

6

Buddhist Dependence

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1 Introduction: Orientation

Many issues in Western philosophy were discussed with great sophistication in the Eastern philosophical traditions. A prime example of this is metaphysical dependence.¹ This is absolutely central to Buddhist metaphysics.² Indeed, there is a wide variety of views about, in particular, the structure of metaphysical dependence. In this essay, I will explain some of these views, and some of their ramifications. The aim is neither to give a scholarly account of any of these views, nor to argue for or against any one of them. Rather, the point of the essay is to open the eyes of philosophers who know little of the Eastern philosophical traditions to important possibilities of which they are likely to be unaware.

In Section 3 of this essay, I will explain three Buddhist positions concerning metaphysical dependence: those of Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, and Huayan.³ In Section 4, I will turn to some ways in which these positions engage with some Western debates. But first, for those readers whose knowledge of the history and development of Buddhist philosophy may be incomplete, I will explain enough of this in Section 2 to situate what is to follow.

¹ In contemporary Western philosophy, the topic is discussed under a variety of names, such as *ontological dependence* and *grounding*. Moreover, there seems to be little unanimity as to whether there is just one relationship here, or, if not, how the different varieties of the species are related. For general discussions, see Tahko and Lowe (2015), and Bliss and Trogdon (2014). I use the term *metaphysical dependence* as a catch-all term, to cover any sort of relationship concerning how some things depend for whatever form of being they have on other things. More fine-grained distinctions are unnecessary for our purposes.

² I certainly do not want to suggest that the topic is unimportant in other Asian traditions, such as the Vedic and Daoist ones. However, it is better for people who know more about these traditions than I do to write about these matters.

³ Again, I do not want to suggest that there are not relevant and interesting matters in other parts of the tradition, such as Yogācāra and Tiantai; but one can do only so much in one essay.

2 A Little History and Geography

Buddhist thought started with the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. His dates are uncertain, but he flourished around 450 BCE; and his ideas were developed in a canonical way for the next 500 years or so. The philosophical part of this development was called *Abhidharma* (higher teachings). There were many Abhidharma schools. The only one to survive to this day is *Theravāda* (Way of the Elders).

Around the turn of the Common Era, novel ideas emerged, which were critical of the older tradition. This generated a new kind of Buddhism: *Mahāyāna*. The foundational philosopher of this kind of Buddhism was Nāgārjuna. Dates are, again, uncertain; but he flourished around 200 CE. He founded the version of Mahāyāna Buddhism called *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way).

Buddhist thought died out in India around the twelfth century, but by that time it had spread to the rest of Asia; Theravada going South East, and Mahāyāna going North West into central Asia, and thence, across the Silk Route, into East Asia. It entered China around the turn of the Common Era, where it met the indigenous philosophical traditions: Confucianism and Daoism. Daoism, in particular, exerted a crucial influence on Chinese Buddhist thought.⁴ This resulted in the emergence of distinctively Chinese forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, around the sixth century.

Some of these, such as *Chan* (Jap: *Zen*) are still extant. But perhaps the most philosophically sophisticated of these flourished in China for only a few hundred years (though it still has a presence in Korea and Japan), many of its ideas being incorporated into other forms of Buddhism (and indeed, into Neo-Confucianism). This was *Huayan* (Skt: *Avatamsaka*; Kor: *Hwaeom*; Jap: *Kegon*; Eng: *Flower Garland*) Buddhism, named after the sūtra it took to be most important. The most influential philosopher in this tradition was Fazang, traditionally dated as 643–712.⁵

3 Metaphysical Dependence in the Buddhist Traditions

With this background, let us turn to our three views concerning metaphysical dependence.

3.1 *Well-founded Buddhism*

It is common to all Buddhisms that the world of our common experience is a world of dependent origination, *pratītyasamutpāda*. Nothing is permanent: things come into existence when causes and conditions are ripe, and go out of existence in the same way. Now, how should one think of a person in this context?⁶

⁴ Buddhism (Mahāyāna) entered Tibet relatively late in the piece, in the eighth century. The indigenous Tibetan views did not have an impact of such magnitude.

⁵ For good introductions to the history of Buddhist thought, see Mitchell (2002), Siderits (2007), and Williams (2009).

⁶ For what follows, see Siderits (2007), chs 3 and 6.

The understanding of a person that developed in the Abhidharma literature was as follows. Consider a car. This comes into existence when its parts are put together. The parts interact with each other and the environment; they wear out and are replaced; and they finally fall apart entirely. Persons are just like that. True, their parts (*skandas*), unlike the car's, are both material (*rūpa*) and mental. But otherwise the story is the same. Of course we can think of this dynamically evolving bunch of parts as a single thing, a person; we can even give it a name, say 'Bertrand Russell'; but this is just a matter of convenience.

The Abhidharma philosophers could see nothing special about people in this way. Anything with parts, like our friend the car, is exactly the same. Indeed, what *anything* in our common world of experience is, depends on what its parts are and how we think about them.

So take the car, again, as an example. This depends on its wheels, engine, chassis, and so on. The engine depends on its combustion chambers, fuel-injection system, and so on. If we keep decomposing in this way, do we come to things where no further decomposition is possible? The Abhidharma philosophers thought that the answer was obviously: yes. If something is a conceptual construction, there must be something, *dharmas*, out of which it is constructed. You can't make something out of nothing. This would seem to be the point when Asaṅga (*fl.* 4th century CE), in a late Abhidharma text, says:

Denying the mere thing with respect to dharmas such as rūpa and the like, neither reality nor conceptual fiction is possible. For instance, where there are the skandhas of rūpa etc., there is the conceptual fiction of the person. And where they are not, the conceptual fiction of the person is unreal. Likewise if there is a mere thing with respect to dharmas like rūpa etc., then the use of convenient designators concerning dharmas such as rūpa and the like is appropriate. If not then the use of convenient designators is unreal.⁷

There was some dispute about the nature of the *dharmas*. (A common view was that they are tropes of some kind.) But, as all agreed, they are just as impermanent as anything else; what distinguishes them is the fact that they are what they are independently of anything else (parts, concepts, each other). They have *svabhāva* (self-being).

The Abhidharma philosophers described the picture as one of two realities.⁸ There is the fundamental reality composed of *dharmas*—ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*); then there is the conceptual reality constructed out of this—conventional reality (*samvṛti-satya*).

Clearly, the whole picture paints a story concerning ontological dependence. Where does it lie in the taxonomy of the Introduction to this volume? It is obviously some

⁷ *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, 30–2. Translation by Mark Siderits.

⁸ The Sanskrit word is *satya*. This can mean either *truth* or *reality*. It is standard to translate the word as *truth*. Of course if there are two realities, there are also two (sets of) truths: one about each of the realities. But in the present context, and others that we will come to soon, the best translation is 'reality'.

kind of foundationalism, the foundational elements being the *dharmas*. Does it endorse anti-reflexivity, anti-symmetry, and transitivity? There is, as far as I know, no explicit discussion of these matters in the texts, but let us extrapolate. The Abhidharma philosophers would probably have endorsed transitivity. If the car depends on its engine, and the engine depends on its fuel injector, the car depends on its fuel injector. Moreover, a whole would appear to depend on its parts, in a way that the parts do not depend on the whole.⁹ So the dependence relation would seem to be anti-symmetric. Since anti-symmetry entails anti-reflexivity, we have that as well. So this puts us in case 2 of the taxonomy laid out in Section 2 of Chapter 0 in this volume.

3.2 *Non-well-founded Buddhism*

We now turn to Madhyamaka. Madhyamaka entirely rejected the notion of the *dharmas*. *Nothing* has *svabhāva*. Everything is what it is by relating to other things. The Madhyama philosophers accepted the Abhidharma view that the relations in question could be mereological and conceptual, but also added a third important dimension: causal. (Thus, persons are what they are, for example, because of their relations to their parents, their genetic structure, etc.) Everything depends on other things in some or all of these ways. That is, all things are empty (*śūnya*) of self-being.¹⁰

In much of his enormously influential text, the *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā* (MMK, Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way) Nāgārjuna mounts the case that nothing has *svabhāva*.¹¹ He does this by running through all the things one might suppose to have it (causation, consciousness, space, and so on), and rejecting each one. Many of the arguments are *reductio* arguments. We assume that something has *svabhāva* and show that this cannot be.¹² We will not consider the arguments in any detail here.

More to the point in this context, one might expect Nāgārjuna to have rejected the distinction between the two realities. But he does not (MMK XXIV: 8–10):

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand
The distinction between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.¹³

⁹ By 'part' here, I mean *proper part*, i.e. a part distinct from the whole.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this and what follows, see Siderits (2007), ch. 9, and Williams (2009), ch. 3.

¹¹ It must be said that this is a highly cryptic text, and there can be significant differences as to how to understand its claims. I try not to go beyond a general consensus in what follows.

¹² The arguments themselves are often by cases, though the cases are not the ones familiar to Western philosophy—*true* and *false*—but the four delivered by the *catuṣkoṭi* (Eng: four corners)—*true*, *false*, *both*, and *neither*.

¹³ Translations from the MMK are from Garfield (1995). In this context, 'Dharma' means *correct doctrine*.

Conventional reality is the world of our familiar experience. But if there are no things with *svabhāva*, what is ultimate reality?

Though hardly explicit in the MMK, the view that emerged in Madhyamaka was that ultimate reality is what is left if one takes the things of conventional reality, and strips off all conceptual overlays: emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*; Chin: *kong* itself. One might well think that this ultimate reality provides some foundational bedrock.¹⁴ It does not. According to Madhyamaka, *everything* is empty, including emptiness itself. In perhaps the most famous verse of the MMK (XXIV:18), Nāgārjuna says:

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

Emptiness, as the verse says, is a dependent designation. That is, emptiness depends on something. Conventional reality clearly depends on ultimate reality. But what does ultimate reality depend on? It is hard to extract a clear answer to this question from the MMK; let us set it aside for the moment.

We are now in a position to see how the Madhyamaka view fits into the taxonomy described in Section 2 of Chapter 0 in this volume. In general it takes over the Abhidharma view, but simply rejects its foundationalism. That is, it endorses Exendability. We are therefore in case 1.

3.3 *Buddhist coherentism*

Let us now turn to Huayan.¹⁵ This, like all Chinese Buddhism is Mahāyāna, and so inherited Madhyamaka thought. But whilst Madhyamaka held that all things depend on *some* other things, the Huayan universalized: all things depend on *all* other things. How did they get there? Come back to the question of what ultimate reality depends on.¹⁶

As we have noted, Chinese Buddhism was indebted to Daoism. According to a standard interpretation of this, behind the flux of phenomenal events, there is a fundamental ineffable principle, *dao*, which manifests itself in the flux. To Chinese Buddhist eyes, it was all too natural to identify the flux with conventional reality, and the *dao* with ultimate reality. That is exactly what happened. Moreover, just as one cannot have manifestations without whatever it is of which they *are* a manifestation, one cannot have something whose nature it is to manifest, without the manifestations. So conventional reality depends on ultimate reality, and ultimate reality depends on conventional reality: they are two sides of the same coin. In his *Treatise on the Golden*

¹⁴ In which case, we still are in case 2 of the taxonomy described in Section 2 of Chapter 0 in this volume, but G is true. Ultimate reality is the unique foundation.

¹⁵ For the following, see Williams (2009), ch. 6.

¹⁶ It must be said that these thoughts were available, in principle, to Madhyamaka, but no one ever articulated them.

Lion, Fazang explains the point in this way.¹⁷ Imagine a statue of a golden lion. The gold is like ultimate reality. The shape is like conventional reality. One cannot have the one without the other.

By this time in the development of Buddhist thought, the objects of phenomenal reality are called *shi* principle and ultimate reality is referred to as *li* principle. Hence we have the Huayan principle of the mutual dependence of *li* and *shi*: *lishi wuai*. The matter is put this way by the Huayan thinker Dushun (557–640) as follows:

Shi, the matter that embraces, has boundaries and limitations, and li, the truth that is embraced [by things], has no boundaries or limitations. Yet this limited shi is completely identical, not partially identical, with li. Why? Because shi has no substance [GP: svabhāva]—it is the selfsame li. Therefore, without causing the slightest damage to itself, an atom can embrace the whole universe. If one atom is so, all other dharmas should also be so. Contemplate on this.¹⁸

But if every *shi* depends on *li*, then by the transitivity of dependence, every *shi* depends on every other *shi*. Hence we have the Huayan thesis of the dependence (interpenetration) of every *shi* on every other *shi*: *shishi wuai*. Chengguan (738–839?), another Huayan thinker, puts the matter thus:

Because they have no Selfhood [GP: svabhāva], the large and the small can mutually contain each other . . . Since the very small is very large Mount Sumeru is contained in a mustard seed; and since the very large is the very small, the ocean is included in a hair.¹⁹

We therefore arrive at this: all things, whether *li* or *shi*, depend on each other.

The situation is depicted in what is arguably the most famous image in Huayan: the Net of Indra. A god has spread out a net through space. At each node of the net there is a brightly polished jewel. Each jewel reflects every other jewel, reflecting every other jewel, reflecting . . . to infinity. Fazang puts the metaphor thus:

It is like the net of Indra which is entirely made up of jewels. Due to their brightness and transparency, they reflect each other. In each of the jewels, the images of all the other jewels are [completely] reflected . . . Thus, the images multiply infinitely, and all these multiple infinite images are bright and clear inside this single jewel.²⁰

Each jewel represents an object. And it is the nature of each jewel to encode every other jewel, including that jewel encoding every other jewel, and so on.

So where is the Huayan picture in the taxonomy described in Section 2 of Chapter 0 in this volume? Clearly, this is coherentism, C, and we are in category 13 (since there is more than one object).

¹⁷ The *Treatise* is translated into English as pp. 409–14 of Chan (1969).

¹⁸ Quoted in Chang (1972), pp. 144–5. The character translated as ‘identical’ is better translated in this context as ‘interpenetrating’. See Priest (2015).

¹⁹ Quoted in Chang (1972), p. 165. ²⁰ Quoted in Liu (1982), p. 65.

4 Western Connections

So much for the three Buddhist positions. As is clear, they are significantly different. This is a striking feature of the tradition compared with Western philosophy, which, for all its variety of views, has been almost entirely foundationalist.²¹ For all that, there are many interesting connections between the Buddhist views, and debates and problems to be found in Western philosophy. In this section of the essay, I want to turn to some of these. There is certainly no attempt to be comprehensive here: I have just chosen some of the most obvious connections. I will structure this section by three subsections mirroring those in Section 3.

4.1 Mereology

So let us return to the Abhidharma picture. Clearly, this is some kind of mereological atomism, with the atoms being the *dharmas*—whatever they are. Why should one be an atomist? The Abhidharmikas, as I noted, produced no real arguments for this: they just seemed to think it obvious. But it isn't. Just consider the real line, and let its parts be all the nonempty sub-intervals. One is a part of another if it is a proper subset. Then any part has parts, since any interval can be divided into a left and a right part. The picture is perfectly coherent. So how might one argue that reality is *not* like that?

One famous answer was given by Kant, in the Second Antinomy of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and goes like this:

Let us assume that composite substances are not made up of simple parts. If all composition then be removed in thought, no composite part, and (since we admit no simple parts), also no simple parts, that is to say, nothing at all will remain, and accordingly, no substance will be given. Either, therefore, it is impossible to remove in thought all composition, or after its removal there must remain something which exists without composition, that is, the simple. In the former case the composite would not be made up of substances; composition, as applied to substances, is only an accidental relation in independence of which they must still persist as self-subsistent beings. Since this contradicts our supposition, there remains only the original supposition, that a composite substance is made up of simple parts.²²

Kant's argument is both dark and tangled—and, it should be remembered, he is going to argue that it does not work (since the simple is a noumenon, and so the categories cannot be applied to it). However, *in nuce*, it would appear to be this.²³ Given any substance, it is always possible to decompose any compound part, at least in thought. This is because the fact that something is arranged (composed) in a certain way is always a contingent one. Now, take any substance, and suppose that it is not composed of simples. Decompose it through and through. Nothing will be left, which is impossible since, in that case, the substance would have had no substance.

²¹ See Bliss and Priest (forthcoming), from which much of the above material comes.

²² A434 = B462ff. Translation from Kemp Smith (1933). ²³ See Priest (2002), p. 90.

But the argument would not seem to work—even setting Kantian scruples about the noumenal. Take a substance, say the table on which I write. It is composed of cells of wood. These are composed of molecules, which are composed of atoms, which are composed of protons and electrons, which are composed of quarks, which . . . Whether this regress does eventually terminate, we may never, in fact, know. But there is nothing logically absurd about supposing that physics will find indefinitely smaller and smaller particles (or maybe better, more and more fundamental kinds of thing). The table is a substantial entity for all that.

Of course, none of this shows that atomism is false: merely that, at least as far as this argument goes, there is no particular reason to suppose it true.

But let us grant its truth, at least for the sake of argument. Another Abhidharma claim is that it is only the atoms which are ultimately real. The table, for example, has no being over and above its atoms. It is simply a bunch of atoms ‘arranged table-wise’. Again, I know of no very focused Abhidharma arguments for this view,²⁴ but it does comport with a certain intuition. Suppose I have a hydrogen atom composed of a proton and electron, how many objects do I have: two or three? Say ‘three’ if you like, but the hydrogen atom itself would seem to be, in the words of David Armstrong, an “ontological free lunch”: no addition to being.²⁵

Still, the atom would seem to have some kind of reality, unlike ghosts and phlogiston. How are we to understand this? It is here that the Abhidharma distinction between the two *satyas* kicks in. The table has a conventional reality, but not an ultimate one. But how are we to understand this?

Recall that for the Abhidharmikas, the conventionally real objects are conceptual constructions. That is, we have a concept, *table*, which we use to organise our thinking about the world. Recall, also, that in mereology there is a debate concerning the question of compositionality: when does a bunch of parts ‘fuse’ to form another object?²⁶ There are two extreme answers. The first is *never*: mereological nihilism. This seems too extreme. In some sense, I am a perfectly good object, partite though I be. The other is *always*: unrestricted composition. Every bunch of objects fuses to form an object. This seems equally counter-intuitive. What sort of object is one whose parts are: the number π , the rings of Saturn, and the Buddha’s left earlobe?

The most natural answer is a middle way, *sometimes*: special composition. But when? Abhidharma provides a simple and natural answer to this: when the objects fall under some concept. So tables and people are in; the bizarre object of the last paragraph is not.

Of course, it is always possible to gerrymander a concept (e.g. simply by listing a bunch of objects). The concepts must be ones which we actually employ to find our way around the world (which does not entail that they have to be ‘common sense’ ones;

²⁴ The nearest I know is to be found in the Malindapañha dialogue, part of which is translated in Radhakrishnan and Moore (1957), pp. 281–4.

²⁵ Armstrong (1997), p. 12.

²⁶ See Varzi (2015) for discussion and references.

the concepts of science also satisfy this rubric). The objects of conventional reality are, then, those non-atoms delivered by the mereological principle of conceptually constrained special composition.

This picture—whether or not it is correct—at least provides, at once, a natural answer to the question of what, exactly, a conceptual construction is, and an answer to the question of compositionality.

4.2 Causation

Let us turn next to the Madhyamaka picture. Madhyamaka took over the Abhidharma picture, with a couple of very significant changes. First, and perhaps most importantly, it ditched the *dharmas*, the things with *svabhāva*. The picture is quite coherent. Come back to our model of the subsets of the real line; but now restrict the intervals in question to those which are definable, say in the first-order language of real number theory. (This gets rid of most of them, since there is only a countable number of first-order definitions.) It is still true that every interval has sub-intervals, but now every interval is also linguistically/conceptually isolable. Reality for a Madhyamaka is like that.²⁷

Neither is this an argument for idealism.²⁸ True, things get to be in the domain in virtue of there being certain concepts. But there is more to idealism than this. For idealism holds not only that objects are conceptually dependent, but also claims an ontological priority for the conceptual. This most certainly is not the case in Madhyamaka. For concepts are as empty of *svabhāva* as anything else. They are what they are in virtue of other things. What other things? Whilst, again, one does not find a clear answer in the MMK, it is easy enough to produce one with the help of the contemporary philosophy of language.²⁹ What makes the concept *dog* the concept it is, rather than, say, the concept *cat*? The fact that it relates in a certain way to the canine creatures wandering the world. (If it related to feline creatures in the same way, it would mean *cat* instead.) What exactly that relationship is, we might argue about; but all that matters here is that the concept depends for its identity on being related to things in the world in this way.³⁰

And so an argument for the emptiness of all things emerges. Things in the world depend on language and vice versa. But the picture is more complicated than that. As noted, Madhyamaka takes over mereological and conceptual dependence from Abhidharma, but adds a third kind of dependence: causal. And this brings us to the second Madhyamaka break with Abhidharma.

It is absolute Buddhist orthodoxy that everything in the world is in a state of *pratīyasamutpāda*, coming into existence when caused to do so, and going out of existence when caused to do so. Just as much as Madhyamaka, then, Abhidharma

²⁷ In particular, we have another argument for the emptiness of ultimate reality. For as Nāgārjuna says, emptiness is a “dependent *designation*”—thing denoted.

²⁸ Though there was another school of Indian Mahāyāna that was idealist: Yogācāra.

²⁹ e.g. Putnam (1973): “meanings ain’t in the head”. ³⁰ See Priest (2013), and (2014), §13.5.

philosophers took it that the *dharma*s were caused to exist and to cease to exist. They just did not take these causal relations to be (partly) constitutive of the *nature* of a *dharma*. The Madhyamaka did. (The first chapter of the MMK is a long analysis of causation.)

This might certainly look like a mistake. It is fairly standard to distinguish between causal dependence and metaphysical dependence.³¹ Causation determines *when* something comes into existence, but not *what* it is.

But not so fast. What makes me the very person I am? Answer (in part): the way my parents treated me, the education I had, my professional experiences, and so on. These are causal factors. It might be thought that people are special in this way. Not so. What makes something an oak tree? The fact that it grows out of an acorn, delivers acorns, and so on. If it grew out of an onion, and delivered, not acorns, but goldfish, it would not be an oak tree. So maybe it's just biological entities that are like this? Again, no. Take an electron. This is the kind of thing which repels particles of the same kind, which is annihilated by positrons, and so on. If it were attracted by other particles of the same kind, and annihilated by neutrons, it would not be an electron. Causation, it would seem, can determine the nature of things, quite generally. One might certainly contest the above considerations, but they have a certain persuasiveness.

So let us turn to another matter: the vexed issue of what to make of the notion of ultimate reality and its relationship to conventional reality, once the notion of *svabhāva* has gone out of the window. A distinctive view of the matter was given by Candrakīrti (*fl.* first half of the seventh century), one of the most authoritative commentators on Nāgārjuna, as follows:

The Buddhas, who have an unmistakable knowledge of the nature of the two truths, proclaim that all things, outer and inner, as they are perceived by two kinds of subject (deluded consciousness on the one hand and perfectly pure wisdom on the other), possess a twin identity . . . They say that the object perceived by authentic primordial wisdom is the ultimate reality, whereas the object of a deluded perception is the relative truth.³²

That is, there is only one reality, but it has a dual nature, a double aspect. When perceived correctly, its ultimate aspect is seen. When perceived incorrectly—that is, by ordinary benighted beings like you and me—only its conventional aspect is seen.

But if these are both objective aspects of the one reality, what makes the one any better (more ultimate) than the other? Come back to Kant again. According to his transcendental idealism, our perceptions ('intuitions')—say of a table—are the product of two things: a raw sensory input and a mental imposition: the forms of space and time, and the concepts of the understanding. The empirical object, then, has these dual aspects, and one of these involves conceptual imposition.

Candrakīrti's account of reality may be thought of in the same way. (Though one should not push the analogy too far. There is no suggestion in Candrakīrti that

³¹ See, e.g. the first few sentences of Tahko and Lowe (2015).

³² Padmakara Translation Group (2004), p. 192.

the concepts are universal and *a priori*. So much the better for Candrakīrti.) The difference between Candrakīrti and Kant concerns neither the dual nature, nor the conceptual overlay, but in our access to the conceptually naked. Seeing such a thing is an impossibility for Kant. Our perceptual apparatus just doesn't work that way. But it is what you *would* see if, *per impossible*, you were able to do this. For Candrakīrti there is no such impossibility. Difficult it may be; impossible it is not. It is exactly what training in certain meditative practices gives you. Here is a serious and important difference between our two philosophers; I do no more than note it here. More importantly, and to return to our question of the previous paragraph, the one aspect of reality is more ultimate than the other, precisely because it dispenses with an extrinsic conceptual overlay.

4.3 *The missing link*

So let us turn finally to the Huayan picture. This moves from the claim that all things depend on some other things to the claim that all things depend on all other things. The crucial move here is to find something on which all things depend, and which depends on all things. Transitivity then does the rest. In the Huayan story, it is *li* (an intellectual descendent of *dao*) that plays this role. Are there other things which might plausibly be thought to do so, so that the move in the argument does not need to be underpinned by specifically Buddhist ideas?

As a first approach, come back to causation. Everything, physics tells us, is causally derived from the Big Bang. Everything depends for what it is, then, at least in part, on this. That gives us half the story we need. What of the other half? Could the Big Bang depend for its identity on the things it produces? That is not so obvious. And even if it is, in fact, the case, we have to worry about not just things in space and time, but abstract objects, such as numbers—assuming there to be such. For these, we do not have even one-way dependence on the Big Bang.

As a more promising candidate for a link, take the object which is the mereological sum of everything: the whole of what is, *W*. The existence of this would seem to be delivered by our account of special composition. We certainly have a conception of such a totality: it does not seem to be at all gerrymandered. Now, a natural view is that a whole depends on its parts. (Maybe not necessarily the very parts it has *now*. Arguably the parts of a car can change while it remains that very car. But you could not have a car without parts.) So *W* depends on all its (proper) parts.

What about dependence in the other direction: do the parts depend on the whole? One can certainly make a case for this in some cases. Thus, Aristotle argued that a hand, for example, would not be a hand unless it were integrated into the functioning whole of a body.³³ Aristotle's claim has been generalized by Schaffer, who argues

³³ See *Parts of Animals*, esp. 640^b34–641^a10.

that any object depends on *W*.³⁴ At root, one might think of the whole as a single functioning entity: we just normally fail to appreciate the deep inter-dependences. Schaffer, it is true, holds that such dependence is anti-symmetric. So he would not endorse the claim that the dependence also goes the other way. However, he gives no argument for this, but simply *assumes* anti-symmetry. The considerations suggesting dependence in the other direction still obtain. Given these, *W* depends in the objects that are its parts, and these depend on *W*.³⁵

A completely different route to a missing link comes from another direction.³⁶ Any object is an object. It could not be the very thing it is unless it were an object. Hence its nature depends on a certain relationship with the property of being an object, or *objecthood*, to make the reference to universals explicit.³⁷ Now, if one is a Platonist about universals, there is no hope of getting a dependence in the other direction. Plato's forms epitomize beings with *svabhāva*. But if one is an Aristotelian about universals, the matter is different. For Aristotle, there can be no uninstantiated universals. The universal of being human depends on the humanity of Socrates, and so Socrates, the humanity of Plato, and so Plato, and so on. And the universal objecthood depends on objects. We have, then, the symmetric dependence relations we need.

We may recast the whole matter in Heideggerian terms. The driving question behind Heidegger's thought is exactly 'What is being?', and *to be* for Heidegger is exactly *to be an object*.³⁸ And *being* is that in virtue of which *beings* are. As Heidegger puts it in *Sein und Zeit*:

What is asked about in the question to be elaborated is being, that which determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings have always been understood no matter how they are discussed.³⁹

Beings, then, depend on *being*. But Heidegger is an Aristotelian about the matter. *Being* is always the being of some object. Again as he puts it:

If we think of the matter just a bit more rigorously, if we take more heed of what is in contest in the matter, we see that *Being* means always and everywhere: the Being of *beings*.⁴⁰

So *being* depends on beings as well. We have our symmetrical dependence.

³⁴ Schaffer (2010). Though Schaffer is careful to restrict his concern to just the physical. He also uses a version of the causal argument from the Big Bang. This delivered an entangled quantum state, in which every object is dependent on the whole.

³⁵ I note that this is exactly what the Huayan accepted. For them, any whole depends on its parts, and any part depends on the whole. See Jones (2009).

³⁶ I note that there is also at least one more candidate for the required linking concept: *nothingness*. I have explored that matter in Priest (2014), ch. 13. As we are about to see, the universal of oneness, that is, of being an object, could also play this role, though this had not occurred to me when I wrote the book.

³⁷ The relationship between a universal and its instantiations is not exactly the same as that between a whole and its parts, but it is very similar. For a gentle introduction to the matter, see Garrett (2006), p. 37ff.

³⁸ For a general discussion of the matter, see Priest (2014), ch. 4.

³⁹ Stambaugh (1996), p. 4f.

⁴⁰ Stambaugh (2002), p. 69.

I note that, for Heidegger, one cannot say what *being* is. (For to do such would be to treat it as a being, which it is not.) *Being* shows itself in the way that beings present themselves—to those with the eyes to see it. I note that at this point we are not so far away from the *dao* which cannot be described, but which manifests itself in “all under heaven”.⁴¹

5 Conclusion

So ends our somewhat whistle-stop tour of some Buddhist views on ontological dependence, and some of their Western connections. Most of this has been written with Western philosophers who know little of Eastern traditions in mind; but I hope that some of it will be of interest to those who know of Buddhist philosophy, but, perhaps, less of Western philosophy. I have done nothing here to try to evaluate the views we have met, or determine their truth. The exercise has been one of urban geography. To use a metaphor I have used before:⁴² Philosophy is like a city. It has *relatively* self-contained suburbs, such as metaphysics, ethics (each with their own neighborhoods). But only relatively: the connections spread in a network over the city, sometimes in the most surprising of ways. Nor is this a finished city: remarkable new buildings are going up all the time. All I have done in this essay is to describe one of the Eastern neighborhoods, and explore some of the connections which cross the city’s Berlin Wall. Of course, a philosopher can live quite happily in just one half of the city—or even just one of its suburbs—the whole of their thinking lives. But their philosophy cannot but be richer and deeper, the more they know of the city. Such is the spirit in which this piece is written.

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⁴¹ As the famous opening lines of the *Daodejing* put it, “The Dao that can be described in language is not the constant Dao; the name that can be given it is not the constant name”: Lynn (1999), p. 51.

⁴² Priest (2011).

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