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Thomas Cattoi

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Ippolito Desideri and the Universality of Aristotelian Rationality: A Model or a Hindrance?

Thomas Cattoi
Jesuit School of Theology
at Santa Clara University, Berkeley

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to explore Ippolito Desideri's apologetic arguments in his Tibetan-language treatise *Byun K'uns* (The dawn), focusing on his critique of the notion of karma and codependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Desideri's theological vision can be seen as an instance of the partial fulfillment paradigm outlined by numerous recent scholars, such as Paul Knitter, for whom non-Christian religious traditions contain elements of truth while falling short of the fullness of the Christian revelation. In the *Byun K'uns*, Desideri deploys his Aristotelian and speculative formation to question the classical Madhyamaka rejection of a first cause or ground of being, and suggests that the Tibetans' awareness of the transitory character of the natural order finds its ultimate fulfillment in the acceptance of the Thomist arguments for the existence of God. After outlining and contextualizing Desideri's apologetic project, I turn to Jay L. Garfield's reading of Madhyamaka thought and offer a critique of Desideri's project, arguing that his overarching argument is vitiated by the assumption of the universality of specific metaphysical categories that mar what is otherwise a pioneering experiment in constructive comparative theology.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, *Byun K'uns*, causality, codependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), Desideri, Knitter, Madhyamaka, proofs of God's existence, Summa, Thomas Aquinas, Tibetan Buddhism.

Toward the end of part one of his work *Byun K'uns* (The origin of all living beings and all things), Ippolito Desideri states in a matter-of-fact way:

If one acknowledges and accepts that there is a Self-Existent Being, the doctrine of co-dependent origination makes total sense, but if one does not, such

doctrine cannot be explained, because it is only by accepting the existence of such a Being that we can explain how effects are produced by causes; conversely, by denying that such a Being exists, we can no longer justify that effects are produced by their causes, for this can only be accounted for by positing an uncaused Cause at the beginning of it all.¹

This paragraph encapsulates Desideri's theological methodology: an engagement of a pivotal doctrine from the belief system of his interlocutors (codependent origination, or *pratityasamutpada*) that acknowledges its import and value in offering an adequate description of reality, but does not shy away from offering a critique of its purported flaws, turning to traditional Thomist metaphysics to supplement the original doctrine and bring out its full metaphysical potential. *Prima facie*, this appears to be a paradigmatic example of informed interreligious dialogue: appreciation for the speculative vision of the other tradition does not erase a full-fledged commitment to one's own. This article will explore Desideri's engagement of the teaching of codependent origination in the *Byun K'ums*, first by assessing his dialectical method in light of contemporary reflection on the theology of religions, and finally—and most importantly—by asking whether his approach to dialogue can still serve as a model for contemporary interreligious encounters.

The question undergirding theologies of religion, as opposed to comparative religious studies or even comparative theology, is the question of the theological rationale of religious pluralism within an overarching perspective that continues to affirm the normativity of a particular tradition: In other words, why are there many traditions as opposed to one? The 2002 volume *Introducing Theologies of Religion* by Xavier University professor Paul Knitter is one of the most influential works in the field of theology of religion, offering an exhaustive exploration of different epistemological paradigms that chart the relationship between different religious traditions.² Knitter outlines four models, offering many examples for each, without however—at least in this work—coming down explicitly on the side of any of these models. Of course, one must remember that what Knitter outlines are *Christian* approaches to a theology of religion. Other religious traditions can, and indeed do, develop analogous second-order templates to discuss religious pluralism, but they simply are not what Knitter sets out to explore here.³

Knitter starts with the exclusivist model, which affirms the truth of the Christian tradition in an unqualified fashion and consequently views all other religious traditions as inherently false and devoid of value. While many equate this approach with “fundamentalism,” the latter is actually a relatively recent term, derived from the evangelical magazine *The Fundamentals* that was published out of Los Angeles in the second decade of the twentieth century to respond to the perceived deviancy of German academic theology. Appalled by the consequences of the historical-critical method, a number of American evangelicals wanted to reassert the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and did not shy away from hinting at the demonic origin of other religious traditions.⁴ This attitude, however, is far from being a modern phenomenon: In the *City of God*, Augustine emphasized the demonic origin of the Greco-Roman

religion, and argued that the gods worshiped by the pagans were none other than demons, who had led these nations into licentiousness and corruption.⁵

While still virtually commonplace in evangelical contexts, especially in the United States, this exclusivist approach was never entirely normative in a Catholic context. The conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, retrieved the more inclusive vision of the Greek Fathers, who asserted the presence of elements of truth in all religious traditions, albeit with the proviso that all such elements derived from the eternal Logos whose intelligence sustained the cosmos.⁶ This approach, which would inform all Catholic official documents about interreligious dialogue for the past half century, was heavily inspired by the Rahnerian vision of anonymous Christianity, which asserted the possibility of salvation for followers of all religious traditions to the extent that they followed their own conscience.⁷ The resulting hierarchical ordering of religious traditions according to their distance from the fullness of the truth resting in the Catholic Church ensures that this model of religious pluralism would also be known as partial fulfillment. In this perspective, all non-Christian religions can be seen as a *preparatio Christi*, paving the way for the reception in the soul of the fullness of Christ's truth.

The third model listed by Knitter is the mutuality model. This approach, which is best represented by the work of the Scottish theologian John Hick, argues that all religious traditions are different avenues toward ultimate reality—a reality, however, that remains beyond our epistemic reach. Rather than talking of the divine, or, in Tillich's parlance, ultimate concern, Hick uses the term "the Real," which eschews the question of its personal or impersonal character. In this perspective, it is then impossible to argue that the claims of a particular religious tradition are incompatible with another, as each tradition is merely a pointer to a reality transcending all dogmas and practices. Practitioners of a tradition can then draw inspiration from practitioners of another (hence the term "mutuality"), coming perhaps to a better understanding of the teachings of their own beliefs, but the hierarchical ranking of distinct traditions that characterizes the first two approaches is discarded as untenable.⁸

The last model listed by Knitter is the so-called acceptance model, which asserts that different religious traditions are bodies of "practices" that practitioners "inhabit," but cannot be regarded as attempts to offer exhaustive metaphysical descriptions of ultimate reality—indeed, the very existence of an ontological referent for the speculative claims of the different traditions is questioned. Such an approach will supposedly ensure tolerance between practitioners of different traditions, since it will effectively eliminate the rationale for theological disagreement. Authors such as Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo have called for a radical rethinking of Christian theology in light of these assumptions, leading the way in the development of the so-called weak theology. Less reflective renditions of this approach are arguably quite common in popular culture, providing a basis for New Age thinking that deliberately avoids theoretical confrontation and focuses on "practices" that avoid normativity and are thus perceived as less threatening.⁹

If we step back and consider the theoretical underpinning of these four models, we will see that the exclusivist and the inclusivist model rest on a fundamentally realist epistemology—in other words, on the assumption that there is a correspondence, albeit one that may be more or less accurate, between a theological claim and an external ontological referent. In this perspective, religious traditions are metaphysical accounts of reality, and therefore one may adjudicate between them on the basis of their supposedly more adequate description of ultimate reality. The mutuality model, however, inserts a chasm between the religious traditions and the ultimate reality that they purport to describe; the former are gestures toward an ontological horizon that forever eludes them, the epistemic bridge between them having been lifted—some may say out of modesty, others out of cowardice. Finally, the acceptance model altogether eliminates the ontological referent from all theological claims, ensuring that religious traditions become little more than language games, or the basis for a kind of existential “performance.”

The trajectory from the exclusivist and inclusivist model through the mutuality model to the acceptance model mimics the gradual excision of metaphysics—or indeed, the general flight from ontology—characterizing theological discourse in the last two centuries. Painting with broad strokes, one could argue that the theological epistemology of the *City of God* is ultimately on the same wavelength of that of *Nostra Aetate*: a fundamental realism resting on the correspondence between the theological claim and the reality that is expressed therein. The theology of Aquinas is the ultimate exemplification of such an epistemological framework, where claims about the divine nature are believed to gesture toward the divine reality, without ever capturing its real infinite qualities: Our familiarity with goodness, for instance, ensures that we get an inkling of such quality in God, even if its extent transcends anything we ever experience in creation. Alas, this analogical reading of the semantic connection between the creator and his creation would eventually crumble under the attacks of Ockamism and the nominalist turn. Eventually, the Kantian revolution and the turn to the subject would sever any remaining ontological link between God and the natural order, relegating the former to the noumenal realm as at best the object of an ethical intuition. Hick’s “Real” that is often referenced in the mutuality model is a Kantian rendition of the unknowable divine, about which everything can be predicated as it forever eludes our epistemic grasp. And yet, this modern turn away from the analogical cathedrals of Medieval scholasticism is only the stepping-stone toward the postmodern deconstruction of being that culminates in the erasure of all ontological referent. As the signified perpetually slides under the signifier, the epistemological inaccessibility of the noumenal realm eventually culminates in its dissolution. *Dieu est l’écriture*, quips Derrida—or rather, all that exists is a linguistic web, which regulates different sets of practices we inhabit according to need. In the acceptance model that Knitter outlines at the end of *Theologies of Religion*, religious traditions are scripts for a sort of existential performance, lacking all supernatural referents. In this perspective, switching religious tradition is akin to choosing to perform a different existential script; and if an actor chose to perform King Lear on a given day and Macbeth on another, who could claim that there is contradiction? The growing popular-

ity, at least in North America, of the notion of multiple religious belonging, reflects the extent to which this last model resonates with the broader sensitivity of our time. The flight from theological ontology has reached its last terminus in a colorful, but rather shallow cafeteria of practices, where different menus may be served on different days, albeit all suitably adjusted to the taste of Western consumers: nothing too tasty, or too demanding.

This lengthy discussion of different models of theologies of religion helps us unlock Desideri's theological strategy, enabling us to locate him on the spectrum of interreligious dialogue, while helping us assess its achievement as well as its shortcomings. Desideri's argumentation in the *Byun K'un*s clearly reflects a vision of the world that dovetails with the partial fulfillment model outlined above, where non-Christian religious traditions are believed to contain elements of truth, but while they may pave the way to the reception of the truth of Christ, they are simultaneously seriously defective and need to be supplemented with the truth of Christ. If this approach is reminiscent of Rahner, it also more directly flows from the great Jesuit tradition calling one to find God in all things: an approach that informs the work of the great Jesuit missionaries in China such as Matteo Ricci or Martino Martini, or the writings on the Brahminic tradition by Roberto de Nobili.¹⁰ These authors, who for a variety of reasons have long enjoyed a far greater popularity than Desideri, became familiar with the language and the culture of their host cultures, and would go on to produce significant works in Chinese and Tamil discussing Confucian *pietas* and the belief in the Lord of Heaven, or the inconsistencies and alleged irrationalities of the *Rāmāyana*. Ricci's more appreciative take on Chinese customs and practices contrasts perhaps with the critical outlook of De Nobili, who, unaware of the historical origins of the *Rāmāyana* as a Saivite text, could only view traces of this tradition under the later Vaisnavite veneer as indicators of mere irrationality. Yet, both Ricci and De Nobili acknowledged that practitioners of Confucianism and Brahmanism—the notion of Hinduism as a religion was still far in the future—could achieve high levels of moral and personal progress: And if such heights of development could be achieved without the light of revelation, God only knew to what heights of holiness these civilizations could rise after receiving the message of the Gospel. Desideri lived at a later stage—he was born almost thirty years after De Nobili's death—but his intellectual horizon was analogous to that of his great predecessors. Instead of Confucianism or Brahminic Hinduism, Desideri encountered Vajrayāna Buddhism and its philosophical articulation in the school of Madhyamaka—and largely Prasāṅgika Madhyamaka—that was favored by the then dominant Gelug school. It is the Gelug scholastic appropriation of Madhyamaka that becomes Desideri's entrée into the world of Buddhist speculation, an appropriation largely shaped by the great syntheses of Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) and constantly enriched and transmitted by the monastic schools of Sera, Drepung, and Ganden.¹¹ The extraordinarily vast commentarial tradition grown from the works of the first masters of Madhyamaka was constantly tested and expanded through the practice of monastic debate, in a way that was not too dissimilar from the Medieval Scholastic tradition grown around the work of Aquinas—a tradition, this one, that had provided the basis for Desideri's

formation at the Collegium Romanum, albeit one that by the end of the seventeenth century had largely solidified into a rigid manualism that discouraged flights of creativity.

In chapter 6 of *Foundations of Christian Faith*, when discussing his understanding of the hypostatic union, Karl Rahner claims that the sacred writings of other religious traditions can also be considered inspired, even if this inspiration, unlike that of the Christian Scriptures, is at best partial and incomplete. Rahner will not tell us in what way the distinction between inspired and non-inspired texts can be drawn—one may wonder, perhaps Book 11 of the *Gīta*, with its description of Krishna's transfiguration, can be regarded as inspired, whereas the earlier discussion of caste falls outside the reach of the Holy Spirit?¹² In the *Byun K'uns*, Desideri takes a different approach, and instead of arguing that certain Madhyamaka texts contain *semina Verbi* and others do not, he explores a particular teaching of this philosophical school—namely, the teaching of codependent origination—and decides that it actually hints at an important truth about reality, but that its account of the metaphysical structure of the universe remains fundamentally flawed and is in dire need of some Scholastic—indeed, Aristotelian—supplementation.¹³ Readers expecting Desideri to dismiss codependent origination altogether as against reason and Scripture—and therefore as intrinsically flawed—will be disappointed: Desideri sees it as a paradoxical springboard to introduce the Aristotelian-Scholastic teaching of the First Cause. The paradoxical implication is that Tibetans who use right reason should conclude that their own teaching about causation requires a First Cause; or in other words, codependent origination inevitably demonstrates the logical necessity of theism. In this perspective, Desideri's task is merely to disentangle the intricate web of implications that accompany this teaching and that Tibetans are reluctant to consider; Madhyamaka is then a first philosophy in need of Aristotelian correctives, which, adequately supplemented, necessarily debunks what Tibetans viewed as its logical conclusions.

What we find in the *Byun K'uns* is a critical but constructive appropriation of a Buddhist philosophical teaching at the service of Christian apologetics, albeit one that comes wearing the heavy armor of the Aristotelian discourse on causality. On one hand, Desideri chooses this approach because, faithful to his earlier theological training, he strongly believes in the apologetic potential of the Thomist rendition of Aristotelianism; on the other hand, he proceeds in this way because he believes that alternative philosophical systems may contain *in nuce* elements that can only blossom when exposed to the sun of the Christian revelation.¹⁴ At this point, then, we need to ask two distinct questions. The first, more specific query is whether Desideri's reading of codependent origination and his attempted qualification of Madhyamaka with Aristotelian correctives rested on an adequate reading of this particular Buddhist philosophical tradition. The second, broader issue is whether this kind of appreciative, yet critical engagement of the religious other can still be a model of inter-religious engagement for Christian theologians seeking real dialogue with another tradition. My take on these two questions is that Desideri's reading of Madhyamaka actually rests on the unwarranted use of an Aristotelian hermeneutic lens to interpret

the teaching of codependent origination, thus fundamentally vitiating his apologetic argument; yet, an appreciation of his methodological slippage actually helps us better understand the specific claims—indeed, the particularity and uniqueness—of the Buddhist teaching in question and of the classical notion of causality that the scholastic manualism of Desideri's time took for granted.

The first part of the *Byun K'uns* explores the nature of the First Cause, and includes three arguments: 1) the existence of a First Cause, who is the origin of all things; 2) the eternity of the First Cause; and finally, 3) the independence of the First Cause from all contingent realities.¹⁵ Desideri notes at the very outset that every aspect of the natural order has a principle or origin; in fact, he points out, even the remarkable happiness that one can see in all Tibetan families must have its origin in the head of the family.¹⁶ In a customary display of *captatio benevolentiae*, he even mentions that the king of Tibet—Lha-bza Khan, who was the de facto ruler of the country during the years of the licentious Sixth Dalai Lama—is clearly the head of all families, and thus must be the source of the happiness that reigns in the country.¹⁷

Desideri's understanding of causality stresses how every cause contains *in acto* within itself what will be manifest *in potentia* in the effect. Whatever is being moved, for instance, has received the action of a cause moving it. In living beings, the movement is of course imparted by the vital principle, while in the case of inanimate beings, the movement is imparted by some other agent. Desideri then mentions the Tibetan belief of a multi-tiered sky, where the highest imparts movement on the lower skies, but does not require any other power to move. If this is the case, he argues, it is then possible to think of a cause that does not depend on any other cause, but causes all movements because of its intrinsic power, like the soul that moves the body. Desideri is effectively trying to rephrase Aquinas's appropriation of the Aristotelian discourse on causality that can be found in the *Summa* by relying on an example that was familiar to his Tibetan audience, so as to show that the notion of a prime mover is not alien to their own culture.¹⁸

A similar strategy is deployed to rehearse the classical Thomist claim that there cannot possibly be an infinite chain of causes, but there must be a cause that is not moved by others, but moves all of them. Clearly aware of the importance of lineage, Desideri points out that all the wisdom shared by all the "wise men" of Tibet must necessarily come from an original wise man, who came to Tibet and was the source of all wisdom that is now in the country.¹⁹ Given Desideri's familiarity with the story of Padmasambhava/Urgyen—which, as we know from the *Relazione*, is also colored by severe criticism—it is not impossible that this is who he had in mind, despite the fact that of course one may have continued all the way to the original Buddha for the beginning of his chain.²⁰ Desideri then deploys this argument to challenge the belief that karma can explain the emergence of samsara: If the karma that comes from meritorious work depends on the practice of the virtues—and as he says, with an interesting twist, with the accumulation of happiness—and if it is also true that the karma of demerit comes from indulging in vice, and thus, the accumulation of unhappiness, all births must be the consequence of a previous life. This approach however does not answer the question of how this cycle of lives might have come

into being: If the effects, namely, the rebirths, have existed without a beginning, it is not possible to say that the cause has not existed without a beginning, since something must have caused the initial birth of every sentient being either in a happy or unhappy realm.²¹

It is important to note that already at this stage, Desideri acknowledges that the Tibetan emphasis on the transitoriness of all things is not without its merits: After all, everyone knows that “all things come into existence and disappear,” or “living beings arose, are born, and then disappear.” The teaching of codependent origination almost echoes the thrust of Ecclesiastes: There is nothing new under the sun, since everything that happens today has already happened in the past and will again happen in the future. Everything is vanity and no one can presume to escape. But what the teaching of *pratityasamutpada* does not acknowledge is that if all things at first did not exist and then they existed, there must have been a prime mover who arranged the whole world in an orderly fashion from the beginning. In words that echo the Anselmian ontological argument, Desideri notes that the cause that sustains the universe must then be perfect and in complete control of the universe.²² Desideri then searches through Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim*, as well as Asvaghosa's *Praise in 150 Verses*, to observe that even Tibetans have the desire to seek refuge in a perfect cause and turn the Buddha into a virtual paradigm of perfection.²³ This is a very intriguing discussion in and of itself, and indeed quite a few Buddhist schools are quite critical of the high Buddhological tendencies that Desideri mentions here. There is no explicit mention here of the teaching of the Buddha bodies, but Desideri might have been familiar with its Gelug version, whose notion of four distinct *kāyas* does tend to push toward a crypto-theistic reading of the Buddha nature.²⁴ His point is that Tibetans have an unacknowledged desire for a first cause to provide ontological support for *pratityasamutpada*, and they turn the Buddha into such a cause, but the Buddha *cannot* be such a cause, because, despite all his extraordinary attributes, he could not possibly possess “great power and rule over everyone without limits.” Clearly, only a God could meet such a requirement. What Desideri might have made of an even higher Buddhology such as that of Dol po pa (1292–1361) will most likely always remain speculative,²⁵ but the point, once again, is clear: The Tibetans' own system ultimately proves the rationality of Desideri's position, once we bring into the open the implications of the system.

Desideri pursues a similar strategy in part II of the *Byun K'un*s that is devoted to the study of emptiness. In the second section of part II Desideri engages five different assertions “upheld by Tibetans” about the non-existence of substance, and concludes that they all contain a kernel of truth, but are all vitiated by their failure to believe in an ontological basis. The first one is that all things exist without substance and depend on a cause; he quotes Nāgārjuna's claim in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that all things “have to be understood” through action and agent, which means that all things exist only insofar as they are interdependent.²⁶ The second claim is that substance is a concept of the mind and is not derived from a real object and its condition; since all aggregates arise from interdependence, whatever arises in interdependence can never become an independent substance.²⁷ The third claim, which is traced in the

writings of Candrakīrti and Bhāvaviveka, is that *śūnyatā* is not a substance that undergirds the whole of reality, since by examining the nature of all objects by way of logic, no such ontological ground will be found there.²⁸ The fourth claim, again backed by quotations from Candrakīrti and other Madhyamaka authors, is that there is no such thing as an independent subject; anything called “I” and “mind” is just a collection of *skandhas*.²⁹ The last claim is that all sentient and non-sentient beings cannot arise from themselves, though, in a further twist, it is also claimed that they cannot arise from another thing, or from themselves and another thing simultaneously, without a cause; the latter three sub-claims, to which we shall return below, are meant to challenge the very notion of causality as an explanatory tool.³⁰

Desideri then offers six different counterarguments, all of them based on the claim that the negation of a First Cause (or Supreme Being) does not withstand logic. Desideri acknowledges that all things are interdependent, but observes that interdependence “makes no sense” if there is no supreme and independent Being on which the flux of codependent origination actually depends.³¹ If there were no Supreme Being, one would have to admit, paradoxically, that codependent origination is independent of causality; or in other words, if everything is *śūnyatā*, the whole cause-effect system falls apart, and Madhyamaka collapses into the nihilism from which it so carefully seeks to distinguish itself. Desideri then acknowledges that individual subjectivity is caught in the web of cause and effect, but humans owe their existence to the Supreme Being in whom there is “no division of parts,” no aggregates, and no members. Finally, he contends that denying the six types of arising amounts to denying existence itself, since otherwise we would have to accept that all things exist from all time without a cause, or “they would have to arise spontaneously all together and in every place.”³² Desideri is adamant that the untenable nature of the five Madhyamaka claims listed clearly emerges once you rely “on the logic of absolute reason”; Tibetans, he alleges, rely solely on the logic of the senses, or relative logic, and that prevents them from apprehending the reality of the ground of being, since the latter cannot be apprehended through the senses. In other words, Madhyamaka thought requires supplementation through Scholastic-Aristotelian logic; without it, it is like a horse that can run but “goes off track,” and Tibetans are like “passengers boarding a coach that has only one wheel.”³³

After this brief survey of the *Byun K'uns* argument, we could make two initial observations. The first is that Desideri engages the Madhyamaka tradition from a partial fulfillment approach, as he believes that there is much that is true and valuable in that tradition, but the tradition is flawed and in need of metaphysical correctives. Much as the other Jesuit missionaries of his time, Desideri does not immediately move on to present the content of the Christian revelation, but uses reason to critique the metaphysical framework of his adversaries, in preparation for an explicitly theological exposition of Christianity, which, however, remains outside the scope of this work. The second point, which is perhaps less obvious but is crucial if we are to understand the ultimate value of his approach to interreligious dialogue, is that Desideri views his interlocutors as themselves primarily engaged in offering a metaphysical account of reality centered on the notion of causality, albeit one that

he has weighed and found wanting. This is where Jay Garfield's reading of Madhyamaka—through his reflections on the vision of Nagarjuna—may cast a different light on this conversation.

Garfield presents Nāgārjuna's thought—and by extension, the whole Madhyamaka tradition—as a form of "skepticism," distinct from both "dogmatists" and "nihilists."³⁴ The goal of skeptic thought is to offer "skeptical solutions" to counter nihilism's attack on the existence of reality, while at the same time capitulating to what Garfield calls "the metaphysical excesses of reificationism." Skeptical solutions can be applied to the notion of material substance, the existence of the self, or the very notion of linguistic meaning. The skeptic will deny that ordinary discourse about reality or subjectivity implicates the concept of a substance; rather, what gives sense to our talk about objects, or about individuals, are the conventions or practices that structure our individual and collective lives. Similarly, assertions about the correctness of linguistic assertions do not rest on an ontological connection between language and reality, but on "a network of social conventions regarding word use."³⁵ Garfield argues that one can find traces of this "skeptic" epistemology in thinkers as radically distinct as Wittgenstein and Tsong kha pa.

The same approach can then be applied to the notion of causality. Reificationists claim that the regularities we experience in nature can only be explained by a fundamental causal power that is possessed by causes and that enables them to bring about their effects. The nihilists deny the existence of such a causal power, and thus claim that explanations of causality are impossible. Skeptics will deny that regularities indicate the existence of a causal power, but claim that it is possible to offer a causal explanation that is grounded in regularities. Garfield argues that skepticism effectively engages in a methodological inversion, which posits the centrality of social conventions, rather than the givenness of reality, as the ground of all epistemological claims. The goal of all philosophical enquiry is this, to accept phenomenal reality as precisely "conventional" and devoid of all foundation beyond convention. In the *Essence of True Eloquence*, Tsong kha pa notes that the *dbarma* will teach one to reject mistaken views such as the reification of non-conventional existence of permanent phenomena, on one hand, and the repudiation of conventional reality, on the other; rather, one must accept phenomena such as arising or ceasing as conventional.³⁶ Once you accept this approach, you will see that investing causes with causal powers bringing about specific effects will not add anything to our understanding of natural regularities, since we would still have to explain in what way the causal power caused the effect (perhaps one should ascribe a causal power to the causal power, and so on *ad infinitum*). A skeptic reading of natural reality will then dispense with the Aristotelian taxonomy of causes without for that reason falling into the pit of nihilism.

Garfield then invites us to turn to the first chapter of the *Mulamadhyamakakārikā* and explore how Nāgārjuna distinguishes between causes (*betu*, *rgyu*), on one hand, and conditions (*pratyaya*, *rkyen*), on the other.³⁷ The former is used to indicate events or states that possess as parts of their nature a power to bring about an effect, whereas the latter indicates events or states that can be appealed to when explaining other

processes, without however postulating any metaphysical commitments between the two. Nāgārjuna then argues against the causation in general while offering a positive account of codependent origination and the relation between the conditions and what is conditioned. So the negation of the four forms of causality that is one of the five Madhyamaka claims Desideri sets out to critique does not trap us in the pit of nihilism; rather, it suggests that to explain phenomenal regularities a different strategy is needed altogether. The opposition between inherent existence of substances and their complete non-existence is a false dichotomy; rather, one should transcend this epistemic dualism pointing at the regularities that take place in nature, and arguing for their hermeneutic sufficiency. According to Nāgārjuna, the rejoinder that it would then be impossible to distinguish between coincidental and causal sequences, and that in the absence of specific causal powers, things could arise randomly from things that are non-conditions, is profoundly mistaken, since effects that lack inherent existence will depend upon conditions that in turn lack inherent existence—indeed, without the latter, the former would not arise. Asserting the emptiness of *śūnyatā*, as opposed to the existence of an ontological ground in the form of a First Cause, amounts to asserting the emptiness of our explanatory practice and the resulting causal discourse: Codependent origination simply is the coherent and therefore explicability of the universe. Nothing else is needed.³⁸

Western readers of Madhyamaka often tend to distinguish the two truths postulated by this system as ontologically distinct, as if one were talking of two levels of reality that inform each other like Plato's world of the ideas and world of shadows. The difference between conventional and ultimate is a difference in the way phenomena are conceived; the lack of inherent existence in phenomenal entities is not understood as the lack of a property that some other reality—a First Cause, or Supreme Being—could actually possess, but rather as the lack of an attribute that it is actually impossible to possess. The claim that codependent origination requires the presence of an original cause providing ontological ground, no less than temporal beginning to the chain of dependent arising is thus a misunderstanding of Nāgārjuna's notion of codependent origination, where the existence of material reality—and individual subjectivity—is asserted in the very absence of inherent existence.

Where does this reading of Nāgārjuna leave Desideri's *Byun K'uns*? His critical reading of Madhyamaka and his attempt to supplement it with Aristotelian correctives reflects an unspoken, but at the same time rather evident belief in the universality of the Aristotelian discourse on causality, with the attendant Thomist conflation of an Aristotelian First Cause with the God of the Christian revelation. Desideri's resulting critique of the Madhyamaka tradition through this Aristotelian lens informs his understanding of codependent origination as a cosmic chain of causes and effects that lacks the initial link setting the process in motion. It is certainly the case that within this particular framework, the system of *pratityasamutpada* would be incomplete, and "logic" would demand the presence of a First Cause. *Śūnyatā*, however, transcends the taxonomy of causality altogether as it rests on the self-explanatory and exhaustive presence of a web of conditions engendering phenomenal regularities even in the absence of inherent substances invested with causal powers. The rejection of a First

Cause does not lead to nihilism, but is merely part and parcel of an acceptance of an explanatory strategy that affirms the normativity and indeed the sufficiency of socio-linguistic convention.

Desideri clearly believed that Madhyamaka philosophy could be corrected and appropriated as part of a broader Christian apologetic strategy, much as Athanasios of Alexandria and the Cappadocians took over—and significantly modified—numerous insights from Hellenist thought.³⁹ In contemporary terms, we would say that his theology of religion reflected a partial fulfillment model, where all religious traditions contain elements of truth that will develop their full potential when encountering the Christian revelation. In that respect, his extraordinary role in the history of Buddhist-Christian understanding cannot be minimized, and his respect for, and willingness to explore, the religious tradition he encountered will remain an example for anyone engaged in interreligious dialogue. This positive assessment, however, cannot erase some questions as to the methodological strategy employed in his apologetic writings, which appear to assume the universality of specific metaphysical categories even when mapping a significantly distinct speculative system. What a critical reading of the *Byun K'uns* actually reveals is that Madhyamaka and Aristotelian/Thomist scholasticism inhabit distinct metaphysical worlds, and that an informed approach to dialogue requires an awareness of this tension. If Aristotelian causality and *pratityasamutpada* cannot be made to fit into each other's system, they can still engage in conversation, and like different religious traditions in the mutuality model, gesture at the ultimate reality that transcends them both.

NOTES

1. Ippolito Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* I, 3, 3, in Guido Stucco, *When Thomas Aquinas Met Nagarjuna: Two Works by Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* (Create Space Independent Publishing Network, 2016), 190. Stucco's translation of the *Byun K'uns*, however, is not based on the original Tibetan text by Desideri, but on the Italian translation by Fr. Giuseppe Toscano, SX, published in 1989 by the Italian Institute for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies (ISMEO). Stucco's volume also contains a translation of the *Tbo Rang*s (The dawn).

2. See Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

3. It may be worth noting that this volume does not represent the latest stage in the evolution of Paul Knitter's thought on the question of religious pluralism. In the volume *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: One World Publication, 2013), Knitter recounts his decision to take refuge with Buddhist Lama John Makransky and his increasing acceptance of a pluralist position.

4. Paul Knitter, op. cit., 20–23.

5. See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book VII.

6. See *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions 'Nostra Aetate'*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

7. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), chapter 6.

8. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 109–125.

9. Ibid., 192–202; also Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2002.

10. For some basic biographical and bibliographical information about Desideri, see the introduction to this issue. The literature on the Jesuit missions is vast and ever expanding; among some recent publications, see Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011); C. Joe Arun, *Interculturation of Religion: Critical Perspectives on Robert de Nobili's Mission in India* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corp., 2007); Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

11. For the history of the Gelug ascendancy in Tibet after the early seventeenth century, and the role of Prasangika Madhyamaka as a virtual state philosophy, see Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), 392–419; Sam Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 114–146.

12. See Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, chapter 6; *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. R. C. Zaehner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), Book XI.

13. For an introduction to *pratītyasamutpāda*, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), chapters 1 and 3.

14. In this regard, Desideri's apologetic strategy is no different from Ricci's attempt to evidence the propaedeutic value of Chinese beliefs about the Tao; see Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trans. Douglas Lancashire (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985).

15. Stucco, *When Thomas Aquinas Met Nagarjuna*, 138.

16. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns*, I, 1, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 140).

17. Desideri's *Relazione* offers the only Western record of the political struggles that plagued Tibet in the years between the Sixth Dalai Lama's "disappearance" and the enthronement of the Seventh—a period that culminated in the Dzungar invasion, the eventual arrival of Chinese troops, and the stationing of an imperial garrison in Lhasa; it is significant that the *Relazione* contains hardly any mention of the Dalai Lamas, while it devotes ample space to the political maneuvers of Lha-bza Khan, the de facto ruler of the country whom Desideri calls "king." See Ippolito Desideri, *Mission to Tibet: The Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri S. J.*, trans. Michael Sweet, ed. Leonard Zwilling (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), Book II, chapters 9–13. See also Sam van Schaik, *Tibet: A History*, 114–145.

18. See *Summa Theologiae* I, Q2, A3; Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* I, 1, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 141–142).

19. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* I, 1, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 145–147).

20. In fact, in Desideri's account, Padmasambhava's behavior appears cruel and arbitrary—one more argument for the demonic origin of his supernatural powers. See Desideri, *Mission to Tibet*, Book III, 398–406.

21. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* I, 1, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 152–158).

22. Ibid. (in Stucco, op. cit., 159).

23. Ibid. (in Stucco, op. cit., 162–163). It appears that Desideri translated the whole of Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo* into Italian; unfortunately, the translation is lost.

24. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, chapter 8, 172–187.

25. Dol po pa's *zheng tong* (other-empty) understanding of Buddhahood is in stark contrast to Tsong kha pa's *rang tong* (self-empty) understanding, which would become part of Prasangika Madhyamaka philosophy. See Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, chapters 112–115.

26. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 2, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 211).

27. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 2, 2 (in Stucco, op. cit., 215).

28. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 2, 3 (in Stucco, op. cit., 216). *Zhen tong* approaches to Buddha-nature could be used as a conceptual springboard for a contextual articulation of the notion of divine essence, but again, Desideri may have never come across this particular approach.

29. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 2, 4 (in Stucco, op. cit., 220).

30. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 2, 5 (in Stucco, op. cit., 224).

31. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 3, 1 (in Stucco, op. cit., 232).

32. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 3, 5 (in Stucco, op. cit., 274).
33. Desideri, SJ, *Byun K'uns* II, 3, 6 (in Stucco, op. cit., 286).
34. Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6–8.
35. Garfield, op. cit., 8–12.
36. Tsong kha pa, *Legs bshad snying po* (Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies Press, 1998), 171, in Garfield, op. cit., 12–13.
37. Garfield, op. cit., 27–33.
38. Garfield, op. cit., 40–44.
39. On this theme, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).