# MADHYAMAKA: A METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION

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# Madhyamaka: A Metaphysical Interpretation

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This work will argue for a metaphysical interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy, primarily focusing on the writings of the school's founder – Nāgārjuna. The metaphysical interpretation I defend does not entail a fundamental absolute level of reality (which is clearly inconsistent with Madhyamaka), nor does it entail nihilism, as has often been suggested by ancient and contemporary critics. My metaphysical interpretation also runs contrary to attempts at presenting Madhyamaka (or Nāgārjuna) as a sceptic. Instead, I interpret Madhyamaka as endorsing metaphysical anti-foundationalism, a position that is now clearer to articulate by reference to contemporary work in the metaphysics of grounding. Throughout the work, I pay close attention to the philosophical and religious context within which Nāgārjuna wrote, specifically by showing his work as a response to developments in metaphysics and ethics in the Abhidharma Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism, and epistemology in the non-Buddhist Nyāya school. The work is therefore divided into three parts: (i) metaphysics, (ii) epistemology, and (iii) ethics.

Part I (concerning metaphysics) uses developments in the metaphysics of grounding to frame the philosophical dispute between the Sarvāstivāda and Nāgārjuna. I present the Sarvāstivāda as advocating for a multi-layered structure of reality which terminates in foundational independent entities, marked by their possession of an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), rendering their position a form of metaphysical foundationalism. I present Nāgārjuna's rejection of intrinsic nature as a rejection of its implied foundationalist metaphysics. In order to rebut the claim that Nāgārjuna's anti-foundationalism entails nihilism, I draw upon the models of metaphysical infinitism and coherentism as a response to the 'Source of Being' objection (the claim that the being of entities must originate from an independent source).

Part II (concerning epistemology) argues against the sceptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna, an interpretation incompatible with my proposed metaphysical interpretation. In order to understand

the epistemological position of Nāgārjuna, I pay special attention to his Nyāya opponents and their epistemological foundationalism. I draw attention to the technical connotations of terms which the sceptical reading misunderstands, the debating practices of the time, and the tendency towards the reification of concepts in the Indian philosophical context.

Part III (concerning ethics) returns to a comparison with the Sarvāstivāda school, and indicates a tension between the Sarvāstivāda foundationalist metaphysics and the Buddha's ethical outlook, as exemplified by the Four Noble Truths. By consideration of the competing ethical ideals of the *arhat* and the *bodhisattva*, Madhyamaka philosophy is presented as a means to resolve this tension.

In considering the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical aspects, the work provides a consistent reading of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy, one that is neither nihilistic nor sceptical, though most definitely metaphysical.

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# Part I: Metaphysics

# 1. Introduction to Part I

## 1.1. Foundationalism in Indian Philosophy

As with many attempts to understand and describe reality, Indian philosophical traditions often seek to identify the fundamental entities (or entity) that underlie the world and upon which the remainder of the world and our phenomenal experience depend. In brief, they seek foundations. We see this clearly in the pluralist Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika attempt to define the fundamental ontological categories and atomic basis of the world, or in the monistic Vedānta belief in an absolute substance underlying the false illusion of plurality. Within the Buddhist traditions, there are the fundamental *dharma*s of the Abhidharma account of the world, or the *ālayavijñāna* of the Yogācāra. I believe that Madhyamaka philosophy, as formulated by Nāgārjuna, stands apart from these traditions and their philosophical underpinnings due to its commitment to an anti-foundationalist metaphysics.[1] This goes some way to explaining the sense of bafflement and paradox encountered when reading Madhyamaka texts – put simply, this confusion stems from the Madhyamaka rejection of the view that the world has a foundation in a philosophical climate that presupposed foundationalism. As a result, Madhyamaka philosophy provides fascinating arguments for an underappreciated metaphysical picture which has, only recently, received a surge of interest in contemporary analytic philosophy in the literature related to metaphysical grounding. Before moving on to a detailed discussion of metaphysical foundationalism, let us get a clearer picture of how metaphysical foundationalism is distinguished from epistemic foundationalism.

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[1] Admittedly there is occasional overlap – the belief that our common understanding of the world is mistaken or illusory is shared by both Vedānta and Madhyamaka, especially in their shared dislike for proliferation. The phrase *prapañcopaśama* occurs in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* as well as the dedicatory verse (*maṅgalaśloka*) of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK). For a study on the relation between Madhyamaka and Vedānta, see King (1995). Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa also seems to adopt Madhyamaka style argumentation in his *Tattvopaplavasiṃha* (see Franco (1994)).

## 1.2. Metaphysical vs. Epistemic Foundationalism

Foundationalism in the relevant sense here involves two distinct forms – metaphysical and epistemological. They are similar in that a foundationalist strives for some secure basis on which the rest of the world may depend. In the case of metaphysics, this would be fundamental entities – the basic building blocks from which the rest of experience derives its existence, such as the Aristotelian primary substances. In the case of epistemological foundationalism, it is a belief in which we have certainty that ensures any further inferences from this belief also share in that certainty. The paradigm example in Western philosophy would be the Cartesian declaration of *cogito ergo sum*. These forms of foundationalism are not restricted to the Western philosophical traditions. In fact, the desire for foundations and the concepts employed to secure them are comparable to a great many philosophical views in the Indian tradition, these views being the object of criticism by the Madhyamaka. In Part I, I interpret Madhyamaka philosophy as an endorsement of metaphysical anti-foundationalism, and defend this against the charge of nihilism. In Part II, I consider epistemic foundationalism, and argue against a sceptical reading of Nāgārjuna (which, if true, would undermine my metaphysical interpretation).[2]

I begin Part I with a discussion of the metaphysics of grounding (2.1) and its relation to metaphysical foundationalism (2.2), laying this as a framework for understanding the philosophical dispute between Nāgārjuna and the Abhidharma philosophers (specifically, the Sarvāstivāda school). A clear understanding of the Abhidharma philosophy is essential to an understanding of Madhyamaka. Nāgārjuna's philosophy emerged within a philosophical environment dominated by these Abhidharma schools, and his most famous text – the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*) – is primarily an attack on the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma concept of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). I will therefore discuss the origin of the Abhidharma (3.1), its positing of a multi-layered ontology which terminates in the foundational level of entities known as *dharmas* (3.2), and its introduction of the concept of

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[2] Part III concerns the ethical implications of metaphysical anti-foundationalism, and whether its adoption is compatible with the Buddhist ethical outlook.

intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) as a way to identify the foundational level of entities (3.3). I then use the terminology of metaphysical grounding in order to further analyse the Sarvāstivāda view of ontological dependence (3.5), its binding together the notion essence and foundationalism in the concept of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) (3.6), and its commitment to a multi-layered structure to reality (3.7).

Having presented the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma as adopting the view of metaphysical foundationalism, I then turn to the Madhyamaka position. I begin with a discussion of the origins of the Madhyamaka, and its affiliation with the then nascent Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism (4.1). I defend Nāgārjuna's understanding of intrinsic nature against the charge of equivocation (4.2), and then provide a summary of his chapter on fire and fuel as an example case of Madhyamaka philosophy (4.3). I then consider how Nāgārjuna deals with the "two-truth" teaching of Buddhism (4.4), a teaching used by the Abhidharma to justify their view that reality is a multi-layered structure of dependent entities terminating in foundational entities.

With the philosophical positions of Nāgārjuna and the Sarvāstivāda outlined, I turn to address a pressing issue for my metaphysical interpretation of Madhyamaka, what I call the 'Source of Being' objection (5.1). This is the claim that no entity can have being without an ultimate source for that being. My metaphysical interpretation of Madhyamaka requires that this claim be false. In order to defend my reading, I turn to recent work on the metaphysics of grounding, discussing the plausibility of two anti-foundationalist (or "sourceless") metaphysical positions: metaphysical infinitism (5.2) and metaphysical coherentism (5.3). I then present Madhyamaka as a metaphysical position that is distinct (though in many ways similar) to both infinitism and coherentism, primarily due to its collapsing the distinction between subject and object (5.4). Finally, I offer some concluding remarks on my interpretation (5.4).

Now that the plan for what follows has been laid out, let us turn to discussing metaphysical foundationalism.

# 2. Metaphysical Foundationalism

## 2.1. Grounding

The notion of metaphysical foundationalism, though possessing a long history, has more recently been articulated with reference to the topic of "grounding". The project of grounding involves questions on the ordering of reality – which elements of reality (be they kinds of facts, propositions, objects) are fundamental? Which are derivative? And what is the nature of the relation between these two kinds? This is held to contrast with the prevalent (at least until recently) project initiated by Quine (1948) where the only ontologically significant question is to ask what exists, with no consideration being given to the entity's level of reality. Quine asks that we take our best scientific explanation of reality and only admit as existent those entities that are required to exist by this explanation. Depending on how our scientific explanations develop, we may eventually hold numbers or universals to be non-existent (or existent, if that is the case). But this notion of existence is "flat" – there are no levels of existence, merely existence and non-existence. Philosophers such as Schaffer (2009) argue that the Quinean outlook is misguided, and the goal of metaphysics ought to be concerned with the fundamental, the derivative, and their relation, rather than simply a question of whether a given entity exists or not. As Schaffer (2009: 347), criticising the Quinean position, emphatically states:

> "[M]etaphysics is about what grounds what. Metaphysics so revived [so that it is concerned with grounding] does not bother asking whether properties, meanings, and numbers exist. Of course they do! The question is whether or not they are *fundamental*."

Those entities which fall into the category of fundamental would thereby be the metaphysical foundation of the world. But before discussing the idea of a foundation, we must clarify the relation of grounding through which it is understood.

Examples of grounding relations abound in recent literature, but they are driven by the idea that the grounding relation is an explanatory metaphysical relation, "the ultimate form of explanation" (Fine 2001: 16).[3] The relation is often expressed by the phrases "in virtue of" or "because", as the following examples make clear[4]:

(1) Mental facts obtain because of neurophysiological facts.

(2) Normative facts are based on natural facts.

(3) What accounts for the existence of a whole is the existence and arrangement of its parts.

Whilst causation may provide a model for the grounding relation, the grounding relation itself is not considered a causal relation. This is thought to be clear from (2) – natural facts do not *cause* the origination of normative facts, rather the *explanation* for the normative fact is provided by natural facts. Perhaps our *coming to understand* the relation in this example involves a causal relation, but the relation between the relata themselves is not causal. As Fine (2001: 7) writes:

"In thinking about these matters, we need to restore ourselves to a state of innocence in which the metaphysical claims are seen to be about the subject-matter in question—be it mathematics or morality or science—and not about our relationship to that subject-matter."

Furthermore causation is seen as diachronic, whereas the relation of grounding may be synchronic (Rabin 2018: 38). Where *a* must occur prior to *b* in order to be its cause, the relation of grounding may hold between *a* and *b* simultaneously. Causation is temporal, the grounding relation is apparently not.[5]

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[3] The explanations of grounding in the literature are very diverse, and I offer only a simplified account in order to frame the following discussion. For some thinkers (e.g. Correia 2010), the logic of grounding is not predicative/relational, but grounding is best expressed as a sentential connective. This avoids the thorny issues of admitting the predicate/relation into our ontology. For a good overview of the many different approaches to grounding, see Trogdon (2013) and Bliss & Trogdon (2021).
[4] These examples are taken from Correia & Schnieder (2012: 1).
[5] One could also think of causation as a type of grounding relation, the latter including non-temporal relations as well as temporal relations.

Nor is the relation thought to be one of reduction, for reduction is often construed as a denial of the actual existence of what is reduced (Fine 2001: 15). But grounding relates entities existing on different levels – the fundamental and the derivative (and perhaps different levels of the derivative). Where a Quinean analysis would have the question of the existence of numbers be answered in a strict affirmation or denial, the proponent of a metaphysics of grounding would be less hesitant to admit such entities into the realm of existence, though much more particular and restrictive as to what would be included in the narrower list of fundamental entities. This does not mean that all entities are existent – there is still room for the non-existent, with plausible candidates being those supposed objects that lead to contradictions e.g. "a non-self-identical creature" (Schaffer 2009: 359).

Fine (2001: 15) also argues that the relation of grounding may be distinguished from logical analysis, since in the case of logical analysis the two sentences are held to express an identical proposition, and the grounding relation does not permit a proposition to ground itself.[6] The reason for this becomes clear when we return to the motivation behind accepting the grounding relation and its broader project – that reality is ordered, and not flat (as in the Quinean project). The need for ordering leads to the relation of grounding being (i) asymmetrical, (ii) anti-reflexive, and (iii) transitive.[7] If $x$ is grounded by $y$, then in order to retain some form of hierarchy, $y$ cannot also ground $x$. Nor can $x$ ground itself. If $x$ is fundamental, it is simply ungrounded. Should we allow $x$ to ground itself, then we have lost the core appeal for introducing the grounding relation into metaphysics – that it best captures the sense of explanation. A self-reflexive explanation is no explanation. The need for ordering also requires transitivity – if $x$ is grounded in $y$, and $y$ is grounded in $z$, then $x$ is also grounded in $z$. Here we would have three layers.

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[6] Fine's characterisation of logical analysis is controversial as it appears to lead to the paradox of analysis. This paradox concerns the difficulty in claiming that analysis is both correct and informative. If two sentences express the same proposition, then one wonders how claiming they are identical is informative. One may do as Frege did, and introduce a level of "sense" – see Beaney (1997: 151 – 171). My goal here is, however, not to defend the notion of grounding, but merely to explain it in preparation for its comparison with Abhidharma metaphysics.

[7] As expected, each of these as requirements for grounding have been challenged in the literature. For an overview that challenges all three requirements, as well as challenging the requirement for a foundation, see Rabin (2018). I shall come to discuss challenges to these requirements in Ch. 5.

## 2.2. Fundamentality

We are now in a position to discuss the foundationalism that some theorists of grounding would like to maintain. The notion at work here is that if an entity is grounded by another, eventually the grounding relations must terminate, and the entities in which they terminate are the fundamentals – the foundations of reality. They are the building blocks of our world. This particular motivation for a fundamental layer is what we may call the Independence Requirement, which enjoys such widespread support that it may be seen as the default position. As Bliss (2020: 339) writes:

> It seems undeniable that fundamentality understood in terms of a very particular kind of independence—independence understood in terms of grounding—is not only the dominant but also the core conception of fundamentality.

Another way to frame this requirement is by way of what Bliss and Priest (2018: 7) refer to as the structural property of 'extendability' which they formulate as:

> Everything depends on something else.

Any position that denies this structural property would be a form of metaphysical foundationalism, and have the form:

> Something does not depend on anything else.

But the desire for an independent ground on which chains of dependence terminate is not the only motivation for positing a fundamental level of reality. Since grounding is understood as a metaphysical *explanatory* relation, this requires that there be a 'complete minimal base' on which everything derivative depends. Foundationalists would therefore argue that there is a complete set of fundamentals which grounds (i.e. metaphysically explains) all other entities, and there is no

subset of this set which does the same job (see Bliss 2020: 340).[8] Their existence explains the existence of the entirety of the world. In arguing that fundamentality is characterised by a 'complete minimal base,' these foundationalists are emphasising the 'upwards' explanatory role of foundations in our understanding of the world.

These then are the two elements that characterise metaphysical foundationalism: independence and a complete minimal base. Arguments in defence of a metaphysical foundationalism so characterised may fall into either those based on a concern with ontology itself, or one based on theoretical virtue. I will take each of these in turn.

Dixon (2016: 465) expresses the ontological concerns when he writes:

> The basic idea behind foundationalism, then, is that the derivative must have its source in, or *acquire its being* from, the non-derivative. [Emphasis mine].

Schaffer (2010: 62) also expresses this concern in what is now an oft-cited remark, that in the absence of a foundational level, "[b]eing would be infinitely deferred, never achieved." The idea here is that being is transferrable, but in the absence of a basis for being, the entire process of being itself (i.e. existence) could never begin. For foundationalists like Schaffer, to say that reality is without foundations is akin to claiming that one may be rich through an endless chain of lenders lacking a source for the money (from which the lending is supposed to begin). The impulse towards foundationalism arises from the intuition that an entity's reality is determined by its possession of 'being,' this 'being' itself requiring a source from which it has been transferred along to derivative entities. A more rigorous formulation of this argument based on ontological concerns is provided by Trogdon (2018). Central to the argument are three premises:

> *The reality inheritance premise*: necessarily, if A is non-fundamental then A inherits its reality from whatever fully grounds it.

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[8] It should be noted that there is an open debate as to whether foundationalism, so characterised, requires a *unique* complete minimal basis, or whether it may admit of multiple disconnected minimal bases. See Bliss (2022: 339 – 340) and Bennett (2017: 107 – 118) for a consideration of this issue.

*The source of reality premise*: necessarily, if A inherits its reality then there are Δ that are a source of A's reality (i.e. A inherits its reality from Δ, and no entity among Δ inherits its reality).

*The reality/fundamentality premise*: necessarily, if Δ are a source of A's reality then the entities among Δ are fundamental and Δ fully ground A.

(Trogdon 2018: 185).

I will not dwell on either the strengths or shortcomings of the above premises at present.[9] My aim is to simply provide a sketch of the general framework within which metaphysical foundationalism is advocated. I will have more to say about strengths and weaknesses of arguments for foundationalism when discussing Abhidharma and Madhyamaka.

The arguments for metaphysical foundationalism based on theoretical virtue are primarily concerned with the explanatory work that foundationalism can do in our account of reality. Firstly, if the grounding relation is modelled on explanation, an explanation must end somewhere. As Fine (2010: 105) writes:

[T]here is still a plausible demand on ground or explanation that we are unable to evade. For given a truth that stands in need of explanation, one naturally supposes that it should have a "completely satisfactory" explanation, one that does not involve cycles and terminates in truths that do not stand in need of explanation.

Though foundationalism may appear intuitively appealing, it faces a number of difficulties when assessed through the lens of theoretical virtue. For one, it posits entities that are in fact unexplained – the fundamentals. This is a great concession in an argument that is based on explanatory power. A rejection of metaphysical foundationalism would not suffer from such a weakness (Bliss 2019: 363).

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[9] Trogdon (2018) in fact finds them unconvincing and argues for an account of grounding based on the transfer of causal properties rather than a transference of being.

But a case in favour of foundationalism on the basis of theoretical virtue can be made. Cameron (2008: 12) has argued that a single unified explanation is preferable to a separate explanation for each phenomenon. If there is an infinite chain of dependent entities, then we have only separate explanations for each layer. But if there are foundational elements, these provide the single unified explanation for all derivative entities. Alternatively, Bliss (2019: 373) argues that, by definition, there is an explanation for why there are derivative entities, and that a derivative entity cannot be the answer to that question since this would mean breaching the 'kind-instantiation principle'. Such a breach occurs when a kind that is to be explained turns up in the explanation. In this case it would be derivative entities being used to explain derivative entities. To avoid this, we should accept metaphysical foundationalism.

Now that an account of both grounding and metaphysical foundationalism has been briefly sketched, I will show how the philosophy of the Abhidharma, and the dispute between this school and the Madhyamaka, can be understood through the lens of these contemporary debates.

# 3. Abhidharma Metaphysical Foundationalism

## 3.1. Intellectual Origins of the Abhidharma

The Abhidharma emerged following the death of the Buddha as an attempt to provide a comprehensive and consistent systematic elaboration of the teachings scattered throughout those discourses (*sūtras/suttas*) attributed to him. These sutras were the first of three baskets (*piṭaka*) considered canonical in the early schools. The second basket (*vinaya*) concerned monastic discipline and rulings. The third and last basket was the Abhidharma.

The Buddha lived within a religiously complex and dynamic society, filled with priests and wandering mendicants, with many striving towards the goal of liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). This goal led to various philosophical disagreements on the roots of suffering and the correct understanding of reality. The Buddha, it is said, realised four Noble Truths (*caturāryasatya*): that the world is characterised by suffering (*duḥkha*), that suffering has a cause, that there is an end to suffering (*nirvāṇa*), and that there is a path that leads to this end. The world is characterised by suffering because we cling to things in a world where everything is impermanent (*anitya*) and insubstantial (*anātman*). If this is the case, then whatever we hold dear and valuable will eventually cease to be, leading to sadness and disappointment.

How then does one prevent suffering? The Buddha answered that it is the striving after impermanent and insubstantial entities that will inevitably lead to suffering. And this striving emerges when one, through ignorance, identifies their experience of the world as belonging to an enduring persistent self. This was the Buddha's great philosophical revolution. If we identify the occurrence of first-hand experiences as belonging to something that endures through time, and if everything is impermanent, then we must confront the fact that both our experiences and the entity we believe they belong to shall eventually also cease to exist. If we do not conceive of ourselves as an enduring entity, then it makes little sense to strive to acquire possessions, or to strive for the

meaningless accumulation of impermanent entities, whether these be physical (such as wealth) or immaterial (such as beauty or fame). As stated in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.8:

> And how does grasping lead to anxiety? It's when an uneducated ordinary person regards form [i.e. physical matter][10] like this: 'This is mine, I am this, this is my self.' But that form of theirs decays and perishes, which gives rise to sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress.
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> (Translated by Sujato (n.d.)).

Though the discourses of the Buddha are not particularly rigorous and are clearly intended towards edification, what the Buddha does say is that the notion of a self is not equivalent to the phenomena we would take to characterise a self. These phenomena are the five *skandhas* –

1. *Rūpa* – matter or form
2. *Vedanā* – feeling
3. *Saṃjñā* – concepts and designations
4. *Saṃskāra* – volition or conditioned things
5. *Vijñāna* – cognition

These factors include both the spatial and non-spatial. In fact, only the first – *rūpa* – is spatial and covers all matter. The remainder are non-spatial psychological phenomena. The Buddha denies that the self is identical to any of these. The celebrated Questions for King Milinda (*Milindapañha*) provides a reason for why this might be the case. The Buddhist sage Nāgasena, in denying that the self is identical to any of the five basic factors, nor identical to a collection of the five, nor found elsewhere, provides the analogy of the chariot:

> 'Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?'

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[10] The sutra repeats the formula for non-material phenomena also, intending to cover all five *skandhas*. See below for elaboration on the *skandhas*.

'I did not say that.'

'Is it the axle that is the chariot?'

'Certainly not.'

'Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?'

And to all these he still answered no.

'Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?'

'No, Sir.'

'But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?'

And still he answered no.

'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot!'

(Translated by Rhys Davids (1890: 43 – 44)).

Returning to the notion of self, Nāgasena concludes:

And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about— The thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body, and the five constituent elements of being— that I come under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "Nāgasena."

(Translated by Rhys Davids (1890: 44)).

Here we have the emergence of a number of important concepts that are developed by later thinkers, notably ontological dependence and existence on the basis of designation.

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The Buddha's reductive project was not limited to reducing persons to the five *skandhas*, but also

includes a reduction of our experiential awareness into the six sense bases (*āyatana*), their objects

(*viṣaya*), and the consciousness (*vijñāna*) that arises from this interaction. These are known as the

eighteen elements (*dhātus*). Essentially, this comes down to the belief that each sense faculty has its

own sphere, and that these sense-faculties remain independent of one another. The visual-faculty

has visual form as its object, the hearing-faculty has auditory phenomena as its object etc. When the

visual-faculty (i.e. the eye) is in contact with visual form (i.e. a pot), it gives rise to the visual

consciousness – the experience of observing a pot. Interestingly, the Buddha included the mind

(*manas*) as a distinct sense-faculty, having mental objects as its sphere. This allows for the

phenomena of experiencing an experience – the mental sense-faculty may take the consciousness

that results from the other sense-faculties as its object.[11]

These classifications lent themselves to easy memorisation, and yet provided a problem. The Buddha

taught how the world really was, and that knowledge of this led to liberation. But the lists do not

appear commensurable. What was the correct picture of reality – the *dhātus* or the *skandhas*? Both

had import, having been discussed in detail by the Buddha. But the conflict between these distinct

classifications, and the reductionist tendency from which they were initially derived, led to the

primary question – which classification is the *more fundamental*? Did the *skandhas* reduce to the

*dhātus* or the other way around? Or – and this was the Abhidharma approach – were both

classifications dependent upon something even more fundamental?

## 3.2. *Dharma*s and the Abhidharma Method

The answer of the Abhidharmas was that both classifications can be reduced to the *dharmas*. The

third basket of the canon, the Abhidharma Piṭaka, focuses on an elaboration of these elements. They

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[11] There is also a classification based on the six sense-faculties (*āyatanas*) and their objects (*viṣayas*). This
classification is the same as the eighteen *dhātus*, minus the six types of consciousness (*vijñāna*).

are classified into various dyads and triads in the first collection (the *Dhammasaṅganī* of the Pāli Canon) of the Abhidharma Piṭaka. These provide a typology of *dharma*s – eighty-two types for the Theravādin tradition dominant in Sri Lanka, and seventy-five for the Sarvāstivādins of Kashmir and north west India. This means that the earlier category of material *skandha* (i.e. *rūpa*) is actually dependent upon instances of the twenty-eight types of material *dharmas* (see Ronkin 2005: 47), and so on. From here, the Abhidharma tradition philosophically develops into a detailed examination of *dharmas* and a defence of their status as primary existents. The arguments adopted in response to philosophical criticisms diverged between the various Buddhist schools, but one of the most influential of these schools, and the school to which Nāgārjuna (the founder of the later Madhyamaka school) was responding, is the Sarvāstivāda. My discussion therefore will now focus primarily on the Sarvāstivāda position.[12]

According to the Sarvāstivāda (and the Abhidharma philosophy more broadly), we have the person and the chariot, generated and explained by the *skandhas* or *dhātus*, which in turn are generated and explained by the *dharmas*.[13] This is clearly an ordering of reality. If the Abhidharma are taken to be foundationalist, the question to be considered is whether these chains of dependence terminate. The answer to this is yes – they terminate with the *dharmas*. The history of this concept, and the connection between the etymology and the sense of the term, is complex.[14] One way of understanding *dharmas* is by reference to the two-truths doctrine (*dvaya-satya*) of the Buddhists. If we return to the prime motivation for the development of Abhidharma – the intention to provide a consistent doctrine in the face of apparent incommensurate statements by the Buddha in the sutras – then we see that one way of doing this is by employing a hermeneutical device which differentiates between two levels of different value (i.e. one level being considered more accurate to

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[12] An account of the history of the Sarvāstivāda school is beyond the scope of my discussion, however see Dhammajoti (2015: Ch. 3 – Ch. 4), Frauwallner (1995: Ch. 2 & Ch. 8), and Potter (1996: 100 – 119).
[13] I have deliberately left the existential status of the derivative entities vague. I believe the position is best construed as dependent entities having a derived existence, rather than being non-existent. This is controversial, but will be defended later.
[14] For a detailed overview, see Cox (2004).

reality or more fundamental than the other level). When statements or descriptions by the Buddha appear incommensurate or contradictory, the Buddhist can then place each statement on a different level, allowing for an overall consistent project even if in certain cases the Buddha offered less precise or less fundamental descriptions or statements of reality, perhaps for pragmatic communicative purposes. It was just this approach that the Abhidharma undertook with their developed doctrine of the 'two truths' (*dvaya-satya*). There is a fundamental level of reality (*paramārtha-sat*) to which certain statements of the Buddha accord, and this is the level the adept should strive towards understanding. There is also the non-fundamental, conventional level (*saṃvṛti-sat*), within which all other statements not compatible with the fundamental level, and the entities to which they refer, are placed.[15] With this in mind, it is the *dharmas* and only the *dharmas* which exist as fundamental (*paramārtha-sat*) – all else has conventional existence (*saṃvṛti-sat*), meaning that which is determined to be an entity to suit human interests. The *Abhidharmakośabhāsya* (6.4) of Vasubandhu gives the Abhidharma criteria for distinguishing whether a given phenomenon should be classed as a *dharma* or as something with conventional existence:

> Where that cognition (*buddhi*), by splitting or by thought in reasoning, turns into something else, like water or a pot, then it is a conventional entity (*saṃvṛtisat*), otherwise it is a fundamental entity (*paramārthasat*).[16]

The commentary elaborates on this definition:

> When split part by part and there is no cognition of that [entity], that [entity] is a conventional being (*saṃvṛtisat*). For example, a pot. For surely there, when split into potsherds, there is no cognition of a pot. And where the other things having been abstracted

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[15] I use the translations 'fundamental' and 'conventional' only provisionally. Since *sat* may be translated as either 'truth' or 'being,' and since it is contentious as to whether it is a feature of non-linguistic reality or a feature of statements that is being characterised by these two terms, it is difficult to find a translation neutral in this debate. I will have more to say when discussing and defending the position that the Abhidharma accepts two modes of *being* to entities.

[16] *yatra bhinnena tadbuddhiranyāpohe dhiyā ca tat / ghaṭāmbuvatsaṃvṛtisat paramārthasadanyathā* (889).

by thought, the cognition of that [initial entity] does not arise, that [entity] is also to be understood as a conventional entity. For example, water. For surely there, by the thought possessing form (*rūpa*) of the bearer, the cognition of water does not arise. But just in these, a conventional designation (*saṃvṛtisaṃjñā*) is thus made from the influence of conventions, from saying both "there is a pot and there is water," they thus speak truth (*satya*) – that conventional truth is thus not falsehood. But being otherwise is fundamental truth (*paramārtha satyam*). There, even when divided, there is still that cognition. Even when excluding other things by thought, that is fundamental existence. For example, form (*rūpa*). For surely there when an object is divided into atoms, and thought has excluded other things – including being worthy of taste – the cognition of the essence (*svabhāva*) of form arises. Just so are experience (*vedanā*) and so on [i.e. the other *dharmas* falling under the *skandha* category] to be seen. That, from existing with fundamentality (*paramārthena*), is called fundamental truth (*paramārthasatyam*). That which is grasped by supernatural wisdom, or by the ordinary people who have obtained supernatural wisdom, is fundamental truth. What is otherwise, that is conventional truth, according to the ancient teachers.[17]

From the above, we have a means of distinguishing fundamental from derivative or 'conventional' entities, and the level of truth of the statements which refer to these entities:

(i)     If there is no cognition of the entity when divided, broken into parts etc. then the entity is derivative. If, on the other hand, the cognition of it remains even when the initially cognised object is divided, then it is a fundamental entity.

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[17] *yasminnavayavaśo bhinne na tadbuddhirbhavati tat saṃvṛtisat / tadyathā ghaṭaḥ / tatra hi kapālaśo bhinne ghaṭabuddhirna bhavati / tatra cānyānapohya dharmān buddhyā tadbuddhirna bhavati taccāpi saṃvṛtisadveditavyam / tadyathāmbu / tatra hi buddhyā rūpādīndharmānaṣohyāmbubuddhirna bhavati / teṣveva tu saṃvṛtisaṃjñā kṛteti saṃvṛtivaśāt ghaṭaścāmbu cāstīti brūbantaḥ satyamevāhurna mṛṣetyetatsaṃvṛtisatyam / atonyathā paramārtha satyam / tatra bhinne 'poi tadbudhirbhavatyeva / anyadharmāpohe 'pi buddhyā tat paramārthasat / tadyathā rūpam / tatra hi paramāṇuśo bhinne vastuni rasārhānapi ca dharmānapohya buddhyā rūpasya svabhāvabuddhirbhavatyeva / evaṃ vedanādayo 'pi draṣṭavyāḥ / etat paramārthena bhāvāt paramārthasatyamiti / yathā lokottarena jñānena gṛhyate tat pṛṣṭhalabdhena vā laukikena tathā paramārthasatyam / yathānyena tathā saṃvṛtisatyam iti pūrvācāryāḥ /* (890).

(ii)     If there is no cognition of the entity when its properties are abstracted, then it is a derivative entity. If, however, the cognition of it remains even when its properties are abstracted, then it is a fundamental entity.

The example of the pot is helpful in illustrating the difference. If we come across broken shards, then the cognition we have is one of shards, not one of a pot. Of course, we may think once we have cognised the shards that they were once a pot, or some other object, but this is different from the cognition of a pot. Even if we grant that there may be some idea of a pot in our mind when see the shards, our cognition is still of some vague notion of pot rather than a concrete immediate cognition in the way our cognition of the shards is. In this requirement for retaining the cognition even when the entity is divided, we have a case of mereological dependence with only the atomic elements constituting the fundamentals. The *dharmas* are therefore atomic. They cannot be broken into smaller parts.

The water example seems more difficult to interpret, but the point appears to be this: if we abstract a property of the water and, in focusing on this property, the cognition of water no longer arises, then the entity is a derivative entity. For the water example, Vasubandhu says that we may abstract the form or matter (*rūpa*) of the water, but once we focus on this form the cognition of water does not arise any more. Therefore water is a derivative entity. This is not the case with form itself (*rūpa*), which even if one was to abstract away the property of taste from water, and to focus on the former, the essence of form would still arise. The *dharmas* are what always remain when properties are abstracted by the mind from the entity in question.

The reason for requiring a form of division by mental analysis is due to the fact that the Buddhist outlook is not simply concerned with what we would call physical matter, but encompasses the full spectrum of experience. We should recall that four of the five *skandhas* are what we would call 'mental' phenomena, and only the remaining *rūpa skandha* refers to physical matter.[18] The

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[18] More specifically, it is only entities composed of *rūpa dharmas* that are visible.

Abhidharma philosophers would also like to reduce intentional states to their fundamental constituents and one cannot smash a thought into pieces in the way one can smash a pot. But one can use the intellect to abstract properties until the thought is divided into its constituents, and these constituents would be akin to the shards of a pot. It seems that requirement (ii) includes all instances of (i), but not vice-versa. One can simply abstract the parts of a pot, and when focusing on these parts, the cognition of the pot would not arise.[19] In both cases, a *dharma* is an entity that cannot be divided further.

If this is the case, then in the act of analysis we eventually hit on an aspect that remains even after abstracting away the many apparent qualities of an entity. The Sarvāstivāda philosophers recognised the importance of a notion of essence for the practice of analytic reduction, and held *dharmas* to be determined by their specific characteristic (i.e. essence) rather than the characteristics they shared with other entities. As Vasubandhu writes: "The etymology of *dharma* is from its bearing (*dhāraṇa*) its unique characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*)."[20] When abstracting, we eventually land on a single characteristic that cannot be removed without cognition of that experience completely ceasing. We begin with the cognition of a pot, and by dividing it we reach a stage where we are no longer thinking of a pot but rather about potsherds. By abstraction, we remove different qualities of the potsherds, such as its colour, shape and resistance to touch. The cognition of the potsherds no longer arises. If we try and reduce these elements further, we have, as it were, changed the subject entirely.  It is difficult to see at this stage how we could divide these three elements further without the cessation of the cognition. Here we now have three specific characteristics – say colour, shape and physical resistance – that are the characteristics which determine three distinct types of *dharmas* (and indicate to us that we are now dealing with *dharmas*).

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[19] I believe the inclusion of (i) is simply a way of presenting the idea in a more intuitive and less controversial manner. Indian philosophical traditions tend to consider perception as the strongest source of knowledge, and the shards would in this case be directly perceived. The mental activity of analysis would be at least one step removed from perception.

[20] *nirvacanaṃ tu svalakṣaṇadhāraṇād dharmaḥ* (12).

## 3.3. *Svabhāva* as the Mark of the Fundamental

The importance of essence in the Abhidharma project is most pronounced in the notion of *svabhāva* – 'intrinsic nature'. Operating in much the same way as the 'specific characteristic' (*svalakṣaṇa*) discussed above, it etymologically foregrounds the link between essence and existence in the Sarvāstivāda system.[21] This concept would become the origin of many inter-Buddhist philosophical disputes and the focal point of criticism from the Madhyamaka. As Cox (2004) explains, the concept began simply as a method of marking an entity's category given that *svabhāva* by definition would not be something the entity could be without. This allowed a form of categorisation that was atemporal and not liable to fluctuate in the way a categorisation based on relational qualities might.[22]

It is important to note that the admission of a substance-property distinction in the fundamental constituents, the *dharmas*, would make these liable to further decomposition (into separate substance and property) and hence not fundamental in the manner required by the Abhidharma. Therefore *svabhāva* should not be considered a property:

> As in the case of categories that are nothing other than the *svabhāva* that demarcates them, so all *dharma*s should not be considered [i.e. no *dharmas* should be considered] to possess a separately existing intrinsic nature [*svabhāva*], but are constituted by the very *svabhāva* that defines them. In this sense, each *dharma* so defined is "determined" (*pariniṣpanna*) by its intrinsic nature. The composite objects of ordinary experience are, by contrast, not determined; that is to say, as complex entities that depend for their existence upon the

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[21] *Sva-* being a reflexive pronoun, and *bhāva* having amongst its senses both 'nature' and 'existence'.

[22] As Cox (2004) indicates, much of the confusion for contemporary scholars when examining *svabhāva* in the Abhidharma context results from both categories and individual entities being said to have a *svabhāva*. On the one hand, a category's *svabhāva* operates as its definition. In this way the only requirement is that the definitions of categories do not overlap. Thus we have the following in AbhK 1.10d: "The tangible = the *svabhāva* of eleven elements [*dravya*]" [*spraṣṭavyamekādaśadravyasvabhāvam* (35)]. The tangible [*spraṣṭavyam*] is one of many phenomena that comprise a *rūpa skandha* category, and this tangible is again defined by the presence of some eleven fundamental elements [*dravya*]. However, when applied to individual entities rather than categories, *svabhāva* takes on its ontological import as a mark of fundamental existence.

constituents of which they are made, their character is relative and must be assessed differently depending upon the circumstances.

(Cox 2004: 561, comments in square brackets added).

The growing importance of *svabhāva* as a marker of *dharmas* (i.e. fundamental existents) is best reflected in the controversy of whether a *dharma* that is no longer occurrent exists. The dispute draws out tensions within the Buddhist outlook – on the one hand all entities are supposed to be impermanent, a position expounded in the first Noble Truth of the Buddha. Tied to this and the second Noble Truth that suffering has a cause is the concept of dependent-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). This is the metaphysical explanation for change based on causation. If one can map the causal links between impermanent entities, one has the opportunity to change their situation by changing which impermanent entities occur (eventually allowing one to change it to such a degree that *nirvāṇa* is obtained). Certain elements included within the stream that we consider to be our 'self' are associated with impurities, which, when they arise, produce a residue which leads to further rebirths and suffering. By understanding which thoughts, dispositions and actions lead to avoiding the arising of these impure elements, we can prevent the accumulation of residue that leads to those further rebirths and the suffering associated with them. This teaching of causality is best expressed in the oft-repeated statement of the Buddha in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 12.61:

'When this exists, that is; due to the arising of this, that arises. When this doesn't exist, that is not; due to the cessation of this, that ceases.'

(Translated by Sujato (n.d.)).

A number of concerns led to the Sarvāstivāda to adopt the view that *dharmas* exist at all times (hence the name *Sarva-asti-vāda*: 'the view that all exists'), and not just in the present moment during which a *dharma* exercises its causal efficacy. If the present causal efficacy of a non-reducible entity was not an adequate way to class the fundamental existents, due to such a classification

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excluding entities which the Sarvāstivādins believed should be included as fundamental existents, then that left these philosophers with the fixed nature of an entity (*svabhāva*) as the surest way of determining fundamental existence.

Something must be said about those existents the Sarvāstivādin felt would be excluded under a 'presentist' model of fundamental existence. Four arguments are provided in favour of the existence of *dharmas* across the three time periods of past, present and future:

1. The view is explicitly supported by scripture.

2. If *dharmas* did not exist at all times, then the Buddha's claim that consciousness arises from the combination of the sense-faculty and sense-object (as per the *dhātu* model of experience) would be false.

3. *Dharmas* must exist at all times, because consciousness always has an object.

4. *Dharmas* must exist at all times, because the past has a result in the present.[23]

The commentary by Vasubandhu[24] elaborates on each of these arguments. For the first, he cites a scriptural passage which includes the following interesting example: if the future *rūpa* did not exist, then monks would not delight in future *rūpa*.[25] Future reality is in a causal relationship with the present even when not manifesting its particular quality. Accordingly, a future *dharma* must exist if we are to make sense of this. The second argument once again relies on a Buddhist presupposition via scriptural authority – that of the model of the eighteen *dhātus*. Here, consciousness arises when a sense-faculty is in contact with a sense-object. When the eye is in contact with visible matter, a visual consciousness arises. Recalling that the mind (*manas*) is also considered a sense-faculty, the

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[23] AK 5.25: *sarvakālāstitā uktatvāt dvayāt sadviṣayāt phalāt| tadastivādāt sarvāstivādā iṣṭāḥ caturvidhāḥ* (804 – 805).

[24] It should be noted that whilst Vasubandhu, in admirable scholarly fashion, lays out the arguments of the Sarvāstivādin for this position, he then goes on to criticise the position from a non-Sarvāstivādin angle. In fact, the commentary is often seen as Vasubandhu's criticism of the Sarvāstivāda outlook from a Sautrāntika perspective.

[25] *uktaṃ hi bhagavatā "'tītaṃ ced bhikṣavo rūpaṃ nābhaviṣyanna śrutavānāryaśrāvako 'tīte rūpe 'napekṣo 'bhaviṣyat / yasmāttarhyastyatītaṃ rūpaṃ tasmācchrutavānāryaśrāvako 'tīte rūpe 'napekṣo bhavati / anāgataṃ cedrūpaṃ nābhaviṣyat na śrutavānāryaśrāvako 'nāgataṃ rūpaṃ nābhyanandiṣyat / yasmāttarhyastyanāgataṃ rūpamiti" vistaraḥ /* (804).

mind may have as its object something from the past or something from the future. But then the past and future *dharma* which it has for its object must exist otherwise mental consciousness does not arise from both the sense-faculty and its object, and the Buddha's statement is false.[26] The third argument is similar to the preceding argument but does not rely on scriptural authority. For the Sarvāstivādin, consciousness is intentional – it must always have an object. If so, then: "consciousness arises when the object [of consciousness] exists, not when it does not exist. If there is no past and future (*dharma*), consciousness would exist with a non-existent object (*ālambana*). Therefore there could be consciousness from a non-existent object."[27] The final argument is one based on ethical consequence – if we are to believe that a past action has a consequence, then we must grant causal power to our actions. But our actions are in the past, especially when their consequences are manifested. In order to make sense of this, we must grant existence to past *dharmas*.[28]

In the above arguments, we see that the Sarvāstivādin would like to include intentional past and future *dharmas*, and past-action *dharmas* with ethical consequences, among the fundamental existents. They believe that if present causal efficacy is the only marker, this would exclude the past and future *dharmas*. Whilst the causal principle of dependent-origination appears to have motivated the arguments, the consequence of these arguments means that present causal interaction is no longer the means of determining the existence of *dharmas* (i.e. the fundamental existents). When combined with the method of reduction and abstraction discussed earlier, this leaves *svabhāva* as the marker for fundamental existence – *svabhāva* therefore attains an ontological and metaphysical import rather than simply a role in the project of categorisation.

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[26] *"dvayaṃ pratītya vijñānasyotpāda" ityuktam / dvayaṃ katamat / cakṣū rūpāṇi yāvat mano dharmā iti / asati vā 'tītānāgate tadālambanaṃ vijñānaṃ dvayaṃ pratītya na syāt / evaṃ tāvadāgamato 'styatītānāgataṃ yuktito 'pi / (804).*

[27] *sati viṣaye vijñānaṃ pravartate nāsati / yadi cātītānāgataṃ na syādasadālambanaṃ vijñānaṃ syāt / tato vijñānameva na syādālambanābhāvāt (805).*

[28] *yadi cātītaṃ na syāt śubhāśubhasya karmaṇaḥ phalamāyatyāṃ kathaṃ syāt / na hi phalotpattikāle varttamāno vipākaheturastīti / (805).*

A distinction is therefore drawn between the fundamental existence of a *dharma* via *svabhāva*, and its temporal activity or function.[29] As Williams (1981: 241) writes:

> A *svabhāva* is something a primary existent *has*, and a *dharma* as past or future *only* has a *svabhāva*, a self-essence, while a *dharma* in the present stage *also* has a function (*kāritra*). The presence or absence of function is the determinant of whether the *dharma* is temporally present or not, but there is a crucial asymmetry here with the *svabhāva*. The presence or absence of a *svabhāva* does not determine the temporal status of the *dharma* since this is determined by the presence or absence of function and where the absence occurs relative to the precedence or subsequence of the function concerned. Rather, the presence or absence of the *svabhāva* indicates an entity's primary or secondary status. If *x* has a *svabhāva* then it *is* a primary existent irrespective of its temporal determination, that is, the *svabhāva* determines primary and not temporal status.

And as Dhammajoti (2015: 184) succinctly states:

> In fact, in the Sarvāstivāda conception, all dharma-s in their essential nature have always been existent; it is only a matter of inducing their arising through causes and conditions.

So *dharmas* exist via *svabhāva*, a quality which they never lose, whilst it is the manifestation of their *activity* which interacts in the causal matrix of phenomenal existence. The changes we see in our everyday experiences of the world, such as our perception of objects, would be due to the foundations of these derivative entities exercising or ceasing to exercise their causal activity with one another. Now if *svabhāva* (unlike *kāritra*) is separate from the causal matrix, if it is not determined by anything distinct to itself, then it is *independent*. Thus we may characterise the *dharmas* as the independent fundamental basis for the non-fundamental derivative phenomenal

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[29] This distinction was most clearly expressed by Saṃghabhadra (Williams 1981), although it occurs even in the commentary of AbhKB 5.26 (808) within which it is criticised.

experience that is the world. The collection of *dharma*-types forms the complete minimal base of all derivative entities.

## 3.4. *Dravya* and *Prajñapti*: Ontological Permissivism of the Sarvāstivāda

The distinction between the fundamental *dharmas* determined by *svabhāva* and the entities derived from these led to another categorisation – that of *dravya-sat* and *prajñapti-sat*. Those entities that exist fundamentally are *dravya-sat*,[30] whereas those dependent upon or derived from the *dravya* entities (i.e. the *dharmas*) are classed as *prajñapti*. This latter term carried a sense of something dependent upon linguistic conventions and verbal practice i.e. a 'designation'.[31] We see this sense when Vasubandhu, explaining the Sarvāstivādin claim that *sabhāgatās* (the sameness of classes) are *dharmas*, and therefore fundamental entities, writes that "if the sameness of [living] beings was not a *dravya* of non-difference [i.e. the phenomena of non-difference as a fundamental entity], there would not be the cognition (*buddhi*), by identity, of "[living] being" when beings are divided by distinction from one another, nor [would there be] the designation (*prajñapti*)."[32]

More importantly, the term is used by Vasubandhu in his commentary on the *Abhidharmakośa* when criticising those entities which the Sarvāstivādins consider to be *dharmas*. Vasubandhu's criticisms are from a Sautrāntika perspective, and as such, he is less inclined to accept certain

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[30] Though the term *dravya* appears to resemble the Vaiśeṣika ontological category of substance (see *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* 1.1.15 (25) and Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasaṃgraha* (20)), Vasubandhu includes a criticism of the Vaiśeṣika notion in the commentary of AbhK 3.100 (557). The dispute concerns the part-whole relation, however towards the end of the discussion the Vaiśeṣika claims that an atom (as *dravya*) is distinct from the qualities that inhere within it, and so matter (*rūpa*) would only be a quality of a *dravya*, and the *dravya* would exist even after the destruction of matter. Vasubandhu retorts that once matter is removed, there is no cognition of the *dravya* and therefore *dravya* would not be fundamental in the way the Vaiśeṣika argues. One must also keep in mind the Buddhist commitment to the doctrine of 'radical momentariness' (*kṣaṇika*) which is at odds with the eternal *dravya* of the Vaiśeṣika.
[31] See the entry for *prajñapti* in Edgerton (1953: 358) where the senses of 'declaration,' 'manifestation in words,' 'verbal expression,' and so on, are given, along with the philosophically significant sense of 'designation'. It should also be noted that *prajñapti* plays a significant role in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, whose works predate those of Vasubandhu.
[32] *yadi sattvasabhāgatā dravyamaviśiṣṭaṃ na syāt, anyonyaviśeṣabhinneṣu sattveṣu 'sattvaḥ sattvaḥ ityabhedena buddhirna syāt, prajñaptiśca* |(230).

phenomena as *dharma* and considers the Sarvāstivādins as overly generous in their ontology.[33] The

error, he believes, is that the Sarvāstivāda mistake something that is derivative (*prajñapti-sat*) for

something that is fundamental (*dravya-sat*). The disputed *dharmas* are often those categorised by

the Sarvāstivādins as neither physical nor mental (*cittacaittaviprayukta*). The adoption of these

entities as *dharmas* is driven by their uncompromising realism combined with the belief that the

Buddha's use of such terms in the scriptures corresponded to the world as it is in itself. A case in

point is the Sarvāstivādin claim that the state of deep meditational absorption (*samāpatti*) is itself a

distinct *dharma*. This leads to Vasubandhu's criticism:

> But do these [two types[34] of] meditation (*samāpatti*) exist as fundamental (*dravyatas*)? Or as
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> designations (*prajñaptitaḥ*)? "As fundamental" is said [by the Sarvāstivādins]. From being an
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> obstruction to the arising of the mind [*dharmas*] (*citta*).[35] No [says Vasubandhu], because
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> the obstruction of the mind is [brought about] by the mind in meditation. Indeed that later
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> obstruction of the mind that is produced is just the mind in meditation, by which there is
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> mere inactivity of the mind at the later time, from bringing about the stream[36] of the
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> obstruction of that [i.e. the stream of mental dharmas]. That [inactivity of the mind] is
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> designated (*prajñapyate*) "meditation," and that mere inactivity did not exist prior, [and]
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> does not arise later of the [stream] engaged [in meditation], thus that meditation is
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> designated (*prajñapyate*) conditioned (*saṃskṛta*). And furthermore – then meditation is the
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> bringing about of the very stream. Thus even non-cognitive [meditation] is to be
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> understood. That [stream which] there enjoys obstruction of the activity of the mind is thus

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[33] For a discussion of Sautrāntika and their differences to the Sarvāstivādins, see Bartley (2015: Ch. 4) and Dhammajoti (2015: 67 – 69).

[34] The two types of meditation (*samāpatti*) in consideration are: (i) *āsaṃjñikasamāpatti*, which is the obstruction of mental activity, pursued as a means to deliverance, and (ii) *nirodhasamāpatti,* which is the obstruction of both mental activity and sensations, pursued for tranquility. See AbhKB 2.41 – 2.44 (229 – 248). Their differences do not affect the current issue.

[35] Being an obstruction to the arising of the mind *dharmas* is taken to be the svabhāva of the *dharma* that is under dispute here (see AbhK 2.41).

[36] I have translated the term *āśraya* (basis) as "stream" in line with Yaśomitra: *tadviruddhāśrayāpādanāt | cittaviruddhasyāśrayasya santānasyāpādanāt kāraṇāt |* (247).

mind, and that mere inactivity is designated (*prajñapyate*) non-cognitive, thus they do not describe that in words. The [two] meditations are therefore explained.[37]

Vasubandhu's argument is essentially the claim that what is merely the inactivity of the mind *dharmas* in a stream of *dharmas* (which we take to be the person) is taken by the Sarvāstivādins to be a fundamental (*dravya*) *dharma* distinct from mental *dharmas*. Yaśomitra, commenting upon Vasubandhu's commentary, explains the basis of the Sarvāstivādin's belief that meditation is fundamental – "from its own characteristic; from being an obstruction to the arising of the mind, from which the arising of the mind gained obstruction."[38] The Sarvāstivādin, on abstracting the qualities of meditational experience eventually hit upon what they conceive to be a distinct characteristic to that of the mind (and all other *dharmas*), and so accord it a status as fundamental. Vasubandhu claims that this is mistaken, and meditation should be understood to have the status of a *prajñapti* entity. This is because we find that its claimed characteristic can be sourced in the mere inactivity of mental *dharmas* within a stream of *dharmas*.

A second point is the status of meditation as a conditioned entity (*saṃskṛta*). The Sarvāstivādin claims that if meditation is causally efficacious (as Buddhist praxis and scripture states), then surely it is a *dharma* since it is only *dharmas* that are categorised as conditioned (and some that are unconditioned). *Prajñapti* entities are not thought to be causally efficacious. Vasubandhu's response is to state that even the status of being conditioned can be on the level of *prajñapti* and not just *dravya*. This means that meditation, due to its being inactivity of the mind, and seemingly arising and then ceasing in line with when mental activity ceases and arises, is conditioned on the level of *prajñapti* but not *dravya*. Once again Yaśomitra's commentary clarifies the distinction in an

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[37] *kiṃ punarete samāpattī dravyataḥ staḥ? utāho prajñaptitaḥ? dravyata ityāha | cittotpattipratibandhanāt? na; samāpatticittenaiva tatpratibandhanāt | samāpatticittameva hi taccittāntaraviruddhamutpadyate, yena kālāntaraṃ cittasyāpravṛttimātraṃ bhavati; tadviruddhāśrayāpādanāt | yāsau samāpattiriti prajñapyate, taccāpravṛttimātraṃ na pūrvamāsīt, na paścād bhavati vyutthitasyeti saṃskṛtāsau samāpattiḥ prajñapyate | atha vā - āśrayasyaiva tathā samāpādanaṃ samāpattiḥ | evamāsaṃjñikamapi dṛṣṭavyam | cittamevāsau tatra cittapravṛttiviruddhaṃ labhate, taccāpravṛttimātramāsaṃjñikaṃ prajñapyata iti tadetanna varṇayanti | vyākhyāte samāpattī | (247).*
[38] *dravyata iti | svalakṣaṇataḥ; cittotpattipratibandhanāt, yasmāccittotpatti pratibadhnītaḥ | (247).*

important way: "The conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) is this designated (*prajñapyate*) meditation, or non-cognitive meditation, or cessation meditation; as daily convention (*saṃvyavahārataḥ*) but not as fundamental (*dravyataḥ*)."[39] Entities that are derivative (*prajñapti*) appear to owe their origin to daily *conventions* by way of convenient designations. In a sense they are dependent upon our cognition, community norms, and fundamental entities, whereas the *dharmas* – as *dravya* entities – are independent of these.[40]

A second example of an entity Vasubandhu believes should have the status of derivative, but that the Sarvāstivādin have mistaken as fundamental, is the *dharma* known as *prāpti*. Once again this derives from the Sarvāstivādin commitment to realism coupled with reference to "acquisition" or "possession" (*prāpti*) discussed by the Buddha in scriptures. If what is referred to as a person is fundamentally the stream of *dharma* activity, then the phenomenon of *taking* certain *dharmas* within a given stream is a *prāpti dharma*.[41] Vasubandhu provides a criticism of this position with the following:

> This [position] is incorrect – [i.e. the fundamental existence of an entity] of which no
> *svabhāva* is even discerned, as it is with form, sound and so on, or passion, hate and so on;
> and is not even an effect, like the eye-faculty, hearing-faculty and so on. From its non-existence as a fundamental *dharma* (*dravyadharma*), it [i.e. the Sarvāstivādin claim] is incorrect.[42]

In order to be *dravya*, therefore, Vasubandhu appears to argue that the entity have a discernible essence (*svabhāva*) or that it be causally efficacious. Yaśomitra elaborates on this succinct argument:

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[39] *saṃskṛtāsau samāpattirasaṃjñisamāpattiḥ, nirodhasamāpattirvā prajñapyate; saṃvyavahārato na tu dravyataḥ* | (247).

[40] Of course mental *dharmas* are dependent upon our cognition, but the mental *dharmas* would occur, according to the Sarvāstivādins, whether we know the existence of *dharmas* or not. A *prajñapti* entity can *only* occur if a designation for it exists.

[41] There is more to *prāpti* than this, including a corresponding *dharma* of non-acquisition/non-possession (*aprāpti*). The discussion in the AbhKB is multifaceted (see AbhKB 2.35 – 2.40 (209 – 229), yet our focus is purely on the way in which the discussion highlights the distinction between *prajñapti* and *dravya*.

[42] *ayamayogaḥ - yadasyā naivaʼsvabhāvaḥ prajñayate rūpaśabdādivad, rāgadveṣādivadvā; na cāpi kṛtyaṃ cakṣuḥśrotrādivat | tasmād dravyadharmāsambhavādayogaḥ* | (213)

Indeed a two-fold [interpretation] is possible in the explanation – either a thing as fundamental entity (*dravyasat*), or as a designated entity (*prajñaptisat*). "Why is it [i.e. its status as *dravya*] incorrect?" the Vaibhāṣika [i.e. Sarvāstivādin] ask. The teacher [i.e. Vasubandhu] said "This is incorrect". In more detail [the argument is] – that thing which is a fundamental entity (*dravyasat*) would be discerned (*grāhyaṃ*) either by perception or discernible by inference. Form, sound and so on are discernible by perception, from being grasped by the five sense-faculties. Some perception is even obtainable by mental perception (*manovijñāna*), [like] passion, hate and so on, from being self-experienced. The eye-faculty, hearing-faculty and so on are discerned by inference from being inferable by the effect of the eye-consciousness and so on, from the existence or non-existence [of consciousness when there is] the existence or non-existence of this [sense-faculty and sense-object]. But *prāpti* is not obtainable by perception, nor obtainable by inference; from the non-perceptibility (and) flawed inferrability in its establishment. Therefore from the non-existence of it as a fundamental entity (*dravyadharma*), that [statement by the Vaibhāṣika] is determined as incorrect.[43]

According to Yaśomitra, then, a fundamental entity must have a perceptible *svabhāva* (including those perceivable by the mind), or be inferable from an effect it causes. Form, sound and such others (these two fall under the category of *rūpa*) have an essence (*svabhāva*)[44] that is perceptible, as do those mental states that are perceived by the mental sense-faculty (*manas*). Alternatively, if it is held that the contact between a sense-faculty and sense-object produces a particular consciousness episode, then the presence of a consciousness episode and a sense-object allows one

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[43] *pravacane hi dvividhamiṣyate - dravyasacca vastu, prajñaptisacceti | kathamayuktiḥ? iti vaibhāṣikāḥ | ācārya āha - ayamayoga iti | vistaraḥ - iha yad dravyasadvastu tat pratyakṣagrāhyaṃ vā bhavedanumānagrāhyaṃ vā | tatra pratyakṣagrāhyaṃ rūpaśabdādi, pañcendriyagrāhyatvāt | manovijñānagrāhyamapi kiñcit pratyakṣaṃ rāgadveṣādi, svasaṃvedyatvāt | cakṣuḥśrotrāditvanumānagrāhyaṃ cakṣurvijñānādikṛtyānumeyatvāt, tadbhāvābhāvayostadbhāvābhāvāt | prāptiḥ punarna pratyakṣagrāhyā, na cānumānagrāhyā; tatsiddhau niravavadyānumānādarśanāt | tasmād dravyadharmāsambhavādayoga iti sthitametat |* (213)

[44] It would be more correct to say that form, sound or such *is* the *svabhāva* of a given *rūpa dharma*.

to infer the presence of a sense-faculty (since the eye does not see itself, and the ear does not hear itself, the sense-faculty *dharmas* must be inferred). Since *prāpti* is not ascertained either by perception or by inference, then it cannot be considered a fundamental and is instead a derivative entity. As with the case of *samāpatti*, the occurrence of *prāpti* is just a designation for the particular operations of a stream of *dharmas*. In this instance there is no separate *prāpti* but only the stream which either includes the seeds to produce negative *dharmas* (*kleśa*) within it or not.

But these are Sautrāntika criticisms that utilise a distinction between fundamental (*dravya*) and derivative (*prajñapti*). By the time of Saṃghabhadra (a Sarvāstivādin rather than Sautrāntika), this distinction was brought into accord with the distinction between fundamental (*paramārtha*) and 'conventional' (*saṃvṛti*).[45] First, in a nod to the previously discussed Sarvāstivādin basis for its doctrine that *dharmas* exist at all times due to the intentional structure of awareness, Saṃghabhadra explains:

> To be an object-field that produces cognition (*buddhi*) is the true characteristic of existence
> [*sallakṣaṇa*].
>
> (Translated by Cox (1988: 47); text in square brackets added).

The object-field (*viṣaya*) of a cognition can then be either a *dravyasat* entity or a *prajñaptisat* entity, and these correlate, respectively, to *paramārthasat(ya)* and *saṃvṛtisat(ya)*. As Saṃghabhadra continues:

> This (i.e. entity) is divisible into two: what exists fundamentally [*dravyatas*] and what exists
> as a designation [*prajñaptitas*], the two being designated on the basis of conventional truth
> [*saṃvṛtisatya*] and absolute truth [*paramārthasatya*]. If, with regard to a thing, a cognition

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[45] There are divisions of modes of existence into more than two categories in the earlier Abhidharma works, including the *Mahāvibhāṣa* and *Abhidharmadīpa*. For an explanation and extracts, see Cox (1995: 153) and Dhammajoti (2015: 74 – 76). It appears, however, that the additional modes collapse into the two-fold distinction, perhaps explaining why the latter became the dominant approach.

(*buddhi*) is produced without depending on anything else, this thing exists fundamentally —

e.g., the *skandhas* of form, experience, etc. If it depends on other things to produce a

cognition, then it exists as a designation — e.g., a vase, army, etc.[46]

There is much to unpack in this explanation. Firstly, if the definition of an existent is that which

causes a cognition, then it is difficult to think (literally) of any non-existent entity, especially if mental

objects are possible causes of cognition. As Yao (2020: 8) remarks, "the Sarvāstivādins expelled

nonbeing from the realm of knowledge and forbade us to think or talk about it." Saṃghabhadra

must therefore provide an explanation of those entities that we consider non-existent (such as

logical impossibilities or hallucinations), and explain their manner of being that is distinct to non-

existence. This is precisely what Saṃghabhadra does.[47] The general strategy is to distinguish the

object of a cognition (*viṣaya*) from the content (*ākāra*) of a cognition. In this way, even cognitions of

apparently non-existent objects have an existing object and it is only the conflating of their content

with their object that leads to confusion. Both the contentful cognition, and the object that caused

the cognition, are existent. The cognition of touching a snake in a dream may in fact be caused by

the non-dream blanket passing through the hands as it falls from the sleeper. The snake is the

content of the cognition, and the blanket is the object. Only when we believe the content to be the

object in such scenarios is there a problem.

The case of logical impossibilities is framed by Saṃghabhadra as the question of how an expression

referring to a non-existent object (even an apparently impossible one) is at all possible, unless we

can cognise non-existent objects. Saṃghabhadra's response is two-fold.[48] In the case of expressions

such as 'non-*brahman*,' Saṃghabhadra would say that the initial cognition is of a negated quality

(which exists, though not in that location) – in this example, the quality of being a *brahman*. A

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[46] I have amended Dhammajoti's (2015: 79) translation of this passage, as I believe his translation of *dravyatas* as "really existing" is misleading, since it implies that a *prajñapti* entity does not *really* exist.
[47] My explanation follows Cox's (1988) very informative article.
[48] This twofold approach follows from the recognition in Indian logic of two negations: a negation that affirms the existence of its contradictory (*paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*), and a negation that has no such implication (*prasajya- pratiṣedha*). See Bartley (2005: 107 & 114) and Ruegg (2002: 19 – 24).

following cognition would then take the specified object as the locus that does not have the previously cognised quality, here this is a person that isn't of the brahman caste, say, a *kṣatriya*. This example of the non-*brahman* relies on the expression having a specified object-field, that is existent, that lacks a quality, and so the expression implicitly refers to an existent object (Cox 1988: 56). Even in expressions that cannot be analysed in this way, such as 'nothing exists,' Saṃghabhadra argues that expressions can serve as the object of a cognition whilst the constituents of the expression need not refer to anything for that particular utterance. In the case of 'nothing exists,' it is the complete expression itself that produces the cognition, but the isolated term 'nothing' does not refer to anything that could serve as the object (i.e. causal basis) of a cognition.[49] Such reasoning applies to Indian stock examples of impossible objects, such as 'the horn of the hare' or 'the son of a barren woman' (Cox 1988: 56 – 57).

In addressing the problem of illusions, Saṃghabhadra utilises a similar strategy. In the example of perceiving two moons due to faulty sense-faculties, there is no additional non-existent moon which the observer perceives. Only the single moon acts as object of the cognition, and yet, since the Buddhist doctrine holds that consciousness arises from the contact of the sense-faculty with the object, any damage to the sense-faculty would, of course, have an impact on the consciousness it generates. The content (*ākāra*) is therefore of two moons, but not the sense-object (*viṣaya*), which can only be the single existent moon (Cox 1988: 49 – 50). These, along with parallel arguments against other apparently non-existent sense-objects (see Cox (1988)), show that Saṃghabhadra and the Sarvāstivādins had no function for non-existence. It did not occur in their ontology in any meaningful way – if an entity could be referred to, spoken of, thought of, and so on, it was existent. Even doubting whether our cognition accurately represents the external world requires the content and object of the cognition to be existent. As Cox (1988: 66) explains, for Saṃghabhadra:

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[49] The isolated expression 'nothing' may produce a cognition, but the cognition would have the *expression* 'nothing' as its object-support.

[S]uch deliberative reflection or doubt is only possible with regard to an existent object. The possibility of investigating whether one's cognition of a particular object is accurate or mistaken (*viparīta*) does not demand that the object-support be nonexistent. On the contrary, distinctions, such as that between accurate and mistaken cognition, are possible only with regard to or among existents; existence and nonexistence share no characteristic by which they may be compared. Accordingly, it is only possible to distinguish accurate from mistaken cognition when those cognitions have an existent object-support.

Rather than non-existents, it is mistaking existent objects that lead to the cognition having the content of an apparently non-existent object. The mistake can sometimes rest, especially in philosophical analysis, on taking what is a derivative entity to be a fundamental entity. In this way the Sarvāstivādins and their Sautrāntika critics are not so different. Their disagreements stem from whether a given entity is a *dharma*, meaning whether it is fundamental, and not on a difference in their use of the *dravyasat/prajñaptisat* dichotomy.

It may be tempting, however, to consider whether the category of derivative entity (*prajñaptisat*) is used in place of non-existence. Is it the case that *prajñaptisat* entities do not *really* exist.[50] What is their ontological status? What exactly is the adverb doing in this translation? The motivation behind such a reading appears to be the link between the two modes of being, and the two truths. If one of the two levels of truth is to be valued more highly than the other, then there must be an explanation for why this is the case. One option is to say that the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) is not the *real* truth, and so designated entities (*prajñaptisat*), which are parallel to the conventional truth, are likewise not *really* entities. But the Abhidharma authors appear to have been quite firm in holding that the conventional truth is indeed truth – recall Vasubandhu's remark that "conventional truth is thus not falsehood" since it is based on "conventional designation (*saṃvṛtisaṃjñā*) produced from

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[50] Many translations casually speak of *dravyasat* entities, or the state of being *dravya* as 'really' existing (for example, see the amendment to Dhammajoti's translation above).

the influence of conventions."[51] Returning to Saṃghabhadra, we find in the passage quoted earlier

the notion that if a cognition of a thing is produced independently, then that thing is a fundamental

entity. If it is dependent, then it exists as a *prajñaptisat* entity. An example of an independent object

of cognition is form (*rūpa*). A dependent example is an army, where the army is dependent upon

each individual soldier, and each individual soldier is ultimately dependent upon the *dharmas* that

constitute them. But in both cases the entities exist. Instead of dismissing derivative entities as

simply a dressed-up notion of a non-existent thing, we may, adopting the language of grounding,

read the Abhidharma as positing a strict partial ordering of reality, whereby the *dharmas*, as

*dravyasat*, are fundamental, and expressions that describe *dharmas* as being expressions of the

absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*). In contrast, an entity that is derivative and dependent is

*prajñaptisat* and expressions that describe reality more broadly than *dharmas* are on the level of

conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*).[52] These entities also exist, for they are possible objects of

cognition, but they are derivative. This reading of the Abhidharma project echoes Schaffer's (2009:

357) remark that "existence debates are *trivial*, in that *the entities in question obviously do exist.*

(What is not trivial is whether they are fundamental)."


## 3.5. Ontological Dependence in the Sarvāstivāda: Causal and Explanatory

Having said something of the categories of fundamental and derivative, and the criterion by which

an entity may be identified as one or the other, there remains the issue of the relation between

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[51] *teṣveva tu saṃvṛtisaṃjñā kṛteti saṃvṛtivaśāt ghaṭaścāmbu cāstīti brūbantaḥ satyamevāhurna mṛṣetyetatsaṃvṛtisatyam* (Abhk 890).
[52] This follows from McDaniel's (2019) criticism of accounts that seek to explain the difference as residing in whether the expression contains a term that refers to a *prajñaptisat* entity or not. These accounts state that if the expression does contain reference to *prajñaptisat* entities, then it is *saṃvṛti-satya*. McDaniel argues that there are *saṃvṛti-satya* expressions that do not contain reference to *prajñaptisat* entities, such as the statement "there are more than *n* entities here," where *n* is the number of *dharmas*. Instead McDaniel states that the ontological distinction should take precedence over the semantic distinction, and that it is expressions that deal with fundamental reality that are *paramārtha-satya*, and those that deal with the derivative (as well as the fundamental) are *saṃvṛti-satya*.

these two types of entity. There are two layers of dependence that must be disambiguated, each of which fulfils a particular function in the overall Abhidharma outlook. These are (i) causal dependence, and (ii) explanatory dependence.

As discussed previously, a causal relation is considered to be diachronic, meaning the relation holds between relata in a temporal series. The Sarvāstivādins, in their elaborate defence of the existence of fundamental entities within the past, present and future, still maintained a commitment to the Buddhist emphasis on the causal nature of reality. They did this by distinguishing between the existence of a *dravyasat* entity (i.e. a *dharma*, being an entity determined by *svabhāva*), and the manifesting of its activity (*kāritra*) in a causal series. As Dhammajoti (2015: 167) puts it:

> [A]ll *dharma*-s have been always existing. As a matter of fact, time is an abstraction on our part derived from their activities. A *dharma* exists throughout time and yet is not permanent as it "courses in time" (*adhvan-saṃcāra*).

Whilst the *dharmas* exist at all times, they require causes for the manifestation of their activity and it is from this position that the Sarvāstivādins explicate their account of the various causes and conditions (*hetu-pratyaya*).[53] But since these causes and conditions are restricted to *dharmas*, and therefore only relate fundamental entities to one another, they do not provide an account of the relation between fundamental and derivative entities.

If we turn our attention away from the narrower picture of the activity (*kāritra*) of *dharmas*, which is intimately tied to a causal account, and instead focus on the essence (*svabhāva*) of *dharmas*, we come to see that the relation of fundamental to derivative is one of metaphysical explanation, that is, ground. We know from both Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra that a derivative entity may depend

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[53] Even the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) *dharmas* must be involved in the causal process. Whilst they may not be perceived in space-time by the sense-faculties, without them the Buddhist goal would not be possible and so they must be considered real and causally involved to make sense of this. One option, following Saṃghabhadra, is to consider them causal on the basis of being objects of cognition and therefore a cause of consciousness. Another manner is to consider these *dharmas* to be a *kāraṇa-hetu*, meaning a cause in virtue of not obstructing the arising of other *dharmas*.

upon another derivative entity or a fundamental entity, but that a fundamental entity does not depend on another due to the fundamental entity being determined by its intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). A fundamental entity will never lose its intrinsic nature, and the intrinsic nature is the mark by which it is determined as distinct and independent – it is the identifying mark of fundamental existence. If its nature is permanent, and if a derivative entity derives its nature from the intrinsic nature of the fundamental entities upon which it depends, then the relation becomes one of explanation rather than causation – it is synchronic rather than diachronic. By this is meant that a derivative entity does not emerge from fundamental entities in a temporal sequence, but rather that a derivative entity being what it is *is explained* by the fundamental entities.[54] The pot, characterised by solidity, shape, function and such, has its being a pot explained by the *dharmas* upon which it depends. The actual manifestation of a pot is dependent upon the causal activities of these *dharma*s.


## 3.6. Essence, Svabhāva and the Fundamental

The plausibility of an account of ontological dependence that draws upon essence and ground is addressed in the current literature.[55] This development follows from the dissatisfaction with accounts of ontological dependence based on supervenience, and accounts based on modal-existential analysis. For the former, a relation of supervenience only holds that a change in one kind of entity is covariant with a change in another kind. For example, we may say that mental states supervene on brain activity. An alteration in the mental state leads to an alteration in the brain state. But the concept of supervenience does not intrinsically contain the asymmetry required for an

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[54] One may look to the distinction between being and existence, or identity-dependence and existential-dependence (Fine 1995) as capturing the distinction between the roles of *svabhāva* and *kāritra*. A *prajñaptisat* will, then, be caused and emerge by an aggregation of *dravyasat dharmas* exercising their *kāritra*. But this leaves *svabhāva* without a function unless we conceive of it as the basis for identity – i.e. a synchronic dependence relation of explanation.

[55] For example, see Fine (1995), Koslicki (2012) and Jago (2018). For a summary of these developments, see Zylstra (2020).

account of ontological dependence (Koslicki 2012: 187).[56] It allows for both mental states and the

brain to be fundamental (i.e. ontologically independent of one another), and yet to exhibit

covariance. Since relations of supervenience are not always asymmetric, the concept is too coarse

grained in determining which entities are fundamental, and which are derivative.[57]

An account of ontological dependence based on a modal-existential analysis similarly struggles (Fine

1995: 271). Here, the ontological dependence of *x* on *y* would be defined as "necessarily, *x* exists

only if *y* exists."[58] If this is correct, then the existence of a member of a singleton set would depend

upon the set just as much as the existence of the set depends upon the member. To critics of the

modal-existential analysis like Fine (1994: 4 – 5), the thought that the individual Vasubandhu

depends upon the singleton set {Vasubandhu} is very counter-intuitive, for it does not seem

*essential* to Vasubandhu that the set exists, and yet it does seem essential for {Vasubandu} that

Vasubandhu exists. This asymmetry is not captured by the modal-existential analysis. In addition to

this, modal dependence is over-inclusive in its list of grounds for a given entity: whatever is

necessarily the case would be a ground of any dependent entity, so that the singleton set

{Vasubandhu} would be dependent upon both the individual Vasubandhu, and that '2 + 2 = 4' (and

all other necessary truths or entities). Once again, this is too coarse grained to capture the fact that

it is not *essential* to {Vasubandhu} that '2 + 2 = 4.'

As the above criticism of the modal-existential analysis of ontological dependence relies upon the

notion of what is essential to a given entity, something more must be said about essence. Perhaps a

defender of the modal-existential account would bite the bullet and accept that the individual

Vasubandhu essentially depends upon {Vasubandhu}. This would lead to a case of symmetric

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[56] The possibility of mutual dependence will be considered later, when I discuss Madhymaka thought.
[57] See Kovacs (2020) for more on the differences between grounding and supervenience.
[58] This is a form of "rigid dependence," where that very *x* depends upon that very *y*. This type of dependence may not be applicable in all cases. If the notion of dependence is "generic," such as the claim that electricity ontologically depends upon something being an electron (though not any *specific* electron), the relation of ontological dependence may be defined as "necessarily, *x* exists only if some *F* exists." See Tahko & Lowe (2020) for more on these various definitions.

dependence, and would call into question the usefulness of grounding (characterised as asymmetric) in an account of reality's structure. Fine (1995: 275) argues that just as a collection of sentences provides the nominal definition of a term, so too does a collection of propositions, constituted by objects and properties, provide a real definition of an entity, and this real definition is its essence. This notion of essence contains within it a sense of ontological dependence, for a given entity *depends* upon the objects and properties which constitute its real definition (i.e. its essence).[59] In response to the possibility that a defender of the modal-existential analysis may simply accept that the member of a singleton set essentially depends upon the set (as well as the set depending upon its member), or that any entity essentially depends upon all necessary facts, Fine (1995: 276) distinguishes an object's "consequential essence" from its "constitutive essence." The consequential essence of an entity is the collection of those properties of the entity which are a logical consequence of the properties that make up its constitutive essence. The constitutive essence is the collection of those properties which are *not* a logical consequence of some more fundamental properties. Of course, this formulation presupposes the distinction between different levels of fundamentality for an entity's properties, but Fine offers a way to distinguish them independently of this presupposition. He suggests (1995: 277) that the constitutive essence of an entity consists of those of its properties which cannot be "generalized out" of its consequential essence. To take an example, the consequential essence of Socrates includes the fact that 2 = 2. But the consequential essence also includes the general formulation of this same fact, that "for all *x*, *x* is identical to *x*." The fact that 2 = 2 has been "generalized out," means that it is not a part of the constitutive essence of Socrates, and so Socrates does not depend upon this fact. If the notion of essence is construed as "consequential," then an account of ontological dependence based on essence faces the same difficulties as the modal-existential analysis, for an entity's essence would include all necessary facts. But if essence is understood as "constitutive," then it provides an account of ontological dependence which is more fine-grained than both supervenience and modal-existential accounts, as well as

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[59] As Fine (1995: 275) writes: "The notion of one object depending upon another is therefore the real counterpart to the nominal notion of one term being definable in terms of another."

retaining the intuition that ontological dependence, and the grounding relation, are asymmetric. On this account, the constitutive essence of an entity is its real definition, and this consists of the objects and properties which ground it.

Whilst a *dharma* is glossed as that which bears its *svabhāva*, the term *svalakṣaṇa* is sometimes used interchangeably (as in AbhKB 1.2 (13)). This latter term (without the reflexive pronoun, which implies the mark of the fundamental) includes the sense of "definition," in addition to the broader notion of "characteristic" (Apte 1957 – 1959: 1353). More importantly, the notion of essence is helpful in both expressing the relation of ground and, by doing so, providing a criterion for fundamental entities. The usage of "essence" by those contemporary philosophers working on metaphysical grounding is broader than that captured by *svabhāva*, for a derivative entity cannot be determined by an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). It is intrinsic nature which marks the fundamental. Instead, the derivative entity is determined by a *parabhāva* – an "external essence." Both intrinsic nature and extrinsic nature fall under what the grounding literature refers to as "essence," but an entity with an essence, which determines its real definition, the latter of which does not contain another entity as constituent, is held to have intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and therefore to be fundamental.

What would such a fundamental entity look like? Jago (2018), drawing on Fine's suggestion that the essence of an entity is its real definition, takes an entity's essence (or 'nature,' as Jago calls it) to be a logically complex construction. This logically complex construction provides the grounding conditions for the entity in question. Jago sees logical constructors as emblematic of the this link between grounding and essence, for it is in the essence of a conjunctive entity that it obtain in virtue of its conjuncts obtaining, and so any conjunctive entity can be said to be grounded in the entities that are its conjuncts.[60] Eventually, however, we expect to reach the basic constituents of these

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[60] It should be noted that for Jago, these complex logical constructions are not "linguistic, conceptual or mental entities" and that "there is logical complexity in the world, not only in our thoughts and language" (2018: 205). These logical constructions include complex properties and states of affairs. On this understanding, a conjunction is a mereological sum of atomic states of affairs (2018: 206).

complex logical constructions, and it is these that seem best placed to play the role of fundamentals in this account of essence. As Jago (2018: 207) states:

> One issue raised in this discussion is: just what are the primitive non-logical constituents, the non-logical 'vocabulary', from which this language [i.e. the logically complex real definitions] is constructed? These are the terms which admit of no further definition. As they have no logical constitution, our theory accords them no grounding condition. It treats them as ungrounded, and hence as fundamental, entities. Strictly speaking, our theory says only that if there are such primitive pieces of non-logical vocabulary, then they are the fundamental entities. (Comments added in square brackets).

He briefly goes on to consider some candidates, including properties distributed across space-time, being "atomist in nature – a scattering of distinct qualitative entities" (2018: 207).[61] Such is the picture of the Sarvāstivāda, where, for example, the *svabhāva* of fire is heat and the *svabhāva* of water is fluidity. It is difficult to see how these qualitative entities could be reduced further whilst maintaining a commitment that the fundamental level be unconstructed.[62] For the Sarvāstivāda, possession of an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) – a qualitative atomistic phenomenon – is the mark of a fundamental entity. Where an entity borrows its nature from another, it is considered to be derivative, having been constructed from extrinsic natures (*parabhāva*). My intention here is not to defend Jago's position, but only to highlight the way in which his idea of an intimate link between essence, grounding and the fundamental is reflected in the project of the Sarvāstivāda. This intimate link also explains why the Madhyamaka criticism of metaphysical foundationalism takes the form of an attack on the notion of intrinsic nature.

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[61] It should be noted that Jago's theory, by his own reasoning, is not committed to a fundamental level (2018: 207). One should also keep in mind that for Jago, the fundamental level would exclude matter (he distinguishes between material and formal constitution, with only the latter being relevant to essence) as matter would always be derived. For the Abhidharma, *rūpa* (matter) is admitted as a class of *dharmas*.
[62] One may suggest doing away with the *dharmas* altogether, and replacing their function with the qualities which the *dharmas* supposedly uphold. This was, in fact, the move made by the Sautrāntika school.

## 3.7. The Motivation for a Metaphysics of Grounding

So far, I have shown how the Abhidharma project, and in particular the Sarvāstivāda, can be viewed as pursuing a project of metaphysics comparable to that of modern proponents of metaphysical grounding. This is not to say that they produce theories that are an exact match,[63] nor even that they deploy the same arguments. Where the two overlap, however, is in their desire for a complete explanation of reality – as it is in itself – that displays a hierarchical or layered structure. As Rabin (2018: 38) puts it:

> In fact, much of the appeal of the notion of ground, and its recent rise to prominency in metaphysics, comes from the intuitive appeal of the layered conception.

Or, as Bliss and Priest (2018: 1) explain in more detail:

> The content of reality to which these parts give rise is arranged relatively neatly into layers: facts about economies and crimes reside at a higher level than facts about biological systems, which reside at a higher level than facts about chemical systems and so on. Or perhaps we might prefer to say that economic systems are further up the Great Chain of Being than ecosystems, which are further up the chain than carbon compounds. This picture, or something very much like it, looms large over contemporary analytic metaphysics: a picture according to which reality is hierarchically arranged with chains of entities ordered by relations of ground and/or ontological dependence terminating in something fundamental.

And finally, as Schaffer (2009: 364) states:

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[63] Of course grounding theorists are not in agreement, and so I am here referring to what may be called grounding 'orthodoxy,' being the position which accepts a relation of grounding between entities arranged hierarchically which is asymmetrical, non-reflexive and transitive.

Grounding is an unanalyzable but needed notion—it is *the primitive structuring conception of metaphysics*.

We might then ask why an ordering and structure is of such importance to philosophers. There are a number of reasons, some based on theoretical virtue (see Bennett 2017: Ch. 8) and others based on competing flat accounts of reality presupposing the importance of the fundamental (and so presupposing a layered conception – see Schaffer 2009).[64] But most important for the comparison with the Buddhist analysis is its intuitive pull, for as Bennett (2017: 217) remarks in her rejection of flat ontology, "[i]t is tempting to just gesture around, indicating all the people, cars, colors, beliefs, and so forth." The Abhidharma philosophers wanted to provide an account of phenomenal experience in all of its complexity, and sought to alter that phenomenal experience. A layered conception provides an effective and manageable roadmap – one understands the derivative by means of the fundamental, and one can alter the occurrence of the derivative by altering the occurrence of the fundamental. The fundamental is the final court of appeal for metaphysics, a solid ground upon which to build our explanations and understanding of reality. It is the desire for getting to the bottom of things, and believing that this is possible, that the contemporary grounding project was undertaken. This 'getting to the bottom of things' also includes getting to the root of a disagreement. Such was the motivation behind an article by Fine (2001), from which the recent resurgence of interest in grounding stemmed. He sought to explain the debate between realism and antirealism as a debate on the status of the constituents that ground the disputed entity.[65]

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[64] One of Bennett's points is that the theoretical virtue of parsimony should not simply be based upon a measure of the number of things a given theory claims to exist, but instead the number of fundamentalia it claims exist, since it is the fundamentalia that are held to be without a ground or explanation. There is no internal reason for an advocate of the layered conception of reality to have more fundamental entities than a "flatworld" advocate – see Bennett 2017: 221 – 222. One of Schaffer's separate claims is that the flatworld ontology based on the Quinean model begins by identifying our best theory (from which our ontological commitments will follow). However, the notion of a "best" theory already presupposes a notion of the fundamental, and Quine himself seems to believe this in his adoption of physics as providing the best theory – see Schaffer 2009: 366 – 367.

[65] Applications of grounding also include its use in debates on the mind (Ney 2020), ethics and normativity (Leary 2020) and social entities (Passinsky 2020).

When we consider the Abhidharma project, we find a similar drive towards uncovering the structure and ordering of reality for the sake of 'getting to the bottom of things'. Thus, 'Abhidharma' itself is taken to mean an "unsullied understanding" (AbhKB 1.2).[66] "Understanding" (*prajñā*) is glossed by Vasubandhu as "the discernment of dharmas."[67] To understand, then, is to have knowledge of the fundamental elements and to be able to distinguish them. It is also to distinguish the *dharmas* – the fundamentals – from the derivatives which depend upon them. The text (AbhKB 1.3) then goes on to explain the importance of this discernment of the fundamental entities and structure of reality:

> There is no means other than the discernment of *dharmas* for the pacification of the afflictions. And here, because of the afflictions, the people wander in the ocean of worldly existence, for this reason, they [the Sarvāstivādins] say, this teaching (*śāstrā*) was spoken.[68]

It is only by means of the Abhidharma – its method of analysis and discernment – that one can pacify the afflictions, the elements that are the cause of rebirth in this world filled with suffering. The route to ending suffering is by means of understanding reality, its structure and the distinction between the fundamental and the derivative. It may appear strange, given that the Abhidharma begins with the Buddhist scriptures and their exposition, that it should place such a high emphasis on understanding the fundamental elements of reality, rather than focusing purely on a hermeneutical analysis of texts. But as Westerhoff (2018: 39 – 40) notes:

> Buddhists assume that with his enlightenment the Buddha obtained universal knowledge, not necessarily knowledge of each individual fact, but comprehensive insight into the nature of all things. This kind of omniscience implies having answers to all the questions about the fundamental nature of reality […] For this reason it seems plausible to assume that one of

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[66] *prajñā' malā sānucarā 'bhidharmaḥ* (11).
[67] *tatra prajñā' dharmapravicayaḥ* (11).
[68] *dharmāṇām pravicayam antareṇa nāsti kleśānāṃ yata upaśāntaye 'bhyupāyaḥ | kleśaiś ca bhramati bhavārṇave 'tra lokas taddhetor ata uditaḥ kilaiṣa śāstrā ||* (14).

the motivations for composing the Abhidharma treatises was to develop a kind of substitute

of the Buddha's omniscient knowledge of the nature of existence and the path to liberation.

The Buddha's knowledge at the moment of enlightenment mirrors reality exactly as it is. This

knowledge is contained within the Buddhist scriptures, but requires drawing out into a complete

systematic picture and this is precisely the Abhidharma goal. Such knowledge is the only means to

liberation from suffering in the cycle of rebirths. Analysis via an understanding of the fundamental

and the derivative, their natures and their relations, will lead to *nirvāṇa*.

# 4. Madhyamaka: Against Metaphysical Foundationalism

## 4.1. Origins of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna and the *Mahāyāna*

The Madhyamaka ("Middle Way") school of Buddhist philosophy emerged from the writings of Nāgārjuna, a monk most likely born in Southern India in the 2nd century. Little is known for certain of his life, and much is mixed with the fantastical.[69] His influence, however, is tremendous.

The uncertainty regarding the historical Nāgārjuna stretches to his authorship of a number of texts. A strictly conservative position would be to accept only the root text of the Madhyamaka school – the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*) – as correctly attributed to Nāgārjuna. If the *MMK* is taken to be the text authored by Nāgārjuna, then "Nāgārjuna" is simply taken to be synonymous with the author of the *MMK*. Even if we accept additional texts to have been authored by Nāgārjuna, the *MMK* is the "*chef d'œuvre* among Nāgārjuna's dialectical tracts" (Lindtner 1987: 24). It has spawned numerous influential commentaries – from the Indian Madhyamaka tradition alone this includes Bhāviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa* (6th century) and Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (7th century), as well as commentaries by non-Madhyamaka philosophers, such as Sthiramati (this commentary now extant only in Chinese). The later Tibetan Buddhist tradition, within which Madhyamaka found fertile ground to thrive, collects six works among those attributed to Nāgārjuna which comprise its corpus on reasoning (see Ruegg 1981: 19 – 26). This includes the *MMK*, but also the "Removal of Disputation" (*Vigrahavyāvartanī - VV*) – a short work concerned with epistemology and refuting critics from the non-Buddhist Nyāya school – and the "Seventy Verses on Emptiness" (*Śūnyatāsaptati - ŚS*). Both of these texts are described by the commentator Candrakīrti as each an elaboration upon a specific verse of the MMK (Lindtner 1987: 22 fn 70). The corpus also includes the "Sixty Verses on Reasoning" (*Yuktiṣāṣṭika - YṢ*) – a collection of aphorisms defending the teaching of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) – and the "Crushing of the Categories"

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[69] For a wonderful overview of the 'fantastical' elements, see Westerhoff (2018: 89 – 92). For a detailed historical study of Nāgārjuna and the society within which he lived, see Walser (2005).

(*Vaidalyaprakaraṇa – VP*), a critique of the Nyāya categories that govern epistemology and debating practices. Finally there is the "Proof of the Conventional" (*Vyavahārasiddhi*), a text that has not survived except in extracts quoted by later writers (Westerhoff 2018: 98). It must be stressed once again, however, that the ascription of authorship for classical Indian texts is a precarious business, and no text other than the *MMK*, *by definition*, can be ascribed with absolute certainty.[70] As such, I will focus on the *MMK*. I will also make use of commentaries by later writers, in particular the *Prasannapadā* of Candrakīrti.

Nāgārjuna's philosophy is a radical refutation of the Abhidharma metaphysics, but its radicalism should be seen in the broader context of a movement in which Nāgārjuna would eventually be held in high esteem as one of its greatest propounders. This is the Mahāyāna ("Greater Vehicle") movement of Buddhism. The origins of this movement are obscure, and it is debatable whether Nāgārjuna would have considered himself an advocate of the Mahāyāna.[71] Regardless of this, the fact that a Mahāyāna movement was emerging with values and views that went well beyond the established Abhidharma schools goes someway to answering the puzzlement of scholars summarised by Potter (1999: 13):

> Nāgārjuna has become a celebrated Buddhist, classified as a skeptic by some, a nihilist by others, an absolutist by still others, yet counted as one of the great Buddhists, perhaps second only to the Buddha himself in rank among Buddhist philosophers. Scholars have found this assessment puzzling, and a vast amount of scholarship has been directed his way. If he was such a skeptic, nihilist or absolutist, why isn't he seen by Buddhists as an enemy rather than a defender of the Buddha's teachings?

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[70] See Ruegg (1981) and Lindtner (1987) for assessments on the veracity of the ascriptions of texts to Nāgārjuna outside of this *yukti*-corpus.

[71] See, for example, Potter (1999: 16), Warder (1973), and Harris (1991: Ch 3). However see Walser (2005) for a sociologically sensitive account of Nāgārjuna's affiliation with the nascent Mahāyāna movement.

The means by which we may identify the Mahāyāna as a distinct movement is by considering it a textual tradition. Its great innovation was its broadening of the canon of Buddhist scriptures, incorporating what are known as the "Perfection of Wisdom" (*Prajñāpāramitā*) sutras. The legitimacy of these texts was rejected by the older Abhidharma schools, yet by a growing number of followers they were accepted as the word of the Buddha – the *buddha-vacana*. The justification for their acceptance came in a number of ways which included: (i) holding the scriptures to have been dictated by the Buddha but concealed for a time as the teachings were too sophisticated for people in the Buddha's worldly existence; (ii) revealed by the Buddha in meditative visions or dreams; (iii) revealed by future Buddhas in meditative visions or dreams. The latter two explanations allow the texts to have been literally penned by monks, though their contents are said to have been provided directly from an authoritative source (i.e. a Buddha).

The contents of these sutras are no less innovative. The Mahāyāna movement presented a new ideal – the *Bodhisattva*. Whilst the earlier ideal of the Abhidharma was an *arhat*, one who had cleansed oneself of the afflictions, a *Bodhisattva* was driven by the ideal of great compassion (*mahā-karuṇā*) and strove to liberate all beings, delaying one's own *nirvāṇa* until all other beings had achieved *nirvāṇa* (Westerhoff 2018: 99). As stated in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*:

> *Subhuti:* Again, when the Lord speaks of a Bodhisattva as 'a great being,' for what reason is a Bodhisattva called a 'great being'?
>
> *The Lord:* A Bodhisattva is called 'a great being' in the sense that he will cause a great mass and collection of beings to achieve the highest [i.e. *nirvāṇa*].
>
> (Translated by Conze (1975: 89))

The sutras also contained much that was metaphysically pregnant, perhaps nothing more so than the concept which gave the sutras their name: the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). This term *prajñā* was deployed in Abhidharma systems as meaning the discernment of the fundamental

entities (*dharmas*) – their natures and relations – via the process of analysis. But the Mahāyāna push further, as Williams (2009: 51) explains:

> The perfection of wisdom transcends their [i.e. Abhidharma] wisdom, both in terms of its more refined analysis and also because it occurs within the context of the extensive and compassionate Bodhisattva deeds, the aspiration to full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

To perfect *prajñā* is to go further than the Abhidharma, to subject even their fundamental categories to rigorous analysis. This continued analysis can only lead to the realisation of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), a concept recurring again and again in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*:

> I will teach you how a Bodhisattva should stand in perfect wisdom. Through standing in emptiness should he stand in perfect wisdom.

> (Conze 1975: 97).

The teaching of *dharmas* as the real fundamental basis of reality by means of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is seen as misguided, and the absence of *svabhāva* in *dharmas* is seen as perfected wisdom:

> Sariputra: Maitreya, have you then perhaps really witnessed those dharmas in the way in which you teach?

> Maitreya: I have not. Even I do not know those dharmas, do not apprehend, do not see them, in the way in which my words express, and my thoughts reflect on them. But certainly the body could not touch them, speech could not express them, mind could not consider them. That is the own-being [*svabhāva*] of all dharmas, because they are without any own-being.

The emergence of Mahāyāna reflected an effort in Buddhism at a redefinition from what had come before – a pushing further to logical consequences the most important teachings it saw the Buddha as proclaiming. But, as Williams (2009: 52) points out, "[t]he Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, as with most Mahāyāna sūtras, do not indulge in elaborate philosophical argument. For this we must look to the philosophical schools, particularly in this case the Mādhyamika." In such a shifting, innovative and fertile environment, it is no wonder that contemporary scholars have had difficulty in assigning a philosophical position to Nāgārjuna that does not make him appear as an enemy of Buddhism rather than its staunchest defender. His position is a reaction, and if we are clear about what it is that Nāgārjuna is reacting to, and how he reacted without abandoning a form of Buddhism (i.e. Mahāyāna), we will go some way to understanding his appeal. I suggest that he is reacting to the foundationalism of the Abhidharma philosophers, and if we understand this debate through the lens of metaphysical grounding, we will see how the criticism that such a position entails metaphysical nihilism does not hold. Let us then turn to Nāgārjuna's critique of the Abhidharma.

## 4.2. *Svabhāva* and Sophistry

Nāgārjuna's position is the advocating of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This is the absence of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) in what the Abhidharma philosophers referred to as *dharmas*. Now if an intrinsic nature is the mark of *dharmas*, and *dharmas* are understood to be the fundamental elements of the world, we have a critique of fundamentality in the advocacy of emptiness. Nāgārjuna's method is to demonstrate the undesirable consequences of accepting any entity to hold an intrinsic nature. The most troubling consequence, according to Nāgārjuna, is that the existence of intrinsic nature is not compatible with the teachings of dependent-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The arguments of Nāgārjuna are therefore directed primarily against the concept of intrinsic nature. Before delving

into the specifics, one point should be borne in mind. Nāgārjuna wrote some centuries before both

Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra, and his arguments appear to blur the distinction between the later,

more specific notions of activity (*kāritra*) and essence (*svabhāva*). This means appearing to blur the

distinction between causal dependence/independence, and metaphysical

dependence/independence as understood by the relation of ground. These apparent ambiguities

lead Hayes (1994: 299) to believe that "Nāgārjuna's arguments, when examined closely, turn out to

be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader." Examining MMK 1.5[72],

Hayes points out that Nāgārjuna's arguments turn on an equivocation with the term "*svabhāva*."

The verse runs, according to Hayes' (1994: 312) translation, as follows:

> Surely beings have no *svabhāva* when they have causal conditions. And if there is no
>
> *svabhāva*, there is no *parabhāva*.[73]

At face value the argument can be taken as stating that causal dependence implies a lack of

*svabhāva*, and so the two are mutually exclusive. *Svabhāva* is taken to mean causal independence,

therefore the statement that this property is incompatible with a causally dependent entity is

obvious. But, according to Hayes, the second clause does not follow from the first. Here, if *svabhāva*

is taken to mean causal independence, and its opposite – *parabhāva* – is taken to mean causal

dependence, the statement would be absurd: if there is no causal independence, there is no causal

dependence. The only reading Hayes can find that permits of a non-contradictory reading is one that

involves equivocation. *Svabhāva* in the second clause would now refer to the *identity* of an entity, its

nature, and *parabhāva* would refer to its *difference* to other entities. So the claim would now be: if

identity does not exist, then difference does not exist either. The ambiguity is permissible in Sanskrit,

as Hayes (1994: 311 – 312) details:

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[72] This verse numbering is according to the version of the *MMK* used by Hayes. de la Vallée Poussin's edition has the same ordering. A recent edition by Siderits & Katsura (2014) alters the verse order so that this verse is as *MMK* 1.2.

[73] *na hi svabhāvo bhāvānāṃ pratyayādiṣu vidyate | avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate*. (78).

The word "sva-bhāva" means a nature (*bhāva*) that belongs to the thing itself (*svasya*); it refers, in other words, to a thing's identity. But Nāgārjuna takes advantage of the fact that the word "svabhāva" could also be interpreted to mean the fact that a thing comes into being (*bhavati*) from itself (*svataḥ*) or by itself (*svena*); on this interpretation, the term would refer to a thing's independence. Assuming this latter analysis of the word, rather than the one that most Buddhists actually held, Nāgārjuna then points out that whatever comes into being from conditions is not coming into being from itself; and if a thing does not come into being from itself, then it has no *svabhāva*.

But if a thing has no *svabhāva*, he says, it also has no *parabhāva*. Here, too, Nāgārjuna takes advantage of an ambiguity in the key word he is examing [*sic*]. The word "para-bhāva" can be analysed to mean either (1) that which has the nature (*bhāva*) of another thing (*parasya*), that is, a difference, or (2) the fact of coming into being (*bhavati*) from another thing (*parataḥ*), that is a dependence.

I do not believe Nāgārjuna need be taking advantage of an ambiguity for the verse to be non-contradictory. If so, what must we understand by the term *svabhāva*? We see in MMK 15.2cd the following explanation by Nāgārjuna:

Surely *svabhāva* is non-artificial and without dependence upon another [entity].[74]

The Sanskrit for "non-artificial" here is *akṛtrimaḥ*, which implies something natural and not produced. Yet the apparent gap between nature and independence must be bridged. It seems to me that the gap was already implicitly bridged by the Abhidharma thinkers. In the above excerpt, Hayes refers to one sense of *svabhāva* as a "thing's identity," having noted that *bhāva* has the sense of "nature". But it is not merely a "thing" which has *svabhāva*, it is a "*fundamental* thing". *Svabhāva* is not held by tables, buildings, persons or chariots. It is held only by *dharma*s. Now if an entity's

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[74] *akṛtrimaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca* (262).

nature is transferrable, as the Abhidharma thinkers seem to believe so in the case of *dharma*s

transferring their natures to derivative entities (to the degree in which the derivative entities have

an essence that is merely a combination of natures derived from *dharma*s), there must be a source

for all natures. The Abhidharma thinkers are happy to give this role of source to the *dharma*s. But if

a *dharma* is not always manifesting a nature, it must, when it finally manifests that nature, be

deriving it from somewhere else. If we hold the former – that a *dharma* is always manifesting its

nature, then we are committed to a static conception of the world and the causal teaching of

dependent-origination is thrown out. But if we accept that a nature is being derived from elsewhere,

then the *dharma*s do not have a *svabhāva* – their nature is derived. They are no longer fundamental.

Perhaps, as I previously suggested, one may maintain that there are two different dependence

relations involved – causal and metaphysical. These reflect the distinction between essence

(*svabhāva*) and activity (*kāritra*). But it seems that the distinction between a non-derived nature

(*svabhāva*) and its causal activity (*kāritra*) appears arbitrary. What exactly is the difference? Even

Vasubandhu attacks the distinction in his commentary (AbhKB 5.27):

> How does it [i.e. a *dharma*] sometimes exercise its activity and sometimes does not. If you
>
> argue it is when there is a lack of their [causal] conditions [that it does not exercise it], that is
>
> not correct, because you have accepted the eternal existence [of conditions]. And which is a
>
> past and future activity, and which is called present?[75]

The criticism has more bite when we recall the Sarvāstivāda's ontological permissivism, and its

doctrine that a *dharma* exists at all times (*sarva asti*).[76] Indeed the *kāritra* doctrine was designed to

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[75] *yena kadācit kāritraṃ karoti kadācinneti | pratyayānām asāmagrayam iti cet | na |*
*nityamāstitvābhyupagamāt | yac ca tat kāritramatītānāgataṃ pratyutpannaṃ cocyate* (809).

[76] Saṃghabhadra attempts further distinctions in his response (Dhammajoti 2015: 141 – 145), arguing that
*kāritra* is the act of bringing into the present another *dharma* of like kind, and that a further characteristic –
*sāmarthya* – is the power of a *dharma* to bring into the present *dharma*s of a distinct kind. The latter
characteristic, the *sāmarthya*, appears to be the exercising of that activity which is defined by a dharma's
*svabhāva*. The reason for the introduction of this distinction is to address the very specific problematic
example of a *tatsabhāga dharma*. This is a *dharma* at the end of a series, i.e. one that does not lead to the
arising of another of its kind in a given sequence. The favourite example is the vision-organ *dharma* in a dark

make sense of speaking of past, present and future even when, in reality, *dharma*s exist at all times. Whilst *svabhāva* may be conceived as that which determines identity, and that which therefore reflects a synchronic dependence relation between fundamental (*dravyasat*) and derivative (*prajñaptisat*) entities, the added thesis that *dharma*s exist at all times produces a tension in the Sarvāstivāda picture. If *dharma*s exist at all times, the teaching of dependent-origination – that entities are causally determined – does not hold and the world is forever fixed. It is not so much that causal and metaphysical dependence are distinguished, than causal dependence is done away with entirely. For a Buddhist, this would be unacceptable.

Alternatively, if *dharma*s require causes and conditions (in the form of other *dharma*s) for the manifesting of their distinct nature, and this nature is not always present, then surely the nature of a *dharma*, its *svabhāva*/real definition, must also make reference to the causes and conditions which determine its nature. If we wish to restrict the causal activity of the *dharma* from being eternal, then surely its nature must make reference to this restriction. The description of its activity (*kāritra*) would be part of its essence (*svabhāva*). It would not be the entity it is without possessing the potential for that activity. And the description of the activity would require reference to both those entities upon which it causally depends, and those which it causally produces. In this case, causal dependence would be built into metaphysical dependence. But then its nature would be derivative, by having other entities (its causes and conditions) as constituents of its essence. It would derive its nature from a distinct source and so it would not be a *sva-bhāva*.

This is the tension which the Madhyamaka seeks to exploit, and the notion of *svabhāva* with which it is dealing. By showing the inconsistencies of both formulations, the Madhyamaka concludes that the concept of *svabhāva* must be discarded. A *svabhāva* – a completely independent nature – cannot be

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room. As the sense-object is not visible, it does not exercise its activity of bringing about visual-consciousness, and being at the end of a sequence of *dharma*s, it does not produce another of its kind. The question arises as to how it could ever be present under the Sarvāstivāda model. See Gold (2014: 32 – 38; Appendix A) and Dhammajoti (2015: 141 – 156) for discussions of this controversy. For current purposes, however, the further distinction only moves us to direct our criticisms to the concept of *sāmarthya* rather than *kāritra*.

found anywhere, neither in a *dharma*, nor in that which is the cause or condition of a given *dharma.* Tillemans (2016) stresses this point, drawing on the later Tibetan exegetical tradition, in stating that it is not the simple identity of an entity that is indicated by *svabhāva* (as Hayes presumes), but a much stricter notion – one of an identity that is findable by reason and can withstand logical analysis.[77] The inability to locate such an identity after this analysis is just the claim that all entities are empty of *svabhāva*. They do not have an ungrounded ground. The link between identity and independence is explained by Tillemans (2016: 25) as:

> [W]hatever exists dependently — in other words, whatever lacks independent existence — also lacks findable identity, for being a findable identity means, according to Nāgārjuna, that one should be able to say rationally, in a way that stands up to analysis, that a thing is either identifiable with, or is something different from, the things it depends upon.

Tillemans (2016: 26) then goes on to note:

> [I]t looks to me that Nāgārjuna would also accept the converse, that if something were to be of a genuinely independent intrinsic nature (namely, independent of causes, parts, and all activities to understand it), it would have to be somehow findable under analysis — for example, as something completely distinct from parts or from any kind of causal history, and present in an object independently of any conventions, customs, or cognitive and linguistic processes.

I will shortly return to Nāgārjuna's arguments against intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), but let us once again consider the claim of equivocation. Following the refined concept of *svabhāva* as has been discussed, we can now make sense of the passage in MMK 1.5, with a slight amendment to Hayes' translation, as follows:

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[77] Here we may recall Vasubandhu's claim that a *dharma* is that which remains when all other aspects are removed by thought (*buddhyā*).

Indeed the independent nature (*svabhāva*) of entities is not found in the conditions and so on.

My adjustment emphasises the locative of the phrase "conditions and so on" (*pratyayādiṣu*), as well as the singular passive verbal formation "is not found" (*na… vidyate*) taking the nominal "*svabhāva*" as the object. This reading resembles recent translations of the verse by Siderits and Katsura (2013: 19) and MacDonald (2014: 303). Let us consider the argument with these changes. Firstly, Nāgārjuna is arguing that the independent nature of any entity is not found in its conditions. As Hayes already accepts, this seems plausible. However let us now turn to the following passage:

When an independent nature (*svabhāva*) is not found, another nature (*parabhāva*) is not found.

Rather than this being a statement on identity and difference as mutually entailing concepts, the point appears to be that in the absence of a foundational source for the natures of entities (*svabhāva*), a nature that is dependent is not found either. At first glance this looks muddled. Surely entities are dependent if they are not independent. However we can look at MMK 15.3 for clarification. This passage once again discusses the concepts of *svabhāva* and *parabhāva*:

When an independent nature (*svabhāva*) is absent, how will there be a derived nature (*parabhāva*)? Surely the independent nature (*svabhāva*) of another entity (*parabhāva*) is called a derived nature (*parabhāva*).[78]

The issue is the source of these natures. A derived nature (*parabhāva*) is strictly defined here as a nature that is derived by a dependent entity from the independent nature (*svabhāva*) of another entity. The use of *parabhāva* implies a termination in dependence relations, ending in something that holds an independent nature. I believe it is for this reason that Nāgārjuna chose to describe

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[78] *kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati / svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate* (265 – 266).

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*dharmas* as empty, rather than as having a derived nature. One implies a foundational base, the other does not.

Candrakīrti is sometimes unclear on this point. He writes in reference to MMK 15.3:

> Here, in everyday speech (*loke*), a *svabhāva* is called other (*para*) with reference to some other *svabhāva* in the world. Surely if the heat of fire is a *svabhāva*, with regard to water, with a *svabhāva* of liquidity, it would be called a *parabhāva*. But when there is no *svabhāva* of anything being analysed by those desirous of liberation, then how will there be otherness (*paratvaṃ*)? And therefore a *svabhāva* does not even exist from another nature (*parabhāva*). Therefore [the claim in the verse] is proven.[79]

His argument seems to concern the use of the terms "*svabhāva*" and "*parabhāva*," and considers the sense of *parabhāva* to be dependent upon some prior understanding of the sense of *svabhāva*. As Candrakīrti believes *svabhāva* to have been refuted (by those who desire liberation and sincerely examine reality), then *svabhāva* cannot be justified by reference to *parabhāva*, since the latter concept is dependent upon the former. But if we return once again to MMK 1.5, and take a look at his commentary, we find:

> *Bhāva* means arising, origination. *Parabhāva* means an entity originated from another, and this is not found [i.e. does not exist]. Therefore it is incorrect to state that there is origination of entities from other entities.[80]

In response to this passage, Hayes (1994: 314) writes:

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[79] *iha svabhāva eva hi loke kaścitsvabhāvāntarāpekṣayā para iti vyapadiśyate | yadi hi agnerauṣṇyaṃ svabhāvaḥ syāt, dravasvabhāvasalilasāpekṣayā parabhāva iti vyapadiśyeta | yadā tu mumukṣubhirvicāryamāṇasya kasyacitsvabhāva eva nāsti, tadā kutaḥ paratvaṃ syāt? parabhāvācca svabhāvo 'pi nāsti iti siddham* (266).

[80] *bhavanaṃ bhāva utpādaḥ, parebhya utpādaḥ parabhāvaḥ, sa na vidyate | tasmādayuktametat parabhūtebhyo bhāvānām utpattiriti* (78).

It is very difficult to see why "it is incorrect to state that there is coming into being or arising from others." Candrakīrti is left without a strong argument for why this is incorrect, and so all he can do is to assert it strongly and hope no one will question him too forcefully.

I do not think it is so difficult if we keep in mind the role of *svabhāva* as the foundational base of all entities. If there is no source, no *svabhāva*, then it would be incorrect to assume that one could still derive a property that presupposes the existence of what is being denied.

Now that we have established just what is implied by the notion of *svabhāva*, it will be fruitful to understand how exactly this concept is denied by the Madhyamaka.

## 4.3. *Śūnyatā* of *Svabhāva*: A Summary of the Investigation of Fire and Fuel

There is no "master argument" against intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) put forward by Madhyamaka thinkers. The closest we get to such an argument is when the concept of intrinsic nature is implied to be incompatible with the causal framework of *pratītyasamutpāda* (see, for example, MMK 24.14). The majority of arguments in the *MMK* take an entity held to have intrinsic nature, and show this entity's existence with intrinsic nature to be untenable.

Chapter 10 of the *MMK* concerns the relation of fire and fuel, and contains an illustrative example of Nāgārjuna's method and argumentation in refuting intrinsic nature. In particular, it deploys forms of arguments that are used throughout the various other chapters, as well as citing other chapters for reference. Examining this particular chapter is therefore an effective way of understanding Nāgārjuna's philosophy.

First, we must be clear on the entities and their definitions/natures being examined. Fuel is considered to be that which burns, and fire is said to be that which is alight.[81] First, Nāgārjuna considers the consequences for fire being said to have this characteristic as its intrinsic nature. The argument runs (*MMK* 10.1 – 10.3):

> If fire is the same as fuel, agent and object would be identical. If fire is different from fuel, there would be fire even without fuel.

> It [fire] would therefore be eternally alight, without a cause for lighting. Another beginning is pointless, and when existing [without fuel] it would be without object.

> From being without dependence upon another, it would be without a cause of lighting. Being eternally alight, the pointlessness of another beginning would follow.[82]

The chapter begins by quickly dismissing the claim that fire and fuel are identical entities (and therefore the claim that the nature of fire – being alight – would already be located in fuel). The only argument Nāgārjuna gives is that agent (*kartṛ*) and object (*karman*) would then be identical, and this is an undesirable consequence. Bhāviveka in his *Prajñāpradīpa* (Ames 2019: 250) gives us two reasons for why fire and fuel are not identical:

(i)     An agent and its object cannot be identical, like a cutter and what is cut (i.e. a knife cannot cut itself – this is simply the anti-reflexivity principle).

(ii)    The fuel excludes properties of the fire, such as heat and burning, therefore they are not identical.

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[81] It is important to keep this in mind in the discussion which follows, for the notion of fire and fuel at work in this chapter is the notion which would be relevant to an Abhidharma account of foundational entities and not our everyday notions of fire and fuel. This means that the entities, if they are to be foundational, must have a fixed independent nature.

[82] *yad indhanaṃ sa ced agnir ekatvaṃ kartṛkarmaṇoḥ / anyaś ced indhanād agnir indhanād apy ṛte bhavet // nityapradīpta eva syād apradīpanahetukaḥ / punarārambhavaiyarthyam evaṃ cākarmakaḥ sati // paratra nirapekṣatvād apradīpanahetukaḥ / punarārambhavaiyarthyaṃ nityadīptaḥ prasajyate //* (202 – 203).

Candrakīrti seems to argue only (i), and provides the additional example of a potter and a pot.[83] I shall provide a fuller explanation of this anti-reflexivity argument when discussing the examples of light and darkness further below.

Let us instead say that fire is a distinct entity to fuel, and that it possesses the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of lighting. By being distinct, and having an intrinsic nature, it does not derive this nature from another entity. But the following consequences follow:

(i)     Fire would always exist.

(ii)    Fire would always exercise its characteristic of lighting.

(iii)   Fire would be without causal dependence upon an entity for exercising its characteristic of lighting.

(iv)   Positing a causal basis for lighting would be superfluous to its eternal exercising of its characteristic.

(v)    If it existed while fuel did not, it would not have an object upon which to act.

I have previously explained how (i) and (ii) follows from the Sarvāstivāda insistence on both a foundational level determined by intrinsic nature and the claim that these foundational entities are always existing. The (later) Sarvāstivāda would not object to (i), but would object to (ii) by trying to distinguish between essence (*svabhāva*) and activity (*kāritra*). But to avoid (ii), the intrinsic nature, as always existing, would need to include reference to the activity (*kāritra*) – what it is caused by and what it causes would be part of its nature. This would risk its status as independent, which is required if it is to serve as a foundation for derivative entities. The consequences of (iii) and (iv) mean that causality, and the teaching of dependent-origination, is excluded if intrinsic nature is accepted. Causality has no role to play in such a world. The final consequence stated by (v) is due to the activity of lighting, considered the intrinsic nature of fire, requiring an object on which to act.

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[83] *tatra yadi tāvad yadindhanaṃ sa evāgniriti parikalpyate, tadā kartṛkarmaṇorekatvaṃ syāt | na caivaṃ dṛṣṭam, ghaṭakumbhakārayośchettṛcchettavyayoścaikatvaprasaṅgāt, tasya cānabhyupagamāt |* (203)

Something must be alight. This cannot be the fire itself, as to admit this would be to violate anti-reflexivity. In the absence of fuel, it is not clear what could fulfil this function.

Nāgārjuna applies similar reasoning to the case of fuel (MMK 10.4 – 10.5):

> If "fuel is what is burning" is the case, by what would fuel be burned, when that [fuel] is only so when this [occurrence of burning] is so?

> Or as [fire and fuel are] other, it [fire] will not touch [fuel], untouched, it [fire] will not burn, non-burning, it will not burn out, not burning out, it will remain as possessing its own nature (*svaliṅga*).[84]

If fuel has the nature of burning, then it must be asked what it is that does the burning since without something to do the burning, fuel would not occur. Once again, fuel cannot burn itself as this would violate the anti-reflexivity principle (not to mention, it would mean that fuel causes itself to go out of existence by being burned up. I suppose Nāgārjuna would ask how such a characterised entity could ever emerge in the first place if its characteristic is its own destruction). Perhaps fire, occurring independently, could do the job. What we see in the following verse is a direct criticism of the notion of an independent nature (here the term *svaliṅga* is used). If fire exists as a foundational element distinct from fuel, it will not come into contact with fuel i.e. they cannot form a relation with one another. Why might this be the case? Candrakīrti compares the reasoning to another argument deployed in discussing the characteristics of light and darkness.[85] In *MMK* 7.8 – 7.12 Nāgārjuna argues against the intrinsic nature of light as "that which illuminates" and the intrinsic nature of darkness as "that which conceals" being compatible with a relation of contact between the two. He writes (MMK 7.9 – 7.12):

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[84] *tatraitat syād idhyamānam indhanaṃ bhavatīti cet / kenedhyatām indhanaṃ tat tāvanmātram idaṃ yadā // anyo na prāpsyate 'prapto na dhakṣyaty adahan punaḥ / na nirvāsyaty anirvāṇaḥ sthāsyate vā svaliṅgavān //* (204 – 205).

[85] *yadi indhanādanyo 'gniḥ syāt, so 'nyatvādandhakāramivendhanaṃ na prāpnuyāt* (205). [Translation: If fire were other than fuel, that fire, from being distinct, would not touch fuel, like darkness (does not touch light)].

Darkness is not in the light or where the light is located, then how does the light illuminate? Surely illumination is the destruction of darkness.

How is darkness destroyed by an originating light, when surely an originating light does not come into contact with darkness.

Or if, having no contact, darkness is destroyed by a light, then the light located here would destroy darkness located in the whole world.

If light illuminates itself and what is other, even darkness will cover itself and what is other.[86]

We can derive the following arguments from the above verses:

(i)     If light has the nature of illuminating, and illumination is defined as the destruction of darkness, light cannot illuminate itself since it does not come into contact with darkness (they being contradictory qualities, they cannot occur in the same entity).

(ii)    If it is maintained that light has a nature of illumination, and that illumination is the destruction of darkness, and that this stands even without any contact between light and darkness, then a light located in one place could destroy the darkness located anywhere (and everywhere) in the world.

(iii)   If darkness has the nature of concealing, and concealment is the lack of visibility of an object, darkness cannot conceal itself since if it did so, it would never be perceivable (and yet we do perceive darkness when it conceals an object).

Arguments (i) and (iii) provide examples of the reasoning that is used to deny reflexivity. But these arguments are applied to the example of fire and fuel to show the impossibility of their contact. The point appears to be that fire and fuel, by possessing independent natures, have no need of one

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[86] *pradīpe nāndhakāro 'sti yatra cāsau pratiṣṭhitaḥ / kiṃ prakāśayate dīpaḥ prakāśo hi tamovadhaḥ // katham utpadyamānena pradīpena tamo hatam / notpadyamāno hi tamaḥ pradīpaḥ prāpnute yadā // aprāpyaiva pradīpena yadi vā nihataṃ tamaḥ / ihasthaḥ sarvalokasthaṃ sa tamo nihaniṣyati // pradīpaḥ svaparātmānau saṃprakāśayate yadi / tamo 'pi svaparātmānau chādayiṣyaty asaṃśayam //* (151 – 154).

another. But if their natures do not involve any dependence, then the contact between them is unnecessary. By reference to the examples of light and darkness, a fuel located here could be related to a fire elsewhere in the world. In the passage on fire and fuel, Nāgārjuna adds the consequence that the requirement for contact is not a part of a foundational entity's nature (such a requirement making the entity dependent), so both fire and fuel are eternal. We may think that fire ceases to exist when the fuel is burnt out, and fuel ceases to exist when it is not being burnt (this activity requiring fire). This would be possible if they were dependent, and had their natures derivatively. But as foundational entities, their natures are independent, and without being dependent in some way, they would always exercise this characteristic – both fire and fuel would "remain as possessing its own nature." Without dependency, there is no causal link between foundational entities. Without such causation, dependent-origination is not possible. The world would be eternally fixed.

At this point, Nāgārjuna proposes an objection to his arguments (*MMK* 10.6) – surely a man and a woman exist independently and yet they can come into contact, where contact is considered a relational property.[87] In such a way, fire and fuel may exist independently and yet share a relational property. But Nāgārjuna responds (*MMK* 10.7):

> If fire is distinct from fuel, it could obtain its object of fuel. If fuel and fire were to exist as such, they would be independent of one another.[88]

Candrakīrti helps elaborate on the argument being made:

> But whatever would be fire without dependence on fuel, and fuel without dependence upon fire, that does not exist. Therefore the example is useless. Of those entities that are proven to come into contact, when being distinct, and being of mutually dependent existence, just

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[87] *anya evandhanād agnir indhanaṃ prāpnuyād yadi / strī saṃprāpnoti puruṣaṃ puruṣaś ca striyaṃ yathā* (206) [Translation: If fire is other than fuel, it could touch fuel, as a woman touches a man and a man touches a woman.].

[88] *anya evendhanād agnir indhanaṃ kāmam āpnuyāt / agnīndhane yadi syātām anyonyena tiraskṛte* (206).

of these would acquisition in the manner of the example be logical. And these do not exist as such, therefore it is not correct to say there is acquisition when they are distinct.[89]

The point is that fire is, by its nature of being alight, something that involves a dependence on fuel. Fuel is similarly, by its nature of being that which burns, something that involves a dependence upon fire. Therefore the example of a man and woman coming into contact does not apply. The man and woman are not, by their nature, dependent upon each other. If there was an example of two entities that were (i) mutually dependent, (ii) distinct from one another, and (iii) in a relation of contact, then the argument would hold. But no such example is found. It may be objected that Candrakīrti is only refuting the identity of the entity but not its existence. This seems plausible in the case of fuel. Fuel is that which is burning, but perhaps the entity that is not yet burning still fundamentally exists, but only has the nature of fuel when it is burning (with dependence upon fire). What Candrakīrti seems to be doing is making an argument based on notional, rather than existential, dependence. Notional dependence are relative characteristics, such as being taller or shorter. An entity's status as taller or shorter is dependent upon other entities, yet the existence of the entity itself is not so dependent. A relevant example to consider is that of the dependence between father and son. We may say that a son depends upon his father both existentially and notionally, but is it correct to say that a father depends upon his son? Surely the father only depends notionally upon his son, as father, yet is existentially independent of him. Westerhoff (2009: 28) provides an explanation as to why the Madhyamaka argument can still stand:

> The difficulty disappears if we take into account that if some object *x* is essentially *F*, and if it also depends notionally on some *y* being *G*, then *x* will also depend existentially on *y*'s being *G*, since *x* has to have *F* to exist at all (this is just what *F* being an essential property of *x* means). Therefore if we assumed that Abelard was the father of Astrolabius essentially,

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[89] *na tvevaṃ saṃbhavati yadindhananirapekṣo 'gniḥ syāt, agninirapekṣaṃ cendhanamiti | tasmād dṛṣṭāntavaiyarthyam | anyonyāpekṣādhīnajanmanāṃ satyanyatve yeṣāṃ prāptiḥ siddhā, teṣāmeva dṛṣṭāntatvenopādānaṃ nyāyyaṃ syāt | te ca na saṃbhavantīti na yuktametadanyatve sati prāptirastīti* (206).

Abelard would indeed depend existentially on his son, since having Astrolabius as a son would be a property Abelard could not lose without being that very man.

Burning is an essential property of fuel – without being something that is burning, the entity would not be fuel. To say that fuel exists without burning, and therefore without fire acting upon it, is to speak about another entity entirely. Fuel only exists if burning, therefore fuel is both existentially and notionally dependent upon fire.

So far it has been shown that neither fire nor fuel is prior in the ordering of reality. This is due to the difficulty in establishing an independent nature for either of them. Neither exists on a foundational level due to their natures being derived from each other. The nature of fuel is burning, which is dependent upon fire. The nature of fire is being alight, which is dependent upon fuel. It is difficult to see which of the two functions as the source of the nature for the other, given the difficulties already established with holding both to have a nature independently (it always exercising its characteristic etc.). Another option is considered – that both of them are mutually dependent. Nāgārjuna responds (*MMK* 10.8 – 10.11):

> If fire is dependent upon fuel, and if fuel is dependent upon fire, which is the first to arise of the two? Fuel or the fire dependent upon it?

> If fire is dependent upon fuel, there is an establishing of the (already) established fire. When it is so, even fuel would arise without fire.

> If an entity is established dependent upon another, and that other is established dependent upon the former, what is to be depended upon is that which is to be established. Then what will be dependent upon what?

If an entity is dependently established, how will it depend without being established first? But as it depends, the establishment of dependence is not possible.[90]

The argument is the fact that the relation of dependence is concerned with an ordering of prior and posterior, such that one entity existing is the basis of another's existence. Mutual dependence is not compatible with such an ordering. The thought appears to be that if two entities were to arise simultaneously, they would not be dependent upon one another, but on a third entity (although this then inherits the same issues that have been discussed when considering fire and fuel as distinct and independent).

A further concern is the requirement that a relation is only possible among relata, and therefore if a relation of dependence actually holds between *dharmas*, then its relata must also have their nature independently of the relation. But then these entities already have an independent nature, and so the dependence relation would be superfluous. An independent nature is not compatible with a dependence relation. Therefore a relation of dependence between independent existents is superfluous (if not blatantly contradictory).

We now come to the conclusion of Nāgārjuna's arguments thus far (*MMK* 10.12 – 10.14):

Fire is not dependent on fuel. Fire is not independent of fuel. Fuel is not dependent on fire. Fuel is not independent of fire.

Fire does not come from [something] distinct. Fire is not found in fuel. Here with fuel the argument is explained by the presently traversing, the traversed and the not yet traversed [i.e. the chapter on motion].

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[90] *yadīndhanam apekṣyāgnir apekṣyāgniṃ yadīndhanam / katarat pūrvaniṣpannaṃ yad apekṣyāgnir indhanam // yadīndhanam apekṣyāgnir agneḥ siddhasya sādhanam / evaṃ satīndhanaṃ cāpi bhaviṣyati niragnikam // yo 'pekṣya sidhyate bhāvas tam evāpekṣya sidhyati / yadi yo 'pekṣitavyaḥ sa sidhyatāṃ kam apekṣya kaḥ // yo 'pekṣya sidhyate bhāvaḥ so 'siddho 'pekṣate katham / athāpy apekṣate siddhas tv apekṣāsya na yujyate //* (207 – 209).

Again, fire is not [identical to] fuel, and fire is not elsewhere from fuel. Nor does fire possess fuel, nor is fuel in fire, nor is fire in fuel.[91]

A relation of dependence cannot occur between independent fundamental entities. Yet fire and fuel, at the risk of exercising their natures (i.e. burning, lighting) permanently, cannot be independent of one another either. Fire is neither identical nor distinct to fuel – if it was identical (i.e. if fire was "found in" fuel), it would share a nature and there would be no need for production of fire from fuel. Fuel would exercise the nature of lighting. Causation, and the teaching of dependent-origination, would be expelled from the structure of the world. If distinct, the relation of dependence would not be applicable.

In these verses, Nāgārjuna also refers to his chapter discussing motion (*MMK* 2) as a model for his argument relating to fire and fuel. The chapter is wide ranging, yet the relevance to the discussion of fire and fuel appears to be the question of where the characteristic of motion is located, and who is the agent of it, since if it exists, it will be located somewhere and enacted by something. We can consider motion as occurring either in a spatial location or in an entity. To make the point clearer, let us say that motion may be located in a portion of road, and enacted in the cyclist that appears to move from one place to another. It seems obvious that motion is not located in the portion of road that the cyclist has passed (call this *point A*), or in the location that the cyclist is yet to reach (call this *point C*). But surely motion takes place in the location the cyclist currently occupies – what we may call the "present" location (call this *point B*).[92] We could also say that motion is held by the cyclist currently passing through space, but not in the stationary parked car.

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[91] *apekṣyendhanam agnir na nānapekṣyāgnir indhanam / apekṣyendhanam agniṃ na nānapekṣyāgnim indhanam // āgacchaty anyato nāgnir indhane 'gnir na vidyate / atrendhane śeṣam uktaṃ gamyamānagatāgataiḥ // indhanaṃ punar agnir na nāgnir anyatra cendhanāt / nāgnir indhanavān nāgnāv indhanāni na teṣu saḥ //* (209 – 211).

[92] The usefulness of this example is limited, for in introducing a separate term (i.e. "point A") for what is under consideration ("the traversed"), we may be inclined to see point A as a separately existing entity which sometimes has the property of being traversed. In this way, we would not consider any of these points as *essentially* possessing the characteristic of motion (though motion may be an inessential property). But the Sarvāstivāda philosophers were focusing on foundational entities which were determined to be fundamental by their possession of an intrinsic nature, and in this case the relevant fundamentals are the traversed, the

Nāgārjuna dismisses both answers. The issue is locating the characteristic of motion. If the characteristic of motion is located in point B, then point B must be something distinct from the characteristic of motion (we may compare here the distinction between a *dharma* and its *svabhāva*). But point B was characterised as where motion is currently located. It therefore, by its nature, cannot occur without motion being located within it. But why should we think that point B must be something distinct to the characteristic of motion? This appears to be a question of relations – the relation of being located within something requires the located and location to be two distinct entities. We are trying to locate a characteristic, motion, and if the presently traversed is where motion is located, it must be distinct to this characteristic. Otherwise we will have just stated that motion is located in motion, and this isn't particularly informative.

If we try to argue that point B exists at a particular place prior to obtaining its characteristic of motion, this would be to speak of a different entity entirely (recalling that notional and existential dependence are symmetrical when dealing with essential properties). Arguing that the "currently traversed area" (*gamyamāna*) exists without having motion occurring within its vicinity is to be describing a different entity than the one stated.

Regarding this particular argument's relevance to the investigation of fire and fuel, Candrakīrti offers a rewrite of *MMK* 2.1 replacing the notions of motion with that of burning:

> The burnt does not burn, nor does the unburnt burn,
>
> The presently burning, separate from the burnt and unburnt, does not burn.[93]

Unfortunately he offers little more by way of explanation.[94] Bhāviveka states (Ames 2019: 263) that the characteristic of burning is not located in the burnt, unburnt or presently burning, since all of

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presently traversed and the yet to be traversed. It is therefore helpful to keep in mind that the entities under consideration are those which are *essentially* traversed, *essentially* being traversed, and *essentially* yet to be traversed.

[93] *dagdhaṃ na dahyate tāvadadagdhaṃ naiva dahyate | dagdhādagdhavinirmuktaṃ dahyamānaṃ na dahyate ||* (211).

these locations possess the property of something yet to be burnt (*dahanīya*, *dagdhavya*). The argument appears to be that the property of burning cannot reside in what is not yet burnt, unburnt or the presently burning, just as motion does not occur in what has been traversed, what is yet to be traversed, and what is presently being traversed (this last more plausible option requiring the possibility of what is designated as "the presently traversed" to occur without motion occurring within it, which is held to be impossible).

Nāgārjuna further argues that if motion characterises the presently traversed, and motion *also* characterises the agent that is moving, this requires there to be two distinct motions occurring (*MMK* 2.5). And if two distinct motions occur, there must be two agents responsible for each motion (*MMK* 2.6), for an action cannot occur without an agent to initiate it. Notice however that the presupposition allowing Nāgārjuna to make this argument is the idea that a characteristic can be located somewhere, and that the characteristic is distinct from its bearer. The response may be to collapse bearer and characteristic into one, and so avoid this proliferation of agents. But, mirroring the argument of *MMK* 10.1, Nāgārjuna states this would mean agent and object were identical, violating the anti-reflexivity principle (*MMK* 2.18 – 2.19). Returning to the claim that the agent of motion and the characteristic of motion are distinct, Nāgārjuna parallels his previous argument by stating that if motion is held by the agent of motion, the agent should be occur without motion. But the "agent of motion" is only such when motion is held by it (*MMK* 2.7 – 2.10). Applied to the example of fuel, and as explained by Bhāviveka (Ames 2019: 263), the agent of burning does not possess a distinct characteristic of burning, as this would lead to the agent of burning possessing two characteristics (burning and non-burning). This would lead to two distinct agents for each distinct characteristic. It would also mean that an agent of burning can sometimes be non-burning, which has been argued to be contradictory with regard to motion and the agent of motion.

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[94] I agree with Westerhoff (2009: 134) that the argument in *MMK* 2 is primarily one aimed at targeting the possibility of an individual instantiating a distinct property, rather than a mathematical argument aimed at criticising the possibility of motion itself similar to Zeno's paradox. This is explained by the form of the argument being deployed (and explicitly referred to) in cases where there is no spatial traversal, such as the case of burning and fuel.

Once again, the criticism is directed against the possibility of an independent nature. Such a nature must be locatable, and yet we find that it does not occur in those candidates most suitable for the role, nor in the remaining candidates. Returning to the chapter on fire and fuel, Nāgārjuna ends with two verses (MMK 10.15 – 10.16):

> The manner of appropriating a self is to be explained by the example of fire and fuel, along with everything else without remainder – pots, cloth and so on.

> And those [Buddhists] who describe the self and entities as identical or distinct, I do not think them to possess wisdom of the meaning of the teaching [of the Buddha].[95]

The arguments that utilised the examples of fire and fuel are applicable to all entities in order to demonstrate the untenability of positing intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). The relation between a pot and the potter, or cloth and the thread, can be examined in the same way. We also see mention of the "neither identical or distinct" argument that has been utilised throughout the chapter, as well as the rest of the *MMK*. This comes down to the claim that if independent natures are accepted, then dependent relations between entities that have these independent natures is not possible. A relation cannot occur between entities that are distinct by their independent nature, nor by entities that are in fact identical. Either relations must be accepted to be illusory and the world be fixed by entities with independent natures, or independent natures must not exist. The Madhyamaka way is the latter.

At this point it would be helpful to summarise what has been argued in the chapter discussed:

(i)     If intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is held to exist, it must be located somewhere. So the intrinsic nature of fire must be held to exist in the fuel that is the fire's cause (and

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[95] *agnīndhanābhyāṃ vyākhyāta ātmopādānayoḥ kramaḥ / sarvo niravaśeṣeṇa sārdhaṃ ghaṭapaṭādibhiḥ //*
*ātmanaś ca satattvaṃ ye bhāvānāṃ ca pṛthak pṛthak / nirdiśanti na tān manye śāsanasyārthakovidān //* (212 – 214).

therefore fire be identical with fuel) or in the fire itself (and therefore fire be distinct from fuel).

(ii)     If fire is held to be distinct, it would have an independent nature and so would not depend on the fuel for the exercising of its nature. This means that it would be eternally exercising its nature.

(iii)    If an entity is held to have intrinsic nature, there would be no purpose to positing a causal basis – a cause would be superfluous since it already exists with an independent nature.

(iv)     If a dependence relation is to be possible, it must involve two entities. If entities are held to have intrinsic nature, they cannot enter into a relation of dependence.

(v)      Mutual dependence of entities with intrinsic nature is not possible as dependence requires an ordering of entities as prior and posterior.

(vi)     An entity and its characteristic cannot be distinct – this requires an entity designated by its characteristic to exist without this characteristic, and then acquire it. This is not possible when the characteristic in question is the essence of the entity.

(vii)    An entity and its characteristic cannot be identical as this violates the anti-reflexivity principle.

The above arguments are made to highlight the incompatibility of intrinsic nature with a relation of dependence. If intrinsic nature is rejected in favour of dependence, this must have an impact on what was the basic ontological structure of reality according to the Abhidharma thinkers – an ordering of dependence that terminates in foundational entities possessing an independent nature. If the Madhyamaka are correct, there are no fundamental (*dravyasat*) entities. Let us then turn to how the Madhyamaka themselves understand the distinction between the two-truths that was the basis for the Abhidharma model.

## 4.4. The Two Truths in Madhyamaka

If intrinsic nature is to be rejected, this means a rejection of the possibility of what was, for the

Sarvāstivāda thinkers, the mark of the fundamental elements – the *dravyasat*. They understood any

statement concerned with this fundamental level as an ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), and one

that deals with the ultimate reality (*paramārthasat*). Any entity that is not fundamental is

*prajñaptisat* – derivative and dependent. Statements that discuss reality on this level are

conventionally true (*saṃvṛti-satya*), dependent upon the fundamental entities, linguistic

conventions and the everyday exchanges (*vyavahāra*) of the world. If the layer of fundamental

entities is removed, does this not collapse the entire distinction and contradict the teaching of two

truths? Apparently not. In *MMK* 24, Nāgārjuna believes that the teaching of emptiness presupposes

the legitimacy of the distinction between two truths. Responding to criticism that emptiness

undercuts the Buddhist way, he writes (*MMK* 24.7 – 24.9):

> Here we say you do not understand emptiness, the purpose of emptiness or the meaning of
>
> emptiness. Because of this you are frustrated.

> The teaching of the *dharma* of the Buddhas is dependent upon the two truths: the
>
> conventional truth of the world (*lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ*), and the truth from the ultimate
>
> (*paramārthataḥ*).

> Who do not know the division of these two truths, they do not know the profound reality
>
> (*tattva*) in the teaching of the Buddha.[96]

It is clear that if the distinction stands, it is not one regarding the distinct ontological levels of

fundamental entities and derivative entities.[97] In the verses cited above we find that Nāgārjuna

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[96] *atra brūmaḥ śūnyatāyāṃ na tvaṃ vetsi prayojanam / śūnyatāṃ śūnyatārthaṃ ca tata evaṃ vihanyase // dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dharmadeśanā / lokasaṃvṛtisatyaṃ ca satyaṃ ca paramārthataḥ // ye 'nayor na vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayor dvayoḥ / te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane //* (490 – 494).

acknowledges that the purpose of teaching emptiness, the meaning of emptiness, and emptiness itself, are all to be distinguished. So we have three elements: a pragmatic goal, a semantic layer, and then emptiness itself. These three layers are consistent when seen through the lens of the two truth teaching. Candrakīrti elaborates on these by explaining the purpose of emptiness as "the pacification of all proliferation (*prapañca*)," proliferation being the world as endlessly unfolding. The meaning of emptiness is equivalent to the meaning of dependent-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and emptiness itself is described by reference to *MMK* 18.9:

> Without dependence upon another, calmed, not proliferated by proliferations, without imagined reifications, not manifold – that is the character of reality.[98]

It should be noted that the above description is qualified. Earlier, in MMK 18.7ab, Nāgārjuna states the following:

> The nameable ceases when the scope of the mind in ceased.

The point here is that both our mental activity and the objects to which that activity are directed are interdependent. When the nameable intentional objects of the mind cease, so does the mind. This is how one obstructs the undesired proliferation of entities. If such a position stands, any description of reality is automatically tainted by proliferation. For this reason, Candrakīrti explains the verse which describes emptiness (*MMK* 18.9) as a response to a request:

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[97] The specifics of the Madhyamaka distinction is fraught with controversy, and through the opposition of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti (the latter defending the earlier Buddhapālita), a later doxography emerged whereby the Madhyamaka school was split between a Svātantra approach, reflecting the position of Bhāviveka, and a Prāsaṅga approach, reflecting the position of Candrakīrti. Bhāviveka's approach allows for a foundationalist reading of Madhyamaka philosophy, but Candrakīrti's does not. In my aim of defending the consistency of an anti-foundational Madhyamaka, I will focus on the latter's reading of Nāgārjuna's verses referring to the two truths. For a discussion on Bhāviveka's approach, see Thakchöe (2022). For discussions of the later doxography and its emergence, see Dreyfus and McClintock (2003).

[98] *aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcair aprapañcitam / nirvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam //* (372).

Even if it is so [that any description is tainted by proliferation], do state – in accordance with conventional truth (*vyavahārasatya*) – the characteristic of this [emptiness] by an attribution (*samāropa*), in the manner of reality and such for the worldly [i.e. unenlightened].[99]

Reliance on the teaching of the two truths allows the Madhyamaka to discuss their understanding of reality without committing to the presuppositions they wish to undercut (that *any* independent nature, and therefore fundamental entity, exists). Emptiness is only a nature or characteristic when attributed in accord with conventional truth. Conventional truth is explained as follows:

The conventional (*saṃvṛti*) is a concealing from every side. Indeed total ignorance is called the conventional from its concealing the suchness of all things. Also the meaning [of conventional] is that the conventional is mutually dependent, by dependence of one [conventional entity] upon the other. Also the meaning is that the conventional is the agreed upon exchanges of the worldly. And it has the characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) of name and named, known and knowing. Worldly convention is the convention among the worldly [i.e. unenlightened]. But even non-worldly convention [i.e. what is false by worldly convention] must exist, otherwise from what will worldly convention be distinguished? […] The non-worldly [i.e. false even on the conventional level], dwelling in erroneous vision like sight damaged by blindness, jaundice and such, whatever is the convention of these, that is non-worldly convention. Therefore worldly convention is distinguished [from falsity on the conventional level] […] The truth by the conventions of the worldly is the worldly conventional truth. All of these exchanges (*vyavahāra*) of name and named, knowing and the known, without remainder, is called worldly conventional truth. Indeed these exchanges do not arise from the ultimate [perspective].[100]

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[99] *yadyapyevam, tathāpi vyavahārasatyānurodhena laukikatathyādyabhyupagamavat tasyāpi samāropato lakṣaṇamucyatāmiti* (372).

[100] *samantādvaraṇaṃ saṃvṛtiḥ | ajñānaṃ hi samantātsarvapadārthatattvāvacchādanātsaṃvṛtirityucyate | parasparasaṃbhavanaṃ vā saṃvṛtiranyonyasamāśrayeṇetyarthaḥ | athavā saṃvṛtiḥ saṃketo lokavyavahāra ityarthaḥ | sa cābhidhānābhidheyajñānajñeyādilakṣaṇaḥ | loke saṃvṛtirlokasaṃvṛtiḥ | kiṃ*

The conventional truth is a truth which accords with the concealing screen of ignorance that

conceals reality for all of the unenlightened that are born into existential ignorance. One way of

looking at it is to conceive of it as a description in accord with the shared illusions of the ignorant.

What is conventional is also that which is produced by another, and by mutual dependence. I take

Candrakīrti here to mean that conventional reality is the totality of dependent entities (which is a

result of lacking intrinsic nature), in the sense that everything depends upon something else. The

final sense of the conventional is that which is agreed upon by the exchanges within the world as are

characterised by a name and the thing named, or the known and the cognising of it. This is simply

the truth according to the way people in the world use names, or the way in which they cognise

objects. Candrakīrti adds a separate tier to the two truths (*alokasaṃvṛti*), awkwardly translated as

"non-worldly conventions". The negation should apply to the phrase "worldly conventions" and not

only to "worldly," giving the sense of those cognitions or statements that do not accord with the way

things are, nor the way things appear in the shared illusions of the worldly. These are those

statements or cognitions that are considered false even by the worldly, and Candrakīrti gives the

example of someone who perceives with an impairment of their visual faculties. The one with a

normal functioning visual faculty (albeit unenlightened) would perceive in accord with the

conventional truth, but the one with a disease that affects sight (say, Charles Bonnet syndrome, due

to which one hallucinates entities) would not even perceive in accord with this conventional truth.

This is how truth and error on a conventional level is distinguished by Candrakīrti. Had such a

distinction not been made, it would be hard to call what is conventional a "truth." It should be noted

that the conventional truth is still useful, and cannot be completely escaped by those wishing to

assist others on the path to Nirvana. If most people operate on the basis of a shared distortion of

reality, surely one must work within that distortion to nudge them towards a correct understanding.

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*punaralokasaṃvṛtirapyasti yata evaṃ viśiṣyate lokasaṃvṛtiriti? yathāvasthitapadārthānuvāda eṣaḥ, nātraiṣā cintāvatarati | athavā | timirakāmalādyupahatendriyaviparītadarśanāvasthānāste 'lokāḥ, teṣāṃ yā saṃvṛtirasāvalokasaṃvṛtiḥ | ato viśiṣyate lokasaṃvṛtiriti | etacca madhyamakāvatāre vistareṇoktaṃ tato veditavyam | lokasaṃvṛtyā satyaṃ lokasaṃvṛtisatyam | sarva evāyamabhidhānābhidheyajñānajñeyādivyavahāro 'śeṣo lokasaṃvṛtisatyamityucyate | na hi paramārthata ete vyavahārāḥ saṃbhavanti* (492 – 493).

The other option is to remain silent, yet this would not be expressive of the compassion so hailed by the Buddhists. Nāgārjuna is explicit in this necessity of operating with the conventional level, as MMK 24.10 shows, when he writes that "without dependence on the everyday exchanges (*vyavahāra*) the ultimate is not taught. Having not reached the ultimate object (*paramārtha*), Nirvana is not attained."[101]

Returning to the distinction between the two truths, Candrakīrti ends his remarks on conventional truth by stating that these exchanges, the conventions of the name and named, and so on, do not arise from the position of ultimate understanding. Instead, the ultimate truth is, as described in *MMK* 18.9, "without dependence upon another, calmed, non-proliferated by proliferations, without reification, neither one nor many," except whereas this description is from a conventional perspective, the object of this description (inasmuch as there could be an "object" answering to it for the Madhyamaka) from the highest vantage (*paramas*) is the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*).[102] It is not possible to cognise it or linguistically refer to it accurately.[103] In the verses of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, along with his own commentary on these, Candrakīrti offers more detail on this elusive notion:

> The hearers, solitary buddhas and bodhisattvas have relinquished afflicted vision, and not entertaining assumptions about truth they experience conditioned things as similar to reflections and such, contrived in nature but not real. For the immature these things are deceptive, while for the others they are dependently originated, like illusions and so forth, and therefore *merely relative*.
>
> (Translated by Liland 2020: 165).

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[101] *vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate | paramārthamanāgamya nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate* (494).
[102] *paramaścāsāvarthaśceti paramārthaḥ | tadeva satyaṃ paramārthasatyam* (494).
[103] *sa nopadiśyate na cāpi jñāyate* (493).

When existential ignorance is removed, one perceives the nature of things as they are and this includes perceiving what is taken to be real and true by the ignorant as instead something constructed and dependent. Elsewhere, Candrakīrti explains the perception of the way things actually are as a perception of an absence, though an absence should not be taken to be a positive entity. This is compared with the denial of the reality of hairs in the visual field by someone with healthy sight when speaking to somebody perceiving hairs in their visual field due to cataracts. The former sees reality as it is, and sees the nature of the hairs as brought about by damaged cognition and not having the form of reality that the cataract-sufferer perceives (Liland 2020: 166). The nature of entities on the ultimate level, if a nature is to be posited, is that they are empty of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). But to state this is still a distortion, for it makes reference to a fixed nature.[104]

It should be stressed that emptiness is not an entity but an absence, namely the absence of *svabhāva*, and so cannot serve as the foundation (or *dravyasat*) for Madhyamaka, since this would mean emptiness being an entity possessing an independent nature. Such a position is ruled out in *MMK* 24.18:

> That which is dependent-origination, we declare that is emptiness, that is a dependent designation, just that is the middle way.[105]

There has been much contemporary debate on the exact implication of this verse.[106] Candrakīrti offers the following explanation:

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[104] This difficulty for the Madhyamaka philosophers is in the tendency of Indian philosophers to treat all entities as objects. Nyāya philosophers accepted the ontological reality of absences, and I have already discussed the ontological permissivism of the Sarvāstivāda school. But the Madhyamaka philosophers aren't treating emptiness as an object or property, but as the "way of being" of entities. I discuss this distinction at the end of Part II.

[105] *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tāṃ pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā* (503).

[106] See Arnold (2005: 162), Oetke (2007), Berger (2010), Garfield & Westerhoff (2011), and Salvini (2011). My own reading of the verse is most indebted to Salvini, who bases his analysis upon the well established and documented grammatical rules (or norms), specifically regarding absolutes, of Sanskrit and Pāli during the time the verse, and Candrakīrti's later commentary, were written.

What is this dependent origination – the origination of sprouts, consciousness and so on in dependence of causes and conditions – that does not non-originate when there is *svabhāva*. And the emptiness of entities is [their] non-origination with *svabhāva* […] This emptiness of *svabhāva*, that is dependent designation (*prajñaptirupādāya*), dependent designation is held to be just this emptiness. Depending upon the parts of a chariot, such as a wheel and so on, a chariot is designated. What is designated by dependence upon its parts, that is non-originated with *svabhāva*, and what is non-originated with *svabhāva*, that is emptiness. The middle way is held to be just emptiness characterised as non-origination with *svabhāva*. Indeed whatever is non-originated with svabhāva, that is absent of existence, and absent of non-existence, because of the absence of cessation of [what is] unoriginated. Therefore the middle way, emptiness, characterised as non-origination with *svabhāva* of everything, from being devoid of the two extremes of existence and non-existence, is called the middle path. As such, these are just different terms for dependent-origination – emptiness, dependent designation, middle way.[107]

An equivalence is made between dependent-origination, emptiness, dependent designation and the middle way. The description that seems to glue the terms together is an understanding of entities' "non-origination with *svabhāva*" (*svabhāvenānutpattiḥ*). Dependent-*origination* is incompatible with intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Since positing an intrinsic nature means entities do not originate by causes and conditions, it is unclear in what sense "origination" could be applied to them. They are permanently and eternally manifesting their nature. They cannot cease either by the removal of

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[107] *yo 'yaṃ pratītyasamutpādo hetupratyayānapekṣya aṅkuravijñānādīnāṃ prādurbhāvaḥ, sa svabhāve nānutpādaḥ | yaśca svabhāvenānutpādo bhāvānāṃ sā śūnyatā | […] yā ceyaṃ svabhāvaśūnyatā sā prajñaptirupādāya, saiva śūnyatā upādāya prajñaptiriti vyavasthāpyate | cakrādīnyupādāya rathāṅgāni rathaḥ prajñapyate | tasya yā svāṅgānyupādāya prajñaptiḥ, sā svabhāvenānutpattiḥ, yā ca svabhāvenānutpattiḥ, sā śūnyatā | saiva svabhāvānutpattilakṣaṇā śūnyatā madhyamā pratipaditi vyavasthāpyate | yasya hi svabhāvenānutpattiḥ, tasya astitvābhāvaḥ, svabhāvena cānutpannasya vigamābhāvānnāstitvābhāva iti | ato bhāvābhāvāntadvayarahitatvāt sarvasvabhāvānutpattilakṣaṇā śūnyatā madhyamā pratipat, madhyamo mārga ityucyate | tadevaṃ pratītyasamutpādasyaivaitā viśeṣasaṃjñāḥ- śūnyatā, upādāya prajñaptiḥ, madhyamā pratipad iti ||* (503 – 504).

these causes and conditions. Emptiness is therefore equivalent to the inability of something to originate if it has an intrinsic nature.

The most curious of the equivalent terms is *prajñaptirupādāya*, which I have translated as "dependent designation." Following Salvini (2011), I read the term as an absolutive of the verbal root *dā*, with prefixes *upa* and *ā*. This generates the sense of "having depended upon." *Prajñapti* is a term we have seen before, in the Abhidharma taxonomy of derivative entities – *prajñaptisat*. In his exposition of the teaching of the two truths, as discussed, we find Candrakīrti places special emphasis on the practice of naming objects in accordance with general everyday practice as a defining characteristic of the conventional truth. *Prajñapti* therefore becomes something closely tied to naming conventions, and the English term "designation" captures this sense. The idea of the whole phrase then is that something is designated on the basis of the constituents upon which it depends.[108]

The final equivalent term is the "middle path" (*madhyama pratipad*). The explanation is that this notion of emptiness prevents one from falling into the extreme positions of existence (*astitva*) and non-existence (*nāstitva*). Explanations of this form are often used in Madhyamaka literature to defend against the charge of metaphysical nihilism (which I will discuss in Ch. 5). Sense can be made of this framing when we recall once again the project of foundationalism and the motivation for its acceptance – that being must have a source. Madhyamaka argues against intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), and in doing so also argues against the possibility of fundamental (*dravyasat*) entities. It does not admit a point of termination for dependence relations (i.e. a ground for being). In doing so, it avoids any definitive position on whether an entity that fulfils the role of ground exists or does not exist. It is a question that cannot be answered because the candidate for its function cannot be located. The problem is the measuring instrument.

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[108] This is similar to the notion that the essence of an entity is its real definition, and that this real definition is constituted by those distinct entities which ground the entity in question (Jago 2018).

Taking all of this into account, the ultimate level in the two truth dichotomy is no object. It is not a foundational entity or property. As Lindtner (1987: 276) writes:

> The two truths cannot be claimed to express different levels of objective reality since all things always equally lack *svabhāva*. They are merely two ways of looking (*darśana*) at things, a provisional and a definite.

It is more akin to a clear perceiving of the nature of all things, not as something substantial but as an absence. The sense of the distinction is more cognitive than ontological – it is to know one is dreaming, a position that is itself parasitical upon the act of dreaming. Emptiness is parasitical upon the natural tendency to cognise certain entities as possessing intrinsic nature, a tendency that results from existential ignorance. One who is enlightened may still cognise in such a manner, but they are aware that this cognition is an illusion.

# 5. The Possibility of Dependence without Foundations

## 5.1. The 'Source of Being' Objection

The conclusions of the arguments put forward by Nāgārjuna are aimed at undermining the notion of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and, as a result, the notion of a fundamental basis for reality. If there are *dharma*s at all, then they must have a derivative existence – they must be *prajñaptisat* rather than *dravyasat*.[109] As no entity possesses intrinsic nature, there is no entity that meets the requirements of being foundational.

Such a position seems counter-intuitive. If the dependent entities have no ultimate basis, then it is a wonder how anything came to be in the first place. We are reminded of Schaffer's (2010: 62) worry that in the absence of a foundational level, "[b]eing would be infinitely deferred, never achieved." There is a sense in which the reality of an entity is inherited from the entity upon which the former depends. In the absence of a base, this chain of reality could not begin. It is as though we could hold a relay race without a first person to hold the baton and stand at the starting line. If reality is inherited, it must have a source.

This assumption seems to be the motivation for Burton's (1999) forceful criticisms of Nāgārjuna and his belief that the Madhyamaka positions leads to nihilism – the view that nothing exists. He (1999: 109) writes:

> Nāgārjuna is not merely saying – despite his apparent claims to the contrary – that entities are *dependently originating*, but further that all entities are entirely conceptually constructed. But if *all* entities are conceptually constructed, then there can be nothing unconstructed out of which conceptually constructed entities can be constructed. And if

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[109] In as much as the term can have any meaning in the absence of admitting the *dravya* level. One may say that the distinction collapses, but the argument being made is against *svabhāva* and therefore *dravyasat*.

there is nothing unconstructed out of which the conceptually constructed entities are

constructed, then these conceptually constructed entities cannot exist.[110]

The assumption also appears to be at play with the opponents of Madhyamaka in the classical Indian

context. Almost all criticisms take the Madhyamaka position to be asserting or entailing the non-

existence of any entity (see Westerhoff 2016), despite the explicit protestations in Madhyamaka

writings. They then state the familiar argument that the *claim* of universal non-existence is self-

contradictory.

Nāgārjuna does not consider himself to be endorsing nihilism. Indeed, we find him declaring that the

criticism of nihilism does not stick in *MMK* 5.8:

> But those of small intelligence who perceive the existence and non-existence of entities,
>
> they do not see the auspicious pacification of the perceivable.[111]

Candrakīrti, in his commentary of the verse, quotes from the *Ratnāvalī* (a text often ascribed to

Nāgārjuna by Buddhist tradition):

> The nihilist (*nāstika*) walks a bad path, the non-nihilist (*anāstika*) walks a good path. Those
>
> who don't rely on these two [views] achieve liberation by knowledge of reality.[112]

As indicated by Westerhoff (2016), it was Nāgārjuna's later commentators that emphasised the

incompatibility of the Madhyamaka position with nihilism. This may be due to the accusation of

nihilism gaining momentum and sophistication in the years that followed Nāgārjuna's original

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[110] Burton takes *prajñaptisat* entities to be those that are a result of the conceptualising activity of our minds, and so those entities that do not possess a mind-independent nature. His use of "conceptual construction" therefore means *prajñaptisat*. I do not disagree with Burton, and the Sanskrit supports reading *prajñapti* as something which involves our conceptual and linguistic practices. Yet I emphasise the distinction as between the fundamental and the derivative, rather than between the mind-independent and mind-dependent. Of course, the derivative may derive, in part, from the conceptualising activity of the mind. My issue with framing the term as meaning 'mind-dependent' is the inclination for it to then treat the mind as foundational. I will have more to say on this later.

[111] *astitvaṃ ye tu paśyanti nāstitvaṃ cālpabuddhayaḥ / bhāvānāṃ te na paśyanti draṣṭavyopaśamaṃ śivam* (135).

[112] *nāstiko durgatiṃ yāti sugatiṃ yātyanāstikaḥ |yathābhūtaparijñānānmokṣamadvayaniśritaḥ* (135).

writings. In any case, a statement is not an argument, and if Nāgārjuna wishes to avoid the charge of

nihilism, then the idea that dependence relations need not terminate in a fundamental level must be

defended. It is in the contemporary literature on grounding and fundamentality where we may

locate the means of providing a defence. We may first, however, recapitulate the two main

motivations for supporting the position of foundationalism:

(i) Without a foundational source of being, there would be no source from which the
being of derivative entities may derive.

(ii) It is a theoretical virtue for a theory of reality to have a minimal base on which
dependence relations terminate.

In recent literature, two metaphysical models of grounding have been suggested as alternatives to

the foundationalist model: (i) infinitism, and (ii) coherentism. I shall discuss how each of these

models may address the above arguments for foundationalism before showing how Nāgārjuna's

position is a third distinct option, located somewhere, perhaps, in the middle.[113]

## 5.2 Metaphysical Infinitism

The position of metaphysical infinitism[114] holds that dependence chains, *contra* foundationalism, do

*not* terminate. This appears highly counter-intuitive and yet recent literature shows the position to

be more sophisticated than such first impressions. Much of the appeal for infinitism comes from the

dissatisfaction with metaphysical foundationalism: should infinitism be a consistent and plausible

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[113] It should be noted that there are both "strong" and "weak" versions of infinitism and coherentism. A weak version holds that there are *some* chains of dependence that do not terminate (infinitism) whilst also allowing other chains to terminate. A strong version holds that all chains do not terminate. Coherentism can be conceived similarly, although replacing the non-termination of dependence chains with the interdependence of all relata.
[114] Some philosophers, such as Bohn (2018), prefer the term "indefinitism" in order to distinguish it from what they see as an unhelpful parallel to mathematical infinitism.

position, without the issues that attach to foundationalism, it seems difficult to see why it should not be seriously considered as a model for reality's structure.

The difficulties with foundationalism arise when one considers the possibility of "gunky" and "junky" worlds. Gunky worlds are those where every entity has parts, and these parts have further proper parts. Such a world is conceivable and therefore not impossible. Similarly, but running in the opposite direction, a junky world is one in which every entity is a proper part of a further entity. Whereas a gunky world descends indefinitely, a junky world ascends indefinitely. Once again, this is not a logical impossibility. Finally, combining both junky and gunky worlds, we have what is called a "hunky" world – a world in which there is no lowest nor highest level along chains of dependence. The chains of dependence do not terminate on either side. A world like this would be incompatible with foundationalism, and would instead be best described by metaphysical infinitism. Gunky, junky and hunky worlds may appear to be mere philosophical speculations, but as Bohn (2018: 176 – 177) correctly points out:

> As science has progressed, we have again and again discovered that U [the universe] is both bigger (cf. the development of cosmology) and smaller (cf. the development of particle physics) than we thought before. Considering that overall cosmic pattern, we are faced with some inductive/abductive reasons to think there is no end in either direction; dismissing these reasons out of hand, and especially on a priori grounds, seems scientifically and theoretically irresponsible.

With this in mind, we can now see whether infinitism answers the arguments for foundationalism discussed above. The first of these is the 'Source of Being' objection. Must the derived have a source upon which their being depends? An argument of this sort appears to underlie objections to Madhyamaka, such as those by Burton (1999). What is presupposed in this account is a "transmission" model of being, one "whereby the being of an entity at a given level of reality $L_n$ is

fully obtained, in a yes/no, all-or-nothing fashion, from the entity or entities at the immediately prior level L$_{n-1}$." (Morganti 2015: 560). Bohn (2018: 169) makes a similar point:

> An intuition pump [for foundationalism] might come by the more or less *dynamical* metaphors often used to explain the grounding relation: the ground *transmits* its being to the grounded, the grounded *gains*, *achieves*, or *derives* its being from the ground.

As an alternative to this transmission conception of being, Morganti (2014, 2015) has developed an "emergentist" conception of being. Rather than there being a foundational base level source for being that is transmitted to derivative entities in chains, Morganti believes that being *emerges* from the infinitely descending chain of relations. To argue this, he compares the metaphysical model of foundationalism to the epistemic model. An epistemological foundationalist believes that justification for beliefs eventually terminate in a foundational belief that does not require further justification (recall the paradigm example of Descartes' *cogito*). Justification for a belief is transmitted from this foundational belief to other beliefs (with each prior belief being the reason for each posterior belief along the chain). Without delving into the disputes of epistemology here, an alternative epistemic account has been proposed which holds that justification is not transmitted, but emerges from the chain of reasons as a whole.[115] Justification is complete when the chain is greater than a finite number of reasons. It is precisely this infinite chain that generates justification for a given belief. Rather than dealing with a binary truth or falsity being transmitted between beliefs, infinitists adopt a probabilistic model. Crudely put, if *p* is a reason for *q*, and the probability of *p* being true depends upon the probability of some further reason, *r*, being true, then the greater the number of probable reasons added to the chain, the greater the probability for the truth of belief *q*. The increase in probable reasons eventually leads to an emergence of justification.[116]

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[115] Morganti (2014) cites Fantl (2003), Aikin (2009), Klein (1998, 2007, 2011) and Peijnenburg and Atkinson (2013) as informing his theory. His defence of infinitism draws mostly on Klein, and Peijnenburg and Atkinson.

[116] My description is brief and somewhat crude. See Peijnenburg and Atkinson (2013) for a fully detailed explanation on the mechanics of emergence.

Morganti (2015) takes this account and replaces the property of justification with that of being. As more and more grounding entities are added to the chain, the being of the grounded entity in question emerges. He (Morganti 2015: 562) writes:

> The need for metaphysical analysis to go on ad infinitum, on this construal, ultimately turns from representing a seemingly insurmountable problem to indicating the key intuition behind infinitism: i.e., to repeat the slogan, that the being of x is given *only when*, *and only because* an infinity of entities more fundamental than x is also given.

There are, of course, objections. One line of criticism is to show that the analogy between epistemology and metaphysics does not hold. Justification comes in degrees. One can have *more* or *less* justification for a belief. Being just *is*. The former can operate on a probabilistic model, the latter is an all-or-nothing affair. According to this criticism, being does not emerge from the chain of dependent entities as a whole – it must be transmitted from each individual entity along the chain. One may choose to hold that being also comes in degrees, but this is contentious.[117] Morganti offers another way out. He distinguishes between (i) process, and (ii) structure. The process of justification, the manner in which a specific epistemic agent processes their justification for a belief, is to be distinguished from the structure of justification itself. In terms of the metaphysical picture, this is to distinguish the metaphysical structure of the world from our explanatory process. Our explanation of the structure may come in degrees, but the infinite chains of dependence of the world are not beholden to our epistemic abilities.[118] Morganti (2015: 564) writes:

> In a nutshell, then, what I am suggesting is a general differentiation between i) an ontological issue about the metaphysical structure of a given domain and ii) an

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[117] Morganti refers to McDaniel's (2009) work on ontological pluralism. I may add his more recent (2017) as another example of such thinking. As interesting as this line of thought may be, it is clear that the Madhyamaka would not accept ontological pluralism. The school's key move is, in fact, to drop the distinction between fundamental (*dravya*) and derivative (*prajñapti*) entities.

[118] Morganti (2015: 563 – 564) gives the example of Aristotle's actual vs. potential infinite as reflecting his distinction.

epistemological issue concerning what and how we can gain knowledge of, and thus

formulate explanations concerning, specific parts of that domain. It should be clear from the

foregoing, but it is good to make it explicit anyway, that this ontology/epistemology divide is

orthogonal to that between the issue of justification and the issue of priority and

dependence. The epistemological issue of justification itself, I am claiming, has an

ontological aspect related to the way reality is and an epistemological aspect related to what

we can believe, know etc. about it.

Or, put another way (Morganti 2014: 239):

> [T]he infinitist can again insist that there is an important distinction to be drawn here
>
> between subjective facts concerning explanation/conceptual analysis on the one hand and
>
> objective facts concerning what exists "out there" on the other hand. In particular, he or she
>
> could plausibly contend that every actual thing exists—period; and the degree to which it
>
> does is a magnitude that is only present in our minds, and expresses the particular
>
> "position" which is occupied by that entity in our representations of the relevant facts.

What is crucial to note here is the separating of explanation from the grounding relation. It is

contentious whether such a move is warranted. Most of the intuitive appeal of grounding comes

from its mirroring our explanatory practices. To state that our explanatory process is distinct from

this grounding relation is to somewhat obscure the relation itself. The division between the

subjective and objective is also problematic, and this is a point I shall return to later when assessing

the Madhyamaka model.

A related criticism of infinitism addressed by Morganti (2015: 565) is the issue of distinguishing being

from nothingness.[119] Let us accept that a mereological material composite generates no additional

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[119] The issue of distinguishing existence from non-existence, and the underlying assumptions that lead to the raising of the question in the first place, have been dealt with by the Madhyamaka philosophers since the writings of Nāgārjuna. I shall come back to this.

matter over and above that of its parts (since there is no addition to the total sum of matter than that already provided by the parts of the entity). Such an entity may be called an ontological "free lunch" for this reason – it does not require any additional matter than that which is provided by its parts. But then infinitism entails that all material entities are composites, for there is no fundamental level from which the composites are built. If everything is such a composite, then everything is an ontological "free lunch" in the sense described – nothing contributes any matter. If this is so, being and nothingness amount to the same (i.e. they cannot be distinguished), for both lack an ultimate material base. Morganti offers two responses. The first is to state that such a position is still preferable to an admission of brute facts by the foundationalist (I shall return to this issue shortly). But Morganti finds such a response unsatisfactory and instead offers a further explanation. The above criticism claims that "everything" is an ontological free lunch, since "everything" is a composite. But this use of "everything" conflates particular entities with the structure of reality as a whole. It is true that each particular entity, as a composite, would be an ontological "free lunch" in the sense above, but the structure of reality is not a composite entity – it is what emerges from an infinite chain of dependence, and "this is the very point of the move from the transmission to the emergence model of being!" (Morganti 2015: 566). The infinite chain of dependence does not itself obtain being from elsewhere, but is rather the condition for the emergence of being in the first place. It is only when holding to a transmission conception of being that one still stumbles upon this objection.

Bohn (2018) has also responded to two objections to infinitism as entailing a vicious regress based on (i) the explanatorily reductive character of dependence relations, and (ii) the regress of repeating an explanation.[120]

Beginning with the criticism that involves reduction, to say that $p$ depends upon $q$ is to "explain away" $p$. To "explain away" may be taken to mean that the "explained away" thing has the status of

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[120] Bohn's article takes facts as the relata of grounding relations, although this should not affect the points I draw from it.

something non-real. For example, one explains away the reality of institutions by reducing them to the social processes, roles and buildings which make up the institution. For a certain type of reductionist, the institutions, on the basis of their being explained away, may not be ultimately "real" as a result. But if this reductive process occurs *ad infinitum* (as infinitism implies), then everything is explained away into nothingness. But, as Bohn states (2018: 171), this reductive supposition is not warranted, and the recent project of grounding was introduced as a reaction to the Quinean flattening of ontology. Recalling Schaffer's ontological permissivism, we see how grounding, properly understood, does not entail an explaining away of the grounded. The explained is just as real as what explains it, only its status is derivative. It is not a question of *whether* it exists, but *how* it exists. Even allowing that grounding entails an explaining away of the grounded in the reductive manner described, Bohn (2018: 171) thinks this is no objection to infinitism, for if something held to have being is grounded, then its ground must either have an equal or higher degree of being in order to do the grounding. He continues:

> But then, as we approach infinity towards ground, we either stay with the same degree of being, or we approach infinite being! In neither case is being infinitely deferred, never achieved, as per Schaffer's intuition. If anything, being is always deferred, but infinitely achieved! So, if grounding is reductive, we're not explaining facts away only to approach nothingness, but rather we're explaining facts away in terms of other facts that have equal or more being.

Therefore a vicious regress, based upon an infinite reduction model, does not arise.

The second possible regress is based upon repeated explanations. Such a scenario occurs when a given explanation is of the same kind as the thing it was supposed to explain, leading one to ask the same question again of this same kind *ad infinitum*. Bohn (2018: 174) gives the homunculus theory of perception as an example, whereby the question of how a human interprets signals from the external world is explained by there being a homunculus sitting on the inside of the eye that

interprets the signals entering before sending the interpretation off to the brain. If we then ask how this homunculus interprets the signals, we are told that there is *another* homunculus sitting on the inside of the first homunculus' eye, interpreting the signals, and so on and so on. This is indeed a vicious regress, for the explanation of the concept (perception by a homonculus) contains the concept itself (perception by a homonculus). In this way, the concept is not satisfactorily explained. Yet infinitism does not suffer from this type of regress since each entity in the chain of dependence relations has an explanation of a different kind (Bohn 2018: 174). Infinitism does not entail the same kind of entity repeating in every stage of the dependence relation without termination, but only that the dependence chains do not terminate. If each kind of entity is explained by a distinct kind of entity, no comparable regress arises.

The worry that infinitism would not account for a source of being now appears less straightforward than initially assumed. Let us now turn to how infinitism responds to the arguments in favour of foundationalism based on theoretical virtue.

The proponent of foundationalism believes that without foundations, a satisfactory explanation of the world is not possible. Recalling Fine's (2010: 105) point:

> [T]here is still a plausible demand on ground or explanation that we are unable to evade. For given a truth that stands in need of explanation, one naturally supposes that it should have a "completely satisfactory" explanation, one that does not involve cycles and terminates in truths that do not stand in need of explanation.

These truths that do not stand in need of explanation (or entities, if we wish to take a more neutral stand on the form of the relata) are the foundations. Their lack of explanation is, on balance, considered a theoretical virtue when compared against an infinite chain of explanations. The troublesome admission of fundamental entities as just "brute facts" is mitigated by their contribution towards a complete explanation of reality. The simpler, coherent explanation which

posits the least entities is theoretically preferable. Cameron (2008: 12) captures this sentiment when he writes:

> [I]t would be better to be able to give a common metaphysical explanation for every dependent entity. We can do that only if every dependent entity has its ultimate ontological basis in some collection of independent entities; so this provides reason to believe the intuition against infinite descent in metaphysical explanation.

It is a theoretical benefit to give an explanation of the totality of reality on the basis of a limited number of entities (and the possible relations to derivative entities that they may engender). This benefit outweighs the concession of treating the fundamental entities as brute facts. But there are a number of responses to this kind of argument. Firstly, Tahko (2014, 2018) has argued that if the infinite dependence chain eventually becomes a repeated sequence, what he calls "boring infinite descent," then this would allow the theoretical utility of a simple explanation (namely, the repeating sequence) without positing entities that are without explanation (i.e. fundamental). The boring sequence acts as the foundation for the totality of entities derived from it. Since there is an eventual repetition, there are a limited number of kinds of entities. This is not to say that each entity in the boring sequence is the same kind (which would suffer from the regress discussed by Bohn mentioned above), but that a sequence of kinds repeats: an entity of *type-a* depends upon an entity of *type-b*, which depends upon an entity of *type-c*, which depends upon an entity of *type-a*, and so on, repeated. The whole sequence of *type-a*, *type-b* and *type-c* then acts in the way a foundational entity would, providing the theoretical virtue of a simple explanation, but without positing a non-dependent, unexplained foundational entity.[121]

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[121] As Tahko (2014: 261) explains: "There is no *novelty* in the structure after a certain point. This means we can follow the *mereological* chain of dependence all the way to the supposed mereological bottom level, but this is not where the story ends. The whole mereological chain of dependence could supervene on *another*, infinite chain of dependence (of a non-mereological kind). The boring part of the structure that repeats infinitely could be of any length, as long as it starts anew eventually. A description of the repetitive part only needs to be supplemented with an instruction to continue as before […] On the face of it, this type of chain does *not* satisfy well-foundedness, because it is genuinely infinite. But the situation is not as simple as that, for it is now being

Tahko's approach is to reframe the notion of fundamental level in a more liberal sense to include an actual infinite.[122] In this way he attempts, under the sway of arguments from theoretical virtue, to retain the principle that dependence relations must be well-founded. But one need not even attempt to play the game of aiming for theoretical virtue in the first place. Given Morganti's distinction between reality as it is in itself and our conceptual analysis of reality, he claims that the arguments for theoretical virtue conflate the distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological spheres, and the "feeling lurks that foundationalism is being reintroduced by the backdoor for no particular reason" (2015: 571). He suggests that the *a priori* rejection of infinitism is unjustified. In fact, as previously mentioned, the trajectory of the physical sciences leads one to question the foundationalist model of reality. It is not that the sciences indicate a foundationalist account of reality, but that we presuppose such a model in advance of the scientific work. Morganti has also pointed to instances in which only an infinitist model can explain certain facets of reality, undermining the tacit assumption that foundationalism is a natural fit for the structure of reality and any other model is an unnecessary aberration. He writes (Morganti 2015: 568):

> Indeed, in several cases metaphysical infinitism has been presented as the only approach able to provide 'non-ostrich' explanations of certain philosophical problems, i.e., explanations that do not simply rely on the assumption of something as a basic primitive and/or a non-further-explicable fact."[123]

Finally, a tension can be drawn out in the foundationalist account that is not applicable to the infinitist account. The impetus to find a fundamental level of foundational entities derives in no small part from the tacit (if not explicit) acceptance of the principle of sufficient reason, whereby

proposed that the mereological chain terminates, even though it is dependent, in some sense, on another (non-mereological) chain: a two-tiered structure."

[122] See Raven (2016) for another attempt at reframing the notion of fundamental (by characterising fundamentality as ineliminability, and distinguishing this from foundationalism).

[123] He (Morganti 2015: 568) further writes: "Without entering into details, this has been argued to be the case, for instance, for the ontological constitution of facts and Bradley's regress (Orilia (2006, 2009), for the notion of literal contact between extended objects (Zimmermann 1996) and for the analysis of partial similarity facts in terms of partial identity (Morganti 2011)." I have included Morganti's citations in the bibliography.

everything has a reason or cause. It is this principle that leads to a structured model of reality based on dependence relations. Bohn (2018: 177 – 178) posits, in relation to grounding, the *Metaphysical Principle of Sufficient Reason* (MPSR), by which "every fact *p* has a metaphysical explanation." But the foundationalist only pursues this up to the point of foundational entities – the independent constituents that do not require any further explanation. Such a position may be termed "brutalism" – it is just a brute fact that there are ungrounded foundational entities that ground all that is derivative. Brutalism, in the end, violates MPSR. But "there is no non-ad hoc way to draw the line between facts that do and do not have a metaphysical explanation, and drawing an ad hoc line is surely no natural resting point for thought" (Bohn 2018: 178). Infinitism, however, maintains a strict commitment to MPSR. *Everything* has an explanation. *Everything*, without exception, is dependent. If MPSR has any weight, then infinitism is preferable to foundationalism.

Before moving on to metaphysical coherentism, I would like to highlight some salient features of metaphysical infinitism that will have a bearing on the analysis of Madhyamaka metaphysics. The first of these is the infinitist's strict distinction between our own epistemic sphere and explanatory process from that of reality's mind-independent, objective structure. This distinction is required for the infinitist to avoid certain objections, as discussed above. It should also be noted that whilst infinitism does away with foundationalism, it still retains many characteristics of the metaphysics of grounding: anti-reflexivity, asymmetry and transitivity. The recent interest in metaphysical infinitism as a model for reality's structure may derive from it retaining most of these intuitions, even whilst taking the radical step of denying foundationalism. With that said, let us turn to the more radical position of metaphysical coherentism.

## 5.3 Metaphysical Coherentism

Metaphysical coherentism[124] is more radical than infinitism by its rejection of another component of the standard picture of grounding: asymmetry. It posits that entities can mutually ground one another. Of course, such a position prevents the mutually grounded entities from having a status as more or less fundamental than the other. If *x* grounds *y*, and *y* ground *x*, then neither *x* nor *y* is more fundamental. The ordering of reality is therefore threatened by such a move. A weak version of metaphysical coherentism would argue that there are *some* symmetric grounding relations, but that not all relations must exhibit symmetry. This avoids the threat to ordering reality, but, in doing so, also retains a limited foundationalism, for it allows for some entities to act as foundations for other derivative entities, although not all entities may have foundations. I shall first consider arguments defending metaphysical coherentism, before discussing its strongest form – "holism".[125] I will close by briefly noting weaker models of metaphysical coherentism.

The approach to defending metaphysical coherentism depends in part upon which notion of grounding one adopts. It is clear that the relation of grounding is intimately connected to the notion of explanation. It is for this reason that the grounding relation is often expressed by phrases such as "in virtue of" or "because." There are, broadly speaking, two approaches which may be taken to the question of the connection between grounding and metaphysical explanation – (i) to distinguish them ("separatists"), or (ii) to hold them to be identical ("unionists").[126] Distinguishing the grounding relation from metaphysical explanation highlights the realist tendency behind the project of grounding – that there is a mind-independent worldly relation which backs metaphysical

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[124] Also called "metaphysical interdependence" (Thompson 2016, 2018) and "metaphysical holism" (Cameron 2022). As with infinitism, it is a model derived from an epistemic theory, this time the theory of coherence, such as defended by BonJour (1985).

[125] Since I characterise Madhyamaka philosophy as anti-foundationalist, it is global metaphysical coherentism that is perhaps the most comparable for its firm rejection of any ordering of reality (and therefore of any foundationalism).

[126] See Bliss and Trogdon (2021) for details of the debate between grounding "separatists" and "unionists." See Glazier (2020) for an alternative taxonomy of views on this issue, including the potential anti-realist consequences of adopting an approach that unifies the grounding relation and metaphysical explanation.

explanations, and that metaphysical explanation simply tracks this grounding relation. The alternative approach of the unionists is to collapse the distinction, and hold that grounding relations are identical to metaphysical explanations. As far as metaphysical coherentism is concerned, if one adopts the separatist understanding of grounding, one ought to show how symmetrical *ontological dependence* is possible. If, however, one adopts the unionist approach, one will also have to show that metaphysical *explanation* need not be asymmetric. I will begin with discussing the possibility of symmetric ontological dependence before moving on to the possibility of holistic explanation (as a form of explanation that is not asymmetric).

Asymmetry is appealing when we look to examples such as the mental being dependent upon the physical, or the non-natural being dependent upon the natural. But there are also cases of symmetrical ontological dependence. If grounding is taken to be a real worldly relation that backs our explanations, then given the clear cases of symmetrical ontological dependence, it must also be possible for grounding to be symmetric (Thompson 2016: 43). Let us turn to some examples. Take the Neo-Aristotelian position that universals are immanent (meaning that they do not occur independently of their instantiations), and the position that membership of a natural kind is had essentially (so that if an entity is a member of natural kind *k*, it cannot be the entity that it is without being a member of that kind). As Barnes (2018: 56) shows, this entails a symmetrical dependence between universals and their instantiations. A universal cannot occur independently of its instantiations – it is dependent upon them. But then since an entity by its essence belongs to a natural kind, it is dependent upon those universals that characterise its kind – namely those universals that it instantiates. The universal is dependent upon its instances, and its instances are dependent upon the universal: symmetrical ontological dependence.

Another example is the difficulty for Armstrong's ontology of states of affairs (Barnes 2018: 57), whereby the states of affairs are primitive and the constituents are abstractions (although no less real) from these states of affairs. The problem (assuming asymmetry) is that this picture holds the

constituents to be dependent upon the states of affairs, and so any explanation of similarity between states of affairs (say the similarity between the state of affairs that "The rose is red" and "The apple is red") would not have recourse to its constituents: "if the ultimate explanatory bedrock is just the states of affairs, and not their constituents, then it's hard to see how we could explain this commonality." (Barnes 2018: 57). The solution is to remove the requirement of asymmetry. Both states of affairs and their constituents are mutually dependent.[127]

A final example is that of events being mutually dependent (Barnes 2018: 60)[128]. Events are seen to contain smaller events, and some of the latter can be said to constitute the former essentially. Barnes' example is the event of World War II. Whilst there are plenty of smaller events that have no bearing on the essence of World War II, there are others by which the event would not be the event it was had these smaller events not occurred. It is not that a similar war would not have occurred, but that it would not be what we know as World War II. Barnes points to the evacuation at Dunkirk as one smaller event that is an essential constituent of World War II. But the dependence works both ways. The event that is the evacuation of Dunkirk would not be that very event if it had not occurred in the larger event we call World War II. Therefore both the evacuation of Dunkirk and World War II are mutually dependent i.e. a case of symmetrical dependence.

Thompson (2016, 2018) provides further examples of symmetric dependence.[129] Let us take two propositions. Proposition A = [B is true], and Proposition B = [A is true]. Let us further assume that both propositions are true. Then since the truth of propositions is determined by their constituents, and the world, the truth of Proposition A is dependent upon Proposition B, and the truth of Proposition B is dependent upon Proposition A (Thompson 2016: 46 – 47; 2018: 110 – 111). Or let us consider the quantities of mass, density and volume for a portion of homogenous liquid. The

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[127] That is, if one wishes to maintain Armstrong's "Tractarian ambitions" (Barnes 2018: 57) of holding states of affairs be in some sense fundamental, by which universals and properties are to be explained.
[128] Barnes (2018) gives further examples based on trope theory and mathematical ontology.
[129] It should be noted that Thompson takes the grounding relation to be identical to metaphysical explanation, and the relata of this relation to be facts.

quantity of each is dependent upon the quantity of the other two, and there appears to be no

principled reason for choosing one quantity as fundamental, and the other two as derivative

(Thompson 2016: 47).[130]

Such notions of symmetrical dependence are also evident in the case of integrated wholes. The

relation between a circle and the semi-circles which constitute it is one of symmetrical dependence

(Thompson 2018: 111). The existence of the circle is explained by the existence of its parts, which

include the semi-circles that constitute the circle. At the same time, the semi-circles are derived

from the circle, and so depend upon the circle. Neither foundationalism nor infinitism can capture

this intuition. Similarly, organisms have their nature as a result of the organs that work to constitute

and sustain them. But then these organs have the nature of organs only when functioning as part of

an organism's system. As Thompson elaborates (2018: 111):

> [T]he fact that the heart pumps blood around the body depends on the fact that the
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> organism exists and has a properly functioning circulatory system. But the fact that the
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> organism exists and has a properly functioning circulatory system depends on the fact that
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> the heart pumps blood around the body.

Once again, foundationalism and infinitism, with their commitment to an ordering of reality via

asymmetrical dependence relations, are unable to account for the intuition behind this mutual

dependence of organs and organisms. Metaphysical coherentism, by giving up this demand for

asymmetry, suffers no such issues.

There are, therefore, possible cases of symmetrical ontological dependence. If one holds the

grounding relation to be a worldly relation which backs metaphysical explanation (rather than being

identical to it), then one may rely on the above examples to motivate the claim that certain

instances of grounding are symmetrical. But not all proponents of grounding accept the distinction

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[130] Thompson cites Fine (2001: 11) as the source of this example.

between grounding and explanation. Grounding is intimately related to explanation, and it is only by reference to the structure of explanation that grounding loses its obscurity. To the "unionists" who believe that the grounding relation *just is* metaphysical explanation, a defender of metaphysical coherentism must show how explanation need not always be asymmetrical. The problem with symmetrical explanation, however, is that it appears to render explanations circular. This, critics will claim, is to distort the actual structure of explanation. Let us look at the problem of circularity in more detail.

If asymmetry is denied, but transitivity is maintained, then irreflexivity must also be denied.[131] This is because if A is grounded by B, and B is grounded by C, and C is grounded by A, then via transitivity, A grounds A at some point in the chain. Grounding becomes reflexive (Thompson 2016: 42). To breach reflexivity where grounding is concerned would be to compromise its strength against foundationalism. The main critique against foundationalism is its positing of unexplained brute entities. It is difficult to see how an entity that grounds itself is any better of an explanation than such brute entities.[132] A number of points may be made to assuage such worries. Firstly, there is the distinction between "mediate" and "immediate" ground (Fine 2012: 50; Thompson 2020: 264). Take again the chain that A grounds B, and B grounds C. In this case A is the immediate ground of B, as it is the immediate next step in the chain of grounding, but is only the mediate ground of C. If we then add that C grounds A, we find that A only mediately grounds itself. A second distinction is between full and partial grounds (Fine 2012: 50). So far I have written in a manner that implied grounding that is full. If A, alone, grounds B, then A is the full ground of B. But it is possible in certain cases that an entity is not grounded by a single other entity, but by a combination of entities. In this case, if A, B and C are not sufficient, taken individually, to ground D, but in combination are sufficient, then they are *partial* grounds of D. In this case we may hold than, if A grounds B, B grounds C, and C grounds A, A only mediately and partially grounds itself. In fact, A, B and C are all partial grounds for

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[131] For a survey of objections to transitivity, and responses to these, see Thompson (2020).
[132] Although see Bliss (2018) for a defence of immediate reflexive grounding.

themselves, and each individually mediately grounds itself.[133] In this way, it is not the case that the violation of irreflexivity encountered in this example is *completely* trivial, or uninformative.

The intuition that explanation must be informative is what first motivates the case against circularity, and with it, the case against metaphysical coherentism. It seems that we find circular explanations unsatisfactory.[134] But the desire for an asymmetric explanation need not rule out the possibility of a larger explanation which, when taken as a total, is circular. The desire for asymmetry stems from the fact that the practice of seeking explanations is always contextual and driven by the interest of the explanation seeker (Thompson 2018: 120).[135] So whilst there may be a case of circular explanation, the explanation we seek, due to whatever prior interests or goals we have, determines the direction of explanation we are seeking. Just as person *x*, seeking an explanation of the shape of a shadow, may explain the shadow by the shape of the sundial, person *y*, seeking an explanation of the shape of the sundial, may explain this by reference to the shape of the shadow. It is also the case that, if the circular chain of explanations is so great (as one would be inclined to think if the chain is a model for reality), it is hardly likely that we require the entire chain as an explanation of some given link in it (Thompson 2018: 121). A localised slice, the direction of which is determined by our prior goal and interest, would be the norm. This reflects our intuition that explanation cannot be circular, but still allows that the entire structure of explanation, and of reality, may in actuality be circular.

Another consideration regards the model of explanation we are adopting. Metaphysical foundationalism, if it conceives of grounding in the manner of "unionists," is driven by the same thinking as epistemic foundationalism – that some property is passed from a more foundational entity to a derivative one in an asymmetrical manner. For the epistemic foundationalist, this property is justification, for the metaphysical foundationalist, it is the property of "being

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[133] Compare this with Morganti's (2018: 263 – 265) notions of *quasi-reflexivity* and *quasi-transitivity*.
[134] As Barnes puts it (2018: 66): "Circular arguments are valid. The reason that they're bad arguments is an epistemic reason – they don't provide any new information, or any further warrant, for thinking that the conclusion is true. And so they don't play the justificatory role we want arguments to play."
[135] Thompson draws on the work of van Fraassen (1980) to make this point.

(explained)."[136] A model like this seems to require a source for the property being transferred, which the structure of circular explanation appears to be unable to provide. On this view, the problem for metaphysical coherentism is that the property of "being explained" just happens to have popped up somewhere, mysteriously, and then gets passed around to the different things acting as explanations for one another. But explanation need not be structured in this manner. We can understand this possibility by reference to epistemic holism, the theory by which justification for a belief is not transferred from some foundational beliefs to other derivative ones, but rather where the network of beliefs, supporting one another, lead to the emergence of justification for all of the beliefs within the network.[137]

Here is an example taken from Thompson (2018: 112 – 113):

> Aimee notices that her neighbour, Bob, seems a little upset and withdrawn. She wonders what could explain his behaviour, and realizes that she hasn't seen Bob's partner, Chris, in a week or so. She then remembers hearing raised voices coming from Bob's house one evening, about a week ago. She hypothesizes that Bob's behaviour is due to him and Chris having split up. With that explanation in mind, she reasons that the raised voices she heard were Bob and Chris, and that the reason she hasn't seen Chris lately is that Chris and Bob have split up. On this basis she reasons that Bob is indeed upset, and that he's upset because he and Chris have split up.

If one of the beliefs is taken away from the network of beliefs, then the remaining beliefs do not have the same level of justification. In fact, we might go so far as to say that the remaining beliefs are no longer justified. It is the combination of all beliefs, propping each other up, that generates the

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[136] I do not recall any proponent of (unionist) grounding adopting the notion of a property of "being explained," but I use it only to bring out the comparison between metaphysical and epistemic foundationalism.

[137] As Cameron (2022: 160) writes: "when there is a circle of dependence among some things, this can allow for a holistic explanation of the existence or nature of those things, collectively. Explanation cannot be circular, but it can be holistic."

justification for each individually. This manner of knowing is ubiquitous in our day to day lives, and it is only when we try to abstract a strict structure in idealised conditions that a foundationalist structure seems appealing. Justification is one form of explanation, and if holistic explanations are plausible, as the above example shows, then given the fact that our explanatory practices are our only guide to the structure of the grounding relation (as "unionists" would have it), the charge of circularity (based on a prior foundationalist conception of explanation) loses force.

It should be clear by now that the structure of explanation need not be asymmetric. If the structure of explanation is our guide to the structure of ground (by being identical with it), and if either circular explanations or holistic explanations are acceptable, then metaphysical coherentism is an appealing account of reality's structure. Just as there can be circular explanations, similarly, entities may mutually ground one another. Whether one thinks of the grounding relation as separate to metaphysical explanation, or identical with it, metaphysical coherentism is an appealing alternative to metaphysical foundationalism.

We can now see how the metaphysical coherentist addresses the 'Source of Being' objection. The charge, against the coherentist, is that whilst the coherentist can explain how being is passed between entities in a network, it cannot explain how being is there in the first place. Since infinitism answers this objection by its distinctive position (that chains do not terminate, but this is the condition for the emergence of being in the first place), the same response is not available to a coherentist. But the metaphysical coherentist can do two things. Firstly, the coherentist can claim that the foundationalist does not fare any better in answering the 'Source of Being' objection. Stating that an independent foundational entity is the source of being, and does not itself require being, is just to claim the existence of a brute fact (Thompson 2020: 267). And why should the coherentist not similarly treat the being that is shared within its network as a brute fact?

But the appeal of coherentism is to do better than the foundationalist in this regard, and this is where the comparison with epistemic holism helps. If we take holistic explanation as the paradigm

model, then the need to locate a source of being loses its bite. To explain, in the way the holist takes it, is to see the interdependence of entities, their fitting-in with one another, and their place and function within the wider structure. It is to explain the system as a whole, not each individual link in the chain. This does away with the "transmitter" model upon which the foundationalist relies, whereby the property of "being explained," and "being" itself, is passed along from one entity to another. As Cameron (2022: 164) writes:

> Instead of attempting to explain (in the first instance, at least) the particular nodes in the structure – why this thing exists and/or is the way it is – the metaphysical holist attempts to explain (in the first instance) the structure as a whole: why these things (collectively) are the way they are. And this explanation arises holistically, because of the pattern of ontological dependence that obtains among those things in that structure. That is why metaphysical determination relations like ontological dependence can go in a circle, but explanation does not: the explanation does not concern the individual nodes in the structure, and it does not flow along the lines of metaphysical determination that hold the structure together. Rather, the explanation concerns the structure as a whole – the system of entities, and what they are like collectively.

In a sense, this is to undercut the objection. The objection already assumed a transmitter model of being. Neither the infinitist nor the coherentist thinks that such a model is warranted. Examples of symmetric dependence, the commitment to MPSR, the possibility of gunky, junky or hunky worlds, all act as a motivation to rethink our conception of explanation, dependence, and with them, the relation of ground.[138] It is only when presupposing a foundationalist model of explanation that the

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[138] It is worth noting that where metaphysical infinitism gained strength from its compatibility with gunky, junky and hunky worlds, metaphysical coherentism fares just as well. There is no requirement for termination in a foundational level, and so there is no linear ordering that results from a given foundation. If our science continues to expand to include even smaller and larger phenomena, so does the web of mutually dependent entities in the coherentist model. Also, similar to metaphysical infinitism, metaphysical coherentism need not posit theoretically costly brute facts (i.e. the unexplained foundational elements), nor does it violate the metaphysical principle of sufficient reason (MPSR) (Thompson 2018: 117).

question of a source arises. A foundationalist model asks from where this particular *x* arose – on what was it dependent? But to ask this question is to act on a presupposed understanding of how explanations work (and a presupposed understanding of reality's structure). To understand is not to chip away in the hopes of being unable to chip any further, but to step back and see the object in its relation to all others. In this sense, to understand reality is to see how the network operates. Instead of asking where this property – being – originates, the question is to ask what the nature of entities must be in order for this interdependent network to be.

Let us now turn to the strongest form of metaphysical coherentism, the form which does not admit of *any* asymmetric dependence relations – "holism" (Swiderski forthcoming). Holism holds that every entity partially grounds every other entity. As is to be expected, such a radical position is not without issues.

The first issue with such a picture is the "contamination" problem (Swiderski (forthcoming): 6). This is where definitionally distinct kinds of entities ground one another, rendering their distinction void. Take objective facts. If an objective fact is partially grounded by every other fact, this includes subjective facts. But then by being grounded by a subjective fact, by its very involvement with subjectivity, the objective fact is rendered subjective. The same applies in the other direction – subjective facts will be rendered objective. As Swiderski (forthcoming: 7) concludes, "[t]he contaminating property of subjectivity leaves the holist in an uncomfortable position: she must deny either that there are any subjective, or any objective facts."

A further problem for metaphysical coherentism relates to the necessity of grounding relations.[139] If every entity *necessarily* depends upon every other entity, then one given entity – say *x* – will, in the absence of any of the other entities, fail to be grounded. Its occurrence would be underdetermined. But then its failure to be grounded would impact every other entity, until there is no longer any

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[139] Grounding is often taken to be a necessary relation, though not always. For a discussion on this issue, see Skiles (2020).

entity in the network due to no entity being grounded. This is what Swiderski (forthcoming: 7 – 8) calls the "fragility" of holist worlds. To frame this in modal terms, imagine a holist world (W1) which contains *a*, *b*, and *c*, and where each of these *partially* grounds all of the others. Now let us take the grounding relation to be necessary – that is, the same relations of ground hold across other possible worlds. In this case, a second holist world (W2) cannot contain *a*, *b*, or *c*, for each of them is necessarily dependent upon all of the others, since they are only partial grounds. This means that there cannot be any alteration of a holist world. There is no other possible world, since by containing one entity, it must contain all the others, and without all the others, it cannot contain any in isolation. It occurs containing exactly those entities it does, for without them, the entire world could not occur. There is no possible world which contains only, say, *a* and *b*, without *c*.

One possible solution is to replace the notion of partial grounds in holistic worlds with that of *full* grounds. Now each entity in the circle fully grounds the others. This permits of possible worlds where certain entities are absent, since their absence does not render every other entity ungrounded – each entity can act as the full ground of each other entity. Of course, this renders each entity massively overdetermined (in fact, it seems difficult to see how one could overdetermine any further!). The issue of metaphysical overdetermination is far from straightforward, and whether admission of metaphysical overdetermination is fatal is unsettled, but I will touch upon one point relating to foundationalist accounts highlighted by Bliss (forthcoming: 19 – 20). This is that the fundamentals in a foundationalist account may also overdetermine the derivative entities. If *a* (a derivative entity) is fully grounded in *b* (another derivative entity), and this latter is fully grounded in *f* (a fundamental entity), then it seems that *a* is overdetermined. Either *a* is fully grounded by *b*, and then *f* becomes superfluous to the grounding of *a*, or *b* only partially grounds *a*. If the latter option is taken, then there cannot be multiple layers of derivative entities, for any entity that is not fundamental would either be fully grounded by a fundamental entity, or grounded by a combination

of fundamental entities.[140] The foundationalist may accept that grounding only holds between fundamental entities and derivative entities (and not between derivative entities), but this will come at the expense of its original appeal, which was that the theory of grounding best captures our intuition that the world consists of multiple levels of entities.

Holism is not the only model of metaphysical coherentism, though it is by far the strongest. According to Swiderski (forthcoming: 4), metaphysical coherentism may take weaker forms than holism, so long as it subscribes to the following thesis:

> *Coherentist Canon*: (i) For any $x$, there is some $y$ such that $y$ grounds $x$, and (ii) there is some $z$ and some $w$ such that $z$ (perhaps indirectly) grounds $w$ and *vice versa*.[141]

This allows for models such as "insularism", where there can be separate networks of entities that are self-contained and do not interact outside of their networks (Swiderski (forthcoming): 10 – 13). Two other models are possible: "hierarchism," where the self-contained networks are themselves grounded by other self-contained networks (allowing both infinitism and foundationalism of the networks, but the coherentism of the entities within the networks); and "rebarism," where the foundation is a coherent network, from which other entities derive in a hierarchical fashion. These latter two models are no longer as thoroughly anti-foundational as either holism or insularism.

Metaphysical coherentism is a radical position that seems highly counter-intuitive. But our intuition may stem from presuppositions which originate from a popular but misguided foundationalist framework, one especially prevalent in the Western world. It is not the case that these presuppositions hold across the globe. Cameron (2022: 158 – 159) is sensitive to this point:

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[140] Bliss (forthcoming: 19) writes that "systematic overdetermination of derivative entities by fundamental entities places an additional burden on foundationalist theories, as the work of the fundamental is not only potentially superfluous—if they are involved in overdetermination—but expensively so."
[141] (i) is a rejection of (a certain) foundationalism, and (ii) is a rejection of (a certain) infinitism.

Is there independent reason to deny the possibility of circles of dependence? Usually the claim is just stated without argument, or at least nothing beyond the declaration that it is intuitive. This may be so if your familiarity with metaphysics begins and ends with the Western tradition. In Eastern metaphysics, by contrast, the idea that there can be circles of dependence is far more familiar. We risk parochialism, then, in just assuming […] without argument, just as we do if we assume without argument that there cannot be infinite regresses of dependence.

With this in mind, let us now turn to Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school.

## 5.4 Madhyamaka and the Proliferated World

Is the Madhyamaka account of reality a form of either infinitism or coherentism? There are elements within both theories that seem to indicate affinity. We have the coherentist's claim of metaphysical interdependence, a model that seems the right fit for reflecting the teaching of dependent-origination. But we also have the infinitist argument for non-terminating and non-repeating chains of dependence, reminiscent of the claim that an independent nature (*svabhāva*) is not findable under analysis. In either case, we find that neither infinitism nor coherentism suffers from the issues of vicious regress as first thought, and both provide ready replies to the 'Source of Being' objection that was used to imply that emptiness entails nihilism. I believe that the metaphysical model of the Madhyamaka is best exemplified by its notion of proliferation (*prapañca*). Before delving into this, I will reiterate the key features of the Madhyamaka picture.

Emptiness is the denial that any entity possesses a *svabhāva*. A *svabhāva* is an independent nature, and in virtue of possessing *svabhāva*, and entity is held to be *dravya-sat* – i.e. fundamental. Any entity that derives its nature from another is held to be derivative, that is *prajñapti-sat*. The term *prajñapti* also has the sense of something dependent upon custom, linguistic practices and/or

mental activity. The distinction between these two ontological levels is derived from the Buddhist conception of "two truths" – one of which pertains to the fundamental, and the other which pertains to the derivative level. Nāgārjuna alters this picture. By refuting the possibility of an independent nature, Nāgārjuna also refutes the possibility of the fundamental. In the absence of the fundamental, everything is now derivative (including any conception of emptiness itself). Yet Nāgārjuna retains the distinction between the teaching of two truths, conceiving of the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) as non-linguistic and non-conceptual. It is not a description of the collection of entities that make up our experience of reality, but a correct cognition of the *nature* of these entities. This nature is the absence of an independent nature, that being emptiness (*śūnyatā*). To try to encapsulate this in words or concepts leads to paradoxical statements. But there is still the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*), which accords with conventional reality – the way the world appears to those who perceive and conceptualise the world in accord with the existential ignorance described by Buddhism. This ignorance is characterised by the cognition of an independent nature (*svabhāva*) in certain entities. Even so, one requires the conventional truth in order to convey the ultimate truth. Since any exchange between peoples is conventional, the ultimate truth cannot be conveyed without recourse to the conventional.

According to Nāgārjuna, then, the entities that we experience in the world are all, without exception, derivative – *prajñapti-sat*. The question is whether the chain of dependence forms a web with a limited number of entities, or continues in infinitely descending levels of dependence. If we take both models in the most general way, the former acts on a horizontal level (eventually looping in on itself) and the former on a vertical level. That is, the coherentist adopts the position that grounding relations are symmetrical, and so occur on the same 'plane,' whereas the infinitist believes they are asymmetrical, and so involve an infinite number of levels. The former does not countenance a prior and posterior ordering of entities, whereas the latter does. Nāgārjuna often makes reference to symmetrical dependence relations, such as the mutual dependence of light and

darkness (*MMK* 7), fire and fuel (*MMK* 10), self and person-like components (*skandha*s) (*MMK* 18).[142]

The clearest articulation is found in *MMK* 8.12 – 8.13:

The agent, having depended upon an object, and the object, having depended upon that

agent, are produced. We see no other [way for] the establishment [of them].

Appropriation (*upādāna*) should be known so, thus from the renunciation of agent and

object. One should contemplate the remaining entities by [the example of] agent and

object.[143]

Candrakīrti, in commenting on the final line of these verses, adds the following:

Those other entities distinct from agent, object, appropriation and appropriator – the parent

and their offspring, the agent of movement and movement, the object of sight and seeing,

the characterised object and the characteristic, the produced object and the producer, plus

the part and the whole, the act of arriving and the one arriving, the quality and the one

qualified, the means of knowledge and the object of knowledge, and so on – having refuted

the self-sufficient (*svabhāva*) existence (*astitva*) of these, by the investigation of agent and

object, the wise, desirous for liberation, should contemplate, for the liberation from

bondage to birth, aging and death and so on, the mutually-dependent establishment [of

these entities].[144]

So symmetrical dependence is definitely admitted by the Madhyamaka. It seems the symmetrical

dependence goes hand in hand with an absence of an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) which marks an

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[142] At times it appears that Nāgārjuna is refuting mutual dependence (i.e. symmetrical dependence), but of course his target is the possibility of mutual dependence between entities that are taken to possess *svabhāva*.
[143] *pratītya kārakaḥ karma taṃ pratītya ca kārakam | karma pravartate, nānyatpaśyāmaḥ siddhikāraṇam || evaṃ vidyādupādānaṃ vyutsargāditi karmaṇaḥ | kartuśca karmakartṛbhyāṃ śeṣān bhāvān vibhāvayet ||* (189 – 190).
[144] *karmakārakopādeyopādātṛvyatiriktā ye 'nye bhāvā janyajanakagantṛgamanadraṣṭavyadarśanalakṣyalakṣaṇotpādyotpādakāḥ, tathā avayavāvayaviguṇaguṇipramāṇaprameyādayo niravaśeṣā bhāvāḥ, teṣāṃ kartṛkarmavicāreṇa svabhāvato 'stitvaṃ pratiṣidhya parasparāpekṣikīmeva siddhiṃ prājño nirmumukṣurjātijarāmaraṇādibandhanebhyo mokṣāya vibhāvayet ||* (190).

entity as self-sufficient. If entities are symmetrically dependent, then neither can possess intrinsic

nature, since intrinsic nature is incompatible with any form of dependence relation (see the earlier

discussion on fire and fuel). Whilst admitting symmetrical dependence, the Madhyamaka also holds

a strict commitment to irreflexivity, with examples of the knife that cannot cut itself, or light that

cannot illuminate itself. This requirement for irreflexivity appears to be a rejection of reflexivity for

immediate full grounds, and not for mediate partial grounds, as the examples demonstrate.

Transitivity, whilst clearly articulated in the Abhidharma systems, is not discussed in any focused

manner by Nāgārjuna, given the unsystematic structure of Madhyamaka argumentation.[145]

The next question to ask is whether the collection of entities is finite. If it is, then the Madhyamaka

depiction of reality falls in line with the coherentist picture. This is where the discussion of *prapañca*

and *vikalpa* seems fruitful. It seems to me that Nāgārjuna is simultaneously describing the

consequences of presupposing a foundationalist metaphysics, and justifying a holistic model for the

metaphysical structure of this reality. Integral to this account is that whilst defenders of grounding

relations are spurred on in their project by the belief that these explanatory dependence relations

and the ordering of reality are completely independent of epistemic agents, that is, mind-

independent, the Madhyamaka has no qualms with making the *project* of grounding itself one more

item in the vast interrelated web of interdependence. This means that the line between epistemic

agent and metaphysical structure becomes blurred. The metaphysical structure is not completely

mind-independent. This may give rise to the temptation of seeing the mind as the foundational level

from which all else derives, and yet this is not so, for the Madhyamaka is staunchly against an

ordering that places the mind as more fundamental, and it is this opposition that drives its disputes

with the Yogācāra school of Buddhism.[146] What we have instead is an indeterminate[147] web of

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[145] Aitken (2021: 3) believes that the commitment to irreflexivity should lead to a rejection of transitivity. I think this would stand if we do not make a distinction between mediate/partial and immediate/full grounds.
[146] See, for example, Candrakīrti's criticisms of the "mind-only" position in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* (Huntington Jr. and Wangchen 1989: 162 – 164).
[147] I follow Aitken (2021) in adopting the term "indeterminism" rather than "infinitism" when applied to Madhyamaka. Aitken (2021: 14) writes "the indefinitism of Madhyamaka dependence chains represents a kind

mutually dependent entities, one that grows based on the activity of epistemic agents, and then the epistemic agent reacts once more to this expanded web.[148] The activity is the pursuit towards locating a *svabhāva*, a source of being, the fundamental level of the world. But this pursuit, assuming a transmitter model of being, creates further branches of dependence. These branches continue splitting and splitting *ad infinitum*. Proponents of foundationalism view symmetrical dependence with suspicion as it threatens the strict ordering of reality – if entities are mutually dependent, neither is prior and more fundamental.[149] As such, they seek a further level upon which the entities that appear symmetrically dependent are both in fact dependent asymmetrically upon a third entity (see Barnes 2018: 62 – 63). But *svabhāva* is non-locatable, and so the chains of dependence grow and grow without termination once the process of seeking it is undertaken. Should one *realise* emptiness, that is, cognise the lack of *svabhāva* in any and every entity we encounter, then the activity of jumping from one link to another also ceases. To realise emptiness is to accept an indeterminately expanding holistic model of what is the interplay of metaphysical structure and epistemic agent. Though this may seem to posit a form of solipsism, the Buddhist claim that a belief in the locatability, and the pursuit of its locale, is a result of existential ignorance (that is, the ignorance that characterises the experience of reality by the naïve and unenlightened). It is therefore a shared experience (or illusion) for every being, excepting the enlightened.

This fusion of the infinitist and holistic goes some way towards explaining the plausibility of both interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought in recent scholarship. For example, Arnold (2010: 375), taking a non-terminating chain as his interpretation, writes:

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of *metaphysical* indeterminacy; the reality of the dividedness of a given object is settled only insofar as we have (mentally or physically) carried out the division. Epistemic and semantic indeterminacy may follow from this, but indefinitism is foremost a metaphysical claim." Whilst Aitken uses mereological dependence relations as her example, it can be applied to any attempt to ground a given entity.

[148] I should stress that neither the metaphysical structure nor the epistemic agent is prior, as the sentence implies. Whatever has *svabhāva* is prior, but since *svabhāva* isn't locatable, then neither the epistemic agent nor the metaphysical structure is prior.

[149] Of course there are ways to integrate foundationalism and coherentism (or at least a hierarchical structure whilst maintaining coherentism). See Swiderski (forthcoming).

But it is precisely the Madhyamaka point to emphasize that there is no exception to this rule; phenomena are dependently originated *all the way down*, and it is therefore impossible to specify precisely what it is upon which anything finally depends. Hence, there can be no set of "ultimately existent" things. [Emphasis mine].

When Westerhoff (2016: 361)[150] describes Madhyamaka as a consistent form of nihilism, he adopts an infinitist reading in response to the 'Source of Being' objection, writing:

[T]here is nothing to rule out an appearance that has another appearance as its source. So as long as the nihilist is happy to postulate appearances all the way down, and as long as his opponent has not established an argument that an *infinitely descending* sequence of appearances is inconsistent, there is no reason why our ability to identify sources of appearance should be considered to be particularly problematic for the nihilist. [Emphasis mine].

Or as Priest (2018: 130) writes of Madhyamaka: "In general it takes over the Abhidharma view, but simply rejects its foundationalism" meaning that it retains asymmetry, transitivity and irrelexivity, but has no commitment to foundationalism. In other words, it is an infinitist metaphysic.

Taking the coherentist approach, Walser (2005: 244) responds to Burton's criticism – what I am calling the 'Source of Being' objection – with the following:

Part of Burton's objection can be answered […] by the doctrine of reciprocal designation. *Rūpa* [form] and so forth are designated on the basis of *kārya/kāraṇa* [cause and effect]. But because these two are designated based on each other, like two sheaves of reeds leaning one against the other (to use a metaphor commonly associated with dependent-origination) there is no regress.

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150 It should be noted that Westerhoff (2016: 356) acknowledges the possibility of both an infinitist and coherentist reading of Madhyamaka.

Similarly Goodman (2016: 143) states:

> Objects of awareness depend for their existence on other objects, and on mental processes; mental processes depend for their existence on other mental processes, and on objects. In this interdependence, there is no asymmetry. To use a Buddhist term, objects and mental processes are *born together* (Skt. *sahaja*, Tib. *lhan cig skyes pa*).

Both paths of interpretation are appealing, and it may be possible to state that Madhyamaka is a hybrid system of some infinitist chains of dependence, and some holistic chains. But this is unsatisfactory, for there would need to be a means of distinguishing between when a chain is infinite and when it is circular. Yet there does not appear to be a way to do this when all entities are described as similarly empty. If all entities are empty, then why would some empty entities form an infinite chain of dependence, and other empty entities form an holistic chain of dependence? If we instead understand Madhyamaka as describing "reality" as the interdependence of all entities (including the interdependence of epistemic agent and metaphysical structure) resulting from emptiness, and the number of entities being indeterminate, continually expanding as we pursue a foundationalist metaphysics, but contracting when we pursue an holistic metaphysics, then there is a middle way that integrates infinitism and coherentism.

Having stated my interpretation, let us turn to some textual support. The goal of Madhyamaka is the cessation of proliferation (*prapañca*). The *maṅgalaśloka* (dedicatory verse) of the *MMK* is quite clear about this, as Nāgārjuna writes that the purpose of teaching dependent-origination is for "the auspicious cessation of proliferation [*prapañca*]."[151] I have adopted the neutral "proliferation" as a translation, but there are other significant senses: "expansion," "explanation," "manifoldness," and, just as interestingly, "appearance," "manifestation," and "illusion" (Apte 1957 – 1959: 1094). When placed in the Madhyamaka philosophical context, the sense of the term becomes more specialised.

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[151] *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaṃ prapañcopaśamaṃ śivam | deśayāmāsa saṃbuddhas taṃ vande vadatāṃ varam* (11).

As such, we have translations such as "hypostatization" (Siderits & Katsura 2013: 13, 202), "manifold of named things" (Sprung 1979: 33), and "conceptual proliferation" (Ruegg 2002: 99; Ñāṇananda 2012: 15 – 16).[152]

Closely associated with *prapañca* are the notions of *vikalpa* and *kalpanā*. Both derive from the root *kḷp*, which, when formed into a verb, carries the sense of fixing, fashioning or arranging (Monier-Williams 1899: 308). When formed into a noun, as in *kalpanā*, we have the additional senses of "invention," "imagination," "idea," and "fabrication" (Apte 1957 – 1959: 548). *Vikalpa*, by the addition of the *vi-* prefix which adds a sense of "division" and "distinction" (Apte 1957 – 1959: 1422), then takes the meaning of constructed division, a fabricated or imagined distinction. Within the Madhyamaka context, we have translations of *vikalpa* as "falsifying conceptualization" (Siderits & Katsura 2013: 202), "thought construction" (Sprung 1979: 183), "reified concepts" (Huntington and Wangchen 1989: 160). In what follows, I will adopt the translation "imaginary construction," in order to emphasise the interplay between *vikalpa* being the object (hence "imaginary") and the product (hence "construction") of perception.

The most extensive explication of these notions by Nāgārjuna is found in *MMK* 18.5, 18.7 and 18.9. The chapter concerns the relation between the notion of a self (*ātman*) and the *skandhas*, the latter being the fundamentals upon which the notion of a self depends, according to the Abhidharma. In typical fashion, Nāgārjuna posits their symmetrical dependence, which entails their lack of self-sufficiency (*svabhāva*), and therefore their lack of fundamentality. But given the importance to the Buddhist project of refuting the false notion of the self, and the relation of this refutation to the goal of the religious life, Nāgārjuna goes on to discuss the structure and expansion of the unsatisfactory world that is to be overcome. He writes:

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[152] Ñāṇananda analyses the correlating Pāli term (*papañca*) and its occurrence in Pāli texts, rather than the Sanskrit.

Liberation is from the destruction of actions and afflictions. Actions and afflictions are from imaginary construction (*vikalpa*). They [the imaginary constructions] are from proliferation (*prapañca*). But proliferation is obstructed in emptiness. (*MMK* 18.5).[153]

The nameable [object] is ceased when the field (*gocara*) of the mind is ceased. Indeed reality (*dharmatā*) is unoriginated and unobstructed, like Nirvana. (*MMK* 18.7).[154]

Pacified without dependence upon another, without proliferation by proliferations (*prapañcair aprapañcitam*), without imaginary construction (*nirvikalpa*), not manifold – that is the character of reality (*tattva*). (*MMK* 18.9).[155]

Liberation from the cycle of rebirths is the goal of the Buddhist life. The afflictions (*kleśa*s) are the states of mind, namely passion, hate and ignorance, which cause us to commit deeds (*karman*), which then produce the karmic results of keeping us within this cycle of rebirths. So far, the description is standard Abhidharma metaphysics. The Madhyamaka difference is to place both imaginary construction (*vikalpa*) and proliferation (*prapañca*) as further elements in the account of the sources of suffering. Our actions and afflictions are generated on the basis of *vikalpa* – the imagined construction of reality. This itself is generated by *prapañca*, the proliferating world. Realising emptiness is the means of obstructing this process of *prapañca*. Candrakīrti provides a more detailed explanation:

And the imaginary constructions (*vikalpāḥ*), from the repeated beginningless cycle of existence (*saṃsāra*), arise from the manifold proliferation (*prapañca*) characterised as knowing and the known, expression and referent, agent and object, cause and effect, pot,

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[153] *karmakleśakṣayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ / te prapañcāt prapañcas tu śūnyatāyāṃ nirudhyate* (349 – 350).

[154] *nivṛttam abhidhātavyaṃ nivṛttaś cittagocaraḥ / anutpannāniruddhā hi nirvāṇam iva dharmatā* (364).

[155] *aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcair aprapañcitam / nirvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam* (372).

cloth, diadem, chariot, form and experience, woman and man, the obtained and the unobtained, pleasure and suffering, fame and infamy, censure and praise.[156]

And this entire worldly proliferation (*prapañca*) is obstructed when, in emptiness, one sees the emptiness of *svabhāva* in everything.[157]

In explaining the method by which emptiness obstructs proliferation (*prapañca*), the description of *prapañca* is that of the object of perception that involves *svabhāva*, and one that leads to the experience of suffering in the cycle of rebirths:

Because surely when a thing (*vastu*) is so [i.e. empty], there would not be the net of proliferation (*prapañca*), as described, in perception. Having not perceived the blooming exquisite daughter of a barren woman, the impassioned does not enter the proliferated entity (*prapañca*), the object of that [perception]. And having not entered proliferation (*prapañca*), the object of that [perception], they would not enter into groundless imaginary construction (*vikalpa*). And having not entered the net of imagination (*kalpanā*) they do not produce the multitude of afflictions rooted in the belief in a self, from attachment to "I" and "mine." [...] Thus abiding in the perception of emptiness, even Yogins do not perceive all *skandhas*, *dhātus* and *āyatanas* [elements] with intrinsic nature (*svarūpa*). And not perceiving the intrinsic nature (*svarūpa*) of things, they do not enter proliferation (*prapañca*), the object of that [perception]. And having not entered proliferation, the object of that, they do not enter imaginary construction (*vikalpa*). And having not entered imaginary construction (*vikalpa*), they do not produce the multitude of afflictions rooted in the belief in a self by attachment to "I" and "mine". [...] Having entered emptiness characterised as the auspicious tranquilising of the entire proliferation as such, from which

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[156] *evaṃ tāvat karmakleśā vikalpataḥ pravartante | te ca vikalpāḥ anādimatsaṃsārābhyastād jñānajñeyavācyavācakakartṛkarmakaraṇakriyāghaṭapaṭamukuṭaratharūpavedanāstrīpuruṣalābhālābhasukha duḥkhayaśo 'yaśonindāpraśaṃsādilakṣaṇādvicitrātprapañcādupajāyate* (350).

[157] *sa cāyaṃ laukikaḥ prapañco niravaśeṣa śūnyatāyāṃ sarvasvabhāvaśūnyatādarśane sati nirudhyate* (350).

there is the destruction of the entire imagined net of proliferation (*kalpanā-jāla-prapañca*), and from the destruction of proliferation, [there is] the enclosing of imaginary construction (*vikalpa*), and by the enclosing of imaginary constructions (*vikalpa*), there is the cessation of actions and afflictions without remainder, and by the cessation of actions and afflictions, there is the cessation of birth, therefore just this emptiness, from being characterised by the cessation of all proliferation, it is called "Nirvana."[158]

The passage is of importance in that it concerns not only the metaphysics, but the soteriological outlook of Buddhist philosophy. We may, however, extract a number of relevant details. Firstly, that it is the perception of entities as possessing distinct natures which characterises proliferation (*prapañca*). What I have translated as "perception" (and associated terms) is the Sanskrit *upalambha*, which has the literal sense of "obtaining" or "seeking." *Prapañca* is the intentional object of perception when one is under the illusion of the possibility of locating an intrinsic nature in entities. It is the world as conceived and constructed by one ignorant of the true nature of entities. This is where one believes that an entity is either derivative, and that its derivative nature can eventually be sourced in an entity with an independent nature, or that the entity so perceived actually has an independent nature. Perceiving this *prapañca* – a world of entities conceived under a foundationalist picture – is what leads to *groundless* imaginary construction (*vikalpa*). Elsewhere this

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[158] *yasmātsati hi vastuna upalambhe syād yathoditaprapañcajālam | na hi anupalabhya vandhyāduhitaraṃ rūpalāvaṇyayauvanavatīṃ tadviṣayaṃ prapañcamavatārayanti rāgiṇaḥ | na ca anavatārya prapañcaṃ tadviṣayamayoniśo vikalpamavatārayanti | na ca anavatārya kalpanājālam ahaṃmametyabhiniveśāt satkāyadṛṣṭimūlakān kleśagaṇānutpādayanti | na ca anutpādya satkāyadṛṣṭayātmakān kleśagaṇān karmāṇi śubhāśubhāniñjyāni kurvanti | na ca akurvāṇāḥ karmāṇi jātijarāmaraṇaśokaparidevaduḥkhadaurmanasya[upāyāsādirūpaṃ] ekajālībhūtaṃ saṃsārakāntāramanubhavanti | evaṃ yogino 'pi śūnyatādarśanāvasthā niravaśeṣaskandhadhātvāyatanāni svarūpato nopalabhante | na ca anupalabhamānā vastusvarūpaṃ tadviṣayaṃ prapañcamavatārayanti | na ca anavatārya tadviṣayaṃ prapañcaṃ vikalpamavatārayanti | na ca anavatārya vikalpam ahaṃmametyabhiniveśāt satkāyadṛṣṭimūlakaṃ kleśagaṇamutpādayanti | na ca anutpādya satkāyadṛṣṭayādikaṃ kleśagaṇaṃ karmāṇi kurvanti | na ca akurvāṇāḥ jātijarāmaraṇākhyaṃ saṃsāramanubhavanti | tadevam aśeṣaprapañcopaśamaśivalakṣaṇām śūnyatāmāgamya yasmādaśeṣakalpanājālaprapañcavigamo bhavati, prapañcavigamācca vikalpanivṛttiḥ, vikalpanivṛttyā ca aśeṣakarmakleśanivṛtti, karmakleśanivṛttyā ca janmanivṛttiḥ, tasmāt śūnyataiva sarvaprapañcanivṛttilakṣaṇatvānnirvāṇamityucyate ||* (350 – 351).

imaginary construction is defined by Candrakīrti as "the wandering of the mind."[159] It is wandering

upon the "field of the mind" (*MMK* 18.7), that is, upon *prapañca*, the object of perception. It is the

rambling search for the fundamental sources of being that is, in fact, nothing more than imaginary

constructing. Proliferation (*prapañca*) is also associated with the realm of speech, in that when one

cognises a nature in an entity, it can then be named and mapped.[160] In this sense language is also

proliferation, for it causes the proliferation of entities. So, putting this all together, the object of

cognition by the ignorant who accept intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is the proliferated world

(*prapañca*). The proliferated world (*prapañca*) then becomes the object upon which cognition acts

when seeking the fundamental constituents, and by acting upon it (i.e. via *vikalpa*), it constructs

further proliferations (*prapañca*). Harris (1991: 18) has a similar understanding:

> *Prapañca* then is that activity of consciousness that leads us to the belief that we are
>
> isolated beings at large in an extended world of plurality. At its root *prapañca* is a
>
> dichotomising tendency which endlessly generates principles reliant on the relationship
>
> between identity (*ekatva*) and difference (*anyatva*). In other words, because of *prapañca*
>
> categories such as self, other, being, non-being, *nirvāṇa*, *saṃsāra*, subject, objects, etc.
>
> arise.

*Prapañca* is therefore dynamic. It is not a static ordering of reality, but a potentially fluctuating

indeterminate web of interdependent entities that expands when one pursues a self-sufficient

source of being (*svabhāva*). This process is reflected in the structure of Candarkīrti's commentary. A

number of the chapters open with an imaginary interlocutor suggesting that, where the posited

entities in the prior chapter failed to possess *svabhāva*, they must still derive their nature from the

entities of the current chapter, which possess *svabhāva*.[161] Thus we find in the opening of

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[159] *vikalpaścittapracāraḥ* (PSP 374).
[160] See PSP: "Indeed words are proliferation, causing the proliferation of objects" [*prapañco hi vāk, prapañcayati arthāniti kṛtvā* (373)].
[161] Admittedly this does not apply to every chapter. A number of them concern Buddhist scripture, which is itself considered source enough for the truth of a particular teaching. The issue then becomes one not only of

Candarkīrti's commentary on *MMK* 8, focusing on the notion of an agent and its object, which follows on from a chapter refuting the possibility of conditioned *dharma*s possessing *svabhāva*:

> Here it is said [by the opponent] – "the conditioned *dharmas*, consciousness and so on, from the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of [being] conditioned, do exist, because of the real existence of agent and object [which is] the cause of these.[162]

The indeterminate character of the illusory world is indicated in the early scriptural uses of *prapañca* in the Pāli canon (as *papañca*). Thus the erroneous suggested answers to the famous unanswerable questions (*avyākṛta*) of Buddhist tradition are described as something proliferated (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 7.54). This is the search for a ground upon which one may declare that the one who achieves Nirvana exists after their death, does not exist after their death, both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor does not exist. But since there is no ground, there cannot be a termination for this search once it is undertaken. It is indeterminate (*avyākṛta*).

In *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 35.248 we also have the following:

> These are all proliferations: 'I am', 'I am this', 'I will be', 'I will not be', 'I will have form', 'I will be formless', 'I will be percipient', 'I will be non-percipient', 'I will be neither percipient nor non-percipient.'

> (Translated by Bhikku Sujato (n.d.)).

Such declarations require, under the Madhyamaka understanding, a final ground. Since that ground is absent, these declarations will cause the further proliferation of entities that appear to fill the role, only to be seen as unsatisfactory when subjected to further analysis.

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philosophical analysis but also scriptural hermeneutics, as in *MMK* 4 (concerning *skandha*s) and *MMK* 5 (concerning *dhātu*s).

[162] *atrāha- vidyanta eva saṃskṛtasvabhāvato vijñānādayaḥ saṃskṛtā dharmāḥ, taddhetukakarmakārakasadbhāvāt* (180).

An objection to both the infinitist and coherentist models was that, if grounding is the mind-independent relation that backs (or is identical to) our explanations of reality, then since either non-terminating explanations, or circular explanations, are considered epistemically unsatisfactory, both models are insufficient in showing what backs our explanations. One response by infinitists and coherentists was to sharply distinguish between the metaphysical structure and our epistemic practices, and hold that there is no reason to believe that the latter should restrict the structure of the former – the structure of reality is not beholden to our practices. This response is not available to the Madhyamaka, since *prapañca* – the world – is both constructed by us and acts upon us due to existential ignorance.[163] As Lindtner (1987: 270 – 271) rightly points out:

> All conscious beings find themselves living in an extended world of plurality (*prapañca*) […] Now, from the common Buddhist outlook we cannot really distinguish between an 'objective' and 'subjective' world, we cannot really isolate 'facts' from 'judgments'. This is a most decisive point which should not be left out of account. For this reason *prapañca* also means *our* expansion of the world […]

The requirement that metaphysical structure and epistemic practice be distinguished, along with criticisms of foundationalism, is a means by which coherentists and infinitists may claim that their picture of reality is not only possible, but more theoretically virtuous than the alternative of metaphysical foundationalism (for reasons already discussed). If they are not distinguished, then the widespread intuition that a regressive or circular explanation is not an explanation at all is an argument against metaphysical structure being this way. Theoretical virtue is, of course, desirable in the Indian philosophical context,[164] yet it plays a secondary role to the soteriological goals of the religious enterprise. If the Madhyamaka admits circularity and regresses, due to the interdependence of metaphysical reality and the epistemic agent, this is acceptable if it remains

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[163] Note that this means the Madhyamaka account is not troubled by the issue of contamination raised by Swiderski (forthcoming: 7).

[164] We may cite the example of the general appeal to parsimony: one means by which Nāgārjuna refutes *svabhāva* is by showing it to be superfluous in explaining the origination of an entity.

consistent with Buddhist teaching. This is why the Madhyamaka are concerned with the correct

exposition of the Buddhist teaching of dependent-origination. Existential ignorance leads to

conceiving of the world in a manner incommensurate with dependent-origination. Analysis of this

ignorance highlights its error of supposing entities to be ultimately grounded. The ultimate truth

(*paramārtha-satya*) is the realisation of the universal dependence of entities, that is, the realisation

of the only conception of the world in which the Buddhist teaching of dependent-origination is

possible. I will have more to say on this when discussing epistemology and ethics, and so will not

dwell upon these concerns here.

The apparently fatal objection to the indeterminate holistic Madhyamaka picture is found in the

criticisms of those that call its philosophy nihilistic. Is the 'Source of Being' objection insurmountable

for Madhyamaka philosophy? We have seen that the 'Source of Being' objection presupposes a

foundationalist picture of metaphysics in which being is transmitted between entities along chains of

dependence. But other models are possible, and it seems that Madhyamaka philosophers may have

been aware of this without articulating it in a manner that is immediately apparent to our

contemporary philosophical language. What I have in mind is Nāgārjuna's discussion of existence

and non-existence in *MMK* 15. He writes in *MMK* 15.4 – 15.6:

> But from where is there an existent without it being from intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) or
>
> extrinsic nature (*parabhāva*)? Indeed an existent is possible when there is intrinsic nature
>
> and extrinsic nature.
>
> If there is impossibility of an existent, the non-existent is not even possible. Indeed people
>
> call the alteration of existence "non-existence".

Who perceive intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), extrinsic nature (*parabhāva*), existent, and non-existent, they do not see the reality (*tattva*) in the teaching of the Buddha.[165]

The question of answering whether a given entity ultimately exists or does not exist is only produced if one presupposes a foundationalist metaphysic, along with a transmission model of being. Both *svabhāva* and *parabhāva* have the foundationalist metaphysical view built into them. Existence is decided by finding whether a given entity is finally grounded in something that possesses *svabhāva*. For the Sarvāstivāda, an entity is either foundational, and so possesses *svabhāva*, or it possesses *parabhāva* – that is, it derives its nature from another entity, and this goes on until the chain ends in an entity that possesses *svabhāva*. This is especially important in considering the response to nihilism and the 'Source of Being' objection. For the Madhyamaka philosophers, the only way it would make sense to speak of there being *nothing* would be if it was possible to distinguish this *nothing* from *something*. That is, the question requires the possibility of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Since intrinsic nature cannot be located, no matter how far the analysis proceeds, there is no sense in the question – one may as well ask whether the colour blue is happy. As Candrakīrti explains:

Surely here, if something labelled an existent would later not exist, it would be a non-existent due to it being an alteration of this [existent state]. Indeed pots and so on, being displaced from their state of existing, attaining an alteration [from this state], exist in worldly discourse by the word expressing non-existence. But when these pots are not possible with the nature of an existent, then from where is there an alteration of the non-existing *svabhāva*s? From this there is not even the non-existent.[166]

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[165] *svabhāvaparabhāvābhyām ṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ / svabhāve parabhāve ca sati bhāvo hi sidhyati // bhāvasya ced aprasiddhir abhāvo naiva sidhyati / bhāvasya hy anyathābhāvam abhāvaṃ bruvate janāḥ // svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvam eva ca / ye paśyanti na paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāsane //* (266 – 267).

[166] *iha hi yadi bhāvo nāma kaścidabhaviṣyat, syāttasyānyathābhāvādabhāvaḥ | ghaṭādayo hi vartamānāvasthāyāḥ pracyutāḥ santaḥ anyathābhāvamāpannāḥ abhāvadhvanivācyā bhavanti loke | yadā tvamī ghaṭādayo bhāvarūpatvenaivāsiddhāḥ, tadā kuto 'vidyamānasvabhāvānāmanyathātvamiti | ataḥ abhāvo 'pi nāsti ||* (267).

A pot may be dependent upon its parts, or upon the further expanding chains of dependencies (say, linguistic practices, and therefore words and sounds, the aims of the speakers etc.), and yet the chain will never terminate. So it cannot qualify as an existent. But then alternative of a non-existent is not available either, for if one cannot locate *svabhāva* in any entity, then the lack of locating a *svabhāva* cannot be a mark of non-existence. Rather than follow the infinitist in positing an emergence model of being to answer the 'Source of Being' objection, the Madhyamaka undercuts the objection. As Harris (1991: 16) states:

> Being and non-being are only one pair of opposites which are inappropriate for use when talking of reality. The mind addicted to discursive thought (*vikalpa*) automatically generates such sets in its doomed attempt to describe reality.

What the Madhyamaka philosophy does instead is offer an account of the nature of entities that permits them to enter into dependence relations (i.e. allows the possibility of dependent-origination). This, in the end, is not a description of entities so much as it is an explanation of the structure of reality, a dynamic reality composed of the interaction of both metaphysical structure and epistemic agent.

A final point to consider is that where Swiderski (forthcoming) sees an objection to metaphysical holism in the fragility of such worlds, the Madhyamaka see an opportunity for Nirvana. The world as we experience it, conditioned by existential ignorance, is an illusion and a cause of suffering. The goal is to overcome this world. In Buddhist terms, the goal is the cessation of this world of suffering. If metaphysically holistic worlds are fragile, so much the better for the soteriological aims of Buddhism. When one entity collapses, so does the entire proliferated world of illusion. What this means is an end to the project of foundational grounding. As explained by Nāgārjuna (*MMK* 25.24ab):

The pacification of all perception (*upalambha*), the pacification of all proliferation

(*prapañca*), is peace.[167]


 It is the realisation of emptiness that will collapse the foundational picture, and with it, the manifold

objects which lead to further deeds which lead to further sufferings, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

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[167] *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivaḥ* (538).

# 6. Conclusion to Part I

Foundationalism has had an intuitive sway upon philosophy both in the Western and Indian traditions. The foundationalist sees the world as organised and ordered, whereby certain entities are derived from others, and where at the base level there stands independent entities – the foundational or fundamental level. This is most clearly articulated within the Indian Buddhist context by the Abhidharma outlook and ontological system. Central to their system is the notion of a *svabhāva*, an independent nature that marks the bearer as a fundamental element of reality. But there have been critics. The Madhyamaka school, founded by Nāgārjuna and further elaborated upon by Candrakīrti, rejected the notion of *svabhāva*, and with it the entire foundationalist picture. For centuries the Madhyamaka school was accused of nihilism, for in denying a foundational level there could be no ground of being. As a result, opponents held that the Madhyamaka admitted of global non-existence, and so was self-refuting. This objection is based upon the intuition that being must have a source (or sources), and all real entities ultimately derive their being from this source. Such an intuition has held for long periods in history, yet recent developments in the metaphysics of grounding have brought forward renewed criticisms of foundationalism, and offered the alternative models of metaphysical coherentism and metaphysical infinitism. Both of these provide a new framework within which Madhyamaka philosophy may be articulated. Both also provide responses to the 'Source of Being' objection that has plagued metaphysical anti-foundationalism from its earliest advocacy. Madhyamaka, when construed within the language of metaphysical grounding, yet sensitive to the intra-Buddhist dispute and Indian context, offers another model and another response to the 'Source of Being' objection. It is a view of reality as dynamic, holistic, and expandable without a point of termination, as expressed by the notions of proliferation (*prapañca*) and imaginary construction (*vikalpa*). It responds to the 'Source of Being' objection by questioning the possibility of locating the mark of existence in any entity – that is, of locating *svabhāva*. Without such a mark to distinguish existence and non-existence, the distinction itself becomes untenable.

The opponent must give up their foundationalism, characterised by an admittance of *svabhāva*, and

embrace a holistic model of reality. To do so is to realise the Madhyamaka goal of emptiness.

# Part II: Epistemology

# 7. Introduction to Part II

## 7.1.  The Issue of Interpretation

The study of epistemology in the classical Indian tradition exhibits a very particular form that has

come to be known as the *pramāṇa* theory. Of the early schools, it was the Nyāya that was most

associated with this sophisticated account of knowledge and justification. It was this same school

which Nāgārjuna criticises in his only text which focuses specifically on epistemic concerns – the

*Vigrahavyāvartanī* (*VV*). Within it, Nāgārjuna questions the very possibility of an account of

knowledge and justification structured in the manner of the *pramāṇa* theories.[168] Some (Mills 2018)

have come to conclude that Nāgārjuna's arguments are those of a sceptic. If my metaphysical

reading in Part I is correct, then Nāgārjuna cannot be a sceptic, for a sceptic would not endorse a

particular metaphysical position. In order to understand Nāgārjuna's philosophy, we must therefore

clarify what his Nyāya opponents took to be the grounds for knowledge, and what Nāgārjuna found

so objectionable about their approach. By doing this, we will come to find that the verses which

seem to suggest a sceptical reading should in fact be read as a refusal to engage on terms that imply

a metaphysical picture which Nāgārjuna does not support, to wit, metaphysical foundationalism. A

consideration of the technical baggage and philosophical connotations that come with the terms

"*pratijñā*" and "*dṛṣṭi*" also suggests the sceptical reading is misguided. By weakening the appeal of a

sceptical reading, the space is opened for my metaphysical reading as described in Part I.

## 7.2. Epistemic Regress and Foundationalism

Epistemology seeks answers to questions relating to knowledge. We may seek an answer to the

question of "what is knowledge?" and so aim to provide a definition of the concept, that is, an

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[168] However see Lindtner (1987: 70 – 71, fn. 110), where the opponent is taken to be a follower of the Abhidharma.

analysis of its constituents (i.e. knowledge = justified true belief).[169] We may ask a question about the sources of knowledge, whether it is to be derived from only sense-experience, *a priori* analysis, or a mixture of the two. This would include determining whether (and if so, how) memory or testimony are sources that generate knowledge. Then there is the ever-present sceptic who casts all possibility of knowledge into doubt. Epistemology can be seen as an attempt to refute this sceptic. Finally there is the structural question in which we ask whether all justified beliefs require a further justified belief as their justification, and if so, whether there is an end to this chain of justification in the form of a foundational basic belief (i.e. a self-justified belief – one that does not require a further justified belief as its justification). It is with this structural question that the issue of foundationalism (and anti-foundationalism) emerges.

Let us begin with a common understanding of knowledge, that of "justified true belief." If S believes *p*, and *p* happens to be true, but S has no justification for believing *p*, then our intuitions will say that S does not have knowledge. There is a sense in which the true belief must be justified. The notion of justification must then be elucidated. Once again, our intuition argues against a self-justified belief. Let us say that I believe William Faulkner to have worked on the screenplay for the 1946 film noir, *The Big Sleep*. If I am then asked *how* I know this, it is no justification to repeat the initial belief. I must provide a justification that takes the form of a distinct proposition, perhaps "His name appears in the opening credits for the film as writer of the screenplay" or "I read the fact in a biography of his life." This requirement for a distinct proposition operating as a justification for the proposition in question may be termed the "Principle of Inferential Justification" (Aiken 2011: 14, amended in square brackets):

> **The Principle of Inferential Justification** (**PIJ**): S is justified in holding that p only if (i) there is some [distinct] proposition, q, that S is justified in holding, and (ii) q provides S some supporting reason for p's truth.

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[169] Of course Gettier's famous examples throw into doubt this common definition. I assume the truth of the common definition in what follows, as it provides a helpful entry point to the Indian epistemological theories.

The problem, however, is now evident. An infinite regress looms, for now *q* must be justified by a distinct supporting reason, *r*, and then *r* must also be justified by a distinct supporting reason, and so on, and so on. This regress has, since the time of Aristotle,[170] often been deployed in argument to defend the thesis of foundationalism: that the regress terminates in foundational basic beliefs that do not require a separate justification. According to foundationalists, if this were not so, the inferential chain would either never terminate or would just loop back upon itself. All beliefs would be without justification. Since we all intuitively accept that we have knowledge (think of banal instances, such as the fact that I know the black liquid in my cup is coffee),the foundationalist claims that the only option is to conclude that we have foundational basic beliefs that are not in need of justification. In this way, the argument proceeds by process of elimination. It is held that neither a non-terminating chain of inferential beliefs, nor a circular one, can account for this knowledge. According to the foundationalist, knowledge requires justification, and justification must have a source. This source consists of the set of basic beliefs.

The paradigm example of a basic belief is the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes: "*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind." (Cottingham 2003: 17). We may reformulate this as the claim that, necessarily, a belief is basic if, when S believes that *p*, *p* is true. The importance of truth to the conception of justification (besides its requirement in the classical analysis of knowledge) is due to our cognitive status as beings whose beliefs do not automatically match up with the objective way of the world. It is this possibility of error that requires a possessor of knowledge to hold a justification for their belief. As Bonjour (1985: 7) puts it, "[w]e have no such immediate and unproblematic access to truth, and it is for this reason that justification comes into the picture." If all beliefs immediately attained truth, and we knew this to be the case, there would be no need for justification in the articulation of the concept of "knowledge," no asking for or providing reasons for beliefs. To have a belief would be the same as having knowledge. So, given that this is not the case, and given that justification is a means to truth, it appears that our

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[170] Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I.3 72b1–15

source of justification must have a more intimate relation to truth by which beliefs derived from this foundational belief can also lay claim to truth. It is for this reason that basic beliefs are often seen to require infallibility. Meeting this requirement, however, is no easy matter. Even self-referential beliefs, such as "I exist," are not so straightforward as to be considered infallible. Nietzsche (Kaufmann 2000: 213) criticises Descartes on this point, writing:

> When I analyze the process that is expressed in the sentence "I think," I find a whole series of daring assertions that would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove; for example, that it is *I* who think, that there must necessarily be something that thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause, that there is an "ego," and, finally, that it is already determined what is to be designated by thinking – that I *know* what thinking is. (16).

But even if Nietzsche is incorrect in taking the Cartesian deduction to involve a distinction between subject and activity (whether Descartes did or not, we can surely make the argument that the *cogito* at least proves that there is *some* thinking going on, whether or not there is an "I"), it is difficult to see how such a belief could ground the beliefs we take as instances of everyday knowledge. I seem to know that my appointment with the doctor is scheduled for 9:15am tomorrow, but how this is ultimately inferred from the infallible belief that "I exist" is difficult to track.[171]

Putting aside the *cogito*, we may consider other potential candidates for basic beliefs. One appealing candidate is the type of beliefs that refer to one's mental states. The argument for this qualifying as an infallible belief is that if one believes they are in pain, then it seems that one *must* be in pain, and so we have the case of a belief that, in being believed, is in fact the case – it is necessarily true when

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[171] The Cartesian approach is not, of course, to derive our everyday beliefs in this manner but instead to prove God's existence. With God's existence proven, his goodness will ensure that we possess the ability to have true beliefs, as Descartes writes in the Fourth Meditation: "And since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty [of judgement] which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly." (Cottingham 2003: 37 – 38). Descartes' proof of God was, however, immediately criticised for its circularity – see the selection of objections found in Cottingham (2003: 102 – 106).

believed. But there is an issue with this approach (Bonjour 1985: 27; Armstrong 1968: 106 – 107). Take the belief "I am in pain." The state of affairs in which one holds this belief is distinct to the state of affairs in which one is, *in fact*, in pain. It is possible that the belief is held when the pain has passed. The line between pain, discomfort and slight irritation is not always clear. If the distinction between these states of affairs was not maintained, it would not be possible to remark "I believed I was in pain, but I guess the painkillers had kicked in by then." So long as it is conceded that *p* and the belief in *p* are two separate states of affairs, the holding of the belief does not entail the truth of the content of the belief. One cannot have an infallible belief of the kind posited by this variety of foundationalism.[172]

If we lower the requirement such that infallibility is not a measure of basic beliefs, but instead a basic belief may be fallible while still maintaining enough justification to be a source of justification for other beliefs, we reach the position Bonjour (1985: 26) calls "moderate foundationalism."[173] He identifies a fatal problem for such an account. A basic belief under this account has a certain level of justification (though not infallible), and this may be construed as a property or feature of the belief. The account also holds that beliefs having this feature are highly likely to be true. The argument of the moderate foundationalist then runs as follows (Bonjour 1985: 31):

(1) B has feature $\varphi$.

(2) Beliefs having feature $\varphi$ are highly likely to be true.

Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.

The issue is that both of these premises must be satisfied in order for the conclusion to follow, and yet this undermines the status of a belief as basic. B, in the above argument, is held to be basic, and

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[172] Bonjour (1985: 26 – 27) refers to the kind of foundationalism that requires the basic beliefs to be infallible as strong foundationalism.

[173] Bonjour (1985: 28) also refers to "weak foundationalism," which holds that the noninferential justification of a basic belief is not sufficient alone, and instead requires something in addition in order to meet the adequate-justification requirement: coherence with other beliefs (28). He argues that weak foundationalism would also be vulnerable to his criticisms aimed at moderate foundationalism.

may have an adequate level of justification (φ). But in order to know what the relevance of φ is, one must also know (2). Therefore B is not basic, since it is reliant on (2) for its justification as basic. Perhaps we might think that the belief contained in (2) can be the basic belief. But then this shifts the content of (2) into the place of B in the above argument. This is in effect saying that "the belief that 'beliefs having feature φ are highly likely to be true' has feature φ." It merely prompts the question "but what is the relevance of φ?"

An alternative option is to forego the possibility of basic *beliefs* and instead find some other source of justification for beliefs. In this way the source, let us call it *x*, provides justification for beliefs but since it is not a belief in itself, it does not require justification. The requirement for justification seems to apply only to beliefs. They are the sort of things to which we ask "but what is your reason for *believing* that?" Instead one may posit some non-belief that acts as foundation – rather than call it a basic belief, we may call it a basic justification. The most intuitive example of this kind of justification will likely be our sense-experiences – the phenomenon of redness, etc. – what C.I. Lewis (1929), a proponent of such a view, referred to as "qualia." These qualia are the basis of justification for a basic belief, but by being something other than a belief, they themselves do not require justification. These qualia fill the role of the "Given" in an account of epistemology, and it is this "Given" which has been so forcefully attacked as being nothing more than a myth by Sellars (1956), and more recently by Bonjour (1985) and McDowell (1994). The essential thrust of criticism against the notion of a Given is this: if something is to act as justification, it must in some way be related to our beliefs. If it is related to our beliefs, it must have conceptual content. If it has conceptual content, then it must itself have the same structure as a belief. In this case it is difficult to see why it should be exempt from a requirement of justification. But if it is held to be completely free of conceptual content, it is hard to see how it could fulfil its role as justification. Furthermore, justification is an explanation, and an explanation must have content. As Bonjour (1985: 78) explains, "it is one and the same feature of a cognitive state, namely, its assertive or at least representational content, which both enables it to confer justification on other states and also creates the need for it

to be itself justified – thus making it impossible in principle to separate these two aspects." Either the Given and beliefs are just such distinct kinds of things that the former type of thing cannot serve as justification for the latter, or the former type of thing can fulfil this function but only at the cost of it then itself requiring justification.

With all this said, there is an assumption in these criticisms. The notion of justification required for these criticisms involves the idea that justification is something internal to the epistemic agent. If the property of justification belongs to beliefs, then justification is something available to the agent (as beliefs). Additionally, justification as being grounded in qualia, in "the Given," is something by definition available to the agent. But this tendency to conceive of justification as something internal to the epistemic agent – that is, the view of internalism – may not be necessary to an adequate account of knowledge. The view that justification is in fact something external, and need not be something consciously available to this agent, has been proposed by Goldman (1967; 1979; 1986), and, more recently, by Williamson (2000). But it was a position also formulated and defended within classical Indian philosophical discourse. Let us then turn to epistemology as it was formulated in classical India – the *pramāṇa* theory – and its greatest proponents: the Nyāya school.

# 8. Nyāya and the *Pramāṇa* Theory

## 8.1. Nyāya and its Relationship to Vaiśeṣika

As with most of the Indian philosophical schools, the Nyāya traces its heritage back to a key text: the *Nyāya Sūtra* (NS), attributed to Akṣapāda Gautama. Dating is once again inconclusive, and yet, interestingly, the final redaction of the *NS* is held to be close to the date of Nāgārjuna's epistemic critique, the *VV*, due to the fact that the former responds to points presented in the latter (Matilal 1977: 78; Matilal 1986: xiv; Potter 1995: 4). This would place it approximately in the 2nd century AD. Two commentaries on this sūtra are of significant import in elucidating the characteristically terse verses of the medium – the *Nyāyabhāṣya* (*NBh*) of Vātsāyana (450 – 500 AD) and the *Nyāyavārttika* (*NV*) of Uddyotakara (7th century AD).[174] The Nyāya school continues to flourish (as do the other schools discussed previously), and many significant and influential commentaries have been written since Uddyotakara; however to extend the scope of the present discussion so broadly would be counter-productive to my focus. In the manner by which I restricted my consideration of Madhyamaka texts to those up to and including the works of Candrakīrti, likewise I shall restrict the consideration of Nyāya texts to those up to and including the works of Uddyotakara (who happens to have been writing around the time of Candrakīrti). Indian philosophy, spanning centuries in continuous development, is a complex affair, and each innovation brings with it new concerns, terminology and responses. To push too far beyond the founding texts would be to concern ourselves with particulars which may be far removed from the broad intentions of the founders.

Before moving on to the philosophy, a note should be made regarding another Indian philosophical school to which the Nyāya was seen as complimentary: the Vaiśeṣika school. Whereas the Nyāya

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[174] See Potter (1995: 239) for a brief note on the dating of Vātsāyana, and again Potter (1995: 303) for the dating of Uddyotakara. It should also be noted that Uddyotakara's *Nyāyavārttika* is a commentary on the *Nyāyabhāṣya* of Vātsāyana, rather than a direct commentary upon the *Nyāya Sūtra* (a commentary upon a commentary – more the norm than the exception in Indian philosophical writings!), although given the stylistic tendency of commentaries, this merely provides a richer discussion of the initial text (see Coseru (2018) for a discussion on the commentary form of philosophy in India).

concerns itself with epistemology and logic, the Vaiśeṣika were primarily concerned with metaphysics and ontology. The founding text of this school is the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* (*VS*) of Kaṇāda, the final redaction of which is likely earlier than the *NS* or *VV*, being dated by Potter (1995: 211) to around 50 – 150 AD. Rather unusually, the most influential Vaiśeṣika text following *VS* is not a commentary, but instead a systematic philosophical elucidation of the doctrines of the school – the *Padārthadharmasaṃgraha* (*PDhS*) of Praśastapāda, dated to 400 – 550 AD (Matilal 1986: xiv). Where the Nyāya is concerned with how we come to know the objects of knowledge, it has little to say on what those specific objects are. This is the job of the Vaiśeṣika and their ontological categorisation of reality.

## 8.2. Cognitive Episode vs. Belief

The Vaiśeṣika basis for Nyāya epistemology can be appreciated with reference to the bearers of justification. The dominant trend in the Western tradition is to treat beliefs as the bearers of the property of justification, and by having a belief with justification, the holder of the belief is justified (and then if true, that belief counts as knowledge). Justified beliefs, once attained, can be held for long periods, if not indefinitely (of course, true beliefs without a justification may also be held for long periods of time, but their lack of justification indicates that they were never instances of knowledge in the first place, perhaps instead being nothing more than 'hopeful' beliefs, etc.). This is captured by our verbal metaphors (at least in English), when we say that we *hold* a belief.[175]

The Vaiśeṣika metaphysic has no such notion. It consists of six (later seven) ontological categories: substances (*dravya*), qualities (*guṇa*), activities (*karma*), universals (*sāmānya*), individuators (*viśeṣa*) and inherence (*samavāya*).[176] Later Vaiśeṣika philosophers added absence i.e. non-existence

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[175] Compare with Plato's *Meno* [97a – 98a], as noted by Matilal (1986: 103) and Burton (1999: 130).
[176] *dravyaguṇakarmasāmānyaviśeṣasamavāyānām ṣaṇṇām padārthānām sādharmyavaidharmyatattvajñānam niḥśreyasahetuḥ* (*PDhS*: 6). [Translation: A true understanding of the

(*abhāva*). For present purposes, only the first two categories – substance and quality – are relevant.[177] For the Vaiśeṣika, a quality must inhere in a substance.[178] Mental episodes are qualities, consisting of six kinds: cognition, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion and effort. They inhere in a substance that is the enduring permanent self (*ātman*),[179] described by Vātsyāyana as the "perceiver of everything [i.e. of everything that counts as an object of knowledge], enjoyer of everything, cogniser of everything, experiencer of everything."[180] The mental qualities come to inhere in the *ātman* by way of the internal sense-organ, often translated as "mind" (*manas*), which synthesises the inputs of the various external sense-organs into a single cognition for the *ātman*.[181] What is of particular importance here is that these mental qualities, unlike substances, are taken to be fleeting.[182] Therefore, a true cognition, once obtained, is gone. It is an occurrent and not some timeless proposition towards which we have an attitude. It is not beliefs that are held (i.e. "standing beliefs") that are considered to have justification, or a truth-value, but occurrent cognitions. How a cognition is caused is the basis of its justification (I shall return to this in a moment).

There may be a fear that placing evanescent cognitions in the role of bearer of truth-values and justification may lead to each cognition's content or structure being a private affair and not inter-subjectively available. This, however, can be addressed by referring to the intentional structure of these cognitions (Matilal 1986: 117). As Praśastapāda writes, "and these (i.e. cognitions) are many

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similarities and differences of the six categories – substance, quality, activity, universal, individuator and inherence – is the cause [*hetu*] of final beatitude (i.e. the religious goal)].

[177] See Potter (1995) for a brilliant overview of these categories. See also Bartley (2015: 121 – 134). Halbfass (1992) provides a full study of the categories, with many refences to Praśastapāda's works.

[178] *rūpādīnāṃ guṇānāṃ sarveṣāṃ guṇatvābhisambandho dravyāśritatvam nirguṇatvam niṣkriyatvam* (*PDhS*: 64). [Translation: Of all qualities – such as colour and so on – is a connection to the universal "qualityhood," dependence upon a substance, being without a quality itself, and being without an activity].

[179] *tasya guṇāḥ buddhisukhaduhkhecchādveṣaprayatnadharmādharmasaṃskārasaṃkhyāparimāṇapṛthaktvasamyogavibhāgā-ḥ* (*PDhS*: 70). [Translation: the qualities of this (i.e. *ātman*) are knowledge, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, virtue, vice, mental traces, number, size, separateness, conjunction, disjunction].

[180] *tatrātmā sarvasya draṣṭā sarvasya bhoktā sarvajñaḥ sarvānubhāvī* (23).

[181] See *NS* 1.1.16, and the *NBh* (28). See also Potter (1995: 93 – 94).

[182] See *NS* 3.2.1 – 3, *NBh* (158 - 161) and *NV* (376 – 383). Potter (1995: 125) explains the reasoning: "Consider our judgment [i.e. cognition] of an arrow in flight. Since […] motions are momentary, and these motions are the proper contents of the judgments [i.e. cognitions] whose series constitutes knowledge of an arrow's motion, it follows that these judgments [i.e. cognitions] each are momentary too."

forms, from the innumerability of objects and from [a cognition] being connected with each [relevant] object."[183] The content and structure of a cognition is determined by its objects, and the latter are categorised according to the ontology of Vaiśeṣika. This ontology follows strict rules (such as a quality being that which inheres in a substance, yet does not itself bear another quality). By doing so, it allows separate individually held cognitions to share a structure – this being the arrangement of the different elements that go into the content of the cognition. This structure will then permit cognitions, even as temporary qualities, to provide a basis for logically valid inferences. If a cognition has a structure of "the quality of red inheres in this pot," we may also then infer that "the universal redness inheres in this pot," since under Vaiśeṣika ontology, a universal inheres in a quality (that is, in a non-repeatable qualia – see Potter (1995: 112) and Halbfass (1992: 122)), and the quality inheres in a substance, so that if the quality of redness is present in a substance, then the universal must also be present there. Or, to use the frequent example, if one cognises smoke on a hill, and one recalls the relationship between smoke and fire from a prior cognition, one may infer that there is fire on the hill. We may also note that for the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the role of "standing beliefs" is fulfilled by memory (Phillips 2012: 7), the latter being a disposition produced by a prior occurrent cognition. This disposition would lead to the production of a new occurrent cognition (when conditions satisfy) in the likeness of the prior one, perhaps with the added form of being aware that it is a recollection. This seems to better capture certain intuitions of our claims to knowledge, such as when one seemingly forgets the answer to a question (say, a quiz) but, on being told the answer, recalls having previously known this to be the case and is more irritated than if one had never known the answer at all previously.[184]

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[183] *sā cānekaprakārārthānantyātpratyarthaniyatatvācca* (*PDhS*: 172).

[184] Phillips (2012: 7) also acknowledges the strengths of opting for cognition rather than belief as the possessor of justification, writing: "There seems to me to be the advantage of parsimony in talk of cognitions rather than beliefs. For cognitions are immediately introspectable properties of a person and something such seems uneliminable, whereas beliefs seem otiose once we have cognitions and the dispositional properties they etch in memory."

## 8.3. *Pramā* and *Pramāṇa*

So much for cognitions as the type of thing to bear justification. Of course, not all cognitions are instances of knowledge.[185] As Matilal (1986: 141) states, "[k]nowledge-ness consists in its truth-hitting character, and not in its indubitability or in its constructive character." The relation between truth and justification is tightly interwoven for the Nyāya. If a cognitive episode is truth-hitting, it is an instance of *pramā*, but the only way for a cognition to be truth-hitting is for it to be obtained by way of a reliable source (*pramāṇa*).[186] This intimacy between truth and justification stems from the causal account of cognition found in Nyāya – a cognition is an effect, and so a cognition's truth is tied to the manner in which it arose.[187] The fact that a cognitive episode is a *pramā* is just as much a result of its being by way of a *pramāṇa* as it is by way of it being truth-hitting. I shall come to discussing the *pramāṇa* in a moment, though it is important to keep the relation between *pramā* and *pramāṇa* in mind. What is meant by truth-hitting is that (i) the cognition accords with the state of affairs which it mirrors (these being some arrangement of the ontological categories),[188] and (ii) that it leads to successful activity (*arthavat*).

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[185] *tasyāḥ satyapy anekavidhatve samāsato dve vidhe vidyā cāvidyā ceti* (*PDhS*: 172). [Translation: Of these (cognitions), though many kinds exist, concisely, (they are in) two kinds – "knowledge" and "non-knowledge"].

[186] The etymology is quite evident here: *mā* = measure; *pramā* = a correct measure (i.e. knowledge); *pramāṇa* = instrument of measuring correctly (i.e. source of knowledge); prameya = something to be measured. See Matilal (1986: 35 – 36) and *NBh* 1.1.1 (1).

[187] This may raise the issue of how erroneous cognition is possible. The Nyāya explanation of error is often by way of referring to a disruption in the normal causal process of cognition. Obvious examples are where lighting is bad, or the visual sense-organ is impaired. Another example of a disruption in the normal causal process of cognition is the Nyāya theory of "misplacement" (*anyathākhyāti*). Here, the causal process involved in the generation of a cognition may also trigger memory, and the memory then leads to an incorrect ascription of one property (derived from memory) being applied to the present object that is being perceived (and lack the remembered property). The error of perceiving a rope as a snake is therefore explained by the object causing the memory of previous perception of snakes which then affects the resulting perceptual cognition. The resulting cognition takes the form of perceiving the object as possessing "snake-ness." But since the cognition did not derive from the contact of object and sense-organ, but was mediated somewhat by memory, it is not derived from a reliable source. See Matilal (1986: 201 – 208) and Phillips (2012: 41 – 44) for more on Nyāya theories of erroneous perception.

[188] See *PDhS*: 186 – 189.

These characteristics of *pramā* point to the Nyāya tendency to conflate the nature of truth with the criterion of truth. [189] Where the nature of truth is that which explains what truth is, the criterion of truth is that which lets us know the measure by which a given cognition is known to be true. The nature question asks "what is truth?" and the criterion question asks "how do we know that *x* is true?" It seems that the Nyāya support a correspondence theory of truth in answering the nature question. The criterion is being arrived at via a *pramāṇa*, and also, as Vātsyāyana states, "a *pramāṇa* is useful (*arthavat*), (as known) from successful activity when an object is apprehended by a *pramāṇa*."[190] Regardless of the finer details of a Nyāya theory of truth, and which of these "marks of truth" is primary (if any of these are), the truth of a cognition consists in its having these three marks – corresponding to reality, leading to successful activity, and being produced by a *pramāṇa*. The intimate relation between truth and *pramāṇa* indicates the distinctive notion of justification at work in the Nyāya epistemology.

Justification is provided by means of ascertaining whether a given cognition was obtained through a *pramāṇa*. If it was obtained by a *pramāṇa*, then it is a justified cognition. Different schools offer different accounts of the valid *pramāṇas*. For the Nyāya, there are four *pramāṇa*: perception, inference, analogy and testimony.[191] Of these, perception is the most fundamental, in that knowledge derived from the other three *pramāṇas* can only take place on the basis of prior knowledge obtained via perception (for example, in the case of inferring the existence of fire from the presence of smoke, the general rule "wherever there is smoke, there is fire" is derived from prior perceptions, not to mention the requirement for the current perception of smoke). Perception is defined as "a cognition that is produced from contact between the sense-organ and object,"[192] and from this we can see that the account of justification in the Nyāya school is causal and externalist – it

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[189] As Potter (1995: 155) states: "It may be helpful to distinguish at the outset between two questions: (1) What is the criterion of truth? and (2) What is the nature of truth? I say it may be helpful, because it is difficult to make out that any such distinction is consistently adhered to by our philosophers [i.e. the Nyāya philosophers] […]" (text added in square brackets).
[190] *pramaṇato 'rthapratipattau pravṛttisāmarthyād arthavat pramāṇam* (*NBh*: 1).
[191] *pratyakṣānumānopamānaśabdāḥ pramāṇāni* (*NS* 1.1.3).
[192] "*indriyārthasannikarṣottpannaṃ jñānam* […]" (*NS* 1.1.4).

does not matter what is in the mind of the knower, other than the fact that the causal sequence by which the cognition originated is without any flaws (for example, that the sense-organ is diseased). In this way, the Nyāya does not require a knower to be able to provide justification in the form of an explanation for their cognition to count as a case of knowledge. A knower need not know that she knows. Of course, a knower may, subsequent to the true cognition, then take that cognition as its object and obtain a further cognition of the truth of the first cognition, but this is not necessary. What matters here is that the ascription of knowledge in Nyāya does not have epistemic internalist presuppositions.

If we return to Bonjour's criticism of moderate foundationalism, we find the Nyāya able to respond. Bonjour claims that one cannot have a basic (i.e. foundational) belief, since one knows a belief is basic on the basis of it holding a property, but then the knower must also know that beliefs which hold this property are likely to be true, leading to the former belief being dependent upon the latter belief and no longer basic, in the sense of being without need of justification. For the Nyāya, the knower need not be aware of the latter belief. It is enough for the epistemic agent to have obtained a cognition that has the said property (let us say, the property of being obtained through a *pramāṇa*) in order for the agent to have knowledge.

The foundationalism of the Nyāya does not concern beliefs. There are no basic beliefs from which the rest of our knowledge is inferred. The Nyāya foundationalism instead concerns the instruments of knowledge, that is, the *pramāṇas*. The *pramāṇas* are the foundations. If there is to be a critique of foundationalism in Indian epistemology, it must be a critique of the role of *pramāṇas*. By placing the function of justification within a causal process, one also places epistemology within the sphere of metaphysics – that is, if we treat knowledge as something that involves the causal relations between external objects and sense-faculties, then our account of knowledge will be heavily influenced by our account of the metaphysical structure of reality. Let us then consider Nāgārjuna's critique of the *pramāṇa* outlook.

# 9. The Madhyamaka Critique of *Pramāṇa*

## 9.1. The Basic Structure of Nāgārjuna's Regress Argument

The Nyāya epistemological theory's combination of cognition and *pramāṇa* appears to avoid the criticisms of foundationalism that depend upon internalist presuppositions. The foundation is not a basic belief, but instead a type of means of obtaining knowledge. The knower need not know that they know, and so the requirements by which a subject is said to have knowledge are less stringent. But the position is not without problems, and Nāgārjuna presents a robust criticism of the Nyāya foundationalism in his *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (*VV*). The crux of the criticism is raised in verse 31:

> And if the establishment of these objects is by means of the *pramāṇas*, state how there is the establishment of these *pramāṇas*.[193]

If the means by which we determine whether a given cognition is a case of knowledge is its being produced by a *pramāṇa*, we are still left to wonder how these *pramāṇas* are themselves established as being the correct means of knowledge. There are a number of possible responses available to the Naiyāyika: (1) the *pramāṇas* are established by other *pramāṇas*, (2) the *pramāṇas* are not in need of establishment, (3) the *pramāṇas* are self-established, (4) the *pramāṇas* are established by the objects, (5) the *pramāṇas* and objects mutually establish one another.[194] (1) – (3) involve an establishment that limits reference to *pramāṇas* only, whereas (4) – (5) involve referring to the objects of knowledge (the *prameyas*). The former is sometimes referred to as "intrinsic establishment," and the latter "extrinsic establishment." Let us take each in turn.

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[193] *yadi ca pramāṇatas teṣāṃ teṣāṃ prasiddhir arthānām / teṣāṃ punaḥ prasiddhiṃ brūhi kathaṃ teṣāṃ pramāṇānāṃ* (272).
[194] See Siderits (1980: 310) for a helpful breakdown of the various options addressed by Nāgārjuna.

## 9.2. Against Intrinsic Establishment of *Pramāṇas*

The establishment of *pramāṇas* by other *pramāṇas* is somewhat vague – it may apply to tokens (e.g. this particular instance of perception is established by reference to that other particular instance of perception), or it may apply to types (e.g. all instances of inference are established by instances of perception). In any case, Nāgārjuna's criticism is damaging to both forms. He writes:

> If the establishment of *pramāṇas* is by means of other *pramāṇas*, there would be an infinite regress. Then there would not be the establishment of either the beginning, middle or end.[195]

The regress is obvious – if an instance of inference is held to be a valid means of knowledge (i.e. a *pramāṇa*) by reference to an instance of perception, then how is it determined that perception is a valid means to arriving at knowledge? The epistemic process of justification cannot begin, and so the end result of a true cognition – a *pramā* – is also unestablished. Later Nyāya philosophers[196] try to avoid this consequence by way of reference to our epistemic practice – we do not seek bedrock justification for any claim, we only seek justification insofar as our cognition has been called into doubt by our inability to obtain what we are seeking whilst taking the given cognition as true.[197] For example, we may have a cognition of water in a desert, and we come to doubt this when we are unable to satisfy our thirst. We then subject our epistemic process to criticism, realise that all of the conditions for the production of a mirage are in place, and come to treat the cognition as false. We do not go further and question whether the perception of our whole external world is similarly a mirage, for this has no relevance in obtaining what we are seeking – we were seeking water, found the mirage unsatisfactory for quenching thirst, and then moved on. The doubt also presupposed some certainty (for example, the certainty that I desire water, or the certainty of perceiving the

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[195] *anyaiḥ yadi pramāṇaiḥ pramāṇasidhir bhavaty anavasthā syān / nādeḥ siddhis tatrāsti naiva madhyasya nāntasya* (274).
[196] Siderits (1980: 311) refers to Udayana as offering such a response. The seeds of such an approach can be found in NS 2.1.20.
[197] See Burton (1999: 158 – 160) for a similar argument.

desert), and so universal scepticism is refuted. But for all its ingenuity, this argument only explains our epistemic practice, *not* whether a given cognition is true in reflecting the external world. Whether we do or do not seek bedrock justification for any given cognition does not prevent the possibility that whatever we do, we may be mistaken at the root (Westerhoff 2010: 71). Nāgārjuna's criticism remains standing.

A second option for the Nyāya is to argue that the *pramāṇas*, by their very nature as instruments of knowledge, are without need of justification. They are just the kind of thing that provides justification without itself requiring it. Such an argument would hold it to be definitional that a *pramāṇa* does not need to be justified. Nāgārjuna's response contains two elements:

> If the establishment of these [*pramāṇas*] is without [reliance on] *pramāṇas*, [your] doctrine is abandoned. And [as there is] an inequality in this, the cause of difference is to be stated.[198]

Nāgārjuna's own commentary on the verse elaborates:

> If you think the establishment of these *pramāṇas* is without *pramāṇas*, and the establishment of the objects of knowledge is by *pramāṇas*, when so, the doctrine of yours that "objects are established by means of the *pramāṇas*" is abandoned and there is an inequality - some objects are established by means of the *pramāṇas* and some are not, and the cause of the difference is to be stated. By what reason are some of these objects established by *pramāṇas* and others not? And that [reason for the difference] is not specified, therefore this supposition is unproven.[199]

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[198] *teṣām atha pramāṇair vinā prasiddhiḥ vihīyate vādaḥ / vaiṣamikatvaṃ tasmin viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyaḥ* (276).

[199] *atha manyase teṣāṃ pramāṇānāṃ vinā pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ prameyānāṃ punar arthānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhir iti | evaṃ sati yas te vādaḥ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhir arthānām iti hīyate vaiṣamikatvañ ca bhavati | keṣāñcit | arthānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ keṣāñcin neti viśeṣahetuś ca vaktavyaḥ | yena hetunā keṣāṃcid arthānāṃ pramāṇaiḥ prasiddhiḥ keṣāñcin neti | sā ca nopadiṣṭaḥ tasmād iyam api kalpanā nopapanneti |* (276).

Holding that the *pramāṇas* do not require justification undermines the whole Nyāya project, an outlook which believes that everything that exists is knowable and nameable. Not only this, but the Nyāya epistemology is both comprehensive and detailed, listing the number of *pramāṇas*, their scope, their function within a syllogism, and so on. Believing that the *pramāṇas* do not stand in need of justification is tantamount to isolating them from analysis, and yet the Nyāya would not be content with such an approach and rightly so. We would not be satisfied with an account of knowing which argues that our cognitions, if doubtful, require justification, and then relies on some arbitrary presupposition without justification. A further criticism is that if this position is held, then there must be some account of why the objects of knowledge are ascertained through a *pramāṇa*, but the *pramāṇas* themselves are not. Such an explanation is not provided, and further, should it be provided, this would open the possibility of doubt about how this is known of the *pramāṇas* if it is not known through *pramāṇas*, and we return to the issue of inconsistency or regress. The second option, therefore, is an unsatisfactory response to Nāgārjuna's initial criticism.

We come, therefore, to the third option. This is the view that the *pramāṇas* are self-established. This appears to be the position of Gautama in the *NS*[200], although by the time of Vātsyāyana's *NBh* the position alters so that *pramāṇas* are established by means of other *pramāṇas*, in the way by which a subsequent perception establishes the prior perception. Of course, this would be susceptible to Nāgārjuna's previously discussed criticism. The initial Nyāya adherence to the claim that the *pramāṇas* are self-established may account for Nāgārjuna devoting six verses (v. 34 – 39) of his short treatise to criticising the position. Returning to the *NS*, we find that the self-establishment of the *pramāṇas* is argued on the basis of an analogy, as stated in *NS* 2.1.19:

> No [the criticisms against the establishment of the *pramāṇas* do not hold], because the
>
> establishment of these is like establishment by lamplight.[201]

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[200] See Bhattacharya, Johnston & Kunst (1998: 116 fn. 2).
[201] *na pradīpaprakāśasiddhivattatsiddheḥ* (70).

The *NS* argues that just as a lamp illuminates itself as well as its objects, just so do the *pramāṇas* establish themselves as well as the objects of knowledge. They are self-establishing. The use of an analogy to make the point is characteristic of Indian philosophy, where a syllogism will deploy an example (*dṛṣṭānta/udāharaṇa*) as support for a thesis (the characteristic example being the example of a kitchen to support the claim that where there is smoke, there is fire).[202] The light analogy seeks to provide a counter-example to the principle of anti-reflexivity. If a counter-example is provided, then it is possible that a lit lamp may not be the only thing that is self-reflexive. Since the principle of anti-reflexivity will no longer hold, there must be an alternative argument against self-establishment of the *pramāṇas*. Now I think modern inclination would have us believe that the best response to this light analogy is in fact to argue against the applicability of the comparison. But Nāgārjuna opts to accept that the *pramāṇas* are analogous to the light of a lamp, but then argues that fire does not illuminate itself. We have seen these arguments already deployed in the *MMK*, and so I shall briefly recapitulate them here:

1. For something to be illuminated, it must also be possible for it to be in a state where it is not illuminated. The possibility of illumination presupposes a prior state of non-illumination. A pot can be illuminated since when it is in darkness, it is not illuminated. A fire never exists in an unilluminated state (*VV* 34).

2. If an entity can act upon itself, then all of its properties must be self-reflexive. But fire does not burn itself (i.e. it is not its own fuel), even though it burns other entities. Therefore fire does not illuminate itself either (*VV* 35).

3. If fire illuminates itself and other entities, then it must be the case that every entity's nature acts upon itself. Just as fire, characterised as that which illuminates, illuminates itself, just so will darkness, characterised as that which conceals, conceal itself. But if this is the case, then darkness would never be perceived. Darkness is perceived, and so it

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[202] See *NBh* (4 – 5), *NV* (14), Potter (1995: 180 – 181, 199), Matilal (1986: 75 – 78), and Siderits (2007: 95 – 97).

cannot be the case that an entity's nature acts upon itself (i.e. light illuminates itself) (*VV* 36).

4. If illumination is the nature of fire, and the destruction of darkness is the nature of illumination, then if fire is to illuminate itself, there must be some darkness within fire on which the illumination is to act upon by destroying it. But there is no darkness located where fire is located, and so there can be no illumination there either (*VV* 37).

5. If the opponent argues that fire does illuminate itself, but only at the moment of fire coming into existence, Nāgārjuna argues that this is not possible. Light and darkness are mutually exclusive properties and cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Accordingly, there cannot be contact between light and darkness. Therefore light cannot illuminate the darkness that occupied the space now occupied by the fire (*VV 38*).

6. If it is argued that light can illuminate darkness without contact (i.e. without occupying the same space), then since there is no restriction on the scope of light, the fire in one location should be able to dispel darkness in all the world (*VV* 39).

Some of these arguments are stronger than others, with (2) seeming the weakest. It is hard to see why all properties of an entity must act in the same way (i.e. be self-reflexive if one property is self-reflexive).[203] But even the stronger arguments, namely those concerned with illumination as the nature of fire/light, have been criticised. Both Matilal (1986: 58 – 59) and Burton (1999: 161, 166 – 172) believe that Nāgārjuna has been bewitched by language, with the former writing "the agent-action-patient distinction may be an arbitrary linguistic device and not an ontologically significant one." (Matilal 1986: 59). The point is that Nāgārjuna treats the single event of an illumination as divided into three elements – the agent of illumination (i.e. the light), the act (i.e. illumination) and the patient (i.e. the illuminated object). For the critics of Nāgārjuna, to say that "light illuminates itself" is simply to say that "there is light." In addition to this, as Burton (1999: 166) points out, the verb "illuminate" may be taken to have the sense of "making manifest" or "making evident," and so

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[203] See Burton (1999: 166 – 167).

the point of the analogy is that just as light is made evident by the illumination of objects, just so are the *pramāṇas* made evident by the very fact that the objects of knowledge are evident. I do not think, however, that this counter-argument will work. One has presupposed objects of knowledge in the definition, where these are only to be known to be correctly cognised by the very instruments that stand in need of establishment. For all we know, the cognitions we take to be true may in fact be mistaken. The arbiter of whether they are correct should be the *pramāṇas*. We cannot infer the validity of the *pramāṇas* from the fact that we have what *appear* to be correct cognitions. The *pramāṇas* are not simply instruments of cognition; they are instruments of *correct* cognition. Unless we know that our cognitions are correct, we cannot know that their revelation is due to the *pramāṇas*. But the only means of determining whether they are correct is by recourse to the *pramāṇas*, which at present stand in need of establishment.

A similar point seems implicit in Nāgārjuna's final broad criticism of any attempt to establish *pramāṇas* independently of the objects of knowledge. He writes (*VV* 31 – 32):

> And if there is the establishment of *pramāṇas* intrinsically, they would be without dependence on the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*). There is the establishment of *pramāṇas*, for [intrinsic] establishment is surely without dependence on another.[204]

> [Commentary:] And if you think the *pramāṇas* are intrinsically established like fire, there will be the establishment of the *pramāṇas* even without relying upon the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*). How so? Indeed what is reliant on another is not intrinsically [established]. And what is not intrinsically established is reliant [on another].[205]

> […]

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Indeed if there is the establishment of *pramāṇas* without reliance on the objects of knowledge, there would be *pramāṇas* without objects of knowledge, then of what would these be the *pramāṇas*?[206]

[Commentary:] If there is the establishment of *pramāṇas* without reliance on the objects of knowledge, these *pramāṇas* would be the *pramāṇas* of nothing. That [argument for intrinsic establishment] is faulty. And *pramāṇas* are [measures of something]. But the *pramāṇas* are not so [measures of something] when they are not reliant on the objects of knowledge.[207]

The class of instruments known as the *pramāṇas* is always a measure of something. The attempt to establish their validity without reference to that "something" (the object of knowledge) is to miss their purpose – their validity is dependent upon correctly cognising their objects. Burton (1999: 175 – 177) incorrectly, I think, takes Nāgārjuna to be equivocating between two senses of establish – (i) "establish" in the sense of "validate," and (ii) "establish" in the sense of "attest existence." He thinks that Nāgārjuna merely proves that a true cognition is dependent for its existence upon its object, purely from the intentional structure of a knowledge-episode, but that this cannot then be used to show that a true cognition's validity is dependent upon the object of knowledge. But again, the question is how we know that a cognition is a true cognition, or how we know that the *pramāṇas* are in fact correct instruments, and not pseudo-instruments of correct cognition. Westerhoff (2010: 81) makes this point by comparing alternative epistemic practices, such as reading tea leaves or tossing a coin.[208] There must be some way to differentiate which epistemic practices are conducive to correct cognition (such as the four adopted by the Nyāya) and which are not (such as reading tea leaves). This method of differentiating is by way of the objects – it is the objects which determine whether a given cognition is correct or not. There is nothing in the intrinsic make-up of the *pramāṇa*

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[206] *anāpeksā hi prameyān arthān yadi te pramāṇasaṃsiddhiḥ / bhavati na bhavanti kasyacid evam imāni pramāṇāni* (286).

[207] *yadi prameyān arthān anapekṣya siddhir bhavati pramāṇānām iti | tānīmāni pramāṇāni na kasyacit pramāṇāni bhavanti | evaṃ doṣaḥ || atha kasyacit bhavanti prāmāṇāni | naivedānīm anapekṣya prameyān arthān pramāṇāni bhavanti* (286).

[208] See also Siderits (1980: 314 – 215).

that can fulfil this function. It would be like trying to determine which glue is the best at sticking

objects together purely by looking at the intrinsic features of glue (Westerhoff 2010: 82) without

reference to the objects that are to be glued.[209] The validity is dependent upon the object.

## 9.3. Against Extrinsic Establishment of *Pramāṇas*

Following this attack on any attempt at intrinsic establishment of the *pramāṇas*, the final two

attempts at answering Nāgārjuna's initial charge of infinite regress are made with reference to the

*prameyas*, that is, the objects of knowledge. Here the *pramāṇas* are not intrinsically validated, but

rely on something falling outside of the class of *pramāṇas* for their establishment.[210] Such an

approach leads to an inverse of the original order of dependence – it was initially held that the

*pramāṇas* are the foundational sources of knowledge, and now we find they require reference to

objects of knowledge. If this is so, the objects of knowledge are now prior to the *pramāṇas*, and in

this way provide for the validation of the *pramāṇas*. The objects become foundational in the

epistemic theory. To this, Nāgārjuna writes (*VV* 42 – 44):

> If it is thought that the establishment of these [*pramāṇas*] is dependent [upon the objects]
>
> what is the fault here? [The fault is that] there would be the establishing of the established.
>
> Indeed, the unestablished is not reliant on another.[211]

> Indeed if the *pramāṇas* are in all cases established with reference to the objects of
>
> knowledge, there is the establishment of the objects of knowledge even without reference
>
> to the *pramāṇas*.[212]

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[209] See Westerhoff (2009: 172 – 173) for a similar argument relating to can-openers.

[210] The light analogy is normally understood to be an argument to the effect that the *pramāṇas* are intrinsically validated. As I have argued, however, I believe that attempts to bypass Nāgārjuna's arguments by recent scholars end up introducing a reliance on the object of knowledge. Either the analogy is taken literally and discredited, or, if it is taken metaphorically, it is subject to the additional criticism discussed.

[211] *atha matam apekṣa siddhis teṣām iti atra bhavati ko doṣaḥ / siddhasya na sādhanaṃ syān nāsiddho pekṣate hy anyat* (288).

And if there is the establishment of the objects of knowledge even without reference to the *pramāṇas*, what is gained by the establishment of the *pramāṇas*, when the object is [already] established?[213]

The point here is that if the objects of knowledge are to provide the validation for the *pramāṇas*, they must be ascertained to be objects of *knowledge* (*prameya*) before they can perform that role, which would then require them having been cognised by means of already established *pramāṇas* (for this is how we know them to be *prameyas* – objects of knowledge). Since the *pramāṇas* would already have been established in order to ascertain the objects of knowledge, the use of the objects of knowledge to validate the *pramāṇas* would be superfluous. If, however, the opponent decides to maintain the objects of knowledge as prior in establishment, then the *pramāṇas* become superfluous – the objects are already established as objects of knowledge, what need is there then for an instrument that establishes a given object as an object of knowledge?

The strategy pursued by Nāgārjuna here is comparable to the "Problem of the Criterion" as notably outlined by Chisholm (1989: 6):

We may distinguish two very general questions. These are "*What* do we know?" and "How are we to decide, in any particular case, *whether* we know?" The first of these may also be put by asking "What is the *extent* of our knowledge?" and the second by asking, "What are the *criteria* of knowing?"

The problem follows from the inability of answering one of the questions without presupposing an answer to the other (which, for an epistemic theory, is undesirable, given that one is seeking a comprehensive account of knowledge, and not conjecture). We either begin with a set of beliefs which we take to be true, and on this basis then extract a set of instruments that lead to us arriving

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[212] *sidhyanti hi prameyāṇy apekṣya yadi sarvathā pramāṇāni / bhavanti prameyasiddhir anapekṣyaiva pramāṇāni* (288).

[213] *yadi ca prameyasiddhir anapekṣaiva bhavati pramāṇāni / kinte pramāṇasiddhyā tāni yad arthaṃ prasiddhaṃ tata* (290).

at such beliefs. These instruments then become our criteria for a given belief counting as knowledge. Alternatively, we presuppose the validity of certain instruments, and then from this determine which of our beliefs count as knowledge. The method is circular – we cannot begin our epistemic project without an assumed answer to one of these questions. This assumption acts as a foundation for the remainder of the theory, and yet an epistemic theory should not be reliant on an assumption if it is to provide an account of *knowledge*. One possible response is that of reflective equilibrium – that is, we enter with a certain answer to one of these questions, but only hold it as provisional. Over time, with observation and reflection, we come to adjust either the beliefs we hold to be cases of knowledge, or the instruments of obtaining knowledge we claim to be valid. I shall return to this possibility when discussing the case of mutual dependence of *pramāṇas* and *prameyas* (with which it seems a natural fit).

In *VV* 45, Nāgārjuna raises the issue that should the *pramāṇas* be established by the *prameyas*, then the *prameyas* become the measures of validity (that is, they become *pramāṇas*) and what were referred to as the *pramāṇas* become the objects of knowledge, i.e. the *prameyas*.[214] Nāgārjuna doesn't add much to this criticism, and the Nyāya have more to say in defence of the harmlessness of such a consequence. Vātsyāyana writes (*NBh*):

> The terms "*pramāṇa*" and "*prameya*" arise by the applicability of the term [to its context], from the authority of the reason for the appellation. The establishment of the [object of] knowledge is the reason for the appellation *pramāṇa* and the object of knowledge is called the *prameya*. And when the object of knowledge is the establisher of some knowledge, then that one object is described as "*pramāṇa*" and "*prameya.*"[215]

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[214] *atha tu pramāṇasiddhir bhavaty apekṣyaiva te prameyāṇi / vyatyaya evaṃ sati te dhruvaṃ pramāṇaprameyāṇām* (290).
[215] *pramāṇaṃ prameyam iti ca samākhyā samāveśena vartate samākhyānimittavaśāt/ samākhyānimittaṃ tūpalabdhisādhanaṃ pramāṇam upalabdhiviṣayaś ca prameyam iti/ yadā ca upalabdhiviṣayaḥ kvacid upalabdhisādhanaṃ bhavati tadā pramāṇaṃ prameyam iti caiko 'rtho 'bhidhīyate* (68).

So certain entities may act as *pramāṇas* in certain contexts, and objects of knowledge in other contexts. Gautama, in the *NS*, provides the example of a set of weighing scales as an analogy.[216] A scale's purpose is as a measuring instrument. But, in certain circumstances, we may wish to measure the instrument to make sure it is providing an accurate reading. In this case, we place a fixed known weight on the scales, and see if the scales give the correct measurement. In this instance, the scale has become the object, and the fixed weight the instrument of measurement. Similarly a *pramāṇa* may become a *prameya* in certain circumstances. Nāgārjuna's criticism in *VV* 45 seems to rely on the impossibility of a single object having different roles at different times. In defence of this possibility, Vātsyāyana makes reference to the grammatical *kāraka* theory, where a single object may stand in the various roles indicated by its possible case endings.[217] Thus, the very same tree can be both the agent of a verb ("the ground was shaded *by* the tree"), and the object of a verb ("the monkey looked *at* the tree"). According to Vātsyāyana, philosophers like Nāgārjuna are mistaken in thinking each case-ending indicates a distinct entity, which themselves are distinct from the entity designated by the verb in a given scenario.[218] But even if this response is accepted,[219] it is still susceptible to earlier criticisms. Let us say that a *pramāṇa* may act as a *prameya* in certain circumstances. When it does act as a *prameya*, then we require some other *pramāṇa* to measure its validity. In the case of measuring a measuring scale, we use a fixed *known* weight. How is it known? Perhaps by another scale (i.e. another *pramāṇa*). But how then is this second *pramāṇa* validated? We return to the initial problem of the regress.

A final strategy for the *pramāṇa* theorist is to argue that both the *pramāṇas* and their objects mutually establish one another. In response to this, Nāgārjuna writes (*VV* 46 – 48):

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[216] *prameyā ca tulāprāmāṇyavat* (68).

[217] *tathā ca kārakaśabdā nimittavaśāt samāveśena vartanta iti* (69) [Translation: "and therefore the case-endings occur by application from the authority of the reason (i.e. the context for its application)"]. See also Matilal (1986: 60 – 61) for a discussion of this point.

[218] Note that this same reasoning could apply to the light analogy discussed earlier.

[219] The issue is complex, and involves considerations of metaphysics (such as the Buddhist position of radical momentariness), ontology, philosophy of language etc.

If the establishment of the object of knowledge (*prameya*) is by the establishment of the

*pramāṇas*, and the establishment of the *pramāṇas* is by the establishment of the objects of

knowledge, then there is not the establishment of either of these.[220]

Surely if the objects of knowledge are established by the *pramāṇas*, and these [*pramāṇas*]

are established by just these objects of knowledge, how will they [i.e. the *pramāṇas*]

establish these [i.e. the objects of knowledge]?[221]

And if the *pramāṇas* are established by the objects of knowledge, and these objects of

knowledge are established by just these *pramāṇas*, how will they [the *prameyas* – objects of

knowledge] establish these [the *pramāṇas*].[222]

The criticism is that mutual dependence for establishment is no form of establishment at all. As

Westerhoff (2010: 85) remarks, "we have not grounded anything at all, but have just gone around in

a circle". There is, however, an intuitive feeling that such an account of knowledge is plausible, as I

mentioned previously with regard to the possibility of reflective equilibrium as a response to the

problem of the criterion. Perhaps we begin with a set of beliefs we consider as true, and then from

these we come to ascertain the methods by which we can justify these beliefs. These methods then

become our instruments. Perhaps, however, as our project continues, some of these beliefs we

considered as true come to be considered false by means of the development of our methods. And,

conversely, perhaps on the basis of certain collections of new beliefs, we come to refine or alter

those methods we thought were sure sources of acquiring knowledge. This would become a form of

coherentism – that is, a given cognition would count as knowledge if it cohered with other instances

that we hold to be cases of knowledge, and the methods by which we ascertain them. The Nyāya do

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[220] *atha te pramāṇasiddhyā prameyasiddhiḥ prameyasiddhyā ca / bhavati pramāṇasiddhiḥ nāsty ubhayasyāpi te siddhiḥ* (292).

[221] *sidhyanti hi pramāṇair yadi prameyāṇi tāni tair evā / sādhyāni ca prameyais tāni kathaṃ sādhayiṣyanti* (292).

[222] *sidhyanti ca prameyaiḥ yadi pramāṇāni tāni tair eva / sādhyāni ca prameyais tāni kathaṃ sādhayiṣyanti* (294). My translation follows Bhattacharya, Johnston and Kunst (1998: 20, 70), where *prameyais* is read as *pramāṇais*. Such a reading makes more sense of the points made in v. 46 and 47.

accept a limited level of coherentism in their account (Phillips 2012: 19). But this coherentism comes at a price, for the possibility remains that all of the initial stock of beliefs we take as evidence to begin with may be rejected as the process develops, and so our current epistemic process rests on false assumptions. It may also be the case that there are mutually incompatible accounts of our knowledge dependent upon the set of beliefs by which we begin the process. Since the initial set of beliefs are assumed to be knowledge, rather than known to be, there appears to be no way to adjudicate between competing accounts.[223] At the root of the problem, however, is that the purpose of the *pramāṇa* theory is to provide the foundation for knowledge. The final court of appeal on whether a given cognition is a case of knowledge or not is by ascertaining whether it has been arrived at through a *pramāṇa* (i.e. one of the four accepted sources of knowledge of the Nyāya school). This is the purpose of the *pramāṇa* project. Should there be mutual establishment of the *pramāṇas* and the objects of knowledge, then the *pramāṇa* no longer fulfil their intended function.[224] Both the *pramāṇas* and their objects are unestablished if establishment is measured by being arrived at via *pramāṇas*.

If, however, one rejects the claim that it is *only* via *pramāṇas* that knowledge is established, then an epistemic account based on mutual dependence becomes possible. I have already argued that the division between the cogniser and the cognised, the agent and the object, is blurred by Nāgārjuna by his understanding of emptiness. There is nothing that is the independent foundational source of the proliferation of the world, nothing that exists with *svabhāva*. Any attempt to propose such a foundation runs into contradictions and paradox. To this we can now add that neither the *pramāṇas* nor the *prameyas* exist with *svabhāva* – neither serves as the independent source of the validity of

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[223] See Siderits (1980: 316 – 319) and Westerhoff (2009: 173 – 177).

[224] Though I have not emphasised the point at present, it should be noted that the Nyāya are realists. They believe the *pramāṇas* give cognitive access to the mind-independent foundational constituents of the world. Accepting a coherentist account would also compromise their claim that *pramāṇas* provide access to these mind-independent entities (see Siderits 1980: 318 – 319). Since Nāgārjuna believes that both the world and the cogniser are derivative, that is, dependent, there is no risk in his accepting the mutual establishment of means and objects of knowledge.

the other. Having rejected the *pramāṇa* theory, we may now turn to whether Nāgārjuna has an

alternative account of knowledge or whether he is best described as a sceptic.

# 10. Against the Sceptical Reading

## 10.1 The Spectre of Scepticism

It is tempting on the basis of the arguments in the *VV* to read Nāgārjuna as a sceptic, namely, as someone who claims that one cannot have knowledge of anything. It is not surprising that scholars such as Matilal (1986) and, more recently, Mills (2018), have referred to Nāgārjuna as a sceptic. It is notable that both scholars think that the sense of "sceptic" should be expanded in order to accommodate Nāgārjuna, acknowledging the uneasy fit with other sceptical traditions (such as external-world scepticism, or Cartesian scepticism).[225]

The difficulty of interpretation arises from the apparent tension between two streams of Nāgārjuna's thought. On the one hand, Nāgārjuna makes claims that appear to be knowledge-claims, such as the statement that all things are empty of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).[226] Yet on the other hand, he also claims that he is not proposing a thesis (*pratijñā*) and that emptiness ought to lead to the abandonment of all views (*dṛṣṭi*).[227] Mills' (2018) sceptical interpretation attempts to make sense of this by presenting Nāgārjuna's philosophy as operating in two phases. The first phase is the advocacy of the position that all entities lack *svabhāva*. The second phase is then the claim that:

> [W]hile the thesis of emptiness undermines all philosophical views, it also undermines itself, thus leaving one without any views, theses, or positions whatsoever […] Nāgārjuna means to stop just where he does: with the purging of philosophical impulses; in other words, Nāgārjuna is a skeptic about philosophy."

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[225] Matilal (1986: 50) writes: "There may be objections against my use of the term 'scepticism' in connection with Nāgārjuna. […] By calling Nāgārjuna a sceptic, or rather by using his arguments to delineate the position of my sceptical opponent of the *pramāṇa* theorists, I have only proposed a probable extension of the application of the term 'scepticism'." Mills (2018: xxvi) writes: "I am asking readers to engage in substantial reconsideration of what most contemporary philosophers take skepticism to be." Mills does believe Nāgārjuna to share a sceptical outlook comparable to that of the Pyrrhonists. See Burton (1999: 19 – 43) for arguments against comparing Nāgārjuna to either Academic or Pyrrhonian Sceptics.

[226] I have discussed what I take to be the substance of this claim in Part I. Such statements are made, for example, in MMK 15.6, 18.9, 22.16 and 24.18.

[227] The former claim is contained in *VV* 29, the latter in MMK 13.8 and 27.30. I shall return to these positions shortly.

(Mills 2018: 35).

The sceptical reading therefore argues that phase one is merely a provisional position, one that it is eventually undermined in phase two. Phase two is held to be the real purpose of Nāgārjuna's statements. But this is not so clear. Even Mills (2018: 35 – 36) admits that the transition is not linear, and that Nāgārjuna is happy to switch back and forth between phases. Mills believes that statements reflecting phase two occur in especially significant moments of the text, such as in the introductory verse (*maṅgalaśloka*), the end of certain chapters and the end of the text as a whole. Yet a substantial bulk of the text, including the endings of chapters, are also concerned with arguing in line with phase one.[228] There is also the question of why the rejection of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) in particular is required in order to pave the way to scepticism. A refutation of the notion of intrinsic nature, or a defence of the teaching of dependent-origination, is not necessary for a sceptical position, and yet it appears as a core teaching advocated by Nāgārjuna.[229] The link between phase one and phase two is described by Mills (2018: 38 – 39) as:

> Emptiness is the lack of characteristics, so emptiness cannot, after analysis is complete, be a characteristic; it cannot have the characteristic of emptiness that would form the content of a view about emptiness – hence, the emptiness of emptiness.

The point appears to be that emptiness, in being an absence of a nature rather than some positive characterisation, is not a possible object of a view, since the view would be about nothing. In other words, any view held pertaining to emptiness would be without content. In this way, emptiness leads one to abandon all views, including the views encapsulated in phase one. I have argued in Part I that Nāgārjuna's arguments against intrinsic nature can be understood as a rejection of any independent foundational source for derivative entities. We can also understand this as the claim that all entities are, without exception, derivative. If my reading is plausible, it does not lead to

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[228] Such as MMK 8.13, 17.33 and 22.16. In addition to this, the bulk of the text is taken up with refuting *svabhāva* and *not* for arguing for a universal absence of a position.

[229] Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa's scepticism did not require the acceptance of emptiness, nor an explicit rejection of *svabhāva*, as a first step towards his scepticism. See Franco (1994).

scepticism – the link between phase one and phase two in Mills' formulation is not established. There is no reason why an acceptance of the derivative character of entities (or, more precisely, their emptiness) should lead one to abandon all views or theses, where these terms (*dṛṣṭi* and *pratijñā*) are understood in a non-technical way. I do believe Nāgārjuna to be sceptical in a limited sense – he is sceptical not of philosophy (or metaphysics) broadly understood, but of a *particular way* of doing philosophy, one that was perhaps so prevalent that to argue against it required a refusal to engage with it on its terms. Before looking more closely at this form of philosophy in order to understand Nāgārjuna's claim that he does not propose a *pratijñā*, and that emptiness leads to the abandonment of all *dṛṣṭi*, let us briefly recapitulate the core positive teaching of Madhyamaka – universal dependent-origination.

## 10.2 Emptiness is Dependent-Origination

The *VV* opens with a forceful objection to Nāgārjuna's philosophy:

> If a *svabhāva* is not found anywhere in any entities, your statement (*vacanam*) is without *svabhāva*, [and therefore] surely *svabhāva* is not to be refuted (by it).[230]

Similar criticisms follow, boiling down to the issue of whether Nāgārjuna's position is self-defeating (*VV* 2 – 4). If everything is empty, then so is Nāgārjuna's expression that all things are empty. If he denies that his statement is empty, then the statement "all things are empty" is obviously false. However, if his statement is empty, the opponent believes it cannot do the work of refuting *svabhāva*. What the opponent assumes here is that an entity's being empty is equivalent to its being non-existent.[231] Nāgārjuna admits that even his statement is without *svabhāva* (i.e. empty).[232] He

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[230] *sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaś cet / tvadvacanam asvabhāvaṃ na nivartayituma svabhāvam alaṃ* (216 – see also fn. 2).
[231] As seen here, the reading of Nāgārjuna as a nihilist is nothing new.
[232] *na svābhāvikam etad vākyaṃ tasmān na vādahānir me / nāsti ca vaiṣamikatvaṃ viśeṣahetuś ca na nigadyaḥ* (258). [Translation: "That (statement) is not said to possess a *svābhāva*, therefore there is no

also uses the term *vāda*, stating that he possesses one ("my *vāda*"). The term *vāda* may have a sense

of "speech" or a "statement," but can also mean something more substantial, such as a "theory" or

"doctrine" (see Apte 1957 – 1959: 1412), as well as "teachings". It is worth keeping this in mind as

we proceed.

Prior to Nāgārjuna's claim that his own statement is also empty, he elaborates on what is meant by

something's being empty in *VV* 22 and its commentary, explaining that emptiness does not mean

non-existence as the opponent assumes. His explanation here supports my metaphysical reading in

Part I, and shows that emptiness does not entail nihilism:

> And that by which entities are dependent, that is called emptiness, for a dependent entity
>
> surely does not possess intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).[233]

> [Commentary:] And you, having presupposed the meaning of the emptiness of entities,
>
> having not [actually] understood the meaning of emptiness, come to say there is [the
>
> following] fault [in my position]: "because of the emptiness of your speech (*vacana*),
>
> because of the lack of *svabhāva* of your speech, the refutation of the *svabhāva* of entities is
>
> not possible by speech (*vacana*) without *svabhāva* [because what does not have *svabhāva*
>
> does not exist, and so your speech does not exist]." [I reply:] Indeed, that which is the being
>
> (*bhāva*) of entities which are dependent, that is emptiness. How [are entities] without
>
> *svabhāva*? Surely entities dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpānna*) do not possess
>
> *svabhāva*. [That is] because of the absence of a *svabhāva*. [There is an absence of svabhāva]
>
> because of the non-existence of *svabhāva* in that which is dependent on causes and
>
> conditions. Surely if there were entities with *svabhāva*, they would be without causes and
>
> conditions. But entities are not so. Therefore lacking *svabhāva*, from being without

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abandonment of my view, and there is no inequality (between my statement and other entities), and reason
for a distinction to be declared."]
[233] *yaś ca pratītya bhāvānāṃ śūnyateti taṃ brū + + / yas tu pratītyabhāvo bhavati hi tasyāsvabhāvatvaṃ* (252
– see fn. 2). See also Bhattacharya, Johnston and Kunst (1998: 11, 55): *yaśca pratītyabhāvo bhāvānāṃ
śūnyateti sā proktā / yaśca pratītyabhāvo bhavati hi tasyāsvabhāvatvaṃ*.

*svabhāva*, they are named "empty". Just so is my speech. From being dependently-originated it is without *svabhāva*, [and] it is empty because it is without *svabhāva*. Thus [the meaning of emptiness] is demonstrated.[234]

Emptiness here is clearly equated with being dependently-originated, which itself is incompatible with an entity having *svabhāva*. So Nāgārjuna is here arguing that every entity is dependent – no entity exists independently to act as a source for other derivative entities. This includes the articulation of his claim – it is also dependent on various causes and conditions, rendering it empty. But in arguing that emptiness does not entail non-existence, Nāgārjuna proceeds to explain the efficacy of something that lacks *svabhāva*:

> And therefore the emptiness of *svabhāva* is from being dependently-originated. A chariot, cloth, pot and so on, in their respective functions are engaged in carrying away wood, carrying clay, carrying honey, water, and milk, undertaking protection from cold, wind or heat. Thus this speech of mine, without *svabhāva* due to being dependently originated, is engaged in proving the absence of *svabhāva* of conditioned entities.[235]

Chariots, cloth and pots are understood in the Abhidharma system as dependent upon their parts. Yet even as dependent, they have causal efficacy. They are not non-existent. Just as a pot carries honey, water and milk, whilst itself being dependent on its parts (and whatever else it is dependent upon), Nāgārjuna's claim is also causally efficacious. Emptiness is not non-existence. It is universal dependence. The claim that everything is dependently-originated *is* Nāgārjuna's position.

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[234] *śūnyatārthañ ca bhavān bhāvānām anavasamya śūnyatārtham ajñātvā pravṛtti upālambhaṃ vaktuṃ tvadvacanasya śūnyatvāt tvadvacanasya niḥsvabhāvatvād evaṃ tvadvacanena niḥsvabhāvena bhāvānāṃ svabhāvapratiṣedho nopapadyata iti | iha hi yaḥ pratītya bhavānāṃ bhāvaḥ sā śūnyatā | kasmān niḥsvabhāvatvāt | ye hi pratītyasamutpānnā bhāvās te sa sasvabhāvā bhavanti | svabhāvābhāvāt | tasmād dhetupratyayāpekṣatvāt | yadi hi svabhāvato bhāvā bhaveyuḥ | pratyākhyāyāpi hetupratyayāṃś ca bhaveyuḥ | na cevaṃ bhavanti | tasmān niḥsvabhāvāḥ niḥsvabhāvatvāc chūnyā ity abhidhīyante | evaṃ madīyam api vacanaṃ | pratītyasamutpannatvān niḥsvabhāvaṃ niḥsvabhāvatvāt śūnyam ity upapannam* (252).

[235] *yathā ca pratītyasamutpannatvāt svabhāvaśūnyāḥ | rathapaṭaghaṭādayaḥ sveṣu sveṣu kāryeṣu kāṣṭhāhaṇamṛttikaharaṇamadhūdakapayasāṃ dhāraṇā śītavātātapaparitrāṇaprabhṛtiṣu vartante | evam idaṃ madīyavacanaṃ pratyayasamutpannatvān niḥsvabhāvaṃ niḥsvabhāvatvaprasādhanaṃ pratyayabhāvānāṃ vartate* […] (254).

## 10.3. *VV* 29 and *Pratijñā*

Let us turn to the verse that appears to support a sceptical reading. In *VV* 4 (226), the opponent anticipates a response by Nāgārjuna and argues against it. The opponent has stated that by lacking *svabhāva*, Nāgārjuna's statement itself is unable to refute the claim that "all things possess *svabhāva*." Nāgārjuna could respond by saying that if *all* things lack *svabhāva* (understood as non-existence in the way the opponent assumes), then so does the opponent's statement, and so the opponent's statement is unable to refute emptiness. But the opponent states that it is Nāgārjuna's thesis (*pratijñā*) which is faulty. The opponent accepts that certain entities have *svabhāva*, including the statements which express their doctrines, and so their theses are not affected. In response to this, Nāgārjuna writes:

> If there was any thesis (*pratijñā*) of mine, then there would be a fault for me. But there is no thesis (*pratijñā*) of mine, therefore there is no fault for me.[236]

Mills (2018) refers to this verse in defence of his sceptical reading. Whilst the opponent argues that Nāgārjuna's thesis cannot be supported via a *pramāṇa*, Mills (2018: 36) writes that Nāgārjuna "responds that nobody can support a thesis with a means of knowledge, but at least he doesn't pretend to be supporting a philosophical thesis." It is interesting that Mills specifies that it is a "*philosophical* thesis" which Nāgārjuna is claiming not to have, since this is an indication of the technical baggage that comes with the term *pratijñā*. Before looking at this in more detail, it is worth covering Nāgārjuna's own commentary:

> And if I were to have some thesis (*pratijñā*), then [there would be] the preceding fault, from attaining the character of a thesis. If entities [are as] stated by you, then there would be [a fault] of mine, but there is not any thesis of mine. Therefore, when all entities are empty, perpetually pacified, isolated by nature, how will there be an attaining of the character of a

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[236] *yadi kācana pratijñā tatra syān na me tat eṣa me bhaved doṣaḥ / nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmān naivāsti me doṣaḥ* (268). I have followed Bhattacharya, Johnston and Kunst (1998: 14, 61) in order to make sense of the verse: *yadi kācana pratijñā tatra syānme tata eṣa me bhaveddoṣaḥ / nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmānnaivāsti me doṣaḥ*. This rendering of the verse is implied by the commentary.

thesis? How will there be the fault produced by attainment of the character of a thesis?

Therefore, what is stated by you when you say "the fault of yours is from attainment of the

character of a thesis," that is not so.[237]

According to the commentary, then, the fault attributed to Nāgārjuna is only applicable if his view is

taken to have the character of a thesis. There appear to be two methods for avoiding a sceptical

reading of this verse. One is by arguing against its relevance to characterising Nāgārjuna's overall

philosophy and by considering its specific uses within the debating norms and culture of the period

(Williams-Wyant 2017). In effect, this is to explain away the verse. A second approach is to

understand the metaphysical baggage that is involved in the term *pratijñā*, including its tacit

acceptance of *svabhāva* when a realm of mind-independent entities is accepted, as is implied by the

*pramāṇa* model. I read Nāgārjuna as adopting a certain semantic model in order to avoid this

baggage, but crucially one which follows rather than precedes his metaphysics. I will take each of

these approaches in turn.

First, we may consider whether it is possible to explain away the importance of *VV* 29. The term

*pratijñā* is the first stage in a five-membered inference as described in the *NS* (1.1.32).[238] It is defined

as "the specifying of what is to be proven (*sādhya*)." (*NS* 1.1.33).[239] Now the five-membered

inference had a particular function in the debating culture of classical India, which strictly defined

the formats for these debates. Of the three forms of debate, it is the *vāda* format that allowed only

the five-membered inference structure to disputes. The *vāda* form of debate is defined as one

"(where) proof is acquired by means of the *pramāṇa* and suppositional reasoning (*tarka*), where

there is conflict of positions, where the five-membered (inference) is deployed, and where there is

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[237] *yadi ca kācin mama pratijñā syāt tato mama pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptatvāt sa pūrvako doṣaḥ | yathā tvayoktaṃ bhāvāḥ tathā mama syān na ca mama kācid asti pratijñā | tasmāt sarvabhāveṣu śūnyeṣv atyantopaśānteṣu prakṛtiviviktēṣu kutaḥ pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptiḥ kutaḥ pratijñālakṣaṇatāprāptikṛto doṣaḥ | tatra yat bhavatoktaṃ pratijñālakṣaṇaprāptatvāt tavaiva doṣa iti tan nāsti* (268).

[238] *pratijñāhetūdāharaṇopanayanigamanāny avayavāḥ* (39) [Translation: "The components (of an inference) are the thesis (*pratijñā*), reason (*hetu*), example (*udāharaṇa*), application (*upanaya*) and conclusion (*nigamana*)"].

[239] *sādhyanirdeśaḥ pratijñā* (40).

consideration of theses and counter-theses." (*NS* 1.2.1).[240] In contrast to this format, we have a

format known as *jalpa* (*NS* 1.2.2) which involves questionable tactics, such as employing

equivocation or wearing down the opponent with irrelevant points of detail. The goal for

participants is to obtain victory by any means, and this format lacks the characteristic "good faith" of

a *vāda* debate. The final format, the *vitaṇḍā*, is defined as one in which a participant is "devoid of

(the aim of) establishing a counter-thesis" (*NS* 1.2.3).[241] Interestingly, the Madhyamaka philosophers

were often described as adopting the *vitaṇḍā* method.[242]

The legitimacy of adopting the *vitaṇḍā* approach is controversial. Vātsyāyana argues that it is

inconsistent, for there is always an implicit counter-thesis in a negation, even when the debater

adopts a *vitaṇḍā*-style approach.[243] The later development of the two forms of negation (*prasajya* vs

*paryudāsa*) show the weakness of his argument.[244] There is a difference between saying "there is a

non-tiger" and "there is not a tiger." The negation can apply either to the verb, in which case nothing

contrary is implied, or it may apply to the object of the verb, and then a contrary is indeed implied.

In the case of "there is a non-tiger," another entity is implied (whether that is a lion, a tree or

whatever). In the case of "there is not a tiger," there is nothing else asserted, nothing implied as

being the actual object of the verb. In a similar way, if Nāgārjuna is taken as operating in the *vitaṇḍā*-

style, he may only be refuting a position without this refutation implying a counter-thesis. His claim

that there is no *svabhāva* of entities is not equivalent to the claim that entities have a non-*svabhāva*

(i.e. a property that is not a *svabhāva*). His claim is that things are empty and lack *svabhāva*, which is

merely a negation of what the opponent assumes. In any case, the belief that the *vitaṇḍā* method is

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[240] *pramāṇatarkasādhanopālambhaḥ siddhāntāviruddhaḥ pañcāvayavopapannaḥ pakṣapratipakṣaparigraho vādaḥ* (49).

[241] *sa pratipakṣasthāpanāhīnovitaṇḍā* (51).

[242] Williams-Wyant (2017: 274) cites Stcherbatsky (1993: 29 fn. 1), in which the latter writes: "The term *vitaṇḍā*, in NS I.1.1., moreover, we probably must understand as meaning nothing else than the Mādhyamika-Prāsangika method of discussion; Śrīharṣa, Khaṇḍ. loc. cit., uses the term *vaitaṇḍika* as a synonym of Mādhyamika."

[243] *yad vai khalu tat parapratiṣedhalakṣaṇaṃ vākyaṃ sa vaitaṇḍikasya pakṣaḥ* (51).

[244] See Bartley (2005: 107 & 114) and Ruegg (2002: 19 – 24) on these two negations.

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illegitimate in a good faith debate was not universally held.[245] From such considerations, Williams-Wyant (2017) believes that Nāgārjuna's statement that he does not have a *pratijñā* should be seen in the context of the text of the *VV* operating under the *vitaṇḍā* format. The text begins with an opponent stating a thesis, namely, that if all entities lack a *svabhāva*, then even Nāgārjuna's statements must lack a *svabhāva*. Further theses follow. Then Nāgārjuna responds to these. He is not interested in presenting a position (the opponent has done that), he is simply interested in refuting the opponent. If the format is *vitaṇḍā*, then Nāgārjuna will have conceded defeat if he is to present his own thesis, by breaking the rules of the debating format. As these texts were written as resources for education and training (with philosophical texts especially having the back and forth debate format), it is not implausible that the inclusion of *VV* 29 is intended as a reminder to be cautious of such traps. As Williams-Wyant (2017: 274 – 275) argues, the *pratijñā* of the *VV* should not be seen as having the content of the *pratijñā* of the MMK. They are not aiming at the same end. The MMK contains Nāgārjuna's thesis. The VV contains his *vitaṇḍā*-style refutation of the opponent's theses.

There is some appeal to Williams-Wyant's reading. It is difficult to make a case for an interpretation built upon a single verse in a text of seventy verses (as the sceptical readings seems to do with *VV* 29). There is also the necessity for understanding the norms and culture of philosophical debate within the era in which the text was written. Even so, there is nothing to explicitly indicate the text is definitely written in the *vitaṇḍā* format. It may be the case that opponents read it as a *vitaṇḍā* argument, or, in the general dismissal of this format's benefit in arriving at truth, described Madhyamaka philosophers as proponents of *vitaṇḍā* as a helpful way to avoid debate and question the sincerity of their opponent.

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[245] It appears that *jalpa* was seen as the most problematic format, and *vitaṇḍa* seen as applicable in both good and bad faith debates. Matilal (1986: 87 – 88) writes that "some Gauḍa Naiyāyikas such as Sānātani talked about a fourfold classification of debate: (i) *vāda*, (ii) *vāda-vitaṇḍa*, (iii) *jalpa*, (iv) *jalpa-vitaṇḍa*, the first two being for the honest seekers after truth and the last for those proud people who intend to defeat others. Tricky devices are allowable therefore only in the last two and not in the first two."

I believe there is an alternative approach that complements the metaphysical interpretation I have

suggested in Part I. This approach is a development of the semantic interpretation put forward by

Siderits (2003, 2007, 2015). Rather than treat the semantic interpretation as an alternative to

metaphysical readings, I wish to adapt it in a way that follows from the metaphysical reading I have

proposed. Siderits argues that the best way to understand Nāgārjuna's position is not as a

metaphysical theory, but as a theory of truth (thereby rendering it a "semantic" interpretation). A

metaphysical reading has some conception of an ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) as distinct to

what is merely conventionally true (*saṃvṛti-satya*). A nihilistic interpretation, and an interpretation

of reality as ultimately ineffable are, in both cases, saying something about the ultimate nature of

reality. In this sense, they are both metaphysical. The semantic reading, however, understands the

purpose of Nāgārjuna's philosophy to be summed up by the phrase "the ultimate truth is that there

is no ultimate truth" (Siderits 2003: 11; 2007: 202). Whilst appearing on the surface as a paradoxical

statement, Siderits proceeds to disambiguate two sense of ultimate truth at play, (i) ultimate truth

as "a fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment," and (ii) ultimate truth as "a

statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality" (Siderits 2007:

202). Putting this all together, we may say that emptiness is the fact that there is no statement that

corresponds to or captures the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality, and that this fact must

be grasped to reach enlightenment. If such a reading is accepted, we can see why Nāgārjuna would

state that he has no *pratijñā*, if such a thesis is seen to accord with a supposed mind-independent

world. In this way, Nāgārjuna is not a sceptic – he is an anti-realist (here meaning someone who

believes the world is not mind-independent).

Now I agree with Siderits that Nāgārjuna rejects the possibility of a description of reality that is

mind-independent, but that this does not entail a rejection of certain metaphysical interpretations. I

believe Nāgārjuna rejects a metaphysical priority ordering of agent and world, means of knowledge

and objects of knowledge, cogniser and cognised, and so on, to prevent the conclusion that one side

of this relation is the independent producer of the other. To accept a mind-independent reality

would be to give mind-independent reality metaphysical priority and to grant it the position of the foundation for the generation of our knowledge (or as the generator of a truth-value for statements).[246] Another way of putting this is to say that Nāgārjuna rejects any description of the world that admits a place for independent foundations (i.e. entities with *svabhāva*) that act as the source for the emergence of other entities. The point in the absence of *svabhāva* is simply that one cannot locate an entity which can act as the independent source of other entities. From this understanding, and for present purposes, we can recast Siderits' second sense of ultimate truth as "a statement which is held to describe the foundational and independent level of reality". The ultimate truth, then, is the realisation that there is no description of reality that is based on a foundational metaphysics. This is a semantic theory that follows from a particular metaphysical picture. We can see from this why Nāgārjuna would reject the legitimacy of the *pramāṇa* model – it assumes that one can get at this independent world that operates as the foundational source for our knowledge-episodes (i.e. true cognitions) by way of the *pramāṇas*.

Returning to *VV* 29, we may now see whether the supposed *pratijñā* that the opponent tries to draw from Nāgārjuna has any unwanted metaphysical commitments of the kind discussed above. The *pratijñā* is the first stage in a five-membered inference and involves the ascription of some property to a subject. In order to establish this *pratijñā*, one is required to provide its proving property (*hetu*), and a similar example case (*udāharaṇa/dṛṣṭānta*). If "there is fire on the hill" is the *pratijñā*, the hill would be the subject, and fire the property to be proven. The *hetu* would be stated as "because there is smoke on the hill." The *udāharaṇa* would be: "like in a kitchen," implying that wherever there is smoke, there is fire, as seen in a kitchen. The issue appears to be that eventually, according to this inferential model, one would need to refer to some true cognition achieved by means of

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[246] We may also contrast this with *Vijñaptimātra/Yogācāra* philosophers, who would grant priority to the mind (*manas*), or the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). These would act as generators of what we take to be mind-independent reality. Of course, the Madhyamaka philosophers do not accept this priority ordering either.

perception.[247] Perception, as per the *pramāṇa* theory, occurs when there is contact between the sense-faculty and the sense-object. This sense-object is independent of the cognising agent. The object produces the cognition – it is the source of the cognition. As has been stated by numerous scholars, the Nyāya thinkers are naïve realists. They believe that the world "out there" is completely independent of the subject's cognising. As an epistemic theory, they believe that it is the world as distinct to cognisers (including our conceptual categories or desires) which determines the truth or falsity of a cognition. If we accept the distinction between cognising subject and world, and to make the world the cause of truthful cognition (as opposed to, say, coherence or pragmatism), this is to place the world in the position of priority in an account of knowledge. It is to grant the entities in the world a *svabhāva*.[248] To propose a *pratijñā* is then to accept the legitimacy of the five-membered inference, the legitimacy of the *pramāṇa* model, and the reality of a mind-independent world. Of course, such presuppositions are not shared by Nāgārjuna, and so he will not propose a *pratijñā*. This does not, however, make him a sceptic.

## 10.4. *Dṛṣṭi* as (Wrong) View

Let us turn now to *dṛṣṭi*. The view that Nāgārjuna should be seen as a sceptic due to his disparaging of all *dṛṣṭi* (views) is much more easily dismissed than that concerning *pratijñā*.[249] As Williams-

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[247] That is, if pushed far enough. One may use an example obtained via inference, but if pressed, one would eventually end up referring to some cognition achieved via perception. At some point, one must have perceived the property that one is claiming two entities share. As Phillips (2012: 330 writes "the perceptual process plays a foundational role in giving us knowledge […] the other sources depend on perception as a *pramāṇa*."

[248] It is tempting to think that if the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika adopted a foundationalism, it would be their ontological categories that fulfil the role of foundational entities. But entities in these categories are not independent in the sense understood in the literature on metaphysical grounding. For example, a pot is a substance according to Vaiśeṣika ontology, but it is dependent upon the atoms which compose it. It is therefore not an *independent* source of being for anything derivative. But if we consider the epistemic theory as containing a metaphysical presupposition, we can see that the role of foundation (in the manner in which I understand *svabhāva*) of knowledge for the Nyāya is simply the "world" (or the objects that constitute it) as distinct from the cognising agent (or cognition). My reading of this debate is assisted by the fact that knowledge itself was seen as involved in some kind of dependency relation, hence the apparent externalism of Nyāya epistemology. Objects in the world *cause* the (true) cognitions. Even the epistemic account of the Nyāya contains a metaphysic.

[249] The verses in question regarding *dṛṣṭi* are *MMK* 13.8 and *MMK* 27.30

Wyant's (2017) points out, the term is more often used in Buddhist texts than those of other schools and is contrasted with the term *samyagdṛṣṭi*, meaning "correct view." The term *dṛṣṭi* then comes to mean an incorrect view.[250] The correctness or incorrectness of a view is specifically related to the soteriological function of the view in question, for *samyagdṛṣṭi* refers to one element in the Noble Eightfold Path (*āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) to achieving *nirvāṇa*. With this taken into account, let us look at *MMK* 13.8:

> Emptiness is declared by the victorious as the remedy to all views. But for whom there is the view of emptiness, they are said to be incurable.[251]

If we take religious context into account, we can see that emptiness is the remedy to all *incorrect* views. But if one is to have an incorrect view of emptiness, they will not be cured. This view of emptiness is one that takes emptiness to be some positive entity rather than an absence.[252] It is this mistake which leads Candrakīrti to comically reply that someone who takes such a positive view of emptiness is like a customer who, when told by a shopkeeper that there is nothing to sell, asks to purchase some nothing.[253] Nāgārjuna is not replacing one property with another, he is merely negating what was presupposed.[254]

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[250] See Edgerton's (1953: 269) definition as "*view, opinion*; rarely in a good sense" and "almost always *wrong opinion*". Williams-Wyant (2017: 273) also quotes Halbfass (1988: 266) describing *dṛṣṭi* as "something which is not only neutral or irrelevant, but soteriologically harmful". A number of sūtras in the Pāli Canon highlight this sense (where the Pāli for *dṛṣṭi* is *diṭṭhi*), such as the Brahmajāla Sutta. For a detailed study on *diṭṭhi* as it appears in Theravāda Buddhism (and therefore the Pāli Canon), see Fuller (2005). On later developments of the concept in non-Theravāda Buddhism, it is worth noting Vasubandhu's *AbhKBh* 5.7: *ātmātmīyadhruvocchedanāstihīnāgradṛṣṭayaḥ / ahetvamārge taddṛṣṭiretāstāḥ pañca dṛṣṭayaḥ* (772) [Translation: "The view of a self and what belongs to the self, the view of eternalism, the view of annihilationism, the view of negating what is the case, the view of mixing what is good with what is bad, a view in the path or the uncaused (*ahetutva*), just these are the five views."] In the commentary that follows *AbhKBh* 5.7, we find the last of these, the view of something uncaused as meaning an uncaused cause of the world, such as a God. I suppose Nāgārjuna would also count *svabhāva* as being a view to the effect that there is an uncaused cause to the world (i.e. a metaphysical foundation).

[251] *śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭīnāṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ / yeṣāṃ tu śūnyatādṛṣṭistānasādhyān babhāṣire* (247).

[252] A similar error occurs when one takes emptiness to be mere non-existence.

[253] *ye tu tasyāmapi śūnyatāyāṃ bhāvābhiniveśinaḥ, tān prati avācakā vayamiti kuto 'smadupadeśāt sakalakalpanāvyāvṛttyā mokṣo bhaviṣyati? yaḥ nakiṃcidapi te paṇyaṃ dāsyāmītyuktaḥ, sa cet 'dehi bhostadeva mahyaṃ nakiṃcinnāma paṇyam,'; iti brūyāt, sa kenopāyena śakyaḥ paṇyābhāvaṃ grāhayitum?* (*PP* 247 – 248).

[254] See Burton (1999: 37 – 38) where he argues that *MMK* 13.8 should be read as meaning that emptiness should not be interpreted as nihilism or the assertion of an Absolute Reality.

Let us turn to another verse referring to *dṛṣṭi* which is presented as support for a sceptical reading of

Madhyamaka philosophy. In *MMK* 27.30, Nāgārjuna writes:

> I bow to Gautama, who, relying on compassion, taught the true *dharma* for the destruction
>
> of all views (*dṛṣṭi*).[255]

This is the final verse of the *MMK*, which leads to the appeal of reading it as the culminating thought

of the preceding text. Once again, however, the sceptical reading only gains strength by neglecting

the religious context and technical connotations of the term "*dṛṣṭi*". The verse clearly states that

something is taught – the true *dharma*. Candrakīrti elaborates:

> There, [the term] *dharma* [is used] because of it restraining (*saṃdhāraṇa*) the fall from a
>
> peak by obtaining understanding of the destruction of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The *dharma* of
>
> the true nobles, whose goal is accomplished, is the true *dharma*. Also if the *dharma* is good
>
> (*śobhana*), it is a true *dharma*, by being the means of the complete destruction of the
>
> suffering of *saṃsāra*, from being praiseworthy.[256]

Note the first sentence, in which *dharma* is something through which one gains an *understanding*

(*adhigama*) of the destruction of cyclic existence and of liberation. This *dharma* is nothing other than

dependent-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Candrakīrti goes on to state that the Buddha is

praiseworthy because of "teaching, by knowledge of dependent-origination, the auspicious calming

of proliferation, for the purpose of abandoning all views […]".[257] Now the question for a sceptical

interpretation is why dependent-origination is held to be the core teaching of Madhyamaka (recall

its equation with emptiness in *MMK* 24.18) if the philosophy is to be understood as a refutation of

all views. Mills (2018: 61) simply treats these assertions as "phase one" arguments to be superseded

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[255] *sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat / anukampām upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamam* (592).
[256] *tatra saṃsāranirvāṇaprahāṇādhigamopalambhaprapātapatanasaṃdhāraṇāt dharmaḥ | satāmāryāṇāṃ kṛtakāryāṇāṃ dharmaḥ saddharmaḥ | yadi vā śobhano dharmaḥ saddharmaḥ, sakalasaṃsāraduḥkhakṣayakaratvena praśaṃsanīyatvāt* (592).
[257] The full passage is: *prapañcopaśamaṃ śivaṃ pratītyasamutpādasaṃjñayā hi deśitavān sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇārthaṃ jagatāmanukampāmupādāya mahākaruṇāmevāśritya priyaikaputrādhikatarapremapātrasakalatribhuvanajanaḥ na lābhasatkārapratyupakārādilipsayā, taṃ namasyāmi niruttaramadvitīyaṃ śāstaram* (592 – 593).

by a "phase two" scepticism. His reason for believing scepticism to be the culminating teaching is due to the latter sections of the text seeming to indicate such a reading, especially when the final verse of the whole text makes reference to the destruction of all views. But we have the Indian commentator Candrakīrti once again making reference to dependent-origination when explaining this sceptical-seeming verse. The mention of destruction or abandoning all views is then not to be taken as an endorsement of the sceptical approach. The religious connotations of the term *dṛṣṭi* indicates that it is *wrong* views that are destroyed. A wrong view is perceiving the world (and our relation to it) not as it *truly is*, but through ignorance of the way things really are. The way things really are is dependent – every entity without exception is dependent. There is no independent source of being. There is no *svabhāva*. Wrong views emerge when one takes a collection or kind of entities to have *svabhāva*. To understand emptiness, which means to understand dependent-origination, is to destroy all wrong views. The destruction of all wrong views allows for the pacification of proliferation (by giving up the quest for locating *svabhāva*). Such an outcome is indeed auspicious.

# 11. Conclusion to Part II

At this stage, it seems natural to ask why Nāgārjuna doesn't just come out and say what I have suggested is implied within his writings. Why not just say that all entities are dependently-originated and that one should give up a search for some entity that acts as an independent source? Why the evasive attitude? I think there are a number of possible reasons for this, but the problem is primarily a result of the terse structure of the texts of the early schools of Indian philosophy (i.e. the *sūtra* literature). Nāgārjuna does in fact explicitly state the positions I am suggesting (in the verses I have referred to throughout discussing my interpretation). The problem is that there are other verses which do not immediately fit so well (such as those which inform a sceptical reading as discussed above). This is the case with all readings that have been proposed. There are also social, religious and political considerations, in addition to the philosophical, which may have pushed Nāgārjuna towards framing certain responses in seemingly incompatible ways. It is not my purpose to go through these (that is best left to the great historians working on this period in Indian thought). But there are two additional (philosophical) points I would like to make concerning my reading of Madhyamaka.

Firstly, I believe Nāgārjuna would be happy to accept the *pramāṇa* model if it came without the associated metaphysical baggage. The issue for Nāgārjuna is the implicit acceptance of *svabhāva* in the model. The belief that there are *independent* entities that *cause*, and therefore *generate*, the true cognition of them, is something Nāgārjuna would not accept. If, instead, the two sides of knowing and the known are seen as dependently originating, I think this would be acceptable to him. But then the *pramāṇa* model would become something quite different from what its proponents hope it to be. Nāgārjuna's method becomes almost hermeneutic – it is not an attempt to get at an understanding of independent entities out there, but to understand the relationship between what we take to be the self, and what we take to be the entities out there. The notion of "reality" at work is not simply the external world, but the world as experienced. The Madhyamaka way is not a

cataloguing exercise, it is an attempt at teaching the method of liberation. To do that, it must explain

the possibility of liberation by reference to the way things are. The way things are is not the way

things immediately appear when we superimpose the notion of *svabhāva* onto reality.

The second point is that the terms "emptiness" and "dependent-origination" appear to emerge as a

result of the tendency in Indian philosophy for ontological promiscuity. Even where certain

ontological entities may appear to be denied (such as the case of denying the enduring self in

Buddhism), we find absences and processes having some kind of positive ontological existence. I

have already discussed Abhidharma ontological permissivism, but there are further examples, such

as treating origination, endurance and destruction as separate *dharmas* that interact with the

*dharmas* that are to come into being, endure, and are eventually destroyed. We also find that the

inference-model developed by Nyāya assumes a locus structure – there is a property located in the

subject. The rest of the inference is aimed as proving that the property is in fact located there. Even

absence becomes a substance in later Nyāya. With all this in mind, we can see how both emptiness

and dependent-origination might come to be seen as positive entities or properties. From this we

get Nāgārjuna's insistence that emptiness wrongly understood is dangerous. It is not some positive

entity. It is not pure non-existence. I think Nāgārjuna's difficulty in expressing himself can be

illustrated by reference to the ontic-ontological distinction proposed by Heidegger.[258] Here the ontic

refers to *what* a given entity is, and the ontological refers to *how* an entity is. As explained in the

Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon (Slaby 2021: 542):

> The adjective "ontological" concerns being – i.e., what it is for a given entity or class of
>
> entities to be – in distinction to the adjective "ontic," which applies to entities as such, i.e.,
>
> their properties, their various arrangements and behaviors, whatever can be known
>
> empirically about them.

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[258] See Heidegger (1962: 29 – 35).

Now I am not saying that Nāgārjuna was a Heideggerean before Heidegger (God help us!) but only that there is a tendency in the structure of philosophy in the Indian tradition of focusing on the ontic and treating ontological discussions as though they must imply something ontic. Emptiness is the ontological way of entities – they are dependently-originated. It is not an ontic "thing". The verses supporting sceptical readings, the claims that there is an ultimate truth that cannot be stated, all of these are a result of the pressure of treating an ontological description as positing an ontic reality. Emptiness can be known, but not as something ontic. It is known only when reality is understood as ontologically dependently-originated. This cannot be done in the empirical fashion of the *pramāṇa* model. It is known through reflection.[259] Nāgārjuna is not a sceptic. His position is metaphysical, only in a way that is not easily accommodated by the philosophical tendencies that preceded (and even those that followed) him.

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[259] This distinction may be indicated by the use of the term *prajñā* to refer to supreme knowledge in Madhyamaka (and generally Mahāyāna) texts, rather than the term *pramā* as used by the proponents of the *pramāṇa* model.

# Part III: Ethics

# 12. Introduction to Part III

## 12.1. Buddhist Tradition and Competing Ethical Ideals

The Buddhist discussions on metaphysics are not purely speculative but are intimately connected to an ethical way of life and soteriological goal. Any description or understanding of reality which undermines these aspects would be antithetical to Buddhism. These aspects are succinctly stated in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths (held in Buddhist tradition to be the first teaching of the Buddha). Their importance for a full understanding of the Buddhist religious outlook can be noted from the way in which many contemporary academic texts introducing Indian Buddhist philosophy choose to begin with an explanation of these truths.[260] Acknowledging the importance of this teaching, we may then ask after the ethical purpose of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness, and whether there may have been ethically problematic consequences in the Abhidharma systems which he intended to correct. I believe that the Abhidharma metaphysics indirectly retained a residual sense of "clinging" which ran contrary to the content of the Four Noble Truths. The Abhidharma position of positing an ultimate foundational level leads to a tension with the second and third Noble Truth – for their method of eradicating existential suffering does not remove the root of this suffering, which is craving. Though one is no longer attached to the derivative self, one may still be attached to the *dharmas* which ground the derivative self. This inability to remove attachment may account for the emergence of a Mahāyāna ethical ideal outside of the Abhidharma soteriology – that of the *bodhisattva*. Rather than strive for individual enlightenment, the *bodhisattva* strives for the enlightenment of all beings. This ideal finds it metaphysical articulation in Nāgārjuna's philosophy, where a picture of universal dependence undercuts any foundational distinction between self and other, removing the final possible object of egocentric attachment. The metaphysics of dependent-origination bring the Four Noble Truths into harmony.

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[260] Such is the case in Bartley (2015: 27 – 33), Siderits (2007: Ch. 2), and Carpenter (2014: 5 – 11).

In what follows, I will begin by outlining the key features of the Buddhist ethical and soteriological outlook as contained in the Four Noble Truths. I then discuss how the *dharma* ontology of the Sarvāstivāda school of Abhidharma describes a soteriological path based on the removal of afflictions and impurities within a given stream of *dharmas*, this stream being the source for the derivative notion of an enduring self. This leads me to highlight the difficulty the Abhidharma has in managing the resulting tension between the Noble Truths (that suffering is caused by craving, and that the path to the end of suffering is the purification of a *specific* stream of *dharmas*), with a brief reference to the contrasting *bodhisattva* ideal. A discussion of Nāgārjuna's writings regarding ethics in the *MMK* and *VV* follows, and I conclude that Nāgārjuna's arguments point to the fact that intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is not compatible with dependent-origination (the latter being the metaphysical principle behind the second and third Noble Truth). I go on to discuss the emergence and key features of the *bodhisattva* ideal, in contrast to the Abhidharma ideal of the *arhat*. Finally, I draw upon Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī* to show the link between this *bodhisattva* ideal and Nāgārjuna's metaphysics of emptiness, concluding that the *bodhisattva* ideal naturally follows if one adopts the harmonious reading of the Four Noble Truths as found in the philosophy of emptiness.

## 12.2. The Four Noble Truths and the Buddhist Ethical Outlook

The ethical outlook of Buddhism, prior to the development of the philosophical schools which attempted to draw out the implications of the early Buddhist teachings, can be found in the account of the Four Noble Truths. According to Buddhist tradition, the first sermon of the Buddha after his achieving enlightenment included a description of these four truths: (i) the truth of suffering; (ii) the truth of the arising of suffering; (iii) the truth of the cessation of suffering; and (iv) the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Walpola 1974: 16). Each of these truths indicate distinctive traits of Buddhist ethical thought, and so I will discuss each in turn.

The first truth of suffering is described in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* as follows:

The Noble Truth of suffering (*Dukkha)* is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; disassociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering – in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

(Translated by Walpola 1974: 93).

The truth of suffering is not, therefore, an injunction to act in a particular way but is instead a description of existence. The choice of translating the Pāli word '*dukkha*' (the Sanskrit equivalent being '*duḥkha*') as "suffering" is not perfect, and misses some important shades of meaning, although this translation has become standard. Additional senses are "unsatisfactoriness," "unease," and "pain" (Garfield 2022: 71).[261] The various senses show that suffering as understood by Buddhists is much broader than the suffering felt by a presently felt pain. It is all-pervading, not simply occasional. If it were the latter, one could strive to have one's pleasures outweigh one's pain, something that may be achieved better by a life of opulence and hedonism than the Buddhist path. One may even be tempted to put all their effort into building Nozick's "Experience Machine" (1974: 42 – 45) to eradicate their experience of suffering.[262] But the Buddhist notion of suffering, whilst inclusive of those instances of occasional pain, is much deeper.[263] We see this in the extract above, where the Buddha states that suffering is "disassociation from the pleasant," and "not to get what one wants." The former becomes clear when linked with the Buddhist teaching of the three marks of existence – that all is impermanent, all is suffering, and all is insubstantial. Both we and the

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[261] We may also add "sorrow," "trouble," and "difficulty" (Monier-Williams 1899: 483), as well as "misery" (Edgerton 1953: 265). The term is contrasted with *sukha*, translated as "ease, easiness, comfort, prosperity, pleasure, happiness" (Monier-Williams 1899: 1221). The contrast is highlighted by the fact that the Sanskrit prefix *du-* indicates a negative quality, and the prefix *su-* indicates a positive quality.

[262] As Carpenter (2014: 7) puts it: "The threat of [occasional] pain does give me good reason to take those measures [to avoid it], but for this I do not need the Buddha's 'Path'; I just need to look both ways before crossing the street."

[263] Siderits (2007: 18 – 22) provides a good description of the scope of suffering within three separate layers, according to Buddhist tradition: (i) pain-sensation, (ii) suffering from impermanence, (iii) suffering from past actions (or, more broadly, from causal conditions).

phenomena of the world are transitory, so whilst one may avoid instances of sensory pain, we must also come to terms with the inevitable loss of that which brings us pleasure. This is not the simple fact of knowing the dessert one is voraciously enjoying must eventually end, but the sadness one feels on the return journey after a wonderful holiday seeing old friends, or the distress at knowing the inevitability of death for one's loved ones. It is the dissatisfaction always present when one reflects and regrets the decisions and actions taken in life, or when one feels sadness at the inevitable (such as the longing for a return to a particular time in one's youth). The suffering of not getting what one wants is not simply the suffering of the person that desires a sports car but does not have the means of affording it, but the constant feeling of imperfection and the wish to be better. The meaning of one's life is to an extent determined by one's goals, ambitions and desires, but as these are transitory and liable to alter, one is never at ease. These deeper feelings of suffering are perhaps best captured by those words tinged with poetic feeling – "nostalgia," "wistfulness," the German "*sehnsucht*" and the Portuguese "*saudade*". What one can take from all of this is that the Buddhist path is a response to an *existential problem* – the problem of existential suffering (Garfield 2022: 6). The experience of being in the world is one of suffering in this broad sense. It is this realisation which is the motivation to follow the Buddhist path, and the path itself is the answer to the existential problem of suffering.[264]

The second Noble Truth is the claim that suffering has a cause. It may be ubiquitous, but it has an explanation. The description of this truth is described in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* as follows:

> The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here

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[264] As Garfield (2022: 6) states: "The Buddha did not set out to prove this [ubiquity of suffering] […] He took it as a datum, one that is obvious to anyone on serious reflection, though one that escapes most of us most of the time precisely because of our evasion of serious reflection in order not to face this fact." See also Siderits (2015: 139, en. a): "this truth amounts to the claim that for any reflective person, the happiness-seeking project that is constitutive of personhood will inevitably be undermined by the realization of one's own mortality, so that one's life comes to be predominately characterized by suffering in the form of frustration, alienation, and despair."

and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and

thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).

(Translated by Walpola 1974: 93).

There are two immediate points to raise. Firstly, suffering is not itself an ungrounded phenomenon,

but one that is derived from particular causes and conditions. The importance of this truth is

highlighted by Siderits (2007: 22), for "by learning the cause of some phenomenon we may be able

to exercise some control over it." It is clear that this truth is merely a statement of the teaching of

dependent-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), focusing on a particular phenomenon being an

effect.[265] The second point to note is the role of thirst or craving (Pal. *taṇhā*; Skt. *tṛṣṇā*) as the

producer of suffering. This is the perpetual yearning that characterises our existence, whether it be

for certain objects of pleasure, for one's immortality, or for one's non-existence. What causes this

yearning is considered to be unwholesome (*akuśala*),[266] and in the *Sammaditthi Sutta* it is said that

the roots of what is unwholesome are threefold – desire (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), and delusional

ignorance (*avidyā*).[267] Ignorance is often stated to be the cause of desire and aversion, leading to

thirst, which leads to suffering, yet as Carpenter (2014: 251 en. 5) rightly notes:

"[p]henomenologically, they [desire, aversion and ignorance] can each cause each other. In the

pragmatics of interrupting this mutual causation, however, eliminating ignorance is both a good way

in and necessary for the definitive elimination of the three." In these three traits we find a

continuation of the existential concern of the first truth. In this truth, existential suffering is related

to our conception of and conduct within the world.

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[265] See Siderits (2007: 22 – 24) for a good discussion on the relationship of this truth with dependent-origination, along with a consideration of the traditional Buddhist model of the twelve links of dependent-origination as spaced over three lifetimes. A short but detailed explanation of the traditional model of twelve linked chain of dependent-origination (with its apparent temporal structure across lifetimes) can be found in Lamotte (1988: 35 – 40). I read Nāgārjuna as believing that the essence of the model lies in its teaching that everything is ungrounded.

[266] See Goodman & Thakchöe (2016: 13 – 14), Keown (1992: 116 – 123) and Harvey (2000: 42 – 43) for a discussion of the terms *kuśala* and *akuśala*.

[267] I have included the Sanskrit equivalents in brackets. The Pāli terms are *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. The relevant passage reads: "*Lobho akusalamūlaṁ, doso akusalamūlaṁ, moho akusalamūlaṁ*" (Sujato n.d.).

The third truth concerns the possibility of the end of suffering:

> The Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very
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> thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.
>
> (Translated by Walpola 1974: 93).

Had the Buddhist teachings consisted simply of the first two truths, there would not be much to it

other than a description of our existential reality, and yet the third truth provides a goal – the end of

suffering (*nirvāṇa*).[268] For Buddhists, it is not the case that suffering is permanent and inescapable.

The third truth shows that whilst our existential condition from birth may consist of suffering, there

is an opportunity to bring such suffering to an end. This possibility is the *telos* of the Buddhist view,

and it is in relation to this *telos* that certain practices and moral injunctions are derived.[269] As Harvey

(2000: 40) puts it, "ethics is not for its own sake, but is an essential ingredient on the path to the

final goal."

Finally, the fourth Noble Truth states the means to this cessation of suffering, known as "the path"

(*marga*):

> The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the
>
> Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view; right thought; right speech; right action; right
>
> livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration.
>
> (Translated by Walpola 1974: 93).

In the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (Horner 2007: 360 – 368), these eight elements are categorised into three

groups. The first group, consisting of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, is categorised as

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[268] For the relation of the third Noble Truth to the concept of *nirvāṇa* in early Buddhist teachings, see Lamotte (1988: 40 – 42).
[269] My use of *telos* is an intentional nod to Aristotle. See Keown (1992), especially Ch. 8, for a comparison of Buddhist and Aristotelian ethics, where *nirvāṇa* is argued to play a role similar to Aristotle's *eudaemonia*. However, see Goodman and Thakchöe (2016: 11 – 12), and Siderits (2015: 139 – 140, en. b), for some issues regarding the compatibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics with the Buddhist view of non-self (*anātman*).

proper conduct (*śīla*).[270] The second group, consisting of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, is the category of concentration (*samādhi*). The final category, consisting of right thought and right view, is wisdom (*prajñā*). It is tempting to focus upon only on the elements of proper conduct when attempting to derive an ethical theory from Buddhist thought and yet this is to distort the overall picture.[271] These requirements that fall under the category of *śīla* do appear most comparable with the injunctions of the Western ethical theories of Divine Law, deontological duties or rule-based consequentialism, such as the requirement to abstain from murder and theft.[272] But even if the other two categories are neglected, and *śīla* is considered the whole of Buddhist ethics, the requirements of the Buddhist path are not intended to be universally applicable, but for those who are committed to ending their existential suffering.[273] In other words, the ethical demands are different depending upon whether one is fully committed to traversing the path towards the end goal of the Buddhist way, or whether one is merely supportive of those who are upon such a path. This is the distinction between the monks and the laity. Such an approach is at odds with theories which purport to determine universally applicable moral injunctions.[274]

Turning to the categories of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*), we see what is unique in the Buddhist ethical outlook. Again, I will not go into specific details, but offer a brief account of each.[275] *Samādhi* – consisting of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration – is the

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[270] I follow Garfield (2022: 12) in translating *śīla* as "proper conduct" rather than the usual "ethics," for all elements of the eightfold path are ethical, even if elements such as right view or right concentration do not fit easily within Western preconceived notions of the scope of ethics (82).

[271] I will not dwell on the particulars of *śīla* since its compatibility with an ethical outlook is quite evident. For more details on *śīla*, see Lamotte (1988: 42), Garfield (2022: 84 – 86), and especially Keown (1992: Ch. 2).

[272] Certain scholars read Buddhist teachings as forms of one of these ethical theories. For example, Goodman (2009: Ch. 3) argues that Theravāda Buddhism is best seen as a rule-based consequentialist moral theory.

[273] It is universal in the sense that anybody may embark upon the path, but it is not the case that there is a single path for those who are committed and those that are uncommitted to the end goal.

[274] It is true that the laity and monks share some base requirements, such as that found in the five precepts (*pañcaśīla*), but these are merely partial towards the ultimate end goal, which involves many additional requirements, as found in the extensive *vinaya* literature of monastic regulations. See Lamotte (1988: 42, 53 – 84) and Harvey (2000: 66 – 97).

[275] For more details on *samādhi*, see Lamotte (1988: 42 – 44), Keown (1992: 76 – 82), Garfield (2022: 86 – 88) and Potter (1996: 61 – 67). On the historical origins and development of *samādhi*, specifically the last element, which is often translated as "meditation," see Wynne (2007) and Bronkhorst (2009: 44 – 56). For an interesting book-length study, including interviews with practitioners, see Shankman (2008). On *prajñā*, see Lamotte (1988: 44 – 47) and, again, Keown (1992: 76 – 82). For an analysis of its constituents, see Garfield (2022: 82 –

practice of cultivating the kind of attitude required for fulfilling the Buddhist goal. It includes effort, for without effort on the part of the practitioner, all moral reasoning is merely an intellectual exercise. As Garfield (2022: 86) succinctly states: "[w]ithout effort, ethical resolution is empty." Mindfulness is the attentiveness required to act in accord with the Buddhist path – the vigilance to stifle unwholesome thoughts and deeds. Concentration consists of mental practices that are a means to developing such dispositions – namely, meditation. *Prajñā* (right view and right thought) is based on the notion that our perception of the world is morally significant. Since suffering is caused by ignorance, and the Buddhist path is aimed at the cessation of suffering, the correct view of reality is an ethical requirement. A particular view of reality leads to particular thoughts and intentions, which lead to specific actions. If one views reality as composed of self-interested individuals, this will lead to specific intentions and actions. As such, one way of altering our conduct is by way of altering our perception of reality (specifically, to see reality correctly). It should be noted that no single element of the Eightfold Path is primary, and each supports the others (Garfield 2022: 12).

From the earliest Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths, we come to see that Buddhist ethics is a response to the problem of existential suffering. It holds that suffering is a dependently originating phenomenon, one which is caused by certain cognitive conditions and psychological dispositions. This highlights the importance of correct cognitive and mental states in Buddhist ethics. The possibility of *nirvāṇa* fulfils a teleological role in the Buddhist picture, and the Eightfold Path shows that the scope of Buddhist ethics is not concerned simply with acts (construed as physical movement), but requires adopting a total way of life, including correct intentions, mental states, dispositions and perceptions of the world. Since different perceptions of the world and different conceptions of the ethical goal can affect what are considered the correct actions and dispositions to adopt, let us turn to the ethical implications of the Sarvāstivāda school of Abhidharma, with its

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84). For the importance of right view – the first constituent of *prajñā* – see Carpenter (2014: 11 – 14). Needless to say, *prajñā* comes to have great importance in Mahāyāna Buddhism as clearly indicated by the name of the collection of *sūtras* with which it is associated – the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*).

notion of *svabhāva*. Having understood this, we will be better positioned to understand the ethical

implications of Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* (that is, his rejection of *svabhāva*).

# 13. Abhidharma Ethics

## 13.1. The Soteriology of the Sarvāstivāda School: *Dharmas* and Defilements

In Part I, I explained how the Abhidharma schools (specifically the Sarvāstivāda) developed a

metaphysics in which all phenomena could be divided into either that which is derivative (*prajñapti*)

or that which is an independent foundation (*dravya*) which grounds the derivative. The independent

foundational entities are known as *dharmas* and are identified by their possession of an intrinsic

nature (*svabhāva*). On the Abhidharma account, what we presuppose to be an enduring, personal

identity (a "self") is derivative, and the independent foundations from which this phenomenon is

derived are the types of *dharma* that fall under the five categories of *skandhas*. Only one group

consists of matter (*rūpa*) and the remaining four are mental, reflecting the emphasis placed on

cognition, psychology and mental states in the Four Noble Truths.[276] These *dharmas*, although

eternal, manifest their distinct quality dependent upon the causes that have preceded them. They

then "deactivate" and, in our normal perception of the world, appear to cease. This, in brief, is the

Sarvāstivāda metaphysic.

In ethical matters, the soteriological goal of Sarvāstivāda is for the flux or stream (*santāna*) of

*dharmas* that are the basis of the person to become free from association with defilements

(*āsrava*).[277] These defilements are the Abhidharma answer to the cause of suffering as stated in the

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[276] The other four are: (i) feeling (*vedanā*), (ii) concepts/designation (*saṃjñā*), (iii) volition (*saṃskāra*), and cognition (*vijñāna*). See *AbhKBh* 1.7 (25) for the initial statement of the five *skandhas*. See Dhammajoti (2015: 239 – 272) for a discussion of these mental *skandhas*. It is helpful to note that, given their penchant for categorisation, some Abhidharma schools were happy to organise the totality of *dharmas* into the following five categories: (i) matter (*rūpa*), (ii) mental (*citta*), (iii) mental concomitants, such as emotions and passions (*caitasika*), (iv) conditioned *dharma*s unconnected to the mental, such as words (*cittaviprayukta-saṃskṛta*), and (v) unconditioned *dharmas*, such as space or the *dharma* that maintains the non-origination of any further conditionings (*asaṃskṛta*). See Cox (2004: 552 – 554) for a discussion of the development of this five-fold taxonomy. See Dhammajoti (2015: 41 – 42) for a list of the seventy-five *dharmas* of the Sarvāstivāda school categorised according to this five-fold taxonomy.
[277] The use of "defilement" is not ideal for "*āsrava*" due to it being an equally appropriate translation for other distinct terms in the Abhidharma system, such as "*kleśa*" and "*anuśaya*". An analysis of their subtle shades of meaning would be too great of an unnecessary detour for present purposes, however see Dhammajoti (2015: 48 – 49; 365 – 370) for these differences.

second Noble Truth. When a particular *dharma* in the stream occurs to one unenlightened, it is always accompanied by one of these defilements which perpetuate the existence of the stream as characterised by suffering.[278] Only four kinds of *dharma* are held to be without defilements – (i) the truth of the Path, (ii) space, (iii) cessation due to knowledge (*nirvāṇa*), and (iv) cessation not due to knowledge, the cessation of further defilements attaching to the stream being the goal of the Abhidharma method.[279]

It should be noted that the defilements are themselves *dharmas*, and in the five-fold categorisation of *dharmas* adopted by Sarvāstivāda (see Cox 2004: 552 – 554), we find these defilements to fall under the category of mental concomitants (*caitasika*), as distinguished from the category of thought (*citta*). When a thought (*citta*) *dharma* arises in the stream, so do certain *dharmas* of the mental concomitants category (*caitasika*). The notion of a self is ultimately a series of five kinds of *dharmas* (the five *skandhas*), and it is one of these five – cognition (*vijñāna*) – that is equivalent to the category of thought (*citta*).[280] This *dharma* is described by Vasubandhu as "the discernment obtained with regard to each object," meaning it is simply the discernment of *an* object without any further information.[281] This latter information is obtained via the *dharmas* which occur together with any cognition, that is, the mental concomitants (*caitasika*),[282] to which the remaining three mental categories of *dharmas* commonly taken to constitute a person belong. The mental concomitants are (yet again!) grouped into a schema, but without going into tedious detail, we may note that this

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[278] See *AbhKBh* 1.4: *sāsravā 'nāsravā dharmāḥ saṃskṛtā mārgavarjitāḥ / sāsravāḥ āsravāsteṣu yasmāt samanuśerate* (16). [Translation: "*dharmas* are connected with defilements or not connected to defilements. Excluding [the *dharma* that is] the path, the conditioned [*dharmas*] are connected to defilements. In those which the defilement clings are those [we call the *dharmas*] connected to defilements."]

[279] See *AbhKB* 1.5 – 1.6 (18 – 25).

[280] See *AbhKBh* 2.34: *cittaṃ mano 'tha vijñānamekārthaṃ* (208). [Translation: "thought, mind and cognition are one object"].

[281] *viṣayaṃ viṣayaṃ prati vijñaptirupalabdhirvijñāna skandha ityucyate* (*AbhKBh* 50).

[282] See *AbhKB* 2.23: *cittaṃ caittāḥ sahavaśyaṃ* (185). [Translation: "thought and the mental concomitants occur together"].

schema reflects a value system such that some of these *dharmas* are considered good, bad or neutral.[283] The defilements, being the origin of suffering, are, of course, morally bad.

A certain subset of these mental concomitants appears to have its moral value determined by its effectiveness in combatting the arising of defilement *dharmas* within a given stream. They are categorised as either skilful (*kuśala*) or unskilful (*akuśala*), by which is meant their inherent skilfulness (or unskillfulness) in preventing defilement *dharmas* from clinging to the other *dharmas* in the stream.[284] Thus we have ten *dharmas* including faith (*śraddhā)*, vigilance (*apramāda*) and tranquillity (*praśrabdhi*) classed as skilful, as well as the negations of both desire and aversion, two of the roots of clinging as described in the *sūtra* literature.[285] Interestingly the *Abhidharmakośa* only includes two kinds of *dharmas* classed as unskilful - non-modesty and shamelessness.[286] We can see then how skilful and unskilful *dharmas* have moral significance with regard to the teleological goal of Buddhism.

Having scaled the dizzying heights of *dharma* taxonomy, it is worth once again considering the overall ethical approach of the Sarvāstivāda. They believe that only *dharmas* are the ultimate existents, and that the experience of existence is a collection of activating and deactivating eternal

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[283] This schema is stated in *AbhKBh* 2.23 (186), and consists of (i) *mahābhūmika dharmas*: *dharmas* that occur with all instances of thought (*citta*), and so are morally neutral – see *AbhKBh* 2.24 (186 – 187); (ii) *kuśala-mahābhūmika dharmas*: those that are conducive to preventing defilements in a stream and so may be classed as morally good – see *AbhKBh* 2.25 (188 – 191); (iii) *kleśa-mahābhūmika dharmas*: the defilements that are always present in a stream that is classed as defiled, and so may be considered morally bad – see *AbhKBh* 2.26ab (191 – 194); (iv) those that are a cause of defilements attaching to a stream, and so are considered morally bad – see *AbhKBh* 2.26cd (191) and 2.32 (201 – 203); (v) *parīttakleśa-bhūmika dharma*: those defilements that are connected specifically with *dharmas* of ignorance, and so are morally bad – see *AbhKBh* 2.27 (194); (vi) *aniyata dharmas*: those that are indeterminate, such that their link with other *dharmas* determines their moral value – see *AbhKBh* (194 – 195).
It is worth noting that this appears to be an acceptance of the objective truth of morality. As Keown (1992: 64) puts it: "One important conclusion to be drawn from the Abhidharmic analysis is that virtues and vices – since they are *dharmas* – are objective and real. [...] This mean that Buddhist ethics is naturalistic: good and bad are not abstractions to be apprehended by observers according to their various intuitions and sensibilities [...] what is to count ultimately as good and bad is not determined by accidental factors but grounded in the reality of human nature."
[284] See Goodman and Thakchöe (2016: 14) and Dhammajoti (2015: 44 – 48).
[285] *AbhKBh* 2.25: *śraddhā 'pramādaḥ praśrabdhirupekṣā hrīrapatrapā / mūladvayamahiṃsā ca vīryaṃ ca kuśale sadā* (188 – 189). [Translation: "Faith, vigilance, tranquillity, equanimity, modesty, shame, the two roots [non-desire and non-aversion], non-violence and vigour are always in the skilful [mind]].
[286] *AbhKBh* 2.26cd: *akuśale tvāhrīkyamanapatrapā* (194).

*dharmas*. What is commonly taken to be the person is at root a particular stream of *dharmas*. Every

stream prior to reflection contains within it a set of *dharmas* that are considered defilements – they

are the basis of the continued perpetuation of existential suffering. The removal of these

defilements is believed to lead to the end of suffering and an end to the cycle of rebirths. Since every

*dharma* is part of a causal-nexus, it is possible to cause particular *dharmas* to activate within one's

stream, and replace those currently active and contributing to suffering (the defilements) with

others conducive to permanently eradicating the defilements from one's stream. Those *dharmas*

which assist in preventing defilements from arising are "skilful," and considered moral virtues. But

the separation of afflictions from the stream requires knowledge of reality, here meaning knowledge

of the *dharmas*, for the above account of moral virtues presupposes the correctness of reality

understood as a collection of *dharmas*. It is not for nothing that Vasubandhu states:

> There is no means for pacifying the defilements without discernment of the *dharmas*.[287]

This discernment must be accompanied by meditation to habituate and internalise this knowledge,

so that one remains on the path to enlightenment (see Potter 1996: 62).

We might wonder where the *dharma* theory leaves those moral injunctions and exhortations found

in the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts, or the regulatory requirements for monks found in

the *vinaya* literature (*prātimokṣa*). These are, ultimately, a means to acquire certain (good) *dharmas*

within one's stream. Each instance of an action or speech *dharma* produces a separate kind of

*dharma* that leads to consequences within that stream. It may remain unactivated for a time, but

eventually it will activate and manifest its own nature, as well as produce the activation or acquiring

of certain other *dharmas*. This is, essentially, a way of integrating the *karmaphala* model (that each

act or intention produces moral consequences) into the *dharma* theory. These "invisible" *dharmas*

fall under a sub-category of the *rūpa dharmas* (matter) – the *avijñapti dharmas*. A further sub-

category of *avijñapti dharmas* is referred to as "the restraint of the moral code" (*saṃvara*

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[287] *AbhKBh* 1.3: *dharmāṇām pravicayam antareṇa nāsti kleśānāṃ yata upaśāntaye 'bhyupāyaḥ* (14).

*prātimokṣa*).[288] Once this *dharma* enters the stream, its effect is to hinder the arising of the kind of

*dharmas* that might lead to further defilement *dharmas* becoming a part of the stream. The aim is to

prevent any obstructions from cropping up on the road to liberation.

Now that the relation between ethics, psychology and the *dharma* theory (according to the

Sarvāstivāda school) has been outlined, it is worth looking at the implications of this picture. These

implications may go some way to explaining the motivation for an alternative metaphysical view,

and associated ethical ideal, in the Mahāyāna tradition, specifically as seen in Nāgārjuna's

Madhyamaka.

## 13.2. A Problem for the Sarvāstivāda: Craving the Foundations

The philosophical developments of the Abhidharma system – the distinction between the

fundamental and derivative, intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) as a mark of the former, and the

understanding of persons as ultimately streams of *dharmas* – lead to tensions between elements of

the Four Noble Truths. On the one hand, we have an account of the origins of suffering, arising from

craving, which itself derives from desire, aversion and ignorance, as stated in the second Noble

Truth. For the Ābhidharmika, this is explained by a stream of *dharmas* having certain defiled

*dharmas* within it. In tension with this are the third and fourth Noble Truth – that suffering has an

end and that there is a particular path to this end. For a Sarvāstivādin Ābhidharmika, the end of

suffering is to clear the stream of defiled *dharmas* by acquiring within one's stream the *dharmas*

which prevent the arising of further conditioned *dharmas*, the latter of which inevitably come with

defilements. Note, however, the focus on one's own stream. The motivation for pursuing the

Buddhist path is one's own existential suffering. The goal of the path is the eradication of suffering in

one's own stream. Any impetus to generosity or benevolence appears to be simply a means to, in

the end, alleviating the discomfort in one's own stream, without any regard for the well-being of

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[288] See *AbhKBh* 4.13 (605).

other streams. The Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anātman*), linked to the first Noble Truth, was intended to undercut egocentric motivation and craving, for the attitude that followed from perceiving oneself as a permanently enduring self was seen as a contributing factor to existential suffering. It seems that the Abhidharma approach has merely reintroduced the problem under a new guise. We can also see how this issue emerges with the concept of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and the ontological categories of foundational (*dravyasat*) or derivative (*prajñaptisat*). If we accept that the notion of a permanently enduring self merely derives from what is ultimately a series of foundational elements, we are still left with wondering why we would not develop the traits associated with selfishness when the object of selfishness is a stream of *dharmas* instead.

This apparent selfishness may account for the emergence of the Mahāyāna ideal of a *bodhisattva*.[289] Whereas the Ābhidharmikas considered the ethical ideal that of an *arhat*, one who had cleared their stream of defilements, the *bodhisattva* is characterised as one who commits to remaining within the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) until suffering had been eradicated for every being. This exemplifies the trait of compassion (*karuṇā*), the key virtue of the *bodhisattva*.

I shall return to the differences between these ideals in a moment, yet it is worth acknowledging the lesser status accorded to the *arhat* ideal by the Mahāyāna Buddhists, most notably in their derogatory references to the Abhidharma philosophical outlook and goal as the "lesser vehicle" (*hīnayāna*) to enlightenment, in contrast to their own "greater vehicle" (*mahāyāna*).[290] We also find in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* passages such as the following:

> For a Bodhisattva should not train in the same way in which persons belonging to the vehicle
>
> of the Disciples [Śrāvakayāna] or Pratyekabuddhas are trained. How then are the Disciples or

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[289] For thoughts on the history of these two ideals, see Siderits (2007: 140 – 142), Williams (2009: 5 – 44) and Walser (2005: 16 – 58).

[290] The preferred neutral name for the advocates of the *dharma* metaphysics is "Śrāvakayāna," meaning "the vehicle of the listeners." It should be noted that the term *hīnayāna* appears to postdate the term *mahāyāna* and perhaps emerged when the distinctions between the two outlooks became much sharper. It should also be added that the Mahāyāna is not always dismissive of the *arhat* ideal, and often allows space for it as a preliminary step towards an additional commitment to the Bodhisattva goal. An intermediate level (according to the Mahāyāna) between itself and the Śrāvakayāna is the *pratyekabuddha* (one who attains enlightenment in isolation from teachers and the community, and does not teach others).

Pratyekabuddhas trained? They make up their minds that "one single self we shall tame, one single self we shall pacify, one single self we shall lead to final Nirvana." Thus they undertake exercises which are intended to bring about wholesome roots for the sake of taming themselves, pacifying themselves, leading themselves to Nirvana. A Bodhisattva should certainly not in such way train himself. On the contrary, he should train himself thus: "My Own self I will place in Suchness, and, so that all the world might be helped, I will place all being into Suchness, and I will lead to Nirvana the whole immeasurable world of beings."

(Translated by Conze 1975: 163).

The problem for the Ābhidharmikas is that the cause of suffering – craving – is not removed by their account of the soteriological goal and means of achieving it. The very admission of *svabhāva* into the metaphysical system, and with it, the notion of *dravyasat* entities, provides another object for craving. Let us now turn to Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school in order to see whether their own approach is able to resolve this internal contradiction.

# 14. Madhyamaka Ethics

## 14.1. Emptiness and the Possibility of the Noble Truths

The majority of Nāgārjuna's arguments in the *MMK* and *VV* are concerned with metaphysical or

epistemological issues. Even when the question of ethics is raised, it tends to be raised in a

metaphysical manner. In these texts, Nāgārjuna does not offer concrete practical advice on what

actions to take or which virtues to cultivate. This should not come as a surprise, however, since

those monks with a tendency to Mahāyāna would live in monasteries alongside more traditional

monks following the Śrāvakayāna.[291] The real point of controversy between monks would be if a

disagreement arose regarding the regulations on monks' behaviour – that is, a disagreement

concerning *vinaya*.[292] Nāgārjuna was not arguing against the rules of the *vinaya*, since as a monk he

himself would have subscribed to them. Instead, when ethical issues are raised in either the *MMK* or

*VV*, they concern whether the doctrine of emptiness would undermine the Buddhist ethical outlook

and commit one to moral nihilism. Let us turn to some of these concerns.

In *MMK* 24.1, the hypothetical interlocutor claims that the doctrine of emptiness is contrary to the

Four Noble Truths:

> If all this is empty, there is no arising, nor cessation – the non-existence of the Four Noble
>
> Truths follows for you.[293]

What follows is a sequence of entailments which, according to the opponent, result from accepting

the non-existence of these Four Noble Truths – that activities considered to be based on the Four

Noble Truths cannot take place (MMK 24.2), that there cannot therefore be agents pursuing a life

characterised by these activities (MMK 24.3), that there cannot therefore be a community made up

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[291] For more on this point, see Williams (2009: 4 – 7).

[292] Perhaps the most famous schism within the Buddhist community is associated with the Second Council dispute on *vinaya* rules between the Mahāsāṃghikas and the group that became known as the Sthavira. For more on traditional accounts of schism in the Buddhist community (*saṃghabheda*), see Lamotte (1988: 124 – 140).

[293] *yadi śūnyamidaṃ sarvamudayo nāsti na vyayaḥ / caturṇāmāryasatyānāmabhāvaste prasajyate* (475).

of such agents and the teachings by which they are constituted as a community (MMK 24.4), that in the absence of a community and teaching, there could not be a Buddha, virtue, vice nor worldly conduct (MMK 24.5 – 24.6). But what does it mean to say that the Four Noble Truths are non-existent (*abhāva*)? The Four Noble Truths are part of the Buddha's speech – the *buddhavacana*. If we recall that the initial motivation for the Abhidharma taxonomic practice was the precise ontological elucidation of the Buddha's teaching, then we can also understand how the existence of this speech needed to be accommodated to the *dharma* theory. This was done by claiming that the Buddha's pronouncements fell under a certain class of *dharmas*, whether this be the token utterances or the mental intention the utterance was articulating.[294] As a result of this, it appears that the Four Noble Truths are *made true* by the reality of the *dharma* metaphysics – that is, it is only when *dharmas* exist, marked by their intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), that the speech of the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths can be said to exist, by virtue of its being possible to explain their existence as grounded in *dharmas*.

The criticism the opponent raises is based upon the equation of emptiness with non-existence. But, of course, emptiness is just the claim that there are no independent entities, that is, there are no entities that exist with an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) which marks them as independent. According to Nāgārjuna, the Four Noble Truths are neither held to have *svabhāva*, nor are they held to be grounded in anything that has *svabhāva* – they are dependent entities. The question is not whether an entity exists or does not exist (as the opponent would have it), but whether these Four Noble Truths entail the existence of two levels of reality – the foundational and derivative – or whether they instead require all entities to be derivative. The opponent begins by assuming that the two level ontology is necessary.[295] But this assumption is what is in question.

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[294] The dispute in Abhidharma terms is whether the speech of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) was a *dharma* falling under the category of matter (*rūpa skandha*), or the category of mental formations (*saṃskāra skandha*). For more information on this issue, see Dhammajoti (2015: 349 – 355).
[295] Thus the humorous rejoinder by Nāgārjuna in *MMK* 24.15: "But you throwing your own faults upon us, being mounted on a horse, forgot that very horse" [*sa tvaṃ doṣānātmanīyānasmāsu paripātayan / aśvamevābhirūḍhaḥ sannaśvamevāsi vismṛtaḥ* (502)].

Nāgārjuna's response is to demonstrate that an admission of intrinsic nature is what truly

undermines the Buddhist ethical path. The second and third Noble Truths – that suffering has a

cause, and that suffering has an end – can be generalised into the teaching of dependent-origination

(*pratītyasamutpāda*), that all entities are dependent.[296] In *MMK* 24.16 and 24.17 we find this

expressed as follows:

> If you see the existence of entities as through [them having] intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*),
>
> when so, you see entities without causes and conditions.[297]

> You prevent [the reality of] effect and cause, agent, instrument and act, origination and
>
> cessation, and result.[298]

All of these entities (from "effect" to "result") are by definition dependent, as has been argued

throughout the *MMK*. To introduce a level of independence is to negate their possibility, for the

independent level is permanent and this does not permit for any alteration that is implied by such

concepts as cause and effect, or agent and act. Later, in *MMK* 24.37, Nāgārjuna makes this point

clear when writing:

> From the denial of emptiness, there would not be anything to be done, activity would be
>
> uncommenced, the agent would not be acting.[299]

The importance of change is highlighted in the concepts of origination and cessation. We saw that in

the Four Noble Truths, suffering is said to have originated, and it is said that suffering can cease. This

requires that origination and cessation be possible. But this is only possible when the phenomena of

reality are dependent – for dependence implies the ability for alteration. A dependent entity may

originate, but just as importantly, if the conditions for its origination are removed, it may also cease.

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[296] I have already made reference to *MMK* 24.18 in Part II, but it is worth once again noting that in this verse Nāgārjuna equates emptiness with dependent-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). See also *MMK* 24.19.
[297] *svabhāvādyadi bhāvānāṃ sadbhāvamanupaśyasi / ahetupratyayān bhāvāṃstvamevaṃ sati paśyasi* (502).
[298] *kāryaṃ ca kāraṇaṃ caiva kartāraṃ karaṇaṃ kriyām / utpādaṃ ca nirodhaṃ ca phalaṃ ca pratibādhase* (503).
[299] *na kartavyaṃ bhavetkiṃ cidanārabdhā bhavetkriyā / kārakaḥ syādakurvāṇaḥ śūnyatāṃ pratibādhataḥ* (513).

Such is not the case for independent entities with intrinsic nature. They remain at all times. As put in *MMK* 24.20ab, "if all is non-empty, there is no origination nor cessation."[300]

The argument that intrinsic nature and independence are incompatible with the Four Noble Truths is developed in more detail as Nāgārjuna focuses on suffering. Thus, he writes in *MMK* 24.21ab:

> From where will suffering arise if it is not dependently-originated?[301]

This follows from the previous emphasis on origination and cessation, however in *MMK* 24.21cd, he adds an additional concern:

> Verily the impermanent (*anitya*) was said to be suffering (*duḥkha*) – that is not found when there is intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).[302]

By accepting that a certain class of entities – the *dharmas* – are independent entities, the Sarvāstivādins have excluded them from the scope of impermanence and so undercut the explanation of existential suffering that forms the first Noble Truth. If certain entities are independent, with intrinsic nature, then it is false that all is impermanent. If this is false, then suffering is not an existential fact, since one can identify with or direct one's desires towards the permanent. This relation between intrinsic nature and permanence is raised numerous times throughout the chapter, such as at *MMK* 24.26 and *MMK* 24.39.

As the chapter progresses, Nāgārjuna simply turns the initial objections back upon the opponent. All of this points to the fact that emptiness understood as non-existence is indeed incompatible with the Four Noble Truths, but emptiness understood as universal dependence is a metaphysical articulation of those very Truths. Since universal dependence, or emptiness, is the very negation of intrinsic nature, intrinsic nature itself must be contrary to the Four Noble Truths. Let us now turn to the objection to emptiness found in the *VV*.

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[300] *yadyaśūnyamidaṃ sarvamudayo nāsti na vyayaḥ* (505).
[301] *apratītya samutpannaṃ kuto duḥkhaṃ bhaviṣyati* (506).
[302] *anityamuktaṃ duḥkhaṃ hi tatsvābhāvye na vidyate* (506).

The objection comes at *VV* 7 – 8:

> And people knowledgeable of the nature of things think [there is] a virtuous intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) in the virtuous *dharmas*. That categorisation [applies] to the remainder [of *dharmas*].[303]

> And those *dharma*s which are conducive to liberation, of these there is an intrinsic nature of being conducive to liberation. It is just so of those [*dharmas*] not conducive to liberation, and the rest, as stated with regard to the nature of *dharmas*.[304]

The commentary to these verses lists a large number of *dharmas* held to be virtuous, along with their associated intrinsic natures. The list itself is problematic, in that it contains certain *dharmas* that should not be considered virtuous according to the Abhidharma taxonomy, nor does the list actually consist of 119 members, as the commentary states. In the words of Bhattacharya (1998: 100), the list is "of no particular interest in a treatise in dialectics."[305] In any case, the point appears to be that the notion of what is a virtue and what is a vice is based upon the intrinsic nature of *dharmas* as entities which exist independently. It is the *dharmas* that are the source of moral right and wrong.

Nāgārjuna's initial response (*VV* 53) is to state that it is not possible to locate a moral intrinsic nature in any *dharma*. If the *dharma* results from specific causes and conditions, then it derives its nature from elsewhere.[306] It has an extrinsic nature. Since its moral status is derived, the status of an act or thought as a virtue or a vice is not determined by reference to a fundamental level of *dharmas*. Nāgārjuna is not arguing that certain acts or thoughts lack a moral status, but that their moral status is not determined by reference to an independent nature of goodness or badness in the *dharmas*

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[303] *kuśalānāṃ dharmāṇāṃ dharmāvasthavidaś ca manyante / kuśalaṃ janasvabhāvaṃ śeṣeṣv apy eṣa viniyogaḥ* (232).

[304] *nairyāṇikasvabhāvo dharmo nairyāṇikāś ca ye teṣāṃ / dharmāvasthoktānām eva ca nairyāṇikādīnāṃ* (238). See Bhattacharya, Johnston & Kunst (1998: 6) for an alternative reading of "[…]*evamanairyāṇikādīnāṃ*".

[305] For more on the list and some issues pertaining to it, see Westerhoff (2010: 94 – 99).

[306] *yadi ca pratītya kuśalaḥ svabhāva utpadyate sa kuśalānām / dharmāṇāṃ parabhāvaḥ svabhāva eva kathaṃ bhavati* (302). [Translation: "But if the virtuous intrinsic nature of virtuous (*dharmas*) is dependently-originated, how will the extrinsic nature of *dharmas* be an intrinsic nature?"].

which constitute the act or thought. We will see how Nāgārjuna's metaphysics of emptiness motivates ethics in an alternative manner, but for the moment it is helpful to conceive of the difference as that of the ontic-ontological distinction discussed in Part II. The opponent wishes to explain ethics via an ontic description (where the moral and immoral are seen as *things* to be obtained or avoided), but Nāgārjuna believes ethics to follow from an ontological description (that ethics follows from the *manner* in which the totality of reality is).

The bulk of Nāgārjuna's reply to the objection (*VV* 54 – 56) echoes his remarks in *MMK* 24, highlighting the incompatibility of an independent intrinsic nature with the Four Noble Truths, and so I shall only summarise here. The essential claim is that if a level of independent entities is admitted, these entities would be without conditions for their origination, and so there would be no way to make them cease through removing their causes and conditions. Now if these independent entities also have an intrinsic moral value, then since they will not cease through the removal of their causes and conditions, the moral structure of the world is fixed, such that there is no possibility of bad *dharmas* ceasing, or good *dharmas* coming to originate. As a result, "there would be no practice of religious life" (*VV* 54cd).[307] The religious life, as detailed in the Four Noble Truths, depends upon the possibility of origination and cessation.[308] This is impossible for anything with intrinsic nature, for with its admission, "everything would be permanent, since being permanent is being without a cause" (*VV* 55cd).[309] If everything is permanent, then there is no opportunity for change. If there is no opportunity for change, then there is no motivation for the religious life.

Throughout his remarks, Nāgārjuna continues to stress the incompatibility of intrinsic nature with dependent-origination. In the commentary to *VV* 54, he writes that if one accepts that *dharmas* possess an intrinsic nature of virtue (or vice), then "surely when it is so, there is a denial of

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[307] *atha na pratītya kiñcit svabhāva utpadyate sa kuśalānām / dharmāṇām evaṃ syād vāso na brahmacaryasya* (302) [Translation: if that intrinsic nature of virtuous *dharmas* does not dependently originate, there would be no practice of the religious life].
[308] See the commentary of *VV* 54 (302 & 304). This is, of course, the argument of *MMK* 24.
[309] *nityāś ca sarvabhāvāḥ syuḥ nityatvād ahetumataḥ* (304).

dependent-origination."[310] Referring to notions such as the meritorious (*dharma*) and demeritorious (*adharma*) in *VV* 55, he writes in the commentary "indeed all that is dependently-originated – how will it be when there is no dependent-origination?".[311] For Nāgārjuna, if one admits a foundational level of independent entities that are determined as foundational by their possession of an independent nature, one fixes the world. The base level is permanent, and is determined to exist as such by its nature. This nature must therefore manifest itself perpetually – it is not dependent on anything, and so cannot be eradicated by the removal of its causes and conditions. Whatever derives from the base level must also be fixed as a result (for no alteration can take place at the base level, by which change would occurs at the derivative level). If this is the case, then dependent-origination is false, and with it, the Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

Nāgārjuna's arguments in the *MMK* and *VV* point to an internal contradiction in the Abhidharma picture, but they are primarily concerned with metaphysical issues. There is no specification of why certain moral acts are praiseworthy, nor others the opposite. They do show how the emptiness of phenomena is another way of explaining suffering (by way of emptiness explaining the impermanence of what is desired), and that emptiness as dependent-origination allows this suffering to be originated and ceased (meaning the desire for what is impermanent has an origin and may cease). It is also the case that by refuting intrinsic nature, Nāgārjuna makes room for change in reality, thereby ensuring that there is a path to liberation and that religious practice is possible. But the contents of this path, and how the realisation of emptiness should affect an understanding of it, remains unclear. It is in his writing that refers to the Bodhisattva ideal (specifically, the *Ratnāvalī*) that we find this element of his ethics elaborated, and from this we come to understand how the metaphysics of emptiness is an elegant articulation of the Bodhisattva ideal.

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[310] *pratītyasamutpādasya hi evaṃ sati pratyākhyānaṃ bhavati* (302).
[311] *pratītyasamutpannaṃ hy etat sarvam asati pratītyasamutpāde kuto bhaviṣyati* (306).

## 14.2. The Bodhisattva Ideal

I have earlier made reference to the distinction between the *bodhisattva* and *arhat* ideals, and cited a passage from the Mahāyāna *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* which held the former to be superior to the latter ideal. It is now time to say something more on why this is seen to be the case.

The notion of a *bodhisattva* is simply one who, on the sure path to enlightenment, remains within the cycle of rebirths in order to eradicate the suffering of all other beings. The word itself is a conjunction based on the terms "fully awakened" or "complete knowledge" (*bodhi*) and "being" or "nature" (*sattva*).[312] The ideal is not exclusive to Mahāyāna traditions, as can be seen in the *Jātaka* texts – tales of the Buddha's compassionate actions in his past lives being narrated as an example of him embodying the *bodhisattva* ideal.[313] A certain class of monks found such an ideal worthy of emulation, and strove to model their outlook on that of the Buddha's compassion and generosity. What emerges is the articulation of a *bodhisattva* path that is seen as something distinct from the eightfold path outlined in the fourth Noble Truth, though one held to be a development of the latter, and not a replacement (Garfield 2022: 117, Harvey 2000: 123). The scope of concepts relating to the *bodhisattva* path is broad,[314] encompassing models such as the stages or stations (*bhūmi*) towards the *bodhisattva* goal,[315] or a separate set of ethical precepts specific to *bodhisattvas* (Harvey 2000: 132 – 134, Keown 1992: 142 – 145).[316] I will limit myself to briefly highlighting three crucial elements of this large soteriological project: the emphasis on compassion (*karuṇā*) as a core cardinal virtue, the sincere intent and commitment to be a *bodhisattva* (*bodhicitta*), and the cultivation of the *bodhisattva* perfections (*pāramitā*).

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[312] Harvey (2000: 123) translates it as "Being-for-Enlightenment."
[313] For details of the *bodhisattva* ideal as found in early Buddhism, see Anālayo (2010).
[314] For a discussion of the various understandings of the *bodhisattva* path within the Mahāyāna tradition, see Clayton (2018).
[315] Examples include the *bodhisattva-bhūmi* section of the *Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra*, composed by the influential Mahāyāna propounder, Asaṅga (see Engle 2016), as well as Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* (See Huntington and Wangchen 1989). Both of these follow the model of ten stages, which is also found in the early Mahāyāna text, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*.
[316] The precepts were not absolute, and could be overridden on the basis of values central to the *bodhisattva* way, such as compassion (see Harvey 2000: 134 – 141, and Keown 1992: 145 – 157).

Compassion has been respected as a core virtue from the earliest days of Buddhism, such that it is included among the four great virtues, or, literally, "sublime abodes" (*brahmavihārāḥ*) that are described in the *Metta Suttas* of the Pāli Canon's *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.[317] By the time of Śāntideva in the 7th – 8th century CE, it becomes equal in importance to wisdom (*prajñā*) (Clayton 2018: 147). Its significance is captured in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, for when one on the *bodhisattva* path aspires to the perfection of wisdom:

> Great compassion on that occasion takes hold of him. He surveys countless beings with his
>
> heavenly eye, and what he sees fills him with great agitation [...] And he attends to them
>
> with the thought that: "I shall become a saviour to all those beings, I shall release them from
>
> all their sufferings!" But he does not make either this, or anything else, into a sign to which
>
> he becomes partial.
>
> (Translated by Conze 1975: 238 – 239).

Later writers such as Candrakīrti continue this emphasis, when he writes in his treatise on the stages of the *bodhisattva* path, the *Madhyamakāvatāra*:

> Before all else I praise compassion; for this sympathy is regarded as the seed of the precious
>
> harvest [which is] the conquerors, as the water that nourishes [this crop], and as the
>
> ripening process that yields mature fruit after some time.
>
> (Translated by Huntington and Wangchen (1989: 149) (words in square brackets in original)).

It should be noted that compassion is not simply a passive act, but one that necessarily involves action.[318] It results from the realisation of universal suffering and the need to eradicate that

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[317] The other three are benevolence (*mettā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*) and impartiality (*upekkhā*). For a philosophical elucidation of these virtues, see Garfield (2022: Ch. 9). For a discussion of benevolence and compassions, see Harvey (2000: 103 – 109).

[318] For this reason Garfield (2022: 111- 112) prefers to translate *karuṇā* as "care" rather than "compassion," however given that the latter has become standard, I have maintained it. Garfield (2022) also discusses the popular (though contested) Sanskrit etymology of compassion (*karuṇā*) from the verbal root for "do" (*kṛ*) (112). He also points to the Buddhist distinction between the virtue of compassion with its "near enemy"

suffering. Nor is it complete in its first emergence, but a virtue that a practitioner constantly strives

to perfect. Thus we come to the *bodhisattva* intention.

The intention to become a *bodhisattva* is taken to be the first stage on a long and arduous path.[319]

The commitment to embark upon that path takes the form of an intention or thought (*bodhicitta*).

As described in the influential *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, the thought is possible only for one who has

cultivated the necessary traits and virtues to a high (though not perfect) degree, and the link with

compassion is seen in the statement that *bodhicitta* is "arisen in beings filled with tender

compassion."[320] This thought may then take the form of a vow, forms of which have already been

seen in the excerpts from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* above, wherein the *bodhisattva*

makes the vow to work towards the eradication of suffering and towards the enlightenment of all

beings. Some of these vows are more complex, listing many commitments,[321] however the essential

point of the act of the vow is captured by Garfield (2022: 152) as: "a kind of promise or agreement,

but it is more a promise or agreement to oneself – a resolution – than to anyone else." The

resolution to eradicate suffering requires, however, a commitment to the cultivation of a set of

"Perfections" (*pāramitā*s).

The Perfections number six, though are later extended to ten (in order to match the ten stages listed

in texts like the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*). The six found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* are as

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(meaning something that is mistaken for the virtue, but is actually unhelpful), which is the inactive pity (Pāli: *gehasitaṃ domanassa*) one may feel for suffering whilst choosing not to act (138 – 139).

[319] It should be noted that the *bodhisattva* path, under Buddhist cosmology and the belief in transmigration, takes many lifetimes. For the preparations involved prior to the arising of the *bodhicitta*, see Williams (2009: 196 – 199).

[320] *kṛpākaruṇābhimukhānāṃ (bodhi)sattvānāṃ bodhāya cittamutpādyate* (Dharmamitra 2019: 466). See also, for example, the remarks: "and that thought arisen in *bodhisattvas* has great compassion as pre-eminent" (*ca taccittamutpadyate bodhisattvānāṃ mahākaruṇāpūrvaṃgamaṃ* (Dharmamitra 2019: 466)) and "having seen the oppression in heaps of suffering of these beings with this nature [of ignorance etc.], the seed of great compassion for all beings produces [the following exhortation]: these beings are to be rescued, to be released, from great delusion, and to be placed in the perpetually pleasant Nirvāṇa" (*teṣāmevaṃrūpeṇa sattvānāṃ duḥkhaskandhāvipramokṣaṃ dṛṣṭvā sattveṣu mahākaruṇonmiñjaḥ saṃbhavati - ete'smābhiḥ sattvāḥ paritrātavyāḥ parimocayitavyā ato mahāsaṃmohāt, atyantasukhe ca nirvāṇe pratiṣṭhāpayitavyāḥ iti* (Dharmamitra 2019: 472)).

[321] See Dharmamitra (2019: 69 – 77) for a translation of the passage in the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* wherein the "ten great vows" of the *bodhisattva* are given, including commitments to teach the *bodhisattva* path and remain in the cycle or rebirths.

follows: (i) generosity (*dāna*), (ii) proper conduct (*śīla*), (iii) patience (*kṣānti*), (iv) diligence (*vīrya*), (v)

contemplation (*dhyāna*), and (vi) wisdom (*prajñā*).[322] These Perfections are the closest correlate to

the older explanation of the Eightfold Noble Path to *Nirvāṇa* for the *arhat*, and whilst I will not go

into details regarding the specifics of each, I shall simply note a few points.[323] Firstly, they are clearly

virtues rather than moral injunctions – neither generosity, patience nor diligence are individual acts

(though they may manifest as such). They are instead virtuous traits to be continuously cultivated. In

this way, the goal is for ethical conduct to be commensurate with character, and for the resulting

conduct to be less based upon abstract reasoning and more a result of spontaneous engagement.

More importantly for our discussion is the final perfection – wisdom (*prajñā*).[324] This is the

realisation of emptiness, and the link between metaphysics and ethics in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Without knowledge of emptiness, the *bodhisattva* path is not complete. Wisdom is necessary for the

eradication of universal suffering. If that is so, emptiness must be explicated in a manner that

supports the other Perfections, and, ultimately, the *bodhisattva* path. An understanding of

emptiness must be intertwined with the compassion upon which intention to embark upon the

*bodhisattva* path and its Perfections relies. Thus we return to Nāgārjuna.


## 14.3. The *Ratnāvalī* and the Ethics of Emptiness

Though Nāgārjuna elaborates on the key Mahāyāna concept of emptiness in the *MMK* and *VV*, both

an explicit reference to the Mahāyāna or the *bodhisattva* ideal are noticeably absent. Some scholars

(Warder 1973; Kalupahana 1986) have questioned whether Nāgārjuna was indeed an advocate of

the nascent movement, or whether he is best seen as revising the metaphysical outlook whilst

maintaining the general ethical outlook of the *arhat* ideal. However, the lack of explicit reference to

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[322] The extension of Perfections to 10 adds (vii) pedagogical skill (*upāya*), (viii) resoluteness (*praṇidhāna*), (ix) strength (*bala*), and (x) knowledge (*jñāna*) – see Dayal (1970: 165 – 168).
[323] For a detailed philosophical analysis of these, see Garfield (2022: Ch. 8). For an investigation into their history and textual basis, see Dayal (1970: Ch. V).
[324] See Williams (2009: 49 – 51) for details on this and its link to emptiness.

the Mahāyāna may be related to pragmatic concerns on how best to propagate the new teachings without arousing censure, a social situation discussed in detail by Walser (2005).[325] One text attributed to Nāgārjuna which does describe both the Mahāyāna and the *bodhisattva* ideal is the *Ratnāvalī* (*RĀ*),[326] for it "supplements these dialectical texts [*MMK, VV*] by affording a code of Mahāyāna Buddhist principles – practical as well as theoretical" (Lindtner 1987: 163). The *RĀ* is divided into five chapters, [327] and written as advice to a monarch. With regard to the latter feature, it is fascinating to note the pedagogy and rhetoric deployed in order to convince the monarch of the superiority of the Mahāyāna, such that Nāgārjuna gives a long explanation of the attractive physical attributes (the 32 marks of a Buddha) that develop when one follows the *bodhisattva* path (*RĀ* 276 – 296).[328]

Another method of persuasion is the reference to self-interest. At certain places, Nāgārjuna states that a certain virtue or act should be pursued for the rewards it offers the pursuer, so that in *RĀ* 307 he writes:

> If you do not make contributions of the wealth
>
> Obtained from former giving to the needy,
>
> Through your ingratitude and attachment
>
> You will not obtain wealth in the future.
>
> (Translated by Hopkins 2007: 135).

I would like to suggest that such arguments disguise a deeper point Nāgārjuna makes throughout the text, and one that is liable to be concealed when framed as a discussion on statecraft or leadership. This is the fact of dependent-origination, a fact which undermines any notion of distinct subject, or agent of action, against an object or patient of action. The first two chapters of the text make many

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[325] See especially pp. 264 – 270.
[326] The evidence for Nāgārjuna's authorship of the text is nicely summarised in Walser (2005: 271 – 278).
[327] For a summary of each of the five chapters, see Lindtner (1987: 164 – 166) and Potter (1999: 153 – 161)
[328] He also argues that a virtuous monarch ought to propagate the Mahāyāna doctrine and texts (*RĀ* 265), perhaps alluding to the difficult position the Mahāyāna had found itself within during its early stages.

of the same points as Nāgārjuna's other texts concerning metaphysics (that independent entities are not possible), yet the emphasis comes to fall on the notion of an "I" or self (*ātman*). Nāgārjuna argues that if emptiness is not understood, then the refutation of an ultimately existent self is not achieved, and one should cultivate the virtues on the basis of faith in the *dharma* (*RĀ* 124 – 125). What is implied by this is that a correct understanding and realisation of emptiness (dependent-origination) would lead to a particular ethical comportment which would not require conscious reference to following a set of rules or virtues, but instead be what Garfield (2022: 42) calls "spontaneous experience."[329] In the absence of this understanding, one ought to cultivate habits that reflect the kind of behaviour that follows from understanding emptiness.[330] Returning to the issue of self-interest, it is clear that when one acts upon the *bodhisattva* path, one is acting in a way that reflects the metaphysical structure of reality – dependent-origination. If dependent-origination is true, and intrinsic nature is not, then there is ultimately no distinction between self and other. It is not possible to locate a certain *x* that constitutes the "I" or "not-I" without running into paradox. Therefore self-interest is simply the interest of all. It is, as has been discussed, the *bodhisattva* commitment to eradicating all suffering. This ethical consequence emerges explicitly in certain passages, such as *RĀ* 174 – 175, where Nāgārjuna writes:

> […]
>
> If you and the world wish to attain
>
> Unparalleled enlightenment,
>
> Its roots are the altruistic aspiration to enlightenment
>
> Firm like the monarch of the mountains,
>
> Compassion reaching to all quarters,

---

[329] Garfield also explains this as being an ethics not concerned with output (actions), but focusing instead on input (an agent's perception of the world, which may then lead to particular kinds of action). He refers to his colleague Geshe Namgyal Dadul as explaining: "Buddhist ethical thought and practice is aimed at facilitating a transition from being *reactive* to being *responsive*." (Garfield 2022: 29).

[330] It should be noted that the three virtues listed by Nāgārjuna are the first three Perfections of the *bodhisattva*: generosity, proper conduct, and patience.

And wisdom not relying on duality.

(Translated by Hopkins 2007: 117).

And in *RĀ* 300, Nāgārjuna writes:

Therefore knowing the concordance

Of actions and their effects,

Always help beings in fact.

Just that will help yourself.

(Translated by Hopkins 2007: 133).

The extent to which this new metaphysical picture was a natural fit for the emerging *bodhisattva*

ideal is clear with Nāgārjuna's emphasis on both compassion and the Perfections. In fact, we find

that compassion is often listed together with the six Perfections as a description of the Mahāyāna

religious outlook (*RĀ* 380; 435). Compassion is stated to be "a mind having the one savor [o]f mercy

for all sentient beings" (*RĀ* 437) and that from which "all aims are achieved" (*RĀ* 438).[331] The

aspirational wish for the cessation of suffering in all beings (*bodhicitta*) that is rooted in the

compassion of the *bodhisattva* is not explained by the followers of the Abhidharma, and so "how

could one become [a] Bodhisattva through it?" (*RĀ* 390).[332]

What is revealed by this line of reasoning is the criticism of the *dharma* theory discussed earlier – if a

distinction is made between the derivative and the foundational source of the derivative (*dravya*),

then the latter may become an object of attachment. The foundational level – the *dharmas* – may

also be distinguished into separate streams, and so one may become selfishly concerned with one's

own particular stream, meaning that the causes of suffering described by the Buddha (desire and

aversion) are not eradicated. This tension remains in the Sarvāstivāda account of the soteriological

goal and the method to its achievement, and yet does not arise in my metaphysical reading of

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[331] Both quoted passages translated by Hopkins (2007: 154 – 155).
[332] Translated by Hopkins (2007: 146).

Nāgārjuna. The Madhyamaka approach describes reality as without a foundational level of independent entities grounding all else. Since everything is dependent, nothing is permanent, for by removing the conditions of its emergence one may destroy the entity. The mistake of taking certain entities to have an intrinsic nature and therefore independent existence (our natural – though ignorant – way of perceiving the world) coupled with the metaphysical fact of dependent-origination leads to our suffering. We desire permanence where in fact everything is impermanent. This same teaching of dependent-origination means that suffering has a cause and an end due to suffering, like all else, being dependent. Finally, there is a path to the end of suffering, and for the Madhyamaka the only possible path for the eradication of suffering is not the eradication of afflictions adhering to a particular stream, but the eradication of *all* suffering for every entity. In the absence of a foundational level, all is dependent upon all else, and the eradication of suffering in any one being requires the eradication of suffering in all beings. The *arhat* ideal cannot meet these demands, and so the *bodhisattva* ideal arises as an answer to the question of the correct soteriological method.

It has been said that the entire Buddhist teaching can be understood as an explication of the Four Noble Truths. These form the heart of what the Buddha came to understand when he achieved enlightenment. Later Buddhist philosophers attempted to work out the implications of this teaching. One route was to expand the teaching into a project of categorising the fundamental constituents of reality – the *dharmas*. The other route was to condense the teaching into a simple ontological description – dependent-origination. The latter, it seems, avoided an unresolved tension present in the former. It is no wonder that the Madhyamaka philosophy and the *bodhisattva* ideal flourished in the centuries that followed Nāgārjuna, as it continues to do so today.

# 15. Conclusion to Part III

I have sought to show how Nāgārjuna's philosophy of metaphysical anti-foundationalism (as discussed in Part I) fits in with the Buddhist ethical outlook contained within the Four Noble Truths. We have seen how the Sarvāstivādin philosophers, in describing a reality consisting of ultimate independent fundamental entities and the entities that derive from these, struggles with eradicating the craving and attachment that characterises suffering. This is due to two reasons. The first is that a description of independent entities marked by an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) finds difficulty in accounting for change. If the fundamental entities exist independently, without relying on causes and conditions, then they exist permanently. If they exist permanently, then suffering neither has a cause (the second Noble Truth) nor an end (the third Noble Truth). The entire motive for the Buddhist religious life is undermined. This is the focus of Nāgārjuna's arguments in the *MMK* and *VV* regarding the Four Noble Truths, and virtue and vice, respectively.

The second issue is that, if a fundamental level exists, then the entities of this level (*dharmas*) may become the object of attachment. Though, according to the Abhidharma model, one acts out of step with reality if one believes in an ultimately real permanently enduring self, this still leaves room for the stream of *dharmas* which ground the self to themselves become the objects of attachment, desire and fear. If this craving is not eradicated, then the cause of suffering, as explained in the second Noble Truth, remains in place. Once again the Buddhist religious life is undermined.

Though not explicitly raised by Nāgārjuna, criticisms of the second kind are implied by the *bodhisattva* ideal of the nascent Māhāyana movement, in contrast to the *arhat* ideal of the Abhidharma schools. Where the *arhat* seeks liberation for a single stream in isolation, the *bodhisattva* seeks liberation for the whole mass of suffering beings. The *arhat*'s path is possible when one understands reality as consisting of streams of *dharmas*, but when one understands the teaching of emptiness, as dependent-origination (or universal dependence), then the possibility of

the *arhat* path is itself an illusion. As noted in the *RĀ* (and Nāgārjuna's other texts), the teaching of emptiness entails that the distinction between oneself and another collapses, for neither is a completely isolated entity possessing an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), but is always dependent upon another, whether these relata are considered as ultimate existents or simply as streams of *dharmas*. If all is dependent, the liberation of one must depend upon the liberation of all. This requires the virtue of compassion, highlighted as the key virtue of one on the *bodhisattva* path. This understanding of emptiness, in conjunction with the *bodhisattva* ideal, resolves the tension in the Noble Truths and provides a harmonious account of the Buddhist way. The philosophy of emptiness is a metaphysical articulation of the *bodhisattva* path. But the *bodhisattva* path is also an ethical articulation of the metaphysics of emptiness. We may say that they are, in fact, dependently-originated.

# Conclusion: Madhyamaka as Metaphysical

Throughout this work, I have shown how Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy is best understood as a form of metaphysical anti-foundationalism, though, importantly, one that does not entail either a metaphysical absolute nor nihilism. I have argued that this position is consistent and able to respond to the 'Source of Being' objection. By holding a metaphysical position, Nāgārjuna is not a sceptic, and the Madhyamaka philosophy is an innovative metaphysical articulation of the Buddhist ethical ideal of the *bodhisattva*. All of this goes to show that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is very much consistent with the Buddhist ethical outlook.

In Part I, I focused on understanding Madhyamaka philosophy as resulting from a dispute with the foundationalist metaphysics of the Sarvāstivāda school of Abhidharma Buddhism. The framework of metaphysical grounding was employed in order to draw out this emphasis on foundationalism. I have shown how the Sarvāstivāda posited a multi-layered structure for reality, and how the chain of dependence terminated in foundational entities called *dharmas*. By reference to work on essence in the literature on grounding, I showed how the Sarvāstivāda notion of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) is intimately tied to the notion of a foundation. The Madhyamaka attack on intrinsic nature is therefore best understood as an attack on metaphysical foundationalism. I also defend the Madhyamaka position against the 'Source of Being' objection – the claim that without a foundational base, nothing could attain being. By discussing the positions of metaphysical infinitism and metaphysical coherentism, I have shown how the 'Source of Being' objection can be met. I then presented Nāgārjuna as arguing for an indefinitely expanding holistic metaphysical structure, one which, by collapsing the distinction between subject and object, expands as one attempts to locate a source of being and contracts as that search is given up.

In Part II, I discussed the sceptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna, with reference to his work on epistemology and his Nyāya opponents. I have shown how the sceptical reading misunderstands key technical terminology used by Nāgārjuna, the debating context in which these terms are used, and

fails to appreciate the foundationalist metaphysics which underlie the Nyāya epistemology. A correct understanding of these elements is only compatible with a metaphysical interpretation of Madhyamaka.

In Part III, I have shown how my metaphysical interpretation is compatible with the Buddhist ethical outlook, and that it provides a metaphysical articulation for the Buddhist ethical ideal of the *bodhisattva*. I argued that this latter ideal emerged due to a tension in the Four Noble Truths that resulted from the alternative ideal of the *arhat* (the ideal aimed at by the Sarvāstivāda) and its *dharma* metaphysics. This was the difficulty of explaining change, and the difficulty of completely removing "clinging" when one accepts the foundational elements which make up the experience of a person as belonging to distinct streams. I demonstrated how the Madhyamaka is able to resolve this tension and how it offers a metaphysical model for an ethical ideal which take compassion as its key virtue.

In sum, I have shown how Madhyamaka can be read as a defensible form of metaphysical anti-foundationalism, one that is neither absolutist, nor nihilistic, and very much consistent with the Buddhist ethical outlook.

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