

**Review of ‘Moonshadows:
Conventional Truth in Buddhist
Philosophy’ (Journal of Buddhist
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The Cowherds,
Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy
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Think of “playful rigor” as a style of academic writing and “love of paradox” as a healthy principle, and you will discover in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* a fine example of that most Socratic of virtues: studied irony. But, alas, philosophical fun at the expense of venerable thinkers in the Buddhist canon is still frowned upon by those who believe the Buddha, in all seriousness and out of deference for the First Noble Truth, proscribed laughter.

“This is an unusual volume” is how the first sentence announces it. As stated by the group of scholars who co-authored it under the self-described appellative “The Cowherds,” it is at best an understatement. In a colloquial vein, one might more aptly blurt out something like “Oh, boy, tell me about it.” A “*polygraph*” no less! That is, a “collectively written volume reflecting the varying views of a large collection of authors” (v). Or, perhaps, this is just another symptom of the diminishing value of sole authorship in our increasingly collectivist academic culture. Either way, a “Cowherd” is what the first-millennium Buddhist philosopher Candrakirti means by “the man on the street”: an individual whom the Cowherds behind this volume are emulating only in jest.

In its playful tone, *Moonshadows* casts a long and brightly lit (for a nocturnal orb) shadow over the burgeoning field of Madhyamaka (“Middle Way”) scholarship. Centered on its two key figures, Nagarjuna and Candrakirti (especially the latter), the second- and sixth-to-seventh-century Buddhist philosophers most associated with this school of thought, but also on their appraisal in Tibet, the volume offers a unique blend of light but pointed exegesis, thorough philosophical analysis, and ample methodological reflections. The key questions driving the discussion are identified right from the outset: “(1) What *is* conventional truth? (2) What is *true* about conventional truth? (3) How *flexible* is conventional truth? How much can it be revised?” and “(4) What are the implications of all of this for how we live our lives?” (vi). The “conventional” (*samvrtisatya* lit. “conventional truth”) in question is precisely the truth that gets called into question when the conventions of our everyday world are shown to be misleading. Just what it means to say that something true in one sense is characterized as entirely false in another sense is an interesting question, and one that the Cowherds think is a good pretext for doing philosophy “*with* Candrakirti” without bowing down at his feet.

How successful this cross-cultural philosophical enterprise is depends in large measure on what one takes to be its stated goals. If a “systematic philosophical exploration of questions raised” (vi), that is, the questions raised by the Cowherds themselves rather than by the historical thinkers, is the goal, *Moonshadows* succeeds admirably. If what is aimed at is rather the illumination of “Madhyamaka ideas about conventional truth” (vi), its achievements might be harder to sell to those who are mainly pursuing text-critical projects in Buddhist philosophy. Disclaimers to the contrary won’t persuade seasoned exegetes (perhaps not even those few, Krsna-like disguised, in their midst)

that the Cowherds really do not mean to be advancing any exegetical claims about what Candrakirti *really* means by, for instance, endorsing the reliability of epistemic instruments. As Jay Garfield puts it, in a lucid and aptly titled plea for “Taking Conventional Truth Seriously” (chapter 2), one commits a “serious mistake” in thinking that Madhyamaka “at least as articulated by Nagarjuna, Candrakirti, and Tsongkhapa, eschews reliance on or an account of epistemic authority” (29). The presence of different views on this issue (Siderits’s, for instance)—specifically, on whether, for Candrakirti, any systematic account of knowledge must reject metaphysical and epistemological foundationalism even at the conventional level—in contemporary scholarship warrants more, not less, exegesis. However, in its defense, and judging from its prefatory disclaimers, the volume should not be judged by what it is deliberately not trying to do: exegesis of “antique positions.” The Cowherds make abundantly clear they are “after truth, or at least insight, not just understanding of antique positions” (vii).

The notion that ordinary objects and events, and the conventions we employ to assess their ontological status, are not as they seem when subjected to rigorous analysis or, as the case may be, scientific inquiry, should strike even lay readers as sensible enough. This is, after all, what is meant when a distinction is drawn between the manifest image and the scientific image. But the two truths doctrine elaborated by philosophers in first-millennium India offers some interesting *sui generis* developments that, when engaged by deploying the ideas and tools of analytic philosophy, as the Cowherds do, show interesting new ways to engage the Buddhist literature in general, and Madhyamaka in particular.

The brief and accessible introduction to conventional truth by Guy Newland and Tom Tillemans lays open the whole problematic: “truth,” while a correct rendering for the Sanskrit *satya* is nevertheless problematic insofar as it can also be translated as “real,” forcing a hard disambiguation between *truth* and *existence*.

The Abhidharma metaphysical reductionism, against which Madhyamaka stakes its epistemological claims, has its own two truths scheme, but the former is decidedly different: for Abhidharma, the two truths “involve a conception of *standpoints*” (8) from which different classes of objects can be said to exist. The historical question, as Newland and Tillemans pose it, is: How could a move from statements to objects have happened philosophically? That is, how can objects become truthbearers when the former are nothing like propositions, the *locus classicus* of truth. The discussion leads to an analysis of the concept of object itself, which, as the authors note, has too long and complex a history for an easy answer. Claiming, as some Tibetan Madhyamika philosophers do, that the conventional level of truth and/or reality is empty (*stong gzhi*) won’t do it, since such an assertion can only be made from the standpoint of the truth that defines the quality of being empty (*stong chos*), and this assertion presupposes that one first gets the conventional right. One cannot understand the difference between a true oasis and only a mirage, if the question of what gets to be (and be thus called) an oasis is not settled first. So it is, then, that Garfield delivers in chapter 2 a message from “Our Sponsors” (in this case, Candrakirti and Tsongkhapa):

“[C]onventional phenomena, unlike the snake thought to be perceived when one sees a rope, have causes and effects and are actual” (30).

The same line of argument is pursued by Sonam Thakchoe in chapter 3, who arrives, following the logic of Candrakirti’s account of epistemic instruments, at no less stark a conclusion: the argument from dependent arising acknowledges “the dependent existence of epistemic instruments as a conventional reality, but denies them any intrinsic epistemic authority on the conventional level,” and the argument from emptiness acknowledges that “being empty allows for dependently arisen cognitive function, but it denies the existence of ultimately real or intrinsic authority” (54). How this “allowing” actually functions is less clear and no account is given of precisely what it would mean to get cognition out of a causal chain of dependently arisen noncognitive elements and events (that is, on the view, taken as canonical by the Madhyamaka, that the content and character of a cognitive event such as awareness or apprehensibility, cannot be internal to that event). Additional treatments of the two truths in terms of levels of explanation (and falsification) are adduced in chapter 4 by Guy Newland who, likewise, puzzles over whether Tsongkhapa should be faulted for having imported Dharmakirti’s notions about the efficacy of conventional epistemic practices, thus undermining Candrakirti’s (Prasangika) stance on conventional truth.

Several contributions in this volume run, it seems, against the grain of arguing (*with* the Madhyamika) for some robust notion of conventional truth. Georges Dreyfus’s case study of the twelfth-century Tibetan philosopher Patsab’s own take on Madhyamaka (chapter 6), finds ample evidence for a skeptical interpretation: “to say that phenomena such as pots and plants are conventionally real in a philosophy that rejects the very notion of reality” (89) is to advance a skeptical hypothesis (admittedly of the Pyrrhonian rather than the Cartesian type, but with specific Buddhist nuances insofar as the goal is to relinquish all views rather than deny the possibility of knowledge), a conclusion that has a long and venerable pedigree in modern Madhyamaka scholarship (as Dreyfus and Garfield acknowledged in chapter 7). Dreyfus also signals the indispensability of the exegetical and historical framework to any philosophical analysis, given the varied claims about, say, Nagarjuna’s philosophical standpoint, and the indispensability of the commentarial literature in settling the exegetical debate. A similar line of argument is followed by Tom Tillemans in chapter 9 (though not in chapter 8, co-authored with Priest and Siderits), who thinks Candrakirti’s commitment to reforming, on a conventional level, the common folk’s ethical and political ideas, and correcting their false beliefs, falls short of allowing for “sophisticated theoretical ideas.” As he notes, rightly in my view, the notion that “explanation of those nontechnical activities should largely reproduce the way the average person understands and describes them” is “extraordinarily crippling” (161). Dumbed-down conventional truth is not terribly attractive even to modern lay audiences, let alone to the philosophically savvy.

An example of what such philosophical acumen demands of the Madhyamaka account of conventional truth is at work in Jan Westerhoff’s insightful use of antirealism (in the vein of David Lewis) for demonstrating that conventions can be formed without

presupposing that they must be real in any sort of ultimate way (chapter 12). How effective this “game-theoretic” strategy can be in persuading readers that it could serve as a platform for cross-cultural philosophical reflection depends, as with most contributions to this volume, less on the degree of acquaintance with recent developments and debates in analytic philosophy, and more on the willingness to allow for this style of philosophical analysis to take hold. Furthermore, Westerhoff’s analogy to studying ancient mechanics encapsulates much of the Cowherds’ methodological thrust: if studying ancient texts were like studying ancient mechanics, one way to approach it would be to build the actual devices the treatises described (assuming they could be built) and see where one can improve on their functionality. This is philosophy as engineering: oiling old rusting parts, fixing those that no longer work, and getting things that might in principle still work to function better.

What standpoint should a Madhyamika, then, adopt in debating realists who believe there are things with intrinsic natures and epistemic instruments that are effective in getting a handle on those things? In chapter 10, Mark Siderits tells us that, no matter the standpoint, the dialectical progression leading from conventional to ultimate truth is fraught. We can’t overcome the pure conventionalism of the first dialectical step without some epistemology and, as Siderits notes, the “Nyaya account of the epistemic instruments promises to do just that” (178)—hence its adoption by Candrakirti. That is, without some account of how “true and false cognitions differ in their etiology” (178) there is little scope for mitigating conventionalism—the view that how things appear to us depends on whatever system of conventions ordinary practice has set in place (the conventions by which we get to call something “white” and “a shell”). Siderits’s ingenious new fable about the conventional wisdom of *gopi*s (the original cowherds) and their clever way of keeping Kṛṣṇa’s love of butterballs free of any medical consequences adds a further tinge of irony to the project of rescuing the conventional: that there should be another truth beyond the conventional is “just another bit of *upaya*, something it is useful for us to believe insofar as it makes us strive to resolve our disagreements” (179).

The volume’s two concluding chapters (13 and 14) round up the discussion by addressing the ethical implications of the two truths schema. As Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka note in chapter 14, Madhyamika philosophers “avow and endorse the bodhisattva precepts and the Mahayana account of the virtues” (221), and their analysis sets out to examine whether that means ethical principles can be simply justified “conventionally or as conventions.” Similarly, Graham Priest’s proposal for a “two model” descriptive framework of the two truths meets the soteriological demand that one explain how the story of awakening can fit with a natural and simple understanding of what it means, epistemically, to effect such a perspectival shift. Readers familiar with the problematic issues Madhyamaka epistemology raises for Buddhist ethics might find the mere connection of epistemology and ethics in thinkers such as Candrakirti unconvincing as an argument for justifying an ethical stance as normative (for the common folk) while declaring its merely conventional status (for the enlightened).

There is much to admire in this intensely collaborative effort to bring Buddhist conceptions of truth in conversation with contemporary analytic philosophy, and these minor points of criticism should not detract from the appreciation of its merits as an engaging—and playfully so—exercise in the best kind of cross-cultural philosophical reflection. Though of interest primarily to specialists, its elegant and lucid prose should make it accessible to general audiences seeking to engage Buddhist ideas in a critical and effective way.

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