Madhyamaka Metaethics

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Abstract

This paper develops two novel views that help solve the 'now what' problem for moral error theorists concerning what they should do with morality once they accept it is systematically false. It does so by reconstructing aspects of the metaethical and metanormative reflections found in the Madhyamaka Buddhist, and in particular the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhist, tradition. It also aims to resolve the debate among contemporary scholars of Madhyamaka Buddhism concerning the precise metaethical status of its views, namely, whether Madhyamaka Buddhism can count as a genuine moral skepticism. The paper argues that Mādhyamikas are indeed moral skeptics, and moral skeptics more in a 'Pyrrhonian,' or quietist, sense if one follows the Prāsaṅgika line of thinkers. Overall, the claim is that Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhists treat morality and normativity more broadly as a source of suffering to be ultimately overcome for therapeutic reasons. They propose to do this by abolishing fully asserting genuine moral and normative beliefs while also occasionally passively and reactively pretending some normative judgments are true when it appears doing so would be salutary. These two approaches are called 'nonassertive moral abolitionism' and 'reactionary moral fictionalism,' respectively. They are developed and offered to contemporary error theorists willing to consider a non-normative and non-collectivist criterion for solving the 'now what' problem.

Keywords Moral skepticism · Moral error theory · Moral abolitionism · Moral fictionalism · Madhyamaka Buddhism

The 'Now What' Problem

Moral error theory is an example of moral skepticism. Moral skepticism is the approach that doubts or denies the possibility of moral knowledge (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006). It does this by questioning justified moral belief, moral truth, moral facts, and moral reasons. Moral error theory denies moral truth by denying moral

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reality, that is, by denying moral facts, or categorical reasons for action. For error theorists, moral judgments are false or untrue because there are no moral facts to which moral judgments could correspond. Moral discourse conceptually entails or pragmatically presupposes the existence of moral facts, which error theorists regard as too weird to exist because they would have to enjoy a kind of intrinsically prescriptive, inescapably authoritative, irreducibly normative, and mind-independent existence and there is nothing like that in the world (Joyce, 2001; Kalf, 2018; Mackie, 1977; Olson, 2017). Error theory is an 'Academic,' or negatively dogmatic, form of moral skepticism: it positively disbelieves in the existence of moral facts and thus believes morality is systematically false, untrue, or at least unjustified.

That error theorists believe all moral judgments are in error means they also believe we express moral beliefs when we express moral judgments and that moral discourse is in the business of trying to report moral facts. Error theory is cognitivist and factualist. It is also the case, however, that morality always fails to correspond to the world because there are no moral facts. The negative dogmatism of error theoretic moral skepticism amounts to a combination of moral cognitivism and moral factualism with moral anti-realism, which is an ontological thesis. One could also arrive at this ontological view by denying one expresses moral beliefs when expressing moral judgments and that moral discourse is trying to report moral facts. Moral noncognitivsm and moral nonfactualism, as found in various moral expressivist and prescriptivist views, also lead to moral anti-realism, though noncognitivists do not seem to confront anything like the 'now what' problem insofar as they endeavor to retain and redeem morality from its ontological nullity, even if such redemption is not obviously warranted. In other words, moral noncognitivists are skeptics who are also *insulationists*, skeptics who insulate themselves from their skeptical conclusions (Burnyeat & Frede, 1997; Machuca, 2018). These are skeptics who do not want to live their skepticism. The insulationist aims to protect a faulty discourse they doubt or deny for mostly psychological or social reasons. We will see that Madhyamaka moral skepticism is not insulationist in this sense, which helps to characterize the superiority of its solutions to the 'now what' problem.

The question that bedevils error theorists after coming to accept the error theory is, now what? Now what do error theorists do with a moral discourse they believe to be false? This has been called the 'now what' problem. Before solving the 'now what' problem, error theorists seek to establish a criterion for a possible solution. They have mostly agreed on a criterion. For example, Matt Lutz offers three aspects of a criterion any solution must meet: (1) it cannot involve lapsing back into holding genuine moral beliefs, (2) it must allow us to continue to act and speak morally, and (3) such acting and speaking cannot be based on accepting moral propositions (Lutz, 2014). For Lutz, a solution to the 'now what' problem must pay heed to 'what we care about, our deepest commitments' (Lutz, 2014: 361). Similarly, Toby Svoboda has argued that an acceptable solution 'ought to preserve morality because of its useful features, including interpersonal coordination and intrapersonal motivation' (Svoboda, 2017: 6). An effective solution to the 'now what' problem should conserve 'advantages including possessing the conceptual means to avoid moral error while retaining useful features, such as the ability to allow and to account for moral motivation, moral disagreement, and moral reasoning' (Svoboda, 2017: 8).

Error theorists have, therefore, mostly agreed that what matters when it comes to solving the 'now what' problem is preserving morality's seeming psychological and social utility. Morality is thought to be the most effective way of holding and expressing our deepest commitments, of providing the motivation to do what is ultimately in our best collective interest, and of coordinating our interactions such that we can best cooperate. For error theorists, morality's falsity should not block its psychological and social benefits. Error theorists are thus as insulationist as moral noncognitivists, insulating morality (and themselves) from its falsity while preserving its purported ability to provide us with 'intrapersonal motivation' and 'interpersonal coordination' without entailing a falling back into genuinely asserting full beliefs in nonexistent moral facts. This is what determines the error theorist's criterion for solving the 'now what' problem.

The solutions to the 'now what' problem are then evaluated on the basis of this criterion. For example, moral conservationism is the view that error theorists should simply continue on as before they came to believe the error theory (Olson, 2017: 190–196). This involves genuinely asserting full beliefs in moral facts. Error theorists see how conservationism would insulate morality from its falsity and retain its utility, but they worry it borders on the irrational insofar as it involves asserting beliefs in what one really does not believe. The conservationist responds by claiming not only are we mostly fated, either through genetic or social determinants, to believe in moral facts, but that there is no real threat of irrationality since the conservationist only 'dispositionally' believes the error theory while 'occurrently' believing in moral facts.

On the other end of the spectrum, moral abolitionism recommends error theorists give up completely on asserting beliefs in moral facts (Garner, 2007). Of course, to most error theorists, abolishing morality makes it rather difficult to retain what is apparently useful about it. The abolitionist claims that the goal of achieving 'what we care about, our deepest commitments,' is reached precisely by abolishing morality because morality does more harm than good. It renders disagreements intractable, provides cover for social inequalities and structural injustices, and is often used to motivate international war (Mackie, 1980; Hinckfuss 1987; Garner, 2007; Marks, 2013). Thus, to obtain what is thought to make morality useful (the provision of coordination and cooperation), it is best to abolish morality altogether. While not obviously insulationist, there is still something strongly normative about this view since its confessed 'assertiveness' and activism is similar to other solutions in their attempt to remedy social problems through collective reforms to normative thinking and behavior.[1]

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[1] Garner labels his version of the view 'assertive moral abolitionism.' We will see below we can develop a non-normative, nonassertive version of the view based on the metaethical and metanormative reflections of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism. Another recent abolitionist, Joel Marks, provides an apt example of the zeal of assertive moral abolitionism: 'Finally I reached a point where I felt that, far from needing to hide my amorality from the world, I should share it with the world. It would be a gift. At the very least, it was important—perhaps the most important thing in the world! I also saw the humor in my situation: it was not lost on me that I was becoming an unbelieving proselytizer' (Marks, 2013: 14). Suffice it to say, the views developed here out of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism will lack this zeal. On the other hand, what assertive and nonassertive moral abolitionism will share is a recognition of the pathological nature of morality, the fact that it often results from or induces mental turmoil. Morality

A third solution to the 'now what' problem is revolutionary moral expressivism. It says 'cognitivist moral discourse and judgment should be replaced with non-cognitivist moral discourse and judgment' (Svoboda, 2017: 7). The mental state one has when expressing a moral judgment should not be belief, but perhaps emotion or desire, thus replacing cognitivism with an expressivist view like emotivism or prescriptivism. Also, the speech act one performs should not be assertion, but rather something like an expression of approval or disapproval through an emotion or command. A kind of revolutionary moral expressivism is revolutionary moral fictionalism. A revolutionary fictionalist is someone who actively proposes that a group of people, at first just the unbelievers but then perhaps everyone, should revolt and start to treat a discourse as a useful fiction, unlike a hermeneutic fictionalist who claims we are already using a discourse in a pretense mode of some sort (Kalderon, 2005). As opposed to Nolan, Restall, and West's revolutionary content moral fictionalist view (2005: 307–330), which says error theorists should replace genuine assertion of full belief in moral facts with genuine assertion of full belief in moral fictions, Richard Joyce's force fictionalist version of the view recommends error theorists swap out the genuine assertion of full belief for the quasi-assertion of make-belief in moral facts, with such a pretense being an expression of a noncognitive (or partially cognitive) mental state like make-belief (Joyce, 2001: 206–231).

Error theorists often complain in response that while revolutionary expressivisms do avoid any lapsing back into believing in moral facts, they fail to provide strong enough moral motivation to achieve the hoped-for intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits morality is thought to provide. Also, revolutionary fictionalists are accused of making a mess of moral disagreement insofar as they burden themselves with all the problems of first-order expressivist metaethical views like the Frege-Geach problem. Revolutionary expressivists reply that we are in fact quite often motivated by the fictions, not to mention the emotions and desires, that are rather common noncognitive mental events we all share. Also, the performance of the moral pretense is only ever enacted within a group of other error theorists who would break out of their pretense, and reactivate their belief in the error theory, if they were to ever drift into having serious moral disagreements with each other.

Finally, there is moral substitutionism, which is Lutz's own view. It says that error theorists should substitute genuine assertion of full moral belief with genuine assertion of full belief in what is less normatively demanding than the categorical reasons that are entailed by moral facts. What such normative beliefs are beliefs in could be anything from individual preferences or subjective desires to relatively collective or cultural preferences or desires to even God's preferences. In general, what appears to get substituted are the categorical reasons of morality for the hypothetical reasons of some agent's practical reasoning. While substitutionism seems to avoid

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Footnote 1 (continued)

almost always involves not only the issuing of false judgments, but the discharging of negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, fear, pity, anger, resentment, indignation, disgust, condemnation, outrage, and contempt (Marks, 2013: 83). One rarely moralizes joyfully, peacefully. It could be that abolishing morality brings joy and peace. That is the abolitionist's hunch.

believing in moral facts and yet provides an effective substitute for moral motivation and reasoning, one could complain that employing a voluntarist approach to normative discourse after accepting the error theory leads one to becoming troubled by the problems that already afflict voluntarist views like Euthyphro-style dilemmas. The substitutionist might respond by recommending error theorists replace morality with a less voluntarist, and perhaps more Humean, theory of reasons. One many wonder at this point if that doesn't take us back toward a revolutionary expressivist view anyway.

Madhyamaka Moral Skepticism

The point of summarizing the taxonomy of solutions to the 'now what' problem above was not to adjudicate between them, but to emphasize they all agree, in order to insulate morality from error-theoretic skepticism, on a social or collectivist criterion for solving the problem, and that the use of this criterion has led to an impasse. Moreover, it is important to recognize each solution presumes two motivations for engaging in metaethical and metanormative reflection in the first place. They are motivated by a primarily epistemic desire to discover if there are any moral truthmakers, and so whether moral judgments are ever vindicated. And they are also driven by a concern to preserve morality's supposed social benefits, and so insulate morality from its falsity, regardless of whether it turns out to be systematically false. Of course, this is not the case for assertive moral abolitionism, but its emphasis on remedying the social problems caused by morality is driven, as we saw, by a similarly normative concern for obtaining and preserving social coordination and cooperation.

I want to claim that if one looks deeper into the history of philosophy, East and West, one finds examples of moral skepticism, some of which could safely be labeled as proto-error theoretic, employing a different criterion for solving the 'now what' problem. Along with Classical Chinese Daoism and Pyrrhonian skepticism, Madhyamaka Buddhist moral skepticism is one such example. It shares neither of the two motivations just mentioned, or at least it is not directly concerned with preserving or reforming moral discourse while simultaneously gaining access to its falsity. Of course, as a kind of skepticism, Madhyamaka Buddhism is preoccupied with the epistemic issue of whether moral, or any, judgments are ever true, but such a preoccupation is driven by an ultimately therapeutic goal of aiming to experience release from the agitation and anxiety that attends genuinely asserting full beliefs in anything whatsoever, but especially moral facts. Madhyamaka Buddhist moral skepticism is a kind of moral skepticism driven primarily by, and all else within it follows from, a concern with overcoming the suffering that attends belief in not only intrinsic value, but in the intrinsic existence of anything. As a form of Buddhism, and in particular Mahāyāna Buddhism, Madhyamaka is focused on overcoming the suffering that stems from the belief in and desire for selfhood, permanence, independence, and essential or intrinsic identity. Madhyamaka is characterized by a

brute desire to maximize release from the suffering that produces and results from dogmatic belief and specifically dogmatic moral belief.[2]

The first point to establish then is that Madhyamaka Buddhism is indeed skeptical about morality. We will next see how Mādhyamikas live their moral skepticism in order to show how their approach offers superior solutions to the 'now what' problem.[3] 'Madhyamaka' means 'middle way.' It involves an avoidance of the extremes of believing things have a permanent essence and the nihilistic thought they lose their essence when they are annihilated. Instead, Mādhyamikas regard all types of entities and properties (*dharmas*) as empty (*śūnya*) of essence, permanence, independence, or intrinsic identity (*svabhāva*). In their broadest possible construal, 'things' are so mutually interdependent (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that they lack any independent essence or existence of their own. Things do not conditionally emerge or causally result only from themselves, nor only from other things, nor from both, nor from neither. This is an example of the famous tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) offered by Nāgārjuna (ca 150–250 CE), one of the founders of the Indian Madhyamaka tradition, in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*. Nothing ultimately exists even though humans apparently think and speak as if things do. This negative insight is what Mādhyamikas aim to experience through an overcoming of all belief, desire, and attachment to things formerly thought to enjoy an independent or ultimate existence. Such an experience would be the way to obtain that *nirvāṇa*, that extinguishing liberation or release from suffering, all Buddhists seek.

Insofar as most ethicists and metaethicists think moral facts exist with some degree of independence or self-sufficiency, the Madhyamaka negation of intrinsic existence will apply to moral facts as much as it applies to all other things. Error

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[2] 'Brute desire' might not be the most appropriate phrase here. Technically, it seems desires are of the sort that they could not be for no reason. If by 'brute' we mean something like ungrounded, preconscious, or instinctual, then that desires always seem to be for reasons would render them never 'brute,' but always grounded by some reason, by something normative. This is a threat to my approach here because I am trying to emphasize the non-normativity, or at least the non-normative nature and consequences, of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition. Also, this brings up the possibility that Buddhism's general approach concerning the desirability of the overcoming of suffering might itself be a normative or axiological judgment, which also brings up the older discussions about the paradox of desirability in Buddhism, the apparent paradox that Buddhists desire to cease desiring (Alt, 1980; Herman, 1979; Visvader, 1978). But there seems to be a straightforward solution to these worries. Instead of a 'brute desire' for release, we could say Buddhist have an instinct or taste for, an inclination or tendency toward, release, which would not reach the conscious, and hence normative or axiological, level of a desire for reasons or a supposed tapping into a mind-independent value. Even better, we could say that by a 'brute desire' for release, all that is meant is a mere or simple preference for overcoming suffering. Similar to the Pyrrhonian replacement of beliefs in propositions, of holding onto things for reasons, with mild non-cognitive preferences for seemings, with avowals of appearances, the Buddhist could overcome any charge of incoherence or defaulting back into any normative or axiological realism by intimating that they simply prefer release, not that they desire it. Perhaps all that we could mean by 'brute desire' is a preference without attachment, an inclination without reason, a tendency without an attending value judgment. This way Buddhism, especially Madhyamaka, falls into no paradoxes and is committed to nothing normatively or axiologically real in quasi-asserting a preference for release.

[3] I follow the convention of referring to the thought as 'Madhyamaka' and the thinkers as 'Mādhyamikas.'

theorists, for the most part, agree with moral non-naturalists and other robust moral realists that it is either a semantic or conceptual necessity that moral facts are regarded as enjoying some kind of independent existence. The problem for error theorists is that it is not a metaphysical necessity that moral facts exist. Rather, as we saw, moral facts do not exist for them at all, making moral judgments systematically false. Well, Mādhyamikas agree: since nothing enjoys independent existence, and moral facts are supposed to be something with independent existence, moral facts cannot exist either, and any claims intending to really refer to them will have to ultimately fail.

This point applies to all reasons as well, not just moral reasons. Normativity is as empty as everything else. Reasons are thought to be, again by non-naturalists and robust realists, independently existing considerations in favor of believing in or doing certain things (Enoch, 2011; Parfit, 2011; Scanlon, 2014). But nothing independent exists. So, reasons do not exist. At this point, one may wonder if Mādhyamikas might not allow reasons to be reduced to what actually does exist, as in certain voluntarist views where reasons are explained in terms of some agent's preferences, or perhaps as in expressivist or Humean views of reasons as reducible to certain affective or conative states, attitudes, or again preferences. After all, at least some Mādhyamikas are viewed occasionally as reductionists (Goodman, 2014; Priest, 2017; Siderits, 2007, 2016). One could easily imagine a moral substitutionist offering this point as well. Recently, Javier Hidalgo (2020), while also defending a Buddhist moral error theory (2021),[4] has confronted this precise issue. He offers a dilemma for any attempted Buddhist reduction of reasons to something that might ultimately exist.

Along with the notion of the mutual interdependence of all things, Hidalgo discusses certain views shared by so-called Buddhist reductionists.[5] Firstly, Buddhist reductionists are mereological nihilists, claiming that composite entities cannot exist and that only simple entities could ultimately exist. Buddhist reductionism is thus a kind of metaphysical eliminativism. Reduction of a whole to its parts will entail elimination of the whole as ultimately nonexistent. Secondly, Buddhist reductionists are nominalists about *abstracta* and universals, and instead end up utilizing a proto-trope theory whereby the fleeting features of mutually interdependent entities are understood as being these ultimate simples or *dharmas*. Thirdly, Buddhist reductionists employ something like the Eleatic Principle in the sense that they treat only those entities as ultimately existing which evince causal power. So, the question at

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[4] Tom Tillemans (2011:158–159) and Bronwyn Finnigan (2015: 776) have also remarked that Mackie's anti-realist moral error theory might be the most appropriate contemporary metaethical label for what follows from the Madhyamaka notion of emptiness. It is also relevant to note that other Mahayana Buddhists were discussing metanormative issues, especially concerning the prospects of a normative nominalism or constructivism. See, for example, Richard P. Hayes excellent work, *Dignaga on the Interpretation of Signs* (1988).

[5] I employ the phrases 'Buddhist reductionists' and 'Buddhism reductionism' simply because scholars like Hidalgo, Siderits, Priest, and Goodman do. Who they group under the label 'Buddhist reductionists' appears to be not only obvious candidates like Abhidharmikas, but also figures like Dharmakīrti and a Mādhyamika like Śāntideva. I highlight what I see to be the chief differences between Abhidharma Buddhism and Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism below.

this point is, how do reasons fit into a picture of reality without wholes, *abstracta*, universals, relations, and the causally inert? Hidalgo's answer is that they do not.

A dilemma emerges when one see that reasons could only exist in one of two ways: as composites or as simples. They cannot exist as composites for Buddhist reductionists because no composite exists. This is a problem for Humeanism about reasons and moral substitutionism because they do not want to eliminate reasons, but rather explain them in terms of other features which constitute them like certain mental events like attitudes and preferences. But that would mean reasons are composed of these mental events, and that would be unacceptable to Buddhist reductionists insofar as they are mereological nihilists. Reasons cannot be composites because nothing is composite. If one wants to view reasons as composites, then they do not exist. This is also bad news for those noncognitivist and nonfactualist views trying to insulate and preserve the realist-seeming surface grammar of moral discourse while somehow also clinging to a technically anti-realist reductionist view of reasons as mental states other than beliefs.

On the other hand, what if one wanted to view reasons as simples, as *dharmas*? There is a lot of support for this view among non-naturalists and robust realists. They believe reasons are basic, fundamental, and irreducibly normative. The problem is that no Buddhist reductionist would accept the other aspects of the robust realist's view of reasons, for they understand reasons to be causally inert abstract relations. Reasons are not causes, but relations. They are thus not concrete and neither do they causally affect anything (Carmichael, 2010; Skorupski, 2010). But if that is the case, then they do not exist for Buddhists because for them what exists must be both concrete and causally efficacious.[6] So, reasons do not exist if they are simple either. As composites or simples, reasons cannot exist.

Hidalgo's dilemma is quite effective. One problem, however, is that it is not yet a fully Madhyamaka view. The dilemma only works for Abhidharma Buddhism, which was the tradition to which Madhyamaka emerged as a critical response. The dilemma certainly takes care of reasons, but it still allows for *dharmas*—supposed concrete, causal simple tropes—to be ultimately existent. It is conceivable that, not a robust normative realist, but perhaps a robust axiological realist in the tradition of Max Scheler, for example, could come along and claim these *dharmas* are actually values or virtues and so they must ultimately exist. The Madhyamaka tradition emerged in order to counter such a situation and to show that absolutely nothing, no simples or tropes, and certainly no *dharmas qua* ontologically basic values, could ultimately exist.

This is again because of the implications of the total mutual interdependence of all things. Absolutely everything is empty of essence or intrinsic nature because

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[6] Again, the Buddhists I am referring to here are those like Abhidharmikas and Dharmakīrti, who influentially held something like the Eleatic principle, a kind of causal efficacy criterion for ultimate existence, as evinced in a line by Dharmakīrti like this, 'whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is ultimately existent' (quoted in Hidalgo, 2020: 980). Now, by 'concrete' all is meant, as far as I can tell, is causal efficacy. One could probably continue to describe the concrete as being present in the spatiotemporal manifold of the natural order, but this is all rather controversial, clearly. To say the least, the concrete/abstract distinction is quite vexed in philosophy.

everything is merely the causes and conditions which occasion it, which means nothing is ultimately itself, most especially any projected axiological simples like Schelerian values. There are no ultimate values just as much there are no ultimate reasons, or ultimate anything for that matter. Nothing enjoys ultimate independent existence. All is interdependent or, said differently, co-dependently arisen. All is empty. All are empty. Therefore, only with Madhyamaka could one offer a moral skepticism so complete nothing whatsoever could serve as a truthmaker for any normative, axiological, or moral judgment. Morality and normativity both completely fail. There are neither reasons nor values. As a prime example of its global anti-realism, normative error theory—and thus implied within it, moral error theory—serves as the implied metanormative and metaethical view of Madhyamaka Buddhism.

Nonassertive Moral Abolitionism

Hidalgo emphasizes one other view shared by Buddhist reductionists: that which is empty and lacks ultimate existence still enjoys some kind of conventional existence. This brings us to perhaps the most internally contentious aspect of Madhyamaka: the relationship between ultimate (*paramārthasatya*) and conventional (*saṃvṛtisatya*) truth or reality. This distinction is also relevant for understanding how Mādhyamikas are supposed to experience *nirvāṇa* considering they deny a difference between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, the karmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth that characterizes all mutually interdependent things and which is the very nature of the world. Also, this samsaric world of emerging and decaying interdependent things is precisely what is supposed to constitute conventional reality. This means then that, somehow, the ultimate is nothing but the conventional (or that the ultimate can only be thought and expressed conventionally), that *nirvāṇa* is nothing but a fully absorptive experience and realization of *saṃsāra*, and that emptiness is nothing but the true nature of everything's mutual interdependence. How exactly this is supposed to work is, one could say, the most vexed question in the reception of Madhyamaka Buddhism.

In the metaethical and metanormative context, these sets of identifications would also mean that the therapeutically driven salvific experience of the ultimate emptiness of reasons and values, and so the falsity of all normative discourse, is in fact also the pragmatically concerned disposed engagement with the ubiquitous conventional normative thinking and speaking that permeates the world. We may wonder as well how exactly this is supposed to work. How can one both live and experience the therapeutic benefits of realizing normativity's emptiness and falsity while remaining involved in the use of a discourse one knows to be false and merely conventional? How is one to do this and still achieve one's primary goal of maximizing therapeutic release from the suffering that stems from and results in the emotional turmoil that attends the ignorance of genuinely asserting full normative beliefs, especially moral beliefs?

In the metaethical context, this is similar to the question that confronts moral abolitionists. How are they supposed to free themselves not only from morality's falsity, but from its pathological effects? They answer this question by going 'assertive' about their abolition of morality, which means they exchange the categorical normativity of

morality for the hypothetical normativity of prudential reasoning, but prudential reasoning applied to morality itself. This means assertive moral abolitionists do not end up as all that distinct from moral substitutionists after all. It is just that their targets are different. Assertive abolitionists gladly genuinely assert the hypothetical normative beliefs that constitute conventional normative discourse, which they have adopted in order to abolish, and thus continue to utilize after abolishing, morality. They sincerely recommend to everyone that they become error theorists and to error theorists that they become abolitionists. Again, this is out of a normative concern for defeating the negative effects of morality on social goals like coordination and cooperation.

This assertive moral abolitionist move is not an option for Mādhyamikas, however. Their response to the realization of morality's falsity will not be to actively and assertively go out into the world and try to change people's ways of thinking and speaking, to encourage everyone to exchange morality for hypothetical normativity. Mādhyamikas are not driven by moral, normative, or axiological concerns, but only with a brute therapeutic desire, a 'blind impulse' one could say, for release from suffering, and from the suffering that characterizes normativity in particular. This is exemplified in a line like this from Nagarjuna's *Ratnāvalī*, 'Beyond good and evil, profound and liberating, this [doctrine of emptiness] has not been tasted by those who fear what is entirely groundless' (quoted in Huntington, 1989: 26), which harkens back to talk in the *Dhammapada* of an 'awakened one…who has gone beyond both merit and demerit' (Buddharakkhita, 2019: 30). The concern of Mādhyamikas is not social or collective, at least not in any clumsy and direct way. So, instead of being assertive about their encounter with ultimate emptiness, their first response to their nirvanic experience is to go quiet, to cease believing in or asserting anything. The first Madhyamaka solution to the 'now what' problem is to nonassertively abolish morality, to quiet and hence eliminate the projection of moral concepts. Indeed, a predominant Madhyamaka approach is to no longer give independent reasons at all. It is to cease arguing. It is to give up on fully asserting real ethical, metaethical, or normative beliefs in their entirety. To receive the full therapeutic upshot from engaging in metanormative reflection, one is to eliminate believing in and asserting reasons for beliefs and actions through a quietist pacification and elimination of not only the normative contents of one's mind, but perhaps one's entire mind as well if mental states like beliefs, mental content, and meaning in general are all meant to be ineluctably normative as some have claimed (Wedgewood, 2007; Whiting, 2007; McHugh & Whiting, 2014).

Nāgārjuna begins and ends *The Fundamental Verses* by announcing he prostrates himself before the Perfect Buddha who, 'free from conceptual construction,' 'taught' the true doctrine of emptiness that thereby 'leads to the relinquishing of all views' (Garfield 1995: 83). The first response by Mādhyamikas to the realization of the falsity and failure of normative cognitive grasping and assertive projection is to employ quietism. When humans perceive and conceive things, they engage in the utterly flawed activity of superimposition (*samāropa*).[7] The pervasively normative

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[7] While *samāropa* is a term one can commonly find in Advaita Vedanta texts, it is often found in Madhyamaka texts as well. For example, we find Candrakīrti speaking in the *Prasannapadā* of 'the *samāropa* of self and *dharmas*' and observing 'the false thing as the *samāropa* of the self and the five aggregates

mind is the thoroughly deluded human mind. The first Madhyamaka solution to the 'now what' problem is fundamentally therapeutic because it aims to pacify as much pathological normative superimposition as possible on the basis of the insight into the ineffable emptiness of all things, including reasons. Its intention is to match that emptiness by shutting down one's constructive and projective normative mental and linguistic faculties as far as one can. One thereby abolishes all moral belief and assertion and so as much normativity as possible. One does this to such an extent one might end up emptying the mind and world of themselves. What seems to be on offer here then are therapeutic forms of eliminativism and acosmism.

What is sought is the tranquility and peace that *nirvāṇa* provides. One can obtain this only by emulating the Buddha in not teaching or arguing for anything much beyond what is already the case, what the world already has to offer. Nāgārjuna writes, 'The pacification of all objectification and the pacification of illusion: no Dharma was taught by the Buddha at any time, in any place, to any person' (Garfield 1995: 76). The Buddha's non-teaching conveys the ultimate truth that everything, including morality and normativity, is ultimately empty. Nāgārjuna offers the non-thesis, or the purposefully self-undermining thesis, of the emptiness of emptiness itself, insofar as it might be the case that certain Mādhyamikas assert a momentary and purposively self-destructive belief in the emptiness of everything.[8] He does this in order to emulate the Buddha's quietist achievement of release from suffering. What attends this peace, what follows from pacification, is the cessation of the desiring, believing, and asserting, each of which entail normative projection, that is at the root of suffering.

One may wonder just how far this Madhyamaka nonassertive abolitionism, this quietist eliminativism, of moral, normative, and mental projections goes. Here it is relevant to mention the distinction between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Madhyamaka Buddhism. The basic difference between the two is that the Svātantrika line is willing to use independent reasoning to argue for Madhyamaka conclusions while the Prāsaṅgika line abstains from any reasoning beyond the application of *reductio*s to the views of others, merely showing them the absurd consequences of their own positions, with those consequences always being the falsity and emptiness of any view whatsoever. For Prāsaṅgikas like Patsab Nyimadrak (1055–1145 CE), continuing and developing the approach of Candrakīrti (ca 600–650 CE), nonassertive abolitionism is enacted so completely we

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Footnote 7 (continued)

appears as really existent (*satyatah*) for a person in transmigration following the erroneous inversion of ignorance, but it does not appear for (the sage) who is near to the insight of the reality of things' (quoted in Tanji, 2000: 353).

[8] That the ultimate can only be regarded from the perspective of the conventional extends to this point about the ultimate itself, leading to the famous claim from Nāgārjuna that even emptiness itself is empty (Garfield 1995: 69). The ultimate truth that everything is empty of essence is itself empty of essence and so is entirely dependent upon conventions for conception and expression. This is precisely what characterizes the middle way: all beliefs and assertions, along with all things they are purportedly about, are interdependent, hence empty, and so is *that* very belief and assertion, if it is in fact the literal assertion of a genuine belief, leaving one dissolved and detached from any beliefs or assertions. The conventional is ultimately empty and that emptiness is only conventionally expressible. We will return to the precise nature of the conventional below.

end up with something like a global Pyrrhonian skeptical approach insofar as they cease to even assert beliefs in either the falsity of errant discourses like morality or the ultimate emptiness of all things. These Prāsaṅgikas literally have no views at all. They assert no beliefs, not even purposefully self-defeating ones like the emptiness of emptiness, thus leaving behind the dogmatism of negative, or Academic, skepticism as exemplified in positions like moral error theory and pretty much all other Buddhist skeptical approaches. Prāsaṅgikas abolish morality, and everything else, so quietly they end up transforming themselves into something like non-human mirrors of the world. They offer nothing, store nothing, posit nothing, negate nothing. Mark Siderits called them 'Robo-Buddhas' or 'Zombie-Buddhas' (Siderits, 2006: 308–333). They just emptily reflect the world's emptiness. For them, therapeutic release from the suffering that stems from normativity is so wholesale they cease being merely human.

For example, Candrakīrti distinguishes between three kinds of beings. First, there are 'childish,' ordinary beings who are basically all of us normal humans as we remain naïve realists, assuming how the world appears to us is actually how it is, that the world is actually full of objects, facts, properties, and relations like persons, moral facts, values, categorical reasons, normativity in general, and so on (Dunne, 1996: 541). Then there are 'Āryas,' spiritually advanced beings who, like academic skeptics and global anti-realists, believe that the world and all it contains is a fabricated lie and that all such 'childish' moral and normative projections are systematically false. For them, all entities involved in perception and conception, both subject and object, are merely conventional and so ultimately empty. As Candrakīrti puts it, for Āryas, 'all things are merely spurious' (Dunne, 1996: 544).

Finally, there are Buddhas. For these 'beings,' not even spurious, conventional reality appears to them. The world, in a sense, disappears. Its basic falsity, its conventionality, which is all that it is, vanishes. Or, rather, it is the Buddhas who have disappeared and taken the world with them. Buddhas are those spiritually perfected agents who have suspended their minds entirely. Candrakīrti again: 'The Buddhas have fully awakened to (a complete understanding of) all elemental things. Therefore, the fluctuations of mind and mental functions has completely ceased (for them)' (Dunne, 1996: 544). Buddhas obtain a veritable subjectless and objectless omniscient awareness of the world in the process of emptying themselves and the world of themselves. That is, they understand the ultimate emptiness of the world so well they simply realize it. With neither perception nor conception nor assertion, neither cognition nor intentionality, Buddhas realize what all things are, what the world ultimately is: empty. They simply quietly realize the world's emptiness. For them, they do not believe or assert or do anything about any of this because there are no reasons to, no genuine considerations in favor of anything. All moral and normative thinking and speaking has ceased for Buddhas because they have realized the emptiness of all so-called reasons. They mindlessly 'know' this because they are it.[9]

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[9] To step back for a moment, it could be helpful to emphasize that what I am describing here is quite unlike what we might be used to in analytic philosophy where views are presented as fully formed attempts to answer a theoretical problem. What I am discussing is closer to a therapeutic process wherein certain claims are made at the beginning and later relinquished at the end, similar to certain philosophies as ways of life in Greco-Roman philosophy (see Hadot, 1995).

In a less spiritually ecstatic manner, Patsab Nyimadrak, who is thought to be the founder of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka in Tibet, similarly employed a therapeutically driven suspension of all that normativity entails: meaning, content, beliefs, assertions, arguments, justifications, knowledge, morality, action, and so on.[10] Patsab followed Nāgārjuna in supposing that all so-called means of knowledge, all 'epistemic instruments' (*pramāṇa*), were impossible, and that the most a Mādhyamika could do was mirror the absurdity and self-contradictions of their opponents' views through an absolute application of *reductio*s. A Prāsaṅgika can offer no positive argument to justify anything, which is a kind of Pyrrhonian skepticism that involves quietly abolishing all reasoning, including ethical, metaethical, and metametaethical reasoning. A Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika would neither genuinely assert a full moral or normative belief nor a full metaethical belief like one in moral error theory, nor a full normative metametaethical belief like the one offered by assertive moral abolitionists in their earnest and sincere recommendation that we all abolish morality for the sake of hoped-for social benefits. Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka have glimpsed these Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka consequences for normativity. They have seen what follows from Patsab's Prāsaṅgika approach for morality and normativity:

If Patsab is right, it follows that Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas cannot justify any ethical precept. But if they cannot even adopt precepts as *conventionally* acceptable, then it is impossible to endorse Mahāyāna ethics and be a *consistent* Prāsaṅgika. … Normativity is grounded in justification, which in turn depends upon argumentation. Patsab denies the possibility of argumentation to justify ethical precepts on the bodhisattva path. On his view, ethical precepts are neither justifiable *by* a Prāsaṅgika in theory nor justifiable *by the agent* in ordinary practical reasoning. The *activity of justifying ethical precepts* is not a practice on the bodhisattva path." (Finnigan & Tanaka, 2011: 226).

Moreover, for George Dreyfus, it is not merely that a Prāsaṅgika of Patsab's temperament 'cannot... argue that her decision is right and should have any *binding force* on others' (Dreyfuss, 2010: 111). It is also the case that a Prāsaṅgika cannot 'hold that what appears to her as true has any *normative force*, even conventionally' (Dreyfuss, 2010: 111). No normative judgments are ever justified, nor are they even justifiable. For Patsab, a Prāsaṅgika, for the sake of therapeutic release, performs a complete 'suspension of normativity' (Dreyfuss, 2010: 111). What this means, then, is that the first solution for the 'now what' problem of what to do with a false discourse like morality, or indeed with any discourse whatsoever insofar as they all involve the normativity of the making of genuine claims to knowledge of some sort, is to quietly or nonassertively abolish that discourse. So, morality is to be abolished not loudly or assertively through a normative agenda of activist reformation of social practices of coordination and cooperation, but through a suspension and ultimate elimination of not only moral beliefs and assertions, but of all normative mental content and indeed of the mind itself since all cognition involves the

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[10] Patsab is admittedly an essential source for the approach I am developing here. However, there is quite little translated of him and written on him in English, though do see: Lang (1990), Ruegg (2000), Vose (2009), Dreyfus and Tsering (2009), and Dreyfus (2010).

normatively determined spurious and conventional error of assuming anything is not empty of intrinsic nature, that is, that there are independent reasons for anything. The Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika experiences therapeutic release from the suffering that attends normativity through a complete quietist absorption into the emptiness of the world, an omniscient nonknowledge of, perhaps a noncognitive faith in, the ultimate emptiness of everything's projected independence, especially reasons for action and belief.

Reactionary Moral Fictionalism

A slight problem with Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka nonassertive moral and normative abolitionism is that it still does not explain what Prāsaṅgikas actually do with conventional reality. Quietism is only half of the story. Along with pacification, Prāsaṅgikas are driven to simultaneously live in and, even more, feel great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) for the world, with all its suffering rooted in ignorance and attachment. Living on the bodhisattva path still means Prāsaṅgikas want to save the world from suffering. How do they do this? How can they both go completely quiet, suspend their minds, and realize the world's emptiness while also interacting with other apparent human beings and so help them ease their suffering rooted in normative projections? Another way of asking the question is, what are Buddhas (and figures like Nāgārjuna) doing exactly as they think, speak, and write about topics like ultimate emptiness? If they are not literally asserting genuine beliefs, not engaged in conceptual proliferation or projection, how are they employing the conventions of concepts, beliefs, and speech-acts? One answer, as we saw with the non-thesis of the emptiness of emptiness, is they are using conventions to convey the ultimate with the intent of undermining conventions by infecting them with their own emptiness. How exactly does this purposive therapeutic self-undermining work?

An aspect of the answer involves the treatment of conventional truth and reality as 'skillful means' (*upāya*). Thought and talk of emptiness, or any thought and talk, can be utilized as an expedient pedagogical device for regarding and expressing the ultimate truth that all things are empty, including all thought and talk of emptiness, thus cancelling itself out in the process and exposing one to the insight that produces *nirvāṇa*. Nāgārjuna writes, 'Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation [*nirvāṇa*] is not achieved' (Garfield 1995: 68). Again reminiscent of Pyrrhonian skepticism (Annas & Barnes, 2000: 206–7), there are some moments in Madhyamaka texts where this self-undermining of the conventional is understood as a purgative therapy. In a commentary on Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti cites the *Kāśyapaparivarta Sūtra*, which compares emptiness to a medicine meant to cure a body of an illness and then purge itself from the body it has cured (Mills, 2018: 123). This is similar to the Wittgensteinian image of throwing the ladder of propositions away after climbing up it. Harkening back to earlier Mahāyāna sutras, one finds other upayic images comparing the Buddha's teaching to a raft that is used for crossing over a river but then let to float downstream, to narratives told by a father to

trick his sons into escaping a burning house, and to a story of a father presenting his sons with an empty fist to get their attention.

Using conventional reality as a skillful means for exposing someone who suffers to the insight of emptiness can already sound rather fictionalist. Conventions could be used in a pretense mode in order to induce the experience of ultimate emptiness. There is even greater evidence for a Madhyamaka version of fictionalism in the way Candrakīrti regards conventional truth. But first we must clarify what Candrakīrti meant by *saṃvṛtisatya*. Recall that *saṃvṛtisatya* can mean both 'conventional truth' and 'conventional reality.' For Candrakīrti, the conventional covers both the psychological and linguistic attempt to capture some aspect of the world and the purported world meant to be captured. The *satya* in *saṃvṛtisatya* means both true and real or existent (Newland & Tillemans, 2011: 4). The *saṃvṛti* in *saṃvṛtisatya* has a few meanings.

On the one hand, *saṃvṛti* means convention in the sense of human agreements, rules, regulations, names, and what these conventions are supposed to be in reference to, all of which are arbitrary constructions and normative projections of the normally deluded human mind. *Saṃvṛti* in this sense is what humans believe and say and about which have reached a rough consensus, the worldly practices that determine human mental and linguistic life. *Saṃvṛti* is what the world understands to be the case. On the other hand, *saṃvṛti* means 'to cover' and 'conceal' in the sense of masking the truth, of being false or at least 'true' only for the ignorant and suffering. Thus, conventional reality is conventional truth for us childish, ordinary beings (Newland & Tillemans, 2011: 13). Finally, *saṃvṛti* is simply another way of referring to the samsaric world or reality of mutually interdependent things, the only things there are, which are both themselves conventions and the purported content of conventions.

Citing a famous passage from the *Ratnakūṭa* in his *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛtti*, Candrakīrti has a precise recommendation for how an enlightened being, perhaps both an Ārya and a Buddha, could approach the world, could approach conventional truth and reality. This recommendation is complementary to using conventions as skillful means. It is: *do not attempt to confront or change the world, but passively acquiesce to it* (Siderits, 2003: 202). For Candrakīrti, 'what is acknowledged by the world' (*lokaprasiddha*) is all a Buddha could offer the world in return:

The world (*loka*) argues with me. I don't argue with the world. What is agreed upon (*saṃmata*) in the world to exist, I too agree that it exists. What is agreed upon in the world to be nonexistent, I too agree that it does not exist. (Tillemans, 2011: 151).

Many commentators have found Candrakīrti's flippant detachment from any independent search for truth, from any stumping for projected independent epistemic or moral reasons, to be reprehensible. Tom Tillemans, for example, likens it to wallowing in a 'dismal slough' (Tillemans, 2011: 152), a kind of lazy and submissive conventionalism or relativism where anything goes. Tillemans thinks that to indifferently sacrifice so much normativity would amount to a passively nihilistic relinquishing of reforming the epistemic and moral character of the world to such a troubling extent that it means neither science nor morality would remain

all that possible and we would thus be somehow confined to a simultaneously anarchic and deeply conservative condition.

There are few problems with this view, however. One problem is that it fails to note that the Prāsaṅgika approach to the world could be neither conventionalist nor relativist since these two views are still, at least minimally, realist. Conventions and relative social or culture practices are still treated as truthmakers for normative judgments by most who hold these views. For Prāsaṅgikas, conventions and social preferences are as empty as everything else, so they will not assert any beliefs about conventions, nor would they be attached to them. There are no ultimate truthmakers for assertions purporting to report the actual content of world, even conventional truthmakers. Accepting what the world acknowledges does not involve asserting any beliefs in what it itself posits. So, it is not by accepting *lokaprasiddha* that one slips back into any sort of realism, even if that realism is not as robust in being about independent entities as a more non-naturalist approach. Conventions are not ultimately real. Prāsaṅgikas do not assert any beliefs in them. Prāsaṅgikas are neither conventionalists nor relativists nor deflationists nor any other position that somehow has its cake and eats it too by still allowing for insulating protection of the realist surface grammar of a discourse and so the real assertion of genuine beliefs in the independent, even if barely independent, truthmakers such a discourse purports to be about.

A second problem with Tillemans's worry is that it seems to not notice that science and morality, with their necessary use of normativity, are merely more aspects of the acknowledged world accepted and affirmed, but never confirmed, by Prāsaṅgikas. Why would a Buddha's private, internal nonassertive abolition of normativity count as a threat to worldly conventional systems of believing and speaking like science and morality? After all, Prāsaṅgikas are affirming science and morality too by accepting *lokaprasiddha*. Of course, they will not be practicing scientists or moralists themselves, quietly suspending the assertion of scientific or moral beliefs, but that is neither here nor there. It is hard to imagine that massive, worldly enterprises like science and morality could be all that affected by some Buddhists experiencing some salvific relief from the ubiquitous suffering leading to and resulting from the seemingly all-too-human search for scientific or moral truth by excusing themselves from such endeavors. The Prāsaṅgika criterion for solving the 'now what' problem will not be social or collectivist like the other proposed solutions, but instead therapeutic and individualist. Therefore, Prāsaṅgikas will leave science and morality exactly as they are. There is nothing for the world of normative projection with which to concern itself. The 'search for truth' can continue unabated. Indeed, being completely false has stopped neither science nor morality for a moment in human history. Their supposed 'progress' can continue indefinitely. Why would a Prāsaṅgika's affirmation of *lokaprasiddha* make a difference to them? If the worry is that a Prāsaṅgika would influence others to be like them, then that seems like a baseless concern considering there is very little evidence that has ever or will ever happen. Are we really supposed to expect that a sufficiently large number of people would give up moralizing or attempting to conventionally explain the world because they have learned about Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism? That seems unlikely.

A third problem with Tillemans's worry about wallowing in a 'dismal slough' by accepting *lokaprasiddha* is that, for Prāsaṅgikas like Candrakīrti, passively acquiescing to the world is the *only* means for therapeutically enduring it and using it as a conventional means to reach an experience of emptiness. Not by trying to fix conventions or adding much that is informative or insightful, but by merely outwardly submitting to the world while remaining internally utterly detached from any genuine beliefs or desires whatsoever, thereby eliminating normativity, will one be able to experience a restorative and rewarding insight into the ultimate truth of the emptiness of all things. There is simply no other way for Prāsaṅgikas to accomplish this considering all that there is, is the world anyway. Why would anyone want to take that away from them? If Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhism is to have any pragmatic effect for its practitioners, it would need to be allowed to passively affirm the world as it is. That does not seem like too much to ask.

Some have noted (Crittenden, 1981; D'Amato, 2012; Garfield, 2006; Matilal, 1970; Tillemans, 2011) that Candrakīrti's approach, and Madhyamaka in general, resembles a kind of fictionalism, that Prasaṅgikas treat the conventional world as a mere pretense. What Buddhist scholars have failed to determine is whether this fictionalism is of a content or force variety and how distinct it might be from the hermeneutic and revolutionary forms on offer today.[11] It is not the case that Candrakīrti is claiming a Buddha would approach the conventional by really asserting genuine beliefs about known falsehoods rendered as real fictions. That might be closer to the Svātantrika branch of Madhyamaka. For Prasaṅgikas, real fictions would be just as empty as the real posits of which they are the fictional versions. So, Candrakīrti's acceptance of *lokaprasiddha* does not amount to a content fictionalism (along with other weaker realisms like conventionalism, relativism, and so on) whereby one literally asserts real beliefs about conventions understood as real fictions. And neither is Candrakīrti claiming that the world is already pretending in some basic or fundamental manner. He does not seem to be a hermeneutic fictionalist. The world is determined by literal assertions of genuine concepts, beliefs, and desires by deluded humans aiming to express the truth. Such is what makes conventions conventional. It is just the world is wrong about everything, which is the source of the ignorance that constitutes its endless suffering.

This goes to explain why the nonsubjectivity of a Buddha in the Prāsaṅgika mode feels such deep compassion for the nonobject that is the world. The world is suffering, and a Buddha feels that suffering so completely through her total compassion for it that she realizes it as she suspends her mind. A Buddha is the way a suffering world feels its own pain and redeems itself through a compassionate quietest

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[11] Recall that Joyce's version of moral fictionalism, following the social or collectivist criterion, was of both the force and revolutionary varieties. This means that Joyce proposed that error theorists collectively revolt and change their way of using moral discourse by reducing the assertoric force of their moral utterances and instead merely quasi-assert not full moral beliefs, but moral make-beliefs. By not claiming we (humans and error theorists) are already pretending with respect to morality means this view is not a hermeneutic fictionalism as well. And a content fictionalism, in contrast with Joyce's view, would propose that we fully assert real beliefs in fictional versions of formerly believed to be real posits like moral facts. No, Joyce's view is a revolutionary force moral fictionalism.

realization its ultimate emptiness.[12] And yet a Buddha must still interact with apparent suffering entities in the world, seemingly other sentient beings, especially in the terms of the moral and normative discourses they cannot help but express their suffering through, and this is where we find a novel kind of moral fictionalism coming from Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka.

While Candrakīrti is offering neither what could be described as a content or hermeneutic fictionalism, he also is not, as far as I can tell, recommending that everyone revolt and start pretending to only quasi-assert moral and normative make-beliefs. Of course, it might be nice if more could reach that point. The Mahāyāna Buddhist will probably always be striving for that in some indirect way in his dealings with others who may be themselves trying to obtain release from normative attachments. But such a revolutionary approach involves disagreeing with and confronting the world far too much, which Candrakīrti refuses to do. He is no revolutionary. Rather, Candrakīrti's approach amounts to a reactionary force moral and normative fictionalism. He does not revolt or foment revolt. Rather, he passively reacts in a pretense mode when he has to, when it appears pragmatically utilizing some normative speech could cure an entity's suffering.[13]

His recommendation is that those who seek therapeutic relief from suffering and are willing to encounter ultimate emptiness might wish to merely reflect the conventional world of false normative views back onto itself through a detached pretense performance of passively quasi-asserting normative make-beliefs when called upon by certain contexts to reaffirm the delusions the permeate and constitute the world—but in an occasionally upayic manner that might ease some pain for ordinary, childish beings like ourselves—all the while quietly internally experiencing the tranquilization and even elimination of their mind. This is how Candrakīrti's reactionary force moral and normative fictionalism compliments and completes Nāgārjuna's quietist pacification of literally asserting genuine normative beliefs.[14] A moral and

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[12] Stephen Jenkins (2016: 100–101) has provided a discussion of the relation between compassion and emptiness in Madhyamaka. He summarizes the division into three *ālambana*, or objects, of compassion as found in Candrakīrti and Prajñākaramati (950–1030 CE): first, there is compassion for imagined sentient beings, then there is compassion for the supposed *dharmas* of which all beings are composed, and finally and ultimately there is compassion for the emptiness of all things. This ultimate, great compassion is a compassion with no referent, an objectless compassion (*anālambana-karuṇā*) felt by no one, a subjectless compassion for the empty nonobject of the world, emptiness's compassion for itself which occurs through a Buddha. This threefold division is also how the Buddhist notion of loving-kindness (*maitrī*) can be understood. Jenkins cites the description of this ultimate loving-kindness from the *Akṣayamatinirdeśa Sūtra*: '*Bodhisattvas* who have attained acceptance of the nonarising of *dharmas* have *maitrī* with no basis' (Jenkins, 2016: 101). This must mean Simon Keller's (2017) recent attempt to argue that a moral error theorist cannot love because she denies the existence of objective and independent reasons must be false, or at least not applicable to the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition.

[13] Of course, this is not to deny that Candrikīrti might be regarded as a 'revolutionary' in a different sense, perhaps in the sense of initiating a paradigm shift in the interpretation of Nagarjuna and laying the groundwork for the eventual emergence of the Prāsaṅgika line of Madhyamaka Buddhism.

[14] Candrakīrti provides an image to help us grasp what such a being is like, what a Buddha's combination of nonassertive abolition with reactionary pretense might be like. A Buddha is like a potter's wheel spinning after a potter has ceased kicking the flywheel with her foot. The wheel spins without effort, without intention. Yet, it still coasts with great momentum. Similarly, a 'didactic sound is emitted' from a Buddha through her utterances in the same way the potter's wheel spins. A Buddha stored up enough traces of beliefs and meaningful sounding speech-acts, especially moral speech-acts, while on the

normative reactionary force fictionalism is how one lives and therapeutically survives in a conventional world experienced to be ultimately empty yet dominated by the suffering permeating normative belief and speech. In the specifically metanormative and metaethical contexts, it is how a Madhyamaka moral skeptic can complete her solution to the 'now what' problem of what to do with a false discourse like morality by combining nonassertive moral abolition with a reactionary moral pretense. Moral discourse, including Buddhist ethics itself, is used as another possible means to induce release from suffering by quasi-asserting moral make-beliefs in contexts where there may be no other technique available for expressing one's great compassion for the world. If contemporary error theorists were interested in considering a different, more therapeutic and non-normative, criterion for solving the 'now what' problem, then this Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka Buddhist combination of nonassertive moral abolitionism with a reactionary force moral fictionalism might become appealing to them.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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Footnote 14 (continued)

bodhisattva path that she can quasi-assert moral make-beliefs in contexts where they seem to be expected and might serve an upayic end, all the while remaining mindlessly detached from any normative or conceptual projection. John Dunne nicely describes a Buddha's mode of communication: 'a spontaneous sound effortlessly emits from him, and in it we hear what we need to hear. In short, Candrakīrti's Buddha appears to be more a volitionless, transcendental force than a speaking, feeling human' (Dunne, 1996: 550).

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