Abhidharma Metaphysics and the Two Truths

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1. Introduction

The distinction between "the two truths" was initially developed to resolve seeming contradictions in the Buddha's teachings.[1] The Buddha teaches that persons should act compassionately, that persons will be reincarnated, and that persons don't exist. The first two lessons seem inconsistent with the third. Consistency could be restored by distinguishing kinds of truth: the first and second lessons are conventionally true, but it's *conventionally* but not *ultimately* true that persons exist.[2]

In addition to this *semantic* distinction, there is an *ontological* distinction between modes of being that also promises to restore consistency. As many note, "the two truths" is a distinction between entities at least as much as it is one between statements.[3] The Buddha refers to persons and other composite objects, but denies that they exist. But we can distinguish two modes of being: persons and other composite objects merely *conventionally exist*, whereas other things—such as partless dharmas—*ultimately exist*.

We can distinguish two kinds of truth or two modes of being. Perhaps one of these distinctions grounds the other. In this paper, I critically examine three conceptions of the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth, each of which has advocates in the secondary literature on Abhidharma.[4] I'll defend an account of conventional and ultimate truth in terms of conventional and ultimate existence.

In section 2, I examine Mark Siderits's interpretation of conventional truth and argue that it is philosophically unsatisfactory.

In section 3, I examine the view that conventional truths are truths that are expressed by sentences containing *convenient designators*. I distinguish three theories about what convenient designators refer to. The first is that convenient designators covertly refer to fictional objects. The second is that convenient designators are covert plurally referring expressions. The third is that convenient designators don't refer to anything at all, but there is a fiction according to which they do. I then argue that the view of conventional truths as truths that contain convenient designators is unsatisfactory, since there are conventional truths expressible without using convenient designators.

In section 4, I argue for my conception, according to which conventional truth and ultimate truth are defined in terms of conventional existence and ultimate existence. I show how this conception captures the considerations that favor its predecessors while avoiding their problems.

Section 5 closes this paper by suggesting directions for future research.

Two comments before we begin. First, I don't claim to account for *the* distinction between conventional and ultimate truth as found in the Abhidharma canon. Perhaps there are many competing accounts rather than exactly one.

Second, one constraint on this project is that I take conventional truth to be a kind of truth. If conventional truth is just a kind of interesting falsehood, then the Buddha did contradict himself, albeit in a potentially interesting way.[5]

2. Siderits's Conception of Conventional truth

Siderits characterizes conventional truth in several places. We'll focus on the account of Siderits (2007: 56-57), according to which:

> A statement is *conventionally true* if and only if it's acceptable to common sense and consistently leads to successful practice.[6]
>
> A statement is *ultimately true* if and only if it corresponds to the facts and neither asserts nor presupposes the existence of any conceptual fictions.

Many sympathize with something like Siderits's proposal. Aung and Davids (2016a: 180) mention a distinction between ultimate truth and "popular truth", which I take to be had by commonsensical claims. Mohanty (2000: 16) claims that Buddhists believed that "truth is the property of causing successful practical response" and "a cognition on the Buddhist view is true if and only if the practical response it generates leads to success". Westerhoff (2013: 130) claims that, for Abhidharma philosophers, conventional truths are statements that lead to successful action; ultimate truths are about how the world is at the most fundamental level.[7] Ziporyn (2013: 344-345) claims that early Buddhists had a pragmatic theory of truth, and that what is true is what is conducive to ending suffering. Moreover, some scholars ascribe something like this conception of conventional truth to later Buddhist philosophers. Garfield (2015: 80) suggests that, for Candrakīrti, conventional truth is truth as taken for granted by ordinary people; similarly, Goodman (2009: 125-126) argues that Candrakīrti takes conventional truth to be what is incontrovertible commonsense. Finally, in McCrea and Patil (2010: 93), Jñānaśrīmitra appears to say that conventional truth consists in the understanding of ordinary people.

Nonetheless, it's controversial whether Siderits's account is historically accurate. Tillemans (2016: 10) claims that Siderits "over interprets" the Abhidharma philosophers and that

“convenient” and “useful” are Siderits’s extra-textual additions. Siderits (2015: 25, endnote b) himself suggests a cautionary note, calling his account an *extrapolation*. In what follows, I focus on whether Siderits’s conception is philosophically sound rather than textually well-grounded.

Four preliminary comments on Siderits’s account will be useful. Criticisms will then follow.

First, a statement could be both ultimately and conventionally true. Perhaps “there are feelings of pleasure and pain” is both ultimately and conventionally true.[8]

Second, these kinds of truth are each formulated as conjunctions of two non-equivalent conjuncts. Other kinds might be formulated by dropping conjuncts, and in some places Siderits construes conventional truth merely in terms of acceptability to common sense, and in other places primarily in terms of inducing successful practice.[9]

Third, although Siderits occasionally characterizes conventional truth wholly in terms of acceptability to commonsense, conduciveness to successful practice is arguably more important. Here’s why. Commonsense claims like “there are persons” are in better shape with respect to tracking reality than “there are unicorns”. Which feature of commonsense claims constitutes their being in better shape? It’s hollow to say of commonsense utterances that they are in good standing simply because they are commonsensical. However, that commonsense utterances lead to successful practice isn’t hollow.

Fourth, this conception of conventional and ultimate truth is a kind of pluralism about truth, which raises many questions.[10] If conventional truth and ultimate truth are both kinds of truth, is there a generic kind of truth? If there is a generic kind of truth, then a claim is generically true whenever it’s either conventionally true or ultimately true. Is generic truth just

the mere disjunction of conventional and ultimate truth, since it's not a genus of which they are species? If there is no such thing as generic truth, what prevents us from defining up a notion of generic truth?

These four comments clarified Siderits's view but weren't intended as criticisms. I'll now present arguments against it.

The first argument is that, given Siderits's characterization, conventional truth isn't preserved by seemingly deductively valid inferences. But even for conventional truth, deductive reasoning—which, when successful, preserves truth—is important. Even in philosophical contexts, it matters: since claims about me are at most conventionally true, to reason about how I should act, feel, or believe, I need to know what inferences preserve conventional truth.

In what follows, I'll presuppose classical logic since it's easier to state the problem for Siderits's conception of conventional truth using it, although similar problems would arise in a non-classical setting. Begin with a conventionally true statement *P*. *P or Q* follows from *P*. Moreover, one can validly introduce arbitrary disjuncts indefinitely. Eventually, one will produce a lengthy disjunction that commonsense has at best no opinion about and the acceptance of which will not be conducive to successful practice. Perhaps accepting that I should love my neighbor is conducive to successful practice, but it's not obvious that accepting that either I should love my neighbor or donkeys love chocolate or there is an even number of stars in the world or … is conducive to successful practice. Accordingly, on Siderits's account, this lengthy disjunction isn't conventionally true despite being a logical consequence of a conventional truth.[11]

My second argument is that Siderits's conception of conventional truth is too conservative: there are conventionally true claims that aren't commonsensical. Suppose an astronaut travels through space at close to light speed, turns around, and returns home. She'll find that her husband (and everyone else on Earth) has aged more than she has. This result is wildly counterintuitive—it's called "the Twins Paradox" for a reason. But I've stated an instance of the paradox in terms of macroscopic objects, and so this highly verified yet wildly anti-commonsensical result is at best conventionally true. A conception of conventional truth should make sense of this. Siderits's conception doesn't seem able to.[12]

There might also be anti-commonsensical conventional truths in normative philosophy. For example, consider the following argument: each person has a strong reason to promote her own interests; if ultimately there are no persons, then each person has an equally strong reason to promote the interest of others; ultimately, there are no persons. Conclusion: Each person has a reason to promote the interests of others that's as strong as the reason to promote her own interests.[13] This argument isn't obviously unsound. However, the conclusion isn't ultimately true, and it's dubious whether it's conventionally true given Siderits's conception. The conclusion isn't commonsensical, and it's unclear whether its acceptance would actually be conducive to successful practice. If the conclusion isn't conventionally true, then either one of the premises isn't either, or modus ponens is invalid. Either way, the argument fails, and, in general, arguments purporting to derive surprising normative conclusions from metaphysics are probably unsound given Siderits's conception of conventional truth.[14]

The third argument is that because both "acceptable to common sense" and "leads to successful practice" are vague, "is conventionally true" is also vague. Given Siderits's conception, some statements are vague whether they are conventionally true even though every

meaningful sub-sentential expression occurring in them is precise.[15] Suppose that there are finitely many stars in the universe. Is the number of stars even or odd? Both answers are acceptable to commonsense. Neither answer seems more conducive to successful practice.[16] But the number can't be both even and odd, and it must be one or the other. It's surprising that a precise sentence can be indeterminate in this way.[17]

My fourth argument is that it's always an empirical question whether a given claim is conventionally true: for any claim, whether that claim is accepted by commonsense and whether its adoption would lead to successful practice are empirical questions. And yet there can be non-empirical conventional truths. How are these compatible? Note that Siderits's conception of conventional truth is itself a non-empirical claim! Moreover, Siderits's conception isn't ultimately true—since statements are merely conventional entities—so at best it's conventionally true. Whether it's acceptable to common sense depends on its status as a stipulation or an analysis; if the former it presumably is, but if the latter it might not be.[18] I doubt that accepting it is conducive to successful practice, and it's troubling that the fate of a conception of conventional truth hangs in the balance in this way.

This concludes the case against Siderits's conception of conventional truth.

3. Conventional Truths as Truths Containing Convenient Designators

Siderits (2015: 22) suggests that a statement is conventionally true when it's taken to be true and has a *convenient designator* in it, and elsewhere, Siderits (2007: 57; 2016: 93) says that statements containing convenient designators can at most be conventionally true. These statements suggest a simpler conception according to which a statement is conventionally true (false) if and only if it's true (false) and contains a convenient designator; statements are

ultimately true (false) if and only if they are true (false) and don't contain a convenient designator.

This conception has two components, *truth* and *convenient designator*. We'll clarify each in order to assess the proposed conception. With respect to truth, a minimal theory suffices: to say that [P] is true is to say that P; falsity is defined as the negation of truth. This minimal core is compatible with additional conditions that certain statements must satisfy in order to be true; some are discussed momentarily. Note that even the most extremely realistic metaphysics is compatible with a minimal conception of truth, as Lewis (2001) demonstrates.[19] This conception of conventional and ultimate truth is only mildly pluralistic: each is a species of the genus *truth simpliciter*, and conventional and ultimate truths are both true simpliciter.[20]

On this conception, no statement can have both an ultimate truth-value and a conventional truth-value. This is weaker than a ban on "mixed discourse", i.e., nothing in this conception implies that sentences that contain both convenient designators and expressions standing for fundamental entities are meaningless. Siderits's official formulations of conventional and ultimate truth also don't imply this, although Siderits (2009: 62-65; 2015: 98, 191; 2016: 250-252) argues for a ban on mixed discourse. I think these arguments fail, but won't argue that here. Suffice it to say that mixed sentences aren't meaningless, but they have only conventional truth values given the conception of conventional truth articulated here.[21]

We'll now discuss *convenient designators*, which are referring expressions whose semantics is not what an ordinary speaker uncritically assumes. We should probably expand the notion of a convenient designator to include predicates that can be appended to referring expressions. This isn't as precise as I'd like, but its imprecision won't matter here, since most

ordinary proper nouns and singular terms would be convenient designators according to the Abhidharma.[22]

This conception of conventional truth nicely fits with early developments in Buddhist thought. The difference between statements that are fine as is and statements that require interpretation is a difference between statements that have transparent truth-conditions and statements that don't. In *the Discourse to Poṭṭhapadā* (in Holder 2006: 148-149), an implicit distinction is drawn between popular expressions which the enlightened person uses without being led astray by them and expressions that have transparent meanings. Jayatilleke (1963: 361) claims that in the Pali canon, there is a distinction between two types of Suttas (discourses), those of direct meaning and those of indirect meaning. Finally, Watanabe (1983: 39-40) claims that, for Abhidharma, two kinds of statements are distinguished: those consisting of popular terms and those consisting of terms of "strict truth"; the latter have the meanings that they appear to have whereas the former must be restated in order to clarify how they related to ultimate truth.[23]

Here's a helpful example: the expression "the hat". Suppose that some ultimately real partless entities are arranged so that they appear to compose a possession, such as a hat. I want a convenient way to track the sequences of simples so arranged, and so I employ "the hat". (Hence, the name "convenient designator".) That "the hat" is used for reasons of convenience doesn't tell us what, if anything, is referred to by "the hat" or by other convenient designators. Ordinary people (mistakenly) think that "the hat" refers to a genuine concrete whole that is composed of simpler entities. We'll distinguish three revisionary theories of the underlying semantics and metaphysics of the "the hat" and other convenient designators.[24]

On theory 1, “the hat” refers to a fictional object. Theory 1 is suggested by Siderits (2015: 191) and Westerhoff (2013: 131), who both say that conventional statements are about conceptual fictions, and by Priest (2013: 216), who says that convenient fictions are like fictional objects, or social objects like the equator or the Parliament.[25]

On theory 2, “the hat” doesn’t refer to a single entity, but instead plurally refers to many entities. Some expressions are plural referring expressions, i.e., they refer to many things rather than one single thing.[26] One plural referring expression is “The Continental Rationalists”, which is typically used to refer to Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza. But some plural referring expressions are grammatically singular expressions. An example of a grammatically singular plural referring expression is “this pair of socks”. Speakers might falsely believe that a grammatically singular expression is a singular referring expression even though it’s a plural referring expression.[27] “The hat” might plurally refer to many partless entities but speakers mistakenly think that it refers to a single thing. Nonetheless, enlightened persons such as the Buddha might continue using such expressions to conveniently communicate.

Theory 2 is suggested by Buddhaghosa (1997: 687-689), who analogizes “person” with “fist”, the latter of which collectively refers to many fingers when they are in a certain arrangement. In Aung and Davids (2016a: 61), it’s claimed that “Being”, i.e., “sentient being”, stands for a mere bundle of formations.[28] Others sound similar notes.[29]

Don’t conflate theory 1 and theory 2! Even if we recognize that it’s a *convenient fiction* that a given expression singularly refers, it doesn’t follow that there is a fictional object that the expression refers to.[30] Even if, in addition to the partless entities arranged hatwise, there is also a fictional entity of the sort that a proponent of theory 1 believes in, theory 2 denies that “the hat” refers to it.

On theory 3, "the hat" doesn't refer at all, but there is a fiction that we all presuppose (or uncritically believe) according to which "the hat" does refer to something, specifically, a concrete whole. Don't conflate theory 1 and theory 3! Theory 1 is committed to fictional objects whereas theory 3 isn't. Don't conflate a name that refers to a fictional object and a fiction according to which a name refers to an object! Perhaps "Sherlock Holmes" refers to a fictional object. But we could create a fiction in which a random sound such as "blerg" refers to something without establishing any particular thing in that fiction as the referent of "blerg". In this situation, it wouldn't be unqualifiedly true that "blerg" refers to something, not even a fictional object.

Theory 3 is suggested by Giles (1983: 185, 187, 197), who says that pronouns like "I" and proper names like "Nāgasena" are non-denoting, and Ganeri (2011: 188), who interprets Vasubandhu as holding that "I" is a referring expression without a referent even though its use creates a false impression that there is one.[31]

These theories of convenient designators engender different explanations of how a conventional truth can be true.

Consider "the hat is wet". Given theory 1, this sentence is true only if the predicate "wet" is applicable to fictional objects. Prima facie, fictional objects can be depicted as being wet, but they can't actually be wet. So does "wet" refer to a different property than we thought? If so, just as it's a convenient fiction that "the hat" refers to a nonfictional object, it's a fiction that "wet" refers to a property that only nonfictional things have.

Alternatively, perhaps "the hat is wet" is merely true according to a fiction. (Compare: Sherlock Holmes, the fictional object, isn't a detective, but is a detective according to the

Sherlock Holmes stories.) On this view, conventional truth isn't a kind of truth but rather is merely truth according to a convenient fiction.

Theory 2 is perhaps the least revisionary. If a grammatically singular term really is a plural referring expression, then, if some set of commonsense sentences using it are true, the predicates in those sentences need to be reinterpreted as predicates that can be true of pluralities. Consider "The hat is unique". Just as "the hat" is a plural referring expression, "is unique" is a plural predicate that can be collectively satisfied by many entities, such as those referred to by "the hat". On this reinterpretation, "the hat is unique" is true. But ordinary speakers mistakenly take plural referring expressions and plural predicates to be singularly referring expressions and singular predicates.

Let's turn to theory 3, according to which "the hat" doesn't refer, and so unqualified sentences like "the hat is wet" aren't true. But there's a nearby sentence that's true: according to the convenient fiction embodied in commonsense, the hat is wet. On this addition to theory 3, conventional truth is truth according to a convenient fiction.[32]

The theories of convenient designators we've discussed each were about expressions as used by ordinary speakers. Alternatively, these theories could be interpreted as theories of the semantics of expressions as used by extraordinary—that is, enlightened—speakers. On this alternative, the enlightened use ordinary words in new ways so that they can express truths with sentences that contain these words. These sentences ordinarily would not express truths, but do in the contexts in which the enlightened use them. I'll henceforth ignore this alternative interpretation.

The conception of conventional truths as truths containing convenient designators avoids many of the problems that faced Siderits's conception. Some conventional truths are a priori, since some a priori truths contain convenient designators. ("All hats are hats" is an a priori conventional truth.) Conventional truths can deny commonsense, and hence we can be surprised by them. (Recall the discussion of the Twins Paradox and revisionary ethical theories.)

Conventional truth might also be preserved under logical implication. Given theories 1 and 2, there is no obvious reason to think that it's not. Theory 3 is harder to evaluate. Whether it is turns on whether fictions in general implicitly represent all the logical consequences of what is explicitly represented by them, or whether the particular fiction we presuppose does.[33] If so, then conventional truth is in this sense closed under logical consequence. If not, this is perhaps a serious problem for theory 3.[34]

Let's now assess what theories 1-3 each imply about the ontological distinction between conventional and ultimate *entities* that is also in the Abhidharma literature.

Here, theory 1 does best. On theory 1, there are fictional entities. Fictional things (i.e., "conventional existents") are a different kind of thing than nonfictional partless entities (i.e., "ultimate existents"). Fictional entities plausibly exist in a different way than nonfictional entities, so we could reasonably distinguish conventional and ultimate existence. But, if we go this route, we should endorse the simpler conception of conventional truth discussed in section 4.

Theory 2 does poorly. On theory 2, there aren't two different kinds of entities or ways of existence. Rather, there is only one kind of entity—partless dharmas—and two ways of referring to its members: singularly or plurally. Given theory 2, the status of "the hat is a conventional entity" is problematic. "The hat" covertly plurally refers to partless dharmas in a particular

arrangement. They aren't conventional entities. So "the hat is a conventional entity" isn't conventionally true or ultimately true. It's only conventionally false. One *could* introduce a technical expression "is a conventional entity", and understand this to be an *explicitly* plural predicate that is collectively satisfied by some dharmas under certain conditions. If we do this, "there are conventional entities" will be *ultimately* true but "the hat is a conventional entity" will be merely conventionally true. This is weird and artificial—and we wouldn't capture an ontological distinction between kinds of entities or modes of being. We'd merely pay it lip service.

Theory 3 also does poorly. On theory 3, "the hat" doesn't refer at all. So there is no conventional entity that is the hat. Given theory 3, there are no conventional entities. There are only fictions according to which there are entities other than dharmas. This isn't a distinction between kinds of entities or modes of being. It's a distinction between what there is and a pretense about what there is.

One nice thing about each conception of conventional truth as truth that contains a convenient designator is that they employ only relatively ordinary notions such as reference (to fictional objects), plural reference, or truth in fiction.

Unfortunately, none of these versions succeed. There is a master argument against them all: there are conventional truths that don't contain a convenient designator; hence, the conception of conventional truths as truths that contain convenient designators is false. Consider a momentarily slice of spacetime that seems to include a hat. Exactly *n* ultimate entities are located there. So it should be conventionally true that there are more than *n* things there. (It's conventionally true that the hat exists, and the hat isn't identical with any of the partless entities.) Usually, if there is some finite number *n* of partless entities at a given place, it's conventionally

true that more than *n* entities are there.[35] "Entity" isn't a convenient designator.[36] In short, quantified claims can be conventionally true even though they don't contain convenient designators.[37]

The obvious response to this argument is to expand the notion of convenient designators so that *quantifiers* can also be convenient designators. We could distinguish two existential quantifiers: one that ranges over only fundamental/partless entities, and one that ranges over fundamental entities and merely conventional entities. This is a good response. But once we make it, we'll see that there is a simpler, better conception of conventional and ultimate truth available, which ties this distinction directly to the distinction between conventional and ultimate existence. We'll discuss this next.

4. Conventional Existence and Ultimate Existence Are Modes of Being

On the view I prefer, conventional existence and ultimate existence are modes of being. On this view, hats, persons, and other conventional existents exist, but the way in which they exist is different from the way in which dharmas exist. Moreover, the mode of being of conventional existents is deficient or attenuated relative to ultimate existence.

This conception is suggested by Aung and Davids (2016b: 81, 199-200), which contains a discussion of things that exist "in the highest sense". Asaṅga (2001: 29-30, 73) distinguishes conventional and ultimate existence, and distinguishes (p. 85) conventional truths about the suffering of persons from ultimate truths about aggregates of attachment. Bartley (2015: 44) notes that Sarvāstivādins distinguish conventional from ultimate existence. Similarly, Williams (1981) notes that Abhidharma philosophers distinguish primary and secondary existence, with the latter being in some way dependent on language or concepts. Williams (1981: 237) also notes

that Samghabhadra adds that the distinction between primary and secondary existence corresponds to that between ultimate and conventional truth.[38]

I'll draw on recent work in metaphysics on ontological pluralism, which is the view that there are modes of being, when formulating the conception of conventional truth that I prefer.[39] I assume that there is a metaphysical distinction between expressions that are metaphysically fundamental/carve nature at the joints and those that don't, and that this distinction doesn't merely apply to predicates but also applies to quantifiers.[40] Fundamental modes of being correspond to metaphysically fundamental quantifiers.[41] Some quantifiers are "semantically primitive restricted quantifiers": they range over only a proper subset of what there is but not in virtue of being defined in terms of an unrestricted quantifier conjoined with a restricting predicate or operator.[42] The unrestricted existential quantifier present in ordinary speech— which corresponds to what I will call "generic existence"— isn't a joint-carving quantifier, but some (possible) semantically primitive restricted quantifiers are.[43]

On my conception, conventional existence just is generic existence, and ultimate existence/primary existence is what is expressed by a metaphysically fundamental semantically primitive existential quantifier that ranges over only partless dharmas.[44] If you like, it's the quantifier that ranges over the things that *really* exist, in that peculiarly metaphysical use of "really".

Dharmas both ultimately exist and generically exist. (Dharmas are within the range of the ordinary language expressions "some", "exists", "there are", and so on. I have mostly written in English in what has preceded.) On my view, an entity's grade of being is proportionate to the grade of fundamentality of that entity's most fundamental mode of being.[45] Since dharmas enjoy a fundamental mode of being, they have the highest grade of being. But some things generically

exist but don't ultimately exist; these entities are *merely conventional entities*. Merely conventional entities have less being, and this is why they are second-rate entities.[46]

On my conception, the ontological distinction between ultimate and conventional existence is more important than a semantic distinction between ultimate and conventional truth. Moreover, as noted in section 1, this ontological distinction is by itself sufficient to render internally consistent the Buddha's teachings.

That said, we could still define up notions of conventional and ultimate truth. There are many proposals to consider. One proposal naturally extends the theory discussed in section 3: we define a conventional truth (falsehood) as a truth (falsehood) containing a kind of expression—in this case, a *conventional* expression. Generic existence is expressed by the generic quantifier, and is by default a conventional expression. Conventional referring expressions are those that denote conventional entities; conventional predicates are those that are possibly true of some conventional entity or entities. An ultimate truth (falsehood) is a truth (falsehood) that contains no conventional expressions. "Mixed discourse" isn't banned, but any sentence containing it has only a conventional truth-value. In slogan form, conventional (ultimate) truths are truths about what conventionally (ultimately) exists.[47]

Another possibility is to define conventional truth as truth that is grounded (partially or totally) in facts about merely conventional existents, while ultimate truth is grounded wholly in facts about what ultimately exists.[48] I'm confident there are other alternatives to explore; I'll focus on existence rather than truth in what follows.

In McDaniel (2010; 2017: chapters 5, 7), I align my view with a western medieval tradition according to which we must recognize a way in which certain second-rate entities exist

because there are innumerably many true sentences about these entities. Similarly, Bodhi (1999: 6) claims that conventional truths are about entities that don't possess "ontological ultimacy" but nonetheless can be referred to.[49] Recall that one reason to distinguish "two truths" is that the Buddha asserts truths that seem to refer to ontologically dubious objects. It's not merely that the Buddha asserts truths seemingly contradicted by other truths—the truths that he asserts are *about* objects.

If we don't distinguish between ultimate existence and conventional existence, we will take certain objects—such as ourselves—to have an ontological status that they in fact lack. [50] This difference in ontological status plausibly has other metaphysical consequences: in McDaniel (2017a: 160), I argue that merely conventional existents are non-substantial, lack essences in the strict sense, and lack non-derivative intrinsic natures.

Our failure to distinguish conventional and ultimate existence is closely connected to our failure to understand the conventionality of our ordinary concept of existence. What determines what ordinary existential vocabulary—"there is", "exists", "some", and the like—stands for? At least two potentially competing factors determine what our words refer to.[51] The first factor is *fit with use*: an assignment of entities to expressions fits with use insofar as it maximizes the truth of sincerely uttered sentences that use those expressions. The second factor is how metaphysically fundamental the possible referents are. Ultimate existence is the only metaphysically fundamental mode of being, but if ordinary existential vocabulary expressed ultimate existence, then the majority of ordinary existential sentences would be false.[52] Ultimate existence fits poorly with our use of existential vocabulary, and its exceptionally poor fit explains why we don't refer to ultimate existence with that vocabulary.[53]

When we do fundamental metaphysics, we should state what there ultimately is. But we aren't doing metaphysics when we go about our daily lives, and it's our day to day linguistic conventions that largely determined that "exists" has a semantic value such that "persons exist" expresses a truth.[54] Our ordinary concept of existence is parochial or conventional in that it's not metaphysically mandated by the world.[55]

My conception captures what's right about Siderits's conception, which tied conventional truth to commonsense and successful practice. Fit with commonsense is part of fit with use (that is, linguistic practice), which in turn partially determines reference, and the potential success of a linguistic practice often partially explains why that linguistic practice occurs. That we speak a language in which we can truthfully say that tables and persons exist has much more to do with us than the world. The language mandated by how the world ultimately is would be very different: it would be a language in which every expression carved nature at its joints.[56]

My preferred conception also captures what's right about the conception of conventional truth as containing convenient designators. All three theories of conventional designators imply that the putative referent of a convenient designator doesn't have the metaphysical status that we took it to have. On my preferred conception, this is also true of conventional expressions designating ordinary composite objects, including persons: they exist but not in the metaphysically significant way we thought.

The conception of conventional and ultimate truth defended here avoids the problems that plagued the conceptions discussed earlier. Conventional truths can be surprising—the Twin Paradox is a counter-intuitive conventional truth about conventional existents. They can be a priori: it's a priori that torturing innocent children is immoral, and children are conventional

existents. Conventional truth is a species of truth in general, and truth in general is preserved under logical consequence.

This concludes my case for conceiving conventional and ultimate truth in terms of conventional and ultimate modes of being.

5. Looking Ahead

I've focused on conventional and ultimate existence in the context of Abhidharma philosophy. Later Buddhist philosophers developed the doctrine of "the two truths" in highly divergent ways. If these philosophers can be interpreted as responding to a distinction between conventional and ultimate existence drawn as presented here, then there's further indirect evidence for my interpretation of Abhidharma metaphysics.

So note that it's central to this interpretation that there are two modes of existence—ultimate and conventional existence—that correspond to two kinds of things. My interpretation posits a fundamental ontology that is comprised of that which ultimately exists. Garfield (2015: 88) suggests that, for the Madhyamaka, the idea of a final ontology might be incoherent, and similarly, Tillemans (2016: 229-23) explores how "the ontological stance" might be misguided. In both cases, a distinction between conventional and ultimate existence is rejected.

Note also that, on the conceptions of ultimate truth discussed in this section, a claim can have an ultimate truth value only if there is a metaphysically fundamental mode of existence. Without ultimate existence, the only truth is conventional truth.

Further exploration would be fruitful.[57]

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[1] See Collins (1982: 165), Cowherds (2010: 5-6, 139), Gowans (2015: 32-33), Law (1999: 41-43), and Siderits (2015: 25, endnote a).

[2] Contemporary metaphysicians discuss similar issues, particularly concerning *compositional nihilism*, the view that composite objects don’t exist; see van Inwagen (1990: chapter 8) and Siderits (2015: 98). As Bennett (2009) notes, compositional nihilists attempt to minimize the differences between compositional nihilism and commonsense.

[3] Buddhaghosa (1997: 581-582, footnote 18) contains a passage from Dhammapāla’s *Paramatthamanjūsā* in which conventional truths (sammuti-sacca) are distinguished from ultimate truths, which are called “formed dhammas”; this appears to be a distinction between entities. (Mark Siderits has suggested that the word “sacca” in this passage should have been translated as “entity” rather than “truth” to begin with.) See also Bodhi (1999: 3-4), Kapstein (2001: 213-214), Garfield (2014: 177), and Blumenthal (2013: 90).

[4] I lack the space to discuss other initially plausible theories, e.g., that conventional truths are true wholly or partially in virtue of our conventions; see Jayatilleke (1963: 364), Goodman (2005: 378), Garfield (2002: 90), and Tillemans (2016: 8) for discussion.

[5] Goodman (2005: 381, 383), Guenther (1976: 145), McCrea and Patil (2010: 24-25, and 137-138, footnote 39), Kalupahana (1992: 257, endnote 2), Williams (2009: 16-17), Tillemans (2016: 51-52), and Siderits (2016: 283) discuss whether conventional truth is a kind of truth.

[6] Siderits (2007: 74-75) identifies successful practice as that which brings about more pleasure and happiness and less pain and suffering than relevant alternatives to it. Note that "consistently" means "reliably over time" rather than "in a logically consistent manner".

[7] That said, Westerhoff also compares conventional truth to what is strictly speaking false but useful.

[8] Siderits (2016: 265) says that it's both conventionally and ultimately true that there are causally related partless entities.

[9] Siderits (2016: 25, 41, 78) characterizes conventional truth solely in terms of acceptability to commonsense. On the other hand, Siderits and Katsura (2013: 4) say that a conventional truth is one in which action based on its acceptance reliably leads to successful practice and that our commonsense convictions concerning ourselves and the world are for the most part conventionally true; this suffices to show that in this passage they aren't taking acceptability to commonsense to be constitutive of conventional truth.

[10] Siderits (2015: 191) claims that the Buddhist believes in two truth predicates: "ultimately true" and "conventionally true". Sauchelli (2016: 1277) suggests that Siderits is committed to an onerous truth pluralism.

[11] This argument doesn't presuppose that what have truth-values are abstract propositions. They might be sentences, utterances, or judgments. Thanks to Mark Siderits for discussion here. Li Kang suggested to me that in an extended sense the acceptance of these lengthy disjunctions might be conducive to successful practice because to reject them would be to implicitly reject classical logic, which is crucial for many successful practices. Because "conducive to successful practice" is vague, it's hard to assess this response; since I'll discuss a distinct objection from vagueness, I'll say no more about Kang's response here.

[12] Siderits has suggested to me that, in order to make sense of this sort of case, we could understand conventional truth in terms of acceptability to commonsense in light of our evidence concerning macro-objects; Siderits (2007: 57, footnote 10) is also relevant. This is an intriguing proposal, but I have two concerns. First, some conventional

objects aren't macro-objects, e.g., hydrogen atoms. We should consider acceptability to commonsense in light of our information about these objects too. I worry that to ensure that all relevant objects are included we must appeal to acceptability to commonsense in light of our evidence concerning *all* conventional objects rather than just macroscopic ones—and if we can't define "conventional object" without defining it terms of "conventional truth", we have a very tight circle indeed. Second, I worry that the notion of evidence is partially defined in terms of truth; perhaps evidence is what increases the probability that a belief is true.

[13] See Williams (2000: 425) for a brief critical discussion of a similar argument.

[14] Although not directed specifically at Siderits's conception of conventional truth, many philosophers have raised this worry. The Cowherds (2010: 18-19) note that Kamalaśīla argues that when truth is equated with what is widely accepted, criticism and growth of knowledge become impossible. See also Cowherds (2010: 152, 161, 223-224) and Tillemans (2016: 47-48 & 55-56). Siderits (2016: 30-31) himself notes that community standards can change or improve and that our conceptions of truth and rationality should not deny this.

[15] Sauchelli (2016: 1276) suggests that conventional statements could have degrees of truth. This is one way to account for vagueness.

[16] As noted by the Cowherds (2010: 135), there are truths that lack "practical oomph".

[17] Set aside the possible vagueness of "star", which is inessential to the argument. The same argument could be made with the precise predicate "material body with at least 1.5*10^30 kg mass".

[18] Siderits (2009: 60) himself suggests that the folk don't think of truth as what is conducive to successful practice; in this context, Siderits also suggests Sider's (1999) notion of quasi-truth might provide a good account of conventional truth.

[19] Minimalism about truth conjoined with a radically deflationary metaphysics is explored on behalf of the Madhyamaka philosophers by the Cowherds (2010: 132-133, 143-144, 164), Siderits (2015: 7, 188- 194), and Priest (2013: 220). Conversely, Tillemans (1999: 20-21, note 16): notes that a correspondence theory of truth doesn't imply robust realism, as McTaggart accepted both a radical idealism and the correspondence theory of truth. See "An Ontological Idealism" in McTaggart (1934) and McDaniel (2009b) for further discussion.

[20] The Cowherds (2010: 139) suggest that a deflationary notion is best for understanding the kind of truth that is common to ultimate and conventional truth.

[21] Compare with Siderits (2015: 16; 2016: 38, 92, 265-266), Gowans (2015: 32), and Siderits and Katsura (2013: 4-5).

[22] If we distinguish conventional and ultimate existence, we could say that convenient designators are expressions that refers to or are true of a thing that merely conventionally exists. This idea is discussed further in section 4.

[23] See also Aung and Davids (2016a: 63), Sharma (1995: 111-112), Jayatilleke (1963: 362-363), Mortensen (2009: 4), and Garfield (2015: 24).

[24] Given that ordinary speakers have false beliefs about the semantics of their expressions, we can't in general straightforwardly ascribe them beliefs on the basis of what sentences they express.

[25] See also Aung and Davids (2016b: 254-255), MacKenzie (2011: 258), the Cowherds (2010: 136-137), Gowans (2015: 45-46), Sauchelli (2016: 1273-1275), Dreyfus (2011: 133), Siderits (2011: 310), Albahari (2006: 3), and McCrea and Patil (2010: 1).

[26] See McKay (2006) for extensive discussion of plural reference and plural predication.

[27] Siderits (2015: 111) mentions the expressions "sixpack" and "six cans of beers held together by a plastic yoke", and suggests that the latter is more (metaphysically) illuminating. Siderits (1997: 463) says that "army" and "forest" are convenient designators.

[28] I thank Mark Siderits for discussion of this passage.

[29] See Bartley (2015: 42), Harvey (1995: 27, 35; 2013: 35), Duerlinger (1993: 84-85), Garfield (2015: 45), Guenther (1976: 144), Ronkin (2005: 246), Davids (1965: 41-46), Gowans (2015: 34) Collins (1982: 155-156, footnote 19), Sauchelli (2016: 1275), Siderits (2007: 49, 56, 73, 110, 115), and Chadha (forthcoming: 4). Contessa (2014) defends a contemporary version.

[30] Compare with Vasubandhu (1989: 182, endnote 8): "When a consciousness perceives a causally efficacious collection of dependently co-arising substances possessed of natures of different sorts, it produces in the next moment in the same continuum of consciousnesses another consciousness that grasps the collection as a substance, an entity that possesses a nature of its own by virtue of which the substances in the collection are unified as parts of a single substance. Since a name is given to the collection as a whole on the basis of this misconception, the collection, when so named and misconceived, is said to be real in name or concept". Note that the name is given *to the many* on the basis of a *false belief* that there's *one* thing to be named.

[31] Siderits (1997: 461) worries that this view is eliminativist rather than reductionist.

[32] Cowherds (2010: 19, 140, 144-145, 159, 216), Sauchelli (2016), Goodman (2002: 362; 2005: 377, 384-386; 2009: 149), Siderits (2016: 251) explore whether conventional truth is something like truth according to a fiction.

[33] See Badura and Berto (forthcoming).

[34] Mark Siderits has suggested to me that analogizing conceptual fictions with literary fictions risks engendering truth-value gaps that world force an objectionable departure from classical logic.

[35] Siderits (2009: 58) considers a similar case involving *n* particles that compose a pot but says that neither *n* nor *n*+1 is a great answer to the question of how many things there are.

[36] Moreover, the use of "entity" is unnecessary. Numerical sentences like this are expressible simply with quantifiers, identity, and negation.

[37] Siderits (2015: 111) considers following Thomasson (2007), who denies that sentences like "there are *n* entities" have truth-values independently of some presupposed background sortal that determines a domain of quantification; presumably this sortal would be a convenient designator. I can't assess this view here, but see Schaffer (2009) for a plausible rejoinder. Note that Siderits's preferred conception of conventional truth might deflate the master argument: that there are more than *n* entities when there are *n* partless entities is acceptable to commonsense, and it might be conducive to good practice.

[38] See also Bodhi (1999: 9, 25), Williams (1981: 240, 249): Cowherds (2010: 136), Garfield (2015: 32), MacKenzie (2011: 245-246), Duerlinger (1993: 94-95), Tsering (2008: xii-xiii, chapters 3&4), and Kapstein (2001: 91).

[39] See McDaniel (2009a; 2010; 2017), as well as Caplan (2011), Spencer (2012), and Turner (2010).

[40] See Sider (2009) and Lewis (1986), on which McDaniel (2009; 2010; 2017) is based.

[41] See McDaniel (2009).

[42] See Hirsch (2005).

[43] See McDaniel (2010; 2017: chapters 5-7). McDaniel (2017a: 45-46) also discusses formulations of ontological pluralism that use Fine's (2001) notion of reality. Relatedly, the Cowherds (2010: 141-142, 148) and Tillemans (2016: 238, footnote 18) consider using Fine's notion to distinguish conventional and ultimate existence.

[44] Perhaps in addition to the partless dharmas, there is an "unconditioned" ultimate reality, namely nibbāna. See, e.g., Bodhi (1999: 19, 27). Interestingly, Tsering (2008: 65-69) suggests that some schools of Abhidharma might accept the existence of composite objects like molecules, provided that these objects are genuinely unified. I set these possibilities aside in what follows.

[45] See McDaniel (2017a: 149-150).

[46] Although I initially focused on absences (shadows, holes, and the like), McDaniel (2017a: 155) also discusses whether only partless entities are first-class entities, while composites are less than fully real.

[47] Compare with MacKenzie (2011: 246).

[48] I thank Nicholoas Jones and Daniel Nolan for discussion here.

[49] See also Bodhi (1999: 326), in which Anurruddha says of persons, caves, wells, and other ordinary things that they don't exist "in the ultimate sense" but are objects of thought and can be referred to. Anurruddha also says that they are "shadows of (ultimate) things", a metaphor also used in McDaniel (2017a: 171-172) when discussing entities that exist in only a secondary way.

[50] Compare with Duerlinger (1993: 95), who claims that a conventional existent is deceptive because it doesn't have the kind of existence that it appears to have. We might also misjudge the value things have. Williams (1998: 118-119) suggests that in some strands of Buddhist thought, ultimately real things are more valuable than conventional entities, and as such are the apt objects of our focus or attention. Similar thoughts are pursued in McDaniel (2017b).

[51] This is defended in McDaniel (2010), which in turn follows Lewis (1986) and Sider (2009).

[52] Arguably, the majority of non-negated predicative sentences, e.g., "My car is in the shop", would be false as well.

[53] Compare with McDaniel (2010: 637-638).

[54] Note that it doesn't follow from this conception that conventional existents exist in virtue of our conventions. Whether conventional existents exist in virtue of conventions is compatible with but not required by the picture sketched here. See McDaniel (2017a: 151-154) for further discussion.

[55] Compare with McDaniel (2017a: 153-154).

[56] Williams (1981: 244) writes that, "In certain Pali texts we find mention of the "sabhāva language", the real, correct and unique name for each thing, a language of uniquely referring names which arises out of this notion of a uniquely characterizing definition". See, e.g., Buddhaghosa (1997: 486-487), where this language is called "the individual essence language". Mark Siderits has suggested to me that in this context "svabhāva" refers to intrinsic nature and so such a language would be one in which every term carves at the joints.

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