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## The *Atipada* Problem in Buddhist Meta-Ethics

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# The *Atipada* Problem in Buddhist Meta-Ethics

Gordon F. Davis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

We can express a wide range of objections to philosophical views by saying a view “goes too far”; but there is a more specific pitfall, which opens up when a philosopher seeks to generalize some form of anti-realism in such a way that it must itself be pronounced groundless or incoherent by its own standards. In cases where this self-stultification looks impossible to overcome without revising the view in question, it can be called the *atipada* problem. Signifying a risk of “overstepping,” this Sanskrit label reflects a particular relevance to Mahāyāna ethicists who seek to enlarge the scope of compassion by enlarging the meaning of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) to the point where all truths and ideals are pronounced ultimately empty, and likewise, at least *ipso facto*, the ideal of compassion itself. This incarnation of the problem is left unresolved by sev-

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eral recent defenders of Madhyamaka ethics, as well as by one recent interpreter of Vasubandhu; meanwhile, some Buddhist ethicists who try to avoid theorizing at this “ultimate” level run into the same general problem nonetheless. More than a specialized meta-ethical puzzle, this problem threatens to undermine central Buddhist ideals in precisely those contexts where philosophical ethics is invoked to vindicate them; however, rather than disposing us to foreswear meta-ethics in an attempt to avoid the problematic views in question, the problem should lead us to expand the scope of Buddhist meta-ethics.

From a philosophical point of view, the growing interest in exploring theoretical frameworks for Buddhist ethics has been fruitful, despite—or perhaps even due to—its often yielding inconclusive results, both at the level of interpretation and at the level of defense and critique. Inconclusive analyses can inspire efforts to try a different approach, or they may have *upayic* value in a host of other ways. Certain *problems* on the other hand, while useful in clarifying the cost of a philosophical commitment or in exposing an unexpected dialectical juncture, can turn out to be deeply subversive. In this paper, I explore a problem that can result in debilitating paradox, a problem that warrants its own name—for which I propose “*atipada* problem.” *Atipada* is a generic Sanskrit term for overstepping or overreaching. The fact that it has no particular Buddhist usage or affiliation may be just as well, considering that the problem may be of philosophical interest to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists (in particular as a problem for Advaita Vedānta perspectives, which I do not explore here). Having said that, Yogācāra objections to other Buddhist notions of emptiness are perhaps paradigms of the invocation of this

problem; and for the most part, I will be focusing here on debates within Mahāyāna ethics and philosophy.

The problem reaches beyond the ancient literature of the Mahāyāna, and arises in many other Buddhist writings, especially contemporary ones, but it only comes clearly into view when we consider ethics in relation to broader metaphysical themes—ones even broader than the familiar theme of *anattā/anātman* (non-self). Perhaps the most widely discussed point of contact between ethics and metaphysics in Buddhist philosophy has been the family of claims going under this “no-self” or “non-self” label; but these are not the claims that generate our problem, even though *śūnyatā* is a term associated both with those claims and with the ones mainly addressed here. Anti-realism about *ātman* and putative *svabhāva(s)* of that kind may be a step forward, one that raises philosophical problems to be sure, but nonetheless a step that can help to purge obstacles to clear-sighted ethical thinking, be it rooted in moral deliberation or rooted in *sati* or *bodhicitta* or the *brahmavihāras* or all the above. More serious problems emerge when the scope of anti-realism is expanded: it may go a step too far (*ati-pada*), if it ends up debunking or discrediting those values—including the clarity and ethical mindfulness that undergird specific virtues and arguably underlie every Buddhist value, precept and ideal. Even more subversively, anti-realism seems to go too far if it undermines the very notions of path and fruition (e.g., by subverting the distinction between means and ends), and surely reaches a breaking point, at least for Buddhists, if it undermines the idea of there being *any* real distinction between *kuśala* and *akuśala*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Despite long-standing debate over these terms (for summaries, see Premasiri 1997 and Keown 2001 [116 ff.]; and for details, the archives of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*), these are central normative terms, arguably all the more important for their flexibility and range—in this respect akin to the English term “good” (which can refer to an instrumental or an intrinsic quality). If there were any real doubt that *kuśala* can sometimes

In guarding against this risk of “*atipada*,” a philosopher may nonetheless entertain or endorse some quite robust forms of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), ones that may be compelling and ethically salutary, for instance regarding selfhood or personhood. The point of cautioning against *ati-pada* is that these other *pada*(s)—those latter steps in an anti-realist direction—may be not only salutary, but ultimately coherent and philosophically tenable. It is far from obvious, that is, that one steps over the edge into incoherence when one speaks of the emptiness of persons (or analyzes the *skandhas* as subsisting without any allegedly autonomous *ātman*).<sup>3</sup> But an emptiness in all thoughts and concepts might seem to imply an emptiness in all values; and an emptiness in all values seems to erase the value of anything, including any value in the realization of emptiness itself—and taking a step even further, claiming the emptiness or unreality of normative truths may eviscerate any rationale for seeking wisdom, including *śūnyavāda* wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

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indicate intrinsic value, one could at least have recourse to “*paramakuśala*” (which is more loaded than “intrinsic value,” but at least includes it; cf. Premasiri 1997), or else consider what *kuśala* must mean when applied to *svabhāva* and to *nirvāṇa* (as noted in the Appendix to Goodman and Thakchoe 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Nor is it plausible that an *anātman*-based perspective precludes robust moral commitments, *pace* Paul Williams (1998); on the contrary, I see no *atipada* in this context (cf. the range of views on this in Davis, ed. (forthcoming)).

<sup>4</sup> I do not mean merely in cases where wisdom involves propositional insight (where propositions may correspond to truths); I mean, rather, that this subverts the notion of justification, even in relation to wisdom that may be non-propositional (e.g., *jhānic*), because the truths of which the *atipada* would deprive us include truths that must—I argue—be involved in any real form of justification, including any justification for seeking wisdom. Moreover, I do not assume that justification is an entirely cognitive matter. In fact, we will consider not only values that are tied up with beliefs and concepts (and not only “pro-attitudes” like hope or desire), but also values that are instantiated in cases of something’s having value *simpliciter*, i.e., in the objective way that is some-

Which of these steps, though, is the “*step too far*” that flirts with unacceptable paradox? In a nutshell, it is any version of *śūnyavāda* that takes all normative claims to be ultimately empty; or so I shall argue.<sup>5</sup> When anti-realism debunks the role of truth in the assessment (or ultimate standing) of ethical claims, the implications seem much more vertiginous than those of the proverbial mystical ladder that leads to a paradoxical ineffability; and arguably they are more damaging to the prospects of vindicating or revitalizing Buddhist ethics. It is perhaps more subversive than mysticism, that is to say, when a Mahāyānist invites us on a path to “highest realization,” thereby positing an ideal, and then explains the whole nexus of path and fruition from a viewpoint that denies ultimate truth, in effect denying that the ideal might be an objective ideal (or that “highest” really means *highest*, or that the path is a path to anything of an objectively valuable kind). After all, mysticism would not *deny* such things. What is potentially “damaging” or “subversive” in all this is that the salutary insights of Buddhist ethics may turn out to have no normative relevance to anyone who does not already buy into them on non-rational grounds.<sup>6</sup>

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times called the “external” or “externalist” sense (putatively not dependent on either beliefs or desires).

<sup>5</sup> Here, and unless otherwise indicated, I use *śūnyavāda* in a broad sense, rather than as a synonym of “Madhyamaka” (though Madhyamaka may be a paradigm case). I use “normative” in the contemporary philosophical sense, not in the more anthropological sense that applies to social “norms” (such socially sanctioned “norms” may indeed be generally empty, as Cynics and other Socratics would say, along with *śūnyavādins*). I should also note that I use “ethical” in a broad sense that goes beyond the interpersonal dimensions of morality, encompassing all types of goods, personal and impersonal, including soteriological ends (for more on this, see the last part of the next section).

<sup>6</sup> The point is not that Buddhist belief is “non-rational.” (Unless one is an emotivist, one will see almost every ethical belief as partly rational and partly non-rational; and the elements of pragmatism in Buddhist ethics, along with other elements that I highlight here, are surely more rational than what we find in many other kinds of ethical belief.)

As I began by saying, this may primarily be a problem for theorists, as it only seems to come into view when the problematic position gets articulated in theoretical terms.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I call it the “*atipada* problem for Buddhist meta-ethics,” rather than calling it a problem for Buddhist ethics *tout court*. It may, however, run deeper, and have more wide-ranging ramifications for Buddhists. My last illustration of the problem, from Stephen Batchelor’s recent book *After Buddhism*, shows that there should be concern, not only among ethical theorists and other metaphysically inclined Buddhist writers, but also among those who present themselves as having an “anti-theory” orientation, or in the terms Batchelor himself favors, an orientation that is “ethical, not metaphysical.” If he, too, has become entangled in the *atipada* problem, then we should consider, not only how deeply, but also how broadly, the problem seems to apply.

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The point is rather that many forms of anti-realism preclude the sort of non-partisan critical comparison that would allow a non-Buddhist to appreciate insights in Buddhist ethics.

<sup>7</sup> I address, at several points below, the question of whether this problem was on the radar of ancient Buddhists. It is often alleged that classical Buddhist philosophy never explored general normative theory, and it might seem to follow, *a fortiori*, that it ignored meta-ethics. I would suggest that, on the contrary, the latter was *more* present than normative moral theory, and in some writings an almost ubiquitous theme, insofar as the stakes in discussions of the two-truths distinction (involving meta-theory) often concerned soteriology (which presupposes evaluative claims). Meanwhile, it is worth underlining the distinction between normative theory and meta-ethics, which has often been blurred, for instance by those who see the general disagreement between Keown (2001) and Goodman (2009) as mainly a “meta-ethical” one. Prioritizing virtue over consequentialism or vice versa is a matter of normative theory, not meta-ethics. The reader will notice that there is no discussion of general moral principles or criteria of those kinds in what follows; for better or worse, I follow standard practice, whereby meta-ethicists addressing the most basic questions of meta-ethics begin with claims and analyses that are independent of particular normative theories, a *modus operandi* common to both moral realists and anti-realists.



### The Nature of the Problem and the Scope of “Ethics”

I begin with a few clarifications. The first is that despite perhaps sounding at times like a root and branch critique, this is not a critique of Buddhist ethics in general, let alone Buddhist philosophy as a whole. The problem may initially sound like the Theaetetan paradox of relativism invoked so often as a *bête noire* by many contemporary Christian philosophers (to show the alleged incoherence of modern views such as atheism and materialism). However, if only to distinguish between very different agendas, it should be noted that one can treat the *atipada* problem as a crucial test of coherence, while accepting many of the key premises of Buddhist ethics—and even those of Mahāyāna ethics in particular, which is where the problem most vividly arises. Mahāyāna ethics has shown great versatility, ranging from its role in inspiring various political leaders to its role in local community initiatives that are sometimes grouped under the umbrella term “Engaged Buddhism.” Mahāyāna texts also offer deep theoretical perspectives, as recent work on Śāntideva in particular has amply shown.<sup>8</sup> Even if we were to decide, however, that a theoretical approach is out of place in the Mahāyāna tradition, the figure of the bodhisattva would remain a fascinating and compelling ideal. Its potency as an ideal of altruism would remain intact, in my view, even if my objections to a certain kind of *śūnyavāda* do end up posing serious problems for its way of explaining the bodhisattva path. There are rich traditions of ethical thought throughout the Mahāyāna tradition, not to mention the entire sphere of Buddhist thought and practice.

These traditions arguably do not require any meta-ethical underpinnings, or explicit reflections of that kind, in order to earn their well-deserved place in the global conversation about justice and ethics. On

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., Clayton, *Moral Theory in Śāntideva* (2006) and Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion* (2009).

the other hand, it may end up weakening—if not to some degree discrediting—the Mahāyāna message of extending care to all sentient beings, if it turns out that philosophical elaborations of this message tend to undercut themselves, even at some unexpectedly theoretical level. I do not say “may” in any loaded way; the jury will remain out on how the balance should be struck between practice and theory, or between inspiration and reflection. When I extend the *atipada* problem, in the last section, in order to remark on its relevance to a more ecumenical Buddhist approach, it becomes even more important to underline that I have no intention of generalizing this problem as an accusation against all Buddhist ethicists. The problem nevertheless seems to run deep; so, we do indeed have to consider how general it is. But it would be in keeping with many key elements of the broader Buddhist tradition to fall back on a straight solution to the problem, which I will ultimately recommend, if tentatively. My initial diagnosis of the problem is that it has been aggravated by the coming together of a few indigenous schools of thought with certain philosophical trends in the West that have been especially pronounced over the last century and that continue to influence the meta-ethical conceptions of contemporary writers and philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

At least two other clarifications are in order, including one set of clarifications about the terms “realism” and “anti-realism,” and one about the role of “ethics” in Buddhist philosophy. Both inside and outside of analytic philosophy, some find that the term “anti-realism” has a slightly alien ring to it, leaving it unclear how it relates to skepticism, nihilism, and various kinds of idealism. Nonetheless, the term can be a useful place-holder for a range of familiar views that tend to raise eyebrows and/or hackles, e.g., for views such as “relativism,” “emotivism,”

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<sup>9</sup> Some key figures in twentieth-century anti-realism are cited by the writers I discuss below; but I shall leave those historical details for another occasion.

and “reductionism.” For those who incline towards one of the latter but who are suspicious of any loaded use of these terms, my next few remarks might be reassuring. And for those who recoil from all these specters, preferring a default “realism” about the contents of most people’s beliefs, it is worth keeping in mind that everyone accepts some anti-realism or other, due to the scope of things that have already been debunked by various uncontested ways of avoiding naïve realism. Almost all of us are “anti-realists” when it comes to Santa Claus, and most—in modern society at any rate—are now casually “anti-realist” when it comes to witches and magical spells.<sup>10</sup> The spectrum of religious belief, from the concrete to the more abstract, offers a variety of examples where modern attitudes tend to be either skeptical or favor a consensus verdict that has tipped skepticism into widespread anti-realism.<sup>11</sup>

What all this points to, meanwhile, is a potential set of domains to which a debunking anti-realism may or may not apply—domains ranging from mythical characters to semi-mythical historical narratives to ideologies to common-sense ontologies to scientific ontologies to realms of the abstract (such as word meanings), to various philosophical inventories of ideas and things. Most people are anti-realists (of one kind or

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<sup>10</sup> Some may find this debunking attitude presumptuous and might feel that blunt forms of (any) anti-realist dismissiveness seem chauvinistic; on the other hand, there would be troubling implications if recourse to a debunking style of explanation were unavailable or impermissible: in that case, every conspiracy theory would have to be allotted its place in the realm of possibility, not to mention narratives that sustain racist or fascistic fantasies.

<sup>11</sup> The question of the existence of specific angels (e.g., Gabriel) remains, in many places, a matter where skepticism is not only more common than naïve realism but also more common than anti-realist debunking. The proverbial point of the pin, on the other hand, where angels have supposedly congregated, is now a widespread default example where “anti-realism” goes without saying—indeed, on *both* sides of the divide between believers and non-believers.

another) about any species of monster only mentioned by Tolkien but are realists (of one kind or another) about word meanings, as well as about physical objects. (I am of course not wishing to suggest here that majority opinion can determine the *merits* of an anti-realism, e.g., the anti-realism(s) about physical objects that we find in certain parts of both the Western and Buddhist traditions.) The appeal of “reductionism,” to some people, is made possible by this apparently common-sense acceptance of realism at some levels along with anti-realism at others. After all, for something to be reducible, and thereby possibly “*explained away*,” it must be reducible to some real thing that produces it or explains it. Thus, if someone is a reductionist, she would be a realist about those “real” things, but an anti-realist, perhaps, about the thing or idea that gets explained away; and many accept something along these lines in light of explanations offered in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, not to mention the so-called basic sciences.

This is not the place for a long discussion of whether a “potential set of domains” for debunking can be ordered (from the uncontroversially debunked to the controversially debunked), in the way I have just attempted. There is not, and probably cannot be, a standard order of that kind. But I put that complication aside, in order to highlight a different, cross-cutting spectrum of anti-realisms. Reductionism and relativism are just two of the options on this latter spectrum. Though dismissive of the idea of objective truth, relativism nonetheless retains a distinction between truth and falsity (albeit relativized to some standard, which may itself be treated relativistically). By comparison, what is often called “error theory” is apparently a bolder view, treating all claims with respect to a contested domain as simply false.<sup>12</sup> And even more radically revi-

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<sup>12</sup> I have deliberately avoided calling error theory “nihilism” here, because under that label it would be too easily confused with *ucchedavāda*, a view that Buddhism rejects, almost by definition (insofar as the “middle path” is often used to define Buddhism). In

sionist, it would seem, is non-cognitivism, which interprets the contested claims as not even structured so as to permit truth values one way or another (and even within this category, analyses range from the less *outré*, e.g., the expressivist's, to the more boldly revisionist, such as the emotivist's). My suggestion here will be that the sort of ethical objectivism that is required for avoiding the *atipada* is one that rejects all such anti-realisms, as applied to the analysis of normative claims. For now, it is just worth bearing in mind that relativism tends to accompany the error-theoretic style of anti-realism, at least when its diagnosis of error leaves intact a system or discourse that its anti-realist adherents may wish to conserve, or at least conserve well enough to maintain their practices and traditions. That is, on some error theories, a tradition's own pronouncements may not escape the global denial that this form of anti-realism represents—so they can only be retained in a relativized form. (This may help to explain why relativism and the theme of “emptiness” sometimes come together in the arguments below.)

Whether we are surveying this taxonomy or the earlier spectrum (covering the scope of things targeted for debunking), we will come across forms of anti-realism that many regard, for various reasons, as “going too far.” But I begin with something that seems clearly to constitute an *atipada*—namely the point at which an anti-realism undercuts even the *notion* of a reason, in particular the kind of reason that could bestow at least a degree of justification *on the anti-realism itself*, or more

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my explanation above, “reductionism” may have sounded more moderate, and with the exception of Batchelor, many of the authors discussed below are sympathetic to one or another variety of “Buddhist reductionism.” But it is worth keeping in mind both that relativism can be seen as reducing unqualified evaluations to relativized ones (sometimes via semantic reductionism) and that error theory can be the result of any reductionism that permits “elimination” of conceptual constructions that are reducible to subvening facts.

generally, on the sort of philosophical discourse which it requires for being articulated at all. Of course, reasons take different forms in different contexts: there are reasons for expressing philosophical thoughts, and there are reasons for accepting common-sense beliefs, and then again, there are reasons for engaging in some project or course of action or way of life—all very different, and yet it is worth emphasizing the affinities between these kinds of reason. Even if we call the latter “ethical reasons,” that does not suddenly make them Kantian imperatives; on the contrary, they can be mere *pro tanto* reasons, and sometimes just reasons for thinking a certain way, or for favoring a concept or a turn of phrase—in much the way that epistemic reasons tend to function. However, reasons play a normative role in our thoughts and discourse that is interdependent with values, ideals, standards, and many other normative notions. So, it is not merely anti-realism about reasons that represents an *atipada*; it is, in general, any anti-realism about normativity.<sup>13</sup>

The last clarification I should offer here at the outset concerns the scope of “ethics” in the context of ethical realism and anti-realism. Since “ethics” is tasked with investigating both *aretaic* considerations and *eudaimonia* (along with other concepts of well-being, and even of salvation), it is a broader field than that which covers what many think of as “morality” or “moral deliberation.” It helps to keep this in mind when we notice that Buddhists sometimes claim that moral prescriptions (e.g., the domain of *śīla*) are subordinate to the highest aims of

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<sup>13</sup> And likewise, anti-realism about normative *truth*. This will not be obvious to those who think of reasons as consisting in subjective beliefs and desires; but the following seems to apply regardless of how we analyze reasons: truths are a *sine qua non* in ethics, for if there is no truth to the effect that (e.g.) Orpheus has reasons to help Eurydice, then Orpheus cannot have reasons for helping her; and in general, if there is never any truth to the effect that A has a reason to x, then there cannot be such a reason. The contrapositive highlights the *sine que non*.

Buddhist thought and practice, which are broadly soteriological and thus broadly ethical. Those higher aims are often thought of as relating to meditative practice, and/or to forms of spirituality that are believed—rightly or wrongly—to surpass mere *moral* concerns in depth and ultimate significance. A proponent of engaged *bodhicitta* might contest this claim (as would Kantians, in a different way); but not only is it a coherent way to order different values, it also parallels ancient Greek distinction(s) between the domain of justice and the domain of ethics in general.

The distinction is worth noting at the outset, in order to underline that it is not only in light of her moral or *śīla*-based commitments that a Buddhist philosopher should beware of what an anti-realist *atipada* would mean for normativity, and for the notion of what is worth doing or thinking for its own sake. The same basic problem can arise with respect to normative epistemology, something that is akin to long-standing traditions in Buddhist philosophy regarding *pramāṇa*.<sup>14</sup> And perhaps most importantly, the same problem can arise when the inherently value-laden language of enlightenment and liberation is incorporated into a philosophical understanding that claims or implies something about the nature of values or ideals. Since enlightenment is both a value and an ideal, it is *ethically* salient, whether as concept or aim or hope or prospect. The *atipada* problem, then, is a problem that can arise

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<sup>14</sup> This is perhaps the paradigm case of how an anti-realism can become self-stultifying, if not self-refuting. Normative epistemology requires both reasons and reasoning; but anti-realism about either cannot get off the ground without both, and therefore seems unable to get off the ground at all (*by its own standards* of what sort of basis might be available, which *ipso facto* does not include reasoning). And if reasons are immanent in the very *formulation* of anti-realism (which may require, at a minimum, reasons for its choice of terms and concepts), it may be self-refuting. For a discussion of analogies between epistemic and practical reasons, see Cuneo (2007), whose reflections suggest that this risk of self-stultification generalizes to meta-normative contexts in ethics.

whenever any kind of normative concern, aim, guidance, dilemma, expectation, standard or ideal is involved. Some of these normative categories apply also to meditative aspirations, and indeed, to almost everything about the change(s) of perspective that Buddhism proposes. We can admit, then, that there may be narrowly *moral* concerns about the implications of (some) anti-realism that may be legitimate concerns, but that do not pose any special problem for Buddhist meta-ethicists, let alone any *atipada*. But here we shall consider problems in *ethics*—and even more broadly, *axiology*—that no philosopher, Buddhist or otherwise, can afford to dismiss as irrelevant.

### **The Cowherds on Emptiness: Anti-realism One Step at a Time?**

In their most recent volume of essays, *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*, the loosely Madhyamaka-oriented philosophers calling themselves the “Cowherds” have turned to the problems of ethics, to consider how Madhyamaka approaches to *śūnyatā* may bear on a Buddhist understanding of ethics. Despite undertaking to tackle the relativist problem of the “dismal slough,” however (a key problem that stimulated much of the discussion in their first volume, which I explain below), the various contributors take rather tentative steps in broaching the question of how a global anti-realism affects the status of ethics. Nonetheless, the variation in how many anti-realist steps they are willing to take at least serves to illustrate the difference between a *prakrāmanta*-pada (a step in the direction of greater critical awareness) and what I am calling an *ati*-pada (a step too far).

Instead of confronting the “dismal slough” from the outset, the opening lines of this Cowherds collaboration highlight a more familiar challenge for Buddhist philosophers, the challenge of accommodating *anattā/anātman* in ethics: “Buddhist texts frequently extol the value of



developing extraordinary generosity, self-sacrifice, and forbearance . . . [and yet they] consistently assert that neither the agents nor the beneficiaries of these actions ultimately exist” (Goodman and Thakchoe 7). Despite their particular interest in Mahāyāna ethics, the Cowherds’ opening chapter does not consider problems relating to the Mahāyāna’s *generalization* of emptiness (not just to all persons but to all entities *qua svabhāva*), emphasizing mainly the emptiness of metaphysical notions of selfhood instead. Similarly, Stephen Jenkins opens by remarking that “Anyone who becomes familiar with Buddhist thought eventually has to deal with the question of how compassion can be meaningful, if both its agent and its object are ultimately unreal” (97). Jenkins does discuss the generalization of *sūnyavāda* anti-realism—where emptiness is revealed by the “dissolution” of *any* entity “under analysis”—but continues to focus on this as a problem for making sense of the “agent and object” of compassion, as opposed to making sense of value or values, where the problem would concern the “dismal slough” of a looming relativism. Jenkins admits only this much: “From the Madhyamika’s standpoint of emptiness, finding a meaningful object for compassion is apparently more difficult, since here even the . . . elements of psycho-physical continuum dissolve under analysis” (Jenkins 98).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In correspondence, Jenkins has explained that he does not think that central Madhyamaka figures (such as Candrakīrti) have really exposed themselves to a “dismal slough” problem at all. As I am arguing that the Cowherds do not resolve this problem, Jenkins should perhaps not be grouped, then, with those I am critiquing here, who do treat it as a genuine problem. On the other hand, two points of disagreement remain relevant: (1) I believe this is an important problem (although Jenkins and I may agree that it affects contemporary writers more directly than it does ancients); (2) I do not think that the inference from *anātman* to altruism requires as much defense as (nor the philosophical contortion that) the global emptiness claim does. This is not to say that the former does not call for careful philosophical attention as well (for examples of both critique and elaboration of that inference, see the various contributions to Davis, ed. (forthcoming).) Jenkins also raises concerns about the terms “realism” and “anti-

This denial of ultimately real elements might strike some as going too far; and as acknowledged in the first section above, some will feel that it is already a step too far when metaphysics flirts with analyses that exclude any place for diachronic personhood in ontology.<sup>16</sup> However, such anti-realism about individual persons is not generally charged with *incoherence*. Such anti-realism may be a step into “revisionism,” for better or worse, but among philosophers it is not often construed as a step too far *per se*. For instance, anti-realism about individual persons does not seem to push as far towards the vertiginous edge of common sense as anti-realism about time, physicality, intentionality, or propositional structure; and in particular, it would be difficult to show that such anti-realism (about diachronic personhood) goes too far *by the standards of the anti-realist herself*. What I am calling an *atipada*, by contrast, arises when one goes too far even by one’s own standards. Some reductive naturalists, for example, favor scientific explanation in light of what they see as its high epistemic standards, which they also apply to philosophi-

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realism.” Though there is much to say, for and against the use of such terminology here, I offer only this thought for now: these terms may be apt even if the two options are not exhaustive. (Part of the aptness is historical: classical Nyaya, for example, seems paradigmatically realist in ways that prompted Buddhist reactions.) Some writers consider “non-realism” to be a third option; and perhaps such a view opens up a sort of “middle way.” But prominent non-realists (e.g., Derek Parfit) typically maintain *cognitivism* and *objectivism* nonetheless; and departures from *those* take some Buddhist views into *anti-realist* territory, however those views may have been formulated. It may be that the *atipada* problem is critical, then, even for many writers who avoid the term “anti-realist.” I wish to thank Stephen Jenkins for prompting me to clarify this.

<sup>16</sup> As I have already implied, I myself do not consider this a step too far; and for what it is worth, subversive analyses of selfhood or personhood are far from absent in the history of Western philosophy (let alone Asian philosophy), even within some of the classic ethical systems of ancient and early modern philosophy. Favorable assessments of some of these Western forms of “selfless ethics” can be found in several contributions to Davis, ed. (forthcoming). On the separability of *anātman* from more general claims of emptiness, see also Gowans (2015), pp. 175-83.

cal explanation but then find it difficult to explain those standards when their naturalism leads them to an anti-realism about epistemic properties; in light of their own epistemic standards, they may have overstepped in thus expanding the scope of anti-realism.

It is worth pausing to highlight this notion of the “standards of the anti-realist,” insofar as some standards may be more universal than the ones that happen to trip up the naturalist just mentioned. Universal standards do not merely relate to the scope of the anti-realism in question; there are normative standards as well—consistency, for example. But even if there is no settled notion of consistency that can be pinned down, there are at least notions of accountability with respect to how one articulates (e.g., how fully or how clearly) one’s anti-realism, as well as minimal standards of justification. Even if there need not be a particular standard that all can agree upon, there is at least an acceptance that some kind of justification, even if only allowing a *degree* of justification, is called for when presenting the view to those who disagree, or to those who react with any degree of skepticism or puzzlement.<sup>17</sup>

The Cowherds, adopting a phrase coined by Tom Tillemans in their first volume, accept that without these and related kinds of epistemic accountability, their own philosophizing—and that of other Bud-

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<sup>17</sup> These are minimal standards of philosophical discourse; but I will suggest that we need to go further, beyond norms of *justification-to-others*, and consider justification *simpliciter* (the notion of something’s being intrinsically justified—which need not mean *fully* justified, nor even *most* justified). The dismal slough arises from lacking an unrelativized notion of justification, more than from a lack of norms for how to offer a justification of a view *to an interlocutor*. As just indicated, and as I believe authors like Goodman and Tanaka also have in mind, something that is intrinsically justified would in the first instance be *pro tanto* justified—as in *a* justified, rather than *the* justified (or fully justified) option, for a judge or agent. In light of this, we need not worry that accommodating this notion of justification will commit us to believing that moral certainty is possible (let alone required).

dhist philosophers—might end up wallowing in a “dismal slough.” Without a notion of potential justification that does not reduce to mere cultural pedigree, or blind personal conviction, or incorrigible wishful thinking, anything whatsoever would qualify as unsurpassed insight, and eventually every view would count as equally sound, in the “dismal slough” of mere opinion. The problem the Cowherds tackle in the first volume results from the possibility that Madhyamaka emptiness amounts to an anti-realism not only about substance or *atman*, but about the notions of truth and justification as well—or at any rate about notions of *objective* truth (the sort of truth, and/or warrant, that might figure in the notion of justification). More precisely, the problem is that disavowing an error theory about *conventional* truth, as Mādhyamikas do, may not prevent relativism from creeping in, if conventional truth must be assessed or characterized in some other way than its relationship to ultimate truth—which Mādhyamikas debunk or deny, thereby leaving the practice of appraising conventional judgments to its own devices, so to speak, with only relativistic factors such as *lokaprasiddha* to “guide” that practice.

The concept of *lokaprasiddha* offers a way of elaborating on what it means to say that all truth is conventional truth. Koji Tanaka glosses *lokaprasiddha* as meaning “what is acknowledged by the world,” and points out that he and other Cowherds are inclined to accept that “Candrakīrti [for one] seems to accept a *lokaprasiddha* account of truth and knowledge . . . [and if so he] is accepting an account that reduces truth and knowledge to mere opinions and beliefs” (46). True to his title (“The Dismal Slough”), Tanaka cuts closer to the heart of the threat of relativism than most of the other Cowherds. However, until the final stretch of his paper, he rehearses the problems—with taking ourselves to be confined to conventional truth—outside the context of ethics. He broaches the central problem when he says, “If truth is stripped of normative roles other than simple consistency checking in our epistemic practice,

the notion of justification also loses its normative status . . . [this] dismal slough flattens out any meaningful distinction between truth and falsity that can be relied upon to acquire knowledge” (50).

Tanaka sees the relevance of this for ethics, but here he understates it; for we should be uneasy about what this flattening out would mean for our attempts at moral reasoning, even if we resign ourselves (for whatever reason) to an incapacity for acquiring *knowledge*—for instance, knowledge of ethical truths. Like Michel de Montaigne, or any other skeptic who is willing to consider skepticism as one possible path to the good life, we may treat the “sovereign good” as an important question, even if we concede that it is impossible to guarantee any knowledge of it. But it is indeed the loss of a meaningful notion of justification that bridges the concerns in epistemology with those in ethics. “[L]okaprasiddha offers no resources to *justify* ethical claims and conduct beyond mere facts about us having certain opinions . . . ” (Tanaka 51); “We would be trapped in extreme relativism and there would be no possibility of justifiably reforming our conduct” (52).<sup>18</sup> Tanaka does not quite conclude that a fatal *atipada* is around the corner, but he does ask (without proposing an answer): “How can we account for Madhyamaka ethics if Madhyamikas cannot account for justified moral claims and conduct?” (53)—a question that is posed in his final paragraph, but well-posed, and well-placed to provoke thoughts from the other Cowherds.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The key word here is “*justifiably*”; whereas, in a value-neutral sense of “reform,” meaning “*change*,” we can easily “reform our conduct,” regardless of how things stand with respect to truth and justification. The naked word “can” is often abused in this sort of context, with anti-realists often stressing that they “can” take a moral stance—something that boils down to an unremarkable fact about their own psychological capacities, unless qualified with “*justifiably*.”

<sup>19</sup> Though he gives a slight impression of weary resignation by closing with this question, Tanaka appears to keep Madhyamaka hopes alive, referring in a note (n. 19) to an

In a separate essay in the *Moonpaths* volume, Charles Goodman grapples with these issues to a greater extent than most of the Cowherds, so I shall focus on his essay in what remains of this introduction to the *atipada* problem. He echoes Tanaka's concern that Mādhyamikas may not be able to "account for justified moral claims," at least insofar as justification is taken to require an objectivist account of intrinsic value. As he points out, the Madhyamaka view is that "there is no such thing as self or intrinsic nature anywhere" (143);<sup>20</sup> but he realizes it is the latter, general denial of *svabhāva* that poses persistent problems about justification (rather than the no-self claim). "[I]t is clear that, according to Madhyamaka, ethical statements cannot possibly be ultimately true . . . they must be merely conventional" (141-42). Insofar as this makes ethics a "social construct," then, this "leaves us with a variety of extremely unattractive metaethical options, including moral relativism, ethnocentric conservatism, and error theory" (142).

If that bleak choice is the upshot, then Mādhyamikas seem to face an *atipada* (though some might describe it differently if they are content to relegate *all* their values to the twilight zone of unreal illusions).<sup>21</sup> And

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account of Madhyamaka ethics in an earlier, coauthored paper (Finnigan & Tanaka, "Ethics for Mādhyamikas" 2011); I critique that earlier effort in Davis (2013).

<sup>20</sup> Goodman acknowledges favoring the Gelug philosophical approach of Tsong kha pa (p. 142), which I shall not challenge here as a sound interpretation of Madhyamaka.

<sup>21</sup> In considering what it would mean if the upshot required us to narrow the options down to error theory—in the general form of "metaphysical nihilism"—Mark Siderits (2015) succinctly identifies the fatal *atipada*: "[m]etaphysical nihilism is an absurd doctrine that is readily refuted: one could not so much as consider it if it were true (since at least the mental episode of its consideration would have to exist)" ("Case for Discontinuity" 114). In a separate contribution to the Cowherds volume, Siderits develops a somewhat different objection, to a different interpretation of Madhyamaka, but one that reflects the same concern, I would argue, with what I am calling *atipada* ("Does Buddhist Ethics Exist?" 135). And earlier in that chapter, he expresses one positive lesson we can draw from the negative aspect of *atipada*: we should, he says, "defend an

if Madhyamaka meta-ethics really leaves no room for backtracking away from that *atipada*, I believe Goodman would probably agree that ethical theory would (prematurely) meet its demise—at least in a Madhyamaka context—and possibly genuine ethical praxis too. It seems that Goodman himself recognizes the difficulty of opening an escape route for the Mādhyamika here; but he does explore one way of attempting a reconciliation, which I discuss in the next paragraph. He explores the scope for reconciliation because, he says, “we should develop [Madhyamaka ethics] in a way that does not require us to abandon one of the most fundamental commitments of Buddhism . . . the commitment to the universality of morality and to the moral equality of all humans” (147). Goodman also expresses the hope that a robust form of Śāntideva’s *svabhāva*-based (i.e., Abhidharma-based) “ownerless suffering argument” can be maintained, as it provides a clear case of “rational justification of . . . *dharma-āmbanā-karuṇā*” (153), for example, a justification that even aliens with egoism bred in the bone would have reason to consider. “So we have a paradox,” he admits, “[which is that] the broader metaphysical views we are assuming require ethics to operate only within a certain context [due to conventionalism], but the overall normative picture we find in the texts requires ethics to be universal and to involve the possibility of criticizing the practices of our own and other societies” (147). Goodman may mean that Mādhyamikas here face an *apparent* paradox; otherwise, the risk is that conventionalism will preclude critical reflection and thereby preclude any scope for attempts at justification, ultimately revealing an

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interpretation of emptiness that is sufficiently conservative as to leave a place for the argument for impartial benevolence, by showing that the more radical interpretations are problematic” (133). His strategy, which I hope to discuss on another occasion, differs from Goodman’s, which—for better or worse—is more closely related to work in contemporary meta-ethics.

*atipada*.<sup>22</sup> But perhaps Goodman has a conciliatory strategy that can avert the most debilitating possible consequences of his “paradox.”

Given that Goodman is trying to pull back from the sort of moral nihilism that leaves no alternative in moral philosophy besides a relativist framework, we would not expect his conciliatory proposal to emphasize the “emptiness” of moral claims. And indeed, on the contrary, his starting point is similar to a suggestion I made earlier about where normative objectivity can get a grip in Buddhist ethics—not with the rules of *śīla*, but with the axiology that *śīla* seems designed to serve, the axiology of spiritual fulfilment. Goodman’s first move, then, is to argue that insofar as rules and rights have any normative standing, that normativity is derivative from, and subordinate to, the “more objective” standing of *well-being* in Buddhist ethics. (In anticipating what is nonetheless a looming *atipada* problem, there is no need to take issue with this move; in fact, many moral realists accept this foundational role for well-being.) Goodman then asks whether we can explain the normative status of well-being in terms that are at least as objective as the most indisputable findings of modern science. He turns to an account proposed by Richard Boyd, which highlights “homeostatic property clusters” in nature, and conjectures that normative factors in a desirable life may form such a cluster (Goodman 149-50). The idea is that our needs include physical, medical, psychological, and social needs, and “[w]hen some of these needs are satisfied, that often tends to make it easier to satisfy others” (150). Moreover, this relational account fits nicely with Buddhist ideas about the deep interdependence of various mental states.

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<sup>22</sup> This apparently worst-case scenario for the fate of Madhyamaka would mean that simply taking this dilemma as *justifying* philosophical reflection would be something that we could no longer make sense of—which seems *ipso facto* to go too far, insofar as we must on the contrary be able to make some sense of Madhyamaka and its alternatives as justifying a degree, at least, of philosophical reflection.



These relations between “goods,” however, are *causal* relations, so the pattern in various fulfilments of needs, clustered in the general way envisaged here, would be a causal pattern, and would, from the point of view of a prospective agent, amount to a value-neutral basis for hypothetical or instrumental reasoning—something insufficient for vindicating well-being as a worthy goal or end.<sup>23</sup> Even those who reject Kant’s account of “categorical imperatives” generally acknowledge the conceptual difference between hypothetical (instrumental) relations and final (or “telic”) evaluations—that is, even apart from whether any of the latter are ever veridical (and even if, supposing that a telic evaluation *can* reflect an objective truth, it may concern well-being rather than duty). Despite widespread recourse to the “hypothetical” vs. “categorical” terminology, even in this context, this is not a point that owes anything to Kantian ethics; after all, almost every modern ethicist, from Hume to G. E. Moore and beyond, would consider an instrumental relation between aims to be fundamentally different from a final or axiological evaluation of an aim. Now, admittedly, even if it is fair to highlight the instrumentalist nature of Boyd’s account, that account may not result in eliminativism about all other notions of well-being; but we should note that the *raison d’être* of the account is to underline that there appear to be no other axiological claims of relevance to human life with anything

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<sup>23</sup> It might be thought that the demands imposed by seeking to vindicate such a *telos* could be sidestepped by favoring a “negative” form of consequentialism, one that focuses only on the reduction of suffering (rather than well-being). And along these lines, one anonymous referee argues that the apparently realist demands of Vasubandhu’s invocations of *nirvana* (discussed in the next section) could be set aside if we interpret this ideal in terms of the cessation of bad mental states rather than the attainment of good ones. We may doubt that this move either avoids construing *nirvana* in terms of non-instrumental value or obviates moral realism. But in any case, it is telling that in his book, Goodman rejects a “negative” approach, insofar as it would countenance globally destructive ways of ending suffering in the world (2009, 101), and even more telling that he excludes it as a viable interpretation of Mahāyāna ethics (ibid, 101-102).

approaching the degree of objectivity that instrumental ones can have. On this naturalist account of well-being (and/or social concord), there is no other kind of ultimate truth to explain its having final or intrinsic value; there would only be causal connections that cluster together to explain our beliefs and feelings about various “needs.” In a nutshell, this leaves only truths about (descriptive) facts, not truths about values (whether prescriptive, or normative in some other way). Insofar as axiology requires the latter, axiology would on this account turn out to be empty after all.<sup>24</sup>

In discussing the “relational character” of goods, on this account, Goodman shows that he is aware of problems along these lines. Moreover, he admits that “[h]appiness itself would be more difficult to treat in this way” (152). The problem, as he acknowledges, is that happiness is a conception of a final end (if not the highest good), and thus its axiology must be teleological rather than instrumental. The worry is that this role, which happiness is expected to play in a teleological theory, would be debunked if all there is to ethical normativity is homeostatic property clusters involving natural kinds (e.g., the “needs” mentioned above). Goodman briefly speculates nonetheless about the prospects of folding

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<sup>24</sup> This is intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*; but I expect many readers will be surprised by the implied willingness to entertain the notion of an ultimate *ethical* truth, as a way of avoiding the *reductio*. In light of Goodman’s consequentialism, for example, some will ask what such a truth could possibly look like, and in particular, could it be something like consequentialism? Here I can only reiterate what I said at the end of n. 7, which was, in effect, that the larger questions here are not well-served when we let ourselves conceive of ultimate truths in prematurely specific ways. In any case, consequentialism is a theory of right action, not a specific axiology (it can be filled out by one or another axiology, i.e., any account of good(s), as Goodman (2009) adeptly shows); and though either of these could be normatively fundamental—the right or the good—it is in axiology that candidates for ultimate truth surface in ancient sources (cf. various forms of *nirvana* qua “highest good” (*paramakuśala*)).

the good of happiness into this account of other goods. This would—as intended—reduce a putatively ultimate truth about intrinsic value to a conventional one; but here, once again, a dilemma arises: either this approach will collapse into a *relativist* conventionalism (disqualifying happiness and well-being as universal ideals), or else the Mādhyamika meta-ethicist will have to entertain a naturalistic analysis of happiness that might only turn out to be superficially non-relative, at best.<sup>25</sup> As Goodman himself says, “[The Madhyamaka] view of well-being might turn out to look strikingly like a realist one, even if [it] would go on to reject a fully realist understanding of the metaphysical status of that account” (149).<sup>26</sup> The “if” here reflects the understandable tentativeness of Good-

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<sup>25</sup> One problem (with the latter option) is that it is unclear how a Mādhyamika can coherently privilege naturalism in this way; but a larger problem has to do with the residual relativism that looks inevitable on this approach. After all, the clustering hypothesized by the account is tied to evolutionary history; but a species-relative axiological profile seems, in terms of its meta-ethical repercussions, to be as relativistic as a culturally-relative one (not to mention that most Buddhists would not let boundaries between species determine the moral significance of well-being). It would be interesting to speculate—if only to reassess the parameters of the dilemma just posed—about some natural property that might in principle determine ethical truth(s) for any and every species in the cosmos. Moorean “open question” concerns aside, though, this line of inquiry risks losing contact with the empirical considerations that guide Boyd’s naturalist approach. Those considerations focus on human desires and human “needs,” which would now have to be treated as potentially misleading prejudices in the context of this cosmic-scope alternative, an alternative that Goodman does not consider in any case. (An account of karmic patterns with a cosmic scope might seem a tempting proposal along these lines; but its irreconcilability with contemporary naturalism is presumably what keeps Goodman from considering it—if not the fact that such an account would remain merely “relational” in a sense broadly parallel to the one cited from Goodman above.)

<sup>26</sup> This formulation resembles, perhaps inadvertently, the sort of anti-realism defended by Simon Blackburn, called “quasi-realism.” As Blackburn acknowledges (1998, chapter 9 & appendix), concerns about an implicit relativism naturally arise here. Moreover, paradox looms when one says something along the lines of “We accept realist constru-

man's approach; and ultimately it would appear that he—again understandably—is taking precautions against sliding all the way to an *atipada*, a fate to which some other Cowherds are perhaps more vulnerable.

Nonetheless, we are left with problems that only a more robust realist (or a more robust defender of the notion of ultimate truth) seems able to resolve. These problems echo a contemporary debate among moral realists and objectivists—in particular between those who tend towards a naturalistic reductionism and those who wish to expose that tendency as a vicious reductionism that ultimately entails eliminativism (or error theory) about the only kinds of normative properties that might really matter in ethics.<sup>27</sup> This debate, in turn, may parallel certain themes in Theravāda meta-ethics.<sup>28</sup> But the sort of “naturalist” Goodman cites, for instance Richard Boyd, is motivated by universalist intuitions in meta-ethics, whereas the strategies explored by Goodman are motivated by the global anti-realism that takes Madhyamaka emptiness more or less at face value. On the one hand, the challenges for Boyd's meta-ethical naturalism are perhaps formidable enough to highlight a risk of its own *atipada*; but the concern about error theory—that is, the idea that the pervasiveness of illusion and unreality belie any claims about intrinsic value—is bound to be even more acute when some such view is built into the philosophical starting point, as it appears to be for many of the

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als of moral truths, but those construals are not really true” (an apparent instance of “Moore's paradox”).

<sup>27</sup> Parfit (2011) is a recent example of a meta-ethical objectivist who not only sets out to expose this problematic implication of meta-ethical naturalism, but also argues that naturalist non-reductionism is an unstable variant of naturalism that tends to collapse into the kind of reductionism that leads back to ethical anti-realism.

<sup>28</sup> Premasiri (1997), drawing on Rhys Davids' analysis of moral language in the Pali Canon, sees in the *Nikāyas* a “naturalistic” account of the property to which “*kuśala*” refers.

Cowherds.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the prospects for Mahāyāna ethical theory need not be so bleak, because many important Mahāyānist philosophers have *not* taken at face value the global emptiness claim (whether in *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures or in philosophers like Candrakīrti) that seems central to Madhyamaka thought.<sup>30</sup> In particular, the Yogācāra school interpreted global emptiness claims as *upāya*: intellectually stimulating and spiritually powerful, but not meeting the standards of the ultimate truth, which, though perhaps indeterminate, and in any case ineffable, the Yogācāra philosophers uphold as a higher form of truth—unlike Mādhyamikas, who also treat emptiness claims as *upāya*, but do not see them as falling short of ultimate truth (because there is no *svabhāva* to sustain such a thing). Most interesting for contemporary philosophers is the fact that the significance of this *bona fide* ultimate truth is treated as normative; it appears to be something that Yogācārins take to vindicate the bodhisattva path.<sup>31</sup> Before stepping outside the

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<sup>29</sup> A notable exception is the contribution by Amber Carpenter (2016), whose implicit (or, I should say, apparent) rejection of anti-realism is, interestingly, buttressed by her reading of a Madhyamaka work by Nāgārjuna, the *Ratnāvalī*. For better or worse, this reading may not be welcome to all admirers of Nāgārjuna, especially those who consider the distinctive feature of his philosophy to be a commitment to the emptiness of ultimate truth.

<sup>30</sup> A closer examination of some specifically Madhyamaka themes is offered by Finnigan (2015), who, despite her involvement in an earlier Cowherds project (2011), expresses concerns similar to the ones I express here (and in Davis [2013], where I also discuss some of Finnigan's earlier work exploring Buddhist meta-ethics).

<sup>31</sup> It is notable that the majority of contributors in Garfield and Westerhoff (2015) acknowledge a deep difference between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra—many in response to the idea that their shared emphasis on non-duality erases any real philosophical divide—centering on the question of whether ultimate truth is “empty” or is instead a real and important alternative to conventional truth. Burton (2004) reaches the same conclusion, noting not only that “Madhyamaka anti-realism is more extreme than that of Yogācāra” (93), but also that the latter was a philosophical repositioning *in response* to what I am calling Madhyamaka's *atipada* (cf. pp. 94-98).

Mahāyāna context, then, we should consider how Yogācāra ideas are now received among Buddhist philosophers in this contemporary meta-ethical context.

### **A Yogācārin Without an Ultimate Axiology: Vasubandhu Through a Contemporary Lens**

Jonathan Gold, in a landmark study of Vasubandhu's philosophy (*Paving the Great Way: Vasubandhu's Unifying Buddhist Philosophy*), develops a framework for interpreting Yogācāra that encompasses the full range of Vasubandhu's writings. Interestingly, his interpretation points to some close parallels between Vasubandhu and Madhyamaka.<sup>32</sup> Whereas I have been suggesting that a real distinction between ultimate and conventional truth is necessary to avoid relativism and other instances of *atipada*, Gold casts doubt on the objective significance of that distinction, appealing to considerations that seem to tie together Vasubandhu's diverse texts. His Vasubandhu takes aim, in particular, at the postulation of *nirvāṇa* as a focus of ultimate truth (whether truth(s) about *nirvāṇa*, or truth(s) as cognized in the state of *nirvāṇa*). Even if we should be skeptical about many classical Buddhist statements regarding *nirvāṇa*, however, the term is often used as an important placeholder that functions in Buddhist axiology as a concept of the highest good; and if it turns out that Yogācāra debunks it just as much as Madhyamaka has been alleged to, the *atipada* problem may be around the corner, once again.

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<sup>32</sup> As Gold acknowledges on p. 287 (n. 87). Another prominent interpreter of Vasubandhu (and of Chinese elaborations of Yogācāra), Dan Lusthaus, to an even greater extent, tries to reconcile Yogācāra and Madhyamaka themes (2002, chapter 10), despite the apparently even greater difficulty of extending this to the *Weishi* tradition.

My philosophical reservations here are not directed against Gold himself, but against the Vasubandhu that Gold offers—whether that ultimately means Vasubandhu himself (insofar as Gold accurately captures the main import of his Yogācāra philosophy, as well as his other philosophical phases), or whether it indicates a reservation about the way in which Gold interprets Vasubandhu. This is not the place to venture a view on how best to interpret Vasubandhu, so my default assumption should perhaps be that my doubts are doubts about “*this* Vasubandhu,” a figure who, in this guise, supposedly renounces ultimate axiology. (Nonetheless, I do also express some doubts, on the next page, about portraying the Yogācārin Vasubandhu as an anti-realist about ultimate truth in axiology.)

It might not be fair, in any case, to judge Gold’s complex interpretive approach on the basis of the issues we are discussing here. In fact, only in a few places does he consider what amounts to an *ethical* anti-realism, which he suggests is something that follows from Vasubandhu’s mature system of thought. It is nonetheless noteworthy that, in those sections, Gold offers anti-realist interpretations that dovetail with views expressed by certain Cowherds and a great many other contemporary Buddhist philosophers. These include the view—or a provocation that proposes—that even *nirvāṇa* itself is not ultimately real.<sup>33</sup> *A fortiori*, its

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<sup>33</sup> Whereas this theme (which is itself a variation on the “non-duality” theme; cf. pp. 171-75) surfaces at several points in Gold’s book, ethics itself is only discussed in his last chapter. Although the relevance of this for ethics is made plain early in that chapter, however, most of the chapter is devoted to questions concerning free will. The latter focus seems to risk understating the importance of the *pāramitās* and other aspects of bodhisattva ethics in Vasubandhu, an understatement which perhaps occludes the issue of the fate of those ideals in the context of (putatively) generalized *sūnyatā*—in other words, the main issue I am raising here. I would add that my inclination to see Vasubandhu as using a robust two-truths distinction (to affirm the reality of *nirvāṇa*) is not incompatible with the non-duality theme, or at least this version of it: non-duality

putative role as the highest good must also thereby be debunked as not ultimately real. (As he says early on, regarding views that “ramif[y] across [his] philosophy,” Gold finds that “Vasubandhu denies the causal efficacy, and the reality, of unconditioned things . . . (such as . . . *nirvāṇa*) . . . [which] are like a creator god . . . The only reason we notice them—really, we imagine them—is that we project an absence upon a locus of expectation” (31).) Meanwhile, in noting that Gold sees such an anti-realism as *following from* Vasubandhu’s system, it seems that we may contrast this with what Vasubandhu says directly about *nirvāṇa*. There is an apparently straightforward assimilation, in at least three of Vasubandhu’s *Yogācāra* texts, of claiming *nirvāṇa* as the supreme good and claiming that the ultimate truth—whatever it is—should govern any justifiable systematization of “conventional” matters, in effect making it ultimately true that *nirvāṇa* is the final shared aim of sentient beings (and ultimately true that it has, to say the least, intrinsic value). We can highlight some instances of this, before comparing Gold’s interpretation.

In the last stanza of his *Triṃśatikā*, Vasubandhu refers to “*vimuktikāyo*” (liberation), and calls it *dharma*(kaya), which Kochumuttom translates simply as “truth” (160). Similarly, in the last stanza of the *Tri-Svabhāva-Nirdeśa*, Vasubandhu speaks of “bodhi” (enlightenment), and calls it *anuttarām*—i.e., highest, or as Kochumuttom has it, “unsurpassed” (126). And in the *Madhyānta-Vibhāga*, *nirvāṇa* is discussed explicitly, qualified at one point as *nirupadhi*(śeṣe), which can mean either “genuine” or “absolute,” and which this translator renders as “absolute” (81). Meanwhile, the third and highest *svabhāva* is called *pariṇiṣpanna*, a normative

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can reflect the aim of overcoming problematic dichotomies such as *pure/impure*, which may be more detrimental in ethics than in meta-ethics. With this in mind, we can throw some light on aspects of Vasubandhu’s value theory that are independent of his *Cittamātra* claims, which is just as well, seeing as some might worry that the implied monism of *Cittamātra* also flirts with *atipada*.



designation meaning *perfected* or “absolutely accomplished” (which, in stanza 23 of the *Tri-Svabhāva-Nirdeśa*, is equated with ultimate truth).<sup>34</sup> As a purveyor of *upāya*, Vasubandhu may not always wish us to take his words at face value; but an overview of these passages would suggest that he may simply be expressing, in various ways, the view that the normative salience of *nirvāṇa* is ultimately real, and perhaps the only ultimately real *svabhāva*. (In other words, Vasubandhu may take anti-realism very far indeed, but he seems intent on stopping short precisely where a further step would be an *atipada*.) Gold, on the other hand, seems to suggest that we should not take any of this at face value.

Gold acknowledges some tensions within Vasubandhu’s ethics: not only does the reductionism with respect to personhood pose the usual challenges for moral reflection, but also, there is a conception of the universe as “charged with moral significance,” even though each of its elements’ real significance is exhausted by its “participation in causal relationships” (178). Anticipating the response of an axiological realist, he adds:

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, in that stanza, *pariṇiṣpanna svabhāva* is called “beyond the conventional” (Kochumuttom has “freed of all conventional values” for *vyavahāra-samuccheda* (*Buddhist Doctrine*, 108)), which is in some ways a more definite rejection of an anti-realist reduction to conventional truth (compared to use of the term *paramārtha*, which can at times be used as poetic hyperbole and/or formulaic *upāya*). Gold writes that “[w]hen we read Vasubandhu’s Three Natures view . . . we must understand that its purpose is not a literalistic reification of the structure of ultimate reality” (172); but in light of that stanza and other Yogācāra equations of *pariṇiṣpanna* and *paramārthasatya*, the purpose seems hardly to be one of pragmatic “conceptual construction” either. It seems fair enough to exclude “reification” (and after all, if it were that, this could lead to an unnecessary *is-ought* problem from the ethical viewpoint); but to make this point, Gold may be conceiving the “structure of ultimate reality” too narrowly; that “structure” could be something inherently normative, as the term *pariṇiṣpanna* suggests.

. . . We might be inclined to think that this is countered by the notion of *nirvāṇa* as an unmoving, literally “unconditioned” (*asaṃskṛta*) goal, which provides an ultimate, not merely pragmatist, test of morality. Yet for Vasubandhu . . . what is “unconditioned” is by definition disconnected from the causal flow of conditioned entities, and so must be admitted to be a mere conceptual construction, not an ultimately real entity. (179)

Gold also comments that “[e]ven without Vasubandhu’s denial of the ultimate reality of change and *nirvāṇa*, I think it is important to acknowledge that the Buddhist denial of the conventional self veers quite close to moral nihilism” (179). On the one hand, Gold is right to hold off on concluding that it veers all the way into moral nihilism (and meanwhile, his phrasing reflects our concern about *atipada*—the concern about denials that veer *too* close to nihilism). On the other hand, if the intention is to assuage our concern about the nihilistic implications of precluding any highest good (and *nirvāṇa* in particular), by suggesting that even some standard, non-sectarian premises of *buddhadharma* carry similarly nihilistic implications, Gold is surely underestimating how much further the axiological anti-realism would take us (i.e., how much closer to *atipada*). Consider, once again, this contrast with the *anattā* premise: it cannot be self-refuting to deny something’s diachronic identity (even if the thing in question is a self or person); but it may well be self-refuting, and in any case incoherent, to give reasons for a denial of the existence of reasons—and if reasons are provided by axiology in the broadest sense, then denying the latter, and/or explaining away the no-

tion of intrinsic value, would amount to an attempt at simultaneously offering reasons and precluding the possibility of actually doing so.<sup>35</sup>

In any case, Gold is portraying Vasubandhu as claiming that *nirvāṇa*, and *a fortiori* the value of *nirvāṇa*, are not ultimately real. As we have seen, Gold's descriptions include "projected," "imagined" and "merely [conceptually] constructed." If this were Vasubandhu's view, and if no other source of intrinsic value is envisaged to take the place of *nirvāṇa*, then, I would suggest, his *atipada* would be as philosophically damaging as that of strict Mādhyamikas, e.g., as interpreted by the Cowherds above. The passages quoted earlier may nonetheless make us wonder if it was really his view, though to be fair to Gold, it would seem that he attributes this to the mature Vasubandhu as a result of his intentional—and thought-provoking—extension of Vasubandhu's earlier treatments of causality into the context of the latter's Yogācāra writings. Far from being a rash overgeneralization, this "unifying" reading of Vasubandhu's various works, in light of the theme of causal interdependence, is one of Gold's striking innovations (or, perhaps, discoveries). It may indeed be a fruitful avenue of interpretation; however, its implications for the possibility of robust ethical insight (and likely for normative epistemology as well<sup>36</sup>) seem to emerge as even more nihilistic than he suspects.

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<sup>35</sup> For several influential arguments that seek to show that reasons presuppose objectivist axiology, see Parfit (2011); but the above way of arguing for the incoherence of anti-realism does not assume Parfit's externalism about reasons—it does not argue *from* such an externalist premise, though it may indirectly *support* a realism along those lines.

<sup>36</sup> And this is where the risk of self-stultification becomes acute: we may wonder if Gold really wishes to valorize a Vasubandhu whose (alleged) reductionism would mean that both the former's and the latter's steps in reasoning are merely instances of causal patterns.

It would be unfair, and perhaps superfluous, to assume that Gold is echoing the same pervasive ethical anti-realism in contemporary philosophy that may make some other contemporary Buddhist philosophers comfortable with such anti-realism. After all, interpretive inclinations akin to Gold's could come from the other direction in time, e.g., from an interpreter's appreciation of the emptiness theme in *earlier* Prajñāpāramitā scriptures, which Vasubandhu does not after all wish to disown, and which any writer on Mahāyāna themes is likely to have in either front or back of mind when exploring Buddhist philosophy. It is not that I wish to—or feel we should—speculate about the genealogy of Gold's (or other) interpretations. This observation should lead us, rather, to pose an important question about the scope of our problem: is it something about the *Mahāyāna* context, specifically, that generates the *atipada* problem? That would be an awkward conclusion for any historian of ethics, such as myself, who regards the bodhisattva ideal as containing a unique insight into the morality of self-sacrifice, and as a highlight of “medieval” ethical theorizing, by any philosophical standard.<sup>37</sup> (Awkward, because an anti-realist's explanation of the ideal would risk depriving it of its *philosophical* interest.) But we may doubt that any account

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<sup>37</sup> “Medieval” is a flawed—though not easily replaced—term, when used to refer to the Indian period when Nālanda (and e.g., Śāntideva) flourished; and the idea that this traditional periodization can capture common features of both Indian and European developments is problematic, to say the least. Even though moral self-sacrifice was obviously a central theme of medieval Western thought, the justification for it generally had to do with the saintliness of the martyr; and though there are parallels to that in some Buddhist conceptions of self-sacrifice, there are also very different justifications based on the radically other-regarding focus of the selfless bodhisattva (cf. Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*, chapters 5-6). Partly for this reason, we should respond to anyone pointing an accusing finger at Mahāyāna in general (for the problem discussed in this paper) by emphasizing such formidable intellectual achievements of Mahāyāna philosophy as these. As we are about to see, its various notions of emptiness are not the only culprits here, in any case.

of Vasubandhu's soteriology could ultimately support a general indictment of Mahāyāna ethics. Moreover, the *atipada* problem is not confined to elaborations on the Mahāyāna conception of emptiness. For better or worse, even a more naturalistic ethical approach, dispensing with the otherworldly *bodhicitta* of the bodhisattva, can raise similar concerns about ethical anti-realism, as another recent book to which we now turn (Stephen Batchelor's *After Buddhism*) demonstrates.

### **Going back to the Suttas: Ethics without Metaphysics, Originalism without Finalism**

Not all forms of Mahāyāna meta-ethics suffer necessarily from the *atipada* problem, as we have just seen (insofar as what we saw in the direct quotes from Vasubandhu was a vindication of the normative role of ultimate truth rather than a denial of it). Perhaps some form of Yogācāra perfectionism can offer a promising approach to Buddhist meta-ethics,<sup>38</sup> more promising not only than other Mahāyāna paths but also various non-Mahāyāna options—for there are tendencies that risk *atipada* outside of the Mahāyāna context as well. One that I will not discuss here may arise from Theravāda versions of what Damien Keown calls the “transcendancy thesis,” the claim that enlightenment is “beyond good and evil” (Keown, ch. 4). Insofar as versions of the transcendancy thesis are grounded in specific passages in the Pali suttas, there may thus be some forms of textual originalism that are indigenous to Buddhist societies and that raise a version of the *atipada* problem. Once again, however, I will instead discuss a modern form of Buddhist originalism, a perspective that interlaces some of the themes of contemporary Western philosophy with an ethical vision based on what we know of Gotama's natu-

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<sup>38</sup> I consider this possibility in more detail in Davis (2013).

ral human experiences in the life he lived after his enlightenment but before receiving the honorific titles of “Buddha” and “Bhāgavata.”

Developing his primarily ethical understanding of Buddhism, Stephen Batchelor has reverted from the lofty ideals of Mahāyāna bodhi-sattvas to a more worldly moral conception inspired by the Pali suttas. In his recent book *After Buddhism*, he tries to recover what he believes Gotama laid out as a fourfold *task*, in order to rescue it from its “metaphysical” reification into a fourfold “truth.” He does not entirely shun the philosophical standards referred to earlier, however; his is not a project along the lines of a shock-tactic anti-intellectualism, such as is sometimes associated, rightly or wrongly, with some forms of Zen discourse. In fact, he offers justifications for the shift in perspective, and not only scriptural ones, but also philosophical ones.

There is, first of all, the general point cited from Alasdair MacIntyre: “the past is never something merely to be discarded,” which Batchelor uses to explain his “return to the roots of the tradition” (Batchelor 20; cf. MacIntyre 146). He adopts some elements of MacIntyre’s historicism, which is partly motivated by a recoil from what Batchelor calls “detached, objective understanding” (a modern and allegedly misguided aim). Going further, he advocates a “reenchantment of the world” (17), one that invests not only the world, but also ancient scriptures, with new meaning and inspiration, and—similar to how some “anti-theory” ethicists see *phronesis*—a reorientation that would shift our focus to “tasks,” rather than an ethic mediated by reflection on objectivist metaphysics. Making “[metaphysical] truth-claims requires the adoption of a distanced stance . . . [without which, for better or worse] an opponent could dismiss whatever you say as merely the product of your own relativistic point of view” (117). Batchelor warns against taking such an opponent too seriously and laments the fact that “Buddhists must have felt obliged to adopt [a] rhetoric of truth,” which explains a puta-

tively regrettable recourse to the distinction between conventional and ultimate truths, after Gotama's time. This is also taken to explain how "a correspondence theory of truth came to be taken for granted in Buddhist philosophical thought, much as it has been in most Western philosophy" (118). Despite suggesting that an engaged renewal of tradition need not pass any kind of anti-relativist test—and implying, perhaps, that systematic justification is an unhealthy expectation in ethics—Batchelor offers a few justifications for his turn of thought. For example, he invokes the work of twentieth-century philosophers who affirm the priority of "task" over "truth": "pragmatic philosophers such as James, Dewey and Richard Rorty and phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Gianni Vattimo have all challenged this notion of truth" (118).<sup>39</sup>

There is at least a philosophical pedigree, then, for Batchelor's approach; and interestingly, even though it is one based on comparatively recent philosophical sources, it is apparently intended to offer a degree of justification for how Batchelor wishes to revive the original ethical vision of Gotama. He may not intend it as a justification that would qualify, in any classical sense, as either "metaphysical" or "epistemological." But, to his credit, Batchelor seems willing to participate in the wider discussion, and in various ongoing dialogues, so to speak, in which reasons and responses are offered to interlocutors, in accord with broadly rationalist (as well as empiricist) norms of inquiry. The problem is that, nonetheless, he advances a form of anti-realism that puts the status

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<sup>39</sup> There is already a problem here, insofar as historicism is (or may be) intended as a kind of historical relativism. The sort of modernist narrative invoked here would appear to contravene relativism, insofar as it treats these thinkers as contributing to intellectual progress via improvements or refinements in (e.g.) epistemology. According to historical relativism, no intellectual or literary epoch could offer more valuable insight(s) than any other; hence, on that view, a survey of recent developments would have to be either purely descriptive or else expressive of the surveyor's own affiliation, but not in any larger sense *vindictory* (again, except in some avowedly subjective way).

of those reasons in doubt. Batchelor's claim is not merely that there is no reified ego that needs to be accounted for in the context of ethical praxis; it is that there are no objective *truths* that either do or should play a role, either in praxis or in reflection or deliberation or discussion. He does not fully endorse the term "relativism," though in that regard, he is similar to some of his pragmatist precursors, who nonetheless qualify as relativists by any common definition (e.g., Richard Rorty, as exemplified in his "Solidarity or Objectivity" (1989), 37-42). In any case, Batchelor does suggest that we "let go of truth," as he has done, as he put it in an earlier book: "I have relinquished the idea that a "true" belief is one that corresponds to something that exists "out there"" (*Confession* 199). If something can only be "valued as true because . . . useful" (*ibid*), then only conventional truth exists; but let us consider where this would leave the general values that Batchelor retains from Buddhist ethics.

Applying all this to his account of *buddhadharma*, Batchelor claims that "[Gotama's] awakening was not achieved by gaining privileged knowledge of an ultimate truth but by seeing himself and his world in a radically different way" (62). Doubts should arise here, in light of some very simple reflections. Batchelor would surely agree, along with almost all Buddhists, that Gotama's insights would not be worth so much attention, if the new "way of seeing" were radically different, but only in a *value-neutrally* different way; the presumption is rather that it is a *better* way. And if it *is* a better way, then it is true that it is a better way. (I italicize "is" to make clear that the antecedent is not just to the effect that we *believe* it to be the better way; after all, when it comes to belief, even those who endorse an extreme—e.g., unconstrained egoism—believe theirs is the better way; but few Buddhists would put their beliefs on the same level as those that endorse such extremes.) The truth just mentioned, meanwhile, had better not be relativized, or else there will only be the bare fact of our preference for the new way of seeing the world, and that fact would be a value-neutral one (except in a subjective sense



of “valuing,” that is, “valuing” from the point of view of those who form this preference). Given the wariness of desire and preference in Buddhism, “value” (*kusala*) would seem to involve more than just “valuing.” And if there is to be real value in the new “seeing,” then it must be true that there is real value in this. This is not to say that we would add value to what already has great value by meditating on *this* truth about it; rather, the role of this kind of truth is simply a presupposition of any talk of “awakening” (or other robust values) in ethics—but it will have to involve a notion of truth that allows for objectivity to be distinguished from subjectivity. To put this another way: if there is nothing objective, then there can be no ultimate truth in the sense of a truth beyond what some people might feel or prefer or wish to instrumentalize. And if we let go of ultimate truth, then there is nothing more than subjective preference—i.e., no partisan-independent prospect of value<sup>40</sup>—involved in a resolution to pursue wisdom or awakening (or rather, what in this case would merely be called “wisdom” or “awakening”). Assuming that we, and perhaps Batchelor himself, would balk at debunking *bodhi* in that

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<sup>40</sup> A few qualifications are important here: (1) “letting go” of any or all *conceptions* of the ultimate truth may be salutary or even salvific in some contexts (this is one of the many grains of truth in Mark Siderits’s explanation of the soteriology of Madhyamaka emptiness (Siderits “Does Buddhist Ethics Exist?” (2016a, 137); cf. his 2016b)); the problem here is not “letting go” in that sense, but rather the claim that “there is no ultimate truth”; (2) I take it that “ultimate” implies “objective” (in what might be called the “truth-maker” sense, not in the concrete object-involving sense, and not necessarily in an epistemic sense); but “objective” does not necessarily imply “ultimate”; (3) It is tempting to shorten “no partisan-independent prospect . . .” to “no demonstrable value,” but doing so could make it harder to keep in mind that this argument does not rule out ethical particularism of the kind favored by Michael Barnhart (2012) as an interpretation of Buddhist ethics. Not only might particularism be ultimately true, it might also be true that we have no means of *demonstrating* or *assuring* (ourselves, let alone others) that this or that is a worthwhile thing to do or a worthwhile thing to think. Such an epistemic limitation can—and I would argue, must—coexist with there *being* ultimate truth(s) that make some course or path either *kuśala* or *akuśala*.

way, it seems we must retrace our steps, and reconsider the step that led in that direction—reconsider, that is, the rejection of ultimate truth.

One aspect of this response to Batchelor, qua *meta*-ethical, is that it need not put truth on a pedestal as an ideal of its own, however crucial we may take the alethic presupposition to be for the viability of any ethical discourse, including practical deliberation. Batchelor seems to overlook this way of salvaging the concept of ultimate truth (all specification of that truth aside), when he says:

By shifting the emphasis from tasks to truths, the Buddhist tradition begins tacitly privileging abstract knowledge over felt experience. As long as Buddhist teachers persist in employing the language of “noble truths,” they unthinkingly endorse the preeminence of doctrinal belief over practical application. (122)

Perhaps there are some who have elevated doctrinal matters too high in their hierarchy of values; however, what an ethicist needs to bear in mind is not the “preeminence” of doctrine, but rather the *presupposition* of a special status for objective truth as a constitutive aim of ethical reflection. That special status is meta-ethical rather than ethical; we need it, but we do not have to hallow it or exalt it. Of course, many Buddhists *do*, in a sense, exalt the notion of ultimate truth, but right or wrong, they have other reasons for doing that.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, an anti-realist who attempts to debunk truth and objectivity will lose any claim to seek (let alone to find) ethical importance in some things rather than others—which, in ethics, amounts to an *atipada*.

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<sup>41</sup> These reasons have to do with how *jñāna* and *samādhi* are meant to come together in awakening, and not, of course, with a logical relation of presupposition between normative claims and *alethic* commitments.

It should be said in Batchelor's defense, perhaps, that he does not fully expose himself to such a *reductio ad absurdum* because he does not present a settled philosophical position. And indeed, one of the appealing features of his ethical explorations is the way in which he draws on diverse sources in order to highlight concrete and sensible ethical values—including his own background in Tibetan Mahāyāna philosophy, a close familiarity with the Pali suttas, and a way of respecting the latter that resonates with certain aspects of the Theravāda tradition. The Theravāda element may even offer a refuge from the *atipada*; it can do justice to the emptiness of persons, perhaps, without taking fraught steps towards a generalization of emptiness and global anti-realism. Some might even see a robust moral realism at work in Theravāda ethics, though it is not clear that either the suttas or the Abhidhamma tradition can settle this one way or the other.<sup>42</sup> To the extent that Batchelor recovers some related ideas from the Pali suttas, his approach may ultimately suggest ways of stepping back from the *śūnyavādin's* anti-realist precipice.

In closing, however, it is worth noting an irony that results from Batchelor's skepticism about the karma/rebirth framework for Buddhist ethics (a framework that one finds, of course, in some of the most traditional forms of Buddhist morality). That skepticism has all the hallmarks of modern methods of critique; but if the critique cannot at least aim at a degree of objectivity (in addition to mere "modernity"), it is not clear how or why the skeptical stance would deserve greater credibility than the karma/rebirth framework—or any dogma, for that matter. In mentioning this, my aim is not to defend the role of karmic conceptions in Buddhist ethics (let alone ethics in general); it is rather to highlight the

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<sup>42</sup> Keown (63–64) favors a meta-ethical naturalism of a broadly realist kind, inspired by elements of this tradition; the question of whether it can be sufficiently robust is discussed in Davis (2013).

handicap that results from *atipada*, which would hamper our ability to defend *any* framework for ethics.

### Concluding Remarks

Taken in a generic sense, *atipada* is something that almost all who consider themselves Buddhists are committed to avoiding, insofar as the tradition as a whole advocates pulling back from any steps that veer too far from the middle path. The middle path is often hard to describe, however (no less for Buddhists than for Aristotelians in the Western tradition); and it may be that a philosophically motivated concept of *atipada*, along the lines explored here, could be more precise—for better or worse—than the concept of an ethical or spiritual “mean” or “middle way.” This would be because the philosophical concept does not merely castigate the very notion(s) of excess and extremity, but instead specifies how certain steps in expanding the scope of *śūnyatā* carry subversive implications for the status of reasoning and philosophical reflection, including that which is needed to nourish *śūnyavāda* itself.

Meanwhile, I should conclude by stressing the conditional form of my principal claim in this paper. I have not argued that ethical anti-realism is false in all possible formulations of anti-realism, but rather that several meta-ethical forms of anti-realism (invoked in discussions of Buddhist ethics) clash with robust ethical ideals, and are thus out of place, if not subversive, in any system of belief or praxis that has such ideals. In other words, if a Buddhist—or anyone else—acknowledges the normative intent of their ethical or epistemic standards, then to that extent the scope of whatever anti-realism *they* might endorse must be limited. In light of the fact that Buddhist philosophers tend to reject “Platonic” ideals (*qua* Forms or Universals), some may respond that their Buddhism is not one that has ideals or standards that are “robust” in

that way, or any other objectionable way. This does not settle very much, however, because debunking Platonic realism does not exclude other forms of realism and does not do much to either support or mitigate anti-realism; and meanwhile these philosophers cannot so easily dislodge the basic thought that putatively universal ideals require a notion of *justified* universality. Moreover, we have seen that the most sweeping kinds of anti-realism can lead to incoherence even before the proponent's ideals or values can be scrutinized on ethical grounds, because their denial of normativity undermines the normativity of their broader rational standards, including standards of argument and conceptualization. With the latter in mind, we may note that it is not moral attitudes or behavior that presuppose moral realism or objectivism; it is rather the idea that some may ultimately be more justified than others. Whether Buddhist ethicists should keep an open mind to moral realism—or at least be mindful of the philosophical costs of *atipada*—will depend, therefore, on whether they acknowledge the role of the justified/unjustified distinction in explicating the *kuśala/akuśala* distinction.

The willingness to apply global forms of emptiness in ethics, even to the point of embracing relativism, is hardly new in Buddhist philosophy (cf. Huntington). But it is notable that the main works discussed here, which are already gaining widespread recognition for their importance in the contemporary discussion of Buddhist philosophy, are very recent. One should perhaps not presume to decipher any sort of *Zeitgeist* on such a slender basis as this, but this may at least be an indication that, if the *atipada* is as problematic as I have suggested, then it constitutes a pressing problem both in Buddhist ethics and in contemporary Buddhist philosophy.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> I would like to thank Stephen Jenkins and two anonymous referees for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and also thank Douglas Berger, Christopher Framarin,

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