

One Name, Infinite Meanings: An Analysis of Jizang's Thought on Meaning and Reference

To use a finger to convey the nonfingerness of a finger is not as good as using a nonfinger to convey the nonfingerness of a finger. To use a horse to convey the nonhorseness of a horse is not as good as using a nonhorse to convey the nonhorseness of a horse. Heaven and earth are one finger; the myriad things are one horse.

The Zhuangzi, chapter 2

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Speakers use words to identify the object they intend to refer, yet it is often not very clear what object is identified. For example, the demonstrative “that” can be used to refer to different objects on different occasions; there is no context-free word-object relationship. Likewise, many nouns cover a variety of meaning, and the ascertaining of the meaning, and hence the referent, of a noun in a given case hinges on concrete linguistic and non-linguistic contexts. Further, words may be used metaphorically, ironically, allusively, and so on, in which case they may go far beyond their literal meaning or reference.

A word can have multiple meanings and the referent of a word is not fixed independently of the context. Normally, of course, we would hardly claim, *á la* Humpty Dumpty, that speakers can use a word to mean just what they choose it to mean. However, perhaps the range of possible meanings that a word can have goes far beyond what we might think. Might it be possible to have a feasible theory of meaning and reference, that is followed in a community of language users, such that a word, as used on a particular occasion, expresses not only its conventional, literal meaning or referent, but also what is literally meant by its opposite word, and even

the negation of its conventional meaning? Further, can we stretch the meaning of a word without limit, such that it virtually means each and everything in the world? Startling as this may be, it is basically what is proposed by Jizang (Chi-tsang; 吉藏) (549-623 CE), the main philosophical exponent of the *Sanlun* (Three Treatises; 三論) school of Chinese Buddhism, in his hermeneutical theory of “one name, infinite meanings,” in which one name (*ming*) (名), or rather one nominal word, is said to bear infinite meanings (*yi*) (義).¹ The multiplicity and indeterminacy of linguistic reference are highlighted to the utmost.

Indeed, Jizang also speaks of “one name, one meaning,” “one meaning, one name,” and “one meaning, infinite names.” However, the “one name, infinite meanings” theory is philosophically the most intriguing and is explicated quite extensively by Jizang himself.² Significantly, the theory serves for Jizang as a hermeneutical means for construing key Buddhist doctrinal terms to suit his own purposes; it also seems to be the epitome, in linguistic terms, of his overall philosophical position. The present paper attempts to offer an analysis of the theory with a view to elucidating Jizang’s thought on meaning and reference and considering the contemporary significance, if any, of the theory.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 1, I briefly outline the Indian *Madhyamaka* thought propounded by Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE), mainly whose work Jizang used as a basis for his philosophy, and sketch certain aspects of

¹ Jizang is somehow exaggerating here, for what he actually means is that one nominal word bears as many as four types of meaning. However, his fourth type of interpretation of word meaning to the effect that the word means all kinds of things in the world does suggest a notion of “infinite meaning.”

² The theory is briefly described in Jizang’s *Sanlun Xuanyi* 《三論玄義》(The Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:14, and is discussed extensively in his *Erdi Yi* 《二諦義》(The Meaning of the Two Truths), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:94–96.

Jizang's philosophy. In Section 2, I discuss Jizang's thought on language concerning the notion of provisional expression, to pave the way for the following section. Section 3 is the focus of the paper. Here, I explicate in turn the four types of interpretation of word meaning that together constitute the "one name, infinite meanings" theory. In Section 4, I attempt to give a sympathetic evaluation of the theory.

I.

Nagarjuna, the founder of the Buddhist Madhyamaka school, claimed that all things in the world originate co-dependently (*pratityasamutpanna*), because their coming to be, change, and perishing depend on various causes and conditions. On the ground that they originate codependently, things are said to be empty (*wunya*) in the sense of being devoid of self-nature (*svabhava*) where by "self-nature" Nagarjuna roughly means a self-existent, causally unconditioned, and unchanging nature that a thing may be believed to possess. In his view, putative self-natures are actually conceptual constructs that are illicitly reified and embedded in the world.

Now, the thorough dependent origination and consequential emptiness of a thing may seem to strip it of any firm ground and show its deeply illusory character. Here, Nagarjuna resorted to figurative cases of a phantom, a dream, a reflection, bubbles, and so on, to indicate the ultimately illusory character of things. However, he upheld a doctrine of two truths that draws a thin line between the supreme truth (*paramarthasatya*) and the conventional truth (*samvrtisatya*). From the perspective of conventional truth, things in the world are (conventionally) real. It is only in the light of the supreme truth that they are said to be illusory. In this respect, they differ from self-nature, a square circle, and the horns of a rabbit, which are sheer nothings.

It is difficult to tell how Nagarjuna understood the notion of supreme truth, and

present-day scholars differ in their interpretations of his understanding. Given that we are concerned mainly with Jizang's philosophical thought, we may skip this intricate issue and turn to Jizang's construal of the doctrine.

Just as Nagarjuna sought to render explicit some implications of the Buddha's teaching about the causally conditioned state of things by emphasizing their emptiness, Jizang further deepened Nagarjuna's teaching about the emptiness of things by highlighting *non-acquisition* (*wu-de*) (無得) as the main intention behind all Mahayana Buddhist scriptures as well as the gateway to final liberation. Here, to have acquisition is to make an item (an idea, a teaching, a thing, an event, etc.) an object of acquisition; this is to take it to be fixed, determinate, delineated in form or nature, and to count on it as a firm ground. Jizang is emphatic that one must not abide in, or attach oneself to, any such object for dependence.³

Now, if the two truths are singly determinate and mutually distinct, there is a strong temptation to have them as objects of acquisition and become attached to them;⁴ for those who have not yet begun to follow the path to liberation, attachment to the conventional truth is the *de facto* mode of being, whereas those who are already on the path will be tempted to become attached to the supreme truth. In order to counter against acquisition and attachment, Jizang avers that the *two truths* are just two provisional, expedient teachings about the ineffable, indeterminable nondual Way. Just as when one points to the moon with a finger, one's intention is not to show the finger, but to let others see the moon, so it is also with the doctrine of two truths. The two truths, contends Jizang, are meant to make explicit the nondual Way; the intention

³ For Jizang, “non-acquisition,” “non-abidingness,” “non-attachment,” and “non-dependence” are in principle interchangeable. See his *Bailun Shu*《百論疏》(A Commentary on the *Wata-wastra*), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigaku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 42:234c21–22.

⁴ Cf. *Erdi Yī*, 108c17–23.

is not of duality, but to let others get at the nondual.⁵ Here, the Way is variously named the middle Way, the correct Way, the ultimate Principle (*li*) (理), and so on. Significantly, it is also equated with non-acquisition, non-attachment, or the like.

Jizang's philosophical practice aims at transcending all dualistic thought, challenging even the duality between the ineffable Way and the verbal teaching. It dismisses as defective even the acquisition of non-acquisition itself. The fact that Jizang equates the Way with non-acquisition may suggest that he dispensed with any notion of higher reality and attended merely to the subjective state of complete freedom from any acquisition whatsoever. This view explains his therapeutic use of words and his claim that once acquisition is gone, non-acquisition must be relinquished as well; that is, spiritually relevant words are timely medicines used for curing intellectual illness and not to be taken once the disease is gone. However, it seems to me quite clear that Jizang *also* uses words as a moon-pointing finger to point toward the formless and nameless Way, though, to be sure, the words used inevitably fall short of representing the latter.

II.

Following Nagarjuna, Jizang treats linguistic fabrication (*prapabca*; *xilun*) (戲論) as a root cause of human suffering. While Nagarjuna probably takes the Sanskrit term *prapabca* to mean our propensity to posit linguistic referents as self-natured and intrinsically real, Jizang construes the Chinese term *xilun* as meaning a definite understanding of all things as well as attachment to them.⁶ Here, a definite

⁵ *Erdi Yi*, 108b23–25. For a lucid exposition of Jizang's doctrine of two truths, see Ming-wood Liu, “A Chinese Madhyamaka Theory of Truth: The Case of Chi-tsang,” *Philosophy East & West* 43 (1993): 649–673.

⁶ See his *Zhongguanlun Shu* 《中觀論疏》(A Commentary on the *Madhyamaka-wastra*), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai,

understanding is one that views the intended referent of a word as determinate in nature and determinable by the word. Such a referent is easily an object for acquisition and attachment. Therefore, Jizang sets as his task a critique of the definite understanding of things.

We can only consider briefly how Jizang would deny things their determinate nature. Here is an example. One may take a green tree to be determinately such. However, the tree may be green only in respect of the surface of its barks and leaves, not the rest of it. Even the surface might look red to a colorblind person, a cat, or under a microscope. Further, what one human being takes to be a tree may be just food for tree-eating bugs, a post ablaze for some meditating yogins, or a great mass of particles of indeterminate nature for a stubborn quantum physicist.⁷ In Jizang's view, much of what things are is such only relative to the observer's perspective, and there is no ultimate, perspective-free determination of things for what they are. Moreover, because what we take to be things are, at bottom, not different from the ineffable Way, things are not determinable by words either.

On the other hand, Jizang appears to have a more positive attitude toward language than his Indian predecessors. In Indian *Madhyamaka*, the conventional truth is within the bounds of speech, while the supreme truth goes beyond the reach of words. Jizang, instead, takes speech and silence to be codependent and declines to value silence over

1924–32), 42:12b25–27. Correlatively, Jizang appears to interpret the notion of self-nature to mean a determinate state or nature; see, for example, *Siermenlun Shu* 《十二門論疏》(A Commentary on the *Dvadawanikaya-wastra*), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 42:204c23–205a5, where it is said: “The moment one becomes aware (of a thing as) existent and claims that it is definitely different from a nonexistent, then there is present the (self-)nature of existence ...”

⁷ For Jizang's own, more exotic examples, see his *Jingming Xuanlun* 《淨名玄論》(A Treatise on the Profound Teaching of Vimalakirti), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 38:897a17–29.

speech. He even emphasizes the sameness between speech and the nondual Principle.⁸ In any case, because Jizang affirms the value of language, he must suggest and endorse a way of using and comprehending words such that one, while engaging in linguistic practice, does not fall into the trap of definite understanding.

For Jizang, all words are in reality provisional words (*jiaming*) (假名) and should be understood and used as such. Provisional words are codependent and indeterminate in nature; neither intrinsically real, nor denotative of the real.⁹ They are used expediently and pragmatically for conveying information, repudiating false views, or for other purposes, and should not be taken as implying the determinate nature of their referents. Correlatively, and as a prevailing practice in the Indian and Chinese Madhyamaka traditions, their referents are also said to be provisional, for they are codependent, non-substantial, indeterminate, and are expressible by provisional words.

Here is how Jizang speaks of the provisional use of words:

If one takes affirmation (*shi*) (是) to be affirmation, negation (*fei*) (非) to be negation, all affirmations and negations are to be negated. If one knows that there is no affirmation, no non-affirmation, no negation, and no non-negation, that both “affirmation” and “negation” are provisional words, then all affirmations and negations are to be affirmed.¹⁰

⁸ *Jingming Xuanlun*, 38:856b22–c4.

⁹ Provisional words are unable to properly and directly express the ineffable Way, but are tentatively used as a moon-pointing finger for *indicating* it. For an elaboration of the simile of a moon-pointing finger in relation to the Sanlun school, refer to Chien-hsing Ho, “The Finger Pointing toward the Moon: A Philosophical Analysis of the Chinese Buddhist Thought of Reference,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35 (2008): 159–177.

¹⁰ Jizang, *Dasheng Xuanlun*《大乘玄論》(A Treatise on the Profound Teaching of Mahayana), in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, ed. Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Kai, 1924–32), 45:42a29–b3.

According to Jizang, affirmation as the referent of the word “affirmation” is codependent and indeterminate in nature. To view an affirmation as a *determinate* affirmation unfavorably involves the definite understanding disproved of by Jizang. In reality, there is no determinate affirmation or negation at all, not even their (determinate) negation. Still, one may continue to use words like “affirmation” and “negation,” but only *provisionally* such that no determinate nature or state of their referents is posited. Thus, both affirmation and negation, taken precisely as provisional and indeterminate in themselves, may be used in the Sanlun system.

Likewise, existence and emptiness, signified in the school by the conventional and supreme truths respectively, are provisional and indeterminate. Given their codependent nature, Jizang refers to existence as existence-*of*-emptiness, emptiness as emptiness-*of*-existence. In the last analysis, existence and emptiness (or nonexistence) are not delimited and distinct from each other, but are in interwoven union with each other. This radical philosophy of indeterminacy denies things any real self-identity whatsoever.

Jizang agrees with Sengzhao (僧肇) (374–414 CE), a forerunner of the Sanlun school, for the view that to say x is *not-existent* (*fei you*) (非有) is to say it is *not existent* (*fei shi you*) (非是有), but not that it is *nonexistent* (*shi fei you*) (是非有). That is, the term “not-existent” is intended expediently to deny x ’s existence and not to attribute to it the determinate property of being nonexistent. Similarly, Jizang elsewhere distinguishes between “is *not* dual” and “is nondual” and dismisses the latter. Here, with “is *not* dual” one goes beyond duality without being attached to nonduality. By contrast, “is nondual” may easily result in a definite understanding of

nonduality.¹¹ What matters, however, is not precisely the form of expression itself, but the attitude behind its use: the expression should be taken provisionally so as to imply no positing of any determinate state or nature whatsoever. Indeed, Jizang would further ask us to recognize the intrinsically provisional character of words to avoid any such positing. Thus, he says that “if one realizes the provisional (nature of) words, though one speaks of existence and nonexistence, there is eventually neither existence nor nonexistence.”¹²

III.

We saw in the previous section that for Jizang, words should be understood and used provisionally, such that nothing determinate concerning their referents is posited, that, as the referents of provisional words, all things are empty of any delimited, determinate form or nature. To ensure that there be no such positing, we may resort to negative expression to negate or empty what has been spoken. For instance, if we apply the word *X* to the thing *x*, one may falsely think that *x* is a determinate *X*; to guard against such thinking, we may then assert that *x* should *not* be said to be *X* or even that *x* is *not X*.¹³ However, we may instead construe the referential function of a word in such a way that once one recognizes that the word has multiple meanings and has comprehended those meanings, one discerns its provisional character and is

¹¹ *Erdi Yi*, 93b27–c3. We may say “*x* is *not dual*” represents a sentence negation of the form “*x* is *not P*,” while “*x* is *nondual*” expresses a predicate negation of the form “*x* is *non-P*.” A similar pair of two types of negation (*paryudasa-prativedha* and *prasajya-prativedha*) was made use of by Indian Madhyamika thinkers after Nagarjuna.

¹² *Dasheng Xuanlun*, 40a14–15. In Jizang’s writings, significantly, “emptiness” and “nonexistence” are typically interchangeable. This plainly deviates from Nagarjuna’s stance.

¹³ For example, according to Jizang, though things are said to be empty, given that one may then reify the notion of emptiness, it is said that things should *not* be said to be empty; see *Zhongguanlun Shu*, 143a16–20. This view can be traced back to verse 22.11 (chapter 22, verse 11) of Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamaka-karika*, on which Jizang is commenting.

unlikely to have a definite understanding of its referent. The thing x as expressed by X is not a determinate X , not even distinct from a non- X . Thus construed, words are to be valued for their intrinsically provisional and non-reifying character, and an appeal to negative expression may not be needed.

This leads us to Jizang's “one name, infinite meanings” theory, which proposes four types of interpretation of word meaning to disclose in a sequence the comprehensive *meaning* of a word. Jizang presents the theory mainly for interpreting key terms in Buddhist scriptures, and it serves for him as a hermeneutic means for showing the coincidence of his thought with what he takes to be the real intention behind the scriptures. However, the point to note is that given Jizang's respects for language, the theory indicates how words can, as usual, be used without their referents being reified and determined.

Here, what is meant by “name” (*ming*) in “one name, infinite meanings” is basically a nominal word, which includes both nouns and adjectives, but probably not proper names, such as “New York” and “Smith.” What Jizang means by the general concept of “meaning” (*yi*) is plainly not identical with the literal meaning of a word, for the latter concerns at most only one meaning given in the first interpretation. Basically, “meaning” here means what is expressed, directly or indirectly, by the nominal word and intended to be known by the hearer.¹⁴ Now, to explore the *meanings* a nominal word has, especially in the context of Buddhist scripture, Jizang presents the following four types of interpretation of word meaning, which we shall examine in turn: the conventional interpretation (*suiming shi*) (隨名釋), the codependent interpretation (*yinyuan shi*) (因緣釋), the Way-revealing interpretation

¹⁴ Here, I think, we should just loosely understand the notion of “meaning.” There is in the theory no clear-cut distinction between meaning and reference; even the modern linguistic distinction between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning may not help here.

(*xiandao shi*) (顯道釋), and the nonhindrance interpretation (*wufang shi*) (無方釋).

According to the conventional interpretation of word meaning, the meaning of a word in the Buddhist context is its conventional meaning as it is literally and typically interpreted by Buddhist thinkers in reference to Buddhist texts. For example, the noun “existence” has as its meaning real being, whereas the adjective “middle” (as in “the middle Way”) means the state of being correct. Significantly, although the interpretation represents how the Buddhists normally construe a word, if one knows only of this construal, one is in danger of taking the referent concerned to be determinate in nature. The word “existent,” for instance, may then refer to something determinately real, which in turn becomes an object for acquisition or attachment. That being so, Jizang regards the interpretation as an interpretation based on the attitude of acquisition.¹⁵

As the conventional interpretation readily leads to a definite understanding of things, the codependent interpretation and the Way-revealing interpretation, both based on the attitude of non-acquisition, are introduced to make manifest the provisional character of words and counterbalance the understanding. In light of the codependent interpretation, given that *existence* and *nonexistence* (or their ideas) are mutually dependent in that one cannot be understood without also understanding the other, the word “existence” also has nonexistence as its meaning. Paradoxically, the word “existence” means both existence and nonexistence. Some clarifications are needed.

We know that many words are interdependent and complementary, forming such pairs as “long” and “short,” “heaven” and “earth,” and so on. Indeed, given any word *X*, we can always coin a word, say, *non-X* to form a pair of interdependence.

¹⁵ *Erdi Yi*, 95a27–28.

Moreover, in our experience of daily life, we cannot cognize things independently from words and concepts. Every cognition is a recognition that involves the presence of words or concepts. Consequently, our experience of things is inevitably conditioned by the relation of conceptual interdependence. This might have driven Jizang to imply that our experience of something *as* existent is deeply conditioned by the concept of nonexistence. It also explains why Jizang does not seem to draw a clear line between the referent of a word and its correlated idea.

In Jizang's view, existence and nonexistence, as conceptually known and forming a relation of conceptual interdependence, depend on each other in order to be what they are: they are existence-*of*-nonexistence and nonexistence-*of*-existence respectively.¹⁶ Thus, they are not distinct from each other and are indeed in interwoven union with each other. As a result, the word "existence" (meaning existence-*of*-nonexistence) has nonexistence as its meaning. In addition, the meaning of a word can, for Jizang, be what the word is used for: *meaning is function*. For example, the Buddha taught the conventional truth in order that people may comprehend the supreme truth. Comprehending the supreme truth is the purpose of teaching the conventional truth. Therefore, for Jizang, the word "conventional" can be said to take the supreme as its meaning, and vice versa.¹⁷

One may treat such a meaning of a word as its connotation or associated meaning, in contrast to its explicit and primary meaning. Yet the point is that the codependent

¹⁶ In a similar vein, life is life-*of*-death, while a finger is a finger-*of*-nonfinger. Such pairs of interdependence would indeed vary from person to person; Jizang, for instance, may take a finger to be a finger-*of*-moon.

¹⁷ In *Sanlun Xuanyi*, 14b11–12, Jizang quotes from a sutra to the effect that the Buddha taught the supreme truth to let people comprehend the conventional truth. He probably has in mind the *Mahaparinirvana-sutra*, yet the sutra only claims that the Buddha taught the conventional truth to let people comprehend the supreme truth, a claim also made by Nagarjuna. I am not aware of any Buddhist sutra that makes the reverse claim.

interpretation serves for Jizang the purpose of shaking our attachment to determinate form or nature. On this interpretation, the existent as the conventional referent of the word “existent” is also meant by the word “nonexistent,” while “existent” means the nonexistent as well.¹⁸ This suggests that the existent *may* not be determinately existent or determinable by the word “existent” in conventional meaning. Rather, it depends upon and is somehow interwoven with the nonexistent. However, this second interpretation only shakes the attachment concerned. It does not eradicate it. So, we need to proceed to the third interpretation.

According to the Way-revealing interpretation, the word “dual” has as its meaning *not-dual*, whereas the word “existence” means *not-existence*. The word *X*, then, has as its meaning *not-X* or the negation of *X* (as its conventional meaning). One may also take *X* to mean *not-X* and *not-non-X*. Indeed, the meaning here may involve a series of negation such that what is *meant* is eventually the ineffable Way. As a result, the word “existence” in fact points toward the Way that transcends all affirmations and negations. Since the Way cannot be spoken of, cannot properly and directly be expressed, we understand that words in this interpretation negate their conventional meanings to *indicate*, or indirectly express, the ineffable Way.

To sustain this interpretation, Jizang cites a verse from a Chinese translation of the *Avatamsaka-sutra* to the effect that given all the existent and nonexistent things, one should comprehend that which is neither existent nor nonexistent.¹⁹ However, this verse, referring to things but not words, does not clearly lend support to the

¹⁸ Likewise, *this place* as the referent of the indexical “here” can also be meant by “there” (in respect of a speaker some distance away), while “here” can mean *that place* as well. Of course, the actual extent of the place meant by “here” in a given context of utterance mainly hinges on the speaker’s intention. However, such a purely pragmatic consideration is not quite pertinent to the theory.

¹⁹ *Erdi Yi*, 95b23–25. Elsewhere, in *Dasheng Xuanlun*, 16a16–17, Jizang quotes for a similar purpose from Kumarajiva’s translation of the *Vimalakirti-nirdewa-sutra* that “(all things’ being) neither arising nor perishing is the meaning of (their) impermanence.”

interpretation. Anyway, for Jizang, though the Buddha made use of names, he actually intended the hearers to realize that which is nameless; similarly, when he spoke of “middle,” he actually intended to reveal the Way that cannot be denoted by the word “middle.”²⁰ Jizang is then in a position to adapt the Buddha’s teaching to his own metaphysical thought.

The Way-revealing interpretation helps to eradicate our attachment to determinate nature. With the interpretation, the intended referent of the word “existent” is empty of any determinate content that is conventionally implied by the word. It is *not* a determinate existent and is, in its true nature, neither existent nor nonexistent. Moreover, the word does not express anything determinate; it negates its conventional meaning, while indicating that which is beyond any conceptual determination in terms of the notions of existence and nonexistence. Thus, there is nothing determinate to be an object of attachment.

Ideas echoing the Way-revealing interpretation recur in Jizang’s writings, and this suggests the centrality of this interpretation to his philosophy. For instance, he thus speaks of the “two truths inside the principle (*li-nei*) (理內),” which represents how he thinks one should approach the Madhyamaka notion of twofold truth:

In the case of the two truths inside the principle, both existence and nonexistence are codependent. Codependent existence is not existence, while codependent nonexistence is not nonexistence. As “existence” and “nonexistence” express neither existence nor nonexistence (or express the not-existent, not-nonexistent Principle), both existence and

²⁰ *Sanlun Xuanyi*, 14b4–5. In *Zhongguanlun Shu*, 9c29–10a2, Jizang avers that the Buddha spoke of “life-and-death” and “nirvana” to express the Way that is neither life-and-death nor nirvana. He thus suggests the accordance between his thought and what he takes to be the Buddha’s real intention.

nonexistence (as the two truths) are named “means of instruction.”²¹

We also recall Jizang’s claim that if one realizes the provisional nature of words, though one speaks of existence and nonexistence, there is eventually neither existence nor nonexistence. The point, once again, is to highlight the indeterminacy of all linguistic referents.

Among the four types of interpretation of word meaning, the nonhindrance interpretation is palpably the least intuitive. It is held here that a single word has as its meaning all things in the world---a cat, a cup, sky, water, whatever. There are two broad reasons for this interpretation. First, according to the third interpretation, the word “existence” points toward the ineffable Way, which is in interwoven union with all things in the world; consequently, the word can *mean* all these things. This reason hinges on Jizang’s metaphysical stance. Second, in light of the second interpretation, the word “convention” has as its meaning non-convention. Now, all things belong to the category of non-convention; therefore, they can be considered to be the meaning of the word. Jizang also cites the words “jar” and “cloth” for elucidation. We know that “*is* a jar” and “*is not* a jar” are codependent; so are jars and non-jars. Since clothes are non-jars, the word “jar” can then have clothes as its meaning; correspondingly, the word “cloth” can *mean* jars as well.²²

Additionally, we may thus arrive at this interpretation. In Jizang’s view, all things are codependent, interrelated, in no hindrance to each other, and with no determinate boundary between one another. They, let us say, constitute an interwoven net that

²¹ *Erdi Yi*, 89b10–12. Cf. Ming-wood Liu, *Madhyamaka Thought in China* (Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994), 145–148. It is said in *Erdi Yi*, 81b6–8, that though a material object is, *á la* the two truths, said to be existent and nonexistent, it is in reality neither existent nor nonexistent.

²² *Erdi Yi*, 95c8–96a8.

stretches over whatever there is. The application of one word to one part of the net, then, never terminates there; it is automatically directed to any other part of the net as well. Therefore, one word *means* all things. Though this reason is not plainly formulated by Jizang, it somehow tallies with what is meant in the verse of the *Avatamsaka-sutra*, “Realizing infinity in one, and one in infinity,” which he quotes in support of the interpretation.²³

We may here read the verb “mean” as “allude to.” Myriad things in the world, surely, cannot all be the semantic correlate of a word like “horse,” but they might be viewed as its implications. For Jizang, a horse is not different from the Way as its transcendental state (or *ti* 體), whereas the Way is not different from the myriad things, and so a horse is not really different from all other things. Thus, the word “horse” can allude to the myriad things other than horses!

All in all, the theory states that a nominal word *X* means X, non-X, the negation of X or the Way that is not X, and all things whatsoever. The word, then, amounts to have infinite meanings or referents. Since a language user may stress one interpretation on one occasion, and another on another occasion, we see here the indeterminacy of linguistic reference.

IV.

We have briefly sketched Jizang’s *Sanlun* thought and explicated in detail his “one name, infinite meanings” theory. The theory presumably looks odd, problematic, and paradoxical. Jizang resorts, perhaps not very successfully, to a few passages in Mahayana Buddhist sutras and treatises to show the soundness of his approach. The theory has the advantage of suggesting the coincidence between his thought and what

²³ See *Sanlun Xuanyi*, 45:14b13–14.

he takes to be the content of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. However, apart from its counterintuitive outlook, one may wonder whether the theory places too much of a referential burden on words, for a word like “cat” would then refer, not only to cats, but also to the Way and all other things. Again, communication may fail if the speaker and hearer do not have the same convention, or if the convention is unstable across time. Thus, one wonders whether one can practically *say* “It’s cold here” and *mean* “It’s warm here” or “It’s not cold here.”

Jizang, of course, does not claim that a word means simply what the speaker chooses it to mean. He seems to think that the Buddhist community or those who are to read the Buddhist texts should be aware of his four interpretations for a better reading of the texts, but nothing beyond that. Besides, the conventional interpretation remains the starting point for understanding key terms in the texts. The conventional interpretation is not to be discarded. However, it need be implemented in the context of a provisional understanding of words, which the other three interpretations supply. These interpretations constitute, as it were, a new set of general linguistic rules which give the *nonconventional* meanings of words, and which one must follow in order to better catch the intention of the speaker or writer, generally a Buddha or a Buddhist sage.

The idea that all words refer toward the Way reminds us of the semantic claim by the Hindu philosopher Ramanuja (c. 1075–1140 CE) that all thing-denoting words, such as “cat” and “mat,” eventually refer to the supreme God as the existential basis and *soul* of all things. However, unlike Ramanuja, Jizang does not take the Way to be sayable in words.²⁴ Moreover, the notion of “meaning” (*yi*) concerns not simply the

²⁴ For Ramanuja, the word “cat” denotes the bodies of cats, the souls of cats, and God too, all being its proper referents; there seems to be a referential burden here. See S. S. Raghavachar (trans.), *Vedartha-savgraha of Wriramanujacarya* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), 19.

semantic meaning of a word, but also what the user of the word intends to convey beyond its literal meaning, including roughly connotations and implications (assuming that the user here follows the set of rules referred to above). It is not claimed that a word has many semantic meanings or direct referents. Hence, the theory may not confer an unbearable referential burden on words.

Now, can we apply the theory to a larger context, beyond that of the Buddhist community? Can we take the word “coffee” to mean non-coffee, *not*-coffee or the negation of coffee, even all things in the world? If we dismiss the notion of the Way and the related thinking, the theory may remind us of what has been termed “meaning holism” in analytical philosophy, basically the thesis that what a linguistic expression means depends on its relations to many or all other expressions in the language.²⁵ Jizang would agree that the meanings of “*x* is a jar” and “*x* is not a jar” are mutually dependent, so are the meanings of “jar” and “non-jar” and of “long” and “short.” Given a rationale behind the nonhindrance interpretation, what a word means would somehow depend on the meanings of all or most other words.²⁶ However, differing from the typical forms of meaning holism, Jizang’s theory rather centers around a notion of multiple meanings: to give the meaning of a nominal word is to give its four types of meanings, which involve the conventional meanings of many other words.

The theory is not as absurd as it may seem. Here, it is not just that words within a given language system have meaning only relative to other words. Rather, words may mean what are literally meant by their opposite words. Yet, people do use language this way in daily practice, as when one says “Jack is a genius” but means, ironically,

²⁵ For a general introduction of meaning holism, see Peter Pagin, “Meaning Holism,” in Ernest Lepore and Barry Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 213–232.

²⁶ If all things are codependent and interrelated, then so are all words. As we cannot really speak of words without considering their meanings, all words are codependent in meaning.

“Jack is a moron.” In the metaphor “Cynthia is a hedgehog,” on the other hand, the word “hedgehog” connotes the negation of a hedgehog (“Cynthia is *not* literally a hedgehog”) while intimating something else. Further, an irascible boss shouting “Jack is a genius!” might imply that Jack is anything and everything but a smart creature, whereas the word “crows” in the order “Protect the sacrifice food from the crows!” may cover whatever has a mouth. All this, while helping to diminish the absurdity of the theory, suggests how we may approach the three nonconventional interpretations. Anyway, I think the theory, minus its metaphysical aspect, deserves the attention of contemporary philosophers, especially if Jizang’s viewpoint concerning the indeterminacy of actuality is somehow plausible.

For Jizang, there is nothing determinate in reality, nor can there be any objective representation of reality through words. However, under the propensity, presumably fostered by the improper use of words, for a definite understanding of things, we tend to view the referent of a word as determinate, independent, substantial, and delimited. We think that words match well with their objects, that the latter are properly determined by the former. We may, for instance, in our use of the word “mind” take the mind to be determinately existent and substantial, perhaps endowed with some essence, and delimited from the body or matter. Against this practice, Jizang would recommend that we provisionally bring in the notion of emptiness: the mind is empty of any determinate existence and nature. He is emphatic that we must not then stick to a determinate conception of emptiness. Likewise, there should be no attachment to the negation of existence or emptiness.

The issue at stake also concerns how we construe the meaning of a word. With the “one name, infinite meanings” theory, we are not supposed to attend only to the literal or conventional interpretation of word meaning. Here, Jizang introduces the codependent interpretation to indicate that the thing x as the intended referent of the

word *X* is known as *X* only in dependence on non-*X*; the *X* is only *X of non-X* and so may not determinately be *X*. Indeed, *x* can also be referred to and known as non-*X*. His Way-revealing interpretation further advises us to treat *X* as connoting the negation of *X* such that *x* is *not* a determinate *X*. Meanwhile, the nonhindrance interpretation suggests that *x* is in interwoven union with all other things and has no exclusive self-identity at all. Overall, the thing *x*, being indeterminable by words like *X* and *non-X*, is not precisely as we may characterize it on the basis of the conventional meanings of the words. Given the theory, finally, the value of words is restored, for we now recognize right in words the mechanism for *emptying* whatever determinate content that may come with their conventional understanding.

Just as medicines are prescribed for eliminating disease, not the patient, so the theory is meant to erase the determinate factors in linguistic reference, but not the rest. It does not render all words equally applicable or inapplicable to a given object. On the other hand, we recall that the principle of non-acquisition is self-referential. We, for example, cannot say *x* is *determinately* not a determinate *X*. The theory is not one that presents a determinate picture of linguistic meaning and reference. Thus, it may best be viewed as an expedient reminder for how to use and understand words provisionally, and in a spirit of non-acquisition.