

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick

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Abstract This paper evaluates several recent efforts to interpret the work of Nāgārjuna through the lens of modern symbolic logic. An attempt is made to uncover the premises that justify the use of symbolic logic for this purpose. This is accomplished through a discussion of (1) the historical origins of those premises in the Indian and Tibetan traditions, and (2) how such assumptions prejudice our understanding of Nāgārjuna’s insistence that he has no “proposition” (*pratijñā*). Finally, the paper sets forth an alternative interpretation that takes into account the literary dimensions of Nāgārjuna’s writing.

Keywords Madhyamaka · Symbolic Logic · Textual Exegesis · Doxography · Reason and Mysticism

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick is now quite clear.

– Richard Robinson

I

The conviction that the past has become present in the reading or writing of history brings with it one of the great pleasures of the intellectual life. And yet, as with all convictions — and all pleasures — even the most profound sense of historical authenticity is enmeshed in a complicated set of needs and desires.

It may be worthwhile, from this perspective, to take a closer look at attempts to read Nāgārjuna through the lens of modern symbolic logic. The

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conclusions of such research have been presented as “pure historical exegesis” approaching “the ideal of detached, scientific objectivity,” in contrast to readings derived through the application of interpretive strategies based on other genres of modern philosophical thought, which are labeled “ethnocentric” and historically naive. Richard Robinson’s work is perhaps the most illustrious example of the type; it has furnished a model for subsequent studies, including an article by Richard Hayes in which the author repeatedly acknowledges his debt to Robinson (Hayes 1994).¹ Hayes’ thesis rests on a central claim, summed up in his conviction that Nāgārjuna “had a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments” (ibid.: 363). Hayes presents no specific arguments in support of this claim; rather it functions, in the context of his paper, not as a conclusion, but as a point of departure, a premise. A similar premise seems to bolster the work of two other contemporary interpreters of Nāgārjuna, Tom Tillemans and Jay Garfield.² For example, Tillemans writes that “one must... suppose that [Nāgārjuna] believed his own reasoning by *reductio ad absurdum* to be not a mere ruse or sophism, but rather an argument that was valid and that resulted in a true conclusion...” (Tillemans 1999: 191). Elsewhere he writes of “the seriousness of argumentation in the Madhyamaka system” and “the numerous rigorous arguments advanced by the Madhyamaka” (ibid.: 190). For Garfield, Nāgārjuna is “committed to rigorous analytical argument” and to “true contradictions commanding rational assent” (Garfield 2002: 87).

Hayes, Tillemans, and Garfield share a common desire to characterize Nāgārjuna as an analytic, rationalist philosopher. All three assume not only that his writing *can* be successfully translated into the terms of modern symbolic logic, but that it may in fact benefit from such translation, which has the virtue of clarifying his language and freeing it from the onerous temptation to read him “as a simple mystic or an irrationalist of some kind” (ibid.: 87).³ They differ quite radically, however, in their ultimate assessment of whether or not his project holds up under such close scrutiny. Garfield (2002: 105) claims to have uncovered an entirely unique ontological paradox “found nowhere else,” “a property of emptiness... whose centrality to philosophy [Nāgārjuna] first demonstrates.” Tillemans (1999: 197) is a bit more guarded.

¹ It will become clear enough in what follows that I have my disagreements with Hayes, concerning both his presuppositions and his conclusions. Nevertheless, I enjoyed reading the essay. In our efforts to take Nāgārjuna’s writing seriously as philosophy we occupy, I believe, an important common ground.

² See Ruegg (1977) for a summary of various attempts to render the Madhyamaka’s use of the tetralemma into the terms of classical Western logic.

³ Cf. Tillemans (1999: 188–189): “The idea... that Indian philosophy is essentially mystical and that hence it is bereft of rational argumentation is a *non-sequitor*. Let us suppose that a good part of these traditions are influenced by some type of mysticism: it does not *thereby* follow that rational argumentation stemming from or leading to those mystical ideas will be absent or insignificant.” Hayes echoes these sentiments when he characterizes Nāgārjuna as conforming to “the Indian Buddhist tradition [which] was for the most part quite insistent on sound argumentation” (Hayes 1994: 300).

He leaves open the possibility that Nāgārjuna has successfully exploited “a logic without ontological commitment.” Hayes, on the other hand, finds Nāgārjuna’s arguments to be fallacious and therefore unconvincing to a “logically astute reader” (Hayes 1994: 299). In his view the counterintuitive conclusions reached through Nāgārjuna’s faulty logic could appeal only to modern proponents of a deviant logic, or outright opponents of logic of any kind, both of whom are searching for “the sort of comfort that attends finding famous and highly respected antecedents to one’s own position” (ibid.: 363).⁴

There is one other way in which they appear to differ. Although all three see obvious merit in their use of symbolic logic as a tool for understanding Nāgārjuna’s work, Garfield seems to offer a kind of historical disclaimer when he writes that what he is doing is “not textual history, but rational reconstruction” (Garfield 2002: 88). Tillemans acknowledges that the expression “Buddhist logic” does not translate any Sanskrit term, but he nevertheless locates his project historically as “a translation — as faithful as possible — into modern logic of the formal structures of thought found in Buddhist texts” (Tillemans 1999: 191–192). Of the three, Hayes appears most confident about his privileged access to Nāgārjuna’s own, original thought, and his position in this matter warrants special consideration.

Hayes draws a stark distinction between interpretive, hermeneutical studies grounded in the search for contemporary relevance and the work of rigorous historical exegesis, which “attempts to discover what a text meant in the time it was written” (ibid.: 362). Such a distinction presupposes that it is possible for a competently trained historian to, so to speak, set aside his modern spectacles and read and understand a classical Indian text in the context of the time it was written without being compromised by interests characteristic of his or her own historical milieu. D.S. Ruegg, Christian Lindtner and Kamaleswar Bhattacharya are offered as examples of scholars “who appear to come very close to the ideal of detached and scientific objectivity” (ibid.: 362). It is clear that Hayes sees himself not as a “philosopher” or “preacher” (ibid.), but rather as a hard-nosed historian whose project is “to place [Nāgārjuna] firmly in his own classical context, disregarding his relevance, or lack thereof, to modern times” (ibid.: 326). We are meant to understand, in other words, that he deals with logical and historical facts, and not with interpretation, speculation, or homily. Nevertheless, when Hayes associates himself with Robinson, Ruegg, Lindtner and Bhattacharya in his efforts to achieve “the ideal of detached and scientific objectivity” he is advocating not only a style of scholarship but a particular epistemology as well — and a

⁴ Both Tillemans and Garfield are at pains to demonstrate that Nāgārjuna’s logic is in conformity with the fundamental theorems of classical logic. While Garfield acknowledges that Nāgārjuna’s logic occupies a significant common ground with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida (among others), he insists that this fact alone “does not demonstrate that he has any special value to us” (Garfield 2002: 105).

questionable one, at that.⁵ When this ideal of objectivity is aligned with the effort “to explain the Mādhyamika system solely in terms of philosophical currents present in the India of [Nāgārjuna’s] day” (ibid.: 352), and further contrasted with an “ethnocentrism in which we assume that what we modern Westerners find of greatest importance and value must also be what the classical Indian Buddhists found of greatest importance and value” (ibid.: 352), we have then entered the realm of polemics.⁶

The charge of ethnocentrism cuts both ways. One might point out, for example, that the very idea of this sort of detached, “scientific” analysis is itself embedded in an entirely modern, value-laden, ethnocentric view of truth which has for some years now been the subject of any number of influential critiques directed at precisely these concerns. To engage in an exhaustive review of the relevant literature would be an enormous task. Suffice it to cite a few examples from the realm of philosophy of science, where we have the writings of Karl R. Popper, Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi, and Paul Feyerabend — men whose work spanned the second half of the 20th century, profoundly challenging the assumptions underlying the belief in scientific objectivity through an historical analysis of its origins and development in late medieval Europe. According to an interview with Feyerabend in *Scientific American*, his book *Against Method* — presently translated into 16 languages — has become “a staple of courses on the philosophy of science” (Horgon 1993: 36). In the same interview Feyerabend recalls how he was

⁵ Cf. the comments of another modern scholar of Buddhist logic, Dreyfus (1997: 9), who has not missed the implicit bias of any claim to “detached scientific objectivity”: “However methodologically refined our works may be, they do not come into existence from a position of absolute neutrality but reflect our historical situation... Ethically and methodologically useful at times, the injunction to absolute neutrality usually given to modern scholars obscures the epistemological nature of the interpretive process.” Donald Lopez’s discussion of “commentators ancient and postmodern” (Lopez 1996: Ch. 10) is also relevant here; especially his distinction between “psychological association” and “historical association” (ibid.: 246ff): “What distinguishes the ancient commentator from the postmodern, then, is the historical consciousness available to the latter and its attendant demand to historicize not only the root text but the very act of commentary itself... Buddhist texts and theories about Buddhist texts are always in a state of mutual interchange, making a neutral and merely descriptive theory of textual interpretation impossible” (ibid.: 258).

⁶ Such polemics are nothing new to Buddhist Studies. As early as 1923 A.B. Keith took a remarkably similar position in his criticism of the Russian scholar Theodor Stcherbatsky: “Yet another, and perhaps more serious, defect in the most popular of current expositions of Buddhism is the determination to modernize, to show that early in Buddhist thought we find fully appreciated ideas which have only slowly and laboriously been elaborated in Europe, and are normally regarded as the particular achievement of modern philosophy. Now there is nothing more interesting or legitimate than, on the basis of a careful investigation of any ancient philosophy, to mark in what measure it attains conceptions familiar in modern thought; but it is a very different thing to distort early ideas in order to bring them up to date, and the futility of the process may be realized when it is remembered that every generation which yields to the temptation will succeed in finding its own conceptions foreshadowed” (Keith 1923: 3–4). Like Hayes and Robinson, Keith as well was a rationalist interested in maintaining a clear distinction between “modern scientific advances” and “what the Buddhists thought” (ibid.: 18). The conversation between Keith and Stcherbatsky went on for some two decades, and provides an illuminating parallel to the issues raised in the present paper. Cf. Huntington (2007) for a fuller discussion of this material.

teaching at Berkeley in the sixties to a student body that included growing numbers of Mexicans, African-Americans and Indians when he began seriously to question the nature of his task. “Who was I to tell these people what and how to think? Their ancestors had developed cultures of their own, colorful languages, harmonious views of the relations between man and man and man and nature whose remnants are a living criticism of the tendencies of separation, analysis, self-centeredness inherent in Western thought” (ibid.). Most relevant in the present context, Feyerabend’s Who’s Who entry ends with a characteristically shocking assertion: “Leading intellectuals with their zeal for objectivity... are criminals, not the liberators of mankind” (ibid.). The author of the interview continues,

Beneath these provocations lies a serious message: the human compulsion to find absolute truths, however noble, too often culminates in tyranny of the mind, or worse. Only an extreme skepticism toward science — and open-mindedness toward other modes of knowledge and ways of life, however alien — can help us avoid this danger. Feyerabend expresses this view in a paradox in his 1987 book *Farewell to Reason*: “The best education consists in immunizing people against systematic attempts at education.” (ibid.)

When the practical demand for empirical objectivity is inflated into a metaphysical claim, then science becomes the basis for “scientism” — a dogmatic ideology within which any appeal to subjective phenomena is *taboo*. As Alan Wallace (2000) has persuasively argued, this taboo of subjectivity severely compromises any effort to understand philosophies and practices associated with the “ritual thought”⁷ of contemplative traditions, where the realm of introspective experience is granted considerable authority.

Both Robinson and Hayes — champions of “the ideal of detached scientific objectivity” — are at pains throughout their writing to point out that, when it comes to analytical thinking, Nāgārjuna and his contemporaries were “infinitely less sophisticated” than modern philosophers (cf. Hayes 1994: 337).⁸ Hayes cites Robinson approvingly in this context and makes it clear throughout his article that he sees his own use of “modern canons of validity” (ibid.: 323) to uncover the “various fallacies and tricks” inherent in Nāgārjuna’s work as an extension of Robinson’s earlier project of “historical exegesis” which attempts “to place [Nāgārjuna] firmly in his own classical context, disregarding his relevance, or lack thereof, to modern times” (ibid.: 326).

To engage in this sort of polemic is, I believe, to snare oneself in an irresolvable contradiction. How is the application of a thoroughly modern, culture-bound ideal of “detached scientific objectivity” to analysis of the *Madhyamakārikā*-s any different from the attempt to read the same text

⁷ See Faure (2004: 48), cited below, p. 831.

⁸ A.B. Keith (see note 6: above) was more blunt in his assessment of “the crudities of the Buddha’s views” and the futility of “our natural desire to... find reason prevailing in a barbarous age” (ibid.: 26).

through the lens of logical positivism, empiricism, pragmatism or deconstruction — all of which are dismissed by Hayes (*ibid.*: 363) as attempts to secure “the sort of comfort that attends finding famous and highly respected antecedents to one’s own position”? In fact all of these approaches to exegesis — including Hayes’ appeal to symbolic logic — embody certain sets of assumptions shared by certain influential groups of contemporary intellectuals; in principle none of them is any more or less immune to the charge of anachronism or ethnocentrism when applied to the interpretation of an ancient Sanskrit text.

I do not mean to suggest that we should abandon all attempts to read a classical text in the context of its own times; this is where we must always begin, for if we can not claim to have some real appreciation of the original conversation which produced the author’s words then any effort to find contemporary relevance in the text is necessarily futile. However, our notion of history ought, at this point, to be more acutely attuned to the risks involved in any serious desire to absent oneself from personal responsibility for the conclusions of one’s research. That the writing of history never has been a value-free enterprise has been for some time now a rather banal observation, and any appeal to objectivity can too easily function as a mask obscuring the historian’s own interests. Much better to do what Hayes himself seems to suggest toward the end of his essay, and simply make one’s agenda clear (*ibid.*: 362).⁹

To speak of an agenda, in this context, is to speak of assumptions, pre-suppositions, premises, or beliefs that furnish the necessary ground on which every argument is built. Even the most dazzling conceptual edifice rests on a subterranean foundation of desire. Such premises are often either partially or wholly removed from view, so fundamentally unquestionable as to be taken for granted by the author and — if he is skillful enough — by his readers as well. We therefore must constantly ask ourselves: On what essential

⁹ However, the force of Hayes’ suggestion here is compromised by his attempt to make an airtight distinction between exegesis (“attempts to discover what a text meant in the time it was written”) and hermeneutics (“attempts to find the meaning of a text for the time in which the interpreter lives”). In practice, both exegesis and hermeneutics are, inevitably, ways of constructing meaning in an inescapably historical context that includes both the object of investigation and the historian himself. On this see Bernard Lewis’ eloquent survey of the historical method (Lewis 1975), which relies on a considerably more flexible distinction between three intermeshed forms of history: First, “remembered history” consists of simple statements about the past that form the collective memory of a community. Second, “recovered history” which is, in some sense, “the reconstruction of a forgotten past... *But reconstruction begs the basic question, and disguises what would be better described as construction. The word itself indicates the dangers of the process...*” (*ibid.*: 12 [italics mine]). And third, “invented history:” by definition, “history for a purpose,” “history devised or interpreted” on the basis of the first two. What separates recovered history from invented history is itself, ironically, a matter of interpretation: “The essential and distinctive feature of scholarly research is, or should be, that it is not directed to predetermined results. The historian does not set out to prove a thesis, or select material to establish some point, but follows the evidence where it leads. No human being is free from human failings, among them loyalties and prejudices which may color his perception and presentation of history. The essence of the critical scholarly historian is that he is aware of this fact, and instead of indulging his prejudices seeks to identify and correct them” (*ibid.*: 54).

understanding does the work as a whole rest? What is assumed to be beyond question? Where does this author *begin* his argument?

In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna responds to his Nyāya interlocutor with the following: “If I had anything to assert, then I would fail. Because I have no proposition, I therefore can not fail.”¹⁰ Citing these same lines from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Garfield (2002: 98) baldly exclaims: “Nāgārjuna’s reply does not deny that he is asserting anything. How could he deny *that*?” Tillemans is a bit less blunt. In dismissing earlier understandings of the Madhyamaka’s appeal to logic as “nothing but a psychological technique” (his gloss on the Sanskrit *upāya*), he asserts that such understandings “nearly always have as their consequence the denial of any *propositional content* or truth value as applicable to any of the tetralemma’s four negations. And it is precisely in this regard that this interpretation is insufficient, for it minimizes the role and the seriousness of argumentation in the Madhyamaka system” (Tillemans 1999: 190 [italics mine]). Finally, Hayes (1994: 363) writes: “...it appears to me on examining the textual evidence that Nāgārjuna had a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments. That he failed in this task does not diminish his importance within the history of Buddhist philosophy.”

If the citation from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (above) were an anomaly, then the logician’s perspective would be considerably easier to accommodate. Such is not the case. In fact, the unqualified rejection of any sort of “definitely stated doctrine” — whether in the form of a philosophical view (*dr̥ṣṭi*), thesis (*pakṣa*), or proposition (*pratijñā*) — is not only a leitmotif of Nāgārjuna’s writing, it is arguably the defining feature of his work, its single most troubling aspect, one with which any serious attempt at interpretation must come to grips.¹¹

¹⁰ Bhattacharya et al., (1978: 80): *yadī kā cana pratijñā syān me tata eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ/nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ*||. Like Hayes (1994: 302), in my translation I too have tried to use “ordinary language as much as possible so as not to employ technical terms that would favor one philosophical interpretation over any other.” Consulting Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit Dictionary under *pratijñā*, one finds “a statement, assertion, declaration, affirmation; (in logic) a proposition, the assertion or proposition to be proved;” and for *doṣa* (as in “I have no *doṣa*”): “fault..., damage, harm, bad consequence, detrimental effect.” Therefore, “I have no *doṣa*” becomes “I can not fail.”

¹¹ To cite but a few characteristic examples from the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*: “It is strange indeed that exponents of universal impermanence, those who follow the Buddha’s path, should cling to things by quarreling. When, on close inspection, neither “this” nor “that” can be found, what wise man will argue for the truth of either?” (*sangs rgyas lam la brten nas ni/kun la mi rtag smra ba rnam//rtsod pas dngos rnam mchog gzung bas//gnas pa gang yin de rmad do/[41]’di ‘am de ‘o zhes gang du//rnam par dpyad nas mi dmigs na//rtsod pas ‘di ‘am de bden zhes/mkhas pa su zhiḡ smra bar ‘gyur/[42]* [Lindtner (1987 rep): 112]). Again: “Convinced that impermanent things are like the moon’s reflection in water, neither true nor false, one is not carried away by philosophical views” (*gang dag brten nas dngos po rnam//chu yi zla ba lta bur ni//yang dag ma yin log min par//‘dod pa de dag bltas mi ‘phrog/[45]* [Ibid: 114]). And again: “Great men have no position and therefore no quarrel; for those who have no position, where is the opposing position? In taking any stand whatsoever one is seized by the writhing snakes of emotional attachment. They alone are free, whose mind has no place to stand” (*che ba’i bdag nyid can de dag//rnam la phyogs med rtsod pa med//gang rnam la ni phyogs med pa//de la gzhan phyogs ga la yod/(50)/gang yang rung ba’i gnas nyed nas//nyon mongs sbrul gdug gyo can gyis//zin par gyur te gang gi sems//gnas med de dag zin mi ‘gyur/[51]* [Ibid.: 114–116]).

One could hardly avoid encountering forms of this rejection of all views in any examination of “the textual evidence.” In fact Hayes cites the closing verse of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*-s (MMK), where Nāgārjuna pays homage to the Buddha:

I prostrate before Gautama, who, after experiencing compassion, taught the true virtue in order to dispel all opinions (*dr̥ṣṭi*-s).¹²

After acknowledging that “some appreciation” of the meaning of *dr̥ṣṭi* (“view” or, in Hayes’ translation, “opinion”) is crucial to an understanding of Nāgārjuna’s thought (1994: 302), he points out that the term is “virtually devoid of any constant meaning” (ibid.). The only thing we can know for sure is that it has “undesirable overtones” (ibid.: 303). Then, in the very next sentence, he seems abruptly to change his mind: “Fortunately, it is not too difficult to discover what Nāgārjuna means by the term ‘opinion (*dr̥ṣṭi*).’” Since the final chapter of MMK discusses and rejects various views of the self, Hayes concludes that the reference to “all *dr̥ṣṭi*-s” in the closing stanza can safely be glossed as “[all] opinions [or views] that presuppose that one has some definite personal identity” (ibid. 304). It then follows, presumably (this is nowhere actually spelled out), that chief among the “definitely stated doctrines” Nāgārjuna is interested in defending is the so-called “doctrine of no-self.” In this way Nāgārjuna’s radical rejection of all views is quickly and effectively reduced, first, to a rejection of one particular view (the view that one has some definite personal identity) and then, through an unstated inference, to the defense of yet another particular view or “doctrine” (the view/doctrine of no-self). Hayes is now free to move on to what most interests him — a logical analysis of the rational arguments deployed by Nāgārjuna in his efforts to promote this doctrine.

It is no mere coincidence that Hayes’ attempt at scientific detachment is brought to bear through a logical analysis of Nāgārjuna’s language. The appeal to logic carries with it a certain flavor of truth that is considerably older and more widespread than any modern assertion of scientific or historical objectivity. In this respect there is no doubt that Hayes’ concerns, and much of his method, do in fact have an Indian pedigree, for one cannot help but be struck by the similarities between, on the one hand, Hayes, Tillemans, and Garfield, and on the other, Bhāvaviveka, one of Nāgārjuna’s earliest and most influential commentators. Both the modern commentators and Bhāvaviveka are preoccupied with logical analysis, and both assume that it is possible to reduce Nāgārjuna’s rich and subtly nuanced writing to “a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments” without sacrificing anything of literary or metaphorical value. Once this premise is in place, it is relatively unimportant whether — like Garfield and Bhāvaviveka — one is convinced that he has succeeded in vindicating Nāgārjuna the logician, or — like Hayes and

¹² *sarvadṛ ṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat/anukampām upādāya taṁ namasyāmi gautamam*/(XXVII.30) The translation here is Hayes’ own.

Robinson — one is persuaded that Nāgārjuna’s logical “trick” is little more than a curious historical artifact, the anachronistic vestige of a time and place less sophisticated than our own. Either way, the conclusion follows directly on the heels of the premise around which it is framed.

I have elsewhere suggested an alternative way of reading Nāgārjuna, one not grounded in the compulsive search for objective, rational certainty (Huntington 1995). In what follows I shall not attempt either to attack or to defend Nāgārjuna’s “arguments” by producing an alternative set of even more persuasive logical formulae, but rather I shall suggest that this approach to the *Madhyamakakārikā*-s is steeped in a set of preoccupations that violate the spirit of the text as it was understood by yet another of Nāgārjuna’s ancient commentators. Like Robinson and Hayes, I insist that my interest here is primarily historical: I believe that the compulsion experienced by so many of Nāgārjuna’s modern readers — to force a logical grid over the work of a writer who is so obviously and profoundly distrustful of logic — derives, to a considerable extent, from a skewed understanding of the intellectual history of Indian Buddhism. In the balance of this paper I shall trace the source of this contemporary preoccupation with logical analysis back to the early centuries of the common era, and show how the need for a logical reading of Nāgārjuna is historically bound up with the desire to find a place for his writing in a tradition of doxography that moved from India into Tibet.¹³ I shall further suggest that our best efforts to understand Nāgārjuna historically, in the context of his own time, have thus far been hampered by an inability to free ourselves from the vocabulary, values and presuppositions of this same doxographic tradition — a tradition that perhaps epitomizes what Paul Feyerabend had in mind when he cautioned against “systematic attempts at education.” I will close by offering what I take to be a more congenial interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s work — a reading not based on any desire to “command rational assent,” a reading that sets his obvious abhorrence of *all* “definitely stated doctrines” and “true conclusions” at center stage, where it belongs.

II

The modern compulsion to read Nāgārjuna through the lens of symbolic logic is, in one important (and perhaps ironic) respect, the end result of a long and complex scholastic enterprise, a construct of the religious imagination that proves, on closer inspection, to embody its own socio-political agenda. The thread of this idea can be traced backwards from contemporary academic discourse to 15th century Tibet, and from there into India, where we uncover the roots of a hermeneutical strategy that served to create and maintain the

¹³ Cf. Huntington (2003). The present essay is in several respects an extension of the arguments presented in that earlier paper.

orthodox belief in a continuous, unbroken transmission of the Buddha's own teaching, the single, unchanging Truth.

In one of the oldest extant scriptures of the Pāli canon, the *Sutta Nipāta*, we come across a rudimentary assertion of the ideal:

Truth is indeed one and the knower of it does not dispute it. There is not a second [view] (884) (Saddhatissa 1985: 104).¹⁴

And yet if this assertion is to be taken seriously at face value (and all the evidence suggests that it was taken very seriously by the majority of those responsible for assembling the canonical literature) then there are obvious hermeneutical problems to be overcome in reconciling any number of apparently contradictory statements attributed to the Buddha in the scriptures as a whole. In composing the tradition's earliest formal exegetical commentaries, the men who composed the *abhidharma* were the first to confront the difficulty directly. Referring to the central doctrine of the four noble truths, the *Vibhāsa* frames the relevant question in unambiguous terms:

If there are four truths, why then did the Blessed One say that there is only one? (De la Vallée Poussin 1937: 161)

The Indian tradition seems almost from the outset to have incorporated two distinct, but seemingly incompatible, responses to this question.

The first of these two, evidence for which may be found in the earliest strata of the Pāli sources, may be understood as a version of Jamesian pragmatism:¹⁵ The cash value of truth is a strict function of its soteriological efficacy; therefore, the single truth is the truth that brings spiritual liberation, which is found when one ceases to need, or desire, certainty of the sort provided by fixed views. Not surprisingly, what is true in this sense for one person is not necessarily true for another.¹⁶ The *Kalama Sutta* tells us to “reject any doctrine when you yourself realize that its acceptance leads to misfortune and suffering” (*Āṅguttara Nikāya*, II.191). To insist on any single articulation of truth as final is, from this perspective, like insisting that everyone must accept a particular theory of bike-riding rather than simply mastering the activities of balancing, peddling, steering, and so forth. It is, in other words, to fail to see that what is called for is not belief, but rather, a kind of practical skill; specifically, the capacity for non-clinging.

The *Sutta Nipāta* is replete with passages suggesting precisely this. For example: “He who is attached enters into debate about doctrines. By what and

¹⁴ Cf. Halbfass (1988: ch. 19) for an interesting discussion of the Indian tendency to view truth as “one” and “hierarchical”.

¹⁵ As far as I know, De la Vallée Poussin (1913: 129) was the first to use the word “pragmatic” with reference to these passages: “Nous avons défini l'ancienne dogmatique comme une doctrine essentiellement ‘pragmatique’...”

¹⁶ There is some reason to believe that this “practical” understanding might be more ancient than the theoretical approach described below: See Vetter (1988: 41ff). I am inclined to believe, for reasons that will become apparent in what follows, that this was the oldest interpretive strategy brought to bear on the Buddha's teaching, one that predates the necessity to speak of a Buddhist tradition.

how can an unattached person be characterized? He has nothing to grasp or reject; he has purified all views here itself” (Saddhatissa 1985: 92, verse 787). Again: “They do not speculate, they do not esteem any views and say ‘This is the highest purity’. They release the knot of dogmatic clinging and do not long for anything in the world” (ibid.: 94, verse 794). Once again, defining the qualities of a Sage (a *muni*, or Silent One): “He has no longing for the future and no grief for the past; there are no views or opinions that lead him” (ibid.: 100, verse 851). This is no doubt why, in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (I.431), when the Buddha was asked questions that implicitly required a definitive, binding answer he responded with silence: “They were not practical, not related to what is fundamental to the spiritual life, not conducive to *nibbidāya*, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, awakening or *nibbāna*.” The parable of the poison arrow (ibid.: I.429) suggests a similar perspective on truth: To become attached to the desire for a particular doctrinal formulation of the truth is to become mired in abstraction; as if a man wounded by an arrow would not have it removed until he knew the name of its maker, the material from which it was crafted, and who shot it. A second parable — the famous parable of the raft — carries a similar message: “I preach a doctrine (*dhamma*) comparable to a raft, useful for crossing over but not to be clung to... Those who understand [my] doctrine to be like a raft should discard it as well, to say nothing of what is not [my] doctrine (*adhamma*)...” (ibid. I.134). When clinging is the problem, any actual doctrine is potentially dispensable, for the simple reason that all doctrinal statements are of exclusively pragmatic value. In all of this, we find a clear and demonstrable historical precedent to Nāgārjuna’s thoroughgoing rejection of all doctrines, views, arguments, and proofs.¹⁷

To assume that the radical version of this spiritual pragmatism can be reconciled with an essentially metaphysical doctrine of truth as “one without a second” without violating its integrity is, at the least, problematic, and I shall have a bit more to say on the subject below. As a matter of historical fact, however, this early response to the problem of reconciling various apparently conflicting truth claims within the Buddha’s teaching was soon absorbed into the canonical literature and assigned its place in the orthodox hierarchy of doctrine by a powerful and profoundly theoretical approach to truth that came to dominate textual exegesis in India and later, with certain important modifications, in Tibet.

The *Vibhāsa*’s rhetorical question, cited above, takes for granted that the various statements attributed to the Buddha can and must be reconciled. The means for such a reconciliation was found in a hermeneutical distinction, present in the Pāli *sutta*-s and throughout the Mahāyāna corpus, between two kinds of discourse: On the one hand, isolated expressions or entire passages with a “direct meaning” (*nītattha/nītārtha*) in which the single truth is manifestly or literally present; and on the other hand, expressions or passages with

¹⁷ For a detailed presentation of the evidence supporting this claim with respect to the *Sutta Nipāta*, see Gomez (1976).

an “indirect meaning” (*neyyattha/neyārtha*). In other words, language in which the single truth is not immediately available and must therefore be accessed by the application of interpretive principles sanctioned by the canons of orthodox exegesis:

There are these two who misrepresent the Tathāgata. Which two? He who represents a scripture of indirect meaning as a scripture of direct meaning and he who represents a scripture of direct meaning as a scripture of indirect meaning. (*Anguttara Nikāya*, I.60)

Although the terms “direct” and “indirect” already presuppose some kind of value hierarchy (Jayatilleke 1963: 361ff.), it is possible that in the beginning this distinction may have been intended simply to point out that there were “expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathāgata makes use of without being led astray by them” (*Dīgha Nikāya*, I.202). Whatever the case, the primary appeal of the *nītārtha/neyārtha* analysis as a hermeneutical tool was its power to act as the critical judgment necessary in order to measure specific doctrinal statements against the ideal of a single truth.¹⁸ This was accomplished by the systematic reconciliation of all apparent discrepancies and incoherencies among doctrinal statements. In accomplishing this task the same hermeneutical strategy served to weave together various disparate doctrinal threads into the fabric of a continuous historical tradition wherein the single truth could be seen to unfold. No matter if the fabric of tradition is every bit as abstract and ideal as the unitary truth which it is supposed to preserve and reveal; it could not be otherwise, for if the incoherencies were treated as anything other than apparent — that is, if all the various specific doctrinal formulations could not in the final analysis be reconciled — then it would no longer be possible to maintain the idealized construct of an unbroken tradition.

One always begins with a presupposition — what has been recognized, since Heidegger, as a “pre-understanding” — and from there moves through a process of interpretation to confirm precisely what it was that one already knew in an indistinct, inarticulate way. If the early Ābhīdhārmika-s found themselves linked to the Buddha through an unbroken tradition then it was only because as pious Buddhists they had known all along that such a tradition must be present. Nor is there any question of relativism at this level. We are dealing here with the ontology of understanding, an existential/hermeneutic circle that defines both knowledge and existence; for only in the rigorous, often painful working out of what is always already given as true do we find ourselves in a particular situation embodying a particular range of possibilities.

¹⁸ This “single truth” is found in the Word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), or — alternatively — the Intent of the Buddha, which includes his silence, as for example his refusal to answer questions about the fourteen *avyākṛtavastūni*. Cf. also Candrakīrti’s references to “the silence of the sages” (e.g. *Prasannapadā* XIX.25), as well as the silence of one who, under pressure of the Madhyamaka critique, is rendered speechless because his views no longer appear coherent.

In the present case of an exegetical distinction between direct and indirect meaning the ensuing relationship between hermeneutics and ontology is not difficult to trace. The *nītārtha/neyārtha* scheme was the clear expression of a coherence theory of truth, which has been paraphrased as follows: “If someone makes a series of statements on a particular matter it is important that they should all point in the same general direction, or rather that they should cohere. Someone whose statements do not meet this condition may be dismissed as someone who does not expound a unitary truth” (Harris 1991: 84). The ontological commitment embodied in this theory was first made explicit in the early commentaries with the specification of a distinction apparently not recognized in the Pāli *sutta*-s between “the truth of the highest meaning” (*pāramārthasatya*) and “the truth of conventional affairs” (*saṃvṛtisatya*):

The Perfectly Awakened One, the best of teachers, spoke two truths: one conventional, and one of the highest meaning. One can not find any third. A conventional statement is true because of worldly convention; a statement of the highest meaning is true as [the expression of] the real characteristics of things.¹⁹

The value hierarchy implicit in the original *nītārtha/neyārtha* hermeneutic is here preserved and mapped onto an ontological landscape where the effort is still to reconcile apparent contradiction; the critical difference being that in this case the reconciliation is to take place in strictly metaphysical or ontological terms. When exactly the shift from a concern with doctrinal statements to a concern with ontology occurred we will probably never know, but it is clear that such a shift is taken for granted in ābhīdharmic exegesis, where the two truths are now linked to a correspondence theory of truth. In the *Vibhāsa* we find the highest truth identified with reality (*tattva*) and the world as it exists (*yathābhūtam*) (cf. Harris 1991: 90).

In other words, one ontological truth (i.e. reality [*tattva*]) gives rise to two epistemic truths, i.e. the conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and the ultimate (*pāramārtha*). The Buddhist teaching (*dharmā*) is itself a body of disparate doctrines such as the four noble truths, the theory of *dharmā*-s, the three marks of existence, etc. which cohere into an overall picture with the explicit intention of providing an antidote to the conventional way of seeing things. It eventually leads to the realization of ultimate truth. The *dharmā* then, while it may appear contradictory to a

¹⁹ These lines appear in two places: In a commentary on the *Kathāvatthu* and in a commentary on the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (cf. Jayatilke 1963: 363 where the text is quoted and discussed). The fact that they do not appear in the *sutta*-s seems to be a further indication of a historical move away from the soteriological pragmatism of, e.g., the *Sutta Nipāta*, and toward an orthodox commitment to the ideal of a Buddhist tradition.

superficial examination, in fact has a coherent unity which points toward the true nature of reality. (Ibid.: 91)

Judging from references in Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*,²⁰ by the time of the fifth century the process was probably long since complete: Just as the (single) ideal essence of the Buddha's teaching is present both explicitly (*nītārtha*) and implicitly (*neyārtha*) in multiple doctrinal statements, so ultimate reality itself is directly present at the highest level (*pāramārtha*) and only indirectly (metaphorically) accessible at the level of convention (*saṃvṛti*). Once this hermeneutical scheme was in place there was no avoiding it or its metaphysical implications. From then on to speak as a Buddhist, from within the orthodox tradition, meant, in the most primary sense, to perform one's exegetical work with these particular linguistic/conceptual tools.

III

According to the account of the "Council of Rajagṛha" recorded in the *Cullavagga*,²¹ the first concern of the monastic community after the Buddha's death was to determine a fixed canon that would provide, in the absence of the Master, the source for all orthodox doctrine. The canon is fundamental to a religious tradition for it defines, within very specific parameters, what the community of believers will talk about and — to an equal extent — *how* they will talk. The Word of the Buddha was preserved in the *sūtra*-s, but the *sūtra*-s themselves incorporated no binding strictures that would govern their interpretation. What was required was not only a canon but a canonization of intent which would isolate and systematically organize those passages of scripture where the direct meaning of the Buddha's teaching could be found. The process of systematization began very early with recitation of certain cryptic formulae (*māṭṛka*) which captured the essence of the doctrine.²² Over time these formulae seem to have generated their own systematic commentaries which were gathered together and canonized, significantly, as the "Higher Doctrine" or Abhidharma. The Abhidharma texts entered the early canon as a formal distillation of the *sūtra*-s and themselves became the authorized source for a burgeoning commentarial tradition that makes up the earliest corpus of Buddhist philosophical literature. Not surprisingly this literature shows a virtual obsession with the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" meaning, and technical terminology expressive of this distinction multiplied rapidly.²³

²⁰ See Harris (1991: 87) for a discussion of the relevant passages.

²¹ See the discussion of this material in De la Vallée Poussin (1976: 2).

²² Warder (1970: 10–11 & 220ff.) still provides one of the best reviews of the Pāli materials dealing with this topic.

²³ Cf. the interesting discussion of these terms in Ruegg (1989: 297ff).

The first five centuries of the common era were an astonishingly productive time in the history of Buddhist thought. Buddhism had become a powerful social and intellectual force in India, and Buddhist exegetes were in constant conversation not only with each other but also with intellectuals speaking from a variety of perspectives. These were years of extreme creativity, arguably the single most fertile period in the long history of Indian Buddhist thought; new systems of metaphysics, epistemology and logic abounded. This was also a time of grave danger — a danger which can not be overestimated — for the Buddhist community was finding it more and more difficult to define any fixed parameters for acceptable doctrine and practice. The authors of these new systems were vitally concerned with the exegetical project of grounding their ideas in the canonical scriptures, but two significant developments now threatened to subvert this project and, worse, to jeopardize the very ideal of an orthodox tradition by exploding the canon into an unmanageable chaos of competing interests.

First of all there was the serious problem posed by the proliferation of new scriptures purporting to contain the actual Word of the Buddha (cf. Williams 1989: 37–42). Many — perhaps most — of the new Mahāyāna texts claiming to be the actual Word of the Buddha belonged to a single genre called the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*-s, or (in Conze's translation) the *Scriptures on Perfect Wisdom*. This literature was not only revolutionary in its assertion of scriptural authenticity; the ideas promulgated there were themselves subversive. The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra* (or Heart Sūtra) is typical of this literature in its overt repudiation of the earlier tradition's fundamental doctrines. Under the scrutiny of this new "wisdom" virtually the entire Buddhist catechism of the day — including the four noble truths, dependent origination, and the ultimate goal of *nirvāna* — evaporates into the void. And when the eye of perfect wisdom is turned back on itself...

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,
 No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.
 When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious
 A Bodhisattva courses in the Well-Gone's wisdom.
 (Williams 1989: 48)

The literature makes a great deal of the obstacles to acceptance of this radical form of "Perfect Wisdom:"

And yet, O Lord, if, when this is pointed out, a Bodhisattva's heart does not become cowed, nor stolid, does not despair nor despond, if he does not turn away or become dejected, does not tremble, is not frightened or terrified, it is just this Bodhisattva, this great being who should be instructed in perfect wisdom. (ibid.)

In the *Vajracchedikāsūtra* we are told that those who hear of perfect wisdom and do not become terrified "will be possessed by the greatest astonishment" (Schopen 1989: 124). As Williams (1989: 48) observes, "It is difficult for us to

appreciate just how extraordinary these teachings are as religious teachings, and how disturbing they must have seemed to anyone who took them seriously at the time they were first promulgated.” Schopen (1989: 135) seems to concur: “This repeated emphasis on fear, terror and dread in connection with hearing the Perfection of Wisdom being taught or explained would seem to indicate that the authors of our texts were clearly aware of the fact that what they were presenting was above all else potentially terrifying and awful, and that a predictable reaction to it was fear. And, although these passages need to be studied further, they already give us some valuable information on the nature of the experience with which this literature is dealing.” The usual modern interpretation suggests that such passages convey a message of non-clinging and renunciation involving the surrender of attachment to all self-interest. What is especially important, for present purposes, is that this message entailed not only a sort of generalized existential non-clinging, but a very specific practice of renunciation directed squarely at the orthodox tradition. The reader of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is encouraged, in no uncertain terms, to cease clinging to every form of Buddhist doctrine — including any new doctrines or ideas articulated in these scriptures.

No less ominous in the long run, was the appearance during this same period of influential philosophers like Vasubandhu and Dignāga, whose radical interpretations of the ancient teachings had themselves assumed a quazi-scriptural authority among certain segments of the scholarly community. The most revolutionary among these new Buddhists was certainly the philosopher Nāgārjuna, who probably lived sometime during the first century CE.²⁴ Nāgārjuna’s writing preserves the earliest and most extensive interpretation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. Not surprisingly, a good deal of the conversation during this period turned increasingly on exegetical interpretation of the writings of these men and on the effort to marshal their words not simply under the old rubrics of “direct” and “indirect” meaning but also, increasingly, under terms suggestive of a single veiled intent that was presumed to be in operation behind the bewildering variety of views, opinions and approaches to practice.²⁵

The threat of anarchy was decisively contained in the sixth century CE with the work of a single brilliant individual. Bhāvaviveka (c. 500–570?) was the first great Buddhist doxographer, a quintessentially orthodox scholar who devoted his considerable gifts to the task of making peace in the Buddhist

²⁴ On the dating of Nāgārjuna, see Ruegg (1981: 4–5).

²⁵ This hidden intent or motivation corresponded with the essential core of truth at the heart of the tradition. Cabezón (1990: 14: note 27) provides some useful references on the subject. Also see Ruegg (1989: 302ff) on “the unexpressed but intended ground” (*dgons gzhi = *abhipreta-vastu*) and “the pragmatic purpose” (*dgos pa = prayojana*). Here the distinction is explicitly defined in terms of a metaphysical split between the “emptiness” of all appearances and the practical (soteriological) efficacy of the doctrines through which this emptiness is communicated.

world of his era by erecting a hermeneutical canopy large enough to shelter every potential renegade.²⁶ Under cover of his writing the intellectual *saṅgha* could be organized into schools and within these schools each would know, first of all, that he was a Buddhist, and second, precisely where his ideas fit into the hierarchy of meaning that culminated in the “ultimate intention of the Buddha” (cf. Ruegg 1985, 1988; Broido 1985). Seen in this light Bhāvaviveka’s *Tarkajvālā* is much more than an exegetical or pedagogical treatise; it is an immensely sophisticated attempt to define a philosophical canon that would serve to contain the threatened disintegration of the intellectual community by assembling the myriad fragmentary, competing doctrines into an all-encompassing system of “normative ideology” (Cabezón 1990: 25).²⁷ The measure of Bhāvaviveka’s success in this endeavor is evident not only from the status his work achieved among subsequent Buddhist scholars, but also from the fact that among Western academics the *Tarkajvālā* is generally recognized as the progenitor of an entire genre of doxological literature in India and, eventually, in Tibet, where from the ninth century on Buddhist converts experienced their own acute need to give definitive shape to the orthodox Indian tradition.²⁸

The Tibetan word for “Buddhist” is *nang pa* — “Insider” — an expression which makes explicit the idealized vision of tradition that had existed in India ever since the time when exegetes first became concerned with the line from the *Sutta Nipāta* about “one truth without a second.” The orthodox Buddhist is by definition a person who lives and thinks within the realm of this one truth, a realm that was circumscribed in various ways, from reports of the closing of the canon of Buddha-Word at the first council to the closing of the philosophical canon in the doxographical treatises of Bhāvaviveka and the others who followed his lead (cf. Cabezón 1990: 13–14). Among Tibetans, where scholastic taxonomy attained unprecedented heights through the medium of the *grub mtha’* literature, virtually every educated lama is at least a de facto doxographer.

Grub mtha’ (Sanskrit *siddhānta*) means, literally, the end or extreme (*mtha’*) of what is established (*grub*). It signifies by extension any tenet characteristic and in some way definitive of a particular fixed doctrinal

²⁶ Cf. Ruegg (1981: 61) for Bhāvaviveka’s dates. Also the comments of Qvarnstrom (1989: 99): “As a doxographer, Bhavya actually initiated the genre of comprehensive histories of philosophy in Buddhism...” See Huntington (2003) for a detailed discussion of Bhāvaviveka’s role as the initiator of the doxographical tradition, and its impact on the interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s writing.

²⁷ Cf. also Cabezón (1990: 21): “...we might say that what we have been considering thus far has been only a simplified model of the process of philosophical canonization, one in which the *siddhānta* system was taken as a given... The philosophical canon is considered, as it were, the distillation of the textual canon.”

²⁸ On Indian models, see Cabezón (1990: 13) and Lopez (1987: 29–30 & 439: note 38). Cabezón (1990: 10: note 9) also comments on the similarities between Tibetan *grub mtha’* literature and the *p’an chiao* hermeneutics of Chinese Buddhism.

position. In this sense the word serves as the generic cover-term for a full range of technical terminology, including any philosophical view (*dr̥ṣṭi*), thesis (*pakṣa*) or proposition (*pratijñā*). The expression is also routinely applied to a genre of scholastic literature in which such tenets, doctrines or philosophical views are expounded (Mimaki 1982: 2). The basic meaning of the expression is made clear, for example, in the introduction to an 18th century *grub mtha'* manual, the *Grub pa'i mtha'i rnam par bzhaḡ pa rin po che'i phreng ba*:

The etymology for 'tenet' (*siddhānta*) is: a tenet [literally, an established conclusion] is a meaning which was made firm, decided upon, or established in reliance on scripture and/or reasoning and which will not be forsaken for something else... "Established conclusion' [tenet] signifies one's own established assertion which is thoroughly borne out by scripture and reasoning. Because one will not pass beyond this assertion, it is a conclusion." (Hopkins and Sopa 1976: 53–54; the citation is from Dharmamitra)²⁹

This same manual informs us that "there are two types of persons: those whose minds have not been affected by tenets and those whose minds have been affected by tenets. Those whose minds have not been affected by tenets seek only the pleasures of this life..." (ibid.: 53) Obviously, it is of primary importance to have "a mind affected by tenets." That is, one needs first of all "to have studied some system of tenets" (ibid.) and to hold to some "established conclusion/assertion" that one "will not pass beyond". The alternative is a sort of brutish, unreflective existence characteristic of the untrained mind. But to be an Insider (i.e. a Buddhist) one must not simply hold to just any doctrine or view, one must be "a proponent of specific tenets" (Hopkins 1983: 319).³⁰ In the context of a useful article on *grub mtha'* literature, José Cabezón furnishes a thumbnail sketch of the basic principles involved:

Religious systems are divided into two: Buddhist and non-Buddhist. The former are in turn subdivided into four major [Indian] schools, Vaibhā ika, Sautrāntika, Yogācāra (or Cittamātra) and Madhyamaka, schools that were distinguished from one another on the basis of their philosophical tenets. Each of these schools is then divided into further sub-schools. It should be realized, moreover, that the order of the schools in the schema is not arbitrary but is believed to represent an ascending

²⁹ *dKon mchog 'jigs med dbang po, Grub pa'i mtha'i i rnam pa bzhaḡ pa rin po che'i phreng ba* (no date: 4): *grub pa'i mtha ste/rigs pa'i lung gis rab tu bstan par rang gi 'dod pa grub pa ni/de las phar yang 'dro ba med pas na mtho/zhes gsungs pa ltar lung rigs gang rung la rten nas thag bcad cing grub pa 'am dam bcas pa'i don de nyid rang gi blo ngor tshul de las gzhan du 'dod pa med pas na/*

³⁰ There seems to be some allowance made for those unable to cultivate a more sophisticated view; they can become Insiders merely by taking refuge in the "three jewels": the Buddha, the Buddhist Doctrine, and the monastic community (See Hopkins and Sopa 1976: 54). For the unreflective it is apparently sufficient simply to have strong faith in the orthodox doctrine.

hierarchy of successively more subtle and accurate philosophical positions, positions that, according to most Tibetan exegetes, culminate in the views of the Madhyamaka school. (Cabezón 1990: 10–11)

The final word on the matter is provided by Jeffrey Hopkins in his *Meditation on Emptiness*:

In general, non-Buddhists are called ‘other sectarians’ because they are followers of sects other than those of the Buddhists. They are called ‘outsiders’ because they are outside of the correct view of emptiness. (Hopkins 1983: 32)

It is important to note that “the correct view of emptiness” mentioned here is specifically associated with what had originally been defined by Bhāvaviveka centuries earlier, in India, as the view set forth in the Madhyamaka school founded by Nāgārjuna (Huntington 2003: 74–75). This “view” (*dr̥ṣṭi/lta ba*) is said to be of “direct meaning” (*neyārtha*) and is therefore identified with the Buddha’s ultimate purport (Cabezón 1990: 15), which had as well long since been recognized within the exegetical tradition as the one ultimate truth taught by the Buddha. Just as this absolute truth, the single essence of the Dharma, infuses and upholds the manifold expressions of tradition, so its tropological referent, the metaphysical essence of reality, infuses and upholds the conventional world.

Here is where contemporary logicians like Robinson, Hayes, Tillmans, and Garfield find tacit historical justification for their operating premise, namely, that “Nāgārjuna had a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments” (Hayes 1994: 363). Such a premise need not be questioned — even in the light of Nāgārjuna’s own apparent insistence to the contrary — in part because it has received the imprimatur of the full doxographic tradition dating back to Bhāvaviveka in sixth century India. The assumption that Nāgārjuna is attempting to “command rational assent” for a “true conclusion” is not confined merely to logicians like those I have been discussing. The influence of this orthodox understanding of early Indian Madhyamaka is everywhere visible in the secondary literature of contemporary academic discourse, where it has been absorbed under the rubric of “Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.” The very expression itself — our own neologism — has meaning only against the backdrop of a hierarchical, scholastic taxonomy made up of “definitely stated doctrines” and “systematically arranged set[s] of rational arguments.” Compare, for instance, Paul Williams (1991: 200): “There is such a thing as the Madhyamaka viewpoint, it is the correct viewpoint which sees things the way they really are...” Or Cabezón (1992: 137): “Specifically, the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika represents the highest philosophical view because it sets forth the only unequivocally true and complete theory of the nature of reality.” Examples like this could

be multiplied indefinitely.³¹ It is important to note that such remarks are presented without qualification; they are not framed as the orientation of a particular lineage of orthodox scholastic exegesis. In other words, we are dealing here not with a conclusion, an end-point subject to debate, but rather with a premise, a place from which subsequent argumentation may begin. And yet, when one sets these passages directly alongside Nāgārjuna's own unequivocal words in his *Madhyamakaśāstra* the effect is striking:

The emptiness of the conquerors was taught in order to do away with all views. Therefore it is said that whoever makes a philosophical view out of "emptiness" is indeed lost.³²

Once we postulate that "Nāgārjuna had a set of definitely stated doctrines" then we are compelled to further assume that "he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments" in support of these doctrines. This was the position endorsed by Bhāvaviveka, and it is built into the doxographic project which he initiated. I have written elsewhere in some detail about Bhāvaviveka's debt to the logician and epistemologist Dignāga (ca. 480–540), who provided the prototype for Bhāvaviveka's attempt to clarify what he saw as the implicit syllogistic structure of Nāgārjuna's arguments.³³ No doubt his work has provided a powerfully seductive historical precedent, and the orthodox pedigree in itself may be sufficient to explain the perennial appeal of this otherwise curious perspective. But there is a second explanation as well, an explanation first suggested by yet another early Indian commentator who was obviously disturbed by Bhāvaviveka's efforts to foist a "view" on Nāgārjuna.

It is well known that Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650)³⁴ vehemently objected to Bhāvaviveka's logical method, on the grounds that it was a fundamental perversion of Nāgārjuna's project. Specifically, Candrakīrti maintained that the purpose of the *Madhyamakaśāstra* has nothing to do with "commanding rational assent," with demonstrating, proving or disproving anything. Rather the goal is to uproot altogether the very desire, or need, for rational certainty, and so to provide an anecdote to the intellectual and spiritual disease of

³¹ See, for example, Ruegg's discomfort with the literal meaning of VV 29 (*nāsti ca mama pratijñā*): "Formally speaking, Nāgārjuna's statement 'I have no *pratijñā*' may look to us like a (semantic) paradox... [I]t seems possible to understand it not as a first-order utterance in the object language but as a second-order metalinguistic one stipulating that none of the Mādhyamika's statements is to be taken as a thesis positing/presupposing/implying the existence of an entity having self-existence (*svabhāva*)" (Ruegg 2003: 220). Elsewhere he refers to this heavily qualified reading of VV 29 as the "standard Madhyamaka view" (*ibid.*, 240). Claus Oetke writes of Nāgārjuna's "tenet of emptiness" (Oetke 2003: 468) and of "the original doctrine of the Madhyamaka," which is "the outcome of intricate considerations, in particular those which have been formulated in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* and which were meant to prove by rational means the tenet that there is no *svabhāva* of an entity of any sort" (*Ibid.*: 460).

³² *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭinām proktā niḥsaraṇam jinaih/ye ām tu śūnyatā dṛṣṭis tām asādhyān babhāṣire//* (XIII.8)

³³ Cf. Huntington (2003).

³⁴ On Candrakīrti's dates, see Ruegg (1981: 71, note 228).

clinging. This is accomplished by uncovering a logically indeterminate space between proof and disproof, affirmation and negation, consent and dissent. Access to this ungrounded space is opened through a “skillful” application of the two truths discussed above. So-called “rigorous analytic arguments” function as an *upāya*, a soteriological device, or, alternatively (in the words of Bernard Faure, cited below), a “spiritual exercise.”

Here is where the road forks: One way leads toward the promise of a true, rationally binding conclusion, the other to a state of non-abiding, a metaphorical place neither *on* nor *off* the map.

For a logician, to understand Nāgārjuna’s use of reason as recourse to *upāya* is considered a mistake, for it “minimizes the role and the seriousness of argumentation in the Madhyamaka system” (Tillemans 1999: 190). But for Candrakīrti, to understand *upāya* as “nothing but a psychological technique” (*ibid.*) is to minimize the role and seriousness of what Michael Pye, in his richly documented study of the subject, has called “the key to understanding Buddhism” in the Mahāyāna (Pye 1978: 5).

According to Pye, “It is beyond argument that insight (*prajñā*) and skilful [sic] means are most intimately related” in the *prajñāpāramitā* literature (*ibid.*: 106). “This stress on the close association of insight and skilful means is of great importance over against popular conceptions of the idea as being one of mere expediency” (*ibid.*: 108). Far from being a mere technique, as the soteriological method par excellence of the Mahāyāna in general and the *prajñāpāramitā* in particular, one must consider the possibility that skillful means somehow lies at the heart of Nāgārjuna’s denial of all views. Pye poses the question in this fashion: “Is there perhaps some way of taking seriously their non-advancement of a position while at the same time indicating how their mode of going about these matters has definite significance?” (*ibid.*: 117). In other words, instead of taking the arguments for emptiness as leading, ultimately, to a resting place — a view, position, or “true conclusion” — is there some way that we might focus our attention on the process of argumentation itself, on “the nature and role of religious language” as it functions *in the experience of the reader* (*ibid.*). From this perspective, skillful means may be understood as “a kind of clue about the appropriate way to put into operation the religion which one has, that is, in the case of the Mahāyānists, Buddhism” (*ibid.*). Skillful means is, then, not really a device used to make a point, but rather it is itself the end-point or goal of all religious striving. In this context, what appears as a commitment to rational argumentation is no more, or less, than that: *appearance*.

Reflecting on the two truths as a form of skillful means, Bernard Faure writes:

... this adoption of an absolute perspective expresses not so much a mystical experience as an act of faith regarding the reality of such a perspective. It authorizes a series of spiritual exercises, logical and epistemological permutations that, by encouraging the practitioner ‘not to abide anywhere,’ are supposed to enable him/her to accede to a higher

plane. This entails a pragmatic decision for whoever seeks to pass beyond the level of conventional truth, in the same way as the principle of contradiction, far from constituting an absolute law, entails a pragmatic decision for whoever intends to remain at that level. (Faure 2004: 35)

Consider the following conversation between Candrakīrti and Bhāvaviveka, found in the *Prasannapadā*. Candrakīrti speaks first:

If we allowed for any real certainty (*nīścaya*) whatsoever then either it would have to arise from some valid means of knowledge or else it would not. But we do not allow for any certainty. How is that? There could be certainty if there were some possibility of uncertainty as its opposite. When we do not allow for any real uncertainty, however, then, in the absence of its opposite, how could there be certainty? [Discussion of certainty] without reference to its partner would be like [arguing whether] a donkey's horn is long or short...

[Bhāvaviveka] If you allow for no certainty whatsoever, then why does your statement about things not arising from self, etc., appear to be certain?

[Candrakīrti] this statement is certain for worldly people who interpret it in terms of arguments familiar to them. It is not certain for those with deep insight (*ārya*-s).

[Bhāvaviveka] Do those with deep insight really have no conclusive argument (*upapatti*: proof, demonstrated conclusion)?

[Candrakīrti] Who can say whether they do or they don't? For those with deep insight the truth of the highest meaning is a state of silence. This being so, how is there any possibility of discursive thinking out of which we might find either a conclusive argument or no real argument at all? (Huntington 2003: 77–78)³⁵

Faure casts the ability to access this logically indeterminate “higher plane” as rooted in an initial act of faith. Ironically, perhaps, Karl Popper has said the same thing about the commitment to reason, when he “recognizes the fact that the fundamental rationalist attitude *results from an (at least tentative) act*

³⁵ *Prasannapadā* (Vaidya 1960a: 19.16–29: *yadi kaścīn nīścayo nāmāsmākaṃ syāt, sa pramāṇajo vā syād apramāṇajo vā/na tvasti/kiṃ kāraṇam? ihā nīścayasāmbhave sati syāt tatpratipakṣas tadapekṣo nīścayaḥ/yadā tvaniścaya eva tāvad asmākaṃ nāsti, tadā kutas tadviruddhāvīruddho nīścayaḥ syāt sambandhyantarānirapekṣatvāt, kharavi śāmasya hrasvadīrghatāvāt/[...] yadyevaṃ nīścayo nāsti sarvataḥ, katham punar idaṃ nīścitarūpaṃ vākyam upalabhyate bhavatām — na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpyahetuto bhāvā bhavantīti? ucyaite/nīścītam idaṃ vākyam lokasya svaprasiddha-yaivopapattiyā, nāryāṇām/kiṃ khalu āryāṇām upapattir nāsti? kenaitad uktam asti vā nāsti veti/paramārtho hyāryāṇām tūṣṇīmbhavaḥ/tataḥ kutas tatra prapañcasāmbhavo yadupapattir anupapattir vā syāt?*

of faith — from faith in reason” (Popper 1950, Vol. II: 231).³⁶ It might be more helpful, then, to refer in this context not so much to an act of faith, which suggests that assent to rational argumentation is itself not also governed by faith, but rather to an act of surrender. I mean a recognition of the limits of reason and a willingness to surrender to the groundless space below or beyond those limits, which are as well the limits of memory and imagination, of desire and fear. Such an act of surrender cannot ultimately take the form of a “decision,” pragmatic or otherwise, unless the very act of deciding to abandon attachment to reason is itself a sort of mystical experience. One way or another what both Faure and Candrakīrti are talking about clearly lies on the other side not only of the limits of rationality, but also of the limits defined by one’s capacity to will, or even to desire what is by definition outside the scope of the imagination (*nirvikalpa*). Perhaps the only thing self-evident about moving away from the need for certainty (or attachment to belief, which is the same thing) and toward the ability “not to abide anywhere” is that the process is anything but formulaic. The spiritual exercises referred to by Faure are reflections of a profound silence uncontaminated by self-centered desire in any of its myriad subtle and not so subtle forms. When Candrakīrti goes so far as to say that Bhāvaviveka is not really a Mādhyamika at all, but rather a Logician (Tārkika) “taking the side of the Madhyamaka school out of a desire to parade the extent of his own dialectical skill” (Huntington 2003: 82), he is drawing attention not simply to the methodology of logical analysis but to the *motivation* of the Logician, who is driven not by selfless compassion but rather by a self-serving need for certainty rooted in rational conviction — a form of

³⁶ Popper’s attitude in this matter is well known, and (I believe) uncontroversial. For an extended discussion of his views on the subject, see Herbert Keuth’s excellent study, from which the following remarks are worth citing: “Popper subdivides rationalism in the broad sense into ‘critical rationalism’ and uncritical rationalism’ or ‘comprehensive rationalism.’ Uncritical rationalism adopts the *principle* ‘that any assumption which cannot be supported either by argument or by experience is to be discarded.’ This principle, however, is *inconsistent*, ‘for since it cannot, in its turn, be supported by argument or by experience, it implies that it should itself be discarded.’ Hence ‘neither... argument nor experience can establish the rationalist attitude’; thus ‘comprehensive rationalism’ is untenable. Popper therefore advocates ‘a modest and self-critical rationalism which recognizes certain limitations...’ His critical rationalism ‘frankly admits its origin in an irrational decision.’ In a lecture given in 1960, he stresses that the rationalist demand to *justify* all assumptions is untenable” (Keuth 2005: 240 [see the original text for full references to citations]). Cf. Faure (2004: 47): “...even when the internal coherence of human reasoning appears to be beyond question in one particular field of thought, we should not be misled into thinking that reasoning as a whole is truly well founded. There is no way of proving that it is well founded, but neither is there any way of proving that it is erroneous. The idea that belief in reason is, in its very principle, irrational appeared as early as in the work of the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi... The circle of reason, like a magic circle, or what Buddhists call a *maṇḍala*, is subject to certain laws. Kant was one of those who traced out that circle on the ground, a circle out of which one could not step on pain of being ruled out of the game. So it was, after all, just a game! But outside the game, life goes on, although, short of a miracle, the players will never realize that.” The chapter from which these remarks are lifted — titled “Buddhism and Rationalities” — provides a valuable anecdote to the compulsion to approach Nāgārjuna’s writing as a logical tract.

clinging no less seductive now than it was some two thousand years ago in ancient India.³⁷

IV

It is time to take stock. If, as it so happens, the attempt to make logical sense out of Nāgārjuna has its historical precedent in Bhāvaviveka, then surely the insistence that such a reading entirely misses the point finds its own precedent in Candrakīrti. The real issue here is not about who is the legitimate historian, but simply: Whose reading is most persuasive, most interesting, most cogent and engaging? “What is to be avoided,” Tillemans (1990: 17) has wisely observed, “is a certain type of stultifying narrowness in the name of ‘history’ or ‘philology’.”

Once we dispense with all attempts to secure a priori privilege for one or another reading of Nāgārjuna by linking it to claims about some kind of inherent methodological purity, the way is open to adjudicate any particular interpretation of his writing strictly on its own merits. It seems to me that the most serious shortcoming of this insistence on reducing the *Madhyamakārikā*s to a series of logical formulas is that such a reading lacks any sensitivity for the very features of textuality — symbol, metaphor, polysemy, multivalence — that might lead us (à la Candrakīrti) out of the compulsive desire to deal in certainties. In other words, this way of reading denies to the text its existence as a *literary* work, and in doing so it allows us to forget — or never to see — that “truth is in the act, not the content, of reading” (Humphries 1999: 41)...

To the extent that we insist, to ourselves or in critical practice, that texts refer to specific material and objective truths, and do not admit the emptiness of these, we defeat this aspect of reading, and fall into reification. To the extent that we read texts as collections of signs that can take the shapes and assume the importance of realities when we read, we directly experience the nature of emptiness, just as we do in dreams. As we realize that texts exist as literature only in the moment of reading, in the same instant in which we come into being with them as readers, we gain a direct experience of the nature of mind according to the Middle Way: the mind is nowhere to be found, neither any one of its parts nor exactly their sum. (ibid.: 45)

Faure (2004: 48) makes a similar point:

Western thought (that is to say, rational thought, logical philosophy) asserts itself through confrontation, in accordance with the principle of

³⁷ Cf. his remarks in the *Prasannapadā* (Vaidya 1960a: 11, line 22) and *Madhyamakāśāstra* XXVII.30 (Vaidya 1960a: 258) where Nāgārjuna acknowledges that Gautama was motivated by compassion (*anukampa*) in his efforts to dispel all views. It is in this sense that the Buddha is presented not as a philosopher or a preacher interested in compelling either rational assent or belief, but rather as a physician concerned with healing dis-ease (*duḥkha*) rooted in clinging.

the excluded middle. By so doing, it casts into outer darkness a number of human realities such as imagination, dreaming, literature, and myth, and – last, but not least – the “thought from/of the outside,” for instance ritual thought. These various domains, allegedly irrational, are the ones that Buddhist rationality will enable us to explore – without however, entirely leaving our own philosophical “preserve.”

The systematic lexicon of this desire, or need for certainty (what Faure refers to here as “Western thought,” registered in words like “command” and “demonstrate”) works to obscure not only the textuality of the materials we are studying, but its own tropological implications as well. Let me suggest just one fertile example.

Following Robinson’s lead, in his zeal to expose “the nature of the Mādhyamika trick” Hayes (1994: 324) compares Nāgārjuna’s writing to a *trompe-l’œil*, and yet he is apparently blind to the nuances of his own extraordinarily provocative simile. A more finely tuned appreciation of the peculiar aesthetics of this genre of painting might have led in quite a different direction, for there are tricks to be dispensed with, and then again, there are tricks from which one might learn something exceedingly valuable about the medium in which they are performed:

Even though *trompe-l’œil* is meant to deceive and in some cases very nearly succeeds, it is not always accepted at once as a reality. At first sight the image comes as a surprise. By turns it inspires doubt and certainty in a continual readjustment of the gaze. The puzzled viewer is torn between the message of his eyes and the message of his brain. The mind may already know the right answer, and yet the spectator’s reaction is to abandon his receptive passiveness and act in order to test what he sees... A ‘relation of uncertainty’ is thus created between the image and the viewer... (Milman 1983: 103).

The response of reason to the discomfort of a logically indeterminate space is, invariably, to search for an escape back into the known. It is one of the curious features of a successful *trompe-l’œil*, however, that the passageway back into the known may be blocked. This can be accomplished in a number of ingenuous ways. For example, in a remarkable work by the 17th century painter Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts called *Turned-over Canvas*, the artist has depicted what appears to be the back of a painting. This “negation of art” was designed to be exhibited on the floor, propped up against the wall, where it would tease the naive viewer into picking it up and turning it over so as to see the painted side — which is, of course, not there. If the painting is successful as a work of art it can only be because it succeeds in heightening the spectator’s awareness of the broadest possible parameters within which art functions. To turn over Gijsbrechts painting and be disappointed is to fail to let go of one’s preconceptions about art, and so entirely to miss the point. For the trick of a *trompe-l’œil* does not so much reside in the technical features of

the painting as in its capacity to bring the viewer into the “relation of uncertainty” which is an effect of the artist’s vision:

When, at a subsequent moment, the mystification becomes certain and unmistakable, is the picture to be rejected? It is at this point that one begins to realize what is meant by the strange and well-defined world of *trompe-l’œil*. A world without history or features, with no horizon or depth, in which the arts exchange their means of expression... The repertory of *trompe-l’œil* painting is made up of obsessive elements, it represents a reality immobilized by nails, held in the grip of death, corroded by time, glimpsed through half-open doors or undrawn curtains, containing messages that are sometimes unreadable, allusions that are often misunderstood, and a disorder of seemingly familiar and yet remote objects... (ibid.: 104–105)

Like Gijsbrechts, Nāgārjuna has placed before us a masterwork of the creative imagination that disturbs and provokes in that it appears to be something it is not, something *graspable*. We feel a compulsion to pick it up and turn it around in order to see what has been proven or, as the case may be, disproven. But to succumb to the temptation — and to be disappointed to find that neither the one nor the other has been accomplished — is, as I have already indicated, to miss the point, for the logically indeterminate space hiding behind the writing ought to tell us something about our own preoccupations, about the nature of our relationship with the meanings of words seemingly familiar and, at the same time, distressingly remote. What Proust has written about dreams is true not only of poems and novels, but of every written work: “[They] are not realizable, and we know it; we wouldn’t have any if it weren’t for desire, and it is useful to have them in order to see them fail and so that their failure may instruct” (Proust III: 181).³⁸

It is the nature of the Mādhyamika trick not to argue, explain, command, or demonstrate — all of which would be self-defeating — but rather to *conjure*. “The strange and well defined world” conjured up in Nāgārjuna’s writing is ultimately none other than this world: “A world that is neither as it appears nor otherwise.”³⁹

It may be that the problem is, after all, more strictly historical in at least one way. I called attention at the beginning of this essay to the similarity between Robinson, Hayes and Bhāvaviveka, as well as to their primary difference: For Bhāvaviveka, Nāgārjuna the logician succeeds; for Robinson and Hayes, he fails. Robinson (1957: 307) has explained to us that this difference is due to the more sophisticated state of formal logic in our times. This suggests to me one final, unexplored dimension to the difficulty of understanding Nāgārjuna’s writing in its own historical context:

³⁸ Cited in Humphries (1999: 39). Faure (1993: 241) seems to have made a similar point: “Truth has no essence; it exists only through its effects and in particular through speech.”

³⁹ Here I’m paraphrasing a line from the *Lankavatārasūtra* (Vaidya 1960b: 64.6): *na te tathā yathā dṛṣṭā na ca te vai na santi ca/*

When a lapse of time intervenes between the creation and reception of the work, the interpretation of a *trompe-l'œil* may become complex, for it is a mirror full of ambiguous reflections, also giving back both the image of the spectator and the image of his world with its own fancies and peculiar truths. (Milman 1983: 105)

Let us assume Robinson is correct, and we are more logically sophisticated than Nāgārjuna's contemporaries. It does not necessarily follow that we are in a better position to evaluate the significance of his work. The historically situated critic must be especially cautious about any temptation to apply contemporary standards of excellence to the technical accomplishments of an age long since past, as if the exquisite Roman frescoes of Pompeii were any less grand because the painters had not mastered post-renaissance canons of perspective. A genuine work of art (of artifice/of magic) is designed to achieve an effect, and it is in terms of the total effect it achieves on the audience for whom it is intended that its success or failure must ultimately be judged. Technical skill is only one element of creative genius, and it is often not the most significant one at that. Hayes' central question, then — “What would have seemed important to Nāgārjuna?” — might more provocatively be phrased: “What sort of *effect* was Nāgārjuna interested in achieving?” The answer to this question has a great deal to do with where one begins.

If you begin with the belief that Nāgārjuna was interested in systematically commanding Buddhists and non-Buddhists of his day to assent to a set of rationally grounded doctrines, tenets, or true conclusions, then Bhāvaviveka and other logicians are your best guides to the appreciation of his writing. But if, on the other hand, you are inclined to see Nāgārjuna as interested in helping his readers to achieve some degree of sensitivity for what it might mean to think and live in wholly other terms, if you sense that he was interested in conjuring up a philosophical and religious world in which it appears possible completely to cease identifying with any doctrine, tenet, thesis, or point of view, a groundless world of “non-abiding” in which one might surrender attachment to the elaborate and convoluted project that grows out of the compulsion to know something for certain, to command, demonstrate, prove or disprove something once and for all — including the validity of rational argumentation itself... If you begin here, with the admittedly perplexing belief that one may somehow come to relinquish all attachment to belief, then you are probably better off following the lead of Candrakīrti and those others, ancient and modern, who have tried to steer the conversation in more promising directions.

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