

Zhihua Yao

Yogācāra Critiques of the Two Truths

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in:

Chen-kuo Lin / Michael Radich (eds.)

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in memoriam

John R. McRae (1947-2011)

Yogācāra Critiques of the Two Truths

Zhihua Yao

1 Introduction

More than a decade ago, I went to Boston University to study Buddhist philosophy with M. David Eckel. In one of our first conversations, he said to me, “Madhyamaka is easy. On the level of the ultimate truth, you can say nothing. But on the level of the conventional truth, you can say anything.”¹

Even if Madhyamaka can be put as simply as that, however, I have still had problems with it over the years. Why two truths? What could it mean for there to be two truths? Two different perspectives? Or two different realities? If the former, then the notion of two truths implies perspectivism. But in that case, why is truth limited to only two types? Why not three, or four, or more? If it is the latter, then it is even more troublesome. Reality is reality; how can there be two different realities? And can both claim to be true?

The Mādhyamikas seem to insist that “truth” (*satya*) here implies both perspective *and* reality. But this intertwinement between perspective and reality only makes things worse. It leads at least to this problem: to claim that there are two truths, in the perspectivist sense, is a way of evaluating or prioritizing different views or perspectives, and of passing judgment on right or wrong views, desirable or undesirable perspectives. In this sense, it might be possible for us to commit to a wrong view or perspective; but how can reality itself be wrong?

¹ In a recent conversation, he said that he would rather express the second alternative by saying, “At the level of the conventional truth, you can say *something*.”

Yijing (義淨, 635-713), a Chinese pilgrim to India in the seventh century, pinpointed the main difference between the two philosophical schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He said, “For Yogācāra, what pertains to the ultimate [level] exists, but what pertains to the conventional [level] does not exist; and [Yogācāra] takes the three natures as foundational. For Madhyamaka, what pertains to the ultimate [level] does not exist, but what pertains to the conventional [level] does exist; and it is in fact the two truths that are primary.”² This suggests that if there were any key disagreements between these two schools, they should have to do with the two truths and the three natures. As Eckel (2008: 68) points out: “At its most basic level, the dispute between these two traditions (as it was formulated in the sixth century) can be understood as a conflict between these two interpretive principles: the Yogācāra doctrine of ‘three natures’ versus the Madhyamaka doctrine of ‘two truths’.”

On the Madhyamaka side, Bhāviveka, who is believed to be the first thinker who explicitly engaged in Madhyamaka-Yogācāra controversy, did fiercely attack the Yogācāra theory of the three natures in Chapter 5 of his *Madhyamakahr̥daya-kārikā* and *Tarkajvālā*, and in Chapter 25 of his *Prajñāpradīpa*. The other major Yogācāra theory under attack was the doctrine of mind-only. It is only reasonable to assume that the Yogācāra side should have fired back, as turns out in fact to be the case with Dharmapāla, who is believed to be responding to Bhāviveka’s criticism in the last chapter of his commentary to Āryadeva’s *Catuhśataka* (see Keenan, 1997).

However, it has been a matter of debate among contemporary scholars whether Bhāviveka, being a rather energetic critic of almost all Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical schools of his time, started his attack without warning, or was responding to some criticisms of Madhyamaka that were initiated by the Yogācāras themselves.³ If the Yogācāras had ever criticized the Mādhyamikas before Bhāviveka, then the theory of the two truths would have been an obvious target; the other target, as I will show later, was the concept of emptiness.

² 瑜伽則真有俗無，以三性為本。中觀乃真無俗有，寔二諦為先; T40:1817.783a29-b1.

³ See Hanson, 1998 for a summary of the view that Bhāviveka initiated the controversy. For the opposite view, see Eckel, 1985; Eckel, 2008: 65-81.

In his recent study of the two truths in early Yogācāra, Lusthaus (2010) focuses on the writings of Asaṅga (and Maitreyaṅgā, if we follow the Chinese tradition of ascribing the encyclopedic *Yogācārabhūmi* to Maitreyaṅgā rather than Asaṅga). In this rather comprehensive survey of the writings of these founding masters of Yogācāra, however, Lusthaus says nothing about this conflict with the Mādhyamikas. Instead, he demonstrates that the Yogācāras incorporated the two truths rather neatly into their more complex conceptual frameworks, where we can find paradigms of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten truths. They even admit that “such distinctions can be extended without limit (*apramāṇa*)” (Lusthaus, 2010: 105).

Is it really true that the early Yogācāras did not say anything negative about the two truths as understood by the Mādhyamikas? Is there any trace of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka controversy before Bhāviveka formally launched his criticism of Yogācāra? To answer these important questions, I turn to some texts of Maitreyaṅgā, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu that have escaped Lusthaus’s attention.

2 Against nihilism

First of all, a passage from the Tattvārtha Section of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, which is part of the *Yogācārabhūmi* ascribed to Maitreyaṅgā, holds great importance for the Madhyamaka-Yogācāra controversy. It was quoted indirectly in the *Tarkajvālā* 5.83ab by Bhāviveka, who thinks that “These angry words are like vomit, [which] shows the undigested pride [of the Yogācāras].”⁴ The original passage from the *Yogācārabhūmi* reads:

Therefore, when some people hear the difficult and profound Mahāyāna sūtras that deal with emptiness and are considered to convey a meaning that needs to be interpreted, they do not discern the correct meaning of that which is spoken [in the sūtras]. They develop false concepts, and with mere logic (*tarka*) that is unreasonably performed, they come to have the following view and make the following state-

⁴ *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* 5.83cd: *iti dveṣāmiṣodgāro ’bhimānājīrṇasūcakaḥ*. See Eckel, 2008: 282, 432.

ment: “All is nothing but a designation (*prajñaptimātra*), and that is reality. Whoever sees it this way, sees correctly.” For these people there is no real thing itself (*vastumātra*) that serves as the basis of that designation. [But] this means that there cannot be any designation at all. Moreover, how can reality be nothing but a designation? In this way, they end up denying (*apodita*)⁵ both designation and reality. Someone who denigrates (*apavāda*) designation and reality should be known as the worst kind of nihilist (*nāstika*).

Since he is a nihilist, those who are wise and practice a religious life should not speak or share their living community with him. He causes himself to fall, and [causes] people who follow his views to fall as well.⁶

This passage is one of the key pieces of evidence for Eckel’s (2008: 65-66) argument that there was a Yogācāra-Madhyamaka controversy before Bhāviveka. Putting aside the interesting historical and textual significance of this short passage, let us focus on its philosophical implications.

The thesis held by the Mahāyāna nihilists is formulated thus: “All is nothing but a designation, and that is reality” (*prajñaptimātram eva sarvam etac ca tattvaṃ*). This statement echoes Nāgārjuna’s famous verse in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 24.18: “We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness, it [emptiness] is a dependent designation (*prajñapti*), [and] it itself is the middle way.”⁷ However, the Mādhyamikas

⁵ The Chinese translation *bang* (謗) and the Tibetan translation *skur ba btab pa* support the alternative reading *apavāditam*, suggested by the Wogihara (1930-1936: 46) and Dutt (1978: 31) editions of the text.

⁶ The Sanskrit edition of the text is based on Takahashi, 2005: 99-100: *ato ya ekatyā durvijñeyān sūtrāntān mahāyānapratīsamuktāṃ gambhīrāṃ śūnyatāpratīsamuktān ābhiprāyikārthanirūpitāṃ śrutvā yathābhūtaṃ bhāṣitasārtham avijñāyayoniśo vikalpayitvāyogavihitena tarkamātrakeṇaivaṃdr̥ṣṭayo bhavanty evaṃvādināḥ prajñaptimātram eva sarvam etac ca tattvaṃ yaś caivaṃ paśyati sa samyak paśyati teṣāṃ prajñaptiyadhiṣṭhānasya vastumātrasyābhāvāt saiva prajñaptiḥ sarveṇa sarvaṃ na bhavati || kutah punah prajñaptimātram tattvaṃ bha- viṣyati || tad anena paryāyena tais tattvaṃ api prajñaptir api tadubhayam apoditam bhavati || prajñaptitattvāpavādac ca pradhāno nāstiko veditavyaḥ || sa eva nāstikaḥ sann akathyo bhavaty asaṃvāsyō bhavati vijñānāṃ sabrahmacāriṇāṃ || sa ātmānam api vipādayati | lokam api yo ’sya dr̥ṣṭyanumatam āpadyate.*

⁷ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.18: *yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā*, see La Vallée Poussin, 1913: 503.

themselves did not normally describe their view of reality in terms of “nothing but a designation” or “designation-only” (*prajñaptimātra*). Instead, they were fond of two other key terms, i.e., “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and “the middle way” (*madhyama*); therefore, they were known as Śūnyavāda or Madhyamaka. But as shown in Nāgārjuna’s statement, “designation” is a concept as fundamental as “emptiness” and “the middle way” to the Mādhyamikas.

The Yogācāras seem less upset when Madhyamakas couch their claims in terms of “emptiness” and “the middle way”, as the Yogācāras have their own way of using these terms that eventually asserts the existence of consciousness (see further below). However, they are very critical of the notion that “all is nothing but a designation”. The reason for this criticism is a foundationalist dogma inherited from the Abhidharma tradition: there has to be some real thing (*vastu*) that can serve as the basis of the designation. For instance, both the Yogācāras and the Ābhidharmikas would agree with the Mādhyamikas in regarding a “person” as a designation. They would further hold that a person is designated on the basis of real *dharma*s, which, in the current case, include all the five aggregates, namely, form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness. But the Mādhyamikas would plainly deny this. They see the five aggregates as just as unreal as a person; therefore, *all* of reality is only a designation. For the Yogācāras, by contrast, this would mean the denial of real things, and therefore the denial of reality itself. In terms of their own position, as the Yogācāras are committed to foundationalism, if there is no real thing to serve as the basis of designation, then there cannot be any designation at all. In this way, the Mādhyamikas also have to deny designation itself. By holding that “All is nothing but a designation,” the Mādhyamikas are led into a paradoxical situation in which both designation and reality are denied.

3 The nihilists’s two truths

In the *Viniścaya-saṃgrahaṇī* Section of the *Yogācārabhūmi*, another passage is devoted to arguing against the Mahāyāna nihilists. In his commentary on the *Yogācārabhūmi*, Dunnyun (遁倫, d.u., alias Doryun 道倫), quoting contemporaneous Yogācāra scholars of the Tang Dynasty, iden-

tifies this passage as a hypothetical dispute between Maitreyanātha and Bhāviveka *et al.*⁸ This time it focuses on their theory of the two truths, which is here formulated in a similar way as in Yijing: “Some nihilists in the Mahāyāna⁹ hold that [seen] from the [standpoint of the] conventional [truth], all things exist; [seen] from the [standpoint of the] ultimate [truth],¹⁰ nothing exists.”¹¹ The proponent further requests clarification of the two truths, and proposes a hypothetical answer for the opponent as follows:

If they [i.e., nihilists] would answer: The fact that all *dharmas* are devoid of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is called the ultimate [truth]. The fact that intrinsic nature can be apprehended within these *dharmas* that are [thus] devoid of intrinsic nature is called the conventional [truth].¹² Why? Because conventions (*shisu* 世俗, *kun rdzob*, **samvṛti*), designation (*jiashe* 假設, **dogs pa*, **prajñapti*), linguistic expressions (*mingyan* 名言, *mngon par brjod pa*, **abhilāpa*), and verbal conventions (*shuo* 說, *tha snyad*, **vyavahāra*) are imposed on nonexistents.¹³

⁸ “This [object of critique] is the views held by Bhāviveka *et al.*, who are refuted by Maitreyanātha” (此是清辨等計，被慈氏所破; T42:1828.770c17)

⁹ Literally, those among the Mahāyāna who understand emptiness wrongly (*e qu kong* 惡取空, *durgrhītā śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid la log par zin pa*). Its Sanskrit equivalent is attested in the *Yogācārabhūmi* cited in n. 33 below. The Tibetan translation reads differently: *theg pa chen po pa la la rang gi nyes pa gzung nas*, which suggests a meaning similar to Paramārtha’s rendering of “some Mahāyānas who are attached to [their own] wrong views” (大乘中學有偏執者) in his translation of the same passage in the **Buddhadhātu-śāstra* (*Foxing lun* 佛性論) (T31:1610.793c8, see Part 4 below for more discussion).

¹⁰ I supply “truth” on the basis of Paramārtha’s renderings: “conventional truth” (*sudi* 俗諦) and “ultimate truth” (*zhendi* 真諦) (T31:1610.793c9).

¹¹ 復次於大乘中，或有一類，惡取空故，作如是言：由世俗故，一切皆有；由勝義故，一切皆無，T30:1579.713b2-4; *theg pa chen po pa la la rang gi nyes ba gzung’ nas ’di skad ces kun rdzob tu ni thams cad yod la | don dam par ni thams cad med do zhes zer ro*, D4038: zi 42b5-6 (**nye bar bzung D*; *nyes pa gzung Q*).

¹² Paramārtha renders “the conventional truth” (*sudi* 俗諦) (T31:1610.793c12), while the Tibetan translation reads *kun rdzob* (conventions).

¹³ 般若答言：若一切法皆無自性，是名勝義；若於諸法無自性中，自性可得，是名世俗。何以故？無所有中建立世俗、假設、名言而起說故，T30:1579.713b5-8; *gal te de ’di skad ces chos thams cad kyi ngo bo nyid med pa gang yin pa de ni don dam pa yin la | ngo bo*

As we see, the latter formulation is more in line with the terms of Madhyamaka itself. Viewed from the perspective of the ultimate truth, all *dharmas* are devoid of intrinsic nature, and therefore they are empty. This emptiness is in turn understood by their Yogācāra opponent to mean that “nothing exists” (*yiqie jie wu* 一切皆無, *thams cad med*). Those who are sympathetic to the Madhyamaka position may find this characterization inaccurate. But as I have argued elsewhere (Yao, 2010: 84-85), although Nāgārjuna and his followers were not willing to commit to this position, their view of emptiness eventually leads to this nihilist end.

The two parties do not exchange too much fire over the ultimate truth. Instead, they argue more extensively about the conventional truth. The Yogācāra again asks of designation by means of linguistic conventions: “Do you mean to say that linguistic expressions and conventions arise from a causal relation, and intrinsic nature can be apprehended therein; or that they are merely linguistic expressions and conventions?”¹⁴ In his commentary, Dunnyun quotes another Yogācāra scholar of the Tang Dynasty named Huijing (慧景, d.u.) to explain the implications of this question. If conventional existents arise from material or mental elements (*dharmas*) that are dependent in nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*), then they are in a causal relation and have an identity or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). On the other hand, if conventional existents are merely words, that means that they arise without a cause and are not bound by a causal relation (see T42:1828.770b22-24).

If the Mahāyāna nihilist holds to the former alternative, that is, that linguistic conventions arise from a causal relation, then the Yogācāra would say, “If linguistic expressions and conventions arise from a causal relation, then it is unreasonable to regard [such] linguistic expressions

nyid med pa'i chos de dag la ngo bo nyid du dmigs pa gang yin pa de ni kun rdzob yin no || de ci'i phyir zhe na | 'di ltar de ni yod pa ma yin pa dag la kun rdzob tu byed pa dang | 'dogs pa dang | mngon par brjod pa dang | tha snyad du byed pa'i phyir ro zhes lan 'debs par gyur na, D4038: zi 42b6-7. To help make sense of Xuanzang's obscure translation of the final sentence, I have followed the Tibetan translation.

¹⁴ 汝何所欲？名言、世俗為從因有，自性可得？為唯名言、世俗說有？ T30:1579.713 b8-10; *ci ngo bo nyid du dmigs pa de mngon par brjod pa dang kun rdzob kyi rgyu las byung ba yin par 'dod dam | 'on te mngon par brjod pa dang | kun rdzob tsam zhig yin par 'dod, D4038: zi 42b7-a1.*

and conventions, which arise from a causal relation, as nonexistents.”¹⁵ The Mādhyamika might refer to Nāgārjuna’s foundational verse 24.18 in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* (already cited above): “We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness;” and argue that even that which causally arises can be empty. The Yogācāra would further ask whether that which causally arises is an existent or a non-existent. If it is a non-existent, then absolute nonexistents, such as the hair of a turtle or the horn of a rabbit, would also arise from a causal relation. But this is certainly absurd. If that which causally arises is an existent, on the other hand, then it is an existent *dharma*, and cannot be empty or non-existent.

Dunnyun again explains the dispute in the explicitly Yogācāra terms of the three natures: “Any *dharma* that arises causally is dependent [in nature, **paratantra*]. There is in a dependent *dharma* neither the determinacy nor the nature of spontaneous arising, and therefore [Nāgārjuna] says: ‘We state that [whatever is dependent arising], that is emptiness.’”¹⁶ Here, Dunnyun interprets that which causally arises in terms of the dependent nature, and he also gives a Yogācāra account of “emptiness” by reference to the “non-arising-ness” (*utpatti-niḥsvabhāvātā*) of the dependent nature, one of the “three naturelessnesses” (*triniḥsvabhāva*).

If the Mādhyamika holds to the latter alternative, namely, that linguistic conventions are merely words, the Yogācāra would say that “It is unreasonable that linguistic expressions and conventions should exist without a real thing (*vastu*) [as their basis (*gzhi*)].”¹⁷ This objection echoes the passage from the Tattvārtha Section of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* that we discussed earlier. The rationale is that any linguistic convention or designation has to be based on something real (*vastu*). Now, if linguistic

¹⁵ 若名言、世俗從因有者，名言、世俗從因而生，而非是有，不應道理，T30:1579.713 b10-11; *gal te mngon par brjod pa dang | kun rdzob kyi rgyu las byung ba yin na ni des na mngon par brjod pa dang | kun rdzob kyi rgyu las byung ba yin pas yod pa ma yin pa zhes byar mi rung ngo*, D4038: zi 43a1-2.

¹⁶ 因緣生法者，即是依他。依他法上無決定無自然生性，故云「我說即是空」，T42:1828.770c1-3. 我說即是空 = *sūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe*, i.e. MMK 24.18b (cited above n. 7).

¹⁷ 名言世俗無事而有，不應道理，T30:1579.713b12; *des na gzhi med par mngon par brjod pa dang | kun rdzob ces byar mi rung ngo*, D4038: zi 43a2. The Tibetan translation reads alternatively: “without [a real thing as] their basis” (*gzhi med par*).

conventions are merely words and bear no causal relations, then no *dharma* can arise from causal relations. But these *dharmas* are exactly the real things that would serve as the basis of linguistic conventions and designations.

The Yogācāra then puts forward a second question, regarding an epistemological issue: “Venerables, why is it that knowables (*zhu kede zhe* 諸可得者, *gang dmigs pa*) are devoid of intrinsic nature?”¹⁸ In other words, if things are knowable, then they should not be nonexistent or empty. The Mādhyamika opponent hypothetically answers: “Because of the perverted view [that there are] real things (*vastu*).”¹⁹ According to the Buddhist teachings, sentient beings are always perverse, owing to their ignorance. It is this perversion that contributes to our attachment to notions of self, permanence, and happiness, with regard to a reality that is in fact without self, impermanent, and characterized by suffering. So the Mādhyamika is saying that things are in reality empty and devoid of intrinsic nature, but because of our perversion, they are known as something, or are something knowable.

The Yogācāra goes on to ask, in the same manner as for designation, “Do you mean to say that this perversion (*phyin ci log*)²⁰ is existent, or that it is nonexistent?”²¹ As in the earlier case of linguistic expressions and conventions, the Yogācāra again forces the Mādhyamika into a dilemma, and thereby claims victory over his opponent. If the Mādhyamika says that perversion is existent, “then it is unreasonable to say that all *dharmas* are devoid of intrinsic nature in the sense of the ultimate

¹⁸ (又應告言)：長老！何緣諸可得者，此無自性？ T30:1579.713b12-14; (*de la 'di skad ces*) *tshe dang ldan pa ci'i phyir na gang dmigs pa de med pa yin zhes kyang* (*brjod par bya'o*) D4038: zi 43a2-3. The Tibetan translation omits “of intrinsic nature”.

¹⁹ (彼若答言)：顛倒事故， T30:1579.713b14; (*gal te de 'di skad ces*) *phyin ci log gi dngos po yin pa'i phyir ro zhes* (*lan 'debs par gyur na*), D4038: zi 43a3.

²⁰ Xuanzang's translation reads: “this perverted view of real things”. The simpler “this perversion” is supported by the Tibetan translation and Paramārtha's rendering (T31: 1610.793c19).

²¹ 汝何所欲？此顛倒事，為有？為無？ T30:1579.713b14-15; *ci phyin ci log de yod par 'dod dam 'on te med par 'dod*, D4038: zi 43a3.

[truth]”.²² This is because if perversion is admitted to be an existent thing, then all causally-based *dharmas* would also be existent, and it would be self-contradictory to say that they are ultimately empty or nonexistent. Note that the Yogācāra here does not embrace the two-tiered perspectivist analysis of the conventional and the ultimate, as adopted by the Mādhyamika. Instead, by “ultimate” or “ultimately” the Yogācāra usually means the Abhidharmic sense of “analyzing things to their ultimate end”.

If the Mādhyamika holds to the other horn of the dilemma, namely, that perversion is nonexistent, “then it is unreasonable [to say] that because of the perverted view of real things, these knowables are devoid of intrinsic nature”.²³ This again calls for an epistemological consideration of the question of whether nonexistents can be knowable. In this context, the Yogācāra seems to hold that nonexistents cannot be knowable. For him, if perversion is nonexistent, then it should be as inapprehensible as the horn of a rabbit, a standard example of something that absolutely does not exist. This position is stated more explicitly in Dunnyun’s commentary: “If the perverted view of real things is absolutely nonexistent, then it should be as inapprehensible as the horn of a rabbit. Now it is evident that [perversion] can be apprehended, so it is unreasonable to say that it is nonexistent.”²⁴ Note, however, that as I have discussed elsewhere, a variety of Yogācāra arguments do claim that it is possible to cognize nonexistent objects (Yao, 2014). For the present, I have no idea how to make sense of this discrepancy.

²² (若言有者) , 說一切法、由勝義故、皆無自性、不應道理, T30:1579.713b15-16; (*gal te yod na ni*) *des na chos thams cad kyi ngo bo nyid med pa nyid ni don dam pa'o zhes byar mi rung ngo*, D4038: zi 43a3-4.

²³ (若言無者) , 顛倒事故、諸可得者此無自性、不應道理, T30:1579.713b17-18; (*gal te med na ni*) *des na phyin ci log gi dngos po yin pa'i phyir gang dmigs pa de ngo bo nyid med do zhes byar mi rung ngo*, D4038: zi 43a4.

²⁴ 若顛倒事畢竟無者、應不可得、猶如兔角。今現可得而言無者、不應道理, T42:1828.770c15-17.

4 The two truths and the three natures

The passage from the *Viniścaya-saṃgrahaṇī* Section of the *Yogācārabhūmi* that we have just discussed is quoted in its entirety in the **Buddhadhātuśāstra* (*Foxing lun* 佛性論 T1610), a work ascribed to Vasubandhu and translated into Chinese by Paramārtha (Zhendi 真諦, 499-569) between 557 and 569.²⁵ Compared to its original form in the *Yogācārabhūmi*, this quotation features a number of important variations. First of all, as we have seen, the target of the criticism is identified as “some Mahāyānas who are attached to [their own] wrong views” (*dasheng zhong xue you pianzhi zhe* 大乘中學有偏執者, T31:1610.793c8; see n. 9 above), rather than explicitly as “Mahāyāna nihilists”. This expression of Paramārtha’s is supported by the Tibetan translations: “some Mahāyānas who grasp their own wrong views” (*theg pa chen po pa la la rang gi nyes pa gzung nas*; see n. 11 above). Nonetheless, we can safely assume that the opponents are the Mādhyamikas.

In the first set of arguments, i.e., about whether linguistic conventions and designations exist or not, Vasubandhu’s recension is barely intelligible to me. Maybe the translation is corrupt, and we should simply follow the clearer expression in the *Yogācārabhūmi*.

However, in the introduction to the second set of arguments, i.e., about whether perversion exists or not, Vasubandhu’s recension seems a bit clearer. He says: “Again, you state that there is a designation of intrinsic nature on the basis of that which lacks intrinsic nature; this is called conventional [truth]. [But] if the designation exists, how could it be nonexistent?”²⁶ In his answer, Vasubandhu gives some further details that are not found in the *Yogācārabhūmi*:

Answer: Because of perversion, one designates existents on the basis of nonexistents, [or] permanence and other such qualities on the basis of *dharmas* that are impermanent, suffering and without self.

²⁵ Some scholars have questioned the ascription of this text to Vasubandhu, but, as I have explained elsewhere (Yao 2005: 127), I follow Takemura (1977: 36-38) and others in insisting on the traditional attribution to Vasubandhu.

²⁶ 又若汝謂於無自性中，執有自性，是名為俗。若執有者，云何是無？ T31:1610.793c17-18.

Those [things which are designated] actually do not exist, and they are only considered existents provisionally. Such a designation is part of the four perversions. Therefore, although the designation exists, what is designated does not.²⁷

Subsequently, the two horns of the dilemma are also formulated in a slightly clearer way:

Question: Does perversion exist or not? If it does, then it contradicts [your view] that all *dharmas* are devoid of intrinsic nature. If it does not, then designation cannot be considered a perversion, and it is wrong to hold that the conventional truth is a designation of intrinsic nature where there is [in fact] no intrinsic nature.²⁸

After this long quotation, we come to Vasubandhu's own rather sophisticated remarks:

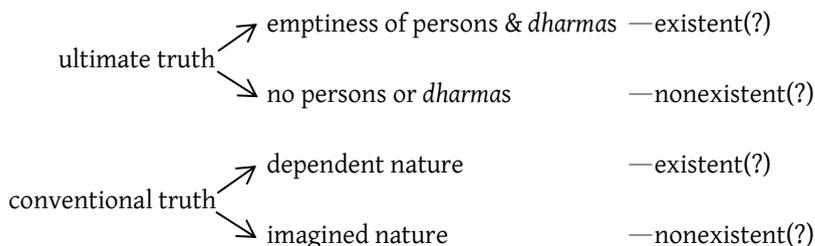
Why [does the text give the above criticism of the two truths]? We can say neither that the two truths exist, nor that they do not exist, because they are neither existent nor nonexistent. As for the fact that we cannot say that the ultimate truth exists or does not exist: 1) we cannot say that [the ultimate truth] exists, because there are no persons or *dharmas*; [but] 2) we cannot say that [the ultimate truth] does not exist, because of the demonstration of the emptiness of the two [i.e., persons and *dharmas*]. The same is true of the conventional truth. Because of its imagined nature, we cannot say that [the conventional truth] exists. Because of its dependent nature, we cannot say that it does not exist. Moreover, the ultimate truth is not definitely existent or nonexistent. Persons and *dharmas* do not exist, and yet they are not nonexistent. The emptiness of the two [i.e., persons and *dharmas*] exists, and yet it is not existent. The same is true of the conventional

²⁷ 答曰：為顛倒品類故，故無中說有，乃至於無常樂我等諸法，說言皆有常等諸德，其體實無，但假說有。如此執者，為四倒攝。是故雖執是有，而得是無，T31:1610.793c18-22.

²⁸ 問曰：如此顛倒，為有？為無？若是有者，一切諸法無有自性，是義不然。若是無者，此執顛倒亦不得成。若無性中，執有自性，為俗諦者，是義不然，T31:1610.793c22-25.

truth. It is not definitely nonexistent because of its imagined nature. Nor is it definitely existent because of its dependent nature.²⁹

These remarks of Vasubandhu's are probably the very first attempt on the Yogācāra side to incorporate the two truths into their more complicated structure of the three natures. Based on these remarks, we can draw the following diagram:



As we see, the conventional truth is described as having two aspects. Viewed as the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), it does not exist; while viewed as the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*), it does exist. So conventional reality cannot be one-sidedly taken as purely imaginary or illusory; this would be to fall into nihilism. Nor can conventional reality be taken as utterly existent, on the other hand, because the imagined nature does not exist. That is why the Yogācāra criticizes both of the extremes into which his Madhyamaka opponent tends to fall.

As compared to the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths, one of the major contributions of the Yogācāra paradigm of the three natures is to introduce the dependent nature to the picture, thereby reinstating a more robust worldview against the illusory worldview to which most Mādhyamikas are committed. Kenshū (賢洲, ?-1812), a Japanese commentator on the **Buddhadhātu-sāstra*, explicitly pointed out that the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths implies an illusory worldview. He says:

²⁹ 何以故？二諦不可說有，不可說無，非有非無故。真諦不可說有，不可說無者，無人法故，不可說有；顯二空故，不可說無。俗諦亦爾，分別性故，不可說有；依他性故，不可說無。復次真諦不定有無，人法無、不無，二空有、不有。俗諦亦爾，分別性故，非決定無；依他性故，非決定有，T31:1610.793c25-794a2.

However, the two truths, as delineated by the beginning teaching [of the Mahāyāna], take the ultimate and the conventional truths as sharply distinct from each other. The so-called “conventional truth” is imagined illusory phenomena, which are conventionally taken to be real existents. In conformity with [the usage of] worldly persons, the sage calls them the conventional truth. In conformity with his own understanding, [however,] the sage calls that which is ultimately nonexistent the ultimate truth. These are the two truths as established on the basis of the imagined nature.³⁰

Having learned that the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths is actually based on the imagined nature, and therefore commits to an entirely illusory worldview, we can now understand better why the Yogācāra criticism of the two truths focuses exclusively on the conventional truth, and especially on issues such as whether designation or linguistic conventions exist or do not. This is because in the Yogācāra system, designation or linguistic conventions themselves are of the dependent nature and therefore exist, but whatever is designated by linguistic conventions is of the imagined nature and does not exist. When Maitreyaṅātha, Vasubandhu and Yijing characterize the Madhyamaka position by saying, “Viewed from the perspective of conventional truth, all things exist,” this does not mean that the Madhyamaka sense of the conventional truth embraces the dependent nature and takes it as genuinely existent. Rather, things are seen as real existents only conventionally, by those worldlings who dwell in the imagined nature. Therefore, this characterization does not contradict the Yogācāra criticism of the Mādhyamikas as nihilists, since a commitment to an illusory worldview necessarily leads to nihilism.

Note that Yijing characterizes the Yogācāra view, by contrast, by saying, “What pertains to the ultimate level exists, but what pertains to the conventional level does not exist.” Here the “conventional”, which does not exist, refers to the aspect of the imagined nature, and the “ultimate”,

³⁰ 然始教分齊之二諦，真俗條然不融。所言俗諦是偏計妄法，世俗認為實有。聖順世間說者為之俗諦，依自所知說畢竟無體者為之真諦，是於分別性所立二諦。Quoted from Takemura, 1977: Appendix, 29.

which does exist, refers to the third perfected nature (*pariṇiṣpanna-svabhāva*). In the above diagram, this third nature is not explicitly indicated. The perfected nature is roughly equivalent to the ultimate truth. But unlike the ultimate truth, the perfected nature is not a distinctive layer of reality or perspective. Instead, it is usually defined as the dependent nature when it is devoid of the imagined nature, so the perfected nature can be the same as the dependent nature when the latter is not affected by the imagined nature. In this very subtle way, the Yogācāra theory of the three natures rejects the two-tiered reality suggested by the Madhyamaka theory of the two truths, and restores the holistic worldview that prevails among the mainstream Buddhist philosophical schools. This is probably the reason that the perfected nature cannot be separately indicated in the diagram.

Although the perfected nature is roughly equivalent to the ultimate truth, as pointed out by Yijing, there is at least one major difference between the two, that is, for the Yogācāras what pertains to the ultimate, i.e., the perfected nature, exists, but for the Mādhyamikas what pertains to the ultimate, i.e., the ultimate truth, does not exist. In Vasubandhu's remarks, and my diagram characterizing them, this point is shown by acknowledging that the ultimate truth means first and foremost that self and *dharma* do not exist. The standard Madhyamaka expression of the ultimate truth would be that intrinsic nature or self-nature (*svabhāva*) does not exist. Since the Yogācāras still adhere to the positive Ābhidharmika usage of self-nature, e.g., in the usage of the terminology of the three "natures" (*trisvabhāva*), they substitute the often negatively colored terms "self" and *dharma* for self-nature. But what they mean is the same: imagined illusory things do not exist. The ultimate truth in this sense means merely the negation of what does not exist at all, so that the ultimate truth is negative and nonexistent in its very nature. This is why we say that for the Mādhyamikas, what pertains to the ultimate does not exist. But for the Yogācāras, this purely negative characterization of reality falls into nihilism. According to Vasubandhu, there does exist one way to restore a robust sense of ultimate reality. He thinks that "the emptiness of self and of *dharmas*" is something existent, and he therefore presents a positive characterization of the ultimate reality.

5 A robust sense of emptiness

Some may wonder what on earth is the difference between these two expressions: “Self and *dharmas* do not exist” and “the emptiness of self and *dharmas*”. And why is one negative, while the other becomes positive? This has to do with the way the Yogācāras treat “emptiness” as a positive concept, and their distinction between the right and wrong understandings of emptiness. In the Tattvārtha Section of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, we see a classical definition of two conceptions of emptiness:

[This (x)] is empty of that (y), because that (y) does not exist. And this (x) is empty, because this (x) does exist.³¹ In this way, emptiness is justified. If everything does not exist, what is empty? Where is it empty? What is it empty of? For [the notion of] emptiness of exactly this (x) itself (*eva*) of this (x) [itself] is not coherent. Hence, this is a wrong understanding of emptiness (*durgrhītā śūnyatā*).

What, then, is the right understanding of emptiness (*sugrhitā śūnyatā*)?³² One rightly observes that because something (y) does not exist in a given place (x), [therefore] this [place] (x) is empty of that [thing] (y). Moreover, one knows in accordance with reality that whatever remains in this place (x) [apart from that thing (y)] still exists, and it is something that exists in this place (x). This is called the unmistakable understanding (*avakrānti*) of emptiness, which is in accordance with reality.³³

³¹ See Willis’s (1979: 162) translation: “One thing is empty of another because of that [other’s] absence and because of the presence of the void thing itself.”

³² The Derge edition of the Tibetan translation reads *stong pa nyid la log par zin pa* (= *durgrhītā śūnyatā*) (D4037: wi 26b5), and should be corrected by the Peking edition, which reads *stong pa nyid la legs par zin pa* (= *sugrhitā śūnyatā*) (Q5538: zhi 31b6).

³³ Takahashi, 2005: 101: *yena hi śūnyam tadasadbhāvāt yac ca śūnyam tatsadbhāvāc chūnyatā yujyeta || sarvābhāvāc ca kutra kiṃ kena śūnyam bhaviṣyati || na ca tena tasyaiva śūnyatā yujyate || tasmād evaṃ durgrhītā śūnyatā bhavati || katham ca punaḥ sugrhitā śūnyatā bhavati || yataś ca yad yatra na bhavati tat tena śūnyam iti samanupaśyati | yat punar atrāvāśiṣṭam bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtam prajānāti || iyam ucyate śūnyatāvakrāntir yathābhūtā aviparītā.*

Here, the Yogācāra advocates the right understanding of emptiness, which is actually rooted in our ordinary usage of this term: This (x) is empty of that (y), which means that that (y) does not exist in this (x), but this (x) does exist. For instance, when we say, “The bottle is empty (of water),” we mean that water does not exist in the bottle, but the bottle is certainly there. But if the sentence is understood to mean that “x itself is empty of x,” then the bottle would not exist either, which would sound absurd.

The Yogācāra definition of the right understanding of emptiness can be rephrased in the following way: If something (y) does not exist in such-and-such a place (x), one rightly observes this place (x) to be empty of that thing (y). Moreover, whatever remains in this place (x), apart from that thing (y), still exists; it is known in accordance with reality to be something that exists in this place (x). This definition (*yad yatra na bhavati tat tena sūnyam iti samanupaśyati | yat punar atrāvaśiṣṭaṃ bhavati tat sad ihāstīti yathābhūtaṃ prajānāti*) is actually a direct quotation from the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta: iti yaṃ hi kho tattha na hoti, tena taṃ suññaṃ samanupasati, yaṃ pana tattha avasiṭṭhaṃ hoti, taṃ santaṃ idaṃ atthīti pajānāti*.³⁴ Interestingly, in all their rather extensive discussions on emptiness, the Mādhyamikas never referred to this passage, even though it is attributed to the Buddha himself and makes more sense in light of our ordinary usage of the term “empty”; probably because it would undermine their interpretation of emptiness (see Nagao, 1991: 210).

Another classical definition of the Yogācāra sense of emptiness is found in the *Madhyāntavibhāga*, a work ascribed to Maitreya-nātha and transmitted by Asaṅga: “The defining characteristic of emptiness is the nonexistence of the duality [of subject and object], and the existence of that nonexistence.”³⁵ In their epistemologically oriented project, subject and object are regarded as conceptual constructions on the basis of existent processes in consciousness. The concept of emptiness denies the ex-

³⁴ *Majjhima-nikāya* III 104. The translation by Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995: 966ff) reads: “Thus he regards it as void of what is not there, but as to what remains there he understands that which is present thus: ‘This is present.’”

³⁵ *Madhyāntavibhāga* I.13ab: *dvayābhāvo hy abhāvasya bhāvaḥ sūnyasya lakṣaṇaṃ*; see Nagao, 1964: 22.

istence of these conceptual constructions, yet asserts the existence of consciousness (*vijñāna*), thusness (*tathatā*), or the *dharma*-realm (*dharma-dhātu*). In this respect, emptiness is a positive characterization of reality.

The Madhyamaka and Yogācāra senses of emptiness were characterized rather neatly by later Tibetan scholars as respectively “self-emptiness” (*rang stong*, i.e. the emptiness of the thing itself) and “other-emptiness” (*gzhan stong*, i.e. the emptiness of the thing of anything other than it); and the mainstream Tibetan Buddhists considered the former (i.e., “*x* is empty of *x*”) to be the authentic Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness, while condemning the latter (i.e., “*x* is empty of *y*”) as heretical. For the Yogācāras, however, the Madhyamaka sense of emptiness is a wrong understanding of emptiness and leads to nihilism. Their own sense of emptiness, i.e. “other-emptiness”, by contrast, is the right understanding of emptiness, and is capable of retaining the positive character of ultimate reality as existent. Therefore, in the above diagram, “the emptiness of self and *dharmas*” is characterized as something existent, and acts as a distinctive aspect of the ultimate truth.

6 A holistic worldview

The four question marks in the brackets in my diagram are a way of capturing the latter part of Vasubandhu’s remarks, where he seems to cast doubt on everything he said earlier. Self and *dharmas* do not exist, and yet they are not nonexistent; the emptiness of self and *dharmas* exists, and yet does not exist. The imagined nature is not definitely nonexistent, and the dependent nature is not definitely existent either. Everything becomes indefinite now. So what is going on here?

In order to understand this, we need to move on to a passage from the **Madhyamakānusāra* (*Shun zhong lun* 順中論 T1565), a work ascribed to Asaṅga, and translated into Chinese by Gautama Prajñāruci (Jutan Boreliuzhi 瞿曇般若流支, fl. 538-543) in 543. This text is intended to be a commentary on Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, but it does not comment on the entire work. Instead it only explains a few important verses from this work. After a lengthy introduction to and debate on proper methods of argumentation, which takes up more than half of the

entire text, Asaṅga jumps to two verses in Chapter 24 that discuss the foundational Madhyamaka view of the two truths. He says:

Proponent: What *dharma* does not cease? What *dharma* does not arise?

Opponent: The ultimate truth.

Proponent: If this is the case, then there are two truths, i.e., the so-called conventional and ultimate truths. If there are two truths, then your thesis will be proven.

Opponent: If there is ultimate truth distinct from conventional truth, then it proves my thesis. What is wrong with that? As [Nāgārjuna] says in the following verses:

When the Tathāgata teaches the *dharma*, he relies on the two truths: first, conventional truth; second, ultimate truth. Those who do not thus know the two kinds of reality (*liangzhong shi* 兩種實) [expressed] by the two truths cannot understand the real truth (*shidi* 實諦) in the Buddha's profound teaching.³⁶

The opponent here can be identified as a Mādhyamika, who supports himself with verses 24.8-9 of the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*. As we know, these two verses are one of the few occasions when Nāgārjuna elaborates his theory of the two truths, and they thus hold great importance for the Madhyamaka tradition. I have translated them literally, closely following the Chinese, which apparently overinterprets these verses by holding that there are “two kinds of reality” (*liangzhong shi* 兩種實) expressed by the two truths. Interestingly, verse 24.9 is quoted again by the Yogācāra

³⁶ 答曰：何法無滅？何法無生？

問曰：第一義諦。

答曰：若如是者，有二種諦。所謂世諦、第一義諦。若有二諦，汝朋則成。

問曰：若異世諦，有第一義諦，成我朋分，為有何過？如說偈言：

如來說法時 依二諦而說

謂一是世諦 二第一義諦

若不知此理 二諦兩種實

彼於佛深法 則不知實諦; T30:1565.45a13-21.

See *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 24.8-9, La Vallée Poussin, 1913: 492-4:

dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā |

lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthaḥ ||

ye 'nayo na vijānanti vibhāgam satyayor dvayoh |

te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane ||

proponent in his response, but with slightly different wording, which does not imply two levels of reality: “Those who do not know the meaning (*yi* 義) of the two truths cannot understand the true reality (*zhenshi* 真實) of the Buddha’s profound teaching.”³⁷

Asaṅga goes further, to criticize the two truths by means of a focus on non-duality:

Proponent: Your thesis is pleasing; but so is mine; it is based upon the two truths, a doctrine expounded by the Tathāgata. When [the Tathāgata] teaches the thusness of *dharmas* through the two truths, he does not destroy non-duality. If there were two [truths], then the conventional thusness of *dharmas* would be distinguished from the ultimate thusness of *dharmas*. Now, even one thusness of *dharmas* is inapprehensible; how, then, could one apprehend two thusnesses of *dharmas*? If we are to talk about the two truths, we should say that there is no ultimate truth other than the conventional truth, because there is only one characteristic, which is no characteristic at all.³⁸

A few lines later, Asaṅga again emphasizes this point of non-duality: “Opponent: What is not destroyed by these two truths? Proponent: The one characteristic, which is no characteristic and no intrinsic nature.”³⁹ Finally, he overthrows Nāgārjuna’s claim that the Buddha’s teaching relies on the two truths by insisting: “All the Tathāgatas have nothing that they rely on; [they] rely upon neither the conventional truth nor the ultimate truth. When the Tathāgatas teach, their minds have nothing that they rely on. What use is there in saying any more?”⁴⁰

³⁷ 若人不知此 二諦之義者
彼於佛深法 則不知真實 (T30:1565.45a29-b1).

³⁸ 答曰：汝快善說，我說亦爾。依於二諦，如來說法。依二諦說，說法真如，不破不二。若其二者，異第一義法真如，別有世諦法真如。一法真如尚不可得，何處當有二法真如而可得也？若說二諦，此如是說：不異世諦，而更別有第一義諦，以一相故，謂無相故，T30:1565.45a22-27.

³⁹ 問曰：此之二諦，何物不破？答曰：一相，所謂無相、無自體，T30:1565.45b2-4.

⁴⁰ 一切如來皆無所依。不依世諦，亦復不依第一義諦。如來說法，心無所依。何用多語？ T30:1565.45b8-10.

As we see, Asaṅga tries to maintain a holistic and yet non-dualistic worldview, by refusing the Madhyamaka paradigm of two truths, which tends to introduce a two-tiered structure into reality. This, as I see it, is one of the main agendas of the Yogācāra arguments against the Mādhyamikas. In this light, we can now understand that Vasubandhu's earlier remarks are also intended to resist a dualistic tendency towards positing existence versus nonexistence, and to maintain a holistic worldview by going beyond this dualistic tendency.

7 Conclusion

In the wake of the widespread influence of Madhyamaka philosophy, the paradigm of the two truths has become a common way of characterizing the Buddhist approach to reality. But, as I have shown, this two-tiered paradigm contributed to a great extent to the illusory worldview to which the majority of Mādhyamikas subscribe.

One of the goals of the Yogācāra theory of the three natures was to improve on this two-tiered paradigm, and to restore a more robust and holistic worldview. My study of some scattered sources from Maitreya-nātha, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu has demonstrated that they criticized the Madhyamaka version of two truths doctrine on the basis of the Yogācāra theory of the three natures. I hope that this study will help correct some misconceptions concerning the Buddhist approach to reality among contemporary scholars who have fallen under the influence of Madhyamaka.⁴¹

⁴¹ I extend my thanks to members of the workshop series "Indian Buddhist Thought in 6th-7th Century China", especially Shoryu Katsura and Michael Radich, for their very helpful comments, and for corrections of my translations and my English. This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies (KSPS) Grant funded by the Korean Government (MEST) (AKS-2012-AAZ-104).

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