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The meaning of existence (*bhava*) in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha

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ABSTRACT
This paper seeks to reconstruct the meaning of existence in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha by considering how the notion is used in the most systematic contexts in which it appears, and how it could be best interpreted. The discourses are concerned with how existence is used to support and consolidate a certain attitude of ownership, appropriation, and entitlement over contents of experience, in virtue of which one can claim that this or that is 'mine'. The problem with this move is that it seems to require a degree of stability that is at odds with the fundamental uncertainty (*anicca*) of all conditioned realities. Existence is used to somehow cover up uncertainty, and thus allow for a semblance of genuine ownership and possession, while in fact possession and ownership are just deluded views doomed to be contradicted by the structural uncertainty of actual experience. This reading entails that the early discourses do share with later traditions an anti-realist inspiration, which is worth exploring in its own right.

1. Anti-realism

In order to be anything in particular, any being needs first of all to exist, and hence existence can be regarded as the most general and fundamental feature of any possible reality. Existence comes first and before any further qualification; hence, any other qualification can only be dependent upon or secondary to existence itself. Call this the 'realist' approach (for further discussion, see Westerhoff, *The Non-Existence*).

In the long history of Buddhist thought, several schools developed various strategies against the realist approach to existence. Yogācāra, for instance, is best known for its claim that all realities are dependent on how they are

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experienced by a conscious mind (see an overview in Westerhoff, *The Golden Age*, 147-216). Madhyamaka is known for its claim that no reality can be found to have its own inherent existence (for some interpretations of the arguments in support of this claim, see Garfield and Priest, "Nāgārjuna and the Limits"; Priest "The Structure of Emptiness"; Westerhoff, "On the Nihilist Interpretation"). The fact that there is no 'mind-independent' reality has been considered a fundamental point that might be endorsed also from a Madhyamaka perspective (Siderits, "Causation and Emptiness"). While traditional Indian and Tibetan doxographies tended to present these two schools as rivals, recent scholarship stresses how they complement each other (King "Early Yogācāra"; Harvey *An Introduction*, 129; Garfield and Westerhoff eds. *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra*; but cf. Siderits, "The Case for Discontinuity" for a more discontinuist reading).

In earlier periods, though, certain strands of *Abhidharma* thought and later commentarial literature showed a tendency towards a reification of entities (Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*). Some entities are not genuinely real and do not really exist because they can be analysed and decomposed in terms of underlying more fundamental entities, which are then taken to be genuinely and ultimately real. Due to this sort of mereological nihilism (wholes are not true entities), there would be a dichotomy emerging between things that appear to exist but are not real, and things that are instead real and have their own existence. Some school (like the Sarvāstivāda) even maintained that all realities (including past and future) do have their own kind of existence (Williams, "On the Abhidharma ontology"). This form of realism seems to have been among the targets of the later non-realist schools. The fact that earlier strata of the Buddhist tradition allow for realism raises an important question about to what extent Buddhist thought has to be construed as necessarily anti-realist; and if this is not the case, why the non-realist approaches did seem to take over the realist ones as time went by.

This paper examines this problem from the point of view of the early Pāli discourses by looking, in particular, at how existence is discussed in the context of the core teachings attributed to the Buddha there. Existence (Pāli *bhava*) occupies a key role in the twelvefold structure of conditioned co-origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), and in the four noble truths. Moreover, *bhava* (or related notions) also appears at other important spots, usually in the context of showing why fulfilling the soteriological goal of liberation somehow requires debunking and abandoning the use of this notion altogether.

Although later Mahāyāna traditions did also rely on other textual sources, they all remained formally committed to some degree of faithfulness to the early teachings, often aiming at complementing or deepening them, never at actually rejecting them. Among the core teachings of the Buddha, the

discourses point to the insight into conditioned co-origination as perhaps the most fundamental and radical one. Nāgārjuna, the noble father of the Madhyamaka and one of the most prominent authorities of later Mahāyāna thought, begins his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* with some verses extolling the Buddha's teaching on conditioned co-origination, and he explicitly refers in his work to some of the key points in the early discourses in which the Buddha discusses existence.[1] While Nāgārjuna's appropriation of the early teachings might be seen as suspicious or just strategic (Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context*), it does raise the question about the extent to which the anti-realist approach defended by Nāgārjuna (or perhaps even that of later Yogā-cāra) can be supported by the early discourses themselves.

From a scholarly point of view, the notion of (inherent or own) existence (Sanskrit *sva-bhāva*) in later Buddhist thought has received some attention (e.g. Westerhoff, "The Madhyamaka Concept"), but its roots in the discourses still remain largely unexplored. The (Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit) compound *svabhāva* is never used in the discourses themselves, and it only appears in the *Abhidharma* literature. Since most of today's philosophically-oriented scholarship on Buddhist thought tends to regard the *Abhidharma* as the starting point of proper Buddhist philosophy (e.g. Westerhoff, *The Golden Age*, 36), philosophical explorations of the notion of existence in early Buddhist thought (e.g. Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*, 193-243) usually take that as their starting point, leaving the discourses themselves aside. However, from a historical point of view, it is also clear that the *Abhidharma* was more than a simple systematization and 'cleaning up' of the original teachings, as the divergences among various ancient schools on several key philosophical topics reveal. This indicates that studying the *Abhidharma* cannot dispense from a more direct investigation into the discourses themselves, since there is no reason for believing that the *Abhidharma* could exhaust or uncontroversially capture what the discourses have to say.

An important exception to this trend is provided by Wynne's study ("The ātman and its negation") of the notion of personal identity in the early discourses. Wynne draws attention to the way in which self-consciousness, existence, and even space-time are regarded as conceptually constructed in key canonical sources (such as DN 1 and 15). He also suggests that "this challenging philosophy was misunderstood and replaced by a sophisticated but simpler realistic philosophy" (Wynne, "The ātman and its negation", 166).

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[1]For instance, Nāgārjuna quotes the discourse to Kaccana (SN 12.15) in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* ch. 15, v. 7, in Nāgārjuna, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, 159. Cf. also Nāgārjuna, *Ratnāvalī* I.26-27: "*nāsmy ahaṃ na bhaviṣyāmi na me 'sti na bhaviṣyati* | *iti bālasya santrāsaḥ paṇḍitasya bhayakṣayaḥ*" ("I am not, I will not be. I have not, I will not have, | That frightens all the childish and extinguishes fear in the wise," translated by Hopkins in Nāgārjuna, *Precious Garland*, 97), with *Samyutta Nikāya* 22.55: "*No cassaṃ, no ca me siyā, nābhavissa, na me bhavissatī*" ("I might not be, it might not be mine; I will not be, it will not be mine"). For an early, and fairly speculative comparison between apophantic elements in the *Aṭṭhaka-vagga* and Nāgārjuna, see Gómez, "Proto-Mādhyamika".

Leaving aside for now whether this change originated from an actual philosophical misunderstanding or rather from some shift of emphasis in the presentation of the early teachings, the following discussion attempts to explore this insight further.

The discourses explicitly investigate how the notion of existence comes about and what the implicit agenda behind it is. They explore why ordinary human individuals use the notion of existence in order to interpret their experience and what they want to achieve by doing so. More specifically, the discourses are concerned with how existence is used to support and consolidate a certain attitude of ownership, appropriation, and entitlement over contents of experience, in virtue of which one can claim that this or that is 'mine'. From the fact that 'I *have* this body' one can infer that 'this body *exists*'. The problem with this move is that it seems to require a degree of stability that is at odds with the fundamental uncertainty (*anicca*) of all conditioned realities. Existence is used to somehow cover up uncertainty, and thus allow for a semblance of genuine ownership and possession, while in fact possession and ownership are just deluded views doomed to be contradicted by the structural uncertainty of actual experience. Striving to appropriate what cannot be appropriated is a frustrating endeavour, which the discourses encourage us to see as bound to suffering and best avoided altogether.

This reading entails that the early discourses do share with later traditions an anti-realist inspiration (*pace* some accounts found in certain *Abhidharma* strands), which is worth exploring in its own right. In fact, the discourses seem to combine (or rather not distinguish) the two anti-realist approaches that will be developed perhaps more independently by later traditions. On the one hand, the discourses see *bhava* not as a fundamental property, but as a conditioned condition of experience, a link in the structure of conditioned co-origination, dependent on appropriation and leading to (re)birth. This entails that existence and its meaning depend on the basic infrastructure in which, and through which, sentient beings experience reality.[2] On the other hand, the discourses see the notion of existence itself as a dependent construction, and they oppose any attempt of taking existence at face value, as if this notion was able to capture the most general and fundamental property of reality. Explicitly, existence pretends to say something about what all things essentially are and ought to be in order to receive any further qualification. In fact, though, existence is just a device through which appropriation sustains its deluded wish to hold on to contents of experience that are ultimately unownable.

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[2]Notice that conditioned co-origination in the discourses is not seen as a metaphysical doctrine about the universal inter-connectedness of all things, but more as a way of understanding and exploring how sentient experience arises and is shaped by various forces. See, on this point, Shulman, "Early Meanings of Dependent-Origination".

2. Existence in the discourses[3]

2.1. Conditioned co-origination

In its most standard and canonical form, conditioned co-origination encompasses twelve links, which spring from *avijja* (ignorance) and end with death, aging, and the whole mass of suffering (*dukkha*). In this structure, *bhava* appears in the last segment of the progression:

> … with thirst (*taṇhā*) as a condition, there is appropriation (*upādāna*); with appropriation as a condition, there is *bhava*; with *bhava* as a condition, there is birth; with birth as a condition there is aging and death, and sorrow, lamentation, suffering, sadness, despair come to be. This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.
>
> (SN 12.1)

In an attempt to define each of the links involved in the twelvefold structure, the following brief definition of *bhava* is offered:

> Mendicants, what is *bhava*? Mendicants, there are three kinds of *bhava*: *bhava* connected with sensual pleasures (*kāmabhavo*), *bhava* connected with form (*rūpabhavo*), *bhava* connected with the formless (*arūpabhavo*).
>
> (SN 12.2)

The standard interpretation of this definition takes it to indicate three realms or spheres in which one can be (re)born: the world of sensual pleasures (*kāma*), the world of (bodily or embodied) forms (*rūpa*), and the world without (bodily or embodied) forms (*a-rūpa*). Other discourses (e.g. AN 6.63) often mention lower realms of existence as well, like those of beings living in hell, the animal realm, and that of the hungry ghosts. This suggests that existence is indexed to a certain life-form, a certain horizon or domain of experience, from which existence appears in a specific way, peculiar to how it is experienced in that condition.

It should be noted that the three worlds mentioned in SN 12.2 correspond quite neatly with a threefold division covered in Buddhist meditation practice as taught in the discourses. The world of sensual pleasures is the ordinary world that one should abandon by turning away from it through sense restraint and renunciation (*nekkhamma*). The world of forms is spelled out in terms of four meditative contemplations, almost always presented as a fourfold succession (the four *jhānā*). The formless realm coincides instead with another four meditative attainments, sometimes considered as a deepening of those just mentioned, other times presented instead as standing

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[3]All references to the discourses of the Buddha are based on the main collections of the *Suttapiṭaka*: *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN), *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN), *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN), *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN), *Khuddaka Nikāya* (K). The last one includes several smaller sets, among which *Udāna* (Ud). All English translations are original. Pāli texts are consulted in the *Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500: World Tipiṭaka Edition in Roman Script*, edited and published by The M.L. Maniratana Bunnag Dhamma Society Fund, 2005. This edition can be consulted online (together with several translations) at https://sutta-central.net/ For the purposes of this paper, other available editions do not offer significant variants of the original texts translated here.

independently in their own right (e.g. MN 121). In all presentations, though, these three worlds are exposed as intrinsically uncertain (*anicca*) and unsuitable to be taken as an ultimate refuge (AN 9.36). Even the most refined formless condition is still subject to the same problems that plague, in one way or another, all the others.

As the conditioned co-origination formula shows, *bhava* sits in between appropriation (*upādāna*) and birth. Birth can be interpreted literally as being born from one's mother's womb in this physical body (as suggested by SN 12.2 itself), but it can also be interpreted more broadly in psychological terms, as the explicit appearance and manifestation of the sense of being 'me', and its correlative 'I am this or that' (Buddhadāsa, *Under The Body Tree*). The two meanings are not incompatible, but rather complementary. Physical birth is the opening of a whole playground for multiple psychological births that will unfold throughout one's biological life. The doctrine of rebirth and samsaric wandering entails that psychological birth is not confined within this particular playground (to this particular life-form, human or non-human), and when this biological life breaks apart, at death, that same struggle to be born as 'me' will reappear in another form. In this sense, psychological birth is more fundamental than biological birth and constitutes its underpinning condition because it is only by explicitly taking up this or that form as 'mine' that one is properly born.

In this context, *bhava* is the condition of birth (both psychological and biological), and with no *bhava* there would be no birth. What allows birth to arise, and what makes it possible? If birth is the fact that 'I am something' or 'something is for me, it is mine', then in order for this content to be experienced, some sort of being or entity should be available for identification and grasp. Without something that is suitable to become what 'I *am*' or what 'I have (what *is* mine)', birth would not be possible, it could not occur. Hence, *bhava* is the condition of birth, in the sense that *bhava* is that (form of) existence that 'I *am*', or that 'I take *to be* mine'. In other words, *bhava* is the object or the basis upon which one can claim to *be* this or that. Analyzing the condition for *bhava* itself lends further support to this point.

The term *upādāna* is translated in various ways, and one common rendering is 'clinging'. Literally, the term means 'taking (*ādāna*) up (*upa-*)' and it is sometimes used to express the fuel taken up by a fire as it burns. A very common way in which the term is used is in the stock compound 'the five aggregates affected by *upādāna*' (*pañcupādānakhanda*), which indicates the main focus of identification from which the sense of 'I am' arises (SN 22.59). If one is asked: 'who are you?' the expected reply from a common person (not instructed in the Buddha's teaching) will point at one or more of these five aggregates. For instance, one identifies as one's body (*rūpa*) or some mental activity like intentionality (*saṅkhara*) or consciousness (*viññaṇa*). Anyhow, in this context *upādāna* means the appropriation with

which one takes these ingredients of one's experience and interprets them as 'my own'. Translating *upādāna* as 'appropriation' is meant to express the attitude of taking up something as one's own, by claiming ownership of it.

Understood in this way, this segment of conditioned co-origination can be paraphrased as follows: conditioned by appropriation, there is *bhava*; conditioned by *bhava* there is birth. *Bhava* is the bridge between appropriating something and being born as that thing. If one then translates *bhava* as 'existence', the existence at stake here has to do with the kind of being that one assumes to be, as suggested in the threefold definition quoted above (SN 12.2). If one appropriates sensual *bhava*, then one is born as a sensual being, in the world constituted by the five physical senses plus thought (SN 12.44). In this sense, *bhava* is not a common or universal property that all sorts of different things possess (or lack). Rather, *bhava* expresses the fact that some kind or form of life has been 'taken up' as being 'my own', and because of that, one is born as that sort of being. The life-form that has been appropriated as 'mine' becomes then the general context or background within which one will discern all sorts of other beings or entities as more or less suitable for extending further the domain of one's belongings. Appropriating a human life-form gives access to a very different context from that of an insect or that of a deity. However, in each case it is the appropriation of that life-form as 'my' form of existence that discloses a whole realm of being, namely, a field of experience in which one might then further discern what else 'exists' (what can be appropriated).

To illustrate the role that *bhava* plays in this process, one might think about how the experience of the same thing can change in different circumstances. Imagine you are invited to visit a friend at her home. You go there, and stay there, you might have all sorts of ideas about that home, but you never experience it as 'yours', because that is your friend's home. Now, it happens that your friend wants to sell her house, and you are interested in buying it. You then engage in a certain legal and commercial transaction through which your friend's house becomes your own. After this moment, even if you do not spend all your time in that place, whenever you think of it or go there, you think 'this is my home' and you deal with it accordingly, in a way that is different from how you dealt with and thought about it when you visited the first time as a guest.

In the context of conditioned co-origination, the link of appropriation is the intention of buying your friend's home, *bhava* is the value or price of the house you pay during the transaction, which allows you to then own the house, and birth is your newly established right to live in that house as its owner and act accordingly. If there was no intention to buy your friend's house (if there was no appropriation), no transaction would have taken place, and you could not have become the owner of that house (there would have been no birth). But if the object of the transaction

(the house, the life-form) was not qualified by some imputed value or price (existence), it would have been equally impossible to first buy it (or even want to do so) and then own it, given that your intention of possessing the house would have found no support, ground, or basis, nothing actually to own. Something that is experienced as absolutely worthless cannot be owned, and usually one does not have any desire for owning it. Worthless trash is simply thrown away and it is not even regarded as 'mine'; unless one somehow sees some value in it, which would then make it no longer worthless. Nonetheless, any price or value is conditioned by a demand or an intention to appropriate that value. Something that nobody wants to buy has no value on its own. Hence, the intention of buying (appropriation) is the condition for the attribution of value. Value does not exist independently on its own, as an intrinsic property of things. Existence is like the value or price attributed to this or that, which allows the desire for appropriation to result in the actual ownership of that good by providing to that desire a basis, a ground, something to grasp and claim to be 'my own'.

2.2. The four noble truths

The idea of *bhava* as the focus of what is appropriated as 'mine' is also conveyed in the core teaching of the four noble truths (SN 56.11). These are, in their most compact form: (i) there is suffering (*dukkha*), (ii) there is an origin (*samudaya*) of suffering, (iii) there is a cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, and (iv) there is a path (*magga*) leading towards the cessation of suffering.

The first noble truth has been already indirectly touched upon. In its extended formulation, it lists several aspects that illustrate the nature of *dukkha*, which are then summarized in the *pañcupādānakhanda*. Hence, to the question 'what is dukkha?' the short answer is: the five aggregates that one has appropriated as one's own.

Bhava figures prominently in the second noble truth:

> Mendicants, this noble truth is the origin of dukkha: this thirst (*taṇhā*) for the renewal of *bhava* (*ponobbhavikā*), accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there, that is: thirst for sensual pleasures (*kāmataṇhā*), thirst for *bhava* (*bhavataṇhā*), thirst for non-*bhava* (*vibhavataṇhā*).
>
> (SN 56.11)

Once again, *bhava* is connected with rebirth (*ponobbhavikā*), and one domain of its manifestation is the world of sensual pleasures (*kāma*), on which thirst is particularly keen. The second noble truth might be seen as another way of expressing the same insight already presented in the context of conditioned co-origination. The difference here is the appearance of two antithetical options: thirst for *bhava* or thirst for non-*bhava*. There are two relevant and

complementary ways of interpreting this dichotomy. The first is to connect it with two of the three main 'fires' that consume sentient beings: greed (*lobha*, often a synonym of *rāga* and *nandi*), and aversion (*dosa*), the third fire being 'confusion' or 'delusion' (*moha*) closely related to ignorance (*avijjā*). While greed seeks sensual pleasures and some form of existence (*bhava*), aversion seeks to get rid of (*vibhava*) what one has and would not like to be joined with (which is another way of expressing the nature of *dukkha*, mentioned in the first noble truth: 'being yoked with what one does not like', *appiyehi sampayogo*). In this case, *bhava* mentioned in the second noble truth encompasses both *rūpa-* and *arūpa-bhava* mentioned in the analysis of conditioned co-origination (SN 12.2). The second, related way of interpreting the dichotomy has to do with the fact that one might well understand that all forms of *bhava* are problematic, and one can then be devoured by the thirst of getting rid of this problem (*dosa*), by trying to get rid of *bhava* itself (*vibhava*), without realizing (*moha*) that this is just another way in which thirst manifests and makes *dukkha* arise.

While the teaching of conditioned co-origination presents *bhava* as the result of appropriation and the condition for (re)birth, the second noble truth focuses instead on one link back in the twelvefold structure, by stressing how thirst is led to seek either *bhava* or *vibhava*, by thus determining (re)birth. Between the two teachings there is a different emphasis, but there is a fundamentally identical insight that underpins both.

It might be helpful at this point to explicitly rule out another possible rendering for *bhava* that is common both in standard presentations of conditioned co-origination and of the four noble truths, namely, 'becoming'. In the context of conditioned co-origination, interpreting *bhava* as 'becoming' seems to be directly influenced by the emphasis on rebirth. In order to be born and reborn, one needs to somehow move from one life to the next, and this can be seen as a form of becoming. In the context of the four noble truths, *bhava* is sometimes also interpreted as becoming, in the sense that one has thirst for becoming something or something else, hence for changing one's condition. However, in neither of these two contexts does interpreting *bhava* as 'becoming' yield a more convincing reading than interpreting it as 'existence'.

In the discourses, it is crystal clear that what is subject to changing and becoming *cannot* be owned and appropriated. This is the main thrust of the notion of *anattā* (SN 22.59). If one interprets *bhava* as becoming, then conditioned co-origination would sound: with appropriation as a condition, there is becoming; with becoming as a condition, there is birth. Although appropriating something might entail some form of change in one's experience, for example, as one passes from not-owning to owning something, this change is overruled by the fact that appropriation

is always aimed at something stable, certain, unchanging. However, if appropriation by itself would lead to see its object (*bhava*) as becoming, then it could not really take that up and appropriate it; hence, it would not lead to (re)birth. But if appropriation does not lead to see *bhava* as becoming (quite the opposite), then *bhava* cannot be interpreted as becoming because the meaning of *bhava* is conditioned by appropriation.

In the context of the second noble truth, interpreting *bhava* as becoming makes the discussion of the three focuses of thirst fuzzier. Thirst for becoming something is a mixture of the thirst for an imagined pleasant state that it is currently lacking and thirst for getting rid of something not quite pleasurable in the current experienced condition. Both kinds of thirst are already covered by thirst for sensual pleasures and thirst for non-existence (*vibhava*), leaving the thirst for becoming a redundant mixture of both. Moreover, as already mentioned, realizing that something is changeable and subject to becoming does not usually make it appealing or desirable, simply because what is changeable cannot be owned in a secure way, but it is subject to inherent uncertainty. This would make 'thirst for becoming' a contradictory attitude since if one sees becoming one cannot simultaneously be thirsty about what is becoming.

2.3. The dichotomy between existence and non-existence

The dichotomy between *bhava* and *vibhava* has an interesting parallel in a different kind of discussion that is also often found in the discourses. This usually portrays the Buddha as being asked about certain stock questions that concern whether something 'is' or 'is not' in one way or another (e.g. SN 44.8). These questions include references to whether the 'self' is or exists after death or not or whether the world is infinite or not. These are referred to as 'indeterminate' questions (e.g. AN 3.67), since the Buddha refuses to choose any of the proposed alternatives to answer them, and he dismisses the question instead as irrelevant (and unhelpful) for soteriological purposes (e.g. SN 56.41). Although the phrasing does not employ the substantive *bhava*, these questions clearly refer to 'existential' problems (both in the ontological and in the more existentialist sense), and thus they are important to explore the meaning of *bhava*. One key text that illustrates this point is the following:

> Kaccana, for the most part, this world is based on this duality: 'that exists' (*atthi-tañceva*) and 'that does not exist' (*natthitañca*).

> But, Kaccana, for one who sees the origin of the world (*loka-samudayaṁ*) with true wisdom, according to nature, 'non-existence' (*natthitā*) does not occur with respect to the world.

> And, Kaccana, for one who sees the cessation of the world (*loka-nirodhaṁ*) with true wisdom, according to nature, 'existence' (*atthitā*) does not occur with respect to the world.
>
> Kaccana, for the most part, this world is bound to remain stuck due to attachment and appropriation.
>
> But this one does not follow (*na upeti*), does not appropriate (*na upādiyati*), does not remain stuck (*nādhiṭṭhāti*) in the attachment and appropriation (*upayupā-dānaṃ*), mental prejudice (*cetaso adhiṭṭhānaṃ*), obstinacy and bad habit (*abhi-nivesānusayaṃ*): 'this is myself' (*attā me*).
>
> 'What arises is just suffering arising. What ceases is just suffering ceasing.' In this matter, he is not perplexed, he does not doubt. Knowledge about this occurs to him without depending on anyone else (*aparapaccayā*). Kaccana, to this extent there is right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*).
>
> Kaccana, 'Everything is' is one extreme. 'Nothing is' is the other extreme. Kaccana, without going to either of these, the Realized teaches the reality by taking the middle: 'with ignorance as condition, there are coactions … This is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.'
>
> (SN 12.15)

The two opposite views about existence and non-existence both refer to ways in which one ordinarily tries to appropriate one's own existence. Consider the notion of non-existence first. What does not exist? The most precious thing of all, 'myself', when the body breaks apart at death (when the world 'ceases' from a phenomenological point of view). The assumption here is that if one holds on to the view of 'non-existing' after death, then one might be convinced that actions do not lead to any future consequence, and one might just enjoy whatever one wants, persuaded that with the breaking up of the body, there will be just sheer annihilation. There is a trade-off in this nihilist view. By giving up any appropriation towards oneself after death, one can more easily enjoy and appropriate anything in this very life, without any fear or worry for future consequences. This kind of view is often denounced by the Buddha (e.g. DN 2, AN 3.61) as incompatible with the effort of finding a viable escape from *dukkha* and the round of rebirth. This form of nihilism simply undermines the meaningfulness of any practice aimed in this direction. In fact, nihilism is just one way of creating an ideological justification that fosters thirst and appropriation by cultivating *vibhavataṇhā*.

The remedy consists in observing with proper wisdom the 'origin of the world'. The world is just a synonym for the five aggregates affected by appropriation; hence, the origin of the world is the way in which *taṇhā* and appropriation take hold of the aggregates (the world) by giving birth to the sense of 'I am', from which *dukkha* follows. If one sees how *dukkha* arises conditioned by appropriation towards the five aggregates (and how this conditional relation is not stopped by physical death), then holding on to the nihilist

view will become pointless, since one will realize that believing in one's future annihilation does not actually provide any justification for a fuller enjoyment or possession of this present life. Appropriation, even when limited to this life, is itself the problem. In other terms, seeing the origin of the world means to understand the second noble truth, namely, how *taṇhā* leads to (re)birth, and any birth is plagued by its *dukkha*. Even *vibhavataṇhā* is still a species of *taṇhā*, and not a way out from it.

Consider now the alternative notion of existence, which again concerns the existence of the self after death. This view is connected with an eternalist assumption associated with the sense of being a self, and its alleged ability to survive regardless of the biological form that is taken up in any lifetime. By constantly seeking a better form of *bhava*, one might be tricked into thinking that *bhava* is inescapable, or that there is an ultimate form of *bhava* that can provide complete liberation from *dukkha*. This is another view that blocks further progress towards liberation, since it overlooks the fact that *bhava* as such, in any form, is always connected with *dukkha*. However, it is only by seeing the cessation of the world, the cessation of appropriation of the five aggregates (the third noble truth, namely, the cessation of *taṇhā* from which *dukkha* arises) that one can genuinely realize what the possible alternative to *bhava* might be. Then, one sees that the escape from *dukkha* is not in any special *bhava*, but in being free from appropriating any form of *bhava* altogether. It is not true that all experience has to be confined within the horizon of *bhava*, because *bhava* is not an ultimate or even genuine horizon of experience in the first place. The experience of the cessation of *dukkha* is real, and it shows that it is also possible to experience a cessation of *bhava*, which is *not* a destruction of what is, but rather a stepping outside of the horizon of *bhava* altogether by ceasing to make use of this notion and thus stopping any way of experiencing reality that presupposes or hinges upon it.

All questions concerned with ascertaining existence or non-existence make assumptions about some entity (usually the self, or the world in which the self experiences its reality), and its boundaries (in the case of self, death and what might come after it). In the discourses, the Buddha rejects these sorts of questions because they are ill-conceived and their underpinning assumptions are problematic. They take at face value that entities can have existence or non-existence, and they seek to inquire which one is the case, without realizing that the very *notions* of existence and non-existence are *views*, namely, ways of looking at reality from a very specific point of observation and for very specific reasons. Engaging with existence (moving towards it, trying to conquer it, defending it) is a way of supporting one's thirst for having (being) this or that; engaging with non-existence (cultivating aversion, aiming at destroying or annihilating this or that state or condition) is a way of supporting one's thirst for not having (being) this or that. Existence

and non-existence seem to deal with the status of objects given in the world in their own right, while they actually mask one's own conative and reactive attitudes towards the experience of those objects. Existence (and its opposite) is the bridging space between the dynamics of thirst and appropriation and that of (re)birth. These concepts are an attempt to justify and support one's practical attitudes based on thirst and appropriation. The teaching of conditioned co-origination is a way of stepping outside this tangle and seeing it for what it is: a complex process of ideological fabrication.

2.4. The cessation of existence

A final relevant context in which *bhava* acquires an important soteriological function is the discussion of the 'cessation of existence' (*bhavanirodha*). For instance, in Ud 3.10 the Buddha contrasts his own discovery of a way of leaving existence behind, with the solutions provided by other renunciants and brahmins, who seem to remain caught in the dichotomy between existence and non-existence.

On one occasion, venerable Sariputta (one of the foremost disciples of the Buddha), is asked about what remains in experience once the 'sixfold domains of contact' have ceased. The interlocutor presents Sariputta with the four standard tetralemmatic options. Sariputta replies:

> My friend, if you say that with the complete dispassion towards and cessation of the six domains of contact there is something else (*atthaññaṃ kiñci*), you proliferate where there is no proliferation (*appapañcaṃ papañceti*).

> If you say that with the complete dispassion towards and cessation of the six domains of contact, there is nothing else (*natthaññaṃ kiñci*), you proliferate where there is no proliferation.

> If you say that with the complete dispassion towards and cessation of the six domains of contact there is both something else and nothing else (*atthi ca natthi ca aññaṃ kiñci*), you proliferate where there is no proliferation.

> If you say that with the complete dispassion towards and cessation of the six domains of contact there is neither something else nor nothing else (*nevatthi no natthaññaṃ kiñci*), you proliferate where there is no proliferation.

> My friend, proliferation goes as far as the six domains of contact go; the six domains of contact go as far as proliferation goes. My friend, with the complete dispassion towards and cessation of the six domains of contact, there is the cessation of proliferation (*papañcanirodho*), the relief from proliferation (*papañcavūpasamo*).

> (AN 4.173)

Notice that each of the four options entails a way of advancing some statement about existence, either positive or negative. All these options are denounced as forms of proliferation, which in the discourses is understood

as the spinning around of those thoughts and intentional processes that underpin appropriation, attachment and thirst. The output of proliferation is the sense of 'I am' (AN 4.199).

The cessation of the six domains of contact can be understood in the context of the teaching of conditioned co-origination as the recognition that the six domains of contact are inherently uncertain and thus doomed to cease (they are qualified by the inherent possibility of cessation). Alternatively, this might also refer to the meditative attainment of cessation, in which experience is temporarily suspended altogether (SN 41.6). Either way, cessation is linked with the cessation of proliferation, and hence with the cessation of appropriation and thirst. Without appropriation and thirst there is simply no room for the notion of existence since that notion becomes meaningless. In turn, this means that the six domains of contact are no longer interpreted from the point of view of 'I am'. There is experience, but this experience appears as *just* experience (cf. Ud 1.10) and is no longer framed in terms of 'my existence' (Ñāṇavīra, *Clearing the Path*, 73-76).

This sheds light on the way in which the discourses conceive of the 'cessation of existence'. It should be clear at this point that *bhavanirodha* cannot be (nor be experienced as) a sheer annihilation. Seeking annihilation is just the twin wrong view of seeking eternity. And yet, sometimes the condition of awakening is presented as a 'cessation of existence'. On another occasion, the same Sariputta is asked about his experience of awakening, which he describes as follows:

> Like in a burning fire, a flame arises, another disappears, in the same way, my friend, a perception arises 'extinction is the cessation of existence (*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ*), extinction is the cessation of existence,' and another perception disappears. I perceived: 'extinction is the cessation of existence,' at that time, my friend, that was my perception.
>
> (AN 10.7)

Sariputta describes a positive experience of extinction (*nibbāna*), which is not a sheer experiential black out. This is elsewhere described as the extinguishing of the three fires of greed, aversion, and ignorance (SN 38.1), which is equivalent to the cessation of thirst. As seen so far, existence is closely connected with 'my' existence, with the fact that experience is appropriated as 'mine' and 'I am' conceived as its owner. *This* is what ceases with the extinction of greed, aversion, and ignorance. Experience is still present, perceptions still unfold, but things are no longer appropriated as 'mine' or 'belonging to me'.

3. Uncertainty

The discussion so far has revealed two salient points about the way in which the discourses tackle the notion of existence. First, existence is seen as systematically conditioned by appropriation and leading to the explicit

expression of ownership and selfhood (birth). Second, the basic method to counter this conditioned process is by realizing that what is appropriated as existing (hence, as 'my own') is inherently uncertain, unstable (*anicca*). Ordinarily, worldlings tend to regard existence as somehow stable, certain, relatively unchanging, *and because of that*, what exists is suitable to be appropriated. By contrast, the Buddha urges us to see that no conditioned reality can exist in this way. Seeing this undermines the very possibility of regarding appropriation of any content of experience as feasible in the first place. The key question at this point is: what entitles the Buddha to challenge so radically the ordinary view?

An important element to answer this question is nestled at the core of the Buddha's discourse on the four noble truths. After having heard the teaching, one of the disciples in the audience reaches a full understanding of it:

> While this discourse was being spoken, the stainless and clear vision of reality arose in the excellent Koṇḍañña: 'whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing' (*yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhamman*). […] Then, the Fortunate uttered this inspired utterance: 'Koṇḍañña has indeed understood! Koṇḍañña has indeed understood!' In this way, the excellent Koṇḍañña acquired the name: 'Koṇḍañña Who Has Understood.'
>
> (SN 56.11)

Koṇḍañña's insight sees a structural relation between origination and cessation, such that anything that has the reality of originating has, *consequently*, the reality of ceasing. Anything that originates is necessarily doomed to cease at some point and hence is non-permanent, contingent, uncertain (*anicca*). From the above discussion (SN 12.15), origination (*samudaya*) is best understood as to the origination of a *being*, or the origination of the world of experience (the five aggregates) appropriated by an existing subject (myself). This is easily relatable to the first noble truth, which presents 'birth' as the first instance of *dukkha*. Birth might thus work as a paradigmatic instance of origination.

Birth is an act of separation; it makes a difference with respect to the state of affairs in which one was not yet born. This point becomes even more apparent if one takes birth in the broader sense of the instantiation of a sense of 'I am'. The fact that I am born, that I am here now, means that my being here is substantially different from my not being here, or that my existence is substantially different from my non-existence. This difference is of vital importance for my being, and my whole existence revolves around it. If my existence and non-existence were indiscernible, the notion of birth would not make any sense (experientially, conceptually, or existentially). But as long as I perceive myself as a being born into this life, my existence is defined by its opposition to the *real possibility* of my non-existence. This is a *possibility* since for as long as I am here, my non-existence is not

actualized yet, it remains something that might obtain; and yet, for as long as I am here, this possibility is also something terribly real that will surely obtain at some point, even if I do not know *how* or *when* (that is, even if its execution remains uncertain).[4]

Non-existence can be understood here relatively loosely, not necessarily as an ontological absolute annihilation, but more phenomenologically as any state of affairs in which my current existence is absent or has ceased. The time before my birth can thus be a time in which I was non-existent in this loose sense (in other words, I did not exist *at least* in this present form which begins with my birth, regardless of any further speculations). Any time now or in the future in which my current existence might cease to be present will also be a time in which I will cease. In this sense, the *possibility* of my non-existence extends to all times (past, present, and future) and in this way it becomes a structural feature of my existence in general, ultimately indifferent to time coordinates as such. Since being born is a condition structurally defined by the opposition between existence and non-existence, if non-existence did no longer apply after one is born, then one's being, for as long as it endures, would cease to be defined by this very opposition, and in this sense the notion of being born would also collapse and no longer apply.

Keeping this reflection at the level of life and death is perhaps the most effective way of understanding the point realized by Koṇḍañña.[5] Does human history recall even one instance of someone who, after been born, did not die? And yet, ordinarily, I might think that once born, existence belongs to me, and anything that might challenge my possession of it can only result from some sort of external cause or action overpowering my right to otherwise exist indefinitely. Koṇḍañña's insight, conversely, is that origination and cessation, life and death, existence and non-existence, belong to one another, in such a way that wherever one applies, the other must apply too. In this sense, since the existence of something that originated is defined by its opposition to its non-existence, that very existence constantly posits its own non-existence as an immanent real possibility of cessation. This is what discloses the fundamental uncertainty of existence, since it reveals how cessation is the implacable shadow that always follows anything that originated *just because it originated*. And since one usually endeavours to avoid, escape, or delay that cessation, the uncertainty created by this fact

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[4]For this passage from possibility to certainty of a future cessation, see SN 22.55 quoted in footnote 1.
[5]The insight nestled in Koṇḍañña's claim can also be seen as a generalization of a basic meditation practice, which the Buddha recommends unreservedly to all his disciples, lay and ordained, men and women. This practice consists in the uninterrupted recollection and reflection on some themes, three of which at least are similar not only in content but also in phrasing with Koṇḍañña's insight: "Aging is my reality (*jarādhammomhi*), I did not go beyond aging, … Sickness is my reality (*byādhidhammomhi*), I did not go beyond sickness, … Death is my reality (*maraṇadhammomhi*), I did not go beyond death" (AN 5.57). See on this point Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness*, 195-236.

surrounds existence with a peculiar dissonance (*dukkha*), a clash between what one wants or craves (holding on to existence, for instance) and the structure of experience which makes this want unwarranted, and determines that its craving will lead to frustration.[6]

Koṇḍañña's claim synthetizes the four noble truths. By trying to preserve this current existence against its possible non-existence, this very attempt reveals and entails the real possibility of cessation of this current existence. Hence, the relation between the first and the second noble truths: by wanting to appropriate any specific form of existence, thirst grasps onto something that turns out to be defined by the prospect of its own cessation (by uncertainty, *anicca*), and hence is structurally unsuitable for being fully appropriated, mastered, and owned (*anattā*). Thirst results in endless frustration (*dukkha*). However, if one sees this mechanism (*vijjā*) and relinquishes the thirst for *both* existence and non-existence, then uncertainty is no longer a dissonance (it no longer produces *dukkha*), because there is no longer any effort in holding on to any form of existence at all. The very notions of existence and non-existence cease to be meaningful and the notion of birth is dropped along with them. Cessation of thirst is cessation of *dukkha* and the end of (re)birth (third noble truth). Wanting to build a rock castle on quicksand is frustrating, and one might complain about quicksand and even try to fix it. But the problem is not the quicksand, the problem is this craving for building a rock castle upon it. Once the craving is relinquished, quicksand is just quicksand, it bothers nobody.

This is not meant to be an argument aimed at convincing a reluctant interlocutor, or a sceptic, or to win a public dispute. Koṇḍañña's insight is presented as the result of a process of understanding, triggered by the Buddha's explanation of the four noble truths, but lived from within. This process involves more than reasoning and logic (although it in no way conflicts with them), since it encompasses phenomenological, conceptual, and existentialist dimensions. The phenomenological dimension concerns the observation of the facts of experience, such as birth and death. The conceptual dimension involves the notions and concepts used to interpret these experiences, how they shape the meaning attributed to them, and the constraints they introduce. The existentialist dimension indexes this contemplation to the subject who is simultaneously having the experience, reflecting upon it and, by reflecting in this way, also uncovering their own actual position and role in it.[7]

Because of this complex interplay of factors, the discourses do not elaborate on this insight by backing up its logical structure with further premises,

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[6]Similarly, by seeking non-existence, one would end up hypostatizing it and never really escaping from the duality of existence and non-existence (see Ud 3.10).

[7]This existentialist dimension of the teachings of the Buddha in the discourses is stressed in particular by Ñāṇavīra, *Clearing the Path*, e.g. pp. 3–9 and 423-433.

addressing counter arguments, or exploring implications. They instead provide a form of practice, a path (fourth noble truth) that can help a practitioner to develop their contemplation. By countering outward and inward forms of thirst, and by directing attention to the way in which all constituent elements of experience share the reality of originating, *and hence* are structurally defined by the real possibility of ceasing, the path of practice uncovers, clarifies, and extends the scope of one's appreciation of uncertainty, until everything in experience appears to be unsuitable for appropriation. This sort of training takes up any of the aggregates (or the six sense bases) in order to show how they depend on something else and how they originate from that; and by reflecting on the fact that their conditioning condition is itself uncertain, one can appreciate how any of the aggregates is uncertain too (e.g. SN 22.18, 22.82, 35.93). A full exploration of this method leads to a deepened insight into conditioned co-origination, which lies at the very core of the Buddha's own awakening, but also outside of the limits of the present discussion.

For present purposes, two remarks are crucial. First, this contemplation of uncertainty entails something more than simply the observation that everything changes.[8] Changes can only be meaningfully experienced with respect to something that does not change at the same time. When one observes changes in one's life, one is able to do so because there is something else in life that does not change in the same way and at the same time, and hence provides the unchanging broader context for observing more local changes. However, appreciating that 'whatever has the reality of originating, all of that has the reality of ceasing' tackles precisely the fact that *while* something is experienced as present and unchanging (my life, for instance), within that same unchanging experience there is the real possibility of its cessation, even if that cessation has not been actualized yet (i.e. even if I have not died yet). In this sense, uncertainty goes much deeper than the shallow remark that 'everything changes', since it provides a way of underscoring the structural instability of any content of experience even when that is not directly actualized or manifest *yet*.

In general, the ordinary worldling takes their own existence as the general background context within which all changes are experienced and dealt with. But this contemplation of the structural uncertainty of experience entails that no matter what one takes as a presently enduring existence or condition, *that* is already defined and inhabited by the real possibility of its own cessation. And no matter how far one tries to escape this structure, one will always face the same predicament, so that the Buddha can exclaim (Ud 3.10):

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[8] Ñāṇavīra, *Clearing the Path*, 167–182 provides further discussion about the problems connected with interpreting *anicca* as 'constant flux' of becoming.

"whatever it conceives, that is becoming otherwise". Wherever there is exist-
ence, there is uncertainty.[9]

Second, in this contemplation, existence and non-existence are primarily
understood from the point of view of a subject who appropriates them (or
might relinquish this appropriation). They are not taken as objective,
neutral, impersonal ontological concepts that might equally apply to any
sort of entity whatsoever. This is not supposed to be a detached contempla-
tion from 'nowhere' about an object that raises no concern in anybody. In
fact, the exact opposite is the case. The four noble truths are supposed to
subvert and challenge the ordinary way in which a worldling understands
their experience, and the notion of existence they tackle is the notion that
one takes closest to one's own heart: 'my own existence', the *being* that 'I
am' or can cease to be. This approach is in line with the treatment of existence
discussed so far, which shows how it is primarily conceived as the result of
appropriation. A more objective and impersonal notion of existence (and
any 'ontology' as a general discipline concerned with such a notion and its
multifarious implementations) would thus be considered derivative from
the point of view of the discourses, and ultimately misguided. This is also
why getting entangled in speculative views about whether there is some-
thing eternal or not is dismissed by the Buddha, as mentioned above. At
best, these speculations are irrelevant, and it is most likely they are them-
selves ideological tools constructed to support appropriation (DN 1).

4. Conclusion

Discussion of the notion of existence in the discourses has shown that *bhava*
is primarily introduced in order to refer to the way in which individuals ident-
ify with this or that life-form and thus take it as their existence. Following the
structure of conditioned co-origination, existence is first qualified as a general
domain or field of experience associated to a certain life-form, and within this
domain (by appropriating it), existence is experienced as 'my' existence, the
existence of the subject who lives and acts in that domain or field. The dis-
courses thus index existence according to two perspectives, the latter depen-
dent on and conditioned by the former, namely: life-form-existence (*bhava*)
and self-existence (*jāti*). The notion of 'I am' makes sense and arises only
on the basis of the experience 'there is this life-form' ('there is this living
human body', for instance). From the point of view of the subject of appro-
priation, self-existence appears as more fundamental (it is because 'I am'

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[9]One might paraphrase by saying that the discourses defend the view that reality is ruled by the opposite
of inertia. Inertia entails that something stays the same until some external cause intervenes in order to
bring about a change. Change requires a cause, while the continuation of the same identity does not.
By contrast, the discourses contend that things are structurally defined by the fact that they will cease
to be what they are (which is the most radical change anything might ever undergo). If some continu-
ation of the same is experienced, then *that* continuation is what requires an explanation.

here that there is this life-form of mine), but from the point of view of conditioned co-origination, the opposite is true (it is because this life-form has been appropriated that 'I am' born here).

Since existence can only be encountered in experience within a certain field or life-form, assuming that there could be any existence independently from that field or life-form is a contradiction, since it postulates that something can appear outside or independently from the condition of possibility of its own appearing. The ontological existence that can be attributed to any sort of contents of experience can be thus attributed to them only *because* those contents are encountered in a certain field of experience, which belongs to a certain living individual who experiences them in a certain way and under certain conditions. By contrast, discarding the notion of existence does not entail uncovering the alleged illusory, dream-like nature of experience or making it unreal. Rather, it 'simply' strips the reality (*dhamma*) of whatever is experienced of any ground for appropriating that as 'mine' or part of 'my' world, by thus undermining any further action that would be built upon such appropriation.

However, one might contend that this approach will have a relatively weak appeal in a more dialectical setting or while engaging in a controversy with someone who does not already take the validity of the Buddha's teaching for granted. In other words, from *within* the teaching presented in the discourses it might be sufficient to point to the conditional nature of existence in order to undermine any pretension of attributing inherent existence to objects without indexing it to a subject or a life-form. This might not be enough to convince an opponent who does not share this same 'insider' perspective, or does not cultivate the sort of practice recommended by the Buddha. In order to counter this opponent, it might be necessary to develop further reflections on why the opponent's idea of inherent existence is misguided, either because it cannot be shown to be instantiated by any actual object of experience or because any existing thing must always be first of all conceived of as a content of experience, and thus existence is always inevitably indexed to experience.

This suggests one possible reason for why later Madhyamaka and Yogācāra approaches seem to have developed their distinctive views way beyond what is explicitly covered in the discourses. Their intention might not have been necessarily that of leaving behind the older teaching, but rather that of providing it with further dialectical weapons and strategies, suitable for defending it in a more sophisticated intellectual context, in which various rival philosophical schools were actively debating. The discourses show already a concern for distinguishing the Buddha's teaching from that of other rival schools. Taking further and updating this dialectical inspiration might also be a driving force behind the later developments.

Indian and Tibetan doxographies have often criticized the approach taken in the discourses as concerned only with acknowledging the 'emptiness of

self', without recognizing that all things are empty as well (hence attributing to the older teaching a form of realism). The above reconstruction shows that this understanding does not fit the actual teaching of the older discourses, since they would reject the possibility of treating self-existence and the existence of other things independently of one another, given that all existence is always indexed to a certain experience and conditioned by appropriation towards that experience. However, confronted with rival schools, later Buddhist thinkers might have found it necessary to somehow tackle more explicitly the objective and the subjective aspects and uses of the notion of existence, and their effort might have well crystallized in the approaches defended by Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. If this suggestion is correct, then later approaches can be seen as developing in different and new ways (and adapting to new dialectical circumstances) a common anti-realist core that is at work already in the early teachings. The 'realist interlude' developed by certain older schools in their *Abhidharma* would have then to be interpreted as occasioned by the specific way in which those schools were attempting to solve specific puzzles they saw in the early teachings,[10] but at the cost of developing a realist approach that later schools would come to find inconsistent with the more fundamental anti-realist inspiration of the Buddha's thought.

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[10]For instance, Williams, "On the Abhidharma ontology" draws attention to the problem of accounting for the intentionality of consciousness, and how the Sarvāstivādin doctrine resorted to the ontologization of time for solving this issue. For another suggestion related instead to the interpretation of the 'not-self' doctrine, see Wynne, "The ātman and its negation", 158.

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