

From: The Two Truths by Guy Newland,
Chapter 7, The Divisions of Concealer Truths - Pages 123-125

WHAT ARE UNREAL CONVENTIONALITIES?

Tsong-ka-pa's Illumination of the Thought says:

Question: Since you do not assert real conventionalities, there is no division [of conventionalities] into real and unreal; but why do you not posit objects and subjects polluted by ignorance as unreal conventionalities (log pa'i kun rdzob)?

Answer: Conventionalities must be posited by conventional valid cognizers; therefore, even when on posited unreal conventionalities, they would have to be posited in relation to those [conventional valid cognizers], whereas [objects and subjects] polluted by the predispositions of ignorance are not established as mistaken by conventional valid cognizers.

While the gist of Tsong-ka-pa's passage seems to be that unreal conventionalities do not exist, later Ge-luk-ba interpretations unanimously assert the contrary. The problem is this: If "unreal" in the phrase "unreal conventionality" as used in that passage means falsity in the general sense, then unreal conventionalities exist because all conventionalities are unreal conventionalities and can be recognized as such by conventional valid cognizers that arise subsequent to realization of emptiness. This seems to contradict Tsongka-pa. On the other hand, "unreal" in that passage could mean "unreal in relation to the worldly perspective." In that case, unreal conventionalities certainly exist since a worldly conventional valid cognizer not directed toward emptiness can realize that a mirage, for example, appears as water but does not exist as water.

Jam-yang-shay-ba advocates the former position. According to him, all conventionalities are unreal conventionalities and all concealer-truths are unreal concealer-truths because there are special conventional valid cognizers-subsequent to and influenced by realizations of emptiness-that realize that forms and so forth falsely appear to be inherently existent. Form and so forth are real in relation to the "worldly perspective" explicitly indicated in Candrakirti's stanza by the words "true from just [the viewpoint] of the world" because an ordinary conventional valid cognizer, not directed toward suchness, cannot realize that they are unreal. However, they are unreal in general because they are falsities. Furthermore, leaving aside the specific context of Candrakirti's stanza, they are unreal in relation to the worldly perspective because certain conventional valid cognizers, relying upon previous realizations emptiness, can realize that they are wrong, unreal, falsities.

In Jam-yang-shay-ba's interpretation, Tsong-ka-pa's phrase "objects and subjects polluted by ignorance" refers specifically to the conceptions of an inherently existent self of persons and other phenomena and the conceived objects of such ignorant consciousnesses. Tsong-ka-pa does not mean that these are not unreal conventionalities in general, he means that they are not conventionalities that are unreal in relation to the perspective of the "world" explicitly indicated in the context of Candrakirti's stanza. That is, they cannot be invalidated by ordinary conventional valid cognizers not directed toward emptiness.

Jay-dzun-ba and Pan-chen offer the alternative interpretation. They argue that unreal conventionalities exist, but that not all conventionalities are unreal conventionalities. Unreal conventionalities include mirages, illusory horses, and so forth, but exclude water, horses, and so forth. An object is an unreal conventionality only if a conventional valid cognizer in the continuum of a person who has not realized emptiness can realize that it does not exist as it appears. Tsong-ka-pa's statement means that objects and subjects polluted by ignorance, such as an inherently existent self, cannot be posited as unreal conventionalities because conventional valid cognizers in the continuums of those who have not realized emptiness cannot realize them as unreal.

Jam-yang-shay-ba and Jay-dzun-ba agree that "objects and subjects polluted by ignorance," in this context, refers only to ignorant consciousnesses and their conceived objects. In a broader sense, pollution by ignorance might be understood to refer to the presence of an appearance of inherent existence. In this broader sense, an eye consciousness of an ordinary sentient being apprehending a face and an eye consciousness misapprehending a reflection as a face are both "polluted by ignorance" in that, through the force of ignorance and its predispositions, their objects appear to be inherently existent. In fact, Tsong-ka-pa defines "pollution by ignorance" in this broader sense in another context [Chapter 10 of The Two Truths] Jam-yang-shay-ba and Jay-dzun-ba cannot allow "having an appearance of inherent existence" to be the meaning of "pollution by ignorance" in this context because here Tsong-ka-pa states that objects and subjects polluted by ignorance cannot be realized as mistaken via ordinary conventional valid cognition, yet an ordinary conventional valid cognizer can realize that a reflection (an object "polluted by ignorance" insofar as it appears to be inherently existent) is not a face. Therefore, ordinary conventional valid cognition can realize the coarse mistakenness of something that also has an appearance of inherent existence. For Jam-yang-shay-ba and Jay-dzun-ba, the realization of such "polluted objects and subjects" as unreal (or wrong) would not, of course, entail a refutation of the inherent existence that appears to a mind apprehending a reflection; it would only involve realizing that a reflection is not a face. Nonetheless, such an interpretation of "pollution by ignorance" in this context would lead to a contradiction of Tsong-ka-pa's statement that objects and subjects polluted by ignorance cannot be realized as mistaken by ordinary conventional valid cognizers.