

ARTUR PRZYBYSŁAWSKI*
(Jagiellonian University)

Remarks on the Misuse of the Term “Ontology” in Madhyamaka Studies

ABSTRACT

The text is an analysis of a widespread mistake in the research on Madhyamaka, that is the erroneous application of the term “ontology” to the philosophy which is essentially a critique of any ontology.

KEY WORDS

Madhyamaka, ontology

The term “ontology” seems to be quite an obvious description of middle way philosophy in mahāyāna. C. W. Huntington, Jr. in his introduction to the translation of Candrakīrti speaks about “ontological position” concerning the philosophy of emptiness;¹ Inada in the introductory essay to his translation of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* writes: “The middle path doctrine is the Buddhist ontological principle”² and Nāgārjuna is the one who “gave direction to man for his ontological quest.”³ In the monumental *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* one can even read about “an ontology that proclaims the emptiness of

¹ C. W. Huntington Jr., Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness. An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamikā*, Delhi 2003, p. 18.

² Nāgārjuna, *A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay* by K. K. Inada, Delhi 1993, p. 22.

³ Ibidem.

* Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: artur.przybyslawski@uj.edu.pl

everything.”⁴ These are only a few examples of the tendency to use this term as a relevant description of madhyamaka. Unfortunately, this kind of usage of the term “ontology” proves to be either a misunderstanding of madhyamaka or of ontology or, most probably, of both. The reason arises, I believe, from forgetting basic definitions. In this paper I would like to clarify the circumstances surrounding the misuse of the term “ontology” as a relevant term for describing madhyamaka in the Nāgārjunian sense.

THE ORIGIN OF MISUSE OF THE TERM “ONTOLOGY” IN MADHYAMAKA STUDIES

Since the tendency to describe madhyamaka as ontology is quite widespread it probably originates from the work of an influential author. In 1953 in *Philosophy East and West* E. Conze published his text entitled “The Ontology of Prajñāpāramitā”. On the very first page he refers to Nāgārjuna and goes on to discuss ontology in the context of the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness in mahāyāna. Even though he warns that “It would be a mistake, of course, to regard these texts as philosophical treatises in the European sense of the word,” just a few sentences later he decides to use one of the most crucial terms of European philosophy to characterise Prajñāpāramitā literature with its later continuation and unfolding. He starts in a most unfortunate way:

If ontology in the usual sense is interpreted, however, to mean any attempt to contact the true nature of reality, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras are replete with it.⁵

The only problem with this interpretation of ontology is that no serious philosopher dealing with ontology has ever defined it in this way. With such a general phrase as “attempt to contact the true nature of reality” one can also describe epistemology or natural sciences etc. This kind of characteristic was never given as a distinguishing feature of ontology so precisely defined by Aristotelians or other philosophers. Moreover, the usage of the phrase “true nature” shows a lack of familiarity with the ontological discourse of European philosophy. The term “true nature” suggests that there may well be some “false nature” to be avoided – and this is exactly the reason why it is not used

⁴ *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, eds. K. H. Potter et al., Delhi 1999, Vol. VIII, p. 229.

⁵ E. Conze, *Ontology of Prajñāpāramitā*, “Philosophy East and West” 1953, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 117.

in European ontology where nature or essence are, of course, inherently true, which is why they can play the role of nature or essence, so a collocation like “true nature” makes as much sense as “true truth”.

Conze obviously does not know traditional ontology and makes no effort to explain it properly in traditional terms and then compare it with the subject matter of Prajñāpāramitā literature. On thirteen pages of his text on ontology the term appears only five times and with the exception of the fragment quoted above, there is only one more time he writes about his understanding of this crucial term:

The ontology of the Prajñāpāramitā is a description of the world as it appears to those whose self is extinct.⁶

Again, if we use such a general phrase as “description of the world” it can in no way define ontology since it is simply much too general. Biology is also a description of the world, as is physics and even theology could describe the world as the creation of some god. If something is a “description of the world” it does not mean that it is necessarily an ontology. Fairytales can also describe the world for children but to include them within ontology would be a slight exaggeration.

Ontology can never be a description of something as it appears to somebody, since it was an investigation of being in itself independent from the way it appears to any subject. Ontology as a “description of the world as it appears” would never be fundamental and thus would not be an ontology. Furthermore, in Buddhism those whose self is extinct are exactly the ones who can see the world as it really is and not the world as it appears to any one person – they can see dharma as dharma, not dharma as it appears to them. This is a rather important point in the Buddhist doctrine, obviously forgotten by Conze.

It is hard to avoid the impression that Conze uses the term “ontology” merely in order to make his article sound more serious and, unfortunately, this is not the only example of this kind. Probably the most flagrant one would be the book on Candrakīrti *The Ontology of the Middle Way* by Peter Fenner where the term “ontology”, with the exception of the title, appears only four times in 338 pages. He writes that “the middle path and relational origination are essentially ontological doctrines.”⁷ Nowhere does the author of these words explain what he means by ontology and one can only guess from the next sentence what he had in mind, in which he claims that “The middle path

⁶ Ibidem, p. 129.

⁷ P. Fenner, *The Ontology of the Middle Way*, Dordrecht–Boston–London 1990, p. 85.

refers to a perspective which views reality as neither something nor nothing.”⁸ This is true regarding the middle way, although it is hardly an ontological view. Ontology is the last thing one could ascribe to Candrakīrti who used to say that he has no thesis of his own but discusses only to the point where his adversaries give up their views.

THE MEANING OF THE TERM ONTOLOGY AND NAGARJUNIAN MIDDLE WAY

The term “ontology” is not so old as we used to think since, despite its Greek etymology, it appeared for the first time in *Lexicon philosophicum*, a work by Rudolf Göckel published in 1613. It was introduced as a synonym of the term *philosophia prima* that can be traced back to the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. Ontology gained its final classical shape in the work of Christian Wolff who published his *Philosophia prima, sive Ontologia* in the year 1729. Generally we can say that ontology in its classical form preserved the characteristic of *philosophia prima* formulated by Aristotle:

There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part; this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do. Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be some thing to which these belong in virtue of its own nature. If then those who sought the elements of existing things were seeking these same principles, it is necessary that the elements must be elements of being not by accident but just because it is being. Therefore it is of being as being that we also must grasp the first causes.⁹

Now it will be easy to distinguish madhyamaka from ontology which is so different from it. First of all, ontology in its Aristotelian form presupposes the existence of ultimate being. This presupposition is clearly an expression of wishful thinking, since Aristotle tries to persuade us that from the fact of searching for something, it must follow that the object searched for exists. This is clearly not necessarily the case. Nobody will accept this kind of inference. When Aristotle says “since we are seeking the first principles and the highest

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in: *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon, Random House 1941, 1003a.

causes, clearly there must be some thing to which these belong in virtue of its own nature”¹⁰ he presents only a dogmatic standpoint so characteristic also to the opponents of madhyamaka philosophers. In ontology generally there is no place for questioning the notion of being; being is presupposed as the main irreducible principle. This one main assumption is enough to understand how enormous the gap is between a traditional ontological approach and that of madhyamaka. One of the targets madhyamaka criticises is in fact ontology. Any kind of being is dismissed by madhyamaka, so what then is the sense of placing madhyamaka under the banner of ontology?

Secondly, one of the main notions of ontology is essence. Without essence there is no being or thing, according to ontology. Essence is the axiom of ontology. That is why it is enough to read just the second and third stanza from Nāgārjuna’s *Śūnyatāsaptati* to know that ontology is the worst name for madhyamaka since the main meaning of emptiness is to be empty of essence.

(2) Substance does not exist, there is no non-substance,
There is no substance-non-substance, and that is why there is nothing to be explained.
All dharmas to be explained
Like nirvana are empty of essence.

(3) Since the essence of any thing
Does not exist in cause, conditions, their combination,
Or in any of them separately, or in all of them,
It is empty.¹¹

Also Candrakīrti ends his commentary to chapter 15 of *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* saying that what is meant by the non-existence of things is the lack of essence. How can we then say that madhyamaka is “an ontology that proclaims the emptiness of everything?”¹² This is self-contradiction! That which is empty of essence will never be proclaimed by ontology since what it tries to establish is a being endowed with or even full of essence. That is why emptiness can not be any ontological concept even though another Buddhist encyclopaedia tries to persuade us with nonsense such as “ontological

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Nāgārjuna, *Śūnyatāsaptatiḥ with Auto-Commentary*, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi 1996, 74n: (2) *bdag med bdag med min bdag dang// bad med min pas brjod ‘ga’ med// brjod par bya ba’i chos rnams kun// mya ngan ‘das mtshungs rang bzhin stong//* (3) *gang phyir dngos po thams cad kyi// rang bzhin rgyu rkyen tshogs pa’am// so so rnams la’am thams cad la// yod min de phyir stong pa yin//*

¹² *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, op. cit., p. 229.

categories as the two truths, no-self and emptiness”¹³ in the discourse of Candrakīrti.¹⁴ Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti put so much effort into criticising such classical ontological categories like cause, effect, essence, being, individual or self etc. that labelling their work with the name of ontology is ridiculous. The philosophy of Aristotle is ontology but not madhyamaka!

Thirdly, ontology strives to give the only and correct description of reality or the structure of reality that must be set up as a system. This is exactly what madhyamaka philosophers do not want to do – they do not want to build any kind of philosophical system. In the famous passage from *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna says that just advancing any thesis would be an error:

If I had any thesis, that fault would apply to me.
But I do not have any thesis,
So there is indeed no fault for me.¹⁵

Candrakīrti explains that the Madhyamaka philosopher speaks only because he is faced with theses proposed by somebody else but he himself has no assertion to pursue: “He makes no use of reasons and examples but pursues his own thesis only until the adversary gives up his.”¹⁶ This kind of procedure is much closer to Greek skepticism than to the ontology that was put into question by skeptics.¹⁷ We simply have to remember that even though in madhyamaka we can find a lot of discussion on such ontological categories as cause, effect, being, and essence, the middle way philosophy is not the type of discourse which tries to show them as fundamental and irreducible. Its aim is exactly the opposite: to undermine every foundation. “In madhyamaka, no

¹³ *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, eds. R. E. Buswell, Jr. et al., New York 2004, p. 152.

¹⁴ From the same entry we can also learn something quite surprising, namely that “Madhyamaka philosopher must avoid syllogistic reasoning, and must defeat opponents solely through drawing out the absurd consequences of their own statements” (ibidem). Unfortunately the method of drawing conclusions without using syllogism remains the secret of the author of the entry on Candrakīrti.

¹⁵ J. Westerhoff, *The Dispeller of Disputes. Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*, New York 2010, verse 29.

¹⁶ Candrakīrti, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way. The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*, trans. Mervyn Sprung, London 1979, pp. 37–38).

¹⁷ Cf. „Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Scepticism” by Georges Dreyfus and Jay L. Garfield in: G. Dreyfus, J. L. Garfield et al., *Moonshadows. Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, New York 2011, pp. 115–130.

effort is made to establish any ontology."¹⁸ In madhyamaka, no effort is made to establish anything. Contrary to the claim of Nagao, that "True ontology can be said to have begun with the advent of Mahāyāna or with the appearance of Nāgārjuna,"¹⁹ his appearance marks the death of true ontology.

Fourthly, the next main category of ontology is truth.²⁰ In classical ontology the notion of truth is always rooted in being as being (for example in Wolff). Again this is the tradition that is traced back to Aristotle stating: "As each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth."²¹ No doubt this is another deep difference between ontology and madhyamaka. The notion of correspondence so crucial for the classical understanding of truth does not function in madhyamaka discourse. In a famous passage from *Metaphysics* it was formulated as follows: "It is not because we think truly that you are pale, that you are pale, but because you are pale we who say this have the truth."²² What is presupposed here is that a certain being has certain qualities and so the truth then concerns the conformity between it and the statement about it. In madhyamaka such a situation is ultimately impossible,²³ since ultimately there is no thing that possesses certain attributes, so the correspondence between what is said and what exists is impossible. In madhyamaka "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth."²⁴

Nevertheless Conze claims that in the case of Buddhist philosophy, which is not interested in the notion of being, we can talk about a "new ontology"²⁵ with its "principle of Buddhist ontology, which is common to all schools and has been formulated on many occasions." It states that the truth 'lies in the middle' between 'it is' and 'it is not.'²⁶ Conze does not elaborate on the notion of

¹⁸ K. Brunnhölzl, *The Center of the Sunlit Sky. Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition*, New York 2004, p. 159.

¹⁹ G. M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies*, Albany 1991, p. 166.

²⁰ The notion of truth is one of the widest topics so here we have room only for the most general remarks.

²¹ Aristotle, op. cit., 993b.

²² Ibidem, 1051b.

²³ Of course we can not forget that Madhyamaka makes use of so called "worldly conventions" but does so in order to lead towards ultimately inexpressible enlightenment.

²⁴ M. Siderits, *Thinking on Empty: Mādhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality*, [in:] *Rationality in Question*, eds. S. Biderman and B. A. Schaufstein, Dordrecht 1989, p. 6.

²⁵ Inada takes over this term. Cf. K. K. Inada, *The Range of Buddhist Ontology*, "Philosophy East and West" 1988, Vol. 38, No. 3, p. 263.

²⁶ E. Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India. Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, London

truth, so the reader hardly knows what is meant by this term in his book. But since he contrasts this view with that of Aristotle, claiming that being can not be contradictory, he probably means that the referent of a true statement is not any kind of being but that which lies in between the extremes of existence and non-existence. The only problem then is that unfortunately there is nothing in between them that one can speak of and all the more speak of truthfully.

To sum up, if somebody claims Madhyamaka to be a kind of ontology, the implication is that it is a form of science in search of the highest principles of being and its essential attributes, placing the notion of essence in the centre of the philosophical system. Nobody could agree that this is the standpoint of middle way discourse. Were somebody to attempt to hold on to the argument that the highest principle is emptiness and that this is why we can define madhyamaka as a search for the highest principles called ontology, we would surely answer: please remember that ontology comes from the Greek *ontos on* – being; ontology is the science of being! This is exactly what is neglected by Nagao who says “ontology in a Buddhist context is not an ontology of ‘being,’ but that of *śūnyatā*.”²⁷ What is so pitiful about these kinds of claims is that they are made with premeditation - the author knows that ontology is the science of being yet uses this term to describe the philosophy of emptiness that criticises and gives up this notion. What is the point of this kind of deliberate strategy? What is achieved or gained by calling Nāgārjunian middle way an ontology? If we called madhyamaka an ontology we would say in fact that emptiness is a kind of being which is one of the most serious philosophical diseases that should be cured with the emptiness of emptiness:

Absence of essence in phenomena is called emptiness by the wise ones. This emptiness is also empty. Empty of nature, as it is said. Emptiness of the so called emptiness is said to be emptiness of emptiness. It was taught in order to refute intellectual grasping of emptiness as object.²⁸

1962, p. 219. Eckel uncritically repeats this error: “a valid ontology is worked out only in the middle ground between the two extremes” (M. D. Eckel, *Bhāvaviveka’s Critique of Yogācāra in Ch. XXV of the Prajñāpāradīpa*, [in:] *Indiske Studier 5: Miscellanea Buddhica*, ed. Chr. Lindtner, Copenhagen 1985, p. 31).

²⁷ G. M. Nagao, op. cit., p. 187.

²⁸ Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6. 185–186: *chos rnam rang bzhin med pa nyid// mkhas pas stong pa nyid ces bsnad// stong nyid de yang stong nyid kyi// ngo bos stong par ‘dod pa yin// stong nyid ces bya’i stong nyid gang// stong nyid stong nyid du ‘dod de// stong nyid dngos po’i blo can gyi// ‘dzin pa bzlog phyir gsungs pa yin//*

This medicine was not taken by Conze and his uncritical followers. Luckily, there are also counterexamples like Ruegg, one of the most prominent scholars investigating middle way philosophy, who never refers to it as ontology, proving thus that one can perfectly assess Nāgārjunian philosophy without misinterpreting it or basic European notions.²⁹

Referring madhyamaka to European philosophy is essential for choosing the correct terminology for translation, since when translating Asian philosophy into European languages, we have to use European philosophical terminology simply because this is the only terminology we have (if somebody does not know this terminology, how can he offer a proper translation?). This is also – or even first of all – essential for understanding Asian philosophy because we are brought up in a certain philosophical context that determines the shape of our thinking. Lack of knowledge of European philosophy is a serious obstacle in understanding Asian philosophy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in: *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon, Random House 1941.
2. Brunnhölzl K., *The Center of the Sunlit Sky. Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition*, New York 2004.
3. Candrakīrti, *dbu ma la 'jug pa zhes bya ba bzhugs so*, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath-Varanasi 1997–1998.
4. Candrakīrti, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way. The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*, trans. Mervyn Sprung, London 1979.
5. Conze E., *Buddhist Thought in India. Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, London 1962.
6. Conze E., *Ontology of Prajñāpāramitā*, “Philosophy East and West” 1953, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 117–129.
7. Della Santina P., *Madhyamaka Schools in India*, Delhi 1986.
8. Dreyfus G., Garfield J. L. et al., *Moonshadows. Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, New York 2011.
9. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, eds. R. E. Buswell, Jr. et al., New York 2004.
10. *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, eds. K. H. Potter et al., Delhi 1999, Vol. VIII.
11. Eckel M. D., *Bhāvaviveka's Critique of Yogācāra in Ch. XXV of the Prajñāpradīpa*, [in:] *Indiske Studies 5: Miscellanea Buddhica*, ed. Chr. Lindtner, Copenhagen 1985, p. 25–75.
12. Fenner P., *The Ontology of the Middle Way*, Dordrecht–Boston–London 1990.

²⁹ Cf. D. S. Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, Wiesbaden 1981.

13. Huntington Jr. C. W., Geshé Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness. An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamikā*, Delhi 2003.
14. Inada K. K., *The Range of Buddhist Ontology*, "Philosophy East and West" 1988, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 261–280.
15. Nagao G. M., *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies*, Albany 1991.
16. Nāgārjuna, *Śūnyatāsaptatiḥ with Auto-Commentary*, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, Varanasi 1996.
17. Nāgārjuna, *A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay by K. K. Inada*, Delhi 1993.
18. Ruegg D. S., *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*, Wiesbaden 1981.
19. Siderits M., *Thinking on Empty: Mādhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality*, [in:] *Rationality in Question*, eds. S. Biderman and B. A. Schaufstein, Dordrecht 1989.
20. Westerhoff J., *The Dispeller of Disputes. Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī*, New York 2010.