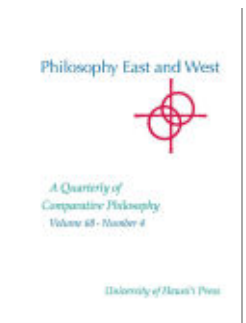Madhyamaka, Metaphysical Realism, and the Possibility of an Ancestral World

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MADHYAMAKA, METAPHYSICAL REALISM, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ANCESTRAL WORLD

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It is the evening of January 11, 1951. A. J. Ayer retires to a Parisian bar for a post-lecture drink, where he is joined by Georges Batailles, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the physicist Georges Ambrosino. They argue until 3 A.M. The point at issue: Was there a sun before human beings existed? Ayer says "yes," the other three say "no."[1]

Now imagine that a fifth person joins the debate—a Mādhyamika. She argues that because nothing exists independently of conceptual imputation, since, as she puts it, everything is *prajñaptisat,* neither the sun nor anything else could exist "in itself" or "from its own side"—apart, that is, from the conceptualizing activities of beings like us.

Ayer is unimpressed. He stubs out his cigarette and replies that if the Mādhyamika cannot consistently accept the evident truth that the world existed before any concept-imputing subjects evolved, then so much the worse for Madhyamaka.

Had he made that reply, Ayer, I shall argue, would have been giving voice to a charge that has been leveled at metaphysical anti-realism by a variety of thinkers, from Alfred North Whitehead to Quentin Meillassoux. In what follows, I consider how a Mādhyamika could respond, and in so doing clarify where she should stand in debates about metaphysical realism and metaphysical anti-realism. In the final section, I argue that such debates are not just of academic interest but also relevant to Buddhist practice.

First, though, I need to explain what I mean by Madhyamaka. In particular, I must explain why anyone might think that Mādhyamikas believe that the world is dependent on conceptualization—a belief that is, after all, more usually associated with Yogācāra.

Interpretative Issues

Madhyamaka is a multifaceted tradition, and there are considerable differences between the Madhyamaka of, say, Candrakīrti and that of Bhāviveka. Yet, despite their various differences, Mādhyamikas agree that their tradition strikes a middle way between two extreme views *(antagrāhadṛṣṭi).* In opposition to nihilism *(ucchedavāda),* Mādhyamikas deny that nothing exists. But against eternalism *(sāsvatavāda)* they deny that anything enjoys the kind and degree of ontological independence that is signaled by the

Sanskrit term *svabhāva*.[2] Nothing, they contend, exists in that way. Anything one might care to name is ontologically dependent in one or more respects.

Mādhyamikas appeal to various sorts of dependence to make this point, including the causal dependence of an effect upon its cause as well as the mereological dependence of a whole upon its constituent parts. In recent decades, however, several prominent philosophers of Buddhism, including Jay Garfield, Jan Westerhoff, Paul Williams, David Burton, and Mark Siderits, have focused on Mādhyamikas' appeals to a different sort of relation—one variously referred to as dependence on "concepts," dependence on "conceptual construction," or dependence on "conceptual imputation."[3] Indeed, Westerhoff claims that for Nāgārjuna, and by implication for Madhyamaka generally, "it is the notion of emptiness in terms of conceptual dependence or imputation which is generally regarded as the most subtle understanding of emptiness" (2009a, p. 124).

What we have here, I would suggest, is a distinct interpretation of Madhyamaka, one in which appeals to what may be called *conceptual dependence* are taken to play a key role. Not all scholars of Madhyamaka accept this interpretation.[4] For the present purposes, however, I will assume that it is accurate. I will ask whether Madhyamaka, interpreted in this way, is vulnerable to what I call *the ancestrality objection.*

Before *that* question can be answered, though, I need to take one more step back to explain what conceptual dependence means.

Conceptual Dependence

Conceptual dependence is best thought of, initially, in terms of identity. If x is conceptually dependent for its identity, then x is what it is only because of the presence of certain subjective or intersubjective conditions. As Garfield et al. would say, its identity necessarily depends on "concepts," "conceptual construction," or "conceptual imputation."[5] Were it not for the application or imputation of certain concepts, then x simply would not be whatever it is.

It is clear that the identities of *some* entities are conceptually dependent. Consider a broom, for instance. Beings who lacked the concept *broom* might see what we take to be a broom as a combination of two items, a stick and a brush, or perhaps as just one part of the single entity we see as a combination of a broom and a bucket (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, §60). Alternatively, take the area of land we call "Nepal." Beings who lacked the concept of a nation-state would not take that area of land to be a distinct area of land. The entity we know as "Nepal" would not show up as a constituent of their world.

Such claims are often supported by drawing a contrast with supposedly natural things. For example, it might be suggested that whereas Mount Everest would still have been the entity it is if humans had never evolved,

the same cannot be said of the area of land we call "Nepal." The boundary of that area of land is, one might say, artificial or "fiat," whereas that of the mountain is natural or *bona fide* (see, further, Smith 2001). Mādhyamikas, however, draw no such contrasts. In their view, it is not just obvious conceptual constructs, such as nation-states, that depend for their identities upon conceptual imputation. It is not just artifacts that so depend. No, in the interpretation we are here considering, the Mādhyamika is committed to holding that the identity of anything one might care to name, be it a concrete object (such as a mountain), a relation (such as the sun's effects on the mountain's upper slopes), or an event (such as an avalanche), is conceptually dependent—dependent, that is, on the application or imputation of concepts.

So Mādhyamika denials that anything has *svabhāva* are, in this interpretation, partly about identity. They amount to claims that "nothing can have any identity . . . in its own right," that "independent of conceptual imputation there are . . . no identities."[6] Commentators sometimes add that such claims about identity imply certain claims about *existence.* Thus, Amber D. Carpenter (2004, p. 86) writes that for Madhyamaka "to exist implies identity." Garfield (2015, p. 36) makes an even stronger claim:

> The Quinean slogan "no entity without identity" has a clear ancestor in [the Madhyamaka school]. To say that something exists, whether it is a proton, a person or a national deficit, is to presuppose that it has an identity. . . . [E]xistence is always *existence as an entity with a particular identity.*

On this interpretation, then, the Mādhyamika is rationally committed to the view that nothing could exist if nothing had an identity and that nothing could have an identity were it not for conceptual imputation. She will of course acknowledge that the world *seems* to be articulated into discrete items bound together by causal, mereological, and various other sorts of relations. However, for reasons we will consider below, she will maintain that that impression is ultimately false. Even the Abhidharmika's *dharma*s are, she will insist, conceptually dependent.

Idealism and Anti-realism

According to Garfield et al., Mādhyamikas are committed to the truth of the following anti-realist claim:

> (A) For any x, x depends on conceptual imputation for both its identity and its existence.

However, even among those commentators who hold that Mādhyamikas are committed to the truth of (A), there is some dispute about whether that claim entails that all things depend for their existence on conceptual imputation *and on nothing else.* Paul Williams, for instance, suggests that conceptual imputation is sufficient in this sense. A Mādhyamika, he writes, is "one who

holds and sets out to demonstrate that absolutely everything is nothing more than a conceptual construct" (Williams and Tribe 2000, p. 141). Similarly, David Burton argues that Mādhyamikas "contend that all entities are caused *completely* by conceptual construction."[7]

Others disagree. For instance, H.H. the Dalai Lama (2005, p. 49) maintains that according to the Prāsaṅgika, "external phenomena are not mere projections or creations of the mind." Garfield, for his part, claims that to say that a table lacks *svabhāva* is to say "that its existence *as the object that it is—as a table*—depends not on *it,* nor on any purely nonrelational characteristics, but depends on us as well"—where the "as well" implies that conceptual imputation is just one of the conditions that combine to form the phenomenon we call "the table" (Garfield 1995, p. 89; cf. Garfield 2015, p. 35).[8]

Graham Priest would agree. He begins his discussion of conceptual dependence by contrasting metaphysical realism, the view that "there is a world which is, and is what it is, independently of any conceptual grasp to be had of the matter," with its antithesis, "idealism" (which is precisely the view that Paul Williams and David Burton attribute to Madhyamaka) (Priest 2014, p. 195). As one would expect, he claims that Mādhyamikas are not metaphysical realists since they hold that the "world is not concept-independent" (2013, p. 219). Yet, he adds, they also believe that just as "objects in the world depend for their nature on concepts," so "concepts depend for their nature on the world" (Priest 2014, p. 198; 2013, p. 219). So they are not idealists, either. For Madhyamaka, then,

> concepts do not float in some ethereal space. Concepts can be what they are only because they relate to things in the world in certain ways. Thus, the concept *dog* is what it is, in part, because it relates to dogs—the (generally four-legged) canine creatures in the world. If it related in the same way to cats instead, it would not mean what it does. (Priest 2014, p. 198)

The difference between Williams and Burton on the one hand and Garfield and Priest on the other amounts, therefore, to this: the former pair seem to ascribe to Mādhyamikas the view that conceptual dependence is sufficient for the identity and existence of any particular entity—that, in other words, all entities are nothing more than conceptual constructs. Garfield and Priest would deny this. In their interpretation of the tradition, Mādhyamikas hold that some entities depend for their identity and/or existence on conditions other than conceptual imputation. For the present purposes, there is no need to take sides in this debate. It is enough to note that all parties to it—Williams, Burton, Garfield, and Priest—see appeals to conceptual dependence as playing a key role in Mādhyamika argumentation. All parties agree that, for Mādhyamikas, the identity and existence of any particular entity must depend on conceptual imputation to *some* degree.

That apparently anti-realist thesis is open to various objections (see, further, van Inwagen 2014, chap. 5). In the next section, I consider one.

The Ancestrality Objection

Take metaphysical realism to be "the view that there is a world of objects and properties that is independent of our thought and discourse (including our schemes of concepts) about such a world" (Horgan and Timmons 2002, p. 74). And take metaphysical anti-realism to be the denial of this view.

In the opening section, I imagined Ayer arguing that metaphysical anti-realists are unable to account for the fact that the world existed prior to the emergence of any human or other concept-wielding beings.[9] In fact, that is a common objection to anti-realism.

It is there in the works of Alfred North Whitehead, for instance. In *Science and the Modern World,* Whitehead objects to the "subjectivist" view that "what is perceived is not a partial vision of a complex of things generally independent of that act of cognition" on the following ground:

> Our historical knowledge tells us of ages in the past when, so far as we can see, no living being existed on earth. Again it also tells us of countless star-systems, whose detailed history remains beyond our ken. . . . Our perceptions . . . tell us that in remote ages there were things happening. (1925, pp. 89–90)

Barbara Hannan levels a similar charge at Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism:

> [Schopenhauer's] idea that space, time, and causality come into being only when living, sensing beings appear seems immediately paradoxical: How could there have been no time before such beings came along? Imagine a volcano erupting on the lifeless earth, long ago, prior to the existence of organisms. Surely the eruption occurs at a time, and is a definite event. It need not await the appearance of organisms before becoming time-bound and individuated. (2009, p. 48)

To give another example, Holmes Rolston III challenges Hilary Putnam's old claim that "*We* cut up the world when we introduce one or another scheme of description" on the ground that

> the Earth-world was quite made up with objects in it long before we humans arrived with our minds; the Earth-world made our minds over several billion years of evolutionary history, as it also made up our hands and our feet. (Rolston 1997, p. 55; contrast Putnam 1981, p. 52)

In recent years, Quentin Meillassoux has attracted a lot of attention for articulating and defending a very similar argument. He begins by suggesting that to be a metaphysical realist is to endorse the following theses: (a) there is a way the world is that is independent of our thought and discourse, and (b) it is possible to come to know something about what that world is like. Those he calls *weak correlationists* reject (b) but not (a); those he calls *strong correlationists* reject (a)—and hence (b) as well.

[Meillassoux (2008, p. 16)](#) argues that either sort of correlationism can be refuted quite easily:

> all we have to do is ask the correlationist the following question: *what is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago? Did the accretion of the earth happen, yes or no?*

On pain of inconsistency, Meillassoux argues, correlationists of either stripe will be unable to respond in the affirmative. They will be unable, in fact, "to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements" about an "ancestral" world, one "anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life" ([Meillassoux 2008](#), pp. 9–10).

Whitehead, Hannan, Rolston, and Meillassoux are expressing a similar charge; following the last of them, I call it the "ancestrality objection." Those who object to metaphysical anti-realism on this ground will concede that different people will, in many cases, have different views about what went on in the ancestral world. They could concede that we will never know, with complete certainty, what exactly went on back then. They could even admit that as soon as we try to *represent* what went on in the ancestral world, our representations will necessarily be shaped by certain facts about us—by our conceptual schemes, for instance, or our social conventions. Nonetheless, the realist will insist that *something* must have gone on back then, prior to the emergence of human beings or any other concept-wielding entities.[10] And she will also maintain that any philosophical approach or system that cannot allow that something went on back then must be rejected as being contrary to the findings of geology, paleontology, cosmogony, and a host of other respectable sciences.

Madhyamaka would seem to be vulnerable to this objection. For if Garfield et al. are correct, then according to Madhyamaka nothing—no entity, relation, or event—is what it is independently of conceptual imputation. And from this it would seem to follow that in the absence of any concept-imputing beings, there could be no causal or mereological structure. It would seem that no peak or arête could be part of a mountain, since no part-whole relations could obtain. It would seem that no tumbling rock could set another in motion, since no causal relations could obtain either. For the Mādhyamika, in fact, it would seem that this mysterious subject-independent realm, the ancestral world, could not exist.

A Kantian Interlude

Meillassoux writes as if the ancestrality objection undermines a great number of positions in modern Western philosophy—not just Berkeley's idealism, but also Kant's transcendental version as well as all the various kinds of absolute idealism and phenomenology. But he exaggerates. Consider what Kant would have said about the following claim:

(B) Our solar system congealed from a cloud of dispersed particles.

Not only would Kant have endorsed it as true; he *did* endorse it as true, since it expresses the essence of his influential nebula hypothesis. Granted, he formed that hypothesis in his pre-critical phase; yet there was, I would suggest, nothing in any of his subsequent *Critiques* that would have compelled him to reject it. In the light of those *Critiques,* he would have maintained that to think (B) is to bring into play certain subjective conditions, including forms of intuition (such as time) and categories of understanding (such as causality). Yet he would not have been rationally compelled to suppose, absurdly, that (B) could be true only if one or more subjects had actually been present at the birth of our solar system to apply those forms and categories.[11] On the contrary, Kant would have maintained that if we are content to seek *empirical* truths and nothing more, then we are perfectly entitled not only to help ourselves to concepts of causation, time, space, and so forth, but to contemplate the possibility of a world that exists independently of us.

The Mādhyamika, for her part, can appeal to the concept of conventional truth *(saṃvṛti-satya)* to make a broadly similar point.[12] A full explanation of the various meanings of this concept would take us too far off course; for our purposes, it will suffice to note that any scientific truths must, by the lights of Madhyamaka, amount to conventional truths. So, just as a Kantian could consistently argue that so long as we aspire to discover merely empirical truths then we are entitled to appeal to forms of intuition and categories of understanding, so the Mādhyamika could consistently argue that so long as we are content to remain at the level of conventional truth, then we are entitled to help ourselves to concepts of causation, temporal passage, part-whole relations, and indeed a range of scientific models or theories. In this sense, the Mādhyamika need "not quarrel with the world" (*Madhyamakāvatāra* VI, verse 166 [Candrakīrti 2002]). She could even say that in certain contexts—when one is doing paleontology, for instance—it is epistemically legitimate to hypothesize about the ancestral world—so long (once again) as one doesn't presume to uncover anything other than conventional truths.

Yet the Mādhyamika would not be at all happy with appeals to the ancestral world when they are made with a view to supporting metaphysical realism. For she would recognize, correctly, that metaphysical realists such as Hannan, Rolston, and Meillassoux do not moot the possibility of such a world because they are interested in what happened a long time ago. They do so because they want to encourage people to accept that there was (and is) a way the world is "in itself" (to use a Kantian expression) or "from its own side" (to use a Tibetan one).[13] They postulate an ancestral world, that is, because they want to justify metaphysical realism.[14]

Now maybe Svātantrikas will hold that there can be *conventional* truths about the ancestral world, where that world is conceived of as existing from its own side.[15] However, Prāsaṅgikas will reject any such claim. And *all*

Mādhyamikas will reject the suggestion that any claims about the ancestral world could be ultimately true—true, that is, in a way that captures how the world is from its own side. Few of them would, I believe, do so for Kantian reasons. Only those who subscribe to what Mark Siderits (2007, p. 181) calls the "reality is ineffable" interpretation of Madhyamaka would argue that although the world in itself is articulated in some way, we could never know *how* it is articulated. Instead, most Mādhyamikas would, I suspect, argue that the very notion that anything has its own side fails to withstand analysis. They would argue that when a metaphysical realist speaks about the ancestral world, where such a world is supposed to have *svabhāva,* he is speaking about nothing at all.

Nāgārjuna on the Unreality of Time

So, as I suggested in the opening section, the Mādhyamika would not accept Ayer's claim. But what reasons could she give in support of her view?

One line of argument is suggested by the first three verses of chapter 19 of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK)*:

If the present and the future
Depend on the past,
Then the present and the future
Would have existed in the past.

If the present and the future
Did not exist there,
How could the present and the future
Be dependent upon it?

If they are not dependent upon the past,
Neither of the two would be established.
Therefore neither the present
Nor the future would exist.[16]

Like all the verses of the *MMK,* these ones have generated a great deal of debate. Commentators and critics have discussed how they relate to the arguments presented in other chapters of that work—in particular, the analysis of motion *(gatāgata)* in chapter 2 and the examination of arising and dissolution *(saṃbhavavibhava)* in chapter 21. They have debated what arguments the verses present, at whom those arguments are directed, and whether they work.[17] I will not enter into these complicated hermeneutical debates here, however. So, for instance, I will not try to work out what Nāgārjuna really meant when he composed *MMK* 19:1–3. Instead, I will merely set out an argument *inspired* by these verses:

(1) The present depends for its existence on the past.[18]
(2) If x depends for its existence on y, then both x and y must exist.[19]
(3) So if the present exists, then both the present and the past must exist.
(4) But when the past exists, the present does not exist
(5) And when the present exists, the past does not exist
(6) So the present does not exist.

Call this the "Argument against Time." Although it is supposed to prove the non-existence of the present, it could also be applied *(mutatis mutandis)* to both the past and the future. Thus expanded, its conclusion seems to anticipate McTaggart's: neither the present nor the past nor the future exists.[20]

How, in the light of the Argument against Time, might a Mādhyamika respond to the ancestrality objection? She would not, of course, provide a robustly realist account of what went on in the ancestral world, but neither would she argue that something-I-know-not-what went on back then. Nor, I believe, would she maintain that what went on hundreds of millions of years ago was the result of conceptualization. So, for example, she would not need to avail herself of the traditional Buddhist idea that sentient beings, bound up in the beginningless cycle of *saṃsāra,* have always been around and exercising their conceptualizing faculties. Instead, the Mādhyamika would, I suspect, use the Argument against Time, or something like it, to challenge the realist's presupposition that there "was" a "back then," an ancestral world. She would argue that that presupposition does not withstand analysis, and that there is, therefore, no objection to answer.[21]

Practical Implications

That would be an interesting response to the ancestrality objection, but it is not obviously compelling. For the Argument against Time, on which it is based, is open to several forceful objections. For instance, one might wonder whether there is any sense of dependence that would make (1) true; and one might also wonder whether (2) trades on the same sort of dependence. (If, for example, (1) trades on causal dependence then it is not obviously true, and (2), for its part, is contentious, since causal relations are typically thought to require temporal contiguity but not temporal coincidence (although see Westerhoff 2009a, pp. 117–118).) One could, moreover, challenge (4) on the ground that when the past exists, the present exists, too, albeit in a non-actualized state. And, to compound matters, (5) will be rejected both by eternalists (who hold that the past, the present, and the future exist) and by advocates of "growing block" theories of time (who hold that although both the past and the present exist, the future does not).[22]

I will not follow up any of these lines of argument here. Instead, I merely note that defending the Argument against Time is likely to prove an uphill struggle. So why struggle? Why should the Mādhyamika feel obliged to go

to such lengths—even to deny the existence of the past!—to defend a position in what seems to be a purely academic dispute about a world that, if it ever existed, has not done so for millions of years? Doesn't the so-called parable of the poisoned arrow warn us that it is foolish to fret about such theoretical matters?[23] In fact, didn't the Buddha expressly reject speculations about the world's existence in time?[24]

Debates about the ancestral world need not, however, be irrelevant to Buddhist practice. After all, as we saw, writers such as Meillassoux appeal to the notion of such a world, not because they are interested in what happened long ago, but because they want to justify a particular metaphysical position. And by the lights of Madhyamaka, the practice of trying to justify metaphysical positions is not hived off from the rest of life. In metaphysics, as in any other domain of practice, one can succumb to greed, aversion, or delusion. Indeed, regarded through the lens of Buddhist practice, a commitment to metaphysical *realism* seems especially problematic—not just a distraction from the Eightfold Path but also, perhaps, an obstacle on it. For once they accept the realist thesis that there is a way the world really is, independent of conceptual imputation, metaphysically minded people will find it hard to resist the temptation to try to *discover* what that world is like. The Mādhyamika will maintain that some of them may, in fact, become afflicted by a certain sort of *metaphysical craving*: a longing to achieve what Bernard Williams once called an "absolute conception" of reality—a conception of reality as it is independently of our thought, and to which all representations of reality can be related.[25] And the Mādhyamika will add that when—inevitably—their efforts fall short, they will experience the *duḥkha* of disappointment.[26]

It might be objected that a commitment to metaphysical *anti*-realism could also be a source of attachment, that one might resist the attractions of realism only to succumb to a craving to defend its antithesis. That danger is no doubt real: one can become attached to anti-realism, as to anything else. Yet the objection does not appear to be decisive. For it would seem that a Mādhyamika could blunt its edge by saying that her negation of realism is a non-implicative *(prasajya)* negation—one, that is, that implies nothing about the subject term— and that her considered stance is therefore not anti-realism but a "quietistic" refusal to endorse either realism or anti-realism (see, further, Tillemans 2017).

That sort of response is unlikely to convince the realist, however. To be sure, the realist may very well accept that her efforts to develop an absolute conception of reality are likely to end in failure and disappointment. But she will contend that there is no solace to be found in anti-realism or quietism, either. For to take either of these roads is to relinquish any hope of getting to the bottom of reality—and, to the mind of a realist, it must be terribly disappointing to relinquish that.

But must it? In considering this question, it may help to consider the words of one of the thinkers with whom we began—not Ayer, Bataille, Ambrosino, or even our imaginary Mādhyamika, but Merleau-Ponty:

Suppose . . . that no thought ever detaches itself completely from a sustaining support . . . that the figurations of literature and philosophy are no more settled than those of painting and are no more capable of being accumulated into a stable treasure; that even science learns to recognize a zone of the "funda-mental," peopled with dense, open, rent *[déchirés]* beings of which an exhaustive treatment is out of the question . . . that in the end, we are never in a position to take stock of everything objectively. (1964, pp. 189–190)

That might, Merleau-Ponty admits, seem a disappointing result; yet he adds that any such disappointment would issue from "that spurious fantasy which claims for itself a positivity capable of making up for its own emptiness *[vide]*" (1964, p. 190). Merleau-Ponty wrote these words in the summer of 1960, but imagine that he had spoken them on that cold January morning nine years earlier. Ayer would not have been persuaded. However, had she been present, the Mādhyamika might well have agreed.

Notes

The following abbreviation is used in the text and Notes:

MMK   *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūla-madhyamakakārikā.* Translated by Jay Garfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

1 – Bataille tells the story in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (Bataille 2001, p. 112). Merleau-Ponty explains his own views on the notion of a pre-human world in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 456). Ayer records his objection that those views are hard to square with "well-established scientific hypotheses that there have been and will be times which are not contemporaneous with any manifestations of human consciousness," in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Ayer 1982, p. 225).

2 – The concept of *svabhāva* plays a role in various fields of inquiry, including epistemology and the philosophy of language. In the following, I will restrict myself to considering its role in ontology. For a clear introduction to the various meanings of *svabhāva*, see Westerhoff 2009a.

3 – See, for instance: Priest 2013, p. 219; Garfield 2015, p. 33; Paul Williams 1998, p. 108; Burton 2013, p. 154; Siderits 2016, p. 41 n. 9.

4 – Disputes tend to focus on the question of how to interpret terms such as *prajñapti, prajñaptir,* and *prajñaptisat* in Madhyamaka texts. Writers such as Paul Williams, David Burton, and Jan Westerhoff follow the most prominent Madhyamaka tradition, the Prāsaṅgika, by holding that such terms used in such contexts denote some form of conceptual imputation or conceptual construction (see Paul Williams 1998, p. 222 n. 26; Burton 1999, pp. 95–104; and Westerhoff 2009a, p. 23). Others dispute this reading. For instance, Douglas L. Berger (2010, p. 51) contends that Nāgārjuna, unlike Candrakīrti, did not use the term *prajñapti* to denote "conceptual constructs." Dan Arnold (2005, p. 170) expresses similar reservations about what he calls Burton's "undefended rendering of *prajñapti* as 'concept' or 'conceptual construct.'" For a good introduction to these issues, see Berger 2010, Garfield and Westerhoff 2011, and Berger 2011.

5 – I take the phrase "conceptual imputation" from Garfield, who seems to use it to indicate Mādhyamika conceptions of *prajñaptisat* (see, e.g., Garfield 2015, p. 35, or Garfield 1995, p. 102). Several other writers use identical or similar phrases to make similar points. For instance, Williams (1998, p. 108) uses "conceptual imputation," Westerhoff (2009a, p. 124) uses "conceptual dependence or imputation," Burton (2013, p. 154) uses "conceptual construction," and Siderits (2007, p. 185) uses "mental construction." It is not my aim here to question the use of such terms, and in what follows I will continue to use the phrase "conceptual imputation." That said, it is worth asking whether that phrase is apt. For the claim that things depend for their existence on conceptual imputation might be thought to imply that we create the world's articulations by actively imposing our concepts onto some sort of unarticulated stuff—a notion which is open to question. For some interesting criticisms of it, see Tillemans 2017. For a clear discussion of anti-realists' use of the "Promethean" imagery of "imputing" concepts and "carving up" reality, see Cooper 2002, chap. 4.

6 – Eckel 2009, p. 121, and *MMK* (in Garfield 1995, p. 251), respectively. In the second quotation, Garfield is interpreting *MMK* 18:9.

7 – Burton 2013, p. 154 (my emphasis). See also Burton 2004, chap. 5, and (especially) Burton 1999, chap. 4.

8 – Indeed, in Garfield's view, this is one of the points on which Madhyamaka differs from Yogācāra. Unlike Yogācārins, he claims, Mādhyamikas do not believe that phenomena "are all really nothing more than projections of our consciousness" (Garfield 2015, pp. 33–34).

9 – It's a nice phrase, but do we really *wield* concepts? I wonder whether the suggestion that we do is yet another expression of the Promethean image of our relation with the world mentioned in note 5 above.

10 – John Nolt (2004, pp. 71–72) provides the following argument in support of this claim: (1) The cosmos existed and had structure before we existed; (2) during some of this time, it was possible that we would never exist; so (3) the cosmos has structure that would have existed even if we never had; so (4) the cosmos has structure that is independent of our cognition (cf. Meillassoux 2008, p. 22).

11 – See Gabriel and Žižek 2009, pp. 86–87. Meillassoux responds to this sort of objection in *After Finitude* (Meillassoux 2008, pp. 22–26). Briefly stated, his argument is that: (1) the transcendental subject must be embodied; hence (2) it must have emerged at a certain point in time and space, which entails that (3) transcendental idealism cannot account for the existence of a world prior to that emergence. Yet the argument is, on the face of it, unconvincing. Consider the possibility of aesthetic judgments. It is not unreasonable to suppose that such judgments make no sense when they are entirely divorced from the notion of an embodied subject for whom certain things could show up as beautiful, etc. But one can accept *that* supposition without concluding, absurdly, that before any such subjects arrived on the evolutionary scene nothing could have had any aesthetic qualities. On the contrary, I am sure that the impact of the meteorite which formed the Sudbury basin in Ontario over 1,800 million years ago would (if viewed from a safe distance) have made for a sublime spectacle.

12 – The point is, I stress, only *broadly* similar. In several respects, Kant's conception of empirical truth is very different from Mādhyamika accounts of conventional truth (see, further, Garfield 2002, p. 92).

13 – *rang ngos nas grub pa.*

14 – That, at least, is what motivates Hannan, Rolston, and Meillassoux. I am not sure about Whitehead. It is clear that he appeals to our "historical knowledge" in order to challenge metaphysical anti-realism; yet it is not clear that he does so in the hope of justifying metaphysical realism.

15 – There is some evidence—though, as Tillemans (2003, p. 95) maintains, not very strong evidence—to think that followers of the Sautrāntika-Svātantrika school believed it was conventionally true that some objects exist in a mind-independent manner. Similarly, Paul Williams (1989, p. 59) claims that the "distinctive difference" between the Madhyamaka and the Svātantrika is that only the latter accept "inherent existence conventionally." To allow that there could be conventional truths about the ancestral world, where that world is conceived of as existing from its own side, is, presumably, to allow that there are pragmatic reasons to treat the ancestral world as a subject-independent truthmaker (see, further, Siderits 2007, p. 56).

16 – *MMK* 19:1–3:

> *pratyutpanno 'nāgatas ca yady atītam apekṣya hi / pratyutpanno 'nāgatas ca kāle 'tīte bhaviṣyataḥ // pratyutpanno 'nāgatas ca na stas tatra punar yadi / pratyutpanno 'nāgatas ca syātāṃ katham apekṣya tam // anapekṣya punaḥ siddhir nātītaṃ vidyate tayoḥ / pratyutpanno 'nāgatas ca tasmāt kālo na vidyate.* For an account of all the arguments presented in *MMK* 19, see Garfield 1995, pp. 254–257 and Westerhoff 2009a, pp. 124–127.

17 – For instance, many commentators suppose that the arguments of *MMK* 19 are directed at Sarvāstivādin claims that past, present, and future all have *svabhāva* (see, e.g., Kalupahana 1974, p. 187; cf. Westerhoff 2009a, pp. 115–116). However, even if Nāgārjuna had the teachings of that school in mind, it is not clear that he was right to attribute to its members a belief that each of the three times has *svabhāva* (see, further, Williams and Tribe 2000, pp. 114, 259 n. 3).

18 – Tsongkhapa makes a similar point about the past's dependence on the present: "the past has to be posited as that which is past with respect to the present," for if it were not so dependent, then it "would be nonexistent, just like the horns of an ass" (Tsong khapa 2006, pp. 337–338, 395–396).

19 – Candrakīrti expresses this point very clearly: "there can be no dependence of something on that which is non-existent. This would be like progeny issuing from a barren woman, or a flower from a garland in the sky, or sesame oil from a grain of sand" (*Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*, in Candrakīrti 1979, pp. 187–188).

20 – Nāgārjuna's argument is expressed in what would (post-McTaggart) be regarded as A-series terms. But if it works when it is expressed in those terms, then it looks like it would also work when expressed in B-series terms, with "what is later" substituted for "the present" and "what is earlier" for "the past."

21 – Cf. Westerhoff 2009b, where Westerhoff considers how one might defend Nelson Goodman's wholesale constructivism from the objection that beings who (like us) are capable of constructing have not always been around. He suggests that one strategy would be to argue that time itself is a construct.

22 – For a clear and concise introduction to these ideas and arguments, see Carroll and Markosian 2010, chap. 7.

23 – See the *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya*, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, pp. 533–536).

24 – See the *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* and the *Aggivacchagotta Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya*, in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, pp. 533–536 and 590–594, respectively).

25 – Bernard Williams 2005, p. 196. See, further, Westerhoff 2009a, p. 224.

26 – It might be objected that the realist will not be disappointed if he *believes* that he really has managed to capture what reality is like in itself. I suspect, however, that few realists have such confidence. In his *Pensées,* Pascal (1995, p. 57) suggests that a proof of God's existence could only be of service for a moment; an hour later, the theologian would fear he had been mistaken. I expect the same would hold true of any realist who thought he had hit upon the nature of reality in itself. (Merleau-Ponty [1964, p. 20] makes a similar point.)

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