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**Tom J. F. Tillemans
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Trying to be Fair to M€dhyamika Buddhism

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The Lectureship

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The Lecturer

The 2001 Chairholder for the Numata Chair in Buddhist Studies was Tom Tillemans, Professor in the Faculty of Letters and Chair of Buddhist Studies at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. Professor Tillemans holds a B.A. Honours in Philosophy from the University of British Columbia where he became interested in Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy. He travelled and studied in India before receiving a Licence of Letters and Doctor of Letters in Sanskrit, Chinese and Philosophy at the University of Lausanne.

Professor Tillemans has held positions as research fellow at the University of Hiroshima, Professor at the University of Hamburg before being appointed as full professor and Chair of Buddhist Studies at the University of Lausanne in the section of Oriental Languages. His research projects have been sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by the Swiss National Research Funds. Professor Tillemans’ research activities have resulted in a lengthy list of book chapters, refereed articles, translations, review articles, articles in reference works and other academic enterprises.

Trying to be Fair to Mēdhyamika Buddhism

Is that all there is?

(Peggy Lee)

When looking about in the computer room of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, my eyes often fixed upon a little drawing of a stick-man with bug-eyes and wild, electric, hair. The art-work was just a piece of graffiti, nothing more than one of many doodles and scrawls, but the message hit home, because underneath this otherwise insignificant stick-man was the caption, “somebody who has really had it with that Nēgērjuna.” I have no insider information as to why the artist got fed up with reading Nēgērjuna, the founder of the Buddhist Middle Way school, or Mēdhyamika, but I can more or less surmise that if she (or he) was like many of us, she probably felt a kind of initial giddiness at the heady perspective of taking on and defeating the myriad systems in Indian philosophy, and then quickly became exhausted and punch-drunk as argument after argument came at her in rapid-fire succession, most or all of them being complicated and none of them seeming wholly convincing. She may well have ploughed laboriously through a chapter or two of Nēgērjuna’s famous *M^mlamadhyamakakĒrikĒs*, perhaps hitting upon Chapter XV in which every second word seemed to be *svabhĒva*, variously translated as “self-existence,” “own-being,” and probably better rendered as “intrinsic nature.” Or she may have hit upon a number of turgid grammatical arguments concerning the minutiae of whether goers go over places that are being gone over (*gamyamĒna*), have been gone over (*gata*), or have not yet been, but will be, gone over (*agata*). Who knows: she might have even had a good background in basic Buddhism, but unless she also happened to have pursued the studies of a traditional Indian paNDit, specializing in PĒnini and Patañjali’s works on grammatical philosophy (*vyĒkaraŚa*), the context of this discussion about agents, actions and objects would have probably escaped her. But, whatever she read, at some point she closed the book in exasperation and perhaps asked herself something like, “Is that all there is to it—a series of very complicated moves with no way into the underlying system, if indeed there is one?” So then she took to graffiti, letting the rest of her fellow sufferers know that she had had her fill. And in many ways, I can understand her reaction, even though I will try to show that Mēdhyamika texts do present significant philosophy and deserve the effort that it takes to get past the series of obscurities. I obviously can’t go much further in my dialogue with an anonymous backroom cartoonist. What I would like to do is look a bit more closely at what is probably a similar, and also partly understandable, type of disappointment that has set in, at least in some professional Buddhist Studies circles, about the Mēdhyamika school of thought in Buddhist philosophy.

What is the Mēdhyamika? Or, first of all, the troublesome quibble: should the term be *Madhyamaka*, or *Mēdhyamika*? In fact, the attempt to see the former as the word for the school of thought and the latter as the word for the adherents to this thought is, as Jacques May pointed out quite some time ago, not grounded in rigorous data from Sanskrit texts. The situation in Sanskrit is *not* parallel to that in Tibetan where *dbu ma* and *dbu ma pa* do respectively designate the philosophical system and its adherents. In short, although there is now a type of convention amongst

writers to make such a distinction between the two Sanskrit terms, it is doubtful that there is much to recommend it. Even if *Madhyamaka* might be more of a designation of the system, *Mēdhyamika* is attested for both, viz. the system and its adherents.¹

That said, turning from mention to use of the term, the *Mēdhyamika* is one of the principal interpretations of Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures and has a lineage of several prolific and revered thinkers in India, Tibet and China, beginning with Nāgārjuna and Śryadeva in about the 3rd century C.E. and going on to Candrakīrti and Bhāvaviveka in the 6th century, Kamalācīla and Antirakṣita in the 8th, and a host of illustrious Tibetan exponents, not the least of which was Tsong kha pa in the 14th and 15th century. It has fascinated western writers for more than a century, including the major figures in Buddhist philology, like T. Stcherbatsky, Louis de la Vallée Poussin or Etienne Lamotte, and even some well-known philosophers, like Karl Jaspers. It is the school that has been often depicted as the pinnacle of subtlety in Buddhist thought, and notably has been taken in this way virtually unanimously by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition; in one way or another Tibetan Buddhists profess allegiance to a *Mēdhyamika* philosophy, although there are several more or less rival indigenous and well-developed Tibetan interpretations of what the true *Mēdhyamika* actually is. It is thus quite understandable that many practitioners of Buddhism in the West inspired by, or belonging to, one or another Tibetan school would faithfully endorse the hierarchy of Indian thought as found in the genre of Tibetan works known as *grub mtha'* or *siddhānta*, i.e., the doxographical literature, and maintain that Buddhist philosophy culminates in the *Mēdhyamika*.

With all this Eastern and Western superlative billing of the *Mēdhyamika* it is not surprising that at some time or another there would be a vociferous counter-reaction, where someone would finally thumb his nose at the hyperbole and argue that "the emperor has no clothes." The first article in this direction was that of Richard Robinson, published in 1972, and entitled "Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute all Philosophical Views?"² For Robinson, the principal complaint was that Nāgārjuna and the *Mēdhyamika* school were attributing to their opponents notions and positions to which these opponents themselves would never agree. The second major article was a follow-up to Robinson by Richard P. Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal,"³ in which the author argued that not only did the *Mēdhyamika* regularly misrepresent his opponent's positions and thus refute a man of straw, but his key arguments only appear to work because of a systematic equivocation upon the key polysemic term "intrinsic nature" (*svabhāva*); while Robinson saw a strategy of deliberate misrepresentation, Hayes added equivocation to the would-be sins of Nāgārjuna.⁴ No doubt this strong negative turn is understandable. After all, what could be more irritating to a good, serious, scholar than a general idolatry of a philosophy that seemed to him to be a serious of bad arguments, misrepresentations and

¹ See p. 472 in Jacques May, "Ch^mgan," *HÇbÇgirin V*, Paris-Tokyo, 1979: 470-493.

² Richard H. Robinson, "Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute all Philosophical Views?" *Philosophy East and West* 22, 1972: 325-331.

³ Richard P. Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22, 1994: 299-378.

⁴ Cf. Hayes, p. 325: "To the various fallacies and tricks brought to light by Robinson in his articles, we can now add the informal fallacy of equivocation as outlined above. That is, not only did Nāgārjuna use the term "svabhāva" in ways that none of his opponents did, but he himself used it in several different senses at key points in his argument."

sloppy or deliberate plays on words. The temptation is great to buck the tide of exaggerated claims. Nonetheless, the Robinson-Hayes type of reaction is itself overly vociferous and, what is probably worse, it is a bit simplistic and unfair. Indeed, as we shall see, the later Indian and Tibetan Mēdhyaṃika scholastic had taken up some of the accusations similar to those which Robinson and Hayes are leveling and had some solutions that involved considerable ingenuity, and in some cases, I would argue, significant insights. I think it is clear that at least the impatient tone of Robinson and Hayes articles is unfair: the Mēdhyaṃika philosopher is much, much less of an amateur, or to put it more strongly, he is less of a trickster or fraud than Robinson and Hayes make him out to be.

It would be too involved and technical in the present context to undertake a detailed blow by blow analysis of the passages that modern critics of the Mēdhyaṃika cite. Nor fortunately do I think we need to do this, as I think we can get our points across with a reconstruction of some general strategies in this school's argumentation. But before we delve into that, it is worthwhile to point out that the argumentation is not *just* what should make or break this philosophy or other philosophies for us. Even if certain of the different sorts of arguments that we find in these Mēdhyaṃika texts seem unconvincing to us, as they probably often do, it would nonetheless be a mistake to thereby dismiss Mēdhyaṃika thought. To take a parallel, I think that many people, other than perhaps certain die-hard analytic philosophers, would think it strangely narrow to dismiss the philosophies of St. Thomas Aquinas or Descartes because of the unconvincingness of the Five Ways, the cogito or the ontological argument—it would be seen as narrow because somehow these philosophies are more than just those arguments, and involve a certain systematic vision, approach and method of thinking that is of interest and can be developed further, even if many of the actual arguments that St. Thomas and Descartes themselves gave might often leave us less than converted. It may be that someone formulates other arguments to arrive at essentially Thomistic or Cartesian conclusions. So I think it could be with Nēgērjuna and the Mēdhyaṃika: even if certain of the reasoning which he gave in the third century would leave us somewhat puzzled in the twenty-first, the philosophic vision may well be of interest and could conceivably find support in arguments quite different from those of Nēgērjuna himself. I am not going to elaborate or invent such types of arguments, but I can imagine other people doing so. In short, I think the Mēdhyaṃika should be of interest to contemporary scholars, because the system and philosophic vision should be of interest. On the most general level the Mēdhyaṃika is trenchantly asking the question "What is a thing?", and this question, as well as the Mēdhyaṃika's attempted answers, should be of interest to philosophers, be they analytic philosophers concerned with issues of realism and anti-realism, or so-called "continental" philosophers, such as the Heideggerians meditating on *Die Frage nach dem Ding*.

I

For our purposes, that is, to try to re-open the debate on Mēdhyaṃika in a fairer way and bring out some of what seems promising in the Mēdhyaṃika vision, we need to do two things: have a working description of what Mēdhyaṃika is and dispel, to some degree at least, the accusations of sleight of hand and amateurism.

The Mēdhyaṃika is in the first place a philosophy that denies, across the board, that things (whatever they might be) have any intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This lack of intrinsic nature, or what it terms “voidness of intrinsic nature” (*svabhāvena Cūnyatā*), is considered the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). Now, there have been certain interpretations of Mēdhyaṃika that have tended to go in the direction of taking this ultimate truth as a kind of absolute that is real and permanent, much more real than the phenomena of our ordinary world, which are supposedly just widespread illusions that the world shares in common due to its general ignorance of this absolute. And the Mēdhyaṃika interpretation that no doubt goes the furthest in this direction of advocating such a real and permanent absolute separate from the illusory things of the world is no doubt the Tibetan Jo nang pa school, founded by Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan in the 13th Century, and with somewhat obscure bases in Indian textual sources. On the other hand, we also find in Indian and Tibetan literature, a carefully developed position that the ultimate, or voidness of intrinsic nature, is itself nothing more real or consistent than the ordinary things that make up our world. To say, therefore, that all those ordinary things lack intrinsic nature is not to describe a genuine reality lying behind or separate from illusion, but rather to give the final and best account of how ordinary things are; voidness, or the ultimate, is nothing in itself apart from, or more real than, the ordinary things upon which it is based—indeed this “no intrinsic nature-ness” (*nīfsvabhāvatī; nīfsvabhāvya*) is just itself something without any intrinsic nature, no more no less.

That said, no intrinsic nature-ness is supposedly something that is difficult to realize, something extremely subtle that has a deep effect upon us when we do realize it—following the usual canonical descriptions a superficial understanding of “no intrinsic nature-ness” inspires terror, but a genuine understanding is a liberating experience.⁵ Why would this realization be liberating at all and what would this liberation be like? Of course, there are elaborate scholastic accounts as to how this liberation comes about, who has it and when. However, I think the fundamental Mēdhyaṃika stance is that people’s thought and language is through and through pervaded with error, so that there is an almost instinctive error about the world, reifying the world and taking this distorted version of things as being consistent, possessing intrinsic natures, and existing independent of our thoughts about it. The emotional and ethical life of people is then supposedly directly conditioned by this systematic misrepresentation. One of the many surprising Mēdhyaṃika positions is that the ordinary man is himself also fundamentally in the dark about ordinary things, so that instead of Mēdhyaṃika advocating a simple acquiescence in the banal, there are significant discoveries to be undertaken. But

⁵See p. 99 et sq. and 122 et sq. in Vol. I of T. Tillemans, *Materials for the Study of Śryadeva, Dharmapāla and Candrakīrti*. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 24, Vienna 1990.

if there are such discoveries or rediscoveries of the ordinary to be made and if they are liberating, it is difficult to see that a liberation of this sort would involve anything much resembling transcendence, although I would acknowledge that many Buddhists, East and West, would probably disagree here. At any rate, one formulation that I find particularly appealing and which goes a long way in this direction of no-transcendence is what we find in Candrak.rti and in Tsong kha pa: understanding voidness and being liberated is understanding the ordinary, or the so-called “customary truth” (*sa ^ v•tisatya*), simply as is, stripped of our all-pervasive reifications of intrinsic natures and so forth; it is an understanding of *sa ^ v• timētra*—what is just ordinary, or customary, and no more.⁶

So much for the basic picture of Mēdhyamika as I see it. Clearly the key term here is *svabhēva*, intrinsic nature. Broadly speaking, the way the term is generally used, whether in Mēdhyamika or in other philosophies, is to signify something or some property which exists objectively and genuinely occurs in, or qualifies, certain things; it is thus to be contrasted with a mind-dependent appearance that is absent from, or fails to correspond to, the thing themselves. Thus, to take the stock Indian example: when a striped rope is seen as a snake, the pseudo-snake that appears has no intrinsic nature and is not present in, or corresponding to, the striped rope. In the Mēdhyamika texts we find this fundamental sense expressed in terms of designations and their bases: to say that something has an intrinsic nature, and is not just a mere appearance or a mere designation (*prajñaptimētra*) due to language and thought, means that it withstands logical analysis and that it is findable or obtainable by reason in the “basis of designation.” The pseudo-snake is obviously not findable anywhere in the striped rope—a fact which any worldling can verify—but if we switch to a more sophisticated level, that of ultimate analysis of the mode of being of things, then, according to the Mēdhyamika, nothing is fully findable in its bases, and in that sense, nothing has intrinsic nature.

Note that the formulation I have adopted in terms of *x* having a *svabhēva* implying that *x* and its properties are findable when one searches logically, or equivalently, that *x* and its properties have the ability to withstand logical analysis (*rigs pas dpyad bzod pa*), is not literally what occurs in the texts of Nēgērjuna himself. That said, the locution “ability to withstand logical analysis” and variants upon this terminology are prominently used by most major Indian Mēdhyamika writers, who say that customary things exist for us only insofar as they are not analyzed (*avicēratas*), or to take the striking formulation of r.gupta and At.a, they are “satisfying [only] when not analyzed” (*avicēramēṣiya*).⁷ “Findable/ obtainable/ perceptible as existent under analysis” figures in such

⁶ See Candrak.rti’s #*adhyamakAvatArabhaSya* ad *Madhyamakēvatēra* VI.28. Translated by Louis de la Vallée Poussin in *Le Muséon*, nouvelle série, 8, Louvain, 1910, p. 304-305.

⁷ See e.g., *Prasannapadē* 67.7 (ed. Louis de la Vallée Poussin, Bibliotheca Buddhica IV) : *naitad eva ^ / laukike vyavahēra ithaMvicArApravrtter avicArataC ca laukikapadērthēnēm astitvēt*. “No, it’s not so, for in the world this type of analysis does not operate with regard to transactional usage, and entities for the world exist [only] from a non-analytic point of view.” See also *ibid.* 71, n. 1a. On the term *avicēramāṣya* and Jñēnagarbha’s emphasis on no-analysis (*avicēra*), see p. 42 and 138 in M.D. Eckel, *Jñēnagarbha on the Two Truths. An Eighth Century Handbook of Madhyamaka Philosophy*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1992.

texts as, for example, *MadhyamakĀvatāra* VI. 160 where Candrakīrti discusses the so-called “sevenfold reasoning” (*rnam bdun gyi rigs pa*) and says that when yogins analyze things, the latter are not found (*rnyed pa*) to exist as having any of the seven possible relationships to parts.⁸ Thus, it is argued that under analysis wholes are neither identical with nor different from their parts, meaning that when we look for, or analyze, what we take to be the intrinsic nature of something like a cart in terms of possible part-whole relations, we come up empty handed: we don’t find (obtain / perceive) any coherent, unassailable, version of what this cart or its cartness could be. And in that sense, we don’t find (obtain / perceive) any real thing: the customary cart only exists unanalyzed. In short, these ways of interpreting Nāgārjuna are probably present in one way or another in all the important currents of Indian Mādhyamika philosophy and especially so in the later Indian Mādhyamika works, such as those of Candrakīrti, Jñānagarbha, R. Gupta, Ānandakīrti and Kamalaśīla. There is a quasi-consensus amongst commentators on this matter of Mādhyamika philosophy being about unfindability under analysis, and I see no reason to deny that, on this very broad characterization at least, they may well have gotten Nāgārjuna pretty much right.

As we shall discuss shortly, Richard Hayes also focused on something like this sense of *svabhāva*, but instead of speaking of it being a type of analytically findable identity or intrinsic nature, he spoke of it as being identity *simpliciter*. Thus, for him this usage of *svabhāva* meant just what something is, its identity, as opposed to what it is not, its difference from other things.⁹ This is not far from accurate as an account, but nonetheless lacks a very important feature in Mādhyamika contexts. The term *svabhāva* can indeed mean identity, what something is—as for example in Abhidharma texts or when Mādhyamikas themselves endorse the generally recognized verity that fire has the *svabhāva* of heat—but it is always more than that in the polemical contexts where it is being refuted by the Mādhyamika. In those contexts, it is an identity that withstands analysis, that is hence real and not just customary; it is consistent and does not dissolve into contradictions when subjected to logical analysis. This is why I prefer to speak of this sense of *svabhāva* as an “analytically findable intrinsic nature,” or “analytically findable identity,” thus bringing out the fact that the Mādhyamika is arguing against *real* identity, what something really is. In their polemical attributions of *svabhāva* to “realists”, or advocates of “real entities” (*bhāva*), the Mādhyamikas always take this *svabhāva* as involving a reification, a misguided attempt to confer some sort of an ultimate status to things, a *bhāvasvabhāva*. As I shall try to show below, this idea that realists, and indeed we ourselves, are constantly engaged in reification, i.e., a type of distorting projection, is the thread which ties the would-be double use of the term *svabhāva* together. However, before we get to that, let’s very briefly look at the Nāgārjuna’s own use of *svabhāva*.

⁸ *MadhyamakĀvatāra* VI.160ab: *rnam bdun gyis med gang de ji lta bur / yod ces rnal ‘byor pas ‘di’i yod mi rnyed*. It is not clear what the Sanskrit corresponding to *rnyed pa* is here, but it is likely to be *labdha*, as it is in VI.23, or possibly *prāpta/upalabdha*. The basic idea of things being fundamentally unfindable (*na labdha*) is already present in the *SamādhirĀjas* 32.96: *dharmo na labdho buddhena yasya sa jñāna utpadyate* “The Buddha has not found any dharma of which a notion arises.”

⁹ Hayes op. cit. 305, 311.

In Chapter XV of his most important work, the *M^mlamadhyamakakārikās*, Nāgārjuna develops what seems to be a different use of “intrinsic nature” from that which we have termed “analytically findable identity.” In the first two verses he speaks instead of an intrinsic nature as something which “cannot arise due to causes and conditions” (*na sa ^ bhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ*) and as that which is “not fabricated and is not dependent on anything else” (*ak•trimah svabhāvo hi nirapek•aḥ paratra ca*).¹⁰ It is this sense that Robinson would take as the point of departure for his critique, arguing that Nāgārjuna foists upon his innocent opponent an acceptance of an absurd and self-contradictory *svabhāva* (After all, would anyone actually acknowledge that things are independent of causes and conditions?) and proceeds to an all-too-easy refutation of his opponent by saying that *this* cannot exist.¹¹ Equally it is this second sense of *svabhāva* that Hayes would seize upon to show that the Mēdhyamika arguments’ seeming persuasiveness will evaporate when we diagnose the equivocations between the first and second senses of *svabhāva*. Let us term these two aspects, intrinsic-nature-as-findable-identity and intrinsic-nature-as-independent-existence.¹² As I had mentioned earlier, Hayes spoke of the first sense as identity *simpliciter*, but it’s worth our while to stress that what it is actually a type of *analytically findable* identity, or analytically findable intrinsic nature. So I’ll deliberately take the liberty of modifying Hayes’ formulation a bit and add the qualification of “findability” to identity.

Now, I think that it is quite clear that Nāgārjuna himself made a conscious attempt to fuse these two would-be separate aspects of *svabhāva* in some sort of mutually implicative relationship. In his *M^mlamadhyamakakārikās* XVIII.10, we find:

pratītya yad bhavati na hi tēvat tad eva tat /
na cēnyad api tat tasmēn nocchinna ^ nēpi •ē•vatam //

Whatever *x* exists in dependence [upon *y*], that *x* is not identical to *y*,
 nor is it other than *y*. Therefore it is neither eliminated nor eternal.

The passage is in effect stating that whatever exists dependently— i. e., whatever lacks independent existence—also lacks findable identity, for being a findable identity means, according to Nāgārjuna, that one should be able to say rationally, in a way that stands up to analysis, that a thing is either identifiable with or is something different from the things it depends upon. In short: if *x* and *y* are dependent, they do not have independent existence; if they do not have independent existence, they do not have a findable identity. And if this “if ...then” paraphrase of Nāgārjuna’s verse is right, it follows by applications of *modus tollens* that whatever *x* and *y* have findable identity must also have independent existence, and will not be dependent on anything. The route from findability to independence is thus short and sweet: for Nāgārjuna, a findable identity entails independence. If we

¹⁰ A similar statement concerning *svabhāva* being independent is also to be found in Candrakīrti’s *ṭīkā* to verse 288 of the twelfth chapter of Śrīyadeva’s *Catuhcatāka*: *tatrātmā nēma bhāvanē ^ yo ‘parīyattasvar^mpasvabhāvaḥ* “There, what is called *ātman* (“self”, “identity”), is entities’ intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), the essence (*svar^mpa*) that does not depend on anything else.” See Tillemans *Materials*, op. cit. p. 126.

¹¹ See Robinson op. cit. 326.

¹² Hayes’s terms are respectively *svabhāva*1 “identity” and *svabhāva*2 “causal independence.” Hayes op cit. 312.

add the term “intrinsic nature,” it looks like the following entailment holds for Nĕgĕrjuna: intrinsic-nature-as-findable-entity entails intrinsic-nature-as-independent-existence.

There is another famous passages in the *M^mlamadhyamakakĕrikĕs* that rather clearly supports our contention that Nĕgĕrjuna himself saw a link between findability and independence and thus between the two aspects of the semantic range of the supposedly equivocal term, *svabhĕva*. This is the extremely well known verse, XXIV.18, which makes a series of equivalences or mutual implications, including one between being dependent and being something just simply designated by the mind on the basis of other things, especially its parts:

yaf prat...tyasamutpĕdaf •^mnyatĕˆ tĕˆ pracak•mahe /

sĕ prajĕnaptir upĕdĕya pratipat saiva madhyamĕ //

“Dependent arising, that we declare to be voidness. This [voidness] is [equivalent to] being a designation in dependence. And it [i.e., voidness] is precisely the middle way.”

Without going into a detailed exegesis of this rich and complex verse, we can fairly readily see that an attempt is once again being made to connect the concepts of dependence and unfindability, or equally, findability and independence. Being a designation in dependence upon something else has to be understood as being just a designation by thought and language and no more (*prajĕnaptimĕtra*): the thing in question cannot be found if we subject it to analysis. What is dependent, then, is unfindable under analysis. Note that characterizing all things as dependently arising and as being mere designations also highlights the primordial role of the cognizing mind that is responsible for something being such and such: these “designations” are “mere designations” in that they are mentally created without being somehow “out there” in the object.

We’ll come back to the type of argumentation strategies used by Nĕgĕrjuna, but in any case, I think we already should have an inkling that a relatively natural reading of Nĕgĕrjuna is to take him as accepting a very close link between the two aspects of *svabhĕva*. In fact, I strongly suspect that the link is not just a conditional in one direction, but is rather a biconditional, i.e., *x* has independent existence *if and only if* *x* is analytically findable. Besides findability under analysis implying independence, it looks to me that Nĕgĕrjuna would also accept the converse, i.e., that if something were to be of a genuinely independent intrinsic nature (viz., independent of causes, parts, and even the minds that designate it), it would have to be somehow findable under analysis— for example, as something completely distinct from parts or from any kind of causal history, and present in an object independently of the mental processes of designation. It would be a genuine absolute completely other than the relative. The candidates for this sort of absolute would be things like *nirvĕṣa* or the “unconditioned” (*asaˆ sk•ta*), and it is not surprising that Nĕgĕrjuna subjects them to a trenchant critique of unfindability under analysis. In short, it looks like, for Nĕgĕrjuna at least, findability under analysis and independence are two equivalent, mutually implicative, notions. If we say that sometimes the use of the term *svabhĕva* seems to highlight one aspect and sometimes the other, that does not mean that term *svabhĕva* is thereby equivocal: we may well have two ways to unpack one and the same concept. If that is right, then the minimum result of our discussion up to

this point is that it should begin to look rather doubtful that Nēgēṛjuna is guilty of the gross equivocation of which he is accused by Hayes. He may perhaps have been wrong, he may have even done something which we cannot easily follow, but he didn't just simply play on two different senses.

II

A few words about Robinson's paper and the charge that the Mēdhyaṃika pursued a sophisticated strategy of misrepresenting his opponents as accepting an absurd and contradictory notion of *svabhēva*. Robinson had argued:

"The validity of Nēgēṛjuna's refutations hinges upon whether his opponents really upheld the existence of a *svabhēva* or *svabhēva* as he defines the term."¹³

He then proceeded to survey the various opponents' positions to see whether "Nēgēṛjuna succeed[s] in refuting all views without making any assumptions that are not conceded by the adherents of the particular view under attack."¹⁴ I won't evaluate the actual list of "axioms" that Robinson attributes to the Mēdhyaṃika himself and their non-acceptance by the Mēdhyaṃika's opponents, as fortunately we need not enter into the details of this rather complicated picture. I would maintain that the accuracy of those details is in any case a secondary debate—what is significant for us here is Robinson's general line of argument that the Mēdhyaṃika philosopher is just practicing sleight of hand *because* he attributes to his opponents things they do not accept.

Now, I think we would have to say that it would be quite unfair to accuse Nēgēṛjuna of deliberate misrepresentation *simply* because he attributed to his opponent things that the same opponent would reject, even vociferously. Certainly if an opponent didn't recognize something attributed to him, that in itself would not necessarily mean that he was misrepresented, for it is a natural and even inevitable part of many genuinely philosophical debates between truth-seekers, that at some point one group says what the other actually thinks, or what they must think if they are to remain consistent with their own basic principles. Of course, there are good and bad, fair and unfair, ways to do this, but the simple fact of one party adopting such a move in a debate does not in itself mean that it is misrepresenting the other or playing, what Robinson calls, a type of sophisticated "shell game."

The issue can be reformulated: Is the Mēdhyaṃika then himself being fair to his opponent, and (often or mostly) doing truth-seeking philosophy, or is he just playing at disingenuous and sophisticated shell games? I think the texts would tend to back mostly the former view, even if the dichotomy is a little simplistic and the line that we want to draw between truth-seeking and sophistry is often shaded. In any case, Mēdhyaṃikas, or at least many Mēdhyaṃikas, were quite aware that misrepresentation was a charge *they* had to answer, and they tried to answer it (as far I can see) with

¹³ Robinson op. cit. 326.

¹⁴ Ibid. 327.

sincerity. Of course, it might be that they were in the long run unsatisfying in their answers, but it's very hard to agree that they were just performing a *trompe l'oeil* or deliberately setting up their opponent with facile self-contradictions. For example, the eighth century Indian writer, Kamalaśīla, in his *Madhyamakāloka*, was confronted with the objection that his opponents would not themselves acknowledge the logical reasons which the Mādhyamika was using, and that therefore the reasons would be "unestablished" (*asiddhahetu*). He replied with rather detailed arguments showing that his adversaries *would have to accept* the reason, in spite of their vociferous denials, because it was entailed by other propositions that they did explicitly accept. The tactic of argumentation is clear and figures repeatedly in the discussion of the "neither one nor many" argument (*ekānekavīyogahetu*) in the *Madhyamakāloka*, from folio 215b to 218a in the *sDe dge* edition (henceforth "D.").¹⁵ Indeed, Kamalaśīla systematically takes up the objections of numerous sorts of Buddhist and non-Buddhists who argue that they have been misrepresented by the Mādhyamika who alleges that things *they* accept (i.e., God, atoms, space, consciousness, etc.) are neither single entities nor several different entities (and are hence unreal). Kamalaśīla's reply is always the same: the adversary accepts by implication, or has in fact accepted (*shugs kyis na khas blangs pa nyid; khas blangs pa kho na*), that the pseudo-entity to which he subscribes is neither one thing nor many different things, because he accepts such and such a property of this entity, and that property in fact implies being neither one nor many. The key Tibetan term *shugs kyis na* that is used here probably translated a Sanskrit original term along the lines of *sāmānyatā*, "indirectly," "by implication." One example passage from *Madhyamakāloka* should suffice to show how such "acceptance by implication" works:

gang dag gis lus la sogs pa rdul phran bsags pa tsam yin pa'i phyir rdul phra rab rnamso so so re re gci pa nyid du kun brtags pa de dag gis kyang sbyor ba dang bsags pa sogs pa'i chos su khas blangs pa'i phyir shugs kyis na gci pa nyid dang bral pa nyid kyang khas blangs pa kho na yin te /

"Those who imagine that each atom individually is one thing since the body and other such [gross objects] are just simply collections of atoms, do in fact also accept by implication that [the atoms] lack oneness, for they accept that [the atoms] have properties (*chos*) such as being junctions or collections [of parts]."¹⁶

Nor should it be thought that this use of "acceptance by implication," or perhaps more simply "implicit acceptance," was an occasional flash in the pan of one Indian thinker—it looks to me to be a more or less basic Indo-Tibetan Mādhyamika argument strategy. In Tibet, the same basic general method of attributing positions by implication was often known as presenting what the "opponent's position ends up being" (*khas len pa'i mthar thug pa*), or less literally, "the upshot" of his views. One also finds in certain texts the related notion *rigs pas 'phul ba*, "imposing [a principle] through logical reasoning" or *'phul mtshams kyi rigs pa*, literally translated as a "logical reasoning which imposes a limit". Interestingly enough, although the term *'phul mtshams* is not, to my knowledge, found in any dictionary, including the three volume *Tibetan-Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*, or *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, and is a bit difficult for me to translate satisfactorily, a quick

¹⁵ = *Peking* edition f. 238b-241a.

¹⁶ *sDe dge* edition folio 216a-b.

search of the *Asian Classics InputProject* data base of Tibetan collected works (*gsung 'bum*), reveals that *'phul mtshams* occurs eighty-two times— if we were to add the variants like *rigs pas 'phul*, *'phul nus pa'i rigs pa*, etc., we would be into hundreds of occurrences, largely in later commentaries, but also occasionally in Tsong kha pa's works, like his *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal* on Candrak. rti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*. It seems to have escaped lexicographers, and so it escaped western researchers on Mēdhyamika too. That said, I have the impression that it was, and still is, more or less common knowledge amongst monks. Indeed, this technique of logically imposing principles upon recalcitrant opponents was, according to the late dGe bshes rTa mgrin Rab brtan, essential in actual dGe lugs pa monastic debates on Mēdhyamika and was typically used when someone wanted to show that having an intrinsic nature, or equivalently "being truly established" (*bden par grub pa*), or being truly established as such and such a thing, would imply its being such and such in "complete independence from everything whatsoever" (*gang la'ang bltos med*).¹⁷ In fact, this implication of complete independence from causes, parts and also from the cognizing mind, is amply attested in the texts and is not just an oral tradition. It figures, for example, in an extract from Sera Chos kyi rgyal mtshan's *sKabs dang po'i spyi don* that I translated a number of years ago.¹⁸ I think the implication in question is a compactly formulated version of the principle that we were stressing earlier in looking at the two verses from Nēgērjuna, viz. that findability under analysis, or findable identity, implies complete independence. What is noteworthy in the present context is that this implication, according to experienced debaters like dGe bshes Rab brtan, is known as a case of *rigs pas 'phul ba*. Of course, it would supposedly hold whether the opponent liked it or not—his protests would just be grounds for more debate, a debate which could, nevertheless, be quite sincere and truth-seeking.

III

Let us now take up anew the problem of the link between findability and independence. While it should be clear that the Mēdhyamika, with his strategy of implications, upshots and imposed principles, is probably a much more sophisticated and interesting philosopher than Robinson and Hayes made him out to be, his use of these implications between findable identity and independence is a particularly important step and is a hard one to fathom. Perhaps at some point much further down the road we might come to the conclusion that we should give up on it all and go back to detecting misrepresentations, equivocation and other forms of sloppy thinking. But I think that Robinson and Hayes were far too quick in taking that step. So, how does the link work? If we grant, as I think we should, that Mēdhyamikas were not cunningly equivocating on *svabhāva* and misrepresenting their

¹⁷ I had the privilege of being dGe bshes rTa mgrin Rab brtan's student for a number of years in the 1970's and early 80's and often had arguments with him where I presented my own Robinson-like objections.

¹⁸ T. Tillemans, "Two Tibetan Texts on the 'Neither One Nor Many' Argument for *cUnyatā*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 12, 1984: 357-388. See especially p. 364 (text f. 26a6) : *khyab ste / bden grub kyi gcig yin na gang la'ang bltos med kyi gcig yin dgos / de yin na cha bcas ma yin dgos pa'i phyr /* "The entailment holds because if anything were to be truly one, it would have to be one [thing] which does not depend on anything [else] whatsoever, and in such a case it could not have parts."

opponents, then how did *they* think that the seeming gap between findability and independence should be bridged?

There is unfortunately no quick answer. To arrive at a charitable interpretation of Mēdhyaṃika thought that would start to answer that question, we need to be clearer on how the mass of seemingly diverse arguments in Mēdhyaṃika might work together. I can see at least three types of argument strategies that are relevant to us in this context, all three present in varying degrees in Mēdhyaṃika texts, although for the purposes of this lecture I'll have to be brief and concentrate on broad outlines rather than on the detailed exegesis of specific textual passages. Here are the three:

- a. a selective use of pan-Indian philosophical debates
- b. etymological and purely semantic arguments
- c. non-obvious facts about our mental-makeup and way of seeing the world.

We first turn to what I am calling “the selective use of pan-Indian debates.” A good example of this is to be found in Dharmapāla's commentary on Śryadeva's *Catuf•ataka*, where this 6th century Viñṇavēda commentator on Mēdhyaṃika examines the possibility of vision and other sensory experiences, and embarks on a detailed analysis whether or not the subtle matter of the eye has contact with its object.¹⁹ The problem thus is whether or not the senses act at a distance. This is a bona fide pan-Indian debate, known as the problem of *prēpyakēritvavēda* (“action by contact”) and *aprēpyakēritvavēda* (“action without contact”), and interestingly enough, Dharmapāla accepts the critique of each side against the other.²⁰ This acceptance of the absurdities raised by both sides means that the Mēdhyaṃika can then move to the desired conclusion that all possibilities of genuine vision are riddled with faults, and that it is hence impossible that people do really see anything. For Dharmapāla, Śryadeva's end was best served by showing that both sides of the debate were untenable—the two adversaries' refutations were both accepted, with the result that the matter in question was shown to be without intrinsic nature, that is, inconsistent and unable to resist a thorough examination, and hence unfindable under analysis.

We see a similar strategy at work in the Mēdhyaṃika arguments on causality, e.g., whether effects and causes are essentially identical or different. Causality was regularly examined in terms of two alternatives, *satkēryavēda* and *asatkēryavēda*, or the “theory of the effect existing or not existing [at the time of the cause]”—predictably Nēgērjuna's conclusion is that neither alternative is possible.²¹ We also see this use of pan-Indian themes in Nēgērjuna's use of the recurring

¹⁹ See pp. 156–159 and n. 290, 299 in Vol. I of T. Tillemans, *Materials for the Study of Śryadeva, Dharmapāla and Candrak.rti*.

²⁰ On the general outlines of this debate in Indian philosophy, see chapter XVIII in S. Mookherjee, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

²¹ There are several arguments involved here involving fairly clearly discernible pan-Indian controversies invoking widely accepted principles, often from grammatical analysis. For example, my colleague, Johannes Bronkhorst, has traced how Nēgērjuna used a certain pan-Indian preoccupation concerning the correspondence between words and things to argue that statements like “X causes Y” or “X makes Y” cannot resist analysis, because the effect Y does not yet exist at the time of X. See J. Bronkhorst, *Langage et réalité. Sur un épisode de la pensée indienne*. Brépols Publishers, Turnhout, Belgium, 1999.

controversy on parts (*avayava*) and wholes (*avayavin*), i.e., whether parts are identical to or different from wholes, or whether wholes are somehow more or less real than parts. Here too the conclusion is that none of the alternatives are satisfactory, and yet if something genuinely had intrinsic nature it would have to fit in with one of the two possible positions. The conclusion is immediate: no intrinsic nature.

What is noteworthy for us is that this peculiar type of acceptance of both sides' refutations in pan-Indian controversies *does* make for a bridge between intrinsic-nature-as-independent-existence and intrinsic-nature-as-findable-identity. In *M^mlamadhyamakakĒrikĒs* XVIII.10, cited above, we saw that when *x* was dependent on *y*, the two were neither genuinely identical nor different; at least following Candrak.rti's interpretation in *PrasannapadĒ*, the argument turns on the *satkĒryavĒda-asatkĒryavĒda* debate: the cause would be neither the same nor different from the effect. *M^mlamadhyamakakĒrikĒs* XXIV.18, it will be recalled, made a linkage between being dependent and being a mere designation (*prajñaptimĒtra*), that is to say, between dependence and being unanalyzable, unfindable. Here Candrak.rti explicitly glosses the verse in terms of the problem of parts and wholes—everything has parts and is dependent upon parts, but cannot be found as the same or different from the parts.

Whether it is causality or part-whole problems that are at stake, the Mēdhyamika very often relies upon the same type of argumentation strategy: use one side of a pan-Indian debate off against the other to show that dependence will imply not being findable, and thus show that findability entails independence. If things were dependent *and* findable under analysis, then the cause and effect relationship would be either along the lines of *satkĒryavĒda* or *asatkĒryavĒda*, but it is neither of the two; therefore things cannot be both dependent and findable. Similarly for parts and wholes: if things were dependent and findable, then they would be identical or different from their parts; but they are neither; therefore they are not both dependent and findable. The linkage between dependence and being unfindable is thus made by means of an implicit three step argument:

1. For things to be both dependent and findable under analysis would imply a solution to major pan-Indian debates such as those concerning part and wholes and causality.
2. These debates have no such solution.
3. Ergo dependence and findability are incompatible and cannot both be asserted.

In sum, if things are dependent, they cannot be findable under analysis; their findability entails their independence from causes, parts and all other factors.

The second approach, i.e., etymologies and semantics, is what one finds in *M^mlamadhyamakakĒrikĒs'* chapter XV on *svabhĒva*, and especially in Candrak.rti's exegesis upon this chapter in *PrasannapadĒ*. It is the type of argumentation where the Mēdhyamika says that that if something has *svabhĒva*, the word *svabhĒva* is to be analyzed as meaning that the thing has its own being, i.e., *svo bhĒva*. Equally, in the world, to say that a property is the *svabhĒva* of something is to say that it is "natural," "innate," "intrinsic," and is not "fabricated" by extraneous causal facts, just like heat is said by the world to be an intrinsic nature of fire but not of water (because when we boil

water, the heat has to be brought in “from the outside”). While an adequate treatment of the use of semantic arguments in Mēdhyaṃika texts would take us much too far afield here, for our purposes now we can probably skirt the detailed textual exegesis. What is to be stressed is that the semantic approach in arguments like the one about fire, water and heat is probably best viewed as providing no more than approximate illustrations and analogies, but not rigorous probative demonstrations about *svabhāva*'s complete independence. Indeed Candrakīrti himself, in the *Prasannapadā*, goes on to stress that actually the heat, because it *is* causally dependent, does *not* have intrinsic nature for the Mēdhyaṃika at all, and he thereby acknowledges rather clearly the approximate and merely illustrative aspect to his discussion about fire, water and heat.²² Not only that, but in stressing the limits of the fire-heat case, he suggests that what constitutes the intrinsic nature that he and other Mēdhyaṃikas are refuting is not just the worldly conception of a natural, innate, or intrinsic property like fire's heat, but something more subtle and radical, in that it involves *complete* independence. It may be approximately illustrated by reference to the ordinary worldly notion of nature with its partial independence from certain types of (extraneous) causes, but it is not the same as that notion because it goes much further in its independence. Similarly for the etymological argument about *svabhāva*, which immediately precedes the fire-water-heat analogy: this too is explicitly recognized by Candrakīrti to be showing how “it is established, for the world, that intrinsic nature is not a fabricated entity.”²³ It is at most indirectly illustrating the type of *svabhāva* which the Mēdhyaṃika is attacking. But once again, that latter *svabhāva* is something rather special and is not simply identifiable with the ordinary notion of intrinsic nature with which the world is familiar.²⁴

²² See *Prasannapadā* 260.9-10: *tad evam akṛtakaḥ svabhāva itī lokavyavahāre vyavasthite vāyam idēn... br̥mo yad etad auSNya tad apy agnef svabhāvo na bhavati gṛhyatā kṛtakaṭvAt /* “So, thus, when in the world's transactional usage it is established that intrinsic nature is what is not fabricated, we now assert that it should be understood that heat is not the intrinsic nature of fire either, for it is produced [from causes and conditions].” Cf. also the discussion of this and other uses of *svabhāva* in Chapter XV developed by J.W. de Jong, “Le problème de l'absolu dans l'école mēdhyaṃika,” *Revue philosophique* 140, 1950: 322-327.; “The Problem of the Absolute in the Madhyamaka School,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 2, 1972: 1-6.

²³ *Prasannapadā* 260.5: *k takaf padērthaf sa loke naiva svabhāva itī vyapadīcyate* .

²⁴ It is also worth noting that what the Mēdhyaṃika is arguing against is *not* simply the notion of an “intrinsic property” as it figures in certain articles in contemporary western analytic philosophy. Compare Stephan Yablo's intuitive characterization: “You know what an intrinsic property is: it's a property that a thing has (or lacks) regardless of what may be going on outside of itself” (p. 479 in S. Yablo, “Intrinsicness,” *Philosophical Topics* 26, 1999, 479-505). Cf. also I. L. Humberstone, “Intrinsic/Extrinsic,” *Synthese* 108, 1996: 205-267. See the summary of these views in B. Weatherston, “Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Properties,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intrinsic-extrinsic>, 2002. One of the ways of distinguishing intrinsic and extrinsic, i.e., that of Brian Ellis (Humberstone, 206), is suggestive of Candrakīrti's fire-heat-water case: intrinsic properties are those which an object has independently of any outside forces acting on them and extrinsic are those the object has because of outside forces. Cf. also J. Michael Dunn, “Relevant Predication 2: Intrinsic Properties and Internal Relations,” *Philosophical Studies* 60, 1990: 177-206. On page 178 Dunn writes: “Metaphysically, an intrinsic property of an object is a property that the object has by virtue of itself, depending on no other thing.” In any case, it should be clear that when *these* authors are speaking of no dependence on outside forces, other things, etc., they are *not* saying that an intrinsic property (e.g., an object's mass or atomic composition) is completely independent of any and all factors, like its own causes that brought it into being, its parts, etc., etc.

Finally, the third strategy, viz., invoking non-obvious facts about our mental make-up and way of conceiving the world, is arguably what pins down better the interpretation of the first two as involving a subtle sense of intrinsic nature. An extremely important feature of Mēdhyaṃika philosophy is that it depends heavily on the idea of the Mēdhyaṃika refuting our “superimpositions” (*samēropa*), i.e., our inveterate tendencies to distort the world by systematically imposing upon it “intrinsic natures.” *Svabhēva* is thus a false projection upon otherwise innocuous objects of our customary world that do not have such *svabhēva*, and the task of the Mēdhyaṃika is to refute these projections, but not the customary world itself. This key emphasis on distinguishing subtle “superimpositions” (*samēropa*) of intrinsic nature from the otherwise innocuous customary world of ordinary objects is to be found in texts of Candrakīrti, Jñānagarbha, Kamalaśīla, and many others, and perhaps even in those of Nāgārjuna himself, at least if we believe the commentators. To take a passage from Jñānagarbha’s *Satyadvayavibhāṅgavṛtti* (D. 12a-b):

gzugs la sogs pa’i lus rtog pa’i nyes pas ma sbags pa gzhan gyi dbang gi bdag nyid rnam par shes pa tsam snang ba dgag par mi nus pa ‘ba’ zhig tu ma zad kyi / byed na byed pa po la mngon sum la sogs pas phyir gnod pa kho na byed do //

“We cannot negate physical things, such as visible matter and the like, which are untainted by conceptualization’s corruptions, are of a dependent nature, and which are appearances to simple [non-conceptual] cognition. Not only is this impossible, but if we did [negate such things] then the person who performed [this negation] would in fact be subsequently refuted by direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and other [valid cognitions].”

Compare Kamalaśīla in the *Madhyamakāloka* (D. 180a):

des na dngos po rnam kyī ngo bo nyid kun rdzob pa la yang gnod pa ni mi byed kyī / ‘on kyang de la bden pa’i rnam pa nyid du sgro btags pa sel ba’i phyir rab tu sgrub par byed pa kho na yin no //

“We do not invalidate the customary natures of entities, but instead just prove [the absence of real intrinsic nature] in order to exclude what is superimposed upon the [customary entities] as their aspect of being true (*bden pa’i rnam pa*).”

Finally, Candrakīrti also stressed that there had to be an all-important distinction between things and the “intrinsic nature” (*svabhāva*), of things. *Prasannapadā* 58.10-11:

tasmād anutpannē bhāvē ity eva tēvad viparītasvarūpēdhyēropa-pratipakṣeṣa prathamaprakaraśērambhaf / idēn... kvacid yaf ka cid vi e o dhyēropitas tadvi e ēpēkaraśērtha e aprakaraśērambhaf / gant gantavyagamanēdiko ‘pi nirava e o vi e o nēsti pratītyasamutpēdasyeti pratipēdanērtham //

“Thus, when [Nāgārjuna] says ‘entities do not arise’ in this way first of all [it is pointed out that] the initial chapter [of the *Mādhyamakakārikās*] was written as a counter to superimpositions of false intrinsic natures; and then that the remaining chapters were written in order to eliminate whatever distinctions are superimposed anywhere; the [passage] is designed to show that dependent arising has absolutely no distinctions at all like goes, places to be gone over and going, etc.”

Some remarks. First, all three authors regularly speak in one way or another of superimpositions, be they superimposed intrinsic natures (*svabhāva*, *svarūpa*), distinctions (*viśeṣa*), aspects (*ākāra*)—the differences are essentially those of wording. That said, Kamalaśīla's words, "what is superimposed upon the [customary entities] as their aspect of being true (*bden pa'i rnam pa*)," take on special significance because they show that this superimposition is a *reification*, a way of taking the ordinary as being much more real, consistent, and resistant to analysis than it is. Second, in a recent article, "On *samāropa*", Teruyoshi Tanji says quite rightly about the passage cited from *Prasannapadā*:

"... Candrakīrti asserts that, strictly speaking, the effect of *samāropa* is not a thing but the own-being [i.e., intrinsic nature] of a thing, as he observes that ... [*tasmed anutpannē bhāvē ity ... pratipēdanērtham*]. This observation [i.e., the passage in *Prasannapadā* 58.10-11], being the summary of the subjects of the chapters in the MMK [i.e., *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*], expresses aptly the core of Candrakīrti's philosophy of emptiness. It is so important and cardinal that the meaning of all the other statements in his commentary ought to be estimated by way of meeting the view of this observation."²⁵

I agree fully. In brief: at least for Jñānagarbha, Kamalaśīla and Candrakīrti, refuting superimpositions (i.e., reifications of things rather than customary things themselves) is what Mādhyamika thought is essentially about.²⁶ Mādhyamikas would thus refute superimposed versions of causes, parts, wholes, people, things, what have you, but not the causes, parts, wholes, etc., themselves upon which the superimpositions are made. It is here, in the reliance upon the contrast between superimpositions and the ordinary that we see clearly that the *svabhāva* which the Mādhyamika is refuting is not just an ordinary and familiar property or nature like heat, impermanence, being blue, etc.—it can and should be distinguished (albeit with difficulty) from ordinary things. The result, however, of it not being identifiable with ordinary things is that it is non-obvious as to what it is.

In fact, while it seems clear that we must see Candrakīrti, Kamalaśīla and other commentators as recommending an interpretation of Nāgārjuna as refuting superimpositions, it is considerably less clear if Nāgārjuna himself is to be read that way. It could be argued that his reasoning doesn't have anything to do with superimpositions at all and simply targets the ordinary things themselves, showing that, if analyzed, the latter are seen to just exist erroneously and only for benighted worldlings. This is certainly a way in which people (e.g., those of a Jo nang pa inspiration) have taken Mādhyamika

²⁵ P. 353 in T. Tanji, "On *samāropa*. Probing the Relationship of the Buddha's Silence and His Teaching," in J. Silk (ed.) *Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding*. The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2000. See also our remarks on Tanji's article in our review in *The Eastern Buddhist* 33, 1, 2001: 181-185.

²⁶ One way to arrive at a more or less similar interpretation of Nāgārjuna as refuting superimposed reifications is to say that the Mādhyamika tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭī*) is refuting propositions implicitly or explicitly qualified by an operator "ultimately", but is not attacking unqualified propositions. Thus, e.g., Nāgārjuna would be refuting "Ultimately, such and such is the case", but not the simple statement "Such and such is the case." See p. in T. Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic and Language: Essays on Dharmakīrti and his Tibetan Successors*. Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism 1, Wisdom Press, Boston 1999. Cf. Claus Oetke, "Remarks on the Interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 19, 1991: 315-323, where we are advised (p. 318) to interpret Nāgārjuna's refutations as of the form "On the highest level of truth, it is not so that there are x such that x is such and such."

thought, viz., that the point of this philosophy is to show that customary things themselves are just “void of themselves” (*rang stong*) and only “exist from the perspective of mistaken consciousness” (*rnam shes ‘khrul ba’i ngor yod pa*);²⁷ it also finds a type of confirmation in the recurrent Buddhist image of the customary world being just like the hairs and other such hallucinations that appear to people suffering from opthalmia (*timira*). I won’t delve into the problem of how to eliminate this way of reading Nēgērjuna, if indeed it can be eliminated at all. I personally am increasingly skeptical about current attempts to say in meaningful philosophical terms what Nēgērjuna *himself* really meant apart from how he was interpreted: at the end of the day we may well come to Paul Griffiths’ conclusion that Nēgērjuna’s texts, by themselves, straight without a commentarial chaser, may be simply too indeterminate to answer philosophers’ questions about their precise meaning.²⁸ In any case, all I wish to claim is that historically the way of reading Nēgērjuna’s philosophy as a refutation of superimpositions was very well attested and was explicitly promoted by major commentators of India, be they of the so-called Svētāntrika school or of the Prēsaṅgika school. That will have to suffice for us here.

Now, if we adopt the commentarial approach and methodology of Candrakīrti, Kamalaśīla, Jñānagarbha *et alii* on which we have been insisting, the use of semantical arguments, etymologies and pan-Indian debates will have to be interpreted accordingly. Candrakīrti, as we saw above, was especially clear in his exegesis of Nēgērjuna: the myriad of arguments in the *Mūlamadhyamakārikās* which focused on the basis schemata of Indian thought were exclusively refuting superimpositions. The Mēdhyamikas, thus, were not using these pan-Indian arguments against ordinary entities tables, such as chairs, vases, etc., nor even our ordinary notion of natures, intrinsic properties, etc. (notions which the worldling does undoubtedly have and use),²⁹ but rather against a peculiar reified version of intrinsic nature, i.e., one which at most exhibits analogies to the ordinary. In that case, the pan-Indian arguments about parts, wholes, causes, perception, etc., etc., are not being used to undermine the purely ordinary notions of parts, wholes, etc., but rather superimpositions, or perhaps more exactly, the notions of parts, wholes, etc. as corrupted by a subtle, erroneous, superimposition which is

²⁷ See, e.g., a modern Jo nang pa textbook, the *rGyu ‘bras theg pa mchog gi gnas lugs zab mo’i don rnam par nges pa rje Jo nang pa chen po’i ring lugs ‘jigs med med gdong lnga’i nga ro* of Yon tan bzang po, published by Mi rigs dpe skrung khang, Beijing, . In the section on the two truths (p. 116) we find statements like:

de ltar gyi kun rdzob bden pa / chos can / khyod don dam bden pa ma yin te / khyod gshis kyi gnas lugs su ye shes dam pa’i spyod yul du mi bden pa’i phyir / der thal / khyod kyi rang bzhin na rnam shes ‘khrul ngo tsam du zad pa gang zhig / ‘phags pa mchog gi ye shes kyi gzigs ngor rnam yang ma grub pa’i phyir / kun brdzob bden pa yin na rnam shes ‘khrul ngo tsam du zad pas khyab ste ...

“Take such customary truth as the topic: it is not ultimate truth, because it is not true as an object of the highest wisdom about the absolute. This follows because in its nature it is nothing more than a mere perspective of mistaken consciousness and is never established from the perspective of the noble, supreme wisdom. If something is a customary truth, this implies that it is nothing more than a mere perspective of mistaken consciousness.”

²⁸ P. Griffiths, Review of D. Burton, *Emptiness Appraised*. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7, 2000 (<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/>): 22-25. See p. 24: “The first difficulty is one endemic to all scholarship on Nēgērjuna. It is that Nēgērjuna’s works are, in this reviewer’s judgment, insufficiently precise and systematic to make debates about what he really meant, philosophically speaking, very useful.”

²⁹ See n. 22 above .

responsible for them being reified. It is with regard to that rather specific subject matter, that both sides of the pan-Indian debates, for the Mēdhyaṃika, have no solution.

What then of the link between findability and independence? The first problem would be exegetical: to look at some of the passages that Hayes discussed and try to see whether Nēgērjuna's arguments could work better and make better sense once we saw them as directed against a rather special target of things corrupted by superimpositions. I think they do make better sense, in that the equivocations and non-sequiturs which Hayes diagnosed with regard to verses like *M^mlamadhyamakakārikā* 1.5 disappear rather well when we see *svabhāva* as always involving *both* analytically findable identity and independence. Similarly for the other verses that troubled Hayes. True, the verses highlight, at one time or another, one of the aspects of *svabhāva*, but the other aspect is always implicitly present. And if that's so, then the complicated analysis that Hayes gives us is largely unnecessary and moot. Indeed, instead of hastening towards a reading discerning equivocations, we might well want to adopt what Paul Grice once termed the "Modified Occam's Razor": senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.³⁰ It looks like there is no need to do what Hayes did with Nēgērjuna and thus I think we had better not do it.

I could imagine a defender of Hayes's approach saying the following: if we avoid the charge of equivocation by making *svabhāva* non-obvious in this way, we may have temporarily sheltered Nēgērjuna and co. from being charged with sleight of hand, but at the price of fuzz and obscurantism. Why should we believe that people see the world through these mysterious types of superimpositions of *svabhāva*? A quick and somewhat cavalier reply: I'm not sure that I can or need to show that people do in fact see the world in this way; my rather longish argument so far has not been that the Mēdhyaṃika philosopher is *right*, but rather that he is not tricky, sloppy, equivocal or amateurish. Now, if one *also* wanted to argue that people *do* make the superimpositions that the Mēdhyaṃika says they do, then unfortunately the Indian Mēdhyaṃika literature would offer very little evidence, apart from a number of quotations from scriptures and a lot of doctrinal talk about people being ignorant, under the influence of karma, etc. And this type of religious "evidence" would of course not be persuasive to anyone other than an already convinced Mahāyāna Buddhist. Indeed it looks like the type of evidence that we would need would be some type of psychological, or phenomenological, analysis of how people perceive and think of objects, so that the Indian Mēdhyaṃika reasonings would have to be supplemented with another, and quite different, sort of analysis, namely, introspection and thought-experiments, perhaps a type of phenomenological analysis of our *Lebenswelt*.

To my knowledge, the only Mēdhyaṃikas who explicitly discuss these kinds of thought-experiments are the Tibetans in the dGe lugs pa school. Some of their experiments and phenomenological investigations are indeed fascinating in that they provide a set of Mēdhyaṃika

³⁰ See p. 47 in P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press, 1991.

meditations which are said to be necessary preliminaries to the use of Nēgērjunian logical reasoning.³¹ They are designed to make it vivid that in our way of conceiving of things and persons we take them as being something analytically findable and isolated from their complex background of relations so that they stand out as if something independent of everything else, independent of their relations to the mind, independent of their causal history, of parts, etc.—entities seem to have objective status completely independent of our thinking, the causal chain seems to us to be one thing, the entity itself at the end of the chain another, parts are apprehended as separate from the whole and persons are apprehended as separate entities from the bodies, ideas, impressions, feelings, etc., which constitute their component factors. In general, this independence seems to be fundamental to our apprehension of a thing, whatever it may be, and yet reflection would show that there is something fundamentally wrong here, if things are what they are only because of minds and a myriad of factors, dependencies and relations. This process of recognizing where we go wrong comes to be known in dGe lugs pa Mēdhyamika thoughts *dgag bya ngos 'dzin*, “recognizing that which is to be denied.” Obviously this is a considerable step beyond (or perhaps away from) the Indian texts. Although arguably the notion of the “object to be refuted” (*dgag bya*) looks like what the Indian Mēdhyamika is calling “superimpositions of *svabhēva*,” there are no exercises or preliminary procedures in the Indian texts to lead us to this recognition or to persuade us that we make the superimpositions we do.³²

IV

What might have laid at the root of Robinson’s and Hayes’ treatment of the Mēdhyamika? I suspect that their point of departure was their sincere puzzlement as to why anyone intelligent would ever want to subscribe to a Nēgērjunian type of *svabhēva*, once it was brought out clearly and starkly

³¹ One such thought-experiment is to imagine a tempting trade-off of one’s own old and decrepit psycho-physical components for those of the youthful, omniscient, bodhisattva, Mañju•r... At that point, the “exchanger” (*brje pa po*), i.e., the self whom we feel would benefit from this deal, appears as if it were separate and independent from its components. For Buddhists, such a separate “self” is of course an illusion, but it stands out vividly when “just like a merchant seeking [potential] profit, [the old person] would sincerely grasp at making an exchange.” See p. 36 in T. Tillemans, *Persons of Authority*. Tibetan and Indo-Tibetan Studies 5, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1993.

³² Note that the fact that commentarial evidence suggests that we should see Mēdhyamika philosophy as a refutation of superimpositions is at most a partial vindication of the dGe lugs pa Mēdhyamika philosophy about the necessity to recognize the object to be refuted (*dgag bya'i ngos 'dzin*). In fact, the similarity with Tsong kha pa and the dGe lugs pa Mēdhyamika is far from complete, even if the Indian Mēdhyamika’s emphasis on superimpositions could be a surprising source of legitimacy for the notion of a *dgag bya*. The dGe lugs exegesis of Chapter XV in the *Prasannapadē* and *Mlamadhyamakārikās* is, for example, very different from what we have adopted, taking non-fabrication, immutability and independence, as being a *positive* description of a genuine nature, namely, voidness itself. As William Magee has pointed out in a recent publication, it is an exegesis which was contested by many Tibetans and which is also quite different from the way many major modern writers on Candrak•rti and Nēgērjuna (including Hayes, Jay Garfield and D. Seyfort Ruegg) have taken these chapters. Whereas Magee seems to think that Tsong kha pa can perhaps correct these writers, I would tend to think that the balance of the evidence comes down *against* Tsong kha pa here—there are good reasons why people read Chapter XV as they did, essentially the straightforwardness of reading what Candrak•rti says as he says it. See Chapters 3-5 in W. Magee, *The Nature of Things. Emptiness and Essence in the Geluk World*. Snow Lion, Ithaca N.Y., 1999.

what this *svabhēva* supposedly was, especially when it involved absurd properties like independence.³³ And of course why *not* formulate things clearly and starkly and expose fallacious theses for all to see? Isn't this what a rational, analytic reader and critic should do? In fact a so-called "Prēsaṅgika Mēdhyamika" like Candrak.ṛti potentially has a type of response, which we may not ultimately accept, but which is certainly not to be dismissed outright: bringing *svabhēva* out into stark clarity is impossible and even counterproductive, for how could one readily distinguish between superimposed intrinsic natures and the otherwise innocent customary things? The subtlety of the superimposition, and hence the difficulty in distinguishing it from the ordinary that should be conserved, is a key position of certain Tibetan Prēsaṅgika commentators, who speak of the average man's life-world as a kind of inseparable "mixture" (*'dres pa*) between customary truth (which is innocent) and reification (which is not). But it is also implicit in Candrak.ṛti's discussion of *sa^v timētra*, the "merely customary" — merely customary things are not to be identified with what the average man sees and conceives, but are according to Candrak.ṛti, the ordinary as understood only by those who can see the world free of reifications, i.e., those Noble Ones (*ērya*) who have understood voidness and are free of grasping things as being true (*satyēbhimēna*). For these Mēdhyamika writers there is thus a sense in which grasping at *svabhēva* can only thrive in the shadows.

An illustration from another context may be of use in showing possible dangers inherent in certain demands for clarity. The extreme difficulty of distinguishing the "purely ordinary" from the ignorant person's hybrid combination of ordinary-plus-superimpositions is not unlike that which, in another context, Wittgenstein faced in trying to separate what is right and wrong in our views on following rules. The ingrained tendency we have is to think that when we follow a rule, like adding two numbers, the results are already determined and implicitly present from the start—Wittgenstein's well-known phrase is that we think rule following is grounded in a "superlative fact". Nonetheless, someone asks "But *are* the steps then *not* determined by the algebraic formula... in a *queer* way, the use itself is in some sense present." To this Wittgenstein replies, "But of course it is "in some sense!" Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression "in a queer way". The rest is all right."³⁴

One of the more interesting and persuasive analyses of the complexities inherent in philosophical reform of seemingly acceptable commonsense beliefs is that of Saul Kripke in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. The dangerous phase invariably comes in when we feel the need to formulate clearly what we deny and thus filter it out from what is acceptable in the commonsense belief: in other words, a problem arises when we try to explicitly separate the deep-seated queer way of taking things from what is all right and ordinary.

³³ See Hayes op. cit. p. 324-325.

³⁴ See §195 in L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989. This Wittgensteinian theme of queerness versus the ordinary is a major preoccupation of Stanley Cavell in his exegesis of the opening passages of the *Investigations* discussing the seductiveness of St. Augustine's theory of language. Cf. also his idea of the "uncanniness of the ordinary," e.g., p. 153-178 in his *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.

“For in denying that there is any such fact, might we not be expressing a philosophical thesis that doubts or denies something everyone admits? We merely wish to deny the existence of the ‘superlative fact’ that philosophers misleadingly attach to such ordinary forms of words, not the propriety of the forms of words themselves. ...Whenever our opponent insists on the perfect propriety of an ordinary form of expression (e.g., that the ‘the steps are determined by the formula’, ‘the future application is already present’), we can insist that if these expressions are properly understood, we agree. The danger comes when we try to formulate what we *are* denying—*what* ‘erroneous interpretation’ our opponent is placing on ordinary means of expression.”³⁵

The danger, i.e., a type of misplaced clarity, also seems to be what the Prēsaṅgika Mēdhyamika alleges to occur in the attempt to isolate ordinary customary things from their superimposed intrinsic natures—the superimpositions at stake look to be close to a type of “superlative fact”,³⁶ i.e., a hard to isolate queer way of taking things that is held as necessary to ground the ordinary. The danger then is this: the Mēdhyamika runs the risk of being simply dismissed as absurd when he lays out a general thesis as to *what* he is denying. From the Mēdhyamika philosopher’s own point of view, it is thus arguably defensible, and even perhaps profound, that this *svabhēva* *must* be non-obvious and remain so if it is not itself to be misconstrued and trivialized. And if we follow Mēdhyamikas this far, then the starting point of the problem that Hayes and Robinson had in taking Nēgērjuna seriously will have been that they proceeded with clear generalized theses about what was to be denied. In setting out what *svabhēva* was in the form of axioms and theorems, they had already guaranteed that the Mēdhyamika would be seen to be absurd: the queer way of taking the ordinary had lost all its potent grip and all its interest. No doubt there will be something disturbing here to the analytic reader intent on giving clear summaries of such and such a philosopher’s theses: if a Mēdhyamika philosophy like that of Candrakīrti is to receive a just and serious treatment, then the otherwise laudable intellectual work of dissection, disambiguation and formulating clear theses and general principles is not without danger of superficiality; indeed, in certain important areas, it is precisely *not* what we should be doing.

Tom J.F. Tillemans
University of Lausanne

³⁵ See p. 69-70 in Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Blackwell, Oxford, 1982.

³⁶ See Wittgenstein op. cit. §192.