



BRILL

The Madhyamaka Contribution to Skepticism

Georges Dreyfus

Department of Religion, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, USA

Georges.B.Dreyfus@williams.edu

Jay L. Garfield

Department of Philosophy, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA

jgarfield@smith.edu

Abstract

This paper examines the work of Nāgārjuna as interpreted by later Madhyamaka tradition, including the Tibetan Buddhist Tsongkhapa (1357–1419). It situates Madhyamaka skepticism in the context of Buddhist philosophy, Indian philosophy more generally, and Western equivalents. Find it broadly akin to Pyrrhonism, it argues that Madhyamaka skepticism still differs from its Greek equivalents in fundamental methodologies. Focusing on key hermeneutical principles like the two truths and those motivating the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika schism (i.e., whether followers of Nāgārjuna should offer positive arguments or should proceed on a purely “negative” basis), it argues that the Svātantrika commitment to *mere* conventional practice is robust and allows for a skepticism consistent with the scientific practices we must take seriously in the modern world. These findings are put forth as an illustration of what the Western tradition might gain by better understanding of non-Western philosophy.

Keywords

Nāgārjuna – Madhyamaka – Mādhyamika – Tsongkhapa – Candrakīrti – Bhāviveka – Pyrrhonism

1 Introduction

Skepticism is often approached as a specifically Western development. In this essay, we will show that this attitude is seriously mistaken. Skepticism was alive and well in ancient India as well. In fact, it is quite possible that Pyrrho of Elis developed his skepticism in conversation with philosophers in India, and hence that it is that country that should be credited as the fountainhead of the skeptical tradition, and its source may perhaps be in the early Buddhist ideas that gave rise to Madhyamaka. The sayings attributed to Pyrrho by Diogenes Laertius are redolent of *Prajñāparamitā* language, and at least raise this possibility.¹ In this essay, we argue not simply that skepticism is part of the Indian tradition, but that Madhyamaka skepticism offers important resources for interpreting skepticism and for bringing it into meaningful dialogue with other philosophical positions.

The Madhyamaka school was founded by Nāgārjuna, an Indian philosopher (circa 2nd C CE) whose masterwork, *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mulamādhyamikakārikā*, henceforth *MMK*), revolutionized Indian Buddhist philosophy. Its central claim is that all phenomena are “empty,” that is, lack *svabhāva*. This term has been translated into English in a number of ways: own-being, essence, inherent existence, intrinsic nature, true nature, real existence, substance, thing-in-itself, etc. Although we prefer *intrinsic nature*, the range of options indicates its complex semantic range. The central Madhyamaka insight is that all things lack intrinsic nature: nothing has an essential characteristic in virtue of which it is what it is; nothing exists independently of a manifold of causal relations and part-whole relations; nothing has any kind of reality that does not in some way depend on conventions.

This is both an ontological and an epistemological claim. Ontologically, it is the claim that nothing has intrinsic nature; epistemologically, it means that when we analyze phenomena to determine what they are, we find nothing; we come up empty. This lack of findability concerns the way things are (or, rather, how they are not) but also involves our ways of understanding the world. This epistemic sense is all the more important given that the refutation of intrinsic nature is not meant to be just a theoretical enterprise but to entail a cognitive transformation of the ways we conceive of and experience ourselves and the world, as we will see later.

Nāgārjuna argues that nothing has *svabhāva*. That is, everything is empty of intrinsic nature. But what about the lack of *svabhāva* itself, the fact that phenomena don’t have a true nature? Is this lack of true nature their true nature?

1 See Garfield (1990), Kuzminsky (2008), McEvilly (2012), and Beckwith (2015).

Is this how things are in reality, namely that they lack any true nature? And if this is so, isn't this their true nature? Indeed, the *Aṣṭaśārika-prajñāparamīta-sūtra* says that "all things have one nature—that is, no nature." This is obviously paradoxical. This paradox (which Garfield and Priest (2003) call "Nāgārjuna's Paradox") is neither accidental to Nāgārjuna's philosophy nor unnoticed in the Madhyamaka tradition—ancient and modern.

There are many responses to this paradox, reflecting a variety of interpretive choices made by commentators and the complexity and ambiguities of Nāgārjuna's corpus. Some commentators choose to embrace the more paradoxical and radically skeptical passages in Nāgārjuna's works, particularly the ones concerning thesislessness and the repudiation of all views. Others attempt to defuse the paradoxes and to find consistent readings. This is true both of canonical and contemporary commentators.²

Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) presents an important canonical non-skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna. He argues that the assertion that things lack intrinsic nature is meant simply to undermine the tendency to reify reality and to present a positive theory of the nature of things, *viz.*, that they lack intrinsic existence; that they exist as elements in the web of interconnected causes and effects (Tsongkhapa 2002, 2006). On this understanding, the claim that emptiness is the ultimate truth is not merely the refusal to accept any intrinsic nature; it is also the assertion that things exist in a particular way.³ This interpretation has to be taken seriously, for, while Nāgārjuna—at least according to his interpreters who follow Candarakīrti—uses *reductio* arguments to demonstrate that his opponents' positions are incoherent by their own lights, this does not preclude his arguing for his own position, namely, that things lack *svabhāva*.

On the other hand, on a more skeptical interpretation, we might think that this realization can never be cashed out as a definitive understanding of how things really are. When we look for how things are, we always come up empty. We can never reach their true nature. All what we can do is to use various formulations that will help us to relinquish the instinctive commitment to the idea that there must be a way that things really are, and this is the freedom from views recommended in the early sermons of the Buddha himself (*Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 72). This may be what Nāgārjuna means when he says that emptiness is the rejection of all views, and that one for whom emptiness

2 See Tsongkhapa (2006) for the former strategy, and Deguchi Garfield & Priest (2008, 2013), Garfield and Priest (2010), and Garfield (2015) for the latter.

3 Whether it is possible to evade paradox this way is another matter, one addressed by Deguchi, Garfield & Priest (2003) and by Garfield & Priest (2003).

becomes a view is incurable (*MMK* Xiii.8). Candrakīrti puts this point nicely in his commentary, when he compares someone according to whom emptiness is the final nature of things to someone who, when told that a shopkeeper has nothing to sell, asks to buy some of that nothing (*Prasannapadā* 83b, quoted in Tsongkhapa 2006: 299).

When viewed in this perspective, we believe that Madhyamaka is best understood as similar to Pyrrhonian skepticism rather than modern epistemological skepticism of Descartes.⁴ Here we explore the ways in which the Madhyamaka doctrine of the two truths can provide resources for responding to some challenges that skepticism faces. We then ask which of the two principal interpretations of Madhyamaka—Prāsaṅgika (which sees it as a purely “negative” exercise) and Svātantrika (which allows for some theses to be held by the school)—provides the best resources for the explanation of the utility of practical knowledge within the skeptical perspective. In asking this question, we presuppose that each of these schools is in fact Skeptical; we are only asking which school solves this problem better given their shared skepticism. We hope that this exploration gives philosophers interested in skepticism a reason to look beyond Greece and to open their eyes to the resources provided by Madhyamaka for the skeptical tradition.

Having noted that there are non-skeptical readings of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka, we now set them aside to explore what we can learn from reading Nāgārjuna as a skeptic. But we advise the reader to keep in mind that this is only one strand of Madhyamaka interpretation. On the other hand, it is a very important one, probably even the main one followed by the majority of traditional Indian and Tibetan commentators, and so our attention to it is justified, not only by its philosophical importance, but also by its prominence in the Buddhist tradition.

2 Madhyamaka and Skepticism

We begin this section with a few distinctions well known to readers of this journal. Many contemporary philosophers understand by *skepticism* the modern skepticism introduced by Descartes: the view that we should refuse to assent to any claim of which we cannot be certain, and where certainty entails the elimination of any possibility of error. This is very different from any form of classical skepticism, whether Academic or Pyrrhonian. It is both more limited

4 See Garfield (1990) and The Cowherds (2010: chs. 6 and 7) for a sustained defense of this position.

in its scope, and more methodological and theoretical; Pyrrhonian skepticism is universal in its reach, and has profound implications for how we understand our cognitive relation to the world, including to ourselves.

Pyrrhonian skepticism has a very distinctive structure, including both a negative and a positive phase. Pyrrhonian skepticism situates itself as a kind of middle path in a substantive philosophical debate, but a middle path of a very particular kind, essentially involving the dialectical device of *epochē*. The skeptic, when she encounters a debate between two dogmatic extremes—a reificationist and a nihilist position—identifies the shared presupposition at the core of the debate, and rejects it, suspending the entire debate as senseless. This suspension does not consist in saying “maybe this side is right; maybe that side”; nor does it involve taking some kind of compromise position. Instead, it rejects both positions not as false, but as senseless, and the entire debate as meaningless, to be suspended.⁵

For example, one might imagine a debate regarding the existence of the external world. The reificationist argues that our ways of talking about the external world (including the assertion of the existence of the objects of perception) are justified because we have direct perceptual evidence that it exists; the nihilist argues that none of our evidence is direct and all we perceive are our sensations, and so our discourse about the external world is entirely unjustified. The Pyrrhonian skeptic argues that none of this makes any sense. She argues that despite the fact that the reificationist and the nihilist appear to disagree completely, they agree about the only thing that matters—that our conventions are justified if, and only if, we have direct access to an independent external world. Instead, in a move that Garfield (1990) has called the “skeptical inversion,” the skeptic argues that nothing independent of our conventions could ever justify those conventions, and that our conventions themselves constitute the external world for us; that there is no bedrock that could ground our epistemic, or any other practices.

This is tightly bound up with what Sextus Empiricus called “the problem of the criterion.” He argued that any attempt to ground convention in an independent reality—any search for epistemic foundations, founders on the impossibility of securing a criterion for validity: if a criterion is needed, then a criterion is needed for the validation of the criterion, leading to a circle or to a regress.

Skepticism so far seems entirely negative, to be the position that we can never have justification for what we say, what we do, or how we lead our lives;

5 For detailed defense of this reading of Pyrrhonian skepticism, see Garfield (1990, 2019) and Dreyfus & Garfield (2010) as well as Hallie (1985) and Mates (1996).

that nothing we say has any ground. The positive side of skepticism emerges from what Sextus called “the fourfold prescription.” Sextus urged that the skeptic leads life in accordance with our natural instincts; the way things appear to our senses; the customs of our culture; and the instruction of the arts and crafts:

Holding to appearances, then, we live without beliefs but in accordance with the ordinary regimen of life, since we cannot be wholly inactive. And this ordinary regimen of life seems to be fourfold: one part has to do with the guidance of nature, another with the compulsions of the *pathé*, another with the handing down of laws and customs, and a fourth with the instruction in arts and crafts. Nature’s guidance is that by which we are naturally capable of sensation and thought; compulsion of the *pathé* is that by which hunger drives us to food and thirst makes us drink; the handing down of customs and laws is that by which we accept that piety in the conduct of life is good and impiety bad; and instruction in arts and crafts is that by which we are not inactive in whichever we acquire. And we say all these things without belief. (*OUTLINES OF PYRRHONISM* [PH] I 23–24, translation by MATES 1996.)

These four determinants of practice give us all of the justification we ever need or could ever have for our ordinary practices, including moral and scientific discourse. The skeptic thinks we go wrong not when we talk, not when we assent to things, but rather when we think that that talk or assent is grounded outside of human convention.⁶

There is one last point we should make about the classical Greek skeptical tradition before we return to Madhyamaka, and that is the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism. These were the two skeptical schools active in the Hellenistic period, and Sextus, for good reason, defends the Pyrrhonian approach. The difference is this. The Academic skeptic takes the arguments for skepticism itself to be compelling, and hence for skepticism to be clearly warranted as an epistemological position. This might appear to be as radical as one could get in the refutation of dogmatism. But it is not, and it is an unstable stopping point. The Pyrrhonian goes one step farther, applying skeptical arguments reflexively to skepticism itself, and arguing that skeptical critique and practice itself can never be any more than one more custom. If it does become more than this, it becomes one more dogma. Sextus uses

6 See Hallie (1985), Garfield (1990), and Mates (1996) for more detail on the structure of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

the metaphor of a laxative in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: if the laxative does not purge itself as well as the material in the bowel, it becomes one more disease. Interestingly, Candrakīrti offers exactly the same metaphor in his commentary on xiii.8 of *MMK*. The passage is drawn originally from the *Kaśyapa-parivarta-sūtra*, a venerable Māhāyāna Buddhist text (see Tsongkhapa 2006: 300).

We are not the first to link Madhyamaka and Greek skepticism. B.K. Matilal, for example, understands Nāgārjuna as offering a skeptical argument against his Hindu realist adversaries and their epistemology (Matilal 1986: 46–68). Matilal argues that skeptical argument rests on the problem of the criterion. Our epistemic practices are based on criteria responding to standards of proof. We do not just have impressions about reality but hold these impressions to be true in relation to some criteria, which in turn can be assessed in relation to some standards of proof. But these criteria both demand justification and cannot be justified independently; they hence should be rejected by the rational person (see also Kuzminski 2008).

In the Indian context, Matilal finds such epistemological skepticism in Nāgārjuna's *Abandoning the Arguments* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*), a sustained critique of the Hindu realist (the Nyāya) epistemology according to which our epistemic practices require the support of warranting epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) like perception, inference, or reliable testimony.⁷ For Nāgārjuna, such support is impossible since it either begs the question (presupposing the very standards that it seeks to establish) or it leads to an unacceptable infinite regress in which every appeal to some standard presupposes another standard of justification. This is precisely Sextus' critique of the criterion. Matilal understands Nāgārjuna to conclude that it is incoherent to require every epistemic episode to be supported by some well-established means of reliable cognition. We should dispense from this requirement and realize that we do not have hard criteria to distinguish veridical from non-veridical cognitions. Nāgārjuna, on this view, is a skeptical coherentist.

Nāgārjuna's refutation raises an immediate objection from his realist opponent (Matilal 1986: 64). If there are no well-established means to distinguish reliable from unreliable cognitions, what is then the epistemic status of this

7 *Pramāṇa* is often translated as "valid cognition," "epistemic warrant," "epistemic instrument," "means of reliable cognition" or simply as "reliable cognition." We will use the term "epistemic instrument" when referring to *pramāṇa* as a means of acquiring knowledge, and "epistemic warrant" to translate the term when it refers to a validator or knowledge. These translations have the advantage of avoiding jargon while at the same time capturing the reliabilist view of knowledge, or rather, its rough Indian equivalent *pramāṇa*, that Buddhist thinkers share. For a translation of Nāgārjuna's work, see Battacharya (1978). For a discussion of the Nyāya epistemology, see Matilal (1986). See also The Cowherds (2010) and Garfield (2015).

refutation? Is it itself reliable? If it is, it should be supported by some well-established means of reliable cognition in flagrant contradiction to the skeptical thesis. If it is not reliable, why should we give it any credence? Against this accusation that his refutation is self-stultifying, Nāgārjuna gives this famous answer: “If I had any position, I thereby would be at fault. But since I have no position, I am not at fault at all.”⁸ At first sight, this paradoxical answer can seem a glib way for Nāgārjuna to get out of a tricky situation. This is in fact how many authors, traditional and modern, have understood this statement, which they see as an illustration of the sophistry that they see as being at the heart of his philosophy (Robinson 1972 and Hayes 1994). But this dismissal misses the key point made by Nāgārjuna, for this is precisely where Nāgārjuna is clearly aligned neither with modern nor with Academic, but with Pyrrhonian skepticism. Nāgārjuna is not just questioning the Nyāya claims in relation to well-established standards of proof; he is reflexively applying the skeptical argument to his own position, affirming that there is no convention-independent Archimedean epistemic fulcrum, and that he claims none for himself.

Nāgārjuna, that is, rejects the very idea of appealing to independent standards of proof to establish anything, including that (see Garfield 1996, 2010). According to Nāgārjuna, Mādhyamikas are not in the business of defending true positions about the nature of reality. This is why he says (*MMK* xxii.11):

We do not assert “Empty.”
Nor do we assert “Non-empty.”
We neither assert both nor neither.
They are asserted only for the purpose of designation.

That is, he asserts, these statements are used simply for the purposes of discourse, and are not meant to be accounts of the nature of reality. In this passage, Nāgārjuna is explicit about his skepticism. This “thesislessness,” i.e., of complete suspension of assertion was also claimed by Pyrrho in his remarks, “I assert nothing” (*PH* I 192–194) “I have no position” (*PH* I 197).

Nāgārjuna’s method is, however, different from that of Pyrrhonism, which seeks to reach a suspension of belief by outlining the arguments for and against a thesis. The Madhyamaka method does not use this method of equipollence, but instead applies *reductio* arguments to each dogmatic position. Hence, in some ways, its argument form goes further the Greek method of

⁸ Nāgārjuna, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, quoted by Patshab (2006: 49). For a thorough examination of this statement, see Ruegg (2000). A similar point is made in *Yuktishastikavṛitti* 50–51 (see Scherrer-Schaub 1991: 294–296).

equipollence, and we could say that the Madhyamaka reductio method is a significant contribution to the skeptical tradition. Despite these differences, it is clear that Pyrrhonian skepticism and Madhyamika do belong to the same skeptical family.

3 Madhyamaka and the Two Truths

If it is true that the Mādhyamika skeptic aims to reject all views (“anyone for whom emptiness becomes a view is incurable”; “I prostrate to Gautama, the best of all teachers, who taught the supreme Dharma that leads to the relinquishing of all views...””) and not just question the reliability of our knowledge, shouldn’t she reject *all views*, even those concerning everyday reality, and even her own? This objection is well-known and has been raised against Pyrrhonism and its founder, Pyrrho of Elis. This objection raises an important question: can the skeptics’ commitment to the suspension of beliefs avoid including that of beliefs concerning everyday life? Our thesis is that the Madhyamaka schema of the two truths can explain how the skeptic can respond to this challenge.

The two truths scheme is articulated in different ways in the history of Buddhist philosophy, but it plays a distinctive and central role in Madhyamaka (see Siderits 1980, 1981; Garfield 1995, 2015). Nāgārjuna, for instance, asserts that

The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention,
And an ultimate truth. (xxiv.8)

Candrakīrti, in glossing this verse, emphasizes that the two truths reflect two natures that every entity has—a conventional nature as a conditioned, perceptible object and ultimate nature as empty (*Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* 253a) But these two natures—although they are two natures of an object, are defined with respect to the perspectives of the subject to whom those objects appear. Conventional truth is constituted by our ordinary perceptual and conceptual processes and by our linguistic conventions. It is the way things are according to our ordinary experience and as confirmed by our conventional investigative techniques, including science. But even to the extent that we get it right on these terms, conventional truth is deceptive: the things that are conventionally real appear to us as though they have a greater, a deeper reality than that—they appear as convention-independent realities.

In fact, however, they are empty of that kind of deep existence, and this is their ultimate truth. This is how they would appear to an awakened consciousness. From this standpoint, they have no independent nature; nothing can be said about them except that they are empty of any intrinsic nature, even of that emptiness (see Garfield 1995, 2015; Garfield & Priest 2003). These two standpoints enable a distinction between two sorts of statements, those that are true conventionally and those that are ultimately true. This distinction in turn suggests an apparent distinction between two levels of reality: ultimate truth (the objects that make ultimately true statements true) and conventional truth (the objects that make conventionally true statements conventionally true), a distinction that we will see in a few moments is nonetheless itself undermined by the Madhyamaka dialectic.

It may seem odd in English to call pots and pans *conventional truths* as we are used to limit the application of the concept of truth to truth-bearers, entities such as propositions, statements, sentences, thoughts, etc. The Indian tradition does not share this restriction and use liberally the idea of truth (*satya*) as referring to both statement and the objects of the statement. The Sanskrit participle *sat*, often translated as “true” equally means *real*. So, we can think of it as picking up the meaning of *true* as it occurs in phrases like *a true friend*, or *true coin of the realm*. It means *to be nondeceptive* (and indeed falsity is glossed by Nāgārjuna in MMK xiii.2 in terms of deceptiveness). We can thus see the common use of *true* as applying only to sentences or beliefs as derivative from the more basic use of *true* as cognate with *trust*: things are true to the extent that we can trust them; to the extent that they do not deceive us. If we understand the term this way, there is nothing odd about translating *satya* as *true*. True sentences like true water are non-deceptive; false sentences like the false water in a mirage are deceptive.

In the early Buddhist scholastic literature called the Abhidharma, the distinction between the two truths is framed in mereological terms. Composite phenomena are conventional truths, whereas their ultimate partless components are ultimate truths. This conception of the two truths differentiates two classes of phenomena: those that have a certain amount of substantial reality and those that exist only as designations or constructions on the basis of really existent elements.

The Madhyamaka doctrine of the two truths is related to that of the Abhidharma but does not involve a two-tier ontology. The decisive passage of the MMK is found in the xxivth chapter. Nāgārjuna responds to his Abhidharma opponent, who argues that if all things lack true existence and everything is only conventionally real, we cannot make ethical distinctions between the vices that need to be abandoned and the virtues that need to

be developed. Against this charge of relativism, Nāgārjuna responds that the opponent has failed to understand the scope of the Madhyamaka approach. The thoroughly deconstructive approach advocated by Nāgārjuna concerns only ontological notions such as causality, movement, the Buddhist four noble truths, “dependent-arising,” etc. It is an inquiry into how things really are and does not affect the pragmatic concepts that we use in daily life. Those are conventional or transactional truths, that is, they are only conventionally or transactionally real. They don’t have any real existence outside of their being used in the practices without which life in this world would be impossible.

But even though this might appear to be a reaffirmation of the two-tiered approach characteristic of the Abhidharma, a few verses later Nāgārjuna pulls the rug out from under that reading by affirming the ontological *identity* of the two truths: “Whatever exists according to conditions we explain to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation is itself the middle way” (xxiv.18). As Tsongkhpa puts it, the two truths are intensionally distinct, but extensionally identical. Ultimate truth on Nāgārjuna’s view consists not in intrinsically real partless momentary particles, but in emptiness itself, the absence of any intrinsic reality. This lack of true nature is the ultimate truth, not in the sense that it is some kind of super-reality, but in the sense that it is what the ontological analysis comes up against ultimately: no thing. Hence, ultimate truth should not be hypostatized into a real entity, for the lack of true nature itself lacks itself any true nature. Emptiness itself is empty. Statements about the emptiness of things should not be understood as revealing their true nature, but, rather, as statements that they have no nature to be revealed (see Garfield 2014).

Many have noted that this is paradoxical: emptiness is the ultimate nature of things and it is the absence of any nature (see Garfield & Priest 2003). Indian commentators wrestled with this paradox. Bhāviveka argues that such a statement should be understood rhetorically. It is like somebody wishing to prevent noise saying “quiet” (Siderits & Katsura 2013: 248). This is a performative utterance that is meant to intervene in practice and this is how Madhyamaka statements about emptiness being the ultimate truth have to be understood. They are not descriptions of how things are, nor do they refer to some kind of mystical absolute (as it may be for a school like Vedānta) or a rock bottom basis of reality, as it is for the Abhidharma. Candrakīrti, on the other hand, in a more Pyrrhonian gesture, uses the similes of the shopkeeper with empty shelves and the laxative to argue that we should understand these assertions reflexively, as applying to themselves as well as anything else, echoing the Pyrrhonian model of skeptical discourse.

The notion of conventional truth can be much more complex than that of the ultimate truth (see The Cowherds 2010). Candrakīrti devotes a great deal of his philosophical effort to explicating this idea. This is how he explains the two truths:

All things bear two natures through correct and false views. The object of those who see correctly is said to be “reality” (*tattva*) and the objects of those who see false is said to be “conventional existence” (*saṃvṛ-tisatya*). (From *MADHYAMAKĀVATĀRA-BHĀṢYA* 253A, quoted at THE COWHERDS 2010: 9.)

For Mādhyamikas, the conventional nature of objects does not consist just of their being the objects of the conventions (agreements in practice) we engage in for the sake of convenience, as they are understood by the Abhidharma. Their being conventional also entails that they are the objects constructed by the distortions created by the ignorance afflicting sentient beings. Contrary to what the naïve realist believes, we do not see the world as it is; we engage in a constant construction of the realities we encounter. In doing so, we superimpose intrinsic identity instead of seeing the world as a web of inter-relations.⁹ Thus, conventional realities are to be thought not just as the entities we engage with in practical transactions, they are also the entities that we construct using our innate perceptual and cognitive apparatus, modulated by our culturally acquired concepts and dispositions, and mistakenly taken to be objects perceived directly, just as they are, independently of their mode of apprehension.

Candrakīrti captures this complexity when he distinguishes three meanings of the term *saṃvṛti*. The term can mean *dependent arising* (*pratitya sam-utpāda*) in the sense of mutual dependence including causal, mereological, and imputational dependence. It can also refer to existence in virtue of the ordinary mundane *conventions* in which we engage in daily life, or more simply, ordinariness. These meanings it shares with the English word *conventional*, give or take a bit. But *saṃvṛti* can also mean *concealment*, indicating the fact that our habits of reification and of taking what we perceive to be given directly to us through transparent perceptual processes *conceal* the real way in which they exist (The Cowherds 2010: 13; Garfield 2015).

9 Tillemans claims that Mādhyamikas simply postulate that beings reify reality without offering any proof (Tillemans 2016: 33). Whether or not classical Indian Buddhist arguments for the omnipresence of reification are compelling, however, contemporary cognitive science provides ample evidence to fill the gaps.

We began this section by suggesting that the doctrine of the two truths can solve a problem for skepticism: how can the skeptic respond to the challenge that her skepticism is crippling in that it prevents her from formulating a constructive account of the ordinary world that supports the distinctions necessary to ordinary life? Can the doctrine of the two truths provide such a principled way? In particular, does the doctrine allow for a sufficiently robust account of conventional truth to ground the rationality undergirding ordinary life? It is to that question that we now turn, and we will examine it through a doxographic rubric introduced by Tibetan philosophers to systematize commentarial debates in India regarding the proper understanding of Madhyamaka: the distinction between *proponents of independent arguments* (*rang rgyud/Svātantrika*) and *wielders of reductio arguments* (*thal 'gyur/Prāsaṅgika*).

4 Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika

A difference among commentators emerged during a dispute on the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's *MMK*. Bhāviveka argued that an earlier commentary written by Buddhapālita was a failed commentary in that it did not gloss arguments presented in the text as autonomous (*svatantra*), that is, probative arguments (*prayoga*) establishing the emptiness of all phenomena. Candrakīrti responded by defending Buddhapālita, arguing that Mādhyamikas should not provide probative arguments, and criticizing Bhāviveka for doing so. This essay is not the place to explore this extremely complex issue (see Dreyfus & McClintock 2003 for details). Here we emphasize that this difference also concerns whether a Mādhyamika can claim to have no view while formulating an account of conventional truth that responds to the challenge faced by the skeptic.

Bhāviveka takes a moderate approach, arguing that the claim to positionlessness cannot be taken at face value, that we need some way to modify, or, at least, reduce the scope of the apparently paradoxical claim so as to make Madhyamaka safe for philosophical discourse. And he does so by appealing to a strong distinction between the ultimate and conventional. Candrakīrti disagrees vehemently with this strategy and argues for a more radical stance that takes Nāgārjuna's statement of thesislessness much more literally.

Tibetan commentators see this debate as defining two lines of interpretation of Nāgārjuna. They argue that this difference does not concern just the ways in which Mādhyamikas deploy arguments to establish emptiness but has also important implications for how to understand the two truths. Hence, they see this difference as separating two sub-schools of Madhyamaka: those who

follow Bhāviveka, accepting the use of autonomous arguments in establishing emptiness, they call Svātantrikas; those who follow Candrakīrti's rejection of this type of argument and who offer only *reductio* arguments (*prasaṅga*) they call Prāsaṅgikas. (Nonetheless, although they agree on the importance of this distinction, Tibetan commentators disagree on how to understand the scope of this difference between Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas (Dreyfus 2003).

Tsongkhapa argues that this difference concerns not just the way to understand conventional truth but also how to understand ultimate truth. He argues that the Svātantrika offers an inferior interpretation of Madhyamaka which does not go far enough in its deconstruction of our sense of what it means for something to be real. We should note, however, that Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the Prāsaṅgika view raises important questions for some of his other commitments, and in particular his endorsement of the rational analysis of the ultimate (Dreyfus 2003). Hence, Tillemans is quite right in calling him an "atypical Prāsaṅgika" (Tillemans 2016: 5). Non-Geluk thinkers such as Mipham (1846–1912) have noticed this ambiguity and have rejected Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the difference. According to these interpreters, there is no difference in the view of emptiness between Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas. The difference only concerns the way we should approach this view and the implications that this has as far as how we understand what it means for something to be conventionally real. It is this interpretation that we are following here.

According to Svātantrikas, Mādhyamikas must draw a principled distinction between ultimate and conventional truths. Without such distinction, they argue, Nāgārjuna's dialectic descends into an incoherent position in which everything can be equally negated or affirmed, what Tillemans has called "the dismal slough" of relativism (The Cowherds 2010). To avoid this danger, Svātantrikas recommend that Nāgārjuna's positionlessness be understood as concerning only the ultimate. Mādhyamikas, they agree, should not hold any position about how things are in reality, since any attempt to hold Madhyamaka statements about the ultimate is bound to reify phenomena by attributing them a positive or negative intrinsic nature. Therefore, they argue, the best that Mādhyamikas can do is to make statements that approximate the ultimate without ever claiming to grasp it fully.

This, then, is what Svātantrikas take Madhyamaka arguments to be all about: using the conventional to bring opponents to provisional conclusions that will lead them to understand the ultimate. This conceptual understanding is not, however, a fully accurate realization of the ultimate but merely an understanding of the ultimate through concepts. Hence, inasmuch as it is taken to be the ultimate, the object of realization can be only the represented, or categorized, ultimate. The actual—non-represented, non-categorized—ultimate is beyond

the reach of language and thought, which implicate the dualities that are to be transcended at the ultimate level (Eckel 1987: 71–75; Dreyfus & Garfield 2010).

These Svātantrika arguments are based on the assumption that while we cannot find any ultimate intrinsic nature, we can still draw conventional distinctions. If we analyze things as they are taken conventionally, we will find, in our conventions, enough resources to delineate sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for their identities; if we ask about the nature of our conventions, we will find at some point definite rules that determine our practices. Philosophical analyses of the *conventional* world, on this view, yields results, albeit *provisional* ones. There are, for example, principled distinctions that can be made between what is conventionally real and what is completely imagined and hence has no reality whatsoever (Eckel 1987: 75–80).

As Mādhyamikas, Svātantrikas deny that any of what this *conventional* philosophical analysis yields survives *ultimate* analysis. The criteria that we find in our conventional analyses, they concede, do not apply to anything independently of our practices and schemata; instead, they are useful only within the context of these practices. For instance, when we say that things are produced in dependence upon causes and conditions, we are not attempting to capture how things really are, but merely describing how they appear to us. We are the kind of beings who can only organize our experiences through a schema such as causality. Hence, we are justified in claiming that things are produced conditionally, but only conventionally, that is, within the context of our own practices and schemata.

Prāsaṅgikas vigorously reject this Svātantrika position as a reintroduction through the back door of the notion of the real intrinsic nature that Nāgārjuna threw out of the front door. According to the Prāsaṅgika interpretation, Madhyamaka is incompatible with any commitment to the existence of independent truthmakers for our assertions. Svātantrikas, they argue, even though they take the truthmakers they posit to be merely conventionally existent, insist that our ordinary conventions presume that these entities have the natures that they do independently of our conventions, and so constitute an independent standard of truth or falsity.

This is the sense in which Prāsaṅgikas charge Svātantrikas with positing intrinsic nature conventionally, even if not ultimately. Prāsaṅgikas argue that this amounts to the presupposition that the objects of some statements constitute standards for truth and so, at least conventionally, have intrinsic, not relational or dependent, identities. They claim that this apparent rational reconstruction of ordinary practice ascribes to ordinary people a metaphysical commitment neither required nor present in our everyday conventions. (Compare Wittgenstein's critique of the idea that our use of words presupposes

that we have necessary and sufficient conditions for their correct application in mind.) This radical position raises deep questions about conventional truth. What are the implications of the Prāsaṅgika embrace of Nāgārjuna's thesislessness for understanding the conventional? Shouldn't one be able to draw distinctions within the realm of conventional transactional reality between true and false statements? Shouldn't we be able to say that the affirmation that the earth is flat is simply false?

It is here that interpretations diverge. Patsab Nyimadrak, the 11th century Tibetan translator of Candrakīrti and the introducer of his ideas in Tibet (Dreyfus 2003, Patsab 2006), rejects the very idea of truth in the conventional realm. He argues that the role of Madhyamaka arguments is not to establish truth—or even falsity—but rather simply to debunk the naive view that things exist the way they appear to us. The Madhyamaka refutation of the realist is, from this perspective, not intended to provide some higher truth, but to get us out of the game of ascribing truth and falsity, and to do so without committing ourselves to any standpoint, positive or negative, on the grounds that any commitment to truth and falsity as polar semantic opposites leads us to contradiction. Thus, according to Patsab, even the claim that all phenomena are empty is not a conclusion, even one derived from the contradictions entailed by the Mādhyamikas' opponents' views that things are non-empty.

On Patsab's view, it is merely a rhetorical stance, a kind of slogan useful in showing opponents the way to get out of the contradictions entailed by their own commitments; the Mādhyamika doesn't even actually say that he has no position, and even his professions to accord with mundane convention are to be distrusted. Patsab claims that the doctrine of the two truths is merely a way to take into account the ways of the world and should not thought to have any constructive philosophical value. Madhyamaka should aim for a complete suspension of truth and falsity and uses conventions only as a way to lead beings out of their miseries. This view is echoed by the Sakya scholar Taktshang Lotsawa (1405–*circa* 1460) in his critique of Tsongkhapa's use of reasoning to investigate ultimate reality and of Tsongkhapa's commitment to standards of truth within conventional reality (see Garfield 2019 and The Yakherds 2021).

But Patsab seems to get Candrakīrti wrong (as does Taktshang). Candrakīrti does claim that no assertions are possible regarding the intrinsic nature of things. But he does not go as far as Patsab: he is happy to distinguish truth from falsity within conventional reality, and in glossing truth as nondeceptiveness, he argues that conventional phenomena may deceive us regarding their ultimate nature without deceiving us regarding their conventional nature (The Cowherds 2010). More importantly, he *defends* this methodology extensively in *Clear Words Prasannapadā* and criticizes Bhāviveka for advocating a

different argumentative methodology, the use of autonomous reasonings on the grounds that Bhāviveka's methodology reintroduces intrinsic nature conventionally, and so seeks a standard of truth and falsity more robust than mere convention. Hence, his claims and arguments have to be understood as being something more than mere slogans or concessions to the world, as Patsab understand them.

Moreover, Candrakīrti endorses the use of conventional epistemic instruments, and the normative status of conventional epistemic warrants. He faults the Buddhist epistemologists, particularly Dignāga (*circa* 480–540 C.E.), for offering an overly pared down epistemology and argues that in these matters we should follow common sense rather than a revisionist epistemological program. In this perspective—one that echoes Sextus' fourfold prescription—epistemic practices are not to be rejected; they are simply to be understood descriptively as the ways we in fact lead our epistemic lives; as conventions to be followed, because that is how human life works. On this view, epistemology and ontology are more anthropological than transcendental pursuits, revealing our conventions regarding what we take to be real and what counts as warrant, not any independent standard that grounds or fails to ground those conventions. Hence, Candrakīrti is quite happy to accept the Nyāya epistemology as reflecting the ways in which we use the concept of knowledge in daily life (see The Cowherds 2010; Siderits 1980, 1981).

Svātantrikas are distinctively unhappy with this minimalist epistemology. While as Mādhyamikas, they do not argue that Madhyamaka reasoning can capture ultimate reality and provide a true depiction of how things really are, they do seek to rein in the paradoxical nature of Madhyamaka so as to resolve, or at least, attenuate the fundamental tension that is at the heart of this tradition. They want to make sense of a doctrine that claims to show that it makes no sense to talk about how things really are even while preserving robust ways to make transactional distinctions. According to the Svātantrikas, the tension can be relieved by arguing that Madhyamaka reasonings do not aim at providing a true description of reality but as providing the most justifiable way of thinking about reality, the one that is least misleading and most likely to foster a healthy attitude toward Buddhist practice while preserving the possibility of making principled distinctions informing such practice.

5 Prasaṅgika, Svātantrika, and Skepticism

The Svātantrika position seeks a place for constructive philosophy, and worries that Prasaṅgika has eliminated any such space. It develops this constructive

position by providing a robust distinction between the ways in which skepticism operates regarding the ultimate truth and how it operates in the domain of practical life, the conventional truth, or transactional domain of objects of practical inquiry.

In the Indian context, this requires a robust account of epistemic warrant in the conventional realm. Patsab rejects this possibility entirely but Candrakīrti does not. The issue here concerns whether an account of conventional truth and conventional epistemic warrant that is merely anthropological can have sufficient bite to constitute and to explain genuine normative force. For Patsab, no epistemic practices can survive the deconstructive Madhyamaka analysis and hence it makes no sense to attempt to distinguish warranted from unwarranted epistemic practices, even at the conventional level. Such distinction is merely a concession to the world; the world to which the Buddhists should not pay too much attention. Instead, they should rely on the only valid source of guidance, the words of the Buddha. Candrakīrti is less extreme in that he is happy to accept the Nyāya catalog of *pramāṇas* as a description of ordinary epistemic practices, but he rejects the idea that this, or any set of epistemic practices has anything beyond custom to recommend it. So, he argues, knowledge is simply opinion validated by the epistemic practices accepted by the world. But according to Svātantrikas, this conventionalism degenerates into a relativism according to which conventional truth is whatever the world accepts (see The Cowherds 2010: ch. 9). If this is to be an adequate epistemology, it must provide a principled account of how pragmatic distinctions can be preserved and explained that goes beyond merely saying “this is what we do.” And indeed, Candrakīrti does not do so.

As we noted above, Candrakīrti’s position resembles that Sextus Empiricus’ account found in the Fourfold Prescription presented in *Outlines* (hence the kinship to skeptical positions in the West adopted by Hume and Wittgenstein). Sextus asks how the skeptic is to live his skepticism, and replies that the skeptic follows his appetites, appearances, the laws and customs of his culture, and the instructions of the arts. Sextus’ deep insight is that all of this is *practice*, and none of it involves commitment to deep theses about the nature of things (see especially *PH* I 18). The fourfold prescription, as we have noted, is the *positive* side of Pyrrhonian skepticism, and it is important to Sextus that it is possible to follow this prescription without falling in to dogmatism, without making assertions, in the relevant sense; without taking positions, in the relevant sense.

But how is this possible? Many find Sextus’ own account too weak to provide a philosophically satisfying answer to the challenge facing skepticism. We are not told how or why this prescription is to operate, or what its benefits are. Nor are we told how the list is made. Is it exhaustive? What is its basis?

This is part of the motivation for the 17th and 18th century attempts of Bacon, Mandeville, Hume, and others to defend the normative force of custom, a strategy which remains controversial (see Garfield 2019). Can the Svāntantrika approach do better and provide a more principled account of conventional truth? The 8th century philosopher Jñānagarbha argues that Mādhyamikas can meet the challenge that it faces by making a distinction between correct (*satya*) and incorrect (*mithyā*) conventional truths. He says: “A mere thing (*vastu-mātra*), which is not to be confused with anything that is imagined and arises dependently, is not known as correct relative [truth]” (Eckel 1987: 75). According to Jñānagarbha, the distinction that can save Madhyamaka from descending into relativism is to be found on the basic Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising (*pratitya samutpāda*). We must distinguish the appearances that are illusory according to the world (like mirages, the objects of dreams, etc.) from the ones that are correct (like the appearances of the heat produced by fire). The latter are produced in dependence on widely recognized external causes and conditions, and hence can be established as conventionally real. In this way, the Mādhyamika can claim to have provided a principled way to preserve the integrity of the objects that our practices presuppose without reifying them into hypostatized entities.

This way of arguing for Madhyamaka starts by taking the idea of conventional truth very seriously. It is not just the way deluded beings conceive of reality (as Patsab thinks) or, even, a kind of concession that the skeptic makes to participate in the conversation according to the conventions of the world (as Candrakīrti may think), but an articulation of the presuppositions of our practice. Obviously, such an articulation does not aim to provide a description per impossible of how things really are but just of how we assume them to be when we engage them in our practices. Hence, this articulation is merely conventional and is to be set aside when we attempt to think how things really are.

Nonetheless, such a strategy must start from the provisional knowledge that we have of the world as assumed by our practices. The world we experience does not exist outside of our interests and conventions, but is also not completely determined by these considerations. Our assumptions about reality are also largely determined by our embodied condition. We see the world of experience in certain ways not just because of our interests and conventions but also because of the kind of the perceptual apparatus that we have. It appears to us that our experiences and the objects of the world are produced in dependence on complex causal nexes. Whether or not origination is not built in the fabric of the universe, it is certainly a ubiquitous feature of the world of appearance. Jñānagarbha asserts: “[T]his is why [the Buddha’s] teaching is based on appearances” (Eckel 1987: 89). And even if dependence on causality

is merely of the domain of appearance, we are not free just to dispense from it and established sets of convention that would negate causal dependence.

Hence, our embodied existence and the perceptual apparatus that this entails significantly constrain the kind of conventions that we can come up with, and thus offers a basis for a principled account of conventional truth based on the concept of dependent arising, understood not as an ontological concept but as providing an account of the fundamental perceptual constraints of our experience and the objects that they yield.

This is so not because the objects given in perception exist in reality just as they appear, but because they reflect our most fundamental modes of interaction with the world. It is on this basis that Mādhyamikas can then proceed to show their fundamental point that it makes no sense to think of reality in abstraction of our modes of interaction with the world, as if we could take the view from nowhere. This conclusion may not strictly correspond to reality but is the best way, the most useful and least deceptive, way of thinking about reality.

Once we adopt this healthy skepticism toward any attempt to characterize how things really are in abstraction from our interactions with them, we come to realize that all we have is what is provided by our interactions with the world. On this Svātantrika view, this is what conventional reality is about, and we need to realize that this is all that we have. This does not mean, however, that our account of this level of reality is arbitrary. There are ways in which our experiences are significantly constrained by our embodiment and by the world.

The Svātantrika position suggests that we may be wise to start from this conventional basis to show how we are justified to go from there to the fundamental Madhyamaka insight. This suggestion also provides a response to the challenge facing skepticism. Although inquiries into how things exist are to be suspended as they lead to unsolvable contradictions, the investigations into how things are within the context of how things appear to us are to be welcomed. It may be impossible to establish a hard line dividing which kind of inquiry is allowable and which is not, but the reliance on dependent arising does provide a guideline sufficiently robust to respond to the challenge facing skepticism.

Inquiries based on causality (and in a modern context on probability) can be taken as providing the provisional bedrocks on which to base our conventional distinctions. In a modern context, this means that we can take the well-established scientific findings as bases to establish the kind of distinctions that we need to survive on this planet. Hence, we do not need to fear that skepticism may undermine the reliance on causal or probabilistic regularities established

by science as long as we understand that although those are not arbitrary they are also not how things are in reality since they are of the domain of the appearances.

In this way, Nāgārjuna's insight that it is impossible to make sense of how things are in reality is preserved and made compatible with a more constructive approach to knowledge in general and philosophy in particular. The Prāsaṅgika project of grounding everything in convention may be possible; but this requires an account of convention sufficiently robust to induce the genuine normativity presupposed by ideas such as truth and knowledge. Alternatively, the Svātantrika project, with its commitment to conventional intrinsic natures may be a better articulation of the skeptical program. In setting out this dilemma, the Madhyamaka tradition enriches our understanding of skepticism. And whichever way one goes, the Madhyamaka tradition indicates a way of resolving skeptical problems that was not anticipated in Western skeptical thought. These are contributions that Western philosophers interested in skepticism should take seriously.

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