ABSTRACT:

While it is generally agreed that Abhidharma Buddhists held a Reductionist view of persons and personal identity, some claim that the Mādhyamika Buddhist Candrakīrti explicitly rejects Reductionism. Since Abhidharma frames its Reductionist understanding of non-self in terms of the notion of a privileged ontology, and Madhyamaka explicitly rejects the very idea of a privileged ontology, it seems to make sense that Candrakīrti would reject Reductionism. Still one would expect a Non-Reductionist to affirm a more robustly real sense of personhood than Candrakīrti seems willing to countenance. I explore the evidence, and claim that Candrakīrti is best seen as holding a kind of mitigated Reductionism.
MARK SIDERITS

There is now something of a scholarly consensus that the Abhidharma schools of Buddhism held the view of persons that I have called Buddhist Reductionism. The question I want to address is whether the Mādhyamika Buddhist Candrakīrti held the same view. Roy Perrett, Jonardon Ganeri and David Duerlingler all deny that he did. Perrett calls Candrakīrti a Minimalist, Ganeri considers him a Performativist, and Duerlingler takes him to be a Non-Reductionist. For my own part I am not convinced that Candrakīrti rejects Buddhist Reductionism. But I am less interested in achieving a historically accurate reconstruction of Candrakīrti’s view, than I am in working out what a consistent Madhyamaka position would look like. Madhyamaka shares with Abhidharma the Buddhist commitment to the view known as non-self. But the Buddhist Reductionist understanding of non-self requires that there be a privileged ontology consisting of simples of some sort. And many who find the idea of non-self appealing consider it implausible that there can be such things. Madhyamaka rejects the very idea of a privileged ontology. So it may be worth investigating how a Mādhyamika should understand non-self.

The Buddhist Reductionist understanding of non-self involves a two-pronged strategy that rests on a distinction between self and person. By ‘self’ is understood some simple persisting entity that is the essence of the person. By ‘person’ is understood a composite entity that has the psychophysical elements as its parts. The strategy is to deny that selves exist, and to claim that persons are only conventionally and not ultimately real. The first part of the strategy is executed along familiar Humean lines. The strategy of the second, more philosophically interesting part is to deny that composite entities are real, on the grounds that such entities can be neither identical with nor distinct from their parts. It follows that chariots, pots, trees, cows and persons do not exist. We do nonetheless have many beliefs about such things, and activities conducted on the basis of these beliefs routinely lead to success. This fact is accounted for through a kind of fictionalism. Pots and persons, while not
ultimately real, may still be said to have a kind of reality as useful fictions. The word ‘pot’ is a convenient designator for bits of clay arranged in a way that serves a function in which we have an interest. We thus have a use for the word, but we then forget that it is merely a shorthand device for referring to bits of clay arranged pot-wise, and so end up thinking there is such a thing as a pot. Since there are no pots, no statement about a pot can correspond to reality. But because there are bits of clay arranged pot-wise, it has proven useful to believe there are pots and act accordingly. So it is conventionally true that there are pots. A true statement about a pot correctly represents the facts about a conceptual fiction.

Buddhist Reductionism thus deploys two distinct truth-predicates and uses a two-tier ontology. Ultimately true statements are those that correctly represent how the ultimately real things are. Conventionally true statements are those that correspond to how such conceptual fictions as pots and persons are. The idea is to retain the intuitive understanding of ‘true’ as meaning correspondence to the facts. Doing this requires positing things that aren’t there—the pots and persons that are merely conceptual fictions. Still this can be made to work if we understand conventional truth to supervene on ultimate truth, since ultimately true statements concern things that are (ultimately) there. But this strategy also requires that there be impermeable semantic insulation between the two truths: no statement that is ultimately truth-apt is conventionally truth-apt, and vice versa. This is regularly expressed using the ‘neither the same nor different’ locution. The repaired chariot containing new parts is ultimately neither identical with nor distinct from the original chariot. This is not because Buddhist Reductionists embrace a deviant logic, nor because chariots are ineffable entities. It is simply because no statement about chariots could be ultimately true (or false either). Were there no semantic insulation between the two discourses of conventional and ultimate truth, and one could speak of the whole and its parts in the
same breath, irresolvable paradoxes would result. Semantic insulation is the price one must pay in order to preserve a univocal sense of ‘true’ while retaining classical logic.

Buddhist Reductionism is said by those who hold it to represent the truth about us that will enable us to escape existential suffering. The idea is that we suffer because we wrongly take there to be an ‘I’ for which events in this life can have meaning and value. The insight that this ‘I’ is no more than a conceptual fiction enables us to escape the alienation and despair that typically result from recognition of our transitoriness. It also grounds an argument for the obligation to exercise benevolence. The argument is that while it is ultimately true that suffering is to be prevented, there is no ultimate basis for discriminating between ‘my’ suffering and that of others. Consequently there is an obligation to prevent all preventable suffering regardless of where it occurs.

Given the Buddhist Reductionist understanding of non-self, strictly impersonal benevolence is rationally required.

Buddhist Reductionism requires that there be entities that are simple or impartite. These are said to be things whose natures are intrinsic. The central claim of Madhyamaka Buddhism is that there are no things with intrinsic nature. This seems like prima facie evidence that Madhyamaka should reject Buddhist Reductionism. The reduction of persons to wholly impersonal elements requires that these elements be ultimately real, so if such things are not on offer then it looks like the reduction cannot go through. Reduction requires the asymmetry of Buddhist Reductionism’s two-tier ontology: the reduced as fictional, the reduction base as ultimately real. I take this to be the thought that has led some scholars to conclude that Candrakīrti must hold some other view about the person. But each of the three mentioned above has a slightly different take on what that view is. Perrrett calls Candrakīrti a Minimalist about persons, based on Candrakīrti’s alleged rejection of
what Perrett labels the Indian Grounding Assumption. This is the claim that our normative practices with respect to persons are to be grounded in facts about things with intrinsic natures. Since Mādhyamikas deny that there are things with intrinsic natures, yet Mādhyamikas would presumably affirm such claims as that persons deserve reward and punishment for earlier deeds, (1) Perrett takes Candrakīrti to hold that the metaphysics of persons and personal identity is irrelevant to our practices with respect to persons.

While this sounds plausible, it leaves unexplained the great stress Candrakīrti lays on the illusory nature of the person. Like other Buddhists, Candrakīrti sees our ordinary conception of the ‘I’ as a source of acute danger, which he likens to having a snake’s nest in the wall of one’s home (MAV 6.141). And he calls realization of non-self a magic charm that destroys the sense of ‘I’ (MAV 6.145). So it looks like he sees metaphysical analysis as deeply relevant to our practice with regard to the ‘I’. What may have misled Perrett is that Candrakīrti also says the notion of a real ‘I’ arises independently of any metaphysical analysis of its relation to the psychophysical elements (MAV 6.158, 164, 166). This is not, though, the Minimalist claim that such analysis leaves the person unscathed. It is rather the Reductionist claim that since there is no satisfactory analysis of that relation, the person must be thought of as no more than a useful fiction, something that can be held to be real only as long as we fail to subject it to analysis. To say there is no satisfactory analysis is not to say that the reduction fails; it is to say that reduction means semantic insulation between the two truths.

When Ganeri calls Candrakīrti a Performativist, he is claiming that Candrakīrti sees our use of ‘I’ as non-representational. There are, on Ganeri’s view, three things one might say if one saw our talk of persons as representational: that the person is the self, something distinct from the psychophysical elements; that the person is reducible to and hence identical with the psychophysical elements; and that the person is an utterly
fictitious entity like phlogiston, so that our talk of persons derives from a simple error (186-8). But one may also claim that our talk of persons is in some line of work other than that of representing how things are in the world. Ganeri sees Candrakīrti’s rejection of both identity and distinctness as the relation between person and elements as equivalent to embracing this performativist alternative. But this analysis rests on a misunderstanding of Buddhist Reductionism. Reductionists like Vasubandhu and Buddhaghosa are well aware that in the case of a complex composite series like a tree, the relation between tree and constituent elements cannot be that of identity. For consider the two sentences ‘The tree bears fruit’ and The tree loses its leaves’, and suppose that ‘tree’ refers to the collection of all the parts essential to there being what we call a tree. Then the truth of the first statement requires that leaves be among the parts in the collection, while the truth of the second statement requires that leaves not be among them. There may be a determinate collection of truth-maker elements for any given use of ‘tree’, but there can be no fixed rule for all occasions of use. This is why Buddhist Reductionists deny that identity holds between person and elements. This does not make our use of person-talk non-representational. It simply shows that what such talk must be understood as representing is a conceptual fiction. It explains why semantic insulation is needed between the two truths.

Duerlinger (1993: 84) once called Candrakīrti a Non-Reductionist. More recently he claims that the use of such ‘Western’ terminology distorts Indian Buddhist philosophical theories. But he still sees an important difference between the view of Vasubandhu (who is generally acknowledged to be a Buddhist Reductionist) and the view of Candrakīrti (2003:35-6). He now characterizes Candrakīrti’s view as that the person is ‘neither other than nor the same in existence as’ those psychophysical elements in dependence on which the person is conceptualized (2003: 36). Vasubandhu, by contrast, is said to hold that the person is ‘the same in existence’ as those psychophysical elements. Candrakīrti must reject this view, since he holds that while the whole is conceived in
dependence on its parts, the parts in turn are conceived in dependence on the whole of which they are parts (2003: 33). Hence for Duerlinger’s Candrākīrti, neither person nor psychophysical elements are ultimately real, but both may be said to be real conventionally, so there is none of the asymmetry in ontological status required for reduction.

Still it is not clear just what it means to say that for Vasubandhu the person is ‘the same in existence’ as the psychophysical elements. This cannot mean that Vasubandhu thinks the person is identical with the collection of elements. As Duerlinger is well aware, Vasubandhu does not believe that a conventional real can be identified with any aggregate of ultimate reals (2003: 240, 250-1). Such identification would lead to all the absurdities of one thing being many things, of parts both belonging and not belonging to the collection, and the like. If all this means is that the person is conceptualized on the basis of the elements, then this does not mark a difference with Candrākīrti. What, then, of the other alleged difference, that for Candrākīrti there is mutual conceptual dependence between whole and parts? There are two verses in MAV 6 that might be taken to suggest this view:

152. Now if the chariot consisted of the mere collection of its parts, the scattered fragments would comprise a chariot; But if there is no owner of the parts, there are no ‘parts’, and neither can the shape or simple pattern constitute it.

161. If the chariot itself has no reality, there are no ‘chariot parts’ because there is no ‘part possessor’; The chariot burned, its parts are also burned; so too when the fires of wisdom burn the owner of the parts, the parts themselves are all consumed.
But the first verse is equivocal, and can be read in the following way. The context is the consideration of two possible views about the relation between whole and parts: that the whole is identical with the collection of parts, and that the whole is identical with the arrangement of the parts. The first possibility is ruled out on the grounds that we do not call a scattered collection of chariot parts a chariot. To this the realist may reply that the chariot is identical with the collection of parts when these are arranged chariot-wise. The objection to this proposal is that it involves singling out one particular arrangement of the collection, over the infinitely many other possible arrangements. And this singling out can only occur based on the concept of a chariot. So the argument is not that were there no chariots there would be none of the parts out of which a chariot might be constructed. The argument is rather that unless we suppose the chariot is independently real we cannot identify it with a particular arrangement of its parts.

The second verse looks more like a straightforward assertion of ontological dependence of parts on the whole. But if this is how it is meant then the argument is clearly bad. One way to destroy a chariot is to burn it, and in doing so one typically also destroys its parts. But another way is to disassemble it, and in this case the parts are not destroyed. Moreover, the Reductionist claims that when the ‘fires of wisdom’ show the person not to be ultimately real, this is precisely by virtue of its being reductively analyzed into its constituent parts, things that are there taken to be independently real. Fortunately we need not take the verse this way. In early Buddhism a distinction is drawn between psychophysical elements in general, and psychophysical elements that are taken as objects of appropriation (see Visuddhimagga XIV). And as Candrakīrti’s comments on MMK XVIII.2 make clear, it is the appropriation elements that are said to be dependent on the person, not elements in general (V p.346). So MAV 6.161 merely says that when we lose all sense of an ‘I’ then the elements cease being thought of as ‘my parts’. And this is something with which the Buddhist Reductionist would readily agree.
There remains the fact that according to Candrakīrti the psychophysical elements are mere conceptual fictions, while for a Buddhist Reductionist like Vasubandhu they must be ultimately real. This looks like a first substantive difference. Still Candrakīrti seems to follow Nāgārjuna in arguing along straightforwardly Buddhist Reductionist lines, e.g., at MMK XVIII.1-5 and MMK XXVII 3-20, where they utilize the standard ‘neither the same nor distinct’ argument concerning the relation between person and psychophysical elements, and use this argument to motivate the claim that there is no basis for the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Can a Mādhyamika consistently use Buddhist Reductionist resources and still maintain that nothing is ultimately real? One way to reconcile these views might be to claim that the Buddhist Reductionist understanding of non-self—which requires that the elements be seen as more robustly real than the person—represents a more useful way of conceptualizing the world than either the common-sense view, according to which the person as a whole and its constituent elements are equally real, or the view held by some philosophers, that the person is a separately existing self which owns the elements. The Mādhyamika might then claim that while neither person nor elements is ultimately real, there is less overall suffering when we take the person to be conceptually constructed out of elements that are consequently seen as more robustly real. This view is more useful because it allows us to avoid the existential suffering that results from taking the ‘I’ to refer to something mind-independently real, while avoiding the suffering that results from the nihilist alternative of taking there to be nothing whatever that ‘I’ refers to. Still this is not the ultimate truth. There is no such thing as the ultimate truth. The notion that there is turns out to be just another useful device. But for the Mādhyamika its usefulness ends at the point where one takes oneself to have attained the ultimate truth. That is, for the Mādhyamika, the Buddhist Reductionist path has the danger that it leads to the subtle form of self-affirmation that comes with the notion of a final view of the ultimate nature of reality (2). This is the Madhyamaka understanding of the general
Mahāyāna dictum that while Abhidharma teaches *pudgalanairatmya*, Mahāyāna completes the Buddhist path by going on to teach *dharmanairatmya*. Madhyamaka does not reject the Abhidharma’s Buddhist Reductionist formulation of non-self. It merely supplements it with a corrective that is designed to prevent the doctrine of non-self from becoming a new source of attachment and clinging, and thus suffering.

A second apparent difference between Madhyamaka and Buddhist Reductionism comes in the area of ethics. The Buddhist Reductionist argument for an obligation to benevolence requires the premise that suffering is ultimately bad. Since Madhyamaka denies that things have intrinsic natures, it must deny that suffering is ultimately bad. Here is where Perrett might have sought resonances with Minimalism’s claim that the metaphysics of persons is irrelevant to our normative practices. And he might also have appealed to this to support his claim that Candrakīrti’s view comes close to the Kantian view, which rejects Reductionism on the grounds that the demands of practical rationality put important constraints on any account of persons (Perrett 2002: 382). Yet the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika Śāntideva formulates an argument for benevolence that appears to rely on Buddhist Reductionist premises, and explicitly states that suffering is to be prevented just because it is suffering (BCA 8.102). This certainly sounds like the claim that suffering’s intrinsic nature is to be bad. How might this be reconciled with the core Madhyamaka tenet that nothing has intrinsic nature? Here too the suggestion will be that contextualization allows for intrinsic natures of things that are only conventionally real. Specifically it will be claimed that (1) since nothing is ultimately real, suffering is not ultimately real, and can only be conventionally real; and yet (2) no analysis can undermine the claim that suffering is intrinsically bad and to be prevented. (Note that the ethical egoist agrees with this claim; their disagreement with those who accept an obligation to benevolence concerns only whom suffering is bad for.) There is no inconsistency here, it will be said, despite the fact that (2) attributes intrinsic natures to instance of suffering, and there are good reasons to believe that only ultimately real entities can have intrinsic natures.
Why is this not inconsistent? The short answer is that conventional truth requires that there be conventions, and conventions are chosen on pragmatic grounds. If there are no chariots, then we do not decide to adopt the convention that certain parts arranged in a certain way be conceptualized as a single entity by looking to see if this convention reflects the nature of reality. We do so on the grounds that such a convention helps minimize overall suffering. For Mādhyamaka all truth is conventional truth. Any theory we adopt will necessarily reflect facts about our interests cognitive limitations. But no matter what theory we choose, we must presuppose that suffering is bad and to be prevented. Otherwise there is simply no grounds for choosing, and so no choice. It is for this reason that the badness of suffering does not dissolve under analysis, and not because suffering is ultimately real. This is why Śāntideva can consistently employ the impersonal badness of suffering in his argument for benevolence.

I claim, then, that Madhyamaka need not reject Buddhist Reductionism. The fact that Buddhist Reductionists typically employ the notion of an ultimate ontology does not mean that the view requires such a commitment. Of course it is still possible that Candrakīrti rejected Reductionism, though I am not aware of any evidence that he did. But I am less concerned with the historical question than with the philosophical question. And there I feel fairly confident that one can consistently claim both that persons are reducible to impersonal entities—that they dissolve under analysis—and that everything else dissolves under analysis too.

GEORGES DREYFUS

Okay. So I don't have a whole lot to say, and I'm not sure how much I disagree with Mark. This is part of Mark's excellent work on selfhood/persons, and I think Mark has a definite taste for reductionism and wants to
find a place for reductionism in Madhyamaka, and with that I don't necessarily disagree. The problem I have with his paper is whether this paper is descriptive or prescriptive. And that seems to be – in a way, when you say, "I claim that Madhyamaka need not reject this reductionism," I don't have real argument with that.

There is an argument, however – another argument in the paper, which is about Candrakīrti, right? And that's where I think I am not sure whether this is – really work [sic] or not. I mean, the question of whether – what kind of difference there is between Candrakīrti and the Madhyamaka is obviously a difficult question. This is a question that I have worked extensively about, and I've been able to trace recently the so-called Svāntantrika or Prasaṅgika distinction up to the eleventh century in India. So it is slowly getting closer to Candrakīrti. But obviously, Kashmir – eleventh century Kashmir is still pretty far from Candrakīrti, right? But it seems that the Indian antecedent of this distinction is – do [sic] exist. So that's interesting, obviously. That's not proof.

So really, Mark's paper seems to presuppose that basically we can deal with Candrakīrti as any other Mādhyamika, that there is no interesting or important difference to be made between Candrakīrti and, let's say, Bhavaviveka and Śāntarakṣita about Madhyamaka philosophy. And I guess I am not comfortable with this claim. Now, obviously, what the difference is is problematic. But I think, for example – well, we can look at it several ways. Like, if Candrakīrti was so keen to adapt – adopt Buddhist Reductionism, it would seem that we would need to find the trace of this reduction in his system, right?

Now, in Madhyamaka we do find the trace of it. We find it in Jñānagarbha and many of the authors, where they distinguish between true and false conventional truth, right? And that's clearly an adoption, more of an ingestion – adoption of Buddhist Reductionism within Madhyamaka. The fact that Candrakīrti explicitly
refuses to make such distinction does for me raise a real question about your claim of adopting – of Candrakīrti adopting Buddhist Reductionism within the – his system.

So I think this is one thing which leads me – I mean, one element which leads me to suspect that maybe there is more to some of the claim that you mention and refute than you make it here.

As you probably know, in Tibet the Karampa has a critique of Dzong-ka-ba that might be quite sympathetic to your claim. Dzong-ka-ba is probably the best-known traditional philosopher, who has elaborated the view an interpretation of Candrakīrti as offering a different view of the person as the Svātantrikās do, right?

So, I mean, I wouldn't say that Dzong-ka-ba’s argument is necessarily decisive. But I think there are elements in Candrakīrti which seem to me to point in that direction. One is a refusal of the distinction between false and true conventional truth. The other is obviously what you yourself call the svabhāva-phobia of Candrakīrti, right? If Candrakīrti was sympathetic to your view, he wouldn't be so svabhāva-phobic, right? And we all understand what you mean. And I actually think that there is quite a bit of merit in the view that Madhyamaka should or could or maybe even should adopt svabhāva as being contextual and so on, depending on the interest of the inquiry and all that.

So again, can a Mādhyamaka do that? Yes, I believe they can. But the question is really Candrakīrti, and this is why I'm quite skeptical. So these are two elements which I think lead me to suspect that there is more to the apparent claim than you make.
Finally, I think the recourse to Śāntideva is – strike [sic] me as a bit problematic. Obviously, Śāntideva is thought to be a Prāsangika, whatever that means. But it seems it would require obviously more careful hermeneutical interpretation of the argument because I think the argument could be taken in several ways. And if we come back to Candrakīrti, it is not at all sure what Candrakīrti would say because this argument is nowhere to be found in Candrakīrti.

So I guess your paper really raised the question of whether we can take Candrakīrti to be basically on the par with all the other Mādhyamaka thinkers, and on that I am rather skeptical. So I do think that this mixture of the prescriptive and the descriptive in your paper is a problem for me because it seems to be saying to Candrakīrti, come on, come on, come to – come join the reasonable crowd, right? And, you know, that is saying to Candrakīrti, don't do what you are actually doing, right? And that's a problem. Okay?

MARK SIDERITS

Okay. Thank you, Georges.

JONATHAN GOLD

Okay. So at this point, would you like to respond a little bit to Georges, and then we'll open it up to questions?

MARK SIDERITS

Very, very quick response. I didn't actually want – I know I came across that way. But there were a couple of lines in the paper where I said I'm actually less interested in the historical question than I am in the question what would a reasonable Mādhyamika say. And, of course, Georges knows perfectly well that I'm one of those blue-eyed Svātantrika demons who wants conventional svabhāvas. We fought about this many times. And so,
of course, I'm always going to hop the fence and get into the line of prescription instead of – you know it. Is it – I shouldn't – well, yeah, regardless.

But I think the one thing I will say in defense of what I'm doing here is I think it could be said that Candrakīrti's disagreements with other Mādhyaṃkasa and Abidharmikasa as well lie elsewhere. And in particular – okay, his disagreement – I don't want to suggest that Candrakīrti really is a Svātanrika at heart. I recognize a real distinction. Whether it is something philosophically defensible is another question entirely, and you and I have gone around on that several times. But I think the disagreement has to do with the methodology that a Mādhyaṃkasa should employ after the reductionist project is done.

The picture I have in mind here is this: Mādhyaṃkas all agree that Abidharma represents a useful first step in overcoming – in the Buddhist project of overcoming suffering. As Mādhyaṃkas, we see that that project requires temporarily believing in things with svabhāva. That's the privileged ontology requirement of Buddhist Reductionism. We'll put up with that, up to a point. But then we turn around and say, look, you people only went so far. Your Pudgalanairātmya stuff is very important, very useful. But there is yet another step that has to be taken. And it is over exactly how to take that step that Candrakīrti I think disagrees with other Mādhyaṃkas. That's where the methodological differences come out, what sorts of arguments should Mādhyaṃkas –

GEORGES DREYFUS

Sure
MARK SIDERITS

— use against people who believe in ultimately real entities, mere prasaṅgas or can we come up with svātantra-anumānas, that sort of – that's the beginnings of the distinction. But that is after the reductionist work is done and I think accepted by all Mādhyamikas as useful up to this point. Now it is question of is there a further step to be taken, and that's where the difference comes in.

That's at least the way in which I would try to defend, without getting into deep, deep questions of Candrakīrti exegesis, the sort of mitigated or contextualized commitment to intrinsic natures that the Buddhist Reductionist – that the Mādhyamika is going to have to accept in order to make Buddhist Reductionism work for them. So that's all I –

GEORGES DREYFUS

Okay. All right. And just one – just one word, which is that I'm not necessarily saying that Candrakīrti is actively arguing for a different view of the person.

MARK SIDERITS

Right.

GEORGES DREYFUS

But I think that the difference he has with Madhyamaka has implications, and that these implications, if you tease them out, do amount – lead to these kind of differences. So I think that's – okay. But I want to –

JONATHAN GOLD
Yeah, let's open up other questions.

**LOZANG JAMSPAL**

Lozang Jamspal. [Unintell] seems to – doesn't accept [unintell], and Candrakīrti also. Then what is your opinion [unintell] and example like a mirror, a reflection from [unintell] from [unintell] doesn't go anything into mirror. Similarly, there is a light [unintell] in the future that – future life [unintell] reflection as example. One is reflection, one is like seed. From seed comes the sprout. {Unintell} is not agreeing the example, like [unintell], like reflection – example of the reflection that exists and is not – doesn't come from like cutting off [unintell]. Then like the seed – like seed because of the continuity of the [unintell], then going to the next life. Then it seems that there are some problems if you don't accept [unintell], then [unintell] very difficult to arrange.

It is [unintell]. There are six verses, and the last one [unintell] that when you say [unintell] missing all of them [unintell]. And my question is then like – two examples [unintell] example [unintell] mirror and reflection like that [unintell] next life is not like that – should be something [unintell] going continuously, like how do we [unintell].

**MARK SIDERITS**

Okay. My own view is, first of all, this dispute isn't actually, I think, relevant to the question that I'm discussing here. It's a dispute for reductionists in general, people who hold a reductionist view of persons, and who also believe in rebirth. The Mādhyamika doesn't necessarily have to have a view about that. It is the Buddhist reductionist in general who also believes in rebirth, who has to have some sort of view about how exactly that mechanism works.
But frankly, I have never understood why – what the argument is for the Antarabhava. My understanding of Vasubandhu's account – and Buddhaghosa has essentially the same account as well in Visuddhimagga – the causal transmission is in *susjingas* [ph]. At the moment of death, there is this reflex that causes the infusion of this fetal body with consciousness. So there is no time lag, and so there is no necessity for something to serve as the connecting link. It being a non-physical causal process, there is no worry about death happens here, rebirth happens there, since, you know, mental things have this ability to travel faster than the speed of light, whatever.

**SPEAKER**

Right.

**MARK SIDERITS**

So yeah, I've been looking recently at that discussion in chapter 27 of the [unintell]. It doesn't particularly surprise me because it's really the Pudgalavādins more than anyone else in the Abidharma tradition who take seriously this talk of the Antarabhava. And Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti and the other commentators – Mūlamadhyamakakārikā as well – tend to reflect, I think, the orthodox non-Pudgalavāda Abidharma view when it comes to analysis of person and the causal series.
So – but yeah, it's an interesting question in Abidharma, but if you ask me as – if I put my Abidharma hat on and you ask me where do you stand on that issue, I'd say I don't really see what the argument is for Antarabhava [ph]. I don't think there is a problem with rebirth without an Antarabhava.

KATALIN BALOG

Katalin Balog. And I have – maybe my question is for clarification because I'm not so familiar with all these classifications and views and maybe [unintell] for the people as well. Just the contrast between the reductionist view and the Madhyamaka view of what – the way I understand, you're trying to reconcile some Madhyamaka view about ultimate and conventional reality with the reductionist views – reductionist view about that. And I sort of understand the idea that – what you want to call non-fundamental entities, unreal, and what you want to call concepts or statements involving non-fundamental – you know, reference to these as conventional versus – I mean, I find it a little bit funny kind of language, you know. But I understand that that's – that's the idea that is being conveyed.

But then – then what I understood is that Madhyamaka also employs the distinction between ultimate and conventional, and the view would be that everything is – that everything is – so then I get lost because I understood the concepts between fundamental and non-fundamental, you know, truths that are – where – that hold in virtue of some facts about fundamental entities. But if there is no contrast between fundamental and non-fundamental, then I don't – then I lose the distinction between conventional and ultimate.

MARK SIDERITS

Yeah. Think of Mādhyamikas as, in [unintell]’s terminology, global anti-realists.
KATALIN BALOG

Excuse me?

MARK SIDERITS

Global anti-realists. They are basically saying that what [unintell] calls metaphysical realism doesn't work, won't make sense, can't make it – can't turn it into any sort of coherent view. And that's a way – that's what they can I think be understood as getting at when they say the only ultimate truth is that everything is empty. See, there is a kind of paradox involved in that claim.

KATALIN BALOG

And "empty" here means –

MARK SIDERITS

Empty of intrinsic nature or svabhāva.

KATALIN BALOG

And intrinsic would be fundamental?

MARK SIDERITS
Well, okay. See, what Abidharma did – what Buddhist Reductionists did was they gave an argument that was supposed to show that the only really real things – the only things in a fundamental ontology are things with intrinsic nature, with svabhāva. This is an argument for myriological [ph] reductionism. The only really real things – the only things that are not products in part of our cognitive interests and limitations are symbols, things that are the way that they are independently of everything else. There is no aggregation involved in their being what they are.

If that's right – and Mādhyamikas never actually dispute that argument. If that's right, then the only things that could be said to be objectively mind and independently real are things with intrinsic nature.

SPEAKER

Of what?

MARK SIDERITS

Things with intrinsic nature, things with svabhāva. And consequently, the only statements that could be ultimately true are things about – statements about things of that sort. That's the Abidharma picture, that's the Buddhist Reductionist picture.

Along comes Nāgārjuna and develops a whole battery of arguments that were meant to show that this assumption that there are things with intrinsic nature, things that are ultimately real, won't work. Invariably it
leads to contradiction after contradiction after contradiction, okay? These are the Prasanga arguments, the *reductio ad absurdum* arguments that Nāgārjuna develops and all his later commentators have great, great fun with. What that is taken by Mādhyamikas to show is that the ultimate truth is that all things are devoid of intrinsic nature, and that when you use this ultimate truth language, it sounds paradoxical.

**KATALIN BALOG**

Right, right.

**MARK SIDERITS**

Because what ultimately are true statements supposed to be? They're supposed to be statements that correctly depict how the ultimately real things are. Mādhyamikas come along and say, hey, guess what, here is how things ultimately are. They are all empty. What does that really amount to? Answer, the very idea of ultimate truth is seriously screwed up, global anti-realism, okay?

So that's the background. And that's why people who like Candrākīrti most among the Mādhyamikas want to say that Candrākīrti can't be a reductionist because reductionism requires this privileged ontology of things that are ultimately real, and that means things with intrinsic nature. We Mādhyamikas, we say there is nothing with intrinsic nature, so how can you say the person is reducible to things with intrinsic nature? It's not in the cards; it's not an offer.

What I'm claiming is that – and I claim this in part because Candrākīrti, like other Mādhyamikas, says many things that sound like approval of the basic reductionist move that the Abhidharmikas make. This is pretty much
Buddhist orthodoxy. You analyze the person into this converse, into the impersonal psycho-physical elements, all of which are impermanent, and so that shows that there is no self, and the person is just a conceptual fiction. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti both say things along precisely those lines.

What I'm trying to do is make sense of that on the one hand. On the other hand, there is an ultimate truth talk. And what I'm suggesting is they can do that by contextualizing this two-tier ontology approach that Buddhist Reductionism requires. There are different forms of conventional truth. There is everyday ordinary conventional truth, in which we – we get really messed up because we talk about persons and we talk about their parts in the same breath. And so we're always running into paradoxes. We can clean that up by trying to talk about persons and leave the whole – leave the parts out, and then we won't have any paradoxes. We won't run into any contradictions. But then when it comes to explaining what happens when things go wrong with persons, we wind up having to talk about the parts. And we do some psychologizing. We break the person down into parts.

Well, then we run into paradoxes if we try to keep persons in view, and so here is a better way to think about it, semantic insulation. We are talking about the parts now. We leave persons out of the picture. And the Buddhist reductionist says, talking that way helps you overcome suffering because it gets rid of this conceptual construction, this mere fiction, me. And so we overcome alienation that leads to suffering.

The Mādhyamika can, I'm claiming, do all that by saying, yeah, okay, I realize that sounds like I'm bringing svabhāvas back in through the back door, but I'm not. I'm not in fact giving a privileged ontology. I'm simply
saying, here is a more useful form of conventional truth, one that only talks about the parts and doesn't talk about the whole that those parts can be thought of as constituting.

**KATALIN BALOG**

But then the conventional truths, what are they? What in the world makes them true?

**MARK SIDERITS**

Okay. Now you want to know how can the Madhyamaka be a – how does global anti-realism work.

**KATALIN BALOG**

Yeah, right.

**MARK SIDERITS**

And that's a big question. I am not going to try to answer that one.

**JONATHAN GOLD**

That's a big one, yeah.

**MARK SIDERITS**

The Mādhyamika is basically going to go in the direction of a certain sort of pragmatism. What makes this all tricky, though, is that in the end the pragmatism is going to wind up even in the anti-realism, and so you're going to wind up coming out the other side and looking like you're right back at conventional truth with
ordinary talk about proceeds. I gestured in that direction and I did say some I think quasi-intelligible things about that in chapter 8 and a little bit in chapter 9 of the empty persons book.

JONATHAN GOLD

Let's open it up to other questions. Yeah.