

Buddhist Error Theory

Abstract: Few philosophers have systematically examined what Buddhist commitments imply for metaethics. In this paper, I explore the status of normative reasons in Buddhist philosophy. I argue that Buddhist commitments entail an error theory about normative reasons. But I also make the case that this is a defensible position. I show that the Buddhist argument for error theory is plausible and that Buddhist error theory can overcome key objections, such as the objections that Buddhist error theory is incoherent, self-defeating, unbelievable, and incompatible with prominent schools of Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, I argue that Buddhist error theorists can accommodate Buddhist ethical commitments if they adopt fictionalism about normative reasons.

1. Introduction

Pretty much everyone agrees that reasons exist. We think that we have reasons for action, belief, or attitudes. For example, I have reason to care for my children, to take antibiotics to stave off a dangerous infection, to feel afraid if a tiger is chasing me, and so on. These reasons are normative. Normative reasons explain why we ought to perform certain actions or adopt certain beliefs and attitudes.

Here's a question that's seldom asked: how do normative reasons fit into Buddhist philosophy? While there's been a growing interest in Buddhist metaethics in recent years, the discussion remains preliminary.¹ Few philosophers have systematically examined what Buddhist commitments imply for metaethics. But some authors suspect that Buddhism is unable to make sense of normative reasons. Throughout its long history, Buddhism's critics have alleged that Buddhist principles entail nihilism. In recent years, Dan Arnold has developed a sophisticated

version of this argument.² Buddhist epistemologists such as Dharmakīrti hold that only causally efficacious entities are real. Yet Arnold claims that reasons don't have causal powers. So, Buddhist philosophers are committed to the view that reasons are unreal. But, if Buddhist philosophy lacks the resources to make sense of a "logical space for reasons," then Buddhism faces problem of incoherence and self-defeat. If there are no reasons, then there are no reasons to believe Buddhism. Furthermore, Arnold suggests that it's impossible to rationally believe that there are no reasons. So, we should reject at least certain influential positions in Buddhist philosophy that entail these problematic claims about the nature of reasons.

In this paper, I'll examine the status of normative reasons in Buddhist philosophy. I'll argue that Buddhist commitments do in fact entail an error theory about normative reasons. But I'll also make the case that this is a defensible position. I'll show that the Buddhist argument for error theory is plausible and that Buddhist error theory can overcome the objections that Arnold and other critics raise against it. I'll proceed as follows. In section 2, I'll explain why Buddhist commitments entail error theory about reasons. In sections 3 and 4, I'll respond to a range of objections, such as the objections that Buddhist error theory is incoherent, self-defeating, unbelievable, and incompatible with Mādhyamika Buddhism. In section 5, I'll suggest that Buddhist error theorists should endorse fictionalism about normative reasons. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. A Buddhist Error Theory About Normative Reasons

Consider the following claims:

- (1) The fact that a medication is necessary for my survival is a reason for me to take this medication.

- (2) The fact that donating to charity would reduce the suffering of others is a reason to donate to charity.
- (3) The fact that there's strong evidence that climate change is happening is a reason to believe that climate change is happening.
- (4) The fact that Oskar Schindler risked his own life in order to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust is a reason to admire him.

Claims (1-4) are rather plausible. I'll refer to claims like these ones as "reason claims," claims about the reasons that you and I have to do, feel, or believe. These reasons are normative reasons, not descriptive ones. Normative reasons justify actions and attitudes. They explain why we ought to perform certain actions or adopt certain attitudes.

A global error theory about reasons says that all reason claims, such as (1-5), are false. According to this error theory, there are no normative reasons. I'll now argue that Buddhist commitments entail a global error theory about reasons. My argument begins with the premise that there are two ways of understanding the nature of normative reasons: reductionism and non-reductionism. I'll briefly clarify these views and then argue that both of them lead to error theory when combined with Buddhist principles.

Reductionism about reasons holds that reasons are reducible to some other non-normative property. The most popular candidates are psychological states of some kind, such as desires and attitudes. On this view, reasons are explained by a person's psychology. Roughly speaking, a person's reason to ϕ is constituted by her desires, attitudes, and beliefs. Suppose that Coraline has a reason to help her friend Sarah move to a new apartment. Coraline's reason to help Sarah move just consists in, or is explained by, her attitudes and desires. Perhaps Coraline likes Sarah and feels affection for her. Her affection for Sarah explains, at least in part, why she has reason

to assist Sarah. Or consider another example. Assume that Leticia loves to dance, and she's been invited to a party tonight where there will be dancing.³ Leticia has a reason to go to the party in virtue of the fact that she loves to dance. So, a descriptive fact about Leticia's psychology (her desire to dance) explains a normative property (her reason to attend the party).

Mark Schroeder suggests that the relationship between reasons and psychological states is constitutive in nature.⁴ Consider a square. A square is constituted by four lines arranged in a certain way. This arrangement of lines constitutively explains the properties of the square. Similarly, Leticia's psychological states are constitutive of his reason to attend the party. These states just are what it is to have a reason to go to the party. In this sense, reasons are fully reducible to, or explained by, non-normative properties.

Let's now consider non-reductionism about normative reasons (philosophers often refer to non-reductionism about reasons as "non-naturalism"). Non-reductionists deny that reasons are identical with any descriptive or non-normative properties. Rather, normative properties are *sui generis*. These properties are fundamental favoring relations between facts and actions, attitudes, aim, or belief. These relations are basic and irreducible—we're unable to analyze the concept of a reason in terms of other concepts, such as beliefs or desires. Imagine that Timothy is walking along one day and notices a child drowning in a pond. Timothy lacks any desire to save the child whatsoever. A reductionist about reasons may need to concede that Timothy has no reason to save the child. After all, Timothy's has no desire to save the child. Yet a non-reductionist can still say that Timothy does have a reason to save the child. This is so because reasons are irreducible to descriptive properties. Thus, there might still be irreducible normative reasons in favor of Timothy's saving the child. In this way, a non-reductionist can claim that we're unable to escape our moral reasons by jettisoning our desires.

There are many different varieties of reductionism and non-reductionism about normative reasons. But I take the dichotomy between reductionism and non-reductionism to be exhaustive. Either we can give reasons a reductive explanation or they're irreducible. I'll now argue that Buddhists should reject the existence of both irreducible and reducible reasons.

Let's start with irreducible reasons. Here's my argument for why Buddhists must deny the existence of irreducible normative reasons:

1. Irreducible normative reasons lack causal efficacy.
2. The only entities that exist have causal efficacy.
3. Thus, irreducible normative reasons don't exist.

Consider the first premise. Irreducible reasons are similar to other abstract objects, such as universals and mathematical objects. Notice that mathematical objects don't seem to have causal properties. The number 2 never comes into causal contact with other objects. The number 64 never bumps into 56. Mathematical objects are causally inert.⁵ The same goes for universals. We can't touch or hold the universal property "redness" or "wetness." We can only interact with particulars or instantiations of universals.

Like other abstract properties, irreducible normative properties are causally inert. Why exactly? Non-reductionists about reasons believe that reasons are robustly mind-independent. They exist independently of what we happen to think or feel. This is why non-reductionists can say that Timothy has a reason to save the child even though he has no desire to do so. But, if reasons are robustly mind-independent, then it's false that reasons causally depend on our attitudes or judgments. In fact, they never causally interact with us at all. Defenders of non-reductionism accept these claims. David Enoch says that "normative truths are causally inert."⁶ Thomas Scanlon rejects the view that we acquire knowledge of normative truths by causally

interacting with them.⁷ Derek Parfit denies that normative truths “exist in space or time.”⁸ If reasons don’t exist in space or time, it’s hard to see how they could have causal properties. So, proponents of non-reductionism agree that irreducible normative reasons lack causal powers.

Yet Buddhist philosophers think that only entities that have causal powers exist. Buddhist philosophers affirm the causal efficacy criterion for real entities.⁹ According to this principle, all real entities have causal efficacy. The Buddhist epistemologist Dharmakīrti famously describes this principle as follows: “Whatever has causal powers (*arthakriyāsamārtha*), that really exists (*paramārthasat*) in this context [i.e., when we examine reality]. Anything else is declared to be [just] customarily existent (*saṃvṛtisat*)...”¹⁰ Mark Siderits says that the causal efficacy criterion is “the pan-Buddhist position.”¹¹ The causal efficacy criterion is also closely related, or perhaps even equivalent to, the doctrine of dependent origination, which holds that everything is subject to causes and conditions.¹² If everything is subject to causes and conditions, then it follows that everything that exists has a causal backstory. The causal efficacy criterion rules out the existence of universals and other abstract objects, and explain why Buddhist epistemologists accept nominalism.¹³ So, core Buddhist commitments are incompatible with non-reductionism about reasons. If the causal efficacy criterion is true, then everything that exists has causal capacities. Yet irreducible normative properties lack causal powers. Thus, Buddhists must conclude that irreducible normative reasons are unreal.

Buddhists are unable to accept irreducible normative properties. But what about reductionism? Buddhists must also reject the reality of reducible normative reasons. Here’s my argument for this conclusion:

1. If normative reasons have a reductive explanation, then reasons are composites.
2. Composites ultimately don’t exist.

3. So, if normative reasons have a reductive explanation, then normative reasons ultimately don't exist.

The first premise of this argument is just a straightforward entailment of reductionism about reasons. Remember that, if reasons are reducible to non-normative properties, then reasons are composed of, or constituted by, psychological states such as desires, beliefs, or attitudes. So, in this sense, reasons consist in psychological states. Entities that have constituents or components are composites. Consider a car. A car is a composite entity. It has parts: a motor, tires, a frame, and so on. If reasons are constituted by psychological states or dispositions, then reasons are composites as well. We can reduce reasons to their more fundamental constituents.

The controversial premise in the argument is the second one. This premise is mereological nihilism, the view that composites lack reality. While mereological nihilism is a controversial position, most Buddhist philosophers accept it.¹⁴ We can trace the origins of mereological nihilism in Buddhism to the Buddha's arguments against the self. The Buddha contends that we can decompose persons into five *skandhas* or constituents: feelings, corporality, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness. None of these *skandhas* is a suitable basis for the self. So, we should conclude that the self lacks reality.¹⁵ The logic of this argument suggests that, once we reduce a whole to its components, the whole may not exist.

Early Buddhists, such as the author of *Milinda Pañha*, further developed this style of argument.¹⁶ In this text, the Buddhist monk Nāgasena argues that chariots and persons are unreal because they're composite. Nāgasena claims that the word "chariot" is a mere convenience designator for a collection of parts, such as wheels, spokes, a hub, and so on. Similarly, the word "person" is a convenience designator for a series of psychophysical elements. Buddhists in the Abhidharma tradition explicitly endorse mereological nihilism in arguing that reality consists in

bundles of momentary tropes like shape and color. The composite entities that tropes constitute are unreal—only the underlying tropes exist.¹⁷ While Mahāyāna philosophers disagree with other Buddhists in various ways, many of them agree that composite entities don't exist. For example, mereological nihilism seems to underwrite Candrakīrti's rejection of the self in the *Madhyamakavatara*.¹⁸

Why accept mereological nihilism? I'll only briefly sketch some of the considerations in favor of it here.¹⁹ One important argument is the “neither identical nor distinct” argument. This argument begins with the assumption that, if wholes exist, then wholes are either identical with their parts or distinct from their parts. Both options lead to trouble. Consider the first option, the claim that wholes are identical with their parts. The problem with this claim is that wholes and parts have distinct properties. A whole is one, while the parts are many. So, if wholes and parts have different properties, then the indiscernibility of identicals rules out the possibility that wholes are identical with their parts. Now consider the possibility that wholes are distinct from their parts. The problem with this option is that the properties of the whole seem reducible to the properties of its parts. Take the chariot example again. To understand how a chariot works, we only need to understand the properties of a chariot's parts, and their relation with one another. The whole “chariot” lacks any causal powers that we're unable to trace back to the chariot's components. This suggests that the whole chariot isn't actually distinct from its parts. And, if wholes fail to do any explanatory work, then it's unnecessary to postulate that wholes exist. Therefore, wholes are neither identical nor distinct from their parts. It follows that wholes are unreal.

Another influential argument for mereological nihilism appeals to sorites problems for composite objects. Here's an example. There's a coffee mug in front of me. Now, suppose that I

remove a few of its atoms. The coffee mug is still there. Suppose that I remove a few more atoms from mug, and I repeat the process again and again. At some point, the coffee mug is gone.

When exactly did that happen? There's no non-arbitrary answer to this question. Instead, there's vagueness about when the coffee mug neither exists nor doesn't exist. So, the coffee mug is a vague object. Yet vague objects are unreal. It's false that vagueness exists in the world.

Therefore, the coffee mug is unreal. If that's true of the coffee mug, then it's also true of composite objects in general. Thus, to avoid metaphysical vagueness, we should conclude that composite objects don't exist.

My aim here is not to defend mereological nihilism.²⁰ Instead, my point is merely to explain why Buddhist philosophers accept it. Buddhist philosophers believe that wholes are mere conceptualizations. They're ways that we think and use concepts. Yet wholes don't exist in reality. Wholes are reflections of our cognitive interests, dispositions, and imputations. And, if wholes lack reality, then it's false that reducible reasons exist. Reducible reasons are composites. Thus, given mereological nihilism, reducible reasons don't exist. So, Buddhists should hold that, if reasons are reducible to constituent components, then they ultimately lack reality.

We've now arrived at the conclusion that, according to Buddhists, reasons are unreal.

Here's the complete argument:

1. Either normative reasons are reducible or irreducible.
2. If reasons are irreducible, then they lack causal efficacy.
3. The only entities that exist have causal efficacy.
4. So, if reasons are irreducible, then they don't exist (2, 3).
5. If normative reasons are reducible, then reasons are composites.
6. Composites ultimately don't exist.

7. So, if reasons are reducible, then they don't exist (5, 6).

8. Therefore, reasons don't exist (1, 4, 7).²¹

In other words, Buddhist commitments entail an error theory about normative reasons. The error theory is a claim about ultimate reality. Ultimate reality refers to what the world is really like or the fundamental furniture of the universe independent of our theorizing about it.²² From this perspective, there are no reasons.

Let me be clear about what I take this argument to accomplish. My aim in this section is to show that key Buddhist philosophical principles entail error theory about normative reasons. I'm not going to fully defend the premises of this argument here. For example, I'll refrain from arguing that the causal efficacy criterion or mereological nihilism is true. An adequate defense of these premises is well beyond the scope of this paper. For my purposes here, it's enough that most Buddhist philosophers endorse these premises. While I'll avoid offering a full-fledged defense of this argument, I'll defend it in a way. I want to show that Buddhist error theory is a serious view, and one that we're unable to easily dismiss. Indirectly, this will amount to a defense of Buddhist principles. For if Buddhist principles entail the error theory and the error theory is false, then there's something wrong with Buddhist principles. On the other hand, if error theory is defensible, then Buddhist principles may be defensible as well. In what follows, I'll consider various objections to Buddhist error theory and show how we can rebut these objections.

3. Incoherence, Self-Defeat, and Unbelievability

One objection to Buddhist error theory is that this view is incoherent or self-defeating. Dan Arnold suggests this objection. Arnold's argument goes like this. Arnold is criticizing

Dharmakīrti, the influential Buddhist philosopher from the sixth or seventh century C.E.

Dharmakīrti accepted the causal criterion of reality according which only things that have causal efficacy are real. Arnold thinks that this commitment has objectionable implications. This is so because reasons are irreducible to entities with causal efficacy. In the words, Arnold seems to believe that, if reasons exist, then they must lack causal efficacy. But, if Dharmakīrti is right that the only reals have causal efficacy, then this implies that reasons don't exist.

Yet it's incoherent or absurd to argue that reasons don't exist. Why? Arnold writes that "it is...a condition of the possibility of arguing so that the space of reasons already be in play" and that "it seems [Dharmakīrti] would therefore be...vulnerable to the argument that reason's being 'practical' is not, in fact, something that can coherently be denied, insofar as it is only in terms of reasoning that such a denial is even intelligible."²³ Arnold is arguing that it's incoherent to claim that reasons are unreal. His argument seems to be that you could only arrive at the conclusion that reasons are unreal through reasoning. You need to assume that reasons exist in order to engage in reasoning. This assumption is inconsistent with the claim that reasons are unreal. So, error theory is incoherent.

At first glance though, it looks like the error theory is coherent. Consider the following two claims:

- (5) The error theory is true.
- (6) There's no normative reason to believe the error theory.

Claim (5) entails claim (6). If the error theory is true, then there's no reason to believe it.

Furthermore, claims (5) and (6) are consistent with each other. It seems possible that some claims are true despite the fact that you have no reason to believe them. Here's an example.

Suppose that I declare to you that Goldbach's conjecture is true. But I decline to offer any proof

for this claim. Everything else being equal, you lack any reason to believe that Goldbach's conjecture is true. Nonetheless, it could still be true. The same point holds for error theory. Error theory could be true even though I have no reason to believe that that's the case. So, on the surface, error theory appears to be coherent.

But this may misunderstand Arnold's complaint. Perhaps his complaint is not that error theory itself is incoherent. Instead, maybe his claim is that arguing for the error theory involves an incoherence. To defend error theory, you must offer reasons for believing error theory. Yet to engage in the practice of offering reasons is already to presuppose that normative reasons exist and that the error theory is false. So, there's an incoherence in both arguing for error theory and accepting it as true. On reflection though, it's hard to see why this behavior is literally incoherent. Suppose that Coraline is trying to convince Leticia to become a vegetarian. Coraline knows that Leticia is a utilitarian. Coraline argues that, if you accept utilitarianism, then you should give up animal products. But suppose that Coraline actually rejects utilitarianism, and accepts some alternative moral theory. There's no rational error in using premises that your interlocutor accepts in order to persuade them of a conclusion that you endorse. Similarly, the Buddhist error theorist can rhetorically appeal to premises that her interlocutor accepts—that there are reasons—in order to persuade this person that error theory is true. At worst, this dialectical approach is disingenuous. It's not incoherent.

There's another interpretation of Arnold's complaint. Arnold may be arguing that the error theory is self-defeating, not incoherent. He suggests this when he writes: "...even if some coherent way is found to reduce the deliberate adducing of reasons to the causal processes of our sensory interactions with the world, one will...not be able to give reasons that justify him in

thinking his beliefs true, so much as explain why he believes them....”²⁴ To explain this objection, consider the following two positions:

- (7) It’s true that it’s raining outside.
- (8) There are no reasons to believe that it’s raining outside.

There seems to be something wrong with the conjunction of these two statements. It’s unclear how a rational person could affirm both (7) and (8), as (8) undercuts the grounds for (7). But remember that the error theorist is committed to:

- (5) The error theory is true.
- (6) There’s no normative reason to believe the error theory.

If there’s something wrong with the conjunction of (7) and (8), then it looks like there’s something wrong with (5) and (6). Claim (6) undercuts the grounds for accepting (5). In this sense, error theory is self-defeating. And presumably critics like Arnold believe that we should reject self-defeating positions.

How should a Buddhist error theorist respond to this objection? My suggestion is that the error theorist should bite the bullet. She should concede that there are, in fact, no reasons to endorse error theory while denying that that’s a problem for error theory. Here I’ll draw on the work of Jonas Olson.²⁵ Olson points out that we can distinguish between the claim the following two claims:

- (9) We have a normative reason to believe the error theory.
- (10) There are arguments that show that the error theory is true.

An error theorist accepts (10) while rejecting (9). If the Buddhist argument for error theory is sound, then there can be no normative reasons, and thus (9) is false. But this argument can still show that error theory is true, even though (9) is false.

Here's another way of putting the point. Error theorists don't deny that epistemic instruments exist. They refrain from rejecting the reality of perception, inference, testimony, or any other standard epistemic instruments.²⁶ If we use these epistemic instruments in a certain way, we'll learn that the error theory is true. Yet that's different from saying that we have normative reason to believe the error theory. As Olson points out, "the error theorist is offering arguments to the effect that the error theory is true. She is not offering arguments to the effect that there are epistemic reasons to believe that the error theory is true."²⁷

Consider an analogy. Suppose that you're magically transported back to the year 1500, and you've brought along a microscope. You want to convince people that our world is covered is covered in tiny creatures called bacteria. Here's what you do. You ask them to observe bacteria by looking through the microscope. You also carefully explain to them the evidence and logic that supports the existence of bacteria. Your hope is that, if other people observe germs with the microscope and follow your chain of reasoning, they'll realize that bacteria are real. And it works. Other people start to believe that bacteria exist. Notice that nothing in this story requires you to affirm that people also have normative reasons to accept that bacteria exists. You only need to believe that certain epistemic instruments exist that allow people to discern the truth, such as perception aided by a microscope. In this way, the error theorist can reject the reality of normative reasons while claiming that epistemic instruments, such as inference and consistency, allow us to learn the truth that reasons are unreal. There's no need to claim on top of that that we also have normative reasons to believe the error theory.

Where does this leave us? Arnold indicates that a denial of normative reasons is incoherent or self-defeating. Not so. An error theorist only needs to affirm that arguments exist that can cause us to see the truth about reasons. It's hard to see why the Buddhist error theorists

should be troubled by the fact that we lack reasons to believe this truth. After all, this is just the position that the error theorist defends.

Arnold sometimes says that, even if the position that reasons are unreal is coherent, it's impossible to believe this position. Arnold argues that "performatively ineliminable features of practical reason are constitutively different from theories; as stances that it's not open to us to adopt or not adopt, they cannot be superseded in the way that theoretical commitments can be."²⁸ What does "cannot be superseded" mean here? By this, perhaps Arnold means that we're unable to bring ourselves to believe that there are no reasons. Bart Streumer has developed this argument in detail.²⁹ Streumer argues for the surprising view that error theory is true and that we're also incapable of believing it. So, some truths are unbelievable. In other words, Streumer's view is that error theory is unbelievable, but that's no objection to error theory.

It would, however, be unfortunate if the truth about reality were unbelievable. Perhaps this would be especially troubling for Buddhists. This is so because Buddhists draw a close connection between believing the truth about reality and ourselves, and liberation. Buddhists think that we achieve enlightenment and liberation in part by discarding false beliefs about reality, and coming to realize the truth that reality is very different from received opinion. Take non-self. The thesis that selves lack reality and that persons are merely convenience designators for a collection of psychophysical processes is a radical view. But Buddhists insist that, to achieve enlightenment, you must bring yourself to accept non-self. The same goes for other Buddhist doctrines, such as the doctrine of emptiness. So, given the close relationship in Buddhism between accepting the truth and enlightenment, it would be bad news that we're unable to fully believe the truth about reality. For that reason, it's worth considering whether the error theory is actually unbelievable.

Why should we accept that error theory is unbelievable? The crux of Streumer's argument seems to be this principle:

Necessary Condition. A person believes that p only if this person does not believe that there is no reason to believe that p.³⁰

If Necessary Condition is true, then you can't believe some proposition if you also believe that you lack any reason to believe this proposition. So, you can't believe that it's raining outside while believing that you have no reason to believe that it's raining outside. In the same way, you can't believe the error theory while believing that you have no reason to believe the error theory. But, if you believe the error theory, then of course you also believe that you lack any reason for believing the error theory. Thus, you can't believe it.

I think that Streumer's argument is inconclusive. The problem is that Streumer sometimes treats Necessary Condition as if it were a conceptual truth about the nature of belief. But on my view it's mostly an empirical question whether someone can come to believe the error theory. So, Necessary Condition is vulnerable to counterexamples. At one point, Streumer acknowledges this possibility. He says: "Suppose that someone says: 'I will die tomorrow, but I know that there is no reason to believe that I will die tomorrow.' If this person's belief that he will die tomorrow is compulsive, we may think that he can fully believe what he says he believes."³¹ So, Streumer seems to concede that it's possible for us to believe propositions despite the fact that we believe that have no reason to believe them. If this is true about compulsive beliefs, then it's unclear why it couldn't be true more generally. For example, perhaps a person could come to believe the error theory in an advanced meditative state. Or maybe Streumer's right in that we're unable to believe the error theory for a long period of time.

But perhaps we can believe for some period of time or for a few moments. It's hard to rule these possibilities out if Necessary Condition is ultimately an empirical claim.

Streumer could, I suppose, insist that Necessary Condition is a conceptual truth about belief. But, in response to this move, it's open to us to redefine belief. Let's call Streumer's analysis of belief: BELIEF. Streumer could have his definition of BELIEF. We can then use a different notion, belief*, according to which we can believe* p even if we believe* that we lack any reason to believe* p. So, on this notion, we can believe* the error theory. It's then unclear why Streumer's notion of BELIEF is the correct analysis of our intuitive understanding of belief in comparison to belief*. As far as I can tell, Streumer neglects to directly argue for the view that BELIEF is the correct conceptual analysis of ordinary belief. In the absence of compelling arguments to the contrary, we should tentatively conclude that it's at least possible to believe the error theory in some ordinary sense of belief and that there may be cases where this could happen in practice. Thus, if the error theory is true, then Buddhist can believe the truth about reality, although I concede that it's probably pretty difficult.

4. Error and Emptiness

My argument for Buddhist error theory appeals to Abhidharma premises. Abhidharma is a philosophical movement in early Buddhism. Ābhidharmikas accepted mereological nihilism and most of them seem to have endorsed the causal criterion of reality. These are the premises that I've used to defend error theory. Abhidharma is also a form of realism. What's realism? Roughly speaking, realism is the view that there's one true description of the world and that truth involves correspondence with how things really are independent of our concepts.³² My argument also rests on realist premises because I've argued that, from the perspective of our final ontology,

there are no normative reasons. But there are other schools of Buddhist thought that reject central Abhidharma premises. Are these other schools of thought consistent with error theory?

I can't survey all branches of Buddhist philosophy in this paper. I'll only focus on one of the most prominent Buddhist philosophical schools: Mādhyamika. Interpreters notoriously disagree about how to understand Mādhyamika philosophy. Here I'll rely on Mark Siderits' influential interpretation of Mādhyamika.³³ According to Siderits, Mādhyamika rejects metaphysical realism. Mādhyamikas argue that the idea of ultimate truth is incoherent. They conclude that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. We're unable to arrive at a description of the world that's free of all conceptualization. Mādhyamika philosophers deploy intricate and fascinating arguments to defend antirealism. I'll put these to one side for now. I'll merely consider whether Mādhyamika is compatible with error theory. At first glance, the answer seems to be "no." Why? Error theory is a theory about the ultimate truth. It says that the ultimate truth is that there are no reasons. Yet Mādhyamikas deny that the idea of ultimate truth is coherent. Thus, Mādhyamika's anti-realism and error theory are inconsistent.

But, of course, things aren't that simple. Mādhyamikas do think that certain beliefs are better than others in some respects. For example, Mādhyamika philosophers regard antirealism to be, in some sense, more justified than realism. How can we make sense of this idea? Siderits argues for a kind of epistemic contextualism as an interpretation of Mādhyamika thought. Epistemic contextualism holds that truth is relative to the context of inquiry. That is, in a given context of inquiry, there's a truth of the matter. Yet there's no truth that extends across all contexts of inquiry. Here's an example. Suppose that you ask what my desk is made of, and I say: "wood." That's a true statement in an ordinary conversational context. But, in another context of inquiry, we can give a different answer. In a lecture about the chemical composition of

wood, a chemist might point out that my desk is “really” composed of a complex arrangement of carbon and oxygen molecules. If we were engaged in a scientific inquiry into the nature of my desk, then that would be a true statement. And we can keep going deeper. Perhaps at a more fundamental level of analysis my desk is composed of infinitesimal vibrating strings or a series of momentary tropes.

Mādhyamika philosophers believe that the process of analysis can go on forever. There’s an infinite number of levels of analysis, and reality never bottoms out in “real” entities that bear intrinsic natures. For this reason, it’s false that there are truths that obtain across all contexts of inquiry. Nonetheless, Mādhyamikas can make sense of epistemic improvement. Siderits says: “in order for this to work and not amount to an ‘anything goes’ relativism, these contexts must be seen as falling into a hierarchy, so that each is seen as an improvement on its predecessor.”³⁴ Siderits’ proposal is that some contexts of inquiry are more fundamental than others, even though it’s false that there’s a final level of reality. So, for instance, an analysis that holds that persons are a series of psychophysical elements is an improvement over an analysis according to which persons have enduring selves, at least in certain contexts of inquiry.

With these points in mind, let’s return to Buddhist error theory. Mādhyamika would reject the suggestion that error theory is a final truth about reality across all contexts of inquiry. Suppose that we’re debating first-order ethical questions, like “should I give to charity?” or “should I eat animal products?” In the context of answering these questions, we’d likely ignore error theory or assume that it’s false. The statement “normative reasons are unreal” isn’t a good answer to the question “should I call my mother on her birthday?”³⁵ Yet error theory could be true in another context of inquiry. Suppose you’re in a metaethics seminar and someone asks: do normative reasons exist? Error theory may be the most plausible answer to this question given

the context. In this sense, error theory could be a truth in a context of philosophical inquiry about the nature of reasons. So, we can conclude that error theory is compatible with Mādhyamika antirealism as long as we qualify error theory in the right way. While Mādhyamikas would deny that error theory is an ultimate truth in all contexts, it could be the “truth” in some of them.

5. Conventional Reasons and Buddhist Ethics

A Buddhist might respond to the case for error theory by conceding that error theory represents the ultimate truth. But this Buddhist might argue that normative reasons exist conventionally. Buddhists draw a distinction between ultimate and conventional truth, although they describe this distinction in different ways. Ultimate truth is about our final ontology. Let’s say that a sentence is ultimately true if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of what is not ultimately real. So, if the arguments for error theory are sound, then the statement “there are no normative reasons” is ultimately true in virtue of the fact that this statement neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of entities that lack ultimate reality. Yet there’s another kind of truth, conventional truth. Many Buddhists believe that moral reasons exist at the level of conventional truth. If that’s the case, then error theory is conventionally false.

Is this an objection to error theory? To figure this out, we need to clarify what conventional truth involves. What does it mean to say that the error theory is conventionally false? The problem with answering this question is that Buddhist philosophers disagree about the nature of conventional truth.³⁶ Some Buddhist philosophers characterize conventional truths as “statements governed by agreement.” This suggests that a statement is conventionally true if everyone (or most) people agree to it. Other Buddhist philosophers imply that conventional and

ultimate truths are two different aspects of objects. Some Buddhists regard conventional truth in terms of degrees of being. Conventional truths have a lesser degree of existence than do ultimate truths. There are various other interpretations of conventional truth as well. So, Buddhists disagree about what conventional truth involves. Given this disagreement, how should we proceed? In this section, I'll try to show that, on at least one plausible interpretation of conventional truth, error theory is compatible with the conventional existence of normative reasons. Here's my proposal: we can understand conventional truth in fictionalist terms.

As I'll use the term here, fictionalism is a thesis about how to interpret a domain of discourse. Someone who takes a fictionalist approach to a domain of discourse adopts a pretense or make-believe stance towards this domain. The fictionalist says that certain claims in this discourse are true or false, but only relative to the fiction. You can claim that "according to the relevant fiction, X is true" and you can be right. For example, in Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, it's true that Ivan Ilyich was a judge in nineteenth century Russia, and that he died a painful and agonizing death. But Ivan Ilyich never existed. He's a fictional character that Tolstoy invented. Yet there's a sense in which claims about Ivan Ilyich are truths. They're truths about a fiction. Moreover, the fiction constitutes the truths. Fictions create worlds about which we can make true or false claims.

In an illuminating essay, Jay Garfield argues that conventional truth in Buddhist philosophy is fictional truth. He writes:

Conventional truth is truth in a fiction, a fiction we collectively constitute. Like a novel, our collective practices, including our language, our perceptual activities, our thoughts and attitudes, constitute a world against and in which truth and falsity can be measured.

The standards appropriate to that world are just those that mark off truth and falsity within the fiction.³⁷

As Garfield points out, several Buddhist philosophers seem to understand conventional truth in fictionalist terms. This is a possible interpretation of the Prasaṅgika school of Tibetan Buddhism.³⁸ The Prasaṅgikas would sometimes suggest that conventional truth is a kind of truth—it's truth “according to the world.” The Prasaṅgikas were Mādhyamika Buddhists. They accepted antirealism. So, they thought that reality constitutes a kind of fiction. There's no truth out there that's free from our conceptualization. If we understand “the world” to constitute a fiction, then the typical Prasaṅgika was probably a fictionalist.

Philosophers draw a distinction between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalism. Hermeneutic fictionalists believe that fictionalism is an interpretation of actual practice. So, when people make claims about the relevant domain of discourse, they in fact intend their claims to be interpreted in fictionalist terms. When I say that Ivan Illyich lived badly, I want my audience to interpret my claim as a pretense. Everyone knows that Ivan Illyich is a fictional character. So, fictionalism about literary characters is an accurate interpretation of actual discourse. Revolutionary fictionalists on the other hand say that we ought, in some sense, to treat a domain of discourse as a fiction even though most people treat the objects of this domain as real. A revolutionary fictionalist about mathematics would say that, while most people treat mathematical properties as if they were real entities, we should start viewing mathematical properties as useful fictions.

The typical Prasaṅgika was a revolutionary fictionalist. While conventional truth deceives most of us, enlightened beings understand that conventional truths are falsehoods from the perspective of ultimate truth. Candrakīrti, who influenced the Prasaṅgika school, writes along

these lines that the enlightened “who have abandoned afflictive ignorance, compounded phenomena, which are seen to be like reflections have the nature of being created; but these are not truths for them because they are not fixated on things as true.”³⁹ In what sense is conventional truth deceptive? Conventional truth is deceptive because conventional truths present to us if they were real. We think that there are entities that bear their own intrinsic nature out there in the world. But that’s misleading. According to the Mādhyamikas, there are no real entities with intrinsic natures. We achieve greater understanding by realizing that conventional truths are mere fictions. Thus, the Prasāngikas thought that viewing conventional truths as a kind of fiction represents intellectual progress.

So, it’s plausible that one prominent interpretation of conventional truth is fictionalism. Buddhists in the Mādhyamika tradition often claim that the only kind of truth is conventional truth. If we understand conventional truths as fictional truths, then it follows that Mādhyamikas must be global fictionalists, fictionalists about all of reality. Here I only want to consider a local version of fictionalism: fictionalism about normative reasons. To illustrate how this works, notice that we can express truths about the reasons that characters have in fictions. Consider again *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Near the end of his life, Ivan Ilyich realizes that he had lived badly. Ilyich has spent his life devoted to advancing his career, making money, boosting his social status and reputation, and accumulating possessions. The rest of elite Russian society approves of Ilyich’s way of life. Yet most of Ilyich’s relationships are shallow and dysfunctional. His wife and children despise him, and his friends resent having to attend his wake. Ilyich acknowledges as much near the end:

It occurred to [Ivan Ilyich] that what had formerly appeared completely impossible to him, that he had not lived his life as he should have, might be true... His work, and his

living conditions, and his family, and these social and professional interests—all might have been not right. He tried to defend it all to himself. And he suddenly felt all the weakness of what he was defending. And there was nothing to defend.⁴⁰

Here's my judgment: Ivan Ilyich had reasons to live his life differently than he did. Ilyich should have cared less about himself, and more about the lives of others. If Ilyich had been more altruistic, then he would have lived a better life, and he had good reason to live a better life. Again, these claims seem true, even though both Ilyich and his reasons are fictions.

Fictionalists about normative reasons say that all reasons are like this. They're fictional entities, but claims about them are true or false from the perspective of the fiction. Error theory and fictionalism seem compatible. Remember that error theory is a claim about the ultimate truth. It says that there are no normative reasons in our final ontology. Fictionalists can agree, and they treat reasons as existing only "according to the world"—that is, according to a perspective contaminated by our cognitive limitations, interests, and conceptualizations. Error theory is conventionally false if fictionalism about reasons is true. But, from a perspective external to the fiction, error theory represents the ultimate truth. Therefore, if conventional truth is fictional truth, then conventional truth is consistent with error theory.

However, if error theory is ultimately true and conventional truth is merely fictional, this raises another problem. Is my account compatible with Buddhist ethics? Buddhism has a rich ethical tradition. Buddhists generally insist on the importance of compassion and loving-kindness for all sentient beings, and condemn killing in almost all circumstances. Buddhism begins with the reality of suffering (*dukkha*) and is premised on the idea that we have reason to avoid this suffering. Furthermore, Buddhists often present Buddhism as a set of universal truths. Everyone should exercise compassion for sentient beings, and everyone has reason to escape the cycle of

suffering. If normative truths are fictional, must we also jettison Buddhism's ethical aspirations?⁴¹

This is a tough question that I can only briefly explore here. Here's what my account seems to imply for Buddhist ethics. If error theory is true, then there can be no normative reasons to adopt any specific fictions. There can only be descriptive reasons or explanations for why we adopt certain fictions rather others. In this respect, I agree with Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka that Buddhist philosophy lacks the resources to justify fundamental moral precepts.⁴² Nonetheless, I'm more optimistic than Finnigan and Tanaka about the prospect of justifying Buddhist ethics *after* we've adopted some core and nearly universal fictions about normative reasons. Let me conclude this section by illustrating how this is possible.

According to my version of fictionalism, we tell ourselves a story according to which we have reasons for action, belief, and attitudes. Where does this story come from? The explanation is complex. Evolutionary, social, and personal factors likely all play a role in explaining the content of our story about reasons. Sharon Street asks us to compare evaluative claims that are nearly universal across humans to the range of possible evaluative claims. Consider:⁴³

- (11) The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason to do it.
- (12) The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason not to do it.

Or:

- (13) The fact that something would help one's child is a reason to do it.
- (14) The fact that something would help one's child is a reason not to do it.

Almost everyone accepts (11) and (13), while few accept (12) and (14). Why? Street appeals to evolutionary biology for an explanation. We evolved in a way that makes (11) and (13) much more plausible to us than (12) and (14). More specifically, we evolved with dispositions that

favor our survival and reproduction, which includes the disposition to affirm that we have reasons to survive and to benefit our offspring. There's surely more to the story than just evolution. Cultural forces and other factors also shape our views about which reasons we have. But let's suppose that Street is right that, because of our common evolutionary heritage, humans share a large set of convictions about their reasons. So, we can expect people to adopt common and overlapping fictions about what reasons they have.

Once we've adopted a set of fictional reasons, we start trying to make them coherent with one another. Our beliefs are rarely perfectly consistent with one another in part because we have so many of them. We might hold two potentially conflicting beliefs like "it's wrong for me to cause animals to suffer and die" and "it's permissible for me to consume animal products from factory farms." In the process of making our beliefs about our reasons consistent, the content of our beliefs can change quite a lot.

We're also often wrong about the non-normative facts. Correcting these mistakes can change our understanding of how we should behave, even holding our values fixed. The most prominent example of this in Buddhism is the belief in the self. Buddhists argue that, if there's no self, then altruism is rationally required. Most of us think that we should minimize our own suffering. But we also think that we're enduring and independent entities, and that this fact justifies prioritizing our own suffering more than the suffering of others. Yet, if this belief in the self is false, then we should minimize suffering regardless of its location.⁴⁴ If this argument succeeds, then a non-normative mistake (the belief in a self) can change how we ought to treat others. So, a fictionalist account of reasons leaves room for moral progress if we're capable of subjecting our fundamental values and non-normative beliefs to widely-accepted epistemic standards, such as standards of coherence and empirical observation.⁴⁵

With this sketch on the table, Buddhists can now make the following case. They can argue that Buddhist moral principles are included in the maximally coherent set of moral beliefs that are also consistent with our best knowledge of the non-normative facts. So, it's true that there are only descriptive reasons why we've adopted certain core convictions about our reasons. Following Street, perhaps our values have an evolutionary explanation. Nonetheless, given that most of us have adopted a common set of fictions, Buddhist values and principles are still in the running for the truth relative to these fictions. I've obviously done nothing to show that Buddhist ethics is *in fact* included in our maximally coherent set of beliefs. To show this, we'd need to engage in an enormous amount of first-order ethical reasoning. I only claim that it's *possible* that Buddhist ethical principles and values are included in most people's ideally coherent set of beliefs, and that this possibility is consistent with the fictionalist account that I've described.

But what about universalism? Recall that many Buddhists think that Buddhism describes a set of universal truths about what we have reason to do and believe. It's hard to see how fictionalism is entirely consistent with universalism. Although we might expect most people to assume a common set of core fictions about their reasons, this probably won't not be true for everyone. Some people will reject our fictions, and endorse different ones. If some people reject foundational premises in the overall case for Buddhist values and principles, it seems unlikely that there's anything Buddhists can say to convince these people of the truth of Buddhist views.

If these reflections are correct, then the Buddhist aspiration for universalism may be frustrated. Perhaps though we should question the motivation behind this universalistic aspiration. The desire to show that everyone is committed to the same set of ethical and prudential truths may represent a kind of clinging. One of Buddhism's central insights is that clinging generates suffering. In particular, clinging to the self is among the greatest sources of

suffering. We should overcome desire and attachment because these psychological states perpetuate the false belief in the self. Yet the desire to show that certain values or moral principles are universal truths could be a subtle kind of self-assertion. This form of clinging is expressed when we pound the table and claim that “X just is the correct, mind-independent moral principle that all rational beings must accept.” This table-pounding suggests an insidious kind of grasping and that we’ve become possessive of our own ethical views. The insight that normative reasons are mere fictions could help us to overcome clinging and attachments to our beliefs. We can come to see our moral beliefs as truths, but truths relative to a fiction that not everyone accepts. This realization may weaken our grasping and possessive attitudes toward our convictions and thereby help undermine our sense of self. So, like other Buddhist doctrines, perhaps fictionalism about normative reasons can have a soteriological point.⁴⁶

6. Conclusion

Critics have long objected to Buddhism on the grounds that it’s nihilistic. This understanding of Buddhism has lasted until modern times. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, thought Buddhists were “passive nihilists.”⁴⁷ If we view error theory as a kind of nihilism, then I’ve argued that Buddhist philosophers should bite the bullet. Core Buddhist commitments entail error theory about normative reasons. But the news isn’t all bad. It turns out that Buddhist error theory is a surprisingly compelling position. To show this, I’ve argued that Buddhist error theory can overcome both common objections to error theory in general and the objection that error theory is incompatible with central Buddhist doctrines and aims. Buddhists are notorious for denying things that most other people affirm, such the self, composite entities, universals, and the idea that there’s a way that the world is really like independent of our concepts. My

arguments in this paper suggest that Buddhists should deny another set of entities that everyone else accepts: reasons.

¹ Christopher Gowan remarks: “In comparison with other work in Buddhist moral philosophy...meta-ethical discussions are at a relatively early stage.” Christopher W. Gowans, *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 167. For some insightful recent discussions of Buddhist meta-ethics, see: Gordon Davis, “Moral Realism and Anti-Realism Outside the West: A Meta-Ethical Turn in Buddhist Ethics,” *Comparative Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2013): 194; Bronwyn Finnigan, “Madhyamaka Buddhist Meta-Ethics: The Justificatory Grounds of Moral Judgments,” *Philosophy East and West* 65, no. 3 (2015): 765–85.

² Dan Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing: The Problem of Intentionality in Classical Buddhist and Cognitive-Scientific Philosophy of Mind* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014).

³ I adapt this example from: Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ Schroeder, chapter 4.

⁵ Gideon Rosen, “Numbers and Other Immaterial Objects,” in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Rosen et al. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 507–15.

⁶ David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense Of Robust Realism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 159.

⁷ T. M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 22.

⁸ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Vol. 2* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 484.

⁹ Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters To Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter 2.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Tom Tillemans, “Dharmakīrti,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/dharmakīrti/>.

¹¹ Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, 2 edition (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2016), p 125, fn. s.

¹² This depends on how we interpret the doctrine of dependent origination. Arguably, dependent origination in early Buddhism only referred to an analysis of the causes of suffering. But later Buddhist philosophers interpreted dependent origination as a metaphysical law of causality. See: Eviatar Shulman, *Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chapter 2.

¹³ Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, pp. 48-54.

¹⁴ The exception is perhaps some Chinese Buddhists, such as Fanzang. See: Nicholaos Jones, “Buddhist Reductionism and Emptiness in Huayan Perspective,” in *The Moon Points Back*, ed. Koji Tanaka et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 128–49.

¹⁵ For instance, see: *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 3.66-68.

¹⁶ N.K.G. Mendis, trans., *The Questions of King Milinda* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007).

¹⁷ For this interpretation of Abhidharma, see: Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), chapter 6.

¹⁸ Candrakīrti seems to explicitly endorse mereological nihilism in this verse: “[w]e cannot claim a chariot is other than its parts, Nor that it is their owner, nor identical with them. It is not in its parts; its parts are not contained in it. It’s not the mere collection of the parts nor yet their shape.” See: Chandrakīrti and Jamgön Mipham, *Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakīrti’s Madhyamakavatara with Commentary by Ju Mipham*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), p. 89.

¹⁹ Here my presentation draws heavily on Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, chapter 5.

²⁰ For a defense, see: Siderits, chapter 5.

²¹ In an unpublished paper, I discuss a similar argument in presenting a dilemma for Buddhist reductionism, a version of Buddhist philosophy that Mark Siderits and other authors defend. I argue that Buddhist reductionism faces a dilemma: either it’s committed to error theory about normative reasons or Buddhist reductionists must accept non-reductionism about reasons. Furthermore, I claim that, if they accept non-reductionism about reasons, Buddhist reductionists must jettison fundamental Buddhist doctrines. In this paper, my plan is to explore what happens if we embrace the first horn of this dilemma and accept error theory. My question is: is this a viable option for Buddhists? I’ve now come to the conclusion that it is. See: [citation omitted for blind review.]

²² Siderits, p. 9.

²³ Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*, p. 111 and 200. Arnold’s arguments are part of a broader critique of physicalist and reductionist theories of mental content. I won’t discuss all of Arnold’s arguments here. Instead, I’ll only focus on his arguments against the coherence of an error theory about normativity.

- ²⁴ Dan Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 55-56.
- ²⁵ Jonas Olson, *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), chapter 8.
- ²⁶ “Epistemic instrument” means something distinctive in Indian philosophy. Indian epistemologists focused on the means by which we reliably generate knowledge, which they referred to as epistemic instruments. Standard epistemic instruments include inference, perception, testimony, and meditative insight. I’m using the phrase “epistemic instrument” in this sense here: the processes through which we acquire knowledge.
- ²⁷ Olson, *Moral Error Theory*, p. 157.
- ²⁸ Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas, and Believing*, p. 229.
- ²⁹ Bart Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory about All Normative Judgements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ³⁰ Streumer, p. 134.
- ³¹ Bart Streumer, “Can We Believe the Error Theory?,” *Journal of Philosophy* 110, no. 4 (2013): 194–212, at p. 197
- ³² Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 143.
- ³³ Mark Siderits, *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Jan Westerhoff (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), chapters 1 and 4; Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, chapter 9; Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, chapters 6-9.
- ³⁴ Mark Siderits, “Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopis Know,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167–80 at p. 179.
- ³⁵ Notice that the same holds for other subjects. Suppose my desk is being repaired and a carpenter asks me: “what’s your desk made of?” A bad answer would be “my desk is composed of an infinitesimal set of vibrating strings.” A better answer would be “maple wood.”
- ³⁶ Mark Siderits, Graham Priest, and Tom Tillemans, “The (Two) Truths about Truth,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 131–50.
- ³⁷ Jay Garfield, “Reductionism and Fictionalism: Comments on Siderits’s Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy,” *APA Newsletters on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies* 6, no. 1 (2006): 2–7 at p. 3. See also: Mario D’Amato, “Buddhist Fictionalism,” *Sophia* 52, no. 3 (2013): 409–24.
- ³⁸ Siderits, Priest, and Tillemans, “The (Two) Truths about Truth.”
- ³⁹ Quoted in Garfield, “Reductionism and Fictionalism: Comments on Siderits’s Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy,” p. 2.
- ⁴⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2010), p. 88.
- ⁴¹ This concern is raised in: Davis, “Moral Realism and Anti-Realism Outside the West.”
- ⁴² More specifically, Finnigan and Tanaka argue that Mādhyamika Buddhism may lack the resources to justify fundamental moral precepts. But Finnigan later concedes that this judgment may apply to Buddhist ethics as a whole. See: Bronwyn Finnigan and Koji Tanaka, “Ethics for Mādhyamikas,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 221–32; Finnigan, “Madhyamaka Buddhist Meta-Ethics.”
- ⁴³ I take these from: Sharon Street, “Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?,” in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Rosen et al. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 685–92 at 688.
- ⁴⁴ This is one interpretation of Śāntideva’s famous arguments in: *The Bodhicaryavatara*, ed. Paul Williams, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ⁴⁵ This is similar to the approach of what Tom Tillemans calls the “atypical Prasaṅgika.” According to Tillemans, an atypical Prasaṅgika begins with widely-shared intuitions, but subjects these intuitions to critical scrutiny and allows for the possibility of serious revision. See: Tom Tillemans, “How Far Can a Mādhyamika Buddhist Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives,” in *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. The Cowherds (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151–66 at p. 158.
- ⁴⁶ My argument in this paragraph is an adaptation of Siderits’ argument for the soteriological significance of emptiness. Siderits contends that the doctrine of emptiness is helpful for philosophers who aim to discover the ultimate truth or believe that they have access to it. But, if we adopt the doctrine of emptiness, then this would cause us to weaken our attachment to our sense that we have arrived at the ultimate truth. See: Siderits, *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy*, pp. 38-52.
- ⁴⁷ Quoted in: Damien Keown, “It’s Ethics, Jim, but Not as We Know It’: Reflections on the Absence of Moral Philosophy in Buddhism,” in *A Mirror Is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Jake H. Davis (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17–32 at p. 17.