

Dunne, John D. (1999) "On Essences, Goals and Social Justice: an Exercise in Buddhist Theology." In *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. Edited by J. Makransky and R. Jackson. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press.

## On Essences, Goals and Social Justice: An Exercise in Buddhist Theology

John D. Dunne

When I was invited to present a paper on the panel from which this volume is derived, I originally intended to spend most of my time engaging in a bit of applied Buddhist theology, so to speak. Specifically, I intended to discuss certain categories relevant to the pursuit of social justice. But as I thought more deeply about how best to proceed, the need to examine the term "Buddhist theology" and to discuss in some detail the "theological" principles I intended to apply became apparent. As a result, the applied aspect of this exercise – the attempt to address issues within the realm of social justice – remains somewhat truncated. This is not to say, however, that an examination of "Buddhist theology" itself is merely an annoyance that I am obliged to endure. Rather, the way we envision Buddhist theology is crucial, for the vision we choose to accept corresponds to limits on the possibilities that appear to us when we formulate theological principles and apply them in practice. Our examination of Buddhist theology, however, is complicated by the question of where to begin: do we start with a metatheory of Buddhist theology, then move on to the principles implied by that theory and the praxis that stems from those principles? Do we begin with some praxis, then derive principles and hence a metatheory? Or do we begin with some principles that imply both a metatheory and a particular praxis?

I do not raise the question of beginnings so as to offer a direct answer; instead, I merely ask the reader to note that these three theological moments – metatheory, principles, and praxis – are inextricably interrelated. Hence, if my remarks on application or praxis are necessarily somewhat brief, by dwelling on metatheory (or "metatheology") and a set of related principles, I hope to spark some interest among Buddhist activists and others in a further exploration of the practical or applied theology that I will touch upon.

As is suggested by the three theological moments that I have highlighted, my presentation falls into three parts: in the first, I will discuss some difficulties of "Buddhist theology" and explain the approach I favor. In the second part, I formulate the Buddhist principles

that I will apply to the question of social justice. And in the third, I present a brief application of those principles.

## **BUDDHIST THEOLOGY**

The night before presenting the original version of this article, I told a senior colleague that I was to give a paper on Buddhist theology. In response, he burst out, "Isn't that kind of kinky?!" He contended that since Buddhism lacked *theos*, Buddhist Theology could only be an oxymoron. To rejoin, one might note that there are some Buddhist notions that function like a *theos*, but another tack is simply to say that there are other interpretations of Buddhist theology to which the question of a *theos* is irrelevant. On one such interpretation, the term Buddhist theology draws a parallel between the self-consciously Christian thinking that Christian theologians engage in, even within an academic context, and a kind of self-consciously Buddhist thinking that a Buddhist might engage in, even in an academic context. Essaying a definition of this approach, we might say:

Buddhist theology is the self-conscious attempt to present reasoned arguments from within the tradition on issues of importance to Buddhists in order to correct, critique, clarify or expand upon the tradition.

Now, although this definition does not seem all that problematic, this is in part due to the vague nature of the terms employed. For the sake of argument, we might assume that one can specify without great controversy what it means to be "self-conscious" in this context. But other aspects of the definition raise more persistent problems that are rather hard to ignore. The first and most obvious of these is simply the question of how we understand the *Buddhist tradition*, and the second is the related problem of what constitutes *presenting reasoned arguments from within the tradition*.

Contemporary Buddhists are certainly not the first to confront these problems. Consider, for example, the Tibetan doxographical enterprise. In order to assess the tremendously diverse philosophies of Indian Buddhists and fit them into a hierarchical schema, Tibetan doxographers are faced with the problem of defining what constitutes Buddhist thought. As always, such problems become most clear with liminal cases, such as the *Vātsīputrīyas*. These misguided fellows were rather sloppy about the notion of Selflessness, and as a result, they have been vilified ever since the time of Vasubandhu (some fifteen

hundred years ago) as the paragons of bad Buddhist philosophers.<sup>1</sup> But for Tibetans such as the eighteenth century philosopher lCang kya rol pa'i rdo rje, these wayward Indians pose a special problem. That is, according to Tibetan philosophers such as lCang kya, to be truly Buddhist, a philosopher must assent to four basic points: all things are impermanent; all contaminated things are or produce suffering; all things are devoid of any ultimately real Self; and *nirvāṇa* is peace.<sup>2</sup> On his view, then, a Buddhist philosopher cannot admit any ultimately real Self and still be a Buddhist. And since the Vātsīputrīyas allegedly admit an ultimately real Self, they cannot be Buddhists. In institutional terms, however, they are (or more precisely, were) Buddhists because they had taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha and ran around claiming to be *bhikṣus* – indeed, they were *bhikṣus*, for their monastic rules were not vilified in the way their philosophy was.

lCang kya solves this problem by allowing it to stand: the Vātsīputrīyas are at once Buddhist – because of their faith in the three jewels and their adherence to Buddhist vows – and not Buddhist – because their philosophy includes views that lCang kya has defined as non-Buddhist (55-58).

Certainly, on the definition given earlier, lCang kya's doxography is an instance of Buddhist theology: it speaks from within the tradition about a central issue – the proper way of thinking so as to become a Buddha; it critiques that which fails to be Buddhist; it corrects those Buddhists who are stuck at the "lower" philosophical levels; it clarifies the nature of the tradition; and by its very nature it enlarges on the tradition, in that doxography is only possible after the philosophies it purports to analyze have been formulated. But while lCang kya's doxography clearly meets our first definition of Buddhist theology, we should note with considerable interest that his Buddhist theologizing has created an insurmountable tension for itself: the Vātsīputrīyas must be both Buddhists and not Buddhists.

On my view, this tension is unavoidable because it is created precisely by the way this form of Buddhist theology proceeds. That is, this form of Buddhist theology necessarily involves, on the one hand, an all-encompassing definition of the tradition and, on the other, a definition of what it means to reason from within that tradition. On lCang kya's fairly typical view, to reason from within the tradition one must shun excluded middles and pay proper homage to the law of contradiction.<sup>3</sup> The problem, however, is that a truly all-encompassing definition of any living tradition would almost certainly be bursting at the seams with excluded middles, and it would most likely trample all over the law of contradiction.

My point in saying all this is really quite straightforward. If Buddhist theology must locate itself within the tradition as a whole, and if it is to say something coherent about the tradition, then it must essay some systematic and over-arching definition of the tradition. But in the process of formulating anything more than a trivial definition, one inevitably excludes some who would claim to be Buddhist. In other words, by attempting to speak for the whole tradition, one inevitably fragments it – one of the five worst deeds for a Buddhist to commit. And a sojourn in hell is a heavy price to pay for a bit of Buddhist theology!

Of course, any good bodhisattva is willing to plunge into hell for others' sake, so the threat of karmic retribution need not dissuade us from accepting the vision of Buddhist theology suggested by works such as ICang kya's. One can, however, find far more compelling reasons for rejecting the approach typified by ICang kya. These reasons are derived from a hypothesis that I would like to introduce at this point: when we attempt an exhaustive definition of, for example, a "Buddhist," we must proceed either from an *essentialist* perspective or a *teleological* one. To be *essentialist* is to construct one's definition on the basis of an essence, construed as a property or set of properties, that is purported to be truly present in every instance – every "true" Buddhist assents, for example, to certain beliefs while rejecting other beliefs. To be *teleological* is to construct one's definition in terms of some *telos* or goal – in our case, either a goal that all Buddhists are alleged to seek, or a goal that the definition itself is meant to fulfill.

These two options – to be essentialist, or to be teleological – are at the heart of what I wish to raise in this article, and I will discuss them in greater detail below. But at this point, in anticipation of that discussion, I will make this claim: an essentialist definition is actually a teleological one in which the *telos* has not been made explicit, and to the extent that the *telos* in question is imposed by the concept of an essence, rather than derived through consensus, it may harm those who have had no voice in the formulation of that essence. With this in mind, I would argue that the definition of a monolithic tradition required by the approach exemplified by ICang kya slips all too easily into essentialism, for it attempts to define what is "Buddhist" by appealing to some universalized properties – whether a set of beliefs or vows – that are meant to characterize all Buddhists. Tending toward essentialism, such definitions do not present explicit goals, and one is therefore left wondering what those goals might be – what, in particular, requires ICang kya to offer what amount to two competing definitions? What is being preserved? What is being rejected and excluded? Who benefits and who is harmed thereby?

Answering questions such as these would require an extensive examination of ICang kya's own historical milieu. In any case, the answers are less important than the queries, for the mere plausibility of these questions justifies our suspicions about the motives behind the essentialism nascent in this approach. It is not so much that we should be suspicious of ICang kya himself – perhaps his motives were entirely benign. Instead, we should be suspicious of the hidden goals themselves, for it is entirely possible that some later interpreter could employ ICang kya's definitions to justify the suppression of those who are not "true" Buddhists. This inchoate harm would be true of any essentialization of the tradition, and since our first definition of Buddhist theology requires just such an essentialist view, we must find some other approach if we wish to avoid such harm.

In an effort to avoid the essentialism implicit in the approach I have discussed so far, one might propose any number of other approaches to Buddhist theology. The one I prefer can be stated in an almost embarrassingly simple fashion: to do Buddhist theology is to think like a Buddhist (or, perhaps, some specific Buddhists). In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that to do Buddhist theology one must think like a Buddhist in general; rather, one must think like a *particular* Buddhist (or Buddhists). Likewise, in suggesting that one think like a Buddhist, what I mean is that one adduce certain principles from the works and words of some Buddhist(s), and that one then attempt to think in accord with those principles about the issue at hand.

What is immediately obvious here is that this version of Buddhist theology must begin with an act of interpretation. But this act does not attempt to be normative, in that it does not make any claims about the way in which all Buddhists should think. Rather, this interpretive act is of quite limited scope, for it claims merely to be formulating principles on the basis of the explicit statements of a particular Buddhist (or Buddhists) in such a way that they would or do elicit the agreement of that Buddhist (or those Buddhists). In the case of living figures, this would be a dialogic process; in the case of philosophers to whom one has no access, it would be a process that involves the construction of an interpretive context and authorial persona for what might be called an imaginary dialogue. Of course, the interpretive issues at stake here range far beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that I presume no statement or text can have only a single possible interpretation,<sup>4</sup> but that at the same time there are definite limits on interpretation. The result, in any case, is that this approach is explicitly teleological from the beginning, for it is oriented toward the straightforward goal of arriving at an interpretation that is acceptable

to one's interlocutor, whether actual or imaginary.

Of course, one might claim that this approach is somewhat trivial if its *telos* consists solely in arriving at a consensual understanding of some principles. But I envision an approach that also applies what might be called a "teleological analysis" of those principles themselves. That is, when one examines these principles in terms of the mode of rationality through which they are presented,<sup>5</sup> what are the expected results of these principles, and do those results conform to the *telos* that one seeks? This analysis requires that some choice of *telos* has been made, and it implies a self-conscious sharing of that *telos* with the Buddhist(s) in question. In the course of such an analysis, it would be important to note that one need not agree on all principles, but rather only on those whose efficacy is essential to the shared *telos*. Likewise, the self-conscious identification of oneself and one's interlocutor as Buddhist need not enter into the analysis. In other words, unless one's goals have something to do with preserving Buddhist institutions or identities, one can relinquish the debate about who is "Buddhist" as irrelevant to the pursuit of one's goals.

One might argue that, thus far, this form of Buddhist theology is simply careful, primarily emic scholarship: it is an attempt to understand a person's spoken or written words in the clearest possible fashion and to formulate that understanding in a set of manageable principles. Indeed, the interpretive approach I would favor might prove unfamiliar or even objectionable to some who identify themselves as Buddhist, in as much as it relies on motifs – such as notions of historical consciousness and a nuanced approach to authorial intent – that are unfamiliar or challenging to them. Moreover, since anyone with some training should be able to engage in the same manner with a text or oral testimony, this interpretive aspect of Buddhist theology is not really all that Buddhist. One might respond that the interpretation becomes Buddhist when the interpreter affirms the philosophical principles derived thereby, but this would raise an amusing corollary to ICang kya's theory (one that underscores the difficulties of his enterprise) – namely, that one might well be philosophically a Buddhist, but a Christian, for example, in terms of faith and practice.

Be that as it may, the point here is that there is something that the Buddhist theologian and the academic should share, if any attempt at interpretation is to be possible: namely, a belief<sup>6</sup> that languages, cultures and time do not constitute insurmountable barriers to understanding; a belief that one can speak with other human beings or read their words (even if, in the latter case, those persons be long dead) and be able to come to understand them. And if Buddhist

theology is to be more than an interpretation, but also an attempt to apply the principles derived thereby, an additional belief is necessary: the belief that what is understood in interpretation is not entirely restricted to a particular time or place, but that it is somehow applicable now in one's own context.

The justification of these first two beliefs – the belief in the penetrability of cultural, linguistic and historical barriers and the belief in the possibility of genuine understanding – is no mean task. Suffice it to say that if these beliefs are not justified, then you would not be able to understand any of the words written on this page. The justification of the third belief – that the principles adduced from interpreting a Buddhist text or testimony are applicable to our own situation – is in the pudding, so to speak; that is, it is only by actually attempting to apply some principles to some contemporary issue that the viability of such a project will become evident. Without further ado then, I will now gather the ingredients for the pudding.

## **SOME PRINCIPLES: ESSENTIALISM AND PURPOSE**

I have already mentioned a certain choice: a choice between focusing on essences, or focusing on purposes or goals. These two possibilities, I would maintain, pertain to any use of language or concepts. In other words, when I say or think, "This is a chair," I can either be doing so on the basis of a belief in real essences, or I can do so with the awareness that that statement or determination is meaningful only in terms of the expectations that arise in relation to a particular goal. These two are mutually exclusive, and they are exhaustive: one must either believe that one is trafficking in real essences, or that one is organizing one's perceptions in relation to some goal; one cannot believe that one is doing both. I will maintain that the first option – to accept the reality of essences – would constitute a mistaken belief. Hence, it is the second option – the recognition of the regulative function of our goals – that we must accept; not because it is preferable, but because it is in fact what we do.

This, then, is the principle with which I would like to do my thinking (or theologizing, if you prefer) about social justice: that the belief in essences is mistaken, and that it must be supplanted by a full awareness of one's telos.

This is an extremely concise way of stating the gist of a very lengthy and detailed series of arguments from the philosophy of Dharmakīrti, a seventh century Indian philosopher. At this point, it may all seem a bit opaque, so perhaps I should step back a bit and

explain in greater detail just what I am getting at. I will begin with Dharmakīrti's view of essences, then I will consider how and why he rejects essentialism. Finally, I will consider how he supplants essences with the notion of goals.

## ESSENCES

I use the term essence to capture the nuances of Dharmakīrti's usage of the term *sāmānya* (or *jāti*), a "sameness" or universal. For Dharmakīrti, the notion of an essence arises most obviously in the context of language, although conceptual awareness, which he understands to operate much in the same way as language, is equally relevant in this regard. If we restrict ourselves to a discussion of language, however, we can say the following: by *essence* (*sāmānya*) Dharmakīrti means an entity that is instantiated in multiple points of time and space such that all the spatio-temporal loci in which it is instantiated are the objects of the same expression (understood as a type, not a token). Consider, for example, the expression person. We would understand that expression to take each of us panelists as an object. Now, we can ask ourselves, "Why is it that this expression can refer to each of these individuals? Why does it not also refer to chairs?" On the essentialist account, the answer is that there is something the same about all of these individuals; present in all of us is an entity – call it *personhood* – and it is by virtue of this entity's presence that each of us can be called a *person*. Moreover, since this entity is not present in chairs, they cannot be called *persons*; only things that instantiate *personhood* can be called *persons*, and chairs lack *personhood*.

At first glance, this does not seem all that implausible. Certainly, our intuition would tell us that if some things are the objects of a certain expression while others are not, there must be something identical about those things that differentiates them from the other things.<sup>7</sup> But although this may seem plausible, Dharmakīrti points out that it makes no sense at all.

Dharmakīrti offers numerous arguments against essentialism, but perhaps his favorite motif is an identity/difference analysis, especially with regard to two basic criteria for the success of any semantic theory: those criteria are continuity or repeatability (*anvaya*) and action (*pravṛtti*). Continuity is similar to the notion of sameness. That is, each use of the expression person, for example, is picking out something that is the same in each case – the same essence, personhood, is continuous across all persons. In Western philosophical terms, this

amounts to the notion that essence is repeated in each instance, or that it is distributed over all its instances.

The criterion of *action* rests on the notion that any expression is successful in its semantic function if and only if it directs the interpreter of the expression toward only the intended referent and not something else. For example, if I say to you, the reader, "Please point to the paper on which these words are printed," that expression must give you some information that directs you toward this paper. And if you were to abide by that injunction, you would extend a finger and point to this paper; you could not abide by that injunction by, say, standing on your head and wiggling your legs in the air.

Dharmakīrti employs these two criteria – *repeatability* and *action* – as part of an identity/difference argument. Basically, he asks: Is the essence *personhood*, for example, different from its instances – the individuals in question – or the same as those instances? If *personhood* is identical to its instances, then it could not be repeated in all persons, because if it were repeated in all of its instances, then all persons would be exactly identical. That is, if *personhood* were exactly the same as a particular person (such as my friend John), then, in order for *personhood* to be repeated or instantiated in all persons John would have to be repeated or instantiated in all persons. Amusing as this might be, it is clearly not the case. And if *personhood* it is not repeated in all persons but is instantiated only in John, then only John is a person. Thus, the essentialist theory fails the test of continuity.

The criterion of *action* becomes an issue when one considers the essence to be distinct from its instances. Consider again the injunction, "Please point to this paper." On the essentialist theory, the expression *paper* picks out some *paperness* that is instantiated in every piece of paper. But if this *paperness* is distinct from any individual paper, and if it is in fact what the expression *paper* picks out, then that injunction would not direct one toward any actual paper; it would direct one toward the essence. Thus, since the essence *paperness* is distinct from the paper – which is the same as saying that it is something other than the paper – in order to act on that injunction, you would have to ignore the paper. You would be obliged to ignore the paper because my injunction directs you toward something other than the paper, namely, the essence. Hence, if you were to follow my injunction, you would seek to point to the essence, but since the essence is necessarily not an instance, you could not point to anything at all.

As refutations of essentialism, I find these arguments quite convincing, and I would agree that essentialism is a flawed theory. But more than being merely philosophically flawed, on Dharmakīrti's view, essentialism is practically flawed. In fact, he maintains that

essentialism about one's personal identity is the primary cause of all suffering.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, some of the ways that this might be true are obvious. That is, while we habitually assume essences to be real entities in the world, there are in fact no such entities; hence, we must be supplying them. And if in the process of supplying essences, I wish, for example, to claim that a particular individual or group of individuals are not persons because they lack *personhood*, or that a particular place is part of "the Motherland," because *Motherland-hood* is instantiated in it, the only thing that will stop me will be other, competing attempts at supplying other essences. That such attempts can come to blows is obviously the case. In this regard, I am reminded of quip I heard from the late A. K. Ramanujan: "A language is a dialect with an army." Here, we should say, "An essence is an assertion with an army."

I am, however, anticipating my discussion of social justice, and before doing so, one more issue must be dealt with. I mentioned above that the principles I wish to employ are that the belief in essences is mistaken, and that it must be supplanted by a full awareness of one's *telos*. I must now explain how it is that the question of one's goal or *telos* becomes an issue here.

To discuss this point, we should begin by recognizing that the critique of essences appears to make language and conceptual thought impossible. That is, if there is in fact no real *personhood*, for example, that is the same in all that we call *persons*, then how is it that we are able to use that expression for all of them? Dharmakīrti responds to these objections by noting that the absence of some real, hypostasized essence does not mean that one cannot *construct* or supply some unreal, imaginary essence or sameness for things.

The construction of unreal essences begins with the claim that, if there are no real essences, then no two things can be identical; ontologically, this means that all things are entirely and completely unique. However, despite the uniqueness of all things, it is obviously the case that expressions such as *person* still manage to make sense. If then, there is in fact no real entity that is the same in any two persons, and if the expression *person* can still be used for those persons, then there must be some way of accounting for their sameness without positing some positive entity. Dharmakīrti claims that their sameness consists of a negation: namely, their *difference* – but not their difference from each other; rather, their sameness is their difference from all *non-persons*. Thus, persons are the same in that they are not *non-persons*.<sup>9</sup>

On Dharmakīrti's ontology, at least, this makes good sense. That is, since any thing is in fact entirely different from all other things, to

base one's categories on difference is initially not problematic. The difficulty comes when one tries to move from the absolute difference of any given thing, such as the paper of this page, to the notion that it is *not* different from all other papers because it *is* different from all non-papers. What this requires, clearly, is that we have a way of ignoring or "filtering out" the difference between papers while focusing upon their difference from non-papers. This "filtering mechanism" consists of a set of expectations that arise from one's intended goal.

Consider, for example, the papers once again. We should note first that, if the papers were to have some *paperness*, they would present themselves as such in sense perception; that is, sense perception would be *determinate*; in perceiving them, we would necessarily perceive them as papers.<sup>10</sup> But if there is no *paperness* in the papers, our sense perceptions are necessarily indeterminate. To construe them as papers requires some act on our side – an act that attributes a constructed essence to them and determines them as papers. One can ask at this point: Why do we bother to make determinations? Dharmakīrti's contention is that we do so because we have some purpose in mind: we need the papers to fulfill some goal, or to avoid some undesirable outcome. This need for a means to a goal amounts to a set of expectations about causal functions – there are things that can perform the functions we need, and those that cannot. But again, these expectations must be stated negatively, because there is no positive entity – no essential causal potentiality – to which they could refer. The upshot, then, is that one's goals require a certain kind of causal functionality, but since that causal functionality cannot be pinpointed affirmatively, it is approximated negatively by excluding those things which do not have the desired effects or functions.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, when I ask you to point to this paper, the term *paper* is really a marker for a certain disposition that I have – a desire to achieve a goal whose accomplishment requires a kind of causal functionality that *non-paper* things (chairs, tables, etc.) cannot perform. And both you and I can see all the papers as the same (i.e., as "papers") on this basis – namely, that they are all different from those things that cannot perform the desired causal function.

Now, there is obviously quite a lot more that could be said here, especially about how conventions are constructed such that persons using language can share a set of expectations, but the key issue I wish to raise is how goals are regulative. As I have noted, the determination of these things as papers has to do with their function or causal capacity – they produce effects that other things do not produce. Obviously, the papers, as with all real things (*bhāva*, *vastu*), always present the effect of interaction with one's senses. If this is all we had

to go on, we could not say very much. All we could say is that these things are perceptible, but since we can say this of any real thing, we cannot differentiate the papers from other things on this basis. Hence, if we want to identify them as *papers*, then we must have something more in mind. That "something more" is precisely a goal that guides our inquiry into these things – it establishes a set of expectations about function by which additional determinations can be made – flat, thin, combustible, capable of bearing ink, and so on. Again, it is important to note that these distinctions are made by ignoring the differences among combustible things, for example, in favor of excluding what is not combustible. And in order for me to make those determinations, I must have some *interest* – something that makes me focus not on the difference among the papers, but the papers' difference from everything else. This *interest* amounts to a desire to attain a goal. In other words, it is all a matter of what one chooses to focus on, and these choices are regulated by one's goals. In a certain sense, one might even claim that to choose a goal is to choose a reality.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

With all this in mind, allow me now to finally suggest how the principles adduced above might be applied to questions of social justice. This is where the largely interpretive enterprise above becomes Buddhist theology, at least as I understand it.

In accord with the usage of the term in the United States, I will briefly define the pursuit of social justice as the attempt to ameliorate (or more optimistically, eliminate) oppression and inequities in society. This, of course, is not much of a definition at all, since the difficult issues concern questions about what constitutes oppression and inequities. These include issues about resource distribution, quality of life, expectations and so on.

While clarifying these issues is clearly crucial to the effective pursuit of social justice, I will restrict myself to another issue – one that has received more attention of late, but still remains an extremely difficult issue for many activists. I am referring to the question of what I shall call *communal identity*. By this I mean the way in which a person is identified as a member of a particular community; and when I use the term *community* here, I mean it in its broadest sense. Hence, religious identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, class identity and the like are all species of communal identity. My purpose in throwing all these different forms of identity into the same barrel is to show how they all tend to generate certain assumptions about the persons so

identified.

The first and most obvious of these assumptions has to do with the notion of essences. Let us consider, for example, the notion of "racial" or "ethnic" identity. Almost inevitably, to identify an individual as the member of a some "ethnic group" or "race" is to assume that that individual is somehow the same as all other individuals of that ethnicity or race. In this regard, it is crucial to note that Dharmakīrti's theory of essentialism includes the notion that an essence necessarily implies other properties. That is, when one believes that some person or thing has some particular essence, one assumes that that person or thing also necessarily has some other essential qualities; these latter qualities are assumed to be necessitated by the presence of the aforementioned essence.<sup>12</sup> That which has "paperiness," for example, necessarily has the essential quality of being combustible, capable of bearing ink and so on. What is interesting about this process of associating certain qualities with a given essence is that one can associate qualities that have absolutely no sensory evidence for them, or even qualities that are contradicted by sensory evidence. For Dharmakīrti, a standard example is the notion of something "being one's own" (*ātmīya*), where anything that has that essence, anything that is one's own, is assumed to have qualities such as desirability and so on.<sup>13</sup>

If we now return to the question of ethnic or racial identity, when an essentialist says that all persons of a particular "ethnicity" or "race" necessarily have the same essence – such as "*whiteness*" – s/he is at the same time saying that all the persons with that essence also have certain essential qualities which are necessarily present with that essence; these latter qualities function as the definition, in a loose sense, of that essence. On a Eurocentric world-view, for example, *whiteness* might be necessarily present with *superiority*.

It is quite easy to find instances of this kind of ethnocentric essentialism, but what is even more common is to *deny* that certain essential qualities are present with some essence. For a long period during the Euroamerican slave trade, for example, it was commonly claimed that Africans were not fully human. Interestingly, a similar claim was made in the Eighteenth century by some English with regard to the Irish, who were considered to be little better than beasts.<sup>14</sup> The point behind these examples is that, by essentializing the identity of Africans or Irishmen, one can assume that they all have the same traits, and that these traits necessarily exclude the trait of being truly human.

The Buddhist response I offer here is simply that, as has been shown above, essences are unreal; they cannot possibly exist. And

ontologically, this necessarily means that there is nothing whatsoever that is actually the same about any two Africans or any two Irishmen. Of course, reflectively, many of us know this to be true: even our popular notions about biology – such as the notion that no two persons have exactly the same gene sequence – tell us that no two persons can be physically identical. Likewise, one cannot even identify any particular physical structure or pattern that every single member of a particular ethnic group has. If we branch away from mere physicalism, it becomes even more obvious that, on the mental level, persons must be unique due to the uniqueness of their sensory experiences. Yet even though, at this level of particularity, the differences among individuals are undeniable, the essentialists attempt to obscure the trees with the forest – to claim that there is some macro level at which sameness persists. Again, the Buddhist response is simply: there is no macro level, except in one's imagination.

Clearly, then, a critique of essences can be employed as a tool to counter racism and ethnocentrism (in which I include, for example, Orientalism). For to be racist or ethnocentrist is certainly to be essentialist: it is the presumption that the essence that is allegedly instantiated in each individual of the ethnic group in question is necessarily co-instantiated with (*sāmānyādhikāraṇya*) other essential qualities such as "intellectual inferiority," "dishonesty," "lack of cleanliness" and so on. If one critiques the essentialist world-view and points out that any such sameness is fabricated, one has at least removed the rationale for racism and ethnocentrism.

This application of a critique of essentialism, however, is not as straightforward as it appears. For in an ironic twist, these anti-essentialist arguments could be easily used to hinder attempts at social justice. Here, I am thinking particularly of the repeal of affirmative action policies in California and the conservative politics with which it has been associated. Many of the voices against affirmative action claimed that affirmative action is a racist policy because it perpetuates divisions among ethnic groups. And although this largely conservative response was not extended to a full critique of essentialism, an official anti-essentialism might serve some oppressive purposes quite nicely. On the other side, we find that the California issue put those working for social justice in the odd position of defending the kind of essentialism that allows oppression in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, essentialism on the part of communities seeking social justice is a persistent issue; in some ways, the perception of diversity as mere "political correctness" points to the essentialist manner in which those seeking social justice sometimes conceive their communal identities. Some persons from within these communities have pointed

out the problematic nature of the essentialization of their identities (and I am not thinking here only of conservatives), and if we take the principles adduced earlier seriously, this essentialism must be uprooted, since it contains the seeds of oppression.<sup>16</sup> As Dharmakīrti might have put it, just as essentialism about one's self perpetuates suffering, essentialism about one's community perpetuates oppression.

Despite, however, the need to critique the essentialization of oppressed communities from within those communities themselves, it has thus far been difficult to conceive of a way to eliminate essentialism without also eliminating those communities themselves. How, in other words, does one eliminate communal essentialism without also robbing historically oppressed communities of their voices and their identity?

This is where the notion of *telos* becomes crucial, for on the analysis I presented above, even when one *purports* to just be pointing out essences, one is *in fact* constructing an essence on the basis of some *telos*, although one may not be aware of this fact. Hence, in the explicit essentialism of the *Hindutva* or "Hindu-ness" movement in India, one can argue that this alleged essence actually stands for a series of goals concerning social conservatism, Indian nationalism and (perhaps most of all) political power in India. Affirming the reality of the essence merely serves to obscure the sometimes unsavory goals hidden within an essentialist enterprise.

For the purposes of social justice, the key is to make these goals explicit. In terms of responding to oppression, one begins by pointing out that essences are unreal; one then demonstrates the implicit goals of the essentialism in question, and one shows that other goals are more desirable. In terms of one's communal identity, one takes control of the construction of its essence by explicitly formulating its goals – the most obvious and straightforward such goal being the elimination of oppression itself. The point, in any case, is to stop playing the *essence-game*, for one will inevitably lose.

Obviously, there are many more issues that need to be considered here, not the least of which being the way in which one can (in practical terms) formulate goals in a consensual manner. So too, questions of resource distribution are crucial, in as much as scarcity, inequity and notions about proportional need are certainly products not just of essentialism, but of the goals which are currently in place. Despite the difficulties of such issues, I would maintain that one cannot think clearly about them without first critiquing essentialism, and if there is any hope for solutions, it can only come through the consensual construction of goals – the vision of a common *telos*.

NOTES

- 1 See Vasubandhu's presentation refutation and refutation of the Vātsīputrīya position (1189ff).
- 2 ICang kya (58) follows the opinion of mKhas grub dge legs dpal bzang, an earlier philosopher in his tradition, in identifying a Buddhist view by appealing to these four points. For a specific enumeration of these points, known as "the four seals that authenticate a philosophical view (*lta ba bkar btags kyī phyag rgya bzhi*)," see the work of ICang kya's student, dKon mchog 'jigs med dbang po (76).
- 3 As with most Buddhist philosophers, ICang kya is not explicit in his views on the excluded middle or the law of contradiction. Nevertheless, throughout his work he clearly follows what the Euroamerican tradition would consider a nondeviant approach to these issues. In the section of his work under consideration here, see, for example, his treatment of the relationship between person (*gang zag*) and aggregates (*phung po*) (55–56).
- 4 It is worth noting here that a naive view concerning the recoverability of some unitary and unique authorial intent can itself be considered a form of essentialism.
- 5 For more on the notion of different "modes of rationality," see the collection of essays entitled *Rationality and Relativism*, edited by Hollis and Lukes.
- 6 I use the term belief in its philosophical sense, where it means to entertain some proposition to be true.
- 7 An important point to note here is that, when this kind of intuition about language is played out, we find that not only must be the same essence be instantiated in all the objects of an expression, but that essence must *always* remain the same. It must be immutable, for if the essence *personhood*, say, were to change when I snapped my fingers, what were persons before I snapped my fingers would now be something other than persons afterward. That is, if the expression *person* still applies to all of us, yet *personhood* has changed, then either we were not persons a few moments ago, or we are not persons now. Either before or after, we would be non-persons, like chairs. For a related passage in Dharmakīrti's works, see, for example, *Pramāṇavārttikasvaytti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 144a. On all Dharmakīrti references, see both Dharmakīrti 1960 and Dharmakīrti 1989.
- 8 This is the basic point of *Pramāṇavārttikasvaytti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 221–223. On my interpretation of Dharmakīrti, what I have called "essentialism" lies at the core of *satkāyadṛṣṭi*, inasmuch as it is a form of ignorance (*avidyā*), which Dharmakīrti explicitly identifies with conceptuality and language (*Pramāṇavārttikasvaytti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 98–99ab).
- 9 Dharmakīrti discusses this important notion throughout his

*Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti*; perhaps the most concise statement occurs at *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 68-69.

- 10 For simplicity's sake, I have only discussed the model according to which essences, if real, would be directly intuited through the senses. For Dharmakīrti's discussion of more nuanced positions, as when the universal is somehow "manifested" (*vyakta*) by its instances, see *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 146-156.
- 11 See especially *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 92-95ab.
- 12 The most often cited source for these views is *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 40-42. One might argue that this necessary association of "essential properties" amounts to a "complex" notion of essence, where an essence is a set of properties, rather than a single property. For our purposes, however, it is far more useful to see how a single property – an "atomic" essence – becomes associated with other essential properties. As for Dharmakīrti himself, his discussion of "essential properties" (*svabhāva*) remains at the level where these properties are understood to be mere constructions; he thus avoids falling into the essentialism that he criticizes.
- 13 See, for example, Dharmakīrti's definition of "desire" in *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* on *Pramāṇavārttika* 1: 12.
- 14 As Poliakov points out, perhaps the most influential figure to have seen Africans as non-human animals was Voltaire (55–56, also cited by Smedley: 169). Smedley, in her brilliant study, discusses several other such instances (see especially 181–185) with regard to Africans. As for the Irish, Smedley (52–70) is one of many scholars who see the roots of contemporary Euroamerican racism in early English attitudes toward the Irish.
- 15 Not long after the events in question, the journal *Social Justice* (22: 3, 1995) devoted an entire issue to the attack on affirmative action in California. The issue is well worth reading, for it contains the full gamut of approaches – both essentialist and non-essentialist – to communal identity as expressed by persons who identify with minority communities.
- 16 Among the more influential voices against essentialism is that of Cornel West. On my reading, West's "The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning" in his *Race Matters* is an eloquent critique of the essentialization of the African-American identity. He seeks to replace essentialism with a "prophetic framework," which, with its emphasis on "vision," is teleological in tenor. Another outstanding example of a critique of essentialism in this context is Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman*.

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