

“Linguistic Through And Through”?  
The Challenge Of Yogâcâra To David Tracy’s  
Epistemology<sup>1</sup>  
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ONE OF DAVID TRACY’S MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS HAS BEEN TO OPEN UP SPACE FOR interreligious dialogue as a sincere and mutually transformative encounter with the “other.” To this end, he has argued for a radically “hermeneutical turn” in theology, an approach modeled upon conversation. However, Tracy’s theological methodology is founded upon radical claims about the nature of reality, experience, and understanding. These claims are summed up in the following two passages from his *Plurality and Ambiguity*:

Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or *even experience*, we are interpreting (emphasis mine, 1987:9).

What we discover...is that *all understanding is linguistic through and through*.... There are no pure ideas free of the web of language. There are no pure messages (emphasis mine, 43).

While Tracy strives for openness to other traditions, statements such as these appear directly to contradict claims made by Mahâyâna Buddhism that the experience of awakening to enlightenment occurs outside language.

This paper examines the workability of David Tracy’s epistemology by evaluating it in light of the Yogâcâra Buddhist vision of the relationship between language and experience, as represented by the teachings of Asanga and Dharmapâla. My aims are (1) to make explicit the epistemological assumptions underlying Tracy’s theological methodology; (2) to highlight the apparent conflict between Tracy and Yogâcâra over the nature of reality,

1. I wish to thank Dr. Ruben L. F. Habito of Perkins School of Theology, SMU, for his comments on this paper.

experience, and understanding; and (3) to explore possibilities for reconciling the two positions.<sup>2</sup>

## PART 1: TRACY'S THEOLOGICAL PROJECT AND ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

### Dealing Constructively with a Pluralistic Context

David Tracy's theological project can be seen as an ongoing attempt to deal positively and constructively with what he calls "our radically pluralistic moment" (1981:447). This laudable preoccupation is evident in the prevalence of forms of the word "pluralism" in his major titles: *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (1975); *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981); *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism* (1983); and *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (1987). Tracy sees as an unavoidable reality the radical pluralism of theologies—"a pluralism that suggests a seemingly indeterminate creativity of interpretation," "indeed an intense conflict of interpretations, from which there can often seem no honourable exit" (Tracy 1989:36).

Religious pluralism has been viewed by some Christians as a threat to traditional Christian verities, the proper response to which is either to "dig in" and resist from entrenched positions, or to make a more sophisticated, postliberal attempt to "absorb the world."<sup>3</sup> Tracy, on the other hand, opposes theological understandings that privilege confessional positions. "Christianity, he says, must not become 'no more than a set of personal preferences and beliefs making no more claim to either publicness or universality than the Elks Club'" (Placher 1989:156). Tracy considers the privileging of a confessional stance to be a kind of reductionism as objectionable as

2. N.B.: In his translation of Dharmapāla's *Sataka Commentary* (Keenan 1997), John P. Keenan encloses his own amplifications and clarifications in square brackets ( [ and ] ). In order to distinguish my editorial comments, which are enclosed in square brackets, from Keenan's clarifications, I have converted the latter to braces ( { and } ). In other words, editorial comments enclosed in square brackets are mine; comments in braces are Keenan's.

3. For an entrenched position vis-à-vis other faiths, see Geivett and Phillips 1995:213-45. For the classic postliberal statement, see Lindbeck 1984.

that attempted by secularist critics of religion. What confessionalist reductionism assumes is that “Anything different, other, alien must clearly be untrue and impossible” (Tracy 1987: 100).

In contrast, Tracy sees the encounter with the “different, other, alien” as a liberating opportunity:

We find ourselves. . . with a plurality of interpretations and methods. We find ourselves with diverse religious classics among many religious traditions. We find ourselves glimpsing the plurality within each tradition while also admitting the ambiguity of every religion: liberating possibilities to be retrieved, errors to be criticized, unconscious distortions to be unmasked (112).

Echoing Paul Ricoeur,<sup>4</sup> Tracy approaches pluralism as a field of play. Dialogue with other faith traditions is the play itself, the means for growth, enrichment, and new understandings. Thus Tracy believes that pluralism can enrich, rather than threaten, the search for religious truth. With refreshing humility, he testifies to the “liberating transformation” of his own Christian beliefs that has come about through his own dialogue with Buddhism. Tracy writes: “What little, painfully little, I understand of the Buddhist notion of compassion, I understand through my own experience of compassion—an experience formed through my concrete involvement in my own religious and cultural heritages. I recognize that my focal meaning for compassion is likely to receive a liberating transformation through genuine contact and conversation with the Buddhist traditions” (1981:451).

#### TRACY’S THEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Tracy’s contribution so far has been less in constructive theology than in proposing a methodology for doing theology in a pluralistic context. His methodological proposals serve to open a space in which Christian scripture and doctrine can be creatively reevaluated in light of the fact of pluralism (both within Christianity itself and at the interface with other religions) and in a way that allows for mutual respect between dialogue partners.

Though Tracy has labeled his approach “revisionist” theology, Werner G. Jeanron prefers to group Tracy under the category of “correlational theology,” a contemporary movement which takes its cue from Paul Tillich. There

4. See, for example, Ricoeur 2000:340-44.

are three main aspects to Tracy's correlational method. First, it is bi-directional in the sense of true "conversation"—a metaphor Tracy employs frequently. Unlike Tillich, Tracy "insists on a *mutually* critical correlation" between Christian and non-Christian sources. Tracy's method "is both critical and self-critical, . . . [and] listens to the other as other without attempting to subordinate the conversation partners to one's own agenda" (Jeanrond 1998:139). Secondly, Tracy's method privileges two sources for Christian theology: "Christian texts" and "common human experience and language" (Tracy 1975:43).

A third aspect of Tracy's method—and the most important for this paper—is that it is radically hermeneutical, stressing the centrality to theology of ongoing interpretation of religious texts and human experience. Jeanrond notes that, for Tracy, "no form of theology and no theological method can ever be considered final; all theology is in constant need of re-interpretation and refinement through critical conversation" (Jeanrond 1998:140). Thus theology is for Tracy an essentially interpretive project. The interpretive task is not limited to religious texts alone; the theologian must also interpret the situation in which she finds herself: "In keeping with the demand that a theological position appeal to some analysis of the contemporary situation, all theologians are also involved in . . . interpreting or defining the religious dimension of the situation" (Tracy 1983:6). This second "constant" in the theological task obliges the theologian "to raise to explicit consciousness the question of the truth of, first, an interpretation of the most pressing, fundamental questions in our contemporary situation and, second, the answers provided by a particular religious tradition" (7).

Tracy portrays interpretation in terms of a dialectic between reader and text. His preferred model is that of a "conversation" between the text—the religious "classic"—and the experience, or pre-understanding, which the reader brings to it. On the one hand, he avoids pure subjectivity by stressing that religious "classics" contain a "certain permanence and excess of meaning that resists a 'definitive' interpretation" and that has the power to challenge and to change the reader's assumptions about reality (Tracy 1989:40).

On the other hand, Tracy emphasizes the pre-understanding—the lack of autonomy—of the reader. He follows Gadamer in asserting the inevitable role of pre-understanding in interpretation: "no interpreter enters into the attempt to understand any text without pre-judgments formed by the history of the effects of his or her culture" (Tracy 1989:34). Because of the reader's situatedness, there is no guarantee that the reader will retrieve the

author's original "meaning." For Tracy this is not a handicap but a liberating possibility, for it allows "classics" to speak beyond their own time and place since as conversation partners with the text, "we live in and by our finitude and historicity with the liberating insight that 'Insofar as we understand at all we understand differently (from the original author)'" (Tracy 1989:43).

The process of interpreting religious texts is thus a creative and fully two-way process: "To interpret the religious classics is to allow them to challenge what we presently consider possible. To interpret them is also to allow ourselves to challenge them through every hermeneutic of critique, retrieval, and suspicion we possess. To understand them at all we must converse with them" (Tracy 1987:84).

The implications for interfaith dialogue are substantial. By challenging the possibility—even the desirability—of any final and definitive reading of religious texts, Tracy allows for a reinterpretation of Christian teachings that formerly supported religious particularism and exclusivism.

#### THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS: NO EXTRALINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE

Tracy's claims for the radically hermeneutical nature of theology are grounded in a particular epistemological vision. To my knowledge, Tracy nowhere sets forth this vision in any systematic fashion. Instead, his epistemological assumptions surface intermittently, in seemingly off-hand statements which hint at a broader philosophical view.

A recurrent theme in Tracy's writings is his claim that all experience, understanding, and knowledge is radically hermeneutical and linguistic. In other words, there is no "pure" or unmediated experience or understanding. All experience and understanding is mediated through—or perhaps constructed by—one's historical/psychological/cultural/linguistic "set." A very similar position among philosophers of religion has been labeled "constructivism," and is associated with such thinkers as Wayne Proudfoot, Steven T. Katz, and Hans H. Penner.<sup>5</sup> However, a more direct influence for Tracy's position is Ricoeur, who asserts: "The mediating role of imagination

5. I have been unable to find any direct influence of the constructivist school on Tracy. Although Tracy cites both Katz and Penner in *The Analogical Imagination*, and cites Penner in *Plurality and Ambiguity*, the citations are not to ostensibly "constructivist" works. Cf. Tracy 1981:189 n.66 and 223 n.27; and 1987:140 n.50. For articles by the constructivist school, see Katz 1983 and 1992. For a critical survey of constructivism by an opponent, see "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting" in Forman 1990:3-49.

is forever at work in lived reality (*le vécu*). *There is no lived reality, no human or social reality, which is not already represented in some sense*" (Ricoeur 2000:343).

Tracy's own "set" appears to be the postmodern rejection of the impartial and autonomous ego/subject/self. In *Plurality and Ambiguity* he effectively declares the downfall of the Cartesian ego and the rise of the radically *situated* self: "Whether we know it or not, we are all de-centered egos now. We are all linguistic, historical, social beings struggling for some new interpretations of ourselves, our language, history, society, and culture" (Tracy 1987:50). The result is a loss of "any belief in pure self-presence as well as any claims to certainty or to apodictic knowledge" (61).

What the de-centered subject has instead of certainty is her *interpretation*. Life for the non-autonomous subject is thoroughly hermeneutical. In his 1989 essay "Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm," Tracy writes: "In order to understand this world—indeed even to experience it—we must interpret it" (1989:55). Similarly, he asserts in *Plurality and Ambiguity* that "Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret" (1987:9). Later in the same work he declares that "all experience and all understanding is hermeneutical" (77).

I gather that Tracy asserts that experience, understanding, and knowledge are radically hermeneutical because he believes that they are, more fundamentally, radically *linguistic*. In the postmodern context, "Reality and knowledge are...linked to language" (78). In another passage, Tracy goes even further: "What we discover...is that *all understanding is linguistic through and through*.... There are no pure ideas free of the web of language. There are no pure messages" (43).

It is difficult to determine exactly how broadly Tracy intends these epistemological claims to apply. First, as mentioned earlier, they are non-systematic in nature. Secondly, they often occur in the context of discussion of the nature of texts and their interpretation. It is possible, then, that these seemingly global statements are intended only to refer to experience and understanding related to *texts*.

However, I doubt that Tracy is so careless with his language: surely he recognizes that such statements will be taken globally. Take, for example, the following statement: "*Every time* we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand *at all* is to interpret" (9,

my emphasis). It would be difficult to read this as applying only to the interpretation of texts, particularly in light of the following assertion, from another of his works: “Interpretation is not something added to experience and understanding but is always-already present as intrinsic to understanding itself” (Tracy 1989:55). I am forced to conclude that Tracy actually means what he seems to be saying.

Thus Tracy’s epistemological position can be summarized as follows. *All* experience and understanding is hermeneutical because it is linguistic. To experience and to understand is to interpret, and we cannot interpret apart from language. There is no prelinguistic or extralinguistic experience or understanding.

The theological implications of this epistemological stance are substantial. If *all* experience is thoroughly linguistic, it necessarily requires interpretation, as does any text; and if *all* experience requires interpretation, then it comes as no surprise that religious scriptures, confessional positions, and theologies—all of which involve experience in some way (e.g., experiences of divine revelation, experiences of Ultimate Reality, the reader’s own experiences)—should require interpretation as well. In this way, Tracy can resist claims to certainty about religious truth, and can thereby open up a space for religious pluralism.

I applaud Tracy’s sincere commitment to real dialogue. His methodology promises a way for theologians to escape the blind alleys of particularism and move out into a world rich with diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints, many of which have much to offer the Christian theologian in the crucial task of making Christian teachings relevant to the pluralist situation. Nonetheless, as I will attempt to show in the concluding part of this paper, the underpinnings of Tracy’s theology run into trouble when faced with an epistemology radically different from his own. Just such an epistemology is found in Mahâyâna Buddhism, to which we turn next.

## PART 2: MAHÂYÂNA CLAIMS FOR EXTRALINGUISTIC EXPERIENCE

Seemingly in direct contradiction to Tracy’s claims, the Mahâyâna Buddhist tradition holds that *all* experience, knowledge, and understanding is decidedly *not* linguistic. According to Mahâyâna teaching, the Ultimate Reality which is experienced in awakening to enlightenment (or which is

that awakening) can *only* be experienced outside of, and apart from, language. Indeed, as we will see, language itself is seen as an obstacle to the liberating realization of Ultimate Reality. Thus there is an experience, and an understanding of that experience, which lies outside the realm of language. This would seem to undermine Tracy's epistemological position, and potentially the theological methodology which rests upon it.

However, the Mahâyâna view of the relationship between language and experience is more complex than it appears at first glance. Indeed, while the Mahâyâna affirms the pre-linguistic nature of the awakening experience, it subsequently "moves back to reclaim, if possible, a valid role for language" (Keenan 1997: 26-7). This latter move becomes particularly pronounced in the Yogâcâra school, in the work of Asanga and Dharmapâla. It is my contention that Yogâcâra's sophisticated epistemology both challenges that of Tracy, and provides a means for reconciling Tracy's epistemological claims with those of Yogâcâra, and Mahâyâna generally, concerning the existence of extralinguistic experience.

For an understanding of the complexities of Yogâcârin epistemology, it is necessary to look more closely at how views of the relation between language and experience developed within the broader Mahâyâna tradition. Accordingly, we first will take a brief look at the move toward radical ineffability within the Mâdhyamika school, particularly in the work of Nâgârjuna. Next we will look at the continuities and modifications of the Mâdhyamika position within early Yogâcâra, paying special attention to one of its founders, Asanga. Finally, we will look at how a later Yogâcârin, Dharmapâla, affirms the existence of a pre-linguistic experience and ascribes part of the problem to language itself, then reclaims language as a "lower" truth which can lead persons to the very experience which transcends language.

#### NÂGÂRJUNA AND THE MÂDHYAMIKA MOVE TO RADICAL INEFFABILITY

In contrast with the "Monastic Buddhism"<sup>6</sup> from which it originated, Mahâyâna substantially broadened the extent of *úûnyatâ*, or emptiness.

6. I use this term as a neutral designation for the forms of Buddhism which began with the followers of Gautama and developed through the period of the codification of the *Abhidharma* literature—that is, the Buddhisms which Mahâyâna pejoratively labeled "Hînayâna." Contemporary Theravâda traces its descent from these forms of Buddhism (in particular, the *Sthavira* (Pali: *Thera*) group).

Whereas Monastic Buddhism had ascribed emptiness to the self by analyzing the self into constituent *dharma*s which possess a degree of substantiality (*svabhava*), the Mādhyamika (“Middle Way”) school of the Mahâyâna denied the substantiality of the self *and* its constituent *dharma*s, declaring empty even emptiness itself.

Led by its founder, Nâgârjuna, the Mādhyamika school makes its move toward the radical ineffability of the experience of awakening. The primary obstacle to the realization of emptiness, according to Nâgârjuna, is conceptual and propositional thought, both of which are bound up with language. Concepts conceal or obstruct the realization of Ultimate Reality, and thus conceptual thought cannot reveal Ultimate Reality. And because language and conceptual thought are inextricably bound up with each other, Ultimate Reality must be radically ineffable. From the ultimate standpoint of *ûûnyatâ*, “nothing can be literally said,” because “ultimately there is no entity of which emptiness or nonemptiness can be predicated”; “language is hence at best only ostensive” (Garfield 1995: 280). In short, Nâgârjuna holds to a radically apophatic position.

The obvious question arises: if language cannot convey Ultimate Reality, why did the Buddha—and indeed, why does Nâgârjuna himself—use language to teach the Buddhadharmas? Nâgârjuna replies by positing two kinds of truth: conventional, or provisional truth (*samvrti satya*); and ultimate, or absolute, truth (*pâramârtha satya*).<sup>7</sup> Keenan interprets this teaching as simultaneously asserting both the apophatic nature of the Ultimate, and the soteriological validity of language:

The truth of ultimate meaning (*paramârtha-satya*) is ineffable (*avâcyatva*) and silent. . . . Yet, in order to teach, one has no alternative but to employ conventional words and to express conventional truth. Thus one has to rely upon language (Keenan 1997:15).

The problem, however, is that it is easy to miss Nâgârjuna’s second move, the affirmation of validity of language, because he does not elaborate on it in

7. This is set forth in chapter 24:8,10 of his *Mûlamadhyamakakârîkâ*:

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

....

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation is not achieved (Garfield 1995: 296, 298).

the *Mûlamadhyamakakârikâ*. Consequently, the affirmation of a soteriological role for language tended to be lost in later Mâdhyamika. Indeed, as Janice Dean Willis notes, many of Nâgârjuna's followers misinterpreted emptiness "as unqualified nihilism" (1979:17). As Keenan writes, the Mâdhyamika's "idea that everything was empty was a source of despondency and consternation to practitioners....In a world of negation and essencelessness, there appears to be no refuge and no sure path to cessation. No doctrinal discourse can maintain its validity and no scriptures can present words of awakening" (Keenan 1997:204).

#### ASANGA AND THE RISE OF YOGÂCÂRA

Founded by the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu in the fifth century CE, the Yogâcâra school attempted to moderate the radically apophatic tendencies of the Mâdhyamika school. By no means did Yogâcâra deny the extralinguistic nature of Ultimate Reality. However, beginning with Asanga, the Yogâcârins "sought to set things aright by explaining *ûûnyatâ* in a more positive way" (Willis 1979:14). Keenan elaborates on this move: "[T]he Yogâcâra thinkers....attempted to ground insight into emptiness in a critical understanding of the mind, articulated in sophisticated theoretical discourse....Asanga's aim was to revive theory as dependently co-arising understanding through rethinking the meaning of emptiness. Yogâcâra is thus a partial reaffirmation of the validity of abhidharmic analyses and expositions. It no longer presupposes the naïve realism of Hînayâna Abhidharma, but attempts to make explicit the underlying structure and dynamic functioning of consciousness" (Keenan 1993:203).

Yogâcâra holds that all phenomena are generated by the mind or consciousness (*vijñâna*) (Hattori 1987:523).<sup>8</sup> It explains the apparent reality of phenomena—which Mâdhyamika fails to explain clearly—by ascribing them to the existence of consciousness. At the same time, it affirms the Mâdhyamika doctrine of total emptiness by teaching that consciousness itself is inherently dependent (because it depends for its origination upon preceding moments of consciousness), and is thus insubstantial. Yogâcâra

8. This doctrine gave rise to the school's other names, *Vijñânavâda* ("consciousness doctrine") and *Cittamatra* ("mind only").

effects this compromise through the use of Mādhyamika's two-truths doctrine. Consciousness, and indeed, the objects it fabricates, are conventionally real; yet because their origination is dependent upon other causes and conditions, they are not ultimately real.

Like Mādhyamika, Yogâcâra asserts the ineffability of the awakening experience of Ultimate Reality. As Keenan writes, "Underlying all of the arguments is the consensus in all Yogâcâra texts... that the wisdom of awakening (*buddhatva*) is itself beyond language, beyond all mental operations" (Keenan 1997:25). And, like Mādhyamika, Yogâcâra identifies language as a cause of the problem of delusion. As Janice Dean Willis explains, Asanga argues "that ordinary beings (who possess the most 'inferior' knowledge of reality) believe that a name stands for a thing... [and that names] accurately characterize the nature (or essence) of the things to which they are applied" (Willis 1979:39). This mistaken assumption that names somehow confer reality or essence leads to attachment. And, of course, attachment produces suffering, in the Buddhist calculus.

At the core of the Yogâcâra analysis is the concept of the "container consciousness," or *âlaya-vijñâna*. As Keenan describes it, this "foundational substructure of all mental operations" contains karmic "seeds," which "form the habitual proclivities according to which each being discriminates and verbally fabricates images and names." These "latent seed impressions... subtly and subconsciously program our minds to construct images and ideas believed to correspond to real essences existing apart from the mind." In this way the Yogâcârins account for the generation of experience (Keenan 1993:205).

The *âlaya-vijñâna* is bound up with language. Asanga holds that "Most of the permeations of consciousness are permeations of language. They are conscious constructs (*vijñapti*) because they are formed as ideas in a mind imbued with language" (Keenan 1997:35). These "seminal permeations of language" engender all aspects of ordinary (non-enlightened) experience, including the sense of subject and object (Cf. Keenan 1997:123 n90). Here again, language is intimately associated with the creation of delusory experience.

However, Asanga is not content to stop at this negative portrayal of language, as Mādhyamika tends to be. He seeks to reclaim a valid soteriological role for language. While simultaneously holding to the extralinguistic character of Ultimate Reality, he wants to show how it is possible for the buddhas and bodhisattvas to use the conventions of language in order to communi-

cate the liberating message of enlightenment to all beings. To accomplish this double goal, he extends Nāgārjuna's two-truths doctrine by adding an intermediate truth that stands as a transition state between conventional and ultimate realities. In the resulting doctrine of the "three natures," the first is equivalent to Nāgārjuna's conventional truth; the third, to the ineffable ultimate truth. The second nature, called by some writers the "other-dependent" nature, provides a transitional state of realization between conventional experience and the ineffable experience of the Ultimate (cf. Willis 1979:18).

The other-dependent nature thus constitutes a kind of bridge between ordinary, dualistic, linguistic experience, and the ineffable experience of the Ultimate. At the same time, the other-dependent nature also constitutes a bridge from Ultimate Reality back to the conventional experience of ordinary beings. In this way, Asanga shows how it is possible for enlightened beings to communicate the message of enlightenment to ordinary beings. This communication occurs through the use of "skillful means" (*upāya*): knowing the inherent nature of language, enlightened beings use it skillfully to teach those who are not yet enlightened.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Asanga provides the theoretical mechanism to differentiate "a fabricated, deluded use of language versus a wise, awakened, and thus valid, usage" (Keenan 1997:24-5). The former use, which mistakes names of things for their essences, binds beings to the delusions of conventional reality. The latter use, on the other hand, has the power to liberate.

#### DHARMAPĀLA'S RECLAMATION OF LANGUAGE AS SKILLFUL MEANS

Asanga's more positive attitude toward language and experience is developed further by the later Yogācārin Dharmapāla (c. 530-561), in his *Ātaka Commentary*.<sup>10</sup> Keenan notes that Dharmapāla's central concern

9. I realize that I have a great deal more to learn about the three-truths doctrine. The foregoing discussion represents my best effort to characterize the doctrine, but I recognize that it leaves much to be desired.

10. Dharmapāla belonged to the so-called Sākāra-vijñānavādin school of the Yogācāra, which held "that the consciousness...is necessarily endowed with the 'form' (*ākāra*) of an object and that of a subject." They were opposed by the Nirākāra-vijñānavādins, who held that only the consciousness is real, the forms of subject and object being merely imaginary. Hattori 1987:527.

in this work is “the issue of the value of language,” which “constitutes the boundaries and bounds of samsaric existence” (1997:57).

Language constitutes for Dharmapāla the boundary between ultimate and conventional realities: the latter can be spoken of; the former cannot. “If things can be articulated, they are provisional and not real. That which is not provisional but real is definitely ineffable. All that can be articulated is conventional and not real” (87). (In this case, by “not real” Dharmapāla must mean “not *ultimately* real.”)

One achieves the standpoint of enlightenment by separating oneself from the “propensities of language”: “when one is definitively apart from propensities toward language, the subsequently attained mind penetratingly focuses on the two truths.” “Insight into emptiness and no-self can cut off {these imaginings} entirely, lead sentient beings to sever the fetters of the triple world, personally realize that final and quiescent cessation, and then they will convert others and lead them to attain liberation by uprooting the roots of the hindrances to true practice” (123).

Yet as that passage suggests, Dharmapāla insists that enlightened beings do not, as Mādhyamika would have it, simply rest in yogic emptiness. Rather, they turn back to enlighten others. Dharmapāla argues that language can also play a positive role in the liberation of beings from samsara. He appeals here to the idea of “*upāya*” or “skillful means”:

The Tathāgata’s compassion employs skillful means to teach that all things are only conscious constructs in order to lead them to abandon external objects. Having abandoned external objects, mistaken conscious constructs are destroyed. When mistaken constructs are destroyed, they realize cessation (120).

Thus Dharmapāla offers a nuanced view of language, in which it continues to be implicated in the delusions of samsara, and yet, when used skillfully from the standpoint of emptiness, can lead others to liberation from samsara.

## Summary of Part 2

From the early Mādhyamika of Nāgārjuna, through the Yogācāra of Asanga and Dharmapāla, Mahāyāna Buddhism has stressed the pure, extralinguistic character of the awakening experience, and has implicated language in the delusory consciousness which binds ordinary beings to samsaric existence. The major difference between the two schools is over the possibility of a

positive role for language. Despite Nāgārjuna's "two-truths" doctrine, Mādhyamika moves toward radical apophasis, denying any positive role for language. Yogâcâra counters by positing a transitional ("other-dependent") stage between conventional and ultimate realities, a kind of bridge across which enlightened beings can communicate with the unenlightened through the use of *upâya*, skillful means.

### PART 3: RECONCILING TRACY'S EPISTEMOLOGY WITH THE MAHÂYÂNA CHALLENGE

#### The Problem

At this point, we are faced with two mutually contradictory epistemologies. That epistemology hinted at in Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity* asserts that all experience and all understanding is "linguistic through and through." On the other hand, Mahâyâna Buddhism claims that there is a kind of experience and understanding which is extralinguistic—and that this experience, in a sense, is the only *real* experience. This disagreement is ironic because Tracy's epistemology is a key part of an overall effort to be open to other conceptualities. Yet it is unclear how he can truly hear what Mahâyâna is saying about the extralinguistic character of the awakening experience when he presupposes the contrary.

At first glance, it would seem that Tracy can respond to this problem in one of two ways. The first would be to stand pat on his claim that all experience and understanding is linguistic through and through. He has already provided ample reason to do so: his stated opposition to theological understandings that privilege confessional positions. Certainly the Mahâyâna claim to extralinguistic experience qualifies as a confessional position. Yet he can only maintain his own epistemological stance either by denying *a priori* the Mahâyâna claim, or by "neutralizing" it. To deny the Mahâyâna claim would imply that Tracy "knows better" than Buddhist practitioners the nature of their experience—a questionable claim, at best. Furthermore, to prejudge the truth status of the Mahâyâna claim hardly contributes to the truly interactive conversation which Tracy advocates. On the other hand, Tracy can neutralize the Mahâyâna claim by "correlating" it with the common postmodern sense of the pervasiveness of language in experience. This would see the Mahâyâna claim as mythical or metaphorical, rather than epistemological or propositional. However, from the Mahâyâna standpoint, the

postmodern view is itself symptomatic of the problem of samsaric existence: any view which privileges language over the Ultimate is bound up with the delusions of samsara.

The second option is for Tracy to revise his own epistemological stance to accommodate the Mahâyâna claim: that is, his revised position would hold that *most* experience, but *not all*, is linguistic through and through. Tracy has certainly left this option open, through his notion of the religious “classic.” As noted earlier in this paper, Tracy notes that “classic” texts contain a “certain permanence and excess of meaning that resists a ‘definitive’ interpretation” (1989:40). Classic texts contain something “more” which transcends and resists the meanings available to socio-historically situated interpreter/readers. If anything qualifies for that “excess,” it is the Mahâyâna claim of an extralinguistic experience of ultimate reality. Furthermore, Tracy argues that the reader must be open to the possibility that the religious classic’s “excess of meaning” has the power to challenge, and implicitly to change, her own assumptions about the nature of truth. If the “excess of meaning” is the Mahâyâna claim to an extralinguistic experience of awakening, then it could overrule the epistemological assumptions which Tracy brings to the interpretation of Mahâyâna teachings.

However, if the Scylla of holding to Tracy’s epistemological position is fraught with difficulties, the Charybdis of revising his position appears no safer. By acknowledging that some experience, and specifically the religious experience of awakening, is not linguistic, Tracy implicitly acknowledges that the testimony of at least one confessional position, that of the Mahâyâna, is possibly true. If that is the case, then the Mahâyâna claim could naturally assume a privileged position in theological discourse. Yet, as we saw above, Tracy does not wish to privilege any particular confessional position. Furthermore, to privilege the Mahâyâna experience would undermine or at least weaken Tracy’s own radically hermeneutical theological stance. As I attempted to show in Part 1, as long as *all* experience is thoroughly linguistic, it necessarily requires interpretation; and if *all* experience requires interpretation, then religious scriptures, doctrines, confessional positions, and theologies—all of which involve experience in some way—*necessarily* require interpretation as well. However, this connection is severed if some experiences are not thoroughly linguistic and so are not subject to interpretation. Such experiences can only be affirmed, confessed, proclaimed. Of course, the teachings, scriptures, and theologies which *refer* to that experi-

ence will necessarily be matters for interpretation, but the extralinguistic experience itself can only stand as it is.

The awakening experience becomes, then, an absolute against which all other experiences must be evaluated, and in comparison to which all other experiences are more or less “real.” This, of course, is precisely the role the awakening experience plays in Mahâyâna thought. However, to give the Mahâyâna confessional position such a privileged role in theology would fly in the face of Tracy’s resistance to such practices in Christian contexts.

Given Tracy’s obvious respect for the possibilities of genuine dialogue with other faith positions, I doubt that he would be comfortable with either of the alternatives discussed above. Yet it seems that his totalizing statements about the thoroughly linguistic nature of experience, if taken literally, back him into this corner when he is confronted with Mahâyâna’s radical challenge to his epistemology.

#### TRACY’S “UPÂYA”?

Thus far, we have been approaching the problem in terms of conflicting epistemological positions. However, another option suggests itself: stop taking Tracy’s epistemological statements literally. That is, what if we instead interpret Tracy’s statements as themselves a kind of “play”—as rhetorical devices intended to warn of the dangers of absolutizing certain interpretations and readings, as well as to open our minds to new possibilities for interpretation? In other words, Tracy’s epistemological claims can be seen as similar to the “skillful means” described by Asanga and Dharmapâla. This is not to say that Tracy should not be taken at his word; quite the contrary, it is to say that “his word” functions as a kind of performative utterance rather than an epistemological proposition. Nor am I claiming that Tracy’s claims about the inherently linguistic nature of experience are not epistemological in nature, for they clearly are; they are assertions about the way we come to know what is real and true. However, it is possible to understand Tracy as taking an extreme, and ultimately unsupportable, epistemological position as a means to shake us out of our complacency and to warn us of the even more dangerous extremes of secularist and confessionalist reductionism.

This reading does not take Tracy’s comments as applying universally. *All* experience is *not* linguistic through and through; the awakening experience (and perhaps other experiences) is extralinguistic. Rather, such comments refer only to experiences within samsaric existence—that is, our *normal*

experience of reality. Tracy's comments remind us that *normal* experience is thoroughly bound up with our conceptual and linguistic frameworks. As such, it cannot be absolutized.

Asanga and Dharmapāla would not disagree with that message. They hold that ordinary experience—non-enlightened experience—is largely a creation of mind imbued with the conceptualities of language. Recall, for instance, Asanga's assertion that the permeations of language engender the constructs of consciousness—including “the experienter, the experienced content, [and] valid experiencing” (quoted in Keenan 1997:123 n90)—is certainly reminiscent of Tracy's assertions about the linguistic nature of experience.

To be sure, to say that experience is *bound up* with language is not to say, with the Yogâcârins, that language is bound up in *the construction* of experience *by* consciousness. I am not arguing that Tracy is a Yogâcârin, or for that matter, an absolute subjective idealist. However, both the “skillful-means Tracy” and the Yogâcârins work to point out that we cannot take for granted the “reality” of ordinary experience, for it is inextricably involved with the conventions of language, and as such is a matter of interpretation, a hermeneutical object.

Yet would not this reading of Tracy also weaken his theological position, as does the “revisionist” position discussed in the previous section? Does not this reading, by backing away from the claim that all experience is linguistic, break the chain of necessity that authorizes Tracy's advocacy of a fundamentally interpretive approach to theology? Yes, and no. Certainly this reading of Tracy cannot be used to mandate the creative interpretation of religious texts on the grounds that all experience must be interpreted. Nevertheless, even if it is ultimately unsupportable, Tracy's “*upāya*” does work to undermine those who hold that only a hermeneutics of confessionalist retrieval is possible. For, in a sense—although he does not express it this way himself—his point is that religious texts *themselves* are best seen as instances of *upāya*. Contrary to biblical literalists and fundamentalists, he holds that religious texts are not ends in themselves. They are rather means toward an end. Scriptures are not the message; they are the medium. As such they must be read and interpreted in light of the reader's own social, historical, and cultural context. In this regard, Tracy's “correlative” method becomes especially important, since the texts alone cannot speak for themselves: they speak only when the reader engages them in a “mutually critical dialogue,” bringing to bear her own experiences and the

needs and circumstances of the present context, yet remaining open to a message that may challenge those experiences and that context. The same goes for theological discourse—including that of Tracy himself—and of this paper!

In short, then, Tracy's global epistemological claims may be read as a kind of skillful means, designed to focus the reader of religious texts, and particularly the theologian, on the need for creative dialogue with, rather than mere retrieval from, religious texts. As such, Tracy's claims do not rule out the possibility of extralinguistic experience such as that asserted by Mahâyâna Buddhism. At the same time, however, they function to shake up the reader, to challenge conventional understandings, and to remind the reader of the need for creative interaction with religious texts.

### CONCLUDING PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I have not found it pleasurable to challenge David Tracy's work. For several reasons, I want him to succeed, to be "right." As an aspiring theologian working at the interface of Christianity and other faiths, I find much to admire in Tracy's work. He has sketched a methodology that allows for a *mutually* critical dialogue between Christians and non-Christians, a dialogue in which, as Jeanrond writes, one "listens to the other as other without attempting to subordinate the conversation partners to one's own agenda" (1998:139). I can conceive of no more *Christian* approach to our neighbors.

Furthermore, my earlier studies of linguistic theory lead me to sympathize instinctively with Tracy's emphasis on the hermeneutical and linguistic character of experience, understanding, and knowledge. Language does allow us to "think the world" in certain ways. Language gives us inherited categories with which to pigeonhole, to systematize, to make meaningful—or to misperceive and misunderstand—a world of experiences that would otherwise be chaotic and confusing. For similar reasons, I also sympathize with the Mahâyâna assertion of the integral role of language in shaping the delusions of ordinary existence.

Yet my own experience with Zen meditation practice and my Christian belief in the reality of the trinitarian God convince me that there is also experience which transcends language as well as normal modes of conceptual and discursive thought. While I do not claim to have experienced "en-

lightenment,” I have caught glimpses of a nondual reality similar to that described in the Mahâyâna literature. It is difficult for me to deny these experiences—nor do I wish to deny them. Consequently, despite my great admiration for Tracy, I cannot share his epistemological claim that all experience is linguistic “through and through.”

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate the challenge the Mahâyâna experience represents to the epistemological claims that ground Tracy’s theological methodology. Because of my great respect for Tracy’s work, I have tried to find a way to salvage his position in light of that challenge: that is, by reading his work as a skillful means of decentering the reader’s expectations and motivating the play of creative interpretation of religious texts. Perhaps I have been too kind to Tracy; perhaps his epistemology truly does come up short. However, I believe that there is truth in what he is saying, as there is in the message of the Yogâcâra sages Asanga and Dharmapâla.

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