Abstract

This chapter offers a reading of the *Root Verses* which anchors Nāgārjuna's thought in its intellectual context. Against the background of his second century CE times, Nāgārjuna offers a fundamentalist reformation of Buddhist ideas, centred on restoring dependent arising to what he takes to be its original conception and its original centrality. In Nāgārjuna's view, dependent arising should *replace* – and not supplement or qualify – conceptions of being, thus undermining all metaphysical individuation *tout court*. Only this, he argues, will free us from the mesmeric power of individuating misconceived as apprehension instead of creation. The epistemic implications of abandoning individuation (without individuation there is no assertion; without asymmetrical relations between distinct terms, there is no explanation) explain both the style of the *Root Verses* and the elusive, apparently sceptical manoeuvres of the *Dispeller of Disputes*. The epistemic challenges posed by non-individuating are offered pragmatic resolution in the *Precious Garland*, which neither isolates nor assimilates conventional and ultimate reality and their associated concerns. Thus the new understanding of dependent arising revises the shape of our practical-soteriological task: from one of seeing ultimate reality as it is, to one of seeing experienced reality as dependent.

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Nāgārjuna

Dependent Arising Without Any Thing Arising[1]

Amber D. Carpenter

With Nāgārjuna (c. second–third century CE), we come to the first named philosopher in the Buddhist tradition, and certainly one of the most significant. As with Plato, half the fun of Nāgārjuna (when it does not lead to blood on the carpet) is that there are nearly as many Nāgārjunas as there are serious students of his work – with the added layer of complication that it is even more radically contested what counts as Nāgārjuna's work. Yet, so little is securely known about Nāgārjuna the person that the best way to anchor a referent for the name is via his works, traditionally including 'analytical' treatises, several practical works (for instance, the *Letter to a Good Friend* [*Suhṛllekha*]), and a number of hymns. While scholars have disputed whether the same person is indeed responsible for all these works, for philosophical purposes, it is not necessary to adjudicate the matter. For within philosophical discourse, the analytic text *Root Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*; abbreviated as *MMK*) may be taken as criterial: Nāgārjuna is, by definition, "the author of the *Root Verses of the Middle Way*," the founding text of what became over t ime a distinctive understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought known as Madhyamaka.[2]

About Nāgārjuna-the-author-of-the-*Root Verses of the Middle Way* as a person, we know very little with certainty. It is said that he was born into a Brahmin family and converted to Buddhism, and possibly even worked as advisor at the Sātavāhana court on the Deccan Plateau.[3] He wrote in Sanskrit, not in one of the various vernaculars as

[2] Ruegg (1981) is still unsurpassed for a scholarly philosophical overview of the history and literature of Madhyamaka thought in India.

[3] Joseph Walser (2005, 61–88), argues for the dates and place, for which there is cautious scholarly support; Walser argues more specifically that Nāgārjuna "wrote the *Ratnāvalī* within

was common practice among Buddhists at the time, thus situating his thought within the wider pan-Indic intellectual discourse, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

It is broadly accepted that Nāgārjuna so defined also wrote the *Dispeller of Disputes* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*) [4] and other treatises grouped together in Tibetan doxography as Nāgārjuna's 'analytic' works, namely: the *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* (*Śūnyatāsaptati*), with accompanying commentary by Nāgārjuna and later commentaries by Candrakīrti and Parahitabhadra;[5] the *Sixty Verses on Reasoning* (*Yuktiṣāṣṭika*), widely-cited in Madhyamaka debates (quotes appear in, for instance, Bhāviveka, Śāntarakṣita, and Candrakīrti, who also wrote a commentary on the whole);[6] *Crushing the Categories* (*Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*), which critiques non-Buddhist metaphysical categories;[7] and, possibly in this group, and at any rate mostly agreed among scholars to be by the author of the *Root Verses*, the *Precious Garland* (*Ratnāvalī*; abbreviated as *RĀ*), a letter of advice to a prince containing within it a healthy measure of articulation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka.[8]

Naturally, disagreements continue.[9] But in some cases, at least, settling these disagreements may not be vital for philosophical purposes: if the ideas in the *Letter to a Good Friend*, for instance, are so generic that any Mahāyāna Buddhist might have composed them, then we may allow the attribution to stand,[10] so long as any

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a thirty-year period at the end of the second century in the Andhra region around Dhānyakaṭaka (modern-day Amaravati)" (Walser 2005, 61).

[4] Westerhoff (2010) offers a lucid translation of, cogent commentary on, and introduction to the *Dispeller of Disputes*.

[5] Komito (1987) translates just the verses from Tibetan into English, as do Tola and Dragonetti (1987), which includes the Tibetan, as well. Lindtner (1982, 34–65) translates verses with auto-commentary from Tibetan into English. Erb (1997) offers a partial translation of Candrakīrti's commentary into German.

[6] Lindtner (1982, 102–19) offers a translation of the Sixty Verses, as do Tola and Dragonetti (1995); Loizzo (2007) includes a translation of Candrakīrti's commentary along with the verses.

[7] Westerhoff (2018a) offers a translation of *Crushing the Categories*, tackling in the introduction the question of attribution. Tola and Dragonetti (1995) also offer a translation into English.

[8] Translation of the Precious Garland from the Sanskrit can be found in somewhat old-fashioned English in Tucci (1934; 1936). Hopkins (1998) provides a more modern English translation, from the Tibetan.

[9] Pind (2001) and Tola and Dragonetti (1995) have challenged the attribution of Crushing the Categories, for instance, while in the opposite direction, Lindtner (1982) has a more expansive (and therefore more contentious) list of authentically Nāgārjuna texts, including in addition to the previous: the *Letter to a Good Friend*, *Proof of Convention* (*Vyavahārasiddhi*), *Four Hymns* (*Catuḥstava*), and *Verses on the Heart of Dependent Arising* (*Pratītyasamutpādahṛdayakārika*), among others.

[10] Nāgārjuna need not think that his Middle Way is distinct from other Mahāyāna interpretations of the Buddha-dharma in all respects in order to think there are important enough differences.

interpretation of it is guided by an understanding of the *Root Verses* and not the other way round. The question acquires philosophical interest only if taken as evidence for some broader claim – for instance, that the *only* ethical implications of Madhyamaka are generically Mahāyāna. Similarly, regarding the hymns attributed to Nāgārjuna but possibly retrospectively ascribed to him: the Buddhist tradition of associating these with Nāgārjuna is long and deep, and from the point of view of what the figure of Nāgārjuna stands for in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this association is significant. For philosophical purposes, however, the *Root Verses* will be used to interpret the hymns, and not the other way round.[11]

There is, of course, a great deal this leaves open. In particular, one might wonder whether the largely metaphysical[12] – or semantic,[13] or epistemological,[14] or anti-rationalist[15] – *Root Verses* have any bearing at all on ethical conduct. Here the beloved but disputed text, the *Precious Garland*, comes to the fore. If this text is by Nāgārjuna, in our sense of that name, then it could give, first of all, some confirmation that Nāgārjuna took the views articulated in the *Root Verses* to be consistent with

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[11] We are, incidentally, similarly situated regarding Plato's dialogues and the letters traditionally attributed to him. See Burnyeat and Frede (2015) for recent discussion.

[12] See Arnold (2005, 6, 117; 2010; 2012); also see Westerhoff (2009a) – an excellent resource for getting to grips with Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophically – and Shulman (2011). Thomas Wood (1994) proposes a metaphysical nihilist interpretation; see also Westerhoff (2016). Oetke (2007) proposes metaphysical illusionism as a viable alternative (though Oetke [2011] rejects metaphysical readings). Ferraro (2013; 2014) proposes 'realist antimetaphysics,' which is as much metaphysical as Kant's critical philosophy may be. Priest and Garfield (2002) offer a logical reading of the Root Verses, more metaphysical than epistemological in its claim that Nāgārjuna endorses a paraconsistent logic that sanctions true contradictions, though it may also be given a semantic construal, as Garfield endorses in Siderits and Garfield (2013).

[13] Ruegg (1977; 1983); Garfield (1996); Siderits (2003b; 2007) (semantic non-dualist).

[14] Arnold (2010) focuses on explanation, while Ferraro (2017) is epistemological in a rather different, anti-metaphysical way. Matilal (1986, Ch. 2) and Mills (2018) present Nāgārjuna as a skeptic, as does Garfield (1994) (explored further in relation to later Madhyamaka in Dreyfus and Garfield [2010; 2021]).

[15] Huntington (2018, 156) argues that "to insist that Nāgārjuna's sole or overriding concern is to make rational sense is to forget that looking for meaning in these terms is – at least in principle – only one possible methodological approach to interpretation of his writing." Huntington characterizes the *Root Verses* as a literary work of art aimed at inducing "a recognition of the limits of reason and a willingness to surrender to the groundless space below or beyond those limits, which are as well the limits of memory and imagination, of desire and fear" (Huntington 2007, 125). See also de la Vallée Poussin (1933, 59), and more recently Stepien (2019) for an anti-argument reading of Nāgārjuna and of the *Root Verses*. Such an approach has less difficulty explaining the practical implications of the *Root Verses*, but while it may arise from and lead to provocative philosophical reflections, it does entail removing the content of the text from the sort of philosophical discourse in which Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, for instance, placed it – a discourse in which, as Tillemans (2017, 111) puts it, "the particularity of the Madhyamaka is that it emphasizes philosophical analysis as a method of leading to the quietening of thought."

continued engagement with conventional reality and with hortatory reform within that discourse; and second, it would give some indication of what such a Madhyamaka engagement might look like – or it might alternatively confirm that Madhyamaka differs from other Buddhist views only in its conception of the ultimate goal, without that bearing on everyday conduct.

The Buddhism Nāgārjuna adopted upon entering the Buddhist fold was of the Mahāyāna sort – although precisely what Mahāyāna meant, apart from the growing clarity that it was different from the other Buddhist views and practices dominant at the time, was still under construction. Indeed, Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses* constitutes an important move in the formation and definition of the Mahāyāna, as it gradually acquired that distinctiveness from other Buddhist views which retrospectively appears so categorical.

In the early part of the first millennium of the Common Era, a subset of views within the eclectic Abhidharma tradition became increasingly correlated and distinguished from all other Abhidharma strands of thought. Usually associated with the Mahāsāṃghikas, these ideas included the supermundane nature of the Buddhas, and bodhisattvas who make vows to remain in *saṃsāra* for the sake of helping suffering beings. This subset of associated views began to come together with the new injection of ideas – such as Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) and an emphasis on emptiness – from the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*), texts 'discovered' from perhaps the turn of the millennium and recognised by some – but not all – Buddhists as authentic *buddha-vacana*, words of the Buddha.[16] While Mahāyāna was, by Nāgārjuna's time, a distinct label for those working out an interpretation of the Buddha-dharma centred on these notions, such an affiliation was not yet so distinct as to warrant distinct communities of practice, and Mahāyānists of Nāgārjuna's time and place would have been practicing in mixed monasteries alongside other assorted Abhidharma Buddhists.[17]

It is within this dialectical context that Nāgārjuna offers his interpretation of the Buddha-dharma. He is a Mahāyānist, and in that, he can be expected to be critical of Abhidharma views where they differ from the Mahāyāna. At the same time, his aim is to legitimate the Mahāyāna, and his strategy for doing so will be two-fold: first, to offer

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[16] The *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight-Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), which by some accounts was composed by – or at least prevalent among – the Mahāsaṃghikas of the Andhra region (where Nāgārjuna may also have hailed from), may be especially relevant; according to P. L. Vaidya (1960, xvii) it was the exclusive *prajñapāramitā* text to which Indian Buddhist philosophers attended.

[17] This is a cause for some of the difficulty in determining just how distinctive and exclusive Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas were. As Walser (2005) observes, under these conditions of communal living, Mahayanists had to present themselves as not so very different from their brethren if they hoped to have resources devoted to the copying and preservation of their texts.

the most defensible interpretation of key notions any Buddhist must recognise (and this will include the critical enterprise of demonstrating alternatives to be incoherent); second, to demonstrate that this reading more accurately captures the original thought of the Buddha, from which his Abhidharma competitors offer unwarranted departures. Nāgārjuna is thus typical of a fundamentalist reformer, legitimating what is innovative by presenting it as a reclamation of the original thought from which more established interpretations have in fact departed.

Nāgārjuna seems not to have had much immediate impact on Buddhist thought, whether because his view was simply unexceptionably Mahāyānist[18] or because his argument was to Sanskrit speakers so obviously fallacious.[19] Although there were apparently others, only one early commentary on the *Root Verses*, entitled *Fearless* (*Akutobhayā*), survives at all. And there was an immediate successor, Āryadeva, who took up the Madhyamaka banner energetically enough to be considered nearly a co-founder of this distinctive interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. A flurry of interest some centuries later, in the commentaries and debates of Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka in the late fifth century, and Candrakīrti in the sixth, revived Madhyamaka as a (to varying degrees distinct) Mahāyāna alternative to Yogācāra.[20] Since the *Root Verses* is an enormously opaque text, most attempts to come to grips with Nāgārjuna's thought therefore do so by reaching back through these layers of interpretation, particularly through the Tibetan reception of Candrakīrti's interpretation of Madhyamaka.[21]

In what follows, however, I will use a reading of the *Root Verses* to anchor an articulation of Nāgārjuna's thought from the other direction – *viz.*, as it arose in the intellectual context of second-century CE Buddhist thought. Against the background of his own times, Nāgārjuna's fundamentalist reformation hinges specifically on a recovery of what he takes to be the original and correct teaching of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and the centrality this ought to hold in relation to all other teachings. Associating the distinctively Mahāyāna notion of emptiness with dependent

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[18] As Westerhoff claims, the *Root Verses* is "not primarily conceived as a treatise with a specific sectarian orientation, but as a fundamental Mahāyāna text" (Westerhoff 2018b, 121).

[19] Hayes (1994) argues that transparent equivocation explains the delayed effect of Nāgārjuna on the development of Buddhist philosophical thought.

[20] Garfield and Westerhoff (2015) largely explore the rivalry between these two Mahāyāna views, but Westerhoff's and Shulman's contributions suggest that the hostility may not be there in Nāgārjuna. There were also important Mahāyāna syncretists.

[21] This is so for at least the bulk of the Anglophone scholarship. A notable exception to this is Kalupahana (1986); Shulman (2008) is a more recent instance, while Shulman (2010) identifies the tendency to assimilate Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti in the contemporary Anglophone scholarship on Madhyamaka, and gives specific reason why we should be cautious about taking Candrakīrti as our authority in understanding Nāgārjuna.

arising should legitimate the Mahāyāna as more authentically capturing the Buddha's original thinking than subsequent Abhidharma thought had managed.

On Nāgārjuna's view, dependent arising should *replace* – and not supplement or qualify – conceptions of being, thus undermining all metaphysical individuation *tout court*. Only this, he argues, will free us from the mesmeric power of individuating misconceived as apprehension instead of creation. The epistemic implications of abandoning individuation (without individuation, there is no assertion) explain both the style of the *Root Verses* and the elusive, apparently sceptical manoeuvres of the *Dispeller of Disputes*. And finally, so understanding the nature and centrality of dependent arising indeed revises the shape of our practical-soteriological task, from one of seeing ultimate reality as it is (instead of as it is constructed) to one of seeing experienced reality as dependent, or even seeing the ultimate reality of dependence *in* the fabrication of ordinary thought and life. The implications of this can be seen in the *Precious Garland*, which bridges everyday practical and ultimate concerns.

Fundamentalist Reformer: Centering Dependent Arising

To see which fundamentals of the Buddha's teaching Nāgārjuna wants to reclaim, there is nowhere better to look than the verse of praise of the Buddha that frames the *Root Verses*. These apparently formulaic verses which open Buddhist Sanskrit philosophical texts indicate the author's priorities and the lens through which we are to understand the text which follows.[22]

The *Root Verses* are framed with:

> I salute the Fully Enlightened One, the best of orators, who taught the doctrine of dependent arising, according to which there is neither cessation nor arising, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither

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[22] Diṅnāga's *Compendium of Pramāṇas* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya*), for instance, opens by praising the Buddha as "the personification of the *pramāṇa*s." Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma, with Commentary* (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*), largely concerned with *prajñā* as the "discernment of *dharma*s" (*AKBh.* I.2a), begins by honouring the Buddha as the "teacher of the truth" who "has in an absolute manner destroyed all blindness," by which, the commentary notes, "the Blessed One is sufficiently designated" (*AKBh.* I.1). In each case, the Buddha is praised for having those features which are most valued by and essential to the ideas that follow.

singularity nor plurality, no coming nor going, for the auspicious cessation of *prapañca*.**[23]**

Exactly what this *prapañca* is which ceases will have to emerge from an interpretation of the *Root Verses*. According to Siderits and Katsura (2013), "*pra + √pañc* literally means to be prolix or excessively wordy" (*NMW*, 126); it is often glossed in Buddhist-English discourse as 'conceptual proliferation,' and that will do as a working approximation. The relevant point for present purposes is that it is the teaching of dependent arising for which the Buddha is praiseworthy; and this teaching is *the* key to realising the supremely desirable end, characterised here as the stilling of *prapañca*. Nāgārjuna does not pick out the Buddha as a knower nor as supremely compassionate, and he entirely neglects familiar themes distinctive of the Buddha's teaching – no self, non-clinging, impermanence, suffering and the roots of suffering.**[24]** The opening verse does not so much as hint at themes more closely associated with the Mahāyāna, such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*).**[25]** Instead, Nāgārjuna selects dependent arising as the sole basis for the Buddha's praiseworthiness.

Half the verse,**[26]** in fact, is given over entirely not to praise of the Buddha but to characterisation of dependent arising – and the manner of its characterisation is striking. First, dependent arising is characterised entirely through matched pairs of negations, which is even more evident in the Sanskrit where each word of the first two lines begins with an alpha-privative. This is very far indeed from earlier *sutta* formulations of dependent arising as "from *this*, *that*" – as, for instance, "with ignorance as condition, formations [come to be]; with formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, materiality-mentality."**[27]** Second, one of those negations is actually a negation *of arising itself* – unarising (*anutpādam*) seeming to

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[23] The translation is that of Siderits and Katsura, leaving out material they supply in square brackets, using '(dependent) arising' for their '(dependent) origination,' and leaving untranslated '*prapañca*,' which they render as 'hypostatisation.'

[24] Notice that both Vasubandhu and Diṅnāga, by contrast, connect their selected qualities of the Buddha to his beneficence: "he has drawn the world out of the mire of transmigration" (*AKBh.* I.1); he "seeks the benefit of [all] living beings" (*PS* I.1.1). They praise other qualities of the Buddha, as well, in particular his beneficence, while Nāgārjuna selects exclusively the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising for praise.

[25] Nor is there reference to *svabhāva* (translated, variously, as 'own-nature,' or 'self-nature,' 'intrinsic nature,' 'essence,' and even 'own-being'), as that which is lacked, despite the centrality of this to discussions of Madhyamaka; indeed, *svabhāva* is somewhat less central to the *Root Verses* generally than its prevalence in Madhyamaka discourse would suggest. Even Chapter 15, which Candrakīrti presents as an analysis of *svabhāva*, may rather be, as Bhāviveka's title suggests, "An Analysis of the Existent and Nonexistent." See Shulman (2007, 148–499) for a sustained argument that this term of art indeed holds less central significance for Nāgārjuna than most contemporary interpretations suggest.

[26] In the Sanskrit, this is the first half and not, as in the English translation, the middle portion.

[27] *MN* 38; cf. *SN* 12.1 (PTS ii.1)

negate the very thing that is asserted in dependent arising (*pratītysamutpadam*). This is an acute form of the tension pervasive in the whole verse, which holds dependent *arising* responsible for an auspicious *stillness* (*upaśamaṃ*, translated 'cessation' above). This tension in honouring the Buddha as the teacher of unarising dependent arising signals that not only will Nāgārjuna hang his exposition of the Buddha-dharma on *pratītyasamutpāda*, but his understanding of this central term will be challenging to the received orthodoxy.[28]

Nāgārjuna therefore opens the *Root Verses* proper by squarely situating his project with respect to the incontestable received teachings, the Discourses of the Buddha:

> Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause;
> Never in any way is there any existing thing [*bhāvāḥ*] that has arisen.
> (*MMK* 1.1)

In its deployment of the tetralemma – presenting and rejecting four ways beings (*bhāvāḥ*) might arise – this verse, and the chapter it announces, epitomises what the *Naked Ascetic Kassapa Sutta* (*Acelakassapasutta*, *SN* 12.17/ii.18–21) expresses more expansively, also deploying the tetralemma.[29] In the *Naked Ascetic Sutta*, the insistent ascetic Kassapa asks the Buddha whether suffering is created by oneself, by another, or both, or whether it arises spontaneously, and in each case, the Buddha replies negatively. He also rejects the suggestion that perhaps there is no suffering or he does not know that there is suffering. The baffled Kassapa asks the Buddha to teach him about suffering. "Kassapa," the Buddha replies,

> [if one thinks,] "The one who acts is the same as the one who experiences [the result]," . . . this amounts to eternalism. But, Kassapa, [if one thinks,] "The one who acts is one, the one who experiences [the result] is another," . . . this amounts to annihilationism. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: "With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness . . . . Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."[30]

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[28] See Arnold (2005, 169) for a similar understanding that in the Root Verses, "pratītya-samut-pāda must be associated with a novel, not commonly accepted import." Oetke (2007) concludes that "the linguistic meaning" of pratītyasamutpāda "and its notional significance is preserved whereas its conceptual import or its intension is completely novel" (Oetke 2007, 27).

[29] Alex Wayman argues that "Nāgārjuna, in the matter of the *catuṣkoti*, is heir to and continuator of teachings in the early Buddhist canon," the *catuṣkoti* (tetralemma) in its distinct uses being "found in early Buddhism and later in the Mādhyamika school," and "well represented in passages of early Buddhism, as preserved in the Pāli canon" (Wayman 1977, 10–11).

[30] Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi in *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom Publications).

While this discussion clearly has a pragmatic import – it is the origin of *suffering* that is under discussion – the Buddha's answer addresses the point from the most general angle; namely, how one should think of the origins of anything that arises. The false view of eternalism arises if one thinks, quite generally, "the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences" the result, while nihilism arises from supposing quite generally "the one who acts is different from the one who experiences." Nāgārjuna's first verse, seen in this connection, only makes explicit the generality implicit in the *sutta*'s tetralemma and, picking up on the 'created by' of the *sutta*, places the discussion squarely in the context of causes or conditions of arising.

With such a *sutta* passage in the background, Nāgārjuna's decision to present a discussion of conditions in the form of a tetralemma reinforces the message of the praise verse, that dependent arising is the focus of attention, since that is what is positively asserted as the Buddha's teaching at the end of the *sutta* passage. Nāgārjuna's audience will more specifically be primed already to anticipate the untenable implications associated with each limb of the tetralemma: the first option implying eternalism, the second nihilism, the third presumably inheriting the faults of both – since the "Dhamma by the middle" avoids both extremes, rather than mixing them – and the last is simply rejected.

The explicit reiteration in *Root Verses* 1 of so much of the *Acela Sutta* draws attention to what it leaves tacit, namely "the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the Middle." If there is any work for Nāgārjuna to do, it will be in interpreting this, the proposed alternative to the four rejected options – "with ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness" and so on, up to "this whole mass of suffering."[31] Here is where Nāgārjuna will challenge prevailing interpretations and offer his own version of dependent arising as an alternative.

What are these prevailing interpretations that Nāgārjuna challenges? While the centuries of interpretation since the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* took his teachings in various directions, and while it is difficult to determine with precision how exactly the various interpretations were developed at the time of the composition of the *Root Verses*, the evidence of a canonical Abhidharma text such as the *Conditional Relations* (*Paṭṭana*) suggests that "the Dhamma by the middle: 'With ignorance as condition, volitional

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[31] That the focus is on interpreting dependent arising is underscored by the *MMK*'s only explicit reference to a named discourse: "The Instructing of Katyāyana" (*MMK* 15.7a) refers to *SN* 12.15 (the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*), the core of which again has the Buddha not "veering towards either of these extremes," here between existence and non-existence, and again teaching "the *Dhamma* by the middle: 'With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness'" (trans. Bodhi 2000). Kalupahana (1992, 161) calls the *Root Verses* as a whole "a grand commentary on the Buddha's discourse to Kaccāyana" (*viz., SN* 12.15); but the *Naked Ascetic Sutta* (*SN* 12.17), which includes the "Doctrine of the Middle" passage of *SN* 12.15, prefigures also the tetralemmic approach to expressing it.

formations [come to be]'" was predominantly interpreted as a claim about conditions and causes. Conditions for arising were many and various – and identifying, distinguishing, and describing the conditions by which things arise was tantamount to grasping dependent arising.[32] For anything arising, there are multiple conditions for its arising and multiple further events or items for which it is a condition. This is dependent arising as a sort of hyper-distributed, massively ramified causation.[33]

This view is most naturally put in an ontological mode, but it can also characterise the phenomenological practices ascribed to the Theravādins of identifying and describing mental phenomena as conditions under which further mental phenomena arise.[34] Whether ontological or phenomenological, appeal to dependent arising so conceived works as a part of Buddhist doctrine and practice by deflecting away from the tendency to pick out and privilege one thing as *the* cause, without asserting the sheer non-existence of causes (thus avoiding being stricken by nihilism). Instead of one cause, there are always many causes, none of them autonomous (self-causing, or uncaused). Meditative practices of distinguishing the many contributing factors from one another enable us to recognise this massively interconnected network of dependencies. Any apparent object of desire or aversion, fear, or pride thus dissolves into countless strands of endlessly ramifying causal conditions, undermining the coherence of these afflictive emotions.

This general metaphysical point translates immediately to the personal context: there are no autonomous acts, and therefore no agents as we might feel ourselves to be or aspire to be. The self – both as agent and subject – dissolves into

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[32] Ronkin (2005) does some of the careful work necessary for articulating the interpretive moves made from Nikāya to Abhidharma Buddhism. Chapter 5 in particular details the transition from the Nikāya view of dependent arising to the early Abhidharma interpretation of it in terms of causation.

[33] This need not imply a well-worked-out theory of causation as such; contrast Kalupahana (1975) with Ronkin (2005) on whether there is or need be a theory of causation implicit in the analysis of conditions. Shulman (2008) argues for the priority of mental conditioning in the early Buddhist notion of dependent arising (rejecting *pratītyasamutpāda* as a "general principle of causality," 315), while Meyers (2018) argues that 'dependent arising' and 'causation' are false friends with only superficial and misleading similarity, but is concerned specifically with what modern notions of causation infelicitously import.

[34] Gethin 1992 and 2004, both focus on the practical aspect of Abhidharma classifications. Heim (this volume) offers an anti-metaphysical phenomenological reading of texts from the Pāli Abhidhamma. The advantage of the understanding of Nāgārjuna's critique which I unfold below is that its target might include not only such an ontologically reticent version of the Abhidharma, but also Abhidharma views at any point along the trajectory from *dhamma* as classificatory category to *dhamma* as ultimately existing entity (see Cox 2004; Ronkin 2005, Ch. 2.). Whether it would so readily tell against the sort of 'philosophical perception' and meditative phenomenon that Shulman 2014, Ch. 1, attributes to early, *sutta* Buddhism is less evident. Indeed, one reading of Nāgārjuna may be as arguing that just this is the original Buddha-dharma that the Mahāyāna returns us to, after Abhidharma deviations and codifications.

countless dependencies on both personal and impersonal factors. This eliminates the coherence of the notion of a real self that might be successfully distinguished from the rest. The result is not the discovery of the true self, but the acceptance that there is no self to seek, and no empty hole where a self *could* be.

Nāgārjuna's Critique: Its Target and Motivation

If this aptly, if impressionistically, characterises Abhidharma thinking about dependent arising, what, we might ask, could Nāgārjuna possibly find objectionable?

We might begin at the broad exegetical level. In the tetralemma of *SN* 12.17, all four limbs are *rejected*, and *Root Verses* I.1 explicitly picks up on this. The "Dhamma by the Middle" – that is, dependent arising – is offered *instead of* any of those four options. But any analysis of dependent arising that figures it as causes and conditions, however multiple, must necessarily present these multiple conditions and their results as either the same as or different from each other – that is, as either the first or second limbs of the tetralemma. But these options (as well as the option of combining or rejecting both), were *rejected* by the Buddha, as leading to eternalism and nihilism, respectively. So, any apt understanding of the Doctrine by the Middle must construe it as *an alternative to* causes and conditions, not as a special version of it.

This would be a textual basis for Nāgārjuna's objection, and for supposing this *is* what he is objecting to. But his objection, seen in this light, is not to any particular theory of causation, and it would hold even when all parties acknowledge that causation, as a relation, is merely nominal and not ontologically robust. Indeed, Nāgārjuna's objection is only incidentally about causation at all: in the first place, because distributed causation is how Ābhidharmikas mistakenly construe dependent arising (the topic it is essential to get right); and in the second place, because causal relations share problematic features of any relations and model the relevant features of any asymmetrical or asynchronous relation. The Buddha offered the Dhamma of the Middle as an alternative to *either identifying or distinguishing* cause and effect. What his Dhamma of the Middle rejects, then, is the identity *or* difference of any cause(s) and its/their effect(s) – and by extension, says Nāgārjuna, of any relata. The objection, it seems, is to the individuation of relata and, in *Root Verses* 1, of cause and effect in particular.

Thus, *Root Verses* 1 aims to show that if the relata 'cause' and 'effect' can be individuated from each other, then they cannot arise dependently. If the relata exist

prior to and independently of their relation,**35** then each must have a distinct identity: "Nowhere does there exist any such thing as an existent [*bhāvaḥ*] without defining characteristic"**36**; and "There is no existing thing [*bhāvaḥ*] that is without *svabhāva*."**37** But, Nāgārjuna reasons, if each relatum has its distinct identity independently of any relation to an other, then those distinct individuating natures themselves cannot be dependently arising.[38]They were either there all along and so did not *arise* at all (the first limb of Nāgārjuna's tetralemma) or else they pop into existence *apropos* of nothing (the fourth limb).[39] To make that which distinguishes an existing thing from everything else – that which makes it *this* individual – dependent on another, as the second limb of the tetralemma suggests (and as perhaps the Ābhidharmikas thought they were doing) is to acknowledge that there is no individual there to be related prior to the relation, and thus the whole notion of a web of causal relations between discrete individuals falls apart.

Massively distributed causation is not merely *not* dependent arising; it is antithetical to it, because it presumes the individuation of the relata, and such individuation requires independence. Thus, it is significant that the primary assertion of *Root Verses* I.1 is that "Never in any way is there *any existing thing* [*bhāvāḥ*] that has arisen."[40] No *bhāvaḥ* arises in any of the four ways because a 'being,' were there any, would be something distinct from other beings, something independently identifiable as 'this.' But there are no such things.

The practical objection to the Abhidharma conception of dependent arising as distributed causation is that it leaves individuation intact, not just as an apt characterisation of reality but also as a mode of thought, with its attendant implicit

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[35] Bastow (1994, 496) calls this "a principle which in general seems to be noncontroversial: that the existence of a relation demands the existence of its terms" and cites Saṃghabhadra as explicitly recognising it.

[36] *MMK* 5.2 uses *lakṣaṇa* for defining characteristic, accentuating that it is distinct identity which is at stake.

[37] *MMK* 13.3. See note 25 on translating *svabhāva*. This is, as Siderits and Katsura render it, said in the opponent's voice, but it thereby confirms that this is the conception at issue (see Shulman 2007, 150n29 for discussion of this point). This translation drops bracketed texts added by Siderits and Katsura, and retains "existing thing" for *bhāvaḥ*, to underline the connection between this and *MMK* I.1: The very same thing which "does not arise in any way" is something which necessarily has a proper, individuating nature.

[38] Ronkin (2005, Ch. 4) presents Abhidharma *dharma* theory as concerned centrally with individuation; and this includes reading the associated notion of *svabhāva* as this arises from the early Abhidharma (Ronkin 2005, 112–22) as that which identifies a discrete individual as what it is, and thus individuates it.

[39] All of this can be read in causal terms, or in more broadly explanatory terms.

[40] Compare *MMK* 12.1, "Some say that suffering is self-made, some that it is made by another, some that it is made by both, and some that it is without cause; *but it is not correct to think of suffering as an effect*" (emphasis added).

values.[41] There may not be well-individuated personal selves on the Abhidharma view; but this is explained – as in the much-discussed chariot analogy in *The Questions of Milinda* (*Milindapañha*), which itself is rooted in *SN* 5.10 – by appeal to the constituent elements on which such apparent wholes depend. These constituent *dharma*s enjoy the independent identity which persons and chariots lack, and enjoy greater claim to reality in virtue of that fact. The Abhidharma conception of dependent arising thus dissolves the personal self into countless "selves," retaining the notion that to be real is to have well-individuated identity independently of others – so that instead of pointing away from the self and the search for the self, the Abhidharma understanding of dependent arising as a way *dharma*s associate risks simply attaching us more to the notion that a clear delineation of independently specifiable individuals-in-relation gets at how things really are.

Nāgārjuna's Alternative

Nāgārjuna rejects distributed causation as the correct construal of dependent arising, and therewith the fundamental picture of reality as beings-in-relation. If well-individuated relata cannot be dependently arising, then conversely what dependently arises cannot be well-individuated.

Thus, in the course of the *Root Verses*, the point from Chapter 1 is generalised across any relations and relata,[42] with asymmetrical or asynchronous relations modelled on the examination of causation in Chapter 1 and symmetrical or synchronic relations modelled on the analysis of traversing-traversed in Chapter 2, which claims that it is both necessary and impossible to distinguish two conceptually dependent things (in this case, traversing and the space traversed, 2.1–5, or motion and mover[43]);

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[41] See Carpenter (2014).

[42] The focus on relata and relations is even clearer in the titles given these chapters by Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka than those more commonly used in English translations, given by Candrakīrti. For instance, where Candrakīrti has, "What is Prior" (Chapter 10), Bhāviveka offers "Appropriator and Appropriated"; Chapter 18 on "Self" is, for Bhāviveka, "On Self and Things"; for Chapter 20, instead of Candrakīrti's "Assemblage," Bhāviveka offers "Assemblage and Causal Factors."

[43] *MMK* 2.18–20 reads: "It is not right to say that the goer is identical with the act of going; nor again is it right to say that goer and act of going are distinct. If act of going and the goer were identical; then it would also follow that agent and action are one. If, on the other hand, the goer were thought to be distinct from the act of going, then there would be the act of going without a goer, and a goer without an act of going."

The analysis of sense-fields (*āyatana*s, Ch. 3), for instance, is modelled on this. See also the "Hymn to Him Who Has Gone Beyond," 11; "Hymn to the Unthinkable One," 11. Shulman (2010) argues that even the first half of this chapter concerns the relation between agent and

in Chapter 6 on Desire-Desirer, where there is dependence, one cannot have co-occurrence and distinctness together (6.8); Chapter 10 on Fire-Fuel concludes, upon consideration of the necessary mutual dependency of fire and fuel (10.10–12, *et passim*), that "they are not considered by us to be wise instructors in the teachings of the Buddha who describe the subject and existents in terms of identity and difference" (*MMK* 10.16). In each case, it turns out to be both *necessary* and *impossible* for what is distinct to be in relation.[44] This is a wholesale critique of *beings as individuals*, and one which can be extended to practices of individuation with minimal ontological commitment.[45]

Just as the Buddha's *anatta* teaching was not the assertion of an absence where a 'self' could have been, so Nāgārjuna's critique of individuation does not assert the contingent non-existence of what might have existed. On the contrary, Nāgārjuna insists that it is rather the very dichotomy between 'exists'/'does not exist' – set up by thinking in terms of discretely identifiable individuals in terms of identity and difference – which is the problem:

> What entity is prior to arising and the rest, what entity is simultaneous,
> and what entity comes after — these do not exist; the concepts of
> existence and nonexistence no longer apply there. (*MMK* 9.12)[46]

So this is not the view that there is nothing instead of something; only "those of little intellect . . . take there to be existence and non-existence with respect to things" (*MMK* 8.13). Rather, the conclusion is that there are no *things* – with the additional specification that it did not take much to be an Abhidharma 'thing' in the first place. Space, *nirvāṇa*, and the Four Noble Truths are, on one standard Abhidharma analysis, all distinguishable items – existing things in the sense of knowable *dharma*s – without being substances (*dravya*). And Nāgārjuna criticises these only tenuously thing-like individuals, too, on the same grounds that he criticises all purported beings (space, *MMK* 5; the Noble Truths, *MMK* 24; *nirvāṇa*, *MMK* 25). This is thus not merely the

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activity, rather than between locus and activity as Candrakīrti's interpretation, and the Siderits and Katsura translation, suggest.

[44] If Bastow (1994, 494) is correct and the Sarvāstivādins already defined their *dharma*s by their relations to each other ("the very being of a *dharma* is interpenetrated by those other *dharma*s which are causally responsible for its arising"), then Nāgārjuna is here either bringing to the surface an incoherence with their explicit commitments, or else pushing those commitments to their logical conclusions.

[45] This is important if Heim is right in interpreting Pāli Abhidhamma, of which Nāgārjuna should certainly have been aware, as primarily doing phenomenology, without making claims about ontology or the nature of existing things (see Heim, Chapter 9 in this volume).

[46] Chapter 8, on object and agent, particularly stresses the inadequacy of the real–unreal dichotomy; "intrinsic nature and extrinsic nature, existent and nonexistent – who see these do not see the truth of the Buddha's teachings" (*MMK* 15.6). See also 4.4, 5.7 (and 5.2 quoted in what follows). *MMK* 15.6 is immediately followed by a reference to *SN* 2.17.

rejection of robust Aristotelian substances as bearers of properties or as primary existents, but of any kind of individuatable 'this' at all.[47]

In place of things-in-relation, there is dependent arising. "Whatever exists in dependence, that is free of *svabhāva*" (*MMK* 7.16).[48] Thus, it is incoherent to demand an account of *what* arises dependently, for the very conception of dependent arising is the erasure of the model of individuals-in-relation.[49] In a move to appropriate, and perhaps implicitly critique, Mahāyāna notions of emptiness, Nāgārjuna goes on in *Root Verses* Chapter 4 to characterise this as the appropriate sense of that key Mahāyāna term, emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Drawing on Chapter 1's critique of causal relations, Nāgārjuna says that bodily form or *rūpa* (and likewise, the other "aggregates," or *skandha*s, 4.7) is neither separate from, nor similar to nor dissimilar to its cause, nor is it without cause. And he concludes by characterising this as a refutation and explanation based on emptiness (*MMK* 4.8–9). An argument based on emptiness, that is to say, is an argument based on the unreality of discrete individuals, as evidenced in the neither-same-nor-different character of any purported individuals.[50]

What arises dependently cannot be said to be identical to or different from that on which it depends (22.6–8); nor, for the same reason, can it be said to exist by means of *svabhāva* (22.9). "Thus," according to Nāgārjuna, "both that on which he depends and the one who is dependent are altogether empty" (22.10). Emptiness is thus presented as

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[47] Hence, the sense to be found in calling Nāgārjuna a nihilist, in a specific metaphysical sense. It is not that he asserts there is *nothing*, but he does conclude there are no *things*. See Westerhoff (2016) for a careful and incisive discussion of the various senses of nihilism, those that Nāgārjuna would be keen to avoid, those with which his opponents (then and now) might reasonably charge him, and the specific sort of nihilism which avoids those objections, and is distinct from the nihilism decried ubiquitously in Buddhism as an 'extreme view.' This latter sense, which Westerhoff attributes to Nāgārjuna, is rather similar to the view set out here, but Westerhoff underscores the 'substantiality' supposedly implied by *svabhāva,* while this account focuses on its individuating character.

[48] Compare *RĀ* 38–62, which associates correct understanding of dependent arising with rejecting the existent/non-existent dichotomy (v. 38, 42cd, 48–49, 56).

[49] Similarly, to suppose that after the critique of *Root Verses* I Nāgārjuna owes some *alternative* account of causation, some explanation of how things *do in fact arise*, is to miss the main point of the critique. Causation is critiqued to clear space for an alternative understanding of dependent arising. If the result of the critique is an understanding that dependency impugns individuation, then to even suppose there might be an account of causation is to be in the grip of an illusion.

[50] Emptiness as an alternative to existence (and non-existence), understood as having a distinct identity, is worked out in Chapter 13 (on suffering) and Chapter 15 (which Candrakīrti considers an analysis of essence (*svabhāva*), but which Bhāviveka considers "Analysis of the Existent and Nonexistent"); from here, as talk of *svabhāva* diminishes somewhat, references to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) – previously sparse – accelerate. Chapters 13 and 15 particularly look like they may be Nāgārjuna's attempt to correct mistaken notions of emptiness arising among the Mahāyānists.

non-individuatedness, or what follows from it[51] – not just the lack of *svabhāva* in the sense of substantial (as opposed to insubstantial, merely apparent) reality, but lack of individuatedness, of the distinctness in virtue of which things are thought to exist as the identifiable things they are. Where this lack of individuation was the account of dependent arising proposed in place of any causal model in Chapter 1, it should be no surprise to find emptiness then used explicitly to characterise dependent arising in Chapter 24: "Dependent arising we declare to be emptiness" (*MMK* 24.18).[52]

Nor, given this assimilation, is it any wonder that *prapañca* is extinguished in emptiness (*MMK* 28.5). Where there is no individuation (the emptiness which is ubiquitous is emptiness of *svabhāva*), language and concepts – which function, essentially, to discriminate discrete items as 'same' (as itself) and 'different' (from not-this) – necessarily lose their function.[53] Recognising that dependent arising is absence of any individuation, there is quite simply nothing left for thought and language to *do*. The stillness of conceptualising promised in the framing verse is the natural result.

Thus, the declared assimilation of emptiness and dependent arising is immediately followed by the observation that emptiness itself "is a dependent concept" (*MMK* 24.18). 'Emptiness' is not a thing or a substance or a quality that pervades reality – nothing enjoys that status; nor, moreover, is it independently specifiable in some more attenuated way. Emptiness is a way of conceptualising dependent arising, meaningful within this specific context as a way of indicating the ubiquitous absence of independent discriminability, or the pervasive non-individuatedness due to dependency. In a precursor to Diṅnāga's *apoha* theory, any apparently well-individuated concept, 'emptiness' included, derives whatever meaning it has through its association with other concepts, and not by accurately referring to real individuals.[54]

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[51] "Dependent arising is emptiness'" in 24.18 is immediately followed up in 24.19 with, "There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated, it follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty" (*MMK* 24.19). That is, *because* dependently arising, *therefore* emptiness. This might be understood as the reason why *dharma*s are empty (they are empty because dependently arising); and it might equally be articulating how we are to understand that pervasive emptiness (*dharma*s are empty in the sense that they depend and are not independent in any respect whatsoever, including in respect of their distinct, individuating identity).

[52] Compare, from the "Hymn to Him Who Has Gone Beyond the World," 22: "Dependent Origination has been considered by you to be just emptiness. 'There is not an independent being': (this is) your incomparable lion's roar" (in Tola and Dragonetti 1985). All quotations from the hymns are taken from this translation.

[53] From the "Hymn to the Unthinkable One," 40 (minor adaptations from Tola and Dragonetti's translation): "What is neither one nor not one, neither both nor not both, without base and not manifest, unthinkable; what cannot be pointed out, what neither arises nor disappears, is neither liable to destruction nor eternal – that, similar to space, is not within the range of words and knowledge."

[54] If one asks about Emptiness, the thing itself, the answer is that there is no *thing*, Emptiness, just as there are generally no *things*, as discrete individuals with their own definitive identity.

Perhaps 'emptiness' is a particularly useful way of characterising dependent arising; dissolving the apparent independent specifiability of anything whatsoever, it may well be "taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all views" (*MMK* 13.8).[55] But it remains, for all that, a concept or a way of grasping something, dependent for both its sense and its usefulness on the very conceptions of individuation and existence which it seeks to undermine. Without a notion of discrete identities, there is nothing for emptiness to be empty *of*;[56] and were there no habits of individuating and relating discrete items, there would be no good for understanding emptiness to do.[57] As far as 'the thing itself' which the word 'emptiness' presumably refers to, this just is dependent arising; if there was ever a place for necessary self-predication, it is surely in

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But one can use the circle of related concepts through which it gets its meaning to better grasp the alternative to things-in-relation, *viz.* dependent arising.

[55] There is considerable controversy over how exactly to understand the *dṛṣṭi* (views) which emptiness should get rid of. See discussion following.

[56] And likewise, wherever one wishes to indicate the specific emptiness of any particular thing, this necessarily depends on first individuating it: the emptiness *of* the chariot or *of* the *rūpa dharma* derives any specificity it has dependently upon the reference to the chariot or the *rūpa dharma*.

[57] This is a rather deflationary take on the 'emptiness of emptiness,' which has been the subject of a great deal of careful and ingenious debate in the contemporary Anglophone literature. Garfield (1994) argues that *MMK* 24.18 "provide(s) the fulcrum for Candrakīrti's more explicit characterization of the emptiness of emptiness as an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophical system – the interpretation that is definitive of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika school" and offers an interpretation of *MMK* I that agrees in making "the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness" the heart of Nāgārjuna's view (Garfield 1994, 221–22). Siderits (2003b)'s semantic reading also focuses on the emptiness of emptiness, arguing that the upshot is "that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth – there is only conventional truth" (Siderits 2003b, 11). While Siderits' view avoids paradox through disambiguation, Priest and Garfield (2002) and Garfield and Priest (forthcoming) embrace the paradox. Such a reading, however, risks being lopsided – recoiling from the fact that words do not correspond to reality to conclude that "there is only conventional truth" (Siderits 2003b, 11) looks very much like the semantic equivalent of discovering nothing *exists* as an identifiable individual and concluding *non*-existence. As Nāgārjuna reminds us, the Buddha taught two truths/realities (*MMK* 24.8), worldly (*lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ*) and ultimate (*paramārthataḥ*) truth/reality, the distinction between which must be understood (and failure to grasp the latter prevents one attaining *nirvāṇa*, 24.10). If worldly truth (*lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ*) is *saṃsāra*, then this reading of the emptiness of emptiness adopts the extreme position that the claim "there is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*" (*MMK* 25.19) is tantamount to the positive assertion that there is only *saṃsāra*. We should be wary of following Candrakīrti's lead here and taking the emptiness of emptiness as the core of the *Root Verses*, particularly when alternatives exist. Nāgārjuna might rather be understood, for instance, as reining in the enthusiasm of his Mahāyāna brethren, by advocating that ubiquitous emptiness be understood *merely* as a way of designating the essenceless non-individuatedness of reality. See note 51 on 24.19. The opening thirteen verses of the *Seventy Verses on Emptiness* could be read as arguing in the same way, namely "*Because* dependently arising, *therefore* without distinct nature, and that just is to say 'empty.'"

the dependent arising of dependent arising. Bringing us back to the Discourse with Kassapa, the verse concludes, "just that is the middle path."[58]

Most contemporary philosophical scholarship on Nāgārjuna recognises this as articulating a kind of anti-foundationalism, whether metaphysical, explanatory, or semantic.[59] There is nothing that explains, grounds, gives being to, or validates anything else, which does not also depend on that very thing for its very identity. In this way, anything that could be picked out or individuated in any way is *equally* non-basic.[60] This equalising of everything as dependent seems reinforced by the infamous claim at *Root Verses* 25.19, that "there is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*." Even in the most basic practical distinction between that from which we move and that towards which we move, their individuation as such is mutually dependent, and they are no different from each other in this respect.[61] Such anti-foundationalism, however, may be compatible with considering dependent arising as, in a certain sense, ultimate: dependent arising explains or grounds the possibility that anything whatsoever should arise, without ever explaining that *this* rather than *that* should arise here.[62]

As Nāgārjuna understands it, dependency necessarily impugns the well-individuated nature of any purported existent, rendering impossible the individuation necessarily prior to any relating. This is the true heart of the Buddha's teaching of

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[58] Oetke (2007) offers patient analysis of subtly distinguished interpretations of *MMK* 24.18, including the reading, not pursued here, which takes the verse to *identify* 'conceptual designation,' and not just dependent arising, with emptiness.

[59] Presumably that is the force of the 'non-dualism' in Siderits 2007's 'semantic non-dualism.'

[60] It is not to be taken for granted here that this 'equally' is warranted; everything could be dependent, yet some things might be more basic or fundamental than others. Ubiquitous dependency does not itself entail equality of all dependent entities.

[61] This difficult verse seems to claim further that *nirvāṇa* is not a distinct state or mode of being from *saṃsāra*, and this is hard to make good sense of. *Nirvāṇa* is frequently understood as cessation, and cessation looks very much like the 'stillness' that should arise upon the correct grasp of dependent arising, in the frame verse, but will not otherwise arise. If *nirvāṇa* is the stilling of *prapañca* and *saṃsāra* the proliferation of concepts (non-stilling of *prapañca*), then there does seem to be a great difference between the two, and the purpose of the *Root Verses* is to actualise the change from one to the other. If, however, *nirvāṇa* is *not* the stillness recommended in the frame verse, then it is also no longer the goal of the Buddhist path, but something quite different he is talking about. It is tempting to consider here whether Nāgārjuna might be overstating his case for a certain literary-soteriological effect at 25.19 – and in general, this text deserves much closer consideration of how the literary elements function argumentatively, as seen for instance in Plato's dialogues or the *Introduction to the Bodhisattva Way* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*).

[62] In this respect, it is rather like Plato's *chora* in the *Timaeus*. In just the way Plato would take this to be an incomplete and inadequate explanation of reality and what exists, *pratītyasamutpāda* could be understood as non-foundational, for it can never adequately explain or ground any particular *being*. (My thanks to Alexis Pinchard, whose work on Nāgārjuna and Plato suggested the association.)

dependent arising – not the fragmentation of being into countless impersonal beings and a frenetic mental hygiene of chasing down endlessly unfolding relations between them,[63] but rather the utter absence of real individuals, together with a mental hygiene of ceasing to individuate what is not really individual.

Tetralemma, Scepticism, and Speechlessness

There are, then, significant implications of Nāgārjuna's construal of dependent arising for language, thought, and the sorts of philosophical argument for which these are the necessary medium. For all language and all thought is individuating, and this is so even if we think that meaning arises from use and not by reference to entities – if words do not delineate, they cannot *mean* or be used as words at all.[64] Likewise, all argument relies on the explanatory priority of explanans to explanandum. If *individuation itself* is incoherent, there will be no way to state the position which does not rely on the very incoherence it diagnoses. Even to say that dependent arising *is* ultimate reality – as we must in English – says too much, for it invokes the existence and identifying-individuating power of 'is' which Nāgārjuna eschews. Similarly regarding "emptiness *is* lack of *svabhāva*," a claim Nāgārjuna immediately follows up with

> "It is empty" is not to be said, nor "it is not-empty," nor that it is both,
> nor that it is neither; ["empty"] is said only for the sake of instruction.
> (*MMK* 22.11)

One might use words as a kind of paedagogical gesture, to facilitate the appreciation of reality as not carved in the way words necessarily do carve: "The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking" (*MMK* 24.10). But any

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[63] Gethin (1992) brings out the open-ended fecundity of the Abhidharma matrices as a salutary practice. See also Heim (2014, 86): "The Abhidhamma is engaged simultaneously in open-ended possibility and reductive analysis. The Abhidhamma's work with the Dhamma takes us deeply into ultimate matters (*paramattha*) and into the irreducible factors of our experience that cannot be analysed further, even while the relations between them can extend and vary almost infinitely."

[64] We cannot even *use* language – thinking of Wittgenstein's example at the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations* – if 'block,' 'slab,' and 'bring' are indistinguishable from each other. Diṅnāga recognises this when he argues that any naming or categorising involves conceptualising distinctions (ad *PS* I.1.3–4), and his comment on *PS* I.1.3d explicitly indicates that whether language refers to a real individual or not has no bearing on the matter. Even his *apoha* theory of meaning necessarily individuates – which is why, although the theory may be a useful tool for getting us to cease conceptualising or to navigate everyday reality more skilfully, *apoha* theory cannot connect concepts and percepts (nor does it pretend to: "a general term does not express particulars", *PS* V.2). Even if a word means by excluding other words (*PS* V.1, 11), these exclusions are just an alternative way of individuating. Plato's worry in the *Theaetetus* that the extreme Heraclitean flux-theorists fall into a similar predicament (*Tht.* 156a–157c) is operating in similar terrain.

such gesture must be immediately undercut by reminders that "one should assert neither real nor non-real"[65] in order to dispel the false impression that the customary ways of speaking are accurate articulations of how things are, or indeed that *things* (distinct and related to one another) are. It is an unavoidable implication of this construal of dependent arising that the *via negativa* is the only way, and even here one must be careful that the negations do not imply an assertion of their opposites: not *being* must be supplemented by not non-being.

This makes Nāgārjuna's way of presenting his project an elegant – perhaps even necessary – fit for the particular aims of his project. Since the aim is to present a construal of dependent arising which dislodges the individuals-in-relation picture, and its associated identify-and-relate mode of thinking, the manner in which this is presented matters. That manner is most conspicuously the destructive tetralemma itself, which structures the first chapter of the *Root Verses*, and looser but similar constructions in subsequent chapters (see *MMK* 3.2, 5; 4.1, 12.1, 18.8, 22.17–18). Much scholarly work has accordingly been done on the logic of the tetralemma;[66] more attention still has been given to Candrakīrti's codification of Nāgārjuna's method as exclusively *prasaṅga* – exclusively making use of others' views in order to reveal an unwanted (to the opponent) implication of those views.[67] More immediately relevant than the logic of the tetralemma to Nāgārjuna's philosophical goals as outlined is the fact that Nāgārjuna negates each limb – just as the Buddha did in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 12.17, considered previously. And more salient than potential codifications of method is the regularity with which (apparently) exclusive and opposite pairs are both negated.[68]

One might worry, however, that this leaves the Mādhyamika in an awkward position. If everything sayable is inadequate simply in virtue of being sayable, then it looks as if every claim is *equally* inadequate. But if every claim in conventional language

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[65] For instance, "it is correct to call *nirvāṇa* neither existent nor an absence" (*MMK* 25.10cd).

[66] Nāgārjuna's deployment of the tetralemma has been the topic of significant scholarly attention, particularly as it is later associated by Candrakīrti with a distinctive interpretation of Nāgārjuna's thought. Oetke (1996) discusses the use of the tetralemma in Indian philosophy generally; Ruegg (1977) is a classic discussion of the tetralemma in Mahāyāna. Tillemans (1999, 200), after considering a "logically trivial interpretation of the tetralemma" that could take it as "a uniquely 'therapeutic' use of language" (Tillemans 1999, 190), argues instead that it is an example of non-classical logic that does not deviate considerably from classical logic. See also Ganeri (2001, Ch. 2) and Priest and Garfield (2002).

[67] While Candrakīrti's dispute with Bhāviveka on this point is the origin of it, this became an especially important marker of a distinct interpretation of Mādhyamaka as Indian Buddhism travelled into Tibet; see Dreyfus and McClintock (2003).

[68] Examples include: "An action does not possess conditions; nor is it devoid of conditions" (*MMK* I.4); "vision does not see; nor does nonvision see" (*MMK* 4IV.5); "an agent that is both real and unreal does not bring about an object that is real or one that is unreal" (*MMK* 8.11); "Dissolution does not at all exist either with or without arising; arising does not at all exist with or without dissolution" (*MMK* 21XXI.1); and so on. Cf. "'Hymn to the Unthinkable One," 12–15.

is equally inadequate, then it would seem that, conversely, any claim is as *valid* as any other: the teachings of Gotama the Nyaiyāyika would be just as (in)valid as the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Sage of the Śakyas.

And there is a deeper problem. The very practice of reason-giving is a practice of asserting relations of priority and dependency among things. (The 'cause' discussed in *Root Verses* I.1 is *hetu*, which means 'reason' as much as 'cause'; and the critique counts as much against explanation as against causation.[69]) And fundamentally, any knowledge claim implicitly asserts the independence and priority of the means by which one knows. For any knowledge claim, my knowledge is only as secure as my basis for believing it. The proximate basis is my evidence – thus, the asymmetry implicit in any explanatory enterprise. But any evidence must be accessed in some way, whether through direct experience or through reasoning. And thus, any evidence can only be as strong as my mode of access to it is reliable. That is to say, any knowledge whatsoever depends upon reliable means of cognition, or *pramāṇa*s (if my vision is faulty, no visual evidence in the world can deliver accurate knowledge of visibles to me). In this way, a reliable means of cognition underlies the very possibility of valid cognition – and so is prior to any particular valid cognition, and independent of it. Seeing must be determinate independently of any particular visual cognition, if any particular visual evidence is to count for anything. But this sort of independence and priority is just what Nāgārjuna has undermined with his new interpretation of dependent arising.[70] He has, therefore, undermined the very possibility of having a valid cognition of emptiness or dependent arising – and with this, he seems to have lost the means for asserting dependent arising, or emptiness, itself.

This seems to be the animating concern of Nāgārjuna's *Dispeller of Disputes*. Valid means of cognition, if they are determinate and distinct from their objects and the knowledge they give rise to, must be either validated by some yet prior means of cognition (perhaps inference grounds confidence in perception) or must be self-validating. If Nāgārjuna rejects both of these – as he must, since the former leads to a vicious regress, while the latter reintroduces independent foundations the *Root Verses* argued against – then he is left unable to claim any validity for his own claims about emptiness, lack of individual being (*bhāvāḥ*) or *svabhāva*, and dependent arising.

While Nāgārjuna presents this dilemma as an objection to his proposed interpretation of the Middle Way in terms of emptiness, this is in fact a pretext for an extension of that interpretation into a trenchant critique of the whole epistemic project. For, after quickly disposing of the trivial form of the objection based on the misconstrual of 'emptiness' as non-existence, Nāgārjuna rebuts the objection by arguing that any opposing view is as much skewered on this objection as his own – and

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[69] Arnold 2010 and 2012 lean heavily on the explanatory priority aspect.

[70] Nāgārjuna recognises this explicitly in *Root Verses* 9 and in the *Dispeller*.

indeed, more so. No means of cognition is self-validating, nor is it possible to have infinitely stacked modes of cognition validating each other – this is so, Nāgārjuna argues, whatever one takes one's metaphysics to be. The dependency which was incompatible with individual identities in the *Root Verses* likewise infects all the tools by which one might argue for or against it (or anything else). So, trying to launch an argument *against* Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka by relying on such tools is misguided – the tools themselves would be revealed as either only conditionally or capriciously authoritative, thus demonstrating rather than defeating Nāgārjuna's point. Knowledge as the objector conceives it, when he complains that Nāgārjuna cannot lay claim to it, is simply impossible in any case.

Nāgārjuna's strategy and conclusion here is quite similar to the classic Problem of the Criterion, which Sceptics of Graeco-Roman antiquity deployed to such effect.[71] But Nāgārjuna's aim is not the same as the sceptic's.[72] For the argument leads to sceptical conclusions only for one who is committed to a certain conception of knowledge – a conception on which causes are prior to, independent of, and explanatory of their effects; and a conception on which therefore causes of valid cognition, the apparatus for cognising itself, must be prior to and independent of the object of cognition. Dispense with this prejudice and the non-independence of means of cognition does not impugn cognitions at all. One recognises merely that their credibility is neither freestanding nor indefeasible. This makes honest humility and a standing openness to reconsideration the best epistemic condition to be in, for seeking certainty (even relative certainty) is a fool's errand. But only Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka is willing to make this move, and so only the Mādhyamika is free of the very scepticism of which they stand accused.

Of course, dispensing with the epistemic foundationalist prejudice is more easily said than done, for if one goes about it *via vacua* as Nāgārjuna demands, it seems to entail eschewing the claim to have asserted anything at all. Indeed, Nāgārjuna encourages this understanding of the implications: "If I had any thesis (*dṛṣṭi*)" he (in)famously says (*Dispeller* 29), "that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me"[73] – leaving uncomfortably ample room for speculation about what it means for whatever we read in the *Root Verses* to *not* be tantamount to expressing a thesis, view, position, or claim (*dṛṣṭi* can mean any of these), and likewise what it meant there to say that emptiness rids one of all *dṛṣṭi*. An extremely capacious understanding would include any assertion or claim whatsoever

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[71] Garfield (1996) notes the similarity to Pyrrhonists in strategy and aims.

[72] For a contrary view, see Matilal (1986, Ch. 2), and more recently Mills (2018).

[73] Translation Westerhoff (2010); the choice of 'thesis' for *dṛṣṭi* reflects a narrow rather than capacious interpretation of what is disavowed, and what emptiness eliminates. Westerhoff (2009b) offers detailed consideration of three ways in which one might understand, and what the tradition in fact has understood, this verse. A similar claim is found in the *Sixty Verses*, v. 50.

about anything – indeed, any articulate speech or thought at all, since we saw previously that thought and language necessarily individuate where there are no corresponding individuals; on such an understanding of 'view,' the *Root Verses* might be understood as a work of literary fiction, or at any rate a mere device to induce a certain mental state.[74] A more restricted understanding of 'view' construes it specifically as 'speculative' views, theoretical or metaphysical claims, or – as Siderits and Katsura have it – even more specifically with metaphysical views about the ultimate nature of reality.[75] Then the point would be not the cessation of conceptualising altogether, but rather to cease understanding concepts as even potentially well-defined terms for referring to a well-delineated reality.

An approach to the question which would integrate it into the preceding discussion of dependent arising and emptiness might begin by associating 'view' with emptiness: something counts as a 'view' just in case it purports to be non-empty, which is to say lays claim to being independently well-defined or referring to some well-defined individual whose identity as that individual does not depend upon the very thing it explains, grounds, or refers to. So understood, there is an obvious sense in which Nāgārjuna has expressed no views, for he has already acknowledged the dependency of everything he has said – emptiness itself depends for its intelligibility and coherence on prior and mistaken notions of individual beings. His own claims are explicitly empty in just the sense that everything is: arising dependently and not identifiably distinct from the conditions on which they depend, including the tools for cognition which are themselves dependent on the cognising and object cognised. It is, then, not a *thesis* or a claim in the sense that the interlocutors mean it at all. On the one hand, Nāgārjuna has been careful not to even try to give a positive specification of his position as distinct from all other positions, preferring instead to give us reason to *stop* adopting views and mental practices that even implicitly presume independent identity. On the other hand, inasmuch as even the *via negativa* relies implicitly on distinguishing thoughts, recognising reasons, and relations between statements, Nāgārjuna can happily accept that any characterisation of or argument for his view is dependent – and not just incidentally dependent on prior causal factors, but dependent for whatever apparent identity and distinctness it has on precisely those mistaken notions of individuality and being they aim to undermine.

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[74] Huntington (1995) and more recently Stepien (2019).

[75] The capacious reading would seem to connect back to the 'auspicious stilling of *prapañca*' associated with emptiness in the opening verse, but this itself depends on whether *prapañca* is *any* conceptualisation at all, or merely (as Siderits and Katsura translate it) *hypostasisation* – that is, conceiving of things as 'having intrinsic nature.' The restricted view is closely related to understanding Nāgārjuna to be concerned specifically to reject realist semantics: e.g. "Nāgārjuna makes no claims that would be true or false in virtue of real entities with intrinsic natures" (Tillemans 2017, 117). See Ruegg (1983, 2003, Part I) for articulation of this semantic interpretation of Madhyamaka thesislessness.

But this preliminary understanding of the sense in which Nāgārjuna has no views – and how having no views might enable him to escape the self-refutation objection while redeeming the meaningfulness of the *Root Verses* – only goes so far. If Nāgārjuna gets the better of his opponents, it is only inasmuch as he recognises the inevitable emptiness of his own claims, their non-absoluteness or lack of ultimate grounding in some self-sufficient mode of cognition, while his opponents lack awareness that their own views are in the same position. But dialectically, this should only put all contending views on all fours: all views arise dependently, lack coherent and distinct content, and rely for their intelligibility on similarly dependently arising factors. If this is where we are left, we might think that Madhyamaka avoids logical self-contradiction only at the drastic cost of a kind of practical self-abnegation: if the Madhyamaka view is correct, that very fact eliminates the point of saying so and the possibility of showing it.

Two distinct worries may be distinguished here, the first to do with everyday practice and the second with insight and the ultimate Buddhist goal. If thought and language can never get it right about how things really are, and if everyday speech is not even trying to make claims about how things really are, then everyday language can never be criticised for having got it wrong. Everyday language is an effective instrument for achieving everyday ends, and so long as it succeeds in that objective, there is nothing going wrong and nothing in need of correcting. This, however, suggests that there is no space for a reforming Buddhist outlook on practical everyday affairs – we must simply leave everything in its place.[76] This would leave even the Buddha's ambiguous talk of the self, so at odds with everyday notions, as itself a bit of idle chatter without practical relevance. The second concern is that if the means of substantiating arguments is itself undermined, then there is no adjudicating between views – not even between the view that we should abandon all views, and the view that we ought to aim, as the Eightfold Path suggests, for Right View.

In short, it seems the Mādhyamika is saved from speechlessness only by destroying the inherently teleological character of the Buddhist path. For if ordinary speech generally is fine just as it is, so long as it is intended and taken pragmatically – as indeed it ordinarily is – and without implying some conviction about the really real basis underwriting it, then what needs reforming? If "there is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*" (*MMK* 25.19), where is there *to go*? And if all language that does try to say anything about 'how things really are' is equally falsifying, this seems to render Buddhist insight utterly mute.[77]

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[76] This concern about quietism is raised by Tillemans (2011) and in this volume.

[77] Tillemans (2016, Ch. 5) characterises Candrakīrti (but not Bhāviveka) as such a quietist. Tillemans (2011; 2019) identifies this quietist reading of Candrakīrti as the "typical Prāsaṅgika" perspective (2011, 156; 2019, 640), with Tillemans (2011) exploring an alternative, more philosophically promising version of Prāsaṅgika. Tillemans (2017) presents 'Nāgārjuna and Early Madhyamaka' as quietist of a sort, though perhaps not a pernicious sort. It is worth

Practical Implications, Proximate and Ultimate

We might see our way out of this by turning to the text in which Nāgārjuna seems most explicitly concerned with just this issue.[78] The *Precious Garland* is presented as 'advice for a prince' – so it is explicitly concerned with everyday life and how that might be lived better. What there is to be said on this score, however, does not come neatly disentangled from ultimate concerns of a specifically Madhyamaka kind, nor is it disconnected from the ultimate aim of escaping worldly life altogether.

The text sets up two distinct ends – happiness and the highest good — with virtuous practices and wisdom as their respective means (*RĀ* 3–4).[79] This may seem at first to reinforce the idea that the *Root Verses*' view of dependent arising as lack of individuation leaves us with two disconnected alternatives: *either* we fully embrace its implications for language and thought, and thus remain mute and disengaged (literal quietism); *or* we accept the categories of the world as they stand and aim for worldly goods as these are understood (practical quietism).[80] Even if one could alternate between the two, one could never use the former to reform the latter, nor the latter to approach and articulate the former. This disjunctive quietism would seem to leave the practical commitments of the committed bodhisattva impotent. So it is essential to see how the text gives us more than that and, in doing so, addresses how it could be that "the ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking" (*MMK* 24.10) – indeed, how it could be that Nāgārjuna follows his extended critique and re-conception of dependent arising in the *Root Verses* with a presentation

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noting that classical Mediterranean skepticism faced this same threat of two-fold quietism: a default conservatism regarding what is commonly accepted (since all grounds for critique have been undermined), and a simultaneous ideal mental calm (*ataraxia*) consisting in holding and asserting no convictions whatsoever (not even that everything is unknowable).

[78] Many other and ingenious ways out have been tried – see for instance Priest, Siderits and Tillemans (2011).

[79] These two run throughout the discussion, returning for instance at vv. 44–57, 212–13, 221–23, 230 and 381. Carpenter (2015) discusses in detail the correct understanding of these two goals, and the structure of the ethics in the *Ratnāvalī* which avoids presenting them as parallel alternative ends. Shulman (2011) offers insightful close comment on what he calls the 'philosophical' portions of the *Precious Garland*, although one might (and the reading set out here does) query the aptness of cutting off certain portions of the text from others as being 'philosophical.'

[80] One way of reading verses 174–75 might support 'happiness' and 'enlightenment' as non-intersecting alternatives, though it relies on taking them out of the context of the whole.

of the twelve-fold chain of dependent arising (*MMK* 26) that is, as Katsura and Siderits (307) put it, "the perfect model of orthodoxy."[81]

The *Precious Garland* articulates two crucial ways in which the two ends (worldly well-being and ultimate attainment) and their respective paths converge. First, on a practical level, we are assured that aiming for happiness will indeed eventually issue in attaining the highest good.[82] The text then bears this out in its extended discussion of sense-pleasures, which takes the main constituent of happiness as ordinarily conceived and uses the prince's interest in it to motivate a concern not only for virtue but for wisdom and liberation. Note, for instance, how what starts as a familiar Abhidharma exercise on the foulness of the body as a means to inducing disenchantment with sensual pleasures (*RĀ* 148–70) – essential for virtuous practice – leads to an orientation towards "unparalleled enlightenment" rooted in "wisdom not relying on duality" (*RĀ* 174); and later how the analysis of pleasure at *RĀ* 348–63 relies on specifically Madhyamaka positions and techniques concerning emptiness and insubstantiality. Indeed, it turns out that one of the four main virtuous practices for a happy life is none other than wisdom (*RĀ* 139), so that to aim at happiness turns out, as promised, to lead one to enlightenment. The higher goal is actually built into the path to the lesser goal.

This convergence of higher and lower goals grounds a second convergence, which operates in the opposite direction. For now, leading to wisdom operates as a constraint on what could count as virtuous practice. The fact that a certain 'ordinary outlook' or way of conceptualising leads – or does not lead – to wisdom as the Mādhyamika understands it is a reason for considering such an outlook as either apt (134–35) or in need of reform. Thus, we have a basis for critique of ordinary practice, after all, and indeed a basis in ultimate truth and not just in the several prescriptions found in scripture – though not in the way the Abhdidharma might have suggested. Common ways of speaking and thinking are indeed riddled with error, not because they get at the wrong objects, but because thinking in that way causes suffering. Given dependent arising/non-individuation/emptiness, *no* distinctions and ways of individuating are correct characterisations of how things really are, and wisdom will consist in recognising this. Ordinary modes of thought can be criticised if and when they block this recognition.

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[81] What follows would be an alternative to the Katsura-Siderits suggestion that Chapter 26 is compatible with what came before by being pegged to conventional reality, while the foregoing chapters concern ultimate reality; the worry is that resolving tensions in this way so separates the two truths that there is no way that one could be used to lead to the other.

[82] "In one who first practices high status, definite goodness arises later" (*RĀ* 3). Translations from the *Precious Garland* are those of Hopkins (1998), which translates from the Tibetan translation ('high status' is roughly worldly well-being, while 'definite goodness' is the ultimate enlightened state). Translation from the Sanskrit is available in Tucci (1934; 1936), though the English is quite outdated.

Thus, those conventional uses of language are apt which lead one towards recognition of ubiquitous dependency and its concomitant insubstantiality – and this is indeed what the *Precious Garland* does with the prince, a paradigm worldly figure, in verses 125–75, and elsewhere. A perfectly orthodox exposition of the twelve links of dependent arising may do the same.

Uncritical participation in the language of individual persons ('I,' 'mine,' and associated desires: 'I want this to be mine') probably will not. A thorough examination of the relationship between individuation, causation, existence, and reality – such as the *Root Verses* itself – would be a use of language which facilitates this, as would thinking of emptiness as the lack of substantial individuation necessarily implied by dependency. Going along with whatever the world happens to say about individuation and causation may or may not be fruitful, depending on the circumstances. Perhaps there is no immediate harm in using the language of persons for everyday transactions, but it can be difficult to do so while simultaneously maintaining the perspective that recognises the purposes of these transactions themselves are most often riddled through with confusions about self and individuation that cause suffering.[83] And so it may well be appropriate for even ordinary folk with worldly commitments – the prince, for instance – to engage in active critique of ordinary language and concepts (*RĀ* 37–73). The Mādhyamika is not restricted to using all ordinary language with only its ordinary meanings without critique, for critique may arise from the conduciveness of practice to happiness *and* final liberation. Nor then, conversely, is the Mādhyamika restricted to using ordinary language for only its ordinary non-philosophical purposes; reasons *can* be given and reasoning efficaciously engaged in, without indulging in the self-refuting presumption that one's reasons and reasoning enjoy an implausible epistemic or ontological independence.

None of this requires that philosophical reasoning be a necessary and exclusive means to ultimate realisation of the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. There is no reason to restrict the effect of language on the mind in that way, and every reason to suppose that non-argumentative use of language may also have salutary effects on one's phenomenology, state, or outlook – indeed, nothing speaks against reading the *Root Verses* itself in such a literary way, if that accomplishes the same end.[84] It is noteworthy in this regard that the four hymns most centrally associated with

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[83] Maintaining an ironic engagement, as Siderits (2003a, Ch. 5) calls it, is not easy, but the stuff of bodhisattvas.

[84] See Huntington (2018). However, determining whether the end achieved is indeed the same, and the correct one, would seem to require engaging in philosophical reflections on the explicit content of the *Root Verses*. Only direct philosophical engagement with the *Root Verses* could suggest that reading it as one reads fiction would be salutary – it does not come with such reading instructions on its surface, or present as fiction at first glance.

Nāgārjuna engage explicitly in reasoning to achieve their aim,[85] as well as in rehearsing terms of approbation in a more poetic way.[86] We need not suppose some strict distinction between philosophical engagement on classic philosophical topics such as cause, relation, individuation, essence, and existence, on the one hand, and 'merely' skillful teaching on the other.[87] On the contrary, these might often be one and the same, as is demonstrated not just in the *Root Verses*, but also in the *Precious Garland*.

But if one does engage philosophically with the *Root Verses* (and other analytical texts, such as the *Dispeller of Disputes*), whether negatively or constructively,[88] what one can no longer do is naïvely suppose that such engagement is a search for some lynchpin, whether that be one thing or many *dharma*s. Nor may one engage in practices of individuating, identifying, relating, and classifying – making Nāgārjuna's work into a worldview – as if such a mental exercise were essentially different from the more modest individuating and relating we do in everyday life. The *Root Verses*, however, has this advantage over ordinary thought: it carries its own antidote within it. By enabling us to recognise the individuating we do while we are doing it – making, indeed, such recognition inescapable – the *Root Verses* ensures that we are no longer implicitly convinced of the superficial unimpeachability of our thinking. To engage in thinking through the *Root Verses* is to become aware of the dependency of that very activity – and it may possibly even suggest an alternative.[89]

Conclusion

To sum up: Nāgārjuna is a fundamentalist reformer, taking us back to what he asserts is the core of the Buddha's teaching – *viz.*, dependent arising – and the correct understanding of that. His critique of the Abhidharma aims to transform how we think of dependency and therewith the distinction between ultimate and conventional, and of the Buddhist goal and the path to it.

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[85] Analogical reasoning, for instance, at "Hymn to the Unthinkable One," 4–6; a recap of *MMK* 1 at "Hymn to the Unthinkable One," 9–12; "Hymn to Him Who Has Gone Beyond the World," 4–7, 11, 14 17.

[86] The "Hymn According to the Supreme Truth" especially, and much of the "Hymn to the Incomparable One."

[87] Contra Schroeder (2000).

[88] Negatively, as in Candrakīrti's way, doing no more than turning others' commitments against them, or constructively, as in Bhāviveka's way, making suitably contextualized assertions and reasons which are then undercut or their own dependency (their emptiness) made explicit.

[89] One of the great debates within the Madhyamaka originating from Nāgārjuna is whether there *is* 'something else,' or whether the recognition of the dependency of one's thought, as well as any objects of thought, suffices to effect the blissful transformation to stillness.

As Nāgārjuna tells it, the Ābhidharmikas are working with a view according to which existing things dependently arise. Dependently arising characterises the behaviour or relations of things with respect to one another; but it can only do so on the presupposition of individuation; that is, of a prior distinction between two things (elements of experience, existing things) subsequently related. When seen in this light, it becomes clear that this Abhidharma understanding of dependent arising does not, after all, do away with a picture of reality that fundamentally sees individuals as acting on and being affected by each other; it only complicates that picture. It depersonalises the picture, to be sure, but the basic elements into which we analyse experience or existent things retain the characteristics of persons – having a distinct identifying nature which makes them what they are by distinguishing them from everything else.

Such a model, Nāgārjuna aims to show, positively precludes dependency and *eo ipso* dependent arising. For dependency is incompatible with having a discrete identity and therefore incompatible not only with causation, but with any relating that presumes (as it commonly does) the distinctness and identifiability of the relata. If causation is especially relevant, it is because (i) it is the terms in which his Buddhist opponents understand dependent arising, so it is the view of dependent arising he has particularly to displace in his project to recover the Buddha's original teaching by the middle; and (ii) causation can be used as a model for any asymmetrical relation, and in particular for epistemological dependency relations inherent in explanation.

Nāgārjuna's larger project in the *Root Verses* is to defend a replacement conception of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda* instead of existence/non-existence) against the Ābhidharmika supplementary conception of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda* as a way in which things arise). *Instead of* conditioned relations between discrete individuals, *instead of* the being/non-being, same/different dichotomy this implies: dependent arising. Eschewing *individuation itself* (and not just an ontological commitment, since it is as much the mental habit of individuating that generates suffering as any additional existence claim on top of that); recognising the imperfect individuation of things, their imperfect sameness and difference from others and themselves; and recognising this incomplete differentiation as due to dependency – just this *is* the Middle Way.

This leaves much still up for debate. For instance: does relating – even the conventional, epistemological, and non-ontological activity of relating – indeed presume the prior individuation of its relata? Are existence and essence so mutually bound up that rejecting the latter implies losing also the former? Is Nāgārjuna's alternative proposal even coherent – or has it not, perhaps even wittingly, removed its own conditions for the possibility of being coherent? And in spite of the suggestions offered in this chapter, there is still ample room for debating the practical implications of this: is the implication a kind of recommendation to extreme quietism, a re-conception of the ultimate *prajñā* to be obtained as simply not thinking anything at all, and a rejection of critical engagement with everyday notions? Is Nāgārjuna a sceptic

in the classical mould, using critical thinking to defeat any ambitions of critical thought, for the purposes of a disengaged equanimity? Or if we should stay engaged, how does the Madhyamaka view support or revise that project? How will correct understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* – a distinctively Madhyamaka, non-Abhidharma understanding – make one a better leader in the world?

It is indeed fitting that such questions should remain open, for the power and inescapability of Nāgārjuna in Buddhist philosophy consist in how much new terrain his thought opened up and the standard he set for the degree of penetration, subtlety, and systematicity to be brought to the task.

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