

THESIS

UPAYĀ-KAUŚALYA AS THE PRAGMATIC JUSTIFICATION OF MADHYAMA
KA
ETHICAL CLAIMS

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ABSTRACT

UPĀYA-KAUŚALYA AS THE PRAGMATIC JUSTIFICATION OF MADHYAMAKA ETHICAL CLAIMS

Madhyamaka Buddhism is typically characterized as a particularly thoroughgoing form of anti-foundationalism. This leads to difficulties when trying to justify knowledge claims as well as ethical claims, especially in the light of how these claims are handled in mainstream Abhidharma Buddhism. The ethical domain is particularly important for Buddhism since the Buddhist project is fundamentally soteriological. I endeavor to offer a plausible way that truth claims, especially ethical truth claims, can be justified while keeping to Madhyamaka's metaphysical commitments. Specifically, I will argue that a functional-pragmatist approach – I use the term *upāya-kauśalya* or “skillful means” – is the most promising way that Madhyamaka can situate the normativity of ethical claims.

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DEDICATION

To my father, for the seeds of wisdom

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INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist philosophical position is united by a set of shared commitments regarding the ubiquity of suffering or discontent (*duḥkha*), the causes for this suffering, the way to eliminate this suffering, and the way that our understanding of, and approach to, reality facilitates or obstructs this elimination.¹ Different schools and thinkers may interpret these commitments in vastly different ways making for a rich and varied philosophical tradition that has continued since the time of the Buddha in sixth century BCE India. In the second century CE the scholar and monk Nāgārjuna established a position that came to be known as Madhyamaka, notable for the assertion of universal emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Although this will be detailed later on this assertion essentially amounts to the claim that no phenomena whatsoever possesses an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This has led modern interpreters to conceptualize Madhyamaka as a form of anti-foundationalism or anti-realism (though these may be problematic characterizations). Typically, anti-foundational positions face problems when justifying knowledge claims as they cannot make appeals to foundational claims and Madhyamaka is no different in this respect. Moreover, the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths, conventional and ultimate (this will be detailed later on), takes on a particular meaning within Madhyamaka that makes the justification of knowledge claims even more troublesome.

Since the Buddhist project is fundamentally a soteriological enterprise concerned with the freedom from suffering many of the claims made within Buddhism relate to what one should do to help bring about that state. This gives the entire Buddhist project an ethical flavor whereby one's actions, in one way or another, make a difference to the basic goals of Buddhism. Truth and falsity play an important role in the elimination of suffering because it is through one's

¹ This is not an exhaustive list.

benighted state that suffering arises. Buddhists hold that the primitive root of suffering is ignorance about the way things *really* are; yet the characterization of how things really are may vary from thinker to thinker. Nevertheless, correcting one's view is a necessary condition for eliminating suffering and achieving awakening – essentially the permanent removal of the benighted state that leads to perpetual suffering. In this manner, the strongly ethical claims of Buddhism are characterized as ethical truths. For many types of Buddhism the normative weight of these truths comes from their connection to the particular type of metaphysical outlook that they hold. That is, one should do *x* because doing *x* reflects the fact that the world is fundamentally *y*, and action based on the knowledge of *y* is that which will lead to awakening. So there is a tight connection between the knowledge of the way things *really* are and the goal of awakening. However, if ethical truth is a subset of truth, then not only does Madhyamaka face trouble in epistemic justification but also in ethical justification. And since the ethical and soteriological component is so deeply a part of the Buddhist project, Madhyamaka seems to be in need of a way to justify their ethical claims otherwise a core part of the Buddhist project is in danger of being undermined.

This is not a new problem for the Mādhyamika,² since Nāgārjuna's time many opponents, both Buddhist and not, rejected Madhyamaka as a form of nihilism. Contemporary efforts to explicate the Madhyamaka position in a non-nihilist manner face the same issue of justification in both epistemology and ethics. In what follows I endeavor to offer a plausible way to understand truth in Madhyamaka, particularly ethical truth, given the particular philosophical commitments of the Mādhyamika. My postulation is that Madhyamaka can offer a plausible justification of their ethical claims by appealing to the practical efficacy of these claims in

² Following contemporary convention I will refer to the philosophical position as “Madhyamaka” and an adherent of this position as a “Mādhyamika”.

bringing about the goals particular to Buddhism. I refer to this by use of another Buddhist term, *upāya-kauśalya*³ or skillful means. In essence, the Mādhyamika can offer a sort of pragmatic justification for their ethical claims because these ethical claims, and the actions they prescribe, are particularly effective means of achieving progress on the path to awakening.

The first chapter will explicate the Madhyamaka position and other central concepts necessary to understand the broad and narrow justification problems it faces. Much of this involves the Abhidharma position that Madhyamaka contrasts with; as such I will present Abhidharma as a foil to highlight the particularities of certain Madhyamaka assertions. Since my concern is for the ethical claims made in Madhyamaka and this is directly related to the actions one takes, I examine agency in chapter two. My goal there is twofold, first to understand what notion of agency there could be in Buddhism (particularly Abhidharma and Madhyamaka) given particular Buddhist doctrines. Secondly, to tentatively examine how the notion of skillful means could operate in assertions of autonomous agency. In the final chapter I offer my approach to understanding truth, particularly ethical truth, within Madhyamaka. I consider ethical truth to be a subset of truth generally and as such the justification of both types of claim are similar. My proposal is broadly pragmatic and functional in nature, but specifically oriented according to the structure of the Buddhist path to awakening. However, this approach is restricted to the framework of Buddhism and does not offer incentive to those outside of the Buddhist framework. That is, a functional or pragmatist epistemology does not lead one to a particular ethical view, as multiple views are plausible on this account, so one may ask “Why Buddhism?” I again draw on resources from within and without Buddhism to answer this objection in a

³ I will generally use *upāya* for short when referring to skillful means, although *upāya* technically translates to “means” only and *kuśala* to skillful (when combined *kuśala* becomes *kauśalya*).

manner that keeps to the commitments of the Madhyamaka position, but is not necessarily one that would be articulated by a Mādhyamika.

CHAPTER ONE

Madhyamaka emerged as one of two major schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India during the second and third centuries CE primarily through the works of the scholar monk Nāgārjuna. His articulation of the Madhyamaka position is characterized by the assertion of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. Although Madhyamaka is not the only branch of Buddhism to emphasize this concept, their interpretation and implementation of the concept is unique. What this amounts to may be described in contemporary terms as a form of anti-foundationalism or anti-realism, one that invited criticism from many of their contemporaries, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. This criticism is reasonable given that their position seems to generate a host of problems regarding metaphysics, truth, and language. Broadly, this problem concerns any truth claim made within an anti-realist or anti-foundationalist framework, although what primarily concerns me are ethical claims. The ethical domain is particularly important as the Buddhist project is characterized by a number of ethical claims, which, if subject to this broad problem, seem to be in danger of being undermined. In what follows I will articulate and motivate this broad problem for Madhyamaka by first explaining the context to which Madhyamaka may be seen as a reaction. This involves canvassing the earlier Abhidharma philosophical position as well as a foray through certain pan-Buddhist concepts, specifically those regarding truth and ontology. Once the Madhyamaka position is articulated and explained in this light the broad problem described above should start to materialize. Furthermore, since the Buddhist project places specific importance on ethical themes I will motivate the particularly ethical problem that the Mādhyamika faces. Finally, I will offer a suggestion for situating these ethical claims within the Madhyamaka framework through the expansion of another Buddhist concept – *upāya-kauśalya*

or “skillful means”. I then tentatively examine *upāya* to see whether it may serve as a plausible candidate for the task at hand.

1.1 Abhidharma Background.

The teachings of the Buddha were preserved orally in the years that followed his death sometime in the fifth century BCE. The earliest written records of these teachings constitute the Pāli Canon, the scriptural basis for the earliest forms of Buddhism. The Pāli Canon is divided into three “baskets” or *pitakas* (referring to the vessels that contained the palm leaf manuscripts upon which the teachings were written). The three *pitakas* are: the *Vinaya Pitaka*, concerning rules and regulations regarding the monastic community and their practices, the *Sutta Pitaka*, the recorded discourses and sermons of the Buddha, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, works that elaborate upon various Buddhist doctrines in a more systematic and philosophical manner. Abhidharma⁴ as a philosophical orientation includes that which is outlined in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* but also refers to the philosophical position(s) of the various schools of early Buddhism, and as such may not necessarily reflect one specific sub-school of Buddhism.⁵ Abhidharma, then, is the first systematic explication of Buddhist philosophy, one that impacted future Buddhist thought and engendered Buddhist philosophy as distinct enterprise.

1.1.1 Two Truths.

The conceptual distinction between ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*) and conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) is one that first appeared in this early Buddhist philosophical literature. This division of truth permeates much of Buddhist philosophy with different schools defined (in part)

⁴ “Abhidharma” is Sanskrit and “Abhidhamma” is Pāli. Both mean something like “concerning the teachings”. Noa Ronkin. “Abhidharma”. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2017 ed. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/abhidharma/>.

⁵ At least eighteen various schools of Abhidharma Buddhism are believed to have been operating during this early phase, of which Theravāda is the only remaining still practiced today. These are notably not Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism and represent the Buddhist landscape out of which Mahāyāna arose.

by how they understood the difference as well as the relation between ultimate and conventional truth. It is unclear whether the Buddha explicitly gave this particular characterization, but it seemed to develop out of another pair of terms: *nītārtha*, statements whose meaning is definitive, and *neyārtha*, statements whose meaning requires interpretation⁶. This distinction was originally a hermeneutical device to draw out the meaning of various teachings that seemed to be in conflict with each other. However, this distinction developed into the more robust concept of the two truths, which had resulting effects for metaphysics, semantics, and epistemology. Moreover, the Sanskrit terms for conventional truth *saṃvṛtisatya*, and ultimate truth *paramārthasatya* share the suffix *satya*, which means “truth”. However, the term *sat* also encompasses reality, as in *saṃvṛtisat* and *paramārthasat*, which would then mean conventional reality and ultimate reality respectively. The relation between *sat* and *satya* will become more important later on, but at this point it is important to note that there is a distinction between conventional and ultimate truth.

Asserting this bifurcation of truth or reality as a way to reconcile apparently conflicting remarks made by the Buddha does not tell us to what exactly this distinction amounts. What constitutes the two truths in early Buddhism is indicated by The Cowherds through a reference to a passage in the commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*,

The Enlightened One, the best of all teachers, propounded two truths, conventional and ultimate; we do not see a third. A statement governed [purely] by agreement is true because of the world’s conventions, and an ultimate statement is true in that it characterizes things as they are.⁷

The conventional is simply understood as the “normal” world that we interact with and maneuver through, complete with the attendant truths that hold in it. This characterization importantly includes a transactional nature, which hinges on how conventional reality is constituted by (in a

⁶ Cowherds, *Moonshadows Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

⁷ Cowherds *Moonshadows*, 6.

non-tautological sense) conventions. A useful analogy here is to traffic laws. There is no real principled reason why US drivers and UK drivers travel on different sides of the road but as long as all participants within each respective system adhere to convention then collisions are averted and motorists arrive at their destinations. However, the notion of agreement in conventional reality may run deeper than traffic laws; the (perhaps naïvely held) notions of the world as permanent, substantial, and enduring are included in conventional truth, but these notions (insofar as they are accepted by a vast majority of people) provide a shared and somewhat useful framework in which to carry out one's affairs.

The particular characterization of ultimate truth above indicates that there is a way things are that is more foundational than the conventional. Moreover, this characterization of ultimate truth as describing “the way things are” correlates to *yathā-bhutam-darśanam*, the Sanskrit term for “seeing things as they are”, which is said to be a characteristic of awakened beings because they see the ultimate nature of reality. Richard Hayes's explanation of the doctrine of the two truths states similarly,

According to this doctrine there is a level of understanding that consists of an accurate account of the world as it is experienced in everyday life [conventional] and another level of understanding that is conducive to reaching the ultimate goal ... of Buddhist practice, namely, *nirvāṇa* [or awakening]...⁸

Again, the conventional is characterized as the realm of our everyday lives, but this description of the ultimate as that which facilitates the goal of awakening is worth noting. The Sanskrit term for ultimate truth, *paramārthasatya*, breaks down into *param*, “highest” or “supreme” and *ārtha*, which can mean “meaning”, “referent”, or “goal” (as mentioned previously, *satya* means “truth”). The translation of *paramārthasatya* into ultimate truth is reasonable yet the semantic range of *ārtha* indicates that “truth of the highest meaning” or “truth of the highest goal” would

⁸ Hayes, “Madhyamaka”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2017 ed. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/madhyamaka/>.

serve as well. These overlapping translations capture the notion that ultimate truth is constitutive towards the fundamental goal in Buddhism. Moreover, the connection between ultimate truth as a goal, and the understanding of ultimate truth as a perception of “the way things are”, point towards the particularly Buddhist approach to soteriology, which runs throughout Buddhist philosophy.

The Buddhist project is fundamentally about the liberation from suffering⁹. The Four Noble Truths, foundational in all forms of Buddhism, exemplify this by asserting: 1) *duḥkha*, the pervasive presence of suffering 2) *samudaya*, the origin of suffering, 3) *nirodha*, that suffering can cease, and 4) *marga*, the path to the cessation of suffering. In addition, Buddhism describes suffering as having three roots: greed, hatred, and ignorance. Of these, ignorance is seen as more primitive than the other two because it is thought that through one’s faulty view (of the way that things *really* are) that one resorts to greed and hatred in one’s interactions with the world. If one had the correct view on the nature of the world then the grasping or rejection of various phenomena would cease and one would have severed the sources of suffering at the roots. The view mentioned here is akin to a metaphysical understanding of the world, but this idea need not be abstract. For an analogous example, if one mistakenly thinks that a diet of candy and soda has all the necessary nutrients for a healthy body then this error will lead the person into suffering when their body begins to fail. The Buddha’s assertion of the Four Noble Truths is much like a physician diagnosing a problem and prescribing a treatment. Suffering, in all its manifold forms, is the diagnosis, and part of the treatment involves a fundamental shift in how we view the world and ourselves. For the Buddhist, metaphysical investigation is not simply philosophizing for its

⁹ The Sanskrit term *duḥkha* is only partially captured by the term “suffering”. Generally this includes not only gross forms of suffering such as bodily or mental harm, but also more subtle and existential forms of unease or dissatisfaction. An apt way of characterizing this used in Buddhist teachings refers to the hub of a wheel that is misshapen or disjointed. When a cart or chariot is rolling along with a wheel whose hub is misshapen then the ride is characterized by repeated and regular bumps.

own sake, but a necessary component in correcting one's outlook so as to reduce the suffering that necessarily results from a false view. In this way Buddhist metaphysics is fundamentally revisionary because it asserts that the naïvely held conception of the world is wrong insofar as it inevitably leads to suffering.

When ultimate truth is described as conducive to reaching awakening the implication is that whatever ultimate truth actually is will be the metaphysical view that benefits those that hold it according to this Buddhist metric. In keeping to the teachings of the Buddha, Ābhidharmikas developed their philosophical positions using Buddhist doctrine as a starting point. The Buddha taught that three marks or aspects characterize all conditioned existence. These are 1) *duḥkha* or suffering, 2) *anātman* or non-self, and 3) *anitya* or impermanence. This characterization of specifically *conditioned* existence indicates another core Buddhist doctrine, *pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent origination, which holds that all phenomena arise as a result of causes and conditions¹⁰. Asserting that all phenomena arise from some set of causes and conditions is meant to indicate that any given entity does not possess its own substantial existence. This is what non-self means as there is no substantial or essential core of the entity responsible for its existence. In this way dependent origination and selflessness can be seen as mutually implicating. Regarding this development of Abhidharma thought Waldron states,

The [Ābhidharmikas] took the early Buddhist idea that the beings and things of the world are impermanent, selfless, and dependently arisen and extrapolated it to apply to all phenomena whatsoever. They argued that referring to anything in terms of entities or wholes (e.g. tables, persons, or even thoughts) is merely a conventional way of designating continuing yet provisional collocations of simpler more fundamental elements or factors, which alone could be said to truly exist.¹¹

¹⁰ This distinction is not paramount for my purposes here but the idea in specifying conditioned existence is to contrast with a type of existence that is unconditioned. Unconditioned existence, namely *nirvāṇa*, is not described by these three marks and is not subject to causes and conditions.

¹¹ William Waldron. *The Buddhist Unconscious: The ālaya-vijñāna in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*. (New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 50.

The simpler and more fundamental elements that constitute composite phenomena Waldron alludes to are known as *dharmas*.

1.1.2 *Dharma* Theory

A *dharma* is an absolutely simple, particularized, and momentary quality instantiation, somewhat similar to a trope in contemporary metaphysics. These are atomic in the strict sense as there is no conceivable divisibility within them, such that a *dharma* cannot even possess both shape and size.¹² Furthermore, in reducing our experiential reality to these momentary units *dharmas* can be either physical or mental. Carpenter states,

Dharmas are elements in that anything else that is real is ultimately composed of them. They are substances in the sense that they are genuine individuals, with a distinct identity. They are also that which ‘underlies’ reality in that anything real is constituted by *dharmas*; but they cannot be substances in the sense of bearers of properties. They *are* their (respective) properties.¹³

This indicates a number of things worth mentioning. Composite entities, which encompass all phenomena we interact with, are constituted by *dharmas*. This points to the Abhidharma distinction between ultimate and conventional truth/reality. If something can be analyzed into its component parts then that entity is not ultimately real. However, that entity is still conventionally real because it is constituted by ultimately real *dharmas*. It is in virtue of these *dharmas* that composite entities have any status ontologically, albeit derived. There is then a clear sense of the ontological priority of *dharmas*, and the ultimate, over conventional reality populated by composite wholes.

Take some composite entity, following classical Buddhist fashion we will use a chariot. This is a complex whole made up of wheels, yoke, pole, etc. so clearly the chariot is only conventionally real. Moreover, each of these parts in turn can be analyzed into constituent parts

¹² Amber Carpenter. *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*

as well with the wheel reducible to spokes, rim, hub etc. The end result of this type of analysis leads us to the *dharmas* of each component part, with each quality of the part accounted for by a corresponding *dharma*. Moreover, since *dharmas* are momentary there must be some relation that allows the quality to be identifiable conventionally. *Dharmas* are momentary events but ones that are causally produced and causally produce more *dharmas*. For some particular quality of, say the spoke, there is a casually continuous ‘stream’ of *dharmas* that corresponds to that quality. So the firmness of the spoke is understood to be the result of a momentary ‘flash’ of firmness that causally produces¹⁴ another ‘flash’ of firmness and so on such that we can conventionally identify the wheel spoke as something firm. If something were to occur that stopped the wheel from being firm, perhaps combustion, then this would be an interruption of the stream of *dharmas* such that the firmness ceased to be causally produced. This type of analysis underlies all phenomena for the Ābhidharmika and demonstrates their penchant for ontological reductionism.

1.1.3 *Svabhāva*

What of this description of *dharmas* as ‘genuine individuals’, mentioned above? This attribution points towards an important concept underlying Abhidharma philosophy, and the Madhyamaka critique of it. This quality of a *dharma* is known as *svabhāva*. *Svabhāva*, like many Sanskrit terms, does not find a simple translation into English. The term can be divided into *sva*, meaning “own” and *bhāva*, meaning “being” so a literal translation would be “own-being”, but it has been variously translated as “intrinsic nature”, “independent nature”, “essence”, or “substance”. None of these fully capture the notion of *svabhāva* but may indicate some understanding of what the term covers. In addition, *svabhāva* is typically contrasted with another

¹⁴ Different Abhidharma schools had different conceptions and on the perplexing problem regarding causal efficacy of momentary entities. The differences among these approaches are interesting but unnecessary for my purposes here.

term *parabhāva*, which literally means “other-being”. Westerhoff rightly points out a particularly thorny problem in explaining *svabhāva*,

[This problem] consists in presenting a clear explanation of a concept which is taken to be vacuous and in fact, if clearly examined, inconsistent. When one is looking at the Madhyamaka arguments, it is often quite hard to attribute anything like a defensible philosophical theory to the proponents of *svabhāva* at all, since these often appear to be conveniently set up straw men.¹⁵¹⁶

In light of this I will follow Westerhoff’s analysis of *svabhāva* (albeit in much truncated form) as comprising three dimensions: ontological, cognitive, and semantic, although I am primarily concerned with the first two dimensions here. By canvassing these dimensions I hope to give a clear account of what a proponent of *svabhāva* is actually asserting, and why this may be a philosophically defensible position.¹⁷

Later Madhyamaka arguments were primarily directed towards the ontological aspect of *svabhāva*, but there are two further distinctions¹⁸ that can be made within this dimension, *svabhāva* as essence and *svabhāva* as substance. *Svabhāva* as essence (or as Westerhoff calls it essence-*svabhāva*) concerns the specific characterizing property of an object.¹⁹ That is, the property that an object must have if it is to remain that particular object. If the object were to lose this property then it would cease to be the object in question. For example, fire may be characterized as essentially hot. In the event that fire ceased being hot, it would cease to be fire

¹⁵ Jan Christoph Westerhoff. *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19-20.

¹⁶ See also Richard Robinson’s “Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views?,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 1972): 325-331.

¹⁷ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s*, 20.

¹⁸ Westerhoff identifies a third, absolute-*svabhāva*, but this is found entirely in the commentarial literature and, though interesting, does not serve my purposes here.

¹⁹ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s*, 21.

as we understand it. It is this attribution that gives *dharmas* their “genuine individuality” Carpenter mentions above.

The prime target of the Madhyamaka critique is on *svabhāva* as an ontologically basic substance of sorts. Whereas essence-*svabhāva* serves epistemological ends in defining and individuating certain objects, substance-*svabhāva* serves to demarcate those that have *dravyasat*, or primary existence and those that have *prajñaptisat*, or conceptual existence. This neatly maps onto the distinction between ultimate and conventional reality indicating that only those with substance-*svabhāva* are ultimately real and primary, with everything else being conventionally real and secondary. The contrasting term *parabhāva* here would describe entities that make up conventional or secondary reality. In this manner the world is metaphysically split into a secondary realm made up of conventional and composite objects, each of which can be reduced to their primary and ultimate parts – *dharmas* – that alone possess substance-*svabhāva*. It is in virtue of substance-*svabhāva* that *dharmas* possess their primary ontological status over composite and complex objects, which themselves possess only *parabhāva* because their being is derived from these more basic *dharmas*. Westerhoff characterizes this ontological understanding of *svabhāva* thusly,

...*svabhāva* is equated with primary existence and denotes a specific ontological status: to exist with *svabhāva* means to be part of the basic furniture of the world, independent of anything else that also happens to exist. Such objects provide the ontological rock-bottom on which the diverse world of phenomena rests.²⁰

This independence condition is somewhat stronger than the position adopted by Abhidharma thinkers. Recall, the *dharmas* of ultimate reality are subject to causation and in this way they may be understood as dependently arisen. In this manner, *dharmas* are not totally independent of

²⁰ Jan Christoph Westerhoff. “Nāgārjuna” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2017 ed. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/nagarjuna/>.

other *dharmas*, but may be understood as independent of any conventional entity²¹. If this is the case for the Ābhidharmika then the Madhyamaka critique, as it especially pertains to this notion, will have a certain amount of traction.

The cognitive aspect of *svabhāva* points back to the idea of metaphysics as a fundamentally soteriological enterprise for Buddhist philosophy. The idea is that when one has grasped the correct metaphysical situation of *svabhāva* (or for the Madhyamaka, the absence of it) then one not only has a theoretically satisfactory understanding of the world, but one is that much closer to the cognitive state of an awakened being. The cessation of ignorance as a root of suffering is in part achieved through the correct understanding of the two-fold nature of reality and its substance-*svabhāva* foundation. For the uninitiated non-Buddhist everyday objects are incorrectly attributed with *svabhāva* insofar as they are taken to be substantially real and enduring, existing independently of beings like us. This is simply the reification of conventional reality. The Ābhidharmika position views this as ignorance insofar as the attribution of *svabhāva* is in the wrong place, at the conventional instead of the ultimate level. The cognitive shift for the Ābhidharmika is when one no longer reifies composite objects, but sees them as fundamentally “empty” of *svabhāva* because this is only something that exists at the ultimate level of analysis. For the Ābhidharmika considering the ultimate reality of momentary *dharmas* possessing *svabhāva* is a way to undermine the roots of suffering that grow from an incorrect and ignorant way of conceptualizing the world. *Svabhāva* is not discarded but carefully situated within a larger metaphysical picture as an ontologically foundational property.

1.2 Madhyamaka Critique.

The primary philosophical conviction of Madhyamaka is *śūnyatā* or emptiness. To be empty necessitates the question of what something is empty *of*, and for the Mādhyamika this is

²¹ See Westerhoff's, *Nāgārjuna's*. 24-26.

svabhāva, which is why the core Madhyamaka doctrine is also known as *svabhāva-śūnyatā*. Asserting emptiness is not exclusive to Madhyamaka, as Abhidharma holds that conventional reality is empty of *svabhāva* as well, but for Madhyamaka this denial is thoroughgoing and applies to conventional and ultimate alike. Nāgārjuna, the second century monk attributed as the founder of Madhyamaka, makes a number of arguments rejecting the ontological notion of substance-*svabhāva* as incoherent or inconsistent. This philosophical approach carries into the Madhyamaka understanding of the relation between ontology and truth.

1.2.1 Rejection of *Svabhāva*

Substance-*svabhāva* is understood to be the end-point in a series of dependency relations, and it is this notion that is rejected by Nāgārjuna. Three types of dependency concern Madhyamaka in their critique, mereological (the dependence of a composite object upon its parts), causal (dependence of an effect on its cause), and conceptual (the dependence of an object on a conceptualizing mind).²² Insofar as some object exhibits any of these types of dependency then that object cannot exist independently or be “established from its own side” as later Tibetan commentators phrased it. If something cannot be established in this manner then that object is taken to be empty of *svabhāva*. So if something can be shown to depend upon its parts, causes and conditions, or on a conceptualizing mind then that object is empty. This insistence on emptiness may be seen as *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) taken to its logical conclusion. Nāgārjuna states in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* or *The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (MMK) 24:18a, “Whatever is dependently co-arisen / That is explained to be emptiness...”²³ It seems clear here that Nāgārjuna is equating dependent origination and emptiness, and he continues in verse 19,

²² Westerhoff, “Nāgārjuna”.

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.²⁴

All phenomena are within the domain of inquiry here and all demonstrate some type of dependence. However, just because the notion of existence through some sort of substance-*svabhāva* is rejected does not mean that existence, full stop, is rejected. Rather, what Nāgārjuna is saying is that the only way for things to exist is dependently, or ‘emptily’. Emptiness is a characterization of *how* things exist, not a proclamation that things do not exist at all.

1.2.2 The Causation Arguments Against *Svabhāva*

Nāgārjuna does not have a single master argument for emptiness but employs a number of different arguments that are meant to show the inconsistency or incoherence of certain notions when *svabhāva* is taken as a presupposition. Carpenter describes the procedure of Nāgārjuna’s MMK thusly,

...the [MMK’s] examination of classic Abhidharma categories takes shape as a series of destructive tetralemmas: the *catuṣkoti* (tetralemma) should show that for any category, each of the logically possible positions regarding it, or implied by it, turns out to be untenable.²⁵

The very beginning of the MMK takes causation as its target, and here Nāgārjuna’s project is not to prove causation impossible, but rather that our understanding of causation is based on some faulty premise, such as that cause and effect exist with their own *svabhāva*.²⁶

In examining how things could be caused Nāgārjuna opens his MMK with,

Neither from itself nor from another,

²³ Jay Garfield. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Carpenter, *Indian*, 79.

²⁶ Westerhoff, “Nāgārjuna”.

Nor from both,
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.²⁷

This is the aforementioned *catuṣkoti*, presenting all four possible options and rejecting all of them. In short, Nāgārjuna is rejecting that entities can be caused 1) from themselves, or 2) from other things, or 3) from both themselves and from other things, or 4) from neither. Recall that Nāgārjuna and the Ābhidharmikas do not disagree about the dependencies and lack of *svabhāva* on the conventional level, so the focus of these arguments, the entities in question, are those possessing substance-*svabhāva* – that is *dharmas*. However, for the following examination of options I will apply both conventional examples as well as examples using *dharmas*.

The idea that anything could cause itself is counterintuitive to our normal understanding of how things arise. An acorn gives rise to an oak tree, but the acorn is not the only factor in bringing about the oak tree. Sunlight, water, warmth, and nutrient rich soil are also conditions that contribute to the arising of the oak tree, and these may be understood as the background conditions or the causal field.²⁸ In analyzing an entity as self-caused Westerhoff gives two ways this could be interpreted, that cause and effect are identical, or that the effect is contained within, or forms part of, the causal field.²⁹

The refutation of self-causation via the identity of effect and cause is not a particularly controversial claim. For one *dharma* to be the effect and the cause of itself borders on the completely incoherent given the characterization of *dharmas* as possessors of substance-*svabhāva*. Take a more mundane example of a fire and the spark that ignited it. It is not clear to me that much understanding is gained by asserting that the fire is identical with the spark that

²⁷ Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 3.

²⁸ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's*, 95.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 100.

ignites it. Moreover, the acorn (along with the causal field) is decidedly *not* the oak tree. So this notion of self-causation I think can be safely discarded, or at the very least, shown to be fundamentally problematic.

That the effect is in some way already a part of the causal field is the other way that self-causation may be understood. If the effect is already within the causal field then it is not clear how the causal field is producing the effect since the effect is already present. Similarly, if we were presented with all of the components of the causal field (say the sunlight, soil, warmth, acorn etc.) then we should be acquainted with the effect already, in this case, the oak tree. Now we might be able to infer that an oak tree will arise but inference is not the same as the literal presence of the effect within the causal field, and it is this literal presence that Nāgārjuna is concerned with. Furthermore, if a cause and an effect are supposed to be independent entities, that is *dharma*s possessing substance-*svabhāva*, then this sort of intermingling of effect within cause does violence to any notion of independence attributed to substance-*svabhāva*.

This emphasis on the distinctness of cause and effect leads one to the second option rejected by Nāgārjuna, that an effect is caused by some other entity. This is certainly the most natural way of conceiving of causation, as we understand spark and fire to be distinct as well as acorn and oak tree. Given this strong intuition Nāgārjuna's rejection of this option becomes a significantly controversial claim. Nāgārjuna argues that the cause and the effect cannot be distinct because of the dependency that exists between the two. Westerhoff states,

This is because the effect depends *existentially* on the cause (if the cause did not exist the effect would not exist) and cause depends at least *notionally* on the effect (if there was no effect the cause would not be called "cause"). The kind of independence demanded by [substance-*svabhāva*] is simply not available for things which are cause and effect.³⁰

³⁰ Westerhoff, "Nāgārjuna".

The problem here is with the way that substance-*svabhāva* has been defined, existing as fundamentally independent. Recall that the *dharmas* that constitute the Abhidharma ultimate reality are purportedly related only through causation, indicating that each *dharma* (possessing substance-*svabhāva*) causes the following *dharma* and so on until there is a causal stream that constitutes the enduring qualities of various objects. The ontological status afforded these *dharmas*, their substance-*svabhāva*, seems to disallow the most intuitive understanding of how causation works, which is precisely what Nāgārjuna is trying to show here.

The third alternative is that an object is caused both by itself and by other objects. One may think to dismiss this option immediately seeing that self-causation and causation from another have already been individually refuted, and a further argument to disprove their conjunction is unnecessary. However, Westerhoff presents a third possibility whereby the individual refutation of the previous two options will not suffice. He states that the most plausible way to understand this option is,

...in terms of a cause that contains the effect in itself as a potentiality that is actualized given certain conditions. A block of marble (the cause) may be said to contain a statue (the result) as a potentiality that is made real by a variety of supporting conditions, namely the sculptor's actions. Here cause and effect are not wholly distinct (since the block and the statue share some parts) nor are they identical (since the block is not the statue), thereby avoiding the difficulties implied by the preceding two accounts.³¹

Again the problem here is with the assertion of substance-*svabhāva* and the independent existence that both cause and effect are supposed to possess. Since the statue shares some parts with the marble then there is no independent existence of the statue or the marble. Moreover, if we apply this option to *dharmas* then the problem becomes clearer as a single *dharma* is by definition absolutely simple and could not contain multiple parts, one of which would have to be the potential effect.

³¹ Ibid.

The final option that Nāgārjuna rejects is that causation is neither self-causation nor causation by another object. This option is taken to be the denial of causation altogether if the previous three options exhaust the possibilities for causation. If so, then what Nāgārjuna is rejecting here is the denial of any apparent causal relation. The reasons for keeping some sort of causal relation, albeit one that is not based on presuppositions of *svabhāva*, is first, that our epistemic practices are causally based. The things that we know about the world are grasped via a causal relation with the world. If there were no causal relation then it would be difficult to gain any sort of beneficial information about the world that we necessarily are a part of. In addition, a world without causal regularity would be utterly foreign to us insofar as causal regularity appears to saturate the world.³² Candrakīrti, a seventh century Madhyamaka scholar, says in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* (a commentary on the MMK),

If things arise in total absence of a cause,
It follows that at all times, everything can come from anything.
If that were so, then worldly people would not gather seeds,
In all their myriad ways, to cultivate their crops.³³

Certain things follow from other things wind pushes water into ripples and waves, fire burning a log leads to ash and smoke, grass seeds give rise to grass and not to oak trees. If the world did not exhibit some sort of regularity then the practices that beings like us use to maneuver and survive in the world would be futile. Therefore, this fourth option of denying a causal relation is an insufficient way to account for our concept of causality.

One option that may seem missing here is that of the cause and the effect overlapping in some way. This seems to accord with how we understand the arising of various phenomena. A potter crafting a pot on her wheel is a process in which a lump of clay is gradually transformed

³² Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's*, 111-112.

³³ Verse 6:99, from *Introduction to the Middle Way, Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra* (2002).

into a finished pot. Once again this is a model that cannot arise for the *dharmas* of Abhidharma ontology. *Dharmas* are momentary, temporally atomic units and they cannot undergo a temporally thick process of emergence.³⁴ For some sort of emergence there would need to be temporal parts within the *dharma* such that it existed across some span of time with the effect (the next *dharma*) arising during the latter stages (temporal parts) of the causing *dharma*. Temporal parts indicate that the *dharma* is not absolutely simple; therefore emergence, and the temporal parts required of it, cannot be applied to *dharmas*.

Thus far we have explored how Nāgārjuna demonstrates the failing of causation when *svabhāva* is taken as a core presupposition. Indeed, Nāgārjuna endeavors to show not just that postulating some ultimate ontological ground is unnecessary but also impossible (as seen through the analysis of causation). Nāgārjuna does not limit his arguments to causation only, he applies the same maneuver to motion and change as well, but I will not canvass those arguments here as they proceed in a similar manner.

1.2.3 Explicating the Madhyamaka Position

The Buddhist path itself is commonly known as the middle way, referring to a middling position between asceticism and sensual indulgence. The term “Madhyamaka” alludes to this characterization of Buddhism³⁵ but refers to a middle position between nihilism (or annihilationism) and reificationism (or eternalism). Hayes states that this school,

...avoids the two extremes of eternalism—the doctrine that all things exist because of an eternal essence—and annihilationism—the doctrine that things have essences while they exist but that these essences are annihilated just when the things themselves go out of existence.³⁶

³⁴ Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's*, 202.

³⁵ “Madhyamaka” literally means something like “belonging to the most middle”.

³⁶ Hayes, “Madhyamaka”.

The assertion of *svabhāva*, which Nāgārjuna endeavors to show as incoherent, is taken to be a type of reification, one extreme Madhyamaka strives to avoid. The other extreme of nihilism or annihilationism is a charge that is commonly levied against Mādhyamikas due to their own denial of *svabhāva*. Yet insofar as metaphysics involves holding some sort of foundational or ultimate ontology (assertion of *svabhāva*) then Nāgārjuna is not quite participating in the same metaphysical project. Moreover, it is only from this substantialist or foundationalist approach to ontology that charges of nihilism or reificationism arise. The manner in which Madhyamaka tries to carve out a defensible position here, while holding that all things are empty of *svabhāva*, is an interpretative task that has occupied commentators and scholars since Nāgārjuna's time. There are long commentarial traditions with various interpretations in both India and Tibet but many contemporary scholars tend to adopt a particular reading of Madhyamaka. I will follow Jay Garfield in explicating this interpretation³⁷, but given the nature of interpretations this need not be the only one.

The midpoint that Nāgārjuna seeks to establish relies on a three-way correlation between emptiness, dependent origination, and convention. Recall 24:18 from his MMK,

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.³⁸

The first assertion here is an identification of emptiness and that which is dependently arisen; to say that something is dependently arisen is to say that it is empty and, conversely, to say that something is empty is to say that it is dependently arisen. Emptiness and the world of dependently arisen phenomena (i.e. conventional reality) are not distinct things but two different

³⁷ Garfield in his *Fundamental Wisdom, and Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002).

³⁸ Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 69.

ways of characterizing the same thing.³⁹ In addition, as this interpretation goes, there is a relation between whatever is dependently arisen and verbal conventions. As Garfield states,

...the identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon verbal conventions. To say of a thing that it is dependently arisen is to say that its identity as a single entity is nothing more than its being the referent of a word. The thing itself, apart from conventions of individuation, is nothing but an arbitrary slice of an indefinite spatiotemporal and causal manifold. To say of a thing that its identity is a merely verbal fact is to say that it is empty⁴⁰

The latter part of 24:18 indicates that emptiness itself is a dependent designation and as such it too is conventionally existent but ultimately empty. Emptiness viewed thusly is not some sort of entity, as this would reify emptiness, nor is it entirely unreal, as this would be annihilationist, but rather, emptiness is conventionally real. Conventional reality can be assessed similarly, being dependently arisen it cannot be non-empty, but it is also not completely nonexistent, it exists but its existence is characterized by emptiness. Furthermore, the same analysis can be applied to convention. Convention, for the Mādhyamika, is not ontologically insignificant, as it is in Abhidharma, because it is convention that determines the character of the phenomenal world, nor is it ontologically efficacious because it is empty.⁴¹ In the following verse of the MMK (24:19) Nāgārjuna reinforces the extent to which this analysis applies, recall:

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.⁴²

Everything that exists is dependently arisen because everything that exists is empty. Yet the only existence that can obtain is conventional existence, and this, in turn, is characterized as

³⁹ Garfield *Empty Words*, 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 69.

dependently arisen and empty. As Garfield states, "...nothing lacks the three co-extensive properties of emptiness, dependent origination, and conventional identity."⁴³ For the Mādhyamika, the three-way correlation of emptiness, dependent origination, and convention functions to carve out a middle position between nihilism and reificationism. Moreover, emptiness itself does not escape this analysis leading to the proposition that emptiness is itself empty. Yet this must naturally follow for to assert emptiness as non-empty would be to assert that emptiness exists in virtue of some independent nature, that is, to reify emptiness as some sort of ineliminable ontological property, and this would be a slip into one extreme Madhyamaka seeks to avoid.

In sum, Mādhyamikas endeavor to position themselves between one extreme that denies existence entirely (nihilism) and another extreme that asserts an ontologically robust notion of existence via *svabhāva* (reificationism). This is done through the three-way correlation of emptiness, dependent origination, and convention. Mādhyamikas avoid nihilism by rejecting a *svabhāva* based approach to ontology, and they avoid reificationism by applying emptiness universally. Conventional reality, maligned as second-rate in Abhidharma, becomes the center of Madhyamaka understanding but only when understood as dependently arisen and empty. In this way conventional reality becomes foundational, not in a metaphysically loaded manner, but insofar as the conventional is understood as dependently arisen, empty, and a product of verbal convention, then it is all that can be countenanced in one's ontology.

1.2.3a Emptiness of Emptiness and the Two Truths

To hold emptiness as non-empty would be to assert that it has *svabhāva*, that it has some sort of substantial essence that analysis can reveal, or that it can be fully characterized in a non-relational manner. It should be clear at this point that this notion is anathema to Nāgārjuna, yet to

⁴³ Ibid, 36.

assert that emptiness is itself empty is by no means an easily grasped conclusion. If we take a conventional entity, again we shall use the chariot, we can analyze it to demonstrate its emptiness. There is no chariot apart from its parts, nor can the chariot be identified in isolation from its own antecedent and subsequent histories.⁴⁴ This emptiness itself, the emptiness of the chariot, amounts to the chariot's lack of *svabhāva*, and this is dependent upon the chariot for if there were no dependently arisen chariot then there would be no emptiness of the chariot either. To view the chariot as empty is not to see "through" the chariot to some fundamental reality, but to see the chariot as conventional and dependent, for that is all that its emptiness entails. The empty chariot does not become some different entity for the Mādhyamika but is seen as it is – dependent, conventional, and empty. Garfield states,

Emptiness is hence not different from conventional reality – it is the fact that conventional reality is conventional. Hence it must be dependently arisen, since it depends upon the existence of empty phenomena. Hence emptiness itself is empty.⁴⁵

Understanding that the chariot has dependently arisen and has an identity in virtue of conventional verbal designation is to see it as empty, and this emptiness is nothing more than the understanding of these facts about the chariot.

This conception is deeply connected to the Madhyamaka understanding of the two truths. Conventional truth in Madhyamaka is similar to the Abhidharma understanding, whereby things are conventionally true if they accord with the standards of convention. Convention here may mean several things, so for example there is strong and reasoned consensus for things like scientific theories. These have been experimentally shown and the results incorporated into the current body of scientific knowledge. This is one conventional approach to truth, but others may involve mere agreement on the verbal conventions that constitute conventional reality. When

⁴⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 39.

people speak of water there is a clear understanding of what is being referred to, that which is wet, (typically) clear, and necessary for life on earth. If one were to use the term “water” but refer to something to which the previous description – i.e. conventional understanding – did not apply then this would be (conventionally) false.⁴⁶ One principal difference between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka is that the latter does not consider conventional truth to be second-rate. The Madhyamaka approach to conventional reality is not one of scorn but one that sees it as the only reality possible. However, the extent to which these conceptions differ will become more apparent in what follows.

Ultimate truth in Madhyamaka is the assertion of the universal emptiness of all phenomena, but as we have seen this claim is about conventional reality. So the ultimate claim of emptiness is a testament to how conventional reality operates. For the Ābhidharmika ultimate truths are statements that concern ultimate reality, *dharmas* etc., but the Mādhyamika asserts that ultimate truth is *not* correlated to an ultimate reality. In this manner the Mādhyamika denies that there is an ultimate reality, for their claim of ultimate truth only concerns conventional reality. For Nāgārjuna the search for some ultimate reality, insofar as that project is meant to incorporate *svabhāva* or some other ontological ground, is futile. What we are left with is the conventional world and a claim regarding how it operates. Conventional reality is not ontologically second-rate as it is in Abhidharma, but becomes the principal way to understand the full import of the Madhyamaka position.

Ultimate truth cannot be about an ultimate reality, as there isn't one, but it can still pertain to the soteriological goals of Buddhism. In his MMK chapter 24:8-10 Nāgārjuna states,

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:

⁴⁶ Distinguishing conventional truths and conventional falsities seems necessary, more so for the Madhyamikā because of their seeming denial of an ultimate reality. This issue will be explored further down.

A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand
The distinction between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate
Liberation is not achieved.⁴⁷

The ultimate truth still concerns the awakening of an individual, it is just that this is now a fact about the conventional. This understanding of the thoroughly empty nature of conventional reality is the key to attaining liberation, it is only through the conventional that one can grasp the ultimate and have any chance of awakening. Nāgārjuna also points to this in his MMK chapter 25:19 where he states,

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence and nirvāṇa.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.⁴⁸

Cyclic existence here is *saṃsāra*, a term meaning a cyclical and aimless existence whereby one is constantly being reborn only to suffer and die and be reborn again ad infinitum.⁴⁹ The liberation from this cycle is *nirvāṇa*, which is brought about through the awakening or enlightenment that forms an end goal of Buddhist practice. So despite the fact that there is no longer any sort of ontological bifurcation between ultimate and conventional reality there is still

⁴⁷ Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 68.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 75.

⁴⁹ Buddhism has no monopoly on the term *saṃsāra*, as it is a fundamental assumption in Indian philosophy and religion, each of which deals with it in ways particular to that religion.

an ultimate truth that facilitates awakening – emptiness. It is just that this truth does not correspond to an ultimate reality in the way that Abhidharma ultimate truths do.

1.3 The Problem Emerges

Recall that any philosophical endeavor in Buddhism is fundamentally oriented towards the soteriological goal of awakening. The default view of the world is deeply flawed insofar as it engenders greed, hatred, or ignorance, which in turn always lead to suffering. Correcting ignorance through a proper metaphysical understanding is the reason why Buddhist metaphysical claims are revisionary, as the default view is in need of revision. But if Madhyamaka has jettisoned any sort of ultimate reality then there seems to be nothing that the conventional default view of the world is revised against, no benchmark by which misunderstanding is corrected. If this is the case then the question is what situates truth claims within a world that is taken to be merely conventional? If truth claims are to have revisionary traction, then they cannot be “made true” merely through the adopted conventions that constitute conventional reality. This problem faces any anti-realist position regarding claims made under the assumption that there is no independently existing world “out there” acting as a truthmaker for our claims. This is especially salient in the Buddhist context because of the highly soteriological nature of their enterprise. Since the Buddhist path is characterized by a number of ethical claims and directives, situating these within a wholly conventional – anti-realist – framework appears to be of paramount importance. The Mādhyamika is then in a particularly tight spot by holding what appears to be a form of anti-realism while also asserting revisionary ethical claims.

The question may arise of whether the Mādhyamika is really so poorly off in this situation as there is a whole literature within contemporary Western philosophy dealing with anti-realism and truth, and perhaps there are options here for the Mādhyamika to exploit. The

idea would be that the Mādhyamika only has to hold a theory of truth that does not require an ultimate ontological reality to act as a foundation or benchmark for claims. By rejecting, say, the correspondence theory of truth the Mādhyamika need not reject all of the ways that a claim could be taken as true, so perhaps her claims can be viewed on a different theory. If, say, a Mādhyamika were to adopt a coherence theory of truth then the claims they make would be true insofar as they were coherent with the set of propositions that she already held as true. This, however, seems to be less helpful when considering the revisionary claims that Madhyamaka wants to make. If a Mādhyamika is bound to conventional reality and the set of propositions that she holds as true is formed on the basis of this conventional situation then highly revisionary claims may not cohere with this set in virtue of their revisionary nature. I think it is plausible to assert that one's coherent set of beliefs, causally created through one's engagement with the conventional world, is going to be largely made up of conventional truths. These conventional truths constitute the default view of the world that Buddhism targets, so it seems that situating Buddhist claims, metaphysical or ethical, by appealing to a web of conventional truths is the wrong direction in which to look.

1.3.1 *Upāya-kauśalya*

What is needed is some account of truth that is able to situate truth claims made under a Madhyamaka framework. When a Mādhyamika makes a claim there must be something appealed to that gives the claim some sort of normative weight. This account may hold for all truths but I am particularly interested in the ethical domain. To this end I think there is promise in co-opting and expanding a concept from elsewhere in Buddhist thought – *upāya*. *Upāya-kauśalya* translates as “skillful means” and is typically employed to describe a teaching technique attributed to the Buddha (and other spiritually advanced beings) whereby teachings are

adjusted to suit the situation and comportment of a less spiritually developed audience. Charles Goodman states,

The idea is that the Buddhas don't always tell such people the final truth; instead, they tell them whatever they need to hear at the time, including even falsehoods, if doing so will be the most effective way to support their progress towards spiritual maturity.⁵⁰

The paradigm example comes from the *Lotus Sūtra*, a popular early Mahāyāna text, which presents an allegorical story that gives a sense of *upāya* at work. Briefly, a wealthy old man has a rather large and decrepit house with only one door. A fire breaks out and threatens to engulf the whole house, and with it the wealthy man's children who are inside absorbed in their play. The man calls out to them repeatedly in vain so in desperation he calls out to tell his children that there are goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts outside, things that he knows they all enjoy. At mention of this the children rush out and are saved from the flames, but there are no carts of any kind to be seen.⁵¹ This may be seen as an exercise in *upāya* because the children were deceived, but for the purposes of saving them from a fiery death.

As far as spiritual instruction goes, this technique is seen as a means to an end whereby the end is the Buddhist goal of awakening. But whereas the children were told an outright lie, *upāya* as a pedagogical tool relies on teachings that are not true in an ultimate sense. For example, the Buddha may indicate to a particular practitioner that there exists a self, even though this assertion contradicts a core Buddhist doctrine. Some sense of self may be a conventional truth and it may be the thing that this practitioner needs to hear at this particular time for them to progress along the path, but ultimately speaking this is a falsehood. My proposed application of *upāya* is primarily a pragmatic one and chiefly concerned with situating ethical claims in the

⁵⁰ Charles Goodman, "Śāntideva", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Fall 2016 ed. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/shantideva> (2016).

⁵¹ Michael Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism, 2nd Edition* (New York: Routledge, 1978), 37.

absence of ultimate reality. General truth claims within Madhyamaka, I will argue, follow a similarly pragmatic justification, whereby the validity of a truth claim is cashed out in terms of its efficacy in maneuvering through conventional reality, which allows the Mādhyamika to sift conventional truth from conventional falsity. *Upāya* as a way to give normative weight to ethical claims proceeds with a more specific goal than general truth claims in Madhyamaka, one that concerns the particular soteriological goals of Buddhism.

In brief, the *upāya* approach to ethical truths couches their truth and normativity in terms of the effectiveness of these ethical claims in progressing a practitioner along the Buddhist path to awakening. Such truths would be particularly potent for practitioners on this path and that which is considered ethical falsity would be those claims that obstruct or reverse progression along the path. I think that this approach is particularly plausible when considering the philosophical constraints of the Madhyamaka position as well as particular insights from Buddhist epistemology.

CHAPTER 2

The Buddha's analysis of the human condition identifies suffering (*duḥkha*) as fundamentally problematic, and his recommendation of a remedy encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path indicate a causal approach to this problem, much like a physician treating an illness. Eliminating suffering involves eliminating the causes of suffering while also cultivating the causes of happiness. In this respect the Buddhist path consists of a number of claims that indicate certain actions to avoid and certain actions to take. These are ethical claims⁵² as they concern how one ought to conduct oneself individually and in relation to others in accord with the Buddhist normative project. The Buddha's analysis indicates that our normal way of understanding the world and ourselves includes deleterious presuppositions that contribute to our perpetual suffering. For the Buddha's message to have any traction it must be the case that we can, in some meaningful way, alter the situation in which we find ourselves. There has to be a sense in which the actions we take (or do not take) have some meaningful effect upon our own futures, for if it did not then the Buddhist path as a way to eliminate suffering or effect any change would be pointless. We seem to run into some difficulty here as Buddhism asserts the doctrine of *anātman*, or "non-self" which seems to eliminate the very agent by which meaningful change can occur. If there is no agent then how can "my" actions make a difference to "my"

⁵² In one sense these *may* be considered merely prudential claims, for the method outlined by the Buddha is only appropriate for those that wish to be rid of suffering (*duḥkha*). This leaves the possibility that for those that do *not* wish to be rid of suffering or perhaps enjoy it (perhaps a masochist of some sort), the Buddhist project has no appeal. However, the full range of meaning in the term *duḥkha* indicates not only gross forms of bodily harm and pain, but also deeper anxieties regarding frustration in not obtaining what one desires and losing what one has already obtained. Insofar as the masochist desires something and will not be able to hold onto it indefinitely then he too will experience *duḥkha*. Yet there may be those that still find no appeal in the Buddhist criticism of suffering, perhaps those that lack the psychological ability to either feel pain or experience desire and frustration. However, these instances are probably indicative of an atypical neurology/psychology and likely occupy a very small minority of the human population. Given this, the Buddha's claims that *duḥkha* is both pervasive and problematic apply to vast majority of human beings. This seems to indicate that the claims that constitute a path out of suffering impinge upon (almost) all human beings and therefore ought to be followed by (almost) all human beings.

future? The Buddhist assertion of the thoroughly dependent nature of all phenomena, whereby any composite entity can be “dissolved” into its causes, parts, or conventional identity deepens the problem of how to understand agency in Buddhism as these causes and conditions enervate typical notions of an agent. We seem to be left in a troubling situation whereby the agent has been enfeebled or eliminated but we also seem to require agency for the central purpose of eliminating suffering.

In the West many of the issues that surround agency concern free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. The will, according to Jay Garfield, is the legacy of Augustine and his struggle in responding to the problem of evil⁵³. Briefly, if God is the cause of all things, and evil exists in the world, then God would end up being the cause of evil. If this is the case then it seems that God is not omnibenevolent, a core attribute of Western conceptions of God. Augustine’s solution to this was to absolve God of the causation of evil⁵⁴ by proposing a faculty that allowed persons to produce free, uncaused action – a free will. Thereby making human beings the ultimate authors of their own actions. God’s creation of this faculty does not mean that the usage of this faculty reflects God’s benevolence, and God is therefore absolved of the presence of evil. It is this connection of morality to freedom that has reverberated throughout Western discussions of issues surrounding agency⁵⁵, and, according to Garfield,

It grounds the political and legal theory of the enlightenment to which we are heirs, and infuses our high and popular culture with a presupposition of the reality of the will and its freedom. It also leads us to take for granted the idea that we are only persons in the full

⁵³ Jay Garfield, “Just Another Word For Nothing Left to Lose: Freedom, Agency, and Ethics for Mādhyamikas,” in *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Dasti (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 165-66.

⁵⁴ In traditional church doctrine this ultimately comes back to the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This “original sin” resulted in not only the punishment of Adam and Eve, but also all of humanity.

⁵⁵ I use this term to cover discussions of determinism, free will, moral responsibility, and action.

sense to the degree that we are free, and that moral responsibility is possible only in the context of this freedom.⁵⁶

No appeal to this story can be made in the context of Buddhism as nothing like this situation has arisen in Buddhist discussions. Yet this does not mean that Buddhists do not care about these sorts of issues, as we have seen agency (of some sort) is a necessary requirement that undergirds the whole Buddhist project. Rather, when we approach these questions in Buddhism we must exercise caution regarding the paradigms that have shaped this discussion in the West. To neglect this would be at best a limitation to any potential understanding, and at worst a form of cultural and philosophical imposition. It seems to me that the best way to approach these issues in Buddhism is to look where discussions of agency issues actually arise without necessarily needing to categorize this or that articulation as “determinist”, or “compatibilist” etc. Buddhists most certainly care about moral responsibility, agency, and freedom; it is just that these discussions take a different form than that in the West.

My concern regarding ethical claims in Madhyamaka is undergirded by questions of agency. In this respect I endeavor to apply my expanded conception of *upāya* to see how (or if) agency can be understood or situated similarly in the Madhyamaka framework. I will first examine interpretations of agency in Abhidharma before turning to interpretations in Madhyamaka. Then I will see how (or if) agency issues can be handled through the application of *upāya*, particularly in Madhyamaka. All of this serves to buttress an understanding of the ethical claims made within Madhyamaka, for every ethical claim presupposes some sort of agency. Moreover, my proposition of *upāya* as a way to justify claims essentially involves situating claims within the Buddhist plan of action – the path toward awakening. What this will

⁵⁶ Garfield, “Just Another,” 166.

amount to is not the successful situation of agency as a form of *upāya*, but of the understanding of a particularly robust type of agency as a form of *upāya*.

2.1 Abhidharma Agency

Chapter one discussed how Abhidharma Buddhism maintains an ontological reductionism of composite objects into metaphysically substantive *dharmas*, importantly though an analysis of the person also displays this reductive approach. On this view, what we conventionally call the “person” ultimately consists in the existence of five *skandhas* (bundles, aggregates, or heaps) organized in the correct manner. These five *skandhas* are 1) *rūpa*, the body or material form, 2) *vedanā*, affective feeling, 3) *saṃjñā*, perception and cognition, 4) *saṃskāra*, conditioning or constructing activities, and 5) *viññāna*, consciousness. These *skandhas* are not separable and come together to form a dynamic and functionally integrated psycho-physical system. Support for this view of the person usually proceeds by analyzing various elements of human experience and accounting for them by appealing to one or more of these *skandhas*. Moreover, the definition of *skandhas* as “aggregate” or “bundle” refers to the fact that the *skandhas* themselves are composed of more basic bits, *dharmas*. There is no priority of the material or psychological elements on this account, and no apparent difficulty in causal relations between the two types. So we have a view that dissolves the person into various *skandhas* and the *skandhas* into momentary *dharmas*. The *dharmas* interact causally and constitute self-similar streams that are grouped as each *skandha*, the collection of all five we conventionally take to be a person. The idea is that these five *skandhas* explain all of the things that we typically attribute to a “self” and a proper understanding of this reductive account loosens self-grasping or self-reification and therefore facilitates awakening.

It should be noted that Buddhist reductionism could come in various flavors. On one interpretation of the Abhidharma project when we speak of persons or other composite entities we are speaking of wholly illusory entities. Here a person is *really* a collection of *dharmas* arranged in a particular manner. This type of reductionism is eliminativist as it seeks to eliminate the person from our ontology. On this view we are in error when speaking of the person or of any other composite entity, when what we should be speaking of are *dharmas* or *skandhas*. Another flavor of reductionism is less austere and seeks to situate the reality of persons and composite entities, albeit in a less substantial manner than that of *dharmas*. On this latter view when we speak of composite entities we are speaking of real things but we are asserting that they consist in these more basic elements. That is, the person and the table are real but they ultimately consist in *skandhas* and *dharmas*. This description maps onto the distinction between ultimate and conventional reality, but the difficulty here comes when different interpreters take conventional reality to be wholly illusory, thereby holding an eliminativist position, or less substantial but still real in a significant enough sense. This distinction will become important later on as we see how Abhidharma understands issues surrounding agency.

2.1.1 Meyers's Account

According to Karin Meyers any discussion of issues surrounding agency in Buddhism must begin with the acknowledgment of the tension indicated in the introduction above. She explains that on the conventional level persons seem to engage in deliberation, choice, and willful action, yet at the ultimate level there are not even persons to whom these actions could be attributed (this latter point is exemplified in the no-self doctrine). Moreover, the goal of the Buddhist project is the elimination of suffering and liberation from *saṃsāra*, and the path to this goal is contingent upon there being some kind of meaningful agency that we can exercise.

Consideration of these tensions helps us avoid imposing Western concerns onto Buddhist discourse. Meyers's interpretation seeks to explain what we understand conventionally in terms of what is *actually* going on ultimately. In this sense she appeals to the *dharmas* operative in the sequence of (mental) events issuing in an action.

Notions of agency and action in Buddhism, especially in the Abhidharma, are tightly connected to the Buddhist understanding of *karma*. *Karma* literally means "action", and this includes both an act itself as well as the fruit of that act. In a well-known passage from the Pāli canon the Buddha explains *karma*,

Students, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.⁵⁷

This statement is a response to a student's question as to why some human beings seem to suffer misfortune while others do not (the distinction between inferiority and superiority). So this indicates first, that *karma* describes a causal relationship between types of action and quality of life, and second, that the moral quality of the action is what determines what kind of result will occur. The moral quality of an action is typically described as *kuśala*, "wholesome", "beneficial", or "skillful", or *akuśala*, "unwholesome", "unbeneficial", or "unskillful"⁵⁸. So the claim is that within an individual's single life wholesome actions tend to result in positive consequences for that individual, while unwholesome actions tend to result in negative consequences.

Discussion of *karma* includes differentiating purposeful action from mere events, and this is familiar in Western discussions as significant weight is placed upon the intention to perform

⁵⁷ "Cūla-kammavibhanga Sutta," *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 3rd Edition*, trans. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli and Bhikku Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom, 1995 [2005]), 1053.

⁵⁸ In the context of the Buddhist project what counts as wholesome are those actions, characteristics, and virtues that the Buddhist path endorses, things like generosity (*dāna*), compassion (*karuṇā*), or wisdom (*prajñā*).

some act in evaluating the moral valence of that act. Regarding this the Buddha explained, “I say, oh monks, *karma* is an intending (*cetanā*). Intending, one acts with the body, speech, or mind.”⁵⁹ (I follow Karin Meyers’s translation here of *cetanā* as “an intending” as she calls attention to the verbal sense of the Sanskrit term, adding that *cetanā* is not something someone has but rather it is something that someone does⁶⁰, and in this sense it is action (*karma*) in its own right). Here *cetanā* is presented as the defining characteristic of action, and this is intuitive as an action is brought about when one intends to perform an action. Meyers goes on to state that *cetanā* is a highly polyvalent term, but despite this she distills the most basic sense of *cetanā* as simply, “...the movement of a mind (*citta*) towards an object or goal.”⁶¹ This demonstrates an intentional structure, but it should be noted that *cetanā* also connotes affective and conative elements.⁶² One may be tempted to read the Buddha’s statement above as indicating that *karma* is deliberate and conscious action, or that the results of *karma* are determined primarily by the conscious intention behind the action. In this case an analogy would be drawn between *karmic* fruits and moral deserts, with *cetanā* as an analog of free will or choice, but Meyers cautions against this interpretation saying,

⁵⁹ AN 6.63 {A iii.415}.

⁶⁰ Karin Meyers “Freedom and Self-Control: Freedom in South Asian Buddhism” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2010) 139, fn 7.

⁶¹ Karin Meyers, “Free Persons, Empty Selves: Freedom and Agency in Light of the Two Truths,” in *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, ed. Matthew Dasti (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46.

⁶² The *saṃskāra-skandha* includes cognitive, affective, and conative elements but only as intimately tied to the effects of conditioning. MacKenzie explains, “...[the] *saṃskāra-skandha* (conditioning) includes the various dispositions, capacities, and formations — such as sensorimotor skills, memories, habits, emotional dispositions, volitions, and cognitive schemas — that both enable and constrain the person and her experiences. This category also includes our basic conative impulses — attraction, aversion, and indifference — which are in turn closely tied to our feelings and the affective modalities (*vedanā*) of experience. In the Buddhist view, typically one’s whole being in the world is driven by this sedimented conditioning — and not always for the better. Indeed, the basic conative impulses often manifest in pathological ways, such as the ‘three poisons’ of greed, hatred, and ignorance.” From his “Enacting Selves, Enacting Worlds: On the Buddhist Theory of Karma,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (April 2013): 199.

The problem is that in classical Buddhist sources, facts about moral responsibility do not always map directly onto facts about *karma*: a person is not necessarily morally responsible for his *karma* or morally deserving of its results.⁶³

The basic definition that Meyers provides indicates that *cetanā* may not always be voluntary, conscious, or subject to choice. For example, when sleeping or in dream states the mind still is directed toward some object or objects, in this case the dream phenomena, yet typically this content is not something that is under the direct control of the one who is dreaming. Since *cetanā* is not always deliberate, conscious, or subject to choice – all things associated with free will to some degree – it appears unsuitable to fulfill the role of a free will. In sum, *cetanā* distinguishes an action from an event, and as such plays a necessary role in the ascription of responsibility, but does not in itself entail responsibility. *Cetanā* may be the most crucial factor in *karma* but this does not mean that *karma* and *cetanā* are equivalent.

2.1.2 How Free Are We?

Despite the fact that *cetanā* is not itself an analog to free will its role in responsibility is important for understanding how an individual exercises agency. I have belabored the fact that the Buddhist path requires some sense of meaningful agency otherwise it would be a pointless endeavor. The Abhidharma understanding of how one effects change in one's life does concern *cetanā*, but not as some free will analog. Here it is important to see that the Buddhist path is concerned specifically with freedom *from suffering*, and that this is achieved through various forms of self-control. The default position in which people find themselves is characterized by ignorance regarding the fundamental nature of reality and maladaptive emotions (greed and hatred); these drive actions in such a way to perpetuate suffering. So in this sense those not on the path, those fully entrenched in the default position, are the *least* free because their actions are compelled by these deleterious factors. However, since all action is conditioned by mental

⁶³ Meyers, "Free Persons," 45.

factors, of which *cetanā* is one type, both the perpetuation of suffering and the liberation from suffering operate in a similar manner. In the former, an individual has a mistaken conception of how actions arise, and may think he is a substantial agent who “owns” and enacts his actions outside of any causal chain. In the latter, a practitioner understands that actions are conditioned by mental factors, and that certain (wholesome, *kuśala*) factors can be emphasized while others (unwholesome, *akuśala*) can be diminished. This ability to choose the influence of certain mental factors is often described in terms of mastery or control over the mind. Indeed in the Pālī canon one finds expressions like, “. . . a bhikkhu (monk) wields mastery over his mind, he does not let the mind wield mastery over him.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, Meyers points out that certain qualities, namely, faith (*śraddhā*), energy (*vīrya*), mindfulness (*smṛti*), concentration (*samādhi*), and discernment (*prajñā*), are significantly referred to as ruling or controlling faculties.⁶⁵ In practice these types of qualities and the approach endorsed by the path would operate by opening up a sort of space between a mental state and action. For example, a practitioner may experience anger but recognizes this as an unwholesome mental state and therefore chooses not to act upon it, whereas those not on the path may not have this ability and may unreflectively act on their anger. So it seems that the type of freedom available to most people is quite limited, whereas those on the path acquire greater and greater freedom through Buddhist practices that weaken the reactionary bond between mental state and action.

It is important to note that within the Abhidharma framework the aforementioned mental factors are operative on the ultimate level of *dharmas*. The umbrella of conditioning (*saṃskāra-skandha*) that partly constitutes the conventional person includes *cetanā* as well as these other mental factors. The actions typically ascribed to conventional persons are the result of *cetanā*

⁶⁴ *Mahāgosinga Sutta*, MN 32 {M I.214}

⁶⁵ Meyers, “Free Persons,” 51.

and other mental factors causally operating in a particular way upon the mental stream of an individual. The conventional agency of the practitioner is then explained through an appeal to ultimate reality in terms of the causal interaction of momentary *dharmas*, and, in this sense, dissolves any sort of robust autonomous agent. This understanding begins to sound similar to what Thomas Nagel described as the objective or external standpoint. On Nagel's view, if we consider our actions as part of the causal fabric of the world, that is impersonally, then we become paralyzed and helpless. He states,

The essential source of the problem is a view of persons and their actions as part of the order of nature, causally determined or not. That conception, if pressed, leads to the feeling that we are not agents at all, that we are helpless and not responsible for what we do.⁶⁶

Where Nagel views this approach as debilitating, Buddhists assert that not only is this therapeutic but can also enhance the ability to control action.⁶⁷ From this framework Meyers points out that there seem to be two problems, one theoretical and one practical. First, how can Buddhists explain choice and control enjoyed by ordinary persons or advanced practitioners when they deny that agents cause actions? Second, what prevents the doctrine of non-self from undermining a sense of agency crucial to the initiative and effort needed to engage on the path?⁶⁸ Her solution to each of these questions is intimately connected to the Buddhist doctrine of the two truths.

2.1.3 The Two Truths and Free Action

Despite the fact that conventional phenomena may be explicable in terms of ultimate reality there is no equivalence between facts about persons and facts about *dharmas*. Meyers

⁶⁶ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 110.

⁶⁷ Meyers, "Free Persons," 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 51-52.

indicates that certain facts about persons only make sense because they require persons and cannot be ascribed to *dharmas*.⁶⁹ This is another reason why attempts to locate some free will analog at the ultimate level (in *cetanā* or elsewhere) are misguided, as attributes such as freedom or moral responsibility are contingent upon persons, not particular elements that constitute the person. To neglect this is to make a sort of category error, attributing characteristics of a person to *dharmas*, which cannot possibly possess them. The crucial issue for Meyers in explaining freedom is,

...identifying the kinds of *dharmas* and relationships between *dharmas* whose salience in the mental process (*citta-santāna*) issuing in action accounts for the empirical distinction between free and compelled or constrained action. In other words, persons can be said to choose or control an action when it issues from the right sort of causes in the right sort of mental state (*citta*) with the right sort causal history, regardless of the truth of causal determinism.⁷⁰

The appeal to the right kinds of causal relationships is an appeal to ultimate reality. The conventional person and her attendant agency is not discarded through this explanation but rather that agency is explained as consisting in these certain relations that occur at the ultimate level. The question then becomes, what are the right sorts of mental states, causal histories etc. that demarcate free from compelled action?

One principal task within Abhidharma is the classification of various kinds of *dharmas* and conditioning relationships that obtain between them. I will not venture to give anything close to an exhaustive account of these, but some general comments will help illuminate the questions Meyers poses. We have seen that *cetanā* is the defining feature of action so it must be present in all action, but we also have seen that it alone is not sufficient to distinguish free from compelled action. Given the Buddhist concern with *karmic* fruition certain conditions that bear on this

⁶⁹ Ibid, 54.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 57.

question do arise. For instance, Vasubandhu mentions that in the case of verbal or bodily action there must be an appropriate relationship between *cetanā* and the verbal utterance or bodily movement, one where the latter is the object or aim of *cetanā*.⁷¹ For murder to have the full *karmic* consequences (full in the sense of appropriately relevant for the act of murder) there can be no cognitive error in the act or doubt about the identity of the victim. Here veridical knowledge regarding the act of murder and the victim function as conditions that, in addition to *cetanā*, result in negative *karmic* fruition. This is intuitive because we typically don't ascribe responsibility to those that lack a basic sense of awareness about their actions or the objects of their actions. If one cannot separate reality from fantasy, as is in some cases of mental illness, then this becomes a mitigating factor for moral responsibility. Indeed one Buddhist monastic code⁷² presents madness and extreme pain to be mitigating factors for assigning culpability, so the absence of these may indicate some conditions that must obtain for meaningful freedom.

Meyers notes,

There are, in fact, a variety of mental factors that pick out the sort of cognitive, affective, and conative conditions that might figure into the distinction between free and compelled or constrained action, such as attention (*manaskāra*), approbation (*adhimokṣa*), desire for action (*chanda*), discernment (*mati*), reflection (*vitarka*), examination (*vicāra*), doubt (*vicikitsā*), delusion (*moha*), and anger (*krodha*).⁷³

While some of these mental factors align with western intuitions regarding culpability (as in the case of madness) Buddhists go so far as to assert that the default position people find themselves in is one of extremely limited freedom due to the pervasive conditioning of greed, hatred, and the

⁷¹ Ibid, 58.

⁷² Those of the Theravāda Vinaya as mentioned in Peter Harvey's, "Vinaya Principles for Assigning Degrees of Culpability." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 6 (1999), 271-291.

⁷³ Meyers, "Free Persons," 59.

delusion of self-grasping. Since these people are the least free then it seems that they are also the least responsible for their own actions.

This may sound like a wholesale abandonment of moral responsibility but rather it speaks to particular standards and practices to which the Buddhist should attend. Once one has embarked on the path they are expected to treat their own actions one way and the actions of others in a different way. Part of this is due to the nature of the path itself, where (as some scholars have argued⁷⁴) it is one of moral psychological transformation. From the Buddhist perspective all ordinary beings are children (*bāla*) because they are unknowingly compelled by greed, hatred, and ignorance, which inevitably lead to suffering. Even though many non-Buddhists voluntarily endorse actions, provide thoughtful reasons for them, and judge courses of action respective to desired ends, as long as these activities are saturated by the self-grasping that pervades the typical human experience then these actions will still perpetuate suffering. If one is still compelled by the factors that perpetuate suffering, and that person does not even realize it, then, for the Buddhist, this person should be approached as a child, not condescendingly but with great compassion. For those that *are* on the path the standards are more stringent. The kid gloves are removed when regarding practitioners because it is assumed that practitioners have heard the teachings, are engaging in the practices, and are beginning to understand the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome mental factors. This understanding and the nascent cultivation of certain characteristics correlate to an increase in the freedom valued by Buddhists and also to an increase in the moral responsibility associated with this increased freedom.

So for Meyers the answer to the theoretical problem involves an appeal to the ultimate level of *dharmas* and their interactions with each other. The right sorts of *dharmas* or mental

⁷⁴ For instance Jay Garfield's, "What Is It Like to be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 33, No.1 (2010/2011), 333-358.

factors that condition the mental stream from which actions arise constitute, on the conventional level, free or unconstrained action. Conversely, other types of *dharmas* and mental factors that condition the same mental stream result in conventionally unfree or constrained action. A Buddhist psychological vocabulary via *dharma* taxonomy provides the specifics of how this distinction is made. Meyers states,

All that liberation requires is for our efforts to make a difference to our future and for the causal processes with which we identify to be sensitive and responsive to influence of wholesome mental factors or, put another way, for these factors to play a role in the mental series (*citta-santāna*) issuing action.⁷⁵

Liberation here is the completion of the Buddhist project but the point still holds for what these Buddhists would consider more mundane freedom. In addition, the wholesome influences that engender a change in the mental series need not initially come from within the series itself. All one needs is to be exposed to the teachings and to have a receptive mind with some degree of understanding, and this can occur even if one is afflicted by unwholesome mental factors.⁷⁶

2.1.4 Jonathan Gold and the Ants

Jonathan Gold presents a useful analogy that may help illuminate some of the technical aspects of this process.⁷⁷ Gold recounts an anecdote of a time he was staying in Kenya and awoke in his hotel room to discover that there appeared to be a new red stripe that went from one window up the wall and across the ceiling to another window. He initially thought that his room had received some sort of clandestine paintjob while he slept, but upon closer examination he found that the stripe was in fact a mass of ants moving from one window to another, a colony migration due to rain. Gold saw such regularity in this pattern that he thought it was the result of

⁷⁵ Meyers, "Free Persons," 60.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁷⁷ This is recounted in Jonathan Gold's, *Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) 200-202.

a skilled painter, but this regularity is due to the physiological factors that underlie ant communication and movement. Ants communicate by scent, laying down a pheromone trail each time they forage for food. If one finds a promising food source then the ant will double back on its path back to the colony strengthening the pheromone trail the second time over. Moreover, if additional ants detect these pheromones they follow the trail thereby strengthening it further. Shortest paths to food will be the strongest because they have the most ants travelling them. The laying down of pheromones by a single ant does not resemble anything like intention on the part of the ant, but is just a feature of the ant's genetic programming and physiology. However, when this is applied on a large scale with a colony of ants the result may appear to be something like conscious intention, or in Gold's anecdote the regularity of the stripe on the ceiling of his hotel room.

Using this metaphor Gold suggests that each individual ant could represent a discrete *dharma* in the mental stream (*citta-santāna*), and the laying down of pheromones as the activity of *cetanā*. Recall *cetanā* is itself an action that is conditioned but also one that conditions future actions. However, many other factors affect *cetanā* (and here the metaphor may be imperfect) in ways that increase tendencies toward or away from some actions. Perhaps these other factors can be represented as affecting the relevant strength of the scent laid by each ant. Since *cetanā* is the movement of a mind toward some object and is present in every action (whether conscious or not) then these other mental factors help to determine what that object will be. As mentioned above, the *saṃskāra-skandha* refers to all the conditioning factors that play a role in action, and this shapes the landscape of possibilities for action. If one is conditioned to steal, perhaps from a history of successful theft, then this conditions action in such a way as to increase the possibility of that action recurring again. At the very least, this theft-conditioning allows for theft to be a

more salient option in the future than it would be for those who have not been similarly conditioned. Regarding our ant example then, the pheromone trail may best represent all of these conditioning factors, *cetanā* included, which increase the likelihood of particular actions occurring in the future.

One may object that this seems to confine one to a form of fatalism regarding one's conditioning, for if all action is conditioned in this manner then we would most likely be the product of whatever circumstances in which we happened to develop. Or, if all action were like the progression of the ant colony then whatever we had done previously would severely delimit the horizon of possible action. The Buddha and the subsequent tradition may have been less than clear about their stance regarding causal determinism and freedom as it is understood in the West, but one area where the Buddha is very explicit is regarding the position of fatalism, which he vehemently castigates on several occasions. In the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Buddha explicitly rails against the views of the Ājīvika Makkhali Gosāla who asserted that,

...purification and defilement were without cause, that nothing is done by oneself (*attakāra*), another (*parakāra*), or man (*purisakāra*); that living beings are without power (*bala* and *vasa*), energy (*virīya*), steadfastness (*thāma*), or exertion (*parakkama*) and experience pleasure and pain as the result of fate.⁷⁸

The Buddha refers to this view as the “most vile” and likens Makkhali Gosāla's position to a trap meant to ensnare men into harm, suffering, and distress.⁷⁹ The problem with this view is that it attacks the notion that one's efforts can make a difference both to one's suffering but also to one's liberation, enfeebling meaningful agency. The Buddha's censure speaks to the importance of one's own efforts in action, but here we face the second problem that Meyers posed, that of the incongruence between the ultimately impersonal causal view and the need for some sense of

⁷⁸ DN 2 {i.53} Quoted in Meyers, “Free Persons,” 62.

⁷⁹ Meyers Ibid, (AN 3.135)

personally effective effort. The Buddha, in his castigation of Gosāla, enforces the psychological importance of viewing oneself as an autonomous agent, and again this is implicit within the Buddhist path. This brings us back to the second question Meyers posed regarding initiative and effort.

2.1.5 Meyers's Practical Solution

Meyers refers to the presupposition of oneself as an autonomous agent as a useful delusion because although there is a need to endorse some sort of agency for the Buddhist path to get off the ground, strictly speaking the postulation of *autonomous* agency is not only incorrect but also dangerous insofar as it may lead to reifying the self. The idea is that certain attitudes once cultivated will lead the practitioner to perfecting higher virtues and progressing along the path. For example, shame (*hrī*) and apprehension (*apatrāpya*) are endorsed for the purposes of cultivating moral discipline, which is instrumental in attaining a calm mind needed to cultivate concentration and insight into the nature of reality.⁸⁰ In this manner the assertion of autonomous agency is a means to an end, at the very least one that is required to get individuals to embark on the path. However, the path progressively dismantles this sense of autonomous agency as the practitioner proceeds along it. The naïve sense of complete autonomy is first undermined through the Abhidharma reduction of the person into *skandhas* and *dharmas*. Later on the practitioner completely drops a sense of self-conscious effort but only after progressing in a particular manner whereby certain characteristics and virtues are properly cultivated. It is only after the practitioner has been primed in this way that she is ready for such an abdication. As Meyers states,

The impersonal flow of psycho-physical elements must be set on the right course, and this requires, at first, alternation between personal and impersonal perspectives, lest the view of non-self have the kind of stultifying effect Nagel fears... Thus at first the

⁸⁰ Meyers, "Free Persons," 63.

ultimate perspective must be confined to rarefied moments of deep reflection, meditation, and the period just after meditation... Gradually, however, as wholesome habits take hold and self-grasping loosens, there is no need for self-conscious effort.⁸¹

A common analogy here is that of the virtuoso musician, one who has trained to such a high degree that when playing there ceases to be the same conscious effort as perhaps when a neophyte struggles through a piece of music. One does not expect the beginner musician to play without self-conscious effort nor should one expect the beginning practitioner to skillfully implement an understanding of the ultimate impersonal ground of all action. It is the progression and structure of the path as well as the cultivation of certain characteristics that prevents this impersonal or ultimate viewpoint from becoming debilitating (as for Nagel), and instead allows for it to be liberating and therapeutic.

Some care must be exercised here for what Meyers is postulating is that *autonomous* agency is a useful delusion, not agency full stop. We have seen how Abhidharma understands agency as a property of persons that is explicable in terms of certain configurations obtaining at the ultimate level. This reductionism is non-eliminativist as it seeks to explain conventional agency in terms of more basic *dharmas*. Given this, then autonomous agency may be considered as an example of *upāya*, ultimately unsupported but necessary for advancement along the Buddhist path. The default way of viewing the world includes a deep sense that one is autonomous, and this is important so as to not undermine the initiative of would-be and neophyte practitioners. So insofar as this delusion of autonomy at least gets someone going along the Buddhist path then it is a delusion with benefit for the practitioner.

Conventionally we are persons who possess agency, but ultimately there exists just various flows of psycho-physical processes. Since ethical claims and directives constitute the

⁸¹ Ibid, 64

Buddhist path, the postulation of autonomous agency is deeply fundamental and indicates a deployment of *upāya* at the ground floor of the Abhidharma Buddhist project.

2.2 Madhyamaka Agency

Much of Meyers's project concerning agency endeavors to reconcile the competing viewpoints of ultimate and conventional reality, both ontologically and practically. As we have seen Madhyamaka jettisons any notion of ultimate reality, removing what Abhidharma Buddhism utilizes as a basis for their revisions regarding conventional reality. In considering agency within a Madhyamaka framework then, we cannot make any appeals to ultimate reality as it is denied. The Mādhyamika can only address this question through the realm of conventional truth and dependent origination. The person, whose agency we are chiefly concerned, is only a conceptual imputation or convenient designation within Madhyamaka. It is not the case that persons do not exist, but rather that the mode of our existence is merely conventional and imputed.⁸² How this framework can explain the agency of the conventional person, and how this affects my broader concern about the ethical claims made within Madhyamaka will occupy us for the remainder of this chapter.

2.2.1 Constructed Selves

Conventional reality involves a three-way correlation between dependent origination, emptiness, and conventional identity, so any conventionally identified entity upon analysis reveals its emptiness and dependent origination. The sense of self as a conventional entity is no different. The primal ignorance that Buddhism seeks to overturn is the reification of the self based upon viewing thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, and a body as entirely one's own. The more these things are taken to be constitutive of a "self" the more the self becomes a feature of how that individual interprets and maneuvers through the world, perpetuating the fundamental

⁸² Garfield, "Just Another," 179.

ignorance. However, as Garfield points out this is not solely an activity of the individual, he states,

None of us is innocent in our own creation; but at the same time none of us is *autonomous* in that creative activity. Our identities are negotiated, fluid, and complex in virtue of being marked by the three universal characteristics of impermanence, interdependence, and the absence of any self.⁸³

The appropriation of various mental states and a body as one's own may be deep psychological habits that occur below the level of conscious thought. However, it does seem that at the conscious level we weave narratives about our own reasons, motivations, and actions, and that others also contribute to this narrative through their similar attributions. This is similar to Daniel Dennett's description of the sense of self as a "narrative center of gravity,"⁸⁴ fictional but utilized for various ends, just as the center of gravity in a physical object. Individual persons are defined then through the narratives that are woven both by them and others. Since there is no deep metaphysical fact of the matter to which descriptions align, then there is no robust metaphysical distinction that differentiates one individual from another. Moreover, the emphasis on narratives is how Garfield explains the Madhyamaka understanding of human action solely within the realm of conventional reality. To act is to engage in some behavior for some reasons or motives that we (and others) take to be our own, because that is all it can be in the absence of ultimate reality. Garfield states,

On a Madhyamaka understanding, it is therefore for the causes of our behavior to be a part of the narrative that makes sense of our lives, as opposed to being simply the part of the vast uninterpreted milieu in which our lives are led, or bits of the narratives that properly constitute the lives of others.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid, 180.

⁸⁴ Daniel Dennett, "The Self as Narrative Center of Gravity," in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, eds. Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale Johnson (Abingdon, UK: Psychology Press, 1992)

⁸⁵ Garfield, "Just Another," 180.

As mentioned, some parts of these narratives are likely deep psychological habits, but much may be a matter of choice, and if this is so then the narratives we spin about ourselves and others are constrained by explanation. I interpret the particular action of a particular individual in terms of the narrative that has been constructed through the interactions of that individual and others.

Garfield provides an example of defenestration that illustrates some of this process. In one case I am troubled by the current political situation, the climate, and other social woes, I therefore decide to end it all by jumping through a window at the twelfth floor. In a different case, despite my existential struggling, someone else physically tosses me through the window. In the former case there are cognitive and emotional states that motivate my act, which I, and those that know me, would regard as my own. The narrative that constructs the conventional self upon which I am individuated then includes these aspects. Hence this is uncontroversially an action.⁸⁶ In the latter case the causes of my flight are clearly a part of the narrative of the one who tosses me out. On conventional grounds the cause of my being thrown through the window lies within the one throwing me because it is the most plausible narrative in this scenario.⁸⁷ Garfield does mention a more difficult case of coercion, whereby I am forced to jump lest my children suffer torture. Here it may be that multiple narratives can be constructed that each assign agency to either myself or the one coercing me. How one chooses a narrative especially in cases where agency is a matter of dispute becomes a more difficult problem, but one that Garfield avoids answering directly. However, he highlights the point that when we do compare narratives,

⁸⁶ Ibid, 180.

⁸⁷ The possibility of multiple narratives does not necessarily mean that all narratives are equally good. As Garfield mentions, “It is possible for people to disagree about whether a particular event is an action or not, or about the attribution of responsibility. It is possible for us to wonder about whether we should feel remorse for a particular situation or not. These questions are in the end, on this account, questions about which narratives make the most sense. While these questions may not always be easy (or even possible to settle), the fact that they arise saves this view from facile relativism that would issue from the observation that we can always tell *some* story on which this is an action of mine, and *some* story on which it is not, and so that there is simply no fact of the matter, and perhaps no importance to the question.” Garfield “Just Another,” 181, fn. 10

or try to best tell the story, we need not (and in fact, do not) look for a “will” or some metaphysically robust agent at all.

2.2.2 Beneficial Authorship

Conventionally we experience the pull of different motives and the consideration of alternative reasons before we engage in some action. Whatever motives and reasons are the strongest or most dominant result in some particular action occurring. Moreover, these motives and reasons are the result of background psychological dispositions as well as other cognitive and conative factors (recall the various mental factors that condition action within the Abhidharma framework). The Buddhist project at large describes some actions as being expressive of and conducive to happiness, tranquility, and the welfare of others, and so these are considered praiseworthy or wholesome, whereas other actions do not express nor are conducive to these same sorts of things, and are therefore not praiseworthy or wholesome.⁸⁸ It seems that this is all that is needed for moral assessment in Madhyamaka as some alignment with ultimate reality is unavailable. Since the self is a conceptual imputation deeply connected to a narrative, change can occur when that narrative is altered. The malleability of the narrative and hence of the self is a feature rather than a bug for we can author a narrative that has a more virtuous self as the protagonist. It may be the case that I am currently motivated and conditioned by a set of unwholesome and unbeneficial factors such as greed, anger, fear, etc. yet I can imagine a narrative where I am instead motivated by compassion, joy, generosity, and the like. What the Buddhist path does within the Madhyamaka framework is endorse the cultivation of these conditions such that one will incrementally increase their wholesome conditioning while diminishing their unwholesome conditioning. This all occurs without recourse to an ultimate metaphysical story. Conventionally we understand our actions to arise from our own motivations

⁸⁸ Garfield, “Just Another,” 182.

and reasons, which in turn are the result of our background psychological dispositions. A practitioner pursues the path by training her dispositions and altering her psychology such that her motivations and reasons change as well. The path then becomes a calculated and effortful endeavor to rewrite one's own narrative toward a more beneficial end. However, this is not a freewheeling constructive endeavor, this occurs at the conventional level, the realm of dependent origination, and that is what constrains this activity. One can explain a positive change that they are trying to enact by explaining that they have had an epiphany regarding their behavior, or an encounter that led to a deep look at their current way of life. In this manner, reconstruction is explanatorily constrained within the realm of dependent origination.

Buddhist virtues such as generosity, compassion, joy, loving kindness etc. are constituted by particular actions regarding the mind, speech, and the body. If moral assessment in Madhyamaka is a matter of determining which actions do or do not express and facilitate such virtues then all action may be evaluated morally. Such action requires agency, but here it is in the conventional sense of an individual's narrative that is sensitive to explanatory purposes. Again, this cannot conflict with some ultimate metaphysical reality in Madhyamaka. Moreover, if we understand agency in this narrative sense then there is no robust agent being asserted at all so the Mādhyamika also dodges conflict with the doctrine of non-self.

However, what I have been explaining is agency as it is understood within a Madhyamaka framework, and this is not necessarily how most people understand their own actions. Part of the primal delusion that fuels suffering is viewing oneself as an autonomous and substantial "self". Most individuals think that they have autonomy in most matters (when not constrained or compelled in obvious ways) and understand their own narratives in these terms. "I chose to do X because I wanted to, but I could have done Y as well." Like Abhidharma,

Madhyamaka first dismantles this autonomous sense of the self, but not through appeals to ultimate reality, rather through a proper understanding of the three-way correlation of dependent origination, emptiness, and conventional identity. The Mādhyamika may then explain how non-autonomous agency can operate through the public and private construction of narratives explanatorily constrained.

Here is where it seems that both the Ābhidharmika and Mādhyamika are in agreement, for both may view robust autonomous agency as an exercise in *upāya-kausālya*. The default position people find themselves in includes a deep sense that one is an autonomous entity acting freely. This sense helps would be practitioners on either side engage with Buddhist teachings and embark upon the Buddhist path to awakening. It is in the best interest of the practitioners that the first teaching they are exposed to is not regarding their lack of autonomy as this quickly may lead to the enervating effects of fatalism or the paralysis described by Nagel. Although both branches would hold that the road to perpetual suffering is paved with this sense of autonomy, when framed within a particular path so it can be progressively dismantled, this sense is a requirement for advancing along the path.

2.3 Summary

Both Abhidharma and Madhyamaka Buddhist paths require a revision of one's practices, such that a practitioner must alter her actions of mind, speech and body in accordance with the particular path outlined by each branch. This is a futile endeavor if there is no way for our efforts to result in meaningful change, so agency cannot be entirely discarded within the Buddhist project. Although both Abhidharma and Madhyamaka have ways to explain conventional agency, significantly this agency is not of the autonomous kind. Abhidharma explains conventional agency as consisting in the particular relations of particular types of *dharmas* at the

ultimate level. Madhyamaka explains conventional agency as public and private narrative construction explanatorily constrained by dependent origination. The typical assertion of oneself as an autonomous agent is part of what the Buddhist path seeks to overturn, but this is executed in a systematic and particular manner, whereby the practitioner progressively transforms her psychology and gradually relinquishes self-grasping. The claims that the Buddhist path makes (in either branch) at some point require holding onto this false and generally dangerous (insofar as it leads to suffering) autonomous sense of self, and this is why it may be considered as a form of *upāya*.

CHAPTER 3

Without recourse to ultimate reality to justify and ground truth claims Madhyamaka faces what Tom Tillemans has termed “the dismal slough”.⁸⁹ This is the notion that conventional truths fall into unreliability and extreme relativism. He presents this as a consequence of a view tentatively attributed to Candrakīrti, a prominent philosophical figure in Tibetan Madhyamaka.⁹⁰ He is said to endorse a *lokaprasiddha* view of truth due to his endorsement of this passage,

The world (*loka*) argues with me. I do not argue with the world. What is agreed upon (*sammata*) in the world to exist, I too agree that it exists. What is agreed upon in the world to be nonexistent, I too agree that it does not exist.⁹¹

The *lokaprasiddha* view of truth understands what is acknowledged by the world to be the sole criterion for truth and knowledge. This is devastating for truth because the reasoned claims of experts, say in the science community, as well as the opinions of the average person on the street, can obviously be unreliable. It may have been cutting edge science at one point to accept the existence of phlogiston only to find out that the compounds at work in combustion included no such thing. If this unreliability affects experts, then the average person on the street falls prey as well. Furthermore, if all there is to truth are the opinions or beliefs of any person you choose, then there is nothing that can establish the actual fact of the matter. There is no privileged account of how things are because any criticism would be just another opinion, and there would be no way to revise or reject claims. This leads to conservatism and quietism where one has no epistemic duty other than to consistency within the set of one’s beliefs; what is believed is taken

⁸⁹ Tom Tillemans, “How Far Can a Mādhyamika Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives,” in *Moonshadows* by Cowherds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

⁹⁰ It is not clear whether or not Candrakīrti actually held this view but Tillemans and others who have worked with these issues tend to approach them as if he did.

⁹¹ Tillemans, “How Far Can,” 151.

as true and there remains no reason to question it. Normativity is reduced to mere consistency internal to a set of one's opinions and beliefs, and there becomes no way to say why something is the way that it is thereby making justification normatively impotent as well. Koji Tanaka writes that the dismal slough, "...flattens out any meaningful distinction between truth and falsity that can be relied upon to acquire knowledge."⁹² This is devastating for epistemology but it also means that a robust distinction between good and bad conduct becomes quite blurry. The Buddhist path is fundamentally a revisionary project concerned with conduct⁹³ so this muddling of the distinction between good and bad conduct appears to threaten or undermine the basic Buddhist project. Now it is not certain that Candrakīrti actually held this view, nor is it certain that most Mādhyamikas hold this view. However, since Tanaka has detailed how the *lokaprasiddha* view can be derived from Nāgārjuna's discussion of the two truths and emptiness in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*⁹⁴, a justification of ethical claims while maintaining Madhyamaka constraints becomes a pressing matter⁹⁵.

My tentative suggestion in chapter one regards another concept found in Buddhist philosophy, *upāya-kauśalya*. This is typically translated as "skillful means" and originally concerned the pedagogical ability of the Buddha when addressing audiences of differing spiritual development. In essence, *upāya* means utilizing various ways to facilitate the practitioner's

⁹² Koji Tanaka, "The Dismal Slough," in *Moonpaths* by Cowherds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 50.

⁹³ Recall from chapter two that mental acts are considered actions in their own right, so conduct here includes not just actions of the body, but also actions of speech and mind as well.

⁹⁴ Tanaka, "The Dismal Slough," 47-49.

⁹⁵ Despite the importance that Candrakīrti holds within the Indo-Tibetan tradition of Buddhist philosophy, it is not clear that any philosopher with his acumen would willingly assert a position so contrary to basic Buddhist presuppositions, even if his assertions are operating entirely at the level of conventional truth. That is, people by default operate out of ignorance, which leads to suffering, and the Buddhist path is the remedy. This assumes that there *are* better or worse ways of going about in the world. This is partly an exegetical matter given his other writings that do not seem to indicate a thoroughgoing *lokaprasiddha* approach to truth, but the matter is best left explored by others elsewhere.

progress along the Buddhist path. Certain concepts or ideas may be emphasized (or at least, not discarded) because the one receiving these ideas would expedite their progress along the Buddhist path having heard such concept presented in such a manner. These ideas or concepts may not be true from the perspective of an enlightened being, so in this sense may be viewed as deceptive to some degree, yet they are particularly expedient for the practitioner absorbing them. Situating truth and normativity as such situates these ethical claims within a Buddhist plan of action directed towards a goal. For example, the force behind the directive to cultivate generosity (*dāna*) comes from the instrumental nature of this directive within the path towards awakening.⁹⁶ Part of this understanding relies upon the fact that the path to awakening, as it is characterized in Mahāyāna Buddhism (of which Madhyamaka is a part), consists of various characteristics or perfections (*parāmitas*) that are meant to be cultivated, and that mutually support one another. Considering ethical claims within Madhyamaka as a form of *upāya* indicates that these directives all point towards a distinct goal but are not ultimately grounded in a robust ontological manner as they are in Abhidharma, nor are these claims strictly endorsed as ultimate or settled truth claims by an enlightened being.

In this chapter I will delve deeper into the use of *upāya* in giving normative weight to the ethical directives within Madhyamaka. Given the focus on the conventional within Madhyamaka I will first look into the notion of conventional truth for a Mādhyamika, suggesting a promising way to view truth, primarily in terms of function rather than definitional properties. This chiefly involves an account of truth articulated by Huw Price that I think is particularly agreeable to Madhyamaka commitments. Turning to more mainstream Buddhist epistemology demonstrates

⁹⁶ Though it may not be entirely instrumental. The Buddhist virtues are instrumental insofar as they prepare the practitioner in such a way as to be most receptive to the wisdom that brings awakening, but these virtues are also constitutive of the psychology of an awakened being who has cultivated them to a superlative degree. This will be explored later on.

the importance of practice in knowledge acquisition and conventional truth claims. This in turn helps to support my postulation of *upāya* as a way to situate normativity for the ethical claims made within Madhyamaka.

3.1 Huw Price and Frictional Truth

Many positions regarding truth attempt to explain truth by asking what truth *is*, or what it is that makes true statements true. The Madhyamaka assertion of universal emptiness and their rejection of essentialist notions greatly narrow the field of positions about truth to which a Mādhyamika could appeal. In his “Truth as Convenient Friction” Huw Price argues for a particular way of viewing truth that is not easily found on the map of positions relating to truth, realism, and meaning.⁹⁷ Price’s account appears to be a particularly useful way of articulating an understanding of conventional truth for a Mādhyamika.

Price’s article first mentions Richard Rorty as holding the position that truth is nothing beyond justification. That is, when we speak of some statement being true what we mean is that that statement is justified in some particularly robust manner. Rorty self-identifies as a pragmatist and his position allegedly derives from pragmatist principles. He states,

Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the distinction between justification and truth, for that distinction makes no difference to my decisions about what to do.⁹⁸

Rorty sees the distinction between truth and justification as making no behavioral difference and therefore, presumably for principles of parsimony, he rejects truth in favor of justification.

Notwithstanding whether or not Rorty’s position is an accurate representation of pragmatism,

⁹⁷ Debates surrounding truth, realism, and meaning have occupied a sizable portion of western analytic philosophical discourse since the beginning of the twentieth century. I endeavor to sidestep much of this debate for to give even a whirlwind tour would be a diversion difficult to justify.

⁹⁸ Richard Rorty, “Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs Wright,” *Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 45, No. 80 (July 1995): 281.

Price asserts that there would indeed be a behavioral difference if a community of language users really did *not* have any notion of truth, and held only justification as normative.

Price holds that insofar as truth exists, it exists as a norm that is central to the linguistic practices in which we are engaged. What is important is that the language users of a community feel as though they are beholden to this norm and not whether or not the norm has some sort of metaphysical existence (the latter point being a discussion not particularly fruitful, though more about this later on). Price describes truth as the third of three norms of increasing strength that constrain discourse for communities of language users. He describes them in negative terms so as to illuminate the censure that applies when assertions are made among speakers.

The first norm is subjective assertibility, that is, a speaker would be incorrect to assert that p if she did not believe that p ; to assert p in these circumstances provides the speaker's peers with prima facie grounds for censure, or disapprobation⁹⁹. In other words, sincerity restricts what a speaker would and would not utter. Price mentions that this is divorced from a notion of truth and the easiest way to see this is through the example of utterances we do not take to be truth apt. For example, it would be incorrect for Susan to request a cup of coffee if Susan did not in fact want a cup of coffee.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the community in which Susan was a part would hold her to be incorrect for asserting that she wanted a cup of coffee if she in fact did not. The second norm is that of (personal) warranted assertibility, that is, a speaker would be incorrect to assert that p if she does not have adequate (personal) grounds for believing that p ; to assert that p in these circumstances provides the speaker's peers with prima facie grounds for censure.¹⁰¹ Again, this

⁹⁹ Huw Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (April 2003): 173.

¹⁰⁰ Price, "Truth as," 173.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 174.

is distinct from truth as some realists will ensure that even though Susan believes that p , and is personally justified in believing that p , p may still be false. Yet even those “pragmatists” such as Rorty do not have a notion of personal justification in mind when they collapse truth into justification. Rather, they have some sort of objective, community-based variant whereby p is justified if it coheres with the other beliefs of a community.¹⁰² Price is arguing for the existence of truth as a norm distinct from sincerity and justification, and this is partly the reason why he cashes out justification personally. If the Rorty-style pragmatist does not think that truth exists as a norm beyond sincerity and justification then the idea that a belief improves when it is justified according to the beliefs of a larger community starts to look incoherent. That is, unless May recognizes some sort of norm of truth (beyond sincerity and justification) then the idea that her views might improve through consultation with the wider community does not make sense. Price states, “It would be as if we gave a student full marks in an exam, and then told him that he would have done better if his answers had agreed with those of other students.”¹⁰³ If for some reason the “pragmatist” feels inclined to follow Peirce and identify truth with justification at the end of an ideal limit of inquiry, Price has a response to this as well. His response indicates how his approach to truth remains pragmatic yet differs from other pragmatist theories of truth. Instead of identifying truth with increasingly sophisticated notions of justification for Price the better move for the pragmatist is:

...to resist the pressure to *identify* truth with anything – in other words, simply reject the assumption that an adequate philosophical account of truth needs to answer the question, ‘What is truth?’. Better questions for the pragmatist to ask are the explanatory ones: Why do we have such a notion? What job does it do in language? What features does it need to have to play this role? And how would things be different if we did not have it?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 175.

Insofar as the pragmatic theory of truth states that truth is just warranted assertibility for one person, across an actual community, or at an ideal end of inquiry, or whether truth is just that which expedites practice, then Price's account of truth is not a traditionally pragmatist one. Yet Price's concern for explanatory questions within our actual practice seems to warrant his account's inclusion under a pragmatist heading.

The notion that improvement of our beliefs makes sense only when we are subject to the norm of truth is what Price calls the passive account of the role of the truth norm, but this norm also has an active role. Price explains,

The third norm does not just hold open the conceptual space for the idea of improvement. It positively encourages such improvement, by motivating speakers who disagree to try and resolve their disagreement.¹⁰⁵

Without truth all disagreement would become like differences of opinion, inconsequential and lacking urgency for resolution. In a community without the norm of truth all assertions are merely opinionated assertions or MOAs. Such a community (Mo'ans, as Price calls them) would express disapprobation only if a speaker asserted that $\sim p$ if she really believed that p (the norm of sincerity), or if she asserted that p without any personal justification for believing that p (the norm of justification). But this is where the disapproval ends for the Mo'ans, for without truth operating as a norm they do not treat a disagreement between two speakers as an indication that one is mistaken; disagreement is always of a no-fault kind.¹⁰⁶ If the Mo'ans were to adopt the third norm of truth then this would require them to ascribe fault to anyone that asserted $\sim p$ when they themselves asserted that p , independent of any fault through violation of the first two norms.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Price's argument does not rely on whether or not a linguistic practice like that of the Mo'ans is actually possible. The example is meant to clearly show what the norm of truth brings to linguistic practice. Price, "Truth as," 177-179.

What happens is that disagreement itself becomes grounds for disapproval, because the disagreement itself indicates that one's interlocutor has fallen short of a normative standard.¹⁰⁷

The cost (as Price puts it) of this third norm is a general disposition to seek the approval of our fellow speakers, as well as a more particular disposition to disapprove of speakers with whom we disagree. This disposition connects motivation to approval and disapproval, whereas the norm of truth connects disagreement to disapproval and successful argument and agreement to approval. Price emphasizes that it is disapproval that motivates speakers not the disagreement itself. This is because, for example, if the Mo'ans did not care about disagreements when only operating under the first two norms then why would it suddenly bother them when trying to implement the third norm? Price is tentative in his explanation,

Insofar – so very far, in my view – as terms such as ‘true’ and ‘false’ carry this normative force in natural languages, they must be giving voice to something more basic: a fundamental practice of expressions of attitudes of approval and disapproval, in response to perceptions of agreement and disagreement between expressed commitments.¹⁰⁸

Price also mentions that there seems to be a primitive incompatibility between certain behavioral commitments of an individual such that one cannot do and not do a particular action e.g. Susan cannot both have and not have a cup of coffee.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps this is the most basic level of approval or disapproval whereby perceived incompatibility is what determines disapproval, and perceived compatibility what determines approval. In any case, Price's main point here is that truth operates as the third norm both passively and actively as described.

¹⁰⁷ Price, "Truth as," 179.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 180.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 182.

Price notes that the norm of truth provides a sort of friction that characterizes factual dialogue.¹¹⁰ This friction comes about when speakers find themselves concerned with and motivated by disagreement via disapproval. The disagreement, subsequent argument and agreement are taken by Price to be generally beneficial for a community that is beholden to the third norm, as opposed to a community such as the Mo'ans. Tipping his pragmatist hand, Price is interested in the practical implications of the notions of truth and falsity. He first indicates that truth and falsity make our linguistic practice genuinely (or perhaps robustly) assertoric in nature rather than the merely opinionated assertions of the Mo'ans. Pressing the practical difference question further he states that the subsequent approval or disapproval that comes with genuine assertions bound to the third norm, encourages dialogue through the drive to resolve disagreement. The importance of this third norm seems to bottom out in an assumption (or gamble as he puts it) that there generally seems to be long run advantages in the pooling of cognitive resources and agreement on shared projects.¹¹¹ Moreover, the third norm has the distinct behavioral consequence of *actual* dialogue, rather than the freewheeling arena of sincere and justified "assertions" found among the Mo'ans. This dialogue is brought about by the disposition of speakers to criticize, or at least disapprove of, those with whom they disagree, and this is the behavioral difference that Price, contra Rorty, thinks marks a community that accepts the third norm over a community that does not.

3.2 Mādhyamikas as Priceans or Price as a Closet Mādhyamika?

As mentioned, Price refers to his approach as a pragmatist one because he is concerned with the function of truth in human discourse. His account seeks to answer what it is that truth

¹¹⁰ He pithily remarks, "Truth is the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another. Truth puts the cogs in cognition, at least in its public manifestations." Price, "Truth as," 169.

¹¹¹ Price, "Truth as," 183.

does for speakers and what discourse would be like if we did not possess truth. He chooses to approach truth in this way not just for novelty, but because he is unconcerned with questions that start from the supposition that truth has a metaphysical status of some sort, whether that is robustly real or unreal. He mentions (quite rightly I think) that it is a uniquely difficult problem to articulate for the issue of the metaphysical status of truth is enmeshed with the terms of the problem because metaphysical conclusions tend to be cast in semantic terms.¹¹² Price states,

In my view the right response to this is not to think ... that we thereby have a transcendental argument for semantic realism. Without an intelligible denial, realism is no more intelligible than antirealism. The right response – as Rorty himself in any case urges – is to be suspicious of the realist-antirealist debate itself. ... We should reject the metaphysical stance not by rejecting truth and representation, but by recognizing that in virtue of the most plausible story about the function and origins of these notions they do not sustain that sort of metaphysical weight.¹¹³

Although Price agrees with many disquotationalist minimalists that truth is not a substantial property, metaphysically speaking, he does not think that truth is merely a grammatical device for disquotation.¹¹⁴ For Price the functional question of truth is primary and he thinks that once this question is answered there is no further question of philosophical interest to be asked regarding truth. He knowingly rejects the paradigm that encompasses almost all discussions of truth in favor of a functional analysis that metaphysically deflates truth. This maneuver is reminiscent of Nāgārjuna's approach to metaphysics mentioned in chapter one. There I discussed that Nāgārjuna endeavored to carve out a defensible position that rejected the entire metaphysical

¹¹² Ibid, 170.

¹¹³ Ibid, 170-171.

¹¹⁴ Briefly, according to the deflationary theory of truth, to assert that a statement is true is just to assert the statement itself. For example, to say that "snow is white" is true (or that it is true that snow is white) is equivalent to saying simply that snow is white, and this, according to the deflationary theory, is all that can be said significantly about the truth of "snow is white". Disquotationalism is a variety of deflationism named as such due to how the significance of a statement's truth is given simply by removing the quotation marks e.g. ["snow is white" is true] becomes [snow is white]. Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, "The Deflationary Theory of Truth", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/truth-deflationary/>>.

paradigm that characterized contemporaneous positions by rejecting the presupposition of *svabhāva*. His arguments are meant to illustrate the incoherence of *svabhāva* when asserted as foundational for existence. He also defended the charge that by denying *svabhāva* he was denying existence and thereby falling into nihilism, a charge that (on his view) can only land when *svabhāva* is held as a necessary condition for existence. Here then is a striking similarity between an Indian philosopher operating between the second and third centuries CE and an analytic philosopher of the contemporary West. Madhyamaka as a distinct philosophical position is distinguished by the universal application of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), that everything is empty of, or does not possess, inherent existence (*svabhāva*). This is typically understood as a form of anti-essentialism or anti-realism, yet this latter description may be misleading if the entire paradigm of realism-antirealism is what Nāgārjuna rejects. Nevertheless, Price's rejection of the metaphysical stance as well as an approach to truth that seeks to analyze it *as* something is very similar to the Madhyamaka rejection of *svabhāva* and robust essentialist definitions.

If some phenomenon exhibits some sort of dependency then according to Madhyamaka, that phenomenon is empty. Price's approach to truth looks at its genealogy and function in human discourse, and he does admit that in some sense truth (when metaphysically inflated) is a myth, or at least human creation.¹¹⁵ This illustrates that truth is dependent upon human discourse for the particular type of existence that it has, that it is not some ontologically robust feature of the universe. Truth arises in dependence upon human discourse, and has an identity in virtue of conventional verbal designation. That which arises in dependence upon causes and conditions and is conventionally designated is empty according to Madhyamaka. Price's truth, then, is empty and stands inside the three-way correlation of dependent origination, conventional designation, and emptiness that characterizes all phenomena for Madhyamaka.

¹¹⁵ Price, "Truth as," 190.

3.3 Conventional Truth and Falsity.

I think Price's approach is a plausible and helpful way to think about conventional truth within a Madhyamaka framework. From the standpoint of conventional reality it may very well be the case that pooled cognitive resources and shared goals are taken to be generally beneficial, insofar as the benefit is successful practice and maneuvering through the world. In speaking of conventional truth here as functional along Price's lines I mean truth that obtains *within* conventional reality, as opposed to truth *about* conventional reality. For the Mādhyamika the latter concerns the truth of emptiness, dependent origination, and conventional identity, whereas the former concerns the truths that (while being empty) constitute the shared experience of conventional reality. Apprehending the truths within conventional reality is vital to successful navigation through the world, and in this way I think Price's account offers a plausible way to situate truth without countenancing additional metaphysical baggage. A brief foray into Buddhist epistemology will indicate a focus on practical efficacy as a way to obtain validity for the truths within conventional reality.

A typical example used in demonstrating truth and falsity within conventional reality is that of a rope mistaken for a snake. To say that the rope is a snake is conventionally incorrect for within the realm of conventional reality the term "snake" does not apply to the phenomenon of the rope (insofar as one is speaking standard English). More importantly, conventionally real phenomena have actual causes and effects, whereas conventional falsities do not. The Tibetan commentator Tsongkhapa makes this point in his commentary to Nāgārjuna's MMK,

However, if there were no place for conventional phenomena, the existence of which is established by authoritative cognition, those phenomena would be like the snake – that is, the rope grasped as a snake – of which no cause or effect is possible...¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Tsongkhapa, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Translated by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 30-31.

Tsongkhapa’s mention of “authoritative cognition” points to a central issue within Indian epistemology and refers to one of various epistemic instruments that correctly or reliably present their epistemic objects.

In traditional Indian epistemology, as in western epistemology, a central question regards the nature of knowledge. The Sanskrit analogues closest to the term “knowledge” are *pramā* and *pramāṇa*. Georges Dreyfus explains,

These technical words are derived from the root *mā*, to measure or cognize, and the prefix *pra* indicating excellence or perfection. The word *pramā* designates a state of being factually aware of something, and should be literally translated as “knowledge event.” The adjunction of the suffix *ana* makes the word *pramāṇa*, which literally signifies the means or instrument of bringing about the knowledge event (*pramā*).¹¹⁷

There are two important differences between the Western concept of knowledge and *pramā*. First, *pramā* does not refer to an enduring quality of knowing but rather an individual event of knowing. Indian and Tibetan philosophers understood knowledge as a succession of knowing events that arise and, once they pass, the traces of the knowing event are what lead to recollection.¹¹⁸ Second, whereas Western knowledge is typically characterized in terms of belief, *pramā* is analyzed in terms of certainty. That is, *pramā* or *pramāṇa* are able to lead to the correct identification of the object and generate certainty with regards to it.¹¹⁹

Dignāga and his successor Dharmakīrti, operative in the fifth to sixth centuries CE, are chiefly responsible for developing and refining the Buddhist approach to epistemology and logic. Dharmakīrti accepts only two *pramāṇas* as valid, perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). Valid here specifically means nondeceptive, as Dharmakīrti writes, “Valid cognition

¹¹⁷ George B. J. Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 287-288.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 288.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

is that cognition [which is] nondeceptive. [Nondeceptiveness consists] in the readiness [for the object] to perform a function.”¹²⁰ This readiness refers to the causal implications of an object. That is, an object is non-deceptive if it accords with the expected causal regularities attributed to it. The later commentator Dharmottara emphasizes this practical nature of nondeceptiveness, where it is the potential results of the cognition that determine its validity. Dreyfus explains,

A cognition is nondeceptive inasmuch as it has the ability to bring about the appropriate possible practical results. For example, a perception of fire is valid inasmuch as it enables us to deal with the fire in the appropriate way (appropriateness here being a contextual notion). This nondeceptiveness is understood in a causal way: It is the result of the mental episode’s causal connection with reality and in turn leads to the appropriate causal results.¹²¹

These potential practical implications can also be understood as a type of reliability. The apprehension of a vase is nondeceptive if we see that it reliably holds water and flowers as we expected. Yet this reliability does seem to require some amount of previous experience so as to have some expectations for the apprehended object to meet or not meet. However, it is not practical efficacy alone that constitutes nondeceptiveness, as other Tibetan thinkers stress an additional (although less emphasized) intentional aspect coupled with the practical. The intentional aspect refers to the cognition’s correct identification of the object in a manner that is not contradicted by other cognitions.¹²² So the cognition of a bicycle is nondeceptive (and therefore valid) when the bicycle seems to exhibit the causal connections appropriate to a bicycle (it functions as a bicycle should etc) and when we correctly apprehend the bicycle as a *bicycle* rather than a scooter or horse.

Dharmakīrti’s limitation of *pramāṇas* to perception and inference allows only two objects

¹²⁰ Dreyfus, *Recognizing*, 289.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 292.

¹²² *Ibid*, 302.

of knowledge (*prameya*) through these means. For him perception apprehends only bare particulars or *svalakṣaṇas*, whereas inference apprehends universals or *sāmānyalakṣaṇas*. The particular apprehended by perception is the first contact with the world that gives rise to a knowledge event. So when I see something the bare particular is that which impinges upon my senses immediately prior to any conceptualizing activity. Dharmakīrti regards any conceptualizing activity as inference and any object of inference is considered a universal. So if I have a perceptual event that I come later to understand as the seeing of a blue flower the moment that I conceptualize my sensory input and understand the percept as that of a blue flower I am conceptualizing and therefore dealing in universals. Up to that point it is the bare particular that causally impinges upon me and leads the perceptual event.

Dharmakīrti's metaphysical view is thoroughly nominalist and denies robust existence to universals, asserting that only bare particulars are real and causally efficacious. This indicates a type of foundationalism whereby the particulars are what the superstructure of higher cognition and thought are built.¹²³ The distinction between the two truths maps onto this ontological dichotomy with particulars as ultimately real and universals as conventionally or conceptually real. The Mādhyamika would disagree with Dharmakīrti's metaphysics regarding the ultimate reality of particulars, but this leads back to the question of how, when limited to conventional reality, we can determine which cognitions are authoritative. Despite the fact that Nāgārjuna predates Dharmakīrti, he seems to indicate a similar reliability criterion for authoritative cognition. In his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (*The Dispeller of Disputes*) Nāgārjuna seems to defend the mutual cohesion of instruments of knowledge and objects of knowledge. In this manner, certain pre-theoretical beliefs about objects initially appear to be reliable and we use them to test

¹²³ There is much I am glossing over and many thorny questions that Dharmakīrti's account raises. I will neglect to detail these for the sake of space.

assumptions about our instruments of knowledge. These instruments are then used to refine our beliefs about objects. After which these objects can be used to justify further instruments of knowledge of further objects etc.¹²⁴ Jan Westerhoff repackages Otto Neurath's metaphor¹²⁵ to explain,

Like people finding some planks on the seashore, we build a boat to cross the ocean, and once we are afloat we find new planks in the sea that we use to expand and repair our boat. Our boat does not depend essentially on the first planks we used; similarly, our theory does not depend essentially on our first unquestioned assumptions. Both may be replaced and discarded at some point in the process without the whole system ceasing to be functional.¹²⁶

For the Mādhyamika neither the instruments of knowledge nor the objects of knowledge are foundational to the knowledge acquisition process. The function that Westerhoff alludes to here seems to be successful knowledge acquisition in light of one's successful practice in the world. Both the instruments of knowledge and the objects of knowledge that are delivered are fallible and up for revision in light of how successful they are, and this can only be determined by how effective they prove to be in orienting oneself within or maneuvering through conventional reality. This is quite similar to the causal or practical efficacy found in Dharmakīrti's epistemology, but without the troublesome metaphysics. It seems quite plausible, then, that the thread of functionally or casually efficacious epistemic practice runs throughout Buddhist epistemology.

Tsongkhapa above emphasized that conventional truths are causally efficacious and conventionally falsities are not. Recall in chapter one that the Mādhyamika does not deny causal relationships, just the presupposition that causation requires *svabhāva*. Candrakīrti says that if

¹²⁴ Jan Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vīgrahavyāvartanī*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 86.

¹²⁵ Otto Neurath was a scientific philosopher and leader within the Vienna Circle of logical empiricists who championed a holist and social view of science with uncertainty and cooperation at its core.

¹²⁶ Westerhoff, *Dispeller*, 86.

there was no causation whatsoever then everything could arise from anything and people would not be able to succeed in relatively straightforward projects such as farming because this act requires some causal regularity in regards to seeds producing sprouts under favorable conditions etc. This, along with the mutually reinforcing system of instruments of knowledge and objects of knowledge, appears to indicate an approach to truth and falsity deeply connected to practice within conventional reality. Conventional truth is sifted from conventional falsehood through the use of instruments of knowledge that derive their authority through a sort of mutual equilibrium between these instruments and their objects of knowledge. The whole process is sensitive to experience and the function seems to be promotion of successful maneuvering through conventional reality. If I grasp a snake believing it to be a rope a subsequent bite will cause me to realize the error of my belief, and if I believe the rope to be a snake then I cannot utilize it in fastening freight to my oxcart. Given the constraints of the Madhyamaka philosophical position it seems plausible that practical orientation through experience plays a significant role in determining authoritative cognition and therefore sifting conventional truth from conventional falsity.

3.4 Ethical Truth and Falsity Considered as *Upāya*

I think that this is a plausible approach to conventional truth generally, but the ethical truths with which I am concerned can be considered a subset of this. My postulation is that ethical truths in Madhyamaka obtain their normativity in a similar manner as conventional truths outlined above, and that this is best understood as a form of *upāya-kausalya*. Recall that *upāya-kausalya* translates to “skillful means” and this invites one to ask what it is a means to, or for. In the present case I am suggesting that it is a means to successful operation within conventional reality *specifically* while reducing suffering and progressing along the path to awakening. This is

a narrower and more specialized function than the truths of conventional reality, one that is deeply connected to the soteriological goals of Buddhism rather than the truths that constitute conventional reality. Ethical truth, then, would be those claims or directives that are meant to advance the practitioner along the path, while ethical falsity would be those claims that obstruct progress along the path or actively prohibit possible advancements. So in this sense the normative weight for ethical claims within Madhyamaka does not come from some sort of correspondence to an ultimate ontological realm but from how effectively the ethical claims lead one to a deeply transformed way of being in the world.

Some specifics may prove helpful in seeing how this could work. Madhyamaka is a school within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and the principal explanation of the path toward awakening within this tradition concerns the moral ideal of the *bodhisattva*, or Buddhist moral saint. This is a being that has cultivated *bodhicitta*, typically translated as “awakened mind” or “awakening mind”. *Bodhicitta* is a complex psychological state, essentially a standing motivational state with affective and conative dimensions that principally involves a compassionate, altruistic¹²⁷ aspiration to supremely develop oneself morally – to become awakened – for the benefit of others.¹²⁸ The framework of the Mahāyāna path (sometimes called the path of the bodhisattva) is typically structured around six perfections or virtues (*pāramitās*); these are generosity (*dāna*), moral discipline (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), energy or vigor (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). These are all undergirded with a thoroughgoing emphasis on compassion (*karunā*) that characterizes the Mahāyāna path. One of the most

¹²⁷ Altruistic in a loose sense insofar as the development of *bodhicitta* is not entirely without benefit for the one developing it but does contain a significant other-directed focus.

¹²⁸ Jay Garfield, “What Is It Like to be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 33, No.1 (2010/2011), 334-335.

influential Buddhist texts in Tibet, where it is regarded as principal source of Mahāyāna ethical thought, is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* or *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* by Śāntideva composed sometime during the eighth century CE. The text serves as a guide for moral development instructing readers on how to become a bodhisattva through the cultivation of the six *pāramitās*, the process by which one generates and maintains *bodhicitta*. Jay Garfield argues in his “What is it Like to be a Bodhisattva?” that this path is best understood as a path of moral phenomenological transformation and that Śāntideva’s text is a treatise on the distinction between the phenomenologies of benighted and of awakened moral consciousness.¹²⁹

The text is structured in a particular order for the practitioner to follow and includes instructions on developing and maintaining the six Mahāyāna *pāramitās*. Śāntideva also mentions two degrees of *bodhicitta*, first, at the outset of moral development one is to cultivate *aspirational bodhicitta*, the serious intention to cultivate one’s moral capacities and lead an awakened life, second, *engaged bodhicitta*, the set of spontaneous moral perceptual skills and dispositions that lead one to act in beneficial ways.¹³⁰ Both degrees are mental aspects that deeply concern the intention and motivation behind one’s actions, both in regards to oneself and others.

Much of the text concerns aspirational *bodhicitta* with Śāntideva considering how to nurture this attitude in the beginning chapters. He then turns to the development of concentration necessary for maintaining introspective awareness regarding one’s motivational and affective states, then to the cultivation of patience and the energy for ethical practice.¹³¹ The chapters on developing generosity, moral discipline, patience, and vigor are written so as to show how one

¹²⁹ Garfield, “What is it Like,” 335.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 345.

¹³¹ Ibid, 347.

can see the world in different, less maladaptive, ways. For example the chapter on patience instructs the reader on the unwholesomeness of anger in particular and recommends ways of viewing one's anger so as to counteract it as it arises. In verse twenty-two Śāntideva states,

I feel no anger towards bile and the like, even though they cause intense suffering. Why am I angry with the sentient? They too have reasons for their anger.¹³²

Here Śāntideva is offering a way to conceive of a situation in which one is the object of another's anger. Rather than returning the anger with more anger Śāntideva implores the reader to consider how we typically do not feel the same type of anger towards illnesses because they arise due to some set of particular conditions. We should view the anger of the other person as arising due to some set of causes and conditions as well. The intended effect is the dissipation of anger towards other sentient beings by contemplating how all things arise due to causes and conditions. This type of strategy indicates Śāntideva's phenomenological approach to moral transformation, and how one can consider, and eventually perceive, situations in radically different ways that do not engender suffering. These different ways of seeing are reinforced in the later chapters, Garfield explains,

The final chapters of the text address the role of meditation in stabilizing the qualities and ways of seeing cultivated earlier, and finally the importance of a particular kind of wisdom as the foundation of the engaged *bodhicitta* that is the foundation of awakened life – that is, the ability to see all phenomena – including oneself, that to which one is intimately related, and other moral agents – as empty of inherent existence, as interdependent and as impermanent.¹³³

Earlier strategies for cultivating the perfections may be cognitive exercises one works through, but the perfection of meditation and wisdom aim to solidify these ways into a wholly new way of experiencing the world.

¹³² *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6:22, Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 52.

¹³³ Garfield, "What is it Like," 347-348.

The perfections elucidated on the bodhisattva path transform the moral psychology of the practitioner successively such that each progression informs and deepens further progress. For instance, generosity and moral discipline are not merely acts that one does such as feeding the poor or following tenets; they are mental states that facilitate progress on the path and contribute to a diminishment of suffering (at least) within the practitioner. A generous mind has relinquished attachment to worldly possessions so that there is no mental resistance if and when the practitioner needs to give up all they have. A morally disciplined practitioner has transformed the intention of her mind and has renounced the greed that fuels many worldly concerns.¹³⁴ When treated as mental states the cultivation of these perfections places much emphasis on the practitioner's introspective awareness, and her intention from moment to moment. Generally this awareness is beneficial for developing the meditative focus that stabilizes these ways of seeing within the character of the practitioner. More specifically, the cultivation of generosity may further enforce the transitory nature of all phenomena within the mind of the practitioner while the cultivation of moral discipline allows for the practitioner to become less distracted from the requirements of the path. In this manner the directives on the path are tools that the practitioner can utilize to modify their moral psychology in ways that dismantle the attitudes and emotions that are associated with suffering, enhancing those that are associated with happiness, and prepare the practitioner's mind for further advancement along the path.

In the chapter on wisdom Śāntideva indicates the moral importance of the Madhyamaka view of metaphysics whereby all phenomena are empty of inherent existence, interdependent, and have only conventional identities. For Śāntideva once this view is completely internalized then one's experience, both of oneself and of the world, is fundamentally transformed. The suffering that is pervasive to human experience is rooted in the cognitive instinct to take the

¹³⁴ *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 5:10-11 here Śāntideva explicitly calls them mental

world and oneself to be substantial, independent, and enduring. Extirpation of this instinct is necessary for awakening as well as the complete cessation of suffering and is contingent upon philosophical reflection. However, for the practitioner to be receptive to this philosophical position she must have cultivated her moral sensibility in ways that loosen the attachment and aversion that come with this default instinct.¹³⁵ This is why Śāntideva's chapter on wisdom comes at the end of the text even though its content forms the foundation of awakened life. Moreover, once this point has been reached the practitioner does not merely discard the practices and conventions of conventional reality for these constitute the world that the practitioner must live within. Knowledge acquired through the use of authoritative epistemic instruments still applies within conventional reality and are necessary for successful functioning. A thoroughgoing experiential understanding of emptiness does not undermine a bodhisattva's ability to navigate throughout the world, it just undermines the cognitive instinct to take conventional phenomena as substantial, enduring, and independent. In this manner the bodhisattva sees conventional reality but also sees *through* conventional reality by understanding it as empty, dependently arisen, and conventionally identified.

In this manner there is a sort of internal justification to the particular practices that constitute the path of the bodhisattva. Incitements to cultivate, say, generosity and patience are normative because of their particular place within the structure of the path such that they till the soil of the practitioner's mind for the seeds of wisdom presented in the final chapter on *prajñā*. For the Mādhyamika the normativity of the robustly ethical directives and claims that constitute the path to awakening comes about through their particular effectiveness in transforming the psychology of the practitioner traversing the path. This transformative nature of the path does not only facilitate the later stages of the path, but contributes to the diminishment of suffering within

¹³⁵ Garfield, "What is it Like," 355.

the practitioner by dismantling the roots of suffering. In a linguistic sense, the truth of these ethical claims is functional along Price's lines insofar as they express a type of normativity focused on a goal. Within Price's account, and plausibly within conventional reality, there is a general assumption that pooled cognitive resources and shared goals are beneficial for communities that have the norm of truth. In the more narrow context of the Madhyamaka ethical project there is still this normativity attached to truth but robustly ethical claims are focused on a more specific goal of successful maneuvering through conventional reality while mitigating suffering and progressing towards awakening. Within this context the claim of ethical truth means that any claim opposite is regarded as false for the purpose of guiding the practitioner (one already within the context of the Madhyamaka ethical project) along the path. Moreover, according to the Madhyamaka framework the specific claims regarding generosity, patience, and the like are endorsed for their particular effectiveness in helping the practitioner progress along the path, and in diminishing her experience of suffering.

3.5 Objections

Despite all of this, the approach I am postulating is not without problems. There does not seem to be a way to ground the truth of these ethical claims without appealing to the Buddhist framework from which they are given. A functional and broadly pragmatist theory of truth may certainly be plausible but this does not necessitate one particular ethical view, let alone the Buddhist one. Moreover, if the Mādhyamika is correct in asserting that all things are empty and without any inherent existence or essence then what is it that makes their worldview and approach worth engaging with as opposed to any other? Or more broadly, what could be the basis for making any particular claims within conventional reality? These are important

questions and I will offer some initial avenues of exploration for the Mādhyamika in facing these objections.

3.5.1 James and Religious Belief

I have alluded to pragmatism as a source of potential avenues that Madhyamaka could exploit in defending particular aspects of their view while maintaining a commitment to emptiness, and I think this approach can be utilized to some degree here as well. “The Will To Believe” is one of William James’s most popular essays, in it he argues for (among other things) the justifiability of holding evidentially unsupported beliefs under certain conditions, as well as our passional nature’s ineliminable role in influencing belief. There is a distinction worth noting in his essay between the *right* to believe and the *will* to believe¹³⁶, where the former concerns the epistemic acceptability of holding certain beliefs, and the latter the psychological tendency to hold certain evidentially unsupported beliefs given one’s disposition, socio-cultural background etc.

James provides two formulations of his will to believe doctrine¹³⁷ the first of which comes in section IV,

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – and is attended with the same risk of losing truth.¹³⁸

In this essay James is primarily concerned with religious belief, and in this regard he argues that the attitudes we take towards religious matters are not simply governed by evidence, but rather

¹³⁶ Michael Slater emphasizes this distinction in the first chapter of his *William James on Ethics and Faith*, 19-47, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹³⁷ Despite the distinction made between the *right* and *will* to believe I will continue to refer to James’ doctrine as the will to believe doctrine as this is what has been the accepted practice in the relevant literature.

¹³⁸ William James, *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1896, 1921, 11.

involve a range of contingent psychological and historical factors.¹³⁹ It is these that James refers to as our *passional nature* and they include (but are not limited to) one's temperament, personal history, culture, tradition, and the society into which one is born.¹⁴⁰ In James's view, since religious matters are objectively inconclusive and the above aspects are inexorably bound up with rationality, then religious belief is not mainly a rational affair. This is not a cause for concern for James as he not only says that our *passional nature* may influence our decisions of belief, but that it *must* influence these decisions under certain conditions.

Chief among these conditions is when the options for belief are "genuine options", which James defines as being *live*, *forced*, and *momentous*. For the person making the decision a *live* option is one that is considered credible. That is, the decider considers the option to be a possibility for her, given her own particular psychological constitution and history. This lends an irreducibly subjective aspect to *live* options but does not mean they reduce to being *merely* subjective.¹⁴¹ His example is of becoming a theosophist or Muslim;¹⁴² both are *dead* options for him in particular but the former may be *live* for someone else living in late nineteenth-century Boston, whereas the second is not. Moreover, some options are irredeemably *dead* for someone despite their desires, history, and socio-cultural background. For instance, I cannot become a samurai no matter how attractive I find the notion because this is not a real option for me, or any of my contemporaries. Second, a *forced* option is one that involves an exclusive logical disjunction. This does not allow one to abstain from making a decision one way or another. His example of choosing to go out with or without an umbrella is decidedly *not* a forced option

¹³⁹ Slater, *William James*, 27.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

because you could just as easily stay inside. However, the decision to accept or reject a truth claim is forced because there are only two options. Finally, a momentous option is one that is unique, significant, and irreversible in such a way as to mark a major shift in the life of the one making the decision. A non-momentous decision is trivial, and most of the decisions we face in everyday life are trivial. James even mentions that scientific practice abounds in trivial decisions of belief. This is due to the ability of the scientist to discard a hypothesis if experimentation shows the corresponding avenue of study to be fruitless. Believing in the existence of an Abrahamic god would be a momentous decision because this would presumably entail a large shift in the patterns of behavior for one that holds this belief as opposed to one that does not.

When some belief is evidentially inconclusive and the belief is a genuine option for the one making the decision then it is lawful for our passional nature to influence our decision in the matter. According to Michael Slater, James's second formulation comes towards the end of the essay,

In concreto, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.¹⁴³

This notably jettisons the conditions of the decision being forced and momentous. For Slater this is a better formulation because the requirement that the decision be forced concerns only the logical form of the choice not the actual content. Moreover, the momentousness requirement means that religious beliefs must be momentous to be justified, effectively denying the right to hold trivial religious beliefs, which seems implausible.¹⁴⁴ This being the case, then one can seek justification for religious belief if the evidence is inconclusive and if the option is live for the one making the decision. This notion is not meant to relieve us of the obligation of evidential

¹⁴³ James, *Will to Believe*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Slater, *William James*, 34-35.

support; we still have an obligation to attend to the relevant evidence regarding the belief when there is evidence available. In addition, it is the evidential inconclusiveness that provides the justification for the belief, Slater explains,

Presumably it is the evidential inconclusiveness of our options which gives us our epistemic warrant, and the liveness or deadness of the options which, according to our passional nature, guides our decision to believe one option rather than another.¹⁴⁵

Slater remarks that this is not necessarily what James himself thought of the matter, but that this is a defensible interpretation, especially when distinguishing the epistemic *right* to believe and the psychological *will* to believe.

3.5.2 Buddhist Application

If the proper justification of religious belief comes through the absence or inconclusiveness of evidence then the core doctrines of Buddhism must be evidentially inconclusive if the Mādhyamika is to utilize this approach. It seems unlikely that universally compelling evidence will obtain for or against the reality of the self, for the fundamental impermanence of conventional reality, or, more directly, for the universal emptiness of all phenomena. Since these metaphysical claims seem to be beyond the scope of empirical support then it seems plausible that such a belief could be justified in the manner that James describes. However, this does not necessarily answer the objection above. One may be justified in choosing to adopt Buddhism given the evidential inconclusiveness but this does not tell us why one would or should do so.

The potential answer to this lies in the psychology of the one faced with the decision. As James mentions, the passional nature will incline us toward or away from certain options, and our personal histories and dispositions will determine the liveness or deadness of such options. This matter has an irreducibly subjective aspect to it and will vary across a population. If this is

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 34.

the case then not everyone will find the basic claims of Buddhism compelling. For example, those never exposed to Buddhist thought and brought up in a thoroughgoing Catholic tradition may not necessarily find the claims within Buddhism compelling. Or, if such a person does find certain claims compelling, say that of the ubiquity of suffering, then he may disagree on the best way to remedy the situation, or on whether the situation needs to be remedied at all. On the other hand, if one has neutral or lukewarm metaphysical commitments, intellectually appreciates the Buddhist explanation of suffering and its ubiquity, and recognizes a need to diminish suffering in one's own life, then the option for belief in the Buddhist framework is quite live.

Tsongkhapa's *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*¹⁴⁶ supports this psychological aspect where he talks of three types of motivation to enter onto the path. The first motivation is to merely obtain favorable rebirths for oneself. One is not concerned with escaping *samsāra* but rather merely "getting a leg up" within the cyclic existence. The second motivation is disenchantment with cyclic existence and the desire for peace through one's own liberation from *samsāra*. The third describes those who sincerely wish to extinguish the suffering of all sentient creatures through the understanding of their own suffering. These motivations are described in terms of increasing capacity or merit with the third being superlative. The first two have one's own wellbeing as the prime motivation to embark upon the path, whereas the third is fundamentally concerned with all creatures. Despite this graduated classification Tsongkhapa goes on to say that all scriptures and teachings cater to all three, and even if one may already be motivated by the suffering of others one should still cultivate the first two motivations so as to affectively benefit oneself in the cultivation and maintenance of great compassion.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Tsongkhapa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment: Lam Rim Chen Mo Vol. 1*, trans. The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, eds. Joshua W.C. Cutler and Guy Newland, (Boston: Snow Lion, 2000) 129-142.

Tsongkhapa's point is that various psychological factors may drive someone to pursue the path but they can all be transmuted into the great compassion that characterizes the *bodhisattva*. Moreover, he is giving explicit examples of psychological dispositions that would help make the Buddhist path a live option in a manner similar to what James describes. Tsongkhapa describes the first motivation as merely aspiring for favorable rebirths, but in this context where rebirth is assumed this amounts to a basic self-interest. If this is the case then he seems to cast the net quite wide to include most people who would hold at least a primitive form of self-interest.

The Buddhist tradition also places importance on the role of exemplars in motivation for pursuing the path. In the legendary account of the Siddhartha Gautama's life before he was the Buddha he was a noble prince who lived a life of splendor and luxury. When Gautama was born his father had received omens that his son would be either a great king or renounce worldly life entirely. Because of this his father kept him cloistered within the palace walls surrounded in a life of worldly pleasure. Gautama left the palace for the first time when he was twenty-nine, and came across four sights that profoundly impacted him. The first was an old man, and when Gautama asked his charioteer about this (he had been surrounded by beauty and youth his whole life) the charioteer responded that this was something that happened to all beings. The second sight was an ill person suffering from disease. Again Gautama asked and the charioteer said that all beings are subject to sickness and pain. The third sight was of a dead body, once again Gautama asked the charioteer and again he replied that this fate befalls everyone. Gautama was deeply troubled by these sights when they came across the fourth, an ascetic monk who had withdrawn from the world. The ascetic seemed to be quite content despite the afflictions of the world around him. This gave Gautama the hope that there was a way to address the suffering that he had just been exposed to, and it was this sight that convinced him to renounce his princely life

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 134-35.

and become an ascetic himself. He joined a group of ascetics and quickly mastered the meditation techniques they offered but found no answer to the fundamental problem of suffering so he left them seeking more understanding. He tried more extreme methods of disciplining his body through fasting and extremely austere living but this only served to make him ill and he realized that this path would lead to death rather than answers. He sat beneath a fig tree and resolved to attain what he was searching for until several days later he had what is described as an awakening experience. Afterwards he returned to the group of ascetics that he initially joined to try to explain what he had learned and they were struck by the change in his demeanor. It was the change they sensed in him that was chiefly responsible for their receptiveness in listening to his message, and so he formed the first *samgha* or community of Buddhist monks.

Both the fourth sight of the ascetic and Gautama's own appearance to his former companions are examples of the psychological effect of exemplars on behavior within Buddhism's origin story. The fourth sight of the ascetic serves as a particularly strong exemplar especially given Gautama's heightened sensitivity towards suffering after witnessing the first three sights. It is this sight that shows Gautama a way out of the mire of existential suffering that he is experiencing, and so contributes to his journey of awakening. When the Buddha met with his former companions he was the exemplar, and it was the change they sensed in him that led to their acceptance of his teaching. Moreover, within many types of Buddhist practice there is an emphasis placed on the relationship between student and teacher that I think is at least partly explained by the psychological effect of exemplars on motivation. Although not the only function, the teacher serves to show what is possible from cultivation on the Buddhist path, thereby inciting the practitioner to maintain and persist her development.

Psychological factors seem to explain the other concern regarding following a particular Buddhist path, say that of the Mahāyāna, among many others. One may be convinced of the Buddha's message regarding the ubiquity of suffering but be drawn to different traditions within Buddhism and this is the result of the passional nature of the individual in question. It is a contingent matter whether one was first exposed to Mahāyāna thought or non-Mahāyāna thought when entering into the Buddhist framework. Within this framework a Mādhyamika may offer some reasons for the particular potency of their approach to the Buddhist path, but again in the absence of objective evidential support it is a matter of the practitioner's psychological disposition whether or not the practitioner will accept this conception of the path to awakening. The manifold arguments made by prominent Mādhyamikas (Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Śāntideva etc) serve to convince those of the rational nature of Madhyamaka. However, if we take James quite seriously then there is no such thing as unadulterated rationality because our reasoning and rational faculties are shot through with subjective and passional factors. He states in section III that, "...pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds."¹⁴⁸ And in section VI, "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream visited planet are they found?"¹⁴⁹ For James belief is a jointly rational, passional, and volitional affair¹⁵⁰, but this does not mean that we can bring ourselves to believe anything we wish.¹⁵¹ Once again, for James there is an irreducibly subjective and passional nature to our belief formation. It seems though that this

¹⁴⁸ James, *Will to Believe*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Slater, *William James*, 37.

¹⁵¹ James himself gives the example of believing that the sum of two one-dollar bills is one hundred dollars. This is something that we can say but we are impotent to believe it because there is direct evidence that bears on the belief. See James, *Will to Believe*, 5.

works in favor for the Mādhyamika interlocutor, at least insofar as he is addressing one already within the framework of Buddhism. It seems plausible that such a practitioner is more apt to accept rational arguments from another Buddhist given some of the commitments that they already share. Moreover, if we take the explanation of Śāntideva's path to awakening as one of moral psychological transformation structured in a specific way, then the rational arguments that come at the end of his BCA are intended for one who has prepared her mind to accept them. This preparation is a volitional alteration of one's passional nature such that one is more inclined to believe the arguments that follow.

3.6 Conclusion

The problem with which I have been grappling is not a product of recent philosophical engagement with Madhyamaka. The claim of universal emptiness has been interpreted as a form of nihilism since opponents began to engage with the Madhyamaka philosophical approach. Disentangling and articulating the Madhyamaka position is a step to avoiding such mischaracterizations, and was what occupied me in the first chapter. There we saw that the support that Abhidharma gives to their truth claims is the result of correspondence between the claims themselves and ultimate reality. Part of what Madhyamaka does is to jettison this foundational metaphysical ontology, and with it the Abhidharma manner of justification for truth claims. Without this resource the Mādhyamika is in need of a way to support their claims while maintaining the commitment to emptiness that signifies their position. Moreover, the abandonment of ultimate reality leaves the Madhyamaka ontology concerned entirely with conventional reality. Within Abhidharma ultimate reality is foundational and knowledge of it is that which facilitates awakening, whereas conventional reality is that which obscures this knowledge. For the Mādhyamika conventional reality is all that there could be and Nāgārjuna

even makes the claim that it is through knowledge of conventional truth that ultimate truth is realized.¹⁵² So the Mādhyamika is in need of providing some sort of grounding or justification for the ethical claims that they put forth without any sort of foundational appeal to an ultimate reality.

Without providing some sort of normative weight then Madhyamaka faces the crippling problem of the dismal slough. This characterization, coined by Tom Tillemans, concerns truth claims within Madhyamaka philosophy. Candrakīrti, mentions an approach to truth that takes the opinion of the world as the sole criterion which determines truth. This position is derivable from claims made within Nāgārjuna's MMK and as such seems to be a problem that Madhyamaka needs to address. For Tillemans this approach to truth will inevitably lead to unreliability and extreme relativism; the former because all opinions, even those of experts, can be unreliable in some situations, the latter because there would be no fact of the matter to establish truth if truth is merely the opinions that some population holds. This completely undermines epistemology by removing any meaningful distinction between truth and falsity, but it is also harmful for ethical claims by significantly blurring the distinction between good and bad conduct.

This is the problem the Mādhyamika needs to address, especially since the Buddhist path is one that is so primarily concerned with the actions one takes to achieve a particular valued outcome. My approach in this chapter has been to consider ethical truth as a subset of truth generally, and since Madhyamaka is primarily concerned with conventional truth I began with an articulation of conventional truth drawing on Huw Price's functional approach to truth. Price's account is metaphysically deflationist in one sense but realist in another, and is concerned with what truth does for a community that operates with it in their language. Essentially he views it as

¹⁵² MMK 24:8-10. The lack of ultimate reality does not exclude the existence of at least one ultimate truth for Madhyamaka – emptiness. This truth is ultimate in a soteriological sense due to its importance in the awakening of the one who has fully understood and implemented it.

a norm that engenders actual dialogue through the incitement of disagreement with those whom hold contrary claims. Dialogue is postulated as important because Price assumes (rightly I think) that shared goals and pooled cognitive resources are generally beneficial and that they arise only through the successful application of dialogue within a community of language users.

This seems a suitable option for the Mādhyamika due its deflationist aspect and its focus on the normativity of truth. We can consider conventional truth in Madhyamaka as operating in a similar way. Truth is best analyzed not metaphysically but functionally and serves to direct us into dialogue with each other, with the promise of beneficial cooperation in the end. In chapter one I characterized conventional truth as similar to traffic laws insofar as they are arbitrary in one sense but serve a purpose to get commuters efficiently to their destinations while reducing collisions. I think this analogy is telling and conventional truth operates much like this with the general function being efficient maneuvering through the world.

This is supported by traditional Buddhist epistemology, which concerns (like all classical Indian epistemology) instruments of knowledge and objects of knowledge. For Dharmakīrti perception and inference are the only two accepted instruments of knowledge and their acceptability lies in their nondeceptiveness. This nondeceptiveness is understood primarily through the expected causal effects of an object. This practical or reliability criterion seems to run through Buddhist epistemology and Nāgārjuna indicates an approach whereby instruments of knowledge and objects of knowledge mutually reinforce each other. This process is explained to be a type of coherence between objects of knowledge and instruments of knowledge such that neither is foundational and the whole process is fallible and revisable. Experience dictates which instruments of knowledge yield valid objects of knowledge, which help refine instruments of knowledge and so on. The whole process takes nothing as robustly foundational and can be

adjusted as experience presents certain instrument-object pairings as more or less efficacious in facilitating successful maneuvering through conventional reality.

If ethical truth is a subset of truth then it is plausible that this approach will be similar to how ethical truth operates. Ethical truth retains the same normative function component exhibited in Price and mainstream Buddhist epistemology but the function here is a narrower one. The Mādhyamika retains the authoritative cognition of conventional truths, which provide an effective way to maneuver through conventional reality, but in addition the ethical claims of Madhyamaka serve to help the practitioner mitigate suffering and achieve awakening. Ethical truth is normatively loaded in a pragmatic manner because of the particular structure of the Mahāyāna path toward awakening. When understood as a path of moral psychological transformation the Mahāyāna path serves to change the moral experience of the practitioner. The end result is a different and more beneficial way of being in the world that is more morally sensitive and effectively responsive to moral situations. Ethical truth then would be those truths that normatively guide the practitioner toward awakening due to their particular effectiveness in moral transformation within the Madhyamaka framework. Ethical falsity would be those claims that prevent or obstruct this moral transformation of the Mādhyamika. The Buddhist concept of *upāya-kauśalya*, “skillful means” captures this notion well despite how it is not necessarily employed in this particular context. Originally it applied to the pedagogical skill of the Buddha, as he would adjust his teaching to meet the disposition and spiritual advancement of particular audiences; asserting something in one context that he may not in another. What was asserted was dependent upon what would best suit the spiritual advancement of the audience. This is similar to Price’s metaphysical deflation of truth and consequent elevation of the functional role of truth. Here then the Madhyamaka notion of ethical truth is a type of *upāya* insofar as it serves to

advance the progress of the practitioner while maintaining the emptiness of the claims being made.

I mentioned that the primary problem for this approach is its internally directed nature. Normativity is supplied to ethical claims because of the claimed practical efficacy of these claims in moral transformation. Moreover, if such emptiness is really this pervasive then what can the Mādhyamika offer as reason to follow the path? Religious and philosophical systems typically orbit around certain metaphysical claims and Buddhism is no different. These claims are evidentially unsupported because they are either not of the nature to be evidentially supported or there is no evidence for or against them. For William James this evidential inconclusiveness along with the particular passional nature of some individual is what justifies the religious or philosophical belief of that individual. So in this sense one can justify one's adherence to a Buddhist worldview as long as the distinctly Buddhist claims are not evidentially supported, and one's passional nature has made the Buddhist worldview a live option for that person. This particular matter is contingent upon that particular person's psychology, yet this the psychological aspect of James's will to believe doctrine. Since the Mādhyamika is loathe to assert some sort of inherent essence in any domain then it seems she will need to accept this sort of contingency regarding the acceptance of the Buddhist framework. Similarly, one's psychology would play a pivotal role in the acceptance of the distinctly Madhyamaka variety of Buddhism. Yet if one is already within the Buddhist framework then it seems plausible that one would be more inclined to accept Madhyamaka given the shared commitments that span Buddhism at large.

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