

Reductionism and Fictionalism

Comments on Siderits' *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy**

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As a critic, I am in the unenviable position of agreeing with nearly all of what Mark does in this lucid, erudite and creative book. My comments will hence not be aimed at showing what he got wrong, as much as an attempt from a Madhyamaka point of view to suggest another way of seeing things, in particular another way of seeing how one might think of how Madhyamaka philosophers, such as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, see conventional truth, our engagement with conventional truth, and the status of persons. I suspect that this alternative is also in the minds of earlier Buddhist philosophers, and that Madhyamaka may be more an explicit working out of ideas implicit in the tradition than a radical break. If this suspicion—for which I will not argue here—is correct, this alternative is also available to those to whom Mark refers as “reductionists.” I think that this way of seeing things may put certain ideas in Buddhist philosophy into better focus, and may indeed make them more attractive as well.

My view of these matters is guided by three ideas: (1) Truth in fiction is, while fictional, *truth*; (2) Madhyamaka Buddhist theory is committed to a doctrine of two *truths*, not to a doctrine of one truth and one falsehood; (3) the last claim notwithstanding, such thinkers as Candrakīrti often refer to conventional truth as entirely *false*. I will first explain these three ideas and their importance, then turn to a

* Thanks to Constance Kassor and to Lindsay Crawford for lots of hard thinking and good conversations about fictionalism, personal identity and the two truths. Their theses and our supervision meetings provide much of the raw material for these thoughts.

more explicit account of Madhyamaka fictionalism, and finally indicate where I think Mark's presentation could be enriched with a dose of fiction.

1. Truth in Fiction

Works of fiction are different from factual reports. The latter aim at getting it right about the actual world, and the latter, for the most part, do not (though they nonetheless may rely on and comprise claims that are non-fictional). So, measured against reality, many of the claims in works of fiction are simply false, and nobody frets about that. Were somebody to become angry as a result of her failure to locate Dean Moriarty's birthplace, and to accuse Jack Duluoz of lying about his existence, we would think her terribly confused about the nature of fiction; were she unable to locate Neal Cassady's birthplace and to accuse Jack Kerouac of making him up, we would merely accuse her of sloppy scholarship, not ontological confusion. Neal was as real as Kerouac; Dean as fictional as Duluoz.

Nonetheless, Dean's fictional status does not preclude drawing the distinction between truth about him and falsity about him, and not merely truth and falsity as measured from outside.¹ There are real distinctions to be drawn between truth and falsity within the fiction, despite the fact that the fiction is a fiction. It is *true* (in the fiction) that Dean drove from Mexico City to San Francisco. It is *false* (in the fiction) that Dean flew from New York to Kathmandu. It is even *true* (in the fiction) that Dean is a real human being, and *false* (in the fiction) that he is a fictional entity, despite the fact that the former claim is false *outside of the fiction*, and that the latter is true *outside of the fiction*.

¹ By truth and falsity as measured from outside, I mean the truth of claims like, "Dean is a character in *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*" and the falsity of claims like "Kerouac modeled Dean on Woodrow Wilson." These are sentences the truth-values of which are determined by facts about the real world.

There is nothing terribly mysterious about this. Nor does this hinge on any particular theory of truth. The story is independent of whether we are correspondence theorists, coherentists, pragmatists, deflationists, and of how many truth values we think there are, etc. The point is simply that fictions can *constitute* worlds against which truth can be assessed, despite the fact that those worlds are themselves fictional. Truth and falsity are determined by these fictional worlds, even though the truth and falsity of many propositions about these worlds are left open. These worlds bear little analysis. It is not just that we don't *know* Dean's shoe size. There is not fact of the matter about what it is. I don't know Neal's shoe size, but I am sure that he had one.

These fictional worlds are neither reducible to nor ontologically supervenient upon the actual world. Dean is not *really* a bunch of inkmarks on paper, nor an idea, however real these are. He is a fictional human being. And it is not true that in any world physically identical to this one there would be a Dean. There would be no Dean in any world like this one. Neither reductionism nor supervenience theory gives us an account of Dean's ontological status. But this does not, I repeat, undermine the fact that there are truths and falsehoods about Dean, and that those are constituted by a wholly natural, real phenomenon, a real fiction.²

Finally, note that fictions *constitute* the truth or falsity of claims about the worlds they describe. It makes no sense to ask whether *On The Road* gets Dean Moriarty right, or whether it makes mistakes about him, while it does make sense to ask whether a historian of the beats gets Neal Cassady right, or makes mistakes about him. Facts about Neal determine the truth or falsity of claims about him independent of our

² This does indicate an interesting formal problem regarding the way that supervenience is often formulated. For any world physically identical to this one will *induce* a fictional world in which Dean is as he is in the fiction as it is constituted here. This indicates that supervenience, as an ontological thesis, has to be formulated in the material mode, not in terms of descriptions.

practices; the Kerouac novels *constitute* the truth or falsity of claims about Dean, and nothing in the actual world can verify or undermine them.

2. Two Truths (and a bit of falsehood)

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

Nāgārjuna argues that there are two *truths*, and Siderits correctly notes that this follows an earlier Buddhist tradition of distinguishing *samvṛti-satya* from *paramartha-satya*. Candrakīrti is intriguingly ambivalent about the status of *samvṛti-satya*, sometimes characterizing it as a kind of *truth*, sometimes as *wholly false*.

Conventional truth is posited due to the force of afflictive ignorance, which constitutes the limbs of cyclic existence. For the śravakas, pratekyabuddhas and bodhisattvas, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, compounded phenomena, which are seen to be like reflections have the nature of being created; but these are not truths for them because they are not fixated on things as true. Fools are deceived, but for those others—just like an illusion—in virtue of being dependently originated, they are merely conventional.
[*Madhyanakāvātāra-bhāṣya*, *dBu ma 'a* 255a]

His ambivalence, and the complex three-fold gloss he provides for *samvṛti*, as well as the complex distribution of *samvṛti* and *vyāvahāra* against *satya* and *sat* (*kun dzob/ tha snyad//bden pa/yod pa*) generate a fair amount of debate among subsequent commentators in Tibet regarding the ontological status and nature of the truth claims of conventional truth or conventional reality. Some commentators emphasize the *falsity* (*dzun pa*) of conventional truth.³ Others emphasize its conventional *reality*, and its status as an object of authoritative cognition, and hence the status of claims

³ See especially Go ram pa in *Ngas don rab gsal*.

regarding it as *true*, even if only conventionally so.⁴ This debate can become both recondite and partisan very quickly.

By adopting a fictionalist reading of Candrakīrti on these matters, and by following Tsong khapa in reading this back into Nāgārjuna, we arrive at understanding of the relationship between the two truths slightly different from that suggested by Siderits, and a correspondingly different understanding of Buddhist approaches to personal identity and to morality. The two truths are, as Nāgārjuna, and Candrakīrti in *Prasannapadā*, emphasize, each *truths*. Each one establishes a standard against which claims may be measured as true or false; each determines a *pramāṇa*.⁵ As Tsong khapa puts the point, conventional authoritative cognition is authoritative in distinguishing between conventional truth and falsity. Similarly, transcendental authoritative cognition is authoritative with regard to question about ultimate truth.

Objects of knowledge constitute the basis of division of the two truths. The conventional truth and the ultimate truth are the entities that are the divisions of objects of knowledge. [Ocean xxx]

This shows that, from among the two natures of the sprout, or the two truths about the sprout, the ultimate nature of the sprout is found by the former cognitive process, and the conventional nature is found by the latter cognitive process. [Ocean xxx]

It thus says that each phenomenon has two natures; and the ultimate is the one that is found by the cognitive process that apprehends reality; and the conventional is the one that is found by the cognitive process that perceives that which is unreal.

Ordinary beings grasp such things as pots as truly existent, and grasp them as ultimately existent as well. Therefore from the perspective of their minds, such things as pots are ultimately existent, but they are not conventional objects. These things, such as pots, which are ultimately existent from their perspective, are conventional objects as they are seen by the āryas, to whom things appear as illusion-like. Since they cannot be posited as truly existent as they are apprehended by an āryan consciousness, they are referred to as merely conventional.

⁴ See especially Tsong khapa in *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal* and *rTsa she tik chen*.

⁵ I set aside for present purposes a hard problem, but one truly orthogonal to this discussion, *viz.*, the nature of ultimate reality, and its relation to statements purporting to express ultimate truth. This issue quickly involves complex questions in Madhyamaka ontology, philosophy of language and logic. But all of these questions are independent our views about the status of conventional truth, and even about its relation to ultimate truth, which are the questions at stake here.

However, since their nature is said to be ultimate truth, it should be asserted, with this distinction in mind, that such things as pots are conventional. but their nature, as the āryas grasp it, is ultimate; but one should *not* assert that such things as pots are ultimates for the āryas, because the āryas' rational minds, which see reality, do not find things such as pots; and because it is said that the distinctive characteristic of the ultimate truth is that it is found by [408] the rational mind that sees reality.

There are two kinds of cognitive processes that perceive unreal deceptive objects: the cognitive process associated with an acute sensory faculty, which is not impaired by any extraneous causes of misperception such as cataracts; and the cognitive process associated with a defective sensory faculty impaired by extraneous causes of misperception. In comparison to the ones discussed earlier, these two are fallacious cognitive processes...

Just as there are two kinds of faculty—non-erroneous and erroneous—their objects are said to be of two corresponding kinds—unreal and real: the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are unimpaired by extraneous causes of misperception; and the objects that are grasped by the cognitive processes associated with the six faculties that are impaired by extraneous causes of misperception, respectively. Here *Madhyamakāvātāra* says:

That which is perceived by ordinary people
By being grasped through unimpaired sense faculties
Is regarded by ordinary people as real.
All the rest is said to be unreal. [VI: 25]

The internal impairments of the sense faculties are such things as cataracts, jaundice and such things as hallucinogenic drugs. The external impairments of the sense faculties are such things as mirrors; the echoing of sound in a cave; and the rays of the autumn sun falling on such things as white sand. Even without the internal impairments, these can become the causes of grasping such things as mirages, reflections, and echoes as water, etc. [409] Magicians' mantras and potions should be understood similarly.

The impairments of the mental faculty are such things as erroneous philosophical views, fallacious arguments, dreams and sleep. Thus, the impairments such as ignorance with regard to the two kinds of self-grasping that develop from beginningless time are not treated as impairments in this context. Rather, as we previously explained, the extraneous causes of misperception in the faculties are treated as impairments in this context.

It is important to note that in drawing this epistemological and ontological distinction Tsong khapa, following Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna, emphasizes that just as conventional authoritative cognition cannot undermine transcendental authoritative cognition in its domain, *viz.*, the ultimate truth, transcendental authoritative cognition cannot undermine conventional authoritative cognition in *its* domain of authority, *viz.*, conventional truth. It is in this respect that the two truths are *two*, and *truths*.

On the other hand, Candrakīrti reminds us in *Madhyamakāvātāra* that the conventional truth is *entirely false*, and sometimes explains this by saying that it is *deceptive*. (*blu ba*) In the *Yuktiśastikavṛtti* Candrakīrti says:

Suppose some one asked, “in that case, why is nirvana said to be an ultimate truth?” Because it does not deceive ordinary beings regarding its mode of existence. Only through mundane nominal conventions is it said to exist as ultimate truth. Compound phenomena, which are deceptive, are not ultimate truths. [412] Since three of the truths are compound phenomena, they appear to have essence, although they do not. Therefore, since they deceive fools, they are regarded as conventional truths. [*dBu ma ya 7b*]

This, of course, follows Nāgārjuna’s remark that “whatever is deceptive is false.” The deceptiveness of conventional truth is a straightforward matter. Conventional reality has a mode of appearance discordant with its mode of existence. Things that are merely conventionally real appear to ordinary people to be ultimately real.

Taking conventional objects grasped by such unimpaired and impaired cognitive faculties to be real or unreal, respectively, merely conforms to ordinary cognitive practice. This is because they actually exist as they appear or do not, according whether or not they are undermined by ordinary cognition. This distinction between the real and the unreal is not drawn from the perspective of the āryas. Just as such things as reflections do not exist as they appear, such things as blue, that appear to exist through their own characteristics to those who are affected by ignorance do not actually exist as they appear. Therefore there is no distinction between those two kinds of cognitive faculties in terms of whether or not they are erroneous.

This superimposition of inherent existence on that which lacks it is the primal ignorance that leads to suffering. There is no difficulty in reconciling this sense of “falsehood” with the truth of conventional truth. Conventional truth is truly conventional, and deceptively appears to be more than that just as counterfeit dollars are *real* fakes. That’s why you can be prosecuted for making them.

But Candrakīrti does not *always* gloss falsehood in terms of deceptiveness.

Sometimes he says that what is conventionally true does not exist at all.

Through seeing all phenomena both as real and as unreal,
The two natures of the objects that are found are grasped.
The object of the perception of reality is the way things really are.
That which is seen falsely is called the conventional truth. [VI: 23]

It is asserted that there are two kinds of perceptions of the false:
 That by acute sensory faculties; and that by defective sensory faculties.
 The cognitive processes of those who have defective senses
 Are fallacious in comparison to those of persons with acute senses. [VI: 24]

This claim must also be reconciled with the truth of conventional truth. Here is where fictionalism helps. It is in one important sense that Dean Moriarty doesn't exist at all, and that anyone who believes that he does is horribly deluded, just as it is true, according to Madhyamaka, and according to earlier schools to the extent that their ontology is consistent with its ontology,⁶ in that same sense that whatever is conventionally existent, including persons, does not exist at all, and in the sense that anyone who believes that mere conventional phenomena, including persons, actually exist is horribly deluded. But that sense is perfectly compatible with the truth *constituted by* the Kerouac stories that Dean Moriarty did lots of speed, drove from Mexico City to San Francisco, and worked on the railroad, just as the nonexistence of conventionally real phenomena is consistent with their fictional existence and with lots of important conventional—that is, fictional—truths about them. Those truths are constituted by our conventions, and can neither be verified nor undermined by ultimate reality.

3. Madhyamaka Fictionalism

We can now say what it is to be a Madhyamaka fictionalist about conventional reality, about persons and about reality, and in sketching this position its virtues as an account of the doctrine of the two truths that manages to salvage in a natural way many of the *prima facie* inconsistent claims about the two truths in Buddhist literature will be apparent. Once again, let us leave aside for present purposes the status of ultimate truth. There is a lot to say here, but too much for present

⁶ This is another vexed issue in Buddhist doxography about which Siderits has much to say that is of interest, and about which there is much more to say. I will say nothing more about it here.

purposes, and most of it independent of the points that must be made here (and in all respects, I think I agree with Siderits on that side).

Conventional truth is truth in a fiction, a fiction we collectively constitute. Like a novel, our collective practices, including our language, our perceptual activities, our thoughts and attitudes constitute a world against and in which truth and falsity can be measured. The standards appropriate to that world are just those that mark off truth and falsity within the fiction. To ask deny that the persons or enduring physical objects of the conventional world are real, or that they possess the properties that conventional epistemic authority assigns to them on the grounds that they do not withstand ultimate analysis and are found thereby to be empty would be as silly as to deny that Dean Moriarty really drove cross country high on Benzedrine on the grounds that nobody by that name ever had a driver's license, or on the grounds that Neal Cassady did no such thing. On the other hand, arguing that these things truly exist, exist independently of the fiction, on the grounds that there is a difference between being right and wrong about them would be as silly as to argue that because it is *true* that Dean lived in San Francisco and *false* that he lived in Topeka, Dean truly exists.

As a fiction, conventional truth is, in an important sense, wholly false, and is seen to be false by anyone who takes a standpoint outside of the fiction. The āryas are such people, of course, for any Buddhist. From that standpoint, every sentence in *On the Road* that mentions Dean is entirely false. And from the standpoint of ultimate truth, any sentence that implicates the existence of persons and enduring objects is wholly false.

We can make sense not only of Madhyamaka assertions of the complete falsehood of conventional truth, but also of the analysis of "false" as meaning *deceptive*. It is certainly possible for one to pick up a novel and to take it to be a chronicle. Some misguided readers might assume, for instance, that a novel is autobiography and then

complain when details of the lives of the fictional protagonist do not match those of the author's life that the novel contained lies. Such readers are *deceived*, and to the extent that the claims in the novel are taken to be false, it is not because they are false by the standards of fiction, nor because the appropriate standards against which to measure their truth and falsity is the extra-fictional world, but instead because the reader was deceived by the fiction into thinking it was more than just a fiction. Just so with conventional truth: primal ignorance just is the mistaking of the fiction of conventional truth for reality. Its falsity can hence be analyzed, as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti urge, neither as falsity by conventional standards, nor in terms of the appropriateness of ultimate standards as the measure of conventional truth, but in terms of ordinary persons taking the conventional truth to be more than just conventional, to deception.

As we have seen, it is central to Madhyamaka theory (and, as we are properly reminded by Mark, of earlier Buddhist metaphysics to the extent that Madhyamaka is a continuous outgrowth of that tradition) that the two truths are two *truths*, and not one truth and one falsehood. Madhyamaka fictionalism allows us to understand that claim as well. Fictional truth, as we have emphasized, is not only wholly false, not only deceptive, but also a kind of *truth*. To the extent that our lives are lived largely within the fiction of conventional reality, it is essential that we master conventional authoritative cognition and distinguish truth from falsehood in that domain; this is essential both as an instrument to realize ultimate truth, and despite the fact that liberation requires us to see the conventional truth as merely conventional, and hence as entirely false. The sense in which the two truths are at bottom one—as Mark has put it famously, that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth—is that the ultimate truth is just that the conventional truth is just conventional. Nothing lies behind or beneath it.

4. Reductionism, Anti-realism and Irony vs Fictionalism

The foregoing is simply meant to motivate fictionalism as a natural way of understanding much Buddhist metaphysics of the person. I have argued most directly that it is a natural way to understand Madhyamaka, that school that Mark characterizes as “anti-realist.” I shall have a few things to say below about why I think that fictionalism is a close cousin to, and perhaps a more attractive cousin than, anti-realism. But my real goal is to suggest that fictionalism represents the common thread that links earlier to later Buddhist metaphysics. The continuities in this respect to which Mark adverts I believe are real, and in fact I think that in characterizing the shift from Sautrantika to Madhyamaka schools as a shift from reductionism to anti-realism Mark overplays the differences in this regard. In fact, I think that he characterizes each school as more *extreme* than each in fact is and that fictionalism provides the middle path in exegesis.

Mark

The Reductionist has proposed an account according to which our talk of persons as owners of pain is just a shorthand way of referring to a set of discrete but causally connected psychophysical elements. [40]

While it has become common to translate *samvṛti-satya* as ‘conventional truth’, still to some Buddhologists it may sound quite un-Buddhist to call our use of the personhood concept a convention where by ‘convention’ is meant a social practice that prevails and persists in a society due to some contingent social arrangements... Surely the occurrence of such beliefs is the result of our having been socialized into a society that found it useful to employ such convenient designators [as ‘forest’, ‘chariot’, ‘army’ or ‘city’]. And since ‘person’ is regularly classified along with ‘army’ and ‘chariot’ as a convenient designator, the same should hold for our belief in the existence of persons.

Candrakīrti gives an account of the notion of conventional truth that also supports this interpretation. ... And while Candrakīrti is not himself a Reductionist, it is important to his project that his explication of this concept reflect the understanding of the Buddhist Reductionist.

... The ignorance that is to be overcome through enlightenment is thus not our belief in the existence of the person but rather our disposition towards hypostasization with respect to convenient designators. [72 n. g]

While there can be little doubt that the Buddha espoused a form of Reductionism, there were some Buddhists who held an anti-Reductionist position. Since the name by which their view came to be known (*pudgalavāda*) simply means the doctrine of the person, we shall call them 'Personalists'. And while they did not formulate their view in terms of the notion of non-reductive supervenience, there are many suggestive elements in their defense of their view. First, Personalists agreed with the Buddhist Reductionists that there is no separately existing self. They also held that the person is named and conceptualized in dependence on the psychophysical elements, and that it can be said to be neither identical to nor distinct from its elements. Unlike the psychophysical elements, it is not ultimately real, but neither is it a mere conceptual fiction. Instead it must be accorded a distinctive sort of reality, since it has properties that none of the psychophysical elements has, such as being the bearer of moral desert... [89]

When Nāgseṇa tells Milinda that it is neither true nor false that adult and infant Milinda are the same person, he is best thought of as speaking of the ultimate truth. But the apparent bivalence failure in this case should be seen as purely rhetorical, calling attention to the fact that sentences containing 'person' are ultimately ill formed, so that the question of their truth simply does not arise. [97 n. c]

[After arguing that there cannot be anything with intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*)] the Buddhist anti-realist would put this as the claim that all things are *empty*... Now a Buddhist Reductionist would agree that such things as chariots, forests and persons are empty in this sense. For it is a hallmark of conceptual fictions that they borrow their natures from the parts of which they are composed. ... What might [this] claim mean? There appear to be just two possibilities, metaphysical nihilism and global anti-realism... According to global anti-realism... the very notion of an ultimate truth, of there being an ultimate nature of reality, is incoherent. [132]

Coming to grips with Buddhist anti-realism can be usefully compared to what happens when a currency is taken off the gold standard. A paper currency that is readily convertible into gold may come to be seen as having value quite independently of its relation to something antecedently thought of as intrinsically valuable. To withdraw the backing of gold is to disrupt any attachment we may feel toward the currency by showing it to be without intrinsic value. This may in turn give rise to the fear that our currency will become just so much worthless paper. Such fears are shown to be misplaced when it turns out that the currency retains its former value after going off the gold standard. For we then learn that what gives a currency value is its role as a medium of exchange within that set of human institutions and practices known as an economy. Indeed we then come to see that gold is equally without intrinsic value, that its value has always rested on contingent facts about human interests and practices. But the insight that nothing has intrinsic value does not trigger the despair of economic nihilism. Instead we simply acquiesce in the practice of accepting the currency (and gold too, for that matter) as having economic value. [202]