

Two Images of the World —Sellars and Buddhism—

Ryo TANAKA, Kyoto University

Starting Point

- Buddhists' doctrine of two truths
 - Conventional and Ultimate truths
- Wilfrid Sellars' distinction of two images of the world
 - Manifest and Scientific images
 - Cf. Willfrid Sellars: an American philosopher who worked in the late 20th century. Famous for his criticism of “the myth of the given” in his “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”
- Analogy: in both frameworks, it seems to be claimed that it is only the latter that reflects “how things really are,” and that the former is constituted by our practical interests and conventions; ultimately unreal.

Why Sellars?

- Personal reason: because I have studied Sellars for a couple of years (with Profs. Deguchi and Garfield)
- More substantial reason: it may be possible to draw insights from the debate on the doctrine of two truths, which are useful in the contemporary philosophy,
- And I think the task would become easier by exploring analogies between Sellars' two images and Buddhists' two truths.

Doctrine of Two Truths

Conventional Truths (*saṃvṛtisaṭya*)

- Truths that are constituted by worldly conventions
- Good laypeople's commonsensical understanding of the world
- Easier to attain?

Ultimate Truths (*paramārthasaṭya*)

- Truths that reflect “how things really are”
- Buddhas' understanding of the world; necessary for *nirvāṇa*
- Harder to attain?
- Cf. Thakchoe (2011)

*“*Satya*” can mean truth, reality, existence;

I will use these interchangeably.

From *The Questions of King Millinda*

- One of the early understanding of the doctrine of two truths:
- A chariot (a macroscopic entity) is *ultimately* unreal.
 - It is only irreducible, unanalyzable parts that are *ultimately* real.
 - A chariot's existence *depends upon* its parts such as wheels, axel, pole (*mereological dependency*)
- A chariot is however *conventionally* real; our practical purposes and conventions let us say that a certain aggregation of microscopic particles is a chariot.
 - More on this later.

Sellars' Two Images of the World

Manifest Image

- Sophisticated commonsensical understanding of the world
- Includes empirical generalizations about *observable* phenomena

Scientific Image

- Scientific understanding of the world
- *Explain* manifest phenomena by postulating *unobservable* entities
- E.g. explain Boyle-Charles Law by motions of molecules
- Cf. Sellars (1963)

Eddington's Two Tables (Eddington 1955)

- “I have settled down to the task of writing these lectures and have drawn up my chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me - two tables, two chairs, two pens. “
- “One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world. [...] It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is colored; above all it is substantial.”
- “Table No. 2 is my scientific table. [...] It does not belong to the world previously mentioned [...] numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient table.”

Main Question

- Ultimate / scientific truths reflect “how things really are.”
 - In the strict ontological sense, what exist and what properties they have
- Conventional / manifest truths do not reflect “how things really are.”
- Nonetheless, they are “truths” in some sense.
- In what sense?
- We will look at the Abhidharma’s view first, then move on to the Madhyamaka. And develop corresponding interpretations of Sellarsian two images.

Ultimate Truth in the Early Buddhist Philosophy (the Abhidharma)

- “An entity, the cognition of which does not arise when it is destroyed and, mentally divided, is conventionally existent like a pot and water. Ultimate existence is otherwise.” (*Abhidharmakośa*, 6.4)
- Ultimate existence is neither reducible to parts nor analyzable in thought.
- A pot does not have ultimate existence; it can be destroyed physically, and is analyzable in thought.
- Hence a pot has only conventional existence.

Ultimate Truth in the Early Buddhist Philosophy (the Abhidharma)

- Siderits (2003), (2007)
- There are ultimate ontological grounds for determining what is *ultimately* real; there are irreducible and unanalyzable entities: *Dharmas*
- *Dharmas* as ultimate, fundamental constituents of reality
- *Dharmas* are also supposed to exist independently of our *conception* of them; they have their own *intrinsic natures* (*svabhāva*).
 - A chariot does not exist independently; it is our *conceptual imputation* that makes an aggregate of *dharmas* a chariot. Its existence *depends* on our conventional conception of it. (*conceptual dependency*)

Ultimate Truth as Correspondence

- On this understanding, ultimate truths are truths because they *correspond* to the way how things really are.
 - Truth as correspondence
- There is independent reality that transcends our conceptual framework.
- To achieve (ultimate) knowledge is to mirror that reality.
- Something is ultimately true *iff.* it reflects how *dharmas* really are

Reductive View on Conventional Truth

- Conventional truths are not about “how things really are.”
- Then, why do they “work”? In what sense are they “truths”?
- Because they are *grounded* in facts about fundamental *dharmas*.
- “The thought is that explaining this fact requires that the truth of conventionally true statements be grounded in facts about things that are not mere fictions but are genuinely, that is, ultimately, real.” (Priest, Siderits, Tillemans, 2011, p. 138)

Reductive View on Conventional Truth

- Something is conventionally true, *only if* it is grounded in the facts about fundamental *dharmas*
 - Remark: this is only a necessary condition for conventional truth; we should also consider practical interests and conventions
 - E.g. We do not call scattered chariot parts as “chariot,” but call them “chariot” when they are arranged in a certain manner.
 - Conventional, institutionalized use of words or concepts constitute the conventional reality
- In summary, conventional truths are constituted by facts about fundamental *dharmas plus* our practical interests and conventions.

Sellars as a Reductivist?

- Can we interpret Sellars' two images in a similar, reductive way?
- Sellars is a *scientific realist*; he claims that we should make *ontological commitment* when we adopt an explanatory theory. (Sellars(1956), §41)
 - E.g. If one explains the correlation between the pressure, temperature and volume of gas by appealing to motions of unobservable *molecules*, one should make an ontological commitment about molecules.
- Manifest observable phenomena are explained by ontological reduction to unobservable scientific entities.
- Motions of molecules are *also* explained by adopting a theory that refers to *more basic* entities.
- This seems to require *ultimate ontological grounds* for determining what the most basic scientific truths are.

Is This Really a Good Way to Look at Two Truths / Images?

- It might not be so.
- One reason: is it really legitimate to postulate such ultimate ontological grounds for determining every truth?
- Especially in the Buddhist tradition, this notion of *dharmas* is famously criticized by the Madhyamaka school.
- A similar argument may be posed for the reductivist interpretation of Sellarsian two images.
- Another reason (on which I won't focus): it is a short step from *reduction* to *elimination*; conventional / manifest truths are to be *replaced with* ultimate / scientific truths.

The Madhyamaka's Rejection of the Ultimate Ontology

- “Central to the Abhidharma is the distinction between the conventional truth (that persons and selves exist) and the ultimate truth (that persons and selves are ultimately simply aggregates of evanescent *dharmas* -- physical and mental events). The main teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom is that from the perspective of perfect wisdom, even this account of the way things are is *ultimately* arbitrary.” (Gethin 1998, p. 235)
- The Madhyamaka rejects *dharmas* as independent reality, that have intrinsic natures.
- “Global Anti-Realism” (Siderits 2007, 2011)

An Argument against the Abhidharma's Ultimate Ontology

- The Madhyamaka's objection: the notion of *dharmas* that have intrinsic nature, is incoherent
- It is one of Buddhists' central doctrines that everything is caused by something else (*dependent origination*).
- *Dharmas* are of course no exception; they are *causally dependent upon* other *dharmas*.
- Therefore, *dharmas* do not exist in an absolutely *independent* manner; they do not have intrinsic natures.
- Nothing has intrinsic nature.
- Cf. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, chap. 24

A Similar Argument against the Reductivist Interpretation

- Sellars takes roughly a “Kantian” approach to causation.
- Causes and effects do not exist independently of our application of the *category*
- On this view, it is incoherent to say that entities in the scientific image causally interact with each others, *and* that they exist *purely independent of our conception* of them.
 - *It is possible to say the scientific reality does not have any such causal structure; but the description of the world without any categorical structure is hard to imagine.
 - Cf. deVries (2005)

An Alternative: the Madhyamaka on Conventional Truth

- Rejection of ultimate ontology: paradoxically speaking, “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.” (Siderits 1989, p. 6)
- There is no fundamental ontological ground for determining what is ultimately real.
- Conventional truths need not be grounded in the facts about ultimate constituents of reality (*dharmas*).

An Alternative: the Madhyamaka on Conventional Truth

- If conventional truths are not grounded in the facts about *dharmas*, in what sense are they “truths”?
- The Abhidharma: conventional truths are constituted by facts about fundamental *dharmas plus* our practical interests and conventions.
- Now we are left with only practical interests and conventions.
- The Madhyamaka’s view (as I interpret it): *our ontology is constituted by our practical interests and conventions*

Put it in Sellarsian (Contemporary) Terms

- Insight: our conventional practices constitute our ontology.
- We need not (should not?) seek for ultimate ontological foundations, which exist purely independent from our practical interests and conventions.
- The scientific image is constituted by our practical purpose (in this context, *explanation* of phenomena) and conventions (*norms* of sciences); it is nothing more or less.

More Specifically...

- It may be indeed correct that *ontological reduction* of manifest phenomena is necessary for explanatory purposes.
 - E.g. Gas behaves in a certain way *because* gas is an aggregate of molecules.
- However, there is no determinate *end* for such ontological reduction; our ontology is always conventional, and subject to revision.
- Do not *reify* the *ideal* scientific image! Do not seek for ontological foundation that exists independently of our purposes and conventions!

Summary

- The Abhidharma interprets ultimate truths in terms of correspondence to independent reality (*dharmas*); conventional truths are given a reductive account
- The Madhyamaka criticizes such independent reality, and rejects it
- An alternative is to think our ontology is also constituted by our practical interests and conventions
- Ontological reduction may be necessary for *explanatory* purposes, but we should not suppose that there is determinate end for such reduction

Some Other Interesting Things

- If our ontology is constituted by practical interests and conventions, it is possible to have different ontologies for different purposes
 - *Scientific Explanation* may be merely one of those purposes, hence its ontology may be merely one of many ontologies
 - *But I have no idea whether Sellars himself would agree
- Ontological reduction is indeed explanatory necessary, but we need not (should not?) stick with our present ontology (such as physicalism)
 - If something really important (probably for our practice) resists ontological reduction so hard, then try *revising our ontology*

An Important Problem Untouched

- We have abandoned the notion of independent reality.
- Truths are not *correspondence* to independent reality; they are matters of convention.
- Then, what is the *standard* for revising our convention and ontology? A threat of relativism?
 - This is easy for the Abhidharma; the standard is *independent reality* outside our convention.
- There are literatures on this topic (in the context of Buddhist philosophy).
 - E.g. Cowherds(2011), Guerrero(2013)
- And this is also a problem for Sellars.

Another Important Problem

- Can ontological reduction have any explanatory power, if there is no determinate *end* for such ontological reduction?
- We need to examine why ontological reduction has explanatory power, in the first place.
- My guess is that explanatory power of ontological reduction in general is logically independent from whether there is any conceptual framework independent ontological foundation

Reference

- Cowherds. (2011). *Moonshadows : Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- DeVries, W. (2005). *Willfrid Sellars*. : McGill-Queen's.
- Eddington, A. (1955). *The Nature of the Physical World*. London: Dent.
- Gethin, R. (1998). *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graham, P, Siderits, M, and Tillemans, T. (2011). "The (Two) Truths About Truth." Chap. 8 In *Moonshadows*.
- Guerrero, L (2013). "Truth For The Rest Of Us: Conventional Truth In The Work Of Dharmakīrti (dissertation)." University of New Mexico. Dept. of Philosophy
- Sellars, W. (1956). "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in H. Feigl & G. Maxwel (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, I, University of Minnesota Press, Reprinted in SPR.
- . (1963). "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man." In R. Colodny, Ed. *Frontiers of Science and Philosophy*, University of Pittsburgh Press. Reprinted in SPR.
- . (1965). *Science, Perception, and Reality* (SPR). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Siderits, M. (1989). "Thinking on Empty: Madhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality." In S. Biderman and B. A. Schaufstein, eds. *Rationality in Question*. Dordrecht: Brill.
- . (2003). *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- . (2007). *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Thakchoe, S. (2011) "The Theory of Two Truths in India." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved March 5, 2015 from <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/twotruths-india/>>.