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Madhyamaka and Modern Western Philosophy: A Report

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Abstract

In the past the study of Asian philosophical traditions has often been approached by asking how the theories developed within these non-Western cultures would help us to solve problems in contemporary Western philosophy. The present account, which summarizes results of a research project funded by the John Templeton foundation in 2015, attempts to reverse this way of studying Asian philosophy by investigating which theories, approaches and models from contemporary Western philosophy can be used to support, analyse, refine and advance insights into key questions discussed by Indian Buddhist Madhyamaka. Our discussion concentrates on six key philosophical areas that can contribute in important ways to the analysis and development of Madhyamaka thought: metaphysics, logic, semantics, cognitive science, philosophy of science, and ethics.

Keywords

Madhyamaka, philosophy, metaphysics, logic, semantics, cognitive science, philosophy of science, ethics

Introduction

In the past the study of Asian philosophical traditions has often been approached by asking how the theories developed within these non-Western cultures would help us to solve problems in contemporary Western thought. While this approach has its merits, and has produced various interesting instances of 'fusion philosophy', it is worthwhile to investigate whether there might not be some merit in attempting to advance the dialogue between different philosophical traditions in an alternative way. Rather than asking what Asian philosophy can do for us, we might set out to investigate which theories, approaches and models from con-

temporary Western philosophy can used to support, analyse, refine and advance insights into the 'big questions' developed during the last three millenia of Asian thought.

The Asian philosophical tradition is as vast and complex as the Western one; an investigation such as this must therefore necessarily restrict itself to a single theoretical strand. A current project funded by the John Templeton foundation[1] tries to explore the potential of this alternative approach by considering Indian Madhyamaka philosophy as an example. As part of the project, an invitation-only workshop was conducted that set out to investigate the potential of applying contemporary philosophical results and techniques to Madhyamaka.[2] The aim of this paper is to give a concise summary of some of the results emerging from the workshop's presentations and subsequent discussions.

The overarching aim of the project is to navigate between the Scylla of a purely historical and philological approach lacking analytical sophistication and the Charybdis of an ahistorical philosophical analysis that separates historical theories from their context and tries to squeeze them into the Procrustean bed of current philosophical agendas. This project develops a new way of avoiding these difficulties. It avoids the latter by putting a coherent piece of the Asian philosophical tradition, its arguments and conclusions, in the driving seat, and it avoids the former by focusing not on the arguments for these conclusions found in historical texts, but on ways of supporting these conclusions using contemporary philosophical theories and techniques. Building on our increasing historical knowledge of Asian thought, and on the greater openness of philosophers towards non-Western philosophical material, we hope to contribute to the strategic advancement of the study of Asian philosophy.

The project's focus, the philosophical theory developed by the Buddhist Madhyamaka ('Middle Way') school, is a tradition that began in second century India and subsequently spread across India, Tibet, and China, travelling as far north as Mongolia and as far east as Japan. In addition to its obvious historical importance, this school has also attracted the interest of Western philosophers since the early twentieth century, when the first translations of Madhyamaka texts into Western languages began to appear.

A pervasive feature of the approach pursued here is to examine concepts, tools, and techniques from contemporary Western philosophy with respect to their usefulness in analysing and developing Madhyamaka thought.[3] This means

1. The project, hosted by the University of Oxford, is called 'The New Madhyamaka: Developing Ancient Indian Thought Through Contemporary Philosophical Tools and Techniques'. Jan Westerhoff is the project's principal investigator.

2. The workshop took place at the University of Oxford on 20th and 21st April 2015, and included presentations by Jay Garfield (Yale/National University of Singapore), Jan Westerhoff (Oxford University), Graham Priest (Graduate Center, City University of New York), Sonam Thakchoe (University of Tasmania), Parimal Patil (Harvard University), Mark Siderits (Seoul National University), Michel Bitbol (Centre nationale de la recherce scientifique, Paris), Charles Goodman (Binghamton University), Mattia Salvini (Mahidol University), Georges Dreyfus (Williams College), and Yasuo Deguchi (Kyoto University). Recordings of the workshop are available at http://madhyamaka.theology.ox.ac.uk.

3. In order to make this report as comprehensible as possible for a varied audience, I often refer to the authoritative and freely available Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (plato.stanford.edu) for the further explication of specific philosophical concepts and up-to-date biblio-

adopting a stance that allows us to read ancient Indian texts in terms of distinctions available to us now, instead of feeling constrained to try to understand them solely against the horizon of the conceptual resources we believe to have been available to their authors. To give one example from many: contemporary philosophy distinguishes between epistemic[4] and ontological[5] conceptions of foundationalism; the former refers to a ground of our knowledge of the world, the latter to a ground of the existence of entities in the world. Madhyamaka texts frequently run these two distinctions together. Teasing them apart can help us to gain a clearer picture of what is at stake when the soundness of the Madhyamaka arguments regarding the rejection of foundationalism is examined.

Of course some caution is necessary in applying this procedure. If we imagine a hypothetical scenario in which we could travel back to sixth century India, say, in order to explain our favourite concept *x*, which we believe to be of great utility in clarifying certain Madhyamaka arguments to some Madhyamaka thinkers, there are two possible outcomes. First, they might like what we say, and consider it a useful additional tool for making the point they are trying to make. Second, they might be skeptical of the concept, either because it conflicts with other Madhyamaka ideas or for more general philosophical reasons. It is likely that the distinction between epistemic and ontological foundation would have found favour with the ancient Madhyamaka thinkers. But there are other concepts where matters are not so clear. One example may be the use of modal notions to analyse various Madhyamaka ideas. Ancient Indian thought did not have a worked out theory of possibility and necessity; the idea of a possible world,[6] which was instrumental for the development of theories of modalities in the Western context has no equivalent in ancient Indian philosophy. This may not simply be explained by the fact that the idea of a possible world never occurred to them, but by their dislike for the concept for philosophical reasons, reasons we might share if we try to think through problems from Western philosophy from an ancient Indian perspective.

Another example, frequently discussed by Mark Siderits (2004, 2016a) is that the ancient Indian tradition generally adhered to an externalist theory of knowledge.[7] Several epistemological concepts familiar from the Western tradition make internalist presuppositions, and if we use such concepts to analyse ancient Indian debates we will end up assessing their positions on the basis of assumption that they did not share.

This situation is less problematic than it might seem, as with sufficient acquaintance with the context of ancient Indian philosophical discussion we can develop a relatively good idea of the kind of concepts and assumptions the participants in these discussions are likely to have rejected. Such concepts and assumptions are not going to be helpful in analysing ancient Indian debates (unless we

graphical references. References of the form 'SEP: 'x'' thus refer to entry 'x' in the Stanford Encyclopedia.

4. SEP: 'Foundationalist Theories of Epistemic Justification'.
5. SEP: 'Metaphysical Grounding'.
6. SEP: 'Possible Worlds'.
7. SEP: 'Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification'

assume that the debaters were wrong to reject them), though they can still contribute to the systematic discussion as contrastive cases.[8]

This overview will look at six key philosophical areas that can contribute in important ways to the analysis and development of Madhyamaka thought: metaphysics, logic, semantics, cognitive science, philosophy of science, and ethics.

1. Metaphysics

Our discussion will focus on three key notions in contemporary Western metaphysical thought that have particular relevance for the analysis of Madhyamaka ideas: essence, foundation, and convention.

Essence

To the extent that we can identify a single claim at the heart of the Madhyamaka approach it is the rejection *svabhāva*, a term variously translated as essence, intrinsic nature, substance, inherent existence, or own-being. These varying translations succeed in delimiting the outer boundaries on the conceptual field in which the notion of *svabhāva* can be located, even though none of them manages to bring out all the dimensions of the term. In contemporary Western philosophy we find a variety of ways in which notions like essence, intrinsicality, or independence can be spelt out. One way to arrive at a closer understanding of what the Madhyamaka rejection of *svabhāva* amounts to is by determining how this notion relates to the Western understandings of the essential, the intrinsic, and the independent.

One prominent way of understanding the notion of essence is in terms of a thing's definition.[9] The *definitional essence* of a thing refers to properties that are implicit in the very definition of some object. Tofu is a product made from soybeans, so 'soy-based' is an essential property of each and every piece of tofu.

It also appears plausible to characterize essence in *modal* terms: an essential property of any thing is one such that if it were to lose it, it would cease to be that very thing. Changing the colour of a car does not stop it from being a car, but raising its temperature to such a degree that its metal melts does. For this reason it is modally essential for a car to have a temperature in a given range. The modal understanding of essence can be specified with regard to the properties of a thing, such as in this example, or it can concern other aspects, such as a thing's *parts* or origins. A tripod has three legs as essential parts, any deduction of a leg destroys the tripod. The driving force behind this understanding is not how a tripod is defined, but what we could do to a tripod in terms of subtracting parts that would or would not stop it from being a tripod. Essentialism in terms of *origins* focuses on the idea that a thing could not have been what it is if it did

8. Often progress in philosophical discussion depends on making certain basic assumptions and thereby choosing a specific argumentative path. Sometimes we may suspect that the path was mistaken, and the consideration of another philosophical tradition can help us find out where things went wrong. For example, as we find in the Indian philosophical tradition very little that corresponds to the Western notion of analyticity (SEP: 'Logical empiricism', section 4.2), it is also free from the perplexities that this notion has generated. It is then worthwhile to consider whether the Indian tradition has a satisfactory alternative way of addressing problems that Western philosophy deals with by recourse to the notion of analyticity and, if so, whether this would make us query the justification for having that notion in the first place.

9. SEP: 'Essential vs. Accidental Properties'; 'Aristotle's metaphysics', section 7.

not have the origin it does. For origin essentialism this table would not be what it is if it was made of ice instead of wood, I would not be me if I did not have the parents I in fact have.[10] My parents are not a part of me, so origin essentialism differs from essentialism understood in terms of parts.

Intrinsic properties[11] differ from essential properties by their specification as non-relational. An object has a property intrinsically if it can possess it 'all by itself' without depending on other objects. While the conceptions of essential nature and intrinsic nature are closely related, they are not co-extensive. A piece of tofu is essentially made of soy beans, but being made of soy beans is not part of its intrinsic nature, since this depends on variety of factors other than itself (such as the causal chain that brought the soy beans into existence).

Having a clear distinction between essentiality and intrinsicality is particularly important when considering the idea of a natural kind.[12] Contemporary Western philosophy is very interested in the idea that nature is in some way 'carved at the joints', and that natural kinds corresponds to the divisions thus carved. Terms like 'tiger' or 'gold' pick out such natural kinds, while other terms that might emerge from the philophical laboratory (such as 'grue', denoting anything green before the year 2000, and anything blue thereafter)[13] do not correspond to the joints of nature, and therefore only represent our superimpositions onto the world, but do not represent anything that exists in the world itself.

It is important to determine the precise relation between natural kinds, essential properties, and intrinsic properties, in order to determine whether a Madhyamaka analysis commits us to rejecting natural kinds. If this is the case, and if all kind are imputed, this will have important consequences for the Madhyamaka understanding of what natural science is about (If they do not determine the joints in nature, what is the relation of scientific theories to the world?), and for understanding how we acquire a conceptual grasp of the world in the first place (If there are no joints, we cannot acquire a language, and a corresponding conceptual scheme, by linking up our expressions or concepts with these joints.) Alternatively we might explore the options that natural kinds are neither essences nor intrinsic properties, but that there are in some way relationally established, that it makes no sense to conceive of tigers or gold without taking into account parts of the world extrinsic to them. In this case natural kinds might, after all, remain unaffected by the Madhyamaka criticism of *svabhāva*. We might also consider evidence for the idea that certain putative examples of natural kinds can be more straightforwardly considered to be conceptually imputed entities, while others cannot be. For example, there appears to be empirical evidence that we are cognitively hard-wired, simply by way of our neurocomputational biology, to conceive of certain kinds of animals to have specific kinds of essences. There might be a possibility for the Madhyamaka to regard such essences as simply imputed, while trying not to lose the ability to refer to other forms of natural kinds in a way that allows us to make sense of the contemporary scientific conception of the world.

10. SEP: 'Transworld identity', section 3.3. This idea is most famously associated with Kripke 1980.
11. SEP: 'Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Properties'.
12. SEP: 'Natural kinds'.
13. SEP: 'Nelson Goodman', section 5.3.

Foundation

When we characterize Madhyamaka as an anti-foundationalist theory it is useful to draw an initial distinction between epistemological and ontological foundationalism. Again, this is not a distinction the Madhyamaka texts themselves draw; the two kinds of anti-foundationalism are sometimes run together, and they are interrelated in complicated ways. Nevertheless, this distinction, which is a very common one to draw within the Western philosophical context, is extremely helpful in understanding some of the Madhyamaka arguments.

Epistemological anti-foundationalism is a term that refers to a set of theories within the theory of knowledge that are unified by criticism of the notion of givenness, of introspective privilege, and of sensory experience as providing a foundation for knowledge. They reject the idea that the skeptical challenge is answered, and our knowledge of the world is put on a secure foundation, if we start from a sufficiently secure basis, of something that is given to us prior to our epistemological engagement with the world, whether this is the Cartesian *cogito*, introspectively derived knowledge more generally, or specific parts of our inner world such as sense data. Epistemological anti-foundationalism in itself is not a theory, but a label for a diverse group of theories that attempt to account for knowledge without reference to some kind of epistemic rock-bottom. They include accounts such as infinitism,[14] arguing for the consistency of downwards infinite chains of justification, or various forms of coherentism, that derive justification from a web of mutually supportive beliefs.[15]

In the context of Madhyamaka philosophy this question is raised in the discussion of the relation between epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) and epistemic objects (*prameya*), inquiring whether one grounds the other, or whether they stand in a circular relationship (see Westerhoff 2010a). For understanding what form of epistemic anti-foundationalism the Madhyamaka authors pursue it is useful to read their texts with a selection of the different models in mind by which Western thinkers have spelt out the idea of knowledge without foundations.

Epistemological anti-foundationalism needs to be distinguished from ontological anti-foundationalism, which concerns the analysability of things. There are, to be sure, intricate connections between these two. The reasons for adopting a certain theory of epistemic instruments might have to do with the kinds of things they are, and hence be ontological, and the reasons for adopting a given ontology might flow from our epistemology. Yet we can only have a precise understanding of the relation of the two if we are always clear about which kind we mean when we refer to 'anti-foundationalism'. The Indic Madhyamaka texts sometimes run these issues together, and a differentiation between them allows us to understand the arguments in these texts with a greater degree of precision.

Ontological anti-foundationalism concerns what happens when we break things down. If we do not reach a foundation, the two remaining possibilities are either an infinite descent of finer and finer divisions, or a circle. 'Breaking down' can refer to a variety of different procedures, amongst them material decomposition (like cutting some object in half), causal analysis (determining a thing's causes), and theoretical reduction (replacing terms in a given theory

14. Klein 1998, Turri and Klein 2014.

15. SEP: 'Epistemology', section 3.

by those from another, more basic one). Anti-foundationalism with respect to material decomposition denies the existence of atoms,[16] anti-foundationalism with respect to causal analysis denies the existence of a first cause,[17] and anti-foundationalism regarding theoretical reduction denies the existence of a fundamental, irreducible theory.[18] Madhyamaka takes all three denials on board.[19] While its arguments against atoms might benefit from closer analysis through the perspectives of mereology and contemporary physics, investigating the nature of anti-foundationalism regarding reduction has most to gain from connecting with contemporary Western ideas.

An example is provided by current neo-pythagorean positions that claim all reality to be mathematical. Such claims can range from relatively mild forms, arguing that all theories about the world can in the final analysis be expressed as claims about sets of numbers (Quine 1981) to quite extreme ones, saying that all existing objects whatsoever are mathematical (Tegmark 2014, 271).There is a wide variety of opinions in contemporary philosophy about the question of how the nature of mathematical entities is to be best understood. One approach, sometimes referred to as cognitivism, considers mathematical objects to be creations of the human mind (Lakoff and Núñez 2000). If we combine the two approaches we obtain a circular reductive theory: the world around us and everything that is in it depends for its existence on mathematical objects. These objects in turn depend for their existence on mental activity, which is one of the set of things that exist in the world. We therefore have an example of a reductive theory that is anti-foundational because it does not bottom out in a set of fundamental entities, but doubles up on itself in a circle.[20] This reductive circularity presents an interesting case to study in the context of analysing Madhyamaka metaphysics because it constitutes one way in which the Madhyamaka's conception of universal dependence without foundation may be spelt out.

Another way of explicating the anti-foundationalist idea is in terms of an infinitely descending chain. Here some ideas from the contemporary discussion of anti-realism can be illuminating. Anti-realists sometimes argue from the fact that there are various different schemes that can equally well be superimposed on reality to the claim that none of these schemes is essentially correct.[21] Such arguments frequently presuppose a kind of 'cookie-cutter' account: our concepts are the cookie-cutters that shape the dough of the world into concept-shaped bits. But on this understanding the dough precedes the cookies, and even if the cookies are all mind-made, so to speak, the dough is objectively real. We are therefore only dealing with a restricted form of anti-realism that does not affect the underlying 'given' that our concepts shape. It is then interesting to find out whether it is possible to generalize the anti-realist approach in order to get rid of the dough,

16. SEP: 'Mereology', section 3.4.
17. SEP: 'Cosmological argument'.
18. SEP: 'Richard Rorty', section 2.2.
19. The second, but not the other two denials are shared by the Ābhidharmikas.
20. For another example of a circle of mutually reductive theories see Tolman 1938.
21. Hilary Putnam's example of different ways of counting is a case in point (Putnam 1990, 96). Depending on what conception of 'thing' we use there seem to be three things or seven things in a particular world. As such there might then be no universally true answer to the question whether there are three or seven things.

for example by arguing that underneath every level of conceptual construction there is another equally constructed level, so that it is never possible to arrive at an unconstructed level by digging down further and further (Goodman 1978). A contemporary example is Rorty's idea of relativizing truth claims to particular theories or stories in which they occur (Rorty 1994, 57). As such a truth is not simply true, but true only relative to the theory in which it occurs. What about the claim that it is true that the truth in question is true relative to a theory? Again, this is true relative to *another* theory, and so on. We never reach the rock-bottom of something that is simply true.

Circular and infinitely descending constructions carry with them the air of paradoxicality, simply because there are various circles or infinite regresses that are indeed vicious. Short of coming up with a general theory of what kinds of circles and infinite descents are allowed, it is essential to find out whether constructions such as the neo-pythagorean circle or the Rortyan infinite descent are in fact consistent, or whether they contain hidden contradictions. If we manage to establish that certain circles or regresses are not vicious, we can show that the Madhyamaka approach of how to avoid foundationalism is in principle feasible, and we can inquire whether the actual examples of such circles or regresses we have studied would be able to serve as models for what the Mādhyamika sets out to do.

That there is nothing wrong with circular or infinitely regressive constructions as such is demonstrated by the example of non-well-founded set theory (Aczel 1988). This consistent extension of classical set theory allows the existence of infinitely descending sequences of set membership, as well as membership loops (sets that contain themselves, or sets that contain sets that contain sets (...) that contain the first set). Graham Priest has constructed a model of an unfounded chain of ontological reductions of the type the Madhyamaka defends within the framework of non-well-founded set theory (Priest 2009, 2014, 171–172).

Priest's model formalizes a type of thoroughgoing structuralism, and it is indeed in the current discussion of ontological structuralism that we can find interesting ways of spelling out the Madhyamaka project. The version of 'ontic structural realism' developed by Ladyman and French[22] over the last years constitutes an ontology that privileges structures over individuals individuating the structures, and attempts to dispense completely with the notion of a fundamental level. According to this theory, it is 'patterns all the way down'. Despite its anti-foundationalist agenda, ontic structural realism is hardly an approach contemporary Mādhyamikas would want to adopt in its original form. While there is no foundational level within the structure, the infinitely descending structure itself is taken to be ultimately real, in contrast with the Madhyamaka denial of any ultimately real entities.

There is, however, the possibility of combining the ontic structural realist position with other accounts in order to achieve, as in the case of the combination of neo-pythagoreanism with cognitivism, something much more in accordance with the Madhyamaka outlook. The first possibility is to combine it with the rejection of absolutely general quantification, that is with the denial of theories

22. Ladyman and Ross 2007, French 2014.

that quantify over absolutely everything.[23] For if absolute generality cannot be achieved, ontological theories understood as complete, ultimately true theories of the world cannot be formulated, since there will always be something outside of the theory that the theory does not include. No ontological theory can therefore constitute the last word about reality.

A second possibility involves the assumption of semantic contextualism.[24] The basic idea here is that for any statements to be meaningful it is always necessary to hold the truth of some other statements fixed. These other statements function like background assumptions, and if some purported ontological theory is supposed to be meaningful there has to be a set of statements outside of the theory that we have to hold fixed as truths. Yet in this case the ontological theory cannot constitute a complete and ultimately true account of the world, because the fact that the theory means anything at all depends on something that falls outside of the scope of the theory.

Madhyamaka appears to represent an example of thoroughgoing interdependence, where every thing depends on some other thing or things, combined with the claim that this interdependence does not express an ultimately true theory. As such it provides an interesting example of an attempt to take the basic anti-realist intuition as far as it will go. Even the most convinced realist is likely to believe that some things we talk about are not really there, but are merely artificial creations of the way we think and talk about the world. He will thus accept a localized version of anti-realism, and most anti-realist theories that current Western philosophy examines are such local anti-realisms, anti-realisms concerning mathematical objects, abstract objects, mental states, qualia, and so forth. There are only a few examples (such as in the theories of Goodman (1978) and Rorty (1979)) where the anti-realist conception of specific kinds of things is globalized, extending it to all kinds of entities. Madhyamaka then adds a final turn of the screw, by considering the possibility of anti-realism directed against the very entity that is the global anti-realist theory. Even if we are anti-realists with respect to all kinds of things in the world, we would still want hold on to a realist conception of the *truth* of the global anti-realist account. In opposition, Madhyamaka defends a global anti-realism with respect to truth. Whether such a form of global anti-realism is a consistent position is not discussed much in contemporary Western thought. But the resources it has developed in order to discuss local forms of anti-realism will be useful in trying to advance its discussion.

Additional notions that have been analysed in considerable detail in Western philosophy and that can throw further light on what precisely the Madhyamaka notion of ontological anti-foundationalism amounts to include the idea of supervenience, the theory of parts and wholes as formalized in mereology, as well as the notion of grounding. However, to discuss them further here would go beyond the limitations of a survey such as this.[25]

23. Grim 1991, Rayo and Uzquiano 2006, Westerhoff 2013.

24. Recanati 2005, see section 3 below.

25. The interested reader is referred to SEP: 'Supervenience', 'Mereology', and 'Metaphysical Grounding' for introductory discussions that include references to further reading.

Conventionalism

Throughout Madhyamaka texts we find the pervasive claim that reality is just conventional (*saṃvṛtisat*). What precisely is meant by the notion of 'convention' here is unfortunately less than clear, and spelling this out is a major part of gaining a clear understanding of the Madhyamaka conception of the two truths, one of which is precisely the truth of conventional reality. In the recent past Western philosophy and adjacent disciplines have developed a useful set of conceptual tools that can be employed to study the nature of convention more deeply.[26]

One way of analysing conventions is by treating them as a solution to coordination problems in which two or more participants aim to associate a common sign with a specific event. Obviously they cannot just agree on what the sign refers to, since that would presuppose the existence of an antecedent system of convention in which it is possible to talk about the sign. Lewis (2002) has proposed a solution to this problem based on successful and unsuccessful interactions between speakers. How the notion of convention proposed there may be applied to the discussion of the Madhyamaka understanding of the concept is described in Westerhoff 2011.

Another approach to the idea of a conventionally created reality can proceed from the idea of plural subjects in social psychology. This tries to understand intentions as something formed by groups or collective bodies, something that is not reducible to sets of individual intentions. Wilfred Sellars (1968, 222) has introduced the notion of we-intentionality, of intentions that we, *qua* members of a group hold, but would not hold on our own behalf (for example we might believe (collectively) that the elected candidate should take office, even though we (individually) think we should not, as we have not voted for him.) These ideas might be usefully employed to analyse the Madhyamaka idea that humans can be bound by conventions even against their expressed intentions. The notion of convention in play when reality is called conventional is not of the kind one can simply opt out from, like stopping to participate in a game. The convention of reality goes beyond any convention that can be understood as resulting from an explicit agreement between participants.

This idea can be further developed by considering the biological bases of conventions.[27] Certain conventions can arguably be grounded in cognitive reflexes, which form part of our cognitive heritage. Studying the behaviour of very young, pre-linguistic infants we can determine assumptions they make about the world which cannot be acquired by learning. These assumptions do not arise from deliberation about the world, or from having been learned from others, but have evolved as part of our genetic endowment. Such cognitive reflexes can then be understood as giving rise to social conventions that hold between humans sharing the same general biological setup. But such a grounding of the social in the biological is not one-way, rather, the biological and the social are linked up in a pattern of mutual dependence: part of the reason why we are biologically equipped with the cognitive reflexes we have is that we have evolved to fit into social matrices governed by social conventions like the ones we live in.

26. SEP: 'Convention'.

27. Zelazo 2013, part 4: Cognitive Development.

On the basis of these ideas we can conceptualize conventional truth as a conventionally constituted reality based both on cognitive reflexes in individual psychology as well as on collective intentions. Thus understood, conventional reality can be interpreted as the kind of reality we are biologically hard-wired to construct, and as the kind of reality we construct socially because of the kinds of beings we are.

2. Logic

Madhyamaka arguments are well-known for the employment of an argumentative pattern known as the *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma. In this pattern four positions, A, not A, both A and not A, and neither A nor not A are negated. How exactly to make sense of this in logical terms is a complex question, and one that has occupied Madhymaka scholars for a considerable length of time. While convincing explications of the tetralemma that do not require any resources beyond classical logic can be given,[28] it is interesting to consider whether developments in non-classical logic might be helpful in further elucidating ideas lying behind it.[29]

One way of analysing the tetralemma is in terms of many valued logic;[30] Garfield and Priest consider the example of the Dunn four-valued semantics for first-degree entailment.[31] This distinguishes four truth values, apart from the familiar 'true' and 'false' also 'true and false' and 'neither true nor false'. It is quite straightforward to extend the familiar logical operators to this new system; negation, for example, makes everything 'true' 'false' and vice versa, while the negation of what is both true and false is 'both false and true' and that of what is neither true nor false 'neither false nor true'. Validity is here defined not as preserving truth, but as preserving the truth-values 'true' and 'both true and false'.

Understood in this way the tetralemma can be considered as simply spanning up the logical space of all possibilities, exactly like the dilemma ('either A or not A') exhausts all logical possibilities in systems where the law of the excluded middle is accepted. This, of course, is not the main use of the tetralemma in Madhyamaka. Rather than acting simply as a blueprint for enumerating all the options, the Mādhyamika will additionally also present reasons for rejecting all the four alternatives. Moreover, Nāgārjuna seems to suggest that there are certain states of affairs (such as the existence of the Tathāgata)[32] that cannot be described by any of the four alternatives, thereby opening up the possibility that

28. Ruegg 2010, Westerhoff 2006.

29. Priest and Garfield 2002, Garfield and Priest 2009, Priest and Routley 1989, as well as the special issue of *Philosophy East and West*, 63(3), 2013, called 'Buddhism and contradiction', devoted to papers from a workshop on the dialetheist interpretations of Madhyamaka use of the tetralemma. For some nuanced reflections on the appropriateness of applying dialetheist tools to Madhyamaka texts even though it appears that 'contradictions were anathema [...] for later Mādhyamikas' (96), see Tillemans 2009. For an introduction to contradiction-tolerant logics see SEP: 'Dialetheism'.

30. SEP: 'Many-valued logic'.

31. Garfield and Priest 2009, 71, Priest 2001, 8.4.

32. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 22:12a: 'How can "It is eternal", "It is non-eternal", and the rest of this tetralemma apply [to the Tathāgata], who is free of extrinsic nature?', *śāśvatāśāśvatādy atra kutaḥ śānte catuṣṭayam* (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 241).

there is something *beyond* the supposedly exhaustive enumeration of all logical possibilities.

This something would be inexpressible, given that the four alternatives of the tetralemma exhaust what can be expressed by language. We can account for this by introducing a fifth truth-value, 'inexpressible', that is systematically related to the other four truth-values by the familiar logical operators. We can then understand the four alternatives of the tetralemma as indicative of what can be said about conventional reality, while the fifth alternative applies to ultimate reality. In Madhyamaka conventional and ultimate reality are not supposed to be distinct entities, but in some important sense one and the same. What this means is that the very same state of affairs can be conceptualized as describable (when viewed via the lens of the four alternatives) or as inexpressible (when the four alternatives are seen as insufficient for expressing it). This allows us to account for a puzzling feature of Madhyamaka texts (and of Mahāyāna sūtras seen as closely aligned to them, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*), which is that they sometimes describe ultimate reality as ineffable, while simultaneously saying quite a bit about its qualities. The relevance of formal models such as the five-valued semantics we have sketched here in elucidating and developing Madhyamaka ideas lies not in any claim that the detailed mechanisms of these logics were in any direct or indirect way known to the ancient Madhyamaka authors. Rather, reference to such formal developments which post-date Madhyamaka works by numerous centuries allows us to show how initially obscure, unintuitive, or even apparently inconsistent claims found in some of these texts can be provided with clear, formally precise models. As such, the analysis of Madhyamaka claims with the tools of non-classical logic does of course not demonstrate their truth, but it shows how some of their crucial claims can be made sufficiently precise to establish a connection with contemporary philosophical ideas and concerns. Such work follows a trajectory already established by the Madhyamaka commentators in ancient India, who tried to explain the meaning of the texts they were commenting on by using the latest conceptual resources of their time, in order to explain the relevance and philosophical power of their ideas to audiences contemporary with them.

3. Semantics

Madhyamaka has a very critical view of conceptual hypostatization (*prapañca*), in fact the Madhyamaka position is sometimes described as the pacification of this falsifying *prapañca*.[33] Yet if we ascribe to the Mādhyamikas the claim that *all* conceptualization falsifies we seem to arrive at a paradoxical situation. Saying that something is true of all conceptualization involves conceptualization, so if what the claim says is true the claim itself must be false.[34]

Some recent contemporary work in semantics can be brought in to dissolve this paradoxical situation, and to explain at least one other puzzling fact about

33. For example in the dedicatory verses of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

34. One way of solving this problem would be to embrace dialetheism (see section 2). While such a solution is interesting for systematic reason, it is less satisfactory as a historical explication, since the logical conservativism of key Madhyamaka texts makes it hard to describe any non-standard logical principles to them.

Madhyamaka. The work in question is *radical contextualist semantics* (RCS).[35] We can introduce its central idea by considering sentences containing demonstrative or indexicals. If we take a sentence like 'this is hot now', which contains both, it is clear that the statement can only be meaningful, and thereby either true or false, if we have some contextual way of specifying what is meant by 'this' and by 'now'. If, for example, I utter a token of this sentence, the reference of 'now' is taken care of (whenever I say the sentence), and if I point at the same time at a radiator my pointing supplies the context for interpreting the referent of 'this'. The idea behind RCS is to extend this requirement for context to all sentences, independent of whether they contain demonstratives or indexicals.[36] Elaborating on the idea that 'meaning is use' this approach denies that there is a fundamental divide between semantics and pragmatics, as it is only when used in the context of actual, concrete sentences that words have a meaning. In order to mentally compute (and thus understand) the meaning of individual words that make up a sentence we need to look at the sentence frame in which they occur, and in order to understand what the sentence as a whole means, we need to look at the meanings of the individual words that constitute it. Both top-down and bottom-up processes are required, in particular there is no way of arriving at an understanding of the meanings of individual words without consideration of the sentential context.[37]

On the basis of RCS it is easy to motivate the idea that *there cannot be any truth bearers outside of a context of assertion.* According to the common semantic understanding the majority of sentences expresses a proposition, an abstract, atemporal entity that acts as the bearer of the truth-value (which, in turn, is settled by the world, depending on whether it is the way the sentences says it is). But according to RCS a string of words does not express a proposition outside of a context of assertion, and therefore cannot be either true or false outside of such a context.

This will then resolve the paradox of claiming that all conceptualization falsifies, for if we accept RCS the claim will fail to express a statement. To do so it would require context-transcendent truth conditions, speaking about all contexts whatsoever, and RCS denies that any such truth-conditions exist. The paradoxical claim then turns out to be something that can only be shown, not said. We can demonstrate for a specific concept that a given use of it involves hypostazation, and thereby the postulation of an entity that is simply the product of our conceptualizing activity. If we ascribe any further reality to it, we falsify what there is. The Madhyamaka would then suppose that this can be demonstrated for *any* concept, though considerations of radical contextualist semantics show why we cannot express the corresponding universal generalization.

35. For some introductory remarks on contextualism in semantics see SEP: 'Theories of Meaning', section 2.3.

36. For a good survey of different forms of contextualism and arguments motivating them, see Recanati 2005.

37. These considerations would not be too foreign to the ancient Indian authors themselves. After all, the idea that the meaning of certain assertions can only be understood by taking their context of utterance into account is present in the Buddhist distinction between the interpretable (*neyārtha*) and the definite (*nītthārta*) teachings of the historical Buddha.

Apart from this paradox, another problem with Madhyamka that RCS can help to dissolve is the fact that making an assertion frequently presupposes the existence of entities with intrinsic natures, natures which function as end-points for a justificatory why-regress. Suppose I say that this table is hard. When challenged, I can respond that it is made of ice (and that ice simply has the nature of being hard). If this is challenged, I can talk about ice being a crystalline structure consisting of H_2O molecules, and that such structures have the property of being hard. Further challenges can be responded to by referring to something even more fundamental, such as the way the different atoms in the H_20 are bonded to each other. At each point I refer to an entity that has the property in question intrinsically, and this is where the chain of explanations will stop.[38] To put the matter in Madhyamaka terms, at each point we attribute *svabhāva* to something. Yet for the Mādhyamika, all of these attributions must be false, since there are no entities with *svabhāva*. This leaves him with the difficulty to explain why these claims are at least true in some way (why talking about the crystal structure seems to be a better response than postulating little invisible men that hold the molecules together really tightly), why some of them appear to be more fundamental than others, and how explanations could ever come to an end.

From the perspective of RCS, all of these intrinsicality claims are only true in a specific context of assertion. Each context may contain parameters when, for a specific assertion, and for a specific audience, explanatory bedrock is reached. As such it would be possible to hold on to the claim that there are no entities with intrinsic natures (no entities with *svabhāva*), but that we can still speak as if there were, by assuming the existence of purely context dependent intrinsic natures. In this way it may be possible to escape the charge of 'epistemological narcissm' sometimes brought forward against forms of anti-realism, that of tailoring our ontology to the limits of our knowledge. But this version of Madhyamaka informed by RCS would say that the problem with realism about intrinsic natures is not that some of them may forever elude our epistemic grasp, and that it would therefore be pointless to assume that such natures exist, but that there is a problem with having a notion of truth that applies outside of any context. The realist understanding of intrinsic natures and the associated idea of truth as correspondence can work in localized settings, relative to given contexts of assertion, but it is not possible to up-scale it to a globalized version.

4. Cognitive science

Unlike most contemporary theories of our cognitive relation to the world, Madhyamaka defends a massive error theory. Instead of a careful epistemic optimism that assumes that we get the world mostly right, at least in its broad outlines, Madhyamaka is strongly pessimistic when it comes to viewing ordinary, untrained epistemic subjects and their attempts to form true beliefs of the world. As a matter of habit, the Mādhyamaka argues, we get the world largely and dangerously wrong. The frequent metaphors of the world being like a mirage or a dream need to be cashed out as literal claims, not as literal claims that we are in fact dreaming, but as literal claims about the nature of our epistemic relation to the world.

38. For further discussion of this, see Siderits 2016b.

But how convincing is the idea that illusion is a pervading factor of everyday life? Recent research in cognitive science has produced a wide-ranging set of results that suggest that rather than constituting the exception relative to the rule of non-deceptive perception, illusions of different kinds are characteristic of the normal functioning of a considerable number of our cognitive interactions with the world. Such illusions range from the familiar and relatively localized, as in the case of optical illusions, to the less obvious and more widespread, as in cases of choice-blindness and inattentional blindness, the way memories are constructed, misattributions of intentionality, and implicit bias.[39]

None of these illusions need sophisticated technology to generate them. The very ease with which they can be produced demonstrates that they do not arise at the fringes of our sensory or conceptual capacities (involving the very small, very fast, or very complex) but that they are part of our normal or everyday way of interacting with things. As such they constitute a good illustration of what Buddhist thinkers (within Madhyamaka as well as outside) mean by their claim that our perception of the world is shot through with defilements (*kleśa*). Moreover, considering illusions investigated by contemporary cognitive science as examples of such defilements provides us with a way of understanding the connection between deceptive perception and ethics that Madhyamaka asserts. The natural way to think about illusions is to subsume them amongst epistemological problems: they are things that get in the way in our enterprise of acquiring correct knowledge of the world. Yet Madhyamaka argues that the main difficulties with the defilements are their ethical consequences, as a mind subject to such defilements finds it more difficult to interact with the world in an ethical way. If we consider most cases of optical illusion, it is indeed hard to understand how e.g. the fact that we see two lines of the same length as having different lengths could have any implications for how we interact with people. But thinking about more pervasive illusions such as inattentional blindness makes this quite transparent. Given that such illusions imply that we often simply do not perceive elements of a situation that are of crucial ethical relevance (such as that our conversation partner is switched for someone else mid-conversation, as shown in the famous 'door' experiment; Simons and Levin 1998), it is hardly surprising that we are then not able to respond to these elements in a way that does justice to the ethical dimension of the situation.

It is also useful to consider the relation of such cognitive and meta-cognitive illusions to the idea of a conventionally created reality, as well as to the various notions of essence mentioned above. For the Mādhyamika, they are connected to each other in important ways, insofar as we illusorily perceive the world as endowed with essences, despite its conventional nature, and insofar as this illusion is perpetuated partly by convention-based practices such as language and reasoning.

Traditional Madhyamaka sources distinguish two sources of the cognitive illusion of essences: innate imputation, which is based on cognitive reflexes, and

39. For some further discussion see Gregory and Gombrich 1980; Westerhoff 2010b; Chabris and Simons 2011.

conceptualization-based imputation, an imputation that results from faulty philosophizing that accepts the existence of essences.[40]

Cognitive science can contribute to developing a more precise idea of the Madhyamaka notion of innate imputation by trying to find out what kinds of concepts are innate (the conceptual bases of language learning, inductive generalization, socialization, and the concepts of person, action, intentionality, and animal identity seem to be plausible candidates). We then need to inquire further whether the concepts thus arising are characterized relationally or not. If they are, such innate imputation may be benign, but if they are characterized essentially, and if there are no essences, we might be biologically hardwired to make philosophical mistakes. This idea would provide us with an interesting way of spelling out the thought that the imputation of essences results in important ways from habitual tendencies that are not consciously acquired, but form part of our heritage.

As such reference to cognitive science allows us to make relatively broad suggestions regarding the nature of experience (such as that our view of the world is permeated by massive errors, or that there are innate factors responsible for a particular way of conceptualizing the world) much more precise. This can be conceptualized as a continuation of the approach found in the tradition of commentaries (śāstra) on Madhyamaka texts, an approach that tried to explicate and amplify the ancient text in a manner that was consistent with their intent, while using resources to do so that went beyond those available to the authors of the root texts themselves.

5. Philosophy of science

Quite a lot has been written in the past decades on the connections between Buddhist philosophy and quantum mechanics. Of course nobody would want to suggest that the theory of the physical world the ancient Indian Mādhyamikas were operating with in any way anticipates the results of contemporary physics. It is rather the case that in order to explain specific empirical observations quantum mechanics suggests particular models of reality that bear an interesting similarity to those the Mādhyamikas developed, even though the reasons they developed these models had nothing to do with results of experiments. By exploring what kind of theoretical options are available in current quantum theoretical thinking we become aware of possibilities of explicating and advancing specific Madhyamaka claims.

An example attempts to come up with a satisfactory account of quantum entanglement.[41] In cases of entangled particles we can specify certain relational properties of a pair of such particles, though we cannot specify their individual properties. We know that *if* one particle has property A the other has property B, but we do not know which one has which. This is not simply an epistemological problem. Assuming that, unknown to us, the particles really have the properties, though we could never find out, leads to wrong predictions. The identity of these particles is relational, that is we can only distinguish one particle from another by taking the relational properties into account. If we accept the Quinean point

40. SEP: 'The distinction between innate and acquired characteristics'.

41. SEP: 'Quantum entanglement and information', section 1.

that there is no entity without identity, the existence of these two particles as entities turns out to be relational as well: one cannot exist without the other.

This interdependent existence of entangled particles is sometimes seen as a conceptual model for the Madhyamaka notions of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), extrinsic existence (*paratantra*), and mutual establishment (*parasparasiddhi*). In the quantum case there is no underlying productive cause (*nirvatakaḥ hetuḥ*)[42] that brings about the different properties of the entangled particles, even though there is a strong correlation between the two properties. The relation between the particles seems to be able to stand on its own, without requiring support from a prior, categorical basis giving rise to it.

Some physicists have therefore argued that the relation between the two particles has physical reality, even though what it relates (the properties of the individual particles) do not. In the quantum mechanical case this sometimes leads to the idea that reality is pure structure, an idea that can then be spelled out in terms of various forms of holistic realism[43] or structural realism.[44] Applied to the Madhyamaka case such an interpretation leads to a view that takes the intrinsic nature of reality to be emptiness, meaning that at the level of ultimate analysis the world is a network of interdependent entities, a network that bears its own identity and existence without depending on the identity and existence of an underlying set of individuals.

It is interesting to note that this realist interpretation appears to be satisfactory neither in the quantum mechanical case nor in the Madhyamaka case. Results obtained by Cabello (1999a and b; Bitbol 2010) suggest that relational realism fares no better than property realism in trying to address the problem of entanglement. In the Madhyamaka case it becomes clear it is hard to square the realist interpretation with the claims of universal emptiness (considering everything, including emptiness itself, to be empty) that we find in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*s and that are adopted by the Madhyamaka philosophers.

It is obviously not the case that the *reasons* for why the structuralist or holist interpretation is rejected are identical in each case. In the quantum case there are experimental reasons that make the realist conception unsatisfactory; with respect to Madhyamaka the reasons against postulating interdependent existence as an ultimate reality are primarily textual: claims various Madhyamaka philosophers make repeatedly do not seem to cohere well with such an interpretation.

What we can nevertheless determine from a comparison of both cases is whether the resulting anti-realist picture is stable. In the quantum mechanical case such an interpretation would adopt a view of 'deep interdependence', a form of structuralism where realism about properties of quantum-theoretical objects is rejected, while the relationist view that accounts for the appearance of properties is itself not founded in a realist view of relations. Such an account will have to assume that existential dependence relations are not well-founded, and that such dependence relations can either proceed infinitely backwards, or close back up on themselves in the form of a loop. Such a circular approach is

42. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 1:7.

43. SEP: 'Holism and nonseparability in physics', Esfeld 2002, 2004, Esfeld and Lam 2008.

44. SEP: 'Structural realism', Ladyman and Ross 2007, French 2014.

achieved, for example, if the properties of the entangled particles are ascribed to them relative to an act of measurement or observation, but not absolutely. Such an act would then not be considered as transcendent, but, due to its causal nature, as part of the very same quantum-theoretically described world of which the entangled particles are also a part.

Such a view has a variety of theoretical benefits. It allows us to address the problem of Schrödinger's cat[45] by pointing out that relative to a certain state of knowledge of the observer, the cat will be alive, dead, or in a superposed state. There is simply no intrinsic fact about whether the cat is alive or dead, nor is there an intrinsic fact about the relations relative to which it is alive or dead.

It also equips us with a way of addressing the problem of Wigner's friend,[46] i.e. the difficulty caused by the fact that the superposed state of the cat will spread to that of the observer, its observer, and so on. Accepting the account of 'deep interdependence' and the anti-realism about relations it brings with it, we do not require a transcendent observer to break the chain of superposed observers. This is because there is no objective fact about whether an observer is in a superposed state either. He may be in such a state from the perspective of a third person, but not from his own perspective.

If we can show that the non-well-founded anti-realist interpretation provides a consistent way of describing quantum mechanical results, and helps us to dissolve philosophical difficulties, we can see this as evidence for the potential usefulness in using such a framework for interpreting Madhyamaka *insofar as the framework has a satisfying model*. A criticism raised against non-foundational interpretations of Madhyamaka (both in traditional[47] and in modern[48] discussion) is that it reduces to an inconsistent form of nihilism, to a theory that ends up saying that, contrary to appearances, nothing exists. The comparison with the quantum mechanical case can help to dispel this worry (needless to say, it does not tell us anything about the adequacy of this interpretation in interpreting Madhyamaka sources, though it may raise our belief in the truth of key Madhyamaka claims, thus interpreted, at least to the extent that we believe in the truth of quantum mechanics, thus interpreted.)

6. Ethics

In the contemporary Western discussion Madhyamaka is sometimes seen to be predominantly concerned with metaphysical or ontological questions, and thus as focusing on the theoretical over the normative. This understanding is mistaken. Like all Buddhist schools Madhyamaka presents a complete picture of progression from ordinary cyclic existence to liberation, and the discussion of ethical questions is an indispensible part of this.[49]

45. SEP: 'The Consistent Histories Approach to Quantum Mechanics', section 10.1.
46. SEP: 'Quantum Approaches to Consciousness', section 4.2.
47. Willis 1979, 161–162.
48. Williams 1998 and 2000, Burton 1999.
49. Recent research on Madhyamaka acknowledges this; see, for example, Cowherds 2015. An earlier discussion of the connection between Madhyamaka ontology and ethics is in Williams 1998 and 2000.

There is considerable debate about what kind of ethical theory Buddhist ethics should be taken to be,[50] one useful framework recently suggested (Garfield 2010–2011) considers it as an enterprise focused on the development of care and perceptual skills in interpersonal interactions. According to this interpretation it is not first and foremost concerned with our actions and their consequences, or with cultivating a specific kind of character, but with a transformation of our moral phenomenology. Ethics is therefore concerned with changing our comportment to the world by changing our way of seeing the world, resulting in a phenomenological shift that will then influence how we act (and thus what kind of consequences we produce) and what kind of character we build for ourselves through the habituated tendencies that our actions express.

In this respect two sets of discussions within experimental cognitive psychology are particularly interesting. The first is implicit bias theory,[51] a theory that describes the existence of fast perceptual responses that are sensitive to cultural bias. Such responses are beyond our conscious control and might even be held against our explicit beliefs — even an activist against *x* can have an explicit bias in favour of *x*. Implicit bias theory provides us with a good way of spelling out the Madhyamaka (and more generally Buddhist) idea that our moral perception of the world is permeated by more or less subtle defilements (*kleśa*) that colour the way the world appears to us, thereby influencing the way in which we act. Because such defilements are not always introspectively accessible, even a moral action can take place against the background of unconscious, non-virtuous tendencies of cognitive response. Moral practice is then understood as transforming the way we perceive the world to make it less coloured by such *kleśa*s. By paying more attention to the way the world is in the absence of implicit bias responses we can facilitate a more caring and less aversive (and thereby more moral) interaction with the world. Much of Buddhist contemplative practice aims at eradicating the defilements in pursuit of moral perfection. The identification of implicit biases with at least a subset of the *kleśa*s as understood by Madhyamaka provides us with an opportunity to interpret the Buddhist theory from a contemporary empirical perspective, and to use our theoretical insights into how implicit biases arise and how they might be eliminated in order to explain, assess, and possibly develop the Budddhist account of the origin of the *kleśa*s and the techniques proposed for their elimination.

A second set of results that is of interest in explicating the concept of *kleśa*s concerns subliminal perceptions (Dixon 1971). It is well documented that there is a significant number of features of our environment that we perceive, even though we do not know that we perceive them (examples range from the olfactory perception of pheromones to the visual perception of geometric features of faces). Such perceptions influence our behaviour, in many cases in ethically relevant ways, yet the way they do so is not introspectively available. Identifying some *kleśa*s with subliminal perceptions gives us a way of explaining why they are traditionally considered to be part of our karmic potential, and hard to eradicate. If some dimension of what 'karmic potential' amounts to includes the bodies we have, the biological hard-wiring of the susceptibility to specific subliminal perceptions can explain why they should be considered part of our 'karmic poten-

50. SEP: 'Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism', Keown 2001, Goodman 2009.

51. SEP: 'Implicit bias'.

tial', and the fact that they are not introspectively available, that they are a part of our consciousness that is 'phenomenologically transparent' (Metzinger 2003) can explain why they are so hard to eradicate.

Research into both implicit bias theory and in the nature of subliminal perception therefore presents us with a set of empirical results we can use to analyse, and potentially advance the conception of Buddhist ethics as an enterprise with a specific focus on mental cultivation.

Conclusion

The study of the Asian philosophical tradition is nowadays conducted primarily as a study in the history of ideas: scholars try to understand what views and arguments historical authors put forward in specific texts, and how these can be understood in their intellectual context. While such a study is an indispensable precondition for understanding what the Asian thinkers were thinking about, it brings with it the risk of forgetting that the views they put forward were intended not as historical curios, but as defensible, plausible answers to the 'big questions' in the very same way as those developed by current Western philosophers. We hope that the discussion that emerged from this project, some of which we were able to describe here, will contribute to bringing about a new outlook on Asian thought that regards it as containing answers to mankind's most fundamental questions that are as 'live', transparent, and defensible as those found in the tradition of Western thought. Only in this way can a true exchange between different intellectual cultures come about.

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