

**JUSTIFICATION AND TRUTH, RELATIVISM AND PRAGMATISM:
REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN PHILOSOPHY
AND ITS LESSONS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

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In *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief*, I elaborated and engaged the epistemological contributions of three trajectories of Indian philosophy, attempting to understand not only how their positions were developed in conversation with one another, but also what each might contribute to philosophical debates that are still very much alive. I concluded that the conceptual tools I had found useful in characterizing these various positions in play in first-millennium India could be usefully developed, as well, to address what seem to me some recurrent issues in the field of religious studies—and that those presently engaged more generally in the academic study of religion might therefore be (as I have been) instructed by some attention to the philosophical debates recorded in centuries-old Sanskrit texts. I argued, in particular, that reflection on these debates can give us some conceptual tools for addressing what is surely among the most pressing questions for students of religion: what sense are we to make of the fact that a great many seemingly rational persons have ardently held, as *really true*, religious beliefs that are often mutually exclusive? That question becomes especially acute when we realize that our answer to it cannot consist in simply jettisoning the idea of *truth* (and therefore, of rival claims as at least *possibly true*); for that is an idea that itself is necessarily presupposed by our work as scholars.

Insofar as I developed my positions on these matters in conversation with various Indian philosophers (and by taking as a guiding *example* the debates between them), it is useful to frame my proposal with reference to my readings of some Indian philosophical debates. The first of the Indian traditions that I considered was the foundationalist strand of Buddhist thought initiated by Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE) and Dharmakīrti (c.600-660 CE)—two thinkers who decisively

influenced the course of Indian philosophy, and whose thought defined, for many traditional and modern interpreters alike, “the Buddhist position” in matters philosophical. I next took up what was arguably the most orthodox of the various Brahmanical schools: that of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, whose constitutive concern was the interpretation and application of the Vedic literature—and particularly of the earlier parts of that corpus that are concerned with the performance of ritual sacrifice. The key figures here were Kumāriḷa (roughly contemporaneous with Dharmakīrti) and his commentators, all of whom had compelling philosophical and ideological reasons for opposing the philosophical program of the Buddhists Dignāga and Dharmakīrti—and whose thought, on the interpretation that I defended, has some striking affinities with the contemporary trend of “reformed epistemology.”

Finally, I took up the Madhyamaka (“middle way”) school of Buddhist thought that stems from the pregnant but enigmatic and logically elusive works of Nāgārjuna (fl. c. 150 CE)—here, in the form advanced by the commentator Candrakīrti (also roughly contemporaneous with Dharmakīrti—this was an exciting period in Indian philosophy!). While Candrakīrti’s works seem to have represented something of a philosophical dead-end in the history of Indian philosophy, he now enjoys great renown, partly in proportion to the extent to which his works were later claimed by ascendant Tibetan traditions of Buddhism as uniquely authoritative—indeed, as advancing the definitive interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy, which is almost unanimously thought by Tibetan scholars to represent the pinnacle of Buddhist thought. On my reading, though, it is especially interesting that Candrakīrti’s works should thus have risen to such prominence in Tibet; for while it is characteristic of some of the most influential of the Tibetan appropriations to wed Madhyamaka to the philosophical program of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, I argued that Candrakīrti’s philosophically principled objections to that approach run so deep as to be integral to his thought.

In arguing that the Buddhist Candrakīrti, like the Mīmāṃsaka Kumāriḷa, was thus a philosophical critic of his co-religionists Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, I was interested in appreciating the logically distinctive character of these different critiques of a foundationalist

approach. My contention was that while the Mīmāṃsakas elaborated something like a “reformed epistemology,” Candrakīrti instead argued in terms that are best characterized as *metaphysical*—that, in particular, he ventured what can be understood as *transcendental arguments*, such as were meant to show that the epistemologist Dignāga’s demands for justification were themselves intelligible only given the truth of Candrakīrti’s claims.

All of these traditions are recognizably a part of the same historical conversation, and share not only a great deal of Sanskritic learning and conceptual vocabulary, but a great many discursive strategies. All are concerned, for example, with questions relating to (what is the principal term of art in much Indian philosophy) *pramāṇas* (“reliable warrants,” or *criteria* of knowledge): which ways of knowing (perceptual, inferential, linguistic, traditional) are to be admitted as such, how they have the status they do, and whether or not the only justified beliefs are those that can be shown to have been engendered by one of them. All are basically *scholastic* traditions of thought, their arguments developed and conceptual problems addressed within the framework of commentaries on the authoritative texts of a received tradition. And all evince a preoccupation with characteristically Sanskritic analyses of language, with the arguments often turning on such matters as the definitions and etymologies of key terms, the rules of the Sanskrit grammarians, and the analysis of actions on the model of semantically complete verbal constructions.

These are, then, all recognizably *Indic* traditions of philosophy, and understanding the textual artifacts of these traditions is, to a large extent, a matter of Sanskrit philology. But understanding these is also a *philosophical* matter; that is, it involves understanding not only the Sanskrit utterances in which they are recorded, but the logic and cogency of their arguments. Indeed, neither can finally be done without the other, as anyone who has spent significant time reading Sanskrit philosophical texts can attest; for most such people will have had the experience of puzzling long over some recalcitrant passage, only to discover that what had seemed a grammatical difficulty turns out to have been a conceptual one—that one had all along

“understood” what the sentence said, but that its intelligibility emerges only as the logic of the argument becomes clear.

Thus, while the three trajectories of thought I engaged are commonly shaped by the world of first-millennium Sanskrit learning, each also reflects commitments that are specific to a particular ethical and axiological framework, and the arguments of these various traditions are therefore to be understood as logical developments of their framing commitments. Recognizing this does not, moreover, preclude our assessing the philosophical success of the arguments—which is to say, assessing the arguments in terms not only of their coherence with the traditional commitments they are meant to develop, but in terms of other things we know or believe. By doing so, I hoped to suggest, we may learn more not only about these Indic traditions of thought, but also about our own philosophical commitments as scholars.

A recurrent concern in the works of these three strands of Indian philosophy (and in my analysis thereof) was with the *production* of knowledge and belief; these various thinkers wrestled, that is, with the question of how (or whether) the *causal description* of one’s forming a belief is relevant to the (normative, justificatory) question of whether the belief is one that anybody *ought* to hold. That there is an age-old philosophical issue here is clear if we briefly consider two broadly different kinds of intuitions about how best to account for the objectivity of our knowledge. Thus, it could reasonably be thought that there is no better way to account for this than to attend carefully to the points at which our thought bumps up, as it were, against “the world.” This is the broadly *empiricist* intuition that the world is most basically “given” to us in causally efficacious “impingements by the world on a possessor of sensory capacities” (in the words of philosopher John McDowell)—and that we ought, therefore, to see our knowledge of the world as having its surest “foundations” in the perceptual experience that can be described in such causal terms.

Though it will seem counter-intuitive to those who (as perhaps most people these days do) have empiricist predilections, the broadly *rationalist* (or as I would prefer to say, following Robert Brandom, *inferentialist*) rejoinder to this is compelling: In thus taking causally

describable, perceptual sensations as foundational, one inevitably ends up basing the objectivity of knowledge on something finally *subjective*—specifically, the subjectively occurring representations (what a tree *looks like to me*, what one looks like to *you*) that happen to be produced by the world’s “impingements.”¹ Against this, then, the best way to account for the objectivity of our knowledge is by attending to something *intersubjectively available*—in particular, to the discursive sphere of *concepts* that allow us to give expression to commonly held judgments. Only thus can we ask, in Robert Brandom’s words, “a question Kant taught us to ask: does the experience (or whatever) merely *incline* one (dispositionally)? Or does it *justify* one in making a claim, drawing a conclusion?”²

These are the terms that I had in mind, then, in elaborating and critically engaging the Buddhist foundationalism of Dignāga and his philosophical heirs, whose philosophical project I take (not uncontroversially) to be a basically *empiricist* one. There are, to be sure, good Buddhist reasons why philosophers such as Dignāga should thus have been inclined to privilege the causally describable faculty of perception; for this can seem a natural way to warrant (what all Buddhist philosophers are most intent on showing) the belief that *there is no self*—there is, that is, no such thing as “what we really are,” no enduring substratum of all our experiences, there are only causally continuous series of sensations.³ Thus, if one can argue (as Dharmakīrti does) that the only things that *really exist* are causally efficacious particulars—things with determinate spatio-temporal locations, which pointedly does *not* include things like “concepts” (you can chop down *some particular tree*, but you can’t make lumber out of “the fact of being a tree”)—and can argue, furthermore, that perceptual experience is unique in being *caused* by such things (when you see a tree, the object of that perception is among the causes of that cognitive event); then the only finally warranted beliefs will be those that are caused by these uniquely particular and evanescent events—which are, therefore, the only things we are finally warranted in believing to exist. And with that, we have the generally Buddhist claim that is finally advanced by this whole philosophical program: all that is finally warranted by the kind of cognition that is

uniquely in contact with really existent phenomena is the conclusion that *there are sensations*—which does not also warrant the (inferential) belief that these must be the states of a “self.”

The problem, though, is that these causally precipitated moments of awareness are not themselves *beliefs* at all; beliefs are what they are (they have, as philosophers say, the *content* they do) only in virtue of their inferential relations to other beliefs—only, that is, in virtue of relations (such as “one thing’s being warranted in light of another,” in John McDowell’s phrase) that cannot be exhaustively described in causal terms.⁴ One can, then, only be said to be engaged in the activity of *justifying* a belief—only, that is, offering reasons why *you ought* to hold this belief, as opposed to explaining, for example, why I *happen to*⁵—if what one is talking *about* is something that is at least possibly true. What is needed, then, is a way to understand that the beliefs at issue are about something more than just *what’s appearing in my head*—that they are, rather, about *something in the world*.

In the book, I made this point by characterizing Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s program as entailing a finally *epistemic* conception of truth—a conception that takes the *truth* of beliefs to be somehow related to the fact of their *being known*. That is, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s appeal to perceptions as uniquely “constrained” by reality is ultimately an appeal simply to what happens to appear most “clear and distinct” to us. But while the clarity and distinctness (the *vividness*) of a conviction may very well explain why we happen to hold it, it does not necessarily represent a good reason why anyone *ought* to; for (in the words of John Henry Newman) “a proposition, be it ever so keenly apprehended, may be true or may be false.”⁶

To say this approach entails an epistemic conception of truth is not, to be sure, to say that perceptual cognitions cannot count *towards* the truth of beliefs, that they can’t be *among* our reasons for believing. Indeed, if the Mīmāṃsakas (as I understand them) are right, perceptions must (lest the whole world be blind) intrinsically confer justification to the same extent that any other *pramāṇa* does. It is surely a matter of empirical fact that we are *justified* in holding a great many beliefs about which we know nothing more than that we have them, and whose arising can be explained causally. The point, rather, is that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti cannot coherently

claim that it is finally *only* to perception that we must appeal in (actively) *justifying* beliefs. That is, we may be entitled to consider a great many of our beliefs (including perceptual ones) really true; but what we are *doing* when we try to *show* our entitlement is something other than merely showing how we happen to have arrived at the belief.

It is with these arguments in mind that I characterized the Mīmāṃsaka and Mādhyamika critiques of Dignāga as compatible, unlike Dignāga’s program, with a *realist* conception of truth—one, that is, according to which something’s *being true* is logically independent of how or whether anyone happens to *know* it.⁷ In both cases, it is because of a suspicion particularly of Dignāga’s privileged category of perception that these other Indian philosophers were led to critique his Buddhist version of empiricist foundationalism. For proponents of the orthodox Mīmāṃsaka school of thought, the problem is that Dignāga’s ultimate appeal finally to the subjectively occurrent representations yielded by perception poses a particular threat to the Mīmāṃsaka vision of Vedic religion. For Mīmāṃsakas, the quintessentially religious goal of “*dharma*” consists in what Francis Clooney has characterized as a “decentering” of the human—one such that once a sponsor “has undertaken a certain sacrifice, the action is no longer governed by his viewpoint and desires. He himself is now part of a larger event not totally dependent on him.... The transcendence ‘occurs’ when the performer finds himself in a world which accounts for his viewpoint without making him the center of the world.”⁸

This overriding concern with *the world* as the locus of ritual action inclines Mīmāṃsakas to be particularly concerned to avoid the subjectivism that arguably follows from empiricism. Moreover, the characteristically Mīmāṃsaka account of the objective world involves a particular focus on *the Vedic text* as an eternal (hence, authorless) part of that world. Clearly, though, the Mīmāṃsaka confidence in the unique value of Vedic textual injunctions to ritual action is challenged by the empiricism of the Buddhist foundationalists; for a typical Vedic injunction (like “one desirous of heaven should perform the *agnihotra* sacrifice”) is not likely to generate much confidence to the extent that it is thought to require perceptual corroboration. Accordingly, in order for Mīmāṃsakas to advance their concerns on an epistemological front, it is important to

undermine the view that perception is uniquely reliable—and indeed, to argue generally that there is *no* kind of cognition which can, simply in virtue of its being that kind, uniquely confer justification.

Kumāriila and his philosophical heirs did this by taking the task of epistemology to be not the normative one of “raising the bar” that cognitions must clear, but that of describing what must be the case in order that we can have such knowledge as we generally believe ourselves *already to be justified in claiming*—what must be the case, as Kumāriila’s commentators put it, if we are to avoid concluding that the whole world is blind. For if it is thought that we count as *knowing* something only if we can show (by pointing to putatively indubitable perceptions) *how* we know, then we would turn out to “know” precious little.

On my reading of Kumāriila’s epistemology (which I developed by commending one commentator’s reading of his texts as better, on both interpretive and philosophical grounds, than another’s), the basic argument is one to the effect that *justification* is all the more that any cognition can confer—no cognition, that is, can coherently be thought to yield not only justification, but also *truth*; for one could advance such a demonstration only by appealing to further cognitions, none of which could reasonably be thought to confer something fundamentally different in *kind* than what was provided at the start.

But it is precisely insofar as a realist conception of truth virtually *consists* in recognizing the logical independence from one another of justification and truth—the logical independence, that is, of facts about *our epistemic perspective* from facts about *what is true*—that this strategy turns out in fact to be better able to accommodate the idea of truth than can the foundationalism of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Thus, against those for whom it is a problem to urge that the Mīmāṃsaka epistemology develops an understanding only of *justification* as contra one of *truth* (as J. N. Mohanty does when he carps that Kumāriila’s “theory, I should think, is talking about truth and not merely of truth-claim”),⁹ we can rejoin that to be justified *just is* to be entitled to think one’s belief really true; and what more *could* we want than thus to be entitled to judge our beliefs true? Even if (counterfactually) one could demonstrate that one’s justified belief was also

true, nothing further would be added, since having been justified was already to be entitled to think so—unless, perhaps, it is thought that showing a belief additionally to be “true” could consist in *compelling the assent of all rational persons* (and I take it as uncontroversial to say that this does not occur).

I argued, finally, that while the Buddhist Candrakīrti would surely never have countenanced the idea of enlisting the orthodox Brahmanical philosopher Kumāriḷa as an ally, the foregoing arguments can be brought on board to inform what I understand as Candrakīrti’s transcendental arguments for the characteristically Mādhyamika elaboration of Buddhist commitments. To characterize Candrakīrti’s as *transcendental* arguments for a properly *metaphysical* claim—to understand him, that is, as arguing that any denial of the truth of his claims would be self-contradictory—is to fly in the face of the many interpreters for whom Madhyamaka is best understood as a radical sort of skepticism. But that understanding, I think, misses something important about the logically distinctive character of Candrakīrti’s arguments, and about the sense in which those are best understood as serving claims that are proposed as really *true*.

To unpack that a bit: the characteristically Mādhyamika claim is that “all *dharmas* are empty”—empty, that is, of an essence or “independent existence” (*svabhāva*). This is a claim that must be understood relative to (because it is constitutively framed against) earlier Buddhist talk about “*dharmas*.” In the schools of Buddhist philosophical thought that take their bearing from the so-called “Abhidharma” literature (which is arguably to say, most Buddhist schools), dharmas represent the “ontological primitives”—the most basic or (as Buddhists say) “ultimately existent” constituents of reality *to which* such merely “conventionally existent” things as selves can be reduced. Against this idea, Mādhyamikas like Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti can be understood as arguing that the set of “ultimately existent” things is an empty set—a point that Mādhyamikas characteristically press by insisting on the “emptiness” not only of wholes like “persons,” but also of the analytic categories (*dharmas*) to which these are reduced in Abhidharma literature. Hence, the claim that “all *dharmas* are empty.”

In proceeding thus, Mādhyamikas can be understood to think that the ontologizing impulse of Abhidharma compromises the most important insight of the Buddhist tradition—which is, on the Mādhyamika reading, that all existents are “dependently originated” (*pratītyasamutpanna*).¹⁰ More precisely, Mādhyamikas can be said to have recognized that the ontological primitives posited by Abhidharma could have explanatory purchase only if they are posited as an exception to the rule that everything is dependently originated; that is, dependently originated existents could only be ultimately *explained* by something that does not itself require the same kind of explanation. But it is precisely the Mādhyamika point to emphasize that there is no exception to this rule; phenomena are dependently originated all the way down, and it is therefore impossible to specify precisely what it is upon which anything finally depends. Hence, there can be no set of “ultimately existent” things.

But that fact itself is proposed as *ultimately true*; “essencelessness” (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), as Candrakīrti often says, is itself the essence of things. To embrace this paradox, as Candrakīrti clearly does, just is to say it is *really true* that “all *dharmas* are empty.” And it is the intelligibility of saying as much that I tried to advance by reconstructing Candrakīrti’s as transcendental arguments in support of a constitutively metaphysical claim. Thus, against Dignāga’s demand that Candrakīrti show his claims to be warranted by some empirical means of justification (some *pramāṇa*),¹¹ Candrakīrti argues that such a means of justification cannot coherently be demanded with respect to Candrakīrti’s claims regarding emptiness. This is because Dignāga’s project gains purchase only given its peculiarly technical use of ordinary words (words like “perceptual”), with this transformation of conventions serving a systematic re-description of our cognitive practices—serving, that is, an attempt to explain conventions by terms that are not themselves conventional.

But the whole point of Madhyamaka is that there is nothing that is not itself subject to the same constraints as our conventions—nothing, that is, that is not *dependently originated*. To the extent, then, that Dignāga’s demand for justification can reasonably be considered a demand precisely that we adduce something not dependently originated, that demand is itself a further

example of precisely the problem to be overcome; hence, Candrakīrti argues instead by showing Dignāga's demand itself incoherent, insofar as it must presuppose the very conventions that exemplify the truth of Candrakīrti's claims. And (here supplementing this reconstruction with an appeal to the lesson gleaned from considering the Mīmāṃsakas) among the discursive conventions that Candrakīrti can thus think are necessarily presupposed is that there is a difference between "what we think" and "what is true."

But despite our necessarily presupposing this distinction, it is one that is partially overcome—indeed, overcome to the only extent possible for those of us who are not Buddhas—in being justified; for to be justified *just is* to be entitled to think that the belief in question *really is true*. As Candrakīrti says (invoking a famously recurrent Buddhist scriptural reference), all *dharmas* are empty whether or not there is a Buddha to be aware of that fact¹²—that is, quite independent of the fact of anyone's knowing it. But in that case, the difference between Dignāga and Candrakīrti is not best understood in terms of one's having beliefs and one's not; rather, it is that the content of Candrakīrti's beliefs is such as to require a different kind of justification—and that precisely in virtue of their being proposed as really *true*.

Attention to the distinction between truth and justification—the appreciation of which just is what distinguishes a realist from an epistemic conception of truth—is, I think, helpful not only in expressing what I hope are some promising ways to think about the philosophical contributions of Madhyamaka and Mīmāṃsā, but also in situating this discussion within the larger context of the field of "religious studies." I would like to suggest, then, that getting clear on this distinction can dispel some important confusions that recurrently surface within the field of religious studies (as in the humanities more generally)—by suggesting that, in the phrase of the pragmatists, the difference between truth and justification is one that makes a difference. In particular, I would commend the realization that many of the theoretical and philosophical

projects that have influenced the field of religious studies are to be understood as concerning only *justification*—and that their possible contributions are compromised to the extent that they are taken instead to concern (often by arguing against the relevance or possibility of) *truth*.

Thus, we can argue, with Bruce Lincoln, that constitutively “religious” discourse aims above all to efface its own origins in the interests of particular people, “giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal”¹³—and that we ought therefore to be alert to the ways in which religious discourse is eminently a matter of power relations. Or we can argue, with George Lindbeck (whose work owes much to Wittgenstein), that “the proper way to determine what ‘God’ signifies ... is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly”¹⁴—that, in other words, being religious cannot be thought to consist simply in assent to propositional claims, insofar as the latter are only intelligible to those who already know the “grammar” of the faith. Or we can ask, with Talal Asad, how “(religious) power create[s] (religious) truth,” emphasizing St. Augustine’s view that “coercion was a condition for the realization of truth, and discipline essential to its maintenance.... It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth.”¹⁵ Or we can, as students of Indian philosophy are to be commended for having recently begun to do, follow Pierre Hadot in appreciating that for many if not most pre-Enlightenment philosophers, the point of engaging in philosophical discourse was “not so much to inform the reader of a doctrinal content but to form him, to make him traverse a certain itinerary in the course of which he will make spiritual progress”¹⁶—and that philosophical arguments will be understood rather differently if they are thus taken as the artifacts of a “way of life.”

All of these theoretical projects can surely be thought helpfully to describe real aspects of the epistemic situations relative to which humans have been and are apt to form their beliefs (and to be justified in holding at least some of them). They describe, that is, aspects of the nexus of power and contestation, psychosis and fear, love and hope that shape us as holding the beliefs we

do, and that give us (for better or for worse) our intuitions about what count as good reasons and arguments for belief. None of these projects, however, is rightly understood to preclude consideration of the possible *truth* of the beliefs thus formed—none of these, that is, renders unintelligible the distinction between *what we think* and *what is true*. It may indeed be the case, for example, that the characteristically Mīmāṃsaka appeal to the “transcendence” (*apauruṣeyatva*) of the Vedas functions to “naturalize” Brahmanical claims to authority and power—just as it may indeed be the case that one must have ritually concluded a period of celibate study with a bath before one can properly have the “desire to know dharma” (*dharmajijñāsā*) that motivates Mīmāṃsaka study,¹⁷ or that Mādhyamika teachings regarding emptiness can finally be understood only by those who have first wept at the thought of the Buddha’s fathomless compassion.¹⁸

But these various facts (if such they be) concern only the *justification* of belief—only, that is, the various circumstances in which a person might be constituted as someone for whom certain beliefs are rationally held. How and why the beliefs in question were thus developed is, however, logically independent of whether or not they might be true—a distinction that is given up only at the cost of denying that we understand the difference between “what is said or thought and what it is said or thought *about*.”¹⁹ Just as acknowledging something as “true” does not make it thus, so, too, a belief is not necessarily false (and the question of truth not superfluous) simply because its acceptance is, in any of the ways described by these and other theories, historically contingent—otherwise, we could not be said to hold any true beliefs at all (not even the belief that at least one of these theories is right), since of course the discovery of any truth can only take place in history.

It is important to note, though, that thus to say the question of possible truth is not precluded is not to say that all of the various beliefs that may be justified *are* true²⁰—only that whether or not they are is a logically distinct question. To recognize the distinctions I am commending, then, is not to forfeit the possibility of judging some beliefs true and some false—or even of arguing that some are more rationally held than at least *some* others. The importance

of these points emerges, I think, from consideration of a provocative article recently published in *Harper's* by Stanley Fish.²¹ Characteristically venturing into the heart of controversy, Fish engaged the question of whether, as some had argued, the events of September 11 advanced any position in the "Culture Wars"—and whether, in particular, these events undermined the cogency of characteristically "postmodern" thought by showing the moral impossibility of relativism. Surely, that argument goes, here were events so monstrous that nobody could ethically or reasonably judge them to have been guided by any sort of rationality.

Fish argues, among other things, that the perpetrators of such events are not helpfully judged to be simply "irrational," and that any condemnation of them necessarily issues from the perspective of some commitments. Significantly, though, Fish states his point in this regard conditionally: "if by 'a reliable condemnation' [of a rival perspective] you mean a condemnation rooted in values, priorities, and a sense of right and wrong that *no one would dispute and everyone accepts*, then there is no such condemnation, for the simple reason that there are no universally accepted values, priorities, and moral convictions. If there were, there would be no deep disputes."²² Fish's point, though, is to deny the antecedent of this conditional—this is *not* what we ought to mean by "condemnation," which must instead be understood always to presuppose commitments that are at least in principle disputable.

This can, however, seem like an expression of morally vacuous relativism only if we ignore the following, highly significant clarification:

I am not saying that there are no universal values or no truths independent of particular perspectives. I affirm both. When I offer a reading of a poem or pronounce on a case in First Amendment law, I do so with no epistemological reservations. I regard my reading as true—not provisionally true, or true for my reference group only, but true. I am as certain of that as I am of the fact that I may very well be unable to persuade others, no less educated or credentialed than I, of the truth so perspicuous to me. And here is a point that is often missed, the independence from each other, and therefore the compatibility, of two assertions thought to be contradictory when made by the same person: (1) I believe X to be true and (2) I believe that there is no mechanism, procedure, calculus, test, by which the truth of X can be necessarily demonstrated to any sane person who has come to a different conclusion (not that such a demonstration can never be successful, only that its success is contingent and not necessary). In order to assert something and mean it without qualification, I of course have to believe that it is true, but I don't have to believe that I

could demonstrate its truth to all rational persons. The claim that something is universal and the acknowledgment that I couldn't necessarily prove it are logically independent of each other. (34)

Fish's point, in the terms I have been suggesting, is simply that *truth* is logically independent of *justification*—recognizing which, we can judge the beliefs of others to be false (and indeed, can condemn them strenuously), while nevertheless appreciating that their holding them does not, *ipso facto*, show them to be irrational—while appreciating, in other words, that we may fail to persuade them.

To think otherwise—to think, for example, that the “objectivity” of true beliefs consists in the likelihood of their *compelling the assent of all rational persons*—is to forfeit a realist conception of truth; for this just is to think that what causes a *belief* is at the same time what makes it *true*. As Frege recognized, though, that way lies solipsism; for all manner of subjective facts (psychological, socio-economic, and neurological facts specific to the situation of the knower) engender beliefs. The objectivity of beliefs has to do, rather, with their being intersubjectively available—with their being, in other words, framed in language, and at least possibly expressed and tested for their inferential consequences in the eminently social game of exchanging reasons. Indeed, objectivity virtually *consists* in such intersubjectivity. That is, the “conditions of the possibility” of *being justified* are, as Wittgenstein effectively urged in arguing against the possibility of a private language, never simply willed by individual agents—we do not *choose* what reasons will be found compelling (even by ourselves) in any context.

But if we appreciate the distinction between truth and justification, there is room to recognize that there is yet a further element of objectivity to our beliefs; for the possibility that beliefs thus circumstantially and socially *justified* might also be *true* brings into play something (truth) altogether objective (that is, *independent of our perspective as knowers*)—even though our epistemic situation in this sublunary world will allow nothing more than that we ever be *justified in thinking our beliefs really true*, and never “knowing” them to be so. But in that case, it is only reasonable to think that “knowing” consists in *justifiably thinking one's beliefs true*; for otherwise, nobody could be said to “know” *anything*, and we would be left without a use for a

perfectly ordinary word—and without a use for a concept (*truth*) that we presuppose whenever we so much as think it possible to be mistaken about something.

These points have been lucidly developed by Jeffrey Stout, who appropriates the work of Robert Brandom particularly for its value in religious, theological, and ethical inquiry. Stout recognizes, then, that justification is context-sensitive: “...affirming that many of us are justified in holding some of the (nontrivial) moral beliefs we hold is not the same thing as affirming that somebody has established a set of (nontrivial) moral beliefs that any human being or rational agent, regardless of context, would be justified in accepting.”²³ Stout further recognizes, with the Mīmāṃsakas, that there is a crucial distinction “between being entitled to a belief and being able to justify that belief to someone else” (87). He elaborates these points particularly with reference to the American tradition of pragmatism, emphasizing the extent to which justifying a claim is an *activity*. As such, its success is to be gauged in terms of the difference it makes: “In what, then, does the success of a justification consist? In eliminating relevant reasons for doubting that P. What reasons for doubting P are relevant and what suffices for their elimination? That depends on context, in particular, on the people to whom the justification is addressed” (234-35).

But Stout recognizes, with Brandom, that while it thus affords rich resources for explaining the circumstantial character of *justification*, pragmatism fails as a conception of *truth*, which is logically distinct from the question of how we may know it:

Truth pertains to the conceptual content of a claim, not the epistemic responsibility of the person who accepts or asserts it. Truth, or accuracy, is an objective status as well as a normative one.... whether our beliefs and claims actually enjoy the status of being true is not up to us. Believing that someone has a particular obligation, right, or virtue does not make it so. Truth-talk has a place wherever we take the subject matter under discussion—and not simply the evidence pertaining to it—as the object of our inquiry. By engaging in truth-talk, we implicitly view our subject matter as something we might get wrong, despite our best cognitive efforts.²⁴

Recognizing this makes it possible to commend what is surely the honorable impulse behind relativism: *viz.*, the belief that there is no single way of looking at the world that is self-evidently more rationally held than all others. But this can now be rightly understood as a point

about the circumstantial character of *justification*. We can retain, then, the relativist's recognition that many different (even mutually exclusive) beliefs might alike be rationally held—but only if we also recognize that this point becomes incoherent if understood as concerning the *truth* of beliefs. A relativist conception of *truth*, Stout rightly urges, “erases disagreement among groups rather than making it intelligible” (2004: 238). Only by making disagreement intelligible is it possible to respect the beliefs of others enough to appreciate that they are considered *really true*; and to appreciate this is, *ipso facto*, to disagree with them where they seem to contradict one's own commitments.²⁵

To urge that we necessarily have recourse to talk of “truth” is, though, not to claim to be in *possession* of the truth, which is something that committed relativists seem typically to suspect whenever the word “truth” so much as rears its head; indeed, quite the opposite. Thus, critiques of the idea of a “transcendental perspective” (of a “God's eye view”) can be recognized and acknowledged even, for example, by those who offer transcendental arguments—provided that we understand such critiques to pertain to our *epistemic situation*, to the *circumstances of our being justified*, and not to truth. Recognizing the validity of such critiques—the validity, for example, of the pragmatist account of the context-sensitivity of justification—the proponent of a transcendental argument can acknowledge that the fact of her offering the argument is not understood to reflect her being *in possession* of the “transcendental truth,” or her *occupying* a transcendental perspective. The argument is, rather, only a way of *justifying* the belief that such and such a condition really does obtain. The content of the most important beliefs thus credited as true may, indeed, itself be precisely such as to relativize our perspectives as knowers; “the rhetoric of a higher law is little more than an imaginative embellishment of the gap between the concepts of truth and justification, between the content of an ideal ethics and what we are currently justified in believing.”²⁶

Recognizing the distinction between truth and justification gives us the conceptual resources to describe religious people as (among many other things) thinking their beliefs really *true* (and correspondingly, of thinking contradictory beliefs really false)—and to appreciate,

moreover, that the possibility that their justified beliefs are really true may never finally be eliminated, whatever other explanatory or theoretical interests we may have. What this distinction gives us more generally, as human persons with beliefs and commitments, is a way to explain the possibility of saying people are *wrong*, without necessarily judging them thereby to be *irrational*—and insofar as we can only *understand* those commitments that, as rational, are possibly intelligible to us, it is surely imperative that we be in a position to do this. It is, then, as we should expect that while the arguments of Kumāriila and Candrakīrti represent cogent critiques of Dignāga’s foundationalist demand for justification, they should not necessarily compel our acceptance of their beliefs. Certainly, it is indisputably the case that, as an empirical matter, no arguments in history *have* given all rational persons good reason to adopt their conclusions, at least if we are to judge by whether or not they have succeeded, rhetorically, in persuading all who have received them.

But to say this is not to make a point that can properly be held against these (or any other) arguments.²⁷ One can only fault arguments for failing to persuade people (or, conversely, fault believers for not having arrived at their beliefs as the result of assent to arguments) given the view that *what arguments are for is to produce beliefs*. Against this, we should understand arguments as meant, rather, to *justify* beliefs. We can then conclude without contradiction that Mīmāṃsakas like Kumāriila and Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti have cogently argued that their beliefs are rationally held, *and* that they are entitled moreover to consider those beliefs *true*—and yet, just as rationally opt not to adopt them as our own.

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¹ This is the point that Gottlob Frege makes when he says that “I understand objective to mean what is independent of our sensation, intuition and imagination, and of all construction of mental pictures out of memories of earlier sensations, but not what is independent of reason; for to undertake to say what things are like independent of reason, would be as much as to judge without judging, or to wash the fur without wetting it” (*The Foundations of Arithmetic* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1959], §26). Similarly, the philosopher Donald Davidson has said that “empiricism is the view that the subjective (‘experience’) is the foundation of objective empirical knowledge” (*Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 46).

² Robert Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics),” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12:1 (2004), 13.

³ Not wishing to give short shrift to the complex and profound insight that Buddhists have arguably developed (and in particular, to the possibilities for this insight’s being both spiritually transformative, and variously elaborated philosophically), I will at least refer the reader here to Steven Collins’s *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), which is the standard account.

⁴ Consider, as well, that when one sees, say, a tree, there are all manner of causes of the resultant cognition (including numerous neurological events, etc.); and it turns out to be very difficult to specify *which* one among these innumerable causes is at the same time *the thing perceived*. Even with respect simply to sensations, then, exhaustively causal explanation is not as straightforward as might be supposed.

⁵ Consider, in this regard, the difference between my arguing that you ought to vote for proposal X *because it will, in specifiable ways, address the situation at hand, and my saying you ought to do so because it seems clear to me that it’s a good thing*. That the latter does not amount to a useful justification is clear if we imagine generalizing it; for surely no one would think it a good reason if you were then to say to someone else that they ought to do this *because it seems clear to Dan Arnold that it’s a good thing*.

⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 80.

⁷ To invoke the idea of a realist conception of truth is, perhaps, to skate on thin ice, insofar as the philosophical literature on such matters is both highly technical (such that one could thereby be taken as commending far more in the way of metaphysical apparatus than one realizes), and greatly various in terms of usage. For the present, suffice it to say that I wish to commend as “realist” what I take, in fact, to be simply the common-sense understanding. The notion I have in mind might, however, be better captured by the technical term *deflationist*. For a brief but useful statement of some of the relevant philosophical issues here, see John McDowell, “The True Modesty of an Identity Conception of Truth,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13:1 (2005): 83-88.

⁸ Francis Clooney, *Thinking Ritually: Rediscovering the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini* (Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1990), 145, 149; for a fuller elaboration of Clooney’s insightful characterization of the characteristically Mīmāṃsaka vision in this regard, see 129-162.

⁹ J. N. Mohanty, *Gangeśa’s Theory of Truth* (Santiniketan: Visvabharati, Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1966), 78.

¹⁰ The cardinal doctrine of “dependent origination” of all existents represents the flip-side of the Buddhist denial of a “self”; that is, the reason we do not have unitary and enduring selves just is that any moment of experience can be explained as having originated from innumerable causes, none of which can be specified as what we “really” are.

¹¹ Thus, in one of the main texts I considered, Candrakīrti—who is here commenting on the text by Nāgārjuna that is foundational for the Madhyamaka school of thought—imagines Dignāga objecting, with respect to the claim made in Nāgārjuna’s first verse, “Is the conviction [expressed in your first verse] based on a *pramāṇa*, or is it not based on a *pramāṇa*?”

¹² The passage goes: “Whether or not Tathāgatas arise, the nature of existents abides.” For some sources and scholarship relevant to this often-invoked passage, see *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief*, 186, 281 n39.

¹³ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5 (here quoting Roland Barthes). Surely the Mīmāṃsaka project, in particular, lends itself to this kind of characterization—as well recognized by some of its traditional critics. Thus, the Indian materialist philosopher Bṛhaspati is recorded to have urged that the various practices associated with Vedic religion, far from being eternally enjoined, were in fact thought “introduced by the Brahmins as a way of making a living.”

¹⁴ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 114.

¹⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 34-5. Note (what is sometimes overlooked by Asad) that this idea—i.e., that one must first have *cultivated* oneself as the kind of person who is sensitive to the truth in order to know it—expresses a basically Aristotelian conception of ethics. The fact that this characteristically Aristotelian idea includes the recognition that the truth in question obtains whether or not one has been thus cultivated that kind of person is reflected in Asad’s further remark that “[e]ven Augustine held that although religious truth was eternal, the means for securing human access to it were not.” Asad’s ideas in this regard reflect the influence of Michel Foucault, whose work on “technologies of the self” is not, it seems to me, as prone as that of Asad to elide questions of truth.

¹⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 64. For an illuminating appropriation of Hadot by a scholar of Indo-Tibetan philosophy, see Matthew Kapstein's *Reason's Traces* (Boston: Wisdom, 2001), 3-26.

¹⁷ A discussion of whether or not this is the case figures prominently at the beginning of one of the early Mīmāṃsaka commentaries.

¹⁸ Candrakīrti eloquently says as much at Madhyamakāvātāra 6.4-5.

¹⁹ Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 163.

²⁰ On the reading that Schubert Ogden develops in his *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* [(Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992) see 23-26, 53-7], this is the *a priori* view characteristically defended by theological "pluralists" like John Hick—against which, Ogden proposes the logically significant view that more than one religion *may* be true, but that whether or not this is the case cannot be known *a priori*.

²¹ Stanelly Fish, "Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals," *Harper's*, July 2002: 33-40.

²² Fish, 34. This point enables Fish succinctly to frame the issue at stake here: only if there were such indisputable norms "could the question 'Is this a religious war?' be a real question, as opposed to a tendentious thesis pretending to be a question, which it is. That is to say, the question 'Is this a religious war?' is not a question *about* the war; it *is* the question that is the war" (35).

²³ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 231.

²⁴ Stout, 255. See also Stout's essay "Radical Interpretation and Pragmatism: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth," in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25-52. Stout understands that this point is useful also in explaining an issue that emerges as central to the debate over how best to interpret Kumāriḷa's claims about the Mīmāṃsaka epistemological position: that of how our beliefs can *change* (how, that is, we can judge some of our earlier beliefs to have been overridden). Thus, one "can be justified in believing a moral claim at one point in his life and justified in rejecting precisely the same claim at a later point, whereas the truth-value of the claim has remained the same all along" (2004: 240). This account of change in one's *own* beliefs is usefully invoked as an argument for respecting the possibly justified status of *others* with whom we disagree: "The line of reasoning that counsels humility with respect to our own beliefs also counsels charity toward strangers.... That is what we should expect if being justified in believing something is a contextual affair. Unless we are prepared to give up our own beliefs at the points of conflict, we shall have to say, on pain of self-contradiction, that some of their beliefs are false. But unless we can show that they have acquired their beliefs improperly or through negligence, we had better count them as justified in believing as they do" (2004: 234).

²⁵ It turns out, though, often to be very difficult to be certain that this is so. The more deeply one delves into such highly ramified systems of belief as, say, "Buddhism," the more complex and in need of qualification any particular one of its claims turns out to be. This, I think, is the most compelling reason why Ogden (n.20, above) is right to consider the possible truth of rival beliefs a necessarily *a posteriori* question—and some judgments in the matter may have to await the findings of a lifetime of inquiry.

²⁶ Stout 2004: 245. For further reflections on truth as something like a "regulative ideal," see also 248-256.

²⁷ This is a point recurrently missed by William James, who frequently says, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that all he needs to do in order to show the failure of characteristically "rationalist" projects in philosophy is "point to the plain fact that a majority of scholars, even religiously disposed ones, stubbornly refuse to treat them as convincing.... if [such a project] were as objectively and absolutely rational as it pretends to be, could it possibly fail so egregiously to be persuasive?" [(New York: Penguin, 1985), 454]. I hope to have shown why the answer to James's rhetorical question had better be, "Well, yes."