

## How It All Depends: A Contemporary Reconstruction of Huayan Buddhism

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Forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Justin Tiwald. Oxford University Press. Please cite published version.

**Abstract:** Few would deny that something ontologically depends on something else. Given that something depends on something, what depends on what? Huayan Buddhism 華嚴宗, a prominent Chinese Buddhist school, is known for its extensive thesis of interdependence, according to which everything depends on everything else. This intriguing thesis is entangled with seemingly paradoxical claims that everything is not only identified with everything else but also contained within it. Moreover, the radical thesis of interdependence entails that dependence is pervasive and symmetric. In this paper, I first develop a contemporary interpretation of Huayan interdependence by employing the definitional account of essence and the essence-based account of dependence. Through these contemporary resources, I elucidate and unify the theses of interdependence, mutual identity, and mutual containment within Huayan Buddhism. I then propose a unique framework of ontological dependence that suggests varying degrees of ontological dependence, aimed at accommodating and explaining away our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence. By contemporizing Huayan Buddhism, I explore its potential and facilitate engagement between contemporary metaphysics and Huayan Buddhism.

**Key words:** Huayan Buddhism, ontological dependence, identity, essence, interdependence, degrees of dependence

## 1 Introduction

Few would deny that something ontologically depends on something else. Smiles depend on faces. Bagel holes depend on their host bagels. Sets depend on their members. Numbers depend on each other. Either composite objects depend on their parts, or vice versa. Given that something depends on something, what depends on what?

An extensive thesis of interdependence, according to which everything depends on everything else, is developed in Huayan Buddhism 華嚴宗. This prominent Chinese Buddhist school is named after its chief scripture, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (*Huayan Jing* 華嚴經).<sup>1</sup> Although later Huayan Buddhists retrospectively trace their lineage through the five patriarchs—Dushun 杜順 (557–640 CE), Zhiyan 智儼 (602–668 CE), Fazang 法藏 (643–712 CE), Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839 CE), and Zongmi 宗密 (780–841 CE)<sup>2</sup>—Fazang is the real founder of Huayan Buddhism. He played a pivotal role in systematizing and disseminating Huayan thoughts, thereby earning him the status of the most significant Huayan figure.<sup>3</sup>

The Huayan thesis of interdependence is inspired and illustrated by the majestic metaphor of Indra's net, which is mentioned a number of times in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.<sup>4</sup> Cook (1977: 2) provides a vivid description of Indra's net:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a

single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of the jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.

Just as all the glittering jewels in Indra’s net reflect one another, all things are interconnected and mutually dependent.

The Huayan thesis of interdependence is philosophically fascinating. Within Huayan Buddhism, one central inquiry revolves around the question of how everything depends on everything else. In Fazang’s *Essay on the Golden Lion* 金獅子章 (T45.1881) and his *Treatise of the Five Teachings* 華嚴五教章<sup>5</sup> (T45.1866), the Huayan thesis of interdependence is anchored in two seemingly paradoxical relationships between all things: mutual identity (*xiang ji* 相即) and mutual containment (*xiang ru* 相入). According to Fazang, everything is not only identified with everything else but also contained within it. This, however, raises three further questions: How can things with distinct numerical identities, e.g., a lion statue and a house, be considered identical? How can a thing, such as a house, be contained within one of its proper parts, such as its rafter? How is the thesis of interdependence explained by the mutual identity and mutual containment of all things in Huayan Buddhism? To answer these questions, I integrate historical Huayan texts with Kit Fine’s definitional account of essence and essence-based account of dependence. I show

how these contemporary resources can elucidate and unify the theses of interdependence, mutual identity, and mutual containment within Huayan Buddhism.

Moreover, the radical thesis of interdependence entails pervasive and symmetric dependence. If everything depends on everything else, then the rafter of a house and a decorative tile depend on each other. However, at first glance, the rafter and the tile can exist without the other. Moreover, if the thesis of interdependence is true, then the house depends on its parts, and vice versa. This notion appears to clash with the common belief that dependence is asymmetric. How can the house depend on its parts while the parts also depend on the house? To make sense of pervasive and symmetric dependence, I draw analogies between dependence and gravitation. While our intuition might lead us to believe that the rafter has no influence on a decorative tile or the Earth, gravitation is universal. In fact, the rafter does exert some minute gravitational force on the tile and the Earth. Similarly, Huayan Buddhists can say that the rafter and the tile depend on each other to some small degree, even if it is not overtly apparent. Moreover, the house and its parts may depend on each other to varying degrees, offering a nuanced framework of ontological dependence.

While this paper contains a historical element, its primary focus centers on exploring the potential of Huayan Buddhism and fostering a more inclusive and diverse philosophical landscape. Through the development of the Huayan thesis of interdependence, I illustrate how Huayan Buddhism and contemporary metaphysics enrich each other. On the one hand, contemporary resources such as the definitional account of essence and the essence-based account of dependence enhance the Huayan thesis of interdependence by developing the thesis in a clear and coherent way. On the other hand, both the account of degrees of ontological dependence and the thesis of

interdependence provide distinctive alternatives for understanding ontological dependence and the intricate interrelationship between all things. Firstly, while we tend to treat ontological dependence like a binary switch—a thing either depends on another or not—the account of degrees of dependence treats ontological dependence like a volume knob, acknowledging varying degrees of dependence. Consequently, it is not sufficient to merely establish what depends on what; we also need to investigate the extent to which one thing depends on another. Secondly, the thesis of interdependence envisions reality as a reciprocal frame structure, where interconnected rods mutually support each other. In contrast, metaphysical foundationalism, a mainstream view, portrays reality akin to a multi-level building: higher-level things depend on lower-level things, but not vice versa; at the bottom level, there are independent things that serve as foundations for all other things. In short, Huayan Buddhism can introduce fresh perspectives into contemporary metaphysical debates.

Roadmap: Section 2 introduces the Buddhist notions of dependent origination and raises the question of what depends on what within the context of Huayan Buddhism. Section 3 examines the relevant historical texts and argues that the Huayan thesis of interdependence is best understood in terms of identity dependence. That is, everything depends on everything else for being the very thing. Section 4 enhances the Huayan thesis of interdependence by incorporating insights from contemporary resources, such as Kit Fine's definitional account of essence and essence-based account of dependence. Section 5 further develops the Huayan thesis of interdependence by proposing varying degrees of ontological dependence, which accommodate and explain away our intuitions against the interdependence of all things. Section 6 concludes the paper by exploring

how my development of Huayan Buddhism contributes to ongoing contemporary metaphysical debates.

## 2 Dependent Origination

The Huayan thesis of interdependence is Huayan Buddhists' take on dependent origination (Sanskrit: *Pratītyasamutpāda*), which is one of defining characteristics of Buddhism. In early Buddhist texts, e.g., the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Saṃyukta Nikāya*, dependent origination is expressed as “this existing, that exists; this arising, that arises; this not existing, that does not exist; this ceasing, that ceases.”<sup>6</sup> This early formulation of dependent origination is open to multiple interpretations and has been further elaborated and developed in various ways. As a result, theses of dependent origination may address the following questions differently:

- Which things are (and are not) subject to dependent origination?
- Given that there are dependent things, what are they dependently originated from?
- Given that something is dependently originated from something, in what sense does the former depend upon the latter?

Although the early formulation of dependent origination pertains to the existence of things, the existence of a thing can be dependent in several ways. For example, the existence of a loaf of bread is causally, ontologically, and teleologically dependent.

- Causal dependence: The bread causally depends for its existence on its ingredients—such as water, flour, yeast, and salt—and the baking process.
- Ontological dependence: The bread ontologically depends for its existence on its parts, such as its chemical elements, being arranged in a certain way.
- Teleological dependence: The bread teleologically depends for its existence on its purpose, e.g., satisfying someone's appetite.

The contemporary notion of causation captures the changes in the natural world and is closely connected to the laws that govern the physical realm. In the case of a loaf of bread, certain laws of nature ensure that the combination of its ingredients and the baking process result in the creation of the bread, making the bread's existence causally dependent on these factors.

Moreover, causal dependence can be distinguished from ontological dependence,<sup>7</sup> as they pertain to the existence and nature of things in distinct ways. For example, the same loaf of bread exists because its chemical elements are arranged in a specific manner. If different chemical elements were present, the outcome might be a piece of metal instead of bread. While the laws of nature can explain why and how water, flour, yeast, and salt give rise to the bread over time, they do not address why and how the bread's existence depends on its parts at a given moment. The latter aspect can be understood through ontological dependence, which establishes a connection between a thing's existence and its nature, i.e., what it is, in relation to other things. Given that the bread simply would not be categorized as bread if it were composed of the chemical elements of a piece of metal, the bread ontologically depends on its parts for being what it is.

Additionally, apart from causal and ontological dependence, the existence of the bread is teleologically dependent on its purpose. The bread is brought into existence with the purpose of satisfying someone's appetite or serving a specific function. Because the bread would not be made without such a purpose, the bread teleologically depends on its purpose.

It is worth mentioning that the Buddhist notion of causation is more coarse-grained than the contemporary notion that captures the natural world's diachronic changes. Buddhists understand the cause of a thing as what gives rise to the thing, making the Buddhist notion of causation as coarse-grained as the idea of dependent origination itself. Although dependent origination was initially associated with the causally dependent twelve links (Sanskrit: *Nidānas*) of a person's past, present, and future lives, it is subsequently developed to include the ontological dependence of conventional constructs upon primary dharmas in Abhidharma Buddhism. Abhidharma Buddhists develop a two-tier ontology:

Primary existents (Sanskrit: *dravyasat*) have intrinsic nature (Sanskrit: *svabhāva*)<sup>8</sup> in the sense that they are irreducible and mind-independent.

Conventional existents (Sanskrit: *prajñaptisat*) arise from our conceptual and linguistic activities; they are constructed and accepted by us based on their practical uses.

Abhidharma Buddhists identify primary existents as *dharmas*, which are particular occurrences of properties such as shape, color, heat, and solidity. These dharmas, being indivisible and momentary simples, serve as the foundational elements of everything else in the world.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, conventional existents such as persons, chariots, trees, and stars are considered as



constructions we assemble from aggregates of primary dharmas to suit our practical needs. In Abhidharma Buddhism, the ontological dependence of conventional existents upon primary dharmas is both mereological and conceptual. It is mereological in the sense that conventional existents depend on their parts; it is conceptual in the sense that conventional existents depend on our conceptual and linguistic activities. Moreover, the ontological dependence and teleological dependence of conventional existents coincide with each other, provided that conventional existents are constructed and accepted by us for their specific practical uses.

The two-tier Abhidharma ontology was revolutionized by Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250), who is recognized as the most significant Buddhist philosopher after the historical Buddha. Nāgārjuna developed the thesis of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*), according to which all things are empty of intrinsic nature. Consequently, there are no primary existents that are irreducible and mind-independent, and even Abhidharma Buddhists' dharmas are our conventional constructs. Since its inception, Nāgārjuna's thesis of emptiness has been open to many interpretations.<sup>10</sup> Following Westerhoff's (2007, 2009, 2022) interpretation, the thesis of emptiness does not mean that things do not exist, nor does it mean that things lack essence if the essence of a thing is what the thing cannot lose without ceasing to be the very thing. Instead, the thesis of emptiness entails that all things lack independent existence in a particular manner: they are not free from our conceptual and linguistic activities and therefore are not objectively real.

Nāgārjuna's thesis of emptiness has a dominant influence on Chinese Buddhism, including Huayan Buddhism, and is often viewed as a starting point for Chinese Buddhist theoretical development. Like Nāgārjuna, Huayan Buddhists offer a radical answer to the question of what is dependently

originated—everything is. But Huayan Buddhists provide their own answer to the question of what a thing depends on for its existence. While the thesis of emptiness only entails that everything depends on *something*, Huayan Buddhists go further by advocating a thesis of universal dependence, asserting that everything depends on *everything else*.

In what sense does everything depend on everything else? The Huayan thesis of interdependence revolves around two seemingly paradoxical relationships between all things: mutual identity and mutual containment. In his overview of Huayan doctrines, the *Essay on the Golden Lion*, Fazang utilizes a golden lion as a metaphor to illustrate key Huayan doctrines. The gold represents the ultimate principle behind all things (*li* 理), while the golden lion represents the totality of all things in the world (*shi* 事). According to Fazang, the golden lion and all its parts are not only identified with but also contained by each other.

(a) Each organ and each hair of the lion completely take in the lion by means of the gold. Each and every one of them presents in the eye of the lion. The eye of the lion is its ear, its ear is its nose, its nose is its tongue, and its tongue is its body.<sup>11</sup>

(b) In each of the lion's eyes, ears, limbs, joints, and in each and every hair, there is the golden lion. All the lions embraced by all the single hairs simultaneously and instantaneously enter into a single hair. In each and every hair, there are an infinite number of lions, and in addition, all the single hairs, together with their infinite number of lions, in turn, enter into a single hair. It is repeated infinitely in this way, like the jewels of Celestial Lord Indra's net.<sup>12</sup>

The above Huayan texts raise three intriguing questions:

- In what sense are things, such as a golden lion and its nose, considered identical?
- In what sense do things contain each other? This is particularly puzzling when a thing, such as the golden lion, is contained within one of its proper parts, such as its nose.
- How is the thesis of interdependence explained by the mutual identity and mutual containment of all things in Huayan Buddhism?

Section 3 answers the first question by showing that the Huayan thesis of mutual identity is best understood in terms of the definitional notion of identity. Section 4 answers the second and third questions. Kit Fine's (1994a) definitional account of essence and Fine's (1994b) notion of constitutive essence can explain in what sense everything contains everything else. Moreover, Fine's (1995) essence-based account of ontological dependence can bridge the thesis of interdependence with the mutual identity and mutual containment of all things.

### **3 Mutual Identity**

Although the most straightforward way of understanding identity is to take it as the numerical identity relation that a thing has to itself, the Huayan thesis of mutual identity does not entail that all things are numerically identical with each other.<sup>13</sup> In the following paragraph in the *Essay on the Golden Lion*, Fazang refers to the lion (including its parts) as many and thereby recognizes the numerical distinctness between things.

(c) The gold and the lion established each other compatibly. One and many do not obstruct each other. In this, the ultimate principle (*li* 理) and things (*shi* 事) are each different. Either one or many. Each remains in its position.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the mutual identity of all things is not the thesis that all things share one and the same principle.<sup>15</sup> Although Fazang refers to *li* as one in the above paragraph and holds that all things share the same principle, his thesis of mutual identity captures a more intricate relationship between things.

In the more detailed *Treatise of the Five Teachings*, Fazang uses a building (including its parts) as a metaphor to elucidate the relationships between all things, including their mutual identity. The building, like the golden lion, represents the totality of all things, while a part of the building, e.g., its rafter, represents a thing in the world. According to Fazang, one part of the building, its rafter, is identified with the building as well as other parts of the building. And the reason why the rafter is the building is that the existence of the rafter is necessary and sufficient for the building.

(d) The rafter is the building. Why? Because the rafter by itself establishes the building. Without the rafter, the building is not established. When there is the rafter, there is the building.<sup>16</sup>

Although Fazang's notion of identity ties to modality, it is richer than modal notions such as necessary and sufficient.<sup>17</sup> The rafter is the building because, without the rafter, the building is

spoiled.

(e) Question: Why would there be no building if a single rafter is lacking? Answer: That would be a spoiled building, not a perfect building. Therefore, you should know that the perfect building is inherent in the one rafter. Since it is inherent in this one rafter, you should know therefore that the rafter is the building.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the rafter is the parts of the building because, without the rafter, the parts are spoiled.

(f) Question: Since the building is the rafter, then the planks, roof tiles, etc. should also be the rafter? Answer: They all are the rafter. Why? Without the rafter, there would be no building. If there is no rafter, the building is spoiled. If the building is spoiled, then you cannot speak of planks, roof tiles, etc. Hence, the planks, roof tiles, etc. are the rafter. If they were not the rafter, the building could not be established. The rafter, tiles, etc. could not be established. Now they are all established, we know they are identical with each other.<sup>19</sup>

In what sense does the absence of a thing, e.g., the rafter, spoil another thing, e.g., the building? Priest's (2018) interpretation of Huayan Buddhism involves the definitional notion of identity, which captures what it is for a thing to be the very thing. If the rafter defines what the building is, then without the rafter, the building would no longer be the very building. Generally, one way for a thing to go out of existence is for it to lose the conditions for being the very thing. Hence, when some condition for being the very building, e.g., the rafter, is not present, the building does not

exist. This is how the building is spoiled by the absence of the rafter.

By claiming that the rafter is the building as well as its parts, Fazang does not mean the rafter is ontologically prior to the building and other parts of the building.

(g) Question: If the rafter all by itself totally establishes the building, then if there are still no roof tiles and other things, how can it establish the building? Answer: When there are no tiles and such things, the rafter is not a rafter, so it does not establish the building.<sup>20</sup>

The rafter would only be the very rafter when it is in the building and relates to the planks, roof tiles, etc. in a certain way. The building would only be the very building when all its parts, including the rafter, are arranged in a certain way. And other parts of the building, e.g., planks and tiles, are themselves when they are in the building and relate to the rest of the building in a certain way. In short, the building and its parts define what each other is; consequently, they ontologically depend on each other for being what they are.

#### **4 Essence and Dependence**

As shown in Section 3, the Huayan thesis of mutual identity is best understood in terms of the definitional notion of identity. In contemporary philosophy, Kit Fine (1994a) explains the definitional notion of identity in terms of essence; and Fine (1994b) develops different senses of essence; Fine (1995) explores the intricate relationship between essence and dependence. In this

section, I show how Fine's views of essence and dependence can help elucidate and unify the puzzling Huayan theses of interdependence, mutual identity, and mutual containment.

Fine (1994a) constructs a definitional account of essence, where the essence of a thing characterizes what the thing is (i.e., the identity of that thing). For example, the essence of the singleton set {Socrates}—containing Socrates as its sole member—characterizes what {Socrates} is. In Fine's view, this notion of identity is stronger than pure modal notions such as necessity and sufficiency. Although the presence of {Socrates} is modally necessary and sufficient for the presence of Socrates, the presence of {Socrates} has nothing to do with what Socrates is. Fine's definitional account of essence aligns well with Fazang's explanation of mutual identity. According to Fazang, the rafter defines the building; without the rafter, the building would not be the very building.

Fine (1994b: 57) thinks that essences have constituents. For example, {Socrates}'s essence, containing Socrates as its sole member, has Socrates as a constituent. This can make sense of the puzzling thesis of mutual containment in Huayan Buddhism. Recall the golden lion metaphor. In paragraph (b), Fazang claims that the golden lion and all its parts contain each other. With Fine's help, we can say that  $x$  contains  $y$  in the sense that  $y$  is a constituent of  $x$ 's essence. Even though the lion contains the lion nose as its mereological part, the essence of the lion nose can still have the whole lion as a constituent.

Moreover, Fine (1995: 275-276) endorses the essence-based account of ontological dependence, according to which  $x$  ontologically depends on  $y$  just in case  $y$  is a constituent of  $x$ 's essence. For

example, {Socrates} ontologically depends on Socrates because Socrates is a constituent of {Socrates}'s essence. Huayan Buddhists can use this account to unify the mutual identity, mutual containment, and interdependence of all things. Given that everything's essence has all things else as its constituents, everything ontologically depends on everything else.

In conclusion, Fine's work on essence and dependence facilitates a way to clarify and enrich the historical Huayan view. Nonetheless, while some of Fine's ideas improve Huayan Buddhism, others are irrelevant or even unfriendly. Notably, Fine's (1995: 283) restriction on two things constituting each other's essences does not align with the Huayan thesis of mutual identity. Hence, Huayan Buddhists should not accept every aspect of Fine's view without scrutiny. Moreover, by integrating Huayan Buddhism with Fine's work, I do not mean to suggest that Fazang, who lived many centuries ago, had the contemporary ideas of essence and dependence, as that would be anachronistic. Rather, my goal is to explore how certain contemporary resources can realize the potential of Huayan Buddhism.

## **5 Degrees of Ontological Dependence**

The Huayan thesis of interdependence entails that ontological dependence is pervasive. Even if two things appear to be separable, they depend on each other. The Huayan thesis of interdependence also entails that ontological dependence is symmetric. Any pair of things depend on each other. Recall the house metaphor in Fazang's *Treatise of the Five Teachings*. Although the rafter is seemingly separable from a decorative tile, Fazang insists on asserting that the rafter depends on the tile for being the very rafter. In general, the house and all its parts depend on each



other, as the house and its parts define what each other is. The Huayan thesis of interdependence is thereby in tension with our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence. We tend to believe that the rafter and a decorative tile can exist without each other. We also tend to believe that dependence is asymmetric. How can the house depend on its parts while the parts also depend on the house?

In the Huayan view, our intuitions are erroneous. But this does not mean Huayan Buddhists cannot accommodate our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence. To see this, let us first consider what ancient people tend to believe about our physical world. It seems that the rafter and a decorative tile do not attract each other. It also seems that the Earth attracts the house, but not vice versa. As a result, it is tempting to believe physical foundationalism, according to which:

- (1) Our physical world has different levels, including a foundational level.
- (2) Lower-level things attract higher-level things, but not vice versa.
- (3) Physical foundations are not attracted by anything.

In fact, in ancient Hindu mythology, our Earth is described as resting on four elephants, which in turn rest on a giant tortoise.

But now we know that the Earth does not rest on anything. It orbits around the Sun, which in turn orbits around the center of our galaxy. According to Newton's universal gravitation, a universal force is behind various physical phenomena. Even though the rafter does not seem to attract a decorative tile, gravitation is pervasive. The rafter and the tile gravitate toward each other. The

force is hard to notice because of the distance between them and the small amounts of mass they have. Similarly, even though the house does not seem to attract the Earth while the Earth attracts the house, gravitation is symmetric. The Earth and the house gravitate toward each other. The force is hard to notice for the Earth because the Earth is much more massive than the house. In general, different physical phenomena are due to different mass of physical bodies and distances between them. They are not due to having or lacking gravitation. Any two material bodies gravitate toward each other.

Huayan Buddhists can construct a thesis of interdependence that resembles Newton's universal gravitation. Ontological dependence is pervasive, even though the rafter does not seem to depend on a decorative tile. The rafter and the tile depend on each other to a small degree. This explains why we tend to overlook the mutual dependence between the two. Similarly, ontological dependence is symmetric, even though the house and its parts do not seem to depend on each other simultaneously. Perhaps, their mutual dependence is hard to notice because the house depends more on its parts than the other way around. In general, our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence are not due to having or lacking ontological dependence. Everything ontologically depends on everything else, but some things are more dependent than others. By appealing to different degrees of ontological dependence, Huayan Buddhists can reinterpret our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence.

It is worth clarifying that by constructing a thesis of interdependence that resembles universal gravitation, Huayan Buddhists are not committed to the truth of universal gravitation because the two theses have different subject matter. Even if it is false, universal gravitation is still able to

reinterpret our native observations about the physical world. This is how universal gravitation can help Huayan Buddhists—or any proponent of the thesis of interdependence—explain away our intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence.

It is also worth clarifying that varying degrees of ontological dependence are orthogonal to the thesis of interdependence. On the one hand, the thesis of interdependence does not entail that ontological dependence comes in degrees. A proponent of the thesis of interdependence is free to treat ontological dependence as a binary switch or a volume knob. On the other hand, acknowledging varying degrees of ontological dependence does not imply the interdependence of all things. Even if ontological dependence is more like a volume knob than a binary switch, the degree of dependence between two objects can be zero. Moreover, varying degrees of ontological dependence are not an *ad hoc* defense for the thesis of interdependence but can be independently motivated. It looks like, for example, Harry Potter ontologically depends more on his creator, J. K. Rowling, than his archenemy, Lord Voldemort; and he depends more on Lord Voldemort than his mentor, Professor Dumbledore, for being who he is. It also looks like a bagel hole depends more on the inner side of its host bagel that outskirts the hole's boundary than the outer side of its bagel.

Given that varying degrees of ontological dependence is orthogonal to the thesis of interdependence, should Huayan Buddhists acknowledge that ontological dependence comes in degrees? In addition to accommodating the intuitions against pervasive and symmetric dependence, the view aligns harmoniously with the renowned Huayan metaphor, Indra's net. To illustrate, consider a jewel within Indra's net, labeled as  $J_1$ . While  $J_1$  reflects all other jewels in the

net, these jewel images exhibit a diversity of sizes within  $J_1$ . The size of a jewel's image in  $J_1$  is contingent upon both the size of the jewel and its distance from  $J_1$ . Suppose the image of a jewel,  $J_2$ , is larger than the image of another jewel,  $J_3$ . This discrepancy could arise due to  $J_2$  being larger than  $J_3$ ,  $J_2$  being closer to  $J_1$ , or a combination of both factors.

How jewel images vary their sizes in Indra's net inspires a way to develop the idea that ontological dependence comes in degrees. Huayan Buddhists can take the entire reflected image in  $J_1$  to represent the essence of  $J_1$ ; and they can take the size of a particular jewel image in  $J_1$  to indicate the degree of  $J_1$ 's ontological dependence upon the jewel. Then they can develop the idea that how much  $J_1$  depends on a jewel is based on both the "size" of the jewel and its "distance" from  $J_1$ . For example, they can understand the "sizes" of things as degrees of being. According to McDaniel (2013), existence comes in degrees, and some things exist more than others. Perhaps Harry Potter ontologically depends more on J. K. Rowling than Lord Voldemort because Rowling exists more than Voldemort. Similarly, Huayan Buddhists can maintain the apparent asymmetry between some mutually dependent things, e.g., the house and its parts, by pointing out that one's degree of existence is higher than the other. Moreover, Huayan Buddhists can understand a thing's "distance" from another as how relevant the former is to the identity of the latter. Perhaps Harry Potter ontologically depends more on Voldemort than Dumbledore because Voldemort plays a more significant role in defining who Harry Potter is. Similarly, Huayan Buddhists can say that the rafter depends more on the house than a decorative tile because the house plays a more significant role in shaping the identity of the rafter.<sup>21</sup>

## **6 An Alternative to Metaphysical Foundationalism**

In sum, my contemporary construct of the Huayan thesis of interdependence includes two developments of the historical thesis. First, it incorporates the definitional account of essence and the essence-based account of dependence. With the help of these analytic resources, we see how the Huayan thesis of interdependence is clarified and unified with the mutual identity and mutual containment of all things. Second, to make sense of pervasive and symmetric dependence, I propose that ontological dependence comes in degrees. While my contemporary construct realizes the potential of Huayan Buddhism in the above two ways, how does it contribute to contemporary metaphysical debates?

The thesis of interdependence pictures reality like a reciprocal frame structure in which rods mutually support each other. It provides a viable alternative to metaphysical foundationalism, which pictures reality like a multi-level building:<sup>22</sup>

- (1) Reality is divided into multiple levels, including a foundational level.
- (2) Higher-level things depend on lower-level things, but not the other way around.
- (3) Things at the foundational level are independent.

Metaphysical foundationalism has a long history. The idea can be traced back to the Greek tradition, and it is dominant in Abhidharma Buddhism. Moreover, the view is often taken as the mainstream in contemporary literature, as shown in Cameron (2008), Schaffer (2010: 37), Bennett (2011, 2017), and Rosen (2012).

Metaphysical foundationalism is often motivated by some version of the regress argument. Roughly, since dependent things cannot come into existence by themselves, their existence requires independent things to serve as their foundations.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, as Bliss (2012), Barnes (2018), and Thompson (2016) correctly point out, the regress argument does not favor foundationalism. Even though a single dependent thing cannot come into existence by itself, a group of dependent things may support each other and come into existence together. This is just like in a reciprocal frame structure, even though each sloping rod cannot support itself, the rods support each other and give rise to the frame structure.

Metaphysical foundationalism has been challenged. Bliss (2013) and Priest (2009) argue that there might be infinitely many levels all the way down, while Thompson (2016) argues that there might just be exactly one level. All these challenges (1) reality is divided into multiple levels, including a foundational level. Moreover, Wilson (2014), Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015), and Barnes (2018) argue that there might be dependent foundational things. If they are right, then it is not the case that (3) things at the foundational level are independent.

My contemporary thesis of Huayan interdependence, especially degrees of ontological dependence, challenges (2) higher-level things depend on lower-level things, but not the other way around. In my framework, all things depend on each other to varying degrees, and even lower-level things may depend on higher-level things to a small extent. Nonetheless, one might raise an objection to my contemporary Huayan thesis of interdependence by arguing that it is simply a conceptual truth that lower-level things cannot depend on higher-level things. To reply, saying that  $x$  ontologically depends on  $y$  is just to say that  $x$ 's existence and identity rely upon  $y$ . This does not forbid lower-

level entities to depend on higher-level entities. In general, we should be aware that unorthodox alternatives can sound funny for bad reasons. Consider George Orwell's discussion of Newspeak in his *1984*. "Big Brother is ungood" sounds contradictory in Newspeak because the meaning of "good" ties to the meaning of "Big Brother." Once we separate the meanings of the two words—like what we do in English—we are able to utter a perfectly sensible sentence. It turns out that when we bundle various notions together, we run the risk of creating necessary connections that do not really exist. In light of this reasoning, I suspect that the conceptual link between dependence and levels might be an artifact of our understanding rather than an inherent reason for metaphysical foundationalism.

In addition to offering a viable alternative to metaphysical foundationalism, degrees of ontological dependence can reshape the landscape of first-order metaphysical debates. This is because ontological dependence plays a crucial role in framing such debates as whether wholes depend on their parts, if the mind depends on the body, whether properties depend on their bearers, and if sets depend on their members, among others. Traditionally, ontological dependence has been viewed as a binary switch—either a thing depends on another or not—but the account of degrees of dependence treats it as a scaled spectrum. This nuanced perspective opens up new possibilities for understanding the complexities of ontological relationships between various things by transcending the binary view.

By constructing a contemporary Huayan thesis of interdependence, I demonstrate how contemporary metaphysics and Huayan Buddhism can be mutually beneficial. I do not expect an analytic metaphysician would fully align with all aspects of Huayan Buddhist perspectives, nor

vice versa. However, by integrating resources from these diverse traditions, we can recognize how they complement each other. Together, they can advance metaphysics beyond the limitations of each individual tradition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese Buddhism, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is presumed as the first sermon of the Buddha after he attained enlightenment and is thus believed to provide the most comprehensive and profound Buddhist truth. For more information about the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, including its significance, see Buswell & Lopez 2014: 84 and Cleary 1993.

<sup>2</sup> According to Fang (2012: 36), the list of the five patriarchs was created by Zongmi.

<sup>3</sup> For more details regarding Fazang’s contribution to Huayan Buddhism, see Fang 2012: 22-39.

<sup>4</sup> For example, a description of Indra’s net appears in Book 25 *Ten Dedications* (Cleary 1993: 683). In Book 33 *Inconceivable Qualities of Buddhas*, Indra’s net is used to characterize the interrelationship between all things (Cleary 1993: 925).

<sup>5</sup> This treatise is also known as *Paragraphs on the Doctrine of Difference and Identity of the One Vehicle of Huayan* 華嚴一乘教義分齊章.

<sup>6</sup> Gethin 1998: 141.

<sup>7</sup> But Bennett (2017, Ch. 4) argues that the line between causal and ontological dependence is unclear.

<sup>8</sup> The Sanskrit word “svabhāva” does not have a perfect English translation. Its prefix “sva” has been translated to self, intrinsic, own, and inherent; and “bhava” has been translated to being, existence, nature, and essence. The precise meaning of the term “svabhāva” often depends on the philosophical context where the term is used. The notion is complex and often entangled with existence, nature, and essence.

<sup>9</sup> Although fundamental dharmas are ontological independent, they are still causally dependent and hence subject to dependent origination.

<sup>10</sup> For overviews of contemporary interpretations, see Siderits 2021, Chapter 8 and Westerhoff 2022,

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Section 2.

- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Chan 1963: 411 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 89.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Chan 1963: 412 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 90.
- <sup>13</sup> But Chang (1971: 136) interprets the Huayan thesis of mutual identity in terms of numerical identity.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Chan 1963: 411 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 89.
- <sup>15</sup> But Cook (1977, 1979) and Odin (1982) interpret the Huayan thesis of mutual identity in terms of emptiness, a universal principle shared by all things. According to them, two things are identical in the sense that they share the important mark of being empty of intrinsic nature.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Cook 1977: 78 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 82.
- <sup>17</sup> But Jones (2009: 205) reduces the Huayan notion of identity to modality: “one entity is another entity just if the presence of the one is both necessary and sufficient for the presence of the other.”
- <sup>18</sup> Cook 1977: 82. Cf. Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 82.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Cook 1977: 82 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 83.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Cook 1977: 79 and Tiwald & Van Norden 2014: 82.
- <sup>21</sup> Priest (2014) develops a similar interpretation of Huayan Buddhism, proposing that something can be more significant than another in shaping the identity of a particular thing. Suppose that  $x$  is more significant than  $y$  in defining  $z$ . For Priest, this is due to the fact that the relations between  $x$  and  $z$  is more significant than the relations between  $y$  and  $z$ . Moreover, Priest (2014: 173) observes the view is analogous to Newtonian theory of gravitation; Priest (2014: 181) observes the view is analogous to Indra’s net.
- <sup>22</sup> But Jones (2018, 2019b, 2022) develops a foundationalist interpretation of Huayan interdependence, according to which each object is aspectually foundational and aspectually dependent.
- <sup>23</sup> The argument can be traced back to Leibniz (1989: 85). Contemporary proponents of the argument include Cameron (2008), Schaffer (2010: 37), Tahko and Lowe (2016), and Bennett (2011, 2017).
- <sup>24</sup> Acknowledgement: Versions of this paper were presented at the Women in Metaphysics Workshop, the 2019 Mentoring Workshop for Pre-Tenure Women in Philosophy, Early Career Metaphysics

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Workshop, the 2017 APA Pacific, Graduate Women in Metaphysics Workshop, and the Humanities Center at Syracuse University. Many thanks to all involved for those helpful discussions, especially to Bradley Rettler and Bobby Bingle for their detailed comments on the paper at two of the above events. Thanks also to Fatema Amijee, Sara Bernstein, Shamik Dasgupta, Maegan Fairchild, Jade Fletcher, Nathaniel Goldberg, Mark Heller, Kris McDaniel, Elanor Taylor, Jennifer Wang, Jessica Wilson, and the anonymous referees for their extremely valuable comments on previous drafts of this paper. The journey in developing this paper has been a lengthy one. While I regrettably cannot recall all those to whom I owe gratitude, I extend my sincere apologies for any inadvertent omissions.