

Yes, There are Limits to Tracy's Linguistic Emphasis;  
But We Can Only *Talk* About Them  
A Response to David Brockman

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I ONCE KNEW A SCHOLAR WHO WAS ORDAINED IN EAST ASIAN FOLK AND BUDDHIST religious traditions, and many decades back had been a Jesuit. With thirty years experience in China, Taiwan, and Japan, he was perhaps himself a work in interfaith dialogue. During one class, he tried to explain a Buddhist concept to us. He said:

“When you put a noun to a verb, you sin.”<sup>1</sup>

He was trying to explain that in Buddhism any mental judgment or thought—“linguistic”, experiential, or otherwise—is an impediment to enlightenment. The seemingly transparent description of noun and verb invariably interprets and essentializes. In this case, the language of “sin” proper may be foreign to Buddhism, but the term is helpful in pointing to dangers of the hermeneutical turn in everyday experience.

Religious practitioners often provides such critiques of a linguistic approach to knowing or experiencing the divine. The *Dao De Jing* begins famously with the words, “The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao (Way)” (De Bary: 139). The Buddha cautioned his disciples not to take his judgments at face value, but to test them carefully. Additionally, as Mr.

<sup>1</sup> Class conversation with Michael Saso, Institute of Asian Studies, Beijing (Spring, 1997).

Brockman helpfully reminds us, some forms of Buddhism, such as Yogâcâra, are especially cautious about language, strongly resisting the hermeneutical urge.

We might note that Christians also have recognized the tension between sign and referent, between the textual word and the Word to which it points. Karl Barth, for instance, says that, “[I]t is not merely possible but necessary to appeal from scripture (always recognizing its unique value) to a true and original Word of God which we have to conceive of quite differently. The Church can and should go beyond the representative and preliminary judgment of Scripture to the supreme and real Judge the Lord” (Barth: 540-541). Christians may purport to place more trust in the reliability of these mediating signs than do other faith systems, but they do typically acknowledge limits on the written word. So Brockman is on target in holding something—experience, revelation, *something*—as prior to the hermeneutical turn.

And yet, while I think Brockman is helpful in reiterating this point so emphatically, I believe that this emphasis on the limitations of language is something that Tracy himself has clearly articulated.

### TRACY ON THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

I begin in noting that for Tracy, a linguistically structured reality is not some ideal. It is instead a *de facto* recognition by Tracy of the socially constructed—or at least interpreted—nature of reality. Tracy insists that we work methodologically on this linguistic-hermeneutical problem, because in most cases it is our sole means for meeting the world. Tracy himself calls theological interpretation “a highly precarious mode of inquiry” (Tracy 1987, 84), and yet, are there alternatives?

For Tracy, in this reality, the answer is no. He says: “We understand in and through language. We do not invent our own private languages and then find a way to translate our communications to others. We find ourselves understanding in and through particular and public languages” (49). For Tracy, literary and social criticism is crucial to his enterprise because to a large degree the hermeneutical turn is unavoidable.<sup>2</sup> At another point, Tracy

<sup>2</sup> See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 40, for a discussion of the importance of contemporary literary criticism to theology.

makes a further statement about the problematic nature of language. He says, “[E]very word, including every word about words, becomes not merely ambiguous and polyvalent, as Burke sees, but over-determined and disseminating—as Freud saw” (Tracy 1990: 20). In other words, we never really get the “right word” because of the susceptibility of language to ambiguity.

Thus, when Brockman cites Tracy to the effect that “every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting”, I think we must bear in mind that Tracy sees this more as intrinsic to the human experience rather than as an endorsement of the representational power of language. Interestingly, in the same paragraph to which Brockman has drawn such attention, Tracy says that “To experience in any other than a purely passive sense (a sense less than human) is to interpret” (Tracy 1987: 9).

At this point, I think it might be interesting to turn, after a fashion, to an examination of Mr. Brockman’s own use of religious dialogue. Mr. Brockman speaks personally of his experience bringing Trinitarian faith and Zen practice into conversation. Ironically, he seems to argue for a primacy of personal experience—through his own interpretative turn. I think that this reflection, in fact, underscores the degree to which we can access or receive an other’s experience linguistically. I would doubt that any of us passively received Mr. Brockman’s interesting reflection on his experience in the Mahâyâna tradition. We may have wondered at his adherence to Trinitarian faith and non-duality. Or we might have asked ourselves where he gained this experience, where he hopes it will lead, or how it contributes to his studies. Alternately, we might be skeptical that he really experienced anything, curious over whether it was a physical sensation or something more, or hopeful that we might be able to incorporate such practice into our own regimen. Regardless of the questions we ask, however, we will have encountered Mr. Brockman only to the degree that we have experienced, interpreted, and reacted to his words.

I believe that Brockman, in his final paragraphs, implicitly endorses Tracy’s conceptualization of dialogue. Tracy writes that “It is possible that some interpreters may have encountered the power of Ultimate Reality. They may have experienced, therefore, religious enlightenment and emancipation. But these claims can be interpreted only by the same kinds of human beings as before: finite and contingent members of particular societies and cultures” (Tracy 1987: 86). While Brockman acknowledges that he has cer-

tainly not experienced enlightenment, his concluding comments on his own experience seem to endorse Tracy's basic methodology. If he is arguing for limitations on a dialogical and correlative methodology, this argument is *only* accessible to us linguistically. When Brockman has argued that certain "experiences can only be affirmed, confessed, proclaimed" (19), I think that he has missed Tracy's line of thought; affirmation, confession, and proclamation all involve a hermeneutical thrust and a linguistic expression.

#### NUANCING LANGUAGE: ATTEMPTS AT GOING BEYOND TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS

That said, I believe that Brockman has raised an important qualification regarding Tracy's conception of dialogue. Here also, I think that a close reading of Tracy shows his willingness to enlarge his understanding of dialogue. Tracy's methodology clearly hopes to include arenas other than purely academic forums such as this. Tracy notes, for instance, that the "choice of 'thought' or 'doctrine' as the religious reality chosen for analysis by most philosophers and theologians confines the study of religion, from the very beginning, within too narrow boundaries" (1990: 55). Tracy recognizes the dangers of construing dialogue as white, middle class, or academic, and has argued for a more diverse approach. Of these Others, he says that: "What seems to me to unite so many of these new voices is not a theory of hermeneutics, much less a revised correlational method for theology. Rather it is a new hermeneutical practice which actualizes that theory and that method better than many of the theorists do" (1990: 6). Most recently, Tracy has argued that in the Christian tradition emergent theologies should be granted a place of prominence comparable to the traditional classics.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> He says "[A]nd now it seems to me that we theologians must be as interested in Asian thought as the early church was in Greek questions; Africa should interest us as much as the Celtic concerns that freely entered earlier Christian conversations. I think also of how Martin Luther King brought the Declaration of Independence into his own preaching. I remain interested in fragments and forms from all the great traditions" (Holland: 57).

One of the things that is striking about Tracy—especially in his later work—is a renewed emphasis on solidarity. To some degree, Tracy runs the risk of disjoining solidarity and dialogue, or of creating a dialectic between them. He writes that, “What conversation is to the life of understanding, solidarity must be to the life of action” (1987: 113). Thus, at times Tracy does seem to treat hermeneutics as solely a mental activity, where at other times he has treated it more holistically. Nonetheless, Tracy’s response is typically to construe this method quite broadly.

It may be, however, that the best way to maintain the autonomy of a prior experience—interpreted after the fact, to be sure—is simply to acknowledge the limits of language. We do well to follow Tracy’s lead and to dialogue widely and in a variety of media and among many actors, while affirming that aspects of the divine will always resist human mediation.

#### BUDDHISM IN TRACY & A REFORMED ANALOGY

So far, I have tried to argue that Tracy conceives of linguistic analysis as an imperfect means by which human beings signify the divine. I have further argued that Tracy has proposed dialogue that goes beyond traditional academic, European, or middle class concerns, although he has imprecisely indicated along which lines “solidarity” may flow. Now I hope to turn to the main thrust of Mr. Brockman’s argument—the relationship between *Yogâcâra* and Tracy’s epistemology.

Tracy himself presents the Buddhist Other as in many ways the most threatening other for monotheists, and Brockman is wise to choose *Yogâcâra* for contrast, and, of course, analogy. Tracy expresses well the difficulties before us today. He says:

For the Christian or Jew what can be more other than this Buddhist other who names Ultimate Reality not God but Emptiness? This other who declares that there is no self, or, more exactly, with *Nâgârjuna*, that both and self and no-self neither exist nor do not exist? This Buddhist other who employs a highly metaphysical vocabulary and insists on the need for correct thinking while at the same time suspecting all metaphysical and, at the limit, all language? (1990: 68).

I have to confess that at first I was not quite sure how to proceed with these questions. Luckily, Tracy and Brockman have already pointed to some of the greatest difficulties before us. Despite his protestations of naiveté, Tracy seems to have a strong sense of what is at stake—of what the major themes are—in dialogues with Buddhism.

Brockman is right to emphasize skillful means, the method by which Yogâcârins explain the use of thought structures which, theoretically could lead beyond all mental constructs.<sup>4</sup> To argue that language is imperfect is not the same as to say that it is useless. This is why, as Tracy notes, Buddhist skepticism of language does not preclude complex and metaphysical discussion.

And yet while the Buddhist Other is perhaps more of a cultural challenge to Christian theology, I think that other examples might continue to highlight the generically problematic and difficult nature of language. In closing, I want to offer up another analogy to pair with Brockman's—one that I believe offers similar challenges. In my own Reformed Protestant tradition, Jonathan Edwards is known for some rather creative theology. Edwards has a famous sermon, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" (based on Mt. 16:17), the doctrine of which he summarizes: "There is such a thing, as a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means" (Smith et al, 107). I think that Edwards would see this Supernatural Light as prior to interpretation and language, although humans inevitably so interpret it. Edwards might describe the imputation of God's grace as extralingual, and as resistant to normal human language, in his words, "notional." Edwards says, "This light, and this only, has its fruit in an universal holiness of life. No merely notional or speculative understanding of the doctrines of religion will ever bring this." (Smith et al: 124). One of the reasons this sermon is so well known is because of a famous analogy that Edwards uses. He talks about the human experience of tasting honey versus describing it. His exact words are:

<sup>4</sup> Peter Harvey says it well: "The 'substantialism' of the Yogâcârins is in fact more apparent than real, as their theories on mind are essentially tentative devices, 'skillful means to be used in conjunction with a series of meditations in leading the practitioners beyond all mental constructions, including all theories, to a direct experience of ultimate reality'" (106).

Thus there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. (Smith et al: 112)

While Edwards will certainly take this analogy in different directions than might Tracy, Brockman, or Asanga, I think that the analogy serves us well.

Like Brockman, Edwards emphasizes the radical disjuncture between language and what Tracy refers to as Ultimate Reality. Like Tracy and many Mahâyânists, Edwards nonetheless sees the value of language. I believe that Tracy has in his most recent work recognized the difficulty of language. He has tended to turn toward the apophatic, and himself acknowledges that he has taken “a shift to the apophatic, the apocalyptic, and also quite importantly to the fragment” (Holland: 55). While he continues to recognize the necessity of language, he also recognizes its limits.

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