Is Madhyamaka Buddhism Really the Middle Way?

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I

A COMMON ACCUSATION made against the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is that it entails nihilism. One needs to look no further than Nāgārjuna's own works – such as the *Stanzas on the Middle Way*, the *Refutation of Objections*, and the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* – to find this criticism made by his opponents. If everything is empty, the opponents contend, then nothing exists at all. Madhyamaka philosophy thus destroys the entire world, and with it the very possibility of the Buddhist spiritual life.[1]

However, Mādhyamikas are quick to refute this claim that the emptiness of things means that these things do not exist at all. Nāgārjuna warns against such a nihilistic misunderstanding of emptiness, saying that by this misperception of emptiness 'a person of little intelligence is destroyed, like by a snake wrongly seized or a spell wrongly cast.'[2] His intention is not to negate [178] the world, nor does the teaching of emptiness, when rightly understood, destroy the possibility of the Buddhist spiritual life.

On the contrary, emptiness means, Nāgārjuna says, not that entities are *non-existent* but rather that they are empty of, i.e. lack, *independent* or *autonomous* being. Entities are without inherent existence (*svabhāva*).[3] Emptiness denotes that things exist but their existence is never self-standing. The existence of entities is always dependent on many conditions.

Some of these conditions are external to the entities themselves. The existence of a tree, for example, depends upon various extrinsic conditions – such as the earth in which it is rooted, rain, sunshine, the seed from which it grew, and so on. Without these conditions, the tree would not exist. But the Mādhyamika also says that entities depend for their existence upon intrinsic factors – namely, the various necessary parts which make up the entity. The tree cannot exist without its essential constituents, such as the roots, the trunk, the branches, and so forth. So, the tree does not have an autonomous existence. It does not and cannot stand alone in the world, as it were, unsupported by other entities and independent of its indispensable parts.

And what is true of the tree in this respect is equally the case, according to the Mādhyamika, for all other things. This can be most potently realized in the case of one's own self. One's existence is clearly dependent on numerous factors both external and internal. One's existence depends, for instance, on the benign environmental conditions in which one lives – that there is enough oxygen to breathe, and that the sun has heated the world to a temperature which makes human life possible, that one lives in a peaceful society and one without epidemics. Further, one's existence depends on the continued functioning of one's various parts – one would cease to exist if one's essential parts such as one's heart, lungs or brain stopped working. In terms of traditional Buddhist categories, one's existence relies on the five constituent aggregates (*skandha*s) of form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness.

Thus, Nāgārjuna is able to claim – in both the *Stanzas on the Middle Way* and the *Refutation of Objections* – that it is only because things are empty, i.e. devoid of autonomous existence, that they can come into existence in dependence upon various conditions. It is the rejection, rather than the acceptance, of emptiness which in fact destroys all entities.[4] If things were not [179] empty of autonomous existence then there could be no explanation of the manifold dependently originating

entities which undeniably do occur. The world would be static, unchanging, which is evidently not the case. Nāgārjuna declares that 'since a phenomenon not dependently originating does not exist, a non-empty phenomenon certainly does not exist.'[5]

Most importantly for the Buddhist practitioner, it is, according to Nāgārjuna, the emptiness of all things which makes spiritual life possible. It is because all entities lack autonomous existence that change can occur. Things change when the things change upon which they depend. And Buddhist practice is fundamentally about change. That is, Buddhism is about transforming – by means of ethical conduct, meditation, ritual, mindfulness and so forth – unskilful mental events into skilful mental events. Buddhism is about progressing from a state of unenlightenment to a state of enlightenment, from ignorance to wisdom. If entities were not empty – if they possessed an independent existence unaffected by any alterations in other things – they would be unchanging and unchangeable. And, thus, if we were autonomously existing beings, we would be unable to gain enlightenment, or indeed to make any spiritual progress at all. We would be stuck, spiritually speaking, with the way we are at present.[6]

So, the Madhyamaka claim is that everything – including, most importantly, the spiritual life itself – is made possible by emptiness. The contention that entities are not empty contradicts the empirically verifiable reality that things change when the factors upon which these things rely alter, and would, furthermore, completely undermine the possibility of spiritual transformation. As Nāgārjuna says, 'For whom emptiness exists, all things are possible. For whom emptiness does not exist, nothing is possible.'[7] The teaching of emptiness is actually an affirmation of the dynamic interconnectedness of all things.

Thus, the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness appears to be a re-statement of the venerable and central Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Indeed, Nāgārjuna proclaims in the auto-commentary to the *Refutation of Objections* that emptiness and dependent origination are synonyms.[8] And in the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* he declares that 'since all entities are empty of inherent existence, the unequalled *tathāgata* taught [180] the dependent origination of entities.'[9] This Madhyamaka rejection of the accusation of nihilism is expressed succinctly by Candrakīrti, in his commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

> Some people insist that the Mādhyamikas are not different from nihilists, since the Mādhyamikas say that good and bad acts, the agent, the consequences of acts, and the entire world are empty of an inherently existing nature. As the nihilists also say that these things do not exist, the Mādhyamikas are the same as nihilists. We reply that this is not the case. Why? Because Mādhyamikas are proponents of dependent origination. Having apprehended causes and conditions, they explain that the entire present and future world is without inherent existence, because dependently originated.[10]

In which case, it appears that the Madhyamaka philosophy is not really saying anything new. Madhyamaka is re-affirming a doctrine which seems to have been at the heart of Buddhism from the earliest times. The doctrine of emptiness – understood as a re-statement of the dependently originating nature of all things – is the true Middle Way (Madhyamaka) philosophy. It avoids the extremes of nihilism (which says that all entities are non-existent in reality) and eternalism (which says that some or all entities in reality have existence independent of conditions).[11] The Middle Way of dependent origination promulgated by Siddhārtha Gautama has been expressed again by Madhyamaka, albeit perhaps in a somewhat novel and developed form.[12] The charge of nihilism is thus easily refuted.

II

HOWEVER, the accusation of nihilism actually has more weight to it than this analysis indicates. Let me explain. Mādhyamikas claim *not only* that the emptiness, the absence of inherent existence, of entities means that these entities originate in dependence upon conditions. In addition, many Madhyamaka statements indicate that all entities lack inherent existence in the sense that they are conceptual constructs, mental fabrications. It is not just that the tree, for example, originates in dependence upon numerous conditions – such as the water, the earth, the sun, the seed. It is, furthermore, the case that the [181] tree, the water, the earth, the sun, the seed, etc. originate in dependence upon the mind. As this is sometimes expressed in Madhyamaka texts, all entities are simply conventions (*saṃvṛti*, *sāmvṛta*) or fictions (*kalpanā*, *parikalpa*, and *vikalpa*).[13] And other Madhyamaka statements declare entities to be name-only (*nāmamātra*)[14], and to have a merely conceptual existence (*prajñaptisat*).[15] In Tibetan (Prāsaṅgika) Madhyamaka, things are said to have no 'existence from their own side,' (*rang ngos nas grub pa*) and no 'existence from the side of the basis of designation' (*gdags gzhi'i ngos nas grub pa*).[16] Hence, Mādhyamikas often compare all entities to illusions, dreams, mirages and so forth.[17] Entities are – like illusions, etc. – simply fabrications, merely appearances to the mind which have no further reality. This is why in Madhyamaka texts one finds statements that dependently originating entities do not really originate.[18] In other words, the whole world of dependently originating entities is simply a phantasm, a show, a mental creation, a mere appearance. So, the absence of inherent existence, the emptiness, of all things in the final analysis means, for Madhyamaka, not simply that all things dependently originate. It means, furthermore that all these dependently originating things are mere mental fabrications.

But how does the Mādhyamika reach this conclusion? The Madhyamaka contention, it appears, is that the dependent origination of entities actually *entails* that these entities are conceptual constructs. This is because an entity, by virtue of its origination in dependence on various internal and external conditions, is always analysable into these conditions. Thus, according to Madhyamaka, the entity is simply a name or concept attributed to the conglomeration of conditions. The Mādhyamika would challenge us to examine any entity whatsoever. A tree, for example, is made up of various components – the trunk, roots, branches, bark, leaves and so forth. And the tree is also dependent on various external factors, such as soil, sunshine, water, and so forth. The Mādhyamika contends that, if one examines the entity which one calls 'tree' one finds that, in reality, there is nothing there other than these various parts and external conditions operating in conjunction. There is not in fact a separate 'tree-entity'. As the Mādhyamikas sometimes put this point, when analysed, an entity, any entity, is actually unfindable.[19] When one searches for the tree-entity, for instance, it dissolves – so to speak – into [182] its components and external conditions. Actually, the Mādhyamika would say, the entity which we call 'tree' is simply a name, a concept, which the mind attributes to these various conditions. There is no mind-independent tree-entity. Hence, dependent origination means that dependently originating entities have a merely conceptual existence.

Buddhism is well-known for carrying out this sort of analysis with regard to the self (*ātman*). The self, when examined, is discovered to be composed of five ever-changing psycho-physical factors. Physical form, feelings, conceptions, volitions, and consciousness. What one calls 'the self' is simply the inter-play and constant flow of these various factors. If one looks closely at one's experience, there is no additional factor, it is argued, which might be called the self. The self is, then, just a name, a concept, which is attributed by the mind to this ever-changing psycho-

physical process. The *Milindapañha* famously compares the self in this respect to a chariot, which (it is claimed) is simply a name imputed to the collection of its parts – the axle, wheels, frame, reins, yoke, and so forth.[20]

Madhyamaka applies this reasoning to each and every thing. Just as the self or a chariot cannot withstand analysis, so it is with every entity. If one examines any entity, it can be analysed into internal and external conditions. The entity itself will be found to be nothing more than a name or concept which is used to label the conjunction of these conditions. These conditions will themselves be found to be mere names or concepts used to label their own conditions, and so on. In no case is an entity anything in itself; it does not exist inherently, mind-independently. In all cases entities will be found, in other words, to be empty. Thus, every entity whatsoever is simply a name, a concept, a mental fabrication with no further existence.

And one must not make the mistake, according to Madhyamaka, of thinking that the mind itself escapes this analysis. The mind too is empty. When analysed it is found to be just a name or concept given to its components and external conditions, and the components and external conditions are themselves liable to the same sort of analysis into their components and external conditions. This appears to be the principal objection of Madhyamaka to the Yogācāra philosophy, an objection which stimulated a number of sustained critiques by Mādhyamikas of what they claim to be the Yogācāra [183] contention that consciousness or the mind has inherent existence.[21] The Mādhyamika is insistent that the entire dependently originating world – both physical and mental – has a merely conceptual existence.

But this Madhyamaka claim that everything is mentally fabricated is surely problematic. Contrary to the Madhyamaka position, it does not seem to follow that, because all entities can be analysed in terms of their internal and external conditions, the entities are nothing more than names or concepts attributed to the conglomeration of conditions. The Madhyamaka equation of dependently originating existence with conceptual existence is questionable. It is true that entities exist in dependence on internal and external conditions. But this does *not* entail that these entities are merely mental fabrications. Arguably, an entity may be a mind-independent reality, but nevertheless depend for its existence on a variety of external conditions and essential components. A tree, for instance, may exist independently of the mind even though it is dependent on numerous external conditions and components for its existence. An entity is not necessarily simply a concept, entirely reducible to the intrinsic and external factors on which its existence depends. The Madhyamaka claim – a form of extreme ontological reductionism – that entities which can be analysed into external and internal conditions have a merely conceptual existence can be resisted.

In fact, it would appear that many Buddhists[22] and non-Buddhists would have found unacceptable the Madhyamaka contention that all entities have a merely conceptual existence. Their objection would be that, even if it is true that everything dependently originates, it is not true that everything whatsoever is a fabrication. One can see here why opponents of Madhyamaka – as represented even in Madhyamaka texts – accused the Mādhyamikas of nihilism. They perhaps have a point after all. For an entirely fabricated world – with no basis at all which is real, i.e. anything more than a conceptual construction – would seem to be hardly distinguishable from a non-existent world. Conceptually constructed things, it can be contended, need an unconstructed basis out of which they are constructed. Arguably, also, conceptual construction requires an agent of the construction – someone or something which is doing the constructing – which is not him/itself a conceptual construction. Perhaps, then, Mādhyamikas have gone too far in asserting the [184] merely fabricated nature of all things. The Madhyamaka philosophy, it can be claimed, is not the Middle Way after all. It has fallen into the extreme of nihilism.

III

HOWEVER, Madhyamaka texts are notoriously difficult to unravel, and they can often admit of a variety of interpretations. It is also possible that the Madhyamaka tradition is not entirely internally consistent. There may be more than one philosophical stance advanced in Madhyamaka texts. Furthermore, it may be that the Mādhyamikas in some respects had not considered the possible implications of their often laconic statements, and that some of these statements may be compatible with more than one philosophical position. In studying Madhyamaka, one is often faced by the problem of interpretative uncertainty. But it is this very interpretative uncertainty which can perhaps offer some possible ways out of the nihilistic predicament. While the reading of Madhyamaka which I have presented is supported by many textual passages, and the nihilistic interpretation of Madhyamaka is thus plausible, it need not be the only understanding of Madhyamaka which can be countenanced. Even if one finds that the nihilistic interpretation of Madhyamaka is a credible reading of many Madhyamaka texts, it is worth investigating some ways in which the Mādhyamika might claim that things have a fabricated, conceptually constructed existence, while avoiding the charge of nihilism. I will consider briefly three non-nihilistic readings of this Madhyamaka contention.

(1) EMPTINESS AND THE UNCONDITIONED

The nihilistic interpretation of Madhyamaka says that everything is empty in the sense that everything lacks inherent existence, which means both that everything is dependently originating and that all these dependently originating things are mere fabrications. But surely, it might be suggested, this philosophy of emptiness does not for Madhyamaka apply to *nirvāṇa*? Buddhists often say that *nirvāṇa* is an unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) sphere attained by the liberated person. There is some room for interpretation about the nature of this unconditioned sphere. However, quite a few Buddhist texts seem to sug-[185]gest that it is a permanent reality which transcends the conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) world of dependently originating entities, a permanent reality which is apprehended by the liberated person and, it seems, into which the liberated person passes – in some undefined sense – after his death (the *parinirvāṇa*). It is a true refuge and the source of real bliss, unlike the conditioned, mundane things of this world. In which case the Buddhist claim that everything is dependently originating actually means that every conditioned thing is dependently originating. The Unconditioned is, by contrast, not subject to dependent origination. Similarly, perhaps the Madhyamaka claim that everything is a mental fabrication applies only to the conditioned world, and there is for the Mādhyamika an Unconditioned reality which is real, unfabricated, and blissful.

There are a number of Madhyamaka texts which might be understand as advocating such an Unconditioned Reality. Passages that might support this reading of Madhyamaka are found even in the writings attributed to Nāgārjuna himself, especially but not exclusively in his corpus of hymns. Thus, for example, the *Hymn to the Inconceivable* says that,

> Convention arises from causes and conditions and is dependent. The dependent is proclaimed in this way [by the Buddha]. But the ultimate is uncreated. Also, it is called *svabhāva,* nature, reality, substance, essence, and true being.[23]

This Unconditioned Reality can be called ‘emptiness’, but not in the sense that it lacks inherent existence. Rather, this Unconditioned Reality is empty in the sense that it is beyond all words,

beyond all conceptualisation, and empty of all the taints/defilements of the conditioned world. There are certainly passages in Madhyamaka works which refer to reality as ineffable and as transcending conceptualisation. Thus, the *Stanzas on the Middle Way* state:

> Not dependent on another, calm, not diffused by verbal diffusion, free from conceptual discrimination, without diversity – this is the description of reality.[24] [186]

In this case, even the word 'emptiness' is merely a provisional aid, which will at best point us towards the ineffable reality which words cannot possibly describe. When talking about the Unconditioned Reality, only metaphors and not descriptions are appropriate.[25] There is always a degree of distortion or falsification of the Unconditioned Reality whenever it is expressed in words, yet some words are required in order to assist those who have not yet realised this Unconditioned Reality for themselves. As Candrakīrti declares:

> What hearing and what teaching can there be of the unutterable truth (*dharma*)? And yet, the unutterable [truth] is heard and taught through superimposition.[26]

Even emptiness is itself empty, i.e. unable to describe the Unconditioned Reality as it actually is. It is itself a superimposition (*samāropa*). This explains, it might be argued, the common Madhyamaka claims that the Mādhyamika has no view (*dṛṣṭi*), position (*pakṣa*) or thesis (*pratijñā*).[27] The Mādhyamika, according to this interpretation, has no philosophical stance at all about the nature of the Unconditioned Reality, knowing that this Reality is in fact quite indescribable.

It is of course debatable whether this notion of an indescribable reality is intelligible. One might object that the claim that reality is indescribable is itself a description of this reality.[28] And it is perhaps difficult to comprehend how the Mādhyamika can avoid incoherence if he treats as metaphors rather than descriptions his claims that the Unconditioned Reality is unconditioned, permanent, and unfabricated.

Leaving aside these philosophical problems, such an understanding of Madhyamaka need not deny that Madhyamaka teaches that the things of the conditioned world are one and all empty in the sense that they are mental fabrications. But this mundane sense of emptiness needs to be complemented by the teaching of the higher emptiness, which points us towards the ineffable Unconditioned Reality.

However, here we are faced again by the problem of interpretative uncertainty. For many Madhyamaka texts seem to imply that emptiness is *not* an ineffable Unconditioned Reality, itself exempted from the general rule that all entities are empty of inherent existence. Rather, emptiness is nothing more [187] than the ultimate truth about entities – it is how they actually are. It is purely and simply their lack of inherent existence. The *Hymn to the Inconceivable* says that 'the ultimate truth is the teaching that objects are without inherent existence.'[29] And in the *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness* Nāgārjuna declares that the ultimate is no more than the teaching that things are dependently originating, because they lack inherent existence.[30]

Furthermore, Nāgārjuna's famous claim that 'there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*'[31] can be interpreted to mean that, just like the entities which constitute cyclic existence, *nirvāṇa* as an unfabricated Unconditioned Reality is itself a fiction, a mental creation. So, Candrakīrti proclaims that *nirvāṇa* is simply a convention, and thus lacks inherent existence.[32] It is not in fact an inherently existing Unconditioned Reality. It is true that these statements might be read as an attack on the term '*nirvāṇa*', if understood as ultimately denoting what is actually an ineffable Reality. But it is also possible that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are here negating the ineffable Reality itself, and not just the ability of the term '*nirvaṇa*' to describe it. In this latter case,

it would appear that the only genuine *nirvāṇa* which the Mādhyamika can accept is the psychological state of freedom from craving, attachment and suffering which supposedly results from the realisation that all things are empty. As the *Sixty Verses of Reasoning* declares, 'the thorough knowledge of *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*'.[33] On this verse, Candrakīrti comments that the thorough knowledge in question is that *saṃsāra* arises without inherent existence.[34] *Nirvāṇa* – far from being an unfabricated, unconditioned ontological realm – is simply the insight into the merely conventional nature of the all things.

The Madhyamaka texts which state that Mādhyamikas have no views, positions, or theses are thus to be understood as meaning only that Mādhyamikas have no views, positions or theses which assert the inherent existence of anything. Mādhyamikas do assert the emptiness, the absence of inherent existence, of all entities. This emptiness is permanent only in the sense that the absence of inherent existence is always and everywhere the true nature of things. Emptiness is the emptiness of the chair, the emptiness of the tree, the emptiness of the person, and so forth. Mādhyamikas in the dGe lugs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism say, therefore, that there are as many emptinesses as [188] there are entities. There is an emptiness, an absence of inherent existence, for each and every thing.[35] Emptiness is itself empty, according to this interpretation of Madhyamaka, precisely because it is not an autonomous, Unconditioned Reality. On the contrary, emptiness only exists in dependence on the things of which it is the emptiness. Without entities, there would be no emptiness. Emptiness is itself dependently originating.

This disagreement about the meaning of emptiness entails, or is entailed by, quite divergent and incompatible understandings of Madhyamaka philosophy. On the one hand, there is the understanding of Madhyamaka as asserting that reality is simply the lack of inherent existence of all entities. On the other hand, there is the understanding of Madhyamaka as advocating, in addition, a further Reality – the higher emptiness – which is quite beyond all conceptual and linguistic categories. It is undefinable and indescribable. Madhyamaka understood in this latter way is, it might be argued, not nihilism for, even if the conditioned world is envisaged by them as totally fabricated, there is for the Mādhyamika an entirely unfabricated Unconditioned Reality. However, it might be objected that such a version of Madhyamaka simply combines nihilism with regard to the fabricated, conditioned world with an eternalistic belief in a permanent and blissful *nirvāṇa*. If this objection is correct, far from treading the Middle Way, such a Mādhyamika appears to fall into both extreme views simultaneously.

(2) *MADHYAMAKA AS PROCESS PHILOSOPHY*

THE NIHILISTIC READING of Madhyamaka contends that for Madhyamaka all things are conceptual constructs. There is no unconstructed basis on which the conceptual construction takes place. But perhaps the Mādhyamika might claim that, although all entities are indeed conceptually constructed, there is nevertheless an unfabricated substratum for conceptual construction. This substratum is to be envisaged as an entity-free flow of pure change, with no divisions or distinctions. When conceptual construction occurs, this undifferentiated process gets carved up, so to speak, into distinct entities. What is really there is the entity-free flow of change. The manifold world of entities is a superimposition on this basic and unfabricated flow. Nihilism is thus averted, because there is a substratum on the basis of which conceptual con-[189]struction can take place. And the Madhyamaka claim that all entities are conceptual constructs or conventions is also preserved, because the substratum is not itself an entity – it is the undifferentiated stuff out of which the conceptually constructed world of entities is fashioned.

A difficulty is, however, that there seems to be little textual evidence which would give any explicit support to this reading of Madhyamaka. If the Mādhyamikas did think that there is such an undifferentiated substratum for conceptually constructed entities, they certainly have not, as far as I can see, expressed this vital point in their texts. The interpretation is thus rather speculative, being ungrounded in textual evidence. Nevertheless, one might argue that, though the Mādhyamikas do not articulate that there is such a substratum, it remains a possible philosophical solution to the problem of nihilism, which is compatible with what they *do* say.

However, though it overcomes the problem of nihilism, this reading involves philosophical problems of its own, two of which I shall highlight.

First, it can be argued that the idea of 'change' always presupposes *something* which is changing. Change is arguably always a characteristic of an entity. The notion of change without an entity of which it is the change is perhaps incomprehensible. In other words, the notion of an entity-free substratum of change, upon which conceptually constructed entities are imposed, may be incoherent.

Second, it is far from clear that it is correct to claim that the world as it exists independently of the fabricating mind is undifferentiated into distinct entities. This interpretation is philosophically suspect in that it contends that all distinctions, all differentiations between and within entities, are a result of conceptual construction. This seems to give the constructing mind an inordinate amount of power. It seems far more likely that many of the distinctions which are made between and within entities have a basis is a mind-independent reality, even if this mind-independent reality is distorted or added to in the process of the perception of it. [190]

(3) *EMPTINESS AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL DOCTRINE*

IN WHICH CASE, perhaps the Mādhyamika means that, although the world is not *entirely* a mental fabrication, it is difficult to disentangle what is actually the case about the world as it exists independently of one's own mind from the interpretations and valuations which one imposes upon the world.

It seems undeniable that many of our perceptions and understandings of the world are heavily influenced by our prejudices and fantasies. Most importantly from a Buddhist point of view, we are (it is thought) afflicted by the fantasy that entities have a permanence and reliability which they simply do not have in reality. According to the Buddhist analysis, on the basis of this fantasy we crave, get attached and then suffer. We would do well, the Buddhist thinks, to see this fantasy for what it is. We must, in this case, see that the permanence, and reliability which we attribute to the things which we covet do not actually inhere in the entities themselves; these characteristics of things are simply false attributions by one's deluded mind. Things are certainly empty of the permanence and reliability which one's mind tends to impose upon them.

Furthermore, there is a serious epistemological problem in establishing how the world exists independently of our interpretation-laden perceptions of it, for one's apprehension of the world is necessarily of the world as perceived, not as it is in itself. One can never step outside one's perceptions, so to speak, in order to see the world as it really is in itself, for this very seeing would itself be a perception.

Thus, when the Mādhyamika says that entities lack inherent existence perhaps he means that entities *as perceived* lack inherent existence, because so much of the perception of the entity is actually a contribution of the perceiving mind. Entities are empty of inherent existence – i.e. are conceptual constructs or mere conventions – insofar as entities as perceived are always subject to the interpretative framework of the perceiver.

This claim that the world as it is independently of our perceptions is inaccessible to us is quite different from the nihilistic position that everything is fabricated. It is saying that the apprehension of things necessarily involves fabrication, because of the interpretative contributions of the apprehender, [191] rather than that the things themselves, independent of the apprehension of them, do not exist.

One might, however, feel quite suspicious of this interpretation of Madhyamaka because it seems to turn Madhyamaka philosophy into a species of Kantianism. Thus, the charge of anachronism might be made. Nevertheless, it is surely not impossible that philosophical traditions from distinct times and cultures might have developed similar insights. And there is perhaps some textual evidence in support of such a reading of Madhyamaka.

Most notably, there is an extensive critique in the *Refutation of Objections* (and its commentary) of the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and objects of knowledge (*prameya*).[36] Nāgārjuna attempts to demonstrate that there is no way of proving that the means of knowledge – identified as perception, inferential reasoning, analogy and verbal testimony – do actually apprehend objects of knowledge as they exist mind-independently. It seems, then, that Nāgārjuna's intention in this critique is not to prove that there are no mind-independent entities, but rather that we cannot establish that our means of knowing these objects are able to apprehend them as they actually are, without distortion or superimposition.

In addition, the *Treatise of Pulverization* (and its commentary) stresses the mutual dependence of the means of knowledge and the object of knowledge.[37] Perhaps the point is that knowledge requires an object (in order to be knowledge of something) yet the object as known (as opposed to how it is in itself) is altered and contributed to by the very act of knowing it. Objects as they are in themselves are inaccessible to the mind. Objects as known are conventions and lack inherent existence insofar as the entity as it is in itself remains concealed behind the veil of the mind's own interpretative activity.

In this reading of Madhyamaka, nihilism is replaced by scepticism. The ontological claim that all entities are mere fabrications is supplanted by the epistemological notion that entities as they exist in themselves are unknowable, obscured by the fabricating activity of the mind. The Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness treads the Middle Way between the nihilistic claim that everything is totally a fabrication and the naive realists' contention that one has access to the unfabricated world as it actually is. However, it might be objected that this scepticism makes too severe a break between [192] mind-independent things and one's efforts to apprehend them. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that things in themselves *are* known to us – they are present to us when we apprehend them – but this knowledge is nevertheless always a negotiation between the known entity and the knower.

Unlike the scepticism I have described, this position – which might be called 'perspectival realism'[38] – would claim that the mind-independent entity is not inaccessible. Yet, unlike naive realism, it acknowledges that the limitations and contributions of the apprehender entail that the apprehended entity is never *fully* available to us. One's apprehension of the entity is always mediated by the knowing mind and its perceptual apparatus. However, this mediation does not cut one off from mind-independent things. On the contrary, it is our only means of access to them. But it does entail that our access is always incomplete, imperfect.

This perspectival realism seems to be compatible with the Madhyamaka statements that *prameya* and *pramāṇa* are mutually dependent, and that *pramāṇa*s cannot be established to apprehend *prameya*s as they are mind-independent. Entities *as known* are empty in the sense that they originate in dependence upon both the mind-independent entity and the knowing mind. But

this does not mean that the mind-independent entity remains entirely concealed from us. The Middle Way is here between scepticism and naive realism, for the Mādhyamika acknowledges that mind-independent things can be apprehended – there is no unbridgeable gulf between the mind and reality – but that the apprehension of these things is always from a particular vantage point.

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NOTES

[1] See *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 1–6; *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 1–20; *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* 15.
[2] *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 11. See also *Ratnāvalī* II, 19.
[3] For Nāgārjuna's description of *svabhāva* as uncreated, independent existence, see *Madhyamkakārikā* XV, 1–2.
[4] *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 36.
[5] *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 19.
[6] See the auto-commentary to *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 70.
[7] *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 70.
[8] Auto-commentary to *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 70. This point is also made by Candrakīrti at *Prasannapadā* 504.

[9] *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* 68.
[10] *Prasannapadā* 368.
[11] For Nāgārjuna's advocacy of the Middle Way, see *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 18; *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 22 (and the auto-commentary to 70); *Lokātītastava* 22; *Acintyastava* 40.
[12] This type of interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka thought is advanced by D.J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna. The Philosophy of the Middle Way*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986.
[13] See, for example, *Acintyastava* 6, 36, 44; *Lokātītastava* 19; *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 37.
[14] See *Acintyastava* 35.
[15] See, for example, the *Hastavālanāmaprakaraṇa* 1–3 in which entities are said to have *prajñaptisat* (*btags yod pa*) because they exist dependent on parts.
[16] See J. Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1983, 1996 (2nd edition), pp.35–41.
[17] See *Madhyamakakārikā* VII, 34; *Acintyastava* 4–5, 30; *Ratnāvalī* II, 12–13.
[18] See *Yukṭiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 19, 48.
[19] See, for instance, Atiśa's *Satyadvayāvatāra* 21.
[20] *Milindapañha* pp.25 ff.
[21] For some discussion of these Madhyamaka critiques of Yogācāra philosophy, see D. Burton, 'Wisdom Beyond Words? Ineffability in Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Buddhism', pp.62ff. In *Contemporary Buddhism,* vol.1, no.1, 2000.
[22] For example, both Abhidharma and Yogācāra Buddhism seem to posit an unfabricated basis for the conceptually constructed world . In the case of the Abhidharma, the foundational elements are the dependently originating but unconstructed *dharma*s. For the Yogācāra, the unfabricated basis for construction would appear to be the dependently originating flow of mind/consciousness (*citta*).
[23] *Acintyastava* 44–5b.
[24] *Madhyamakakārikā* XVIII, 9.
[25] It is possible, perhaps, to read *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV, 18 and XXII, 11 as supportive of this interpretation.
[26] *Prasannapadā* 264. See also *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* 178.
[27] See *Yukṭiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 50; *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29; *Madhyamakakārikā* XIII, 8.
[28] For a detailed discussion of this problem, see D. Burton *Emptiness Appraised. A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy.* Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999, pp. 55–7.
[29] *Acintyastava* 52.
[30] *Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā* 68.
[31] *Madhyamakakārikā* XXV, 19.
[32] *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikāvṛtti* 5.
[33] *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* 6.
[34] *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikāvṛtti* 6.
[35] See E. Napper, *Dependent Arising and Emptiness*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1989, p.94.
[36] *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (and auto-commentary) 30–51.
[37] *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (and auto-commentary) 2.
[38] The name 'perspectival realism' was suggested to me by M. McGhee and my reflections on it have been stimulated by his ideas.