

CHAPTER TEN

MEANING AND REALITY: A CROSS-TRADITIONAL ENCOUNTER

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1

Different views on the relation between *phenomenal* reality, the world as we consciously experience it, and *noumenal* reality, the world as it is independent from an experiencing subject, have different implications for a collection of interrelated issues of *meaning and reality* including aspects of metaphysics, the philosophy of language, and philosophical methodology. Exploring some of these implications, this paper compares and brings together analytic, continental, and Buddhist approaches, focusing on relevant aspects of the philosophy of Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Dharmakīrti, and Dōgen. *Prima facie*, these philosophers have little in common, and indeed the differences are vast. Even in case of the two Western thinkers there is a fundamental difference between Davidson's anti-dualist identification of phenomenal, experienced reality with the noumenal, real, external world on the one hand, and the bracketing or elimination of noumenal reality at the base of Derrida's thought on the other, which lead to radically different ideas with regards to (the possibility and nature of) objectivity and our linguistic access to the real/external/noumenal world. Nevertheless, there are important similarities between Dharmakīrti's theory of *apoha* and Davidson's and Derrida's theories of *triangulation* and *différance* respectively, and these similarities can be exploited to bridge some of the differences and attempt a constructive engagement. After briefly introducing analytic and continental approaches to meaning and reality (and Davidson's and Derrida's theories in particular) in section 2, and some relevant Buddhist approaches (including Dharmakīrti's and Dōgen's) in section 3, it will be argued in section 4 that Davidson's theory of triangulation as a connection between the noumenal and the phenomenal needs Dharmakīrti's theory of *apoha* as a complement, and that *apoha* is best understood through Derrida's *différance* in turn. A further investigation into the implications of the resulting triangulation-*différance*-*apoha* integration in section 5 (and the concluding section 6) leads to a view on

meaning and reality similar to the *perspectivism* advocated by the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Dōgen: the phenomenal is (mostly) necessarily noumenally real, but partial, one-sided, or incomplete.

2

Depicting a tradition of fruitless speculation about what lies beyond the horizon of experience, Kant wrote in the preface of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) that metaphysics is like “a battlefield seemingly intended for practicing one’s skills in play-fight, on which no combatant was ever able to conquer even the smallest bit of ground and to base permanent possession on victory.”¹ Ironically, Kant’s *Critique* spawned another century of speculative metaphysics, reaching its apex in the neo-Hegelian *absolute idealism* of Bradley *cum suis*, which could only be followed by its antithesis: the unrelenting rejection of metaphysics in early analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, despite the nineteenth century idealist appropriation of parts of Kant’s philosophy and its coloring of early twentieth century Kant interpretation, Kant’s influence on modern philosophy can hardly be overstated.² Kant is often considered to be the last common ancestor of analytic and continental philosophy, and much of the difference between those traditions can be better understood against the background of their respective treatments of the shared Kantian heritage. (Which should not be understood as implying that this fully explains those differences.) The key feature of Kant’s thought is his metaphysical dualism. Kant distinguished phenomenal appearances from noumenal things-in-themselves.³ The phenomenal is the world as we (consciously) experience it, and the noumenal is the world as it “really” is, independent from any experiencing subject. By definition, all experience is phenomenal, and the noumenal is beyond experience, and therefore, metaphysical speculation

¹ (...) daß sie vielmehr ein Kampfplatz ist, der ganz eigentlich dazu bestimmt zu sein scheint, seine Kräfte im Spiegefechte zu üben, auf dem noch niemals irgend ein Fechter sich auch den kleinsten Platz hat erkämpfen und auf seinen Sieg einen dauerhaften Besitz gründen können. (Bxv)

Except where noted otherwise, all translations in this paper are my own. The original fragments will be given in footnotes.

² For a brief overview of the reception and interpretation of Kant’s thought in the 19th and 20th century, see Gardner (1999), ch. 10.

³ Whether this should be understood as a distinction of *worlds* (or realities) or *aspects* (of the same world/reality) is not entirely clear, however, and the last decades saw the growth of a sizable literature on this question.

about the noumenal is pointless. (Hence, Kant's above-quoted rejection of the "battlefield" of such metaphysical speculation.) Therefore, metaphysics should be concerned with the fundamental structure of the phenomenal world instead.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, both in the Anglo-Saxon world and in continental Europe, philosophy turned away from metaphysical speculation, but different philosophers and different emerging schools of thought did by no means turn in similar directions. Phenomenology, which would become the dominant tradition in continental philosophy, *bracketed* the noumenal by explicitly and exclusively focusing on the phenomenal (hence its name). Early analytic philosophy, on the other hand, adopted a kind of 'common sense' realism according to which the experienced (phenomenal) world *is* the real, external (noumenal) world, and consequently, rejected the Kantian dualism (including the associated terminology). But by identifying the phenomenal with (or as) the noumenal, such *anti-dualism* similarly directs attention to phenomenal reality. A few decades earlier, Nietzsche had also rejected the Kantian dualism, but while (analytic) "common sense" realism identifies the noumenal with the phenomenal, Nietzsche rejected the idea of a noumenal, "true" world. Furthermore, in *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1889) he argued that with giving up the idea of a noumenal world, the idea of a phenomenal world makes no sense either, and thus, that we have to give up both. "We have abolished the true world: what world is left? the world of appearances perhaps? . . . But no! *with the true world, we also abolished the world of appearances!*"⁴ This rejection of phenomenal reality (or realities), however, seems to be terminological more than substantial considering that Nietzsche's *perspectivism* entails a multitude of perspectives, which are effectively different phenomenal realities. Hence, it is the *concept* of the phenomenal as part of the noumenal—phenomenal dualism that Nietzsche rejected, not the phenomenal as (an) experienced reality.

What the different versions of the anti-metaphysical turn had in common was a shift of focus away from speculation about the noumenal, and towards the phenomenal. The phenomenal is conceptual, however; that is, phenomenal experience—the only kind of experience there is—is experience *as*: experience of cows *as* cows, of water *as* water, and of weddings

⁴ Die wahre Welt haben wir abgeschafft: welche Welt blieb übrig? die scheinbare vielleicht? . . . Aber nein! *mit der wahren Welt haben wir auch die scheinbare abgeschafft!* (§IV.6).

as weddings; and this conceptuality of the phenomenal means that the exclusion of a *distinct* noumenal sphere from philosophical analysis comes with important consequences not just for metaphysics, but also for the philosophy of language and for philosophical methodology (meta-philosophy), or shorter: for philosophical thought about *meaning and reality*. The “common sense” realist identification of noumena and phenomena as in most of analytic philosophy implies that words or meanings are *directly* grounded in (noumenally) real things, and that language gives us direct access to the (noumenally) real world, which leads to a near dogmatic belief in the authority of ordinary language. (This does not mean that there can be no contexts or occasions in which ordinary language is deceptive, but that on the whole, ordinary language is a reliable guide to objective reality.) The bracketing or elimination of the noumenal as in much of twentieth century continental philosophy, on the other hand, detaches meaning from (noumenal) reality, which can ultimately only lead to relativism and/or skepticism about language, about cognitive access to (noumenal) reality, and about the possibility of objectivity (regardless of whether these consequences were/are universally accepted). Nietzsche expressed such skepticism about language *and* about the belief in language as a reliable guide to objective truth and reality (the opposite point of view) with characteristic trenchancy in his *Menschliches Allzumenschliches* (1878):

The meaning of language for the development of culture is situated in [the fact] 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.⁵

Among representatives of the analytic and continental traditions, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida stand out for the rigor of their inquiries into the implications for issues of meaning and reality of, respectively, analytic anti-dualism and continental “phenomenalism” or noumenal nihilism.

⁵ 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 Mensch an die Begriffe und Namen der Dinge als an *aternalae 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. (§1.11)

Many of the main strands in continental philosophy—phenomenology, structuralism, Nietzsche, Hegel—come together in the work of Derrida, who in his theory of *différance* (1968), advanced what is probably the most thorough exploration of the consequences of bracketing or eliminating the noumenal. Meaning (then) cannot be grounded in (noumenal) reality, this is the unmentioned, implicit starting point of Derrida’s analysis, but that means that words and meanings can only point to other words and meanings. Meaning is *deferred* indefinitely into a network of *differences*, different words, different meanings: “Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by a systematic play of differences.”⁶ This deferment of meaning also applies to ‘*différance*’ itself, even though Derrida claims that this is “neither a word nor a concept” (p. 2), and consequently, his explanation illustrates more than defines, encircles more than pinpoints—it *defers*. The methodological implications of *différance* reach further than to its own elucidation, however: if meaning is always and necessarily deferred into a network of differences, attempts to fix meanings by means of definitions, and the conceptual rigor associated therewith, are misleading and concealing more than clarifying. And rather than constructing such concealments, they should be revealed, or deconstructed (see also section 5).

Within the analytic tradition, Donald Davidson (although sometimes classified as a “post-analytic” philosopher) is one of the most outspoken critics of dualism. Most famously, Davidson rejected scheme—content dualism in his “On the very idea of a conceptual scheme” (1974), but underlying that rejection and his related arguments against subjectivity and massive error (*e.g.* 1988) is a more fundamental rejection of noumenal—phenomenal dualism (Brons 2011). The main argument for Davidson’s rejection of such metaphysical dualism is that “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world” (1977, 201). This argument appears in different forms in many places in his work, and is in turn supported by the idea that “communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects” (1983, 151). Davidson elaborated this latter idea in his theory of “triangulation” (1982), which came to play a central role in his later philosophy (*e.g.* 1990; 1991; 1992;

⁶ Tout concept est en droit et essentiellement inscrit dans une chaîne ou dans un système à l’intérieur duquel il renvoie à l’autre, aux autres concepts, par jeu systématique de différences. (Derrida 1968, 11)

1994). The theory of triangulation is a transcendental argument intended to establish that only in a process that involves (at least) two speakers and a shared object (of reference) a concept can have (or get) (empirical) content, and propositional thought and objectivity are possible. If (a substantial subset of) concepts are indeed *necessarily* formed in reference to shared objects, actually having concepts (and/or actually communicating) implies that this necessary condition must be fulfilled (that is the nature of a transcendental argument).⁷ This means, that—if Davidson’s argument is successful—communication simultaneously proves other minds, an external world, and the correspondence of our experience (or experiential categories) to that external world (Sosa 2003). In other words, it establishes the identity of the noumenal and the phenomenal.

3

Stepping back from the continental—analytic divide, we find in Buddhist philosophy a collection of traditions and schools of thought as concerned with questions of meaning and reality and as diverse in theories and points of view as the Western traditions. However, in Buddhism some answers are barred from the outset. According to the Buddha,⁸ the ‘right view’ is a middle path between the extremes of *absolutism* and *nihilism*. ‘Absolutism’ is the belief that *conventional* (phenomenal) categories are *ultimately* (noumenally) real,⁹ and that (conventional/phenomenal) concepts accurately grasp noumenal reality. This is essentially identical to the anti-dualism commonly found in analytic philosophy (including Davidson’s variant; see above). ‘Nihilism’ is the rejection of the conventional (phenomenal) because of its ultimate (noumenal) unreality. Contrary to Western/Nietzschean *noumenal nihilism*, the kind of nihilism rejected by the Buddha is

⁷ Although Davidson’s transcendental argument may seem to be related to the Kantian original, it is considerably more far-reaching. According to Kant, ‘the categories’ are necessary conditions for the possibility of empirical knowledge. According to Davidson, a shared external world is a necessary condition for that same possibility (and more, language and rationality specifically). Hence, while Kant’s necessary condition is still within the realm of phenomenal reality, Davidson’s argument brings the noumenal within reach.

⁸ “The Buddha” here refers to the mythical author of the ideas presented in the *Pali Canon*, not unlike, for example, Lao Zi’s (老子) mythical authorship of the *Dao-De-Jing* (道德經).

⁹ In Buddhist philosophical terminology, the concepts closest to noumenal and phenomenal reality are ultimate reality (*paramārthasat*) and conventional reality (*saṃvṛtisat*) respectively.

phenomenal nihilism: where the latter rejects the phenomenal, noumenal nihilism affirms it (and rejects the noumenal instead).

Like most of recent Western philosophy, much of Buddhist philosophy rejects dualism, but Buddhist *non-dualism* is of a very different nature than the Western variants. Rather than denying the philosophical relevance of the noumenal—phenomenal distinction or one of its “poles” or “levels”, Buddhist non-dualism accepts the distinction, but argues that ultimately, the two “poles” are not fundamentally different. For example, according to *Yogācāra* (or *Cittamātra*), everything—both the conventional/phenomenal and the ultimate/noumenal—is mind or consciousness only (which is what “*cittamātra*” means). Dualist schools, on the other hand, sharply contrast the two kinds or levels of reality. According to *Sautrāntika*, for example, behind the familiar phenomenal/conventional appearances hides a noumenal/ultimate reality consisting of *svalakṣaṇa*, unique spatio-temporally non-extended part-less “atoms”.

Any strict distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal owes an explanation of the connection there between. The most rigorous theory of this connection within Buddhist philosophy can be found in the work of the “logicians” or “epistemologists” Dignāga (5–6th century) and Dharmakīrti (7th century). Dignāga and Dharmakīrti switched between Sautrāntika and Yogācāra in different parts of their work, but most of their epistemological writings are from a Sautrāntika perspective. In their philosophical system(s), phenomenal/conventional (conceptually determinate) experience and noumenal/ultimate reality are connected—through perception—by *apoha* (literally: “denial”, “negation”, “exclusion”, etc.). This concept of “*apoha*” plays a role in two different but related theoretical contexts: conceptual construction (*kalpana*) and concept formation. In the former we construct particular phenomena in opposition to what they are not—we perceive a particular cow as *not non-cow*; in the latter we create (pseudo-)universals rather than particular phenomena. Dignāga introduced the concept in the former context: conceptual construction (*kalpana*) is a form of inference (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 5.1) which works by means of “exclusion”: *apoha* (id. 5.17). Dharmakīrti further elaborated Dignāga’s idea (and philosophy in general) and applied it to concept formation (mostly in the auto-commentary to his *Pramāṇavārttika*; Dreyfus 1997; 2011). (We will return to *apoha* in section 4.)

Probably the most influential *non-dualist* theory is that by Nāgārjuna (2nd–3rd century), the founder of the Mādhyamaka school in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, Nāgārjuna argued that conventional (phenomenal) determinations (conceptualizations) are empty

(of self-essence), but also that the emptiness of phenomena is itself empty, and therefore, that ultimate/noumenal truth/reality is (ultimately) conventional as well.¹⁰ Consequently, according to Nāgārjuna's non-dualism, conventional reality is not any less real than ultimate reality and *vice versa*.

Most of Chinese Buddhist philosophy (and its Japanese and Korean offshoots) belongs to the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism, and of the schools within that branch, Mādhyamaka has been the most influential. Chinese Buddhism, however, competed for attention with Daoism, which at least superficially seems to share many concerns and ideas (and which provided many of the terms for translation of Buddhist texts). This led to a transformation of Buddhism in general, and Mādhyamaka non-dualism in particular (but also of Daoism, which borrowed many terms and ideas from Buddhism in turn). The general tendency of this process was a gradual shift from Nāgārjuna's *conventionality of the (ultimately) real* to the *(ultimate) reality of the conventional*. The result—as summarized by Fung Yu-lan (馮友蘭; 1948)—was the idea that:

The reality of the Buddha-nature [noumenal reality] is itself the phenomenal world, (...). There is no other reality outside the phenomenal world, (...). Some people in their Ignorance, see only the phenomenal world, but not the reality of the Buddha-nature. Other people, in their Enlightenment, see the Buddha-nature, but this Buddha-nature is still the phenomenal world. What these two kinds of people see is the same, but what one person sees in his Enlightenment has a significance quite different from what the other person sees in his Ignorance. (pp. 252–3, trans. Derk Bodde)

The process of transformation took many centuries, however, and can be *roughly* divided in three “phases”, although these are not nearly as neatly separable and distinct as the term “phase” may suggest (hence, the scare quotes). Representative of the “first phase” is Seng Zhao (僧肇; 4–5th century), a key figure in early Chinese Buddhist philosophy. Seng Zhao argued for a non-dualism similar to Nāgārjuna's, but his strongly Daoist-influenced writings helped lay the foundations for the later Buddhist-Daoist entanglement and competition. Integrating Buddhist and Daoist skepticism about language as a reliable guide to (ultimate) reality,¹¹ and planting the seed for

¹⁰ This idea is commonly known as the *emptiness of emptiness*, although that phrase does not occur in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Rather, the ‘emptiness of emptiness’ is a slogan-like summary of 24:18. It should further be noted that there is relatively little agreement in the (old and new) secondary literature on what exactly the ‘emptiness of emptiness’ entails.

¹¹ On the Buddhist-Daoist entanglement and its origins in competition in the same attention space, see Sharf (2002). On skepticism about language in the *Dao-De-Jing*

the ‘second phase’, he wrote in his *Treatise on the Emptiness of the Unreal* (不真空論; chapter 2 of the *Zhaolun* 肇論):

A thing is not identical with its name, which does not approach/capture the [ultimately] real thing; a name is not identical with a thing, and thus does not lead to [ultimate] truth. And this being so, ultimate truth remains in silence, beyond description/elucidation by names. How could spoken or written words even recognize/distinguish it?¹²

The “second phase” is characterized by a quietism born from the idea that ultimate reality is beyond language and conceptual distinctions. Representative of this phase are the influential, heavily Daoist-influenced eighth century apocrypha, the *Treasure Store Treatise* (寶藏論; *TST*), and early *Chan/Zen* (禪), but in its embryonic form, the main idea was already present in the ‘first phase’, as evident from the quote by Seng Zhao above. Ultimate reality “utterly transcends all perception and thus cannot be measured by thought. It utterly transcends all reckoning and thus cannot be captured in words” (*TST*, trans. Sharf 2002, 208). Nevertheless, the ‘second phase’ was not a dualism of conceptualized phenomena and an absolutely non-conceptual and non-differentiated ultimate (noumenal) reality (which this quote may seem to suggest), but still advocated non-dualism. For example, *Chan/Zen* patriarch Hui Neng (慧能; 7–8th century), who expressed similar views about the non-conceptuality and non-differentiatedness of ultimate reality and the associated quietism (albeit much more ambiguously), wrote in his *Commentary on the Diamond Sutra* (金剛經解義; Ch. 13) that “when one realizes that [ultimate] reality is deception [*i.e.* mere convention], one realizes that deception is reality. Then reality and deception disappear together, and there is/exists nothing else.”¹³ (Note the similarity to the first quote by Nietzsche above.)

Nevertheless, there is some tension between the asserted non-dualism, and the *apparent* dualism, which would only be resolved in the “third phase”, completing the shift from the *conventionality of the real* to the *reality of the conventional*. As was the case before, the seed was already

(道德經), see Hansen (1992, Ch. 6); on skepticism in the *Zhuang-Zi* (莊子), see Ivanhoe (1993) and Kjellberg & Ivanhoe eds. (1996), especially the chapter by Loy. Particularly noteworthy in the *Zhuang-Zi* is that the only cases of objective knowledge of ultimate reality mentioned, are those of absolutely wordless knowing how, such as the famous story of the cook in chapter 3.

¹² 是以物不即名而就實、名不即物而履真。然則真諦獨靜於名教之外、豈曰文言之能辨哉。

¹³ 了真即妄。了妄即真。真妄俱泯。無別有法。

planted in the prior phase. The non-dualist rejection of absolute difference between conventional and ultimate reality implies that “there is nothing to be realized, nothing to be attained, and yet if there is no realization or attainment, the mind will forever be confused” (*TST*, trans. Sharf 2002, 159). Building on this, the Japanese *Zen* philosopher Dōgen (13th century) wrote in the chapter *Hosshō* (法性) of the *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏)¹⁴ that “opening flowers and falling leaves [the phenomenal world] is nature (such) as it is. However, fools think that there are no opening flowers and falling leaves in the world of Dharma-nature [ultimate reality].”¹⁵ In other words, the conventional is real, and there is nothing to be realized, *except* this higher-level realization, but this higher-level realization gives conventional phenomena a wholly different significance (see the quote by Fung/Bodde above).

Dōgen’s philosophy (or at least this aspect thereof) is a variety of what Bo Mou (2008) calls ‘*objective perspectivism*’ in distinction of the ‘subjective perspectivism’ most commonly associated with Nietzsche.¹⁶ The essential difference between these two kinds of perspectivism is that the former quite literally assumes that different perspectives (phenomenal realities) just reveal different sides or aspects of the same ultimate/noumenal reality, and thus that perspectival knowledge is not (ultimately) untrue, while according to subjective perspectivism there are *just* perspectives and nothing (noumenal) those perspectives are perspectives on. Superficially, objective perspectivism, such as Dōgen’s, may seem to be a form of absolutism, but that is not (necessarily) the case. Although Dōgen did not reject conventional (phenomenal) categories as ultimately (noumenally) unreal, he did not consider them to accurately grasp noumenal reality either. There are “opening flowers and falling leaves” in ultimate reality, but these conventional designations do not exhaust the ultimately real ‘natures’ of whatever they are pointing at.

The remainder of this paper will argue (in section 4) that Davidson’s theory of triangulation as a connection between the noumenal and the phenomenal needs Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s theory of *apoha* as a complement, and that *apoha* is best understood through Derrida’s *différance*

¹⁴ All further references to texts by Dōgen in this paper are references to chapters of the 75 and 12 chapter versions of the (*kana*) *Shōbōgenzō*.

¹⁵ しかあれば、開花葉落、これ如是性なり。しかあるに、愚人おもはくは、法性界には開花葉落あるべからず。

¹⁶ On Dōgen’s perspectivism, see, for example, Kim (2007) and Davis (2011).

in turn; and (in section 5) that the resulting theory leads to a view on meaning and reality similar to Dōgen's perspectivism.

4

As mentioned above, *apoha* was introduced by Dignāga in his account of conceptual construction (*kalpana*). According to Dignāga, we construct particular phenomena in opposition to what they are not: we perceive a particular cow as not non-cow. Words, therefore, do not directly refer to real things, but rather—as in Derrida's *différance*—meaning is deferred into a network of different conceptual determinations. Dharmakīrti further elaborated and extended Dignāga's philosophy, and applied *apoha* to concept formation, the creation of (pseudo-)universals rather than particular phenomena. Describing Dharmakīrti's theory of concept formation, Dreyfus (2011) writes: "thought and language are causally related to our experiences of things and hence are grounded in reality" (p. 209). This, however, could (in the exact same terms) just as well be a description of Davidson's theory of triangulation.¹⁷ Nevertheless, *apoha* is not some kind of combination of *différance* and triangulation, but significantly differs from both. Even so, the similarity is sufficient to act as a bridge (although perhaps more a bridge to something new that the three of them cross together (while conversing), than just a bridge between them).

In "Dharmakīrti, Davidson, and knowing reality" (Brons 2012), I proposed an integration of *apoha* and triangulation. As suggested by the title, the focus was on Dharmakīrti and Davidson, and Derrida was only mentioned in passing. However, Derrida's notion of *différance* plays a key role in the integration of *apoha* and triangulation proposed in that paper. Below, I will summarize its main argument, focusing more on the

¹⁷ In addition to the writings of Dharmakīrti and Davidson, the idea that language (or at least word learning or concept formation) is *necessarily* tied to the (noumenally) real world *and* to social use of words can also be found in the philosophy of Averroes (Ibn Rushd) (see Leaman 1988) and possibly in Zhuang Zi's (莊子) assertion that "a path is created by walking it, a thing is (called) as it is by it being called so" (2.6: 道行之而成、物謂之而然). (Interestingly, the philosophy of both Averroes and Zhuang Zi can be interpreted as variants of objective perspectivism: Bo Mou (2008) does so explicitly in the case of Zhuang Zi, and especially the final chapter of Leaman's book on Averroes strongly suggests such an interpretation.) What distinguishes Dharmakīrti's and Davidson's theories from those suggested by Averroes and Zhuang Zi, however, is that the former are more explicit about concept formation and are elaborated in much more detail (while especially Zhuang Zi's is mere cryptic suggestion).

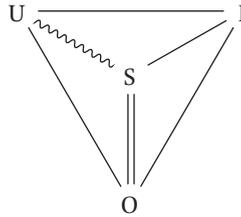


Figure 1: *Davidson's triangle.*

identification of the contributions of the three philosophers involved (Dharmakīrti, Davidson, and Derrida) and their ideas (*apoha*, triangulation, and *différance*). The main addition to this argument is to be found in the next sections, where I will further explore the implications of the integration suggested.

Of the three theories, Davidson's theory of triangulation is the most elaborate and detailed, and most suitable as the backbone or general framework for integration. Triangulation, however, has been understood in many different ways, and has been linked to many different aspects of Davidson's philosophy. In its simplest form, triangulation is a singular occasion of pointing out some object by one communicant to another by means of some *ad hoc* sign. These two communicating creatures and the shared stimulus are the three corners in the 'triangle' (see figure 1). Many of Davidson's papers make use of a notion of triangulation in a less simple form, however: as (a model of) a process of word learning by means of repeated similar signs in the (repeated) presence of similar stimuli (*e.g.* 1990; 1992; 1994).

Either in its 'simple' or in its less simple form, triangulation involves the same triangle graphically represented in figure 1. Obviously, the term 'triangle' is a misnomer if triangles are considered to consist of nothing but three corners and three sides—triangulation involves a fourth element: language (*S* in the figure), which Davidson called the 'base line' on a number of occasions, but which is more properly characterized as the triangle's *pivot*. These four elements are connected by six lines. A communicating creature *U* utters (*wavy line*) some sound *S* (which could in principle also be another kind of sign) in reference¹⁸ (*double line*) to some object, occurrence, or state of affairs *O* perceived (*single line*) by *U*.

¹⁸ "Reference" here, is nothing but the *act* (by the utterer) of referring to something; it should not be confused with the technical term.

Triangulation further involves a second creature *I* that also perceives (*single lines*) the object (etc.) *O*, the sound *S*, and its utterer *U*, and the relationships between these three (uttering: *U-S*, reference: *S-O*, perception: *U-O*; but note that the *awareness of* these relationships is not graphically represented in the figure). By “correlating” these incoming lines, *I* finds or creates the meaning (or “content”) of *S*. Words (as a kind of sign *S*; but not necessarily *all* words) are learned by repetition of this process (often with different people in the roles of *U* and *I* at different occasions, and/or the same people switching roles): by repeated correlation of sufficiently similar verbal signs *S*, sufficiently similar objects *O*, and sufficiently similar utterers *U* (that belong to the same species and seem to speak a similar language, for example).

Apoha comes into the picture when one realizes that *S* comes to designate a class of *non-identical* ‘things’. Consider the following very abstract example to illustrate this: a perceiver (in the role of *I*) has become aware of 9 particulars, which all have one and only one characteristic such that these characteristics are values on a single dimension, and each particular has a unique value on that dimension. Figure 2 shows the positions of the 9 particulars on that single dimension (the *x*-axis, ranging from 0 to 1). The perceiver perceives the difference between the 9 particulars, but at the same time notices that some are less different (or more similar) than others. The pair {d,e} is considerably less different than {c,h}, for example.

Next, assume a second perceiver (in the role of *U*) who, in the presence of *e* (and nothing but *e*) utters ‘def’, and does so again in the presence of *d* (and nothing but *d*), but utters ‘bac’ in the presence of *b* (and nothing but *b*). With this information alone (the utterings and the perceived relative differences), the first perceiver is able to construct two working concepts, ‘bac’ and ‘def’, such that the first refers to {a,b,c}, and the second to {d, . . . ,i}. Further communication may refine these concepts—despite the gap between *c* and *d*, it is in principle possible that *c* is classified as ‘def’ rather than ‘bac’, for example; and there may be a third concept ‘hig’ that refers to {g,h,i} and that restricts ‘def’ to {d,e,f}.

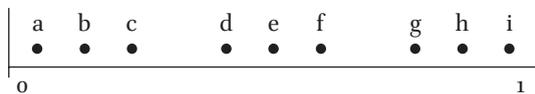


Figure 2.

Let us assume that further triangulations result in the latter restriction of 'def' indeed. The formation of this concept makes those particulars seem even more similar, even identical in their 'def'-instantiating capacity, but that is mere phenomenal illusion. Having a concept 'def' does not mean that the apparently similar elements of {d,e,f} are 'def', that they share a property 'def'-ness, that such a universal 'def'-ness exists, or that *defs* (ultimately/noumenally) exist (as *defs*). All that the "things" we call 'def', the phenomenal *defs*, share is that they are "not non-def". This 'not non-...' is a central notion in *apoha* in its more specific sense as exclusion of difference. It should not be interpreted as a double classical negation 'not not', but available sources do not make clear how 'not non' should be understood exactly either (and consequently, there is little agreement in the secondary literature). The point of the formula 'x is not non-X' is avoiding the ontological commitment to a universal involved in 'x is (an) X'. X marks a class, membership of which is determined by a universal, meaning, or intension, or something similar; and 'x is X' denotes membership of that class ($x \in X$), which implies that there is an X (that the universal X (or X-ness) exists). Any acceptable interpretation of 'not non-...', therefore, should not collapse into $x \in X$, and not commit to the existence of X (or other universals or classes determined thereby) by existentially quantifying over X.

As mentioned in section 3, Dignāga originally introduced the notion of *apoha* in the context of conceptual construction (*kalpana*): we perceive a particular cow as not non-cow. As in Derrida's theory of *différance*, words do not directly refer to real things, but meaning is deferred into a network of different conceptual determinations. Taking this connection between *apoha* and *différance* as starting point for a (re)construction of the *apoha*-ic 'not non-...' (in the context of concept formation) results in an interpretation that satisfies the two criteria mentioned. 'Non-X' then, is deferment into the network of prior triangulatory concept formations: it is a reference to the contextually salient past triangulations as something other than X, or more accurately: as something other than *not non-X*. Non-X is the loose collection of triangulations as not non-Y, non-Z, and so forth. 'Not' (in 'not non-') is classical negation, and thus, 'x is not non-X' means that x is not (sufficiently) similar to one of the members of that loose collection of triangulations as something else: it is not (not non-) Y, not (not non-) Z, and so forth. In other words, the formula 'x is not non-X' means that *there is no * collection of previously triangulated not-non-somethings other than not-non-X, such that x is * similar to the * members of that collection*; wherein each * can be replaced with 'subjectively

contextually salient(ly)'. (See Brons 2012, 45–47 for a more detailed and somewhat formal explanation.)

This interpretation does not result in a commitment to universals (or universal-like classes), but merely to collections of (remembered or reconstructed) particulars loosely bound together by that interpreter's history of triangulations. An obvious objection would be that 'similarity' is too vague and subjective to guarantee success, but repeated triangulations (of similar particulars) progressively disambiguate (dis-)similarity and reduce subjectivity. Moreover, the whole process embeds any singular triangulation in the whole triangulation history of that interpreter, locking all words and concepts together in a single, (more or less) coherent whole; and coherence and incoherence with that history and its result (the web of concepts) also (progressively) disambiguate (dis-)similarity and reduce subjectivity.

Of course it can always happen that the learner does not learn what the teacher has in mind, but as the number of instances increases, and interconnections with further sentences come into play, the chances of this rapidly diminish. (Davidson 1999, 194)

Essential to *apoha*, triangulation, and *différance* (at least in this interpretation) is that the meaning of a word or concept is not some kind of universal, but its embedded triangulation history, a history that, moreover, never stops. Rather, speakers/interpreters (one has to be both to be either) continuously further 'atune'¹⁹ their words and concepts in further communication. And in 'atunement', at least some vagueness clears up.

There is a second, perhaps more fundamental type of vagueness involved in concept formation: the vagueness of what counts as one particular. In addition to the negative classification of 'things' (as not-non-something), *apoha* similarly constructs (at least some of) the 'things' classified themselves. In the above example, illustrated in figure 2, there were nine clearly distinguishable and discrete particulars, and the process of concept formation merely added a convenient (negative) classification. However, as Dharmakīrti pointed out, singular concepts are either grounded in

¹⁹ This notion of 'atunement' is borrowed from Hall and Ames's (1987) *Thinking through Confucius*, in which it is used for a similar process. Interestingly, their Derrida-inspired interpretation of Confucius has similarities with the integrative theory suggested here and in Brons (2012). "Classical Chinese is a system of differences, (...) The meaning of a given sign is (...) determined by its active and passive difference, and that meaning is never altogether present but deferred" (p. 293).

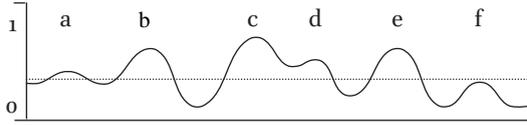


Figure 3.

(noumenally caused) singular effects, *or are purely conventional (saṃketa)*.²⁰ There are cases in which particular-hood itself is determined by (negative) classification, where the objects we (phenomenally) perceive are constructed (*kalpana*), and are, therefore, conventional. To illustrate this, consider again a rather abstract example. Figure 3 shows a continuum on one spatial dimension (the *x*-axis), and with one type of characteristic with infinite values between two extremes (0 and 1; the *y*-axis)—a bit like one-dimensional pumpkin soup with solidity on the *y*-axis.

Given the right circumstances, an agent could form a concept ‘gu’ (as ‘not non-gu’), but in the same way that particulars could be grouped together differently in case of the previous example, in this case particular-hood itself can be constructed differently. For example, there may be an absolute threshold, the dotted line in the figure, making the concept of ‘gu’ applicable to a, b, {c,d}, and e; or a relative threshold, which might exclude a, but include f; and depending on the convention constructed, different bumps in the line are called ‘gu’, and c and d may be considered one *gu* or two. Whatever the rule for distinguishing ‘gu’ from ‘non-gu’, it is nothing more than a (constitutive) rule, a convention (*saṃketa*). There are no real (discrete) noumenal *gus* (as a plural of *gu*); it is that convention that creates (constructs) phenomenal instances of ‘gu’. In other words, the thing-ness (or particular-hood) of (at least) some perceived ‘things’ is itself phenomenal. (And indeed, the 9 particulars in figure 2—as individual, discrete particulars—may be phenomenal, in which case triangulation adds a further layer of phenomenal classification.) It is, however, the same process of *apoha*-ic triangulation, outlined above that constructs such ‘thing-ness’, and by implication, in some cases this process simultaneously creates and classifies the phenomenon.

²⁰ “Eka-vacanam api tad-eka-śakti-sūcana-arthaṃ saṃketa-paratantraṃ vā” (autocommentary (PVSV) at *Pramāṇavārttika* 1.141–142). Note that the expression ‘(noumenally caused) singular effects’ is not an accurate translation of “eka-śakti-sūcana-artha” but a summary of what this fragment refers to: the capacity of a collection of *svalakṣaṇa* (unique spatio-temporally non-extended part-less noumena) to have a singular effect.

At bottom, Davidson's and Derrida's projects are deeply incompatible. Aside from differences in aims and purposes, they differ fundamentally with regards to issues of meaning and reality. Davidson's anti-dualist identification of phenomena with noumena and the continental bracketing or elimination of the noumenal in which Derrida's thought is rooted lead to radically different ideas with regards to objectivity and our linguistic access to the (real/external) world. Dharmakīrti's theory of *apoha*-ic concept formation to some extent bridges the difference and provides a possible shared framework for constructive engagement, but the above interpretation and reconstruction of *apoha* is an interpretation *through* triangulation and *différance* in turn. Hence, the encounter is a three-way dialogue from the start. Furthermore, although this "*apoha*-triangulation-*différance* integration" seems compatible with these three theories if those are taken out of their context, it has implications for thought on meaning and reality that differ from Davidson, Derrida, and Dharmakīrti.

The core idea of both triangulation and *apoha*-ic concept formation is that words and phenomena are grounded in the noumenal world through a conjunction of a number of conditions—there must be at least two agents that have the ability to communicate, and that are perceiving the same "things" and the same similarities and differences between those "things", and at least one of those agents uses similar signs in the presence of (or to refer to) perceived to be similar objects. Where they fundamentally differ, is in the nature of classification of (relevant) experiences of "things"—while *apoha* as exclusion loosely groups experiences based on difference, or *différance*, Davidson implicitly assumes a non-constructive, similarity-based form of classification. Consequently, 'def' is not defined by difference from 'non-def', but by similarity between the things labeled as 'def', which suggests perceiving them as instantiations of 'def', as *defs*. In other words, contrary to *apoha*, classification based on similarity invites (but not justifies) the idea that having a concept 'def' implies that there are *defs*, and therefore, that phenomena are noumena and that language gives us more or less direct access to the (real) world. And it is exactly this illegitimate conclusion that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti wanted to avoid.

On the other hand, and this is a key point, having a concept of 'def' does imply that there are shared experiences in which that concept is grounded, and as Davidson suggests (albeit not in these terms), the ultimate cause of such *shared* experiences can only be noumenal. Furthermore, the (Buddhist) rejection of a noumenal category corresponding with

(phenomenal) ‘def’ because of the non-identity of its supposed members implies that we are (or can become) aware of that non-identity. And if that is the case, we can triangulate and conceptualize the difference(s). Perhaps every ‘thing’ that is classified as (not-non-) ‘def’ is uniquely different, and every ‘thing’ constructed as ‘gu’ is merely a conventional construction, and therefore, there *really* are no *defs* and *gus*, but we can be (or become) aware of those differences, conventions and constructions and describe those. Hence, conceptual categories are deceptive or illusory only to the extent of our (contingent) inability or unwillingness to ‘see’ beyond (ordinary) words. Aside from that contingency (or unwillingness), phenomenal perception can only be subjective, deceptive, or illusory in the minimal sense that Davidson (1988, 45) considered “mere empirical accident without philosophical significance”.

The necessary noumenal grounding of conceptual determinations also implies that they are not (completely) untrue, but merely incomplete (or partial) and/or too crude. Consequently, the phenomenal is (ultimately) real, but always one-sided, or perspectival. “The way of seeing mountains and waters differs according to the type of being”,²¹ wrote Dōgen (in *Sansuigyō* 山水經). Different beings, different contexts, different backgrounds and points of view involve different perspectives. From these different perspectives, different *aspects* of the same real ‘thing’ are perceived, leading to different conceptualizations, and “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 [these] numerous aspects, we can see and understand only those that we have developed the capability (eyes of learning) to” (*Genjō-kōan* 現成公案).²² Nevertheless, what we thus “see” from a particular perspective is not some kind of illusion to be erased by learning to “see clearly”. A thought before seeing clearly is just that, a thought before clarification, but that does not make it a wrong thought,²³ and “at the time of seeing clearly that thought is not erased (made lost)” (*Hosshō*).²⁴

²¹ おほよそ山水をみること、種類にしたがひて不同あり。

²² 塵中格外、おほく様子を帶せりといへども、參學眼力のおよぶばかりを見取會取するなり。

²³ That a conceptualization (determination) is not necessarily mistaken in Dōgen’s view is also evident from the occurrence of the term ‘correct determination/discrimination’ (正分別) in the chapter *Ippyakuhachi-hōmyōmon* (一百八法明門) of the 12 chapter edition of the *Shōbōgenzō* (but only there).

²⁴ さきより脱出あらん向來の思量、それ邪思量なるにあらず、ただあきらめざるべきの思量なり。あきらめんとき、この思量をして失せしむるにあらず。

It was argued above that conceptual categories are deceptive or illusory only to the extent of our (contingent) inability or unwillingness to “see” *beyond* (ordinary) words. This metaphor of ‘seeing beyond words’ is a central theme in many currents of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist philosophy, most famously *Chan/Zen*. It is often interpreted as conscious, non-conceptual perception (or experience), but it is controversial whether that is possible, and even though this interpretation may be correct for some Buddhist thinkers, it does not seem to be what Dōgen intended.²⁵ The point here is not such conscious, non-conceptual experience, but a critical examination of the categories given in our (ordinary) language. Such “critical examination” necessarily takes place *in* language—determination of non-identity of the members of a conceptual class requires further triangulation(s) and conceptualization or description. “Seeing beyond (ordinary) words”, or “seeing clearly” to speak with Dōgen, does not *erase* (prior) conceptual determinations (see the quote from *Hosshō* above); it *extends* rather than rejects language, and it is still “seeing through words”, but “seeing through” in *both* senses of “through”.

Derrida (1967; see also 1971) made a similar point with regards to *deconstruction*, which aims at revealing and overturning the inherent, but often hidden oppositions between pairs of concepts and/or the hierarchies between them (an idea he inherited from de Saussure’s and Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism). Deconstruction cannot go (completely) beyond such oppositions because the possibility of language itself depends on opposing what is *x* to what is not, to difference, *différance*, or *apoha*. Deconstruction can expose oppositions and the mis- and preconceptions they conceal, but in doing so it necessarily makes use of and/or newly creates further concepts that involve further oppositions.

6

The continental disconnection of language from (noumenal) reality has more far-reaching consequences than just the holistic deferment of meaning (section 2): it makes language impossible. Language, concepts, communication, but also rationality and objectivity require a shared noumenal

²⁵ There is considerable disagreement among Dōgen scholars about this (see Heine 2012 for an overview), but the current consensus among academic (as opposed to monastic) Dōgen scholars seems to be that Dōgen did not think of Enlightenment as involving some kind of non-conceptual, or non-, extra-, or pan-perspectival perception.

world to anchor words (section 4). Nevertheless, this anchoring or grounding through triangulation and/or *apoha* does not establish a necessary one-to-one identity between words (phenomenal categories) and discrete noumenally real things, but merely the necessity of *some* noumenal ground for our most basic phenomenal categorizations. Furthermore, triangulation and *apoha* anchor words in the world, but this can only work by simultaneously anchoring them in a network of different words, different conceptual determinations, different triangulations (section 4; see also Brons 2012). Hence, triangulation implies and leads to *différance*, to the deferment of meaning into that network, to the *apoha*-ic ‘not non’.

Nevertheless, the necessary grounding of words in the real world implies that language cannot be *radically* deceptive, that conceptual designations are not necessarily and/or completely illusory, as Buddhist (and other) skeptics of language have suggested (section 3). Language is deceptive to some extent, that much can be granted, but only to *some* extent, and the necessary (social) grounding of words in the (ultimately) real world also implies the possibility of uncovering “deception” (section 5). It enables further triangulations, changes of perspective, further explorations and analyses in an attempt to “see beyond (ordinary) words”, but any such exploration can only proceed within the network of similar and different words, simultaneously confronting that network, stretching it, deconstructing it. *Thus conceived*, further triangulations and deconstruction, although diametrically opposed in their original theoretical foundations, serve the same purpose: attempting to look further, uncovering deception, getting closer to truth and reality (but without ever completely arriving).

Language is not radically deceptive; words are (ultimately) grounded in the noumenal world, and the phenomenal is real,²⁶ but any phenomenal reality is just one way of grasping (or pointing at) the noumenal, just one perspective, and therefore, one-sided, partial, incomplete. Dōgen pointed out that we can only see and understand what we have learned to see and understand (section 5), but that is an invitation to learn to see more, not a condemnation to ignorance. We can learn to see further; only “foolishness” stands in the way:

Although people now have a deep understanding of the contents (heart) of seas and rivers, we still do not know how dragons and fish understand and

²⁶ Note that this is just another way of phrasing the outcome of the transformation of Chinese Buddhism sketched in section 3, summarized as a gradual shift from the *conventionality of the real* to the *reality of the conventional*.

use water. Do not foolishly assume that all kinds of beings use as water that what we understand as water. (*Sansuigyō*)^{27, 28}

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²⁷ いま人間には、海のころ、江のころを、ふかく水と知見せりといへども、龍魚等、いかなるものをもて水と知見し、水と使用すといまだしらず。おろかにおが水と知見するを、いつれのたぐひも水にもちゐるらんと認ずることなかれ。

For the opposite kind of "foolishness", see the quote by Dōgen in section 3. These two kinds of foolishness are related to the Buddha's rejection of absolutism and nihilism (see section 3). The "foolishness" mentioned in section 3 (discarding phenomena as ultimately real) is comparable (but not identical) to nihilism, while the 'foolishness' of the quote in this section (ignoring other perspectives) is related to absolutism (as absolutizing one's own perspective).

²⁸ I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

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