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The (Two) Truths about Truth

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In this chapter we address the semantic side of the Buddhist distinc-
tion between the two truths. As was pointed out in the introduction
to this volume, the Sanskrit word that we here translate as "truth"
(*satya*) is sometimes also used to mean "reality," "the real," that is,
the things that are existent/real. Here we concern ourselves with
truth, a property that some statements, ideas, beliefs, theories,
propositions, and representations may have and others lack, but that
cannot properly be ascribed to simple things like pots and chairs.
Though the issue of what sort of things are the *primary* bearers of
truth is important, nothing we say here depends on a determination
of this question. We therefore adopt a "tolerant attitude to truthbear-
ers" (Kirkham 1995, 59–63). Readers are free to reformulate what we
say into their preferred terminology.

If we take the semantic perspective, then among true statements,
there are some that Buddhists claim to be conventionally true and
others that they claim to be ultimately true. This raises two questions.
First, is there something that both types of statement share? Second,
how do they differ? To answer the first question we should look at
some of the different theories of truth that have been developed in
the Western traditions and see which of these might best capture the
conception of truth behind the Buddhist distinction. This may also
suggest some possible answers to the second question.

We will start by reviewing the standard views about the nature of
truth in Western traditions. Matters, of course, are contentious. Our

aim here is not to enter into the contention. It is simply to chart the geography of the area for subsequent application. Much more detailed discussion can be found in standard references, such as Kirkham (1995) and articles in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. All the views of truth we will put on the table come in many varieties. Generally speaking, we will ride roughshod over the differences since it is only the core ideas that are relevant to our discussion.

Theories of Truth

Let us start with a truism about truth. Aristotle enunciated it as follows (*Metaphysics* 1011[b] 25):

> To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false,
> while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is
> true.

The view was canonized some two and a half thousand years later by Tarski (1936) in what has become known as the T-schema:

> $<p>$ is true iff p

where p is some proposition, and $<p>$ is a truthbearer expressing it (and "iff" means "if and only if"). Thus, if p is the proposition that Kathmandu is in Nepal, $<p>$ might be "Kathmandu is in Nepal." It would be a bizarre theory of truth that did not endorse the T-schema. It would seem incoherent, for example, to endorse the thought that it is true that Kathmandu is in Nepal, yet to deny that Kathmandu is in Nepal or vice versa.[1]

According to a currently popular theory of truth, there is nothing more to truth than that it satisfy this schema. An early form of the theory was proposed by Ramsey (1927). A more modern version is presented in Horwich (1998). This view deflates the notion of truth; there is nothing more to truth than the T-schema. We will therefore refer to it as the *deflationary theory* of truth. A crucial question about the view is whether, if there is no more to truth than the T-schema, it can accommodate all the things that a notion of truth is required

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1. Having said that, there are some instances of the T-schema that appear to give rise to paradox—for example, the instance concerning the proposition that this very proposition is not true (the liar paradox). Those who are not prepared to accept the truth of this paradoxical proposition—Tarski included—have often, therefore, restricted the T-schema in such a way as to exclude such propositions. This is a sophistication we ignore here since it is irrelevant to the issues at hand.

to do in epistemology, semantics, and elsewhere. However, this is not the place to go into these matters.

For those who have felt that there is more to truth than the T-schema, perhaps the most popular view is a *correspondence theory* of truth. According to this theory, what makes a statement true is its correspondence to reality. Statements represent the world as being a certain way. For instance, the statement "A pot is on the ground" represents the world as having at least one pot on the ground. According to the correspondence theory, to say of this statement that it is true is to say that the world is as the statement represents it as being. This is sometimes expressed by saying that the statement correctly pictures how the world is. Since "correct" looks like a synonym for "true," this cannot be a proper analysis of truth. But it is useful in suggesting that we look at the picturing relation to understand how correspondence might work. In a picture, various elements (e.g., blobs of color) stand in certain relations to one another— for instance, a yellow blob being above and to the right of a green blob. There are also projection rules, whereby the relations that may obtain among pictorial elements are correlated with relations that may obtain among entities in the world outside the picture. To call a picture accurate is to say that when individual elements are taken to stand for particular entities in the world, then the real-world relations that one gets by applying the projection rules to the picture-relations actually do obtain among those entities.

A deflationist view of truth can be seen as a correspondence theory in a certain sense. After all, "Nepal" stands for Nepal, "Kathmandu" for Kathmandu, and Kathmandu does indeed relate to Nepal by being in it. However, typical defenders of a correspondence view have had something stronger in mind. A true sentence is to be made true by reality (that is, reality has a "truthmaker" in it) in a more robust way. This is explained by Armstrong, a proponent of the view, as follows (2004, 5):

> To demand truthmakers for particular truths is to accept a *realist* theory for these truths. There is something that exists in reality, independent of the proposition in question, which makes the truth true. The "making" here is, of course, not the causal sense of "making." The best formulation of what this making is seems to be given by the phrase "in virtue of." It is in virtue of that independent reality that the proposition is true. What makes the proposition a truth is how it stands to this reality.

This goes beyond a deflated correspondence in two ways. First, there are *entities* in reality in virtue of which true sentences are true. Different versions of the theory characterize these in different ways: They may be facts, situations, states

of affairs, or whatnot. We will simply call them "facts." Second, we are to be a realist about these entities; that is, they are mind/language independent.[2] When we talk of a correspondence theory of truth, we shall have this kind of robust correspondence in mind. Perhaps the most famous theory of this sort is Wittgenstein's in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922).[3] A major problem of the correspondence theory has been to give a satisfactory account of the nature of facts and the correspondence relation between facts and propositions. Thus, we speak of the fact of there being a pot on the ground as what makes it true to say that a pot is on the ground. And here it is natural to think of this fact as something in the world. But we also say that it is a fact that 2 + 2 = 4 and that it is a fact that there are no horned hares. These look rather less like inhabitants of what most people think of as "the world" and more like abstract objects. Some philosophers bite the bullet on this and posit facts as entities that exist in a third realm that is neither physical nor mental. Others find this ontological commitment hard to swallow, but the alternatives seem to end up making facts look rather like linguistic entities; in that case, correspondence fails to be of the robust kind.

If we cannot, in the end, make sense of a robust language-world correlation and yet wish to have more to truth than the mere T-schema, the next obvious thought is that we should locate this more in the relationship among the linguistic things themselves. Thus, we might take a set of sentences—let us call this a theory—to be true if all its members cohere. This is the *coherence theory* of truth, endorsed by idealists such as Blanshard (1939) and some of the logical positivists, such as Neurath (1983). What exactly coherence amounts to is a much-debated point. Consistency is usually taken to be a necessary condition, but more than this is required: The members of the theory should mutually support one another in some sense. Assuming that the notion of coherence can be spelled out satisfactorily, the coherence theory of truth faces a problem, noted, for example, by Russell (1907). It would seem that there can be any number of distinct coherent theories, and on some of these a given statement will count as true, whereas on others it will count as false.[4] We thus end up

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2. In general, that is. Since it is true that Churchill thought about Hitler, there must, on this account, be a fact of Churchill's thinking of Hitler. This is obviously not mind-independent. However, this is a special sort of case.

3. In fact, Wittgenstein's view is slightly more complex than this. Atomic sentences are made true by facts. The truth of a complex sentence is reduced, via its truth conditions, to that of atomic sentences.

4. Note that this does not involve changing the language being used as we move from one theory to another. Take the statement "Mt. Everest is taller than Mt. Washington." The claim is that this statement will cohere with one theory but not with another, even when we keep fixed what is meant by "Mt. Everest," "taller than," and so on. One might think that the facts must tell in favor of the theory with which the statement coheres and against the theory with which the statement does not cohere. But this involves appeal to facts independent of theoretical framework. The coherence theorist has no truck with such things.

with the dismal view that truth is always relative to a theoretical framework. This is dismal because truth then appears to lose its normative force. We take it that one ought, *ceteris paribus*, to tell the truth. Truth functions for us as a norm. If any statement whatsoever may be both true and false, depending upon which framework we adopt, it is no longer clear how truth could serve that function.[5]

Another way in which one may attempt to go beyond the T-schema is to suppose that truth must answer to action in a certain way. This gives us (versions of) the *pragmatic theory* of truth, as espoused by Peirce (1905), James (1909), and others. This is the view that truth is the property of being conducive to successful practice. So to say that the statement "A pot is on the ground" is true is just to say that accepting this statement leads to success in one's pot-seeking and pot-avoiding behavior. It is important to distinguish this view from the view that successful practice is a *test* for truth. On the latter view, the way we tell whether a statement is true is by looking to see whether it leads to successful practice. But one may accept a pragmatic criterion of truth while believing that the property of truth is not this but something else, such as correspondence or coherence of some kind. One difficulty with the pragmatic theory of truth is that by "true" we seem to mean something other than "conducive to successful practice." Thus, we can imagine statements that are true but have no practical oomph whatever. For example, that there are *exactly* $10^8 + 17$ grains of sand on a particular beach would seem to have no practical import at all. Any number of Indian philosophers, including Buddhist philosophers such as Dharmakīrti, subscribe to a pragmatic criterion of truth. But it is not clear that any of them would accept the view that being such as to lead to successful practice is what truth *is*.[6]

The final theory of truth on our list locates what goes beyond the T-schema in one particular kind of activity, namely verification. Thus, a sentence is true if it is verifiable or maybe even verified. This gives us the *verifiability theory* of truth. Some (e.g., Ayer 1936) have held verifiability to be a theory, not of truth, but of meaning. So things that are not verifiable are literally meaningless. However, that truth in mathematics is itself verifiability was held by mathematical intuitionists, such as Brouwer.[7] And the intuitionist account has been extended to a completely general account of truth by philosophers such as Dummett (1976). A verificationist theory of truth would appear to be problematic due to

5. Chapter 9 of this volume takes up "dismal relativism" and the Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas' worries about it.

6. See Kirkham (1995, 212, 215) on the difference between pragmatic theories of truth and justification; Tillemans (1999, 6–12) on Dharmakīrti's supposed pragmatism.

7. See the papers by Brouwer translated into English in van Heijenoort (1967).

the fact that there appear to be statements that are true but not verifiable—for example, that the physical world will (or will not) continue to exist after the death of all sentient creatures (due to excess heat or excess cold, depending on whether the cosmos expands indefinitely or collapses back into itself). No doubt a verificationist would say that this begs the question: There are no such truths since they cannot be verified. But the verificationist is vulnerable to a difficult *ad hominem* argument. It would seem that the claim that truth is verifiability cannot itself be verified. It hardly seems true by definition; neither is it the sort of thing for which one can collect empirical evidence.

Abhidharma

So much for our whistle-stop tour of the Western alethic lands. Now to Buddhism. Buddhist philosophers claim that among the statements that can be said to be true, some are conventionally true, while others are ultimately true. What do they mean by "true"? The answer depends on which formulation of the theory of two truths we are discussing, for there are several. The first, historically, is the one developed by the Abhidharma schools. There, the distinction between the two truths turns on another distinction, that between two ways in which something might be said to exist: conventionally and ultimately. Among the things that might be thought to exist, some are partite (i.e., wholes composed of parts) and others are impartite. Ābhidharmikas argue that no partite entity can be real. Something must be real, however, so the reals must be impartite. Those impartite entities that do exist are then said to exist ultimately, to be ultimately real. Statements correctly representing the way that ultimately real entities are may then be said to be ultimately true. Here the sense of "true" is most naturally thought of as a robust correspondence, impartite things with their properties playing the role of genuine truthmakers.

Most of the things that we ordinarily suppose to exist are not ultimately real. Pots, trees, mountains, and persons, being wholes composed of parts, cannot ultimately exist if the Abhidharma argument against partite entities is sound. It would, though, be odd to say that such things are utterly unreal, like the horns of a hare. For there are atoms arranged potwise, while there are no atoms arranged horns-of-hare-wise. Since it is frequently useful for us to be able to refer to collections of atoms arranged potwise, and the atoms are many, while life is short, we have come to employ the concept of a pot as a shorthand way of referring to such collections. Habitually employing this concept, we come to think that there actually are things such as pots that somehow exist over and above the atoms of which they are composed. Since this useful fiction

grows out of our use of a certain concept, we can call it a "conceptual fiction."[8] And some of the statements we make concerning conceptual fictions, such as the statement that there is a pot on the ground, may be said to be conventionally true.

Uniformity would seem to require that the "true" in "conventionally true" be understood, like that in "ultimately true," along the lines of the correspondence theory. But things cannot be so straightforward. Since the things referred to in conventionally true statements are mere conceptual fictions, they cannot serve as truthmakers in the sense of a robust realist correspondence theory of truth. And it turns out to be extraordinarily difficult to state the truth conditions for "A pot is on the ground" in terms of relations among atoms. (For instance, there is considerable elasticity in the number of atoms required for something to be a pot: As we remove randomly selected atoms one by one from a pot, there is no clear line beyond which there simply is no longer a pot.) This appears to rule out correspondence. Since conventional truths are statements that guide us to successful practice, one might suppose that conventional truth should be understood in terms of the pragmatic theory of truth. But this does not seem to be how Abhidharma philosophers see things. They appear to want to retain something like a correspondence account for this kind of truth as well. One way to understand how this might be involves thinking about what we mean when we say that something is true "in the story," such as that Hamlet killed his stepfather. There is no Hamlet. There are only the sentences that make up the story. But were those sentences true, then there would be whatever truthmakers are required to make "Hamlet killed his stepfather" turn out true. Likewise, there are no pots, only atoms, including some atoms that are arranged potwise at a certain location. But given those atoms arranged in those ways, if there were things such as pots, then there would be the requisite truthmakers for "A pot is on the ground." Thus, we still have correspondence in some sense. For then conventionally true statements are ones that correspond to arrangements of the fictions with which we populate our everyday world through conceptual construction (*kalpanā*).

At this point, a word is in order concerning the truthmakers for the ultimate truth in the Abhidharma scheme. Abhidharma adopts a robustly realist form of correspondence theory with respect to the ultimate truth. From what was just said about conventional truth, we can see why this should be.

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8. There are several widely used terms expressing the Buddhist idea of a conceptual fiction: *kalpanā* · "conceptual construct," or *prajñaptisat* "[merely] designated existent." They express the idea that such and such a thing is fabricated or "thought up," that is, is an invention of language and thought for which no corresponding real entity can be found under analysis.

Conventionally true statements "work" for us, yet they are about things that do not really exist. The thought is that explaining this fact requires that the truth of conventionally true statements be grounded in facts about things that are not mere fictions but are genuinely, that is, ultimately, real. But what are these ultimately real truthmakers like? The claim of Abhidharma is that the ultimately real things are things with *svabhāva*. As used in ordinary Sanskrit, this term has about the same meaning as "essence." That is, it denotes whatever nature is characteristic of an entity, whatever it is about that entity that makes it be the sort of thing it is. So being hot would be identified as the *svabhāva* of fire but not of water. Water continues to be water whether it is hot or cold. When water is hot, its being hot is said to be a *parabhāva* or "other nature" of water, a "borrowed" property that it has in dependence on something else. The ordinary uses of *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* correspond roughly to "essential nature" and "contingent nature." But when *svabhāva* is used in this way, then pots and trees can be said to have *svabhāvas*, yet these are said to be mere conceptual fictions. Abhidharma uses *svabhāva* to mean something other than what we ordinarily mean by "essence."

The reason for this is not far to seek. When we distinguish between a thing's essential nature and its merely accidental or contingent properties, we are thinking of a thing as an entity with a multiplicity of properties—some of which are properties that it must continue to have in order for it to continue to exist, and others, properties that it can acquire and shed over the course of its history. This shows that we are thinking of the thing in question as an aggregate entity. And Abhidharma claims that aggregation is always something superimposed on reality through conceptual construction. Entities that are not conceptually constructed can have but a single nature. And this nature must be intrinsic to that entity; it cannot be a borrowed nature that the entity has in dependence on other things. It is the hallmark of what is a mere conceptual construction that its nature be wholly extrinsic or borrowed from other things, typically the parts of which it is composed. The ultimately real, by contrast, can have only a nature that is *intrinsic*, or its very own. This is why in the Abhidharma context *svabhāva* is best translated as "intrinsic nature." And Abhidharma says that the truthmakers for ultimate truth are just the things with intrinsic nature.

An Interlude

Before we move on to other schools, it is necessary to digress briefly and take up problems that arise when the T-schema is combined with two truths.

Abhidharma denies that wholes like pots have intrinsic natures. So there are not the sorts of truthmakers for conventionally true statements that a robustly realist form of correspondence would require. So which notion of truth is appropriate for conventional truth in Abhidharma? Not a robust correspondence notion. Perhaps the most natural would seem to be a deflationary notion, which, as we noted, can be thought of as a weak sort of correspondence theory. But here we face a nasty little problem. That the pot exists is a conventional truth; that it does not exist is presumably an ultimate truth. All the notions of truth we discussed satisfy the T-schema, so whatever the notions of truth are, it seems to follow that the pot both does and does not exist. But there is no evidence of the Abhidharma endorsing this kind of contradiction. What is to be said about this?

First of all, it should be said that Buddhist traditions were themselves faced with a comparable accusation of contradiction and that they saw it as a serious problem, generalizable to various schools' (not just the Abhidharmas') talk about two truths. There were three basic Buddhist strategies to avoid those potential contradictions:

1. Maintain that there is strict insularity between two kinds of statements, one kind treating of conventional matters and one ultimate matters.

2. Reject the idea that conventional and ultimate statements are both equally true (i.e., both true in the same context of discourse). The conventional might, for example, be true only in a lesser sense of "true" (e.g., true for ignorant worldlings but not true properly speaking), or it might be true in a fictional context and not true in a context of talk about what is really so.

3. Allow that both statements are equally true but build in qualifiers so that contradiction is avoided; the same statement is not both true and not true.[9]

Abhidharmikas adopted mainly strategy (1) to circumvent these problems. Their response to the problem of the pot that both exists and does not exist is to deny that the statement "A pot exists" is ultimately false. As a statement that uses the convenient designator "pot," it can be neither ultimately true nor ultimately false. Only statements that use terms designating impartite entities (things with intrinsic nature) can be ultimately true or ultimately false. In effect, they propose that we use two distinct discourses, one for those entities

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9. For an example of Tibetan use of this strategy to defuse contradiction between the two truths, see Tillemans (1999, 133–138).

that are thought to be ultimately real, the other for the conceptual fictions with which we populate our common-sense world. Thus, the language of conventional truth concerns pots and people; the language of ultimate truth concerns the ultimately real entities with *svabhāva*. Their reason is that if we allow a single discourse that contains terms for both sorts of entity, then the question can always be raised whether, for instance, the pot is identical with or distinct from the atoms of which it is composed. There being good reasons to reject both horns of this dilemma, such a discourse would quickly lead to contradictions.

Strategy (2) is very widespread in Buddhism. It was used by the Buddhist logicians, Mādhyamikas, and at least some Ābhidharmikas; many types of Buddhists saw conventional truth as fictional truth or in some way not properly speaking true, merely "truths" for pedagogical purposes and so on.[10] One way to look at the payoff of this move is to maintain that "It is conventionally true . . ." is going to behave like "In the story . . ." This operator does not satisfy the T-schema. Thus, consider the following:

In Shakespeare's story there was a prince of Denmark called "Hamlet" iff there was a prince of Denmark called "Hamlet."

The left-hand side is true; the right-hand side is false. Another strategy is to distinguish between normal contexts and pretense contexts. The T-schema then remains intact. An instance such as:

"A pot exists" is true iff a pot exists.

is true since both sides are false. However, in the relevant context, we can pretend that both sides are true. Discussing the details of these proposals would, unfortunately, take us too far afield. Strategy (2) will be taken up in the Madhyamaka section, where the pros and cons of fictionalism will be looked at in more detail.

Still, what about the third strategy to avoid contradiction, that is, explicitly putting qualifiers into the two kinds of statements? Historically speaking, it is

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10. Cf. Āryadeva, cited in PP 370 (ed. LVP): *nānyabhāṣayā mlecchaḥ śakyo grāhayituṃ yathā // na laukikaṃ ṛte lokaḥ śakyo grāhayituṃ tathā //* "Just as one cannot make a barbarian understand by any language other [than his own], so too the world cannot be made to understand if we do not use what is worldly."

11. It seems to be what Bhāviveka advocated and Candrakīrti rejected in their debate in the first chapter of the *Prasannapadā*, where the former insisted upon the need to add "ultimately" (*paramārthatas*) in sentences concerning the ultimate status of things and the latter saw it as dispensable. Whether the goal was to preserve consistency, however, is not sufficiently clear. The strategy becomes especially prominent in the Tibetan Madhyamaka, particularly in the philosophy of Tsongkhapa, who clearly does use it to preserve consistency. The strategy is opposed by Tsongkhapa's critics, like Gorampa, who in effect prefer unqualified statements and rely on strategy (2). See Cabezón and Dargyay (2006).

to be found primarily in the Madhyamaka.[11] But arguably this strategy, too, is quite general. It could be used by any Buddhist commentator, including even an Ābhidharmika, who feels the need to be explicit about kinds of truth at stake in order to make ambiguous or potentially misunderstood statements safe from contradiction. Indeed, many Tibetan doxographical textbooks (*grub mtha'*, *siddhānta*) did regularly seek to ensure precision and consistency by slipping qualifiers into their formulations of the four major Buddhist schools' key positions. It is instructive to examine briefly what the prospects and perils would be for this approach when it meets the T-schema. Let us first look at the perils, that is, at applications of (3) that may well have been seductive in traditional contexts but will probably *not* work updated.

Suppose we qualified the right-hand sides of the T-schema uniformly in the manner of the following examples:

"The pot exists" is ultimately true iff ultimately the pot exists.
"The pot exists" is conventionally true iff conventionally the pot exists.

Note that if we do this we have actually *given up* the T-schema. The truth predicate does not simply strip off quotes: It also *adds* material. But the move also has some philosophical plausibility. Western theories of truth have not traditionally had to cope with the thought that there are two truths. Once this is on the table, it is not unnatural to generalize the T-schema:

<*p*> is true, ultimately, iff *p*, ultimately.
<*p*> is true, conventionally, iff *p*, conventionally.

Nonetheless, it is not clear that this proposal is workable. The utterance of a bald proposition, *p*, now becomes ambiguous. It can mean "conventionally *p*" or "ultimately *p*." But what of, for instance, "conventionally *p*" itself? This is just as ambiguous as *p*. It could mean "conventionally conventionally *p*" or it could mean "ultimately conventionally *p*." But each of these is itself ambiguous in exactly the same way. We are clearly launched on a vicious regress.

The culprit is the ambiguous status of *p*.[12] Indeed, it seems likely that many Indo-Tibetan advocates of strategy (3) did take simple statements as ambiguous and thought that one had to specify the perspective in which they are to be taken by the qualifiers conventionally and ultimately. Arguably, there

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12. Horwich (2006, 190) has a similar argument against leaving *p* ambiguous and qualifying it along the lines of "relative to such and such, *p*," "according to such and such people, *p*," and so on.

could be attempts to distribute the two qualifiers differently that may jibe better with Indian and Tibetan textual evidence. No matter. The essential point is that *if* these or other applications of strategy (3) leave *p* itself ambiguous, the regress will remain.

The lesson is as follows: A Buddhist who relies on qualifiers to disambiguate *p* may well go from the frying pan into the fire. The better and simpler course is to take *p* as itself unambiguous, keep a unitary sense of truth for all statements, but capture the special case of ultimate discourse with an operator like "REALLY." In the context of Madhyamaka, we will sketch such a simpler application of (3). But let us leave the consistency problems there for the moment and move on to take up Madhyamaka in detail.

Madhyamaka

It is within the Abhidharma schools that the distinction between two truths first developed. With the rise of the Madhyamaka schools, however, things changed. They agree with much of what Abhidharma says about conventional truth. They agree, for instance, that most of what people say about pots, trees, mountains, and persons is conventionally true. They also agree that the things such statements are allegedly about are some type of conceptually constructed fictions. Indeed, this idea of language and thought pertaining to fictions is present across the board in the Mahāyāna: It is in the Yogācāra and in the Yogācāra-Sautrāntrika school of Buddhist logicians.[13]

What is distinctive of Madhyamaka is that it argues, through the use of a large battery of arguments (many of them *reductio ad absurdum* arguments), that nothing could possibly have intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*. At the same time, Madhyamaka never disavows the Abhidharma claim that only things with intrinsic nature could have the sort of mind-independent existence necessary for something to be an ultimate truthmaker. The upshot is that there can be no things for ultimately true statements to be about. Even the property of being

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13. These two Mahāyānist schools are realist in that they accept that ultimately existing entities must and do have intrinsic natures (*svabhāva*); those natures are, however, ineffable. The Indian Yogācāra school of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, as represented in texts such as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*, places surprisingly little emphasis on the two truths. Instead, the contrast between conventional fictions and the ultimately real is brought out in an intricate theory of three natures (*trisvabhāva*). Of these three, the thoroughly imagined nature (*parikalpitasvabhāva*) is indeed fictional in nature due to language and conceptual thought (*vikalpa*); it is to be contrasted with two sorts of ineffable, real natures. In the Yogācāra-Sautrāntrika of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, the doctrine of two truths is very significantly emphasized in the theory of *apoha* (exclusion), with conventional truth being concerned with fictions, that is, so-called universals (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) fabricated by language and thought, and ultimate truth being about real, ineffable particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*).

empty is, we are told, devoid of intrinsic nature. Consequently, it would appear that it could not be ultimately true that emptiness is the nature of all things. On the other hand, Mādhyamikas do take it as ultimately true that all things are empty. The question as to whether paradox results from this will be briefly taken up further on. It is difficult to juggle with all these balls in the air at the same time.

Let us start with conventional truth for Madhyamaka. This certainly cannot be a robust correspondence notion. If there is any kind of correspondence, this has to be with mind-dependent entities. This leaves us with a number of options. One is to endorse a pragmatic theory of truth. This approach gives no answer to the question of why statements concerning purely fictitious entities should nonetheless prove efficacious. But someone who takes this option might reply that the demand for an explanation of efficacy is illegitimate since it presupposes the correspondence theory of truth. Only someone who thinks of truth as a relation between statements and mind-independent reality will think that statements about fictions require grounding in things with intrinsic natures. The second option is to reject the correspondence theory in favor of the coherence theory of truth. In response to the same objection, the coherence theorist can give a similar answer. But there is a third option: Retain correspondence as our understanding of the "truth" in "conventional truth" but go deflationary about correspondence. In that case, the absence of robust truthmakers to stand behind our acceptance of conventionally true statements need not be an embarrassment. For then when we are asked what makes it true that there is a pot on the ground, we can simply reply that there is a pot on the ground. The absence of things with intrinsic nature is neither here nor there.

As we saw earlier, a deflationist theory, like that of Horwich, does *not* involve anything metaphysically charged. It might then seem that the deflationist's version of truth, purely along the lines of <p> *is true iff p* and stripped of the excess baggage of truthmakers and ontology, would give an elegant reconstruction of Madhyamaka's own oft-repeated principles. It might seem tailor-made for Buddhists who advocate a quietism that eschews ontological commitment or theses (*pakṣa, pratijñā*) about real entities (*bhāva*) and that just acknowledges as true what the world acknowledges (*lokaprasiddha*) without subjecting it to further analysis. Nonetheless, linking deflationism and Madhyamaka Buddhism is not that simple. The problem is this: Many Mādhyamikas (i.e., those whom Tillemans in chapter 9 dubs "typical Prāsaṅgikas") simply maintain that the world's beliefs and statements are actually *completely* wrong and false (*mṛṣā*) and that those beliefs/statements are "right" or said to be "right" only from the point of view of the world

(i.e., within the world's erroneous belief system).[14] These Mādhyamikas thus accept what the world acknowledges unanalyzed, much as if it were a story that is actually false but qua story can be admitted unquestioned.

This position seems best accommodated by the fictionalist account, which we considered in the case of Abhidharma.[15] The approach enables a person to reject commitment to some or perhaps even all kinds of entities by adopting a type of *pretense* or *make-believe* stance, "according to such and such a story . . . ," or, to put things in Buddhist fictionalist terms, "according to the world (who have got it all wrong) . . . ," "conventionally . . ." To be more exact, for the typical Prāsaṅgika, conventional truth is fictionally true for spiritually realized Mādhyamika philosophers themselves, who know that it is all make-believe, but it is just error for worldlings, who wrongly buy into it being grounded in the real. Note, too, that whereas other Buddhist schools are arguably fictionalist in a restricted fashion (e.g., about partite things), Madhyamaka holds that all without exception is conceptual construction; in other words, even allegedly ultimately real entities are themselves just conventionally established fictions. In what follows let us therefore speak of this version of Madhyamaka as "panfictionalism"—the term was often used by Matilal (see, e.g., Matilal 1970) in his characterizations of Madhyamaka Buddhist views.

Fictionalism and panfictionalism can take several forms, and some ideas initially put forward in the 1950s before the term *fictionalism* had entered the analytic philosopher's vocabulary can be seen in this light, taking seemingly serious discourse as ontologically bracketed. Such is the case for Carnap's distinction between internal and external existence questions. In this volume, Finnigan and Tanaka extensively refer to this distinction to offer an interpretation of Madhyamaka's avoidance of ontological commitment. Internal existence questions about entities of type X are those said to presuppose compliance with "rules for forming statements [about Xs] and for testing, accepting or rejecting them" (Carnap 1956, 208). We can in this way remain *within* a linguistic framework and ask whether it recognizes the problematic types of entities. Or we can take a perspective *outside* the framework and ask whether those weird entities *really* exist independently of or even in spite of the framework's rules and procedures—though such questions are literally meaningless for Carnap and can be interpreted only as at best questions about how pragmatically useful it is to adopt the framework in question. Some of the contemporary advocates of fictionalism, like Stephen Yablo, have no problem in using

14. See chapter 9 of this volume.

15. Note that deflationists such as Paul Horwich dislike fictionalism quite intensely. See Horwich (2006). For a defense of a fictionalist interpretation in Buddhism, see Garfield (2006).

something like Carnap's internal-external distinction to their anti-ontological ends (see Yablo 1998). Remaining within the framework is respecting the story, adopting a make-believe stance, describing metaphorically, and so on and is ontologically uncommitted in any realist sense; stepping outside is asking what is true really, literally, and so on. A Madhyamaka fictionalism could be articulated in these directions. The central thought is that truth is truth within a framework; the ultimate truth is that nothing is *really* true (i.e., true in virtue of some real, intrinsic properties that are independent of frameworks). Since the Madhyamaka is rigorously panfictional, there is no such thing.

Panfictionalists are easily charged with the dismal problem that truth-in-a-story or truth-in-a-framework risks engendering relativism and stripping truth of its normative force. This would be a problem, for widespread beliefs and even the procedural rules and validation procedures in such belief systems often *do* need major reforms, and belief systems are not all equally right. Some Mādhyamikas (especially the Svātantrikas) saw these negative consequences as following from the typical Prāsaṅgika's panfictionalism. As they put it, the Prāsaṅgikas' confusion was to replace truths gained through reliable epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) with what is established through mere acceptance (*pratijñāmātreṇa siddha*) and then arrive at the conclusion that pretty much anything acknowledged by the world (*lokaprasiddha*) in the going belief system of the time—false as it actually is—would just have to be accepted as a conventional truth.

There are ways out of this impasse that nonetheless keep to the fictionalist strategy. One does not have to hold that all fictions are equal, so that the acceptance of the world's framework entails endorsing any old set of beliefs, even the dumbest kind, as many typical Prāsaṅgikas or their Svātantrika critics seem to think. Arguably, indeed, there are ways to significantly critique an accepted worldview while staying within it. First, considerations of coherence go a long way. One could propose reforms, some of them quite far reaching, by showing better coherence with other theories and with deep-seated epistemic rules and practices that the world accepts.[16]

Second, one could maintain a more pragmatist line. Indeed, the Svātantrikas deliberately adopt the Buddhist logicians' pragmatic criterion of truth-testing, that is, practical efficacy (*arthakriyā*), and apply it to testing conventional truth. Jan Westerhoff, in his chapter in this volume, uses ideas from David Lewis's

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16. Candrakīrti does appeal to coherence with respect to people's normative beliefs, arguing that inconsistency with basic principles demands that people change many of their ethical views. What is perhaps odd is that he doesn't use that coherentist approach to significantly challenge popular beliefs concerning the nonnormative realm.

game-theoretic account of convention to explain how objects—not just humanly created national borders, stock markets, and the like but also physical things like mountains, trees, and so on—can be purely conceptual constructs that owe their existence only to conventions. But certain such conceptual constructs will yield effects, and others won't: Water that is conventionally existent and the conventionally illusory water in a mirage are both fictional conceptual constructions, but only the former quenches thirst. Finally, following Finnigan and Tanaka, one could maintain that the Mādhyamika replacement of whole frameworks is possible but that this is (as it is for Carnap) for purely practical reasons rather than theoretical reasons. Practical efficacy would then be understood in terms of progress toward enlightenment.

All this having been said, one will nonetheless want further explanation as to why certain effects occur and are as they are. We often look for a reductionist account: Medical science works because of facts about biochemistry that explain the effects of substances on organisms. And in such explanatory contexts, what happens on a molecular level will be regarded as more fundamental than the macroscopic phenomena—indeed, the latter consist just in certain types of events on the microscopic level. Macroscopic objects have properties that are borrowed from others—for example, their weight, size, and so on are determined by features of their microscopic parts and thus are extrinsic properties. The component parts to which the object is reduced may be provisionally admitted to have intrinsic properties in a certain way. Madhyamaka, too, could harmlessly endorse intrinsic natures in specific contexts, like reductive explanations, where an Abhidharma-like approach is deployed, all the while recognizing that under further analysis those same natures will be seen to be mind dependent and empty.[17] Instead of a final Madhyamaka position based on a master argument—that is, a proof that would settle things once and for all, a bit like a Thomistic proof of God supposedly does—we have a Madhyamaka program of acceptances of intrinsic natures that are subsequently annulled in an unending dialectical series. In chapter 10 of this volume, Siderits develops this idea in detail.

We have seen how conventional truth in Madhyamaka can be seen as a species of fictionalism. However, there are reasons that push toward deflationism as a Madhyamaka account of conventional truth instead. To put things

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17. There are Mādhyamikas whose positions can be characterized this way. Tibetan dGe lugs doxographical literature (siddhānta, grub mtha') depicts Svātantrikas as accepting that things are established via intrinsic natures (svabhāva, rang bzhin) on the conventional level (tha snyad du rang bzhin gyis grub pa). In effect, it looks like a Svātantrika's conventional intrinsic nature is taken by the dGe lugs as tantamount to a weak kind of truthmaker. There are intrinsic natures in virtue of which statements are true, but these natures are themselves only conventional entities and ultimately unreal.

roughly, the problem with Madhyamaka panfictionalism—and with fictional-ism in general—is that it fails to take affirmations of truth as earnest, sincere, and literal. Everything has to be qualified with hedges and disclaimers about nonliteralness, pretense, "true from the point of view of . . . ," "in the world's story . . . ," or what have you. Deflationism does take truth very earnestly, liter-ally, straightforwardly, and without hedges about stories even if at the same time it streamlines away any semblance of metaphysical profundity. This is very much in keeping with aspects of Madhyamaka thought, especially a Mad-hyamaka that recognizes full-fledged means of reliable cognition or epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) for determining conventional truth and hence does not see such truths as lesser or merely pretend truths.[18]

In order to see how deflationism might get us further ahead in reconstruct-ing an acceptable Madhyamaka position, let us adopt an *atypical* Prāsaṅgika stance[19]—one that does *not* hold that the world is completely wrong about truth and what is true but holds that worldlings and spiritually realized beings alike are earnest, share an innocent/banal notion of truth in common, and share many literally true beliefs about what is so. There is a radical way to be a Bud-dhist deflationist that would be something like the following. When the Mad-hyamaka dialectic has done its difficult job of ridding us of realism, and when we then realize that nothing is established other than conventionally, we will see no reason to keep two distinguishable truths. We are thus left with a unitary sense of "true," and although the various truths we investigate may be complex and sophisticated, truth per se is not. This may be not all that far from the "mountains are mountains" perspective in Buddhist thought from Chan to Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*), which aims at a lucid, nondichotomizing return to the ordinary. In any case, whatever be the historical schools that it approximates, alethic nondualism and deflationism would be what remain when two truths are no longer needed.[20]

We could thus maintain, in radical fashion, that talk of two truths will be left behind when finally it is no longer needed to counter realists. But then how is such talk to be interpreted *before* we get to that lofty stage? In particular, how are we to talk about ultimate truth on a deflationary approach? We can, in fact, accommodate the notion while remaining deflationist, provided we have a little extra machinery. Thus, we may borrow an idea from Fine (2002). Here is how Horwich (2006, 193–194) puts it (before he argues against it!):

18. See chapter 4 of this volume for a Madhyamaka philosophy that fits this bill.

19. Tsongkhapa, in his own way, is an atypical Prāsaṅgika, as are certain Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) writers like Rongzom Chökyisangpo (*rong zom chos kyi bzang po*) in their own ways. See chapter 9.

20. For an extended attempt to lay out what that might look like, see chapter 8 of Siderits (2003).

[A] common move has been to assume a distinction between, on the one hand, so-called *robust* facts—facts that are REAL (with capital letters)—and, on the other hand, merely *deflationary* facts—facts to which we are committed merely by virtue of making assertions and accepting the trivial equivalence of "*p*" and "It's a fact that *p*." These deflationary facts are certainly taken to be *real* in the *ordinary* sense of that word (since everything that exists is real, in that sense), but not REAL (with capital letters), not robust. The point of this distinction is supposed to be that it's not so unpleasant, metaphysically speaking, to have to swallow weird facts, as long as they are merely deflationary. It's only weird *robust* facts that are hard to stomach . . . So far so good, perhaps. But we are owed an account of the robust/merely deflationary distinction. And no satisfactory way of drawing it has yet been established. Not that there is any shortage of competing candidates.

To implement the idea in the present context, we suppose that the language is augmented by the adverb REALLY, to be understood as a philosopher's term of art. We still have a single deflationary notion of truth. (So, in particular, "REALLY *p*" is true iff REALLY *p*.) Ultimate truths are of the form "REALLY *p*"; conventional truths are simply of the form *p*—where this does not contain an occurrence of "REALLY". A virtue of this proposal is that it also resolves the "nasty little problem" we noted in connection with Abhidharma and other Buddhist schools. When ultimate and conventional truths apparently contradict one another, the "REALLY" operator intervenes to defuse a literal contradiction: We will have, instead, something of the form "*p* but not REALLY *p*" or "REALLY *p*, but not *p*." However, note that because *p* itself does not ambiguously alternate between "conventionally *p*" and "ultimately *p*," the vicious regress described earlier in connection with strategy (3) will not occur.

The obvious problem with this approach is, as Horwich indicates, to give an account of what, exactly, "REALLY" means. Explaining this is no doubt an elusive matter. Thinkers, East and West, who would want to endorse this approach will probably see its elusiveness as a sign of genuine subtlety;[21] others may be tempted to take it as a sign that we have gone down the wrong path. But short of giving up entirely on the notion of ultimate truth, there does not seem much alternative. Moreover and in any case, the Madhyamaka, it may be

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21. The problem of what REAL truthmakers amount to is, in effect, a problem closely connected with one that faces the Tibetan Madhyamaka of the dGe lugs school, namely, the difficult matter of recognizing the object of negation (*dgag bya ngos 'dzin*). (See Garfield and Thakchöe's joint chapter on this subject in this volume, chapter 5.) For Tsongkhapa there is an ascending scale of subtlety correlated with the difficulty of recognizing the various objects to be negated.

thought, owes us an account of ultimate reality.[22] So it is natural to hand-ball the problem off in this direction: We may look to this to tell us how "REALLY" is to be understood.

A final comment on a controversial matter. While using "REALLY" defuses the contradiction that loomed in maintaining distinct notions of conventional and ultimate truth, we may not be in the pure land of consistency yet, at least if we accept that the Madhyamaka means literally that there are no ultimate truths. Indeed, both panfictionalism and deflationism of the kind just described effectively dispense, in their own ways, with anything being ultimately so. A natural move from this is to say that because nothing is ultimately so, there are no ultimate facts (i.e., there are no ultimate *satya* in the sense of things), and there also can be no ultimately true statements about how those facts are. This move and its consequences are contestable; the present authors have differing views.[23] But, prima facie at least, there would seem to be a problem, for in spite of there being nothing that is ultimately so, we find Mādhyamikas regularly saying things that do not look like conventional truths: There is no way, no path, no Buddha.[24] Of course, we could say that talk of the ultimate is all actually false but just skillful means (*upāya*) to be sloughed off when we return to mountains being mountains. But this is not very plausible if we remain within the Madhyamaka philosophy and take what it says seriously. As Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2008, 400) put it:

> It could be said that such descriptions are simply *upāya*, to be
> jettisoned as soon as one can appreciate the nature of ultimate reality
> directly. Although they might be seen in this way, this would not do
> justice to the texts. The texts in question are simply too carefully
> reasoned; too explicit; and are read by their commentators as correct.

Brushing aside consistency problems by invoking the idea of skillful means underestimates how rigorously philosophical the Madhyamaka is. Siderits

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22. As, for example, in chapter 13 of this volume.

23. Priest sees the Madhyamaka stance on the ultimate as dialetheist (i.e., an acceptance of true contradictions about the ultimate). Siderits, who is responsible for characterizing the Madhyamaka stance by the phrase "The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth," takes the point to be that the realization that brings about liberation from suffering (= one sense of "ultimate truth") is that there is no way things are ultimately. He thus rejects the imputation of dialetheism. See Siderits (2008, 127). See also Tillemans (2009) for his views. On the Tibetan Gelukpa (*dge lugs pa*) scholastic's differentiation between ultimately established/existent and ultimate truth, see Newland (1992, 92–94). The Geluk would contest the key move and the true contradictions it might be thought to imply.

24. The situation is, in fact, a standard one for any theory according to which something is ineffable but which then goes on to say something about those things (perhaps by way of explaining why they are ineffable), such as Neoplatonism, Kantianism, Heideggerianism, and indeed the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*. This matter is taken up in Priest's contribution to this volume.

and Tillemans would take Madhyamaka argumentation seriously but seek
ways out of the apparent inconsistency. Priest would go in a different direction
and argue that the contradictory nature of the ultimate even appears to be
explicitly recognized and argued for, such as when the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñā-
pāramitāsūtra* states:[25]

> By their nature, things are not a determinate entity. Their nature is a
> non-nature; it is their non-nature that is their nature. For they have
> only one nature, i.e., no nature.

Further reflection on this matter, as for all the topics we have broached in this
chapter, will have to be left to the reader. In this chapter we have been able to do
no more than sketch an engagement between an aspect of Western philosophy
and an aspect of Buddhist philosophy. We hope, however, that it has provided
the reader some kind of enlightenment, if only of a very conventional kind.

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25. *prakṛtyaiva na te dharmāḥ kiṃcit. yā ca prakṛtiḥ sāprakṛtiḥ, yā cāprakṛtiḥ sā prakṛtiḥ sarvadharmāṇām
ekalakṣaṇatvād yad utālakṣaṇatvāt* (p. 96 in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*, ed. P. L. Vaidya 1960). Trans-
lated and discussed in Bhattacharya (1986, 113, n. 2) in connection with VV 29. See, further, the discussion in
Garfield and Priest (2003) and Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2008).