Speaking Silently: Nagarjuna and the Paradox of Ultimate Reality

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SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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FOR

Senior Thesis

December 4, 2022

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, or *MMK*, the Indian Mahayana Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna explicates his philosophy of the Middle Path. In a series of twenty-seven chapters, each on a different topic and containing a varying number of cryptic, poetic sections, he both offers positive arguments and confronts his various opponents' responses to those arguments. In the process, Nagarjuna manages to adhere to central Buddhist tenets and form his own original, rigorously defended foundation for these tenets. By the end of the *MMK*, Nagarjuna has given an in-depth account of his perspective on emptiness, the difference between conventional and ultimate reality, and his scheme of the Middle Path. But for its thoroughness, his philosophy is fraught with prophetic obscurity. For most of the book, he tirelessly breaks down conventional concepts which block us from attaining knowledge of ultimate reality. But near the end, he turns this analysis back on itself, revealing his very analytical scheme to be, according to itself, just as nonexistent as the conventions it debunks. To understand Nagarjuna's project, therefore, is to understand the impossibility of satisfactorily interpreting it. By drawing brief connections to other thinkers, namely Heidegger and Kant, I will elucidate an underlying paradox at the limit of reason, thus developing my final argument: that Nagarjuna's dialectic offers an anti-position, a poetic puzzle which traces around the ineffable groundlessness of ultimate reality and lures the reader indirectly toward philosophical silence. It is only in this light that we can properly absorb Nagarjuna's *MMK*.

I.1 Conventional and Ultimate Reality

Framing Nagarjuna's entire project, and Buddhist philosophy generally, is the dichotomy between conventional and ultimate reality. The conventional reality of things comprises the

perspectives we normally take on reality–the names, categories, and structures we ascribe to the phenomena around us. Buddhist philosophy consistently aims to uncover the ultimate nature of things by removing the illusions of convention. If we understand how things really are, we see the ultimate nature of things, ideally achieving the state of non-dual knowledge, or *prajna*.[1] Nagarjuna faces two camps of opponent in the *MMK,* each blocked from *prajna* by its own flavor of misunderstanding. On the one hand, the reificationist believes in the inherent existence of the phenomenal world. The nihilist, meanwhile, takes ultimate reality to be the only true reality, sitting behind a completely nonexistent, purely illusory conventional world.[2] Nagarjuna will construct frequent rejoinders to each opponent. In fact, Nagarjuna's particular strategy in the *MMK* is to refute all metaphysical analyses which *posit* concepts, and therefore to show that the categories we use, being conventional, block us from ultimacy. Because explicating ultimate reality is such a central goal, it seems reasonable to assume that most or all of the *MMK* would be written from the perspective *of* ultimate reality, or at least with some access to ultimate reality. As we will see later, this is not so clear at all.

I.2 Essential Nature, Emptiness, and Dependent Arising

A persistent question in the *MMK* is whether certain worldly phenomena have essential natures. If something holds an essential nature, it has always inherently existed in that form, and nothing in the phenomenal world could possibly disrupt or change that form. Nagarjuna's most used conceptual devices are the ideas of dependent arising and emptiness. The two ideas are quite related but hold some intricate differences. Dependent arising is undergirded by the traditional Buddhist idea of impermanence. In Buddhist thought, observable, nameable phenomena in the

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[1] Murti, 1955
[2] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

world are said to be impermanent; the exact process by which this impermanence is said to function involves an arising into existence, a staying in existence for some time, and then a ceasing. The "dependence" comes from the fact that conventional phenomena have conditions which cause them. Nagarjuna holds that in the conventional world, phenomena can be aptly described as fully dependent on their conditions. After rigorous analysis, if something is found to possess no essential nature, that thing is said to be empty. Empty things still exist in the conventional sense–we can still touch, feel, and form opinions about them. But they do not hold an ontologically grounded, independent existence. Their existence always relies–not just causally, but ontologically–on the existence of some other phenomenon or object.[3] Nagarjuna uses a form of analysis–often involving reductio ad absurdum arguments–which interrogates the ultimate nature of things. Again and again in the text, these analyses lead to the conclusion that a given phenomenon is empty.

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[3] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

Chapter 1: The Initial Analyses

1.1 Conditions

Let us explore the first of Nagarjuna's analyses–that of conditions, or causality. In this analysis, Nagarjuna shows his ability to distinguish phenomena's conventional existence from ultimate, essential reality they might hold. It is not metaphysically clear in what sense conditions bring about their effect, or how we should articulate this process. It is clear that in an everyday sense, we speak of certain events predictably leading to other events. And indeed, Nagarjuna does not deny this. It is perfectly logical to speak of conditions in the world, to draw "regularities" of past and future events around us. In everyday parlance, Nagarjuna outlines four types of conditions we might refer to: efficient conditions, percept-object conditions, immediate conditions, and dominant conditions. Because all four types of conditions play the same metaphysical role for Nagarjuna, a brief illustration of just immediate conditions will suffice. If we see a lemon seed sprout, we might ask why it sprouted. An answer in terms of an immediate condition might say, "because the cells inside the seed enlarged sufficiently." As you might suspect, leading up to such an event is an infinite supply of possible explanations at different levels of perspective. This flexible interpretability is a key property of the conventional, constructed world.[4]

Nagarjuna wants to look deeper, and figure out if the nature of causality can reveal something about the ultimate nature of things. He first considers whether there is some special metaphysical power within a cause which makes it a cause. There are many schools of thought–Buddhist schools, in fact–which indeed reify causality in this way. The schools are broken into three major branches, defined by respective contentions:

1) *Phenomena are other-caused*

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[4] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

2) *Phenomena are self-caused*

3) *Phenomena are both other and self-caused*[5]

      The first school of thought argues that a phenomenon owes its existence to the multiplicity of other phenomena, conditions, which give rise to it. When a seed grows into a sprout, it owes its sprouting to its being watered, planted correctly, and given sunlight. The second idea is that phenomena actually hold within themselves all of the necessary conditions for their occurrence. In the case of the seed, the second school would argue that the true explanation for the seed's sprouting is somewhere *within* the seed–in other words, the seed literally holds the power to sprout within it. The third school of thought reaches a compromise between the former two, arguing that the conditions necessary for the seed's sprouting are actually both within and outside of the seed.

      A fourth school of thought argues that the former three are incoherent; this is the school to which Nagarjuna adheres in his ultimate analysis of causality. The line of reasoning is relatively simple: In all three of the cases above, the reifier posits some metaphysically existent "power to act" which conditions hold over their effects. In the case of the lemon seed, if there is a power to sprout somewhere within the seed or outside it, then this power exists as an independent, ontological entity. We must now ask from where this power comes to be. If it comes to be by virtue of some further conditions which themselves hold power to act, then we must ask what gave those further conditions the power to act over the initial power to act. And the line of questioning continues all the way down into an infinite regress. If, on the other hand, we say the power to act has no conditions underlying it, then there is no explanation at all for this power to act. This is "awkward", to use Garfield's terminology, given the reificationist's initial

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[5] Ibid.

commitment to explaining things in terms of causal powers.[6] Nagarjuna's conclusion here, from the ultimate perspective, is that there is no coherent way to posit that conditions hold an inherently real power to act, either over themselves or over other things. This is a key piece, but not a sufficient piece, of Nagarjuna's larger argument that phenomena don't have essences at all; for if the conditions of phenomena have no essences, then these conditions clearly cannot serve as the essences of those which they condition. This dual view leads Nagarjuna to the following seemingly contradictory verse:

> *There are no conditions without power to act.*
> *Nor do any have the power to act. (MMK I:4)*

Nagarjuna is charting here the Middle Path. From the ultimate perspective, he agrees that analysis debunks inherently existent powers to act. But this does not change the fact that we can speak coherently–in the conventional world–of causes leading to outcomes. So insofar as the fourth school of thought wholly denies even conventional causality, Nagarjuna rejects that school. As Garfield articulates, Nagarjuna relates conditions to the conditioned neither "through absolute difference," like the reifying schools, nor through "absolute identity," like the fourth nihilistic school.[7] In other words, we can conventionally say that the seed sprouts because the cells enlarge, but there is no literal inherent power connecting the enlargement of the cells to the sprouting of the plant. The following passage begins to paint a picture of Nagarjuna's dependent arising:

> *Neither from itself nor from another,*
> *Nor from both,*
> *Nor without a cause,*
> *Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (MMK I:1)*

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[6] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996
[7] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

1.2 Vision, Agent/Action, Motion

In his analyses of perception and agent/action relations, Nagarjuna more clearly explains his idea of emptiness, while doubling down on his criticism of reificationists. In Chapter III, Nagarjuna gives another cryptic passage:

> *Without detachment from vision there is no seer.*
> *Nor is there a seer detached from it.*
> *If there is no seer*
> *How can there be seeing or the seen? (MMK III:6)*

Some philosophers say that to have seeing we must have a seer, or put slightly differently, that the act of seeing is evidence of a seer. Nagarjuna argues against this form of reification. If we are to posit a seer, we posit something that somehow stands above or detached from the act of seeing. In the case that the seer is currently engaged in seeing, the reification might appear sensible. After all, as conscious beings capable of sense, it certainly feels as though we *are* something, that we exist prior to those actions we are able to take. We can all identify with Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*. But Nagarjuna seeks to show, through analysis, that this distinction cannot hold. Nagarjuna observes that to posit a seer is to posit an entity independent of the seeing in which the seer partakes. According to the reificationist's schema, seer and seeing are interrelated concepts, but in some way independent. Otherwise, they would not have different names. With seer and seeing separated, we now have the possibility of a seer who does not see, a clear absurdity. Recall, too, the definition of essence. For something to have essence is for it to always have existed in that fixed, essential, immutable form. Perception, though–as well as any case of an agent performing some action–is a relational process. To intellectually consider what it is to perceive X, we must hold a picture of X in our mind. A runner is only a runner insofar as

they are involved in the act of running. Nagarjuna generalizes accordingly. Agents and actions cannot exist independently or with essences, he says, for if they could they would be immutable and therefore would not be able to interact with each other.[8]

Nagarjuna engages in a similar analysis of motion. He begins the examination by stating that motion can only occur in the past or the future, since motion requires change, which can only occur over time. So motion cannot occur in the present. The reificationist responds, saying that motion simply occurs in the mover, in that which is moving. Then, Nagarjuna attacks the idea that motion and the mover can be separated inherently. If we separate the two ideas, we say that a mover does not need motion to exist. So we could theoretically have a mover who is not moving, which violates reason. Another way to frame this issue is to say that the reificationist must somehow posit a "twofold motion," one by virtue of which the mover becomes a mover, and one by virtue of which the motion itself actually takes place.[9] Motion requires a subject to be engaged in the motion (a mover). So we are left needing to posit two different movers for the two different motions, even though we started with one mover moving. In his analysis of motion, Nagarjuna strips common vocabulary of any inherent grounding it might have, ultimately building to the conclusion that "motion, mover, and route are nonexistent".[10]

Nagarjuna has shown the incoherence of positing that any such abstract concept as vision, motion, or the existence of agents and their actions could be posited to exist independently. These concepts rely in their very definition on their relation to other abstractions. The concept of a mover relies on currently existent motion. The concept of vision relies on currently existent seeing. While it will not be possible to cover them exhaustively, Nagarjuna uses similar reasoning in a series of further arguments against the inherent existence of phenomena. Taken

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[8] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996
[9] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996
[10] Ibid.

together, they lead to Nagarjuna's conclusion that phenomena generally lack essences. This is the foundation of the emptiness of the phenomenal world. Nagarjuna's picture of ultimate reality consists of the realization that phenomena–including concepts–lack intrinsic nature. In conventional reality, our concepts often appear independent by virtue of their discreteness or compartmentalization. Analyzing cases such as the agent/action dichotomy shows where those compartments are mere illusions, constructs. For metaphysicians, the conflation of fleeting concepts with essential things leads to faulty substantialist claims. In the soteriological context, it is the inability to see the fleeting impermanence of things that leads to people's suffering.

    We have seen Nagarjuna's cautions to the reificationist: do not put too much stock in the inherent existence of things, for their labeled existence only takes form in the mind. He makes a similar rebuttal against the nihilist, however. The nihilist posits that because such things as agent, action, perceiver and the perceived are not inherently existent, this means that they must be inherently *nonexistent*. To the nihilist, the picture of the world looks something like this: behind the illusion of convention lies a black void, called emptiness. This emptiness is, positively, the true nature of things. Any apparent concept, category, or picture of the world that we may see outside of this void is simply an illusion. The nihilist is supremely skeptical toward their natural awareness of things. It is in rebuffing the nihilist–and those who claim that Nagarjuna is one–that Nagarjuna charts his Middle Path. Nagarjuna never denies the existence of the phenomenal world. From a conventional, unanalyzed perspective, Nagarjuna sees that people move when they run, that lemon seeds cause lemon trees to sprout, and that I am the seer of my visage when I look in the mirror. He wants us to acknowledge, however, that these labels are nothing more than labels; they are temporary, conceptual encapsulations, defined only by their relations to other things. Motion is no more than the relative positions of things changing; it is not its own

positive entity. Vision is no more than the dependent experience of perceptive seeing; it is not its own positive entity. The lemon seed sprouting is a relational process, not a discrete essential power. Nagarjuna has thus sketched his picture of dependent arisings and relational definitions, where phenomena are found to be empty but still conventionally real.

Chapter 2: The Evaporation

2.1 Dependent Arising

Nagarjuna has painstakingly shown us what things are not. Abstractions such as agency, motion, and the self are not inherently existent. Instead, they undergo a process nearly ubiquitous in Buddhist philosophy known as dependent arising. Conventional phenomena arise out of conditions, and it is only in terms of these conditions that the phenomena are coherent. The conventional world, we now see, is a web of interrelations and interdefinitions. To put it more precisely and more in line with strict Buddhist typology, all "conventionally existent phenomena" undergo three stages in this dependent arising: arising, abiding, and ceasing.[11] To clarify further, we might try to sketch a positive account of this world whose foundation seems to be this dependent arising. Take a given phenomenon. Eschewing extreme nihilism, we can conventionally say that it exists, and that it owes its existence to its conditions. That is to say, it exists not ultimately but conventionally. Is dependent arising solid ground, perhaps the ontological foundation, for this picture of the world? To find out, Nagarjuna asks the following question:

> *If arising were produced*
> *Then it would also have the three characteristics.*
> *If arising is not produced,*
> *How could the characteristics of the produced exist? (MMK VII:1)*

If dependent arising does so much important work, surely it must exist in some sense. And according to dependent arising, to exist is to be produced. There seem to be two significant possibilities for how this arising of the arising could occur. On the one hand, dependent arising could undergo some higher order form of dependent arising, a special arising distinct to it. Or it

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[11] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

could, like a web caught in its own strands, be subject to itself. Nagarjuna quickly dispatches with the first possibility, seeing that any higher order form of dependent arising would cause an infinite regress, much like that of causal powers. So he wonders if dependent arising can be subject to itself. If dependent arising itself dependently arises, then it also shares the three characteristics. From this follows an immediate issue: if dependent arising, supposedly the fabric of the conventional world, is caught up in the same cyclic impermanence as everything else, then it seems that it would cease to exist at some point, leaving the world devoid of dependent arising. The situation does not improve when we take a more microscopic look. Nagarjuna investigates the three characteristics in turn, testing whether they can hold ontological independence.

Arising

Arising is the first of the three characteristics, and perhaps at first glance the most critical. As Nagarjuna says,

> *If a nonarisen entity*
> *Anywhere exists,*
> *That entity would have to arise.*
> *But if it were nonexistent, what could arise? (MMK VII:17)*

As discussed in the very first chapter, the power of arising lies in the fact that without it, our conventional reality loses all common sense. To talk of a concept or phenomenon is to treat it as having arisen. But looking squarely at the concept of arising itself, how does arising arise? We are again trapped in a bind: if we posit a higher order arising, then we are launched into a regress. If we posit that arising need not arise at all, that it simply exists without the need to come into existence, then we must wonder why other conventional phenomena cannot appeal to such a simple explanation for their existence.

Abiding

We know that a phenomenon must endure for a certain period of time. If we posit stasis as the force which allows it to stay, then we must ask what allows this stasis to stay, and we are left with the same regress as above. An abiding phenomenon does stay for some period of time, but the means by which it does so cannot coherently be explained by that very same force of stasis.

Ceasing

Nagarjuna's discussion of ceasing explores more deeply the problematic relationships between the three characteristics. Nagarjuna turns his attention to the nature of a phenomenon which is said to be undergoing ceasing. Is it possible for this ceasing thing to arise? Clearly not, since it is already undergoing a later stage of the three-part process.

> *The arising of a ceasing thing*
> *Is not tenable.*
> *But to say that it is not ceasing*
> *Is not tenable for anything (MMK VII:21)*

The latter half of the passage above reinforces Nagarjuna's idea that all conventional phenomena must cease. Now we turn to the relationship between stasis and ceasing:

> *The endurance of a ceasing entity*
> *Is not tenable.*
> *But to say that it is not ceasing*
> *Is not tenable for anything. (MMK VII:23)*

Stasis and ceasing suffer from the same relational problem as arising and ceasing. In sum, there is a lack of inherent grounding in the relationship between the three characteristics. The three characteristics are, at any one moment, mutually exclusive, preventing one characteristic

from depending on another for its existence–even though dependent arising was initially meant to provide this exact process for all conventional phenomena. Ultimately, Nagarjuna is at a loss for any deeper principle that could govern the behavior of the three characteristics.

> *The ceasing of what has ceased does not happen.*
> *What has not yet ceased does not cease.*
> *Nor does that which is ceasing.*
> *What nonarisen can cease? (MMK VII:26)*

This last passage centers squarely on ceasing, finding that there is never really a moment we can point to that identifies the existence of ceasing. Where does ceasing occur? It clearly cannot occur in something which has already ceased, nor in something which is yet to cease. Even in the case of a currently ceasing thing, there is a problem. For as soon as this "ceasing thing" actually ceases, it no longer is a ceasing thing, which is to say, a ceasing thing cannot really cease. The analysis of the conditioned reaches the dual conclusion that there is no way for inherent, definable things to undergo true dependent arising, and there is no way for dependent arising to be an inherently definable phenomenon. Recall that the original picture of dependent arising involved a sea of interdependent phenomena whose existences were fleeting. If we take the fleetingness seriously, we understand that, in the words of Garfield, "there is literally no time for them to arise, to endure, or to decay."[12] The three characteristics cannot really inhere in anything we can ontologically ground or assign a static identity to. We have sought an inherent ground of reality within one of the core principles of the *MMK*, and we have come up with nothing. By showing the characteristics of dependent arising to be empty upon analysis, Nagarjuna has shown that dependent arising cannot be a positive explanatory foundation of the world. In fact, Nagarjuna reminds us that dependent arising was only ever a conventional picture

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[12] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

of the conventional world. It is the conventional picture which most closely models the impermanence of phenomena; it tells us a great deal about how phenomena behave and interact. But as a descriptive picture of things, it only maintains coherence when separated from what it describes. Dependent arising *is* a high-order picture of things. It tells us about the behavior of all phenomena. But ultimately, as just another phenomenon, it can't be coherently posited to exist in an ultimate sense. No matter if we analyze it as a broad, all-encompassing mechanism of the phenomenal world, or in specific instances where it might act on phenomena, we come up empty. Nagarjuna rejects the idea that "there must be an explanatory basis, an independent entity that has characteristics, as an explanation of the occurrence of any characteristic." The proper way to understand dependent arising is as a nameless, formless backbone of things, not as an active engine doing positive work in the world. In other words, dependent arising is conventionally real, but empty:

> *Like a dream, like an illusion,*
> *Like a city of Gandharvas,*
> *So have arising, abiding,*
> *And ceasing been explained. (MMK VII:34)*

2.2 Emptiness

Nagarjuna has shown phenomena and concepts to be, on analysis and therefore in an ultimate sense, empty. It is only in Chapter XXIV, the Examination of the Four Noble Truths, that Nagarjuna gets explicit about this emptiness. The chapter begins with the concerns of an opponent. After witnessing Nagarjuna dub dependent arising empty, the opponent fears that Nagarjuna has assigned a blanket nonexistence to the phenomenal world. In a world where everything is empty of inherent existence, anything we try to grasp onto, build, or strive for is

meaningless. This includes, the opponent worries, the teachings of the Buddha. Nagarjuna seems

to have dismantled Buddhism itself. The opponent says:

> *If all of this is empty,*
> *Neither arising, nor ceasing,*
> *Then for you, it follows that*
> *The Four Noble Truths do not exist. (MMK XXIV:1)*

This opponent is particularly concerned about the emptiness of dependent arising. But

Nagarjuna responds in force. The opponent, says Nagarjuna, has conflated the emptiness of

dependent arising with the conventional nonexistence of dependent arising. Like a "man on a

horse who denies that very horse," Nagarjuna's opponent has inserted their own view of

emptiness–a highly dualistic view in which emptiness is the opposite of conventional

existence–and thereby equated Nagarjuna with an extreme nihilism.[13] Nagarjuna turns the

discussion around, observing that the risk of extremism really lies in the opponent's equating of

existence with inherent existence and therefore of emptiness with nonexistence. There are two

possible sides to this extremism. The reificationist–or substantialist–side of the spectrum fully

affirms the inherent existence of reality, therefore denying emptiness completely. The nihilist

extreme, on the other hand, affirms an inherently existent emptiness, denying reality completely.

To the nihilist, if we consider emptiness and conventional existence to be opposites, and we

believe in the emptiness of things, we are forced to believe that all conventional reality is an

illusion, completely false, utterly void. But as Nagarjuna has been at pains to remind us,

conventional reality cannot be denied. To deny conventional reality is to deny existence, deny

experience. As the proponent of a Buddhist school tasked with eliminating suffering, to deny the

experience of suffering is clearly counter-productive.[14]

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[13] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

[14] Ibid.

We will now cover the climax of Nagarjuna's dialectic through the case of a table. When the reificationist sees a table, she sees something with the objective, inherently existent quality of being a table. There might be different ways she comes to the conclusion that the table *is* a table; it might be due to its appearance, or perhaps what it is able to functionally provide her. But affirming the observable nature of things, she substantiates the table as a table, and considers ridiculous the assertion that the table is in any way empty.[15] The nihilist, on the other hand, performs some deep analysis on things. He sees that none of the attributes we assign to the table really provide a ground. Since he can reveal each attribute to be only relationally defined, he concludes that the table is empty. And taking empty as the opposite of existent, he concludes that the table before him literally does not exist. It is only the third analysis, that of the Middle Path, that makes sense to Nagarjuna. The follower of the Middle Path accepts that the table before them is a table in the conventional sense, and that its existence as a "table" is only relational and dependent and therefore empty. The end of the analysis is where things take their most surprising turn, however. At a most climactic moment in Nagarjuna's philosophy, it turns out that the proponent of the Middle Path has one last step to take: instead of simply concluding that the table is empty, they consider this proposed emptiness with the same eye that led them to it in the first place. In one final philosophical move, Nagarjuna sees that this emptiness, as a dependent concept, a conditioned piece of analysis, is empty too.[16]

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[15] This is not a fair encapsulation of substantialist positions on things like metaphysics, which usually involve positions whose inherent existence are more compelling than that of a table. But it helps to illustrate the idea.

[16] Nagarjuna & Garfield, 1996

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way. (MMK XXIV:18)

Perhaps we should not be *too* surprised at this final stage of Nagarjuna's dialectic. After all, it is clear to see that emptiness is just another mental concept we have been using to analyze conventional things. But whereas the emptiness of dependent arising was troubling for the existence of the conventional world, the emptiness of emptiness calls into question the entirety of Nagarjuna's argument. As we will see shortly, this argumentative evaporation leaves us with confusion instead of any potential interpretation; our only hope, ultimately, lies within this confusion.

Chapter 3: A Groundless, Silent Peace

After using reason to pierce seemingly stable conventional concepts, Nagarjuna has now turned reason back on itself in a final transcendent evaporation. Throughout the initial stages of Nagarjuna's dialectic, emptiness is the final analytical point. When Nagarjuna finds perspectives on motion, vision, and causality to be empty, he is clearing away confusion and leaving the reader with a clearer sense of the true nature of things. Emptiness appeared to have this power. So to Nagarjuna, the statement that something is empty is a statement with metaphysical weight. But now that he has called this emptiness *itself* empty, we might reasonably conclude that Nagarjuna's philosophy is self-refuting–that Nagarjuna has failed, and we should return to an acceptance of conventional reality as the only reality. This is the conclusion of the quietist, and it looks like a rebuff to Buddhist attempts at understanding. The reader at this stage is excused for feeling, if not defeated, utterly confused. At this point, we should investigate the two eminent interpretations of Nagarjuna–Siderits' "semantic"[17] interpretation and Murti's "Kantian" interpretation. Both interpretations take certain tenets in the same way–they both accept that the world of thoughts, categories, and constructs are housed within the conventional, for example. Their final conclusions on Nagarjuna, however, seem to be diametrically opposed. Analyzing this opposition will give us insight into the basic paradoxical difficulty of Nagarjuna's thought.

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[17] Ferraro, 2013

3.1 The Interpretations

Siderits and Garfield take the emptiness of emptiness as a grand "unification" of the conventional and the ultimate. The upshot, articulated originally by Siderits, is that "the ultimate reality is that there is no ultimate reality."[18] This is a visibly paradoxical statement. It seems to be positing, simultaneously, that there is an ultimate reality and that there is none. Indeed, Graham Priest, a follower of this interpretation, takes it as an endorsement of dialetheism, or a logical system that allows for contradictions. Siderits' interpretation certainly embodies a lack of finality. And perhaps this will save Nagarjuna from confusion! If we understand convention to be the world of words and concepts, and we take Nagarjuna's project to be the disintegration of all positive metaphysical claims founded in words and concepts, then this lack of finality seems appropriate: there is no ultimate reality, because any so-called ultimate reality we might posit is a mere conventional attempt. This seems satisfying. But after one more level of reflection, we are back to the same problem. For this conclusion, too, in positing itself as a satisfying encapsulation of the status of ultimate reality, commits the same sin of convention. We can simply continue asking how such a statement claims to have knowledge about ultimate reality. There is no escaping this limitational paradox. In an article called *Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought*, Garfield & Priest use simple set theory to eloquently outline the structure of such a paradox.[19] What makes this a paradox is that it simultaneously involves the phenomenon of enclosure and that of transcendence. When we speak of ultimate reality, we seem to enclose it within language. But by its very nature–and according to the very words we are supposedly enclosing it with–ultimate reality is such that it cannot be enclosed. First, Priest asks us to imagine a set Ω, which comprises all ultimate truths. Now, imagine a function $\delta(X)$, which takes as its input a set

[18] Siderits, 1997
[19] Garfield & Priest, 2003

X, and outputs a sentence stating, "there is nothing in X". When we apply this function to the set

Ω, we reach the sentence: "there is nothing in the set of all ultimate truths," or, more clearly,

"there is no ultimate truth." According to Siderits' interpretation, this sentence, $\delta(\Omega)$, is an

ultimate truth, and so can be safely enclosed within the set Ω. This is the enclosure step of the

paradox, stating that $\delta(\Omega)\epsilon\Omega$. However, recall that what $\delta(\Omega)$ actually outputted was the

statement that Ω was empty. So, if $\delta(\Omega)$, then Ω is empty, meaning that $\delta(\Omega)\notin\Omega$. This is the

transcendence step. Since $\delta(\Omega)\epsilon\Omega$ directly contradicts $\delta(\Omega)\notin\Omega$, we see that Siderits'

interpretation of things leaves us with an unsolvable paradox.

Murti

In the 18th century, German philosopher Immanuel Kant became engrossed in a similar

paradox of transcendence. This led T.R.V. Murti to directly analogize the two in his work *Central

Philosophy of Buddhism*. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant outlines the existence of two

realms: the phenomenal realm, which includes that which we can conceptualize and understand,

and the noumenal realm, which involves intrinsically existent things which transcend empirical

understanding. Exemplary members of this transcendent, non-understandable noumenal realm

include God, and complete freedom of will. Murti's interpretation is that Nagarjuna's

conventional and ultimate realities map respectively onto Kant's phenomenal and noumenal

realms. This interpretation seems to free us from some of the problems of Siderits'. According to

Murti, ultimate reality *does* exist, but it exists in such a way that we will never be able to

describe its existence. We no longer have to confront the enclosure/transcendence paradox, since

the Kantian Nagarjuna simply posits some far away, inaccessible ultimate reality, separated from

our convention by a gulf of conceptual failure.[20] Murti's interpretation calls into question the

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[20] Hogan, 2009

unification of the conventional world with the ultimate world which was causing us so much trouble.

Unfortunately, the separation cannot really hold. Despite initial appearances, the paradoxical rears its head in the Kantian interpretation, too. Given Murti's agreement that the conventional world encompasses words and categories, we must accept that his encapsulating sentence: *that the ultimate reality cannot be described*, is a conventional sentence. So far, so good–until we see that the sentence is clearly describing ultimate reality. If ultimate reality cannot be described, then we really cannot believe this sentence. And if we cannot believe the sentence, then we do not know whether ultimate reality indeed is describable or not. This is strikingly similar to the issue of the transcendental illusion which Kant confronts in the *CPR*. Indeed, to Murti, "[Kant and Nagarjuna]'s systems may be taken as the philosophy of philosophies–the reflective awareness of the working of philosophy."[21] Kant first establishes various phenomena as existing *a priori,* or necessarily and without any prior judgment. But then in his transcendental dialectic he establishes that, after all, because he has reached some understanding of them, these very phenomena are confined within the "limits of experience," or the phenomenal realm. Empirical knowledge, Kant found, can falsely masquerade as access to the noumenal realm. Kant called this the "transcendental illusion". Most troubling of all to Kant is that this illusion, like the moon's appearing bigger near the horizon, does not disappear once we have identified it as an illusion. Therefore, certain categories and phenomena, to Kant, enjoy "empirical reality" but "transcendental ideality." Once again, we seem to be back at a puzzling picture of unity between that which we can and cannot understand. The argumentative paths

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[21] Murti, 1960

sketched below give an idea of each interpretation's problems. Note that both lead to inevitable

ambiguities.[22]

Siderits' Interpretation:

1. *The ultimate reality is that there is no ultimate reality.*
2. *(By accepted definition) Sentences can only contain conventional truths.*
3. *Either*
    a. *(1) holds the ultimate truth of things*
        i. *(From (1) and (3.a.)) There is an ultimate reality.*
        ii. *(From (1) and (3.a.)) There is no ultimate reality.*
        iii. *Contradiction between (3.a.i.) and (3.a.ii.)*
            1. *Ambiguity*
    b. *(From (2)) (1) is merely conventional, and therefore cannot say anything ultimately true*
        i. *(From (3.b.)) We do not know anything about ultimate reality.*
            1. *Ambiguity*

Murti's Interpretation:

1. *From the conventional perspective, ultimate reality is indescribable. Attempting to describe it will lead us to paradox.*
2. *(By accepted definition) Sentences can only contain conventional truths.*
3. *Either*
    a. *(1) holds the ultimate truth of things*
        i. *(From (1) and (3.a.)) Conventional statements cannot describe ultimate reality.*
        ii. *(From (2)) (1) is a conventional statement*
        iii. *(From (3a)) (1) holds the ultimate truth of things.*
        iv. *(From (a.i.), (a.ii)., (a.iii).) Conventional statements both can and cannot describe ultimate truths.*
            1. *Ambiguity*
    b. *(From (2)) (1) is merely conventional, and therefore cannot say anything ultimately true.*
        i. *(From (3.b.)) We do not know whether ultimate reality is "indescribable" from the conventional perspective.*
            1. *Ambiguity[23]*

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[22] Murti, 1960
[23] Murti, 1960

Each interpretation has a corresponding encapsulating sentence. Armed with an understanding of the difference between conventional and ultimate reality, we start our analysis of each encapsulating sentence with a question: does the sentence contain an ultimate truth, or is it merely a conventional sentence? All four interpretive possibilities (two for each interpretation) leave us with a paradox-fueled ambiguity; no matter what, we are blocked from coherent knowledge about ultimate reality. The two interpretations are thus unified by an underlying groundlessness. That is, we do not know where the ground of our knowledge, or perspective, lies, and thus we cannot say anything final or coherent about ultimate reality–not even that. We seem to have been forced into silence.

3.2 Heidegger, Groundlessness, Peace

20th century existentialist Martin Heidegger confronted a similar form of groundlessness in his 1927 *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time). One of his initial questions in the book is: what makes beings in the world be? To answer this question, he seeks to ground reality with a stable ontological basis. An ontological basis, or ground, is a backdrop on which all other things depend for their very existence.[24] More basic than causal (or any other form of) dependence, ontological dependence is defined by some as that which cannot be defined in any more basic terms.[25] In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger is after the ground which "determines entities as entities."[26] He believes, much like Nagarjuna in the latter's rebuff to the reificationist, that this ground will have to be undefinable in deeper terms. In other words, it will not do for that which defines being to itself be defined by a deeper being. Such an answer would lead to an infinite regress. Eventually, Heidegger hypothesizes that the ontological ground of reality is Nothingness, or *das*

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[24] Tahko & Lowe, 2020
[25] Correia, 2012
[26] Heidegger, 1962

Nicht. Nothingness, or total absence, averts the problem of the infinite regress. But then he

encounters a paradox:

> *What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has*
> *something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in*
> *advance as something that 'is' such and such. We posit it as a*
> *being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from.*
> *Interrogating the nothing–asking what, and how it, the nothing*
> *is–turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question*
> *deprives itself of its own object.[27]*

Because of the nature of Nothingness, trying to understand it completely changes it. Eventually,

Heidegger gives poetic elaborations, stretching language to its very limits to grasp this

Nothingness:

> *We assert: the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation….*
> *Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing….*
> *We know the Nothing…. Anxiety reveals the Nothing…. That for*
> *which and because of which we were anxious, was*
> *'really'—nothing. Indeed: the Nothing itself—as such—was*
> *present…. What about this Nothing?—The Nothing itself*
> *nothings.[28]*

According to Heidegger, the notion of being must in a certain sense be a vacant notion,

merely involving something we know fully from experience–that we are, that things are. The

actual state of being, to Heidegger, is simply a contrast against true Nothingness–Nothingness

not as a reified positive concept, but as the ontological basis.[29] Unfortunately, there appears to be

no way to describe this, and the "thingliness" of our attempts perpetually get in the way. This is

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[27] Heidegger, 1962
[28] *(Heidegger as quoted by Carnap 1932, 69)*
[29] Sorensen, 2022

analogous to the interpretations of Nagarjuna, where we attempted to ground our understanding, or lack thereof, of ultimate reality within terms that by their nature altered the form of ultimate reality. Our attempts to encapsulate the paradox of encapsulation simply perpetuate the paradox.[30] So no matter what we say about emptiness and ultimate reality–and no matter what perspective we think the statements are grounded in–we end up lost. The question of what to conclude from Nagarjuna's philosophy, therefore, cannot be answered. The naive optimist may have fully believed Nagarjuna's analytical deconstruction of motion, vision, and more experientially relevant phenomena such as suffering. But upon the emptiness of emptiness, she sees that such "deconstruction" was as much a construct as the initial constructs themselves. Troublingly, the quietist might see that any attempt to understand ultimate reality leads to failure, and thus she might abandon ultimate reality and return to a full belief in conventional reality. But the quietist perspective is just as contradictory as the naive optimist's. The quietist's contradiction is in the fact that she seems to simultaneously believe and not believe in the teaching of emptiness. It was the emptiness of emptiness that turned her off to ultimate reality, so she clearly takes the emptiness which applies itself to emptiness seriously. But she does not seem to take the initial discoveries of emptiness very seriously at all, since she ends up turning her belief back to the conventional world, a world Nagarjuna thoroughly described to be empty. As Nietzsche observes and the quietist forgets:

> *The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained?*
> *The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have*
> *also abolished the apparent one.[31]*

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[30] Casati, Priest & Scott, 2018
[31] Nietzsche, 1998

The *MMK* is a book meant to be read in its dialectic entirety. Without the initial analyses of convention, we do not see the hollowness of the everyday. Without the emptiness of emptiness and the final limit paradox, we are lulled into a naive sense of victory, an egoistic securing of truth. We can only see the profound relativity of convention once we accept that convention traps us, and no final "understanding" can set us free. This is a groundlessness, a spiral that leaves us with a feeling of philosophical impotence. But somewhere beyond empirical thought there may be hope. In *Sein und Zeit,* Heidegger discusses the direct phenomenological confrontation with pure Nothingness. Somewhere within the ineffable, he muses, and between the gaps in our reason, we are able to intuit the groundlessness of our existence; we know the meaning of what cannot be said. Nagarjuna's dialectic, by obliterating the logical coherence of words, points us toward this direct understanding. Our impotence indicates a truth in silence, a truth already here, not to be discovered outwardly but realized inwardly. This is not a lazy return to convention, for we've seen the power of earnest thought. It is precise and focused, a practice of self-reflection and the questioning of *all* convention. We with our finalities are bound up in that truth we might describe, and any truth we chase is bound up in our finalities. Like Escher's drawing hand, we cannot get a full picture of that which we are a part of. After reading the *Mulamadhyamakakarika,* we might wonder what we have been able to learn about ultimate reality. The answer, *prajna,* does not exist.
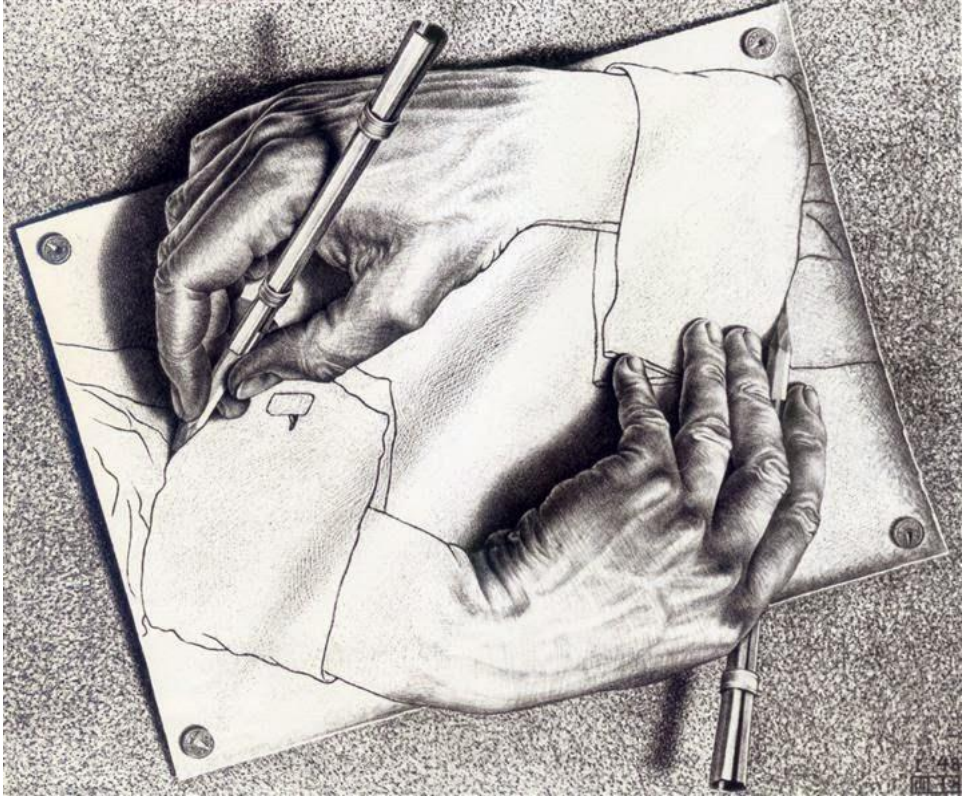
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