

Emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Interpretations and Comparisons

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Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a central concept in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy; however, it has multiple meanings. Many Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers use the term “emptiness” but often in divergent ways. Moreover, there is considerable disagreement among contemporary scholars of Buddhism about the interpretation of emptiness. This is fueled in part by the hermeneutical challenges posed by Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophical works; different texts or portions of texts can suggest different readings, and often the same passage or verse can support more than one interpretation. There is also an understandable wish to relate teachings about emptiness to current philosophical trends and debates. When done without sensitivity to the original intellectual, linguistic, and social context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this comparative thinking can lead to dubious readings (Tuck 1990). However, given the ambiguities and divergent views often present in the source material, even careful commentators reach different conclusions about the philosophical implications of emptiness. This rich polysemy provides an opportunity for vigorous debate about the relative philosophical merits of the variety of interpretations.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the most prominent meanings of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism and to highlight some important interpretive disputes. Given the complexity of the subject, there is no ambition to be comprehensive. Although there will be some discussion of statements about emptiness from relevant Buddhist sources, the focus will be on conceptual distinctions and their philosophical connotations rather than on in-depth investigation of texts. Attributions of particular interpretations of emptiness to individual Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers will be intentionally avoided, as commentators often disagree about how specific Buddhist thinkers construe emptiness; engagement with these disputes is beyond the scope of this brief treatment of the topic. This chapter is also an exercise in comparative philosophizing; it discusses similarities between the emptiness concept and some Western philosophical ideas. However, it is naïve to think that similarity implies sameness; comparison becomes

insightful when interesting points of cross-cultural affinity are balanced by inevitable differences.

Madhyamaka: Emptiness as Absence of Intrinsic Existence

The Madhyamaka assertion that all things are empty means that they are all dependently originating (*pratītyasamutpāda*); they lack or are empty of autonomous existence because they are reliant on causes to bring them into and sustain their existence. The manifold entities that make up the world are related to one another in complex patterns of interdependence. Some contemporary Buddhists see this teaching as entailing the ethical responsibility to respond to the sufferings of other people. They also perceive similarities between the Buddhist focus on interconnectedness and contemporary environmental theories that stress our duties to the natural world (Edelglass and Garfield 2009, 420, 428–30). Moreover, parallels are sometimes drawn between the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination and trends in the philosophy of science such as cybernetics, which sees humans and the environment as irrevocably intertwined in symbiotic relationships within vastly intricate systems (Macy 1990).

However, the Madhyamaka concept of emptiness entails more than an assertion of interconnectedness; in addition, it means that all phenomena are empty in the sense that they lack existence independent of the conceptualizing activity of the mind. Dependent origination in the Madhyamaka context entails that all entities are mental constructions.

This Madhyamaka claim should be understood in the context of Abhidharma Buddhism, which, in its Vaibhāṣika form, distinguishes between fundamental or primary existence (*dravyasat*) and conceptual existence (*prajñaptisat*). This distinction corresponds to that between ultimate truths (*paramārthasatya*) and conventional truths (*saṃvṛtisatya*). Entities such as mountains and tables have conceptual existence and are conventional truths because they can be analyzed into their component parts. Their existence is the result of conceptual synthesis on the basis of their constituents. Entities have fundamental existence and are ultimate truths if they cannot be further analyzed into parts. Abhidharma philosophy refers to these partless components of all mental and material things as *dharma*s, each of which is said to have its own defining characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) and intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*). The *dharma*s are in most cases radically impermanent and causally produced by preceding *dharma*s in a chain of dependent origination. Nevertheless, they are ultimate truths and have intrinsic existence because they are the basic components into which all other things can be analyzed. Their existence is not the result of conceptual reification.

Mādhyamikas contend that this two-tier Abhidharma ontology does not go far enough. All things are empty of intrinsic existence. Even the *dharma*s have conceptual existence and are conventional truths. Mādhyamikas present a host of detailed arguments intended to refute the intrinsic existence of all things. But the key Madhyamaka contention is that *dharma*s would have to be independent and permanent in order to have their own, autonomous defining characteristics; however, nothing has that type of existence. All things originate dependently, and dependently originating existence entails conceptual existence; entities are reifications on the basis of their manifold

causes. These causes are themselves always reifications on the basis of their own causes. There is just conceptual construction without exception. There are no ultimately true entities that function as an ontological bedrock on which conceptual construction takes place.

This means that, for Mādhyamikas, the ultimate truth is that there are no ultimate truths. This apparent paradox can be resolved by identifying two senses in which Madhyamaka philosophy uses the term “ultimate truth”: ultimate truth (1) refers to the way things really are, while ultimate truth (2) is used in the plural to refer to entities that have intrinsic existence. The Madhyamaka claim is that the ultimate truth (1) is that there are no ultimate truths (2).

Mādhyamikas are insistent that emptiness has genuinely universal scope; emptiness is itself empty. Emptiness is not an independently existing Absolute Reality like Brahman in Advaita Vedānta, for example. On the contrary, emptiness is itself a characteristic of the entities of which it is the emptiness – it is the emptiness of the tree, the emptiness of the chair, and so forth. Emptiness is itself dependently originated. Without entities there would be no emptiness. The emptiness of emptiness does not mean that emptiness is not ultimately true (1) but it does entail that emptiness is not an ultimate truth (2). The ultimate truth (1) is that all things, including emptiness itself, are empty of intrinsic existence.

This account prompts interesting questions about the status of conventional truths which can be raised but not answered here (see The Cowherds 2011). Given that conventional truths are conceptual constructs, in what sense are they true? Mādhyamikas claim that unenlightened people fail to see that the conventional truths are merely conventional; the spiritually ignorant give such truths an ontological status they do not in fact have. Conventional truths are deceptive in the sense that they appear in a manner that conceals their true nature as empty of intrinsic existence. Nevertheless, can the Mādhyamikas provide an account of conventional truth that acknowledges that it is in some sense true that my book is sitting on the desk and false that I am a world-class violinist? Evidently some things are not even conventionally true – for example, square circles and winged horses. And there are presumably some serious constraints on the conventional truths that are possible – for example, we are not able conceptually to construct a world in which a picture of a cup of water can quench thirst. Are the Mādhyamikas required simply to accept whatever the consensus or the majority of people take to be true with the caveat that this conventional truth is merely conventional, unbeknown to most people? Or can Mādhyamikas accommodate a more demanding understanding of conventional truth as something that can be reformed and improved by, for example, scientific inquiry irrespective of the opinions of the (often scientifically uninformed) majority? Presumably Mādhyamikas consider some conventional truths – for example, the ethical and religious truths espoused by Buddhism – to be superior to others even when most people do not accept the Buddhist teachings. Finally, there are debates about whether the Madhyamaka account of conventional truths is compatible with a correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic theory of truth, the dominant theories of truth in contemporary philosophy. The Mādhyamikas do not all give the same responses to these questions concerning conventional truth, and in many cases it is debatable what their answers would be.

The Madhyamaka concept of emptiness invites comparison with contemporary currents in philosophy that attack ontological realism – that is, the philosophical view that there is a reality which is not conceptually constructed. The similarity is most pronounced in forms of ontological constructivism that claim that even physical and biological phenomena – such as race, sex, trees, chairs, and atoms – are human constructions rather than having existence independent of our interests and concerns. Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Terry Winograd, J. R. Wheeler, and Humberto Maturana have made such constructivist claims (Searle 1995, 157–60). There is clearly an affinity between this recent trend in Western thought and the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness. Nevertheless, there are notable differences. For instance, Mādhyamikas would highlight the influence of karma on the way the world is constructed, whereas contemporary constructivists often emphasize the impact of social conditioning.

When the contemporary constructivist thesis is taken to mean that the world is *entirely* a human construction, it has attracted stern opposition. For example, Searle acknowledges that many aspects of our social reality are constructed and that the socially conditioned mind is very active in creating the world that we inhabit (Searle 1995, 1–30). However, he finds unintelligible the notion that *everything* is a human construct; there must be some unconstructed “brute facts” on the basis of which such construction takes place. Similar doubts occur about the intellectual coherence of the Madhyamaka claim that all entities are entirely conceptually created.

Critics of Madhyamaka dismiss the philosophy of universal emptiness as a form of ontological nihilism; the claim that everything is empty means that nothing exists at all. The standard Madhyamaka reply is that this objection rests on a misunderstanding of emptiness. Emptiness means that entities exist without intrinsic existence but not that they do not exist at all. Emptiness is the ontological middle way between non-existence and intrinsic existence. Mādhyamikas claim that it is emptiness properly understood which explains and makes possible the existence of all things. Far from entailing ontological nihilism, it is because things are empty that they can exist in a dependently originating way (Nāgārjuna 1995, 67–72). However, it is not clear that the Mādhyamikas’ explanation is entirely convincing, because they do not say only that all things are dependently originated; they also contend that all entities are caused completely by conceptual construction. It is this latter claim that many opponents find particularly problematic.

Yogācāra: Emptiness of the Subject–Object Duality

The Yogācāra concept of emptiness can be viewed as a reaction against the Madhyamaka contention that all things lack intrinsic existence. It also represents a return to the Abhidharma position that there must be an unconstructed ontological foundation for conceptual construction. For both Yogācāra and Abhidharma philosophy, the Madhyamaka claim that everything is conceptually constructed amounts to ontological nihilism. For the Abhidharma, the unconstructed substratum is the *dharma*s, which include the fundamental material constituents of the world. By contrast, the Yogācāra substratum is the dependently originating stream of consciousness. Hence, the Yogācāra ontology is described as “mind-only” (*cittamātra*). Emptiness for Yogācāra

does not mean universal absence of intrinsic existence. On the contrary, there is something that has intrinsic existence, namely, the flow of cognitive events (*viññapti*). It is this substratum which is erroneously bifurcated into the duality of subject and object. Unenlightened people fabricate a world of external objects and selves. However, in reality the objects and selves are nothing more than a flow of experiences. Emptiness in Yogācāra Buddhism means the emptiness of the subject–object duality.

Central to the Yogācāra philosophy is the teaching of the three aspects (*trisvabhāva*). The first of the three aspects is the “constructed aspect” (*parikalpitasvabhāva*). This is the world of subject–object duality which unenlightened people wrongly think intrinsically exists; in fact, it is a fabrication. The second aspect is the “dependent aspect” (*paratantrasvabhāva*). This is the intrinsically existing, dependently originating stream of cognitive events. It is the dependent aspect which is the way things really are and which functions as the substratum for the erroneous conceptual construction of reified subjects and objects. If the constructed aspect were removed, then only the non-dual dependent aspect would remain. The third aspect is the “perfected aspect” (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*). It is what needs to be known for enlightenment to occur – namely, emptiness – understood here as the fact that the dependent aspect is empty of the constructed aspect. The perfected aspect is seeing the dependent aspect as it really is, devoid of the conceptual fabrications ordinarily superimposed on the non-dual stream of cognitive events. Enlightened people achieve human perfection by seeing this emptiness with perfect clarity. They overcome craving by fully understanding that the subjects and objects that most people grasp are merely conceptual constructions (Vasubandhu 2009).

The Yogācāra concept of emptiness does not go as far as the Madhyamaka assertion that everything lacks intrinsic existence; nevertheless, it is a radical and controversial position. The Yogācāra denial of the mind-independent existence of objects certainly contradicts the contemporary view of scientific realism that consciousness is dependent and evolves out of the material world. It has more in common with forms of Western ontological idealism which make the claim that nothing exists independent of the mind. The most famous Western proponent of this position is George Berkeley (see Berkeley 1998). The Yogācāra philosophers would agree with Berkeley’s contention that the mind-independent existence of the world is unobservable; all that we perceive is cognitive experiences that we falsely believe to be caused by objects that exist independent of the mind. The existence of these cognitive experiences can be explained without recourse to an unobservable world of external objects.

However, there are also significant differences. For example, Berkeley considers the mind to be a thinking substance with ideas (including sensory images) as its qualities. By contrast, for Yogācāra philosophers the notion of an unchanging substance is anathema; their view is that the mind is a causally conditioned series of events. This is in accordance with the prevalent Buddhist rejection of an enduring self. The difference might be summed up as that between substance and process ontological idealism. Furthermore, one of the principal objections to ontological idealism is that it is difficult to explain the shared nature of sensory experiences. The ontological realists can claim that people have similar sensory experiences because there are mind-independent objects that cause these similar sensory experiences in different people. We have a shared experience of a river in the park because there really is a river in the park. If the

ontological idealists are right, this explanation of shared sensory experience is not acceptable. Berkeley resorts to the explanation that God coordinates the experiences in different individual minds and ensures the regularities in our perceptions of nature. Yogācāra philosophers would have no truck with this theistic form of ontological idealism; instead they claim that shared sensory experiences are the result of similar karma. We are all able to perceive the river in the park because as humans we have broadly similar karmic backgrounds. Different karma leads to different sensory experiences. The stock example is that the bad karma of hungry ghosts (*preta*) causes them to experience rivers of pus rather than rivers of water (Siderits 2007, 152–8). However, it might be objected that the Yogācāra philosophers have simply replaced the ontological realists' assumption that there is an external world with the unverifiable belief in karma.

There is also the danger of solipsism – that is, the philosophical position that only the cognitive events that make up one's own mind exist or can be proven to exist. Many Yogācāra philosophers reject solipsism and assert the existence of a plurality of streams of consciousness; however, it is not evident how one would know that there must be streams of consciousness other than one's own. They might, after all, be nothing more than the product of one's own conceptual activity. Some Yogācāra thinkers demonstrate that they are aware of this difficulty and seek to prove the existence of other minds (Williams 2009, 309–10). Of course, solipsism is a challenging philosophical problem that is not peculiar to Yogācāra Buddhism.

Whether ontological idealism provides a better account of reality than ontological realism is a topic of perennial debate. The ontological idealists' denial of the existence of the external world is a counter-intuitive affront to common sense. However, this does not make it wrong, because intuition and common sense are not always reliable guides to truth. Moreover, Yogācāra philosophers do provide some arguments in support of their position. For instance, they claim that the perception of physical objects is analogous to the experience of apparently external objects in dream experiences. The fact that many people have similar perceptions of external objects is likened to a collective hallucination. Finally, the Yogācāra philosophers claim that it is impossible to make sense of the existence of external, physical objects. They provide detailed refutations of the notion that such objects can exist as whole entities or that they can exist as constructs out of indivisible atoms. Given that these are the only possibilities, the conclusion the Yogācāra thinkers wish us to draw is that physical objects do not really exist (Siderits 2007, 146–79). It is a moot point whether these Yogācāra arguments are convincing.

Buddha-Nature: Emptiness as Absence of Defilements

Another concept of emptiness occurs in the buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) teaching, which claims that sentient beings each have within them something that enables them to become a fully enlightened buddha. While this is sometimes interpreted as meaning that sentient beings have the potential to become buddhas, there is also a common view that the buddha-nature is an actual fully formed, primeval reality already present within sentient beings, who are therefore already enlightened. This buddha-nature is

obscured by various adventitious moral and cognitive defilements (*kleśa*) – primarily greed, hatred, and delusion – which afflict the unenlightened. However, this nature is intrinsically pure and undefiled. The purpose of Buddhism is thus to remove the defilements and recognize that one has always been enlightened; this is sometimes likened to removing the layers of dust from a mirror or discovering a precious jewel hidden within one's clothing. This buddha-nature is referred to as empty in the sense that it is empty of the defilements. But it is also not empty because it has all of the pure characteristics of enlightenment, such as wisdom and compassion. A key interpretive question is whether this buddha-nature itself lacks intrinsic existence in accordance with Madhyamaka ontology or is identifiable with the Yogācāra non-dual stream of consciousness, purified of the conceptual constructions that constitute the imagined nature.

An alternative view, prevalent in East Asian Buddhism and also present in some forms of Tibetan Buddhism, is that the buddha-nature is an unchanging, intrinsically existing Absolute Reality. This latter understanding of the emptiness of the buddha-nature denies the universal scope of the Madhyamaka claim that things lack intrinsic existence. It also departs from the Yogācāra claim that the ultimate truth is an ever-changing flow of consciousness. It affirms what the earlier Madhyamaka and Yogācāra ontologies deny. Nevertheless, this belief in an Absolute Reality is sometimes conjoined with modified forms of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophies. Mādhyamikas who accept the existence of an Absolute Reality might claim that everything except this Absolute Reality is empty of intrinsic existence; an adapted form of Yogācāra would identify the Absolute Reality as a pure level of the mind unaffected by change (Williams 2009, 103–19).

This version of the buddha-nature teaching has been contentious. For example, the recent Critical Buddhism movement in Japan acknowledges that the buddha-nature doctrine has been widespread in East Asian Buddhism, partly as a result of its similarity to indigenous Chinese teachings concerning the Dao as a mysterious, ineffable Absolute Reality. However, the Critical Buddhists claim that this is a departure from the authentic Buddhist teachings of universal dependent origination and non-self. The views of the Critical Buddhist movement have been the subject of considerable interest and scrutiny (Hubbard and Swanson 1997). Their judgments concerning authenticity are controversial given the sheer variety of forms that Buddhist thought has taken, each with its own claim to be genuine.

One of the defilements said to be absent from the buddha-nature is that of conceptuality. This means that the Absolute Reality is ineffable and can be apprehended by a special non-conceptual gnosis which is achieved by enlightened people. There has been detailed discussion in recent scholarship about comparative mysticism and the possibility of non-conceptual or inexpressible experience (King 1999, 161–86). Defenders of ineffability sometimes see the pure, unmediated apprehension of reality as lying at the heart of diverse forms of mystical experience, which then gets interpreted differently in different cultural and religious contexts. Critics argue that experience is necessarily mediated by concepts and language. Mystical experience is always already informed by conceptuality, and “ineffable knowledge” is an oxymoron. Furthermore, there is an apparent contradiction in the claim that reality is ineffable, given that this statement

itself appears to be a description of reality. In response, it might be argued that, even if the claim that reality is indescribable is itself a description of reality, it is a negative description with minimal content.

What is clear is that the notion of non-conceptual knowledge is widely present in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy and not just in the context of the buddha-nature teaching. Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy thus presents an alternative epistemology to that of many recent thinkers who claim that experience is always imbued with conceptualization. The classical Yogācāra philosophers who do not accept the existence of an unchanging Absolute Reality nevertheless identify language and conceptualization with the imagined aspect; this means that the enlightened knowledge of the non-dual flow of dependently originating consciousness is ineffable. The dependent aspect devoid of the imagined aspect is beyond the reach of concepts and words. Furthermore, those Mādhyamikas who deny that emptiness is an Absolute Reality nevertheless often claim that meditative techniques can be employed to induce a direct and focused awareness of emptiness in which the proliferation of conventional conceptually constructed entities subsides. Admittedly, this claim is puzzling if it is interpreted to mean that conceptuality is entirely absent. In this case, it would seem that even emptiness would not appear to the meditator given that emptiness, as a property of conceptually constructed things, itself has only conceptual existence. It would seem that, for these Mādhyamikas, a literally non-conceptual experience might be a blank state of mind, an experience of nothing at all.

The Emptiness of Views

A famous claim of Mādhyamikas is that they assert no views (*dṛṣṭi*) of their own and that emptiness is not itself a view (Nāgārjuna 1995, 26). This statement is perplexing. Isn't the emptiness of intrinsic existence a view about the way things really are that the Mādhyamikas wish to assert? One possible solution to this conundrum is to offer a non-literal reading of the Madhyamaka claim to have no views. The Mādhyamikas have no views in the sense that they have no views that assert the intrinsic existence of anything; however, they do assert the view that nothing has intrinsic existence, including emptiness itself. Their chastisement of those who take emptiness to be a view is directed at those who misconstrue emptiness as intrinsically existent. The Mādhyamikas do think that it is ultimately true that all things lack intrinsic existence; they do assert that emptiness is the way things really are, and in this sense they do have a view. In addition, the Madhyamaka aversion to views might be interpreted as a warning against a merely theoretical understanding of emptiness; the intellectual grasp of the ultimate truth that things lack intrinsic existence needs to be matured through meditative techniques into a perception of emptiness. In modern philosophical parlance this is akin to the distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. The latter has a potency which the former often lacks. For example, knowledge about a tiger does not have the same impact as an encounter with a tiger. A view is not the same as a vision; those who rest content with the theoretical understanding of emptiness will not achieve the direct insight that has powerful transformative effects on one's character. The unmediated perception of oneself and the objects one craves as empty

of intrinsic existence is liable to undermine the psychological proclivity to crave and be attached.

However, it is also possible to take the Madhyamaka “no views” claim at face value. Mādhyamikas literally hold no position about the true nature of things and simply refute those who have such positions. In this case, emptiness is not the ultimate truth (1) in the sense identified earlier; it is not how things really are and is only a conventional truth. Mādhyamikas are not doing ontology when they teach emptiness; on the contrary, emptiness is a warning against all attempts to formulate views about the nature of reality.

The philosophical implications of this interpretation of emptiness are not clear. Some Mādhyamikas might think that all views should be abandoned because there simply is no way things really are. The emptiness teaching is intended to dispel all ontological speculation because the true nature of reality simply does not exist. Truth and reality are always contextual and relative. It can be objected that this is paradoxical because the claim that there is no way things really are is itself a claim about how things really are. The claim that truth and reality is always contextual and relative is not itself contextual and relative. However, the Mādhyamika might respond that this paradox does not demonstrate a fault in their teaching; on the contrary, it indicates that the misguided need for there to be ultimate truth is deeply rooted in the structures of our language and thought. There is no way things really are even if our minds struggle to make sense of this claim. This is arguably a risky move for the Mādhyamika to make because it seemingly neglects the constraints of rationality.

Another possibility is that the Madhyamaka abandonment of views is intended to be a critique of all knowledge claims about the true nature of things. Emptiness in this case is an epistemological rather than an ontological (or anti-ontological) teaching. It is not a claim about how things really are or even that there is no way things really are. On the contrary, the emptiness of all views means that we do not know the nature of the world as it exists independently of human interest and concerns. The world that we experience is without intrinsic existence in the sense that it is suffused with the conceptual constructs that originate from our minds. How the world exists in itself is beyond our comprehension, as we experience the world from behind the veil of conceptuality. The world as experienced is conventionally true in that it is the world as it appears to human beings; the Mādhyamika can accept this world as conventional but rejects any assertions that our perceptions correspond to the mind-independent world. The Madhyamaka focus on the emptiness of all views can be seen as an encouragement to let go of all pretensions to knowledge about the true nature of reality; hankering after knowledge of the true nature of things, as well as the misguided conviction that one has achieved such knowledge, fuels so much of the attachment, conflict, and suffering which Buddhism is dedicated to eradicating. The enlightened Mādhyamika is one who recognizes the futility of the search for knowledge of things as they really are.

Doubts about the reliability of truth claims concerning the world as it is, independent of our perceptions, have also been an important feature of Western philosophy. This has sometimes led to a thoroughgoing knowledge skepticism, which does not accept any knowledge about things as they really are, although in modern philosophy the arguments for such skepticism are often raised only in order to be refuted. A common

objection to universal knowledge skepticism is that such skeptics must at least claim to know that they have no knowledge of the true nature of things. In the Madhyamaka context, this would mean that they must claim to know that all views are empty, in which case they still have one view about things as they actually are. One response is for knowledge skeptics to accept that this is the one exception to the general claim that we have no knowledge of things in their true nature. However, critics might object that this is a case of special pleading. Alternatively, the knowledge skeptics might choose to bite the bullet and contend that they do not even know that they have no knowledge. This is not necessarily paradoxical. For example, the knowledge skeptics might believe that they have no knowledge without attributing the status of knowledge to this belief. For Mādhyamikas, this would mean that they believe but do not know that all knowledge claims are empty. However, the paradox re-emerges if the assertion that all views are empty is interpreted as universal belief skepticism. That is, the Madhyamaka refutation of views is a refutation of all beliefs about things in their true nature and not just of all knowledge claims. In this case, it would seem that the paradox can be resolved only if the Mādhyamika can passively accept the claim that all views are empty without this acquiescence requiring the level of assent associated with a belief. The view that all views are empty is simply how matters appear to them without its having the status of a belief about how things really are.

The attempt to undermine beliefs and knowledge claims about things in their true nature is a feature of Pyrrhonian Skepticism in ancient Greece and Rome (Hankinson 1995, 21). Moreover, some of the arguments employed in Pyrrhonian Skepticism to undermine ontological assertions have quite close parallels in Madhyamaka texts. For instance, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics contend that attempts to make truth claims credible lead to circularity or an infinite regress (Empiricus 1994, 40–3). The Mādhyamikas also argue that circularity and an infinite regress occur when efforts are made to establish the instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) as reliable (Nāgārjuna 2010, 30–5). Furthermore, Mādhyamikas liken emptiness to a drug that is expelled from the body once its curative work has been done (Candrakīrti 1979, 150–1). A similar metaphor is employed by the Pyrrhonian Skeptics; their skeptical arguments are said to be like purgative medicines which are not to be retained once their task has been accomplished (Empiricus 1994, 118).

There are scholarly disagreements about the nature and precise extent of the various forms of Classical Skepticism. However, it is clear that Pyrrhonian Skepticism aims to produce suspension of judgment (*epochē*) about competing beliefs concerning the true nature of things. The result is said to be a state of tranquillity (*ataraxia*), in which the mind gives up its restless search for what is really the case. The turmoil associated with the search for truth is removed. Nevertheless, the Pyrrhonians claim that they are still able to function in the world; they follow the appearances without making the mistake of believing that the ways things appear correspond to what is really the case. This is arguably similar to the Mādhyamika, who might accept conventional truths while recognizing that they are merely conventional (Hankinson 1995; The Cowherds 2011, 89–130).

While some Mādhyamikas contend that all knowledge claims are empty, others might claim that their skepticism extends only as far as conceptual knowledge claims; this does not appear to have any parallels in Pyrrhonian Skepticism. Such Mādhyamikas

would maintain that there is a special non-conceptual form of knowledge which apprehends the true nature of things without any distorting mental impositions. The veil of conceptuality can be pierced but only by the enlightened consciousness. These Mādhyamikas would contend that knowledge is possible but hold no ontological views because the true nature of things cannot be captured in concepts.

The Yogācāra concept of emptiness is sometimes interpreted in a manner similar to this reading of Madhyamaka. This chapter has presented Yogācāra as a form of ontological idealism, which claims that the external world of objects is actually a creation of the mind. The alternative reading (see Lusthaus 2002) considers Yogācāra to be a form of epistemological idealism which contends that unenlightened minds are unable to distinguish the world as it actually is from the conceptual constructions which we place upon it. The unenlightened mind is thus unable to gain knowledge of things as they really are because it is trapped within a web of conceptual fabrications. The world as we experience it is a projection of our own minds to the extent that it is always a product of our own interpretive categories. These impositions are fueled by ignorance and craving. For example, objects of desire are imbued with a substantiality, an attractiveness, and a permanence which they do not have independent of the desiring mind. The mind thus interprets the world in an appropriative way; objects are there to be grasped by a grasping self. The true nature of things is empty of the conceptual mistakes, such as the duality of grasping subject and grasped objects, which permeate unenlightened experience. The Yogācāra philosophy is a mind-only teaching in the sense that the world as we experience it is a construct of consciousness; however, this does not mean that no mind-independent world exists. The world as it really exists independent of the conceptualizing mind is the dependent aspect understood as the complex causal flux; this is what the enlightened mind sees shorn of the false imaginings that are a feature of unenlightened experience. Contrary to ontological idealism, Yogācāra Buddhism is not making the claim that this causal flux is reducible to a flow of exclusively mental events. However, some scholars have criticized this alternative interpretation of Yogācāra as unsupported by the textual sources, no matter what its philosophical merits might be (Williams 2009, 302–4).

Emptiness as Therapeutic

Buddhist philosophy is inherently therapeutic in intent. It tries to correct mistaken mental attitudes and convictions that lead to suffering (Burton 2010). This characteristic of Buddhism has led to comparisons with and influences on contemporary psychological techniques for improving mental health, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2011).

A similar therapeutic attitude to philosophy is evident in the Hellenistic traditions of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Skepticism, where philosophy is understood in its original etymological sense as “the love of wisdom.” Philosophy treats the diseases of belief that cause people misery. Moreover, philosophical reflection is often complemented by less discursive therapeutic techniques such as self-control, ethical precepts, and meditation. The philosopher is envisaged as a compassionate doctor who endeavors to cure the world’s ills by teaching people to live wisely (Hadot 1995). This contrasts with the

attitude that philosophy is an abstruse and professional academic activity with little obvious relevance to the individual's own life.

This chapter has explained that the concept of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism is contested and open to a variety of interpretations. However, these diverse readings are united in recognizing that emptiness, as a central part of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, has a therapeutic purpose. Understanding emptiness removes the psychological impediments to enlightenment. Emptiness is likened to a medicine because it cures the mind of the causes of suffering, namely, the mental ailments of craving and ignorance. While emptiness might seem abstract, the concept is intended to have an existential impact. Moreover, emptiness is meaningful only in the context of Buddhist praxis; insight into emptiness is part of a broader Buddhist path of ethical training and meditation. Philosophical reflection on emptiness is not intended to be simply an intellectual and theoretical exercise; it is also meant to induce a profound change in one's psychological dispositions and motivations.

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