Two Truths, the Inexpressible and Analysis: What (I think) Mādhyamikas should say

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I'm a philosopher, not a philologist. And I read Sanskrit, but not Tibetan. So I am not in a good position to work out exactly what Bhāviveka actually says about the two truths. As a philosopher, though, I have been thinking for a long time about the two truths and Madhyamaka, specifically about the difficulties that result from some of the things Mādhyamikas seem committed to with respect to the two truths. And from what I know about Bhāviveka (from the work of others who are better equipped than I am to explain his system), I believe he is a philosophically astute Mādhyamika. So I would like to think that Bhāviveka is aware of the difficulties inherent in Madhyamaka uses of the notion of the two truths, and sees a way around these problems. What I shall do here is lay out what I think a philosophically sophisticated Mādhyamika should say about the two truths. I leave it to those with far more expertise in Bhāviveka to say whether it is correct to attribute anything like these ideas to him.

The two difficulties I have in mind concern (1) the notion of an inexpressible ultimate, and (2) the claim that conventionally real entities can be said to exist only when not subjected to analysis.

The first difficulty stems from the claim, common in Mahāyāna texts, that the ultimately real is of such a nature as to be inexpressible. This claim is, of course, perfectly consistent with Yogācāra three-natures theory, according to which there is such a thing as the ultimately real, and its nature is to be beyond all conceptualization. Of course the claim does lead to the problem that if the perfected nature is inexpressible then it should not be possible to express this fact about it. But that is a problem faced by anyone who affirms something ineffable.[1]

[1] For a discussion of the paradox of ineffability and some possible solutions see sec.3.1 of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on 'Mysticism':
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/

What Yogācāra does not have is the problem faced by Madhyamaka, according to which there is nothing that is ultimately real. On my understanding, Madhyamaka accepts the *svabhāva* criterion of ultimate reality – something is ultimately real only if it bears its nature intrinsically – and also claims to show that in fact nothing bears an intrinsic nature. It then follows that there is nothing that might be said to have an inexpressible nature. Now this difficulty can be solved by invoking the distinction between two kinds of negation, committed *paryudāsa* and commitmentless *prasajya pratiṣedha*. When the negation in 'The ultimately real has an inexpressible nature' (namely the 'in-' in 'inexpressible') is read in the latter way, there is then no implication that there is an ultimate with some nature that is other than expressible. So the Mādhyamika is not caught in a contradiction. But perhaps the more important question is why Mādhyamikas should engage in a rhetoric that naturally leads to the difficulty in the first place: if the very idea of the ultimately real is incoherent, why say something that is naturally interpreted as affirming an ultimate reality that is beyond speech and conceptualization? This is the difficulty I should like to see Bhāviveka address.

Now Bhāviveka may be addressing this when he discusses the Madhyamaka understanding of a Buddha's omniscience (MHK 5.105-112). He repeats the standard account that attributes to buddhas a grasp of the natures of all things, a grasp that involves two distinct modalities, inference and perception. It is not surprising that omniscience might be acquired in the first way, through mediation of concepts. But buddhas are said by some to be omniscient in a more interesting way, by means of a single perceptual (i.e., non-conceptual) cognition that somehow succeeds in apprehending the intrinsic natures of all dharmas. This claim is surprising, since those who take perception to be non-conceptual in nature typically hold that in it the object is more directly grasped due to the object's being 'right before the eyes' (*pratyakṣa*), and it is difficult to see how more than one object at a time can causally interact with a sense faculty.

Bhāviveka attempts to explain how such grasping is possible by describing it as a seeing that is non-conceptual by virtue of its being a non-seeing (*jñānena nirkalpena buddhāḥ paśyanty adarśanāt* MHK 5.106). In this case the 'seeing' is to be understood metaphorically: a buddha's omniscience is like perception in being non-conceptual, but it is non-conceptual insofar as it is a cognizing that proceeds on the basis of the realization that there is nothing ultimately real to be cognized. This realization is presumably one that results from the knowledge that is represented as the expressible ultimate: the rejection through inference of various ways of conceptualizing what is imagined to be ultimately real (see MHK 5.105).[(2)]

[(2)] For the distinction between two levels of the ultimate, expressible and inexpressible, in Madhyamaka see Hayashima 2014.

So perhaps what we have here is the idea that the Madhyamaka path leads through the refutation of different competing characterizations of reality, to a final single moment of realization which grasps the liberating insight that the very idea of the ultimately real is empty of meaning. Why, though, should Bhāviveka resort to metaphor here, rather than simply say that this realization does not employ concepts to characterize objects of knowledge? Why bring in perception at all?

Perhaps the answer is that Bhāviveka is working with a set of ideas that can be traced back to a much older view, one often attributed to the Mahāsāṃghikas (Yao 2005: 12-14): that general knowledge of the natures of all *dharma*s can culminate in a single moment of knowledge of all *dharma*s in their full specificity. In the hands of the Mahāsāṃghikas this claim is part of the general elevation of the epistemic status of buddhas over other enlightened beings (such as *arhat*s and *pratyekabuddha*s). Something that we find unimaginable – a single cognition that captures the specific natures of all objects – is readily achieved by buddhas due to their having developed their skills over countless past lives. And of course it is perception, not inference, that cognizes the intrinsic natures of objects. When I cognize a particular fire inferentially I am made aware only of natures that it shares in common with other fires. So perhaps it is natural to think of this realization as perceptual in character.

I would speculate, though, that there is something else going on here as well. As the adage 'Seeing is believing' makes clear, it is widely held that perception is a more potent motivator of behavior change than such conceptually mediated instruments as inference and verbal testimony. Perhaps I 'know' that smoking will shorten my life, but it may very well take seeing a loved one die of emphysema or lung cancer to make me acknowledge this and actually quit. Now the realization of non-self (of *pudgalanairātmya*) at the core of the Abhidharma conception of liberation is subject to the same dynamic. We see a hint of this when Candrakīrti points out that the sort of grasp of non-self one attains through the reasoning that undermines philosophical conceptions of the self fails to rid one of the 'I'-sense (MAV 6.140–41). I may be utterly convinced by the arguments that show there to be no such thing as an abiding subject of experience, yet still behave in a way that shows I still think of myself as just such a thing. Theoretical knowledge of non-self, we might say, is not enough; stronger measures must be taken. And if we think those measures include ones that are cognitive in nature, the intuition that perception is the more powerful cognitive instigator of change will come into play. This might help explain why several Abhidharma schools claim liberation results from a single cognition that directly cognizes that all *dharma*s are *pudgalanairātmya*. And perhaps likewise for Mādhyamikas with respect to their view that liberation comes from realization of *dharmanairātmya*. In this case it would be clear that Bhāviveka's acceptance of the idea of an inexpressible ultimate is strictly epistemological, without ontological implications, and driven by soteriological considerations.

The second difficulty I wanted to discuss may be harder to resolve. It grows out of the idea that for Madhyamaka, things deemed conventionally real exist only insofar as they are not subjected to analysis. This is a view that Candrakīrti shares with many ābhidharmikas (see e.g. AKB on AK 6.4). Tsong kha pa claims, though, that it is rejected by those he calls Svātantrikas, including Bhāviveka. As Eckel and others have argued (e.g., Eckel 2003: 177–88), Tsong kha pa may be reading more into what Bhāviveka says than was actually intended. But the claim does derive some support from the fact that Bhāviveka believes Mādhyamikas should offer well-formed inferences that involve affirmation of a subject acceptable to both the inference's proponent and the audience.

To say of something that it can be taken as real only so long as it is not subjected to analysis is to say that while it is commonly taken to be real, its intrinsic nature is not found when the cognitive record is subjected to scrutiny. Dharmakīrti gives the example of the pot, the nature of which is not found independently of the occurrence of such things as color and shape (*Vādanyāya* 16–18). One argument for this claim is the 'neither identical nor distinct' reasoning, which has a long history beginning with the example of the chariot in *Milindapanha*. The basic idea is that since we must accept the reality of the parts of the chariot in any event, if we also claim that the chariot is real in the same way as the parts, we must assert either that it is identical with those parts or else is distinct from them. Since neither option proves tenable (a one cannot be identical with a many, and a chariot lacks a distinctive intrinsic nature), we should conclude that the chariot is 'real' only relative to purposes of ordinary life, not strictly speaking or ultimately. Its reality can be maintained only so long as we fail to analyze or look more closely.

Now in Abhidharma as well as in Dharmakīrti's Yogācāra, the efficacy of those things that 'disappear under analysis', like a chariot or a pot, is explained in terms of the causal capacities of the entities into which those things are analyzable. And we know our analysis has reached such a grounding level when it reveals entities that bear their natures intrinsically – that could possess their natures in the 'lonely' or unaccompanied state. Thus there is the prevailing assumption that there must be entities with intrinsic natures, lest the everyday experience of the efficacy of pots and chariots go unexplained. This is why the Madhyamaka claim that all things are devoid of intrinsic nature sounds so radical. For this means there can be no such grounding in ultimately real entities with intrinsic natures. This is nonetheless what Mādhyamikas maintain. But concerning the conventionally real things they are in agreement with Abhidharma and Yogācāra: these only seem to exist as long as the cognizers to whom they appear refrain from seeking their intrinsic natures.

At this point some clarification is in order concerning 'analysis' (*vicāra*). So far we have been working with the idea that to analyze the claim that something exists conventionally is to seek that

entity's intrinsic nature. But as Candrakīrti himself makes clear, the term 'intrinsic nature' has two distinct senses. In ordinary usage it simply means the essence of a thing, the nature that a thing of a certain kind always or usually exhibits. Candrakīrti's examples are the heat of fire and the red color of a lotus (PrP 263). This is to be contrasted with the contingent nature that an entity either may or may not possess, such as the heat of water or the red color of quartz containing hematite. In this sense the chariot may be said to have an intrinsic nature, which will include the property of having two wheels. But it is in a different sense of *svabhāva* that the chariot is said to be devoid of intrinsic nature. Used in this second stricter sense, an intrinsic nature is a property that the entity in question could not have in the 'lonely' or unaccompanied state. A 'lonely' chariot would be in a world devoid of wheels, so it could not have the property of having two wheels; this is a property that the chariot borrows from its parts. And once we acknowledge that the chariot depends on its parts in order to possess this property, we immediately see that the chariot would have to be either identical with or distinct from its parts, and the dialectic of 'neither identical nor distinct' comes into play. This is why when we take 'analysis' to mean the search for intrinsic nature in the second, stricter sense, the chariot turns out to be something that disappears under analysis.

This is not the case, however, when 'analysis' is understood as the search for *svabhāva* taken in the first, looser sense. And recall that the evidence that Bhāviveka rejects the claim that conventionally real things disappear under analysis comes from the fact that he affirms the conventional reality of the locus (*pakṣa*) in the inferences he uses to prove emptiness. It could be argued that this can be done without denying that such things as chariots do disappear when subjected to close philosophical scrutiny. We do not ordinarily worry about whether what we identify as the nature of a chariot is something it could have in the unaccompanied state. The ontological attitude of common sense is quite promiscuous: we are happy to affirm both wholes and parts, substances and their properties, positive reals and absences, and so on. When Buddhist philosophers point out the contradictions that ensue from this ontological profligacy, the common-sense response is likely to be indifference. That attitude toward philosophical scrutiny may well be unjustified. Still it is not at all clear that one must reject the attitude and adopt the stricter sense of *svabhāva* in order to be justified in claiming that a locus is *conventionally* established. To say of an entity that it is conventionally established would seem to be to say that it is taken by the world to exist in the sense of 'exist' that is used in the world. And as the world sees things, the chariot and the pot each have their own intrinsic natures.

So there is some reason to wonder whether Tsong kha pa is right to criticize Bhāviveka for introducing intrinsic natures at the conventional level in a way that conflicts with the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness. There is, though, evidence that Bhāviveka may have a more philosophically rigorous notion of analysis in mind when he lays out his inferences. This is what might be

inferred from Bhāviveka's views concerning the self and the atom.

Like many other Buddhist philosophers, Bhāviveka sometimes uses 'self' (*ātman*) to mean the person (*pudgala*), the conventionally posited entity that is the referent of 'I', as distinct from the simple eternal entity posited by non-Buddhist philosophers as the ultimately real referent of 'I'. Like all Buddhist philosophers save the Sāmmitīyas, Bhāviveka denies the ultimate existence of such a self or person, but he does grant its existence as a conventional real. (Here is where his logical views come in: he feels he needs an entity he can acknowledge as the subject of an inference to the effect that the self does not ultimately exist.) And he identifies it with a particular *skandha*, consciousness, on the grounds that this is what appropriates the other *skandha*s in the rebirth process (Pandeya 1988, vol.2 p.52). This identification looks rather more like the sort of philosophical analysis that so-called Prāsaṅgikas find objectionable. It is generally agreed that when there is a person there are the five sorts of phenomena classified as *skandha*s. But it can be argued that common sense has no view as to the relation between the person and the *skandha*s. The folk view (at least according to so-called Prāsaṅgikas) is indifferent as to whether they are its constituents, its modalities, its non-reductive supervenience base, that to which it is reducible, or whatever. The question whether the person is identical with or distinct from any or all of the psychophysical elements is not one to which common sense offers an unequivocal answer. So when Bhāviveka identifies the person with one of the five *skandha*s, he seems to be engaging in precisely the sort of *svabhāva*-mongering that a Mādhyamika like Candrakīrti would find objectionable. Of course Bhāviveka can say in his defense that since what he identifies as the self is in fact a series, it is partite and for that reason not ultimately real. The reply will be, however, that to the extent that analysis makes plausible the idea that our conventional conceptual practices are grounded in a mind-independent nature, Bhāviveka's practice contravenes Madhyamaka's commitment to global anti-realism.

A similar critique could be built out of what Bhāviveka says about atoms. In response to a common Yogācāra argument for *sākāravāda*, he claims that the intentional object of sense perception can be identified as the aggregate of homogeneous atoms (MHK 5.35). Implicit in this move is the idea that a macrophysical object like a pot is reductively analyzable into an aggregate of atoms, the properties of which explain what we commonly say about the pot. This would seem to suggest that we can carry out reductive analysis on things we find at the conventional level without draining away all their efficacy. But things only get worse, since he also says (in the commentary on MHK 5.35) that the atom is itself an aggregate entity, being composed of the four *mahābhūta*s and the four invariably concomitant *bhautika*s. Of course he claims that the aggregate that is the pot and the aggregate that is one of the pot's constituent atoms are, like the consciousness continuum, only conventionally real. But now his conventional realm begins to look like a multi-layered affair, with

entities at a lower level explaining the facts about things at the next higher.[3] It suggests, in other words, that as we carry out reductive analysis we proceed ever closer to how things ultimately and mind-independently are. And that sounds suspiciously like the metaphysical realism that Madhyamaka is in the business of repudiating.

At this point, though, I would like to intervene on behalf of Bhāviveka. While I agree that the principal Madhyamaka project is the rejection of metaphysical realism, I also suspect that grave difficulties result if analysis is given no role to play at the level of conventional truth. To reject metaphysical realism is to deny that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, the truth about how things mind-independently are. This means that analysis cannot be seen as leading to the ultimate truth. The Abhidharma project (culminating in Dharmakīrti's claim that analysis ends in inexpressible pure particulars) was built on the assumption that analysis does lead to a grasp of how things ultimately are. But standing behind all this was the core Buddhist project of dissolving the 'I'-sense. The Buddha's diagnosis of suffering has it that suffering originates in the mistaken belief that this sense has a real object, the enduring subject of experience. It is because reductive analysis reveals how this belief could be universal and yet mistaken that it plays such a prominent role in Buddhist thought. For Madhyamaka, however, there is no such thing as the ultimate truth (except in the ironic sense conveyed in the slogan, 'The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth'). If all truth is conventional, and conventional truth is not grounded in anything ultimately real, it becomes difficult to see how one is to criticize the universally accepted belief in a real 'I'. We might be told that our lives would go better if we were to abandon this belief, but it seems we can be given no reason why this should be.

There are, I think, good Buddhist reasons why Mādhyamikas should want to allow a role for analysis in their account of conventional truth. It is not clear how the core Buddhist project of realizing non-self can be carried out without some way of explaining our ignorance about the 'I'-sense. And allowing for a hierarchy of levels of conventional truth (as in Bhāviveka's views about pots and atoms) may be one way to achieve this. But there are other reasons as well. Candrakīrti's view of common sense (what is known 'even to cowherds and women') as something accepted without a thought as to its analytic underpinnings may have been accurate in 7^{th} century South Asia. But today's common sense includes the belief that scientific investigation leads to useful technical advances. And while scientific literacy may not have kept pace with technological progress, still it is widely recognized that the development of useful technologies turns on the scientific practice of reductive analysis. In medicine, for instance, it is only through the multi-level reduction of the organism – first to constituent organs, then to tissue types, then to

[3] Note that this makes the conventional like the ultimate in having multiple levels.

the cells of which the tissues are composed, then to their constituent molecules – that real progress is made in finding effective ways to fight disease and heal injury. Everything else falling short of full understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved is hit or miss, trial and error. Progress in medical techniques turns on progress in molecular biology. The same goes for the relation between solid state physics and electronics, for fluid dynamics and aeronautical engineering, and so on. Those of us who enjoy the fruits of modern medicine, avionics, electronics and the like should be glad that so many researchers have ignored Candrakīrti's advice and sought the intrinsic natures of the things we find in the world. While Bhāviveka should not be credited with the discovery of subatomic particles, the sort of multi-level analysis he championed with respect to pots and atoms turns out to have been on the right track.

Of course it is difficult to reconcile recognition of this fact about the practice of science with the core Madhyamaka claim that there is no such thing as the ultimate nature of reality. For science is commonly seen as the instrument that will finally deliver knowledge of how things ultimately are. If reductive analysis does not bring us closer to knowledge of how things ultimately are, how can it be said to lead to epistemic progress? Or to put the point in Buddhist terms, if knowledge of the causal interactions among the *skandha*s is not an improvement over the common-sense view of persons, why think that such knowledge can help us avoid suffering? But when the question is put in this way it becomes clear that it is based on the assumption that there can be no such thing as improvement – a becoming better – unless there is such a thing as a final ideal state, a 'best'. Perhaps that assumption should be questioned. Perhaps certain ways of looking at the world may constitute improvements on others without there being such a thing as how the world itself ultimately is.

It would not be enough merely to grant the possibility that when it comes to truth there can be better without there being a best. Positive steps would need to be taken to show how the fear of *svabhāva* can be safely overcome. Elsewhere (Siderits forthcoming) I sketch a contextualist semantics that would allow the Mādhyamika to avoid the paradox generated by the statement 'All conceptualization falsifies'. Adoption of such a semantics would also facilitate 'domestication' of intrinsic natures: showing how our conventional assertoric practice of presupposing that there are truth-makers for our assertions can be compatible with the ultimate absence of things with *svabhāva*. This is not the place to go into the details of the proposal. The question is whether such a semantics could prove acceptable to a Mādhyamika like Bhāviveka. My resort to contextualism was inspired in part by Jñānaśrīmitra's approach to the two truths, so the spirit of the enterprise seems to accord with at least some Indian Buddhist thought. I am also fairly confident, despite my limited expertise, that Bhāviveka does not put forward anything like a contextualist semantics. But I turn to those with far greater expertise than my own for an answer to the question whether

making logical room for analysis at the conventional level is something Bhāviveka would at least approve of.

Abbreviations and References

AKB: *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, ed. Prahlad Pradhan (1975), Patna: Jayaswal Research Institute.

MAV: '*Madhyamakāvatāra-kārikā* Chapter 6', ed. Li Xuezhu, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 43 (2015), pp. 1–30.

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