

Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality

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1. The Problem

Tsong khapa, following Candrakīrti closely, says writes that “Convention”¹ refers to a lack of understanding or ignorance; that is, that which obscures or conceals the way things really are.” [Ocean 480-481]. Candrakīrti himself puts the point this way:

Obscurational truth is posited due to the force of afflictive ignorance, which constitutes the limbs of cyclic existence. The śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, see compounded phenomena to be like reflections, to 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 obscurational. [d*Bu ma* ‘a 255a] [Ocean 481-482].

So it might seem that for Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa conventional truth is merely illusion, wholly false, accepted only by the fools it deceives.

But of course that can’t be the whole story, for several reasons. First of all, both Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa refer to conventional truth as a *truth*; secondly, they also indicate that the term “convention” can refer to *mutual dependence* and to *signifiers* [Ocean 480, *MavB* 252b]; third, Candrakīrti also asserts that “It has been shown that each phenomenon has its own two natures—a conventional and an ultimate nature.” [253a] [483] The fact that these are natures of phenomena means

¹ There is a translational problem posed throughout this paper by the terms *vyāvahāra* and *samvṛti* in Sanskrit and *tha snyad* and *kun rdzob* in Tibetan. I will use “convention” to translate the first members of these pairs and “obscurational” to translate the second. The only time that this difference is important is where they are glossed. Both Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa regard them as absolutely coextensive.

that they are in some sense, both *real*. Fourth, Nāgārjuna asserts quite plainly, in the verse to which all of the passages to which I have just adverted are commentaries, that “the Buddha’s teaching is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth.” [MMK XXIV: 8, *Ocean* 479]. Finally, given the doctrine of the identity of the two truths [MMK XXIV: 18-19], a doctrine of which both Tsong khapa and Candrakīrti approve, if the ultimate truth is a truth, a conventional truth that is identical with it just has to be true in some sense.

I am interested specifically in how Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa understand the idea of conventional truth, most specifically, in the sense in which, and the reasons for which, they regard conventional truth as *true*. We must therefore reconcile the claims that conventional truth is *concealing, deceptive, truth only for fools* with its *identity* with ultimate truth, and its being one of the two *natures* of any object. We thus also must explain the sense in which conventional truth is distinct from, and the sense in which it is identical to, ultimate truth, and why these two claims are mutually consistent.

I am interested in the work of Candrakīrti because I think that he, more than any other Indian mādhyamika, worries about how to interpret this doctrine, and thinks it through with more clarity than any other Indian commentator on Nāgārjuna. I am interested in the work of Tsong khapa, because I think that he, more than any other commentator on Indian Madhyamaka, understood and appreciated the force of Candrakīrti’s analysis and took seriously the implications of taking conventional truth seriously for Buddhist epistemology and practice. If we can make sense of the doctrine of the two truths and of the reality of the conventional despite its implication with primal ignorance at all, we can make sense of it in the context of the work of these two philosophical giants.

2. Two Reasons that Conventional Truth is a Truth (Preliminaries)

I begin by noting two *prima facie* reasons for treating conventional truth as a truth in the work of Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa. First, there is a very important sense in which the conventional truth is the only truth that there is. There are two ways of making this point. First, as we noted above, the two truths are in *some* sense, identical. If that is true, then even ultimate truth is only conventional. The second way to make this point is this, though: the ultimate truth is emptiness, the absence of true existence in things, and thus the fact that they are merely conventionally true. The ultimate truth is hence that the conventional truth is all that there is. We will return to this consideration at the end of this paper.

The second reason will occupy more of my analytic attention in what follows. Tsong khapa and Candrakīrti each emphasize that conventional truth is the domain of conventional authoritative cognition, and hence that conventional truth is a domain about which there is a difference between getting it wrong and getting it right, and that one can be *correct* about conventional truth, in two different, but equally important senses. First, ordinary people can be right about the fact there is a rope on the ground, wrong about the fact that there is a snake there. The fact that there is a rope, not a snake, is hence in some sense *true*. Second, as we have seen, āryas can know the conventional nature of conventional truth in a way that ordinary fools cannot. What is deceptive to fools is not deceptive to āryas, although it is merely conventional. In that sense, too, convention can be seen *truly*.

The important point here, and the principal topic of this paper, is that for both Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa, it is the fact of epistemic authority that guarantees truth in convention. When we ask why is conventional truth a *truth*, the answer will turn on the fact that there is a difference to be drawn *within* the conventional between truth and falsehood, as well as a truth *about* the conventional. There is something that counts as getting it right about conventional reality.

3. Mirages for Mādhyamikas

Among the many similes for conventional truth that litter Madhyamaka texts, the most fruitful is that of the mirage. Conventional truth is false, Candrakīrti tells us, because it is deceptive. (*Yuktiśaṣṭikavṛtti dBu ma ya 7 b*) Candrakīrti spells this out in terms of a mirage. A mirage appears to be water, but is in fact empty of water—it is deceptive, and in that sense, a false appearance. On the other hand, a mirage is not *nothing*: it is a *real* mirage, just not real water.

The analogy must be spelled out with care to avoid the extreme of nihilism. A mirage appears to be water, but is only a mirage; the inexperienced highway traveler mistakes it for water, and for him it is deceptive, a false appearance of water; the experienced traveler sees it for what it is—a real mirage, empty of water. Just so, conventional phenomena appear to ordinary, deluded beings to be inherently existent, whereas in fact they are merely conventionally real, empty of that inherent existence; to the āryas, on the other hand, they appear to be merely conventionally true, hence to be empty. For us, they are deceptive, false appearances; for them, they are simply real conventional truths.

We can update the analogy to make the point more plainly. Imagine three travelers along a hot desert highway. Alice is an experienced desert traveler; Bill is a neophyte; Charlie is wearing polarizing sunglasses. Bill points to a mirage up ahead and warns against a puddle on the road; Alice sees the mirage as a mirage and assures him that there is no danger. Charlie sees nothing at all, and wonders what they are talking about. If the mirage were entirely false—if there were no truth about it at all, Charlie would be the most authoritative of the three (and Buddhas would know nothing of the real world). But that is wrong. Just as Bill is deceived in believing that there is water on the road, Charlie is incapable of seeing the mirage at all, and so fails to know what Alice knows—that there is a real mirage on the road, which appears to some to be water, but which is not. There is a truth about the mirage, despite the

fact that it is deceptive, and Alice is authoritative with respect to it precisely because she sees it as it is, not as it appears to the uninitiated.

4. A Message from our Sponsors: Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa

Let's now consider a few crucial passages from the relevant texts to get a better sense of the constraints that an account of Madhyamaka theory of conventional truth must satisfy. Tsong khapa, in his discussion of the status of arising and ceasing, etc in the context of the negations presented in the Homage verses for *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, remarks:

[I]f there were no place for conventional phenomena, the existence of which is established by authoritative cognition, these phenomena would be like the snake—that is, the rope grasped as a snake—of which no cause or effect is possible...

[I]f one were forced to maintain that there is no place for bondage, liberation, etc in the meaning of “conventional existence,” and that these must be placed only in the erroneous perspective, that would be a great philosophical error.

Even worse, as long as convention is conceived [as entirely nonexistent], since there would be no place for authoritative cognition, neither the proposition maintained nor the person who maintains it nor the proof—including scriptural sources and reasoning—could be established by authoritative cognition. So it would be ridiculous to maintain that there are genuine phenomena maintained by authoritative cognition. [*Ocean* 30-31]

Tsong khapa makes it plain here that conventional phenomena, unlike the snake thought to be perceived when one sees a rope, have causes and effects, and are real. Moreover, he argues that the repudiation of the reality of the conventional would undermine the possibility of epistemic authority, undermining even the ability to argue cogently that the conventional does not exist. Such a position would be self-refuting. Returning to the discussion of *MMK XXIV*: 8, Tsong khapa, citing Candrakīrti, emphasizes the deceptive side of the conventional:

Suppose someone asks, “what is conventional and what is truth?” The convention from the perspective of which such things as form are posited as true is the ignorance which fabricates the essential existence of phenomena which do not inherently exist... Thus *Madhyamakāvatāra* says

Since the nature of confusion is to veil, it is obscurational.
 That which is created by it appears to be truly existent.
 The sage has said that it is the obscurational truth.
 Created phenomena are obscurational. [VI: 28]

Here *Madhyamakāvātāra-bhāṣya* says:

Obscurational truth is posited due to the force of afflictive ignorance, which constitutes the limbs of cyclic existence. The śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas, who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, see compounded phenomena to be like reflections, to 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 obscurational. [255a] (*Ocean* 481-482)

There are subtle philosophical distinctions to be drawn here. On the one hand, conventional truth is obscurational, confusing and veiling. The reason for that is that conventional truth appears to most of us as though it is truly (inherently) existent—as more than merely conventional. Those who have transcended afflictive ignorance, Candrakīrti emphasizes, in fact do see the compounded phenomena comprised by conventional truth, but see them as mirage-like, as real, but deceptive.

Tsong khapa comments that this means that ignorance is not a necessary condition of positing conventional truth, but that ignorance is instead the source of the superimposition of inherent existence on that which is conventionally real.

This does not demonstrate that those who posit the existence of obscurational truth posit through ignorance, nor that from the perspective of the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas... it is not posited as conventional truth. ... Since it is through afflictive ignorance that one grasps things as truly existent, the object that is thereby grasped cannot exist even conventionally, and whatever is an obscurational truth must exist conventionally.

...When it is said that compounded phenomena are “merely obscurational” from their perspective, the word “mere” excludes *truth*, but in no way excludes *obscurational truth*.... Thus, the sense in which the obscurational truth is true is that it is true merely from the perspective of ignorance—that is, obscuration.

[When] Candrakīrti... says, “since it is obscurationally true, it is obscurational truth” [MVB 254b] [he] means that conventional truth is that which is true from the perspective of ignorance—obscuration—but not that it is truly existent from the standpoint of nominal convention. [*Ocean* 482]

Tsong khapa next turns to the question of whether the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is drawn on the basis of two distinct perspectives on the same reality, or on the basis of two distinct natures of that reality. Following Candrakīrti, he adopts the latter position:

Each of the internal and external phenomena has two natures: an ultimate and a conventional nature. The sprout, for instance, has a nature that is found by a rational cognitive process, which sees the real nature of the phenomenon as it is, and a nature that is found by a conventional cognitive process, which perceives deceptive or unreal objects. The former nature is the ultimate truth of the sprout; the latter nature is the conventional truth of the sprout.

[Candrakīrti's assertion that] "It has been shown that each phenomenon has two natures—a conventional and an ultimate nature" [MVb 253a] does *not* show that a *single* nature is in fact two truths in virtue of the two *perspectives* of the former and latter cognitive process.

The distinction between the two natures, or two truths about a phenomenon, is drawn on the basis of the kind of authoritative cognition appropriate to each, and it is important that there is a kind of cognition authoritative with respect to each. To be empty and to be deceptive are different. It is one thing for a mirage to be *empty of water*; it is another thing for it to be a *deceptive appearance*. These are two natures of the mirage, and the distinction between them is not the difference between two perspectives on the mirage, but between two objects of knowledge, which in turn are apprehended through different cognitive states.

When one perceives the emptiness of a phenomenon, one perceives a nature that that phenomenon has, regardless of one's perspective on it, and the kind of cognitive process that perceives that is one that is authoritative with respect to ultimate truth; when one perceives the conventional character of a phenomenon, one perceives its deceptive nature, both the way it appears and the fact that it does not exist in that way, and the kind of cognitive process that perceives that is one that is authoritative with respect to the conventional. On the other hand, to perceive a conventional phenomenon as inherently existent is not even to be authoritative with respect to the conventional.

... In order to ascertain a pot for instance, as a deceptive or unreal object, it is necessary to develop the view that refutes... the object of fixation that is the object grasped as truly existent. This is because without having rationally refuted its true existence, its unreality is not established by authoritative cognition. So, for the mind to establish anything as an object of conventional truth, it must depend on the refutation of its ultimate existence. [*Ocean* 483]

...

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. The things, such as pots, which are ultimately existent from their perspective, are conventional objects from the perspective of the āryas, to whom they appear as illusionlike. Since they cannot be posited as truly existent as they are apprehended by an āryan consciousness, they are referred to as merely conventional. [*Ocean* 484]

...

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. [*MAV* VI:25]

Finally, there is a standard of correctness for conventional truth. Truth, for Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa, must contrast with falsehood. And the standard for the truth of a judgment regarding conventional truth is that it is vouchsafed by conventional authoritative cognition and cannot be undermined by conventional authoritative cognition, just as the standard of truth of a judgment regarding the ultimate is that it is vouchsafed by ultimate authoritative cognition and not undermined by cognition of that kind. This in turn requires a distinction between sound and impaired conventional faculties:

The internal impairments of the sense faculties are such things as cataracts, jaundice, and such things as hallucinogenic drugs one has consumed. The external impairments of the sense faculties are such things as mirrors, the echoing of sounds 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 of such things as mirages, reflections and echoes as water, etc...

The impairments of the mental faculty are... such things as erroneous philosophical views, fallacious arguments and sleep...

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 to whether or not they are undermined by ordinary cognition. This distinction is not drawn from the perspective of the āryas. This is because 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 afflicted 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. [*Ocean* 485]

Note the emphasis on ordinary cognitive practice. Conventional truth is that which is delivered by unimpaired cognitive faculties when they are used properly. This is not an accidental generalization; instead it is *constitutive* of conventional truth. It entails that any judgment about truth is in principle revisable, but that to be true, is to endure through revision. But the distinction between the conventionally true and the conventionally false has nothing to do with ultimate truth. Conventional truths and conventional falsehoods are all ultimately deceptive, all false from the ultimate perspective.

5. The Centrality of Epistemic Authority

Authoritative cognition is hence central to this story, and that is so in two respects. First, conventional truth is conventionally *true* precisely because it is that which is delivered by conventional authoritative cognition and not undermined by it. Without an antecedent account of conventional authoritative cognition, there is no way to distinguish conventional truth from conventional falsity. On the one hand, without such an account, we might take the only authoritative cognition to be ultimate authoritative cognition. But then, since all phenomena are ultimately unreal, authoritative cognition would deliver the verdict that everything is false, and we would have no domain of truth whatsoever. On the other, in the absence of such an account, we might take the object of *any* cognition to be conventionally real. But that would make a hash of all inquiry, as there is always somebody crazy or deluded enough to believe, or to believe in, anything. It is therefore the fact of conventional authority, of the robustness of ordinary epistemic standards that allows us to distinguish truth from falsity and to engage in inquiry in the first place.

Secondly, the reality of conventional truth, its genuine actuality not simply as an object of deluded thought, is a consequence of the fact that the authoritative cognition of āryas—of those who have transcended the primal ignorance that fabricates inherent existence—delivers the reality of conventional phenomena, as real, but deceptive phenomena. Once again, this authoritative cognition doesn't so much *reflect* the fact that it is true that conventional phenomena are real but *constitutes* their truth, as it constitutes a standard by means of which we can distinguish the true from the false.

Truth for Candrakīrti and Tsong khapa is always that which is delivered by authoritative cognition. But what makes authoritative cognition authoritative? Here is where the epistemic rubber hits the soteriological *marg* and where the term “conventional,” (*vyāvahāra, tha snyad*) gets its punch. Ultimate authoritative cognition is simply defined as cognition that leads to the realization of ultimate truth—to awakening. Conventional authoritative cognition, much more straightforwardly, is just what we conventionally accept. As Nāgārjuna argues persuasively in *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, this is not a static set—*pramānas* depend for their validity on *prameyas*, and vice versa, in a coherentist spiral that defies grounding, but characterizes epistemic practice in the only way we could every hope to do so.

6. Seeing Mirages Correctly

We can now see why it is so important to see mirages, and to see *that* mirages *are* mirages. Mirages are genuine parts of our world, and they cause real problems. If one were to spend one's life in polarizing sunglasses, one would never know this, and one would be useful to everyone else. (Of course if we evolved with polarizing eyes, like some birds, there would be no mirages.) To see a mirage as water is not to see conventional truth, but conventional falsehood, for conventional authoritative cognition undermines the assertion that there is water on the road. But conventional

authoritative condition vindicates the claim that there is a mirage that appears to be water. That is why it is conventional truth.

There are two levels of apprehension of mirages, though. There is a difference between the *novice* desert driver who *sees* the mirage *as water*, but then *infers* its mirage-status and the *experienced* driver who sees it *as a mirage*. They each apprehend conventional truth, but the first does so as do most of us ordinary, but sophisticated mādhyamikas, inferentially. The latter sees conventional truth as an ārahat—immediately, perceptually, non-inferentially. *We* see it as deceptive because we are, at least in the first moment of perceptual consciousness, deceived. *She* sees it as deceptive because she knows what it is like to be us. The transcendence of ignorance is hence not the transcendence of the *apprehension* of the conventional, but the transcendence of *deception* by it.

Buddhism is about solving a problem—the problem of the omnipresence of suffering—and the central intuition of Buddhism is that the solution to that problem is the extirpation of ignorance. Epistemology is located at the foundation of morality, and gets its point just from that location. The mechanism of the extirpation of ignorance is authoritative cognition. What it delivers is hence, at least indirectly, always of soteriological significance—always instrumental to liberation. Inasmuch as that is the central moral virtue, and inasmuch as epistemology is so tightly bound to the soteriological project, it is also the central epistemic virtue, and what we call the goal of epistemic activity is *truth*. Conventional truth is hence not to truth as blunderbusses are to buses, nor as fake guns are to real guns, but rather is, instead, simply one kind of *truth*.

7. The Identity and Difference of the Two Truths

One of the Buddha's deepest insights was that there are two truths, and that they are very different from one another. They are the objects of different kinds of cognition, and they reflect different aspects of reality. They are apprehended at different stages of practice. Despite the importance of the apprehension of ultimate truth, one can't skip the conventional. Despite the soteriological efficacy of ultimate truth, even after Buddhahood, omniscience and compassion require the apprehension of the conventional.

Nāgārjuna's deepest insight was that despite the vast difference between the two truths in one sense, they are, in an equally important sense, identical. We can now make sense of that identity, and why the fact of their identity is the same fact as that of their difference. The ultimate truth is, as we know, emptiness. Emptiness is the emptiness not of *existence*, but of *inherent existence*. To be empty of inherent existence is to exist only conventionally, only as the object of conventional truth. The ultimate truth about any phenomenon is hence that it is merely a conventional truth.

Ontologically, therefore, the two truths are absolutely identical. This is the content of the idea that the two truths have a single basis: that basis is empty phenomena. Their emptiness is their conventional reality; their conventional reality is their emptiness.

But to *know* phenomena conventionally is not to *know* them ultimately. As objects of knowledge, as opposed to as mere phenomena, they are objects of different kinds of knowledge, despite the identity at a deeper level of those objects. Hence the difference. But the respect in which they are different and that in which they are identical are, despite their difference, also identical. A mirage is deceptive because it is a refraction pattern and it is the nature of a refraction pattern to be visually deceptive. The conventional truth is merely deceptive and conventional because, upon ultimate analysis, it fails to exist as it appears—that is, because it is ultimately empty. It is the nature of the conventional to deceive. Ultimately, conventional truth

is all the truth there is, and that is an ultimate, and therefore, a conventional, truth. To fail to take conventional truth seriously as truth is therefore not only to deprecate the conventional in *favour* of the ultimate, but to deprecate *truth*, per se. That way lies suffering.