



Who Identifies with the Aggregates? Philosophical Implications of the Selected *Khandha* Passages in the Nikāyas

Grzegorz Polak¹ 

Accepted: 8 August 2023 / Published online: 9 September 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract In this paper, I discuss some philosophical problems connected with the notion of regarding the aggregates (*khandha*) as self in the Nikāyas. In particular, I focus on the attitude represented by the formula “I am this” (*esohamasmi*) which may be labeled as that of identifying with the aggregates. In the first part of the paper, I point out and analyze certain similes contained in the Nikāyas which may be read as implying the existence of a distinction between the aggregates and the individual who regards them as self. Then, I consider a hypothesis that the aggregates are not objective constituents of a human being but subjectively experienced representational phenomena. I argue that several Nikāya texts imply the existence of important aspects of a human being, in particular cognitive ones, which are not conceptualized in the terms of the five aggregates. I also discuss the possibility of interpreting *khandhas* as not active in character but as resultant of other cognitive processes. In the last part of the paper I offer a hypothesis that one of the key aspects of regarding the aggregates as self lies in the identification of a human individual with one’s own phenomenal self-representation which results in a mistaken projection of the notions of agency, identity and subjectivity onto something that is inherently devoid of it. I also consider certain parallels between the ideas present in the Nikāyas and the concepts of the modern philosophy of mind.

Keywords *Anattā* · Not-self · Mind · Consciousness · Self · *Khandha* · Early Buddhism

✉ Grzegorz Polak
grzegorz.m.polak@gmail.com;
grzegorz.polak@mail.umcs.pl; <https://www.umcs.pl/pl/adres-book-employee,2226,en.html>

¹ Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, pl. M. Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, 20-031 Lublin, Poland

Introduction

The doctrine of the five aggregates (*khandha*) occupies an important place in the Pali Nikāyas and is often presented in the context of a criticism or negation of the notion of self (*attā*). While at its basic level it states that none of the aggregates may be regarded as self, the criticism of the notion of the self in the Nikāyas is much richer and more multifaceted. Some passages (e.g., DN 15/3.66-67, MN 2/3.8) contain detailed analyses of the nature of the self and provide definitions which may be considered very impressive for their time from a philosophical point of view. Other fragments, on the other hand, focus more on the forms of cognitive attitude adopted towards the aggregates which may result in either wrongly seeing them as self, or correctly regarding them as not-self (*anattā*). One particularly often encountered stock passage describes the three basic attitudes which one can wrongly adopt towards the aggregates. It states that an “uninstructed ordinary person” (*assutavant puthujjana*) regards (*samanupassati*) each of the *khandhas* in the following way: “this is mine, I am this, this is my self”.¹ These three attitudes are described in the commentaries as grips (*gāha*). The *Aṭṭhakathā* commentary to the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the *Sāratthappakāsinī* describes these three attitudes respectively as grips of craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and views (*diṭṭhi*).²

In this paper, I would like to focus on the philosophical meaning and implications of the second of these attitudes, namely regarding the aggregates in terms of “I am this (*esohamasmi*)”. What does seeing the aggregates in this way actually mean from a philosophical point of view? Considering this question in greater detail will bring to attention some interesting philosophical problems as well as highlight certain dimensions of the *khandha* and the not-self teachings which have not yet been given much attention so far.

Who identifies with the aggregates?

Firstly, let us consider the question of who or what regards the aggregates in terms of “I am this”, or where exactly is this attitude generated. To put it another way: who is the agent who displays this attitude? By the usage of the term “agent” we are not automatically committing ourselves to an essentialist or a personalist view, as it is intended here merely in a functional meaning. In this sense, even a set of processes or an artificial intelligence may be considered an “agent” of a particular attitude if this attitude originates from within it.

The already mentioned Nikāya stock passage states that it is an ordinary person who maintains this attitude towards the aggregates. The historically dominant interpretation within Theravāda was that the terms such as “person” or “being” are merely conventional and that what exists in the ultimate sense are the five aggregates. One of the earliest formulations of this important idea is found in the *Vajirā-sutta* (SN 5.10/1.296), where in response to Māra’s question about the nature

¹ E.g., SN 22.8/3.18: *etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, eso me attā’i samanupassati*.

² Spk 2.98.

of being (*satta*) the nun Vajirā states that a being is just a convention (*sammuti*) used when the aggregates exist. The *Sāratthappakāsinī* explains the meaning of *sammuti* in this context by stating that the term *satta* is only used as a mere designation or common parlance (*samaññā*).³ Vajirā compares the relation of “being” to the aggregates to that of a chariot to the accumulation of its parts (*aṅgasambhāra*). The *Vajirā-sutta* has been very influential in the history of Theravāda, and its main ideas as well as the famous chariot simile re-emerge in the *Milindapañha* and the *Visuddhimagga* which directly quote the older text. In the former work, Nāgasena explains that his name is only used as a mere designation,⁴ but in the ultimate sense (*paramattha*), a person (*puggala*) does not exist. Buddhaghosa states in the *Visuddhimagga* that “being” or a “person” are merely worldly expressions (*lokasamaññā*), and what really exists is name-form⁵, which is identified in the Theravāda tradition with the five aggregates.⁶ When commenting on the *Bhāra-sutta* (SN 22.22/3.25–26), the subcommentary (*ṭīkā*) to the *Samyutta Nikāya* known as the *Sāratthappakāsinī-purāṇa-ṭīkā*, states that by “person” the text means a continuity (*santāna*) of the aggregates.⁷

It is noteworthy that all the abovementioned Theravāda passages do not contain the term “self” (*attā*) but refer to a being or a person. While carrying similar meanings to *attā*, the latter two terms are not entirely synonymous with it. It seems then that the tendency in the history of Theravāda was to shift the focus from the notion of *attā* to those of *satta* and *puggala* as objects of criticism in the context of the doctrine of the aggregates.

In light of the historically dominant view within Theravāda, it would then seem that the five *khandhas* themselves are the collective agent of the attitude “I am this” with respect to the *khandhas*, i.e., themselves. This leads to an interesting problem, as one might ask what is exactly wrong with the *khandhas* seeing themselves as being *khandhas*. Let us suppose, for example, that there arises a thought (*vitakka*) “I am this” with regard to the *saṅkhāras*. Now, *vitakka* is considered to be a *saṅkhāra* of speech.⁸ Therefore, from an ultimate point of view, it is a *saṅkhāra* which regards *saṅkhāras* as “I am this”. But is it not true? In response to this question, one may perhaps suggest that the problem lies foremost in seeing oneself in terms of “I” (*ahaṃ*) and also perhaps as “this” (*eso*). The former involves a self-less process seeing itself in personal terms, while the latter may involve a certain dose of reification of something which is insubstantial. From this perspective, the cognitive attitude displayed by the aggregates by seeing themselves as “I am this” would need to be considered mistaken. Such an interpretation of course rests on the assumption that “an uninstructed ordinary person” which maintains this attitude is merely a conglomerate of the aggregates, as stated in the abovementioned classical

³ Spk 1.94: *sammūṭṭi sattuṭṭi samaññāṇamattameva hoti*.

⁴ Miln 28. Several nearly synonymous Pali words are used in this context to express this meaning: *saṅkha*, *samaññā*, *paññatti*, *vohāra* and *nāma*.

⁵ Vism 593: *nāmarūpamattamevadaṃ, na satto, na puggalo atthī*.

⁶ E.g. in Vism 593.

⁷ Spk-pt 2.214: *Puggalanti khandhasantānaṃ vadati*.

⁸ E.g., MN 44/1.301: *vitakkavicārā vacīsaṅkhāro*.

Theravāda texts. The question, however, is whether this view can be generalized to the whole Nikāyas and whether it was held by the authors of the texts speaking about seeing the aggregates in terms of *esohamasmi*, such as the *Dutiyaupādāparitassanā-sutta* (SN 22.8/3.18-19).

This, however, is far from certain. In recent decades there have appeared important scholarly works questioning whether the set of the *khandhas* was originally intended to be an exhaustive account of the objective constituents of a human being. In an important contribution, Gethin (1986, p. 49) has suggested that the concern of the *khandha* teaching “is not so much the presentation of an analysis of man as object” while Hamilton (2000, p. 29) has commented that “the *khandhas* are not a comprehensive analysis of what a human being is comprised of”. This insight has been taken up and expanded upon by Wynne (2010) and Davis (2016).

Let us for the sake of the argument attempt to look at the stock passage about regarding the aggregates as “I am this” without automatically assuming that the agent of this attitude is just a conglomerate of the five *khandhas*. Read in the most direct way, the attitude described in the passage seems to be best characterized as that of identifying with something.⁹ What are the most straightforward criteria for assessing whether an act of identification with something is correct or mistaken? The former is the case when the agent who identifies with something is identical to the object of identification, while in the opposite case, an act of identification can be considered wrong. Therefore, if the attitude “I am this” were to be considered mistaken, it would imply that the “uninstructed ordinary worldling” is not identical to the five aggregates. Such a view is of course at odds with the historically dominant Theravādin interpretation.

***Khandha* similes and their philosophical implications**

However, upon direct reading, some Nikāya texts may be interpreted as implying a sort of a distinction between the individual and the aggregates. Such is of course the case with the famous *Bhāra-sutta* (SN 22.22) which states that the five aggregates connected with grasping are the burden (*bhāra*), while its bearer is said to be a person (*puggala*), further defined as a “venerable one of such a name and clan”.¹⁰ This text has become a subject of an intense historical debate between the Pudgalavādins and their mainstream Buddhist opponents.

Interestingly, there are several other, less known Nikāya texts dealing with the *khandhas*, which contain similes that can be read as implying some sort of distinction between the aggregates and the individual who displays varying attitudes towards them. The *Vammika-sutta* (MN 23/1.142-145) describes a sage (*sumedha*) using a knife to delve within a fuming anthill. Gradually he discovers various things which he is told to throw away one by one until finally discovering a *Nāga* serpent,

⁹ Other scholars also describe the wrong attitude towards the aggregates as identification with them, e.g., Wynne (2010, p. 114) who states that “the Not-Self teaching considers a person’s identification with the five aggregates in terms of the notion “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”.

¹⁰ SN 22.22/3.25-26: *yvāyaṃ āyasmā evaṃnāmo evaṃgotto; ayaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, bhārahāro*.

which he is told to keep and honor. The anthill (*vammika*) is said to be a designation (*adhivacana*) for the human body (*kāya*), while the things discovered in it and meant to be later abandoned are designations for various elements negatively evaluated in Buddhist doctrine. Amongst things to be abandoned are also the five *khandhas* represented by a turtle (*kumma*). The remaining *Nāga* serpent is, on the other hand, a representation of a bhikkhu who has ended the taints (*khīṇāsava*). The *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*, also known as the *Papañcasūdanī* explains that the abandoning of the *khandhas* is to be understood as abandoning of desire (*chanda*) and passion (*rāga*) for them.¹¹

In a simile contained in identical form in the first *Natumhākam-sutta* (SN 22.33/3.33) and in the closing part of the *Alagaddupama-sutta* (MN 22/1.130-142), the Buddha addresses his disciples in Savatthi's Jeta Grove, asking them to imagine people carrying grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in that very place. He then asks his disciples whether they would think that they are themselves being carried by these other people to which the disciples answer in the negative, explaining that the carried items are "neither our self nor what has the nature of self".¹² The Buddha advises his disciples to look at the aggregates as "not yours (*na tumhākam*)" and to abandon (*pajahati*) them, which in turn will lead to welfare and happiness. The *Papañcasūdanī* comments that abandoning of the aggregates is to be done by the removal (*vinaya*) of desire and passion and not by uprooting or tearing the aggregates out.¹³

The *Ānanda-sutta* (SN 22.83/3.105-106) contains a simile of a young person that would look at her own facial image (*mukha-nimitta*) reflected in a mirror or a bowl filled with pure water. Depending on the meaning of the word *upādāya* used in the text, it either means that the notion "I am" (*asmīti*) occurs by having grasped (*upādāya* read as an absolutive of *upādiyati*) the aggregates, or is dependent (*upādāya* in an idiomatic sense) on the aggregates.

The two *Gaddulabaddha-suttas* (SN 22.99-100/3.149-152) contain a simile of a leashed dog (*gaddulabaddha*)¹⁴ bound to a sturdy post. In the first sutta, the dog is said to run around the post (*anuparidhāvati anuparivattati*). In the second sutta, it is said that whether the dog runs, stands, sits or lies down, it does it always close to the post. Similarly, an ordinary person who regards the aggregates as self constantly runs and revolves around them, not being freed from them. The second sutta contains an additional simile describing "an artist or a painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson, to create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas."¹⁵ The simile is meant to

¹¹ Pps 2.133: *pajaha pañcupādānakkhandheti ettha pañcasu khandhesu chandarāgappahānaṃ kathitaṃ*.

¹² SN 22.33/3.34: *na hi no etaṃ, bhante, attā vā attaniyaṃ vā*"ti.

¹³ Pps 2.119: *yaṃ na tumhākam taṃ pajahathāti bhagavā, khandhapañcakaṃyeva na tumhākanti dassetvā pajahāpeti, tañca kho na uppājetvā, luñcitvā vā. chandarāgavinayena panetaṃ pajahāpeti*.

¹⁴ The compound *gaddulabaddha* literally just means "one bound by a leash" without specifying that a dog is meant here. Such meaning is implied, however, as directly stated by the *Sārathappakāsinī*: "*sā gaddulabaddhoti gaddulena baddhasunakho*" (Spk 2.326).

¹⁵ Trans. Bodhi (2000, p. 959).

convey the notion that all that an “uninstructed worldling” produces (*abhinibbatteti*) are merely the five aggregates.

The *Nadī-sutta* (SN 22.93/3.137-139) continues the theme of dichotomy with the simile of a man (*purisa*) being carried by a swiftly flowing mountain river (*nadī pabbateyya*), who would try to save himself by clutching various forms of grass, reed and trees growing on both of its banks. However, in all of these cases the man would meet with misfortune and misery (*anayabyasana*) as the plants being clung onto would break (*palujjati*), offering no firm support. This is compared to an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) who regards each of the aggregates as self (or self as possessing each of the *khandhas*), and as they break down, he similarly undergoes calamity.

The *Yamaka-sutta* (SN 22.85/3.109-115) contains the simile of a person wanting to take away the life (*jīvita voropetukāma*) of a householder or householder’s son. In order to kill him easily, he would first gradually win his favor. The victim would die from failing to recognize the true nature of the assassin early enough. Then, the text directly compares this situation to an ordinary individual who fails to see the aggregates as selfless, impermanent, suffering, constructed (*saṅkhata*), and “murderous” (*vadhaka*).

What is interesting about these similes, is that they seem to imply some distinction between the aggregates and an individual who displays various attitudes towards them. It needs to be said that apart from the *Bhāra-sutta* and the *Vammika-sutta*, the particular vehicles (i.e., persons, animals or items) used in these similes are neither explicitly said to symbolize the *khandhas* nor the individual (e.g., a murderer or a sturdy post or are not explicitly said to be a representation of the aggregates). Instead, the similes as a whole are said to be a portrayal of a particular attitude towards the aggregates. e.g., grasping them or abandoning them. Nonetheless, the dichotomy between the aggregates and the individual seems to be implied by the very nature of the similes in question.

Interestingly, the commentaries sometimes share a similar view. Commenting on the *Yamaka-sutta*, the *Sāratthappakāsinī* states that an uninstructed ordinary person attached to the round [of rebirth] is like a stupid householder’s son, while the “weak and feeble” five aggregates are like a murderous adversary.¹⁶ The same commentary claims with respect to the *Nadī-sutta* that a stupid ordinary person attached to the round is like a man fallen into a stream, while the five aggregates are like the plants on its both banks.¹⁷ In case of the first *Gaddulabaddha-sutta*, the *Sāratthappakāsinī* comments that a fool attached to the round is like a dog, a view (*diṭṭhi*) is like a leash, while a post is like personal identity (*sakkāya*).¹⁸ According to the *Sakkāya-sutta* (SN 22.105/3.159) *sakkāya* is defined as the five aggregates of grasping, so the simile again implies a dichotomy of an individual and the *khandhas*. Of course, the fact that the commentaries interpret the similes in this way has little bearing on the

¹⁶ Spk 2.312: *bālagahapatiputto viya hi vaṭṭasannissitakāle assutavā puthujjano, vadhakapaccāmitto viya abaladubbālā pañcakkhandhā*.

¹⁷ Spk 2.319: *sote patitapuriso viya vaṭṭasannissito bālaputhujjano daṭṭhabbo, ubhatotīre kāsādayo viya dubbalaṇṇaṇṇakhandhā*.

¹⁸ Spk 2.326-327. *Sakkāya* literally means “existing body” but is usually translated idiomatically as “personal identity” or “personality” (cf. Bodhi, 2000, p. 53).

meaning intended by the Nikāya authors. It shows, however, that interpreting the dichotomies in the similes as referring to the dichotomy of the aggregates and the individual is their most straightforward and natural reading.

The necessity of not identifying with the *khandhas* seems to be more explicitly emphasized by the simile in the *Natumhākāṃ-sutta* and the *Alagaddupama-sutta*. The Buddha's statement prior to the simile focuses on the "not yours (*na tumhākāṃ*)" aspect of the not-self teaching. However, the message of the simile seems to be directed against identification with the aggregates; the latter attitude symbolized by the hypothetical possibility of the Buddha's listeners thinking that they themselves are the grass and branches carried by other people in the very same Jeta's Grove in which the sermon is delivered. The simile thus conveys the message that the aggregates are utterly different from those who regard them as self.

When read directly, the abovementioned similes seem to imply a distinction within a human being between the aggregates and the individual who displays various attitudes toward them. This in turn suggests that the five *khandhas* are not the only components of a human being.

But are we justified in drawing such an inference? It needs to be pointed out that it is very difficult to come up with a simile that would perfectly convey the classical Theravādin interpretation of the not-self doctrine. After all, is there even a real-life example of a sum of parts conceiving of themselves as a unitary entity which could be used for the purpose of a simile? The chariot metaphor successfully conveys the message that a supposed unitary entity can be reduced to the sum of its parts but says nothing about how one becomes self-deluded and wrongly conceives one's own identity. Perhaps only currently, with the progress of the computer technology, we could come up with something more appropriate, like a simile of some AI behaving and expressing itself as if it was an intelligent sentient being endowed with personality while actually being just a sum of hardware parts controlled by equally self-less software. One may also try to explain away the problem by claiming that the dichotomies of the individual and the aggregates in the similes are not dichotomies in the ultimate sense and that the texts just seamlessly shift between the two perspectives of description: a conventional (*sammuti*) one of an individual and an ultimate (*paramattha*) one of the aggregates, though this shift is not explained explicitly.

Still, in case of at least some of the similes, their dichotomous implications could have perhaps been avoided if that really had been the intent of their authors. Instead of a simile of a dog revolving around the post which indirectly suggests the existence of a distinction between the aggregates and an individual, a simile of a dog chasing its own tail would better fit with the historically dominant Theravāda interpretation. That is because from the point of view of the latter, obsessing about the aggregates essentially means that a set of the aggregates obsesses about itself. Likewise, the simile of an assassin and a householder could be replaced by the one of a householder unintentionally killing himself. If we accept the interpretation of human being as a combination of the aggregates, then in the context of this simile it would imply that the combination of the *khandhas* actually murders itself. Instead of the simile of looking with grasping at one's reflection in the mirror, a simile of

looking with grasping at one's own body directly (though not at one's own face anymore!) could perhaps be used.

Nonetheless, we should honestly admit that the *Bhāra-sutta* and the abovementioned similes do not in themselves constitute strong enough evidence to conclude that their authors really believed that within a human being there exists a dichotomy of the aggregates and their enigmatic counterpart. They may, after all, be a form of poetic license and one should be wary of drawing definite philosophical conclusions from them. However, they may serve as an inspiration for a further inquiry into the Nikāyas regarding this issue.

What are the aggregates?

In the earlier part of the paper, I mentioned some scholarly statements to the effect that the set of the *khandhas* was not supposed to provide a comprehensive analysis of what the human being is in the objective sense. If this is the case, then what are the aggregates exactly? In his seminal article, Gethin (1986, p. 49) has suggested that the concern of this teaching is “the understanding of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject” and that the *khandhas* are “five aspects of an individual being's experience of the world”. Following that line of reasoning, Wynne has claimed that they represent an “experiential understanding” (2009, p. 64) and that their “phenomenological understanding seems to make good sense of the textual evidence” (2009, p. 63) regarding the aggregates. Davis (2016, p. 140) sees the aggregates as “a kind of phenomenological analysis of human experience from within” and as “an analysis of the lived experience of a subject, from within.” Nikāya focus on the phenomenality and subjectivity of our experience is confirmed by the presence of a specific notion of the world (*loka*) which is said to exist in the body endowed with perception and mind (SN 2.26/1.61: *kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake*), the world which can cease for a Buddhist practitioner.

Having phenomenal nature or being a phenomenon means that something is shown, revealed, or manifest in experience (Blackburn, 2005, p. 275). This furthermore entails that something is directly available to experience and need not be inferred indirectly. If a state is phenomenal, it usually means that it is qualitative and that there is something that is like to experience it. From a functional perspective, being phenomenally conscious is usually considered tantamount to being globally available.¹⁹ This in turn means that something is available to faculties such as speech, memory, introspection or action guidance.²⁰ We can talk about our subjective experiences, remember them or express them by action. The *khandhas* definitely meet some key criteria of phenomenality and global availability. This is most obvious in the case of mental aggregates such as feeling (*vedanā*) or perception (*saññā*). The pleasant or painful feelings or the perceptions of basic

¹⁹ Cf. Siderits (2020, p. 199).

²⁰ For various definitions of global availability/broadcasting see Siderits (2020, pp. 200–201); Baars (1997, pp. 157–164), Carruthers (2015, p. 2).

colors²¹ are typical examples of phenomenal, qualitative direct experiences characterized by their irreducible “what it is like” character. The experience of the *khandhas* is certainly available to the faculty of speech and memory which is the key mark of global availability. One remembers experiencing the *khandhas* and can express these experiences in language. For example, the *Nibbedhika-sutta* (AN 6.63/3.410-417) states that verbal expression (*vohāra*) is a result (*vipāka*) of the *khandha* of perception, as one verbally expresses (*voharati*) according to the way one perceives: “Thus I was percipient”.²²

Some texts can be read as implying that all the aggregates are available for direct experience. The *Aggivaccha-sutta* states that each of the aggregates, its origin and subsiding has been seen by the *Tathāgata*.²³ In the *Khemaka-sutta*, a bhikkhu is said to be dwelling contemplating the rise and fall (*udayabbayānupassī*) with respect to the *khandhas*.²⁴ Phenomenal and subjective reading of at least four so-called mental *khandhas* seem quite natural. Slightly more problematic is explaining *rūpa* as phenomenal in nature and not as referring to matter as an objective constituent of the external world. Perhaps *rūpa* could be understood as referring to one’s own body as a constant phenomenal element of experiencing the world. One’s own body as a phenomenon is of course not synonymous with the body as an element of objective reality, but rather with its subjective representation. Such a phenomenal understanding of *rūpa* is certainly implied in the enigmatic passage of the *Kalahavivāda-sutta* which states that *rūpa* vanishes (*vibhoti*) for one who has achieved a paradoxical state in which all possible modes of being percipient (*saññī*) or non-percipient are denied. The text then proclaims that it is because proliferated concepts (*papañcasaṅkhā*) have their source (*nidāna*) in *saññā*.²⁵ The text thus seems to imply that *rūpa* itself is a type of *papañcasaṅkhā* which has origin in *saññā* and can vanish in a special state beyond all forms of perception.

A possibility that the aggregates were meant to represent aspects of subjective, phenomenal and globally available experience of the world and not its objective constituents has quite profound potential implications which seem not to have been fully considered. Wynne (2009, p. 64) has aptly noted that the “five aggregates are aspects of person that can be observed” and that “a person is made up of many things that cannot be observed in this way”. The very notions of subjectivity, phenomenality and global availability usually imply the existence of something which is neither subjective, nor phenomenal, nor globally available. One trying to account for the functioning of one’s own mind and of the world just by referring to the phenomena which are subjectively available will find this to be an impossible task as some key elements or processes seem to be missing from the equation. Let us consider the case of eureka phenomena or moments, when a solution to a certain

²¹ This understanding of *vedanā* and *saññā* is based on SN 22.79/3.86-91.

²² AN 6.63/3.413: *yathā yathā naṃ sañjānāti tathā tathā voharati, evaṃ saññī ahoṣinti*.

²³ MN 72/1.486: *diṭṭhañhetam, vaccha, tathāgatena — ‘iti rūpaṃ, iti rūpassa samudayo, iti rūpassa atthaṅgamo*. The same descriptions are given for the remaining aggregates.

²⁴ SN 22.89/3.131: *so apareṇa samayena pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu udayabbayānupassī viharati*.

²⁵ Snp 4.11/170: *na saññāsaññī na viśaṇṇasaññī, nopi asaṇṇī na vibhūtasaññī. evaṃsametassa vibhoti rūpaṃ, saññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā*.

problem comes to our consciousness unexpectedly, often without any conscious preoccupation with the problem in the moments directly preceding the eureka moment.²⁶ If we reject the idea that this new thought has been put into our minds by some supernatural agent, then the only plausible explanation is that our minds must have been working on this problem, but this process was not available to our introspection, speech and memory i.e., was not globally available. Siderits (2020, p. 199) states that:

there is now widespread consensus in cognitive science concerning two points about consciousness: (1) not all mental states are conscious, and (2) global availability is the mark of consciousness.

Garfield (2015, p. 210) speaks about the “innumerable unconscious cognitive processes” which “lie below the level of introspectibility” and construct our introspective subjective self-awareness. These statements can hardly be considered controversial from the perspective of modern philosophy of mind and are widely accepted. The dominant interpretation is that these non-introspectable mental processes are also non-phenomenal in character, i.e., there is nothing that it is like to have them.

Can the mind work in a *khandha*-less way?

If the aggregates really represent the subjective, phenomenal and globally available elements of our experience of the world, then do the Nikāyas acknowledge any vital aspects of a human being and especially of human cognition which cannot be conceptualized in terms of the five aggregates? If there are such aspects, then this could have relevance for our discussion of the dichotomy of the aggregates and their counterpart implied by some *khandha* similes.

It seems that there are indeed Nikāya texts which speak about certain forms of cognition without conceptualizing them in terms of the aggregates. The *Mūla-pariyāya-sutta* (MN 1/1.1-6) describes a heightened state of cognition characterizing the arahants and the *Tathāgatas* in which one no longer “perceives” (*sañjānāti*) all the elements constituting the world, but rather “directly knows” (*abhijānāti*) them. This implies the absence of the aggregate of *saññā*, since the latter is connected with a cognitive process labeled by the verb *sañjānāti*.²⁷ Furthermore, this would suggest that the latter form of cognition is somehow defective when it comes to reflecting the true nature of reality. The *Papañcasūdanī* insists that what is meant here is not perception *per se*, but only perceiving by means of a distorted perception (*viparītasaññā*).²⁸ Thus, the mode of cognition labelled as *abhijānāti* would not actually be devoid of *saññā*. However, the *mūla* text in question does neither explicitly make such a qualification nor imply it in any way. According to the

²⁶ See Carruthers (2015, pp. 176–177) for an explanation of this phenomenon.

²⁷ For an explanation of a connection between *saññā* and *sañjānāti* see *Khajjaniya-sutta* (SN 22.79/3.86–91).

²⁸ Pps 1.26: *pathaviṃ pathavito saññatvāti so taṃ pathaviṃ evaṃ viparītasaññāya sañjānitvā*

Paramatthaka-sutta (Sn 4.5/156-157), not even a subtle *saññā* is fabricated (*pakappita*) with regard to what is seen, heard and sensed by a bhikkhu who is presented as a personal ideal in this text.²⁹ This is not implied to be a state of sensory insentience, but rather that of a pure, direct cognition.

There are several passages which suggest some sort of distinction between the mind (*citta/cetas*)³⁰ and the so-called mental aggregates. The *Dutiyasikkhattaya-sutta* (AN 3.90/1.235-236) contains a statement that “with the cessation (*nirodha*) of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), the release (*vimokkha*) of the mind (*cetas*) is like the extinguishing of a lamp.”³¹

The *Vāhana-sutta* (AN 10.81/5.151-152) contains a statement that the *Tathāgata* lives with an unrestricted (*vimariyādīkata*) mind (*cetas*), released (*nissāṭa*), detached (*visaṃyutta*) and freed (*vippamutta*) from the ten elements of worldly existence, including the five *khandhas*. While it is not stated directly, the line strongly implies that for the author of that text, *citta/cetas* and the mental *khandhas* including *viññāṇa*, did not refer to exactly same mental faculty.

That *citta* can dissociate itself from the *khandhas* is also implied in the *Mahāmālukya-sutta* (MN 64/1.435-437) and the *Jhāna-sutta* (AN 9.36/4.422-426). In these texts, after having attained one of the nine successive meditative states, a bhikkhu regards (*samanupassati*) whatever *dharmas* exist there and are related (*gata*) to any of the five aggregates, as impermanent, suffering, and non-self (among several other negative characteristics). He then makes his mind (*citta*) turn away (*paṭivāpeti*) from those *dharmas* and directs it to the deathless (*amata*) property (*dhātu*). In the *Anicca-sutta* (SN 22.45/3.44-45) the *citta* of a bhikkhu is said to be detached (*viratta*) from the properties (*dhātu*) of all the five *khandhas* (e.g., *viññāṇadhātu*).

The possibility of *citta* or any mode of cognition working in a *khandha*-less way is not really accounted for in the later developments within the Theravāda school. According to the first text of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhāras* (as a wider category encompassing several other basic *dharmas*) and *viññāṇa* (as a synonym of *citta*) are the *dharmas* which are present in every mind (*citta*) moment, whether beneficial (*kusala*: Dhs 9), unbeneficial (*akusala*: Dhs 75) or indeterminate (*abyākata*: Dhs 87). According to the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* by Ācariya Anuruddha, *vedanā* and *saññā* belong to the seven mental concomitants (*cetasika*) shared by every moment of *citta* (*sabbacittasādhāraṇa*).³² While *saṅkhāras* are not explicitly listed here, the remaining concomitants are understood in Abhidhamma as belonging to that

²⁹ Sn 4.5/157: *tassidha diṭṭhe va sute mute vā, pakappitā natthi añupi saññā*. *Mute* can be read either as “sensed” or “thought”.

³⁰ *Cetas* and *citta* seem to be synonymous to a large extent. Cone (2010, p. 162) states that *cetas* is “often not to be distinguished from *citta*”, while Rhys Davids and Stede (2007, p. 268) claim that “there is no cogent evidence of a clear separation of their respective fields of meaning”.

³¹ AN 3.90/1.236: *viññāṇassa nirodhena, taṇhākkhayavimuttino. pajjotasseva nibbānaṃ, vimokkha hoti cetaso*.

³² AbhS 7: *Phasso vedanā saññā cetanā ekaggatā jīvitindriyaṃ manasikāro ceti sattime cetasikā sabbacittasādhāraṇā nāma*.

group (e.g., in Dhs 17-18). Therefore, from this perspective, every moment of *citta* is synonymous with the presence of all the four mental aggregates.

Furthermore, a historically dominant trend was to identify *viññāṇa* with *citta*. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* lists *viññāṇa* and *viññāṇakkhandha* as two of the several synonyms of *citta* in its analysis of the beneficial *dhammas* occurring in every profitable form of consciousness/mind (*citta*) which takes as its object something from the sense-sphere (*kāmāvacara*).³³ In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa states that the words *viññāṇa*, *citta*, and *manas* are one in meaning.³⁴

It is noteworthy that when in the Nikāyas *viññāṇa* and *citta/cetas* sometimes appear in the same texts they clearly do not have the same denotation. Such is the case with the already mentioned statement in the *Dutiyasikkhattaya-sutta* about the cessation of consciousness coinciding with the release of the mind. Furthermore, they occur in different theoretical contexts, specific to each of these terms. In the formula describing the process of cognition, *viññāṇa* precedes the arising of contact and feeling.³⁵ Therefore, it seems to be that which makes phenomenal experience connected with any of the six senses possible. The *Khajjaniya-sutta* (SN 22.79/3.87-91), connects *viññāṇa* with being conscious (*viñāṇāti*) of basic gustatory qualities, while the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta* (MN 140/3.238-247) speaks of being conscious of pleasure and pain. Pleasure, pain, sour, bitter and sweet can be considered typical examples of the so-called qualia. If we were to use the terms of contemporary philosophy of mind, *viññāṇa* would be something that provides several key features of phenomenal experience; its qualitative nature, the “what it is like” character, self-givenness and intentionality.³⁶ *Citta*, on the other hand, is almost always presented in a functional context, as a mental faculty which can perform a particular cognitive task in the sense of producing certain knowledge or dispelling delusion. While a phenomenological perspective focuses on the subjective, “what it is like” character, from the functional perspective this is pretty much irrelevant as it focuses on the function and effects of a particular mental process. For example, from the phenomenological perspective “understanding” is a particular phenomenon, a “feel” which can be experienced subjectively. From the functional one, the criterion for establishing whether one has understood something or not is not any subjective state but whether this understanding has some practical effects which can be demonstrated.

The Nikāyas do not describe *citta* as having a particular phenomenal content, like blue, red, bitter or sweet which implies that it is not conceived as a sort of an inner space of the mind in which qualitative experience takes place. The epithets with which it is described point to its cognitive potency for performing certain tasks and bringing about results. For example, it may be concentrated (*samāhita*), malleable (*mudubhūta*), workable (*kammaniya*), or steady (*ṭhita*). It may be directed (*abhinīharati* or *pañidahati*) to perform certain cognitive tasks, including the

³³ Dhs 10: *yaṃ tasmiṃ samāye cittaṃ mano mānasaṃ hadayaṃ paṇḍaraṃ mano manāyatanaṃ manindriyaṃ viññāṇaṃ viññāṇakkhandho tājāmanoviññāṇadhātu — idaṃ tasmiṃ samāye cittaṃ hoti.*

³⁴ Vism 452: *viññāṇaṃ cittaṃ manoti atthato ekaṃ.*

³⁵ E.g., MN 18/1.111.

³⁶ Somewhat similar view on *viññāṇa* is proposed by Hamilton (2000) and Nizamis (2012).

liberative knowledge (*ñāṇa*) of destruction of the effluents (*āśava*) (DN 2/1.76). Unlike *viññāṇa*, *citta* is never said to undergo cessation. Furthermore, *citta* is not discussed in a *post-mortem* context, while there are accounts of Māra looking for a *viññāṇa* of a deceased *bhikkhu*. The question of *citta* surviving after death does not seem to be even considered. The various types of *cetovimutti* do not seem to refer to the ultimate liberation from *samsāra* occurring after death, but rather to the release of the mind from various types of cognitive and emotional constraints which occurs during life and frees its potential. The term *viññāṇa* occurs in its own specific soteriological context, where it may be described as established (*patitṭhita*), unestablished (*appatitṭhita*), or undergoing growth (*vuddhi/virūḷhi*) and expansion (*vepulla*).³⁷ However, it is never described with epithets typically used with respect to *citta* to describe its cognitive potency.

It seems that a deliberate effort has been made by the Nikāya authors to keep the usage of the terms *citta* and *viññāṇa* restricted to their own specific contexts, not use them interchangeably and in some cases to imply the possibility of separation of the mental faculties designated by them. This would have been hard to explain, were the two terms really synonymous as Buddhaghosa has stated. A more straightforward and natural interpretation would, however, be that for the authors of these texts, the terms *cetas/citta* and *viññāṇa* simply did not have the same denotation. This does not mean that in the texts we are considering, *citta* and the so-called mental *khandhas* need to be seen as entirely distinct mental faculties. It rather seems that the mental *khandhas* are specific, but not obligatory end-results of the former's activity. The interpretation I am suggesting here is in full agreement with the statement in the *Cūlavedalla-sutta* (MN 44/i 301) that *saññā* and *vedanā* are *citta-saṅkhāras*. It mirrors the key idea present in some strands of contemporary philosophy of mind that phenomenal, globally available consciousness is but a one specific product of the activity of the mind. The latter, however, also operates in modes which are neither phenomenal nor globally available.

As I have noted in the earlier part of the paper, it is impossible to account for the functioning of a human organism and its cognition by merely referring to subjectively experienced phenomena. The first-person phenomenological perspective is certainly crucial for understanding the subjective aspects of our experience and in this regard cannot be reduced to anything else. However, one needs also a functional account. I believe that in the Nikāyas we may be dealing with two complimentary perspectives of describing a human being which to a certain extent correspond to the distinction between phenomenological and functional approaches. The subjective, phenomenological first-person perspective is represented by the sets such as those of the five aggregates and the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*).

But there also seems to be in the Nikāyas a very rudimentary, quasi-functional perspective focusing on a human being and its cognition in terms of its functions, effects and behavioral outputs. This perspective is represented by the statements about *citta/cetas*, but also about the five *indriyas* (the sense faculties) and perhaps the body (*kāya*). I have already commented on the distinction between the mental *khandhas* and *citta*. The distinction between the *āyatana*s and the *indriya*s seems to

³⁷ E.g., in SN 22.54/3.54-55.

be a bit analogous. The *āyatana*s clearly represent unique qualitative modalities of phenomenal consciousness, the irreducible “what it is like” character of experience connected with each particular sensory modality. The set of the *indriya*s, on the other hand, does not seem to be an account of the senses from the first-person phenomenological perspective, but rather from a functional or even quasi-biological one. Let us notice that just as *viññāṇa*, the *āyatana*s can undergo cessation (*nirodha*: e.g., in SN 35.117/4.100) while such descriptions are not used with regard to *citta* and the *indriya*s. In the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* (MN 43/1.296), *indriya*s are actually said to be very pure (*vippasanna*) during the attainment of cessation. It is noteworthy that in this case the descriptions of the *indriya*s are made from a third person, and not a first-person perspective. As to the relation between *rūpa* and *kāya*, some distinction between them is implied in the already mentioned simile in the *Vammika-sutta*, where *kāya* is symbolized by an anthill, while *rūpa* with the other aggregates by a turtle which is to be thrown out of the anthill. The already analyzed statement in the *Kalahavivāda-sutta* mentioned the possibility of *rūpa* vanishing (*vibhoti*), while such terms are not used with reference to *kāya*. However, one must admit that the difference between the two is not very clearly outlined in the Nikāyas. It needs to be strongly emphasized that the distinction between the *khandhas* and the *āyatana*s on the one hand, and *citta*, *indriya*s and *kāya* on the other, does not imply any ontological dualism of different spheres of reality within a human being, but merely that of the different ways of describing various aspects of the same organism.

The Nikāyas certainly do not display an ambition to provide a comprehensive account of a human being as a whole and of the workings of cognition. There seems to be, however, an awareness that functional accounts of cognition and its effects should not be made using a conceptual scheme of the *khandhas*, while the phenomenological descriptions do not refer to *citta*.

The above considerations may have significance for the understanding of the seeming dichotomy of the aggregates and the agent who identifies with them discussed in the first part of this paper. If the hypothesis about the phenomenal nature of the aggregates is correct, then seeing them in terms of “I am this” would mean that a human being (by means of the operations of its cognitive apparatus, i.e., *citta*) identifies with the contents of one’s own phenomenal experience, and in particular with the phenomenal representation of oneself in the world. A very brief suggestion to that effect has already been made by Wynne (2010, p. 113), who has stated that the not-self teaching “addresses the problem of personal identity by questioning the identification with phenomenal being”. The implications of this hypothesis are, however, much more significant and have not yet been fully considered.

Are the aggregates active processes of cognition?

There is an important strand (e.g., Baars, 1997; Carruthers, 2015; Metzinger, 2009) in the modern philosophy of mind which removes the locus of agency and active cognitive processing from phenomenal consciousness and sees the latter as passive in character. On this account, its role lies in making data which was actively

produced by various unconscious and mutually isolated cognitive modules globally available throughout the cognitive system for further processing. According to this view, “we” (in the common-sense meaning of this term) are not directly aware of the actual processes of volition, perceptual processing of external objects or even our internal, bodily responses to various stimuli but know them through the medium of their phenomenal representations. The actual processes which have produced these representations are not available to our faculties of introspection, memory and speech. For example, we do not experience our body directly as it really is objectively but only through its internal representation. Damasio (1999), for example, makes an important distinction between emotions and feelings. The former are unconscious physical states which are the neural responses to stimuli which cause observable changes in the organism, while the latter are mental experiences of the said bodily states. On this account we consciously experience feelings and not emotions. Carruthers (2015) sees desires, beliefs, intentions, goals and decisions as “amodal attitudes”³⁸ which operate in the background and in themselves are not available to consciousness, but manifest through thoughts and behavior. This may be relevant for our problem, as identifying, grasping or abandoning can be considered similar forms of attitude. Baars (1997) speaks of intentions as contexts: unconscious processes which shape later conscious experience, while Wegner (2002) claims that consciously experienced feeling of volition is an epiphenomenon, lacking direct causative power which he ascribes to unconscious processes. In this line of reasoning, consciousness may be compared to a computer monitor. It converts the digital input from the computer into vivid, three-dimensional moving images, but it does not decide in any way what exactly is displayed or influence what occurs on the screen. These latter functions are performed jointly by computer hardware and software.

But would this line of thinking have any relevance for interpreting the Nikāyas? From the fact that something is proclaimed in modern philosophy of the mind it does not follow in any way that such was the early Buddhist position. At best it may give us an awareness of the very possibility of certain philosophical perspective and inspire us to look at the Nikāya texts from a new, previously unexpected angle.

In the early Buddhist context, it would mean that the aggregates are merely passive, representational phenomena devoid of their own agency and direct causal efficacy, themselves being the end-results of other cognitive processes. This would be a very controversial position to take, as even scholars such as Hamilton (2000) who opposed the notion of the *khandhas* as objective constituents of a human being, still claimed that they are selfless cognitive processes which actively perform cognitive functions. In its definition of the *saññākkhandha*, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* lists *sañjānanā* (the activity of perceiving) and *saññā* (perception) as synonyms.³⁹ In this interpretation, the notion of the aggregate encompasses both the active cognitive process and its end-result.

³⁸ Amodal in the sense of being non-phenomenal, i.e., not representing any of the sensory modalities.

³⁹ Dhs 10: *katamā tasmim samaye saññā hoti? yā tasmim samaye tajjāmanoviññāṇadhātusamphassajā saññā sañjānanā sañjānitattam — ayaṃ tasmim samaye saññā hoti.*

Despite being taken pretty much for granted, the historically dominant interpretation of the aggregates as active processes does not really possess unequivocal basis in the Nikāyas, while the few texts which are used in its support are open to different interpretations. It is surprising how little detailed and definite analysis is offered on the subject of the *khandhas* in the Nikāyas, given the centrality of this concept and its role in the not-self teaching.⁴⁰ The definitions are often limited to distinguishing different types of *khandhas* according to the sense base from which they arise (e.g., SN 22.56-57/3.58-65). No sutta offers a detailed analysis of the mutual interrelation of all the *khandhas*. Their understanding as active but selfless cognitive processes is partially based on an interpretation of the statements in the *Khajjaniya-sutta* (SN 22.79/3. 86-87) and the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* (MN 43/1.292-298), which may give the impression that the aggregates themselves perform the essential cognitive functions. For example, the definition of feeling (*vedanā*) literally reads: “‘feels’, bhikkhus, therefore it is called ‘feeling’”, where it is assumed that feeling is the subject of the sentence.⁴¹ Analogous definitions are provided for the other mental aggregates.

Commenting on the *Khajjaniya-sutta* (SN 22.79/3.86-91), the *Sāratthapakāsinī* states: “it is feeling (*vedanā*) itself that feels (*vedayati*), not another—a being or a person.”⁴² The most natural interpretation of this line would be that it is *vedanā* that performs the cognitive activity labeled as *vedayati* in a functional sense.⁴³ However, the *mūla* text of the *Khajjaniya-sutta* and the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* does not explicitly mention the subject of a sentence and does not claim that it is exactly feeling that feels. It does not directly state that *vedanā* is the subject of the verb *vedayati* (or *vedeti* in the case of the *Mahāvedalla-sutta*), *saññā* of *sañjānāti* and *viññāṇaṃ* of *viñjānāti*. It is equally or even more plausible that the statements imply an individual as a subject of the sentence. Such is the reading of Choong Mun-Keat (2000, p. 27) and Nizamis (2012, p. 213, note 107). Bhikkhu Bodhi agrees that in the definition of *viññāṇa*, from the grammar point of view the word, *viñjānāti* could be understood to mean that “one cognizes” and not that “consciousness cognizes”.⁴⁴ A probable reading of the passages describing *khandhas* in the context of cognition could therefore be that at least *saññā*, *viññāṇa* and *vedanā* are the end results of the actual processes of cognition, while their agent is an individual who performs the respective acts: e.g. the individual feels and this results in experiencing subjectively a feeling. A similar reading is offered by del Toso (2015, p. 690), who states that “it will be better said that *saññā* refers to the fruit of the particular perceptual action expressed by the verb *sañjānāti*”.

⁴⁰ This has been noted by Gethin (1986, p. 35) who writes about the five aggregates: “We find very little in terms of formal explanation of either the sequence as a whole or of the individual terms. What there is, is confined to a few stock and somewhat terse definitions.”

⁴¹ SN 22.79/3.87: *vedayaṭṭi kho, bhikkhave, tasmā ‘vedanā’ti vuccati*.

⁴² Spk 2. 292: *ettha ca vedanāva vedayati, na añño satto vā puggalo vā*. Trans. Bodhi (2000, p. 1071).

⁴³ One can also interpret this line in the sense of self-reflexivity. On this reading, there is no need to posit another subject or self who experiences *vedanā*, as it feels itself, i.e., is self-reflexive. Such a reading would not refer to the functional aspect of feeling, but to the phenomenal one.

⁴⁴ Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995, p. 1235), note 430.

Indeed, one can find passages where the subject of these verbs is simply an individual person. In the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* (MN 1/1.1) we read that an ordinary person (*puthujjana*) perceives (*sañjānāti*), while the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* (MN 18/1.108-114) states that what one feels, one perceives (*yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti*). The definitions given in the *Khajjanīya-sutta* and in the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* may say much less about the *khandhas* than is usually read into them. They may represent a type of a contextual definition reminiscent of the commentaries where instead of straightforwardly explaining the meaning of the term in question, it is simply glossed with better known, more commonly used terms of a similar meaning (e.g., *vedanā* is glossed with *vedetivvedayati*).

Such a reading is most problematic in the case of *saṅkhāras* which were considered to be active constructing processes in classical Theravāda and most current scholarship. Most importantly, grasping (*upādāna*), one of the fundamental attitudes directed towards the aggregates, was considered generally synonymous with the *saṅkhāras*. The *Papañcasūdanī* comments that “grasping is only one part of the aggregate of *saṅkhāras*”⁴⁵. In an interesting contribution, Nizamis (2012, pp. 205–210) challenges this commentarial position. Besides pointing out that there is no strong textual basis in the Nikāyas for such an interpretation, he argues that since acts such as abandoning and clinging are directed towards totality of phenomenal experience (i.e., the *khandhas*) as their object, then they in themselves cannot belong to that sphere but must be acts of a mental faculty lying beyond it.⁴⁶

There are also texts in the Nikāyas, which analogously to the other *khandhas*, present *saṅkhāras* as end-results of an activity/process performed by an individual. In the *Bhūmija-sutta* (SN 12.25/2.38-41) we read that either by oneself (*sāmaṃ*) one constructs (*abhisañkharoti*) bodily, verbal or mental *saṅkhāras*, or others (*pare*) construct (*abhisañkharonti*) them.⁴⁷ It is therefore possible to read *saṅkhāras* as referring to the constructed character of our subjective experience but not necessarily to an actual process which resulted in this character and is rendered by the verb *abhisañkharoti*.

Some Nikāya passages seem to implicitly equate *saṅkhāras* with all experienced phenomena (e.g., Dhṛp 277/40: *sabbe saṅkhāra anicca*, DN 16/2.156: *vayadhammā saṅkhārā*), and not just with their specific subgroup. This agrees with the statement in the *Cūlavēdalla-sutta* (MN 44/ī 301) that *saññā* and *vedanā* are in fact *citta-saṅkhāras*. Such a reading harmonizes more with the passive reading of *saṅkhāras* as the constructed aspect of all phenomenality than with their active reading as constructing processes, as it is hard to conceive that every phenomenal experience would be a causally efficacious constructing process.⁴⁸ This also calls into a question whether the Nikāyas actually see different *khandhas* as phenomena which

⁴⁵ Pps 2.258/2.359: *upādānassa saṅkhārakkhandhekaḍḍhabhāvato* Trans. following Ñānamoli and Bodhi (1995, p. 1241), note 461.

⁴⁶ Nizamis (2012) believes that faculty to be transcendental consciousness understood in a Husserlian sense, a position radically different from my interpretation.

⁴⁷ Also cf. AN 3.23/1.122-123 where it is said that a certain person (*puggala*) constructs (*abhisañkharoti*) afflictive body-*saṅkhāra*.

⁴⁸ Though even passive phenomenal consciousness may be indirectly causally efficacious simply by providing data for directly causally effective processes to work upon, and thus influencing them.

are temporally distinct (e.g., *vedanā* occurs at t1, *saññā* at t2) and may be sharply distinguished from one another in our introspection, or rather they imply that they are complimentary aspects of every phenomenal experience. I believe the latter to be the case, and that the statements such as “*yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti*” (what one feels, one perceives: MN 18/1.111) should not be read as implying temporal succession. This would coincide with the statement in MN 43/1.293 that *vedanā*, *saññā* and *viññāṇa* are conjoined (*samsatṭha*) and not possible to clearly separate (*vinibbhujati*). This also harmonizes with the already discussed Abhidhamma position that they are universal mental concomitants occurring in each moment of consciousness, the only caveat being that in my interpretation such consciousness would need be understood only in the sense of phenomenal consciousness and not as the mind in general.

To sum things up, it does not seem obligatory to read the *khandhas* in the Nikāyas as the active processes of cognition or construction. Their alternative reading as phenomenal end results of such processes is also possible. Such an interpretation harmonizes with the direct reading of the *khandha* similes which suggest that the aggregates are not the collective agent of the attitudes such as identifying or grasping. We have also seen that the Nikāyas speak of several important aspects of a human being and human cognition without conceptualizing them in terms of the aggregates.

What does it mean to identify with the aggregates?

On such a reading, identifying with the aggregates would mean that an individual, through the means of his cognitive apparatus (*citta*), identifies with one's own phenomenal experience and in particular with the phenomenal representation of oneself. One does not just see the aggregates as one's self, but also as oneself. Similar ideas are actually present in the contemporary philosophy of mind. For example, Metzinger (2009) claims that we as human organisms existing in an objective physical world create what he calls a “phenomenal self-model” (PSM) which allows us to represent ourselves in a sort of a virtual reality in “phenomenological real-time”. It is a type of simulation, but due to its transparency we consider it to be objective reality. Everything that we subjectively experience as “ourselves”, i.e., bodily sensations, emotional state, perceptions, memories, acts of will and thoughts are merely phenomenal representations of various aspects of our objective physical bodies. What is the purpose of the PSM? Our biological organism consists of a multitude of disjointed cognitive processes and is not a monadic being separated by fixed borders from the external environment. However, through the PSM it represents itself as a relatively unified entity distinct from other beings and objects and as a person endowed with an ego. Since the PSM is the content of phenomenal consciousness, it is the only thing which is globally available to the cognitive processes which constitute us. These processes take the model to be reality, since it is transparent to them and identify themselves with the model—which means that they start to act and behave as if they were the model. This results in an originally self-less organism appropriating its own hardware: it obtains a sense

of the ownership of its own body and mental processes, as well as the sense of agency and subjectivity. This makes it more inclined to protect its autonomy from the environment and strive to obtain certain things while avoiding other, which in turn increases its evolutionary fitness.

It is possible to see certain analogies between the ideas present in the Nikāyas and Metzinger's hypothesis. The five aggregates can be seen as a sort of a phenomenal self-representation within a subjective "world" (*loka*) which become the object of a mistaken identification for the individual. Depending on how directly we are willing to read them, some of the *khandha* similes can be interpreted along these lines. The simile of a reflection in the mirror or that of a painter creating a faithful effigy of a human being may be read as suggesting the representational aspect of the aggregates. In the case of both similes, this representation is devoid of life of its own and is merely a reflection of the actual human being. This would correspond to the notion of the *khandhas* as merely phenomenal end-results of the actual active processes which occur beyond them.

But why is identification with one's own phenomenal self-representation a bad thing? Afterall, due to the very nature of the cognitive process, we cannot perceive reality directly and must resort to representing it by the medium of our cognitive system. The issue, however, is whether this representation is faithful or distorts reality. Some Nikāya passages suggest that there seems to be some inherent distortion and potential for delusion in the very nature of the aggregates. We have already brought to attention the passage in the *Kalahavivāda-sutta* which implies that *rūpa* is a proliferated concept (*papañcasaṅkha*) and several fragments suggesting that *saññā* carries with it a certain level of cognitive distortion. In light of such passages, one may consider the possibility of interpreting the *khandhas* not as basic and neutral elements of reality but rather mentally constructed (*saṅkhata*) phenomena whose nature reflects some original cognitive error or primordial ignorance.⁴⁹ The *Anta-sutta* (SN 22.103/3.157–158) defines a portion of personal identity (*sakkāyanta*) simply as the five aggregates connected with grasping (*pañcupādānakkhandha*). This could be interpreted as suggesting that the aggregates are structured in such a way that the notion of self is inherent in them. The passage in the *Khemaka-sutta* (SN 22.89/3.131) speaks of the notion "I am" (*asmī'ti*) as an underlying tendency (*anusaya*) towards the five aggregates connected with grasping. Wynne (2010, p. 116) believes that this indicates that self-consciousness is "an ever-present factor of conditioned experience". One also cannot fail but notice that the Nikāyas consistently present the aggregates in a negative light. Were the aggregates just basic and neutral constituents of objective reality, one would expect to find some accounts of the hypothetical purified *khandhas* existing in the arahants, but this is not the case.

⁴⁹ In this interpretation, the dependent arising of the aggregates would need to be interpreted in epistemic and not ontological terms. Similar line of reasoning has been pursued by Wynne (2010, pp. 138–150) with his idea of cognitive conditioning and Shulman (2008, p. 306) who has suggested that "the 12 links are an explanation of mental conditioning, an analysis of subjective existence. They do not deal directly with the manner in which all things exist." Thus, the act of producing (*abhinibbatteti*) the aggregates likened to a painter painting an effigy of a man in SN 22.100, would not represent generation of elements of objective reality but of a specific form of phenomenal experience.

Secondly, by identifying with the aggregates and believing oneself to be them, one projects the notions of agency, identity and subjectivity into something that is inherently devoid of them, i.e., phenomenal consciousness. One forms beliefs, interacts with the environment and engages in activities under a mistaken impression that one in fact is the phenomenal consciousness which inhabits the body and governs it, the thinker of thoughts, agent of actions and subject of experiences. This belief is aptly described in the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta*, where Sāti believes that *viññāṇa* it that which is speaking (*vada*), feeling (*vedeyya*) and experiencing (*paṭisaṃvedeti*) results of action.⁵⁰ In the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, the same characteristic is applied not with respect to *viññāṇa* but to “this self of mine” which is further described as permanent and not subject to change.⁵¹

This is, however, a fundamental error as “we”⁵² are simply not our phenomenal consciousness or some homunculus dwelling within it. To use again the very useful computer metaphor, identification with phenomenal consciousness can be compared to a situation where for some reason the active components of the computer hardware would not have direct access to their own operations but only through the medium of the images displayed on the monitor connected to the computer. The hardware would operate on software that would allow it to draw inferences and incorporate its results into behavior. In such a situation, the computer would inevitably reach the conclusion that it is in fact the monitor, and that all its activity originates from the monitor (while in fact changes of the images displayed on a monitor merely reflect changes of input from the computer). Had this computer the ability to express itself, it would make statements reflecting its mistaken sense of identity i.e., assuming that it is the monitor. The situation of an organism identifying with phenomenal consciousness is quite analogous. A set of self-less psycho-physical processes starts to behave as if was the self, i.e., phenomenal consciousness (or its portion) governing the body.

Thirdly, according to one of the most basic tenets of Buddhism, the five aggregates are painful (*dukkha*). This radical idea implies that phenomenal experience is inherently dissatisfactory. However, once the individual identifies with it, or at least some portion of it, he will constantly hold onto it, multiplying one’s own suffering. In light of this understanding the similes of a dog running obsessively around the post to which it is tied, a murderer coming in disguise or of picking up a burden make perfect sense.

⁵⁰ MN 38/1.258.

⁵¹ MN 2/1.8: *yo me ayaṃ attā vado vedeyyo tatra tatra kalyāṇapāpakāṇaṃ kammāṇaṃ vipākaṃ paṭisaṃvedeti so kho pana me ayaṃ attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāmadhammo sassatisamaṃ tattheva ṭhassatīti*.

⁵² “We” in the sense of that in us which strives for certain goals, forms certain beliefs and wants to avoid suffering, as these features are most important from a Buddhist point of view. None of this belongs to the functions of phenomenal consciousness.

Concluding remarks

Can such an interpretation be considered absolutely certain and proven beyond doubt? I think that absolute certainty regarding many of the problematic issues arising from the critical reading of the Nikāya texts is sadly not reachable. The texts simply do not provide us with enough evidence to reach absolute and infallible conclusions. There is, however, value in identifying and articulating certain problems and in considering their various potential explanations and the arguments for and against them. Besides the fact that these issues concern the origins of one of the most historically influential soteriological systems, they are also philosophically interesting in themselves, and still relevant in modern times. I believe, nonetheless, that the interpretation proposed in this paper makes good sense of the analyzed Nikāya passages and leads to a lesser number of interpretative problems than its alternatives.

I would also like to emphasize that the hypothesis offered in this paper is not fundamentally at odds with the historically dominant interpretation within classical Theravāda regarding many of its aspects. It still holds that an agent who identifies with the aggregates is just a self-less organism and not any sort of a special consciousness or a self. However, this agent is no longer conceptualized in terms of the five *khandhas*. The main thesis is fully compatible with Buddhist reductionism, i.e., the notion that human individual is in fact a combination of parts and processes. The idea of a mistaken identification with one's phenomenal self-representation forwarded in the paper can be seen as just one dimension of a richer and more multifaceted criticism of the notion of the self in the Nikāyas and is complimentary with its other aspects. It may also be harmonized with the positive denial of the existence of self, or at least with the denial of such a self which is an active agent and subject as its non-existence may be considered an objective fact. What differentiates the hypothesis forwarded in this paper from the historically dominant interpretation is of course a vision of the *khandhas* as passive elements of our own phenomenal self-representation devoid of agency and not as active processes constituting what a person objectively is.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for useful comments.

Funding The paper was created as a result of the Research Project No. 2018/31/B/HS1/01324 financed by the National Science Center (NCN) in Poland.

Declarations

Competing interests I declare that I have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. I declare that I have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. I declare that I have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. I declare that I have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this

article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

AbhS	<i>Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
Miln	<i>Milindapañha</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
Pps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
PTS	Pali Text Society
Snp	<i>Suttanipāṭa</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthapakāsinī</i>
Spk-pt	<i>Sāratthapakāsinī-purāṇa-ṭīkā</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

References to the source texts

Numerical references to the Nikāya texts use a twofold system. A reference to the number of a text is given before the slash, while a reference to the volume and page of PTS edition is provided after the slash. References to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the *Milindapañha*, and the *Visuddhimagga* are to the numbers of page of the PTS edition, while to the *Papañcasūdanī* and the *Sāratthapakāsinī* are to the numbers of volume and page of the PTS edition. References to the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* and the *Sāratthapakāsinī-purāṇa-ṭīkā* are to the volume and page of Myanmar edition.

Primary sources

All Pali source texts are from *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka*, Version 4.0 (CST4) published by the Vipassana research Institute, online: <http://tipitaka.org>.

References

- Baars, B. J. (1997). In the theatre of consciousness: Global workspace theory, a rigorous scientific theory of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4, 292–309.
- Blackburn, S. (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of philosophy Oxford paperback reference*. Oxford University Press.
- Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.
- Carruthers, P. (2015). *The centered mind. What the science of working memory shows us about the nature of human thought*. Oxford University Press.

- Choong, M. (2000). *The fundamental teachings of early Buddhism. A comparative study based on the Sutranga portion of the Pali Samyutta-Nikaya and the Chinese Samyuktagama*. HarrassowitzVerlag.
- Cone, M. (2010). *Dictionary of Pali. Part II g-n*. The Pali Text Society.
- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Harcourt.
- Davis, J. H. (2016). The scope for wisdom: Early Buddhism on reasons and persons. In S. Ranganathan (Ed.), *The Bloomsbury research handbook of Indian ethics* (pp. 127–154). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Del Toso, K. (2015). The function of Saññā in the perceptual process according to the Suttapiṭaka: An appraisal. *Philosophy East and West*, 65(3), 690–716.
- Garfield, J. L. (2015). *Engaging Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, R. (1986). The five Khandhas: Their treatment in the Nikāyas and early Abhidhamma. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 14(1), 35–53.
- Hamilton, S. (2000). *Early Buddhism: A new approach*. Curzon Press.
- Metzinger, T. (2009). *The ego tunnel: The science of the mind and the myth of the self*. Basic Books.
- Nāṇamoli, B., & Bodhi B. (Trans.). (1995). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.
- Nizamis, K. (2012). 'I' without 'I am': On the presence of subjectivity in early Buddhism, in the light of transcendental phenomenology. *Buddhist Studies Review*, 29(2), 175–250. <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsrv.v29i2.175>
- Rhys Davids, T. W., & Stede, W. (2007). *The Pali-English Dictionary*. Nataraj Books.
- Shulman, E. (2008). Early meanings of dependent-origination. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 36, 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-007-9030-8>
- Siderits, M. (2020). Self-knowledge and non-self. In M. Siderits, C. Keng, & J. Spackman (Eds.), *Buddhist philosophy of consciousness. Tradition and dialogue* (pp. 189–208). Brill.
- Wegner, D. (2002). *The illusion of conscious will*. MIT Press.
- Wynne, A. (2009). Early Evidence for the 'no self' doctrine? A note on the second *anātman* teaching of the Second Sermon. *Thai International Journal for Buddhist Studies*, 1, 59–79.
- Wynne, A. (2010). The Ātman and its Negation. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 33(1–2), 103–171.