CHAPTER TEN

MEANING AND REALITY: A CROSS-TRADITIONAL ENCOUNTER

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Different views on the relation between *phenomenal* reality, the world as we consciously experience it, and *noumenal* reality, the world as it is independent from an experiencing subject, have different implications for a collection of interrelated issues of *meaning and reality* including aspects of metaphysics, the philosophy of language, and philosophical methodology. Exploring some of these implications, this paper compares and brings together analytic, continental, and Buddhist approaches, focusing on relevant aspects of the philosophy of Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Dharmakīrti, and Dōgen. Prima facie, these philosophers have little in common, and indeed the differences are vast. Even in case of the two Western thinkers there is a fundamental difference between Davidson’s anti-dualist identification of phenomenal, experienced reality with the noumenal, real, external world on the one hand, and the bracketing or elimination of noumenal reality at the base of Derrida’s thought on the other, which lead to radically different ideas with regards to (the possibility and nature of) objectivity and our linguistic access to the real/external/noumenal world. Nevertheless, there are important similarities between Dharmakīrti’s theory of *apoha* and Davidson’s and Derrida’s theories of *triangulation* and *différance* respectively, and these similarities can be exploited to bridge some of the differences and attempt a constructive engagement. After briefly introducing analytic and continental approaches to meaning and reality (and Davidson’s and Derrida’s theories in particular) in section 2, and some relevant Buddhist approaches (including Dharmakīrti’s and Dōgen’s) in section 3, it will be argued in section 4 that Davidson’s theory of triangulation as a connection between the noumenal and the phenomenal needs Dharmakīrti’s theory of *apoha* as a complement, and that *apoha* is best understood through Derrida’s *différance* in turn. A further investigation into the implications of the resulting triangulation-*différance-*apoha* integration in section 5 (and the concluding section 6) leads to a view on
meaning and reality similar to the perspectivism advocated by the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Dōgen: the phenomenal is (mostly) necessarily noumenally real, but partial, one-sided, or incomplete.

Depicting a tradition of fruitless speculation about what lies beyond the horizon of experience, Kant wrote in the preface of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787) that metaphysics is like “a battlefield seemingly intended for practicing one’s skills in play-fight, on which no combatant was ever able to conquer even the smallest bit of ground and to base permanent possession on victory.”¹ Ironically, Kant’s *Critique* spawned another century of speculative metaphysics, reaching its apex in the neo-Hegelian absolute idealism of Bradley *cum suis*, which could only be followed by its antithesis: the unrelenting rejection of metaphysics in early analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, despite the nineteenth century idealist appropriation of parts of Kant’s philosophy and its coloring of early twentieth century Kant interpretation, Kant’s influence on modern philosophy can hardly be overstated.² Kant is often considered to be the last common ancestor of analytic and continental philosophy, and much of the difference between those traditions can be better understood against the background of their respective treatments of the shared Kantian heritage. (Which should not be understood as implying that this fully explains those differences.) The key feature of Kant’s thought is his metaphysical dualism. Kant distinguished phenomenal appearances from noumenal things-in-themselves.³ The phenomenal is the world as we (consciously) experience it, and the noumenal is the world as it “really” is, independent from any experiencing subject. By definition, all experience is phenomenal, and the noumenal is beyond experience, and therefore, metaphysical speculation

¹ (...) daß sie vielmehr ein Kampfplatz ist, der ganz eigentlich dazu bestimmt zu sein scheint, seine Kräfte im Spielgefechte zu üben, auf dem noch niemals irgend ein Fechter sich auch den kleinsten Platz hat erkämpfen und auf seinen Sieg einen dauerhaften Besitz gründen können. (Bxv)

Except where noted otherwise, all translations in this paper are my own. The original fragments will be given in footnotes.

² For a brief overview of the reception and interpretation of Kant’s thought in the 19th and 20th century, see Gardner (1999), ch. 10.

³ Whether this should be understood as a distinction of worlds (or realities) or aspects (of the same world/reality) is not entirely clear, however, and the last decades saw the growth of a sizable literature on this question.