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Metacognitive variety, from Inner Mongolian Buddhism to Post-Truth

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Abstract

In this chapter I present a case study based on ethnographic research carried out in Inner Mongolia, northern China. A Buddhist teacher and his students have subtly different metacognitive relationships to Buddhism and their practice and knowledge are dramatically different as a result. I offer this case study as an example of metacognitive variety, and argue that a similar approach is required to understand other cases in which people reflect, and attempt to act, on their own cognition and cognitive experience, including the transformations that have been described as 'post-truth'. In conclusion I make some methodological remarks about the study of metacognition through ethnography.

Introduction

Social scientists, like other academics concerned with human beings, have been trying to refine their understanding of belief, knowledge and ignorance -- in other words, their account of how people think about and act on information -- for a very long time.¹ One consequence of the argument I present in this chapter is that these efforts may have been missing an important part of the picture all along. My starting point is simply that it is not only academics who are interested in these questions. The people we study and write about, too, have their own thoughts about the nature of thought -- about what it is like and what it ought to be like. Those theories are likely to differ from their academic equivalents, not least because whereas academic thought aspires to universal generalizability, 'folk theories' tend to be particular, and embedded in specific social relations and practices.

The temptation will be to see this specificity as a shortcoming and dismiss them, but that would be a mistake. If we want to understand what people in general are doing when they say they believe something, then understanding metacognition -- in all its specificity and variety -- will be very important; we will need to begin to take local understandings of thought seriously. As the case study I present here shows, metacognitive beliefs and practices can have significant effects on the way people think (for instance, they provide strategies for acquiring habits, sensibilities and skills

¹ I am grateful to the editors for the invitation to make this argument in this form, and to Tom Bell, Joanna Cook and David Henig, members of the Social Anthropology Think Tank at the University of Kent, and members of the Centre for Language, Mind and Society, at the University of Hradec Králové for their comments and suggestions. Fieldwork on which this paper is partly based was funded by the William Wyse Fund, Cambridge University, and by St John's College, Cambridge. I am also deeply indebted to Hotogbayar for his patient instruction.

that aim to transform the way in which information that is encountered is experienced and understood) and what they think about (for example, by influencing how they direct their attention).

The Pew Research Center's latest figures suggest that as of 2015 there are some 244,000,000 Buddhists in China ('Buddhists' 2015), but that figure tells us little unless we know something about the variety of things it can mean, in today's China, to *be a Buddhist*. It tells us very little, if anything, about the way these people think and act at all. Even if we are well acquainted with the Buddhist philosophy contained in texts, we know nothing about the way in which the people described as Buddhist think or act until we know how they think their being Buddhist bears on their relation to those texts. Do they read them or not? Have they even heard of them? If they do read them, how do they do so? Under what conditions do they draw inferences from their knowledge about Buddhism or avoid doing so? The principal case study in this chapter is drawn from my ethnographic research with Buddhists in Inner Mongolia, northern China and it aims to shed a little light on these questions. It can do so only for this small corner of what is a vast, and surely a very varied cognitive field, so its value for thinking about Buddhism in China as a whole is mainly as an illustration of a complexity that will lead us to exercise caution in making generalizations about Buddhists in China, 'believers' of other religious traditions, and indeed consumers of all kinds of information.

In the case study, I introduce Hotogbayar, a reluctant Buddhist teacher, and his students, and explain why I think that master and students represent two distinct

approaches, or metacognitive stances, towards the teachings of the Buddha. One of these stances is relatively optimistic, the other pessimistic. The differences between them are subtle, but they issue in drastically different behaviour that leads to very different relationships to Buddhism as an objectified body of knowledge, which I have described elsewhere as distinct 'styles of belief' (Mair 2008; 2013). Though Hotogbayar and his students would all readily agree that they are participating in a single project, they are also quite aware that their views about the proper relationship to that project do not coincide, and this is something that causes Hotogbayar quite a bit of consternation.

The Inner Mongolian case is a rather dramatic one, but the conclusions I draw from it could apply in any situation in which people objectify and reflect on their relationship to a body of knowledge. As an illustration of the potential utility of a focus on metacognition, later on in the chapter, I consider the ways an understanding of metacognitive diversity might lead to a more accurate account of the developments in the past couple of years that have been labelled 'post-truth'. The few academic attempts to come to terms with post-truth that have been produced so far, cognitive factors loom large, but metacognition has not been seriously considered. I explain how a research project might go about putting that right. Finally, in conclusion, I make some methodological remarks on the ethnographic study of metacognitive variety.

Culture and metacognition

It will be useful to say a word about the concept of metacognition to explain how I use it in what follows. I have found the framework developed by the psychologist John Flavell in his paper 'Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: a new area of cognitive-developmental enquiry' to be helpful (Flavell 1979). Though some subsequent authors have suggested modifications to Flavell's model, these have mostly been minor and his original scheme suits my purposes well. Flavell defines metacognition as 'knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena' (Flavell 1979 p. 906), *and further distinguishes between four related phenomena: (1) metacognitive knowledge, (2) metacognitive experience, (3) goals and (4) actions or strategies* (Flavell 1979 p. 907). Metacognitive knowledge is any knowledge 'that has to do with people as cognitive creatures and with their diverse cognitive tasks, goals, actions, and experiences. An example would be a child's acquired belief that unlike many of her friends, she is better at arithmetic than at spelling' (Flavell 1979 p. 907). *Metacognitive experiences are 'cognitive or affective experiences that accompany and pertain to any intellectual enterprise', such as 'the sudden feeling that you do not understand something another person just said'* (Flavell 1979 p. 907).

By 'goals' and 'strategies', Flavell refers to the objectives of some 'cognitive enterprise' and the tasks carried out to achieve those objectives, respectively. Goals and strategies may be straightforwardly cognitive, or metacognitive.

As an example of the former, you sense (metacognitive experience) that you do not yet know a certain chapter in your text well enough to pass tomorrow's exam, so you read it through once more (cognitive strategy, aimed at the

straightforward cognitive goal of simply improving your knowledge). As an example of the latter, you wonder (metacognitive experience) if you understand the chapter well enough to pass tomorrow's' exam, so you try to find out by asking yourself questions about it and noting how well you are able to answer them (metacognitive strategy, aimed at the metacognitive goal of assessing your knowledge, and thereby, of generating another metacognitive experience) (Flavell 1979 p. 908 f).

Flavell's is interested in metacognition from a developmental and educational psychology point of view, which is to say he is interested in the way in which infants pass through identifiable and regular stages of metacognitive ability in their development towards adulthood, and in the ways in which additional skills might be taught to children and adults in order to make their 'cognitive enterprises' more effective. What I find fascinating about this schema from a comparative point of view is that the idea that metacognitive knowledge (including knowledge about metacognitive experience, and about goals and strategies) can be taught means that there can be cultures of metacognition that are specific to particular periods in history, to particular cultures, or to specific groups or practices within them.

As a short hand, in most of what follows I refer to specific combinations of metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive experiences, and related goals and strategies as 'metacognitive stances'. What I am getting at by the use of this term is that we need to be ready to interpret people's relationships to bodies of knowledge using concepts that are thicker, more substantive and complex, more specific than

broad-brush doxastic attitudes such as 'belief', 'deference' and so on. For instance, the difference between the two Inner Mongolian Buddhist metacognitive stances I describe is subtler than the difference between believing and not believing; they are both deferential stances in some sense, but their differences show that 'deference' does not begin to capture their specificity. Likewise, this example will remind some readers of the theory, popularized by scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith 1963) and Karen Armstrong (Armstrong 2001), that there is a distinctive religious or 'faith' mode through which some forms of knowledge are apprehended -- but how can it be that religious people the world over share one form of reason when the students I describe here exhibit a cognitive stance that is significantly different from that of their own teacher? In the section on post-truth, my suggestion is that what marks out those who are particularly disposed to believing 'fake news' may be something more historically specific than political affiliation, a singular combination of particular theories about the nature of information and its sources and the relation of both to economic interest, perhaps.

This is not the place to explore the long and complex history of anthropological thought about belief, but suffice it to say that my conclusions here are challenging for what passes for disciplinary orthodoxy on the topic. Many anthropologists have argued that the concept of 'belief' belongs exceptionally to those societies in which anthropology and other social sciences first emerged, and that it is therefore misleading to apply it in societies where those traditions have had little influence (Ruel & Davis 1982).

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The most influential version of this approach sees 'belief' as a distinctively Christian or perhaps Abrahamic concept, one that is marked by a complex and contradictory intellectual history, so that when, say, a competent English speaker uses the term, she invokes a chain of diverse and sometimes contradictory connotations (Needham 1972), as well as a whole monotheistic metaphysics that invests belief in entities that lie 'beyond' the world of human experience (Pouillon 1982). Another version sees the mental hygiene that is required for ordered, coherent and stable beliefs as the distinctive product of disciplined and objectified thought, something that arises only in historically unusual social fields such as capitalist book-keeping and academia (Bourdieu 1986; 1990 p. 381).

In either case the upshot is the same: that the standard social scientific expectations -- that everyone has a stable and coherent set of beliefs from which their behaviour is consistently derived -- are the result of ethnocentric assumptions and are inapplicable in many of the contexts that anthropologists have traditionally worked (Ruel & Davis 1982). In those contexts, people are said not to care very much about a supposedly interior world of beliefs and reasons, instead, their focus is said to be practical (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Language that appears to refer to beliefs, in such societies, should be understood as metaphorical or expressive, for example, of assent to the prevailing social system (Leach 1966). Such views are longstanding in anthropological literature and continue to be endorsed (Handelman 2008; Lindquist & Coleman 2008; N Hamayon 2006). In particular, when it comes to the anthropology of religion, undergraduates are commonly taught the commonsensical

'stress on "belief" may be misleading for the kinds of religions studied by anthropologists' (Bloch 2005 p. 107).

My argument in this chapter is incompatible with this view for the same reason it is incompatible with the idea that there is a universal attitude of faith shared by all religious people. Or rather, it is compatible with only half of this view. The idea that there are distinctive styles of belief that are characteristic of Christianity or modernity is plausible, though I would rather think of styles of belief in the plural even in those contexts. However, the idea that everywhere else what Flavell calls 'cognitive enterprises' are of little interest, or that non-modern or non-'Western' cognitive life is so exotic we cannot begin to fathom it does not ring true to me. Certainly, the example I present here is one counterexample: a case in which non-Christian, non-'Western' people reflect on and invest care in their own cognitive attitudes in specific and distinctive ways. Let me turn to that example now.

Metacognitive variety in some forms of Inner Mongolian Buddhism

Buddhism in Inner Mongolia

Inner Mongolia is an autonomous region with the same formal political status in the Chinese state as Xinjiang and Tibet. It has international borders with the Republic of Mongolia, and, in the far north east, with Russia. The autonomous status of the region is a product of its association with a minority ethnic group or nationality (*minzu*, to use the Chinese term),² the Mongolians, though they now make up only

² Foreign-language terms in this chapter are in Mongolian unless otherwise indicated. There is no single standard of Romanization for Mongolian that captures both spelling and pronunciation. Here I have opted for a rendering that aims at approximating pronunciation.

about 15% of the population. Most Mongolians in the region can speak Mandarin, but many also speak Mongolian and follow Mongolian-language media, which are supported by the state under minority nationality policies, and some elderly people and those living in rural areas may have limited proficiency in Mandarin. In the past, much of Inner Mongolia was home to pastoral nomads, but settlement policies, enclosure of open land, and urban development have led to a steep decline in nomadism.

For Inner Mongolians, one of the most salient aspects of Mongolian culture is the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The religion was adopted by an important khan in the region in the seventeenth century. Thousands of monasteries were built during the subsequent two and a half centuries, and many of them became very powerful, controlling vast swathes of pastoral land and the people and livestock that lived on it. By the end of the nineteenth century, vast numbers of Mongolian men had taken vows as monastics, though many of these were so-called 'countryside lamas', who lived as householders most of the time but attended monasteries for festivals.

However, political instability and growing calls for modernisation meant that the institutions of Buddhism were under increasing pressure by the beginning of the twentieth century. Mongolian and Chinese nationalists alike blamed Buddhism for encouraging weakness and submission. When the Japanese occupied much of what is today Inner Mongolia, in the 1930s, they implemented policies aimed at reducing the size and power of Buddhist estates. The status of Buddhism in Inner Mongolia was thus already much reduced by the time of the civil war in China and by the

revolution of 1949, but a much more dramatic decline was on its way. In the 1950s the new Communist government reformed land ownership, removing the endowments that had long sustained large monastic institutions all over China. Pressure on 'religious personnel' to take part in 'productive' work, narrowly conceived grew, and celibate monastics were often forced to leave their monasteries to marry. By 1958, according to elderly lamas I spoke to in Inner Mongolia, all lamas in the region had been forced out into lay life.

In the following two decades, religion was targeted as 'old culture'. Former monks, nuns, and priests were harassed, and often tortured and imprisoned. Though the policy of freedom of religion was reaffirmed after the death of Mao, people I met who were children in the 1980s told me they were mainly aware of Buddhism as something one shouldn't mention. It was only in the mid-1990s, as the central government promoted the revival of traditional culture in order to foster the tourism industry, that the monasteries that had been closed--and with only rare exceptions destroyed--began to be rebuilt.³

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Inner Mongolia, northern China, from summer 2003 to spring 2005, and have frequently returned for follow-up work. By the time I first arrived in Inner Mongolia in 2003, there were hundreds of operational temples. Most of them had only two or three lamas, but there were a number of larger centres, including Ih Juu in the regional capital, Hohhot, where I spent a good deal of my

³ For a detailed history of Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, seen through the lens of an important monastic institution, see (Humphrey & Üjeed 2013).

time. By that time, there was no stigma in attending the temple. On important festivals, thousands of people would turn up, mainly, but not exclusively, ethnic Mongolians. Many of the people whose homes I visited had set up shrines in order to worship (*morgoh*) more frequently. More recently, the temple has been renovated and extended, with a handsome row of new stupas. I have seen the same pattern all over Inner Mongolia: temples have been rebuilt and renovated at great cost. There are many lay worshippers, and they are unembarrassed about demonstrating their commitment to Buddhism publicly.

Humble, but optimistic, metacognition

One of the activities that I most enjoyed while carrying out fieldwork was studying with a lay Buddhist teacher, Hotogbayar (following anthropological convention I refer to him by a pseudonym). Hotogbayar was a physics lecturer at a local university, and had carried out research on thermodynamics, but he had also served for twenty years as the interpreter for Ulaan Gegeen, a senior Inner Mongolian lama. Ulaan Gegeen could speak Chinese, but generally felt more comfortable speaking in Mongolian, so Hotogbayar would accompany him to official engagements to help out. He was also Ulaan Gegeen's disciple or student (*shabi*), and had been studying a specific text with him for the whole of that period: Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. He had first studied the text in its traditional Mongolian translation, and had subsequently read it in Chinese.

He had offered to teach me the text too, and it was, in theory, the topic of our classes together. In practice, however, we rarely progressed beyond a few lines as every

sentence, and often every word, would prompt long discussions. On one occasion in 2004, I arrived as usual at nine in the morning and had breakfast with Hotogbayar and his wife. Afterwards, we sat down, cross-legged, in Hotogbayar's study, and put the facsimile of Mergen Gegeen's Mongolian translation of the Great Treatise on the low table between us. Before turning to the text, Hotogbayar asked me, as he had on other occasions, about the impression I had formed of the text we were studying. The conversation that followed is a typical expression of his views about teaching, learning, understanding and believing in the context of Buddhism.

We had been looking at the first part of the work, which establishes the pedigree of the book within legitimate teaching lineages in order to inspire the student with respect for its contents. I thought carefully about his question and replied that to me this way of beginning a book is difficult to accept, since my education has consistently taught me to believe nothing on strength of authority alone, but to wait for evidence to be presented in support, and to evaluate that evidence critically.⁴

Hotogbayar looked at me and said, 'Just the opposite is true in Buddhism. If you don't believe the author, it is better you don't read the book. Only one kind of people in the world can see the truth: only enlightened people. The beginning of the Great Treatise is there to tell you that Atisha was enlightened, so his teachings can be believed.' He went on,

⁴ Interestingly, some modernist strands of Buddhism have associated this rationalist approach to knowledge with Buddhism, in contrast to other religious traditions (Mcmahan 2008 p. 66).

Our life is limited, we cannot waste our time. If we lived one or two thousand years then no problem. But we don't. So at first we need a solid foundation of belief, then to read books of the great lamas of Gelugpa and Nagarjuna--that is who is referred to [in the text] by "ornaments of Jambudvipa". In a limited life, believe in the Buddha then plan time to read him.

Not all valuable knowledge requires this foundation of belief, he explained. Knowledge that falls into the category he called 'common knowledge' can be understood simply by learning it and thinking about it. "Why should we read Lao Zi and Hegel?" he asked, rhetorically,

This is common knowledge, believable knowledge. You can read it in Britain or China, Germany, or wherever. So we know it is real. This is common knowledge and everyone should read it.

But for Buddhist teachings, belief must come first, 'If I cannot understand something in the teachings, that shows that my level of understanding is too low. One must never ask, "Is this right?". Doubt is not permissible (*selje bolohgui*). If you doubt you may think, "this is not worthwhile".'

If you do not have belief in the three jewels [the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (the community of monastics)] then you cannot have belief in Buddhism. Belief in the three jewels means belief that the teachings and monks can give enlightenment—but only qualified ones, belief in

unqualified monks will lead to terrible problems. This is why I believe in my master [Ulaan Gegeen].

'How do you know which teachers can be believed in?' I asked.

By their actions. Greed, anger and ignorance. But these can be hidden deeply, so you have to observe carefully. This depends on your ability to judge.⁵ *One day or one year is not long enough to make a decision. Sometimes people take a lot of care over small things but not the big ones. So it is OK to doubt some monks, but not Tsongkhapa and Atisha,*⁶ because they are qualified, they really understand emptiness.

Once a prospective Buddhist has found a teacher in whom he or she can trust, Hotogbayar explained, it is necessary to banish doubt and only believe.

Humble and pessimistic metacognition

Hotogbayar was very atypical in his approach to Buddhism. Most Inner Mongolian Buddhists that I encountered were much less confident in their ability to engage directly with the teachings, even in the humble spirit that he advocated. This was something he recognised and he complained about it frequently. Though he was very busy with his university work, he accepted many lay disciples. They came to him because of his association with Ulaan Gegeen. Some even suggested that

⁵ Formally similar problems of judgment and belief are known to some Christians as problems of discernment. For a clear discussion of the issues, see Tanya Luhrmann (2008).

⁶ *Atisha was the Indian master on whose work Tsongkhapa's *Great treatise* is a commentary.

Hotogbayar himself might be enlightened. He encouraged his students to read philosophy and to practise a kind of visualisation meditation, but they were very reluctant to do those things. Instead they asked him for practical life advice and for suggestions about religious practice: which buddhas to worship, how often, where to put them, and so on. Sometimes they just came to be in his presence for a while.

Not all the Buddhists I met in Inner Mongolia were lucky enough to have such a distinguished master, but they all, to a greater or lesser extent, shared this attitude, which can be described as another metacognitive stance, similar to, yet subtly different from, the one that Hotogbayar was trying to teach me. In a nutshell, Hotogbayar's view was that the cognition of the unenlightened was severely limited but not completely useless. Unenlightened people can, he thought, learn and think about the teachings, to the extent that their study is based on an unquestioning trust in enlightened masters. As one's wisdom grew, he thought, one's understanding would improve and progressively vindicate the belief that all the teachings are consistent, making any further doubt that might arise less pressing.

Most of his coreligionists, including his students, took a much more pessimistic view of the potential of unenlightened cognition to grasp the truth of Buddhism, preferring to concentrate on devotion and worship rather than on philosophy, and meditation. This did not mean that they were interested only in practice rather than cognitive activity, however. On the contrary, they thought that belief (*itgel*), was an essential part of faith (*sūjūg*), and that faith, in turn, was an essential ingredient of effective worship. Paying respects and making an offering at a temple, or before a shrine at

home, or to a lama, was thought to be beneficial, in proportion to the faith with which the action was carried out. Belief, in this context, as many worshippers explained to me, meant believing that the teachings of the Buddha are true, believing it with a sincere heart (*ünen setgel*), and avoiding all doubt. Faith also entailed respect (*hündetgel*), based on the cultivation of a humble character (*daruu jang*).

Although some important aspects of this approach to religious life look similar to Hotogbayar's, there is an important difference. Both views hold that one must begin by accepting axiomatically that the teachings are true. Both hold that failure to understand the truth contained in the teachings is due to a fault on the part of the believer: insufficient wisdom. However, whereas Hotogbayar's view allows for the unenlightened devotee to understand the real meaning of the teachings to a degree, imperfectly, with the prospect of gradual improvement, the other Buddhists I knew did not think this was possible.

The way this was most commonly explained was by means of a distinction between two bodies of knowledge: a deep meaning (*gün utga*), and a superficial meaning (*öngön utga*). The teachings of the Buddha, all the texts, and the rituals and ceremonies that put them into practice were all expressions of the same deep meaning. That deep meaning was what the Buddha had understood when he attained enlightenment, and it is the same wisdom that is shared by all the enlightened beings. Buddhists I met were often referred to this deep meaning using terms from Tibetan philosophy such as 'middle view' (*dund üje*) and 'emptiness' (*hooson chanar*). I did not meet anyone who could or would explain those terms to

me apart from Hotogbayar, and he hedged his explanations by telling me they were incomplete, the best he was capable of providing.

If the deep meaning is the distinctive attainment of enlightenment and buddhahood, it follows that what ordinary, unenlightened people can understand and know about Buddhism is not the deep meaning at all, but the surface meaning. This knowledge is not the knowledge of the enlightened, so is not the object of respectful belief that brooks no doubt. The result of this bifurcated model is that the same people who evince a deep seriousness about worship and faithfulness can at the same time treat what they know about Buddhist teachings with a degree of levity. They—the unenlightened—can know and understand these things, so, ipso facto, the content is not the real deep meaning of the teachings, and it is not the proper object of faithful belief. During the performance of rituals at the temples I frequented, for instance, lay people and even the lamas would float rumoured explanations for various elements of the ritual and wonder which was correct, but would always conclude with a wistful sigh and a shrug, saying that Buddhism was 'very deep', that only 'great lamas know' and so on.

Only novices sought earnestly to understand the surface content, perhaps by referring to information they had read on websites or popular books on Buddhism. More experienced devotees soon put them right, tutting and shaking their heads, and reminding them that they could not understand. A really faithful Buddhist of this kind knows that reading a book of Buddhist philosophy in the expectation of understanding it is to exhibit an unfaithful arrogance (*omorhog*). This was the cause

of Hotogbayar's frustration with his students, who would not read his books, however much he encouraged them. Faith requires a humble character, and that means developing an acute awareness of one's own ignorance. The Buddhists I met constantly engaged in what I have described as a discourse of ignorance, lamenting their own feeble knowledge and that of all the Mongolian Buddhists, and reciting a range of causes of it: from the suppression of Buddhism under the Communists and the increasing disconnection of ethnic Mongolians from Mongolian language and culture to the coming end-of-Dharma period prophesied in Buddhist cosmology (see Mair 2015).

'If you can't believe Atisha', Hotogbayar had told me, 'you can't believe Tsongkhapa, and you can't believe the teachings. So reading them is a waste of time.' This was intended as an exhortation to believe before reading. His students told me instead that really believing the teachings are true, in the deep sense, means accepting that they are so difficult that reading them is a waste of time. They admired Hotogbayar of course, and they cultivated faith in him. This meant that they would not doubt him, and therefore that his serious study of Tsongkhapa was strong evidence that he was already enlightened.

Varieties of metacognitive variety in Inner Mongolian Buddhism

Clearly, an important aspect of what Hotogbayar was trying to teach me in our classes was a form of domain-specific (that is, specific to Buddhism and not applicable to what he called 'common knowledge') metacognition. It featured all of the aspects of a metacognitive stance outlined above. The metacognitive knowledge

(1) included the idea that knowledge is divided into two kinds—Buddhist knowledge and common knowledge—and that the unenlightened mind is capable of apprehending each differently, so that the goal of learning is to be approached differently in relation to each of them. The metacognitive experiences (2) that Hotogbayar told me about included the experience of humility in relation to Buddhist teachings and teachers, the experience of confusion or contradiction that results from inadequate wisdom, and the progressive growth in wisdom that helps one to understand that the teachings are coherent despite the apparent contradictions. 'Wisdom allows you to see', as he told me, 'that the scriptures are a complete system with no contradictions.'⁷ *The principal goal (3) was to understand the deep meaning of Buddhist teachings, and the strategies (4) he advocated to achieve that goal included finding a trustworthy teacher, putting one's trust in that teacher, and then studying hard while attributing any confusion to one's own inadequacies.*⁸

Metacognition was also an important part of the way in which Hotogbayar's students and the ordinary Buddhists I interacted with in temples and on pilgrimages engaged with Buddhism, but it was a different combination of theory, experience, goal and strategy. They, too, (1) distinguished between ordinary knowledge and the knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, but for them, this distinction was mapped to a distinction between two kinds of people, the enlightened, who were enlightened because they could understand the teachings, and the unenlightened, who could

⁷ Michael Lempert's *Discipline and debate* gives a detailed account of the way in which the axiomatic assumption that Buddhism has no contradictions is put into practice in a contemporary Tibetan monastery in India (Lempert 2012).

⁸ *Hotogbayar's ideas about metacognition and the importance of submission for finding truth are similar in some respects to those discussed by anthropologist Talal Asad in his influential work on mediaeval Christianity* (Asad 1993).

only understand the other, everyday kind of knowledge. The metacognitive experience (2) they stressed was the awareness of being ignorant and of being cut off from deep meaning. Their principal metacognitive goal (3) was to believe intensely and sincerely in the truth of the teachings, which entailed also accepting that they were unable to understand their content. The strategies (4) for attaining this goal were to monitor their thoughts for signs of doubt during episodes of worship, to rehearse a number of narratives about ignorance, and abstaining from intellectual engagement with Buddhist philosophy—that is, but refusing to read the kind of books Hotogbayar wished his students would read. Both Hotogbayar and his students stressed that in order to believe in the right way, it was important to cultivate a humble character, which was equally a matter of self-conscious cognitive humility as of physical restraint.⁹

For reasons of space, my exposition of these two approaches to Buddhism is necessarily rather schematic, and I certainly know people in Inner Mongolia whose approach to religion does not coincide neatly with either. However, what should be apparent already is that understanding metacognitive variety is absolutely essential if we seek to understand cognition, action and experience in relation to bodies of knowledge. When we read that, say, Buddhism is booming in China, or when we try to interpret a survey that purports to show the proportion of countries' populations that subscribe to one or another religion, it is tempting to think that we can infer from this how people will think or act. Before we can do that, however, we need to

⁹ Michael Carrithers has written persuasively on the importance of physical comportment as an expression of religious virtue in the context of Jainism and Buddhism in contemporary South Asia (1990).

understand the variety of things it can mean to 'subscribe' in each case. From a distance, Hotogbayar and his students might look very similar. However, what they take from their engagement with Buddhism is quite different, and the difference must be understood in terms of metacognitive variety.

Consequences of metacognitive variety for cognition and action

It should already be apparent that if our aim is to understand the thought and action of people involved in Inner Mongolian Buddhism, understanding the specific forms of tacit and explicit metacognition that they form in relation to their religion will be absolutely crucial. Metacognition is not simply a matter of idle reflections on the nature of the mind and the apprehension of its objects, something that people may or may not think about when they are not engaged in the real business of the first-order knowledge and practice. It plays a central part in reasoning and action. To be more specific, there are at least two ways in which this is true.

(1) In order to understand the ways in which people interpret the information about Buddhism that they encounter, it is necessary to know their view of their own cognitive capacities in relation to such information. For the pessimistic Buddhists I have described, this will depend on their classification of the information into the categories of deep and superficial meaning. Usually a single utterance, or symbol, or action will be said to have a deep and a superficial meaning simultaneously. The deep meaning is not thought to be available to the unenlightened, so no inferences can be drawn from it. The superficial meaning is available, inferences can be and are

drawn from it, but those inferences are treated as provisional and untrustworthy, rather than definitive.

For the more optimistic Hotogbayar, the distinction is between enlightened and unenlightened beings: the deep meaning is available to all, but can only be imperfectly understood by an unenlightened person, in proportion to that person's wisdom. Hotogbayar is thus willing to draw inferences from Buddhist teachings, and to take them seriously, but would seek the approval of his master before settling on a conclusion. This accounted for his having read *The great treatise* some twenty times, painstakingly taking notes and seeking advice from Ulaan Gegeen and other trusted teachers as he did so each time.

(2) Metacognition provides normative standards of belief, knowledge, assertion, and so on—philosophers have called these 'epistemic norms' (Pollock 1987).

Understanding epistemic norms is important if we want to understand how people evaluate cognition, both their own and other people's. Perhaps more importantly, however, these norms also act as models, so that people act in ways that are likely to bring them closer to achieving the model. That might be a matter of actively controlling their exposure to information (by reading or avoiding reading Buddhist philosophy, for instance), or it might be a matter of cultivating the cognitive capacities and habits that are considered to be conditions of belief or knowledge under a particular metacognitive scheme.

According to Hotogbayar, for instance, in respect of Buddhist teachings, to know the teachings one should be very familiar with them, ideally memorising them so they could be contemplated without referring to a text. However, proper knowledge was dependent on finding a reliable teacher to explain the meaning of the teachings, and on a cultivated faithfulness in that teacher, which in turn depended on successfully cultivating the ability to refrain from doubt. Knowing in this sense was based on an awareness that, as an unenlightened being, one was ignorant to some extent, so that one's knowledge had its limits.

Hotogbayar contrasted his own approach to knowledge and belief with the critical approach I claimed as my own. He said,

On one level your education is better. It stops you from believing blindly, you can doubt anyone. You research things first then come to a decision. But the conclusion you reach is the conclusion of ordinary people, not of enlightened people. Your decision may be wrong and then you will follow an error and waste your time.

In Buddhism you do not need research, what you need to research is why the Buddha said what he did. This is to increase our own level of understanding, not to doubt. In Buddhism, research means doubting yourself, not Buddha or the three jewels. This may be an essential difference. When you read Buddhist books I suggest you don't doubt the authors, just yourself. But when you read science you can doubt them because they are not enlightened people.

For Hotogbayar's students, the awareness of ignorance was perhaps even more important. Some philosophers have argued that knowledge should be considered the norm of belief. That is to say, that proper, permissible belief ought to be based on knowledge. Extending this way of thinking about metacognition to my Inner Mongolian cases, we might say that for Hotogbayar's students, in the context of Buddhism, ignorance, not knowledge, is a norm of belief. That is to say that the unenlightened can only justifiably believe in something of which they are ignorant. This makes sense since only the deep meaning of Buddhism is thought to be a proper object of faithful belief, and the deep meaning is, as a matter of definition, only available to the enlightened.

Pragmatism and satisficing from Inner Mongolian Buddhism to post-truth

Satisficing and metacognition

On reflection, my own metacognitive stance is much more complex and consistent than I admitted when I rather self-righteously told Hotogbayar, on numerous occasions, that I am a critical thinker. I may assiduously reserve judgment when it comes to claims about cosmology, but I routinely believe claims of journalists, historians, and many of the people I meet every day, so I have my own context-specific metacognitive practices and epistemic norms. What makes cosmology distinctive is not that I lack evidence about it, the same could be said about much of my knowledge (to be scrupulous, I must call it belief). I often rely not on evidence,

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but on testimony, sometimes for information that will be of great practical importance for the way I think about and lead my life.

How do I decide how to distribute my scepticism and my credulity between different domains? An important ingredient must be pragmatic considerations and what economists and theorists of rationality call 'satisficing'. Satisficing is an alternative to optimizing in situations in which there is no rational way of achieving an optimum, and in which the standard must therefore instead be 'good enough' (Simon 1972). A clear example of this arises in relation to the information on which we base beliefs or decisions.

As Jon Elster explains in *Sour grapes*, it seems obvious that sound opinions are the products of judgment exercised in the light of the evidence that we have at hand, but,

It will not do for long, however, to talk glibly about "the available evidence", for in doing so one begs the crucial question of how much evidence one should rationally make available to oneself before arriving at one's belief. This question admits to different answers according to the further use, if any, to which the belief is to be put (Elster 1983 p. 17).

The stance I adopted towards the cosmological claims of Tsongkhapa's Treatise was similar to that of what Elster calls the 'pure scientist', whose only goal is truth.

The chances of arriving at a true belief increasing with the amount of evidence, it might appear that the search for truth is self-defeating, since a scientist committed to it would have to go on collecting evidence forever, always postponing the formation of a belief (Elster 1983 p. 17).

I am happy to tolerate this indefinite deferral when it comes to cosmological beliefs, such as beliefs about reincarnation and karma, because I do not think believing one way or another makes a practical difference to the way I live my life. It was this view, which is among other things a metacognitive view, that Hotogbayar was at pains to correct. His position was that one must form an opinion on these questions in one's lifetime. As we have seen, he thought this should happen neither too soon, nor too late. Deciding too soon would leave one, unnecessarily, open to falling under the influence of poor teachers. Deciding too late would leave one without sufficient time to put one's determinations into practice.

One of the most important things Hotogbayar tried to teach me was thus the urgency of forming an opinion about Buddhism in the context of my limited wisdom, and of my short human lifespan.¹⁰ On some views of cognition, this self-consciousness about pragmatic reasons for forming beliefs should undermine certainty (Williams 1973). For instance, Elster has argued that to succeed in deciding to believe would mean forgetting that the belief was the result of a decision (Elster 1979 p. 47). Hotogbayar certainly did not think (at a metacognitive level) that it was impossible to combine, on

¹⁰ See Martin Southwold's *Buddhism in life* for an account of similar reasoning, which he calls *sapientalism*, analysed in different terms (1983).

the one hand, a cultivated awareness of the pragmatic importance of adopting a belief on the basis of incomplete information with, on the other hand, an iron certainty that the belief one has adopted is the truth. Whether people like Hotogbayar are capable of doing this (at a cognitive level) is a question my methods make me ill placed to answer.

The kind of satisficing that Hotogbayar was encouraging me to engage in is a necessary part of any deliberation that is both based on information and expected to issue in a decision or action. Though it need not be as explicit or self-consciously formulated as it was in his case, we should expect widespread reflection about satisficing. Satisficing can be thought of as a metacognitive strategy, and it seems likely that it often varies between domains of activity, given that the importance of metaphorically rolling up one's sleeves and *getting on with it* varies from task to task.

Understanding post-truth

At the end of 2016, OUP's Oxford Dictionaries chose 'post-truth' as its word of the year, reflecting a dramatic spike in the use of the decade-old term in the context of the campaign for BREXIT in the UK and for the election of Donald Trump in the US.¹¹ Commentators have converged on a consensus that, although there have always been lies and mistrust in politics, this is in some respects a recognisably novel international phenomenon, in which facts are not just spun, but manufactured (Lockie 2016), or in which beliefs are driven by emotion rather than information ('Yes, I'd lie to you' 2016).

¹¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> accessed 26 December 2016.

Attempts to explain the alleged emergence of this new relationship to truth have so far focused on the deliberate actions and strategies of its protagonists--leaders such as Trump and Farage--and the characteristics of its audience. The leaders are said to wield power in 'an effort to overwhelm truth' (Till 2017). Modern citizens are said to be poorly educated, brought up on conspiracy theory (Peters 2017), assailed by a surfeit of information, in a world that lacks trust, but is full of competing sources of authority. Their senses are deadened by the internet (McCartney 2016). They are locked into their social media echo chambers and are not exposed to views that challenge their prejudices. Their news sources present current affairs in the form of ever more vacuous sound-bites and photo-ops shaped to capture attention and fit the 24-hour news cycle (Peters 2017). These conditions are said to have exacerbated the tendencies of all humans to fall for universal cognitive biases, especially confirmation bias.

All of these factors are perfectly plausible, but in these explanations, post-truth audiences are purely passive, and they fall victim to untruths essentially because they lack the proper information, training and skills. However, anyone interested in understanding these changes ought to be open to the possibility that as well as passivity and lack, there is also an active or substantive aspect to the situation. Explaining post-truth in terms of fragmentation of authority, cognitive bias, laziness, and so on, does not allow for the possibility, which ought at least to be investigated, that acceptance of post-truth representations may depend on knowledge, skills,

values, reflection and effort just like the two metacognitive stances I have sketched for Inner Mongolian Buddhism.

Some have described post-truth as a form of self-deception or wishful thinking in which non-epistemic considerations are brought to bear in the process of belief formation. For example, a recent editorial in *American Scientist* argues that groups that benefit from the status quo resist scientific knowledge, for example, about climate change, when it threatens their interests (Vernon 2017). 'What matters is not whether the claims of politicians can be proven true.' writes Stewart Lockie in his editorial in *Environmental Sociology*, 'What matters is whether those listening to those claims would like them to be true – truth being judged not by evidence but by consistency with listeners' existing beliefs and values' (2016 p. 1). There is surely something in these functionalist explanations, but they beg the question, just as Marxist ideas about ideology did, about the mechanisms that allow believers to avoid doubt in circumstances where doubt threatens or appears to threaten their interests (Elster 1983 44).

Like belief, ignorance is often the result of specific strategies on the part of the ignorant and of those who would keep them in the dark. In addition, in order to be the object of metacognitive goals and strategies, specific areas of doubt, uncertainty and ignorance must first be recognised, and this awareness of the lack of knowledge must relate to metacognitive knowledge and experience (Mair et al. 2013).

Understanding the metacognitive theories, experiences, goals and strategies that allow specific groups in respect of specific domains of activity to achieve belief and control doubt, or maximise doubt and avoid belief, is a topic that requires further research. It seems likely that if there is really a difference between post-truth and what went before it, then some of the difference at least can be explained in terms of metacognitive variety on the part of the recipients.

One suggestion that could be seen in metacognitive terms is that general publics have adopted bastardized versions of relativism and scepticism derived from academic postmodernism, which has, as Peter Pomerantsev has argued in *Granta Magazine*, 'trickled down over the past thirty years from academia to the media and then everywhere else' and has taught us that 'every version of events is just another narrative, where lies can be excused as "an alternative point of view" or "an opinion", because "it's all relative" and "everyone has their own truth" (and on the internet they really do)' (2016). This relativism is associated with a demotic anti-elitism that casts doubt on information from 'elite' sources on the grounds of the theory that the primary interest of the powerful is in their own interests, and not in the truth (Lockie 2016).

Such epistemological scruples would be a kind of metacognitive theory, one that is probably, as in the examples I have discussed above, applied only in some domains of activity. And if we find such a metacognitive theory, we should also ask to what extent it is regularly accompanied by the other elements of a metacognitive stance—specific metacognitive experiences, goals and strategies. Taking inspiration from the

Inner Mongolian metacognitive stances I have described, we might also ask whether specific post-truth metacognitive stances are pessimistic or optimistic and in what ways.

I am not arguing here that post-truth metacognition should be considered religious or equivalent to religious metacognitive stances and that both should be opposed to scientific metacognitive styles. The message of the Inner Mongolian contrast I have painted above is that things are more complicated than that. If anything, the sceptical approach of post-truth has more in common with the hyper-critical approach that I told Hotogbayar was the product of my scientific education. Climate-change sceptics often see themselves as defenders of the scientific method (Lockie 2016 p. 3), for instance, while those of us who feel threatened by these developments find ourselves grasping for an unfamiliar and uncomfortable language of epistemic deference. Writing against post-truth and lamenting the 'death of expertise', for instance, political scientist Tom Nichols has argued that reasoned public discourse requires popular acknowledgement of expert opinion, recalling his own teacher, James Schall, who wrote that "students have obligations to teachers," including "trust, docility, effort, and thinking." (Nichols 2017).

Conclusions

Methodological reflections

The question of whether normative cognition takes a single form, to be applied to all domains of thought and action, or multiple forms, each attuned to a specific domain, is core metacognitive question itself and it may turn out to be an area in which

research will uncover considerable variety.¹² To be successful, such research must be clearly distinguished from the normative study of epistemology (which aims to determine the right or at least best configuration of metacognition), and from the study of universal metacognitive traits and tendencies.

Experimental work such as is conducted by psychologists will surely have an important place in understanding metacognition. However subjects' self-reports must also have a role in attempts to understand metacognitive diversity. It is true that people may have significant metacognitive theories, experiences and habits of which they do not have a developed reflective awareness and which they are therefore incapable of articulating clearly. It is also surely the case that people are often mistaken or even self-deceiving about the quality and consistency of their own cognition and metacognition, and that they are therefore not reliable witnesses.

However, an important part of at least some forms of metacognition must be reflection on metacognitive theories and experiences, the self-conscious adoption of certain norms, including epistemic norms, and the deployment of specific strategies aimed at cultivating a form of cognition that conforms to those norms. All of these are important, and shape behaviour, language and thought, even if they are incompletely or imperfectly effective in producing the desired changes in cognition. For instance, the different metacognitive stances of Hotogbayar and his students explain their choices to study Buddhist teachings assiduously or not at all. That is true regardless

¹² Writing about research scientists working with animals, who cultivate objectivity by self-consciously abstaining from anthropomorphism, Matei Candea has described a third possibility, in which a strong norm is cultivated for one setting (science) through rigorous self-monitoring, while cognition in other contexts is simply less strictly regulated (2013).

of whether or to what extent their strategies actually help them to make progress towards their respective goals, for instance, greater wisdom, or greater humility, or the eradication of doubt.

In the same way, using experimentation to understand the ways in which people in fact respond to information, misinformation and correction is surely important.

Subjects' own assessment of their ability to process such information wisely may be inaccurate. However, attention to local accounts of belief, whether garnered through ethnographic methods or through literary analysis is also essential. That is because local metacognitive knowledge can sometimes define the domains of activity and the categories of information or knowledge that determine the ways in which people plan, monitor and regulate their own cognition.

For example, the distinction between the religious domain and the domain of the everyday might seem to be a low-level classification, and therefore a safe basis for cross-cultural experimentation and comparison on domain-specific cognition.

However, the case I have discussed here includes two related but different metacognitive stances, of which only one, Hotogbayar's, includes a metacognitive distinction between Buddhist and common knowledge that seems to correspond to the religion/everyday categorisation. His students' approach, as we have seen, distinguishes between deep meaning and surface meaning of Buddhist teachings, and counsels different epistemic norms, and different cognitive habits, in relation to each of them, even though they are both firmly associated with religion, so the

subtleties of their metacognitive stance would be lost in any protocol in which the religion/everyday distinction was assumed.

If these kinds of variety are widespread, and there is no reason to think this is an unusual case, then understanding what we might call cultures of metacognition—such as specific forms of religious belief, or 'post-truth' orientations—will need to proceed as much through close observation of behaviour and informal, explicit statements about belief and doubt as by experimentation.

Domain-specific metacognitive variety

What I hope to have shown in this chapter, in relation to the Inner Mongolian Buddhist material I have presented and in relation to the questions I have raised about the phenomenon of post-truth, is that paying attention to metacognitive diversity can help to overcome a tacit and unhelpful distinction between cognitive form and cognitive content. The convention in the human and social sciences is to treat the form of thought as universal while focusing on the great diversity of the content to which thought is applied. It is clear that this model is unsatisfactory. Even the most basic functions of thought, such as believing and doubting, can be made the object of tacit theories and experience, as well as self-conscious reflection, ethical evaluation, and concerted attempts to mould them into specific forms by building habits, directing attention, associating cognitive functions with emotion and so on. The distinction between form and content is muddier than we usually assume.

Since elements of metacognition (theories, goals, and so on) and what I have called 'metacognitive stances' (complex configurations of metacognitive elements) are often taught, like other kinds of culture that are passed on through formal and informal teaching, they are likely to vary historically and geographically. However, they can also vary across different activities or domains in which a single person is engaged. For example, Hotogbayar was frustrated with my critical approach to reading not because he thought this was a bad form of thinking. Rather, he thought I had failed to distinguish between two different domains—common knowledge and Buddhist knowledge—for which different forms of thought were appropriate.

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