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A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor

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A Review of *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*

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A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor. By Roy Tzohar. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 296 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-066439-8 (Hardcover), \$105.00.

Rare is the academic monograph that combines the precision of painstaking textual and conceptual analysis with the kinds of dazzling and innovative insights that have the capacity to give rise to many new areas of inquiry in an already established field. Such is what Roy Tzohar accomplishes in *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*, winner of the 2018 Toshihide Numata Book Award in Buddhism. This book offers a sophisticated interpretation of one Yogācāra thinker's theory of meaning, which Tzohar contextualizes within the broader Indic philosophical context and conceptually interlaces with other defining features of Yogācāra thought. Because this book both breaks new ground, and does so in a methodical, comprehensive, and intellectually challenging fashion, it is essential reading for students of Yogācāra thought and South Asian philosophy of language, and is to be highly recommended to students of Buddhist philosophy more generally. Whether contemporary philosophers of language will find it useful or stimulating may depend on the degree of their

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willingness to bracket the current hegemony of the tradition of analytic philosophy of language and enter into a new conceptual territory, one in which both language and the intentional cognition with which it is tightly interwoven are understood within a soteriological framework.

That Tzohar sets his sights on big questions is evident from the first page, where he formulates what he calls “the paradox that is language” within Buddhist thought:

. . . on the one hand, while Buddhist thought is underlined by a deep devaluation of language as a means for representing, describing or reaching reality, on the other hand, insofar as it is required for any salvific discourse, language is viewed as necessary for liberation. (1)

Tzohar’s question is, then, what theory of meaning can make sense of both functions that the Buddhist tradition writ large attributes to language: its utility on the path to liberation, as well as its active role in constructing delusion, or as Tzohar describes, its capacity to serve as the “metaphysical workshop in which entities are forged and, once produced, . . . erroneously believed to be real” (1). The heart of Tzohar’s account is a presentation of one Buddhist answer to this question, that of the Yogācāra philosopher Sthiramati (fifth to sixth centuries C.E.). Through a careful analysis of Sthiramati’s position that all language is metaphorical, where the basic sense of metaphor is a use of language in which the referential object is absent from the locus of reference, Tzohar compellingly lays out the stakes and consequences of this position for Buddhist philosophy itself.

Equally evident from the introduction is Tzohar’s commitment to examining and articulating the broad, cross-sectarian conceptual context in which Sthiramati’s theory of meaning was nurtured, even while recognizing the methodological difficulties that such an endeavor faces. This commitment is performed through attention to the pan-Indic philosophical context in which Sthiramati wrote and to the Buddhist sectarian divisions that shaped Sthiramati’s thought. Such consideration of the

intertextual nature of South Asian thought brings an added dimension of depth to the whole book, which in turn functions as a sustained argument for the necessity of cross-sectarian contextualization.

A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor comprises three parts: the first outlines the non-Buddhist philosophical context with regard to the concept of metaphor that shapes Sthiramati's thinking; the second reviews the discussions of language and metaphor in Yogācāra texts that preceded Sthiramati's time and which he drew upon and advanced; and the third presents Tzohar's analysis of Sthiramati's own position that all language use is metaphorical, as well as the wide ranging implications of this position for Yogācāra thought and Buddhist philosophy more generally. This review focuses on the book's contribution to Yogācāra studies and Buddhist philosophy more generally, and so dedicates more time to the second and third parts.

Part one, comprised of the first two chapters, is where the bulk of the cross-sectarian textual analysis occurs, as it focuses on Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya, and Grammarian theories of *upacāra*, the word here translated as metaphor. Tzohar's interest in these other schools' theories of *upacāra* is motivated by the goal of illuminating the shared philosophical conversation about this word's meaning, as well as the relationship between linguistic reference and ontology, that forms the context in which Sthiramati articulates his own position. Tzohar identifies upfront what he takes to be the key feature that these schools' distinct understandings of the concept share: a "referential mechanism underlying figurative usage" which is, he argues, "the absence of the primary referent from the locus of reference" (25-26). Consequently, Tzohar rightly does not seem to take his mission to require providing comprehensive accounts of these schools' understandings and uses of the concept. Instead, part one engages foundational texts from each school in turn, demonstrating that this shared and basic referential mechanism is indeed present in those texts' concepts of *upacāra*, and giving sustained attention to the

distinctive deployments of the concept based on the particular conceptual interests and constraints of each school.

In part two, which includes chapters three and four, Tzohar turns to earlier Yogācāra texts that Sthiramati drew upon and, Tzohar argues, advanced beyond when crafting his own theory of meaning. Chapter three treats of Asaṅga's understanding of reference and meaningful expression in the *Tattvārthapaṭalam* of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, as well as the passages that correlate with it from the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. Chapter four offers surveys of the treatments of *upacāra* in three texts: Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and Sthiramati's commentary on it; the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*; and Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*.

Chapter three convincingly shows that Asaṅga's concern is to argue for the inexpressibility of an ultimate essential nature of reality (*svabhāvatā*) by "pointing out the utter incoherence of any *expressible* essential nature" (84). This amounts to a position that stands against what Tzohar calls an essentialist theory of reference, or a theory "for which meaning is given through the correspondences among a designation, an object, and its essence" (94). With regard to *upacāra*, Tzohar seeks to demonstrate that here *upacāras* do "seem to be treated . . . as paradigmatic of all designations," but that these texts do not stake out the position that Sthiramati is later to establish: that all language use is figurative (124). Asaṅga's goal, Tzohar argues, is not to "bridge the metaphysical gap between real existents and language" but rather to "highlight the contours of language in order to reveal the limits of discourse as a means of indicating the possibility of its transcendence" (124). Thus, like Sthiramati after him, Asaṅga is indeed concerned both with the meaningfulness of conventional and *śāstric* discourse, and with the soteriological concern of escaping from the delusive constructed realm with which language is bound up, but he approaches these concerns by revealing language's limits, rather than connecting language to the causal account of the arising of delusion as Sthiramati will do.

Chapter four's survey of other major Yogācāra predecessors to Sthiramati is entitled "The Seeds of the Pan-Figurative View" for the way that each of the texts scrutinized here is shown to contribute some element to Sthiramati's pan-figurative theory of meaning. Tzohar shows that in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* Vasubandhu is concerned primarily with metaphor as serving the function of "broadening the initial referential range of expressions so that they are understood figuratively" (129), a position that aids with the hermeneutic task of cohering Abhidharma and sūtra literatures' sometimes divergent expressions of the Buddha's teachings. Tzohar argues here that Sthiramati's commentary on Vasubandhu's text advances beyond the hermeneutical function to engage the concept of metaphor in the epistemic function of showing the "presence of a breach between how we take things to be and how they truly are" (133). Turning to the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, Tzohar persuasively argues that this early Yogācāra text uses the concept of metaphor to think through language's relationship to ontology more fully by rendering metaphor "a linguistic sign that indicates at once an absence and a presence: the ontological non-existence and referential absence of an allegedly real (primary) object, and the presence of a causal deep-structure" (143), the very causal structure that produces the appearances that are mistaken for allegedly real (primary) objects. Finally, with regard to Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, Tzohar shows that Dignāga uses the concept of *upacāra* to argue that general terms refer to universals only figuratively. Tzohar understands this move to take *upacāra* in terms of the basic referential mechanism wherein the primary referent is absent from the locus of reference, with the additional condition that there be "qualitative similarity between the primary and secondary referent," in this case the universal and a given instantiation of it (148). Tzohar hypothesizes that Sthiramati's even barer account of *upacāra*, in which the second of these conditions is dropped, may be influenced by Dignāga, but that Sthiramati goes further than Dignāga by undermining any essentialist view of meaning, thus producing a theory of meaning that resembles Asaṅga's position more than Dignāga's.

With the way fully paved, the two chapters of part three offer a full interpretation of Sthiramati's theory of meaning and its implications for Yogācāra thought. Chapter five addresses the theory of meaning while chapter six connects this theory of linguistic meaning to what Tzohar calls a theory of perceptual meaning, showing the close connection between Sthiramati's understanding of linguistic reference and his understanding of the intentionality of cognition. Chapter six's theory of perceptual meaning has high stakes: resolving the apparent incommensurability of a Buddha's or bodhisattva's pure perceptions of reality and the ordinary person's defiled and distorted ones. Thus, Tzohar's account of Sthiramati's theory of perceptual meaning is also an account of how one Yogācārin thinks a bodhisattva can actually do the work of guiding other beings to salvation.

Sthiramati's theory of meaning as presented in chapter five contains four aspects. First, Tzohar demonstrates that for Sthiramati all language use is metaphorical (*upacāra*) because a word's primary referent is always absent from its locus of reference. This is referred to as the "pan-metaphorical" or "pan-figurative" theory of meaning, and Tzohar grounds this interpretation on a convincing reading of Sthiramati's commentary on Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā*, in particular the extended commentary on the first verse. This reading of Sthiramati is significantly bolstered by the preparatory work of parts one and two, which help the reader to recognize that Sthiramati is indeed engaging in a shared philosophical conversation, employing many of the terms his interlocutors from other schools and his Yogācāra forebears used, and relying on the same basic referential mechanism that non-Buddhist thinkers did in interpreting *upacāra*.

The second aspect of Sthiramati's theory of meaning is that a word's actual referent is not the object that the word appears to refer to, or that the speaker understands herself to refer to, but the real (*dravya*) causal process that brought about the appearance of that object. Here the reader versed in Yogācāra thought will recognize two connections to

other important features of Yogācāra thought. First, the real causal process is itself the transformation of consciousness, elaborated in terms of the eight consciousnesses. This point is the reader's first signal that Tzohar's work provides not just an interpretation of Sthiramati's theory of meaning, but also an interpretation of his theory of cognitive intentionality, or experience itself. Second, the theory of the three natures of *dharma*s is recognizably in the background of this understanding of reference, for the object a word ostensibly refers to is the constructed nature, while the real causal process is the dependent nature. These conceptual links to other important Yogācāra concepts are significantly elaborated in chapter six's discussion of the problem of incommensurability.

Third, Tzohar interprets Sthiramati's position on reference as entailing what he calls a causal figurative theory of sense. Engaging the sense-reference distinction, Tzohar argues that for Sthiramati the actual referent of a given word is the causal nexus from which the ostensible object of reference emerges, while the sense of the word is the conceptual articulation of that causal nexus, in particular in terms of the Yogācāra school's model of consciousness. As Tzohar succinctly puts it: "the meaning of a term is constituted by the *description* of an underlying causal process" (170, emphasis mine). Tzohar shows that for Sthiramati this description is itself a conceptual construction (*vikalpa*). This seems to have two entailments: first, that because this description is a conceptual construction, it is not free of the cognitive errors that are coextensive with the misunderstandings about language that the Yogācāra school diagnoses; but second, that as a conceptual construction the Yogācāra model of consciousness is an accurate or true account of the cause of these cognitive errors, in that it accurately describes the way that speakers and experiencers understand words and worlds wrongly. The payoff here for Tzohar's interpretation is twofold. First, as an accurate account of the arising of delusion the Yogācāra model of consciousness is able to provide an account of how a given cognitive object is causally situated vis-à-vis other cognitive objects, precisely because the referent of a word, no matter who uses it, is always fixed, even while different speakers' under-

standings of the referent may diverge. It is, thus, the conceptual apparatus definitive of a word's *sense* that generates *meaning* in a given language. Second, as a true account of delusion, the Yogācāra model of consciousness allows for gradations of understanding, and thus can accurately describe the range of epistemic awareness, from the wholly delusive, in which words are taken to actually refer to the merely ostensible objects, to the position of the advanced bodhisattva, who has "an exhaustive direct knowledge of causal relations" and thus in some sense *sees* not the ostensible cognitive object, but the causal nexus that gave rise to it (170).

The fourth and final aspect of Tzohar's theory of meaning is the way it wards off two opposing theories of meaning: what Tzohar calls a correspondence theory of meaning, according to which metaphor itself is possible only against a backdrop in which words have real cognitive objects as primary referents, and the Madhyamaka position, according to which all language use is conventional, at no point referring to anything outside of the conventionally instituted linguistic realm itself. At stake in the first refutation is the fundamental Yogācāra position that all objects of cognition and reference are constructed and thus not substantially real, which pits the Yogācārin against both a non-Buddhist realist (like a Naiyāyika) and an Abhidharmika, who, as Tzohar writes, advocated for "the possibility of an analytical language that corresponds to real particulars" (177). And at stake in the dispute with the Mādhyamikas is the truthfulness of Buddhist discourse about delusion and liberation, over and against the reifying and delusive functions of ordinary language use, which is to say the meaningfulness of Buddhist sūtra literature and philosophical treatises like those of both Sthiramati and his Madhyamaka interlocutors. With these refutations, Tzohar argues, Sthiramati's "Yogācāra solution comes to represent a midpoint between these two extremes" and that this "solution represents the school's attempt to salvage the meaningfulness of its discourse while allowing the same discourse to argue positively about the true nature of reality—to be both conventional and conducive to liberation at one and the same time" (177).

Chapter six is a sustained engagement with a number of major themes in Yogācāra thought, all put in service of solving a problem raised by Sthiramati's pan-figurative theory of meaning: if a word's meaning is the description of the causal process that gave rise to the appearance of the object to which the word ostensibly refers, then how can beings of radically different levels of understanding of this fact ever engage in shared meaningful discourse? Tzohar proposes this as a form of the problem of incommensurability innate to the Buddhist tradition. And in this Buddhist context, it concerns nothing less than the possibility of bodhisattvic labor, for a bodhisattva is a being who has complete and accurate vision of this causal nexus, but must nevertheless both use language and act in a way that is meaningful to the other beings she works to liberate from suffering.

Tzohar's argument for how Sthiramati's philosophy of language overcomes the threat of incommensurability involves three different strands. First, the causal figurative theory of sense is deployed to show that shared linguistic meaning can operate between beings of distinct epistemic levels, such as ordinary deluded beings and bodhisattvas. Second, Tzohar astutely interprets the Yogācāra concept of subsequent mundane pure awareness as the form of awareness that allows the bodhisattva to both have complete non-discursive knowledge of the causal nexus from which ostensible objects of cognition and language itself arises and engage with these words and objects in a way that is salvific for other beings. Third, Tzohar employs a robust interpretation of intersubjectivity in Yogācāra thought to show that bodhisattvas and ordinary beings share a world of experience and that "it is . . . the inescapably intersubjective nature of our conceptual activity and language use, seen as causally efficacious, that accounts for the common content of our experiences and of the world we inhabit" (199). Tzohar shows, moreover, that this form of intersubjective experience can account for both "experiential agreement . . . but also for the discrepancies in different perceivers' experiences of the same object" (200).

Chapter six is truly innovative and provides an astounding payoff for the student of Buddhist philosophy who reads it patiently. Indeed, chapter six is so innovative that it seems there is almost more here than the text credits itself with. One important instance of this is Tzohar's discussion of the meaning of the central claim of mature Yogācāra thought: that everything is mind only or mere representation. Tzohar's account of intersubjectivity not only does not rely on positing any essential distinction between mind and matter, but in fact shows that things experienced as mental and things experienced as material are understood by the Yogācārin as existing on a psycho-physical continuum (or, in Tzohar's words, both kinds of things are "manifestations along the same spectrum of causal and mental phenomena" (197, fn. 27), all of which is intersubjectively available in the relevant sense (section 6.3, especially 191-197). Tzohar persists in using the concepts of "internal" and "external" with regard to the mind only claim as though the distinguishing criterion is that which separates mind from matter (e.g., 191), but his own account here strongly suggests that the relevant criterion for distinguishing internal and external, and denying the existence of the latter, is whether the experience of a thing can be explained through appeal to the causal nexus that constitutes this spectrum of phenomena: if it cannot be so explained, then it is "external" and does not exist, but happily, all experiences can be so explained, or so the school argues. In this sense, Tzohar has convincingly shown that "the school's [the Yogācāra's] understanding of intersubjectivity in fact runs deeper than the realism-idealism debate" (191), even if at times his own language falls back into the terms of that debate. And while Tzohar refrains from a forthright statement of the following, it strikes this reader at least as true: he has here provided a comprehensive and compelling interpretation not only of Sthiramati's theory of meaning, nor of just the Yogācāra concept of intersubjectivity and its response to the problem of incommensurability, but of the school's centrally important mind only position.

This treatment of mind only appears late in the book, and without much fanfare, making it one of what I think of as the book's two sustained

deferrals, or late treatments of topics to which the reader's mind may turn long before the text does. Regarding the mind only position, this deferral is a good decision. The claim has been subject to a vigorous debate among Yogācāra scholars over the past few decades, and the topic has functioned as a third-rail, often derailing constructive conversation and occluding points of broad agreement. Thus, the book's deferral of the topic has in the first place a rhetorical function; it allows Tzohar to carry along readers with divergent positions on the meaning of the claim while he builds his argument about Sthiramati's theory of meaning. In terms of that argumentation, the position advanced does not turn on any particular interpretation of the mind only position, and yet by chapter six the reader is surprised to discover that in fact the theory of meaning that Tzohar has carefully delineated contributes to staking out a new position about the meaning of mind only.

The second deferred topic is the relationship between the referential mechanism of language and the intentional mechanism of cognition. This deferral may be experienced as frustrating to the reader, in large part because at certain key points in the argument the primary texts under scrutiny seem to be employing a fruitful equivocation between language and experience that is left unacknowledged during the book's analysis of relevant passages. The major such instance is the central textual object of Tzohar's interpretive gaze: Sthiramati's commentary on Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā*. Its opening lines appear to refer not just to the words "self" and "dharma," but also to selves and dharmas as ostensible objects of cognition. Tzohar's own emphasis on Sthiramati's assertion that the *upacāras* of self and dharmas appear, "in the world and in treatises" as occurring with regard to the transformation of consciousness, should, the reader may think, lead to the view that in this passage and others, Sthiramati takes *upacāra* to be not just a theory of how the words "self" and "dharma" refer (i.e., in treatises), but also how selves and dharmas appear within intentional cognition or within experience itself (i.e., in a world, of which Tzohar's Yogācāra definition is the totality of shared experience available to a given life form, 197). Tzohar's treatment of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* seems

to make the same pre-emptive decision to collapse the productive ambiguity between linguistic reference and cognitive intentionality in favor of the former. The passages that Tzohar focuses on for proffering his interpretation of *upacāra* are about conceptual construction (*vikalpa*), and thus the range of meaning of the term *upacāra* here again seems to include both linguistic reference and cognitive intentionality, since the dualistic nature of both are indicators of the presence of conceptual construction itself.

The reader may thus be puzzled by the book's failure to treat these and other passages as referring both to words and the ostensible cognitive objects that serve as their ostensible referents. But by the time we arrive at chapter six, the book has moved to an examination of the "deep structural affinities between the Yogācāra understanding of linguistic meaning and its understanding of experience" (180) and so we find that the book has led us to the essential question of the relationship between linguistic reference and cognitive intentionality, without telling us along the way that that was where we were headed all along. And, indeed, Tzohar's treatment of these "deep structural affinities" makes good sense of why these texts employ this equivocation or ambiguity: reference and intentionality are isomorphic elements of the conceptual construction of experience, and neither has logical or causal priority over the other. They thus can and should be treated together.

The reader cannot know whether Tzohar employs these deferrals as a skillful method to carry along readers of different—one might even say incommensurable—views of major Yogācāra positions, or whether he rather understands his arguments to have a more limited scope and understands the passages in question to indeed involve claims only about language and not about cognition more broadly. It seems likely to this reader at least that the decision to defer any discussion of mind only was calculated, while the interpretation of various primary passages that takes them to be strictly about linguistic reference rather than about both reference and cognitive intentionality represents Tzohar's considered

view on the topic, a view that I do not think the evidence supports or that his argument needs. To the contrary, his own argument seems to support a reading on which the term *upacāra* may be understood as offering a theory of meaning that accounts for both linguistic reference and cognitive intentionality. Nevertheless, read as skillful means, these deferrals allow for the book to bring readers with incommensurable pre-existing views about the meaning of the mind only claim and the related link between reference and intentionality, to a rich, deep, and shared understanding of the Yogācāra position about meaning, experience, the construction of delusion, the nature of intersubjective experience, and what liberation might look like. Given the entrenched disagreements about the meaning of the mind only claim in particular, this is no small feat. And it is in general skillfully managed by Tzohar's careful sequencing of topics in this intricately conceptually layered work. This book should, one hopes, aid the field of Yogācāra studies in maturing past the polarizing phase of this debate to a more nuanced discussion that engages with aspects of Yogācāra thought that had previously been viewed as irrelevant to the question of the meaning of major positions like mind only, such as the concept of subsequent mundane pure awareness or the bodhisattva's aspirations (*āśaya*), understood in the tradition, Tzohar argues in a startling passage, as "reality-forming" (186-187), which here seems to mean that these aspirations in effect replace the causal nexus account of how a world comes into being, which we come to understand holds true only for non-bodhisattvas, or those who have never experienced nonconceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa jñāna*).

A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor should rightfully become a foundational scholarly work for students of Buddhist philosophy, Yogācāra in particular. Starting from the already ambitious goal of presenting a robust Yogācāra theory of meaning, its fruits realize even more ambitious goals, culminating as it does in the presentation of a coherent picture of the Yogācāra understanding of delusion and reality that weaves together many aspects of Yogācāra thought previously treated as isolated or not addressed at all. The abundant footnotes are themselves small

lessons in careful sourcing, textual interpretation, and creative thinking, and the conclusion weaves in even more by circling back to a thoughtful treatment of the metaphors, conventionally understood, frequently employed in Yogācāra texts. Tzohar's work serves as a sign of a maturing field and as a standard for future monographs in Yogācāra thought and Buddhist philosophy to measure themselves by.