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Two Truths: Two Models

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The claim that there are two truths is a central philosophical plank of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Roughly, the conventional truth (Skt. *saṃvṛtisatya*, Chin. *sudi* 俗諦) is the way that things normally appear to us; the ultimate truth (Skt. *paramārthasatya*, Chin. *zhendi* 真諦) is the way that things appear to an awakened being. However, a precise understanding of what, exactly, these are and of the relationship between them is a thorny issue, especially in Madhyamaka and the Buddhist schools influenced by it.

It is this Madhyamaka tradition on which we focus here. Two ways in which one may think about the two truths and the relationship between them will be given—two models of the two truths. To focus on what is philosophically important and to avoid scholarly questions of who said what and what they meant by it, no claims will be made about any particular philosopher holding either of the views described. The models are to be thought of as something like ideal types, to which various actual accounts approximate. Not to be tendentious, let us call these two models simply “Model A” and “Model B.”

One further preliminary matter: The Sanskrit word *satya* is ambiguous, at least when translated into English. It can mean “reality,” what there is, and it can mean “truth,” what we say about it.¹ This is an

1. See the discussion in chapter 1.

important distinction. So when *satya* is used in the context at hand, which of these does it mean? The answer, unfortunately, is both—sometimes at the same time. Arguably, this is sometimes the source of confusion in discussions of the matter. However, that is another topic. It seems to us that the most important issue in these debates is best thought of as reality, and we will use that word—though truth proper will make an appearance at the end.²

Setting up the Problem

Let us approach the models by looking at the background of the problem they address. The distinction between conventional and ultimate reality is central to Mahāyāna, but the distinction is implicit in earlier Buddhist discussions in the Abhidharma tradition³—in particular, in connection with the self. It would appear that a person has a self, something that identifies that person and persists through change. But on analysis, a person turns out to be a collection of parts (the aggregates) that come together, change and interact, and finally fall apart. How things appear to be is conventional reality; how they actually are under analysis is ultimate reality. Mahāyāna takes up this distinction, develops it, and applies it to all things.

The distinction is developed in a relatively straightforward fashion in Yogācāra Buddhism—or at least in one standard way of interpreting it—the other main school of Indian Mahāyāna. In Yogācāra, ultimate reality is the way that things actually are. Conventional reality is a mere appearance, an illusion that deceives. Thus, to use a standard example, ultimate reality is like a coil of rope; conventional reality is like the snake that a mistaken observer takes the coil to be.

Although there are echoes of this view in Madhyamaka,⁴ matters there cannot be that simple. This is so for two reasons. The first is this. All Mahāyāna Buddhists agree that everything is empty. What this means in Madhyamaka is that all things are empty of intrinsic nature (Skt. *svabhāva*). Roughly, everything exists and is what it is only in relation to other things. How, exactly, to understand this thought is itself a tough question. However, we do not need to go into this. The important point for now is that in Madhyamaka, the *all* is to be taken very seriously. Everything is empty, including ultimate reality. This is the core doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. Ultimate reality also exists and is

2. For a discussion of truth proper, see chapter 8. The word “truth” is used in the title of this chapter because the usage is so standard.

3. See the discussions in chapters 8 and 10.

4. See the discussion in chapters 2 and 4.

what it is only in relation to other things—and in particular to conventional reality. Hence, in the end, its ontological status is no different from that of conventional reality. The appearance/reality model is not, therefore, appropriate. Indeed, an important Madhyamaka critique of Yogācāra is exactly that it reifies ultimate reality into something having intrinsic nature: You can't have a misleading appearance of something unless there is a something, but you can have the something without the misleading appearance.

The second reason that the Yogācāra model will not do—which is really a corollary of the first—is that, for all that the two realities are two, they are, in some sense, one. Ultimate reality is not something *over and above* conventional reality. The two are coordinate. To use another well-worn analogy, they are like the two sides of one coin. The idea has profound and apparently shocking soteriological consequences. Conventional reality is the realm of samsara, suffering; ultimate reality is the realm of nirvana, awakening. But the two are one. As Nāgārjuna puts it in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (XXV.19),⁵ there is not the slightest difference between samsara and nirvana.

So now we have a problem. Metaphors about coins aside, how are we to understand this puzzling relationship between the two realities? How can they be both two and one? Modern developments in paraconsistent logic would allow us to understand these inconsistent claims quite literally.⁶ If *c* and *u* are conventional and ultimate reality, then we can have both $c = u$ and $c \neq u$. But such a simple-minded understanding is not appropriate. If *c* is literally identical with *u*, then anything true of *c* is true of *u*, and vice versa. But then it cannot be the case that $c = u$: There are many things true of conventional reality that are not true of ultimate reality—for example, that the former cloaks the latter; the latter does not cloak itself. And conventional reality is a conceptual construction in a way that ultimate reality is not, so we must seek more subtle understandings. Such are indeed to be found in Madhyamaka and the schools it influenced. One can find, in fact, two rather different basic ways of understanding the situation. This brings us to our two models.

Model A

The first of these is historically the older model. Arguably, it is to be found in Candrakīrti, though, of course, interpretations of Candrakīrti vary, and, as already said, we take no stand in this chapter on whether this is the correct

5. See, for example, Garfield (1995).

6. For a brief and not too technical survey of paraconsistent logic, see Priest (1998).

interpretation. At any rate, in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (VI.23),⁷ Candrakīrti—one of the first Madhyamaka thinkers to clearly articulate the theory of two realities—tells us that every object has a dual nature. There is only one object, but it has two “aspects.” There is, then, literally only one reality. The claim that the realities are one is to be understood in this way, as a direct denial of the dualism of the Yogācāra position. The sum total of reality is not of two kinds: All there is is the totality of all interdependent (co-arising) phenomena.

So how are we to understand the claim that the realities are two? As in the Abhidharma tradition, these are two ways of looking at the same reality: a misleading way and a more accurate way. It may be viewed in the more common-sense way, the way that we are accustomed to viewing it, as a realm of intrinsically existent entities. This is the conventional way and a misleading way of grasping reality—literally, since it is the grasping of things in this way that causes suffering. But it can also be looked at in an enlightened way as emptiness. (Though it is not possible to say what this is like since anything that can be described can be described only by using the categories of language, which help constitute the conventional.) It is not so much that conventional reality is an illusion. It is the way that we conceptualize it that is illusory.

Seen in this way, then, the difference between the two realities is one of perspective: The “distinct” realities are formed by different modes of apprehending one and the same thing. In this sense, it is subjective. One can hear it as ontological if one wishes: Reality has the properties of being such that it may be perceived in such and such ways. But these features are *dispositional*—the dispositions being to be apprehended in such and such ways. (In the same fashion, in Western philosophy, one may think of secondary properties as dispositions of objects to be perceived in certain ways.) The difference between the two realities is still, therefore, essentially subjectivity related.

Model B

Let us now turn to the second model. Historically, this arises later than Model A and spins off certain aspects of Yogācāra thought. In Yogācāra, conventional reality is a certain kind of manifestation of the most profound part of consciousness, the storehouse consciousness (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*). Specifically, karmic “seeds” are stored in the *ālaya*, and the *ālaya*, thus tainted, manifests itself in phenomenal consciousness (conventional reality). In Yogācāra, the *ālaya* is always the mind of some particular individual. In later thought this

7. See chapter 1, note 16, and the translation in Huntington and Wangchen (1989).

transforms into or assimilates the notion of the womb of Buddhahood (Skt. *tathāgatagarba*), the part of a person that is already enlightened, which in turn metamorphoses into something like the universal Mind, or buddha nature (Tib. *sems nyid*, Chin. *xinxing* 心性)—in some ways, like Hegel’s *Geist*. In the process, it loses most of its mindlike qualities—the *ālaya* had few enough of these anyway. But the Yogācāra thought that it is the ground of the phenomenal world that is retained, as is the idea that this world is its manifestation. Buddha nature can therefore be taken to be ultimate reality, and conventional reality its manifestation.

This picture is reinforced when Buddhism moves into China and encounters the native philosophical traditions there. The most important of these for the present purposes is Daoism (or perhaps more accurately, a certain form of neo-Daoism that was then influential). According to this, there is a principle that underlies the phenomenal world, the Dao. In some sense, it is the cause of all we see in that world. The relationship between the Dao and the “myriad things” is not at all that between appearance and reality, however; the myriad things are the manifestations of the Dao, roughly in the same way that your actions are the manifestation of your personality. One cannot have a manifestation without the something of which it is a manifestation. Conversely, the form of being of the Dao is precisely in its activity (which is a nonactivity in the sense that it just happens—like normal breathing), so one cannot have the Dao without its manifestations. Because the Dao is not a thing but the cause of all things, one can say nothing about it. It is not a *this* or a *that*. It was therefore common for Daoists to describe it as nonbeing (Chin. *wu* 無), contrasted with the beings (Chin. *you* 有) of the phenomenal world.

When Buddhism entered China, it was natural for people to identify the Dao with emptiness, that is, ultimate reality. Both were, in some sense, the realm of nonbeing, and both were ineffable. Coordinately, the phenomenal world of the myriad things was conventional reality. So things came to be seen in the following way:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} \text{Dao} & = & \text{nonbeing/emptiness} & = & \text{ultimate reality} \\ \hline \text{manifestations} & & \text{beings} & & \text{conventional reality} \end{array}$$

Of course, the identification of the Dao with Buddhist emptiness is distinctly misleading in many ways. However, by the time that Buddhism was sufficiently well understood in China for this to be appreciated, the analogy was too entrenched not to have a powerful effect on Chinese Buddhism. In particular, it provided a way of understanding the relationship between the two realities that resonated with the developments in *tathāgatagarbha* theory that we just have described: Conventional reality is a manifestation of ultimate reality.

This picture is to be found, arguably, in Fazang's *Treatise on the Golden Lion*.⁸ (Again, we will not enter here into the question of whether this is the correct interpretation of Fazang.) Fazang uses the metaphor a golden statue of a lion to illustrate. Describing the ultimate/conventional distinction in terminology more familiar to Chinese thought, as between principle (Chin. *li* 理) and phenomena (Chin. *shi* 事), he likens *li* to the gold out of which the lion is made and *shi* to the lion. So we have the following analogy:

$$\frac{\text{gold}}{\text{lion}} = \frac{\text{ultimate reality (li)}}{\text{conventional reality (shi)}}$$

Again, on this model, there is only one reality: There is only one thing—the golden lion. The gold and the lion are nonetheless distinct. (The gold could be melted down and refashioned into the statue of the Buddha. The lion would then cease to exist, but the gold would not.) The relation between them is one of interpenetration (Chin. *ji* 即), as Fazang sometimes puts it. One cannot have the lion without the something of which it is made, the gold; conversely, the gold must manifest itself in some form or other, in this case, that of the lion. So neither has intrinsic existence.

Note, however, that the gold and the lion are not two different perspectives of the same thing. The relationship between a statue and its matter is an objective one. One simply could not *have* the one without the other. You can, of course, focus on one, and you can focus on the other, but they will always both be present since the one is the manifestation of the other.

Chinese Buddhists had not, of course, forgotten the mind, and it is related to the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality, but its relationship to the two realities is very different from that in Model A. As we have seen, the mind, or buddha nature, is ultimate reality itself. Mind is not something that provides different perspectives on the one reality. It is one aspect of that reality. Indeed, in some sense, it is all of it: Take away the gold, and there would be nothing left of the lion.

Awakening

We now have the two models before us. The distinction, in crude terms, is that in Model A, the difference between the two realities is one of a difference of perspective, while in Model B, it is a difference between manifestation and that of which it is the manifestation.

8. See, for example, Chan (1963, 409–414).

With the two models in place, the obvious thing to do next is to ask how each of them relates to other aspects of Buddhist thought—perhaps in order to determine which is preferable, perhaps to see how the models might profitably be combined. This is clearly far too big a task to take on here. However, let us look briefly at the relationship between the two models and the notion of awakening—surely one of the most important notions of Buddhist thought. Even this is a complex question, though; all we can hope to do here is initiate a discussion.

Model A allows a very simple and natural understanding of what it is to awaken. This is obtained by a perspective shift (obtained by the appropriate conceptual [textual] and perceptual [meditative] practices.) The unenlightened person has only the conventional perspective of reality. At awakening, this shifts. With regard to how it shifts, there is room for dispute, but perhaps the most common view is that, at enlightenment, both perspectives become available at once, as does, consequently, the misleading nature of the conventional-only perspective.

This account of awakening does not jibe easily with Model B, just because all talk of subjective perspective has disappeared in that model (though, of course, it can be tacked on to it). The model of enlightenment that fits best with model B is in terms of action. Since awakening is always and already present in the form of buddha nature, enlightenment is not *being* anything different; it is *doing* something different—or perhaps, more precisely, doing things in a different way. Just as in Daoism, the sage acts by spontaneously manifesting the Dao, so in Buddhism, the awakened person's acts spontaneously manifest Buddha nature. (A particular example of this is Dōgen's doctrine that awakening is not something that happens as a result of meditative activity; this activity is awakening.⁹) The account does not jibe well with Model A, precisely because action is not part of that story at all (though, of course, it can be tacked on to it).

It is worth noting that there is a part of the story that is common to all accounts of awakening. All agree that awakening involves the disappearance of intentional thought and the dualism between subject and object involved in this. However, this disappearance plays out in different ways in the two accounts of awakening. In the first, the distinction between subject and object is absent in the ultimate perspective. (And even if the conventional perspective, in which there is such a dualism, is still available, its illusory nature is simultaneously perceived.) In the second, spontaneous action is action not mediated by the conceptual thought which generates dualities: It is conception-free.¹⁰

9. See Kasulis (1981, ch. 6).

10. For a discussion of action in the context of enlightenment, see Finnigan (200+).

A final note: Both Model A and Model B need to talk about ultimate reality (buddha nature, etc.), both in explaining what awakening is and in other ways. This itself poses an apparent problem. As all agree, whatever it is, ultimate reality is indescribable. So how, without contradiction, can one say anything taken to be true about it? One can't. This is a feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and one has to learn to live with it. So paraconsistency will get in on the act, at least at this point.¹¹ This feature is shared by any theory—such as Advaita Vedānta, Kantianism, and Heideggerianism—that claims that there is something ineffable and then goes on to talk about it (for example, by explaining why it is ineffable).¹² Mahāyāna gives a very distinctive account of why the ultimate is ineffable, however; roughly, it is because language (concepts) effectively constructs the *conventional*. The ultimate truth—the truth about ultimate reality—is therefore contradictory, and this is so on both of the models described.¹³

Conclusion

In this chapter two models of the relationship between conventional and ultimate reality have been sketched. Buddhist scholars may be discomforted by the fact that no attention has been paid to the detailed exegesis and analysis of particular texts—though, of course, the discussion of matters is informed by an understanding of many texts. Naturally, the concrete interpretation of texts is essential to serious Buddhist scholarship. But interpretation is always interpretation *from* somewhere. Here, we have taken a step back from texts themselves to provide a point of perspective from which to see them. It is, we hope, a fruitful one.

11. There are Mādhyamika thinkers who were, arguably, skeptics and who thus maintained nothing at all. (See chapter 6.) For reasons that it would be out of place to discuss here, this is, arguably, a very implausible interpretation of both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. It is not even clear that such skepticism is coherent. See Priest (2002, ch. 3) for a discussion of the closely related Pyrrhonian skepticism.

12. See Priest (2005).

13. See Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2008).



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