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ABSTRACT
Theorists who advocate worldly (metaphysical or ontological) indeterminacy—the idea that the world itself is indeterminate in one or more respects—should address how we understand the signifying nature and function of language in light of worldly indeterminacy. I first attend to Sengzhao and Jizang, two leading thinkers in Chinese Sanlun Buddhism, to reconstruct a Chinese Madhyamaka notion of ontic indeterminacy. Then, I draw on the thinkers' views to propose a provisional (non-definitive) understanding of the nature and use of language. Under this understanding, an expression signifying a thing is provisional in that the expression connotes no determinate feature of the thing.

1. Prologue

Especially over the past twenty years, the phenomenon of indeterminacy has received considerable attention in analytic philosophy. While the dominant approach treats indeterminacy as semantic in nature in that putative cases of indeterminacy are held to be rooted in semantic indecision or in how we represent the world, a number of theorists have embraced metaphysical or worldly indeterminacy by contending that the world itself is indeterminate in one or more respects.[1] This trend is not without challenges from within the analytic tradition. In addition, an account of the signifying nature and function of language in light of worldly indeterminacy seems absent in the analytic discussion. In this short paper, I exploit Chinese Madhyamaka thought to offer such an account.

Chinese Madhyamaka developed from Indian Madhyamaka, a prominent philosophical school of Buddhism, which was reputed to have been founded by Nāgārjuna (c. 150−250 CE). Grounded in the idea that things in the world are dependently originated, Nāgārjuna maintained that all things have no independent and invariable nature—that is, no intrinsic

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[1] For example, Akiba (2004), Barnes and Cameron (2009), Barnes and Williams (2011), Wilson (2013), and Torza (2017). Rosen and Smith (2004) argue for the coherence and intelligibility of worldly indeterminacy. I include both ontic and metaphysical indeterminacy under the heading of worldly indeterminacy. Over the last century, attention has generally focused on vagueness instead of indeterminacy, and now analytic philosophers may use 'vague' and 'indeterminate' interchangeably.

nature (Skt. *svabhāva*). This lack of intrinsic nature is neatly encapsulated in the Madhyamaka catchphrase 'All things are *empty*'. Here, the relationship of dependence includes not only sequential causal relations and simultaneous reciprocal relations of dependence, but also relations of dependence on conceptualization. To the extent that things depend on conceptualization for their existence, the denial of intrinsic nature in them amounts to a denial of the metaphysical realist view that things exist independently of what we think about them.

The study in China of translations of several Indian Madhyamaka treatises, together with those of various Prajñāpāramitā sutras, gave rise to Chinese Madhyamaka, which includes the Sanlun and Tiantai traditions. My focus herein is on the Sanlun tradition, especially its two leading thinkers, Sengzhao (374−414) and Jizang (549−623). The two thinkers follow Indian Madhyamaka in taking all things to be dependently originated and empty. However, because of translational and, possibly, cultural factors, they tend to think that for things to be empty is for them to be devoid of determinate nature (Chin. *dingxing*) and determinate form (*dingxiang*). The Madhyamaka catchphrase would then mean that all things are indeterminate with respect to their nature and form or, simply, that all things are ontically (ontologically) indeterminate.

This recognition of ontic indeterminacy demands that we understand and use words in a particular way to accommodate the indeterminateness of things. Here I draw on Sengzhao's and Jizang's views to suggest that we understand language as *provisional* (non-definitive). That is, typically, a linguistic expression is such that using it to signify a thing does not predicate of that thing any determinate feature that would make the thing ontically determinate with respect to a certain way it is. The principal objective of this paper is to propose that we understand language as provisional and show that understanding language this way is coherent and intelligible.

Notably, my approach in much of this paper is that of rational reconstruction: I employ contemporary concepts to interpret the Madhyamaka thinkers' texts in a coherent and philosophically meaningful way that is accessible to the contemporary philosophical reader. I do not intend to offer a wholly accurate reading of the texts, and the ideas I discuss may not always be acceptable to the thinkers. Still, my reconstruction, being based on the texts, is largely in tune with the Madhyamaka way of thinking.

Section 2 attends to Sengzhao's and Jizang's works to succinctly reconstruct a Chinese Madhyamaka notion of ontic indeterminacy. Section 3 employs the thinkers' views to present the provisional understanding of the nature and use of language and shows the coherence and intelligibility of this understanding. Section 4 concludes.

2. Ontic Indeterminacy

According to Sengzhao, things in the world are dependently originated, empty, and neither existent nor nonexistent. They are not existent because they are not intrinsically or ultimately existent; they are not nonexistent because they look substantial and are not mere nothings. To the extent that it is sensible to view things as not existent, they are not determinately existent; similarly, as not nonexistent, they are not determinately nonexistent. In addition, Sengzhao implies that interdependent things are empty because they are indeterminate with respect to their nature and form.[2]

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[2] Sengzhao 2016b: 152c2−18 (page 152, column c, lines 2−18); Sengzhao 2016a: 377a7−10, 389b18−22. The aim of this section is to reconstruct a Chinese Madhyamaka notion of ontic indeterminacy and not to argue for its validity. So, I shall not here defend the Madhyamaka thinkers' views.

The following passage indicates that, for Sengzhao, a given thing does not itself legislate what specific expression must be used to describe it such that no description of the thing can definitively represent the way it is:[3]

> The Middle Treatise says that things are neither this nor that. Yet one person takes this thing to be this and that thing to be that, while another takes this thing to be that and that thing to be this. This and that thing are not determined conclusively by one word ['this' or 'that'], but deluded people think that they must be so. … Therefore, we know that the myriad things are not [intrinsically] real and have for long been provisional designations (*jiahao*). (Sengzhao 2016b: 152c23–28)

Here the determination of a thing by demonstratives, such as 'this' and 'that', is made relative to the language user's location and perhaps even their conceptual perspective. Presumably, Sengzhao applies this observation to referring expressions that people conventionally think have a fixed reference. He perhaps regards demonstratives as primordial among all referring expressions and as such they can represent other expressions. In any case, we can draw from the passage the idea that, whereas people may believe that an expression that is suited to expressing a thing determines the way the thing is conclusively,[4] the determination is always relative to a certain perspective and so fails to be conclusive.

Sengzhao's view, which originated from the Prajñāpāramitā sutras, that the myriad things are provisional designations probably highlights that things do not exist completely independent of our conceptual and linguistic contributions (recall Nāgārjuna's putative denial of metaphysical realism). It is because of our applying a certain concept or expression to a thing that the thing figures as such-and-such a thing. Significantly, the passage suggests that a thing does not itself legislate what specific concept or expression must be used to represent it. This means that the thing is originally indeterminate, but our deployment of concepts or expressions leads to its determination such that we provide the thing a specific identity and even falsely consider it determinately such-and-such. The passage also indicates that we can construe the indeterminateness of things in terms of linguistic indeterminability.

Jizang explicitly states that the myriad things are empty because they are devoid of determinate nature and form. If things are determinately such-and-such, they would be independent of and discrete from each other. Consequently, their determinateness could not properly explain the interdependence and interrelatedness of things that Indian Madhyamaka acknowledges (Jizang 2016b: 868a12–15; 2016e: 27c3–14). He recognizes that a given thing is originally neither *P* nor not-*P* but sentient beings take it to be *P* or not-*P* through their conceptual imputations, which may vary from one sentient being to another, depending on their conceptual perspectives and cognitive mechanisms. For instance, an ordinary person may consider a physical thing as existent; but a Buddhist sage may consider the thing as empty or not-existent to the extent that the thing is itself indeterminate with respect to its existence. Moreover, a greedy person, a practicing yogi, someone with supernatural powers, an animal, a fly, and a ghost may each determine the same thing to possess

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[3] The saying, which is ascribed to *The Middle Treatise*, Kumārajīva's (344–413) translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and a commentary by Piṅgala, probably refers to a line in Piṅgala's commentary (see Nāgārjuna 2016: 30c8) to the effect that the way things really are has neither this nor that. Incidentally, translations from Chinese sources are my own.

[4] By 'conclusively' I imply non-relatively and exclusively: I use 'conclusively', 'definitively', and 'determinately' interchangeably.

different natures, instantiate different properties, possess different forms, and have different ontic statuses.[5] Thus, someone who accepts Jizang's view may affirm the stronger thesis that all concrete things are ontically indeterminate with respect to the concrete ways they are, such as their existence, nature, property, form, and ontic status.

In one of his works, Jizang interprets the term 'determinate nature' in light of a determinate understanding of things. For example, if one, employing the concept 'existent', understands the thing X as determinately existent, one ascribes to X the determinate nature of existence; if one, employing the concept 'nonexistent', understands X as determinately nonexistent, one ascribes to X the determinate nature of nonexistence (Jizang 2016d: 204c23−205a1). Jizang's interpretation indicates that one can construe the indeterminateness of things in terms of conceptual indeterminability.

Drawing on Sengzhao's and Jizang's views, we can characterize the ontic indeterminateness of things as follows: for a thing X to be ontically indeterminate at time t with respect to the way it is, is for X to be such that no concept or expression can be conclusively applied to X at t and definitively represent the way it is.[6] Here 'to represent a way X is' means to determine X as containing a certain feature. The term 'feature', when used to characterize a thing, signifies the particular ways the thing can be. Thus, for X to be ontically indeterminate is also for X *not* to be conclusively determinable with respect to the way it is.

We have seen that an indeterminate thing is originally neither P nor not-P and cannot be conclusively determined as (determinately) such-and-such. However, if we already know this, we can, relative to this or that conceptual perspective, determine the thing *provisionally* as such-and-such. Such determinations are provisional in the sense that, being relativized to different perspectives, they are not conclusive and do not predicate of the thing any determinate feature that would make it conclusively determinable.[7] Suppose—to use Wilson's (2013) example merely for illustrative purposes—that an iridescent hummingbird feather is itself indeterminate with respect to its colour property (red, blue, etc.). We can say that it is false to state that the feather is determinately red, that it is determinately not red, and so on. Yet, it is true to state that the feather is provisionally red, that it is provisionally not red, and so forth. These true statements result from the provisional determination of the feather as red (relative to one perspective), as not red (relative to another), and so forth. Clearly, none of these determinations is conclusive, and none excludes the other determinations.

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[5] Jizang 2016b: 897a14−29. Jizang (2016b: 894c14) writes: 'A physical thing is originally neither existent nor nonexistent, yet [sentient beings] take it to be existent or nonexistent'.

[6] Cf. Ho 2020. In so far as this characterization is expressed mainly in semantic terms, one may think that the relevant indeterminacy is merely rooted in how we represent the world. Nevertheless, the indeterminacy is not solely semantic but pertains to how the world is. I have in Ho 2023 explained this point in some detail and shall not repeat it here. But I note that analytic philosophers who advocate worldly indeterminacy tend to think that worldly and semantic indeterminacy are not exclusive. Cf. Barnes's remark on the mismatch between words and the world: 'It's coherent to think that vagueness is always such a mismatch, but that in cases of metaphysical vagueness, the direction of explanation for the mismatch is from world to words, rather than from words to world' (2010: 955).

[7] Cf. Jizang 2016e: 42a29−b3. In what follows I assume the principle of bivalence, that every meaningful statement is either true or false. Moreover, the words 'true' and 'false' do not respectively express determinate truth and determinate falsity.

3. The Provisionality of Language

From a Madhyamaka perspective, language is dependently originated, empty, and thereby not intrinsically real. From a Chinese Madhyamaka perspective, language (or speech) is ontically indeterminate with respect to its nature.[8] Given the above notion of ontic indeterminacy, in this section I draw on Sengzhao's and Jizang's views to propose an understanding of the nature and use of language as provisional and show the coherence and intelligibility of this understanding. The primary point of the understanding is that, typically, a linguistic expression is such that in using it to signify a thing, one does not predicate of that thing any determinate feature.

As noted in section 2, if X is ontically indeterminate with respect to the way it is, although we cannot determine it as determinately such-and-such, we can determine it provisionally as this or that. Such determinations are provisional in the sense that, being relativized to different perspectives, they are not conclusive and do not predicate any determinate feature of X. Relatedly, we should treat expressions used to express X or its determinations as provisional in the sense that such expressions do not connote determinate features of X. Assuming the aforesaid thesis that all concrete things are ontically indeterminate with respect to the ways they are,[9] I think that we can coherently and meaningfully understand language as provisional in this sense. Exceptions include words such as 'determinate', 'definitively', and 'conclusively' as well as words that are artificially coined to express supposed determinate features of things. Yet when these words are used positively to describe things, the resultant descriptions would fail to correctly represent the ways things are.

Significantly, we can also recognize the provisionality of language without assuming the above thesis by considering the interdependence of linguistic expressions. Nagel once wrote: 'Every concept that we have contains potentially the idea of its own complement—the idea of what the concept doesn't apply to' (1986: 97). While I am in broad agreement with Nagel's claim, our rationales may differ. So, I present mine here for clarity. A referring concept or expression marks out and identifies the thing (or things) it is applied to only if it differentiates the thing from other things to which the concept or expression does not conventionally apply but to which its complementary concept or expression does. These other things, while being set aside, serve to bring the marked-out thing into relief, so they must be known implicitly. In consequence, the referring concept or expression must refer implicitly or indirectly to these other things, and this it does through depending on, and containing potentially, its complementary concept or expression, which refers explicitly and directly to the things. This observation applies to all concepts, so every concept can be said to contain potentially the concept of what it does not conventionally apply to.

Complementary expressions, such as 'cause' and 'effect', 'speech' and 'silence', and 'existent' and 'nonexistent', are then interdependent and potentially interimplicative. Given any referring word 'P', we can always coin a word, say, 'non-P' to form a codependent pair of expressions. In light of their codependence and potential

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[8] Jizang 2016c: 126b17−24. One may account for the indeterminacy of referring words by saying that the words are vague in meaning and reference. However, this pertains to the semantic indeterminacy of language and is not my concern here.

[9] Jizang (2016a: 391b19−20) appears to say that one must not use expressions to connote determinate forms of things. I argue in Ho 2023 that there is a genuine metaphysical possibility of the world's being indeterminate in all respects, so I here assume the thesis to be coherent and intelligible.

interimplication, we cannot introduce one expression without implicitly introducing its complementary.

Let us say that if we understand language as *definitive*, using a linguistic expression to signify a thing predicates, of that thing, some determinate feature that makes the thing determinate with respect to a certain way it is. Under such an understanding, applying a referring expression to X leads us to represent X as determinately—non-relatively and exclusively—such-and-such, as expressed by the expression. Here, referring expressions are treated independently from each other. Yet because words such as 'P' and 'non-P' are in fact codependent, applying 'P' to X is dependent on applying 'non-P' to something else, say, non-X. Then, X's being the referent of 'P' is dependent on, and relative to, non-X's being the referent of 'non-P'.[10] Consequently, to apply 'P' to X can mean to represent X as P as well as to represent such an X as being dependent on, and relative to, non-X qua the referent of 'non-P' such that we should not represent X as non-relatively P. In addition, given the potential interimplication of 'P' and 'non-P', X could be said to be potentially and implicitly a referent of 'non-P' such that we should not represent X as exclusively P. Thus, we recognize that applying an expression to X should not in general lead us to represent X as determinately such-and-such, that the expression typically connotes no determinate feature of X. This spells the provisionality of language.

This reasoning may not very convincing. However, I am not arguing that in light of the codependence and potential interimplication of complementary expressions, we ought to regard all things as ontically indeterminate.[11] Instead, the reasoning is to show that we typically should not take linguistic expressions to represent their referents as determinate. Moreover, as stated above, my objective is to show the coherence and intelligibility of the provisional understanding of language but not its validity.

Nevertheless, there might be problems of incoherence. Since the words 'determinate' and 'indeterminate' form a codependent pair of expressions, to apply 'indeterminate' to X can mean to represent X as being dependent on, and relative to, some determinate non-X such that we should not represent X as determinately indeterminate. In response, as said in a previous footnote, the relation of dependence concerned does not require the existence of both relata. So, while we can readily acknowledge the existence of determinate things, it is not necessary that we do so. Furthermore, we saw in section 2 that for X to be ontically indeterminate is for it not to be conclusively determinable with respect to the way it is. This means that X can be indeterminate and also not conclusively determinable as indeterminate. Therefore, we are coherently *not* required to represent X as determinately indeterminate. It is easy to see that this non-requirement resonates with, rather than undermines, the indeterminateness of things.[12]

That language can be understood and used provisionally should be readily intelligible. Language can proceed without its users knowing which thing truly exists and

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[10] For instance, if the words 'father' and 'child' are codependent, a person's being the referent of 'father' is dependent on, and relative to, another person's being the referent of 'child.' Note that this relation of dependence does not require the existence of both relata. If a man depends on his son for being a father, this dependence continues even when the son is dead.

[11] The reasoning partially draws on Jizang (2016b: 891c20–892a8), but there he appears to argue for the indeterminateness of things on the basis of the codependence of complementary concepts.

[12] Cf. Jizang 2016a: 392a3–8. See the discussion below.

which does not. That is, we can use words meaningfully to signify their referents without assuming that the referents exist. We can speak meaningfully of fictional objects, such as Pegasus and Sherlock Holmes, and a compositional nihilist, for whom nothing composite exists, can coherently use words such as 'tree' or 'horse' to signify composite things.[13] If one wishes, one can use expressions such as 'there exists' to indicate the existence of something. Similarly, it makes sense to hold that we can use words meaningfully without having to posit determinate features of their referents. If one wishes, one can use expressions such as 'determinate' to indicate the determinateness of something. Thus, a given thing can be determinate in many or all ways that it is, but the point is that expressions for the thing generally do not carry the burden of connoting its determinateness.

For one who adopts a definitive understanding of language, we can reasonably prefix a determinacy operator, say, 'determinately' or 'it is determinate that', to every true statement. In addition, something that is reasonably expressible by the word 'existent' is determinately existent, while something that is expressible by 'not-existent' is determinately not-existent. Consequently, if anyone asserts that X is existent and not-existent, this assertion will amount to a contradiction.

Nonetheless, we are not obliged to embrace this understanding. We can treat words for X as provisional such that their use predicates no determinate feature of X. A thing that is provisionally expressed by 'existent' does not contain the determinate feature of being existent, is not determinately existent, and may be provisionally expressed by 'nonexistent' or 'not-existent'. The law of noncontradiction states that nothing can be both P and not-P all over in the same way at the same time. If one understands and uses the words 'existent' and 'not-existent' provisionally such that X is existent relative to one perspective and not-existent relative to another, X is not both existent and not-existent in the same way. One can then assert that X is both existent and not-existent without violating the law. Yet if one were to assert both 'X is determinately existent' and 'X is determinately not-existent', one would indeed assert a contradiction.

Although we can understand and use words provisionally, people may still be disposed to think that words connote some determinate feature of their referents. To thwart this tendency, we can further re-conceptualise how predicate words and negative expressions function.

Consider, first, the signifying function of predicate words. In using such words, people may think that they function by positively representing their referents, which might induce one to take the words to connote determinate features of the referents. However, we can understand the function differently: predicates negatively differentiate their intended referents from what the referents are not. We can say, for example, that the provisional use of the predicate 'existent' in referring to X is to show that X is not nonexistent (to differentiate X from nonexistent things), while the provisional use of 'nonexistent' is to show that X is not existent (to differentiate X from existent things).[14] Although this understanding is not necessary for the meaningful use of predicate words, it could help to curb the tendency to ascribe determinate features to things.

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[13] Sengzhao (2016b: 152a24−26) implies that the meaningfulness of a referring word does not depend on its referring to some extra-linguistic reality. So, 'horse' and 'unicorn' are both meaningful even though the latter's referent, unlike the former's, is unreal.
[14] Sengzhao 2016b: 152c12−14, 159b11. See also Jizang 2016e: 42a25−28.

Next, let us distinguish these two kinds of negation: implicative negation and non-implicative negation. If we treat the sentence S, 'X is not-P', as involving an implicative negation, then, while denying P of X, S also implies the affirmation of some other feature (say, non-P) of X. One's assertion of S commits one to accepting that feature of X. By contrast, if we treat S as involving a nonimplicative negation, it simply negates any substantial relation between X and P without predicating any feature of X.[15]

If we regard a given negation as implicative, we may tend to predicate some determinate feature of the referent. For instance, if we construe the negative expression 'not-existent' as expressing an implicative negation, we may take the sentence 'X is not-existent' to ascribe the determinate feature of nonexistence to X. To thwart this tendency, we can construe the expression as expressing a nonimplicative negation. Then, the sentence conveys that X is *not* existent (negating any substantial relation between X and existence) but not that X *is* nonexistent (predicating of X the feature of nonexistence). Likewise, we can construe the negative expression 'indeterminate' as expressing a nonimplicative negation such that we would not take the sentence 'X is indeterminate' to suggest that X is determinately indeterminate. Thus, to curb the tendency to ascribe determinate features to things, while the construal is not necessary, it is advisable to construe a negative expression as expressing a nonimplicative negation.

4. Conclusion

In the foregoing, I first reconstructed a Chinese Madhyamaka notion of ontic indeterminacy. Then, I proposed understanding the signifying nature and function of language as being provisional and showed that this understanding is coherent and intelligible. Under the understanding, in general an expression that signifies a thing is provisional in that the expression connotes no determinate feature of the thing. Although I did not demonstrate the correctness of this provisional understanding of language, I think that theorists of worldly indeterminacy should consider adopting it. After all, if we yield unconditionally to the definitive understanding of language such that we can naturally prefix a determinacy operator to true statements, the indeterminateness of the world would be substantially diminished. Moreover, appealing to the provisionality of language may help the theorists to respond to some challenges to worldly indeterminacy, but addressing this issue will be the subject of a future work.

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[15] This distinction between implicative and non-implicative negation, which is widely recognized among Indian philosophers, is similar to that between choice and exclusion negation in analytic philosophy. For Sengzhao (2016b: 156b25−27) and Jizang (2016d: 185b28−c3), Madhyamaka emphasizes nonimplicative negation.

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