SURELY YOU'RE JOKING, MR. NĀGASENA! ONCE AGAIN ON MENANDER'S QUESTIONS AND NĀGASENA'S REPLIES

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ABSTRACT

This essay revisits the opening dialogues in *The Questions of Menander*, by which title I shall mean an overlapping stretch of *The Questions of Milinda* and the *Scripture of the Monk Nāgasena* (**Nāgasenabhikṣusūtra*). In this work, Nāgasena, I argue, is more interested in a semantic implication of the ontological thesis that there are no selves than he is in the thesis itself: it is *the intelligibility* and not alone the truth of not being a self that is in question. It is my goal in this essay to offer a new perspective on this dimension of the conversations. To do so, I offer a reconstruction of the text's use of what I'll characterize as *frames of discourse*, taking up for reflection the possibility, meaning, and salience of ontological commitments which are made available in different frames. My goal is the recovery of this orientation and a reconstruction of the meta-philosophical tool of frames. The essay considers the problem to which the frames are a solution, and then tracks the frames within early conversations in the text. I discuss the following three conversations: the conversation between Menander and Nāgasena conducted in public; a private conversation between Menander and Nāgasena; and lastly, the spontaneous conversation on the road between Anantakāya (Antiochus), a member of the King's party, and Nāgasena. In conclusion, I step outside of the text, as it were, to offer a hypothesis about the possible sociological and historical significance of this meta-philosophical device.

Introduction

The Questions of Menander can be treated as a name for *a genre of works*, the best-known representative of which today is the Pāli *Questions of Milinda*.[1] The genre ostensibly records for us conversations held at

[1] The core of the Pāli work may date to the second century CE (possibly earlier, according to Nolot 1995: 9). See Baums 2018: 33. The expanded version of this text, however, dates to about the fifth century CE (Trenckner 1880); on translations of this

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Sāgala (today, Sialkot) between the Bactrian King Menander, who reigned over the North West of the subcontinent and the Punjab in 155–130 BCE,[2] and a (more than likely fictional) Buddhist monk named Nāgasena.[3] Were one to squint at the considerable philosophical literature that has developed around this genre – and the Pāli representative of it in particular – one would likely find in the foreground talk of a putatively direct argument for the claim that we are not selves. The argument, sometimes dubbed a mereological argument,[4] is a creature of reconstruction, involving the following argument from exhaustion:

> If the self, like any composite thing, say, a chariot, exists, it must exist either (a) independently of its parts, or (b) in some relation to its parts. The only variety of relations to its parts it can enjoy is for it to be (b1) one of its parts, or (b2) some variety of collection of its parts. But analysis shows us that neither (a) nor either of the disjuncts of (b) make sense. Therefore, the self, like any composite thing, is "not got at here," and does not exist.

This reconstructed argument is sometimes taken to be a generalized iteration of older arguments available to Buddhists (Kapstein 2001: 77–81; Carpenter 2014: 36–37). Each of these premises has come in for scrutiny, particularly (b2).[5] One might also step back and ask: Does the argument above purport to *eliminate* composite things altogether, as some maintain (Siderits 2007: 54; Parfit 1984: 502, m), or does the situation admit of

work into European languages, see de Jong 1996. On representatives of the wider genre in Chinese (possibly reflecting a Gāndhārī original), see Demiéville 1924; Fussman 1993: 63–66; Baums 2018: 33; for evidence of more representatives of the genre, see Skilling 1998: 91–92.

[2] For valuable historiographical context, see Neelis 2011: 105.

[3] We have no need (*pace* Woodcock 1966: 95–96) to believe that he ever existed as an individual, despite Vasubandhu, for one, treating him as a *sthavira*, an authoritative Buddhist elder and forebear to several early traditions (Kapstein 2001: 363).

[4] Though it is worth saying that the type of unitary whole these arguments set themselves against is not equivalent to the formal (and rather bloodless) notion of mereological sum or fusion at issue in contemporary mereology. Rather, what is on the table is *the metaphysically substantive* notion of some separable item, to be counted *in addition* to its parts, and whose properties entirely depend on those of its parts. (On the distinction between formal and metaphysically substantive notions of wholes, see Van Inwagen 1990: 30; see also Van Inwagen 2006 for unclarity about the precise implications of the formal notion of a mereological sum in contemporary analysis.)

[5] For example, see Kapstein 2001: 184; Sorabji 2006: 39–41; Siderits 2007: 54–55; Carpenter 2014: 36–42.

more nuance (cf. Carpenter 2014: 37; Garfield 2019: 279)? There are even more basic issues.

Most pertinently, Nāgasena offers *no* such *direct* argument for the non-existence of self.[6] As we shall see, the kind of argument schema offered above is initially Menander's (cf. Garfield 2019: 279). Nāgasena is more interested in a semantic implication of the ontological thesis that there are no selves than he is in the thesis itself. To be sure, one might maintain that the text is invested in *elucidating* the fact that there are no selves. One might even maintain that the mereological analysis of persons and chariots illustrates a variety of epistemic standing which offers an echo, though not a strict recapitulation of, one historical argument for no-self available to Buddhists. Thus, after the first exchange of arguments, Nāgasena reiterates that "ultimately (*paramathato*), the self is not got at here" (cf. Horner 1963: 37–38),[7] citing, in this context, the elder Vajira's verse: "Just as when the parts are assembled / the word 'chariot' is spoken. / So, when the bundles are present / there's the convention (*samutti*): 'being'" (cf. Horner 1963: 38).[8] But that a self is not found is neither directly proven nor intended to be proven by Nāgasena's initial arguments. If one attends to the beginning carefully, one can argue that at issue, instead, is the *prima facie* intelligibility of claiming that we are not selves: Can one say or think this and mean it?

Obviously, the concern with intelligibility and existence are related. To say that "P doesn't make any sense" – because of entailing a contradiction, one might maintain by way of example – might mean that P can't be the case. But the converse does not hold. Saying that "P makes sense" does not entail that P is the case. But showing that it does make sense might just entitle one to maintain it, and so vindicate the controversial thesis.

I will argue that the issue at the beginning of the dialogue has to do with whether or not Nāgasena is entitled to maintain that there is no self, given certain problematic semantic entailments of the apparently ontological

[6] Unlike, say, Candrakīrti's mereological argument based on analogy to a chariot and its parts in *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.150–161; cf. Sorabji 2006: 287; Kapstein 2001: 101–102.

[7] By "cf." I mean to indicate that the translations are, for the most part, derived from the text cited, with minor differences for style or emphasis.

[8] In the Chinese, Nāgasena quotes *Saṃyuktāgama* T.2, 327b.

thesis that there is no self. And in the exchange of reasons over the two days of conversation which follow, the text quickly identifies meta-conceptual concerns with how one is to understand not-self, concerns which a narrow focus on the ontological thesis alone obscures (cf. Kapstein 2001: 91). It is my goal in this essay to offer a new perspective on this dimension of the conversations. This will require reconstructing the text's use of what I'll characterize as *frames of discourse*, taking up for reflection the possibility, meaning, and salience of ontological commitments which are understood as being made available in different frames.

The putative direct argument for the non-existence of self is a reconstruction which abstracts from the circumstances of dialogue and the dramatic structure of the text. My commentary (complementing that of Vasil'kov 1993) stresses the dramatic context of the first conversations to recover Nāgasena's distinctive concerns. It is important to note that a frame of discourse is a meta-philosophical tool; it is not the same thing as a dramatic frame – or any other dramatic device – used in a dialogue. Though, to be sure, the text uses dramatic situations to set-up reflection on the philosophical tool of frames of discourse. My commentary will attempt to show how.

I define frames of discourse beginning in the section entitled "Towards Private Edification and Frames of Discourse." But to reconstruct the interaction of dramatic context and frames of discourse, and the very idea of frames of discourse to begin with, we shall first need to appreciate the problem to which frames of discourse are a response. To that end, I begin with the well-known dialogue concerning the semantic implications of not-self which begins the dialogues of Menander and Nāgasena proper.

In the course of the essay, I discuss the following three conversations: the first conversation between Menander and Nāgasena conducted in public; a private conversation between Menander and Nāgasena which allows us to get a grip on the idea of frames of discourse; and lastly, the spontaneous conversation on the road between Anantakāya (Antiochus), a member of the King's party, and Nāgasena. This last conversation takes place before the private conversation between Menander and Nāgasena, but I have found useful to discuss it last. I will end this essay by taking up a point of view outside of the text, as it were, and offering a hypothesis about the sociological and historical significance of this meta-philosophical device.

In what follows, my commentary follows the text from the second book of the Pāli *Milindapañha*. I will continue, however, to speak of "Menander" and not "Milinda." I do not do so because I have forgotten that we are dealing with a dramatic character rather than with a historical figure. Instead, for the purpose of my reconstruction I simply wish to stress the continuity and overlap obtaining between books two and three of the Pāli work, on the one hand, and the dialogues of the Chinese **Nāgasenabhikṣuśāstra* on the other.[9] To do this, I find it useful to constrict the scope of the genre I called *The Questions of Menander* above to mean this overlap (and what lies behind it), while also using the name "Menander" to broaden our textual horizon, naming thereby a dramatically consistent character we find in more than one work. My reason for wishing to gesture beyond the Pāli work is this: The meta-conceptual tool of frames of discourse is the achievement, I believe, of a larger genre, and not any one surviving representative of it.

Menander's Resolute Incredulity

The first conversation in Pāli opens abruptly:[10]

> The King Menander approached the venerable Nāgasena … and then spoke thus: "How is the revered one known? What is your name, revered sir?" – Sir, I am known as Nāgasena; fellow Buddhist monks address me, sir, as Nāgasena. But though my parents gave me the name of Nāgasena, or Sūrasena, or Vīrasena or Sīhasena, yet it is but a denotation … for Nāgasena is only a name, since no self[11] is got at here (cf. Horner 1963: 34).[12]

[9] For the purposes of my commentary and reconstruction, the differences with the Chinese are minor, with very few exceptions (such as recorded in the note above). For more, see Thich Minh Chau 1964: 9–11; see also Guang Xing 2008: 245.

[10] But only in the Pāli; the Chinese version has Nāgasena begin with a summarizing statement of the norms valued in the Buddhist tradition, which echoes *Dhammapada* verse 204 (see Thich Minh Chau 1964: 9); see also the Chinese *Dharmapada*, T.4 573a.

[11] As Horner (1963: 34, n. 2) already pointed out, and as the commentary indicates, "*puggala*" here does *not* track the forensic and conventional notion for which we might use "person," but rather the metaphysical idea of a concrete self (or being, living-principle, as in *attā*, *satto*, *jīvo*). Thus, here and elsewhere in this argument, I have tried to forestall confusion by sticking with "self" in translation.

[12] For a connection between this claim and earlier canonical sources in Pāli, see Walser 2005: 196; for the connection with Buddhist nominalism in scholastic sources, see Bronkhorst 2006.

Note that Nāgasena's initial claim is this: "For Nāgasena is only a name, *since* no self is got at here (cf. Horner 1963: 34; emphasis mine)." That is, there not being a self is *a reason* and *not the thesis* to be defended. It is a reason for thinking that even proper names can be meaningful in the absence of referents. Getting clearer on this entailment is what initially occupies the protagonists, and what should occupy us (cf. Siderits 2007: 52).

Given that no self is found to exist, Nāgasena maintains, we must consider names to function in a different way than we otherwise might be inclined to do. As the ensuing debate will make clearer, Menander appears to take it that meaning trades on reference, and that reference involves a relation on which words acquire meaning by standing in a (real) relation with some item in the world. Nāgasena is proposing that even proper names – for many, taken to be paradigmatic of reference (cf. Sainsbury 2007: 1–2; 91) – do not acquire meaning by virtue of any such referential relation.[13] This suggests that the use of a proper name does not commit us, as a referential relation might suggest, to the existence of the referent that supplies the meaning of the word.[14]

[13] For related issues, such as issues arising with reference to something which is non-existent (such as the future), see Rhys Davids 1890: 124–125; more generally, the wider genre that is *The Questions of Menander* was used by later philosophers such as Vasubandhu for its insights into neighboring problems, such as presupposition failure (see Kapstein 2001: 363).

[14] By "existence" one might wish to supply a qualification: "existence as a concrete particular." At this stage of the argument, though, the qualification might be misleading. Menander does not appear yet to suspect or believe that there could be various senses of existence, or that "existence" is not a transparent conception. Instead, Menander appears to think that there is only one sense in which things exist (or fail to exist). For example, when discussing why sounds without concrete particulars as referents would be noise (see below), Menander appears to believe that things either exist as concrete particulars or not at all. Yet one reviewer, not without reason, thought attributing such a view to him tendentious. On reflection, I'm inclined to agree that caution is warranted. There are two reasons for this: textual, and philosophical. The notion of "senses of existence" is not clear, and the textual grounds for attribution are thin. Let me say this. Conisder Nāgasena's implicitly contrastive case that absent a self to be found, "[self] is only a name" – this makes it seem as if he thinks that to be exist as a description-dependent feature is not to exist in any sense (as Menander takes him to mean), though later we find Nāgasena's reliance on the operator made explicit: "The self, ultimately, is not got at" (cf. Horner 1963: 37–38). This makes it seem like the point of the dialogue is to come to see the need for such operators, and so also to distinguish Nāgasena's claim from Menander's inference

If the first part of the proposal is to bring our attention to the fact that our talk is not ontologically transparent – that we must, as it were, consider the vehicles of meaning and not only the putative referents of those vehicles – Nāgasena's second proposal is this: instead of looking for putative ersatz referents (say, fictional or abstract objects) to satisfy the referential relation, we designate the use of such words in a way that clarifies their dependence on usage:

> ["Nāgasena" is] just a label (*saṅkhā*), appellation (*samaññā*), designation (*paññatti*), an item in transactional use (*vohāra*) (cf. Horner 1963: 34).

In speaking like this, and in stressing the contingency and arbitrary nature of which bit of language comes to serve as the proper name of an individual, Nāgasena would have us recall that between word and world, as it were, there is a social world in which a variety of meaningfulness finds traction differently than the kind of traction one hopes to secure with reference and some variety of real relations obtaining between words and other things "in" the world. By the end of the third conversation, we will have to consider that meaning might operate given something like collective frames of discourse which will tie questions of existence to questions of semantic considerations in a particular way. But that clarification must wait. What is on the table at the moment is how best to understand the relationship between ontology (as in the claim that there is no self) and semantics (as in the claim that "Nāgasena" is just a name).

Menander sees that Nāgasena's proposals concern the relationship between ontology and semantics. But, incredulous, Menander takes the implication of Nāgasena's proposals to be, on the one hand, a variety of nihilism, and on the other, the meaninglessness of all discourse. He will

that to be abstract, or not to exist as a concretum – is not to exist at all. I don't think the latter is terribly far from being a variety of monism about existence (cf. Merricks [2017] 2019). But would that make Nāgasena a pluralist about existence? Does he believe in modalities of being? (see Williams and Tribe 2000: 93–95; McDaniel 2019). Not necessarily. I shall attempt to show that the best way to interpret Nāgasena's use of operators with respect to existence is to think in terms of frames of discourse (to which "existence" is parametrized); and this strikes me as being importantly distinct from belief in multiple senses of existence – for one can believe the latter without endorsing the former. And belief in the former might render talk of the latter vacuous.

use this entailment to challenge Nāgasena to a public test of the intelligibility of selflessness.

To see how these claims emerge we must follow Menander's response to Nāgasena and what are best treated as two independent varieties of argument to be met with. The first argument attempts to show why Nāgasena's claim is indirectly self-defeating, leading as it does to a variety of nihilism; the second, that it is directly self-defeating, being a variety of performative self-contradiction.[15] On the first variety of argument, Nāgasena must see that he has unavailable to him a variety of claims basic to Buddhist discourse involving persons; on the second variety of argument, it must be impossible for anyone, including Nāgasena, to actually affirm the thesis he states: It is not possible, Menander thinks, for anyone *to mean* what Nāgasena says. In the rest of this section we will take up the first variety of argument and get a feel for some ways in which to articulate what will be at stake in the initially contrasting orientations of Menander and Nāgasena.

I will introduce the arguments below, but not before first offering a reader two pairs of distinctions connected with an orientation to items in discourse which inform our collective conventions. Let X be some possibly description-dependent thing which comes into view for us, and which has a functional role to play in our collective life. With respect to X, one may, firstly, take either a maximalist stance with respect to it, or a minimalist one; and secondly, one may characterize it from above or from below. I'll define these quickly below.

A maximalist about the use of X, unlike a minimalist, believes that we require a metaphysical picture of what undergirds the justification for our use of X, and believes, again unlike a minimalist, that such metaphysical pictures do represent the crucial conditions of justification of those

[15] The second is not marked off as being especially different in the text. But a reader may find it in the question beginning "You tell me that your brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nāgasena. Now what is that Nāgasena?" (Rhys Davids 1890: 42). It repeats Nāgasena's opening claim and draws out a new problem for it. I have been led to offer the characterization of the two arguments in terms of an ontological consequence and a semantic one by prompts by a reviewer dissatisfied with my initial description of there being two arguments. I owe my use of "nihilism" to them, which will also play a role in my characterization of the possible historical salience of Menander's first argument below.

practices (after Johnston 1992: 590). We shall be dealing with a rather naïve variety of maximalism, which seeks to read-off the metaphysical commitments needed to justify X on the basis of superficial features of our talk involving X. By "naive" and "superficial" I do not mean to imply that such evaluations of our practice are necessarily flawed. I mean to say that we might be dealing with attempts to hew close to untutored "semantic phenomenology," meaning thereby being true to what it seems to us we are doing with some unit of speech. This would include thinking that speaking about X using singular existence (or non-existence) claims indicates that we must be speaking about some one thing which must enter into a relation with certain sounds to shore-up reference to X. We shall meet with this dimension of Menander's commitments in the next section.

Along with distinguishing maximalism and minimalism with respect to conventional practices, we shall need another distinction. One may seek to characterize X from above or below. To see this, allow that X is something – in the most general sense of this word, be it an object, state-of-affairs, fact, or what have you – which may, in some contexts, be treated as being composed of some further items (a, b, c, …). To characterize it from below is to believe that X, in all contexts in which it plays a role – and any value, semantic, functional or otherwise, with which it may be associated – may be identified with some one item or combination of items in the set (a, b, c…), and that talk of X may be replaced with talk of some item or combination of items in the set (a, b, c…). To characterize X from above involves, at minimum, an investment in functional features of X which may not be identified with items in (or composed by) the set (a, b, c…). But there are as many ways of being a minimalist as there are of avoiding the identification of X with its constituents.

These distinctions, I believe, will help us understand what is at stake in the different ways in which Menander and Nāgasena will orient themselves towards the particular nexus of concepts we are here interested in, namely those concerned with organizing the ways in which we think about and speak of ourselves and medium-sized partite things like ourselves. In this section, I will focus on Menander's maximalism with respect to some Buddhist ways of talking about persons in the section below; in the section after that, I will go on to add to this Menander's

initial commitment to characterizations from below to which he appeals in attempting a directly self-defeating argument against Nāgasena.

The Indirectly Self-Defeating Argument

I'd like to frame Menander's first argument as follows. There can be *prima facie* different ways of identifying the concept involved when speaking of myself and different functions such concepts might play in different contexts. I believe that in presenting us with Menander's first argument against Nāgasena, the text would have us note the following. The different possible functions of concepts (linked to possibly different genres of discourse) may be elided by a maximalist impulse to under-gird our use of terms in possibly distinct contexts with one single sort of thing. At the same time, this elision of functional distinctions is accompanied by the imposition of a certain kind of vertical order on our discourse. Such imposition is an effect of a (here rather naïve) maximalist's effort to identify different conceptions of persons with one metaphysically basic grounding item.

Consider, to begin with, that Menander's initial response can be described as hewing to a variety of self-talk that emphasizes sociological identities and roles (such as monks, laypeople, and so on):

> If, revered Nāgasena, the self is not got at, who on earth is it then that gives to you members of the Order your robes and food and lodging and medicines for the sick? Who is it that uses them? (Horner 1963: 34–35)

In speaking of being a child, a student, a parent, a monk, a layperson, and so on, one might have in mind a concept of a person as a location in a network of social relations. One might call this a sociological conception of persons, or with Marcel Mauss in mind, a variety of "personne-theory" (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985: 235–236; Collins 2013: 102–110). It may well be distinct from other ways of thinking of oneself, such as when one thinks of oneself as an individual agent and enjoyer of desert, the kind of thing which Menander invokes when he goes on to ask:

> Who guards ethical discipline? Who devotes themselves to meditative cultivation? Who makes real and realizes the path, its fruits, nirvana? (Cf. Horner 1963: 35)

Here Menander may, from our vantage point, be described as appealing to a notion of a person as an individual agent from a (morally or spiritually salient) practical point of view: In terms, that is, of being an agent with respect to personally specified goals and achievements.[16] To do this is to do something potentially different than what one is doing when describing oneself primarily in terms of an existing social network and functions. (Less anachronistically, one may speak of the very different styles of conceptualizing persons or action in different genres of Buddhist thought, such as *Abhidhamma* and *Vinaya*, for example.)[17] But what I would call Menander's maximalism compels him effectively to align what, in other contexts, might be kept apart as sociological and agential discourses of persons. He does this, in effect, by requiring that their justificatory conditions must overlap, involving, at some point, one and the same kind of thing. In fact, if pushed, Menander might say that he believes that the discourse of persons as individual agents *grounds* the irreducibly sociological (*personne*) conception:

> [If there were no self,] therefore, there is neither what is skillful or unskillful; there is neither agent nor cause of skillful or unskillful actions; there is neither fruit nor result of actions which are well- or ill-done. If, most reverend Nāgasena, we are to think that were a man to kill you there would be no murder, *then it follows* that there are no real masters or teachers in your monastic community and that your ordinations are void.

"Then it follows," which I have here used *after* Rhys Davids (1890: 41–42), links the last two utterances – there not being no basis for speaking of murder, and there being no reality to ordinations – as antecedent and consequence respectively. But the text does not mandate that reading, being read more simply as listing two independent consequences of there not being self (cf. Horner 1963: 35). On each reading, however, Menander is committed to the thought that it is the existence of something which

[16] By which I do not mean to entail more modern senses of individuality, or individualism. On premodern senses of individuals contingent on ascetic practices of self, see Collins 2013: 196–199, distinguished from modern entailments in n. 1, p. 211; n. 89, p. 224.

[17] More generally, one might keep in mind the fact that while many Buddhists held discourses concerned with establishing regulatory norms and disciplinary rules (*vinaya*) to be the precondition for there to be a monastic community (von Hinüber 1995: 7), such norms are not taken to be metaphysically grounded or absolute (Rahula 1978: 62–63).

grounds the truth of each type of utterance, and that this something is a self. On Rhys Davids' reading, it just doesn't do so independently: discourses of persons have an internal structure, with practical discourses of individuals grounding *personne* discourses; on Horner's reading, all discourses of persons are directly grounded in the existence of a self. Either way, on Menander's discourse "levelling" maximalism is put to work to argue that the consequence of Nāgasena's thesis is the unavailability of all varieties of person-talk and the values which they reflect and express.

Menander's first argument is interesting on its own terms. But it may also enjoy a wider salience given its possible historical context. In this, the last paragraph of this section, I offer a brief comment as a signpost for the desirability of future work. Using the distinctions made above, one may re-describe what Menander has done as follows. His maximalism has led him to interpret Nāgasena's denial of self as entailing that "Were a man to kill you there would be no murder." In the first centuries of the common era, however, such a move and such a claim might have enjoyed a very particular salience. Kṛṣṇa, some will recall, taught something similar to Arjuna in the Gītā when he argued that metaphysically speaking, "this [self] does not slay, nor is it slain" (2.19d, in Sargeant 1994: 104), *with an eye*, ultimately, towards deflating Arjuna's implicit sense of the moral and metaphysical weight of kinship and social institutions, and Arjuna's reliance on these as the ultimate orienting conditions for practical action. The point is this. What one might call the concern of a philosophical age[18] involved questioning the bases for the meaning, intelligibility, and justification of collective and individual ways of speaking of persons and asking whether or not such bases are ontologically weighted. Nihilism seems to have been a recurring worry. Such concerns also involve asking what entailments, if any, obtain

[18] The complete history will have to look to the provocation of the views of ascetic philosophers (*śramaṇas*), such as Ajita Kesakambalī (Bronkhorst 2007: 145), for whom metaphysical truths evacuate our typical ethical distinctions of sense, and our evaluations of the weight of enjoined ethical activities of their force; or Pūraṇa Kassapa, who explicitly held that "the self" is entirely insulated from all that is involved in activity (whether as agents, patients, or instruments of activity); see Bronkhorst 2007: 47–48. What appears to be happening at the turn of the millennium is that such implications come in for explicit meta-conceptual attention.

between utterances in one kind of discourse of persons and utterances in another.[19] Nāgasena's appeal to what I will call "frames of discourse" below is best read, I believe, in light of such a larger, background concern. But I mention this here only in passing, leaving it to future studies to see whether such arguments may shed light on one another when read together.

The Directly Self-Defeating Argument and Nāgasena's Wonder-Working Display

Menander also attempts a more direct argument, attempting to catch Nāgasena out in a performative contradiction. The general shape of the argument has to do with Menander's identifying a tension in meaningfully *using* a name to deny that the name has a referent. Let us consider the conclusion of Menander's argument first (Rhys Davids 1890: 43):

> "Nāgasena" is a mere empty sound. Who then is the Nāgasena that we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken, an untruth!

On Menander's view of meaning, absent a thing that could serve as the referent of a word, one is left with noise. Menander thinks Nāgasena's views generate a dilemma, one which turns on the self-evident fact that all present at the dialogue, Nāgasena included, are in the presence of conditions that make the use of the name "Nāgasena" meaningful and *not* an instance of noise ("Who then is the Nāgasena that we see before us?"); yet Nāgasena, as Menander interprets him, wants to say that there is no *thing*, no separable and identifiable referent, which contributes to the meaning of his name. Menander began the argument by inviting Nāgasena to specify what, if not a self, could serve as the referent of the name "Nāgasena:"

> You tell me that your brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nāgasena. Now what is that Nāgasena? Do you mean to say that the

[19] Nāgārjuna, meanwhile, perhaps contemporaneously, argued that it is only if we eschew metaphysical grounding for the meanings of our utterances that we can make sense of the intelligibility of practical activity and Buddhist social institutions. See, for a particularly relevant example, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.14–17 (and the concerns to which these respond) in Garfield 1995: 69.

> hair is Nāgasena? … Hairs on the body? … nails, teeth, skin, flesh, nerves … brain, or any or all of these? (Rhys Davids 1890: 42)

This is maximalism in combination with a commitment to getting Nāgasena to characterize the referent from below. Importantly, Nāgasena refuses to identify *any* one thing revealed by Menander's mereological analysis of a person as the referent of his name – whether an individual part of himself, all the parts taken together in some unspecified way, or something yet outside of the collection of parts. But this, in connection with Menander's commitments to the conditions of meaning, entitles one to think that "Nāgasena" *is* and *is not* a bit of noise.

It is important that the tension which results is not merely formal, nor a simple instantiation of the more general worry that we use words to speak of things we might, in another context, claim do not exist (cf. Yablo and Gallois 1998). Imagine calling call me on the telephone and, on hearing my voice, asking "Sonam?" Were I to say something like, "No, I am not here," or "There is no Sonam here," it's not unreasonable to assume that either I was joking or out of my mind.[20] That is, there is a practical inference to be drawn, one concerning the kind of conversational partner I am, and the kind of conversation we can possibly have. When Menander exclaims, "It is a falsehood (*alika*) that your reverence has spoken, a lie (*mūsāvādaṃ*)," it is important that he is not issuing *merely* a charge of falsehood. That would only convict Nāgasena of an unwitting statement that turns out to be contrary to the facts. A *musāvāda* (Sanskrit: *mṛṣāvādā*), instead, is typically concerned with *the deliberate misrepresentation* of how one knows things to be (Nance 2010: 78).[21] Menander's dilemma has the potential to show his audience the following

[20] Or, perhaps, playing-at something in a larger sense, though not for that "joking" in a strict sense. But it can be difficult to adjudicate the different ways this can happen. For a real-world example, Peter Sellers in an interview in 1980 on NBC's *Today Show* said (to laughter) "He's not in" when asked by the interviewer "Who am I talking to now?" But it is not self-evident that he was joking. They were discussing Sellers' claims to the effect that "There is no Peter Sellers," that "There is only a mass of characterizations," or "Inside there is nobody" and so on. See the discussion from minute 1'30'' in the following link: https://youtu.be/7S6uGe7p280.

[21] For early evidence of the fear that one's position might be discovered to be such an unstable bit of deliberate misrepresentation and its role in motivating, in part, the turn to skepticism on the part of some ancient Indian philosophers, see Jayatilleke [1963] 1980: 211.

possibility: the commitment at the heart of Buddhism – that we are not selves – might actually a bit of malicious nonsense: contrary to the seeming case, such an utterance might not be even stable enough to be an entertainable proposition, much less true.[22]

To recover the possibility that utterances like "there is not a self" can be intelligible *as* candidates for truth, Nāgasena generates a problem for Menander with "chariot" and not "self." The point is to show that it is not "self" or its denial which is generating the battery of problems, but Menander's commitments. The problem, in part, is generated by Menander's treating reference as a real relation, requiring units of sound and some item in the world to enter into combination with the sounds; there is also Menander's maximalism, as well as his reliance on the availability of characterizations from below. Nāgasena is committed to the thought persons, in certain contexts, may be described as consisting in a set of items (a, b, c…). It is Menander's maximalism and his views on reference which direct him to ask Nāgasena to identify some element (or combination of elements) from the set of items (a, b, c…) to serve as the referent of talk of self. Call this battery of conditions "meaning from below."

Nāgasena attempts to show that Menander cannot consistently hew to these principles.[23] In particular, the meaning of some of the expressions we use to speak of features and facts that make up our life together do not involve meaning from below. Or so Nāgasena's analogy to the chariot is designed to show (after Horner 1963: 36; and Rhys Davids 1890: 43):

> Then the venerable Nāgasena said to King Menander: "You, Sire, are a noble delicately nurtured, exceedingly delicately nurtured. If you were to

[22] For what such instability of utterances might portend in Greek, in the context of the demarcation of philosophy and sophistry, see Foucault 2013: 41–43.

[23] Comparativists will want to note that Nāgasena, unlike a contemporary reductionist such as Derek Parfit, does not claim that something counts as a concept-involving fact or truth *because* it is identical with, or may be captured by, its composing facts (see Parfit 2011). Nāgasena seems to believe that something is a concept-involving feature when it *cannot* be identified with or captured by composing facts, or facts involving the concrete particulars into which, in certain contexts, the thing in question may be resolved. (Thus, Parfit may have been too quick to align his view with that of Nāgasena's in Parfit 1984: 502, m.) This is one reason to distinguish the strategy of frames of discourse from reductionism, as we shall do below.

> walk at noon on the scorching ground and hot sand, trampling on sharp grit and pebbles and sand, your feet would hurt you, your body weary, your mind would be disturbed, and you would experience a haptic awareness accompanied by anguish. Now, did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?" – "I did not come, Sir, on foot; I came in a chariot."

Nāgasena goes on to subject "chariot" to the same analysis Menander offered for the proper name "Nāgasena." And the result is the same: the disappearance from view of any possible unitary and separable referent. Call this reference failure. To understand the lesson in such reference failure, we need to consider Nāgasena's question more carefully.

The first thing Nāgasena wishes Menander to do is to embed the word "chariot" within a practical frame of commitments, revealed by utterances like "I came in a chariot." Such utterances figure in practical reasoning: "I came in a chariot *because* this serves to minimize discomfort." This points to another acknowledgment Nāgasena requires of Menander. Just as the word "chariot" has its place in a discourse, chariots make a difference in the world. And these facts are related. The function a chariot-wise arrangement of parts makes possible grounds the success of the above instance of counter-factual practical reasoning ("Were you to walk…").

The relationship between the order of discourse in which "chariots" figure and the kind of facts which make them true is not further spelled out here. All we need for now, however, is to note is that the success of the counter-factual reasoning involved in practical rationality suggests a non-trivial role for talk of things like chariots: at the very least, it does not seem that it is *a convenience* that we rely on keeping such causal functions in view along with chariots to frame the intelligibility of the world and our actions in it (cf. Collins 2013: 106). The lesson of "chariot" will generalize:

> And Menander the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: "I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. Depending on all these things – the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad – the denotation, appellation, designation, the item in transactional use, the name 'chariot' occurs."

Reference failure suggests that meaning is not unproblematically to be identified with reference. As with chariots, so with talk of persons. The

further lesson Nāgasena extracts from Menander appears to involve a general acknowledgment of the need of minimalism with respect to the under-girdings of our praxis and our usage of terms (after Rhys Davids 1890: 44; and Horner 1963: 37), particularly our personal ways of having the world in view, which includes talk of selves and chariots. Such ways of having the world in view, furthermore, do not involve semantic values or functions best characterized from below. Our question will be how to understand Nāgasena's way of making sense of this much without inflating his ontological commitments. The answer, I believe, will involve frames of discourse.

Towards Private Edification and Frames of Discourse

When Menander and Nāgasena shift from debate to conversation and from a public to a private setting (from the market to the private chambers of the King), the shift in the kind of conversation is marked by a shift in social roles, in topic, and in the mode of conversation.[24] Such a shift involves clarification of a position, and not contest (as did the first debate).

The public contest ended with the avoidance of Menander's dilemma, an achievement described thus (Horner 1963: 38):

> It is wonderful (*acchariyam*), revered Nāgasena, it is marvelous (*abbhutaṃ*) … the explanations of the questions posed are very brilliant (*aticitrāni*).

The language of wonder and marvels in connection with the analytic resolution of difficulties may conceal an important meta-poetic suggestion. Such an exclamation echoes a longstanding theme of argumentation as the adversarial attempt to catch people out in demonstrations of unintended dilemmas. Being caught in a dilemma has consequences for one's social standing; and the avoidance of a dilemma – when read with the help of a long history of similar tropes in Buddhist canonical literature – may be read as representing something of a quasi-miraculous

[24] There is transition involving social roles and authority. While it might be accurate to speak of the reversal of positions (given the King's having retreated on foot, leaving the chariot behind, as did Janaka from Yājñavalkya, for which see Vasil'kov 1993), they are speaking in a different way, as friends (perhaps), guided by a new and common concern (see Horner 1963: 39; Collins 2013: 203–205).

demonstration.[25] The important point for us to note is that such demonstrations of facility in the face of challenges may stop at victory. They do not necessarily entail clarification.

Here, for example, we know that Menander has changed his mind. He no longer thinks that maintaining not-self necessarily leads to unintelligibility. But, to use the example of the first debate, he – and we, the readers – do not yet know how to think about the fact that sometimes we keep chariots in view, and sometimes don't. Nāgasena's argument does not tell us whether or not there in fact are any true varieties of meaning from below. I think that is left open, though the implicit contrast involved in the denial that we can find selves and chariots when we resolve them into parts – recall Nāgasena's saying that "ultimately, the self is not got at here" (Horner 1963: 37) – strongly inclines one to taking it that there are some ways of fixing reference that will contrast with, and so bring into view, our conventional ways of bringing things into view.

But how are we to understand the qualifier "ultimately"? And how does a characterization of something "from above" relate to characterizations of it "from below"?

It is hard to shake off the feeling that the argument has the character of a discovery of there being at least two distinct, incompatible, yet possibly equally necessary ways in which we may have things in view – pre-theoretical and personal, on the one hand, and theoretical and impersonal on the other. And it is tempting to align these with what elsewhere in the vast labyrinth of Buddhist literature come to be known as two discourses, involving two varieties of truths (Collins 2013: 106).[26] But Nāgasena, at least, does not elaborate on this at this juncture. To see

[25] See for example, *Mahāsaccakasutta* in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005: 343; *Abhayarājakumārasutta* in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005: 498–501; see also Jayatilleke [1963] 1980: 227; for a sense of different yet related topoi, compare the introduction to *Cūḷasaccakasutta* (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005: 322, 330) with *Poṭṭhapādasutta* (Walshe 1987: 159, 165, 170). For general remarks from Buddhist evidence of the philosophical culture and practices of ascetics, see Jayatilleke [1963] 1980: 211, 219–228; for evidence of similar concerns in Greek, see Foucault 2013: 41–45; and Robinson 1985: 27–28.

[26] It is important to note that there are many models of how to understand the distinction between these discourses, and how such discourses might relate; and even when related, they need not involve a hierarchy (cf. Hallisey 1994). Nāgasena remains, however, silent on these issues here. As far as I can tell, Nāgasena even eschews speaking in terms of "truth" with respect to our collective, intrinsically social frame of intelligibility.

more, we will have to consider how the text goes on to discuss the issue. And to do this, in turn, we noted that we must shift with the text to co-operative conversation and not debate; and as importantly, we must no longer frame our conversation as only involving a choice between one proposition and its contrary. Rather, as we shall see, we shall be tasked with explicating the choice between what I shall call different frameworks, each of which affords the availability of distinctive types of utterances which are not to be related by identities. I'll unpack the first part of this first and develop the second point below (and in the next section).

This shift in mode of conversation and in topic is innocuously announced (Rhys Davids, 1890: 49; my emphasis):

> And when he saw that Nāgasena had finished his meal, *he took a lower seat*, and *sat beside him*, and said, "What shall we discuss?"

Nāgasena's reply asks the King to align the topic with their new-found mode of conversation. Rhys Davids translates it as saying that "We want to arrive at truth. Let our discussion be about truth" (Rhys Davids 1890: 45). "Truth" is alright to get the valence of Nāgasensa's reply, though I'd even have preferred to capture the upshot of Nāgasena's reply more colloquially: "If we're going to get real, let discuss what it's all really about." For "truth" here picks up Nāgasena's adjective *atthika*, which means what is fitting, proper, or what makes sense, because related to, or conducive to some end (*attha*). And as indicated by the use of the word *paramattho* in what follows, what we have most reason to pursue is not unrelated to what we take to be most real.

Menander takes up the suggestion, raising now a topic related to the principles and vocabularies which serve to organize the meaningfulness of a way of life (after Rhys Davids 1890: 49):

> And the king said: "What was the purpose (*kim atthiyā*) of your going forth in renunciation? And what is your ultimate end (*paramattho*)?"

But Menander is canny; he here implicitly raises a possible distinction between that which serves as the reasons (because of providing the ends) of activity for individuals, and what a Buddhist has available to consider to be most real – the latter, perhaps, being only *in principle* what they have most reason to pursue (*paramattho*). The King asks one question: "What ultimate reality frames the intelligibility of your actions as a Buddhist

individual?" But he is encouraging another: "What is the nature of individuals from the perspective of a discourse framed in terms of what is most real, when what is most real is a kind of selflessness?"

Nāgasena's instructive reply will help us get a sense of what is involved (after Rhys Davids 1890: 49):

> Why do you ask? Our renunciation is for the sake of the ending of this discomfiture (*dukkha*), and that no further discomfiture may arise: nirvana without any remainder is our ultimate (*paramattha*).

Note that this is a *general* claim about individuals, though one which concerns *an impersonal* collective: anyone who takes up the life of a Buddhist may lay claim to it *as the reason* for taking up a new frame for the intelligibility of an individual life. Menander sees this much when he asks (Rhys Davids 1890: 49–50):

> – Why, Sir, Is it for such an end that all members of it have joined the order?
> – Certainly not, Sire. Some for those reasons, but some have left the world in terror at the tyranny of kings. Some have joined us to be safe from being robbed; some harassed by debt, and some perhaps to gain a livelihood.

Nāgasena's first utterance should be distinguished from the many individual utterances we would require to capture the individual and personal motivations which people may have for their actions. There is a process of coming into a new descriptive possibility, with which to re-describe oneself with a Buddhist frame, involving the impersonal vocabularies Buddhist texts and practices involve:

> – But for what object, Sir, did you yourself join?
> – I was received into the Order when I was a mere boy. I knew not then the ultimate aim. But I thought: "They are wise scholars, these Buddhist ascetics, they will be able to teach me." And by them I have been taught; and now do I both know and understand what is at once the reason for, and the advantage of renunciation.

Buddhist normative philosophical discourse is here presented as a frame for the intelligibility of an ideal life, in comparison with which ordinary ways of speaking and thinking about ourselves are taken to be something of a pre-theoretical frame for the intelligibility of our lives. A frame, as I shall use it here, is a way of putting into some kind of order a

stretch of discourse with respect to which questions of "existence" are to be determined. I said above that Nāgasena and Menander are interested in the relationship between ontology and semantics. A frame of discourse is a semantic tool ideal for taking the sting out of ontological questions. We will flesh out this thin characterization in this and the next section.

We are also to see that Buddhist normative discourse is presented here as something of a rational reconstruction of pre-theoretical frames. Adapting Carnap, we can say that we are dealing with rational reconstruction when, firstly, we draw a distinction between two linguistic frameworks (Maddy 2007: 68–75), or frames for intelligibility, and when we, secondly, replace the reliance of causation as an ordering principle in one with appeal to ideal reasons in another.

On Nāgasena's view, there is a frame of description on which some individual S, has reasons p, q, r, …, for some personal goal P, which leads to some action A. Only after A is accomplished, does S come to learn that A could have been embedded within a new goal Q, and retroactively supplied with a new set of reasons, x, y, z…, which now come to serve as real reasons, unlike the former which now have the status of causes, and not (in a retrospectively reconstructed sense) reasons.[27]

Note the aspirational quality of the new framework: the new discourse is not simply retroactive, but proleptic: realizing, or making real a new descriptive frame *produces the sort of person for whom this sort of new description can be true*. We need to understand that Nāgasena's talk of "know[ing] and understand[ing]" associated with the reconstructed frame for the intelligibility of our lives does not only involve knowledge of an antecedently given layout of reality, but the set of skills needed *to constitute* oneself so as to have these new utterances hold true (cf. Collins 2013: 115–116).[28]

Frameworks must help us close the gap left open at the end of the first dialogue. How does what is ultimately true relate to the conventional?

[27] For a different way of making retrospective reappraisal a part of the story of assessment, see Brandom 2019: 437–440.

[28] The proleptic features of this account should be connected with what Agnes Callard identifies as true of "aspiration" more generally as a distinctive mode of practical rationality. See Callard 2018.

This becomes the question: How do frameworks relate to one another?[29] To take only one example of a possible relation, does such reconstruction entail reductionism?

Reductionism typically involves a relation between theories, and secondarily, a consideration of ontological relation between items available in distinct theories. Take the latter first. Nāgasena clearly argues *against* taking it that "chariots" in our social vocabulary *reduce* to some other variety of item, or items available in Buddhist theory, by virtue of some relation like identity: There is no item, or set of items, with which the chariot is *identical* (Garfield 2019: 279; Siderits 1997: 460). However, if one chooses to take reductionism to mean something else, say that the existence of some X involves *nothing but* the occurrence of some other type(s) of thing(s) (as does Siderits 1997: 458–460), one must still be cautious: The phrase "nothing but" need not entail a denial of existence, nor does it tell us whether or not to distinguish different ways in which things might be said to exist (Lewis 1998: 29, quoted in Ganeri 2012b: 66–67), which, as we have seen, is a particular concern of Nāgasena's.

Nāgasena's arguments against meaning from below would have us consider a more basic question, one which directs our attention as follows: Can the ostensibly *reducing* framework recapitulate the representational power of the *reduced* framework? Can the reducing framework introduce, and so refer to, phenomena and properties in the reduced framework? Affirmative answers to these questions are required if reductionism is to be motivated (cf. Klein 2009), yet I don't see how Nāgasena's argument against fixing meaning from below could warrant an affirmative answer.[30] Once we have a discourse of impersonal features (eschewing mereological combinatoric structure and composition), we have no way

[29] For Carnap, see Maddy 2007: 82, n. 37. For interpretations of Buddhist views of discourses tracking different types of things in terms of frameworks whose truth conditions are "insulated" from one another, see Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans 2010: 139 (see also Finnigan and Tanaka 2010); for an argument for why a Buddhist philosopher might wish to give up thinking in terms of frameworks altogether, see Tillemans 2019.

[30] I must here skip over what any complete interpretation of Nāgasena's ostensible response to these matters would have to reconstruct: his views on the relationship between the translatability, deducibility, and explicability of sentences in one framework from those of another (cf. Ganeri 2012b), and his views on inter-theoretic "bridging principles and sentences" (Klein 2009).

of settling the referent of words like "chariot." On Nāgasena's account, what is needed to introduce talk of chariots, acknowledgment of their real functions, and the semantic way in which such talk hooks up with talk of persons and agency, is not some further extensionally identified item – some variety of magic ingredient – but rather, a switch to an entirely different frame for meaning. There appears to be no concession to the possibility of any "bridging principle" or commensurability between frames. Instead, we are being asked to suppose that based on usage, we have certain ways of bringing things into view for ourselves and others, and which – consistent with Nāgasena's minimalism about justification – it is inappropriate to treat as metaphysically transparent: with respect to the semantic values of the terms we use in this way it is inappropriate to ask for identity conditions, or any sort of ontologically transparent grounding.

There is another reason to be wary about reductionism. Reductionism is insufficient to get at the practical and dynamic nature of the new frame of discourse which Nāgasena introduces: the fact that the discourse of what is most real *constitutes*, and does not simply represent, new sorts of persons.

Despite the reconstructive character of the new discourse, in adopting it we are *not simply* re-describing the same terrain described in our social frames of discourse. In bringing ourselves under a description using the new framework we are bringing into being some modality of being in the world which, in turn, serves as the truth condition for that new discourse. There is an ellipsis in Nāgasena's report. The "socio-religious theater" (cf. Collins 2013: 113; 135) the process of internalizing and making real the new discourse involves is not here shown. But such a transition is intimated to us in a prior conversation, to which we shall now turn.

The Resolution of Spontaneous Doubts and the Limits of Conversation

To be asked to shift between different ways of speaking about persons is to shift between different frames of intelligibility and different reasons for undertaking either descriptions or re-descriptions of oneself. This is to "make oneself up" differently. While we have looked at this transition from the point of view of a reconstituted individual, we need to know: What does such a transition involve?

I think that the text tries to show us narratively – or, perhaps, more appropriately, through the seed of a narrative – how such a shift can happen. To see the formal and narrative points at stake in getting a grip on what a transition between discursive frames involves, consider a conversation which the text records as having occurred after the public contest of Menander and Nāgasena, and before their private conversation. The conversation in question took place spontaneously on the road between the monastery and the palace (cf. Horner 1963: 41):

> Then as Antiochus [Anantakāya] was walking beside the venerable Nāgasena, he said, "When, your reverence, I say 'Nāgasena,' what here is that Nāgasena?" "But who do you think 'Nāgasena' here is?" replied the Elder.

The question emerges abruptly as they make their way. This abruptness, I suggest, is an attempt to underscore something important about what we might call the availability and character of philosophical practice.

Let us first consider Antiochus' question, before considering what we might learn from the formal properties of the kind of answer which Nāgasena elicits from him. While Antiochus' question appears to be abrupt, given that it is seemingly unconnected with the task he and his interlocutor are engaged in, and though it appears to echo Nāgasena's opening claim concerning selflessness in conversation with Menander, it does not exhibit the lack of fit between theory and background convention which Nāgasena deliberately evoked in the opening conversation, nor does it orient itself to the resulting situation in the same way as Menander did. Antiochus asks a question which appears, for want of a better word, *genuine*: it does not seek to challenge a *thesis* held by another, but to clarify how such a thesis might personally be understood (cf. Horner 1963: 41):

> "But who do you think 'Nāgasena' is here?" replied the Elder.
> "Reverend sir, whatever the inner mobile principle is, the life-principle, that enters and issues forth, that, I think, is 'Nāgasena'."

Though couched third-personally with the help of proper names, we can imagine the first-personal relevance of the answers elicited by this type of a question. Formally, the question asks for an identity of the following kind:

> X [The referent of a proper name, and possibly first-personal pronouns] is (really) Y [which, in turn, is discoverable not alone by the use words, but by inquiry].

Call this a personal form of identity, involving some bridge between words we use in self-identification and self-ascription, and words we use to track other sorts of phenomena. We have no reason to treat such identities as indicating "primitive" or "untutored" thought, as Levy-Bruhl was inclined to do (quoted in Empson 1967: 375); rather, what is on offer is probably an attempt to sketch a variety of answer that, in terms of its form and content, reflects two sorts of facts: the continuity of untutored and tutored thought (cf. Empson 1967: 388–389); and the possible alignment of cognitive reflexes, at least were the business of thinking with identities is concerned, across civilizational complexes.

Let's unpack these. Neither Antiochus' answer nor Nāgasena's initial response feature technical vocabularies, but everyday terms. And identifications are basic to the form of thought we find in the *Upaniṣad*s,[31] even as they capture something of the identification of an explanatory (because constitutive) principle in the presocratics.[32] Content-wise, identifications of self (*psychē*) and life with a principle of air in motion (*aēr*; *pneuma*) are almost paradigmatic to students of Greek thought (see Beuso 2006; Empson 1967: 376–377); but it is likely that the text is not attempt to offer Antiochus an exclusively Greek view (pace Ishigami-Iagolnitzer 1997: 40): after all, among many other examples we might offer, the view captures Indra's identification of self and breath (*prāṇa*) in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*.[33]

I suggest taking it that Antiochus' question represents the slow penetration into everyday concern of philosophical analysis, which serves to illuminate two things: the long-term influence of the public reasoning, which now, free of the public staging of the debate, can work its influence

[31] A discovered identity or connection, being perhaps, what *upaniṣad* might mean; see Cohen 2018: 2–3, for the sense that an *upaniṣad* is a statement not only of a hidden connection, but also of an underlying reality. But when applied to the self, the hidden connection might not be best represented in a straightforward identity, and the sense of "hiddenness" takes on meta-conceptual recognition that the self is not a straightforwardly ostensible object, or representable in constructions such as "This is X" or "X is Y;" see Ganeri 2007: 23–37; Kapstein 2001: 59.

[32] *Arche*, to use Anaximandros' word, though the style of explanation I have in mind to flag (on which some X is identified as (really) being Y) is apparently to be credited to Xenophon; see Mourelatos 2008.

[33] *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.2 (Olivelle 1996: 216; see also *Taittirīya* 2.2.2; Olivelle 1996: 185).

in the mind of an individual in a very different way; and secondly, it shows us something important about the dispositional reflexes of any reflective individual, whatever his or her civilizational background, and the relationship of the Buddhist view towards it.

Nāgasena's response can clarify two issues we have already canvassed, touching on the trouble with identities: reference failure, and the question of reductionism. Consistent with his arguments against meaning from below, Nāgasena, as I read him, *rejects* Antiochus' question, and does not seek to answer it, so much as help him abandon its presupposition (cf. Horner 1963: 41):

> – But if this breath has issued forth and does not again enter, or has entered but does not issue forth again, can that man live?
> – No, revered sir.
> – Or when those who are blowers on bamboo-pies blow on a bamboo pipe, does their breath enter (again)?
> – No, revered sir.

The trouble with the identification, then, Nāgasena attempts to show, is revealed by the nonsense which results when we attempt the strict substitution of terms using the identities promoted by naïve theorizing about self. Thus, breath is paradigmatically something which "issues out and enters again;" but substitute "self" in such sentences for "breath" and one will create the pseudo-puzzle of wondering why a flautist does not die with every exhalation or inhalation: "Or, when those … horn blowers blow on a horn … why do they not die?" (cf. Horner 1963: 41).

It is important, I think, *not* to take this as a vacuous bit of reasoning applied to a caricature of identification. I think the view is available to us to find meaningful if not true today.[34] It was seriously entertained in antiquity. Thus, Sappho concludes one lyric: "You will go your way among dim shapes. / Having been breathed out" (*ékpepotamena*; Fragment 55 in Carson 2002: 114–115): the grammatical and, shall we say, spiritual details of the poem (see Carson 2002: 368) require, and draw our attention to, the identification of the subject of that last participle with the subject addressed by the speaker. Nāgasena, I suggest, is addressing a "lived" identification in the culture.

[34] Think of the sentences one might think or say when a friend gasps back awake after the successful administration of CPR.

But the provision of such a personal identification is not here (as it might seem from some early philosophical works) *a model* of what philosophical knowledge consists in, nor a conclusion. It is here a stepping-stone for reasoning to take us in a different direction. Instead of treating Antiochus' question as concerned with some item in the world we wish to explain by identifying it with some other variety of item, take ways of speaking and thinking of as a confused frame for bringing many sorts of things under a certain kind of description.

Here is the schematically presented step. Take the absurd consequences of identity statements involving the self to recommend replacing one frame, a personal, conventional way of speaking of selves, by another kind of resolutely impersonal frame, like scholastic Buddhist discourse (*Abhidhamma*):

> "This is not the life principle; in-breathing and out-breathing are impersonal, dispositional activities of the body (*kāyasankhāra*)," [said Nāgasena]; and the Elder gave a discourse on Buddhist theory (*Abhidhamma*).

Here we drop self-talk of all kinds, and focus on resolving putatively personal facts, like breathing, into impersonal descriptions.

One knows that one is working *within* a frame which makes available some variety of thing X when one doesn't ask questions like "Are there Xs?" One's questions within such a frame typically involve questions which presuppose Xs, and ask for further specifications, "How many Xs are found in such-and-so case?" (cf. Yablo and Gallois 1998: 234). But when the very existence of something does come up for scrutiny at a generalized level one might be at the boundaries of a frame. Nāgasena is asking Antiochus to recognize that his question about the self is taking place *at* such a boundary, and not *within* a frame; he is also encouraging a replacement of one frame, where self is either presupposed or self-talk constitutes a frame, by another where such commitments are not expressible. In a selfless frame, impersonal identifications in the form of definitions are offered to replace our pre-theoretical intuitions that there are identifications to be made between intrinsically first-personal items in our grammar and third-personally tagged phenomena.

To summarize, I think the text would have us see that the boundary between self as a frame and Buddhist scholastic discourse as an impersonal frame is also the boundary between pre-theoretical and theoretical

modes of discourse. Thus, to credit self-talk as if it could be parsed in terms of theoretical identities (X is Y) is a confusion twice-over: it treats self as a putative thing, and not a frame; and it unjustifiably uses such a confusion to peddle pseudo-theoretical statements of the kind Antiochus offered ("the self is the principle of motion"); instead, identities should be restricted to items picked out *within* a frame (such as "breath" and "dispositional tendencies" as in Nāgasena's reply). We are to understand that learning how to use the new frame to bring ourselves under impersonal descriptions (with such things as "impersonal bodily dispositions" in our vocabulary), and impersonal definitions to guide us, will inoculate us from the temptation to credit Antiochus' variety of question as anything more than a temptation born at the boundaries of ways of speaking.

We are not shown, from the inside, as it were, what it looks like to so inoculate oneself. From here the text moves us to the private conversation between Menander and Nāgasena where we saw intimated a little more about what is involved in adopting a new frame, a new way of "knowing and seeing." We can say, however, that making such a change involves going beyond conversation to practice; to follow such a shift will require a shift in literary genre, perhaps. And it also shows us the proper bounds of the work of *reasoning*. In such moments of ellipses, where the text gestures in the direction of practice but does not let its readers follow, we find perhaps the wisdom of *The Questions of Menander*: reasoning is a part, but only a part, of the practices of self promoted by Buddhists. One may also propose the following question: Can one read the dialogues to follow (in books two and three of the Pāli, and the rest of the surviving text in Chinese) as exemplifying a drama in which Menander attempts, not without internal resistance and obstacles to his understanding, to internalize not-self (or, *Abhidhamma*) as a frame of thought and discourse? I think so, but must leave this to another time or to others.

Conclusion

Abstracted from the conditions of dialogue to different degrees, the argument reconstructed for the non-existence of self has enjoyed salience as a peculiarly suitable way to engage Buddhism philosophically in a

contemporary marketplace of ideas.[35] I hope to have shown that, as is no less true of Plato's dialogues (Rosen 1968: xi–xxxi), ignoring dramatic framing is a mistake. If we do not read the conversations in sequence, reflecting on changes of setting, modes of conversation, conversational partners and topics, we might lose sight, thereby, of the introduction and use of a meta-conceptual tool like that of frames of discourse. A frame of discourse, we have seen, is a way of understanding one's situatedness in a given stretch of discourse, characterized by having certain topics available in it to form utterances about while ruling out others. There can be drama in a person's coming into and out of a frame of discourse. But dramatic framing is a literary device; frames of discourse a philosophical one. They may inter-relate in complicated ways, as I hope to have suggested in the foregoing remarks. In conclusion, I would like to suggest how they let us take stock of the context of the dialogue in different ways.

Taking up the *Questions of Menander* from the outside, as it were, we may read the dramatic frame as having something to say about the how the claims of Buddhism had to find a place in a dynamic and diverse cultural and philosophical climate, the historical North West of the subcontinent at the turn of the millennium, a time and place for which the metaphor of a marketplace of ideas is peculiarly apt (Baums 2018).[36] It is not alone the "victory" of Buddhism, nor the "conversion" of a skeptical King that is at issue, though the vindication of Buddhism in a marketplace of ideas, a literary reflection, perhaps, of concerns with the penetration of Buddhism into uncharted territory, is surely at stake. A focus on the idea of frames of discourse, however, might allow us to try our hand at a more provocative interpretation.

The prospect of that which seems farthest from common-sense – the claim that we are not selves – and the way in which the text seeks to afford it a place in our settled commitments and cognitive reflexes – for a very capacious way of realizing the scope of the collective pronouns here – is suggestive. Not-self, now conceived not alone as a proposition

[35] As intimated by Price 1955, quoted in Ganeri 2001: 1–2.

[36] The "marketplace of ideas" sounds modern, but it is a trope one could derive from the opening of the *Milindapañha* (Horner 1963: 2), where we are told how Sāgala, rich in markets, features innumerable varieties of well-displayed goods, and also the cries of welcome of teachers of every philosophical tradition, and many ascetic practices.

but as what we called above a *frame* of discourse, serves almost as a point in a triangle, the base of which in this text is shown to be formed by two cultures, Indic and Greek.

It is important to be clear about what I am not suggesting. Some have thought that the *Questions of Menander* might originally have been composed in Greek, possibly reflecting the self-understanding of a nascent community of Hellenistic Buddhists (Tarn 1951: 414–436); some have thought, at the very least, that it is reflective of a more composite world (Festugière 1942–1943: 40; Derrett 1967; Bronkhorst 1999: 22–23; Sick 2007). Some have responded that we don't need any such commitments, particularly given the Indic literary background available to us to explicate the work (Gonda 1949; Vasil'kov 1993; but see Sick 2007: 254–255; 272–275). I propose that we forego monolithic questions of historical origin in order to consider, instead, the issue of *hermeneutic continuity*, given the possibly intentional alignment in this text of what is *philosophically continuous* in two distinct linguistic and philosophical cultures.

In my commentary I have sometimes tacitly (in the notes) and sometimes explicitly (as in the last section) tried to highlight how the prospects of reasoning oneself in and out of stances with respect to identity dramatized for us in the opening conversations of *The Questions of Menander* is staged in a very particular way, involving vocabularies and concerns for which one can find precedent – not availability alone, but also salience – in the histories of both Greek and Indic philosophical cultures. To review, the text appears to self-consciously employ a dialogical frame that has Indic and Hellenistic precedent (Gonda 1949; Vasil'kov 1993; Sick 2007); employs non-theoretical vocabularies (as with breath), and metaphors of self (like the chariot) with Indic and Greek philosophical salience (see Kapstein 2001: 89; Forte and Smith 2016; Magnone 2016); stresses an apparently shared concern with the demarcation of propositions from pseudo-propositions; thematizes the provision of identities as one style of reasoning philosophical knowledge involves.

Such alignments might represent a fully self-conscious realization and deliberate reflection of a complex, historical landscape, one wherein, as Stefan Baums reminds us, the use of a language tells us nothing about

ethnicity or cultural self-identification (Baums 2018: 41).[37] I also take it that such hermeneutic alignment through conversation is partly intended to model how one might render more transparent the claims of another (individual, or culture) that initially seems opaque, enacting thereby a variety of "intellectual hospitality" (cf. Ganeri 2012a), one well-worth of our attention today. Needless to say, I intend such a remark as an invitation to future philological and philosophical research.

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[37] There is some evidence, that the details of Menander's depiction in the *Milindapañha* do evince some quasi-historical recognition of cultural contact, and more particularly, an awareness of Greek *literary* precedent (Sick 2007: 271–276).

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