

## Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics<sup>1</sup>

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What is this elusive discipline called “Buddhist ethics?” As is often the case in modern interpretations and analyses, it is not easy to characterize exactly what a western-inspired term corresponds to in traditional Indian culture, and sometimes it’s not even clear how a particular term is being used in a burgeoning modern secondary literature on the subject. If we look at Indian and Tibetan literature, the closest term to the western notion of “ethics” seems to be *śīla*, “moral discipline,” something that is the subject of monastic Vinaya codes, Abhidharma scholastic, bodhisattva literature, Jātaka tales, narrative Avadāna literature, some Madhyamaka<sup>2</sup> treatises, even tantric texts and so on and so forth – in short, a little bit everywhere. Modern scholars have devoted significant efforts to the question as to whether there is a recognizable Western ethical *theory* – be it utilitarianism or virtue ethics – that is implicit in all, or at least the most, significant works in this literature. This debate will not be my concern here, although like Jay Garfield (2011) ~~(year)~~ I too think it is difficult to meaningfully attribute such an overriding ethical *theory* to Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> That said, almost all Buddhist literature is certainly profoundly ethical in orientation, even if it is

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<sup>2</sup> In what follows, for convenience rather than conviction, I adopt the modern convention of using “Madhyamaka” for the thought and “Mādhyamika” for the thinkers.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent vigorous defense of Buddhist ethics as utilitarianism, see Goodman 2009.

not clearly and consistently theoretically oriented. The *śīla* discussions do attempt to tell us what we ought to do and why – to take a very rough and ready characterization of what ethics is about (Thomson 2001: 6). The codes and advice and obligations involve a sense of “should/ought,” one no doubt weaker than a Kantian duty, but an ethical demand nonetheless. And *śīla* literature does often tell us why, that is, it gives justificatory reasons as to why one should think that such and such ethical demands are genuine and well-founded and others are not. The Buddhists are not just moralizers; they give rationales for what they say ought to be done.<sup>4</sup>

Is there in any interesting sense a Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics, i.e., an ethics that would be particular to the Middle Way school and follow from or somehow be linked to its subtle analyses of metaphysics? In other words, does the Madhyamaka anti-realist philosophy that all things are empty (*śūnya*) of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) make any difference to discussions about what people ought to do and why? In many respects Madhyamaka ethics is just general Mahāyānist Buddhist ethics, no more no less. A radical and purely text-based answer thus might be to say flatly, “No, there’s no evidence in the texts that would suggest it makes any significant difference at all.” One could point out that the position Nāgārjuna and other Indian authors seem to espouse is that canonical ethical distinctions remain thoroughly intact in Madhyamaka, all be they transposed from the level of ultimate (*paramārtha*) to conventional reality/truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*). The monastic rules, bodhisattva precepts, love, compassion, and the attention to the law of karma and its often unfathomable consequences remain unchanged. In the auto-commentary to Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī* verses 7-8 the opponent is depicted as arguing that without real moral intrinsic natures, the typical Abhidharma list of virtuous and non-virtuous mental factors (*caitta*) could not exist, nor could there be any liberating (*nairyāṇika*) tropes (*dharma*) or any of the other factors needed for the path. Nāgārjuna, in reply, doesn’t contest anything *within*

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<sup>4</sup> “That ‘why’ is important: moralizers are happy to tell you what you ought to do – moral philosophers differ in that they aim to tell you also what makes it the case that you ought to do the things they say you ought to do (Thomson 2001: 6).”

the classifications of what is virtuous, non-virtuous, liberating and binding. Instead he seeks to show that the whole Abhidharma-style list remains possible for a Mādhyamika providing it is suitably transposed to the proper level of truth. While he thus consecrated very significant efforts to showing that ethics would not be simply precluded *in toto* by a philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyavāda*), he did not seem to even entertain the idea that *some* important aspects of ethics or ethical reasoning would have to be affected or that some new approach to ethical questions would be demanded.<sup>5</sup>

Often it is said that understanding Buddhist *ultimate* reality leads to one being convinced of the interconnectedness of all life and that it hence reinforces environmental ethics or universal responsibility; these are themes frequent in popular presentations. In fact this is *not* what I shall focus upon for the simple reason that talk of interconnectedness and the transformative effect of realizations of the ultimate is found in writings of virtually all Mahāyānist schools and is not linked exclusively, or even principally, to the Madhyamaka. The potential changes I wish to take up stem from systemic tensions in Madhyamaka positions on *worldly* reality. I insist on “systemic” to emphasize that what is at stake is rational reconstruction of the system of Madhyamaka thought and not the discovery of some hitherto unknown textual data. (Not surprisingly, rational reconstructions are predominant nowadays in discussions of Buddhist ethics and especially so when it comes to applied ethical issues, like contraception, responsibilities to future generations, environmental ethics, human rights, etc., that don’t have clear textual discussions in canonical literature.)<sup>6</sup> The Mādhyamikas’ *śūnyavāda* should, if carried through, have significant implications

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<sup>5</sup> As Jan Westerhoff succinctly put it: “[Analyses] dealing with the specific ethical consequences of Madhyamaka thought are virtually absent” (Westerhoff 2009: 209).”

<sup>6</sup> Rational reconstruction seems to be what e.g. Damien Keown (2005) is doing in taking up Buddhist positions on issues such as cloning and others that medieval Indian Buddhists certainly were not aware of. Another striking example: investment guidelines for ethical investing by Buddhists in the stock market. The result of the deliberations of Richard Gombrich et al. (2007) is what you find in the Dow Jones Dharma Index.

for their conceptions of what *worldly* reality is and on the epistemology that governs knowledge claims and justification on the level of worldly truths. For ethics, this means a break with certain types of *justificatory reasoning* that Buddhists use on the worldly, or conventional (*saṃvṛti*), level.

In a chapter on ethics in a book on Indo-Tibetan Buddhist notions of conventional truth/reality, Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka (2011) also examine justification in a Madhyamaka approach to ethics, arguing that in a thoroughgoing anti-realist *śūnyavāda* genuine justification becomes impossible; in its stead we supposedly only find a weaker type of reasoning to tell Buddhists why they should act and think in certain ways rather than others *as Buddhists*. Now, it is true that in the Madhyamaka and other schools there are many discussions that *are* little more than homiletics and that involve reasoning which would not stand up, or even be intelligible, outside the church. Such is often the case in Candrakīrti's first five chapters of *Madhyamakāvātāra* (often cited by Finnigan and Tanaka); it is also what we find in the enormously complicated Svātantrika-Mādhyamika scholastic treatments of *Prajñāpāramitā* ethical schemata discussed in the Indian commentarial literature centered on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* or in the corresponding Tibetan literature. Nonetheless, not all Madhyamaka ethical reasoning is purely or even essentially destined for the already committed Buddhist – far from it. In texts like Bhāviveka's *Madhyamakahr̥daya*, we find direct polemical confrontations with non-Buddhists to show that their ethical pronouncements are wrong and unjustified, and that the Buddhists' views alone are justified. There is also a recurring insistence, by Svātantrika-Mādhyamika authors aligned with Dharmakīrti's school, such as Śāntarākṣita and Kamalaśīla, that ethical argumentation should be accessible to an open-minded rational being who provisionally suspends religious commitment; this is the so-called “judicious person” (*prekṣāvāt*) who represents an ideal figure in that she adopts positions, ethical and otherwise, purely on the basis of sound justificatory reasoning alone. It is thus incontestable that there *were* such rational strategies for justification in non-Madhyamaka and Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics alike. Mādhyamikas not only thought they were important, but that they functioned unproblematically on the level of conventional truth/re-

ality.<sup>7</sup> Of course, one could still maintain that Indo-Tibetan Mādhyamikas were somehow badly wrong about this and that an appeal to conventional truths/realities in justificatory reasoning simply *is not* compatible with anti-realism at all, philosophically speaking. But this, if right, would end up being the very strong claim that there is a fatal flaw in the numerous sorts of anti-realism East and West, namely, that such philosophies and ethical justification just simply can't mix *a priori*. I don't see that *that* general position is established in Finnigan and Tanaka (2011) or elsewhere.

I think that Finnigan and Tanaka (2011) were certainly on the right track in focussing on issues of justification. Where I disagree with them, however, is in their position that the Mādhyamikas' anti-realism constrains these thinkers to a type of ethics *without* justification. We'll leave aside the Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas, like Kamalāśīla et al., who clearly rely heavily on the robust justificatory reasoning of the Epistemological School (*pramāṇavāda*) transposed onto the domain of conventional truth. The more interesting case is that of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika. Does Finnigan and Tanaka's position apply better here? Briefly: I don't think we end up with *no* justification; on the contrary, justification for a Prāsaṅgika can remain strong and not simply an affair of the church preaching to the faithful. Justification would, however, become significantly different from what it is generally in Buddhist ethics. This is because evaluation of actions largely in terms of their humanly unfathomable karmic consequences – which *is* a major part of Buddhist ethical reasoning – becomes especially problematic for the Prāsaṅgika.

What problems does a Prāsaṅgika have with this that others don't? The Prāsaṅgika, more than other Buddhists, is caught between accepting that justification proceeds via the usual tallying of karmic consequences, on the one hand, and a fundamental methodological constraint, on the other, stemming from their views on

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<sup>7</sup> The debate about the possibility or impossibility of justification and its compatibility with *śūnyavāda* is certainly not a new one, and the Madhyamaka answers follow Nāgārjuna's well-worn strategy of arguing that ethical reasoning functions on the level of the conventional. See Nāgārjuna's replies to the objections in *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 7-8.

metaphysics. This methodological constraint is that conventional truth and the reasoning based upon it must, in some sense, be in conformity with the world's ideas and intuitions – Prāsaṅgikas must remain in keeping with what the world acknowledges (*lokaprasiddha*), and should not, as do the other Buddhist schools, propose radical alternatives.<sup>8</sup> Related to this is the idea that argumentation must proceed in keeping with principles recognized (*prasiddha/ abhyupagata*) by the other party. Indeed Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas notoriously claim that a consequence of their *śūnyavāda* is that they see no reason to go fundamentally against the world's views, and thus stress that they accept what the world accepts and reject what it rejects as conventional truth, as for a *śūnyavādin* there is nothing deeper grounded in real intrinsically existing facts.<sup>9</sup> The prescriptive accounts of the other schools, accounts that seek largely to change what the world thinks in order to better conform to entities, end up for the Prāsaṅgika as being a reformulation of realism. Let's look at the details. (I will rely on some previous publications giving a more detailed treatment of the Indo-Tibetan ideas and the textual data; the point here is to assess the implications for ethics).

What an emphasis on conformity with the world and its ways of reasoning means for Buddhist ethics is, in effect, that the world's fundamental moral intuitions, epistemic practices and norms are

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<sup>8</sup> I have taken up the idea of *lokaprasiddha* and its problems of interpretation in Tillemans 2011. There are obviously better and worse exegeses, the worst being that truth simply is equated with what the majority of people in the world believe to be true.

<sup>9</sup> The *Prasannapadā* of Candrakīrti cites a famous passage from the *Ratnakūṭasūtra* to show that Madhyamaka acknowledges just what the world acknowledges (*lokaprasiddha*): “The world (*loka*) argues with me. I don't argue with the world. What is generally agreed upon (*saṃmata*) in the world to exist, I too agree that it exists. What is generally agreed upon in the world to be nonexistent, I too agree that it does not exist.” *loko mayā sārđhaṃ vivadati nāhaṃ lokena sārđham vivadāmi / yal loke 'sti saṃmataṃ tan mamāpy asti saṃmatam / yal loke nāsti saṃmataṃ mamāpi tan nāsti saṃmatam. Trisaṃvaranirdeśaparivarta* (chapter 1) of the *Ratnakūṭa*. The source is traceable back to *Samyutta Nikāya* III, p. 138. Sanskrit found in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* 370,6-8 (ed. L. de la Vallée Poussin, St.-Petersbourg 1903/1913).

reinstated and legitimized as the grounds for justification.<sup>10</sup> And indeed Mādhyamikas do often justify their ethical positions in this way. A good example of Prāsaṅgika ethical argumentation that proceeds in terms of the world's moral intuitions and that uses justificatory reasoning destined for the unconvinced is found in the first four chapters of the *Catuḥśataka* (CŚ).<sup>11</sup> In this text of the third century C.E. Mādhyamika Āryadeva and in the *Catuḥśatakaṭīkā* (CŚṬ) of Candrakīrti (6<sup>th</sup> century) we find an elaborate discussion of the four “illusions” (*viparyāsa*) that, according to canonical literature (i.e., Abhidharma), are supposedly present in the minds of worldlings: taking transitory life as permanent, what is painful as pleasurable, what is dirty as clean and what is selfless as having a self. The argumentation follows a pattern. The authors try to show that the world's superficial attitudes on these matters are in conflict with its deep-seated intuitions – if the world reflected it would recognize the four illusions as indeed illusions. Candrakīrti here, in effect, uses the methodology he uses everywhere else, i.e. a form of *prasaṅga*-method using *reductio ad absurdum* and “opponent-accepted reasons” (*paraprasiddhahetu*) invoking principles that the world implicitly accepts, and will recognize upon reflection.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On the tension between moral theory and intuitions, see McMahan 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Translated and studied in Lang 2003, Sanskrit fragments in Suzuki 1994.

<sup>12</sup> To résumé the critique in the CŚ and CŚṬ concerning the illusions (*viparyāsa*): the ordinary person's confidence about the future is based on self-deception about his mortality (CŚ I.6-7); worldlings' attitudes to mourning are inconsistent (*gal ba = viruddha*) so that they mourn what on reflection does not deserve it (CŚ I.13); pleasure and happiness are rare, contrary to widespread opinion; upon reflection we see it is actually pain that is prevalent (CŚ II.4); people might think that work is a source of happiness, but it is better seen as largely meaningless and slavish exertion to survive (CŚ II.18); attitudes about beauty and cleanliness are confused and would be seen to be wrong if we reflected upon them (CŚ III.3-5); possessiveness makes no sense (CŚ III.11); kings (and other so-called “superior individuals”) are more like social parasites, dependent upon others' work – they have no reason to feel justified of their status (CŚ IV.2); a king who is violent, corrupt or cruel deserves to be denounced, even though he claims to provide protection or to be the “father of the people” (CŚ IV.11-13), and so on and so on.

Not only did Candrakīrti in CŚT appeal to propositions that the world recognized, but he proposed an account of the *pramāṇas* (reliable sources of knowledge) that stayed as close as possible to worldly epistemic practices; he deliberately rejected the prescriptive epistemology of the Dignāga school. Indeed in chapter XIII of CŚT he ridiculed prescriptive epistemologists as being “completely unversed in mundane objects” and “intoxicated through imbibing the brew of dialectics” (Tillemans 1990, vol. 1: 177, 179). The commitment to *lokaprasiddha* in all things epistemic and ethical is abundantly clear.

What difference would such a professed conformity with the world’s moral intuitions and epistemic practices make to Buddhist ethics? It is obvious that Āryadeva and Candrakīrti were seeking to rationalize and conserve intact a canonical ethical schema and that they did not see their *prasaṅga*-method nor their epistemology as in any way placing it in jeopardy. However, unlike the CŚ’s discussion of the four illusions, which is largely argumentation about intuitions and does not involve controversial facts, much of Buddhist ethical argumentation, *does* crucially rely on problematic facts, typically when actions are evaluated because of their total set of karmic consequences across several lives. While some karmic consequences will be accessible to ordinary reflecting individuals – e.g., the general rule that he who lives by violence tends to die by it – many will be completely unfathomable by any ordinary human beings, in that they are supposedly unobservable and not inferable from anything observable. These so-called “radically inaccessible facts” (*atyantaparokṣa*) – like the details of why one comes to have the particular destiny and rebirth one has – are thus supposedly only understandable through scriptures authored by individuals with extraordinary understanding (Tillemans 1999 and 2000). In later Indian and Tibetan Buddhism this extraordinary understanding is increasingly taken to be full omniscience: knowing everything about all.

Although Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas professed *lokaprasiddha* across the board on conventional matters, they certainly did not, for all that, abandon recourse to radically inaccessible facts about karma to justify ethical positions. In a sense, they tried to have the

usual Buddhist cake and eat it, and the result was unsatisfactory. Buddhists, Mādhyamika or not, were certainly aware that persuading people by citing scriptures that weren't understood or believed in, or by invoking the idea that the Buddhists' teacher was a superior individual (*atiśayapuruṣa*) with supra-normal understanding, were indeed highly problematic in the eyes of the world.<sup>13</sup> However, instead of simply siding with the world on this, Mādhyamikas sought an ingenious argumentation strategy whereby critical thinkers could supposedly come to accept scriptural propositions and accept that they be used as justificatory reasons in ethical debate. This Buddhist strategy goes back at least to Āryadeva, after which it is taken up by Dignāga (5<sup>th</sup> century) and Dharmakīrti (7<sup>th</sup> century); most modern Tibetan Buddhists continue to promote it as being a critical approach leading to rational proof of otherwise inaccessible facts; it is regularly espoused by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. In brief, the procedure in the "triple analysis" (*dpyad pa gsum*) and "scripturally based inferences" (*āgamāśritānumāna*)<sup>14</sup> is that one first ascertains the truth of a scripture's pronouncements on all the observable matters (*pratyakṣa*) it treats as well as on those matters which are rationally accessible (even though unobservable) – an immaculate record in these two categories allows one to infer the scripture's accuracy on otherwise completely unknowable matters like karma.

This method is indeed present in Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka* XII.5, which tells us that when, in an ethical deliberation, there is doubt about the veracity of the Buddha's descriptions of completely obscure karmic consequences we should be confident in his teachings about them because he was right in other areas, notably the teaching on emptiness.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Dharmakīrti in PV I.218 says that we would accept what such a superior person says "if we could know that he is superior" (*śakyeta jñātum so 'tiśaya yadi*), the point being that short of us having clairvoyance we simply couldn't know who had such extraordinary knowledge and who didn't.

<sup>14</sup> On the so-called "triple analysis" (*dpyad pa gsum*) and "scripturally based inferences," see chapters 1 and 2 in Tillemans 1999; see also the introduction to Tillemans 1993.

*buddhokteṣu parokṣeṣu jāyate yasya saṁśayaḥ /  
ihaiva pratīyayas tena kartavyaḥ śūnyatām prati //*

“When someone entertains doubt concerning the imperceptible things (*parokṣa*) taught by the Buddha, he should develop conviction in these very things on account of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).”

The point is that we supposedly can, with our own critical acumen, determine that the teachings on emptiness are an example (*drṣṭānta*) where the Buddha got the facts perfectly right. Therefore, because of his reliability on something essential like emptiness, it is also rational to believe his statements even when we cannot ourselves determine their truth. As Candrakīrti puts it in his *ṭīkā* to *Catuhśataka XII.5*:

“Now the [adversary] cannot state even the slightest reason for any uncertainty, and thus this example [i.e., emptiness] is indeed proven. Therefore, you should understand by means of your very own principles alone (*svanayenaiva*) that the other statements of the Illustrious One, which establish unobservable states of affairs, are also true, for they were taught by the Tathāgata, just as were the statements setting forth [that] state of affairs which is the emptiness of intrinsic nature. How then could there be any place for doubt concerning the imperceptible things taught by the Buddha?”<sup>15</sup>

In short, this (and the slightly more elaborate later idea of *āgamāśrītanumāna*) is an appeal to the Buddha’s track-record in teaching. It’s a justificatory argument that one finds in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti, who commented upon Āryadeva, as well as in Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas like Kamalaśīla and Śāntarakṣita, who relied on Dharmakīrti’s method in *Pramāṇavārttika* (PV) I to prove unfathomable facts inferentially. What is striking for our purposes is that Candrakīrti says that the appeal to the Buddha’s reliability proceeds “by means of your very own principles alone (*svanayenaiva*).” *It is clear that Candrakīrti wishes to say that this*

<sup>15</sup> *na ca śakyam anena svalpam apy aniścayakāraṇaṃ kiṃcid abhidhātum iti siddha evāyaṃ drṣṭāntaḥ / tatas cānyad apy asamakṣārtha-pratīpādakavacanāṃ bhagavato yathārtham iti pratīyatām svanayenaiva tathāgatopadiṣṭatvāt svabhāvaśūnyatārthābhīdhāyavacanavad iti kuto buddhokteṣu parokṣeṣu saṁśayāvakāśaḥ /* Translation and text in Tillemans 1990 vol. 1: 120 and vol. 2: 17-19..

*argument strategy is in conformity with the world and its own epistemic norms.* Candrakīrti, and perhaps Āryadeva, and certainly later Tibetan writers, thus thought that a Madhyamaka philosophy which took conventional truth as “what is acknowledged by the world” (*lokaprasiddha*), could *also* engage in a method that stretched the world’s acceptance to include propositions about unfathomable things. And this is where one gets the distinct impression of a stratagem to have the cake and eat it too.

Is Candrakīrti’s idea nonetheless somehow defensible? Do we actually conform to the world’s own epistemic standards and practices if we invoke such track-records to persuade the unconvinced and doubt-ridden on matters where there are not, and indeed supposedly cannot, be any other empirical evidence or rational arguments. I don’t think so. First of all, it’s implausible to claim that any major scripture will actually pass the test of getting all empirical and all other humanly verifiable matters right. It might get some right, but not all, given that empirical knowledge changes and grows. True, Buddhist writers, like Dharmakīrti and probably Āryadeva and Candrakīrti too, recognized that what really counted was not a track-record of one-hundred percent accuracy on every conceivable trivial matter treated in a scripture or treatise, but accuracy on important or difficult principal topics, such as the four noble truths, emptiness and the like.<sup>16</sup> But what kind of rational “conviction” (*pratyyaya*) could one develop in this way? How would all doubts be eliminated, as Āryadeva and Candrakīrti say, by reminding oneself of the rightness of the Buddha’s teaching on emptiness, for surely the mere fact of getting one very important thing right is not *ipso facto* a guarantee on anything else. Dharmakīrti was quite skeptical about these “scripturally based inferences,” and said clearly in his *Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti* to PV I.217 that

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<sup>16</sup> See PV I.217: “Because he/it is reliable on the principal matters, we can infer [reliability] on the others” (*pradhānārthāvisaṃvādād anumānaṃ paratra*). For Dharmakīrti and his commentators the principal matter is the four noble truths. It is striking that Āryadeva and Candrakīrti speak of the significance of getting emptiness right: it seems clear that the Mādhyamika in CŚ XII.5 is using a reasoning very similar to PV I. 217, but that the principal matter is indeed emptiness.

they weren't actually bona fide inferences at all – *na ... anumānam anapāyam* – as they lacked certainty (*niścaya*). As he recognized, there are just too many counterexamples where a person is correct on one set of things, be they important or not, but falls down hopelessly on other things. (See e.g., his *Svavṛtti* to I.318: *na kvacid askhalita iti sarvaṃ tathā / vyabhicāradarśanāt*. “It is not the case that when one is unmistaken on something, all the rest is similarly [unmistaken], for we see that this [implication] is deviant.”) Any observer of human foibles can come up with examples where people get significant things right and fall down on less significant and even comparatively easy matters.<sup>17</sup>

Now, the first impression one gets in reading this type of critique of scripturally based inference is that the problem raised is just the usual one of the fallibility of induction: we cannot arrive at certainty about the truth of generalizations on the basis of a finite number of confirmations. Indeed, the weakness of induction is a constant theme in Dharmakīrti. But if it were only a matter of the well-known failings of induction to generate certainty, one might well reply, “So much the worse for Buddhist demands of certainty,” and thus become a resigned or even cheerful fallibilist. In that case a fallibilist could say that demonstrated accuracy in certain important matters constitutes at least *reasonable grounds* for supposing accuracy in another *duly related* type of matter. After all, it is indeed so that we proceed by such transfers of credibility in many cases where someone's proven expertise in one set of matters serves as grounds (all be they fallible) for trusting him or her in another closely related set. (One need only think of expert witnesses in court cases to see that this is indeed common practice.) A suitably fallibilist Candrakīrti would then at least be right in saying that *this* is in keeping with the world's epistemic standards.

Arguably, though, the problem with scriptural inference is not simply the ever-present uncertainty one finds in inductive reasoning. And so merely embracing fallibilism is not the remedy either.

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<sup>17</sup> To update things a bit: the math department may be brilliant on the significant theoretical aspects of topology but unable to add up their phone bill correctly.

The real catch in transferring credibility from one area to another, if we wish to conform to the world's own norms, is that there must be a type of connection or relevant similarity between the different areas so that the expertise is transferable in a reasonable, albeit fallible, fashion. We are all too familiar with people who are highly qualified in one area – say, economics – and who then *think* they can expound on virtually everything else, related or not, and usually with disastrous results. We would say that those would-be experts become unreliable, not because they hadn't at some point understood a lot of significant things rightly or because of some general problem about induction, but because they overstep their qualifications. They take on subjects not clearly related to the area in which they have been recognized to be reliable. Alas, the flaw in a fallible appeal to the Buddha's track-record is similar: it is not at all clear that reliability concerning important general principles like emptiness *does* reasonably transfer to explanations concerning the details of karma in all their specificity and complexity, because the relationship is not clear. While emptiness of intrinsic nature, as a general principle, may be closely linked with the general feature that phenomena arise dependently due to causes and conditions – as Buddhists from Nāgārjuna on have stressed,<sup>18</sup> – knowing that much would hardly suggest that one somehow knows the specific details of what causes what.

Now, while Āryadeva and Candrakīrti seem to have thought that scriptural inferences were an unproblematic way for Buddhists to argue with any opponents, Buddhist or not, in that such inferences were just another case of the world's extending credence to people on the basis of their past performances, Dharmakīrti's position was no doubt much more nuanced. Dharmakīrti, in *Pramāṇavārttika* I and IV, maintained that this type of faith-based reasoning about the specifics of karma would *not* be persuasive to non-believers; not only is the reasoning extremely uncertain, but many opponents would simply refuse to recognize its subject matter (*dharmin*), i.e., Buddhist accounts of the details of karmic causality.

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<sup>18</sup> See *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* XXIV.18ab: *yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracakṣmahe* “Dependent arising, that we declare to be emptiness.”

Nonetheless, Dharmakīrti's view was that scriptural inferences, even if they weren't fully bona fide, were still somehow to be used, at least in the "private" context of Buddhists who wished to set out (*pravṛttikāma*) on the spiritual path. While scripture may provide direction (albeit very fallible) in a closed context of believers, it is not at all probative (i.e., a *sādhana*) in a public context when appeals to authority are contested. I think that some such distinction between private and public is indeed important to the Buddhist position. On the one hand, Dharmakīrti would steer clear of outright denial of karma – which no scholastic Buddhist writer can just flatly deny – but on the other hand he knows that he cannot and should not use scriptural descriptions of karmic consequences to clinch debates in the public domain, where rebirth and the causality between lives are either contested issues or too obscure to be admitted in "fact-based" (*vastubalapravṛtta*) debates.

How might such a public-private distinction work? If we take another type of subject matter, viz. the nature of mind, there is a great difference between a discussion in a private domain, amongst convinced Buddhists, that cites sūtra or tantra passages on the luminous nature of mind, the subtle consciousness and so forth, and such a discussion in the public domain where the other party is a well-meaning, but non-Buddhist, cognitive scientist working in a secular university. To mix up the private and public domains and say that Buddhist scriptural quotations about otherwise inaccessible features of mind should also be probative for the cognitive scientist would be seen as a rather comical violation of norms of rationality. And if one then goes from bad to worse and persists in somehow saying that the scripture is in any case right because it is the words of the Buddha, etc., this would be seen as not far from fundamentalism. Now, instead of cognitive science, let's take an example of an ethical argument on a contested issue in applied ethics: animal welfare and vegetarianism. People on both sides can and will invoke considerations that are publicly debatable: harm to animals, ecological consequences, health benefits of eating meat or not eating meat, suffering, perhaps rights of animals, speciesism, etc. This is recognizably normal argumentation on such an issue. Things are much different when someone seeks to prove their case by a scriptural quote concerning the unfathomable karmic con-

sequences of eating meat. For example, a vegetarian may invoke passages from the *Lankāvatārasūtra* to the effect that a meat-eater will be reborn as a carnivore, or alternatively a meat-eating Tibetan Buddhist might reply to a vegetarian opponent by invoking a (tantric?) teaching that the meat-eater will establish a “karmic connection” with the animal whose flesh he eats and will in a future life lead the being to enlightenment, etc., etc. Perhaps such ways of thinking would still somehow be meaningful in the private context of committed Buddhist exegetes wondering what their scriptures advise. However, they would certainly become deeply suspect if they left the purely private context of intra-Buddhist religious exegesis.

Clearly there are huge philosophical problems about holding *any* dual perspectives, be they in philosophy of mind or on ethical and religious issues. While private perspectives do sometimes co-exist with what is publicly acceptable, it is another matter as to whether and when they should co-exist, if at all.<sup>19</sup> The question thus remains whether some dual perspectives are to be preserved, and which ones, or whether norms of rationality dictate that we always seek unity. Dharmakīrti, if I read him rightly, thought that at least in ethics a purely intra-Buddhist perspective on some key matters, while publicly unarguable, could be more than simple irrationality. For our purposes, however, we shall have to leave that larger philosophical problem on hold. In any case, the shift to such a private perspective will not enable scriptural argumentation about karma to be used convincingly in an adversarial debate on ethics, as Āryadeva and Candrakīrti thought it could be used and as Buddhists often do try to use it. Instead, following the world’s norms, this would be an illegitimate shift from one perspective to the other, i.e., an attempt to promote certain Buddhist ethical ideas

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<sup>19</sup> It is of course no secret that many intelligent, scientifically minded people hold weird private ideas – e.g. on medicinal remedies, on ways to ensure good luck, on CIA conspiracies, etc., etc. – ideas that they know would be unacceptable in a public discussion with their peers. Such types of dual perspectives, however, are *not* of much interest to us here, as they would usually be dismissed as simply irrational.

in the public domain all the while insulating them from criticism by stressing people's epistemic incompetence.

Recently the philosopher Owen Flanagan (2006), in a lecture on Buddhism and science, confronted much the same problem where Buddhists priced certain problematic subjects outside critical debate: he coined the term "epistemological protectionism." (This may capture the problem better than the accusations of dogmatism that are sometimes bandied about). Such a protectionist approach would claim that one could cite reasons – e.g. scriptural passages – to provide proof in a public debate, but at the same time preserve them from criticism by making them unassailable to anyone but the largely convinced alone. I think it is clear that in a critical approach to ethics appeals to humanly unfathomable facts are also protectionist in this way. They too fail to conform to what the world, on reflection, values and demands in debate on contested issues, namely, that a discussion, if not between the already convinced, must be open for both parties to criticize and evaluate on the basis of publicly accessible information.

Once one puts into question the Mādhyamika's use of scriptural inferences to give knowledge of unfathomable karmic consequences, his appeal to the omniscience of the Buddha is also going to be in considerable trouble. In both cases one is pricing much ethical debate outside the realm of criticism, or worse, engaging in a type of protectionism. However, there are also other reasons as to why a Mādhyamika should feel particularly uncomfortable in invoking a literal notion of omniscience to clinch an ethical debate. The problem arises that if the Buddha supposedly has knowledge of all things in all their details, including the unfathomable effects of karma, this looks to be tantamount to him understanding how things are in themselves, by their own intrinsic nature (*svabhāvena*). And that would be precluded by a Mādhyamika's thorough-going anti-realism – realist Buddhist schools might have some way to accept it, but it seems that the Madhyamaka would be in an especially delicate position. Literal omniscience seems in effect to be a "God's Eye point of view of the world," a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, and

that is one way to formulate what an anti-realist holds to be impossible.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the subject of omniscience and the different views that Buddhists have had about it historically are matters upon which I cannot reasonably embark here. In later Indian Buddhism and in its Tibetan successors we find in one way or another several versions as to what full-fledged omniscience is, and some versions would be closer to a crypto-realism than others. (There has also been, over time, an evolution from a limited conception of omniscience where an omniscient being supposedly knows one or a few essential things about everything, to a much stronger type of knowledge.)<sup>21</sup> For our purposes we'll contrast two quite different versions of omniscience. If we take, for example, a conception such as that of the 14th century Tibetan writer Klong chen rab 'byams pa who distinguishes between “dualistic mind” (*sems*) and “primordial gnosis” (*ye shes*) or Mind itself (*sems nyid*), omniscience is taken as primordial gnosis/Mind itself rather than “dualistic mind” – dualistic mind is in fact something to be eliminated.<sup>22</sup> Omniscience for Klong chen pa, like primordial gnosis, is a special type of understanding free from all objects (*yul*). In such a case, there seems to be no question of an omniscient being knowing each and every thing in all its details – that would *per impossibile* be a sort of dualistic mind (*sems*). Gnosis/omniscience is a type of transcendent understanding in which the very idea of a thing/object is absent. On the other hand, if we take omniscience as it seems to be understood by later Indian commentators on Dharmakīrti or by Tibetan

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<sup>20</sup> The characterization of metaphysical realism as involving the God's Eye perspective is due to Hilary Putnam (see, e.g., Putnam 1981: chapter 3).

<sup>21</sup> See McClintock 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Klong chen rab 'byams pa, *Sems dang ye shes kyi 'dri lan, gSung thor bu*, p. 384: *mdor bsdu na khams gsum pa 'i sems sems byung cha dang bcas pa thog ma med pa nas bryud pa 'i bag chags can sgrub pa gnyis kyi ngo bo 'dzin cing / bskyed par brten pas spang bya yin zhing dgag dgos par bshad pa yin no /* “In short, the three realms' dualistic minds (*sems = citta*), mental factors (*sems byung = caitta*), and their qualities are subject to imprints coming down from beginningless [time], have as nature the two obscurations and rely on production. As such, it is explained that they are to be eliminated and should be stopped.”

Mādhyamika writers such as Tsong kha pa, it does seem to involve essentially an amplification *ad infinitum* of people's cognition of objects to arrive at all of them in all their details. It is this latter, more literal, version that would seem to run thoroughly afoul of anti-realism.

Where does this critique of the Mādhyamika appeals to track-records and omniscience leave us? I think we have to admit that Prāsaṅgikas attempted the impossible in professing *lokaprasiddha* all the while trying to recuperate unfathomable karma in ways that the world itself would supposedly accept. My argument so far has been that this is not likely to work and that some hard choices therefore have to be made. Now, one of the more attractive features of Buddhism is, and has been for a long time, its openness to discussion and its emphasis on reason. We see this strongly in the present Dalai Lama's commitment to dialogue based on empirical methods and rationality – what Flanagan (2006) called a “welcome mat” to open, public, debate.<sup>23</sup> What I think needs to be offered in ethics, in largely the same constructive spirit as that of Owen Flanagan's article on science, is a sober note: this welcome mat will attract few long term visitors if contemporary Buddhists, Mādhyamikas included, continue to justify their ethical views on the basis of facts knowable only via a scripture whose author had omniscient knowledge.

What then would *śūnyavādin* Buddhist ethics look like without such a heavy reliance on radically inaccessible facts and God's Eye omniscience? I think a partial answer is something like the following: if moral intuitions and personal attitudes become more dominant in ethical debate, rather than scripture and omniscience, ethics becomes humanized and to quite a degree secularized; the extended welcome mat will be genuinely attractive. The opposite tendency however will keep Buddhist ethics oriented towards religious

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<sup>23</sup> Here is how Flanagan (2006) reformulated the Dalai Lama's invitation to dialogue. “The *Welcome Mat*: ‘Come sit by my side, my Western scientific and philosopher friends. Tell me what you know. I will teach you what I know. We can debate. But in the end it is our duty, on both sides, to change our previous views if we learn from the other that what we believe is unfounded or false.’”

fundamentalism and increasingly out of touch with contemporary concerns. Both these competing visions were in fact combined in various degrees in Buddhist schools, just as they are in most major world religions. The important feature of the Madhyamaka for Buddhist ethics is that it, more than any other school, insists on the primacy of what the world acknowledges, rather than upon humanly unfathomable facts that are as they are for all time. This, if carried through, would be a significant move away from fundamentalism and towards the humanization of ethics.

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