

Language and Reality in Buddhism

The Case for Moderate Linguistic Optimism

David Burton

A central concern of the philosophy of language is the relationship between words and reality. Can language describe successfully the ways things really are, or do words in fact function as a veil that conceals whatever reality there may be? There is a spectrum of possible views. At one extreme is a naive linguistic optimism that would posit a snug fit between words and reality. A moderate and possibly more credible linguistic optimism would claim that some words do depict reality with some degree of accuracy; however, words can also miss their mark, failing to pick out things as they really are. At the other extreme, linguistic pessimism would completely sever any relation between language and things as they really are. Reality is literally inexpressible. Words do not and cannot correspond to the true nature of things. Linguistic pessimism should be distinguished from linguistic scepticism, which says that we cannot *know* to what extent our words correspond to the world as it really is. Linguistic scepticism is rooted in the epistemological conviction that we can never establish how objects are independently of our experience, individual and collective, for we can never get outside our experience to see the world from a God's eye perspective or view from nowhere.

How do Buddhists understand the relationship between language and reality? There is not a single Buddhist philosophy of language as Buddhism is not monolithic; moreover, many ancient Buddhist texts and traditions are open to a variety of interpretations. However, I will argue that although Buddhists typically express caution about the tendency for words to lead us astray, there is a strand of moderate linguistic optimism in some forms of Buddhism. In other words, there is a confidence that, when used carefully and appropriately, language is capable of describing things as they really are. My thesis is that this moderate linguistic optimism can be found in the early Buddhist texts, in the Abhidharmic systematization of early Buddhism, and in the Madhyamaka and Cittamātra Mahāyāna traditions. In these varieties of

Buddhism, we find statements about the way things really are but also claims that words can be inaccurate and misleading. Moreover, these forms of Buddhism are committed to a version of nominalism that claims that many or, for some of these Buddhists, all entities identified by language do not exist independently of one's perceptual and cognitive processes. Thus, to describe things as they really are means to express that many or all things to which language refers do not have a mind-independent existence.

Language in Early Buddhism and Abhidharma

Early Buddhist texts undertake a reduction of apparently stable subjects and objects into their constituents, all of which are envisaged as processes made up of impermanent events. Thus, people and other sentient beings are analysed into the five impersonal aggregates (*khandha*) of physical form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception or discrimination of objects (*saññā*), volitional forces or dispositions (*saṃkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The five aggregates are described as being impermanent (*anicca*), without an enduring self (*anattā*), and thus the cause of suffering (*dukkha*) (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 138-139). This is thought to be an exhaustive analysis of the individual, intended to prove that he or she is simply a complex bundle of mental and physical interconnected events, with no unchanging agent or subject of experience. An alternative analysis sees the individual and objects as comprising twelve spheres (*āyatana*), namely, the six senses (the five physical senses and the mind) and the six types of objects of those senses. (*Samyutta Nikāya* iii, 62). Another variation refers to eighteen elements (*dhātu*), that is, the six senses, six types of sense objects, and six types of consciousness (*Majjhima Nikāya* i, 138-139). This means that the external world is made up of physical data of five types, that is, visible, audible, tactile or tangible, olfactory and tastable, apprehended by corresponding sense faculties and states of awareness. In addition, there is a consciousness of and capacity to apprehend mental entities such as ideas and affective states. These typologies, and others like them, are meant to describe accurately the genuine constitution of the individual and the world of objects, leaving no room for a belief in anything unchanging and uncaused. These descriptions are thought to pick out the genuine character of the world as it really is, independently of our

interpretations. By contrast, the enduring self and stable external objects identified by language as mountains, houses, and trees and so forth do not exist independently of our perceptual and cognitive processes that reify the flux of causally connected mental and physical events.

The *Milindapañha* (25-28) famously gives an account of a meeting between the local Bactrian Greek king, Milinda, and a Buddhist monk. The monk introduces himself to the king as Nāgāseṇa, but declares that Nāgāseṇa exists just ‘as a denotation, appellation, designation, as a current usage, merely as a name’, for in reality there is no Nāgāseṇa entity corresponding to the label. He likens terms such as ‘Nāgāseṇa’ and ‘being’ to the term ‘chariot’, used to describe the vehicle by which the king came to visit the monk. Nāgāseṇa asks the king whether the chariot is the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, the yoke, the reins or the goad. King Milinda admits that the chariot cannot be identified with any of these constituents. Indeed, when the chariot is analysed, we find that it exists just as a name in dependence upon the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, the yoke, the reins and the goad. There is no distinct, separate chariot entity that is found in the analysis. ‘Chariot’ is a convenient label for what is in fact a number of entities in a particular spatial relationship to one another. So too, Nāgāseṇa says, terms such as ‘Nāgāseṇa’ and ‘being’ are used as convenient labels when the five aggregates are present, despite the fact that, when analysed, there is found no independent thing corresponding to ‘Nāgāseṇa’ and ‘being’. Of course, this analogy has its limitations. Most importantly, unlike the five aggregates, which are, according to early Buddhism, real physical and mental processes and not simply labels, the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework and so forth can presumably themselves be analysed into physical processes (*rūpa*), and are thus themselves, like the chariot, just convenient names used to refer to what is actually a complex, interdependent web of physical events.

There are two further points that need to be made about this text. First, Nāgāseṇa does not deny that terms such as ‘chariot’, ‘Nāgāseṇa’ and ‘being’ have utility. Though there are no real entities to which the terms refer, they can have a pragmatic function, facilitating everyday activities and communication. We could hardly do without them, for communication would be difficult if not impossible if we insisted on

meticulously describing the manifold physical and mental processes that make up the world whenever we talk to one another. Indeed, the Buddha himself uses such terms in his sermons, but presumably always with the awareness that they are a pragmatic shorthand and refer not to substantial entities, but to complex and evanescent causal processes. Steven Collins (1982, p. 71) has shown that terms such as ‘self’ and ‘person’ are used in early Buddhist texts ‘quite naturally and freely’ except for ‘matters of systematic philosophical and psychological analysis’ where they are strictly prohibited. Second, although useful, words like ‘chariot’, ‘Nāgāsenā’ and ‘being’ are, according to early Buddhism, also potentially extremely misleading. We are easily beguiled by language into thinking that these terms have stable and unchanging referents. Because we use the term ‘I’, for instance, we tend to think that there is an ‘I’ that exists apart from the changing flow of mental and physical events. The careless and unreflective use of language contributes significantly to the endemic unenlightened ignorance (*avijjā*) about the way things really are.

Early Buddhism is thus a form of nominalism, according to which much of the world described by words does not exist independently of our minds. However, it can also be described as moderate linguistic optimism. In other words, according to early Buddhism, some language hits the mark. For example, the statement that ‘things are impermanent and dependently originate’ is an accurate proposition about the nature of reality. Furthermore, the descriptions of the *khandhas*, the *dhātus*, the *āyatanas* and so forth are thought to be precise and correct uses of language. In addition, the statement that ‘linguistic referents such as “chariot”, “Nāgāsenā” and “being” exist only in dependence upon our perceptual and cognitive faculties’ also expresses the way things really are. As Sue Hamilton (1996, pp. 53-65) explains, according to early Buddhism, *saññā* is the capacity to discriminate, identify and name. It is our ability to form concepts that pick out objects from their environment. Hamilton (1996, p. 60) comments that *saññā* ‘does not in itself mean *false* conceptions’ because some conceptions or names are compatible with things as they really are. However, some *saññā* is incompatible with reality. For example, the statement that ‘things are permanent and uncaused’ is simply incorrect, as is the claim that ‘entities such as “chariot”, “Nāgāsenā” and “being”

exist independent of our cognitive and perceptual processes'. Such propositions misrepresent the way things really are.

In Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma texts such as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* and Saṅghabhadra's *Nyāyānusāra*, there is a systematisation and elaboration of the nominalism and moderate linguistic optimism that is first articulated in the early Buddhist texts. The analysis of the self and objects into constituent processes is more sophisticated, with the elucidation of many types of momentary physical and non-physical events (*dharma*) and also the various types of causal relationships that pertain between them. The non-physical *dharmas* are the range of psychological occurrences that together get labelled as the mind. The physical *dharmas* are akin to atomic sense data out of which sensed objects and the human body are fashioned and named by consciousness. There are general characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), notably impermanence and dependent origination, which are shared by all of these conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) *dharmas*. In addition, each *dharma* has a defining characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*), which allows for it to be described as belonging to a particular type and thus placed within the taxonomy of *dharmas*. The Vaibhāṣikas say that these *dharmas* have substantial existence (*dravyasat*) or inherent existence (*svabhāva*) and are ultimate truths (*paramārtha satya*). In other words, the conditioned *dharmas* are the real features of the world that exist independently of language but can be described accurately by it. By contrast, things that are formed out of these *dharmas* are said to have conceptual or nominal existence (*prajñaptisat*), to be conventional truths (*saṃvṛti satya*), and to have no inherent existence (Williams, 1981, pp. 227-257). This means that the language that refers to things such as mountains and tables describes reified objects that do not exist independently of the mind. Evidently the Vaibhāṣikas think that the sense data, as raw material, gets interpreted and labelled as the discrete everyday objects of our conventional world because we impose on the sense data a cognitive and linguistic framework that does not correspond to the complex dependently originating flow of events that is ultimately real.

A.K. Warder has demonstrated that Theravāda Abhidhamma texts express a similar attitude to language and reality. For example, the *Abhidhammavataṛa*, distinguishes between concepts or names

(*paññatti*) that are occurring (*vijjamāna*) and non-occurring (*avijjamāna*), terminology also used by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*. Warder says that ‘occurring’ means ‘that there is a reality corresponding to the name, whereas ‘non-occurring’ means ‘that there is no such reality’. In other words, occurring concepts are those that refer to something ultimately real (*paramattha*); they identify the defining characteristics of the *dhammas*; a non-occurring concept has a referent, such as the self, which is a mere name (*nāmamatta*). Warder also explains that the *Paramatthavinicchaya* of Anuruddha II similarly distinguishes between occurring and non-occurring names. The former identify the ‘ultimately real elements’, that is, the *dhammas*. They are ‘not contradicted’ (*avisaṃvādaka*) by reality. By contrast, the concepts or names that are non-occurring have conceptual or nominal objects such as ‘being’, ‘person’, ‘I’, ‘man’, ‘horse’, ‘pot’ and so forth. They are not ultimately true but are ‘in conformity to the linguistic usages of the world when using everyday language’ (Warder, 1971, pp. 181-196).

Both the Vaibhāsika and Theravāda forms of Abhidharma combine nominalism and moderate linguistic optimism. Many entities exist only as referents of language; some named entities, that is, the *dharmas*, exist independent of our perceptual and cognitive interpretations. Language goes wrong if, for instance, it attributes a mind-independent existence to those things that are simply conventions. It also misses the mark if it misidentifies the *dharmas* and their general and individual characteristics. However, these *dharmas* and their causal relationships can be accurately described. So, there is plenty that language can express about the way things really are, including that many things identified by language do not have a mind independent existence.

It is evident that these Buddhists think that the world of everyday things is dependent on language for its existence. Thus, mountains, houses and trees and so forth exist because language categorises the world into these objects. However, if it is claimed that such things *only* exist because of language, the this seems philosophically problematic, given that there is evidence of pre-linguistic discrimination of objects. Things sometimes seem to be identified, or picked out from their surrounding environment, without the use of labels or names. For instance, witness the ability of young babies and non-human mammals to recognise

features of the world without having any linguistic skills. Furthermore, even those who have language can often recognise objects without having known their names or when their names have been forgotten. Language users often navigate their environment and discriminate between objects without having to label them. For instance, if I am cleaning my kitchen, I am able to turn on the water tap, mop the floor and so forth without recourse to language. I function in this familiar environment without naming. Much of our everyday activity seems to take place at a pre-linguistic level where we identify objects and yet do not label them. It would seem that perceptual and cognitive processes, some of which are pre-linguistic, identify the world of objects. Our sense organs and minds act as interpreters of the ever-flowing world of *dharmic* processes, shaping these processes into the relatively stable objects of perception that we experience. This interpreting activity happens even prior to naming, though the use of language surely adds a new level of complexity to the individuation of objects.

***Nibbāna* and the limitations of language**

Moderate linguistic optimism might be appropriate with regard to the conditioned world of impermanent, caused things but surely *nibbāna* or *nirvāṇa* is inexpressible? Of course, there have been longstanding debates about the nature of *nibbāna*, and this seems like a clear case where the textual tradition can admit a variety of readings (Welbon, 1968). Richard Gombrich (1997, p. 6) has argued that *nibbāna* is described in Theravāda Buddhism as the blowing out of greed, hatred and delusion and seeing things as they really are, that is, as impermanent, without self and unsatisfactory. The enlightened person who realises *nibbāna* knows the truth about the conditioned world, and this truth is expressible. This is the epistemic content of the *nibbāna* experience. It is thus misleading to claim that *nibbāna* is simply ineffable.

Nevertheless, Gombrich also comments that there is a subjective quality of the experience of *nibbāna* that is, strictly speaking, incommunicable. Indeed, the affective dimension of experiences is notoriously difficult to describe, largely because of the essentially private nature of emotions. For instance, how it feels for me to be in love is difficult for me to communicate to another person, for whom the

experience of love might be rather different. And words are like empty husks when compared with the full-blooded experience. This problem is exacerbated in the case of experiences that are not shared, so that, if for example, you have never been in love and I attempt to describe my feeling of being in love to you, my efforts are unlikely to succeed. There is no referent to which my words can be directed and to which you also have access by personal acquaintance. Similarly, the subjective dimension of the experience of *nibbāna*, that is, how it feels to be enlightened, cannot be entirely communicated to someone who has never had the experience, or anything like it. If the affective content of the total and final elimination of greed, hatred and delusion is quite unlike unenlightened experience, then words will totally fail to convey the feeling to those who are not enlightened. However, presumably the descriptions can succeed, to an extent at any rate, if there are broadly similar non-enlightened experiences that roughly approximate what the enlightened person feels. For instance, a person who has experienced a temporary elimination or diminution of greed, hatred and delusion might have some inkling of the subjective dimension of the enlightened person's experience. *Nibbāna* is sometimes described as the highest happiness (*paramaṃ sukhaṃ*); if this happiness bears any resemblance to that non-sensual happiness sometimes experienced by the unenlightened, for example in meditation, then presumably they can have some appreciation of how it feels. If the happiness associated with *nibbāna* is of a completely different order, then perhaps the word has no shared emotional reference in the two cases, and the unenlightened person cannot understand how it feels to achieve *nibbāna*. Either way, we need to distinguish between psychological and epistemic ineffability. The subjective dimension of the experience of *nibbāna*, that is, the psychological content, might be inexpressible or not fully expressible. But this is compatible with the claim that what is known, that is, the epistemic content of the experience, is describable.

However, it can also be argued that *nibbāna* is not simply the blowing out of greed, hatred and delusion and seeing things as impermanent, without self and unsatisfactory. Early Buddhist texts say that *nibbāna*, the *summum bonum* which the enlightened person (*arahant*) experiences in life (*sa-upādisesanibbāna*) and passes into in an undefined way at death (*anupādisesanibbāna*), is unconditioned

(*asaṃkhata*) not born or made and outside of time and space (*Udāna* I, 102-104). Collins (1998, p. 163) shows that frequent epithets for *nibbāna* in early Buddhism include unthinkable (*acintya*), free from conceptual differentiation (*nippapañca*), indescribable (*na vattabba*) and beyond reason (*atakkavacāra*). While Buddhism does sometimes offer descriptions of how things really are, these things are the mundane objects of the conditioned (*saṃkhata*) world. Nevertheless, Rupert Gethin (1998, p. 77) writes that the early tradition tends to ‘shy away’ from definition of the unconditioned and its ‘ontological status’ is ‘undetermined’ (*avyākata*), as the categories of existence and non-existence, like all other words, apply only to the world of conditioned things. Christopher Gowans (2003, pp. 153-54) says that *nibbāna* is clearly thought to be an ultimate reality, rather than mere nothingness, but our concepts and words are suitable to describe only objects of the spatio-temporal world. Thus, early Buddhism might be characterised as a form of linguistic pessimism with respect to *nibbāna* as the ultimate, unconditioned reality that is accessible only to a special gnosis that transcends words. Understood in this way, the realisation of *nibbāna* seems similar to William James’s notion of the mystical experience, which he identifies as both noetic, that is, a state of knowledge, and ineffable (James, 1982, pp. 380-81): the epistemic content of the experience cannot be expressed.

The notion of an ineffable reality, apprehended by an inexpressible knowledge is admittedly rather puzzling, prompting Collins (1998, p. 176) to remark that ‘ineffability is easier said than understood.’ Sceptics might doubt that there can be knowledge that has an inexpressible content, for it seems hard to distinguish from mere blankness and, furthermore, all other examples of knowledge have describable referents. Surely knowledge entails that the thing known has some qualities, attributes or characteristics, and can thus be expressed linguistically? As Gowans (2003, p. 151) writes, the early Buddhist response to doubts about this indescribable unconditioned reality is essentially an argument from religious experience; that is, in order to resolve the doubts one must undertake the arduous ethical and meditative training that eventually results in the realisation of *nibbāna* as an unconditioned reality beyond the purview of language. The enlightened develop a new cognitive capacity, and trying to explain the ineffable unconditioned reality

to the unenlightened is like attempting to explain colour to the blind. Of course, sceptics can still raise questions about the reliability and trustworthiness of inherently private religious experiences but that is a topic for another discussion.

Nevertheless, it appears that claims that *nibbāna* as unconditioned reality is *strictly* ineffable must be an exaggeration. After all, early Buddhism refers to *nibbāna* as ultimate reality in terms of what it is not, similar to the apophatic *via negativa* of the Christian mystics. References to *nibbāna* as not born, not conditioned, not made, and so forth indicate its otherness from the world of conditioned things. The similes that the enlightened person after death is unfathomable like the great ocean and that *nibbāna* is like the further shore of a dangerous stream have a similar function (*Majjhima Nikāya*, I, 487; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV, 172-175). These are descriptions, even if expressed negatively, that tell us something about *nibbāna*, namely that it is quite other than the conditioned world. Furthermore, early Buddhism is clear that *nibbāna*, though an ultimate reality beyond change, is not the cause of the universe, nor is it a personal, omnipotent and all-loving God. It seems, then, that *nibbāna* as ultimate reality is not entirely ineffable and even here there is room for linguistic optimism even if it is of a very limited variety.

Language in Madhyamaka

Nāgārjuna's thoughts and those of the Madhyamaka tradition that he is said to have founded are notoriously open to a variety of interpretations, both by modern academia and within Buddhism itself. It seems likely that the search for a definitive understanding is misguided, as the texts credibly attributed to Nāgārjuna seem sufficiently philosophically underdetermined to admit a plurality of readings. With this caveat, my contention is that Nāgārjuna's view of language and reality is a radical step beyond the Abhidharma position, because he claims that even the *dharmas* have a merely conventional existence. We might therefore describe his philosophy of language as a thoroughgoing nominalism. I will also argue that Nāgārjuna is still a moderate linguistic optimist, because he contends that words can accurately describe the true nature of things, namely, that they are all empty (*śūnya*). However, I will show that there is also an

alternative interpretation, which sees Nāgārjuna as a linguistic pessimist committed to the radical ineffability of reality.

Nāgārjuna famously declares that emptiness (*śūnyatā*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the middle way (*madhyamā pratīpad*) are synonyms (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* 70). In other words, emptiness means that all things lack, or are empty of, autonomous existence because they depend on other entities as their causes and sustainers. No thing is an island unto itself. This is an ontological middle way between complete non-existence, the extreme of nihilism, and independent and permanent existence, the extreme of eternalism. Moreover, Nāgārjuna equates emptiness, dependent origination and the middle way with what he calls dependent designation (*prajñaptirupādāya*) (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 18). One plausible reading of this statement is that, according to Nāgārjuna, entities are one and all designations or concepts that exist in dependence on our perceptual and cognitive processes, both pre-linguistic and linguistic, of discrimination and individuation. The ontological middle way for Nāgārjuna is that everything exists, but nothing exists more than conventionally. In other words, Nāgārjuna has universalized the nominalist tendency in early Buddhism and Abhidharma. The Buddhists had always recognised that named entities such as chariots, selves, mountains and so forth did not exist independently of our minds. However, they had claimed that the purview of conceptual construction is limited; some names and labels refer to entities or events that really do exist, that is, the *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, *dhātus* and the *dharmas*. By contrast, Nāgārjuna claims that even the *skandhas*, the *āyatanas*, the *dhātus* and the *dharmas* are empty of inherent existence, that is, they too are, like all other things, simply the referents of our conceptual and linguistic activity (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* IV and V; *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* 53-54; *Acintyastava* 2). Contrary to the Abhidharma analysis, there are no entities that are ultimate truths and have substantial existence.

Thus, Madhyamaka texts attributed to Nāgārjuna declare that all entities are simply conventions (*saṃvṛti*, *sāṃvṛta*) and that the whole world is name-only (*nāmamātra*). They also claim that all things are the result of conceptualisation (*vikalpa*) and imagination (*kalpanā*, *parikalpa*) (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikārikā* 37; *Lokāttastava* 19; *Acintyastava* 6, 35, 36). Furthermore, these sources often compare all entities to illusions,

dreams, mirages and so forth. All things are, in a manner akin to fantasy objects, dependent on cognitive processes for their existence (*Ratnāvalī* 2, 12-13). This is presumably why Nāgārjuna says that dependently originating entities do not really originate (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 48). In other words, the whole world of dependently originating entities is simply like a phantasm or a mental creation. Thus the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* seeks to demonstrate the merely conventional existence of phenomena such as causality, motion, the senses, the aggregates, the agent and actions and so forth. In Tibetan Madhyamaka, things are said to have no ‘existence from their own side’ (*rang ngos nas grub pa*) and no ‘existence from the side of the basis of designation’ (*gdags gzhi’i ngos nas grub pa*). Entities are declared to ‘mere imputations of thought’ (*rtog pas btags tsam*) and to have a conceptual existence (*btags yod pa*) (Hopkins, 1996, pp. 35-41). And, in an apparent denial of the earlier Buddhist belief in an unconditioned reality beyond time and space, Nāgārjuna declares *nirvāṇa* to be identical with *saṃsāra*, that is, the conditioned world of conventionally existing things (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXV, 19-20), and that *nirvāṇa* is simply the correct understanding of existence (*bhava*), that is, as lacking inherent existence (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 6). The early Buddhist and Abhidharma ontology of the conditioned and the unconditioned is here replaced with an ontology that denies that there is an unconditioned reality. And Madhyamaka also rejects the two-tiered ontology of conditioned things that lies at the heart of the Abhidharma project by denying that any dependently originating entities have substantial existence (*dravyasat*),.

However, the precise implications of this new Madhyamaka ontology are not clear. On the one hand, it might mean that there is a reality that is not dependent on our perceptual and cognitive functions, but that it is pure process, not yet divided into things. There is an unconstructed substratum but it is undifferentiated change, not a thing or things. Independently of the mind, there are no distinct objects; named entities are a result of conceptual and linguistic superimposition that carves up an indeterminate spatio-temporal manifold. The partition of the world into things, their properties and relationships is a function of conceptual and linguistic reification, rather than existing independently of the human mind. All talk of things is merely a practical convenience that is misleading if they are taken to be real. According to Jay L. Garfield (2002, p.

61), Nāgārjuna's assertion that all things are conventional means that 'Nature presents no joints at which to be carved, and a fortiori none by virtue of which this thing must be served as a portion to experience.' On the other hand, and even more radically, the Madhyamaka ontology might mean that all entities are simply conventions, and that is all there is. There is absolutely no substratum for conceptual construction, not even an undifferentiated process.

José Ignacio Cabezón notes that, according to the analysis of the 15th century Tibetan dGelugs pa mKhas grub rje, an important difference between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Madhyamaka is that the Prāsaṅgikas reject any inherently existing substratum for the conceptual construction and labelling of things. By contrast, the Svātantrikas, while accepting that all entities occur in dependence upon concepts and labelling, also accept that a substratum does exist. It appears, however, that in mKhas grub rje's analysis, the Svātantrika's substratum is already differentiated into objects prior to conceptual construction and labelling because according to them, 'there exists a substratum, some form of characteristic existence, inherent *in the object* that makes such labelling possible' (Cabezón, 1994, pp. 166-67, italics added). mKhas grub rje claims that, according to Bhāvaviveka, the purported founder of the Svātantrika tradition, 'direct perceptual consciousness (*mngon sum gyi shes pa*) perceives the thing's own characteristic, and that is devoid of conceptual thought and the misconception to which it leads.' (Cabezón, 1992, p. 145). mKhas grub rje's interpretation appears to entail that Svātantrikas accept objects that are not simply conventional, because there is a substratum of objects, with their own characteristics that exist independent of concepts and names. This seems to contradict the traditional Madhyamaka claim that all things lack inherent existence. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that mKhas grub rje's position that 'Svātantrikas do not accept that things are *mere* labels by name and conceptual thought' was 'repudiated by certain later dGelugs pa exegetes (who claim that both Prāsaṅgikas and Svātantrikas accept things to be mere labels)' (Cabezón, 1992, p. 463). Nevertheless, this still leaves open the possibility that, although things, with all their characteristics and properties that differentiate them from other things, are entirely the product of conceptualisation and labelling, the Mādhyamikas might accept a substratum of pure change, which is

‘thingless’ prior to conceptual construction and naming. Of course, one might doubt the intelligibility of the notion of change without things that are changing. However, if instead Mādhyamikas reject any substratum whatsoever, this arguably brings them perilously close to ontological nihilism, despite their protestations to the contrary, for a world of mere conventions with no basis at all in an unconstructed reality seems hard to distinguish from a non-existent world. Does there not need to be some sort of unfabricated basis on which the conventional world of named entities is founded? Clearly, as we have seen, early Buddhism and its Abhidharma systematisers thought so and, as we will see shortly, the Cittamātra tradition was to agree.

At any rate, the Madhyamaka radical nominalism is arguably, like early Buddhism and the Abhidharma, a form of moderate linguistic optimism. It is true that Mādhyamikas think that some words simply misrepresent reality. For instance, the statement that ‘things exist independently of cognitive and linguistic processes’ is simply false. However, if the Mādhyamikas claim that there is a pure unnamed substratum, then it is the case that the words ‘there is a pure unnamed substratum not yet differentiated into discrete entities’ accurately describe the mind-independent reality before it is interpreted and labelled as discrete things by the perceiving mind. By contrast, if they claim that there is not a pure unnamed substratum, then the words ‘there is not a pure unnamed substratum not yet differentiated into entities’ accurately describe the fact, as they see it, that the world is purely conventional with no real foundation at all. Furthermore, Mādhyamikas say that ‘all entities are merely the referents of concepts and words’, and this claim is thought to be an accurate description of reality. That is, it is a correct statement of the truth that there are no things beyond the web of conventions. This is why Nāgārjuna contends that the absence of inherent existence of all things is the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) (*Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* 69). Of course, this statement is itself empty, in the sense that it is part of the web of conventions, but it is nevertheless the part of the web of conventions that speaks the truth that the web of conventions is simply a web of conventions, rather like a person in a dream who proclaims that he or she is in a dream. Indeed, Nāgārjuna likens his statement that ‘all things are devoid of inherent existence’ to a fictitious or magically created person (*nirmitaka*) who tells a man, obsessed with a fictitious or magically created woman whom he takes to be

real, that the woman is indeed unreal, thus dispelling the false notion that fuels his passion. The proposition that things lack inherent existence itself lacks inherent existence, but, like the fictitious or magically created person who points out the true nature of the unreal woman, it is nevertheless truth-bearing, in the sense that it accurately points out that all things lack inherent existence (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* 27). Perhaps here we need to introduce a distinction between conventional existence and conventional truth. The statement that ‘each and every thing has a merely conventional existence’ itself exists only conventionally, but it is ultimately rather than simply conventionally true, in the sense that it accurately states that everything, including itself, exists in this way. Hence Nāgārjuna claims that emptiness is the incontrovertible (*avisamvādi*) truth (*Acintyastava* 41). Other statements, like ‘this is a chair’ or ‘I am going to catch the train’, are both conventionally existent and conventionally true, which means that they point out features of the conceptually and linguistically dependent world, like chairs and trains, but without pointing out that these things have merely conventional existence. Such statements have pragmatic, transactional (*vyavahāra*) value, facilitating interaction and survival in the dream-like world of experience but overlooking the ontological status of their referents.

Against this interpretation of Madhyamaka as a form of moderate linguistic optimism, it might be objected that Nāgārjuna recommends the relinquishing of all views (*dr̥ṣṭi*), that emptiness should not to be misconstrued as a view (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XIII, 8), and claims that he does not have a thesis or standpoint (*pratijñā*) (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29). This claim was taken literally in Tibet by Ngog blo ldan shes rab and this attitude continues to be influential in the rNying-ma school of Tibetan Buddhism (Garfield, 2002, p. 48). D.S. Ruegg (1981) identifies a number of proponents of this type of position, or non-position, in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka. This attitude to language and reality arguably has precedents even in the Pāli literature, most notably in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta Nipāta*, which seems to advocate that holding any views (*diṭṭhi*) at all is an obstacle to enlightenment (*Sutta Nipāta*, 766-975; Gomez 1976). Ontological opinions are to be given up, for reality is radically ineffable. Emptiness means that the true nature of things is empty of, or inaccessible to, conceptualisation. There are simply no words that can

describe the ultimate truth. This reading might be further supported by Nāgārjuna's depiction of the Buddha as 'having the eye of knowledge' by means of which he sees the world as 'free from the characterised (*lakṣya*) and characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) and free from expression by words (*vāgudāhāra*)'. He also refers to a 'signless (*animitta*) consciousness (*viññāna*)', which results from meditation (*bhāvanā*) and is required for liberation (*Lokāṭīstava* 12, 26-27). Moreover, Nāgārjuna claims that reality (*tattva*) is not conceptualised by conceptual diffusion (*prapañca*) and is devoid of conceptualisation (*nirvikalpa*) (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XVIII, 9). Śāntideva declares that, unlike the conventional, the ultimate is beyond the scope of thought or the intellect (*buddhi*) (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX, 2). Candrakīrti claims that the view that things are empty is like a purgative medicine that, once it has flushed out all other views, must be expunged itself lest it make one ill (*Prasannapadā* XIII, 8). So, it would follow that, paradoxically, even the view that things lack inherent existence is simply a conventional truth and not expressive of how things really are. It too must ultimately be abandoned. The appropriate response to the ultimate truth, beyond the conventions of our concepts and words, is silence. This linguistic pessimism is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, by Vimalakīrti's 'great silence' when Mañjuśrī asks him to explain the doctrine of the entry into non-duality (*advayadharmamukha*), presumably a metaphor for the direct experience of reality (*tattva*). Mañjuśrī praises Vimalakīrti's response and declares that syllables (*akṣara*), sounds (*svara*) and concepts (*viññapti*) are worthless (*asamudācāra*) in this matter (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* VIII, 33). Thus, it is possible that my claim that Madhyamaka is a form of moderate linguistic optimism does not take sufficient account of Madhyamaka claims that indicate the radical ineffability of things as they really are.

However, the Madhyamaka relinquishing of all views has not always been taken at face value. Tsong-kha-pa and the dGe lugs pa tradition, for instance, claim that Nāgārjuna means that he does not have a thesis or standpoint that asserts the inherent existence of anything (Hopkins 1996; Napper, 1987). The implication is, of course, that he does hold the view that all things lack inherent existence. Reality is not inexpressible, because the view that all things lack inherent existence expresses the true nature of things

with precision. Only wrong views (*mithyādr̥ṣṭi*), and not the right view (*samyagdr̥ṣṭi*) are to be given up. In this case, the Madhyamaka texts which refer to reality being beyond conceptual diffusion and as free from characterised objects, characteristics and without expression by words can be interpreted as statements of psychological rather than epistemic ineffability. Reflection on things as they really are is central to Madhyamaka meditation and is intended to transform knowledge by description into knowledge by acquaintance, that is, a direct *seeing* of things in their true nature, the latter having an immediacy and affective impact that the former cannot match. Thus Candrakīrti makes a distinction between the *dr̥ṣṭi* that things are empty, which would be the merely propositional knowledge, and the *darśana*, or direct perception (*Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti* 23). Buddhist meditation theory identifies special states of meditative absorption (*dhyāna*) in which discursive thought and conceptual diffusion fall away, as consciousness becomes focused on the ultimate truth. The conceptual construction of the manifold world of everyday entities would temporarily be suspended. How this feels might be indescribable, or not fully describable, especially to those who have not had the experience. And, at the time, even the object known in the experience, that is, the absence of inherent existence of all phenomena, might be inexpressible, because one is so utterly absorbed in the experience. The meditator might have a non-dual experience, in the sense of feeling no sense of being a knower at a distance from the object of knowledge. Nevertheless, this psychological ineffability is compatible with later, post-meditative experience descriptions of what was known, namely, that all entities are simply conventions, and does not contradict the thesis of moderate linguistic optimism that things as they really are can be accurately expressed in words.

Language in Cittamātra

There has been a trend in recent scholarship to reject the dominant view that Cittamātra is a form of ontological idealism (Kalupahana, 1987; Kochumuttom, 1982; Lusthaus, 2002). Of course, as with Madhyamaka, texts regarded as Cittamātra in orientation are not univocal and, furthermore, contain ambiguities and unclarity that make them susceptible to diverse readings. However, I am sympathetic to

the view of Williams (1998, p. 803) and Garfield (2002, p. 155) that there is substantial evidence for an idealist interpretation of many Cittamātra texts. In other words, the Cittamātra position is that consciousness (*citta*) exists prior to and autonomously from its objects and that these objects exist only as objects of consciousness and have no genuine existence external to consciousness. Vasubandhu makes this abundantly clear when he declares that the external world is only perception (*vijñaptimātra*) because consciousness manifests as non-existent objects; he compares this perception of the external world to that of a person who is afflicted by an optical disorder, and thus sees hair, bees and so forth when they are not really there (*Viṃśatikākārikāvṛtti* 1). He rejects the existence of divisible material entities and of indivisible material atoms, explaining the perception of external objects as analogous to dream experiences in which an unreal world is created by the mind and falsely believed to be real. The fact that many people experience the same external world is the result of the maturation of similar *karmic* seeds in their individual consciousnesses, resulting in a shared hallucination (*Viṃśatikākārikāvṛtti* 2-16).

Vasubandhu expresses his ontological idealism succinctly in the teaching of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*), which he identifies as the imagined nature (*parikalpitasvabhāva*), the dependent nature (*paratantrasvabhāva*) and the perfected nature (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*) (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* 1). The subject-external object dualism is the imagined nature, because external objects are actually just cognitive experiences produced by karmic seeds. Objects falsely appear to exist externally. Consciousness is a stream of causally connected mental events, which Vasubandhu calls the dependent nature. The dependent nature is what really exists, but, when contaminated by the imagined nature, it does not exist in the way that it appears, that is as a subject set over against a world of external entities. The perfected nature is the fact of non-duality realised in the perfect insight of the enlightened person who sees the dependent aspect as it really is, that is, as a non-dual flow of consciousness not reified into subject and external objects (*Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* 2-4, 11-14). In other words, the enlightened person sees the absence of the imagined nature in the dependent nature. In Cittamātra, emptiness refers not to the universal absence of inherent

existence, for consciousness is not empty in this sense, but to the absence of the consciousness-external world duality, given that the supposedly external world is a product of consciousness.

Cittamātra adopts the Abhidharma two-tiered ontology of conventional reality (*saṃvṛti satya*) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*), but, unlike Abhidharma, attributes conventional existence to all external objects, even the physical *dharmas*, and ultimate reality to the flow of consciousness. Various Madhyamaka texts criticise the Cittamātra tradition for advocating the inherent existence of consciousness (*Bodhicittavivaraṇa* 26-56; *Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX, 11-37). From a Madhyamaka perspective, Cittamātra is not thorough enough, insofar as it does not assert the merely conventional nature of absolutely everything, including consciousness. The Cittamātra reply is that consciousness cannot lack inherent existence, because consciousness is the agency that fabricates the conventional world of external things. There has to be something non-imaginary that imagines the world of conventions and it is precisely that which Cittamātra calls consciousness (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* IX, 15-16). There is also a Cartesian style argument that can be employed to support the Cittamātra tradition here; that is, one cannot successfully doubt the inherent existence of consciousness because the act of doubting is itself a state of consciousness. To dream the world of things there must be a dreamer, even if that dreamer is, contrary to Descartes, a flow of consciousness events rather than a static, unchanging substance. Consciousness must exist, though the external world is only appearance.

What implications does this have for the Cittamātra view of language? As with the other traditions of Buddhism already examined, nominalism is a characteristic of Cittamātra. With the exception of consciousness itself, the referents of language do not really exist. Named objects are a product of the mind. But Cittamātra also continues the moderate linguistic optimism evident in early Buddhism, Abhidharma and Madhyamaka. Some statements misrepresent reality, for example, the claim that ‘there is an external world that exists independently of consciousness’. But other words are up to the task of describing things as they really are, though the Cittamātra description of how things really are differs from that of the other Buddhist

traditions. Thus, statements that ‘external objects are merely imagined’ and that ‘the consciousness really exists and is empty of the subject-external object duality’ are accurate portrayals of reality.

However, Cittamātra texts also say that reality is indescribable, which appears to support a more pessimistic view of language. For instance, Asaṅga refers to the inexpressible inherent nature (*nirabhilāpyasvabhāvatā*) of all phenomena that he equates with suchness (*tathatā*), reality (*tattva*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, 26, 32). Elsewhere he declares that the signless (*animitta*), as well as suchness (*tathatā*), reality-limit (*bhūtaḥkoṭi*), the ultimate (*paramarthatā*), and the sphere of reality (*dharmadhātu*) are all synonyms for emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (*Madhyāntavibhāga* I, 14). That is, emptiness is the signless or inexpressible ultimate reality. Furthermore, Vasubandhu says that, though phenomena are essenceless (*nairātmya*) in their imagined aspect, where they are fabricated as dualisms such as subject and object (*grāhaka* and *grāhya*), they nevertheless have an inexpressible (*anabhilāpya*) essence (*ātman*) that is not a product of fabrication. He claims that there is an inconceivable (*acintya*) supramundane (*lokottara*) knowledge (*jñāna*), free from grasping subject and grasped object (*Triṃśikārikā* 29-30). The *Samḍhinirmocanasūtra* (Powers. 1995, pp. 20, 98) says that, unlike the dependent aspect the imagined aspect ‘is established as names and signs’. The *sūtra* in this way proclaims the inexpressible (*brjod med*) nature of the dependent aspect as the true nature of things.

What does this mean? It might be argued that for the Cittamātra all language is implicated in the subject-object duality and thus the non-dual consciousness transcends language. But surely this statement is self-refuting, given that language is being used to express that the non-dual consciousness is the true nature of things and that it transcends language. If the inexpressible reality is the non-dual flow of consciousness, no longer infected by the illusion of a grasping subject who craves and appropriates external objects to which it attaches names and signs, then this non-dual consciousness cannot be literally inexpressible, because it is describable as a non-dual flow of consciousness.

Perhaps the solution to this problem is to rely again on the distinction between psychological and epistemic ineffability. Unenlightened consciousness is always intentional. Unenlightened consciousness is

always consciousness of an object. It seems likely that the enlightened experience of a non-intentional (or non-dual) consciousness would be so extraordinary and unlike unenlightened experience that words might fail to communicate its affective character. Thus, words might express the truth about reality (reality is non-dual consciousness), but unenlightened person can get very little purchase on what the experience of this reality would be like. It is possible, then, that Cittamātra references to the inexpressibility of reality are best construed as statements of psychological ineffability; we cannot really express what it would feel like to have the experience of an enlightened non-dual consciousness. However, this is consistent with the epistemic claim that language correctly expresses the truth that this reality is non-dual consciousness. Such an interpretation of Cittamātra certainly preserves a degree of optimism about the capacity of words to express the way things as they really are.

Language and the path to liberation

I have made the case for moderate linguistic optimism in early Buddhism, its Abhidharma systematisation, Madhyamaka and Cittamātra. Language can express the way things really are though it can also misrepresent reality. We have also seen that these Buddhists are committed to nominalism, according to which many, or in the case of Madhyamaka, all linguistic referents are merely conventional. However, I do not wish to deny that more pessimistic views about language are also present in Buddhism. Nor should we forget that the Buddhists make statements how things really are because they believe that the understanding of the nature of reality is necessary to bring about enlightenment. The linguistic expression of the nature of reality is not an end in itself but a means to the transformation of experience from a state of ignorance and suffering. Buddhism employs language to identify and discourage mental attitudes, patterns of speech, and action rooted in greed, hatred and delusion and to identify and encourage those that lead to the alleviation and eradication of these mental poisons. Descriptions of the nature of reality often have a central place in these strategies as necessary for the cultivation of right views which are believed to have a liberating effect.

Bibliography

- Anacker, S. (trans)(1998), *Seven Works of Vasubandhu. The Buddhist Psychological Doctor*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. [includes translations of *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Triṃśikākārikā Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* and *Viṃśatikākārikāvṛtti*]
- Bodhi. Bh. (trans) (2005) *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Cabezón, J.I. (trans) (1992), *A Dose of Emptiness. An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cabezón, J.I. (1994), *Buddhism and Language. A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Collins, S. (1982) *Selfless Persons. Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, S. (1998) *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crosby K. and Skilton A. (trans) (1995) *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dutt, N. (ed) (1966) *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute.
- Garfield, J.L. (2002) *Empty Words. Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, R. (1998) *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gombrich, R. (1997) 'Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?' *British Association for the Study of Religions, Occasional Paper 17*. Leeds: University of Leeds Printing Service.
- Gomez, L.O. (1976) 'Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon', in *Philosophy East and West* 26 (2), pp. 137-65.
- Gowans, C.W. (2003) *Philosophy of the Buddha*, London: Routledge.

- Hamilton, S. (1996) *Identity and Experience. The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism*, London: Luzac Oriental.
- Hahn, M. (ed) *Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī, Volume 1. The Basic Texts*. Bonn: Indica et Tibetica Verlag.
- Hopkins, J. (1996) (2nd edn) *Meditation on Emptiness*. London: Wisdom Publications.
- Horner, I.B. (trans), 1990, *Milinda's Questions [Milindapañha]*, Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Inada, K. (1993) *Nāgārjuna. A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Ireland, J.D. (trans) (1997) *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha and the Itivuttaka: The Buddha's Sayings*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- James, W. (1982) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Penguin: Harmondsworth.
- Kalupahana, D. (1987) *Principles of Buddhist Psychology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kochumuttom, T. (trans) (1982) *The Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Works of Vasubandhu the Yogācārin*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Lamotte É. (trans) (1976) *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Lindtner, Chr. (trans) (1982) *Nagarjuniana. Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass [includes translations of *Acintyastava*, *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, *Lokātītastava*, *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* and *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā*].
- Lusthaus, D. (2002) *Buddhist Phenomenology. A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun*. Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Ñāṇamoli, Bh. and Bodhi, Bh. (trans) (1995) *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha [Majjhima Nikāya]*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Napper, E. (1987) *Dependent Arising and Emptiness. A Tibetan Buddhist Interpretation of Mādhyamika Philosophy Emphasizing the Compatibility of Emptiness and Conventional Phenomena*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

- Norman, K.R. (trans), 1984, *The Rhinoceros Horn and Other Early Buddhist Poems (Sutta Nipāta)*.
London: Pali Text Society.
- Powers, J. (trans) (1995), *Wisdom of Buddha. The Saṃdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra*. Berkeley: Dharma Publishing.
- Ruegg, D.S. (1981) 'On Thesis and Assertion in the Madhyamaka/dBu ma', in E. Steinkellner and H. Tauscher (eds), *Contributions of Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Csoma de Koros Symposium*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetologie und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, pp. 205-241.
- Scherrer-Schaub, C.A. (trans) *Yuktiṣaṣṭikāvṛtti. Commentaire à la soixantaine sur le raisonnement ou du enseignement de la causalité par le maître indien Candrakīrti*. Bruxelles: Institut Belge Des Hautes Études Chinoises.
- Sprung, M. (trans) (1979) *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*. Mervyn Sprung (Trans.), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Warder, A.K. (1971) 'The Concept of a Concept', in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 1 (2), pp. 181-196.
- Welbon, G. (1968) *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and its Western Interpreters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, P. (1981) 'On the Abhidharma Ontology' in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9, 1981, pp. 227-257.
- Williams, P. (1998) 'Indian Philosophy', in A.C. Grayling (ed), 1998, *Philosophy* 2, further through the subject. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 793-847.

SHORT PROFILE OF CONTRIBUTOR

David Burton is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University. Along with a number of articles, he has published two books: *Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation: A Philosophical Study* (Ashgate, 2004), and *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy* (RoutledgeCurzon, 1999).