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Acquiring the Notion of a Dependent Designation: A Response to
Douglas L. Berger

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In a recent issue of *Philosophy East and West* Douglas Berger defends a new reading of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV:18, arguing that most contemporary translators mistranslate the important term *prajñaptir upādāya*, misreading it as a compound indicating “dependent designation” or something of the sort, instead of taking it simply to mean “this notion, once acquired.” He attributes this alleged error, pervasive in modern scholarship, to Candrakīrti, who, Berger correctly notes, argues for the interpretation he rejects.

Berger’s analysis, and the reading of the text he suggests is grounded on that analysis, is insightful and fascinating, and certainly generates an understanding of Nāgārjuna’s enterprise that is welcome amid the profusion of such understandings. We have learned much from it. The central argument, nonetheless, is vitiated by two significant fallacies, to which we draw attention, not in order to refute Berger’s reading, but to indicate that the more generally accepted reading should not be discarded on the strength of this argument.

First, in arguing for his new translation of *prajñaptir upādāya*, Berger adduces many other occurrences of the term *prajñapti* in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, occurrences in which it indeed has the ordinary sense of “concept,” or “idea,” “notion.” He argues (pp. 48–49) on this basis that we should not take it to mean any more than this in XXIV:18. Fair enough. But in none of *those* occurrences does *prajñapti* occur in the context of the phrase at issue, namely *prajñaptir upādāya*, and it is this unusual occurrence that concerns us. The lexical argument is thus at least a *non sequitur*.

Furthermore, all canonical Tibetan translations of *prajñaptir upādāya* render it *brten nas gdags pa*, which can only be glossed as a noun derived from two terms connected by an ablative particle, that is, “dependence [abl] designation,” and should be translated as “dependent designation” (or as one of the many rough equivalents chosen by the many Western translators whom Berger criticizes).

Of course, Berger might reply that all of these Tibetan translators, like their Western successors, were in thrall to Candrakīrti. But that would be a desperate argument for at least two reasons. First, at the time of the translation of the text into

Tibetan, Candrakīrti's star had not yet risen to the zenith it would occupy in Tibet, and there is little evidence of his thought having substantial impact in India during this period. Now, to be sure, Tibetan translations circa the ninth century do not by any means clinch the case, but the fact that these translations were all produced by teams of eminent Indian pandits and eminent Tibetan scholars and that they are unanimous should carry some weight.

The second reason takes us to Berger's second fallacy. Berger charges that Candrakīrti is to blame (pp. 51–56). But this can't be right. It is very hard to make sense of Buddhapālita's fifth-century commentary following Berger's interpretation. Indeed Pandeya (2:202) reconstructs Buddhapālita's phrase *brten nas gdags pa as pratītyaveditavyaḥ* ("to be understood as dependent"). Bhāvaviveka also writes before Candrakīrti, and indeed Candrakīrti takes issue with much of Bhāvaviveka's reading of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. But Candrakīrti agrees with Bhāvaviveka about how to read XXIV:18. In *Prajñāpradīpa*, glossing the term in question in the context of the verse in question, he writes: "Here, *brten nas gdags pa*(*prajñaptir upādāya*) means 'mundane and transcendental conventional expressions.' Thus, it means 'designation on the basis of the aggregates' (*brten nas gdags pa ste/ 'jig rten pa dang 'jig rten las 'das pa'i tha snyad 'dod pas nye bas len pa dag la brten nas gdags pa yin no//*)" (230b).

The fact that Candrakīrti and Bhāvaviveka disagree about so much lends force to their agreement on this point. The fact that such great Indian pandits, including both of these figures as well as Buddhapālita, and, as we shall now see, Piṅgala, writing in a cultural milieu so much closer to that of Nāgārjuna than is ours, agree on this reading suggests that we might wisely defer to their understanding of these terms, particularly when taken in the context of both these early Indian Madhyamaka commentaries.

But we can go a bit further, calling on the corroboration by an authoritative Chinese translation by an eminent Indian scholar. In one of the earliest extant commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the *Zhonglun* 中論, translated by Kumārajīva in 409 C.E., Piṅgala (ca. fourth century C.E.) writes on this verse, and in particular on the term *jia ming* 假名 (*prajñaptir upādāya*), treated by Kumārajīva in translation as a single technical term, as follows: "Emptiness, furthermore, is also empty. It is only in order to guide and to instruct sentient beings that he explains this by using a provisional designation" (空亦復空。但為引導眾生故。以假名).¹ So in what is arguably the earliest Madhyamaka commentary, *prajñaptir upādāya* is taken in this sense, and Kumārajīva translates it into Chinese in this sense.

We would also like to point out that according to Berger "Candrakīrti's" reading (which, we argue, is part of the commentarial tradition at least since the fourth century) is not just philologically unsound, but also unsatisfactory from a philosophical perspective. He asserts:

if we adopted Candrakīrti's declaration that language lends us nothing more than conceptual constructions, it would be difficult to understand why such corrections would be required and how they would be distinguished as more true to the way the world works than alternative constructions.

Nāgārjuna for his own part extols the teachings of enlightened beings above precisely because those teachings bestow upon us an understanding of what action does as opposed to what it does not do; otherwise there would be no reason to call the teachings praised by enlightened beings “truth” (*dharma*). (p. 57)

But there are of course many reasons that insights of the Buddhas, Pratyekabuddhas, and Śrāvakas are better than an ordinary person’s construction of the world, and none of these require us to say that their verbal expression is more than conventional dependent designation, and in particular that they accurately represent ultimate reality. Nāgārjuna stresses repeatedly (e.g., in verses 52–56 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*) that Buddhist teachings such as those specifying which things are auspicious (*kuśala*) and which are inauspicious do not have to be understood as accounts “true to the way the world works”; in fact, regarding them as having their nature substantially (*svabhāvatas*) would contradict the Buddha’s own teaching (see Westerhoff 2010). The value of the teaching of enlightened beings can be understood without interpreting them as true in a correspondence-theoretic sense (see also Garfield 2002, p. 3). Some more skillful, more illuminating constructions might just be better in bringing us to see that no construction is ultimately true. That is the nature of *upāya*.

Of course Piṅgala, Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, and Candrakīrti, as well as Kumārajīva and all of the great Indian and Tibetan translators who compiled the Tibetan canon, and all other Western scholars who followed them might be wrong about the meaning of the crucial term *prajñaptir upādāya*, and Berger might be right. But we place our faith here in the tradition.

Note

1 – Taishō T30.33b17–18, trans. P. Gregory (personal communication).

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