

**Review of ‘Moonshadows:  
Conventional Truth in Buddhist  
Philosophy’ (Philosophy East and  
West Journal)**

Jeremy E. Henkel

July 2012

*Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. By the Cowherds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 251. \$35.00.

Reviewed by **Jeremy E. Henkel** Wofford College

Collaboratively written by some of the world’s foremost experts in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy,<sup>1</sup> *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy* is an unusual book. It stands somewhere between being a collection of essays and being a single monograph. The authors refer to it as a “polygraph” to acknowledge both their mutual influence on each other and the interrelatedness of the chapters; nevertheless, each chapter is independent enough to stand on its own as a separate article. The central theme of *Moonshadows* is the notion of conventional truth, particularly as it is elaborated in Madhyamaka. The book is not a historical exegesis, however; it is an attempt—and a successful one at that—to engage with the Buddhist notion of conventional truth not only on its own terms, but also from the perspective of contemporary Western epistemological discussions.

The first chapter contains an introduction to the notion of the “two truths” in Buddhism and the role that conventional truth plays in Buddhist philosophy as well as a summary of the remaining chapters. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of how a truth that is distorting, misleading, and ultimately to be abandoned—as conventional truth is taken to be—can properly be considered a “truth” at all. The authors argue that there is something legitimate here, that “conventionally true” is not just a roundabout way of saying “false.”

Chapters 3 and 4 deal specifically with the epistemology of conventional truth, including what the legitimate epistemic instruments (*pramana* in Sanskrit, *tshad ma* in Tibetan) are. Chapter 3 focuses on Candrakīrti’s divergence from the Dignaga-Dharmakīrti analysis of the *pramanas*, and chapter 4 looks more closely at Tsongkhapa’s development of Candrakīrti’s analysis. Together, the chapters address concerns about how the grasping of what is only conventionally true can be considered knowledge, and how something can be said to exist (even if only conventionally) if analysis reveals it to be ultimately empty or non-existent.

Chapter 5 examines Tsongkhapa’s and Gorampa’s competing interpretations of what we should take Nagarjuna’s emptiness to be a denial of—the supposed intrinsic natures of objects, or the objects themselves. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the affinities between Madhyamaka and classical Western (both Academic and Pyrrhonian) skepticism. In chapter 8 the authors argue that, at least with regard to conventional truth, the Madhyamaka position is best understood as a sort of deflationary theory of truth, rather than correspondence, coherence, or even pan-fictionalism.

Chapters 9–12 explore the question of how the notion of conventional truth can be accepted without truth thereby losing its normative force. For the notion of conven-

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<sup>1</sup> The contributors include Georges Dreyfus, Bronwyn Finnigan, Jay L. Garfield, Guy Martin Newland, Graham Priest, Mark Siderits, Koji Tanaka, Sonam Thakchoe, Tom Tillemans, and Jan Westerhoff.

tional truth to do the work that it is supposed to do within a Buddhist framework, there must be a difference between accepting that something is conventionally true and just slavishly following majority opinion. Relatedly, an account is needed of how there can be epistemic progress within the realm of the merely conventional.

Finally, chapters 13–14 look at the implications of different accounts of conventional truth for understanding enlightenment, and for attempts to justify a moral/ ethical standpoint to those who do not necessarily share one’s basic views.

The notion of the two truths is a central issue in Buddhist philosophy, but discussions almost always focus primarily or exclusively on the nature of ultimate truth. The authors of *Moonshadows* have done a great service to Buddhist scholarship in reminding us just how important, and how philosophically interesting, the notion of conventional truth is.

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East and West Journal)

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Philosophy East and West, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 2012), pp. 428–429.

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