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The Fist Is Indistinguishable from Five Clenched Fingers: Mereological Anti-Realism in Sinitic Madhyamaka Buddhism

Ernest Billings Brewster

Institute for the Intellectual and Cultural History of Asia (IKGA), Austrian Academy of Sciences,
1010 Vienna, Austria; ernestbrewster@gmail.com

Abstract

Mereological anti-realism denies the intrinsic reality of both composite wholes and their constituent parts. This paper analyzes the mereological anti-realist argumentation developed by the Sino-Parthian scholar-monk Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE) targeting the mereological realist doctrine of the Brāhmaṇical Vaiśeṣika tradition in his understudied *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise* (*Zhongguan lun shu* 中觀論疏) and *Exegesis on the Hundred Verse Treatise* (*Bailun shu* 百論疏). By counterbalancing Jizang's critiques with the Vaiśeṣika mereological realist doctrine on its own terms, this paper critically assesses the viability and coherence of Jizang's arguments that there are no entities that instantiate mereological relations or properties. An examination of Jizang's critique of Vaiśeṣika mereological realism brings to light how the Madhyamaka Buddhist doctrine avoids metaphysical nihilism in accounting for how both wholes and parts can possess causal efficacy without being attributed intrinsic reality in and of themselves.

Keywords: mereological realism/anti-realism; substance realism; mereological nihilism; Madhyamaka Buddhism; Vaiśeṣika; Jizang (549–623 CE)

1. Introduction

Do composites made up of multiple parts have an identity which is distinct from that of their parts in relation? Or, are composites nothing more than assemblages of parts? Take, for instance, a small red rubber ball. If, as a composite made up of bits of rubber that have been dyed red and shaped into a sphere, the ball has properties which are distinct from those of these parts, then these properties cannot include being red, being spherical, nor being elastic. The Aristotelian doctrine, deeply formative to the historical development of Western philosophy, maintaining the independence of substances as bearers of properties with identities that are distinct from those of their properties¹ faces the thorny problem of how to account for the existence of bare substrata—i.e., intangible substances lacking any distinguishing properties.²

Any theory postulating composites as forms of substance whose existence cannot be reduced to that of their parts in relation must wrestle with the problem of how to individuate composite substances when their identity is considered to be separate and distinct from the properties exhibited by the collection of their parts.

The question of whether composites are distinct from, or identical with, their parts in relation is not only a transhistorical philosophical problem continuously debated throughout the history of Western philosophy, but also a perennial topic of dispute between Buddhists and their Brāhmaṇical interlocutors in the classical South Asian context.³



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Since the inception of the Buddhist tradition in ancient South Asia, Buddhist thinkers have formulated their doctrines in constant opposition to the exponents of Brāhmaṇical traditions, their primary religious competitors and most prominent critics. In the context of Sui-dynasty China, the Sino-Parthian scholar-monk Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE) contributed to the venerable Buddhist tradition of anti-Brāhmaṇical polemics. His engagement with the long-simmering Buddho-Brāhmaṇical debate about the existence of composites as distinct from, or identical with, the aggregate of their parts is fundamentally motivated by his doctrinal commitments to core Mahāyāna Buddhist tenets. Jizang's foray into the broader Buddho-Brāhmaṇical debate concerning the intrinsic reality/unreality of composite wholes stands out within the context of Chinese Buddhist philosophy in that it pits the mereological anti-realist doctrine found within the Madhyamaka tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism against a mereological realist opponent representing the Brāhmaṇical Vaiśeṣika tradition.⁴

The anti-realist position staked out by Jizang in the course of his disputes with the Vaiśeṣika theorists is distinct from the mainstream Buddhist doctrine, typically characterized as either “mereological reductionism” or “mereological nihilism,” which denies the intrinsic reality of composite wholes but affirms the intrinsic reality of their ultimate parts.⁵

The systematic inquiry into the nature and existence of wholes advanced by Mādhyamikas in both South and East Asia does not rely on the realist doctrinal premise—upheld by the earlier Abhidharma traditions of mainstream Buddhism—which postulates the fundamental reality of the mereological simples upon which wholes are conceptually constructed. Rather, Mādhyamikas such as Jizang can account for the causal efficacy of both wholes and parts without attributing to them an ultimately real nature that is the way it is, no matter what. For Jizang, both composites and the parts which constitute them are mere “convenient designators” (*prajñapti*; *jiaming* 假名) whose “conventional existence” (*saṃvṛtisat*; *shisu you* 世俗有) depends upon the interests and cognitive limitations of the human beings who find them to be useful in navigating the world. Jizang argues that composites are constructed by the mind, which bundles together various properties and labels their collection as a single thing. The properties that are clustered together are ultimately not “parts” of any overarching and singular thing. The version of mereological anti-realism advanced by Jizang maintains that both wholes and parts are simply convenient labels that do not designate anything with intrinsic reality in and of itself.⁶

However, while denying that either composites or their constituent parts possess an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*; *zixing* 自性) that is independent of the process of conceptual construction, Jizang avoids metaphysical nihilism by affirming that both wholes and parts are conventionally real in that they can fulfill causal functions in the world.⁷

Like modern mereological anti-realists, Jizang argues for the incoherence of the idea of composites as substrata in which properties reside. However, he goes further to reject the notion common to both mereological reductionists and nihilists that there exist ontological simples exemplifying the mereological relation of improper parthood—the relation that every mereological simple bears to itself. By denying the existence of any mereological relations, including both proper and improper parthood, contemporary mereological anti-realists rule out the existence of substances as bare particulars—i.e., things which may possess properties, but whose essential being does not itself involve any properties.⁸

Even for scholars not particularly well-versed in the Buddhist philosophical traditions, Jizang's anti-realist arguments against the intrinsic reality of composites have relevance in that they offer a coherent account of the nature and existence of composites without recourse to bare substrata as the underlying bearers of properties who exist independently of any distinguishing properties. This account is broadly anti-substantialist in character in that it rejects the notion of an empirically inaccessible property-possessor

and claims that composites are clusters of empirically evident properties supporting various causal capabilities.

In contrast to the mereological anti-realist stance upheld by Jizang, the version of mereological realism articulated by the Vaiśeṣika theorists is undergirded by two major planks: first, their postulate that “particularity” (*viśeṣa*; *biexiang* 別相)⁹ and “distinctness” (*prthakva*; *yixiang* 異相)¹⁰ are intrinsic features of a composite whole (*avayavin*; *youfen* 有分)¹¹ *simpliciter*; and second, their theory of inherence (*samavāya*; *he* 合). One aspect of the Vaiśeṣika doctrine of substance realism is that composite wholes are complex forms of substance (*dravya*; *tuoluobiao* 陀羅驛) which are individuated by particularity and the intrinsic property of distinctness from both their parts (*avayava*; *fen* 分) in relation and from all other substances populating the universe.¹² The Vaiśeṣika theory of inherence maintains that wholes inhere in each of their ultimate parts, while remaining quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from the sum of these parts. Based upon these two core doctrines, the Vaiśeṣikas contend that not only do wholes have intrinsic reality over and above their parts in relation, but also that each part supporting the existence of the distinct whole is also intrinsically real.

In his arguments against the Vaiśeṣika mereological realist, Jizang rules out the notion that either composites, or mereological simples, instantiate mereological properties or relations, including those of wholeness or proper/improper parthood. His critiques of the Vaiśeṣika realist doctrinal stance establish what is a crucial plank undergirding his global anti-realist philosophical position: anything that can be analytically broken down into more minute components is not ultimately real. By banishing the mereological realist view that composites are more than just arrangements of parts, because they possess an intrinsic nature making them substantially real and uniquely independent entities, Jizang validates the Buddhist doctrine that composites are merely aggregates of parts.¹³

2. Jizang Against the Vaiśeṣika Postulate That Composite Wholes Are Individuated by Particularity

Throughout the penetrating critique of the Vaiśeṣika doctrine developed in his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise* (*Zhongguan lun shu* 中觀論疏) and his *Exegesis on the Hundred Verse Treatise* (*Bailun shu* 百論疏),¹⁴ Jizang contends that any mereological realist account of wholes as both quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from their parts in relation faces insurmountable difficulties. Jizang’s extensive *reductio* argument aims to refute the notion that there is composition of intrinsically real wholes from parts by demonstrating that the posit of wholes as distinct from their parts in relation leads to a number of undesirable consequences.

In these arguments, Jizang singles out for withering critique the mereological realist opponent’s posit of particularity as an essential feature of composites, on the basis of which they are both differentiated from collections made up of parts and also from all other composites existing throughout the universe. The *Vaiśeṣikasūtras* (VŚs) postulate the ontological category of particularity in order to account for the unique identity of each substance as both numerically and qualitatively distinct from all other composites in the universe.¹⁵

According to Vaiśeṣika doctrine, each physical composite in the universe—such as fists, pitchers, and trees—is a unique individual due to each of the many atoms composing it being inhered in by its own distinct particularity.¹⁶

Vaiśeṣika mereological realists point to the presence of particularity as distinguishing composite substances from mere aggregations of parts. According to Vaiśeṣika doctrinal understanding, only composite substances, and not collections (*pracaya*), exhibit a cohesive unity or “oneness” (*ekatva*) due to the connection and integration of their parts being supported by a single substratum (*āśraya*).¹⁷

By contrast to compound substances (*avayavidravaya*), collections are combinations of originally separate items which have become loosely conglomerated together (perhaps through mere proximity) and lack any essential principle of unity as a function of possessing the quality of oneness.¹⁸

By contrast to the Vaiśeṣika theorists, who postulate that the distinctness of a composite substance is due to the specific relationship between it and its parts and not contingent upon the existence of anything else, Jizang contends that particularity cannot be a self-contained and self-differentiating feature of composites. Jizang's argumentation targets the Vaiśeṣika account of particularity as an intrinsic feature of all composites differentiating them from other composites, as well as from the parts that constitute them, in making the case that the distinctness of composites is dependent upon the existence of other entities. He reasons that because distinctness is a relational property, and not an intrinsic one, it cannot be taken as a characteristic feature of something's ultimate reality. For Jizang, ultimately real things should ostensibly have a nature which does not depend upon anything else. Something with an ultimately real nature would be distinct from all other things by virtue of its intrinsic properties—i.e., the properties that it would possess even if it were the only thing existing in the universe [18] (p. 151).

In his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, Jizang identifies the aspect of the particularity of things with their “distinctness” and argues that distinctness cannot be an intrinsic property of things, whether those things are composites constituted in parts or the parts themselves.¹⁹ Jizang adduces the example of five fingers of varying length on one hand in order to demonstrate that the distinctness of something, such as its lengthiness or shortness, always involves reference to the other, that from which it is differentiated:

今明異相從異法生，異相是因緣義。如指長短要從長短指生。是故異相，即是因緣。²⁰

We now explain that the distinctness [of something] derives from things from which it is distinct, thus distinctness is conditional. We liken it to how the lengthiness or shortness of a finger necessarily derives from being longer or shorter [than other fingers]. Therefore, distinctness is conditional.

Jizang cites his interlocutor as pointing to the lengthiness or shortness of each of the five fingers clenched into a fist as the basis upon which to distinguish them as each distinct from each other, and distinct from the fist of which they each are a part.²¹ However, Jizang argues that this strategy is defective as long as the opponent is taking distinctness as an intrinsic property belonging to distinct things, since he considers lengthiness or shortness to be properties which depend upon, and are relative to, other things. Here, Jizang hews to the premise, shared by his realist opponent, that any property that depends upon the causes and conditions supplied by other things in order to come to be cannot be something's intrinsic property.²² Jizang's argument against “distinctness” as an intrinsic property of composite wholes, such as the fist, identifies an inconsistency in the opponent's position: if the distinctness of the parts of the hand, both from the fist which unifies them and from each other, depends upon the observation of difference in their relative sizes or spatial magnitude, then one's claim that distinctness is an inherent and distinguishing attribute of distinct items is undermined. Jizang's reasoning here relies upon a disanalogy between the attributes of lengthiness and shortness and distinctness, the former being properties which are essentially correlative, and the latter postulated as an intrinsic property of physical bodies that does not depend upon the properties of other things.

3. “Distinctness” (*Prthaktva*) Is Not a Distinct Property of Discrete Things

Jizang’s rebuttal of the Vaiśeṣika realists who posit the presence of particularity and distinctness as intrinsic features of things—both mereologically complex and mereologically simple—relies on the premise that whatever is causally produced by or ontologically dependent upon other things cannot be an intrinsic feature of something. If the property of distinctness which the opponent believes to distinguish something as distinct depends upon the existence of other things from which it is differentiated, then distinctness cannot be an intrinsic characteristic of things. Jizang maintains that this line of argument thoroughly dispels the notion that composites have intrinsic natures of their own, since it leads to the logical conclusion that nothing is essentially distinct from anything else, including composites from their constituent parts and causal results from their causes.

Jizang articulates this line of argument in the form of a dilemma meant to force his mereological realist opponent into a logical impasse. Here, he poses two logical options: either distinctness is a unique feature of a particular composite, different from that of other composites from which they are distinct, or distinctness is not a unique feature of a composite different from that of other composites. He writes in his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*:

又問:汝異為異異? 為異不異? 若異異者, 異已是異, 何須異耶? 若異不異者, 則無復不異. 云何得有異?²³

Again, we pose the question: Is the distinctness you posit [as intrinsic to a distinct thing] distinct from that of other distinct things? Or is it not distinct from that of other distinct things? If [something’s] distinctness is distinct [from that of other distinct things], then its distinctness is already distinct, and what use is [positing] distinctness [as a separately existing feature of things]? If [something’s] distinctness is not distinct [from that of other distinct things], there is nothing from which it is furthermore nondistinct, and how could there be any distinctness?

Jizang attempts to exclude the only two accounts available to the mereological realist who posits that composite wholes are concrete particulars with unique identities. In short, either a particular composite is distinguished by its own self-standing distinctness; or, a particular composite can only be individuated if there are already other distinct composites to differentiate it from.

Jizang reasons that if the former is the case then a distinct composite is *already* distinct in its essential being, even if it were the only thing existing in the universe. If something is distinct in its core nature, an additional property of distinctness would be an utterly useless posit. Jizang concludes that distinctness as a separately existing and inherent attribute of all composites, required to differentiate something from all other things, would serve no explanatory role.

However, if the latter is the case, and a particular composite’s distinctness is not discernable in the absence of other composites to set it against, then it is logically incoherent to call that thing either something distinct or nondistinct from other things. It could not be something distinct, since it would possess no inherent distinctness differentiating it from other things. However, neither would it be possible to call that composite nondistinct if this nondistinctness were not a unique property distinguishing its relation to itself from its relation to other composites from which it is distinct. Without any distinctness rendering it numerically and qualitatively different from other composites, there would be no basis for distinguishing a particular composite from other things in being uniquely identical with itself and not identical with other composites from which it is distinct.

Jizang concludes that the mereological realist is thus caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, pointing to an intrinsic distinctness or particularity as what

differentiates between discrete composites begs the question: it attempts to individuate things *already* assumed to be unique individuals, independently of whatever else exists in the universe. On the other hand, without being able to identify composites as discrete items based on some inherently distinct feature, there would be nothing to distinguish them from either the collection of their parts or from any other composite thing.

4. Is the Distinctness of Composites Independent or Derived from the Distinctness of Their Parts?

As we have seen in the previous subsection, Jizang disputes the conception of distinctness as an inherent property of composites, in order to undermine the mereological realist opponent's entire postulate of substantial composites as distinct from their parts in relation. In his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, Jizang points to the example of the eye, a macrophysical complex, in order to press a further challenge to his realist adversary who posits the real existence of composites in the form of a dilemma: if a macrophysical complex—such as an eye—is a distinct entity existing over and above its parts, then is (1) its distinctness as a composite an intrinsic property independent from the properties of its parts, or is (2) its distinctness a property derived from, and thus causally or ontologically dependent upon, its parts? Jizang initially attacks the realist account associated with the first alternative:

若眼自以眼為體, 不以色為體, 則異自以異為體. 不以色為體.²⁴

If the eye has intrinsic reality in and of itself, its intrinsic reality is not that of its constituent matter (*rūpa*),²⁵ since whatever is distinct from [the eye] has its own distinct intrinsic reality. [Therefore, the intrinsic reality of the eye] is not that of its constituent matter.

Jizang formulates a *reductio* argument involving either of two logical possibilities, both of which create difficulties for the mereological realist opponent. Jizang reasons that either the eye as a composite is distinct from the collection of its parts, such as the iris and retina, by virtue of possessing its own intrinsic characteristic of distinctness, independently of the distinctness of each of its parts; or, the eye is distinct from the sum of its parts due to the distinctive configuration of these various parts all coming together.

Jizang reasons that if one follows the account embedded in the first alternative, the unwarranted consequence follows that the distinctness of the eye or the fist as macrophysical complexes is separate from that of the physical matter (*rūpa*; *se*色) which constitutes them. If this is the case, and the distinctness of eyes or fists as composite wholes is separate from that of each of their appropriately arranged parts, then the absurd consequence follows that one's own eye and fist would be as separate from their own parts as they are from completely disconnected things, such as a pillar or a pitcher residing in someone else's dwelling.²⁶

Jizang proceeds to rule out the account associated with the second of the two available alternatives entailed by the postulate of the distinctness of composites from their component parts. This second account maintains that the intrinsic reality of composites over and above their parts derives from their parts but is not reducible to them. Jizang reasons that, according to this account, composites only have intrinsic reality if their parts have their own intrinsic reality, since the distinct existence of composites is based upon the distinct existence of their parts. Jizang further drills down on what, exactly, the intrinsic reality of these parts consists of:

又色有體可名異. 色竟無體, 云何有異? 又異指色為體. 色復以誰為體?

Again, [if] the constituent matter [of the fist] has intrinsic reality, then it is definitely “distinct” [from it], since [inasmuch as] this constituent matter ultimately lacks intrinsic reality, how can it be something distinct? Again, [if] the intrinsic

reality [of the fist] is that of the constituent matter of the distinct fingers, what, furthermore, is the intrinsic reality of this constituent matter?

體復有體即無窮。無窮則無體。²⁷

If the intrinsic reality of [the constituent matter of each finger] further possesses [its own] intrinsic reality, then there is an infinite regress. If there is an infinite regress, then neither [fist nor fingers] has intrinsic reality [since the intrinsic reality of the constituent matter of each distinct finger can endlessly be broken down without reaching anything indivisible and fundamentally real].

Jizang reasons that the postulate of composites as distinct, yet derived from, the aggregate of their parts leads to a vicious infinite regress. If the distinctness of the eye as a biological organ derives from that of its various parts, such as the retina and iris, then complex items must be derived from that of their own constituent matter. This constituent matter itself breaks down into even more minute constituent parts, each with its own intrinsic distinctness deriving from further subparts, and so on, *ad infinitum*. One is thus confronted with an endless process of breaking down the parts, subparts, and so on, of composites, a process which goes onto infinity. This process never reaches the fundamental basis from which the intrinsic reality of the composite whole is ultimately derived. Thus, for Jizang, the postulate that both composites and their constituent parts are intrinsically real begs the question of what exactly would be the bedrock foundation from which the intrinsic reality of composites is derived. The intrinsic nature of a composite seeps away into its parts, and the intrinsic nature of these parts further seep away into subparts, and so on. Jizang reasons from this that the dependence hierarchy between wholes and parts descends infinitely, and one is never able to trace the chain of dependencies back to something non-dependent, something with an intrinsic nature that does not dissipate. That is to say there is no underlying, unchanging metaphysical substance there. This does *not* entail the metaphysical nihilist conclusion that neither wholes nor parts exist at all, since both wholes and the parts they depend on exist as conventionalisms—essentially, convenient designators that play a role in the ordinary discourse that helps human beings communicate successfully.²⁸

In his rebuttal to the Vaiśeṣika theorists, Jizang relies on the premise, present in both Buddhist teachings as well as in the doctrine of his Vaiśeṣika opponent, that anything whose nature depends upon the nature of other things cannot be ultimately real. Jizang reasons that, in the final analysis, the postulate of composites as derivative entities produced by or whose identity depends upon the collection and appropriate configuration of constituent parts, yet who nonetheless exist independently of these parts, is invalid, as it violates a basic premise shared by both the Vaiśeṣika opponent and the Buddhist disputant. Jizang thus concludes that anything that is the causal product of, or the derivative of, other things cannot have an essential or intrinsic nature that is distinct from the natures of those other things upon which it is causally or ontologically dependent.

5. Jizang's Arguments Against the Vaiśeṣika Doctrine of Inherence

In his efforts to dismantle the Vaiśeṣika doctrine of substantial wholes, Jizang targets their postulate that the relation between an extended substance and each of its ultimate parts is the inherence relation that also obtains between a universal (*sāmānya*; *zongxiang* 總相) and each of its instances, as well as between a substance and its intrinsic properties. The Vaiśeṣika mereological realists whose views are vigorously combated by Jizang rely upon two core premises to support their doctrine that composite substances as wholes can be differentiated from mere collections or aggregates on the basis of the specific relation of inherence between wholes and their ultimate parts. The first premise is that a whole is (either wholly or partially) present in each of its parts. The second premise is that com-

posites as causal results (*kārya*; *guo* 果) produced by various constituents have ontological status which is distinct from the causes (*kāraṇa*; *yin* 因) which produce them. The following traces Jizang's diagnosis of difficulties concerning both of these premises undergirding their doctrine of inherence, a key plank of Vaiśeṣika mereological realism.

6. Jizang Against the View That Wholes Inhere in Each of Their Parts

In Vaiśeṣika doctrine, the relation of inherence is defined as a kind of necessary connection between that which inheres (*samavāyin*) and what it inheres in (*samavāya*).²⁹

Vaiśeṣikasūtra 1.1.14 describes composite substances as “possessing qualities” (*guṇavat*) as well as being the “inherent cause” (*samavāyikāraṇa*) of these qualities.³⁰

In the case of the cloth stitched together from many threads, the cloth *qua* whole inheres in each of its threads *qua* parts. While the whole is inherent in each of its parts, these parts are tethered to the whole and depend upon it as their underlying substratum (*āśraya*) in order to coalesce together as an integrated unit (VŚs 1.1.15).

Early commentator Candrānanda's exegesis on *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* 1.1.9 adduces the example of cloth as a whole and the threads as the parts which together form the cause of its composition to argue that the existence of composite wholes as complex substances is *not* reducible to that of their aggregated parts. Candrānanda insists that, in fact, the cloth as result and the collection of threads as cause are two distinct items distinguishable in terms of their inherent qualities:

yathā tanturūpādayaḥ svāśrayasa-samavete paṭadravye rūpādiguṇān ātmavyatiriktān ārabhante |³¹

For example, the color, etc., of thread is inherent in the substratum of the cloth *qua* substance and cannot produce [other] qualities such as color, etc., indistinguishable from its own [substratum].

The qualities of the threads, such as color, produce color in the cloth which is inherent in the cloth *qua* substratum. An implication of the posit of an inherence relation between the qualities of the threads and the cloth *qua* substratum is that the qualities of the thread are not the same as the qualities of the cloth—for example, the cloth is one, while the threads are many; the cloth has a variegated (*citra*) color, while each individual piece of thread is monochrome.³²

The upshot of the example of the cloth stitched together from many threads for Vaiśeṣika mereological realists is that it supports the Vaiśeṣika postulate that composites are both numerically and qualitatively distinct from configurations of parts. The cloth is numerically distinct from the collection of threads in that it is a separate and complex substance, characterized by its own particular identity. The cloth is qualitatively distinct from the collection of threads in that its properties are not all explicable in terms of the properties of the individual threads. The cloth is inhered in by the universal “clothness,” while its many parts, the threads, further break down into minute atomic constituents, each of which is inhered in by its own particularity. Therefore, the cloth *qua* composite substance and the threads *qua* parts each have properties which are numerically and qualitatively differentiated from one another.³³

Jizang attacks the Vaiśeṣika doctrine that wholes are distinct from, yet reside in, each of their ultimate parts by posing a dilemma which aims to trap his opponent between two choices, both of which lead to undesirable consequences. He reasons that if wholes inhere in each of their ultimate parts, then there are only two possibilities: either wholes wholly reside in each of their parts or wholes only partially reside in each part. Jizang rules out both available alternatives in order to topple the overall theory of inherence on which they are predicated.

The position that wholes are equally inherent in each of their ultimate parts in the same way that universals are present in all substances of the same kind leads to several difficulties frequently pointed out by Buddhist thinkers in their anti-Brāhmanical polemics. For example, if the cloth *qua* composite—the cloth-whole—which possesses the distinctive quality of having “variegated color” is equally present in all its parts, then how can this variegated color be present in red thread? Furthermore, there is a difficulty related to the different functions of a whole [13] (p. 158); [6] (pp. 51–52). The inside of a pitcher keeps liquids in, while the outside keeps other things out. But if the pitcher resides in all of its parts equally, the function of keeping things in must be found on the outside of the pitcher.

Jizang contends that the Vaiśeṣika mereological realist theory that wholes wholly reside in, yet remain distinct from, each of their parts leads to the counterintuitive stance that two distinct physical objects with different extensions could perfectly coincide in space. He reasons that on this account, since the separately existing cloth-whole comprises a composite object with distinct spatial dimensions, it would itself break down into many minute components, cloth-parts, each of which would somehow have to perfectly coincide with each thread-part.³⁴ This necessitates the further subdivision of each thread-part into thread-subparts, and so on, in order to explain the collocation of the cloth-whole with each of its many distinct cloth-parts, in each thread-part. In essence, this position would appear to allow that although the cloth-whole and each of the thread-parts evince different properties, they would have to be collocated with one another. Jizang takes this to be absurd.

Jizang goes on to exclude the possibility that wholes are only partially located in each of their parts by pointing out a defect afflicting this account. In his *Commentary on the Hundred [Verses] Treatise*, Jizang argues that:

又偏在一系中，即餘系中應無絀...若一絀分在眾系中者，即有分如分。³⁵

If the [separately existing cloth-whole] only partially resides in a single thread[-part], then neither would there be a [full] cloth[-whole] any of the other thread[-parts]...If [only] one cloth-part [of the overall cloth-whole] resided in each thread[-part], then the [cloth-]whole would be just like the [cloth-]parts [in that these cloth-parts would themselves further break down into many distinct cloth-subparts, subsidiary cloth-subparts, and so on, none of which fully resides in each thread-part].

Jizang reasons that if the cloth-whole only partially resides in each thread-part (parts₁), then this separately existing cloth-whole would itself break down into cloth-parts (parts₂), some of which coincide with each thread-part and some of which do not. If each cloth-part (parts₂) is also only partially located in each thread-part (parts₁), then each cloth-part itself dissolves into more minute cloth-subparts (parts₃). But then the further question arises about the relation between the cloth-subparts (parts₃) and the thread-parts (parts₁). If the cloth-subparts only partially reside in each thread-part, this triggers the demand for yet another more fine-grained sort of subparts, subsidiary cloth-subparts (parts₄). The position that wholes are partially present in each of their ultimate parts, while remaining distinct from these parts, thus entails a vicious infinite regress for the mereological realist.³⁶

The endless proliferation of different sorts of parts, subparts, *ad infinitum*, resulting from the attempt to account for the precise spatial location of composite wholes vis-à-vis their ultimate parts, is a problem for this particular position. In that none of these distinct parts, subparts, and so on, that physical composites must be divided into are genuine mereological simples, this position is inconsistent with the Vaiśeṣika doctrine that the physical composites ultimately decompose down to indivisible atoms.³⁷

7. Jizang Against the View That Wholes Are Causal Results Which Are Independent from Their Causes

Based upon the premise that results produced by causes are distinct from their causes, the Vaiśeṣika theorists conclude that substantial wholes resulting from the proper assembly and integration of component parts must be distinct from these parts.³⁸

The Vaiśeṣika theorists argue that it is precisely because a causal result is distinct from its cause that composite wholes as the “common results” (*kāryaṃ sāmānyam*) of the collective causal conditions provided by their parts can withstand the destruction or replacement of these individual parts.³⁹ The Vaiśeṣika theorists therefore point to the purported ability of causal results to outlast the causes which produced them, as support for their claim that composite wholes must be distinct from mere assemblages of parts. Jizang again turns to the example of the fist resulting from five fingers clenching into the palm in order to illustrate the position of his mereological realist opponent maintaining that a composite whole *qua* causal result remains distinct from the collective causal conditions responsible for its physical composition.⁴⁰

Jizang’s strategy to overturn the Vaiśeṣika postulate that physical composites as causal results are distinguishable from plural parts as the cause of their material constitution requires dislodging the undergirding premise that causal results can persist beyond the cessation of the causes which produce them. In combating this view, he reasons that if physical composites indeed derive their specific properties from the collective causal conditions responsible for their material constitution, then their identity is essentially dependent upon these causal conditions and never distinct from them.⁴¹

In order to further this line of argument, Jizang draws from two venerable examples deployed by the earlier commentator *Piṅgala (Qingmu 青目)—namely, a cloth formed out of threads, and a house formed out of building components. Jizang first turns to the example of the cloth-whole as the common result of the arrangement of many threads in his efforts to invalidate the doctrinal premise that causal products come to exist independently of their causes. In his *Exegesis on the Hundred [Verses] Treatise*, he draws attention to the observable fact that the cloth-whole dissolves as its many threads are removed as laying bare the incoherence of the notion of the substantial whole as a possessor of parts distinct from the parts it possesses:

若分與有分異，離眾系之外別應有絙，眾系既滅而絙應在；若系滅則絙滅，不得言異。⁴²

If the parts and the possessor of parts are distinct, then the cloth would exist separately from the mass of threads, and when the mass of threads comes to cease, the cloth would still remain. But if the cloth ceases when the [mass of] threads cease, it is impossible to say that they are distinct.

In short, the possessor of parts thoroughly disintegrates as its parts are removed. Jizang takes this to show that a causal result which depends upon a certain cause for its production cannot ever exist separately from this cause.

In his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, Jizang revisits the second example of the house produced by the assemblage of beams, pillars, and so on, but which cannot outlast the destruction of these building components, in order to further discredit the notion of physical composites as causal results existing separately from the cause of their material composition:

如因柱成舍，不因空成舍。故知空異舍，柱不異舍。⁴³

While the formation of the house depends upon pillars, the formation of the house does not depend upon space. Therefore know that space is distinct from the house, but the pillars are not distinct from the house.

Jizang argues that precisely because a house is produced by the assemblage of various building components, it is in no way distinct from this assemblage. He contends that only things which do not existentially depend upon one another are, in fact, distinct. For example, the house depends upon its integrated structural components, such as the beams, pillars, and so forth, and is therefore not distinct from them. By contrast, the house and the space it occupies are, in fact, distinct, because the space now occupied by the house would continue to exist even if the house it currently contains were to be demolished.

Having concluded his analysis of the two concrete examples, Jizang encapsulates the thrust of his argument against the opponent's claim that composite substances, as the common result of the collective causal conditions of their parts, are nonetheless distinct from these parts:

若果從因出，則果不異因。所以然者，若因壞果存，果可異因。⁴⁴

In that the result derives from its cause, it isn't distinct from its cause. Therefore, only if a result is distinct from a cause would the result remain when the cause is destroyed.

The Vaiśeṣika theorists, such as Candrānanda, maintain that a composite substance resulting from the integration of various component parts, and whatever accordingly comes to possess specific properties invested by those parts, is a distinct type of entity which can undergo alteration in these parts without becoming a numerically different thing.⁴⁵

For example, according to the Vaiśeṣika doctrine, an apple—as a composite substance—does not fundamentally change despite going from green all over to red all over. However, for Jizang, it follows that no composite can retain its selfsame identity when it loses the distinctive properties endowed by its parts. Therefore, he insists that nothing can incur intrinsic change without becoming something numerically different.⁴⁶

8. Conclusions

Jizang disassembles Vaiśeṣika mereological realism by pointing out a number of difficulties afflicting the doctrine, in particular stemming from its core postulate that distinctness comprises an intrinsic property of both wholes and each of the ultimate parts that constitute them. Jizang argues that wholes do not exist as distinct or separate from their constituent parts, and, further, that the notion of fundamentally real parts is untenable, given that the reality of these parts further dissipates into subparts, and so on, without anything fundamentally real lying at the bottom of an infinitely descending hierarchy of dependencies. In denying the intrinsic reality of the composite objects posited by the rival non-Buddhist Vaiśeṣika theory, Jizang succeeds in bolstering the Buddhist doctrine that composites are, at best, nominally real. For Jizang, composite wholes are conventionally real entities that are mentally constructed via a process which bundles together multiple distinct constituents as “one thing” in order to serve the interest of ease of communication.

The sophistication of Jizang's argumentation demonstrates that dispelling mereological realism does not necessarily lead to metaphysical nihilism. While he refuses to impute an ultimately real nature to either wholes or parts, he does not deny that either lacks causal functions. In this way, his position contrasts with that of the mainstream Buddhist mereological nihilists who render composite wholes *simpliciter* causally impotent by restricting causal efficacy to mereological simples. Jizang's denial of the existence of genuine mereological simples abolishes any hierarchy between composite wholes as ontologically secondary and parts as ontologically primary.

Jizang also radically diverges from mainstream Buddhist mereological nihilism in affirming the possibility of material composition in a world without any genuine mereological simples. Instead, his explanation of material composition approaches the version

of “mereological idealism” defended by Pearce [32], as it accounts for the formation of composite objects through the force of mental construction. However, Jizang’s position is distinct from this thesis in that it treats mereological sums as not just causally inert byproducts of a process of conceptualization, but as sites of causal efficacy in their own right. This is one way in which Jizang’s novel formulation of mereological anti-realism expands the terms of the mereological realism/anti-realism debate beyond their typical confinement to Euro-American analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophers have much to gain by looking closer at the strategies developed by East Asian Buddhist philosophers to challenge key tenets of metaphysical realism.

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Abbreviations

Below, D refers to the *sde dge Tibetan Tripiṭaka Bstan ‘gyur* (Derge), preserved at the Faculty of Letters, University of Tokyo, edited by Takasaki Jikidō 高崎直道, Yamaguchi Zuihō 山口瑞鳳, and Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭 (Tokyo: Sekai Seiten Kankō Kyōkai, 1980). Citations are indicated by the work number followed by the volume, page, and line number(s). Below, T refers to the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 et al. (Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932). (= Citations are indicated by the text number, followed by the volume, page, register (a, b, or c), and line number(s).

Notes

- ¹ Aristotle, *Categories*, 1.5.
- ² Hoffman and Rosenkrantz [1] (p. 17) stipulate that according to substratum theory, “...a substance is a propertyless or bare particular which gives unity to the properties which inhere in it.”
- ³ In the critical analysis of Jizang’s mereological arguments, I adopt what Bou Mou [2] (pp. 1–2) has described as the Constructive-Engagement strategy of Comparative Philosophy (CECP), which considers the philosophical-issue concerned approach and the historical-exegetical approach as complementary and as sensitive to the original philosophical context of classical texts, while emphasizing their philosophical interpretation. Pace Levine [3] (p. 211), this methodological strategy is distinct from that of “fusion philosophy,” in that it does not assume that the original philosophical context can be “siphoned off, or distilled from,” historical-exegetical approaches in critically assessing philosophical arguments embedded in classical texts. As identified by Levine [3], one pitfall of the fusion philosophy approach is that, in drawing conceptual resources from premodern Asian traditions to do constructive philosophical problem-solving, it tends to engage with these philosophical problems as they have been

conceived in modern analytic philosophy. By contrast, the CEP approach pursued in this paper examines Jizang's arguments concerning the philosophical problem of the existence/nonexistence of wholes as distinct from their parts in relation, as this problem has been discussed within the context of classical Buddhō-Brāhmanical debates.

- 4 Thinkers embedded within the rival Brāhmanical traditions of Sāṃkhya as well as Nyāya also maintained mereological realist doctrines affirming the intrinsic reality of composites. Jizang evinces familiarity with the contents of the *Jin qishi lun* 金七十論, the Chinese translation of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, along with an attendant prose-commentary, made by his contemporary Paramārtha. In the 10th stanza of *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, being composite (i.e., having multiple proper parts) is enumerated as one of twenty-three subdivisions of primordial materiality (*mūlaprakṛti*)—for detailed analysis of this paradigmatically Sāṃkhya taxonomy, see [4] (p. 50). As for Nyāya, Funayama [5] (p. 108) observes that Jizang does not mention the Nyāya tradition by name within his corpus. Funayama points out that, in general: “Medieval Chinese Buddhist texts do not refer to the Nyāya school by name.” While Jizang does enumerate the sixteen “ontological categories” (*tattvas, padārthas*), systematized within the Nyāya tradition (see *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.1) in his *Exegesis on the Hundred Verse Treatise* (T1827.42.247c1-6), he attributes this taxonomy to the “God Maheśvara” (摩醯首羅天) and not to Nyāya, specifically.
- 5 Siderits [6] (p. 13) characterizes this mainstream Buddhist doctrine as “mereological nihilism” in that it holds that, “...there are, strictly speaking, no mereological sums; the composite objects of our folk ontology, as well as any composite objects posited by rival metaphysical theories, are at best merely nominally real.” Earlier work by Siderits [7] has characterized the mainstream Buddhist position as “mereological reductionism” in that it decomposes composite wholes down to ultimately real parts. For an analysis of Siderits’ reconstruction of mainstream Buddhist arguments for reductionism, see [8] (pp. 129–132).
- 6 In contrast to the Abhidharma mereological nihilist and the Madhyamaka mereological anti-realist doctrinal orientations, the later Chinese Buddhist tradition of Huayan 華嚴, which emerged in the centuries following Jizang, embraces wholes as part of the structure of ultimate reality. For an examination of this paradigmatically Huayan Buddhist doctrinal stance, which stands out as atypical in the history of Buddhist philosophy, see, for example, [9] (pp. 460–468), [10] (pp. 39–43), [8] (pp. 132–139), [11] (pp. 222–229).
- 7 The characterization of Madhyamaka as metaphysical nihilism has a long history stretching from pre-modern times to the present day. As Ferraro [12] (p. 196) summarizes, the “...nihilistic interpretation conceives ultimate reality as equivalent to pure nothingness.” A point raised by Siderits [13] (pp. 295–296) and Westerhoff [14] (p. 338) is that insofar as metaphysical nihilism is a view concerning the ultimate constitution of the universe, it seems to imply that it is the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of the universe to be that way. However, for Jizang, nothing has an intrinsic nature, including the universe. So, metaphysical nihilism appears to be fundamentally at odds with Jizang’s disavowal of *svabhāva*.
- 8 Cowling [15] (p. 251) distinguishes between mereological nihilism and mereological anti-realism by noting that “...the nihilist accepts the existence and instantiation of mereological relations like improper parthood—the relation every mereological simple bears to itself—while mereological anti-realism denies that any mereological properties or relations are instantiated by the world.”
- 9 The Vaiśeṣika doctrinal understanding that it is due to *viśeṣa* that a particular substance becomes individuated as both qualitatively unique and numerically distinct from all other substances in the universe, motivates the translation of *viśeṣa* as “individuator” by such scholars as Potter [16] (pp. 142–143) and Chakrabarti [17] (p. 374). *Biexiang* 別相 is a common Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit word, *viśeṣa*, and features heavily in discussions of the *pūrvapakṣa* or opposing thesis of the Vaiśeṣika interlocutor in Kumārajīva’s *Hundred Verse Treatise* (*Bailun* 百論) (for instance, see T1569.30.174a2-3), where it is contrasted with the ontological category of “universal” (*sāmānya*; *zongxiang* 總相).
- 10 According to the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras* (VŚs), “distinctness” (*prthaktva*) is an intrinsic quality distinguishing all substances, whether simple or complex, physical (e.g., the atomic constituents of physical matter) or non-physical (e.g., souls, space, time). Cf., esp. VŚs 7.2.1-7.2.8. Kumārajīva deploys the Chinese compound *yixiang* 異相 as a rendering of the Sanskrit term *prthaktva* in his translation of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) 6.7 (T1564.30.8c5); corresponding to [18] (p. 70), and as a rendering of the closely related term *prthagbhāva* in MMK 6.9 (T1564.30.8c14-15; [18] (p. 70)).
- 11 *Avayavin* means, literally, “the possessor of parts (*avayava*),” implying the existence of a whole over and above the parts it possesses. As Halbfass [19] (p. 94) describes: “It [i.e., the *avayavin*] is the product of parts; it does not [merely] consist of parts.” Brackets added for clarity.
- 12 Within the Buddhist context, a *dravya* is an ultimately real entity evincing causal efficacy. Within the Vaiśeṣika context, *dravya* indicates a substance in which qualities (*guṇas*; *de* 德) inhere.
- 13 Some metaphysical theories distinguish between composites and aggregates as two kinds of collection: an aggregate, which is a collection of distinct and dissimilar items related only through proximity (e.g., a pile of boulders); and a composite, which is a collection of distinct but similar items that are integrated together (e.g., a pitcher, which is composed of interconnected earth-atoms). For this distinction between two kinds of collection, see [20] (p. 33).
- 14 The *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise* takes the form of Jizang’s line-by-line exegesis and analysis of Nāgārjuna’s MMK, along with *Piṅgala’s (Qingmu 青目) prose-commentary on Nāgārjuna’s stanzas, included within the Chinese translation of Kumārajīva (344–

- 413 CE). Jizang's *Exegesis on the Hundred Verse Treatise* comprises his commentary on Kumārajīva's translation of the *Hundred Verse Treatise* (*Bailun* 百論; *Śataśāstra), a partial version of Āryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses* (*Catuḥśataka*) with attendant prose commentary attributed to *Vasu (Posou 婆藪).
- 15 According to *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* (VŚs) 2.2.10, what accounts for the distinct individuality of each extended compound substance is not the particularity (*viśeṣa*) inhering in it. It is rather the particularity inhering in the many atoms that compose it. This point is noted by [6] (p. 8) and [21] (pp. 32–33).
- 16 Chakrabarti [17] (p. 374) points out that the posit of *viśeṣa* is required to differentiate qualitatively indistinguishable atoms belonging to the same type of fundamental physical element (*mahābhūta*). Absent *viśeṣa*, it would follow from the principle of the identity of indiscernibles that atoms of the same type would all be one and the same.
- 17 Vaiśeṣika theorists distinguish between compound or composite substances (*avayavidravaya*) possessing integrated parts and collections (*pracaya*) of loosely associated parts—see, for example, Candrānanda's commentary on VŚs 7.1.16. In his commentary on VŚs 7.2.1, Candrānanda avers that the quality of “oneness” inheres only in substances. The Vaiśeṣika distinction between composite substances and collections is roughly similar to that made by modern metaphysicians within the Anglo-American analytic tradition between mereological compounds and mereological sums. As Hoffman and Rosenkrantz stipulate [1] (p. 208), entities of the latter sort are collections, not substances, since their parts need not be joined and connected, while mereological compounds are substances, not collections.
- 18 *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* commentator Praśastapāda (fl. ca. 5th or 6th century C.E.) adduces the example of two cotton balls combining to form a “twofold cotton ball” (*dvitūlaka*), in order to illustrate that while collections are nominally “one” thing, their components are only “loosely conjoined” (*praśīthilasamyoga*), and the qualities of these conglomerated components are not fully amalgamated together such that they together inhere in a single substratum: “The collection of two cotton balls comes to be due to the loose conjunction of parts composing the balls, or depending upon the mutual conjunction of the parts of one ball with those of the other. What [the collection] produces in the twofold cotton ball is largeness [only], not both largeness and plurality.” *pracayaś ca tūlapinḍayor vartamānaḥ piṇḍārambhakāvayavapraśīthilasamyogān apekṣamāṇa itaretarapiṇḍāvayavasamyogāpekṣo vā dvitūlake mahatvam ārabhate na bahutvamahattvāni* | (Sanskrit text according to [22] (pp. 471–472)).
- 19 In his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, Jizang offers the following illustration of “particularity” and “distinctness” in terms of the parts of the hand and their characteristics: “The lengthiness or shortness characterizing the five fingers are their particularities. [Each of] the five fingers themselves are distinct things.” 別相者五指長短相也。異法者五指體也 (T1824.42.110c15–16).
- 20 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.111a24–25.
- 21 In his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, Jizang summarizes this theory of particularity as it pertains to the specific example of five fingers belonging to one hand: “Distinguishable from the fist with its universality (*sāmānya*; *zong* 總), the five [clenched] fingers are distinct by virtue of their lengthiness or shortness. Due to the distinctness of their lengthiness or shortness, they exist as five [distinct] things. Thus, from the lengthiness or shortness of an [individual] finger, one knows the finger as long or short. One therefore takes the lengthiness or shortness of an [individual] finger as a distinct characteristic. Being longer or shorter indicates a distinct thing.” 由分別總捲故有五指長短別異。由指長短異相故有五指之法。則是由指長短，知長短指。故用指長短為異相。長短指名異法 (T1824.42.110c16–c18).
- 22 *Piṅgala's commentary to MMK 14.7 characterizes the position of the realist opponent as maintaining that the distinctness of a discrete entity cannot be a property which depends upon other things to come to be: “Our scriptures state that distinctness doesn't derive from multiple [extrinsic] conditions.” 我經說異相不從眾緣生 (T1564.30.19b23).
- 23 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.111a9–10.
- 24 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.110b12–b13.
- 25 The Chinese character *se* 色, like its Sanskrit correlate – *rūpa* – has multiple senses including both “physical stuff,” the basic physical constituents of things, as well as the properties of “physical form,” and most specifically, “color.”
- 26 As Jizang writes in his *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise* (T1824.42.110c2–3): “If the distinctness of the fist is independent of the distinctness of [each of] the five fingers, then the fist is [also] distinct from the jar and the pillar, etc., in the very same way.” 若離五指異有於捲異，可將捲與瓶柱等異也。
- 27 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.110b14–15.
- 28 Westerhoff [23] (p. 105) makes the point that even though Mādhyamikas are committed to “mereological reductionism,” the position that wholes are not included in the final ontology of “what there is” on the basic level, they are not eliminativists about wholes in that they are still ascribed conventional existence. This conventional existence is distinct from the “utter nonexistence” (*atyantābhāva*; *bijing wu* 畢竟無) of such completely fictitious entities as “sons of barren women” or “square circles.”
- 29 Candrānanda's *vṛtti* on VŚs 10.5 defines inherence between a composite and its constituent parts as the connection between a qualifier (*viśeṣaṇa*) and a qualified (*viśeṣya*). A qualifier necessarily attaches to something which it qualifies. Here, the composite is taken as the causal result (*kārya*) of the collection of constituent parts as the cause (*kāraṇa*). For further discussion of the qualifier/qualified distinction as it relates to the definition of inherence in the *Vaiśeṣikasūtras*, see [24] (pp. 118–121); [25] (p. 35).

- 30 VŚs 1.1.14 reads (according to edition of Ruzsa [26] (p. 7): “The defining characteristics of substance are: to possess activity, to possess quality, to be an inherent cause [of another entity].” *kriyāvad guṇavat samavāyikāraṇam iti dravyalakṣaṇam* |
- 31 Sanskrit text according to [26] (p. 5).
- 32 Vasubandhu’s adaptation of this stock example in *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 3.99cd (see [27] (p. 189); corresponding to the Chinese translation of Paramārtha at T1559.29.224b19–21) attributes “variegated color” (*citrarūpa*; *zhongzhong se* 種種色) to the cloth. Early Sanskrit commentator Yaśomitra identifies the opponent (*pūrvapakṣin*) here as the Vaiśeṣika—see edition of Śāstrī [28] (vol. 2, p. 559).
- 33 For Vaiśeṣika doctrine, the specific qualities (*guṇas*) of each and every substance—whether simple or complex—are differentiated from one another by virtue of being inhered in by their own unique particularity. As Potter [29] (p. 259) explains: “...a single *guṇa* is, in fact, an unrepeatable entity related to exactly one object and no more.”
- 34 As Jizang explains in his *Commentary on the Hundred Verse Treatise* (T1827.42.280a7–8): “If the [cloth-]whole fully resides in each thread[-part], then each thread[-part] would further contain many thread[-subparts] [since the separately existing cloth-whole itself breaks down into many distinct cloth-parts, which all must fully reside in each thread-part].” 若具在一系中，即一系之中便有眾系。
- 35 Jizang, *Commentary on the Hundred Verse Treatise*, T1827.42.280a8–10.
- 36 Westerhoff [30] (p. 131), and Siderits [13] (pp. 154–155) discuss a version of this regress argument against the notion that both wholes and parts are real, although wholes are distinct from their parts in relation.
- 37 Vaiśeṣika doctrine holds that individual atoms are simple substances (*ekadravya*)—i.e., they do not inhere in anything else. For the Vaiśeṣika view of atoms as mereological simples, see Potter [16] (pp. 73–4). Also see Kronen and Tuttle [31] (pp. 296–298) on the material composition of complex substances (*anekadravya*) from atoms according to the Vaiśeṣika system.
- 38 Halbfass [19] (p. 94) explains that according to the Vaiśeṣika mereological realist theory, “the *avayavin* (i.e., whole) has its own qualities, caused by, yet different from, those of the parts. The champions of the theory go so far as to argue that the *avayavin* should have a weight of its own, over and above the combined weight of its parts” (parentheses added for clarity).
- 39 According to VŚs 1.1.22, composite or complex substances (*anekadravya*) form as the “common result” (*kāryam sāmānyam*) of the coalescence and integration of multiple simple substances (*ekadravya*).
- 40 Jizang’s *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise* summarizes the mereological realist position targeted for critique by Nāgārjuna in MMK 14.5–8 as holding that the fist as causal result is distinct from the cause of its composition, the collection of the parts of the hand: “The distinct cause [of the fist] is distinct from that which it is are distinct. What it is are distinct from is the fist as a distinct thing. The cause [of the fist] is distinct [from the fist] due to the distinctness of [each of] the five fingers. How so? When we see five fingers [clenched], we are aware of a single fist, when we see the fingers unclench, we are aware of the fist unfurling. Therefore distinct causes are distinct from that which they are distinct.” 異因異有異者，異即是捲異也。因異者因五指異也。有異者有捲異也。所以然者，見指五，知捲一。見指散，知捲合。見指是因，知捲是果。故云異因異有異 (T1824.42.110a14–17).
- 41 Here, *Piṅgala’s commentary drives home the argument put forward in Kumārajīva’s translation of MMK 14.5cd (T1564.30.19b10) that: “If something derives from a cause, it not distinct from that cause” 若法從因出，是法不異因。Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of this line diverges from the original Sanskrit of Nāgārjuna, which reads (in the translation of [18] (p. 150)): “When x is dependent on y, it does not hold that x is distinct from y.” *yat pratītya ca yat tasmāt tad anyam nopapadyate* | The Tibetan counterpart (D3824.96.8b.2) closely reflects the Sanskrit wording.
- 42 *Exegesis on the Hundred Verse Treatise*, T1827.42.280a4–6.
- 43 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.110b24–25.
- 44 *Exegesis on the Middle Treatise*, T1824.42.110a21–22.
- 45 The position that substances can withstand change in their constituent parts is a consequence of the categorical distinction between substances and their qualities which is firmly embedded in Vaiśeṣika doctrine. In his commentary on VŚs 1.1.4, Candrānanda writes: “substances are [what they are] due to a connection with substantiality.” *dravyatvābhidsambandhād dravyāṇi* ([26] (p. 3)). This implies that a change in its qualities does not compromise the essential nature of a substance.
- 46 By intrinsic change is meant coming to possess mutually incompatible intrinsic properties at different times. Siderits [6] (p. 66) explains the Buddhist denial of composites undergoing intrinsic change as a consequence of their mereological nihilism which rules out the existence of composites as persisting property-possessors over and above property particulars: “Only substances could undergo qualitative change, and the anti-substantialism that is one consequence of Buddhist mereological nihilism rules out there being anything in the ultimate ontology that undergoes qualitative change.” Mereological simples, the *dharma*s, could not undergo qualitative change as a consequence of the doctrine of momentariness (*kṣaṇabhāṅga*), the position that *dharma*s do not endure beyond their moment of origination. As such, nothing—composite or non-composite—could possess mutually incompatible properties over time.

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