



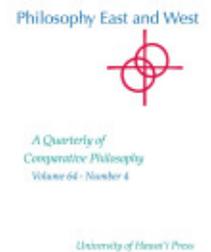
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THE BUDDHIST PARADOX OF THE LIAR: A QUINIAN DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE OF EXPEDIENT MEANS

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1. Introduction

Mahāyāna Buddhism is the major branch of Buddhism practiced in India, China, and East Asia. A signal characteristic of this form of Buddhism is its advocacy of the “doctrine of expedient means.” This doctrine, which makes its first official appearance in the third century of the Common Era in the *Lotus Sūtra* (hereafter “the Sūtra”), is supposed to account for the fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism expresses views about the nature of reality and the goals of Buddhist practice that are not reflected in earlier scriptures. In its famous “Parable of the Burning House,” the Sūtra argues for the view that the earlier teachings were not aligned with the final truth; their limitations were required by natural and unavoidable defects in the understanding of the Buddha’s audience. The earlier teachings were an “expedient means” that was necessary to further the goal of enlightenment of sentient creation.

The question naturally arises, however, whether this doctrine of expedient means is a substantive doctrine or merely a verbal way of deflecting concerns that the Buddha lied (it’s not “lying” if you call it something else). Buddhist apologetics holds that the doctrine is substantive: the earlier reported teachings were expedient means because they were *provisional* in nature. However, it is not precisely clear what “provisional” means, nor is it clear how the provisional nature of the earlier teachings would defend the Buddha against an accusation that the way he presented them was misleading.

Here I will consider how later commentaries have answered these questions. My conclusion will be that they have interpreted “provisional” to have various meanings that would allow the term to be employed in a denial that the Buddha’s action fulfills one or another condition necessary to establish an accusation that he lied. I will further argue that these efforts fail in this goal.

However, as it turns out, the failure of the apologetics to defend the Buddha against an accusation that he lied may be unimportant; for it is not at all clear that he requires such a defense. Indeed, the Sūtra does not itself deny that the Buddha lied; rather, it denies that he committed a falsehood. In light of this fact, an additional interpretation of “provisional” becomes available: “provisional” means “true in the language spoken, but false in a language with which the spoken language will eventually be replaced.” For its part, “expedient means,” although a form of deception of a kind, can then be given a significance distinct from both lying

and falsehood. It follows from these considerations that the Sūtra's position is defensible—despite that whether or not the Buddha lied cannot be definitively established.

I will proceed as follows. I begin by considering the role of the Burning House parable and the doctrine of expedient means in Buddhist thought (in section 2). Then I set forth a definition of lying and present a *prima facie* argument that the Buddha did indeed lie (section 3). Then I will examine two extant interpretations of what “provisional” might mean (section 4), in the process showing that they are directed toward overcoming the accusation that the Buddha lied. In the first, attributable to Kūkai, “provisional” means that earlier scriptures were not *warranted*—the Buddha gave adequate indication that the views expressed did not reflect his most considered position. In the second, attributable to the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* (“SPE”), the deception was *unintentional*; the purpose of promulgating the earlier teachings was to lead the disciples to the true teaching, not that they should believe that the earlier teachings were true in themselves. In neither of these interpretations does the “provisional” nature of the Buddha's original teaching acquit the Buddha of lying, although under the SPE's interpretation the lie might be styled a “white lie.”

I then analyze the Sūtra's own claim that “the Buddha did not commit a falsehood” in light of recent Western scholarship on the relation between a language's discriminative resources and its ontological commitments (section 5). In the interpretation of provisional (and defense of “expedient means”) that I present, (a) it is indeterminate whether the Buddha lied: if he intended the disciples to believe the sentence “There are four practices that lead to enlightenment,” he did not lie; but if he intended them to believe the sentence “The sentence ‘There are four practices which lead to enlightenment’ is true in your future language,” he did lie. But, in the same interpretation, (b) the Buddha did not engage in falsehood. Falsehood is not a necessary condition of lying (the Buddha could have lied despite telling the truth by communicating a true sentence with the intention that the disciples believe a false one); thus the indeterminacy of (a) is consistent with the determinate conclusion of (b). Since it claims (b) but not (a), the Sūtra (if not the Buddha) is entirely vindicated by this defense.

Since this defense depends on properties of two distinct languages with which the Buddha is conversant, I call it the “semantic defense.” The finding is consonant with claims of at least some Sūtras sacred to Mahāyāna Buddhism, which also suggest that the doctrine of expedient means should be interpreted semantically (section 6). I conclude (section 7) with the suggestion that the doctrine may have wider application than heretofore realized.

II. The Significance of the Doctrine

The Mahāyāna (“Great Vehicle”) branch of Buddhism constituted a break with traditional Buddhism (known as Theravāda, or, pejoratively in some texts, as Hīnayāna or the “lesser vehicle”) in many ways. One significant difference from the earlier

teachings is the Mahāyāna advocacy of the view that all sentient beings should aspire to Buddhahood.¹ The earlier tradition advocated aspiring to the status of Arhat (the highest of ten levels of *shrāvaka* or “voice hearer”) or *pratyekabuddha* (a “self-enlightened being”); only the historical Buddha (Shakyamuni Buddha) was or could be a Buddha. Seeking to establish itself as superior to earlier teachings, Mahāyāna Buddhism needed to explain why its doctrines were not reflected in earlier scriptures. The Sūtra develops the “doctrine of expedient means” as a way of answering this question. It explains the significance of the doctrine by means of a parable, the “Parable of the Burning House.” In summary its content is as follows.

A man with many children notices that his mansion is burning. He goes to warn them. But they are busy playing games and will not heed his frantic warnings to evacuate. Thwarted in his efforts to save their lives by direct means, he hits upon a ruse. He tells them that outside the gate of their estate are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts (all their favorite playthings), and they may have their pick if they will just step outside for a moment.

The children are successfully enticed by the ploy, and out they come. But to their astonishment they find not carts of the various types promised but magnificent ox carts of uniform quality, made of all the precious metals and encrusted all over with precious gems. For the man was very wealthy, and he felt no need to skimp when it came to giving gifts to his children.²

The parable derives its significance from a supposed analogy to the relation of the Buddha with sentient creation. The burning mansion is the “threefold world”; the children playing games are the creatures who inhabit that world; the father is the Buddha himself.³ Just as the children do not realize the condition of the house they are in, we ourselves do not know the condition that our *lives* are in—that is, we are not aware of the Four Noble Truths.⁴ Just as the father is forced to use a ruse to rescue his children because of their limited understanding, so, too, the Buddha is driven to use a ruse to rescue us. Thus, we arrive at the Sūtra’s answer to the question, “Why did the Buddha originally preach three vehicles, when there is in fact only one?” Shariputra (the Buddha’s interlocutor here) gives the answer:

“First [the Buddha] preaches the three vehicles to attract and guide living beings, but later he employs just the Great Vehicle to save them. Why? The Thus Come One possesses measureless wisdom, power, freedom from fear, the storehouse of the Law. He is capable of giving to all living beings the Law of the Great Vehicle. But not all of them are capable of receiving it.” (Watson 1993, p. 62)

In other words, to teach the truth would lead to rejection of the teaching and an increase in suffering in the world. But by using a more accessible terminology, the teaching would be made available to many more beings, with the result that they would be saved from the burning house of the material world (the “fires of *Duḥkha*” or attachment) and be brought eventually to *anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi* (supreme perfect enlightenment).

This alteration in terminology to render the teaching accessible is styled an “expedient means”:

“Shariputra, for this reason you should understand that the Buddhas employ the power of expedient means. And because they do so, they make distinctions in the one Buddha vehicle and preach it as three.” (Watson 1993, p. 62)

The Sūtra goes on to point out that the rich man’s use of such a means is not a case of making a false statement:

“At that time each of the sons mounted his large carriage, gaining something he had never had before, something he had originally never expected. Shariputra, what do you think of this? When this rich man impartially handed out to his sons these big carriages adorned with rare jewels, was he guilty of falsehood or not?”

Shariputra said, “No, World-Honored One. The rich man simply made it possible for his sons to escape the peril of the fire and preserve their lives. He did not commit a falsehood. . . . World-Honored One, even if the rich man had not given them the tiniest carriage, he would still not be guilty of falsehood. Why? Because the rich man had earlier made up his mind that he would employ an expedient means to cause his sons to escape. Using a device of this kind was no act of falsehood.” (Watson 1993, p. 58)

Nor, analogously, is the Buddha guilty of using falsehood in preaching three vehicles when there is in fact only one that is not equivalent to any of the others:

“Shariputra, that rich man first used three types of carriages to entice his sons, but later he gave them just the large carriage adorned with jewels, the safest, most comfortable kind of all. Despite this, the rich man was not guilty of falsehood. The Thus Come One does the same, and he is without falsehood.” (Watson 1993, p. 62)⁵

The Sūtra’s defense of the Buddha does not appear entirely satisfactory. That he should be seen to have made a false statement would appear to be beyond dispute. Here is an argument that establishes *prima facie* that he did so:

Argument 1

1. If the sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is false, then the father spoke a falsehood.
2. The sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is false only when it is not the case that there are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate.
3. It is not the case that there are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate.
4. The sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is false.
5. Therefore, the father spoke a falsehood.

Analogously, the Buddha spoke a falsehood when he taught three vehicles instead of the single true one. Moreover, in many definitions of lying, it would be true not only that the Buddha spoke a falsehood but also that he lied. (We will consider such a definition in the next section.) Indeed, the apologetics that we will consider are directed toward overcoming an accusation of lying, not of falsehood.

The response of the Sūtra would appear simply to be further insistence that the use of expedient means excludes the possibility that the earlier teachings were false:

“Why do I say [it was no falsehood]? Because if they were able to preserve their lives, then they had already obtained a plaything of sorts. And how much more when, through an expedient means, they are rescued from the burning house!” (Watson 1993, p. 58; my bracketed addition)

This is inadequate: “A plaything of sorts” is not what they were promised. Is the thought that if the end is good, then must the means—a half-truth—be good also? We may readily grant that sentient creation was not ready for the teaching; that the lives of the inhabitants of the threefold world were preserved by means of it, et cetera. But why could not their lives simply have been preserved by a falsehood and/or by a lie?

The Sūtra does not explicitly state what is gained by styling the Buddha’s earlier teaching an “expedient means,” but the implicit logic is perhaps something like this:

Argument 2

1. Either the Buddha’s device was a falsehood or it was an expedient means and not both. (“Using a device of this kind was no act of falsehood.”)
2. No wrongful acts are acts committed by Buddhas. (“The Buddha possesses . . . the storehouse of the Law.”)
3. All lies are wrongful acts. (—implicit premise)
4. No lies are acts committed by Buddhas. (2, 3)
5. All falsehoods are lies. (—implicit premise)
6. No falsehoods are acts committed by Buddhas. (4, 5)
7. The Buddha’s device was not a falsehood. (6)
8. The Buddha’s device was an expedient means. (1, 7)

This argument suggests that perhaps the goal of styling the Buddha’s action an expedient means is to preserve the appearance of the Buddha’s absolute truthfulness and integrity while explaining an important change in theology. But such abduction (backwards reasoning) might fail to quell doubts among the faithful, since it takes for granted precisely what the change in theology puts into question (premise 2, that the Buddha is incapable of committing a wrongful act). Something more must be added: an independent explication of “expedient means” that makes it an exclusive alternative to telling a falsehood. Without such an explication, “expedient means” may end up being interpreted simply as “What a Buddha has done when he does what if done by the unenlightened would be wrong.”

In section 5 below, I will give such an explication based on the semantic properties of the respective languages used before and after enlightenment. But before we get to that resolution, I will pursue a bit further the question of how the Buddha’s action might be construed as lying (section 3) and then follow up with a consideration of how the issue has been addressed by Buddhist apologists (section 4).

III. Why the Buddha Should Be Considered to Have Lied

If the Mahāyāna teachings are authentic, then the Buddha must be taken to have engaged in some form of deception by not sharing them earlier. But what kind? An obvious place to begin an investigation of this question is to consider whether or not he lied. It may be that his behavior fulfills the necessary and sufficient conditions of lying. If not, it was a deception other than lying, and we may hope to determine more exactly what kind it was. Moreover, our investigation may uncover considerations that mitigate his culpability or reveal the deception (lying or other) to have been morally permissible. Therefore, let us commence by considering a definition of lying (with comments and examples), which we will then use to evaluate the Buddha's actions. The definition is as follows:

An agent (A) *lies* to a patient (P) just when A warrants or antiwarrants a communication (C) to P with the intention that C influence P to believe a sentence (S) that A believes to be false.⁶

Important concepts in the definition can in turn be defined as follows:

To *warrant* means to communicate C under circumstances that A believes justify P in believing that A intends by means of C to influence P to believe that A believes S.

To *antiwarrant* means to communicate C under circumstances that justify A in believing that P will believe that A believes C to be false.

An *intention* is a node in a causal/explanatory network of functional roles such that it strictly precedes an unconstrained action and is strictly preceded both by desires and beliefs of the A having such intention.⁷

An *influence* is a partial cause (i.e., a strict precedence relation).

A *belief* is a node in a causal/explanatory network that precedes certain desires and strictly precedes specified intentions, and which corresponds to a propositional attitude of acceptance of some S, such that the P in whom the "belief that S" occurs is disposed to affirm S or act on S.

A *sentence* is a discursive linguistic entity in the indicative mood, spoken or thought, to which a truth value can be applied.⁸

False is the opposite of true (i.e., nonassertible in a given language).

True means that the sentence to which it is applied is assertible in a language (L_n) among a community of language users with perfect epistemic parity (i.e., each

member knows everything that all the others know, including all of their mental states).⁹

Comments and Examples

A person can lie either by speaking or by acting; the context in which a sentence appears matters in a consideration of whether or not it is a lie; the liar A must intend to influence the dupe P to believe a sentence S that A believes false and where A may be mistaken about the truth of S. C (the means that A takes to influence P) need not be discursive in nature; if it is, it may be true or false. It is *not* a necessary condition of being a lie that it be wrongful. The rightness or wrongness of lies depends on constraints given externally by the correct moral theory.

The garden variety of lie—an agent warrants the truth of a believed (and actually) false sentence by communicating it with the intention that such communication influence the patient to believe that sentence—is common and well known. But it is unlikely that a definition based solely on this kind of case is adequate. The instant definition is more comprehensive; however, it raises many interesting (and some contentious) issues. Some of these are irrelevant from the standpoint of evaluating the Buddha's discourse. Such issues include: nondiscursive C's; the significance that the S be believed false rather than actually false; and how antiwarrant works and its relationship to warrant and believed-to-be-true C's. (These issues will be addressed in depth elsewhere.) The most significant issues from the standpoint of Buddhist apologetics are the relation of warrant and intention, and that S need not be the same as C. The following two examples focus on these points.

Warranted True C, False S No. 1: Used Car Salesman. A used car salesman brings his grandmother to the lot on Sunday, sits her in all the cars and has her turn the ignitions on and off. In his sales pitch to customers, he always notes that "The last person to start this car was a little old lady who only drives on Sundays." The key to seeing why this is lying is that the S which A wants to influence P to believe true and which A believes false is *not* the true C that "The last person to start this car was a little old lady" but the false S that "This car's last owner was a little old lady." The salesman is hoping P will incorrectly infer from this that "This car's engine will remain inside the chassis even after I drive it off the lot."

Often people who believe that their profession requires mendacity of them carefully craft their C's so that they will be true but misunderstood as false S's. The truth of their C permits them to present an appearance of conviction and sincerity: "My C, after all, is true," such a person will tell herself. "Whatever you think as a result of having heard C is *your* problem. *Caveat emptor.*" But if A warrants C with the intention of influencing P to believe an S that A believes false, then A has lied.

Warranted True C, False S No. 2: The Lying Police Officer. A police officer is called in as a witness before a jury in a criminal proceeding. It has been determined in *voir dire* that all of the jury are of the irrevocable opinion that police officers always make only false statements whenever they are under oath. The case involves an altercation between two individuals, one of whom (unbeknownst to other interested parties) is a good friend of the officer. This friend is at fault in the matter. The officer

“honestly” testifies that the dispute is his friend’s fault, with the intention that the jury (disbelieving his testimony) will blame the innocent party. He is *lying* because his intention in telling the truth is that they should come to believe something false, namely that his friend is the injured party.

The purpose of the example is to isolate the factors of warrant and intention to deceive. If you intended to deceive, the fact that you warranted a true sentence does not protect you from the imputation that you lied; lying is impossible, however, without the intent to deceive. We might say that the police officer lies because his attitude to the truth is instrumental: he will say whatever is necessary to achieve his unjust goal. That this requires him to testify truthfully is just a (happy) accident.¹⁰

In light of the definition and examples, we can present the following *prima facie* case (the “Accusation”) that the Buddha lied: (1) by preaching the three vehicles he warranted the truth of the teaching C to the disciples (publicly taught it without qualification or otherwise under circumstances that would undermine the disciples’ being justified in believing he intended to influence them to believe that he himself believed S [here, equivalent to C]); (2) he intended by means of C to influence the disciples to believe S (because such intention was guided by his beliefs and desires, which strictly preceded it, and his action of communicating C preceded the [hoped for] formation of the intended belief in S in the disciples); and (3) by virtue of the Mahāyāna revelations, he can be deemed to have believed S false (nonassertible in the common language).

Given that there exists at least a *prima facie* case that the Buddha lied, it is reasonable to consider how the accusation might be countered.

IV. Defenses of the Buddha

Given the truth of Mahāyāna, at least a *prima facie* case can be made that the Buddha lied by offering non-Mahāyāna teachings. This fact was well recognized by Mahāyāna commentators, and they devoted some attention to how the Buddha might be defended from it without calling into question the superiority (not to mention the authenticity) of the Mahāyāna innovations.

A characteristic of such apologetics is that they hold the earlier teachings to have been provisional, in the sense that the Buddha always intended to replace them with others. But how exactly can this be a defense against the accusation that the Buddha lied? For the Buddha’s intent to replace the teachings is manifestly consistent with points 1, 2, and 3 made in the Accusation. Something more must be said about the term “provisional” that makes it clear that the provisional nature of the teachings is *inconsistent* with one or the other of claims 1, 2, and 3 of the Accusation, if the Buddha is going to be acquitted of lying.

In this section we will examine apologetics directed toward denying 1 and 2. I argue that these apologetics do not succeed. In section 5 below I will argue that some S (S₁, “There are four vehicles”) equivalent to C was in fact not false. This does not necessarily contradict point 3 of the Accusation, because it is not the only possible S that the Buddha might have intended the disciples to believe; if he intended

the disciples to believe some other S non-equivalent to C (e.g., S₂, “The sentence ‘There are four vehicles’ is true in the language spoken after enlightenment”), then he could still have lied. There is no need, however, to dwell on whatever considerations might commend to us the more charitable view, since the Sūtra itself claims only that the Buddha did not speak a falsehood, and this point can be securely established.¹¹

Apologetic 1

The first interpretation of “provisional” is derived from the work of Kūkai. Kūkai was a Japanese monk of the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. He and his school of Esoteric Buddhism (Shingon) exercised a deep and long-lasting influence, not only over Japanese Buddhism but over its arts and culture generally. Kūkai uses the term “provisional” in the following text:

The sermons of the Tathagata [“Thus Come One”] were delivered in accordance with the particular diseases in the minds of his audience; manifold remedies were provided, depending on their various capacities. The sermons thus adapted to the capacities of his listeners were in many cases provisional and seldom final. When the bodhisattvas composed the commentaries, they wrote faithfully on the basis of the Sutras, which were provisional in nature. (Kūkai 1972a, p. 154; my bracketed addition¹²)

Kūkai here divides the body of Buddhist scripture into two types, provisional and final. The “final” scriptures (for Kūkai this includes, inter alia, the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and the *Vajraśekhara Sūtra*) are used to interpret the provisional works and bring out the elements in those works that support his school. Kūkai finds textual evidence in the provisional Sūtras from which one can reasonably infer that the Buddha in his earlier sermons gave fair notice that he would eventually replace the views he expressed there with others:

It is therefore said in the commentary on the *Dasabhumika Sutra* written by Vasubhandu that “only the way to enlightenment can be talked about [and not enlightenment itself],” and also in the commentary on *The Awakening of Faith* written by Nagarjuna that “the perfect sea of Enlightenment cannot be talked about.” These works were based on the [provisional] Sutras and were not intended to advocate the final truth. (Kūkai 1972a, p. 154; citations omitted)

In other words, Vasubandhu’s and Nāgārjuna’s claims that enlightenment is indescribable were (not very subtle) hints that the Sūtras on which they were commenting did not discuss enlightenment in its final form; their audiences were not yet ready for such a conversation:

In Exoteric Buddhist teachings, this [the unconditioned Truth] is understood as the ultimate principle, the theoretically postulated *Dharmakaya*; but, seen from the point of view of the Shingon approach, this is an introduction.¹³ (Kūkai 1972b, p. 209)

A definition of “provisional” along these lines is intended to deny point 1 of the Accusation. Kūkai, reasonably assuming that an important change in doctrine must be accompanied by a defense of some kind against the charge that the earlier teachings

were lies, meets this need by trying to show that the earlier teachings lacked warrant.¹⁴ That is, they were not made under circumstances that the Buddha believed justified the disciples in believing that he intended by means of his sermon to influence them to believe that he believed whatever they would glean from the teachings.¹⁵ “Thus the Buddha who preaches for the benefit of others keeps his innermost spiritual experience hidden and does not reveal it in his instructions” (Kūkai 1972a, p. 156). This has some initial plausibility; the disciples should have been aware that their minds were diseased and that they could not understand enlightenment in the same way that the Buddha did.

However, a successful defense along these lines must unequivocally show that some elements in the situation or in the text of the Sūtras themselves overcome a background assumption of veracity. That is, as a pragmatic matter, we take it as a default (albeit defeasible) presumption in our interactions with others that they are truthful in their communications with us to the best of their ability (Carson 2006, p. 295). Preaching a sermon is a serious case of implicit warrant of this kind. Indeed, an all-knowing being could hardly fail to be cognizant of the fact that his disciples would take him to believe what he taught. Only clear and unambiguous indications to the contrary would nullify the presumption that he warranted the teachings. However, not only did he refrain from providing such indications, but at least some early passages support the view that he intended his disciples to believe that he himself believed his teachings, and that he wished to emphasize that he was communicating his canonical views. For example, in the Pāli *Dhammapada*, chapter 20, “The Path,” it is written:

274

Just this path, there is no other
For purity of vision.
Do ye go along this [path];
This is what will bewilder Mara.

275

Entered upon this,
An end of misery you will make.
Proclaimed indeed is the path by me,
Having known the extrication of the arrows.

276

By you is the task strenuously to be done;
Tathagatas are proclaimers.
Entered upon this path, the meditators
are released from the bond of Mara.

(Carter and Palihawadana 2000, p. 49)

Moreover, the commentaries Kūkai cites are perfectly consistent with the view that the respective commentators believe that the Buddha warranted the teaching; contra Kūkai, it is an obvious interpretation of “enlightenment can’t be talked about” that it simply means enlightenment *can’t* be talked about; the highest truth (that can be

expressed in words) is that the highest truth (without qualification) is inherently unspeakable. (Indeed, this is just what we will argue in section 6.)

Another concern is that it is inherent in any “no warrant” defense that it depends on some particular interpretation of the earlier scriptures that, it will be claimed, was later revealed to only a select few. As Kūkai puts it:

The masters of the Dharma who transmitted the Exoteric Buddhist teachings interpreted the [passages of] profound significance [appearing in the Exoteric Buddhist texts] in the light of their shallow doctrines and failed to find any Esoteric import in them. (Kūkai 1972a, p. 155)

But this tempts the following *tu quoque*:

You followers of the Mahayana envision that the early followers of the Buddha were diseased in mind and did not realize it. But what proof can you provide that you *yourselves* are not diseased in mind, other than the words of the scriptures which you interpret in light of your *own* shallow doctrines?

It is doubtful whether there is any better response to such an objection than to reply, “Obviously, such indications existed; if they had not, then we would have to tax the Buddha with lying.”

But unfortunately this response reveals the “no warrant” defense as question-begging; it takes for granted precisely what the change in theology puts into question: the Buddha’s honesty. It follows from these considerations that defining “provisional” as “made without warrant” could not allay doubts among the faithful, nor is it adequate for the purpose of distinguishing “expedient means” from “lying done by a Buddha.”

Apologetic 2

The *SPE* is a Mahāyāna Buddhist text that is sacred especially to the Korean Chogye school. The *SPE*, for its part, takes the other view of the claim that “enlightenment cannot be talked about”: this itself constitutes the final truth (or at least as much of the final truth as it is possible for the unenlightened to understand). Amantabhadra (the Buddha’s interlocutor here) puts the question in the following way:

If we desire to reach Buddhahood, we must first be freed from false conceptualization; if we desire to be free from false conceptualization, we must provisionally practice; if it is necessary to practice, we must know the stages. The Buddha has already revealed the perfectly enlightened pure realm, universally causing us to awaken and enter, and has made practice the basis. I hope that he will also teach the stages of practice to cause the multitude at this assembly, as well as all the sentient beings of the degenerate age to be free from false conceptualization and be able to reach realization. (Muller 1999, p. 90)

In other words, the creatures of this degenerate age need to be given some direction on how to attain the standpoint from which they will be able to see the limitations of the directions they have been given.

The translator comments:

“Provisional explanation,” or “expedient means,” is a vitally important aspect of the Buddhist teaching, and is directly related to the concept of “two truths.” The real or “absolute” Buddhist teaching is the immediate apprehension of the true nature of existence, which has no duality, is perfect in itself and inconceivable. . . . But the fact is, as Amantabhadra states here, that almost all sentient beings are completely bound in their illusory perceptions and conceptions, and when they hear the “truth,” it goes over their heads, and makes no sense. Therefore, the Buddha, adapting to the various capacities of his followers, provisionally gives them a teaching they can grasp, which includes physical and mental techniques that purify the body and mind. (Muller 1999, p. 90)

It can be seen in this apologetic that “provisional” is interpreted in such a way as to contradict point 2 of the Accusation. The *SPE* observes that the true teaching was incomprehensible to all but the Buddhas—we need to be brought to a point where we can understand it, and the provisional teaching serves this purpose. Thus, the intent to deceive is only a *temporary expedient*. Eventually, it is implied, all sentient creatures who are capable of it will be relieved of their ignorance, as the provisional teaching will be supplanted by the full truth.

The claim that the Buddha did not lie in this interpretation of “provisional” would be satisfactory if it were the case that the only *S* that the Buddha intended to influence the disciples to believe was the true teaching that would eventually be revealed to them. However, it does not appear that this is so. Indeed, in this defense it *cannot* be so: for the *SPE* foresees that the only path to enlightenment is for the disciples to believe the false *S* and act on it.¹⁶ *Eo ipso*, the Buddha must have intended to contribute to their believing the false *S*.

Although the *SPE* apologetic does not defend the Buddha against the Accusation, we might wish to go on to say that the lie is a “white lie,” defined as follows:

A *white lie* is a lie told under circumstances in which *A* is justified in believing that (1) *P* will eventually become aware of the truth of (a) *A*’s actual belief about *S* and (b) the truth or falsity of *S*, and that (2) in the interim *P* will be benefited by *P*’s believing that *S*.

Assuming *arguendo* that the Buddha is justified in believing that by following his teaching disciples will come to enlightenment (a state in which they have epistemic parity with him), all the indicated conditions are met and the Buddha’s false teaching qualifies as a “white lie.” A white lie (by definition) is still a lie, however; this apologetic does not entirely absolve the Buddha of lying.¹⁷

V. *The Semantic Defense*

I believe the defenses presented above, although well-meaning, go astray insofar as they are directed toward contradicting one or another point made in the Accusation. As I will demonstrate, *infra*, although the accusation cannot be proven definitively, it cannot be disproven definitively, either: whether or not the Buddha lied is indeterminate.

However, it is not clear that there is any need to defend the Buddha against the Accusation at all. Although the need for a defense of the Buddha against the Accusation can be supported by reference to scripture, in the context of the Burning House parable the Sūtra focuses its total attention not on the question of whether the Buddha lied but on the question of whether he spoke a falsehood.¹⁸ With respect to this question, it supplies an unambiguous denial.

It is natural enough to suppose that by “falsehood” the Sūtra must intend us to understand “lie,” since there seems to be no way that the Sūtra could seriously deny that the Buddha told a falsehood *as such*. Nevertheless, the defense of the Sūtra I provide herein is directed toward supporting just this denial. The interpretation of “provisional” that I offer—that the Buddha spoke in a language other than the one that would be spoken after enlightenment—not only definitively confirms this claim but also provides an independent explication of “expedient means” and gives the doctrine substantial content. And this is all that is required fully to vindicate the Sūtra. Moreover, this “semantic defense” (so-called because it depends on the particular characteristics of two distinct formal languages and their models) is both highly plausible on its face and consistent with broad strands of Mahāyāna thought.

The semantic defense is based primarily on the work of W. V. Quine. In a series of books and articles spanning over fifty years, Quine articulated a coherent, wide-ranging metaphysics bringing together aspects of logic, epistemology, and philosophy of science. His philosophy was both a reaction to the logical positivist movement of the early twentieth century and deeply influenced by logical considerations.

Quine’s project, broadly speaking, was deflationary. Since at least Aristotle’s time, Western philosophers have used grammatical evidence to bolster their ontological claims. Quine would put a stop to this procedure (or at least require some sound argument for it). He was not against arguing about language per se; he thought there can be value in such argument, but only if it is restricted to its proper sphere. (In this way his work is reminiscent of the critical side of Kant’s metaphysical project.) As he put it:

We look to bound variables in connection with ontology not in order to know what there is, but in order to know what a given remark or doctrine, ours or someone else’s, *says* there is, and this much is quite properly a problem involving language. But what there is another question. (Quine 1964a, pp. 15–16; his emphasis)

Instead of inferring ontological facts from the categorical ways in which we use proper names and singular terms, Quine would prefer that we make claims no more ambitious (based on such usage) than that certain kinds of speech acts “ontologically commit” us to the existence of things:

The argument of “On What There Is” is that we are ontologically committed to those entities that must be part of the domain of our theory in order for the sentences of the theory to be true. (Nelson and Nelson 2000, p. 59)

It is important to understand that this commitment is hypothetical, not “factual.” “To ask what the *assuming* of an object consists in is to ask what *referring* to an object

consists in" (Quine 1981a, p. 2; his emphasis). A sentence expresses an ontological commitment of its user to some entity it mentions, "a," just when we can validly draw from that sentence the inference " $(\exists x) (x = a)$ " ("To be is to be the value of a variable" [Quine 1949, p. 50]).¹⁹ But like any valid inference, an inference of this kind is only as good as its premise: *ontological commitment does not entail existence*.

Indeed, Quine's criterion of ontological commitment simply reflects a rather bland fact about quantifiers—that they range over everything in the domain of a theory under some interpretation:

Kripke writes congenially on ontology and referential quantification, stressing that their connection is trivially assured by the very explanation of referential quantification. The solemnity of my terms 'ontological commitment' and 'ontological criterion' has led my readers to suppose that there is more afoot than meets the eye, despite my protests. For all its triviality, the connection had desperately needed stressing because of philosophers such as were fictionalized in "On What There Is" and cited from real life by Church. I am grateful for Kripke's deflationary remarks, for they cannot be repeated too often. (Quine 1981b, pp. 174–175; citations omitted)

Undoubtedly there is much interesting work to be done in determining what there actually is in the domain. But *this* is not work that will be done by philosophers: "It is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described" (Quine 1981a, p. 21). It is also important to understand that, despite his faith in science as an epistemological project, Quine deeply doubted whether it could produce a single canonical domain (the "underdetermination thesis"). "Truth is immanent, and there is no higher. We must speak from within a theory, albeit any of various" (1981a, pp. 21–22).

Part of Quine's skepticism about the possibility of ascertaining a canonical domain derives from the possibilities inherent in paraphrase.²⁰ Usually, sentences—even those that superficially appear unambiguous—can be rephrased in ways that alter the terms that appear in them as nominals, thus changing the entities to which they ontologically commit the speaker (or theory). In his most famous (if not perspicuous) example, the name "Pegasus," the use of which seems to commit us to there being a winged horse in the domain, can be turned into a predicate. So instead of referring to Pegasus, we can refer to "the thing that 'is-Pegasus'" or "the something that 'pegasizes'"—with no such commitment (since there is never any guarantee that an entity exists for a property or group of properties). Notwithstanding, Quine did insist that acceptable entities must also have clear individuation conditions (a criterion met by all entities in space-time as well as sets—and nothing else), a factor that gives rise to his famous preference for ontological "desert landscapes."²¹

Although Quine's philosophy on its face appears to be an arbitrary, ambitious, and revisionist metaphysical program, it really has much more modest aims. At heart, it is a program of metaphysical reform along logicist lines, a restriction on the aims of ontological investigation. And although he was a vocal advocate of physicalism, in the end Quine would be agnostic on what there really is; and his criterion of ontological commitment may be applied to the analysis of any theory, even one whose

preferred interpretation posits entities (theoretical individuals) of which he would not personally approve.²²

The semantic defense is based on the concept of ontological commitment. I will demonstrate—an apparently valid inference to the contrary notwithstanding—that we need not take either the claim “there are four vehicles” or the claim “there is only one vehicle” to be false. The reason is that the second claim is made in a language whose predicative resources are such that on its preferred interpretation only one vehicle can be distinguished in the domain, ontologically committing its user to only one vehicle; the first is made in a language whose predicative resources are such that on its preferred interpretation four vehicles can be distinguished, ontologically committing its user to there being four vehicles. As Robert Kraut put it, “the specification of a theory’s subject matter amounts to neither more nor less than a specification of the theory’s expressive resources” (Kraut 1980, p. 113). In short, both the claims “there are four vehicles” and “there is one vehicle” are true (assertible in their respective languages).

To demonstrate this, it will be necessary to introduce some logical apparatus adequate to explicate language-relativized identity claims.

In the wake of the controversy over relative and absolute identity, it appears to be clear, at least, that given any first-order language with a finite stock of predicates, it is possible to give a contextual definition of identity by means of an expansion that states of two supposedly distinct entities that they are the same for that language just when they satisfy or (equivalently) fail to satisfy all the available predicates. This procedure trades an absolute “identity” relation for a language-relativized “indiscernibility” relation—what Peter Geach called an “I-predicable.”²³ As Geach put it:

A predicable is an I-predicable iff whenever this predicable is true in L of x and y, any predicable of L whatever is true of x iff it is true of y. . . . But if x and y satisfy an I-predicable of L that guarantees only that they are indiscernible so far as the predicables of L can show—not that they are absolutely indiscernible. . . .²⁴ (Geach 1973, pp. 297–298)

The Buddha participates in multiple discourses, some of which have a larger “ideology” (stock of predicates [Quine 1964d, p. 131]) than others. In the more impoverished discourse, there is no difference speakable among the various practices that bring enlightenment; they are “the same vehicle” in that language. In the more robust discourse, the difference can be articulated. A more expressive discourse can differentiate a single entity into multiple individuals.

Our task, then, is to provide for the Theravāda and Mahāyāna enlightenment theories proofs that place limits on the number of entities that can appear in the domains of the theories *under any interpretation on which their axioms are true*. (Of course, it is always possible to provide an interpretation on which the axioms are false; but the user of the language is not ontologically committed to the existence of the entities in the domain under any such interpretation.) By doing so, we demonstrate that each theory is veracious. In its preferred interpretation, each does indeed ontologically commit its user to the number of ways to enlightenment that he or she

claims exist, and the difference in number of ways can be attributed to a change in language. The Mahāyāna Buddhist will take it that the later language is canonical, and thus the Buddha is actually committed to the existence of only one vehicle. But she can freely admit that—although there was perhaps a kind of deception involved—the Buddha spoke no *falsehood* when he spoke in the earlier language, for speakers of that language (which the Mahāyānist’s language supersedes) commit themselves to there being four vehicles, not one. “Provisional” means “spoken (truly) in a language that would be understood by the disciples, later to be replaced,” while “expedient means” corresponds to the kind of deception involved, and can be given an explication independent of the needs of an apologetic (as will be explained in the sequel).

Now we will put the claim more precisely. We will devise two theoretical languages, L_1 and L_0 , the former having more expressive capacity than the latter. Whereas the variables in L_1 range over a domain whose contents (in the preferred interpretation) are four distinct vehicles, the variables in L_0 range over a domain that can have only one vehicle.

The simulation uses the same logical symbols as classical first-order monadic predicate logic including the normal sentential connectives, but without identity, which is separately defined for each language (“ $=_{L_1}$ ” is L_1 -Identity; “ $=_{L_0}$ ” is L_0 -Identity). It also uses an ordinary natural deduction system.²⁵ In addition to the natural deduction rules, each language uses the axiom schema “Self-Identity” (defined below) as well as its own axioms. Other parameters employed by the languages and their intended interpretations (given in double quotations) are specified as appropriate. (Parentheses have been suppressed where concatenation of \wedge or \vee renders them truth-functionally redundant.)

L_1

Quantifiers: \forall, \exists

Variables: x, y, \dots etc.

Constants: v_1, v_2, \dots, v_n (“Vehicles”)

Predicates: C_1, C_2, C_3, B, E (C_1 = “is the *shrāvaka* way”; C_2 = “is the *pratyekabuddha* way”; C_3 = “is the *bodhisattva* way”; B = “is the Buddha way”; E = “leads to enlightenment”)

L_1 -Identity: $(\forall x, y) (x =_{L_1} y \equiv ((C_1x \equiv C_1y) \wedge (C_2x \equiv C_2y) \wedge (C_3x \equiv C_3y) \wedge (Bx \equiv By) \wedge (Ex \equiv Ey)))$

Axiom Schema

Self-Identity: $(\forall x) (x =_{\zeta} x \equiv \xi x)$ For $\zeta = L_1, \xi = [C_1 \vee C_2 \vee C_3 \vee B \vee E]$

Self-Identity may be entered on any line of a proof with appropriate substitutions.

Self-Identity is a restricted version of the ordinary rule “Identity.” The purpose of the restrictions is to prevent the introduction into proofs of variables or constants that refer to entities in $\{D_{L_1}\}$ about which we have nothing to say. As Quine put it, “Another way of saying what objects a theory requires is to say that they are the objects that some of the predicates of the theory have to be true of, in order for the theory

to be true" (Quine 1966, p. 4). If a theory does not allow us to predicate of a constant, then whatever entity in the domain of the theory the interpretation of the theory assigns to it is not one of the entities to which the theory's user is ontologically committed.

Theravāda Axioms:

Theravāda I: $C_1v_1 \wedge C_2v_2 \wedge C_3v_3 \wedge Bv_4$

Theravāda II: $(\forall x) (C_1x \supset \neg(C_2x \vee C_3x \vee Bx)) \wedge (\forall x) (C_2x \supset \neg(C_1x \vee C_3x \vee Bx)) \wedge (\forall x) (C_3x \supset \neg(C_1x \vee C_2x \vee Bx)) \wedge (\forall x) (Bx \supset \neg(C_1x \vee C_2x \vee C_3x))$

Theravāda III: $(\forall x) ((C_1x \supset Ex) \wedge (C_2x \supset Ex) \wedge (C_3x \supset Ex) \wedge (Bx \supset Ex) \wedge \neg(C_1x \vee C_2x \vee C_3x \vee Bx) \supset \neg Ex))$

We can get a start on ascertaining the commitments of a speaker of L_1 by simplifying Theravāda I:

- 1 C_1v_1 Theravāda I, Simplification
- 2 $C_1v_1 \vee C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1 \vee Ev_1$, Addition
- 3 $v_1 =_{L_1} v_1 \equiv (C_1v_1 \vee C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1 \vee Ev_1)$ Self-Identity, L_1/ζ , $[C_1 \vee C_2 \vee C_3 \vee B \vee E]/\xi$, v_1/x
- 4 $(v_1 =_{L_1} v_1 \supset (C_1v_1 \vee C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1 \vee Ev_1)) \wedge ((C_1v_1 \vee C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1 \vee Ev_1) \supset v_1 =_{L_1} v_1)$ 3, Material Equivalence
- 5 $(C_1v_1 \vee C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1 \vee Ev_1) \supset v_1 =_{L_1} v_1$ 4, Simplification
- 6 $v_1 =_{L_1} v_1$ 2, 5, Modus Ponens
- 7 $(\exists x) (x =_{L_1} v_1)$ 6, Existential Generalization

Thus, we arrive at the formula for existential commitment for v_1 ; the speaker of the language L_1 is ontologically committed to its existence.

Obviously, we can run this subroutine equally well for the other 3 constants ("vehicles") v_2, v_3, v_4 ; hence:

- .
- .
- .
- 8 $(\exists x) (x =_{L_1} v_1) \wedge (\exists x) (x =_{L_1} v_2) \wedge (\exists x) (x =_{L_1} v_3) \wedge (\exists x) (x =_{L_1} v_4)$

Moreover, all four of these "vehicles" can be shown (via Theravāda III) to lead to "enlightenment":

- 9 $Ev_1 \wedge Ev_2 \wedge Ev_3 \wedge Ev_4$

This is no more than to say that the user of L_1 who accepts its axioms as true is committed to the presence in the domain under the intended interpretation of the entities assigned to constants $v_1 \dots v_4$ (or, they have to be values of the variables

for the axioms to be true), and believes that each of these four “vehicles” leads to enlightenment.

However, we are not yet done; we do not yet know that the domain $\{D_{L1}\}$ for our intended interpretation has *just* four vehicles. (a) There might be fewer vehicles, one or more of the constants having been assigned redundantly to a vehicle that has also been assigned to some other name, or (b) there might be more vehicles, and we would need more constants to be assigned to them.

(a) We disprove (a) by showing that no two of the constants that name entities in the domain to which we are apparently committed are co-referential; that is, they cannot be L_1 -Identical. (They are not two distinct names for the same “vehicle.”) Our strategy is to assume that the two members of an arbitrarily selected pair of constants are L_1 -Identical to each other and then use RAA to prove that they are not. Hence:

10 $v_1 =_{L1} v_2$ Assumption

By applying Universal Instantiation v_1/x and v_2/y on L_1 -Identity, then applying Material Equivalence and Simplification, we get:

- 11 | $v_1 =_{L1} v_2 \supset ((C_1v_1 \equiv C_1v_2) \wedge (C_2v_1 \equiv C_2v_2) \wedge (C_3v_1 \equiv C_3v_2) \wedge (Bv_1 \equiv Bv_2) \wedge Ev_1 \equiv Ev_2)$
- 12 | $(C_1v_1 \equiv C_1v_2) \wedge (C_2v_1 \equiv C_2v_2) \wedge (C_3v_1 \equiv C_3v_2) \wedge (Bv_1 \equiv Bv_2) \wedge (Ev_1 \equiv Ev_2)$
10, 11, Modus Ponens
- 13 | $C_1v_1 \equiv C_1v_2$ 12, Simplification
- 14 | $(C_1v_1 \supset C_1v_2) \wedge (C_1v_2 \supset C_1v_1)$ 13, Material Equivalence
- 15 | $C_1v_1 \supset C_1v_2$ 14, Simplification
- 16 | C_1v_2 1, 15, Modus Ponens
- 17 | $(\forall x) (C_2x \supset \neg(C_1x \vee C_3x \vee Bx))$ Theravāda II, Simplification
- 18 | $C_2v_2 \supset \neg(C_1v_2 \vee C_3v_2 \vee Bv_2)$ 17, Universal Instantiation v_2/x
- 19 | C_2v_2 Theravāda I, Simplification
- 20 | $\neg(C_1v_2 \vee C_3v_2 \vee Bv_2)$ 18, 19, Modus Ponens
- 21 | $\neg C_1v_2 \wedge \neg C_3v_2 \wedge \neg Bv_2$ 20, DeMorgan
- 22 | $\neg C_1v_2$ 21, Simplification
- 23 | $C_1v_2 \wedge \neg C_1v_2$ 16, 22, Conjunction
- 24 | $\neg v_1 =_{L1} v_2$ 10–23, RAA

Here v_1 and v_2 are distinct; they do not redundantly refer to the same entity (“vehicle”) in the domain. This same manner of proof can likewise be used to disprove all the other five possible relativized identity claims, which could reduce the number of entities in the domain (“vehicles”) to less than four, despite the fact that they are all E (“lead to enlightenment”). Hence:

$n(D_{L1})$ is greater than or equal to 4 (n = the number of discernible entities in $\{D_{L1}\}$)

In our preferred interpretation of L_1 , there must be at least four distinct ways to enlightenment.

(b) Now we prove that any additional constants must be redundant, that is, refer to one of the entities (“vehicles”) that we have already established (line 8) are in the domain. (That is, although our stock of constants can be very large, no more are actually required than the four enumerated in the Theravāda axioms; whatever additional entities there may be in the domain are indiscernible from each other in L_1 .)

Let’s begin by asserting what we want to disprove:

$$1 \quad (\exists x) (x =_{L_1} x \wedge \neg(x =_{L_1} v_1 \vee x =_{L_1} v_2 \vee x =_{L_1} v_3 \vee x =_{L_1} v_4))$$

We will show via RAA that it leads to a contradiction. Everything that is self-identical in L_1 ’s domain must have already been assigned to one of the four constants we have already encountered. If there are any nonself-identical entities in the domain, they are not worthy of note, for users of L_1 cannot be ontologically committed to their existence.

- 2 | $y =_{L_1} y \wedge \neg(y =_{L_1} v_1 \vee y =_{L_1} v_2 \vee y =_{L_1} v_3 \vee y =_{L_1} v_4)$ 1, Existential Instantiation y/x
- 3 | $y =_{L_1} y \equiv (C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By \vee Ey)$ Self-Identity, L_1/ζ , $[C_1 \vee C_2 \vee C_3 \vee B \vee E]/\xi$, y/x
- 4 | $(y =_{L_1} y \supset (C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By \vee Ey)) \wedge ((C_1 \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By \vee Ey) \supset y =_{L_1} y)$ 3, Material Equivalence
- 5 | $y =_{L_1} y \supset (C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By \vee Ey)$ 4, Simplification
- 6 | $y =_{L_1} y$ 2, Simplification
- 7 | $C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By \vee Ey$ 5, 6, Modus Ponens

Our basic strategy is to show that whichever of these predicates we assign to y , y ends up being identical to one or another of the constants already encountered in Theravāda I.

- 8 | C_1v_1 Theravāda I, Simplification
- 9 | $C_1v_1 \supset \neg(C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1)$ Theravāda II, Simplification and UI v_1/x
- 10 | $\neg(C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1 \vee Bv_1)$ 8, 9, Modus Ponens
- 11 | $\neg C_2v_1 \wedge \neg C_3v_1 \wedge \neg Bv_1$ 10, DeMorgan²⁶
- 12 | $C_1v_1 \supset Ev_1$ Theravāda III, UI v_1/x and Simplification
- 13 | Ev_1 8, 12, Modus Ponens.
- 14 | $C_1y \supset \neg(C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By)$ Theravāda II, Simplification and UI y/x
- 15 | $C_1y \supset (\neg C_2y \wedge \neg C_3y \wedge \neg By)$ 14, DeMorgan

Our first assumption is C_1y . On this assumption, we can show that $y =_{L_1} v_1$.

- 16 | C_1y Assumption
- 17 | $C_1y \supset Ey$ Theravāda III, UI y/x and Simplification

- 18 | | Ey 16, 17, Modus Ponens
19 | | $Ey \wedge Ev_1$ 13, 18, Conjunction
20 | | $(Ey \wedge Ev_1) \vee (\neg Ey \wedge \neg Ev_1)$ 19, Addition
21 | | $Ey \equiv Ev_1$ 20, Material Equivalence
22 | | $C_1y \supset (Ey \equiv Ev_1)$ 16–21, Conditional Proof
23 | | C_1y Assumption
24 | | $C_1y \wedge C_1v_1$ 8, 23, Conjunction
25 | | $(C_1y \wedge C_1v_1) \vee (\neg C_1y \wedge \neg C_1v_1)$ 24, Addition
26 | | $C_1y \equiv C_1v_1$ 25, Material Equivalence
27 | | $C_1y \supset (C_1y \equiv C_1v_1)$ 23–26, Conditional Proof
28 | | C_1y Assumption
29 | | $\neg C_2y \wedge \neg C_3y \wedge \neg By$ 15, 28, Modus Ponens
30 | | $\neg C_2y$ 29, Simplification
31 | | $\neg C_2v_1$ 11, Simplification
32 | | $\neg C_2y \wedge \neg C_2v_1$ 30, 31 Conjunction
33 | | $(\neg C_2y \wedge \neg C_2v_1) \vee (C_2y \wedge C_2v_1)$ 32, Addition
34 | | $(C_2y \wedge C_2v_1) \vee (\neg C_2y \wedge \neg C_2v_1)$ 33, Commutation
35 | | $C_2y \equiv C_2v_1$ 34, Material Equivalence
36 | | $C_1y \supset (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1)$ 28–35, Conditional Proof

Repeated application of the subroutine 28–36 with C_3 and B for C_2 allows us also to obtain 40 and 50:

- 40 | | $C_1y \supset (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1)$
50 | | $C_1y \supset (By \equiv Bv_1)$
60 | | C_1y Assumption
61 | | $C_1y \equiv C_1v_1$ 27, 60, Modus Ponens
62 | | $C_2y \equiv C_2v_1$ 36, 60, Modus Ponens
63 | | $C_3y \equiv C_3v_1$ 40, 60, Modus Ponens
64 | | $By \equiv Bv_1$ 50, 60, Modus Ponens
65 | | $Ey \equiv Ev_1$ 22, 60, Modus Ponens
66 | | $(C_1y \equiv C_1v_1) \wedge (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1) \wedge (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1) \wedge (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Ey \equiv Ev_1)$ 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, Conjunction
67 | | $y =_{L1} v_1 \equiv ((C_1v_1 \equiv C_1v_1) \wedge (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1) \wedge (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1) \wedge (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Ey \equiv Ev_1))$ L₁-Identity, y/x and v₁/y
68 | | $(y =_{L1} v_1 \supset (((C_1y \equiv C_1v_1) \wedge (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1) \wedge (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1) \wedge (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Ey \equiv Ev_1))) \wedge (((C_1y \equiv C_1v_1) \wedge (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1) \wedge (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1) \wedge (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Ey \equiv Ev_1)) \supset y =_{L1} v_1))$ 67, Material Equivalence
69 | | $((C_1y \equiv C_1v_1) \wedge (C_2y \equiv C_2v_1) \wedge (C_3y \equiv C_3v_1) \wedge (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Ey \equiv Ev_1)) \supset y =_{L1} v_1$ 68, Simplification
70 | | $y =_{L1} v_1$ 66, 69, Modus Ponens
71 | | $C_1y \supset y =_{L1} v_1$ 60–70, Conditional Proof

By repeated application of the subroutines from lines 8–71 we obtain:

- 80 | $C_2y \supset y =_{L1} v_2$
 90 | $C_3y \supset y =_{L1} v_3$
 100 | $By \supset y =_{L1} v_4$

The predicate “E” requires a somewhat different treatment, as follows (lines 101–107):

- 101 | Ey Assumption
 102 | | $\neg\neg Ey$ 101, Double Negation
 103 | | $\neg(C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By) \supset \neg Ey$ Theravāda III, UI y/x and Simplification
 104 | | $\neg\neg(C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By)$ 103, Modus Tollens
 105 | | $C_1y \vee C_2y \vee C_3y \vee By$ 104, Double Negation
 106 | | $y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4$ 71, 80, 90, 100, 105, Constructive Dilemma
 107 | $Ey \supset (y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4)$ 101–106, Conditional Proof

Putting all the possible predications of y and their consequences (lines 71, 80, 90, 100, 107) into a conjunction, we get:

- 108 | $(C_1y \supset y =_{L1} v_1) \wedge (C_2y \supset y =_{L1} v_2) \wedge (C_3y \supset y =_{L1} v_3) \wedge (By \supset y =_{L1} v_4) \wedge (Ey \supset (y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4))$

Now, by constructive dilemma on lines 7 and 108, we get:

- 109 | $(y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4) \vee (y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4)$

Redundancy eliminates the extra set of disjuncts:

- 110 | $y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4$

Now, simplification on Line 2 gives us:

- 111 | $\neg(y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4)$

Putting lines 110 and 111 together by Conjunction gives us:

- 112 | $(y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4) \wedge \neg(y =_{L1} v_1 \vee y =_{L1} v_2 \vee y =_{L1} v_3 \vee y =_{L1} v_4)$

Since this is a contradiction, we are afforded the inference that

- 113 | $\neg(\exists x) (x =_{L1} x \wedge \neg(x =_{L1} v_1 \vee x =_{L1} v_2 \vee x =_{L1} v_3 \vee x =_{L1} v_4))$ 1–112, RAA,

or, put another way:

114 $(\forall x) (x =_{L_1} x \supset (x =_{L_1} v_1 \vee x =_{L_1} v_2 \vee x =_{L_1} v_3 \vee x =_{L_1} v_4))$ 113, Quantifier Negation, DeMorgan, Double Negation, Material Implication

—which is what we wanted to prove.

The proof establishes that the domain in any interpretation of L_1 must have at most four distinct entities to which its user is ontologically committed; that is:

$n(D_{L_1})$ is less than or equal to 4.

Combining this with the result of the earlier proof,

$n(D_{L_1})$ is greater than or equal to four,

we arrive at:

$n(D_{L_1})$ is greater than or equal to four and $n(D_{L_1})$ is less than or equal to four

That is,

$n(D_{L_1}) = 4$

In any interpretation, the domain of L_1 consists of four distinct entities; in our preferred interpretation, the Buddhist user of L_1 is ontologically committed to there being four vehicles.

Now let's tackle the Mahāyāna language, L_0 .

Mahāyāna Buddhism asserts that the discriminative resources of L_1 are too plentiful. It prefers a language whose predicates are restricted to just B (“is the Buddha way”) and P (“leads to perfective enlightenment”). As the Sūtra puts it:

Although earlier I told you
that you had attained extinction,
that was only the end of birth and death,
it was not true extinction.
Now what is needed
is simply that you acquire Buddha wisdom.

(Watson 1993, p. 71)

With these resources, however, it is impossible to discriminate four vehicles. The proof follows the presentation of the formal language L_0 (“Mahāyāna theory of enlightenment”).

L_0

Quantifiers: \forall, \exists

Variables: x, y, \dots etc.

Constants: $v_1, v_2 \dots v_n$ ("Vehicles")

Predicates: B, P (B = "is the Buddha way"; P = "leads to perfective enlightenment")

L_0 -Identity: $(\forall x, y) (x =_{L_0} y \equiv ((Bx \equiv By) \wedge (Px \equiv Py)))$

Axiom Schema

Self-Identity: $(\forall x) (x =_{\zeta} x \equiv \xi x)$ For $\zeta = L_0, \xi = [B \vee P]$

Axioms:

Mahāyāna I: Bv_1

Mahāyāna II: $(\forall x) (Bx \equiv Px)$

Here again, we are faced with the task of ascertaining the number of distinct entities in the domain under an interpretation (i.e., the number of vehicles to which the user of L_0 is ontologically committed). We start as before by invoking Mahāyāna I.

- 1 Bv_1 Mahāyāna I
- 2 $v_1 =_{L_0} v_1 \equiv (Bv_1 \vee Pv_1)$ Self-Identity, $L_0/\zeta, [B \vee P]/\xi, v_1/x$
- 3 $(v_1 =_{L_0} v_1 \supset (Bv_1 \vee Pv_1)) \wedge ((Bv_1 \vee Pv_1) \supset v_1 =_{L_0} v_1)$ 2, Material Equivalence
- 4 $(Bv_1 \vee Pv_1) \supset v_1 =_{L_0} v_1$ 3, Simplification
- 5 $Bv_1 \vee Pv_1$ 1, Addition
- 6 $v_1 =_{L_0} v_1$ 4, 5, Modus Ponens
- 7 $(\exists x) (x =_{L_0} v_1)$ 6, Existential Generalization

We know that the speaker of L_0 is ontologically committed to the existence of at least one entity ("vehicle"), v_1 , the "Buddha vehicle" (Bv_1). Hence:

$n(D_{L_0})$ is greater than or equal to 1

Moreover, the following deduction shows that v_1 also bears the predicate P (that is, it "leads to Perfective Enlightenment"):

- 8 $(\forall x) (Bx \equiv Px)$ Theravāda II
- 9 $Bv_1 \equiv Pv_1$ 8, Universal Instantiation v_1/x
- 10 $(Bv_1 \supset Pv_1) \wedge (Pv_1 \supset Bv_1)$ 9, Material Equivalence
- 11 $Bv_1 \supset Pv_1$ 10, Simplification
- 12 Pv_1 1, 11, Modus Ponens

But is v_1 the *only* way to "Perfective Enlightenment"? That is, is $n(D_{L_0}) = 1$? We can prove this too, using basically the same technique as we used to prove that $n(D_{L_1}) = 4$. Let's start by assuming:

- 1 $(\exists x) (x =_{L_0} x \wedge \neg x =_{L_0} v_1)$ Assumption

Then

- 2 $y =_{L_0} y \wedge \neg y =_{L_0} v_1$ 1, Existential Instantiation y/x
- 3 $y =_{L_0} y \equiv (By \vee Py)$ Self-Identity, L_0/ζ , $[B \vee P]/\xi$, y/x
- 4 $(y =_{L_0} y \supset (By \vee Py)) \wedge ((By \vee Py) \supset y =_{L_0} y)$ 3, Material Equivalence
- 5 $y =_{L_0} y \supset (By \vee Py)$ Simplification
- 6 $y =_{L_0} y$ 2, Simplification
- 7 $By \vee Py$ 5, 6, Modus Ponens
- 8 By Assumption
- 9 | Bv_1 Mahāyāna I
- 10 | $By \wedge Bv_1$ 8, 9, Conjunction
- 11 | $(By \wedge Bv_1) \vee (\neg By \wedge \neg Bv_1)$ 10, Addition
- 12 | $By \equiv Bv_1$ 11, Material Equivalence
- 13 | $By \equiv Py$ Mahāyāna II, y/x
- 14 | $(By \supset Py) \wedge (Py \supset By)$ 13, Material Equivalence
- 15 | $By \supset Py$ 13, Simplification
- 16 | Py 8, 15, Modus Ponens
- 17 | Bv_1 Mahāyāna I
- 18 | $Bv_1 \equiv Pv_1$ Mahāyāna II, v_1/x
- 19 | $(Bv_1 \supset Pv_1) \wedge (Pv_1 \supset Bv_1)$ 18, Material Equivalence
- 20 | $Bv_1 \supset Pv_1$ 19, Simplification
- 21 | Pv_1 17, 20, Modus Ponens
- 22 | $Py \wedge Pv_1$ 16, 21, Conjunction
- 23 | $(Py \wedge Pv_1) \vee (\neg Py \wedge \neg Pv_1)$ 22, Addition
- 24 | $Py \equiv Pv_1$ 23, Material Equivalence
- 25 $By \supset ((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1))$ 8–24, Conditional Proof

By the same procedure, we can establish

- .
- .
- .
- 30 $Py \supset (By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1)$

Since we already have $By \vee Py$ (line 7), by Constructive Dilemma with 25 and 30 we get

- 31 $((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1)) \vee ((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1))$
- 32 $((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1))$ 31, Redundancy
- 33 $y =_{L_0} v_1 \equiv ((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1))$ L_0 -Identity, y/x , v_1/y
- 34 $(y =_{L_0} v_1 \supset ((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1))) \wedge (((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1)) \supset y =_{L_0} v_1)$
33, Material Equivalence
- 35 $((By \equiv Bv_1) \wedge (Py \equiv Pv_1)) \supset y =_{L_0} v_1$ 34, Simplification
- 36 $y =_{L_0} v_1$ 32, 35, Modus Ponens

- 37 $\neg y =_{L_0} v_1$ 2, Simplification
 38 $y =_{L_0} v_1 \wedge \neg y =_{L_0} v_1$ 36, 37 Conjunction
 39 $\neg(\exists x) (x =_{L_0} x \wedge \neg x =_{L_0} v_1)$ 1–38, RAA
 40 $(\forall x) (x =_{L_0} x \supset x =_{L_0} v_1)$ Quantifier Negation, DeMorgan, Double Negation, and Material Implication.

Which means, in our preferred interpretation, that in L_0 all vehicles are the Buddha vehicle.

Put more generally, we have proved that

$n(D_{L_0})$ is less than or equal to 1

which, together with the earlier proof that

$n(D_{L_0})$ is greater than or equal to 1,

gives us

$n(D_{L_0}) = 1$

In sum, without the predicative resources available in L_1 , we have no ground for positing in L_0 the same number of “vehicles” as there are in L_1 ’s domain. By judicious use of the relativized identity axiom and the “self-identity” schema, we reduce the number of “vehicles” to the fewest number possible, “an application, in a local or relative way, of Occam’s razor: the entities concerned in a particular discourse are reduced from many, a, b, etc. to one . . .” (Quine 1964b, p. 70).

Discussion. These results based on determinations of the number of entities in the domains of L_1 and L_0 constitute the semantic defense of the Sūtra’s claim that the Buddha spoke no falsehood. We devise two formal languages that are amenable to being interpreted as the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist theories of enlightenment. The axioms are based on reasonable (not necessarily unexceptionable) interpretations of Buddhist scripture. Given the respective predicative resources of the two languages, we prove that any domains of each that we provide under some interpretation must have four entities and one entity, respectively, distinct with respect to the predicative resources of each language, and thus to which the user of each language is ontologically committed. The result is that the entities that were discernible in L_1 are indiscernible from each other in the less expressive language (L_0); the user of that language is thus committed to there being only one way to enlightenment.

Although we have carried out this procedure with specific alternatives in the model languages, there is nothing in principle that prevents it from being carried on for other interpretations of the proper number of Buddhist vehicles. It is a flexible apologetic tool, one that can be used in many ways to defend the earlier Theravāda scriptures as veracious (despite the fact that they claim that there are more ways to enlightenment than Mahāyāna Buddhism admits).

At this point, it might be well to consider certain cogent objections to the defense.

Objection 1. By admitting that the Buddha utilized a language capable of being interpreted as having a domain that permits the believer to distinguish four vehicles, does not the Mahāyāna Buddhist cede too much to the Theravāda Buddhist, insofar as she admits they are correct in thinking that there are really four vehicles? That is, one might consider the problem of giving an elucidation of the provisional nature of the teaching as expressible in either of the following two questions:

Q1: Why did the Buddha preach *four* vehicles when in fact there is only one?

Q2: Why did the Buddha preach *one* vehicle when in fact there are really four?

It seems as if the answer we have given is an answer to Q2. This might satisfy a follower of Theravāda, but a Mahāyāna follower would think it the right answer to the wrong question.

Reply. Two points may be made in reply to this objection. First, what is at issue here is not how many vehicles there “really are,” but rather how many vehicles there are to which the users of each language are ontologically committed through their belief in their preferred theory. As Quine put it:

I am not suggesting a dependence of being upon language. What is under consideration is not the ontological state of affairs, but the ontological commitments of a discourse. What there is does not in general depend on one’s use of language, but what one says there is does. (Quine 1964c, p. 103)

Second, there is no canonical domain independent of the choice of a language user to employ this or that theory. Domains are simply parts of the interpretation of languages, although we have shown in addition that the ideology of a language may place some constraints on the number of distinct entities (“posits”) that may be in the domain provided for a language, and to which its user is ontologically committed.

Hence, the question to which we must direct our attention is neither Q1 nor Q2 above, but rather Q3 below:

Q3: Why did the Buddha preach in a language that ontologically commits its speaker to there being four vehicles, when his preferred language commits its speaker to there being only one?

Unlike Q1 and Q2, this question has a straightforward answer that does not require that either the Mahāyāna or the Theravāda position be false:

First [the Buddha] preaches the [language committed to] three vehicles to attract and guide living beings, but later he employs [the language committed to] just the Great Vehicle to save them. . . . He is capable of giving to all living beings the [language] of the Great Vehicle. But not all of them are capable of receiving it. (Watson 1993, p. 62; my bracketed additions)

For this reason the Buddha adjusts his discourse to the needs of his various audiences (a fact insisted on regularly in the commentaries).

Habituated as we are to the use of languages so comprehensive that it sometimes seems that they refer in an absolute manner to the entities that they invoke, it may be hard to grasp the point that the Great Vehicle is as much a posit of L_0 in its preferred interpretation as the lesser vehicles are of L_1 . But simply assigning entities in a domain to a language's constants is a meaningless gesture unless the domain is attached to a language that has resources adequate to discriminate the entities so specified from others.²⁷ As Kraut put it:

One begins with a language, chooses a set of objects to serve as *denotata* of the referring expressions, and then proceeds to define various relations over the chosen entities, which serve as extensions of predicate expressions. . . . It is as though we can first decide what the theory is about and then decide what the theory says about it. . . . [But] I argue that the specification of a theory's subject matter amounts to neither more nor less than a specification of certain features of the theory's expressive resources. (Kraut 1980, p. 113)

In accordance with Kraut's dictum, we have demonstrated that the number of distinct entities in the domain of "vehicles" depends on the particular theory of enlightenment's "expressive resources."

We might be seduced into thinking that in some sense L_1 is a "superior" language (and its domain canonical) because it has more discriminative power. One should say, for example, when presented with the following inscription,

i* words words words words,

which, from the standpoint of a language that discriminates only word meanings, there is one "word" in i*; and from the standpoint of a language that can, in addition, discriminate word forms, there are four. But *clearly* there are (and we are required to say there are) four *things*. That this way of thinking is misguided can be brought out by considering a famous example of Quine's. Quine argues (1964b) that what we step into when we step into the Cayster on Monday and then on Tuesday are two distinct entities. In order to assert this we must have a language that distinguishes among "rivers," "waters," and "river stages." But for some purposes the discriminative power that this distinction provides (and the expanded domain attached to it) is unnecessary, and we posit an identity of the stages relative to a discourse that does not distinguish such stages (lacks the predicate "river stage"). This collapses multiple river stages into a single river, the Cayster. "Identification of the river bathed in once with the river bathed in again is just what determines our subject matter to be a river process as opposed to a river stage" (Quine 1964b, p. 65).²⁸

The case *seems* analogous to that of i*. Arguing by analogy, we might assert that "well, of course, the river stages *are still there*—they're as real as can be." But isn't this an absurd way of thinking about what has happened? The only reason we would

even consider distinguishing “river stages” from “rivers” is that *some* philosophers (e.g., followers of Hume who deny any ontological privilege to normal spatiotemporal continuant substances) are discontent with the usual language, which does not allow us to distinguish a river from itself at another time. They think it should have all its properties intrinsically, which requires that it be broken into temporal parts (cf. Lewis 2002). So they coin a new term that discriminates these entities from each other.

We should think about the Buddha’s shift between languages in an analogous way. “[T]hough one should seek diligently in the ten directions, he will find no other vehicles except when the Buddha preaches them as an expedient means” (Watson 1993, p. 71). The Buddha vehicle is always self-identical and one, but capable of having certain of its manifestations distinguished from each other by appropriate signs in a language that contains these signs as predicates. But to say this is only to emphasize that to begin with one vehicle and differentiate it is just as plausible a way of proceeding as to begin with four vehicles and collapse them into one; neither is “better” (at least from a logical standpoint).

Objection 2. Let us, then, grant that there is no fact of the matter that can be determined as to what there is, but only as to what posits (existents) there are required to be in a domain under an interpretation (relative to the expressive capacities of a particular discourse) for the sentences in that discourse to be true. Does this not mean that the semantic defense must fail? It cannot absolve the Buddha of falsehood because the truth or falsity of the Buddha’s claim depends on what there *actually* is, not on what a language *posits*.

Reply. An essential part of the semantic defense is its dependence on the “semantic conception of truth.” As we have seen (in section 3 and note 9), in that conception truth is defined as that property of sentences that makes them assertible in a language all of whose sentences are known to all competent users. It is not defined as the property sentences have when they state a claim that corresponds to what there “actually” is. The sentences of L_1 that correspond to the posits of L_1 are all assertible; and so are the sentences of L_0 true in the same way. (The defense is self-consistent in this sense.) Moreover, as I shall argue below, the Mahāyāna Buddhist should prefer a semantic defense over one that interprets the scriptures as asserting that some number of vehicles “actually” exist, since it is a characteristic tenet of later Mahāyāna thought that *nothing at all* has inherent existence.

Objection 3. If, as you say, the contents of a domain are dependent on the discriminative capacities of a discourse, then there is no reason in principle why we could not say there are seventy-five vehicles (or, indeed, any number) rather than four, if the discriminative capacities of our language permit. This would seem to make the whole project of rendering ontology relative unworkable.

Reply. As the ability to refer to the Cayster not only as a “river process” but also as a collection of “river stages” and “waters” testifies, natural language is an extraordinarily flexible discriminative instrument. With the ability to create neologisms ad libitum, we can discriminate between entities we didn’t previously realize existed.

(We can “discriminate” between entities that don’t even exist.) And, of course, we can even make distinctions among entities that for other purposes we would prefer to take as whole and complete. Hardly anyone aspires completely to tame this unfettered wilderness. “A fenced ontology is just not implicit in ordinary language” (Quine 1981a, p. 9). Theoretical languages are another matter. But many of these also have great flexibility; and many techniques have been marshaled to bring order to potentially unwieldy domains and make them more manageable. The most fundamental of these is “naming,” which is satisfactory for many scientific purposes. But philosophers will ask for more: they will want to know what it is about an entity that entitles it to a name. After the critiques of Descartes and Locke in the Modern period, the ancient method of constituting individuals by distinguishing essential from accidental properties is no longer available. Nowadays we depend on sortal criteria of identity and individuation to accomplish much the same end. From individuals, in turn, we make groups of various kinds by means of taxonomies; the entities thus posited can be more or less integral to the lexicon of a discipline (Quine 1981a, pp. 14–15).

There are, in fact, criteria of individuation and reidentification that apply specifically to vehicles and that prevent their arbitrary proliferation. For example, Kūkai distinguishes between the *shrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles by means of their characteristic *samādhis* (concentrations). The *shrāvakas* practice the *samādhi* of “the realization of emptiness;” (Kūkai 1972b, p. 177); the *pratyekabuddhas* practice the *samādhi* of “indifference to all things, which words fail to explain” (ibid., p. 195, quoting the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*). The vehicles, in turn, can be further differentiated by means of criteria attached to subsidiary (non-“vehicle”) sortals. Thus, we could so dispose our discourse as to distinguish the single body of Christ as two *religions*, or as 30,000 *sects*. The choice is governed both by pragmatic considerations and systematic method.²⁹

In sum, we can justify the Buddha’s teaching that there are four vehicles as long as he is inside the gate and speaking in L_1 . Such a teaching cannot be described as a falsehood given the definition of truth as assertibility in a specified language.

Our earlier proof that the father (Buddha) stated a falsehood erred, then, in not indexing his claim to the language in which it was spoken. We should revise it as follows.

Argument 3

1. If the sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is true, then the father didn’t speak a falsehood.
2. The sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is true just when it is assertible in L_1 (the language spoken inside the gate).
3. The sentence “There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate” is assertible in L_1 .

4. The sentence "There are goat carts, deer carts, and ox carts outside the gate" is true.
5. Therefore the father didn't speak a falsehood.

Peculiarly, though, the fact that the Buddha didn't speak a falsehood doesn't categorically exclude the possibility that he lied. The problem is as follows. Although our argument so far establishes that the Buddha did not speak a falsehood, speaking a falsehood is not a necessary condition of lying. An agent can lie by speaking a true *C* as long as his intention is that the patient be influenced to believe a different *S*, which the agent believes is false. The Buddha might have lied, despite the fact that he spoke no falsehood, if he intended his disciples to believe a falsehood, that is, that the teachings are assertible in L_0 . That is because the earlier teaching is not assertible in L_0 any more than "Twas brillig and the slithy toves" et cetera is assertible in English.³⁰

Specifically, if the *S* that the Buddha wanted the disciples to believe was "There are four vehicles," then that is true in the reference language (L_1) and he cannot be taxed with lying. If, however, the *S* the Buddha wanted the disciples to believe was "The sentence 'there are four vehicles' is true in L_0 , the language spoken after enlightenment," then he intended them to believe a falsehood, for this *S* is not assertible. In such a case, the Buddha lied.

That it is an open question whether or not the Buddha lied is a somewhat unsettling conclusion at which to arrive. However, this should not come as a total surprise. After all, it appears that there is an intention to deceive of a certain kind. Analogously, one might imagine the rich man promising his children carts of three colors outside the gate. They can clearly see them from inside the gate, one in maroon, one in green, one in blue. But once they get outside, they lose their ability to distinguish color. They can see such carts from a distance, but never possess them in the way they perhaps thought they had been led to believe.

Since the nature of the Buddha's intention cannot be determined by purely logical means, the question of whether or not he lied cannot be determined by such means either. But is there nothing more to say on the matter than "We'll ask him when we meet him"? I think there is something more to be said. The indeterminacy here reflects an ineliminable feature of psychic life. That is, when people grow, they change in ways that can be neither foreseen nor explained from the standpoint of the position they were in beforehand. The dispositions we discard after having undergone such changes—to speak (or affirm) sentences that employ certain distinctions, or to act on them (despite the fact that these distinctions had previously seemed all-important to us)—reflect the fact that we no longer believe in them. Thus a change in character corresponds in a quite direct way to a change in language. So it is not merely experience that teaches us, but it is in accord with theory that by becoming like a spiritual leader or moral exemplar we will note certain sentences to be true which before we could neither understand nor accept.

Thus, our defense of the Sūtra concludes with the establishment of the following points.

1. The Buddha did not speak a falsehood in promulgating the earlier teachings because the language in which he spoke ontologically committed him to the existence of four vehicles.

2. Nor did the Buddha speak a falsehood when he denied there were four distinct vehicles; he did so in a language in which the claim that there was just one was assertible and the claim that there are four was nonassertible.

3. “Provisional” means spoken in a language that was meant to be replaced by another with which the adept would become conversant after having applied herself to the practices suggested in one of the vehicles.

4. “Expedient means” can thus be given an explication independent of the needs of an apologetic that makes it an exclusive alternative to falsehood, as follows: point 1 uses an *expedient means* on P when A warrants a C believed by A to be true in the language warranted (L_1), and, through believing C true in L_1 , P will learn a new language (L_0) in which language A believes C to be false.

Leaving open the question of what S the Buddha intended his disciples to believe, this explication of the term does not address the question of whether the Buddha lied *as such*. However, it does preserve the Sūtra from the imputation that expedient means are just “lies told by a Buddha.” (Unlike lies, expedient means require that the patient believe that the sentence communicated itself, which is stipulated *to be believed by A to be true* in the language spoken. For lies, on the other hand, the S that A intends P to believe may differ from the C communicated and *must be believed by A to be false* in the language spoken.) Moreover, the definition makes expedient means a form of deception, which is an exclusive (although not exhaustive) alternative to falsehood.³¹ The Sūtra was right after all—the Buddha did not tell a falsehood; he used an expedient means—although whether or not he lied cannot be definitively established.

VI. Buddhist Support for the Semantic Defense

Although the semantic defense is based on modern logic and metaphysics, its interpretation of the doctrine of expedient means finds some support in Buddhist writings. Indeed, Mahāyāna Buddhism appears to be committed to it in broad outline. For example, we may cite this passage from the *Diamond Sūtra*, which points out that “Perfect Peace Lies in Freedom from Characteristic Distinctions”:

[T]he distinguishing of an ego entity is erroneous. Likewise the distinguishing of a personality, or a being, or a separated individuality is erroneous. Consequently, *those who have left behind every phenomenal distinction are called Buddhas all*. (Price and Wong 1990, p. 32; my emphasis)

If the Buddhas leave behind every phenomenal distinction, they must arrive at a state of universal indistinguishability, which is all that I have argued.

But perhaps someone will object that this is a misinterpretation of the *Diamond Sūtra* and that the logicist approach fails to capture the essence of Buddhist teaching. The claim that Buddhas “leave behind every phenomenal distinction” does *not* imply merely that they leave behind all predicates, but rather implies that they leave behind the distinction between entities and their properties as well. Both predicates and entities are equally illusory. Put another way, the domain is *empty*—there is nothing for the bound variables in the sentences of the Buddha’s theory of enlightenment to range over. As Tenzin Gyatso puts it:

In Buddhism we repeatedly speak of emptiness, but if you do not see how people mistakenly attribute to things their own inherent existence, it is impossible to understand emptiness. You have to recognize, at least in a rough way, what you are falsely superimposing on phenomena before you can understand the emptiness that exists in its stead. (His Holiness The Dalai Lama 2006, p. 29)

By positing vehicles we attribute inherent existence to them; the defense I have offered is “a false superimposition on phenomena.”

But this objection totally misses the mark. Quine’s project, remember, is a deflationary one: all posits, even the most substantial, are on the same footing, being merely those things that must be in a universe under quantification for the closed sentences in our theories to be true (“true” being not “correspondence to reality” but the more immanent “assertibility in a language”). That being the case, being ontologically committed to a thing does not assure us that the thing “really” exists, still less that such existence is “inherent.” Quine’s approach is consistent with the view that language is systematically misleading as to what is referred to, indeed, even with the view that there is nothing in the domain at all:

Radical skepticism is not of itself incoherent. . . . Experience might still take a turn that would justify [the skeptic’s] doubts about external objects. (Quine 1981a, p. 22; my bracketed addition)

Thus, like the Buddhas, Quine took pains to “undermine the substantiality of the provisional teaching soon after giving it” (Muller 1999, p. 90). Moreover, he is motivated by a concern they share: the desire therapeutically to undermine excess confidence in existence claims.³²

The objection, then, is not aimed at Quine so much as at the unavoidable human need to put explanations into words. As Watson puts it:

Mahāyāna Buddhism has always insisted that its highest truth can never in the end be expressed in words, since words immediately create the kind of distinctions that violate the unity of Emptiness. (Watson 1993, p. xx)

Doubtless when we have reached enlightenment we will have no more need of words and the distinctions they bring; nor will we have need of Sūtras or defenses of same. Any talk of what “that” is like can only be a mere *façon de parler*. Meanwhile, when the Dalai Lama asserts that “emptiness exists,” it is important to understand

both that he ontologically commits himself to the existence of an entity, “emptiness,” the one entity in the domain of the quantificational transcription of his sentence, and that this commitment is an embarrassment (if at all) to language, not to His Holiness.

VII. Conclusion

In this essay we have examined the position that the Lotus Sūtra takes with respect to the existence of earlier, apparently contradictory teachings attributed to the Buddha. We have ascertained that its explanation has more merit than was apparent at first glance. Although it may be difficult to substantiate the claim that the Buddha didn’t lie (apparently the goal of some earlier apologetics), we can definitively conclude that the earlier teachings were (1) “not false” and (2) an “expedient means.” Insofar as the Sūtra makes only these claims, its position is secure.

True, there is a certain sense in which the Buddha did mislead his disciples. But I have suggested that that deception was unavoidable, an inherent aspect of the human condition. It is a law of the spirit, as it were, that we cannot grow without altering our beliefs, a fact that will inevitably be reflected in what sentences we take to be assertible. The concept of expedient means at which we arrive is thus not only not ad hoc, it is not even limited in application to Buddhist theology; it is, rather, a concept of potentially wide applicability. Further research will undoubtedly display its usefulness in analyzing other important cases of paternalistic deception.

Notes

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- 1 – Some schools of Mahāyāna hold that certain sentient beings (“the cursed ones”) will never achieve enlightenment (Kūkai 1972a, p. 153 n. 10).
- 2 – Adapted from Watson 1993, pp. 56–58.
- 3 – The “threefold world” is the realm inhabited by the unenlightened, consisting of the worlds of desire, form, and formlessness (Watson 1993, p. 340).
- 4 – That there is suffering, that attachment is the cause of suffering, that we can end suffering by ending its cause, and that the means to this end is the Buddhist eightfold path.
- 5 – It may be noted that there is a divergence between the number of vehicles (three) that the Sūtra claims the Buddha taught and our earlier claim that there were two, the *shrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles. It is uncontroversial that Theravāda teaches that there was at least one Bodhisattva, the Buddha before his full enlightenment. However, this would provide no ground for thinking that the Buddha way and the Bodhisattva way are distinct vehicles, and this would give us only the two previously mentioned. The same disparity resurfaces be-

tween schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which the Bodhisattvas play a much more prominent role. Some Mahāyāna Buddhists hold that there is no meaningful distinction between the Bodhisattva vehicle and the Buddha vehicle (both are “ox carts”). (Indeed, Bodhisattvas aspire to Buddhahood, but refrain from accepting it even when available for the benefit of sentient creation.) But others hold the opposite. In short, there is as much support in the literature for holding that there are precisely three vehicles as that there are precisely four. However, in our simulation we will follow the parable on this issue and assume there are four distinct vehicles, with the magnificent ox carts being different from the ox carts promised to the children.

- 6 – The definition has some features that distinguish it from similar definitions found in the literature, for example those of Chisholm and Feehan 1977 and Carson 2006. A full defense of the definition will be presented elsewhere.
- 7 – The principle behind this and the following definitions of mental states is that inner states of individuals are best understood as functional roles, “nodes” in a causal/explanatory network. The inputs and outputs of each node are identified by each node’s precedence relations (causes and effects). “Precedence” means that a state has another state as an output but may share some input(s) with that state; strict precedence means that the node and its output share no inputs. (If two states have all the same inputs and outputs, then they are the same node.) Precedence relations should not be confused with temporal relations; many states have temporal relations but no precedence relations.
- 8 – What to call the objects of “propositional attitudes” is a matter of some controversy. I follow Quine here in calling them *sentences* and not *propositions* (1986, pp. 1–3). Quine’s idea is that in a construction that includes an attitude and a sentence, for example in “John believes that Barack Obama is the President,” “that Barack Obama is the President” is the object of “believes” and names a “state of affairs” or “fact” (ibid., pp. 32–33). John’s belief is reflected in a disposition to speak the sentence “Barack Obama is the President” or assent to it if he hears it, or to write a letter to President Obama “because he is the President,” et cetera.
- 9 – The obvious choice for a definition of “true”—“correspondence with reality”—has been sharply criticized both on linguistic (Sapir-Whorf) and logical (Tarski) grounds. The current tendency among metaphysicians is to deny that truth is a predicate; rather, it is a logical particle useful for certain purposes in formal languages. What Tarski did for the term “true” is analogous to what Kant did for the term “exists.” Under Tarski’s semantic conception of truth (which is an integral part of our semantic defense), to say that a sentence α (where α is the name of a sentence) of a specific language is true means that all sequences of objects in the domain satisfy it. Because satisfaction by sequences, in turn, is dependent on what a language logically implies exists, to say the sentence “ α is true” is to say no more than what is said when one simply asserts the sentence

α names. Unfortunately, we cannot assume in this context that “assertions” are “true” assertions; therefore, I add the condition on epistemic parity. Given such a condition, prevarication (even were it desired) would be impossible.

- 10 – That example no. 2 is a case of lying might seem at first implausible. On reflection, however, we recognize that the apparent implausibility derives from the fact that example no. 2 is a case of lying but not perjury (e.g., an agent explicitly warrants the truth of a sentence she believes to be false). There is no entailment relation between lying and perjury; one can perjure without lying and lie without perjuring oneself. Carson gives examples of the former situation (Carson 2006, pp. 289–292). (N.B.: Carson takes his examples to be cases of lying without intent to deceive.) Example no. 2 represents a case of the latter. More commonly we find situations like that of Clinton’s testimony in the Lewinsky matter. There Clinton told the truth under oath but nonetheless lied because the true C he spoke would commonly be interpreted as the false S: “I did not know Ms. Lewinsky in an inappropriately intimate way.”

Carson (2006, p. 284) holds that “[s]howing that a statement is true is always sufficient to counter the accusation that one has told a lie.” The Clinton case and example no. 2 are two of a variety of cases that stand against this dictum.

Finally, note that in addition to warranting his testimony, the police officer also antiwarrants it (because he testifies under circumstances that justify him in believing that the Ps will believe that he believes his testimony is false). This shows that warrant and antiwarrant are non-exclusive (as well as non-exhaustive) alternatives.

- 11 – Such considerations might include claims that the Sūtra makes elsewhere than in the commentary on the parable, as well as general assumptions of veracious dealing (Carson 2006, p. 295).
- 12 – Unless otherwise indicated, bracketed materials in the translations of Kūkai have been added by the translator. See Kūkai 1972a.
- 13 – There are three bodies of the Buddha (the *trikaya*): the Dharmakāya (truth body), Nirmāṇakāya (manifestation body), and Sambhogakāya (bliss body) (Kūkai 1972, p. 84 n. 17). Kūkai’s Chinese mentor Hui-kuo’s identification of Dharmakāya as the source of extant sermons in the form of the Mahāvairocana Buddha was a significant theological innovation (*ibid.*, p. 82).
- 14 – The division between “provisional” and “final” is rather coarse, and does not reflect the subtlety and variety of Kūkai’s thought. (In “The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury” [Kūkai 1972b], he distinguishes ten stages in the development of the religious mind and associates them with various Buddhist schools and teachings.) In particular, it might lead to some misunderstanding as to the position of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Kūkai held this Sūtra to be a sermon of the Sambhogakāya Buddha, not the Dharmakāya Buddha, and hence held it not to be “final”: “The Sambhogakāya Buddha taught the doctrine of the One Vehicle for the bodhi-

sattvas in the Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood” (Kūkai 1972a, p. 152; see also Kūkai 1972b, p. 187).

However, it does not appear to be “provisional” in the sense evoked in the passage quoted above. Rather, the context indicates that this particular apologetic text is directed toward defending the earliest sermons, those delivered by the Nirmāṇakāya Buddha (Shakyamuni Buddha). Note the parallelism between the quoted text and the opening paragraph of this work: “The doctrine revealed by the Nirmāṇakāya Buddha [Shakyamuni Buddha] is called Exoteric; it is apparent, simplified, and adapted to the needs of the time and to the capacity of the listeners” (Kūkai 1972a, p. 151). However, it cannot be categorically excluded that the apologetic is supposed to be directed to all *non-esoteric* texts, which in the last analysis include the *Lotus Sūtra*: “Both of these teachings (of the three and one) are Exoteric” (1972a, p. 152) (as opposed to the Esoteric doctrine of three Mysteries taught by Mahāvairocana, the Dharmakāya Buddha).

In any case, the critical point is that Kūkai’s defense of the Buddha (which ever Exoteric texts it is intended to include as provisional) was directed toward point 1 of the Accusation.

- 15 – Some of Kūkai’s comments may be read as being directed toward point 2 of the Accusation; for example:

At first, the Buddha preached the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and then the doctrines given in the *Vaipulya Sutra*, etc., in order to wash away the grime of the false view that man’s permanent ego and the constituents of the world are real. Then he expounded the perfect teaching, just as heaven pours abundant rain upon the buds and leaves of plants. (Kūkai 1972a, p. 206; footnote omitted)

The Buddha’s intention is to eliminate a “false view,” not to add one. But in order to eliminate the false view, it appears necessary to inculcate a different false view (see note 16, *infra*).

He also uses a medical analogy: “The doctrine revealed by the Nirmanakaya Buddha is adapted to the needs of the time and is, as it were, an effective medicine to cure the diseases of the mind” (Kūkai 1972a, p. 156). But this seems to be no more than a descriptive metaphor without explanatory power, for the same questions of honesty and deceptiveness plague physicians in their professional activities. (I will address this issue at length elsewhere.)

- 16 – Thus, the Buddha cannot be absolved of lying on the ground of “double effect.” The intention is to bring persons to enlightenment, but the deception is not a foreseen but unintended side effect; it is itself the method by which enlightenment is achieved. (For more on “double effect,” see Bennett 1997, sec. 61, pp. 196–200.)
- 17 – Under the “no warrant” defense the teaching does not qualify as a white lie because it does not exclude the possibility that the P’s will continue in their unenlightened ways, failing to know the true teaching or why they were misled.

- 18 – In chapter 16 of the *Sūtra* the Buddha is quoted as saying (after having expounded a different parable): “In view of the circumstances, however, no one can say I have been guilty of lies or falsehood.” Unfortunately, however, this dictum does little to advance us beyond the original question: whether “expedient means” is just “lying when done by the Buddha” or whether it can be given a significance independent of the needs of an apologetic.
- 19 – Hence his two most famous dicta, “To be is to be the value of a variable” and “No entity without identity.” Interestingly, Kūkai cites a similar thought in Nāgārjuna. The ultimate Buddha “not being identical even with [the name of] the heaven, it defies all predications; no matter how eloquent a man may be, his speech must come to an end and his speculation cease” (Kūkai 1972b, p. 210; footnote omitted).
- 20 – Another reason is the availability of “proxy functions” (see Quine 1981a, p. 19). The variability in the ontological commitments of language under paraphrase makes the doctrine look rather arbitrary. Indeed, it was Quine’s view that what a theory posits *is* arbitrary and, to a large extent, is dependent on extra-systemic factors. As he points out,
- Various turns of phrase in ordinary language that seemed to invoke novel sorts of objects may disappear under [logical] regimentation. At other points new ontic commitments may emerge. There is room for choice, and one chooses with a view to simplicity in one’s overall system of the world. (Quine 1981a, p. 10; my bracketed addition)
- For more on paraphrase, see Alston 1998 and Varzi 2002.
- 21 – An “object” for Quine is any filled area of space-time, for example the Presidents of the United States (Quine 1981a, p. 13). He calls normal space-time continuants “bodies” (*ibid.*, p. 8). Individuation conditions of sets are determined by axiom.
- 22 – In some later works, Quine develops the thought that we can manage with simply an ontology of sets, eschewing spatiotemporal entities altogether (Dalla Chiara and Toraldo di Francia 1994, pp. 104–105).
- 23 – A “predicable” is an empty predicate (i.e., one that is not part of a sentence of a language). See Geach 1980, pp. 112–115. In accordance with ordinary usage, we will simply call the non-subject building blocks of sentences “predicates.”
- 24 – See also Quine 1964b, pp. 70–72; Quine 1986, p. 63; and Kraut 1980. The claim that identity is definable relative to a language should not be confused with the claim that the identity relation is a sortal relative; the latter claim is highly contentious, but the former is not. Geach has argued that the two types of relativization are intimately related (1973, p. 198). His contention is that the same semantic paradoxes that render naive set theory untenable also make absolute identity claims untenable. Few (if any) philosophers have supported Geach on this.

Notwithstanding, some philosophers distinguish between the indiscernibility relation as defined for any first-order language and the relation of identity as such, on the ground that identity is a relation based on properties, not predicates. For these philosophers, there is only one “identity relation,” and it is absolute. See, for example, David Wiggins, who writes: “Once sober conceptualism comes to the aid of common sense, philosophy has no need (I declare) to supplant the common sense conception according to which identity is utterly special and unique” (Wiggins 2001, p. 192).

25 – The terminology is from Layman 2002; virtually the same system is used in Tidman and Kahane 2003, Copi and Cohen 2004, and many other texts.

26 – This would follow from two applications of DeMorgan on $\neg((C_2v_1 \vee C_3v_1) \vee Bv_1)$. Similarly on lines 15, 106, 109.

27 – Thus we can agree with Lavine that quantifiers do not directly do any ontological work; their essential purpose is to assure cross-reference (Lavine 2000, p. 5). But this function is ineliminable. If the substitutional interpretation of the quantifier entails that “the ontological work is done, not by the quantifiers, but by the constant symbols” (ibid., p. 3), this would appear to be a good reason to stick with Quine’s preferred objectual reading; not only because there may be more entities in a domain than there could be constants in a language (Quine 1966, p. 4), but because there should be no (additional) ontological commitment invoked by the use of constants if they refer to entities in a domain redundantly.

28 – It is important to distinguish the procedure followed here, which relies on the dependence of ontological commitment on the expressive capabilities of a discourse, from the procedure of contextually defining new entities, which can then themselves be taken as substituents for variables in accordance with the schema $(\exists x) (x = \xi)$. Ontological commitment in these latter cases is merely apparent. The existential claim is “a mere manner of speaking” because

Under such a procedure [the new “entities”] become explicitly *fictions*, in this sense: there are no such things, from the standpoint of our unabbreviated official language, but we talk as if there were by dint of an eliminable shorthand. (Quine 1949, p. 51; his emphasis, my bracketed addition)

Such a procedure could, indeed, be taken as directed toward answering Q2 above (with the caveat that it is not directed toward explaining away facts of existence but only apparent ontological commitments). (See also Quine 1964c, pp. 103 and 117–118.) Whether reference to universals can be entirely eliminated by such means is a matter of controversy between realists and nominalists (1964c, pp. 127–129).

29 – That is, we could differentiate the Mahāyāna into seventy-five *something* or *others*, but they would not be *yanas*; just as we can further differentiate *i** into five “letters” or twenty “letter tokens.” The addition of discriminative resources does not change the number of word meanings or word forms.

30 – Quine prefers the view that non-true (nonassertible) sentences are simply false, not either false or meaningless (1966, p. 5).

31 – Not exhaustive, since not all true communications are expedient means.

32 – It should be pointed out that the Buddhist position does not appear to be skeptical (or solipsistic), either. The opposite of inherent existence is not non-existence in the sense of an empty domain, but rather non-inherent existence or “dependent arising”:

[W]e are not just mental creations. By understanding this, you are free from what Buddhists call “the extreme of nihilism,” drawing the mistaken conclusion that just because a phenomenon cannot be found to exist independently it does not at all exist. (His Holiness The Dalai Lama 2006, p. 68)

The connections between Buddhist views on existence and those of Quine and (e.g.) Husserl are certainly worthy of a detailed study of their own; but that must await a more propitious occasion.

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