

Realism and Reality in Yogācāra and Tiantai

The variety of realism at the foundation of radical Buddhism is not the minimal realism defined in the previous chapter. It does not just claim that there is an external, mind-independent reality, but that, in some sense, that is the *only* reality. “In some sense,” because it does not deny the distinction between phenomenal or conventional and external or ultimate reality (i.e., it is not naive realism), but it takes the non-dualist position that these kinds of “realities” are more like different facets of, or perspectives on the same world. Only this world is real, even though this one real world can be and is experienced very differently by different people (and other creatures). And because only this world and only this life are real, there are no Pure lands or heavens, and suffering cannot be compensated in future lives or be a punishment for bad deeds in past lives. Consequently, if we want to escape or alleviate suffering, we have to do so *in this life*, and if we aspire for a Buddha land or other kind of utopian or better society, we have to realize it *in this world*.¹

On the surface, the goal of the present chapter is to mine the most promising Buddhist traditions, identified in chapter 6 as Yogācāra and Tiantai, for raw materials to construct this metaphysical and epistemological foundation for a radicalized radical Buddhism, as well as to start laying that foundation. Obviously, one cannot mine what is not there in the first place, but that observation raises a question: to what extent does it even makes sense to say that something is or is not there? Jan Westerhoff has pointed out that, from a Buddhist perspective, the answer might be that it does not.² Among the reasons he mentions for this negative answer, the following two are the most interesting.

Firstly, the idea of there being “a way it really was” or “a way it really was meant” depends on realism about the past, that is, on the idea that the past exists. But some Buddhist schools, such as Sautrāntika, denied the latter, while others, such as Sarvāstivāda, accepted the existence of the past but held it to be causally inefficient, which implies that there is little we can know about it.³

1 About this austere or this-worldly realism and why it matters for radicalized radical Buddhism, see also chapters 4 and 6.

2 Jan Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24ff.

3 The relation of the past to the present in this perspective is somewhat like the relation between noumenal and phenomenal reality in transcendental idealism: by necessity we can only experience the phenomenal and the present, but based on that experience we can make some inferences about the noumenal and the past. See the section “Idealism” in chapter 7.

Secondly, several Yogācāra and later Mādhyamaka texts express the view that experiences of reality differ between observers. In the previous chapter, I gave the example of hungry ghosts (*pretas*) seeing pus or blood where humans see water,⁴ but there are other examples as well. Typically, what is taken to determine these different perspectives is karma. For example, Vasubandhu explained in his own commentary on his *Twenty Verses* that “because pretas are in the same situation due to their karma, all and not just one of them see rivers filled with pus.”⁵

Regardless of whether different perspectives are due to karma or other factors, we cannot step outside of them and observe the world, or history, or some text from nowhere — all experience and all interpretation is perspectival. That is the most fundamental insight of perspectivism. Hans-Georg Gadamer famously applied this insight to hermeneutics. He pointed out that “wanting to avoid one’s own concepts in the explanation [of a historical text, etc.] is not just impossible, but manifest nonsense. Rather, explanation is bringing one’s own preconceptions (*Vorbegriffe*) into the game, and thereby really bring the meaning of the text to speak for us.”⁶ Gadamer called this a “fusion of horizons.”⁷ To a large extent, fusing horizons is what this chapter aims for.

For Vasubandhu, disagreement between perspectives, such as that between humans who see water where pretas see pus, appears to be an argument for the irreality of the object. If this interpretation is right, there are only perspectives, and nothing that those perspectives are perspectives on. There are no rivers seen differently by humans and pretas; there are just these different perceptions. Similarly then, the lack of agreement about the interpretation of Vasubandhu’s writings and Yogācāra or any other Buddhist school in general, indicates that there are just interpretations and nothing those interpretations are interpretations of. Or in other words, there is no “real” or “objective” meaning of the text, no intention of the author, and perhaps even no author or no text. And therefore, there are no “right” interpretations, which obviously means that this interpretation cannot be right either.

The main alternative is to read Vasubandhu’s argument epistemologically, that is, as claiming that the thing-in-itself is unknowable rather than non-existent, but that’s not an unproblematic reading either. The very first line of the *Twenty Verses* holds that “all is just consciousness only because of the appearance of *non-existing objects*,”⁸ which seems to support an ontological rather than epistemological reading. Other translations are possible, and there are other texts that need to be taken into account as well.

Mining for raw materials is a rather questionable analogy if it is uncertain whether those “raw materials” can be identified or even exist at all. Furthermore, aside from the more fundamental problems raised in the preceding paragraphs, there are other obstacles. The primary sources tend to be rather obscure and can be interpreted in

4 See the section “Relativism, Pluralism, and Perspectivism.”

5 *tulyakarmavipākavasthā hi pretāḥ sarve ’pi pūyapūrṇaṃ nadīm paśyanti naika eva* — Vasubandhu, *Viṃśatikāvṛtti* (5th c.), ad Vv §3c.

6 Die eigenen Begriffe bei der Auslegung vermeiden zu wollen, ist nicht nur unmöglich, sondern offenkundiger Widersinn. Auslegen heißt gerade: die eigenen Vorbegriffe mit ins Spiel bringen, damit die Meinung des Textes für uns wirklich zum Sprechen gebracht wird. — Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1965), 374–75.

7 *Ibid.*, 289.

8 *viññaptimātram evedam asadarthābhāsanāt* — Vasubandhu, *Viṃśatikākārika* (5th c.), §1. Emphasis added.

many different ways, and the secondary sources disagree about almost everything. But perhaps, all of these “obstacles” are mere nuisances rather than insurmountable barriers. My aim in this chapter is not to reconstruct Vasubandhu’s, or Dignāga’s, or Zhiyi’s 智顗 philosophy, but to build on interpretations thereof. For that purpose, I do not really need “correct” interpretations, if those even exist, but *plausible* interpretations.⁹ The aim of this chapter is not only interpretation, moreover, but to bring Yogācāra and Tiantai closer together, with a little help from Donald Davidson, in order to lay the foundations of a this-worldly realism for radical Buddhism, a project that will continue in the next chapter.

A Bit of Historical Context

Yogācāra was founded by Asaṅga and his younger half-brother Vasubandhu in late-fourth to early-fifth century, but key ideas of the school almost certainly circulated earlier. Among the most important sūtras for the school are the *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, both of which were compiled from much older fragments in the late-third or early-fourth century. The central Yogācāra doctrine that all is just consciousness or mind only is already found in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and other important ideas such as “storehouse consciousness” and the “three natures” are mentioned in the *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*, for example.

While Yogācāra is classified as a Mahāyāna school, it was closely affiliated with the “mainstream” Abhidharma Sautrāntika school.¹⁰ Vasubandhu was originally a mainstream Buddhist. His most important Abhidharma text, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, mostly defended Sautrāntika doctrines. After his older brother Asaṅga converted him to Mahāyāna, he wrote several of the most important Yogācāra treatises. To what extent it is appropriate to speak of “conversion” is debatable, however, as Mahāyāna and the mainstream probably had not really separated at the time.

After Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the most important Yogācāra philosophers are Dignāga (ca. 480–540) and Dharmakīrti (sixth or seventh century). Dignāga is credited for founding the “logico-epistemological” tradition within Buddhist philosophy, and Dharmakīrti was probably the greatest philosopher in that tradition. The two obviously never met, but allegedly, there may have been a link through Dharmapāla (530–61) who was, supposedly, a student of Dignāga and who was, according to Tibetan sources, in contact with Dharmakīrti later. However, Dignāga died when Dharmapāla was still a child or young teenager, and Dharmapāla probably died before Dharmakīrti was even born. Significantly, both Dignāga’s and Dharmakīrti’s logico-epistemological writings appear to take a Sautrāntika point of view mostly, confirming the continuing connection between the two schools.

The Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 602–64) traveled extensively through India from approximately 630 until his return in China in 645. Among others, he visited

9 The case of Zhiyi’s interpretation of Nāgārjuna (see next section) also illustrates that accuracy in interpretation is not always necessary. Sometimes interesting or useful interpretations are preferable to accurate ones.

10 The term “mainstream” here denotes what Mahāyāna disparagingly called “Hīnayāna.” At the time, the mainstream really was the mainstream, but it was overtaken by Mahāyāna later. The only surviving mainstream school is Theravāda. On the relation between Yogācāra and Sautrāntika, see Robert Kritzer, *Rebirth and Causation in the Yogācāra Abhidharma* (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 1999), and Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhist Teaching in India* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009).

Nālandā, the great Buddhist university where Dignāga, Dharmapāla, Dharmakīrti, and many other famous Buddhist scholars taught and studied. Of all the Buddhist schools he encountered, Xuanzang was most interested in Yogācāra. His *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness Only* 成唯識論 is a commentary on Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses* (*Triṃśikāvijñaptimātratā*) based mostly on Dharmapāla's commentary on the same text. Xuanzang's *Discourse* would become one of the most influential texts in Chinese Yogācāra or *Weishi* 唯識 (consciousness/mind only).

Buddhism came to China in the first century but was confused with and influenced by Daoism for a long time. Initially, Buddhist texts were translated in largely Daoist Chinese terms, but this changed after Kumārajīva (344–413), a Buddhist monk from Kucha in present-day Xinjiang, produced a great number of translations of sūtras and commentaries that set a new standard, and that were rarely eclipsed by later translations, even if those might have been more accurate.

Foreign monks continued to bring new texts and schools, but the schools that flourished in China are quite different from those that are prominent in histories of Indian Buddhism. Pure Land teachings entered China in the second century leading to the establishment of the Pure Land school in 402 by Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416). A meditation school, influenced by the aforementioned *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* became Chan 禪 (Japanese: Zen) in the fifth century. Earlier, Mādhyamaka had established itself as Sanlun 三論, but like many other sects and schools, it would not survive as an independent sect.

While these and other schools were more or less transplanted from India, Zhiyi 智顗 (538–97) founded an entirely new school of Buddhism: Tiantai 天台, named after the mountain where Zhiyi lived. A problem for Chinese Buddhism was to make sense of the contradictions between the various texts imported from India. The typical solution to that problem was to rank teachings into provisional and final teachings, with many different grades of provisional teachings and usually a single sūtra at the top. For Tiantai, that single sūtra was the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), and for the Huayan 華嚴 school, which was founded around the same time, it was the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (*Avataṃsaka Sūtra*).

Aside from the *Lotus Sūtra*, the most important influence on Zhiyi was his misinterpretation of Nāgārjuna's famous doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.18 based on Kumārajīva's Chinese translation.¹¹ The original Sanskrit is:

yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe
sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā.

which was translated by Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura as:

Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness.
It (emptiness) is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path.¹²

11 Paul Swanson, "Zhiyi's Interpretation of Jñeyāvaraṇa: An Application of the Threefold Truth Concept," in *In Search of Clarity: Essays on Translation and Tiantai Buddhism* (Nagoya: Chisokudō, 2018), 45–62.

12 Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Boston: Wisdom, 2012), 277.

and from the Tibetan by Jay Garfield as:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen | That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation, | Is itself the middle way.¹³

Kumārajīva's translation is:

眾因緣生法 我說即是無
亦為是假名 亦是中道義¹⁴

which can be translated into English as:

The arising from causes and conditions of all dharmas [is what] I explain as emptiness.
It is a (conventional) designation. It is the meaning of the Middle Way.

What Nāgārjuna claimed is that the dependently arisen, or phenomenal reality, is empty and that this doctrine is “the Middle Way.” However, Zhiyi read Kumārajīva's translation as implying that reality has three different aspects: emptiness 空 (無 in Kumārajīva's translation, but more commonly 空), the conventional 假, and the middle 中. While for Nāgārjuna “the Middle Way” is not a third element but just a name for the doctrine of the identity of emptiness and the phenomenal, for Zhiyi “the middle” refers to a third truth — in addition to conventional truth and ultimate truth (i.e., the truth of emptiness) — that expresses that identity. In other words, the third truth (i.e., the middle 中) is the non-dualistic affirmation that conventional or phenomenal reality is ultimate reality, and therefore, that there is just one world.

Due to the rise of Huayan and Yogācāra, especially after Xuanzang's *Discourse*, Tiantai soon experienced a decline but was revived briefly in the eight century by Zhanran 湛然 (711–82). In 806 its Japanese branch, Tendai, was established by Saichō 最澄 (767–822). Tendai, however, incorporated elements of Huayan/Kegon, Chan/Zen, and esoteric Buddhism and differed from Zhiyi's Tiantai in many, but mostly subtle, ways. At first, its main opponent in doctrinal matters was the Hossō 法相 (Chinese: Faxiang) sect, the Japanese branch of Chinese Yogācāra (which was known as *Faxiang* in addition to *Weishi*) but eventually it got involved so deeply into politics that the sect became its own enemy, and new sects branched off in the twelfth and thirteenth century. Those new branches flourished, while Tendai gradually declined.

Most of the sects that split off from Tendai were not really new. Rather, they were — nominally at least — Japanese branches of Chinese sects that had little to do with Chinese Tiantai, even though all of these branches were founded by Tendai priests in Japan and were heavily influenced by Tendai thought. Sōto 曹洞 Zen came from Caodong; Rinzai 臨濟 Zen from Linji; and the Pure Land 淨土 sects from Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. The one exception was the Nichiren 日蓮 school, named after its founder, Nichiren (1222–82). With some justification, Nichiren thought of himself as following in Saichō's footsteps. He opposed the strong influence of esoteric Buddhism and other “corrupting” influences in Tendai and

¹³ Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69.

¹⁴ T30n1564, 30b.

wanted to return to the *Lotus Sūtra*. He may have gone a bit overboard in his reduction of Buddhist practice to ritually chanting of that sūtra's title, but it does not seem unreasonable to say that Nichiren was much closer in spirit to original Tendai (and perhaps to Tiantai) than the Tendai sect itself.¹⁵

Although we now can fill whole libraries with books about Buddhist philosophy and celebrate the tradition's great thinkers, philosophy never played a central role in the religious lives of the vast majority of monks and other followers. Most Buddhists were more concerned with relatively practical or soteriological matters than with the abstruse questions that philosophers like to ponder. In Japan this relatively practical and soteriological orientation seems to have been particularly strong. The metaphysical or epistemological views of key thinkers such as Saichō, Nichiren, and Dōgen 道元 (1200–53; founder of Sōtō Zen) can often only be gleaned from scattered remarks in polemical texts expounding the benefits of one sect versus others or in texts about entirely different topics, such as meditation. This, unfortunately, makes interpreting the metaphysical views of Japanese Buddhists even harder than those of their Indian and Chinese intellectual ancestors.

Yogācāra Realism

Does Yogācāra deny external or mind-independent reality? Although the most common answer to this question appears to be “yes,” it is actually not that easy to answer, and it is also possible that there is not a single answer or that the answer differs for different Yogācāra philosophers.¹⁶

Above I quoted Vasubandhu's claim that “all is just consciousness only because of the appearance of non-existing objects,” which opens the *Twenty Verses*, one of his most influential texts. This quote seems as clear a denial of the existence of an external reality as one could find. In the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, Asaṅga also appears to claim literally that external objects do not exist. Furthermore, that text also gives the example of pretas seeing the world differently as an argument in support of this claim.¹⁷

So, that settles it, it seems — Yogācāra denies external reality. But that conclusion would be premature.

Yogācāra philosophers distinguished three aspects of the experience of reality, the “three natures” (*svabhāvas*). (1) *Parikalpita-svabhāva*, the “fully conceptualized” or (conceptually) constructed nature: the experience of things as conceptual constructs, or the appearance; (2) *Paratantra-svabhāva*, the “other-dependent” nature: the complex of causes that bring about the thing's constructed nature, or the process and causes of bringing forth that appearance; (3) *Pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*, the “perfected” nature: the true nature of things, namely, emptiness, which can only be experienced in meditation that entirely transcends language.

In the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, Vasubandhu wrote that the constructed nature, that is, the thing as it appears does not exist, that the other-dependent exists but not

15 See also the section “From Saichō to Nichiren” in chapter 2, and the section “Sources and Schools” in chapter 6.

16 It is significant that Inoue Enryō, the father of Japanese Buddhist modernism, answered “no” to this question. His interpretation of Yogācāra was realist and strongly influenced the this-worldly realism that motivated early Japanese engaged and radical Buddhism. See the section “Realism and Reform in Japan — Inoue Enryō” in chapter 3.

17 Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* (4–5th c.), II.14. But what is “seen differently” if the world doesn't exist?

constructed (<i>parikalpita</i>)	elephant		duality (<i>dvaya</i>)
other-dependent (<i>paratantra</i>)	elephant's appearance		discrimination (<i>vikalpa</i>)
perfected (<i>pariṇiṣpanna</i>)	elephant's absence	piece of wood	suchness (<i>tathātā</i>)

Table 8.1. The magical elephant.

in the form that it appears, and that the perfected exists as non-duality.¹⁸ He then proceeded by comparing perception to a magic show in which the magician makes a piece of wood (*kāṣṭha*) look like an elephant: “The constructed nature is the elephant; the other-dependent is its appearance; and the absence of the elephant is considered to be the perfected.”¹⁹ But then he added three more concepts: duality (*dvaya*), discrimination (*vikalpa*), and suchness (*tathātā*), and compared those with the elephant, its appearance, and the piece of wood, respectively.²⁰ Table 8.1 summarizes these associations and identities.

The concept of “suchness” (*tathātā*; also translated as “thusness”) is more or less the Buddhist equivalent of Kant’s “thing-in-itself,”²¹ although it differs in its connotations — it refers to the ultimately real ground or nature of phenomenal appearances — and consequently, to recognize the existence of suchness is to accept realism. This becomes even more evident in the indirect equation of the perfected with the piece of wood. The perfected as the elephant’s absence can easily be understood as metaphysical idealism, but that interpretation no longer makes sense if the elephant’s absence is equated to the presence of something else, and the text is quite explicit that there is something else, namely, the piece of wood. That piece of wood is the real form appearing as elephant. Similarly, suchness is not just the absence of appearances or of things as they appear, but also the presence of those appearances’ ultimately real ground. Suchness is not nothing, and suchness is not in the mind. Hence, this is realism, not metaphysical idealism.

The text continues by asserting that the penetration of the real objects or true reality (*arthatattva*) results in the knowledge of the constructed appearance, the abandonment of the other-dependent as constructing the appearance, and the attainment of non-conceptual perception of suchness, presumably through meditation. With that attainment, the appearance of duality disappears and non-duality is realized.²² The result is compared to breaking free from the illusion of the magic show. The elephant is no longer perceived, the process that created that false perception is terminated, and instead, one sees the piece of wood for what it is.²³ The goal of practice, then, is to see reality (i.e., suchness, or the piece of wood) as it is, but that objective makes sense only if reality is assumed to exist. Hence, again, this is realism not idealism.

18 Vasubandhu(?), *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, §§11–13.

19 *svabhāvaḥ kalpito hasty paratantras tadākṛtiḥ | yas tatra hastyabhavo 'sau pariṇiṣpanna iṣyate* — Ibid., §28.

20 Ibid., §30.

21 See the section “Idealism” in chapter 7.

22 Vasubandhu(?), *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, §§31–33.

23 Ibid., §34.

The arguments in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* raise a question: would it be possible that apparent arguments for idealism are also merely denying the object-as-it-appears and not its ultimately real ground? Re-reading the opening statement of the *Twenty Verses* certainly suggests a positive answer to that question. “All is just consciousness only because of the appearance of non-existing objects,” wrote Vasubandhu. Indeed, that what appears, or the object-as-it-appears, does not exist *as such*, but that does *not* imply that nothing exists outside the mind. But then, why is this doctrine called “mind only” or “consciousness only” (*viññaptimātra* or *cittamātra*), suggesting the opposite, namely, that nothing exists outside the mind? Perhaps, it is a mistake to think that is what the term implies. Dan Lusthaus pointed out that *-mātra* (only) does not appear to have metaphysical implications in other uses, and there is no good reason to assume why this case is different.²⁴ Furthermore, *viññaptimātra* cannot mean that nothing exists outside a single mind because Yogācāra recognizes the existence of other minds that exist outside that mind.

There is another problem, however. The *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* probably was not written by Vasubandhu, or at least not by the Vasubandhu who co-founded Yogācāra and wrote the *Twenty Verses*. Mathew Kapstein argues convincingly that for linguistic, stylistic, and historical reasons, it is very unlikely that *that* Vasubandhu authored the text.²⁵ More likely, it was an anonymous text that was later attributed to Vasubandhu.²⁶ Nevertheless, it has terminological similarities to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and other important Yogācāra texts such as the *Mahāyāna Sūtrālamkāra Kārikā*, and its content is undeniably Yogācāra as well. Still, if the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* is not by Vasubandhu, we are back at square one with regards to his position.

Although I wrote above that the logico-epistemological school was founded by Dignāga, Vasubandhu also wrote a work about reasoning and perception, the main topics of that school, the *Vādaśāstrī*. That text is lost, but fragments remain in quotes by other authors, including Dignāga. In one remaining fragment, Vasubandhu wrote that “a direct perception is a consciousness through the object [*artha*] itself only.”²⁷ *Artha*, here appears to refer to the external, mind-independent object. Dignāga used the same word in the same sense and argued that “(direct) perception is free from conceptual construction.”²⁸ What is perceived in that direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) is the thing (*artha*) itself.²⁹ Massaaki Hattori explains that

According to Dignāga, a thing, which in itself is essentially inexpressible, comes to be expressed by a word only when it is associated with a name (*nāman*) and

24 Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 534.

25 Matthew Kapstein, “Who Wrote the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*? Reflections on an Enigmatic Text and Its Place in the History of Buddhist Philosophy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 46 (2018): 1–30.

26 It is for this reason that I placed a question mark after “Vasubandhu” when mentioning the author of the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* in footnotes above.

27 Vasubandhu, *Vādaśāstrī* (5th c.), §9, trans. Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu: The Buddhist Psychological Doctor*, rev. edn. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005), 40. Anacker indicates that “object” here translates *artha* (76).

28 *pratyakṣam kalpanāpōdham* — Dignāga, *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (6th c.).

29 On Dignāga’s recognition of the existence of an external reality, see also Shōryū Katsura, “Dignāga and Dharmakīrti on Apoha,” in *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner (Vienna: ÖAW, 1991), 129–46, at 138.

other factors. Conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) means nothing other than this process of associating a name, etc. with a thing.³⁰

What these passages imply is not that external reality does not exist, but that it cannot be expressed in language — is ineffable, and thus that the object-*as-it-appears* does not exist. The same view is expressed by Asaṅga in his *Bodhisattvabhūmi*: “the essential nature of entities does not exist in the way it is described in words.”³¹ However, it is also not the case that it is completely and totally nonexistent.³² Rather, “all entities possess an essential nature that is ineffable.”³³ He explicitly rejected the idea that there are no ultimately real underlying substances,³⁴ which he ascribed to Mādhyamaka, because nominal designations of things or people would be invalid if there are no underlying substances (i.e., suchness).

As long as the bare [underlying] substance of the entities of form, etc., does exist, then the application of designating assertions to the entities of form, etc., is valid. It would not be [valid] if [the bare underlying substance of form and the rest] did not exist, [because in that case] the application of designating assertions would be [an act] that is not related to a [real substance].³⁵

The ineffable, real nature of things cannot be experienced by the ordinary mind but only by an extraordinary kind of non-conceptual knowledge or experience called *prṣṭhalabdha-jñāna*. In the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, this transcendence of conceptually conditioned ordinary consciousness of things (i.e., seeing the wood rather than the elephant) is presented as the goal of Buddhist practice.³⁶ This is mysticism as defined in chapter 7: an apophatic realism that holds that ultimate reality can only be experienced through extraordinary, non-conceptual means.³⁷ The purpose of achieving this extraordinary knowledge is overcoming attachment or craving. We become attached to things-as-they-appear, and supposedly, by seeing them as they really are we can dispel that attachment. Xuanzang warns in his *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness Only* that we should not substitute one kind of attachment for another, however,

[b]ecause the mind and mental conditions arise in dependence on others, they are like magic and not [things that] really exist. To eliminate the false attachment to what is projected by the mind and mental conditions as existing in external, ultimate reality, [we] say that there is only consciousness (*vijñāna*). [But]

30 Massaaki Hattori, *Dignāga, On Perception, Being the Pratyakṣapariccheda of Dignāga's Pramāṇasamuccaya from the Sanskrit Fragments and the Tibetan Versions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 83n127.

31 Similarly, Dharmakīrti argued that due to obscuring cognitions things are commonly said to exist, but they do not really or ultimately exist in the way that they are conceptually constructed by that cognition. Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇavārttika* (6th/7th c.), §§1.69–70. See also John Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004), 339.

32 Asaṅga, *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment: A Complete Translation of the Bodhisattvabhūmi* (4–5th c.), trans. Artemus Engle (Boulder: Snow Lion, 2016), 77.

33 Ibid., 79.

34 On Asaṅga's realism or non-idealism, see also Janice Dean Willis, *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvārtha Chapter of Asaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982).

35 Asaṅga, *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment*, 81.

36 Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha*, especially chapter 8, also explains in detail how and why such non-conceptual knowledge or wisdom should be achieved.

37 See the section “Apophasis, Kataphasis, Skepticism, and Mysticism” in chapter 7.

if one becomes attached to mind-only as ultimate reality, then that is [just like being attached to] the external world of objects — it is [just] an attachment to the Dharma [i.e., an unhelpful dogma].³⁸

According to the second Noble Truth, suffering is caused by attachment or craving.³⁹ For that reason, Buddhist practice aims at overcoming attachment, and as Xuanzang points out, an attachment to a view, even if it is a right view, is still an attachment, and therefore unhelpful or even harmful. Based on this passage among others, Dan Lusthaus argues that for Yogācāra, ontology or metaphysics is itself the problem because it feeds the craving for some kind of (knowledge of) external reality. Yogācāra makes “no ontological claims,” he argues, “except to question the validity of making ontological claims”⁴⁰ because “questions about the ultimate reality of non-cognitive things are simply irrelevant and useless for solving the problem of karma.”⁴¹ While this reminds of the metaphysical quietism mentioned in chapter 5, and thus has ancient roots in the Buddhist tradition,⁴² Lusthaus’s claim that Yogācāra rejects metaphysics and simultaneously adopts the realist view that there is an external reality is a contradiction as the latter is a metaphysical view. A more plausible, or more charitable at least, interpretation is that Yogācāra philosophers held the apophatic position that nothing more can be said about external or ultimate reality than that it exists, and thus that trying to do so anyway is unhelpful.

Apophasis becomes a problem when there is a need to talk or write about things or stuff in external or ultimate reality — for example, when theorizing about perception, one of the most important topics in the logico-epistemological tradition. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti solved this problem by provisionally adopting a language and ontology borrowed from mainstream Buddhism. They ultimately rejected that ontology, but that rejection should not be taken to imply a rejection of ultimate reality itself; it is merely an apophatic rejection of the possibility of describing ultimate reality. If the goal of practice is overcoming attachment by seeing beyond the ordinary, then ultimate reality itself *cannot* be rejected because, without it, that goal would make no sense. The key point of Yogācāra, then, is not that the external world does not exist, but that we should not mistake our conceptual projections of the world for the world itself. This idea was echoed centuries later in Europe when Nietzsche wrote that

in language, man posited an own world next to the other [world], a place that man held to be so solid to, from it, lift the other world from its hinges and make himself its lord. In so far as man throughout long periods of time believed in the concepts and names of things as *eternal truths*, did he develop the pride with which he lifted himself above the animals: he really thought to have knowledge of the world in language.⁴³

38 諸心心所依他起故。亦如幻事。非真實有。為遣妄執心心所外實有境故。說唯有識。若執唯識真實有者。如執外境亦是法執。 — Xuanzang 玄奘, 《成唯識論》 (7th c.), T31n1585, 6c.

39 See the section “Early Buddhism” in chapter 2 as well as the first three sections of chapter 5.

40 Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 535.

41 Ibid., 536.

42 See the section “Metaphysics, Rationality, and Free Inquiry” in chapter 5.

43 Die Bedeutung der Sprache für die Entwicklung der Cultur liegt darin, daß in ihr der Mensch eine eigne Welt neben die andere stellte, einen Ort, welchen er für so fest hielt, um von ihm aus die übrige Welt aus den Angeln zu heben und sich zum Herren derselben zu machen. Insofern der

Significantly, metaphysical idealism makes the opposite move: by eliminating the external world, it leaves *nothing but* our projections. Furthermore, the goal of an unmediated, non-conceptual experience of reality implies that Yogācāra does not involve a kind of epistemological idealism either, because that is defined as holding that all of our experience of reality is *necessarily* mediated by the mind.⁴⁴

So, does this, then, settle it? Can it now be concluded that Yogācāra was realist and not idealist?

Perhaps. Perhaps, not. There is still plenty of room for further arguments for and against either position. Lambert Schmithausen has pointed out, for example, that Xuanzang argued against the Abhidharma view of external matter and speculates that the same argument applies to the positing of anything outside the mind.⁴⁵ But I want to emphasize once more that my goal here is not to determine the one and only correct and final interpretation of Yogācāra, if that is even possible. My aim is much more modest; it is to show that a realist interpretation of Yogācāra is *plausible*, and I think that the foregoing is sufficient to establish that.

Tiantai/Tendai Non-dualism

In case of Tiantai/Tendai, metaphysical questions are almost inseparable from soteriological questions,⁴⁶ and both have their doctrinal roots in the *Lotus Sūtra*. As explained in chapter 2 of this book, the two most important passages can be found in chapters 2 and 16 of that sūtra. Its second chapter suggests that we are all destined to become Buddhas, and that, therefore, we are in a sense bodhisattvas already, which in Tiantai/Tendai and much of the rest of East-Asian Buddhism is interpreted as implying that we all have the Buddha-nature.⁴⁷ In chapter 16, the Buddha says that this world is the Buddha's Buddha land, which implies that this world cannot just be a phenomenal deception or magic show. Rather, this world is ultimately real.⁴⁸ These two doctrines, Buddha-nature and non-dualism, would become increasingly intertwined. "The world of Buddha-nature" is ultimate reality, and non-dualism implies that everything has Buddha-nature. So, Zhanran, for example, wrote:

A perfected person knows the ins and outs of the principle of non-dualism, and that there are no things outside the mind corresponding to our mental projections. [What does it matter] who is sentient or insentient? In the meeting of the

Mensch an die Begriffe und Namen der Dinge als an aeternae veritates durch lange Zeitstrecken hindurch geglaubt hat, hat er sich jenen Stolz angeeignet, mit dem er sich über das Thier erhob: er meinte wirklich in der Sprache die Erkenntnis der Welt zu haben. — Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* (1878), *Digital Critical Edition (eKGWB)*, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/MA-I, §1.11>.

⁴⁴ See the section "Idealism" in chapter 7.

⁴⁵ Lambert Schmithausen, *On the Problem of the External World in the "Ch'eng wei shih lun"* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2015), 24.

⁴⁶ According to Hans-Rudolf Kantor, "Dynamics of Practice and Understanding — Chinese Tiantai Philosophy of Contemplation and Deconstruction," in *Dao Companion to Chinese Buddhist Philosophy*, eds. Youru Wang and Sandra Wawrytko (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 218–92, this is an inherent part of the Tiantai conception of "contemplation" 觀, which is the most central notion in Tiantai practice.

⁴⁷ See the section "Mahāyāna" in chapter 2.

⁴⁸ See the section "From Nāgārjuna to Zhiyi" in chapter 2.

Lotus Sūtra nothing is discriminated. What difference is there between the plants and trees, the earth, and the four elements?⁴⁹

Everything was (or all kinds of things were) in attendance when the *Lotus Sūtra* was preached. Therefore, everything is part of the Buddha's Buddha land, everything has Buddha-nature, and everything is ultimately real. In medieval Japan, the Tiantai/Tendai notion of universal Buddha-nature fused with the doctrine of "original enlightenment" 本覺, the idea that everyone is in some sense already awakened or enlightened, which developed in Chinese Buddhism and was especially influential in Huayan.⁵⁰ Because of this fusion, there is very little explicit metaphysics — the focus is always on soteriological issues of Buddhahood and awakening.

While the increasing entanglement of metaphysics and soteriology tends to obscure both in later Tiantai/Tendai thought, there are plenty of unambiguous metaphysical claims in Zhiyi's thought. For example, in *The Great Calming and Contemplation* 摩訶止觀, a series of lectures written down by his disciple Guanding 灌頂, Zhiyi proclaims:

Dharma nature (i.e., ultimate reality) and all the phenomena are non-dual and non-distinct. [...] To seek the ultimate nature of things beyond the ordinary phenomena is like leaving this emptiness to seek for emptiness elsewhere. The ordinary phenomena are the same as the ultimate nature of things. There is no need to abandon the ordinary and turn toward the sacred/noble.⁵¹

Or as JeeLoo Liu puts it: "there is no need to find a reality beyond this reality — there is no other reality."⁵² For Zhiyi, "the (ultimately) real is identical with the conventional, and the conventional is identical with the (ultimately) real."⁵³ This is the essence of Zhiyi's non-dualist identification of the ultimate and the phenomenal, and that identification is what he called the "middle."⁵⁴

In case of Saichō, the founder of Tendai, it is not that easy to extract a clear and unambiguous metaphysical position, partially because of the aforementioned entanglement with soteriology, and partially because Saichō was concerned more with sectarian politics than with philosophical doctrine. For example, one of the most explicit metaphysical remarks in his *Essay on Protecting the Realm* 守護國界章 can be found in a comparison of the benefits of Tendai and other sects, particularly Yogācāra/Hossō, with regard to the topic of the essay's title. Saichō argues that

49 圓人始末知理不二。心外無境誰情無情。法華會中一切不隔。草木與地四微何殊。 — Zhanran 湛然, 《金剛鐔》 (8th c.), T46n1932, 785b.

50 Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

51 法性與一切法無二無別。...離凡法更求實相。如避此空彼處求空。即凡法是實法。不須捨凡向聖。 — Zhiyi 智顗, 《摩訶止觀》 (594), T46n1911, 6a-b.

52 JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 287.

53 真即是俗; 俗即是真。 — Zhiyi, 《妙法蓮華經玄義》 (6th c.), T33n1716, 703b. See the section "From Nāgārjuna to Zhiyi" in chapter 2 for a longer quote including this sentence.

54 Haiyan Shen summarizes Zhiyi's theoretical philosophy as "everything can be understood as an expression or revelation of the ultimate truth, and the ultimate truth is the essential substance or basic principle behind all things." Haiyan Shen, "Tiantai Integrations of Doctrine and Practice," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism*, ed. Mario Poceski (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 127–44, at 131.

Yogācāra/Hossō teaches that “because that what the conditionally generated creates is other-dependent, there is only deception and no actuality.” On the other hand, Tendai teaches that “because that what the dependently arisen creates [i.e., phenomenal reality] is in accordance with the [ultimately] real, there is only actuality and no deception.”⁵⁵

In his private notes on the Tiantai/Tendai practice of “threefold contemplation” 三觀, he also wrote about the relation between the phenomenal and the real. The context here is meditation, or “contemplation,” and not metaphysics, but despite that, the following passage clearly expresses Saichō’s adoption of Zhiyi’s non-dualist three truths doctrine:

At first, the practitioner of calming and contemplation may calmly dwell in the basic understanding [that all] the *dharmas*, like particles of dust, are simultaneously empty, conventionally real, and the middle. When the profound truth of the threefold contemplation is clearly understood, completely separate from emotional thought, then [one understands that] there is nothing to be practiced and nothing to be realized. [...] The internal [phenomena] and the external [things] are equally obscure; the conditioned [things] and [internal] contemplation are all quiet. All thought arises due to mental projection which must not be clung onto. [He who] continues to dwell in the threefold contemplation without a second thought is a true practitioner of calming and contemplation.⁵⁶

This realist and non-dualist orientation was further strengthened in later Tendai under the aforementioned influences, but it was rarely expressed in unambiguous terms. Probably, the clearest affirmation of phenomenal reality can be found in the writings of Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen, who was originally a Tendai priest. As mentioned in chapter 2, Dōgen considered dualism “foolishness.”⁵⁷ Awakening is not learning to see some other world but learning to see clearly that there is just one world. And a thought or perception before awakening “is not a wrong thought; it is just a thought at the time before clarification/enlightenment; and at the time of clarification it is not discarded.”⁵⁸

Hee-Jin Kim once called Dōgen a “mystical realist,”⁵⁹ but while Dōgen certainly was a realist, at least in the sense that he recognized a mind-independent reality, it is quite debatable whether he adhered to a form of mysticism as defined here.⁶⁰ In his second book about Dōgen, Kim points out that according to the prevalent conception of Zen, which is largely due to the influence of D.T. Suzuki, “the essence of Zen consists in the unmediated enlightened experience (or state of consciousness), totally untainted by ideational and valuational mediations as well as by historical and so-

55 依他縁生所造作故。唯假不實。...眞如縁起所造作故。唯實不假。— Saichō 最澄, 『守護國界章』 (818), T74n2362, 206c.

56 謂止觀行者。先可安住本解。法法塵塵即空即假即中。全離情念。三觀妙理分明之時。無所行無所證。...内外並冥。緣觀俱寂。諸心歷境起更勿執。二念不續住三觀。是眞止觀行者。— Saichō, 『修禪寺相伝私注』 (9th c.), in 『伝教大師全集』, Vol. 3 (Tokyo: 天台宗宗典刊行会, 1912), 661–81, at 663.

57 See the section “From Saichō to Nichiren” in chapter 2.

58 ソレ邪思量ナルニアラス。タタアキラメサルキノ思量ナリ。アキラメントキ。コノ思量ヲシテ失セシムルニアラス。— Dōgen 道元, 『法性』, 『正法眼藏』 (1231–53), T82n2582, 202b.

59 Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (1975; rpt. Boston: Wisdom, 2004).

60 See the section “Apophysis, Kataphasis, Skepticism, and Mysticism” in chapter 7.

cial conditions.”⁶¹ But “such a Zen,” in Kim’s view, and mine as well, “is not Dōgen’s.” For Dōgen, awakening is not associated with a mystical view from nowhere. Rather, as Bret Davis points out, “it involves an ongoing nondual engagement in a process of letting the innumerable perspectival aspects of reality illuminate themselves. Enlightenment thus entails an egoless and nondual perspectivism.”⁶²

Relativism and Perspectivism in Yogācāra and Tiantai

Dōgen is not the only philosopher in the broader Tiantai/Tendai tradition whose thought has been described as perspectival or perspectivist. In the contrary, JeeLoo Liu and Brook Ziporyn, two philosophers with very different backgrounds and orientations, have argued that something like perspectivism is a basic feature of Tiantai thought in general.⁶³ Furthermore, closely related relativisms have been advanced in Yogācāra texts as well.

The most obvious variety of relativism in Yogācāra is the aforementioned example of pretas seeing rivers of pus or blood where humans see flowing water. As far as I know, the earliest mentions of this idea are by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu.⁶⁴ It was mentioned a few centuries later by the Mādhyamaka commentator Candrakīrti, who extensively commented on Yogācāra thought,⁶⁵ but it was not discussed much, or at least not in surviving texts, until several centuries later in Tibetan Buddhism. The key idea here is that karma determines rebirth as a preta (hungry ghost), human, god, and so forth, and thus that karma indirectly determines one’s perspective. That is, humans and pretas have different perspectives on water *because* of their different karmas.

The second relativism in Yogācāra is a kind of monistic conceptual constructionism. Phenomenal reality (i.e., the world as it appears to us) is the product of conceptual construction (*kalpanā*). Raw, uninterpreted perception (*pratyakṣa*) is reorganized and interpreted through our conceptual categories, and because of this, we see cows as cows, tables as tables, and weddings as weddings. (More about this in the next sections.) This constructionism is monistic, however, as the Yogācāra thinkers do not seem to consider the possibility of different conceptual schemes resulting in different phenomenal realities. Rather, our shared karma as humans guarantees that we all share the same phenomenal reality.⁶⁶

It is possible that these two Yogācāra relativisms are really the same. If pretas see pus or blood where humans see water due to different conceptual schemes and

61 Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on His View of Zen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 35.

62 Bret Davis, “The Philosophy of Zen Master Dōgen: Egoless Perspectivism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, eds. Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 348–60, at 349–50.

63 Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, and Brook Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). On Dōgen’s perspectivism, see Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*; Davis, “The Philosophy of Zen Master Dōgen”; and Lajos Brons, “Meaning and Reality: A Cross-Traditional Encounter,” in *Constructive Engagement of Analytic and Continental Approaches in Philosophy*, eds. Bo Mou and R. Tieszen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 199–220.

64 Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* (4–5th c.), II.14, and Vasubandhu, *Viṃśatikakārikā* (5th c.), 3b–c.

65 Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakavatāra* (7th c.), VI.71.

66 Roy Tzohar, “Imagine Being a ‘Preta’: Early Indian Yogācāra Approaches to Intersubjectivity,” *Sophia* 56 (2017): 337–54, at 347–48.

conceptual construction, then the two are the same indeed, but the source texts are insufficiently clear about this. In the first relativism, different views depend on different kinds of being; in the second, the human view depends on conceptual construction. But these two relativisms are never linked to each other.⁶⁷

As mentioned, the first and possibly second relativism became a topic of debate in Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to the example of the river, a second simile of uncertain origin occurred in those debates. José Cabezón summarizes it as follows:

Imagine a cup full of what human beings call “water.” When “hungry spirits” (pretas) see this, they do not see water, but rather pus and blood; when hell beings see it, they may see molten metal. Gods see nectar, and so forth. The beings in each realm see what it is their karmic predisposition to see.⁶⁸

In reference to this simile, Gorampa, a fifteenth-century, Tibetan Buddhist philosopher, wrote that

[Tsong kha pa claims]⁶⁹ that when the six eye consciousnesses of the six classes of beings look at [the object found] at the site occupied by a full cup of water, all six eye consciousnesses are equally nonerroneous [...], and that hence their six objects must be accepted as equally existent [therein].⁷⁰

Gorampa rejected this idea because

[i]t would [...] follow that a human [being] drinks all six substances — ambrosia, pus and blood, and so forth — when it is only the human drinking a cup full of water, so long as that cup of water is being watched by the six eye consciousnesses of the six classes of beings, for all six substances would exist in the space of that cup of water [at that time]. Therefore, who but those who have an inflated sense of their own powers would dare maintain that six separate, real, and tangible substances exist in a single location?⁷¹

The objection is interesting because it depends on the assumption of identity between being something and being non-erroneously perceivable as something. However, this identity is not self-evident. Consider Heraclitus's famous example of seawater being “both pure and defiled: pleasant or drinkable and safe to fish, [but] undrinkable and deadly to humans.”⁷² In the same way that seawater is pleasant-to-fish and deadly-to-humans,⁷³ whatever fills the cup might be water-to-humans and pus-to-pretas, but that does not imply that seawater is simultaneously pleasant and deadly *simpliciter* or

67 The first relativism is mentioned in passing by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu; the second is developed by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Hence, they do not even occur in the writings of the same thinkers.

68 José Cabezón and Geshe Lobsang Dargyay, *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness* (Boston: Wisdom, 2006), 314n223.

69 I have not been able to find this claim in Tsong Khapa's writings, but I must admit that I am not well acquainted with those.

70 Translation from Cabezón and Lobsang Dargyay, *Freedom from Extremes*, 139–41.

71 Ibid., 143.

72 *Θάλασσα ὕδωρ καθαρῶτατον καὶ μιανῶτατον, ἰχθύσι μὲν πότιμον καὶ σωτήριον, ἀνθρώποις δὲ ἄποτον καὶ δαίτηριον.* — Heraclitus, Fragment DK B61/Byw. 52 (–6–5th c. BCE).

73 This may not be Heraclitus's intended interpretation. See the section “Classical Perspectives — Zhuangzi, Heraclitus, and Epicurus” in chapter 10.

that the cup's contents are simultaneously water and pus *simpliciter*. It might be neither. Instead, what fills the cup might be some unnameable ultimately real substance that has the causal capacity of being non-erroneously perceived as water by humans, as pus or blood by pretas, as nectar or ambrosia by gods, and so forth. This, I think, is closer to the Yogācāra view, at least. It also appears closer to Dōgen's view, as we'll see below. Furthermore, co-location is not inherently problematic, as Gorampa suggests, either. If I shape a chunk of clay into a statue, then that statue and the clay are two "separate, real, and tangible substances [that] exist in a single location."

The most fundamental distinction between varieties of perspectivism is Bo Mou's distinction between subjective and objective perspectivism.⁷⁴ The latter assumes that different perspectives on something are somehow grounded in or caused by aspects of the ultimately real nature of that "thing," and thus that perspectives are one-sided, partial, and incomplete, but not untrue. Subjective perspectivism, on the other hand, assumes that "anything goes," that there is no consistent relation between the perspectival perception and the real thing, or even that there is no underlying real thing at all (i.e., that there are just perspectives and nothing those perspectives are perspectives on). JeeLoo Liu interprets Tiantai perspectivism as objective; Brook Ziporyn interprets it as subjective.⁷⁵

Ziporyn locates the origin of Tiantai perspectivism in a passage about the Buddhas' knowledge of reality in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Skillfull Means." In Kumārajīva's Chinese translation:

唯佛與佛乃能究盡諸法實相⁷⁶

This is translated by Ziporyn as "[o]nly a Buddha together with a Buddha knows the ultimate reality of all things."⁷⁷ Key to his perspectivist interpretation is the first part, "only a Buddha together with a Buddha," 唯佛與佛,⁷⁸ which in his interpretation

has an enormous hidden significance, because it hints at one of the main themes of the *Lotus Sūtra*: that real wisdom is no one's possession; that no single viewpoint — not even that of a Buddha, a single Buddha — can ever encompass the ultimate reality of all things; that there is always "more to know" than any one perspective of knowing, however vast and exalted, can encompass.⁷⁹

74 Bo Mou, "Searle, Zhuang Zi, and Transcendental Perspectivism," in *Searle's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bo Mou (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 405–30, at 406. See the section "Relativism, Pluralism, and Perspectivism" in chapter 7.

75 On Liu versus Ziporyn's interpretations of Zhiyi, see also the section "From Nāgārjuna to Zhiyi" in chapter 2.

76 T9n262, 5c.

77 Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 88.

78 Other translations do not feature this expression, which Ziporyn also points out in a note (ibid., 288n4), as well as on 89. For example, Gene Reeves has: "only among Buddhas can the true character of all things be fathomed" (*The Lotus Sutra* [Boston: Wisdom, 2008], 76) and Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama: "No one but the buddhas can completely know the real aspects of all dharmas" (*The Lotus Sutra* [Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007], 23). It seems to me that the most literal translation is "only a Buddha with a Buddha can examine/know the ultimate nature of all dharmas," which largely corresponds to Ziporyn's translation.

79 Ziporyn, *Emptiness and Omnipresence*, 89.

According to Tiantai perspectivism, “to see something is to see ‘not-all’ of it. We are always seeing a little fragment of the world, but every bit of the world is changed by the fact that it is a part of the world,”⁸⁰ and, because of that, no thing has a “single consistent noncontradictory identity.”⁸¹ In Ziporyn’s view, if something can be made to look in a certain way, even for just a moment and even to just a single observer, then that is a perspective on that thing and “‘what something is’ is nothing more and nothing less than ‘how something is seen — by someone or other, from some perspective.’ ‘What it is’ simply has no other coherent meaning.”⁸² And while in apophatic Buddhism all such perspectives are deceptive or false, in Ziporyn’s Tiantai *all* such perspectives are true.⁸³

According to Ziporyn, emptiness in Tiantai means ambiguity, specifically, the ambiguity resulting from differences in perspective. He explains, summarizing his view on Tiantai metaphysics:

What is illusory is not that there is something there or even that there are differences in the world. What is illusory is that there are distinct things that are *one way or another*, definitively. In reality, everything can be seen in the way it appears and *also always in at least one other way*. Since it can always be seen in at least one other way, it can be seen in *infinite ways*. Outside of these infinite ways of seeing, however, there is no “it.” These ways of seeing it are not added to the one way — the one way of seeing it — that is really it. There is no privileged perspective on it that reveals the “real” qualities it has, as opposed to the other, “distorted” appearances. Appearing with certain features and attributes is one way it appears. Imagined as actually being featureless is another way it appears. Neither is more true than the other.⁸⁴

While I agree with some, perhaps even much, of this, it seems to me that there are three serious problems here. First, the claim that “since [something] can always be seen in at least one other way, it can be seen in *infinite ways*” is a non sequitur — that supposed implication just does not follow. That I have at least one other coin in my wallet (besides the five-yen coin I just put in there) does not imply that I have infinitely many coins in my wallet either.

Second, the claim that “outside of these infinite ways of seeing [...] there is no ‘it’” appears to be an anti-realist rejection of the existence of the ultimately real thing or suchness underlying or causing the ways it appears, and that cannot possibly be right. It was already pointed out above that Tiantai is realist, and it is not particularly difficult to substantiate that characterization with further textual evidence. For example, in *The Great Calming and Contemplation*, Zhiyi appeals to what is seen by Buddhas to argue that the objects we perceive must be ultimately real.

If the objects projected by the mind were non-existent [in the sense of] the Middle [truth of non-dualism] then there would be nothing to be known through wisdom and nothing to be seen with the eyes. Thus it should be known that there

80 Ibid., 150.

81 Ibid., 151.

82 Ibid., 170.

83 Ibid., 147.

84 Ibid., 193.

are objects perceived by the Buddha eye. [...] If there were no ordinary objects, then this [Buddha] eye would not [be able to] see the Buddha land(s).⁸⁵

Third, and most importantly, I'm rather skeptical about Ziporyn's thesis that Tiantai perspectivism is subjective, that is, that it holds that all perspectives are equally true. Such "anything goes" perspectivism has the uncharitable implication that a mistaken perception of a rope as a snake would be just as valid as recognizing it as a rope, and I'm not convinced that Zhiyi held that view. On the other hand, Dōgen, who is also part of the broader Tiantai tradition, seems to have argued for exactly that when he suggested that what is experienced in dreams or what is seen with eyes clouded by cataracts is equally ultimately real.⁸⁶

Ziporyn quotes very little textual evidence to support his subjective perspectivist interpretation. I'm not sure whether there is unambiguous textual evidence for the opposing point of view either, but there are clues scattered in various places. One important clue can be gleaned from the *Lotus Sūtra* passage quoted above, for example. That short fragment is part of a longer sentence:

Only a Buddha and/with a Buddha can examine/know the ultimate nature of all *dharmas*: their appearances, their natures, their essences/substances, their (causal) powers/capabilities, their functions, their causes, their destinies, their consequences, their (indirect) effects, all of their aspects from beginning to end.⁸⁷

These appearances, natures, causal powers, and so forth are all aspects of the ultimately real thing, or suchness. In Ziporyn's interpretation, if a drunk sailor briefly sees a walrus as a mermaid, then the mermaid-hood of the underlying suchness would be as real as its walrus-hood; and if someone during a psychotic episode sees the stains on her wallpaper as giant crawling ants, then their ant-ness would be as real as their stain-ness. One might wonder, however, whether this really is what the phrases "their appearances" or "their effects" in the *Lotus Sūtra* passage mean. Perhaps, we should make a difference between an appearance *of* something and an appearance that is merely *triggered by* something. More problematic, however, is that a drunk or madman can see anything as anything, or as Ziporyn put it, anything "can be seen in *infinite ways*." If anything can be seen as anything, and all those infinite ways are inherent aspects of the underlying ultimately real thing or suchness, then every suchness has all possible characteristics, which means that they all have exactly the same characteristics and are, therefore, indistinguishable, even to Buddhas. But that cannot be right.

The sūtra passage, as well as the quote by Zhiyi a few paragraphs back, make clear that appearances of things are not just loosely associated with or triggered by ultimately real things but are connected to them in a much more direct way. That is, ordinary views are not true because they are one among infinitely many possible views but because they reveal something about the ultimately real things that they are caused by and are views on.

85 若無中境智無所知眼無所見。當知應有佛眼境也。...若無俗境此眼不應見於佛土。— Zhiyi, 《摩訶止觀》(594), T46n1911, 26b.

86 In Muchū Setsumu 夢中說夢 and Kuge 空華, respectively. Both are chapters from 正法眼藏, T82n2582.

87 唯佛與佛乃能究盡諸法實相，所謂諸法如是相，如是性，如是體，如是力，如是作，如是因，如是緣，如是果，如是報，如是本末究竟等。— T9n262, 5c.

Furthermore, if any perspective would be equally true, as Ziporyn suggests, then that would imply that there are no mistaken views. The fact that Zhiyi and other Tiantai thinkers made much effort to correct views that they considered to be mistaken in their lectures and writings strongly suggest that they did not believe that. In the contrary, there surely are mistaken views, which raises the question how we can distinguish right views from mistaken views, but that is a topic for the next chapter.

Above, I suggested that Dōgen sometimes appeared to argue for a subjective perspectivism, but Dōgen's ideas are not that easy to classify. The two main sources for his perspectivism are a short passage in the *Genjōkōan* 現成公案 chapter from the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 and much of the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* 山水經 from the same book. In the former, Dōgen stated:

Either in dust [as layman, seeing nothing but the ordinary phenomena] or outside the frame [as an accomplished monk, seeing beyond the ordinary], of all the numerous aspects [of things], we can see and understand only those that we have developed eyes of learning [i.e., capability] for.⁸⁸

Significantly, in this passage different perspectives are acquired — what we (can) see does not depend on karma or on some kind of innate capacity but on our “eyes of learning” 學眼.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the passage also suggests that we can learn more and thus learn to see things in different ways and that indeed is an important aspect of Dōgen's philosophy.⁹⁰ In the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water*, however, Dōgen argues for a perspectivism in which perspectives are determined by kinds of beings, similar to the first Yogācāra relativism mentioned above.

Generally, the way of seeing mountains and water differs in accordance with the kind of being. There are creatures that see as jeweled necklace(s) the so-called water that we see, but it is not that they see [what we see as] a jeweled necklace as water. Something that we see in some form, they see as water. Their jeweled necklace is what we see as water. There are [beings] that see water as miraculous flowers, but it is not that [they] use [what we see as] flowers as water. Demons [i.e., pretas] see water as raging flames; [they] see [it] as pus and blood. Dragons and fish see [it] as a palace; [they] see [it] as a tower. Some see [it] as the seven jewels or a jewel; some see [it] as a forest or a wall; some see [it] as the pure liberation of dharma-nature; some see [it] as true human reality; some see it as [the non-duality of] physical appearance and mental nature. Humans see [it] as water, the cause and condition of death and life. Thus, views differ in accordance to kind. For now, we should be suspicious about this. Are there many ways of seeing one object? Are many phenomena mistakenly assumed to be one thing? On top of [our] spiritual effort, we should make further effort. But if the foregoing is the case, then the way of practice and realization [i.e., our effort] should not be singular or dual either. Ultimate reality may also involve thousands of kinds and manifold forms. Furthermore, reflecting on this doctrine, even though there are

88 塵中格外。オホク様子ヲ帶セリトイヘトモ。參學眼力ノオヨフハカリヲ見取會取スルナリ。— Dōgen, 『正法眼藏』, 「現成公案」, T82n2582, 24b.

89 The idea of acquired perspectives is not entirely new of course. Since Buddhahood is also an acquired state, the multi-perspectival view of collective Buddhas in the *Lotus Sūtra* fragment quoted above, and thus all the individual perspectives involved are also acquired.

90 See the quote by Bret Davis at the end of the previous section.

many kinds of water, there is no original water, and there is no water of many kinds. But even then, the many waters [as seen] according to the [various] kinds do not depend on the mind, do not depend on the body, do not arise from karma, are not self-dependent, and are not other-dependent, but are the liberated/awakened [form] depending on water itself.⁹¹

The passage reminds of the *Lotus Sūtra* fragment. Therein the various perspectives on some thing are also implicitly assumed to be somehow dependent on the underlying suchness, and Dōgen here makes the same point.⁹² The ways of seeing depend on the suchness we see as water itself, but our way of seeing that suchness, *as* water, is just one of many ways of seeing it, and we should not fall into the trap of believing that our way of seeing it is inherently better or more true than others.

[Water] is not [just] flowing and falling. If we recognize it only as flowing, the word “flowing” slanders water. It is like forcing [it] to be non-flowing, for example. Water is just the suchness of its real form. Water is the virtue of water. [It] is beyond flowing. When [the understanding of] the flow and non-flow of a single [instance of] water is mastered, then a complete understanding of the manifold dharmas is realized at once.⁹³

Hence, while water can be seen in many ways, in some sense it is none of them. Rather, it is the underlying form that makes all those ways of seeing (i.e., all those perspectives) possible. But this also means that those perspectives are not arbitrary; they are part of the ultimately real nature of whatever it is that we see as water, or mountains, or whatever.

The latter suggests an objective perspectivist interpretation of Dōgen’s philosophy, which contradicts the subjective perspectivist suggestions mentioned above. This is, moreover, not the only inconsistency. The nature of perspectives in *Genjōkōan* and the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* is very different as well; the former appear to be human perspectives, while the latter are associated with different kinds of beings. And while different perspectives in the *Genjōkōan* are acquired, all that must be acquired and understood according to the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* is the

⁹¹ オホヨソ山水ヲミルコト種類ニシタカヒテ。不同アリ。イハユル水ヲミルニ瓔珞トミルモノアリ。シカアレトモ瓔珞ヲ水トミルニハアラス。ワレカカナニトミルカタチヲカレカ水トスラン。カレカ瓔珞ハ。ワレ水トミル。水ヲ妙華トミルアリ。シカアレトモ華ヲ水トモチキルニアラス。鬼ハ水ヲモチ猛火トミル。濃血トミル。龍魚ハ宮殿トミル。樓臺トミル。アラヒハ七寶摩尼珠トミル。アルヒハ樹林牆壁トミル。アルヒハ清淨解脱ノ法性トミル。アルヒハ眞實人體トミル。アルヒハ身相心性トミル。人間コレヲ水トミル。殺活ノ因縁ナリ。ステニ隨類ノ所見不同ナリ。シハラコレヲ疑著スヘシ。一境ヲミルニ。諸見シナシナナリトヤセン。諸象ヲ。一境ナリト誤錯セリトヤセン。功夫ノ頂顚ニ。サラニ功夫スヘシ。シカアレハスナハチ修證辨道モ。一般兩般ナルヘカラス。究竟ノ境界モ。千種萬般ナルヘキナリ。サラニコノ宗旨ヲ憶想スルニ。諸類ノ水タトヒオホシトイヘトモ。本水ナキカコトシ。諸類ノ水ナキカコトシ。シカアレトモ隨類ノ諸水。ソレ心ニヨラス。身ニヨラス。業ヨリ生セス。依自ニアラス。依他ニアラス。依水ノ透脱アリ。— Dōgen, 『正法眼藏』, 「山水經」, T82n2582, 64b–c.

⁹² Significantly, the passage from *Genjōkōan* about developing new ways of seeing quoted above depends on the same assumption. The aspects seen through new “eyes of learning” are caused by real aspects of the thing or suchness perceived.

⁹³ 流落ニアラス。流ノミナリト認スルハ。流ノコトハ水ヲ謗スルナリ。タトヘハ非流ト強爲スルカユエニ。水ハ水ノ如是實相ノミナリ。水是水功德ナリ。流ニアラス。一水ノ流ヲ參究シ。不流ヲ參究スルニ。萬法ノ究盡。タチマチニ現成スルナリ。— Dōgen, 『正法眼藏』, 「山水經」, T82n2582, 66c

meta-perspectival view that there are multiple perspectives.⁹⁴ Solving such inconsistencies is not an aim of this inquiry. What matters most here is the point made in the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* that perspectives are not arbitrary or groundless and that there always are other perspectives, and the suggestion in *Genjōkōan* that we can learn to see from new perspectives, although the latter suggestion is of greater relevance in the next chapter.

Apoha and Its Implications

The non-arbitrariness of perspectival views is also a key point in Yogācāra constructionism, that is, the second kind of Yogācāra relativism mentioned in the previous section. According to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, “thought and language are causally related to our experiences of things and hence are grounded in reality.”⁹⁵ Concept formation and conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) play key roles in the grounding of our phenomenal experiences in real things (*artha* or *svārtha*). Georges Dreyfus summarizes and clarifies Dharmakīrti’s account of reality-based concept formation as follows:

Our starting point is our experience of things and their mutual resemblances. These experiences give rise to a diffuse concept of similarity. To account for this sense of similarity, we construct a more precise concept by correlating conceptual representations with a single term or sign previously encountered. This creates a more precise concept in which the representations are made to stand for a commonality that the objects are assumed to possess. [...] In this way experiences give rise to mental representations, which are transformed into concepts by association with a linguistic sign. The formation of a concept consists of the assumption that mental representations stand for an agreed on imagined commonality. Two points must be emphasized here regarding concept formation. First a concept, which is nothing but an assumption of the existence of a fictional commonality projected onto things, comes to be through the conjunction of two factors: the experience of real objects and the social process of language acquisition. Hence, the process of concept formation is connected with reality, albeit in a mediated way. Second, a concept is mistaken.⁹⁶

There are interesting similarities and differences between this account and ideas defended by Donald Davidson and W.V.O. Quine. The first half of this quote is strikingly similar to Davidson’s assertion that “all creatures classify objects and aspects of the world in the sense that they treat some stimuli as more alike than others. The criterion of such classifying activity is similarity of response.”⁹⁷ And the quote’s conclusion reminds of Davidson’s theory of *triangulation* (which was also endorsed

⁹⁴ If the perspectives in the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* are inherently inaccessible to other kinds of beings, then it might be more appropriate to use the term “relativism” rather than “perspectivism” for the ideas expressed in that text.

⁹⁵ Georges Dreyfus, “Apoha As a Naturalized Account of Concept Formation,” in *Apoha: Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition*, eds. Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans, and Arindam Chakrabarti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 207–27, at 209.

⁹⁶ Georges Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1997), 227.

⁹⁷ Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” (1991), SIO: 205–20, at 212.

in some form by Quine⁹⁸), the core idea of which is that concepts and the possibility of communication and thought depend “on the fact that two or more creatures are responding, more or less simultaneously, to input from a shared world, and from each other.”⁹⁹ The most obvious difference concerns the last sentence in the quote, “a concept is mistaken,” which reflects the apophatic attitude of Yogācāra, while especially Davidson tended to go to the other extreme, almost approaching a form of naive realism.

According to the Yogācāra three-natures theory, the perfected nature (*pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*) of things, that is, emptiness, cannot be described.¹⁰⁰ As explained above, such apophasis becomes problematic when there is a need to talk or write about ultimately real things, and when theorizing about perception and other topics in epistemology, there often is such a need. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti solved this problem in two ways. First, they provisionally adopted an ontology as a way of speaking about ultimate reality but ultimately rejected that ontology. Second, they avoided making positive or kataphatic claims about things in ultimate reality by means of their *apoha* theory, according to which the conceptual construction and classification (*kalpanā*) of phenomenal appearances proceed by means of exclusion (*anyāpoha*).

Dignāga argued that there are only two instruments or sources of knowledge (*pramāṇa*): perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāṇa*).¹⁰¹ Perception, in his definition, is free from (or prior to) conceptual construction (*kalpanāpōḍha*). Our conscious awareness of things, however, is of phenomenal conceptual constructs. Such verbal cognition (*śabda*) is not *pratyakṣa* by definition, because *pratyakṣa* is non-conceptual, but is not a separate *pramāṇa* either. Rather, it is a kind of inference. In *Pramāṇasamuccaya* 5.1, Dignāga states that “verbal cognition is not a means of cognition separate from inference. That is, a [word] denotes its own referent (*svārtha*) by exclusion (*anyāpoha*) of other [referents].”¹⁰²

Direct perception gives rise to a *pratibhāsa*, a pre-conscious mental response to the object. According to Dignāga, every *pratibhāsa* necessarily accords with its object because it is, and can only be, caused by that object. Dharmakīrti, who further developed Dignāga’s logic and epistemology,¹⁰³ disagreed. Sometimes, due to various circumstances and disturbances, an object can fail to cause a genuine *pratibhāsa*. Only a non-contradictory or coherent (*avisamvādin*) *pratibhāsa* is genuine.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, non-contradictoriness became an important topic in Yogācāra epistemology after Dharmakīrti. We’ll return to that topic in the next chapter.

A *pratibhāsa*, genuine or not, is the raw material for a *pratibhāsa-pratīti*, the conscious and conceptual experience of a thing as something. The unconscious cognitive process in which a *pratibhāsa-pratīti*, a determinate perception, is produced out of the raw data of the *pratibhāsa* is conceptual construction, or *kalpanā*. This

98 See, for example, W.V.O. Quine, “I, You, and It: An Epistemological Triangle,” in *Knowledge, Language and Logic: Questions for Quine*, eds. Alex Orenstein and Peter Kotatko (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 1–6.

99 Donald Davidson, “Indeterminism and Antirealism” (1997), *SIO*: 69–84, at 83.

100 See the section “Yogācāra Realism” in this chapter.

101 Dignāga, *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (6th c.), Chapter 1.

102 Translation, with minor changes: Ole Holten Lind, *Dignāga’s Philosophy of Language: Pramāṇasamuccaya* (Vienna: ÖAW, 2015), 2.

103 Mainly in his *Pramāṇavārttika* and especially his own commentary thereon.

104 See, for example, S.R. Bhatt and Anu Mehrotra, *Buddhist Epistemology* (Westport: Greenwood, 2000), 20.

conceptual construction, according to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, proceeds through exclusion, *apoha* or *anyāpoha*. In an unconscious inferential process, the raw data of the *pratibhāsa* is compared with the conceptual categories in our memory, but rather than fitting the raw data into any of those categories, we exclude it from all but one of them. We recognize something that is not a non-cow, or not a non-table, or not a non-tree, and so forth.

This idea may not make much sense at first, and unsurprisingly, there is an ongoing debate on how to understand the *apoha* theory. One key notion needed to understand the theory and its purpose is Quine's "ontological commitment." An ontological commitment is an implication of a view or theory that something exists. As Quine explained:

We commit ourselves to an ontology containing numbers when we say there are prime numbers larger than a million; we commit ourselves to an ontology containing centaurs when we say there are centaurs; and we commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say Pegasus is. But we do not commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus [...] when we say that Pegasus [...] is not.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, the recognition that "something is a cow" would ontologically commit us to cows, that is, it would imply that cows exist *as cows*, and that is not an acceptable implication from a Yogācāra point of view. In that view, any conceptually determinate ontological commitment must be avoided because such a commitment would imply that we can describe something in ultimate reality, which is exactly what Yogācāra denies. This is the point of *apoha*: explaining conceptual construction and classification without ontological commitments to conceptually determinate ultimately real things. Unfortunately, how it is supposed to do so is less clear.

According to the theory, when we see something *as* a "cow," what we really recognize is that something is not a non-cow. Obviously "not non-" cannot be a double negation because then "not non-*X*" means the same thing as just "*X*," and therefore, "something is not a non-cow" is equivalent to "something is a cow," and the latter, again, is what Dignāga and Dharmakīrti aimed to avoid.

In Western classical logic "non-*X*" refers to a class complement (i.e., the class or collection of things that are not *X*), and consequently, "something is not a non-cow" can be read as involving a negation ("not") and a class complement ("non-"). Unfortunately, if "non-" is understood this way, the sentence is logically equivalent to "something is a cow" again,¹⁰⁶ so this interpretation cannot be right either.

An apparent third option is that "non-" refers to an open class of alternative classifications. Hence, "non-cow" means "horse, or pig, or flower, or" Obviously, such a class of alternative classifications would be extremely large, much larger than what our limited mental processing capacity can handle in the short time we need to classify something as a "cow." But there is an even more serious problem: "non-cow" interpreted like this does not ontologically commit us to cows, but it does commit us to horses, pigs, flowers, and so forth instead. One could try to avoid this by defining the class of alternative classifications without mentioning specific examples — by appealing to the set of properties that no cow has, for example — but this leads to

¹⁰⁵ W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is" (1948), FLPV: 1–19, at 8.

¹⁰⁶ Technically, "something is not a non-cow" is the obverse of "something is a cow."

other problems. Then non-dragons are non-unicorns because the set of properties no dragon has is identical to the set of properties no unicorn has, namely, all properties. But even more problematic is that “something is a non-cow” would then mean “something has a property that no cow has,” which would ontologically commit one to properties or universals, while Yogācāra is nominalist (i.e., it rejects the existence of properties or universals).¹⁰⁷

These problems for the third interpretation are related to the assumption that “non-cow” must exclude all possible alternatives, but the exclusion of the “flower” classification probably rarely plays a role in recognizing something as a “cow,” even if it might matter in some exotic cases. Instead of referring to all possible alternative classifications, “non-cow” could also be understood as referring just to the contextually subjectively salient alternative classifications. To say that something is “not a non-cow,” then, is to say that it is not a horse, or a pig, or anything else that crosses one’s unconscious mind when looking at the thing in question or when processing its *pratibhāsa*. This still implies an ontological commitment to horses and pigs, and so forth, but that is a consequence of a mistake this interpretation inherits from the third interpretation.

Apoha does not proceed by comparing the *pratibhāsa* to actual things out there but by comparing it to memories of previous word use connected to previous sensory data. Hence, to say that something is “not a non-cow” is not to say that it is not a horse and so forth, but that it is not *like things one remembers to have classified as not a non-horse before*, and so forth. This final interpretation is only ontologically committed to memories of horses but not to the horses themselves, but that is a commitment a Yogācārin accepts.¹⁰⁸

Whether this interpretation is right is hard to say — neither Dignāga nor Dharmakīrti is sufficiently clear. Because of that, there is little certainty about how the apoha theory is to be understood and many interpretations have been put forward. Mark Siderits, for example, has proposed an interpretation based on Bimal Matilal’s distinction between “nominally” and “verbally bound negation” found in Hindu philosophy,¹⁰⁹ but as Siderits admits himself,¹¹⁰ there is no clear evidence for that distinction in Buddhist philosophy. Moreover, it is not immediately clear either how Siderits’s two kinds of negation relate to “exclusion” and “difference.” *Anyāpoha* literally means exclusion (*apoha*) of what is different (*anya*), and any plausible interpretation of the theory should take this term seriously. What it should explain is how conceptual construction or concept formation works by excluding what is different.

The “final” interpretation given above succeeds in this respect, I think.¹¹¹ According to that interpretation, “something is not a non-cow” means that that thing is not like things one remembers to have classified as a horse before,¹¹² nor like things one remembers to have classified as a pig before nor like anything else that is contextu-

107 See the section “Realism (1) — Universals and (Anti-)Essentialism” in chapter 7.

108 In any sensible interpretation, the apoha theory is also ontologically committed to an external, ineffable cause of the *pratibhāsa*, which implies that the theory is realist.

109 Mark Siderits, *Indian Philosophy of Language* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), and Bimal Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

110 Mark Siderits, “Śrughna by Dusk,” in *Apoha*, eds. Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti, 283–304.

111 No explanation is ever final, of course. It is just the final interpretation given here. Hence, the scare quotes.

112 Or as not a non-horse, strictly speaking.

ally and subjectively salient. Hence, conceptual construction and classification is exclusion of what one believes to be different in that context.

Furthermore, this interpretation has some important implications. First, conceptual classification depends on memory; to interpret some raw sensory data as a “cow” involves the largely unconscious recognition that that data “is not like things one remembers to have classified as (not non-)Φ before,” where “Φ” stands for all the things or classifications that are contextually and subjectively salient.

Second, and closely related to this first implication, because everyone has different memories of cows, horses, or whatever else is salient to a person in some situation and because different memories affect what exactly is salient in the first place, there are subtle differences in the classifications by different people of something as a (not non-)“cow.” And therefore, what one person means with the word “cow” is subtly different from what another means. As Davidson put it,

what a person’s words mean depends in the most basic cases on the kinds of objects and events that have caused the person to hold the words to be applicable; similarly for what the person’s thoughts are about. [... W]hatever she regularly does apply them to gives her words the meaning they have and her thoughts the contents they have.¹¹³

An implication hereof is what Davidson called the “primacy of the idiolect”: what people mean does not depend on some thing called “a language” but on their own individual experiences with word use. And consequently, languages depend on idiolects (personal ways of using language) and not as it usually assumed the other way around. Or more provocatively:

There is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.¹¹⁴

Third, in conceptual construction and classification, whatever is salient in the *pratibhāsa* is compared to whatever is or becomes salient in memory,¹¹⁵ and salience is likely to be determined partially by the kind of being. Dōgen was almost certainly right when he pointed out that fish and other non-human creatures see and remember water differently than how we see it. And if pretas or dragons exist, they’ll see water differently as well. Because of this, two similarly intelligent creatures belonging to very different species living in very different circumstances might never be able to communicate with each other because what is salient to them differs so much that they can never know whether they are talking about the same thing.

113 Donald Davidson, “Knowing One’s Own Mind” (1987), *SIO*: 15–38, at 37.

114 Donald Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” (1986), *TLH*: 89–107, at 107. Davidson’s argument for the primacy of the idiolect in this paper does not start from the same premise. Rather, he argues that we do not need pre-existing linguistic conventions, or languages to make ourselves understood but can always create new temporary and local conventions on the spot. Davidson’s quote and the relevance of its point for moral theory are discussed in the section “Maps for and of Behavior” in chapter 14.

115 Some thing, property, or memory is salient if it catches the person’s or animal’s attention.

Fourth, if we can only classify something as (not non-)“cow” by excluding what is different, then we can only have a concept of “cow” if we have concepts of at least some of those different but related things. Hence, we cannot have isolated concepts; we cannot have a concept “red” and no other color concepts; we cannot have a concept “warm” without having a concept “cold”; and so forth. Davidson made a very similar point, albeit not for exactly the same reasons.¹¹⁶

Fifth, this interpretation blurs or even erases the line between conceptual construction and concept formation, which is significant as both are assumed to be based on apoha. If conceptual classification of perceptual stimuli depends on one’s memories of previous word use in relation to previous stimuli, then new experiences change future conceptual classifications and constructions, provided that those new experiences are remembered, and thereby the meaning of one’s words. Similarly, when a child learns a word, and thereby a conceptual classification, the word’s meaning is increasingly refined in response to the child’s observations and experiences of the word’s use, which will be observations of word use by others at first. In this way, the child gets gradually attuned to the conceptual constructions, and thus the phenomenal world, of its language teachers. This is more or less how I understand Dharmakīrti’s rather underdeveloped theory of concept formation. But this is also one of the key points of Davidson’s theory of triangulation.

Triangulation, *Kalpanā*, and Kataphasis

Donald Davidson introduced the notion of triangulation as an analogy in lieu of a theory in a lecture given in 1981,¹¹⁷ but it has precursors in his theory of radical interpretation and in Quine’s notion of radical translation and related ideas, which date to the 1960s and which employ the same *triangle of interpretation*.¹¹⁸ From the end of the 1980s, this analogy developed into a picture of the linguistic interaction between two or more speakers in a shared environment, which would become the central idea in much of Davidson’s later philosophy. In different forms and applications, the idea is used to help explain how we get the notions of truth and objectivity, how we learn a first language or radically interpret a second, how we get to mean anything by our words, why private first languages are impossible, how we proceed from no thought to thought, why skepticism cannot get of the ground, how our beliefs are connected with reality, and more. Obviously, not all of these extensions and applications are relevant here. I’ll just focus on how the theory helps to clarify the connections between words and things suggested by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and on what follows therefrom.

In its most basic form, triangulation is a singular occasion of pointing out some object by one communicating creature to another by means of some ad hoc sign.

116 See, for example, Donald Davidson, “Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice,” in *Interpretations and Causes*, ed. Mario De Caro (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 31–44, at 32.

117 Donald Davidson, “Rational Animals” (1982), SIO: 95–105.

118 W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), and Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning” (1967), ITI: 17–36. Davidson himself mentions Quine’s thesis of radical translation as a precursor of triangulation in “Externalisms” in *Interpreting Davidson*, eds. Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal (Stanford: CSLI, 2001), 1–16. In the same paper he also suggests that all the key elements of his theory of triangulation were already present in “Truth and Meaning.” In “Epistemology Externalized” (1990), SIO: 193–204, he also claimed that the main ingredients of his philosophical ideas all date to the early 1960s.

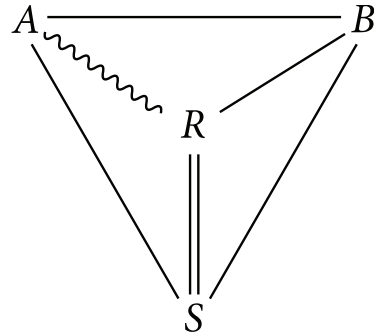


Fig. 8.1. The triangle of interpretation.

These two creatures and the shared stimulus are the three vertices of the triangle. Many of Davidson's papers employ a less basic form of triangulation; in those the term denotes a model of a process of word learning by means of repeated similar signs in the repeated presence of similar stimuli.¹¹⁹ In some of these papers the notion of ostensive learning appeared as a variant denotation of such triangulatory word learning,¹²⁰ and in that form the idea made its final appearance in the last pages of the posthumously published *Truth and Predication*.¹²¹

Figure 8.1 shows what I call "the triangle of interpretation," the basic figure that underlies Davidson's theory of interpretation as well as its direct precursors in his and Quine's philosophy. It is this triangle that "models the primitive situation in which we take the first steps into language, or begin decoding a totally alien language."¹²² Creature *A* responds with response *R*, which may be a linguistic sign but also some other kind of behavior, to stimulus *S*, and creature *B* observes all of that. The different kinds of lines in the figure represent different kinds of relations: observation (simple lines), reference (double line), and utterance or action (wavy line). If the response *R* is a more or less linguistic one — say, uttering the word "table" — and *S* is a table, then what the figure shows is that *A* says "table" in response to observing a table, and *B* observes *A*, the table, and the word "table" (but *B* probably sees the first two and hears the third). From her observations, *B* might infer that *R* refers to or is a response to *S*, but this leaves still lots of room for ambiguity, as Quine stressed in his theory of the indeterminacy of translation,¹²³ and is insufficient for learning a first language.

119 The most important are the following: Donald Davidson, "The Conditions of Thought," in *The Mind of Donald Davidson*, eds. Johannes L. Brandl and Wolfgang L. Gombocz (Amsterdam: Rodop, 1989), 193–200; "Epistemology Externalized"; "The Second Person" (1992), SIO: 107–22; "The Social Aspect of Language" (1994), TLH: 109–25; "The Emergence of Thought" (1997), SIO: 123–34; "Seeing through Language" (1997), TLH: 127–41; "The Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self" (1998), SIO: 85–91; "Interpretation"; and "Externalisms."

120 An early example of the identification of the two notions can be found in "Meaning, Truth and Evidence." Much later, in "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers," Davidson wrote that the importance of ostensive learning was his original inspiration for the idea of triangulation. Donald Davidson, "Meaning, Truth and Evidence" (1990), TLH: 47–62. Donald Davidson, "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers" (2001), in *Interpreting Davidson*, eds. Kotatko, Pagin, and Segal, 285–308.

121 Donald Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2005).

122 Donald Davidson, "Locating Literary Language" (1993), TLH: 167–81.

123 Quine, *Word and Object*, and "Ontological Relativity" (1969), OROE: 26–68.

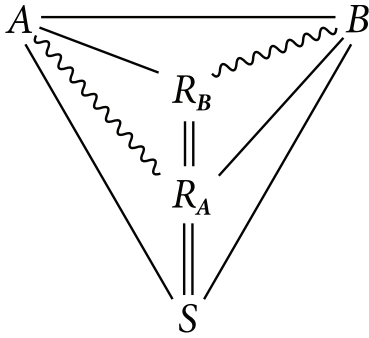


Fig. 8.2. Advanced triangulation.

In the end of the 1980s Davidson started to distinguish this “primitive learning situation” from the more advanced version of triangulation involved in concept formation and language learning.¹²⁴ This version depends on a repetition of the more complex situation depicted in figure 8.2. Each repetition of a similar situation is assumed to involve the same two creatures, *A* and *B* (but in principle only the language learner or interpreter *B* needs to be constant and the teacher or interpretee *A* can vary), different but similar stimuli S_1 , S_2 , and so forth, and different but similar responses $R_{A,1}$, $R_{A,2}$, and so forth. The indexed numbers represent the different occasions of similar situations. Advanced triangulation involves the following seven steps or aspects, numbered (a) to (g):

- (a) *A* finds certain stimuli S_1 , S_2 , and so forth similar. For example, *A* finds a number of flat-topped objects that we would call “tables” similar. (And as it will turn out, *A* calls those things “tables” as well.)
- (b) *B* finds the same stimuli S_1 , S_2 , and so forth similar, although possibly not at first. That is, *B* also finds tables similar, but does not know yet that they are tables and that they are called “tables.”
- (c) *B* finds *A*’s responses $R_{A,1}$, $R_{A,2}$, and so forth to those stimuli similar. For example, *A* responds to the tables by uttering something involving the word “table” every time, and *B* picks up on that similarity, that is, *B* recognizes the word “table.” It should be noted here that, in apparent deviation from (b), *B* does not necessarily have to pick up on the subjective similarity between stimuli S_1 , S_2 , and so forth prior to the triangular learning situation but may develop this awareness of subjective similarity in response to the observed similarity in *A*’s responses $R_{A,1}$, $R_{A,2}$, and so forth to those stimuli.
- (d) *A* finds *B*’s responses $R_{B,1}$, $R_{B,2}$, and so forth to its own (*A*’s) responses $R_{A,1}$, $R_{A,2}$, and so forth similar. *B* responds to *A*’s utterances of the word “table” in similar ways; by parroting that word, for example. Note that without this step (d) *A* would never realize that *B* is actually learning the word “table,” and thus that there would be no reason to assume that *B* has indeed learned the word. This is an application of the more general point that without similarity in responses there is no reason to assume that the creature recognizes a similarity between stimuli.

¹²⁴ In “The Conditions of Thought” and “The Second Person,” presented in conferences in 1988 and 1989, respectively, but published in 1989 and 1992.

- (e) *B* assumes (a) to explain (c). In other words, *B* (unconsciously) assumes that *A* finds tables similar, or that they are similar, to explain the observed similarity in responses (i.e., the repeated utterance of “table”).
- (f) *A* assumes (b) and (c) to explain (d). That is, *A* assumes that *B* finds tables similar and that *B* finds her utterances of the word “table” similar because otherwise the similarity in *B*’s responses would make no sense.
- (g) Both *A* and *B* are aware of (a) to (g), either directly or by assumption.¹²⁵

In this way, in a process of triangulation, a concept and a phenomenal appearance emerge together in mutual dependence. Without the concept of a “table” one cannot see tables as tables, and without perceptions of tables one cannot form the concept of “table.” It seems to me that Dignāga made a similar point in his *Ālambanaparīkṣā* and its commentary when he argued that the perceived phenomenal object and the capacity to see that object cause each other.¹²⁶

These seven steps, (a) to (g), are not so much a description of how we actually learn words and concepts but an investigation into what is necessary for it to be possible to learn words and concepts. Davidson’s point is that without this triangular arrangement, we would not be able to have language and to communicate at all. Hence, the triangulation thesis can be understood as a transcendental argument.¹²⁷ In “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” for example, Davidson argues that the thesis helps solve “three basic problems: how a mind can know the world of nature, how it is possible for one mind to know another, and how it is possible to know the contents of our own minds without resort to observation or evidence.”¹²⁸ Thus, the fact that we can communicate with each other proves among other things that there must be other minds that we are communicating with and that there is a shared external world that we are communicating about.¹²⁹

In this form and application, triangulation eclipses earlier arguments by Davidson with partially similar premises and conclusions. For example, in “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” he wrote that “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world.”¹³⁰ And in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” he argued that

we must [...] take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication

¹²⁵ This explanation is a lot clearer (I hope, at least) than Davidson’s own. (His style of writing is rather obscure, unfortunately.) Nevertheless, in “The Second Person,” (a) to (c) can be found on 119, (d) is added on 120, and (e) to (g) on 121.

¹²⁶ Dignāga, *Ālambanaparīkṣā* and *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* (4–5th c.), §§7–8. This text and its commentary are extremely terse and hard to understand, but it seems to me that Vinitadeva’s commentary supports my interpretation. Vinitadeva, *Ālambanaparīkṣāṭīkā* (8th c.). Translations of all three of these texts with further commentaries etc. can be found in Douglas Duckworth et al., *Dignāga’s Investigation of the Percept: A Philosophical Legacy in India and Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹²⁷ Nevertheless, Davidson sometimes expressed doubt that his argument really was a transcendental argument. See, for example, Donald Davidson, “Reply to A.C. Genova,” in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 192–94.

¹²⁸ Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” (1991), SIO: 205–20, at 208.

¹²⁹ See also Davidson, “Epistemology Externalized”; “Meaning, Truth and Evidence”; and Ernest Sosa, “Knowledge of Self, Others, and World,” in *Donald Davidson*, ed. Kirk Ludwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163–82.

¹³⁰ Donald Davidson, “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics” (1977), ITI: 199–214, at 201.

begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.¹³¹

In these arguments, as well as in triangulation as transcendental argument, the most basic premise is that there is communication, and therefore, that communication is possible. Significantly, as Dan Lusthaus has pointed out, Yogācāra also “rests on both the necessity and possibility that there be communication between distinct minds.”¹³² Where Davidson and Yogācāra differ is in what is supposed to follow from this basic premise. Probably, the most fundamental differences are related to the question of what exactly is located at *S* in the triangle depicted above: what is the shared stimulus that both *A* and *B* respond to?

From a Yogācāra perspective, an external object (*svārtha*) causes a *pratibhāsa*, which triggers a process of conceptual construction (*kalpanā*) resulting in a determinate cognition (*pratibhāsa-pratīti*), which in turn triggers response *R*. Hence, the direct cause of the response *R* is this determinate cognition, and therefore, that is the stimulus *S*. (Except in case of reflexes and some unconscious responses; then the stimulus is a *pratibhāsa* and no *pratibhāsa-pratīti* comes into play.) This is also, more or less, Quine’s point of view,¹³³ but Davidson disagreed.¹³⁴ Concept formation, language, and communication in general require that the stimulus *S* is shared, but whatever is in the mind is private. The only possible shared cause is what is located at the very start of the causal chain, that is, the external object or ground.

Davidson’s argument that it must be this distal cause that is the stimulus because the proximal cause is not shared makes sense, but one may wonder whether there is a genuine disagreement here — Quine and the Yogācārin are not likely to deny that what set the causal chain in motion is indeed the distal cause, or the external object. Technically, Davidson was right when he pointed out that what is located at *S* in the triangle must be the distal cause, but Quine and the Yogācārin were also right that what *directly* causes the awareness of the stimulus in *A*’s and *B*’s minds is some intermediary proximal cause. Davidson, however, seemed to want to eliminate such proximal intermediaries altogether.

The triangle of interpretation implies that “in the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned.”¹³⁵ Davidson repeated this point in many of his writings,¹³⁶ but he did not always clearly distinguish weaker from stronger versions of this externalism. Weaker versions just hold that “what a speaker means is not determined solely by what is in the head; it depends also on the natural history of what is in the head.”¹³⁷ According to the strongest version of Davidson’s externalism, what is in the head plays no role at all, and the contents of beliefs and the meanings of words are their unintermediated causes. In his famous “Swampman” thought experiment, for example, he argues that if a freak incident would simultaneously

131 Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” (1983), SIO: 137–53, at 151.

132 Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 489.

133 Quine, *Word and Object*.

134 Donald Davidson, “The Inscrutability of Reference” (1979), ITI: 227–41; “Meaning, Truth and Evidence”; and “Pursuit of the Concept of Truth” (1995), TLH: 63–80.

135 Donald Davidson, “The Myth of the Subjective” (1988), SIO: 39–52, at 44.

136 See, for example, Davidson, “Knowing One’s Own Mind,” 37, and “The Conditions of Thought,” 195.

See also the block quote from “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” above.

137 Davidson, “The Myth of the Subjective,” 44.

kill him and create an exact replica, then that replica, Swampman, would not mean anything by his words because those words were not learned in a context that would give them a meaning.¹³⁸

This strong version of externalism has rather implausible implications. Consider the fictional case of Hans. Hans grew up in a Swiss mountain village surrounded by St. Bernard dogs. In his early twenties, he moved to Japan and had an accident that made him forget all about his youth in Switzerland. In a conversation, some time after he recovered, Hans remarked that dogs are about the same size as cats, thinking about the tiny dogs that are most common in Japanese cities. According to Davidson, however, because Hans learned the word “dog” in the presence of St. Bernard dogs, when he remarked that dogs are about the same size as cats, Hans meant that St. Bernard dogs are about the same size as cats. Hence, Hans does not just mean something else than what he thinks he means, there even is a difference in truth value between the two. This makes no sense, and Davidson would agree. In one of the papers in which Davidson seems to appeal to strong externalism at one point, he also claims that “the presumption that I am not generally mistaken about what I mean is essential to my having a language.”¹³⁹ And in the paper that introduced Swampman he also argues that

it doesn't follow, simply from the fact that meanings are identified in part by relations to objects outside the head, that meanings aren't in the head. To suppose this would be as bad as to argue that because my being sunburned presupposes the existence of the sun, my sunburn isn't a condition of my skin.¹⁴⁰

Davidson's (unconscious?) slide from weaker to stronger versions of externalism and back again is probably partially due to an oversight and partially due to his rejection of mental intermediaries between the world and our minds. The oversight is memory. The noun “memory” and the verb “to remember” occur a few times in Davidson's writings, but never in a relevant sense. This is odd, given that the recognition of similarity between stimuli *S* and responses *R* in repetitions of the triangular situation described above depends on memory. Without memory, triangulation does not make much sense. (Notice also that in the theory of apoha — or at least in the interpretation presented in the previous section — memory plays a key role.)

Davidson objected to intermediaries between the mind and the world because they create space for skepticism. If what triggers our responses is something in the mind like sense data rather than the external causes of that sense data, then it is conceivable that the way that sense data represents or shows the world to us is radically different from the way the world really is. And if that is a possibility indeed, then it follows that we cannot know anything about the external world. However, according to Davidson, this skeptical conclusion only follows if the supposed intermediary plays an epistemic role. “Skepticism rests on the [...] idea that empirical knowledge requires an epistemological step between the world as we conceive it and our conception of it.”¹⁴¹ Starting with “The Myth of the Subjective,” Davidson repeatedly argued against the idea of a kind of non-conceptual mental content that justifies

¹³⁸ Davidson, “Knowing One's Own Mind,” 19.

¹³⁹ Donald Davidson, “What Is Present to the Mind?” (1989), *SIO*: 53–67, at 66.

¹⁴⁰ Davidson, “Knowing One's Own Mind,” 31.

¹⁴¹ Davidson, “Meaning, Truth, and Evidence,” 56–57.

subsuming all these different things under one single header “red” is misrepresenting them.

Consider, for example, the $6 \times 6 = 36$ “things” in figure 8.3, sorted in a grid from light to dark and from purple to orange. (You’ll have to imagine the colors, as the image is here printed in black-and-white.) One might call the eleven things surrounded by the thick black line “red,” but aside from that classification, they have nothing in common and their actual shades are all subtly different. So, does that mean that these things really are not red? Does it mean that we are being deceived when we think of them as red?

Perhaps. But look back at the mountain landscape in figure 7.1. By the same standard we would have to say that the peaks above the dotted line in that figure really are not mountains either, and that conclusion seems absurd.¹⁴⁴

What these examples illustrate is that we are or can become quite aware that not all red things have the same shade, that not all mountains are of the same height, and that were we draw the line between red and non-red or between mountain and non-mountain is somewhat arbitrary. And as long as we are aware of that, in what sense are we deceived by our constructs “red” and “mountain”? What these examples seem to confirm is Zhiyi’s point that language may not be technically correct but is not entirely mistaken either, and that, anyway, we cannot avoid it; we do need language, and as long as we are aware of its limitations, we do not have to be deceived by it.¹⁴⁵ What these examples do *not* suggest is massive deception.

One might (and should) start to wonder at this point whether massive deception is even intelligible. Given the Dharmakīrtian framework explained above, there are two possible sources of such deception, or two possible distortions: one is between the external object and the pratibhāsa, the other is kalpanā, between pratibhāsa and pratibhāsa-pratīti. While it seems likely that two creatures with very different sense organs perceive the world quite differently, I’m not sure whether it makes sense to say that a dog is deceived because it sees fewer colors than a mantis shrimp.¹⁴⁶ The more important source of distortion or deception is kalpanā, conceptual construction and classification, which raises the question of how our conceptual classifications map to the real world characteristics of things, and how deceptive such classifications can be. There are three possibilities, illustrated in figure 8.4.

The rightmost part of the figure shows a “crisp” classification. The things on the right of the class boundary — the thick black line — are included in one class and the things on the left of the line are included in another class. Let’s call these two classes “dark” and “light,” respectively. Obviously, if our classification would be crisp, then our class boundaries would exactly track real boundaries between things or their

¹⁴⁴ Well... technically they are not mountains, of course. They are drawings of mountains at best, but that is beside the point here.

¹⁴⁵ About Zhiyi, Paul Swanson wrote that “affirmation of the use of language tempered by the awareness of its limitations is exactly the position taken by [Zhiyi], who is constantly re-affirming the inadequacy of language to describe reality, yet immediately affirms the necessity to use language in the attempt to describe the indescribable and conceptualize that which is beyond conceptualization” (*Foundations of T’ien-T’ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* [Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989], 23, also quoted in chapter 2).

¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, similarity between creatures matters in triangulation, as Davidson occasionally observed (e.g., “The Second Person,” 121), because otherwise the creatures might be unable to perceive the same stimulus. The same point was also made in relation to apoha and Dogen’s kind-specific perspectivism in the *Sūtra of Mountains and Water* above. Very different creatures might have very different pratibhāsa, and therefore, perceive the world very differently.

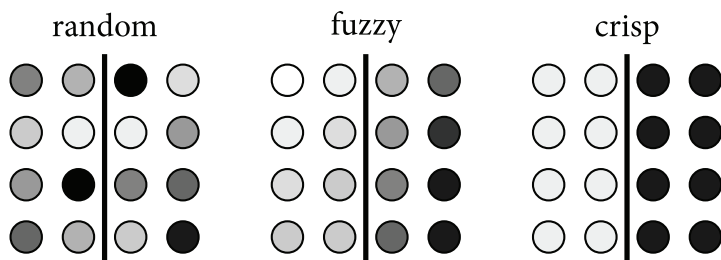


Fig. 8.4. Three kinds of conceptual classification.

properties in the external world. The cases of colors and mountains illustrate that many of our conceptual classes do not work like that.

Randomness, on the left, is the other extreme. If our conceptual classifications would be completely random, they would lack any externally real ground or basis. What we would call “dark” or “light” would be completely arbitrary. What we’d see as dark or light would indeed be dark or light to us, but there would be nothing in external reality resembling or grounding that perception. The most important implication of the theory of apoha or Davidson’s triangulation argument is that this is impossible. Conceptual classes are formed in social processes based on real similarities and differences between things — about this key point Davidson and Dharmakīrti agree — and consequently, we cannot form completely random conceptual classes. Conceptual classes must be based on real properties of real things.

This then, leaves only the third, or middle, option: fuzzy classification, the kind of conceptual classification illustrated by the examples of “red” above and “mountain” in chapter 7, but as explained before, there are more vague or fuzzy boundaries between mountains and non-mountains than figure 8.4 suggests.¹⁴⁷

The realization that *kalpanā* involves conceptual classes with somewhat arbitrary boundaries (as in the “fuzzy” picture in figure 8.4) can lead to two responses. One can look at the middle picture in figure 8.4, compare it to the picture on the right, and say, “*conceptual classes are not crisp, and therefore, language is deceptive and what we say about reality is false*”; or one can look at the middle picture, compare it to the picture on the left, and say “*conceptual classes are not random, and therefore, language is not completely deceptive and what we say about reality is at least partially true*.” The first is apophasis; the second is kataphasis. This is all that the apophasis-kataphasis contrast amounts to — it is a difference in attitude not a substantial difference.¹⁴⁸

Not all attitudes are equally suitable or productive, however. The apophatic attitude demands more from language than it can possibly deliver — a perfect match with independent/external reality — and then, because it cannot meet that impossible demand, rejects language as a tool to describe reality altogether. The problem is not language, the world, or the mismatch between the two, but that impossible demand. Giving up that impossible demand opens up a path to the realization of what

¹⁴⁷ See the section “Realism (i) — Universals and (Anti-)Essentialism” in chapter 7.

¹⁴⁸ In terms of the analogy at the end of the previous chapter, apophasis is saying that the sketch in figure 7.3 is a deception because it is different from the photograph in figure 7.2, while kataphasis is saying that the sketch is partially true because it is based on, grounded in, or a representation of the photograph.

language can do, and what it cannot. Hence, what is more deceptive than language itself, is the apophatic claim that language is deceptive.

While our concepts and conceptual boundaries do not neatly match external reality, language is not completely deceptive either. And moreover, in at least some cases, perhaps even many, we can become aware of the relative arbitrariness of our conceptual boundaries, such as those between “red” and “orange” or “mountain” and “hill.” Language is a tool, and as long as we are aware of its limitations, it does not *need* to deceive us. This is, more or less, Zhiyi’s view on language. It is a moderately kataphatic view. But the arguments that got us here are mostly based on Yogācāra.