

How *We* Think Mādhyamikas Think

Reply to Tillemans*

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In his paper in this Issue, ‘“How do Mādhyamikas Think?” Revisited’, Tom Tillemans reflects on his paper “How do Mādhyamikas Think?” (2009), itself a reply to earlier work of ours (Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest 2008, Garfield and Priest 2003). There is much we agree with in these non-dogmatic and open-minded papers. Still, we have some disagreements. We begin with a response to Tillemans’ first thoughts, and then turn to his second thoughts.

1. Tillemans’ First Thoughts

In (2009) Tillemans maintains that it is wrong to attribute to Nāgārjuna or to his Mādhyamika followers *strong dialetheism*, according to which some contradictions of the form $p \wedge \neg p$ are to be accepted. He argues that, nonetheless, a weak dialetheism may be implicit in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and in pre-Dignāga/Dharmakīrti Madhyamaka. A weak dialetheism, on this understanding, would be non-adjunctive: There might be some pairs of sentences, p and $\neg p$, that are accepted, but their conjunction is nonetheless not accepted.

Before considering this suggestion, let us review the three contradictions to which we argue Madhyamaka is committed, and their grounds:¹

1. (The semantic paradox) *There are no ultimate truths and it is ultimately true that everything is empty.* There is no ultimate reality (distinct from conventional reality). Ultimate truth is the truth about

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¹ Priest and Garfield (2003) describe 1 and 3 under the same rubric. We now think they are best distinguished.

such a reality. Ultimate reality provides the truth-makers of such claims. Therefore there is no ultimate truth. But there is at least one ultimate truth, viz., that everything is empty.

2. (The ontological paradox) *Things have no nature, and that is their nature.* To be empty is to be empty of intrinsic properties. Everything is empty, and so has no intrinsic properties. But: something is an intrinsic property of x iff it would have it even if x were the only thing in existence. Therefore being empty is an intrinsic property. For being empty is part of something's nature (essence) and so it would have it whenever it existed.

3. (The expressibility paradox) *There are no ultimate truths; but there are, e.g., that is one.* Ultimate reality is non-dual. One can't, therefore, apply concepts to it. So it is ineffable. But one can say things about it (e.g., in explaining why it is ineffable) so there are ultimate truths.

The argument that such contradictions are to be found in the Madhyamaka tradition are partly textual. Tillemans grants that many passages in the Madhyamaka sūtra and śāstra corpus at least appear to express these thoughts. Of course, how to interpret these passages is contentious; we certainly do not deny the possibility of other interpretations (though we do claim that ours is the most coherent). The argument is not merely textual, however, and indeed even were we to grant that alternative readings of the relevant texts according to which they are not endorsements of explicit contradictions are preferable, we would stand by our claim that Madhyamaka is inconsistent. We argue that Mādhyamikas ought to endorse these contradictions since they follow from fundamental Madhyamaka doctrines. The arguments we sketched briefly above are developed at greater length in Garfield and Priest (op. cit.)

Tillemans does not take issue with our understanding of the Madhyamaka doctrines or the fact that these entail contradictions – though he does so in his second thoughts, and we turn to this below. Instead, he argues that there is more general evidence that Mādhyamikas rejected any contradiction of the form $p \wedge \neg p$. He offers two principal arguments. The first concerns the use made of the *catuṣkoṭi* by Nāgārjuna in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK). Prima facie, the presence of the third koṭi suggests that dialetheism would appear to be a live possibility for Nāgārjuna and his followers. As Tillemans points out, however, there are important passages in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* where Nāgārjuna appears to reject all four possibilities. A fortiori, in these passages, he rejects the third koṭi. And when he does, his

commentators sometimes claim that he does so on the strength of the law of non-contradiction. (e.g. Tsongkhapa 2006, p. 227)

The matter requires more careful consideration, however. The leitmotif of MMK is that everything is empty (*sūnya*), that nothing has *svabhāva*. Each chapter is devoted to arguing that something one might take to be a candidate for having *svabhāva*, in fact necessarily lacks it. Some chapters (I, VIII, XII) begin by taking as a hypothesis for *reductio* the assumption that something, *x*, has *svabhāva* (that is, that *x* has ultimate existence). The failure of each limb of the *catuṣkoṭi* is then demonstrated to follow. A *reductio* of the original assumption – that *x* has *svabhāva* – is then inferred. (See Priest 2010)

In each of these cases, however, the third koṭi is rejected in the context of *x* having *svabhāva*. It is an object with *svabhāva* that cannot have contradictory properties. The text provides no evidence that this can be generalised to all objects. The position is quite compatible with empty things having contradictory properties. And the DGP contradictions concern empty things. Moreover, in each of these cases, not only is the third koṭi rejected, but all four koṭis are rejected. If Tillemans' textual argument were sound, it would hence prove too much: not only would contradictions be rejected by Mādhyamikas, all assertions would be. And we would be back to paradox very quickly.

Tillemans' second argument can be dealt with more quickly. This argument concerns the way that totality (the whole, the cosmos, *sarva*) is discussed in the Madhyamaka tradition. He argues that there is no evidence to suggest that it was thought of as contradictory, and in fact that there is direct evidence that they did not so conceive it. This is, however, beside the point. The contradictions that DGP ascribe to Madhyamaka are limit contradictions. Garfield and Priest (2003) show that they fit the Inclosure Schema, which shows how the contradictions arise at the limits of certain totalities (such as the totality of the things expressible). The totalities involved in the Inclosure Scheme are not, in general, absolute, the one which Tillemans considers. The contradictions occur, not at the limit of absolutely everything, but at the limits of everything of a certain kind (e.g. the things that can be expressed). In fact, the best way to think of the Inclosure Schema is not as a principle about totalities at all, but as a principle about boundaries. Contradictions arise at boundaries of certain kinds. (The things within a boundary obviously form a totality

of a certain kind.) If there is an explicit discussion of boundaries in the Madhyamaka tradition, and in particular, one that asserts their consistency, we do not know of it, and Tillemans certainly does not adduce one. So, neither of the arguments against our view in Tillemans (2009) is compelling.

Let us turn now to the weak, or non-adjunctive, form of dialetheism Tillemans ascribes to Madhyamaka. He is less impressed by the argument we mount than by the frequent and explicit contradictions of the kind to be found in the Vajracchedikā and other Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras. These are instances of the so-called “signature formula” of the Vajracchedikā, statements of the form a is F because a is not F . It is easy, and standard, to disambiguate these statements. a is F conventionally because a is not F ultimately.

We concur with Tillemans that, as a general hermeneutical principle, it is better to interpret texts straight, without interpolating words; we also agree that this principle admits of exceptions (while disagreeing, perhaps about where those exceptions lie). In the case of the Vaj signature formulae, the disambiguation we suggest is natural, coheres with much other Buddhist thought, and is well-supported by commentarial literature. Attractive as the Vajracchedikā might be to dialetheists at first sight, we therefore suggest that it be put to one side.

The point at issue, though, is Tillemans’ claim that any Madhyamaka dialetheism is weak dialetheism. We think that if there are contradictions here, these should be interpreted in a conjunctive sense – even if the text does not make this explicit. First, note that in contemporary English as well as in classical Greek, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, native speakers do not distinguish between consecutive assertions of p and q , and a single assertion of their conjunction. ‘I got up and made breakfast’ means much the same as ‘I got up. I made breakfast’.

Moreover, weak dialetheism entails the rejection of the logical principle of adjunction: $p, q \mid\text{-} p \wedge q$. There are non-adjunctive logics, but they involve a highly unusual interpretation of conjunction.² And it is reasonable to say that if a connective does not satisfy adjunction, it is not really conjunction at all. Moreover, there is certainly no independent evidence that any Indian logician—Mādhyamika or

² For details of these logics and their history, see Priest (2007).

otherwise—ever proposed a non-adjunctive logic. Tillemans presents no evidence that the attribution of such an account of conjunction is hermeneutically plausible in this case or in any other Indian case.³ We conclude that weak dialetheism is a non-starter. Madhyamaka is either strongly dialethic or not dialethic at all. In this case, ironically, there is no middle path!

Finally, turning, from conjunction to negation, Tillemans says that we can avoid dialethic readings of apparent contradictions by taking it that we have statements of the form p and $\neg p$, the second can be thought of as doing nothing but “cancelling out” the first. Consecutive assertions of the contradictory statements could therefore be seen as a way of expressing the Madhyamaka claim that all substantial views about reality are to be rejected. Now, the thought that asserting $\neg p$ cancels out an assertion of p – as opposed to merely adding more information – is a view of negation that, though known in the West, has been highly heterodox since about the 13th Century. (Priest 1999) This of course, does not settle the point, as we are talking about classical Indian, not modern Western logic. It does however, locate the exegetical burden of proof. We need a hermeneutical argument that there is reason to interpret negation as a cancellation operator in Indian logic. Tillemans does not provide this in (2009) —though he does so, as we shall see, in the present volume. We emphasize here only that this burden must be borne if consecutive apparently contradictory assertions are to be read as Tillemans suggests in this last desperate attempt to salvage a consistent reading of these passages.

2. Tillemans’ Second Thoughts

We now come to Tillemans’ arguments in this volume. We begin by acknowledging many points of agreement:

- We agree that Buddhist thought in general, and Madhyamaka thought in particular, evolves considerably in the 1000 or so years after Nāgārjuna. (How could it be otherwise?)

³ In fn. 16, Tillemans raises the question of the validity of the law of double negation in Indian logic. As far as the distinction between strong and weak dialetheism goes, this is irrelevant. Adjunction will validate the inference $\neg p, \neg\neg p \vdash \neg p \wedge \neg\neg p$; and the conclusion is a conjoined contradiction, even without the law of double negation.

- And though we and Tillemans might interpret particular thinkers differently, we also agree that dialethic tendencies in Madhyamaka thought are at their strongest in its earlier years, and wane under the influence of the logic of Dharmakīrti and Dignāga, with its endorsement of the Principle of Non-Contradiction.
- We agree that it is always possible to interpret a dialethic text consistently by parameterisation (a process of drawing distinctions), and that many later Madhyamaka thinkers were inclined to go down this route.
- We also agree that it would be overkill to interpret all paradoxical utterances in Buddhist texts as dialethic.⁴
- We also agree that Candrakīrti and a host of his successors explicitly urge that contradictions are never to be endorsed, and that any dialethic reading must account for these assertions. We accept this dialectical burden.
- And we agree that many Tibetan commentators including Tsongkhapa and Gorampa explicitly worked to “defuse” the apparent contradictions to which we advert, and so that it is incumbent upon us both to explain their commitment to defusing them and to explain why we think they failed and are better off for that failure. We accept this dialectical burden as well.
- Finally, we absolutely agree with Tillemans that to nail down the case for a dialethic reading requires us to demonstrate some ‘systemic advantage for the Buddhist – and not only for modern dialetheist philosophy’ (p. 3, his italics). We concur, and we cheerfully accept that dialectical burden as well as the previous two.

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We disagree regarding two central issues. First, while Tillemans seeks to find a systemic advantage for weak dialetheism in the service of a quietist reading of Nāgārjuna, we see a systemic advantage in a strong dialethic interpretation of certain contradictions. We argue that the contradictions we identify are neither arbitrary, nor capricious, nor instrumental. Instead, they are the consequences of core Buddhist, or at least Madhyamaka, views. One can avoid them by all sorts of fancy footwork, but the cost of doing so is to gut the original insights. This is the systemic advantage we see.

Compare a similar case from Western philosophy. Anyone who reads Hegel with eyes open sees that his views are explicitly dialethic. (Priest 2007) This has not prevented subsequent commentators, especially in Anglo-American traditions, from

⁴ That, indeed, was the point of Deguchi, Garfield and Priest (2009).

trying to interpret him consistently.⁵ Even if the result of such a misreading of the text is coherent and interesting, the view that emerges is not Hegel's: central and crucial aspects of his thought have been destroyed. So it is with Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka ideas he launched. This is as substantial a 'payoff' (p. 3) for Buddhist philosophy as one could wish.⁶

With this in mind. Let us return to our three arguments. In the semantic and expressibility contradictions, half of the contradiction is that there are some ultimate truths: one such is that everything is empty. That everything is empty is the cornerstone of Madhyamaka. This is the central thesis of MMK: no Mādhyamika is going to deny this. But it is obviously not a conventional truth. Conventional reality appears full of things with *svabhāva*. That is why those who can see only this get it so wrong. Since it is not a conventional truth, it is an ultimate truth. That is the only other kind.

The reason for the other half of the contradiction is different in these two cases. To get the semantic contradiction we take Candrakīrti's insight that there is no ultimate reality distinct from conventional reality. Ultimate reality, if there were one, would be that which has *svabhāva*. There is no such thing. Since there is no ultimate reality, there is not truth about it. To reject this argument one would appear to have to accept that some things have *svabhāva*. No Mādhyamika can accept this.

The reason for the other half of the contradiction in the expressibility paradox, is given by those who endorse the existence of an ultimate reality, such as Gorampa.⁷ For them, it is the very mark of ultimate reality that it is what remains after all conceptual/linguistic overlay has been removed. By very construction, then, one can say nothing of it. It is ineffable. Anything one can say truly must be a conventional truth. There is no ultimate truth. The only way to balk at this argument is to reject the thought that anything expressible in language is a conceptual construction, a conventional reality. But again, this is to deny a central Buddhist insight.

⁵ For references and discussion, see Priest (1989-90).

⁶ Tillemans quotes us as saying that the contradictions in the relevant texts cannot be defused, and takes issue with this (p. 3). Of course, they can be defused in the way that the contradictions in Hegel's thought can be. As should now be clear, this is not what we had in mind.

⁷ Whether they can do this without attributing it *svabhāva* is a matter we will return to in connection with the ontological paradox. We turn to Gorampa's views *per se* in our reply to Kassor in this volume.

An extra feature of this argument is that it provides us with another reason for supposing that there are ultimate truths, the other half of the contradiction. If we are to take seriously the argument that ultimate reality is ineffable, then this must refer to it. To do anything else is to change the subject. Since we can say true things about the ultimate, there are ultimate truths.

Before we move to the ontological paradox, let us pause to see what Tillemans says about these arguments. He suggests that one may try to avoid the contradiction involved by enforcing the distinction between ultimate truth and ultimate reality (existence) (p. 2). It is true that truth (*satya/bden pa*) and reality (*satya/bden pa*) are not distinguished very much in Indian and Tibetan literature. And indeed, paying attention to the difference may defuse Siderits' famous and apparent contradictory slogan 'The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth' (the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate reality). However, the distinction is *irrelevant* for the arguments we have just discussed: we have observed this distinction meticulously in the above explanation of the contradictions (if in doubt, please read over the passage again to check), and Tillemans never charges us with an instance of this confusion.

With regard specifically to the argument concerning the ineffable, Tillemans suggests that the problem is dissolved if we reject an account of language as mirroring reality (a sort of correspondence view of truth), and see it instead in some other way ('being simply causally connected with things', p. 2). This, frankly, is beside the point. If something is ineffable you can't talk about it. Period. It doesn't matter how language works. However it works, it constructs the conventional: the ultimate transcends this.⁸

Let us now consider the ontological paradox. Half of the contradiction here is that nothing has intrinsic reality (*svabhāva*). As we have observed, no Mādhyamika can reject this. The other half of the contradiction is that it is of the intrinsic nature of things to be empty. So things do have an intrinsic nature.⁹

⁸ Tillemans also notes the possibility of interpreting ineffability as the claim that there are *some* things that cannot be said about the ultimate. This is consistent with there being lots of things that can be said. This seems to us to give the game away. If there are some things that can be said about ultimate reality, it's not really ineffable.

⁹ In particular, then, if there is an ineffable ultimate reality, it does have an intrinsic nature: being empty. But this is a fate that is shared with everything else.

We can imagine a desperate strategy to avoid this paradox. It might be suggested that, though it is in the nature of things to be empty, this is not an intrinsic nature. But what is intrinsic nature? A property, P, is in the intrinsic nature of an object, x, iff x's possession of P depends on nothing else. Crudely, in a world where there was nothing but x, it would still be P. But consider such a world (it may even be an impossible world). Since everything else has gone out of existence, x has no parts, and there is nothing with which x can causally interact. So the being of x does not depend on these things. However, x is still one thing: it still has the property of unity. What x is, therefore, does depend on certain properties (concepts)—at least the property of unity. So in the world in question, it is still empty. So emptiness is the intrinsic nature of anything that exists. To exist is to be empty, and this is precisely why, as Nāgārjuna says in MMK XXIV: 19 that no non-empty thing exists!¹⁰

The only obvious way to contest this argument is, again, to say that dependence for identity on concepts does not make something empty. And again no Mādhyamika is going to say this.

Again, let us see what Tillemans has to say about this argument. He points out (p. 2) that the notion of svabhāva can be understood in many ways. Indeed, it can. But merely noting an ambiguity does not solve a paradox: it makes matters potentially worse! Corresponding to each disambiguation we have an argument; and one or more of these may be paradoxical! So it is in this case. We have explained the sense of svabhāva we have in mind; it is absolutely the standard sense employed in Madhyamaka discussions of emptiness. And we have been at pains to use the notion consistently in this sense in spelling out the argument.

[At this point it makes sense to address Tillemans' challenging hermeneutical argument. As he notes, Candrakīrti does say in *Prasannapadā*:](#)

[But if the opponent did not desist even when confronted with a contradiction \(*virodha*\) in his own position, then too, as he would have no shame, he would not desist at all even because of a logical reason and example. Now, as it is said, for us there is no debate with someone who is out of his mind. \(Quoted in Tillemans, this issue p. 000\)](#)

¹⁰ One might at this point cite Candrakīrti's famous example in *Prasannapadā* in his commentary to MMK XIII: 8, in which he compares someone who would take emptiness—which is the lack of any intrinsic nature—to be itself an intrinsic nature to someone who, upon hearing that he shopkeeper has nothing to sell, asks to buy some of that nothing. But this would not help. It gets at only one side of the contradiction. We agree that emptiness is, as Candrakīrti so forcefully emphasizes, the absence of any intrinsic nature. It is also, however, an intrinsic nature.

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And, as Tillemans notes, pronouncements like this are common in Indian and in Tibetan Buddhist literature ever since the rise of the new logic deriving from Nyāya, but brought into Buddhist discourse by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. There are, as Tillemans suggests, two ways to read this statement. On the one hand, we could read it as an *ad hominem* or *prāsaṅga* directed at an opponent who insists on consistency, even if Candrakīrti himself does not. On this reading, this remark does not tell at all against our account. Tillemans grants this.

On the other hand, we concur with Tillemans that this is not the most natural reading of this pronouncement, or indeed of most of its cousins in the tradition. Nonetheless, we disagree that this shows that the contradictions are not real, and this for two reasons. First, as Tillemans concedes, this explicit disavowal of contradiction emerges in the Indian context long after the composition of the Madhyamaka roots texts of Nāgārjuna and after the composition of the *Prajñāparamitā* sutras to which they respond. Even if these later commentators disavow inconsistency the inconsistency we locate in those texts, and in East Asian Buddhism would remain, *unless* these consistent readings were to succeed. We return to this matter below.

Second, explicit avowal of consistency does not consistency guarantee. After all, many Western philosophers have *claimed* consistency despite being committed to theories that are manifestly inconsistent. We might mention Cantor, Russell and Tarski among others. (See Priest 2002 for details.) It is one thing to believe that consistency as a virtue, and to believe that one's theory displays that virtue; quite another for it to be a virtue, or to be displayed by one's theory. We grant that Candrakīrti and his fellow successors of Dignāga were in the thrall of a commitment to consistency. We deny that they achieved it, or that doing so would have been a *good* thing. For Tillemans to demonstrate that Madhyamaka (at least after Candrakīrti) is consistent, he would have to show not that Candrakīrti believes it to be so, but that it is; for him to show that it is better for being consistent, he would have to demonstrate the virtues of consistency. We believe he has done neither.

Finally, Tillemans points out that many post-Candrakīrti Indian and Tibetan exegetes have been at pains to “defuse” the apparent contradictions in Madhyamaka—indeed the very three that we emphasize. Thus he says, “the three “paradoxes” DGP mention were defused regularly and often in very intelligent

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fashions by Indo-Tibetan thinkers.” (Tillemans, this issue p 000) And he points out that we ought

instead of claiming that some would-be contradiction in a text simply cannot be defused, show that there is a substantial benefit for a particular Buddhist philosophical system if the text is read as tolerating inconsistency. In effect, we need to argue for significant systemic advantages for Mādhyamika Buddhists (and not only for a modern dialetheist philosophy building on the recurrence of inclosure schemas in both the East and the West). (Tillemans, this issue p. 000)

We take ourselves to have done just this. To attempt to defuse contradictions, and even to be convinced that one has done so, even “in very intelligent fashion” is not to have done so. Once again, we grant the historical point: many great exegetes take themselves to have demonstrated that the contradictions we locate are not actually contradictions. But we have shown that they are and that the defusings are, and must be, failures. And once again, we accept that our task is to demonstrate “systematic advantages for Mādhyamika Buddhists” from embracing them. We take ourselves to have done so.

We now move to our second main disagreement with Tillemans. He seeks to find a systemic advantage for weak dialetheism in the service of a quietist reading of Nāgārjuna. Specifically, he argues, asserting $\neg p$ after asserting p does not add more information, but serves instead to cancel commitment to p while not committing to $\neg p$.

Now, we do not subscribe to a (merely) quietist reading of Nāgārjuna. Nor could we, since we take him to be endorsing certain things: viz., at least, some paradoxical claims.¹¹ But let that pass for the moment. The contradiction could function in the way Tillemans envisages only if negation really can be a cancellation operator in Indian logic. In our comments on his first thoughts, we noted that this reading requires a defense. Tillemans has now provided this, and we do not wish to contest it here. For even given this reading, Tillemans does not present a case for weak, as opposed to strong, dialetheism. This is because, on an account of negation as cancellation, $p \wedge \neg p$ is self-cancelling: the first conjunct cancels the second, and the second the first. Typically, in logics that endorse this sort of account of negation,

¹¹ Nāgārjuna may deny all *dr̥ṣṭi* (views to the effect that certain things have *svabhāva*) but not all *darśana* (views, period).

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$p \wedge \neg p$ has zero content. It entails nothing—not p , not $\neg p$. (Priest 1999) This is not even weak dialetheism, although it is an even better way of enforcing an appropriate quietism!

What Tillemans really needs is a story about conjunction: one according to which there is a difference between asserting p and $\neg p$ severally and conjointly. An account of negation as cancellation does not provide this. Negation as cancellation is quite compatible with conjunction functioning in the familiar way. (Priest, *Ibid.*)

Tillemans does present three fairly swift arguments for interpreting conjunction in a non-adjunctive fashion (p. 4). The first is that we do not find explicit contradictions of the form $p \wedge \neg p$ in the relevant texts. This may be true, but first, as we observed above: in practice, there is no intuitive difference between asserting $p \wedge q$, and asserting p and q seriatim, and so this is not to the point. Secondly, we are arguing that Mādhyamika's should endorse these explicit contradictions, regardless of whether they do, because Madhyamaka is committed to them.

The second is that conjoined contradictions are rejected in applications of the *catuskoṭi*. We have already answered this objection as well. The conjoined contradictions that are rejected are only those concerning objects with *svabhāva*, and in that context everything is reject, not just conjoined contradictions, leaving no special argument against contradiction or adjunction for that matter.

The third reason is that 'this is tantamount to having a very definite (quasi-Hegelean) position on how things are'. This is not an objection to our view: it is our view. We are not quietists – though as far as the paradox of the expressibility goes, it might be more accurate to say that we both are and are not quietists!

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