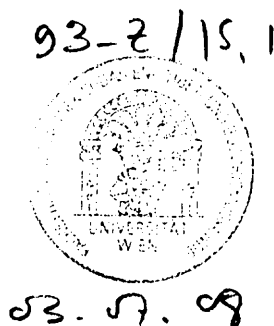


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On Retreating to Method and Other Postmodern Turns: A Response to C. W. Huntington

by José Ignacio Cabezón

C.W. Huntington's response to my review is, like his book, an interesting and provocative piece of scholarship. It raises a number of issues, both practical and theoretical, that are worthy of serious response. It is to further the discussion of the important issues raised in Huntington's essay that I decided to avail myself of the opportunity of responding to him.

Why would someone who repudiates "value-free or objective" truth, who discards the notion of authorial intent, who rejects the possibility of arbitrating between different interpretations of a text (even one's own!), write an essay whose aim is, in large part, to demonstrate that he has been misunderstood? Huntington of course realizes this dilemma and takes great pains to be consistent with his own views on this issue. His approach is ingenious: true to his view that every reading is interpretation, and that competing interpretations can never be arbitrated, he couches his comments in a rhetoric of method. For him what is ultimately at stake cannot be whether his reading of Candrakīrti is right, whether mKhas grub rje's was wrong or whether my reading of both (Huntington and mKhas grub rje) is valid. There is, after all, no objective validity to interpretation, but only variant interpretations. Instead, the fundamental issue becomes one of method. This, at least, is Huntington's own rhetorical strategy, but ultimately of course the very fact that he is responding to my review speaks of a need to defend his own views — his own reading of his book, of Candrakīrti, of mKhas grub rje and of me. At the level of theory Huntington's only possible (*lege* consistent) reply to the challenges I raise in my review of his book is silence, for my review and his own book represent ever irreconcilable interpretations of texts and doctrines. Luckily, his innate philosophical spirit gets the better of him. There is, it seems, something to defend after all!

In what follows I hope to show:

- I. that, despite his rhetoric, Huntington does have a view as regards whose readings are the better ones,
- II. that his ostensible means for demonstrating this are, when he is not retreating to a rhetoric of method, good ones,
- III. that his defense, which involves demonstrating how I have failed to understand his work, ultimately fails, and
- IV. that his theoretical views hamper what is an otherwise noble goal, the attempt to show that he is right.

I

All readings are of course interpretations, as are translations. Only in the case of a calculus-like translation from one language to another, a translation in which a one-to-one isomorphism is artificially created between the source and target languages, can anything like a literal translation ever be effectuated, and even then the choice of equivalents can easily become an object of dispute. Now in natural languages the hope of a literal translation (and by analogy of a single correct reading) of a text becomes even more problematic. On this point Huntington and I are in agreement. For Huntington, however, the value-laden nature of interpretation implies that no two interpretations can ever be arbitrated, that is, that no interpretation can ever be considered better than any other. On this point we differ.

But there are instances in Huntington's response to my review that suggest that Huntington himself is, at best, ambivalent on this question. For example, while eschewing any privileged status concerning the interpretation of what he wrote in his own book, he nonetheless sets out (in section II) to *vindicate* his own interpretation, in the process attempting to argue for the implausibility of my own. Citations from other portions of his work are meant to show a consistency to his views that differs radically from my own reading. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether he is ultimately successful, the fact remains that *in practice* Huntington is engaging in a task that is incompatible with what he is preaching at the level of theory. If the value-laden character of interpretation implies that no interpretation is more plausible than any other, then why argue for one reading of his book (his own) over another (mine)?

Toward the end of section II Huntington's implicit belief in normative standards again rears its head as he attempts to demonstrate that the dGe lugs pa's interpretation of Nāgārjuna is lacking ("... they must still explain *Madhyamakāvatāra* 15.6") and bringing into question my own reading of dGe lugs pa exegesis ("... I find myself in disagreement with Cabezon's interpretation of ... mKhas grub rje"). Toward the end of section III Huntington's innate sense of objectivity is even more prominent, as he is forced "to admit that it seems to me that my book (*Jege* interpretation) has the advantage of being least removed from (*Jege* most proximate/true to) the acknowledged object of our investigation" (my insertions). Finally, toward the end of his essay his denial of objective interpretability and of authorial intent seems to fall by the wayside as he considers Candrakīrti's to be "the final ... transformation of the Master's (Nāgārjuna's) *original impulse*" (my insertion and emphasis). In so far as Mādhyamikas after Candrakīrti "became much less concerned with pragmatics and much more preoccupied with logical and epistemological problems," it seems, they veered from Nāgārjuna's *true* purport. Hence, it seems that at least

one author, Nāgārjuna, had an objective viewpoint; and at least one interpreter, Candrakīrti, managed to get it right.

My point here is not to criticize Huntington for attempting to defend his interpretation (of himself, of Candrakīrti, or of Candrakīrti's reading of Nāgārjuna). As I have already stated, I believe this to be a noble goal. If Huntington is to be taken to task here it is simply for his refusal to acknowledge that goal and the implicit standards he uses in its defense.

II

What are the standards Huntington uses? How is the reader to glean that both Williams and Cabezón have misunderstood Huntington's purport? The technique is of course a common sense one. In his attempt to demonstrate that I have misunderstood him he cites other passages from his work that support his, rather than my own, interpretation of that work. This is, of course, exactly how one should proceed in such a case. One musters up one's exegetical acumen and marshals different passages in defense of the fact that (a) one's work is expressing consistent views on particular issues, (b) that those views have been misrepresented and therefore (c) that the work has been not simply interpreted differently but has actually been *mis*-interpreted. Despite the rhetoric to the contrary, it is clear that Huntington is here engaged in a normative and objective enterprise, that of showing that his interpretation of himself and of Candrakīrti are both *valid* and better than my own. This comes through not only in his language but in the very methods he utilizes to this end.

III

Is mine such a misreading of Huntington, however? Huntington claims, for example, that I have misread him when I ascribe to him the view that what the Mādhyamikas are doing is not philosophy. He corrects me by implying that I have made too much of his reliance on the Rortyan notion of "nonphilosophical." This should not, it seems, be taken literally to imply a repudiation of philosophy. Instead, it should be taken as a repudiation of philosophy as it has heretofore been done, that is, as a critique of "metaphysical speculation" and "systematic philosophical explanations." Mādhyamikas, he says, *do not* engage in *this* type of philosophy, but they *do* engage in what he (following Rorty) calls "edifying philosophy," a kind of philosophy that is "pragmatic," and aimed at the transformation of individuals through the destruction of "the conceptual systems presented by others."

My point, however, was precisely to suggest that in mKhas grub rje's view Mādhyamikas *do* engage in "systematic philosophical explanations," that they *do* have a notion of objective truth, and that they are therefore philosophers in

the classical mode, who, far from “making anti-philosophical points in nonphilosophical language” (*Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 10), are committed to the defense of highly speculative philosophical views in highly technical philosophical language. Are the Mādhyamikas then not “edifying philosophers”? To the extent that the end goal of their philosophical enterprise is soteriological, they are certainly this, but then so are all Buddhist (and, with the exception of the Cārvākas perhaps, all Indian) philosophers. The point is not that I hold, as Huntington suggests, that “philosophy devoid of either epistemology or syllogistic reasoning is not philosophy,” but that mKhas grub rje holds that Madhyamaka philosophy *has* epistemological implications, *does* use syllogistic reasoning and *does* subscribe to objective, rationally defensible truths. Huntington has missed the point when he ascribes to *me* the view that philosophy is “something more akin to therapy of the Wittgensteinian kind.” On the contrary, when I make this statement in my review (p. 159) I am ascribing this view to Huntington himself. There my point is that for mKhas grub rje the Madhyamaka is more than mere therapy, for it makes objective claims and therefore has philosophical content, “philosophical” in the “old” (anti-Rortyan) sense of the word. For mKhas grub rje the Madhyamaka is a better and truer system of thought not because it represents a “restructuring of philosophy,” as Huntington calls it, but rather because it engages in “old-time philosophy” in a better and more sophisticated way. Specifically, the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka represents the highest philosophical view because it sets forth the *only unequivocally true and complete theory of the nature of reality*.

I do indeed claim in my review that Huntington’s interpretation of Candrakīrti dispenses with the need for “rational and systematic justification of the philosophical truth of ... emptiness,” and I glean this from Huntington’s claim (cited in my review, p. 154) that:

... according to the Mādhyamika, concepts of logic as well as practical concepts dealing with empirical phenomena like causation, are all grounded in a particular way of life which is itself groundless. Everyday experience is empty of a fixed substratum for the justification of any type of knowledge or belief, and precisely this lack of justification — this being empty even of “emptiness” — is itself the truth of the highest meaning.

But Huntington insists that again I have misread him, quoting a passage in the *Emptiness of Emptiness* (p. 139) where he states that the Madhyamaka “seeks neither to deny nor otherwise to denigrate all of the evidence that can and must be accepted by the canons of reason.” But that he states *elsewhere* that the Mādhyamikas do not reject the evidence implied by the “canons of reason” does not of course vitiate against the fact that the lengthy passage cited above suggests that neither logic nor experience can justify beliefs, religious or otherwise. Moreover, to say that the Mādhyamikas do not repudiate the things that reasoning

proves is not equivalent to saying that the Mādhyamikas are actively committed to the use of reasoning, that is, logic and experience, to justify their religious claims. It is exactly this latter point that seems to be repudiated by Huntington in the above citation, and it is exactly this point that is very forcefully asserted by mKhas grub rje and his spiritual heirs.

Now when I bring up mKhas grub rje's suggestion that "the belief in no-beliefs is itself a belief" I do not mean to imply that Huntington is unaware of this problem, but simply that he fails to resolve it. Nor does appeal to Rorty, as Huntington suggests, help in this case, for Rorty defends the cogency of Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's "non-views" by resorting to a non-referential view of language (see *Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 135), which is not possible for a Mādhyamika, the latter being a point for which both Williams and I have argued elsewhere. It is at this point that Huntington engages mKhas grub rje for the first time, implying as he does that mKhas grub rje would have to be at best naive and at worst sophistic in urging the fault of contradiction on those who hold to a literal "no-view" viewpoint. It is not that the Mādhyamikas holds no views, says Huntington, but that they hold no "value-free, objective view of truth or reality." It is not that they hold no views, but that they hold no views "that demand any ahistorical, *a priori* justification," for their views are "anchored only in ... a particular way of life," where "particular way of life" seems to be Huntington's gloss of 'jig rten pa'i tha snyad (which I prefer to translate "worldly convention"). Now Huntington's choice of the word "particular" (which has no foundation in either the Sanskrit or the Tibetan) is telling. It seems that, as with interpretation, there is no such thing as objective conventional truth. Instead there are only mutually incommensurable realities, each grounded in particular ways of life (cultures, languages, morals, tastes, one assumes).

This line of argument requires careful scrutiny. Leaving aside the question of whether or not Huntington's qualification of his "no-view" standpoint is an afterthought, it should be pointed out, in defense of mKhas grub rje, that there seem to have existed Tibetan Mādhyamikas who *do* uphold the "no-view" doctrine of the Madhyamaka literally. These were not straw men against which mKhas grub rje was arguing. Be that as it may, is Huntington's (re?)formulation of the "no-views" doctrine any better off than the naive, that is, literal, one? In his view it is precisely because the Madhyamaka view is grounded in 'jig rten pa'i tha snyad (what he calls "a particular way of life" and what I call "worldly conventions") that there is no appeal to an ahistorical and *a priori* grounding, and it is because of *this* that the Madhyamaka has no value free, objective view. Now, as I stated in my review, for mKhas grub rje the Madhyamaka view (in fact, all true philosophy) is grounded in the conventional valid cognitions of the world ('jig rten pa'i tha snyad pa'i tshad ma). But this has nothing to do with a particular way of life, can at times be *a priori*, and most definitely leads to objective truths. Now Huntington (*Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 136) implies that the Madhyamaka's

rejection of all views cannot be understood in the “anachronistic context of a logical or epistemological problematic” (*Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 136). Is it therefore that surprising that I should have offered the dGe lugs pa view as counterpoint — a view that claims that all truth (Madhyamaka or otherwise) can *only* be understood in the context of logic and epistemology?

Huntington suggests that on p. 158 of my review I am ascribing to him the fourth position of the *catuṣkoṭi*. This is not the case. What I *do* state is that Huntington at times seems to subscribe to the fourth of the four views I had listed previous to that, namely the claim that the Mādhyamikas negate the existence of all phenomena, and that he does this “by taking the *catuṣkoṭi* at face value, i.e., literally.” Now my goal here was simply to point out yet another instance in which Huntington’s reading of Candrakīrti differs from the dGe lugs pa one. It is here that Huntington confronts the dGe lugs pas for the second time, by suggesting that in maintaining this nonliteral view of the *catuṣkoṭi* they go counter to *Madhyamakaśāstra* 15.6. This, it seems to me, is the kind of response worth making. It takes a variant reading of the Madhyamaka (the dGe lugs pa reading) seriously and attempts to answer it on its own terms, not by retreating to questions of method. Unfortunately, this former kind of response, one that takes seriously the challenge of dGe lugs pa exegesis, occurs only in two instances in Huntington’s response to my review. Instead, the bulk of his essay is aimed at uncovering faulty methodological presuppositions (what Huntington calls “meta-confusions”) which allegedly undergird both Williams’ review and my own, as if turning to the secondary discourse of theory somehow constituted an answer to the kinds of problems that both Williams and mKhas grub rje, through me, bring up.

To conclude this section, I stand by my assertion that to make of the Madhyamaka the sole “edifying philosophical” school of Buddhist thought, and to pit this school against “an abstract, academic philosophy that had become divorced from the tradition of practical application” (*Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 17), a philosophy whose sole aim was to “search for more and more precise technical terminology,” is to unfairly characterize the Mādhyamikas’ opponents. As mentioned previously, Buddhist philosophical schools cannot be distinguished from each other as regards their pragmatic aims, for they all have soteriological motivations. Instead, they differ as regards their basic philosophical tenets, that is, what they hold as objective truths. The conundrum for Huntington, of course, is that in his interpretation Mādhyamikas *have* no such tenets.

The preceding has been my attempt to defend (a) my reading of the *Emptiness of Emptiness* and (b) my suggestion that mKhas grub rje’s views represent a significant challenge to that work. Whose reading of Huntington and of dGe lugs pa exegesis comes closer to the now infamous “mark” will of course be up to the reader to determine. That there *is* such a mark to be haggled over

— if only figuratively, in the sense that some interpretations are more adequate than others — is evidenced most clearly, perhaps, by the very existence of the exchange you have before you.

IV

I have argued that Huntington's response to my review represents a retreat to method, a turning to meta-questions of theory and away from the primary questions concerning the meaning of Candrakīrti's text. Such a strategy may not adequately respond to the types of challenges raised by the dGe lugs pa interpretation of the Madhyamaka, but it does bring up interesting questions in its own right, and it is to these that I now turn.

Underlying much of Huntington's argument is the premise that the existence of disparate interpretations is evidence for hermeneutical relativism: the view that, since there is no arbitering between competing interpretations, there are no criteria on which to judge whose interpretation of a text is better. His argument runs something like this: (a) Huntington has one reading of Huntington and of the mKhas grub rje, and Cabezón has another; (b) hence, there is no best reading, only alternative ones. Now clearly (b) does not follow from (a). The very existence of disparate readings in no way implies that those readings are equally valid; and I have shown above how, in practice if not in theory, this is something to which even Huntington subscribes. What is more, one does not defend one's reading of a text by saying, "Look, there are other readings, and therefore mine is as valid as any other." One defends one's interpretation through the methods I described in section II above. No one would argue that there are, and have been, different readings of Candrakīrti, or of the dGe lugs pas, for that matter. But when one's reading of Candrakīrti is challenged by another (in this case, I suggest, by mKhas grub rje's) it does not suffice to say simply, "Mine is a different reading of Candrakīrti," or to say "Mine is a different reading of the challenger (mKhas grub rje)." It is necessary to show how one's reading of Candrakīrti or of mKhas grub rje is born out by the texts themselves. It is necessary to defend one's reading by demonstrating how one's own interpretation fits the textual facts better than that of the challenger. This cannot be accomplished from on high, from the realm of method; it requires getting one's exegetical hands dirty in the world of texts, and this Huntington has failed to do, at least as regards the challenges that I think mKhas grub rje poses to him.

As an aside, it is interesting that much of E. D. Hirsch's critique of Derrida has focussed on this very issue: what I am calling hermeneutical relativism, and what others have called subjectivism. In his *American Religious Empiricism*, William Dean paraphrases Hirsch's criticism as follows. He says that if Derrida is right, and "the objective meaning of a text is gone, the text is meaningless — or, to say the same thing, the meaning of the text is simply invented in the

subjectivity of the reader.”¹ It should be obvious that Huntington sides with Derrida on this issue, and I with Hirsch, and that the debate is by no means a new one.

Let me make something clear at this point. I am not objecting here to Huntington’s attempt to make Candrakīrti relevant to the modern Western philosophical mind, an enterprise that we might call Buddhist apologetics. To develop a “persuasive philosophical interpretation of Nāgārjuna and the other early Indian Mādhyamikas, one that we might have the courage, finally, to call *our own*” is indeed a worthy goal, one that takes seriously these thinkers’ claims to universalistic and transhistorical validity. It is about time that we as Buddhologists dispelled the myth that good scholarship in Buddhist Studies requires a neutral and dispassionate, attitude toward our subject matter, a view that has long been dispensed with in other sectors of the academy. I also have no objections to the use of Western or other philosophical traditions to elucidate the meaning and implications of Buddhist doctrine. This is, it seems to me, the great virtue of the comparative approach to knowledge. However, when one has imposed upon oneself the limits of working within the confines of a tradition, say Candrakīrti’s, it is incumbent upon one to demonstrate that one is being true to that tradition. This requires not only that one contextualize one’s reading in its historical milieu by examining Candrakīrti’s sources, which Huntington does, but also that one give heed to the later voices of the tradition and to the challenges which they raise. The philosopher’s and apologist’s task is different from that of the philologist, for whom the task can viably terminate at the text itself.

Now Huntington claims that he has consciously chosen to avoid “meta-confusions” (a skeptic might say “challenges”) by ignoring “later Tibetan exegesis.” But why restrict oneself in this way? If Wittgenstein and Rorty can be of use in the task of developing a version of the Madhyamaka that is of relevance to the modern Western mind, might not later Indian and Tibetan scholarship? Huntington suggests a reason for avoiding Tibetan scholarship as a source later in his essay. The Tibetan tradition, by virtue of having “no concept of history that accords with our own,”² employs different (and implicitly inferior) standards of interpretation. Reading the Indian sources through the filter of the *siddhānta* schema,³ a doxographical system “imported into Tibet along with the canonical literature,” Tibetan exegesis presents the Indian tradition as “monolithic,” and is incapable of the subtleties of “our own peculiarly modern concept of historiography.”

Now the extent to which the *siddhānta* schema was imported into Tibet is not at all clear. Certainly, categories such as “Cittamātra” and “Madhyamaka” were known in India, but Mimaki and others have shown that the finer distinctions of *siddhānta* classification, the Prāsaṅgika/Svātantrika distinction, for example, were Tibetan innovations. Huntington himself is quite willing to utilize such innovations where it suits him (e.g., *Emptiness of Emptiness*, p. 34), which makes his rejection of Tibetan exegetical categories disingenuous. None-

theless, I am not unsympathetic to the problems of using Tibetan exegetical materials to interpret Indian texts. Still, it seems to me unfair to characterize Tibetan *siddhānta* as presenting the Indian tradition monolithically. That the Tibetans were ingenious enough to create categories of use even to the historiographically superior modern (e.g., the Prāsaṅgika/Svātantrika distinction) should be evidence enough of the nuanced (non-monolithic) nature of their doxography. What is more, Huntington's very claim of eschewing reliance on the later Tibetan tradition is problematic for another reason. By relying on the expertise of a learned Tibetan scholar, Huntington's reading of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* is *de facto* a reading that has been influenced by Tibetan exegesis. This is so, it seems to me, whether or not his guide in this endeavor ever represented his views as dGe lugs pa views. My experience has been that when Tibetan scholars teach a text like the *Madhyamakāvatāra* they do not go out of their way to "let one in on" the fact that they are passing on their tradition. They take this for granted, as should the student.

Let me conclude this essay with a response to what is most disturbing to Huntington, the charge that by pitting mKhas grub rje's interpretation against his own I, as critic, have somehow slipped into the background. Now I, as a student of Candrakīrti in my own right, could have taken another tack in my review. I could have, for example, offered my own alternative interpretation of Candrakīrti, an interpretation born from my own apologetic reflection on the meaning of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*. I chose not to do this, however, because, quite frankly, even after fifteen years of studying the text, I do not yet find myself in the position of being able to enunciate a consistent formulation of Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka that is sufficiently true to the tradition to call Buddhist and sufficiently relevant to the modern mind to be worth enunciating. In this regard I admire Huntington's approach. Whether or not it is valid, it is at the very least intelligent and courageous.

Why then impose mKhas grub rje as Huntington's interlocutor? The reasons seem obvious. First of all, Huntington invites a dGe lugs pa response not so much because he acknowledges dGe lugs pa connections as because he does not eschew them. Given the fact that he studied under an eminent dGe lugs pa scholar, it would seem incumbent upon him to mention, if only in passing, that his reading of Candrakīrti is radically different from his teacher's. This he does not do. Secondly, mKhas grub rje is an *interesting* interlocutor for Huntington. The issues that emerge by pitting the two against each other, as I stated in my review, are some of the most fascinating in the history of Madhyamaka exegesis. Am I making the claim then that mKhas grub rje's is *the correct* interpretation of Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka? Not at all. Nevertheless, mKhas grub rje raises objections to Huntington's reading that are deserving of response. Unfortunately, by enveloping his response in a rhetoric of theory, Huntington evades ever truly engaging mKhas grub rje, a loss to us all.

Finally, does mKhas grub rje's represent *the traditional* dGe lugs pa reading of Candrakīrti? On the points that I chose to emphasize in my review I believe that he does. Now I could be proven wrong. For example, Huntington could find passages in Tsong kha pa or in later dGe lugs pa exegesis that disagree with mKhas grub rje's reading. *This*, it seems to me, is the way to proceed if aspersions are to be cast upon my claim that mKhas grub rje is representative of dGe lugs pa exegesis on these issues. Likewise, if Huntington would challenge my reading of mKhas grub rje, he must immerse himself in mKhas grub rje's writings, and show textually how I have failed in my interpretation of him.

Despite a rhetoric that casts me as a wizard behind the scenes, I never claim, nor do I believe myself, to have "direct and unfailing access to an authorized — *the* authorized — dGe lugs pa reading of the Mādhyamika" or to "esoteric knowledge" of the tradition. That mine is one interpretation of mKhas grub rje seems so trivial as to almost be banal. For the record, let me repeat that mine is but *one*, possibly fallible, interpretation of mKhas grub rje. Do I believe it to be vested with authority gained through some sort of esoteric transmission or "*a priori* privilege"? I find it inconceivable that anyone could ever have read such a thing into my words. Is my interpretation a "traditional" one? To the extent that it is consistent with the oral and written texts of the dGe lugs pa tradition, at least those I have read, I would say fairly so. Do I believe it to be a valid one? Yes. Might I be wrong? Yes, but to demonstrate that will require working as I did, not in the ether of theory, but in the nitty gritty of texts. Methodological concerns may no longer be, as Huntington says, "peripheral to our common search for philosophical meaning in Buddhist literature," but they will also never be substitutes for it.

NOTES

1. William Dean, *American Religious Empiricism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 46.

2. I have argued, in a recent essay, that the Indian and Tibetan rejection of history, far from being an artifact of its being a "traditional civilization," represents a self-conscious and philosophically rigorous attempt to posit rationality as the overriding hermeneutical principle. See my "Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* on the Authenticity of the Mahāyāna Sūtras," in J. Timm, ed., *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

3. On this, see my "The Canonization of Philosophy and the Rhetoric of *Siddhānta* in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism," in J. Keenan and P. J. Griffiths, eds., *Buddha Nature* (Reno: Buddhist Books International, 1990).