of emptiness from early Pāli discourses to all individuals, both composite wholes and partless *dharmas*. His second contemplation shifts attention from emptiness, or lack of determinate characteristics, to the activity whereby individuals arise and cease in dependence upon each other (see Jiang 2001: 466–467). Dushun maintains that this activity, *li* 理, is present, in its entirety, within each *shi*; and that contemplating this pervasion of *shi* by *li* involves contemplating each *shi* as limited by its own boundary and yet present in all other *shi* by virtue of their mutual enacting of *li* (see Jiang 2001: 463–465). For the sake of clarification, he offers an ocean-wave metaphor.

> This theme [of the relation between *li* and *shi*] transcends conventional sensibilities and is difficult to perceive. Nor do mundane metaphors quite capture it. Nevertheless, within the limits of this qualification, we may say that it is rather like that of the ocean which is wholly present in each single wave and yet is not thereby diminished, or like that of a single small wave which enwraps the whole of the ocean but is not thereby made large. The ocean simultaneously pervades all waves and yet is not thereby differentiated. And although any particular wave enwraps the ocean at the same time as others do, they do not thereby all become one wave. Also, at the time the ocean is pervading a single wave, it is not then hindered from pervading in its entirety all waves. And when a single wave completely enwraps the ocean, at that time too does each and every other wave also enwrap it completely. The two are thus not mutually obstructive. So should one contemplate it. (Gimello 1976: 483–484)

Just as the oscillatory motion of the ocean is present in each wave and just as each wave, while distinct from other waves, affects the height and other characteristics of all other waves, so too the activity of *li* pervades each *shi* and connects the myriad *shi* in relations of mutual dependence.

Dushun's second contemplation motivates his third, according to which each particular *shi*, whether a composite whole or a partless *dharma*, includes within itself, and enters into, all other *shi*. Dushun articulates the essence of

this contemplation under two headings. The first is "Interpenetration is Without Obstruction."

> [V]iewing all from the perspective of the one, the one both includes and enters the others according to the four following propositions. Each includes all as it enters all. All include each as they enter each. Each includes each as it enters each. All includes all as it enters all. These simultaneous interpenetrations are without obstruction. (Gimello 1976: 509)

The second heading is "Coexistence is Without Obstruction."

> [V]iewing the one from the perspective of all, all both enters and includes the one, also according to four propositions: All contain each as they enter each. They contain all as they enter each. They contain each as they enter all. They contain all as they enter all. These simultaneous interpenetrations are without hindrance or obstruction. (Gimello 1976: 509)

Characterizing mutual inclusion among *shi* as lacking hindrance or obstruction is Dushun's way of declaring that each individual *shi* is real (apart from attachment-inducing convention) and numerically distinct from all other *shi*. Characterizing each *shi* as including other *shi* is his way of declaring that each particular *shi* depends for specific characteristics and powers upon other *shi*: for one *shi* to include others is to be such that the others determine the specific characteristics and powers of the one *shi* and thereby make that one *shi* what it is. Conversely, characterizing each *shi* as entering into others is Dushun's way of declaring that each *shi* determines the specific characteristics and powers of other *shi* and thereby makes those other *shi* what they are.

Consider, for example, the *shi* known as Pope Francis. Pope Francis exists as one among many others within the Roman Catholic Church. These others treat Pope Francis' *ex cathedra* pronouncements—decrees pertaining to matters of faith or morals that members of the Roman Catholic Church must endorse—as immune to error, and in so doing they invest Pope Francis with the characteristics and powers of an infallible teacher. Hence, Pope Francis includes other members of the Roman Catholic Church, and these others enter into him. Conversely, Pope Francis has various powers over other members of the Roman Catholic Church, including powers to elevate or remove members from leadership positions and powers to grant or rescind their status as Roman Catholics. Hence, Pope Francis enters into other members of the Roman Catholic Church, and these others include Pope Francis.

Dushun does not explain how contemplating *shi* as mutually inclusive is relevant to the soteriological project of removing the sense of self. But the connection is relatively straightforward. According to Buddhist tradition, the selves that are targets for clinging attachment are individuals that persist through change. The power of persistence secures selves against the vicissitudes of change, and in particular against changes to their specific characteristics and powers. Nothing that includes others within itself has this kind of security. For whatever includes others within itself is vulnerable to those others, existing with its specific

characteristics and powers only by virtue of its relations to those others. Contemplating reality as a realm of mutually inclusive *shi*, accordingly, precludes contemplating reality as a realm that contains selves.

Consider once more the example of Pope Francis. Prior to Pope Francis' inauguration, there was a *shi* known as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio. This *shi* also existed as one among many others within the Roman Catholic Church, albeit without the authority to make *ex cathedra* pronouncements. Contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio as a self (or as belonging to a self) involves contemplating him as someone who persisted through the rites of papal ascension to become Pope Francis, and it involves contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio as adding to his priestly powers upon becoming Pope Francis. By contrast, contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio and Pope Francis as individuals within a realm of mutual inclusion involves three contemplations: first, contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio as one among the many Roman Catholics who determined the powers of, and received their powers from, Pope Benedict XVI; second, contemplating Pope Francis as one who determines the powers of, and receives powers from, a different group of Roman Catholics (including Pope Benedict); and third, contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio as ceasing to exist upon the arising of Pope Francis. These contemplations preclude contemplating Cardinal Bergoglio or Pope Francis as being, or belonging to, a self, because they entail that what gave Cardinal Bergoglio his powers differs from what gives Pope Francis his powers.

Although Dushun's contemplation of mutual inclusion among *shi* has merit as a strategy for removing the sense of self, Dushun offers no justification for endorsing the contemplation as correct. Mutual inclusion does not follow from the Buddhist teaching of dependent arising, according to which everything arises in dependence upon another, because that teaching is consistent with the existence of noninclusive *dharmas* (of the sort posited by Abhidharmikas). Nor does it follow from the teaching of dependent arising and the denial that such *dharmas* exist (from the tradition of Indian Mahāyāna), because denying the existence of noninclusive *dharmas* entails only that each *dharma* depends for its specific characteristics and powers upon some others—but contemplating *shi* as mutually inclusive involves contemplating each as including all others. Moreover, Indian Buddhist traditions seem to testify that cognizing *shi* as having the characteristic of including only some others does not generate clinging attachment. So a Buddhaghosa-style nonreductive argument for mutual inclusion does not seem to be viable. Without some justification for the mutual inclusion of *shi*, however, those afflicted by a sense of self lack good reason for concluding that they are neither a partless individual that persists through change nor a persisting transtemporal fusion of perishable individuals.

6.2 Fazang's Strategy

Because the contemplation of mutual inclusion among *shi* is a characteristic teaching of the Huayan tradition, Dushun is not the only monk to discuss the contemplation—and so there are prospects for finding a justification of the contemplation beyond *Discernments of the Dharmadhātu of Huayan*. For example, Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839) frames the contemplation as a corollary to the contemplation of mutual

inclusion among *li* and *shi* (see Jiang 2001: 470–471). Chengguan's strategy is indirect, because it shifts the burden of justification to a different contemplation—a contemplation for which Dushun also provides no argument. There is, fortunately, a more direct strategy for justifying the claim that all *shi* include each other. This strategy derives from considerations about the metaphor of Indra's net in work by the Chinese monk Fazang 法藏 (643–712), so-called third patriarch of the Huayan tradition.

The metaphor of Indra's net appears in a brief passage from Śikṣānanda's version of *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Huayan jing* 華嚴經).

> [All Buddhas] know that every *dharma* always accords with dependent arising exhaustively and without exception. They know every kind of world exhaustively and without exception. They know the entire *dharma*-realm is throughout like Indra's net, and they know all the various *shi* within this net exhaustively and without exception.[9] (Śikṣānanda: T10.279.248.c14–16)

In *Contemplations on Exhausting Delusion and Returning to the Source by Cultivating the Mysteries of Huayan* (*Xiu Huayan Ao Zhi Wang Jin Huan Yuan Guan* 修華嚴奧旨妄盡遠源觀), Fazang explicates the ontological import of the metaphor.

> The … contemplation of Indra's net is of chief and attendant manifesting (or revealing) each other. This means that self acting as chief views others acting as attendants; or perhaps one *dharma* acting as chief [views] all [other] *dharmas* acting as attendants; or perhaps one body acting as chief [views] all [other] bodies acting as attendants. So one *dharma*, selected as chief, receives [the other] attendants all together, one after the other without limit. This models the nature of *dharmas* as manifesting reflections one after another, each *shi* [including all others] within itself without limit, just as compassion and wisdom also multiply one after the other without limit.[10] (Fazang: T45.1876.640b27–c3)

According to Fazang, to be dependently arisen is to have two aspects—one whereby that which is dependently arisen includes all others within itself in the way a ruler includes others within their sovereignty, another whereby that which is dependently arisen enters into, or is included within, another in the way a subject is included within a ruler's sovereignty.

Fazang does not provide details that might help to visualize Indra's net. But he endorses the image of Vairocana's tower, from *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, as suitably analogous (Fazang: T45.1876.640c09–10). The final chapter of *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* introduces Sudhana, a young boy who undertakes a quest to attain liberation from *duḥkha* (see Cleary 1993: 1173–1174). Nearing the end of his quest, Sudhana encounters Maitreya, a bodhisattva destined to become the next Buddha. Sudhana petitions Maitreya for access to a tower containing the adornments of Vairocana.[11]

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[9] Author's translation. Translating the final sentence is difficult. Compare Cleary's translation, which interprets the final sentence as containing a surreptitious repetition and introduces the notion (not in the text) of interrelation: "[Buddhas] know all phenomena come from interdependent origination. They know all world systems exhaustively. They know all the different phenomena in all worlds, interrelated in Indra's net" (Cleary 1993: 925).

[10] Author's translation. For an alternative translation, see Cleary 1983: 168.

[11] Vairocana is the *dharmakāya*, the inconceivable reality of which Gautama Buddha is a manifestation.

Maitreya grants the petition, and Sudhana enters to see a tower arrayed with countless amazing decorations.

> Also, inside the great tower he saw hundreds of thousands of other towers similarly arrayed; he saw those towers as infinitely vast as space, evenly arrayed in all directions, yet these towers were not mixed up with one another, each being mutually distinct, while appearing reflected in each and every object of all the other towers. (Cleary 1993: 1489–1490)

Sudhana's vision presents a model of mutually dependent arising as limitless mutual reflection. Vairocana's tower is one among countless others, each reflecting—and being reflected by—every other. Each tower depicts an individual. Insofar as reflections between towers are akin to relations whereby *dharmas* depend upon others for their powers, Sudhana's vision models *dharmas* as thoroughly mutually inclusive. Vairocana's tower serves as chief; the other towers, as attendants. The activity of Vairocana's tower reflecting other towers within itself is akin to the chief including its attendants; and the reciprocal reflectivity among the towers is akin to the mutual inclusion of chief and attendant. Insofar as each tower corresponds to a jeweled node within Indra's net, it follows that each jewel of Indra's net, like each tower from Sudhana's vision, arises in dependence upon every other by virtue of including within itself those others.

In his *Treatise on the Five Teachings of Huayan* (*Huayan Wujiao Zhang* 華嚴五教章), Fazang clarifies that the metaphor of Indra's net is a means for teaching about what is real rather than a skillful means or a teaching arising from deceptive cognition (see Fazang: T45.1866.506a24–28; Cook 1970: 510). This clarification is counterintuitive. Although reflections obviously depend upon that which reflects them, that which reflects seems not to depend upon its reflections. There is a clear sense in which mirrors determine the characteristics of their reflections. Mirrors, however, seem to have their characteristics—as straight or warped, clear or tinted—apart from their reflections. So mirrors seem to have domains of control that include their reflections. If Sudhana's vision and Fazang's metaphor are correct teachings about reality, these appearances are deceptive, because both mirrors and their reflections lack a domain of control.

Like Dushun, Fazang offers no justification for endorsing the metaphor of Indra's net as a reliable guide to reality. His metaphor, however, furnishes material sufficient for constructing an argument on his behalf. The argument relies upon conceptualizing dependent arising as a matter of mutual inclusion. For the sake of clarity, it is helpful to divide the argument into two stages. The first stage demonstrates that nothing real (apart from convention) has a domain of control.

1. Any cognition that generates clinging attachment is misleading or deceptive.
2. Cognizing something real to have a domain of control generates clinging attachments.
3. Misleading and deceptive cognitions are incorrect.
4. Therefore, nothing real has a domain of control.

The first and third claims of this argument derive from Buddhaghosa's nonreductive argument against the ultimate reality of wholes. The argument differs from Buddhaghosa's in its second claim.

Whereas Buddhaghosa's argument supposes that cognizing many as a whole generates clinging attachment, this argument supposes that the source of clinging attachment is cognizing anything, whether composite whole or partless *dharma*, as having a domain of control. This novel supposition derives from Fazang's contention that those who lack deceptive cognition, and thereby lack clinging attachment, cognize *shi* as akin to jewels reflecting other jewels without limit. It receives support from the Upaniṣadic conception of self as an inner controller and from standard Buddhist teaching that rejects that conception as delusional (see Gethin 1998: 136–137). It receives support, as well, from considerations about the nature of attachment. Standard Buddhist psychology conceptualizes attachment as a state that arises from a sense of ownership toward some target of attachment and an attendant sense of being able to control that target. But a sense of owning something always involves a sense of not being owned by that something. Hence, having a sense of ownership always involves cognizing that which owns as having a domain of control. It follows that cognizing something as lacking a domain of control impedes a sense of ownership toward that something and, conversely, that cognizing something as having a domain of control facilitates a sense of ownership toward that something. Insofar as this sense of ownership generates clinging attachment, so too does cognizing things as having a domain of control.

The second stage of the argument for mutual inclusion among all *shi* takes the conclusion of the first stage as its first premise.

1. Nothing real has a domain of control.
2. Anything real that lacks a domain of control depends for its specific characteristics and powers upon all others.
3. Hence, everything real depends for its specific characteristics and powers upon all others.
4. Anything real that depends for its specific characteristics and powers upon another includes that other in itself.
5. Therefore, each real *shi* includes all other *shi*.

The second claim of this argument is a straightforward consequence of the definition for *domain of control*. The fourth claim follows from conceptualizing dependent arising as a matter of mutual inclusion. Insofar as this conception allows for symmetric relations of inclusion and standard models of parthood do not, the fourth claim also indicates that Fazang endorses a conception of inclusion that is not mereological (contrary to an assumption in Jones 2010a: 363).

6.3 Implications of Huayan Strategies

The Huayan vision of reality as a realm of mutually inclusive *shi* has novel metaphysical implications. Chief among these is the claim that no individual *shi* is isolated or separate from any other. This contravenes the view that the fundamental

elements of reality are independent of each other. This latter view is especially prominent in European philosophical traditions that posit the reality of substances that divide into natural kinds and that have intrinsic powers (see Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1997: 20–26). It is prominent, as well, in Abhidharmikan traditions of Buddhism, which frequently posit the reality of *dharmas* with determinate specific characteristics. The Huayan vision of reality, however, precludes the existence of such substances or *dharmas*. This implication entails that the denizens of reality do not admit to free recombination. Lewis defines free recombination, roughly, as

> the principle that anything can coexist with anything else, at least provided they occupy distinct spatiotemporal positions. Likewise, anything can fail to coexist with anything else. (Lewis 1986: 88)

Insofar as the denizens of reality admit to free recombination, they are akin to LEGO blocks, retaining their specific characteristics and powers no matter their relations to others. By contrast, the Huayan vision entails that each *shi* receives its specific characteristics and powers through its inclusionary relations with all others, so that any one *shi* failing to exist would change what all other *shi* are.

A second implication of the Huayan vision of reality is that the Huayan conception of inclusion diverges from Aristotle's conception of inherence. Aristotle's conception appears at *Categories* 1a24–26:

> By "in a subject" I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in. (Ackrill 1963: 4)

James Duerlinger explicates the primary sense of Aristotle's meaning (designated by subscripting the inherence relation as in_1), as follows:

> *a* is in$_1$ *b* if and only if neither *a* nor *b* is predicated of anything and *a* is not a part of *b* and *a* is inseparable from *b*. (Duerlinger 1970: 185)

Aristotelian inherence is (primarily) a relation between particulars. The paradigmatic example is the relation between Callias and Callias' generosity: Callias' generosity inheres in Callias, because Callias is not his generosity, Callias' generosity is not Callias and is not part of Callias, and Callias' existence is necessary for the existence of his generosity.

The Huayan conception of inclusion, and paradigmatic examples thereof, are quite different. For example, in *Treatise on the Five Teachings of Huayan*, when explaining "wholeness" as characteristic for parts of wholes, Fazang maintains that the rafter of a building is the building because the building includes the rafter.

> *Question*: Wouldn't there be the building without the one rafter? *Answer*: This is only a broken building, not a proper building. Therefore, know that the proper building entirely depends upon the one rafter. Since [the building] depends upon the one rafter, know that the rafter is the building.[12] (Fazang: T45.1866.508a12–14)

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[12] Author's translation. For alternative translations, see Cook 1970: 532; Elstein 2014: 82.

Given Fazang's conception of dependent arising as a matter of mutual inclusion, the building's dependence upon the rafter entails that the building includes the rafter— or that the rafter is in the building. Yet Fazang also predicates the building of the rafter. This violates the first constraint on Aristotle's inherence relation.

A third implication of the Huayan vision of reality is the claim that each *shi* has the powers of all other *shi*. Standard Buddhist metaphysics endorses the following principle about individual powers and relations of inclusion:

> *Power-Inclusion Principle*: If an individual *x* has a power *P* and an individual *y* includes *x*, then *y* has *P*.

For example, imagining an immobile person on the shoulders of a blind man, Buddhaghosa claims that, together, these two have the powers of sight and mobility (Ñāóamoli 2010: 619). In the context of a mereology that admits the reality of composite wholes, the *Power-Inclusion Principle* vindicates Buddhaghosa's claims. For example, the blind man has the power of mobility, the combination of men includes the blind man, and so the combination also has the power of mobility. Buddhaghosa also claims that water *dharmas* have the power of cohesion, that fire *dharmas* do not, and that no *dharma* depends for its specific characteristics or powers upon anything else. The *Power-Inclusion Principle* vindicates these claims as well: water *dharmas* have a power that fire *dharmas* lack, and so the *Power-Inclusion Principle* entails that fire *dharmas* do not include—and so do not depend for their specific characteristics or powers upon—water *dharmas*.

In the context of Huayan metaphysics, the *Power-Inclusion Principle* entails that each *shi* is boundless in power, containing within itself the powers of all other *shi*. This contravenes the more prevalent view that most individuals are limited in power. But it helps to explain why Fazang maintains that thoroughgoing mutual inclusion entails that each part of a whole by itself makes the whole. Consider, for example, Fazang's justification for ascribing the characteristic of wholeness to parts of wholes.

> [T]he characteristic of wholeness [for the rafter] ... is the building.... The rafter is the building. What is the reason? Because the rafter by itself makes the building. Apart from the rafter, there can be no building.[13] (Fazang: T45.1866.507c20–24)

For Fazang, something makes another by determining its specific characteristics and empowering it to enact the powers associated with those characteristics, and something by itself makes another if it alone suffices for making the other (Jones 2019: 16). Conceptualizing parts of wholes as limited in power grounds resistance to Fazang's contention that the rafter of a building by itself makes the building. That contention, however, derives from Fazang's claim that each part of a whole has the characteristic of wholeness—or, in Fazang's alternative phrasing, that each part of a whole contains the powers of the whole's many other parts (see Fazang: T45.1866.507c6; Jones 2019: 5). That claim, in turn, derives from combining the Huayan vision of reality, as a realm of thoroughgoing mutual inclusion, with the *Power-Inclusion Principle*.

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[13] Author's translation. For alternative translations, see Cook 1970: 530; Elstein 2014: 82.

7 Concluding Remarks

Some contemporary literature about mereology presents mereological inquiry as significant for its bearing upon various empirical disputes (see De Vignemont, Tsakiris, and Haggard 2006; Graziani and Calosi 2014; Hawley 2017). Other literature presents mereological inquiry as significant for its bearing upon theological disputes (Molto 2018). Some few works present mereological inquiry as significant for its bearing upon ethical and soteriological matters (Ruper 2014). When addressing mereology from the Buddhist tradition, these works tend to focus upon reductionist arguments against the reality of wholes (Siderits 2003: 197–203; Bailey and Brenner 2020).

Those who relate mereological inquiry to matters of soteriology often presuppose that mereological considerations have the capacity to vindicate soteriological projects but soteriological projects lack the contrary capacity. But attending to Buddhaghosa's nonreductive argument strategy about composite wholes, as well as arguments from the Huayan tradition about domains of control, reveals that soteriological projects have mereological consequences. Buddhaghosa's conception of correct view supports an argument against the ultimate reality of composite wholes that is independent of whether wholes are identical to their component parts or collections thereof. The same conception of correct view also supports an argument, from the Huayan tradition, that allows for the ultimate reality of composite wholes, provided that each such whole lacks a domain of control. Both arguments vindicate the Buddhist teaching that there are no selves. That they do so without substantive assumptions about the nature of wholes indicates that this teaching receives support less from a reductive approach to reality and more from a soteriological project that treats endorsements of real selves as an intermediary between certain psychological states (relating to clinging attachment), on the one hand, and certain experiential outcomes (relating to *duḥkha*), on the other hand. It indicates, as well, that those who endorse competing mereological views—according to which there are selves or other denizens of ultimate reality with domains of control—would do well to consider whether such views might receive support from alternative soteriological projects.

Declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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