Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality*:
A Reply to Stephen Evans

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This article offers a critical reply to the assessment of Bhikkhu Kaṭukurunde Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (1971) published by Stephen Evans in *Buddhist Studies Review* 34(1), 2017. The alleged flaws and inconsistencies detected by Evans — both internal to the presentation in *Concept and Reality* and vis-à-vis the doctrinal evidence in the early Pali discourses — are re-addressed in the light of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's work. In particular, the response aims at clarifying the compass of the categories of 'concept' and 'reality' in relation to perceptions and notions that arise due to conceptual proliferation according to the exegetical line put forward in *Concept and Reality*.

Introduction

In the last issue of this journal Stephen Evans (2017) gives an assessment of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought, An Essay on Papañca and Papañca-Saññā-Saṅkhā*, originally written while Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda was lecturing at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya prior to his entering the Buddhist monastic order and published by the Buddhist Publication Society in 1971.[1]

Concept and Reality was the first monograph to be authored by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, who is perhaps the foremost living Sri Lankan English-speaking scholar-monk (born 1940), known for having broken new ground in the Sri Lankan monastic intellectual and meditative landscape of the second half of the twentieth into the early twenty-first centuries and for having deeply challenged the authoritative Ceylonese Theravāda exegesis owing to his stepping out of commentarial orthodoxy.

The impact of *Concept and Reality* has broadly reverberated from the island to the English-speaking global world of Theravāda. Evans' assessment, however, appears to be the first article or review entirely dedicated to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's work to be published in an academic forum.

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1. The book has been reprinted with minor alterations and corrections several times. Evans makes use of the 2012 edition published by the Dharma Grantha Mudrana Bhāraya and I will do the same in the present review.

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Evans introduces his critique as follows:

[t]he thesis has intuitive force and profound implications for understanding the Pāli sources. However, the presentation is flawed by inconsistencies, lack of clarity, and overly interpretive translations of the Pāli — it is not even clear in important details precisely what Ñāṇananda's intended thesis is. The present offering is an attempt at clarifying this seminal work so as to enable building upon it. The given thesis is elucidated, making its problems explicit, and suggesting resolutions, arriving finally with a proposal of what he may have intended. Along the way, I indicate where given support from the *Nikāya*s is weak. (2017, 3)

By way of introduction to my counter-assessment I would like to suggest that *Concept and Reality* is best read as a piece of learned, contemplative scholarship, the combined outcome of scholastic erudition, philosophical exploration and delight in the *Dhamma* (*dhammanandi*). As the preface to the 2012 edition explains:[2]

the work had its origin in the academic atmosphere of a University but took its final shape in the sylvan solitude of a Hermitage ... I was thirty when I wrote the book. Forty eventful years have passed during the course of which I have dealt in detail elsewhere on many of the salient points discussed in this book. However, I do not wish to expand the present edition by incorporating all that material ...

(2012 [1971], vii)

To do justice to the categories of 'concept' and 'reality' as presented in the writings of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda one would need to trace the many threads that connect his seminal *Concept and Reality* to his later scholarship,[3] a project which is outside the scope of what is feasible in the present article. Nevertheless, I wonder why Evans chooses not to resort to the later works of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda at all — publications of which he must have been aware.[4] An assessment of a selected single essay of any prolific author certainly is a legitimate task but, given the perceived obscurity and confusion in *Concept and Reality* and Evans' claim to set out on 'clarifying this seminal work so as to enable building upon it', 'arriving finally with a proposal of what he may have intended' (Evans 2017, 4), consultation of the subsequent writings of the same author would have been required.

Evans also feels dissatisfied with the way Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's central argument is expounded:

[t]he book is subtitled '*An Essay on Papañca and Papañca-Saññā-Saṅkhā*' but is not a sustained treatment of the meaning of these important terms; that argument is completed by page 5. Rather the book is an extended elaboration and defence of a broad thesis within which the given interpretations of these terms play a central role.

(Evans 2017, 3–4)

I am puzzled by the expectation that a sustained treatment of two key terms in early Buddhist thought should be any different than an 'extended elaboration and

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2.   Cf. also Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012], xi–xii.

3.   On *papañca* in particular see, e.g., Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012] (esp. Sermons 11, 12 and 13).

4.   These later publications are mentioned in the preface to the 2012 edition consulted by Evans, who also mentions that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's work is 'frequently mentioned and praised on popular Buddhism websites' (2012 [1971], 3), with which he is obviously acquainted.

defence of a broad thesis within which the given interpretations of these terms play a central role'. In fact it is thanks to the application of a lexical-semantic method that takes into account the occurrences of the terminology in question by connecting them to related vocabulary in the *Nikāya*s that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is able to develop a rich, cogent exposition that unfolds over more than a hundred pages, in which the significance of the two terms is elucidated combining gnoseology and psychology with ethics and ethics with philosophy.[5]

In what follows I hope to contribute a basic clarification of the main points raised or problematized, in my opinion often unduly, by Evans. I confine myself to trying to elucidate the points in *Concept and Reality* that are criticized or challenged by Evans on the basis of my own understanding of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's presentation. I proceed following Evans' paper section by section, taking up what seem to me to be the key passages where I think Evans has misunderstood. I will also mostly refrain from citing other contributions by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda and rather point to the relevant passages in *Concept and Reality* itself, following the way Evans proceeds.

The thesis

The salient points of criticism in this section of Evans' assessment are a supposed lack of lexical justification for Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's chosen translations of the key terms *papañceti* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* and the contention of a somewhat forced or *ad hoc* adoption of the chosen translation terminology in support of an understanding of the epistemological status of 'concepts' in Early Buddhism for which he finds 'there is no hint ... in the *sutta* itself', the *sutta* in question being the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*[6] taken by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda as the point of departure of the essay.

At the outset, Evans states that he sees 'little justification for translating *papañceti* with "turns into *papañca*"' (Evans 2017, 4) and goes on to cite the *Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*'s 'to have illusions', 'to imagine', 'to be obsessed',[7] adopted for example by I.B. Horner in her translation of the *Majjhima-nikāya*,[8] a rendering seen as preferable.

Papañceti (cf. Sanskrit *prapañcayati*) is a denominative form (*dhāturūpakasadda*, lit. a 'word used as a [verbal] root') from *papañca-* (cf. Sanskrit *prapañca-*).[9] As a

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5. Cf. also Ñāṇananda 2012 [1971], 116.

6. MN 18 at MN I 108–114.

7. Rhys Davids and Stede 1994 [1921–1925], 412 s.v. *papañca*.

8. Horner 1954, 141–148 (the reference is to the translation of MN 18).

9. The etymology of *papañca/prapañca* is connected to the five-fingered hand and the numeral 'five', with the preposition *pra-* (Pali *pa-*; Sanskrit *pra-*) plus the base for the numeral 'five', *pañca*, which in Proto-Indoeuropean might have originally referred to the hand clenched to form a fist (the five fingers emerge, as it were, from the fist, from which they spread out); see Wackernagel and Debrunner 1975, III 354 [§ 181], Emmerick (1992, 169 [§ 5.1.5.1]), Mayrhofer 1996, II 66 s.v. *pañca*, Mayrhofer 2001, III 297 s.v. PAÑC, Winter 1992, 15–17 and the summary in Manaster Ramer 1998, 74–75. Gombrich 2009, 205–206 draws attention to the idea of 'quintuplication' in Saṃkhyā and Brahminical texts, that is, an evolution from a primal unity into sets of five and falsely conceptualising multiplicity where there is only one. This doctrine, which the Buddha was opposing, surfaces already in the *Upaniṣad*s. Gombrich 2009, 206 observes: 'what I

denominative, it normally follows the seventh Pali verbal class, which forms the indicative by substituting the affix *-e-/-aya-* or adding *-ya-* to the verbal theme. Therefore the rendering 'to turn into *papañca*' is both legitimate and idiomatic enough in English in that for one to effectively '*papañca*', he or she has 'to turn' a mental content or experience into *papañca*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's terminological choice is therefore justified on morphological as well as lexical/etymological grounds.

   Another lexical shortcut is believed by Evans to be the rendering of *saṅkhā* as 'concept', 'reckoning', 'designation' or 'linguistic convention'. Evans highlights that out of the three senses given by the *Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda 'only mentions the third', i.e., 'denomination, definition, word, name' (Evans 2017, 5). Yet it is hardly plausible that the other two senses, 'enumeration, calculation, estimating' and 'number' could be intended in the passage in question. In addition to the context itself in the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* — where the other two meanings make little sense — expressions such as *saṅkhaṃ gacchati* recur elsewhere in the *Nikāya*s with the clear sense of being reckoned, coming into reckoning.[10] Besides, the same *Dictionary* has 'sign or characteristic of obsession' for *papañca-saṅkhā* and 'idea of obsession', 'idée fixe', 'illusion' for *papañca-saññā* in compound with °*saṅkhā*.[11] This goes to show that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's choice is not his idiosyncrasy, given that the *Dictionary* has 'sign', 'idea' and 'idée' which share the same semantic field as the words chosen to represent the last member of the compound °*saṅkhā*.

   Furthermore, Evans suggests that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exclusive mention of the third sense in the *Pali-English Dictionary* is 'calculated' so as to make it square with the presumed 'close relationship' between *papañca* and language (Evans 2017, 5–6). Such remarks bring me to the second salient point of criticism put forward in this section of Evans' paper, centred on the relationship between language, concepts and reality as understood by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda. Evans develops this topic in greater detail in subsequent sections of his paper and therefore I return to it later.

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am suggesting (though ... on rather slender evidence) is that here ... [the Buddha] was appropriating brahminical terminology. His argument was not that by using language we had *too many* concepts, but rather that none of them did justice to the truth ... The Buddha is denying that we can distinguish, either perceptually or linguistically, between clear-cut *substances*. But he is not denying that we can distinguish between *processes*'. From a philosophical perspective, the etymology of *pa-pañca* seems to me suggestive of the fact that, from an early Buddhist perspective, even a so-called 'first-*hand* knowledge' (a metaphoric expression in several languages), is merely the 'hand' of *pa-pañca* and it remains 'in the hands of' *pa-pañca* to the extent that it is not emancipated from the notion of an ego, the sense of 'I am' being the basic import of *papañca* (*asmīti ... papañcitam*, '"I am" is *papañca*', SN 35.207 at SN IV 203,11–12; cf. Ñāṇananda 2012 [1971], 14–15 and 33–34).

10.   E.g., MN 28 at MN I 190,17, MN 72 at MN I 487,30, SN 22.35 at SN III 35,9, SN 36 at SN III 36,20, AN 3.7 at AN III 5,31.

11.   Rhys Davids and Stede 1994 [1921–1925], 412 s.v. *papañca*.

Concepts as bonds

The prominent point of perplexity for Evans in this section is that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda would carry the reciprocal association between the triad *taṇhā–māna–diṭṭhi* and *papañca* or *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* 'to the point of warning against thinking and concepts altogether' (Evans 2017, 7). That is, Evans here reads Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda to the effect that the latter would be commending an approach to experience free from thoughts and thinking. Now, Evans rightly points out that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda 'may want to say that ... purifying the mind requires (also?) the elimination of conceptual proliferation' and appropriately quotes the following paragraph from *Concept and Reality*:

> [t]he consummation of the training in sense restraint, therefore, consists in the ability to refrain from 'thinking in terms of' (*maññanā*) the data of sensory experience. The chimerical and elusive nature of sense data is such that as soon as one thinks in terms of them, one is estranged from reality. (Ñāṇananda 2012 [1971], 30)

After the above excerpt from *Concept and Reality*, Evans comments that '[g]iven that the mind is included in the senses, this would seem to indicate refraining from thinking at all' and finds this an 'odd claim' (Evans 2017, 7). If Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda were to assert such a proposition, this would be odd indeed. But this is not the case, the gist of *maññanā* in the discourse passages under discussions being rather the thinking *in terms of*, that is, conceiving in terms of, and building up the conceit of, an 'I'.

Instead, Evans understands that rather than 'problematizing only a particular mode of thinking' Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda 'finds all conceptual thought problematic' and concludes that this points to the 'relentless tyranny of the empirical consciousness' wherein '[n]o sooner does one clutch at these [sense] data with "*maññanā*" (imaginings) than they slip into unreality'. This then results into a situation in which 'sense experience has now come to share the blame, presumably because in the *Madhupiṇḍika* formula, sense experience leads to *vitakka* and *papañca*' (Evans 2017, 8).

Next, Evans takes up the sequence *maññita* (imagination), *iñjita* (agitation), *phandita* (palpitation), *papañcita* (proliferation) and *mānagata* (conceit) in the *Vepacitti-sutta*[12] discussed by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda and argues that

> even if *maññita* were translated 'thinking' or 'conceptualization' this passage does not constitute a claim by the Buddha that concepts in general bind us to *saṃsāra*, and 'agitation' and 'palpitation' seem to point more to momentary attitudes or emotions than to thought. ... In any case, it is thoughts/imaginings related to 'I am' that are the problem here, not thought or concepts in general. (Evans 2017, 8)

Yet it is not Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda but rather Evans who has earlier surmised that there would be a problem with thought or concepts in general. Thus here Evans seems to be attempting to find a solution to a problem that he has himself created by attributing to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda something that the latter does not say or imply.

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12. SN 35.248 at SN IV 201–203 (the title in the PTS edition is *Yavakalāpi-sutta*).

Evans then continues to pursue a line of interpretation according to which Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda would 'draw perhaps the strongest evidence for the need to avoid thinking' from the *Sakkapañha-sutta* where mental states 'not accompanied by ratiocination' are held superior to those accompanied by ratiocination (Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's rendering of *avitakka-avicāra* and *savitakka-savicāra* respectively).[13] The practice described in this discourse leads by stages to the cessation of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*. I find Evans' discussion quite confusing at this juncture. His main argument seems to be that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda understands *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as 'thinking'. On this interpretation, 'the need to avoid thinking' should logically amount to the pursuit of the cessation of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* (although Evans notes at the same time that the 'connection between thinking and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* is not univocal', Evans 2017, 8). Be that as it may, according to Evans' assessment Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda would then drive his no-thinking (no-*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*) point home by resorting to the superiority of *avitakka-avicāra* (on which Evans, p. 8, comments that the superiority of *avitakka-avicāra* 'may indeed simply be a reference to a progressing from the first to the second *jhāna*').

I first address the issue of no-thinking and the domain of 'concept' in Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exposition and then I come back to the topic of *vitakka-vicāra* or lack thereof.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda does not at all argue against 'thinking' as such in favour of no-thinking. He could not make such a claim, since the very foundation of his thesis is that concepts are already involved at a very basic level of cognition. Conceptual structures precede fully formed discursive thought. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's target is positioned much earlier than the fully fledged manifestation of thinking in the cognitive chain, so that 'thinking' is only one of the manifestations of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*. *Papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* arises before the intellectual articulation of thoughts in that it is concerned with the very matrix of unawakened sense perception and processing. This is a crucial point in Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's reading of the early Buddhist discourses and I try to summarize it in what follows.

Even the most basic component of experience involves the operation of a concept. Such a basic component consists in apprehending material form (*rūpa*) as a conscious experience, defined in terms of the four great elements (*mahābhūta*), namely earth for the experiential quality and perception of solidity, etc.

An object is cognized, and recognized, through the experience of resistance upon coming into contact with it (*paṭigha*). This gives rise to a perception of form (*rūpa-saññā*). Form becomes an object of experience or cognition only to the extent that it can be perceived. Therefore there is no subjective experience of form independent of a perception of form. That is to say, even the most basic constituent of experience, materiality, is liable to being experienced only in the presence of a conceptual structure, namely perception. In other words, matter is no more primary than concept — nor vice versa — for each requires the coming into being of the other through a relation of mutual conditionality. On account of this dynamic, concepts — starting from perception of form — are seen as the very fabric of conditioned,

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13. DN 21 at DN II 278,15ff.

dependently arisen experience. Conscious experience, with its duality between a cognising subject and an object of cognition, is intrinsically conceptual insofar as it tags, indexes and reckons with a coming and going loop between the two.

The conceptual dimension of experience is thus much more fundamental than any 'thinking' activity as such. Even the most basic sensory experience is an 'experience' to the extent that it is known, which requires the activation of the conceptual functions. Such conceptual functions are the five components of name (*nāma*) in name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*), that is, feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention (*cetanā*), contact (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikāra*).[14] The name group is a cognitive structure that is conceptual and linguistic whilst it precedes the articulation of natural language as such. In one of his *Nibbāna Sermons* Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda gives the example of a toddler who is still unable to speak or understand language:

> [s]uppose there is a little child, a toddler, who is still unable to speak or understand language. Someone gives him a rubber ball and the child has seen it for the first time. If the child is told that it is a rubber ball, he might not understand it. How does he get to know that object? He smells it, feels it, and tries to eat it, and finally rolls it on the floor. At last he understands that it is a plaything. Now the child has recognised the rubber ball not by the name that the world has given it, but by those factors included under 'name' in *nāma-rūpa*, namely feeling, perception, intention, contact and attention. This shows that the definition of *nāma* in *nāma-rūpa* takes us back to the most fundamental notion of 'name', to something like its prototype.[15]

Thus understood, name is not just competence in a natural language or a skill in deploying linguistic conventions, but it lies at the basis of the structure of conscious experience. Concept is in-built in dependently arisen cognitive reality.

This is borne out by the *Mahānidāna-sutta* that is discussed by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2012 [1971], 73ff). This discourse shows that the entire gamut of existence (*bhava*) is caused and conditioned, and it is relational (i.e., not 'absolute'). The pivot point or interface of the basic relation in question is contact (*phassa, samphassa*), namely resistance-contact (*paṭigha-samphassa*) and designation-contact (*adhivacana-samphassa*).[16] Contact is a 'hybrid' in that the qualities of the group of name (*nāma-kāya*) make possible designation-contact regarding the group of form (*rūpa-kāya*), and the qualities of the group of form make possible resistance-contact regarding the group of name. Contact as the basis of experience is relational, conditioned, conceptual: it combines verbal impressions of form and resistant impressions of name. The pair 'nominal form' and 'formal name' — a definition coined by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda in his later *Nibbāna Sermons* which should help illuminate the matter[17] — conveys the sense that, in experience, name and form are mutually 'in-formed'. This holds specifically for the sensual realm (*kāmāvacara*) and the form realm (*rūpāvacara*), where experience arises based on the mutual conditioning

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14. MN 9 at MN I 53,8–15.

15. Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012], 5 (Sermon 1).

16. DN 15 at DN II 62,17ff.

17. Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012] (esp. Sermons 1, 2 and 26); cf. also Ñāṇananda 2016 [2015–2016] (esp. Sermons 1, 2, 9, 18 and 20).

between name and form. In the formless realm (*arūpāvacāra*), name does not arise in dependence on form, because there is no perception of form/matter by way of the four great elements but only name, that is, a non-form-informed concept. In the exemplification of the principle of conditionality through a series of conditionally related links, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the condition for *nāma-rūpa*, which in turn constitutes the entire field of experience available to consciousness (in this context, *nāma* stands only for those mental phenomena that are experienced by consciousness but does not include consciousness itself). Any object, i.e., name and form, requires consciousness in order to be experienced. In turn, consciousness requires and depends on the object which provides the content of what it experiences. To illustrate '[t]his mutual dependence between them, as well as their relevance to the problem of concepts', Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda quotes the simile of the two bundles of reeds in the *Naḷakalāpa-sutta*[18] in the section of his essay devoted to 'Papañca and the Doctrine of Paṭicca-Samuppāda': 'their interdependence is similar to that of two standing bundles of reeds which are mutually supported at the top, so that should one be drawn the other must necessarily fall down' (2012 [1971], 73). Thus the relations between name and form on the one hand, and name-and-form and consciousness on the other, constitute the contingent, fragile matrix of 'existence'.

It follows from the above that concepts are a basic ingredient in experience. Due to the additional step of 'conceiving in terms of' (*maññanā*), the data of sensory experience come to be invested with self-referencing, precisely by ignoring their dependently arisen nature, that qualifies for the beginning of the proliferative chain. This is what ought to be avoided according to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda.

In the sequence *maññita* (imagination), *iñjita* (agitation), *phandita* (palpitation), *papañcita* (proliferation) and *mānagata* (conceit) quoted above, the problem lies in the fact that once inherent existence is imagined — 'conceiving in terms of' — agitation and palpitation are bound to arise as a result of wanting to control, or fearing to lose control, over an experience on which the sense of self-identity and dependency has come to rest. Such an escalation is unavoidable, wherefore avoidance is to be practised already at the first stage of conceivings. Thus what Evans appears to identify as 'thinking' is in fact the very experiential structure of cognition. 'Thinking in terms of' points to the deluded perception in self-referential terms of what is a dependently arisen, ever-changing process. Emancipation from 'concept' is only possible seeing through the dependently arisen nature of subjective experience and refraining from the reification and/or objectification of a subject that experiences objects of experience and conceives itself as an ontologically independent entity. Instead, an ontologically empty process arises from and grows with regard to any sense experience. Such a 'thinking', if one could call it that way, equally happens at the level of the eye-medium, the ear-medium, the nose-medium, the tongue-medium, the body-medium and the intellect-medium. From this it follows that the point of contention is not thinking in favour of no-thinking.

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18. SN 12.67 at SN II 112–115.

This model of conceptuality — rooted in the notion of contact (*phassa, samphassa*) — is clearly envisioned by the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*,[19] the discourse that sets the tone for *Concept of Reality*. This discourse reports the Buddha declaring that not to delight in perceptions and notions that arise due to conceptual proliferation (*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*) is the way to arrive at freedom from the underlying tendencies and from quarrels, false speech and evil states. The venerable Mahākaccāna elaborates on the Buddha's statement with an explanation of how, based on each sense organ and its object, the related type of consciousness arises. With the coming together of the three there is contact, which then leads on to feeling, perception, thought and conceptual proliferation (*papañca*). This is then followed by the arising of notions and perceptions due to conceptual proliferation in regard to the past, present and future. Such conditional sequence does not take place in the absence of the sense organs, their objects and the corresponding type of consciousness, but only when these are present.

Experience arises at the level of the hedonic aspect of experience, i.e., feeling (*vedanā*) — conditioned by contact — and proceeds through various degrees of construction of responses to what is felt. Even what is felt is not entirely free from concept in that it results from contact, and contact is inherently part of the naming construct. As a consequence, the process of purification of the mind does not compartmentalize ethics, emotions and the intellect. Virtue by way of restraint of sense input is ultimately functional to enabling the person to see more clearly through the process of building of a self, starting from sensory experience. To restrain the senses means to minimize the quantity of the input so as to be able to apply a magnifying glass to the construct of experience and develop insight into it. At advanced stages of insight, with the fading away of passion for sense input, restraint becomes an ethical, emotional and cognitive preference of the mind. To that extent, 'thinking' by way of the sense media indeed diminishes. Initial avoidance is instrumental to a more fundamental level of avoidance and fading away — as per the exposition in the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*.

To summarize up to this point, it seems to me that this crucial thesis of *Concept and Reality* has been overlooked by Evans. The arising of concepts and linguistic structures is a basic fact of experience. All conditioned experience is intrinsically conceptual. It is not a matter of concepts being connected to thinking or no-thinking nor of the non-conceptual being thought-free as in common English parlance. There is no experience — except for *Nibbāna* — that is devoid of concepts and language. *Nibbāna* is devoid of concepts because it is the cessation of ontological constructs (*bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ*),[20] ontological constructs being 'conceptual' in light of what I have explained above.

With this summary in place, I am now in the position to address what seems to me a semantically and soteriologically reductive perspective expressed by Evans in the previous section of his paper, devoted to 'the thesis' in general:

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19. MN 18 at MN I 108–114.

20. AN 10.7 at AN V 9,28–29.

because *papañceti* follows *vitakketi* here, Ñāṇananda takes it to mean 'consequent prolificity in ideation', understanding *vitakketi* as initial thought (p. 4). Thought he understands, in turn, as sub-vocal speech (p. 5) ... Given that *vitakka* is typically followed by *vicāra* in the *Nikāya*s, he suggests that *vicāra* has a 'finer sense of investigation and deliberation', while *papañca* indicates the tendency of the 'imagination to break loose and run riot' (p. 4). He fails to make use of this potentially useful distinction, however, noting only that, 'what often passes for "*vicāra*" might turn out to be "*papañca*" when viewed from a higher stand-point' ... (2017, 5)

As regards the 'potentially useful distinction' between *vicāra* and *papañca* which Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda allegedly failed to make use of, closer inspection shows that he does use precisely this type of distinction when he traces the genesis of *papañca* down to the process of sense cognition. In fact whereas *vitakka* and *vicāra* — cognitively in general and meditatively — may serve the functional purpose of placing and keeping the mind on track, *papañca* does just the opposite in that it does not content itself with *vitakka* and *vicāra* but it feeds on expanding and augmenting the domain of experience to be appropriated. This is functional to the increase of its own feeding ground, under the influence of *taṇhā*, *māna* and *diṭṭhi*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda aptly contrasts the relative cosmos of *vitakka-vicāra*, which has a role to play in the normal operations of the mind, to the hypertrophic chaos of *papañca*:

[i]f *'vicāra'*, at least relatively, denotes cosmos in the mental realm, *'papañca'* seems to signify chaos. This of course does not preclude the possibility that what often passes for *'vicāra'* might turn out to be *'papañca'* when viewed from a higher stand-point. In any case, the 'expansion' or 'diffusion' of thought as envisaged by *'papañca'* is one that tends to obscure the true state of affairs inasmuch as it is an unwarranted deviation giving rise to obsession. This particular nuance in the meaning of the term becomes obvious when *'papañca'* is used to denote verbosity or circumlocution. In fact it is probably this latter sense found in common usage, that has assumed a philosophical dimension with its transference from the verbal to the mental sphere. ... conceptual activity presupposes language, so much so that thought itself may be regarded as a form of sub-vocal speech. The above transference, therefore, is quite appropriate.

(2012 [1971], 4–5)

On the other hand, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda does point to the reciprocity between *vitakka-vicāra* and *papañca*, for example in the path leading to the cessation of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* as laid out in the *Sakkapañha-sutta*. This discourse presents a mode of training aimed at the progressive elimination of *vitakka* and *vicāra* as a path suitable for and leading to the cessation of *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda writes:

[it] is significant that although 'applied and sustained thoughts' (*vitakkavicāra*) conducive to wholesome mental states are utilised to eliminate those conducive to unwholesome mental states — much in the same way as a carpenter would drive out a blunt peg with a sharper one — they have merely a relative value.

(2012 [1971], 25–26)

He then goes on to quote from and comment on the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta's*[21] presentation of the gradual process of

> deconceptualization of the mind, whereby each successive 'peg' is being replaced by a sharper one until at last he is able to pull out with ease the sharpest of them all. Indeed the stages there enumerated are 'pegs' on which consciousness hangs ... The crucial decision which precedes the removal of the last 'peg' may be fully appreciated in the light of *'papañca'*. (2012 [1971], 26)

Last, he closes the circle by throwing into relief the basic injunction of sense restraint, whose philosophical relevance I have already highlighted above:

> [s]pecific instructions for the elimination of *'papañca'* by controlling its gate-ways of *'Vitakka-vicāra'* may be seen even in some of the most elementary ethical teachings of Buddhism. For instance, at the level of sense-restraint enjoined for the monk, it is said that he should not dwell on the general or special characteristics of the data of sense-experience lest unwholesome mental states should flow into his mind.
>
> (2012 [1971], 26)

Notably, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda refers to the exposition in the *Dvayatānupassanā-sutta*[22] to explain that

> [t]he consummation of the training in sense restraint, therefore, consists in the ability to refrain from 'thinking in terms of' *(maññanā)* the data of sensory experience. The chimerical and elusive nature of sense data is such that as soon as one thinks in terms of them, one is estranged from reality. (2012 [1971], 30)

The above goes to show that ultimate sense restraint coincides with the complete dismantling of existence in dependence on the six sense bases that comes about with full liberation, as per the Buddha's pithy exhortation to Bāhiya in the *Udāna*,[23] taken up by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2012 [1971], 28–29). According to another discourse reporting a verse exchange between the Buddha and a deity, the world is declared to be tightly fettered by delight, *vitakka* is its means of travelling about, and craving is what must be forsaken in order to say that *Nibbāna* is attained — here *vitakka* and *vicāra* are juxtaposed in the question on what is the world's trailing along (*kiṃsu tassa vicāraṇaṃ*), with *vitakka* evocatively said to be the trailing along or going about of the world (*vitakk' assa vicāraṇaṃ*).[24]

Vitakka and *vicāra* are also featured in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta's* presentation of the first and fourth noble truths. Although among the early discourses this detailed exposition is only found in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta*[25] and in the Burmese and Siamese editions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, and it appears to reflect a commentarial, comprehensive mode of exposition,[26] its treatment of *vitakka* and *vicāra* use-

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21. DN 9 at DN I 178–203.

22. Sn 3.12 at Sn 139–149.

23. Ud 1.10 at Ud 6–9.

24. SN 1.64 at SN I 39,17–21; see Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012], 630–631 (Sermon 29).

25. DN 22 at DN II 309,28ff.

26. Cf. Anālayo 2011, I 90–91 with note 328, Anālayo 2013, 171 and Anālayo 2014, 91–100.

fully throws into relief their range in relation to a series of stages in the perceptual process at each sense door. In this type of exposition, *vitakka* and *vicāra* in relation to visual forms are listed after the eye, visual forms, eye-consciousness, eye-contact, feelings arising from eye-contact, perception of visual forms and intentions entertained in response to visual forms. Craving arising in regard to and becoming established in enticing and pleasurable *vitakka* and *vicāra* related to visual forms, sounds, etc. in the world is the arising of *dukkha*; or else craving may be eradicated and extinguished in regard to enticing and pleasurable *vitakka* and *vicāra*, signifying the cessation of *dukkha*.

To sum up, I cannot concur with Evans' assessment that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda fails to develop the suggested distinction between *vitakka*, *vicāra* and *papañca*. In my opinion, his treatment and the discourse passages he quotes do justice to the polysemy and different contextual implications of this terminology. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda highlights the shared features and interrelationships, explains how *papañca* is a fully formed world that expands on the linguistic-conceptual structure already presupposed by *vitakka* and *vicāra* and, before them, by the most elementary event of contact at the level of the sense bases. At the same time, he places the topic into a higher soteriological perspective — which stands at the heart of his book — by summing up that

> [t]his of course does not preclude the possibility that what often passes for *'vicāra'* might turn out to be *'papañca'* when viewed from a higher stand-point. (2012 [1971], 4)

The superstitions of grammar

From concept to language, the salient point of criticism in the subsequent section of Evans' paper is the supposition that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda sees language itself as the culprit or at least a key accomplice:

> [l]anguage itself is a part of the problem, and in particular the 'superstitions of the grammatical structure'. (Evans 2017, 9)

Evans takes the caption of 'superstitions of the grammatical structure' in a too literary or perhaps literalist sense, when he comments:

> his statement that inflection is an 'elementary feature in language' (p. 50) is mistaken. Sinhala (and Pāli) is more highly inflected than, say, English, and languages like Thai are not inflected at all; yet 'egoistic imaginings' seem quite as common across the board. The discussion is based on the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (M I 1) in which the Buddha runs through ways of thinking about abstract realities (earth, water, fire, wind, etc.) using inflections among other constructions. However, there is no implication that we are forced to think 'on the earth' (*paṭhaviyā*), 'from the earth' (*paṭhavito*), 'earth is mine' (*paṭhaviṃ meti*) (Ñāṇananda's translations, p. 49) by the inflections. Indeed, *paṭhaviyā* does service for the dative, genitive, instrumental, and ablative as well as locative. (2017, 9)

Inflection or the 'flexional pattern' of which Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda speaks (2012 [1971], 50) has nothing to do with the way languages articulate concept in specific

ways, be it by declension or by agglutination or any other morphological format of world languages. Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is referring to the elementary process of conceiving on the basis of sense data, taking them as the ground for self-identity. Thus, *pace* Evans, he is not 'mistaken' that inflection is an 'elementary feature in language', (2017, 9) and the higher or lesser degree of inflection or else non-inflective morphological structure of specific languages such as Sinhala and Pali or Thai respectively does not have any bearing on the conceptual aspect of inflection wherein the subject (thinker/speaker) conceives himself or herself in relation to objects of experience and positions objects of experience in relation to himself or herself. Figuratively, inflection has rather to do with the bending towards or leaning on sense data by way of concepts and proliferation, that is, 'inflection' leads to inflation.

The thinking (or conceiving) in the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* quoted by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda takes place for instance by not understanding through higher knowledge (*abhijānāti*) and thereby conceiving earth to be 'earth' (*paṭhaviṃ maññati*), to be 'on the earth' (*paṭhaviyā maññati*), to be 'from the earth' (*paṭhavito maññati*), 'earth is mine' (*paṭhaviṃ me ti maññati*) and so forth for the other elements that constitute embodied matter (*rūpa*), beings, various *deva*s, the four formless realms, the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized, unity, diversity, totality, *Nibbāna*, twenty-four concepts in total, representative of concepts in the world.[27] Here *paṭhaviṃ maññati*, etc. indeed corresponds with the making of a noun or substantive and the construction of an objectual relation that semantically corresponds with a nominative versus an accusative. The next expression *paṭhaviyā maññāti* implies the locative case and *paṭhaviṃ me ti maññati* the possessive relationship expressed as a genitive. Nevertheless, the point at issue is the imaginings that are superimposed on such objectual relationships so that the concept 'earth' is related to a sense of self. The imaginings reinforce and make much of conceptual categories that have already arisen for experience to be a cognitive event in the first place. This qualifies them for being a case of proliferation, which is what Evans appears to have lost sight of. Imaginings inject further ontological validation to such dependently arisen concepts because one delights in them, that is, 'delighting in earth', makes ego-centred assertions on their basis, etc.

In sum, such thinking (or conceiving) involves exactly the same conceptual pattern regardless of the morphological specifics of the language used by a speaker. The nature of the relationship between syntax and semantics is an object of debate in contemporary linguistics theories but, generally speaking, no theory affirms that it is possible for semantics to be independent from syntax, and all linguistic theories affirm that grammar (syntax and morphology) is an avenue for expressing meaning. That is, the main point made by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is the representation and expression of meaning, as it occurs when self-identity is superimposed on objects of experience and notions that have dependently arisen to begin with.

Thus, *pace* Evans, he is definitely not proposing that 'concepts and grammar *per se* are … blamed in this *sutta* for leading me astray' (2017, 9). Rather, he is showing how existence depends on grasping or clinging, being dependently arisen on its

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27. MN 1 at MN I 4,7ff.

basis (*upādānapaccayā bhavo*). Thus conditioned existence (*bhava*) is in itself a concept, wherein objects and subjects of experience lack essence or substance but are conceived of from within an ontological framework, which happens due to craving, conceit and views. Conversely, with the cessation of dependent arising existence is de-conceptualized and thereby comes to cease. As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda writes in the preface to the first edition of *Concept and Reality*:

> [t]he analysis of the nature of concepts constitutes an important facet of the Buddhist doctrine of *Anattā* ('not-self'). Buddhism traces the idea of a soul to a fundamental error in understanding the facts of experience. (2012 [1971], ix)

By highlighting what one may characterize as the 'semantics of *papañca*', Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda has indeed 'demonstrated that the *Nikāyas* suggest such an influence' and has deeply 'engaged with the questions of how and to what extent such an influence may operate' (Evans 2017, 9). The problem is not the grammatical categories and the way they are articulated by any natural language in the world, the problem is the belief system that holds them ontologically, resulting in an ontological equation between language and reality.

Resuscitating concepts

The prominent point of the critical assessment in this section is that

> [t]he problematization of concepts and grammar raises two serious difficulties. First, The Buddha himself used concepts and grammar extensively in conveying his teachings. Second, if concepts and grammar *necessarily* mislead, then the argument given here, consisting in concepts and grammar, is misleading. Ñāṇananda, to his considerable credit, explicitly recognizes both difficulties and attempts to address them.
> (Evans 2017, 10)

It is clear from the following statement in *Concept and Reality* that it is not the case that they '*necessarily* mislead':

> [o]nce the fermenting-agent is thus destroyed, concepts in the strict sense of the term cannot occur in the emancipated mind ... though he may think and speak with the help of worldly concepts ... when concepts have lost their fecundity for an individual, they will never fertilize or proliferate into any kind of rebirth. (2012 [1971], 78)

A proper appraisal of the nature of concept and experience should clarify Evans' perplexity that

> we are left with concepts that, for the *Arahant*, cannot occur in the 'strict sense', but are nevertheless lacking in fecundity and are transparent. A distinction between concepts in the 'strict sense' and other concepts seems hinted at here, but there is no elucidation of what the distinction might be. (2017, 10)

Once the notion of 'concept' and the implications of 'grammar' are understood as I have explained above, it becomes clear that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is not launching a crusade against using concepts and grammar in principle, or against relying on speech to convey the teachings. He speaks from a soteriological and phenomenological perspective, in which craving, conceit and views are responsible for the

arising of an 'ontology' of the conceptual experience — or experiential concept — of name-and-form and consciousness.

With the eradication of the influxes *(āsavas)*, the ontology of 'concepts' also comes to an end in the mind of the arahant to the extent that existence comes to an end *(bhavanirodha)*. Surely, the arahant still 'exists', but his or her existence is de-ontologized, as it were, in that the mis-construing of things as solidly existing comes to an end. Naturally, name-and-form and consciousness continue to arise, but they are emptied of the conceptual *qua* existential status and investment that occurs in the presence of the influxes.

To recapitulate, what is eliminated is the ontology of concepts, not the operational dimension of concepts. The concepts of name-and-form are not the manifestation of self-identity and self-conceit anymore and in that way they do not become means of measurement and cognition, of reckonings *(saṅkhā)*. The mind is no longer enslaved by concepts, it can peacefully coexist with the employment of concepts in the ever-changing unfolding of experience. (In fact, even the meditative path to liberation from existence involves wholesome thoughts and the wise use of concepts and verbalization.) When existence ceases, a concept-based ontology ceases to furnish the parameters for experience.

Such an appraisal should also be able to clarify passages in Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's book such as:

> [a] dream may be proved false in the light of waking experience, but all the same, it is relatively true as a *fact* of experience. Similarly, the deluding character of concepts is a fact of experience and must not be ignored on that account. Concepts, for all their vicious potency to delude us, are not to be blamed *per se,* for they are merely objectifications or projections of our own *taṇhā*, *māna* and *diṭṭhi* ... Hence, in the last analysis, concepts have to be tackled at their source. They are not so much to be demolished, as to be comprehended and transcended ... (2012 [1971], 90)

This is not to be understood as a 'recogni[tion]' that his thesis, taken too literally, demolishes itself'. When Evans affirms that 'much ... could have been done with the passing recognition of concepts as facts of experience' (2017, 10–11), it seems to me he does not see what is right under his nose, namely that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is revealing throughout 'concepts as [the most elementary] facts of experience'.

There is therefore no question of problematising the use of speech employed in order to convey the *Dhamma*, *Dhamma*-discourse being language articulated as text. With reference to right view *(sammā-diṭṭhi)* and the parable of the raft in the *Alagaddūpama-sutta*,[28] Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda emphatically speaks of the raft of right view and *Dhamma* teachings being '*improvised* out of the medium of language and logic in worldly parlance'. In pointing out that it is possible to 'conceive attachment *(rāga)* or delight *(nandi)* for those very concepts which [one] utilises to attain *Nibbāna*' (2012 [1971], 72), the emphasis is on attachment and delight that accompany craving, which is in turn responsible for the coming into being of existence, based on concepts. The delivery of the *Dhamma* as a teaching stems from an expe-

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28. MN 22 at MN I 130–145.

rience of de-conceptualization and thereby de-existentialization of the mind. According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, this is also what places *Dhamma* teachings on the same level as the noble silence of the sage:

> the truth value of Dhamma — of *Sammā Diṭṭhi* — pertains to the path, and it is essentially a view of the Goal and not the Goal itself. Dhamma or '*Sammā Diṭṭhi*', we may add, is neither more nor less true of the Goal than the raft is of the farther bank. Being a form of *Diṭṭhi* or view, it presupposes a view-point, and it is, or ought to be, the view-point of the Ariyan disciple. ... the emancipated sage has no view-point — indeed he needs none as he has reached the Goal. He has transcended all views of Truth and is in possession of a vision of it. Thus we arrive at another paradox, as in the case of 'the silence' of the '*muni*'. The sage does not entertain any views not only when he refutes '*micchā-diṭṭhi*' (false view), but also when he *preaches* '*Sammā diṭṭhi*' (right view). It may also be mentioned that '*Sammā Diṭṭhi*' itself embodies the seed of its own transcendence, as its purpose is to purge the mind of all views inclusive of itself. (2012 [1971], 40–41)

Here the *Dhamma* teachings of the sage are praised and placed on the same level as noble silence.[29] Noble silence in the mind is reached with the attainment of the second absorption (*jhāna*),[30] which leaves behind *vitakka* and *vicāra* as verbal formations[31] (speech has already been left behind with the first absorption). In the case of the sage's speech related to the *Dhamma*, *vitakka* and *vicāra* as functional qualities of the mind, required to be able to speak meaningfully, are still present. Yet *vitakka* and *vicāra* as potential precursors to *papañca* are appeased at the same time.

In the section of the paper under examination Evans once again returns to the significance of the progressive elimination of *vitakka* and *vicāra* in the *Sakkapañha-sutta* and the related progression towards the elimination of concepts in the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta* (Evans 2017, 11–12). Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda illustrates this cultivation by the use of the imagery or simile of a peg, explaining the merely relative value of concepts and the gradual abandonment of coarser states with the help of the attainment of more refined states 'much in the same way as a carpenter would drive out a blunt peg with a sharper one'. With regard to this, I find unwarranted the contention that

> it's quite a stretch to understand the *Sakkapañha Sutta* as proposing the use of thoughts to eliminate thoughts and the *sutta* which he references for the 'peg' metaphor, the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna Sutta* ... does not describe a process of 'deconceptualization of the mind'. Rather it describes methods of cleansing the mind ... for the sake of achieving the *jhāna*s. ... There is nothing here about using concepts to eliminate concepts, and indeed the *vitakka*s to be eliminated are almost certainly not concepts *per se*, but the fantasies, desires, and the like that arise to disturb the silently meditating monk. (Evans 2017, 11–12)

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29. E.g., AN 8.3 at AN IV 153,7–9; cf. also Seyfort Ruegg 1984, 210.

30. SN 21.1 at SN II 273,15.

31. SN 36.11 at SN IV 217,5; cf. also Anālayo 2016, 29–30.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda simply notes that this simile is found in the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta*[32] (2012 [1971], 26 note 1), but he does not construct any direct parallelism between the doctrinal context of the *Sakkapañha-sutta* and that of the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta*. He is simply recording that there is a canonical occurrence of the very simile he adopts to illustrate the point he is making.

Where earth finds no footing — an application of the thesis

In this section Evans (2017, 12) finds that the key thesis of *Concept and Reality* is put to good use in interpreting controversial passages in the *Kevaddha-sutta* and the *Bāhiya-sutta*.[33]

In the first of these two discourses the Buddha responds to the question 'wherein do those four great elements, i.e., earth, water, fire and wind cease altogether?' by stating that when earth, water, fire and wind, find no footing, name-and-form are here cut off without exception. When consciousness comes to cease, these are held in check therein. The second discourse similarly speaks of where earth, water, fire and wind find no footing, the stars do not shine, the sun does not spread its lustre, the moon does not appear resplendent and darkness is not to be found. The arahant who has seen thus with wisdom, is freed from pleasure and pain, and from form and the formless.[34] At first Evans comments that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda

> holds that ... in both passages the Buddha is speaking of the mind of the living *Arahant*, where the *concepts* of earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing and in which the light of wisdom outshines the *concepts* of the sun and moon. (Evans 2017, 12)

Later, he goes on to say:

> I would like to have seen more done with it. Nevertheless, while the approach applies the notion that *Arahant*s are in some sense beyond concepts, the interpretations do not constitute an illustration of concepts estranging persons from reality. Ñāṇananda's claim is rather that certain words in these utterances may be misconstrued as referring to objective entities rather than to concepts of those entities. That leaves open the possibility that in other utterances the same words, and concepts, may refer to the objective entities themselves. (Evans 2017, 12–13)

Again, a too literalist approach, this time in relation to poetic imagery formulated in verse, seems to have resulted in an over-interpretation of both the Pali lines and Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's commentary. Whereas the disappearance of the four elements indeed points to the emancipation from the concept or percept of form (*rūpa-saññā*), the inability of celestial bodies to shine lyrically evokes the light of wisdom, by which the radiance of the stars, the moon and the sun is superseded and becomes not visible or perceptible. This imagery is best read in relation to the *Pabhā-sutta*, in which the lustre of wisdom is declared the highest in a listing of four lustres featuring that of the moon, sun, fire and wisdom,[35] referenced by Bhikkhu

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32. MN 20 at MN I 118–122.

33. DN 11 at DN I 222–223 and Ud 1.10 at Ud 6–9.

34. Ud 1.10 at Ud 9,4–8.

35. AN 4.142 at AN II 139,20–23.

Ñāṇananda (2012 [1971], 60 with note 2). As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda explains:

> [a]s to the imagery of the darkness of ignorance and the radiance of wisdom, we may say that it is precisely because there is no darkness (in the emancipated mind) that the stars, the sun and the moon do not shine. They have paled away, their lustre having been superseded by the intuitional effulgence. Be it noted that the three verbs used in connection with the stars, the sun and the moon, convey the sense that they do not shine there — not that they are physically non-existent in any mysterious realm beyond. Thus the allusion here, with its touch of imagery (a feature as apt as it is recurrent in such inspired verses), is most probably to that transcendental consciousness of the living Arahant in which the concepts such as earth, water, fire, and air, stars, sun, moon, darkness (of ignorance), realms of form and formless realms, happiness and unhappiness, have lost their 'substantiality' in more than one sense.
>
> (2012 [1971], 60)

The above indicates that the existence of, so to say, 'objective entities themselves' is unimportant in the present context. As a matter of fact, it is never questioned by the early Buddhist discourses nor by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (as Evans himself recognizes in another section of his paper, see Evans 2017, 16). The point at issue is simply that there cannot be any such 'objective entities themselves' in the realm of conditioned experience, experience which arises precisely as the result of a subject versus object dichotomy that is a by-product of conditionality itself. Since the subject arises conditionally and likewise the object, where could one find 'objective entities themselves'?

Validation of the thesis

Next, it seems to me that Evans sees as an instance of 'validation of the thesis' what in reality is the foundation for the thesis if not 'the thesis' itself. He writes:

> Ñāṇananda 'validates' the thesis that concepts bind one to saṃsāra with reference to *Paṭicca-samupāda* [sic], and in particular, the mutual dependence of *viññāṇa* and *nāmarūpa* as given in the *Mahānidāna Sutta* ... (Evans 2017, 13)

Evans correctly identifies the 'connection with concepts' with the convergence of all pathways of concepts and designations on this particular node and cycle and argues that is the validation that is being claimed (2017, 13). According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda, such a convergence bears a liberating potential in that

> [t]he interdependence between *viññāṇa* and *nāmarūpa* in the case of the worldling is such that the one turns back from the other (*paccudāvattati*) refusing to go further (*nāparaṁ gacchati*). This is the vortex proper of all *saṃsāric* currents (*ettāvatā vaṭṭaṁ vaṭṭati*) ... Hence a permanent solution had to be effected at this very vortex, and an approach to the seething mass was rendered possible by the fact that all pathways of concepts and designations converged on it, providing sufficient scope for wisdom to work its way through (*ettāvatā paññāvacaraṁ*). (2012 [1971], 75)

Evans (2017, 13) goes on to quote a passage found two pages later in *Concept and Reality*, noting that it 'perhaps somewhat clarifie[s] ... the relevance of this claimed convergence to the cessation of *viññāṇa* and *nāma-rūpa*':

'Form' (*rūpa*) can secure a basis in consciousness only in collaboration with 'name' (*nāma*) and this is where the concept comes in. Though matter … cannot be completely transcended so long as one's physical body is there, 'name-and-form' … can be dissolved or melted away through wisdom. (2012 [1971], 77)

However, the following observations made by Evans indicate that he has not recognized the gist of the argument being made, notably the crucial role of perception or concept of form (*rūpa-saññā*) as the very point at the core of both the convergence and the potential exit gate out of conditionality:

> [Ñāṇananda] is saying that eliminating the concept of matter would end the *viññāṇa–nāma-rūpa* cycle, leading directly to liberation. Even if we accept this at face value, however, the critique of concepts in general has not been validated. But it seems passing strange that simply holding or relinquishing a concept of matter would be the key to bondage and liberation, or indeed that the *nāma-rūpa* of *Paṭicca-samupāda* [sic] refers specifically to a concept of matter. I suspect that Ñāṇananda intended a more general interpretation, say *nāma-rūpa* as concepts of objects of consciousness as a whole (*rūpa* generalized from visual form). He does not, however, make any such possibility explicit. The claim is that all concepts and designations converge on the vortex, with the implication that they drive the cycle. (Evans 2017, 13)

As I have attempted to clarify in the foregoing, *rūpa-saññā* as apperception of material form partakes of both form/matter and name in that it is the recognition of an object that arises as a result of the experience of resistance which takes place through the coming into contact with an object. Such a divide, 'conceptual' versus 'experiential', does not occur in early Buddhist thought, precisely because the 'experiential' is itself a 'concept', and Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exegetical categories express and articulate this fundamental co-extensiveness at the level of the conditioned realm. Conceptual experience and experiential concepts share the mark of conditionality. It is perhaps worth mentioning that in the case of *arūpa*, concepts do not arise in dependence on *nāma-rūpa*, but only in dependence on *nāma*.

I hope that these reflections help underscore the relevance to the present argument of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's comment on a number of discourse passages that the Buddha 'declared that in the terminology … of the Noble Ones … the "world" is indistinguishable from the concept thereof' (2012 [1971], 80). Yet, according to Evans, this is a 'slipping from the sense experience discussed in the *sutta* to the "concept thereof" (not discussed in the *sutta*) of his claim'. Evans seems to be unable to see such relevance and comes to the assessment that '[n]either that the world is what is presented by the senses nor that it is a conceptual structure entails that concepts bind us to the cycle of rebirth' (2017, 14).

A crucial passage from the *Mahānidāna-sutta*, as discussed by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda (2012 [1971], 73ff), indicates that the entire gamut of saṃsāric existence is co-extensive with name-and-form together with consciousness (*yadidaṃ nāmarūpaṃ saha viññāṇena*).[36] This is thrown into relief by the statement that 'in so far only the round whirls for there to be any designation of the present condition of existence'

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36. DN 15 at DN 64,1–2.

(*ettāvatā vaṭṭaṃ vaṭṭati itthattaṃ paññāpanāya*).[37] The discourse excerpt is evaluated by Evans along the following lines:

> [t]he passage does not say that the cycle is constituted by or depends on concepts and designations, but rather that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* in some sense constitute the range of what can be known conceptually. It says that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* demark the limits of conceptual knowledge, not that concepts cause there to be *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa*. Now, I very much suspect that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* can be usefully understood as having some connection to concept formation. However, Ñāṇananda has failed to show that such an understanding is a workable interpretation of the source material and is thus far from exploring the dynamics of such an interpretation. (2017, 14)

In my opinion Evans correctly envisages 'that *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* can be usefully understood as having some connection to concept formation', yet he does not capture the essential argument that by virtue of the vicious vortex *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* indeed 'demark the limits of conceptual knowledge' by definition. At the opposite end of the spectrum stands the arahant, for whom there is no whirling round for there to be a designation (*vaṭṭaṃ tesaṃ natthi paññāpanāya*),[38] because the whirlpool has been desiccated, craving quenched, the influxes extinguished. The deeper import of the *Mahānidāna-sutta* should also be able to put into proper perspective the subsequent point of criticism expressed by Evans:

> [i]t is in this context that Ñāṇananda writes that concepts are brought about by the *āsavas* … The *āsavas* in turn are eliminated through wisdom, such that 'concepts … cannot occur' … the assertion that *āsavas* bring about concepts remains unsupported. (2017, 14)

Interpretations

This section of the paper offers Evans' own 'attempts to understand' (2017, 15) the main thesis of *Concept and Reality*. Whereas Evans' characterization of the thesis in the summary at the beginning of this section appears to be quite straightforward, his further elaboration contains both insightful and problematic points.

Starting from what I see as problematic, the salient point hinges on the acceptation of 'reality' and 'independent reality' in Evans' usage vis-à-vis that of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda. Because Evans usage does not reflect the sense of these terms in Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's essay, while purporting to present it in a more intelligible and coherent manner, including resolving the problems left allegedly unresolved or unsubstantiated by the author, this basic inconsistency between the frame of references respectively of Evans and his author causes a major flaw in Evans' assessment.

I concur with Evans that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda does not define the keywords 'concept', 'concept tinged by the proliferating tendency' and 'reality'. However, I would not have expected to find such 'definitions'. For one, early Buddhist discourse literature is not, generally speaking, concerned with defining its own terminology.

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37. DN 15 at DN II 63,29–64,1.

38. E.g., MN 22 at MN I 141,25, SN 22.56 at SN III 59,35ff, SN 22.57 at SN III 63,3ff.

Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exegetical method is based on surveying the relevant passages in the early discourses and unravelling the web of interconnectedness that binds these key notions and terms in the discourses themselves. True to the literary fabric and didactic method of the discourses — one which gives multiple perspectives from multiple points of contemplation — Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda illustrates rather than defines, elucidates rather than condenses into definitions that are not provided by his source material. For this reason I do not find justified Evans' disapproval of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's wide-encompassing approach, as if lacking in definitory force or rigour, for instance 'overcoming concepts seems variously to mean eradicating them, transcending them, and seeing through them'. After all Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is simply collecting and handing over a handful of the leaves in the forest of the discourses arranged as if in a bouquet, the few (*siṃsapa*) leaves in his hands being still far less numerous than those overhead in the Siṃsapa forest, to borrow from the simile in the *Siṃsapa-sutta*.[39] So yes, overcoming concepts does variously mean all of what Evans mentions and, personally, I do not find any fault with such a multivalence.

It is also worth pointing out that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exegesis and his vocabulary do not operate within the later Theravāda scheme of the so-called four ultimate realities (*paramattha-dhammā*) that the *Abhidhamma* views as existing in a definitive sense, namely *citta* (the mind occurring as distinct momentary states of consciousness, defined as that which knows or experiences an object), *cetasika*s (the mental factors that arise and occur in concomitance with the *citta*s), *rūpa* (regarded as physical matter) and *Nibbāna*. Although the first three are seen as conditioned and impermanent and *Nibbāna* as unconditioned, all four share the qualification of being 'ultimate realities' because they are categorized as 'experiential'. That is, liable to being experienced regardless of how they are named or defined, as against any other internal or external object which is considered a 'concept' and not an ultimate reality. At the opposite end of the spectrum stand 'concepts' (*paññatti*) in the sense of so-called 'conventional realities' (*sammuti*).

The Theravāda *Abhidhamma* in turn divides ultimate reality into *nāma*, *rūpa* and *Nibbāna*. Within this set *rūpa* stands for materiality irrespective of an observer, realistically conceived of rather than phenomenologically related to the subjective experience or perception of *rūpa*. The experience of *rūpa* phenomenologically rather than realistically intended would exclusively come under perception (*saññā*) in this scheme. In other words, the 'conceptual' nature of *rūpa* as per the early discourses and Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exegesis is not given prominence in the *Abhidhamma*.

This does not amount to saying that the conditional relation between *nāma* and *rūpa* is denied by the *Abhidhamma* framework. In fact the first in the Theravāda scheme of insight knowledges is precisely the discernment of name and form (*nāmarūpa-pariccheda*), which constitutes the basic teaching in insight training and the beginning of the training in conditionality. However, the paradigm is quite different, with a philosophical development that departs from the early discourses:

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39. SN 56.31 at SN V 437,24–27.

owing to his academic education, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is aware of the historical dimension of textual and doctrinal developments and is therefore in the position to step out of Theravāda commentarial and Abhidhammic orthodoxy, as he explains at the conclusion of his comprehensive survey of commentarial interpretations of *papañca* and *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*:[40]

> [i]n view of the above developments in commentarial exegesis, it appears that a quest for the original significance of *'papañca'* and *'papañca-saññā-saṅkhā'* should proceed primarily on the basis of contextual analysis of the suttas. Though the commentaries do throw some light on the subject, they are themselves in the grip of a good deal of semantic development. One has, therefore, to get the suttas to speak for themselves.
> (2012 [1971], 123)

As I have already pointed out above, in his attempt to define everything and put it into neat boxes, Evans aligns himself with what later exegesis — rather than the early discourses or Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda — predominantly does. Therefore criticising Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda for not providing ready definitions of what the early discourses do not define is a case of overlooking that he does not operate from within the later exegetical scheme.

To remain within the topic of philosophical paradigms, I find this observation by Evans particularly insightful:

> [Ñāṇananda] may well be saying that we each build up a conceptual picture of the world, a reification, in his terms 'crystallization', of experience, which we continue to reaffirm and add to by recycling and re-affirming the same set of concepts and by generating new concepts reifying new experiences in ways that reinforce the existing conceptual structure. The self-referential nature of that structure would mean that it becomes more and more detached from independent reality, somewhat resembling the 'epistemic closure' that haunts political discourse, isolating individual movements in self-affirming worldviews. To the extent that we live in terms of the structure rather than directly in terms of independent reality, we become less and less able to know things as they really are and hence to see the way to liberation. (2017, 16)

A footnote supplies an additional clarification:

> [b]y 'independent reality' I mean beings and the world 'as they are', i.e. distinct from opinions about them, concepts of them, references to them etc. Whether and to what extent 'reality' may be truly 'independent' of concepts is a metaphysical issue we need not address. (2017, 16 note 1)

I would definitely concur with Evans that central to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's thesis is the fact that the self-referential nature of the conceptual structure makes the unawakened individual become increasingly engulfed in assigning ontological value to concepts and becoming detached from reality. Reality here refers to things as they really are, literally as they have come to be or become (*yathābhūtaṃ*), as a result of conditionality.

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40. Cf. also, e.g., Ñāṇananda 2015 [2003–2012], 2.

Such a situation indeed closely resembles an 'epistemic closure'. But I beg to dissent from Evans in that I would not set aside the concern as regards '[w]hether and to what extent "reality" may be truly "independent" of concepts' as a metaphysical issue that does not require being addressed. Instead, I would reframe his reflections in this way: the 'self-referential nature' here is none other than conceiving in terms of a self (*attā*); the 'conceptual structure' that estranges from reality is the dependently arisen characteristic of name-and-form and of name-and-form in relation to consciousness; 'reality' stands for the self-less or ego-less (*anattā*) nature of experience delimited by name-and-form and consciousness, which is to be seen as it has come to be: the fundamental 'epistemic closure' is the building of the hermeneutic limit or prison wherein the individual ignores the conditional structure of his or her experience and attributes ontological status to that 'reality'. The closure is due to a misalignment in the perception of 'reality', as if a subject who knows 'reality' were pre-existent or absolutely existent.[41] An unchanging, absolute subject could not actually know anything, as to know something involves being subtly changed by it.

In view of such vital philosophical implications, I feel that the 'metaphysical issue' is crucially addressed (and dismantled) by the early discourses and notably by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's exegesis of the early Buddhist position and therefore it cannot be left unaddressed when reviewing a work like *Concept and Reality*.

Early Buddhist thought addresses the metaphysical by way of a fundamental dismantling of any project that locates gnoseology beyond (*meta-*) the conditionality of things as they have come to be. Beyond conditionality, however, the unconditioned can be known; for example, one can have the perception (*saññā*) of cessation (*nirodha*) and *Nibbāna*.[42] The radical philosophical innovation of early Buddhism involves a proposal to achieve emancipation — an escapeway — from the epistemic closure posed by 'concepts' in the above discussed sense. In terms of philosophical hermeneutics intended as the study of verbal and non-verbal communication as well as semiotics, presuppositions and pre-understandings, one could say that the early Buddhist proposal allows the individual to break free from the so-called 'hermeneutical limit', the prison of the subject.

These are of course my own words, presented here as an interpretation alternative to the various proposals advanced by Evans in his paper. I present these because Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda is in my reading very far from implying that liberation in the sense of overcoming concepts and their proliferation is in contradiction with the fact that 'we *necessarily* live in the world in terms of our understanding of it', nor does he deny pragmatic and functional validity to a 'structure of understanding, which includes concepts drawn from prior experience situating my wife, myself, our home, and the like', a structure that 'must be continually expanded to account for new experiences, for example, if we have a child' (Evans 2017, 17).

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41. In the literary sense of the term 'absolute', derived from Latin *absolutus*, 'loosened', 're-solved', 'ab-solved' as in 'absolution', in this case, quite literally redempted or redeemed from conditioned experience itself and epistemically unrestricted by it.

42. AN 10.60 at AN V 108–112 and AN 11.7 at AN V 318–319.

Evans appears to pursue a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* by painting a scenario that results from his own interpretation of *Concept and Reality*'s main tenet:

> [s]imilarly, without a structure of understanding, the Buddha could not have maintained the Sangha with different monks fulfilling different roles. He would have had to reappoint Ānanda over and over again as his attendant — except, lacking the *concept* of attendant, he could not even have made the appointment. In other words, concepts often *refer*, however imperfectly, to some independent reality; they are *about* something. (2017, 17)

> The role of attendant is an independent reality in that the possibility of someone filling such a role is independent of, in this case, the Buddha's assigning it to Ānanda.
> (2017, 17 note 12)

Such an absurd conclusion, however, does not follow from Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's thesis but only from Evans' interpretation. Evans himself is compelled to acknowledge: 'Ñāṇananda, in fact, readily acknowledges that *Arahant*s think and utilize concepts — as indeed does *Concept and Reality*. He softens the critique then to say that *Arahant*s "see through" concepts'. He then attempts to settle the matter by suggesting that this is 'a possible acknowledgement that concepts may refer to independent realities' and continues his critique by emphasising that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's assertion that concepts should be 'transcended', not 'demolished' (based on the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*'s proclamation of the way Tathāgatas and arahants make use of names, turns of speech and designations), would be self-contradictory with much of what Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda has written in *Concept and Reality*. Finally, Evans concludes that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's resorting to the sage who does not entertain any views even when teaching right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), or to 'the paradoxically detached gaze of the contemplative sage as he *looks through* concepts', 'does nothing to clarify the matter, but highlights Ñāṇananda's recognition of and inability to resolve the problem' (2017, 17).

Concept and reality: Concept

The critique in this section continues to be subject to the misconstruction of the gnoseological implications of the line of interpretation pursued by Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda. Similar to the reductionist approach to the grammatical predicament, here Evans suggests that the problem may lie in 'abstract representations' coming to 'misrepresent independent realities' to which they may refer (Evans 2017, 17).

Such preoccupations are the domain of Greek and Western theoretical philosophy and also occupy a central position in the later traditions of the logico-epistemological schools of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, but are not the concern of early Buddhist texts, nor of *Concept and Reality*. In the introduction to the revised edition of his essay, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda writes that '[i]t must be emphasized that this work does not subscribe to the dichotomy between concept and reality as envisaged by modern philosophers' (2012 [1971], vii), a passage of which Evans himself takes due notice (2017, 20).

Here Evans maintains that the confusion between 'independent realities' and concepts would include

uncritical attachment to concepts as accurately representing reality and responding to events *as if* there were no distance between event and conceptualization of it ... [which] could be conceived as instances of *taṇhā*, *māna*, and/or *diṭṭhi*, driving also the generation/elaboration of new concepts so as to reify events exclusively in terms of prior reifications — we desire (*taṇhā*) to support prior opinion (*diṭṭhi*) and make self-supporting judgements (*māna*) accordingly. What he calls 'seeing through' and 'transcending' concepts might then mean encountering reality directly, not without concepts, however, but in terms of, perhaps even guided by, them, but with those concepts always open to correction. ... Still, while Ñāṇananda sometimes writes of *attachment* to concepts as a problem, he repeatedly insists that *concepts themselves* are the problem, interposed with arguments of the relative validity of certain concepts that are nevertheless ultimately to be eradicated. On the other hand, again, *Arahant*s think and have concepts and concepts are to be seen through and transcended rather than eradicated. (2017, 18)

Evans tries to resolve the perceived impasse and contradictions by giving a closer look at the notion of 'concepts tinged by the proliferating tendency'. He rightly recognizes how '[t]hat formulation implies that there might be concepts that are not so tinged, and thus, perhaps, that only the tinged concepts are to be eradicated' (Evans 2017, 18). In light of what I have discussed so far, the expression 'transparent concepts' can be taken to cover the liberated mind's functional and pragmatic use of concepts, which is no longer subject to ontological bondage.

Transparent concepts are involved in an experience of name-and-form and consciousness that is serviceable, yet empty of passion, aversion and delusion, and in the pragmatic use of language and worldly parlance on the part of the awakened person. However, because he thinks that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda 'fails even to define "concept"', Evans feels the need to advance his own 'rough and ready definition' of concept as 'idea' or 'constituent of thought', 'building blocks of thought, units of understanding of interpretation'. As such, Evans argues,

they are inert, powerless to initiate any kind of 'proliferation' ... of themselves these concepts go nowhere and do nothing; the motive to ridicule or defend the one or to pursue the other comes from elsewhere ... on this definition, motivate nothing ... (2017, 18)

Now, once proper recognition is given to the fact that 'concepts' — on Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's understanding — are subject to dependent origination and to the influence of craving and ignorance — they will appear far from inert, for they whirl and are made to whirl conditioned by the presence of the influxes. As Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda writes:

'Papañca' and *'papañca-saññā-saṅkhā'* comprehend between them a picture of the concept in its dynamic and static aspects, linking up the psycho-ethical foundations of conceptualization with the symbolical superstructure of language and logic. The imperfections inherent in the subjective aspect of the concept are thereby causally related to the frailties that characterise its objective aspect. (2012 [1971], ix)

The reference to a range of *'papañca'* (*'papañcassa gati'*) ... is strongly suggestive of the dynamic import of the term in Buddhist psychology ... the juxtaposition of *'papañca'*

('ramblings') with *'ṭhiti'* ('standing-still') seems to suggest the primary sense of the term with its dynamic overtones. Metaphorically conceived, *'papañca'* signifies the ramblings in the realm of ideation and *'ṭhiti'* the dormant tendencies of the mind (*anusaya*) which prompt those ramblings. (2012 [1971], 21)

In fact, a dynamic interpretation of *papañca* in light of the vortex of *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa*, which Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda places at the core of dependent origination, could be glossed as an hermeneutics of the dependent origination of *papañca*. The paradigm of dependent origination allows one to put Evans' own insights seemingly sparked by *Concept and Reality* into a different perspective, more in line with both the discourses and *Concept and Reality* itself:

[o]pening those concepts to correction and encounter with independent reality then risks the discovery that I may have acted wrongly, perhaps horribly so. The 'stake' here provides or motivates the 'proliferating tendency' to continually reaf-firm that world. Said differently, I live in the world of my interpretations, necessarily understood, at least in part, in terms of and guided by concepts derived from prior experience. To open my concepts too much to correction, especially through direct encounter, is to risk the loss of *my* world, and since this is the world in which *I* live and have my being, it is also to risk the loss of *myself*. This coheres with Ñāṇananda's characterization of one's 'recoil' from the possibility that his 'conceptual superstruc-tures regarding the world' might be displaced by 'a void where concepts are no more' (p. 81). That is, the possibility that reality is void of the concepts that constitute or define the world in which I live. The 'tinge', then would be *taṇhā–māna–diṭṭhi* (or perhaps the *āsavas*) with the associated attitudes of *me* and *mine*. Eliminating/see-ing through/transcending concepts would then equate, at least in part, to allowing oneself to be oriented by concepts towards the regions of reality to which they refer in a disclosive way that leaves the concepts open to correction; that in turn would involve weakening and finally eliminating the motive forces that they are 'tinged' with, *taṇhā, māna*, and *diṭṭhi*. Such open concepts we might for convenience term 'transparent concepts' in contradistinction to 'tinged concepts', recalling that the qualifiers have more to do with how the concepts are used than with the concepts per se. That the problem is the tinge rather than the concept itself may be hinted at briefly in presenting the *āsavas* as a fermenting agent that brings about, agglutinates, crystallizes concepts (p. 78); he seems here almost to be describing an infection of which concepts are to be cleansed. (2017, 19)

Rather than attributing lack of clarity to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's presentation, an effort at a deeper philosophical reflection on the core Buddhist teaching of con-ditionality allows for making better sense of the seminal contribution in *Concept and Reality*,[43] illuminating the relationship between 'the tinge' and 'concepts', and the different dimensions of conceptuality according to the early Buddhist gno-seological map. *Pace* Evans, Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda does not '[alternate] confusedly between these (at least) two notions, making any interpretation of his meaning only tentative' (Evans 2017, 19). Much rather, he articulates the richness of discourse literature in philosophical terms. In a similar vein, a proper appreciation of the sense-informed origination of *papañca* and of the nature of wisdom and right view

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43. See now Ñāṇananda 2016 [2015–2016].

in early Buddhist thought, would prevent the arising of unnecessary terminological problematization such as:

> [w]isdom would seem to refer to a direct apprehension of reality, as opposed to the estrangement from it associated with concepts. When we ask, however, whether or not wisdom is non-conceptual we run into all the problems we have been discussing: obviously wisdom would eschew tinged concepts, but it might well, it seems, employ transparent ones (e.g. in understanding the three characteristics, the Four Truths/Realities, etc.). (Evans 2017, 19–20)

Concept and reality: Reality

This section continues to suffer from Evans' struggle with the main philosophical position expressed in *Concept and Reality*, in that he sees that this work posits a dichotomy if not a trichotomy wherein 'the *subject* is estranged from *reality* by *concepts*' (Evans 2017, 20). Given that the very notion of subject is a concept that emerges from the mutual mirroring between name and form, and name-and-form and consciousness, it is quite correct to say that one could arrive at counting a trichotomy. In fact, the ongoing vortex of name-and-form and consciousness amounts to an 'n-chotomy', a network of many 'things' spun out by conceptualising, as seen in *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*.

Evans ponders in various ways as regards 'what does [Ñāṇananda] mean by "reality"?'. Such doubts can be traced back to having overlooked the intimate relationship between sense data and conceptual prolificity. Eventually he includes the following scenario among the others:

> perhaps by 'reality' [Ñāṇananda] intends something along the line of 'the way things really are' rather than 'existing entities'. That could mean the ordinary objective world reported by the senses — only not *as* reported by them. In that case, and recalling the distinction between tinged and transparent concepts, we might say that he does not subscribe to a concept–reality dichotomy in the sense that he claims no necessary conflict between the way things really are and transparent concepts (but would reality then be void only of tinged concepts?). I suspect that he intends something of the sort but he gives no concrete indication how we might access this 'reality'.
>
> (2017, 21)

The above seems to me to be a by and large accurate understanding of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's position and a reasonable point of arrival of the interpretative journey undertaken in the previous pages. However, the missing link remains the soteriological, liberative significance of non-delight in and appeasement of *papañca* in relation to 'reality' — that is, how only one who does not enjoy *papañca* can indeed reach the goal of the holy life lived under the Buddha.[44] Evans comments:

> 'Experience is the ultimate criterion of truth', [Ñāṇananda] writes (p. 81, cf. p. 21), but what kind of experience is possible, having rejected empirical and conceptual experience as *papañca*? The suggestion of '*stopping-short*', at the level of sense-data without being led astray by them', such that one 'no longer thinks in terms of them', and transcends the 'superstitions' of grammar (p. 29) would seem a descent into naive

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44. MN 11 at MN I 65,10–15.

phenomenalism and a return to a blanket rejection of concepts, thus reinstating the
dichotomy. Knowing 'objectively by *paññā*' and the like remain empty abstractions.
'Reality' remains undefined. (2017, 21)

Briefly stated, the reality in question consists in a vision of reality, an objective
point of view on subjectivity and objectual relationships as inherently conceptual
by virtue of being at the mercy of dependent origination. This is the type of vision
and experience that is possible with the fading away of craving for sense data that
allows for the 'stopping-short', for the cessation of the six sense bases, that is to say,
for the experience of cessation of existence. This is hardly a form of naïve phenom-
enalism. One could perhaps call it a gradual path to the cessation of the ignorance
that conceives of phenomena and noumenon.

The 'stopping-short' experience is the only unfalsifiable criterion of truth in
Early Buddhism, its episteme, as it were. Early Buddhism does not even propose a
dichotomy between provisional and ultimate reality for it knows only one 'real-
ity' proper so-called, that is *Nibbāna*, the single reality that is de-conceptual and is
experienced when craving for concepts — i.e., craving for name-and-form with con-
sciousness — evaporates. This is an experience of reality that does occur (*atthi ... tad
āyatanaṃ*)[45] and that is to be known (*ye āyatane veditabbe*),[46] a sphere of experience
to be realized by seeing with wisdom (*paññāya disvā veditabbā*) through a method of
exposition for attaining valid final knowledge (*aññā*) independent of faith, personal
preference, oral tradition, reasoning and acceptance of a view.[47] To play on words,
this is the only 'independent reality' to the extent that it is completely independ-
ent from (*anissita*) craving.[48]

Conclusions

The closing section confirms the impression that at least occasionally Evans doubts
his own assessment, notably the problematization of the notions of 'independent
reality' and 'concepts'. In particular, he falls into contradiction with the position
he has earlier ascribed to Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda when he writes:

I have taken it for the sake of exposition that Ñāṇananda assumes the existence of
what I have called independent reality. He might mean rather that concepts deceive
us into believing in an independent reality that does not, in fact, exist. (Evans 2017, 21)

I admit that I found the blaming of a lack of philosophical depths on *Concept and
Reality* rather unhelpful:

[m]uch of the problem here may derive from an evident lack of philosophical sophis-
tication and possibly a lack of facility with the English language ... As expressed,
I suggest that the thesis is excessively cognitive. At one point, for example, he defines
the *diṭṭhi* characterizing all non-enlightened beings as, 'dogmatic adherence to the

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45. Ud 8.1 at Ud 80,9.

46. SN 35.117 at SN IV 98,3.

47. SN 35.152 at SN IV 138–140.

48. Cf. the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* refrain in MN 10 at MN I 56,33–34ff: *anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke
    upādiyati.*

concept of an ego as a theoretical formulation' (p. 11). I very much doubt that very many non-enlightened beings harbour such an adherence; certainly the *Nikāya*s say nothing of the sort. It is possible that Ñāṇananda himself was reaching for something more fundamental, but did not find the means of expressing it. (Evans 2017, 22)

If anything, the tapestry of Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's essay is extremely sophisticated and subtly nuanced. On approaching such a piece of writing, to take at least into consideration that one might not understand it fully well rather than assuming that it fails to be understandable or it must be confused would be a more beneficial approach, scientifically and philosophically.

Such an attitude could have enabled the reviewer to recognize that the *Nikāya*s do throughout say and illustrate how 'dogmatic adherence to the concept of an ego as a theoretical formulation' is the very foundation of the world-view of unawakened individuals — found in the very first discourse allocated by the Theravāda reciters to the first canonical collection in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the *Brahmajāla-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, and again in the first discourse in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta*. One would have been thereby in a position to better appreciate that Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda's insistence on the triad *taṇhā–māna–diṭṭhi* is precisely what 'bring[s] the thesis down to a more fundamental level of human existence' (Evans 2017, 22), because the most fundamental level of existence has the concept-informed experience of name-and-form together with consciousness as the rallying point, to borrow from the *Mahānidāna-sutta*. The range of bondage through ignorance and craving on the one hand and liberation through wisdom on the other, extends only up to the relationship between these two or else to the breaking free from such a whirling round. What could be more fundamental?

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

AN   *Aṅguttara-nikāya*
DN   *Dīgha-nikāya*
MN   *Majjhima-nikāya*
SN   *Saṃyutta-nikāya*
Sn   *Sutta-nipāta*
Ud   *Udāna*

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