The Madhyamaka concept of *svabhāva*: ontological and cognitive aspects

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Abstract

This paper considers the philosophical interpretation of the concept of *svabhāva*, sometimes translated as 'inherent existence' or 'own being' in the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy. It is argued that *svabhāva* must be understood as having two different conceptual dimensions, an *ontological* and a *cognitive* one. The ontological dimension of *svabhāva* shows it to play a particular part in theories investigating the most fundamental constituents of the world. Three different understandings of *svabhāva* are discussed under this heading: *svabhāva* understood as *essence*, as *substance*, and as the true nature of phenomena (*absolute svabhāva*). The cognitive dimension shows *svabhāva* as playing an important rôle in our everyday conceptualization of phenomena. *Svabhāva* is here seen as a superimposition (*samāropa*) which the mind projects onto the world.

Although it is never used in the sutras and is rare in the Pali canon the term *svabhāva*, often translated as 'inherent existence' or 'own-being' denotes one of the central concepts of Madhyamaka philosophy. Despite its centrality, its rôle is fundamentally negative: one, if not indeed *the* central concern of Madhyamaka argumentation is to demonstrate that, despite our intuitions to the contrary, *svabhāva* does not exist. The notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) denotes precisely the absence of *svabhāva*.

There are various difficulties to be faced when trying to get a clear idea of what *svabhāva* as a philosophical concept entails. First of all, like many philosophically central terms *svabhāva* is used in a variety of ways in different philosophical traditions. The early Buddhist Abhidharma metaphysics uses *svabhāva* in a different way from the later Mādhyamikas, their use is in turn different from Dharmakīrti's use of the concept, as well as from the Yogācāra notion of the 'three natures' (*trisvabhāva*).

A second problem consists in presenting a clear explication of a concept which is taken to be vacuous and in fact, if clearly examined, inconsistent.

When looking at the Madhyamaka arguments it is often quite hard to attribute anything like a defensible philosophical theory to the proponents of *svabhāva* at all, as these often appear to be conveniently set up straw men.[1]

A final difficulty consists in the fact that the concept of *svabhāva* does not have any straightforward equivalent amongst the concepts discussed in the history of Western philosophy. This is not to say that it is a fundamentally alien concept, but merely that it combines a number of features which we do not see thus combined in the Western context. In order to get a clear conception of *svabhāva* it is essential to appreciate that it incorporates two important conceptual dimensions: an *ontological* dimension and a *cognitive* dimension. This chapter will attempt to spell out these two different aspects of *svabhāva*. Our focus will be on its employment in Nāgārjuna though we will sometimes refer to later Madhyamaka writers. There is no claim that the above analysis will be adequate for the understanding of *svabhāva* in other Buddhist schools of thought. By explaining how the different aspects of *svabhāva* hang together I also hope to be able to address the second difficulty, that is, give a clear account of what a proponent of *svabhāva* asserts and why this might be a philosophical position to be taken seriously.

1 The ontological dimension

Conceiving of *svabhāva* as an ontological concept is no doubt the interpretation most commonly found in the contemporary commentarial literature, and one which gave rise to translations using such metaphysical terms as essence,[2] nature,[3] substance[4] or aseity[5]. In the Madhyamaka literature after Nāgārjuna we find a useful distinction between three different senses of *svabhāva* in Candrakīrti's commentary on the MMK,[6] a distinction which is already partly present in earlier Abhidharma literature. We will refer to the three senses distinguished by Candrakīrti by the terms essence-*svabhāva*, substance-*svabhāva*, and absolute-*svabhāva*, respectively.[7]

[1] See Robinson (1972, 326).

[2] Garfield (1995, 89), Komito (1987, 69).

[3] Napper (1989, 65).

[4] Lopez (1987, 445–446).

[5] Ruegg (1981, 9).

[6] This distinction is still alive in contemporary dGe lugs commentarial textbook literature. See the annotated translation of dKon mchogs 'jigs med dbang po's *Grup pa'i mtha'i rnam par bzhag pa rin po che'i phreng ba* given in Sopa and Hopkins (1976, 122).

[7] Sopa and Hopkins (1976, 122) refer to these as phenomena's 'conventionally existent nature', their 'true or independent existence', and their 'real and final nature'. Further attempts at differentiating the different usages of *svabhāva* in Candrakīrti can be found

1.1 Essence-*svabhāva*

Already in the early Buddhist literature we encounter an understanding of *svabhāva* as a specific characterizing property of an object. One characteristic passage from the *Milindapañha* (composed between 150 BCE and 200 AD) asserts:[8]

> Death, great king, is a condition which causes fear amongst those who have not seen the truth. [...] This, o king, is the power of the specific quality (*sarasa-sabhāva*) of death, because of which beings with defilements tremble at death and are afraid of it.

Although at this early stage *svabhāva* does not yet constitute a clearly defined piece of philosophical terminology it is apparent that it denotes a feature by which a particular phenomenon is to be individuated, thereby rendering it knowable and nameable. This understanding of *svabhāva* is made more precise by the Sarvāstivadins identification of *svabhāva* and *svalakṣaṇa*,[9] the *specific quality* which is unique to the object characterized and therefore allows us to distinguish it from other objects. Objects have specific qualities (*svabhāva*) because they are distinguished from the qualities of other objects (*parabhāva*).[10] In this context *svabhāva* as understood as an antonym to the common characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) which are instantiated by all phenomena.[11]

This understanding *svabhāva* as the specific quality of objects is further restricted by Candrakīrti identification of *svabhāva* with the *essential property* of an object.[12] Every essential property will be part of the specific

in Schayer (1931, xix, 55, note 41), who distinguishes four different senses, as well as in de Jong (1972, 3) and May (1959, 124, note 328), who distinguish two. Although there are obvious connections with the senses distinguished here the relations between the different senses discussed by the three authors and, in Schayer's case, the distinctness of the four senses given by him are too unclear to make an attempt at comparison worthwhile.

[8] *maraṇan ti kho mahārāja etaṃ adiṭṭhasaccānaṃ tāsaniyaṃ ṭhānaṃ [...] maraṇass' eso mahārāja sarasabhāvatejo tassa sarasabhāvatejena sakilesā sattā maraṇassa tasanti bhāyanti.* (Trenckner, 1928, 149). For a translation see Davids (1890, 211).

[9] *svabhāva evaiṣaṃ svalakṣaṇam / sāmāyalakṣaṇamn̄ tu anityatā saṃskṛtānām. Bhāṣya* on Vasubandhu (1970–1973, 6:14). For further references see Williams (1981, 243).

[10] *svabhāvena parabhāvaviyogataḥ* (Vasubandhu, 1970–1973, 1:18).

[11] According to the Buddhist interpretation these characteristics are being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of self (Ronkin, 2005, 114-115).

[12] Note that this sense of *svabhāva* is not to be equated with that of haecceity or quiddity. An haecceity or 'individual essence' is a property only a single individual can have (the socratesness of Socrates is a stock example). But *svabhāva* in the sense discussed here is shareable. The *svabhāva* of fire is heat, a characteristic which cannot just be instantiated by fire, but also for example by water (even though heat does not constitute the *svabhāva* of water).

quality of an object, but not the other way round. The specific quality of an object is the unique combination of property which distinguishes the object from all others. An essential property is something an object cannot lose without ceasing to be that very object. Assume for example that for some reason all existing samples of gold weighed more than 10 grams. In this case 'weighing more than 10 grams' is a part of the specific quality of gold, since we use this property together with others to distinguish samples of gold from other things. But even though we never come across a lighter piece of gold in this world, 'weighing more than 10 grams' is a property any particular sample of gold could lose without ceasing to be gold — cutting a piece of 10 grams in half does not transform it into another kind of metal. Therefore 'weighing more than 10 grams' would be part of the specific quality of gold, but not part of its essential nature.

In interpreting *svabhāva* as essence Candrakīrti notes that[13]

> For, in common usage, heat is called the *svabhāva* of fire, because it is invariable in it. The same heat, when it is apprehended in water, is not *svabhāva*, because it is contingent, since it has arisen from other causal conditions.

Heat is a property which is always instantiated by fire (and, for Candrakīrti at least, every instantiation of fire is also an instantiation of heat).[14] Water, on the other hand, can be either hot or cold and requires some special conditions (apart from just being water) to heat it up. Although not stated explicitly, the notion of essence-*svabhāva* also appears to include a modal element: if fire lost the property of heat it would no longer be fire. Water, however, can cool down and still remain water. This conception of *svabhāva* therefore agrees very well with a common understanding of essence or essential property in contemporary metaphysics which conceives of these to be the properties an object cannot lose without ceasing to be that very object.

The notion of essence-*svabhāva* is not one Nāgārjuna frequently employs in his arguments concerning *svabhāva*.[15] Of of his rare references to this

[13] *agneraus̱n̤yam hi loke tadavyabhicāritvātsvabhāva ityucyate | tadevaus̱n̤yamapsūpalabhyamānaṃ parapratyayasaṃbūtatvātkr̥trimatvānna svabhāva iti* La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 241, lines 8–9). A similar characterization of solidity (*khara*) as the invariable specific quality and thus *svabhāva* of earth is given in the *Madhyāntavibhāgaṭīkā* (Williams, 1981, 242–243).

[14] Ames (1982, 170).

[15] Buddhapālita, on the other hand, clearly has the notion of essence-*svabhāva* in mind when claims that the aim of Nāgārjuna was to teach the *svabhāva* (*ngo bo nyid*) of dependent origination (P 180a:3–4; Walleser (1913–1914, 4:16–17)). As dependent origination identified with emptiness is the exact opposite of *svabhāva* this expression would constitute

conception can be found in the *Ekaślokaśastra* where he states[16]

> because one, two and many each have its own *bhāva*, therefore we call it *svabhāva*. For example, earth, water, fire, and air are respectively hard, moist, hot, and moveable. Each has its own *svabhāva*. And because the nature of every one of the things has its own specific quality (*svalakṣaṇa*) it is said that each has its *svabhāva*.

Here *svabhāva* appears to be identified with a quality each of the four elements cannot lose without ceasing to be what it is. It furthermore plays the rôle of an object's specific quality (*svalakṣaṇa*)[17] which allows the observer to individuate the elements and therefore reflects their essential qualities, i.e. their *svabhāva*.[18]

1.2 Substance-*svabhāva*

The notion of essence-*svabhāva* just discussed which equates *svabhāva* with the specific qualities of an object and contrasts them with those qualities it shares with other objects serves mainly *epistemological* purposes. It provides a procedure for drawing a line between a variety of objects with shared qualities and thereby allows us to tell them apart.

There is, however, a second understanding of *svabhāva* which is of much greater importance in the Madhyamaka debate which considers *svabhāva* to be a primarily *ontological* notion. Rather than seeing *svabhāva* as the opposite of shared qualities (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) it is contrasted with conceptually constructed or secondary (*prajñaptisat*) objects and equated with the mark of the primary ones (*dravyasat*). The distinction between primary and secondary objects constitutes the most fundamental ontological distinction drawn by the Sarvāstivādins.[19]

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a *contradiction in adiecto* unless we realize that Buddhapālita wants to say that Nāgārjuna teaches the *specific quality* of dependent origination.

[16]Iyengar (1927, 160). Another translation of this passage of the *śastra* can be found in Edkins (1893, 307–307). We might want to note, however, that Lindtner (1982, 16) classifies this text as 'most probably not genuine'.

[17]Some information on the conceptual relationship between *svabhāva* and *svalakṣaṇa* can be found in Ronkin (2005, 110).

[18]Nāgārjuna might here have the Vaiśeṣika conception of the five elements (*bhūta*) in mind, all of which are substances (*dravya*) and are taken to have peculiar qualities which distinguish them from the other elements. See Sharma (1960, 177).

[19]Williams (1981, 236–237).

Primary existents constitute the irreducible constituents of the empirical world, secondary existents, on the other hand, depend on linguistic and mental construction for their existence. For the Sarvāstivādin primary existents encompass primarily partless moments of consciousness out of which secondary existents, medium-sized dry goods such as tables and chairs would be constructed. Although both classes of objects were taken as existents (*sat*), only the primary ones were assumed to possess *svabhāva*.

On this understanding *svabhāva* no longer denotes an individuating property of objects by which they can be told apart from other objects (as it did when conceived in terms of essence) but an indication of ontological status.[20] To have *svabhāva* means to exist in a primary manner, unconstructed and independent of anything else.[21]

This notion of *svabhāva*, which we are going to call substance-*svabhāva* is also the sense of *svabhāva* most prominent in Nāgārjuna's arguments.[22] The fifteenth chapter of the MMK, investigating the notion of *svabhāva* begins by saying:

> *Svabhāva* cannot result from causes and conditions, because in this case it would be something artificially created. But how could *svabhāva* be artificially created, as it is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else? [23]

[20]Ronkin (2005, ch 3) argues that there was a gradual move away from a basically epistemological understanding of *svabhāva* as a characteristic mark to individuate different aspects of experience to an ontological understanding, where *svabhāva* subsumes objects with a particular ontological status.

[21]In the contemporary commentarial literature we find occasional reference to the notion of an *intrinsic property* to spell out the notion of *svabhāva* (Tillemans (2001, 14, note 24), Siderits (2004, 117)]). Intrinsic properties are those which 'things have in virtue of the way they themselves are', while extrinsic properties are had 'in virtue of their relations or lack of relations to other things' (Lewis, 1986, 61). While it is clear that all properties constitutive of a primary existent must be intrinsic not all intrinsic properties characterize a primary existent. For example the property of being the tallest man in the room is extrinsic (since a man can only have it in relation to the other men in the room), while that of being a man is intrinsic. However, a man does not exist by *svabhāva* since he is causally, mereologically, and conceptually dependent on a variety of factors.

[22]Hayes (1994, 311) distinguishes two senses of *svabhāva*, *svabhāva* in the sense of identity and *svabhāva* in the sense of independence. The former expresses the understanding as *svalakṣaṇa*, the latter as *dravya*. Hayes then goes on to argue that Nāgārjuna equivocates between these different readings, thereby rendering his arguments invalid (316). For some comments on this see Taber (1998), Tillemans (2001), Siderits (2004, 135, note i).

[23]*na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ / hetupratyaya saṃbhūtaḥ svabhāva kṛtako bhavet // svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham / akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 259–262).

Substance-*svabhāva* is therefore taken to be something which does not depend on anything else. Candrakīrti in fact takes MMK 15:2b to constitute the definition of *svabhāva*:

> This is the definition of it: *Svabhāva* is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else.[24]

A view of *svabhāva* which is not explicitly formulated by Nāgārjuna but is nevertheless prominent in the Indian and Tibetan commentarial literature is of *findability under analysis*. [25] Candrakīrti observes that

> [. . .] worldly things exist without being analyzed. When analyzed, however, there is no self different from form and the other [four constituents].[26]

The underlying idea is that whatever is not ultimately real disappears under analysis so that what we are left with must be an ultimately real object existing by its own nature. The reason why a composite objects like a chariot or the self (*ātman*) are not ultimately real is because they do not withstand logical analysis (*rigs pas dpyad bzod pa*). Once the chariot or the self are conceptually dissolved into the parts which constitute them the objects have disappeared and all we are left with parts collectively conceptualized as a chariot or a self.[27]

Findability under analysis and independence of other objects imply one another. For assume some objects x have been determined by analysis to be the ultimate constituents of some thing. If the existence of these xs in turn depended on the existence of some y only y, but not x, could be a candidate for an ultimately real object. Conversely, if no ultimate constituent can be found under analysis this is because every potential candidate is again dependent on something else.

There are some conceptions of substance in Western philosophy which exhibit a certain amount of similarity with the notion of substance-*svabhāva*

[24] *tasya cedaṃ lakśaṇaṃ akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekśaḥ paratra ca* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 265, lines 5–6). See also Candrakīrti's commentary on Āryadeva's *Catuḥsátaka* 12:13: *de la bdag ces bya ba ni gang zhig dngos po rnams kyi gzhan la rag ma las pa'i ngo bo rang bzhin te med pa ni bdgag med pa'o* 'Here 'self' is a self-existent object which does not depend on other objects. The non-existence [of such an object] is selflessness.' P5266, 98, 265.1.7. See also Tillemans (1990, 126).

[25] See Tillemans (2001, 5–6).

[26] *[. . .] avicārataśca laukikapadārthānāmastitvāt | yathaiva hi rūpādivyatirekeṇa vicāryamāṇa ātmā na saṃbhavati* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 67:7–8), (Ruegg, 2002, 117).

[27] Trenckner (1928, 27), Davids (1890, 44).

just described. Descartes's view of substance as something which does not require another thing for its existence[28] springs to mind, as well as Wittgenstein's theory of logically simple objects presented in the Tractatus, which are supposed to constitute the substance of the world.[29] These objects are simple, unchanging and exist independently of one another and therefore constitute a relatively close analogue of the Sarvāstivādin's primary objects.

1.2.1 Dependence relations

In order to understand this ontological conception of substance-*svabhāva* it is important to get a clear idea of what precisely is meant here by the dependence of an object on another one. First of all it is important to distinguish two notions of 'dependence' in this context which should not be confused. These are

- *existential dependence*: An object a existentially depends on objects falling under the property F iff necessarily, if a exists there exists something falling under F.
- *notional dependence*: Objects falling under the property F are notionally dependent on objects falling under the property G iff necessarily, if some object x falls under F there will be a distinct object y falling under G.

Saying that a sprout depends existentially on its cause means that necessarily, if a sprout exist there will be some objects falling under the property 'causes of the sprout', such as a seed, soil, water, sunlight, and so on. Similarly, if a complex physical object exists, so will all its parts; therefore the object existentially depends on its parts. Necessarily, if a book exists, so will each of its pages.

Notional dependence, on the other hand, is a quite different case. Northern England depends on Southern England, but we would hardly want to say that this dependence is existential. If due to some geological disaster all of Southern England would be destroyed this would not affect the *existence* of the stretch of land now called Northern England. But it affects its *description* as Northern England, since now there would be nothing south of it which was also England. The concept Northern England therefore depends notionally on the concept Southern England, but the object in the world the

[28] Principes I, 51.
[29] Keyt (1963), Proops (2004).

concept 'Northern England' picks out does not depend existentially on the object 'Southern England' picks out.[30]

It is interesting to note that in the later dGe lugs commentarial tradition three varieties of existential dependence are distinguished: *causal* dependence, when an object depends for its existence on its causes and conditions, *mereological* dependence, when an object depends on its parts, and thirdly *conceptual* dependence, postulating the dependence of an object on a basis of designation, a designating mind and a term used to designate the object.[31] These dependence relations are supposed to stand in a qualitative and doxographical hierarchy. Causal dependence is seen that the coarsest understanding of dependent arising and is associated with the Vaibhāṣikas or Sarvāstivādins, the Sautrāntikas and the Cittamātrins; mereological dependence is a bit more subtle; the Svātantrika Mādhyamikas are assumed to understand emptiness in terms of both causal and mereological dependence. The most subtle understanding which incorporates all three forms of dependence is associated with the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas.[32]

There are a variety of examples from Nāgārjuna's works which show that both the notion of existential and of notional dependence are employed in his arguments. Verse 13 of the *Śūnyatāsaptati* asserts:[33]

> The father is not the son, the son is not the father,
> those two cannot exist one without the other,
> those two cannot be simultaneous,
> likewise the twelve links of dependent origination.[34]

When saying that the son cannot exist without the father Nāgārjuna obviously means that the son is existentially dependent on the father: if some person a exists there exists something falling under the property 'father of

[30]A detailed discussion of different kinds of dependence relations can be found in Simons (1987, chapter 8). Our notion of existential dependence is called 'generic dependence' by Simons.

[31]In his (1964, 154:6–155:1) (which constitutes commentary on the *Grub mtha' chen mo* of 'Jams dbyangs bzhad pa (1648–1721)) Ngag dbang dpal ldan (1797–?) refers to these three kinds of dependence as *'phrad ba* (*prāpya*), *ltos ba* (*apekṣya*) and *brten pa* (*pratītya*), respectively. See Magee (1999, 56–57), Hopkins (1983, 166–177), Komito (1987, 1190), Gyatso (2005, 20–21).

[32]Ngag dbang dpal ldan (1964, 154:6-155:1),Gyatso (2005, 33, 43–44, 59–62).

[33]*pha bu ma yin bu pha min*
de nyis phan tshun med min la
de nyis cig car yang min ltar
yan lag bcu gnyis de bzhin no (Tola and Dragonetti, 1987, 13, 26).

[34]The father-son example is also used in verses 49–50 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. See also 8:12 and 10:10 of the MMK.

a'. But claiming that the father cannot exist without the son cannot be a case of existential dependence as well. Abelard (that very man) could have existed without having ever fathered Astrolabius. But Abelard as a father depends notionally on Astrolabius: if nobody was subsumed by the concept 'son of Abelard' Abelard would not fall under the concept 'father'.

It is therefore evident that the 'mutual dependence' of father and son Nāgārjuna postulates is based on two different dependence relations, the son depending existentially on the father, the father notionally on the son. For Nāgārjuna's argument, however, it is necessary that the two entities discussed are related by a symmetric dependence relation.[35]

The difficulty disappears if we take into account that if some object x is essentially F, and if it also depends notionally on some y being G, then x will also depend existentially on y's being G, since x has to have F to exist at all (this is just what it means for F being an essential property of x). Therefore if we assumed that Abelard was the father of Astrolabius essentially Abelard would indeed depend existentially on his son, since having Astrolabius as a son would be a property Abelard could not lose without being that very man.

Of course we might wonder now why we should assume that Abelard was essentially the father of Astrolabius. Even if we do not think that this is reasonable (because we think that a childless Abelard would have been the very same man) it is important to note that Nāgārjuna intends the father-son example as an argumentative pattern in which different predicates can be substituted. For example we might think (as Nāgārjuna's opponent does) that cause and effect have their respective natures essentially. In this case it is then evident that the existential dependence between the two must be symmetric: the effect depends existentially on the cause, but the cause also depends existentially on the effect.

I hope this small example has convinced the reader of the importance of keeping the two different kinds of dependence relation apart when analyzing Nāgārjuna's thought.[36]

[35]Oetke (1989, 11) claims that 'the assumption of isomorphism or identity of logical and causal dependence relations [which correspond to our notional and existential dependence relations] explains a significant part of Nāgārjuna's arguments and simultaneously elucidates numerous apparent difficulties'.

[36]The failure to distinguish between existential and notional dependence has resulted in considerable confusion in the contemporary commentarial literature, primarily in connection with the so-called *principle of coexisting counterparts* (Taber, 1998, 216) (Ruegg (1977) calls it 'the principle of the complementarity of binary concepts and terms') which is supposed to say that 'a thing cannot be a certain type unless its counterpart exists simultaneously with it'. Far from being 'a blatant contradiction of common sense' (Taber, 1998, 238) it expresses an obvious truth about notional dependencies: something cannot be Northern England unless Southern England exists at the same time. It is only if

For Candrakīrti substance-*svabhāva* is therefore qualified by its non-dependence on other objects, *either existentially or notionally*. This is evident from the examples Candrakīrti gives for objects which are dependent on causes and conditions: the heat of water, the farther and nearer shore, long and short.[37] While the heat of fire depends existentially on the causes which heat up the water, the concepts 'farther shore' and 'long' depend only notionally on the concepts 'nearer shore' and 'short'. The farther shore would not cease to exist if the nearer shore did, nor would long objects decrease in length if short objects disappeared, but their descriptions as 'farther shore' or 'long' could no longer be employed.

It is evident that the notion of substance-*svabhāva* is much stronger than that of essence-*svabhāva*. In particular we can assert the existence of the second without affirming that of the first. It could be the case that every object had some properties it could not lose without ceasing to be that very object (although in some cases it may be more difficult than in others to determine what these properties are) and therefore be endowed with essence-*svabhāva*. But at the same time everything could in some way (either existentially or notionally) be dependent on something else so that substance-*svabhāva* did not exist at all.

1.2.2 The rejection of substance-*svabhāva*

It is important to note that the elaborate Mādhyamika criticism of the notion of *svabhāva* is directed against this stronger notion of substance-*svabhāva*, rather than against essence-*svabhāva*. As the common conception of *svabhāva* was in terms of essential properties (a conception 'well known', as Candrakīrti charmingly puts it 'to people, including cowherds and women')[38] Candrakīrti explicitly distinguishes it from his notion of substance-*svabhāva*: even though it is an essential property the heat of fire is no more the *svabhāva* of fire than it is the *svabhāva* of water.[39]

> Let it be recognized that heat, also, is not the *svabhāva* of fire, because of its artificiality. Here one apprehends that fire, which arises from the conjunction of a gem and fuel and the sun or from the friction of two sticks, etc., is purely dependent on causes and

think that notional dependence is the very same thing as existential dependence that we can accuse Nāgārjuna of being unable to distinguish 'between saying that a thing exists at all and saying that it exists under a given description' (Hayes, 1994, 315). For more (unfortunately not very clear) discussion of this matter see Taber (1998).

[37] La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 264, line 1).

[38] La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 260).

[39] La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 260).

> conditions, but heat does not occur apart from fire. Therefore, heat, too, is produced by causes and conditions, and therefore is artificial; and because of its being artificial, like the heat of water, it is clearly ascertained that it is not *svabhāva*.

Candrakīrti does not attempt to refute the notion of essence-*svabhāva* but asserts its existence in conventional terms (*vyavahāra*). If something lacked the property of heat we would not call it fire.[40] Candrakīrti's emphasis is on establishing that essence-*svabhāva* 'does not deserve to be called *svabhāva*'[41] and is distinct from the notion of substance-*svabhāva* Nāgārjuna deals with. Unlike substance-*svabhāva*, however, Candrakīrti has no difficulties in asserting justification of essence-*svabhāva* in everyday usage.[42]

For the Abhidharmikas substance-*svabhāva* does exist; it is the intrinsic and essential quality of ultimately real objects (*dravya*). The justification for the assumption of such objects is evident if we consider the case of objects consisting of parts.[43] A partite object cannot exist by *svabhāva* since it exists only in dependence on its parts. For the same reason its parts cannot exist by *svabhāva* either as long as they have parts in turn. This regress must stop somewhere, because even though it might be possible to have a chain of explanation stretching back infinitely (if we explain the properties of the whole by the properties of the parts and then again ask for an explanation of their properties in terms of their parts) a chain of dependency relations must stop somewhere, that is the hierarchy of dependency relation must be well-founded. The entities which form the basis of the mereological dependency relation considered will be the ultimately real objects which have their properties essentially and intrinsically. They will exist by substance-*svabhāva*.

The Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka literature contains a variety of ways for classifying arguments against the existence of substance-*svabhāva*.[44] A five-fold classification distinguishes the following kinds of arguments:

[40]Schayer (1931, xix) argues that the Mādhyamika denies the existence of essence-*svabhāva*. As everything is causally produced 'there is no property which could never be missing from a particular object' (55, note 41). The important point to get is that saying some property is part of the essence-*svabhāva* of an object of type X does not mean it could never be missing from X, but that if it was missing we would not consider it to be of type X.

[41]La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 260).

[42]Ames (1982, 170).

[43]Siderits (2004, 118–119).

[44]Most classifications distinguish either four or five kinds of arguments; there are also slight variations concerning which arguments are subsumed under which heading. For details see Tillemans (1984, 371–372, note 16).

1. the diamond slivers[45]

2. the refutation of the production from existent or non-existent [46]

3. the refutation of the four kinds of production[47]

4. the argument from dependent origination[48]

5. the 'neither one nor many' argument[49]

1), the diamond slivers, so called because of the power ascribed to this argument in refuting substance-*svabhāva* analyzes four ways in which an object could be causally produced: by itself, by another object, by both, or without a cause.[50]

2), the refutation of the production from the existent or non-existent concerns the temporal relation between cause and effect.[51]

3), the refutation of the four kinds of production is generally taken to refer to an argument that considers the numerical relations between cause and effect: many causes creating one effect, many causes creating many effects, one cause creating many effects, one cause creating one effect. It is the only one of the five argument which is does not have a textual basis in Nāgārjuna's works.[52]

4), the argument from dependent origination considers the compatibility of substance-*svabhāva* with a variety of dependence relations.[53]

5), the 'neither one nor many argument' which investigates whether objects having substance-*svabhāva* are either simple or complex.[54]

As there is a considerable amount of discussion of these five types of arguments in the contemporary commentarial literature I will not discuss them here any further. Instead I will consider two other arguments against

[45] *vajrakaṇa*, *rdo rje gzegs*.

[46] *sadāsatutpādapratiṣedha*, *yod med skye 'gog*.

[47] *catuṣkoṭyutpādapratiṣedha*, *mu bzhi skye 'gog*.

[48] *pratītyasamutpādahetu*, *rten cing 'brel ba'i gtan tshigs*.

[49] *ekānekaviyogahetu*, *gcig du bral gyi gtan tshigs*.

[50] Hopkins (1983, 132–150, 639–650).

[51] Tillemans (1984, 361). The temporal reading of this argument is not always so clear. Sometimes (1984, 361) it is argued that the diamond slivers and the refutation of the production from the existent or non-existent are to be distinguished by the fact that the first analyzes the cause, the second the effect. This analysis then investigates whether a cause produces and existent, a non-existent, a both existent and non-existent or a neither existent nor non-existent effect. See Hopkins (1983, 151–154).

[52] Some discussion is in Hopkins (1983, 155–160).

[53] Hopkins (1983, 161–173).

[54] See Hopkins (1983, 176–196).

the existence of substance-*svabhāva* which are discussed by Nāgārjuna but are not included in the classification given above: the *property argument* and the *argument from change*.

1.2.3 The property argument

One problem with the assumption of primary existents endowed with substance-*svabhāva* becomes evident once we analyze these objects in terms of the familiar distinction between individuals and properties. According to classical Buddhist ontology there are different kinds primary existents (*mahābhūta*s: earth, water, fire, wind) which are distinguished by different qualities.[55] This list is sometimes enlarged to a list of six elements or *dhātu*s by adding space and consciousness.[56] It is this list of six Nāgārjuna's account in chapter five of the MMK is based on.[57] The problem he discusses, however, is independent of our willingness to assume the existence of primary 'fire-atoms' and so forth. It arises whenever we assume that there are different categories of primary existents distinguished by different properties.[58]

We can easily conceive of ordinary individuals as lacking some qualities which they in fact possess; for example we can conceive of a red apple as lacking the property of redness and being green instead. In the case of primary existents, however, this is not possible. If we abstract the property of heat from a fire-atom there is nothing left, unless we believe in a propertyless 'bare particular' which could act as the individual instantiating the property of heat.

Nāgārjuna considers this possibility in the case of space:[59]

> No space is evident prior to the characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) of space. If it existed prior to the characteristic it would be without the characteristic.[60]

[55]La Vallée Poussin (1988–1990, 68–70), Dhammajoti (2004, 147–148).

[56]La Vallée Poussin (1988–1990, 88).

[57]MMK 5:7.

[58]See Siderits (2003, 120–123).

[59]The ontological status of space is a controversial issue in the Buddhist literature. Whilst not being one of the four *mahābhūta*s (Dhammajoti, 2004, 148–149) the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya nevertheless includes it together with these in a list of six elements *dhātu*s (La Vallée Poussin, 1988–1990, 88). Moreover, the ∗Abhidharmamahāhavibhāṣaśāstra argues that space can be a dominant condition (*adhipatipratyaya*) for the *mahābhūta*s and therefore possesses *svabhāva* (Dhammajoti, 2004, 384). Problems with properties of the *mahābhūta*s will therefore equally apply to space.

[60]*nākāśaṃ vidyate kiṃ citpūrvam ākāśalakṣaṇāt*
alakṣaṇaṃ prasjyeta syātpūrvaṃ yadi lakṣaṇāt MMK 5:1 (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 129:6–7).

Thus assuming that a 'space-atom' existed first without its characteristic and only later acquired it, in the way in which an apple can exist without the property of redness which is only acquired once the apple is ripe commits us to the existence of propertyless bare particular. This is due to the fact that unlike ordinary objects such as apples primary existents have all their properties essentially. Since the only essential characteristic of space is its particular space-nature a space-atom without this characteristic is like a knife without a handle which has lost its blade: there is nothing left. For Nāgārjuna introducing bare particulars at this point is not an option, since 'an object without characteristics is not to be found anywhere'.[61]

Why does Nāgārjuna reject the notion of a bare particular? Bare particulars do not appear to be straightforwardly contradictory entities, in fact their existence is postulated by metaphysicians claiming that individuals must be more than just bundles of properties.[62]

The problem seems to be this. Let us assume that there was indeed a bare particular left over once we abstracted the property of heat from a fire-atom. Assume furthermore that this particular would have its nature (its bare-particular-ness) intrinsically and essentially. In this case heat could not be its *svabhāva* as well, since something cannot have two different *svabhāva*s. Its further characterization by heat would therefore be superfluous for establishing its status as a primary existent.

Alternatively we could assume that the bare particular did not have its nature intrinsically and essentially, but dependent on something else. We could then ask again whether this something else has *its* property essentially, and so on.[63] In this case we get into a regress which the opponent of Nāgārjuna has to terminate somewhere, since he wants to establish that *some* objects (i.e. the true primary existents) exist by *svabhāva* and are therefore not dependent on anything else. We therefore end up with the first possibility again, as the various properties which makes up the supposed *svabhāva* of the primary elements fire, water and so forth are superfluous in characterizing these foundational objects as primary existents, as these objects are already existent as such.

This is what Nāgārjuna means when he says that

> The occurrence of a characteristic is neither in the uncharacterized nor in the characterized. It does not proceed from something

[61] *alakṣaṇo na kaścicca bhāvaḥ saṃvidyate kva cit* MMK 5:2a (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 129:15).

[62] Armstrong (1997, 109–110, 123–126).

[63] La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 130), Siderits (2003, 121).

other than those with or without characteristic.[64]

If we regard the bare particular as characterized by its bare-particular-ness intrinsically and essentially, any further characteristic is superfluous for bestowing the status of a primary existent. If we do not regard it as so characterized, however, we end up in an infinite regress without establishing any primary existents at all. Since these possibilities are mutually exclusive the notion of a bare particular seems to be facing a problem.

The proponent of bare particulars might now be inclined to say that the all this shows is that the pluralist theory of the four primary elements was mistaken and that we have to assume that there is only one kind of primary existent, namely bare particulars having their nature intrinsically and essentially. The constitute the 'pure stuff' of the world which is then 'flavoured' by such properties as heat, wetness etc. in order to form fire-, water- and other atoms.

Bracketing the difficulty of how these different bare particulars are to be told apart the most important problem with this is that Nāgārjuna's opponent also wants to argue that the primary existents are mind-independent, they exist whether or not any conscious beings are around. But while this has a certain plausibility for objects which can be distinguished by their properties (such as the four *mahābhūta*s or the fundamental particles of contemporary physics) a bare particular from which all characteristics have been abstracted away bears the mark of the mind's handiwork. Bare particulars are nothing we are immediately (or even mediately) acquainted with — they are conceptual fictions, theoretical entities introduced in the course of constructing an ontological theory, but hardly anything we would supposed exists 'from its own side', independent of conscious minds.

If Nāgārjuna's opponent does not want to postulate the existence of bare particulars he might try to solve the problem of properties of primary existents by arguing that primary existents *are* property-particulars, rather than things characterized by properties. This is the dual of the bare-particular view; for we now assume properties without bearers, rather than bearers without properties. As a matter of fact ontological theories based on property-particulars (also called tropes) have become relatively popular in the recent metaphysical discussion.[65] The fundamental idea here is that the redness of an apple is not regarded as *one* thing inhering in different red objects. The redness of the apple, that of a tomato and that of a postbox are

[64] *nālakṣaṇe lakṣaṇasya pravṛttirna salakṣaṇe / salakṣaṇālakṣaṇābhyāṃ nāpyanyatra pravartate* MMK 5:3 (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 130:7–8).

[65] See Williams (1953) for an early example, Bacon (1995) for a more recent discussion.

rather regarded as three distinct property-particulars which are sufficiently similar to be classified under the common name 'red'.

Nāgārjuna is clear on his rejection of property-particulars ('In the absence of the characterized the characteristic does also not exist')[66] but unfortunately not very explicit on his reasons for doing so. A plausible reason for Nāgārjuna's rejection is provided by Marks Siderits.[67] If we assume that the different primary existents, such as fire- and water-atoms are just property particulars of heat, wetness and so forth we face the problem of how the different atoms are to be individuated.[68] We obviously cannot say that two fire-atoms are different because the property of heat is instantiated in different bearers, as this would get us back to the scenario discussed earlier on. It seems that the best we can do is individuate clusters of property-particulars, as in saying that in one cluster heat is associated with wetness (as in hot water), in another with solidity (as in a red-hot iron ball) and that in this way the two property-particulars of heat are individuated. However, now the problem is that the independence of primary existents is compromised, as we now have to rely distinct property-particulars to tell them apart. Therefore their existence as distinct primary existents is not any quality they possess from their own side, but only something they have dependent on occurring on clusters with other property particulars.

It now becomes evident whatever analysis of primary existents in terms of individuals and properties we propose seems to face fundamental difficulties. If we treat the primary existents and their properties as distinct and independent entities (as we do in the case of ordinary objects) we realize that the two cannot be independent at all, since we cannot conceive of a primary existent without its characteristic property. If, on the hand we subsume primary existents under one side of the individual-property divide, that is if we assume that they are either bare particulars (individuals without properties) or tropes (properties without individuals) it becomes evident that neither of these can play the desired rôle of mind-independent foundational objects existing from their own side.

Given that Nāgārjuna regards these options as exhaustive[69] he considers the above difficulties as a *reductio* of the notion of a primary existent. For him the primary existents and the properties they instantiate have to be regarded as existentially dependent on one another. If the properties did not exist there would be no particular to characterize, in the absence of the

[66] *lakṣyasyānupapattau ca lakṣaṇasyāpy asaṃbhavaḥ* MMK 5:4b (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 131:10).

[67] (2003, 122–123).

[68] A discussion of different ways of individuating tropes is in Schaffer (2001).

[69] MMK 5:3,5.

particular there would be no characterizing properties. But in this case a fundamental property of primary existents is no longer fulfilled, namely that these existents should be independent of all other objects.[70] Depending for their existence on the properties characterizing them the supposed primary existents cannot produce the foundation for a hierarchy of dependence relations. It therefore turns out that the only satisfactory way of understanding the relation between primary existents and their properties has to deny that they are primary existents in the first place.

1.2.4 The argument from change

Nāgārjuna considers the existence of substance-*svabhāva* to be incompatible with change:[71]

> If *svabhāva* existed the world would be without origination or cessation, it would be static and devoid of its manifold manifestations.

But given that we do perceive change in the world this provides us with an argument against substance-*svabhāva*:

> By of the observation of change [we can infer] the lack of *svabhāva* of things. [...] If *svabhāva* was found, what would change? Neither the change of a thing itself nor of something different is suitable: as a young man does not become old, so an old man does not become old either.[72]

No thing which we perceive to be changing can exist by substance-*svabhāva*. This is because an object existing by substance-*svabhāva*, i.e. a primary existent constitutes an independent, irreducible and unconstructed fundamental constituent of reality. If the young man had its age as an essential and intrinsic property (i.e. if he was young by *svabhāva*) he could never grow old.

The obvious reply the advocate of substance-*svabhāva* should make at this point is to say that both change and substance-*svabhāva* exist, though

[70] MMK 5:4–5.

[71] MMK 24:38 *ajātam aniruddhaṃ ca kūṭasthaṃ ca bhaviṣyati / vicitrābhir avasthābhiḥ svabhāve rahitaṃ jagat* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 513:10–11) Other passages dealing with the permanence of *svabhāva* include 13:4, 21:17, 23:24, and 24: 22–26.

[72] MMK 13:3a, 4b–5 *bhāvānāṃ niḥsvabhāvatvamanyathābhāvadarśanāt / [...] kasya syādanyathābhāvaḥ svabhāvo yadi vidyate // tasyaiva nānyathābhāvo nāpyanyasyaiva yujyate / yuvā na jīryate yasmādyasmājjīrṇo na jīryate* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 240:8–241:16).

not at the same level. Things which we perceive as changing do not possess substance-*svabhāva*, while those which do possess it do not change.

There are at least two different ways in which we could spell this out. According to the *annihilationist* view an x-atom existing by *svabhāva* can never change into a y-atom. What can happen, however, is that the x-atom ceases to exist and is replaced by a y-atom. What we perceive as macroscopic change in the nature of entities (hot water cooling down, green leaves turning brown) is in fact nothing else but the microscopic arising and ceasing of entities the natures of which do not change.[73]

According to the *permutationist* view no entities existing by *svabhāva* ever pass out of existence. The change we observe is merely a difference in arrangement of the eternally existing objects. When hot water cools down this is therefore not because the fire-atoms in the water pass out of existence, but rather that the set of permanently existent atoms changes its arrangement so that fewer fire-atoms are now mixed amongst the water-atoms.

There are two main difficulties for the annihilationist view. First of all it is not obvious to which extent the cessation of entities existing by *svabhāva* is theoretically less problematic than a change in their nature. The annihilationist view is based on the assumption that if some object passes out of existence its *svabhāva* is not changed, since the object does not exist any more. It did not lose one nature and acquire another one, as there is nothing left which could possibly acquire such a nature. Whether this in fact works depends on the interaction of the conception of *svabhāva* with that of momentarily existent objects. This is an intricate issue[74] which we fortunately do not have to settle here. There remains a second problem, namely answering the question what is responsible for the cessation and production of entities existing by *svabhāva*. If they are dependent on causes and conditions for their production and annihilation then they cannot be ultimately real entities after all, as the whole point of postulating entities existing by *svabhāva* was to have some objects which are not existentially dependent on any others.[75]

The permutationist view does not have this problem. We still have to assume that the ultimately real objects congregate in certain ways dependent on causes and conditions, but this only concerns the existential dependence of the objects they thus constitute, objects which were not supposed to exist by *svabhāva* in the first place. While the permutationist view thus seems more attractive than the annihilationist view it has the curious consequence

[73]See Siderits (2003, 124–125) for a description of this view.
[74]See von Rospat (1995).
[75]Siderits (2003, 125).

that the supposedly ultimately real objects existing by *svabhāva* recede more and more.

The idea of fire-atoms as ultimately real objects is obviously only of historical interest. It is far from clear, however, whether the conception of elementary particles of contemporary physics is much more attractive to the permutationist. While the *mahābhūta*s had the advantage of being relatively close to object of ordinary experience, such as fire, water, and so forth, things like electrons, quarks or strings are purely theoretical posits. Nobody has ever seen an electron and nobody ever will, as these not accessible to sensory perceptions. As in the case of all theoretical posits claims for their existence are based on the explanatory work the respective terms carry out in a particular theory. It is therefore quite ironic that our best candidates for ultimately real entities existing independent of human conceptualization turn out to be objects which are so highly theory-dependent and the existence of which seems to be considerably less secure than that of the medium-sized dry goods with which we interact daily.

It therefore appears that neither the annihilationist nor the permutationist view manage to give a satisfactory explanation of the existence of change in the presence of substance-*svabhāva*. In the absence of any other explanations Nāgārjuna thus concludes that our experience of change constitutes an argument against the existence of substance-*svabhāva*.

Let us conclude this exposition of arguments against the existence of substance-*svabhāva* by noting that the concept of essence-*svabhāva* does not a major rôle in Candrakīrti's theorizing. Most of his as well as Nāgārjuna's arguments are concerned with criticizing substance-*svabhāva*. Furthermore, certain passages in Candrakīrti's works give the impression of a third conception of *svabhāva* being referred to. This third notion does not seem to share the marginal status of essence-*svabhāva* and is also not the aim of attempted refutations. We will call this conception *absolute svabhāva*.

1.3 Absolute *svabhāva*

Candrakīrti describes absolute *svabhāva* in the following way:[76]

> Ultimate reality for the Buddhas is *svabhāva* itself. That, moreover, because it is itself nondeceptive is the truth of ultimate reality. It must be known by each one for himself.

[76] *sangs rgyas rnams kyi don dam pa ni rang bzhin nyid yin zhing | de yang bslu ba med pa nyid kyis don dam pa'i bden pa yin la | de ni de rnams kyi so sor rang gis rig par bya ba yin no* (La Vallée Poussin, 1912, 108, line 16–19).

While he stresses that substance-*svabhāva* is a notion erroneously ascribed to objects which in fact lack it[77] he also asserts that *svabhāva* does not in any way appear to those having misknowledge.[78] It therefore appears that *svabhāva* is both a mistaken ascription made by beings with deficient cognitive capacities *as well as* something which does not appear to such beings. To make sense of this we have to assume that there are two different conceptions of *svabhāva* in play here: substance-*svabhāva* which the Madhyamaka arguments attempt to show to be non-existent on the one hand, and another kind of *svabhāva*, which I call absolute *svabhāva*, which constitutes the true and intrinsic nature of phenomena.[79]

Candrakīrti explicitly characterizes this as changeless (*avikaritva*), not originated (*sarvaśa anutpāda*) and not contingent (*nirapekṣa*).[80] Based on this the later Tibetan commentarial literature conceives of *svabhāva* as 'triply characterized'[81]. Tsong kha pa describes it as

1. not produced by causes and conditions[82]
2. unchangeable[83]
3. set forth without depending on another object[84]

The interesting problem arising at this point is that both Candrakīrti's attributes as well as Tsong kha pa's triple characterization are supposed to be applicable *both* to substance-*svabhāva as well as* to emptiness, i.e. the

[77]La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 261).

[78]La Vallée Poussin (1912, 107, line 15). See also p 306.

[79]Some of the synonyms for absolute *svabhāva* Candrakīrti gives include 'objecthood of objects' (*dharmāṇāṃ dharmatā*), 'intrinsic nature' (*tatsvarūpam*), 'original nature' (*prakṛti*), 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*), 'lack of *svabhāva*' (*naiḥsvābhāvyam*), 'thusness' (*tathatā*), 'complete non-origination' (*sarvaśa anutpāda*), and 'being thus, changelessness, ever-abidingness' (*tathābhāvo 'vikaritvam sadaiva sthāyitā*) (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 264–265).

[80]La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 265).

[81]*khyad par gsum dang ldan pa* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 643:12), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:194). This characterization follows Nāgārjuna's discussion of *svabhāva* in MMK 15:2 and 8. See also Magee (1999, 87–88).

[82]*rgyu dang rkyen gyis ma bskyed pa* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 643:12-13), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:194).

[83]*gnas skabs gzhan du mi 'gyur ba* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 643:13), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:194).

[84]*rnam 'jog gzhan la mi ltos pa* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 643:13), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:194).

absence of substance-*svabhāva*.[85] But taking into account that substance-*svabhāva* is argued not to exist, while emptiness does exist this view faces an obvious difficulty: as the lack of *svabhāva* seems to have exactly the properties of substance-*svabhāva* the absence of *svabhāva* should both exist (since *svabhāva* does not) and not exist (since it has the same properties as the non-existing *svabhāva*). Emptiness (that is, the absence of *svabhāva*) appears to be a contradictory concept.

1.3.1 Ames' solution

William Ames, in his analysis of Candrakīrti's use of the concept *svabhāva* tries to resolve this problem by arguing that substance-*svabhāva* and lack of *svabhāva* or emptiness do not collapse into one another since the latter differs from the former in two important ways:[86]

> (1) Being purely negative, it does not satisfy the implicit condition that *svabhāva* be a positive quality. (2) It is not a quality of things, but a fact about qualities of things, namely, that none of them are *svabhāva*.

It appears to me that neither of these supposed differences can be made to carry much weight. The difference between 'positive' and 'negative' qualities seems to be purely an artefact of language. If our language did not contain the word 'blunt' we might describe a blunt knife as 'not sharp' and conclude that sharpness is a positive quality while bluntness is not. If we did not have the word 'sharp', the reverse would be the case. But it would be unfounded to assume that this indicates any difference between the *properties* we refer to.

Concerning the second point it does not seem to help much to observe that there is a fact about qualities of things which holds continuously, causelessly, and necessarily. All we have done is push up the location of *svabhāva* to the level of second order properties: it is now not the property of heat (or any other first order property) which qualifies as the *svabhāva* of fire, but one of its second order properties, i.e. the property that none of its first order properties is the object's *svabhāva*. But it is hardly satisfactory for the Mādhyamika to avoid the above problem by saying that when he claims that no

[85] This is the reason why Tsong kha pa does not regard the three characteristics as sufficient for identifying the object of negation (*dgag bya*). 'Jam dbyangs bshad pa asks in the *mChan bu bzhi*: *'di stong nyid kyi khyad par yin pas dgag byar ga la rung* 'These [three characteristics] being characteristics of emptiness how could they be the object of negation?' (Jam dbyangs bshad pa et al., 1972, 387.6).

[86] Ames (1982, 174).

objects have *svabhāva* what he really means is that none of an object's first order properties are its *svabhāva*.

1.3.2 Tsong kha pa's solution

Tsong kha pa attempts to solve this difficulty by arguing that substance-*svabhāva* (i.e. the Mādhyamika's 'object of negation') is to be distinguished from emptiness by its having additional characteristics. Apart from being triply characterized substance-*svabhāva* is also

4. established from its own side[87]

5. a natural, not a learned notion.[88]

Concerning the first Tsong kha pa states that

> Ultimate truth is established in this way as positing the nature of things (*chos nyid*) by *svabhāva* (*rang bzhin du*), but what establishes it as *svabhāva* is the fact that it is not fabricated and does not depend on other objects. It does not in the slightest exist by *svabhāva* which is established from its own side.[89]

Here Tsong kha pa regards 'establishment from its own side' (*rang gi ngo bos grub pa*) as distinct from 'independence from other objects' (*gzhan la mi ltos pa*) in order to drive a wedge between the characterizations of substance-*svabhāva* and emptiness or absolute *svabhāva*. It should be noted, however, that this interpretation is not shared by all dGe lugs commentators, some of which read Candrakīrti's *nirapekṣaḥ* as meaning 'the establishment of an object from the perspective of its own entity'.[90]

Concerning the second point it should be noted that Tsong kha pa draws a distinction between conceptions of *svabhāva* which are acquired misconceptions (*kun brtags*) and those which are innate (*lhan skyes*). Given the fundamental cognitive change the understanding of emptiness is supposed to bring

[87] *rang gi ngo bos grub pa* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 648:5), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:199).

[88] *kun brtags* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 644:20), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:196).

[89] *don dam pa'i bden pa ni chos nyid la rang bzhin du bzhag pa der grub kyang rang bzhin der 'jog byed bcos ma min pa dang | gzhan la mi ltos pa ni rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i rang bzhin der cung zad kyang med pa* (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 648:3–5), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:199). An alternative translation of this passage is in Magee (1999, 92–93).

[90] *rang gi ngo bo'i sgo nas yul gyi steng du grub pa.* The relevant passage from Ngag dbang dpal ldan is cited in Magee (1999, 94–95).

about he regards the removal of the latter as considerably more important than the former.[91] Later commentaries[92] classify the triply characterized *svabhāva* as such an acquired misconception. The triply characterized *svabhāva* is too wide a notion to capture the object of negation, which is therefore further specified as an innate, rather than an acquired misconception.[93]

1.3.3 Absolute *svabhāva* as essence-*svabhāva*

Let us conclude by considering one final way of distinguishing substance-*svabhāva* from absolute *svabhāva* in order to solve the apparent contradiction inherent in this understanding of emptiness.[94] The basic idea is that, whilst agreeing that both substance-*svabhāva* and absolute *svabhāva* are characterized as a) not fabricated (*akṛtṛimaḥ*), b) immutable (*na anyathābhāvaḥ*), and c) not dependent (*nirapekṣaḥ*), we assume that b) and c) are understood in very different ways for the two different notions of *svabhāva*. But let us consider these three characterizations in turn.

Absolute *svabhāva* is described as not fabricated (*akṛtṛimaḥ*) or as 'complete non-origination' (*sarvaśa anutpāda*) to make clear that it is not in any way produced together with an empty object and ceasing once the object is destroyed. It is therefore unlike the hole in a cup or a vase, which is dependent on the cup or vase for its existence and is destroyed if the cup or vase are broken.

This point can be clarified by considering Candrakīrti's assertion that *svabhāva* 'neither exists, nor does not exist, by intrinsic nature'.[95] It is evident that since *svabhāva* does not exist, it also does not exist by intrinsic nature. But why does it not fail to exist by intrinsic nature? In other words, why does emptiness not exist by substance-*svabhāva*? After all for Nāgārjuna phenomena do not just happen to lack *svabhāva*, but could not have possibly had *svabhāva*, no matter what.

What Candrakīrti wants to say here is that the property of lacking *svabhāva* is dependent as well, since it depends on the erroneous ascription of *svabhāva* in the first place. It is not a property phenomena have independently

[91](Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 1985, 644:18–645:1), (Tsong kha pa bLo bzang grags pa, 2000-2004, 3:196).

[92]See Magee (1999, 96).

[93]The problem of the differentiation between substance-*svabhāva* and absolute *svabhāva* was later further elaborated in the Tibetan tradition in the context of the debate over self-emptiness (*rang stong*) and other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*). For further details see Hookham (1991), Magee (1999, 103–115).

[94]I thank Mattia Salvini for helpful discussion of this point.

[95]*na tadasti na cāpi nāsti svarūpataḥ* La Vallée Poussin (1903–1913, 264:3). Candrakīrti uses the synonymous term *svarūpa* 'intrinsic nature' instead of *svabhāva* in this passage.

of everything else. If someone hallucinates white mice running across his desk then part of what it means that this is a hallucination is that there are in fact no white mice on his desk. But even someone with a rather promiscuous attitude towards existence-claims concerning properties would hesitate to say that besides being brown, rectangular and more than two feet high the table also has the property of being free of white mice. If there is any distinction to be made between the properties and object has in itself and those which are merely ascribed to it by an observer, purely negative properties such as being not round or free of white mice seem to be good candidates for being included in the latter category.

Candrakīrti stresses this point in a passage dealing with a person suffering from vitreous floaters[96] which cause the illusory appearance of hair-like objects in the visual field.[97] An ordinary observer would not generally ascribe the property 'free of hairs' to an empty pot, as this is one of the countless things the empty pot is empty of. But in order to correct the impression of the patient with the eye-disease the pot might indeed be described in this way. The property of hairlessness (like that of the absence of *svabhāva*) is something ascribed to an object to correct a mistaken attribution of the property of being filled with hairs. It is not a property an object would have independently of such an attempt to rectify a mistake.

Emptiness as a correction of a mistaken belief in *svabhāva* is therefore not anything objects have from their own side, nor is it something which is causally produced together with the object, like the empty space in a cup. It is also not something which is a necessary part of conceptualizing objects, since its only purpose is to dispel a certain erroneous conception of objects. In the same way as it is not necessary to conceive of tables as free of white mice in order to conceive of them as all, in the same way a mind not prone to ascribing substance-*svabhāva* to objects does not need conceive of objects as empty in order to conceive of them correctly.

When absolute *svabhāva* is interpreted as immutable (*na anyathābhāvaḥ*), as 'changelessness' (*avikaritvam*) and 'ever-abidingness' (*sadaiva sthāyitā*) this does not mean the same as when for example the Sarvāstivādin's *dravya* is described in this way. Emptiness is not to be regarded as some unchanging, permanent, absolute reality. Candrakīrti does not mean that if some empty object like a pot or a flower is destroyed the pot's or flower's emptiness somehow stays behind, as it is changeless and ever-abiding. If the pot or flower are destroyed there is not use in referring to their emptiness. The point is rather that *whatever* phenomenon is conceptualized by ordinary

[96] *rab rib*, *timira*.

[97] La Vallée Poussin (1912, 6:29; page 106, line 10 – 110, line 3).

beings will turn out to be empty, as they will ascribe substance-*svabhāva* to this phenomenon, and it is empty of such *svabhāva*. In this sense emptiness is unchanging, since it is a property to be ascribed to all things ever considered, once they have been correctly analyzed.

Finally, when we say that something is not dependent (*nirapekṣaḥ*) there are two different things we can mean. We might want to say that it does not depend on *any object whatsoever* or that it does not depend on *some specific object*. For example when saying that a mathematical theorem is independent we might make the claim that it does not depend on anything (human beings, minds, the world,...) for its existence, or me might mean something much weaker, namely that it does not depend on some particular thing (the person who proved the theorem, its inscription in a blackboard,...), i.e. that it would exist if someone else had proved it, or if some inscription or other existed on some blackboard or other.

These two meanings can also be employed when speaking about *svabhāva*. We could say that if something exists by *svabhāva*, it does not depend on anything whatsoever. This is the meaning of *svabhāva* usually identified with substance-*svabhāva* and corresponds to the Sarvāstivādin's *dravya*. But we could also say some property exists by *svabhāva* if *as long as any objects are around* they have that property. This, I would want to argue, is the best way to understand the assertion of emptiness being not dependent. It does not mean that emptiness is some sort of primordial reality *ante rem* but rather that as long as objects exist, and are conceived of by beings with deluded minds more or less like ours these objects will be empty.

The bottom line of this way or resolving the difficulty is the claim that for Nāgārjuna there are not three different senses of *svabhāva*, but only two. Absolute *svabhāva* is equated with the essence-*svabhāva* of all objects. In the same way as the property of heat constitutes the essence-*svabhāva* of fire, emptiness, i.e. the absence of substance-*svabhāva* constitutes the essence-*svabhāva* of all things. There are therefore only two different senses of *svabhāva* to be distinguished, namely essence-*svabhāva* and substance-*svabhāva*; what I have called 'absolute *svabhāva*' turns out to be an instance of the former. Apart from resolving the above contradiction is also allows us to make sense of such characterizations of emptiness as the 'objecthood of objects' (*dharmāṇāṃ dharmatā*), 'thusness' (*tathatā*) 'intrinsic nature' (*tatsvarūpam*), or 'original nature' (*prakṛti*). These epithets do not equate emptiness with some objectively existent noumenal reality but simply indicate that emptiness a property all objects could not lose without ceasing to be those very objects.

2 The cognitive dimension

If we conceive of the Madhyamaka arguments about *svabhāva* solely in ontological and semantic terms we are likely to miss one important dimension of the concept which occupies a central place in the Buddhist understanding of emptiness. This is the idea that the purpose of determining the existence or non-existence of substance-*svabhāva* is not just to arrive at a theoretically satisfactory understanding of the fundamental objects which make up the world, or of the relation between words and their referents, but is supposed to have far more comprehensive implications for how we interact with the world. Nāgārjuna notes in the final verses of chapter 26 of the MMK that[98]

> with the cessation of ignorance, formations will not arise. Moreover, the cessation of ignorance occurs through right understanding (*jñāna*). Through the cessation of this and that [link of dependent origination] this and that [other link] will not come about. The entire mass of suffering thereby completely ceases.

Nāgārjuna claims here that with the realization of the non-existence of substance-*svabhāva* the first link (ignorance) of the twelve links of dependent origination, which constitutes the fundamental Buddhist theory of the generation of the cognitive constitution of the human mind,[99] will cease to exist. The first link being cut off, all consecutive links, beginning with formations, will no longer arise. With the cessation of the entire chain, Nāgārjuna argues, suffering, which is the distinguishing mark of human existence will cease as well.

How exactly the twelve links of origination are to be interpreted, and how the cessation of ignorance brings them to a halt is a complex and much debated question within Buddhist philosophy. It is not one I want to focus on in this context, however. The main idea I want to highlight here is that the cessation of suffering is supposed to be brought about by a cognitive shift, which is constituted by the realization of the absence of *svabhāva*.

Candrakīrti remarks in his commentary on the above passage that 'the one who sees dependent origination correctly does not perceive a substance (*svarūpa*) even in subtle things'.[100] Note that *svabhāva* is here not regarded

[98] *avidyāyāṃ niruddhāyāṃ samskārāṇāmasaṃbhavaḥ | āvidyāyā nirodhastu jñānenāsyaiva bhāvanāt || tasya tasya nirodhena tattannābhipravartate || duḥkhaskandhaḥ kevalo 'yamevaṃ samyagnirudhyate* MMK 26: 11–12, (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 558–559).

[99] See Willams and Tribe (2000, 62–72) for an overview.

[100] *yo hi pratītyasamutpādaṃ samyak paśyatīti sa sūkṣmasyāpi bhāvasya na svarūpamupalabhate* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 559:3–4).

as a theoretical posit, as something an ontologist or semanticist might postulate when investigating the world or its representation in language. The underlying idea here is rather that seeing objects in terms of *svabhāva* is a kind of cognitive default which is criticized by Madhyamaka arguments against *svabhāva*, such as the argument from dependent origination. It is important to realize that *svabhāva* is seen here as playing a fundamental *cognitive* rôle insofar as objects are usually conceptualized in terms of *svabhāva*. This conceptualization (which the Mādhyamika tries to argue is also theoretically deficient) is taken to be the ultimate cause of suffering.

According to this cognitive understanding *svabhāva* is here regarded as a superimposition (*samāropa*) which the mind naturally projects onto objects when attempting to conceptualize the world. The term *samāropa* is only mentioned once by Nāgārjuna in the MMK,[101] but acquires a more prominent rôle in Candrakīrti's commentary. I think that agreeing with Candrakīrti about the presence of a notion of *svabhāva* as superimposition in Nāgārjuna's arguments allows us to give a theoretically coherent account of his view *svabhāva*,[102] while it also helps us to understand why the establishment of absence of substance-*svabhāva* occupies such a central place in Madhyamaka thinking.

Candrakīrti argues that the understanding of *svabhāva* in terms of a superimposition is of central importance for understanding the entire intellectual enterprise of the MMK:

> Thus, when it is said that entities do not arise in this way first of all the initial chapter was written to counter the mistaken attribution (*adhyāropa*) of false intrinsic natures; the remaining chapters were written to eliminate whatever distinctions are superimposed anywhere.[103]

It is important to note that Candrakīrti is not merely concerned with the refutation of a theory he assumes to be mistaken, but with something more fundamental:

[101] MMK 16:10. See Tanji (2000, 352, 355).

[102] This does deny that establishing what is 'really meant' by Nāgārjuna's arguments is in many cases more difficult to establish than for other philosophers (Tillemans, 2001, 17), (Griffiths, 2000, 24). Internal coherence of the arguments presented and external coherence with the context of Nāgārjuna's thoughts is all I think to be reasonably expected from a presentation such as this.

[103] *tasmādanuppanā bhāvā ityevaṃ tāvadviparītasvarūpādhyāropapratipakṣeṇa prathamaprakaraṇārambhaḥ | idānīṃ kvacidyaḥkaścidviśeṣo 'dhyāropitastadviśeṣāpākaraṇārthaṃ śeṣaprakaraṇārabhyaḥ* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 10–11).

> For one on the road of cyclic existence who pursues an inverted [view] due to ignorance a mistaken object such as the superimposition (*samāropa*) on the aggregates appears as real, but it does not appear to one who is close the view of the real nature of things.[104]

Independent of one's particular theoretical position concerning the existence or non-existence of *svabhāva*, *svabhāva* is something which is superimposed on ordinary objects in the process of conceptualization. The five aggregates, for example, are seen as a single, permanent, independent self, due to the superimposition of *svabhāva* on such a basis. The same happens when ordinary partite and causally produced material objects, linguistic items, and so forth are apprehended.

It is because this cognitive default of the superimposition of *svabhāva* is seen as the primary cause of suffering that the Mādhyamika draws a distinction between the *understanding* of arguments establishing emptiness and its *realization*. Being convinced by some Madhyamaka argument that an object does not exist with *svabhāva* does usually not entail that the object will not still appear to us as having *svabhāva*. The elimination of this appearance is only achieved by the realization of emptiness. The ultimate aim of the Madhyamaka project is therefore not just the establishment of a particular ontological or semantic theory, but the achievement of a *cognitive change*. The elimination of *svabhāva* as a theoretical posit by means of arguments such as those presented above have to be followed by its elimination as an automatic cognitive superimposition by means of specific practices.

But what kind of evidence is there that *svabhāva* constitutes an automatic cognitive superimposition? I agree with Tillemans that for anyone trying to establish this 'the Indian Madhyamaka literature would offer very little evidence, apart from a number of quotations from scriptures and a lot of doctrinal talk about people being ignorant, under the influence of karma, etc.'.[105]

However, it might be possible to adduce some evidence from other sources which make this assumption at least plausible. Buddhist philosophy generally assumes that the superimposition of *svabhāva* applies to two things: to the self and to other phenomena we encounter. This superimposition at least entails conceiving of the self as *unitary* and *permanent*, and also viewing objects as *external* or *observer-independent*, as well as *permanent*. We will

[104] *saṃsārādhvani vartamānānāmavidyāviparyāsānugamānmṛṣārtha eva skandhasamāropaḥ satyataḥ pratibhāsamānaḥ padārthatattvadarśanasamīpasthānāṃ na pratibhāsate* (La Vallée Poussin, 1903–1913, 347:1–3).

[105] Tillemans (2001, 18).

have more to say on the former when considering Nāgārjuna's analysis of the self later on, so let us at the moment just consider our perception of objects. I would like to suggest that there is a cognitive default which a) determines that all things being equal we conceive of a sequence of stimuli as corresponding to a single enduring (though changing) object, rather than to a sequence of different, momentary ones and b) makes it more likely that we assume an external rather than internal objects as the source of the stimulus. Let me call these the *principle of permanence* and the *principle of externality*.

The principle of permanence ensures that we generally conceive of objects as enduring phenomena which may change over time, but still remain fundamentally the same object, rather than as unrelated momentarily arising and ceasing phenomena, each of which lasts only for an instant. It should be noted that this latter way of interpreting the information we get through the senses is not in any way logically deficient, it is just not the way we see the world. There are good reasons why we do not do so, primarily that such a representation is vastly too complex to use in practice. Any mind who lived in such a world of kaleidoscopically flashing phenomena would presumably be at an evolutionary disadvantage when compared to one which represented a world of stable, enduring objects.

The principle of externality makes us assume that the causes the sensory stimuli are indicative of an object lying outside of us, rather than the product of our own perceptive mechanism. We generally assume that our perception is evidence for things lying outside of ourselves and that we do not live in a hallucinatory world of our own devising. Again, such a principle makes evolutionary sense: running away from an imaginary tiger is not as detrimental to our chances of passing on our genes as is declaring a real tiger rushing towards us to be a figment of our imagination.

Whether the principles of permanence and externality really determine our conceptualization of the world is of course an empirical question which can hardly be decided in a philosophical discussion such as this. What we can do, however, is to acquaint the reader with two simple empirical results could serve as evidence something like these two principles might play and important rôle in our cognitive access to the world.

The first is the so-called phi phenomenon which has been known to experimental psychologists for a long time.[106] The subject of the experiment is shown two slides, the first of which contains a dot in the top left-hand corner, the other in the in the bottom right-hand corner. What the subject perceives if these slides are shown in quick succession is not two stationary dots, but

[106]For the earliest description of the phi phenomenon see Wertheimer (1912), further results and interpretations are in Dennett (1991) and Hoffman (1998).

a *single* dot moving diagonally from the top left to the bottom right across the slides. What has happened here is that our brain has interpreted the sequence of two stationary dots as a single moving object which is first seen on the left and then on the right. Rather than interpreting this particular stimulus as one object appearing at one spot and immediately disappearing, which is followed by another object appearing at a different spot the principle of permanence causes us to see the two dots as indications of a single object changing its position in space. When offered the choice of either regarding some sequence of stimuli as corresponding to a series of momentarily arising and ceasing objects, or to an enduring object changing its attributes our brain seems automatically to opt for the latter.[107]

Some evidence for the principle of externality can be drawn from psychological investigation of dreaming, in particular of the phenomenon of lucid dreaming.[108] A lucid dream is a dream in which the dreamer is conscious of dreaming without waking up. Although lucid dreams happen spontaneously to some people there are also a variety of techniques for inducing them.[109] But the fact that some special effort is required to have a lucid dream points to the fact that our natural reaction to perceptions in dreams is to regard them as caused by external objects, rather than by our own mind. So it seems that our view of sensory information both in the waking state and in the dream state is generally determined by the principle of externality: in both cases we regard the source of the information to be something which is both external to us and existing independently of us. It requires a particular cognitive effort to question in a dream whether the things one sees in this dream are indeed caused by external sources, an effort which appears to be essential in inducing lucid dreaming.

If it is plausible to understand the Mādhyamika's notion of superimposition (*samāropa*) of substance-*svabhāva* in terms of certain cognitive defaults (such as the principles of permanence and externality)[110] which govern our representation of the world then it becomes clear why the Mādhyamika draws a sharp line between intellectual understanding and realization. As familiarity with any optical illusion attests, neither merely understanding *that* it

[107]The problem of 'object permanence', i.e. of the question when two distinct perceptions of an object are regarded as being caused by a single thing has been investigated extensively in developmental psychology. See Piaget (1937) and Spelke (1990) for two now classical discussions. An interesting related experiment is described in Subbotskii (1991).

[108]LaBerge et al. (1986).

[109]LaBerge (1991).

[110]Further investigation of our perceptions of the self, of causality, or of mereological relations might provide yet other aspects which cohere with the traditional view of *svabhāva*.

is an illusion, nor even understanding *how* it works, will make the illusion go away. Now if there was a way of training oneself out of perceiving a particular illusion we would have an apt example of the relation between understanding and insight as seen by the Mādhyamika. First of all we have to gain an understanding of how the illusion (in this case the superimposition of substance-*svabhāva*) works, and in a second step we have to follow some training which eventually makes even the appearance of the illusion go away.

But now this point also indicates the limitations of appealing to results from cognitive science for gaining a better understanding of *svabhāva*. Even though such references are useful in giving us an idea of why the Mādhyamika's view of superimposition could be plausible they give us very little insight into how the removal of such superimpositions could be possible and what it would entail. The reason for this is obvious: according to the traditional Buddhist view those who have realized (as opposed to merely understood) the absence of *svabhāva* and thereby emptiness are few and far between. Empirical research into the way such persons perceive the world is therefore naturally difficult. Fortunately this is not a task the present discussion has to achieve. For our purposes it is sufficient to point out that a mere understanding of *svabhāva* as a theoretical posit (arrived at within an ontological or semantic theory) is not sufficient for understanding the central rôle it occupies in Buddhist thought. The notion of *svabhāva* must also be something which plays a much larger part in the mental life of the majority of persons who are after all neither ontologists nor semanticists. The cognitive understanding of *svabhāva* provides us with an interpretation which achieves this.

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Jam dbyangs bshad pa, Ba so chos kyi rgyal mthsan, Ngag dbang rab rtan sDe drug mkan chen, and Bra sti dge shes rin chen don grub. *mNyam med rje btsun tsong kha pa chen pos mdzad pa'i byang chub lam rim chen mo's*

dka' ba'i gnad rnams mchan bu bzhi'i sgo nas legs bar bshad par bshad pa theg chen lam gyi gsal sgron. Chos 'phel legs ldan, New Delhi, 1972.

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