

## **A Palace Built on Sand by Robert Ellis**

### **A Review of *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* by Michael McGhee, with some reflections on a Buddhist view of Analytic philosophy**

#### **1. Introduction**

Michael McGhee is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Liverpool, and also a member of the Western Buddhist Order, where he is known as Vipassi. His book, published by Cambridge University Press in 2000, is hopefully amongst the forerunners of a new breed which explores the relationship between Buddhism and Western Philosophy in a detailed and sophisticated way.

From the start it must be urged that his book is worth reading simply because of the contribution it makes to blazing the trail of serious investigation in this vast and largely uncharted area. It is an area which is subject to so many misleading generalisations, both from the part of Buddhists commenting on philosophy and of philosophers commenting on Buddhism, that any writer who manages to poke beneath the surface is well worth engaging with, especially for any Western Buddhist who wishes to understand the ideologies around him/her and their compatibility or otherwise with Buddhism.

But the chief difficulty for any work of this kind lies in the assumptions with which it is approached. In particular, recent Western intellectual history offers many warnings of ways in which Buddhism can be misappropriated or misconstrued by philosophers. From Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to the New Age, the full flexibility and subtlety of Buddhist thought has escaped many Western thinkers, who have either loved or hated their own preconceptions projected onto it. In the context of this history, McGhee's work is careful, subtle and sophisticated, but it nevertheless appears to me to misappropriate and misconstrue some of the core features of Buddhist thought. It does this because of the unexamined assumptions with which it begins, which are those of Analytic philosophy.

The image which springs to mind to capture the quality of the book is that of a palace built on sand. The palace may be beautiful, ornate, well-constructed, even moving, but its foundations are not philosophically secure and are liable to subsidence. McGhee would probably argue that there is nowhere else that one could possibly build the palace, that there are no firm foundations for it beyond the assumptions of one's own culture (or sub-culture) and age. But the reflection that even rocks give way eventually is not an argument for failing to seek the firmest foundations available, for sticking to the sand in defiance of other possibilities. In Buddhist thought these alternatives are available, but McGhee persists in sticking to an approach which judges Buddhism in the terms of Analytic philosophy, not the other way round, despite considerable practical experience of Buddhism.

To explain my grounds for this judgement will require me to write something about the general features of Analytic philosophy, so that I can then explain how McGhee relies on it. However, before doing this I shall attempt a brief summary of the content

of the book. In a book as long and complex as this, this will inevitably involve the omission of a number of byways and an attempt only to discern the main structure.

## 2. Outline of *Transformations of Mind*

McGhee begins in a very engaging way: “Listen, wisdom is something dared...”; and a semi-confessional series of asides and autobiographical recollections punctuate the philosophical argument which provides the main fare of the book. His main intention seems to be to illustrate, as well as argue for, his opening claim that “philosophy, which is the love of wisdom, is a spirit of inwardness, which you have to cultivate for yourself, a practice of inner silence, even before reflection, which philosophy is thought to start with” (p.1). This overall theme provides a kind of fairly loose binding for quite a range of material which, on McGhee’s own admission, was written over a period of nearly two decades, and varies both in tone and approach.

Some of this material records different types of wrestling with Christianity and its theological justifications, from which McGhee, an ex-catholic and ex-seminarian, was in the process of withdrawing. Some of the most moving autobiographical passages describe his adolescent struggles with the authoritarianism and repression surrounding the sin of masturbation. McGhee’s need to come to terms with the impact of Christianity on his own life is also reflected in a preoccupation with engaging with the Christian philosophy of religion in some parts of the book.

The main argument, however, attempts, in McGhee’s own words, to “make sense of an alien but compelling Buddhism in terms of western thought, and to look again at western thought in terms of Buddhism, in terms, that is, of a Buddhist *naturalism*” (p. 3, McGhee’s italics). McGhee is mainly concerned with ways in which Buddhism offers a justification for moral or spiritual values, and he attempts to reconstruct this naturalist justification from modified forms of some of the ideas of Plato, Kant and Matthew Arnold.

In Arnold he finds an example of a nineteenth-century figure recognising the ways in which traditional Christian faith could no longer be justified, but seeking to “recast” Christianity as a causal claim about the relationship between righteousness and happiness. This causal claim is related by McGhee to the positive  $\nu\delta\ \square\ \nu\alpha$  which links “concentration” to “knowledge of things as they really are”. McGhee sees this causal claim as a theory which we need to approach and appreciate individually through experience, but nevertheless it involves an “emergent human nature”. Because McGhee is making claims about apparently universal causal processes in human experience, he chooses to call his theory a “naturalism”.

In Kant’s Critique of Judgement McGhee also finds an aesthetic basis for the ethical. For Kant it is sustained and disinterested attention without particular ends in mind which creates beauty, and McGhee argues that it is roughly this kind of concentration, once it becomes habitual, which creates the virtue of *sophrosune*: temperance or recollected mindfulness. It is in this way that he links the fruits of meditation to moral knowledge.

In Plato’s Symposium he finds the third key element of the argument, the claim that there is a continuum of erotic fascination ascending from the appreciation of earthly

beauty in the beloved to that of moral beauty. It is in this process of refinement of our desires that McGhee argues we can find motivation for moral action. He links this process of refinement, too, with meditation.

Apart from intertwining these three themes from Western Philosophy, McGhee does give some space to an attempt to engage with Buddhist Philosophy. Here he interprets the idea of “non-duality of subject and object” metaphysically, and takes it to deny a conventional distinction between subject and object which he wants to defend. He then argues that “non-duality” is best understood as a claim about “grasper” and “grasped”, that they are interdependent and dependent upon conditions. The avoidance of duality between grasper and grasped is related to his overall theme that reflection or “interiority” can provide the greater awareness required to recognise this shared dependence upon conditions.

On the whole, then, McGhee’s book is a wandering meditation on a central Buddhist theme, that of awareness. This central idea, and the way in which he describes its impact on his own life, is not controversial, and indeed he casts light on many ways in which it can be related to Western philosophy. The issue for me, however, is whether in his interpretation of this theme in predominantly Western philosophical terms he misrepresents some of what is best intended by the Buddhist ideas he draws on. This is not just because he takes Buddhist ideas out of their original context, but because he does not sufficiently understand them in their original context to make the appropriate adaptations to the new context. This seems to be occurring because his understanding is impeded by the continuing influence of Analytic philosophy, to the nature of which I will now turn before reviewing the book any further.

### **3. The main features of Analytic Philosophy**

Analytic philosophy is the school (or style) of philosophy which has dominated the majority of university philosophy departments in Britain and the U.S. since the early twentieth century. It was founded by the logical positivists (and by their contemporaries, such as Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, who shared many of the same assumptions) but has been developed since by further thinkers (of which the most influential is Wittgenstein) who share some core assumptions of the logical positivists but have moderated some of their more arrogant excesses.

The term “analytic” philosophy derives from the idea that the correct task of philosophy is to analyse what is already assumed and draw out the implications of what we already know. This task is often pursued with a rigour and precision from which many others could learn, but also sometimes with a narrowness, pusillanimity and introversion that continually prevent the discipline from contributing much of interest to the wider world. The whole idea that philosophy should only analyse what is already believed also tends to prevent Analytic philosophers from examining whether what is believed is actually correct or not, as it is widely assumed that there are no justifiable standards from which to make such value judgements (and therefore that conventional ones should be accepted).

The following list is my own analysis of the typical features of analytic philosophy, built up on the basis of my own reading of it. In offering this list I shall be held by Analytic philosophers to be making sweeping, unsupported generalisations, and of

failing to limit my claims to ones I can support properly in the space of a short paper: but since this requirement is one of the very constraints in Analytic philosophy that I wish to protest against, I make no apologies for this. In my experience Analytic philosophy is almost impossible to challenge on its own terms and on its own ground, where its prior assumptions constantly limit what is accepted as permissible discussion or criticism; so to criticise it one must depart from those assumptions about the bounds of discussion. In any case I have also argued much more fully for these assertions elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

**a. Negative Metaphysics/ Selective Scepticism**

Analytic philosophy tends to take for granted that metaphysical claims (such as the existence of a soul, God, freewill, or universal ethics) cannot be true. These claims are rejected through the use of sceptical arguments which point out ways in which our judgements about them have no firm objective basis. These sceptical arguments are, however, highly selective, as they are not generally turned against the equally metaphysical claim that these metaphysical claims are *not* true.

**b. Ethical Coherentism**

The dominant epistemology in Analytic philosophy is the assumption that we have no definite foundations on which to build knowledge, so that we can only base our understanding of knowledge on its relationship of *coherence* to the knowledge we already accept. In the Wittgensteinian form of Analytic philosophy this coherence is based on the impossibility of meaning beyond the *language game* used in our *form of life*, and the idea that we cannot have knowledge where our language is not meaningful. This is seen as the only alternative to belief in a dogmatic foundation for our beliefs like that traditionally offered by belief in God, or by Descartes' belief in the certainty of his own existence. Even those Analytic philosophers who appeal to an empirical foundation for knowledge (and are thus not strictly coherentist in their overall epistemology) would not do so for ethics (see d). The effect of this is to make Analytic philosophy deeply reliant on convention, and without grounds to challenge the beliefs accepted in a given cultural context. The definite rejection of ethical foundationalism and reliance on ethical coherentism, however, is just as dogmatically metaphysical as a reliance on foundationalism.

**c. Naturalism**

Analytic philosophy tends to see itself as allied to science in the task of discovering "nature", that is, the model of factual reality constructed by science. It supports science not by empirical investigation, but by analysing the terms we use in investigating the world and revealing confusions in their use. Some Analytic philosophers, particularly those concerned with ethics, advance cautiously beyond this to offer "naturalistic" theories describing how ethics works (see d). Even where Analytic philosophers are relatively sceptical about the status of scientific discovery they tend to rely on an appeal to their discovery of how our language "really" works (as in Wittgenstein's appeal to "depth grammar").

**d. Fact-value distinction**

Analytic philosophy relies greatly on a rigid *fact-value distinction*, that is the idea that scientific "facts" are in a different category of certainty to "subjective" values. Continued rigid reliance on this distinction flies in the face of the evidence offered by philosophers and historians of science of the contingency of scientific "facts", which can be based on the acceptance of theories that ignore important conditions which are only discovered much later. It also removes the possibility of objectivity in ethics. Analytic ethics thus confines itself to the *description* (rigidly separated from

*prescription*) of our relative ethical beliefs, usually through analysis of the ethical language we use. Even the forms of Analytic ethics known as “prescriptivist”, such as the philosophy of R. M. Hare, actually attempt to *describe* the prescriptions we tend to unconsciously build into our language, not to provide them with any further universal moral justification. As a result Analytic ethics has given up on the task of offering us any moral guidance. Anyone ransacking Analytic ethics hoping to find out how to live will be wasting their time.

**e. Determinism**

Analytic philosophy also tends to assume that determinism is true, often without explicitly discussing this assumption. It does this particularly by assuming that there is definitely not such a thing as freewill, despite the fact that all the many philosophical arguments existing on the subject have offered only uncertainty. It is generally assumed that freewill would be necessary for objectivity in ethics, which is another reason for the limitations placed on Analytic discussions of ethics.

**f. False humility about the scope of philosophy**

Analytic philosophers are not rational system-builders, but rather like to take a very small, closely-defined use of language and work out all the implications of our use of it. It is assumed that all attempts to build larger rational systems are unjustified because uncertain, ignoring the equally high degree of uncertainty which attends closely-focussed analyses when it is asked what justifies the wider assumptions on which they rely. This self-limitation often amounts to a sort of false humility, as it is assumed that any attempt at a broader philosophical theory is somehow arrogant (ignoring the equal “arrogance” involved in *not* offering a broader philosophical theory).

**g. Rejection of psychology**

Analytic philosophers are often trenchant in their rejection of psychology, which they keep strictly separate from philosophy. This is often justified in terms of a rather narrow interpretation of the philosophical sin of *ad hominem* argument, to mean not just that one should avoid dismissing an opponent’s beliefs as merely due to his mental state as a matter of pragmatic politeness, but that we should never assess a belief in the light of the mental states of the person offering it at all. But this, again, flies in the face of our experience of the interdependence between beliefs and mental states: for example, we do not generally take the assertions of a drunk as seriously as those of a sober person. By cutting itself off from psychology due to dogmatic prior assumptions, Analytic philosophy again prevents itself from offering us much by way of useful truths which relate to our experience.

**h. Insistence on unhelpful distinctions to the neglect of the wider context**

A further characteristic of Analytic philosophy is its tendency to be hooked on the value of making distinctions which are then assumed to reflect reality in some way, and are used as a foundation for further argument. Just because a particular distinction may not be commonly made and may shed light on some cases, it is assumed that it contains a necessary truth. Such distinctions often become rigid and prevent further appreciation of subtle gradations in our experience. A particularly widespread example of this kind of distinction in Analytic philosophy is the distinction between “meaningful” and “meaningless” terms, but there are many others.

If these features are generally characteristic of Analytic philosophy, it should also be noted that there are some Analytic philosophers who are softening the edges of some of them, and who are realising some of the limitations of the traditional approach of their “discipline”. Philosophers like Hilary Putnam, Alasdair MacIntyre, Simon

Blackburn, Thomas Nagel, and Derek Parfit<sup>2</sup> can be named as examples of thinkers on the leading edge of this rethink. However, reading some of their works from a Buddhist perspective, I am continually astonished at how limited their approach continues to be by the features represented above. To think beyond them seems to require the upsetting of a lifetime's academic conditioning, to be almost inconceivable, despite the existence of quite different intellectual paradigms (such as Buddhism) now freely accessible in the Western world.

McGhee is also a thinker whom I would place on this leading edge of Analytic thought. Like all the five thinkers I have mentioned above, he has allowed his Analytic training to soak in a bath of wider experience, resulting in the development of a broad and strong humanity which informs his philosophical argument. Unlike any of them, he has also engaged in Buddhist practice, and attempted to make sense of the fruits of that practice in relation to his philosophy. But even this has not resulted in any questioning of the above-mentioned assumptions of Analytic philosophy, all of which can be found (as I shall argue) underlying his book and placing limitations on its philosophical value.

#### **4. The Analytic assumptions in *Transformations of Mind***

McGhee's reliance on negative metaphysics, ethical coherentism, naturalism and a rigid fact-value distinction is made clear near the beginning of the book. He explicitly says that he is trying to construct a Buddhist naturalism (p.3) and that "there is no bare, no final 'ought', it is an illusion" (p.27). It may at first appear, however, that his concern with "interiority" enables him to go beyond these Analytic assumptions. For he believes that a philosophy practised with reflection preceding analysis is more illuminating than a merely analytic approach.

There is a temptation, not wholly to be resisted, which makes us rest in an ultimate pluralism about conceptions of well-being and human flourishing. However, I have sought to temper the diversity of ultimate ends with the thought that humans live either in the light of knowledge and understanding, or in the false light of delusion, or the darkness of ignorance. (p.6)

He is at pains to point out, however, that this knowledge and understanding is not *moral* knowledge and understanding: "there is no moral, only a practical and epistemic ought: the latter a use of 'ought' which implies a reason for belief rather than for action" (p. 29). This assertion is plainly heavily dependent on the fact-value distinction. He does not think, then, that there is a way that can be prescribed as to how we ought to act (a justifiable value), only that there are ways of describing our experience of what we, in our limited context, might take to be ways we ought to act (a justifiable naturalistic fact). So he does not offer much discussion beyond this of what might be meant by universal moral claims at all, instead trying to supplant an ethical account of how we should act with an *aesthetic* account of how we feel about it. The main reason for this seems to be that aesthetic judgement is much more amenable to explanation in coherentist terms than moral judgement.

At no point does McGhee claim that this account represents Buddhism or is a Buddhist one, despite fairly frequent reference to Buddhism. However, there are good reasons for arguing that these underlying assumptions are in conflict with some of the

core epistemological assumptions of Buddhism. The Middle Way (a term which revealingly does not occur once in McGhee's book) navigates *between* the ethical foundationalism typical of eternalism (which assumes an absolute moral order in the universe against which our efforts are measured) and the ethical coherentism typical of nihilism (which denies any such order and assumes that social conventions or personal feelings are the only guide to action). Similarly the *Kālamā Sutta*, probably the most explicit guide to the Buddha's epistemology in the Pali Canon, stresses not just that the *Kālamā* should themselves *know* moral truths, but that these truths would then be known to be "good", "not blameable", and "praised by the wise"<sup>3</sup>. At no point is it assumed that because the good is known incrementally through our own experience, and therefore that moral claims expressed in language can always be doubted, that there *is* therefore no correct standard of moral belief which we can apply to a given situation. The Analytic view represented by McGhee here makes an unjustifiable slippage from the recognition of our doubts about "moral facts" to the denial of their existence, a slippage which is never exhibited by the Buddha.

McGhee goes out of his way to assure us that he is not making claims about moral facts, an approach which I would also want to relate to the Analytic tendency towards false humility about the scope of philosophy.

Perhaps I should make my position clear: I am not making claims, but trying to represent the form of a position which seems to depend upon establishing a relationship between knowledge and the interior condition of the knower. Even that is difficult enough, since whatever we might say about the realities that a transformed subjectivity discloses we are all already constituted by a particular subjectivity and our views about its possible transformations *may* reflect an unrecognised narrowness of vision. (p.145)

They may indeed, but why should this prevent us from making claims? Why can "claims" not be made in a provisional way which is subject to revision? Obviously how far the claims we make are actually subject to revision is a matter of the mental state of the person making the claims, but rather than acknowledge this it often seems as though McGhee, like many other Analytic philosophers, would rather go through a introductory ritual bow of humility followed by the further ritual of endless delicate qualifications of any idea that may be put forward. This ritual does not fail to leave one with the impression that the author nevertheless has beliefs (indeed that some of these are pretty much non-negotiable beliefs), but that he is culturally incapable of presenting these beliefs and arguing for them in a straightforward way. "Claims" may thus not be made on the surface, but they are nevertheless assumed, and if we are not wary we may end up swallowing many Analytic assumptions without examination because of the purely rhetorical humility with which they are presented.

The wider question here is to ask why philosophy should not make claims. McGhee assumes that argument about "a relationship between knowledge and the interior state of the knower" by its very nature is different from an argument about knowledge itself (the rigid fact-value distinction again). But why should this be so? For one thing, all knowledge depends on the interior state of the knower, so is in the same category, making the implied distinction spurious. For another, the influence of our subjectivity on our claims is no more decisive than the influence of the supposed objective world

beyond. Each means that our claims will contain a mixture of reality and projection; but it is only by making those claims that we will be able to enlist the aid of others in gradually disentangling reality from projection. If we never make “claims” to begin with for fear of looking foolish, there will be no possibility of correction.

The importance of making clear claims which are open to falsification, both in science and philosophy, emerges particularly in the philosophy of Karl Popper, who was much ostracised by mainstream Analytic philosophy. A flashpoint in this disagreement was an incident in which a heated Wittgenstein was said to have threatened Popper with a poker: an incident which perhaps illustrates graphically that the failure to make “claims” does not ensure any actual humility!

However, McGhee would reject the very possibility of a provisional claim, as he makes clear in his discussion of Sangharakshita’s review of Stephen Batchelor’s Buddhism Without Beliefs<sup>4</sup> (where Sangharakshita advocates provisional belief). His reasons for rejecting this possibility are based again on a characteristic Analytic assumption: that of the truth of determinism.

But there is an implicit voluntarism in the notion of provisional belief, which implies that one can *decide* whether and how far to believe a proposition, whereas one’s propositional attitudes tend to be determined, to be forced on one, by the state of the evidence in one’s possession. (p.167)

This appears to reflect only McGhee’s Analytic presuppositions about his own teacher’s doctrines. There is nothing about the idea of provisional belief which requires an assumption of metaphysical freewill. It does, however, involve the rejection of the determinism which McGhee advocates about the way in which our beliefs are formed. This determinism seems to ignore the ways in which we may experience a degree of choice in our responses to the evidence before us (for example, do we continue to interpret it in the light of a theory we dogmatically assume to be true in all cases, or do we consider alternative theories?). The idea of provisional belief may reflect the idea that we experience this choice, but no final metaphysical assumptions about whether this choice is a “real” or “unreal” one. The whole metaphysical dualism between freewill and determinism, is, in fact, quite alien to the Buddhist context in which Sangharakshita writes, in which a thoroughgoing agnosticism on such issues seems to be the only justifiable position<sup>5</sup>. Far from being “voluntaristic”, the idea of provisional belief itself requires that we only accept beliefs about the status of our choices in a provisional fashion: this rules out either freewill or determinism from the beginning.

McGhee’s Analytic rejection of psychology is generally evident in his practice throughout of completely ignoring all the large psychological contributions that have been made to the topics he discusses. More specifically it can be found in his support for Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument (p.221-229) and his unconvincing attempt to link it to the avoidance of the illusion of a separate self in Buddhism. In his treatment of the Private Language Argument McGhee assumes throughout (as Wittgenstein does) that there can be a determinate distinction between “public” and “private” or between “meaningful” and “meaningless” language, both unhelpful and misleading dualisms when applied to our experience of degrees of meaningfulness and of inextricable interdependence between “public” and “private” realms. By

merely pointing out the dependence of “public” language on “public” defeasibility, Wittgenstein and McGhee assume that they have somehow shown the illusory nature of the “private”. As McGhee puts it,

...in the public language we take part in a practice, in the private use we cut ourselves off from the particular practice within which *the use of terms* is embedded and the consequence is that we have nothing left but illusion.  
(p.223)

But one might just as well point out the ways in which the interpretation of “public” language is dependent on “private” interpretation and conclude that the idea of public communication taking place is illusory. An interdependence has been pointed out, but it is only the Analytic prior assumptions which lead to that interdependence being understood as supporting one kind of account over the other. Even if the Private Language Argument is accepted, it is difficult to see how it could provide any justification for the *de facto* rejection of psychology often found in Analytic philosophy, since most psychology uses a “public” language which is merely applied to “private” experiences, rather than a wholly private language.

If the premises of Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument were mistaken in the first place, the attempt to appropriate it to the Buddhist avoidance of egoism, with which McGhee (by indirect implication) concludes his treatment of this topic (p.227-9), arises only from a basic confusion. This is the confusion between the ego and the individual. Egoism, or the forces of unenlightenment in the psyche, consists in a constrictive set of attitudes which prevent us from moving beyond the fixed views within which we interpret our experience. This egoism can just as easily be found in groups (if not more so) as in isolated individuals encountering their experience. There is thus nothing intrinsically “public” or “private” about egoism, and the involvement of Wittgenstein’s argument can sow nothing but confusion.

For an example of the final characteristic I take to be typical of Analytic philosophy - the use of an unhelpful distinction which neglects the wider context - I will turn to McGhee’s discussion of the doctrine of non-duality in Buddhism. McGhee’s interpretation of this turns on the distinction between “a subject-object duality” on the one hand, and “a subject-object distinction” on the other.

But is the ‘erroneous partition’ [i.e. dualistic illusion] a matter of drawing a *distinction* between subject and object, or is it a matter of drawing a distinction between an *inherently existing* subject and object? There are clearly two possibilities, since one can have the notion of a distinction between subject of experience and object of experience without taking the step of assuming that these ‘inherently exist’ or *stand* as such independently of existence.

But the suggested distinction here assumes the possibility of believing in a subject and object that are *not* inherently existent to some extent. McGhee is here treating this doctrine as pure philosophy, and the very idea of a subject or object which is not practically assumed to be inherently existent is a merely philosophical one. Of course one could define “subject” and “object” in such a way that this could become possible, but in the context of the doctrines McGhee is commenting on, subject and object are understood to be fixed quantities to which we are to some extent attached.

Simply making the distinction here, as though the doctrine had neglected it and it somehow solved a problem to make it, ignores the context of the doctrine and its psychological application. In the context of its application, the doctrine of the non-duality of subject and object attempts to undermine our attachment to the ideas of subject and object as inherently existing things. As it is applied, it involves not just fooling ourselves that we can *really* make a complete distinction between provisionally accepted subject and object on the one hand and absolutely or inherently existing subject and object on the other, but a recognition of a graduated scale of progress, beginning with grosser forms of attachment to the distinction between subject and object and ending with the more subtle. Having a practical context and not being merely a piece of philosophy, the doctrine was never intended to be interpreted as offering any final analysis of the metaphysical status of subject and object: indeed it would be self-contradictory if it did. So to introduce a distinction about that metaphysical status is to miss the point about what the doctrine was intended to convey.

In his introduction, McGhee quotes Keats in declaring his intention to avoid “irritable reaching after fact and reason” (p.2). One cannot doubt the sincerity of this intention, but it is extremely ironic given the amount of such irritable reaching the book in fact contains. The unhelpful and rigid distinctions, the lack of a sense of contextuality in understanding Buddhist doctrine, the rigid exclusion of whole areas of enquiry which could have a very helpful bearing on the arguments: all these seem to be mainly cultural features of McGhee’s Analytic background. However, to claim that McGhee has no responsibility for his complicity with this Analytic culture would again involve an unhelpful determinism.

### **5. Attempts to go beyond Analytic tradition**

Alongside these criticisms it must also be acknowledged that there are some important ways in which McGhee attempts to add to or go beyond the Analytic tradition. In order to try to do his work some justice I shall also try to give some account of these, but I shall also still have reservations to express. The reservations on these points are no longer due solely to the influence of the Analytic tradition, but to ways in which McGhee’s approach still seems to misunderstand or conflict with some of the basic features of Buddhism.

An important feature of the book is the appeal to *samatha* practice, which McGhee links with Kant’s aesthetics. He sees *samatha* practices and aesthetic experience generally as creating mindfulness, both in the sense of  $\sigma\mu\leftrightarrow\tau\iota$  and of *σαμπραφανψα*. Both continuity of awareness over time and awareness at a given time contribute to the Greek virtue of *sophrosune*, “temperance” or “protecting wisdom”.

So I envisage a complex sequence, meditation or aesthetic experience, bringing about alert attention, a suspension of normal life, followed by re-orienting ideas, then the process of protecting and sustaining this new mental formation, and then its outcome in action, fitful and in conflict at first, and finally without conflict. In fact ‘temperance’ names only the final outcome. *Sophrosune* is the virtue of fidelity to a vision or purpose, a steadiness of

attention which genuinely ‘protects wisdom’ and is analogous to the Buddhist virtue of *smṛti samprajanya*. (p.114)

McGhee’s account thus draws heavily on the samatha tradition in Buddhism and its analogies elsewhere and attempts to extend its explanation of spiritual experience to encompass the whole spiritual path. But it is also striking in what respects he avoids following a more traditional Buddhist account, which would normally lay an equal stress on insight as the ultimate path to enlightenment. Most Buddhists would agree with McGhee that samatha and vipassana “are merely different phases of what is in reality a single process”, but his attempt to see the whole process purely in terms of samatha clearly misses an important aspect of what is communicated in traditional Buddhist doctrine. His stress on explaining vipassana in terms of samatha, and of ethics in terms of aesthetics, is a reductionism which (like Wittgenstein’s arguments on private language) rely on arguments which justifiably point out interdependence, unjustifiably applied to support explanation solely in one kind of favoured terminology. But the interdependence of samatha and vipassana only implies the possibility of seeing both in the broader terms of a whole progression, not a reduction of one to the other.

It is not necessary to look far to discover the philosophical motives for this reductionism: they are to be found in the reliance on ethical coherentism to be found, not just in Analytic philosophy, but also widely in its “Continental” alternative in modern philosophy. Due to the widespread philosophical belief that any talk of objectivity, or even of insight into reality, must be based on metaphysical assumptions, all such talk has become embarrassing and must somehow be circumvented. Such embarrassment misses the point that it is itself based on negative metaphysical assumptions. McGhee, again, seems to take this culture for granted, with the effect that he examines Buddhism with a prejudice against vipassana. Practically speaking, he puts forward positive theorisations about Buddhist practice, but would apparently want to deny that these amount to “claims”, or that the refinement of belief has an important part to play in Buddhist practice alongside the refinement of aesthetic sensibility. He seems troubled by the mere possibility that Buddhist practice could bring him closer to reality, and because of this ends up with a deeply unbalanced account of that practice and its significance.

A further feature of McGhee’s account of moral practice which departs from Analytic norms is his use of Plato’s Symposium to help explain the motivation behind moral practice. He sees moral motivation as effectively an extension and refinement of an “erotic” motivation (p.189-199). The appreciation of physical beauty gradually changes to an appreciation of moral beauty. The stimulation of affection and integration of desire which appears crudely and temporarily in sexual love can be gradually broadened to encompass moral affection. This explanation of moral progress has the great advantage, for McGhee, of being compatible with ethical coherentism, and seems to me the point in the book which offers the most by way of genuine insights, because here he recognises the possibility of incremental progress without the constant irruption of unhelpful rational distinctions. It is also the point which comes closest to being psychological, although McGhee again pointedly refuses to draw on psychology and cobbles together his own psychological language from philosophical sources (in the process rather over-using the metaphor of erotic motivation for what amounts to desires and drives in general). One is led again, also,

to ask what justifies this evolution as in any respect a moral one, given the avoidance of any attempt to tackle the issue of its objectivity.

The departure from the analytic tradition about which McGhee is most self-conscious is his use of autobiographical material interspersed with the philosophical argument. The intention behind this is never explicitly stated, but I gained the impression that it was meant to add depth to the book in ways which are often intangible rather than directly or explicably illustrative. For this reason, the autobiographical passages rarely seemed to add anything to the argument, although they were often enjoyable and interesting for their own sake.

In his introduction, McGhee worries about the reception he will get from fellow philosophers for “generalising his own case so irresponsibly” (p.2), but actually what I often found frustrating about the autobiographical passages was their *failure* to generalise. We are presented only with one man’s personal experience, usually without much exegesis or contextualisation, with little indication of how that experience might serve to illustrate the general points that were being made in the philosophical sections. As McGhee explains this “One has to gamble that ‘the one case’ turns out representative, take the same risks as the poet”. But do we really have as little control over the representation of our experience as this, that we cannot use it in ways which are more or less universal? This approach to the use of autobiography seems to spring from the same false humility that I find in Analytic philosophy: the idea that one can somehow soften the claims which are clearly being made by seeing them as merely personal, when actually there are ways in which they *are* typical or generalisable. This is particularly irritating when the philosophy *implies* that the personal experiences can be generalised and then fails to show that they can be. This can only be understood as a kind of pre-emptive defensive manoeuvre: a failure again to communicate in a straightforward fashion.

The further question which one finds oneself asking with all autobiography concerns the selection of material. The author often reveals more about himself through what he leaves out than through what he includes. In this case I was struck by the autobiographical focus both on McGhee’s early experiences of Roman Catholicism and of his later experiences of encountering Buddhism. What is missing is any account of the clearly highly formative intermediate period, involving his conversion to Analytic philosophy. This omission is perhaps indicative of McGhee’s tendency to take Analytic culture for granted, rather than comparing it with other cultures he encounters and considering it on the same level.

A final respect in which McGhee veers from the Analytic tradition concerns his treatment of the Christian philosophy of religion. Here McGhee’s particular contribution is to note the lack of justification for much of the rigid dualism which is characteristic of this area of intellectual discussion. We should not get pronged by “Haldane’s Fork” of the two alternatives of theism and non-theism. This is well worth saying in dialogue with Christian theologians, but is not worth the detailed attention McGhee gives it here because it does not contribute further to his account of ethics. It is only in the light of McGhee’s evident personal need to extricate himself from Christianity that these arguments make any contribution.

McGhee's chief concern here seems to be that "New Buddhists need to be sure that they are not valorising their Buddhism at the expense of a degenerate or simple-minded version of the other spiritual traditions" (p.165). This is a worthy call for caution in our generalisations about Christianity, but not a justification for taking the Christian philosophy of religion seriously. None of the theological arguments that McGhee considered, at least, seemed to give any justification for revising my view of the Christian philosophy of religion as mired in hopeless dualisms, which it is increasingly difficult to extricate oneself from the further one gets involved in the discussion: in short, best avoided. The need for continuity with our Christian heritage as Western Buddhists need not entail a *theological* continuity: indeed it is only by offering a distinctly different kind of theory that Western Buddhists are able to progress beyond the limitations of Christian theology.

### **Conclusion**

By now it should be clear that my concerns about McGhee's book are quite serious, despite the fact that I also admire it in a number of ways. There are two related general impressions that it leaves me with, one about Western intellectual culture and the other about Buddhist teachings.

What it reminds me of in Western culture is the pervasive influence of nihilism. The simple solution to the failure of absolute metaphysical doctrines like Christianity is to give up on the quest for moral objectivity, to turn to the negative metaphysics which falsely claims to be no metaphysics. This negative metaphysics expresses itself in a vast array of practical ways which affect our lives, usually by impeding our progress. One of these, for example, is bureaucratic rationalism, the tendency to impose a supposedly neutral account of the "efficiency" with which an organisation should be run without recognising the values that are involved in that account, or the complexity of the psychological processes which motivate the people in the organisation. This approach to management depends strongly on a rigid fact-value distinction, one of the chief modern manifestations of nihilistic assumptions. Another example is cultural relativism, which leaves its advocates, not with a clear justification for humane and tolerant handling of an intercultural dispute based on full understanding of the conditions which gave rise to it, but with a standoff in which there is no higher solution than either imposing the culture of one of the parties, or fudging the issue, which only delays the conflict.

Surely philosophy should be engaged in presenting us with some solutions to these sorts of practical problems, which are created by philosophical confusions? But the dominant form of Analytic philosophy, as I have already remarked, is largely limited, firstly by its conceptions of its own role, and secondly by the narrow preconceptions with which it approaches its task. Buddhism offers insights into the relationship between philosophical and psychological processes which deeply challenge these limitations. Surely, then, a skilled philosopher who is also an experienced practising Buddhist should be capable of making this kind of useful contribution? But actually, the task is attended by great difficulties. Nihilism is immensely difficult to shake off and, hydra-like, constantly sprouts new heads when old ones are removed. If we take into account not only the philosophical but the psychological difficulties involved in engaging Buddhism effectively into Western thought, it is not at all surprising that even the most able may fail to a large extent.

The other side of this picture is the immense difficulty and subtlety of the Buddhist Dharma. Given that it consists, not merely in a set of philosophical theories, but in a set of theories which need to be related integrally to psychological practice to be properly understood, it is not so much a doctrine as a balancing-act. It is vital that we relate the Dharma fully to the other ideologies which have influenced our lives in order to understand it in its full experiential depth, but in working out this relationship we are almost bound to misrepresent the Dharma. To interpret the Dharma too much in terms of aesthetics, in terms of relativism, or in terms of one particular culture or cultural view are just some examples of the kinds of approach likely to create such misrepresentation.

However, none of these considerations should deter us from acknowledging a responsibility for engaging in the task and a hope of progressing in it. The responsibility is both for our successes and for our failures, the hope that we will have the courage to make mistakes and learn from them. Not to maintain either hope or responsibility is a nihilistic trap.

It is in the light of these final impressions, which seek to contextualise the situation in which McGhee's book was written, that I would like to finish by re-emphasising the points with which I began. The most significant thing about this book is that it has been written and published in the first place, and for this reason it is a positive event. If it is also read and discussed this will also be positive, despite its many failings. The existence of any book pursuing these themes in detail is of great significance, and undoubtedly an advance on the absence of any serious discussion of the relationship between Buddhism and Western thought.

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<sup>1</sup> A full justification of these features, with detailed reference to works of analytic philosophy, can be found in A Buddhist Theory of Moral Objectivity, my unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Lancaster University, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> For an evaluation of the value and limitations of some of Parfit's work from a Buddhist standpoint, see my paper "Parfit and the Buddha", in Contemporary Buddhism vol. 1 no. 1, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Κῶλονμα Σοττα, trans. Soma Thera, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1981

<sup>4</sup> The Review appeared in Vol. 2 of the Western Buddhist Review. The book reviewed was Stephen Batchelor Buddhism Without Beliefs, 1997, New York, Riverhead Books.

<sup>5</sup> Such a view seems to be the logical extension of the Buddha's "silence" on other metaphysical points such as the existence or non-existence of the soul (e.g. in Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 63).