Nāgārjuna’s “Middle Way”:
A non-eliminative understanding of selflessness

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I. Introduction: On the difference it makes that Nāgārjuna starts with causation

The thought of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna – about whom we have little more non-hagiographic knowledge than that he probably flourished in south India around 150 C.E. – has exercised generations of interpreters, both within various streams of Buddhist tradition and among modern and contemporary scholars. Though generally expressed in stylistically lucid Sanskrit, his ideas have proven so complex and elusive that it has been found possible to read him both as a paradigmatic exemplar of radical skepticism, and as advancing fundamentally metaphysical claims of universal scope; as engaged in a Wittgensteinian sort of philosophical “therapy,” and as advancing distinctively Buddhist claims that have been readily incorporated into scholastic traditions of Buddhist pedagogy; as a basically “mystical” sort of religious phenomenologist, and as a paraconsistent logician whose distinctive contributions can be expressed in terms of predicate calculus. That his works should thus admit of so many divergent readings is surely evidence of the logically and epistemologically distinctive character of his thought, which has eluded definitive interpretation to at least the extent that typically characterizes the projects of thinkers of enduring philosophical significance.¹

Typically of Indian traditions of philosophical thought, the self-styled Madhyamaka (“middle way”) school of Buddhist thought that stems from Nāgārjuna’s writings chiefly unfolds in the form of commentaries (and commentaries on commentaries…) on the texts traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna. Chief among

¹. Andrew Tuck has written a brief but illuminating study of some of the various ways that Nāgārjuna has been read by modern interpreters; see his Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Along with a general overview of the Madhyamaka tradition of thought that stems from Nāgārjuna’s writings, I have provided what I think is a useful annotated bibliography on the subject in my article (“Madhyamaka”) for The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy; see <http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/b-madhya.htm> for further references.
the criteria for the modern scholarly attribution of any text to Nāgārjuna is the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, “Verses on the Original Middle Way” (henceforth, MMK); whatever else we can say about him, then, “Nāgārjuna” refers to the author of this text. The work that is thus most closely associated with his name is known to survive in the original Sanskrit only as embedded in a commentary by the seventh-century philosopher Candrakīrti—who, though of only marginal significance for later Indian philosophers, has been taken by many Tibetan interpreters down to the present to have elaborated the definitively authoritative reading of Nāgārjuna’s texts. Any thorough approach to the Madhyamaka school of thought therefore inevitably involves some reference to the MMK as understood by Candrakīrti.

In this regard, the Indian Buddhist tradition attests two broad streams in the interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s thought, corresponding roughly to what later Tibetan interpreters would refer to as the “Prāsaṅgika” and “Śvātantrika” accounts of Madhyamaka. Interpreters of the former sort are so called because of their view that the Madhyamaka project should be advanced only by reducing an opponent’s arguments to absurdity; thus, Nāgārjuna is, on this view, to be interpreted as showing only the unwanted consequences (prasāṅga) entailed by his opponents’ claims, and not as defending any philosophical “thesis” (pratijñā) of his own—an understanding that surely suggests affinities with varieties of skepticism. Śvātantrikas, in contrast, are so called because of their characteristic view that Nāgārjuna’s verses require restatement as formally valid inferences (svatantra-anumāna) whose conclusions are to be affirmed. Whatever we make of the various questions involved in distinguishing these trajectories of interpretation, it is a telling fact that this interpretive divergence originally centers particularly on the elaborations of Nāgārjuna’s MMK 1.1 variously offered by Candrakīrti and two of his commentarial predecessors. This verse—which also provides the template for the longest and most philosophically significant chapter of Candrakīrti’s independent work the Madhyamakāvatāra (“Introduction to Madhyamaka”)—makes the characteristically enigmatic statement that “there do not exist, anywhere at all, any existents whatsoever.

2. Though translated from the Tibetan (and not from the extant Sanskrit), the translation of (and philosophically sensitive commentary on) this text by Jay Garfield is the most accessible of the available translations of Nāgārjuna’s foundational text, and philosophically far and away the most sophisticated and illuminating; see Garfield, The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

either from themselves or from something else, either from both or altogether without cause.”

Buddhapālita’s (late fifth century C.E.) “prāsaṅgika” commentary on this verse does nothing more than make clear (what he takes to be) the absurd consequences that would be entailed by affirming any one of the four alternatives rejected in Nāgārjuna’s opening verse; given the view, for example, that things arise causally “from themselves” (which is typically taken to reflect the Indian Śāṅkhya school’s characteristic view that “effects” are always latent within their “causes”), we would have a pointless account of the arising of something already existent. The later commentator Bhāviveka (who likely flourished in the sixth century C.E.) subsequently took Buddhapālita to task, urging that his elaboration of the argument was untenable insofar as the recognized terms of a formally stated inference (particularly as those had been thematized by the early sixth-century Buddhist philosopher Dignāga) were not present, leaving the Madhyamaka position unestablished; characteristic of Bhāviveka’s formal restatements of the arguments is his qualification of Nāgārjuna’s points as denying only something understood as ultimately or essentially (svabhāvataḥ) the case – it is only if understood “essentially,” that is, that the arising of things from other existents doesn’t make sense. A considerable portion of the first chapter of Candrakīrti’s commentary is then given over to defending Buddhapālita’s as the right way to proceed, and to criticizing Bhāviveka’s interpretive procedure as misguided.

4. All translations are my own, from the edition of Louis de La Vallée Poussin: Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Mādhyamakārikās) de Nāgārjuna, avec la Prasannapada Commentaire de Candrakīrti (Bibliotheca Buddhica, Vol. IV; reprinted by Biblio Verlag, Osnabrück, in 1970); the translation of Garfield (note 2, above) can usefully be consulted for comparison. The sixth chapter of Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra is by far the longest, and includes much of philosophical interest; all of the philosophical issues considered there are effectively raised (after some introductory verses in a more religious key) by verse eight, which clearly parallels Nāgārjuna’s MMK 1.1: “The same [entity] does not arise from [itself], and how can it arise from another? Neither does it arise from both [itself and another], and what exists without any cause?” I here cite the translation of C. W. Huntington: The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika (University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), p.158.

5. Candrakīrti repeats this argument in concluding Madhyamakāvatāra 6.8 (see note 4, above): “It would be entirely pointless for an [entity] to arise from itself, and it is moreover unreasonable to suppose that something already produced might be produced all over again.” (Huntington, ibid.) Rather harder to explain is the unwanted consequences of affirming that existents causally arise from other existents, which is surely intuitively plausible; in this regard, the argument of Buddhapālita and Candrakīrti involves a priori consideration of the concept of being “other”— the general concept of “otherness” leaves us, they suggest, with no principled way to know which other things are relevantly connected to the thing whose arising we seek to explain, and we are thus left to suppose that anything that is “other” than, say, a sprout (not only seeds, but also the coals of a fire) could give rise to it.
For my purposes here, it is not necessary for us to pursue the significance of the commentarial differences thus elicited by Nāgārjuna’s opening verse (though I will return, towards the end of this essay, particularly to Candrakīrti); I want, rather, simply to emphasize that it is as we should expect that such philosophically significant disagreement should center particularly on the beginning of Nāgārjuna’s text. Thus, the modus operandi of the MMK is to consider various categories central to the characteristically Ābhidharmika tradition of Buddhist scholasticism (on which, see Noa Ronkin’s illuminating contribution to the present volume), invariably showing these categories to be incoherent just insofar as they are taken to afford intrinsically explanatory purchase on the phenomena they are adduced to explain – and it is significant that Nāgārjuna should thus have begun particularly with causal relations, with his first verse thus initiating a chapter scrutinizing the standard-issue Buddhist category of “causal conditions” (pratyaya). Particularly insofar as there are good reasons for supposing that causal explanation figures centrally in what might be called the “deep grammar” of Buddhist traditions of philosophy, we thus stand to learn much about Nāgārjuna’s characteristic approach by appreciating the sense it could make for him to have begun his magnum opus with a devastating critique of the basic terms of causal explanation.

What could it mean, then, for Nāgārjuna to say that there are no existents “arisen either from themselves or from something else, either from both or altogether without cause” – that, as we might suppose he thus means to say, causal relations do not really obtain at all? In here sketching a reading of what I take to be the guiding impulse of Madhyamaka thought, I want to get at that question by proceeding somewhat anachronistically, briefly developing a philosophically engaged reconstruction that makes reference to a few Buddhist thinkers, separated by a few centuries, whom I take to represent ideal-typical developments of the range of positions that are in play. In all of these cases, what we make of the various positions will center (as should any understanding of what Nāgārjuna was up to) on the question of how we are to understand the relations between what Buddhists have long referred to as the “two truths” – “ultimate truth,” or paramārthasatya, and “conventional truth,” saṃvṛtisatya – and in what these two truths are taken to consist.

On the way of characterizing Madhyamaka that I thus have in mind, the principal point of the tradition of thought stemming from Nāgārjuna is that the two truths are wrongly understood if it is supposed that what is “ultimately” true exhaustively explains what is just “conventionally” true; the cardinal Buddhist doctrine of “selflessness” (anātmavāda) is, in other words, misunderstood if the
elaboration thereof is thought to consist in specifying what “really” exists instead of the self. Causal relations are of central significance here since, as I think can be brought out most clearly with reference to the thought of Dharmakīrti (on whom Vincent Eltschinger’s contribution to the present volume provides a thorough and incisive account), there is a temptation to suppose that the really existent things that explain what we are like can themselves be individuated particularly in terms of their causal efficacy. While things like “persons” and “selves,” that is, are abstractions that finally do no real explanatory work, it is, on one way of elaborating central Buddhist commitments, possible to specify the causally efficacious particulars in virtue of which there are taken to be such things as selves.

Precisely against such a way of explicating the doctrine of selflessness, I take Nāgārjuna and his philosophical fellow travelers to urge that it cannot coherently be thought that causal explanation represents a privileged level of description, that this alone puts us in touch with what is really or ultimately the case. Rather, the terms involved in causal explanation turn out to be – as proponents of Madhyamaka are concerned to show with respect to all of the categories of analysis in terms of which we would explain the world – intelligible only with reference to the phenomena they purportedly explain. The explananda, therefore, can never be thought finally to drop out of any explanation; rather, insofar as any conceivable explanatory terms will themselves depend in part upon what they are supposed to explain, the reality of all putatively explanatory terms is necessarily relative. In terms of the two truths, this amounts to the point that the world (and any account thereof) is irreducibly “conventional” – a thought, however, that seems to me not to preclude its nevertheless being “ultimately true” that this is so.

The insight I thus take proponents of Madhyamaka to have elaborated can, I think, be put in the idiom of some contemporary debates in philosophy of mind. Thus, the understanding of Buddhist commitments that I will take Dharmakīrti to epitomize is the idea that a finally causal explanation can be given of what might be called (to use a term to be elaborated shortly) an “intentional” level of description – and what Madhyamaka thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti can be taken to have recognized is that this way of privileging “ultimate” over “conventional” truth represents what can be called an eliminativist understanding of selflessness. Dharmakīrti’s characteristic emphasis on causal explanation can, then, be taken to exemplify one of the two extremes between which Nāgārjuna aimed to chart a “middle way”; in arguing, against such a view, that the explanatory terms of such an approach cannot coherently be thought to supersede the
phenomena they are adduced to explain, thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti can be taken to urge instead that on the most consistently Buddhist elaboration of the doctrine of selflessness, it must be understood that we can never finally eliminate the “intentional” level of description in terms of which persons are intelligibly conceived both as the subjects and objects of compassion. I want to develop, in other words, an understanding of Madhyamaka thinkers as above all committed to rejecting what might be called “causal realism” – an understanding that, notwithstanding some important contemporary reflections on Madhyamaka, I take to be compatible with nevertheless thinking that Madhyamaka philosophers finally advance fundamentally metaphysical claims that are proposed as really true.

II. The “two truths” in Abhidharma: A Madhyamaka perspective

In styling the school that develops from Nāgārjuna’s works the madhyamaka, or “middle way” (a term used by Nāgārjuna himself), proponents of Madhyamaka exploited a long-invoked Buddhist trope. Traditional accounts of the life of the Buddha typically characterize him as having struck a “middle way” between the extravagant courtly life available to him as a prince, and the self-mortification he is said first to have tried in his pursuit of transformative insight. Philosophically, the relevant extremes between which Buddhist accounts of the person aim to steer are eternalism and eliminativism. “Eternalism” (śāsvatavāda) names the view that there are enduring existents of which the self is the chief example; “eliminativism” (ucchedavāda) here names the contrary extreme according to which intentional actions (karma) have no ethical consequences, insofar as the agents thereof do not endure to experience their effects. The sense in which proponents of Madhyamaka can coherently claim to avoid both of these extremes (as most Buddhists will also claim to do) is central to understanding the distinctive character of Madhyamaka thought.

Of course, given their constitutively Buddhist concern to refuse the existence of an ultimately existent “self,” it is clearly the latter, “eliminativist” pole that proponents of Madhyamaka must work hardest to avoid. Indeed, the concern to avoid charges of nihilism (leveled alike by Brahmanical and by other Buddhist thinkers) represents one of the most significantly recurrent preoccupations of Nāgārjuna and the philosophers who follow him. This concern has to be understood in terms of the traditionally Buddhist idea of “two truths,” or (we might say) two levels of explanation or description: the familiar level of discourse that includes reference to such “conventionally existent” (saṃvṛtisat) things
as (paradigmatically) selves, and that which makes reference only to what is “ultimately existent” (paramārthasat). Most schools of Buddhist philosophy can be understood in terms of the sense in which they deny the “ultimate” existence of the self, while yet affirming the “conventional” existence thereof.

In its basically Ābhidharmika iterations – that is, in the ways characteristically elaborated in the earliest scholastic literature of Indian Buddhism, the so-called “Abhidharma,” particularly (we will see) as I am inclined to understand that in light of Dharmakīrti – this is an idea that can be understood as comparable to some important trends in contemporary philosophical discussion.

Contemporary philosophical projects informed by work in the cognitive sciences, for example, can be said to turn on questions of how (or even finally whether) we are to relate two levels of description: the broadly “intentional” level of description that generally reflects the first-person, phenomenological perspective (and that is also reflected in ordinary language and interactions); and the “scientific” level of description in terms of which that level is (according to the cognitive-scientifically inclined) finally to be explained. In thus characterizing the first level of description as “intentional,” I have in mind the philosophically technical sense of that word (familiar alike to students of continental phenomenology and Anglo-American philosophy of mind) that is generally taken to have been introduced by Brentano. More precisely, I have in mind a usage that can be associated with thinkers such as Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell, for whom intentionality – the fact that mental events like thoughts are “about” something, that they have content – is paradigmatically exemplified by phenomena like giving reasons for our actions. On this kind of view, thought is contentful (is meaningful) in something like the same way that linguistic items such as sentences are. The problem this fact poses for cognitive-scientifically inclined philosophers of mind, then, is whether or how we can say that our first-person experience of our actions – as reflected, e.g., in what we might say that we meant to do in acting some way or another – finally has any explanatory significance; or whether, instead, this level of description is ultimately rendered epiphenomenal by the fact that everything about us can be exhaustively explained in terms of a scientific level of description – a level of description that finally makes no reference to the kinds of things that figure in what Sellars called the “logical space of reasons.”

Rather similarly, the broadly Ābhidharmika trajectory of Buddhist philosophy might be said to take the “two truths” to consist, most basically, in two kinds of enumerable existents: the set of “conventionally existent” (saṃvṛtisat) things is the set of all reducible or supervenient phenomena (basically, all temporally
enduring macro-objects), while the set of “ultimately existent” (paramārthasat) things is the set of ontological primitives – the “dharmas” (as they are called in the Abhidharma literature) that alone “really exist,” causal interactions between which can exhaustively explain all events of the former sort. It is worth noting, in this regard, that this ontological recasting of “two truths” talk is facilitated by the Sanskrit terms in play. Thus, reference to ultimate or conventional “truth” (satya) involves a word derived from the present-participial stem (sat) of the Sanskrit verb √vas, “to be”; claims regarding the two truths are therefore sometimes ambiguous as involving statements (which are the kinds of things typically taken as bearers of “truth”), or existents. I am, then, here trying to bring out the difference it makes that reference in much of the Abhidharma literature is particularly to what is conventionally or ultimately existent – to what is paramārtha- or saṃvrti-sat, as contra satya. Corresponding exactly to this pair, Sarvāstivādin proponents of Abhidharma typically debated the question of what kinds of things finally count as dharmas by asking whether the phenomena in question were dravyasat, “substantially existent,” or prajñaptisat, which Paul Williams has aptly suggested rendering as “secondarily existent.”6 (We will return to the category of prajñaptic in concluding.) On the way of understanding the Ābhidharmika project that I am thus trying to motivate, then, proponents of this way of elaborating the doctrine of selflessness will characteristically claim to strike a middle way insofar as they deny the ultimate reality of the self, while yet affirming both the conventional reality thereof, and the ultimate reality of the fleeting existents (classified as dharmas) that are taken to explain the utility of that convention.

From what I take to be a Madhyamaka point of view, the salient point of the foregoing sort of approach is that something is thus taken to be ultimately existent – and what it could look like for anything thus to be “ultimately existent” (for anything to provide “ultimate” explanatory purchase) is precisely the point at issue. Now, it should be allowed, in this regard, that there are good Buddhist reasons for thinking that something like the foregoing is just what we should say. Thus, the most significant corollary of the Buddhist commitment to selflessness is “dependent origination” (pratītyasamutpāda): we do not have unitary and enduring selves just because any moment of experience turns out, upon analysis, to be dependent upon innumerable causes, none of which can be specified as what we “really” are. The Abhidharma

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6. A particularly good introduction to the strand of Ābhidharmika discourse that I am here sketching is provided by Williams; see his “On the Abhidharma Ontology,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 9 (1981): 227-257.
literature can then be said characteristically to work towards specifying what it is upon which experience thus depends, what really existent kinds of things our “selves” can be reduced to. This concern was advanced by systematizing the often prima facie divergent lists of impersonal categories (such as the skandhas, or “aggregates”) to which earlier Buddhist teachings had typically shown the self to be reducible. Ābhidharmika thinkers like Vasubandhu (fourth century C.E.) thus aimed to show how these categories all related to the set of so-called dharmas – the ontologically basic kinds of things that are finally to be reckoned as “ultimately existent.”

Nāgārjuna can be said in this regard be said to have recognized that the ontological primitives thus 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 would only be ultimately explained by something that does not itself require the same kind of explanation. But it is precisely the Madhyamaka 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. In arguing for such a conclusion, Nāgārjuna and his intellectual heirs can be taken to have developed, among other things, the point that to affirm the ultimate reality of an impersonal level of description – to affirm, in other words, that only impersonally described dharmas “really” exist, and that whatever is explained thereby therefore constitutively enjoys a lesser degree of reality – just is to deny not only the ultimate, but even the conventional reality of the self.

This is because it is constitutive of our conventional (our “common-sense”) experience of ourselves that our intentional attitudes – the reasons and beliefs, for example, in terms of which we understand what we do – seem to us to inform our behavior. To say, however, that this “seeming” really enjoys an explanatorily deficient degree of reality – that our seeming to ourselves to act intentionally can be exhaustively explained in altogether different terms, and that our conventionally described experience is therefore really just epiphenomenal – just is to say that the conventionally understood self does not really exist at all; for on the view that everything about our experience can finally be explained in the impersonal terms of dharmas, facts about the personal, “conventional” level of description do not finally have any role to play at all. The very fact of experience’s seeming like something to the subject thereof is, on this kind of view, thus to be understood as really consisting in something that is finally objectively describable. Proponents of Madhyamaka can, then, take this to exemplify an
“eliminativist” understanding of selflessness – can, in their own idiom, take this to exemplify uchchedavāda – insofar as selflessness, on this understanding of Ābhidharmika views thereof, is tantamount to the claim that we can specify what “really” exists instead of selves. Against this understanding, proponents of Madhyamaka are intent on arguing that we cannot, in fact, finally do without our “conventional” understanding of ourselves.

III. On the privileging of causal explanation: Dharmakīrti’s culminating development of Abhidharma

Before considering some characteristically Madhyamaka arguments for this sort of conclusion, it will be useful to consider the sense in which the broadly Ābhidharmika approach, as here characterized, can be thought to reach a kind of culmination in the thought of Dharmakīrti – to consider, more precisely, what it looks like to say of such an approach that it particularly privileges causal explanation.7 Advancing, then, his predecessor Dignāga’s project of recasting recognizably Ābhidharmika intuitions in epistemological terms, Dharmakīrti can be said to have radicalized the idea that dharmas represent the ontological primitives in which experience finally consists. As Noa Ronkin rightly emphasizes in the present volume, the Ābhidharmikas’ dharmas are not themselves particulars, but rather, types of events or existents; the enumeration of dharmas does not, that is, amount to the enumeration of all existents, but to ontologically basic types of existents, of which there can be innumerable tokens. In terms that will represent the principal target of Nāgārjuna’s critique, these types are individuated by their “essences” (svabhāva) or “defining characteristics” (svalakṣaṇa).8 Among the intuitions advanced by Dharmakīrti, though, is that we cannot be thought to have reached ontological bedrock as long as we are still concerned with types of things; for “types” are themselves abstractions – “universals” (sāmānyalakṣaṇas) that, insofar as they lack determinate identity criteria (which is just what it means to characterize them as “universals”), cannot themselves be thought to do anything.

We can only be thought, then, really to have arrived at “ultimately existent” things to the extent that we have actually come up against real particulars; for

7. I have developed the point I am here making in my Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp.22-31 – though I would now be inclined to be more careful than I was then in distinguishing views held by Dharmakīrti from views held by his predecessor Dignāga.

8. On these terms as they figure in this discourse, see, in addition to Noa Ronkin’s contribution to the present volume, my Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief, pp.17, ff.
just as it is possible to get milk only from some particular ruminant (and not from a concept like *gotva*, ‘being a cow’), so, too, only particular instances of what Ābhidharmikas had classified as dharmas can be thought real. Abstractions such as ‘the class of all similar such particulars,’ indeed, are ultimately just as unreal as selves are. Dharmakīrti’s conviction in this regard (shared with his predecessor Dignāga) is thus that only the unique, episodic particulars given to us in sensation or perception (pratyakṣa) finally count as real (as paramārthasat). While svalakṣaṇa, then, had previously referred to (what Dignāga and Dharmakīrti would call a universal) the “defining characteristics” of dharmas, for these thinkers the word now refers to the distinctive objects of perception – to uninterpreted particulars whose only ‘characteristic’ (lakṣaṇa) is ‘themselves’ (sva-).9 When, in contrast, one’s awareness is of something under some description – of a particular ruminant, say, as being a ‘cow’ – it constitutively involves something not really present, viz., universals like ‘being a cow’ or ‘the class of all cows.’

Now, Dharmakīrti significantly adds to the account he thus shares with Dignāga the intuition against which I have said I particularly want to frame Madhyamaka; chief among Dharmakīrti’s thoughts, then, is that what distinguishes the really existent particulars encountered in perception is just their causal efficacy. That is, the kinds of things of which we can be perceptually aware are distinguished by their capacity for causally interacting with our faculties, their capacity for causally eliciting mental representations of them. Thus, as Dharmakīrti says at the beginning of his Pramāṇaviniścaya,

There are only two kinds of things, perceptible and imperceptible. With regard to these, that is perceptible which causes the content of awareness to track its own presence and absence. That – unique, having the nature of a thing – is a unique particular (svalakṣaṇa). But the other [kind of thing, i.e., the imperceptible], lacking the capacity for projecting its nature directly into thought, only yields [something] unconnected.10

A unique particular’s capacity thus to cause the content of awareness (jñānapratibhāsam) is contrasted, then, with everything that lacks this capacity thus to “project” its own form “directly into thought.” This is the sense it makes

9. I am thus venturing an analysis of the compound svalakṣaṇa that is not, so far as I am aware, actually offered by Dharmakīrti, but that nevertheless seems to me to bring out precisely the point he has in mind.

for Dharmakīrti to maintain that (as he says in the Pramāṇavārttika) “there is nothing at all worth the name ‘being apprehendable’ apart from being a cause.”

In a widely quoted passage that would epitomize, for a proponent of Madhyamaka, what is problematic in his approach, Dharmakīrti specifically indexes the foregoing picture to an understanding of the two truths such as I have taken to characterize the broadly Ābhidharmika approach: “Whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is ultimately existent (paramārthasat); everything else is conventionally existent. These [two kinds of things consist, respectively, in] unique particulars (svalakṣaṇas) and abstractions (sāmānyalakṣaṇas).” Only the objects of perception, that is, count as “ultimately existent,” just insofar as only these can do anything; whenever, in contrast, one has a discursive thought (which is to say, a thought involving concepts), one’s awareness involves reference to things that are not actually present in anything at all like the same way.

This, then, is clearly an account according to which what is “ultimately real” consists in things that can be the discrete objects of awareness – and the epistemically privileged character of the kind of awareness that thus contacts such things (viz., perceptual awareness) consists precisely in its being causally describable. This represents a crucial part of what it looks like to take it that an “intentional” level of description – the level that involves the sāṃvratisat, or “conventionally existent” reals of everyday experience – can finally be explained in terms of the kind of causal description that, for Dharmakīrti, individuates “ultimately existent” (paramārthasat) reals. On a full blown version of such a picture, then, the task would be to show how everything about our experience (including such aspects thereof as our seeming to ourselves to do things for reasons) will finally admit of explanation in terms of this causal level of description – which is, on my reading, just what Dharmakīrti attempts with his elaboration of the apoha doctrine.

Such an account, I have said, has good Buddhist considerations in its favor; clearly, for example, Dharmakīrti’s picture can be taken as meant to recommend the conclusion that only the fleeting sense data of our episodic perceptions are

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11. Pramāṇavārttika III.224 a-b; see Eltschinger’s contribution to the present volume for editions. Though I have here described Dharmakīrti’s account in the generally empiricist terms that make it most intuitively plausible, it should be allowed that the causally describable character of perception will look rather different in light of the idealist sort of view that Dharmakīrti finally holds. On these issues, see especially §14a-c of Eltschinger’s contribution to the present volume.


real, without also warranting the (inferential) belief that these must be the states of an underlying self. It can also be said more generally to have the kind of intuitive plausibility that attaches to empiricism. We can, though, begin to turn to our elaboration of the sense if makes to think of Madhyamaka as particularly opposed to such an approach by first considering, briefly, some problems with this that can be raised with reference to Dharmakīrti’s own treatment of the issue. Thus, when he avers (as seen above) that “whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is ultimately existent,” Dharmakīrti immediately proceeds to make a significant concession, entertaining, indeed, the same kinds of worries about causation that famously preoccupied Hume (who was himself no less reliant on appeals to causation despite his awareness of the limits thereof). Specifically, Dharmakīrti anticipates the objection that what are typically characterized as causal relations may amount to nothing more than observed regularities – that we are not, in other words, entitled to attribute to anything involved in such regularities anything like a causal “power” or “capacity” (sāmartyam or śakti).14

Dharmakīrti’s initial response to this objection is to say that the “śakti” he has in mind is simply that which is observed to belong to seeds that produce sprouts. This occasions, however, a further objection, which the commentator Manorathanandin (here sounding very much indeed like Hume) expresses thus: “The relation of effect to cause is established only customarily (vyavahāramātrataḥ), not ultimately (na paramārthataḥ).” We cannot, for example, ever be said to perceive “the causation” that is thought to occur in any case of causal relations; indeed, insofar as causal relations are constitutively sequential, it can only be with reference to memory that such relations are even posited. Insofar, however, as reference to memory is, by Dharmakīrti’s own lights, chief among the things that distinguishes conceptual awareness from perceptual – perceiving something as a tree, e.g., involves remembering past experience of the use of the word ‘tree’ – Dharmakīrti’s own account of the privileged status of perception turns out, it seems, to depend upon precisely such epistemically deficient procedures as perception is supposedly privileged to lack; the experience of causation itself, as Mark Siderits has put the point in

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14. Here, I am offering paraphrases from Pramāṇavārttika III.4, as explained by the commentator Manorathanandin. My account here is also informed by the work done on this passage (and on the commentator Prajñākaraṇagupta’s explication thereof) by Masahiro Inami. Some of this work has been published in Japanese, e.g., “On the Method of Determining Causality in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition: Can Causality be Truly Determined?” Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu XLVII.1 (1998):150-156; I have benefited from an English presentation of this (“Can Causality Be Truly Determined?”) at the XIIth congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Lausanne, 1999.
the contemporary idiom I suggested at the start, “necessarily involves elements of intentionality or conceptual construction.”

Strikingly, Dharmakīrti’s response to this worry is to concede the point: “Fine,” he says; “let it be as it is.”16 “Worldly discourse,” Manorathanandin says in elaborating the concession, “is achieved based on agreement regarding correspondence of discourse concerning such things as explanans and explanandum, in reliance upon the cause and effect relation, even though the latter is conventional (sāṃvṛtam api).” One way, then, to express the problem with Dharmakīrti’s account in this regard is to observe that we cannot have any epistemic access to the very fact of causation apart from the same cognitive tools available to us in articulating any account thereof – but those are eminently conceptual tools, whereas conceptual elaboration is just what perception was supposed to lack. This is, among other things, the problem that anything we could be said to know about the ultimately existent character of perceptibles, simply insofar as it is an instance of knowing, could not itself be “ultimately existent,” on Dharmakīrti’s understanding thereof. Faced with this worry, Dharmakīrti embraces the point, and says that he doesn’t claim to offer anything more than a conventionally valid account of our epistemic practices.

IV. Some Madhyamaka arguments against Buddhist epistemology

It is at this point, finally, that we can consider some characteristically Madhyamaka arguments for the kinds of insights I have attributed to Nāgārjuna and his followers – that we can, more precisely, elaborate a Madhyamaka critique of causal relations as particularly opposed to an understanding of Buddhist commitments just such as I have here taken to be epitomized by Dharmakīrti. We can start by pointing out (as a proponent of Madhyamaka surely would) that the concession we have just seen Dharmakīrti make – his claim that he does not, after all, offer anything more than a conventionally valid account – would seem to evacuate of any significance his immediately preceding claim that only “whatever has the capacity for causal efficacy is ultimately existent.” Insofar, that is, as Dharmakīrti’s contrast between the “ultimately existent” particulars given to us in perception and everything else depends on the ulti-

15. Mark Siderits, Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), p.131. Chapters 6-9 of Siderits’s book develop what seems to me to be among the most philosophically interesting and sophisticated of contemporary interpretations of Madhyamaka – though I will return to Siderits at the end of this essay to indicate some points on which I take myself to differ from him.

mate/conventional contrast, allowing that the “ultimately existent” can itself be known only “conventionally” would seem to open the way for allowing, as well, that causal relations obtain not just among momentary particulars, but among the full range of medium-sized dry goods that are conventionally said to enter into such relations.

If, in other words, it is admitted that the privileged explanatory terms of causal explanation are themselves available to us only as “conventionally” experienced, then why not also admit the other things that are “conventionally” said about causation, such as that temporally enduring macroobjects are the kinds of things that figure therein? It would seem that Dharmakīrti cannot allow as much while yet maintaining that causal relations between fleeting particulars represent the criterion of the privileged status of being “ultimately existent.” It would be characteristic particularly of the Madhyamaka thinker Candrakīrti to argue, in this regard, that Dharmakīrti is not entitled to help himself to one aspect of any conventional understanding (viz., the “conventionally” allowed character of causal explanation), without thereby committing himself to a lot of the other moves that conventionally go with just that understanding; for it is constitutively characteristic of the conventional senses of explanatory terms for them to be relative not only to all manner of other such terms, but also to the very phenomena on which they supposedly give us purchase.

It is incoherent, then, to claim to offer a conventionally valid account, while at the same time eschewing precisely the conditions for the intelligibility of such an account. I have said, in this regard, that it is just the Madhyamaka point to emphasize that there are no exceptions to the rule that everything is dependently originated – that phenomena are dependently originated all the way down, and that it is therefore impossible to specify precisely what it is upon which anything finally depends. Thus, what cannot be made coherent, according to Madhyamaka critiques, is the idea that explanatory categories have the privileged sort of status (“being really existent”) that could make them intrinsically or “essentially” suited – where what is purportedly explained by them is not so suited – to explain everything about our ordinary experience. This is, as we can now say with respect to the foregoing concession from Dharmakīrti, because for all explanations to be (as proponents of Madhyamaka are most concerned to emphasize) themselves dependently originated is, among other things, for them to be dependent upon the perspective from which any explanation must be offered – and the perspective from which even putatively “ultimately true”

17. Inami (see note 14, above) notes that the Nyāya philosopher Bhāsarvajña ventured similar critiques of Dharmakīrti on precisely this point.
explanations are offered is, necessarily, itself that of “conventionally” described experience.

Anything one might point to as among the causal conditions of something will, then, turn out itself to be “relative” (where that just means dependently originated) in just the same way as the phenomenon it supposedly explains. This thought is typically advanced by arguments for (what is the principal term of art for Madhyamaka) the “emptiness” (śūnyātā) not only of wholes such as persons, but also of the analytic categories (dharmas) to which these are reduced in Abhidharma literature; these, too, proponents of Madhyamaka characteristically argue, turn out to be “empty of an essence” (svabhāvena śūnyāḥ). Emphasizing the etymology of the word svabhāva, Madhyamaka thinkers typically take this to refer to something “existent” (bhāva) “by itself” (sva-). To argue that all things are “empty” of this way of being is thus to deny the reality of anything, as it were, intrinsically existent – of anything that is what it is independently of anything else. Among the points that are taken to follow is that the analytic categories of Abhidharma cannot coherently be thought “more real” than the conventionally existent entities they are invoked to explain. Madhyamaka arguments to this effect typically work by showing that all explanatory categories turn out to be constitutively dependent upon the phenomenon they purportedly explain, and on the conventional understandings relative to which they are intelligible. Let us consider, then, a couple of characteristically Madhyamaka arguments that are particularly such as to show this with respect to the kinds of categories that figure centrally in Dharmakīrti’s account.

The first such argument is a simple one that Nāgārjuna offers in his Vigrahavārtanī (“Turning Back Objections,” henceforth VV).¹⁸ This relatively concise verse text (with autocommentary) scouts several objections that might be raised with respect to Nāgārjuna’s characteristic claims regarding emptiness – paradigmatically, that all existents (bhāva) are “empty” of “essence” (svabhāva), in the sense just sketched. These objections generally come down to charges of self-referential incoherence; how, for example, could a proponent of Madhyamaka ever claim to know whatever it is he would have us understand, when the very content of his claim – viz., that all existents are “empty” – would seem (at least on certain understandings of that claim) to deprive us of any way of knowing it?

¹⁸. There is a reliable translation of this work by Kamaleshwar Bhattacharya: The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: Vigrahavārtanī (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990). Translations here are my own, from the Sanskrit edition included in Bhattacharya’s text.
One version of this objection typifies the frequently anticipated misunderstanding of Nāgārjuna’s claims regarding emptiness as themselves nihilistic in character; thus, the speech act involved in Nāgārjuna’s affirming that “all existents are empty” (sarvabhāvāh śūnyāh) is incoherent since, insofar as that speech act itself is surely to be reckoned among “all existents,” the very existence of the sentence contradicts the claim it expresses. This objection gets its force from the presupposition that “empty” here means non-existent – a presupposition that informs many (if not most) of the objections entertained by Nāgārjuna. Here, as throughout Nāgārjuna’s corpus, the response is to show that the interlocutor has misunderstood what Nāgārjuna means by ‘empty’: “Whatever existents have their being dependently are said to have the property ‘being empty’; for that which is its being dependent just is its being without an essence” (VV 22). Nāgārjuna thus clarifies, as he does repeatedly throughout his corpus, that for anything to be “empty” – empty, recall, of “existing by itself” (svabhāva) – is just for it to be “dependently originated.” But surely there is no contradiction in thus saying of a speech act – even one whose content is that “all existents are empty” – that it does not exist “by itself” or “essentially” (svabhāvena).

Nāgārjuna’s VV also takes on one of the categories that figures as a central term of art for Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (as for mid- to late-first-millennium Indian philosophers more generally): pramāṇa, or (as we might translate this) “reliable warrant” or “valid belief-forming practice” – something, at any rate, that picks out its referent’s being a criterion of knowledge. Many Indian philosophers were preoccupied with which belief-forming practices – perception, inference, testimony, comparison, etc. – should thus be reckoned as criteria (as pramāṇas), and with characterizing the criteria so identified. This is the heading, then, under which Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (who argue that only perception and inference finally count as pramāṇas) elaborate the privileged character of perception, and it is characteristic of philosophers of their ilk to ask, with regard to any contentious claim, for the pramāṇa that warrants it. Nāgārjuna imagines, then, being challenged to adduce the pramāṇa that warrants his claims regarding emptiness. He argues, against this, that the kinds of reliable warrants demanded by the epistemologist cannot coherently count as explaining our knowledge in the way the epistemologists would have it. Thus, Nāgārjuna challenges his interlocutor (at VV 31) to explain how pramāṇas themselves are to be established. If the answer is by other pramāṇas, an infinite regress ensues – but if not by other pramāṇas, then one abandons the claim that only what is known by pramāṇas counts as justifiably credited.
Pramāṇas cannot, then, be thought to explain how we know what we know; they simply exemplify (and therefore any appeal to them already presupposes) the truth of the one thing Nāgārjuna would have us understand, which is just that everything is “empty,” i.e., dependently originated. Nāgārjuna can be taken to argue, in this way, that the things to which the epistemologist looks for justification are themselves possible only given the truth of Madhyamaka’s claim—a fact that cannot itself be established, therefore, in the way the epistemologist demands. In this regard, Nāgārjuna’s famous claim not to advance any philosophical “thesis” (pratijñā)—a claim ventured at VV 29—can be understood to express not a refusal to make any truth claims at all, but only a refusal of the kinds of claims that are thought to require a certain kind of justification. I suggest, in particular, that Nāgārjuna thus urges that his is not the kind of claim that could be “made true” by its being in contact with (by its being ultimately caused by) ultimately existent objects. There is, however, no inconsistency in taking that denial itself to be true, insofar as the whole point of his project is to argue that ‘being true’ cannot coherently be thought to consist in reference to such existents—in the same way, we have here seen him argue, that any cognition’s supposedly being a pramāṇa cannot coherently be thought to consist in its intrinsically affording epistemic purchase on the things known thereby, since pramāṇas are what they are only relative to the intentional level of description in terms of which they are intelligible.

We can advert again to the above-noted concession from Dharmakīrti to frame another characteristically Madhyamaka argument, this one elaborated, in the course of his lengthy engagement with MMK 1.1, by Nāgārjuna’s commentator Candrakīrti. Roughly contemporaneous with Dharmakīrti, Candrakīrti seems not to have known the latter’s work; he did, however, entertain at some length positions that clearly resemble those of Dharmakīrti’s predecessor Dignāga, and the arguments Candrakīrti elaborated against these have at least as much purchase against Dharmakīrti.19 Thus, just as we briefly saw with reference to Nāgārjuna’s VV, Candrakīrti imagines Dignāga demanding, with respect to the claim expressed in MMK 1.1—the claim, again, that “there do not exist, anywhere at all, any existents whatsoever, arisen either from themselves or from something else, either from both or altogether without cause”—that the proponent of Madhyamaka specify the pramāṇa by which this fact is known.

19. I have elaborated this line of argument from Candrakīrti in my Buddhist, Brahmins, and Belief (see note 7, above); a complete, annotated translation of the lengthy passage in which Candrakīrti engages Dignāga is available in my “Materials for a Madhyamika Critique of Foundationalism: An Annotated Translation of Prasannapada 55.11 to 75.13,” Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies 28/2 (2005): 411-467.
And, just as we saw with reference to Dharmakīrti’s concession that he claims only to offer a conventionally true account of ultimate truth, Candrakīrti imagines Dignāga saying in this regard that he understands pramāṇa discourse as just a conventionally valid way of arriving at knowledge, so that his demand for justification can’t be faulted for its presupposing that the answer could not itself be ultimately true.

Sensitive, no doubt, to the significance for Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna’s claim (at MMK 24.10) that “without relying on convention, the ultimate is not taught,” Candrakīrti effectively proceeds to challenge the coherence particularly of that claim. That is, he chiefly aims to show, with respect to the terms of art that figure centrally in Dignāga’s epistemology, simply that Dignāga cannot coherently claim to be offering an account of the conventional understanding thereof. Among other things, Candrakīrti will take this to recommend the conclusion that insofar as the supposedly privileged explanations of epistemologists are themselves available to us only as “conventionally” experienced, we should also admit the other things in terms of which the relevant conventions are intelligible – such as that (as I have here suggested putting it) they are intelligible only with reference to the “intentional” level of description at which we speak of enduring macro-objects as among the things we perceive.

Thus, the privileged status of perception, on Dignāga’s account as on Dharmakīrti’s, consists in the fact that it is constitutively non-conceptual (kalpanāpoḍha) – which is, on his view, to say that perception is uniquely in contact with really existent entities. This is because the only two belief-forming practices admitted by Dignāga as pramāṇas (viz., perception and inference) can be individuated by their respective objects, which are the only two kinds of things that could finally exist: respectively, unique particulars (svalakṣaṇas), and a range of abstractions (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) including such things as complex wholes and universals. Chief among the salient differences between these, we saw Dharmakīrti emphasize, is that perception is causally relatable to the real particulars that impinge upon our senses. This is in contrast to conceptual cognitions, which constitutively involve something not actually present – in the way (to take the example of knowing oneself to perceive a tree) that such abstractions as “being a tree” or “the class of all trees” are not really present.

Candrakīrti seizes on the two correlated terms that structure this picture: pratyakṣa (“perception”) and svalakṣaṇa (“unique particular”). He starts with the latter term, which, on Dignāga’s usage, refers to the ultimately existent particulars that are thus the objects of perception. Candrakīrti argues (rightly) that this is not, in fact, the primary sense of the Sanskrit word svalakṣaṇa; the
word conventionally has the sense, rather, of “defining characteristic,” as when people familiarly say (for example) that fire’s svalakṣaṇa is being hot, earth’s is being resistant, etc. “Defining characteristics,” though, are not particulars; indeed, as shared by every instance of whatever they define, they represent precisely the sort of thing that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti would call a universal. Candrakīrti is right, then, to think that Dignāga would be hard-pressed to use the word as he does, while yet making sense of such conventional expressions as “earth’s svalakṣaṇa is being resistant.”

It is an important fact about the conventional usage, moreover, that it involves a relationship; in particular, it is incoherent to suppose that these are not the “characteristics” of anything, since the conventional understanding of the term constitutively involves a relationship between a characteristic (lakṣaṇa) and whatever is characterized (lakṣya) thereby. But Dignāga cannot concede this, since his position requires that there be no further kind of existent to which svalakṣaṇas could belong – these are meant, rather, to bring the reductionist project to rest. Candrakīrti represents Dignāga as wanting, then, to maintain that the perceptual objects he takes the word to denote are simply self-characterizing – that they are given to perception, in other words, without any properties predicated of them (for properties are universals), simply as the irreducibly unique things they are. This is how Dignāga must understand the term if it is taken to refer to the objects of perception – to the sort of things, that is, that one can cognitively encounter as ontologically discrete entities. It is precisely this requirement, though, that is at odds with conventional usage of the word; for svalakṣaṇas in the sense of “defining characteristics” are not discretely given entities – they are something more like the descriptions under which things are experienced.

Candrakīrti argues in various ways against the intelligibility of Dignāga’s notion, and considers characteristic doctrines of Dignāga as meant to salvage the thought that there could after all be particulars whose uniqueness consists in their having, as it were, only themselves as “characteristics.” Dignāga needs to say this because anything that was itself “characterized” by other things would not be ultimately explanatory, insofar as it would itself require explanation in terms of those further characteristics. We can express the gist of Candrakīrti’s critique of this thought by noting that any particular must at least have the “property” of being a unique particular. To the extent that is an intelligible thing to say, any appeal to such particulars – as finally meant, that is, to explain what is real – just opens an infinite regress; for the characterization of these as unique particulars itself involves a relationship between characteristic and thing characterized. The reduction of things to their parts, then, cannot coherently be
thought to come to rest in particulars that, insofar as they are supposed to be without any properties themselves, could ultimately explain the reduced items; the explanatory terms themselves inevitably exemplify the same features we want to understand.

This whole line of argument is appropriately understood to count against Dignāga’s contention that perceptual cognition affords access to uninterpreted data; for Candrakīrti’s argument effectively advances the point that we invariably encounter things as they are defined. That is, tokens of the type “earth” are invariably encountered under a description (viz., as “resistant”). Among the points that Candrakīrti thus makes by urging that “defining characteristics” are necessarily instantiated in some lakṣya (some “bearer” of the defining property in question) is that it is not possible to perceive some instance of earth without at the same time perceiving this property. This is tantamount to arguing that, notwithstanding Dignāga’s constitutive claim to the contrary, perception is conventionally understood to involve our conceptual capacities, and that it therefore cannot be called upon to explain those capacities.

**Conclusion: Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti on the relation between the self and its impersonal parts**

Arguments such as the foregoing are eminently typical of Madhyamaka arguments, which recurrently exemplify the same basic logic with respect to all manner of usually paired explanatory categories (cause and effect, action and agent, desire and desired, past and present, etc.). That such arguments can, as I have suggested, be taken to recommend the ineliminability of an intentional level of description is clear. I think, at several points in the corpuses of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, but perhaps especially in the discussion of fire and fuel that figures in the tenth chapter of Nāgārjuna’s MMK – a discussion that is explicitly generalized as telling us everything we need to know about “self” and “selflessness,” on the Madhyamaka understanding thereof. Here, as throughout Nāgārjuna’s work, the guiding question is whether these relata (fire and fuel) are intelligible as such apart from one another, or whether instead it is only as related that they can come into view as the kinds of things they are taken to be.

Exemplifying the same logic we have seen on display in the foregoing arguments concerning the categories of pramāṇa and svalaṅkaṇa, Nāgārjuna chiefly challenges the idea that either “fire” or “fuel” could be autonomously intelligible; as he says at 10.10, “If that thing which is established dependent on [something else] were itself to be established to establish [the second thing as the kind of
thing it is, then] what depends on what?” 20 If, that is, the terms of some relationship are intelligible as such only insofar as they are related, what sense can there be in specifying what any of them is apart from the relation? This is the point that is made, then, by saying (at 10.13, in terms that echo 1.1) that “fire does not come from something other, nor is fire in fuel” – nor, indeed, can these be understood as related to each other in any of the other ways canvassed with respect to all of the categories Nāgārjuna considers. The problem, as throughout, is that just insofar as relations are imagined to obtain between autonomously intelligible things, what will be missed is the one thing that Nāgārjuna would finally have us understand about all such relata – viz., that it is only as related that they can even come into view as the kinds of things whose relations we could think require explanation. ‘Fire’ and ‘fuel’ cannot, that is, even come into view as things whose relations we might try to explain apart from the fact of their already being related.

Now, there may be a sense in which this represents a rather underwhelming sort of point; certainly, Nāgārjuna’s arguments can seem repetitively familiar once their basic logic is grasped. 21 This can all look rather different, however, when its significance is appreciated particularly with respect to the relation between the “self” and the various impersonal categories adduced by Buddhists as explaining that. Interestingly, one of the blanket terms for the various impersonal existents that are “taken” to be a self is upādāna, which, significantly, also sometimes refers to ‘fuel.’ Etymologically denoting any act of “appropriating” or “taking up,” the word also typically refers to whatever gets taken up – to the “material out of which anything is made,” 22 or (in the case of fire) what is “consumed” by the “appropriator” which is fire. It is quite naturally, then, that Nāgārjuna can (as Candrakīrti says in introducing verse 10.15) “extend” his point about the fire-fuel relation particularly with regard to the self, which in these terms is to be understood as the “appropriator” (upādātṛ) of the various impersonal existents that are, on characteristically Ābhidharmika accounts, what really exist instead of the self. Against the Ābhidharmika understanding of the relation between this kind of upādātṛ and upādānam, though, Nāgārjuna wants to make just the same point he makes about the terms of all relations; as he says, then, at 10.15, “the

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20. I here follow Candrakīrti’s commentary in unpacking Nāgārjuna’s verse.
21. See, in this connection, Richard Hayes’s “Nāgārjuna’s Appeal” (Journal of Indian Philosophy 22: 299-378), which argues not only that the logic of the arguments is relatively straightforward, but that it centrally involves equivocation on the term svabhāva.
whole order (krama) of [the relation between] the self and its basis (upādānam) is completely explained based on fire and fuel.”

With his reference to the proper “order” or “sequence” (krama) of these relata, I take Nāgārjuna to raise the question of their logical or conceptual priority – the question, that is, of which of these is rightly thought to explain the other. This effectively raises, then, the question of the two truths that is at issue between proponents of Madhyamaka and Ābhidharmikas; that is, are the impersonal terms (upādānam) that alone are “ultimately” or “substantially existent” (paramārthasat or dravyasat) for Ābhidharmikas rightly thought to represent a privileged level of description? Or can these terms themselves come into view only relative to the “intentional” level of description putatively explained thereby? It is, of course, the latter alternative that Nāgārjuna finally means to advance by his characteristic critiques of basic categories. Just, then, as fire and fuel can only be individuated as such insofar as they are relative to one another, so, too, the supposed ontological primitives to which Ābhidharmikas would reduce the self are themselves intelligible only relative to the very phenomenon they are posited to help us understand. Thus, as Candrakīrti says in elaborating on Nāgārjuna’s verse 10.15, none of the ways to get autonomously intelligible ‘fire’ and ‘fuel’ related to one another can work for the self and its constituents, either:

It doesn’t make sense to say that “just that which is the appropriated basis (upādāna) is the self,” because in that case the agent and the action [i.e., the agent and the act of appropriating] would be identical. Nor does it make sense to say that the basis is one thing and the appropriator another, since in that case it would be possible to apprehend a self even apart from the aggregates (skandhas)…. And because of the negation of their being identical and of their being different, it also doesn’t make sense to say there is a self possessing the aggregates. And because they are not separate, it also doesn’t make sense to say that the aggregates are in the self, or that the self is in the aggregates. Since the self’s being existent does not obtain in any of these five ways, therefore, just as in the case of action and agent, it is clear that the establishment of [the categories of] ‘self’ and ‘impersonal basis’ is only as mutually dependent.23

With respect, then, to the question of which of these levels of description should be taken to have explanatory priority – the question, that is, of the right krama between them – Candrakīrti emphasizes that the answer is “neither of

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23. I here rather freely translate from La Vallée Poussin’s edition (see note 4, above), p.213. The arguments Candrakīrti here and subsequently elaborates are very similarly treated in his Madhyamakāvatāra; I have presented and tried to explicate those passages in my Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief, pp.162-174.
them”\textsuperscript{24}; the supposedly privileged, impersonal level of description is only intelligible, that is, relative to the personal level of description (the level involving reference to ‘selves’) putatively explained thereby.

Nāgārjuna concludes this thread of discussion (and his chapter on fire and fuel) with a striking expression of the characteristically Madhyamaka point that consistently to understand the doctrine of dependent origination is thus to appreciate not only that selves are dependently originated, but also that anything that could be posited to explain that fact will itself turn out to admit of the same analysis: “I do not think that those who teach the independent existence of the self and of existents are people who understand the meaning of the Buddha’s teaching.” (MMK 10.16) The impersonally describable ontological primitives (‘dharmas’) that constitute the supposedly privileged level of explanation (the “ultimate truth”) for Buddhist thinkers who like Dharmakīrti uphold basically Ābhidharmika intuitions are not, then, even intelligible apart from the intentional level of explanation (that of conventional truth) they are invoked to explain; on a fully consistent application of the doctrine of dependent origination, rather, these are themselves dependently originated – which means, I take Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti here to emphasize, that this level of description is dependent for its intelligibility on, among other things, the very level of description supposedly explained thereby.

The upshot of such an understanding is that while proponents of Madhyamaka surely mean (simply insofar as they are Buddhists) to have us understand ourselves quite differently from how we ordinarily do, they do not think it right to say that doing so could coherently consist in our understanding what there “really” is instead of our selves. On the kind of non-eliminative understanding of selflessness I thus take these thinkers to advance, the point is neither that the self exists nor that it does not exist; properly understood, the self will be seen, rather, as the kind of constitutively relative thing of which neither of these affirmations makes sense. As Nāgārjuna concludes at MMK 27.8 (in terms that again echo 1.1), “Thus, the self is not other than its appropriated basis (upādāna), nor is it itself the basis, nor does it exist without basis. Nor, though, is there any

\textsuperscript{24} Candrakīrti puts the point thus immediately before introducing the last quarter verse of 10.15 (La Vallée Poussin’s edition, p.213). Thanks to Sonam Kachru for conversation on these passages, and for suggesting the “coming into view” locution that will recur in my characterizations from here on.
certainty that ‘it doesn’t exist.’”

None of the first three alternatives is tenable for the same kinds of reasons seen in the fire-and-fuel discussion; that is, to the extent that the categories in play can come into view in the first place only as related, any questions about how they are related – insofar as such questions presuppose that the terms are autonomously intelligible, and thus need to be (as it were) “gotten into” relation in the first place – are already on the wrong track.

Strikingly, though, Nāgārjuna concludes by emphasizing that the right conclusion is not that the self therefore doesn’t exist at all (“nor is there any certainty that ‘it doesn’t exist’”); the point, rather, is that the self is the kind of thing that can have come into view at all only given a whole range of other things, and that reference to it is unavoidable if we would make sense of any talk of these other things – even if we would make sense, that is, of talk of the Ābhidharmikas’ impersonal terms of analysis. Commenting on the surprising conclusion to Nāgārjuna’s MMK 27.8, Candrakīrti says:

> How could that which is made known relative to the aggregates ‘not exist’? For the son of a barren woman, insofar as there is no such thing, is not made known relative to the aggregates. How, when there is a basis, does it make sense to say there is no appropriator? Therefore, its not being existent doesn’t make sense, either; because of this, the judgment ‘there isn’t a self’ doesn’t make sense, either.

The twice-occurrent expression ‘made known’ here renders Candrakīrti’s prajñāpyate, and can serve to give us a key Madhyamaka term of art in terms of which we can conclude. Candrakīrti thus uses the passive form of the causative stem of the verbal root prajñā, “know” (hence, “is made known”). The same causative stem also underlies the nominal form prajñapti, which was noted above (in section II) in connection with an Ābhidharmika term of art; thus, “really” or “substantially existent” (dravyasat) dharmas are in that context contrasted with everything that is merely prajñāpatisat, or (as Paul Williams suggests) “secondarily existent.” The latter term is more often rendered as “nominally” or “conceptually existent,” which reflects a sense of the word prajñāpti that is not without a place here; to the extent, however, that the word is thus understood, the claim – frequently made by Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, and surely in play in the passage just adduced – that everything’s being ‘empty’ is tantamount to

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25. If I may be permitted a note of interest mostly to specialists, this passage might sound not unlike the “pudgalavāda” position attacked by Vasubandhu in the ninth chapter of his Abhidharmakośabhāṣya; for a thorough presentation of Vasubandhu’s arguments here, see James Duerlinger’s Indian Buddhist Theories of Person (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). Thanks to Dan Lusthaus for bringing this to my attention.
everything’s being upādāya prajñāpāṭi will perhaps be heard as the claim that everything is just “conceptually” existent, just existent as conceptually projected by human subjects. (Recall, in this regard, Mark Siderits’s above-noted characterization of causality as necessarily involving, on the Madhyamaka account, “elements of intentionality or conceptual construction.”)

This kind of emphasis can be taken to give the characteristically Madhyamaka claim an idealist sort of cast – as though, that is, the point in Nāgārjuna’s denying (as he surely does, contra Ābhidharmikas) that anything at all is dravyasat, and in affirming instead that everything is only prajñāpatisat, were to say that things exist only insofar as we think they do. Such an understanding frequently underlies, I think, the sense that proponents of Madhyamaka finally propound a radical sort of skepticism, as well as the sense (in a different but related key) that Nāgārjuna and his philosophical heirs are constitutively opposed to a certain kind of realism – opposed to realism, say, about the status of the world, and about the status of truth-claims pertaining thereto. The characteristically Madhyamaka claims can sound, however, rather different if instead we understand reference to prajñāpāṭi as reference to what is “made known,” or (what amounts to the same thing) reference to what can “come into view.”

Thus, Candrakīrti says above that it does not make sense to say, of something that is “made known relative to the aggregates” (skandhāna upādāya prajñāpātyate), simply that it does not exist – and that things that are said to be altogether non-existent (like the biological sons of barren mothers) are not thus said to “come into view” relative to the aggregates. His point, I take it, is that for anything thus to be “made known” or to “come into view” relative to certain conditions just is for all of the conditions involved to be identifiable only in terms of the description under which they are thus made known. If, for example, it makes sense to individuate various subpersonal or impersonal goings-on (certain neuro-physiological events, say) as figuring in a subject’s perceptual experience of a

26. This point is most familiarly advanced at Nāgārjuna’s MMK 24.18; the section of my Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief (cited at note 23, above) that discusses sections of Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra brings those into contact with this frequently-quoted verse from Nāgārjuna.

27. Note 15, above; I have here added emphasis.

28. Mark Siderits has been the most influential defender of an “anti-realist” interpretation of Madhyamaka – which, to be sure, is not the same as a skeptical interpretation, though as Siderits notes (Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy, pp.150-53), there are reasons why these interpretations sometimes go together. The specific sense of “anti-realism” that Siderits attributes to Madhyamaka is semantic anti-realism, a thorough account of which is well beyond the scope of the present essay; suffice it to say, however, that I am here trying to bring out some senses in which I take my understanding of Madhyamaka to differ from that of Siderits (with whose characterizations of Madhyamaka I am nevertheless frequently in agreement).
sunflower, the description of such goings-on will no longer be a description of the same thing if there is no reference also to the intentional level of description (the level that involves somebody’s seeing a flower) supposedly explained thereby. That there can be no deciding in advance which level of description is the “right” one to try to explain is among the things reflected, I think, by the gerund form upādāya, which (though I have here rendered it as “relative to”) is based on the same root as the upādāna (“appropriated basis”) and upādātṛ (“appropriator”) we have seen Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti refer to; thus, the “coming into view” that is qualified as (literally) “having taken something up” is here represented as a process, its ongoing and dynamic character reflected in a non-finite verbal form such as may connote a continuous “taking up” or “appropriating.” It is never simply given that one or the other level of description picks out the really existent things.

This is all to say, among other things, that for anything thus to come into view relative to some range of conditions is not just for it to be caused by such conditions, at least insofar as the specified causes are imagined to exist apart from what is thus brought into being; for nothing can be individuated even as a cause apart from the total situation in which it is understood to figure. On my understanding of Madhyamaka, then, what it ought to mean to say (with Siderits) that causation “necessarily involves elements of intentionality or conceptual construction” is not that causality obtains only insofar as we think it does (only, that is, in our minds); it is to say, rather, that it cannot coherently be thought that enumeration of the episodic causes of some experience could tell us what experience really is, where the intentionally describable experience itself is understood as constitutively less real than (as explained away by) the causal factors thus specified. And the reason for this, we have seen Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti argue, is that it is just as true that any causal factors one might specify can themselves “come into view” only relative to the self, as it is that the latter emerges only relative to the former; neither level of description can coherently be thought to have explanatory priority.

There is, however, no contradiction involved in affirming that it is ultimately true that all this is so – and no contradiction, therefore, in thinking that proponents of Madhyamaka are finally advancing a properly metaphysical claim. Consider, in this regard, Mark Siderits’s frequently quoted characterization of Madhyamaka as affirming that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.” This seems to me a compellingly apt formulation, though there is scope

29. See, for example, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, p.157, et passim.
for different elaborations of it. Supporting his semantic anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka, Siderits unpacks his formulation as involving an equivocation – the two occurrences of “ultimate truth” here refer, that is, to two different things. Thus, on Siderits’s account, there is “ultimate truth₁: a fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment,” and there is “ultimate truth₂: a statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality.”

On his interpretation of Madhyamaka, the point is then that “[t]he ultimate truth₁ is that there is no ultimate truth₂” – that is, the ultimate “fact that must be grasped” is that there is no “statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality.” This might be taken to recommend the conclusion that proponents of Madhyamaka therefore cannot be understood to affirm any claim about what is really the case, since there seems to be a contradiction involved in making a statement to the effect that no statement “corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality.”

There seem to me, however, to be two things worth tweaking in this account. First, on my understanding of Ābhidharmikas as centrally concerned with an ontological understanding of the “two truths” (as thinking these two consist, that is, in conventionally and ultimately real existents), Siderits’s “ultimate truth₂” – his formula’s second iteration, that is, of the term “ultimate truth,” the one that is denied – should pick out not any kind of statement, but a kind of existent. Thus, Siderits’s formula would be taken to assert not that there can be no “statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality”; it would be taken to assert, rather, that there cannot exist anything which is what it is apart from everything else – and there are no obvious semantic problems in saying it is ultimately true that there can be no such things (in saying that the ultimate “fact that must be grasped” is that there are no ultimately real existents).

Secondly, it seems to me that Siderits’s anti-realist interpretation gets some of its purchase mainly to the extent that one grants a basically empiricist understanding of what it would mean to be a “realist” about truth-claims – an understanding, that is, just such as proponents of Madhyamaka seem to me to attack with their critique of causal explanation. On Siderits’s understanding, then, “realism” is the view that “[t]rue statements reflect how the world is independent of the concepts we employ in describing it” – a view, he suggests, which “relies on the causal efficacy criterion for real entities, something that would likewise seem central to the realist picture.” Thus, “To obtain truth we must let the world

determine the nature of our representations” – where it would be causally that the world does so.31

This reflects, to be sure, the sort of understanding that Dharmakīrti has of what it is in virtue of which one could be entitled to think one’s beliefs true – an understanding, that is, according to which statements are finally made true by the ultimately existent reals that one can show to have caused the relevant awareness. I take the Madhyamaka critique of causal explanation to show, however, that it cannot coherently be thought that this is what being true consists in – showing which is not the same as showing that talk of truth is finally to be jettisoned. There is, then, no contradiction involved in claiming that it is ultimately true that there are no “ultimately existent” reals, that nothing could be specified as what “really exists” over and against the deficiently real things of ordinary experience. That this or any other fact’s being true could not consist in its being “made” so by cognitive contact with ultimately existent things is precisely among the points proponents of Madhyamaka are most concerned to make – this fact therefore cannot be taken to count against the possibility that their claim itself is understood as really true. On the Madhyamaka view as here elaborated, then, anything that could be specified as explaining our selves can only come into view at all relative to the very things we would thus understand – a fact that is, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti should be taken to urge, ultimately true.

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