

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Towards a Buddhist theism

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(Received 22 July 2022; revised 20 October 2022; accepted 21 October 2022;
first published online 5 December 2022)

Abstract

My claim in this article is that the thesis that Buddhism has no God, insofar as it is taken to apply to Buddhism universally, is false. I defend this claim by interpreting a central text in East-Asian Buddhism – *The Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* – through the lenses of perfect being theology (PBT), a research programme in philosophy of religion that attempts to provide a description of God through a two-step process: (1) defining God in terms of maximal greatness; (2) inferring the properties or attributes that God must have in virtue of satisfying the definition. My argument comprises two steps. First, I argue that, since PBT is a method for providing a *description* of God starting from a *definition* of God, any text that contains a PBT *ipso facto* contains a notion of God. Second, I argue through textual evidence that *The Awakening* articulates a PBT, concluding that it contains a notion of God. Since the method of PBT leaves open what descriptions are to be inferred, my argument allows me to conclude that a text contains a notion of God without previously committing to any particular conception of the divine, which makes it particularly versatile and powerful.

Keywords: Buddhism; God; One Mind; perfect being theology; suchness

Introduction

Among the world's religions, Buddhism is often regarded as special, if a religion at all. One reason that people often advance in favour of its exceptionality is what they take to be the Buddhist attitude towards God: in a word, denial. Buddhism is often characterized as an *atheistic* religion. This, of course, allegedly puts Buddhism in stark contrast with the major religious traditions of the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact, for those of us who have been educated in a broadly Western setting, religion, if not the same as belief in God, seems at least to entail it. Buddhism is different, we are told.

In this article, I will try to convince you that this claim, insofar as it is taken as applying to Buddhism universally, is false. In support of my claim I will utilize a central East Asian Buddhist text, the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (大乘起信論 *Dasheng qixin lun*). I will show that the *Awakening* contains a notion of God by using the method of perfect being theology, an influential research programme in philosophy of religion, arguing that since the *Awakening* contains a notion of God as defined by this method the general claim that Buddhism is atheistic is false.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section provides examples of the widespread claim that Buddhism is universally atheistic and sets my motivation for writing the article. The second section introduces the tradition of perfect being theology and explains how I will use its method to formulate my argument. Then, the third section turns to the interpretation of the text and is divided into two parts: in the first, I provide an interpretation of the metaphysical picture of the *Awakening*, while in the second, I argue that the *Awakening* contains a form of theism. Finally, I address two objections in the fourth section – one directed at my use of perfect being theology and one at my interpretation of the text – and give a brief conclusion in the fifth section.

Buddhism: a religion without God?

It is very common among scholars of Buddhism to unequivocally deny that Buddhism has a God. To achieve a better understanding of the content of this claim, let's consider some notable instances of it:

Buddhists have no objection to the existence of the Hindu gods, although they deny completely the existence of God as spoken of in e.g. orthodox Christianity, understood as the omnipotent, omniscient, all-good, and primordially existent creator deity, who can be thought of as in some sense a person. (Williams (2000), 4)

If we expect all religions to be theistic, then Buddhism might not qualify as a religion. [. . .] Indeed Buddhism explicitly denies that there is such a thing as the God recognized by Western monotheism, that is, an eternal, all-powerful and all-perfect creator. To most people this denial is tantamount to atheism. So if we are to count Buddhism as a religion, it will have to make sense to say there can be atheistic religions. (Siderits (2007), 7–8)

Most people would say that religion has something to do with belief in God. God, in turn, is understood as a Supreme Being who created the world and the creatures in it. [. . .] If belief in God in this sense is the essence of religion, then Buddhism cannot be a religion. Buddhism holds no such belief and, on the contrary, denies the existence of a creator god. (Keown (2013), 3–4)

Claims like these seem to have acquired the status of basic remarks that Buddhist scholars make at the beginning of their introductory university courses.¹ But what exactly are they saying is absent in Buddhism? As you can see, their claim is not that Buddhism is incompatible with the existence of deities like the ones we find in polytheistic religions, such as Ganesha in India or Apollo in ancient Greece. In fact, in its expansion around the world, Buddhism has often absorbed pre-existing religious beliefs – including beliefs regarding the existence of deities – reinterpreting them within its framework rather than rejecting them. The claim they make is, instead, that Buddhism is incompatible with a monotheistic God seen as a supreme or absolute being.

Although there are exceptions,² the claim that scholars are making is not the circumscribed claim that a certain set of Buddhist thinkers or traditions are atheists – which would be very plausible³ – but the claim that *all* Buddhist doctrines are. My argument in this article is directed against this general claim. As I said, I will argue that such a claim is false by showing that the *Awakening* – which is a central text in East Asian Buddhism that greatly influenced traditions such as Huayan (see Van Norden and Jones 2019) and Shingon (see Hakeda (1972)) – does advocate for a form of theism. To formulate my argument, I will need the tools of perfect being theology, so let me explain its method.

Perfect being theology

Perfect being theology (henceforth, PBT) is a research programme in the philosophy of religion that aims at obtaining a better understanding of God's nature. Traditionally, it has been traced back to the work of Anselm of Canterbury in the *Proslogion*, but more recently it has been shown that it goes back at least to Plato (Leftow (2011)) and that all the elements of Anselm's PBT were already present in Augustine's work (Wierenga (2011)). Historical notes aside, the gist of PBT is its method, which can be summarized in two steps.

First, we provide a definition of God that captures the idea of God's perfection. Some examples are 'something than which no greater can be thought' (Anselm (1979), 117), 'the greatest possible being' (Morris (1984), 177), and 'the greatest metaphysically possible being' (Nagasawa (2017), 9). Second, we do some reverse engineering to infer the properties or attributes⁴ that God must have in virtue of satisfying the definition, which are often called 'great-making properties'. Examples of properties commonly identified as great-making properties are omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, but of course the list is much longer, including properties like simplicity, aseity, eternity, personhood, omnipresence, and others.

We should be careful to distinguish what is assumed by the method of PBT from what it leaves open. In my view, the perfect being theologian is committed (1) to define God in terms of maximal greatness and (2) to use the proposed definition to infer God's attributes (i.e. great-making properties). I take both points to be widely accepted by perfect being theologians. However, *how* exactly maximal greatness is to be interpreted and, relatedly, *what* great-making properties follow from the definition – and consequently also what form of theism one will get – will vary from one author to another.⁵ For example, Nagasawa (2016, 92–93) differentiates between a way of interpreting God's greatness in terms of the extent to which God possesses positive qualities from a way of interpreting God's greatness in terms of the extent to which God is encompassing, and on the basis of the second understanding concludes that, if that understanding is correct, God is not only maximally good (which is a widely accepted view) but also maximally evil (*ibid.*, 102) – a highly controversial claim to say the least. This shows how perfect being theologians can have massively different views about God's properties. In fact, this openness of perfect being theology is precisely what makes it particularly attractive, for while it assumes enough to provide terrain for genuine disagreement among perfect being theologians, it is also open enough to be used by people who want to argue for different forms of theism.⁶

In what follows, I will use PBT as a tool to identify whether a particular text or doctrine (in this case, the *Awakening*) contains a notion of God. The idea is that if a text contains the method of PBT, that is, if a text describes something as maximally great and explains maximal greatness in terms of a set of great-making properties, then the text, *by definition*, contains a concept of God. In fact, since PBT *defines* God in terms of maximal greatness, we could say that if in a text there is something that is maximally great, there is God. However, if a description of something as maximally great were the only piece of evidence we had, it would be hard to exclude the possibility that the text at issue uses the notion of maximal greatness in a merely hyperbolic or poetic way, and so in a way that wouldn't be relevant for the perfect being theologian. The presence of an explanation of maximal greatness in terms of great-making properties, however, constitutes a form of control for this risk, the reason being that if the notion of maximal greatness were used for merely stylistic reasons it would not be possible to infer great-making properties from it.

It should be pointed out that attempts to identify concepts of God in Mahāyāna Buddhism already exist in the literature. Some work has been done in elaborating

connections between Zen Buddhism and Whiteheadian Process Theism (Gu (2002), (2005)) – the view according to which it is a fundamental attribute of God to be involved in the temporal process – and various Buddhist schools in China, Japan, and Tibet have been described as forms of pantheism (Sueki (1996), 113; Rambelli (2013), xvii; Duckworth (2015)) – the view that God and the universe are, in some sense, identical – or panentheism (Samuel (2013)) – the view that the universe is not ontologically separate from God but God is greater than the universe. More recently, McNabb and Baldwin (2022) have even argued that the Buddhist doctrine that all phenomena are impermanent, interdependent, and lack intrinsic nature is compatible with a commitment to the God of Classical Theism, that is, the form of monotheism that insists on God’s simplicity and metaphysical independence from creation (cf. Rooney (2021)).

The task I set for myself in this article is, however, more ambitious. What all the mentioned attempts to identify a God in Buddhism have in common is that they focus on a rather specific concept of the divine (the God of process theism, classical theism, pantheism, or panentheism). However, as emerges from the above discussion, the advantage of using PBT is that it makes it possible to conclude that a specific text or doctrine has a God without previously committing to any particular conception of the divine because what properties are to be inferred from the definition is left open by the method.

In other words, by defining God in terms of maximal greatness, PBT assumes enough to make the discovery that a text contains a concept of God genuinely interesting. (Since the scholars quoted in the first section claim that Buddhism doesn’t have a God understood as a supreme or absolute being, then if the *Awakening* contains a notion of God in the sense defined by the perfect being theologian, the claim they make would be false.) On the other hand, the method assumes little enough to avoid a principled commitment to any particular conception of God, as whether the definition leads to classical theism, process theism, pantheism, panentheism, or something else will depend on how one spells out maximal greatness and on what properties one infers from the definition. This makes PBT a particularly powerful and versatile tool to argue that the *Awakening* contains a notion of God, which is what I will do in the next section.

Interpreting the *Awakening*

It is finally time to turn to our text. The *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* is a short but very influential treatise in East Asian Buddhism that attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of the doctrines of Mahāyāna (大乘 *dasheng* ‘Great Vehicle’) Buddhism. In this section, I will start by providing a brief overview of the metaphysics advocated by the *Awakening* and then turn to argue that it articulates a PBT.

An outline of the metaphysical view

An overview on the text’s metaphysics will give us a sense of the general view contained in the treatise and give us the background information to know where to look for the method of PBT. An outline of the metaphysical view endorsed by the author of the *Awakening* is given as an explanation of the term ‘Mahāyāna’, which, in this text, is not employed in the usual sense to refer to a set of traditions within Buddhism, but as a name for the metaphysical principle of reality.

Generally speaking, Mahāyāna (摩訶衍 *moheyan*)⁷ is to be expounded from two points of view. One is the principle (Ch. 法 *fa*; Sk. *dharma*) and the other is the significance (義 *yi*). The principle is ‘the Mind of the sentient being’ (衆生心 *zhongsheng xin*). This Mind includes in itself all states of being of the phenomenal world and the

transcendental world. [. . .] [T]he absolute (Ch. 眞如 *zhenru*; Sk. *tathatā*) aspect of this Mind represents the essence (Ch. 體 *ti*; Sk. *svabhāva*) of Mahāyāna; and the phenomenal (Ch. 因緣 *yinyuan*; Sk. *hetu-pratyaya*) aspect of this Mind indicates the essence, attributes (Ch. 相 *xiang*; Sk. *lakṣaṇa*), and [activity]⁸ (Ch. 用 *yong*; Sk. *kriyā*) of Mahāyāna itself. (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 35; T1666_32.0575c20–c24)

This passage has a lot to unpack, so let's proceed in order. The author presents two perspectives from which one can explain Mahāyāna: the principle and the significance. By 'significance', the author is talking about the *meaning* of the term 'Mahāyāna', while on the 'principle side', he is taking a metaphysical perspective. In the next subsection, I will argue that it's in explaining 'Mahāyāna' from the perspective of significance that the author of the *Awakening* articulates a PBT. For now, let's concentrate on the metaphysical view.

The principle is claimed to be 'the Mind of sentient being', which is an expression synonymous with One Mind (一心 *yixin*), and it is also seen as identical with reality, as it is said to include in itself all states of being. The identification of reality with One Mind is probably the core tenet of the *Awakening's* metaphysics, and it implies two substantive philosophical views: metaphysical idealism – the view that reality is fundamentally mental in its nature, as opposed to material (because reality is seen as *mind*) – and metaphysical monism – the view that reality is fundamentally unitary (because reality is seen as *one*). One Mind can be considered from two points of view: the absolute and the phenomenal. The term used for 'phenomenal' (i.e. 'yinyuan') is often translated as 'causes and conditions' and refers to the samsaric world, that is, the world of dependent origination, which is complementary to the absolute (i.e. 'zhenru'), the pure and intrinsically unchanging ultimate reality.

Identifying the absolute aspect of the One Mind with essence (體 *ti*) is a crucial step in the metaphysics of the *Awakening*. The concept of essence comes from pre-Buddhist Chinese metaphysics, and it is part of a conceptual pair of which the other member is the concept of activity (用 *yong*). Although the structure of the paradigm goes at least as back as the stillness–movement (靜 *jing*–動 *dong*) pair in the *I Ching*, it is the Neo-Daoist philosopher Wang Bi (王弼) who has been traditionally taken to deserve the credit for having provided a metaphysical development of the concepts (Lion Kong (1979), 52),⁹ which he gave in his commentary on the *Daodejing*. According to this metaphysics, *ti* is at the same time the ultimate nature of reality, and so its *essence*, and its *substance* or ontological substratum. (We could say that a better translation of the term, although cumbersome, would be 'essence-substance'.)¹⁰ Activity, in turn, is both the ontogenetic process through which the substratum generates the world that we experience and the very result of the process.

Employing this paradigm to explain the distinction between the absolute and the phenomenal, the author is saying that phenomenal reality is nothing but the activity of the absolute, which manifests itself by engaging in a process of self-articulation. Moreover, in a Buddhist context this paradigm is complicated by adding the notion of attributes, which allows us to make a distinction between the activity of substance (*yong*) and the phenomenal manifestations resulting from such activity (*xiang*), which in the bare essence–activity paradigm is obscured.

A widespread metaphor used in Buddhist (and not only Buddhist) texts to describe this kind of metaphysical paradigm is the metaphor of the ocean and the waves: the idea is that the ontological ground of reality (essence) is like the ocean, and beings existing in reality are like the waves of the ocean (its activity). Moreover, in the *Awakening*, substance is clearly understood as having mental nature since it is identified with the absolute aspect of One Mind.¹¹

Going back to the quoted passage, in light of the identification of the absolute aspect of One Mind with essence, we would expect the phenomenal aspect to be equated with activity and attributes. However, the author identifies the phenomenal aspect of Mahāyāna with the whole triad of essence, attributes, and activity. Why does essence come back again? The reason, I think, lies in the insistence, typical of Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the idea of nonduality: '[e]ach of these two aspects embraces all states of existence. Why? Because these two aspects are mutually inclusive' (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 38; T1666_32.0576a06–a07). Again, according to the *Awakening*, reality is *One Mind*, and the risk in delivering an explanation in terms of the two aspects is to lead the reader to believe that there is a duality between them. This risk is avoided by including essence in the phenomenal aspect.

A Buddhist perfect being theology

It is now time to apply PBT to the *Awakening* to determine whether it contains a notion of God. As discussed above, we need to look for two things: (1) a notion of maximal greatness and (2) an explanation of the notion in terms of a set of great-making properties. Moreover, I will show that the *Awakening* takes an additional intermediate step in its PBT, breaking the notion of greatness into distinct and more specific kinds of greatness before going on to identify the great-making properties.

The work that we did to interpret the metaphysical view of the text tells us where to find what we are looking for: if something is described as a supreme God in the *Awakening*, we should expect it to be One Mind or One Mind-*seen-from-the-absolute-perspective*, namely *suchness*. In the previous subsection, we began by considering a passage saying that One Mind can be explained from two points of view: the principle and the significance, and then we discussed the former. Now, it's time to turn to the account of the significance (義 *yi*) of Mahāyāna, which is the part of the text where a PBT is developed.

Of the significance [of the adjective *mahā* in the compound Mahāyāna], there are three aspects: (1) the 'greatness' (大 *da*) of the essence, for all phenomena are identical with Suchness (真如 *zhenru*) and are neither increasing nor decreasing; (2) the 'greatness' of the attributes, for the Tathāgata-garbha¹² is endowed with numberless excellent qualities (功德 *gongde*); (3) the 'greatness' of the [activity], for the [activity] [of Suchness] give[s] rise to the good causes and effects in this and in the other world alike. (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 36; T1666_32.0575c25–c28)

As we know, the adjective 'mahā' in the compound 'Mahāyāna' means *great*. My suggestion is that the adjective here plays the role of the definition in PBT; that is, by calling One Mind 'mahā', the author characterizes it as supreme or maximally great. Of course, the mere use of the adjective is by no means sufficient to support my claim. However, if we found out that the text goes further in explaining 'mahā' in terms of a set of great-making properties, that would be good evidence that it contains a PBT. In the remainder of this section, I will show that that is precisely what the author of the *Awakening* does.

As anticipated and as we see from the passage, the author of the *Awakening* does not move directly from providing a definition to inferring the great-making properties of One Mind. The passage starts instead by identifying three aspects of the adjective 'mahā', and so three aspects of greatness: the greatness of the essence (體大 *tida*), the greatness of the attributes (相大 *xiangda*), and the greatness of the activity (用大 *yongda*). Why this complication? As discussed in the second section, what properties are to be inferred from the notion of maximal greatness is not the only matter that the method of PBT leaves open: different perfect being theologians can also provide different accounts

of maximal greatness, that is, of what it takes for something to be maximally great. In identifying these three aspects of greatness, I think that the author of the text is outlining such an account: he is breaking down the notion of maximal greatness into *specific* kinds of greatness that explain it. In other words, he is providing an account according to which if something is maximally great with respect to the three aspects of essence, attributes, and activity, then it is maximally great *simpliciter*.

The question now is how to interpret the greatnesses of the essence, attributes, and activity. A way to answer this question can be found in Schellenberg's 'God for All Time: From Theism to Ultimism' (Schellenberg (2016)). In the article, Schellenberg advocates a view that he calls 'Ultimism' and argues that there are three conditions that something must meet to be *ultimate* in the sense philosophers of religion are interested in. It has to be (1) metaphysically ultimate, (2) axiologically ultimate, and (3) soteriologically ultimate. The idea is that X is metaphysically ultimate if and only if it is the ontological source of all there is, it is axiologically ultimate if and only if it is unsurpassably excellent, and it is soteriologically ultimate if and only if the ultimate good is to be attained through X. Now, I think that we can use Schellenberg's three conditions for ultimacy to map the three aspects of greatness in the *Awakening* by reading the greatness of the essence as metaphysical ultimacy, the greatness of the attributes as axiological ultimacy and the greatness of the activity as soteriological ultimacy.

This interpretative proposal might seem odd. That is because, discussing the connection between his account of ultimism and PBT, Schellenberg sees PBT only as a possible way to account for *axiological* ultimacy. In other words, according to him, the properties that perfect being theologians infer (e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) can only be an account of axiological ultimacy, as opposed to the metaphysical and soteriological ones. However, that is not the only possible way of going. Although Schellenberg has the option to use PBT as an account of axiological greatness – which will require an interpretation of maximal greatness that confines it to Schellenberg's axiology – the reverse is also a viable option: we can read Schellenberg's Ultimism as providing an account of maximal greatness *within* the confines of PBT. In fact, this latter option seems even to make more sense pretheoretically, for PBT defines God in terms of maximal greatness and, *prima facie*, something that is metaphysically and soteriologically ultimate in addition to being axiologically ultimate is greater than something that is ultimate only axiologically.¹³

If the foregoing interpretation of the notion of greatness in the *Awakening* is correct, we should expect: (1) the author of the treatise to identify the great-making properties of One Mind on the basis of the three aspects of greatness used as an account of maximal greatness, and (2) the great-making properties identified from these three aspects to meet Schellenberg's conditions for metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological greatness. In the remainder of this section, I will show that that is precisely what happens. Consider the following passage:

[The essence of Suchness] knows no increase or decrease in ordinary men, the Hīnayānists, the bodhisattvas, or the buddhas. It was not brought into existence (生 *sheng*) in the beginning nor will it cease (滅 *mie*) to be at the end of time; it is eternal (常 *chang*) through and through. (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 66; T1666_32.0579a12-a14)

From the beginning, Suchness in its nature (性 *xing*) is fully provided with all excellent qualities; namely, it is endowed with the light of great wisdom (大智慧光明義 *da zhihui guangming yi*), [the qualities of] illuminating the entire universe, of true cognition (真實識知 *zhenshi shizhi*) and mind pure in its self-nature (自性清淨心義 *zixing qingjingxin yi*); of eternity, bliss (樂 *le*), Self (我 *wo*), and purity (淨 *jing*); of

refreshing coolness (清涼 *qingliang*), immutability (不變 *bubian*), and freedom (自在 *zizai*). (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 66; T1666_32.0579a14–a17)

[. . .] Spontaneously (自然 *ziran*) performing incomprehensible [deeds]¹⁴ (業 *ye*), exercising manifold [activities], they [the Buddha-Tathāgatas] pervade everywhere in their identity with Suchness. Nevertheless, they reveal no marks of their [activity] that can be traced as such. Why? Because the Buddha-Tathāgatas are no other than the Dharmakāya itself, and the embodiment (身 *shen*) of wisdom. (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 68–69; T1666_32.0579b15–b18)

The first part of the passage explains the greatness of the essence, the second the greatness of the attributes, and the third the greatness of the activity. I will now show that these passages contain the identification of the great-making properties of One Mind and that these properties meet the conditions for metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological ultimacy outlined above. Let's consider the passages in turn.

The author says that the essence never increases nor decreases and that it wasn't created at some point in time and will have no end. Let's think through this by using the metaphor of the ocean and the waves again: while the ocean (i.e. essence), in a sense, is modified through the process of becoming wavy, *the ocean itself* never increases nor decreases. There is no *more* ocean in the wavy state than in the calm one (or *vice versa*): the ocean is always the same and simply takes different shapes. Analogously, while entities (i.e. the waves) come and go through time, essence itself (i.e. the ocean) has no beginning and no end. Moreover, while being the ultimate ground of all existences, it is intrinsically unaffected by the process of creating them (i.e. knows no increase nor decrease). Thus, here we have something very similar to an account of what Alvin Plantinga identified as the most significant attributes of God: 'his *aseity* – his uncreatedness, self-sufficiency and independence of everything else – and his *sovereignty* – his control over all things and the dependence of all else on his creative and sustaining activity' (Plantinga (1980), 1–2; emphases in the original), and these properties clearly show that the condition for metaphysical ultimacy (i.e. being the ultimate source of what there is) is met.

The second part of the passage contains an account of the greatness of the attributes, which we identified with axiological ultimacy. Since axiological ultimacy is defined as unsurpassable excellence, the list of 'excellent qualities' provided by the author – great wisdom, eternity, bliss, purity, freedom, and so on – can be taken as a plausible account of such an ultimacy. Moreover, the logic here is again clearly the one of PBT, for the author of the *Awakening* is still proceeding from a notion of general greatness to a list of great-making properties.

Finally, the third passage contains an explanation of the greatness of the activities, which corresponds to Schellenberg's soteriological ultimacy. The idea is that suchness, which in the passage is identified with the Dharmakāya (i.e. the universal body of the Buddha), pervades everything and, through its activity in the form of Buddha-Tathāgatas, *leads sentient beings to enlightenment*. This makes the *Awakening's* account of the greatness of the activities an account of soteriological ultimacy because soteriological ultimacy is defined in terms of being that through which the ultimate good is to be attained, and the passage is saying precisely that the ultimate good (i.e. enlightenment) is to be attained through suchness. In other words, we can say that the great-making property inferred from the greatness of the activity is the property of being such as to engage in the soteriological activity that makes it possible for sentient beings to be enlightened.

Let's summarize the preceding discussion. In the second section, I introduced PBT as a method to come up with a richer description of God from a definition that captures the

idea that God is maximally great, and I have now shown that the *Awakening* articulates a PBT. Hence, we can conclude that, by definition, the *Awakening* contains a form of *theism*. One Mind, or better, One Mind-seen-as-the-absolute, as suchness, is God. Of course, *what* kind of God is a different question, and so it remains open to further research to say whether the *Awakening* advocates a form of classical theism, process theism, pantheism, panentheism, or maybe something else.

Answers to objections

It is now time to discuss some objections to the proposed view. I will consider two of them: one against my use of PBT and one against my interpretation of the text. Starting from the former, in his *The Greatest Possible Being*, Jeff Speaks (2018) provided a long series of objections to the method of PBT. Instead of considering his objections one by one, which would take up too much space, we can frame the point in a general way: one could say that *if* there are conclusive arguments against the method of PBT (irrespective of what the arguments are), then my employment of the method in this article is problematic because I am appealing to an intrinsically flawed research project.

My answer to this objection is twofold. First, we should remember that PBT has been largely conceived as a research programme in *Western* philosophy. Contemporary perfect being theologians deal with the works of Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas, but not with the *Awakening* or other works in Buddhist philosophy. Hence, even assuming that PBT has been confronted with objections that *Western* philosophers have so far been unable to fully address, it remains an open question whether resources to answer these objections can be found in other traditions. Thus, my first reply is that the objection simply indicates an interesting direction for further research in cross-cultural philosophy.

Second, this objection does not apply to the way in which I am using PBT. In this article, I have *not* used PBT in its own terms, that is, as a method to infer God's attributes from a definition that captures the idea of maximal greatness. Instead, I have used PBT as a tool to determine whether a specific text or doctrine contains a notion of God, and this use would be acceptable even if its method was flawed. Let's make a rather extreme parallel: you might think that astrology is an utterly ineffective method to analyse people's subconscious. However, by the fact that someone uses astrology to enquire into the subconscious, we can legitimately infer that this person does believe in the existence of the subconscious. The validity of the inference doesn't depend on the effectiveness of astrology.

The second objection is hermeneutical. One could object that if there is a God in the *Awakening*, that is not the God of perfect being theology but the God of mysticism, that is, a God that is completely ungraspable by human cognitive faculties. Now, insofar as the thesis at issue is simply that the *Awakening* has a notion of God, the truth of the claim would be preserved. However, it would be false that the *Awakening* contains a PBT because PBT is committed to the claim that we can say something true about God. The question for us is: are there passages in the *Awakening* that support this mystical reading? The answer seems to be affirmative:

All explanations [of the One Mind] by words are provisional (假名 *jiaming*) and without validity (無實 *wushi*), for they are merely used in accordance with illusion and are incapable [of denoting suchness]. The term Suchness likewise has no attributes. (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 38–39; T1666_32.0576a13–a15).

According to this passage, the properties or attributes that we predicate of One Mind through the process that, I have been arguing, is the one of PBT are only provisional. In

other words, these predications are ultimately false or meaningless. If that is the case, then One Mind cannot be the God of PBT because the latter is taken to *really* have the attributes that we predicate of him. The perfect being theologian is not committed to the view that we can attain a *complete* description of God (which would indeed be foolish) but is at least committed to the view that we can say *something* true about the perfect being.

However, if we look at the text more closely, we find that the *Awakening* cannot be taken to endorse mysticism. In fact, later in the text, the author denies ineffability explicitly.

Question: It was explained before that the essence of Suchness is undifferentiated and devoid of all characteristics. Why is it, then, that you have described its essence as having these various excellent qualities?

Answer: Though it *has, in reality, all these excellent qualities*, it does not have *any characteristics of differentiation* (差別 *chabie*); it retains its identity and is of one flavor; Suchness is solely one (唯一 *weiyi*).

Question: What does this mean?

Answer: Since it is devoid of individuation (分別 *fenbie*), it is free from the characteristics of individuation; thus, *it is one without any second* (無二 *wuer*). (Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 66; T1666_32.0579a21–425; emphases are mine)

The author explicitly says that One Mind *really* has the attributes that we predicate of it. In fact, what cannot be predicated of One Mind are not properties *simpliciter* but properties that imply differentiation or individuation. For example, attributes like being red, round, sweet, or heavy do not apply to One Mind because these are properties that *individuate* an entity among other entities within space-time. Conversely, properties like immutability or purity do not imply differentiation and apply, in fact, to that which is beyond all entities. According to the metaphysical view of the *Awakening*, suchness is not an entity among entities but the ontological ground that makes possible the manifestation of all entities: it is one, but one *without any second*. To use our metaphor one more time, the ocean is not a wave among the waves: it is the metaphysical ground that makes the existence of all the waves possible and sustains them.

Therefore, we can say that the *Awakening* does not advocate ineffability in an absolute sense. More simply, it says that certain attributes that apply to ordinary entities like tables and chairs do not apply to One Mind. However, that doesn't mean that our language has no way of describing One Mind truthfully: we can do that by using words referring to attributes that do not imply differentiation. The conclusion that the *Awakening* contains a PBT can thus be maintained. Of course, it contains its own reading of what set of properties applies to God, but that, as we have seen, merely indicates a disagreement *within* the boundaries of PBT and is thus perfectly compatible with the conclusion that the *Awakening* has a God.

Conclusion

The argument I have been presenting in this article can be seen as an attempt to bring into dialogue two fields of research: Buddhist studies and philosophy of religion. My use of perfect being theology to argue that the *Awakening* contains a notion of God constitutes an example of how philosophical devices can be used proficiently to interpret

Buddhist primary texts. In fact, part of the reason why some Buddhist scholars have been claiming that Buddhism has no God might be that they were operating with a too interpretatively charged a notion of God; here, I have shown how one may legitimately use the term ‘God’ without immediately taking on board a lot of assumptions about the nature of the divine, leaving open the possibility of thicker conceptions of God for a later moment of theorization. Conversely, my argument shows philosophers of religion debating about God claiming that the Buddhist tradition can present them with intriguing interlocutors that can help foster the debate. In this sense, this article is also a contribution to the already existing efforts to establish the field of a global philosophy of religion.

Abbreviation. T Taishō Canon. Takakusu Jinjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭, Ono Genmyō 小野玄妙, Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai 大正一切経刊行会, eds. 1924–1932. Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經. SAT Daizōkyō Database (<http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/>).

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank Catherine Prueitt, Jessica Main, and Robert Sharf, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

Notes

1. It is worth pointing out that, in earlier times, some pioneers of the study of Buddhism in the West were more liberal about applying theistic categories to Buddhism. This is evident, for example, in Suzuki ((1999 [1930]), 308) and Murti ((2003 [1955]), 285–286; cf. Harrison (1992)).
2. See, for example, Harvey (2012).
3. See Hayes (1988).
4. In this article, I will treat the two expressions as synonymous.
5. Another option would be to consider different interpretations of divine greatness as disagreements *about* the method of PBT rather than as disagreements *within* it. This interpretation, however, wouldn’t impact the argument of this article because, as long as the author of the *Awakening* is proposing a PBT, we can conclude that he is advocating for a form of theism. I thank an anonymous reviewer for directing me to this point.
6. Cf. Morris (1987).
7. The text renders the Sanskrit’s ‘Mahāyāna’ phonetically, rather than with a semantic calque as in 大乘 *dasheng*.
8. Hakeda translates ‘*yong*’ as ‘influences’. More standards way of rendering the term are however ‘function’ or ‘activity’. I will employ the translation as ‘activity’ as I find it more metaphysically informed.
9. See also Muller ((2016), 116) and Kwon and Woo ((2019), §3) on the connection with the stillness-movement pair.
10. I should qualify my use of the term ‘substance’. First, in Western philosophy, ‘substance’ is used in at least two senses that we need to distinguish: (1) as *existing particular* (or even, more specifically, as *fundamental particular*); (2) as a *substratum* that permeates – and indeed constitutes – reality. In saying that *ti* is ‘substance’, I am employing the latter sense. However, we need to be careful, for one might take substance to be part of a *dualistic* paradigm in which it is opposed to properties, thinking that *ti* is a basis to which the properties attach (see Robinson (2020), §3.2.2). As noticed by Muller ((2016), 125), there is no dualism here (in fact, the *essence-activity* paradigm is used precisely to explain non-dualism): the *activity* of the substratum is not ontologically separate from the substratum itself. (Which also suggests that *ti* cannot be understood as static (cf. Cheng (2002), 148).) This also holds once we complicate the paradigm by adding the notion of *attributes* because these attributes are not some further thing developed by the activity but are the very phenomenal manifestation of the activity itself. Having made these specifications, the term ‘substance’ remains very useful in explaining the meaning of ‘*ti*’. This choice is supported by the analysis of the *essence-activity* paradigm of Lai (1975, 125–126) and also by the analysis of Pang (2009) and Yao (2010) of the concept of nothingness (無 *wu*), which Wang Bi equates with *ti* (Lion Kong (1979)). On this point, see also Liu ((1992), 40), but confront his remarks on *ge-yi* (格義) with Mair (2012).
11. Arguably, the *essence-activity* paradigm is one of the central elements involved in making East Asian Buddhism different from its Indian origins (Lai (1975), 126; Cheng (2002), 157; Muller (2016), 114). In fact, it is interesting how the use of the water-wave metaphor changes from the Indian *Laikāvātāra Sūtra* to *The Awakening of Faith*, which is probably a Chinese craft, in spite of the many similarities that the two texts share. In the *Laikāvātāra Sūtra*, the metaphor is used to explain the relation between the first seven consciousnesses and the storehouse consciousness, but in *The Awakening of Faith*, it is used to explain the relation between

phenomenal reality and suchness (see Lai (1975), 220–223; *Idem* (1979), 247–248). Moreover, Takemura ((1981), 310) points out a different attitude towards the three notions of essence, attributes, and activity in the *Awakening and Lan-kāvātāra Sūtra*. The latter mentions the triad as a kind of *defiled view* to get rid of since it reifies reality. But the *Awakening* (perhaps through the influence of the *Jingang xianlun* (金剛仙論) (*ibid.*, 311)) takes in this respect a radical shift in making the three concepts the centre of its system.

12. For the sake of this article, we can consider the expression ‘Tathāgata-garbha’ in this context as synonymous with ‘One Mind’ (cf. Hakeda (2006 [1967]), 36).

13. Unless axiological ultimacy implies metaphysical ultimacy. However, it would then be redundant to consider metaphysical ultimacy.

14. Hakeda translates the Chinese ‘ye’ as ‘activities’. However, since I have been using this term to translate the character that Hakeda renders as ‘influences’, I choose to modify his translation here to make clear the distinction between terms in the original text.

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