

FREEDOM AND ETHICS IN MADHYAMAKA BUDDHISM



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Abbreviations

AKB – *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*

BCA – *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

MAV - *Madhyamakāvatāra*

MMK – *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

MVŚ – *Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā-śāstra*

PsP – *Prasannapadā*

PTS – *Pāli Text Society*

ŚS – *Śikṣāsamuccaya*

VV – *Vigrahavyāvartanī*

Abstract

This research project articulates the relationship between freedom and ethics in Indian Madhyamaka. Chapter 1 provides a defence of anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka, the ramifications of which are felt throughout the remainder of the investigation. Chapter 2 introduces the reconstructive, cross-cultural and, at times, a-historical methodology used to explicate Madhyamaka's implied stance on issues such as free will and the naturalistic fallacy. Chapter 3 examines the suitability of 'paleo-compatibilism' as a potential solution to the Buddhist free will problem, arguing that, with some modifications, it could be viable in a Madhyamaka context. Chapter 4 investigates the similarities and differences between the Western theory of causal determinism and the Madhyamaka doctrine of dependent origination: dependency relations encompass but are not coterminous with causal relations. Chapter 5 examines 'perspectivalism,' another proposed solution to the Buddhist free will problem, but contends that it is better conceived of as a meta-theory about free will rather than as simply another theory. From chapter 6 onwards, the focus moves from 'free will' to 'freedom' of a spiritual kind. Chapter 6 seeks to negotiate the tension in Madhyamaka's conception of *karma* as both that which binds beings to *samsāra* and, through the accumulation of merit, as a facilitator of liberation. Chapter 7 introduces the ethical ideal of the bodhisattva figure and considers the coherence of Madhyamaka's conception of a Buddha's non-karmic moral action. Chapters 8 and 9 articulate the implied Madhyamaka view on a range of meta-ethical questions, such as whether moral sentences can be truth-apt and whether Madhyamaka can respond to accusations that it commits the naturalistic fallacy. Chapter 10 offers some concluding remarks on the value of cross-cultural philosophical engagement and summarizes this project's key findings.

Chapter 1

The Road to Nowhere? Anti-Realist Interpretations of Madhyamaka

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

“There is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.
There is no distinction whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.”¹

Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25.19

Despite proclaiming itself as a ‘middle way’ philosophy, Madhyamaka has often been classified amongst the most extreme and, sometimes, absurd worldviews. As Ruegg perfectly summarizes, Madhyamaka has been variously described as “nihilism, monism, irrationalism, misology, agnosticism, scepticism, criticism, dialectic, mysticism, acosmism, absolutism, relativism, nominalism, and linguistic analysis with therapeutic value.”² Given both the abundance of interpretive options already available and Madhyamaka’s stated resistance to philosophical views, a defence of the anti-realist reading endorsed throughout this thesis is required from the outset.

Establishing the viability of anti-realism is, of course, a task far greater than that of determining its appropriateness as an interpretive framework. However, since a key part of the anti-realist thesis is denial of objective standards by which it could be assessed, failure to ‘establish’ anti-realism is less perturbing than it is inevitable. Nevertheless, even by the anti-realist’s own epistemic standards, the cogency of this

¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 25.19. *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam/ na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti viśeṣaṇam//* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 302).

² Ruegg (1981: 2).

perspective can be debated: if frameworks themselves are unavoidable, it is still possible to analyse the picture within. Before turning to defend anti-realist readings as encapsulating Madhyamaka's 'middle way' a definition of this conceptually complex term is in order.

The first important distinction to draw is that between 'local' and 'global' anti-realism, where the former is a denial of particular types of objectivity (e.g. in morality, mathematics or meaning) and the latter rejects objectivity *in toto*. Throughout this investigation, references to Madhyamaka as anti-realist should be understood as denoting the 'global' variety. This distinction helps us to avoid the ambiguity of Burton's treatment of this topic, wherein fundamentally distinct positions seem to be conflated. For example, Burton characterizes Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika as anti-realist when, in fact, their subscription to *dharma* theory – i.e. the theory that there are impartite entities with inherent reality (*svabhāva*) out of which the objects of everyday experience are constructed – constitutes a commitment to realism.³ Whilst these schools resist the idea that terms like 'chariot' pick out objective features of the world, they do nevertheless concede the objective existence of ultimately real *dharmas* and, as such, would be better described as 'mereological nihilists' or 'reductionists' than as anti-realists.⁴

With this qualification in mind, this thesis follows Siderits's account of anti-realism as repudiating three inter-related claims about truth, reality and knowledge. According to this view, realism amounts to the following claims: "(1) Truth is correspondence

³ Burton (2004: 88).

⁴ Siderits (2015: 97-126).

between proposition and reality; (2) reality is mind-independent; (3) there is one true theory that correctly describes reality.”⁵ Though this tells us what anti-realism *is not*, it settles neither the meaning nor the conditions of ‘truth’ as conceived within this system and leaves open the competition between coherentism, pragmatism and deflationism as rivals to correspondence.

The search for a positive description of anti-realism leads us to the writings of advocates for this view from the Western tradition, such as Nelson Goodman, who asserts that the world is not ‘given’ or there to be ‘discovered’ but is rather the product of creative and constructive processes. He thus argues that order is ‘imposed’ on experience, often reflecting our particular practical interests, and that absolutely “nothing is primitive or derivationally prior to anything apart from a constructional system.”⁶

The similarities between anti-realism and Madhyamaka are sufficiently striking to render this choice of interpretive framework at least *prima facie* plausible. Indeed, just as anti-realism stipulates that it too should be subject to anti-realist analysis (“while a tighter systematization could surely be developed, none can be ultimate”),⁷ Madhyamaka likewise recognizes that its central thesis of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is just as empty of ultimate truth as any other position (hence Madhyamaka’s acceptance of the so-called ‘emptiness of emptiness’). Further, like Mādhyamikas, anti-realists are sometimes interpreted as advancing a nihilistic philosophy. Once again, Burton appears to confuse the anti-realist thesis with the nihilist thesis, concluding that without some

⁵ Siderits (2016: 13).

⁶ Goodman (1978: 12).

⁷ Goodman (1978: 12).

“ontological bedrock” out of which fabrications are fabricated “the Madhyamaka contention... seems illogical and nihilistic.”⁸

This conclusion can be avoided, however, by differentiating the idea that nothing exists with *svabhāva* from the (self-contradictory) idea that nothing exists *simpliciter*. Burton objects that the theory of universal emptiness cannot give a satisfying account of the entire process of conceptual construction, even if it can give an account of its individual instances. In response, the anti-realist might point out (a) that such an explanation would require us to invoke the reality of something beyond the totality of things to be explained and that this is precisely what the anti-realist resists and (b) that an infinite regress in causality is only problematic if we hold that causation is itself an objectively real relation and/ or requires the existence of a first cause. Again, it is exactly such ‘foundationalist’ assumptions that the anti-realist thesis sets out to counter.

Irrespective of which side of the foundationalist/ anti-foundationalist argument we eventually find ourselves defending, the idea that anti-realism constitutes nihilism is simply mistaken. The anti-realist plainly states that constructions and the constructive process do indeed exist, albeit only relationally. Still, the conflation of these two theses is not entirely surprising given the recurrence of nihilistic interpretations of Madhyamaka throughout history.⁹ Candrakīrti recognizes that Madhyamaka’s acceptance of purely relational existence is open to nihilistic misunderstanding. For example, commenting on *MMK* 8.12 he argues that denying the inherent reality (*svabhāvatas*) of agents and objects is not to deny their existence entirely.¹⁰ On the

⁸ Burton (2004: 95).

⁹ See Westerhoff (2014) and Wood (1994).

¹⁰ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 8.12. *pratītya kāraṇaḥ karma taṃ pratītya ca kāraṇam/ karma pravartate nānyat paśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇam*// “The agent occurs in dependence on the object, and the object occurs in

contrary, he maintains that it is precisely because agents lack *svabhāva* that agential activity is possible; and thus the conventional reality of agents and objects is established.¹¹ Again, Śāntideva stresses the relational reality of father and son at *BCA* 9.113 where he maintains that in the absence of the son there is no father and that, consequently, neither (ultimately) exists.¹² Here the distinction Westerhoff makes between ‘existential’ and ‘notional’ dependency is informative. It is evident that fathers and sons are notionally mutually dependent, in that, for either term to have applicability, both must. That sons are existentially dependent on their fathers is also uncontroversial. Yet Madhyamaka philosophers also argue that fathers are in some sense existentially reliant on their sons.¹³ The details of this perplexing position are examined in chapter 4.

Rather than read anti-realism as eventually entailing nihilism, Siderits argues that it successfully navigates a way through extreme views (including realism, scepticism and nihilism itself). He thus considers anti-realism to be the most appropriate framework for interpreting and accommodating a ‘middle way’ philosophy of the kind proposed by Madhyamaka. Whereas realism, scepticism and nihilism all share the view that there is some way the world mind-independently is, whether knowable or not, anti-realism

dependence on the agent; we see no other way to establish them.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 96).

¹¹ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 8.12. *atrāha kim avadhāritam etad bhavatā na santi bhāvā iti| na hi| bhavatas tu sasvabhāvavādinah svabhāvasya bhāvānām vaidhuryāt sarvabhāvāpavādaḥ sambhāvyate| vyaṃ tu pratītyoṭpannatvāt sarvabhāvānām svabhāvam eva nopalabhāmahe tat kasyāpavādaḥ kariṣyāmaḥ|* “Here it is said [by the opponent], ‘Is it believed by you that things do not exist?’ [We reply:] Not at all. But for you who believe that existents have intrinsic nature, the refutation of all existents is possible, due to the absence of intrinsic nature with respect to existents. As for us, on the other hand, since all existents are dependently arisen, we do not perceive intrinsic nature, so what is there to be refuted?” Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 188). (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 96)

¹² Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.113. *pitā cen na vinā putrāt kutaḥ putrasya sambhavaḥ| putrābhāve pitā nāsti tathāsattvaḥ tayor dvayoḥ||* “If there is no father without a son, how can there be a son? If there is no son there is no father, so neither of them exist.” (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 126).

¹³ Westerhoff (2009: 28).

challenges this basic assumption.¹⁴ Though anti-realism is sometimes conceived of as an alternative metaphysical theory (about the fundamental structure of reality), it might be better thought of as an alternative *to* metaphysical theories. On this view, anti-realism is neither metaphysical nor anti-metaphysical but, if there is such a category, non-metaphysical. Or, to conceive the matter differently, one could posit a difference between anti-realism and higher-order versions of anti-realism, where the higher-order expressions of the theory reinforce the notion that the lower-order versions cannot be ultimate metaphysical descriptions of reality.

With its resistance to ‘views’ (*dṛṣṭis*), to asserting ‘propositions’ (*pratijñās*) of its own, and to the use of argumentative strategies other than *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasaṅga*),¹⁵ Madhyamaka is described as an alternative to philosophical positions and not just an alternative philosophical position.¹⁶ In important ways, the Prāsaṅgika strategy of demonstrating the incoherence and self-contradictory nature of the opponent’s point of view without thereby committing itself to the opposite view, resembles the *reductio ad absurdum* method found in Western philosophy. Nevertheless, there is an obvious and crucial point of difference: whereas the *prasaṅga* method involves the refutation of the opponent’s thesis, the *reductio* method involves the further step of indirectly proving the contrary. As Ruegg eloquently summarizes: “The Mādhyamika’s *prasaṅga* reasoning is evidently not strictly speaking an apagogic proof because he does not seek to establish *a contrario* something that is the reverse of

¹⁴ Siderits (2016: 18).

¹⁵ The exclusive use of *reductio ad absurdum* is characteristic of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. The nature of the distinction between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, where the usual account of the principal difference between these branches is interrogated. For further discussion, see Dreyfus and McClintock (2003).

¹⁶ McGuire (2017: 392). “Śūnyatā is not a worldview itself, but rather is an attitude towards worldviews.”

what has been rejected.”¹⁷ The need to distinguish *prasaṅga* from *reductio* reasoning is reflected in the two types of negation discussed in Buddhist philosophy, namely implicative (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*) and non-implicative (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*).

Whereas implicative negation negates particular propositions, non-implicative negation also negates the presuppositions on which the proposition in question itself relies. By the exclusive use of non-implicative negation, Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas seek to show that their opponent is not merely in error but has also made a category mistake by assuming the inherent existence of what is in fact illusory. Crucially, the Prāsaṅgika opposition to syllogistic-type reasoning stems from rejecting the conceptual coherence of inherent existence (*svabhāva*) such that it cannot be accommodated either ultimately or conventionally. On this view, conceding *svabhāva* conventionally, as the Svāntrika does, is both to make a category error (because to have inherent existence just is to exist in a mode other than conventionally) and an error of logic (because inherent existence is conceptually impossible in the same way as are square-circles).

Interestingly, some contemporary anti-realists and metaphysical relativists likewise distinguish two types of negation. As the famous anthropologist Geertz has written: “In this frame, the double negative simply doesn’t work in the usual way; and therein lies its rhetorical attractions. It enables one to reject something without thereby committing oneself to what it rejects.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Ruegg (1981: 36).

¹⁸ Geertz (1989: 13).

It is in this vein that Nāgārjuna makes a sustained effort throughout his works to distance his ‘middle way’ philosophy from erroneous, and extremist, views such as absolutism and nihilism.¹⁹ For example, in the *Acintyastava* he writes:

“‘It exists’ – the doctrine of eternity; ‘It does not exist’ – the doctrine of annihilation. Therefore the doctrine free from the two extremes has been taught by you.”²⁰

Some verses later he connects this claim with the conceptually dependent nature of existents by stating that, “the whole world is only name; separated from the expression, that which is expressed does not exist.”²¹ Again, the similarities between traditional Madhyamaka texts and the writings of modern anti-realists are striking. To refer once more to Goodman, we find that he conceives of the ‘worldmaking’ process as “effected or consolidated by the application of labels: names, predicates, gestures, pictures, etc.”²² Madhyamaka’s emphasis on the unenlightened mind’s tendency for conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) makes the anti-realist interpretation both plausible and intuitive, particularly when contrasted with the enlightened ‘vision’ of ultimate reality as involving no vision at all.²³

The foregoing remarks are in no way intended to diminish or deny the challenges associated with anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka, some of which will be

¹⁹ The different senses of nihilism, as either the thesis that nothing whatsoever exists (*nāstika*) or as the thesis that there is no rebirth (*ucchedavāda*) are discussed in Chapter 6. The focus of the current discussion, however, is on Nāgārjuna’s rejection both of the concepts of inherent reality (*svabhāva*) and absolute non-existence (*nāstika*) alike.

²⁰ Nāgārjuna – *Acintyastava* 22. *astīti śāśvatī dr̥ṣṭir nāstīty ucchedadarśanam | tenāntadvayanirmukto dharmo 'yaṃ deśitas tvayā* || (Trans.) Tola, F. and Dragonetti, C. (1985: 30).

²¹ Nāgārjuna – *Acintyastava* 35. *nāmamātraṃ jagat sarvaṃ ity ucchair bhāṣitaṃ tvayā | abhidhānāt pṛthagbhūtam abhidheyaṃ na vidyate* || (Trans.) Tola, F. and Dragonetti, C. (1985: 32).

²² Goodman (1978: 7-8).

²³ MacDonald (2015: 133-168) argues that, for Candrakīrti, ‘realization’ of the ultimate differs from any possible ‘conception’ of the ultimate such that the insight of fully enlightened beings does not consist of any vision at all, precisely because there is nothing to perceive or to know once the mind ceases to project.

examined in subsequent parts of this chapter. Nevertheless, it will be maintained that none of the objections so far brought against the anti-realist interpretation are insurmountable and that, so long as anti-realism is treated merely as a propaedeutic for the explication of Madhyamaka, and not as a final theory, it can be explanatorily useful.

Anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka have repercussions beyond the metaphysical, influencing our conception of their epistemological, semantic and ethical perspectives. Moreover, if we consider Madhyamaka to be implicitly committed to anti-realism, this places certain limits on the ways in which we might reconstruct a Madhyamaka stance on a host of philosophical problems and even on how ‘problems’ themselves might be conceived.

This thesis focuses in particular on how Madhyamaka Buddhism might respond to two problems frequently discussed in the Western philosophical tradition. The first half of the thesis explores the free will problem – i.e. the challenge of accommodating free will and moral responsibility if either causal determinism or indeterminism is true – whilst the second half examines the implied Madhyamaka view on a range of meta-ethical questions including its attitude towards the naturalistic fallacy – i.e. the challenge of rationally deriving values from facts. Cast against the backdrop of anti-realism, these problems assume a distinctive shape. Indeed, the assumptions implicit in the ordinary formulation of these problems (such as that determinism and indeterminism are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive as descriptions of the causal structure of the universe, or that facts and values are fundamentally dissimilar) are called into question under the anti-realist framework.

If anti-realism is true, efforts to harmonize determinism/ indeterminism with freedom and responsibility seem less pressing since neither thesis reflects an objective state of affairs. Likewise, in the absence of objective facts, the division between facts and values is itself an illusion. Accordingly, as will become clear in subsequent chapters, anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka determine both the nature of the problems encountered and which solutions count as viable. Yet these points force us to reflect on the very meaning of ‘truth’ according to anti-realism.

Anti-Realist Theories of Knowledge and Truth

Part of Siderits’s definition of realism involves the idea that ‘truth’ corresponds with objective reality and that ‘knowledge’ is the correct apprehension of this relation. Wright uses a cartographical image to capture the realist conception of truth: “Maps can better or worse represent the terrain which they concern. But nothing about that terrain will owe its existence, or character, ... to the conventions and techniques therein employed.”²⁴ As before, this gives us a clear conception of what anti-realism *is not* but does not provide a positive characterization of knowledge and truth from the anti-realist perspective.

Coherentism – i.e. the internal consistency of statements within a given framework – constitutes one viable anti-realist alternative to the correspondence model of truth. Coherentism plays an important part in Madhyamaka conceptions of truth and thus is important for anti-realist interpretations of this worldview. This is especially evident in Madhyamaka’s treatment of *svabhāva* where we find arguments not only against its

²⁴ Wright (1992: 2).

instantiation in the world but also against the internal coherence of the notion. For example, at *MMK* 1.7 Nāgārjuna argues that it would be conceptually impossible for *dharma*s to exist with *svabhāva* and perform the (causal) functions we ordinarily ascribe to them.²⁵ The unfolding of causal processes – an undeniable and universally acknowledged occurrence – would be impossible and incoherent in a world where *svabhāva* had meaning and applicability.²⁶

Despite Madhyamaka’s recognition that what is conceptually incoherent is impossible, such as “the beauty of a barren woman’s daughter,” Mādhyamikas are equally suspicious of any worldview which claims to be completely coherent.²⁷ For reasons that will be developed in chapter two, a key part of Madhyamaka’s soteriological strategy is to undermine potential sources of attachment.²⁸ To appeal to Nāgārjuna again, it is clear from *VV* 29 that Mādhyamikas resist not just the contents of specific views as impediments on the spiritual path, but the identification with views in general.²⁹ Given that there can be “coherent fairy-tales” (e.g. worlds in which impermanence does not perturb the peace of a transcendental *ātman*), Mādhyamikas would not consider coherence a sufficient condition for truth.³⁰ Rather, the soteriological benefits of

²⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 1.7. *na san nāsan na sadasan dharmo nirvartate yadā| katham nirvarako hetur evaṃ sati hi yujyate||* “Since a dharma does not operate whether existent, nonexistent, or both existent and nonexistent, how in that case can something be called an operative cause?” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 24).

²⁶ The (lack of) distinction between contingent and necessary impossibilities in Indian philosophical discourse will be discussed in chapter 2, where we examine which topics in contemporary Western philosophy are open to the ‘reconstructivist’ agenda. For more on this, see Westerhoff (2016 b: 283) who argues that there is no scope for a discussion on modality in a Madhyamaka context.

²⁷ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.22. *prakāśā vāprakāśā vā yadā dṛṣṭā na kenacit| vandhyāduhitṛlīleva kathyamānāpi sā mudhā||* “Whether the mind is luminous or not, talking about it is pointless since it is never seen by anything, like the beauty of a barren woman’s daughter.” (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 117).

²⁸ On the question of the applicability of the term ‘soteriology’ in a non-Abrahamic religious context, see Wangchuk (2007: 30).

²⁹ Nāgārjuna – *VV* 29. *yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ| nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ||* “If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me.” (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 29).

³⁰ Westerhoff (2009: 167).

competing, and perhaps equally coherent, conceptions of the world must also be adduced, as when the appropriateness of using personal or impersonal expressions is determined by context.³¹ Moreover, it is not even clear that Mādhyamikas would consider coherence to be a necessary condition for truth. Indeed, Madhyamaka's emphasis on the need gradually to revise and overhaul one's conception of the world in the pursuit of liberation (*nirvāṇa*) suggests a piecemeal approach to arriving at 'right view,' which, as discussed above, amounts to no view at all. Ironically then, the necessity of such a piecemeal approach is inconsistent with the idea of truth as internal consistency.

Once again, the similarities between Madhyamaka and contemporary Western anti-realist attitudes towards coherentism are manifest. For example, Putnam explains that his view "is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world" such that there are no constraints whatever on truth.³² Instead he defends a view he calls 'internal realism' according to which the utility of a conceptual scheme is not solely determined by its coherence but also by the standards of *convention*. As Putnam indicates, although conventions differ in different contexts, anti-realism stipulates that no convention better approximates the 'objective' truth because there is no such thing. This means that something other than 'objectivity' must guide us in our identification of some conventions as more sophisticated or successful than others.

³¹ Nāgārjuna – *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* 33. "De même que les Victorieux ont énoncé <le moi et le mien> en vertu de ce qui est à faire, de même ils ont enseigné les agrégats, les bases [de la connaissance] et les éléments, en vertu de ce qui est à faire." (Trans. from the Tibetan) Scherrer-Schaub, C. (1991: 251). Scherrer-Schaub also helpfully points out that this verse is also preserved in Sanskrit in Prajñākaramati's comments on *BCA* 9.7 as follows: *mamety aham iti proktaṃ yathā kāryavaśāj jinaih| tathā kāryavaśāt proktāḥ skandhāyatanadhātavaḥ||*

³² Putnam (1990: 262).

Commenting on *MMK* 15.1 Candrakīrti has famously defined the conventional truth in terms of what is generally agreed by “women and cowherds.”³³ Whether Candrakīrti – or indeed Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas more generally – can arrive at a more intellectually satisfying account of convention will be discussed in chapter 3. There it will be argued that soteriological and pragmatic considerations play an important role in creating a hierarchy of ‘truths’ even within the domain of convention.³⁴ Without wishing to foreshadow the argument of chapter 3, it should be noted that Mādhyamikas, including Candrakīrti, conceive of the attainment of spiritual liberation (*nirvāṇa*) in terms of a path (*mārga*) and that this in turn implies that explanatorily primitive conventions are successively replaced with incrementally more sophisticated ones, even though no convention captures the ‘objective’ truth. Madhyamaka’s guiding principle in determining what counts as a less or more sophisticated convention is the soteriological/pragmatic efficacy of its acceptance.

However, the relationship between a proposition’s pragmatic value and its truth status must be unravelled. For example, Gombrich argues that pragmatist conceptions of truth can assume either realist or anti-realist forms. Buddhism in general (and not just Madhyamaka) is often characterized as pragmatic, but, according to Gombrich, “the Buddha was a pragmatist as we use the term idiomatically, but not in the modern technically philosophical sense.”³⁵ He follows this up with a quotation from Williams who writes that “the teachings of the Buddha are held by the Buddhist tradition to *work*

³³ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 15.1. *nanu ca gopālāṅganājanaprasiddham etad agner auṣṇyaṃ svabhāva iti* | Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 260). “You may say: It is evident to the womenfolk of the cowherds that heat is the self-existent nature of fire.” (Trans.) Sprung, M. (1979: 153).

³⁴ Tillemans (2011: 151-166) and Siderits (2011: 167-180) argue against this interpretation of Candrakīrti but the reader must wait until chapter 3 for a defence of an interpretation of Prāsaṅgika as capable of admitting a hierarchy of truths even within the domain of convention.

³⁵ Gombrich (2009: 161-162).

because they are *factually* true (not true because they work).”³⁶ As a characterization of the historical Buddha, these descriptions seem to align with our knowledge of the early tradition where a realist conception of the fundamental constituents of reality (*dharmas*) seems to be endorsed.

In the case of Madhyamaka, however, the situation is different. In the absence of objective facts, the pragmatic value of accepting the four noble truths cannot be derived from their accuracy as true descriptions of the world but instead derives from the spiritual advantages (i.e. the eradication of suffering) entailed by their acceptance. Nāgārjuna makes precisely this point in chapter 24 of the *MMK* in response to the opponent who maintains that the merely conventional status of the four noble truths would render abandonment of craving and transformative insight impossible. On the contrary, he insists, “All is possible when emptiness is possible. Nothing is possible when emptiness is impossible.”³⁷ Nāgārjuna’s remarks on the four noble truths echo the famous passage in *The Heart Sūtra* where it is proclaimed: “There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path.”³⁸ The similarities between the two texts lend support to interpretations of Nāgārjuna as aiming at the philosophical explication of *prajñāpāramitā* literature.

The realist could still protest that there must be some reason why sympathetic joy (*muditā*) conduces to happiness whilst spite leads to suffering. Madhyamaka can respond, as we shall see in chapter 6 on karma, by indicating a causal connectedness

³⁶ Williams (2000 a: 40).

³⁷ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.14. *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/ sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya na yujyate*// (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 276).

³⁸ *The Heart Sūtra* 5.34 (Conze’s referencing system). *na duḥkhasamudayanirodhamārgā* (Trans.) Conze (1958: 89).

between a person's attitudes and the world they create for themselves. According to this picture, the content of cognition and hedonic experience can be transformed by the power of mind. This is possible, in the Madhyamaka view, because the world is devoid of inherently real substances with *svabhāva*, is not ontologically static, and is nothing over and above a conceptual construct.

Resistance to Anti-Realism

The plausibility of anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka has been defended on several fronts. However, as was acknowledged from the outset, Mādhyamikas themselves might be resistant to the anti-realist label, preferring to see themselves as refraining entirely from the adoption of a philosophical position. To the extent that anti-realism necessarily presupposes juxtaposition with realism, and insofar as both represent opposite ends of a single metaphysical spectrum, Madhyamaka would likely oppose both theses equally. Arnold, who as we shall see is averse to anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka, makes precisely this point when he asks “what proponent of Madhyamaka, when faced with the dichotomous pair of ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ would want to endorse either one of these extremes?”³⁹

Unfortunately, however, Arnold's own interpretation of Madhyamaka as “advancing a constitutively metaphysical claim” requires “something like a realist conception of truth” and thus encounters the very same objection as that which he brings against anti-realist readings.⁴⁰ In response to the criticism that anti-realism cannot be an appropriate

³⁹ Arnold (2006: 16).

⁴⁰ Arnold (2006: 15).

way of conceiving Madhyamaka because (a) it represents an extreme position and (b) Mādhyamikas themselves stipulate their pursuit of a ‘middle way,’ it should be noted that this criticism is equally applicable to *all and any* interpretations of Madhyamaka. Accordingly, because this objection can be levied against every conceivable interpretation of Madhyamaka, its force is diminished and its purpose questionable. As Thakchöe notes, Mādhyamikas and Yogācārins have sometimes used the concept of the ‘middle way’ as a rhetorical device, with each side claiming that they alone successfully navigate a course between extremes.⁴¹

As Candrakīrti argues in the *PsP*, the universality of dependency renders all assertions and positions relative. Hence, commenting on *MMK* 15.2, Candrakīrti observes that both the ‘near’ and ‘far’ shore can only exist relationally, just as the concepts ‘long’ and ‘short’ can only ever be relatively, and never absolutely, applicable.⁴² The fact that anti-realism may be cast in opposition to realism does not *per se* disqualify it as an interpretation of Madhyamaka. This is because the extremes Madhyamaka seeks to avoid by taking a ‘middle way’ (i.e. the extremes of nihilism and eternalism) can be successfully navigated via the provisional adoption of anti-realism. Again, Candrakīrti perfectly encapsulates this point of view with the following quotation from the *Samādhirāja Sūtra*:

⁴¹ Thakchöe (2015: 73).

⁴² Candrakīrti – *PsP* 15.2. *yataś caitad evam ato yad evāgneḥ kālatraye 'py avyabhicāri nijaṃ rūpaṃ akṛtrimam pūrvam abhūtvā paścād yan na bhavati yac ca hetupratyayasāpekṣaṃ na bhavati apāṃ auṣṇyavat pārāvāravat dīrghahrāsavavad vā tat svabhāva iti vyapadiśyate* | Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 264). “And this being the case it follows that the innate nature (*nija rūpa*) of fire, which is unvarying throughout all time, must be uncreated, i.e. it cannot come into existence if at one time it did not exist. That which does not depend on causes and conditions like the warmth of water, the other side and this side, or long and short [which are all relative and hence dependent on conditions], is called *svabhāva*.”

“‘It exists’ and ‘it does not exist’ are both extremes; ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ are both extremes. The wise man, avoiding both extremes, likewise does not take a stand in the middle.”⁴³

Moreover, as discussed already, anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka are not intended as final or definitive interpretations, as this would be self-contradictory. Indeed, the main thrust of the anti-realist’s argument is that there can be no objectively correct theory, including any objectively correct theory about how best to interpret Madhyamaka.

Nevertheless, Mādhyamikas might contend that what sets them apart from other schools (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) is their abstention from making philosophical assertions of their own.⁴⁴ As noted, the Prāsaṅgika use of non-implicative negation (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*) seeks not merely to discredit the view of the opponent but to do so in such a way that no alternative stance is endorsed. The Prāsaṅgika contention is that only non-implicative negation is suitable for those who understand the true meaning of the theory of emptiness. This is because to imply that the opposite of what one objects against is true is to fail to challenge the foundationalist supposition that one or other perspective captures the ultimate truth. Non-implicative negation reflects the Prāsaṅgika view that all philosophical assertions are ultimately inadequate and that commitment to a position only hinders one’s progress on the soteriological path. The final verse of the *MMK* is thus important to Prāsaṅgika interpretations of the text as it

⁴³ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 15.7. *astīti nāstīti ubhe 'pi antā śuddhī aśuddhīti ime 'pi antā| tasmād ubhe anta vivarjayitvā madhye 'pi sthānaṃ na karoti paṇḍitaḥ||* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 270). (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 160). Also note that this echoes verse 22 of the *Acintyastava* discussed above.

⁴⁴ The retort that anti-realism should be understood as non-philosophical, or as a non-metaphysical alternative to realism and nihilism, will only engender further questions about how non-philosophical positions are distinguishable from anti-philosophical stances. For further discussion of this, and whether Madhyamaka philosophy eventually undermines itself, see chapter 2.

clarifies that the abandonment of all views is necessary for cultivation of the spiritual life:

“I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion, taught the true Dharma for the abandonment of all views.”⁴⁵

That Nāgārjuna refrains from formulating independent philosophical arguments of his own is a common theme throughout his writings, the most famous example of which (as already discussed) is found at VV 29. In response to the imagined opponent, we encounter the seemingly paradoxical assertion of no assertion. Nāgārjuna accepts that emptiness (Madhyamaka’s main ‘tenet’) cannot be known or established independently because this would imply that non-emptiness is a coherent concept, something Madhyamaka vehemently protests by arguing against *svabhāva*.⁴⁶ This however is deemed unproblematic by Madhyamaka and is instead treated as a natural consequence of their arguments concerning the philosophical incoherence and spiritual danger associated with the notion of ultimate reality as ontologically primary (*dravya-sat*). Concomitantly, Nāgārjuna demonstrates that, even by the epistemological realist’s own standards, ultimate knowledge is impossible because establishing the means of knowledge requires either embarking on an infinite regress (which can be terminated only arbitrarily) or by accepting the mutual reliance of the objects of (*prameya*), and the justifications for, knowledge (*pramāṇa*).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 27.30. *sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat| anukampām upādāya tam namasyāmi gautamam||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 334).

⁴⁶ See Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 15.8. *yady astitvaṃ prakṛtyā syān na bhaved asya nāstitā| prakṛter anyathābhāvo na hi jātūpapadyate||* “If something existed by essential nature, then there would not be the nonexistence of such a thing. For it never holds that there is the alteration of essential nature.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 160).

⁴⁷ Siderits (2015: 168).

Despite this, if the foregoing arguments in support of pragmatist conceptions of truth hold, Madhyamaka could still provisionally accept the anti-realist label as the most helpful to endorse at a conventional level. Although Candrakīrti's account of conventional (*saṃvṛti*) truth as amounting to that which the worldly professes seems to leave little scope for improved conventions, such as the conventional truth of anti-realism, it is clear from chapter 9 of the *BCA* that not all Prāsaṅgikas take this view.⁴⁸ Moreover, as the dispute in the *PsP* between Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka reveals, Svātantrika Mādhyamikas discern nothing problematic in making conventional level philosophical assertions.

Defending the Anti-Realist Interpretation

Whilst the anti-realist herself is first to admit that anti-realism cannot be finally or definitely arrived at, she may nevertheless still argue that it constitutes the best framework for understanding Madhyamaka. In particular, the anti-realist interpretation allows us to make sense of three otherwise deeply contentious, yet integral, aspects of Madhyamaka thought. These are: (1) the idea that, ultimately, there is no difference between ultimate and conventional reality; (2) the idea that, ultimately, there is no ultimate truth, hence conventional truth is the only truth there is; and (3) the idea that Madhyamaka charts a 'middle way' not only between eternalism and annihilationism but also between epistemic certainty and complete scepticism.

⁴⁸ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.4. *bādhyante dhīviśeṣeṇa yogino 'py uttarottaraiḥ| drṣṭāntenobhayeṣṭeṇa kāryārtham avicārataḥ||* “Even the views of the spiritually developed are invalidated by the superior understanding of those at successively higher levels, by means of an analogy which is accepted by both parties, irrespective of what they intend to prove.” (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 115).

(1) *The identity of ultimate and conventional reality*

Madhyamaka inherits, but also transforms, the Buddhist theory of ultimate and conventional reality and truth. According to the Abhidharma perspective, an entity is ultimately real if it possesses *svabhāva* (i.e. its own inherent reality) such that it is not dependent for its existence on anything else and has, in other words, ontological primacy.⁴⁹ Contrastingly, merely conventionally existent entities are composed of/analysable in terms of ultimate existents and are therefore both existentially and conceptually dependent on other things. At *MMK* 24.8 Nāgārjuna invokes the distinction between ultimate and conventional, arguing that the teachings of the Buddha depend upon it.⁵⁰ As he says in the next verse, those who fail to understand this must also fail to see reality in accordance with the Buddhist teachings and hence cannot attain the insights necessary for liberation.

However, in apparent tension with these statements, Nāgārjuna also maintains the absolute indistinguishability of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* at *MMK* 25.19-20. Since *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* can be conceived respectively as the ‘realms’ of conventional and ultimate reality, to which conventional and ultimate truths respectively apply, their alleged identity requires an explanation. He gives the reason for this bold claim at *MMK* 25.24

⁴⁹ Although it would be wrong to think of Abhidharma Buddhism as a single worldview without internal variation, this thesis will use the term ‘Abhidharma’ to cover a range of Ābhidharmika perspectives but, wherever there is a point of disagreement between Ābhidharmikas on a matter relevant to our investigation, the different schools of Abhidharma will be further specified. As Dhammajoti (2007: 9-13) indicates, there are numerous ways in which to define ‘Abhidharma.’ Yet, despite these variations, it is possible to identify points of commonality between different Ābhidharmikas who all ascribe meaning and value to the notion that *dharma*s possess inherent reality. Dhammajoti writes: “Of all the Ābhidharmika studies, the examination of *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānya-lakṣaṇa* may be considered as the most important. In fact, the MVŚ goes so far as to declare that ‘abhidharma is [precisely] the analysis of the *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānya-lakṣaṇa* of *dharma*-s’.” (2007: 25).

⁵⁰ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.8. *dve satye samupāśritya buddhānām dharmadeśanā/ lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārtham*|| “The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 272).

when he explains that the end of hypostatization is blissful and that, in fact “No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone.”⁵¹ That is, to realize the pervasiveness of dependency and the universality of emptiness, is to realize the inapplicability of the designator ‘ultimately’ and hence is to realize that the Buddha’s teaching is effective at achieving psychological transformation precisely because it does not depend on the inchoate notion of static, primary or objective doctrines.

Out of context, the above-mentioned verses seem plainly self-contradictory. This is where the anti-realist interpretation proves useful: the primary target of Nāgārjuna’s arguments both in the *MMK* and elsewhere is the concept of *svabhāva*, belief in which he considers to be a key source of ignorance (*avidyā*). If the arguments against the existence of ontologically foundational *dharma*s prove convincing, the distinction between ultimate and conventional reality collapses and the drawing of any such distinction must itself pertain only at a conventional level, which has become the only level.

Mādhyamikas regard the idea of *svabhāva* as not only incoherent, but also soteriologically pernicious. Whether people are ever attached to the idea of ultimately real, impersonal and impartite *dharma*s, however, is a source of contention between Mādhyamikas and their critics. For example, Burton finds this suggestion psychologically implausible, arguing that people never do in fact crave such entities as the *dharma*s postulated by Abhidharma metaphysics. He goes on to claim that any form of anti-realism motivated by belief that emptiness must be established in order for all

⁵¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 25.24. *na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ*/ (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 304).

instances of clinging to be undermined is fundamentally misguided. Thus, he writes: “liberation from craving does not require a commitment to such extreme anti-realism.”⁵² Burton’s objection, if it hits the mark, is so obvious as to make us wonder whether he really presents the Madhyamaka view in the most sophisticated and charitable light.

In the first place, the Madhyamaka could reply that though nobody craves *dharmas*, the belief that our treasured possessions or loved ones are composed out of such ultimately existent foundational substances could legitimate our cravings in a way inaccessible to the person who acknowledges the non-instantiation of *svabhāva*. Secondly, Madhyamaka aptly points out that it is not just ‘objects’ which can become a source of attachment but also ‘views,’ and the view that there is some ontologically foundational substance is particularly appealing (albeit philosophically untenable) to sentient beings living in a world of impermanence. Regardless of Madhyamaka’s reasons for challenging the coherence of *svabhāva* in any entity, if there is no difference between what is ultimately and merely conventionally real, then both realities alike are characterized as *niḥsvabhāva*.

Having advanced a series of arguments against the coherence of *svabhāva* and having demonstrated its incompatibility with causation, change, and impermanence, Nāgārjuna concludes that everything is empty. As such, there cannot be any substantial difference between ultimate and conventional reality. Nevertheless, provided that the distinction between ultimate and conventional truths is granted conventional status, the distinction

⁵² Burton (2004: 99).

remains pedagogically important and brings people (eventually) to realize its ultimate-level inapplicability.

These reflections explain the choice of title for this chapter: “the road to nowhere?” Madhyamaka accepts that realism is a natural assumption for the untrained mind. Gradually, through a process of meditation and philosophizing, the aspirant discovers the discrepancies between appearance and reality yet nevertheless eventually returns to her point of departure. As Siderits puts it: “That rivers and mountains are empty becomes the simple fact that there are rivers and mountains.”⁵³

(2) Ultimately there is no ultimate truth

The Abhidharma distinction between ultimate and conventional applies both metaphysically and semantically. Statements about ultimate truth and falsity pertain only to ultimately existent things and, likewise, conventional truth and falsity pertains to conventionally existent things. Siderits suggests that these domains are effectively semantically isolated from each other, although, as we shall see in chapter 3, their complete separability makes no sense. In the light of what has been said above concerning the eventual breakdown of any distinction between ultimate and conventional according to Madhyamaka, the anti-realist has resources for dispelling the apparently paradoxical conclusion that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Siderits (2003: 202).

⁵⁴ Siderits (2015: 161).

This assertion raises questions about the supposed truth status of this very claim itself: is it true ultimately or conventionally? Were it to be true ultimately, then it would be a self-refuting claim because in fact there would be at least one thing that was ultimately true. Were it to be merely conventionally true, then it would fail to establish the contents of the claim at an ultimate level. The route out of this apparent paradox lies in the so-called ‘semantic reading’ of Madhyamaka which assigns different senses to the use of the first and second ‘ultimate’ in “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.”

The denial of ultimate reality has immediate consequences for the Madhyamaka theory of truth. Whatever the nature of truth, without mind-independent reality, it cannot be the relation obtaining between propositions and conceptually unmediated reality. Because Madhyamaka accepts only conventional truths, these are necessarily reflective of the interests and values sentient beings bring to bear upon their environment and are thus transactional. Whilst realists contend that epistemic perspectivalism/contextualism makes a mockery of truth, they also insist upon the incoherence of the anti-realist’s proposition, convinced that such perspectivalism must ultimately be grounded in some kind of “absolute and unperspectival reality.”⁵⁵ However, it is far from certain that the construction of truths is possible only if we accept suppressed foundationalism. That emptiness cannot itself be ultimately established, far from representing a problem for Madhyamaka, actually serves to illustrate the very point it seeks to make.

⁵⁵ Sosa (1993: 7).

(3) Anti-Realism as the Middle Way

This brings us to the third and final point in defence of anti-realist interpretations of Madhyamaka. Do anti-realist interpretations substantiate or undermine the idea of Madhyamaka as advancing a middle path? We have already argued above that answering this question requires pre-determination of the extremes to be navigated, with the principal candidates being eternalism and annihilationism. Without this our question is moot as there are very few philosophical proposals more extreme than global anti-realism. Anti-realism appears better equipped than either nihilism or realism to circumnavigate the identified extremes. This is because all-pervasive emptiness is compatible both with the idea of conceptual construction of entities and with the intuitive, and philosophically credible, idea that the causal process is possible precisely because it is not populated with ontologically foundational *dharmas*.

In addition to seeing anti-realism as a middle point between the extremes of nihilism and realism, Siderits argues that anti-realist interpretations facilitate a middle path between the epistemic extremes of knowledge derived from verification-transcendent truth and radical scepticism. In this way, the ethical repercussions of interpreting Madhyamaka anti-realism become discernable, since the value of Madhyamaka philosophy for its adherents consists most importantly in its ability to lead them to spiritual liberation. A person in the grip of absolute scepticism is liable, however, to be paralyzed by doubts and therefore simultaneously unable and unmotivated to make spiritual progress. Moreover, as the entire Buddhist tradition accepts, excessive doubt

constitutes one of the five main hindrances to practice.⁵⁶ Without at least some confidence in the possibility of *nirvāṇa*, the pursuit of the path is unlikely.

Conclusions

To conclude, this chapter has presented a number of arguments in support of the anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka and has addressed several objections that might be brought against it. Ironically, then, this chapter has laid the metaphorical groundwork for a discussion on the two main topics in this thesis: the free will problem and questions in meta-ethics (such as whether Madhyamaka implicitly subscribes to moral relativism or commits the naturalistic fallacy). As the Ruegg quotation with which we began illustrates, the anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka is just one amongst many candidates. The choice of this framework in no way suggests that alternatives are ‘wrong’ for, indeed, the anti-realist concedes neither objective truth nor objective falsity. Instead, the anti-realist maintains only that this is a pedagogically useful tool for promoting the psychological transformation of beings and the relinquishment of attachment. As the parable of the raft makes clear, anti-realism too should be discarded once its work is done, leaving the bodhisattva who perceives the true nature of reality as empty free to perform her deeds of compassion.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Saṃyutta Nikāya 46.55, Saṅgārava Sutta. In this passage the Buddha likens a mind filled with doubt and indecision to a bowl of water, which is full of mud and agitated. Just as someone with good vision would fail to discern their own reflection in such water so too is doubt-riddled mind prevented from acquiring self-knowledge.

⁵⁷ Majjhima Nikāya 22, Alagaddūpama Sutta. *Evam-eva kho bhikkhave kullūpamo mayā dhammo desito nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāya. Kullūpamaṃ vo bhikkhave ājānantehi dhammā pi vo pahātabbā, pag-eva adhammā*|| PTS, Treckner (2002: 135). “So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping. Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings.” (Trans.) Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995: 229).

Chapter 2

The Reconstructivist's Project

“There is much more to commentary than merely exegesis; it can stand for a creative act of philosophy... a rejuvenation of the ancient in the present...”¹

Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason*

“Western and Indian thought are both, each in its own way, incomplete and do not go far enough. If one wants to give each its due, one must not only look to their fundamental difference, but must also take into consideration the fact that both are undergoing change.”²

Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*

The Indian Mādhyamikas with whom this thesis is concerned engaged with all the major branches of philosophy. They discussed everything from metaphysics and ontology, through epistemology and semantics, to ethics and the nature of the good life. Yet, despite this, the two main topics of this thesis – the free will problem and meta-ethics – appear to feature little, if indeed at all, in traditional Buddhist sources. There is certainly scope for speculation on the possible reasons for this notable absence, some of which will be explored later. However, in seeking to contribute to understandings of Madhyamaka as philosophically systematic and as capable of evolving in response to new questions, this thesis takes a reconstructive approach in the belief that Madhyamaka perspectives on the free will problem and the is-ought gap will prove enlightening, not just for Buddhist studies but for contemporary philosophy more generally.

It is undeniable that there are ‘religious’ and ‘mystical’ dimensions to Madhyamaka thought and that these two strands are indispensable for the worldview as a whole.³

¹ Ganeri (2011: 115).

² Schweitzer (1951: 251-252).

³ Still, scholars like Flanagan (2013) and Batchelor (2017) pursue a programme of “naturalizing” Buddhism, i.e. dispensing with any supernatural elements of the tradition whilst trying to retain the

Nevertheless, the idea that such designations can fully encapsulate Madhyamaka's orientation or objectives is becoming increasingly untenable. Indeed, recent scholarship demonstrates both the credibility and value of engaging with Madhyamaka in a more philosophically systematic manner. The use of reconstructive methodologies has been shown to achieve new insights into entrenched and seemingly intractable problems.⁴ Reconstructivism takes the explicitly endorsed theoretical commitments of a given system and applies these in new directions to questions not historically considered by that system's proponents. Hence, this methodology allows us to formulate a range of implied Buddhist perspectives on key philosophical issues.

One advantage of the reconstructive approach is that it provides fresh vantage points for critiquing Madhyamaka, proving an excellent test for its overall coherence and plausibility. By subjecting a system to unfamiliar analysis, springing from different assumptions, and by applying alternative patterns of reasoning, its strengths and weaknesses become more clearly visible. This means reconstructivism can draw out arguments/ conclusions already conceptually available to Madhyamaka and thereby foster on-going engagement between traditional Buddhism and contemporary philosophical thought.

Despite all this, Madhyamaka reconstructivism is not without its dissenters. On the one hand, some scholars seem to oppose the reconstructive agenda as a matter of principle. For example, those writers who place particular – or even exclusive – emphasis on the historicity of philosophical concepts in classical India might fear that engagement with/

coherence of the remaining core commitments which perhaps gave rise to those supernatural beliefs in the first place. The success of such projects is hotly contested and, whilst this debate is interesting, entering into it now would be an unhelpful digression.

⁴ Westerhoff (2016 b).

interpretation of Buddhist, Jain, or Brahmanic concepts outside their original context will inevitably entail distortion.⁵ From this perspective, therefore, reconstructivism is just a veil for anachronism, a method resulting in nothing but misrepresentation.

On the other hand, there are some scholars – such as Adam, Flanagan, and Garfield – who, though generally supportive of reconstructivism, find its application to debates on Buddhism and free will or Buddhism and the naturalistic fallacy entirely mistaken.⁶ According to these writers, it simply is not possible to extract or develop a Buddhist stance on such questions because the Buddhist worldview endorses fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of human agency and the structure of fact/ value relations from those of Western philosophy and, for this reason, these particular reconstructive enterprises are futile. This position is perfectly summarized by Adam’s pithy expression “no-self, no free will, no problem.”⁷

As efforts to supply a Madhyamaka stance on free will, the naturalistic fallacy, and other related questions at the intersection of metaphysics and ethics get underway in subsequent chapters, this thesis also supports the conclusion that reconstructivism on these points really is a ‘road to nowhere.’ Interestingly, however, the real reasons for this turn out to be very different from those suggested by the opponents just discussed. Whereas the opponent argues that reconstruction of a Madhyamaka view on free will or the naturalistic fallacy is either erroneous or, at best, pointless, this thesis contends that theorizing on such questions actually reinforces and supports the systematic

⁵ Halbfass (1991: 7-14) provides an especially interesting discussion on this topic, suggesting that ‘indigenous’ superimpositions and misrepresentations are just as possible and questioning whether these would be any more legitimate.

⁶ Adam (2010), Garfield (2010) and (2013), and Flanagan (2017).

⁷ Adam (2010).

treatment of Madhyamaka. To see exactly how and why the reconstruction of a Madhyamaka view on these topics is a road to nowhere and why this is not a problem, this thesis investigates various interpretations of the Madhyamaka theory of two truths (*satyadvaya*) and argues that, properly conceived, this teaching precludes the possibility of a definitive view on free will, the naturalistic fallacy, or, indeed, any other problem. In a sense, then, reconstructivism on these topics returns to its point of departure, and arguably facilitates Madhyamaka's renewed conviction in its pre-theoretic, conventionally accepted, stance on issues of agency and moral motivation.

If, after lengthy and difficult deliberation, it turns out that the concluding position is virtually indistinguishable from the starting position, it is natural to wonder whether the whole exercise has been pointless. For example, if we begin with the idea that Madhyamaka cannot accommodate robust notions of agency and free will because of belief in no-self (*anātman*), then proceed to articulate a complex theory of two truths (*satyadvaya*) and how these interact, as well as offering increasingly nuanced accounts of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), before finally concluding that ultimately Madhyamaka cannot accommodate robust notions of agency and free will, we might question the value of our pursuit. Still, as will be argued throughout this thesis, even if the process of probing an assumption or argumentative starting point leads eventually to its reassertion, fundamental shifts or reorientation towards the initial view point remain possible. This is precisely what happens in the process of reconstructing a Madhyamaka view on the issues discussed in this thesis. Madhyamaka's understanding of the dependent origination of all phenomena as entailing thoroughgoing conceptual imputation means that – at one level – the world as we ordinary conceive it is left intact whilst – at another level – it is completely overhauled.

Siderits gives a clear and fairly detailed exposition of Indian Madhyamaka, arguing that it is best understood as a form of global anti-realism.⁸ If there is no such thing as the way the world mind-independently is, we can make sense of Nāgārjuna's otherwise enigmatic expression at *MMK* 25.19 on the equivalence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Properly understood, this is a statement not about ontology but phenomenology. That is, it is a statement on the experiential differences between being in a state *limited* by or *transcending* ordinary linguistic/ conceptual constructs.

This thesis sets out the connection between two quite different meanings of freedom, arguing that free will of the sort necessary for moral responsibility and governance of one's own spiritual advancement is implicitly accepted by Mādhyamikas who regard complete spiritual freedom as culminating in proper understanding of the pervasiveness of dependency relations. The details of such arguments are supplied in subsequent chapters, and the remainder of this one is dedicated, first, to a fuller defence of the reconstructive methodology employed throughout and, second, to a discussion of agency as a central concept at the intersection of metaphysics and ethics (the two fields with which this thesis is concerned).

Before these objectives are attempted, however, a few remarks on the scope and limits of this exploration into Madhyamaka are in order. Just as the task of explicating *the* Buddhist stance on agency, free will, and moral motivation would be undermined by the enormous diversity of Buddhist views, so too is the enunciation of *the* Madhyamaka stance on these issues similarly problematic. Firstly, Mādhyamikas disagree amongst themselves on core issues, such as the standards for epistemic justification and what

⁸ Siderits (2015: 13-38).

makes something conventionally true and this inevitably has ramifications for how the ‘middle way’ itself is conceived; and secondly, since Madhyamaka has a long and complex history, it would be a mistake to imagine that all Mādhyamikas concur on even the most important teachings, such as emptiness and dependency, for example.

To narrow the focus, therefore, this thesis concentrates primarily on the contributions of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti and Śāntideva. As the founder of Madhyamaka, the choice of Nāgārjuna requires no justification. Candrakīrti and Śāntideva share important commonalities, in both method and content, and are both widely thought of as belonging to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. The three writers with whom this thesis is primarily concerned all call the possibility of absolute objectivity into question. As part of the evaluation of Madhyamaka’s coherence, therefore, the following reconstruction assesses the arguments presented against objectivity/ mind-independence. This involves tracing the contours of Madhyamaka arguments with both real and imagined opponents.

The reconstruction offered here is motivated by the belief that cross-cultural philosophical undertakings can cast new light on familiar topics. It is doubtful that Western philosophers have exhausted all the avenues for resolving the free will problem or for bridging the is-ought gap, yet, nevertheless, understanding Madhyamaka perspectives on agency, intentionality, and moral motivation may prompt reconsideration of certain axiomatic suppositions (for example, that ascription of freedom requires an underlying agent who is free). Equally, some of the conceptual refinements found in Western philosophy, such as the distinctions between different types of intentionality, are useful to Madhyamaka reconstructivists. Hence, although

the focus of this thesis is Indian Madhyamaka, the works of non-Mahāyānists and non-Buddhists alike are invoked whenever doing so facilitates interesting conclusions. Whilst historically sensitive handling of primary source material is necessary in order to avoid falsely attributing positions to Madhyamaka, if the aim is to enunciate Madhyamaka's implied stance on agency, ethics and free will, then the use of contemporary philosophical tools may prove helpful to the task.⁹

A Defence of Reconstructivism

Reconstructivism is sometimes seen as little more than a poor excuse to reason anachronistically. However, reconstructivists themselves are often aware of the exegetical dangers of describing any particular reconstruction as a view traditional Mādhyamikas would have been either likely or willing to endorse had they encountered it. Sensible reconstructivists therefore avoid claiming that Mādhyamikas 'should have,' 'would have,' or even unconsciously 'did' accept specific reconstructivist proposals. Rather, reconstructivism simply aims to pose unfamiliar philosophical questions and ascertain whether/ how proponents of the system under review could, in principle, respond. Accordingly, even the very best reconstruction is tentative and provisional because another, subsequent, reconstruction might deliver results more fully congruent with the explicitly held commitments of the worldview under analysis.

Using conceptual tools and resources developed in historical, cultural, and argumentative contexts different from those of classical India, reconstructivists attempt

⁹ Many Western interpreters of Madhyamaka philosophy have been notorious interpolators of the texts. Contrastingly, contemporary reconstructivists think of themselves as extrapolators. Whether this is simply a case of self-deception must be decided by successive generations of scholars. For more on this, see Tuck (1990: 8-16).

to formulate the implied Madhyamaka stance on topics of interest. The main proviso to this process is that the tools and resources employed should be conceptually or theoretically available to Madhyamaka, even if, as a matter of historical fact, no Mādhyamika ever employed them. For a reconstruction to be viable, therefore, it cannot undermine or diverge from explicitly held Madhyamaka doctrines or from the common stock of Buddhist belief.

Scholars are increasingly able to demonstrate that western and Asian philosophies alike can benefit from the exchange of conceptual resources, making the defensibility of reconstructive methodologies more straightforward. Concomitantly, the idea (examined below) that reconstructivism is irredeemably culturally imperialist is becoming steadily less plausible. That the sharing of concepts and the shaking up of presuppositions can be mutually beneficial is illustrated, *for example*, (1) in applying the Western philosophical distinction between epistemological and ontological anti-foundationalism to Madhyamaka and (2) in applying the insights of Buddhist arguments for reductionism to contemporary discussions on personal identity.¹⁰

Indeed, as Westerhoff argues, by disentangling ontological and epistemological anti-foundationalism (ideas which seem sometimes to be conflated in Madhyamaka discourse) scholars are able to pinpoint the precise target of Madhyamaka's multifarious critiques on inherent reality (*svabhāva*).¹¹ It is important to know whether

¹⁰ See Westerhoff (2016 b) and Siderits (2015) respectively.

¹¹ A more detailed discussion of the concept of *svabhāva* coupled with a review of Madhyamaka's reasons for rejecting it as both non-instantiated and conceptually incoherent will be provided in due course. For now, suffice it to say that the central Madhyamaka claim that everything is empty (including emptiness itself) amounts to the idea that everything lacks *svabhāva*. As Nāgārjuna famously argues at *MMK* 24.18, the emptiness of everything is coterminous with the middle way itself and, as such, gives viability to Madhyamaka soteriology. *Svabhāva* is notoriously difficult to render into English, not least because the concept involves at least three distinct dimensions and has no straightforward counterpart in

a specific argument against *svabhāva* aims to reject existents with ontological primacy (*dravyasat*) or whether it aims to undermine the idea of foundations of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), conceived of as independent from human needs and interests. Reconstructivism also allows us to probe the relationship between the different types of anti-foundationalism (e.g. ontological and epistemological) operating in the Madhyamaka framework. In particular, it engenders further reflection on the structural features of Madhyamaka's arguments for entities and propositions as purely conventionally established/ true. For example, if neither reality nor knowledge has foundations, do Mādhyamikas posit the circularity/ mutually affirmative nature of entities and propositions or do they instead posit their infinite regress?¹²

Again, Buddhist arguments for reductionism can illuminate and inform the idea of a person as a self-constructing process, an idea gaining currency in contemporary philosophy of mind. Divested of the burden of defending a metaphysical self as found in some early-modern accounts of personal identity, philosophers are reconceiving human nature, activity, and capacity.¹³ For example, Parfit stands out amongst Western philosophers for having developed a reductionist view of persons strikingly similar to that found in early Buddhism. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Parfit's conclusion about the self is not that it demands revision to our metaphysics and accompanying reconfiguration of our place in the universe, but that, as with the Buddhist theory of *anātman*, it should inspire ethical reorientation towards others as

Western philosophy. For more on this see Westerhoff (2009: 19-52). Etymologically, *svabhāva* is a compound of two parts: *sva* (own) and *bhāva* (being).

¹² Westerhoff (2016 b: 286).

¹³ Dennett (1991: 412 - 418). Dennett's argument is too detailed to be adequately summarized here but he notes that the question of whether a self exists provokes two equally compelling and immediate reactions: obviously yes, and obviously no. He therefore suggests that "a middle-ground position is worth considering," a position involving the idea of a narrative self engaged in an ongoing process of self-construction: "Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source."

our moral equals. Parfit himself describes this realisation as “liberating and consoling.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, some scholars persist in their objection that the systematization of Madhyamaka is in principle problematic. Such an objection appears largely to be motivated by interpretations of Madhyamaka as anti-philosophical. According to this view, Mādhyamikas would be much more likely to approve a programme of philosophical *de*-construction than *re*-construction. As scholars who focus particularly on Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka often stress, Mādhyamikas characteristically refrain from formulating philosophical views because they are seen as impediments to spiritual liberation. Instead the Madhyamaka agenda is to expose absurdities and self-contradictions in the arguments of opponents.¹⁵

This type of objection to the enterprise of Madhyamaka philosophical reconstructivism can be formulated in less and more subtle ways, as follows:

1. Some critics contend that reconstructive projects erroneously presume parity between Western and Eastern conceptions of the purpose of philosophy. On this view, it is simply mistaken to imagine that Madhyamaka thinkers share

¹⁴ Parfit (1984: 281).

¹⁵ The Svātantrika/ Prāsaṅgika distinction is widely recognized as a (later) Tibetan interpolation rather than a tool for demarcation employed in (earlier) Indian Madhyamaka. For more on this, see Dreyfus and McClintock (2003: 2). Also see Huntington (2003: 67), where he describes the terminology used to distinguish sub-schools of Madhyamaka as “an invention of the Tibetans.” Contemporary scholars offer competing ways of understanding the nature of this distinction, often citing a difference of view over whether conventional truths are hierarchically structured. However, the fact that Indian Mādhyamikas did not conceive of themselves in such terms should make us cautious about too readily categorizing thinkers in such terms. Indeed, as will be argued in the later chapters of this thesis (especially chapter 3), there are reasons to challenge the prevailing view of Prāsaṅgika as accepting a plateau of conventionality. This will be achieved through a re-examination of what Candrakīrti has to say on the nature of conventional truth.

standards, norms and philosophical ideals with contemporary Western thinkers. Rather, it is suggested, reconstructivism masks yet another attempt at Western domination over the East, this time through the superimposition of Western ideas onto a culturally incommensurable framework. According to writers such as L. Stafford Betty, therefore, reconstructivists neglect the centrality of soteriology in the Madhyamaka system and so fail to appreciate the unapologetically ‘mystical’ nature of texts like the *MMK*. Reconstructivism is thus thought of as driven by the attempt to construe Indian thought as “something the West can easily swallow.”¹⁶ The supposed error in the reconstructivist approach to Madhyamaka is that it treats the *MMK* – from which the subsequent tradition springs – as “a philosophical treatise and not as... a mystical manifesto in philosophical guise.”¹⁷

2. Others argue that the reconstructive enterprise is straightforwardly at variance with Madhyamaka’s self-conscious attempt to undermine the hold concepts have over us. It is objected that, far from seeking to expand the remit of reason (which Madhyamaka presents as invariably involving the reification of ultimately empty concepts), Madhyamaka’s aim is to expose the inherently contradictory nature of all conceptualization.

From this last perspective, Madhyamaka’s employment of reason is explained as an instance of pedagogical skilfulness (*upāya*), but the conclusions of reason can never be elevated to the status of ultimate truths. Rather, as Madhyamaka’s three-fold

¹⁶ Stafford Betty (1983: 124).

¹⁷ Stafford Betty (1983: 133).

classification of understanding acquired by means of hearing (*śrutamayī*), reflecting (*cintāmayī*), and meditating (*bhāvanāmayī*) is designed to show, liberating wisdom (*prajñā*) demands the transcendence of reason itself.¹⁸ Several scholars present a powerful case for this view, including Huntington, who maintains that efforts to sketch a thoroughly conceptually consistent worldview would likely be met with disapprobation by proponents of Madhyamaka. This is because the proliferation of conceptualization – promoted through the use of philosophical procedures – is regarded by Mādhyamikas as part of the problem of suffering, rather than as part of the solution. Huntington writes that:

“Our obsession with the rationalistic structure of epistemological and ontological propositions is symptomatic of a pathology that infects our entire form of life... critical discussion of epistemological and ontological problems will never provide any escape from the closed circle of this way of thinking and speaking.”¹⁹

Hence, if Madhyamaka is understood as aiming to induce a radically ‘other’ form of worldly engagement, in which all conceptualization is abandoned, then reconstructivism itself becomes an obstacle rather than an aid to that understanding.

Although both the above criticisms require a response, the latter is more subtle, sustained, and serious.

In response to 1., the reconstructivist agrees that contemporary Western scholars should be mindful of past failures of interpretation, some of which have certainly involved inappropriate superimposition of Western categories onto Buddhist frameworks.²⁰

¹⁸ Fenner (1990: 25).

¹⁹ Huntington (1992: 108).

²⁰ See for example Tuck (1990: 16-17) who argues that “The enterprise of textual interpretation is subject to trends, fashions, and even fads, and it should not be controversial to assert that scholars are always

Nevertheless, in light both of the content and structure of texts like the *MMK*, it is wholly unwarranted to assert that contemporary scholarship's interpretation of Madhyamaka as 'philosophy,' rather than 'mysticism,' is the product of domineering or imperialist attitudes. On the contrary, the reconstructivist argues that a treatment of Madhyamaka sources as exclusively 'religious' or 'mystical' is only possible if the tradition's clear commitment to the power of reason is wilfully ignored.

To hold, as L. Stafford Betty does, that Nāgārjuna imitates philosophy's strategies simply to "dazzle an objector into bewildered submission" is to do a great disservice to one of Buddhism's most astute thinkers.²¹ Whilst Mādhyamikas concede the limited power of argument in restructuring a person's affective attitudes, advocating instead the need for such arguments to be accompanied by a paradigmatic psychological shift, this does not detract from the significant role of reason in the process of liberation. Indeed, philosophy's power to induce recognition of the conceptual incoherence of inherent reality (*svabhāva*) acts as a trigger for beings who wish to extirpate wrong views. Finally, against critiques of type 1., the reconstructivist contends that the bifurcation of Eastern thought as 'mystical' and of Western thought as 'rational' betrays the simplistic caricature on which this distinction is based. In an ironic twist, then, the reconstructivist might reply that a refusal philosophically to scrutinize Madhyamaka texts for fear of misrepresenting them is itself indicative of an orientalist prejudice which sees Indian thought as "predominantly spiritual, mystical and intuitive."²²

contemporary... A text that is central to the interests of one generation of scholars may be drastically reinterpreted or virtually ignored by a subsequent generation."

²¹ Stafford Betty (1983: 125).

²² Bilimoria and Garfield (2016: 456).

In response to 2., the reconstructivist has two options: either (i) to challenge the view of Madhyamaka as ultimately orientated towards the demise of its very own project, or (ii) to recast the reconstructive method so as to make it consistent with Madhyamaka's view of philosophy as just one pedagogical device amongst others, facilitating spiritual transformation. Which avenue the reconstructivist pursues depends to a large extent on how the Madhyamaka theory of two truths is understood.

On the one hand, option (i) is likely to appeal to scholars who ascribe to Madhyamaka a view of ultimate truth as that which somehow transcends the realm of ordinary experience. On this analysis, ultimate reality is instantiated but cannot be accessible through linguistic conventions, even though such conventions may take a person some considerable way towards her goal.²³ On the other hand, option (ii) is available to scholars who endorse the so-called 'semantic interpretation' of Madhyamaka, according to which *the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth*.²⁴ On this view, the reconstructivist need feel no compulsion to argue that any reconstructed position is one that Madhyamaka could definitively endorse. Rather, depending on the soundness of the particular reconstruction, it would be a tool for furthering the spiritual attainments of aspirants.

To elaborate, the idea that conceptual proliferation and reifying tendencies cause existential suffering is a recurrent theme in Madhyamaka discourse. However, it may be that philosophical reflection is key to refining one's ideas about ideation itself. Paradoxically then, profundity of thought might induce scepticism about the ultimate

²³ See Ferraro (2013) for a defence of ultimate reality as transcendental.

²⁴ See Garfield and Siderits (2013) for a defence of this reading.

value of philosophizing. This, however, is entirely consistent with the pursuit of a reconstructive programme. Assuredly, Nāgārjuna warns the aspirant of the potential boundlessness of human tendencies towards hypostatization and observes that emptiness itself is a candidate for grasping. The soteriological detriment of clinging is intensified when emptiness is the object of a person's attachment. This leads Nāgārjuna to assert at *MMK* 24.11 that "Emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed."²⁵

Contrary to what the opponent of reconstructivism might claim, it is doubtful that efforts to further systematize and/ or refine Madhyamaka philosophy thwart the soteriological ambitions of this system. This is because, even if Madhyamaka pursues a programme of philosophical self-destruction, it necessarily can only accomplish its ends by employing reasons and arguments. Unexpectedly, then, reason is a vital tool for bringing people to the realization that reasoning involves conceptual imputation and is therefore both blinding and binding. Madhyamaka affirms that only beings at the final stages of the path can comprehend the magnitude of abandoning or transcending all conceptualization and, for this reason, reconstructivism is valuable insofar as it facilitates this process. The interrogation of Madhyamaka's axioms is helpful provided that the soteriological objectives of this system are kept in view. Reconstructivism cannot claim to deliver Madhyamaka's 'ultimate' position on any matter because, aside from questions of historical uncertainty, such a stance would be inconsistent with the pervasiveness of emptiness, dependency and conventionality. To use the adage made famous by Nietzsche, then, reconstructivists maintain that, in one sense, for

²⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.11. *vināśayati durdr̥ṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam/ sarpo yathā durgr̥hīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā*// (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 274).

philosophical systems as for persons, that which does not kill them makes them stronger.²⁶ Strength, in this case, however, consists not of an ability to formulate a fully congruent vision of reality but of a willingness to re-evaluate the role of philosophy in bringing about the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*).

In concluding this defence of reconstructivism, however, it should be noted that reconstructions of an implied Madhyamaka stance on any given issue should be fiercely scrutinised. Despite the general defensibility of reconstructivism, reconstructivists themselves disagree over which projects count as viable. Indeed, some of the most ardent defenders of reconstructivism are also amongst the harshest critics of efforts to articulate a Buddhist response to the free will problem or the naturalistic fallacy.²⁷ Arguments are therefore required to show that a formulation of, and response to, these problems is possible within the framework of Madhyamaka. What even the critics of reconstructivism cannot deny, however, is that the emergence of so-called ‘engaged’ projects has been a stimulus for renewed interest in Madhyamaka. This has inspired a new trend in scholarship, where Mādhyamikas are treated as serious interlocutors and intellectual equals, rather than as mere relics from the past.²⁸ For this reason, if for no other, reconstructivism is something to be celebrated.

Before answering the specific objections brought against reconstruction of a Madhyamaka (or any other type of Buddhist) theory on free will, we need first to examine which conceptions of ‘agency’ are permissible in a context where the reality of the self (*ātman*) is repudiated. This will provide a clearer sense of what

²⁶ Nietzsche (2003: 33).

²⁷ For example, Garfield is particularly averse to both of these projects yet is nevertheless one of the staunchest advocates of contemporary engagement with Buddhist philosophy.

²⁸ Garfield (2015: 319).

reconstructivists mean when they speak of Madhyamaka's implied position on free and responsible agency. Similar arguments could be repeated in defence of articulating a Madhyamaka approach to the naturalistic fallacy, but, rather than cover the same ground twice, any particular nuances of these arguments will be spelled out in the second half of the thesis where moral motivation and the (illusory) distinction between facts and values is the focal point.

Questions of Agency

This thesis is primarily concerned with questions of agency in Indian Madhyamaka, explored from two angles.

First, this thesis argues that Madhyamaka thinkers implicitly accept the possibility of free and responsible human agency, without which it would be impossible to make sense of texts designed to motivate the unenlightened to behave morally and to strive for liberation. Nevertheless, arguments in support of free and responsible agency are not readily forthcoming and so must be supplied. The formulation of a response to the free will problem suitable for a Madhyamaka context involves certain prerequisites – namely an account of the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth and a conception of the connection between the different types of freedom thought of as freedom of the will and freedom from *saṃsāra*. Presumably freedom from *saṃsāra* can only be a spiritual accomplishment if it is achieved through the performance of freely willed actions.

Second, this thesis examines the idea that enlightened beings not only remain capable of moral agency but actually excel according to the normal standards of ethics. Despite the fact that the concept of ‘agency’ connects the metaphysical and ethical strands of the Madhyamaka tradition, it remains under-explored by contemporary scholars. A more detailed investigation of this concept is therefore necessary for an understanding of the internal structure of Madhyamaka’s worldview.

Madhyamaka accounts of agency appear, at least *prima facie*, inconsistent with other doctrines endorsed by this tradition. Specifically, there is a tension between the ideas of moral responsibility for one’s *karma* and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which stipulates that all events are governed by impersonal causal laws. The theory of emptiness also engenders questions about the possibility of ethical agency. Indeed, if ‘self’ and ‘other’ are empty, it is unclear that altruism remains a helpful concept. Moreover, as Williams points out, Mādhyamikas could be accused of committing the naturalistic fallacy if they argue that realization of the truth of no-self is sufficient to stimulate moral motivation.²⁹

The success or failure of Madhyamaka philosophy therefore partly depends on rendering consistent its internally conflicting ideas about human agency. Of course, internal non-contradiction is a minimal requirement for philosophical plausibility. Unless additional reasons for accepting Madhyamaka’s account of agency are provided, there may be cause to question the viability of its entire soteriological project.

²⁹ Williams (1998).

In the case of Mahāyāna Buddhism, where karmic activity is considered a determinant of the existential circumstances of living beings, people are thought to have power sufficient for restructuring the nature of reality itself.³⁰ Although a clear conception of agency is essential for any worldview, this is especially true of Madhyamaka where the goal of philosophy is not merely to express right views but actively to commit to them, such that one's behaviour is improved as a result of correct insight.

Theories of agency are essential to the task of distinguishing instances of morally responsible action from impersonal event causation. As Donald Davidson, a leading agency-theorist, explains, accounts of agency make possible the distinction between a person's deeds and the "mere happenings in his history."³¹ Since agency is a prerequisite for moral responsibility, the ethical aspects of the free will problem cannot be addressed without a prior conception of what constitutes responsible agency. Until the defining characteristics of responsible agency are specified, it is futile to argue over its instantiation. As even a cursory examination of free will debates reveals, progress in this field has been hindered by philosophers' failure to agree on what would even count as an instance of free and/ or responsible agency.³²

³⁰ The Madhyamaka explanation for this will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 where the idea of the ontological equivalence of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is contrasted against the idea of their insuperable differences experientially speaking.

³¹ Davidson (1971: 3).

³² For example, Frankfurt's famous thought experiments are designed to show that 'the principle of alternative possibilities,' which, until then had been considered essential for ascription of moral responsibility, need not in fact hold. For more on this, see Frankfurt (1998).

Free and Responsible Agency

That ‘agency’ presupposes the ‘agent’ is generally considered uncontroversial, at least in Western philosophy. However, some of the most influential and prolific contemporary thinkers have begun to question this long-standing assumption by challenging the received view, which sees ‘persons’ and ‘agents’ as ontologically equivalent.³³ The recent formulation of accounts of agency without recourse to agents is immensely valuable to reconstructivists interested in Madhyamaka. The mere possibility of such an account thwarts a recurring objection to Buddhist free will theorizing, according to which the attribution of free agency is nonsensical in a system where agents are not recognized. This objection is raised by Garfield who maintains that Buddhism cannot accommodate the free will problem (or anything resembling it) because such a problem presupposes a “metaphysical doctrine anathema to Buddhists – that of a self or a soul as a centre of agency.”³⁴ As subsequent chapters show, however, the free will problem can be posed without recourse to the notion of a permanent self. Indeed, the Buddhist arguments against the existence of the self (*ātman*) challenge notions of a metaphysically transcendent self, which, somehow, is related to the person of phenomenal everyday experience. Since the free will problem concerns persons and their interactions with the world, appeals to the lack of Buddhist belief in an eternal and immutable self are superfluous. The ramifications of declaring any question concerned with persons or agency off limits to Buddhists would be profound – ruling out the possibility of Buddhist contributions to debates about the nature of self-

³³ Notable dissenters from the received view include Daniel Dennett (2003) and Thomas Metzinger (2009). To use a theatrical metaphor, both accept the performative reality of persons yet do not concede the presence of a directing agent (considered to be explanatorily superfluous).

³⁴ Garfield (2013: 171).

deception as well as debates in important areas of applied ethics, such as human/ animal rights, for example.³⁵

The question of how to retain a functional concept of agency in the absence of an agential centre will be taken up in due course. That it is possible seems clear from the fact that contemporary naturalists such as Dennett have achieved precisely this. Another possible strategy for retaining the concept of ‘agency’ whilst denying an agential centre is to appeal to the idea of ‘shifting coalitions’ between the constituent parts of a person.³⁶ On this view, although the individual parts of a person are too ephemeral to ground agency, when taken as a collection, attribution of agency is pragmatically viable. In any case, even if posing the free will problem required a robust sense of agency, there is still an analogous problem to that found in Western thought which arises out of Madhyamaka’s own conceptual framework.³⁷ Before this analogous problem can be articulated or resolved, however, it is necessary to examine the Madhyamaka view of persons.

Mādhyamikas inherit a sophisticated theory of personhood, in which ‘person’ is regarded as an emergent concept. Like other Buddhists, Mādhyamikas maintain that persons arise from a particular set of linguistic practices. Buddhists of all different

³⁵ Though some no doubt disagree, the reconstruction of a Buddhist stance on questions of self-deception and questions of human/ animal rights is something I take to be possible. In the first case, Buddhists have as a matter of historical fact, dedicated great efforts to explaining self-deception as the result of beginningless ignorance, for more on this see chapter 7. In the second case, the fact that the concept of a ‘right’ is absent from classical Buddhist texts tells us nothing about whether that concept is in principle unavailable to Buddhists. The Dalia Lama, for example, is a long-standing advocate for human rights even though his philosophical commitments may be such that he cannot endorse the idea of an inalienable or intrinsic right. In any case, in the field of the philosophy of rights there are competing arguments designed to show either that a right is something conferred on a person by society or that a right is something that society discovers a person always to have had.

³⁶ Siderits (2003: 67-68; 86-87).

³⁷ Javanaud (2018 a).

schools concur that persons are conceptual constructs and that there is nothing over and above their constituent parts. The parts of which a person is composed (the *skandhas*) constantly change due to the pervasive fact of impermanence. Accordingly, Buddhists produce several arguments against the existence of any entity describable as the self (*ātman*), conceived of as an essential, permanent and immutable substance. Whereas Ābhidharmikas maintain that persons are reducible to their ontologically primal constituents (*dharma*s), and so subscribe to a form of mereological reductionism, Mādhyamikas reject the existence of anything ontologically fundamental to which a person might be reduced.³⁸ For the former, therefore, persons emerge from *dharma*s with inherent reality (*svabhāva*) whereas, for the latter, emergence proceeds from the process of reification, a spiritually pernicious tendency which is itself symptomatic of craving and delusion.

Madhyamaka faces the difficult task of accounting for the utility of the concept of ‘persons’ (both practically and soteriologically) whilst also declaring its philosophical incoherence. Indeed, the Madhyamaka view is not merely that mind-independent and intrinsically real persons do not exist, but also that the idea of *svabhāva* is internally inconsistent. Consequently, encouraging spiritual aspirants to abandon the false notion of *svabhāva* forms a key part of Madhyamaka’s objective. Why, though, if ‘self’ and ‘other’ are incorrect designations, do Mādhyamikas encourage spiritual aspirants to meditate on the mutual reliance of beings?

³⁸ The relationship between parts and wholes according to Madhyamaka will be discussed in chapter 4, where dependent origination is our focus. For an excellent account of both the Abhidharma and Madhyamaka assessment of this relationship, see the discussion on reductionism in Siderits (2015).

The distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is critical to the success of Madhyamaka's message, in which the idea of a person is retained insofar as it promotes both worldly and spiritual attainments, but is consistently challenged in order to undermine habits of reification. In summary, Madhyamaka's commitment to the conventional existence of persons is in itself ethically neutral, since this belief can be used equally for the benefit or detriment of oneself and others. Eradication of belief in the ultimate reality of a self is an essential part of the process of eliminating wrong views. However, as Mādhyamikas emphasize, revision of views is soteriologically effective only when accompanied by the relevant meditational and ethical practices.

The Buddhist theory of persons can be understood, at least partly, as a response to the concept of selfhood (*ātman*) propagated by different religious traditions in classical India. Just as Buddhists nuanced accounts of personhood, aligning them with their other tenets, so too did the various adherents of Vedic philosophy supply multifarious definitions of *ātman*. Nevertheless, proponents of *ātman* generally agree about its essential qualities, stipulating that it represents the metaphysical kernel of a person which is unaffected by worldly conduct. Despite fervent disagreement over the metaphysical status of the self, many Buddhists and non-Buddhists unexpectedly converge on the impossibility of liberating the 'self' through undertaking meritorious deeds.

For Buddhists, this is because ultimately there is no self to be liberated. Hence, although accumulation of meritorious karma is essential for final emancipation from *samsāra*, which implies that ethical agency is crucial for soteriology, the ascription of properties or states to a non-existent self is considered meaningless. In contrast, *ātman*-theorists

maintain that the self is transcendent, and, although perhaps aware of change, is itself untouched by temporally executed activity. Fundamentally, then, the self is neither bound nor liberated. Śāṅkara expresses precisely this view in his commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.6), where he argues that “there is actually no difference between liberation and bondage. For, indeed, the Self is always the same.”³⁹

Monism drives the Advaitin account of the self as incapable of undergoing change, yet dualists too struggle to explain how the self could be an agent. For example, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* arguments designed to show that worldly action cannot affect the transcendental self (*ātman*) are advanced in the hope of persuading the text’s hero Arjuna to engage in battle, against his conscience. This doctrine is expressed in the *Sāṃkhyakārikās*, verse 62 where we find: “Of a certainty, therefore, not any spirit is bound or liberated, not does any migrate.”⁴⁰ Thus it can be seen that the concept of agency, and how it contributes to the soteriological objectives of classical Indian religion, is equally problematic for both advocates of and objectors to the notion of *ātman*.

The intellectual atmosphere of classical India was highly conducive to philosophical exchange. However, despite centuries-long debate on personhood, Buddhists have only recently begun to engage with the free will problem.⁴¹ The reticence of some scholars

³⁹ As quoted in Todd (2013: 127-128). Todd remarks that Śāṅkara’s language (*na hi vastuto muktāmuktatva viśeṣo ’sti*) is eerily similar to Śāntideva’s claim at *BCA* 9.150 (*nirvṛtānirvṛtānām ca viśeṣo nāsti vastutaḥ*).

⁴⁰ Īśvarakṛṣṇa – *Sāṃkhyakārikā* 62. *tasmān na badhyate nāpi mucyate nāpi saṃsarati kaścit| saṃsarati badhyate mucyate ca nānāśrayā prakṛtiḥ*|| Charya, S. (1922: 5). (Trans.) Radhakrishnan and Moore (1989: 444).

⁴¹ Whether any classical Buddhists recognized the free will problem has itself been a point of contention amongst contemporary scholars. Chapter 6 of Śāntideva’s *BCA* has been interpreted as containing an explicit statement on the question of moral responsibility in a world governed by dependent origination (which some take to entail causal determinism) in which a form of qualified compatibilism is defended. This thesis does not much concern itself with the question of whether Śāntideva did or did not recognise

to enter into such discussions has already been alluded to and, although Garfield is perhaps the most outspoken critic of Buddhist free will theorizing, he is certainly not alone. Broadly speaking, objections to this particular reconstructive enterprise assume one of two forms:

1. The free will problem presupposes ideas emphatically repudiated in Buddhism. Specifically, the problem cannot be articulated without recourse to self and therefore any effort to reconstruct the implied Buddhist response proceeds from assumptions explicitly contested by Buddhists. Reconstructivists are accused of making a ‘category error’ and of superimposing ideas with a distinctively Western origin onto an incommensurable philosophical framework.⁴²
2. Distinct from the question of the viability of reconstructing a Buddhist stance on free will is that of whether speculation on a metaphysical topic as abstruse as this could be justified in the face of *saṃsāric* suffering. Whilst Buddhist free will theorizing may have philosophical appeal, it ultimately distracts the spiritual aspirant from the more important task of alleviating the suffering of both herself and others. Given that the Buddha declined to comment on such matters as the eternity of the world, preferring instead to draw his interlocutor’s attention to *duḥkha*, reconstructivists are accused of deluding themselves into thinking that the pursuit of their project renders Buddhism more

the free will problem (or something resembling it) as the text itself is ambiguous on the matter and, in any case, the task of reconstruction can proceed regardless. Amongst those who think some Buddhists *did* acknowledge the free will problem are Breyer (2013), Federman (2010), and Goodman (2017).

⁴² Critics of this variety include Rahula (1959), Garfield (2013), and Flanagan (2017).

coherent or philosophically systematic.⁴³ On the contrary, the objector maintains, ascription of even conventional-level agency constitutes a barrier to final emancipation because the concept of a conventionally existent agent can become an object of attachment.

The Buddhist Free Will Problem

Ordinarily, the free will problem is understood as the difficulty of explaining morally responsible action either in a world governed by causal determinism or in a world not so governed. In the first case, where causal determinism is taken as true, the difficulty consists in explaining how a person can be morally responsible for pre-determined acts. Hard determinists consider attempts to attribute responsibility in such circumstances to be futile, whereas compatibilists maintain that particular definitions of what it means to be morally responsible can be satisfied despite causal determinism. In the second case, where causal determinism is not accepted, attribution of responsibility is equally troublesome because indeterminism requires an explanation of essentially random action. Yet, by definition, it is impossible to explain the inexplicable. Indeterminism inspires similarly divided responses, with hard indeterminists denying the possibility of moral responsibility and libertarians positing a metaphysically distinct form of causation which issues forth from free human agents. The problem is perfectly summarized by Chisholm who writes:

⁴³ Critics of this variety include Abelson (2017), Adam (2010), and Gowans (2017). Such writers make either direct or indirect reference to the Buddha's 'unanswered questions' at Majjhima Nikāya 63, Cūḷamālukya Sutta.

“Human beings are responsible agents; but this fact appears to conflict with a deterministic view of human action... and it *also* appears to conflict with an indeterministic view of human action...”⁴⁴

Even if questions of the comparability of causal determinism and dependent origination are temporarily set aside, it is arguable that a dilemma similar to that outlined above is expressible in Buddhist terms. This analogous problem arises from a tension between the theories of karma and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). On the one hand, Buddhist karmic theory stipulates that beings are responsible for their intentional states (*cetanā*) and the ensuing meritorious or de-meritorious action.⁴⁵ On the other hand, according to the theory of dependent origination, all phenomena emerge from infinitely extended causal processes. As such, intentional states, however personal they may feel, are the product of impersonal causal processes stretching infinitely far backwards. The task of reconciling moral responsibility for intentional activity with the impersonal causal history of all events is certainly as momentous as the challenge represented by the Western free will problem.

Interestingly, leading agency-theorists from the Western philosophical tradition have sometimes defined the criteria for agency in ways strikingly similar to Buddhist accounts of responsible action. For example, according to Donald Davidson, agency is distinguished from mere event causation by the presence of intentionality. He contends that a person can be considered the agent of some event whenever her actions are describable “under an aspect that makes it intentional.”⁴⁶ The Buddha’s dictum, “karma

⁴⁴ Chisholm (1982: 24).

⁴⁵ The idea of *the* Buddhist karmic theory is potentially misleading. As chapter 6 discusses in some detail, Buddhist karmic theory is the product of evolving ideas. Accordingly, Buddhists of different times, places and traditions nuanced the theory in their own ways. Whilst intentional states and actions are generally held by Buddhists to be those for which beings are karmically responsible, there are notable exceptions to this rule (as documented in the *Milindapañha* for example).

⁴⁶ Davidson (1971: 7).

is intention,” similarly emphasises the relevance of intention in assessing moral responsibility.⁴⁷ However, assuming beings are responsible for the behaviours ensuing from their intentional states, are they also responsible for which intentional states they experience?

Posed thus, this question highlights the point of connection between the Western and Buddhist versions of the free will problem, for, as Galen Strawson famously argues, ultimate moral responsibility requires that a person should be free to select their original mental state. The so-called ‘basic argument’ against moral responsibility encapsulates this idea with the claim “to be ultimately morally responsible for the way you are, at *t*, in certain fundamental mental respects, you'd have to be *causa sui* in those respects.”⁴⁸

Though safeguarding ultimate responsibility may fall outside the Buddhist remit, presumably it is important for Buddhists to secure at least conventional-level responsibility for karmic conduct. Without this, karma’s pedagogical power is dissipated. Indeed, unless beings can regard themselves as responsible for their own conduct, there can be no incentive for moral or spiritual improvement. Yet the Madhyamaka tradition is unequivocal about the important soteriological role performed by karmic conduct.

Buddhist free will theorists have developed several responses to these problems, some of which may be available to Mādhyamikas. In response to the basic argument’s damaging critique of free will and moral responsibility, for example, Repetti contends

⁴⁷ Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63, Nibbedhika Sutta. *cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi*/ Pāli Text Society (PTS), Hardy (1958: 415). “It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma.” (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 963).

⁴⁸ Strawson (2010: 291).

that such a conception of freedom is unduly “inflated.”⁴⁹ Instead he argues that Buddhism need only preserve a sense of choice through the power of self-regulatory, meditational, practices in order to explain the transition from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*. It would be premature to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of proposed responses to the Buddhist free will problem before attending to the objections made against this reconstructive project listed above, in the previous section.

A Defence of Buddhist Free Will Reconstruction

Buddhist free will theorists distinguish between the method and the goal of reconstruction. As a method, reconstructivism blends a-historical and cross-cultural/fusion-philosophic approaches. As a goal, reconstruction aims at the articulation of a position which is not only consistent with the Buddhist worldview, but is also implied by it. Although reconstructive scholarship is becoming more widespread, some scholars remain sceptical of its legitimacy, particularly with reference to the question of free will. Repetti has defended the idea that resolving the free will problem is or should be of soteriological importance to at least some Buddhists. Consequently, because he sees the question as one in which Buddhists are spiritually invested, he has answered numerous objections brought against the enterprise, which do not need to be repeated here.⁵⁰

Instead, this section responds to three of the most common and serious objections raised against Buddhist free will theorizing: (a) objections which deny there is a problem; (b)

⁴⁹ Repetti (2015).

⁵⁰ Repetti (2017).

objections which see the problem as anachronistic; and (c) objections which consider the problem as irrelevant to the Buddhist quest for *nirvāṇa*. Addressing these concerns will ensure that the path is paved for the meta-level response offered in subsequent chapters.⁵¹

(a) Denial of the Problem

One recurrent objection brought against Buddhist free will theorizing is that the problem it attempts to resolve is not really a problem at all. This objection essentially springs from the belief (already discussed) that without a theory of selfhood the free will problem cannot arise. Some of the earliest scholars to consider the problem from a Buddhist perspective argue precisely this. For example, in a single footnote Conze dismisses such theorizing on grounds that Buddhists cannot “take sides in the controversy about the pseudo-problem of the freedom of the will... As trying to determine what the ‘I’ can do as against outside forces, the whole problem is meaningless for Buddhists.”⁵²

Similarly, Rahula maintains that the free will problem cannot be conceived in a Buddhist framework because of the central role dependent origination plays within the overall system. Rahula interprets the doctrine of dependent origination as ruling out the possibility of even formulating a free will problem. However, it is precisely because Buddhists adhere to the doctrine of dependency that an analogous problem arises. For,

⁵¹ Why the approach offered in this thesis should be described as a *meta-level* response will become clear in later chapters where it is argued that, once the Madhyamaka theory of dependent origination is correctly understood, the mutual exclusivity of previously proposed solutions to the problem of free will (such as libertarianism, compatibilism for example) is merely apparent. For more on this, see chapter 5.

⁵² Conze (1963: 104).

if everything is dependently originated, in what sense can people be morally responsible for their karmic deeds?

Rahula poses a series of rhetorical questions designed to show the impossibility of even thinking of a free will in a dependent network of causation. His list of questions culminates thus, “If the whole of existence is relative, conditioned and interdependent, how can will alone be free?” However, part of the reason Rahula takes himself to have shown that the entire question is precluded is surely that he has already presupposed which type of response would count as adequate, namely libertarianism. Libertarianism generally affirms the necessity of an intervening agent who disrupts the ordinary (deterministic) causal mechanism as essential to the safeguarding of free will and moral responsibility. Rahula is assuredly right to point out that Buddhism can accommodate no such notion of an agent who acts outside the governance of dependent origination. However, it remains an open question whether free will and moral responsibility can be rendered compatible with dependency.

Rahula concludes his brief discussion on free will with the claim that the debate is inextricably bound up with the ideas of “Soul, justice, reward and punishment.”⁵³ These ideas also form the basis of Garfield’s critique, wherein the problem is held to be inherently connected to that of theodicy (i.e. the difficulty of explaining moral evil/natural disasters given belief in an omnipotent and wholly benevolent creator). The claim is that, since Buddhism does not accept the existence of such a deity, neither the problem of theodicy nor the concomitant issue of free will can arise. Rather, it is contended that the free will problem emerges only from a very distinct set of culturally

⁵³ Rahula (1959: 54-55).

specific considerations such that “this problem cannot arise in the context of Madhyamaka,” or Buddhism more generally.⁵⁴ Repetti has suggested that this criticism is invalid because it commits the so-called ‘genetic fallacy.’ He points out that, strictly speaking, the origins of the problem are irrelevant both to its evolving modes and to its resolution.⁵⁵ However, Garfield’s point seems rather to be that – in this specific case – the origins of the problem exert an influence over its possible expressions. That is, even though atheistic/ naturalistic contributors to the Western free will problem appear to be engaged with questions quite distinct from those with which medieval theologians were concerned, in fact they remain (perhaps unwittingly) steeped in religiously motivated discourse or notions with religious pedigree. Such a view seems simply mistaken for, as the history of these debates makes abundantly clear, the problem itself has evolved over time. Whereas theologians may have once struggled to retain the concepts of divine omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence, contemporary theorists devise ways of retaining moral responsibility in the face of competing scientific hypotheses about the causal structure of the world.

Although Conze, Rahula, Garfield and others who deny the possibility of a Buddhist free will problem are right to observe the absence of presuppositions necessary to generate specific versions of that problem, the claim that no such problem can be expressed is too strong. Within the Buddhist framework itself an analogous problem, concerning karmic responsibility and dependent origination, arises. Moreover, although it may transpire – as certain others have argued – that a proper understanding of these doctrines dissolves (rather than resolves) the problem, this cannot be simply assumed

⁵⁴ Garfield (2013: 165).

⁵⁵ Repetti (2017: 24).

at the outset.⁵⁶ In short, the aforementioned critiques betray a tendency to put the cart before the horse: to acquire the status of a pseudo problem, surely the problem would have to appear genuine to begin with. Only through an attempted resolution could the depth of the problem be ascertained.

(b) The Anachronism of the Problem

Objectors also contend that the effort to articulate a Buddhist free will theory involves anachronistic reasoning such that, whatever the resultant reconstruction, its attribution to Buddhism is highly dubious. However, reconstructivists involved in this enterprise do not claim to have discovered the Buddhist stance on this issue (for it is readily admitted that few classical Buddhist texts include anything resembling a discussion on free will) but rather to have articulated a response conceptually available to Buddhists. For this reason therefore, reconstructivists do not deny that their project is anachronistic but only question the extent to which such a charge is damaging. That is, the reconstructivist does not consider the mere fact of anachronism to be a sufficient reason to disqualify their insights as invalid. The fact that classical Buddhists did not engage with this particular problem tells us nothing about whether contemporary scholars should refrain from doing so. This is especially so given that Buddhism is a living tradition which continuously encounters new sets of problems, both theoretical and practical.

In any case, as Ganeri has argued, it is unrealistic to imagine that reconstructivism represents an entirely new approach to classical Indian philosophy. Instead, he suggests,

⁵⁶ See for example, Adam (2010).

when reconstructivists apply the conceptual tools of contemporary philosophy to the problems of classical texts, they are in fact sustaining a well-established practice. Perhaps ironically, then, a-historical engagement with classical Indian philosophy itself has historical precedent.⁵⁷ Ganeri convincingly argues that in early modern India (which he takes as the period 1450-1700 CE), commentators on religious texts often understood their task to be essentially one of fostering a philosophical relationship between root texts and contemporary readerships. He explains that commentators understood themselves as intervening in order to “bring the past to the present.”⁵⁸ Moreover, early modern commentators (like today’s reconstructivists) elicit the philosophical value of more ancient works by bringing out the “coherence and completeness in the description of a point of view, sound argument in favour of the view described, engagement with alternative views” *et cetera*.⁵⁹ Hence, he suggests that the idea of anachronism as an inherently pernicious mode of reasoning is not widespread in India. Again, as with so many of the arguments against reconstructivism, it could paradoxically be the case that the accusation of superimposition (of which anachronism is a species) is more appropriately directed towards the objector. Indeed, a culture’s disparagement of anachronism seems largely bound up with their sense of history but, as Westerners often remark, history occupies a less central role in the Indian intellectual tradition than in the European.

Writing on the problem of history in traditional India, Pollock notes that the status of the Vedas as eternal and authorless is what ensures their authority. He argues that the influence of the Vedas in classical India was so great as to exert an influence over how

⁵⁷ Ganeri (2011).

⁵⁸ Ganeri (2011: 102).

⁵⁹ Ganeri (2011: 103).

even those from the so-called heterodox schools conceived of matters of historicity. This leads him to conclude, firstly, that “history [is] not so much unknown in Sanskrit India [but]... denied” and, secondly, that history itself is “a category constructed in modern Europe, and a self-deluding category at that.”⁶⁰ Whether Pollock is right to conclude that the presumed authorless-ness of the Vedas strongly influenced how even opponents of Vedic religion and philosophy conceived of history is not our present concern. The point rather is to indicate that the charge of anachronism is not *per se* damaging to the reconstructivist agenda. In essence this is because anachronism can assume both vicious and non-vicious forms, a point to be taken up when we consider responses to objections of type (c) below.

Finally, it could be objected that reconstructivists err less because of their application of new distinctions to perennial problems but more because these distinctions are foisted on philosophical systems with markedly different goals and criteria for success. However, it is striking that the same objection is rarely, if ever, raised against the application of contemporary Western tools to draw out ideas latent in ancient Greek philosophy. Yet, it cannot be denied that the differences between any modern civilization and its philosophical methods and interests are vast when held up against their ancient/ classical counterparts from whichever geographical location. The idea that Westerners have a special affinity with the cultural context out of which works like the *Republic* arose has only recently begun to be challenged. Tartaglia appears to be in the minority when he ridicules this idea as “patently absurd” and, yet, it is in a sense quite obvious that in our treatment of ancient Greek philosophy, as in our treatment of

⁶⁰ Pollock (1989: 603-605).

classical Buddhist thought, the risks of superimposition or appropriation are just as real.⁶¹

(c) The Irrelevance of the Problem

As responses to (a) and (b) have respectively made clear, reconstructivists may concur that ultimately the problem of free will is a pseudo problem and that efforts to supply a Buddhist view on this issue involves anachronism. However, the irrelevance of the free will problem to Buddhism, from either the metaphysical or soteriological perspective, is firmly resisted by reconstructivists. Contrary to Gowans's claims, this is an issue of soteriological relevance to contemporary Buddhists, especially those struggling to find moral motivation in the law of karma (which itself falls under the governance of dependently originated processes).

Indeed, as is repeatedly emphasized in Buddhist philosophical texts, aspirants respond in diverse ways to different teachings. The mark of a bodhisattva is her ability to provide a teaching appropriate to the aspirant's level of insight (i.e. her ability to employ *upāya*). The fact that the historical Buddha refrained from answering metaphysical questions about the eternity of the world tells us little about whether contemporary Buddhists are justified in speculating about free will on soteriological grounds. Moreover, unlike the questions posed by Mālunkyāputta, questions about an individual's capacity to direct their own life (towards perpetual rebirth or towards final *nirvāṇa*) are highly relevant.⁶²

⁶¹ Tartaglia (2014: 1025).

⁶² Majjhima Nikāya 63, Mālunkyāputta Sutta. PTS, Treckner (2002). (Trans.) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995).

On the one hand, if Buddhists do have the conceptual apparatus to harmonize karma and dependent origination, then meditational practice in the face of *samsāric* suffering appears a wise choice. On the other hand, if Buddhists cannot accommodate free will or supply a convincing argument for their claim that beings are responsible for their karma, then pursuit of hedonistic pleasure might have some justification. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose that at least some practitioners will consider the resolution of tension between such doctrines as karma and dependent origination important for sustaining their spiritual motivation.

The primary purpose of the forgoing remarks has been pre-emptively to respond to possible objections against the methodological approach of subsequent chapters and the content of the proposed reconstruction of the Madhyamaka stance on free will. The replies offered here, although not exhaustive, are nevertheless intended to be sufficient to justify examination of Madhyamaka views on agency through the use of contemporary philosophical resources. Of course, the appropriateness of reconstructive projects must be decided on a case-by-case basis. If critics remain unconvinced of the legitimacy of Buddhist free will theorizing, they are encouraged to stipulate further reasons or else explain why the responses offered here are unviable. The reaffirmation of a conviction, however, is dogmatism rather than argument.

Chapter 3

The Buddhist Free Will Problem Revisions to Paleo-Compatibilism

“Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”

H.W. Longfellow, *The Theologian's Tale*

“Psychological determinism and the claim that persons are capable of acting freely are thus two ships
passing each other in the night – and one of the two is a submarine.”

Mark Siderits, *Beyond Compatibilism*

Madhyamaka philosophy has been characterized in myriad ways.¹ Similarly, since the inception of Buddhist free will theorizing, the implied Buddhist view on freedom and responsibility has been variously classified as hard determinist, neo-compatibilist, paleo-compatibilist, perspectivalist and libertarian.² With so many competing interpretations, two important considerations come to light.

In the first place, one wonders how far such diverse reconstructions represent the plethora of views available within Buddhism versus the views of different reconstructivists pursuing their own philosophical agendas. Some critics of the reconstructive enterprise, such as Flanagan, maintain that the lack of scholarly consensus on how Buddhism could respond to the free will problem only betrays the “projection” of our preferred solutions to a problem which does not even emerge in the Indian philosophical context.³

¹ Ruegg (1981: 2).

² Javanaud (2018 b).

³ Flanagan (2017: 60-61).

Secondly, given the mutual exclusivity of some of the reconstructions, it is unclear whether a pan-Buddhist response to the free will problem is available. On the one hand, scholarship has become increasingly attentive to the fact that Buddhism is not monolithic. By examining tradition-specific differences in metaphysics, epistemology, semantics *et cetera*, more nuanced and precise reconstructions, reflective of the particular commitments of different Buddhist schools, are achievable. On the other hand, however, one might expect the views of different Buddhist traditions to converge on so central a question as whether people can exercise a sufficiently free will to take moral responsibility for their actions (*karma*). After all, as Śāntideva asserts, immeasurable merit and spiritual advancement results from the cultivation of wholesome intentions.⁴ For meritorious deeds to count as such, it surely matters whether they are freely chosen or merely the product of deterministic causal processes.

This chapter embarks on the investigation of these points but the process is not concluded until the end of chapter 5. To address these considerations, the intervening chapters set out (a) to establish the relationship between the various reconstructions listed above, determining the depth of their incompatibility and (b) to ascertain if Buddhism is committed to causal determinism and, if so, how far this shapes the problem under review.

Buddhist free will theorizing originated in the late nineteenth century and therefore remains a relatively recent development.⁵ Yet, since then, there has been a profusion of interest in this topic, resulting in an array of possible interpretations. Rather than

⁴ Śāntideva – *BCA* 1.21. *śiraḥśūlāni sattvānāṃ nāśayāmīti cintayan | aprameyeṇa puṇyena grhyate sma hitāśayah* // “Immeasurable merit took hold of the well-intentioned person who thought ‘Let me dispel the headaches of beings.’” (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 7).

⁵ The earliest discussion I have been able to locate is Rhys Davids (1898).

undertake a cursory examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the main theories so far proposed (a project pursued elsewhere), this chapter scrutinizes Siderits's paleo-compatibilist response.⁶ Paleo-compatibilism has been chosen as a 'case study' both because it ingeniously crafts a solution viable within the existing Abhidharma framework and because – once appropriately revised – it also constitutes a feasible solution for Madhyamaka. With necessary modifications, paleo-compatibilism can resolve the free will problem in a way that would be palatable to Buddhists with markedly different metaphysical and semantic commitments.

Paleo-Compatibilism

From his earliest presentation of paleo-compatibilism, Siderits emphasized that it is just one possible strategy for resolving the free will problem in a way consistent with the Buddhist worldview. Whilst acknowledging the absence of anything resembling the Western free will problem in classical Buddhist discourse and conceding that paleo-compatibilism is not a view that "any Indian Buddhist philosopher actually held," Siderits defends the theory as conceptually accessible to Buddhists.⁷ Again, he argues that paleo-compatibilism is distinctive amongst reconstructed Buddhist theories on free will in that, notwithstanding its lack of historical precedent, it relies mainly on the philosophical tools and argumentative strategies unique to Buddhism.

Paleo-compatibilism is the view that simultaneous assertion of (1) the truth of causal determinism and (2) the truth of human free will and moral responsibility is not

⁶ For an overview of the debate's history and a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of different proposals, see Javanaud (2018 b).

⁷ Siderits (2016: 249).

problematic in the Buddhist framework. Siderits argues that Buddhism's distinction between ultimate (*paramārtha*) and conventional (*saṃvṛti*) domains of truth renders determinism and free will straightforwardly compatible. This is because Buddhists would consider any alleged incompatibility between these theses to be an illusion generated from the conflation of ultimate and conventional discourse domains. It is only through mixing up the referents belonging to these two, semantically insulated, domains of ultimate and conventional that the incompatibility of determinism and free will manifests. However, to resolve this apparent tension, the truth of determinism and the truth of free will must be postulated at distinct and incommensurate semantic levels.

The concept of 'incommensurability' has itself generated considerable debate in recent decades, so Siderits's intended meaning is not immediately obvious. Simmons helpfully distinguishes between 'theoretic' and 'practical' incommensurability, where the former signals two or more substantially incompatible approaches to areas of theoretic inquiry (such as scientific methodology or standards of rationality) and the latter signals two or more fundamentally distinct worldviews underpinning areas of practical inquiry (such as ethics).⁸ Simmons also draws the further distinction between 'global' and 'local' types of incommensurability. Where global incommensurability prevents a person from 'inhabiting' the worldview of rival thought-systems, the local incommensurability of different theses prevents a person from accepting the proposed worldview in its entirety. This last distinction, between global and local forms of incommensurability, exposes the challenge inherent in treating the domains of ultimate and conventional truth as incommensurate.

⁸ Simmons (1994: 119) classifies Kuhn and Feyerabend as interested in 'theoretic' incommensurability and Williams and Wiggins as interested in 'practical' incommensurability.

On the one hand, Buddhists argue that the ultimate and conventional truths give access to radically different ways of conceiving the world (either in terms of impartite particulars known as *dharmas* or in terms of the conceptual fabrications of everyday experience). On the other hand, they also present both domains of truth as necessary for correct and successful apprehension of reality. Indeed, enlightened beings do not relinquish conventions once they have attained ultimate insight but rather continue to use conventional truth pedagogically in order to bring other people to their own state of realization. Hence, both global and local incommensurability seem precluded.

The challenges of maintaining the incommensurability of conventional and ultimate truths have been pointed out by others and will be discussed further in due course. Whilst there may indeed be various alternative conceptions of incommensurability than those proposed by Simmons, it would be an unhelpful distraction to explore these possibilities further because, as will be argued, the alleged incommensurability of the ultimate and conventional semantic domains turns out to be an exaggerated feature of the argument for paleo-compatibilism.

In its original form, paleo-compatibilism is a theory intended as a possible solution consistent with Abhidharma Buddhist commitments. As Siderits explains, from the Abhidharma perspective, ultimately true statements neither assert nor presuppose the existence of any partite entity. Accordingly, they “correspond to how the impartite entities are.”⁹ Elsewhere Siderits characterizes the Abhidharma account of ultimate truth as being “just the realist notion of... how things are independent of our modes of

⁹ Siderits (2008: 29).

conceptualizing them.”¹⁰ Contrastingly, conventionally true statements do not refer to impartite entities (*dharmas*) but instead refer to the ‘wholes’ of everyday experience, such as tables, chairs and chariots. Another hallmark of conventional truth is that its acceptance should consistently lead to “successful practice.”¹¹

As later sections of this chapter will investigate, even if success is straightforwardly defined in terms of what is soteriologically and morally efficacious, it is not immediately clear which statements, once accepted, conduce to these ends. In particular, whilst it might be intuitive to suppose that belief in free will supports, rather than undermines, one’s efforts to live morally, this is surely a matter for psychologists to decide through experimentation. Even if it transpires that free will is merely illusory, there is presently too little available data to determine whether sustaining or dispelling the illusion of free will would be morally advantageous.¹² The next chapter explores whether Buddhists could justify belief in, or disavowal of, free will even without empirical evidence as to the ramifications of ascribing or abrogating moral responsibility.¹³

That a statement can only ever be true in one or other of the ultimate or conventional domains, and never in both, is an important feature of the paleo-compatibilist theory. It thus follows that there can be no meaningful interaction between the two independent levels of discourse and, hence, the truths of determinism and free will are said to be ‘semantically insulated’ from each other.

¹⁰ Siderits (2003: 116).

¹¹ Siderits (2003: 116).

¹² Nadelhoffer, T. and Tocco, D. (2013: 124).

¹³ See chapter 5 for a discussion of Buddhist ‘perspectivalism,’ the theory that people should adopt asymmetrical views about the distribution of free will and moral responsibility.

As noted, Siderits argues for the ‘incommensurability’ of conventional and ultimate truth. However, this statement seems too strong because the complete semantic insulation of the two discourse domains cannot be achieved, much less guaranteed. Indeed, reductionism – the analysis of composite entities into the parts of which they are composed – is possible precisely because there is a relationship between the conventionally existent wholes and the impartite *dharmas* on which they depend. At one point Siderits himself suggests that thoroughgoing semantic insulation is precluded even by the *Ābhidharmika*’s own standards because the content of conventional truths could be communicated via ultimate level exposition of how the ultimate *relata* relate and thereby create the convenient fictions of everyday experience.¹⁴ The impossibility of total semantic insulation, however, need not represent a major set back for paleo-compatibilism. Whilst the dependence of wholes on parts means that conventional truths depend on ultimate truths, such that ultimate truths are always implicit in conventional expressions, no statement can ever belong to both domains.

Whenever discourse domains are conflated, the result is not falsity but sheer meaninglessness. From the paleo-compatibilist perspective, it is nonsensical to claim that persons are subject to the law of causal determinism. This is because determinism is an ultimate level hypothesis whereas free will and responsibility are ascribed at the conventional level to conceptually fabricated persons. Hence, attributing moral responsibility to that which has primary existence (*dravya-sat*) is not merely to make a mistake but to make a category mistake because *dharmas* are simply not the kind of thing to which responsibility can be meaningfully ascribed. The paleo-compatibilist

¹⁴ Siderits (2007: 58) “It’s worth remembering, though, that standing behind every conventionally true statement is some (much longer) ultimately true statement that explains why accepting the conventionally true statement leads to successful practice.”

strategy involves reading the Abhidharma scholastics as implicitly accepting the ultimate truth of psycho-physical determinism and the conventional truth of morally relevant human freedom. As the quotation at the start of this chapter intimates, Siderits regards the relationship between statements belonging to the ultimate and conventional levels as like that between “two ships passing each other in the night – and one of the two is a submarine.”¹⁵

Despite its ingenuity and impressive simplicity, paleo-compatibilism faces several potential objections. For example, Repetti argues that by semantically insulating the claims of determinism and free will, paleo-compatibilism does not so much resolve the free will problem as deny its existence. He rightly points out that in the Western context the compatibility criterion is logical consistency. By locating the truths of determinism and free will at different semantic levels, therefore, “paleo-compatibilism seems to avoid bivalence the way subjectivism does (by embedding, relativizing, or indexing its claims).”¹⁶ Repetti elaborates by comparing the compatibilism of paleo-compatibilism to that achieved by predator and prey when both are held apart in different cages.

The Buddhist paleo-compatibilist can respond, however, by arguing that the Western preoccupation with reconciling determinism and free will is doomed to failure because their incompatibility is, in the first place, merely illusory. If paleo-compatibilism’s greatest success is a demonstration that there never was a deep or intractable free will problem in need of resolution, then this too is impressive. Moreover, the paleo-compatibilist also claims that accepting the hierarchy of conventional and ultimate

¹⁵ Siderits (1987: 153).

¹⁶ Repetti (2012: 56).

truths leads to soteriologically successful practice, promoting responsibility for the attitudes one fosters and the actions one performs.

A second objection brought against paleo-compatibilism is that it is inappropriate to ascribe deep or meaningful free will and moral responsibility to merely conventionally existent persons who are formed from a constantly shifting ‘coalition’ of impersonal psycho-physical aggregates. As Abelson argues, even if these shifting coalitions enable radical self-revision, we cannot hold people responsible, because whether they possess the set of coalitions necessary for self-revision will itself be a “matter of deterministic luck.”¹⁷ Abelson challenges the idea that sustaining the notion of free will and moral responsibility could form part of Buddhism’s soteriological agenda. Instead he thinks that all Buddhist free will theories contribute to the maintenance of self-appropriating and self-identifying practices and must therefore be antithetical to the Buddha’s teachings on non-attachment.

However, Abelson’s stance seems dogmatic. After all, the Buddhist tradition itself is apt to treat attachment to non-attachment as just another species of attachment. Even though Buddhists warn against self-appropriation and self-identification, they do not reject the conventional reality of persons as possessors of particular properties. Overall, strategies advocating a process of ‘weaning’ self-graspers off the self seem better placed than Abelson’s at fostering spiritual growth. Realizing that the categories of property and property-bearer are defunct is essential to liberation, but to reject conventional level free will could risk inducing moral apathy in those convinced of the ultimate impossibility of deep responsibility.

¹⁷ Abelson (2017: 154).

A more serious objection stems from paleo-compatibilism's treatment of the Buddhist theory of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as equivalent to the Western theory of scientific causal determinism. The extent to which these theories are comparable with each other is a major source of scholarly contention, to which we will pay close attention in the forthcoming chapters. Uncritically to equate dependent origination with causal determinism is to jeopardize any project concerned with an exploration of distinctively Buddhist responses to the free will problem.

Indeed, although the mechanistic view of physical operations can be traced back to Descartes, the idea that mental phenomena are also determined was notably absent from his works. It is arguably in the work of Laplace that we find the first articulation of a truly *universal* scientific determinism.¹⁸ The idea of a mechanistic or clockwork universe seems at sharp variance with Buddhist belief in the power of meditation as a means of incrementally acquiring mental freedom.¹⁹ Yet, if scholars like Charles Goodman are right, and Buddhists do indeed endorse a thesis akin to Western scientific determinism, important differences will nonetheless persist.²⁰ These should be made explicit to avoid such criticisms as cultural insensitivity and vicious anachronism. For example, scientific determinism and dependent origination are clearly very different in structure. Whereas determinism is a strictly causal – and hence linear – theory, dependent origination is a theory of cyclically structured processes unfolding in both forward and backward directions.²¹ Furthermore, as will be discussed in subsequent

¹⁸ Hahn (2005: 52-57).

¹⁹ Repetti (2010).

²⁰ Goodman (2002).

²¹ Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23, Upanisa Sutta. *jāti jātūpānisaṃ dukkhaṃ | dukkhūpanisā saddhā | saddhūpanisaṃ pāmojjaṃ | ... nibbidūpaniso virago virāgūpanisā vimutti* // PTS, Feer (Vol. 2, 1888: 31-32). "...with birth as proximate cause, suffering; with suffering as proximate cause, faith; with faith as

chapters, dependent origination encompasses causal relations but is not limited to them.²²

However, for the present purposes of demonstrating the applicability of a revised version of paleo-compatibilism to Madhyamaka Buddhism, whether determinism and dependent origination are conceptually equivalent is superfluous. This is because, as preceding arguments in defence of anti-realism demonstrate, Madhyamaka does not accept that either determinism or indeterminism successfully capture the way the world mind-independently is.

From the summary of paleo-compatibilism supplied above, it should already be clear that as a proposed solution to the Buddhist free will problem it lacks universality. The theory works well for Buddhist traditions endorsing metaphysical and epistemological realism (respectively, the view that certain entities are inherently real and the view that we can know such entities by virtue of their existence independent from conceptual and linguistic constructs). However, given Madhyamaka's unique interpretation of the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth, it is unclear at this point whether paleo-compatibilism can be transferred outside of the context Siderits originally intended it to reside in.

proximate cause, gladness...with dispassion as proximate cause, liberation..." (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 555-556).

²² The similarities and differences between scientific determinism and dependent origination are explored in more detail in chapter 4.

The Madhyamaka Theory of Two Truths

Paleo-compatibilism relies on the credibility of a firm distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. As discussed in chapter 1, however, the Madhyamaka tradition challenges the idea that any entities with ultimate existence (*svabhāva*) are instantiated and, hence, there are no existents for ultimate truths to be about. In other words, Madhyamaka philosophers cannot concede semantic dualism. As Nāgārjuna declares at *MMK* 24.10, “The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Having not acquired the ultimate truth, *nirvāṇa* is not attained.”²³

This leads us provisionally to conclude that paleo-compatibilist ideas are not appropriate when applied to Madhyamaka thought. The provisional nature of this conclusion is important, however, since before it can be either endorsed or rejected the different attitudes and interpretations adopted towards the nature and constitution of conventional truth within the Madhyamaka branch of Buddhism will need to be examined. Whether paleo-compatibilism proves a successful solution to the Madhyamaka version of the free will problem depends on modifying it such that semantic dualism is no longer a key component of the theory.

Is it feasible to substitute the notions of conventional and ultimate truth (upon which paleo-compatibilism in its original form so heavily relies) for the notions of ‘less’ and ‘more’ sophisticated truths, both of which are nevertheless conventional? Or would the modifications needed in order to make the theory work be so extensive as to render the

²³ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.10. *vyavahāram anāśrītya paramārtho na deśyate/ paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamyate//* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 273).

paleo-compatibilist theory virtually unrecognisable? If so, would it be more prudent to abandon it and deploy our efforts in finding alternative, more straightforward, solutions?

Madhyamaka's stance on metaphysical and semantic issues makes the application of paleo-compatibilism as a solution to the free will problem seem *prima facie* implausible in this context. However, attention paid to the differences internal to Madhyamaka may render a blanket disqualification of paleo-compatibilist solutions inappropriate. Whilst Svātantrika Mādhyamikas seem particularly well placed to accommodate a hierarchy of truth within the conventional domain, Prāsaṅgika writers like Candrakīrti and Śāntideva are surprisingly open to the idea of degrees of conventional truth. If Madhyamaka accommodates a hierarchy of conventional truths, then it is possible to import key aspects of Abhidharma thought (such as the conventional/ ultimate distinction) into the Madhyamaka system but to relegate these components to the strictly conventional level.

As anti-realists, Mādhyamikas would argue that the full soteriological advantages of pervasive emptiness (*śūnyatā*) are only realizable when understood semantically rather than metaphysically.²⁴ Arguably, whether we persist in viewing the free will problem as precisely that (i.e. a problem) may depend on whether we find the arguments for anti-realism and for emptiness sufficiently persuasive. Siderits's preference for semantically-orientated reconstructions of emptiness stem from his assumption that all metaphysical interpretations of the emptiness theory "pre-suppose metaphysical

²⁴ Siderits (2003).

realism.”²⁵ If this is the case, the project of defending metaphysical anti-realism becomes self-stultifying: the point being made by metaphysical anti-realists is that there *is* no way the world mind-independently is. Accordingly, any metaphysically anti-realist theory necessarily fails to express the way the world is.

The kind of anti-realism examined in chapter 1 as a viable interpretation of Madhyamaka contends that ultimate reality is linguistically inaccessible in as much as there simply is no ultimate reality that language can either succeed or fail in conveying. As Śāntideva expresses it, “It is agreed that there are these two truths: the conventional and the ultimate. Reality is beyond the scope of intellection. Intellection is said to be conventional.”²⁶ Understood in a strictly literal way, this declaration might seem to threaten the purpose of a religious way of life, a life fundamentally driven by the goal of realizing the ultimate.

This concern is perplexing, however, since ‘realization’ in Buddhist just as in Western thought, can be intellectual and/ or experiential. Therefore, even if ultimate reality cannot be realized intellectually due to the intellect’s confinement to the sphere of the conventional, the realization of the ultimate at the experiential level is not precluded. This is often thought of as the ‘internalization’ of, or the ‘psychological commitment’ to, emptiness and the accompanying attitude of non-attachment. On the other hand, literal interpretations of this verse suggest that ultimate reality cannot be conceptualized because it is discursively transcendent, i.e. ineffable.²⁷ Still, to say that ultimate reality

²⁵ Siderits (2003: 12).

²⁶ Śāntideva – *BCA 9.2. saṃvṛtiḥ paramārthaś ca satyadvayam idaṃ matam/ buddher agocaras tattvaṃ buddhiḥ saṃvṛtir ucyate//* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 115).

²⁷ For a discussion of the various interpretations of *BCA 9.2* in classical Indian and Tibetan commentarial and philosophical literature, see Sweet (1979).

is beyond language, and therefore inaccessible through it, is thereby to reify it as something substantially or inherently existent. Siderits himself makes this point, writing “to say that the reals are ineffable is to say that it is their nature to be ineffable... and if the nature of the real is something beyond conceptualization, then that nature is mind-independent in the relevant sense and so intrinsic.”²⁸

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the entire point of Madhyamaka’s project is to resist the hypostatization of ultimate reality. Indeed, Madhyamaka rejects the non-emptiness of emptiness itself. As Nāgārjuna says at *MMK* 13.7: “If something that is non-empty existed, then something that is empty might also exist. Nothing whatsoever exists that is non-empty; then how will the empty come to exist?”²⁹ Evidently therefore, if Siderits is right in thinking that characterizations of ultimate reality as ineffable imply metaphysical realism, then his suggestion that emptiness should be understood as a semantic theory is preferable.³⁰

However, do metaphysical interpretations of emptiness conceal suppressed commitments to realism? Although there are may be certain unwelcome consequences of describing ultimate reality as ineffable (for example, the fact that to describe something as indescribable is contradictory) does it necessarily follow that ultimate reality is thereby reified? The range of possible interpretations of Nāgārjuna’s thought is no doubt partly the product of his playful use of paradox. Whilst perhaps the majority of scholars interpret Nāgārjuna as abiding by and subscribing to the laws of classical logic (accepting such principles as ‘the law of the excluded middle,’ for instance), some

²⁸ Siderits (2003: 132).

²⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 13.7. *yady aśūnyam bhavet kiṃ cit syāc chūnyam iti api kiṃ cana/ na kiṃ cid asty aśūnyam ca kutaḥ śūnyam bhaviṣyati//* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 144).

³⁰ Siderits (2003: 11).

prefer to read him as endorsing dialetheism whilst yet others consider his project to have mystical and a-philosophical ambitions.³¹

The Madhyamaka claim that the content of all and any conceptualizations are constructed rather than given means that the description of ultimate reality as ineffable is itself merely conventional. Therefore, for Madhyamaka, the ineffability of ultimate reality need not signal a commitment to a metaphysically transcendent substance but rather indicates that, relative to other conventions (of which the ultimate is just one) ultimate truths are more sophisticated.

In this system, then, ultimate reality remains embedded within conventional reality. Relationally, ultimate reality surpasses the ordinary intellect because human cognitive and communicative capacities are limited. Siderits's worry, that in asserting the metaphysical truth of anti-realism we undermine ourselves, can perhaps be avoided if we appreciate that, for Madhyamaka, the negation of *svabhāva* in the conventional realm does not imply the presence of *svabhāva* in a transcendent, ultimate, realm. As Nāgārjuna himself makes clear the two realities are really one, insofar as neither have *svabhāva*.

Avoiding the kinds of difficulties engendered by the idea of the ineffability of ultimate truth requires that we take the metaphysical and semantic anti-realism of Madhyamaka seriously. Language's failure to reveal the ultimate truth is explicable by the simple fact that neither language nor any other medium is capable of providing access to mind-

³¹ Dialetheist interpretations are advanced by Priest and Garfield (1995) but will not be examined in this thesis. The mystical/ a-philosophical interpretation – proposed by Stafford Betty (1983) – has already been ruled out in chapter 1.

independent entities, because such entities simply do not exist. In the context of this brief discussion, therefore, discernment of a Madhyamaka free will problem itself becomes problematic. Mādhyamikas, for whom the presupposition of the legitimacy of the terms used in the posing of the very question is not possible, may find that the automatic concession of the existence of a problem in need of resolution cannot be granted. If ‘person’, ‘free will’ and ‘determinism’ do not pick out aspects of mind-independent reality do we need a theory to explain their compatibility?

Nevertheless, questions remain both about the distinctive characteristics of, and the relationship between, the freedom experienced at the point of spiritual liberation and the freedom thought necessary for this achievement. Madhyamaka thinkers themselves have explored the relationship between these two types of freedom, for example in texts such as the *BCA*. Indeed, in chapter 6 of the *BCA* Śāntideva argues that bodhisattvas (who have not yet attained the final liberation of *nirvāṇa* and are still cultivating *bodhicitta*)³² can exercise sufficient control over their will as not to become angry with those who hurl blows or insults at them, just as they do not grow angry with bile even though it causes intense suffering.³³

Without sanctioning an essentialist view of Buddhism, we should note that all the Buddhist traditions agree on the possibility of final emancipation (*nirvāṇa*). If the practice of meditation and the adoption of a life harmonious with the spiritual quest are

³² The difficulties involved in translating *bodhicitta* – or even in communicating its general meaning – are well documented in Wangchuk (2007: 69-70). For further discussion of *bodhicitta* (and how it constitutes the characteristic mental feature of bodhisattvas) see chapter 7 of this thesis. For the present purposes, Garfield’s definition of *bodhicitta* as “as a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration...” will suffice (Garfield 2015: 299).

³³ Śāntideva – *BCA* 6.22. *pittādiṣu na me kopo mahāduḥkhakareṣv api| sacetaneṣu kiṃ kopaḥ te 'pi pratyayakopitāḥ||* “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.”(Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 52).

to be truly meritorious, they must be choices made by people at the start of a spiritual journey and re-affirmed continuously throughout its duration. Hence, if as Buddhism maintains, emancipation and soteriological fulfilment are not merely things that happen to us but are instead events we can be personally responsible for, beings must have sufficient capacity to exercise the will and direct themselves towards such goals.

Madhyamaka Paleo-Compatibilism: Initial Assessment

It is a curious feature of the paleo-compatibilist argument as presented by Siderits that, despite its reliance on the tools and distinctions of Abhidharma Buddhism, it also relies quite considerably on Śāntideva's assessment of causation and moral responsibility. For the reasons examined above, Madhyamaka's implicit commitment to the current version of paleo-compatibilism – the version reliant on the truth of semantic dualism – is inconsistent with anti-realism.

If Madhyamaka endorses metaphysical anti-realism, it cannot accommodate the kind of reductionism required to make paleo-compatibilism a convincing solution to the Buddhist free will problem (i.e. it cannot accommodate the existence of inherently real *dharma*s to which persons are reducible). Nor, if Madhyamaka endorses semantic anti-realism, can it accommodate the strict semantic insulation of statements pertaining to psycho-physical determinants and statements pertaining to persons (for both psycho-physical determinants and persons are illusory, mere conceptual fabrications). Further, even if the foregoing arguments in support of anti-realist readings of Madhyamaka should prove false, Mādhyamikas certainly do not posit the actual instantiation of

dharmas with *svabhāva*. In other words, aside from the alleged conceptual incoherence of *svabhāva*, Madhyamaka also insists that it is nowhere empirically observed.

Paleo-compatibilism's efficacy as a solution to the free will problem requires acceptance of both (i) reductionism about persons and (ii) semantic dualism. Siderits interprets Śāntideva as endorsing both these positions, albeit provisionally. Rather inexplicably, given its centrality to the argument, Siderits leaves a crucial point made in one of his footnotes undeveloped. He writes: "Since he [Śāntideva] is a Madhyamaka, he is unlikely to have accepted the Buddhist Reductionist's final ontology, one of impersonal impartite particulars... What seems likely is that in this discussion he provisionally adopts the view of the Buddhist Reductionist."³⁴ Siderits proceeds by stating that this is a common strategy for Madhyamaka theorists yet does not cite other examples of its employment in Madhyamaka philosophy and does not indicate his thoughts on its intended purpose. Other scholars, however, have recently flagged Candrakīrti's acceptance of Abhidharma accounts of conventional truth and his preference for their conception of reality over rival Mahāyānists. Like Siderits, Li has also argued that Mādhyamikas provisionally endorse the Abhidharma perspective in order to get their own theories off the ground.³⁵ For example, at *MAV* 6.91-92 Candrakīrti explains how the five *skandhas* are conceded at the level of everyday discourse (*laukika-tattva*) even though, by the standards of correct insight, they do not exist. Whilst the Ābhidharmika makes the false move of asserting the inherent reality

³⁴ Siderits (2008: 30).

³⁵ Li (2018: 66-67) writes: "When Candrakīrti's consistent preference for Abhidharma over both Yogācāra and Dignāga's thought is taken into consideration, it appears likely that he has at least some level of provisional acceptance of Abhidharma interpretations of conventional objects."

of the *skandhas*, the Yogācārin makes the still more spiritually dangerous (because, presumably, nihilistic) move of denying that they exist at all.³⁶

The provisional acceptance of Abhidharma commitments seems to be a fairly common strategy amongst Mahāyānists. For example, in their various expositions of Dharmakīrti's philosophical methodology, Dreyfus, McClintock and Dunne have all argued that he employs "a sliding scale" of analysis.³⁷ The use of such a method involves successively replacing what is accepted as true at an elementary stage of philosophical analysis with more refined and nuanced assertions as the stages of analysis progress. Since Ābhidharmika ontology represents the 'common denominator' of subsequent Buddhist thought – which is nevertheless challenged, reinterpreted and, in some sense, even refuted at higher levels of analysis – it constitutes a firm starting point for further investigation. Dunne traces Dharmakīrti's distinctive methodology back to the works of Nāgārjuna himself who, in the *Ratnāvalī*, suggests that imperfect teachings may be acceptable so long as they prove instrumental to overcoming wrong views. For example, at *Ratnāvalī* 4.94 Nāgārjuna acknowledges that the most sophisticated version of the Buddha's teaching (i.e. the teachings on the emptiness of emptiness) would be likely to terrify those insufficiently advanced to understand it. He

³⁶ Candrakīrti – MAV 6.91-92. *pañcāpy ete santi lokaprasiddhāḥ skandhās tattve laukike 'vasthitasya| tattvajñānasyodaye vāñchite vai pañcāpy ete yogināṃ naiva jātāḥ|| rūpābhāve mā grahīs cittasattāṃ rūpābhāvaṃ cittasattve ca mā gāḥ| prajñānītau sūtra ete samānaṃ buddhaiḥ kṣiptā varṇitās cābhidharme||* Li (2015: 15). "(91) Within the context of everyday reality (*laukikatattva*) all five psychophysical aggregates taken for granted by everyday experience do exist, but they do not appear to the meditator who is engaged in developing knowledge of the reality [expressed in the truth of the highest meaning]. (92) If form does not exist, then do not hold to the existence of mind; and if mind exists, then do not hold to the non-existence of form. The buddha unqualifiedly rejected both of them in the scripture on perfect wisdom; and in the Abhidharma literature he affirmed them both." (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:168).

³⁷ For more on this interpretation of Dharmakīrti's methodology – an interpretation aimed at reconciling his use of multiple and even seemingly incompatible ontological systems within his broader philosophical project – see Dreyfus (1997), McClintock (2010) and Dunne (2004).

writes: “A grammarian will make some students recite even the alphabet. Likewise, the Buddha taught the Dharma in accord with his disciples’ abilities.”³⁸

Since others before him provisionally accepted Abhidharma teachings as pedagogically useful, we can assume that Śāntideva also entertained reductionism about persons as part of his commitment to skillful means (*upāya*) even whilst rejecting the idea that there is, ultimately, anything substantial to which persons can be reduced. Still, if Śāntideva’s acceptance of reductionism is provisional, then any solution to the free will problem reliant on reductionism will also be provisional and whether the term ‘solution’ is appropriately attributed to that which has mere provisional status is uncertain. Reductionism is the theory that persons can be reduced to the completely impersonal entities of which they are composed. Semantic dualism enables the utterance of the ultimate truth that psycho-physical *dharmas* are causally determined and the conventional truth that persons (as ‘wholes’) are free. Neither view is available to the Madhyamaka. Their wholehearted acceptance of reductionism is precluded by their denial that either ‘wholes’ or ‘impartite’ things can exist with *svabhāva*. Thus, even though it might be possible to ‘reduce’ persons somewhat (for example, down to the five *skandhas* of which they are composed), these *skandhas* will lack the kind of existence necessary for paleo-compatibilism to work.

To reiterate, Siderits defines statements as ultimately true when they “correspond to how the impartite entities are.”³⁹ Although Mādhyamikas do not reject the idea of impartite entities, they dispute the notion that such entities could have inherent reality,

³⁸ Nāgārjuna – *Ratnāvalī* 4.94. *yathaiva vaiyākaraṇo mātrkāṃ api pāṭhayet| buddho ’vadat tathā dharmam vineyānām yathākṣamam||* (Trans.) Dunne, J. McClintock, S. (1997: 71).

³⁹ Siderits (2008: 29).

which in turn means that no description of an impartite entity could capture the essential nature of that entity, for it lacks such a nature. One possible interpretation of what Madhyamaka theorists are doing in retaining the ultimate/ conventional distinction is making use of skillful means (*upāya*).

On this view, conventional truth can be ascribed to statements with practical utility (and, thus, the ascription of ‘truth’ to what is only conventionally so is a pedagogical technique employed to enable people to make spiritual progress) whilst ultimate truth can be ascribed to statements expressive of the doctrine of emptiness. However, if Madhyamaka theory will only allow ultimate status to be ascribed to something with *svabhāva*, then clearly no such entity qualifies and thus the application of this status goes un-instantiated. In this manner the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness, which is itself empty, is arrived at.

Many ideas need further exploration here – in particular, the value and purpose of distinguishing between ultimate and conventional, if the ultimate is never instantiated, and the difficulties a rejection of ultimate truth introduces for Madhyamaka should be further investigated. In the context of the free will ‘problem’, however, it seems that the refusal to accept either reductionism or semantic dualism might serve actually to dissolve, rather than resolve, the problem. On the other hand, by rejecting semantic dualism (and accepting only the conventional level of discourse as legitimate) Madhyamaka appears closer to the Western free will problem, in which the truth status of morally relevant freedom and causal determinism are operative at the same level, than to Buddhists who posit a robust semantic dualism and therefore imply that

determinism might be ultimately true even though people might have conventional level freedom.

Although the eradication of semantic dualism means that freedom and determinism can no longer be semantically insulated and thence must be either compatible or incompatible with each other, for the Madhyamaka who rejects the idea that such terms as ‘person’ ‘freedom’ ‘determinism’ and ‘causality’ could ever have a place outside of the conceptual and functional role which we assign to them, there simply can arise no such problem as that of free will. To conclude that free will does not constitute a problem for Madhyamaka would, however, be too hasty. If all this is true only at the conventional level then the truth (or falsity) of determinism is also conventional and an account of its compatibility with free will is still required. So, as suggested above, might an exploration into how Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas understand conventional truth help us reformulate the paleo-compatibilist theory in a way useful to Madhyamaka?

Hierarchies of Convention

Once ultimate reality is rejected, it follows that the truth or falsity of compatibilism must at most pertain to the conventional domain. Since Mādhyamikas, like other Buddhists, accept the human capacity for moral perfection through the endorsement and rejection of wholesome and unwholesome attitudes respectively, as well as our capacity to make free choices on the basis of our dependently originated beliefs, it follows that they are implicitly committed to some version of compatibilism.

In the *PsP* Candrakīrti argues for the compatibility of dependent origination and moral responsibility. It is precisely because of, rather than despite, the fact of dependency that sentient beings can become free. Explaining the difference between Madhyamaka and moral nihilism, Candrakīrti says that the former “hold that good and ill acts, responsible agents, the fruits of action and the entire world of personal existence are without self-existence [i.e. *svabhāva*].”⁴⁰ Nihilists also hold that such things as virtuous and non-virtuous activity do not exist. However, the crucial difference between nihilists and Mādhyamikas is that “Mādhyamikas are exponents of the view that all things arise in dependence.”⁴¹ In other words, dependent origination undermines the extreme positions of eternalism and annihilationism equally, charting a middle way between them. Since people are neither static substances nor wholly unreal, it makes sense to attribute moral responsibility – at least at a conventional level – to the fleeting sets of causally connected *skandhas* of which we are composed across lifetimes. However, the nihilist further denies that there is any basis on which to posit existence across lifetimes and maintains that there is no compulsion to “admit that one is born into this life from another or into another life from this [and they] deny that things such as are experienced in this life exist elsewhere.”⁴² Here, Candrakīrti again invokes the theory of two truths,

⁴⁰ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 18.7. (Trans.) Sprung (1979: 179-180).

⁴¹ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 18.7. *nāstikāviśiṣṭā mādhyamikāḥ, yasmāt kuśalākuśalaṃ karma kartāraṃ ca phalaṃ ca sarvaṃ ca lokaṃ bhāvasvabhāvaśūnyam iti bruvate| nāstikā api hi etan nāstīti bruvate| tasmān nāstikāviśiṣṭā mādhyamikā iti| naivam | kutaḥ| pratītyasamutpādvādino hi mādhyamikāḥ hetupratyayān prāpya pratītyasamutpannavāt sarvaṃ evelokaparalokaṃ niḥsvabhāvaṃ varṇayanti| yathā svarūpavādīno naiva nāstikāḥ pratītyasamutpannavād bhāvasvabhāvaśūnyatvena na paralokādyabhāvaṃ pratipannāḥ||* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 368). “Les Mādhyamika ne diffèrent pas des nihilistes puisqu’ils disent que l’acte bon et mauvais, l’agent, le fruit et le monde entier sont vides de nature propre. Les nihilistes aussi disent que tout cela n’existe pas. C’est pourquoi les Mādhyamika ne diffèrent pas des nihilistes. Réponse. – Il n’en est pas ainsi. Pourquoi? En effet les Mādhyamika sont partisans de la production en raison de causes et ils disent que tout le monde présent et le monde futur sont sans nature propre, parce qu’ils sont tous issus d’une rencontre avec des causes et des conditions. Quant aux nihilistes qui croient à l’existence de substances, ce n’est pas en raison d’une vacuité de nature propre qu’ils affirment la non-existence de l’autre monde.” (Trans.) De Jong, J. (1949: 25).

⁴² Candrakīrti – *PsP* 18.7. *kiṃ tarhi aihalaūkikaṃ vastujātam upalabhya svabhāvataḥ tasya paralokādīh āgamaṇam, iha lokāc ca paralokagamaṇa paśyantūḥ iha lokopalabdha padārtha sadrśa padārthāntarāpavādaṃ kurvanti|* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 368). “Au contraire, admettant

arguing that although the nihilist and the Mādhyamika might arrive at the same conclusion, only the Mādhyamika is able to preserve the concept of karma which is vital in the pursuit of *nirvāṇa* and in the practice of ethical conduct.

As already recognized, the rejection of ultimate truth introduces a number of serious difficulties for Madhyamaka theorists. This rejection has provoked criticism of the Madhyamaka system in its entirety since the classical period of Buddhist philosophy until the present day. One objection commonly brought against Madhyamaka's acceptance of pan-fictionalism (the view that everything is a conceptual construction and lacks inherent reality) is that such an outlook leads to the trivialization of truth and to the loss of truth's normative force.⁴³ The worry is that, since metaphysical anti-realism precludes a correspondence theory of truth (on grounds that nothing has ultimate existence, *svabhāva*, and hence statements cannot express the state of affairs about the world, because there is no such state), the idea of making scientific or philosophical progress risks being undermined.

Amongst Buddhists who accept semantic dualism, it is maintained both that in certain respects these truths are 'insulated' but also that there are important 'connections' between them. These connections can account for our misapprehension of composite objects as mind-independently real (i.e. the fact that, ultimately, there are impartite *dharma*s arranged in a particular way is what explains our misguided ascription of the 'reality' of the object before us). In addition to the possibility of misapprehension, the

comme réel l'univers de la vie présente, mais ne constante pas son passage de la vie future à la vie présente et de la vie présente à la vie future, ils en viennent à nier l'existence d'autres catégories qui seraient pareilles aux catégories perçues dans ce monde." (Trans.) De Jong, J. (1949: 25). (Trans.) Sprung (1979: 179-180).

⁴³ Priest, T. Siderits, M. and Tillemans, T. (2011: 145).

connection between ultimate and conventional truths has more positive implications: this connection, according to Abhidharmas, can explain the ‘success’ of acting on the basis of conventional truth.

Abhidharma Buddhists would have no difficulty justifying the decision to administer one particular drug rather than another to a cancer patient. This is because, although the tumour and the drug are both only conventionally real, these are composed of impartite, mind-independent, *dharmas* with distinctive properties (*svalakṣaṇa*) such that the drug could meaningfully be said to destroy the tumour. That is, by explaining what occurs at the chemical level of the encounter between those *dharmas* making up the drug and those *dharmas* making up the tumour, we can also explain the interaction/ effect of the drug on the tumour, even though neither drug nor tumour ultimately exist.

Typically, Madhyamaka would be thought to face a harder task in justifying the decision to administer one drug rather than another in such a scenario. This is because, according to Madhyamaka, neither drug nor tumour, nor indeed the impartite *dharmas* of which they are composed, have *svabhāva* or exist mind-independently. However, the denial of mind-independent reality need not undermine the successful practice of medicine, or any other conventionally accepted practices or norms. Hence, any supposed superiority amongst realists concerning their ability to act ‘successfully’ turns out to be unfounded. Anti-realists too can achieve their practical and pedagogical purposes without the usual metaphysical underpinnings. Nelson Goodman illustrates this point with a most charming thought experiment:

“A friend of mine was stopped by an officer of the law for driving 56 miles an hour. She argued ‘But officer, taking the car ahead of me as fixed, I was not

moving at all.’ ‘Never mind that... you were going 56 miles an hour along the road... and this is what is fixed.’ ‘Oh, come now, officer;... this road is not fixed at all but is rotating rapidly eastward on its axis. Since I was driving westward I was going slower than those cars parked over there.’ ‘O.K. lady, I’ll give them all tickets for speeding right now – and you get a ticket for parking in the highway.’⁴⁴

The point is that even if frames of reference determine the truth status of sentences, we are not thereby free to invent whichever frame of reference we fancy. Instead we must adhere to the accepted principles and norms by which a convention is established. Siderits has suggested that the expression ‘conventional truth’ derives its meaning through implicit contrast with the expression ‘ultimate truth.’⁴⁵ This being so, as Śāntideva retorts against his opponent, the ‘reality’ of the conventional/ ultimate distinction itself exists through convention.⁴⁶

It should be noted, however, that at no point do Madhyamaka theorists reject the *notion* of ultimate truth (and so the notion of conventional truth can still be contrasted with it) – they simply reject the instantiation of any ultimately real entity and, therefore, the possibility of any ultimately true statement. A more pressing question in light of the above is ‘how can we distinguish between conventional truth and conventional falsehood?’

⁴⁴ Goodman, N. (1989: 84).

⁴⁵ Siderits (2003).

⁴⁶ Śāntideva – BCA 9.106. *yady evaṃ saṃvṛtir nāsti tataḥ satyadvayaṃ kutaḥ| atha sāpy anyasaṃvṛtyā syāt sattvo nirvṛtaḥ kutaḥ||* “[Objection] If, this being the case, conventional truth does not exist, then how can there be two truths? [Mādhyamika] In fact it does exist according to the conventional truth of another. [Objection] How can there exist a liberated being?”(Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 126).

The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Debate

The relevance of attending to the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debate as a means of approaching the Buddhist free will problem may not be immediately clear. However, as has already been suggested, if paleo-compatibilism can be modified such that it no longer relies on semantic dualism but instead relies on a hierarchy of ‘less’ and ‘more’ sophisticated truths within the domain of convention, it may prove effective as a solution to the free will problem in the Madhyamaka context too. Given that the status and means of establishing conventional truth occupies a central place in debates between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, it is important to our investigation that the basis, nature and depth of their disagreements should be explored.

Appealing to scripture, Candrakīrti provides a quotation from the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* in support of the idea that conventional truth is nothing more or less than what the spiritually unenlightened profess.⁴⁷ He declares: “What is agreed upon 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.”⁴⁸ Such thoroughgoing conventionalism, characterized by the inability or unwillingness to challenge the status quo, would be, as Tillemans suggests, epistemologically ‘dismal.’⁴⁹ Understood thus, and in combination with

⁴⁷ Candrakīrti’s reference is to chapter 1 of the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra*. The source, as Tillemans (2011: 151) indicates, can be traced back to the Saṃyutta Nikāya, 22.94. *nāham bhikkhave lokena vivadāmi loko ca mayā vivadati| na bhikkhave dhammavādī kenaci lokasmiṃ vavadati| yam bhikkhave natthi sammatam loka paṇḍitānam aham pi tam natthī ti vadāmi| yam bhikkhave atthi sammatam loka paṇḍitānam aham pi tam atthīti vadāmi||* PTS, Feer (Vol. 3, 1960: 138). “Bhikkhus, I do not dispute with the world; rather, it is the world that disputes with me. A proponent of the Dhamma does not dispute with anyone in the world. Of that which the wise in the world agree upon as not existing, I too say that it does not exist. And of that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists.” (Trans.) Bodhi (2000: 949).

⁴⁸ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 18.8. *loko mayā sārđhaṃ vivadati| nāham lokena sārđhaṃ vivadāmi| yal loka ‘sti saṃmataṃ tan mamāpy asti saṃmataṃ| yal loka nāsti saṃmataṃ| mamāpy tan nāsti saṃmataṃ|* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 370).

⁴⁹ Tillemans (2011: 152).

Candrakīrti's other comments on conventional truth – such as that it is deceptive and sometimes even entirely false – Madhyamaka's epistemic prospects look bleak. Indeed, at *MAV* 6.28 Candrakīrti writes: “Delusion is a screen (*saṃvṛti*) precisely because it obstructs [awareness of the] intrinsic nature [of all things], and on its account, what is merely fabricated appears to be real. The sage declared that this ‘[is the truth of the screen, and that an entity which is [pure] fabrication is a mere screen.’”⁵⁰

Madhyamaka is, however, equipped to respond to charges of epistemic hopelessness and, as shall be seen, Candrakīrti's own attitude towards conventional truth transpires to be both more sophisticated and malleable than the above quotations would seem to imply. For, if conventional truth amounts to nothing more than what people say, how could we adjudicate between competing claims? Since Mādhyamikas, including Candrakīrti, are unwilling simply to defer to the masses on questions of philosophy, ethics and soteriology, it is clear that Prāsaṅgika (just as Svātantrika) Buddhists must have better means for determining truth than polling for a majority view. As the history of science attests, the entire notion of ‘progress’ depends upon the possibility of countering the prevailing consensus and questioning commonly accepted ideas. If Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas have no means of challenging convention, they would be disqualified from intellectually demanding pursuits – such as philosophy or science – and, hence, it would be absurd to award them a meaningful place in the history of ideas.

To understand Candrakīrti's account of conventional truth it must be situated against the backdrop of the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debate. In expressing his views on

⁵⁰ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.28. *mohaḥ svabhāvāvaraṇād dhi saṃvṛtiḥ satyaṃ tayā khyāti yad eva kṛtrimam/ jagāda tat saṃvṛtisatyam ity asau muniḥ padārthaṃ kṛtakañ ca saṃvṛtiḥ*// Li (2015: 7). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:160).

conventional truth, Candrakīrti sought to defend a distinctively Prāsaṅgika interpretation of Nāgārjuna as had been advanced by Buddhapālita. Yet Buddhapālita's methods had been subject to criticism by Bhāviveka who preferred – and considered it legitimate – to use independent inferences (*svatantrānumāna*). It was against such inferences that Candrakīrti so staunchly objected on grounds that they were incompatible with the 'middle way' itself.⁵¹

Although the terms 'Svātantrika' and 'Prāsaṅgika' have now become commonplace, it is everywhere accepted that this way of categorizing Madhyamaka thought is a later Tibetan contribution, introduced several centuries after Candrakīrti. Indeed, these labels are not present in Indian Madhyamaka literature but reflect translations from Tibetan and, although they might be helpful to modern scholarship, it is important to note that they were only retrospectively applicable.⁵² Whatever the disagreements between himself and Bhāviveka, then, Candrakīrti did not consider himself as engaged in the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debate and, however poignant the differences between Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka, he is not likely to have treated them as doxographically divisive.

Due to the unavoidable anachronism, many scholars recognize that the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction can be accepted only with caution. For example, Huntington argues that the terms 'Svātantrika' and 'Prāsaṅgika' are problematic not only because

⁵¹ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.3. *ātmanas tarkaśāstrātikauśalamātram āviścikīrṣayā aṅgīkṛtamadhyamakadarśanasyāpi yat svatantraprayogavākyaḥbhidhānam tad atitarām anekadoṣasamudāyāspadam asya tārīkasyopalakṣyate*|| MacDonald, A (Vol. 1, 2015: 167). “Moreover, this logician's (*tārīka*) [i.e. Bhāviveka's] asserting – despite [his] acceptance of the Madhyamaka view (*madhyamakadarśana*) – of independent inferential statements (*svatantraprayogavākya*) out of desire to communicate [therewith] no more than his extreme skill (*atikauśala*) in the science of reasoning (*tarkaśāstra*) is observed to be, to a more extreme degree (*atitarām*) the basis for an assemblage of many faults.” (Trans.) MacDonald, A. (Vol. 2, 2015: 91).

⁵² Ames (2003: 41).

they are neologisms absent from Indian Madhyamaka sources but also because they give credibility to the concept of a break *within* the Madhyamaka tradition. Such a notion, he maintains, would find no affinity with proponents of either the *prasaṅga* or the *svatantrānumāna* method. To use Ruegg’s language, it could be said that the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction only makes sense from the ‘etic’ perspective (i.e. from the perspective of the outsider looking in) and that, from the ‘emic’ point of view (i.e. from the point of view of Mādhyamikas practising self-reflection), it lacks applicability.⁵³ This is because Madhyamaka (i.e. ‘middle way’) philosophers see themselves as defined by their ability and commitment to chart a course between extremes. By conceding multiple versions of what constitutes the ‘middle way’ Mādhyamikas would automatically lose the centre ground, opening up the possibility of infinitely many interpretations of Madhyamaka. Accordingly, Huntington argues that the idea of different versions of the middle way would have been anathema to writers like Candrakīrti who, ironically, has been elevated to the status of the main consolidator, if not also founder, of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. Although it is perhaps tempting to treat the repudiation of alternative expressions of Madhyamaka as a kind of dogmatism, it is equally true that Mādhyamikas refuse to subscribe to any ‘views’ at all. Thus Huntington observes that in a “twist of fate... Candrakīrti was posthumously awarded highest honors from an orthodox scholarly tradition that could sustain its authority only by refusing to take seriously what he himself had insisted upon: Nāgārjuna is not in the business of providing rational arguments designed to substantiate, prove, establish, or make certain anything.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ruegg (1989: 3).

⁵⁴ Huntington (2003: 84).

Despite all this, the terms ‘Svātantrika’ and ‘Prāsaṅgika’ remain useful as hermeneutical tools – especially in the preliminary stages of investigation into the vast body of Madhyamaka’s philosophical literature. Yet, as scholars now realize, there is no simple way of classifying the ancient Indian Mādhyamikas. Indeed, even on matters where Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika theorists are traditionally thought to differ, there are unexpected points of convergence. For example, as Salvini argues, the idea that Candrakīrti must merely accept a plateau of conventions is not unambiguously attested by textual evidence.⁵⁵ Instead, there is reason to believe that Candrakīrti does in fact acknowledge varying degrees of truth within the domain of convention and that, despite his Prāsaṅgika commitments, he is not consigned to an epistemological ‘dismal slough.’⁵⁶ For whilst Candrakīrti does declare at *MAV* 6.35 that “the conventional truth of everyday experience is not to be critically examined” he also accepts that there are standards by which we can judge claims about conventional reality, such as whether they are premised on faulty or reliable faculties (between which there must evidently be a spectrum).⁵⁷ Similarly, though we might expect Prāsaṅgika writers like Śāntideva and Prajñākaramati to echo the point made at *MAV* 6.35, in fact at *BCA* 9.4 and its commentary we again encounter the idea of a spectrum of insight even within the conventional. Śāntideva writes: “Even the views of the spiritually developed are invalidated by the superior understanding of those at successively higher levels, by means of an analogy which is accepted by both parties, irrespective of what they intend to prove.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Salvini (2008: 191).

⁵⁶ Tillemans (2011: 152).

⁵⁷ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.35. *arvān na tattvātmakarūpato ’mī sthitim labhante pravicyāyamāṇāḥ/ yataḥ padārthā na tato vicāraḥ kāryo hi lokavyavahārasatyē//* Li (2015: 8). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:161).

⁵⁸ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.4. *bādhyante dhīviśeṣeṇa yogino ’py uttarottaraiḥ/ drṣṭāntenobhayeṣṭeṇa kāryārtham avicārataḥ//* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 115).

The foregoing points explain why determining the precise nature of the dispute between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Mādhyamikas has itself been a source of contention.⁵⁹ In large part, the disagreement appears to pivot on the suitability of a specific argumentative procedure involving the use of independent inferences (*svatantrānumāna*) for the establishment of one's own conclusions. However, it is questionable whether methodological differences alone are a sufficient explanation for such a persistent rift between advocates and opponents of *svatantrānumāna*. Rather, because the use of/ abstention from this methodology has ramifications on the content of the ensuing philosophical vision, it seems that both the strategy and the conclusions it engenders are equally relevant factors driving the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika disagreement. Thus, the focal point of the debate is at once both methodological and ontological, and concerns such questions as whether *svabhāva* could be 'established' even at the conventional level (an idea Prāsaṅgikas adamantly deny but Svātantrikas are more open to).

Prāsaṅgikas typically conceive the Madhyamaka strategy as involving abstention from all points of view equally. They thus deny the suitability of inferential arguments for the establishment of any thesis on grounds that, whilst the content of specific views may indeed be objectionable, the holding of any view whatsoever constitutes a serious impediment to liberation because it signals attachment and clinging in the one who holds it. Hence, at *MAV* 6.119 Candrakīrti states: "Attachment to one's own philosophical view and aversion to the view of another is evidence of reified thinking.

⁵⁹ Dreyfus and McClintock (2003).

When one sets aside attachment and aversion and analyzes [all views], he will quickly find liberation.”⁶⁰

Conventions and Successful Practice

Candrakīrti presents Bhāviveka as ‘obsessed’ (*prīyānumānatā*) with logic and the quest for epistemic certainty (*nīścaya*), attributing these preoccupations to his failure fully to understand the soteriological implications of the teaching of emptiness.⁶¹ Launching his attack on Bhāviveka in the first chapter of the *PsP*, Candrakīrti rhetorically asks: “when we do not allow for any certainty then why would we imagine some valid means of knowledge? What would it serve to establish? How many such valid means of knowledge would there be?”⁶² Although, *prima facie*, it is tempting to see denial of epistemic certainty as tantamount to the ‘dismal slough’ proposed by Tillemans, a more charitable interpretation is available. Nāgārjuna himself makes much the same point at *VV* 22 where he remarks that, contrary to what the opponent claims, the *Mādhyamika* is not disqualified from the use of epistemic instruments simply by virtue of denying their inherent validity, just as chariots, pots and cloth *et cetera* retain their functions even for those who profess emptiness.⁶³ Rather, correct apprehension of emptiness is

⁶⁰ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.119. *svadṛṣṭirāgo 'pi hi kalpanaiva tathānyadṛṣṭāv api yaś ca roṣaḥ| vidhūya rāgaṃ pratighaṃ ca tasmād vicārayan kṣipram upaiti muktim||* Li (2015: 18-19). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:171).

⁶¹ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.3. *tasmāt sarvathā priyānumānatām evātmana ācāryaḥ prakāṣayati asthāne 'py anumānaṃ praveśayan| na ca mādhyamikasya svataḥ svatantram anumānaṃ kartuṃ yuktaṃ pakṣāntarābhīyupagamābhāvāt||* MacDonald, A (Vol. 1, 2015: 145-146). “Thus, the Master [Bhāviveka], introducing an inference even when it is inopportune (*asthāna*), reveals nothing but his liking – at all costs (*sarvathā*) – for inference. But because he does not maintain any other position (*pakṣa*), it is not right for the *Mādhyamika* himself to formulate an autonomous inference (*svatantram anumānaṃ*).” (Trans.) MacDonald, A. (Vol. 2, 2015: 61).

⁶² Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.3. *yadā caivaṃ nīścayasyābhāvaḥ tadā kasya prasiddhyartham pramāṇāni parikalpayiṣyāmaḥ||* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 56-57).

⁶³ Nāgārjuna – *VV* 22. *yathā ca pratīyasamutpannatvāt svabhāvaśūnyā api rathapaṭaḥṭādayaḥ sveṣu sveṣu kāryeṣu kṣātrānāmṛttikāharāṇe madhūdakapayasāṃ dhārāṇe śītavātātapaparitrāṇaprabhṛtiṣu vartante evam idaṃ madīyavacanaṃ pratīyasamutpannatvān niḥsvabhāvaṃ api niḥsvabhāvatvaprāsādhane bhāvānām vartate||* (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 27) “Therefore it follows that

accompanied by a fundamental shift in attitude towards the role and value of the epistemic instruments which are no longer thought of as delivering mind-independent facts but are instead treated as practically useful tools for spiritual advancement.

It is this account of conventional truth as coterminous with successful practice that explains why Candrakīrti unquestioningly accepts commonplace beliefs of everyday experience, such as that rice comes from rice and that barley comes from barley.⁶⁴ For Candrakīrti, the difference between conventional truths and falsehoods lies in their respective abilities and inabilities to promote successful practice. Although the causal relationship between seed and sprout is empty (*niḥsvabhāva*), it is precisely this feature which guarantees its efficacy. Moreover, the value of such conventionally established truths lies in their practical utility, as when a farmer desires to harvest crops. In this connection, Huntington has said that “the Mādhyamika philosopher is prepared to concede to the force of pragmatic demands as entirely sufficient for definition of cause-effect relation.”⁶⁵ Indeed, far from being precluded by emptiness, causal relations are actually thereby facilitated because there can be no arising or perishing of inherently existent entities which, by definition, cannot be dependent for their existence on any other entity or process.⁶⁶ Taken together these points reveal that, for Candrakīrti, as

in the same way my own speech is without substance, because it is dependently arisen, and because it is without substance it is empty. For instance a chariot, pot, cloth, and so forth, which are empty of substance because they are dependently originated, perform in their respective ways by removing wood, grass, earth, by containing honey, water, or milk, and by bringing forth protection against cold, wind, or heat.”

⁶⁴ Candrakīrti *MAV* 6.16. *iṣṭā yathā na janakā na ca śaktiyuktā naivaikasantatigatāḥ sadṛśā na caiva| śālyankurasya yavakesarakimśukādyā no śālibījam api tasya tathā paratvāt||* Li (2015: 6). “[Response] You do not assume that a barley seed, or a seed of the Kesara, the Kimśuka, or any other flower seed produces a rice sprout, because they do not possess the capability to do so, because they are not included in the same continuum [with the rice sprout], and because they are not similar to it. In just the same way, because of the fact that it is different [from the sprout], the grain of rice lacks [the characteristic features of that sprout].” (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992: 159).

⁶⁵ Huntington (1992: 42).

⁶⁶ The impossibility of the production of *dharmas* with *svabhāva* is the central topic of the opening chapter of Nāgārjuna’s *MMK*. The arguments supplied for such a view will be explicated in more detail in chapter 4.

indeed for subsequent Prāsaṅgikas, conventional truths are supremely important because: (a) they reflect truths about the most ontologically robust entities there are, namely conventionally existent (*prajñapti-sat*) entities and (b) they enable fulfillment of our goals through successful practice. Those who interpret Candrakīrti as denigrating conventional truth face a momentous challenge in explaining the importance he assigns to conventions in leading to perfect wisdom, as when he likens conventional truth to the cup a thirsty person must drink from to quench their thirst.⁶⁷

The key differences between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika thinkers notwithstanding, both camps converge on the idea of conventional truths facilitating successful practice. Textual evidence to support the idea that Bhāviveka accommodates a hierarchy of conventions is more straightforward than that explored above in connection with Candrakīrti. For example, in the *Mādhyamikaḥṛdayakārikā* Bhāviveka draws on the image of a staircase to illustrate the idea that not all conventions are equally sophisticated but are rather incrementally structured. He elaborates: “Also, without the stairs of the *tathya-saṃvṛti* (conventional reality), the ascension to the top of the palace of ultimate reality (*tattva*) is lost. For this very reason, firstly, the *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth) should be discerned by the intelligence. Thence one proceeds to investigate thoroughly the unique and the universal characteristics of *dharma*s.”⁶⁸

Bhāviveka inherits Nāgārjuna’s conception of the two truths existing relationally and in conceptual dependence upon one another.

⁶⁷ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 24.10. *tasmān nirvāṇādhigamopāyatvād avāśyam eva yathāvasthitā saṃvṛtir ādāv evābhyupeyā bhājanam iva salilārthin eti*|| Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 494). “Il faut donc nécessairement, au début tout au moins, admettre la réalité de surface telle qu’elle est constituée, puisqu’elle est un moyen d’atteindre à l’extinction; de même celui qui veut puiser de l’eau [doit servir d’]un récipient.” (Trans.) May, J. (1959: 229).

⁶⁸ Bhāviveka – *Mādhyamikaḥṛdayakārikā* 3.12-13. *tattvaprāsādaśikharārohaṇam na hi yujyate tathyasamvṛtisopānam antareṇa yatas tataḥ| pūrvaṃ saṃvṛtisatyena praviviktamatir bhavet tato dharmasvasāmānyalakṣaṇe sviniścitaḥ*|| (Trans.) Iida (1980: 67).

Though the intricacies of the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika debate have led us some considerable distance from the Buddhist free will problem and the possibility of a paleo-compatibilist solution to it, the foregoing exploration lays the foundations for a modified version of Siderits's original theory suitable for a Madhyamaka context. As the image of a staircase suggests, the relationship between ultimate and conventional truth is not binary but is instead on a continuum. Certain conventions are more true than others not because they reflect reality more accurately (there is no mind-independent reality to reflect) but because some are more soteriologically efficacious than others.

Madhyamaka Paleo-Compatibilism

It is the contention of this chapter that paleo-compatibilism can be modified such that the 'semantic insulation' of conventional and ultimate truth is replaced with the idea of 'less' and 'more' sophisticated conventions, where these evaluative terms denote soteriological efficacy. As previously discussed, the semantic insulation between the two truths is an exaggerated feature of the paleo-compatibilist theory in its original formulation and is not critical to its success. Indeed, although Siderits emphasizes semantic insulation, whether it can be achieved and whether the two domains really are incommensurable has already been called into question. For this reason there is little compulsion for the reconstructivist to retain the insistence on semantic insulation in the reformulated version.

Instead, if the status of 'less' or 'more' sophisticated is ascribed to conventions on the basis of their propensity to induce spiritual insights and cultivate liberating attitudes, then the level of sophistication and the subject's spiritual state will be mutually

determining factors. That is, the sophistication of a conventional truth depends in equal measure on the proposition itself and the context in which it is uttered. This subjectivity (or relativism) is entirely consistent with Madhyamaka’s implicit commitment to anti-realism and explicit commitment to mutual dependency: just as a statement’s level of sophistication depends on the mental state of the being who receives it, so too does the mental state of the being influence the sophistication of the statement. This is in accord with the universal Buddhist principle of pedagogical skillfulness (*upāya*), attested throughout the various traditions and already examined with reference to passages such as *Ratnāvalī* 4.94. Without the concept of *upāya* it would be impossible to make sense of the antinomian exhortations scattered throughout Buddhist literature and discourse (for example, the Hevajra Tantra contends that bodhisattvas can perform “the act of slaying... accompanied by the strenuous arousing of compassion”).⁶⁹ To give advice like this to spiritually undeveloped people would be extremely dangerous. In contrast, to a bodhisattva nearing the end of her spiritual quest, attachment of any kind (including to the Buddha or to Buddhism) is a major impediment to final liberation and must be relinquished. This is the basic meaning of the parable of the raft, in which the Buddha ridicules the idea of retaining equipment – with purely instrumental value – once its purpose is fulfilled.⁷⁰

A further point of clarification for the reformulated version of paleo-compatibilism is whether the truth of psycho-physical determinism or the truth of free will and moral responsibility is the more sophisticated. Here our attempt to rearticulate paleo-

⁶⁹ *The Hevajra Tantra* 7.22. *krpāhīnā na sidhyanti tasmāt krpām utpādayet| duṣṭāvatāraṇe sarvaṃ vidhimukhyāt prasidhyati|* Snellgrove, D.L. (Vol. 2, 1959: 24). (Trans.) Snellgrove, D.L. (Vol.1, 1959: 72).

⁷⁰ Majjhima Nikāya 22, Alagaddūpama Sutta, (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995: 224-236).

compatibilism for Madhyamaka purposes faces some complications. As expressed in Siderits's original theory, the truth of psycho-physical determinism is ultimate and that of the freedom of persons conventional. However, when it comes to mapping these truths onto the new model where ultimate/ conventional have been replaced by more/ less sophisticated the correspondence between 'ultimate' and 'more' on the one hand, and 'conventional' and 'less' on the other, is not necessarily isomorphic. Setting aside the question of whether Mādhyamikas would accept the thesis of psycho-physical determinism for the moment, the reconstructivist still faces the challenge of evaluating the soteriological advantages or disadvantages that would ensue from such acceptance. For a proposition to count as sophisticated its acceptance must encourage the adoption of enlightening attitudes and practices. Whilst it is perhaps intuitive to suppose that belief in free will is more conducive to liberation than belief in universal determinism (which some fear would lead to moral apathy nihilism), the jury is still out.

It might be objected that the correspondence between 'ultimate' and 'more' sophisticated truths in the two versions of paleo-compatibilism is obvious: impartite entities can be psycho-physically determined whereas, as complex 'wholes,' persons cannot, i.e. even if determinism holds at a micro-level there is no reason to suppose it also holds at a macro-level. However, whilst still leaving aside the contentious topic of how dependent origination and determinism relate, it is clear that the *sophistication* of a given convention depends on much more than the mereological structure of the conventionally existent entities. Since Mādhyamikas deny the reducibility of any whole to a set of inherently real impartite *dharmas*, we cannot decide the sophistication of a truth by analyzing the ways in which the whole can be broken down.

Yet, for all the difficulties involved, Madhyamaka theorists acknowledge the importance of acquiring belief in the correct conventions without which the truth that there is no ultimate truth remains forever unattainable. Contrary to the claims of imagined Ābhidharmika rivals (*MMK* 24.1-6), Mādhyamikas see the core components of Buddhist belief and practice as legitimated – and not undermined – by their merely conventional status. Hence, Nāgārjuna asserts the need to employ conventional truths in order to attain knowledge of the ultimate truth.

Is Free Will a Problem?

Despite the absence of anything resembling the free will problem in classical Indian philosophy, the Madhyamaka system has the conceptual apparatus – at least conventionally – to recognize and respond to an analogous problem. Though Madhyamaka does not accept the ultimate presence of the free will problem, this tells us little: indeed, Madhyamaka does not accept the ultimate reality of anything at all. Moreover, the fact that the truths of determinism and free will (if indeed they are truths) occupy the same semantic level means that the pressing question of their compatibility must be addressed.

In this final section we ask, *for whom* is free will problematic? Since only the fully enlightened are rid of all conceptualizations, reifications and problematizing tendencies, the unenlightened still face the challenge of squaring free will with determinism or indeterminism. Enlightened beings, who not only understand but also psychologically internalize emptiness, are no longer perturbed by efforts to rationalize and harmonize the seemingly incompatible features of experience. As Nāgārjuna says

in what some scholars take to be the final, and thus especially significant for its mirroring of the text's *mangala śloka*, verse of the *MMK*: “This halting of cognizing everything, the halting of hypostatizing is blissful. No *Dharma* whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone.”⁷¹

Although bodhisattvas are thought to transcend worldly conventions (in the sense that they are no longer fooled by their deceptiveness) they nevertheless continue to act for the sake of others. Śāntideva takes up the stimulating topic of how enlightened beings can both act and transcend action at *BCA* 9. 35-37, arguing both that the vows taken prior to enlightenment retain their power even afterwards (“just as a pillar empowered by an expert on poisons, who then dies, will continue to neutralize venom and other poisons even when he is long dead”) and that Buddhas appear as projections in the minds of the unenlightened questing after liberation (“the Conqueror is seen because of... the people who need to be trained”).⁷² Reflecting on this question (of action and the transcendence of action) sheds important light on the value of paleo-compatibilism both for the enlightened and the unenlightened.

Todd has argued that the coherence and credibility of Śāntideva's call for altruism and for the impartial extension of compassion relies on the idea of ‘flickering’ within the

⁷¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 25.24 *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ | na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ ||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 305).

⁷² Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.36-38. *cintāmaṇiḥ kalpatarur yathecchāparipūraṇaḥ| vineyaprañidhānābhyāṃ jinabimbaṃ tathekṣyate|| yathā gāruḍikaḥ stambhaṃ sādhyatvā vinaśyati| sa tasmimś ciranaṣṭe 'pi viśādīn upaśāmayet|| bodhicaryānurūpyeṇa jinastambho 'pi sādhitāḥ| karoti sarvakāryāṇi bodhisattve 'pi nirvṛte||* “(36) As the wishing-gem and the magical tree fulfil desires, so the appearance of the Conqueror is seen because of his vow and the people who need to be trained. (37) Just as a pillar empowered by an expert on poisons, who then dies, will continue to neutralize venom and other poisons even when he is long dead, (38) So too the ‘pillar’ that is the Conqueror, empowered by following the path to Awakening, continues to achieve all ends even after that Bodhisattva has attained Enlightenment.” (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 118-119).

bodhisattva's conscious states.⁷³ Such flickering, he argues, is the best way to make sense of the bodhisattva's ability to interact with conventional reality whilst at the same time retaining awareness of all-pervading emptiness at a deeper level. On this interpretation enlightened beings see the world from both the conventional and ultimate standpoints but cannot do so simultaneously because the two 'visions' cancel each other out, just as looking at bi-stable images leads to mutually exclusive perceptual engagements in rapid succession. The flickering theory explains how bodhisattvas act (for which recognition of the 'reality' of persons and the causes of their suffering is required) while still transcending conventions.

The idea that even enlightened beings are prevented from holding contradictory conventions simultaneously is significant. If enlightened beings can believe either the 'more' sophisticated conventional truth of all-pervasive emptiness or the 'less' sophisticated conventional truth of the reality of people in need, but cannot hold both together, how can we expect unenlightened beings to realize that the free will problem is not as deep seated or intractable as is ordinarily supposed? As was argued above, the resolution (we might just as accurately say 'dissolution') of the free will problem depends on keeping the 'less' and 'more' sophisticated truths of determinism and morally relevant free will apart. Hence, free will remains a problem only for so long as these conventions are conflated. In this way, modified paleo-compatibilism closely resembles the original version of the thesis.

Nevertheless, the flickering theory is not immune from criticism. In particular, the theory suggests that bodhisattvas voluntarily embrace delusions for the benefit of other

⁷³ Todd (2013: 58).

beings. In order to ameliorate the circumstances of another being, at some level, the bodhisattva must grant the reality of that being. The suggestion that an enlightened being is subject to delusions, even if they are voluntarily induced, is objectionable.⁷⁴ Alternative accounts as to how an enlightened being could accept the truth of human freedom and psycho-physical determinism might be available and will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Conclusions

The value of the paleo-compatibilist theory is gaining definition. Depending on one's spiritual state, the role afforded to the theory differs. Although there may be intermediary steps, with blurred boundaries between the successive stages of the spiritual path, the theory works insofar as it assumes new roles for different people. To the spiritually under-developed, the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination may be perceived as a serious assault on the possibility of freedom (both for one's actions and in the deeper sense of liberation from suffering). For such people, the original formulation of paleo-compatibilism serves an important function, preserving the idea of freedom, accommodating the idea of karmic responsibility and upholding the ultimacy of dependent origination. However, for the more spiritually advanced, the non-instantiation of any entity with *svabhāva* means that, if free will and determinism are both true they can only be so conventionally.

If the flickering theory is correct then only one level of truth can be maintained at any given time. So, although the truths of free will and determinism are no longer

⁷⁴ This objection will be explored in further detail in chapter 7.

semantically insulated, they may be psychologically incompatible. The difficulty involved in simultaneously seeing the two truths *as* truths is arguably similar to the difficulties of identification experienced when confronted by the rabbit-duck illusion. The object in view flickers back and forth, sometimes being perceived as a rabbit and sometimes as a duck, but seeing both at the same time is impossible. It is only at the point of full spiritual liberation (the point at which conventions may be hierarchically nested for the purpose of leading other beings to freedom) that the problem, ultimately, is completely dissolved and ceases even to be a problem.

If acceptance of the two truths cannot coincide then perhaps there is not a free will problem in need of resolution. Articulated in the context of anti-realist metaphysics, arguably the nature of the free will problem in the Buddhist context is more practical than it is metaphysical: that is, the primary problem under consideration might be how best practically to dislodge the patterns of thought and behavior which keep beings locked into the suffering of *samsāra*.

Nevertheless, practical problems also require resolution. Can an appreciation of the paleo-compatibilist theory, coupled with meditative practices, gradually lead a person to a point at which the problem ceases to be of concern? If by meditating we can gradually cultivate states of mind conducive to liberation (in which we discern the pervasiveness of emptiness) then, of its own accord, the free will problem will subside. Along the path to liberation, during which consciousness flickers between acceptance of the truth of free will and the truth of determinism, paleo-compatibilism may be of pragmatic value. At the end of the spiritual path, characterized as a middle point

between extremes, the enlightened being may realize the point made by Candrakīrti:
that it is precisely *because* of dependent origination that freedom is possible.

Chapter 4

Causes and Conditions: Determinism and Dependence

“Nothing will come of nothing.”

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

“Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:
Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.”¹

Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 1.1

Previous chapters have argued for the legitimacy and value of philosophically ‘reconstructive’ projects whose aim is to articulate implied Buddhist views on the free will problem. Whilst a modified version of paleo-compatibilism seems potentially viable as a solution in a Madhyamaka context, other contending theories are yet to be examined. Until now, the question of how to interpret Madhyamaka’s conception of causation – including whether Madhyamaka is implicitly committed to the thesis of universal causal determinism – has been postponed. However, the centrality of this thesis to Western accounts of the free will problem means that any credible assessment of the implied Buddhist attitude must ascertain the comparability of causal determinism and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

The dangers associated with reconstructivism (such as anachronism or the superimposition of one framework onto another) have already been assessed. Whilst such dangers can be eliminated, or at least mitigated, through a concerted effort to understand Buddhism as far as is possible on its own terms, the reconstructivist should remain particularly alert to these potential pitfalls when analysing the notion of

¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 1.1. *na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ| utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana ke cana||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 18).

causation. This is because, as Gangadean argues, “the possibility of making comparative judgments on causality presupposes a univocal and formal concept of causality.”² Without this, he contends, we cannot be sure that the two systems being compared do not accept such radically different views about causation as to be speaking past each other in merely seeming disagreement. That is, without at least some convergence between two systems over what counts as a cause or over the ontological status of causation, for example, it is impossible to engage in meaningful comparative work and the question of their ‘incommensurability’ remains unsettled.

There are at least two stages involved in establishing the comparability of causal determinism and dependent origination:

First, it is necessary to compare and contrast how classical Madhyamaka philosophers and contemporary Western theorists understand the concept of cause. This step is in itself a challenge, for, as shall become clear, there is no widespread agreement amongst Western philosophers on what counts as the correct conception of causation. Indeed, some scholars suggest that the sheer array of competing theories about causation is such that “no univocal analysis of the concept” is possible.³ If this is correct then, for the current project to succeed, the investigation must be limited to particular Western models of causation with which it seems reasonable to compare Madhyamaka thought. Aside from the tedium that a review of the many causal theories in the history of Western philosophy would produce, it would also be superfluous given that the Humean model of causation stands out as an especially clear starting point for our

² Gangadean (1975: 65).

³ Beebe, Hitchcock, and Menzies (2009: 1).

investigation. Despite the *prima facie* commonalities between Madhyamaka and Humean theories of causation, however, it is still necessary to probe how far similarities between the two reflect a deep convergence of opinion. Indeed, scholars such as Bliss have recently lamented the growing trend towards reading Madhyamaka through a Humean lens, arguing that this is entirely misguided. Rather than see the ‘empty’ (*śūnya*) and ‘conventional’ (*saṃvṛti*) nature of causation as consistent with Hume’s proposed ‘regularity thesis,’ Bliss argues that, on the contrary, “where there are no necessary connections between cause and effect, cause and effect fail to be empty.”⁴ The details of Bliss’s view may perhaps be wanting, but, nevertheless, her staunch opposition to Humean readings of Madhyamaka reveals how even seemingly straightforward comparisons between Buddhist and Western causal theories can be strongly contested.

The second point of investigation asks whether we should expect our conclusions on the similarities and differences between causal determinism and dependent origination to yield useful insights into Madhyamaka’s attitude towards free will. Even if it transpires that Buddhist and (some) Western philosophers share the concept of causation, would Mādhyamikas treat the idea of causal determinism as an assault on our freedom and on the concept of moral responsibility? Alternatively, are there ways of understanding causal determinism which make it is “not directly relevant to the problem of free will in the Buddhist context,” as Meyers contends?⁵ In particular, if the anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka holds up, then the deterministic claim that there is only one metaphysically possible future loses its force and is relegated to a

⁴ Bliss (2015).

⁵ Meyers (2013: 48).

merely conventional status. Moreover, when the reconstructivist contextualizes Madhyamaka's conception of causal dependency relations alongside the mereological and conceptually imputative dimensions of dependency also recognized in this system, it becomes clear that the three types of dependence are hierarchically structured so that causal and mereological relations themselves turn out to be conceptually imputed. Madhyamaka considers recognition of dependent origination's more subtle features to be soteriologically beneficial, helping spiritual aspirants to realize that causal concepts (which are inseparable from notions of 'agency' and 'free will' for example) are foisted onto experience rather than discovered there. Whilst Western free will theorists expend energy reconciling causal determinism and freedom, the Mādhyamika might contend that such efforts are superfluous to, and perhaps even a distraction from, the more immediate goal of eradicating the tendency to impute a fixed structure onto an ultimately empty metaphysical landscape.

Buddhist Models of Causation

The themes of impermanence, change and conditionality have been central to Buddhism ever since its inception, but, as Dhammajoti argues, questions about causation and conditionality became "special topics of concern" with the systematization of Abhidharma thought.⁶ Dhammajoti suggests that such systematization led to the formulation of two competing accounts of causation: the 'four conditions' and the 'six causes' schemas. He also thinks it is likely that the 'four conditions' model preceded that of the 'six causes' and that the former is either

⁶ Dhammajoti (2007: 181).

implicit or embedded in the *sūtra* literature.⁷ Although there are elements of overlap between these schemas, the presence of competing models *within* Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma only makes the reconstructivist's task of delineating Madhyamaka's conception of causation more complicated. For, as has been argued in chapter 3, Mādhyamikas often accept the arguments and conceptual classifications of their Buddhist rivals as provisional, even though they challenge the 'ultimate' (*paramārtha*) status typically ascribed to them in pre-Mahāyāna systems. In the absence of a single account of causation around which all Ābhidharmikas converge, therefore, it is difficult for the reconstructivist to know which existing Buddhist model of causation Madhyamaka accepts, albeit only conventionally.

To understand Madhyamaka's view of causation, then, we should begin by classifying the relationship between causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*). Walser reiterates this point, observing that Nāgārjuna's attitude towards his Buddhist predecessors and contemporaries is neither one of blanket acceptance nor blanket denial: nevertheless, he argues, it is telling that the most obvious Abhidharma references in the works of Nāgārjuna occur in chapter 1 of the *MMK* (on causation) where the intended target appears to be Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma.⁸ Walser aims to show that Nāgārjuna's philosophical vision is the result both of intellectual and pragmatic considerations and that it reflects his ongoing struggle to negotiate Madhyamaka's position in relation to previously existing Buddhist schools. Understanding why – and in what sense – Mādhyamikas take exception to the opponent's account of the 'four conditions' acknowledged at *MMK* 1.3 requires background knowledge, in particular of the

⁷ Dhammajoti (2007: 182).

⁸ Walser (2005: 226).

Sarvāstivādin view of the properties and structures of causes and conditions.⁹ Walser indicates that Nāgārjuna may have had practical reasons to dissociate himself from Sarvāstivādins and align himself with other Ābhidharmikas, such as the Mahāsāṃghikas.¹⁰ This chapter does not attempt either to confirm or challenge such historical claims, leaving this task to those better qualified to judge, but rather aims to establish how deep Madhyamaka’s *philosophical* opposition to the Sarvāstivāda model of causation runs. That is, if the Sarvāstivāda model of causation could be divested of the notion of *svabhāva*, would it cease to be, or would it remain, objectionable to Madhyamaka?

Nāgārjuna opens the *MMK* in his usual laconic style, challenging the idea that anything has ever been caused to arise and writing “not from itself, nor from another, not from both, nor without cause: never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.”¹¹ As the first verse of the text, there is an added significance to Nāgārjuna’s opening remark which sets the trend maintained throughout the remainder of the treatise: namely the repudiation of the concept of inherent reality (*svabhāva*). As is so often the case with Nāgārjuna, his statement that nothing whatsoever has come into existence inspires allegations of nihilism. Even his co-religionists find such utterances to be at variance with their understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, which pivot on the central idea of universal causal dependence. If Madhyamaka is to answer to such allegations, then

⁹ The idea of discussing the ‘properties’ and ‘structures’ of causes and conditions might be off-putting for its high level of abstraction. However, the subsequent sections of this chapter will try to elucidate these obscure notions so that when we speak of ‘properties’ we confront the question of whether the causal process is metaphysically fundamental in some way or whether causes have causal powers as part of their ontologically essential nature. Similarly, when speaking of causal ‘structures’ we investigate such questions as whether there is a necessary connection between cause and effect, whether effects exist inherently in their causes, and so forth.

¹⁰ Walser (2005: 228).

¹¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 1.1. *na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ| utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kva cana ke cana||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 18).

obviously *MMK* 1.1 cannot be taken at face value, for, were it the case that nothing ever arises *in any sense*, it would also follow that an assertion of this fact would be impossible. To this end, the commentators exert much effort in clarifying and qualifying this verse, arguing that it is precisely because of universal causal dependence that entities with inherent reality (*svabhāva*) are conceptually impossible and therefore do not arise. This is because, on the Madhyamaka conception, for any inherently real entity to count as such it would have to exist in complete independence from other things. Ultimately real existents, therefore, cannot be causally dependent.

In the subsequent verses, Nāgārjuna proceeds to attack the ‘four conditions’ accepted by the imagined opponent. These are: the primary cause (*hetu*), the supporting condition (*ālambana*), the immediate condition (*samanantara*) and the dominant condition (*adhipati*). This four-fold classification, which is explicated in key Abhidharma literature such as the *Abhidharma-mahā-vibhāṣā-śāstra* (hereafter *MVŚ*) and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (hereafter *AKB*), presents the modern interpreter with several challenges. For example, whilst it may be easy to identify the primary cause (*hetu*) in terms of the ‘trigger’ for some event (such as rainfall just prior to the sprouting of a seed) and to hypothesize about the dominant condition (*adhipati*), which is the underlying *telos* for some action (such as a farmer’s desire to yield a crop), it seems that only those with the supernatural powers of a Buddha would be able to discern all of the intervening conditions (i.e. the *ālambana* and *samanantara*). This is because conditions – unlike causes – are not directly responsible for the production of some effect but are nevertheless necessary for it. To illustrate, whilst we might describe the presence of fertile soil as a condition on which the sprouting of a seed depends, we

cannot describe it as a cause. In other words, we might invoke the distinction between ‘causes’ and ‘causal fields’ (to be examined shortly).¹²

Nāgārjuna’s attack on the ‘four conditions’ is directed at the idea that they possess *svabhāva*, but this does not mean that he rejects these categories at the conventional level. On the contrary, and in keeping with his provisional acceptance of many core tenets of existing Buddhist philosophy, Nāgārjuna indicates his preference for this way of conceiving conditionality over that of rival non-Buddhists. This is intimated by his concession that no fifth condition is to be reviewed – a point taken up by commentators such as Candrakīrti, who, in the *PsP* attacks non-Buddhist notions of causation as invalid whilst accepting (at least for the most part) this Abhidharma framework as conventionally applicable.¹³ Interestingly, as noted in the previous chapter in connection with his views on reductionism, Śāntideva employs the same strategy of provisionally accepting the Ābhidharmika stance on causation but aligns himself with Nāgārjuna by concluding that causation cannot generate ultimately real phenomenon: “It follows that there is no cessation and there is no coming into existence at any time. Therefore none of this entire universe has come into existence or ceased.”¹⁴

According to Sarvāstivāda analysis, which stipulates the ultimate (*paramārtha*) reality of irreducible *dharmas*, there are four conditions and six causes. Differentiating between causes and conditions is complicated both by the fact of internal disagreement and by the fact that the first ‘condition’ is in fact the ‘causal’ condition. This implies

¹² Garfield (2015: 28).

¹³ Salvini (2014: 472) produces what I take to be a persuasive argument for this position and says that “non-Buddhist categories are invalidated even conventionally, while the Abhidharmic framework of causality remains plausible and favoured.”

¹⁴ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.149. *evaṃ na ca nirodho 'sti na ca bhāvo 'sti sarvadā| ajātam aniruddhaṃ ca tasmāt sarvam idaṃ jagat||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 130).

considerable overlap between the two schemas. Nevertheless, despite the entanglement and inter-changeability of the terms *hetu* and *pratyaya* in the early canonical literature, the Sarvāstivādins articulated some clear points of difference between the two models.¹⁵

According to the *MVŚ* “although a cause and condition do not differ in respect of substance, there is a difference in significance: a cause signifies what is proximate, a condition signifies what is remote.”¹⁶ This distinction raises further questions, some of which are stimulated by cross-cultural engagement on the concept of causation. For example, Schaffer appeals to ‘proximity’ and ‘remoteness’ in explicating the distinction made in Western philosophy between ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ causal categories. From this perspective, causal *relata* count as ‘immanent’ whenever the causal process is conceived in terms of a connection between concrete, real-world, events (such as the relationship between the seed and the sprout). Contrastingly, causal *relata* are characterized as ‘transcendent’ whenever the causal process is conceived not in terms of relation between events but rather at one further level of abstraction, i.e. the relationship between facts about causation (such as the relation between the *fact* of the sprouting seed and the sprouting seed itself).¹⁷ Whilst such a distinction may perhaps be conducive to understanding Madhyamaka’s view on causation – particularly in light of its claim, to be discussed later in this chapter, that events and conceptualizations of events are mutually dependent – the Sarvāstivādins treat ‘causes’ and ‘conditions’ alike as pertaining to real-world events. Still, whilst Sarvāstivādins rely on proximity and remoteness to distinguish causes and conditions, other differentiations are available.

¹⁵ Dhammajoti (2007: 227).

¹⁶ *MVŚ* 109 b-c. As quoted in Dhammajoti (2007: 228).

¹⁷ Schaffer (2014).

For example, Western philosophy's account of 'causes' and 'causal fields' seems particularly pertinent in this context.

This distinction differentiates between 'causes,' upon which effects are always and necessarily attendant, and 'causal fields' in which effects sometime do but sometimes do not occur.¹⁸ Anderson summarizes this distinction as follows: "A may be necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of *B* within the field *X*, and yet not necessary or sufficient for its occurrence within the field *Y*."¹⁹ To illustrate this distinction, some modern writers have appealed to the particularly popular Buddhist image of the sprouting seed. If the seed is to be rightly regarded as a plant's cause then this is only true in the context of the wider supporting conditions/ causal field in which the presence of nutrient rich soil, sunshine and sufficient water *et cetera* are also guaranteed.

This idea acquires special significance in Madhyamaka literature, where the idea of a cause being invested with its own special properties (*svalakṣaṇa*) of productivity is rejected wholesale. Indeed, if causes had as their essential nature the power to cause then, paradoxically, their causal capacities would be thwarted. This is because, in the production of their effects, causes would themselves undergo change and this is incompatible with the idea that they have their own inherent nature. By the same token, if causes have as their essential nature the power to cause, then there is no reason why a cause should produce its effect at one time rather than another. Śāntideva makes precisely this point in response to his (imagined) Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika opponent at *BCA* 9.123 when he asks why a creative deity should not create continuously.²⁰ Elaborating

¹⁸ Mackie (1965: 245-264).

¹⁹ Anderson (1938: 134).

²⁰ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.123. *kasmāt sadā na kurute na hi so 'nyam apekṣate| tenākṛto 'nyo nāsty eva tenāsau kim apekṣatām||* "How come he does not create continuously, if he is not dependent on anything

on these points, Mādhyamikas use the technical term *sāmagrī* to denote the entire collection of conditions (both positive and negative, or present and absent) necessary for the production of an effect. Hence, rather than posit the existence of inherent causal power, Madhyamaka sees the conglomeration of ‘empty’ conditions as satisfying our explanatory needs.

One worry about introducing the cause/ causal field distinction is that it seems to invite yet more ambiguity. The early proponents of this view insisted that, properly conceived, it does not entail indeterminacy. Instead, they maintained, this distinction helps explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of an effect within specific causal fields. As Anderson asserts, it is precisely the difference between causal fields which accounts for responses of anger or indifference in different people, without the respective reactions implying “that there are not perfectly definite conditions for the occurrence of anger.”²¹ That hatred and anger do indeed have very definite conditions is part of Śāntideva’s motivation for exploring the various means by which such emotions can be overcome. He suggests that by altering the conditions of the mind, through practicing patience, generosity, mindfulness and so forth, bodhisattvas gradually uproot the conditions for anger.²²

To be sure, there are very specific circumstances in which, given the supporting conditions which *do* obtain, an effect necessarily follows from its cause. Though not

else? There is nothing else whatsoever which was not made by him, so on what might he depend?
”(Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 128).

²¹ Anderson (1938: 134).

²² Śāntideva – *BCA 6.2 na ca dveṣasamaṃ pāpaṃ na ca kṣāntisamaṃ tapaḥ | tasmāt kṣāntiṃ prayatnena bhāvayed vividhair nayaiḥ* // “There is no evil equal to hatred, and no spiritual practice equal to forbearance. Therefore one should develop forbearance by various means, with great effort.”(Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 50).

articulated in these terms, it seems reasonable to suppose that early Buddhism could and moreover implicitly actually did, accommodate this distinction. Arguably the cause/ causal field distinction is helpful for explaining why, according to the Buddhist tradition, the performance of an identical action by respectively more and less spiritually mature individuals may produce different karmic results.²³

The hermeneutic value of the cause/ causal field distinction is therefore clear in the context of Buddhist causal theories. Approaches towards causation which make use of this distinction may seem either persuasive or perverse to the extent that ‘subject-relative’ perspectives on causation are deemed valid. Although both causal realists and anti-realists alike might invoke this distinction, for the former its invocation signals only that there is explanatory purchase in distinguishing causes and causal fields whereas, for the latter, its invocation has both explanatory purchase and signifies that there is no causal relation independent of the superimposing mind. Subject-relative perspectives enable the identification of ‘cause’ relative to the particular causal story the subject seeks to tell. For example, where everybody agrees about which factors contributed to the production of a specific effect (the contents of the causal field), individuals may disagree as to the precise cause of, or the trigger behind, that effect. Westerhoff describes the causal field as a “cognitive artifact, a collection of objects assembled for the sole purpose of explaining why a particular effect came about.”²⁴ The idea that each event should have numerous causal histories, as told from multiple

²³ Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.99, Loṇaphala Sutta. *Idha bhikkhave ekaccassa puggalassa appamattikam pi pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ tam enaṃ nirayaṃ upaneti. Idha pana bhikkhave ekaccassa puggalassa tādisaṃ yeva appamattakaṃ pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ diṭṭhadhamme c’eva vedanīyaṃ hoti nāṇu pi khāyati bahud eva/ PTS, Morris (1885: 249). “Here, bhikkhus, some person has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].” (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 331-332).*

²⁴ Westerhoff (2009: 97).

perspectives, is congruous with the Madhyamaka claim that causal dependency relations are themselves the product of the conceptually imputing mind which carves up reality not with recourse to ‘objectivity’ but in order to serve its own explanatory or pragmatic purposes.

The spectrum of opinion over the acceptability of identifying causes on a subject-relative basis is broad. While Madhyamaka theorists might discern both utility and accuracy in theories that can accommodate the bestowal of the status ‘cause’ in an agent-relative way, the dissent of causal realists about the legitimacy of this manoeuvre is understandable. However, the worry that subject-relative identification of causes diminishes our ability to locate the dominant cause for some event is not well founded. This is because, in the first place, Mādhyamikas and causal realists alike are equipped to refine their understanding of the role each element within the causal field plays in bringing about an effect and of how the causal process as a whole unfolds. Secondly, Madhyamaka would argue that objections to the ‘objectivity’ of causation are misplaced if directed at the conventional level: whilst ultimately causation, like everything else, turns out to be other than it seems (an illusion of sorts) the need to identify causal chains remains as strong and as useful as ever at the level of daily, transactional experience.

Intrinsic Casual Power vs. Explanatory Causal Process

With the forgoing considerations in mind, let us return once more to Nāgārjuna’s assessment of causal processes. His attack on the Sarvāstivāda conception of causes and conditions is an objection to the idea that *dharmas* acquire their status as primary

existents (*dravya-sat*) through their possession of ‘real’ causal power.²⁵ The extent of the contrast between Sarvāstivāda and Madhyamaka thought is captured by the speculation in the *MVŚ* that “if it is held that the conditions are devoid of reality, then it would imply that all *dharma*s are devoid of reality.”²⁶ Whilst both Sarvāstivādins and Mādhyamikas agree that the unreality of the one implies the unreality of the other, they are irreconcilable about whether conditions are in fact devoid of reality.

In denying the reality of causal power at *MMK* 1.1 Nāgārjuna attacks the realist conception of causal power, i.e. the view that it is the inherent nature of causes to produce effects. This does not imply that Nāgārjuna also rejects the explanatory force of causes when they are understood as denoting regularity in nature. He contends that the idea of ultimately real causes and conditions is conceptually incoherent. Moreover, the ultimate reality of causes and conditions would, ironically, rob them of their *efficacy* as causes and conditions for the two reasons already identified: namely, (1) inherently real causes would be changed in the production of their effects, and change is incompatible with being inherently real; or (2) inherently real causes would be naturally invested with powers of production, meaning that production at one time rather than another would be arbitrary and logically inexplicable. In other words, the ultimate reality of a cause would nullify it as a cause.

²⁵ As was briefly discussed in chapter 3, scholars are deeply divided over how best to classify Dharmakīrti’s contribution to Buddhist philosophy. Whilst he is most often described as an advocate of the ‘Yogācāra-Sautrāntika’ synthesis, commentators such as Jitāri and Mokṣākaragupta regarded him as a Mādhyamika. As Westerhoff observes, “it now looks as if association with every single one of the Buddhist schools has been ascribed to Dharmakīrti” (Westerhoff 2018: 251). Dharmakīrti’s assessment that only what is ontologically ‘real’ can count as causally efficacious is at complete variance with Madhyamaka thought. Nevertheless, as Westerhoff again points out, if we attempt to make sense of Dharmakīrti’s seemingly contradictory stance on the nature of ultimate reality by using the idea of a ‘sliding scale of analysis,’ then “it seems to be the case that we will never arrive at a level of analysis that provides us with an ultimate ground for all the other levels, and this, of course, is precisely what the Madhyamaka analysis would imply” (Westerhoff 2018: 259).

²⁶ *MVŚ* 283 b. As quoted in Dhammajoti (2007: 220).

Causes are called ‘causes’ precisely because they bring about some state of affairs. However, if a cause relies (albeit conceptually) on its effect in order to be what it is, namely a ‘cause,’ then it cannot be an inherently existing entity, for inherently existing entities are non-relative and independent. The mutual reliance of entities and processes ordinarily conceived of as independently established is a point stressed several times in the *MMK* and elsewhere in Madhyamaka literature. For example, at *MMK* 10.8 Nāgārjuna observes that fuel and fire are mutually dependent. Commentators on this verse discuss the possible ways in which fuel and fire are reliant on each other, with Buddhapālita arguing that, without conceptual construction, a pile of logs will never be viewed as ‘fuel.’²⁷ Cause and effect, just like fire and fuel, are both ontologically and conceptually dependent on each other.²⁸ Nāgārjuna elegantly challenges the idea that causes have as their inherent nature the power to produce and the idea that anything caused could have an inherent nature. His point is therefore both all-encompassing, in that it applies to every existent entity, and symmetrical. The counterpart to *MMK* 1.1 comes at 24.16: “If you look upon existents as real intrinsically, in that case you regard existents as being without cause and conditions.”²⁹

²⁷ Siderits and Katsura (2013: 114) write: “Buddhapālita says that we must understand the dependence of fuel on fire as conceptual.” However, Buddhapālita himself writes in his comments on *MMK* 10.15 that “just as fire cannot be identical with or different from fire-wood, nor can it be established in their mutual relationship, so in the same way a self cannot be identical with or different from the objects of clinging, nor can it be established in their mutual relationship.” (Trans. from the Tibetan) Saito (1984: 154). It should be noted, though, that here Buddhapālita rules out the various ways in which fire and fuel could be *ultimately* established as possessors of *svabhāva* and that, nevertheless, the two may be mutually reliant at the conventional level.

²⁸ Westerhoff (2009: 94-99). For more details on the idea of cause and effect as mutually dependent on each other, both conceptually and existentially, see the section entitled *The Structure of Causal Relations* below.

²⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.16. *svabhāvād yadi bhāvānām sadbhāvam anupaśyasi| ahetupratyayān bhāvāms tvam evaṃ sati paśyasi ||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 276).

Despite the fact that chapter 1 of *MMK* reveals Nāgārjuna's rejection of the ultimate reality of causes and conditions alike, Garfield has argued that, nonetheless, for Nāgārjuna, the terms 'cause' and 'condition' carry respectively stronger and weaker metaphysical implications. Garfield understands Nāgārjuna to use the word 'cause' (*hetu*) to denote that which has power to bring about some event or state of affairs as part of its essence. Contrastingly, while the idea of a 'condition' (*pratyaya*) may legitimately be appealed to in explaining an event, state or process there is no assumption that it bears a metaphysically realist nature.³⁰ If Garfield's claim turns out to be correct, and early Mādhyamikas understood the difference between 'causes' and 'conditions' primarily in terms of different metaphysical assumptions, then we need to explain why Mādhyamikas retained the problematic idea of 'cause' which they could, presumably, have easily forgone. Alternatively, if the difference between cause and condition is simply that the former implies metaphysical realism whereas the latter need not, then an equivalence between these terms could be achieved by the simple insertion of the word 'conventional' each time we use the word 'cause.' Another possible explanation for why Madhyamaka retained this distinction is that designating something as a 'cause' brings it into the explanatory foreground. Madhyamaka thereby grants unique transactional, albeit conventional, power to 'causes' of a kind unavailable to the background conditions.

If Nāgārjuna's approach to the coherence of the concepts of cause and condition should primarily be characterized (as Garfield suggests) in terms of the metaphysical assumptions upon which they are grounded, then deeper exploration of the Madhyamaka idea of conditionality is necessary. The distinctively Madhyamaka

³⁰ Garfield (1994: 222).

understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination cannot be appreciated without acknowledging the formal expression of that doctrine in the Pāli Canon. There the thesis is expressed as follows: “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”³¹

Three Types of Dependency Relation

Madhyamaka accommodates three types of dependency relation: causal, mereological and conceptually imputative. In this system, then, the idea of dependency is more expansive than that of causation. For our purposes, failure to consider how the third dimension of dependency informs the implied Madhyamaka view on the free will problem unduly limits the responses available to it. Moreover, because Madhyamaka conceives of these dependency relations as increasingly subtle and sophisticated interpretations of *pratītyasamutpāda*, it is clear that, whatever the connection between the Western thesis of causal determinism and the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, they cannot be conceptually equivalent. By examining the various ways in which Madhyamaka conceives of dependency, the remainder of this chapter acts as a springboard from which a defence of ‘perspectivalism’ as the most appropriate response to the Buddhist free will problem is launched in chapter 5. However, even there, it will be argued that thoroughgoing dependence of the sort argued for by Madhyamaka demands that perspectivalism itself should be treated as a meta-theory about free will – a guideline for ascribing or withholding the notion of moral

³¹ Majjhima Nikāya 79, Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta. *Imasmim sati, idaṃ hoti; imass’ uppādā idaṃ upapajjati; imasmim asati, idaṃ na hoti; imassa nirodhā imaṃ nirujjhatīti*/ PTS, Chalmers (1896: 31). (Trans.) Bodhi (1995: 655).

responsibility – rather than as just one more ‘first order’ theory on free will competing against many others.³² The investigation begun here eventually culminates in the conclusion that, as a matter of principle, Madhyamaka cannot acknowledge any solution to the Buddhist free will problem as ‘definitive’ because all and any acts of conceptualization involve some degree of distortion and are symptomatic of a *samsāric* mode of existence.

(1) Causal Dependency

The Structure of Causal Relations

Nāgārjuna begins his treatise with an examination of four possible ways in which something with *svabhāva* could arise and finds them all to be deficient. It would be either: (i) *causa sui*, which is logically impossible; (ii) dependent upon something else, thence lacking *svabhāva* after all; (iii) a combination of both, and so doubly problematic or; (iv) spontaneously produced, in which case anything could give rise to anything else with no structure or pattern governing the process. This attack, against ‘realist’ notions of causal power, does not aim to undermine the idea of causation *per se* but to undermine a very particular, metaphysically robust, account of it. Hence, Madhyamaka’s opposition to causal realism still leaves open the question of how to understand causation within the confines of conventionality. Options (i), (iii) and (iv) are rejected as impossible even by Buddhist causal realists who are convinced of the coherence of the concept of *svabhāva*. What is most striking about the Madhyamaka account of causation, however, is that it also rejects option (ii), the idea that something

³² If the difference between conceiving of ‘perspectivalism’ as a ‘meta-theory’ or a ‘first order’ theory about free will seems obscure at this stage be assured that these ideas will be explained and defended in considerable detail in chapter 5. However, examination of the three types of dependency relation accommodated in Madhyamaka philosophy is a prerequisite for this.

is causally produced by another thing. This counter-intuitive stance calls for further investigation and some qualification.

All Buddhists, Mādhyamikas and non-Mādhyamikas alike, resist the first option. The idea that something is its own cause (*satkāryavāda*) is deemed false from both the ultimate and conventional perspectives. In chapter 1 of the *PsP*, Candrakīrti criticizes Bhāviveka for prefacing his denial that something could be its own cause with the word ‘ultimately.’³³ Candrakīrti rightly observes that such a qualification is not necessary because even people unschooled in philosophy can see that *satkāryavāda* is self-evidently absurd. He writes: “for the world, not having launched an investigation (*vicāra*) [into whether things arise] from self [or] other, etc., presumes [merely] this much: an effect arises from a cause.”³⁴ Śāntideva raises the same objection against the (imagined) opponent, presumably an advocate of the Sāṃkhya tradition, at *BCA* 9.135-136, writing: “You accept, even against your will, the coming into existence of something manifest which does not exist. If you accept that the result is in the cause, someone eating rice is eating dung! Cotton seed would be bought at the price of cloth and worn as clothing! If you argue that ordinary people do not see this because of ignorance, one who understands this reality is in the same position.”³⁵ The absurdity of

³³ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.3. *paramatāpekṣaṃ viśeṣaṇam iti cet tad ayuktam| saṃvṛtyāpi tadīyavyavasthānabhyupagamāt| satyadvayāvīparītarāśanaparibhṛaṣṭā eva hi tīrthikā yāvad ubhayathāpi niśidhyante tāvad guṇa eva saṃbhāvyata iti| evaṃ paramatāpekṣam api viśeṣaṇābhīdhānam na yujyate||* MacDonald, A. (Vol. 1, 2015: 170). “If [it is argued that] the qualification [‘ultimately’ had been added not in consideration of our own views, but] with reference to the [Sāṃkhya] opponent’s doctrine (*paramata*), that [justification] is incorrect, because [the Mādhyamika] does not accept their... establishment (*vyavasthā*) even from the point of view of the surface [level of reality]. For [only] insofar as the non-Buddhists (*tīrthika*), who are wholly deprived of the correct view of the two truths, are refuted in both ways [i.e., on the ultimate and on the surface levels], can it (the refutation) be considered to be truly of advantage (*guṇa*). Thus even [if it is employed] with reference to the opponent’s doctrine, the stating of the qualification is untenable.” (Trans.) MacDonald, A. (Vol. 2, 2015: 98).

³⁴ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.3. *loko hi svataḥ parata ity evamādikam vicāram anavatārya kāraṇāt kāryam utpadyate ity etāvanmātram pratipannaḥ||* MacDonald, A. (Vol. 1, 2015: 171). (Trans.) MacDonald, A. (Vol. 2, 2015: 99).

³⁵ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.135-136. (135) *annādo 'medhyabhakṣaḥ syāt phalaṃ hetau yadi sthitam| paṭārgheṇaiva karpāsabījam krītvā nivasyatām||* (136) *mohāc cen nekṣate lokaḥ tattvajñasyāpi sā*

option (i) entails the absurdity of option (iii), the idea that something is caused both by itself and something other than itself. This leaves option (iv) as the last option also rejected by Buddhist causal realists on grounds that spontaneous arising of effects is not observed in the world but, instead, we discern patterns of causal regularity.

The common sense view, as Candrakīrti and other Mādhyamikas acknowledge, is that entities arise as the result of being caused by something else, option (ii). For example, at MAV 6.32 Candrakīrti notes that, according to conventional truth, one entity is caused by another such that ‘worldly’ people “merely sow the seed, and yet they claim, ‘I produced that boy,’ or they imagine ‘that tree was planted [by me].’”³⁶ However, from the Madhyamaka point of view, option (ii) is just as problematic as the other options. Two reasons have already been identified as to why Madhyamaka rejects the possibility of something ultimately ‘real’ coming into existence. However, there is a third, more controversial, reason for Madhyamaka’s resistance to the idea of causal production, applicable also at the conventional level, stemming from the idea that cause and effect are mutually reliant. Hence, Candrakīrti also asserts in the same verse that “production from another is not viable even by the standards of mundane experience.” Candrakīrti’s assertion (a) that conventional truth accommodates the idea of effects as generated from causes and (b) that the idea of effects as produced from causes is not even conventionally acceptable, counts as yet more evidence in support of interpreting Prāsaṅgikas as admitting a hierarchy of truth within the domain of convention. However, as there is no need to reignite that debate, the focus here should be on

sthitih| lokasyāpi ca taj jñānam asti kasmān na paśyati| lokāpramāṇatāyāṃ cet vyaktadarśanam apy asat|| (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 129).

³⁶ Candrakīrti – MAV 6.32. *uptvāpi lokaḥ khalu bījamātram bravīti putro janito mayaiṣaḥ| uṇṇa taruś ceti paraiti yasmāj janmānyatas tena na lokato ’pi||* Li (2015: 8). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1989:161).

answering the interesting questions raised by Madhyamaka's conception of cause and effect as mutually dependent. In particular, how does Madhyamaka conceive the structure of causal relations?

Walser appeals to the image of sheaves of wheat propping each other up to illustrate one possible way of understanding Madhyamaka's view of the relation between cause and effect.³⁷ If this image is supposed to suggest, however, that each sheaf is the cause both of its own standing and of another sheaf's standing, then this would imply that option (iii) above is, after all, not incoherent. Since Mādhyamikas have already ruled out this possibility, the image of sheaves of wheat in mutual reliance requires an alternative interpretation. On the one hand, in denying that something could be caused to exist both by itself and another, Nāgārjuna denies the possibility of a causal loop. On the other hand, Nāgārjuna supplies several examples throughout the *MMK* of what Taber calls 'co-existing counterparts.'³⁸ He argues, for example, at *MMK* 8.12 that agent and activity are mutually dependent, not just conceptually but also existentially.³⁹ Likewise, he maintains at *MMK* 10.8 that fire and fuel are mutually dependent.⁴⁰ The mutual reliance of cause and effect reveals that neither can be ultimately existent, for to be ultimately existent just is to exist in complete independence from other things. However, in order for a cause to exist essentially as a cause, it would require (i.e. be dependent on) the existence, and not merely the concept of, its effect. All of this is

³⁷ Walser (2005: 244).

³⁸ Taber (1998).

³⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 8.12. *pratītya kāraṅkaḥ karma taṃ pratītya ca kāraṅkaḥ/ karma pravartate nānyat paśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṅgaḥ*// “The agent occurs in dependence on the object, and the object occurs in dependence on the agent; we see no other way to establish them.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 96).

⁴⁰ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 10.8. *yadīndhanam apekṣyāgnir apekṣyāgniṃ yadīndhanam/ katarat pūrvaniṣpannaṃ yad apekṣyāgnir indhanam*// “If fire depends on fuel and fuel depends on fire, which of the two is arisen first, fuel or the fire that is dependent on that?” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 114).

designed to show that whilst option (ii) might be a conventionally helpful way of understanding the relation between cause and effect, it also establishes that neither can be ultimately real. Candrakīrti's claim that cause and effect should be understood as mutually reliant even by the standards of convention suggests that Madhyamaka rejects the notion of causal power as incoherent. It follows that what Madhyamaka is left with is an 'empty' notion of cause of the type endorsed by worldly individuals who observe the contiguity and constant conjunction of certain events and erroneously bestow the labels 'cause' and 'effect.' For this reason, as shall be argued below, Madhyamaka and Humean models of causation do after all have a great deal in common.

In the context of a discussion on the vice of desire, Candrakīrti explains why Madhyamaka can only accommodate the conventional existence of causes and effects. He asserts that the opponent cannot make sense of temporal notions – such as simultaneity or priority – whilst clinging onto the erroneous view of the ultimate reality of causation.⁴¹ The temporal sequencing of events is possible only if those events and the causes which connect them stand in a relationship of reciprocity with one another. The terms 'simultaneous' and 'prior' are dependent designations, just like the far and the near shore, and hence would be inapplicable if causal power had ultimate reality.

If causal relations exhibit a structure of mutual supportiveness then causation has symmetrical structural properties. However, as Candrakīrti's condemnation of Bhāviveka's unnecessary use of the word 'ultimately' reveals, it is conventionally

⁴¹ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 6. 7. *prthakprthag rāgaraktayoḥ siddhir nāstīti kṛtvā yady anayoḥ sahabhāvam icchasi sa ca prthakprthag asiddhayoḥ nāstīti*|| de La Vallée Poussin (1903: 141). "It is obvious that desire and the one desiring cannot be established separately if you consider only their simultaneity. And there can be no simultaneity unless these have been established separately." (Trans.) Sprung, M. (1979: 113).

unproblematic to say that causes exist prior to their effects. It is clear that even if Madhyamaka regards conventional causal relations as asymmetrical, other dependency relations need not display this same structure. For example, as will be discussed below, mereological dependency relations are symmetrical; with wholes and parts equally reliant on one another from an enlightened perspective, even though wholes rely on their parts but not *vice versa* from the point of view of the conventional.

Similarly, conceptually imputed dependency relations reveal that the way in which we classify objects depends just as much upon our own interests as it does on the arrangement of entities before us. While, for example, the table relies on the legs just as much as the legs rely on the table, so too does our conceptual imputation of 'table' depend just as much on our need for a desk at which to work as it does the presence of a flat surface of wood. Particularly in the case of the dominant condition (*adhipati*), which is characterized by the goal of action, we discern a strong anthropocentric strand to the conditionality process. When it is recognized that the content of the dominant condition relies so heavily upon the interests and goals of sentient beings, including their unenlightened acts of grasping and appropriation, the soteriological importance of noticing and uprooting our habits of conceptual imputation becomes clear.

Madhyamaka and Western Causal Theories

For all the aforementioned reasons, Madhyamaka challenges the idea that the causal process contains ultimately real elements: indeed, that causation is a 'process' is itself sufficient to establish that it lacks inherent reality, for that which is subject to change cannot have *svabhāva*. In this section, we explore some of the key differences between

Madhyamaka causal theory and versions of causal realism presented in Western philosophy. We also investigate the similarities between Madhyamaka and Humean models of causation.

Confronted with Madhyamaka's arguments against the possibility of causal realism, the realist might respond by drawing a distinction between 'dispositional' and 'categorical' properties.⁴² Whilst there is no universally agreed upon method for defining either type of property, dispositional properties are often deemed to be intrinsic to the disposed object even though there is no guarantee of their manifestation.⁴³ To use a stock example, we might say that fragility is a dispositional property intrinsic to glass, even if many items of glass never display this disposition. Categorical properties, on the other hand, are sometimes thought of as properties by virtue of which an entity is the thing it is, such that, were it to fail to display that property it would fail to be what it is. Again, although there is no widespread agreement on this either, causal powers are often thought of as being categorical properties according to the standards of Western causal realism.⁴⁴ This distinction might prove useful in countering Madhyamaka's criticism of the idea that a cause cannot have as part of its essence the power to produce effects, as this would entail either constant productivity or the destruction of the cause's own essence once its causal capacities have been expended. To see how, let us return once more to the example of the seed and the sprout: if it should be said that seeds are merely disposed to be causes of sprouts rather than that

⁴² Bird (2009).

⁴³ The 'Intrinsic Dispositions Thesis' has been considered 'intuitive' by many philosophers but has been independently argued for by comparatively few. For arguments in support of this thesis, see Armstrong (1973).

⁴⁴ Orilia and Swoyer (2017:§17.8).

seeds have as part of their essence the power to produce sprouts, then can the challenge of accounting for the temporal priority of seeds to sprouts be met?

The answer to this in part depends on how dispositional properties are to be conceived. Whether dispositional properties belong to entities intrinsically raises further questions both about the status of that which is not instantiated and about the relationship between the disposition and the disposed object. It is clear, however, that even if appeals to intrinsic dispositions may resolve the temporal priority problem, these will be unacceptable to Madhyamaka on other, more basic grounds: namely that no entity can bear any property (dispositional or categorical) intrinsically. At the ultimate level then, Madhyamaka would reject the notion that an entity is intrinsically disposed in a certain way. While the debate continues in contemporary philosophy over whether all dispositions are intrinsic or whether at least some are extrinsic, pronouncements on how Madhyamaka might have seen dispositional properties conventionally seem unwarranted.⁴⁵

Setting this discussion aside, we can adduce additional reasons for thinking that Madhyamaka and modern Western causal theories have more in common than we might initially suspect. Notwithstanding the many differences between Madhyamaka thought and the philosophy of science from which scientific ‘structuralist’ movements have emerged, it is possible that our appreciation and understanding of Madhyamaka philosophy will be enriched by comparing the ways in which Mādhyamikas and ‘ontic structural realists’ present their various accounts of causation.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ McKittrick (2003).

⁴⁶ French and Ladyman (2011).

According to ontic structural realism, there is such a thing as inherently real causal power but the power to produce effects is not located in individual causes so much as in the entire nexus of reality. Moreover, according to ontic structural realism, the entire nexus of reality is, ontologically speaking, all there is. In other words, the ‘reality’ of the many different nodes embedded within the nexus is assured not by their substantiality so much as by their inter-connectedness and relationship to every other node within the nexus. That is, the patterns or structures of reality turn out to be the most fundamentally ‘real’ things there are.

One motivation behind ontic structural realism is the desire to explain the success of scientific theories without having to endorse all the ontological commitments on which they are grounded. Ontic structural realism might therefore be thought of as offering (in a sense quite different from Madhyamaka) a ‘middle way,’ in that the structure of those theories remains even when scientific findings show that the specific content needs replacing. Whilst ontic structural realism represents a genuine alternative to ‘foundational’ metaphysics, it nonetheless differs from Madhyamaka in profound ways. Indeed, even though both systems seem united in their denial of the idea that individual causes possess causal power, Madhyamaka and ontic structural realists occupy opposite ends of the metaphysical spectrum so far as realism is concerned. Still, the focal point for our purposes is that even causal realists need not posit that the power to produce is intrinsic to individual causes. To summarize, as one contemporary philosopher claims, “the causal relation between a cause and its effect is not the same as the causal process of which they are parts.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Henning (2011).

Any suggestion that ontic structural realism and Madhyamaka share a common goal would rightly signal anachronism, conceptual appropriation and misunderstanding, as there can be no doubt that each is motivated by distinct cultural and philosophical preoccupations. As has been argued at some length in chapter 2, avoiding such pitfalls is essential for any project interested in understanding the implied Buddhist view on topics such as causation, determinism and free will. However, since the present objective is to establish the possibility of meaningful comparisons between Madhyamaka and Western theories of causation, the foregoing remarks may be of some use. Acknowledging that a particular theory can act as a springboard for cross-cultural philosophical exchange, however, implies nothing about whether it would be prudent to read one system through the lens of the other.

This brings us, finally, to a consideration of the similarities and differences between Madhyamaka and Humean models of causation. Within contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship, there is a growing consensus that these two models of causation have important features in common. Indeed, although Mādhyamikas deny the ultimate reality of causes, they nevertheless guard against option (iv) above, namely the idea that entities spring up spontaneously without reliance on a causal process, by endorsing the conventional reality of causation. Similarly, as Hume famously declared, the idea of a ‘necessary connection’ between causes and effects is “nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.”⁴⁸ Hume’s ‘regularity’ thesis maintains that although causes and effects are contiguous and constantly conjoined, it is impossible to discern a necessary connection

⁴⁸ Hume (1969: 215).

between them. Instead he contends that cause and effect are distinct and independent of each other, by virtue of which he establishes a ‘separability principle.’

Despite some clear points of convergence between Madhyamaka and Humean thought, however, some scholars contend that any similarities between the two models are merely superficial. For example, Bliss has criticized those she calls contemporary “friends of emptiness” (i.e. Madhyamaka apologists) for drawing comparisons between Nāgārjuna and Hume on grounds that the ‘separability principle’ in the latter system ensures the non-emptiness of, separable, causes and effects.⁴⁹ She argues, quite rightly, that Hume’s dictum, according to which “there are no metaphysically necessary connections between wholly distinct, intrinsically typed existents” should “ring alarm bells in the head of any good Mādhyamika.”⁵⁰ However, even if Bliss’s contention that “emptying out the [causal] relation comes at the unfortunate cost of filling up... the *relata*” is correct, the ‘filling up,’ i.e. the ascription of *svabhāva* to the *relata* can be easily rectified. Bliss holds that Hume envisaged no difficulty in imagining causes and effects as independent of one another and that this is precisely what Madhyamaka denies. In response, however, the ‘friends of emptiness’ can, firstly, contest the idea that Hume regarded the notions of cause and effect as capable of being entirely distinct (in *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume argues that the mind forges connections between any notions which in any way resemble each other, are contiguous or exist in a cause-effect relation, hence “all ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases...”) and, secondly, simply extend the domain of emptiness so that it applies both to the causal relation and to the causal *relata*.⁵¹ Contrary to what

⁴⁹ Bliss (2015: 78).

⁵⁰ Bliss (2015: 69).

⁵¹ Hume (1969: 57).

Bliss maintains, it can be conjectured that the reconstructivist interested in how Madhyamaka understands causation can legitimately and productively appeal to instances of noteworthy overlap between Buddhist and empiricist accounts of causality.

Whilst identifying commonalities between these two systems is potentially useful, understanding Madhyamaka's implied attitude towards causal determinism requires an exploration of the relationship between causation and other types of conditionality. If chapter 1 of the *MMK* is, first and foremost, a response to Sarvāstivāda accounts of causation, it can also be interpreted as an elaboration and development of the historical Buddha's theory of dependent origination. Indeed, *MMK* 1.1 can be interpreted as Nāgārjuna replicating the arguments of the Pāli Nikāyas wherein the Buddha rejects the idea of 'cause' in favour of the idea of 'conditions.' For instance, as Ronkin records, the Buddha appeals to the doctrine of dependent origination as a way of explaining the origin of suffering whilst contending that none of the four possible causal accounts (options (i)-(iv) above) are satisfactory.⁵² Seen thus, the fact that Nāgārjuna's treatise opens with the theme of causation is entirely comprehensible: only once the idea of causation has been replaced by the idea of dependent origination will release from appropriation and the suffering it engenders be possible. For Nāgārjuna, philosophical reflection on the causal process is only useful to the extent that it alleviates the existential problem of suffering. This insight calls for an analysis of the two other types of dependency relation expounded in classical Madhyamaka philosophy.

⁵² Ronkin (2005: 195). Ronkin writes: "In the *Nikāyas* the Buddha's formulaic descriptions of dependent co-arising and the explanation of the origin of suffering are contrasted with four doctrines of causation... Having classified these four positions, the Buddha rejects them all."

(2) Mereological Dependency

Madhyamaka's account of the interaction between wholes and parts (its mereological theory) provokes further reflection on how it conceives the structure of dependency relations. A particularly interesting, because counter-intuitive, feature of Madhyamaka's presentation of mereology is that the parts and the wholes are held to depend on each other *in the same way*. Candrakīrti, for example, argues that there is symmetrical dependency between a chariot and its parts and that this dependency is existential as well as conceptual. He claims not only that parts and wholes are mutually reliant on each other to be the things they are (an 'axle' as opposed to a piece of scrap metal), but also simply to be at all.

The idea that parts and wholes are conceptually mutually dependent is relatively straightforward. Indeed, just as a chariot depends on its parts in order for it to be conceived of as a chariot, so too does a part of the chariot depend both on all the parts of a chariot and the chariot as a whole in order to be appropriately designated 'part of a chariot.' However, Candrakīrti's account of mereological relations becomes much more challenging when, at *MAV* 6.161, he maintains that the existence of the parts is reliant on the existence of the whole. He writes: "When the carriage does not exist, then the 'possessor of the parts' does not exist, and neither do the parts. Just as, for example, when a carriage has burned, its parts no longer exist, so when the fire of discrimination (*mati*) burns the possessor of the parts, the parts themselves [are incinerated]."⁵³

⁵³ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.161. *sattvaṃ rathasyāsti na cet tadānīm vināṅgināṅgāny api santi nāsyā| dagdhe rathe 'ṅgāni yathā na santi dhīvahnidagdhe 'ṅgini tadvad aṅgam||* Li (2015: 24). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992: 177).

As suggested at the end of the previous section, Nāgārjuna's contribution to causal theorizing is to some extent motivated by soteriological considerations. Likewise, Candrakīrti's presentation of part-whole relations is underscored with therapeutic intent. This is illustrated by the fact that Candrakīrti's argument in support of the mutual existential dependence of parts and wholes comes in the context of his repudiating the idea of an eternal, substantial, self (*ātman*). The Mādhyamika suggests that by realizing the ultimate irreality of the whole, an insight obtained through philosophical reasoning or through the 'fire of discrimination,' the parts too are exposed as ultimately non-existent and as being, therefore, equally unworthy objects of attachment. Nevertheless, the distinction between parts and wholes, where parts are considered as existentially 'primary' and wholes 'derivative,' serves its purpose for daily, unenlightened, life. Madhyamaka avers that it is only through correctly understanding the relationship between the ultimate and conventional truths that proper appreciation of parts and wholes as existentially mutually dependent and, hence, equally empty is achievable.

Belief in the reality of wholes (which are in fact nothing over and above conceptual constructs enabling convenient designation of an otherwise random conglomeration of parts) helps to sustain belief in the reality of parts as capable of existing independently. This is precisely what Buddhists reductionists, such as Ābhīdharmikas, hold: a chariot is a mere conceptual construct, but by dismantling the chariot – through physical deconstruction and through philosophical analysis – one eventually arrives at the chariot's ontological constituents, the impartite parts, from which the construct is constructed. Mādhyamikas acknowledge the difficulty unenlightened beings have in rejecting this ontologically foundational account in favour of their own anti-foundationalist picture, according to which parts turn out to be just as much a product

of mental fabrication as wholes. Yet, they insist, the very same strategy for transforming belief in wholes as ultimately existent into recognition of their empty status as convenient fictions is equally effective and applicable for transforming belief in the ultimate reality of impartite parts (*dharmas*) into recognition of their illusory, empty and dependent nature.

Nevertheless, just as undiscerning ‘worldly’ people might for a time benefit from believing that causal relations are asymmetric (and that effects are produced from causes), they might also benefit from believing that parts and wholes exist in asymmetric dependence. For, conventionally speaking, wholes really do seem to rely on their parts in ways that parts appear not to rely on the wholes they are parts of. The benefits of maintaining this belief for everyday purposes are twofold.

First, belief that parts do not rely on wholes for their existence allows the ascription of continuity and identity to that which is constantly changing. The reductionist ontology of the *Ābhidharmikas* accommodates the conventional continuity of persons even whilst acknowledging that the *skandhas* of which they are composed are constantly changing. Madhyamaka philosophers are aware that failure correctly to understand emptiness and pervasive dependency could lead to spiritual setbacks, causing the aspirant to fall into excessive doubt. It is important that people are able to see both themselves and others as possessing conventional continuity over time even in a world of impermanence. Without such a belief, unenlightened people may cease to think of the consequences of their actions and so struggle to find moral motivation.

Seeing part-whole relations as symmetric even conventionally risks undermining the idea of identity over time. Saying that the parts must rely on the whole for their very existence implies that wholes are stable entities; but this is precisely what Buddhism denies. If the whole, which is made up of a specific set of parts, grounds the existence of those parts, then, if the whole should change in any respect, it would no longer be identical with itself and thus would perish, causing its parts to perish too. In the case of 'persons,' the whole is not identical with itself from one moment to the next because the parts are always changing. When it comes to claiming that the parts conventionally rely on the whole, we can either say that if the whole changes then so too must all the parts (which would be unacceptable because of its annihilationist overtones) or we can say that the whole does not change and that the parts, which rely on the whole for their existence, also do not change (which would be unacceptable because of its eternalist overtones). Buddhists of all traditions deem both ideas to be equally mistaken. Depending on the level of insight one has attained, therefore, it may be better to see mereological dependency relations as asymmetric.

Secondly, seeing the part-whole relation as conventionally asymmetric allows us to identify parts *as* parts even when they are not appropriately assembled to form the whole. Without this capacity what could explain an engineer's ability to piece together all the parts of a chariot such that a functional whole chariot resulted? Thus, acceptance of asymmetric part-whole relations conventionally allows for coherentism, a view of truth perhaps resembling a pointillist painting, where the whole image is available only through negotiating the relation of the dots, and for creativity, allowing us to build the world in conformity with our desires, beliefs and practices. Madhyamaka contends that, ultimately, however, this view too must be relinquished.

The symmetrical structure of the mereological dependency relation as expressed by Candrakīrti presents a more sophisticated level of truth than is available to those who see dependency relations as asymmetrical. Once the distinction between the ultimate and conventional levels of truth and reality is discerned by an enlightened being, the symmetry of the part-whole relationship becomes evident. Although Candrakīrti treats the dependency relations of mereology and conceptual imputation separately, it is arguable that, once beings cease to impute conceptually, they automatically gain a superior level of understanding about part-whole relations, and also about causal relations.

Candrakīrti's contribution to understanding mereological dependency relations demonstrates what is captured through the Buddhist dictum of skill in means (*upāya*). Introducing the idea that part and whole are existentially symmetrically dependent, rather than merely conceptually so, is potentially perilous for a being at the early stages of the spiritual path. Nevertheless, for a being with insight, perceiving part-whole relations as existentially symmetric occurs naturally – it simply requires extending the awareness that wholes are mere convenient fictions to the awareness that parts too are convenient fictions. Neither have ultimate reality and, thus, both are equally reliant on each other. As a modern commentator on Madhyamaka sources explains, “conventional phenomena are false objects [because...] they appear to be different natures from their parts when in reality they are not.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Kelsang Gyatso (1995: 158).

(3) Conceptually Imputed Dependency

Dependence upon conceptual imputation is probably the most interesting type of dependency relation discussed by Mādhyamikas. They argue that conceptual imputation has become automatic for sentient beings, who, deluded by ignorance, imagine that acts of imputation, reification and hypostatization reflect ‘objective’ reality. According to this line of reasoning, dichotomizing between relative terms (such as ‘long’ and ‘short’ or ‘near’ and ‘far’) induces the belief that such terms point to realities beyond themselves, with which they correlate. Madhyamaka claims that this is delusional, however, because, as relative terms, they necessarily lack independence and objectivity. In the same way, just as ‘long’ and ‘short’ are self-evidently relative, Madhyamaka contends that all conceptualizations betray the mind’s same tendency to superimpose structure and substantiality where, in fact, there is emptiness and relativity. For reasons to be developed in subsequent chapters, particularly chapter 7, Madhyamaka regards acknowledgement of the ubiquity of conceptual imputation as a necessary prerequisite for liberation. Hence, psychologically internalizing the truth of pervasive dependency is deemed essential for freedom, a state which Nāgārjuna characterizes in terms of the complete abandonment of conceptualization: “This halting of cognizing everything, the halting of hypostatizing, is blissful. No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone.”⁵⁵

Madhyamaka presents acts of reification and conceptualization as the most subtle instances of grasping and appropriation and claims that the goal of *nirvāṇa* cannot be

⁵⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.25. *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivah/ na kva cit kasyacit kaścid dharmo buddhena deśitaḥ*// (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 304).

attained until these propensities are eradicated entirely.⁵⁶ As has been intimated throughout this chapter, in the final analysis, Madhyamaka holds that causal and mereological dependency relations themselves turn out to be the product of conceptual imputation. There are thus several layers of dependency, culminating in the conceptual dependence of dependent origination itself. This interpretation of dependent origination emerges from very specific – yet contested – readings of *MMK* 24.18. This verse, often regarded as “the most celebrated verse of the work,” reads as follows: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe/ sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā*||.⁵⁷

Various translations have been proposed but Berger has classified the most recurrent renditions as being either “nominalist” or “conventionalist.”⁵⁸ On Berger’s estimation, neither of these are adequate because they overlook the “grammatical ambiguity” contained in the second half of the verse (which centres on the question of whether to understand ‘*prajñaptir upādāya*’ as a technical compound meaning ‘a dependent designation,’ or whether to take ‘*upādāya*’ more straightforwardly as an absolute qualifying ‘*prajñapti*,’ thence meaning something like ‘having acquired this notion.’⁵⁹ He also alleges that these types of translation inspire readings of Nāgārjuna which he considers philosophically untenable.⁶⁰ As the exchange between Berger and Garfield and Westerhoff demonstrates, this verse provokes both philological and philosophical disputation.⁶¹ Several scholars have dismissed Berger’s interpretation as based on a

⁵⁶ Streng (1975: 73).

⁵⁷ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.18. “Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle way.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 277).

⁵⁸ Berger (2010).

⁵⁹ Berger (2010: 46).

⁶⁰ Berger (2010: 40).

⁶¹ See Berger (2011) and Garfield and Westerhoff (2011).

dubious rendering of the Sanskrit.⁶² What is generally agreed, however, is that Candrakīrti is right to read this verse as implying thoroughgoing linguistic conventionalism.

It is in this vein that Oetke suggests an exegesis of the verse which accords well with an interpretation of Nāgārjuna as endorsing, what he describes as, “metaphysical illusionism.”⁶³ Oetke points out various possible ways of reading *MMK* 24.18 and raises the question of whether emptiness should be understood as the primary ‘topic’ of the verse. He writes: “The hypothesis that (the idea of) emptiness constitutes the topic induces a reading according to which *MMK* 24.18 is meant to play down the significance of this notion as employed in Madhyamaka. This results if one takes the verse as furnishing a comment on the proper import of this Madhyamaka key-term to the effect that if that term is properly understood it amounts to nothing but current Buddhist notions such as dependent origination... designation on some basis... and middle path.”⁶⁴ However, if the Madhyamaka teaching on emptiness is nothing new, if it is essentially just a reformulation of existing doctrine, why should this verse have generated the most interest? To answer this, Oetke invokes the idea of “metaphysical illusionism” – which, in all essentials, amounts to an anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka already defended in chapter 1. Oetke suggests that it is only as a challenge to the realist assumptions of existing Buddhist schools that Nāgārjuna’s emphasis on the transitivity and symmetry of the terms for ‘dependent origination,’ ‘emptiness,’ ‘dependent designation’ and ‘middle way’ makes sense.⁶⁵

⁶² Garfield and Westerhoff (2011) and Gombrich (personal correspondence).

⁶³ Oetke (2007: 1).

⁶⁴ Oetke (2007: 13).

⁶⁵ Oetke (2007: 6).

In his commentary on this verse, Candrakīrti intimates that these terms are all synonyms (*viśeṣa-saṃjñā*).⁶⁶ The upshot of this analysis, which embraces their mutual definability, is the so-called emptiness of emptiness itself and a denial of absolute objectivity. The emptiness of emptiness is confirmed in the following verse where Nāgārjuna states that nothing is exempt from being *niḥsvabhāva*.⁶⁷ Hence, if emptiness and dependency are synonyms, and emptiness is empty, then dependency too is itself dependent. In later formulations of Mahāyāna Buddhism, dependent origination is interpreted as inter-dependence, such that all phenomena reflect and influence all other phenomena. On this view the idea of an entity as it is in itself becomes untenable. Here, the ontological primacy of specific entities is disavowed, so that identity can be conferred only insofar as the principle of relationality is universally extended.⁶⁸

The idea that the mind constructs reality has important ramifications for the Buddhist free will debate. These matters will be dealt with more fully in chapter 5 but, for the moment, it is worth noting that if reality is generated rather than given it follows that there may be many different versions of reality, rendering the attainment of definitive or absolute resolutions of any problem impossible. A reading of dependent origination which focuses on the constructive power of mind also has implications for our treatment of the law of karma, as shall become clear in chapter 6.

⁶⁶ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 24. 18. *tad evaṃ pratītyasamutpādasyaivaitā viśeṣasaṃjñāḥ śūnyatā upādāya prajñaptir madhyamā pratipad iti* // de La Vallée Poussin (1903: 504). “C’est ainsi que <vacuité>, <designation métaphorique>, <voie moyenne> sont les noms divers d’une seule et même production par conditions.” (Trans.) May, J. (1959: 239).

⁶⁷ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.19. *apratītya samutpanno dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate | yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmāḥ kaścīn na vidyate* // “There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, it follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.” (Trans.) Siderits and Katsura (2013: 278).

⁶⁸ Hershock (2015).

From the Madhyamaka perspective, it is only by perceiving the emptiness of dependent origination that the dichotomy between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is dissolved and recognized to be the product of mere conceptual imputation. Whilst the foregoing constitutes only a very broad-brush depiction of the three types of dependency relation in Madhyamaka, the investigation has hopefully been sufficient to show that, whatever the similarities between Madhyamaka and Humean accounts of causation as lacking inherent reality, the differences between the theses of determinism and dependent origination are yet more striking. That Madhyamaka sees causal relations as just one strand of the more complex weave of dependency relations invites questions about how the structural properties of different aspects of dependency compare.

Unity in Diversity?

The diversity between the structural properties of different dependency relations forces us to reflect on what unites them. Unsurprisingly, there is little agreement between contemporary scholars on the nature of the structural properties exhibited by the three dependency relations. Moreover, as the above discussion on Candrakīrti's account of causal and mereological dependency reveals, the symmetry or asymmetry ascribed to such relations depends on whether they are being assessed from enlightened or unenlightened perspectives. Yet it is nevertheless important for Madhyamaka scholarship to try to determine the relationship between the different types of dependency as this enables deeper engagement with the role each serves in this system. In particular, for reconstructivists interested in Buddhist attitudes to free will, supplying a clearer account of the interactions between causation, mereology and conceptual imputation than has hitherto been available is crucial. The concluding part of this

chapter, therefore, sketches three possible ways of explicating the relationship between dependency relations. These are not intended to be exhaustive but, rather, are offered as stimuli for future examination.

(i) The Non-symmetry of Dependency Relations

It is natural to suppose that the three dependency relations have something in common and that they all exhibit the same structural properties. After all, they all fall under the category ‘dependency relations.’ One possible way of unifying the dependency relations is by arguing that they all display a ‘non-symmetrical’ structure, where non-symmetry is distinguished from asymmetry. By describing dependency relations as non-symmetrical the reconstructivist adheres to (Prāsaṅgika) Madhyamaka’s own standards of refraining from ascribing properties even conventionally to that which does not have a fixed nature. From the Prāsaṅgika point of view, because causal and mereological dependency relations are considered asymmetrical by the worldly but symmetrical by higher standards of conventionality, it would be inappropriate to make a definitive pronouncement as to their nature, because ultimately they are empty of defining characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*).

Some contemporary metaphysicians, such as Barnes, have deployed a similar technique in order to group together a multitude of ontological dependency relations under the umbrella term ‘non-symmetrical’ with the aim of achieving explanatory holism.⁶⁹ However, at the heart of explanatory holism is an implicit acceptance of ontological essentialism, making its application to Madhyamaka *prima facie* impossible. Indeed,

⁶⁹ Barnes (no date).

employing this method in order to understand the interactions between different dependency relations would require such substantive modifications that one suspects the resultant theory would be virtually unrecognizable. Whilst there could be some value in this project, it will not be attempted here because alternative, more straightforward, means of explaining the unity of Madhyamaka dependency relations are available.

(ii) The Family Resemblance Between Dependency Relations

An alternative way of understanding the connection between the three dependency relations makes use of the ‘family resemblance’ theory found in Wittgensteinian philosophy. According to this theory we identify certain things as belonging to the same class as certain other things because, despite the fact that none of them share one ‘essential’ feature, they are all connected via overlapping features or properties. In the case of dependency relations, we could say that the causal relation is conventionally irreflexive and asymmetric, the mereological relationship is conventionally asymmetric yet ultimately symmetric, and the conceptually imputed relationship is both conventionally and ultimately symmetric.

The family resemblance theory helps to explain the unity of dependency relations whilst still preserving the anti-essentialist strand of Madhyamaka thought. That we should accept this interpretation of the unity of dependence relations as legitimate, however, remains unclear. One point in need of greater investigation is whether resemblances pertaining to structure (i.e. irreflexive, asymmetric and symmetric) are legitimate as points of commonality even between the different levels (i.e. from conventional to

ultimate) at which such structures are said to manifest. Again, this is a matter for further enquiry.

(iii) The Spiritual Hierarchy of Dependency Relations

Still another way of detecting unity in the three dependency relations requires that we see them as hierarchically structured. This strategy enables us to make sense of Nāgārjuna's claim that dependency is the middle way: dependency is both the path leading to the goal and the goal itself. The rate of a person's spiritual progress corresponds with her ability to see dependency relations as increasingly deep reflections of emptiness. The unenlightened will begin by thinking of causes as possessing real causal power but, through contemplation, this wrong view is supplanted with the idea that causes are empty. Similarly, through philosophical analysis it becomes clear that wholes are not ultimately real which in turn leads to the realization that parts too are mere conceptual fictions, dependent on the wholes. Eventually, through repeatedly challenging the coherence of *svabhāva*, realization of the ubiquity of conceptual imputation occurs. Thus a person's attitude towards the reality or ultimate unreality of dependence relations reflects their spiritual insight.

This approach, unlike the last, moves straightforwardly across the conventional/ultimate boundary. Furthermore, support for the idea that the dependency relations are structured hierarchically is also available in Indian and Tibetan commentarial literature. This view of the structure of dependency allows us to see the three types as incrementally sophisticated, where causal and mereological dependency are subsumed beneath the conceptual variety. Hence, Hopkins asserts of the Prāsaṅgikas: "Causes

and conditions' also refer to the parts of an object – an object's basis of designation – and to the thought that designates the existence of an object.”⁷⁰ To some extent this interpretation has already been explored above in our discussion of Candrakīrti's presentation of mereological dependency. Whether a being can recognize the part-whole relation as existentially symmetric depends on the spiritual attainments of the being in question. Conceiving of the dependency relations as spiritually hierarchical is congruent too with our analysis of the Madhyamaka project as a primarily soteriological venture.

What unites the dependency relations, then, is that each occupies a crucial place on the path to liberation. They might helpfully be depicted as successive rungs on a ladder. By climbing from rung to rung we eventually reach the summit, at which point the conceptually imputative process and the constant acts of reification are terminated.

Conclusions: Determinism, Dependency and Freedom

Having explored the Madhyamaka concepts of causes and conditions, we are now in a position to ascertain whether meaningful comparison between dependent origination and Western scientific causal determinism is possible. Although more refined definitions could be provided, for the present purposes let causal determinism be the thesis that: “The world is governed by (or is under the sway of) determinism if and only if, given a specified way things are at a time *t*, the way things go thereafter is fixed as a matter of natural law.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Hopkins (1996: 167-168).

⁷¹ Hofer (2010).

The expression of scientific determinism as a metaphysical thesis (as opposed to a merely physical thesis) is important for our purposes.⁷² It is arguable that the extent to which causal determinism constitutes a threat to human freedom can only be fully appreciated if we consider the possibility that not only physical, but also mental, processes are determined.⁷³ This distinction is the more relevant in a context in which the kind of freedom sought after (*nirvāṇa*) cannot be attained without a free mind, that is, a mind free from delusion.

Regardless of sectarian affiliation, there is a shared commitment amongst Buddhists that full spiritual freedom is possible precisely because of, rather than despite, the truth of dependent origination. Contrastingly, Western philosophy has perceived causal determinism as a perilous proposition for human freedom. As Candrakīrti states at *PsP* 1.1, he understands dependent origination to be the ‘subject matter’ (*abhidheya*) of Nāgārjuna’s treatise, while he considers the ‘purpose’ (*prayojana*) of the text to be to indicate the path to *nirvāṇa*.⁷⁴ These considerations alone imply that similarities between dependent origination and causal determinism are really only superficial and that Madhyamaka’s explicit commitment to dependent origination in itself provides very limited grounds for supposing it is implicitly committed to causal determinism.

⁷² Meyers (2013: 5).

⁷³ The necessity of exercising freedom over one’s mental states in order to be morally responsible for what one does is a matter taken up in chapter 5.

⁷⁴ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 1.4. *tad atrānīrodhādyaṣṭaviśeṣaṇaviśiṣṭaḥ praṭītyasamutpādaḥ śāstrābhidheyārthaḥ| sarvaprapañcopaśamaśivalakṣaṇaṃ nirvāṇaṃ śāstrasya prayojanaṃ nirdiṣṭam||* MacDonald, A (Vol. 1, 2015: 118-119). “Thus here (i.e. according to these verses) dependent-arising (*praṭītyasamutpāda*) qualified by the eight qualifiers ‘without cessation’ (*anīrodha*), etc., is the subject matter of the treatise. *Nirvāṇa*, characterized as the calming of all manifoldness (*prapañcopaśama*) and [ultimate] welfare (*śiva*), is indicated as the purpose of the treatise.” (Trans.) MacDonald, A. (Vol. 2, 2015: 17).

The idea that “determinism is not true in virtue of linguistic or other conventions alone” is questionable.⁷⁵ Even if commitment to causal determinism is consistent with Madhyamaka philosophy, Mādhyamikas are at most implicitly committed to the conventional truth of determinism. Whilst the Madhyamaka view of the ultimate unreality of causes tells us little about whether it should be implicitly committed to causal determinism when this is understood as a conventionally true thesis, it is hard to see how this is reconcilable with the doctrine of *karma*. The metaphysical thesis of determinism implies that even mental processes are governed by prior events outside our control. If the quality of our *karma* is coterminous with the ethical intention behind our actions, then, if metaphysical determinism is true, we cannot be responsible even conventionally for our *karma*. Yet, the achievability of *nirvāṇa* is premised on the possibility that people are free to choose to cultivate moral and spiritual virtues.

The irreconcilability of *karma* and determinism is certainly a problem. However, if we can recognize the conventional, constructed nature of this problem, the need to supply an entirely robust, definitive, response dwindles. From the Madhyamaka perspective, ultimate solutions to conventional problems are both impossible and unnecessary: they are impossible because solutions to constructed, artificial, problems can themselves only be conventional; they are unnecessary because what is required is psychological transformation, not philosophical speculation.

Minds free from confusion and moral defilement are uniquely able to realize that those causal relations and conditioning factors supporting each event are operative only at a conventional level. Consistent with Madhyamaka thought is the idea that it takes the

⁷⁵ Berofsky (1971: 2).

internalization of the truth of the emptiness of dependency to see that the question of whether we are free or determined need not be so pressing a concern. The ability to identify emptiness with dependency and to see that emptiness itself is empty occurs when the last vestiges of the ego are relinquished and only at that point is complete freedom available. Realization of the truth of dependency encourages us to see ourselves as ultimately unreal, which in turn encourages us to see ourselves as capable of spiritual growth because we are not fixed, changeless, substantial, real entities. Contrastingly, belief in determinism, insofar as it encourages people to see themselves as simply subject to laws beyond their control is potentially pernicious and ethically nihilistic. Thus, whatever superficial resemblance there is between the two ideas, they are both conventionally and ultimately irreconcilable.

Chapter 5

Transcending Perspectives: Perspectivalism as a Meta-Theory¹

“Buddhist perspectivalism [is] the view that we should view ourselves as genuinely free and responsible, while viewing others as neither free nor responsible.”

Daniel Breyer, *Freedom with a Buddhist Face*

“Whatever transgressions and evil deeds of various kinds there are, all arise through the power of conditioning factors, while there is nothing that arises independently.”²

“Those who injure me are really compelled by my actions. For this they will go to the realms of hell. Surely it is they who are harmed by me?”³

Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.25 and 6.47

Chapter 3 alluded to the proliferation of interest in Buddhist free will theorizing in recent scholarship. The task of cataloguing and classifying the various possible responses to the Buddhist free will problem – i.e. the analogous problem of reconciling responsibility for one’s *karma* with dependent origination – would now be substantial, given how many competing conceptions have been proposed. Rather than argue for yet another way of reconstructing the implied Buddhist view on free will, this chapter develops the theory of ‘perspectivalism.’ In Breyer’s original formulation of the theory, perspectivalism is presented as a possible response to the Buddhist free will problem but, instead, here it is argued that perspectivalism is more fruitfully conceived of as a theory about how to *organize* the array of competing theories about Buddhism and free will.⁴ In other words, this chapter contends that treating perspectivalism as a ‘meta-theory’ about Buddhism and free will enables the reconstructivist to reinterpret the relationship between the various ‘lower-order’ theories (such as libertarianism, paleo-

¹ Several sections of this chapter are taken from Javanaud (2018 a).

² Śāntideva – *BCA* 6.25. *ye kecid aparādhās ca pāpāni vividhāni ca| sarvaṃ tat pratyayabalāt svatantram tu na vidyate||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 52).

³ Śāntideva – *BCA* 6.47. *matkarmacoditā eva jātā mayy apakāriṇaḥ| yena yāsyanti narakān mayaiivāmī hatā nanu||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 54).

⁴ Breyer (2013).

compatibilism, neo-compatibilism, hard-determinism *et cetera*), which are ordinarily regarded as mutually exclusive. Several consequences follow from the reconceptualization of perspectivalism as a meta-theory, the most important of which are the harmonization of seemingly rival responses to the free will problem and the realization that there cannot, as a matter of principle, be any definitive solution to it.

There is insufficient space available to harmonize every available view on Buddhism and free will with perspectivalism. This chapter therefore sets out to reconcile the modified version of paleo-compatibilism (as presented at the end of chapter 3) with perspectivalism. The philosophical steps involved in harmonizing paleo-compatibilism and perspectivalism, which are, *prima facie*, incongruous approaches to free will, could be replicated for libertarianism or hard determinism. Hence, the harmonization attempted here should be understood as a kind of ‘case study.’ By treating perspectivalism as a meta-theory the reconstructivist is able to structure the different responses to the free will problem hierarchically, in accordance with Madhyamaka’s pragmatic conception of truth as that which leads to successful practice and, eventually, to liberation.

Perspectivalism thus emerges as an overarching theory under which apparent rivals may be subsumed but, crucially, and in keeping with Madhyamaka’s thoroughgoing repudiation of the coherence of the idea of ultimate truth, perspectivalism itself turns out to have merely conventional truth status. Since Madhyamaka considers all ‘views’ (*pratijñās*) to be impediments to moral and spiritual fulfilment, unswerving commitment to perspectivalism as delivering correct insight into free will would be a hindrance to freedom itself. Functioning almost like an insurance policy against this

eventuality, therefore, perspectivalism as a meta-theory contains within itself the idea that one should be a perspectivalist about perspectivalism too.

Perspectivalism: Relativizing Free Will

To begin with a definition, perspectivalism is the view that “we should always regard ourselves as genuinely free and responsible agents... while we should never regard others in this way.”⁵ In important ways, perspectivalism resembles the idea of ‘free will subjectivism,’ a recently developed view on how to negotiate the relationship between the various possible ‘solutions.’⁶ To be a free will subjectivist is to maintain that judgments assigning moral responsibility cannot be objectively true but, rather, can only ever be relatively so. Proponents of free will subjectivism argue that this thesis is the natural counterpart to meta-ethical subjectivism, the view that the truth or falsity of moral claims depends on the context in which they are embedded. On this view, free will theories, like normative theories, are susceptible to meta-level analysis so that in the absence of objective moral facts there can be no definitive answer to the question of whether people are morally responsible.

Breyer has outlined two different versions of perspectivalism: ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist.’⁷ Given that this thesis is primarily concerned with Madhyamaka Buddhism, which has already been interpreted as implicitly committed to anti-realism, the focus here is exclusively on developing the second version of perspectivalism. Like Siderits and Goodman, Breyer appeals to Śāntideva’s *BCA* in explicating his views and

⁵ Breyer (2013: 359-360).

⁶ Double (2002).

⁷ Breyer (2013: 374).

maintains that any adequately reconstructed free will theory must be able to accommodate the ambivalent attitude Mādhyamikas display towards the legitimacy and value of ascribing moral responsibility for intentional action (*karma*). Breyer observes that Buddhist literature reveals a ‘Janus-face’ on the question of whether people are responsible, affirming both the importance of not blaming others for their wrong actions and the need to hold oneself accountable.

For example, in the *BCA* (6.22-25 and 6.33-41) Śāntideva suggests that people cannot be held morally accountable for what they do because their actions are the product of dependent origination. He claims, therefore, that it would be just as inappropriate to get angry with those who wrong us as it would be to get angry at inanimate sources of suffering, like bile, fire or weapons. At one level, then, Śāntideva seems committed to hard determinism (the view that people are causally ‘programmed’ to act as they do and therefore are not personally accountable for their actions). On the other hand, Śāntideva holds himself responsible for his own conduct, as though exempting his own actions from the law of dependent origination. Indeed, Śāntideva even seems to take responsibility for the immoral conduct of other people and sees himself as the progenitor of their misfortunes. At *BCA* 6.48, for example, Śāntideva blames himself for the fact that his tormentors will suffer the karmic consequences of their actions. He writes: “On account of them, because I am patient, my evil is considerably decreased. While on account of me they experience the long-lasting agonies of hell.”⁸

⁸ Śāntideva – *BCA* 6.48. *etān āśrītya me pāpaṃ kṣīyate kṣamato bahu | mām āśrītya tu yānty ete narakān dīrghavedanān||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 54).

Remarking on this ambivalence, Breyer interprets Śāntideva as endorsing ‘asymmetric’ views on the ascription of moral responsibility and free will. What could justify such double standards? Perhaps the most likely explanation, given Madhyamaka’s distinctive account of truth as that which leads to ‘successful practice’ is that the adoption of a perspectivalist attitude towards free will is conducive to the cultivation of equanimity and compassion, both of which are regarded as paramount virtues in Buddhism. At heart, perspectivalism rests on the assumption that seeing other people as subject to external forces and impersonal causal laws, rather than as the directors of their own lives, will stimulate greater compassion and tolerance in the face of hostility or adversity. Śāntideva’s double standards are thus seen as the product of his bodhisattva quest, the purpose of which is entirely to eradicate unhelpful ‘reactive attitudes’ such as blame, hatred and resentment and to liberate all sentient beings. Whether abandonment of the reactive attitudes would in fact produce a more equanimous disposition or whether it would instead entail the end of “life as we know it,” is itself a fiercely contested issue and will be examined in the next section.⁹

One especially noteworthy feature of perspectivalism is that it makes no pretension to universalizability. Since Madhyamaka rejects the idea of truth as ‘correspondence’ there is nothing contradictory about two people both subscribing to the perspectivalist thesis even though they cannot both be ‘objectively’ right in asserting that they alone possess free will and are morally responsible. Nevertheless, provided it is pragmatically or soteriologically efficacious to do so, Mādhyamikas could endorse and even cultivate the view that they differ from others insofar as they are culpable for their wrongdoings. This is because, in the absence of any definitive fact of the matter concerning the

⁹ Strawson (1962).

distribution of free will, there is justification for promoting whichever views most effectively undermine the three poisons of greed, hatred and delusion.

The role of perspectivalism in rooting out delusion is not immediately obvious. Indeed, as Goodman explains, “considered as philosophy, a view of this structure is extremely implausible.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, even Goodman, who previously defended interpretations of Buddhism as implicitly hard determinist, now maintains that “as a medicine for self-cherishing, such a view could have important advantages.”¹¹ Indeed, Goodman has further stipulated that perspectivalism makes more sense when conceived not only as an ‘asymmetric’ stance on free will, but as a ‘doubly asymmetric’ stance. According to the doubly asymmetric view, from the first-person point of view, it makes sense to attribute moral responsibility for unethical conduct and to withhold responsibility for ethical conduct, yet, from the third-person point of view, it makes sense to attribute responsibility for ethical conduct and withhold it for unethical conduct.¹² Goodman considers the ‘doubly asymmetric’ view to be an improvement on the merely ‘asymmetric’ view insofar as it constitutes a remedy to the inflated sense of pride or superiority which could accompany a person’s conviction that they alone possess free will.

It would be a mistake to dwell for too long on the question of whether, or to what extent, the doubly asymmetric view counts as a meaningful improvement to the asymmetric view. Clearly there are occasions on which the most compassionate course of conduct is to treat others as morally responsible for their actions even when doing so involves

¹⁰ Goodman (2017 a: 37).

¹¹ Goodman (2017 a: 38).

¹² Goodman (2017 a: 37).

the ascription of blame for causally conditioned activity. For example, as teachers and parents know, it is sometimes necessary to discipline children not because they have a fully developed capacity for distinguishing right from wrong but because discipline and instruction are vital to the development of just such a capacity. Similarly, in the *Sāmaññaphala sutta*, the Buddha warns that fatalistic conceptions of human activity can induce moral apathy and, hence, it would be unhelpful for Buddhas or bodhisattvas to propagate the view that other people lack free will.¹³ The centrality of *karma* to Buddhist teachings indicates that, in general, Buddhists encourage people to see themselves as responsible for their actions and to undertake exercises such as mindfulness to enhance their capacity for self-regulation. Again, there might be occasions on which it is spiritually helpful for people to believe themselves responsible for their good conduct. Such a belief will not always give rise to pride or a sense of superiority and, indeed, much *sūtra* literature advocates rejoicing at one's own accumulation of merit.

If bodhisattvas were too firmly to subscribe to the perspectivalist view, the view that others are not responsible for their conduct, then their efforts to lead others to moral and spiritual fulfilment would be futile. As Śāntideva emphasizes in the *BCA*, liberation requires the perfection of diligence and zeal (*vīrya-pāramitā*) in inspiring others to pursue enlightenment: “One who has undertaken the Vow should be like someone superintended by swordsmen, who is carrying a jar of oil, wholly intent upon it, out of

¹³ Dīgha Nikāya 2, Sāmaññaphala Sutta. For example, this sutta presents a number of competing theories about the relationship between action, consequences and responsibility – all of which are rejected as wrong views by the Buddha. Amongst the theories discussed are those of Pūraṇa Kassapa, who maintains that action produces neither merit nor demerit, Makkhali Gosāla, who adopts a fatalistic standpoint, and Ajita Kesakambalī, whose materialism leads him to conclude that, ultimately, meritorious action yields the same result as de-meritorious action. The early Buddhist tradition interprets these views as both mistaken from the point of view of metaphysics, but, perhaps still more significantly, ethically antinomian and spiritually dangerous insofar as they could promote moral indifference or nihilism.

fear of death if he stumbles.”¹⁴ Presumably, bodhisattvas can only maintain the energy levels required for their eons-long task by believing that others too are capable of moral responsibility. Although Breyer describes perspectivalism as entailing a qualified version of libertarianism according to which there is the *possibility* of creating the future in fact there is no need to read perspectivalism as implying either the reality of independent agents (frequently posited by libertarianism) or anything about the metaphysical structure of the world. That is, perspectivalism can remain silent on the question of whether there is just one possible future or many and still perform its function of inducing compassion for those who harm us. As a meta-theory, perspectivalism provides a philosophically credible way of structuring the relationship between competing lower-order theories on free will, including lower-order perspectivalism (which has both psychological and pragmatic appeal).

The fundamental principle underpinning both the asymmetric and doubly asymmetric theses, then, is not that bodhisattvas should subscribe to any specific view about the distribution of free will among the populace but that they should be willing to embrace whichever view most conduces to the welfare of others.

Eliminating Reactive Attitudes

Buddhists consider the elimination of reactive attitudes as necessary for liberation. However, Peter Strawson has famously argued that even if somebody comes to believe in the thesis of hard determinism, elimination of the reactive attitudes is impossible.¹⁵

¹⁴ Śāntideva – BCA 7.70. *tailapātradhara yadvad asihastair adhiṣṭhitāḥ/ skhalite maraṇatrāsāt tatparaḥ syāt tathā vratī*// (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 73).

¹⁵ Strawson (1962).

Strawson maintains that reactive attitudes are part of the very fabric of human life and that their elimination would come at the cost of destroying all meaningful interaction with other people. He therefore claims that even if their elimination *were* possible, it would not be desirable. As one of Strawson's supporters puts it, a world without reactive attitudes would be "so cold and dreary that any but the most cynical must shudder at the idea of it."¹⁶

A number of responses are available to the perspectivalist in the face of these charges. In the first place, the perspectivalist could concede the importance of the 'participant' stance, defined as "essentially natural human reactions" towards perceived ill will, indifference or generosity towards us.¹⁷ Retaining the importance of the participant stance, however, means that the perspectivalist is forced to relinquish the idea that *all* reactive attitudes are harmful. Instead, the perspectivalist could argue, it is necessary only to undermine harmful reactive attitudes (for example, indignation, blame and resentment) whilst leaving the helpful ones in place (such as contentment, praise and gratitude). To the extent that helpful reactive attitudes are conceptually reliant on their unhelpful counterparts, however, Madhyamaka cannot accept that any reactive attitudes are helpful. On the contrary, since Madhyamaka considers non-attachment to be crucial for attaining liberation, and since even the 'positive' reactive attitudes are symptomatic of attachment, all must be eliminated eventually. This does not detract from the fact that Madhyamaka recognizes the importance of countering harmful reactive attitudes with helpful ones during the process of path progression.

¹⁶ Wolf (1981: 391).

¹⁷ Strawson (1962: 195).

An alternative response is to concede that elimination of the reactive attitudes does indeed entail the “end of life as we know it,” as Strawson suggests, but to argue that this is a cause for celebration rather than regret. This approach would have greater appeal to Mādhyamikas who hold that bodhisattvas, having seen through conventional reality, engage with others in radically new ways. Having seen through the illusion of selfhood, the bodhisattva no longer even thinks in terms of agential capacity and hence no longer employs the concepts required to articulate the free will problem in the first place. Still, the merit accumulated by bodhisattvas during previous lifetimes is so great as to propel them into aiding others on the basis of indiscriminate compassionate responsiveness.

A third response available to the perspectivalist is to challenge Strawson’s claim that reactive attitudes are essential for meaningful human relationships.¹⁸ The number of people who even *claim* to have relinquished these attitudes is so few that to compare their conduct with that of those who persist in adopting the ‘participant’ stance is virtually impossible. Although Strawson’s claim is empirical in nature, he fails to supply any evidence in support of it. Until evidence is forthcoming, pronouncement on the *necessity* of reactive attitudes for enjoying satisfying relationships with others is unwarranted. Strawson acknowledges that we sometimes do adopt an ‘objective’ as opposed to a ‘participant’ stance, as in our dealings with the criminally insane or with very young children, but argues that this can never become the norm. This is because of his conviction that “it cannot be a consequence of any thesis which is not self-contradictory that abnormality is the universal condition.”¹⁹ As has already been

¹⁸ Strawson (1962: 197). “A sustained objectivity of inter-personal attitude, and the human isolation which that would entail, does not seem to be something of which human beings would be capable, even if some general truth were a theoretical ground for it.”

¹⁹ Strawson (1962: 196).

extensively discussed, however, Madhyamaka's conception of ordinary, unenlightened, people as under the sway of delusion means that the warrant for suspending reactive attitudes in special cases should in fact be universally extended. In any case, as those who work with psychiatric patients or others judged not to meet the threshold for moral responsibility will affirm, it is unrealistic to imagine that "undermining blame turns all relationships into ones where the temperature never rises above clinical or professional detachment."²⁰

Being Perspectivalist About Perspectivalism

Whilst there is much to commend in perspectivalism, in its original form it fails to communicate the need to move beyond the idea of 'definitive' solutions to the free will problem. Although the anti-realist version of perspectivalism is intended as a viable Madhyamaka response to the question of the seeming incompatibility of dependent origination and karmic responsibility, Breyer still presents this solution as in rivalry with alternative approaches such as paleo-compatibilism and hard determinism. However, as intimated above, perspectivalism can be more fruitfully understood as a meta-theory about Buddhism and free will. When perspectivalist insights (pertaining to the fact that there can be no 'objective' fact of the matter about free will) are applied to perspectivalism itself, the theory acquires a new role – namely that of *critiquing* theories purporting to describe the distribution of free will – and ceases to count amongst competing 'solutions.'

²⁰ Glover (2001: 304).

If, like the free will subjectivist, Madhyamaka holds that truth is in some sense subject-relative, or dependent on factors other than objectivity, whatever approach it implicitly has towards free will should be relativized. Again, like the free will subjectivist, Madhyamaka's distinctive conception of truth prevents it from making sweeping statements about the truth or falsity of hard determinism, compatibilism, libertarianism and even perspectivalism. In different contexts, hard determinism and libertarianism may be affirmed without a conflict arising at the meta-level about which is true. Mādhyamikas and free will subjectivists are therefore in a position preferentially to systematize the lower-level free will theories on the basis of pragmatic considerations, such as which view about free will results in the execution of moral norms which are themselves arrived at through non-objective analysis.²¹ Conceived thus, perspectivalism has the power to disabuse Buddhist free will reconstructivists of the illusion that a 'definitive' solution to the problem is available. This insight holds for a whole range of other problems the Mādhyamika might encounter, including whether there can be a 'definitive' expression of the teaching of emptiness and even whether there is any 'definitive' way of determining which teachings count as *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*.

Nevertheless, even as a lower-order theory, perspectivalism stands out amongst reconstructed Buddhist positions on free will as readily available to Madhyamaka. Unlike many of the Buddhist free will theories, perspectivalism pays greater attention to aspects of dependent origination other than the causal dimension. Specifically, in taking Madhyamaka's more refined understanding of what it means for something to be dependently originated – i.e. dependent upon the mind's tendency towards

²¹ Double (2004).

reification and the conceptually imputative process – the perspectivalist arrives at a conclusion which recognises itself to be merely conventionally established.

Nevertheless, insofar as it continues to pitch itself against other theories and insofar as it makes no attempt to harmonize existing approaches by structuring them hierarchically, perspectivalism fails fully to capture Madhyamaka's insight into the pervasiveness of dependency. In his presentation of perspectivalism, Breyer retains the idea that this theory is triumphant over competing approaches to the free will problem. The irony is, that in emphasizing Madhyamaka's disavowal of the possibility of an absolutely correct stance on this issue, the claim's counterpart – that there can be no absolutely incorrect stance either – is overlooked.

Perspectivalism and Compassion

Goodman argues that an anti-realist perspectivalist could justify advocacy of the doubly asymmetric view because it affords soteriological benefits.²² However, if soteriological fulfilment is the perspectivalist's only criterion of truth in debates on free will, their eagerness to dismiss alternative positions is misplaced: people of varied psychological dispositions will be motivated in different measures by the plethora of free will theories available. The value of endorsing any of the lower-order theories is determined just as much by the level of spiritual maturity of the person who endorses it as by the viability of the theory itself. In alignment with the graded teachings of the Buddha, the reconstructivist could likewise grade free will theories in accordance with their soteriological utility. Of course, the patterns of gradation might vary from one

²² Goodman (2017 a: 39).

pedagogical setting to another but could unfold as follows: libertarianism, hard determinism, compatibilism, perspectivalism.

Through recognising the relative truth of responses already proposed to the Buddhist free will problem, the perspectivalist accesses a new type of resolution; one which conceives of the mutual exclusivity of existing proposals as superficial. Perspectivalism thus does for debates on free will what the Madhyamaka system does for the entire enterprise of metaphysics: challenging the notion of truth as objective and, rather than offering one more view, undermines the basis of views altogether.

Whether perspectivalists can always justify switching between a first-person/ third-person stance on the attribution, or withholding, of responsibility is questionable – for it is uncertain that this will invariably lead to the most soteriologically successful results. However, this is a matter to be decided through empirical investigation. Nevertheless, the resolute tone of Breyer’s call for the adoption of the asymmetric view should inspire caution. Goodman has argued that the application of the doubly asymmetric view should serve as a corrective to self-cherishing but he acknowledges that, for the enlightened, compassionate conduct is governed not by adherence to a specific view but by “spontaneous responsiveness.”²³ As noted already, there may be some circumstances in which soteriological objectives will be furthered most effectively by holding others responsible for their misdeeds, even if the illusion of agency is dispelled from an enlightened perspective.

²³ Goodman (2017 a: 38).

The main perspectivalist idea is that we should think of free will distribution in whichever way promotes soteriologically successful practice. The best approach to take, then, is that which most aids spiritual maturation. Accordingly, there is no reason why in principle perspectivalists cannot also endorse other theories about free will if doing so is likely to encourage soteriological progress.

The Consistency of Perspectivalism and Seemingly Rival Theories

Breyer prefaces his presentation of perspectivalism with a sustained attack on Buddhist hard determinism, paleo-compatibilism and neo-compatibilism. As noted, Goodman has recently explored the potential benefits a Buddhist hard determinist may derive from sustaining the illusion of free will, which, he thinks, perspectivalism can deliver. According to Goodman's revised position, even if hard determinism is ultimately true, some people will benefit from the illusion of free will and thus would benefit from acceptance of the perspectivalist claim that they themselves possess it. Goodman has also correctly recognized that to take perspectivalism to its logical conclusion involves the "full abandonment of the ascription of responsibility and the illusion of agency."²⁴ As the Madhyamaka tradition explains, the illusion of agency and selfhood runs so deep that its consequences are experienced both at the cognitive and affective levels. Eventually, acceptance of perspectivalism requires abandonment of belief in agency yet, presumably, during the time this illusion persists the perspectival approach remains useful. Perspectivalism can undermine unwholesome reactive attitudes and so expose as illusory the facticity of free will theorising. In conjunction with each other, these factors of perspectivalism produce a phenomenological shift within the aspirant and

²⁴ Goodman (2017 a: 39).

contribute to the transition from reflection on free will to the attainment of freedom. Perspectivalism is therefore a useful instrument, which, like all instruments, should be discarded once its purpose is fulfilled.

If perspectivalism is better understood as a meta-theory about free will than as a theory describing which conditions must obtain for the ascription of responsibility, it can encompass various approaches to the Buddhist free will problem. In exploring the entailments of Madhyamaka's call to abandon all views and to recognise the emptiness of reality, the perspectivalist should be open to the possibility that apparently rival strategies are, ultimately, consistent. To take Siderits's theory of paleo-compatibilism as an example, there is no need to insist, as Breyer does, on the mutual exclusivity of this approach from perspectivalism.

Paleo-Compatibilism and Perspectivalism

Paleo-compatibilism and perspectivalism have more in common than Breyer allows. Firstly, both theories implicitly subscribe to free will subjectivism – the view that there is no fact of the matter as to whether people have free will. The paleo-compatibilist maintains that statements expressive of conventional truth are semantically isolated from those expressive of ultimate truth. Since people (i.e. conceptual constructs with merely conventional reality) are said to either have or not have free will, ascription of free will can only ever be, at most, conventionally accurate. Since statements about people refer to convenient fictions, statements pertaining to free will are meaningless at the ultimate level. A second respect in which paleo-compatibilism and perspectivalism are similar is that both theories advocate the shifting back and forth

between perspectives. For the perspectivalist, vacillation between first and second/third-person points of view is said to inspire compassion, leading to incrementally more expansive freedom. For the paleo-compatibilist, alternation between conventional and ultimate perspectives on free will presumably facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of reality.

Where the paleo-compatibilist provides reasons for dispensing with the notion of ultimate level free will, the perspectivalist dispenses with the idea of others as morally responsible. It is unclear why Breyer contends that paleo-compatibilism and perspectivalism cannot be synthesized for, in fact, by pooling the resources of each, a more robust stratagem for spiritual progress becomes available. The conventional level focus common to both theories prevents the occurrence of an absolute contradiction between the positions advanced: context and audience determine the efficacy of the theories. Accordingly, the relationship between paleo-compatibilism and perspectivalism may be conveyed through the image of a Russian nesting doll. On this analogy, perspectivalism as a meta-theory always counts as the largest doll, subsuming all the others, but what counts as the smallest doll may vary from one pedagogical setting to another. For example, for somebody still persuaded of the reality of the self, belief in libertarianism might be most helpful; whereas, for somebody who recognizes the difference between conventional and ultimate discourse domains, belief in paleo-compatibilism might be most helpful. The overarching 'nesting' principle relies on the possibility of increasingly greater degrees of skilfulness in expression so that the pedagogical circumstances guide postulations about the relation between perspectivalism and other lower-order free will theories, including paleo-compatibilism.

Breyer, however, goes to some lengths in his attempt to discredit the paleo-compatibilist theory and establish it and his own theory as mutually exclusive. His main criticism of paleo-compatibilism is that it too quickly, and on insufficient grounds, equates dependent origination with causal determinism. The dangers involved in conflating these two doctrines, produced in entirely different contexts for the fulfilment of distinct purposes, have already been acknowledged. Further, the findings of chapter 4, wherein Madhyamaka's three-fold classification of dependency relations as causal, mereological and conceptually imputative, reveal that it would be a mistake to treat commitment to dependent origination as coterminous with commitment to determinism. Indeed, in the Madhyamaka system causal theses turn out to be just as dependent on the conceptually imputative tendencies of the mind as everything else. It follows that as merely conventionally established processes, both causation and karma are illusory and that, therefore, no serious or intractable tension can arise between them.

Whilst Breyer's objection to the insufficient attention paleo-compatibilism pays to the relationship between determinism and dependency is sound, his other objections are less compelling. Suppose that Breyer's argument succeeds in demonstrating the mutual semantic reliance (and hence lack of insularity) of conventional and ultimate truth. In that case, reconstructivists can appeal to paleo-compatibilism (originally intended for an Abhidharma context) to articulate a conventional-level response suitable for Madhyamaka. If, as Breyer contends, there is a necessary semantic connection between the conventional and ultimate domains of truth, then the prospects of modifying paleo-compatibilism and rendering it palatable to a Madhyamaka audience are improved. To reiterate Nāgārjuna's presentation of this relationship at *MMK* 24.10 "The ultimate truth

is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, *nirvāṇa* is not attained.”²⁵

Rather than view conventional and ultimate truths as pertaining to strictly incommensurate domains, the Madhyamaka is apt to think in terms of less and more sophisticated expressions of truth relative to a spectrum, as discussed in chapter 3. Consequently, Siderits’s assessment of the ultimate truth of determinism and the conventional truth of the instantiation of free will could be interpreted as reflecting truths of different degrees of sophistication. This is particularly so if paleo-compatibilism is understood as primarily interested in situating truths about free will hierarchically and only secondarily interested in establishing how exactly free will is distributed.

Conclusions

Although reflection on Buddhism’s implied stance on free will is a recent development, it is already possible to identify certain sub-optimal trends in approaches to this topic. One such trend has been the perfunctory treatment of what is arguably *the* central tenet of Buddhism: dependent origination. Straightforwardly equating this concept with the Western thesis of causal determinism has probably impeded progress and has almost certainly opened the reconstructive enterprise to attack from those who see the entire project as founded on a category mistake. The work of Breyer has been instrumental in encouraging more reflection on the grounds for assuming the parity of ideas which,

²⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.10. *vyavahāram anāsrītya paramārtha na deśyate | paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamayte* | (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 273).

even if superficially similar, have arisen in very different cultural contexts and have fulfilled different explanatory functions therein.

This chapter has therefore argued that in discussing the Buddhist free will problem it is preferable to address the tension engendered by Buddhism's simultaneous commitment to the doctrines of *karma* and dependent origination. This is because posing the problem in terms of determinism and metaphysically possible futures is not viable in a system which rejects as incoherent the idea that there could be a metaphysical fact of the matter about free will or anything else. Reconstructions of a distinctively Madhyamaka stance on free will benefit from appreciation of the multi-dimensional strands of dependency and, in particular, from a consideration of this system's emphasis on the conceptually imputative aspect of dependency. If the Madhyamaka arguments pertaining to the emptiness and conceptual constructed-ness of all phenomena are convincing, then the search for definitive or absolutely correct responses to the Buddhist free will problem is futile.

Finally, this chapter has argued that the perspectivalist theory advanced by Breyer and modified by Goodman constitutes a promising response for a system which has rejected metaphysical realism as incoherent. Insofar as perspectivalism presents itself as an alternative free will theory or as a rival to existing theories (such as paleo-compatibilism *for example*) its soteriological utility is limited. Once presented as a meta-theory under which conventionally competing theories are subsumed, perspectivalism's full soteriological potential can be harnessed.

Chapter 6

The Soteriological Significance of Karma

“He saw other faces, many faces – hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were all yet Siddhartha.”

Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

“If the action were something with intrinsic nature, then it would doubtless be eternal. And the action would be undone, for the eternal is not something that is done.”¹

Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 17.22

The above quotation, from Nāgārjuna’s chapter on action and its fruit, indicates why Mādhyamikas do not regard the demonstration of the ultimate emptiness of karma as spiritually neutral. As is argued throughout the *MMK*, the ideas of *svabhāva* and change are mutually exclusive.² The soteriological agenda of Madhyamaka Buddhism, premised on the possibility of spiritual progression, therefore requires a distinct conception of karma as an ultimately empty, conceptually constructed, phenomenon. Whilst all schools of Buddhism assign importance to karma, the Madhyamaka is one of those in which the pivotal role of karma is particularly pronounced. By positioning karma in the centre of its worldview, Madhyamaka presents karmic operations as *nirvāṇa*’s *sine qua non*. As Āryadeva rhetorically asks at *Catuḥśataka* 12.10 “When there is no good rebirth for someone who, influenced by confusion, would create an impediment to the truth, why speak of liberation?”³ For Madhyamaka, unless beings

¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 17.22. *karma svabhāvataś cet syāc chāśvatam syād asaṃśayam| akṛtaṃ ca bhavet karma kriyate na hi śāśvatam||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 185).

² For a discussion of the mutual exclusivity of *svabhāva* and change, see chapter 4 of this thesis. There I examine Madhyamaka’s claim that dependency relations must be empty to account for causation. This is contrasted with the Western thesis of causal determinism which typically enunciates a realist ontology of causation. For an account of the multi-faceted concept of *svabhāva*, see Westerhoff (2007: 17-45).

³ Āryadeva – *Catuḥśataka* 12.10. *vighnaṃ tattvaśya yaḥ kuryād vṛto mohena kenacid| kalyāṇādhigatis tasya nāsti mokṣe tu kā kathā||* (Trans.) Lang, K. (1986: 113).

have acquired at least *some* good karma, the task of achieving liberation cannot be accomplished.

Of special significance is Madhyamaka's commitment to karma as coterminous with commitment to the middle way itself. Poignantly, Mādhyamikas have occasionally appealed to their belief in karma as a means of rebutting accusations of nihilism and of negotiating their place on the metaphysical spectrum between the extreme positions of nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) and eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*). Although Mādhyamikas distinguish between metaphysical and moral nihilism (positions attributed to *nāstika*-s and *ucchedavādin*-s respectively), that these theses are closely related is clear from passages such as *MMK* 15.10 where 'the wise one' does not merely avoid the conclusion that entities exist eternally but also that they are 'cut off' from existence, such that an agent fails to reap the consequences of her actions.⁴ For example, at *MMK* 15.10 Nāgārjuna defines the *nāstika* position in terms of *ucchedavāda*, indicating the moral and spiritual dangers associated with subscription to wrong views.⁵ In chapter 17 of the *MMK*, Nāgārjuna argues that it is precisely because karmic fruits are neither eternal nor entirely cut off that it makes sense to speak of mental continuity and, by implication, to posit the possibility of spiritual maturation through the conventional operation of karma. For example at *MMK* 17.24 Nāgārjuna remarks that, at least by the standards of convention, it makes sense to attribute specific deeds to specific agents (on account of the causal continuity of the constituents of the agent). Without this, he

⁴ Though both words are commonly translated into English as 'nihilism' *nāstika* and *uccheda* each have distinct morphologies and etymologies. Whereas metaphysical nihilism amounts to the theory that nothing exists ('*na*' '*asti*'), ethical nihilism is the view that after death existence will be 'cut off' *chinnati* such that karma ceases to be a morally motivational thesis. For further discussion on karma as a 'middle way' see the section of this chapter entitled *The Nature of Karma*. For an account of Madhyamaka's response to accusations of nihilism, see Westerhoff (2016 a).

⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 15.10. *astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīty ucchedadarśanam* | "It exists' is an eternalist view; 'It does not exist' is an annihilationist idea." (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 161).

contests “it would not be correct to distinguish between those who have done the meritorious and those who have done wrong.”⁶ Hereby Madhyamaka signifies that the intersection/ synthesis of ethics and metaphysics represents the middle way. Karma thus connects the metaphysics of emptiness to the ethical aspiration of perfect compassion, embodied in the figures of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the significance of karma within the Madhyamaka system. An analysis of the relationship between the ethical and soteriological dimensions of the theory is therefore essential, as is accounting for the diverse roles this single concept fulfils. A cursory consideration of these two dimensions, however, reveals a tension inherent in some conceptions of karma. That early Buddhists were themselves aware of this tension, and explored different means of alleviating it, is attested to in such texts as the *Milindapañha* and the *Nidhikaṇḍa Sutta* of the *Khuddakapāṭha* where the idea that meritorious action can induce liberation (rather than merely lead to good rebirths) is contended.⁷ Aside from the fact that such proposed solutions presuppose an ontologically realist conception of karma, Madhyamaka theorists typically conceive of liberation as something achieved by beings who have altogether transcended karmic conditioning. Indeed, this is also the position endorsed in most Abhidharma literature (so that the message found in such texts as the aforementioned constitutes the exception rather than the rule). As Dhammajoti explains, “the Sarvāstivāda shares the basic Buddhist tenet that the

⁶ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 17.24. *vyavahārā virudhyante sarva eva na saṃśayah| punyapāpakṛtām naiva pravibhāgaś ca yujyate||* “Without doubt this would contradict all worldly conduct. And it would not be correct to distinguish between those who have done the meritorious and those who have done wrong.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 186).

⁷ McDermott (1973: 344). McDermott interprets *Milindapañha* 341 and *Khuddakapāṭha* 6.14 as suggesting the “harmonization of the ultimate and proximate goals” of Buddhism, respectively *nirvāṇa* and good rebirths.

unenlightened worldly experiences *duḥkha* in *saṃsāra* on account of his *karma*...all *duḥkha* ceases when *karma* is transcended.”⁸ Mādhyamikas must therefore seek alternative means of rendering karma’s ethical and soteriological dimensions consistent.

In fulfilling its role as an ethical principle, karma explains how an individual’s intentions will, in the future, inform that individual’s outlook on life, perhaps directly shaping the nature of their experience (for good or ill). Karma should therefore be thought of as inextricable from *saṃsāra*. On the other hand, Buddhists typically believe that the accumulation of positive karmic merit is necessary for progression along the spiritual path towards *nirvāṇa* but that enlightened beings are no longer soiled by karmic residues. An explanation is therefore required as to how people might use the karmic mechanism – which operates only in the *saṃsāric* realm of suffering – in order to propel themselves beyond karmic activity altogether.

Before any explanation is proposed, a number of preliminary steps are necessary. Firstly, if our final analysis of karma’s soteriological import is to be robust, it must proceed from a fuller appreciation of what is entailed by that theory. This requires an analysis of differences between successive iterations of karmic doctrine explicated in the early Buddhist period. How did the evolution of karmic doctrine inform Madhyamaka’s understanding of it? What are the potential benefits of critically engaging with karma? How should the theory be interpreted? And what relation does it bear to the other core Buddhist doctrines, such as dependent origination? Secondly, which aspects of Madhyamaka’s theory of karma are unique to this school? How might

⁸ Dhammajoti (2009: 374).

an awareness of the distinguishing features shape our approach to overcoming the tension between the ethical and soteriological dimensions of the theory? Only once these questions have been settled will the task of explaining how beings might (paradoxically) use the karmic mechanism to arrest the karmic process be achievable.

Karma: Engagement and Interpretation

Contemporary Philosophical Engagement with Karma

Early proponents of Buddhism appear not to have been philosophically perturbed by the idea that, though inextricable from *samsāra*, karma plays a crucial soteriological function. Consequently, some scholars may wonder what benefit can be derived from first problematizing and then seeking to de-problematize an issue, which, from the perspective of early Buddhism, has not been contentious. This is particularly so if the conceptual tools/ philosophical methods used to probe the tension have been developed in culturally and historically remote contexts from that in which karmic theories themselves initially arose. However, if the earliest Buddhists found the relationship between karma's different functions to be conceptually comfortable, this should not deter efforts to investigate its internal coherence. In any case, the Jaina view that karma must be expunged through asceticism before the attainment of *mokṣa* tells us that there is indeed an historical precedent for Indian engagement with this source of tension.⁹ Moreover, some *sutta* literature, as well as post-canonical Pāli sources (such as the *Milidapañha* for example), indicates a growing uncertainty amongst the Buddhist

⁹ Majjhima Nikāya 14, Cūḷadukkhakkhandha Sutta. *atthi kho vo nigaṇṭhā pubbe pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ, taṃ imāya kaṭukāya dukkarakārikāya nijjaretha...iti purāṇānaṃ kammānaṃ tapasā byantibhāvā nanānaṃ kammānaṃ akaraṇā āyatim anavassavo.../ PTS, Treckner (2002: 92-93). "Nigaṇṭhas you have done evil actions in the past; exhaust them with the performance of piercing austerities...by annihilating with asceticism past actions and by doing no fresh actions, there will be no consequence in the future." (Trans.) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995: 188).*

community following the death of the historical Buddha on the issue of karma's binding and liberating functions.¹⁰

In their attempts to explain karma to a Western audience, contemporary scholars of Buddhism sometimes deploy analogies absent from the classical sources. For example, claims that karma operates "like a law of nature" are not at all uncommon.¹¹ Unfortunately, such descriptions of karma are rarely elaborated upon and questions about how the analogy works or the extent to which it should be taken at face value are often left unanswered. Whilst the "law of nature" analogy may help to capture certain aspects of karma, without sufficient explication it can be quite misleading. The traditional accounts of karma use the image of a ripening seed and, whilst this is undoubtedly a process governed by causal principles, it does not unfold with the same degree of uniformity exhibited by laws of nature. Indeed, what makes something a law of nature remains a philosophically contentious matter.

The dispute about laws of nature, between 'necessitarians' on the one hand and 'regularity theorists' on the other, amounts more or less to a disagreement about whether a robust metaphysic must be invoked to explain connections between universals or whether generalizations about how a given system works will suffice for the construction of axiomatic principles which serve all practical purposes.¹² Although it may be possible to produce a convincing argument in support of reading Madhyamaka as somehow implicitly committed to an account of laws of nature closer to that offered by regularity theorists than by necessitarians, the extent to which such

¹⁰ McDermott (1973).

¹¹ Gombrich (2009: 19).

¹² Carroll (2016).

an argument would facilitate progress in understanding the Madhyamaka hypothesis of the operation of karma may be rather limited. Although the operation of karma is only described as *like* the operation of laws of nature (as opposed to an actual instance of such a law), given (1) the starkly contrasting opinions over what counts as a law of nature and given (2) that classical Madhyamaka thinkers have succeeded in describing the operation of karma without appealing to such a concept, there are reasons to be sceptical about the value of this analogy.

Thus, recourse to the early Buddhist idea of karma as intention (*cetanā*) appears a more promising starting point for articulating Madhyamaka's distinctive account of this doctrine (as expressed in chapter 17 of the *MMK* and elaborated on by subsequent commentators and theorists).¹³ This is not to deny, however, the complexity involved in ascertaining the *meaning* of Buddhist definitions of karma as *cetanā*. Indeed, that Buddhists always maintained the equivalence of karma and intention cannot be straightforwardly assumed. As excerpts from the *Milindapañha* reveal, Buddhists have not exclusively subscribed to the view that only what is intended is karmically potent.¹⁴ Further, as shall be discussed later in this chapter, what it is to *intend* remains a philosophically contentious subject. In the context of contemporary scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism, Devdas argues that the range of possible translations for *cetanā* (from 'intention,' to 'volition,' 'will,' 'drive,' 'motive' or 'impulse') reflects the nuances of this concept as found in classical Buddhist literature.¹⁵ More precisely, she

¹³ Aṅguttara Nikāya 6.63, Nibbedhika Sutta. *cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi*/ PTS, Hardy (1958: 415). "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call kamma." (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 963). For further discussion of karma as intention in pre-Mahāyāna literature, see McDermott (1977).

¹⁴ For example, *Milindapañha* 84 states that people can accrue demerit by performing evil unknowingly, and so unintentionally. "If one man were to seize hold intentionally of a fiery mass of metal glowing with heat, and another man were to seize hold of it unintentionally, which would be more burnt?' 'The one who did not know what he was doing.' 'Well, it is just the same with the man who does wrong'." (Trans.) Rhys Davids, T.W. (1890: 129).

¹⁵ Devdas (2008: 25).

maintains that debates on how to define *cetanā* occupy an important place in texts such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Atthasālinī*. For example, she argues that between the time of the historical Buddha and the emergence of the Abhidharma as a literary tradition, the karma concept evolved so that moral responsibility for one's karma demanded the combination of a general mental attitude with a specific purposive impulse.¹⁶

The divergence of opinion – both internal and external to Buddhist thought – on the nature of karma invites further reflection on several important questions. For example, is it possible to interrupt the karmic process? Is it possible accurately to predict the way in which karma will come to fruition (in much the same way as it is possible to predict what will happen if an object is left unsupported in mid-air)? It is noteworthy also that the challenges involved in explaining Buddhist concepts to a Western audience are heightened in the case of karma because this doctrine cannot be separated from the nexus of related doctrines without thereby being distorted. For this reason, karma can only be understood in the context of Buddhism's other axiomatic ideas – such as rebirth and dependent origination. These ideas are, however, so alien to the modern West that the need for sensitivity in cross-cultural exchange is especially acute.

The first task for the cross-cultural philosopher is to identify points of commonality between the Western and Buddhist worldviews and use these as springboards for understanding and appreciating karma. Since karma cannot be fully understood apart from the theory of rebirth, the cross-cultural philosopher should strive to identify those elements or interpretations of rebirth theory that are not only conceptually accessible,

¹⁶ Devdas (2008: 307).

but also plausible, to a secular Western audience. The arguments articulated by classical Buddhist philosophers in support of rebirth are unlikely to persuade a modern audience – especially when presented as a literal truth.¹⁷ However, certain elements of the rebirth theory (such as its ability to explain the subjective nature of experience in terms of attitudes, intentions, and expectations) do resonate with the psychologically attuned West.

Psychological Interpretations

Even if it transpires that certain elements of rebirth theory are in fact shared with particular domains of Western thought (such as psychology), it is still necessary to ask whether these elements have a shared import across the divergent conceptual frameworks. Studies from the social sciences and from experimental psychology indicate that the quality and supposed content of both subjective and inter-subjective experiences may be informed, perhaps even explained, by reference to the psychological predispositions, moral and amoral expectations, and singular intentions of individuals and communities.¹⁸ Some of these studies are particularly interesting insofar as they reveal moral intentions and propositional beliefs to be mutually influential phenomena. For example, using experimental studies, psychologists conclude that attitudes towards corruption are shaped by belief in a just world and that, likewise, beliefs about how just the world is shape attitudes about corruption.¹⁹ These kinds of findings support the Buddhist contention that our views are always imbued

¹⁷ Tillemans (2015: 47-49).

¹⁸ On the idea that illusion plays a more pervasive role in our lives than we might expect (shaping the nature of our experiences and influencing what we think we remember), see Chabris and Simons (2011).

¹⁹ Bai, Liu, and Kou (2014).

with value: the world we inhabit is never given to us unmediated but is something we ourselves construct.

The idea that through intentional activity people construct reality for themselves is present in the earliest Buddhist sources and is indicated by means of the technical term, *saṅkhāra* (mental construction).²⁰ In the Pāli canon, for example, there are occasions where *cetanā* and *saṅkhāra* are used interchangeably.²¹ Heim has suggested that this conceptual inter-changeability denotes either equivalence or overlap.²² Given the translational and interpretive difficulties associated with both terms, that these ideas simply overlap seems more plausible. Heim argues that the conceptual link between karma and *saṅkhāras* becomes clearer when the passive and active roles of mental construction are emphasized in equal measure: our experiences are shaped and informed by previous intentions and constructional activity but they also shape and inform experience into the future.²³ The power of mind to shape experience is further developed in the Madhyamaka system where a three-fold conception of dependency relations (where the most sophisticated type are conceptually imputed relations) is advanced.

²⁰ How best to translate the Pāli *saṅkhāra* / Sanskrit *saṃskāra* is a matter of on-going debate. I have followed Heim's translation of 'mental construction' because it communicates the idea of the *saṅkhāras* as both a constructing force and the object of construction. This translation is also faithful to the etymological roots of the word (*saṃ-karoti*) and denotes a putting together or an assemblage. For further discussion on the term *saṅkhāra* and its many usages, see Jayatillake (1949: 212-224). Nevertheless, in his detailed discussion of the term, Vetter challenges the decision on the part of lexicographers to afford as much importance as they apparently do to the prefix 'saṃ.' Instead he argues that "most options suggest *saṅkharoti* basically means 'to improve something, form or prepare it for some purpose'." Vetter (2001: 32).

²¹ Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.171, Cetanā Sutta. *kāye vā bhikkhave sati kāyasañcetanāhetu uppajjati ajjhataṃ sukhadukkhaṃ...kāyasaṅkhāram abhisāṅkharoti* PTS, Morris (1955: 157-158). "when there is the body, then because of bodily volition pleasure and pain arise internally...one performs that bodily volitional activity..." (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012: 536-537.

²² Heim (2014: 43).

²³ Heim (2014: 48). Heim uses the terms 'patency' and 'agency' to reflect the passive and active dimensions. Whether the dual functionality of karma and the *saṅkhāras* causes difficulties for explaining human free will is discussed later in this chapter under the section entitled *The Nature of Karma*.

Although we might believe that our experiences align with reality, in fact this is not always the case. Take for example the ‘shepard scale illusion’ in which a series of tones is repeated continually. Whilst it may sound as though the pitch is steadily increasing or decreasing, in fact this is only illusory. For people who are particularly nervous flyers, the constancy of the engine noise can be completely overshadowed by the illusory sound of its steady failure. At 30,000 feet, such an illusion has the power to create panic in those who fail to see through it – the nervous flyer looks around at her fellow passengers incredulous at their calmness. Although all passengers receive the same auditory input, there are different interpretative choices available. Which sound is experienced depends largely on one’s attitudes and expectations – a regular flyer hears a steady engine, an excited child a surging one, an anxious person a failing one. Such examples help to explain the diversity of experience and suggest that, to some extent, people create their own reality. Hence, for Buddhism, ‘right view’ signifies more than just assent to correct propositions. Indeed, though adopting right views marks the start of spiritual transformation, their internalization marks the acquisition of wisdom (as something distinct from mere knowledge) and is the culmination of the spiritual enterprise.

As noted, the link between psychological predispositions, the accuracy of perceptions and subjective/ inter-subjective experience are topics currently being explored by the social sciences. As evidence suggesting that intentions and expectations can radically influence how people perceive reality grows, the idea of the mind as a ‘hypothesis-testing’ mechanism gains credibility.²⁴ Westerhoff has appealed to experiments like the ‘anomalous playing card,’ in which subjects ‘see’ the card they expect to see rather than

²⁴ Hohwy (2013).

the one they are shown, to suggest that sometimes our expectations about experience are enough to make experience conform to expectation.²⁵ Whilst it might be premature to declare that humans *habitually* build their experiences from expectation or intention, these experiments reveal that this tendency may be more widespread than is ordinarily supposed. Further, the development and, importantly, the proven effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapies and cognitive analytic therapies suggest that it is indeed possible for people to alter their perception of the world around them by changing their attitudes towards it. Thus, more positive engagement both with oneself and one's environment might be achieved when people learn to interpret the events of their lives in new ways.

Thus certain findings in Western psychology seem not only to accommodate, but also to substantiate, some of Buddhism's claims about the link between intention, expectation and experience. Nevertheless, since Western psychology is typically informed and underpinned by materialist assumptions, elements of karmic theory (itself inextricable from rebirth) are seemingly irreconcilable with Western scientific approaches. If it were conceded that contemporary Western and classical Buddhist perspectives are aligned on the issue of expectations engendering experience, there is always a vast difference in terms of time scale.²⁶ Buddhism allows for the possibility of a link between action and fruits prevailing over the course of aeons, whereas contemporary Western psychology has no reason to accept such claims. Still, whether there really is a dichotomy between literal and psychological accounts of rebirth is

²⁵ Westerhoff (2010: 33).

²⁶ Gethin (1997: 183-217).

debatable; Goodman has argued that, at a fundamental level, Buddhist traditions themselves understand the one reading in terms of the other.²⁷

Gethin has convincingly argued that psychological readings are present in (and not merely dubiously extrapolated from) the ancient sources. He argues that the sharp contrast between the categories of “literal truth” and “mythic symbol” is a product of modernity unrecognized in classical India.²⁸ Referencing Buddhaghosa’s discussion of death and momentariness in chapter 8 of the *Visuddhimagga* (“in the ultimate sense the life-moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment...when that consciousness has ceased the being is said to have ceased...”),²⁹ Gethin shows that whilst there is a precedent for interpreting the twelve links of dependent origination as unfolding over the course of three lifetimes, the tradition also accommodates the idea that, in each and every moment, all twelve conditioning factors arise simultaneously. Whilst non-literal engagement with ideas of rebirth may reflect an evolution of Buddhist thought post-dating the historical Buddha, that psychological presentations were latent in the Pāli suttas which then emerged as unproblematic dimensions of Mahāyāna rebirth theory can be attested by textual evidence.³⁰ This indicates that psychological readings of rebirth are legitimated in classical Buddhism itself. On this interpretation, the key to understanding Buddhist cosmology and Buddhist psychology lies in recognizing their “profound equivalence.”³¹ By assimilating cosmology and psychology in the Buddhist worldview,

²⁷ Goodman (2017 a).

²⁸ Gethin (1997: 192).

²⁹ Buddhaghosa – *Visuddhimagga* 8. *khaṇaparittato ti paramatthato hi atiparitto sattānaṃ jīvitakkhaṇo ekacittappavattimatto yeva...evam eva ekacittakkhaṇikaṃsattānaṃ jīvitam tasmim cīte niruddhamatte satto niruddho ti vuccati.../ PTS, Rhys Davids (1975: 238). (Trans.) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1976: 256).*

³⁰ Goodman defends this idea by demonstrating Śāntideva’s reliance in the ŚS on such earlier Mahāyāna texts as the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna Sūtra*, for example. For more details, see Goodman (2017: 133).

³¹ Gethin (1997: 211).

Gethin maintains that we can understand the Buddha’s saying “by traveling one cannot know, see, or reach that end of the world where one is not born, does not grow old and die, does not pass away and get reborn. Yet I say that without having reached the end of the world there is no marking an end of suffering.”³² Though knowledge of the cosmos and the evolution of world systems as enunciated by classical Buddhists is unnecessary for liberation, once we understand the cosmos as largely – if not exclusively – the product of constructional and intentional mental activity (in terms of the *saṅkhāras* and *cetanā*), it becomes clear that acquiring liberating insight into the destruction of mental afflictions (*kilesas*) is coterminous with acquiring right view about the structure and nature of reality.

Karma and Dependent Origination

As Gethin remarks, the Buddhist tradition itself has understood dependent origination in both micro and macro terms. This leads us to consider the relationship between karma and dependent origination – an investigation sustained throughout the chapter. As an application/ instance of dependent origination, karma functions as it does in virtue of its position within a complex web of interdependent concepts and phenomena. Although there are similarities between the theory of dependent origination and Western ideas of causal inter-connectedness, the former theory is more expansive than the latter. Dependency relations are invoked to explain mereological and conceptual relationships as well as causal ones. Nevertheless, the causal connectedness of phenomena attested to in contemporary science and in classical Buddhism provides the

³² *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.45. *yattha kho āvuso na jāyati...na uppajjati nāhaṃ taṃ gamanena lokassa antaṃ ñātayyaṃ daṭṭhayaṃ pattayyaṃ ti vadāmi, na cāhaṃ āvuso appatvā va lokassa antaṃ dukkhassa antakiriyaṃ vadāmi.../ PTS, Morris (1955: 48). (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 434-435).*

cross-cultural philosopher with a helpful vantage point from which to explain the place of karma in the nexus of dependently originated things.

Just as psychological interpretations of karma and rebirth may further cross-cultural objectives, so too might comparisons of causal processes as understood by theoretical physicists and classical Buddhism. However, the dangers involved in naïvely drawing such comparisons are numerous and may include, for example, reductionism, false attribution of positions and the superimposition of unrecognised categories. If pitfalls of this kind are to be avoided, the purpose and relevance of cross-cultural explorations of karma must first be clearly identified.

Flanagan and others have argued that Western philosophic engagement with the karma concept is futile: “it might be judged best for us not now to talk about karmic rebirth, at least not very much, and not as a sustained and serious topic of discussion in contemporary metaphysics.”³³ Flanagan’s worry, that encouraging Western philosophers to engage with the karma theory also encourages them to adopt/incorporate it into their own system, is unfounded. Provided that comparisons are drawn carefully and the purpose of drawing them (to supply a platform for bringing different philosophical systems into conversation with each other) is kept consistently in view, the opportunities for progressive discussion on the theory of karma may be expanded. Inevitably, there is a point at which comparisons between highly distinct systems break down, a point at which systems must be understood in their own terms. The question, then, is whether the comparisons and analogies deployed carry us along far enough in our understanding so as to be able to leave off comparing altogether. This raises

³³ Flanagan (2017: 61).

important questions about the legitimacy of explaining karmic theory in terms not *sui generis* to Buddhism.

Discussions such as the forgoing suggest that the cross-cultural philosophical exchange is valuable. Nevertheless, and especially in the context of karma, it is reasonable to question whether the participants are set to benefit equally. Whilst the benefits of such an enterprise for Buddhist philosophy may be more obvious, exploration of karma may also further the Western philosophical programme, albeit in a roundabout way. For example, the Buddhist definition of karma as intention might encourage Western philosophers to revisit, perhaps also revise, accounts of intention such that the equivocal senses of ‘intending’ as used in Western philosophy are explicitly drawn out. Though the multifarious aspects of the concept of intention may be identified without recourse to a cross-cultural enterprise – as is evidenced by Anscombe’s important work in this field of moral psychology – such projects can initiate new ways of approaching perennial questions.³⁴ In particular, if there is any credibility in the Buddhist idea that intentions unaccompanied by action may nonetheless be efficacious, the distinctions made/ left unmade between intentions, pure intendings and wishing in Western philosophy may need to be reconsidered. Davidson’s definition of *pure intentions* as “intending that may occur without practical reasoning, action or consequence” allows him later to question in all seriousness what difference there is between intending and merely wishing.³⁵ For Buddhists, however, there are crucial differences between pure intendings and mere wishes. As experiments such as those mentioned above indicate, there may be important practical and social repercussions from acknowledging the

³⁴ Anscombe (2000: 1).

³⁵ Davidson (2001: 83-101).

innate power of intention.³⁶ As Heim explains it, from the point of view of Buddhism “intention does not come first and then culminate in action; intention cannot fail to issue in action.”³⁷ The Mahāyānist idea of *bodhicitta* (a mind turned towards enlightenment) can be understood, at least in part, as a response to earlier Buddhist ideas about the necessity of karmic fruits whenever intentional activity is performed.³⁸ Indeed, though bodhisattvas act non-karmically (from the perspective of ultimate reality), nevertheless, the cultivation of *bodhicitta* is itself sufficient to produce positive change in the world.³⁹ Perhaps it is because, rather than in spite, of the fact that the theory of karma is an unlikely meeting point for Buddhist and Western philosophical encounter that exchanges on such themes as action and intention may yield interesting results.⁴⁰ Further discussion on these topics will benefit from a greater understanding of what is distinctive about the Madhyamaka conception of karma, developed in the next section of this chapter.

The Madhyamaka View of Karma

The Nature of Karma

Scholars have presented karma in a variety of ways, some of which are conflicting. Those committed to a ‘naturalizing’ agenda maintain that though karma theory is

³⁶ As the research by Bai, Liu and Kou (2-14) shows, there is practical value in cultivating the intention not to fall into corruption. This differs considerably from merely wishing for uncorrupt officials.

³⁷ Heim (2014: 42).

³⁸ The difficulties involved in translating *bodhicitta* – or even in communicating its general meaning – are well documented in Wangchuk (2007: 69-70). For further discussion of *bodhicitta* (and how it constitutes the characteristic mental feature of bodhisattvas) see chapters 7 and 9 of this thesis. For the present purposes, Garfield’s definition of *bodhicitta* as “as a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration...” will suffice (Garfield 2015: 299).

³⁹ For an account of Mahāyāna ethics as ‘moral phenomenology,’ see Garfield (2015).

⁴⁰ Ganeri (2001: 36-37).

embedded in Buddhism, it is an inessential component which can be extracted.⁴¹ Thus it is argued that karma is a religious doctrine, a pre-philosophical tenet of Buddhism, which can only be accepted by those with prior confidence in the Buddha's teachings.⁴² Still others, as noted above, think of karma as an objective law governing the connection between a person's action and the quality of their experiences. To varying extents, all these characterizations are questionable as understandings suitable for a Madhyamaka conception of karma. An account is needed of both the regular and more mysterious aspects of karma.⁴³ This account must be able to explain karmic operations in terms consistent with the rest of Madhyamaka discourse.

According to mainstream Buddhism, the doctrine of karma stipulates that the moral quality of actions (their intentional quality) generate results, which, at some point in the future, rebound upon the agent. Though belief in karma is virtually ubiquitous in classical Indian religion (with the notable exception of the Cārvākas),⁴⁴ the differences between the various religious traditions on matters such as the ontological status of an eternal substantial self are reflected in the nuances of the karma theory.⁴⁵ In rejecting the idea of karma as pertaining strictly to ritual action and in promoting the idea of karma as essentially ethical, the Buddha transformed this notion into one capable of

⁴¹ Flanagan (2013).

⁴² Batchelor (2017: 116).

⁴³ 'Mysterious' from the point of view of unenlightened beings. According to Dīgha Nikāya 2, Sāmaññaphala Sutta, direct perception of karmic operations is possible only for those who attain liberation and constitutes one of the three items of knowledge available to the spiritually adept. As Gombrich has pointed out, the early tradition is likely to have understood the Buddha's three items of knowledge as usurping brahmanical knowledge of the three Vedas (see also the Dīgha Nikāya 13, Tevijja Sutta). See Gombrich (1996: 29-30).

⁴⁴ Cārvākas are usually represented as ethical nihilists (in the sense of being *ucchedavādins*), but Gokhale has challenged this view for being too much of a caricature. He remarks that adherents of materialism can differ in their philosophical commitments. Hence the Cārvākas may have pursued the four *puruṣārthas* (goals of human life) recognized in classical Indian thought, including *dharma* and *mokṣa*. Gokhale distinguishes between 'substantial' and 'modal' goals so that, though neither the pursuit of *dharma* nor *mokṣa* are intrinsically valuable, they are instrumentally so. For a fuller discussion of how best to reconstruct the value system of Cārvāka/ Lokāyata thinkers, see Gokhale (2015: 149-177).

⁴⁵ Bronkhorst (2011: 18-28).

grounding moral responsibility. Since Buddhism conceives of beings who do not possess an *ātman* as nevertheless capable of assuming responsibility over their own spiritual condition, karma is evidently doing a great deal of explanatory work which needs to be philosophically unpacked. As beings abandon unwholesome mental states they gradually acquire the capacity for reflection on the nature of reality which in turn stimulates soteriological striving. Prerequisites of liberation include the cessation of karmic production and the eventual exhaustion of all karma.⁴⁶ Thus, in Buddhism, karma is at once both an ethical and a soteriological concept. The distinction between *nirvāṇa* with (*sa-upādi-sesa*) and without (*an-upādi-sesa*) the remainder of karmic traces enabled the early Buddhists to explain the uncomfortable experiences of living Buddhas without having to posit the continuation of the karmic process. Later thinkers, including Mādhyamikas such as Śāntideva, elaborated on how to interpret the conduct of enlightened beings to accommodate the idea of bodhisattvas sustaining illusions to advance the welfare of others.⁴⁷

The task of the spiritual aspirant is to escape from *saṃsāric* existence.⁴⁸ Perhaps paradoxically, although escape from *saṃsāra* requires the exhaustion of all karma, the very attempt to escape and to attain liberation is itself premised on the prior accrual of considerable good karma. According to classical Buddhist cosmology, it is only possible to recognize the inextricability of *duḥkha* from *saṃsāra* in the human realm in

⁴⁶ Whether enlightened beings sow karmic seeds has been a point of contention amongst Buddhists. *Kathāvattu* 17.1 discusses the possibility of *arahants* accumulating merit when they act generously. Andhakas (i.e. those who are blind) maintain that this is possible. This view is contested by the Abhidharma because it would follow that *arahants* can also accumulate demerit. Debates on how to interpret enlightened activity persist. For more on this, see McDermott (1975).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Śāntideva's *BCA* 9.36-37 and 9.45. (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 118-119).

⁴⁸ As Nāgārjuna argues at *MMK* 25.19-20 'escape' may be best understood as realization of the delusory nature of *saṃsāra*. This explains why a bodhisattva is able to act in and inhabit *saṃsāra* without being 'trapped' therein.

which the intensity of suffering is neither so strong as to be mentally debilitating nor so weak as to appear even to a deluded mind as unworthy of attention.⁴⁹ The chances of rebirth in the human realm are believed to be exceedingly remote. Buddhist literature uses the powerful image of a blind turtle swimming in a vast ocean happening to surface for air just where a golden yoke is floating on the waves to convey a sense of how unlikely, and therefore how precious, human rebirth is.⁵⁰ Rebirth in human form suggests that a being has accrued considerable good karma throughout previous existences. This, however, cannot be guaranteed since non-karmic causal explanations as to why a being takes a human rebirth may also be available. As Dhammajoti explains, the Abhidharma position on the role of karma in determining future rebirths contains provisos and qualifications. Retributive karmic causality is, he says, sometimes “responsible for projecting a particular type of existence (e.g. human)” whereas, at other times, karma “contributes in terms of specific details (e.g. the life span of a human).” To this end, Dhammajoti appeals to Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 258 where we find the claim “it is not karma alone which is the projector of a birth.”⁵¹ Dhammajoti further substantiates this point with reference to the *Abhidharmanyāyānusāra*’s claim that *bhava* (or becoming) rather than karma features in the explanation of dependency relations because “*bhava* is the specific karma which effects rebirth – [yet] all *karmas* are not the cause for rebirth.”⁵² Buddhists from the time of the historical Buddha onwards, then, have chastised those who explain all

⁴⁹ Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.48, Dutiyachiggaḷayuga Sutta. The chances – and preciousness – of human life are compared to the remote chances of a turtle surfacing every century and happening to put its head through a floating yoke. The idea is that human life affords unique soteriological advantages which are not to be wasted.

⁵⁰ Śāntideva – *BCA* 4.20. *ata evāha bhagavān mānuṣyam atidurlabham/ mahārṇavayugacchidrakūrmagrīvārpaṇopamam*|| “That is why the Fortunate One declared that the human state is so hard to attain: as likely as a turtle poking its neck through the hole of a yoke floating on the mighty ocean.” (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998:26).

⁵¹ *na ca kevalaṃ karmaivākṣepakaṃ janmanaḥ*| As quoted in Dhammajoti (2007: 482).

⁵² Dhammajoti (2009: 373).

experience with reference to karma – such people assert what cannot be known.⁵³ This is because both karmic and non-karmic causes and conditions are constantly interacting in the production of effects so that mental construction and external factors together make up a being’s experience.⁵⁴ Moreover, as McDermott has argued, the Buddha admonishes those who maintain that all misfortune is attributable to karmic causation not only because other causal factors may be in operation (such as strictly biological/physical causation), but also because the adoption of such a view is said to undermine ethical and spiritual motivation, causing people to fall back into fatalistic ways of thinking.⁵⁵

It is important to the spiritual development of beings that emphasis on the soteriological dimensions of karma should not occur prematurely. This is because the accumulation of good karma through the undertaking of morally wholesome deeds of body, speech and mind is critical to the spiritual maturation of beings. The accumulation of good karma is therefore just a milestone, albeit an important one, in the spiritual transformation of beings who habitually confuse what is unwholesome for what is wholesome. As music teachers may instruct unskilled players with techniques that should quickly be supplanted, so too may beings progressing along the path cease to

⁵³ Saṃyutta Nikāya 36.21, Moḷiyasīvaka Sutta. *Tatra Sīvaka ye te samaṇabrāhmaṇā evaṃvādino evaṃ diṭṭhino yaṃ kiñcāyaṃ purisaṃpuggalo paṭisaṃvedeti sukkhaṃ vā dukkhaṃ vā adukkhamasukhaṃ vā sabbantaṃ taṃ pubbe katahetūti yaṃ ca sāmaṇṇānaṃ taṃ ca atidhāvanti yaṃ ca loke saccasammataṃ taṃ ca atidhāvanti. Tasmā tesam samaṇabhāhamaṇānaṃ micchāti vadāmi* PTS, Feer (1960: 231). “Now when those ascetics and bhāmins hold such a doctrine and view as this, ‘whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-pleasant-nor-painful, all that is caused by what was done in the past,’ they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore, I say that it is wrong on the part of those ascetics and Brahmins.” (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 1279).

⁵⁴ Commenting on this passage, Bhikkhu Bodhi stresses that the Buddha criticizes this view (*pubbakatahetuvāda*) throughout the Pāli Canon. For more on this, see Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000: 1435).

⁵⁵ McDermott (1975: 428). McDermott refers particularly to Aṅguttara Nikāya 361, Tithāyatana Sutta, saying “the notion that the present is but a series of effects produced by kamma is already rejected [in this sutta because] such a view leads to antinomian tendencies.”

see karma as a source of moral motivation.⁵⁶ Instead, once insight into the true nature of reality is attained, thoughts of karmic consequences are replaced by morally richer considerations, such as the wellbeing of others. Lusthaus has described the Madhyamaka discussion of karma as taking place in three “distinct registers.”⁵⁷ These are: the mechanistic, the moral and the soteriological. Successively, each ‘register’ reflects a more sophisticated level of understanding and spiritual development. Whilst the mechanistic analysis of karma – according to which the moral quality of deeds will eventually reverberate on the agent – motivates those who still place great value on their own (illusory) self, the moral and soteriological analyses motivate those whose insight into emptiness is respectively deeper.

Scholars disagree as to whether beings transform their understanding of karma from a primarily ethical to a primarily soteriological concept once they have reached a certain level of insight. Conversely, do beings come to regard karma as soteriologically significant *because* they have realised its ethical importance?⁵⁸ Debates of this kind seem futile – how could they ever be settled? A more fruitful approach has been taken by Lusthaus who instead argues that Buddhist writers have discussed karma in less and more spiritually sophisticated ways and have done so as a means of communicating to their diverse audiences an appropriate level of truth. What Lusthaus’s description of the three ‘registers’ of karmic discussion reveals is that Mādhyamikas are likely to view the tension between karma’s binding (mechanistic) and liberating (soteriological) dimensions as a false dichotomy, borne out of the unenlightened tendency to interpret the different perspectives available on any given phenomenon as mutually exclusive.

⁵⁶ Garfield (no date).

⁵⁷ Lusthaus (2002: 168).

⁵⁸ Keown (2001: 175-185).

Since neither the binding nor the liberating karmic function is reflected in ultimate reality, they need not be considered as competitors in any fundamental sense. On this view, whether individuals emphasize the binding or liberating dimension of karma reveals more about their own spiritual attainments than it does about karma itself.

Madhyamaka's acceptance of the inseparability of karma and *saṃsāra* appears to be in tension with its commitment to the idea that karmic operations are not only necessary for spiritual liberation, but actively facilitate it. Can the karmic mechanism be employed in such a way as to lead to the eventual destruction of karma itself? To ascertain whether appeals to the distinctive Madhyamaka conception of freedom as abandonment of mental affliction will alleviate this tension, it is essential first to understand what is meant by the idea that karma's operation facilitates freedom. Escape from *saṃsāra* is the goal of Buddhist praxis: the pervasiveness of change is consistent both with the possibility that beings remain trapped in the cycle of existence indefinitely and with the possibility that they could close the circle of *saṃsāric* existence. Nāgārjuna communicates this point effectively in the quotation with which we began this chapter: "If the action were something with intrinsic nature, then it would doubtless be eternal." What it means to say that the soteriological agenda of Buddhists is to *escape* from *saṃsāra* is a matter for debate, particularly so given that all Buddhists agree that there is no-self who is either bound or liberated in the ultimate sense. Matters are further complicated for Mādhyamikas who maintain that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are ontologically indistinguishable insofar as both are empty of *svabhāva*.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it may still be appropriate to speak of escaping *saṃsāra* if, by enlightenment, we mean

⁵⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 25.19. *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam/ na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam*// "There is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. There is no distinction whatsoever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*." (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 302).

the destruction of illusions through which we are caused to suffer. From the Buddhist perspective, recourse to the idea of no-self, according to which there is no substantial permanent entity to be located amongst the mass of changing phenomena, is essential to understanding the possibility of liberation. It is maintained that an unchanging substantial self could not experience bondage in the first place but that, once bound, such bondage would necessarily be permanent since the process of liberation would result in the loss of that self's identity.⁶⁰

Pedagogical Techniques: Different Descriptions of Karma

Madhyamaka accepts that beings are reborn in accordance with their karma and other causal factors. Since karmic operations are causal, they facilitate change. Thus, as a mechanism for change, karma provides beings with opportunities to direct the course of their lives towards the attainment of liberation, understood as the exhaustion of all karma. As a person makes spiritual progress, it is necessary that they also revise their understanding of karma's operation and motivational capacity. Hence, Madhyamaka must understand the karmic mechanism as operating in such a way as to result in its own eventual breakdown if it is consistently to maintain both: (i) that karma is inextricable from *saṃsāra* and (ii) that karma functions soteriologically. On a Madhyamaka understanding therefore, karma may be used to transcend the karmic process in a way similar to that in which language may be used to transcend language. Where once karma and its operations might have been conceived by an ignorant being as inherently real phenomena, insight into the emptiness of karma (and everything else) is said by Madhyamaka to reveal the conceptually constructed nature of the distinction

⁶⁰ For an account of some of the many responses offered to these objections, see Ram-Prasad (2013).

between the states of bondage and liberation. The successive iterations of karma's mechanistic, moral and soteriological functions are fruitfully understood as a pedagogical technique through which Madhyamaka uses the karma concept as a means of moving beings along the spiritual path.

Whilst it is helpful for beings to accept the truth of karma in literal terms of correspondence between the moral quality of past deeds and present experience at the beginning of their journey, gradually this interpretation must be replaced with a more nuanced account according to which karma is recognised not as a causal mechanism but as a conceptual construct used to explain the connection between imperfect conduct and *samsāric* suffering. Moreover, beings must come to see both that karma is itself conceptually constructed and that the character of a person's past deeds influences the ways in which that person conceptually constructs the world around them. In the absence of 'objective' facts about the world, Madhyamaka refers to karma in order to explain the differences between how beings experience one and the same phenomenon.⁶¹

If we want to explain how beings revise their understanding of karma in affective, rather than cognitive, terms we will focus less on their abandonment of belief in the inherent reality of the karmic mechanism and more on their experience of karma as morally motivational. The extent to which beings are morally motivated by the prospects of karmic consequence correlates with the sophistication of their moral and spiritual development. Commitment to the idea of *svabhāva*, be it innate or the result of erroneous reasoning, explains why beings are so preoccupied with their own future

⁶¹ Garfield (2015: 35).

good.⁶² Hence, whilst those mistakenly convinced of the reality of an enduring substantial self are morally motivated by crude conceptions of the karmic mechanism, those who have internalized the truth of emptiness disinterestedly strive for the good of others and thereby do not sow karmic seeds. This brief foray into the conceptually constructed nature of karma and the various degrees of sophistication with which the theory can be understood lends support to the idea that the paradoxical aspects of karma can be dispelled once we understand that, for Madhyamaka, none of karma's aspects or functions reflect ultimate reality.

Nāgārjuna's discussion of karmic operations at *MMK* 17 demonstrates that, for him, change in mental disposition is the primary requirement for successively good rebirths and enhanced insight into the ultimately empty nature of reality.⁶³ Nāgārjuna's inclination towards positing spiritual liberation as mental freedom (i.e. freedom from unwholesome afflictions) rather than as the exercise of an independent unconditioned will is confirmed by his expression of the ontological indistinguishability of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, which are, nevertheless, psychologically diametrically opposed. If the difference between the two states amounts to a difference of perspective then freedom is the abandonment of defective metaphysical outlooks and moral dispositions and the adoption of insight into emptiness and its concomitant responsiveness to the plight of others. If freedom must be understood as a mental/ phenomenological rather than an existential shift, then the tension in the idea of using the karmic mechanism as a means of propelling oneself out of the karmic and *samsāric* realm dissipates considerably. On

⁶² For a summary of key Madhyamaka arguments against *svabhāva*, consult Siderits and Katsura (2013: 7-9).

⁶³ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 17.1. *ātmasaṃyamakaṃ cetah parānugraākaṃ cay at/ maitraṃ sa dharmas tad bījaṃ phalasya pretya ceha ca* // “Self-control, being thoughtful of others, and friendliness – these states of mind are meritorious and the seeds of fruit both here and hereafter.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 172).

a Madhyamaka analysis, distinctions drawn between the phenomenological and existential/ ontological themselves reflect ignorance: there is no reality over and above that which is conceptually constructed, and, hence, ultimately there is no *yathābhūta* beyond what we ourselves create.⁶⁴ Properly understood, the ontological *is* the phenomenal. Transitioning from one existential domain to another is only possible if ideas of mind-independent reality are sound and this is the very point Madhyamaka contests. To alter one’s mental state *just is* to alter one’s existential situation. If this method of overcoming the struggles of *saṃsāra* sounds too simplistic, Mādhyamikas will argue it is because the momentousness of the challenges involved in changing one’s mentality have not been acknowledged. The unwholesome tendencies and mistaken ontological commitments of beings are so entrenched that the power of mind to inform one’s state is overlooked.

Intentionality and Enlightened Action

When we consider that even the most basic Buddhist definitions of karma (as *intention*) challenge our usual understanding of the relations between mental states and action, the Buddhist account of enlightened action initially seems incomprehensible. If karma is what binds beings to *saṃsāra*, do enlightened beings act non-intentionally? To answer this question we first need a clearer perspective on intention. Only then can we discern whether all purposive compassionate action is necessarily productive of karmic fruits. Further, perhaps it will be necessary to distinguish between different levels of enlightenment as attested by the Buddhist tradition. Pertinently, the development of the

⁶⁴ Hence the popularity of ‘semantic’ interpretations of Madhyamaka philosophy as encapsulated by Siderits’s now famous formula “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth” (Siderits 2003: 11).

bodhicitta concept emerges out of Mahāyāna notions of the bodhisattva’s path to full enlightenment – a state in which karmic intentionality, and the norms of ethics, have been altogether transcended. Regardless of the common sense point of view, the concept denoted by the term *intention* is not philosophically straightforward. This is supported by Anscombe’s claim that “we are pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept it represents.”⁶⁵

The (pre-philosophical) intuition that intention captures the mental state of desiring to secure a certain outcome in the future seems to be shared both by classical Buddhists and contemporary Westerners. However, where Western theories of intention are typically unperturbed by characterizations of future-directed intentions as the “planning part of action but not the actualization of it”, Buddhist accounts struggle to explain non-efficacious intentions.⁶⁶ For while Buddhism admits a difference in karmic result between failed and successful attempts at moral or immoral acts of body and speech it also insists that: “the mere harbouring of criminal intent...amounts to karma.”⁶⁷ A person’s general moral disposition – and not just the specific intention from which they act – is also believed to influence karmic outcomes, as in the case when generally benevolent people perform qualitatively similar deeds to the generally malevolent.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Anscombe (2000: 1).

⁶⁶ Heim (2014: 42).

⁶⁷ Tin (1920: 120).

⁶⁸ Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.99, Loṇaphala Sutta. *Idha bhikkhave ekaccassa puggalassa appamattikam pi pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ tam enaṃ nirayaṃ upaneti. Idha pana bhikkhave ekaccassa puggalassa tādisaṃ yeva appamattakam pāpaṃ kammaṃ kataṃ diṭṭhadhamme c’eva vedanīyaṃ hoti nānu pi khāyati bahud eva* PTS, Morris (1885: 249). “Here, bhikkhus, some person has created trifling bad kamma yet it leads him to hell, while some other person here has created exactly the same trifling kamma yet it is to be experienced in this very life, without even a slight [residue] being seen, much less abundant [residue].” (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 331-332).

It is worth asking whether the Buddha's understanding of intention was, as Anscombe takes ours to be, similarly shrouded in darkness or whether, when referring to intention, contemporary Western philosophers simply mean something quite different from the traditional Buddhist use of that term. A debate over the nature of Buddhist ethics – and whether it is helpful to use the Western ethical theories, such as consequentialism, deontology or virtue theory as frameworks for understanding – will have to be postponed until chapters 8 and 9. Yet it is immediately clear that a robust definition and theory of intention is required given the Buddhist emphasis on this notion for ethics. Surprisingly few scholars, even those who endorse a virtue theory interpretation of Buddhist ethics, have paid attention to Western classification of differences between 'pure intendings' and 'specific intendings.'⁶⁹ Fewer still have attempted to map these distinctions onto a Buddhist model, even though they may be helpful for better understanding the supposed difference between enlightened and unenlightened activity.

Contemporary philosophers have more systematically explored the relationship between desires, beliefs and intentions than did the proponents of classical Madhyamaka. Though there are few points of consensus between philosophers interested in intention, one such point is that whatever is intended must be thought possible. That is, intentions cannot conflict with beliefs. In the context of the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, it is not entirely clear what the stipulation of non-conflict between belief and intention entails. Having seen through the illusions of conventional reality, bodhisattvas nevertheless work to achieve their goal of liberating all beings within the confines of the conventional. Williams has pointed out a number of difficulties engendered by the bodhisattva's postponement of her/ his own liberation

⁶⁹ Davidson (2001).

until the momentous task of liberating all others has been completed, but none of these are insurmountable.⁷⁰ The coherence of the bodhisattva's task becomes questionable if we maintain both that the bodhisattva does not believe in the ultimate reality of 'self' or 'other' and that the bodhisattva nevertheless forms the intention of delivering all beings from *saṃsāra*.

In addition, we might wonder whether there is disparity between the intentions and beliefs of those who remain unenlightened but nevertheless have begun to work towards the goal of internalizing emptiness. How can we make sense of Buddhist practices, such as meditations designed to stimulate compassion towards all beings, which encourage the unenlightened to pursue ends which, for all practical purposes from within a position of ignorance, are unachievable? With limited resources, does it make better sense to speak of 'wishing' for the wellbeing of all beings rather than 'intending' it? This raises serious questions about the respective moral qualities of intending, versus simply wishing for, a state of affairs. Is the 'pure intention' (i.e. intention unaccompanied by action) for the wellbeing of others itself a source of good karma? Or can it only be so when used to motivate appropriate ethical action whenever opportunities arise?

Here, we return to the idea of *bodhicitta*: to wish others well *just is* to effect a change in the world. In this sense, there is no such thing as completely inefficacious intention. This does not however lead the Buddhist to the conclusion that acting on intentions is an unnecessary extra step. Buddhists admit that, ethically speaking, it is not just the thought that counts. Ethical conduct might start with good intentions but has to be

⁷⁰ Williams (2009: 58-59). Some of these difficulties and responses to them are explored in chapter 9.

accompanied by the corresponding action. Still, from the Buddhist point of view, it does not make sense to speak of completely un-actualized intentions. Whilst plans always run the risk of falling through, the mental states giving rise to plans invariably yield karmic fruits. From the Buddhist perspective, generating positive intentions/wishing for the wellbeing of others is morally transformative both because it encourages the performance of deeds conducive to the good of others and because positive attitudes can transform how we engage with the world. These attitudes have the power to alter, and to inhibit, our tendencies towards conceptual construction so that, eventually, designations are recognized as conventional. For example, the cultivation of a compassionate attitude towards those habitually designated as ‘enemies’ eventually leads to a realisation that the ways in which we categorize others, the ways in which we engage with and perceive the world, reflects our own intentions and is partly a product of karma. Hence, our perception of the world is subject to revision: unhelpful conceptual imputations (such as ‘enemy’) should be discarded and replaced with successively more helpful conceptual imputations (such as ‘being worthy of compassion’) until the conceptually imputed nature of all phenomena is fully realized. Through manipulating the intentions from which one acts in the world, one has the capacity fundamentally to reshape one’s experience of it. As Śāntideva says: “Where is there hide to cover the whole world? The wide world can be covered with hide enough for a pair of shoes alone. In the same way, since I cannot control external events, I will control my own mind.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Śāntideva – *BCA* 5.13. *bhūmiṃ chādayitum sarvāṃ kutaś carma bhaviṣyati| upānaccarmamātreṇa channā bhavati medinī||* (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 35).

Consistency in the Binding and Liberating Functions of Karma

Karma: A Soteriological Concept

In the final section of this chapter, we take up the task of resolving the paradox emerging from the binding and liberating functions of karma. The foregoing discussions on the plausibility of psychological interpretations of karma, its relationship to dependency, and the pedagogical advantages of describing it in mechanistic, moral and soteriological ways should facilitate new ways of thinking about the nature of this tension and potential resolutions of it. As was noted at the outset, Mādhyamikas sometimes appeal to karma as a means of dispelling accusations of nihilism. Candrakīrti argues that to conflate the emptiness of all phenomena with metaphysical nihilism (a *nāstika* position) is unwarranted.⁷² Whereas Madhyamaka denies the instantiation of *svabhāva*, the nihilist absurdly denies the reality (in any sense) of phenomena. In contrast to the ethical nihilist (the *ucchedavādin*), who denies karmic activity, Madhyamaka theorists attribute moral responsibility. Thus they are able to proscribe and prohibit certain forms of conduct. Commenting on Nāgārjuna's *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* (of which only a few Sanskrit fragments have survived),⁷³ Candrakīrti suggests that belief in metaphysical nihilism leads to moral degeneration. For example, at *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* 2, Candrakīrti maintains that those who endorse metaphysical nihilism also “reject all the roots of mundane and transcendent virtues and eventually cause the origination of all ills, because they lay the ground for the accumulation of all non-virtuous

⁷² Candrakīrti – *PsP* 18.7. The opponent says: *nāstikāviśiṣṭā mādhyaṃkāḥ yasmāt kuśalākuśalaṃ karma kartāraṃ ca phalaṃ ca sarvaṃ ca lokaṃ bhāvasvabhāvaśūnyam iti bruvate| nāstikā api hi etan nāstīti bruvate| tasmān nāstikāviśiṣṭā mādhyaṃkā iti ||* Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 368). “Les Mādhyamika ne diffèrent pas les nihilistes puisqu'ils dissent que l'acte bon et mauvaise, l'agent, le fruit et le monde entier sont vides de nature propre. Les nihilistes aussi dissent que tout cela n'existe pas. C'est pourquoi les Mādhyamika ne diffèrent pas des nihilistes.” (Trans.) De Jong, J. (1949: 25).

⁷³ Ruegg (1981: 19).

elements.”⁷⁴ Hence, although metaphysical and moral nihilism are conceptually distinguished in the Madhyamaka system, they are considered equally dangerous from the spiritual point of view and, indeed, commitment to one form can induce commitment to the other. Mādhyamikas contend that the unification of the theories of universal emptiness and karma allows Buddhism to retain the concept of a person (an impermanent locus of causal, including karmic, processes) whilst dispensing altogether with the idea of *svabhāva*.

The Madhyamaka analysis of karma is intended to reveal that it is an empty concept, which therefore cannot be recognized as an ultimate constituent of reality. At one point in his analysis of karma, at *MMK* 17.33, Nāgārjuna likens action and its fruit, as well as the agent, to the illusory city of the *gandharvas*.⁷⁵ However, because no phenomenon is granted the status of an ultimate existent in the Madhyamaka system, this does nothing to detract from karma’s soteriological import or its efficacy as an instrument of moral motivation. On the contrary, Madhyamaka contends that, as a conventional reality, karma situates the reality of persons midway between the extremes of eternity and complete non-existence. The concept of karma can contribute to the idea of a person as a convenient designation without necessarily implying the existence of a substantial self. This is soteriologically relevant insofar as it leaves scope for moral development and spiritual transformation without forcing commitment to an underlying substantial self who develops and transforms. The unification of the theories of universal emptiness

⁷⁴ Candrakīrti – *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* 2. “D’autre part, la vue d’inexistence admise par le nihiliste qui nie la connexion entre l’acte et le fruit, corrompt les racines de bien mondaines et supramondaines sans exception. Par suite, elle est cause de la production de toutes les erreurs et de l’accumulation de tous les mauvais *dharmas*.” (Trans. from the Tibetan) Scherrer-Schaub, C. (1991: 121). (Trans. into English) Loizzo, J. (2007: 135).

⁷⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 17.33. *kleśāḥ karmāṇi dehās ca kartāras ca phalāni ca | gandharvanagarākārā marīcisvapnasamṇibhāḥ ||* “Defilements, actions, and bodies, agents, and fruits, are similar to the city of *gandharvas*; they are like a mirage, a dream.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 191).

and karma connects the metaphysical and ethical aspects of Madhyamaka. This connection is crucial since, as Nāgārjuna states at *MMK* 24.11, failure to understand the true meaning of emptiness is dangerous. Without karma, the metaphysic of universal emptiness appears bleak.

The charge of nihilism has been recurrent for Madhyamaka. Whilst Mādhyamikas are consistent in rejecting nihilism as a wrong view, their claim is not that a nihilistic picture of the world is less accurate than competing worldviews but that subscription to nihilism is more dangerous. Dogmatic adherence to *any* worldview is mistaken insofar as it involves commitment to the incoherent notion of *svabhāva*: there is no way the world mind-independently is according to Madhyamaka. As Nāgārjuna argues at *VV* 29, thorough understanding of emptiness is incompatible with subscription to any thesis.⁷⁶ Gold communicates this point as follows: “As always in Buddhist critiques of nihilism, it is not the view itself that is truly dangerous, but rather the fact that it will lead its advocates to disbelieve and ignore the reality of karma and its consequences.”⁷⁷

Even though Madhyamaka considers the views of Buddhist realists, Naiyāyikas and nihilists to be equally misguided metaphysically (in so far as they adopt positions supposed to be extreme), they are respectively more degenerative ethically (in so far as commitment to extreme views inhibits the attenuation of morally unwholesome behaviours). An enlightened being and a *nāstika* may concur that, ultimately, phenomena lack metaphysical foundations. Despite this, they engage with the world in such radically different ways that this reflects their respective levels of insight into the

⁷⁶ Nāgārjuna – *VV* 29. *yadi kācana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ/ nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ*// “If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me.” (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 29).

⁷⁷ Gold (2015: 218).

truth that ultimately things lack *svabhāva*: whereas the former has seen through the illusion of *svabhāva* yet continues to employ conventions for the sake of leading others to this insight, the latter is so confused that the absurdity of metaphysical nihilism goes unnoticed. This reveals that Madhyamaka understands the difference between enlightened and deeply misguided points of view less in terms of assent to the proposition of ultimate emptiness and more in terms of the ramifications this assent has on ethics and other modes of worldly engagement.

The Madhyamaka account of karma must be situated in the broader context of dependent origination. The conditioned nature of all *saṃsāric* phenomena is taken by Madhyamaka to signify the absolute lack of *svabhāva*. The concepts of production and destruction are, at the level of ultimate reality, inconsistent with the idea of *svabhāva* construed in Madhyamaka terms (denoting immutability, timelessness and ontological primacy). Nevertheless, conventionally speaking, production, maintenance and destruction are meaningful notions capable of explaining the processes of causation and change. As a causal theory, karma may be subsumed under or else considered as an application of the theory of dependent origination. Although opponents of Madhyamaka regard the conventional status of karma as problematic and might wonder how a merely conventional ethical theory can motivate good conduct, Mādhyamikas themselves perceive the conventionality of karma as guaranteeing its causal potency. Having explored the difficulties involved in regarding action as possessing *svabhāva* – which in short amount to the impossibility of the action being done (for something which is eternal does not arise at a particular point in time) – Nāgārjuna maintains that the conventional performance of action must be posited in order not to “contradict all

worldly conduct” and as a means of distinguishing “between those who have done the meritorious and those who have done wrong.”⁷⁸

Taking Moral Responsibility for Mental States

Entailed by the supposition that karma is intention and the claim that beings are responsible for their karma is the idea that beings are responsible for their intentions. Given the notion of freedom explored above (as freedom from mental affliction), does it make sense to think of unenlightened beings as in possession of sufficient mental freedom to take responsibility for their own states of mind? If spiritual ignorance and *samsāric* existence are beginningless then in what sense can beings be said to have freely chosen their state of mind/ habitual mental tendencies? Galen Strawson argues that moral responsibility is incompatible with the fact that one does not get to choose one’s mental states.⁷⁹ According to Strawson, efforts to eradicate certain unhelpful states of mind and to cultivate productive dispositions are beyond a person’s control. He argues that a person’s state of mind is the result of heredity and experience and is consequently not something for which individuals can be held morally responsible.

The fact that Buddhism understands people are ‘inheriting’ their own past karma does little to reduce the force of Strawson’s claim, which is that genuine moral responsibility requires that a being should choose which traits to possess before they come into existence.⁸⁰ Since this is self-evidently absurd (self-creation being impossible) Strawson

⁷⁸ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 17.24. *vyavahārā virudhyante sarva eva na saṃśayaḥ| punyapāpakṛtām naiva pravibhāgaś ca yujyate||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 186).

⁷⁹ Strawson (1994: 7).

⁸⁰ Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.57, Upajjhatthana Sutta. *sabbe sattā kammaṣakā kammaḍāyādā kammayonī kammabandhū kammaṇṇisaraṇā, yaṃ kammaṃ karissanti kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tassa dāyādā*

rejects the notion of moral responsibility. If *samsāric* existence is beginningless then it does not make sense to speak of a being's original mental state – on a cyclic view of existence, there is no first state. Moreover, given the dual functionality of the (sometimes interchangeable) concepts of karma and *saṅkhāras* alluded to earlier – as both passive and active in constructing a person's experience – the Buddhist tradition itself cannot accommodate the idea of absolute freedom of choice about which mental states to endorse. This is because of the universal applicability of the doctrine of dependent origination. Whether we regard these considerations as problematic hinges on whether we accept the rather rigid account of moral responsibility Strawson presents. For the Buddhist, the idea of 'absolute' freedom – of unconditioned freedom – is meaningless. The Buddhist analysis of freedom, in which mental freedom is acquired by degrees without an original selection of dispositions, challenges Strawson's critique. Nevertheless, *how* beings take responsibility for the future given that their present circumstances are the result of past karma is a matter in need of further explanation.

Buddhists appeal to the causal nature of karma as a means of explaining the possibility of transformation. Having rejected the concept of *ātman* as philosophically incoherent, Buddhists maintain that beings have the capacity to cultivate good karma and to make the transition from a state of corrosive ignorance to expansive insight. In this way karma might reasonably be thought of as facilitating freedom. At the same time, the idea that many of the factors of a person's present condition are the result of previous deeds raises interesting questions about the extent to which a person with unwholesome

bhaviṣṣantī] PTS, Hardy (1958: 74-75). "All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are owners of their kamma, heirs of their kamma..." (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 689).

dispositions possesses sufficient freedom to prioritize the wholesome (the Strawsonian objection). Seeing previous acts as conditioning the present moment understandably leads to the worry that future moments will be determined by the karmic quality of the present moment. Whilst this might imply limited freedom, Wadia has argued that such worries dissipate when karma is recognised as a double-edge theory of cause and effect. He writes of karma, “it is determined as effect, but it is creative as cause.”⁸¹ The extent to which people can abandon the tendencies developed over an infinite series of lives depends, then, not only on past karma but also on their ability to exercise self-restraint so that, through meditation for example, they learn to abandon reactive attitudes.⁸² Remaining questions include: (a) what are the prospects of purifying past karma which has not yet come to fruition? and (b) once a deed has been performed, are beings simply destined at some future time to experience the fruits of their action? The performance of ordinary intentional actions stems from misapprehension and ignorance and leaves few opportunities for spiritually immature beings to assume responsible agency. However, there is always an interval between the arising of an experience and a being’s reaction to it for the cultivation of mindfulness. Meditative practices are therefore believed to be essential for the exercise of freedom, conceived of as freedom from the *klesas* afflicting the mind. Without mindful reflection, beings form intentions without realising the moral significance of what they do; displaying behaviours which are engrained rather than chosen. Whilst past karma is unavoidable, it does not follow that one’s future is determined. Buddhism understands free will as something capable of acquisition and loss rather than as something ungoverned by the universal principle of dependent origination.

⁸¹ Wadia (1965: 151).

⁸² For more on this, see Repetti (2010).

For Mādhyamikas, karma represents a preferable alternative to the morally debilitating views of fate and chaos.⁸³ People can explain their present condition partly, though not completely, by reference to past actions. As the Pāli Canon records, the Buddha emphasized that karmic causation is but one species of causation.⁸⁴ It is reprehensible to attempt to explain all the factors of a person’s condition solely by reference to karma when non-karmic causes are likely also to have contributed to a person’s condition. Aside from the fact that unenlightened beings possess insufficient insight to make authoritative claims about which karmic and non-karmic factors have contributed to a person’s condition, hastiness in attributing karmic causes to people’s unfortunate circumstances could also undermine the capacity for compassionate responsiveness. Only the perfectly enlightened can fully understand the complex operation of karma. Nevertheless, it is important to Buddhism that the operations of karma are not utterly mysterious; acceptance of karmic causality should not be based solely on blind faith but also upon experience. Buddhists therefore maintain that within one’s present life it is possible to discern a relationship between the ethical quality of one’s intentions and the balance of positive and negative experiential encounters.⁸⁵ Since the final goal of Buddhism cannot be achieved until the complete exhaustion of past karma, knowledge of the operation of karma is soteriologically essential. Using the sequential structure of the four noble truths as a model, the need for understanding karmic operation becomes

⁸³ The Sāmaññaphala Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 2) documents the historical Buddha’s rejection of the ‘fatalistic’ position of Makkhali Gosāla (founder of the heterodox Ājīvika system). Makkhali Gosāla’s belief in the all-pervasive power of ‘*niyati*’ (sometimes translated as ‘fate,’ ‘necessity’ or the ‘fixed order of things’) is criticized on grounds that it can inspire antinomianism insofar as such a belief makes a mockery of all spiritually directed exertion. For fuller discussion, see Basham (1951: 228).

⁸⁴ Saṃyutta Nikāya 36.21, Moḷiyasīvaka Sutta.

⁸⁵ Aṅguttara Nikāya 3.65, Kesaputti Sutta. *sace kho pana n’atthi paraloko n’atthi sukaṭadukkaṭāṇaṃ dhammānaṃ phalaṃ vipāko idhāhaṃ diṭṭh’eva dhamme averaṃ avyāpajjhaṃ anīghaṃ sukhiṃ attānaṃ pariharāmī ti* | PTS, Morris (1885: 192). For example, the Buddha assures the Kālāma community that even if there is no rebirth – no fruit of action – a noble person lives happily and “without enmity and ill-will, free of trouble” in this lifetime. (Trans.) Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012: 283).

clear: the prospects of terminating the production of karma remain distant whilst the mechanism by which it is produced is unknown.

Conclusions

The law of karma is often amongst those aspects of Buddhist thought which Western philosophers shy away from discussing. In this chapter we have traced some of the reasons behind this – from worries pertaining to literalistic interpretations of rebirth, through the use of poor analogies (such as that it functions like a “law of nature”) to the undeniable fact that contemporary philosophy can provide a more nuanced account of the differences between intentions, beliefs and desires. Nevertheless, it is clear that we can only understand Madhyamaka’s vision of freedom and ethics by resolving the apparent tensions at the heart of karmic theory. Whilst karmic residues must finally be expunged for liberation to occur, the karmic mechanism itself turns out to be the key to liberation.

Chapter 7

The Ethical Ideal of the Bodhisattva: From Ignorance to Insight

“You are locked into your suffering and your pleasures are the seal.”

Leonard Cohen, *Stories of the Street*

“Hoping to escape suffering, it is to suffering that they run.
In the desire for happiness, out of delusion, they destroy their own happiness, like an enemy.”¹

Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 1.28

One important outcome of the investigation thus far has been the drawing of a crucial distinction between (potential) Buddhist attitudes towards ‘free will’ and ‘freedom’ respectively. As proponents of different reconstructions concede, a concept resembling the Western notion of ‘free will’ hardly featured, and was much less ‘problematized,’ in classical Indian discourse. Contrastingly, the idea of ‘freedom,’ conceived as the irreversible result of a life in which wisdom (*prajñā*), morality (*śīla*) and, above all, compassion (*kāruṇā*) are prioritized, was a prevalent and pervasive theme of both *sūtra* and *śāstra* literature. Whereas the earlier chapters of this thesis were primarily concerned with the metaphysical problem of ‘free will,’ the remaining chapters deal principally with more practical considerations such as whether ‘freedom’ in the sense just described is humanly achievable and, if so, what revisions to our mode of engagement with the world would be required.

The present chapter examines the ethical ideal of the bodhisattva, whose characterization as supremely virtuous and limitlessly compassionate is often thought

¹ Śāntideva – *BCA* 1.28. *duḥkham evābhīdhāvanti duḥkhaniḥsaraṇāśayā | sukhecchayaiva saṃmohāt svasukhaṃ ghnanti śatruvat||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 7).

of as distinctively Mahāyānist.² Rather than explore the doctrinal complexities of what precisely is involved at each of the ten stages (*bhūmis*) of bodhisattvahood, this chapter analyses the Madhyamaka notion of ignorance (*avidyā*) as the source of all suffering and assesses the extent to which insight into emptiness (*śūnyatā*) can be considered an effective remedy. By likening the relationship between morality (*śīla*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) to that between the two wings of a bird, Mahāyānists emphasize the necessity of cultivating both equally if liberation is to be achieved.³ The assessment of the ethical ideal of the bodhisattva set out in this chapter then paves the way for further philosophically reconstructive work in chapters 8 and 9 where hitherto neglected questions pertaining to Madhyamaka's implied meta-ethical stance on issues such as whether moral sentences can be truth-apt, what the ontological status of moral properties is, and how moral motivation comes about, are systematically addressed.

The Source of Suffering

The differences between the various traditions of Buddhism notwithstanding, all converge around the idea that the purpose and value of pursuing the spiritual path lies in the unique soteriological advantage it affords both to oneself and to others. Soteriology is thus at the heart of the Buddhist agenda, in which practices such as the cultivation of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) are intended as antidotes to the toxic experiences of *saṃsāra*. Although Buddhists consider access to authoritative teachings to be generally important for bringing about the kind of existential shift occasioned by

² Although it would be a digression to explore how far characterizations of arahants as mainly concerned with their own liberation are fair, it seems that the oft-made distinction between the arahant and the bodhisattva is too polemical and pejorative to be entirely accurate. As one scholar argues, "Arahants are depicted not as silent, self-centred sages but as beings interested in liberating humanity from its predicament." Bond (1988: 159).

³ Trinzin (2008: vii).

the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, alone they are insufficient for liberation.⁴ In addition to the propositional knowledge that the *sūtras* can provide (such as the knowledge that there is no ultimately existent self, *ātman*), Buddhists hold that meditational techniques deliver direct access to such truths and that there can be no substitute for the lived-experience of what some scholars describe as “a selfless response to an illusory world.”⁵

According to the four noble truths, which are part of the common stock of Buddhist belief, our ability to overcome and eradicate suffering relies first on our ability to locate, and then to block, its source.⁶ Again, most Buddhists agree that the root cause of our suffering is *avidyā*, a term commonly translated into English as ‘ignorance.’ However, as Matilal and others have remarked, this translation does not do justice to the full semantic range of the term ‘*avidyā*’ as employed in Indic, and especially Buddhist, philosophical discourse.⁷ There will be opportunity to explore the meaning of *avidyā* in greater detail in what follows, but first it should be noted that at least in the early period, Buddhism itself seems to have been ambivalent as to whether the source of suffering is ignorance (*avidyā*) or craving (*tṛṣṇā*).⁸ As Ronkin observes, the Pāli Canon presents different versions of the theory of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), some of which deviate from the traditional twelve-fold list by mentioning as few as two links (*nidānas*).⁹ Frauwallner conjectures that accounts of suffering as originating from

⁴ The word ‘generally’ is crucial here because *pratyekabuddhas* who somehow manage to attain liberation unaided by the guidance of others are the notable exception. Such enlightened beings are depicted as solitary, however, and the tradition therefore regards their achievements as in some sense inferior because of their reluctance (possibly even their inability) to teach others.

⁵ Todd (2013).

⁶ Saṃyutta Nikāya 5.56, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. (Trans.) Bodhi. (2000: 1843-1844).

⁷ Matilal (1980: 154-164).

⁸ Having noted the challenges involved in translating *avidyā* into English, this chapter provisionally accepts ‘ignorance’ as a suitable translation. For further examination of this central soteriological concept, see the section entitled *Avidyā: Its Definition and Ontological Status* below.

⁹ Ronkin (2005: 200). Examples of various versions of dependent origination are available at: Saṃyutta Nikāya 2.12, Nidānasamyyutta Sutta 10-11 where we find first the traditional formulation followed immediately by a variation. (Trans.) Bodhi (2000: 537-541).

craving and from ignorance can both be traced back to the historical Buddha. He argues that the shift in emphasis from craving to ignorance reflects the evolution of the Buddha's own thinking throughout his teaching career, which spanned a period of over forty years. Frauwallner suggests that it was only natural and proper that the early Buddhists should have revised their views on the ultimate source of suffering once they had clearly established wisdom (*prajñā*) as the outcome of effective spiritual practice. This is because, to stick with traditional 'medicinal' readings of Buddhist teachings, wisdom and ignorance form a more natural pair than wisdom and craving, in that the former can be applied as the 'remedy' for the latter.¹⁰

Arguing to the same end, Jurewicz also speculates that the dual formulations of dependent origination (in which ignorance and craving are identified as the root cause of suffering) betray the polemical approach taken in early Buddhism towards Vedic religion. Of course, the cyclical nature of dependent origination means that no item in the chain of dependency can be 'first' and, hence, to speak of either ignorance or craving as the 'root' of suffering is to speak metaphorically, foregrounding these links for their special significance. Jurewicz argues that the Buddha's formulation of dependent origination counts as one amongst many instances where he employed Vedic terminology and concepts but redefined and transformed them to suit his own purposes.¹¹ Buddhism's two sources of suffering reflect the two sources of activity (which Jurewicz labels 'cosmogonic' and 'microcosmic') presented in the *R̥gveda*,

¹⁰ Frauwallner (1973: 156-157). "The Way of Deliverance which the Buddha knows leads to the attainment of the highest knowledge. But, then, how could knowledge bring Deliverance if ignorance was not the cause of bondage? Such and similar considerations must have soon confronted the Buddha during the propagation of his doctrine. As a matter of fact, he reckoned with them and remodeled his doctrine decisively on this point."

¹¹ Jurewicz (2000: 170). The idea that the historical Buddha employed many of the same terms and metaphors as the Brahminical religious elite but transformed – even inverted – their meanings has been well documented in the works of Gombrich. See Gombrich (1996) and (2009: 180-192).

where ignorance reflects the impersonal first condition from which creation springs, and craving reflects the driving force behind human activity. Jurewicz then makes the interesting further claim that, by modelling his theory of conditionality in this way, the Buddha intended to expose what he considered the absurdity in the Vedic conception of the *ātman* as entwined with the ground or source of the cosmos. Instead, she suggests, it is a “chain of absurd, meaningless changes which could only result in the repeated death of anyone who would reproduce this cosmogonic process in ritual activity and everyday life.”¹²

Whatever the connection between the different versions of the thesis of dependent origination as articulated in the Pāli Canon, ignorance and craving are clearly closely related in this system. As shall be discussed more fully later, Buddhists conceive of *avidyā* as more than a mere lack or absence of knowledge and instead attribute to it both causal efficacy and the power to overlay our ultimately ‘empty’ encounters and experiences with the semblance of inherent reality (*svabhāva*). The ‘positive’ dimension of ignorance, therefore, is to be found in our countless and constant acts of reification or superimposition (*samāropa*) of reality onto what is, in fact, illusory.

Thus, the idea of ‘ignorance’ plays a profound role in Buddhist philosophy and soteriology. In the pursuit of freedom and enlightenment, all beings must personally overcome their engrained tendencies to reify and to project and must individually face the challenge of extirpating ignorance entirely. Interestingly, despite the divergence of different Buddhist schools in their accounts of the fundamental nature of ignorance, its ontological status and its relationship to other key concepts, they largely agree about

¹² Jurewicz (2000: 180).

which practical measures are necessary for its elimination. Indeed, Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists alike concur on the importance of cultivating the four immeasurables, practising meditation and adhering to monastic codes of conduct as a means of spiritual advancement. As many scholars have pointed out, Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists frequently converged on questions of conduct and practice and, for this reason, co-residence within the same monasteries was largely unproblematic. It seems that the early Mahāyāna movement used such convergence to gain momentum.¹³ For example, by employing certain “parasitic strategies,” such as prefacing their texts with expressions like ‘thus have I heard,’ thereby fostering a sense of their authenticity as *buddhavacana*, early Mahāyānists established enough continuity with the prevailing tradition as not to be rejected as non-Buddhists but, at the same time, incorporated a sufficient number of new ideas to constitute a serious challenge to the existing Buddhist paradigm.¹⁴ Similarly, many scholars think that Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists often drew support for their views from textual traditions common to both. For example, Harrison has claimed that “the Mahāyāna ran across *nikāya* boundaries right from the start and was no respecter of such organisational distinctions.”¹⁵ Harrison accordingly warns against construing the Māhāyana/ non-Māhāyana distinction by overly simplistic or anachronistic means. Instead he suggests that “a far more complex situation where Mainstream and Mahāyāna texts developed simultaneously, influencing each other” was more likely.¹⁶ Nevertheless, whether by injecting new life into the bodhisattva concept, by challenging the prevailing dharma theory, or by some other means, early Mahāyānists (and Mādhyamikas in particular) sought to undermine the Abhidharma account of liberation. Over time Mahāyānists increasingly came to see

¹³ See for example, Drewes (2010: 57), Harrison (2018) and Walser (2005: 87-88).

¹⁴ Walser (2005: 153-187).

¹⁵ Harrison (2018: 17).

¹⁶ Harrison (2018: 17).

themselves as alone competent to explain the full complexities of the spiritual path – the pursuit of which relied on a willingness to sacrifice or at least to postpone one’s own accomplishment of *nirvāṇa* in order to assist others.¹⁷

To be clear, Madhyamaka’s innovation lies not so much in pronouncing the mutual dependence of morality and right view (an idea expressed in Pāli sources like the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta*) as in revealing the precise mechanism by which insight into emptiness promotes morality, and *vice versa*.¹⁸ At *Suḥrillekha* 28 Nāgārjuna echoes the view that wisdom and morality are sufficient for spiritual release and suggests that these take precedence over all other positive qualities. He writes, “To those possessed of breeding, learning, handsome looks, who have no wisdom, neither discipline, you need not bow. But those who do have these two qualities, though lacking other virtues, you should revere.”¹⁹ The mutual dependence of morality and wisdom acquires a new significance in the Madhyamaka tradition where it is intimated that without proper appreciation of the pervasiveness of emptiness, there will always be some tendency – however latent – for attachment and, thus, a reticence to be as supremely selfless as the demands of bodhisattvahood require. This is why Śāntideva places such heavy emphasis on the equality of oneself and others, which, conjoined with the insight of thorough-going emptiness, is said at *BCA* 8.102 to inspire an outpouring of spontaneous

¹⁷ Harrison (2018: 9-10) has conceded that “It may well be fair enough to say that the defining characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism is a concern with the pursuit of the bodhisattva path” but he also doubts whether this acknowledgement takes us very far in our inquiry. After all, the next task is then to analyze the nature of bodhisattvahood as conceived by different Mahāyānists.

¹⁸ *Dīgha Nikāya* 4, *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta*. *sīla-paridhotā hi bho Gotama paññā, pañña-paridhotam sīlam, yattha sīlam tattha paññā, yattha paññā tattha sīlam, sīlavato paññā paññāvato sīlam, sīla-paññānañ ca pana lokasmim aggam akkhāyati*|| PTS, Rhys Davids, T.W. (1967: 124). “Wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world.” (Trans). Walshe, M. (1995:131).

¹⁹ Nāgārjuna – *Suḥrillekha* 28. (Trans. from the Tibetan) The Padmakara Translation Group (2013: 37).

compassion and the motivation to ward off all suffering.²⁰ This point is helpfully summarized by one scholar who writes, “moral virtue without *śūnyatā* may be shallow and weak; but *śūnyatā* without moral virtue is blind and dangerous.”²¹ Buddhapālita likewise makes a similar point in his comments on *MMK* 18.7 when he says in response to accusations of nihilism:

“Not knowing the meaning of emptiness, you think that these two are similar. Acting with equanimity [that is, indifference] when one has not analysed [to find that all sentient beings should be valued equally] and acting with equanimity when one has so analysed are similar only in that both can be characterized as acting with equanimity. However, acting with equanimity but without analysis is involved in the entwinements of ignorance. Acting with equanimity when one has analysed [is the result of knowledge and] is used by Supramundane Victors.”²²

The Spiritual Path: Its Structure and Result

That Madhyamaka Buddhism emphasizes the need to expunge all forms and instances of ignorance for spiritual release to occur will become increasingly clear as this chapter progresses. However, since the Madhyamaka system presents language and the ascription of labels (*nāma*) to what is ultimately empty as inevitably bound up with reification and, hence, ignorance, there are serious questions surrounding the feasibility of attaining bodhisattvahood. For example, would bodhisattvahood require the restructuring of our entire cognitive (perhaps even neural) processes and, if so, is this humanly achievable? Though Nāgārjuna assures his reader at *Suḥrillekha* 116 of the attainability of final liberation by ordinary people (*prthagjana*), he is of course working

²⁰ Śāntideva – *BCA* 8.102. *asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāṅy evāviśeṣataḥ| duḥkhatvād eva vāryāṇi niyamas tatra kiṃ kṛtaḥ||* “Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?” (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 97).

²¹ Whitehill (2000: 25).

²² Buddhapālita – *Madhyamakavṛtti* 18.7. (Trans. from the Tibetan) Hopkins (1996: 633).

on the assumption of potentially infinitely many lifetimes in which to complete this momentous task.²³ As Flanagan’s examination of the bodhisattva ideal from a naturalistic perspective indicates, however, the idea of completely eradicating suffering and ignorance – and thus effectively re-wiring our brains – within a single lifetime seems highly implausible.²⁴ Although this is not the place to engage the debate over the prospects of purely naturalistic or secular conceptions of Buddhism, it is worth noting that the connection between ignorance and language throws up serious challenges for explaining how beings such as ourselves (i.e. beings who seem evolutionarily hard-wired to impute labels onto our world of experience) could attain full Buddhahood.

What the Madhyamaka sources make abundantly clear, however, is that merely correcting one’s cognitive misapprehensions is insufficient for achieving liberation. It is not only that deficient reasoning must be replaced with astute philosophical insight but also that morally defective ways of viewing the world must be entirely driven out. In other words, there is a correlation between one’s cognitive processes and one’s affective attitudes, and full liberation requires that they synchronize in the ‘realization’ of emptiness.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, Madhyamaka regards acceptance of right view, which, paradoxically, involves acceptance of no view whatsoever as definitive or as accurately capturing the ultimate truth about reality, as a critical step in developing a supremely virtuous or moral character. The underlying premise here is that, without

²³ Nāgārjuna – *Suḥrillekha* 116. “And even those who realized the truth did not fall from the heavens, nor emerge like crops of corn from earth’s dark depths, but once were ruled by kleshas and were ordinary men.” (Trans. from the Tibetan) The Padmakara Translation Group (2013: 73).

²⁴ Flanagan (2013: 31). “The naturalist will require that whatever excellences of wisdom or virtue are achieved or achievable by the bodhisattva can’t take longer than this one lifetime, because, well, that’s all we have.”

correctly perceiving the world, perfect ethical engagement with it is impossible. According to the anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka then, which stipulates that there is no objective or mind-independent way the world is, complete realization of emptiness and the relinquishment of all attachments coincide to produce a being who sees through the illusion of selfhood and is therefore able to act in consistently selfless ways.

The obvious objection to this account, however, finds expression in the work of Williams who has famously argued that destroying the illusion of an ultimate distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ whilst maintaining just such a distinction conventionally can as easily induce egoism as selflessness.²⁵ The force of this argument and possible responses to it will be reviewed in chapter 9. Meanwhile, another objection can be brought against the account of bodhisattvahood as the embodiment of compassionate responsiveness in the face of emptiness: namely, that once the bodhisattva succeeds in undermining tendencies for reification, she can no longer engage with the world at all because such engagement seems to require the application of labels onto experience. The source of this objection finds its origins in Madhyamaka works themselves, such as in Candrakīrti’s commentary on *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā* 8 where he argues that direct ‘realization’ (*sākṣātkr*) of ultimate truth paradoxically involves the realization of nothing at all.²⁶ MacDonald summarizes the situation saying that, for Candrakīrti, “at the time of perception of the ultimate, of the emptiness of things that were never really there in the first place, inasmuch as there is nothing whatsoever to be

²⁵ Williams (1998: 164-176). For a detailed discussion of this objection and possible responses to it, see chapter 9.

²⁶ Candrakīrti – *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* 8. “Dans ce cas, si, comme l’objet [ici l’arrêt], la connaissance aussi a pour nature l’absence de production, alors il sera juste [de dire] que cette connaissance fonctionne grâce à son objet tel qu’il est. Or, dans le monde, sous un tel aspect, elle est dite <<perception directe>>.” (Trans. from the Tibetan) Scherrer-Schaub, C. (1991: 158).

perceived, that is, since an object for consciousness does not exist, consciousness will simply not come into being; Candrakīrti's assertion that consciousness assumes the mode of non-arising translates into no consciousness at all."²⁷ On this understanding of what bodhisattvahood involves, it is difficult to see how an enlightened being could so much as navigate herself successfully throughout the world, let alone be a source of spiritual inspiration to others. Before this problem can be properly investigated, however, it is necessary first to understand why and in which ways Madhyamaka conceives of language as an impediment to liberation (a point to be examined shortly).

That Madhyamaka metaphysics and ethics enjoy a dynamic relationship with each other is certainly not a new idea. Indeed, the idea of the path as involving the accumulation of merit and wisdom emerges strongly from Madhyamaka texts in which both *punya-sambhāra* and *jñāna-sambhāra* are equally emphasized.²⁸ Nevertheless, it is only fairly recently that scholarship has begun to investigate the exact nature of this symbiotic relationship in a more systematic manner.²⁹ Garfield, for example, has argued that a 'phenomenological' approach to Buddhist ethics allows us to make sense of the bodhisattva's altruistic engagement with the world, an engagement provoked by a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between 'facts' and 'values' wherein facts turn out to be illusory, leaving every aspect of experience open to moral opportunity.³⁰ The upshot is that when beings eventually see the world aright, and in alignment with its ultimate nature, previously unthinkable modes of existing become available.

²⁷ MacDonald (2009: 156).

²⁸ Lindtner (1982: 251).

²⁹ See Clayton (2001), Garfield (2010), Westerhoff (2015) and Williams (1998) as examples.

³⁰ Garfield (2010).

Whilst the idea of a spiritual path is useful it is not without its dangers if interpreted too literally. For example, although Buddhists emphasize the importance of following the eight-fold path, progression need not necessarily involve systematic fulfilment of one stage before moving on to practise the next. Despite occupying the primary position in the traditional formulations of the eight-fold path, acquiring right view is not a prerequisite for successful practice of the other stages of the path. It is a mistake to think, as Burton does, that only those with a basic grasp of such fundamental Buddhist principles as no-self, impermanence and suffering “would have a reason to undertake the other aspects of Buddhist training.”³¹ One way out of this problem is to imagine the eight-fold path as structured more like a spiraled than a linear staircase: rudimentary acquaintance with any of the eight elements need not inhibit progress because the same ground will be covered in greater depth or detail at subsequent levels. Hence, all the elements are mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, spiritual maturity demands that all aspects of the path are eventually harmonized within an enlightened being.

The eight-fold path expresses but one Buddhist perspective on the essential constituents of liberation, and, although wisdom encompasses right view, it is not limited to it. This is because wisdom amounts to more than just the correct apprehension of metaphysical truths and the attainment of propositional knowledge but instead involves the ‘internalization’ of such truths, such that one comes to live fully in accordance with them. What these different articulations of the structure of the spiritual path reveal is that the idea of ‘successive’ stages is in some sense also illusory. No matter the starting point, the final goal cannot be reached without the perfection of every element. This insight accounts for Buddhism’s assurance that regardless of a being’s state of moral

³¹ Burton (2004: 67).

and spiritual depravity, nobody's case is entirely hopeless and, in fact, all sentient beings (both human and non-human) have, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the same soteriological prospects.

Ignorance, Suffering and Compassion

The link Buddhists discern between ignorance and suffering has already been discussed, with ignorance as the first *nidāna* in the twelve-fold chain of dependent origination. Yet one of the more interesting features of Madhyamaka's conception of dependent origination remains to be further explored: namely its view of dependent origination as, in some sense, sharing its *identity* with emptiness (i.e. the ultimate truth). Nāgārjuna makes this point at *MMK* 24.18, indicating that though dependency and emptiness are identical, this identity is empty of inherent reality and, as such, emptiness itself does not exist by the power of its own nature but is rather a mere conceptual designation. It is by arriving at the doctrine of the 'emptiness of emptiness' in the following verse (*MMK* 24.19), therefore, that Nāgārjuna is able to make a convincing case for Madhyamaka as truly a 'middle way' between extremes.³²

Often regarded as the acme of the entire treatise, at *MMK* 24.18 Nāgārjuna suggests that dependent origination can simultaneously explain the maintenance of *saṃsāra* and the possibility of *nirvāṇa*. In this context, understanding the relationship between

³² Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.18-19. *yaḥ praṭītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe/ sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā/apratītya samutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate/ yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate//* "(18) Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path. (19) There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, it follows that there is no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty." (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 277-278). Both of these verses have already been analysed in chapter 4 so my comments will not be repeated here.

ignorance, dependent origination and spiritual freedom is the more pertinent because of Madhyamaka's attestation of the ultimate indistinguishability between the states of bondage and liberation (for example at *MMK* 25.19).³³

It follows from the doctrine of pervasive emptiness, which stipulates the universal lack of inherent reality, that any valid distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is applicable solely at the conventional level.³⁴ According to Madhyamaka, one of the main 'symptoms' the unenlightened display is the tendency to compartmentalize, bifurcate and polarize concepts on the basis of the mistaken assumption that such compartmentalization reflects reality. From this perspective, then, it is utterly meaningless to ascribe any sharp or substantial difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* given that the ideas of *svabhāva* and *svalakṣaṇa* have already been discredited. Nevertheless, for the idea of the spiritual path to remain meaningful, there must be some important sense in which enlightened and unenlightened beings differ. This is where 'phenomenological' approaches to Buddhist ethics and path progression come into their own: by taking seriously the idea that a person's mode of apprehension has a significant effect on what is apprehended, the seemingly contradictory claims that, (1) *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are 'ontologically' equivalent, and (2) they are 'phenomenologically' distinct, can be rendered consistent. On this model, fulfilment of the path involves psychologically reorienting oneself in relation to others so that the categories of 'self' and 'other' are no longer considered ultimately applicable.

³³ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 25.19. *na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam| na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃ cid asti viśeṣaṇam||* "There is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra." (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 302).

³⁴ McCagney (1997: 96).

In relinquishing the ideas of substance, essence and inherent reality the bodhisattva also ceases to act as though these ideas are relevant. This, however, engenders the challenge of explaining how bodhisattvas engage in the world. Alone, Candrakīrti's conception of the fully enlightened as not able to see anything *at all* is hardly satisfying. Indeed, it is not even clear that such an account can accommodate spontaneous or non-cognitive compulsions to act generously towards others. Moreover, even if such spontaneity were possible, must we then understand the bodhisattva as constrained or compelled by her own nature to act as she does?

Perhaps anticipating these potential objections, Candrakīrti elsewhere draws a distinction between three types of compassion: (1) that which has for its object all sentient beings; (2) that which has for its object sentient and non-sentient existents; and (3) that which is devoid of all objects.³⁵ Exercising, one might even say, embodying, the third type of compassion is consistent with the idea of a bodhisattva having entirely transcended the worldly conventions according to which distinctions between 'self' and 'other' are ordinarily drawn. Furthermore, the bodhisattva's intent (*karma*) to bring other beings to liberation is said by Mādhyamikas to be so strong prior to their full attainment of enlightenment that its force persists even afterwards. Hence, the idea of what is sometimes referred to as a 'robotic' or 'zombie' Buddha.³⁶ That bodhisattvas succeed in simultaneously acting and transcending action is precisely Śāntideva's point at *BCA* 9.36-37 which has already been examined in chapter 3.

³⁵ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 1.3-5. "I bow down to this compassion arising for all living beings who have first generated self-infatuation through the thought 'I,' and then attachment to objects through the thought 'This is mine,' so that like a paddlewheel they wander round and round devoid of self-determination. The sons of the conquerors see these creatures as fluctuating and empty of intrinsic being like the reflection of the moon in shimmering water. The first [stage in generation of the thought of awakening] is dominated by compassion directed toward the liberation of all beings, and fixed in happiness that grows from the vow of universal good. Because he has obtained [the thought of awakening], from this moment on he is designated by the title bodhisattva." (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:149).

³⁶ Siderits (2013: 328-329) and Garfield (2015: 167-171).

These reflections naturally lead to further speculation about a bodhisattva's capacities, including whether – having entirely overcome ignorance – they are able to suffer. On the one hand, because suffering is the product of ignorance and is inevitably bound up with *samsāric* forms of existence, Buddhists would be reluctant to admit that bodhisattvas, much less fully enlightened Buddhas, experience any suffering whatsoever. Explaining canonical depictions of the Buddha's apparent suffering in texts like the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is relatively straightforward once a distinction between suffering as mental anguish and pain as a purely physiological response to unpleasant stimuli is invoked.³⁷ That the link between pain and suffering is not assured is further demonstrated by the existence of masochistic individuals who claim to derive pleasure (in the sense of mental satisfaction) from being inflicted by physical pain.

On the other hand, however, if the bodhisattva is no longer able to suffer, descriptions of them as supremely compassionate seem dubious. Aside from the fact that to be compassionate *just is* to suffer with others (although the etymology of the Sanskrit term *karuṇā* does not necessarily convey this sense), if bodhisattvas cannot suffer then in what sense does their activity involve self-sacrifice? Without suffering, the nobility, fortitude and virtue of the bodhisattva figure is surely radically diminished. The very reason bodhisattvas are applauded as heroic is that they take on the sufferings of others at their own expense.

³⁷ Dīgha Nikāya 16, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. *Atha kho bhagavato cundassa kammāraputtassa bhattam bhuttāvissa kharo ābādhō uppajji, lohitaṭṭhāṇḍikā pabāḷhā vedanā vattanti māraṇantikā. Tā sudam bhagavā sato sampajāno adhvāsesi avihaññamāno*|| PTS, Rhys Davids, T.W. and Estlin Carpenter, J. (Vol. 2, 1966: 127-128). “And after having eaten the meal provided by Cunda, the Lord was attacked by a severe sickness with bloody diarrhea, and with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully and clearly aware, and without complaint.” (Trans.) Walshe, M. (1995: 257).

One route out of this conundrum is to argue that bodhisattvas remain subject to physical discomfort even though they no longer associate this discomfort with the sense of ‘I.’ By taking on the sufferings of others, bodhisattvas might be said thereby to transform experiences of suffering into experiences of mere pain. Buddhists think such transformation is possible because the experience of suffering arises out of the erroneous belief in the ultimate reality of oneself as a subject. In other words, whereas suffering involves conceptually constructive processes of *ahaṃkāra*, pain does not. This distinction is encapsulated in *The Art of Happiness*, co-authored by Western psychiatrist Howard Cutler and the Dalai Lama, in the example of a construction worker and a concert pianist sustaining the same finger injury but responding to it in very different ways. Though they might both experience the same pain, the concert pianist is likely to experience more intense suffering, feeling somehow that her identity and individuality depend on her ability to perform.³⁸ In another example, Cutler recounts the experiences of world-renowned surgeon and leprosy specialist Dr. Brand who observed that many people infected by leprosy do not experience the infected parts of their bodies as part of *themselves*. This has devastating consequences, often causing lepers to walk on exposed bone and retrieve things from fire without taking any protective measures. Writing a millennia before, Nāgārjuna observes the same thing, noting at *Suḥṛllekha* 26 “A man with leprosy, consumed by germs, will stand before the fire for comfort’s sake but still find no relief, so know the same is true for those attached to the pleasures they desire.”³⁹ Attachment causes us to pursue pleasure but invariably leads us into the grip of pain.

³⁸ Dalai Lama and Cutler (1998: 175).

³⁹ Nāgārjuna – *Suḥṛllekha* 26. (Trans. from the Tibetan) The Padmakara Translation Group (2013: 37).

Another possible response to the objection that, without suffering, bodhisattvas are not laudable is to argue that characterizations of bodhisattvas as supremely moral beings are in fact wrong-headed. This response is also consistent with Candrakīrti's third type of compassion noted above in which there is no 'object' of compassion. Rather than think of the bodhisattva as moral, one could think of them as having altogether transcended the limits and classifications of conventional morality.

Innate and Philosophical Ignorance

Madhyamaka deems the task of eradicating ignorance to be so complex that it requires a range of strategies. When ignorance is the product of cognitive error, it must be supplanted by the adoption of right views and sound reasoning. For example, if somebody arrives at wrong views about the fact of impermanence, the lack of self, or the sources of happiness and moral purity, these can be corrected through analysis and philosophical investigation. The greater challenge lies in suppressing, or even reversing, the cognitive patterns and processes which underpin false views in the first place. This is because unenlightened beings possess inadequate self-knowledge and routinely manage either to convince themselves of what is manifestly false or improbable (through acts of self-deception) or fail to see the discrepancy between their consciously held beliefs and their unconscious commitments (which are sometimes at variance).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Everitt and Fisher (1995: 54) identify three ways in which a person might unconsciously hold beliefs. For example: (1) some beliefs might be 'episodic' in the sense that somebody might believe London is the capital without presently reflecting on that proposition; (2) some beliefs might never have been consciously entertained even though they are necessitated by other beliefs, as when entomologists believe there are more than 99 ants in the world; and (3) some beliefs might be repressed as a result of their emotional potency, as when somebody unconsciously believes that their father hates them.

Recognizing the two forms of ignorance just outlined, the Tibetan Mādhyamika Tsong kha pa helpfully distinguishes between ‘philosophical’ and ‘innate’ ignorance.⁴¹ He argues that even after the idea of *svabhāva* has been philosophically discredited, people still persist with a firm belief that this notion is applicable. Reifying tendencies, established through beginningless ignorance, cannot be so easily shaken off. In the *Lamrim Chenmo*, Tsong kha pa writes:

“Certain latent propensities are firmly set in the mind-stream through its being beginninglessly suffused with strong attachment to things regarded as intrinsically existent; these latent propensities give rise to errors of dualistic appearance, so that things appear to be intrinsically existent when they are not. These errors are cognitive obscurations.”⁴²

Since ignorance is beginningless, its affective and cognitive dimensions are mutually engendered and exist in a state of mutual reliance. The process of overcoming ignorance must therefore proceed piecemeal through repeated meditational practices, designed to extirpate afflictive emotions, conjoined with regular rehearsal of the philosophical incoherence of the concepts we most cherish. Hopkins explains the need of such repetition when he writes that “the sign of dependent arising is sufficient to show that the subject cannot be found under analysis; however, repeated investigation of dependent arising is required before it is seen that analytic unfindability or non-inherent existence is concomitant with dependent arising.”⁴³ Thus, the eradication of ignorance is deemed possible only when the psychological and intellectual dimensions of the process operate in tandem.

⁴¹ The idea of ‘innate’ ignorance may seem odd in a Madhyamaka context, wherein the idea of any property inhering in a substance is rejected. However, needless to say, there is no suggestion here that it is a person’s ‘inherent nature’ to reify. Instead, Tsong kha pa is merely making the point that overcoming our habituations is extremely difficult.

⁴² Tsong kha pa – *Lamrim Chenmo*. (Trans.) The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, Vol. 3 (2002: 323).

⁴³ Hopkins (1996: 54).

Interestingly, as with the absence of anything resembling discussion of ‘the free will problem’ in classical Buddhist sources, there appears to be little systematic treatment of the paradox of self-deception by Buddhist thinkers despite their ample resources for dealing with this puzzle in novel and fairly satisfying ways. Those opposed to reconstructive projects present the same arguments against articulating implied Buddhist views on self-deception as have been answered in opposition to Buddhist free will theorizing – namely that without the concept of self (*ātman*), the paradox of *self*-deception cannot arise. Thus, Deutsch contends that Buddhists “can have little to say” about self-deception because they refute the idea of a metaphysical self.⁴⁴ For all the reasons previously given, this argument is not compelling.⁴⁵ On the contrary, Buddhism’s account of *avidyā* as more than a lack of knowledge (ignorance) and as an active distortion of reality (*willful* ignorance), coupled with its account of what might be called ‘epistemic partitioning’ between ultimate and conventional truth allows us to explain the mechanism by which self-deception occurs. Such understanding also thereby sows the seeds for its eventual eradication.⁴⁶

Mādhyamikas in general (and Candrakīrti in particular) draw special attention to the relationship between ignorance and conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*). For instance, Candrakīrti sometimes seems to describe conventional truth in terms of its deceptive nature. The problem, then, is that if conventional truth is deceptive, it seems an inadequate means for attaining the ultimate truth. Yet, as Nāgārjuna and his commentators maintain, conventional truth is the basis of, and sole means of working towards, the ultimate truth. Crucially, however, Candrakīrti’s description of

⁴⁴ Deutsch (1996: 319).

⁴⁵ See chapter 2 for a defence of such philosophically reconstructive projects as this.

⁴⁶ Javanaud (2019).

conventional truth as deceptive conveys the truth, but not the whole truth, of his assessment. Elsewhere, for example at *PsP* 24.8, Candrakīrti defines conventional truth in three ways: as deceptive, in terms of dependency and as worldly convention.⁴⁷

In a recent article Tillemans has carefully explicated the possible reasons for this, drawing our attention to the curious and indeterminable etymological roots of *saṃvṛti*. In the Sanskritization of the Pāli *saṃmuti* (which means ‘consensus’ or ‘agreement’) one would have expected to find either *saṃmati* or *saṃmata* and not *saṃvṛti*. Commentators like Candrakīrti, who simply inherited the term *saṃvṛti* for conventional truth, faced the task of investigating its possible etymology and decided on three possible verbal roots and hence three possible meanings of conventional truth. The first possible root is *vr̥*, meaning ‘to cover’ or ‘to conceal’ and this explains accounts of conventional truth as deceptive. The second possible root is *man*, meaning ‘to think’ and this explains accounts of conventional truth as dependency, which the Madhyamaka system takes to encompass the conceptual dependency of all phenomena on the conceiving mind. The third possible root is *vr̥t*, which means ‘to exist’ or ‘to occur’ and this explains conventional truth in terms of what is accepted to be the case by the standards of worldly convention.⁴⁸ Mādhyamikas and some of their present-day apologists thus urge remembrance of the fact that even though conventional truths may be obscuring and in some sense bound up with *avidyā*, they are nevertheless *truths*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Candrakīrti – *PsP* 24.8. *samantād varaṇaṃ saṃvṛtiḥ| ajñānaṃ hi samantāt sarvapadārthatattvāvachchādanāt saṃvṛtir ity ucyate| parasparasambhavanaṃ vā saṃvṛtir anyonyasamāśrayeṇety arthaḥ| atha vā saṃvṛtiḥ saṃketo lokavyavahāra ity arthaḥ*|| Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1903: 492). “*Saṃvṛti* (enveloppement), c’est le fait de couvrir de tous côtés. C’est donc l’ignorance qu’on appelle enveloppement, parce qu’elle masque complètement la vraie nature des entités (*padārthatattva*). Autre explication: *saṃvṛti* (relativité) signifie <support réciproque>, en tant qu’elle est relativité. Ou encore, *saṃvṛti* (convention) veut dire <signe>, <pratique mondaine>. Cette dernière se définit par la dénomination et l’objet de dénomination, la connaissance et l’objet de connaissance, etc.” (Trans.) May, J. (1959: 226).

⁴⁸ Tillemans (2018).

⁴⁹ Garfield (2006: 1).

As Matilal points out in his assessment of how best to understand *avidyā* in the Buddhist context, *avidyā* is a compound composed of two elements: the negative prefix *a*, followed by a noun. Matilal notes that in his analysis of the term *a-brāhmaṇa* the grammarian Patañjali argues that it is not enough simply to understand by this ‘not-a-brahmin.’ Rather, the term *a-brāhmaṇa* implies somebody who is not in fact a brahmin but is nevertheless liable to be mistaken for one. In a parallel way, when Candrakīrti references the ‘delusions’ provoked or sustained by conventions, we should understand not only the absence of truth but an active distortion of it. Still, through skillful means (*upāya*) lesser delusions must be used to overcome greater ones.

Avidyā: Its Definition and Ontological Status

Matilal shows that the morphological structure and semantic force of the word *avidyā* are not aligned.⁵⁰ He asserts that the main objection against ‘nescience’ and ‘ignorance’ as translations of *avidyā* is that “they both express a predominantly negative meaning” when instead, as a positive reality, *avidyā* is better conceived as “beginningless cosmic confusion.”⁵¹ This ‘positive’ dimension means that Buddhists can ascribe powers of causal efficacy to *avidyā* and remain faithful to their account that only that which is in at least some sense ‘real’ can be productive. What it means for something to be ‘real’ is of course a matter of serious contention amongst Buddhists of different traditions, with proponents of *pramāṇavāda* like Dinnāga and Dharmakīrti arguing that causal power is associated with – or can be traced back to – primary existents.⁵² Naturally such a view is the antithesis of what Mādhyamikas accept. Indeed, as discussed in chapter 4,

⁵⁰ Matilal (1980).

⁵¹ Matilal (1980: 155; 162).

⁵² Siderits (2007: 214).

Madhyamaka only ascribes causal power to that which is ultimately empty of inherent reality (*svabhāva*) but is nevertheless conventionally existent. That *avidyā* is empty of inherent reality is crucial to Madhyamaka's soteriological theory for, without this, it would be impossible to arrest the unfolding process of dependent origination which is the source of suffering; thence liberation from cyclic existence would be sheer fantasy. *Avidyā*'s causal efficacy is what allows Matilal to rule out the possibility that it is an *avyayībhāva* compound.⁵³

Matilal then proceeds to explore the remaining grammatical possibilities, asking whether *avidyā* can be conceived of as either a *bahuvrīhi* or a *tat-puruṣa* compound. He rules out the idea that *avidyā* should be taken as a *bahuvrīhi* on grounds that *avidyā* would then signify anything at all that is not *vidyā*, including such things as fruits or flowers. This is clearly preposterous and not at all the intended meaning. Concerning this interpretation Matilal writes: "in this case the compound acts as an adjective of anything that is not *vidyā*. But this also will falsify the notion of *avidyā* in Buddhism."⁵⁴ Thus, only the third possibility remains. Taking *avidyā* as a *tat-puruṣa* means that the second member of the compound is read as dominating the first. Hence, as with *a-brāhmaṇa* discussed above, *avidyā* means that which is liable to be mistaken for genuine knowledge.

In terms of the ontological status of *avidyā* according to the Madhyamaka tradition, it must be remembered that Madhyamaka's primary objective is to explain how emptiness

⁵³ Matilal (1980: 156). "For *avidyā* as an *avyayībhāva* compound would mean a non-entity, or non-existence (non-existence of knowledge). But in Buddhism a non-entity or non-existence cannot (causally) condition another thing. Thus, since *avidyā* is regarded as a condition (*pratyaya*) of *saṃskāra*, it would be wrong to interpret *avidyā* as non-existence of knowledge."

⁵⁴ Matilal (1980: 157).

assures the possibility of ultimate freedom. In chapter 23 of the *MMK*, Nāgārjuna examines the ontological status of false conception. He argues for the mutual dependence of mental defilements and false conception, claiming that this confirms the ultimate emptiness of both. The ‘emptiness’ of false conception is soteriologically central because, as Nāgārjuna rhetorically asks at *MMK* 23. 24-25, “If someone had defilements that were intrinsically real, how would they be abandoned? Who abandons intrinsic essence? If someone had defilements that were intrinsically unreal, how would they be abandoned? Who abandons the non-existent?”⁵⁵

The lack of inherent reality in false conception and in defilements does not entail their conventional non-existence and thus the need for their eradication remains. The fact that defilements and false conception lack *svabhāva*, however, means that this ‘eradication’ must be understood in terms of a psychological corrective rather than as the destruction of ontologically foundational realities. As Ames explains, the cessation of suffering is for Nāgārjuna “not the ceasing to exist of some real entity called ‘ignorance’ or ‘error’. Instead it is the realization that all things, including even error and ignorance, lack intrinsic nature and do not exist as self-sufficient entities.”⁵⁶ It is *avidyā*’s ultimate unreality that makes it corrigible. To put it another way, eradicating ignorance is possible precisely because it is without ontological foundation. Far from diminishing the urgency of the need to overcome ignorance, the ascription of a purely conventional status to it only serves to show its potentially endless manifestation. Since *saṃsāric* existence could continue indefinitely, realizing the ‘empty’ status of

⁵⁵ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 23.24-25. (24) *yadi bhūtāḥ svabhāvena kleśāḥ kecid dhi kasyacit/ katham nāma prahīyeran kaḥ svabhāvaṃ prahāsyati*|| (25) *yady abhūtāḥ svabhāvena kleśāḥ kecid dhi kasyacit/ katham nāma prahīyeran ko ‘sadbhāvaṃ prahāsyati*|| (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 265).

⁵⁶ Ames (1998: 15).

ignorance is essential for the task of developing a variety of effective stratagems to be deployed against it.

The Deceptiveness of Language

Madhyamaka argues for a strong link between ignorance and hypostatization through the use of language. According to this view, being part of an unenlightened community of speakers invariably involves some degree of reification and reliance on distorted concepts. The most serious – in the sense of most morally and spiritually dangerous – instance of hypostatization involves the imputation of the concept ‘I’ onto fleeting sets of causally connected *skandhas*. This is because imputing such firm ontological commitments onto one’s sense of self is not only philosophically misguided but also acts as fertile ground for egoism to take root. Whilst belief in the *ātman* constitutes the most pernicious instance of reification, Mādhyamikas extend the worry about reifying the ‘self’ to all acts of reification, including reification of impartite *dharmas* as possessing inherent existence (*svabhāva*).

Regardless of what is reified, all instances of reification are alike in that they encourage people to accept as metaphysically robust and ontologically foundational what is in fact merely illusory. The moment any entity is imagined as substantial, the mind is plagued by ‘appetitive’ or ‘aversive’ reactions. Consequently, Madhyamaka holds that the hypostatization of any *dharma* leads to both spiritual and philosophical ignorance.

Just as Ābhidharmika Buddhists treat the conflation of ultimate and conventional discourse domains as resulting in meaninglessness, Madhyamaka makes the more

controversial point that any act of conceptualization is ultimately neither true nor false but is instead devoid of meaning. This is because conceptualization necessarily involves dichotomizing and, from the ultimate point of view, everything is equally empty of inherent reality. According to Madhyamaka, acts of dichotomization, reification, compartmentalization *et cetera* are the result of linguistic superimposition of the idea of ultimacy onto what is only conventional. Since beings are believed to have reified constantly throughout countless lives, reification is more than just a ‘habit’ but is, as Tsong kha pa suggests, ‘innate.’ As one scholar expresses it: “the world around us is a reflection of the condition of our mind; we do deeds that build the world for us exactly in the way we interpret to ourselves the reality of things.”⁵⁷

Bodhisattvas (who see through linguistic obscurations) encounter the challenge of using an irredeemably flawed medium to communicate their message of liberation. The bodhisattva’s ability to access conventional reality and communicate via conventional truth suggests that the dangers of conceptualization only exist for those who fail to see conventional reality for what it is. As suggested in chapter 3, the unenlightened can perhaps make some sense of the bodhisattva’s ability to employ language without falling into the trap of reification by recalling their own experiences with bi-stable images. Such images are deceptive because they trick the viewer into thinking there is one definitive image available. Nevertheless, once we have ‘seen’ the same image in two ways, we become aware of the multiplicity of interpretations even though it remains impossible for us simultaneously to see both pictures.

⁵⁷ Ramamam (1987: 71).

According to Nāgārjuna, the realization of emptiness (i.e. the attainment of *nirvāṇa*) occurs only when the proclivity to hypostatize and reify is altogether abandoned. Thus he writes at *MMK* 18.5: “Liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualizations; these arise from hypostatization; but hypostatization is extinguished in emptiness.”⁵⁸ Yet, as noted above, Nāgārjuna admits at *MMK* 24.10 that the ultimate truth cannot be communicated except through language.⁵⁹ Language, however, despite its obvious value, can induce dangerous delusions when used uncritically. Subliminally, beings become persuaded that the words they use correspond with objective, mind-independent, reality. However, there is no such reality. Thus Candrakīrti asserts at *MAV* 6.80: “Conventional truth is the means and ultimate truth is the result of that means. Whoever does not know the difference between these two enters the wrong path because of false conception.”⁶⁰

Given Candrakīrti’s interpretation of conventional truth and the use of language as deceptive, the distinction he draws between definitive (*nītārtha*) and non-definitive (*neyārtha*) teachings requires an explanation.⁶¹ It follows that if all use of language involves some degree of distortion then there can be no *nītārtha* teachings conveyed in the *sūtras* because these are written texts. Therefore, as with everything else, the Mādhyamika must concede that the *nītārtha/neyārtha* distinction is itself *neyārtha* and

⁵⁸ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 18.5. *karmakleśakṣayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ| te prapañāt prapañcas tu śūnyatāyāṃ nirudhyate||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 197).

⁵⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.10. *vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate| paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate||* “The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth *nirvāṇa* is not attained.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 273).

⁶⁰ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.80. *upāyabhūtaṃ vyavahārasatyam upeyabhūtaṃ paramārthasatyam| tayor vibhāgaṃ na paraiti yo vai mithyāvikalpaiḥ sa kumārgayātaḥ||* Li (2015: 14). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:167).

⁶¹ This distinction is endorsed by Candrakīrti in the *PsP*, for example in his comments on *MMK* 18.5.

should only be regarded as a pedagogical technique designed to show that some teachings (all of which pertain to the conventional) point the way to the ultimate truth more successfully than others.

The idea that Madhyamaka should be understood as deriding language is fairly common amongst contemporary scholars but is not without problems of its own. For example, Garfield maintains that “to the extent that language is useful at all, it is a necessary evil; while it can never succeed, it gives us the illusion that we have somehow encompassed the world as it is.”⁶² This perspective is supported in numerous Mahāyāna texts in which we find the idea that language is *per se* a hindrance to spiritual progression. This view is expressed in the *Ratna-guṇa-saṃcaya-gāthā* in the following way: “All words for things in use in this world must be left behind. All things produced and made must be transcended – The deathless, the supreme, incomparable gnosis is then won. That is the sense in which we speak of perfect wisdom.”⁶³

Nevertheless, it could be argued that to attribute the source of suffering to our use of language is a ‘misdiagnosis,’ even by Buddhist standards. This is because to see language *per se* as problematic is to fail to take seriously the possibility that human tendencies for reification are ‘served’ by language but not ‘made possible’ by it. Were this not so then what could account for the Madhyamaka (indeed, pan-Buddhist)⁶⁴ view that pre-linguistic or cognitively impaired humans, as well as non-human animals with

⁶² Garfield (2015: 246).

⁶³ *Ratna-guṇa-saṃcaya-gāthā* 1.27 – *yāvanti loki parikīrtita dharma-nāmu sarveṣupādu-samatikramu nirgamitvā| amṛtaṃ ti jñānu paramaṃ na tu yo pareṇa ekārthu prajña ayu pāramiteti nāmā||* Yuyama, A. (1976: 16). (Trans.) Conze, E. (2006: 12).

⁶⁴ To the extent that Buddhists think that the cosmological realm into which a person is reborn is partly determined by their spiritual achievements (or lack thereof), it is reasonable to say that Buddhists think of non-human rebirths as resulting from spiritual ignorance. For example, the different possible rebirths are listed at Dīgha Nikāya 33, Sangīti Sutta. There is clearly a sense of hierarchy, even though all of the realms constitute *saṃsāric* existence and are therefore impermanent and deficient.

fairly sophisticated methods of communication between themselves, count as more spiritually ‘ignorant’ than linguistically competent and cognitively well equipped human adults?⁶⁵ All the evidence points towards the fact that before children acquire linguistic competence, they routinely categorize, compartmentalize and classify objects according to their similarities and differences and that this ability is, in some sense, ‘innate.’ This suggests, then, that language is not responsible for the illusion that the world is mind-independent and that the source of this illusion must be traced back to something still more primitive within us. Arguably, then, to see language as the source of suffering is to mistake the symptom for the disease itself.

If Mādhyamikas think that language is in itself a problem, this naturally raises the question of why they produced vast bodies of literature handling philosophically complex ideas. For the fact is that wherever proponents of Mahāyāna criticize language they necessarily do so by means of language.⁶⁶ The *Vimilakīrtinirdeśa* for example, which contains probably the most famous expression of Mahāyānist repudiation of language, is nevertheless, paradoxically, a written text. When asked by Mañjuśrī to explain the doctrine of non-duality, Vimilakīrti simply remains silent.⁶⁷ Ironically,

⁶⁵ Although this is not the place to digress into a discussion of speciesism (a form of discrimination in which somebody discriminates – usually in favour of *homo sapiens* – on the basis of species membership), it seems very curious to me that the scientific community shows such resistance to the idea that certain non-human animals possess language. The evidence is overwhelmingly in support of the view that highly evolved primates like chimpanzees as well as elephants and cetaceans use language to communicate, even about ‘displaced referents.’ All of this is not irrelevant to the present discussion inasmuch as Buddhists typically represent the human realm as soteriologically optimal on grounds that we not only experience the right amount of pleasure and pain to be motivated in our pursuit of spiritual goods but also because we possess the cognitive and linguistic capacities to understand the *dharma*.

⁶⁶ Thurman (1991: 5-6).

⁶⁷ *Vimilakīrtinirdeśa* 8.33 – *atha khalu mañjuśrīḥ kumārabhūto vimalakīrtim licchavim etad avocat: nirdiṣṭo ’smābhiḥ kulaputra svakasvako nirdeśaḥ| pratibhātu tavāpy advayadharmapraveśanirdeśaḥ| atha vimalakīrtir licchavis tūṣṇīm abhūt| atha mañjuśrīḥ kumārabhūto vimalakīrtar liccaveḥ sādhuḥkāram adāt: sādhu sādhu kulaputra ayaṃ bodhisatvānām advayadharmamukhapraveśo yatra nākṣararutaravitavijñaptipracārah|* ‘Alors Mañjuśrī prince héritier dit au licchavi Vimilakīrti: Fils de famille (*kulaputra*), maintenant que chacun d’entre nous a dit son mot, exposez-nous à votre tour, ce qu’est la doctrine de la non-dualité (*advayadharmamukha*). Le licchavi Vimilakīrti garda le silence (*tūṣṇībhūto ’bhūt*). Mañjuśrī prince héritier donna son assentiment (*sādhuḥkāraṃ adāt*) au licchavi

Vimilakīrti thereby makes a clear statement about the inadequacy of language for capturing and conveying the deepest kinds of truths there are. Garfield helpfully likens this silence to John Cage’s famous ‘performance’ of 4’33’’ in the context of the history of Western music.⁶⁸

The Madhyamaka attitude towards language should be able to accommodate both the fact (a) that non-human animals who do not use language are still considered more ensnared by *samsāra* than humans, and (b) that spiritually liberated bodhisattvas can employ language. The accommodation of both these ideas requires that language itself be seen as unproblematic. The delusion that words correspond with intrinsically real entities, on the other hand, is always accompanied by spiritually degenerative attitudes of grasping or aversion. The Madhyamaka idea that humans are optimally situated for spiritual progression – if it is to have a basis outside the prejudices of speciesism – could stem from the human ability to reason and use language in a particularly sophisticated, even self-reflexive, fashion. This ability affords human beings a unique opportunity for philosophical analysis, which, in turn, allows deeply engrained assumptions about inherently real substance to be dispelled.

In facing the twin challenge of explaining how bodhisattvas engage and communicate in the world, Mādhyamikas could argue in both cases that the bodhisattva ‘transcends’ worldly convention: it is not so much that the bodhisattva is supremely moral as that she has ‘surpassed’ or ‘gone beyond’ morality; it is not that the bodhisattva abandons

Vimilakīrti et lui dit: Bien, bein, fils de famille: c’est clea l’entrée des Bodhisattva dans la non-dualité. En cette matière, les phonèmes (*akṣara*), les sons (*svara*) et les idées (*vijñapti*) sont sans emploi (*aśamudācāra*).” (Trans.) Lamotte (1962: 317).

⁶⁸ Garfield (2015: 256).

language but ceases to be restricted by the discursive thought patterns its use ordinarily involves.

Conclusions

Madhyamaka attributes great importance to the complete elimination of ignorance and, as has been seen, develops and advocates a range of strategies intended for this purpose. The process of overcoming ignorance is, of necessity, very gradual because the tendency to mistake appearance for reality is so entrenched.⁶⁹ This requires substantive revisions, or possibly a complete overhaul, of ordinarily cognitive processes and affective attitudes.

By keeping the above discussion on Madhyamaka's attitude towards language in mind, we can begin to make sense of the three-fold path structure found in classical Madhyamaka sources. This consists of wisdom derived through hearing (*śrutamayī*), thinking (*cintāmayī*) and meditating (*bhāvanāmayī*). At the first stage of development, beings must simply encounter *dharma* instruction before going on, at the next stage, to reflect on these teachings and apprehend their inner logic. At the final stage, discursive analysis of the *dharma* has to be transcended altogether, at which point one wakes up to and is directly confronted by the truth of 'the emptiness of emptiness.'⁷⁰ By hearing teachings whose content forces us to scrutinize and reconsider some of our most

⁶⁹ Whether the path to liberation is traversed gradually or instantaneously has, of course, been a matter of intense dispute between the different traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism with rival views presented on this question at the famous *bSam yas* debate alleged to have taken place in the eighth century between Kamalaśīla and Mo-he-yen. From the point of view of Indian Madhyamaka of the time period with which this thesis is mainly concerned, however, the consensus was that liberation is the product of a gradual process.

⁷⁰ For a helpful summary of how this process is thought to unfold, see Fenner (1990: 25).

cherished beliefs (such as that 'I' denotes an ultimate referent) Madhyamaka contends that we are naturally prompted to investigate further and reflect more deeply. These experiences are thought to occasion personal transformation, revealing as they do the depth of disparity between reality itself and our common misinterpretations of it.

Chapter 8

Madhyamaka Meta-Ethics

“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

“Moreover, no one will ever perform either good or bad actions. What is there that is to be done with regard to the non-empty? For what has intrinsic nature is not done.”¹

Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.33

The previous chapter examined why Mādhyamikas consider the attainment of wisdom (*prajñā*), conceived as the perfect harmonization of ‘right view’ (*samyak-drṣṭi*) and compassion (*kāruṇā*), necessary for spiritual emancipation. It was noted that, alone, neither lead people to the complete fulfilment of their potential. Śāntideva affirms the need to combine the insights of philosophical arguments about emptiness with the more practical measures taken in pursuit of enlightenment. Quoting from the *Urgapariṣṭhā*, for instance, he writes at *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 198.21-199.2 “If I live in the wilderness but do not give up the assumption of a self, the adherence to a self, the grasping at a self, the basis of a self, the thirst for a self, the concept of a self... then even though I live in the wilderness it will be in vain.”² Yet, despite the close connection between metaphysics and morality intimated in many Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras*, there is a noticeable absence of ethical, much less ‘meta-ethical,’ theorizing in classical Buddhist texts. Keown has speculated as to the possible reasons for the decided lack of anything resembling a “systematic and critical analysis of moral values

¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.33. *na ca dharmam adharmaṃ vā kaścij jātu kariṣyati | kim aśūnyasya kartavyam svabhāvaḥ kriyate na hi* // (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 285).

² Śāntideva – *Śikṣāsamuccaya* 198.21-199.2. *sa cet punar aham arāṇye prativasan nātmaḡrāhaṃ parityajeyam nātmābhiniveśaṃ nātmaparigrahaṃ nātmanidānaṃ nātmatrṣṇāṃ nātmasaṃjñāṃ nātmavādopādānaṃ nātmadrṣṭiṃ nātmādhiṣṭānaṃ nātmaparikalpanāṃ nātmarakṣāṃ parityajeyam | nirarthako me 'raṇyavāsaḥ syād | api tu khalu punar ḡrhapate nāsty ātmasaṃjñino 'raṇyavāso | nāsti parasamjñinaḥ* // (Trans.) Nattier (2005: 299).

and principles” in Indian Buddhism but, predictably, none of his suggestions prove conclusive.³

In the first place, this chapter sets out to demonstrate the legitimacy and value of ‘reconstructive’ projects whose aim is to formulate a meta-ethical perspective consistent with (Madhyamaka) Buddhism.⁴ One of the advantages that is afforded by this cross-cultural philosophical investigation is the opportunity it provides to reflect anew on the connections Western meta-ethicists ordinarily make between moral cognitivism (the view that moral statements are truth-apt) and moral realism (the view that the moral status of actions or properties corresponds with ‘objective’ facts). Here it will be argued that looking at such theories from a Madhyamaka perspective encourages new insights into some of the core concerns of Western meta-ethics. Thus, reconstructivism, in this instance at least, enhances our understanding of Western and Buddhist philosophy alike.⁵

In the pursuit of this aim, however, the reconstructivist confronts both general objections (many of which were answered in chapter 2) and more specific resistance against efforts to articulate Buddhism’s implied ‘ethical’ commitments using Western systems of classification. Whilst history attests to the very real dangers of applying Western norms and standards in our assessment of Indian cultures and texts (encapsulated by Macauley’s painfully narrow-minded remark that “a single shelf of a

³ Keown (2017: 24-30).

⁴ The focus here, of course, is on Madhyamaka but the arguments in support of reconstructing a Madhyamaka meta-ethical theory are largely applicable to other forms of Buddhism too, especially Indic versions. As Keown points out (2017: 17), the situation may be somewhat different for East Asian forms of Buddhism. Of course, as shall be demonstrated, the *content* of Madhyamaka and non-Madhyamaka meta-ethical theories are likely to be very different from each other.

⁵ For further examples of the benefits a ‘reconstructive’ approach can yield, see Westerhoff (2016 b).

good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”), surely the errors of the past are to be learned from, not used to prevent or undermine all future inquiry.⁶

Moreover, it is important that this chapter aims to reconstruct Madhyamaka’s implied ‘meta-ethical,’ rather than ‘normative,’ commitments. Indeed, the argument of this chapter is not intended as a challenge for those who protest against efforts to understand Buddhist ethics in terms of dominant Western models of normativity, such as consequentialism, deontology or flourishing through virtue. Garfield contends that the differences between Western and Buddhist ethical paradigms demand a *sui generis* approach to the latter such that it would be better “to approach Śāntideva on his own terms.”⁷ He goes on to explicate what is described as a ‘phenomenological’ approach to Buddhist ethics, an approach whose defensibility is strengthened by the meta-ethical reflections of the current chapter.

In addition to providing a case for Buddhist meta-ethical theorizing in general, this chapter has three further aims: (1) to determine the implied Madhyamaka perspective on the semantic status of moral sentences, including whether they can be truth-apt; (2) to ascertain Madhyamaka’s view on the ontological status of moral properties; and (3) to analyze both the content of, and means of acquiring, core items of moral knowledge according to this system.

⁶ Macauley (1888: 174). The quotation continues “The intrinsic superiority of Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education.”

⁷ Garfield (2010: 338).

Although Mādhyamikas appear not to have made any explicit meta-ethical claims, passages such as *VV* 7-8 and *VV* 52-56 are especially informative to reconstructivists. In these sections, Nāgārjuna gives voice first to his imagined opponent who contends that whatever conduces to liberation does so necessarily, as part of its inherent nature. He then replies by arguing that whatever is auspicious, right or wrong cannot be so essentially for this would prevent the instantiation of such properties at specific times within the causal nexus in which activity takes place. Similarly, in chapter 24 of the *MMK* Nāgārjuna criticizes the Abhidharma conception of the truth status of the four noble truths, arguing that any ‘essentialist’ or ‘foundational’ account of the Buddhist path – far from assuring its validity and effectiveness – actually nullifies it. By clarifying which meta-ethical positions are conceptually available to proponents of Madhyamaka, this chapter enhances our understanding of why Mādhyamikas regard insight into emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as a form of moral knowledge capable of inspiring a motivation so powerful as to endure through countless eons as bodhisattvas strive to achieve the deliverance of all beings from *saṃsāra*.

One more point before embarking on the stated course is necessary: since the landscape of Buddhist ethics is nothing if not diverse, indeed, as Keown recognizes “you can find counterexamples to almost any statement,” it would be naïve to expect the implied Madhyamaka stance on meta-ethics to be completely unified.⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that this thesis is concerned more or less exclusively with Indian Madhyamaka from the second to eighth centuries CE, the reconstructivist is still confronted by a vast body of literature produced over a lengthy and intellectually rich historical period. That there were important disagreements between Indian Mādhyamikas on questions pertaining

⁸ Keown (2017: 23-24).

to the possibility of the conventional instantiation of *svabhāva* is also relevant to the present task of deciphering their attitude towards the status of moral properties. For instance, Bhāviveka concedes a distinction between two types of ‘ultimate’ reality – which might respectively be described as the ‘ultimate-ultimate’ and the ‘conventional-ultimate.’ This is clear from his remarks at *Madhyamakahr̥daya-kārikā* 3.26 where he writes:

“We make a qualification to our assertion (*pratijñā*) by saying ‘from the standpoint of ultimate reality.’ We do this because there is the *āgama* concerning the *satya-dvaya* by the Bhagavat. Among them, as for the *saṃvṛti-satya*, he established the own-being and the *lakṣaṇa* of the *dharmas*.”⁹

This point of view, however, is completely rejected by Prāsaṅgikas such as Candrakīrti, for whom the concept of *svabhāva* is internally contradictory and therefore incapable of being meaningfully applied even within the sphere of conventional reality. Hence, just as the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debate has ramifications for the ascription of free will and moral responsibility, so too does it inform whether, and in which ways, Madhyamaka can appropriately be described as a form of moral relativism. For, whilst neither Svātantrikas nor Prāsaṅgikas concede the inherent reality of moral properties (e.g. ‘good,’ ‘right,’ ‘just’ and so forth) from the perspective of ultimate reality (i.e. what for Bhāviveka constitutes the ‘ultimate-ultimate’), Svātantrikas accept that such properties have very definite, indeed essential, characteristics conventionally speaking. It is only by paying close attention to the nuances of different Madhyamaka presentations of emptiness and by striving for historical and philosophical sensitivity in the handling of a diverse set of texts that an examination of meta-ethical questions

⁹ Bhāviveka – *Madhyamakahr̥daya-kārikā* 3.26. (Trans.) Iida (1980: 87).

will prove useful in the endeavor to understand Madhyamaka as philosophically systematic.

Meta-Ethics: Its Aims and Questions

As a prerequisite to the examination of points (1), (2) and (3) above, it is helpful to begin with a brief overview of the aims of meta-ethical inquiry and the kinds of questions with which it is concerned. Meta-ethics is sometimes described as a species of ‘second-order’ philosophical theorizing.¹⁰ It is not interested in questions of applied or normative ethics, which typically seek to determine which actions or models for action are ‘good,’ but is instead interested in the nature of ‘goodness’ itself.

It is not clear that Buddhist literature contains terms whose meaning corresponds precisely with the concepts of the ‘right’ and the ‘good’ in Western moral philosophy. As Gowans notes, although the Sanskrit term *śīla* is commonly translated as ‘ethics’ or ‘morality,’ it carries both descriptive and prescriptive connotations.¹¹ *Śīla* can therefore be used both to signal the moral qualities of actions (as when it is used as an overarching denotation to elements within the noble eight fold path) and to prescribe a course of conduct, possibly even to convey a sense of duty, for spiritual aspirants already committed to the Buddhist path (as when used in the context of stressing the importance of the Vinaya’s rules). Gowans makes the further observation that Buddhism employs two sets of evaluative terms: meritorious/ unmeritorious (*puṇya/ apuṇya*) and skilful/ unskilful (*kuśala/ akuśala*).¹² He suggests that this distinction is reflective of the

¹⁰ DeLapp (no date).

¹¹ Gowans (2015: 69).

¹² Gowans (2015: 69).

subordinate and supreme goals of Buddhist moral conduct. Whereas meritorious deeds enable the accumulation of positive *karma* and improved rebirth, skilful deeds enable soteriological fulfilment. Spiro has explored this point in depth and has differentiated between the ‘kammatic’ and ‘nibbanic’ goals of Buddhism.¹³

These points will gain relevance later, as the process of determining Madhyamaka’s conception of the ‘good’ gets underway. For now, sticking with the Western tradition, the meta-ethicist does not ask such questions as whether the statement ‘stealing is wrong’ is true or false but rather investigates what it would mean for a moral statement to have truth value (i.e. to be truth-apt). If being truth-apt implies a ‘correspondence’ between assertion and world, this would entail a commitment to moral ‘realism,’ the view that there are objective moral facts. If it implies merely the ‘coherence’ of this claim within the wider body of beliefs of a given moral community, then it need not entail moral ‘realism’ but could instead imply moral ‘irrealism’ or ‘relativism.’

In general, Western meta-ethicists are divided into two camps over precisely this issue: ‘cognitivist’ and ‘non-cognitivist.’ This debate, over the truth value of moral statements, has serious repercussions for other areas of meta-ethics, including the relationship between belief in moral propositions and the motivational drive such beliefs engender. Hence, the semantic, ontological and psychological components of meta-ethical theory are often intricately intertwined and must be unravelled before their relationship to each other can be fully deciphered.

¹³ Spiro (1970).

To illustrate the inter-connectedness of the various branches of meta-ethics, take the cognitivist's perspective. The cognitivist holds that moral sentences are truth-apt and that when somebody makes a statement like 'stealing is wrong' the truth or falsity of this statement is assured by its relationship (often presumed to be a relationship of correspondence) with some 'objective' facts about how the world is structured. The cognitivist contends that, just as purely factual statements (for example 'it is raining') are true or false by virtue of their relationship to an external state of affairs, so too is the truth or falsity of evaluative statements guaranteed by their relationship to some objective standard. In the Western meta-ethical tradition, therefore, moral cognitivism is mostly thought to entail a commitment to some version of moral realism (although in affirming the truth status of moral statements the cognitivist need not necessarily subscribe to a correspondence theory of truth, in which case moral irrealism could follow – but this is a minority view it seems). Similarly, there is a connection between the cognitivist's claim that moral statements are truth-apt and her conception of how moral motivation occurs. Again, there are two broad categories into which meta-ethicists fall regarding moral motivation, with 'internalists' about reasons contending that once somebody arrives at a judgement about what is right and wrong they automatically have reason to act. In other words, the moral motivation resides 'internal' to the judgement.

Contrastingly the 'externalist' about reasons argues that, in the absence of moral facts, a person *cannot* be motivated to act on the basis of such facts but rather acts on the basis of some feeling, which is not rationally derived. This is the 'emotivist' view, championed by members of the Vienna Circle, according to which utterances like 'stealing is wrong' reflect the attitude of the speaker ('stealing – boo!') and not a fact

about stealing (like ‘stealing costs the economy x -amount per year’). Alternatively, the externalist about reasons could admit the possibility of moral facts but deny that, alone, judgements about these facts are sufficient to move a person to action. In this case, the externalist would then have to confront the question of how to bridge the gap between facts and values, a point to be returned to in chapter 9.

Although this is too cursory a summary of the aims and interests of meta-ethics to be in itself instructive, and though it fails to do justice to the depth and intricacy of the ongoing debates on these important topics, it should suffice for the present purposes of investigating Madhyamaka’s implied perspective on the semantics of moral statements and the ontology of moral properties. The importance of determining the connection between the theory of emptiness (which, as discussed in chapter 1, is variously understood as a metaphysical or semantic theory) and the bodhisattva’s adoption of a supremely moral agenda underpinned by a seemingly limitless source of motivation is crucial to the task of assessing the overall feasibility of Madhyamaka’s soteriological objectives. This is because, as sometimes happens both within and beyond the field of meta-ethics, the ontological status ascribed to a given phenomenon (in this case ‘emptiness’) can inform our account of its operations and functions (i.e. to induce compassion and sustain moral motivation). To use an analogy from the philosophy of mathematics, although for the most part one’s view on whether mathematics should employ classical or intuitionist logic has little impact on mathematical application, one’s account of the ontological status of mathematical objects – whether Platonist, formalist or constructivist – can nevertheless have a serious effect on which mathematical and logical principles one subscribes to.¹⁴ For example, the constructivist

¹⁴ Iemhoff (2016).

view of mathematics holds that mathematical objects are mental constructions. It follows from this view that (a) the truth or falsity of mathematical statements have a ‘temporal’ aspect, rather than an ‘eternal’ status, as is defended by proponents of the Platonist conception of mathematics and (b) the ‘law of the excluded middle’ is not treated as axiomatic, hence, whereas the Platonist would be agnostic about the truth or falsity of an as yet unproven theory, the constructivist rejects a binary approach contending rather that the truth or falsity of the theory will be established not discovered.

The potential value of delineating Madhyamaka’s meta-ethical stance having been outlined, and the broad contours of the meta-ethicist’s terrain having been charted, it is now possible to turn to the first of the aims identified above, namely the determination of Madhyamaka’s view on the semantic status of moral statements and whether they are truth-apt.

The Truth Status of Moral Claims

In contemporary philosophy, meta-ethicists are divided over the question of how to interpret the meaning of moral claims. One of the main ways in which such division manifests is in debates between cognitivists and non-cognitivists. Whether there is any fact of the matter as to the permissibility of stealing, say, is therefore a highly contentious point. Since the debate over the truth-aptness of moral statements influences the assessment of whether moral knowledge is possible (in that ‘knowledge’ as opposed to mere ‘belief’ demands that what one believes is true) which in turn influences the assessment of the motivational power of endorsing some moral judgment

(in that, in the absence of the ‘truth’ of one’s moral beliefs something further or ‘external’ to that belief will be required to motivate action), it is clear that the three questions with which this chapter is concerned are heavily inter-connected.¹⁵ Whilst treating the three topics separately might deliver only a superficially insightful reconstruction, by combining the results of each inquiry a more systematic and robust picture of the implied Madhyamaka view emerges.

Unsurprisingly, Madhyamaka’s stance on whether moral sentences are truth-apt does not easily conform to the Western models of truth. Assuredly, within the Western philosophical tradition, just as in Buddhism, there is great variation between the different accounts of the meaning of truth, with ‘correspondence,’ ‘coherentism’ and ‘pragmatism’ as the primary theoretical contenders. However, as discussed in chapter 1, whilst local anti-realism (i.e. anti-realism about a particular domain of discourse such as morality or mathematics) is fairly common in Western philosophy, global anti-realism (i.e. the view that there simply is no way the world mind-independently is) of the sort endorsed by Madhyamaka is a minority view finding little affinity with Western philosophers, notable exceptions notwithstanding. A further reason for the lack of conformity between the (implied) Madhyamaka and the Western meta-ethical perspectives on whether moral statements can be truth-apt arises from Madhyamaka’s distinctive interpretation of the theory of two truths (*satya-dvaya*). Despite having argued that Madhyamaka’s repudiation of the concept of inherent reality (*svabhāva*) leads eventually to the collapse of semantic dualism of the sort defended by Ābhidharmikas, it nevertheless remains the case that Madhyamaka endorses a two-

¹⁵ The three questions being (1) does Madhyamaka regard moral statements as truth-apt? ; (2) does Madhyamaka ascribe ontological status to moral properties? ; (3) what does Madhyamaka understand the content of moral knowledge to consist of?

tiered semantic theory of ultimate (*paramārtha*) and conventional (*saṃvṛti*) truth. It just happens that, in the universal absence of the instantiation of *svabhāva* nothing ever does in fact meet the requirements of ultimate truth.

The accusation that efforts to uncover Madhyamaka's implicit commitment to cognitivism or non-cognitivism betray the reconstructivist's willingness simply to superimpose decidedly Western conceptual frameworks onto Buddhist modes of reasoning has *prima facie* plausibility in light of these considerations. In a context where statements are not absolutely true or false, but are instead dependent on the cognitive and spiritual capacities of those who hear them, the stark contrast between being truth-apt or failing to be so, on which the cognitivist/ non-cognitivist debate pivots, is itself called into question. When Nāgārjuna declares at *MMK* 18.6 that “‘The self’ is conveyed and ‘nonself’ is taught by buddhas; it is taught as well that neither self nor nonself is the case,” the divisions so sharply drawn by Western meta-ethicists are reduced to a series of increasingly blurred lines.¹⁶ It is only by denying the reality of an ‘objective’ standard of truth that Mādhyamikas can successfully argue for the graded teachings of the Buddha, none of which are true from the ultimate point of view but all of which reflect various degrees of conventional (i.e. soteriologically helpful) truth.

In response, however, the reconstructivist maintains that by examining the semantic status of moral statements from a Madhyamaka point of view, deeper layers of complexity in the cognitivist/ non-cognitivist dispute are revealed and that, resultantly, our understanding of both (implied) Madhyamaka and (affirmed) Western meta-ethical

¹⁶ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 18.6. *ātmety api prajñāpitam anātmety api deśitam/ buddhair nātmā na cānātmā kaścid ity api deśitam//* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 198).

commitments is enhanced. For instance, whereas Western meta-ethicists usually maintain that cognitivism and moral realism are inseparable, the Madhyamaka's account of what it means for something to be true does not rely on a concept of mind-independent objective facts. Hence, by being attentive to the Madhyamaka account of truth – and by assessing its plausibility – the Western meta-ethicist envisions new ways of questioning and confronting the presuppositions on which the link between cognitivism and moral realism is based.

Śāntideva's presentation of the evil effects of anger and the benefits of patience suggest that he implicitly endorses a variety of moral cognitivism.¹⁷ Indeed, he argues that it is because of their misdeeds that beings experience hell realms and suffering in future lives. This suggests that there is a conventionally established connection between *karma* and its consequences (*phala*) so that moral 'facts' are somehow embedded in the structure of conventional reality. Traditional Mahāyāna accounts of the path to enlightenment, which are elaborately structured with specific requirements at every stage of bodhisattva development, also attest to the idea that Madhyamaka subscribes, albeit only conventionally, to objectively measurable moral progress. This progress, it could be argued, is facilitated as a result of the insights (which are both affective *and* cognitive) acquired through the cultivation of virtues like tolerance, equanimity, and imaginative exercises in compassion whilst meditating.

On the other hand, however, although Madhyamaka texts are replete with moral statements of 'fact,' appealing to the syntactic structure of these claims is useless if our

¹⁷ Śāntideva – *BCA* 6.74. *koṣāṅgāṃ evam evāhaṃ naraḥ sahasraśaḥ | kārito 'smi na cātmarthaḥ parārtho vā kṛto mayā||* "In this very same way, on account of anger, I have been placed in hells thousands of times, and I have benefited neither myself nor others." (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 56).

purpose is to establish whether Madhyamaka should be read as either cognitivist or non-cognitivist.¹⁸ This is because, as non-cognitivists themselves keenly remark, moral and non-moral sentences have a shared syntactical structure. The non-cognitivist argues that it is precisely this shared structure that ‘deceives’ the utterer of moral sentences into thinking that they communicate ‘objective’ facts when they in fact only express their approval or disapproval.¹⁹ A second, more comprehensive, reason to be skeptical of Madhyamaka’s seeming commitment to some version of cognitivism is that a crucial part of the Madhyamaka strategy involves rejecting the idea that there are any ultimate truths at all. From the ultimate point of view, then, Madhyamaka cannot accept cognitivism for the simple reason that ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ are applicable to propositions, which are exclusive to the conventional domain. Since realization of the ultimate truth is beyond linguistic expression, the enlightened being’s moral engagement results from intuition rather than moral reasoning. On this point, Prāsaṅgikas and Svātantrikas are fully aligned, evidenced by Bhāviveka’s assertion at *Madhyamakahr̥daya-kārikā* 3.252 that “when a scholar removes the eye disease of defilements and objects of cognition and has the clear eye of true knowledge, he does not see anything at all.”²⁰

However, as previous chapters have shown, Madhyamaka’s notion of truth is multifaceted and bound up with both pragmatic and soteriological concerns. It follows that even if Madhyamaka cannot be committed to cognitivism at an ultimate level, this tells us little about their conventional position. Nevertheless, if Madhyamaka

¹⁸ Gowans (2015: 175).

¹⁹ Ayer (2012: 134). Of statements of value: “in so far as they are not ‘scientific,’ they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false.”

²⁰ Bhāviveka – *Madhyamakahr̥daya-kārikā* 3.252. *kleśajñeyāvṛtitamastimirāpagame tathā| na paśyati budhaḥ kiṃcit samyagjñānāmalekṣaṇaḥ||* (Trans.) Eckel (2008: 44).

subscribes to cognitivism conventionally, it is cognitivism of a qualified kind: such that the truth-aptness of moral sentences is not assured by their correspondence to an independent state of affairs about the structure of reality (as there is no such independence and no such firm structure) but is assured by the relationship between cognitive assent to moral propositions and the ensuing spiritual progress it engenders. The antinomian character of some Mahāyāna prescriptions coupled with the emphasis on compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy found throughout the majority of Mahāyāna literature further attests that, if Madhyamaka does think moral statements express truth, truth itself is dependent upon the moral aptitude of the one for whom it is a truth. Thus, from this angle, a truth is a truth only insofar as it is skilful. Truthfulness and skilfulness are inseparable properties on this model, attributable to given propositions in exactly equal measure.

Under the ‘dismal’ interpretation of Candrakīrti’s account of conventional truth championed by Tillemans, Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas conceive of the conventional in terms of what is generally accepted.²¹ This interpretation altogether undermines the possibility of a hierarchy of truths within the domain of the conventional. It would therefore follow that, in the absence of any mind-independent ultimate truths, Prāsaṅgikas have no means whatsoever for adjudicating between competing moral claims and would be forced to admit thoroughgoing moral relativism. Moral relativism is the thesis that, when two people assert mutually exclusive points of view (such as ‘stealing is always wrong’ and ‘stealing is sometimes permissible’), although they

²¹ The relevant passages supporting this interpretation of Candrakīrti’s philosophy have been examined in chapters 3 and 7 particularly. In addition to the reasons supplied there for the inadequacy of this interpretation, here I adduce further reasons to be skeptical that this uncharitable reading fully captures Candrakīrti’s view. Indeed, if Prāsaṅgikas have no means of questioning and challenging the standards of conventional morality, how can they understand the historical Buddha’s own repudiation of things like animal sacrifice or rigid social categories as legitimate?

might appear to have entered into deep, intractable and possibly interminable disagreement, they have in fact done no such thing. This is because the two utterances are thought of as emerging from distinct moral frameworks each with their own set of ‘moral coordinates.’²²

Such a view, however, is strikingly at variance with interpretations of *karma* operating as a moral law, akin to the laws of physics governing the universe. Moreover, even if Buddhists can concede that the moral value of specific actions is context dependent, the idea that intentions are what give actions their moral flavour is treated like a universal maxim in Buddhist philosophy. To avoid the conclusion that Madhyamaka is implicitly committed to relativism and is utterly incapable of making universal moral pronouncements (as would follow from their concession of conventional truth as nothing more than what people say), however, we can invoke alternative readings of the Prāsaṅgika attitude to conventional truth.

Indeed, as has been discussed at length already, Candrakīrti explicates conventional truth in various ways, at one point suggesting that the conventional truth is established via the application of properly functioning faculties and is what enables successful practice. For example, at *MAV* 6.27 he explains “Just as the apprehension of an eye afflicted with ophthalmia does not invalidate any knowledge derived from a healthy eye, so the understanding of those from whom stainless knowledge is concealed does not invalidate that understanding which is itself without stain.”²³ The Prāsaṅgika explanation as to why some people count as more reliable sources of information than

²² Harman (1996: 13).

²³ Candrakīrti – *MAV* 6.27. *na bād hate jñānam ataimirāṇām yathopalabdhis timirekṣaṇānām| tathāmalajñānatiraskṛtānām dhiyāsti bādho na dhiyo ’malāyāh||* Li (2015: 7). (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:160).

others is thus entirely straightforward. Just as those suffering from cirrhosis would be less successful at harvesting ripe bananas than those not affected by this condition, so too are those at more advanced stages of moral and spiritual perfection better suited to discern the truth value of moral propositions. When conventional truth is conceived as that which enables successful practice, it is clear that there must be degrees of truth just as there are degrees of success.

The answer given to the question whether Madhyamaka endorses moral relativism turns out, ironically, to be context relative: on the one hand, because Madhyamaka rejects the concept of ‘objectivity’ wholesale, it follows that whatever truth status they ascribe to moral sentences must be relative. This is further confirmed by the fact that Madhyamaka regards the notions of truth and success as inter-dependent – whilst telling affluent children that ‘stealing is always wrong’ might aid their success at social integration, it would probably be completely inappropriate for a judge to hold the same belief in the context of sentencing a vulnerable and poverty-stricken thief. On the other hand, however, Madhyamaka’s measure of ‘success’ (i.e. the attainment of irreversible liberation) is not context dependent but has, instead, universal applicability. Whether holding a certain belief or performing a particular action does in fact promote soteriological success may be context dependent, but success itself is the benchmark for deciding the appropriateness of the belief or action.

To summarize the points so far, analysing whether Madhyamaka implicitly accepts moral cognitivism requires us to take seriously the complexity of their view of truth and to ascertain what difference, if any, Madhyamaka sees between moral and non-moral sentences. If there are no objective, mind-independent, facts *at all*, then there

cannot be any moral facts; but this tells us little about whether moral and non-moral claims are fundamentally different in kind.

Moral and Non-Moral Truths

Madhyamaka's arguments for the universal inapplicability of *svabhāva* are designed to show that emptiness itself is empty. At VV 1 the (imagined) Nyāya opponent, contends that pervasive emptiness would have the undesired effect of preventing the very arguments for emptiness from doing their philosophical work. The opponent states: "If the substance of all things is not to be found anywhere, your assertion which is devoid of substance is not able to refute substance."²⁴ In response Nāgārjuna contends at VV 21 that it is precisely because of, rather than despite, the emptiness of emptiness that the theory of emptiness can perform its function and reveal the illogicality of peoples' attachment to perishable and insubstantial things. This is because, if emptiness were not itself empty, it would follow that emptiness would have *svabhāva* and would thus be stripped of its causal capacities. He therefore writes: "If my speech is not in the combination of causes and conditions and also not distinct from them, it is not the case that emptiness is established because of the absence of the substance of things."²⁵

Pervasive emptiness – i.e. the equally empty status of all phenomena – means that the distinction between the two truths, like all other bifurcations, amounts solely to a distinction in their mode of apprehension rather than to an inherently real difference between them. In other words, whilst it might be soteriologically helpful for

²⁴ Nāgārjuna – VV 1. *sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvas cet| tvadvacanam asvabhāvaṃ na nirvartayituṃ svabhāvaṃ alam||* (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 19).

²⁵ Nāgārjuna – VV 21. *hetupratyayasāmagryāṃ ca pṛthak cāpi madvaco na yadi| nanu sūnyatvaṃ siddhaṃ bhāvānāṃ asvabhāvatvāt||* (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 26).

unenlightened beings to distinguish between conventional and ultimate truth, such a distinction completely disintegrates once the ultimate perspective is achieved. This reflection raises important questions about the possibility of terminating beginningless ignorance through knowledge of merely conventional truths (a problem addressed in chapter 7), and also invites questions on the relationship Madhyamaka supposes to exist between moral and non-moral truths.

It seems that both enlightened and ordinary beings ascribe truth status to a whole range of propositions that lack any (immediately obvious) soteriological value, for example strictly scientific, non-moral, claims. They do this in order to be able to make sense of their experiences and to navigate their way around the world successfully. Madhyamaka's implicit commitment to global anti-realism prevents scientific claims from being true in virtue of their 'correspondence' to reality. Instead, where scientific claims are also soteriologically redundant – as many, if not most, of them surely are – Madhyamaka accepts that they are true insofar as they 'cohere' with other such statements or are 'pragmatically' valuable.

These reflections lead us to question whether, in order for a proposition to be soteriologically efficacious, it must also cohere with other aspects of one's worldview and, if so, to what extent? On the one hand, if belief in the Buddhist teachings is to instigate meaningful change in a person's life, if it is to bring about more moral engagement with the world, then these beliefs must be revisionary. Yet the revisions to one's outlook cannot be so great as to require the immediate and complete overhaul of the full body of one's existing beliefs and practices, as this would risk the aspirant's floundering without any view at all to hold onto, potentially leading to nihilism. In

another context, Repetti has likened the process of abandoning views through adopting successively more sophisticated views to the process of ‘weaning’ oneself off addictive substances gradually.²⁶ Just as addicts who attempt the ‘cold-turkey’ method are at higher risk of relapse, so too might practitioners who attempt to live in accordance with *śūnyatā* before first having acquired insight into *anātman* find that they make little progress.

Hence, to be optimally effective, the acquisition of moral truths should result in new modes of worldly engagement without being so radical as to prevent the integration of new beliefs with the old (even if these too must eventually be discarded). Neurath’s analogy of systematically replacing the planks of a ship whilst still at sea conveys the same piece-meal approach to revising one’s worldview accepted by Madhyamaka Buddhism. Neurath argues that it is an illusion to imagine, like Descartes, that epistemologists can start their quest for knowledge completely afresh and, rather than seek new foundations, he argues that epistemologists should be like “sailors who far out at sea, transform the shape of their clumsy vessel... But they cannot put the ship in dock in order to start from scratch. During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves... A new ship grows out of the old one, step by step...”²⁷ Similarly, Mādhyamikas argue that the spiritual aspirant must reorient herself and her moral values step by step, in reliance on the ‘graded teachings’ of the Buddha. The unenlightened point of view can never be entirely coherent, just as the planks on Neurath’s ship are never fully aligned until the task is complete. Still, a leaky vessel may nevertheless prove adequate for crossing the ocean of *saṃsāra*.

²⁶ Repetti (2017: 27).

²⁷ Neurath (1944: 47).

This explains the Buddhist emphasis on graded teachings; teaching the universality of emptiness to a person unconvinced of the truth of *anātman* would at best be futile, as it would be beyond their comprehension, and at worst positively harmful. At the same time, Madhyamaka's piece-meal approach to revising one's worldview is not without its problems either. Indeed, during the process of moral and spiritual transformation in which a person comes to internalise the truth of emptiness, it is bound to happen that one's newly acquired soteriologically efficacious beliefs will conflict with pre-existing aspects of one's worldview. Madhyamaka argues that contradictory notions (such as the notions of *svabhāva*, *svalakṣaṇa*, *ātman* etc.) lie at the heart of spiritually unenlightened worldviews, preventing them from even reaching the logical threshold of internal consistency. Thus, just as psychiatrists might first challenge their patients' more harmful false beliefs – exposing to the patient the internal incoherence of their psychotic beliefs – before challenging their less harmful, but still false, beliefs, Mādhyamikas begin by exposing the flaws in arguments supportive of *ātman* before extending this logic to reveal the emptiness of all *dharmas*.²⁸

Whilst this discussion has taken us some way from the question of whether Madhyamaka implicitly endorses cognitivism or non-cognitivism, the foregoing considerations will hopefully result in a more nuanced response. For, whilst in Western philosophy non-cognitivism is a strictly meta-ethical view, and does not pertain to other areas of discourse such as science, from the perspective of Madhyamaka's global anti-realism, all statements are non-cognitive inasmuch as they cannot ultimately be truth-apt, even if they may be so conventionally. According to Madhyamaka analysis, moral and non-moral claims differ only insofar as the former are invested with soteriological

²⁸ Westerhoff (2015: 218).

import and the latter are completely neutral in this regard: that anger is never helpful is true by virtue of its efficacy; that photosynthesis is a process of energy conversion is true by virtue of its coherence with other factors of plant-life. Neither moral nor non-moral sentences are true by virtue of correspondence to a mind-independent reality.

In chapter 24 of the *MMK* Nāgārjuna argues that the ‘emptiness’ of core Buddhist teachings, institutions and figures (the Dharma, the *saṃgha* and the Buddha) is what assures their efficacy and relevance. The truth of the four noble truths, for instance, is guaranteed by the fact of emptiness – if the existence of suffering (the first noble truth) were an essential feature of reality, there would be no way of bringing about the cessation of suffering (the third and fourth noble truths), as whatever exists inherently cannot be destroyed or eliminated. This is why Nāgārjuna responds to his (imagined) opponent at *MMK* 24.13-14 by saying: “Moreover, the objection that you make concerning emptiness cannot be a faulty consequence for us for emptiness. All is possible when emptiness is possible. Nothing is possible when emptiness is impossible.”²⁹

It might be objected that, since the four noble truths are only claims about the nature of *saṃsāric* existence and the way to terminate it, they are not really moral claims at all. However, although the four noble truths are not prescriptive (i.e. are not of the form ‘do not steal’) and do not even declare which specific actions are ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ they are nevertheless undeniably moral in character, with the eight fold path intended as a practical guideline for achieving liberation. Madhyamaka contends that it is

²⁹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.13-14. (13) *śūnyatāyām adhilayaṃ yaṃ punaḥ kurute bhavān/ doṣaprasaṅgo nāsmākaṃ sa śūnya nopapadyate//* (14) *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/ sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate//* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 275-276).

exclusively in the context of emptiness that the ideas of progress, following a path and cultivating the perfections can make sense. The positive upshot of emptiness is that it facilitates change and accommodates the possibility of a person fulfilling her spiritual potential. When the opponent attacks Nāgārjuna for having destroyed the path by denying its ultimate reality, he answers that this criticism does not apply to himself but rather to those other Buddhists who reject emptiness. He writes: “You, throwing your faults on us, are like the person mounted on a horse who forgets the horse.”³⁰ Conversely, Nāgārjuna claims that whoever understands the teaching of emptiness, which amounts to the fact that all phenomena are dependently originated, understands the unfolding of the spiritual path.³¹

To conclude our investigation into whether Mādhyamikas implicitly subscribes to the view that moral sentences are truth-apt, it is clear that they are unexpected champions of a qualified form of cognitivism. Madhyamaka accepts that, conventionally speaking, moral claims can be true or false. With this proviso in mind, however, the critic could question whether, or how far, merely conventional truths are morally binding. If the truth of the statement ‘stealing is wrong’ depends not on its relationship to objective facts but on the reception it elicits from the person to whom it is uttered, can moral ‘knowledge’ motivate moral conduct? This is a critical question and will be examined more fully in the next chapter. To respond just briefly on Madhyamaka’s behalf, since conventional truths are the only type of truths there are, they are as binding and as motivating as any truth could be. Other Buddhists, such as Ābhidharmikas for whom

³⁰ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.15. *sa tvaṃ doṣān ātmanīyān asmāsu paripātayan/ aśvam evābhirūḍhaḥ sann aśvam evāsi viśmṛtaḥ*// (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 276).

³¹ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.20. *yady aśūnyam idaṃ sarvaṃ udayo nāsti na vyayaḥ/ caurturṇām āryasatyānām abhāvas te prasajyate*// “If all this is non-empty, there is neither origination nor cessation. It follows for you that there is the non-existence of the four noble truths.” (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 279).

there is a clear and substantial difference between conventional and ultimate truths, might interpret Madhyamaka's relegation of morality to the sphere of the conventional as signaling its unimportance but this, Mādhyamikas would insist, would be a mistake.³² Only in a system where conventional and ultimate domains exist independently of one another, and in a hierarchical relationship, can the question of conventional truth's 'inferiority' arise. As Madhyamaka philosophers repeatedly stress, however, the idea of a robust difference between conventional and ultimate domains is itself symptomatic of delusion and attachment.

From the Abhidharma perspective, ultimate truths are true by virtue of their correspondence to ultimate reality, which is populated with inherently existent impartite *dharma*s. On this analysis, ultimate truths must neither assert nor presuppose the existence of any conceptual fiction whereas conventional truths can.³³ With these definitions in mind, it is hard to see how moral truths could be ultimate truths even in an Abhidharma framework. For, although Ābhidharmikas might posit the existence of ultimately real, substantial and metaphysically simple moral *dharma*s (akin to G.E. Moore's account of the 'good' as a simple, non-natural property), moral sentences invariably refer to conceptually constructed wholes, such as sentient beings, and are therefore disqualified from the category of the ultimate.³⁴ This does, however, still leave scope for ultimately true claims about impartite moral *dharma*s, provided that such entities are (a) able to withstand the kind of scrutiny Madhyamaka brings against

³² Garfield (2016: 78).

³³ Siderits (2007: 56).

³⁴ Moore (1993: 58-59). Moore famously defines the 'good' as "indefinable." "If I am asked 'what is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter... You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate. But when you have enumerated them all, when you have reduced a horse to its simplest terms, then you can no longer define those terms."

this concept and be (b) found to be present in the world. If the Abhidharma stance is correct, and moral properties do exist as ultimate entities, the spiritual aspirant is charged with the task of cultivating the ‘good’ and inhibiting the ‘bad’ states of mind. Yet if ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are ultimate existents, then, as Mādhyamikas argue, they are independent, not subject to causation, and, hence, not susceptible to the techniques of cultivation or inhibition.³⁵ This is precisely the point Nāgārjuna is making in the quotation at the start of this chapter: “Moreover, no one will ever perform either good or bad actions. What is there that is to be done with regard to the non-empty? For what has intrinsic nature is not done.”³⁶ This brings us to the next topic with which this chapter is concerned: determining the ontological status of moral properties according to the Madhyamaka system; and evaluating the arguments supplied in support of the view that such properties cannot be primary (*dravya-sat*) existents but are dependent on the conceptually constructive processes of the mind.

The Ontological Status of Moral Properties

Establishing Madhyamaka’s implied view on cognitivism versus non-cognitivism involved many layers of complexity, but, contrastingly, discerning the Madhyamaka

³⁵ As Dhammajoti (2009: 149) notes, according to the Sarvāstivāda theory of *dharmas* “unique entities [are] absolutely isolated from one another in their intrinsic natures.” He says that “without a proper theory of causality which can account for the arising of and dynamic interplay among them, the Sarvāstivādins would utterly fail to present any version of the central Buddhist teaching of ‘conditioned co-arising’.” However, what Mādhyamikas such as Nāgārjuna precisely want to argue is that anything dependent on causes and conditions for its coming into existence is automatically disqualified from being an inherently real *dharma*. By subscribing to such radically different accounts of what it would mean for something to possess *svabhāva*, with Sarvāstivādins holding that impermanent *dharmas* are primary existents and Mādhyamikas saying exactly the opposite, namely that whatever is impermanent cannot have *svabhāva*, it is natural to wonder whether this centuries-long controversy has a fallacy of equivocation at its heart. However, it is clear that Ābhidharmikas and Mādhyamikas are engaged in more than a merely terminological dispute – the core of their disagreement centres on the question of what characteristics something would need to have in order to count as a primary existent.

³⁶ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.33. *na ca dharmam adharmaṃ vā kaścij jātu kariṣyati| kim aśūnyasya kartavyaṃ svabhāvaḥ kriyate na hi||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 285).

attitude towards the ontological status of moral properties is much more straightforward. This is because, in the first place, there is less need to ‘reconstruct’ the Madhyamaka position on this question, with key figures such as Nāgārjuna explicitly declaring that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are not intrinsic properties of action. Secondly, Madhyamaka’s view on whether anything has ontological status is less ambiguous than its account of the meaning of, and criteria for, truth. Again, Mādhyamikas explicitly and repeatedly argue that nothing can have ontological primacy because everything that exists has been caused to come into existence in dependence on something else.

The objection against this line of argument is recurrent and has been perfectly captured by Burton who denies that we can make sense of the Madhyamaka claim that all existents are secondary, constructed, existents (*prajñapti-sat*) without also positing the existence of some primary, unconstructed, existents (*dravya-sat*) at the ontological bedrock. He argues that, in the absence of a Madhyamaka concession of at least some *dravya-sat*, any response Nāgārjuna offers to accusations of nihilism will prove untenable.³⁷ Ābhidharmikas and Mādhyamikas alike are confronted by serious challenges in explicating their stance on whether there are any unconstructed entities out of which constructed existents emerge. Although the accusation of nihilism is a serious one, it is not clear that it is the Mādhyamika who must relent and, indeed, it seems that both the realist and anti-realist here meet at an insuperable impasse. On the one hand, the Ābhidharmika posits the existence of some ultimate existent *dharmas* as a means of explaining the existence of conceptual constructs, thereby avoiding the conclusion of an infinite regress. However, the Madhyamaka points out (a) that if *dharmas* are primary existents they cannot be perishable and (b) they cannot be reliant

³⁷ Burton (1999: 95).

for their status as primary existents on anything else, including the secondary existents with which they are contrasted. Whereas the Ābhidharmika argues that it is impossible to explain constructed experience without recourse to the idea of ontological foundationalism, the Mādhyamika holds that by invoking ontological foundationalism it becomes impossible to explain the facts of our experience, in which impermanence and dependency are irrefutable.

It is against this backdrop that the Madhyamaka view regarding the ontological status of moral properties, such as ‘good’ ‘bad’ ‘just’ ‘generous’ *et cetera*, is to be understood. From Madhyamaka’s dismissal of mind-independent reality as conceptually incoherent, we can infer that moral properties, like everything else, are conceptual constructs imputed onto the world through ignorance. Just as the importance of moral truths is not jeopardized by their merely conventional status, neither are moral qualities undermined by their lack of inherent reality. On the contrary, it is because moral properties are ontologically empty that they can be acquired, developed and perfected. As before, chapter 24 of the *MMK* proves illuminating for those interested in Madhyamaka’s meta-ethics, with Nāgārjuna deriding the Abhidharma view in arguing that “One who is unenlightened by intrinsic nature, though that one strives for enlightenment, will not, according to you, attain enlightenment in the course of the bodhisattva’s practice.”³⁸ Similarly, at *VV* 52-55 he argues that those who think pervasive emptiness would negate the possibility of following the path to liberation through the accumulation of meritorious deeds utterly fail in their understanding of emptiness.³⁹ Whereas the opponent argues that whatever conduces to liberation does so

³⁸ Nāgārjuna – *MMK* 24.32. *yaś cābuddhaḥ svabhāvena sa bodhāya ghaṭann api/ na bodhisattvacaryāyāṃ bodhiṃ te ’dhigamiṣyati||* (Trans.) Siderits, M. Katsura, S. (2013: 284).

³⁹ Nāgārjuna – *VV* 52-55. (52) *kuśalānāṃ dharmānāṃ dharmāvasthāvīdo bruvanti yadi| kuśalaṃ svabhāvam evaṃ pravibhāgenābhidheyah syāt||* (53) *yadi ca pratītya kuśalah svabhāva utpadyate sa*

necessarily, as part of its inherent nature, Nāgārjuna avers that the acquisition of spiritual insights and the manifestation of moral behaviour is only possible within a causal framework. Given that what is inherently real cannot be causally dependent, goodness, badness, generosity, courage and the like cannot be inherently real properties.

The Madhyamaka point is that the static nature of ontologically primary phenomena (which the opponent takes moral properties to be instances of) would make a mockery of the entire Buddhist vision, according to which beings are transformed by sustained ethical practice and the gradual replacement of vices with virtues. These reflections lead Nāgārjuna to say that religious practice would be impossible in a world where moral properties existed by *svabhāva* and that, were it not for the conceptually constructed character of such notions as right/ wrong and good/ bad, moral properties would be ‘a-causal.’ This does not diminish the value of moral properties, however.

In any case, as Nāgārjuna states elsewhere, moral properties are *practically* foundational to the good life even if they are not ontologically so: “Just as the earth’s the base for all that’s still or moves, On discipline, it’s said, is founded all that’s good.”⁴⁰ Practically speaking, therefore, neither the ontological baselessness nor the

kuśalānām| dharmāṇām parabhāvaḥ svabhāva evaṃ katham bhavati|| (54) atha na pratītya kiṃcit svabhāva utpadyate sa kuśalānām| dharmāṇām evaṃ syād vāso na brahmacaryasya|| (55) nādharmo dharmo vā samvyavahārās ca laukikā na syuḥ| nityās ca sasvabhāvāḥ syur nityatvād ahetumataḥ|| “If people who know the state of things speak of the auspicious things, the auspicious substance should be expressed in terms of a detailed division. And if the auspicious substance is produced based on conditions, how is this extrinsic nature of the auspicious things in fact a substance? If the substance of the auspicious things was not produced in dependence on anything, there would be no religious practice. There would be neither right nor wrong nor worldly conventions. They would be permanent and substantial; because they are permanent they are acausal.” (Trans.) Westerhoff (2010: 35-36).

⁴⁰ Nāgārjuna – *Suḥṛllekha* 7. (Trans. from the Tibetan) The Padmakara Translation Group (2013: 29).

conventional status of moral properties and truths detracts from the role they play in bringing beings to soteriological fulfilment.

The Content and Acquisition of Moral Knowledge

The investigation into the implied Madhyamaka meta-ethical view has led, thus far, to the conclusion that Madhyamaka endorses a qualified version of cognitivism but does not accept the ultimate existence of moral properties. The final aim of this chapter is to analyze what Madhyamaka takes the content of moral knowledge to be and to determine which epistemic methods and instruments Madhyamaka deems suitable for its acquisition. Accomplishing this objective is instrumental to any further work done in pursuit of articulating an implied Madhyamaka meta-ethic. Certainly, much more explication and analysis than can be undertaken here is still required but scholarship is only just beginning to ascertain the value of such work for an appreciation of Buddhist ethics in truly *sui generis* terms.

As has been noted in the previous chapter, the vast majority of the content of Buddhist ethics is common to both Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists. Although insistence on the ultimately empty nature of moral truths, knowledge and properties is unique to Madhyamaka, this has little, if indeed any, effect on the Madhyamaka account of which statements are morally true, how these come to be known or how the moral properties are developed within the individual through practice and meditation. Adherence to the eight fold path, commitment to upholding the five precepts and efforts to cultivate the four *brahma-vihāra* virtues (of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity) all form part of the common stock of Buddhist moral principles and values,

irrespective of affiliation to a specific tradition and irrespective of metaphysical persuasion.

With such widespread agreement amongst Buddhists as to what counts as the content of moral knowledge, it is perhaps natural to wonder why Madhyamaka places emphasis on the need to acquire such knowledge through very specific, and sometimes contested, epistemic instruments. That is, Madhyamaka holds first that both Buddhists who conflate illusion with reality (such as the Ābhidharmikas and the Yogācārin) and those who are disabused of this error (i.e. Mādhyamikas) nevertheless still arrive at broadly similar conclusions about what counts as good moral conduct, and second that correct apprehension of reality (or the emptiness of reality) is a crucial ingredient for moral perfection. One point made abundantly clear in Madhyamaka sources, however, is that moral knowledge can never be a substitute for moral conduct. In other words, it is only by putting moral knowledge to use that it becomes a valuable asset on the path to liberation, as when the bodhisattva figure comes to embody the principles of compassion and selflessness.⁴¹

Madhyamaka uses the conclusions of its metaphysical arguments about the pervasiveness of emptiness to expand the compassionate capacities of sentient beings beyond (what it sees as) the limits imposed by subscription to a realist metaphysic. From the Madhyamaka perspective, one cannot expect to achieve a selfless disposition simply through relinquishing belief in the *ātman*. As long as the notion of *svabhāva* is

⁴¹ The idea that purely ‘abstract’ or ‘theoretical’ compassion is meaningless unless put into action through good works is a common theme in religious literature of all traditions. Perhaps this idea finds no better expression than in the words of Dostoevsky who, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a character assert: “the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons.” (Trans.) Magarshack (1958: 62).

entertained as coherent, deluded beings will continue to grasp and continue to meet with disappointment when realising that what they thought of as permanent is in fact not so. Madhyamaka holds that until these tendencies are eliminated, limitless compassion is impossible. Hence, the doctrine of emptiness is rightly thought of as motivated in equal measure by metaphysical and ethical considerations. Śāntideva's *BCA* 8.94-103, which argues that all suffering should be removed dispassionately and impartially, is considered the *locus classicus* of Madhyamaka's demonstration of the connection between the theory of emptiness and its practical application in ethics.⁴² Yet the practical and moral upshot of psychologically internalizing the truth of emptiness has been a key component of Madhyamaka discourse since its inception. As Nāgārjuna affirms at *Lokāītastavaḥ* 1-2:

“O you who have gone beyond the world, homage to you versed in pure knowledge, who have suffered pain, out of compassion, during long time, only for the benefit of living beings. Your opinion is that a living being does not exist, liberated just from the *skandhas*; nevertheless you have suffered extreme pain, O great *muni*, for the sake of living beings.”⁴³

Walser persuasively argues that the early Madhyamaka movement is likely to have been propelled at least as much by the desire to expand upon, whilst remaining continuous with, existing Buddhist philosophy as it was by the desire to represent a radical break from that tradition.⁴⁴ To this end, Mādhyamikas might explain their emphasis on emptiness as entailing a more compassionate response to the world as the simple

⁴² Śāntideva – *BCA* 8.94-103. (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 96-97). These verses will be examined in closer detail in the next chapter, where our main focus is the relationship between the ‘fact’ of emptiness and the moral motivation it is alleged to inspire.

⁴³ Nāgārjuna – *Lokāītastavaḥ* 1-2. (1) *lokāīta namas tubhyaṃ viviktajñānavedine| yas tvam jagaddhitāyaiva khinnaḥ karuṇayā ciram||* (2) *skandhamātravinirmukto na sattvo 'stīti te matam| sattvārthaṃ ca paraṃ khedam agamas tvam mahāmune||* (Trans.) Tola, F. and Dragonetti, C. (1985: 20).

⁴⁴ Walser (2005).

expansion or extension of previous articulations of Buddhist ethics. Whilst the concept of the bodhisattva, as distinct from that of the *arahant*, did acquire a polemical dimension as Mahāyāna thought developed, and was used to imply the moral superiority of the emergent tradition, both concepts are fundamentally conjoined by the idea of selflessness.

As the preceding examination of the ontological status of moral properties has demonstrated though, if Mādhyamikas and non-Mādhyamikas appear ostensibly to share ethical commitments, the reasons underpinning their respective commitments differ. Whereas, for Abhidharma Buddhists, the value of moral properties is assured by their inherent nature, for Madhyamaka the situation is quite the opposite. It would be curious that two metaphysical systems differing as much from one another as that of Abhidharma and Madhyamaka Buddhism should nevertheless share a moral outlook were it not for the fact that, because of its principally therapeutic and practical orientation, in Buddhism, ethics always takes precedence over metaphysics.

It is this therapeutic and practical outlook that guides Madhyamaka philosophy in the determination of what counts as a reliable epistemic instrument for the acquisition of knowledge in general, and moral knowledge in particular. Against his Naiyāyika interlocutors, Nāgārjuna argues that the establishment of any knowledge whatsoever would be impracticable if the means or justification of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) turned out to be inherently vested with the capacity to induce or justify correct belief. This point is made very clearly throughout verses 30-51 of the *VV* in which Nāgārjuna presents a series of reasons designed to show that Nyāya's account of epistemic justification is fundamentally flawed. Interestingly, both Nāgārjuna and his

commentators such as Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti are content to accept the traditional set of *pramāṇas* found in Nyāya philosophy at the conventional level, and the commentators even show a preference for this exposition of justification to that offered by proponents of Pramāṇavāda. Mādhyamikas hence accept that perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), analogy (*upamāna*) and testimony/ scriptural authority (*śabda*) all count as acceptable means of forming one's beliefs. What they deny is that any of the four *pramāṇas* are inherently reliable or are self-established as appropriate epistemic tools. Instead, Madhyamaka contends that knowledge and the objects of knowledge are mutually dependent phenomena such that the legitimacy of the *pramāṇas* is restricted to the domain of conventional, transactional, usage.

The first reason Nāgārjuna offers in support of the mutual reliance of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* is that, presuming the primacy of the *pramāṇas* only invites the question of what means can be used to establish their suitability to begin with. He argues that it is the function of a measuring instrument (the term *pramāṇa* can be traced to the verbal root *mā* meaning 'to measure' or 'to mete out') to establish whatever is being measured but the measuring instruments themselves can only perform their function correctly if they have been measured themselves. As Ganeri summarizes: "one cannot use a pair of scales to measure weight unless one knows that the scales have been properly calibrated."⁴⁵ If the Naiyāyika then attempts to justify the *pramāṇas* with recourse to further *pramāṇas*, however, this will only trigger a regress of justification which cannot rationally be terminated at any particular point. The Naiyāyika would then face two options: either to embark on an infinite regress and engage in an interminable search for the foundations of justification, or accept that the search for justification can only

⁴⁵ Ganeri (2001: 59).

be terminated arbitrarily in which case the idea that the *pramāṇas* are self-established must be foregone. Out of practical considerations, the Naiyāyika favours the second option and accepts that the search for justification only revolves through a few iterations before coming to a halt. This, though, is sufficient for Nāgārjuna's point to go through.

Alternatively, Nāgārjuna argues that the Naiyāyika could simply assert that the *pramāṇas* are self-established but then would be forced to relinquish the view that every item of knowledge is established through some means. Such an admission, however, would not only contravene the observed fact of the universality of dependence but would also lead to a state of epistemic chaos, where items of knowledge simply spring up outside of a causal nexus. Instead, Madhyamaka favours an interpretation of the *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* as mutually dependent because this avoids both the problems just indicated and allows us to retain the concepts of justification, knowledge and items of knowledge without having to invoke the idea of inherent reality (*svabhāva*). Madhyamaka agrees that epistemic instruments lacking *svabhāva* cannot deliver knowledge of ultimate reality but, since the idea of mind-independent ultimate reality has already been rejected as incoherent, this is not a problem. The conventionally real epistemic instruments acknowledged by Madhyamaka are therefore considered perfectly adept at delivering knowledge of the highest sort possible – namely, conventional knowledge.

It is under this rubric of knowledge acquisition that Madhyamaka explains the acquisition of moral knowledge. Although moral knowledge can never be 'foundational,' once again, Madhyamaka holds that this does not detract from its transactional importance. In the same way that Nāgārjuna regards morality as

practically foundational to liberation, so too is moral knowledge foundational to wisdom. Garfield communicates the Madhyamaka attitude as follows: “epistemology is located at the foundation of morality and gets its point just from that location...what truly competent use [of *pramāṇas*] delivers is...at least indirectly, always of soteriological significance – always instrumental to liberation.”⁴⁶

The theory of the four *pramāṇas* is key to understanding Madhyamaka’s presentation of the acquisition of moral knowledge but is arguably too far removed from the everyday morality of the spiritual aspirant to be of much use. It can, however, be supplemented by more concrete accounts of how the spiritual aspirant can come to acquire moral knowledge and deeper compassion. To mention just two ways in which the theory of the *pramāṇas* can be implemented in pursuit of liberation, Buddhists present the operations of *karma* (according to which there is a correspondence between the moral quality of intentional action and the rebounding consequences) as playing an important pedagogical role. Although it is the aim of the bodhisattva eventually to transcend morality, to transcend intentional (*karmic*) action, for unenlightened people knowledge of the law of karma is key to acquiring moral knowledge. As the earliest Buddhist literature recounts, perfect knowledge of *karma* is available exclusively to the fully enlightened.⁴⁷ Still, the Pāli sources also intimate that some degree of *karmic* awareness is readily available to anyone who seeks it. That is, as texts like the *Kālāma*

⁴⁶ Garfield (2015: 239).

⁴⁷ Dīgha Nikāya 2, Sāmaññaphala Sutta. *iti dibbena cakkhunā visuddhena atikkanta-mānusakena satte passati cavamāne upapajjamāne, hīne paṇīte suvaṇṇe dubbhaṇṇe sugate duggate yathā-kammūpage satte pajānāti* | PTS, Rhys Davids, T.W. and Estlin Carpenter, J. (1967: 82-83). The three special knowledges available only to the fully enlightened are: (1) knowledge of one’s own past lives; (2) knowledge of the workings of karma and the connection between somebody’s conduct and their future lives; and (3) direct knowledge of the four noble truths. “Just so the monk with mind concentrated...remembers past births... This is a fruit of the homeless life... with mind concentrated... [he] applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the passing-away and arising of beings... to happy and unhappy destinations as kamma directs them...” (Trans.) Walshe, M. (1995: 106-107).

Sutta suggest, the positive results (*phala*) of acting from good intentions are often immediately obvious. Of course, because immoral people seem not always to get their comeuppance, the Buddhist theory of *karma* depends on the truth of rebirth which, understandably, the modern reader might be more inclined to doubt than were the classical Mādhyamikas. Without entering into the debate over how far efforts to ‘naturalize’ Buddhism are likely to succeed, it is worth reminding ourselves that, even in classical India, ‘psychological’ readings of *karma* flourished alongside the more ‘literal’ accounts.⁴⁸

A second way in which the theory of the *pramāṇas* can be used to explain the acquisition of moral knowledge has already been hinted at in chapter 7, where it was argued that the bodhisattva experiences a direct ‘realization’ (*sākṣātkṛ*) of emptiness and the accompanying moral outlook. Madhyamaka hereby suggests that, with the perfection of wisdom, the fully enlightened being directly intuits the demands of morality. The highest level of moral knowledge would therefore presumably transcend the limitations of linguistic expression and would arise out of the bodhisattva’s spontaneous compassion, which, as Candrakīrti describes it, emanates without any specific object.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted a preliminary investigation into the implied Madhyamaka view on a series of inter-related meta-ethical questions. There is still much for scholarship to contribute in this particular area of ‘reconstructivism’ and, it

⁴⁸ Many of these points have been explored in chapter 6.

has been argued, that there is much to be gained from this enterprise. How moral knowledge is attained and the power such knowledge possesses for transforming our vision of the world and our place in it are meta-ethical issues with normative implications. If Madhyamaka establishes that by correct use of epistemic instruments, beings achieve a state of ethical reorientation, then the arguments in favour of interpreting Buddhist normative ethics in *sui generis* terms, along the lines of ‘moral phenomenology’ suggested by Garfield grow yet stronger.⁴⁹

As a remedy to the suffering of all beings, Buddhist ethics should be understood as directed towards the eradication of the inter-subjective experience of suffering (*duḥkha*). Whether human communities disagree over the permissibility of *x* may even be largely irrelevant from the Buddhist point of view. By using the shared experience of suffering as a benchmark, an experience which cuts across history, geography, society and even species, Buddhists can determine the permissibility of *x* in a particular context by asking whether it conduces to the liberation of all beings. Focusing on the inter-subjectivity of the experience of suffering is especially helpful in the context of Madhyamaka meta-ethical discussion – constituting as it does a noteworthy instance of the more general metaphysical thesis of dependent origination, according to which everything changes, degrades and eventually perishes. As Śāntideva remarks at *BCA* 8.94, the shared experience of suffering coupled with the fact that neither ‘self’ nor ‘other’ possess ultimate reality is reason enough to work towards the eradication of suffering *per se*, regardless of to whom it (conventionally) belongs: “I should dispel the

⁴⁹ Garfield (2010).

suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰Śāntideva – *BCA* 8.94. *mayānyaduḥkhaṃ hantavyaṃ duḥkhatvād ātmaduḥkhavat| anugrāhyā mayānye 'pi sattvatvād ātmasattvavat||* (Trans.) Crosby, K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 96).

Chapter 9

Metaphysics and Moral Motivation

“Altruism itself depends on a recognition of the reality of other persons, and on the equivalent capacity to regard oneself as merely one individual among many.”

Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*

“Without exception, no suffering belongs to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this?”¹

Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.102

Amongst the many qualities Buddhism encourages its practitioners to cultivate, none is elevated to so high a status as altruism. Altruism – defined here as the willingness to sacrifice one’s own welfare for that of others – is considered by Madhyamaka as the metaphorical bedrock on which liberation from *samsāric* suffering proceeds. In the opening verses of the *MAV* Candrakīrti declares compassion to be supremely valuable, writing: “Before all else I praise compassion... I bow down to this compassion arising for all living beings who have first generated self-infatuation through the thought ‘I,’ and then attachment to objects through the thought ‘This is mine,’ so that like a paddlewheel they wander round and round devoid of self-determination.”² Just like Mādhyamikas, Western ethicists have traditionally also emphasized the importance of altruism and compassion for leading a life of flourishing and for achieving the deepest possible sense of satisfaction, which depends not on material gains but on knowledge that one has acted according to the demands of morality. Nevertheless, as the quotations from Nagel and Śāntideva with which this chapter opens reveal, Mādhyamikas and modern Western ethicists completely disagree about the prerequisites of moral engagement with the world. Whereas Western ethical theory proceeds on the

¹ Śāntideva – *BCA* 9.102. *asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāṅy evāviśeṣataḥ/ duḥkhatvād eva vāryāṇi niyamas tatra kiṃ kṛtaḥ* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 97).

² Candrakīrti – *MAV* 1.2-3. (Trans. from the Tibetan) Huntington (1992:149).

assumption of the reality of other persons to whom one can show kindness and compassion, Madhyamaka theorists contend that realization of the ultimate emptiness of ‘self’ and ‘other’ is necessary for the exercise of authentic and limitless altruism. Madhyamaka’s repudiation of the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’ on grounds that they hinder, rather than help, moral development raises many interesting questions about the relationship between metaphysics and morality according to this worldview.

The present chapter examines one further aspect of Madhyamaka meta-ethics, and investigates the psychological components of Madhyamaka’s implied moral theory. Specifically, this chapter explores whether any philosophically feasible account of moral motivation and altruistic activity is available to those who deny the reality of both agents and recipients of compassion alike. To this end, this chapter seeks to satisfy three objectives: first, to determine which metaphysical commitments are necessary for the cultivation of altruism; second, to defend interpretations of Madhyamaka as implicitly committed to a form of ‘moral phenomenology’ and; third, to argue that interpretations of Madhyamaka as ‘pan-fictionalist’ allow scholarship to make better sense of its account of moral motivation, wherein imagination and meditative absorption assume critical roles, than can competing alternatives.

Reconstructivists aiming to elucidate Madhyamaka’s account of moral motivation face the challenge of describing what, even by Madhyamaka’s own standards, is a capricious psychological process. Indeed, one of the main differences between Madhyamaka and Western conceptions of moral motivation is that the former makes no pretensions to the idea that motivational states arise in a uniform way. Contrastingly, for all the differences between Western meta-ethicists (whether ‘cognitivist,’ ‘non-cognitivist,’

‘internalist’ or ‘externalist’) there seems to be a general – and, it will be argued, mistaken – assumption that moral motivation is the product of orderly, even *mechanistic*, mental processes. One of the defining features of a bodhisattva, however, is her ability to induce moral motivation in other people by means of varied, sometimes highly counter-intuitive, techniques. For example, Mahāyāna literature supplies an abundance of support for the view that people with different psychological dispositions and of different levels of spiritual accomplishments are motivated to pursue meritorious (*puṇya*) ends by an array of different stimuli. To note just a few examples: the *Ugraparipṛcchā* records how bodhisattvas can engender moral and spiritual motivation in others by offering them gifts of alcohol. The idea here is that, though consumption of intoxicants is a violation of the precepts, and thus an unexpected origin for the development of mindfulness, for those who are entirely lacking in insight an encounter with an (apparent) act of generosity can entice them into a community of Dharma preachers.³ Similarly, quoting from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, at ŚS 326 Śāntideva identifies certain situations in which it would be permissible for a bodhisattva to prostitute herself (again, seemingly encouraging people to violate the precept against sexual misconduct) in order to bring her clients into contact with the teachings of the Buddha.⁴

³ *Ugraparipṛcchā* – as quoted at ŚS 271. *dānapāramitākālo 'yaṃ yasya yenārthas tasya tat pradānakālah| api tu tathāhaṃ kāriṣyāmi| madyapebhya eva madyapānaṃ dāsyāmi| tāṃs tān smṛtisamprajanye samādāpayiṣyāmi||* “Now is the time for the perfection of giving. The time has come for giving to others whatever they may desire. And so I should act in this way: having given alcohol in this way to various people, I should induce mindfulness and awareness in those who are steady in conduct.” (Trans.) Nattier (2005: 232).

⁴ *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* – as quoted at ŚS 326. *saṃcintya gaṇikāṃ bhonti puṃsām ākarṣaṇāya te| rāgāṅkuraṃ ca saṃlobhya buddhajñāne sthāpayanti te||* “They intentionally become courtesans in order to attract men, and, enticing them with the hook of sexual attraction, they establish them in the pristine awareness of the Buddhas.” (Trans.) Goodman, C. (2016: 303).

These highly unusual, even antinomian, methods, by which bodhisattvas display their infinite compassion for deluded and oppressed beings, attest to the Mahāyānist commitment to ‘individualizing’ the programme of spiritual advancement in order to meet the specific spiritual needs of each being. The use of such a particularized pedagogical strategy (*upāya*) is further testament to Madhyamaka’s thoroughgoing rejection of the concept of, and the search for, absolute objectivity. As intimated at the end of the previous chapter, for Mādhyamikas, the only universally applicable benchmark for evaluating the rightness or wrongness of action is whether or not that action conduces to the alleviation of suffering (*duḥkha*) and the eventual release of all sentient beings (*nirvāṇa*).

As the above examples illustrate, Mahāyāna texts acknowledge that there are numerous legitimate means by which to induce moral motivation. Nevertheless, whilst bodhisattvas are able to cater to the unique needs of those they are trying to liberate, the same texts also enunciate a set of pedagogical principles as applicable to a wider audience and as capable of stimulating moral motivation more generally. The purpose of texts such as the *ŚS* and the *BCA* is two-fold: to sustain the aspiring bodhisattva on their arduous journey towards enlightenment and to instruct bodhisattvas in how to bring other beings to complete liberation, without which their own task cannot be accomplished. When Mādhyamikas transmitted the guidance contained in such texts amongst their communities they also displayed confidence about the possibility of replicating the motivational techniques employed therein. Hence, Madhyamaka again charts a ‘middle way’ between the implausible idea of universal psychological conformity (i.e. the idea that the same considerations motivate different people) and the

idea of psychological lawlessness (i.e. the idea that people are so different from each other that no general principles for engendering moral motivation can be established).

Unlike in the reconstruction of the implied Madhyamaka stance on the semantic, ontological and epistemic aspects of meta-ethics, the reconstructivist can draw on a rich body of sources in explicating Madhyamaka's approach to moral psychology. For example, at ŚS 209-228 Śāntideva presents three meditative practices designed to expel destructive psychological states from the mind and to induce attitudes conducive to the wellbeing both of oneself and others.⁵ Each of these practices is technically distinct – involving visualizations (for example of decomposing bodies as a remedy for lust), cultivating bodily awareness (i.e. practising mindfulness) and using one's ability to reason (about the facts of impermanence and conditionality) – but practically overlapping, in that all are designed to extirpate mental defilements (*kleśas*). Such practical overlap reveals an important feature of Madhyamaka's attitude towards instilling moral motivation: that, although the goal of the various techniques is the same, namely the realization of emptiness, there is no standardized, mechanistic or universally applicable method for achieving it. Thus, Śāntideva seems to suggest that whilst Madhyamaka theorizing can establish the broad guidelines for moral development, discerning the most effective technique to correct a character flaw and drive out the *kleśas* requires the co-creativity of aspirants and their teachers. Together, true friends (*kalyāṇa-mitras*) help each other to devise a programme of spiritual advancement, taking into account their pre-existing psychological dispositions. In contrast, Śāntideva warns of the dangers involved in associating oneself with fools,

⁵ Śāntideva - ŚS 209-228 contains a discussion on how to replace attachment with neutrality, hatred with loving-kindness and delusion with insight into dependent origination. (Trans.) Goodman, C. (2016: 206-217).

writing at *BCA* 8.13 “Between one fool and another something detrimental is inevitable, such as self-advancement, complaining about others, or conversation about the pleasures of cyclic existence.”⁶

Despite their relevance for reconstructing Madhyamaka’s meta-ethical stance on moral motivation, reflections of this kind seem regrettably to have been somewhat overlooked in recent scholarship, where the focus has primarily been on determining whether Madhyamaka can respond adequately to the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ In large part this preoccupation is the result of a controversy emanating from Williams’s provocative work *Altruism and Reality* in which he argued that Śāntideva had inadvertently “destroyed the bodhisattva path” by attempting to derive values (such as altruism) from facts about the ultimate irreality of ‘self’ and ‘other.’ Following Garfield and others, it will be argued that Williams’s charge against Śāntideva rests on a false dichotomy between facts and values. Since this distinction is not admitted as hard and fast by Mādhyamikas themselves, phenomenological and pan-fictionalist accounts of their ethics enable the clearest exposition of their attitude towards moral motivation.

The Metaphysical Prerequisites of Altruism

In chapter 8 of the *BCA* Śāntideva presents the Madhyamaka case for altruism. Verses 101-103 have attracted much interest and been subjected to copious philosophical scrutiny, particularly since the publication of Williams’s attack on the coherence of the bodhisattva path and on bodhisattvahood itself.⁷ Whilst such concentrated analysis

⁶ Śāntideva – *BCA* 8.13. *ātmotkarṣaḥ parāvarṇaḥ saṃsāraratisaṃkathā| ity ādy avāśyam aśubhaṃ kiṃcid bālasya bālataḥ||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 89).

⁷ Williams (1989: 49-54). In this earlier work, Williams begins to criticize the concept of bodhisattvahood, a critique culminating a decade later in the declaration that the bodhisattva path

casts light on new problems and yields fruitful results in terms of understanding Madhyamaka’s assessment of the relationship between facts and values, there is arguably a danger of scholarship ‘missing the wood for the trees’ by focusing so intensely on just a few verses from a single text. Whatever insights into Madhyamaka ethics such an investigation can facilitate, they must be contextualized in the wider body of Buddhist belief.

The verses in question feature in Śāntideva’s account of the perfection of meditation and run as follows:

“(101) The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong? (102) Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. Why is any limitation put on this? (103) If one asks why suffering should be prevented, no one disputes that! If it must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone.”⁸

Williams argues that Śāntideva’s intention in this passage is to supply a philosophical argument in support of the “complete rationality of altruism.”⁹ In William’s estimation, however, the argument is fundamentally flawed on account of it committing the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (i.e. the philosophically unwarranted move of deriving values from

contains the seeds of its own destruction. Here he challenges the coherence of the idea that a bodhisattva postpones her enlightenment until all others have been liberated, writing that, if this is true, “there could obviously be only one bodhisattva. Alternatively, we have the absurd spectacle of a series of bodhisattvas each trying to hurry the others into *nirvāṇa* in order to preserve his or her vow!” Although it would be too much of a deviation to answer these objections against bodhisattvahood systematically, it seems unlikely that these critiques are insurmountable. In the first place, Buddhists might challenge Williams’s presentation of *nirvāṇa* as being spatio-temporally extended and secondly could argue that all the bodhisattvas get to uphold their vows by all ‘entering’ the mental state of *nirvāṇa* simultaneously.

⁸ Śāntideva – BCA 8.101-103. (101) *saṃtānaḥ samudāyaś ca pañktisenādivan mṛṣā| yasya duḥkhaṃ sa nāsty asmāt kasya tat svaṃ bhaviṣyati||* (102) *asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāṇy evāviśeṣataḥ| duḥkhatvād eva vāryāṇi niyamas tatra kiṃ kṛtaḥ||* (103) *duḥkhaṃ kasmān nivāryaṃ cet sarveṣāṃ avivādataḥ| vāryaṃ cet sarvaṃ apy evaṃ na ced ātmāpi sattvavat||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 97).

⁹ Williams (1998: 29).

facts) and is therefore “as noble as it is incoherent.”¹⁰ He takes Śāntideva as grounding his ethical conclusion, that people ought to act altruistically and impartially, on metaphysical analysis concerning the nature of reality as ultimately empty, such that the labels ‘self’ and ‘other’ have no referents. William’s critique is highly detailed but can, nevertheless, be summarized concisely:

On the one hand, Śāntideva appeals to metaphysical theses, such as no-self (*anātman*) and mereological reductionism (as when he denies the reality of ‘wholes,’ like armies, which are in fact composed of numerous parts, such as individual soldiers) in order to show that, ultimately, there is no morally relevant difference between people, such that there can be no rational basis on which to prioritize the satisfaction of *A*’s interests over the satisfaction of *B*’s interests. Since the existence of wholes is an illusion, properly speaking there are no ‘owners’ of suffering and, instead, suffering is ultimately subject-less. On the other hand, according to the standards of conventional truth, it is both legitimate and necessary to differentiate between people because, although there are no ultimately existent selves, there are conventionally existent people, about whom we can predicate particular properties. However, once Śāntideva admits a conventional level distinction between *A* and *B*, he also admits a basis on which to give preference to the interests of one over those of another. This is because, conventionally, suffering is not experienced as subject-less and is instead experienced as ‘mine’ or ‘not mine.’ At the conventional level, then, the rational reasons for altruism are only as strong as the reasons for egoism.

¹⁰ Williams (1998: 107).

There are two parts to Williams's critique, which will be answered in reverse order. First he accuses Śāntideva of deriving moral conclusions from strictly factual premises about the pervasiveness of impermanence, dependency and no-self. Several scholars have sought to defend Śāntideva – and Madhyamaka generally – from this objection and possible responses will be reviewed below. Secondly, he holds that even if Madhyamaka's account of ultimate truth is correct – and it really is the case that 'self' and 'other' are terms without referents – the spiritual aspirant nevertheless depends on her belief in 'self' and 'other' as meaningful categories in order successfully to navigate the world. Once persons are conceded as conventionally existent, the aspirant will inevitably encounter moral dilemmas where, rationally, there is no more justification for altruistic than for selfish conduct. The upshot of this concession is that if Śāntideva aims to provide an unassailable rational justification for altruism, the only way to meet this objective is to relinquish the distinction between 'self' and 'other' at the conventional level too. This last step comes at a considerable conceptual cost, however, for, once the distinction between self and other is precluded even conventionally, the notion of suffering becomes 'free-floating.' This, Williams maintains, is absurd.

It seems that two points can be made in response to Williams's second objection, centring on the alleged absurdity of free-floating, subject-less, suffering. First though, it is worth noting that Williams's contention finds support from the *International Association for the Study of Pain*, according to which pain is "always subjective" and presumably, therefore, always experienced *as one's own*.¹¹ There is certainly something deeply intuitive about the idea that suffering – if not also pain, the two concepts being distinguishable as noted in chapter 7 – is necessarily experienced as

¹¹ IASP Report (2011: §3).

one's own. Nevertheless, since Madhyamaka contests the possibility of suffering being experienced as ultimately one's own once realization of emptiness occurs, perhaps they can also challenge the assumption that suffering is always experienced subjectively even conventionally.

For example, it is widely recognized that pre-linguistic humans and non-humans can experience both pain and suffering despite lacking a clear sense of self. The available scientific evidence indicates that it takes a couple of years for a human baby to fully develop self-awareness and the ability to cognize in terms of 'self' and 'other,' yet, for all this, nobody would deny that babies can in fact feel pain and even suffering, pain's psychological counterpart.¹² Might it be that, although a baby experiences pain subjectively (in the sense that, as a biological organism she experiences the effects of certain physical events negatively) she also experiences it subject-lessly (in the sense that there is no cognition 'I am experiencing pain' associated with the physical sensations)? It is not clear how strong the sense of self must be in order for pain to be experienced as 'the occurrence of *my* pain' rather than as just 'the occurrence of pain.' If pre-cognizant humans and non-human animals lacking self-consciousness can experience suffering without drawing a clear demarcation between themselves and others, then, perhaps, after all, it is conceivable that bodhisattvas are capable of the same.

Another possible response to Williams's claim that the idea of free-floating pain is absurd is to adopt an 'eliminativist' attitude towards pain. An abundance of evidence suggests that certain extreme neurosurgical procedures (such as lobotomies), drugs and

¹² Rochart (2003).

conditions can lead people to feel pain without the usual attendant reactive experience. Patients who undergo such procedures or take certain drugs to help deal with chronic or misplaced pain (as when an amputee ‘feels’ their phantom limb) reportedly recognize painful sensations but do not feel distressed by them.¹³ Again, if lobotomized individuals can experience pain without psychologically investing themselves in that experience, by dissociating themselves from it, perhaps the idea that bodhisattvas (renowned for their dispassion and skill in non-grasping) can likewise experience pain, without a sense that it is *they* who experience it, is not so absurd as it initially seemed.

One point Williams is surely right about, though, is that once pains are conceived as ‘free-floating’ it follows that if they are to be quelled, they should be quelled indiscriminately. In other words, there is an apparent tension in Śāntideva holding both that suffering should be warded off simply because it is suffering and that the bodhisattva always has reason to prioritize the wellbeing of others over herself. At *BCA* 3.12, for example, Śāntideva says “I make over this body to all embodied beings to do with what they please. Let them continually beat it, insult it, and splatter it with filth.”¹⁴ At least sometimes the alleviation of one’s own pain and suffering, rather than somebody else’s, will be the more achievable objective and, depending on its intensity, might also be the most compassionate act. However, to take Śāntideva as arguing that one should always denigrate oneself where doing so pleases others or that one should defer one’s own basic needs in order to satisfy the whims of others is completely unwarranted. Not only would such quietude be to the detriment of other beings, in that they would cultivate bad *karma* as a result, but it would also prevent the bodhisattva

¹³ Aydede (2013).

¹⁴ Śāntideva – *BCA* 3.12. *yaś cāsukhīkṛtaś cātmā mayāyaṃ sarvadehinām | ghnantu nindantu vā nityam ākirantu ca pāṃsubhiḥ* // (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 21).

from using her body most effectively, as a vehicle for bringing others to the realization of emptiness. Such a literalistic reading of passages where the bodhisattva is lauded for her lack of self-concern fails to accommodate the idea that the *BCA* as a whole aims to cultivate a sense of selflessness. Śāntideva could thus be more fruitfully interpreted as using *upāya* in order to counteract the normal tendency to prioritize one's own interests.

Turning now to the question of whether Śāntideva commits the naturalistic fallacy at *BCA* 101-103, it seems that, once again, two responses are viable. It can either be argued that the text does not even intend to supply a rational argument in support of altruism and, therefore, cannot be accused of 'deriving' values from facts. On this interpretation, Śāntideva merely presents a psychologically – not philosophically – compelling case for adopting a more compassionate approach. Alternatively, it can be argued that to accuse Śāntideva of committing the naturalistic fallacy is, in itself, indicative of failure to understand Madhyamaka's entire project. According to this interpretation, because Madhyamaka is implicitly committed to global anti-realism, the sharp distinction between facts and values upon which the naturalistic fallacy depends represents a false dichotomy. The two responses just sketched are not mutually exclusive.

Pettit adopts the first approach, arguing *contra* Williams that it was never Śāntideva's intention to produce an argument for altruism. Instead, Pettit contends that Śāntideva sought only to show that, as a matter of fact, psychologically internalizing the truth of no-self (*anātman*) leads to the cultivation of altruism. He argues that readings of the *BCA* as primarily geared towards delivering rational justification for altruism fail to appreciate "an important part of the puzzle, namely, personal practical experience."¹⁵

¹⁵ Pettit (1999: 134).

Others besides Pettit claim that William's critique of Śāntideva for faulty philosophical reasoning is inappropriate given that the contentious verses feature in a chapter dedicated to the perfection of meditation. In response, Williams maintains that his interpretation is borne out of the textual evidence and writes that if Śāntideva did not intend to produce an argument for altruism "he should have expressed his purposes more clearly and not obscured them with the form of an argument."¹⁶ At a distance of more than a millennium, it is unlikely that scholarship can provide a definitive account of what precisely Śāntideva hoped to achieve, whether logical entailment or psychological reorientation. Yet the far more interesting question than what Śāntideva intended is whether an argument from the fact of no-self to the conclusion that people ought to be altruistic *could* be supplied within a Madhyamaka framework.

Numerous scholars resist Williams's charge concerning Śāntideva's illegitimate derivation of values from facts. They argue that Mādhyamikas are simply incapable of committing the naturalistic fallacy because they do not recognize the reality of facts from which values could be illegitimately obtained. For example, Clayton suggests that the very idea of an is-ought gap finds little affinity in Buddhism where the notion of a firm distinction between the two is not entertained. This, Clayton holds, is true of Abhidharma Buddhism and even more so for Madhyamaka. She writes of the fact/value distinction "this is really a modern, western notion that probably does not mesh well with any premodern Indian worldviews... Since consciousness is not a 'tabula rasa,' but always involves selection and choice, perception is always mediated by one's interest (*saṅkhāra*)."¹⁷

¹⁶ Williams (2000 b: 444).

¹⁷ Clayton (2001: 88-89).

As the arguments in chapter 1 supporting anti-realist interpretations were designed to show, Madhyamaka cannot accommodate the idea of a non-value laden fact. Further, as indicated in chapter 6 on *karma*, Madhyamaka understands the karmic process as influencing the way in which individuals perceive reality, such that their experiences are shaped in large part by their expectations, attitudes and values. If ultimately there are no facts, then there is simply no is-ought problem in need of redress.

Like Clayton, Garfield argues that Madhyamaka cannot accommodate the notion of pure facts. He uses this insight as the basis for formulating a new approach towards understanding Buddhist ethics, arguing for ‘moral phenomenology,’ the idea that Buddhism promotes a completely new mode of engaging with the world which is not dependent on the mistaken idea that there is some fixed fact about the way the world is.¹⁸ Despite the cogency of Clayton’s and Garfield’s interpretation of the fact/ value distinction as being a false dichotomy, what both appear to overlook is the fact that Madhyamaka presents realization of emptiness – realization that there are no objective, mind-independent, facts – as the *culmination point* of the spiritual quest. How then are unenlightened beings, who erroneously believe in the idea of objective truth, perhaps even the objective truth that ultimately there is no-self, to use their insights into reality as a means of generating compassion? If Garfield’s ‘phenomenological’ approach to Buddhist ethics turns out to be correct, it seems it is only capable of influencing how enlightened beings engage with the world. Given that the unenlightened still believe in the firm distinction between facts and values, how do Mādhyamikas stimulate moral motivation in those who have not yet internalized the teaching of emptiness?

¹⁸ Garfield (2010).

Moral Phenomenology

The idea of ethics as a form of ‘phenomenology’ could transform scholarship’s engagement with this branch of Buddhist philosophy. Efforts to understand Buddhist ethics through the lens of Western moral theory have been only partly successful and have invariably involved some degree of distortion of Buddhist ideas. Just as reconstructivists interested in Buddhist free will theorizing must be aware of the dangers of selective interpretations of key concepts and of making Buddhism conform to the mutually exclusive Western categories of libertarianism, compatibilism and determinism, so too must scholarship critically question what has led to Buddhism being variously described as implicitly committed to consequentialism, deontology and virtue theory. Given the enormous body of Madhyamaka literature invoking ethical concepts like compassion, equanimity and sympathetic joy, and given the vast array of competing interpretations available, it is natural to wonder whether consequentialist or virtue theoretic accounts of Buddhism would emerge from Buddhist texts unaided by the reconstructivist’s pre-existing knowledge of Western moral philosophy.

Interestingly, even scholars who argue that Western moral frameworks can be suitable for appraising Buddhist ethics – such as Keown, who argues for interpretations of Buddhism as principally concerned with virtue, and Charles Goodman, who argues that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a form of consequentialism – agree that there are risks involved. For example, Goodman contends that Keown’s aretaic interpretation relies on a specific body of texts and that there are others which could be appealed to in defence of consequentialist readings.¹⁹ Needless to say, however, this argument is

¹⁹ Goodman (2009: 54).

just as strong in the other direction, and Goodman too could be accused of ‘cherry picking’ his textual evidence.

Since these debates seem potentially interminable, with each side always able to adduce further textual evidence taken to discount their opponent’s perspective and bolster their own, the emergence of ‘phenomenological’ readings – which attempt to understand Buddhist ethics on its own terms – offers a refreshing alternative. Garfield presents moral phenomenology as a way of understanding the Buddhist tradition authentically, relying on concepts *sui generis* to the Madhyamaka worldview. He argues that reading Buddhist ethics through the rigid categories of Western philosophy is a mistake not only because Buddhism does not subscribe to a clear set of ethical principles to determine the rightness or wrongness of action but because Buddhist ethics is not primarily concerned with action so much as with transforming our experience of the world and, hence, our comportment to it.²⁰ Garfield alleges that Buddhist ethics is fundamentally interested in a different type of question to that with which Western ethics is concerned, namely how to confront the ubiquity of suffering.²¹ From this perspective, too much *theorizing* about ethics can have the adverse effect of making the rules of conduct seem more important than the practical aim of delivering solutions to the problem at hand.

Moreover, although Mahāyāna Buddhists emphasize the importance of developing the traditional set of perfections (*pāramitās*), there is no suggestion of these leading to the acquisition of unshakable ‘character’ as in virtue theory. On the contrary, the ultimate

²⁰ Garfield (2015: 279).

²¹ Garfield (2010: 338).

purpose of cultivating the *pāramitās* is to undermine one's sense of self as separable and independent of others, not to reinforce the process of self-construction (*ahaṃkāra*). Again, whilst Buddhist texts contain passages where the focus is on alleviating the suffering of others at the expense of sacrificing oneself, Garfield argues that there is no suggestion that achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number would satisfy the demands of bodhisattvahood. The bodhisattva, taking a long-term view of her enterprise to lead all other sentient beings to liberation, never sacrifices anybody's wellbeing at all, at least not from the ultimate perspective. Rather, she may prioritize the welfare of *A* over *B* at a particular time because she knows the time is ripe for *A*'s spiritual advancement and that more good can be done by aiding *A*.

Another advantage of adopting a 'phenomenological' approach to Buddhist ethics is that it forces a re-examination of the presuppositions on which the fact/ value dichotomy rests and shows that the underlying assumptions necessary for the is-ought distinction to be a problem are absent in the Madhyamaka system. In a sense, then, the phenomenological approach enables not resolution, but dissolution, of the problem.

The phenomenological account of Buddhist ethics can straightforwardly explain the occurrence of morally motivational states in enlightened beings yet perhaps struggles when it comes to accounting for motivation in the unenlightened. To take the simpler task first: the phenomenologist maintains that part of what it is for Buddhas and bodhisattvas to realize the truth of emptiness involves coming to engage with others dispassionately, without attachment. The phenomenologist would disagree with Williams in his assessment that "there is no contradiction whatsoever in accepting as true a teaching of no Self (*anātman*) – even seeing it directly in the fullest possible way

– and being selfish.”²² Mādhyamikas themselves amply demonstrate the need to conjoin cognitive and affective acceptance of emptiness in order for it to constitute an effective remedy to *saṃsāra*. For them, if somebody exhibits signs of selfishness this is enough to disqualify them as having directly seen emptiness ‘in the fullest possible way.’ The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* makes the same point when, in chapter 3, it is announced that only those who strive for the liberation of all beings whilst at the same time recognizing the ultimate irreality of beings to be liberated deserve to be called bodhisattvas.²³

When enlightened beings realize emptiness they are also said to experience a spontaneous outpouring of compassion. Hence, in formulating his account of moral phenomenology, Garfield attributes particular significance to *bodhicitta* in explaining motivation. *Bodhicitta* is notoriously difficult to translate but Garfield characterizes it as “a standing motivational state [which] involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in compassion, to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings.”²⁴ The idea that Buddhas and bodhisattvas are motivated to engage in any action at all is problematic insofar as it suggests that they remain subject to the law of *karma*, whose preserve is *saṃsāra*.²⁵ Following the canonical Pāli texts, Nāgārjuna also makes the connection between *karma* – i.e. intentional activity – and being trapped in *saṃsāra* explicit at *Suḥṛllekha* 109 when he writes: “From ignorance comes action, and from

²² Williams (1998: 110).

²³ *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* – chapter 3. *na sa subhūte bodhisattvo vaktavyo yasya ātmasaṃjñā pravarteta sattvasaṃjñā vā jīvasaṃjñā vā pudgalasaṃjñā vā pravarteta*|| “He is not to be called a Bodhi-being, in whom the notion of a self or of a being should take place, or the notion of a living soul or a living person.” (Trans.) Conze, E. (1958: 25).

²⁴ Garfield (2010: 334).

²⁵ Chapter 7 contains a discussion of how best to interpret the conduct of a bodhisattva. In presenting the bodhisattva figure, Buddhists must navigate between ideas of such beings acting purposefully yet without karmic intent whilst at the same time preserving the image of the bodhisattva as both warm and compassionate rather than as robotic, almost *programmed* to act as they do.

that comes consciousness, thence name-and-form appears.”²⁶ If *bodhicitta* is a motivational state which gives rise to the desire to act compassionately and for the good of others, it cannot be of the same order as ordinary motivational states bound up with *karmic* conditionality. Madhyamaka could therefore conceive of *bodhicitta* as effectively reprogramming one’s psychological makeup so that concern for others is the natural result of witnessing their distress, just as ordinary beings are concerned by their own distress and attempt to ameliorate their circumstances.

The portrayal of Buddhist ethics in phenomenological terms allows for an explanation of the connection between Madhyamaka metaphysics (or, what might be a better characterization, anti-metaphysics according to which there is no objective truth about the world) and normative ethics. Moral phenomenology sets out to achieve this by arguing that it is impossible to commit the naturalistic fallacy if facts themselves turn out to be the product of mental fabrication and are always imbued with value.

Nevertheless, phenomenological readings of Buddhist ethics are not entirely satisfactory. Although they can explain moral motivation in enlightened beings – by positing *bodhicitta* and the spontaneous outpouring of compassion it generates – they struggle to explain moral motivation in those who most need to acquire it, namely the unenlightened. If the phenomenological approach exposes the is-ought problem as merely ‘pseudo’ in nature, for unenlightened beings, who remain deluded, there is still the question of how to derive moral insights from seemingly factual premises. Yet even by conventional standards, such a move is generally regarded as philosophically impermissible.

²⁶ Nāgārjuna – *Suḥrillekha* 109. (Trans. from the Tibetan) The Padmakara Translation Group (2013: 71).

Motivating the Unenlightened

The rational derivation of values from facts is unacceptable according to the standards of philosophy, which, like all disciplines dealing with concepts, is a conventional level enterprise. Nevertheless, this does not mean that values cannot be derived from facts when the derivation is the result of psychological, rather than strictly rational, processes. Gowans, for example, argues that even for unenlightened beings there is a psychological connection between cognitively assenting to the fact of no-self and adopting a view of oneself as morally equal to other people.²⁷

Buddhists would presumably also argue that *karma*'s power to morally motivate should not be under-estimated. Positing a 'law like' connection between the moral qualities of somebody's intentional states and the hedonic flavour of their experience should be enough to motivate even the most apathetic individuals. Amongst the unenlightened, for both the philosophically inclined (who perceive the is-ought dichotomy as genuinely problematic) and the philosophically unreflective, karmic considerations are likely to motivate. It is plausible that humanity's shared pragmatic concern to avoid and mitigate personal suffering is enough to motivate ethics in a world where *karma* is thought to have consequences – regardless of which metaphysical picture of the self is endorsed. Proponents of naturalized Buddhism, such as Flanagan for example, doubt the motivational power of *karma* unaccompanied by belief in rebirth but accept that the no-self view can still be morally compelling inasmuch as it leads to a life of flourishing and the abandonment of self-obsessing thought processes.²⁸ Nevertheless, by taking

²⁷ Gowans (2015: 168).

²⁸ Flanagan (2011: 117).

psychological interpretations of *karma* seriously, this doctrine could remain motivational even to materialist naturalists. The belief that mean spiritedness and immoral conduct will negatively impact even one's present life could be sufficient to stimulate ethical reflection. The historical Buddha himself made a similar point in his sermon to the Kālāmas when he invited them to test for themselves the benefits of ethical conduct and the harms of acting perniciously.²⁹

In a recent article, Lele has developed an alternative strategy for rectifying the aforementioned deficiency in Garfield's argument, such that the unenlightened may also acquire a phenomenological perspective (and thus realise the 'pseudo' nature of the is-ought problem) by a series of psychological manoeuvres. Whether this was in fact Lele's purpose is uncertain, especially given his belief that Śāntideva "more than many other Indian thinkers [was] engaging in the traditional Western conception of philosophy."³⁰ Indeed, as Garfield convincingly argues, a phenomenological account of Buddhist ethics is attractive precisely because it delivers alternative procedures for conducting moral reasoning to those found in Western philosophy.

Lele leaves aside the question of whether at *BCA* 8.101-103 Śāntideva in fact commits the naturalistic fallacy and proceeds simply to examine how he uses metaphysical arguments to draw ethical conclusions.³¹ Whether this method is acceptable is

²⁹ *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.65, *Kesamutti Sutta*. In this sutta the Buddha explains to the Kālāmas that somebody who is noble and behaves morally has four assurances: (1) if there is another lifetime, he will have a good rebirth; (2) if there is not another lifetime, he will still lead a content and fulfilling life now; (3) if ill-will breeds enmity, then he will not be subject to enmity in the future; (4) if ill-will does not breed enmity, then he is not subject to enmity in this lifetime.

³⁰ Lele (2015: 256).

³¹ Lele (2015: 267). Lele simply states that "there is no room to get into that debate here." I consider this to be a generally unsatisfying approach, particularly in an article about the connection between metaphysics and ethics in the thought of Śāntideva. Nevertheless, there are other merits to Lele's argument and it is on these that I focus here.

questionable given that the very topic up for debate is whether Śāntideva can legitimately draw any normative conclusions from his conception of the world as entirely without *svabhāva*. Lele could, indeed, be accused of begging the question in taking this approach but it is nevertheless interesting to enquire into the psychological consequences of at least temporarily forestalling philosophical objections against the is-ought *faux pas*.

Unexpectedly, through withholding our objections, the case for Buddhist moral phenomenology gains new strength. Belief in the legitimacy of deriving facts from values may be enough to stave off ethical nihilism in unenlightened beings with a predilection towards it even if there can be no rational justification for this manoeuvre. More positively, internalizing the truth of emptiness may be thought – simply as a matter of psychological fact – to result in less egotistically motivated behaviour.

By simply assuming that his intellectual predecessors have settled what is in fact an on-going debate, Lele explores the connections Śāntideva makes between four separate metaphysical arguments and their ethical upshots as though there were nothing problematic about deriving facts from values. This unusual strategy interestingly reveals the strength of Garfield's proposed moral phenomenology as the final insight into emptiness, arrived at only through successive iterations of greater compassion premised on the basis of increasingly profound metaphysical insights. Hence, by defending interpretations of Buddhist ethics as moral phenomenology one also adduces further support for the idea of Buddhist teachings as necessarily graded, such that in the process of acquiring deeper insights the spiritual aspirant is required to return to and revise previously endorsed positions.

To illustrate, Lele identifies four metaphysical arguments presented by Śāntideva in the *BCA* as inspiring specifically moral conclusions. That these arguments are structured progressively is key to an understanding of how insight into emptiness may induce a morally phenomenological perspective. The four arguments and their conclusions are:

- (1) All things are causally dependent and, consequently, one should not become angry with those who do harmful things on account of how they are causally conditioned to behave (*BCA* 6.22-33).
- (2) All composite entities are subject to decay and destruction. One should therefore refrain from clinging either to one's own body (*BCA* 5.62-64) or from becoming too attached to other people since neither are a proper object of devotion (*BCA* 8.40-82).
- (3) All beings are alike in their experience of suffering. It is erroneous to suppose that there is a permanent self unifying all of one's experiences and, consequently, it is not rational always to give priority to the alleviation of one's own suffering. One should instead practice altruism (*BCA* 8.90-103).
- (4) The forgoing arguments, on causality, impermanence, and suffering, are designed to show that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic reality. Hence, attachment to any entity is inappropriate (*BCA* 9).

If conclusions (1)-(3) are incorporated into (4) as Lele suggests they must be, then the final argument supersedes the others both metaphysically and ethically.³² Whilst (1)-(3) may not represent successive steps in one argument leading to (4), nevertheless, taken together (1)-(3) provide the platform for (4) insofar as, cumulatively, they call

³² Lele (2015: 277).

into question the inherent reality of all phenomena. Moreover, as Lele points out, in putting forth the arguments in this order, Śāntideva demonstrates the sequential nature of Buddhist spiritual progression: where (1) and (2) are acceptable to all Buddhists, (3) promotes qualities distinctive to the Mahāyāna, whilst (4) is acceptable to Mādhyamikas only. Of course, it remains to be answered whether a non-Buddhist should have any independent reasons to endorse (1). Addressing this question would take us too far from the present task. However, much of what has been argued earlier pertaining to perspectivalism suggests that, indeed, independent reasons are forthcoming.³³

As a philosophical argument, Lele's conclusion is unlikely to gain much traction because it is at least conceivable that unenlightened people will accept Śāntideva's metaphysical claims without then endorsing their ethical upshots. The Buddhist tradition itself is aware that there is a possible disjoint between belief in emptiness and the abandonment of attachment. Indeed, the prevalence of just such a disconnect is widespread and attested by the fact that the unenlightened typically sustain the grand illusions of permanence and substantiality throughout a potentially endless series of rebirths, even in the face of their own recurrent deaths. For Lele's four-step argument to succeed in revolutionizing the attitudes people adopt towards entities they acknowledge as empty, it must be conjoined with an account of how endorsement of (1)-(3), and the practice of relevant associated meditations, creates the mental conditions for (4).

³³ Chapter 5 explored the theory of perspectivalism according to which all beings appear set to benefit from abandonment of reactive attitudes. Hence, as a purely pragmatic step it might be helpful to regard the misdeeds of others as causally conditioned rather than as freely willed.

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to a psychological explication of moral motivation amongst unenlightened beings of diverse dispositions and levels of insight. It is widely agreed that acceptance of emptiness as a metaphysical truth cannot by itself stimulate concern for others. However, once acknowledged as a philosophy with both systematic and soteriological components, there is no warrant for neglecting the importance Madhyamaka assigns to meditative absorption as a tool for inducing moral transformation. Such meditative practices as ‘exchanging self with other’ are designed for the purpose of initiating a level of concern for others not accessible through ratiocination alone.

Pan-Fictionalism: Anti-Realism’s Psychological Counterpart

In the discussion so far it has been argued that Madhyamaka is best interpreted as implicitly committed to global anti-realism, the view that there are no ‘objective’ facts at all. This interpretation has been shown to have implications for how Madhyamaka understands the notion of truth and how it conceives the possibility and nature of knowledge acquisition. At this late stage, then, why introduce the idea that Madhyamaka should be read as pan-fictionalist?

The answer lies in the realization that pan-fictionalism is not an alternative to anti-realism, but its psychological counterpart. However strongly the case is made for reading anti-realism as a substitute for metaphysical theory, rather than as one more such theory, it seems impossible ever fully to shake off overtones of objectivity. Is it objectively the case that nothing is objective? Siderits argues that anti-realism aims to show that all the points on the metaphysical spectrum between naïve realism and

nihilism are incoherent when thought of in terms of ‘correspondence.’ To reiterate a point made several times already, the anti-realist contends that the anti-realist view must be applied just as forcefully to itself as everything else. The pan-fictionalist makes the same point, arguing that everything – including pan-fictionalism itself – is fictitious and the product of mental fabrication. The difference between anti-realism and pan-fictionalism, though, is that the latter seems better equipped to promote psychological reorientation towards the world, encouraging people to construct new narratives and to deploy imaginative and visualization techniques *et cetera* in the cultivation of compassion.

From surveying the literature, it seems that Matilal was (one of) the first scholar(s) to describe Buddhism as ‘pan-fictionalist.’³⁴ It is curious that he does not qualify his statement, narrowing its application to Madhyamaka only, for, as he points out, pan-fictionalism is the result of a distinctive interpretation of the theory of two truths (*satyadvaya*). When taken to have general application, his claim that Buddhism “would like to put all the objects over which our thoughts and other psychological activities may range at the same level,” is in fact mistaken.³⁵ Indeed, as Matilal himself was well aware, the primary source of disagreement between Abhidharma and Madhyamaka philosophers concerns the presumed ontological status of impartite *dharma*s. Hence, Abhidharma Buddhists would not accept that all objects of thought are ontologically equal but would rather contend that the *dharma*s have primacy and are foundational. Taking this oversight as a mere slip on Matilal’s part, ever since his investigation into Buddhism’s use of ‘empty’ terms of reference there has been a growing trend towards

³⁴ Matilal (1971: 144).

³⁵ Matilal (1971: 145).

reading Madhyamaka as pan-fictionalist. For example, scholars such as Crittenden, D’Amato, Garfield and Huntington have all argued that Madhyamaka can be understood as advancing the view that everything is fictitious inasmuch as experience is the product of the narratives we construct for ourselves and is imbued with our own interests, values and interpretations.³⁶ That Mādhyamikas themselves thought in such terms is evidenced in texts such as Nāgārjuna’s *Acintyastava* where, at verse 35, he writes: “It has been loudly declared by you that the whole world is only name; separated from the expression, that which is expressed does not exist.”³⁷

Crittenden presents pan-fictionalism not just as a helpful hermeneutical tool for understanding Indian Madhyamaka but also as an independently viable philosophical theory with merits of its own. Acknowledging the peripheral position pan-fictionalism has assumed in the history of Western philosophy, Crittenden argues that the very same reasons for its neglect in the West explain its relative prominence in Buddhist philosophy.³⁸ In particular, Crittenden contends that the influence of the natural sciences on philosophy has been far greater in the Western tradition (generally speaking) and that consequently Western thought has been deeply suffused by the belief in metaphysical realism. This belief underpins the dominant view of the relationship between terms and their referents: that of semantic realism, according to which there is a real connection of correspondence between word and world.³⁹ Interestingly, proponents of Madhyamaka encountered the idea of semantic realism in their engagement with Mīmāṃsā rivals. Bhāviveka, one of the first to produce something

³⁶ See Crittenden (1981), D’Amato (2013), Garfield (2006) and Huntington (2018).

³⁷ Nāgārjuna – *Acintyastava* 35. *nāmamātram jagat sarvaṃ ity ucchair bhāṣitam tvayā| abhidhānāt prthagbhūtam abhidheyaṃ na vidyate||* (Trans.) Tola, F. and Dragonetti, C. (1985: 32).

³⁸ Crittenden (1991: ix).

³⁹ Crittenden (1991: x).

resembling a ‘compendium’ of Indian philosophy, grapples with the Mīmāṃsā worldview in chapter 9 of his *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā*.⁴⁰ It is against the backdrop of Mīmāṃsā’s especially strong version of semantic realism, in which the efficacy of Vedic rites and rituals is considered secured by the one-to-one correspondence of the Sanskrit language and ultimate reality, that the Buddhist support for nominalism and fictionalism must be contextualized. A key component of Madhyamaka philosophy involves demonstrating that concepts remain efficacious even though they are not grounded in objective fact. As has already been noted, this is the motive behind Nāgārjuna’s assertion at VV 22 concerning the utility and functionality of ‘empty’ concepts such as ‘chariot,’ ‘pot,’ ‘cloth’ *et cetera*.⁴¹ When realism (whether arising from belief in the Vedas or belief in scientific objectivity) is contrasted with Madhyamaka it is not surprising that the latter is often described as thoroughgoing fictionalism.

From Madhyamaka’s wholesale denial of inherent reality (*svabhāva*) it follows that pan-fictionalism necessary fails, just as much as other theories, to convey the way the world is. Yet, in alignment with the idea that Madhyamaka can accommodate a hierarchy of conventional truths, there is still scope for less and more fictitious interaction with the world. Hence, pan-fictionalist readings of Madhyamaka allow scholars to make better sense of the role of imagination in facilitating both insight into emptiness and the performance of compassion deeds. When mental construction is executed deliberately and self-consciously, as opposed to habitually and unreflectively,

⁴⁰ Bhāviveka – *Madhyamakahrdaya-kārikā* 9.6 gives a clear exposition of the Mīmāṃsā view as follows: *nityaḥ śabda dhvaniyaṅgyaḥ sambandho ’rthena nityataḥ| pratipattur yato ’rtheṣu pratipattiḥ prajāyate*|| “The sound, which is eternal, is manifested by syllables. Its connection with object stands eternal. From that (connection of word and object), understanding with regard to the object arises for one who understands.” (Trans.) Kawasaki, S.

⁴¹ Nāgārjuna – VV 22. (Trans.) Westerhoff, J. (2010: 27).

there is an opportunity to build new and transformative narratives in which ‘self’ and ‘other’ are valued equally. For instance, in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* the Buddha says to Subhuti “someone who has set out in the vehicle of a Bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner: ‘As many beings as there are in the universe of beings... all these I must lead to *nirvāṇa*.’”⁴²

Arguably therefore, pan-fictionalist accounts of Madhyamaka communicate the importance of imagination in determining the limits of our moral consciousness. Pan-fictionalism introduces the unenlightened to the notion that human conceptual schemas, means of classification, and assignment of properties represent just one feasible approach to phenomena. Potentially infinitely many alternative orientations are available, with some likely to be altogether more coherent and/ or spiritually fulfilling than those ordinarily adopted.

Pan-Fictionalism: Expanding Moral Horizons

Interpretations of Madhyamaka as pan-fictionalist help explain this tradition’s emphasis on the need to identify and overcome our moral blind spots. Although anti-realism and pan-fictionalism are structurally alike and although both call for the eventual overhaul of ordinary, unenlightened, engagement with the world, pan-fictionalism turns our tendency to hypostatize, reify and conceptually impute into an opportunity for moral growth. Indeed, classical Madhyamaka sources themselves place

⁴² *Vajracchedikā Sūtra* – chapter 3. *iha subhūte bodhisattvayānasamprasthitena evaṃ cittam utpādayitavyam yāvantaḥ subhūte sattvāḥ [...] yāvan kaścit sattvadhātuprajñāpyamānaḥ prajñāpyate te ca mayā sarve ’nupadhiśeṣe nirvāṇadhātau parinirvāpayitavyāḥ*|| (Trans.) Conze, E. (1958: 25).

special value on the power of imaginative exercises in cultivating the perfections which eventually culminate in bodhisattvahood.

For example, at *BCA* 1.15-16 Śāntideva distinguishes between ‘*praṇidhi*’ and ‘*prasthāna*’ *bodhicitta*. This distinction, which, according to Wangchuk seems to have featured for the first time in Śāntideva’s works, represents just one of several possible sub-classifications of the *bodhicitta* concept.⁴³ The difference between the two states is comparable to the difference between a person who is already on the way to her destination and somebody who is desirous to set out but has not yet done so.⁴⁴ Wangchuck suggests that, originally, the concept of *bodhicitta* probably constituted nothing over and above than the resolve to become a Buddha and was sufficiently encapsulated by *praṇidhi*. However, he writes that “on a practical level, the difficulty of maintaining motivation during the actual practices may have given rise to the need to combine... *praṇidhi* with... *prasthāna* under the unified concept of *bodhicitta*. This process can be seen as a process of crystallisation that made *bodhicitta* richer in meaning – and made it assume an ever-increasing role until it became the be-all and end-all of Mahāyāna spirituality.”⁴⁵ Mahāyānists acknowledge at least two traditional methods (both involving imagination and meditative absorption) for activating *bodhicitta* and thus developing spontaneous and abundant moral motivation. The first of these is known as the ‘seven-point cause and effect method’ for promoting compassion and involves a series of psychological manoeuvres designed to diminish

⁴³ Wangchuck (2007: 247).

⁴⁴ Śāntideva – *BCA* 1.15-16. (15) *tad bodhicittaṃ dvividhaṃ vijñātavyaṃ samāsataḥ| bodhipraṇidhicittaṃ ca bodhiprasthānam eva ca||* (16) *gantukāmasya gantuś ca yathā bhedaḥ pratīyate| tathā bhedo ‘nayoḥ jñeyo yāthāsaṃkhyena paṇḍitaiḥ||* “The Awakening Mind should be understood to be of two kinds; in brief: the Mind resolved on Awakening and the Mind proceeding towards Awakening. The distinction between the two should be understood by the wise in the same way as the distinction is recognized between a person who desires to go and on who is going, in that order.”(Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 6).

⁴⁵ Wangchuck (2007: 248).

one’s sense of superiority over others and to foster a sense of inter-dependence and reciprocity.⁴⁶ At stage one, the aspirant is encouraged to meditate on the conventionally true proposition that all living beings have, at some time, been their mother. In the context of belief in rebirths, this idea makes sense and acquires psychologically compelling moral relevance. However, internalizing the moral significance of this insight – namely that one should act compassionately towards all beings, including one’s enemies who have at some time been one’s closest allies – requires immense imaginative powers. In the light of the foregoing discussion on whether Mādhyamikas commit the ‘naturalistic fallacy,’ it is important to note that they do not argue that anything *logically* follows from believing all beings to have once been our mother but only that *as a matter of psychological fact* this belief stimulates concern for others. Success in the subsequent six stages of the ‘cause and effect method’ is similarly dependent on the ability to extend one’s moral horizons through a process of combining empirical observation (such as that all beings alike fear pain and pursue happiness) with imaginative exercises designed to foster equanimity.

Śāntideva presents the second method for activating *bodhicitta* in chapter 8 of the *BCA* where he outlines the practice of ‘exchanging self with other.’ As with the ‘seven-point method,’ the first stage in the ‘exchange’ meditation involves recognizing that all beings are equally averse to pain and welcoming of happiness (hence *BCA* 8.90 “At first one should meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: ‘All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself’”).⁴⁷ For the Madhyamaka tradition, acknowledging the equality of sentient beings is a

⁴⁶ Kelsang Gyatso (2012: 31).

⁴⁷ Śāntideva – *BCA* 8.90. *parātmāsamatām ādau bhāvayed evam ādarāt| samaduḥkhasukhāḥ sarve pālanīyā mayātmavat||* (Trans.) Crosby K. and Skilton, A. (1998: 96).

necessary first step in the lengthy process of realigning our emotional/ affective responses with the revised intellectual position achieved through rejecting the coherence of *svabhāva*.⁴⁸

Pan-fictionalism invites aspirants first to recognize the fabricated nature of reality, and then to deploy their imagination in an effort to extirpate afflictive mental factors and to discover more constructive modes of worldly engagement. It consequently represents not just a denial that there are any objective facts but also has a practical dimension to it. Mādhyamikas have not been alone in appreciating the importance of imagination as an integral part of eliciting moral motivation. Contemporary Western philosophers and psychologists also agree that imagination plays a key role in nurturing empathy. Although psychologists have only recently begun to distinguish between ‘self-orientated’ and ‘other-orientated’ perspective-taking (where the former involves imagining oneself in another’s situation and the latter involves imagining how it would feel to be another person in *their* circumstances), it is a distinction already discernible in the Madhyamaka tradition.⁴⁹

For example, much contemporary literature appears to favour ‘other-orientated’ perspective-taking on grounds that it is better suited for the task of delivering practical responses to the plight of others. The issue here is that ‘self-orientated’ perspective-taking may induce emotional trauma and/ or a sense of hopelessness in the face of suffering. Where arguments have been proffered *against* empathy (on grounds that being empathetic is not always conducive to rational decision making or impartial

⁴⁸ Roy (2011: 141). “The malfunction of *vedanā* (feeling) and *saṃjñā* (cognition) is the basic soteriological problem of Buddhism.”

⁴⁹ Coplan (2011: 12).

assessment), they have emerged from a worry that empathy can impede one's ability to supply practical aid to those in need.⁵⁰ Evidence from the social sciences, for instance, supports the view that professionals who regularly encounter suffering can be adversely affected by excessive empathy, thereby failing to deliver the services demanded of them. Consequently, empathic responsiveness can sometimes lead to so-called 'compassion fatigue' or the failure to prioritize needs fairly.⁵¹

The bodhisattva figure, however, is typically depicted as engaging in both 'self-orientated' and 'other-orientated' perspective-taking: it is in this way that bodhisattvas are able to provide the appropriate level of instruction to the sentient being with whom they empathise. On the one hand, because bodhisattvas have already seen through the illusion of selfhood, and therefore understand that, ultimately, there is no being with whom to empathize, it is necessary that they should voluntarily suspend insight and adopt a self-orientated perspective. Thus are they able to reaffirm the need to remove suffering and retain awareness of the moral imperative to overcome it. On the other hand, since bodhisattvas seek not only to empathize with others but also to develop effective strategies for implementing altruism and delivering others from the bondage of *samsāra*, it is necessary that they adopt an other-orientated perspective. This approach allows the bodhisattva to issue instructions suitable for the spiritual level of the being in need.

⁵⁰ Bloom (2016).

⁵¹ Lamothe et al. (2014).

Conclusion

The foregoing exploration into the connection between metaphysics and moral motivation in Madhyamaka thought reveals the seamless integration of philosophy and psychology according to this system. Investigating the metaphysical prerequisites of altruism, this chapter has charted key points of difference between classical Madhyamaka and contemporary Western moral theory which are perfectly illustrated in the contrasting statements of Nagel and Śāntideva with which we began. Madhyamaka argues that it is precisely because of, not despite, the emptiness of the categories ‘self’ and ‘other’ that limitless altruism is both possible and rational. Madhyamaka’s implicit commitment to pan-fictionalism means that there can be no ‘facts’ and, accordingly, no dilemma when it comes to deriving values from them. Following Garfield and others, this chapter supports the claim that the most fruitful way of conceiving Madhyamaka ethics is as a form of ‘moral phenomenology’ where the focus is on inner-transformation and on the cultivation of more open-minded and generous modes of worldly engagement. *Bodhicitta* plays a crucial role in stimulating and sustaining concern for others, as do imaginative encounters with other living beings in meditation practices designed to expand one’s moral horizons.

Chapter 10

Concluding Remarks

“Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves...”

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*

“Buddhist texts invite us to inhabit a new philosophical horizon, different enough from our own to set new questions, and new phenomena in relief, but familiar enough that many of them will be recognizable as philosophical puzzles and insights.”

Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*

The foregoing chapters have investigated Madhyamaka’s view on a range of questions at the intersection of metaphysics and ethics through the use of a reconstructive methodology. The thesis began with a defence of anti-realism as the most appropriate interpretive lens through which to read Madhyamaka. As the findings of the project reveal, anti-realist interpretations lend themselves not only to the task of understanding the thought of leading Mādhyamikas but also to the continued development and systematization of this worldview in the face of fresh philosophical problems. As Gombrich has remarked, when it comes to justifying one’s methodology, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.”¹ In offering some concluding remarks, therefore, it makes sense to step back from the finer details of the debates on free will and meta-ethics and to reflect on what the foregoing analysis can contribute to Buddhist studies more broadly, and, indeed, to the philosophical quest as a whole.

Beginning with the question of how this research might contribute to our broader understanding and appreciation of Buddhism, it is worth noting that the interdisciplinary nature of Buddhist studies means that there are many sub-fields. Indeed,

¹ Gombrich (2009: 4).

Buddhism is a source of fascination for archaeologists, historians, philologists, anthropologists and philosophers alike. For this reason, although the foregoing examination into freedom and ethics in Madhyamaka is unlikely to result in any paradigm shift in scholarship's appraisal of Buddhism *as a whole*, this is in fact only further testament to the richness and intricacy of Buddhism itself, reinforcing the importance of scholarship's shared commitment to methodological open-mindedness. Evidently, what counts as an appropriate mode of engagement with Buddhist ideas will vary from context to context, but, as Garfield argues, 'respect' and 'charity' must constitute the foundation of meaningful philosophical exchange.²

To those who read Buddhist texts in a philosophically serious way, such observations might seem so obvious that remarking on the fact could be condescending. Although the academic community is gradually realizing that it is both possible and important to study non-Western traditions philosophically, it should not be forgotten that some of the most esteemed and original philosophers of the previous generation have in all seriousness questioned whether communities originating outside of Europe or North America have philosophized at all. For example, arguing that truly cosmological and theoretical concerns are the sole preserve of ancient Greece's intellectual descendants, Husserl maintains that "there is something unique here [i.e. in Europe] that is recognized in us by all other human groups, too, something that, quite apart from all considerations of utility, becomes a motive for them to Europeanize themselves even in their unbroken will to spiritual self-preservation; whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, would never Indianize ourselves."³ Similarly, and yet more

² Garfield (2015: 327).

³ Husserl (1970: 275).

recently, Rorty has said that it is “perfectly reasonable to ask in honest bewilderment and without condescension... ‘Is there philosophy in Asia?’”⁴ This is despite the fact that, as Tartaglia observes, Rorty had previously devised a thought-experiment (the ‘Antipodeans’) in which he hypothesizes about the potential for philosophical exchange between terrestrial philosophers acquainted with the works of Plato, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel and Strawson and a group of extra-terrestrials who, though in most respects just like us, lack the concept of ‘mind.’⁵

It would be easy to discredit Husserl’s and Rorty’s attitude towards Indian philosophy as based on too narrow a conception of what philosophy most fundamentally is. If the reconstructivist, however, is to uphold her own principles of ‘respect’ and ‘charity,’ she should recognize that such views – whilst being an irrational product of ignorance about the multi-faceted nature of Indian philosophy, which has as diverse a set of interests and perspectives as Western philosophy – are nevertheless explicable (if not justifiable) as a product of their time.

Mohanty, an Indian scholar with special interest and expertise in Western phenomenology, approaches the task of cross-cultural philosophizing with a unique set of insights. For example, he contends that the dismissiveness of Western philosophers towards Eastern thought (which is, even now, not uncommon) is the result of a “misconstrual of the relation between theory and practice” in Indian traditions.⁶ In contrast to Western styles of reasoning, which are often characterized as ‘analytical’ or strictly ‘systematic,’ Eastern philosophy is often presented as ‘mystical,’ ‘practical’ or

⁴ Rorty (1989: 333).

⁵ Rorty (1980: 70-88).

⁶ Mohanty (1994: 6).

purely ‘therapeutic.’ The fact that some of the leading exponents of modern Indian philosophy, writers like Radhakrishnan for example, endorse the idea of Eastern philosophy as fundamentally orientated towards a different set of goals to those of Western thought only shows us that Indians and Europeans can both be guilty of oversimplifying each other’s traditions and of buying into caricatures peddled by (possibly unconscious) colonialist thought processes which legitimate and normalize an ‘us-them’ mentality.⁷

As contemporary advocates of Buddhist reconstructivism are increasingly keen to point out, the reality is that Western and Eastern philosophies alike contain a mixture of ‘theoretic’ and ‘therapeutic’ dimensions. Whilst Buddhist philosophy, and Indian thought more generally, is largely motivated by the task of eradicating suffering and enabling release from the bonds of *samsāric* existence, it would be a mistake to imagine that it is wholly uninterested in questions of purely theoretical import. For example, although Ābhidharmikas, Mādhyamikas and Yogācārins often frame their disagreements about the existence of impartite *dharmas* in possession of *svabhāva* or about the existence of an external world in terms of soteriology (with each Buddhist school regarding correct apprehension of reality as a prerequisite for supreme spiritual emancipation), it would be disingenuous to contend that *all* Buddhist theorizing centres exclusively around practical problems. This observation holds even more for other systems of Indian philosophy, or of elements within systems, as is evidenced by Sāṃkhya’s articulation of its counter-intuitive causal theory (*satkāryavāda*) which has few obvious or immediate ramifications for escaping from perpetual bondage.

⁷ See King (1999: 28-34; 143-160) for a compelling argument supporting the idea that ‘orientalism’ and ‘colonialism’ has permeated Eastern civilization so thoroughly that non-Western philosophers have even modified their ‘self-conception’ as mystical in conformity with external, dominant, forces.

Similarly, although many modern Western philosophers see themselves as primarily pursuing an epistemological agenda, whose aim is the attainment of knowledge of mind-independent facts, the idea of philosophy as fulfilling ‘practical’ and ‘medicinal’ purposes is not without precedent in the Western tradition either. As Carlisle and Ganeri showcase in their collaborative editorial work *Philosophy as Therapeia*, the therapeutic strand in Western philosophy can be traced from the Socratic notion of philosophy as a ‘midwife,’ through the medieval period with Aquinas’s emphasis on reason as a means of comprehending the divine plan and, more recently, in the expression of American Pragmatism.⁸

If future generations of philosophers are to dispense with unduly restrictive self-conceptions as *either* analytic *or* mystical, if they are to overcome their own intellectual blind spots and cultural biases and if they are to fulfil the universally recognized need for dispassionate critique of one’s preconceptions, then the important role cross-cultural enquiry can play in this process should no longer be overlooked. For philosophy to move beyond participation in parochial sets of discourse domains and to enter the global stage on which perennial problems are examined afresh through innovative procedures and conceptual refinements, it is necessary to transcend ‘comparative’ enterprises (whose purpose is simply to compare and contrast different worldviews) and, instead, to bring the various voices together in the posing of new philosophical questions.

⁸ Carlisle and Ganeri (2010).

The current investigation into freedom and ethics in Madhyamaka reveals how, by challenging some of the presuppositions on which Western articulations of, for example, the free will problem and the naturalistic fallacy depend, it is possible simultaneously to reappraise a number of Western philosophy's assumptions (such as that 'agency' necessarily implies an 'agent') and to explicate a solution congruous with the Buddhist worldview on a previously un-encountered problem. The final contention of this thesis, therefore, is that applying the same reconstructive methodology as has been used throughout this thesis to a range of other philosophical problems would be valuable not only because it would deliver results but also because it would contribute to a 'global' philosophical project which seeks resolutions not reliant on dogmatism or blind belief. Hence, as Struhl rightly professes "philosophical inquiry must be able to create a distance not only from the assumptions under investigation but also from its own assumptions... thus philosophical inquiry is unable to go beyond certain limits without being cross-cultural philosophy."⁹

Some of the benefits of adopting a cross-cultural philosophical strategy have been discussed at earlier stages of this thesis but, in concluding, it will perhaps be helpful to collate the main findings in one place. Amongst the more unexpected results of this enquiry, which has often approached Madhyamaka ideas a-historically, has been the re-evaluation of the basis and nature of the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction. Chapter 3 embarked on the task of explicating the implied Madhyamaka stance on the question of free will and moral responsibility by assessing the viability of the paleo-compatibilist solution in a Madhyamaka framework. This involved an analysis of how Mādhyamikas interpret the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth which, in turn,

⁹ Struhl (2010: 287).

required reflection on whether all, or only some, Mādhyamikas can accommodate the idea of a hierarchy of conventions. Ordinarily, the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika disagreement is presented in terms of a difference of opinion over the legitimacy of using implicative negation to undermine an opponent's thesis. Yet the disagreement also centers on the question of whether, if conventional truth is all there is, there can be a gradation of truths within this sphere. This thesis has argued that, whereas Svātantrikas are usually taken as answering affirmatively and Prāsaṅgikas negatively, in fact the works of Candrakīrti and Śāntideva (who are both taken to epitomize the Prāsaṅgika perspective) are actually more ambiguous on this question than is generally admitted. This ambiguity, it has been argued, paves the way for the reconstruction of 'graded' teachings on free will in line with Madhyamaka's own emphasis on pedagogical skillfulness (*upāya*), abandonment of 'views' (*pratijñā*) and philosophical recognition of the fact that even the distinction between non-definitive (*neyārtha*) and definitive (*nītārtha*) teachings is context dependent.

Chapters 4 and 5 continued along the trajectory initiated in chapter 3 by supplying a more detailed assessment of the commensurability of Western causal determinism and the Madhyamaka conception of dependent origination than has hitherto been provided. Many of the conclusions drawn later on in the thesis ultimately stem from the three-fold classification of dependency relations sketched in chapter 4. There it was argued that, whilst Madhyamaka conceives of causal relations as encompassed by dependency relations, the two are not treated as conceptually equivalent. It is at precisely this point that the connection between the two types of 'freedom' discussed throughout the thesis becomes clear: free will might ultimately be an illusion, albeit a very useful one which functions like a crutch enabling the spiritual aspirant to traverse the path to freedom

(i.e. *nirvāṇa*) where the ‘problem’ under investigation ceases to exist. By probing Madhyamaka’s explicit commitments and drawing out what is only implicit, the investigation into free will and moral responsibility perfectly illustrates the inseparability of the ‘theoretic’ and ‘therapeutic’ dimensions of Buddhist philosophy.

A similar procedure unfolds in the second half of the thesis, where the focus shifts to the second type of freedom mentioned above – namely, supreme spiritual freedom of the sort said to be experienced by Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Here, again, the reconstructivist demonstrates how, by bringing a distinctive set of metaphysical commitments to bear on meta-ethical questions, entirely different ways of conceiving and responding to entrenched and seemingly insuperable Western philosophical problems become available.

Taken together, chapters 7, 8 and 9 point the way to alternative modes of engagement with, and development of, Buddhist moral philosophy. Efforts to understand unfamiliar worldviews on *sui generis* terms form just as important a part of the reconstructivist’s endeavor as the application of conceptual distinctions produced in cultural contexts different from the ideas under analysis. Interestingly, therefore, as Garfield’s defence of ‘Buddhist moral phenomenology’ intimates, sometimes the most successful reconstructive enterprises emerge when the compulsion to shoehorn non-Western models into more familiar frameworks is resisted.

As far as the available evidence shows, classical Buddhist philosophers engaged neither with the free will problem nor with the challenge of explicating a meta-ethical perspective. There are many possible explanations for this, the most likely of which is

that these ‘problems’ simply did not emerge in the specific cultural, religious and philosophical context in which the Madhyamaka thinkers discussed here operated. Nevertheless, because Mādhyamikas have a clear stake in soteriological and moral concerns, they make for valuable conversation partners. Even if, eventually, the Madhyamaka view on free will turns out to be that no single solution is definitive, and that the fact/ value dichotomy does not require resolution because there are no facts, the process of articulating their implied perspective will have been worth it, even by the standards of analytic philosophy whose champion Bertrand Russell has conceded that the true purpose of philosophy is not to arrive at “definite answers” but to study “for the sake of the questions themselves.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Russell (1970: 161).

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