

The non-existence of the real world

Jan Westerhoff

Introduction

This book can be read in two different ways. First, it can be taken to be a series of (negative) answers to a sequence of increasingly more comprehensive skeptical questions: Is there an external world? Is there an internal world? Is there a fundamental level of reality? Is there an ultimately true theory? Second, it can be read as a contemporary investigation of some key positions in Buddhist philosophy. This second dimension of the book is not explicitly signposted in the text, and readers without any background in ancient Indian thought might not have realized it is even there. I will use these introductory remarks to say something more about the Buddhist concepts addressed in the book, and at the same time provide an overview of its key ideas.

The book is divided into four main chapters discussing the four questions just mentioned. Read in Buddhist philosophical mode these chapters deal with the concepts of *cittamātra* ('mind-only', chapter 1), *anātman* (no-self, chapter 2), *śūnyatā* (emptiness, chapter 3) and *śūnyatā-śūnyatā* (the emptiness of emptiness, chapter 4). These concepts are generally associated with different philosophical schools within the Buddhist tradition, the first with the (idealist) Yogācāra school, the second with Abhidharma, the first systematization of Buddhist metaphysics, and the last two with the 'middle way' school of Madhyamaka. Even though these three schools disagree with each other in fundamental respects, the account described in the book is intended as a defence of key ideas of the Madhyamaka school, which subsumes specific versions of the views of the other two schools within its own system (as one might subsume Newtonian physics under relativistic physics by suitably re-interpreting its key concepts).

The first chapter, on the non-existence of the external world, presents a defence of a version of the mind-only school's rejection of external, mind-independent objects. In broad outlines it follows a dialectic readers familiar with the Indian source texts might recognize, by first discarding a direct realist epistemology in favour of representationalism, then, as a second step, arguing that the representationalist should not assume there to be anything *behind* the representations. One is therefore left with mere representations (*vijñapti-mātra*, 'representation-only' is in fact another term sometimes used for Yogācāra's key position). I examine three contemporary representationalist positions, Hoffman's interface theory, Hohwy's prediction-error minimalization approach, and Metzinger's phenomenal self-model, arguing that in each case the supposed similarity between the representations and whatever they represent is exceedingly thin. Faced with a mere existence assumption about something 'out there' about which we cannot say anything, considerations of parsimony, as well as a general skepticism about hypostatizations should convince us to treat the existence of the external world simply as a postulate *within* the system of representation (a position I refer to as 'irrealism'). We can therefore save the manifest image to the extent of being able to say truthfully that there are external

objects, but what this statement means is not that there are any mind-independent entities, but that the appearances appearing to us make the claim that there is something behind these appearances.

The second chapter, on the non-existence of the internal world investigates whether we can simply withdraw from the external world to the certainty of an internal realm. After a general account of the unreliability of introspective access I turn to two prominent parts of our internal world, the idea of a 'stream of consciousness' and the belief in a substantial, self-sustaining, unified, temporally extended 'me' closely connected (and perhaps identical) with our body, the locus of agency and responsibility, and the prime object of our prudential concern: the self. I argue that both are illusory, in the case of the latter I consider contemporary versions of the kind of mereological reductionism that forms a key element of the Buddhist non-self theory, but also investigate the support for various fictionalist accounts of the self (Dennett, Metzinger).

The third chapter, which considers the non-existence of a fundamental level of reality begins by investigating a charge we already find in ancient Indian critics of the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness (such as Asaṅga), namely that anti-foundationalist theories that incorporate infinitely descending chains of ontological dependence are inconsistent. This charge can now be shown to be baseless, and it turns out that other arguments in favour of foundationalism do not fare much better. However, simply arguing for the consistency of metaphysical anti-foundationalism (which I consider to be the core of the Madhyamaka theory of emptiness) is not going to establish its truth. Consequently, I also examine arguments in support of anti-foundationalism, one based on Nelson Goodman's "Ways of Worldmaking", one based on difficulties with intrinsic properties, and one considering the success of anti-foundationalist ideas in mathematics, physics, and cognitive science.

The final, fourth chapter is dedicated to the elusive Madhyamaka idea of the 'emptiness of emptiness', here understood as the claim that any anti-foundationalism that takes itself seriously will also have to be anti-foundationalist about anti-foundationalism. Criticizing fundamental objects will quickly lead to a criticism of fundamental truths, and this chapter considers reasons for why one might be skeptical about the possibility of an ultimately true theory consisting of such fundamental truths. The first is based on a defence of a coherentist theory of truth, which will not allow us to 'step outside' of the system of coherent propositions onto some ontological *terra firma* to assess their truth. The second investigates the wide-spread occurrence of semantic contextualism. If the meaning of any set of words requires that another set is held fixed there can be no comprehensive, context-independent ultimate theory. Finally if there are concerns about absolutely general quantification, such concerns would spread to any theory that claims to encompass everything there is.

The argument in the book is constructed in such a way that the reader could 'get off the bus' at the end of each chapter, without endorsing the more thorough-going anti-realism of the following chapter (in addition, the no-self theory described in the second chapter does not presuppose any of the irrealist conclusions of the first chapter). The destination arrived at the end of the fourth chapter is, I believe, a relatively accurate reconstruction of key Madhyamaka claims in a contemporary

philosophical idiom. I believe this to be an attractive philosophical position for purely systematic reasons. Nevertheless, those who disagree might still find it interesting to discover how an ancient Indian philosophical tradition like Madhyamaka links up with key ideas in metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and ethics that are at the centre of many philosophical debates of the present day. I hope that the reframing of some central Madhyamaka ideas using contemporary Western philosophical tools I attempted in this book will facilitate the better understanding of Madhyamaka, and that it may help us to see how ancient Indian and 21st century analytic philosophy might learn from one another.