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A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor

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ROY TZOHAR, *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. XVI, 279 pp. CAN $105.00 (hc). ISBN 978-0190664398

When popular representations of Buddhism mention views of language, the most usual is that language is an "active force" entangling us in *samsara* (1). While this is accurate, it is also one-sided. The intersection of Buddhist views of language and those of nineteenth-century Romanticism led to the notion that language entangles us in *samsara*, which became overdetermined in contemporary popular representations of Buddhist thought. However, as Tzohar says, not only is language "part of the disease, but inevitably it is also part of the cure" (1). This nuance marks a significant advance in the study of Buddhist thought as an autonomous project, and not simply a reflex of Western philosophy. Tzohar himself calls attention to this when noting that the few treatments of metaphor in Buddhist thought "tend to appeal to contemporary philosophical and literary theories of metaphors" (3).

Metaphor (*upacāra*), or figurative language, pervades Buddhist literature and provides Yogācāra thinkers with a claim for resolving the tension between negative views of language, as obscuring reality, and positive views of language, as heuristically facilitating awakening—the claim that all language is metaphoric. Tzohar sees the importance of reconstructing "a body of theory on metaphor as formulated by Buddhist thinkers" as having three dimensions (3). First, it allows for the creation of a different perspective on the disagreements between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thinkers. While the received understanding is that the two schools differed on ontological grounds, Tzohar maintains that it was primarily linguistic conceptions that divided them. "Contrary to the typical

interpretation of the Yogācāra stance, the school was not concerned with the Madhyamaka's alleged lack of ontological commitment so much as with the implications of this position for the role and status of doctrinal discourse" (154). Second, it brings forward the work of Sthiramati as innovative, rather than as simply commentary, that is, as simply derivative. In Tzohar's presentation, Sthiramati emerges as a creative thinker who, while operating in a well-structured scholastic context, contributed by "synthesizing a varied textual corpus into a coherent and consistent worldview, adding to it in the process some original and strikingly innovative insights" (7). And, third, it demonstrates that the Yogācāra as a school made a significant contribution to Indian thought on the nature of language. While asserting that all language use is metaphorical, Sthiramati develops a theory of meaning that addresses "the ambivalence that characterizes the Buddhist view of language as obstructing the attainment of liberation on the one hand, and yet necessary for any salvific discourse on the other" (205).

Tzohar develops his project as an inward-turning spiral. The first section examines the non-Buddhist context. His first chapter looks at the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsa schools, which for his argument represent the two poles of how language is understood in Indian thought generally. That is, positions "either buttressing or undermining ordinary language use" (16). These schools were also important because of the "specialized terminology, definitions, and philosophical presuppositions" (40) that grounded the discourse on language for Indian thought more generally. Section one of the second chapter is on Bhartṛhari. Particularly relevant to Buddhist concerns is that Bhartṛhari provides an "explanation of the operation of ordinary language as independent from ontological considerations—both in terms of the specifics of its usage . . . and of its enabling semantic conditions" (64). At issue is the relation between language and being, whether conventional or ultimate. Bhartṛhari proposes an account of language that, while not reducible to idealism, treats language as both autonomous

and self-referential, and yet meaningful despite "the absence of an external objective grounding for language" (73).

Like part one, part two comprises two chapters. Chapter three looks at discussions of language in the work of Asaṅga, whose arguments demonstrate "the inexpressibility of an ultimate essential nature" (123), and therefore the incoherence of any essentialist theory of reference. In other words, the essential nature of the ultimate is not something that can be known conceptually. The fourth chapter examines the bases of Sthiramati's "pan-figurative view" of language, specifically in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, along with Sthiramati's commentary on it, in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, and in Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. Tzohar traces the idea of metaphor through these different textual sources to Sthiramati's conception that all language is metaphoric.

The two chapters of part three reach to the center of the spiral. Chapter five focuses on Sthiramati's claim that all language is metaphorical, and the arguments supporting that claim. Sthiramati establishes a positive view of language as conducive to awakening in the face of the Madhyamaka critique of language—a radical conventionalism that flattens out all language use into a single level: For Madhymaka all language is equally conventional. In contrast, Sthiramati presents a "unique understanding of discourse that distinguishes among varying levels of meaning *within* the conventional realm" (154, emphasis in original). In other words, this was a way for the Yogācāra school "to salvage the meaningfulness of its discourse while allowing that same discourse to argue positively about the true nature of reality—to be both conventional and conducive to liberation at one and the same time" (177). Consider in this regard the well-known teaching of "three natures" (*trisvabhāva*), which being expressed linguistically remains within the conventional, and metaphoric, but at the same time facilitates the practitioner's progress toward awakening.

The second chapter in this section focuses on the issue of incommensurability—the problem that the meaning of terms may differ "radically between schemes, and thus there is no way of engaging in meaningful discourse between schemes" (178). In keeping with the orientation toward viewing Buddhist thought on its own terms noted above, Tzohar argues that incommensurability is not simply a modern philosophical problem for which Sthiramati's theory of meaning can be exploited as a resource. Instead, he argues that there is a way in which Buddhist thinkers have also recognized and struggled to answer the problem of incommensurability. It is

> another fundamental concern that ensues from the Buddhist devaluation of language, for it seems to require that in order to be soteriologically efficacious, conventional discourse must not only retain its meaningfulness, but also be able to contain within it deeply discrepant modes of language use (179).

On the one hand, language is used to navigate the conventions of social existence. On the other, however, it is also used to assist in the development of nonconceptual forms of understanding.

Methodologically, Tzohar's argument is just the kind required to avoid subsuming Buddhist thought under the concepts, categories, and concerns of modern Western academic philosophy. Most specifically, Tzohar suggests that the continuing, and at times heated, debate over whether Yogācāra is a form of idealism in fact requires,

> a much more nuanced and variegated picture regarding the relation between the Yogācāra and idealism. They suggest that the answers to this question are deeply context- and text-specific, as well as influenced by factors such as the applied textual selection and the scope of inquiry (15).

This work is a philosophically technical treatment appropriate for scholars of Yogācāra and Mahāyāna thought generally, as well as those interested in how language is addressed by Indian Buddhist thinkers. It is a challenging work in its detailed progression through the relevant texts, but the architectonic is very clear and provides careful guidance through these issues.

As noted at the outset, recognizing the ambivalence toward language—both an obstruction to, and a needed tool for creating an awareness of reality—is essential to creating a more nuanced understanding of Buddhist views of language. Tzohar's work focuses on technical issues in Buddhist thought, and therefore normal—if conceptually technical—discursive language. There is another dimension of Buddhist thought that is not included in the dichotomy between language as obstruction and as heuristically useful. That third option is the view that language can be actively conducive to awakening. A fuller treatment of Buddhist understandings of language will need to extend past ordinary discursive language to many uses of "extraordinary language," that is, uses that go beyond normal discursive ones, and which challenge the definition of language as such.[1]

[1] See for example, Richard K. Payne, "On not Understanding Extraordinary Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan," *Religions* 8.223 (2017), http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.3390/rel8100223, and Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan: Indic Roots of Mantra* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).