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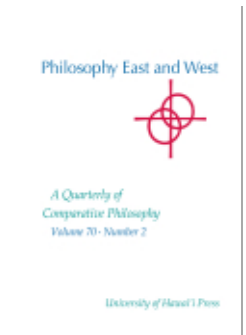
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THINKING BEYOND THOUGHT: TSONGKHAPA AND MIPHAM ON THE CONCEPTUALIZED ULTIMATE



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In Tibetan discussions of the two truths—and in particular in Geluk discussions, inflected as they are by both Dharmakīrti's and Candrakīrti's epistemologies, which, however different they are, agree on the necessity of epistemic warrant for genuine knowledge, and on the appropriateness of particular epistemic warrants or instruments to their respective objects of knowledge—the nature of our knowledge of the ultimate truth leads to interesting epistemological and ontological problems. Given that the ultimate truth must be a possible object of knowledge, there must be a *pramāṇa* by means of which it is known. But only buddhas or bodhisattvas on the path of seeing or above are capable of directly perceiving the ultimate truth. So, for the rest of us, our knowledge of the ultimate is conceptual, and hence mediated by *rjes dpag (anumāṇa)* and so must be conceptual in nature. But the ultimate transcends all concepts, conceptions, and signs. And so it would appear that we can know nothing about it. But that would suggest that we can't even know this, or that there are two truths to be known, including one about which we can know nothing, not even this. . . .

Moreover, the idea that ordinary beings and lower-level bodhisattvas cannot know emptiness at all would wreak havoc on Geluk understandings of *lam rim*, and of the role of study on the path, according to which our ability to verify our apparent perception of the ultimate depends upon the concordance of the object of direct perception in meditative equipoise with the understanding achieved in conceptual meditation and in subsequent realization (*bcad shes*). This raises important questions: Is the object of inferential insight into the ultimate the ultimate truth itself, or merely some surrogate? If it is the ultimate, since the ultimate realized by buddhas and by bodhisattvas in advanced meditative equipoise transcends all conception but can in some sense be known conceptually, are there two ultimates or one? If two, what is their relationship to each other? If conceptual realization grasps only a surrogate, given that that surrogate is deceptive, is it knowledge at all? And if so, in what sense?

The rubric through which these questions are addressed by Geluk scholars and their interlocutors (such as Gorampa Sonam Sengye and Taktshang Loden Sherab) relies on the distinction between the *don dam rnam grangs ma yin pa* and the *don dam rnam pa* (sometimes *rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam* and *rnam grangs pa'i don dam*) or the *uncategorized*

versus categorized ultimate (sometimes translated as the *non-nominal versus nominal ultimate* or as the *conceptualized versus nonconceptualized ultimate*, or as the *figurative or metaphorical ultimate* versus the *genuine or literal ultimate*).

As this set of pairs of terms indicates, it is hard to find a precise English translation for *rnam grangs* in this context. But the family of options on which various translators have settled helps us to fix on the relevant semantic range. The general idea is this: the *categorized* is that which is apprehended conceptually, that which is seen in terms of sets of distinctions, or, as we might put it in the language of Sellarsian epistemology, that which is *seen-as*;¹ the *uncategorized* is that which is apprehended in the absence of the drawing of distinctions, the applications of concepts, or that which is merely *seen*, not seen as anything, not verbalized. In this discussion, I will consistently use *categorized* and *uncategorized ultimate* to translate *rnam grangs pa'i don dam* and *rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*, respectively, unless in direct quotation from scholars using alternative vocabulary.²

Here I explore the resources that this distinction and the accounts grounded thereon provide for an understanding of the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual knowledge of ultimate truth and for an account of ultimate truth and its role in epistemology more generally. I will begin with an exploration of the Geluk position as developed by Tsongkhapa and his commentators, and will then consider responses to that position by Mipham Rinpoche and Bötrül from the Nyingma perspective. I will conclude with some reflections on what we learn from this literature about rival Tibetan understandings of the relation between conceptual and nonconceptual knowledge.

The topic is of interest not only because it occupies so much of the attention of so many of Tibet's most eminent philosophers, but because it focuses on questions about the relation between the conceptual and the nonconceptual in the context of the most important and most recondite kind of knowledge recognized in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, knowledge of the ultimate enabled by ultimate *pramāṇas* (that is, epistemic instruments capable of giving access to ultimate truth). It therefore raises questions about the role of direct perception and conceptual understanding in realization. We will see that the examination of these issues gives us more reason to believe that paradoxical understandings of the ultimate are the most rational understandings, and the only way to avoid a dismal mysticism about ultimate reality.

1. The Geluk Position

Tsongkhapa argues (1998, 2002, 2006) for a particularly strong understanding of the identity of the two truths, and therefore for a particularly intimate connection between knowledge of the ultimate and knowledge of the conventional, namely that to understand the ultimate is to understand

dependent origination, and hence to understand the conventional. He takes the basis of division of the two truths to be objects of knowledge: to know the conventional truth is to know dependently originated phenomena; to know the ultimate truth is to know the emptiness of those phenomena. While conventional and ultimate phenomena are not different *phenomena extensionally*, they are, in this view, different *intensionally*, just as Hesperus and Phosphorus are extensionally, but not intensionally identical.³

In the *special insight (lhag mthong)* section of *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Awakening (Lam rim chen mo)*, Tsongkhapa argues that the basis of division of the categorized versus the uncategorized ultimate is not *objects of knowledge*, but kinds of cognitive state (*blo*). That is, the two truths are divided based on *objects of knowledge*, with the conventional comprising dependently arisen phenomena, and the ultimate comprising the emptiness of those phenomena, regardless of the nature of the cognitive state or status of the subject apprehending them. In the case of the distinction between the categorized and uncategorized ultimate, he argues, we are distinguishing not between two distinct *objects of knowledge (shes bya)*, but between two distinct modes of subjectivity in reference to a single object, namely *emptiness*, the ultimate truth. Tsongkhapa is adamant that there is a single ultimate in the objective sense,⁴ although there are two distinct modes of apprehension, one conceptual and one nonconceptual, and that the latter is the goal. Nonetheless, it is crucial to his framework that each is served by *pramāṇa*, and that each constitutes genuine, nondeceptive insight into ultimate truth. In the *Lam rim chen mo*, referring directly to Bhāviveka's distinction, he says:

Commenting on this, in his *Blaze of Reasons* [Bhāviveka] says:

[ultimate] means that which is concordant with (*mthun pa*) the ultimate. Because that ultimate exists for a wisdom that is concordant with direct knowledge of the ultimate, it is said to be concordant with the ultimate. When we say that something "does not exist ultimately" or "is "nonexistent ultimately," it has [this meaning], because that same text says:

Qualm: The ultimate is beyond all awarenesses, but the refutation of an essence of things is in the realm of letters. Thus, would not the refutation be nonexistent for that reason?

Reply: There are two types of ultimate. One of these operates without conceptual activity; it is supramundane, stainless, and without elaborations. The second operates with conceptual activity and is concordant with the collections of merit and wisdom[;] it is called "sublime wisdom in the world" and it does involve elaborations. Here we hold this latter to be the qualifier in the thesis, "does not exist ultimately," and so there is no fallacy.

Take this as referring to wisdom based on study and reflection that properly analyzes reality and to consciousnesses above that; it does not refer only to a noble being's post-equipoise condition. (Tsongkhapa 2002, vol. III, p. 221)

Bhāviveka, using the language of *concordance* (*mthun pa*) to refer to the categorized ultimate, suggests, at least on Tsongkhapa's reading, that the two kinds of apprehension of ultimate truth agree with respect to their object. The distinction between them must then be on the subjective side. And so, Bhāviveka continues (with Tsongkhapa's agreement) by explaining that when explicit claims are made about the ultimate, one is engaging with the categorized ultimate; when one engages nonconceptually, one engages with the uncategorized ultimate. Since these two kinds of apprehension engage with the same object, there is nothing wrong with understanding the claims made about the categorized ultimate to be true of the uncategorized ultimate, although it cannot be apprehended in terms of those claims or the concepts they implicate.

In *Ocean of Reasoning*, Tsongkhapa draws this distinction explicitly in the context of the discussion of the nature of ultimate truth in the commentary on XXIV:8 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*:

According to other treatises, the ultimate is twofold: the primary [non-categorized] ultimate truth and the secondary [categorized] ultimate truth. For instance the *Satyadvaya-vibhāga* says,

Since the refutation of such things as arising
Is consistent with reality,
We assert that it is ultimate.

And the *Madhyamakāloka* says:

Since non-*arising* is consistent with the ultimate, it is called "ultimate." But it is not actual [*yang dag*]. The actual is that ultimate which is free from all fabrication. Here "fabrication" refers not only to the fabrication that is the object of negation through reasoning but also to the fabrication of appearance. The freedom from fabrication of appearance is the vanishing of all fabrication of dualistic appearances in the perspective of one directly perceiving reality
(p. 494)

Here Tsongkhapa emphasizes both the fact that conceptual understandings of the ultimate, such as those deriving from Prasāṅgika arguments, are understandings of the ultimate itself, and not of something else, and that the *actual* ultimate—that is, the actual *realization* of the ultimate—is a realization free from fabrication, including the fabrication of subject-object duality, but also the fabrication of appearance, that is, the imputation of conceptual categories to the object of perception. Once again, we have a single object, but two distinct modes of apprehension of it; each is correct, but one is more salutary than the other.

The challenge to this framework is twofold: first, we require an account of what it is to apprehend and to *know* without the application of conceptual categories; second, we require an account of the *correctness* of conceptual apprehension despite its implication in fabrication. We will see that it is the latter issue that preoccupies Tsongkhapa's critics. Tsongkhapa then turns to the relation between the categorized ultimate and conventional truth, emphasizing that while they are distinct with respect to their objects, they are intimately related:

However, in the case of the emptiness that is the negation—that is, the internal negation—of the ultimate arising of the person and the aggregates, the bases of emptiness must appear to conventional authoritative cognition, such as a visual consciousness that sees things directly. Therefore, it appears to a dualistic appearance from the perspective of the cognizing mind that sees it directly, but does not appear without dualistic appearance. Therefore, it is a secondary ultimate, but is a genuine conventional truth. . . .

Through this argument, one should understand that the objects perceived through the wisdom through which the Buddha perceives empirical phenomena and the object posited through the wisdom of the other āryas in the post-meditative state, which are perceived through internal negation as illusion-like, are also secondary (categorized) ultimates. (Tsongkhapa 2006, pp. 495–496)

The point here is that when one perceives emptiness as the categorized (secondary) ultimate, one perceives it as the emptiness of conventional phenomena. That requires that conventional phenomena be apprehended by conventional authoritative cognition (*pramāṇa*); as their emptiness and their dependently originated status are one and the same, their emptiness appears to the same conventional authoritative cognition.

While that might appear to be inconsistent with Tsongkhapa's commitment to the division of the two truths on the basis of knowledge, and the commitment to conventional *pramāṇas* for conventional phenomena and ultimate *pramāṇas* for ultimate phenomena, it is not. The ontological union of the two truths entails that ultimate truth is in an important sense identical to the conventional. Moreover, Tsongkhapa asserts that the *secondary*—or *categorized* ultimate—is also genuine conventional truth; the uncategorized, he maintains, transcends all convention.

But this entails neither that the uncategorized and the categorized ultimates are extensionally distinct nor that the uncategorized ultimate is not in any sense identical to the conventional. This is because he also argues that even the uncategorized ultimate is identical to the conventional *extensionally* (*ngo po gcig*), although distinct *intensionally* (*ldog pa tha dad*). This preserves the two bases of division—objects of knowledge for the two truths and subjects for the two classifications of the ultimate—while preserving the identity of the two truths. The distinction is epistemological while the identity is ontological. The categorized ultimate is the bridge: it is

identical in object with, but subjectively distinct from, the uncategorized ultimate; and it is subjectively identical with, but distinct in object from, the genuine conventional truth.

Tsongkhapa explains this idea further in *Illumination of Candrakīrti's Thought* (*dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*). Here he is commenting on Candrakīrti's analogy of floaters in the visual field of someone afflicted by ophthalmia with conventional truth, and the absence of the floaters (falling hairs in the Sanskrit and Tibetan tradition) as analogous to the emptiness of intrinsic nature:

[Candrakīrti's use of the ophthalmia analogy indicates] only the listener's failure to realize exactly what is explained; it does not rule out the listener's conceptual realization of the nonexistence of hair.

Although the explanation of ultimate truth through an analogy does not lead to its realization in the way ultimate truth is seen by those free from the affliction of the cloud of ignorance, this does not mean that Candrakīrti accepts reality as non-realizable in a general sense. Ultimate truth is not ineffable, for definite scriptural texts and their verbal descriptions do embody its profound meanings. Furthermore it is not the case that ultimate truth is unrealizable by the mind associating with verbal descriptions. Therefore every single statement explaining the meaning of reality as beyond the scope of consciousness and verbal description must be understood in the same light. (Tsongkhapa 1998, pp. 198–199; translated in Thakchöe 2007, pp. 84–85)

This is a very helpful passage for understanding Tsongkhapa's insistence that the categorized ultimate must be taken seriously *as ultimate truth*. Suppose I suffer from the relevant ophthalmia and go to see the doctor. When my ophthalmologist explains to me that there really are no falling hairs in the air around me, and that I am simply suffering from an illusion due to injury to my retina, I both *come to know* that there are no such hairs *and fail to stop seeing them*. Only after the surgery (I hope) will I stop seeing them altogether. But the transformation effected by the surgery is a transformation of my subjectivity, not of my cognitive attitude toward the relevant object of knowledge (the absence of hairs). I already *knew* that there are no hairs, otherwise I would not seek treatment; only later did I come to *see* the world without hairs.

It follows, Tsongkhapa argues, that, when she said that it was my retina, not the environment, that was the problem, she spoke the *truth*. Even if I could not see that there are no hairs, I could *believe* what she said, and so consent to the surgery. Once the surgery is completed, and perception delivers to me a world that accords completely with what she said, I come to *know directly* that what I once merely *knew inferentially*, and, moreover, what I knew only inferentially accords with what I now see to be the case perceptually. By analogy, Tsongkhapa insists that ultimate truth is expressible; when we say or think things about it, we are in the position of the

patient prior to surgery: correct, but not yet affirmed in our correctness by perception, knowing only discursively. Part of what we know about it is that it is inexpressible, but we can know that conceptually; so, to say that it is inexpressible is, paradoxically, to express something ultimately true.⁵

Graggs pa bshad sgrub (1675–1748) in his commentary on *Drang nges legs bshads snying po* (Essence of hermeneutics), *The Essence of Eloquence: A Presentation of the Two Truths in the Four Systems of Tenets* (*Grub mtha' bzhi'i lugs kyi bden gnyis kyi rnam gzhas legs par bshad pa'i snying po*) (Graggs pa bshad sgrub 2009), clarifies this point nicely:

We can distinguish between the categorized and the uncategorized ultimate in terms of how they are expressed in language. The categorized ultimate is twofold: the objective ultimate and the subjective ultimate. The first is like the emptiness of the sprout, which has an illusory appearance. The second is like the authoritative inferential cognition that ascertains that emptiness. These two are both called “ultimate,” but this is just a designation, and they are not actual ultimates.

One can also distinguish between an objective and a subjective uncategorized ultimate in terms of how it is expressed in language. The first is emptiness, and so is the ultimate; it is just as it is: emptiness, the consummate, the absolute truth, the same as the dharmadhatu. The second is the mental continuum of one on the path of learning that directly realizes emptiness like the wisdom of realization. This is said by some to be truly called the non-categorized ultimate, but it is not. (Graggs pa bshad sgrub 2009, p. 362)⁶

Graggs pa bshad sgrub argues that there is no difference in *object* between the categorized and non-categorized ultimate; rather it is in its mode of appearance. It is emptiness in each case, although in the case of the categorized ultimate, it appears in an illusory fashion. The uncategorized ultimate is emptiness itself; the categorized is, on the object side, that emptiness as it appears to a mundane subject, and on the subject side like the premises and inferences by means of which we come to know it. The consciousness of one directly apprehending emptiness is called an uncategorized ultimate by courtesy, but, he emphasizes, it is not the actual ultimate, but only a mode of apprehension of it. It is, however, a mode free from illusory appearance, and hence the appellation. In any case, the final goal of practice is not the realization of a *new object of knowledge*, but the *transformation of subjectivity*, the transformation from inferential to direct awareness, and from the apprehension of emptiness with an illusory appearance to an apprehension without that appearance.⁷

We should note several important consequences of Tsongkhapa's account at this point, before considering the positions of his critics. First, Tsongkhapa offers an account that explains the role of conception and language in the process of realization. They are, on his account, more than mere ladders to be cast aside. Language and thought can truly characterize

ultimate reality, even if ultimate reality is characterized as uncharacterizable. Setting aside his aversion to paradox, we note simply that he has the clarity of mind to see that one cannot back away from true assertions about the nature of reality, or undermine the accuracy of a position to which one subscribes, on pain of undermining one's own cogency and claim to correctness. To deny the correctness of the Madhyamaka texts, in Tsongkhapa's view, would be to give up not just on conceptuality, but also on the fact that nonconceptual thought directly perceives the ultimate.

Second, as Grags pa bshad sgrub notes, Tsongkhapa draws the distinction between the categorized and the uncategorized in terms of the distinction between inference and perception. This distinction is marked both in the *pramāṇavāda* (epistemological) tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and in the more Madhyamaka-inflected epistemology of Candrakīrti, both of which inform Geluk epistemology. But Tsongkhapa is not simply following an Indian epistemological tradition; he is working out how, on any understanding of epistemic warrant, we whose epistemic activity is always conceptual can ever be warranted in our understanding of an ultimate truth that cannot be conceptualized. This requires a cogent understanding of a non-categorical mode of apprehension, an idea that may seem mystical, but—although we will see that certain of Tsongkhapa's Tibetan critics take it in that direction—need not be.

Categorical apprehension concerning this view is simply inferential, discursive apprehension, mediated by explicit judgment. Uncategorized apprehension, then, is perceptual apprehension—spontaneous preconceptual engagement. Now, both Western philosophers since Kant and Buddhist philosophers from Sautrāntika on argue that perception of the phenomena we experience is always conceptually mediated; to perceive is to perceive-as, and to perceive-as is to mobilize concepts. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference between perception and inference, and Tsongkhapa's mobilization of Candrakīrti's example makes that plain. To perceive is to come to believe in what one perceives without thinking, without inference (even in cases where one knows that one is deceived, and does not believe *that* that *in which* one believes spontaneously is actual. Inference begins with the data of perception, but then involves the mediation of purely conceptual thought. Just being told that my eyes are bad doesn't get me to stop seeing the floaters, even though it gets me to stop believing in them. By locating the uncategorized ultimate as akin to perception *as opposed to inference* in that sense, Tsongkhapa ratchets down the mystical understanding of the nonconceptual, reducing it to the spontaneous, as opposed to the deliberate. The uncategorized ultimate, then, is simply the ultimate seen spontaneously; the categorized is the same ultimate understood conceptually, but not really seen—believed-that, but not believed-in.

II. The Late Nyingma Critique

The Nyingma scholar Ju Mipham Rinpoche (1846–1912) takes a very different position, more sharply distinguishing the categorized from the uncategorized ultimate. In his view the categorized ultimate is ultimate in name only, a mere simulacrum of the ultimate, referred to as ultimate only by analogy with the genuine, uncategorized ultimate. In *Speech of Delight* he writes:

To begin with, it may be said that origination occurs at a conventional level, within the domain of the words and thoughts of learning and reflection, but that ultimately, there is no arising. When two modes are paired in this way, the latter is the categorized ultimate. Because it is categorized in the correspondence with its partner, relative existence, and because it pertains to the category of the ultimate, it is called categorized. This is what is categorized as the partner to the relative when speaking of the two truths.

Since it is merely an entrance point that accords with the final ultimate truth, and since familiarization with this can overcome the apprehension of entities that is due to the habitual tendencies that have solidified since the beginning of time, it should be understood that this is the ultimate, and that this is also a perspective from which the claim of no origination is positive. One should know that even when having perfected the investigation into this, it is no more than a way of having certainty during the ensuing attainment.

In terms of the final abiding way of authenticity, the deduction of no origination based on origination is mere mental other—exclusion, a mere conceptual reflection. Beyond all extremes of origination, no origination, and so forth, and leaving all objects of word and thought behind, the meaning perceived by the stainless wakefulness of the meditative equipoise of the noble ones is the unsurpassable uncategorized ultimate. From this perspective, no claim whatsoever is made.

Since the categorized ultimate is near to and in accord with this, it belongs to the category of the ultimate and is given the name the *according ultimate*. (Mipham 2004, pp. 63–65)

Here Mipham urges that the categorized ultimate is a mere concept, not reality. It is not placed on the subject side, as it is for Tsongkhapa, as a distinct perspective on ultimate truth, but is rather an object—a conceptual reflection, or a universal—that is called *ultimate* only by courtesy of its proximity to the actual ultimate.⁸ It is not *authentic*. It is not a *true* perspective on reality. He emphasizes the gulf between the categorized and the uncategorized ultimate in *Lion's Roar*:

The context such as the analysis whether the ultimate is within the domain of mind or not refers to the uncategorized ultimate; the categorized ultimate is not the expressed meaning because the categorized ultimate is in the context of a novice progressively engaging in emptiness from merely a conceptual perspective. As such, it cannot roam in the territory of a mind like the nonconceptual meditative wisdom of a sublime one, for which duality has subsided, like a

beggar that has no power to sit on the universal Emperor's throne. (Duckworth 2008, p. 31)

Duckworth comments:

The categorized ultimate concerns a perspective within a conceptual framework. In the content of discursive analysis, the categorized ultimate is known within that framework, where there is no such framework demarcating the uncategorized ultimate. In this way, Mipam portrays a provisional nature to conceptual categories. (Duckworth 2008, pp. 31–32)

We can understand what drives Mipham in this direction. One can fairly ask about ultimate truth: is it correctly captured by conceptual categories or not? Is there a truthmaker for claims about ultimate truth or not? Whereas Tsongkhapa unwillingly and unwittingly walks into paradox by answering both “yes” and “no” to the first, and embraces the unity of the two truths by answering the second question in the affirmative, Mipham dodges explicit paradox by retreating to mysticism. He does so by answering a flat “no” to the first, and divorces the ultimate from the conventional by answering the second in the negative.

By taking the fact that the ultimate transcends all conception and expression to mean that no conception or expression can possibly be true of the ultimate (and therefore by *denying* that nonetheless *that* conception and expression *is* true of it) Mipham must render the categorized ultimate entirely conventional, and hence a different object from the uncategorized ultimate. It therefore is entitled to the label merely by virtue of its similarity to, or utility in approaching, the genuine ultimate. Since nothing can be said of the genuine ultimate, no statement about it can be true, and so everything in the categorized ultimate is simply false. The contrast with Tsongkhapa's position is thus stark.

Bötrül (ca. 1900–1959) develops Mipham's views further. In *Distinguishing the Philosophies* he writes:

The two ultimate valid cognitions are:
Those that analyze the categorized in the uncategorized.
The two conventional valid cognitions are:
Valid cognitions of confined perception and purity.

The Lord Mipam elucidated these delineations
In accord with the quintessential instructions of the school of early translations
And the intended meaning of sutras, tantras, and sāstras,
In the elegant discourse, sword of insight.

The categorized valid cognition analyzing the ultimate
Establishes the temporary categorized ultimate;
The valid cognition that analyzes the uncategorized
Establishes the consummate uncategorized.

The conventional valid cognition of confined perception
Establishes the mode of appearance—the impure relative;
The conventional valid cognition of purity
Establishes the mode of reality—the pure relative. (Bötrül, 2012 p. 34)

Here we see Bötrül distinguishing between the *temporary* categorized ultimate and the *consummate* (*yongs su grub pa*).⁹ The objects themselves are distinct, and the *pramāṇa* that gives us access to the categorized gives us no knowledge of the uncategorized:

Our tradition asserts that the categorized ultimate is
An emptiness that is a negation of constructed extremes only partially, and that
The uncategorized ultimate is
Free from all subtle and gross constructed extremes. (Bötrül, 2012 p. 39)

Here Bötrül explicitly distinguishes the categorized from the uncategorized from the side of the object. The categorized is a kind of emptiness, but an emptiness that is not free from all extremes: there are still things true and false about it. The uncategorized is a different kind of emptiness, one of which nothing can be said at all, and so free of all extremes:

Our tradition asserts that the uncategorized ultimate
Is free from all assertions.
Therefore the arguments of the great middle way
Are the great consequences. (Bötrül, 2012 p. 41)

At this point we should note the subtle but important difference between the approaches of Tsongkhapa and his Geluk followers and Mipham and his new Nyingma followers regarding this issue. As we noted, Tsongkhapa is committed against his will to a contradiction, a paradox of expressibility and characterization that emerges at the limits of language, one that emerges naturally in the Madhyamaka tradition. This does not render him irrational, but perspicacious. And the paradox is explained by the fact that the categorized and uncategorized ultimate are the same object taken from distinct subjective standpoints.¹⁰ As a consequence, the transcendence of the ultimate of conceptual thought does not preclude its being conceptualized. But for Mipham and Bötrül, the objective distinction between the categorized and uncategorized ultimate means that its transcendence of conception and expression is unmitigated by the paradoxical fact that we can express that, and conceive of it as the inconceivable. All of that is sent

over to the categorized side, and so is effectively denied. In attempting to avoid paradox, they are thus forced into mysticism. We see this consequence in the following passage:

Our tradition asserts ultimate emptiness
As the great uncategorized ultimate,
The expense beyond the constructed phenomena
Of the relative objects found by a valid cognition of confined perception.

Emptiness is not an entity;
While appearance is not reified,
That appearance abides as the great emptiness—
This is a critical point that destroys the clinging to entities.

Emptiness is not a nonentity;
While emptiness is not reified,
The self-lucidity of emptiness is appearing phenomena—
This is a critical point of the dawning of dependent arising.

Since it is not an entity, it is free from being a permanent entity;
Since it is not a nonentity, it is free from being the extreme of annihilation.
The expansive luminous clarity—profound, peaceful, and free from constructs
Is asserted as the great ultimate, the abiding reality.

This way is neither the domain of an analysis of the categorized ultimate nor
The domain of analysis of the conventional valid cognition of confined perception.
The great valid cognition that analyzes the uncategorized ultimate
Is the unique meaning established by Prāsaṅgika reasoning. (Bötrül, 2012 p. 42)

Bötrül is explicit here about the radical disjuncture between the categorized and uncategorized ultimate, and explicitly asserts that this disjuncture represents the distinction not between two subjective modes of apprehension, but between two distinct objects of knowledge, only one of which—the uncategorized—is real, and so a proper object of *knowledge*. The difference is between a real nonentity and a non-real, but imagined, entity. From the Geluk point of view—and, I might say, from the standpoint of reason—this locates the ultimate outside the domain of objects of knowledge entirely. If the goal of practice is to come to know ultimate truth, this is a disastrous consequence. Nonconceptuality may have been taken too far if that which we are to attain is in principle unattainable.

III. What Do We Learn from This?

This is not the first time I have argued that one of the virtues of Madhyamaka philosophy, and of Tsongkhapa's adumbration of Candrakīrti's interpretation of that system, is rationally paradoxical. By attending closely to this debate about how to understand the distinction between the

categorized and the uncategorized we see how important these paradoxes are, and how rational. One might think that the embrace of paradox is the first step from rationality to mysticism. On the contrary (and Tsongkhapa himself to the contrary notwithstanding), we discover that it is when one attempts to save the ultimate from paradox by distinguishing objectively the characterized from the non-characterized, and valorizing the non-characterized as the only genuine ultimate, that one slides into a position where the most important thing to realize becomes unknowable, and where the relationship between conventional and ultimate reality falls into mystery.

All Buddhist traditions struggle with the idea that conceptual thought is shot through with fabrication and that it engages with unreal universals, and with the idea that ultimate truth is beyond the reach of language and conception. The struggle is made more poignant because Buddhist scholars of all schools also work so hard to conceive and to describe just what that inconceivable and indescribable ultimate is like, and to show why it is inconceivable and indescribable. That task is necessary if there is to be any real content to Buddhist metaphysics, epistemology, and soteriology. And that task is further complicated by the thought that realization of the ultimate can have no connection to ordinary life. The debate between Geluk and Nyingma scholars in Tibet regarding how to reconcile these demands brings these difficulties into sharp relief. I have argued that in this debate the Geluk tradition probably has things just right. Nonconceptual awareness makes perfect sense, so long as that of which one thereby becomes aware is also conceptualizable.

Notes

Thanks to the members of the Berkeley workshop on conceptuality and nonconceptuality, particularly John Dunne, who offered very helpful comments and corrections. Thanks also to two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments.

- 1 – We leave aside here the vexed question of just *what* it might be seen as.
- 2 – The Tibetan vocabulary is grounded in Bhāviveka’s distinction between the *apāryayaparamārtha* and the *pāryayaparamārtha* introduced in *Tarkajvālā*, but Tibetans are unanimous in urging that their distinctions are not Bhāviveka’s, as that would run the risk of admitting that their position is in fact a *rang rgyud pa* (*svātantrika*) position.
- 3 – *ngo bog cig la ldog pa tha dad*. Also see [Cowherds 2012](#), [Thakchöe 2007](#), and [Garfield 2015](#) for more on this issue.
- 4 – Remembering that this single object is apprehended by two very different kinds of subjective cognitive states.

- 5 – There is another issue lurking here, that of paradox in the ultimate. To be fair, Tsongkhapa, because of his allegiance to Dharmakīrti’s logic, never countenances the possibility of true contradictions. Nonetheless, as a follower of Candrakīrti, he is certainly committed to paradoxes of this kind, even if he does not acknowledge it. (See [Garfield and Priest 2003](#); [Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest 2013a](#); and [Garfield 2015](#).)
- 6 – sgras brjod rigs kyi sgo nas dbyed na/ rnam grangs pa’i don dam dang/ rnam grangs ma yin pa’i don dam bden pa gnyis/ dang po la/ mthun pa’i yul dang yul can don dam bden pa gnyis/ dang po ni/ myu gu bden stong sgyu ma bzhin du snang ba’i cha lta bu gnyis pa ni/ de rtogs pa’i rjes dpag tshad ma lta bu ste/ ’di gnyis la don dam bden pa zhes btags pa tsam ma gtogs/de dgnos ni min no// rnam grangs ma yin pa’i don dam bden pa la yang sgras brjod tshul gyis dbye na/ yul don dam bden pa dang/ yul can den dam bden pa gnyis/ dang po ni/ stong nyid lta bu ste/ don dam bden pa/ ji lta ba/ stong nyid/ yongs grub/ yang dag mtha’/ chos dbyings rnam don gcig// nyis pa ni/ slob pa’i rgyud kyi stong pa nyid mngon sum du rtogs pa’i ye shes lta by ste/ ’di rnam grangs ma yin pa’i don dam dngos yin zhe ga cig bzhen kyang/ don dam dngos ni min no//.
- 7 – It is also worth noting the affinities of Grags pa bshad grub’s views with Yogācāra thought as articulated in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* (seventh chapter) as well as in *Madhyānta-vibhāga-bhāṣya* (Treatise on the discrimination between the middle and extremes), according to which the consummate nature (*pariṇiṣpanna/yongs su grub pa*) is regarded as the ultimate in contradistinction to the dependent nature (*paratantra/gzhan dbang*)—which is also taken to be reality as it is—because it is an object of purification by observation, a foundation of the so-called progressive model of the three natures.
- 8 – “Proximity” here denotes, as Mipham makes clear, not that the categorized ultimate is even *like* the uncategorized, but rather the fact that it is an “entrance point” in contemplation and meditation that makes it possible to realize the uncategorized eventually.
- 9 – Again, note the Yogācāra language that intrudes when these topics are under discussion. One should hesitate before drawing too bright a line between the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka positions.
- 10 – Those familiar with debates about dialetheism in Madhyamaka might at this point think that this distinction between two standpoints amounts to a kind of parameterization, and hence a retreat from a dialethic approach. One should resist this reading. Despite the fact that the contradictory properties of the object become evident from two distinct subjective perspectives, it does not follow that they are not two contradictory properties of the common object. (See [Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest 2013a](#).)

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