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The Unanswered Questions and the Limits of Knowledge

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Abstract In this article I look at the Buddha's refusal to answer certain questions in light of the dynamics of ancient Indian debate. Doing so foregrounds a dimension of the Buddha's interaction with his interlocutors that is central for understanding the problem of what are known as the Undetermined or Unanswered (*avyākata*) Questions: namely, the Buddha's knowledge and authority vis-à-vis rival teachers.

Keywords Unanswered Questions · Debate · No-self

The Unanswered Questions

In numerous places in the Pali Nikāyas, the Buddha refuses to answer a stereotypical list of ten questions.[1] The questions can be divided into three sets. The four questions comprising the first set concern the nature of the self and world (*attā loko ca*). The first two of these deal with the question of whether or not the self and world are eternal (*sassato*); the third and fourth with the question of whether self and world have a limit (*anta*). The second set contains two questions which concern the relationship between the soul and body (*jīva* and *sarīra*, respectively): are they one and the same (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*) or is the soul one thing and the

[1] See S.IV. 374–403 (Avyākata Saṃyutta); M.I. 426–432 (Cūḷa-Māluṅkya Sutta); Udāna 66–69 (Jaccandha-Vagga 4); M.I. 483–489 (Aggi-Vacchagotta-Sutta); D.I. 187–195 (Poṭṭhapāda Sutta); S.IV. 287; S.III. 257ff. (Vacchagotta Saṃyutta); D.I. 159–160 (Jāliya Sutta); S.II. 60–62 (Nidāna Saṃyutta 4). Sometimes the list contains fourteen questions, resulting from the expansion of the first two pairings, on the eternity and the end of self and world, to four (instead of two) alternatives, according to the catuṣkoṭi formula.

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body another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*)? The third set deals with the question of whether the enlightened saint or Tathāgata exists after death (*hoti tathāgato paraṃ maraṇā*). The question of the Tathāgata's existence after death is expressed in terms of a list of four logical possibilities familiar in the *catuṣkoṭi* formula of the Madhyamaks: Does the Tathāgata exist after death? Does he not exist after death? Does he both exist and not exist after death? Does he neither exist nor not exist after death?

As mentioned above, this list of questions is stereotypical.[2] The texts in which they appear exemplify the "pre-fabricated" nature of the Pali Suttas more generally. That is to say, as Richard Gombrich puts it, "[t]he texts of the Pali Canon have been built up out of what biblical scholarship has dubbed pericopes, passages of scripture which were standardized and used as units to compose longer texts."[3] Inasmuch as the meaning of those smaller units is determined, at least in part, by the larger texts in which they appear, we would expect the standardized list of Unanswered Questions to take on a range of meanings corresponding to the various narrative contexts in which they appear. Moreover, we would expect that the fit between list and context to be better, or at least more obvious, in some cases rather than others. The former would provide the paradigm for understanding the Buddha's refusal to answer the questions more generally.[4]

Richard Hayes conveniently enumerates some of the more influential modern interpretations of the Unanswered Questions in an article that concerns the modern reception of classical Buddhist thought. Before offering his own explanation of the Unanswered Questions, Hayes profiles two interpretations that he regards as problematic. The first of these is the "Absolutist" interpretation represented by T. R. V. Murti. According Murti, the Buddha's silence on the Unanswered Questions stems from an awareness of a dimension of reality that transcends the antimonies of human reason.[5] By virtue of his awareness of the Absolute, the Buddha steadfastly refused to be drawn into the dogmatic disputes represented by each pairing in the list of Unanswered Questions.[6] Each opposing view reflects a partial and deficient understanding of the nature of reality. Diametrically opposed to the Absolutist interpretation of Murti is the "positivist" interpretation put forth by David Kalupahana. According to the latter, the Buddha was an empiricist who correctly recognized direct experience as our only valid source of knowledge. The

[2] Norman (1991, p. 2) and Thomas (2002, p. 131).

[3] Gombrich (1987, p. 77); cf. also Gethin (1992).

[4] One could conceivably frame a hypothesis that the paradigm represents an original context of the list and that the list was subsequently extended to other contexts with varying degrees of plausibility, analogous to the way in which, according to Brereton (1986, pp. 104–105), the famous *tat tvam asi* formula of Chandogya Upaniṣad Chap. 6 is integral to the section (6.12) in which Uddālaka has Śvetuketu cut open a banyan fruit and was subsequently extended, with various degrees of fit, to the various other illustrations in the chapter. But this effort in the case of the Unanswered Questions is apt to be speculative and uncertain. Cf. Gombrich (1987).

[5] Murti (1960, pp. 36–54) and Hayes (1994, pp. 334, 357).

[6] Murti (1960, pp. 40–41, 48–49).

Buddha's silence constitutes a radical critique of the metaphysical presuppositions underlying each of the Unanswered Questions.[7]

Hayes argues that both of these interpretations, the Absolutist and the Positivist, are anachronistic.[8] In his article he shows how each reflects an approach to classical Buddhist thought—the article's focus is Nagārjuna—that reflects contemporary currents in Western thought more than it does the Indian texts it purports to elucidate. Murti's Absolutist approach can trace its genealogy to German idealism, specifically, to the engagement with the Critical Philosophy of Kant by philosophers such as Schelling, Hegel, and Fichte.[9] Kalupahana's anti-metaphysical approach to Buddhism stems from another Western philosophical movement arising in response to Kant's critical philosophy, Logical Positivism.[10] After arguing that these two interpretations effectively project Western philosophical preoccupations onto the teaching of the Buddha, Hayes goes on to offer an explanation of the Unanswered Questions that is more faithful to texts themselves. This explanation has two aspects, the first of which appeals to the Buddha's generally pragmatic approach. The Buddha refused to commit himself to one or the other possible answers to these questions because, to quote the Buddha's own words in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*,

> This is not connected to purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the religious life, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvana.[11]

The locus classicus of the pragmatic interpretation is the Cūḷa-Māḷuṅkya Sutta of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (M.I. 426–432). In that text the Buddha famously compares the monk who demands an answer to the Unanswered Questions to a man shot by an arrow who refuses medical treatment until he knows the type of bow and arrow, as well as the caste identity and physical characteristics of the person who shot him.[12]

Unfortunately, not all passages can be explained in terms of the Buddha's pragmatism. For Hayes, following an established line of scholarly interpretation, the doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) provides a more comprehensive explanation of the Buddha's refusal to answer the Unanswered Questions. In a cluster of dialogues on

[7] Kalupahana (1976, pp. 155–160); cf. Hayes (1994, p. 358). Kalupahana concedes that the Buddha had a broader conception the empirical (including extra-sensory experience), and correspondingly, a more restricted conception of the metaphysical (excluding the theory of dependent arising, paṭiccasamuppāda), than modern philosophers (1976, pp. 153, 159, 161).

[8] Hayes (1994, p. 359 and passim).

[9] Hayes (1994, pp. 329–331).

[10] Hayes (1994, pp. 338–339).

[11] D.I. 188–189: na h' etaṃ poṭṭhapāda attha-saṃhitaṃ, na dhamma-saṃhitaṃ, na ādibrahmacariyakaṃ, na nibbidāya, na viragāya, na nirodhāya, na upasamāya, na abhiññāya, na sambodhāya, na nibbānaāya saṃvattati. Trans. Hayes (1994, p. 359), with minor alterations.

[12] M.I. 429; Hayes (1994, p. 359). This sutta, understandably, is cited by practically everyone. Rahula (1959, pp. 13–14), Harvey (1990, p. 66), Collins (1982, pp. 136–137), Gethin (1998, p. 66) and Thomas (2002, p. 126). It has also been cited in support of the anti-metaphysical interpretation. See Murti (1960, pp. 36–37).

the Unanswered Questions found in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (the Avyākata Saṃyutta, S.IV. 383–390), the Buddha attributes a commitment to partial and mutually contradictory views (*diṭṭhi*) on the Unanswered Questions to an inability to distinguish the various physical and psychic constituents of the personality with the idea of self.[13] The Tathāgata, by contrast, holds no such views because he dissociates each of the constituents from the idea of self; that is, he is able to declare, with respect to any of the constituents, "This is not mine, This I am not; This is not my self" (*n' etam mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā*).[14] A preoccupation with the Unanswered Questions, in other words, betrays a lack of what Tilman Vetter calls "discriminating insight" (Skt. *prajñā*; Pā. *paññā*).[15] The unstated assumption in the *Saṃyutta* passage cited by Hayes (but explicit in the preceding two dialogues in the same section) is that an inability to distinguish the constituents from the idea of self betrays an attitude of attachment. Dogmatic attachment to speculative views is a manifestation of attachment more generally.[16] Summarizing the foregoing discussion, Hayes concludes that,

> the Buddha's reason for avoiding giving answers to the celebrated fourteen questions was not because the questions presupposed the existence of polar opposites that could be subsumed under an all-embracing Absolute, nor because he was a pure empiricist who disdained metaphysics, but rather because he recognized all possible answers to these questions presuppose the existence of an enduring self.[17]

The questions, Hayes argues, are analogous to the question, "Is the unicorn white?," a question that, regardless of the answer given, falsely presupposes the existence of the unicorn.[18] Hayes' verdict represents the current scholarly consensus on the Unanswered Questions. The Buddha's refusal to answer the questions is to be explained in terms of the doctrine of no-self, with the pragmatic interpretation playing a subsidiary role.[19]

[13] S.IV 393: aññatitthiyā ca kho, vaccha, paribbājakā cakkhum etam mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā ti samanupassanti. (sotaṃ, ghānaṃ, jīvhaṃ). […] tasmā aññatitthiyānaṃ paribbājakānam evam puṭṭhānam evam veyyākaraṇaṃ hoti: sassato loko ti vā pe. Cf. Hayes (1994, p. 360).

[14] S.IV.393: tathāgato ca kho, vaccha, arahaṃ sammāsambuddho cakkhuṃ n' etam mama, n' eso 'ham asmi, na m' eso attā ti samanupassati. (sotaṃ, ghānaṃ, jīvhaṃ) […] tasmā tathāgatassa evaṃ puṭṭhassa na evaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ hoti: sassato loko ti pe. Cf. Hayes (1994, p. 360), Collins (1982, pp. 134–135) and Harvey (1990, p. 66).

[15] Vetter (1988, p. 35) defines discriminating insight as "knowing that things we normally consider to be the self or belonging to the self cannot be or belong to the self if this self is conceived of as not suffering."

[16] See Hayes (1994, p. 360). Collins (1982, pp. 117, 129; cf. 133–135) observes that this association of (non-Buddhist) doctrines with attachment constitutes an ad hominem argument.

[17] Hayes (1994, pp. 360–361).

[18] Hayes (1994, p. 361). Other scholars give similar examples of questions resting on false presuppositions. Collins (1982, p. 133), following Smart (1964, p. 35), gives the example of the "bald king of France"; Harvey (1990, p. 66) the question "Have you stopped beating your wife?"; Gethin (1998, p. 68), "Are Martians green?" We can go back to Vasubandhu for a similar example: "Is the hair of a tortoise hard or smooth?" (Śāstrī 1973, p. 1209).

[19] Perhaps the most thorough and authoritative representative of this consensus position is Collins (1982, pp. 131–138); see also Smart (1964, pp. 34–36), Harvey (1990, pp. 65–66) and Gethin (1998, pp. 67–68).

The Hermeneutical Gap between the Unanswered Questions and the Doctrine of No-Self

Here I do not want to question the appropriateness of an explanation of the Unanswered Questions in terms of the *anattā* doctrine, an interpretation which has the virtue of being in accord with the Buddhist tradition. When we consider that texts from the Pali Canon serving as our main body of evidence were collected, preserved, and redacted by the Theravāda tradition, it would be surprising indeed if the texts in question did not support, or at least cohere with, the *anattā* doctrine. What I would like suggest, however, is that the *anattā* doctrine, while it does indeed provide a perspective from which one can make sense of the Unanswered Questions and relate them to the Buddha's teaching overall, does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the Nikāya texts in which they appear. Put differently, the no-self explanation does not represent the final, definitive word on a set of texts that remain, pace Collins (1982, p. 131), in certain respects obscure and ambiguous.[20]

In this connection we must recognize that the *anattā* doctrine represents a development, at the very least a making explicit, of the presuppositions of the discourse of discriminating insight found in the *Saṃyutta* text cited by Hayes and others in support of the no-self explanation. As many scholars have observed, the Buddha's declaration that none of the aggregates (*khandha*) belong to, or are, the self falls short of an *explicit* statement that there is no self.[21] Unfortunately, a number of modern interpreters have seized upon this unsurprising and uncontroversial feature of doctrinal development to argue that the Buddha's original teaching included a transcendental self.[22] If, the argument goes, none of the constituents of the personality are the self, then something else is.[23] According to this largely discredited line of interpretation, the Buddha originally taught a proto-Vedāntic discrimination between the empirical self and the transcendental self.[24] This original teaching of the Buddha was subsequently falsified by the Buddhist tradition with its doctrine of no-self. The tendency of contemporary scholars like Steven Collins to hew closely to the commentarial tradition in interpreting canonical texts can perhaps

[20] The interpretive nature of Hayes' explanation is obscured by the rhetoric implicit in his choice of section headings. He contrasts "T. R. V. Murti's explanation" and "David Kalupahana's explanation" with "The Buddha's explanation" (Perhaps, in the spirit of Gombrich's (2009, pp. 155–156) quip on the title of Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, we could say that "Buddhaghosa's Explanation" might be more accurate!). Hayes' distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics (1994, pp. 362–363), while helpful in sharply distinguishing between faithful interpretations and projective ones, does have the effect, unintentional I am sure, of obscuring the hermeneutical nature of the interpretation he offers. Ninian Smart's remark that the Buddha's reason for leaving the questions unanswered is "very up to date in style" (1964, p. 34) may be taken as an indication of the hermeneutical nature of the interpretation he offers (the same hybrid of pragmatism and no-self as Hayes, Collins, et al.), especially in light of Hayes' criticism of the anachronistic nature of the explanations of Murti and Kalupahana.

[21] Bronkhorst (2009, p. 24); Oetke (1988, pp. 89, 153). Whether the texts of discriminating insight presuppose or imply the non-existence of a self is a subject of scholarly debate. See Vetter (1988, p. 42 and passim).

[22] Bhattacharya (1973), Pérez-Remón (1980), Chowdhury (2003) and Radhakrishnan (1929).

[23] Collins (1982, p. 98).

[24] Chowdhury (2003, p. 200).

be regarded, at least in part, as an understandable reaction against this Neo-Vedāntic approach to the study of early Buddhism.[25] I think it is obvious, however, that one can admit development in the *anattā* concept without giving ground to the Vedāntic-Universalist interpretation of early Buddhism.

That there were Buddhists who most likely appealed to the Unanswered Questions in challenging the claim that the self or person was nothing more than the collection of aggregates provides more direct evidence for the interpretive nature of the *anattā* explanation. In the eighth chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, which is dedicated to a refutation of the theory of the person (Skt. *pudgala*, Pā. *puggala*) held by the Vātsīputrīya school of early Buddhism, Vasubandhu has his "Personalist" (Pudgalavādin) *pūrvapakṣin* ask, "If the person is nothing more than the aggregates, then why was the question of whether the soul is the same thing as the body or something other than the body left undetermined by the Blessed One?"[26] As might be expected from the apologetic and polemical nature of Vasubandhu's treatise, we are given tantalizingly little information about how the Puggalavādins understood the Unanswered Questions. We might infer, however, that the Buddha's refusal to commit to either the proposition that soul and body are one and the same or that the soul is one thing and the body another—i.e., the fifth and sixth of the Unanswered Questions—was cited in support of the Puggalavāda doctrine that the person is neither separate from nor reducible to the aggregates, that the *puggala* and the *khandha*s stand in a relation analogous to that between a fire and its fuel.[27] Whatever one may think of the doctrines of the Puggalavādins, the simple fact that they accepted the discourse of the Unanswered Questions as the word of the Buddha (albeit in the context of a no longer extant form of the Canon) without the benefit of the *anattā* doctrine evidences a hermeneutical gap between the former and the latter.

Another convenient indication of the interpretive nature of the no-self explanation of the Unanswered Questions is the gloss of "*tathāgata*" (in the last set of Unanswered Questions) by "self" (*attā*) or, alternatively, "being" (*satta*) in the commentarial tradition.[28] The commentaries interpret the question of the Tathāgata's existence after death in terms of the broader question of the existence of the individual after death. The Buddha's refusal to answer the question in the affirmative constitutes a denial of eternalism (*sassatavāda*), his refusal to answer in

[25] See Collins (1982, p. 136). Vetter (1988, p. 43, note 12) remarks that Collins, "like a Theravāda 'theologian' too easily synthesizes various canonical utterances, projecting the Theravāda position into Vinaya- and Sutta-piṭaka and sometimes simply identifying these with the Buddha's word." Collins' approach is far more sophisticated than an uncritical reliance on the tradition, however. Nor is it purely reactive in nature. It is, on one level, a pragmatic response to an acute sensitivity to the extreme paucity of historical data on the early, pre-Aśokan period of Buddhism. The concept of the Pali immaginaire that he develops in his later volume on nirvāna (1998, pp. 79–82 and passim) is based on an analytical distinction between the world of produced meanings and that of historical events.

[26] Śāstrī (1973, p. 1209). The Unanswered Questions were also a subject of debate in the Sarvāstivāda text, Devaśarman's *Vijñānakāya*. See Cousins (1994, p. 21).

[27] On the indeterminacy of the puggala with respect to the dhammas see Priestley (1999, pp. 54–61, 79–80). On the fire analogy, see Priestley (1999, pp. 165–186).

[28] DA.I.118: hoti tathāgato ti ādisu satto tathāgato ti adhippeto; UdA.340: tathāgato param maranā ti ettha tathāgato ti attā.

the negative a denial of annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*). Thus the gloss of *tathāgata* by *attā* or *satta* serves to assimilate this third set of questions to the second set (on the relation between soul and body), which latter provide a more natural fit with the doctrine of the Middle Way between eternalism and annihilationism. At the same time, however, it places the interpretation of the last set of Unanswered Questions at a step removed from their original context. For the gloss effaces the defining feature of the *tathāgata* concept, namely, that the *tathāgata* denotes an extraordinary, exceptional being.[29]

Given the extent to which the various narrative contexts in which the list of Unanswered Questions appear shape the latter's meaning, we should not be surprised to find that the no-self interpretation explains some passages better than others. Any interpretation ranging over a heterogeneous body of texts must base itself on a restricted set thereof, making those texts, de facto, paradigmatic with respect to others. Some texts, furthermore, might fall out of the paradigm altogether. So while the no-self certainly provides a satisfactory interpretation for passages like the Avyākata Saṃyutta, even when we concede that *anattā* represents a development of the discourse of discriminating insight contained therein, it quite frankly does not shed much light on a text like the Cūḷa-Maluṅkya Sutta. For this reason scholars are forced to supplement it with the pragmatic explanation, owing to the fact that a text like the Cūḷa-Maḷunkya is too famous to be ignored.

Another well-known text whose intelligibility does not require the doctrine of no-self is the famous parable of the blind men and the elephant in the *Udāna*. The text associates the ten Unanswered Questions with a quarrelsome group of "ascetics, brahmins, and wanderers of diverse views, persuasions, and inclinations" (*samaṇabrāhamaṇā paribbājakā… nānādiṭṭhikā nānākhantikā nānārucikā*).[30] Attributing their dogmatic adherence to mutually contradictory views to a lack of vision, the Buddha compares these partisans to a group of blind men arguing about the nature of the elephant on the basis of their respective experience of only one of the elephant's body parts (tusk, trunk, tail, ear, etc.). The point of the parable is that an answer to the questions reflects a partial—in both the literal sense of 'incomplete' and the more pointed sense as 'biased'—understanding of reality. The partial knowledge of those holding diverse views contrasts sharply with the Buddha's direct insight and comprehensive knowledge of reality.

To be sure, this theme of the Buddha's transcendental knowledge and spiritual authority vis-à-vis the proponents of mere views (*diṭṭhi*) can be readily understood in terms of the *anattā* doctrine. The various *diṭṭhi* put forward by rival teachers presuppose the concept of a self, even those *diṭṭhi* of the annihilationist sort that appear to deny it. The concept of a self, moreover, betrays an attitude of attachment; indeed, it is the most fundamental expression of attachment. This attachment impedes these teachers' perception of reality. The Buddha, by contrast, since he is free of attachment, is able to see things as they really are. Apart from the disputable

[29] Jayatilleke (1963, p. 244). Norman (1993, p. 163) translates tathāgata as "(one who is) in that sort of (= very good) way," analogous to the "very specialized sense" of sugata: "(one who is) in a (particularly) good way" = Buddha.

[30] *Udāna* 66–67.

nature of two of its underlying presuppositions—that even the annihilationist *diṭṭhi* presuppose the concept of a self, and that the holding of views ipso facto betrays an attitude of clinging—this interpretation of the Buddha's knowledge in terms of no-self, entailing as it does several logical steps, smacks of a second-order rationalization of an earlier, more immediate understanding of the Buddha's knowledge. Passages like the one from the *Udāna* invite us to look for a more immediate and self-evident interpretation of the Buddha's knowledge and authority vis-à-vis rival teachers, albeit one that that can be made to cohere with, and redescribed in terms of, the no-self doctrine.

Debate in the Buddhist Suttas

I would like to suggest that we gain insight into the kind of knowledge alluded to in the *Udāna* passage and others like it when we relate the Buddha's interactions with rival teachers to the kind of agonistic debates found in the Vedic literature, perhaps most famously in the Yajñavalkya Kaṇḍa of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Such an approach has the advantage of foregrounding the question of the Buddha's relationship with rival teachers, a dimension of the Unanswered Questions that tends to recede in the background when they are understood either in terms of the doctrine of no-self or the principle of pragmatism.

Michael Witzel has conveniently identified a number of the characteristic features of the Upaniṣadic debates.[31] The most relevant of these features for our purposes are: (1) there are two or more adversaries; (2) the debate begins with a formal challenge issued by one of the participants that the other cannot avoid; and (3) the debate ends when one of the participants is forced openly to acknowledge the limitations of his (or her) knowledge vis-à-vis that of the victor. This admission of debate, moreover, can come about in either of two ways. Either the defeated party finds him- or herself[32] unable to answer a question put forward by their adversary, or, more interestingly, the defeated party asks a question exceeding the limits of his or her knowledge, as declared by the person being asked. In this second case where the questioner "asks beyond" (ati + √pṛch), the questioner is forced to retract his or her question and admit defeat. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of these debates is the threat, dramatically invoked by the winner at the moment of clinching victory, that his opponent's head will shatter should the latter fail to concede defeat.

References to debates characterized by these three features—two (or more) adversaries, a challenge that is met, and an acknowledgment of defeat[33]—are found in the Pāli Nikāyas, particularly in the *Dīgha-Nikāya*.[34] The threat of the shattered head, in particular, which, as Brian Black observes, functions as a convenient

[31] Witzel (1987, pp. 370–372).

[32] A notable exception to the male dominance in such debates is the intriguing figure of Gargī, who debates Yajñavalkya in BAU 3.6 and again in 3.8.

[33] Manné (1990, pp. 45, 75) and (1992, p. 117 and passim).

[34] According to Manné (1990, pp. 75–76 and passim), who has identified three types of suttas, namely, "sermons, debates, and consultations," the majority of the debate suttas are found in the *Digha Nikāya*.

identifying mark for a debate proper, as opposed to a dialogue between teacher and student,[35] appears in a number of Suttas. For example, in the Ambaṭṭha Sutta (DN 3) the Buddha tells the brahmin youth Ambaṭṭha that his head will shatter should he refuse to answer the Buddha's question about his (Ambaṭṭha's) ancestry.[36] The exposure of Ambaṭṭha's humble ancestry dramatically undermines Ambaṭṭha's pretensions of superiority.[37] In the *Majjhima Nikāya* (M.I. 231), the Buddha issues a similar threat to compel the reluctant Saccaka to admit that he lacks control over his physical body, thereby refuting the theory of the self that Saccaka defends.[38] In both of these examples, the Buddha invokes the threat of the shattered head against arrogant and impudent antagonists who openly challenge his authority. These examples support the generalization that the shattered head threat serves to enforce the proper hierarchical relations among teachers according to their level of knowledge.[39] It is evoked whenever there is a breach of etiquette, when an inferior fails to recognize the spiritual attainments of a superior. As the Buddha himself articulates this principle to his disciple Kassapa,

> If one not recognizing a disciple endowed with complete understanding were to say 'I know', and not perceiving were to declare 'I see', his head would fall apart.[40]

As Walter Ruben observed many years ago, the type of knowledge at stake in these debates was of a peculiar sort. Noting the curious absence of logical argumentation in the Upaniṣadic riddling contests—that the correctness of the responses is rarely challenged and justification for those responses, accordingly, is rarely provided—Ruben noted that it is not the correctness (*Richtigkeit*) but rather the scope or extent (*Umfang*) of knowledge that is at stake.[41] It was a question of

[35] Black (2009, p. 36; 2011, p. 155).

[36] D.I.94: ayaṃ kho pana te, ambaṭṭha, sahadhammiko pañho āgacchati, akāmā vyākātabbo. sace na vyākarissasi aññena vā aññaṃ paṭicarissasi, tuṇhi vā bhavissasi, pakkamissasi vā, etth' eva te sattadhā muddhā phalissasti.

[37] See Witzel (1987, pp. 381–382) and Black (2011, pp. 141–145 and passim).

[38] In this text there is an ironic play on the theme of powerlessness: the self's powerlessness vis-à-vis the khandhas mirrors Saccaka's powerlessness against the Buddha's argument.

[39] Perhaps the most well-known instance of this hierarchical principle is found in a story from the Buddha's youth: when Suddhodana has his son brought into honor the ascetic Kāḷa Devala, the young Gotama, in a dramatic inversion of customary etiquette, turned his feet around, placing them at (or on?) the matted hair of the ascetic (bodhisattassa pādā parivattitvā, tāpassa jaṭāsu patiṭṭhahiṃsu). Had the young Bodhisattva not performed this wonder, the text tells us, the ascetic's head would have split into seven pieces. (Nidānakathā, p. 54: sace hi ajānantā Bodhisattassa sīsaṃ tāpasassa pādamūle ṭhapeyyuṃ, sattadhā assa muddhaṃ phaleyya.) The mention of the matted hair of the ascetic, marker of his brahmanical caste identity, suggests a sociological reading of the text: namely, to suggest that the proper relation between the Buddha, as a member of the kṣatriya class, and brahmanical wisdom, as represented by the ascetic, is the inverse of the conventional one.

[40] S.II.220 (Kassapa-Saṃyutta): yo kho, kassapa, evaṃ sabbaṃ cetasā samannāgatam sāvakam ajānaññeva vadeyya jānāmīti, apasaññeva vadeyya passāmīti, muddhā pi tassa vipateyya.

[41] Ruben (1929, pp. 241; 247 and passim).

knowing *more* rather than knowing *better* (*des Mehrwissens statt des Besserwissens*).[42] The sought-after knowledge properly belonged to realms beyond the range of ordinary human experience. A particularly clear example of the supernatural origins of the knowledge at stake is found in the Yajñavalkya discourses of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Chapter 3). On two occasions Yajāvalkya is questioned about matters once revealed to the questioners by a Gandharva (BAU 3.7.3; 3.7.7). When Yajñavalkya is able to reveal the Gandharva's cosmological knowledge his challengers fall silent. Knowledge pertaining to extra-human realms—more specifically, knowing the identifications linking this realm to others—gave one access to supernatural powers, including, presumably, the ability to invoke the threat of the shattered head. That the magical-religious power underlying the threat of the shattered head has a supernatural source comes out clearly in the Buddhist texts.[43] When the Buddha tells Ambaṭṭha that his head will shatter if he fails to answer the Buddha's question a third time, the text relates that a Yakṣa wielding an iron hammer appears over Ambaṭṭha's head, poised to carry out the threat should Ambaṭṭha fail to answer.[44] The same detail is found in the Cūḷa-Saccaka Sutta.[45]

That the knowledge at stake in such contests pertains to matters outside the realm of human experience justifies understanding the Upaniṣadic concept of "asking beyond" (ati +√pṛch) in an almost literal sense. If knowledge implies power over its object, then one can perhaps understand the danger in asking about realms and deities surpassing the questioner in power and authority. Such might be the sense of Yajñavalkya's threat to Gargī (BAU 3.6) that she is "asking too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions."[46]

Notwithstanding the similarities between the Buddhist and Vedic debates noted above,[47] it must be conceded that the former reflect a style of thought that is quite different from that of the latter.[48] In the Buddhist debates the validity of the claims discussed *is* routinely challenged and justifications given. In general, the "magical" elements characteristic of late Vedic literature—such as the appeal to homologies

[42] Ruben (1929, p. 245). Noting the same feature of Upaniṣadic knowledge, Bronkhorst (2007, p. 229) speaks of the "linear conception of sacred knowledge" in late Vedic literature. Cf. Fiser's (1984, p. 72) remark on the Vedic brahmodhyas: "The means to attain that goal [viz. recognition and material rewards] was to outwit (lit. 'out-talk', *ati-vad-*) the opponent rather than to convince him by the strength of the arguments." In a quite literal sense, the winner was the one who got the last word.

[43] Manné (1992, p. 136).

[44] Witzel (1987, pp. 381–382).

[45] Black (2011, p. 158) suggests that one reason the Buddhist texts mention the Yakṣa as the executioner of the threat is to dissociate the Buddha from an act of violence.

[46] BAU 3.6; trans. Olivelle, pp. 40–41. Cohen (2008) suggests that "it is the question itself, rather than her lack of knowledge or stubbornness that leads to the warning." For her final question about the basis of the "worlds of brahman" assumed that Brahman is not the ultimate principle. And yet, inasmuch as the question betrays Gargī's ignorance of the nature of Brahman, the distinction may be an academic one.

A curiously similar dialogue, in both structure and tone, is found in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta (MN 44). To the lay follower (upāsaka) Visākha's question about the counterpart (paṭibhāga) to nibbāna, the bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā replies that the question goes too far (accasarā; ati + sarati): M.I. 304: accasārā-āvuso Visākha pañhaṃ, na-asakkhi pañhānaṃ pariyantaṃ gahetuṃ.

[47] Manné (1992, pp. 117–119).

[48] Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 255–257, 270–271).

between microcosmos and macrocosmos, fanciful etymologies, the reification of abstract entities, and the use of performative-magical mantras[49]—are less conspicuous in contemporary Buddhist literature.[50] Indeed, a prominent theme in texts like the Brahmajāla Sutta is the Buddha's disapproval of the array of magical-religious practices—divinization, prognostication, and the use of charms and incantations—that were the preserve of contemporary Brahmanical culture.[51] Included among the practices singled out for censure, interestingly enough, is sectarian debate.[52] Here we see a prominent theme in many of the texts dealing with the Unanswered Questions: the Buddha's aloofness from such debate.

What allows the Buddha to remain aloof from such debates, ironically enough, is precisely what allows his Vedic counterparts to triumph, viz. his direct knowledge of matters lying beyond the ken of his rivals.[53] The texts contrast the mere reasoning of the sectarians with the direct apprehension and wisdom of the Buddha. In a refrain appearing in the Brahmajāla Sutta after each set of speculative views put forth by "some ascetics and brahmins" (*eke samaṇa-brāhmaṇā*), the Buddha declares, in the bold manner of a Yajñavalkya:

> This, O monks, does the Tathāgata know: These speculative views, grasped in this way and taken up in this way, lead to such a postmortem state, to such a kind of rebirth. And this the Tathāgata knows. And he knows things beyond this as well. But he does not become attached to this knowledge. Unattached, he has realized release by himself.
> Knowing as they are the arising and disappearance of sensations, as well as their sweetness, danger, and outcome, the Tathāgata is completely liberated.[54]
> These, O monks, are those things which are profound, difficult to realize and understand, calming, excellent, subtle and inaccessible to mere logic, and known only to the wise. And these things the Tathāgata declares, after having come to understood and realize them by himself. And it is by virtue of these things that those rightly speaking of the qualities of the Tathāgata should speak.[55]

[49] Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 256, 274).

[50] As Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 256–257, 270) argues, one is not justified in concluding from this that the Brahmanical texts are earlier, much less that these features of "magical thought" evidence a more primitive mentality. On the use of the problematic category of "magic" as a foil for modern rationality, see Styers (2004).

[51] Bronkhorst (2007, pp. 271–273).

[52] Brahmajāla Sutta, D.I.8; also the parallel passage in the Samaññaphala Sutta, D.I.66.

[53] Of course, the institution of intellectual debate alluded to here is more akin to the sophistical forms of debate referred to in the *Caraka Saṃhita* and the *Nyāya Sūtra* than to those in the early Upaniṣads. One suspects that the Buddha is tendentiously redescribing Brahmanical institutions of intellectual debate as sophistry.

[54] D.1.16–17: tayidaṃ, bhikkhave, Tathāgato pajānāti: ime diṭṭhiṭṭhānā evaṃ-gahitā evaṃ-parāmaṭṭhā, evaṃ-gatikā bhavissanti evam-abhisamparāyā ti. Tañ ca Tathāgato pajānāti, tato ca uttaritaraṃ pajānāti, tañ ca pajānanaṃ na parāmasati, aparāmasato c'assa paccattaṃ yeva nibbuti viditā.
vedanānaṃ samudayañ ca atthagamañ ca assādañ ca ādīnavañ ca nissaraṇañ ca yathābhūtaṃ viditvā, anupādā vimutto, bhikkhave, Tathāgato.

[55] D.1.16–17: tayidaṃ, bhikkhave, Tathāgato pajānāti: ime diṭṭhiṭṭhānā evaṃ-gahitā evaṃ-parāmaṭṭhā, evaṃ-gatikā bhavissanti evam-abhisamparāyā ti. Tañ ca Tathāgato pajānāti, tato ca uttaritaraṃ pajānāti, tañ ca pajānanaṃ na parāmasati, aparāmasato c'assa paccattaṃ yeva nibbuti viditā.

Here we might distinguish between two aspects of the Buddha's superior knowledge. The first of these is its immediacy. The Buddha's knows what he knows through direct experience, whereas his sectarian rivals rely on mere hearsay. The Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta (M.I. 486) makes this contrast through a nice play on the Pāli words *diṭṭhi*, "view," and *diṭṭha*, "what is seen." In reply to Vacchagotta's question of whether he holds any speculative view (*kiñci diṭṭhigataṃ*), the Buddha declares:

> The Tathāgata has put aside speculative viewpoints (*diṭṭhigataṃ*). For this is seen (*diṭṭhaṃ*) by the Tathāgata, O Vaccha: "This is physical form, this is the arising of physical form, this is the disappearance of physical form; this is sensation, the arising of sensation, and the disappearance of sensation, [etc.]."[56]

Buddhist texts use the expression "the eye of dhamma" (*dhamma-cakkha*) to refer to the direct realization that "everything that has the nature of arising also has the nature of cessation."[57] Views (*diṭṭhi*) arise in default of this direct vision of the impermanence of reality.

As mentioned above, a number of modern interpreters have seized on this emphasis on direct experience to render the Buddha a kind of radical empiricist who eschews claims of spiritual authority. However, this line of interpretation fails to consider the second aspect of the Buddha's knowledge: its transcendental object. The Tathāgata knows "matters profound, difficult to realize and understand, […] subtle, and comprehensible only to the wise." In other words, the matters known to the Buddha do not belong to common human experience.[58] And by virtue of the transcendental nature of this knowledge that the Buddha, like an Upaniṣadic sage, exercises a degree of authority.

Nowhere is this emphasis on the Buddha's transcendence more apparent than in the passages that describe the untraceability of the Tathāgata after death. In the first dialogue of the Avyākata-Saṃyutta, the bhikkhunī Khema attempts to explain to King Pasenadi of Kosala why the Buddha refused to answer any of the four

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Footnote 55 continued

vedanānaṃ samudayañ ca atthagamañ ca assādañ ca ādīnavañ ca nissaraṇañ ca yathābhūtaṃ viditvā, anupādā vimutto, bhikkhave, Tathāgato.

D.I.17 (p. 37): ime kho te, bhikkhave, dhammā gambhīrā duddasā duranubodhā santā paṇītā atakkāvacarā nipuṇā paṇḍita-vedanīyā, ye Tathāgato sayaṃ abhiññā, sacci-katvā, pavedeti, yehi Tathāgatassa yathā-bhuccaṃ vaṇṇaṃ sammā vadamānā vadeyyum. For a rhetorically similar declaration of knowledge, see D.I.159 (Jāliya Sutta): ahaṃ kho pan' etaṃ āvuso evaṃ jānāmi evaṃ passāmi. atha ca panāhaṃ na vaāmi 'taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīran' ti vā aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīran' ti vā.

[56] M.I.486: diṭṭhaṃ h'etaṃ, Vaccha, Tathāgatena iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthagamo, […].

[57] yaṃ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ taṃ sabbaṃ nirodhadhammaṃ. Cf. Collins (1982, p. 106).

[58] We might say that the empiricist and the Absolutist interpretations seize upon only one of these aspects of the Buddha's knowledge (namely, the empiricist its immediacy, and the Absolutist its transcendence). Each of these interpretations builds on a genuine insight, but go astray in their one-sidedness. The Absolutist, it should be noted, has the virtue of explaining the Buddha's ability to transcend sectarian disputation.

questions pertaining to the Tathāgata's postmortem existence.[59] After asking the king whether he has any official able to count the sand in the Ganges or amount of water in the ocean, she draws the following analogy:

> So too, O great king, the physical form by which one might recognize the Tathāgata is abandoned, cut down to the root, destroyed, rendered incapable of arising in the future. The Tathāgata is free from all reckoning of physical form, O king; he is deep, boundless and unfathomable, just like the ocean. Thus the statement, "The Tathāgata exists after death" does not apply.[60]

Elsewhere the Buddha declares that,

> [T]he gods including Inda, Brahmā and Prajāpati, searching for a bhikkhu whose mind is released in this way, (thinking) 'This is what a tathāgata's consciousness is dependent upon', do not find him. Why is this? I say, bhikkhus, that a tathāgata is not findable in the phenomenal world.[61]

The suggestion here that the nirvanized monk resides on a plane of existence that is inaccessible to the apprehension of gods and men recalls the "linear" conception of knowledge that Ruben noted in his analysis of the Upaniṣadic debates, that what is at stake is more the extent than the correctness of knowledge. Of course, one can interpret such statements in a purely philosophical sense. Questions about the Tathāgata's postmortem existence cannot be answered because they falsely assume that the concept of existence in question is that of the conditioned dhammas. As mentioned above, I do not want to question the value of this line of interpretation. The point I would like to make, rather, is that the philosophical interpretation of the Unanswered Questions as resting on faulty presuppositions should not be allowed to suppress a more "mythical" level of meaning which is suggested by the parallel with the Upaniṣadic debates, namely, that the questions cannot be posed because they concern matters lying utterly beyond the ken of the questioner.[62]

Unanswered Questions in the Context of Formalized Debate

Manné remarks in passing that the Buddha's creation of a category of questions that remain unanswered was daring when seen in the context of ancient Indian debate, where, as we have seen, the failure to answer a question could result in the loss of

[59] The king subsequently receives exactly the same explanation directly from the Buddha himself.

[60] S.IV.376: evam eva kho mahārāja, yena rūpena tathāgataṃ paññāpayamāno paññāpeyya, taṃ rūpaṃ tathāgatassa pahīnam ucchinnamūlam tālāvatthukatam anabhāvakatam āyatim anuppādakataṃ. rūpasaṅkhāya vimutto kho mahārāja, tathāgato gambhiro appameyyo duppariyogāho seyyathāpi mahāsamuddo. hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti pi na upeti.

[61] M.1.140. Trans. Norman (1991, p. 5).

[62] There is the danger that the philosophical line of interpretation relegates to the level of mere rhetoric, of "poetic feeling" (Collins 1982, p. 136), a more "mythical" stratum of interpretation. Relevant here would be critiques of Rudolf Bultmann's "demythologization" project in Biblical interpretation. See, inter alia, Tillich (2001 [1957], pp. 57–58), Ricoeur (1967, pp. 164–171, 347–353) and Dupré (2000, pp. 110–120).

one's head.[63] That may well be true, but we must recall that the respondent was in danger only if he knew less, but claimed to know more, than the questioner. And it is clear that Buddha did not refuse to answer because of ignorance or, notwithstanding the claims of some modern interpreters,[64] agnosticism. The Buddha's refusal to answer, rather, is to be understood in terms of the second possible scenario of winning victory in the Vedic debate, viz., the soon-to-be victor warning his interrogator that the latter is asking beyond the limits of his or her knowledge. Seen from this perspective, if anyone was placing themselves at risk, it was the Buddha's questioners.

To be sure, the dialogues in which the Buddha explains his refusal to answer the Unanswered Questions are not, generally speaking, agonistic. Nowhere does the Buddha tell his questioners that their heads will split apart if they refuse to retract their questions. In the Sutta texts dealing with the Unanswered Questions references to sectarian debate, while prevalent, are generally oblique. The dialogues often take place on a "meta" level: typically the Buddha, or even one of his disciples acting on his behalf, explains his refusal to answer the questions on a previous occasion.[65] Moreover, in those cases where the Buddha is questioned more directly, it is invariably in the context of a conversation between teacher and student, not one between rival teachers with claims of authority at stake. Even Māluṅkya, although impudently questioning the Buddha's worthiness as a teacher by raising the possibility that he did not know the answers to the questions,[66] was not himself claiming to have superior knowledge. In the Mahāli Sutta (DN 6), to cite another example, the two mendicants Maṇḍissa and Jāliya approach the Buddha reverently before asking whether the soul is the same as or different from the body.

Given the obliqueness of the references to sectarian debate and the predominance of the student–teacher dialogue as the context in which the Buddha explains his refusal to answer the questions, one might question the relevance of ancient Indian debate for understanding the Unanswered Questions. And yet, the dialogues in which the Buddha explains his refusal to answer the questions to friendly audiences allude to situations in which the Buddha is challenged more directly in debate. At the risk of engaging in some undue speculation, I would like to suggest that there is reason to suspect that the category of questions to be set aside (*ṭhapanīya*) is fully intelligible only when considered in light of the kind of formalized, agonistic debates that we find in the Brāhmanas and Upaniṣads.

An admittedly indirect way of making this point is to note the partial obscurity of the category of *ṭhapanīya* questions in the context of the fourfold typology of debate

[63] Manné (1990, p. 54).

[64] Against the agnostic line of interpretation, see, e.g., Collins (1982, p. 136) and Murti (1960, pp. 36–37). Collins (1982, p. 284, no. 15) gives rauwallner as an example of a scholar who interpreted the Buddha's silence in terms of an agnostic attitude towards metaphysical questions; Murti (1960, p. 37) Oldenberg and Keith.

[65] The paradigmatic example of this structure would be the Buddha's explanation to Ānanda for his refusal to answer Vacchagotta's questions on the self (S.IV.400–401).

[66] M.I.427: sace Bhagavā jānāti: sassato loko ti, sassato loko ti me Bhagavā vyākarotu, […] no ce Bhagavā jānāti: sassato loko ti vā asassato loko ti vā, ajānato kho pana apassato etad eva ujukaṃ hoti yad idaṃ: na jānāmi na passāmi ti.

questions found in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* (A.I. 197–198; A.II. 46). The four types of questions are (1) those to be answered categorically (*ekaṃsa-vyākaraṇīya*); (2) those to be answered with a distinction (*vibhajja-vyākaraṇīya*); (3) those to be answered with a counter-question (*paṭipucchā-vyākaraṇīya*); and, finally, (4) those that are simply to be put aside (*ṭhapanīya*). Skill in debate consists in responding to each of these types of question with the appropriate response, i.e., answering a categorical question categorically, answering a question calling for a distinction with the appropriate distinction, and so on.[67] The commentary (AA.II. 308–309) helpfully gives examples of the appropriate responses to each kind of question. The question, "Is the eye impermanent?" (*cakkhuṃ aniccaṃ*) should be answered categorically in the affirmative. The question, "Is the impermanent the eye?" (*aniccaṃ nāma cakkhuṃ*) is to be answered with a distinction: "Not only is the eye is impermanent, but also the ear and nose." The question, "Is the ear like the eye?" (*yathā cakkhuṃ tathā sotaṃ*) is to be answered by asking the sense in which the question is posed; if it is in the sense of seeing (*dassanaṭṭhena*), then the answer is clearly 'No'; if, on the other hand, one asks whether they are alike with respect to impermanence (*aniccaṭṭhena*), then the answer is 'Yes'. Finally, the text gives as examples of questions to be put aside those "beginning with 'Is the soul the same as the body'," presumably alluding to the standard list of ten Unanswered Questions.[68] Here the only explanation we are given is that this type of question was "undetermined by the Blessed One" (*avyākatam etaṃ bhagavatā*). The explanation is little more than an appeal to tradition.

This fourth category of questions looks like the odd one out in a typology that otherwise appears to reflect a logically more argumentative style of debate than what we have in the Upaniṣads. For it is not entirely clear which properties distinguish the questions to be put aside from those to be answered with a distinction or from those calling for clarification through a counter-question. To dramatize this point, let us take the well-known passage in the Avyākata-Saṃyutta in which the Buddha refuses to answer Vacchagotta's question of whether there is, or is not, a self (S.IV. 400–401). Prima facie, there does not seem to be any reason the Buddha could not have responded to Vacchagotta's questions with a counter-question, specifically, by asking Vacchagotta the sense in which he understood the self.[69] If it could be determined that Vacchagotta understood the self as an unchanging eternal principle, then the Buddha could presumably have answered the question with an unambiguous 'No'—a response that, notwithstanding the justification the Buddha later gives to Ānanda, would hardly have produced more bewilderment than the silent treatment that this poor seeker received!

Let me suggest the hypothesis that the category of questions to be set aside, as distinct from those to be answered with a clarifying counter-question or with a distinction, reflects a highly formalized type of debate situation, such as we find in

[67] A.I.197; A.II.46.

[68] Note that the fifth Unanswered Question is taken to exemplify the Questions as a whole. In the final section of this article I consider the paradigmatic status of the second set of Unanswered Questions (i.e., the fifth and sixth) with respect to the list as a whole.

[69] As he in fact does in S.IV.378: tena hi mahārāja taññevettha paṭipucchissāmi […].

the Upaniṣads. Put differently, the questions in the fourth category in the Aṅguttara typology are not to be distinguished from the other categories in terms of their formal, logical properties, but rather contextually, in terms of the different type of debate situation they reflect. Let us recall Ruben's observation that in the Upaniṣadic debates the correctness of a specific response is not challenged. We do not find in these dialogues the kind of logical argumentation[70] that seems to be presupposed by the other three categories of question in the Aṅguttara's typology. When one becomes familiar with the Upaniṣadic style of debate, it becomes difficult to imagine the respondent interrupting the interrogation by posing a counter-question, or even pausing to make a distinction before offering his response. The debates appear to follow a highly formalized, even ritualized procedure: one party questions the other for a stretch, and then they exchange roles in what appears to be a prescribed manner.[71] The closest modern analogue to this style of questioning might be courtroom interrogations, where the defendants or witnesses being cross-examined are discouraged from posing counter-questions or even, when requested to answer either 'yes' or 'no', from drawing distinctions. Under such conditions a defendant finds herself forced to answer questions on the prosecuting attorney's terms; only when this "round" of questioning is allowed to run its course and it is the defense attorney's turn to question does she have an opportunity to qualify the responses given earlier under a hostile line of interrogation. Could the category of *ṭhapanīya* questions reflect a similar situation in which the person under interrogation had a limited range of options? In other words, might the *ṭhapaniya* category of question be relevant only in default of the *paṭipucchā-vyākaraṇīya* and the *vibhajja-vyākaraṇīya* categories?

This hypothesis receives a measure of support from the anthropologist Maurice Bloch's analysis of formalized speech, which was based on his study of the solemn oratory of the Merina people of Madagascar. Bloch understands formalization in terms of a restriction of the various dimensions of a speech act, such as the choice of vocabulary, the range of syntactic forms, and/or the sources for the speech's content.[72] The restriction of linguistic choice internal to a speech act extends to the type of permitted response, assuming, of course, the other party accepts the formalized code.[73] In other words, formalization drastically reduces the number of speech acts B which can follow a speech act A.[74] When the formalization of language reaches the point of effectively excluding the possibility of contradiction, as in the case of the styles of oratory Bloch studied in Madagascar, it becomes a form of social control.[75] As such it becomes a vehicle of traditional authority. At its extreme, such formalized speech encourages an all-or-nothing response: when one

[70] Ruben (1929, p. 243).

[71] We find this pattern of orderly role-reversal in the debates comprising the *Kathāvatthu*. The debates found in the *Kathāvatthu* are highly stylized, however. I believe it would be a mistake to read this text as a transcription of debates that actually took place.

[72] Bloch (1975, p. 13).

[73] Bloch (1975, p. 19) and (1989, p. 28).

[74] Bloch (1989, p. 28) and (1975, p. 19).

[75] Bloch (1989, pp. 28–29).

finds oneself in a formal speech situation where one is addressed by someone speaking from a position of authority, one is compelled either to accept unquestioningly what is said, or—an obviously more desperate and risky option—rejecting the speech altogether by transforming it into ridicule.[76] Another way of putting this is that formalization, by greatly restricting the range of responses to a statement, including contradiction, excludes logic. For, as Bloch argues, logic presupposes "the potential of one statement to be followed by a large number of others and the possibility of contradiction."[77]

The foregoing analysis might suggest that the category of *ṭhapaniya* questions reflects such a situation of restricted communication. One sets aside a question in default any possibility of probing its underlying presuppositions or introducing an important distinction. The Unanswered Questions might ultimately harken back to the kind of formalized debate situation that we find in the early Upaniṣads—to contests, in other words, whose outcome was ultimately decided less by argument and more by the imposition of authority. As we saw above, in the Upaniṣadic debates, when a Yajñavalkya finds himself at the receiving end of a coercive line of interrogation, his refusal to answer constitutes a bold challenge to the questioner's authority. At the moment a presumptuus adversary appears to have gained the upper hand, his refusal dramatically reestablishes the proper hierarchy between the two parties. If the foregoing analysis has any merit, then we might understand the Buddha's refusal to answer certain questions in terms of an effort to reestablish the proper relation of spiritual authority.

The Assimilation of the Unanswered Questions to the Eternalism/Annihilationism Problematic

The foregoing analysis is admittedly speculative. If the Unanswered Questions harken back to the kind of highly formalized debate situation that we find in the early Upaniṣads, that situation is only hinted at in the texts.

It is likely, at any rate, that the list of Unanswered Questions reflects a process of systematization, assimilation, and schematization. It is plausible that the three sets of questions comprising the ten—namely, the four questions concerning the nature of self and world, the pair concerning the relation between soul and body, and the last four concerning the Tathāgata's post-mortem existence—originally derived from different contexts and were subsequently brought together. In the process they would have shed some of the associations they had in those original contexts. That they were subsequently brought together is suggested by the fact that the second and third sets are occasionally mentioned separately, and, if one counts a text like the Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1), the first set as well. Let me conclude by suggesting the hypothesis that the list of ten questions results from the assimilation of the first and third sets to the second.

[76] Bloch (1975, p. 9; 1989, p. 29).

[77] Bloch (1975, p. 21): "Formalized language is therefore non-logical."

The second set of Unanswered Questions gives direct expression to the doctrine of the Middle Way between annihilationism and eternalism.[78] A natural connection between the second set of Unanswered Questions and the doctrine of the Middle Way is suggested by a passage in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (S.II. 60–62) which happens to be one of the few texts where the second set appears on its own.[79] The passage concerns a series of questions about the nature and subject of each of the twelve links of Dependent Origination. The Buddha declares each of these pairs, beginning with "What is death and dying?" and "To whom does death and dying belong?" (*katamaṃ nu kho bhante jarāmarasṇaṃ, kassa ca panidaṃ jarāmaraṇaṃ*), unfit (*no kallo*). After then establishing that each of these inappropriate pairs of questions is equivalent to the fifth and sixth Unanswered Questions, he declares that the latter pair corresponds to the two extremes that each exclude the religious life.[80] The commentary names these two extremes as annihilationism and eternalism, respectively.[81]

Above I alluded to the possibility that the commentarial gloss of *tathāgata* with *attā* or, alternatively, *satta* served to assimilate the questions concerning the Tathāgata's postmortem existence to the problematic of the Middle Way between eternalism and annihilationism. Originally the refusal to answer any of this third group of questions served to establish the Tathāgata's transcendence over ordinary beings, his inaccessibility to conditioned modes of apprehension. Once '*tathāgata*' is glossed as '*satta*,' the refusal to answer the question of whether the Tathāgata exists after death becomes a refusal to countenance either Sassatavāda with an affirmative response or Ucchedavāda with a negative one.

The pair of questions on the relation between soul and body plays a similar role with respect to the first set of questions on the nature of self and world (*attā ca loko ca*). The four questions comprising the first set reflect a distillation and

[78] The doctrine of the middle way between annihilationism and eternalism, as suggested by the Puggalavāda's appeal to it, would seem to predate the no-self doctrine.

[79] Another is the Mahāli Sutta, DN 6, repeated in the Jāliya Sutta, DN 7. See also the *Kathāvatthu*, sections 156; 166; 167; 168; 169; and 235 (KV.26–27, 32–34, 54). In the *Kathāvatthu*, one of the latest Canonical texts, the fifth and sixth Unanswered Questions appear in the context of the reductio ad absurdum argument that the Theravādin uses against the Puggalavāda thesis that the person transmigrates (sv'eva puggalo sandhāvati). In section 166, the Theravādin forces his Puggalavādin opponent to retract his assent to the claim that the person transmigrates with his physical form (sarūpo sandhāvati). This he does by showing that this understanding of the Puggalavāda thesis is equivalent to the proposition that taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ (KV.32–33). The latter proposition is understood by both disputants to be unacceptable. In the next round (167; KV.33) the Theravādin argues that the alternative understanding of the thesis that the person transmigrates, namely, that the person transmigrates without physical form, is equivalent to the proposition that aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ. In these arguments, the propositions corresponding to the fifth and sixth Unanswered Questions are understood to refer directly to the Buddhist heresies of Eternalism and Annihilationism, respectively.

[80] S.II.61: taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīran ti vā bhikkhu diṭṭhiyā sati brahmacariyavāso na hoti. aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīran ti vā bhikkhu diṭṭhiyā sati, brahmacariyo na hoti. ete te bhikkhu ubho ante anupagamma majjhena Tathāgato dhammaṃ deseti.

[81] SA.II.68–69: taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ ti yassa hi ayaṃ diṭṭhi, so jīve ucchijjamāne sarīraṃ ucchijjati. sarīre ucchijjante jīvitaṃ ucchijjatī ti gaṇhāti. evaṃ gaṇhato sā diṭṭhi satto ucchijjatī ti gahitattā ucchedadiṭṭhi nāma hoti. […] dutiya-naye: aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ ti, yassa ayaṃ diṭṭhi, so sarīraṃ idh' eva ucchijjati: jīvitaṃ pana pañjarato sakuṇo viya yathā-sukhaṃ gacchatṇto gaṇhati. evaṃ gaṇhato sā diṭṭhi imasmā lokā jīvitaṃ paraṃ lokaṃ gataṃ ti gahitattā sassata-diṭṭhi nāma hoti.

schematization of the sprawling list of sixty-two heretical views enumerated in the Brahmajāla Sutta.[82] Originally, the list of positions on the nature of self and world may have served simply to contrast the Dhamma with a proliferating welter of partial and exclusionary views, a sense, incidentally, that is preserved in the *Udāna*'s image of the blind men and the elephant. When the various "heretical" views are streamlined into the first four Unanswered Questions, they are seen as only so many variations on the duality between eternalism and annihilationism.

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[82] A link between the two lists of views is suggested by a passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (S.IV.287, par. 12). A list of views parallel to that of the Brahmajāla is found in the Pañcattaya Sutta (M.II.227ff.).

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Abbreviations

All references are to the relevant Pali Text Society editions, with their corresponding volumes

A. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*
AA. *Aṅguttara Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā* (*Manorathapūraṇī*)
BAU Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
D. *Dīgha Nikāya*
DA. *Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā* (*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*)
S. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*
M. *Majjhima Nikāya*
Ud. *Udāna*
UdA. *Udāna Aṭṭhakathā* (*Paramatthadīpanī*)