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Buddhism, Apophasis, Truth

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According to a common trope in Buddhism, Buddhist teaching—the dharma—is a raft: it is to be used to cross over the expanse of suffering, but when the other shore is reached, the raft should be left behind.[1] Such self-abrogating doctrines are not entirely unusual in Buddhist discourse, and indeed may be seen in other religious and philosophical traditions as well. One author has creatively referred to any philosophy which aims at "its own demise" or employs the "dialectics of self-erasure" as *uroboric*.[2] The image here is that of the uroboros, the serpent which swallows its own tail, an image found in medieval alchemical texts. A paradigmatic example of an uroboric philosophy may be seen in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, when he states:

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)[3]

The doctrinal move towards self-abrogation has of course also been referred to as *apophasis*. Michael Sells explains that:

> Apophasis can mean "negation," but its etymology suggests a meaning that more precisely characterizes the discourse in question: *apo phasis* (un-saying or speaking-away). . . . Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a correcting proposition, an unsaying.[4]

In these terms, an apophatic discourse is one which ultimately abrogates, negates, or "unspeaks" itself. Apophasis is often understood to be a technique

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1 For example, in the Alagaddūpama Sutta the Buddha states, "So I have shown you the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping"; see tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 229.

2 John Visvader, "The Use of Paradox in Uroboric Philosophies," *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978), p. 455.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 189.

4 Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 2-3.

employed by negative theology, a theology which "denies that the transcendent can be named or given attributes."[5] The Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev, however, defines apophasis as "knowledge in the process of discarding all notions and determinations."[6] On this account apophasis is not understood to be a technique for indirectly approaching an ineffable absolute, but is, rather, a form of discourse which aims to "speak-away" all forms of discourse, including its own. For the purposes of this paper, I will understand an apophatic discourse or doctrine as one which makes such a self-abrogating move through employing the "dialectics of self-erasure," and I will use the term *apophasis*[(B)] to refer to this particular form of apophasis.[7] In this paper I will offer some reflections on one instance of apophasis[(B)] in a specific Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrinal treatise, known as the *Madhyāntavibhāga* ("Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes," ca. fourth century CE). I will attempt to formally distinguish such apophatic[(B)] doctrines from doctrines of ineffability, and consider what apophatic[(B)] doctrines might contribute to the impasse regarding "truth" which characterizes certain approaches to the comparative philosophy of religion. Since this paper is intended as a contribution to the comparative philosophy of religion, I will begin with a few remarks on the nature of that enterprise.

On the Comparative Philosophy of Religion

The comparative philosophy of religion may be understood to encompass a number of different tendencies in the interpretation and analysis of non-Western philosophico-religious systems. Perhaps in its most basic sense, the comparative philosophy of religion refers to the project of comparing non-Western philosophy (philosophies, philosophers, philosophical texts, concepts, theories, etc.) to Western philosophy. In the present context this would mean conducting nuanced and philologically rigorous comparative studies of Buddhist philosophy alongside Western philosophy. Such a project might be carried out for the purposes of identifying patterns in form (forms of reasoning and argumentation) and/or content (concepts and theories, e.g., of God, the self, etc.) among the differing philosophical traditions.   Wilhelm Halbfass points out that a comparative approach to the study of religion has a long and distinguished history in the Western tradition:

> In the days of their early historians like Herodotus, the Greeks compared their own traditions with those of the Orient; al-Bīrūnī and others compared the Hindus with the Greeks and with their own Muslim tradition; and deists like Herbert of Cherbury compared various religious traditions in order to determine their universally valid common denominators.[8]

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5 Ibid., p. 2.

6 Nicolas Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, tr. George Reavey (London: Geoffrey Bles, Centenary Press, 1938), p. 33.

7 The use of the superscript [(B)] is intended to indicate that I am using Berdyaev's definition of *apophasis*, especially as applied to Buddhist discourse.

8 Wilhelm Halbfass, "India and the Comparative Method," *Philosophy East and West* 35

Halbfass also indicates, however, that "comparison as such does not appear as an explicit, consciously utilized method" until the end of the eighteenth century, and was more clearly formulated in the nineteenth century.[9] And the idea of applying the comparative method specifically to the study of philosophy became more widespread after P. Masson-Oursel's *La philosophie comparée* (published in French in 1923, and in English in 1926, with the title *Comparative Philosophy*).[10]

Whether or not such comparative projects ought to be carried out—and if so, in what way—is of course open to debate. According to one line of critique, the categories employed in comparing diverse systems tend to be rigidly imposed, resulting in a loss of nuance which may be fundamental to the philosophical doctrines, texts, or systems being interpreted. Nevertheless comparative research is an important step in developing typologies or classification schemes for forms of philosophy. And in any approach to the philosophy of religion, at least a minimal classification scheme is unavoidable: judgments regarding just what phenomena are to be considered to fall under the rubric of "philosophy" or "religion" are predicated upon prior determinations regarding just what the parameters of these concepts are understood to be. And as J. Z. Smith points out, these parameters are formulated from the perspective of Western scholarship:

> "Religion" is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.[11]

Classifying phenomena—at least in some preliminary way—is necessary to any approach to the study of phenomena, and the comparative analysis of phenomena is an important stage in their classification. And even if—according

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   (1985), p. 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 4. Note that while Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* discusses non-Western traditions, it does so in terms of the architectonic of Hegel's system. Hodgson points out that Hegel's "threefold division of the philosophy of religion reflects this logical structure (concept of religion, determinate religion [including Buddhism], consummate religion [viz., Christianity]), as do the subdivisions of each of these main parts" (Peter C. Hodgson, "Logic, History, and Alternative Paradigms in Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions," *Journal of Religion* 68 [1988], p. 5). Regarding Hegel's views on comparative philosophy of religion, Halbfass comments that "European thought, as Hegel sees it, cannot return to Oriental or Indian thought, and they cannot be equated or paralleled with one another. They are not on the same level and cannot be *compared* in the full sense of the word 'comparison'" (Halbfass, "India and the Comparative Method," p. 8).

11 Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 281-282.

to certain self-abrogating apophatic(B) discourses at least—classification schemes are ultimately to be left behind, this can only be achieved by starting within the scheme itself (within the "disciplinary horizon" in Smith's terms), a scheme at least partially constituted by comparative analyses of phenomena. Hence employing at least some typology or classification scheme seems to be indispensable, even if only for the purposes of critique.

According to another line of thought, the comparative philosophy of religion means studying non-Western philosophy—here, Buddhist philosophy—with an acute awareness of the linguistic, conceptual, theoretical, and cultural presuppositions through which we engage in such study. We cannot help but approach non-Western traditions comparatively—at least for those of us who were educated primarily in a Western cultural environment, through Western languages, Western regimes of education, traditions of thought, etc. On this account, being comparative is in some sense a precondition for our approach to Buddhist philosophy. Matthew Kapstein states:

> [A]s Dilthey taught us long ago, understanding must be ever constituted on the basis of prior understanding, and to step altogether out of our skins is an impossibility for us. If we cannot eliminate the conceptual background engendered by our time, place, and personal circumstances, we can, however, with sufficient care, discern some of the ways in which our vision is at once constrained and enabled by it.[12]

In these terms, any approach to Buddhist thought is intrinsically comparative, and we become more open to allowing Buddhist thought to disclose itself to the extent that we make our linguistic, conceptual, and cultural dispositions clearer to ourselves. B. K. Matilal adds that "anyone who wants to explain and translate systematically from Indian philosophical writings into a European language will, knowingly or unknowingly, be using the method of 'comparative philosophy.'"[13] Hence engaging in self-reflexive comparative analyses of one's own philosophical presuppositions vis-à-vis the presuppositions of, say, Buddhist philosophical discourse, is a necessary preliminary for any rigorous interpretation of Buddhist thought. Furthermore, through making our own philosophical commitments clearer to ourselves, the self-reflexive practice of the comparative philosophy of religion might open a way for actual philosophical engagement with non-Western systems of thought, and allow for the possibility of shifting our own approach to philosophy itself.

Some have extrapolated from the comparative philosophy of religion into the domain of cross-cultural philosophy of religion. Cross-cultural philosophy of

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12 Matthew Kapstein, "What Is Buddhist Philosophy?," *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), p. 3.

13 B. K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 13.

religion refers to the project not of comparing different traditions of thought, but of bringing them into conversation with one another. Jay Garfield states that cross-cultural philosophical understanding:

> [I]s actualized in the interaction between historically situated readers and texts, and between interlocutors. This is no less true of inter-traditional understanding than it is of intra-traditional understanding. Only by engaging in such actual interactions can we hope to benefit. . . And in dialogue the dynamic interplay of our horizons can yield a perspective genuinely responsive to the presuppositions and insights of each.[14]

Garfield discusses the interlocking hermeneutic circles of text, tradition, and reader, and recommends the "radically pragmatic turn" of not focusing on texts as the abstract objects of "disembodied minds," but engaging with texts "in-being-read, or in-being-explained."[15] Understood in this way, we might view cross-cultural philosophy of religion as an extension and further transformation of comparative philosophy of religion. Through such open-ended conversations across traditions we maintain the hope of arriving at the pragmatist ideal of truth, namely the "opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate"[16]—a hope which must remain the very precondition for philosophy as such. In a previous paper I explored one way in which semiotics (theory of signs)—especially in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce—might be brought into conversation with certain strands of Buddhist thought.[17] In the next section, I will extend some of the ideas developed in that earlier paper in order to introduce some background themes necessary for understanding the *Madhyāntavibhāga*'s apophatic(B) doctrine.

Three Entrances to Nirvāṇa

According to a Buddhist doctrine found even in the Pāli canon—the canonical collection containing some of Buddhism's earliest extant texts—there are three entrances to nirvāṇa: emptiness, wishlessness, and signlessness (*śūnyatā*, *apraṇihita*, and *animitta*). We may briefly explain these three as follows: one may attain the highest goal through realizing that all phenomena are empty of inherent nature (emptiness), through relinquishing any form of craving for phenomena (wishlessness), and through eliminating any signs of phenomena (signlessness). In his *Buddhist Thought in India* Edward Conze offers an extended discussion of these three entrances to nirvāṇa, or "doors to deliverance." He

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14 Jay L. Garfield, "Temporality and Alterity: Dimensions of Hermeneutic Distance," *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 250.

15 Ibid., pp. 237 and 233.

16 Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in James Hoopes (ed.), *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 177.

17 Mario D'Amato, "The Semiotics of Signlessness: A Buddhist Doctrine of Signs," *Semiotica* 147 (2003), pp. 185-207.

states, "It will be noted that the concentration on emptiness concerns ontology, wishlessness pertains to the volitional sphere, and the signless belongs to the domain of epistemology."[18]   While this is a simple sketch, for the present purposes we may consider it to be not far off the mark—although I would characterize discourse on wishlessness as concerning philosophical psychology, and discourse on signlessness as concerning theoretical semiotics.[19]

Conze provides a synthetic account of how signlessness is understood in Buddhism, describing semiosis in terms of a three-stage process of noting the sign, recognizing the object to which the sign refers, and becoming volitionally engaged with the object. He states:

> The task is to bring the process back to the initial point, before any "superimpositions" have distorted the actual and initial datum. The seemingly innocuous phraseology of the formula which describes the restraint of the senses [through the concentration on signlessness] opens up vast philosophical vistas, and involves a huge philosophical programme which is gradually worked out over the centuries in the Abhidharma and Prajñāpāramitā.[20]

According to Buddhist semiotics, there is a significant sense in which semiosis itself is systematically deceptive, binding one further to cyclic existence. According to Buddhist metaphysics, conditioned phenomena—phenomena which comprise "the world," including whatever we refer to as "the self"—are radically impermanent and without inherent nature or essence. Signs, on the other hand, function to posit stable entities where there are none, affixing inherent natures onto hypostatized existents. While phenomena are in flux, signs posit enduring objects. While phenomena are without essence, signs posit essential natures. Signs point to a realm of stable referents, but the purported "objects" to which they refer are always on the move. So coming to a proper understanding of semiosis, and bringing about its end or terminus through a radical transformation, is understood in Buddhist traditions to be one of the very "doors to deliverance."

In the quote cited above, Conze identifies signlessness as a significant dimension of Buddhist thought. Far from viewing Buddhist semiotics as ancillary to the

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18 Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 68.

19 According to Buddhist doctrine these three entrances are understood to be intrinsically related to one another, and to the entire edifice of Buddhist theory and practice. For example, the *Visuddhimagga* (an important Theravāda Buddhist doctrinal compendium) states that emptiness pertains to absence of self, wishlessness to unsatisfactoriness, and signlessness to impermanence, wherein absence of self, unsatisfactoriness, and impermanence are viewed as the universal characteristics of all conditioned phenomena; see tr. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga* (Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1999), pp. 680-681.

20 Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, p. 65.

history and structure of Buddhist thought, Conze interprets it as a fundamental aspect of the project of Buddhism, playing a role both in the Abhidharma—the earliest fully articulated systems of Buddhist philosophy—and in the Prajñāpāramitā or "Perfection of Wisdom" sūtras—the earliest genre of Mahāyāna sūtra-literature. This is understandable insofar as according to certain strands of Buddhist thought, the fundamental cause of suffering, or the fundamental problem that must be overcome, is some form of conceptualization (*saṃjñā*), conceptual discrimination (*vikalpa*), conceptual construction (*parikalpa*), or conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*)[21]—in short, the fundamental problem is some form of semiosis.

The Middle Way

We now turn to a brief reflection on a passage from the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, a passage that may be understood as offering an apophatic[(B)] doctrine. Before citing and commenting on the passage, a few remarks on the text itself are in order. The *Madhyāntavibhāga* is a Buddhist treatise belonging to an early stratum of the Yogācāra tradition, one of the main philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The text was composed in Sanskrit probably ca. the fourth century CE, and while I would not characterize the *Madhyāntavibhāga* as a text of philosophy, I think it's clear that the text engages with a number of philosophical concerns. As with other Mahāyāna texts, the *Madhyāntavibhāga*'s ultimate soteriological goal is the attainment of buddhahood, an attainment which is understood in the Yogācāra tradition as a non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*). The text presents the path to buddhahood, and the text's sub-commentator, Sthiramati (sixth century CE), offers an explanation of the structure of the text. According to Sthiramati, the text begins with a discussion of mental affliction and purification in terms of the concepts of "unreal imagination" and "emptiness" (Chapter 1). Then in the next two chapters the text discusses mental affliction in terms of a set of specific categories of "obstructions" (Chapter 2)—mental factors which "obstruct" sentient beings from seeing the way things really are and attaining liberation—and mental purification in terms of the proper vision of "reality" (Chapter 3)—a vision obtained through purification from the obstructions. In order to elucidate the method of purification, the text then identifies the mental "antidotes" (Chapter 4), and their proper cultivation. Finally, since the path discussed thus far is common to all Buddhists, including followers of the Hīnayāna (lit., "inferior vehicle"), the text addresses the distinctive features of the Mahāyāna (lit., "great vehicle") (Chapter 5).

I broadly agree with Matthew Kapstein's and Dan Arnold's point that in trying to understand just what these Buddhist thinkers are up to in composing such texts, there's much to be learned from Pierre Hadot's interpretations of the classical Western tradition in terms of "philosophy as a way of life."[22] According

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21 Paul Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8 (1980), pp. 1-45.

22 See Kapstein, "What Is Buddhist Philosophy?," pp. 3-26; and Dan Arnold, *Mīmāṃsakas*

to Hadot, in this tradition "philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us 'be' in a different way."[23] Doing philosophy, on this account, is itself a form of "spiritual exercise." As Arnold has pointed out, we might most helpfully see the concepts and categories, the accounts and arguments, offered in Buddhist doctrinal treatises not as detachable pieces that might be employed in other contexts for other purposes, but rather as part of the enculturation of a certain form of "mental discourse" (*mano-jalpa*), internalizing a Buddhist vision of things—a point which appropriately echoes the self-understanding of Buddhist doctrinal treatises as directed towards attaining wisdom produced first through hearing, then reflecting upon, and finally cultivating the teachings. On this reading, Buddhist philosophy is to be understood as a form of Buddhist *practice*.

Returning to our text, we may now consider the specific passage. The text reads:

> The extreme of conceptually discriminating (*vikalpa*) truth (*samyaktva*) and falsity (*mithyātva*) is due to imagining the analysis of existence (*bhūta-pratyavekṣā*) in terms of true and false. To avoid these two extremes, there is the example of a fire and two sticks. A fire is generated by two sticks that are not themselves aflame; but when [the fire] has been generated, the two sticks are consumed. Similarly, the true noble faculty of wisdom [i.e., nonconceptual wisdom] is generated by an untrue analysis of existence; but when [the noble faculty of wisdom] has been generated, the analysis of existence is itself analyzed (*vibhāvayati*). But the untrue analysis of existence should not be [simply] characterized as false, since it is conducive to what is true.[24]

This passage occurs in the context of a discussion of how the Mahāyāna properly distinguishes the "middle" through avoiding a number of pairs of "extreme" views[25]—a discussion which elucidates a brief section of an important Mahāyāna sūtra, the *Kāśyapa-parivarta*. It is of course a common theme in Buddhist discourse that the dharma is the "middle way" that avoids the extremes of sensory indulgence and extreme asceticism, eternalism and annihilationism, etc. The *Madhyāntavibhāga* takes up this theme and offers a new twist, articulating that in the Mahāyāna all conceptual extremes are avoided through non-conceptualization. In fact, the term "middle way" (*madhyamā pratipad*) is itself

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and Mādhyamikas against the Buddhist Epistemologists (University of Chicago, Ph.D. diss., 2002), pp. 314-330.

23 Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1995), p. 265.

24 The translation is my own; for the Sanskrit text, see Gadjin Nagao (ed.), *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya* (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1964), comm. ad chap. 5, v. 26.

25 Ibid., chap. 5, vv. 23-26.

glossed as "nonconceptual awareness" (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*):[26] the middle between any pair of extreme views is achieved through the absence of conceptualization—wherein one no longer conceptualizes either of the two extremes at all. For our purposes, what is particularly interesting about the present passage is that it characterizes both truth and falsity as extremes, extremes that will be left behind (or consumed) by the (flames of the) "true noble faculty of wisdom." But this nonconceptual wisdom is itself arrived at through the Buddhist analysis of the way things really are. So while the Buddhist analysis of existence entails making a distinction between truth and falsity, when this analysis is carried through to its ultimate conclusion—to the attainment of the wisdom of buddhahood—the Buddhist analysis of things is itself consumed, along with truth and falsity. In short, because the fundamental awareness of a buddha is understood to be nonconceptual—not engaging with concepts and language—the attainment of buddhahood precludes the possibility of positing truth. But shouldn't such a text concern itself with truth? Should all this be understood as "just so much mystical nonsense?"

"Post-Mortem" Philosophy

It is generally understood that insofar as one is engaging in the *philosophical*, rather than strictly just *philological*, study of texts from a non-Western tradition—insofar as one is engaging in the comparative *philosophy* of religion—one should be concerned with the question of truth. While philological rigor is certainly a precondition for such studies, it is not the end of philosophical analysis: even after one is satisfied that one has arrived at a proper understanding of the sense of the text, there is still the question of whether one takes the text's claims to be *true*. But the question of truth is not easily resolved. Arnold offers a particularly succinct account of the "problem of truth" when he states:

> What sense are we to make of the fact that a great many seemingly rational persons have ardently held, as *really true*, religious beliefs that are often mutually exclusive? That question becomes especially acute when we realize that our answer to it cannot consist in simply jettisoning the idea of *truth* . . . for that is an idea that itself is necessarily presupposed by our work as scholars.[27]

In addressing this question, Arnold relies on a distinction between justification and truth: while justification pertains to "the various circumstances in which a person might be constituted as someone for whom certain beliefs are rationally held," the issue of "[h]ow and why the beliefs in question were thus developed is, however, logically independent of whether or not they might be true."[28]

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26 Ibid., comm. ad chap. 5, v. 23.

27 Dan Arnold, "Justification and Truth, Relativism and Pragmatism: Reflections on Indian Philosophy and Its Lessons for Religious Studies" (unpublished paper, 2006), p 1.

28 Dan Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 213.

Through employing such a distinction, we might "retain the relativist's recognition that many different (even mutually exclusive) beliefs might alike be rationally held, but only if we also recognize that this point becomes incoherent if understood as concerning the truth of beliefs," and "appreciate, moreover, that the possibility that [religious persons'] justified beliefs are really true may never finally be eliminated."[29] If Arnold's distinction is the right one to adopt, then the conclusions of any comparative philosophy of religion can only inform us about modes of justification, and cannot finally determine the truth of the claims discussed. We may for example note that Buddhist thinkers and Western empiricist philosophers offer similar accounts of the absence of self, and deploy similar arguments in their defense, although all this could never in the end tell us whether it is indeed *true* that there is no (essential, unchanging) self. But what is true? Shouldn't philosophy be concerned with the truth of the matter?

In connection with the distinction between justification and truth, we might also consider Arnold's comments regarding Hadot's approach to the interpretation of classical philosophy as a form of spiritual practice, "philosophy as a way of life." Arnold points out that such an approach leads us to see that Buddhist philosophical discourse is based upon certain axiological commitments—certain commitments to a hierarchy of values, values largely *presupposed* by Buddhist philosophy rather than *argued for*. He calls our attention to

> [T]he fact *that* these different traditions of discourse all make clear the extent to which they presuppose various (and sometimes mutually exclusive) axiological commitments, and the fact *that* the ideal readers envisaged by these works will be those who share these commitments. . . . [T]hose who engaged religiously with the discourses . . . were *doing* something, were performing some *practice*. . . . [and] none of the arguments . . . surveyed provides good reasons for *choosing* to hold the beliefs or undertake the practices in question.[30]

But where does this leave us with respect to the question of truth? Where does that leave the comparative philosophy of religion? Are we at an impasse, unable to finally adjudicate between competing systems of values?

It may be appropriate to characterize the present situation in terms of the "postmodern condition."   Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives," and states that "the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, [to] the crisis of metaphysical philosophy."[31] Considering the problems

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29 Ibid., pp. 216 and 218.

30 Arnold, *Mīmāṃsakas and Mādhyamikas against the Buddhist Epistemologists*, pp. 314-315.

31 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

associated with the legitimation of science, Lyotard states that the language game of science:

> [L]eaves behind the metaphysical search for a first proof of transcendental authority as a response to the question: "How do you prove the proof?" or, more generally, "Who decides the conditions of truth?" It is recognized that the conditions of truth, in other words, the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bonds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the experts.[32]

While Lyotard concerns himself with the "language game" of science, we might transpose his account to our own domain, to describe the issues raised here in the comparative philosophy of religion. Without recourse to some metanarrative, is it really possible to finally adjudicate between different religious language games, e.g., the language games of Yogācāra Buddhism, Gnosticism, or Lacanian psychoanalysis? Have we conceded the death of philosophy? Have we conceded that in the postmodern condition, metaphysics can only be replaced with "post-mortem" philosophy?

Apophasis: Philosophy as Therapy

Considering the impasse with respect to the question of truth in the comparative philosophy of religion as highlighted above, we might reflect on whether apophatic[(B)] doctrines might contribute to a resolution of the problem, or offer another "way out." It is first necessary, however, to distinguish apophatic[(B)] doctrines from doctrines of ineffability.[33] I will attempt to formally differentiate the two forms of doctrine in terms of a Peircean model of semiosis. According to Peirce's tripartite model of semiosis, three elements are necessary for semiosis to occur: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. Briefly, the sign is the representation, the object is what is represented, and the interpretant is the meaning of the representation—what Peirce defines as "the proper significate outcome of a sign."[34] In these terms, a doctrine of ineffability should be understood to primarily address the relation between sign and object: an ineffability claim is a claim that some object x is unable to be expressed, a claim

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32 Ibid., p. 29.

33   I should point out here that ineffability certainly plays a role in Buddhist discourse; e.g., see José Ignacio Cabezón, "Ineffability and the Silence of the Buddha," *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), chap. 9; and Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 90-97. Numerous other studies also examine the role of ineffability in Buddhism; my aim in this paper, however, is to call attention to a different aspect of Buddhist discourse.

34   See Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), vol. 5, para. 473.

that the sign cannot properly refer to the object. An apophatic[(B)] doctrine, on the other hand, should be understood to primarily address the relation between sign and interpretant: an apophatic[(B)] doctrine indicates that the proper understanding of the doctrine—the interpretant or *meaning* of the doctrine, the doctrine's "proper significate outcome"—entails a realization that the doctrine must ultimately "unspeak" itself, that the doctrine does not function as a description of the "way things really are," but rather is only an instrument or means to some further end: the end of "discarding all notions and determinations."[35] It is certainly the case that doctrines of ineffability and apophatic[(B)] doctrines both involve all three elements of Peirce's model of semiosis: the *interpretant* of a doctrine of ineffability is that the doctrine is unable to properly signify the object, and the *object* of an apophatic[(B)] doctrine is the doctrinal discourse itself. However, doctrines of ineffability are primarily directed towards the sign/object relation; that is to say, they primarily concern the domain of semantics. Apophatic[(B)] doctrines, on the other hand, are primarily directed towards the sign/interpretant relation; they primarily concern the domain of pragmatics. An apophatic[(B)] doctrine does not point out that ultimate reality (or the ultimate nature of reality, or "the way things really are") is ineffable. Rather, an apophatic[(B)] doctrine aims to effect a shift in the status of the given doctrinal discourse itself, and alter the practitioner's relation to that discourse. In short, the goal of apophasis[(B)] is to "unspeak" itself, to place the doctrinal discourse under "self-erasure."

The Buddhist tendency towards apophasis[(B)] may be seen in a number of places in Buddhist discourse. The tendency may be seen, for example, in the trope of the dharma as a raft, the view of the dharma as giving up all views, the claim that Buddhist doctrine is like one illusory king defeating another, the statement found in many Mahāyāna sūtras that the Buddha never uttered a word, the Madhyamaka account of the ultimate goal as the cessation of all conceptual proliferation (*sarva-prapañca-upaśama*),[36] or the *Madhyāntavibhāga*'s claim that when the Buddhist analysis of the nature of things has done its work it will itself be consumed in the flames of non-conceptualization. In the passage from the *Madhyāntavibhāga* discussed above, for example, the Buddhist characterization of the way things really are is understood as an attempt to end all such characterizations, including its own—offering an account of the way things really are that will terminate any accounting for the way things really are. All of this seems to quite clearly imply that when the goal is attained, even Buddhism itself will not ultimately be taken to be true: when awakening is attained, Buddhist doctrine is to be left behind. In the end, Buddhism should serve as a

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35 Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, p. 33.

36 Kapstein states, "As the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness, however, is sometimes said to dispense with all expressed tenets, even this one, more nuanced readings favor finding here a type of skepticism, specifically a skeptical view of the referential capacity of language and conceptual activity. None of this seems to me to be wrong . . . 'emptiness' cannot be understood primarily in propositional, or 'theoretical' terms; rather it fundamentally determines one's orientation to the Buddha's salvific project" (Kapstein, "What Is Buddhist Philosophy?," pp. 13-14).

means of achieving the realization of signlessness, an attainment which dissolves the possibility for affirming any truth at all.

Returning finally to the impasse regarding truth in the comparative philosophy of religion, I would emphasize that apophasis[B] implies a conception of philosophy as *praxis* more than *theory*, as more concerned with the cultivation of spiritual realization rather than the statement of theoretical truths. An apophatic[B] doctrine may, for example, be understood in terms of Wittgenstein's intuition that "All philosophy is 'Critique of language,'"[37] although in offering such "critique" one only has recourse to language itself—a predicament which highlights the tension of self-abrogation driving apophatic[B] discourse. From the perspective of apophatic[B] discourse, the impasse regarding truth may in itself serve as a clue to the nature of our entrapment with the net of views, and a hint that the ultimate goal entails moving beyond all views. In these terms, philosophy is ultimately a form of therapy, and when the therapy has done its work, it should be left behind, like a raft.

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37 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 63.