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NĀGĀRJUNA'S APPEAL

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Among the incidental features of Nāgārjuna's philosophy that have captured my attention over the years, there are two in particular that I wish to discuss in this paper.¹ The first observation is that his philosophical writings seem to have fascinated a large number of modern scholars of Buddhism; this hardly requires demonstration. The second observation is that Nāgārjuna's writings had relatively little effect on the course of subsequent Indian Buddhist philosophy. Despite his apparent attempts to discredit some of the most fundamental concepts of abhidharma, abhidharma continued to flourish for centuries, without any appreciable attempt on the part of ābhidharmikas to defend their methods of analysis against Nāgārjuna's criticisms.² And despite Nāgārjuna's radical critique of the very possibility of having grounded knowledge (*pramāṇa*), the epistemological school of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti dominated Indian Buddhist intellectual circles, again without any explicit attempt to answer Nāgārjuna's criticisms of their agenda. Aside from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna's works, who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed.

Taken together, these two observations may suggest that the interest that modern scholars of Buddhism have in Nāgārjuna may be out of proportion to the influence that Nāgārjuna had on Buddhist themselves. On first consideration, the observation that Nāgārjuna had little impact on classical Buddhists may seem unrelated to the observation that he has had a good deal of impact on modern Buddhologists. On further reflection, however, it seems that a common reason can be found to explain these two observations; the reason could be simply that Nāgārjuna's arguments, when examined closely, turn out to be fallacious and therefore not very convincing to a logically astute reader. By using faulty argumentation, Nāgārjuna was able to arrive at

some spectacularly counterintuitive conclusions. The fallaciousness of his arguments would explain why many generations of Indian Buddhists after Nāgārjuna's time ignored much of what he had to say; the Indian Buddhist tradition was for the most part quite insistent on sound argumentation. And the counterintuitive conclusions would help explain why some modern readers have assumed that since Nāgārjuna's conclusions do not follow from his arguments, he was not trying to conform to the canons of standard logic at all but was instead presenting a radical critique of standard logic, or was at least working within the framework of some kind of so-called deviant logic.

The principal object of this paper is to examine some of Nāgārjuna's arguments in order to determine exactly what type of fallacy he most often employs. In order to reach that object, I shall first try to determine the purpose behind Nāgārjuna's argumentation by looking not only at the conclusions he claimed to have reached but also at the reasons why he may have found it important to arrive at those conclusions. The next step will be to examine the actual fallacies upon which his conclusions rest. Once that has been done, the final section of this paper will examine some of the types of interpretation that modern scholars have used in their attempts to make sense of Nāgārjuna's style of argumentation; it will be suggested, but probably not proven definitively, that these interpretive strategies have much more affinity with modern philosophical preoccupations than with anything that would have seemed important to Nāgārjuna.

2. NĀGĀRJUNA'S PHILOSOPHICAL GOAL

Probably more has been written about Nāgārjuna, in English at least, than has been written about any other Buddhist philosopher. As is to be expected, the more scholars investigate and write about Nāgārjuna, the less agreement there is as to what his principal goals were in setting down his ideas in the way he did. Depending on what one reads about Nāgārjuna in secondary sources, one can come away with the impression either that he was a mystic, or a radical critic of the forms of Buddhism that preceded him, or a conservative trying to get back to certain basic principles that had somehow gotten lost in the scholastic developments that took place between the time of the

historical Buddha and his own time. Of course these different interpretations are not necessarily incompatible, but they do give us somewhat different pictures of the type of world view and the kinds of religious practices one might expect to find associated with a person who expressed himself in the ways that Nāgārjuna did. I cannot hope to solve the problem of which of the competing views of Nāgārjuna is the most accurate, but I think it is possible at least to reject some interpretations of his thought that are not well-supported by a close examination of his writings. Before doing so, however, let me offer a quick recapitulation of what I take to be the most important tenets in his system of ideas.

In speaking of the philosophical goals of Nāgārjuna, discussion will be limited in this paper to one text, the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* (MMK). In this text there is abundant evidence that Nāgārjuna's principal objective is essentially the same as that which is common to all Buddhists of the classical period. Thus it can be said of Nāgārjuna in particular, just as it can be said of Buddhist writings in general, that the texts were written as antidotes to the erroneous thinking that, according to Buddhist theory, functions as the root cause of all distress. More specifically, Nāgārjuna's argumentation is offered as a corrective to two particular views concerning the continuity of the self after the death of the physical body. On the other hand, there is the view that the self is identical with the physical body and the physically generated mental events; when the body dies, so does the mind, and hence so does the self. This first view, known as the view of discontinuity (*ucchedavāda*), is traditionally regarded as one limit (*anta*). The opposite limit, called the view of perpetuity (*śāśvatavāda*), is that the self is not identical with and is separable from the body-mind complex so that the self continues to exist after the decomposition of the body and the mental events based therein. Nāgārjuna's position, and indeed the position of Buddhist doctrine in general, is said to be a position in between these two limits.

In trying to determine Nāgārjuna's principal objective, the natural places to begin looking are the statements he makes at the beginning and at the end of his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*. That work opens with these well-known lines (MMK 1:1—2):

anirōdham anutpādam aucchedam aśāśvatam|
 anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgaman||
 yaḥ pratītyasamutpādam prapañcopaśamaṃ śīvaṃ|
 deśayāṃ āsa sambuddhas taṃ vande vadatāṃ varam||

I pay homage to the finest of speakers, who, being fully awakened, showed happiness to be dependent origination, the quelling of vain thinking, which is without any coming to an end, without any coming into being, without discontinuity, without perpetuity, without singularity, without plurality, without any approach and without any retreat.

And at the end of this same work, Nāgārjuna again pays respects to the Buddha in these words (MMK 27:30):

sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat|
 anukampāṃ upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamam||

I prostrate before Gautama, who, after experiencing compassion, taught true virtue in order to dispel all opinions.

Embedded in these seemingly simple verses are a number of rather difficult problems of interpretation, which I have tried to avoid in my translation by using ordinary language as much as possible so as not to employ technical terms that would favour one philosophical interpretation over any other. Having avoided these problems by a neutral translation, let me now face them head on.

Look first of all at the opening verse that was cited above. In it we are told that the Buddha taught that true happiness (*śīva*) consists in quelling vain thinking (*prapañcopaśama*). And the last verse of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* asserts that the purpose of the Buddha's teachings was to dispel all opinions (*dṛṣṭi*). What is crucial to an understanding of Nāgārjuna's thought is some appreciation of what is meant by the words "prapañca" and "dṛṣṭi."

Before we go any further in this line of inquiry, it should be pointed out that both of these words are virtually devoid of any constant precise meaning. Rather, they are variables that are capable of being

given a more or less precise meaning by the Buddhist who uses them. Every Buddhist uses these words to connote wrongful uses of the mind. So, whenever we encounter the terms in a given text, all we can know for sure is that they refer to mental habits that have to be got rid of if we are to attain the greatest good. For some Buddhist thinkers, wrongful mental habits might consist in holding certain specified views that are contrary to the principal dogmas of institutionalized Buddhism. For others, a wrongful use of the intellect might consist in any sort of analytical thinking. For yet others, it might consist in naive, uncritical thinking. But in the usage of any given thinker, we can never be sure without further investigation just exactly what kinds of mental habits are seen as being impediments to our highest well-being. So in Nāgārjuna's verses all we can know for sure is that the terms have undesirable overtones.

Fortunately, it is not too difficult to discover what Nāgārjuna means by the term "opinion (*dr̥ṣṭi*)," since the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* contains an entire chapter on exactly that subject. In fact, it is the final chapter in his work and serves as a summary of all that he has been trying to achieve from the very outset of his treatise. In this summary chapter, Nāgārjuna gives several examples of the kinds of opinion he feels are counterproductive. He says at the outset of the chapter:

dr̥ṣṭayo 'bhūvaṃ nābhūvaṃ kiṃ nv atīte 'dhvanīti ca|
 yās tāḥ śāsvatalokādyāḥ pūrvāntaṃ samupāśritāḥ||
 dr̥ṣṭayo na bhaviṣyāmi kim anyo 'nāgate 'dhvani|
 bhaviṣyāmīti cāntādyā aparāntaṃ samupāśritāḥ||

There are opinions concerning such things as an eternal world that depend upon a beginning point in time. Examples of such opinions are "I existed in the past," or "I did not exist in the past."

There are opinions concerning such things as termination that depend upon an ending point in time. Examples are "I will not exist in the future," or "I will be someone else [than who I am now]."

On reading these two verses it becomes clear that the opinions that require elimination are just those that presuppose that one has some definite personal identity. Opinions that presuppose that there is a definite personal identity that one carries around throughout one's life are, according to Nāgārjuna, ungrounded opinions. If one presupposes that there is a definite identity, that is, something essential in oneself that remains the same while peripheral things undergo change, then it is quite natural to wonder about such questions as the starting point of one's existence, such as whether one began at conception or at birth. And it is also natural to wonder whether one existed in some sense prior to the present existence, and to wonder whether at some point in the future one's self will cease to exist.

But if there is no warrant for the presupposition that there is something stable and unchanging, then all such opinions about the past (before the present life) and future (after the present life) become groundless. At the very best, dwelling on beliefs that are groundless is a waste of time that could be devoted to more constructive thoughts. And at the worst, groundless beliefs always carry the risk of not conforming to reality, and whenever one's beliefs do not conform to reality, there is a possibility of the unpleasant experience of being taken by surprise by unexpected realities. Therefore, groundless opinions are among the encumbrances to be discarded in order for one to achieve happiness.

There is one other key verse in Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* that sheds light on the opening two stanzas. It is verse MMK 24:18, which reads:

yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracaḡṣmahe|
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā||

We claim that dependent origination is emptiness. To be empty is to be a derivative idea. That alone is the middle path.

If all these verses that have been considered so far are taken together, it is fairly clear that Nāgārjuna is arguing that the intuitive notions we have of our own personal identities are complex notions or derivative

ideas (*upādāya prajñaptiḥ*). If these complex ideas can be analysed into their simpler parts, then one can dispense with them. In particular, one can dispense with the idea of a self, which is the ultimate root of all unhappiness. Accordingly, nearly all the remainder of Nāgārjuna's work sets about the task of showing that the concept of a permanent self cannot possibly correspond to anything in the real world, because the very notion is riddled with internal contradictions. It is, in other words, Nāgārjuna's aim to show that the notion of a self is in the final analysis an unintelligible notion.

During the course of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, Nāgārjuna provides arguments for a number of theorems that bear on the general conclusion that nothing has a self. Two of these subsidiary theorems that will come up for discussion in the course of this paper are the following:

Theorem 1. *No beings at all exist anywhere.* (na jātu kecana bhāvāḥ kvacana vidyante)

Theorem 2. *Nothing can undergo the process of change.* (kasya anyathātvaṃ bhaviṣyati)

The reasoning that Nāgārjuna presents in support of these theorems will be examined below in section 3; in the present section the principal task is simply to understand what these theorems mean, and what they imply.

In order to understand the standard interpretation of Theorem 1, it may be helpful to bear in mind that it is made in the context of an examination of the basic postulates of Buddhist ābhidharma scholasticism. According to the scholastics, a being is that which has an identity (*svabhāva*), that is, a characteristic by which it can be distinguished from beings that have different identities. One can make a theoretical distinction between two types of being. Simple beings are those that cannot be broken up or analysed into small components, while complex beings are organized aggregations of simple beings. The ontological position taken within most schools of classical Buddhist abhidharma is that complex beings do not exist as beings above and beyond the simple beings of which they are composed. Insofar as a

complex being has any identity, its identity is derivative, being a product of the identities of its elementary parts; as was shown above, a being whose identity is derivative is said to be empty (*śūnya*). Simple beings, on the other hand, do have distinct identities, according to the scholastics, and can therefore be said to exist in their own right. Simple beings are basic properties (*dharmā*). They may be physical properties, such as resistance, cohesion, and motility; or basic psychological properties such as attraction, aversion, indifference, joy, sadness, equanimity, understanding, misunderstanding and so forth. When it is said that a person has no self (*ātman*), what is meant is that a person is a complex being whose identity is a product of all the many physical and mental properties that are organized into a single system. Now in stating Theorem 1, Nāgārjuna is making the claim that not only do complex beings lack an identity and therefore an ultimate reality, but so do simple beings. In the final analysis, then, there are no beings of either kind that exist anywhere.

Theorem 2 is also related to scholastic ways of thinking. According to the metaphysical principles followed by the ābhīdharmikas, complex beings are prone to undergo change, because anything that is composite is liable eventually to undergo total decomposition. And before decomposing altogether, a complex being is prone to losing some of its parts and acquiring new parts to replace those that have been lost. A person, for example, may lose the psychological property of attraction for a particular object and replace it with the property of indifference towards that object. The process of losing and substituting their elementary parts is the mechanism by which complex beings undergo change, and eventually death or destruction. Since such change is inevitable, people who become fond of complex beings are bound to feel the unpleasant psychological properties of sadness and so forth that attend the experience of a change or loss of an object of affection. According to classical Buddhist theory, the best strategy for breaking the habit of becoming fond of complex objects is to focus the attention on the simple properties of which they are composed, and to recognize that even these simple properties are transient.

Credit must be given to the ābhīdharmikas for providing a cogent theory of change and for recognizing that all complex beings are liable to undergo change. The ābhīdharmikas also deserve credit for realizing

that the notion of change in a complex being is, like the notion of such a being's identity, a derivative idea. In the same way that a complex being's identity is the product of the identities of the parts of which it is made, a complex being's change of state is a product of the relative locations of its elementary parts. Thus, in the technical language of Buddhist abhidharma, the change the complex beings are said to undergo is also empty. The main shortcoming of the ābhīdharmikas' account of change is that it fails to provide any account for how simple beings can undergo change. Complex beings lose their existence by losing their integrity; that is, their components, become scattered to such an extent that the parts no longer hang together as a single aggregation. But how does a simple being lost its existence? It could be said that a simple being has only one part and therefore loses its existence by losing its one part, but the question still remains: how does a simple being lose its only part? Since the being is identical to its sole component, the being cannot be separated from its single property; the part of a simple being cannot be scattered in the same way as the parts of a complex being. The only way a simple being can go out of existence is if its single part goes out of existence, but there is no account for how its single part loses its existence.

Recognizing that a simple being can neither lost its integrity, not can it go out of existence, Nāgārjuna observed that a being that has an identity (*prakṛti*, *svabhāva*) cannot undergo change. Add this to the ābhīdharmika conclusion that the change of complex beings is a derivative idea rather than a primitive fact of the world, and one arrives at Theorem 2: nothing can undergo the process of change.

As we saw above, Nāgārjuna's view of the Buddha's teaching was that it served to help people achieve happiness by dispelling all opinions (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*). Presumably, Nāgārjuna saw his own task as helping his readers achieve the same goal by the same means. Since most opinions are in some way or another about beings and the changes they undergo, Nāgārjuna's strategy seems to be to dispel opinions by showing that in the final analysis opinions have no subject matters. Showing the insubstantiality of the subject matters of opinions is, in other words, a way of trying to starve opinions out. According to Buddhist theory, the sensual appetites can be starved by withdrawing the attention from sensible objects; recognizing the

intrinsic unattractiveness of sensible objects helps one to be willing to withdraw that attention. Similarly, curiosity and the other intellectual appetites can be starved by withdrawing the attention from intellectible objects, namely, the properties (*dharma*) cognized by the intellectual faculty (*manovijñāna*). Realizing that all properties are insubstantial helps one to be willing to withdraw attention from them. Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, I suggest, is a method of helping one attain that realization. What remains to be investigated now is the soundness of the argumentation by which Nāgārjuna tries to prompt that realization.

3. NĀGĀRJUNA'S APPEAL TO REASON: EXAMINING HIS ARGUMENTATION

The form of argument that Nāgārjuna uses throughout his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is exemplified by the ones adduced in his discussion of causal relations, which is the topic of the first chapter of the work. The strategy of argumentation in the first chapter of that work is one that he uses repeatedly, without significant variation, throughout his philosophical writing. Therefore, it is worth examining Nāgārjuna's arguments on the topic of causal relations in some detail.

3.1. *Arguments in MMK 1: pratyāya-parīkṣā*

It is no accident that Nāgārjuna begins his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* with an examination of causal relations. There is probably no concept more central to formal Buddhist doctrine than that of causality. The notion of cause and effect is the very backbone of the four Noble Truths, which are in turn regarded as the very essence of the Buddha's teaching. Taken as a whole, the Four Noble Truths state that discontent has an identifiable cause, and if this cause can be eliminated, then so can its effect. In other words, the very goal of Buddhist theory and practice is to achieve lasting contentment, which is said to be possible only through the elimination of the ultimate causes of discontent. Without a concept of causality, therefore, there could be no Four Noble Truths, and without these truths there would be no teaching identifiable as Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna's close examination (*parīkṣā*) of the notion of causality begins with this assertion in MMK 1:3:

na svato nāpi parato na dvābhyāṃ nāpy ahetutaḥ|
utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvā kvacana kecana||

There are absolutely no beings anywhere that have arisen from themselves, nor are there any that have arisen from something other than themselves, nor are there any that have arisen from both, nor are there any that have arisen from no cause at all.

The reasoning behind these assertions could be summarized as follows:³

(1) It cannot be thought that a being comes into being from itself. If a being comes into being at one moment out of itself at a previous moment, then there is no change in that being from one moment to another. If there is no change, then it is not appropriate to say that anything new has "come into being." Rather, it would be appropriate to say that something has remained static. And even if one is talking about the same moment, there is a fundamental contradiction involved in saying that two things are identical: if there is identity, there is only one thing. Therefore, we cannot say, for example, that a single self comes into being from the plurality of properties belonging to the five groups (*skandhas*) and that the self is identical with those properties.

(2) It also cannot be said that a being comes into being from something other than itself. If a being is said to be capable of coming into being from what is absolutely different from itself, then it should be possible to say that anything can arise from anything else without restraint, and there should be no constraints on what can be regarded as a cause of a particular effect. It should be possible to say, for example, that a pumpkin seed causes an oak tree to grow. But this is not what people mean when they talk of causes, and especially this is not what the Buddha meant in articulating the Four Noble Truths. He did not say that dissatisfaction comes into being owing to just anything chosen at random, but rather he specified that it comes into being owing to particular kinds of desire and certain specific misconceptions.

(3) Given that one cannot say that a thing comes into being from what is absolutely identical, and one cannot say that it comes into being from what is absolutely distinct, perhaps one can say that a being comes into being from that which is in some respects the same and in some other respects different from itself. Although this suggestion appears to make sense, Nāgārjuna argues that one cannot in fact say that a being comes into being from something that is both the same as itself and other than itself. The only way that something can be in some ways identical and in some ways different from a second thing is if both things are complex beings, that is, beings that are composed of many aspects. But this is not the sort of being that the Buddha was talking about when he discussed causality; he was talking about dharmas, which are not composite beings made up of more simple parts. Since dharmas are simple, there can be no question of two dharmas being in some respects the same and in some respects different. It cannot, therefore, he said that one dharma arises from another dharma that is partially the same and partially different.

(4) Finally, it cannot be said that beings arise from no causes whatsoever. There is, of course, no internal contradiction in this statement, but it is incompatible with the basic assumption of the Four Noble Truths. So, while one can hold to this view as a possible view, one cannot pass this view off as a possible interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha.

What is characteristic of his strategy is that Nāgārjuna first sets out all the logically possible relationships between the two items under examination, and then he tries to show that none of the apparently possible relationships is actually possible. This leads him to conclude that, since there is no possible relationship between the two would-be relata, the relata themselves do not really exist. Hence the heart of the first chapter of *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is the conclusion stated in MMK 1:3: “No beings at all exist anywhere.” This is the content of Theorem 1 discussed in section 2 above.

Now before this conclusion can be reached, it must be firmly established that none of the apparently possible relationships between a being and what preceded it is in fact possible. Of these four apparently possible relations between a cause and its effect, three are fairly

obviously impossible. Given the reasons stated above, one is not likely to want to argue that an effect arises out of a cause that is identical to the effect itself, nor that an effect arises out of a simple cause from which it is in some respects identical and in some respects different, nor that an effect arises out of no cause at all. It may be the case that a simple being cannot come into being out of another simple being, for the reasons stated above. It is, however, by no means obvious that a complex being does not come into being from another complex being or from a collocation of simple beings. In fact, this is precisely the relationship between cause and effect that intuitively seems most correct: the cause is a different thing from its effect. Even if one would want to add the qualification that an effect arises from a cause that is the same *kind* of thing as the effect itself, one would intuitively want to say that the cause is one thing and the effect another. So Nāgārjuna's reasons for dismissing this possibility require a closer examination.

It is important to note that the position that Nāgārjuna examines is the common Buddhist view based upon the notion that each simple property (*dharma*) is distinguished from every other simple property in virtue of possessing its own distinct nature, called its *svabhāva* or its own nature, which is a nature that no other simple property has. Each property's own nature is in effect its identity, in the sense of that by which it is differentiated from others. In his criticism of this view, Nāgārjuna plays on an ambiguity in "svabhāva," the word for own nature. 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 examining. 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.

When one reads Nāgārjuna's argument in Sanskrit, it is not immediately obvious that the argument has taken advantage of an ambiguity in the key term. But when one tries to translate his argument into some other language, such as English or Tibetan, one finds that it is almost impossible to translate his argument in a way that makes sense in translation. This is because the terms in the language of translation do not have precisely the same range of ambiguities as the words in the original Sanskrit. In English, we are forced to disambiguate, and in disambiguating, we end up spoiling the apparent integrity of the argument.

Let's look at the phrasing of Nāgārjuna's argument in the original Sanskrit and see why it looks plausible. The original argument as stated in MMK 1:5 reads:

na hi svabhāvo bhāvānām pratyayādiṣu vidyate |
avidyamāne svabhāva parabhāvo na vidyate ||

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

As we have seen above, the word "svabhāva" can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be rendered either as **identity** (which I shall call *svabhāva*₁) or as **causal independence** (*svabhāva*₂).⁴ Similarly, the word "parabhāva" can be interpreted in two ways. It can be rendered as **difference** (*parabhāva*₁), or as **dependence** (*parabhāva*₂).

Now the sentence in MMK 1:5ab makes perfectly good sense if it is understood as employing *svabhāva*₂.

Statement 1. *Surely beings have no causal independence when they have causal conditions. (na hi svabhāvaḥ bhāvānām pratyayādiṣu vidyate |)*

Statement 1 makes sense at face value, because it is obviously true that if something is dependent upon causal conditions, it is not independent of causal conditions. The sentence in MMK 1:5cd, on the

other hand, makes better sense if it is understood as employing svabhāva₁ and parabhāva₁.

Statement 2. *And if there is no **identity**, then there is no **difference**.*
(*avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |*)

Statement 2 also makes sense at face value, because a thing's identity is understood as a feature that distinguishes the thing from things other than itself; if a thing has no such features, then it has no identity and is therefore not distinguishable or different from other things.

It would be much more difficult to get a true statement out of the sentence in MMK 1:5cd if it were understood as employing svabhāva₂ and parabhāva₂.

Statement 3. *And if [beings have] no **independence**, then they have no **dependence**.* (*avidyamāna svabhāva parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |*)

Indeed statement 3 seems to be quite false at face value. So if one gives Nāgārjuna the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he was trying to write sentences that were true (or at least appeared to be true at face value), one is likely to reject statement 3 as the correct interpretation of MMK 1:5cd and to adopt statement 2.

The problem that now arises is this: no matter how much sense statement 2 may make as an independent statement, it does not at all follow from statement 1. It only appears to follow in the original Sanskrit because of the ambiguity of the expressions involved. A careful logician would not be deceived by Nāgārjuna's argument, but it is phrased in such a way that it might very well take the unwary reader off guard.

Sprung, in order to make MMK 1:5 even appear convincing in English translation, has to coin a new English expression. He comes up with this (Sprung, 1979, p. 66):

If there are conditions, things are not **self-existent**; if there is no **self-existence** there is no **other-existence**.

Sprung's translation has the obvious advantage of preserving the prima facie plausibility of the original Sanskrit, but it has the equally obvious

disadvantage of using a neologism that does not readily convey any meaning to a speaker of the English language. Whereas the word “self-existence” occurs as a standard English word with the meaning of independence, “other-existence” is merely a calque that avoids the task of offering a real translation. Inada’s translation also employs calques rather than real interpretations (Inada, 1970, p. 40):

In these relational conditions the **self-nature** of the entities cannot exist. From the non-existence of **self-nature**, **other-nature** too cannot exist.

Kalupahana’s translation of this verse makes use of the same calques as Inada’s (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 107):

The **self-nature** of existents is not evident in the conditions, etc. In the absence of **self-nature**, **other-nature** too is not evident.

Experiencing difficulty in making sense of Nāgārjuna is not confined to those who tried to translate him from Sanskrit into other languages. Even his own Sanskrit commentators showed signs of having trouble making Nāgārjuna’s arguments appear sensible. Candrakīrti, for example, like Sprung and Kalupahana, has his work cut out for him. Note what he says (Vaidya, 1960, p. 26, lines 17 ff.):

avidyamāne ca svabhāve nāsti parabhāvaḥ| bhāvānām bhāva
utpādaḥ| parebhya utpādḥa parpabhāvaḥ| sa na vidyate|
tasmād ayuktam etat parabhūtebhyo bhāvānām utpattir iti|

And if there is no *svabhāva* there is no *parabhāva*. The word “bhāva” means the act of coming into being, or the act of arising. The act of arising from others is what is meant by “parabhāva.” But that [act of arising from others] does not exist. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that there is coming into being or arising from others.

It is very difficult to see why “it is incorrect to say 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 that no one will question him too forcefully.

Nāgārjuna’s second critique of the notion of causal relations is

independent of his first argument. the second argument is based on the interdependence of the ideas of cause and effect. The argument goes something like this:

- (1) A condition can only be called a condition when something arises from it. In other words, when no effect is arising from a condition, the condition is not a condition.
- (2) It can be said in general that to exist is to be identical to oneself. Conversely, if a thing is not identical to itself, it does not exist.
- (3) A condition is not a condition.
- (4) Therefore, a condition does not exist.
- (5) If a condition does not exist, then it cannot give rise to an effect.

Like Nāgārjuna's earlier attempt, this argument also takes advantage of an ambiguity. But when the ambiguity is removed, the argument ceases to carry any persuasive power. There is an important distinction to be made between saying that a thing exists at all and saying that it exists under a given description. This can be illustrated by considering the following sentences:

Statement 4. *An acorn exists.*

Statement 5. *An acorn exists as the cause of an oak tree.*

Statement 5 is true only if an oak tree arises from the acorn, but statement 4 may be true whether or not an oak arises from the acorn. Now if we look at two of the premises of Nāgārjuna's argument, it can be seen that he is talking about existence in two different ways, and these two ways are counterparts to the distinction illustrated in statements 4 and 5.

In saying "A condition is not a condition," Nāgārjuna is saying something very much like "The condition (for example, an acorn) does not exist as a condition (that is, as the cause of the oak.)" In saying "therefore, a condition does not exist," however, Nāgārjuna would like us to believe that he means that the condition does not exist at all. But this conclusion does not at all follow from anything he has said leading up to it. It is only by playing on the ambiguity of such terms as "existence" that Nāgārjuna can create the illusion of a valid argument.

3.2. Arguments in MMK 15:1–11

Nāgārjuna's use of equivocation is nowhere more evident than in the arguments in which the term "svabhāva" occurs. The ways in which Nāgārjuna glides from one meaning of that term to another merits a closer examination. It was suggested above that the word "svabhāva" is capable of being interpreted either as identity (svabhāva₁) or independence (svabhāva₂), and that "parabhāva" can be interpreted either as difference (parabhāva₁) or dependence (parabhāva₂). In fact, the form of these words naturally allows for a richer interpretation than that. The word "bhāva" is a verbal noun formed by adding the primary suffix (*kr̥tpratyaya*) known in the Pāṇinīyan system as GHaÑ̃ to the root √BHŪ. According to Pāṇini the suffix GHaÑ̃ forms verbal nouns that have one of three senses: (1) the simple name of the action named by the verbal root itself,⁵ (2) the instrument by which an action is carried out or through which a state of affairs arises, or (3) the location in which an action is performed.⁶ These three senses that a verbal noun (VN) formed with GHaÑ̃ can have will be symbolized in the discussions that follow as VN_(P), VN_(I) and VN_(L) respectively. Given the possibility of verbal nouns of this form to express more than one factor in a situation, the family of words used in MMK 15 that have "bhāva" as the principal feature can be analysed as having the following range of meanings.

bhāva _(P)	The performance of the act of coming into being; the performance of being present; existence.
bhāva _(L)	That in which the performance of the act of coming into being occurs; a being, that which is present; an existent.
abhāva _(P)	The performance of the act or fact of not being present; absence. The performance of the act of ceasing to be present; becoming absent.
abhāva _(L)	That in which the performance of the act of not being present occurs; an absentee.

svabhāva ₁ (<i>P</i>)	The fact of being identical.
svabhāva ₁ (<i>I</i>)	An identifying characteristic; an identity; an essence.
svabhāva ₁ (<i>L</i>)	That in which the fact of being identical occurs; that which has an identity; an identifiable thing.
svabhāva ₂ (<i>P</i>)	The fact of being causally independent; independence.
svabhāva ₂ (<i>L</i>)	That which is independent.
parabhāva ₁ (<i>P</i>)	The fact of being other or different; otherness, difference.
parabhāva ₁ (<i>I</i>)	A differentiating characteristic; a differentia.
parabhāva ₁ (<i>L</i>)	That which is different; another.
parabhāva ₂ (<i>P</i>)	The fact of being dependent; dependence.
parabhāva ₂ (<i>L</i>)	That which is dependent.
anyathābhāva _(P)	The process of changing, altering.
anyathābhāva _(L)	An alteration, a change.

The effect that Nāgārjuna achieves by switching from one sense of these key terms to another can be illustrated by examining the argument of the fifteenth chapter of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, in which all but one of the eleven verses in the chapter contains at least one of the terms listed above.⁷ The chapter opens with this verse (MMK 15:1):

na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ|
hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet||

Birth of an independent thing from causes and conditions is not reasonable. An independent thing born from causes and conditions would be a fabrication.

This statement is indisputably true, because it follows from the definition of the notion of independence; it would be a logical impossibility for a thing that is causally independent to be dependent on causes. For this first statement to be indisputably true, then, the term “svabhāva” must be understood as **svabhāva**_{2 (L)}. The use of “svabhāva” in the sense of **svabhāva**_{2 (L)} continues into the next verse (MMK 15:2):

svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham|
akṛtamaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca||

But how could an independent thing be called a fabrication, given that an independent thing is not a fabrication and is independent of anything else?

It is in the next verse (MMK 15:3) that one can find a shift from one sense of “svabhāva” to another as well as from one sense of “parabhāva” to another.

kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati|
svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate||

How, in the absence of an identifiable thing, could there be a difference, given that the identity of a different thing is called a differentia?

The first sentence of this verse makes perfectly good sense when considered in isolation. Difference occurs in relation to a point of reference, and if there is no point of reference, then difference is unintelligible. But this statement does not follow from anything that has been said in the first two verses. This statement only appears to follow from the previous ones because of the use of the term “svabhāva” in this verse and in the two that precede it; the term is not used, however, in the same sense in the three verses:

- (1) The birth of a **svabhāva**_{2 (L)} from causes and conditions is not reasonable. A **svabhāva**_{2 (L)} born from causes and conditions would be a fabrication.
- (2) But how could a **svabhāva**_{2 (L)} be called a fabrication, given that a **svabhāva**_{2 (L)} is not a fabrication and is independent of anything else?
- (3) How, in the absence of a **svabhāva**_{1 (L)}, could there be **parabhāva**_{1 (P)}, given that the **svabhāva**_{1 (I)} of a **parabhāva**_{1 (L)} is called a **parabhāva**_{1 (I)}?

The next two verses (MMK 15:4—5) also make use of equivocation. In verse 4 the term “svabhāva” appears again in the sense of **svabhāva**_{2 (L)}, and “bhāva” also occurs in two different senses.

svabhāvaparabhāvābhyām ṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ|
 svabhāve parabhāve vā sati bhāvo hi sidhyati||
 bhāvasya ced aprasiddhir abhāvo naiva sidhyati|
 bhāvasya hy anyathābhāvam abhāvaṃ bruvate janāḥ||

How can there be existence (**bhāva**_(P)) without either independence (**svabhāva**_{2 (P)}) or dependence (**parabhāva**_{2 (P)}), given that existence (**bhāva**_(P)) is established when there is either independence or dependence?

If an existent (**bhāva**_(L)) is not established, an absence (**abhāva**_(P)) is certainly not established, given that people call the change of state (*anyathābhāva*) of an existent (**bhāva**_(L)) its ceasing to be present (**abhāva**_(P)).

Verse 4 makes the claim that everything that exists must be either causally independent like ether (*ākāśa*) or dependent on causes and conditions, so there is no existent that is neither independent nor dependent. This claim is not one that anyone is likely to dispute. Making this claim does not, however, really serve the purpose that Nāgārjuna appears to wish for it to serve. His argument in MMK 15:3 was that neither a *svabhāva* nor a *parabhāva* can be established; his

claim in MMK 15:4 is that there is no existent unless there is either *svabhāva* or *parabhāva*; and from these two premises the conclusion is supposed to follow in MMK 15:5 that there is no *bhāva*, and if there is no *bhāva* then neither is there *abhāva*.⁸ Owing, however, to the fact that the key terms “*svabhāva*” and “*parabhāva*” are used in different senses in MMK 15:3 and MMK 15:4, the conclusion that Nāgārjuna asserts does not follow from the premises that he offers as grounds for that conclusion.

It is impossible to determine in which of the possible senses the terms under consideration are used in MMK 15:6–7:

svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvaṃ eva ca |
 ye paśyanti na paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāśane ||
 kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayaṃ |
 pratiṣiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā || 7 |

They who perceive **svabhāva**, **parabhāva**, **bhāva** and **abhāva** do not perceive the truth in the Buddha’s instruction.

In the *Kātyāyanāvavāda* the Lord, who clearly saw **bhāva** and **abhāva** denied both the view that one exists and the view that one does not exist.

As Kalupahana (1986, p. 7) has observed, the *Kātyāyanāvavāda* is the only Buddhist text that Nāgārjuna cites by name or even alludes to in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*.⁹ In this text, which was reportedly accepted as canonical by every school of Buddhism,¹⁰ the Buddha is portrayed as explaining to Kātyāyana that the middle path consists in avoiding the two extremes of believing that all things exist (*sarvam asti*) and believing that nothing exists (*sarvaṃ nāsti*).¹¹ The middle path that avoids these two extremes is the recognition that everything that is experienced comes into being through conditions and fails to come into being when its conditions are absent. It is, according to the sūtra, this correct view (*samyagdr̥ṣṭi*) of conditional arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that is supposed to replace the incorrect perceptions of existence (*astitva*, *bhāva*) and non-existence (*nāstitva*, *abhāva*) and above all the incorrect perception of a self (*ātman*).

In MMK 15:8, the word “prakṛti” is introduced and appears to be used as a synonym of “svabhāva”; the term “prakṛti” is evidently being used in the sense of nature or natural disposition:

yady astitvaṃ prakṛtyā syān na bhaved asya nāstitā|
prakṛter anyathābhāvo na hi jātūpapadyate||

If a thing were to exist by nature, then it could not fail to exist, for the change of state of a nature is certainly not possible.

Saying that it is in the very nature (*prakṛti*) of a thing to be a particular way is equivalent to saying that the thing in question cannot be any other way. Therefore, if it is in the nature of a thing to exist, then it cannot be any other way than existent. In this context, then, “prakṛti” is being used in the sense of unalterability, uniformity and identity; it refers to precisely that characteristic or set of characteristics in a thing that are not subject to change (*anyathābhāva*, *vikāra*).¹² In contexts in which “prakṛti” means essence in contrast to accident (*vikṛti*), it overlaps in meaning with “svabhāva” in the sense of identity, that is, **svabhāva**₁ (1). This sense of the term “prakṛti” is carried into the next verse, MMK 15:10, which reads:

prakṛtau kasya cāsatyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati|
prakṛtau kasya ca satyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati||

And in the absence of a nature, what can undergo the process of change? On the other hand, if a nature is present, what can undergo the process of change?

The only possible conclusion of this pair of statements is that there is no change. And so to Theorem 1 we can now add the following as one of the claims that Nāgārjuna is unambiguously making: “Nothing can undergo the process of change.” This is the content of Theorem 2 discussed in section 2.

The last two verses of the chapter related the conclusions arrived at here to the overall themes of the entire *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*,

namely, that a clever person rejects both the view that the self is perpetual and the view that the self is discontinued after the death of the physical body. MMK 15:10–11 read as follows:

astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīti ucchedadarśanam|
 tasmād astitvanāstitive nāśrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ||
 asti yaddhi svabhāvena na tan nāstīti śāśvatam|
 nāstīdānīm abhūt pūrvam ity ucchedaḥ prasajyate||

The notion of perpetuity is that one exists; the notion of destruction is that one fails to exist. Therefore, a wise person should not experience existence or non-existence.

Perpetuity follows from believing that that which exists independently (*svabhāvena*) does not fail to exist; destruction follows from believing that that which existed before no longer exists.

The ways in which authors of previous studies of the fifteenth chapter of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* have translated these eleven verses appears in Appendix A below. An analysis of the differences in the translations appears in Appendix B.

3.3. *Summary of Nāgārjuna's fallacies*

Just how well Nāgārjuna used logic has long been a matter of interest to modern scholars. Most of these studies have focussed on his use of the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) and have sought to discover whether or not this way of framing questions betrays either an ignorance of the law of contradiction or a deliberate use of some kind of non-standard or deviant logic.¹³ Studying the tetralemma alone is not likely to shed much light on Nāgārjuna's knowledge of logic, since the tetralemma was a fairly primitive framework for posing questions that was in use before the time of the Buddha. The Buddha's use of this framework may have inclined Nāgārjuna to treat it with some respect, even if his own command of logic had advanced beyond the level of sophistication that the tetralemma represents. Given that the conceptual tools at the disposal of intellectuals in India had improved considerably during

the half-millennium that separated Nāgārjuna from the Buddha, one can expect that Nāgārjuna's presentation of certain ideas would be somewhat more clear and precise than the Buddha's presentation had been.¹⁴ In any event, one must look at much more than his use of the tetralemma to ascertain Nāgārjuna's command of logical principles, and indeed his whole attitude towards the limits of rational discourse. One scholar who set out to do a more comprehensive study of Nāgārjuna's argumentation was Richard Robinson. Thirty-five years ago Robinson (1957) provided evidence that Nāgārjuna explicitly knew about and referred to the law of contradiction. To quote just one of the five citations that Robinson gave, Nāgārjuna wrote in MMK 8:7cd

parpasparaviruddhaṃ hi sac cāsac caikataḥ kutaḥ|

For how can presence and absence, which are mutually exclusive, occur in the same thing?

Robinson (1957), p. 295) also provided textual evidence of three passages in which Nāgārjuna explicitly stated the law of excluded middle. Since adherence to these two laws is the criterion that people usually use in distinguishing between standard and deviant systems of logic, it is unquestionable that Nāgārjuna's logic was quite standard. This does not mean, however, that he was always correct in his use of logic by modern canons of validity. Robinson found, for example, three passages in which Nāgārjuna clearly committed the formal fallacy of denying the antecedent (p. 297); this is an argument of the form:

$$\begin{array}{l} p \rightarrow q \\ \neg p \\ \hline \neg q \end{array}$$

This use of a formally invalid structure may have been quite innocent, says Robinson, since Nāgārjuna's use of argumentation was in general at about the same level as Plato's; both seem to have had a good intuitive grasp of basic logical principles, but both also used forms of argumentation that later logicians would come to recognize as

fallacious. Denying the antecedent was not recognized as a fallacy in Europe until Aristotle discovered it; there is no clear evidence that it was recognized in India before Nāgārjuna's time. Given that the state of knowledge of formal logic was much more crude in Nāgārjuna's time than in later generations, says Robinson, it is not at all surprising that his contemporaries used lines of reasoning that later Indian Buddhists, not to mention people in the twentieth century, would know to avoid. "It's not that they [*viz.*, Nāgārjuna's contemporaries] were worse thinkers than the moderns, but simply that they were earlier. It is in this milieu that Nāgārjuna's reasoning should be appraised" (Robinson, 1957, p. 307).

In another penetrating study of Nāgārjuna's methods of argumentation, Robinson (1972a) compares Nāgārjuna's presentation to a *trompe-l'œil* or sleight-of-hand trick.

Its elements are few and its operations are simple, though performed at lightning speed and with great dexterity. And the very fact that he cannot quite follow each move reinforces the observer's conviction that there is a trick somewhere. The objective of this article is to identify the trick and to determine on some points whether or not it is legitimate.

The "trick" that Robinson discovered lay in Nāgārjuna's definition of the term "svabhāva" in such a way that it was self-contradictory. If the *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna exists, says Robinson, "it must belong to an existent entity, that is, it must be conditioned, dependent on other entities and possessed of causes. But by definition it is free from conditions, nondependent on others, and not caused. Therefore, it is absurd to maintain that a *svabhāva* exists" (Robinson, 1972a, p. 326). Exposing the absurdity of the notion of *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna only does damage, of course, to those who actually used the term as defined by him. In the remainder of his article, Robinson shows that in fact none of Nāgārjuna's philosophical rivals did use the term "svabhāva" as he had redefined it, and therefore no one was really refuted by him. In his concluding remark, Robinson says:

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick is now quite clear. It consists of (a) reading into the opponent's views a few terms which one defines for him in a self-contradictory way, and (b) insisting on a small set of axioms which are at variance with common sense and not accepted in their entirety by any known philosophy. It needs no insistence to emphasize that the application of such a critique does not demonstrate

the inadequacy of reason and experience to provide intelligible answers to the usual philosophical questions.

To the various fallacies and tricks brought to light by Robinson in his articles, we can now add the informal fallacy of equivocation as outlined above. That is, not only did Nāgārjuna use the term “svabhāva” in ways that none of his opponents did, but he himself used it in several different senses at key points in his argument.

4. NĀGĀRJUNA'S APPEAL TO MODERNS: EXAMINING HIS INTERPRETERS

In the previous section I have tried to show that if one analyses the arguments of Nāgārjuna carefully, then it is possible to reveal their weaknesses. In particular, it was argued that many of Nāgārjuna's arguments are undermined by the informal fallacy of equivocation, that is, using a key term in different senses. What is achieved by revealing the fallacious nature in Nāgārjuna's argumentation is simply the freedom to reject the conclusions that he claims to have reached; since the arguments are not sound, one is not compelled to accept their conclusions. In showing that the arguments are not sound, I have merely shown that the ways of thinking that Nāgārjuna was apparently trying to discredit remain more or less unscathed by his criticisms. This helps explain why generations of Buddhist philosophers coming after Nāgārjuna — and most Indian Buddhist philosophy did develop several centuries after his time — could reasonably continue, without embarrassment or apology, to use the concepts and technical terms that he had apparently tried to show were groundless: concepts such as identity, difference, cause, effect, potential and so forth.¹⁵

It is less obvious, perhaps, that the fallaciousness of Nāgārjuna's thinking may also account for his popularity among people in the second half of the twentieth century. My central thesis in this section of the paper is that since Nāgārjuna employed faulty reasoning, he was able to arrive at conclusions that seem contrary to both reason and common sense experience, such as the conclusions that there are no beings and that nothing undergoes change; and, since there is a robust willingness on the part of many twentieth century intellectuals to

entertain philosophical perspectives that challenge the very foundations of most classical thought and of common sense, there is a predisposition to be attracted to anyone as apparently extraordinary as Nāgārjuna.

Defending such a thesis will require both mustering some evidence and indulging in some speculation without the benefit of compelling evidence. The principal evidence to be examined will be drawn from the writings of scholars and thinkers that I take to be representative of three related but different schools of modern thought. What all these schools have in common is (1) some kind or another of negative view of classical metaphysics and classical ethics, and (2) an assumption that Nāgārjuna's principal agenda was also to criticize metaphysics and to avoid the perceived pitfalls thereof. Again for the sake of ease of presentation, I have called these schools by names that their adherents themselves have used, or at least would probably readily accept: Absolutism, Logical Positivism, and Deconstructionism. Having discussed and criticized each of these schools, I shall conclude by referring to twentieth century interpreters of Nāgārjuna who have attempted to place him firmly in his own classical context, disregarding his relevance, or lack thereof, to modern times. Before looking at any of the particular modern schools of Nāgārjuna, however, let me venture a few observations about modernity in general.

Modern people evidently have a great affinity for Nāgārjuna's philosophy. Of all the thinkers of Indian Buddhism, he has attracted by far the most attention. This vast amount of attention that is paid to him is not merely due to the fact that Nāgārjuna is regarded to have been important in his own time. Much of it is due, I think, to the fact that people find him somehow important for our times. To understand why it is that people of the modern age think they like Nāgārjuna, it will be necessary to say a little about some of the shared assumptions of some of the prominent intellectual trends of the late twentieth century.¹⁶

Two noteworthy trends of the thought of this period that have had a bearing on people's search for philosophers in antiquity who might have anticipated these modern trends are (1) a skepticism about moral issues, or at least a sense that ethical questions are essentially subjective in nature, and (2) a critical attitude towards the enterprise of

metaphysics. Usually ethical reasoning is systematically related to metaphysical and epistemological standpoints. What has most pre-occupied modern interpreters of Nāgārjuna has been his attitude towards metaphysics. But before examining some of the modern ways of interpreting Nāgārjuna's stance on metaphysics, let me make some brief observations on how his doctrines might appeal to people influenced by the ethical skepticism of modern thought.

4.1. *Nāgārjuna and ethical relativism*

The twentieth century has been an era of almost constant warfare, or at least an incessant preparedness for war, in nearly every region of the planet. Many people in these circumstances have grown weary of the categorical messages in the ideological propaganda designed to make populations think of themselves as morally upright people who must be ever ready for combat against those who have been designated as the sinister enemies. People who find such propaganda tedious are usually predisposed to seek out alternatives to the uncompromising rhetoric of the warriors. Looking for more irenic ways of thinking and talking, many such people have been attracted by the apparently open-minded spirit of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness; indeed, one of the many possible interpretations of the doctrine that all dharmas are empty is that this doctrine implies that no teachings or doctrines or ideologies of any kind are absolutely and irrefutably true, for "teaching" is one of the many meanings that the word "dharma" can have.¹⁷

Not only are no teachings indisputably true, according to this peaceable interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness, but even the very concepts of "true" (*sat*) and "false" (*asat*), "competence" (*kuśala*) and "incompetence" (*akuśala*), "good" (*puṇya*) and "evil" (*pāpa*), and "virtue" (*dharma*) and "vice" (*adharmā*) are arbitrary and groundless. Interpreting the doctrine of emptiness in this way is congruent with a set of conclusions about ethics that have been commonly accepted in twentieth century thought, quite often by people who are only dimly aware of the reasoning that one might offer in support of the conclusions. Those conclusions are (1) that moral propositions are neither true nor false, (2) that moral statements are based on judgements of value rather than grounded in the ascertainment of facts, (3) that

moral stances are therefore essentially subjective and indefensible by any rational means, and (4) that since there is no logical or rational defense of moral statements, the only defense of morality is on purely aesthetic grounds.

The kind of moral relativism found in the twentieth century is closely related to views on metaphysics and epistemology that have evolved in Europe since the eighteenth century. The evolution of modern ethical thinking has been described convincingly by Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, pp. 36–78); while MacIntyre's principal interest was the history of European thought, most of what he says about classical Greece could also be said, with only slight modifications, of ancient India.

In ancient Greek philosophy, observes MacIntyre, the propositions of ethics were regarded as statements of fact. This could be so, because the Greeks saw morality as a method designed to convey people from their present state of discontent to their potential state of contentment. Ethics was, in other words, a method of attaining a goal. In much the same way, the teachings of classical Indian Buddhism are presented as a praiseworthy path (*ārya-mārga*) leading from discontent (*duḥkha*) to contentment (*sukha*).¹⁸ In classical Greek thought, as in classical Buddhism, any statement about whether or not a given mode of behaviour would get one to a state of contentment was as accessible to rational and empirical investigation as a statement about whether a given road leads to Athens. This type of thinking prevailed in European thought until the eighteenth century, during which time the thinkers ushered in a new way of thinking that they called the Enlightenment, thereby suggesting that most of the thinking that had preceded that century had been dark and obscure. The intellectuals of the Enlightenment had grown very suspicious of the perceived abuses of claims of divine authority and they began to seek out methods of attaining knowledge that were not in any way dependent upon such claims. As this tendency increased, empiricism and scientific rationalism came to dominate people's ways of thinking. People came to believe that the only things that are objectively real are those things that are revealed to the senses. Among the many things that are not revealed to the senses are potentials, the presently invisible seeds of future events. And among the many kinds of insensible potentials are goals

(*telos*) and purposes. Now ethics, as seen in classical times, is a goal-oriented activity. Post-Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, tried to dispense with the concept of ethics as goal-seeking activity. But in so doing, they deprived ethical propositions of the only claims they had on being either true or false. If one removes the concept of a destination, the question of whether or not any given road is the right one becomes meaningless. In the absence of a criterion by which ethical statements can be decided as true or false, all ethical propositions come to be seen as mere assertions of will. Conflicting ethical statements come to be seen as little more than slogans around which different individuals and groups of people rally in their bid for power. In classical thinking, the individual had meaning only in the context of the goal of contentment. In modern thinking, in the absence of a goal, the individual becomes absolute, something to be considered without reference to any other outside factors. As the individual becomes absolute, the old language of virtue gives way to the new language of individual rights and freedoms. And the classical study of morality is replaced by the study of how people use statements of right and wrong to secure their own self-interests, or worse, how some individuals and groups curtail the inalienable rights and freedoms of others.

While Nāgārjuna's discussions of emptiness may lend themselves to being viewed as being congruent in some respects with the ethical relativism of the twentieth century, it should be borne in mind that the kind of ethical relativism that has evolved in European and American circles is the product of a way of thinking that is quite different from those that prevailed in classical Greece or in classical India. It is possible, of course, that Nāgārjuna anticipated these modern ways of thinking, but it cannot simply be assumed that he did so. Until evidence can be produced that indicates clearly that Nāgārjuna's intention was to challenge the views on morality that prevailed in his times, the safer assumption is that he accepted the standard ethical views of his time without suspicion.

4.2. *The Absolutist interpretation*

The term "Absolute" entered European philosophical vocabulary in 1800 in a work entitled *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), who ushered

in an era of Absolutist philosophers, the most celebrated of whom were Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). In the writings of these thinkers, the Absolute is described as the complete and perfect unity underlying the diversity of appearances; it is that which contains and at the same time supersedes all finite realities. Absolutism is a development of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) Critical philosophy, which questions the dogmatism in both empiricism and rationalism. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which was first published in 1781, Kant described his new "critical" philosophy as achieving within the sphere of metaphysics what Copernicus had earlier achieved within the sphere of astronomy. Before Copernicus, said Kant, the assumption had been made that the earth was fixed in space and that all the heavenly bodies, including the planets, moved around it. As a result of making this assumption, astronomers had to make elaborate theories of planetary motion to account for all the apparent reversals in the directions of planetary motion. Copernicus had argued that a much more elegant account of planetary motion could be achieved by acknowledging that the Earth, along with the other planets, was in fact in motion around the Sun. This radical shift in perspective from a geocentric to a heliocentric model of the planetary system enabled astronomers to arrive at a theory of planetary motion that was both more simple and more accurate. Similarly, before Kant, metaphysicians had operated on the assumption that the basic categories of metaphysics — such as time, space, potentiality, necessity, causality, and free will — corresponded to features of the real world, and that human beings discover these realities by means of reason. What Kant argued was that these metaphysical categories are part of the rational human mind itself and are imposed upon the world. The radical shift in perspective that Kant claimed to achieve is the realization that metaphysics is not a study of the world of nature, but rather a study in human thinking.

Following the lead of Kant's Critical philosophy, Absolutism is contrasted with Dogmatism, a derogatory name given to the belief that knowledge of the world can be attained empirically or rationally or through a combination of both. Typically it is said that the Absolute cannot be known either through the senses (empirically) or through the intellect (rationally). Knowledge of it therefore requires a special

kind of Intuition, which is experienced as a sense of complete unity of the knower with the object of knowledge.

4.2.1. *Stcherbatsky's neo-Kantian Mādhyamika*

Fedor Ippolitovich Shcherbatskoi (1866—1942), known to English readers as Theodore Stcherbatsky, was one of the first European historians of Buddhist philosophy to publish a neo-Kantian interpretation of Nāgārjuna, which appeared in his 1927 study of the first and twenty-fifth chapters of Candrakīrti's commentary to *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*. Stcherbatsky (1927, p. 17) declares that Nāgārjuna had concluded that for the Buddha

... Reality was transcendent to thought. He [*viz.*, Nāgārjuna] systematized the four alternatives (*antas or kotis*), mercilessly exposed the disconcerting implications of each alternative, brought the antinomies of Reason luminously to the fore by hunting them out from every cover, and demonstrated the impossibility of erecting a sound Metaphysic on the basis of dogmatism or rationalism. This was his dialectic. The four alternatives were already formulated by the Buddha. His originality consisted in drawing out by the application of rigorous logic the implications of each alternative, driving Reason in a *cul de sac* and thus preparing the mind for taking a right-about-turn (*parāvṛtti*) towards *prajñā*.

The Absolute Reality that escapes both empirical investigation and the methods of reason, says Stcherbatsky was called *Nirvāṇa* by Buddhists (Stcherbatsky, 1927, 'The conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa' section, p. 3). It could be achieved only by a special "faculty of appreciative analysis" (*prajñā*) (p. 3) that came about through the practice of "mystic trance" or "mystic intuition (*Yogi-Pratyakṣa*)" in which "the mystic sees in a moment the construction of both the gross and the mystic worlds as vividly as if they were an experience of direct sense-perception" (p. 4). In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the preparation for this "intuition of the transcendental truth" was provided by "the course of negative dialectic" (p. 4). For Stcherbatsky, then, the arguments of Nāgārjuna were a preliminary clearing of the mind of concepts that impeded the direct experience of the Absolute through the practice of yogic trance.¹⁹

Stcherbatsky's Absolutist interpretation of Nāgārjuna was criticized within a few years by Stanisław Schayer. Schayer (1931, pp. xxix—xxxiii) rejected the comparison with Kant and post-Kantian Europeans

in favour of comparisons between Nāgārjuna and such exemplars of what he called “mystischen Skepsis” as Pyrrho, Plotinus and al-Ghazālī, but he still regarded the Mādhyamikas as seekers of an Absolute that could not be achieved through the mundane methods of empirical investigation and reason; indeed, the principal difference between the Mādhyamikas and Kant, said Schayer, was that the Mahāyāna mystics believed that the Absolute could be experienced directly, whereas Kant did not.

Both Stcherbatsky and Schayer were criticized two decades later by Jan W. de Jong (1950). Schayer’s mistake, said de Jong, had consisted in trying to isolate four separate meanings of the term “svabhāva” and failing to realize that these four meanings are so interconnected that they really reduced to just two. De Jong (p. 323) recapitulates Schayer’s four distinct senses of “svabhāva” (see note 4 above) and goes on to say (pp. 323–24) “Mais, en fait, on ne peut tenir compte de cette distinction, car, pour Nāgārjuna, les quatre concepts indiqués par Schayer s’enchaînent étroitement les uns aux autres et peuvent se ramener à deux.” The two senses to which the term “svabhāva” can be reduced according to de Jong are (1) that of an identifying nature (*svalakṣaṇa*) of things taken individually and (2) the immutable nature (*prakṛti*) of all things taken together as a single unity. The Mādhyamikas, says de Jong, equally denied both of these fundamental senses of “svabhāva”. While critical of Schayer on this point, de Jong Nevertheless gives him credit for having realized that mystic intuition provided the epistemological foundation of the Mādhyamaka school’s view of an absolute reality that can neither be described in words nor comprehended through the methods of dichotomous thinking.

What Stcherbatsky had failed to realize in his attempt to show the parallelism between Mādhyamika philosophy and various European forms of Absolutism, says de Jong (p. 326), was that analogies between European and Buddhist thinking only serve to distort the latter; moreover, they are not grounded on the evidence of the original texts. The Buddhist form of absolutism, claims de Jong, is quite uniquely “Oriental” and has no exact parallels in any kind of Western thought. He concludes by saying:

Nous espérons avoir réussi à démontrer qu’il est impossible de considérer l’absolu des Mādhyamikas soit comme la totalité de l’être, soit comme le néant. Une telle alter-

native ne peut être posée que dans le cadre des habitudes de la pensée occidentale. L'absolu a, pour les Mādhyamikas, une signification tout à fait différente. Sur le plan philosophique, ils s'abstiennent de tout jugement, mais l'expérience mystique les fait accéder par la délivrance à l'absolu.

4.2.2. *Murti's nondualist (advaita) Mahāyāna*

Notwithstanding de Jong's warning against describing Buddhist thought in terms of modern European philosophical categories, T. R. V. Murti continued along the road of Absolutist interpretation that Stcherbatsky had trod a generation earlier. In his *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, first published in 1955 and revised in 1960, Murti claims that Nāgārjuna achieved a revolution in Indian Buddhist thought that was as significant as the revolution in astronomy achieved by Copernicus and the revolution in metaphysics made by Kant. Kant made his discovery, says Murti, owing to the insoluble philosophical problems that arose when the Empirical tradition, which consisted of mostly English and Scottish philosophers, confronted the Rationalist tradition, which consisted primarily of German and French philosophers. Nāgārjuna's breakthrough, says Murti, came about as a result of similarly insoluble philosophical problems that arose when the *ātman* tradition of brahmanical philosophy confronted the *anātman* tradition of early Buddhist philosophy. It was obvious to everyone that the debate over whether or not there is an imperceptible self that remains constant while all sensible properties undergo change could never be solved by purely empirical means, because the evidence of the senses cannot settle questions about topics that are said to lie in principle beyond the senses. And so people assumed — wrongly, according to Murti — that the question could be solved by intellectual methods, that is, by reason alone (or what Kant would call pure reason). Both Kant and Nāgārjuna, says Murti, saw the role of philosophy as being to reveal the "pretensions of reason". In doing so, the result was not simply one further philosophical system, but a radical critique of all philosophical systems, a critique that showed that there cannot be such a thing as a philosophical system that gives a satisfactory account of the real world (Murti, 1960, p. 294).

Where both Kant and Nāgārjuna fell short, according to Murti, was in their failure to realize the full implication of their own discoveries, namely, that "Mind (Thought or Reason) is the only Real, and all

activity is the activity of reason or consciousness” (Murti, 1960, 297). In Europe it took Hegel to bring this fully to light, and in India it required the Vijñānavāda Buddhists and the Advaita Vedāntin school of Hinduism. A key difference between Kant and Nāgārjuna, according to Murti, is that Kant denied that it was ever possible to get beyond the limits of the human mind; even realizing that the mind presents us with illusions is not sufficient to remove those illusions. Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, never deviated from the Buddhist view that it is possible to attain the Absolute by removing illusion (*avidyā*).

Murti argues in several places in his book that Dialectic is a key feature of early Buddhism and of Nāgārjuna’s thinking. What Murti means by Dialectic may be clarified somewhat by the following passage (Murti, 1960, p. 124):

Dialectic is a self-conscious spiritual movement; it is necessarily a critique of Reason. This is not possible without the consciousness of the opposition of the thesis and the antithesis. There must be at least two view-points or patterns of interpretation diametrically opposed to each other. A dilemma is not a dialectic, for that is a temporary predicament having reference to a particular situation. The Dialectic is a universal conflict affecting every sphere of things.

It was Murti’s contention that the Buddha himself was the first philosopher in India to discover the Dialectic. His evidence for this was that the Buddha refused to answer certain questions, such as whether or not the world has a beginning or an end in time, and whether or not someone exists after death. Murti argues that the Buddha did not answer these questions because he recognized that they could not be answered at all. The Buddha’s silence was his expression of his radical critique of Reason, which trades always in opposites. Thus the Buddha’s silence was the first Buddhist use of Dialectic, which trades in the unification of such opposites. Similarly, Nāgārjuna’s dialectic is portrayed by Murti as “a movement from the relativity of buddhi [intellect] which is phenomenal to the non-dual Intuition of the absolute, from *dr̥ṣṭi* [dogmatism] to *prajñā* [intuitive knowledge of the absolute]” (Murti, 1960, p. 301). But, while there may be certain similarities between the Buddhist use of dialectic and Hegel’s use thereof, Nāgārjuna’s dialectic differs from Hegel’s in several important ways, says Murti. First, Hegel’s dialectic is one in which a higher

synthesis reconciles the opposites of lower levels of truth, whereas Nāgārjuna's dialectic removes all opposites imposed by the intellect. Second, Reason for Hegel constitutes "the very fabric of the real", while for Nāgārjuna reason (*buddhi*) is the fundamental source of all ignorance, for it is reason that veils and obscures the underlying unity of the Absolute. It is Reason (*buddhi*) that impedes Intuition (*prajñā* = *advayaṃ jñānam*) (Murti, 1960, p. 304). Finally, the Absolute for Hegel is Thought, while for Nāgārjuna it is Non-dual Intuition (*Pranjñāpāramitā*).

Murti's fondness for using the term "Absolute" leads to the awkward situation of his having an embarrassment of Absolutes that must somehow be distinguished from one another, since not all the things he has labeled as Absolutes are equivalent. He therefore devotes an entire chapter to the task of distinguishing among the various systems of Indian philosophy that are, according to him, Absolutist. Murti (1960, pp. 311–328) offers a useful summary of the criticisms that the various schools of Indian philosophy — Advaita Vedānta, Vijñānavāda and Mādhyamika — made against one another. And he also attempts to show how these forms of classical Indian absolutism differed from the Absolutist philosophies of nineteenth century Europe. In almost every case, incidentally, Murti's account of the differences between classical Indian and modern European philosophies implies a deficiency in the latter. European philosophers are consistently portrayed as coming close, but ultimately failing, to achieve the brilliant insights of their Indian predecessors.

The dialectic of Hegel is a brilliant superfluity; it has no spiritual value (Murti, 1960, p. 305).

It is unfortunate that Kant missed the startling discovery that he had made. Prejudiced in favour of faith, Kant makes only a negative and trivial use of criticism. He should have taken criticism itself as philosophy, the true metaphysics as a science. The Mādhyamika, however, most consistently develops this. His absolute is the critical Reflection itself (Murti, 1960, p. 328).

In that same chapter, Murti also offers a summary of the points that he feels all the systems that he labels as Absolutist have in common. In all systems, he says,

(1) The Absolute is transcendent, that is, it is "totally devoid of empirical determinations (*nirdharmaka*, *śūnya*).” In other words, the ultimate reality cannot be an

object of any of the senses, including the intellect. And from this it follows that “the absolute is realised only in a non-empirical intuition. . . . The nature of this experience is that it is non-discursive, immediate and unitary cognition; here essence and existence coincide” (Murti, 1960, p. 321).

(2) The Absolute is immanent, that is, it is the reality underlying all appearances. The Absolute is a single undivided reality, being without duality (*advaya*) and without characteristics or features (*nirdharmaka*).

(3) Since the nature of the Absolute is that it is single and undivided, knowledge of it cannot be communicated through language, since language is based upon the making of distinctions.

(4) Absolutism makes it necessary to distinguish between Reality and Appearances. It also makes it necessary to distinguish between scriptures that are discussing Reality and those that discuss only Appearances. Thus in every Absolutism a distinction is made between two levels of truth or two levels of language.

(5) In all forms of Absolutism, the ultimate goal of religious practice is “complete Identity with the Absolute”, that is, losing the individual self in the greater singleness of Being. So for the Mādhyamika, Nirvāna should be understood as loss of individual identity and consequent absorption into the oneness of the Absolute.

By the end of his study of the Mādhyamika system, Murti makes it very clear that he considers the philosophy as he has described it to be a solution to many of the ills of twentieth century life. Indeed, Murti ends his assessment of the Mādhyamika system with an almost passionate utopian vision of a world free from the conflicts among individuals and nations that are rooted in insupportable dogmas. This peaceful world, he argues, in which internal and external conflicts have all disappeared

is possible in the advaita or advaya, where all our faculties and interests are unified as Brahman or Prajñāpāramitā. It is possible *only* in advaita, for that alone abolishes private standpoints and interests, which make for the ego-centric outlook. In the last analysis, the ego is the root of the unspiritual; the universal is the spiritual. Śūnyatā, as the negation of all particular views and standpoints, is the universal *par excellence* (Murti, 1960, p. 333).

Murti’s version of Mādhyamika ends up being rather like a modern version of the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. The philosophical standpoint of Advaita is preserved in Murti’s Mādhyamika, but the dogmatic insistence on the authority of revealed scripture — so central to classical Vedānta — has been removed, and the entire institutional structure of both Advaita Vedānta and Mahāyāna Buddhism has also been removed.

Denominational religions with their dogmas and organisational sanctions deservedly

stand discredited. There is something inherently secular and unspiritual in any organisation. It tends to create vested interests and to breed corruption. In stifling freedom of expression and setting up a norm of dogmas to which the votaries are required to conform, organised religion (the church) succeeds only in antagonising other religious groups and creating schisms and heresies within its own fold. What we need is the realisation of the spiritual which is the bed-rock of all our endeavour. Only mystical religion, which eminently combines the unity of Ultimate Being with the freedom of different paths, for realising it, can hope to unite the world (Murti, 1960, 241).

4.2.3. *Criticisms of the Absolutist interpretation*

Various shortcomings of the Absolutist interpretations of Nāgārjuna have already been articulated by several scholars. As we saw above, Schayer (1931) found it more profitable to compare Nāgārjuna with the Greek skeptics and with certain neo-Platonic thinkers than with the neo-Kantians. Robinson (1957, p. 292) also expressed the view that “The most usual comparisons, those with Kant and Hegel, are not apposite, because Kant’s and Hegel’s structures differ too radically from any of the Indian systems in question.” Moreover, added Robinson, this attempt to compare Nāgārjuna with modern philosophers has the even deeper weakness of seeking “to answer our questions, rather than to identity Nāgārjuna’s questions.” Since Nāgārjuna and his contemporaries were “infinitely less sophisticated” than Kant and his contemporaries, argued Robinson, the modern historian of philosophy had better assess the accomplishments of Nāgārjuna in the historical milieu in which they were produced (Robinson, 1957, p. 307). And when one examines Nāgārjuna’s doctrines in the context of his contemporary setting, it becomes clear that:

There is no evidence that Nāgārjuna ‘uses logic to destroy logic.’ He makes mistakes in logic, but does not deny any principles of logic. He asserts that a certain set of propositions — the Buddhist doctrine — is true under a certain condition, that of emptiness, and false under another condition, that of own-beingness (Robinson, 1957, p. 307).

Sentiments similar to Robinson’s were expressed two decades later by Ruegg, who wrote that “A problematic has thus tended to be imposed on Buddhist thought in a form that does not in fact seem essential to the questions with which the Buddhist thinkers were actually concerned” (Ruegg, 1977, p. 52). Owing partly to criticisms such as these coming from scholars of the stature of Robinson and

Ruegg, and owing partly to the fact that Kantian and Hegelian philosophy have in general become somewhat *demodé* in recent decades and therefore no longer the standard of comparison against which other philosophical achievements are measured, few scholars of Buddhism educated after the Second World War have pursued the line of interpretation set forth by Stcherbatsky and Murti.

4.3. *The Positivist interpretation*

In European philosophy, Absolutism was but one child of Kant's Critical philosophy; another was the set of ideas known as Positivism, which shared the post-Kantian disdain for metaphysics. The term "positivism" was made a part of European philosophical vocabulary through the writings of Auguste Comte (1798—1857). There are many varieties of positivism, but typically the various types have in common that they hold the position that methodical empiricism, also known as the scientific method, is the only means of acquiring testable knowledge.

The particular name "Logical Positivism" was first applied to a set of ideas put forth by members of the Vienna circle, a group of mathematicians, physicists and philosophers of science that included among others the physicists Ernst Mach and Moritz Schlick and the philosopher Rudolf Carnap, whose training had also been in physics and mathematics. The doctrines of this school evolved over the span of two decades, from approximately 1920 until 1940. Many of the doctrines of this school were adopted by various philosophers and scholars in Great Britain and in English-speaking parts of North America. One of the key ideas of the Logical Positivists was the notion that a proposition whose truth or falsity cannot be determined through methodical and controlled testing procedures is simply meaningless. Such a proposition may appear to convey some meaning, say the Logical Positivists, but in fact it says nothing at all and is therefore neither true nor false. One branch of traditional philosophy that had been made up almost entirely of assertions that could not possibly be either confirmed or falsified by experience was metaphysics, the branch of philosophy dealing with such problems as the nature of being and non-being (presence and absence), causality, and potentiality and actuality. Therefore "metaphysics" came to be used by Logical Posi-

tivists as a derogatory name given to philosophical systems, and indeed to some forms of classical physics and mathematics and logic, that were based on propositions that cannot be verified or falsified by the scientific method.

Two prominent historians of Buddhist philosophy whose ideas reflect positivist influences are A. K. Warder and David J. Kalupahana. Warder and Kalupahana share a conviction — which many other scholars of Buddhism would now dismiss as an unwarranted assumption — that the Sutta-piṭaka of the Pāli canon represents the true spirit, although not the actual words, of the historical Buddha's teachings. Moreover, both scholars appear to accept the principle that the truest forms of Buddhism are those that remain closest to the teachings of Gautama the Buddha as recorded in the Pāli Sutta literature. Both Warder and Kalupahana find the spirit of this canonical Buddhism paradigmatically articulated in the Kesaputta Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, where the Buddha is portrayed as saying to the Kālāma people that one should not arrive at conclusions

owing to hearsay, owing to tradition, owing to rumour, owing to distinction in canonical works, on account of speculation, on account of methodical reasoning, owing to a study of appearances, after contemplation and acquiescing to an opinion, because of plausibility nor by thinking "the ascetic is our revered teacher."²⁰

This passage, as interpreted by Warder and Kalupahana, leaves the empirical method of acquiring knowledge, along with legitimate inferences grounded in one's own personal experience, as the sole methods of ascertaining the truth. Their Buddha, in other words, was an empiricist.

4.3.1. Warder's empiricist Buddhism

Warder does not explicitly liken the Buddha's teachings to those of the Logical Positivists, but he does claim that the Buddha regarded some metaphysical questions as "meaningless instead of being beyond our knowledge" (Warder, 1970, p. 194). He clearly recognizes the tension between what he sees as the anti-authoritarian empiricist stance of the passage of the Aṅguttaranikāya quoted above and the tendency of Buddhists to try to establish an authentic record of what the Buddha had said. Buddhists, says Warder (1970, p. 443),

found themselves in an apparent dilemma: they were to rely ultimately on experience, yet they attributed complete authority to the statements of the Buddha as handed down to them in the *Tripitaka*. . . . Of course there ought to be no discrepancy between these two [*viz.*, experience and authority]: the Buddha's words proceeded from experience and the laws of nature (he held) do not change, therefore anyone else's experience must lead to the same conclusions.

What follows from this view of the Buddha as a pure empiricist, of course, is that any of his followers who tried to arrive at a systematic, theoretically sound, intellectually satisfactory account of the master's teachings were — at least to the extent that they introduced metaphysical notions — deviating from the spirit of the Buddha's teachings, and therefore from true Buddhism. As ābhidharmikas and other scholastics set out to explain Buddhist principles, they naturally began to introduce notions that aided the theoretical understanding of Buddhist doctrine. And in introducing such theoretical constructs, argues Warder, they began to wander from the true nature of the Buddha's doctrine. At this point in history, it became necessary for someone to re-discover and reaffirm the purely empirical spirit of genuine Buddhism.

Warder claims that the work of Nāgārjuna was a continuation of the Buddha's original resistance to the notions of "existence" and "non-existence". About the charge that Nāgārjuna was a nihilist, he writes "In fact his rejection of 'non-existence' is as emphatic as his rejection of 'existence', and must lead us to the conclusion that what he is attacking is these notions as metaphysical concepts imposed on the real universe" (Warder, 1970, p. 382). The "real universe" for Warder is clearly the world discovered through the experience of the senses. The Buddha's doctrine, says Warder (1970, p. 377),

is not speculative but empirical: the Buddha emphatically rejected all speculative opinions (*dr̥ṣṭi*) and propounded no such opinion himself, only an empirical account of conditioned origination and the way to end unhappiness. The basic concepts of philosophy, even 'time', 'space', 'motion', 'causality', and so on, are themselves speculative, and Nāgārjuna shows by rigorous analysis that it is inconceivable how, for example, a 'motion' as understood in philosophy could ever take place.

Thus Warder's Nāgārjuna is a far cry from Murti's non-dualist Mādhyamika. Warder's Buddha and Nāgārjuna are firmly grounded in ordinary, common sense experience, while Murti's Buddha and Nāgārjuna

eschewed common sense experience along with reason and grounded themselves in a special kind of unifying experience called Intuition.

4.3.2. *Kalupahana's Positivist Buddhism*

While Warder's Buddha and Nāgārjuna were probably rather more like empiricists in the tradition of David Hume, Kalupahana's Buddha and Nāgārjuna were definitely akin to the Logical Positivists. Indeed Kalupahana (1976, p. 158) writes that the Buddha's rejection of metaphysical questions as utterly meaningless was unmistakably congruent with the teachings of the Logical Positivists. So eager is Kalupahana to maintain this congruence that, faced with having to give an account for the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth (which is not among the doctrines traditionally associated with the Vienna circle), he goes so far as to cite A. J. Ayer, "the chief exponent of Logical Positivism today", in order to show that even for someone like Ayer "the theory of rebirth as presented in the early Buddhist texts could be considered a *logical possibility*"; he also cites a passage from a work by C. D. Broad to show that the question of whether or not one survives after death is an intelligible question and not a meaningless one (Kalupahana, 1976, pp. 52–53). By invoking the testimony of these stalwart members of the Logical Positivist community, Kalupahana manages to clear the Buddha's name of the unpleasant accusation of having traded in meaningless metaphysical questions.

In his study of *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, Kalupahana (1986) follows Warder's lead in portraying Nāgārjuna as a champion of the pristine empiricism of original Buddhism and a slayer of the metaphysical dragons that had a way of endangering the pure doctrine. Kalupahana's Nāgārjuna was, like the Buddha, "an empiricist *par excellence*" (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 81). A principal target of Nāgārjuna's philosophical darts, according to Kalupahana, were the Sarvāstivādins, who "presented a theory of 'self-nature' or 'substance' (*svabhāva*)", a theory that was "contrary to the fundamental philosophical tenet of the Buddha" (Kalupahana, 1986, pp. 1–2). While clearly siding with Robinson in his criticisms of the excesses of Stcherbatsky and Murti, Kalupahana as clearly rejects Robinson's suggestion that modern philosophers are more sophisticated than the Buddha and the Buddhists

of classical India. In a stinging indictment apparently (on the evidence of a footnote) directed at Mark Siderits's (1980) review of Kalupahana (1975), Kalupahana (1986, p. 5) writes:

Some writers on Buddhism, intoxicated by this conception of the evolution of thought, have shown reluctance to recognize the sophistication with which philosophical ideas were presented by the Buddha 2500 years ago. Having failed miserably to perceive the philosophical ingenuity of the Buddha as reflected in the Nikāyas and the Āgamas, as well as the subsequent degeneration of that system in the later commentarial tradition, followed by a revival of the earlier system by philosophers like Moggaliputtatissa and Nāgārjuna, these writers are insisting upon a gradual sophistication in Buddhist thought comparable to what one can find in the Western philosophical tradition.

As the above passage clearly shows, Kalupahana tends to consider deviations from the Buddha's message as recorded in the Pāli Nikāyas, to be "degenerations". In particular, the degenerate tendencies of the Sarvāstivādins and the Sautrāntikas led them to adopt substantialist and essentialist views that were based entirely on speculative reasoning and not in the least on empirical investigations. In short, the Buddhist scholastics became metaphysicians, "blinded" by such concepts as "identity and difference, substance and quality, self-nature and other-nature, permanence and annihilation" (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 81). Nāgārjuna's contribution to Buddhist philosophy, according to Kalupahana, was to heal his colleagues of their metaphysically induced blindness so that they could once again see clearly what the Buddha had taught.

4.3.3. *Criticisms of the Positivist interpretation*

The positivist interpretation of Nāgārjuna, and indeed of the Buddha, may be appealing to many people in the twentieth century, but it is not without its shortcomings. To begin with, it should be fairly obvious to anyone who goes through Nāgārjuna's arguments carefully that he rarely appeals to empirical observations. His view is not that nothing exists unless we can observe it through the senses, but rather that nothing corresponding to a given concept exists unless the concept is free of contradictions. His principal concern is to try to determine what exists and what does not exist, and this question is the paradigmatic question of the branch of philosophy that is traditionally called

metaphysics. If empiricism is the view that only sense-experience is a source of knowledge, and if rationalism is the view that reason takes precedence over experience, appeals to authority, and claimed revelation, then there can be no doubt that Nāgārjuna was more a rationalist than an empiricist. For him the highest good was the form of happiness that comes from seeing the world as it really is rather than through a fog of intuitions accepted uncritically. The means of reaching that highest good was through the careful application of reason to our intuitions towards the aim of eliminating those intuitions that could not stand up to close logical scrutiny. This work is all conceptual in nature with not even a hint of the kind of systematic, methodical, controlled scientific investigation so strongly endorsed by members of the Vienna circle.

Moreover, empiricists are rarely observed drawing such conclusions as Nāgārjuna's "No beings at all exist anywhere" and "Nothing can undergo the process of change." Furthermore, as was pointed out above, the doctrine of causality lies at the very heart of the doctrine declared by the Buddha. The Buddha's doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) — and therefore also Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which is defined as dependent origination — becomes utter nonsense if it is not construed as a doctrine of causes and their effects. The Four Noble Truths state that discontent (*duḥkha*) has a cause, namely misapprehension (*avidyā*), and that when the cause is removed, the effect no longer arises. The supreme happiness is described as the absence not only of actual discontent but of the very possibility of discontent. These notions of causality, potentiality and actuality were among the metaphysical ideas that came to be rejected by the earlier empiricists such as Hume as well as by the later Logical Positivists.

In an unpolished draft of a work in progress that was published after his death, Robinson (1972b, pp. 322—323) stated with reference to what he called the "pragmatist" interpretation of the Buddha's rejection of theory (*dr̥ṣṭi*) that this interpretation

makes several complex and unwarranted assumptions: (a) that an opposition between theory and practice was formulated by Gautama; (b) that the *dr̥ṣṭi* are 'metaphysical'; (c) that Gautama's teaching (four truths, twelve *nidānas*) is not metaphysical. None of this is so.

A more simple interpretation of the available textual data, suggests Robinson, is that the Buddha rejected all theories that did not agree with his own theory. While not directed specifically at those who advocate an empiricist interpretation of the Buddha's teachings (and of his silence on some issues), Robinson's comments are apt criticism of the kind of view advanced by Warder and Kalupahana. Given Nāgārjuna's obvious preoccupation with the paradigmatic questions of metaphysics, and given the absence of any explicit preference for investigations that would qualify in any way as empirical, I am inclined to disagree with Kalupahana's assessment of Nāgārjuna as an "empiricist *par excellence*." Quite on the contrary, if given a choice between classifying Nāgārjuna as a rationalist, an empiricist or an anti-metaphysical Critical philosopher, I would have to say that Nāgārjuna in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* strikes me very much as a rationalist *par excellence* and — dare I say it? — a metaphysician *par excellence*.

4.4. *The Deconstructionist interpretation*

Deconstruction is a term associated with Jacques Derrida and those influenced by him. Like absolutism and Positivism, the Deconstruction movement is motivated in part by a general suspicion of metaphysics that can be traced more or less directly back to Kant. To a somewhat greater degree than Absolutists and Positivists, the Deconstructionists have developed a technical vocabulary and a rather stylized manner of deliberately unorthodox presentation, influenced no doubt by *l'esprit de jeu* that characterizes the writings of Derrida. Owing to the self-consciously playful forms in which representatives of this school present their work (and disguise their ideas), it is more challenging to offer a concise summary of what this movement has tried to achieve.²¹ The following, therefore, is no more than an essay — one with which many would probably find exception — at sketching out features of the Deconstructionist movement that have played a role in how some scholars have interpreted the thought of Nāgārjuna.

In trying to understand Deconstructionist criticism, it may be helpful to bear in mind that this movement evolved as a reaction to various features of the Structuralist school of thought that dominated intellectual circles in France in the 1950's. Structuralism, which was itself strongly influenced by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de

Saussure, was typically grounded in the notion that literary works, like all other cultural phenomena, are products of socially mediated systems of interrelated elements which have no meaning in themselves but derive their significance only through their relationships with and opposition to other elements in the system. All such elements are arranged into hierarchical levels of which the users of the system, such as the speakers of a given language or the performers of a particular ritual, are only partially aware. The task that Structuralist critics set for themselves is to make explicit these structures of which the users of a system are not fully conscious but which they nevertheless correctly employ.

Complex structures require organizing principles around which their elements are ordered. And insofar as the elements of a structure acquire their significance in the context of the overall system of which they are a part, the organizing principle (such as the purpose for which a system came into being) assumes a dominant or central role, and the simple elements that are organized assume a dominated or marginal role. It is difficult to imagine organized systems in which such hierarchical arrangement is not a feature. When one is speaking in particular of social systems, then, the elements of which such systems are made include, among other things, people and groups of people. Much of the Structuralist analysis of society and of cultural phenomena, therefore, is a study of which groups of people are in dominant central positions and which groups of people are in marginalized positions. Thus while the task of a Structuralist critic in general is to make explicit the infrastructures of a system, the task of a social scientist using Structuralist methods might be to show, for example, the effects that domination has on both the central and the marginalized groups within a social system. Many social scientists, as they became aware of the deleterious effects that marginalization has had on some groups, even tried to suggest ways of modifying the structures so that some groups were less marginalized. In highly industrialized nations with a recent history of colonizing less industrialized peoples, social critics often used the concepts of structuralism to try to make their fellow citizens aware of how colonization had put the colonized people at a disadvantage. Many Structuralists became interested in trying to arrive at social structures that were less hierarchical in nature.

Deconstruction can be seen as partly a continuation of the reformist spirit of some structuralism, and partly a criticism of the central concepts of structuralism. As a continuation of reformist sentiments, many Deconstructionists take delight in inverting hierarchical expectations and focusing on the marginal rather than on the central elements in a system. Derrida, for example, has observed that in Saussure's system of linguistics, spoken language was seen as a system of symbols that signified an idea or concept or proposition, while written language was seen as a system of symbols that represented the sounds of the spoken language. Thus written language, being symbols of symbols, was always marginalized in favour of a study of spoken language, and spoken language itself was seen as being dominated by the ideas communicated through it. Derrida uses the term "logocentrism" to refer to hierarchical structures in which ideas play the dominant role, and in order to invert the expectations of this hierarchy he has deliberately drawn attention to writing as an independent act that may be appreciated without any reference at all to the putative ideas of the writer. Deconstructive textual interpretation, then, becomes not an act of trying to infer the ideas of the original author, but an act of playing with the written symbols in deliberate disregard of what the author's intention may have been in first inscribing them.

Deconstruction is also a criticism of structuralism that evolved from, among other things, a recognition that the very idea of a decentralized structure or non-hierarchical system is absurd. The whole history of the concept of structure, says Derrida (1988, pp. 109–110)

must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymics. Its matrix . . . is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence — *eidōs*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.

The radical critique of metaphysics initiated by Kant eventually had, among its many consequences, that of questioning the very idea of centrality. Empiricists challenged the central notion of purpose (*telos*) in one manner, phenomenologists in another, existentialists in yet

another. Structuralists, on the other hand, adopted the dubious strategy of holding on to the notion of structure, in which purpose is central, while decrying the undesired effects of the marginalization that invariably results from something being regarded as central. Thus about the science of ethnology Derrida has observed that it “could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture — and in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts — had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference” (Derrida, 1988, p. 112). But the fact that any science develops within a cultural framework means that the results of its research must be communicated through a system of symbols and concepts that have come to be accepted by that culture. Therefore, the very critique of European ethnocentrism really made sense only in Europe, or in societies in which European ways of thinking had come to be central and other ways of thinking marginalized. Ethnology, in other words,

is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them. Consequently, whether he wants to or not — and this does not depend on a decision on his part — the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency (Derrida, 1988, p. 112).

Generalizing on this observation about the dilemma of Structuralist reformers, who were unable to criticize the presuppositions of their culture without adopting the very presuppositions they wanted to attack, Derrida suggests that one can never escape metaphysics through critiques thereof, for these critiques themselves are based on metaphysical presuppositions. Thus every attempt to decentralize some concept succeeds only in marginalizing the decentralized one and putting some other concept at the center. The run around metaphysics, if it can be achieved at all, can be achieved only through play (*le jeu*), that is, by the refusal to treat anything at all as central.

Thus there are two interpretations of interpretation. . . . The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of

full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play (Derrida, 1988, pp. 121–122).

In practice, this play is typically carried out by deliberately teasing as many “meanings” as possible out of a set of symbols, even to the extent of showing that every text can be shown to hold directly contradictory meanings within itself. This practice is held to be justified by the observation that symbols always have a rich multiplicity of significations, or *polysemy*. Every text thus ultimately refutes itself. The task of the deconstructionist is simply to make apparent the self-refuting nature of every text and every system; the critic does not deconstruct a text but merely shows how the text deconstructs itself.

4.4.1. Magliola on Nāgārjuna as deconstructive bodhisattva

Robert Magliola has argued that Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamika has much in common with the philosophy of Derrida. The affinity is so close, he claims, that “without Derrida it is difficult for a ‘moderner’ to understand Nagarjuna!” (Magliola, 1984, p. 93). But, just as Murti’s Nāgārjuna anticipated more than the best that later European Absolutists could offer, Magliola’s Nāgārjuna anticipated more than the best that Derrida has been able to offer. Nāgārjuna, argues Magliola (1984, p. 87),

tracks the Derridean trace, and goes ‘beyond’ Derrida in that it frequents the ‘unheard-of thought,’ and also ‘with one and the same stroke,’ allows the reinstatement of the logocentric too. (As we shall see, we can ‘have it both ways,’ and the two ways are a non-paradoxical, ever altering and wayward ways; as we shall see, ‘*samsāra* is *nirvāna*’.)

Magliola, who does not claim Buddhist studies as his academic discipline, draws upon the work of numerous specialists in Indian philosophy and in Buddhist philosophy in order to present a picture of Nāgārjuna as a Buddhist who clearly saw the pitfalls of logocentrism and tried to rescue the Buddha’s teachings from the dominant logocentric tendencies of scholastics and systematizers of his day, such as the ābhidharmikas. Logocentrism, says Magliola, “is any *identity* at all that one conceives, or even ‘feels,’ and then ‘labels’ or perhaps ‘behaves towards’ as if it were an ‘idea’. And the structure of an identity, for Derrida, is necessarily a binary unit — factor and expres-

sion, signifier and signified" (Magliola, 1984, p. 89). And Nāgārjuna's *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is best seen as an effort — a successful one at that — to avoid the binary nature of logocentric thinking altogether. Nāgārjuna does not, argues Magliola, simply achieve a mystical unity of opposites under an all-embracing Absolute, for Absolutism is logocentrism *par excellence*, since all opposites and particularities are simply marginalized while the Absolute is seen as the central element in terms of which all particulars derive their significance. Rather, Nāgārjuna shows a way of thinking and speaking that avoids binary oppositions and is thus a thinking that is beyond thinking and a speaking that is beyond speaking (Magliola, 1984, p. 94).

Offering a full sketch of Magliola's argument is not necessary to the purposes of this paper. Suffice it to say that his principal strategy is to quote at length from the anecdotal literature of the Chan and Zen schools of Buddhism,²² and to indulge in a bit of deconstructive play with the Chinese characters used to convey key Mādhyamika terms.

4.4.2. *Other postmodern interpretations*

Other scholars have followed Magliola's lead in presenting Nāgārjuna as a thinker who anticipated Heidegger and the Deconstructionists who followed in his wake. One scholar who has included a few references to Deconstructive strategies in his sensitive attempt to interpret Mādhyamika philosophy in the light of such modern thinkers as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida and Rorty is C. W. Huntington (1989).²³

Another scholar who has been influenced by Magliola's Deconstructive interpretation of Buddhism is David Dilworth in his introductory essay on Kitarō Nishida (Nishida, 1987, 1—45). According to Dilworth, Kitarō Nishida held the view that some East Asian Buddhists based their whole thinking upon a system of logic that denies the laws of contradiction and excluded middle. Nishida, a Zen Buddhist who taught philosophy at University of Kyōto and was a founding father of the celebrated Kyōto school of philosophy, was of the opinion that Eastern peoples think in a radically different way than Western peoples. Whereas Westerners, according to Nishida, rely upon a logic in which something either is the case or is not the case, which leads to all manner of confrontations between people who hold competing

views, Eastern logic can easily accommodate contradictions. In fact, says Nishida, the foundation of Eastern logic is not the law of contradiction but the law that says “A if and only if not A.” It is the opinion of Dilworth that this Eastern logic is not unique to the Zen tradition but can be located in such Indian philosophers as Nāgārjuna. The evidence that Dilworth cites is the opening stanza of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, which we have already looked at. This stanza says of something that it is neither one nor many, that it neither endures nor comes to an end. What Dilworth takes all this to mean is that the subject to which these predicates apply is neither exclusively one nor exclusively many but rather is one precisely because it is many and many precisely because it is one; both unity and plurality apply to it at the same time and in the same respect.

4.4.3. *Criticisms of the Deconstructionist interpretation*

A key supposition in the case that Magliola (and, following him, Dilworth) makes is that Nāgārjuna makes use of a variety of what we have been calling deviant logic. Thus the success of his argument hinges on whether one concludes (1) that Nāgārjuna was deliberately using a form of logic not based on the laws of contradiction and excluded middle or (2) that he was using a standard logic but made mistakes in using it. As I have already indicated, the evidence is strongly in favour of the latter conclusion. Moreover, there is no need to assume that Nāgārjuna is dealing in a deviant logic, since it is quite possible to give a good account of what he was trying to achieve while remaining well within the bounds of the standard logic that, so far as I am aware, every classical Indian philosopher favoured. It is quite legitimate in standard logic to predicate contradictory predicates of a given subject, provided that the subject does not name something that exists. And that, I think, is exactly what Nāgārjuna tried to show over and over again in his work, namely, that there are certain subjects to which contradictory predicates can seemingly be applied, and therefore we can only conclude that the subjects themselves do not really exist. Far from deviating from the law of contradiction, Nāgārjuna relies constantly upon being able to derive contradictions from certain presuppositions; without the laws of contradiction and excluded middle, his whole enterprise becomes entirely ineffective.

In summary, while the Deconstructive approach to Nāgārjuna, like any kind of playfulness, may provide good amusement (perhaps especially for the author who writes it, since it is often more fun to play than to watch others playing), this approach probably offers rather little insight into Nāgārjuna's argumentation. Indeed, the Deconstructive interpretation of Mādhyamika helps to preserve the demonstrably false conclusion that Nāgārjuna used logic to destroy logic.

4.5. *Kamaleswar Bhattacharya*

Several of the interpreters examined up to this point have had in common a somewhat anachronistic tendency to search for anticipations of modern philosophical problems in the writings of a classical thinker. But as we have already seen, not all modern interpreters of Nāgārjuna have taken that approach; some have preferred to look for parallels only in the classical traditions of European philosophy rather than in modern thought. We have already noted that Schayer, Robinson and Ruegg all expressed misgivings about the attempt to find modern counterparts of early Buddhist thinkers, and that Schayer was interested in drawing parallels between Nāgārjuna and certain Greek skeptics. Another attempt to compare the thought of Nāgārjuna with his contemporaries in the Hellenistic world appears in Hayes (1988, pp. 50–62), where it is pointed out that some features of Nāgārjuna's thought are remarkably similar to characteristics in the work of Pyrrho of Elis, who reportedly accompanied Alexander the Great to India and who is given credit for founding the skeptic school. In particular, an attempt was made to show some similarities between some trends in Buddhism and the Pyrrhonian values of non-assertion (*aphasia*), which was understood as the state of having no opinions, and inner calm (*ataraxia*), understood as the peace of mind that results from eliminating the emotional attachments that result from having beliefs.

Siderits and O'Brien (1976) also followed Schayer's lead in an article that pointed out the similarity between Nāgārjuna's arguments against motion and the arguments against motion presented by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea (born 490 b.c.e.) The similarity in the arguments themselves and in the conclusions reached raises the question of whether the two philosophers had a similar purpose in arguing

as they did. Unfortunately, the textual evidence is too scanty to enable one to arrive at any firm conclusions. The thought of Zeno of Elea has been preserved only in fragmentary form, that is, in quotations of his arguments by other philosophers, especially Aristotle. On the basis of what has been preserved, it seems fairly clear that what Zeno was trying to prove was the impossibility of plurality and the impossibility of motion. Being a follower of Parmenides, Zeno was apparently committed to the view that there is a fundamental and indivisible unity underlying all apparent diversity, and that all diversity is, therefore, in the final analysis illusory. Zeno's views are sometimes compared to those of some schools of *advaita* that arose in India at various times. If one takes the parallelism seriously, then it might well be concluded that the underlying motive of Nāgārjuna's method of argument was to establish that beneath the transitory and painful diversity of the world of experience there is a stable and peaceful unity, which can be discovered only through the application of metaphysical reasoning.

Other modern historians of classical Indian thought have preferred to avoid finding parallels between Nāgārjuna and his European contemporaries and instead to explain the Mādhyamika system solely in terms of philosophical currents present in the India of his day. One important scholar who has taken this approach is Kamaleswar Bhattacharya.

Like many other historians of philosophy, Bhattacharya (1984; 1985) is among those who have expressed some misgivings about the conclusions of those who have seen a remarkable parallelism between the Mādhyamikas and trends in modern thought. Those who see anticipations of modern and even post-modern tendencies in the early Madhyamaka, warns Bhattacharya, have often seen these similarities by neglecting what the classical texts themselves explicitly say, and by failing to appreciate the texts in their own historical milieu. Bhattacharya (1984, p. 189) cites approvingly the Buddhist historian David Seyfort Ruegg, who criticizes some modern scholars for imposing their own prejudices and problematics onto the Madhyamaka texts. The result, says Ruegg (1977, p. 52), is a kind of ethnocentrism in which we assume that what we modern Westerners find of greatest importance and value must also be what the classical Indian Buddhists found of greatest importance and value.

Bhattacharya's misgivings about comparisons of Nāgārjuna with

Europeans is not confined to his wish to avoid anachronisms. He is equally skeptical about the attempts to compare Nāgārjuna to the ancient Greek thinker Zeno. Bhattacharya (1985, p. 13) cites Daniel H. H. Ingalls (1954), who writes that it is important to recognize that the paradigm of rationality for Zeno and most other Greek thinkers was mathematics and especially geometry, while the paradigm for rationality for Nāgārjuna and most Indian thinkers was *vyākāraṇa*, the methodical study of natural language. Zeno begins with the geometer's axioms about lines, points and planes, while Nāgārjuna begins with Pāṇini and Patañjali's definitions of action, agent, patient and instrument. The worlds of conceptual analysis may be so far apart that we can attach no significance to the apparent likeness in the conclusions reached by Zeno and Nāgārjuna, especially in the conclusion that there is no motion. Agreeing with Ingalls, Bhattacharya expresses the view that very nearly every modern interpreter of Mādhyamaka has failed to pay sufficient attention to Nāgārjuna's indebtedness to the worldview of the classical Indian grammatical tradition, and especially to the genius of Patañjali.²⁴ Bhattacharya finds it significant that hardly a single argument used by Nāgārjuna was unknown to the grammatical tradition. It is his indebtedness to the grammarians that distinguished Nāgārjuna from those Buddhists that preceded him and from the Greeks and such modern European thinkers as Kant, for whom mathematics was the supreme tool of analysis.

What one might conclude from Bhattacharya's work — Bhattacharya himself does not explicitly draw this conclusion — is that Nāgārjuna's contribution to Buddhism was the return of Buddhist thinking to the heartland of brahmanical intellectualism and hermeneutical methodology. Indeed, for all its apparently radical criticisms of commonly accepted ideas, Nāgārjuna's work is among the first pieces of Buddhist literature to bear all the earmarks of classical brahmanical ways of thinking. Not only can Nāgārjuna be given much of the credit for bringing Buddhism to the intelligentsia, but he can also be given much of the credit for bringing a certain kind of systematic argumentation into Buddhism.

4.6. *Nāgārjuna's philosophical goal: a reprise*

Taking up the hints provided by Bhattacharya, one might describe the philosophical importance of Nāgārjuna's work in something like the

following way. First, one of the most fundamental insights of the Sanskrit grammarians was that language does not directly relate to things as they really are in the world; rather, language is purely the result of a speaker's desire to depict a given situation in a given way. It is the speaker who decides which factors in a complex situation to mention and which to ignore; it is the speaker who decides which factors will be emphasized among those that are mentioned at all. There is nothing in the world that compels anyone to speak in any way. There is nothing that demands to be said at all, and there is especially nothing in the situation of the world that demands that things be said in a particular way. Speaking is willful activity that must be preceded by a desire to have others know one's thoughts. To this basic insight of the grammarians, one can add certain Buddhist doctrines about desire, arriving then at the following conclusions. One who is free of all desire has nothing to say. But the desire to speak is perhaps the last of the desires to be abandoned. What Nāgārjuna's analysis of the categories of speech may be intended to do, therefore, is to reinforce this insight of the grammarians, and simultaneously to reinforce the message of Buddhism. By seeing thoroughly into the intrinsic willfulness of speaking, and by seeing also that speaking is an action that can only create confusion in the final analysis, one may eventually abandon the desire to speak. And if one can abandon the desire to speak, one can easily abandon the desire to know.

The importance of abandoning the desires to speak and to know may become more clear by turning once again to a verse that has already been examined briefly. In the discussion of Nāgārjuna's philosophical goal (see Section 2 above), mention was made of verse MMK 24:18:

yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracaḡṣmahe|
sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā||

We claim that dependent origination is emptiness. To be empty is to be a derivative idea. That alone is the middle path.

In the light of the insights provided by Bhattacharya, let us examine

the implications of this verse once again. First, it should be borne in mind that the expression “*pratītya-samutpāda*” literally means: “coming into being (*samutpāda*) after acquiring (*pratītya* = *prāpya*) something.” What it means to say that something comes into being after acquiring something is explained by Nāgārjuna through the gloss that he himself provides to the term “*pratītya samutpāda*.” He tells us that “coming into being” means “becoming apparent” or “becoming an object of knowledge.” This interpretation is suggested by the gloss that Nāgārjuna gives to the term “*samutpāda*,” namely, “*prajñapti*.” This latter word literally means “the act of making someone aware of something” or “the act of bringing something to one’s attention.” Therefore we can say that for Nāgārjuna “to come into being” is equivalent in meaning to “to become an object of attention”. Now it is said that the act of coming into being, or becoming an object of awareness is subsequent to another act, namely, the act of acquiring (*prati*). The name for this action is glossed by Nāgārjuna by the verb “*upādā*.” This verb has special significance in Buddhism. It names the action of clinging or being attached.²⁵ What this means, then, is that as a result of one’s attachments, one creates the objects of one’s own experience.

The stock list of attachments in Buddhism comprises four items: (1) attachment to pleasures (*kāma*), (2) attachment to views (*dr̥ṣṭi*), (3) attachment to habitual modes of behaviour (*śīla-vrata*), and (4) attachment to belief in a self (*ātmavāda*). Each of these attachments influences the kinds of things of which one becomes aware. Thus, attachment to pleasures brings about the fact that we tend to experience either what we wish to experience and take pleasure in experiencing or what we wish to avoid and find pain in experiencing; that which evokes neither pleasure nor pain tends not to be noticed. Attachment to views brings about the fact that we tend to experience what we believe we will experience; that is, we tend to notice mostly what reinforces our beliefs and opinions and easily overlook what challenges our most firmly held beliefs. Attachment to habitual patterns of behaviour brings about the fact that we tend to experience what we are accustomed to experiencing; that is, we notice what we have conditioned ourselves to notice. And attachment to belief in a self brings about the fact that we tend to place ourselves at the centre of all experience; that is, we see ourselves as perceiving subjects and the

rest of the world as objects either to be drawn into or eliminated from the horizons of our awareness. This world of experience as conditioned through various kinds of attachment is, however, said to be empty. Realizing the emptiness of all things is realizing that we would have no experiences at all without desire and craving. One who has no desire, according to this view, has no perceptions — that is, no interpretations of sensations. One who has no desires has only pure, uninterpreted sensations that are unmediated by language, unexpressed in language, unaccompanied by thought, and unaffected by attraction or aversion. One who has no desires also has no sense of self, no identity.

The general pronouncement that attachments are the immediate cause of things coming into being comes, of course, straight from classical Buddhism. The special insight that desire is also at the root of language, and also of the kinds of thinking that one does about experience, can be seen to stem from the grammatical tradition. Nāgārjuna's insight that attachments are the immediate cause of perception, in the sense of interpreting what is brought to the senses, can be described as a combination of the Buddhist view with the insight of the classical grammatical tradition, with which Nāgārjuna was clearly quite familiar.

5. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF SILENCE

In Section 4 several interpretations of Nāgārjuna's presentation of Buddhism were compared and criticized. In the present section an attempt will be made to show the implications of three of these different interpretations by examining how each deals with the question of the Buddha's refusal to answer certain questions.

As is well known and often repeated, the Canonical tradition of Buddhism records that the Buddha refused to answer fourteen questions. These questions are called the undetermined or unexplained issues (*avyākatavatthūni*, *avyākṛtavastūni*). According to the texts, the Buddha said "I have not determined whether (1) The world is eternal (*sassato loko*), (2) the world is non-eternal (*asassato loko*), (3) the world has boundaries (*antavā loko*), (4) the world is unbounded (*anantavā loko*), (5) life is the physical body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*), (6) life is one thing and the physical body is another (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*), (7) one who knows the truth exists after death (*hoti*

tathāgato param marañā), (8) one who knows the truth does not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato param marañā*), (9) one who knows the truth both exists and does not exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param marañā*), (10) one who knows the truth neither exists nor does not exist after death (*neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param marañā*), (11) discontent is caused by oneself (*sayam kataṃ dukkham*), (12) discontent is caused by another (*param kataṃ dukkham*), (13) discontent is caused by both oneself and another (*sayam katañ ca param katañ ca hoti*), or (14) discontent, being caused neither by oneself nor by another, arises spontaneously (*asayaṃkāram aparamkāram adhiccasamuppannaṃ dukkham*).” Different scholars have offered different explanations for why the Buddha chose not to indicate whether he agreed or disagreed with those fourteen statements.

5.1. T. R. V. Murti's explanation

According to Murti, the Buddha's refusal to answer these questions was grounded in his realization that the categories of Reason, which deal with polar opposites such as identity versus difference, and existence versus nonexistence, are incapable of capturing the nature of the Absolute. Thus he says

The formulation of the problems in the thesis-antithesis form is itself evidence of the awareness of the conflict in Reason. That the conflict is not on the empirical level and so not capable of being settled by appeal to facts is realised by the Buddha when he declares them insoluble. Reason involves itself in deep and interminable conflict when it tries to go beyond phenomena to seek their ultimate ground. Speculative metaphysics provokes not only difference but also opposition; if one theorist says 'yes' to a question, the other says 'no' to the same. . . . [The Buddha] is conscious of the interminable nature of the conflict, and resolves it by rising to the higher standpoint of criticism. Dialectic was born. To Buddha, then, belongs the honour of having discovered the Dialectic long before anything approximating to it was formulated in the West. . . . Criticism is deliverance of the human mind from all entanglements and passions (Murti, 1960, pp. 40–41).

The questions are about the Unconditioned. Buddha is alive, unlike other philosophers, to the insuperable difficulties (*ādīnavam sampassamāno*) in conceiving the Transcendent in terms of the empirical. . . . [The Tathāgato] is deep and unfathomable like the ocean. To say with regard to the ocean that it begins here or that it does not, etc., would be a piece of irrelevance. Likewise, the Tathāgata, as the totality of things, is beyond predication.

5.2. *David Kalupahana's explanation*

David Kalupahana argues that the Buddha remained silent on these issues because he accepted only what could be experienced through the senses, whereas these fourteen propositions dealt with matters that could not be decided by sensual experience.

Since no answer based on experience is possible, the Buddha remained silent when pressed for an answer and maintained that the questions as to whether the *tathāgata* exists (*hoti*) or arises (*uppajjati*), does not exist or does not arise, both or neither, do not fit the case (*na upeti*) (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 157).

Kalupahana rejects Murti's notion that the Buddha's silence stemmed from his unwillingness to attribute categories to the Absolute. There is no textual justification in the Pāli Canon for Murti's contention that the Buddha was concerned with questions of the Absolute or with anything Transcendental. Rather, says Kalupahana, the Buddha realized that our only source of knowledge is our own perfectly ordinary experience of the everyday world, and we have no means of going beyond the limitations of that experience. Kalupahana then goes on to outline three objections that the Buddha has to what Kalupahana calls "metaphysical" knowledge. These three objections are: (1) Metaphysical theories have no basis in our ordinary experience, and they cannot be verified by empirical investigation. (2) Metaphysicians attempt to determine in advance what must be true and ignore what their senses tell them is true. (3) Metaphysical propositions are strings of words that may appear meaningful because they conform to rules of grammar, but turn out to be meaningless when examined more closely.

This is the Logical Positivist criticism of metaphysics and is found in the early Buddhist texts. . . . As the Logical Positivists themselves maintain, these metaphysical statements are meaningless because they are not verified in experience (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 158).

Kalupahana's proof text for this Positivist anti-metaphysical stance is the *Sabba-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya*:

Monks, I will teach you 'everything'. Listen to it. What, monks, is 'everything'? Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and tangible objects, mind and mental objects. These are called 'everything'. Monks, he who would

say: "I will reject this *everything* and proclaim another *everything*," he may certainly have a theory. But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience (*avisaya*) (Kalupahana, 1976, p. 158).

5.3. *The Buddha's explanation*

Both Murti and Kalupahana can be seen to have gratuitously offered an anachronistic interpretation of the Buddha's silence. One need not, however, find exotic modern interpretations of the Buddha's silence, since the very texts in which his refusal to answer questions is reported also report his own explanation of why he chose to remain silent on certain issues. The Buddha's own explanation for why he had not determined the answers to these fourteen questions is given, among other places, in the Poṭṭhapādasutta of the Dīghanikāya:

"Why, venerable sir, has the Lord not determined?"

"Because, Poṭṭhapāda, this is not connected to a purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the life of purity, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvana. Therefore, I have not determined."

"What has the Lord determined, Venerable sir?"

"I have determined that this is discontent, this is the cause of discontent, this is the cessation of discontent, and this is the path leading to the cessation of discontent."²⁶

The Buddha then concludes that he has taught the Four Noble Truths because these truths are connected to a purpose, are connected to virtue, are connected with the life of purity, do lead to humility, and dispassion, and cessation, and tranquility, and superior understanding, and supreme awakening, and nirvana.

In the Cuḷa-Māluṅkyasutta of the Majjhimanikāya the Buddha gives an answer very much like the one he gave to Poṭṭhapāda. But in this sutta he adds:

Living the life of purity does not depend on the view that the world is eternal, nor does it depend on the view that the world is not eternal. Whether or not the world is eternal or not eternal, there definitely is birth, growing old, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. And I have explained how to bring those things to an end here and now.

He then applies exactly this same formula to the other thirteen questions. The evidence of these two passages supports the conclusion that

the Buddha did not answer these questions for the simple reason that they are not relevant to the cultivation of good character and the quest for an end to discontent. But this does not indicate a commitment either to Murti's Absolutism or to Kalupahana's Logical Positivism.

A somewhat more elaborate answer can be found in the *Samyuttanikāya* 4.391. There the Buddha also says he has no answers to these fourteen questions. When asked why he does not determine the answer, he replies:

Let me ask you what is the reason why the wandering ascetics with other views try to answer these questions, whereas Gotama the recluse does not try to answer them. The reason is that other wandering ascetics think that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind either belong to them or are their selves or are part of their selves. But the Tathāgata, being a fully awakened Arahant, does not think of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind as belonging to him, nor does he think of them "These are my self." The Tathāgata, unlike other wandering ascetics, also does not regard feelings, perception, mentality or awareness as things that belong to him or as being himself or as being part of himself. There is nothing about which the Tathāgata says "This is mine. This is I. This is my self."

The argument of this latter passage could be summarized as follows: Someone who thinks of the living body or the mind as the self or as belonging to the self recognizes that the body and mind are both impermanent. Those who think in this way then become filled with fear that they will cease to exist. Because they are filled with a desire to live (*jīvitumkāma*) and a desire not to die (*amaritukāma*), they believe what they want to believe: there is life after death. Some people, on the other hand, are attached to pleasures and wish to pursue pleasures without regard to how their actions will affect other living beings. These people, who choose not to be responsible in their actions, believe what they want to believe: there is no life after death. The Tathāgata, on the other hand, realizes that all discontent arises from ignorance, which takes the form of identifying the body and the mind as the self. When this identification comes to an end, so does all discontent. One can then face all changes and all kinds of experience with calm and dignity.

The *Samyuttanikāya* passage would suggest that the Buddha's reason for avoiding giving answers to the celebrated fourteen questions was not because the questions presupposed the existence of polar opposites that could be subsumed under an all-embracing Absolute,

nor because he was a pure empiricist who disdained metaphysics, but rather because he recognized that all possible answers to these questions presuppose the existence of an enduring self. But if the existence of such a self is denied, then no predicates can truly be predicated of it. If no unicorns exist, then it is as false to say "The unicorn is white" as it is to say "The unicorn is not white." In other words, refusing to give answers to the fourteen questions was the Buddha's way of denying the existence of an enduring self.

When it is recalled that denying the existence of an enduring self was also very much the principal task of both the ābhīdharmikas and Nāgārjuna, it turns out that (1) the ābhīdharmikas need not be seen as in any way spoiling or misconstruing the basic teachings of the Buddha, and (2) Nāgārjuna need not be seen as taking any kind of radical turn either from the Buddha or from the ābhīdharmikas. On the contrary, the Buddha, the ābhīdharmikas and Nāgārjuna appear to be following almost exactly the same philosophical trajectory.

6. CONCLUSION

In the preface of his study of Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna, Andrew P. Tuck (1990, p. v) makes the claim that it is a "common-place of contemporary scholarship" that the interpretations that scholars give of texts are "isogetical: they reveal far more about the views of scholars and their scholarly eras than exegesis is said to do." It should be noted that the primary purpose of Tuck's study is not to offer a history of scholarship on Nāgārjuna, but rather to use some recent studies of Nāgārjuna as illustrations of the process of isogesis at work. Isogesis is, according to Tuck (p. 10), a largely unconscious process whereby an interpreter unwittingly reads a set of biases and unexamined presuppositions into a text; these prejudices are said to stem from such sources as the interpreter's basic temperament as well as from all kinds of social conditioning and indoctrination. This being the focal interest of his work, Tuck naturally (and presumably deliberately) gives far more attention to Stcherbatsky and Murti, whose work serves better to illustrate his thesis, than to scholars such as Schayer, in whose work the phenomenon of isogesis is somewhat less in evidence. Tuck gives no mention at all to the important contributions of

Ruegg, Lindtner and Bhattacharya, who appear to come very close to the ideal of detached and scientific objectivity in scholarship that Tuck suggests is little more than an ideological remnant of nineteenth century mythology promoted by such thinkers as Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

In light of what was seen above in Section 4, it may be tempting to agree with Tuck's claim that twentieth century scholarship on Nāgārjuna reveals much more about the preoccupations of twentieth century intellectuals than about Nāgārjuna and his contemporaries, for it certainly does appear to be the case that the interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought presented by Stcherbatsky, Murti, Warder, Kalupahana, Magliola, Dilworth and Huntington all reflect trends in nineteenth and twentieth century European thinking far more than they reflect trends in classical Indian thought. That notwithstanding, we have seen plenty of counter-evidence to Tuck's thesis as well; the works of Schayer, Robinson, Bhattacharya, Ruegg and Williams all seem far more exegetical than isogetical, and, except for the fact that they all refer to and find fault with post-Kantian interpretations, they bear few characteristics that would identify them as works of the twentieth century.²⁷

On looking at trends in twentieth century scholarship on Nāgārjuna, one can discern two fairly distinct styles, which seem to correspond to the traditional approaches known as exegesis and hermeneutics. Roughly speaking, the former attempts to discover what a text meant in the time it was written, while the latter attempts to find the meaning of a text for the time in which the interpreter lives. Exegesis tends to be confined mostly to the accumulation and ordering of philological, historical and textual data, while hermeneutics attempts to make those data not only intelligible but also relevant to the concerns of people in the present. These two traditional approaches begin with somewhat different questions and therefore yield somewhat different results. As long as scholars are clear in their own minds about which of these approaches they are taking and which approach other scholars are taking, there is no reason for those who take one approach to decry the work done by those who take the other. It is as pointless to accuse the historian of being a bad philosopher as to accuse the philosopher or the preacher of being a bad historian.

What I have attempted to do in the present study, however, is not to adjudicate in the disputes that have occasionally erupted between historical-minded exegetes and philosophically engaged interpreters. Rather, what I have tried to do is simply to show that a close look at Nāgārjuna's work in the context in which it was written reveals that Nāgārjuna put forth a number of fallacious arguments. In particular, I have tried to show that he made frequent use of the fallacy of equivocation. Owing to his use of this and other fallacies, the conclusions he puts forth do not necessarily follow from the evidence he adduces for them. An attempt has been made to show that this fallaciousness in Nāgārjuna's writing has been seen by some modern interpreters not as a vice but as a rather interesting virtue; for it has been seen by some as a clue that Nāgārjuna deliberately rejected standard logic in favour of a deviant logic by which one might simultaneously hold two contradictory views with impunity. While such an hypothesis, if true, might give modern proponents of deviant logic, or to outright opponents of logic of any kind, the sort of comfort that attends finding famous and highly respected antecedents to one's own position, I contend that the hypothesis is in fact unlikely to be true. On the contrary, it appears to me on examining the textual evidence that Nāgārjuna had a set of definitely stated doctrines for which he was trying to produce a systematically arranged set of rational arguments. That he failed in this task does not diminish his importance within the history of Buddhist philosophy. It merely shows him to have been a thinker who displayed about the same degree of fallibility as most other human beings. But being an imperfect philosopher need not at all reduce Nāgārjuna's appeal, either to historians of philosophy or to philosophers themselves.

APPENDIX

A. TRANSLATIONS OF NĀGĀRJUNA'S MŪLA-MADHYAMAKA-KĀRIKĀ CHAPTER 15

In order to illustrate the different strategies that different modern translators have taken in handling Nāgārjuna's mercurial use of the term "svabhāva," the verses of chapter 15 are given below, along with

the translations found in Streng (1967), Inada (1970), Sprung (1979) and Kalupahana (1986), as well as my translation. Schayer's (1931, pp. 55—80) rendering does not appear here, because he chose to avoid altogether translating the key terms, preferring simply to import the Sanskrit terms "bhāva", "svabhāva", "abhāva", "parabhāva" and "prakṛti" into his German translation; his title for the fifteenth chapter of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, however, is 'Kritik der Lehre von dem absoluten Sein,' suggesting that he took the most important sense of "svabhāva" under consideration to be that of unconditioned being.

na sambhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ
hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtako bhavet || 1 |

- Streng:* The production of a self-existent thing by a conditioning cause is not possible, [for,] being produced through dependence on a cause, a self-existent thing would be "something which is produced."
- Inada:* The rise of self-nature by relational and causal conditions is not justifiable. For, such a self-nature will have a character of being made or manipulated.
- Sprung:* The genesis of a self-existent nature from causes and conditions is not intelligible. A self-existent nature which arises from causes and conditions would be something created.
- Kalupahana:* The occurrence of self-nature through causes and conditions is not proper. Self-nature that has occurred as a result of causes and conditions would be something that is made.
- Hayes:* Birth of an independent thing from causes and conditions is not reasonable. An independent thing born from causes and conditions would be a fabrication.

svabhāvaḥ kṛtako nāma bhaviṣyati punaḥ katham
akṛtamaḥ svabhāvo hi nirapekṣaḥ paratra ca || 2 ||

- Streng:* How, indeed, will a self-existent thing *become* "something which is produced"? Certainly, a self-existent thing

[by definition] is “not produced” and is independent of anything else.

- Inada:* How is it possible for the self-nature to take on the character of being made? For, indeed, the self-nature refers to something which cannot be made and has no mutual correspondence with something else.
- Sprung:* How can a self-existent nature be something created? Self-existent nature is not created nor is it dependent on anything other than itself.
- Kalupahana:* Again, how could there be a self-nature that is made? Indeed, an unmade self-nature is also non-contingent upon another.
- Hayes:* But how could an independent thing be called a fabrication, given that an independent thing is not a fabrication and is independent of anything else?

kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati
svabhāvaḥ parabhāvasya parabhāvo hi kathyate || 3 ||

- Steng:* If there is an absence of a self-existent thing, how will an other-existent thing come into being? Certainly the self-existence of an other-existent thing is called “other-existence.”
- Inada:* Where self-nature is non-existent, how could there be an extended nature? For, indeed, a self-nature which has the nature of being extended will be called an extended nature.
- Sprung:* If there is no self-existence, how can there be existence of otherness? For it is the self-existence of the existence of otherness which is called ‘existence of otherness’.
- Kalupahana:* In the absence of self-nature, whence can there be other-nature? For, self-nature of other-nature is called other-nature.
- Hayes:* How, in the absence of an identifiable thing, could there be a difference, given that the identity of a different thing is called a differentia?

svabhāvaparabhāvābhyām ṛte bhāvaḥ kutaḥ punaḥ
svabhāva parabhāve vā sati bhāvo hi sidhyati || 4 ||

- Streng:* Further, how can a thing [exist] without either self-existence or other-existence? If either self-existence or other-existence exist, then an existing thing, indeed, would be proved.
- Inada:* Again, separated from self-nature and extended nature, how could existence be? For, indeed, existence establishes itself in virtue of either self-nature or extended nature.
- Sprung:* How can there be an entity apart from self-existence and other-existence? If there is either self-existence or other-existence entities are already established.
- Kalupahana:* Without self-nature and other-nature, whence can there be an existent? For, the existent is established only when there is self-nature or other-nature.
- Hayes:* How can there be existence without either independence or dependence, given that existence is established when there is either independence or dependence?

bhāvasya ced aprasiddhir abhāvo naiva sidhyati
bhāvasya hy anyathābhāvam abhāvaṃ bruvate janāḥ || 5 ||

- Streng:* If there is no proof of an existent thing, then a non-existent thing cannot be proved. Since people call the other-existence of an existent thing a “non-existent” thing.
- Inada:* If existence does not come to be (i.e., does not establish itself), then certainly non-existence does not also. For, indeed, people speak of existence in its varying nature as non-existence.
- Sprung:* If existence is not accepted, non-existence cannot be established. Because people say that non-existence is being other than existence.
- Kalupahana:* When the existent is not established, the non-existent is also not established. It is, indeed, the change of the existent that people generally call the non-existent.
- Hayes:* If an existent is not established, an absence is certainly

not established, given that people call the change of state of an existent its ceasing to be present.

svabhāvaṃ parabhāvaṃ ca bhāvaṃ cābhāvaṃ eva ca
ye paśyanti na paśyanti te tattvaṃ buddhaśāśane || 6 ||

- Streng:* Those who perceive self-existence and other-existence, and an existent thing and a non-existent thing, do not perceive the true nature of the Buddha's teaching.
- Inada:* Those who see (i.e., try to understand) the concepts of self-nature, extended nature, existence, or non-existence do not perceive the real truth in the Buddha's teaching.
- Sprung:* Those who think in terms of self-existence, other-existence, existence and non-existence do not grasp the truth of the Buddha's teaching.
- Kalupahana:* Those who perceive self-nature as well as other-nature, existence as well as non-existence, they do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha's message.
- Hayes:* They who perceive identity, difference, presence and absence do not perceive the truth in the Buddha's instruction.

kātyāyanāvavāde cāstīti nāstīti cobhayaṃ
pratiśiddhaṃ bhagavatā bhāvābhāvavibhāvinā || 7 ||

- Streng:* In "The Instruction to Kātyāyana" both "it is" and "it is not" are opposed by the Glorious One, who has ascertained the meaning of "existent" and "non-existent."
- Inada:* According to the Instructions to Kātyāyana, the two views of the world in terms of being and non-being were criticized by the Buddha for similarly admitting the bifurcation of entities into existence and non-existence.
- Sprung:* In the *Kātyāyanāvavāda Sūtra*, the illustrious one, who comprehends existence and non-existence, repudiated both thoughts: that something is that something is not.
- Kalupahana:* In the admonition to Kātyāyana, the two theories [implying] 'exists' and 'does not exist' have been refuted

by the Blessed One who is adept in existence as well as in non-existence.

Hayes: In the *Kātyāyanāvavāda* the Lord, who clearly saw presence and absence, denied both the view that one exists and the view that one does not exist.

yady astitvaṃ prakṛtyā syān na bhaved asya nāstitā
prakṛter anyathābhāvo na hi jatūpapadyate || 8 ||

Streng: If there would be an existent thing by its own nature, there could not be “non-existence” of that [thing]. Certainly an existent thing different from its own nature would never obtain.

Inada: If existence is in virtue of primal nature, then its non-existence does not follow. For, indeed, a varying character of a primal nature is not possible at all.

Sprung: If it is the nature of something to exist, it cannot cease to exist. Real change of the nature of something is not logically possible.

Kalupahana: If existence were to be in terms of primal nature, then there would not be its non-existence. A change of primal nature is certainly not appropriate.

Hayes: If a thing were to exist by nature, then it could not fail to exist, for the change of state of a nature is certainly not possible.

prakṛtau kasya cāsatyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati
prakṛtau kasya satyām anyathātvam bhaviṣyati || 9 ||

Streng: [An opponent asks:] If there is no basic self-nature, of what will there be “otherness”? [Nāgārjuna answers:] If there is basic self-nature, of what will there be “otherness”?

Inada: If primal nature does not exist, what will possess the varying character? If, on the other hand, primal nature does exist, what then will possess the varying character?

Sprung: If things have no inherent nature what is it that will

change? If things have an inherent nature what is it that will change?

Kalupahana: When primal nature is not-existent, whose change would there be? When primal nature is existent, whose change would there be?

Hayes: And in the absence of a nature, what can undergo the process of change? On the other hand, if a nature is present, what can undergo the process of change?

astīti śaśvatagrāho nāstīti ucchedadarśanam
tasmād astitvanāstīve nāsrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ || 10 ||

Streng: “It is” is a notion of eternity. “It is not” is a nihilistic view. Therefore, one who is wise does not have recourse to “being” or “non-being”.

Inada: Existing is the grasping of permanency (i.e., permanent characteristics) and non-existence the perception of disruption. (As these functions are not strictly possible), the wise should not rely upon (the concepts of) existence and non-existence.

Sprung: To say ‘things are in being’ is the eternalist view; to say ‘Things are not in being’ is the naturalist view. Therefore thinking man should not resort to the twin beliefs in existence and non-existence.

Kalupahana: “Exists” implies grasping after eternalism. ‘Does not exist’ implies the philosophy of annihilation. Therefore, a discerning person should not rely upon either existence or non-existence.

Hayes: The notion of perpetuity is that one exists; the notion of destruction is that one fails to exist. Therefore, a wise person should not experience existence or non-existence.

asti yad dhi svabhāvena na tan nāstīti śaśvatam
nāstidānīm abhūt pūrvam ity ucchedaḥ prasajyate || 11 ||

Streng: That which exists by its own nature is eternal since “it does not not-exist.” If it is maintained: “That which existed

before does not exist now," there annihilation would naturally follow.

- Inada:* It follows that permanency means that existence based on self-nature does not become a non-entity and disruption means that what formerly was existence is now non-existent.
- Sprung:* What exists by its inherent nature can never not exist: this implies eternalism. What does now not exist but once did: this implies naturalism.
- Kalupahana:* "Whatever that exists in terms of self-nature, that is not non-existent" implies eternalism. "It does not exist now, but existed before" implies annihilation.
- Hayes:* Perpetuity follows from believing that that which exists independently (*svabhāvena*) does not fail to exist; destruction follows from believing that that which existed before no longer exists.

B. DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATING MMK 15

The various senses in which Nāgārjuna uses the principal equivocal expressions on which his argument is based in MMK 15:1–11 can be seen in Table I. the numbers indicate the verse number of each occurrence. Numbers followed by a star indicate that a synonym of the equivocal expression is used; the words in parentheses indicate which synonym is used in the starred verse.

TABLE I
Usage of key terms in MMK 15

bhāva _(P)	existence: 4, 10* (<i>astitva</i>)
bhāva _(L)	an existent: 5
abhāva _(P)	absence: 5, 10* (<i>nāstitva</i>)
svabhāva _{1(L)}	an essence: 3c, 8* (<i>prakṛti</i>), 9* (<i>prakṛti</i>)
svabhāva _{1(L)}	an identifiable thing: 3a
svabhāva _{2(P)}	independence: 4, 6, 11
svabhāva _{2(L)}	an independent thing: 1, 2
parabhāva _{1(P)}	difference: 3
parabhāva _{1(L)}	a differentia: 3
parabhāva _{1(L)}	another thing: 3
parabhāva _{2(P)}	dependence: 4, 6

The presence of equivocation makes translating Nāgārjuna's arguments particularly challenging; conversely, the difficulty that one has in

TABLE II
Translation of key terms in MMK 15

Word	Translator				
	Verse	Inada	Kalupahana	Streng	Sprung
bhāva					
4	existence	existent	thing	entity	
5	existence	existent	existent thing	existence	
6	existence	existence	existent thing	existence	
7	existence	existence	existent	existence	
astitva					
8	existence	existence	existent thing	to exist	
10	existence	existence	being	existence	
abhāva					
5-6	non-existence	non-existent	non-existent thing	non-existence	
7	non-existence	non-existent	non-existent	non-existence	
nāstitva					
8	non-existence	non-existence	non-existence	cease to exist	
10	non-existence	non-existence	non-being	non-existence	
svabhāva					
1, 2	self-nature	self-nature	self-existent thing	self-existent nature	
3, 4, 6	self-nature	self-nature	self-existence	self-existence	
11	self-nature	self-nature	own nature	inherent nature	
prakṛti					
8	primal nature	primal nature	own nature	nature	
9	primal nature	primal nature	basic self-nature	inherent nature	
parabhāva					
3a	extended nature	other-nature	other-existent thing	existence of otherness	
3c	extended nature	other-nature	other-existence	existence of otherness	
4, 6	extended nature	other-nature	other-existence	other-existence	
anyathābhāva					
5	varying nature	change of the existent	other-existence	being other	
8	varying character	change	existent thing other than	real change	
9	varying character	change	otherness	real change	

arriving at a translation that captures the apparent flow of the argument should alert one to the presence of equivocation or other logical fallacies. The difficulty that different translators have had rendering these terms is reflected in Table II. Note the different strategies that the translators have taken.

— Inada has opted to render each Sanskrit term by the same English phrase, regardless of context; following the custom long honoured by Tibetan translators, he has not hesitated to coin new calque phrases (self-nature, primal nature, extended nature), the meanings of which are not always obvious to a native speaker of English.

— Kalupahana has also used calque translations for “svabhāva” and “parabhāva”.

— Streng and Sprung have attempted to show the multiplicity of meanings attached to several terms; they have also shown, at least implicitly, that the term “prakṛti” is synonymous with one of the meanings of “svabhāva.”

— None of the translators has drawn sufficient attention to the extent to which Nāgārjuna’s equivocation on key terms constitutes an informal fallacy that undermines the validity of his argumentation.

NOTES

¹ This essay evolved out of a set of lectures delivered to a seminar course at McGill University in the 1991 autumn term. My understanding of Nāgārjuna has benefited from the lively discussion of the twelve students who participated in those seminars. Improvements were also made as a result of later comments made by Drs. Jan Nattier and Brendan Gillon and by Mr. Raynald Prévèreau, all of whom carefully read the penultimate draft of this presentation.

² See Paul Williams (1989, pp. 60–63) for a lucid presentation of the standard view that Nāgārjuna’s arguments were directed against the ābhidharmika notion of the *svabhāva*. Richard Robinson (1972a) also drew attention to the fact that the philosophical systems at which Nāgārjuna’s arguments were apparently directed “have not considered themselves refuted.”

³ This summary is my own attempt at reconstructing Nāgārjuna’s reasoning. It is *not* an attempt to recapitulate what anyone in the commentarial tradition has said, although much of what I say here has in fact been said by others.

⁴ Schayer (1931, pp. 55–57, note 41) outlines the following four distinct senses of the term “svabhāva.” First, it can stand for an essence (*sva bhāvaḥ*, “*Wesenseigenschaft im Gegensatz zum Accidens*”), as when Candrakīrti defines it as “yo dharmo yaṃ padārthaṃ na vyabhicarati sa tasya svabhāvaḥ” (That property which never leaves a thing is its essence). Heat, for example, is the essence of fire. This corresponds to my

svabhāva₁. Second, “svabhāva” can be used in the sense of a distinctive characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*, “*individuelle Eigenmarkmal*”), that is a mark that distinguishes its possessor from all things that do not possess that mark; this, says Schayer, is how the term was used by ābhidharmikas. Third, “svabhāva” can be used as a synonym for “prakṛti,” the unchanging, eternal substratum of all changeable things (“unveränderlichen, ewigen Substrats aller Veränderungen”). And finally, “svabhāva” can be used in the sense of absolute, not relative being (*svato bhāva*, “*das absolute, nicht relative Sein*”), that is, being that depends on nothing. This corresponds to my svabhāva₂. In section 3.2 below, I shall say more about the senses that the word “svabhāva” can have.

⁵ The Kāśikā-vṛtti to Pāṇini-sūtra 3.1.16 reads “bhāve vācye dhātor ghaṅpratyayo bhavati.” (The suffix GHaÑ occurs after the verbal root when a performance is to be expressed.)

⁶ The Kāśikā-vṛtti to Pāṇini-sūtra 3.2.121 reads “halantād dhātoḥ karanād dhikarāṇayor ghaṅ-pratyayo bhavati.” (The suffix GHaÑ occurs after a verbal root ending in a consonant in the sense of an instrument or a location.)

⁷ The fifteenth chapter of *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is called Bhāvābhāvaparīkṣā (Examination of presence and absence) in the commentary named *Akutoḥbhayā* and in the commentaries of Buddhapālita (early 6th century?), Bhāvaviveka (late sixth century?) and Avalokitavratā (7th century?). In the commentary of Candrakīrti (mid-7th century?), however, the chapter is entitled svabhāva-parīkṣā (Examination of Identity).

⁸ That there is no *bhāva*, it will be recalled, was the content of Theorem 1 discussed above on page 7.

⁹ Kalupahana (1986, p. 5) goes so far as to say that the entire MMK is “a superb commentary on the Buddha’s own *Kaccāyanagotta-sutta*, a commentary in which Nāgārjuna upholds every statement made by the Buddha in the discourse, bringing together more material from the other discourses as well, and then clearing the water muddied by the speculations of some of the metaphysicians of the later Buddhist tradition.” This may be an overstatement of the importance of the Kātyāyanāvāda to the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* as a whole, but certainly the allusion to that text in this passage offers an important clue to the senses in which Nāgārjuna may be using some of his key terms. It is worth noting, however, that the Kātyāyanāvāda does not use the terms “svabhāva” and “parabhāva” — adding those terms to the list of perceptions that obstruct the perception of the Buddha’s teaching is Nāgārjuna’s innovation.

¹⁰ Candrakīrti says in his commentary to this verse (Pāṇḍeya, 1988, p. 263): “idaṃ ca sūtram sarvanikāyeṣu paṭhyate. tasmād āgamāt yathopavarnitāyāś copapater nārhatī prājñāḥ svabhāvaparabhāvabhāvābhāvadarśanam tathāgatavacanād atyantaviruddham āsthātum, bhagavatā pratīṣiddhatvāt.” (This *sūtra* is recited in all [Buddhist] sects. Because of that tradition and because of the reasoning explained in such detail, a wise person cannot adopt the views of existence, non-existence, identity and difference which are completely opposed to the words of the Tathāgata, because the Lord has ruled them out.) See Heinz Bechert (1973) for a discussion of the term “nikāya” used in the sense of a sect with its own distinct set of texts recognized as authoritative.

¹¹ The version cited by Candrakīrti reads “the world” (*lokaḥ*) instead of “all things” (*sarvam*), but the message is about the same.

¹² In some of its applications, the English word “identity” still retains the meaning of

its Latin ancestor "identitas," which means sameness, the state of being the same (*idem*).

¹³ Among the numerous studies that concentrate on the logical implications of the tetralemma are those by J. F. Staal (1976), David Seyfort Ruegg (1977), Sitansu Chakrabarti (1980), F. J. Hoffman (1982), Guy Bugault (1983), Yu-Kwan Ng (1987), Brian Galloway (1989), and Tom Tillemans (1992).

¹⁴ It must be remembered, for example, that Nāgārjuna, unlike the Buddha, was undoubtedly familiar with both Pāṇini and Patañjali and possibly with other representatives of the grammatical tradition that provided classical India with its sharpest tools of conceptual analysis. More discussion about Nāgārjuna's debt to the grammarians will be presented below in Section 4.6.

¹⁵ I have deliberately said in several passages of this paper that Nāgārjuna was *apparently* or *allegedly* trying to show the groundlessness of contemporary ābhīdharmika thinking. It is certainly the consensus of Mahāyāna tradition, and the consensus also of modern scholarship, that the butt of Nāgārjuna's criticisms were those people who studied the abhidharma literature. That this was the case, however, is certainly nothing that can be taken for granted. And indeed, unless one is quite determined to find evidence in Nāgārjuna's writings of an antagonism towards the scholasticism that was beginning to take form in the Buddhism of his day, it is not at all obvious that such evidence really exists; and in the absence of solid evidence, there is no reason for assuming that his attitude was antagonistic. The question of Nāgārjuna's attitude towards scholasticism, or towards what some people later would contemptuously call Hīnayāna, as far as I can see, is still quite open.

¹⁶ For a much more detailed analysis than I can offer here of the modern philosophical trends that underly some modern interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought, please see the interesting study by Andrew P. Tuck (1990).

¹⁷ It is possible that there is an element of wishful thinking in this irenic interpretation of Nāgārjuna. On the other hand, his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* is remarkably free of the uncharitable caricatures of Brahmins and rival *śramana* teachers that fill the pages of the Pāli canon, and it is likewise free of the tedious belittling of the achievements of the earlier *śrāvakas* that characterizes so much of the Mahāyāna literature, where the pre-Mahāyāna tends to be dismissed as so much worthless Hīnayāna. Insofar as Nāgārjuna apparently managed to be a Buddhist without being especially anti-Buddhist, and managed as well to be a general Buddhist without obvious partisanship to any particular school, his writings certainly do not rule out the possibility of the kind of pacific interpretation that many modern people want to give it.

¹⁸ The parallelism between the Greek discussion of method and the Indian discussion of paths is more apparent when one recalls that the word "method" comes into English from the French "méthode" from the Latin "methodus" from the Greek "methodos", a compound of "meta" (after, according to) and "hodos" (path, way).

¹⁹ Stcherbatsky was not alone in this view. As Tillemans (1992) has recently reminded us, Stcherbatsky's scholarly rival La Vallée Poussin (1933, p. 59) also held the view that Nāgārjuna's arguments were nothing more than "une méthode de purification de l'esprit" designed to facilitate entry into yogic trance.

²⁰ "... mā anussavena mā paramparāya mā pītakasampadānena mā takkahetu mā nayahetu mā ākāraparivittakkena mā dīṭṭhinijjhānakkhantiyā mā bhavyarūpatāya mā samaṇo no garū ti ..." (Morris, 1885, p. 195).

²¹ As anyone who is at home with Deconstructive criticism will readily see, it is a plot that lies outside my bailiwick. I have relied primarily on what strikes me as a particularly clear account by M. H. Abrams (1988b) who also provides a very cogent criticism of this school of literary criticism (1988a). I also benefited from accounts by Carl A. Raschke (1990) and Huston Smith (1990) and from conversations with several colleagues (notably David Seljak, Gregory Baum, Richard Cooper and Eric Beresford) who have studied this area more thoroughly than I. Credit for anything of value in the account that follows is due to the above named sources. Any egregious blunders are of my own creation.

²² Magliola makes a distinction between the logocentric modes of Chan and Zen — those masters and teachers, such as D. T. Suzuki, who adopted essentially Yogācāra teachings and saw meditation as a preparatory exercise to ready the mind for an intuitive experience of the Absolute — and what he calls the “differential” modes of Chan and Zen, which successfully preserved the truly nonbinary nature of Nāgārjuna’s deconstruction.

²³ Huntington (1989, pp. 25–32) also provides a brief but useful summary and critique of the stages through which modern Western scholarship has gone in its interpretation of Nāgārjuna. For an excellently written and balanced review of Huntington’s work in particular and postmodernist approaches to Mādhyamika in general, see Williams (1991).

²⁴ Similarly, hardly any modern interpreter has paid sufficient attention to Candrakīrti’s indebtedness to the grammarian Bhartrhari, for whom the ultimate reality, Brahman, was the very power of language itself. It was Bhartrhari’s insight that language is a single innate power from which emerges the whole diversity of the world of experience; we experience the world as we do because we think of the world as we do, and we think of the world as we do because we speak of the world as we do. The world of diversity, according to Bhartrhari, is located entirely within thought, which is located entirely within the capacity for language. Bhartrhari wrote extensively to show that all the basic categories of analysis used by grammarians — words, case endings, etc. — are simply tools of analysis that must be used only when one fails to understand the meaning of the basic unit of speech, the sentence. The categories of grammar, and therefore the categories of analytic thought, are merely heuristic devices that must be employed to reveal the underlying unity of speech and the corresponding unity of being.

²⁵ Compare the sequence of terms in the *pratīyasamutpāda* formula: *trṣṇāpratyayaṃ upādānam. upādānapratyayaḥ bhavaḥ.*

²⁶ Dīghanikāya 9.28: Kasmā bhante Bhagavatā avyākatan ti. Na h’ etaṃ Poṭṭhapāda attha-saṃhitam na dhamma-saṃhitam na ādibrahmacariyakam, na nibbidāya na viragāya na nirodhāya na upasamāya na abhiññāya na saṃbodhāya na nibbānāya saṃvattati. Tasmā taṃ mayā avyākatan ti. (29) Kim pana bhante Bhagavatā vyākatan ti. Idam dukkhan ti Poṭṭhapāda mayā vyākataṃ Ayaṃ dukkha-samudayo ti kho Poṭṭhapāda mayā vyākataṃ. Ayaṃ dukkha-nirodho ti kho Poṭṭhapāda mayā vyākataṃ. Ayaṃ dukkha-nirodhagāminī patipadā ti kho Poṭṭhapāda mayā vyākatan ti.

²⁷ In addition to works discussed in the body of this paper, one could add the following works to the list of those what are purely exegetical: Christian Lindtner (1986; 1987) and David Seyfort Ruegg (1981; 1990).

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