

*Between Mārga and Démarche*

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*A Course  
in Emptiness & Différance*

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## Abstract

This thesis forwards a path-based hermeneutics as a middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*) between Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka, in order to understand our existential relatedness without reference to Being. It does not attempt to do so by way of a comparative analysis, which I believe results inevitably in some form of reification of both in terms of their method. Rather, what I see as unique to both Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka is this very lack of method – hermeneutical or otherwise – hence underscoring the significance of this path (either as *démarche* or *mārga*) that demands our existential response. *The method is the argument*, and in working through the various linguistic, epistemological, and ontological assumptions we thus engage (as our response and responsibility at once) with our very conditions of possibility that make them impossible at the same time.

## Acknowledgements

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To my family, and in particular my aunt Serene, for listening to me late into the night with endless cups of coffee. So many things we’ve shared, from the many different stages of my life. Thank you for being here.

To the memory of my late grandfather, who passed away during the final stages of writing after years of battling with cancer. I am truly sorry I could not be there at the very end, and for not finishing this earlier. I hope you will forgive me, but I have not forgotten my promise.

To my parents, for all the sacrifices you have made over the years without complaint and letting me realise my dream. You have always believed in me, even as a child, no matter what I decided to do or study. Your love and understanding have been unconditional. I can only try to be a better son than I have been, and hopefully half as good a parent as you have been to me. I miss you both dearly, and this thesis is dedicated to you.

A cycle is thus complete. Another one begins.

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## Notes to the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (MMK)

### Mādhyamaka School

Nāgārjuna 150 CE

Āryadeva 180-200 CE

### Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika School

Buddhapalita 5<sup>th</sup> century CE

Candrakīrti early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE

Santideva 691-743 CE

### Svātantrika-Mādhyamika School

Bhāvaviveka 5<sup>th</sup> century CE

The MMK was written originally in Sanskrit by Nāgārjuna (second century CE) containing 448 verses in 27 chapters, with each verse written in metered couplets (of two lines) consisting of exactly 16 syllables. The MMK has been translated into Chinese (中論, Hanyu Pinyin: *Chung-Lun*) by Kumarajiva (beginning of fifth century CE). Its corpus was further enlarged by Candrakīrti's (seventh century CE) commentary on the MMK in his *Prasannapadā*, where chapter divisions of the MMK were first introduced. It is with Candrakīrti that the *prāsaṅgika* (trans. *reductio ad absurdum*) method of the *Mādhyamaka* was firmly established and consolidated. The MMK is also translated into Tibetan, of which the canonical text is *dBu-ma rtsa-ba shes-rab*.

*Mādhyamaka* is the correct term for the philosophy of the middle, while *Mādhyamika* names the adherents of the Mādhyamaka school. *Sūtras* refer to the discourses of the Buddha, while *Śāstras* are the philosophical elaboration or system based on the discourses of the Buddha.

*Prāsaṅga* means “logical consequence”, and the *Mādhyamika* only needs to

convince his opponent that his theory entails by logical consequence conclusions that are unacceptable to reason. The method of *reductio ad absurdum* is also known as *prāsaṅga-vakya* in Sanskrit.

*Svātantrika* means “autonomous”, or “autonomous arguments”. Bhāvaviveka thought that a *Mādhyamika* could advance self-contained, autonomous arguments, or counter-theses to those of his opponent, a position that has come under heavy criticism by Candrakīrti for being inconsistent.

#### Modern Translations of the MMK:

(1967) Frederick J. Streng. Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning.

Streng wrote from a position of religious phenomenology, with emphasis on the soteriological significance of *śūnyatā* in attaining enlightenment.

(1970) Kenneth K. Inada. Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamikakārikā With An Introductory Essay.

Inada wrote from the perspective of Zen Buddhism, and his text is derived from Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā* which was edited by Louis de la Vallée Poussin published by the *Bibliotheca Buddhica* between 1903 to 1913. Inada also lauds the Chinese translation/commentary *Chung-lun* (Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, XXX, No 1564)

(1979) Mervyn Sprung. Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way.

Sprung’s translation (co-translated with T.R.V Murti) is taken from Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*, with only 17 chapters of the original 27. His contention was that these constituted the “essential” chapters as the rest was prone to repetition. He further considers Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā* as homogeneous with Nāgārjuna’s MMK. This also stresses then the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* approach of Nāgārjuna. Sprung used the Sanskrit text from Louis de la Vallée Poussin’s *Mūlamadyhamakakārikās de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā de Candrakīrti* (itself compiled from three Sanskrit manuscripts in Paris, Cambridge, and Calcutta). In fact, Poussin himself views the Tibetan

translation to be superior to the Sanskrit text, which was not consulted by Sprung even though he shares the same view.

(1986) David J. Kalupahana. Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way. Kalupahana's translation is taken from the Sanskrit text, though he felt the Chinese version *Chung-Lun* by Kumarajiva (401– 413 AD) to be closer to the original spirit of the MMK than Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*. His main contention with Stcherbatsky and Murti was they held that Nāgārjuna rejected the Buddha's theory of elements with his conception of *śūnyatā*. Kalupahana considers instead Nāgārjuna as a grand (Theravadin) commentator on the Buddha's *Kaccāyanagotta-sūtra*. While the *Kaccāyanagotta-sūtra* is significant to the MMK (This *sūtra* is included in Appendix B), Kalupahana's view is not a widely held one neither in ancient nor modern scholarship.

(1995) Jay L. Garfield. The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Garfield's text was taken from the Tibetan translation of the original Sanskrit text, which reflected an Indo-Tibetan tradition that read Nāgārjuna in terms of a *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* tradition. Garfield's text is currently considered the most accurate modern-day philosophical translation of the MMK to date. This may be supported by Thurman's claim that the Tibetan tradition inherited the full scriptural and hermeneutical textual traditions from India (1978: 21). Garfield has also proposed breaking down the chapters of the MMK into the following four sections:

#### Framework of the MMK: 4 Sections (Garfield)

Section 1: Chapters I – VII Dealing with fundamental theoretical constructs in Buddhist ontology

Section 2: Chapters VIII – XIII Self and subjective experience

Section 3: Chapters XIV – XXI External world and relation of self to objects

Section 4: Chapters XXII – XXVII Ultimate truth, relation of conventional to ultimate, *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*

*\*Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from the MMK are taken from Garfield's translation.*

## Preface

The initial idea guiding this thesis was that of relation. Specifically, I was concerned about the ineluctable relations that mark our conditioned existence, along with how to make sense of them. These included categories of existence, truth, meaning, and ultimately Being, as the absolute substratum of any possible philosophical inquiry. This did not seem natural to me. Or rather, it seemed *too* natural, like an ontological sleight-of-hand being performed to which one cannot place a finger upon.

Derrida's anti-metaphysical stance *made sense*, even though it was counter-intuitive. So did Nāgārjuna's thorough emptying of philosophical categories. Both, however, achieved this at the cost of making utter *nonsense* the founding concepts of philosophy – origin, causation, essence, identity, and being. Only Otherness made sense, to the extent that this means it is capable of orienting us towards a certain direction, pulling us this way and that; the very thing traditionally defined as the diametrical and dialectical opposite of all that is rational and intelligible.

But this Other goes by just as many names as those founding concepts, through the many detours (or metaphors) of language: *aporia*, *sūnyatā*, *différance*, *khōra*, *pratītya-samutpāda*. I am not trying here to maintain or conserve this dualism (between Self and Other), for it implodes on itself. That moment is affirmed in Derrida's assertion that language bears the necessity of its own critique, or better yet, in Nāgārjuna's proclamation that the limits of *samsāra* are those of *nirvāṇa*.

There was one problem: this Other is not absolute. Just as the principle of identity is not absolute. They are both ineluctably related, pivoting around a treacherous blind spot that is at once its condition of possibility as well as its impossibility. Indeed, it is far easier writing this treachery than it is to think it. Both Derrida and Nāgārjuna appear to be *prima facie* unrelated, despite having some inexplicable form of affinity. Even so, there were significant differences in intellectual milieu, conceptual terrain, and discursive space that refuse to be homogenised.

To better illustrate this I shall seek recourse to an argument by analogy. There are two leading theories within the field of Physics: Einstein's theory of General Relativity along with Planck's theory of Quantum Mechanics. The former allows us to predict the orbital trajectory of stars, planets and galaxies by explaining the gravitational pull they exert in bending space-time. Einstein's theory also predicted the formation of black-holes, objects that are infinitely dense in mass occupying an infinitesimal space of such gravitational power that it threatens to rip apart the space-time continuum. However, to understand the very big and very fast (which Einstein's theory did with great precision), physicists had to turn in a completely different direction – that of the sub-atomic world of Quantum Mechanics. This is because right at the heart of a black-hole is a Singularity that eludes Einstein's formula. It is at this single point where our understanding of physics (and matter) breaks down completely due to its radical indeterminacy. We simply do not understand it. The holy grail of Physics is to present a unified Theory of Everything (ToE), by unifying General Relativity with Quantum Mechanics (through postulating the missing vector of Quantum Gravity).

Of course, any notion approaching anywhere near the possibility of a ToE within the Social Sciences results in nothing less than cries of totalitarianism and universal scorn. The neat form of a final integral is perhaps the bugbear *par excellence* of the Social Sciences itself as a discourse. I am not here trying to enter such a debate, and am certainly not implying some Monty-Pythesque holy grail quest in the process<sup>1</sup>. The analogy has a certain attraction for me, however, in attempting to articulate this affinity between Derrida and Nāgārjuna.

Nāgārjuna's magnum opus – the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter MMK) – is *like* Einstein's theory of General Relativity, arguing for *pratītya-samutpāda* (trans. dependent arising) that the Buddha taught as the reality of our conditioned existence. The MMK is arguably encyclopaedic in its scope, engaging with philosophical categories of causation, time, motion, essence, and elements. Everything in our phenomenal world may be explained within the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, but there is a hidden sting in Nāgārjuna's discourse: he equates *pratītya-samutpāda* with *śūnyatā*, such that the limits of *samsāra* are at once those of *nirvāṇa*. This has a devastating effect of seismic proportions, challenging everything that we thought we understood hitherto in our conception of the world. Entire factions of Buddhism

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, I am tempted to argue that this blind fear of ToE is a misplaced one and an abdication of our critical faculty. A ToE does not mean we have the final answer to everything, because answers beget further questions in their turn. We may then understand *how* things work, but crucially, we will also need to understand *why*. To the extent we do not stop questioning we will not stop having new answers. This questioning spirit cannot be taught, but it can be learnt. The moment all questions are laid to rest is also the very moment of our mortality. The great brain of Einstein has stopped. That has not stopped us from the sanguine hope that another Einstein might come. Or another Messiah. Or another Buddha. My point is, human consciousness does not stop projecting, and if what allows to do it is something that is radically Other, then it will continue to seek that frontier, if only to try and cross it. In arriving finally at a ToE, a cycle is thus complete, and another shall commence, even if we do not yet know what form it might take.

emerged based upon differing (and contesting) interpretations of that singular verse – the MMK XXIV: 18.

Derrida's *oeuvre*, on the other hand, started from looking at language and arguing how the history of Western metaphysics has always prioritised voice over the written word as the sign of a sign. Employing this as leverage he proceeds to unhinge the edifice of philosophy through his critical intervention at the very stress points of its discourse, one by one. Derrida has argued, successfully, for the untenability of the conceptual atom in its ideal unity. Just as nothing escapes Quantum Mechanics (and the sub-atomic particles of its discourse that compose all matter), nothing escapes the deconstructive turn, insofar as all discourses are constituted by language. Derrida insists, however, that this is not an analysis. Because at the fundamental level there is no identity, no simple constituent. Except for this – indeterminacy. This work of dismantling is deeply unsettling. It is for these reasons I maintain that despite his prolific output Derrida's work cannot be considered monolithic in any strict sense. Rather, the dissemination of his texts take the form of monographs instead; as detailed, sustained engagement within the system it inhabits and overthrows. Not unlike an intrepid form of intellectual guerrilla warfare.

As I have pointed out earlier, the conceptual terrain and discursive space engendered by both thinkers are radically different. They seem to be occupying the diametrical ends of the same spectrum, and if this assumption is to be valid, it is only because they appear to converge around one gaping hole in our understanding. If so, the protocols determining our rules of engagement have to be varied. This does not mean I am trying to unify both discourses, as that would be naïvely reductive and can

only come at the cost of reifying both thinkers. It might be objected that the analogy forwarded here is inherently isogetical (*i.e.*, one sees what one wishes to see), and I accept this criticism with a cheerful optimism, *viz.*, to the extent that we do not, as yet, have any direct mode of apprehension to address the Other without mediation. All philosophical argumentation is thus by necessity analogous in this regard. But it does allow us to restate the possibility of their relation in an interesting way.

I propose to do so by forwarding a path-based hermeneutics as a middle path between Derrida and Nāgārjuna. The protocol in question governing this path-based hermeneutics is thoroughly – first and foremost – a meditation on the possibility of method as part of our hermeneutical engagement. This is desideratum in avoiding reductivism of any sort, especially in the absence of a determinable method. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is central to this notion of path-based hermeneutics as a form of hermeneutic questioning that is oriented towards openness. It is conceptually adequate in addressing both Derrida’s and Nāgārjuna’s common refusal of dogmatism, as this orientation towards the Other is always contingent. The notion of a path beautifully expresses the exigencies of this orientation and contingency at once, as avenues of *mārga* and *démarche* leading to and coming from the Other. Moreover, as I will stress throughout this thesis, this path is always ethical, and the possibility of an ethical response cannot take place in the absence of this Other, just as there can be no meaningful dialogue without an Other; regardless whether we advert to it explicitly or not. *Oui, oui, j’accepte, j’accepte*; even if what is admissible to understanding is not always given to perception, except in gestalts of *chiaroscuro*. This has to be accepted. Its *acknowledgement*, however, is quite a different proposition.

Does this then entail negative theology? Far from it, this path-based hermeneutics is deeply anti-theological in character. Because there is no Being. Because the very acceptance of that Other nullifies any stable notion of Self; the term “Other” being a shorthand designation for the relation between conditions of possibility and impossibility. This relation may go by different names – emptiness, differentiality, contingency, indeterminacy – because no single name is proper to it, names its essential property, or belongs to it. In this respect, the succinct X of the aporia remains the most celebrated cipher.

Of course, we are still arguing analogously, through the detours of language. Rather than dismissing this out of the equation, however, can it not be the case that this Otherness manifests itself through myriad permutations and possibilities, precisely because it holds all of that in its reserve? *We speak its reserve*, though this utterance must nonetheless make certain decisions *in the face* of what is indecidable. I argue this remains an existential choice, though such a notion of existence is utterly divested of any ontic content whatsoever.

Therefore, absolute positivism of any sort is incommensurable within a heterological discourse. This has at least two implications: On the methodological level, we are compelled by the spectre of a smoking gun, though decisively, this is the one area where all our attempts are hitherto foiled. On the theological level, I understand it in the expression of a salvific impulse (to reach the other shore of one’s discourse). Of course, we cannot prevent nor forestall heterological discourses from becoming re-territorialised into the body of logocentrism (or God, depending on one’s

persuasion). I stress, however, that this remains a choice between faith and belief<sup>2</sup>. Which boils down to a fundamental question of orientation (towards the other shore), or attachment (to the tools or vehicle we use to get there)<sup>3</sup>. A further possible objection may even invoke Einstein's famous maxim: God does not play dice with humans. Yes, perhaps so, but logically speaking, *He did create the game*. Questions of necessity and contingency invariably dissolve into dilemmas of contingent necessity or necessary contingency. It does not follow from this acknowledgement, however, that an insistence upon absolutism (entailing reification) would be far preferable, for the simple reason that *un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*.<sup>4</sup> To think that one might do so would be misguided, much like mistaking emptiness itself for a view, and a necessarily nihilistic one at that. This amounts to nothing more than the flip side of the same coin; and, pursuing this objection to its logical conclusion, it is a loaded one for in spite of their dialectical opposition they are both very much *the same*. Which is precisely the ontological sleight-of-hand I have cautioned about from the very beginning.

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<sup>2</sup> While faith and belief may share a common root of sense and orientation, they ultimately part ways in the sense that faith is linear (always pointing to True North, as it were) whilst beliefs may change and are thus more malleable.

<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason I have eschewed discussing either the theistic devotional practices of Māhāyāna Buddhism or the Judaism of Derrida. While this may draw criticism that my consideration of both thinkers is thus incomplete because of this potential incompatibility, it is my considered view that these do not invalidate the incipient premise that makes these later expressions possible. Also, as I have made clear, my motive is not to unify both discourses in a homogenising manner. That would be conceptually inconsistent. Despite his stature as a Buddhist philosopher, the beauty of Nāgārjuna's MMK is that it does not seek recourse to mystical insight gained from meditational practices (*dhyāna*) but employs philosophical arguments (*jñāna*) instead, thus satisfying the preconditions necessary for a meaningful dialogical approach. My interest is in continuing this dialogic between the ecclesiastical and secular, East and West, ancient and modern; thus demonstrating that these labels of genres and the prejudices they incite are, at heart, empty and contingent.

<sup>4</sup> A throw of the dice will never obliterate chance (Mallarmé).

§ *Not what/not What, or Why Deconstruction & Buddhism?*

What deconstruction is not? everything of course!

What is deconstruction? nothing of course! (Derrida, 1991b: 275)

If I would make any proposition whatever, then by that I would have a logical error; But I do not make a proposition; therefore I am not in error.

(Nāgārjuna, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*: 29)

Both epigraphs above are equally well-known dictums in their own right, and they demonstrate a particular style of writing and thought that has been labelled obscurantist, and at times downright provocative. They are provocative, because they challenge unabashedly the complacency of our common sense. I am interested in arguing that despite the obscure and counter-intuitive style of both thinkers they demystify our notion of common sense as being anything but common, by exposing its complicity with metaphysical assumptions. In doing so I hope to demonstrate their significance not only to *recherché* areas of philosophy but also their relevance to how we orient ourselves in our daily lives. And as we cannot or will not harbour such seemingly contradictory propositions, we tend to dismiss them as being obscure or even irrational. After all, they are *disturbing*. They are, relentlessly, *not*. *Not* what, one begins to ask, though what is at stake is not so much the negation but the pronoun itself: not *What?*<sup>1</sup> That has never been in question, not something that can be verified or falsified. It

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<sup>1</sup> One should draw the distinction between the form of negation here and the apophatic *Neti neti* (trans. Not this, not this) of Advaita Vedānta, where the latter is the expression *par excellence* of negative theology. While I agree that there is an affirmative note in both Derrida and Nāgārjuna despite their negative critiques, it is critical to note that they do not affirm anything transcendental. Doing so would merely take the form of an over-turning. That being the case, the focus must shift from the thoroughgoing negations to *whatever* that is submitted under consideration instead as an immanent critique. This inversion is disturbing, as it also reinscribes otherness within the field of the same, such that we cannot affirm one without the other, nor can we affirm both simultaneously.

just *is*. We take it, for granted. *What* here can be essence, identity, being, reason, structure, or truth. An economic exchange of impossible names, each lending itself to the other, underwritten by correspondence. They are impossible, because we never fully arrive at the identity they purportedly designate, even if they present themselves otherwise. This myth of common sense is tenacious, and if we accept that desire is a fundamental aspect of the human condition then it will endure. Note that I am not here disparaging the efficacy of daily common sense – in fact, one cannot possibly function without it. That does not necessarily mean, however, one is therefore justified in mistaking a functional property for a substantial one. In other words, treating common sense *as if* it has ontological basis, when that is precisely in question. Therefore, if desire is considered a form of attachment in Buddhism, then I also see it as the need for reification and identification. It is not a lack, nor even a constitutive lack, as it is first and foremost the lack of an impossible attribute (essence).

So then, why Deconstruction and Buddhism, and in particular Derrida and Nāgārjuna? It would be prudent to point out here that the history of Buddhist philosophy is hardly homogeneous<sup>2</sup>, and my primary interest in Nāgārjuna lies in the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* approach that he espouses<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, I am not suggesting that Nāgārjuna is some proto-deconstructivist *avant la lettre*, just as it would be equally absurd to consider Derrida as a post-Mahāyānist thinker. Both thinkers were clearly writing in different intellectual and cultural milieus. Nevertheless, while the spectre of logocentrism remains a thoroughly Western one, the tendency (and need) for reification remains deeply entrenched in the human

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey of Buddhist history, see (Robinson and Johnson, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> A background to Buddhist history is provided in the following chapter.

psyche<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly enough, however, it is my view that as a result of the paradigm shifts brought about by (post)structuralist thought, the *rapprochement* between the two thinkers may be articulated in a novel way while respecting the technical jargon (along with the subtleties) of both at the same time. This is desideratum in furthering the dialogic between ancient and modern scholarship both in the East and West, by borrowing the resources of one tradition to read another<sup>5</sup>.

While some have pointed out how either thinker exposes the limits of philosophical thinking<sup>6</sup>, they are perhaps both unique in redeploying its blind-spots into an enabling constraint whilst remaining vigilant to their own critical assumptions. In fact, what allows them to do so (and which is common to both) is a systematic refusal to either characterise or identify with their own *modi operandi*. Understanding the reason for this is a first step towards understanding what these two thinkers are about. Derrida and Nāgārjuna are famous for deconstruction and emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*) respectively; and perhaps as equally infamous is their refusal to identify with them:

That is why this word [deconstruction], *at least on its own*, has never appeared satisfactory to me (but what word is), and must always be girded by an entire discourse. (Derrida, 1991b: 272, emphasis mine)

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<sup>4</sup> While I have consciously eschewed any form of essentialism in my consideration of both thinkers, it is untenable to theorise in a self-made vacuum. In identifying the human tendency for desire through reification as a point of entry, I am not therefore affirming some quasi-human *essence*. This is crucial, for otherwise there would be no possibility of its cessation, which violates a fundamental tenet of Buddhism.

<sup>5</sup> The choice of ‘dialogic’ here reflects a particular form of path-based hermeneutics I am advocating here with regard to Derrida and Nāgārjuna. It is informed by the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and what he called the fusion of horizons, by regaining the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them (1989: 374).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. (Garfield and Priest, 2003); (Gasché, 1986); (Magliola, 1984); and (Murti, 1955).

“Empty” should not be asserted.

“Nonempty” should not be asserted.

Neither both nor neither should be asserted.

They are only used nominally. (MMK XXII: 11)

Both Derrida and Nāgārjuna would maintain that emptiness is itself to be emptied, just as deconstruction is subject to further deconstruction. This form of vigilance is significant, for whilst the critical leverage afforded by these terms are key, to assert their absolute value *on its own*, however, we effectively mistake the key for the treasure. In pointing out their nominal status I also stress their relative dependency upon specific contexts. Both are acutely aware of this dependency<sup>7</sup>, and are careful in their own attempts at addressing it without elevating it to the status of a transcendental signified in the process of doing so. We may surmise from this systematic refusal that for both thinkers, *the method is the argument*<sup>8</sup>. In doing so we also begin to discern a certain style, or gait, that cuts a path between dialectical extremities within binary logic (is/is not). In claiming that the method is the argument, I am also pointing out that the key concepts are only employed for strategic purposes without having any ontological basis nor essence to it, thus preventing them becoming fixed as hegemonic methods of inquiry.

In the absence of a determinable method, I understand both Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka as pursuing a path-based hermeneutics (as opposed to traditional text-based hermeneutics). The focus of this thesis sets out to address the implications of the following

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<sup>7</sup> Both Derrida and Nāgārjuna address this dependency or relationality that is manifest in language, philosophical thinking, as well as our conditioned existence. This is also where the traditional bifurcation between textuality and reality becomes malleable – a certain form of textuality is thus inscribed in our notions of what passes off as reality.

<sup>8</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three on methodology.

statement: *everything has a context, insofar as they are dependently arisen*. Specifically, they allow us to better understand the notion of dependency in bridging the traditional gap between textuality and reality. Now, this does not preclude Derrida and Nāgārjuna from ultimately pursuing divergent hermeneutical paths, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to account for their variances. These hermeneutical paths are, however, capable of addressing our existential relatedness without having to postulate an ontological basis within Heideggerian hermeneutics. This path-based hermeneutics I am advocating is informed by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in addressing our daily experience, hence my earlier emphasis on the myth of common sense. Thurman (1978) and Lopez (1992) have both made a notable case for Buddhist hermeneutics, with the latter claiming that: "Those who are not yet enlightened must interpret" (1992: 9). If so, this then has real pertinence to most, if not all of us. In looking at how both thinkers address the various linguistic, epistemological, and ontological issues I hope to course a middle path between deconstructive *démarche* and *mādhyamika mārga*.

*§ Philosophia East and West: Love & Suffering*

‘Hermeneutics’ as a philosophical discipline of rational interpretation of a traditional canon of Sacred Scriptures authoritative for a religious community has usually been considered peculiar to the West. This notion is anchored only in the misconception that ‘Eastern’ thought is somehow ‘non-rational,’ or ‘mystical,’ hence excused from the burden of reconciling the tensions between some forms of authority and philosophical reason. (Thurman, 1978: 19)

This section will develop the notion of path-based hermeneutics with regard to Derrida and Nāgārjuna. In doing so, I will employ Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to clarify my earlier claim that everything has a context, insofar as they are dependently arisen. I will not present here a detailed case for Buddhist hermeneutics, except to point out its heterologous development over two and a half millennia independent of the hermeneutic tradition in the West<sup>9</sup>. One of the key points Lopez makes is that the consequence of a Buddhist hermeneutics is to identify with the Buddha’s original enlightenment in accordance with Schleiermacherian hermeneutics: “It would follow then, that it is the experience of the Buddha’s enlightenment that provides final validity in interpretation” (1992: 7). While I am convinced of the soteriological dimension in a consistent Buddhist hermeneutics, to assert Buddha’s enlightenment as providing final validity in interpretation seems absolutist, even if one is able to circumvent dogmatism through employing *upāya* as a hermeneutical principle. While I do not disagree with Lopez’s arguments in general, I believe this premise to be

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<sup>9</sup> Thurman (1978) presents an overview of the development of Buddhist hermeneutics from its very inception, beginning with the utterances of the historical Buddha over the lengthy course of his teaching career, along with the different hermeneutical traditions that proliferated with its transmission. In it, Thurman points out the hermeneutical significance of the four reliances in Buddhist hermeneutics according to Tsong Kha-Pa (1407). This was further developed in a conference (1987), which is collected in Buddhist Hermeneutics edited by Lopez (1992).

fundamentally flawed, and is for me, conceptually inconsistent with the arguments that follow. I draw support from Nāgārjuna:

Whatever is the essence of the Tathāgata,  
That is the essence of the world.  
The Tathāgata has no essence,  
The world is without essence. (MMK XXII: 16)

It is inconsistent to identify with the *tathāgata*, as it necessarily involves an element of objectification of that which is thus defined as empty. Regrettably, Griffiths' review of Buddhist Hermeneutics accepts uncritically Lopez's premise, which is Romanticist in orientation, and in doing so, confuses Gadamer with Schleiermacher:

[...] For the scholastics of the Buddhist tradition, true understanding of a sutra's definitive meaning consists, finally, in having the same insights, and thus the same transformation of consciousness, as that possessed by its *omniscient author*. Buddhist hermeneutics thus tends to be based upon a theory of understanding whose ideal goal is a fusion of the cognitive horizons of the hearer/reader with those of the author in a sense more radical than any envisaged by Gadamer. (1990: 259, emphasis mine)

The path-based hermeneutics I am urging here departs from any such form of identification, and is oriented towards openness. In claiming Buddha as an omniscient author we also elevate him to the status of a metaphysical principle. This is untenable. Ironically, the support for my objection may be found in the four reliances of Buddhist hermeneutics raised by

Thurman (1978), which Lopez (1992) accepts and follows, the chief of which is: *rely on the teaching, not the teacher*. If Buddha had intended himself to be regarded as an “omniscient author”, it then follows that 1) Buddha has the same onto-theistic status as God; 2) The first reliance would therefore be on the teacher rather than the teachings, stressing religious faith rather than a spirit of hermeneutical questioning; and 3) he would not have admonished the disciples to diligently work out their own salvation upon entering *parinirvāṇa*. The logical conclusion to draw from the first reliance promulgated and the third point raised here is this: Buddhist philosophy cannot be divorced from its unique hermeneutical character, in *working out* its fundamental tenets without seeking any final form of identification<sup>10</sup>.

Traditional Western and Buddhist hermeneutics are thus arguably diametrically opposed in their discursive trajectories, as a result of their philosophical and theistic *orientations*. Traditional hermeneutics in the West cannot be separated from its onto-theological element, and is necessarily so, being the interpretation of the Word of God. The interpretation of Buddha’s teachings raises a complex of issues as a result of his long teaching career, and the fact that those teachings were dispensed according to the particular malaise (philosophical or otherwise) of his audience. In fact, his final exhortation was to seek refuge in the teachings themselves (which, in itself, is no mean hermeneutical task), and in doing so, excluding himself from serving as the ultimate seat of authority. From a philosophical perspective, a declared love of wisdom (“to know thyself”) in the West culminates in an Enlightenment celebrating the preeminence of Reason and Truth. In the East, however, all philosophising gains impetus from the fact that suffering exists (“all is *duḥkha*”), and Enlightenment is thus attained when suffering ceases. There is, therefore, a

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<sup>10</sup> This is what also prompts Thurman to claim that Buddha was the first hermeneutician of his own doctrine, which coheres with Tsong Kha-Pa’s description of the role of philosophy in Buddhist thought as primarily hermeneutical (1978: 20).

pragmatic dimension which is absent in the Western philosophical tradition.

A further distinction between Oriental and Occidental modes of thinking lies in the criterion of rationality (or its putative lack thereof). This can imply dualist knowledge (within the traditional subject-object dyad) *vis-à-vis* a non-dualist apprehension of the world<sup>11</sup>. The reason I have chosen to focus on Nāgārjuna's MMK is because it extensively employs philosophical arguments without recourse to *prajñā* or insight gained from meditational practices. McCagney makes a similar point regarding the MMK, claiming that Nāgārjuna applies *jñāna* to break the chain of conditioning instead of *prajñā* (1997: 99). In light of this, I am therefore bemused by Loy's and Magliola's penchant for employing Zen koans in their exegeses of Nāgārjuna, despite the apparent affinities between Mādhyamaka and Zen; it seems to me a rather back-handed way of coming to terms with Nāgārjuna, which is compromised by the even wider latitudes in interpretation afforded by the koans. In fact, this purported affinity between Ch'an/Zen and Indo-Tibetan *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* is itself questioned in Ruegg's review, claiming it as "simply a misconception [that] will very clearly require more rigorous investigation in light of the history of Buddhist thought" (Ruegg, 1995: 576). I also read in Thurman's claim a caveat against *exoticising* aspects of Buddhist (or indeed, any Oriental) thought in terms of mysticism as its defining hallmark. Such deliberate obfuscation (*viz.*, appeals to some mystical 'in-between' realm) is not only unnecessary, but also constitutes a regrettable form of intellectual *flânerie* under the guise of cross-cultural analysis. In fact, part of what I am committed to demonstrate in this thesis is that the *prima facie* mysticism demystifies for us the sedimented metaphors that constitute common sense.

What is this path-based hermeneutics that I am forwarding, and how does it address

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<sup>11</sup> The latter would be dismissed as intuitive and non-rational for failing the epistemological dyad, though this nondual apprehension is understood as *advaya* rather than *advaita*.

our existential relatedness<sup>12</sup>? The notion of a path implies orientation, without coming to rest, and therefore, no fixity. This non-fixity may mean indeterminacy (as in Derrida), or it may also imply emptiness (as in Nāgārjuna):

If the path had an essence,  
Cultivation would not be appropriate.  
If this path is indeed cultivated,  
It cannot have an essence. (MMK XXIV: 24)

If the path were fixed, then it would be more appropriate to speak of linearity rather than cultivation – that which is already determined need not be cultivated – for there is no profit (nor growth) for the practitioner<sup>13</sup>. As a middle path it depends upon its *terminus a quo* and *ad quem*, though they themselves cannot be fixed (as possessing an essence)<sup>14</sup>:

Where there is no beginning or end,  
How could there be a middle?  
It follows that thinking about this in terms of  
Prior, posterior, and simultaneous is not appropriate. (MMK XI: 2)

If suffering had an essence it would be *ipso facto* independent (to whom then does suffering

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<sup>12</sup> By this “existential relatedness” I also refer to the Buddhist tenet of *pratītya-samutpāda* that all things are dependently arisen. Within the doctrine of Two-Truth promulgated by Nāgārjuna this would have the same modal status as the conventional nature of conventional phenomena. See also (Fig. 1: Heuristic Structure of Two-Truths) in Appendix A.

<sup>13</sup> This would violate conventional understanding, as i) Enlightenment is thus guaranteed; without ii) anyone striving for it. It becomes, then, a mere issue of logical necessity. It also obviates the existential demand for one’s own response and responsibility (in accordance with Derrida), which for me takes the form of an engagement by working through the concepts that we otherwise accept uncritically.

<sup>14</sup> As will become clear, the reification of a particular concept involves treating it *as if* it were in possession of an independent essence, which in Nāgārjuna’s terms, would be “non-empty”.

occur?), and it cannot, by definition, cease to exist (nor lapse). Garfield argues: “The path, after all, is a path from suffering and to awakening. If the *former* cannot cease and the *latter* does not depend on cultivation, the path is nonexistent” (1995: 310). The notion of a hermeneutic path therefore emphasises the existential condition in which we find ourselves, *in medias res*, without being underwritten by ontological foundations. This is *prima facie* self-contradictory, for how can we talk about the existential significance of something without also referring to its ontological basis? In what capacity then do we understand this notion of existential relatedness, along with its hermeneutical significance?

Gadamer opines: “The point of Heidegger’s hermeneutical reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance” (1989: 266). While we perhaps cannot avoid this hermeneutical circularity, the section on *Upāya & Bricolage* will demonstrate how this circle is a self-destroying one. The Romanticist approach advocated by Schleiermacher defines the hermeneutic enterprise as one of identification with the author as an autonomous, self-conscious, agent. Hence the ensuing hermeneutic circularity which necessitates its ontologically positive character. This is what I understand Lopez to be endorsing in his claim that the *end* of Buddhist hermeneutics is to identify with the enlightenment of the Buddha<sup>15</sup>. Nāgārjuna, however, has this to say:

The pacification of all objectification

And the pacification of illusion:

No Dharma was taught by the Buddha

At any time, in any place, to any person. (MMK XXV: 24)

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<sup>15</sup> The choice of diction in Lopez’s characterisation of this hermeneutics is revealing of what I see as a need for fixity and authority: “The exegete is constantly in search of his place in the absent circle, and his hermeneutics provide the *compass* (1992: 9, emphasis mine).

I should like to point out here that: *any form of identification cannot be divorced from objectification*. It is for this reason I believe Lopez’s fundamental premise to remain a grasping of the subtlest sort. It would be more consistent to claim, *pace* Gadamer, that “to understand what a person says is [...] to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences (Erlebnisse)” (1989: 383). Now, one may attempt to circumvent this by claiming Lopez’s assertion as *neyārtha* (i.e., subject to further interpretation), that it constitutes a conventional understanding by *urging* this soteriological vision – which is not false *per se* – and thus maintaining its validity. However, this move is vitiated when Lopez claims it (without further qualification) as providing the *final* validity in interpretation – it is therefore definitive (or *nītārtha*) for him in a hermeneutically positive sense.

I mentioned earlier that a path necessarily implies orientation as part of its structure, and a path-based hermeneutics capable of addressing existential relatedness without an ontological basis allows us to *realise* the radical hermeneutical possibilities that I understand Gadamer to be forwarding<sup>16</sup>. This orientation is towards what Gadamer calls “the logical structure of openness” that characterises hermeneutical consciousness, which cannot be divorced from its attitude of critical questioning (or intervention), such that, “when a question arises, it *breaks open the being* of the object, as it were” (1989: 362, emphasis mine). What is in question therefore is the intimate relation, hitherto, between existence and Being. In freeing the hermeneutical project from the question of Being we are also calling it into question: “*The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things* and is always in

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<sup>16</sup> This realisation is also soteriological, but it is a form of becoming, without Being. Thurman claims that “the Buddhist hermeneutical tradition is a tradition of realization, devoid of any intellect/intuition dichotomy (1978: 35). This is correct, and hermeneutical approaches stressing either *jñāna* or *prajñā* to the exclusion of the other is misguided.

part so defined (Gadamer, 1989: 269). This questioning of things also means: whether it is this or that, whether it exists or not, etc.

In doing away with the ontological foundations of our existence we also stress its relative dependency, and in the absence of Being (that otherwise determines us in advance) we are also free to make connections depending upon our orientation (*via* the questions we ask); in doing so we are able to maintain those undetermined possibilities as possibilities:

Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing. That is why we cannot understand the questionableness of something without asking real questions, though we can understand a meaning without meaning it. *To understand the questionableness of something is already to be questioning.*  
(Gadamer, 1989: 375)

A path-based hermeneutics has to be oriented towards this logical structure of openness in order for it to be conceptually consistent. This hermeneutical questioning differs from Hegelian dialectics, which Gadamer characterises as “a monologue of thinking that tries to carry out in advance what matures little by little in every genuine dialogue (1989: 369). I am thus able to understand Buddha’s silence when faced with the fourteen questions<sup>17</sup> in that they did not constitute *real questions*: “We say that a question has been put wrongly when it does not reach the state of openness but precludes reaching it by retaining false presuppositions. It pretends to have an openness and susceptibility to decision that it does not have” (Gadamer, 1989: 364). One may also find support here for Murti’s claim that Buddha

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<sup>17</sup> The famous *avyākr̥tavastunī*, namely, 1) Buddha exists after death, 2) does not, 3) both does and does not, 4) neither, 5) The world is limited, 6) is not, 7) is both limited and infinite, 8) is neither, 9) The world has a beginning, 10) has not, 11) both, 12) neither, 13) The self is the same as the body, 14) The self is different from the body (Thurman, 1978: 38, fn. 13).

was the first person who discovered the dialectic, though not necessarily in the Kantian idealistic tradition he had intended, but rather in the dialogic form of hermeneutical questioning (1955: 9). Nāgārjuna's subsequent systematisation of that eloquent silence in the MMK can then be understood in terms of this dialectical openness:

As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further – i.e., the art of thinking. It is called a dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue.  
(Gadamer, 1989: 367)

I have thus far demonstrated the pertinence of this path-based hermeneutics in addressing our existential relatedness, along with its ontological significance. Gadamer claims language to be the medium of the hermeneutic experience. This is hardly revelatory, for there can be no interpretation without language, but it also sets certain limits on how this language may be conceived. This language cannot be logocentric, with a transcendental signified governing its play of possibilities. It also has to be structural, in terms of its internal dependency (Gasché prefers to call it *infrastructural*). This does not mean, however, that we are simply extrapolating the functional features of structural linguistics to determine the substantial nature of reality<sup>18</sup>. There is an element of translation involved, and in the process of this translation, traditional notions (or indeed, bifurcations) of textuality, reality, meaning, and reading would have to be reinscribed. Derrida claims: “Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around”

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<sup>18</sup> This, as we shall see later, is what Loy ultimately does, in extrapolating a multidimensional textuality from Derrida to the entire universe, thus arguing for its *essential* nonduality.

(1978: 369). The state of play in language determines the character of Being instead, and this notion of *play* cannot be divorced from its relative dependency:

The movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself. In order for there to be a game, there always has to be, *not necessarily literally another player*, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to his move with a countermove. (Gadamer, 1989: 105-6, emphasis mine)

In stressing that there is not necessarily *literally* another player I am also pointing out its non-actuality (as being *essentially other*), for the starting point of structural linguistics is that it is a system of differences without any positive terms. In denying the essence of any entitative identity, any form of alterity has to be subsumed within the context of its relative play. Nāgārjuna makes this clear for us:

If there is no essence,

How can there be difference in entities?

The essence of difference in entities

Is what is called the entity of difference. (MMK XV: 3)

Derrida would add that:

Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the

systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. (Derrida, 1991a: 63)

Therefore, any charge of textualism (or conventionalism) levelled at Derrida (or Nāgārjuna) may only be made from an entrenched realist position that persists in upholding the distinction between text and reality when it is precisely being suspended, or called into question.

Finally, I would like to forward Gasché's characterisation of infrastructure as a general starting point of how we may understand this notion of dependency in language<sup>19</sup>:

1. An infrastructure is not an existent. It *is* not. Nor, however, is it simply absent [...] Although not a being (*on*), it is not a nonbeing (*me on*).
  2. Its preontological nature aside, the infrastructure acquires its interpretive efficiency with regard to the specific problems it clarifies through being in excess of the opposition of sense and non-sense, meaning and the absence of meaning. [having no meaning in itself]
  3. An infrastructure, moreover, is not an essence, since it is not dependent on any category of that which is present or absent [...] Its 'essence' is to have no essence. And yet an infrastructure is endowed with a certain universality.
- (Gasché, 1986: 149-50)

It is my view that the points adumbrated above may also be said of *pratītya-samutpāda*, with

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<sup>19</sup> This is done more for purposes of pedagogy, as there are certain points which require further discussion, and which will be considered in Chapter Five on Derrida.

adequate qualification. I agree that this notion of infrastructure is endowed with a certain universality, though this is also an area of potential confusion, as it is subject to metaphysical reincorporation. This happens once we take this universality to be *definitive* in one way or another – i.e., as having some form of essence – while what should be stressed is its capacity in keeping those conditions of possibility open. One of those possibilities necessarily includes the reversion to essentialist reification, what Derrida might also call, the metaphysical lure. Without this acknowledgement and the vigilance necessitated by it this notion of infrastructure (whether we decide to call it textuality or *pratītya-samutpāda*) would end up becoming a form of hyper-essentiality, approaching the mysticism of negative theology which does not obtain in either Derrida or Nāgārjuna. This will be made clear in Chapter Six where I intervene between the comparative analyses of Magliola and Loy. What I have attempted to do in this section is to locate the interface (or one may call it relation or dependency instead) between linguistics and life through a specific form of hermeneutics that is not predetermined by Being. I have also argued for the orientation of this path-based hermeneutics towards a logical structure of openness. This, in turn, is guided by a critical questioning and vigilance that has soteriological significance. This notion of soteriology, however, cannot be conceived in terms of a hypostatized being, which would amount to foreclosure. The difference, such as it is, lies in the hermeneutical choices we make, and the ends to which we subsequently deploy them. In doing so, we thus cultivate a middle path between Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka in addressing our existential relatedness. This cultivation also means engaging with the sedimented metaphors of philosophy in an attitude of hermeneutical questioning.

## *§ Buddhism and Critical Theory*

I have argued for a path-based hermeneutics as a middle path between Derrida and Nāgārjuna, and I have also pointed out how this cannot be separated from its methodological concerns. The literature review presented in this chapter serves then at least two purposes, one pedagogical and one conceptual: Firstly, it attempts to reconstruct in brief the hermeneutical horizon of Nāgārjuna to understand the intellectual milieu in which he was writing. As this thesis does not presuppose any prior knowledge of Buddhist philosophy nor its intellectual history this is desideratum, especially in making sense of the various debates employing technical terms that may not otherwise be immediately apparent to a reader trained in the Western philosophical tradition. It is my view that without first situating Nāgārjuna in his own philosophical tradition and engaging with him there on his own terms, we cannot hope to translate, with any degree of accuracy, the issues that could have a positive contribution to cross-disciplinary discourse. This also allows me to justify, in the process, my preferred reading of Nāgārjuna, as well as deciding upon a particular translation from the other versions to date. From a conceptual perspective this allows me to highlight certain issues that I will go on to address in the thesis which I think is relevant to pursuing this path-based hermeneutics between both thinkers. This is certainly the case with Garfield's reading of the opening chapter of the MMK – this is given further attention in Chapter Four on Nāgārjuna. The preliminary section on Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka provides a brief look at the attempts thus far comparing Derrida and Nāgārjuna. This would become conceptually formative in shaping my own methodological approach *vis-à-vis* Magliola and Loy, which I shall discuss in Chapter Three.

This section begins with a discussion on the possibility of relating to each other both

Buddhism and Critical Theory, as general discourses in their own right. It will be consequently argued that the possibility of making this relation is also, inevitably, a question of translation (by crossing genres and contexts). At first sight, both discourses stress an emancipatory dimension within them: Truth is achieved through the critical faculty of our philosophical enterprises that is free from error, ignorance, or illusion. This touches upon the end in and of philosophy in general, as a form of eschatological redemption. However, when Murti asserts this to be the “true Mādhyamika standpoint” (Murti, 1955: 41), it also points to the actual and decisive end of philosophy itself and all forms of philosophising, in accordance with Mādhyamaka thought. This is because Mādhyamaka maintains that emancipation (or *nirvāṇa*) is only achieved when we relinquish *all* philosophical views. In other words, criticism not only affords us freedom from error or ignorance then, but even from philosophy itself. How is this possible, as criticism is clearly a function of philosophical theorising? This may be a commonly held view, though Mādhyamaka also argues that what passes for common sense in everyday understanding is in fact complicit with metaphysical presuppositions such that they become untenable, consequently reinscribing what we understand to be common sense<sup>20</sup>.

Now, given the context of this thesis within the field of Critical Theory rather than Buddhology, I have given more attention to the philosophical aspect of the debates rather than philological ones. This might elicit objections of fidelity and violence to Nāgārjuna’s work, though I should also point out here that even within the field of Buddhist studies this issue of fidelity (which more often than not are determined by partisan interpretative choices) remains a much-debated topic. While there is without doubt a great deal of interpretative

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<sup>20</sup> Part of Nāgārjuna’s attraction for me lies in the fact that while he is widely hailed as “a philosopher’s philosopher” because of his erudition, he ultimately demonstrates the untenability of these reified philosophical arguments, such that the insights gained no longer remain the sole province of professional philosophers, but has a real pertinence to our everyday practices.

violence committed in the name of textual fidelity I hope to demonstrate here that the problems surrounding the reception of Nāgārjuna in the West are, if anything else, legion<sup>21</sup>. As I have mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal within the context of Buddhist philosophy is the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, which is considered by Mādhyamaka to be the cessation of all attachments and relinquishing of all views. This means, *inter alia*, that the entire philosophical edifice upon which this goal is made possible to be discarded once it has been attained, much like kicking the ladder under one's feet after reaching the top<sup>22</sup>. As we shall see, the attraction of this trope is particularly enduring, though I would also maintain a critical difference between non-attachment to one's tools (or methods) of inquiry, and attempting to pull oneself up by the boot-strings: the former is groundless in a way while the latter hypostatizes some form of groundless-ground. This brings us to a particular form of *end* in Mādhyamaka, that is no longer understood in terms of teleological closure but an "open-endedness" that resists metaphysical annexation through an on-going hermeneutical vigilance<sup>23</sup>.

Before going further, the inevitable question needs to be posed: what is the value of reading Nāgārjuna, and furthermore, within the context of critical theory today? I think this has to be answered in a round-about manner. Take for example the prevalence of deconstruction within critical theory, it has been almost fashionable for theorists to apply the "deconstructive method" as a powerful tool of critique to challenge and contest the dominant ideologies within their respective fields, from gender studies to post-colonial debates. This certainly covers a wide spectrum, and there is not very much to which the "deconstructive balm" cannot be applied these days. Now, I am not suggesting that it is fruitful we apply

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<sup>21</sup> For further discussion on the topic, see (Bharati, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> For these reasons parallels have been drawn between Buddhism and Wittgenstein of Tractatus. See (Anderson, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> See (McCagney, 1997) for a reading of *śūnyatā* as openness.

Nāgārjuna to a field like gender studies for example, but neither am I entirely convinced by the assiduous applications of Derrida himself (like so much *pharmakon*) to the varying contexts of critical debates. In fact, I am curious about the viability of such applications, and it makes a lot of critical sense to ask why such applications are even possible in the first place, considering that deconstruction first began within literary theory? These are immediately questions of genres and categories, along with the conceptual boundaries or limits that circumvent and determine them. In this respect, both Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka are similar in that they both outstrip their own philosophical horizons; in another sense, one may also say that they lend themselves to translation, though that nevertheless obliges us to identify a core theory as well. The rather awkward truth, however, is there is no such core to begin with. In fact, this problem extends also to Nāgārjuna

It is something of a scandal, then, that the basic meaning of this difficult text remains so obscure. This is not for want of interpreters – no Buddhist thinker has received more attention – yet there is little agreement among his Western expositors. It is curious, and more than a little suspicious, that Nāgārjuna usually ends up expounding something quite similar to one's own favorite philosopher or philosophy: Shayer's Hegel, Stcherbatsky's Kant, Murti's Vedānta, Gudmundsen's Wittgenstein, Magliola's Derrida, Kalupahana's empiricism and pragmatism, and so forth. (Loy, 1999: 246)

This has not, however, prevented critics from continuing to do so – certainly not Loy himself in spite of his protestations, for he is committed to constructing a core theory of nonduality. While one might say the possibilities opened up by both thinkers lend themselves to different philosophical debates, it would be more accurate to say that they completely infect and

undermine philosophical systems and their categories – which includes us (as supposed self-conscious agents). This also implies the metaphysical assumptions found in our everyday lives that may or may not be apparent, and regardless of which we are always already bought into an economy of metaphysics. The possibilities both thinkers open up are possibilities of freedom and openness, and I argue we may find in Derrida and Nāgārjuna these conditions of possibilities (for philosophical speculation) that become at once the very conditions of its impossibility (by resisting determination and reification).

Having said that, the cultural and historical gaps between both thinkers inevitably raises insuperable difficulties for a consistent hermeneutics:

What we do seem to have is a collection of intelligent misreadings, and that may be enough [...] We should not be surprised that interpretation is not an exact science. After all, translation is not an exact science. Science is not an exact science. (Tuck, 1990: 100)

Tuck's main contention was that Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna were largely determined by the philosophical trends current at the time in the following phases: 1) dismissing Buddhism as a form of idealist nihilism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>; 2) stressing the antinomy and absolute in Nāgārjuna by neo-Kantians and neo-Hegelians<sup>25</sup>; 3) emphasis on the logical form of the *catuṣkoṭi* by analytic philosophy<sup>26</sup>; and 4) post-Wittgensteinian analyses on the Mādhyamika philosophy of language. The point here is not to underscore the correctness of any interpretative method in particular, but rather to highlight the

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<sup>24</sup> See (Stcherbatsky, 1927; and de la Vallée Poussin, 1913).

<sup>25</sup> See (Murti, 1955).

<sup>26</sup> See (Gunaratne, 1980, 1986; Jayatilleke, 1967; Robinson, 1957; Wayman, 1977).

presuppositions we bring to any text:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. (Gadamer, 1989: 267)

In pointing this out I am also acknowledging the circumstances surrounding my own interpretative choices. Where comparative analysis was previously a favoured form of approach to cross-cultural texts we now prefer to seek out “family resemblances” instead. However, it should be clear that the insertion of fashionable theoretical cues do not warrant a rigorous or even intelligent reading. What I can agree with Tuck, however, is that all forms of interpretation involve a level of translation, and that the relationship between them is an “inexact science” – the science in question being the scientific model of method. What Tuck called “isogetical interpretation” (1990: 98) is a perennial problem in Buddhist hermeneutics, and to the extent we might possess definitive translations of a text we do not necessarily always arrive at the same interpretations. This problem is further compounded when we consider that Nāgārjuna wrote in cryptic Sanskrit verse with later translated sources available to modern scholarship taken from Tibetan and Chinese versions of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. More often than not, interpretative methods themselves in turn determine the translations (and indeed, entire traditions) that are made available to us. This is certainly true of the two recent translations of the MMK by Kalupahana (1986) and Garfield (1995), at both of whom we shall take a close look in this review. One might argue that any difference lies in the method, as if one believes a stringent application would guarantee

commensurability between the source and target language. Applications cannot be definitive in this way as it already presupposes the bifurcation of a theory and practice of reading that determines to us in advance how to read a text, and where its utility would be a tool that one may employ or administer at leisure.

A similar caveat is to be found in Indian philosophy exhorting one not to mistake the map for the terrain. In both the *Upaniṣads* and Buddhism the notion of a path (Skt. *mārga*) is highly significant. The relation we have with the text we read therefore takes the form of an ethical engagement or solicitation, which I believe forms the middle path between theory and practice as a hermeneutical approach. To the extent that we are unable to jettison our respective philosophical heritage I believe it is not impossible to use tradition as a form of enabling constraint to revisit certain texts with a fresh perspective, as Gadamer also urges: “It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition” (1989: 270). Ultimately, misgivings about textual fidelity (by the nit-pickers) regarding interpretative violence (by the cherry-pickers) at times amount to no more than the flip side of the same coin. In the next section I will consider Murti’s narrative of Buddhist history in light of recent scholarship so that we might better appraise the recent developments in Buddhist studies, along with attempts to link both Deconstruction and *Mādhyamaka*.

## § *Historical Background to Buddhism*

In this section I will outline a brief history of Buddhism taking on Murti's narrative as well as recent scholarship in the field. A diachronic study will have to take into proper consideration the historical development of Buddhism within the context of Indian philosophy, though such reconstructions are at risk of being deterministic in the need for coherence. In fact, what we come to understand by the term "Buddhism" is itself a fairly recent name that comes from eighteenth-century European Enlightenment thinkers, and their quest to subsume religion under comparative sociology and secular history (Robinson and Johnson, 1997: 1). The original term that Buddha himself used was *Dharma-Vinaya* (trans. Doctrine and Discipline). Robinson and Johnson explained that *Dharma-Vinaya* was meant to be prescriptive whilst *Buddhism* is descriptive in that "it simply denotes the actions of people who follow a vision of *Dharma-Vinaya* without suggesting that the reader accept that vision or follow it" (1997: 1).

While this distinction is pedagogically useful I do not find it particularly insightful, as the term "Buddhism" itself raises an entire complex of issues which I will only adumbrate here. To what extent can Buddhism be considered an "ism", and furthermore an "ism" of the historical Buddha? The Buddha himself certainly did not encourage devotion to his person (nor any such conception of self-hood in fact). The alternative is to consider Buddhism in its onto-theistic aspect as a religion, which is the view that Robinson and Johnson subscribe to. This may not be entirely wrong, as later Mahāyāna devotional practices are indeed theistic. However as a descriptive term there are shortcomings, as it brings to the fore a religious conception of the teachings of the historical Buddha that supervenes the other philosophical "isms" or movements that have developed, by recuperating them under its name. I argue this

takes the edge off the conceptual breakthroughs made by some Buddhist philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, for whom I am inclined to believe that his understanding of “Buddhism” would be rather different from the term that is in current usage. This point is made to forestall arguments whether he is Mahāyānist or not, as given the points made above it is as moot as asking whether Nāgārjuna himself was a Buddhist in the way we have come to understand this term? The term “Buddhism” is therefore deployed for pedagogical purposes, though it is used with an awareness of this problematic.

Historically, there were two main branches within Indian philosophy, which differed according to whether they accepted or not the authority of the Vedas. With the exception of Buddhism and Jainism (termed as *nāstika* or unorthodox), all others were considered *āstika* or orthodox. The fundamental difference lay between the *ātma-vada* doctrine (substance view) of the *Upaniṣads* that taught the existence of the soul (*ātman*), and the *anātma-vada* doctrine (anti-substance view) of the Buddha that denied the existence of the soul. Jainism lay mid-way between the two doctrines, teaching the existence of an *ātman* (which conflicted with Buddhism) that could be changing (which conflicted with the *Brāhmanic* teaching of the *Upaniṣads*). For the most part, Jainism did not exert significant influence on the course of Indian philosophy. The *Brāhmanical* systems accepted without question the authority of the Vedas (and hence more dogmatic) while Buddhism was from its very inception more critical of empirical experience, and employed a method of critical analysis (Skt. *vibhajyavāda*). The fact of human suffering (Skt. *duḥkha*) was a common issue both had to address. The *Upaniṣads* found salvation through a principle of identification (*ātman*) with the universal (*Brahman*) that is *positively* characterised as a state of consciousness and bliss. This is famously summed up in the dictum: “*Tat tvam asi*” (trans. That thou art).

In Buddhism, however, there is a strong sense of opposition to the *ātma-vada* and salvation is to be found in *nirvāṇa* instead, which is characterised negatively as the annihilation of suffering, as a state that is *sūnya* (trans. empty). Buddha rejected the substance view of the *Upaniṣads* that asserted both existence of the universal and the individual as being illusory due to wrong belief or ignorance (Skt. *avidyā*). Instead of Being, Buddha taught Becoming (such that reality is in flux) with the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* (trans. dependent co-origination). Buddha taught the theory of elements to avoid affirming the existence of a soul. The five aggregates (Skt. *skhandas*) are the burden and the bearer of that burden is what we conventionally understand as the empirical self or ego (Skt. *puṅgala*). This is also known as the modal view of reality, in contradistinction to the substance view promulgated by the *Brāhmanical* systems. In Buddhism, *Dharma* refers to the law and teachings of the Buddha (e.g. the Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Noble Paths) while *dharma* (or *dharma-sanketa*) refers specifically to the constituent elements of experience held up by *pratītya-samutpāda*. All Buddhist systems accept the dharma-theory taught by the Buddha, though it is the way they interpreted *pratītya-samutpāda* that formed their respective differences.

After Buddha passed into *parinirvāṇa* (544 or 487 BCE), the First Council was convened by the Elders (*Staviras*) at Rajargha to synthesise the teachings of the Buddha into *piṭakas* (trans. baskets or collections of oral traditions) that consisted of *Vinaya-piṭaka* (rules of conduct) and *Sutta-piṭaka* (discourses or dialogues). The third, *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* (philosophical doctrines) was later added to comprise what we now have as the *tripiṭaka*. Robinson and Johnson add, “The complete canon existing in a language closest to Magadhi is that of the Theravāda sect, which has been preserved in Pali, a literary vernacular similar to Sanskrit” (1997: 52). This was then memorised and passed down orally as writing at the time

was reserved for secular purposes.

*Ābhidharmika* schools (circa 300 BCE) represented the earliest attempts at synthesising the philosophical doctrines of the Buddha, and the *Ābhidharma* texts were annotations that interpreted and systematised the *mātrkā* (trans. lists) of essential teachings drawn from the *sūtras* dating from Buddha's time, though they were actually composed much later (Robinson and Johnson, 1997: 54). This is contrary to traditional claims that Ānanda recited the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* as well as the *Sutta-piṭaka* during the First Council, which Warder also agrees is unlikely to be the case (1970: 202). This was also a period of intense philosophical speculation, and almost every sect had their own *Ābhidharma* texts, which tradition numbers as eighteen excluding the later Mahāyāna schools. Recent Buddhist scholarship holds that this number is likely to be wrong. Doctrinal disputes in presenting a coherent system of the Buddha's teachings led to a schism within Buddhism. Robinson and Johnson make a very good point regarding this:

If one assumes that the Buddha's teachings were primarily therapeutic, the inconsistencies are no great issue. Differing approaches were found to work for different types of problems. But if one is looking for a logically consistent system, one has to explain the inconsistencies away. (1997: 56)

The *Ābhidharmikas* understood *pratītya-samutpāda* as denying substance (*ātman*) and establishing the reality of separate elements (*dharmas*) subject to causal law. *Ābhidharmika* systems recognised seventy-five such *dharmas* that they considered real. This was the early stage of realist pluralism in Buddhism. The middle path for the *Ābhidharmika* as a criticism of *ātma-vada* is that between eternalism (Skt. *śāśvata-vāda*) and nihilism (Skt. *uccheda-*

*vāda*). A permanent (or eternal) *ātman* that exists cannot explain change (as it cannot lapse) and is therefore not conducive to spiritual life, for there is no possibility of liberation from suffering. The nihilist position would mean there is no suffering whatsoever, and therefore there is also no path to liberation. The differences between the *Sthaviras* and *Vaisalian* monks led the latter to convene a Second Council at Vaisali where they formed a separate school known as the *Mahāsaṅghika* (trans. Great Assembly). It is also from the *Mahāsaṅghika* school that the later Mahāyāna movement (circa 100 BCE) was born.

The *Sthavirādins* were further split amongst themselves during the Third Council (circa 250 BCE) at Pataliputra into two factions, *Vibhajyavādins* and *Sarvāstivādins*. During the two centuries from 100 BCE to 100 CE, India switched from an oral to a written culture, and, as can be imagined, this lent fuel to the rife speculation that were already taking place within Buddhism:

In the early years, when canons had to be memorized, a monk belonged exclusively to the school whose texts he had memorized. Beginning with the first and second centuries CE, however, as written culture supplanted oral culture and the texts were written down, monks and monasteries were freed to study and even to adopt specific tenets of rival schools without risking expulsion from their own. (Robinson and Johnson, 1997: 62)

Freed by the *Mahāsaṅghika* split from the *Sthavirādins* asserting that scriptures did not constitute the final authority of the Buddha-word, along with the proliferation of writing which was also having profound influence on Hinduism elsewhere, this led to a surge of *śāstras* (treatises) being written, citing *sūtras* as proofs which is characteristic of the

Mahāyāna corpus (Robinson and Johnson, 1997: 85). Robinson and Johnson trace the development of the Mahāyāna movement from its earliest *sūtras* beginning from 100 B.C.E to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* circa 200 – 400 C.E (1997: 85).

It was during such an intellectually charged period that Nāgārjuna (circa 150 C.E – 250 C.E) was writing, and the *Mādhyamaka* (*Śūnyavāda*) school was a radical departure from the *Ābhidharmika*. The *Mādhyamika* contends that *pratītya-samutpāda* as dependent co-origination is not the principle of temporal sequence (as the law of causality determined by *karma*), but rather designates the relative dependence of things on each other that is *śūnya*. The term *śūnyatā* is strictly an empty designation and should not be taken to refer to some mysterious realm of emptiness which is the common mistake we make in everyday language. *Śūnyatā* appears in the *Sūtra Piṭaka* but was generally ignored by the *Ābhidharmika* systematisers. The *Mādhyamika* forwards the essential unreality of separate elements (Skt. *dharma-nairātmya*) through the relative dependency between them. This re-interpretation of *pratītya-samutpāda* is a radical one, and we shall see later in greater detail why this is so. It should be pointed out that when *Mādhyamikas* refer to the *Ābhidharmika* they specifically have in mind the *Sarvāstivādins*. The middle path for the *Mādhyamika* is “the non-acceptance of the two extremes – the affirmative and the negative (Skt. *sat* and *asat*, respectively) views, of all views” (Murti, 1955: 8). However, recent scholarship now tend to view *Mādhyamika* as a middle-path between nihilist and reificationist positions, where nihilism about one kind of entity is typically paired with the reification of another<sup>27</sup>.

Murti thought that *Yogācāra* (*Vijñānavāda*) as a later idealist position in the fourth century C.E was made possible by the *śūnyatā* of the *Mādhyamaka*, as the subject-object

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<sup>27</sup> See (Garfield, 1990: 288; 1994: 228).

duality within the realm of consciousness is considered to be *śūnya*, while consciousness (Skt. *vijñāna*) itself as a substratum of reality is held to be real. *Vijñānavādins* argue that pure consciousness is to be identified with *śūnyatā*, for while both knower and object known are in themselves unreal there has to exist a pure consciousness that makes this process of knowing possible in the first place. Robinson and Johnson, however, claim *contra* Murti that Yogācāra in its original theoretical formulation in the writings of Asanga and Vasubandhu was not a doctrine of idealism. Rather, it was more a phenomenology of mind, focused primarily on the role that the mind played in forming experience, insofar as the mind was the principal factor in giving rise to suffering (Robinson and Johnson, 1997: 91). The middle path for the *Vijñānavādins* therefore is between the realism of the *Ābhidharmikas* and the scepticism of the *Mādhyamikas*.

Despite their differences, all schools of Buddhism accept without question the denial of the soul (*ātman*), which is considered the source of attachment and bondage that leads to suffering. The middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*) each school takes is immediately dependent upon their respective interpretations of *pratītya-samutpāda*. Murti points out that *madhyamā-pratipad* “is not a position in the sense of a third position lying midway between two extremes but a no-position that supersedes them both” (1955: 46). What should be pointed out is that a path is strictly different from a position as it implies orientation instead of rest. However, the notion of a “no-position” has been debated and called into question variously by Kalupahana (1986), Ruegg (1986), and Matilal (1988). The more insightful point made by Robinson and Johnson is that, “one of the greatest ironies of the Mahāyāna movement is that it began as a reaction against the Abhidharma and ended up developing the most elaborate Abhidharma tradition of any tradition” (1997: 95). This is certainly true, and I believe this demonstrates the reificationist tendencies latent in philosophical thought. In fact,

it may be argued here that the more certain one is in believing that such tendencies have been thoroughly dispelled that one is all the more susceptible to them.

Murti's exegesis regarding the development of Buddhism is insightful at times, and it represented a major attempt at synthesising earlier work by Buddhologists such as de la Vallée Poussin (1913) and Stcherbatksy (1927). However, Murti's approach betrays his own Kantian orientation, which was symptomatic of the current scholarship of Buddhism at the time. Murti stressed the emergence of dialectical consciousness in *Mādhyamaka* as precipitated by the antinomical conclusions of both *Sāṃkhya* and *Ābhīdharmika* systems. According to his account, the dialectical consciousness of Nāgārjuna was borne out of logical necessity due to the conflict between Rationalism and Empiricism. Yet, this seems to conflict with his earlier suggestions at various junctures that it was Buddha who had first discovered the dialectic even though it remained implicit in his silence (Murti, 1955: 9, 40-41). If so, then the necessary conditions (*viz.*, the conflict between Rationalism and Empiricism) Murti claimed for the emergence of dialectical consciousness would have to be present at the time of the Buddha, which it was not. One may therefore understand *Mādhyamaka* as a form of absolutism if and only if one subscribes to Murti's view that the *Mādhyamika* dialectic offered a resolution or synthesis to the countervailing oppositions. Such resolution would inevitably mean closure, and this bears testimony to Murti's effort in neatly categorising the development of both traditions within the unfolding narrative of dialectical consciousness. This criticism is not meant to detract from Murti's canonical work, and while there is much to be contended regarding some of the claims it makes in light of recent scholarship my point here is to underscore its enterprise as ultimately an act of interpretation. In the following section we shall see how these hermeneutical problems continue to be a source of contestation in current debates, and how they contribute to further development in Buddhist

studies.

## § *Development and Debates in Buddhist Philosophy*

I will trace some of the on-going debates and developments regarding Nāgārjuna in this section. In doing so I will employ two current modern translations of Nāgārjuna to juxtapose and draw out some relevant issues, as well as providing my justification for adopting one of them in the process. I will consider both Kalupahana's (1986) and Garfield's (1995) translations to do so. Kalupahana's translation of Nāgārjuna was taken from the Sanskrit text of the MMK, though he felt the Chinese version by Kumārajīva (circa fifth century CE) to be closer to the original spirit of the MMK. This is because he believes Kumārajīva's translation supports a non-Mahāyānist reading of Nāgārjuna, compared to Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* (circa seventh century CE). There are fundamental sectarian reasons for his thinking so, as Kalupahana's translation preferred a pragmatic empiricist reading of Nāgārjuna (1986: 81), stressing his continuity within a Hīnayānist tradition that was at odds with Candrakīrti's *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* school that later led to Nāgārjuna being hailed as a Mahāyānist philosopher. In doing so, Kalupahana i) effectively rejects both ancient (Candrakīrti) and modern (Stcherbatsky and Murti) accounts of Buddhist intellectual history; ii) stressing continuity while Stcherbatsky and Murti have emphasised the discontinuity of Nāgārjuna; as iii) where Stcherbatsky and Murti believed Nāgārjuna rejected Buddha's theory of elements with his conception of *śūnyatā* as a form of radical break, Kalupahana considers Nāgārjuna as a *Theravādin* grand commentator on Buddha's *Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra*<sup>28</sup> instead, remaining faithful to the Buddha-word (1986: 5).

While this is not the place to go into the Hīnayāna-Mahāyāna debate it is surely

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The significance of this particular sūtra in relation to the MMK cannot be overstated, and is provided in Appendix B.

shocking that fundamental issues of this sort remain contested to this day<sup>29</sup>. What Kalupahana proposes is bold and radical, because “by implication, both the Tibetan tradition (based on Candrakīrti) and the Sino-Korean-Japanese trajectory of Mahāyāna (with its emphasis on a nonempiricist and ineffable awakening) misconstrue and distort Nāgārjuna” (Keenan, 1988: 173-74). Keenan is right when he points out that such a bold rewriting of Buddhist doctrinal history occasions a host of questions (1988: 174). Indeed, a common criticism of Kalupahana lies in either his lack or ignorance of sources, both ancient and modern. Keenan points out that Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī* is mentioned only once, while the *Ratnāvalī* containing affirmations of the superiority of Mahāyāna is notably absent (1988: 174), an observation further corroborated by Hallisey’s remark that Kalupahana had “ignored the scholarship of the last decade” (1988: 403). Lindtner (1988) provided the most scathing criticism of all, pointing to the fact that Kalupahana’s translation neglects (understandably so even if unjustified) the Tibetan sources, and that his Sanskrit text contains “more than one hundred misprints, omissions, interpolations and wrong readings” (1988: 177). This is not even taking into consideration the numerous mistranslations by Kalupahana that Lindtner takes great pains to point out in his paper, and on grounds of which Lindtner alleges “these mistranslations show, needless to add, a serious lack of understanding of basic ideas in Nāgārjuna’s thought” (1988: 177). To the best of my knowledge Kalupahana never did contest Lindtner’s allegations. The only support Kalupahana found was from Matilal (1988), and on one particular point only, because Matilal argued against the “no-position” view commonly ascribed to Nāgārjuna. This is a significant point of contention for Kalupahana as well, as the no-position view is considered the hallmark of the *prāsaṅgika* approach (in terms of *reductio ad absurdum*). Instead of viewing the entire Mahāyāna tradition as a complete aberration of Buddhism as entailed by Kalupahana’s text it might be more likely the case that

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<sup>29</sup> See (Lindtner, 1982; Ruegg, 1986; Warder, 1973).

Kalupahana's translation stands in need of further scrutiny. I shall only point out here in passing that both Mabbett and Loy eschew the pragmatic empiricist reading of Kalupahana, along with the general scholarship in the field.

Garfield's translation on the other hand was taken from the canonical Tibetan translation (Tib. *dBu-ma rtsa-ba shes-rab*) of the original Sanskrit text, which reflected an Indo-Tibetan tradition that read Nāgārjuna in a *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* approach. Garfield claims in his preface that his translation is not philological in intent but rather "a presentation of a philosophical text to philosophers, and not an edition of the text for Buddhologists" (1995: viii). I am in agreement with Garfield's belief that "although the text is interpreted in being translated, this text should still come out in translation as a text which *could* be interpreted in the ways that others have read it" (1995: ix). As Garfield's text reflects the Indo-Tibetan tradition of *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* that follows Candrakīrti's reading of the emptiness of emptiness in Nāgārjuna, one of the first challenges Garfield faces is to locate this within the MMK and successfully defend the philosophical viability of such a reading. Garfield sets out to do this in his paper (1994), part of which was later incorporated in the first chapter of his translated commentary to the book (1995)<sup>30</sup>.

Garfield in his paper (1994) correctly locates MMK XXIV as the central chapter and climax of Nāgārjuna's argument, claiming that in particular verse 18 "has received so much attention that interpretations of it alone represent the foundations of major Buddhist schools in East Asia" (1994: 221). Garfield's approach is clearly set out, proposing to read this verse in such a way that coheres with Candrakīrti and claiming that the emptiness of emptiness is

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<sup>30</sup> It is for this reason Chapter Four on Nāgārjuna focuses upon this paper to reconstruct in detail some of the key ideas that shape this distinct tradition, as I am convinced that not only is the *prāsaṅgika* rendering accurate, it also bears certain similarities with Derrida's notion of deconstruction. This *rapprochement* would not be possible if Nāgārjuna were read as a Theravādin or even as a *svātantrika-mādhyamika*.

not simply the philosophical conclusion to be drawn at the end of twenty four chapters, but instead is already anticipated right from the first chapter (“Examinations of Conditions”). In doing so he demonstrates how a clear understanding of causality (which is not empiricist *vis-à-vis* Kalupahana’s reading) is important for Buddhist philosophy and why Nāgārjuna began the MMK with it. Garfield further claims rereading the MMK with this understanding of emptiness of emptiness changes the way in which other chapters are read. A great deal of interpretative stake pivots around this single verse then, along with an entire host of epistemologico-ontological significance attached to it. The verse is given as follows:

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

I should like to take a detour at this juncture to consider Arnold’s review (1999) of Garfield’s translation. This is useful for our purposes at hand for a number of reasons: Firstly, Arnold in his review provides both Sanskrit and Tibetan sources for this verse. Secondly, He juxtaposes Garfield’s translation of this verse *vis-à-vis* Inada’s, Streng’s and Kalupahana’s translation, evaluating in what way is Garfield’s rendering of the verse preferable. Finally, Arnold provides a reading of Garfield’s “venturesome claim” in his paper to which we shall return. The Sanskrit and the Tibetan text are presented respectively:

*yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe;*

*sā prajñaptirupādāya pratipatsaiva madhyamā.* (Sanskrit text, emphasis mine)

*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba gang*

*de ni stong pa nyid du bshad*

*de ni brten nas gdags pa ste*

*de nyid dbu ma'i lam yin no.* (Tibetan text, emphasis mine)

As I do not possess any working knowledge of either language the reading here will have to depend on renditions by both Arnold (1999) and Lindtner (1988). Arnold points out the Tibetan text is characteristically close to the Sanskrit text and we may draw preliminary support from Lindtner in his earlier censure of Kalupahana that he has largely ignored the Tibetan translation of the MMK. Arnold highlights the problem to lie in the ambiguous term *pāda* found in *sā prajñaptirupādāya*, which benefits from being restricted in the Tibetan version by *brten nas* to mean “having depended”. This ambiguity in the Sanskrit text presented a common problem for earlier English translations of this particular verse based on the Sanskrit source. Inada’s translation reads thus: “We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. It is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality (of being) and, indeed, it is the middle path” (1970: 148). Arnold claims Inada has completely misconstrued the gerund and has made a stretch to translating it as “for the mutuality (of being)”. Streng’s translation reads, “This apprehension, i.e., taking into account [all other things]...” (1967: 213), sees the gerund but is not clear about its referent nor see the significance of the term *prajñapti*. Kalupahana comes closer: “We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention” (1986: 339), which correctly reads “that” as referring to emptiness, though he errs in translating as though *prajñapti* were in the accusative case when it is in fact in the nominative. I shall supplement here Kalupahana’s own justification for his interpretative choice, because if it were taken as a nominative term this would mean that “dependent arising or emptiness would either be a

mere description with *no* basis in cognitive experience or it would be an experience that is ineffable” (1986: 340). Kalupahana objects to this given his empiricist reading of Nāgārjuna, and is further rejected by various commentators mentioned earlier. Kalupahana then appeals to *Dīgha-Nikāya* III.202 to support his claim that *saṃvṛti*, *vyavahāra*, and *prajñapti* were used as synonyms “as was intended by the Buddha himself” (1986: 340) in support of the line, “That is dependent upon convention”. This is completely rejected by Lindtner:

In XXIV,18, a celebrated passage *sā prajñaptir upādāya*, becomes ‘That is dependent upon convention’ – as if the text reads *prajñaptim – with reference to Dīgha-Nikāya* III,202. In the DN there is, however, nothing at all under this reference to justify such a translation – at least in my copy of the text. (1988: 178)

Returning to Arnold’s review, he claims “Garfield alone understands ‘that’ to refer to ‘emptiness’ and correctly sees this as being in apposition to *prajñapti*, ‘designation’ so that it is *emptiness*, being dependent, that is a ‘designation’” (1999: 89). Arnold further points out that while Garfield’s text is taken from the Tibetan source it coheres with Candrakīrti’s reading (in Sanskrit) who glosses ‘that’ as referring to ‘emptiness’ and says that emptiness, as dependent, is thus termed a designation (1999: 89). Garfield argues that in this passage Nāgārjuna asserts the fundamental identity of 1) emptiness, or the ultimate truth; 2) the dependently originated, that is, all phenomena; and 3) verbal convention (1994: 221). What is critical to note here is emptiness does not entail non-actuality (which would be absurd, even to Nāgārjuna) as they exist conventionally, i.e., dependently originated. All phenomena are considered conventional, insofar as we accept they are dependently arisen. This does not simply mean that things exist solely by social convention or agreement. Something that is

non-conventional would be non-dependently arisen, or independent, thus contravening the truth of *pratītya-samutpāda*. Therefore, within the doctrine of two-truths these conventional phenomena may be characterised differently: To view conventional phenomena in its conventional character is to say that things exist (as having *svabhāva*) in the daily sense of the term. This is the mistake we commonly make in our everyday practices, making claims that there are indeed tables and chairs in the room. To view conventional phenomena in its ultimate character is also to say that things are *śūnya*. The Buddhist doctrine of Two Truths is critical here, and Garfield argues that the emptiness of emptiness is equivalent to the deep identity between the Two Truths (1994: 234). When we say something is dependently originated that is also explained as emptiness, we mean that “emptiness” as a term itself is a dependent designation and not, as it were, referring to some actual cement-of-the-universe (as Garfield is fond of saying) out there. It is not quite the same thing to say that *emptiness* is dependent upon convention, which would then imply the assertion of a non-empty existent (namely, *emptiness*) when we are actually referring to the term “emptiness” itself as being dependent. “Emptiness”, the term with which we explain or express the dependently originated, is just as empty as the ultimate truth (of *emptiness*) it designates conventionally. We move then from simply describing the emptiness of dependent origination (according to Kalupahana) to the emptiness of emptiness (according to Candrakīrti and Garfield). That – the emptiness of emptiness – is the middle way.

Returning to Garfield’s paper from our brief philological excursus he proceeds to re-read chapter one of the MMK (“Examination of Conditions”) with the emptiness of emptiness as the middle way in mind to demonstrate that it is already anticipated from the very beginning. To do so Garfield makes a controversial distinction between causes (Skt. *hetu*, Tib. *rGyu*) and conditions (Skt. *pratyaya*, Tib. *rKyen*) in the following way: Causes

have the power (Skt. *kriyā*, Tib. *Bya Ba*) to bring about its effect as part of its essence (Skt. *svabhāva*, Tib. *Rang bZhin*), while conditions are an event, state or process that can be appealed to without any metaphysical commitment to any occult connection between explanandum and explanans (1994: 222). Chapter Four on Nāgārjuna and causality considers in greater detail the implications of this distinction, along with the challenge posed by Chinn (2001). My purpose here is served by pointing out that because of this distinction what we would normally (in a commonsensical way) think about causality is demonstrated to be flawed and self-vitiating as 1) it needs recourse to occult mystical powers possessed by entities; and 2) these entities if they are to be bearers of such causal powers would have to be existent (independently); such that, 3) it would then be impossible for them to give rise (dependently) to other entities. Conditionality on Garfield's view would allow us to explain causality as a regularity view of reality: "Explanation relies on regularities. Regularities are explained by reference to further regularities" (1994: 224). He goes on to argue that:

To ask why there are regularities at all, on such a view, would be to ask an incoherent question: The fact of explanatorily useful regularities in nature is what makes explanation and investigation possible in the first place and is not something itself that can be explained. (1995: 116, fn. 29)

In other words we are really describing something when we assert something to be actually the case, which is a descriptive fallacy. In doing so we are thus able to reject "the very enterprise of a philosophical search for the ontological foundations of convention" (see Garfield, 1990; Garfield, 1994: 226). It is this particular conclusion I am interested in drawing, and one that I believe has implications towards exposing the metaphysical underpinnings of our daily claims. I am therefore in agreement with Garfield that the *prima*

*facie* mysticism (i.e., the emptiness of emptiness) of Nāgārjuna enables us paradoxically to demystify the fundamental ways we view the world – views that certainly present themselves as common sense when in fact they are deeply metaphysical.

## § Negation & Nāgārjuna

I have argued in the previous section for a *prāsaṅgika* reading of Nāgārjuna, and how this allows for a demystification of common sense by rejecting the philosophical search for the ontological foundation of convention. In doing so, I have also established the emptiness of emptiness as the middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*) of the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika*, which results in the controversial no-position view commonly ascribed to Nāgārjuna. This cannot be established, however, without also considering the specific use of negation by Nāgārjuna. This section will briefly consider the two forms of negation found in classical Indian philosophy, as well as the *catuskoṭi* that Nāgārjuna deploys as the Four-Cornered Negation. This is a particularly problematic area of Nāgārjuna scholarship, with various methods applied to make sense of the logical form of the *catuskoṭi*. My position on the two forms of negation is that while it is desideratum to understanding the operations of Mādhyamika dialectic, I also maintain that these negations cannot be separated from the context of two-truths. The reason for this complaint is that in the process of over-stressing its logical form to establish coherence we also estrange it from the contexts in which they were deployed. I doubt very much that a purely logical formal presentation of the MMK would make sense, and even if it did, what would be the value of such a reading? The *catuskoṭi* remains within the purview of conventional truth, and the logical attempts at educing some *essential* coherence or truth-hood from it seem justifiable, if only in a sort of self-made vacuum. Nāgārjuna makes this clear:

How could the tetralemma of permanent and impermanent, etc.,

Be true of the peaceful?

How can the tetralemma of finite, infinite, etc.,

Be true of the peaceful? (MMK XXII: 12)

This demonstrates how the remit of tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) does not extend beyond conventional truth. We are unable to predicate anything (permanent, impermanent, etc.) of the peaceful *nirvāṇa* in the ultimate sense, because there is no entity of which the predication may be true. Garfield adds, “Empty thing [*sic*] can exist conventionally; but about their ultimate status, nothing can be literally said” (1995: 281).

As a Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna advocated the middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*) against essentialist systems of thought that emphasised either “being” or “non-being” as the basis of their philosophical speculations. He argues instead that all such philosophical views (Skt. *dṛṣṭi*) are in fact empty (Skt. *śūnya*) and untenable, perhaps even to the impossibility of philosophy itself. It has been far easier to dismiss the Mādhyamikas as either nihilists or sceptics in the course of Buddhist intellectual history than it is to mount a successful defence against the Mādhyamika dialectic. In what way is such refutation of all possible views justified, and from what position is such a critique of philosophy undertaken?

There are two general objections that may be raised against Nāgārjuna: Firstly, if Nāgārjuna negates all possible philosophical positions it then follows there is a counter-thesis from which this criticism is made possible, thus taking the form of a negative dialectic. Secondly, if all views are systematically exhausted and consequently shown to be empty (being false) it then follows that Nāgārjuna’s conclusion at least is non-empty (or true), which *ipso facto* becomes self-vitiating. What becomes problematic is Nāgārjuna does not lay claim to any counter-thesis whatsoever, nor does he propose yet another (supplementary) view in the refutation of all others:

When an analysis is made through emptiness,  
If someone were to offer a reply,  
That reply will fail, since it will presuppose  
Exactly what is to be proven.

When an explanation is made through emptiness,  
Whoever would find fault with it  
Will find no fault, since the criticism will presuppose  
Exactly what is to be proven. (MMK IV: 8-9)

If the former objection is successfully countered in this manner the latter objection is also circumvented to a certain degree, and as a thoroughgoing critique of all philosophical concepts Nāgārjuna subjects his own analysis to the same process of criticism – “emptiness” as a philosophical concept is itself shown to be just as empty as the others. It is, in fact, a non-concept that allows for the possibility of conceptuality in general. This is where his radicalism lies. The question then becomes: “What’s the point?” I believe there is a very real point Nāgārjuna wishes to make, even though it is a point that has to be demonstrated or realised instead of being merely stated. This is the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. In this respect there is a soteriological significance to the process of negation that is oriented towards the attainment and realisation of Buddhist enlightenment.

Bhāvaviveka felt that a Mādhyamika could advance autonomous (Skt. *svātantra*) arguments of his own, which is rightly criticised by Candrakīrti for being inconsistent. Murti says of Bhāvaviveka that:

The characteristic Mādhyamika stand as a review or criticism of all positions and theories does not emerge from Bhāvaviveka's procedure. And to review a position, we should not have a position of our own but be alive to the contradictions of other positions. The Mādhyamika [*sic*] is a philosophy of higher order; it is a philosophy of philosophies. (1955: 97-8)

Such an approach by Bhāvaviveka would inevitably fall prey to either one of the above-mentioned objections. I disagree in part, however, with Murti's characterisation of the *prāsaṅgika* method – it is precisely because one is alive not only to the contradictions of other positions, but including those of one's own that one should not be committed to a singular position. Such commitment would remain nonetheless a form of grasping, which runs counter to the attainment of *nirvāṇa* that Nāgārjuna considers to be the relinquishing of all views. I believe it is this attitude of openness that makes Mādhyamaka thoroughly self-critical, which is quite different from what Murti characterised rather awkwardly as “a philosophy of philosophies” (1955: 98). The view that holds all views as being empty remains necessarily a view itself. What I believe is radical about the Mādhyamaka is that it engages with the conditions of possibility for all forms of philosophical views, including its own, such that the emptiness of emptiness entails its conjunctive dissolution. On such a reading then it would be inconsistent to maintain that Mādhyamaka is a philosophy of philosophies, because the “meta-” horizon cannot be attained, for the simple reason that no such putative grounds may exist in a non-empty manner.

What is the *prāsaṅgika* method then and in what way does it allow for a criticism of all philosophical positions? The Sanskrit term *prāsaṅga* means “logical consequence”, and

Murti notes that *prāsaṅga* is “not to be understood as an apagogic proof in which we *prove* an assertion *indirectly* by disproving the opposite. *Prasaṅga* [sic] is disproof simply, without the least intention to prove any thesis” (1955: 131). The *prāsaṅgika* operates by means of *reductio ad absurdum*, reducing the logical consequences of its opponents ultimately to tautology, contradiction, or infinite regress. In other words, the Mādhyamika only needs to convince his opponents that their theory entails by logical consequence conclusions that are antinomic and unacceptable to reason using the very principles espoused by them without having to offer an alternative thesis. Inada provides an insightful comment on this:

Murti talks about the ‘Conflict of Reason,’ ‘Criticism,’ or ‘reflective awareness of things,’ as the dialectical import of the Mādhyamika *Prāsaṅga* doctrine (*reductio ad absurdum*) but whether *Prāsaṅga* is really a method for educating truth or only a method of criticism is a moot question. Perhaps, it is neither and that the whole tenor of the Mādhyamika might actually be to tax reason only to its discriminative limits and thereby render clear the absurdity of adhering to the discriminated objectified elements. Beyond that it might only be either sheer speculation on the function of reason or a case of reading in too much. It might he [sic] added that, in Buddhism as a whole, there is no logic (rational play) without reference to the ontological nature of things. In short, no logic without ontology<sup>31</sup>. (Inada, 1970: 34)

Consequently, Murti chooses to characterise the Mādhyamika dialectic as a “spiritual *ju-jitsu*” (1955: 132) in a somewhat idealist fashion. This is potentially misleading, because as a purported *spiritual ju-jitsu* the Mādhyamika arrives at his conclusion of emptiness solely on

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<sup>31</sup> This notion of logic as rational play recalls for me the *play of différance* as the possibility of conceptuality.

*logical* grounds. Sprung raises an objection regarding this:

According to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti [...] reasoning is not ontologically bound; yet they proceed, unshakably assuming that what fails the tests of reason – what is less than utterly intelligible – cannot exist. (1979: 9)

It is quite obvious to say that thought is independent of reality (i.e. “reasoning is not ontologically bound”), though that does not entail that reality is independent of thought. Sprung, however, wrongly ascribes to Nāgārjuna “that what fails the tests of reason” is reality, from which he draws the nihilist conclusion that for Nāgārjuna, reality cannot exist. What does fail “the tests of reasons”, however, are precisely propositions and not reality – truth-value applies only to statements, not facts<sup>32</sup>. This is Sprung’s mistake. Reality should not be confused with truth-hood, truth concerns the views or propositions we have or make about the world. Similarly, negation or affirmation is a mode in which propositions are stated. What remains open to debate, however, is the possibility of negating a position without necessarily affirming its opposite<sup>33</sup>. This is significant, because if negation for the Mādhyamika does imply the assertion of its opposite this would thereby commit him to a position, which in the face of his conclusion – that all views are ultimately empty – would be inconsistent and self-contradictory.

The negations employed by the Mādhyamika deny *simpliciter* any propositions put forth by his opponents. Kajiyama argued in his paper (1973): “A Mādhyamika, when he negates a concept, actually intends to negate all the human concepts together with it;

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<sup>32</sup> In this way, Nāgārjuna himself does not offer an analysis of the world as such, but analyses our ways of understanding the world. See also (Loy, 1999: 247).

<sup>33</sup> In other words, this effectively foists dialectical oppositions upon Nāgārjuna, even when he has maintained otherwise throughout the MMK.

something other than the concept negated is not to be affirmed either” (qtd. in Wood, 1994: 52). While I am not certain what Kajiyama meant by “all human concepts”, what is clear from this, however, is that we are no longer looking at a dialectical negation that is understood in the Western philosophical tradition because it does not operate within a binary system (either “is” or “is not”). There are two points that need to be emphasised here: firstly, classical Indian logic admits of two forms of negation (Skt. *pratiṣedha*), viz., propositional negation (Skt. *prasajya-pratiṣedha*) and exclusion/term negation (Skt. *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*). The *prāsaṅgika* purportedly employs *prasajya* negation, from which no further inference (or implication) may be drawn, while *paryudāsa* negation is primarily affirmative. This itself is open to debate, as we shall see shortly. Secondly, Nāgārjuna redeploys the tetralemma (Skt. *catuṣkoṭi*) as the Four-Cornered Negation which, taken collectively, is considered logically exhaustive of any proposition. This devastating combination of *prasajya-pratiṣedha* and the *catuṣkoṭi* therefore allows Nāgārjuna to undertake a thoroughgoing criticism of his opponents. What is at stake is whether *prasajya-pratiṣedha* employed by Nāgārjuna is actually tenable such that no inference may be drawn from his negations; and also if the *catuṣkoṭi* is logically consistent which, in turn, depends on the particular form of negation (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*) employed.

What is the difference between *prasajya-pratiṣedha* and *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*? The form of negation employed has profound significance for the interpretation of *śūnyatā*. Take for example MMK I:1, where Nāgārjuna deals with the problem of causation:

Neither from itself nor from another,  
 Nor from both,  
 Nor without a cause,

Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (MMK I:1)

The negation “Neither from itself” (*Na svataḥ*) is taken to be *prasajya*, such that MMK I:1 is a conjunction of the following four negations: 1) it is not the case that things arise from themselves, 2) it is not the case that things arise from others, 3) it is not the case that things arise from both self and others, 4) it is not the case that things arise from no cause. Therefore, the conclusion to draw is that things do not arise at all, as there is no fifth way that they might have arisen. If the four negations were taken as *pariyudāsa* it would mean that, “things are as follows: not arisen from self, not arisen from others, not arisen from both, not arisen from no cause”, such that they might arise in some *other* way, or that there are things which do not arise. Within the context of Buddhist teaching we may establish that this, clearly, was not what Nāgārjuna intended. The question here is whether it is indeed the case that *prasajya* negations do not affirm anything whatsoever. This is critical to the interpretation of *śūnyatā* as it is not held to be yet another position or view. Wood argues that one cannot infer (in accordance to Buddhist teaching) from the negations “not from self”, “not from others”, “not from both”, and “not from no cause” to mean either of the following: i) that things exist, but without originating, or ii) that things originate, but in some other way other than the four ways considered. I agree with this. He emphasises, however, that it does not follow from i) and ii) that Nāgārjuna believed nothing could be inferred at all, for he did accept at least one proposition, *viz.*, that “things do not originate at all”. Wood argues convincingly it is not the case that *prasajya* negations have no implications *at all*, and that “a statement from which no inferences could be drawn would be a *meaningless* statement, and a meaningless statement cannot be an affirmation or a negation” (1994: 65). This would seem to commit Nāgārjuna to a nihilist position, which is something proponents wish to avoid at all costs because *śūnyatā* does not mean non-existence, but rather dependence in co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*).

A number of approaches have been employed in debates between different camps that forward either nihilist (NI) or non-nihilist (NNI) readings of Nāgārjuna, which, among others, include Relevant Logic and Speech Act Theory. Both NI and NNI approaches try to salvage from Nāgārjuna's text aspects that support their theses, and I cannot help but wonder if we are truly concerned about identifying Nāgārjuna's questions, instead of trying to make him answer (and to a certain extent, answerable to) our own. I think it is fair to say the *ostensible* reading of MMK I:1 does support a nihilist reading, though a necessary caveat here is that atomistic approaches that deal with this section without due consideration to the rest of the MMK are at risk of being over-hasty and eliminative.

The *catuṣkoṭi* is presented here below:

It is not the case that X is P.

It is not the case that X is not-P.

It is not the case that X is both P and not-P.

It is not the case that X is neither P nor not-P.

It should be pointed out that the *catuṣkoṭi* does not violate the law of non-contradiction, found in the third proposition; nor the law of the excluded middle, found in the fourth proposition. Also, within the propositions of the *catuṣkoṭi*, "P and not-P" are considered contraries (e.g. Hot/Cold pair) rather than contradictories. Taken collectively, however, P; not-P; both P and not-P; neither P nor not P; are considered to be exhaustive of all possible logical alternatives of any given proposition. The point of contention here is the logical consistency of the *catuṣkoṭi*, because if the negation of P entails the assertion of not-P (even if it is considered a *prasajya* negation) Nāgārjuna would have contradicted himself in the

*catuskoṭi* (such that it is possible a chair both weighs and does not weigh fifty pounds). Sprung maintains the *catuskoṭi* exhausts the ways in which the copula “to be” may be employed, and hence within these four propositions language is being used in its ontological register: “In all four ways language is being used ontologically; the verb ‘is’, in whatever variation, implies the being or nonbeing of what the assertion is about” (Sprung, 1979: 7). This ontological complicity is, however, ultimately repudiated by Nāgārjuna, and the Mādhyamaka philosophy of language is not referential and ontologically bound, but is instead self-referential and tautological. It does not claim that there is any form of correspondence between language and the world, nor does it reflect the world in any way. That is not to say language does not communicate anything meaningful whatsoever, but that while it is adequate at the conventional level (Skt. *vyavahāra*) it does not make sense at the ultimate level (Skt. *paramārtha*). This is the Buddhist distinction of two-truths, and as Nāgārjuna has unrelentingly pointed out:

Those who do not understand  
 The distinction drawn between these two truths  
 Do not understand  
 The Buddha's profound truth. (MMK XXIV: 8-9)

Even so, it has to be stressed that this notion of two-truths should only be understood in a conventional manner, as whatever we may say in language is empty of being or self-existence (Skt. *svabhāva*)<sup>34</sup>. While others have tried to analyse the *catuskoṭi* by formalising it in symbolic logic it remains open to debate still as to whether it is indeed logically consistent<sup>35</sup>. This is fine if we were solely concerned with the logical consistency of the *catuskoṭi*, but my

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<sup>34</sup> This will be made explicit in section 6.1.

<sup>35</sup> See (Gunaratne, 1980, 1986; Jayatilleke, 1967; Robinson, 1957; Wayman, 1977)

concern here is whether this answers the need to understand the way in which Nāgārjuna employed it, or to what end did he have in mind using it? I believe these to be quite different questions altogether, and which are not adequately answered by truth-conditions. In fact, Sprung argues: “Whatever one concludes, however, it will have little, virtually, no, bearing on Mādhyamika method, for, with one egregious exception the *catuṣkoṭi* is not used as a means of investigation or of argument throughout the *Prasannapadā*” (1979: 7). Also, if Nāgārjuna did have a view about other views regarding the world does that necessarily commit him to self-contradiction? There is a difference between a view that regards other views, and views that make certain assertions about the state of the world. To the extent that both are possible in language we have to consider them as being equally empty of any inherent existence. It is surely possible to have a falsehood refuting another falsehood, but does that act of refutation necessarily institute a “truth” then? That is the lure of metaphysics, such that any form of critical thinking is in danger of becoming reified, and which is precisely the kind of view that I believe Nāgārjuna was trying to guard against.

In the following section I turn the discussion to recent attempts at linking both Mādhyamaka and Deconstruction. While the technical jargon in Sanskrit may seem at times forbidding and foreign, we nevertheless get a sense that Nāgārjuna was dealing with *familiar* (though not necessarily *similar*, because the spectre of logocentrism remains thoroughly Western in perspective because of its unique onto-theological character) philosophical problems. This “familiarity without similarity” also underscores the *rapprochement* that I am urging between Derrida and Nāgārjuna, though I also believe we have yet to formulate a satisfactory methodological approach to engage with both. This will become more apparent in the next section. For now, I wish to point out that while Nāgārjuna may seem to be engaged in metaphysics proper, his argumentations through the deployment of *śūnyatā* as

emptiness of emptiness allows him nevertheless to engage with the intimate possibilities of language; this I stress cannot be separated from the contexts of two-truths, and its distinction serve also to highlight the provisional status of language and its logical limits.

## *§ Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka*

This is a preliminary section outlining the attempts hitherto at bridging Mādhyamaka and Deconstruction. It serves a fourfold purpose: Its primary focus is to get a general sense of the current hermeneutical approaches employed in engaging with both Derrida and Nāgārjuna. Secondly, this also provides me with a conceptual platform to articulate an alternative methodological framework which I feel is more satisfactory to a fruitful hermeneutical engagement with both. This is developed in Chapter Three. Thirdly, it underscores the respective contexts in which these attempts have been made hitherto, by Robert Magliola (background in Comparative Literature and European Hermeneutics) and David Loy (background in Philosophy); this is pertinent especially in their reading of Derrida, which both have identified as the assault on the principle of identity in Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics. This allows me to provide an alternative reading of Derrida in Chapter Five, and juxtapose it *vis-à-vis* both Loy and Magliola. Finally, this also highlights certain weaknesses in Magliola and Loy which I will attend to in greater detail in Chapter Six on Differentialism and Nonduality.

The earliest attempt at bridging this cross-disciplinary gap was Magliola's book titled Derrida on the Mend (1984). In it Magliola proposed a Buddhist epistemological approach healing what he called "Derridean anxiety" as a result of an irremediable split between "mind" and "outside" in Derrida's deconstructive practice (1984: 124). Magliola believed that Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism left him nevertheless in a quandary, as he must still have the signs else the entire world and language will collapse for "there is no language available *at all* but logocentric language" (1984: 46). Strictly speaking, no one deconstructs anything whatever – deconstruction is what happens to structures and systems of thought.

What Magliola has termed “logocentrism” in Derrida really means for Magliola the principle of self-identity: “logocentrism is an *identity* at all that one conceives, or even ‘feels,’ and then ‘labels’ or perhaps ‘behaves towards’ as if it were an ‘idea’ (1984: 89). Magliola commits a similar move himself nevertheless in *identifying* Nāgārjuna’s *śūnyatā* and Derrida’s *différance*, claiming it is “the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitute directional trace” (1984: 89). While there is a certain movement in *śūnyatā* it would not be entirely correct to say it is an absolute negation that allows Nāgārjuna to climb “the tetralemmatic ladder” (1984: 118). This I feel would amount to reading Nāgārjuna as a quasi-Vedāntin instead.

Inada points out in his review of Magliola that “only in the West has the philosophic thought of logocentrism reared its ugly head to somewhat crisis proportions” (1985: 218). This innocuous remark is deeply insightful, because it points out for me not only the different philosophical enterprise of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna in terms of their orientation; more importantly, it is a caveat against homogenising cross-cultural philosophical exchanges within the common horizon of logocentrism. In fact, I will point out here that to do so would be deeply *centristic*. As a result, in his attempt to cure this putative metaphysical psychosis by bridging both Mādhyamaka and Deconstruction Magliola ends up reifying *śūnyatā* as a concept in the very process himself. From a Buddhist perspective, what would such an escape from the logocentric quandary possibly look like? Surely not the collapse of the phenomenal world as we know it, and one that is very likely to remain the same unless we were to understand deconstruction in a purely destructive sense (which appears to be Magliola’s reading of the term). Such sameness moreover would not be self-identical, but takes into account difference without the need to appeal to mystical differential grounds nor lexically-challenged neologisms that serve only to obfuscate matters further. Nāgārjuna makes this

clear:

Difference is not in a different thing.

Nor is it in a nondifferent thing.

If difference does not exist

Neither different nor identical things exist. (MMK XIV: 7)

To all intents and purposes, Magliola's provocative book sparked a flurry of reviews and criticisms from both Buddhist and Literary Theory camps in its wake<sup>36</sup>. The criticism I have of Magliola is that in his desire to bridge both Derrida and Nāgārjuna he failed to take into due consideration the significance of each term (*différance* and *sūnyatā*) and how they actually figure in their respective systems. He translates one into the other as if they were entirely commensurable. Now, the reason why I stress the respective academic contexts of both approaches is precisely because at the very heart of engaging with both Derrida and Nāgārjuna is the question of translation. This translation does not simply mean extrapolating concepts from Derrida to Nāgārjuna and *vice versa*; but also translating from the immediate context of one's own academic discipline *vis-à-vis* others. This is not simply a matter of academic elitism, nor am I here privileging any particular account over others. This is because if we take Derrida and Nāgārjuna seriously, a consistent hermeneutical approach towards their thought needs to be able to perform its own deconstructive *démarche*, or it needs to empty out its own analysis. In other words, it has to do so, on their own terms, as far as possible. Therefore the movement of translation is always three-ways, rather than two, because the critic is necessarily implicated in what s/he observes, in bringing his/her own expectations and neuroses to bear upon the texts. For example, a Freudian rendering of both

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<sup>36</sup> See (Inada, 1985; Koelb, 1986; Wiebe, 1986; and Zhang, 1986).

thinkers would be starkly different from a Zen rendering, this difference needs to be acknowledged in order to be conceptually consistent, though this can only be done “by *unflaggingly problematizing* its own status as a discourse borrowing from a heritage the very resources required for the deconstruction of that heritage itself” (Gasché, 1986: 168-9, emphasis mine).

To be sure, forays into the twilight area of Deconstruction and Mādhyamaka philosophy have met with considerable difficulties and oppositions since<sup>37</sup>. These contestations inevitably return us to issues of fidelity and interpretation in Buddhist hermeneutics. Loy points out that no other Buddhist philosopher has received more attention than Nāgārjuna with fewer agreements as to what his MMK really meant as the precise target (the whom and what) of his criticisms often remains unclear (1999: 246). This is certainly not due to a lack in translations nor dearth of commentaries available to Western scholarship; rather, I see this as a hermeneutical problematic at the core of Buddhism itself. Loy makes this point clearly: “The *kārikās* do not offer an analysis of the world itself but analyze our ways of understanding the world” (1999: 246). Katz makes a similar claim, saying that for Buddhism, the awareness of a hermeneutical problem is the beginning of hermeneutics and that the problems of hermeneutics are the problems of life itself (1984: 189). This is an interesting restatement of the problematic. Katz also discusses the traditional classification of scripture, such that texts related to the goal are considered definitive (Skt. *nītārtha*), while those dealing with the path are considered indeterminate (Skt. *neyārtha*). Without going further than is necessary, Katz also pointed out that the redactors placed the *Brahmajāla Sutta* at the beginning of the Pali Canon, and its central focus involved the question of how to interpret the claims made by other Indian religions. In this way, Katz argues that Buddhism is

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<sup>37</sup> See Bharati’s (1992) extended rant against Coward’s *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (1990).

a hermeneutical enterprise right from its very inception (1984: 192).

Many commentators from Murti to Katz have discussed Buddha's dialogue with Vacchagotta in the *Samyutta Nikāya* regarding his *anattā* (no-self) doctrine. Upon seeing Vacchagotta's confusion Buddha told him there is indeed a self, contrary to what he has taught elsewhere. Ānanda (Buddha's chief disciple) upon hearing this becomes understandably perplexed, to which Buddha explains that he gradates his teaching according to the needs and level of understanding of the hearer. Most commentators have traditionally read this as a demonstration of Buddha as a skilled physician, treating the philosophical malaise of those according to their needs. Katz makes a salient point here, arguing that while there is no uniformity of letter in what Buddha taught there is nevertheless uniformity of purpose, such that the conventions of language need not become the convictions of the speaker (1984: 193). Indeed, Buddha himself encouraged his followers to practise the doctrine in their own dialects other than Magadhi which is assumed to be Buddha's native dialect. One may arguably say there is dissemination from the very inception of Buddha's teachings. What this also implies is that inconsistency in method does not necessarily entail inconsistency of purpose. Similarly, a stringent interpretative method would inevitably end up becoming dogmatic, and it is here I disagree with Katz's claim that "any act of interpretation is a reification (Skt. *vikalpa*), and it is precisely this tendency towards reifying which stands in need of analysis and therapy" (1984: 189). While I agree with Katz that the tendency towards reification is in need of therapy, it is not so much that *every* act of interpretation is *in toto* reificationist, but rather that any such interpretative acts remain necessarily at such risk. In fact, I will go further and argue that if there were no such risk *whatsoever*, one would then be *ipso facto*, dogmatic. Clearly, this caveat extends to Buddha's teaching as well for he sought similarly to interpret and understand the conditioned nature of

the world. Katz would conceivably be unwilling to label the Buddha-word itself as a form of *vikalpa*, though that certainly does not prevent his followers from falling into that danger. Buddha himself was clearly aware of the exegetical and hermeneutical problems in his teaching as Katz claimed, in the way we make sense of the world according to linguistic conventions and becoming enamoured by them consequently. I suggest one could even possibly see the traditional debates between various factions within Buddhism over *nītārtha* and *neyārtha* texts as being indeterminable *precisely* due to its implicitly reificationist programme and character – because if one takes Nāgārjuna seriously, both definitions (or any attempts at definition) are meant to be strictly provisional without clinging on to them. While this may be defended as desideratum, the question ultimately remains – for whom does this need really exist?

With this we turn to Loy’s appeal that “it may not be necessary or even worth our while to devote time and energy expounding those particular metaphysical systems [between obscure Buddhist schools]; it may be more useful for us to turn immediately to that commonsense understanding and address its supposed *aporia* more directly” (1999: 246-47). While I have much in sympathy with such a view it is just as important to ensure we understand, as far as possible, the kinds of questions Nāgārjuna was trying to answer, as well as Derrida, instead of simply making them answerable to our own and foisting upon them our own misgivings. Nāgārjuna makes this clear:

When you foist on us

All of your errors

You are like a man who has mounted his horse

And has forgotten that very horse<sup>38</sup>. (MMK XXIV: 15)

Katz would argue instead: “[U]nderstanding a claim or a text, then, entails understanding of the one who claims or the one to whom claims are addressed” (1984: 196). Such a view is inherently naïve and problematic, because our understanding of one’s claims (and one’s purported intentions) along with the claimant’s addressee depends more often than not on the interpretation of the text itself and how we project our own neuroses and assumptions onto it. This is further compounded when we recall Loy’s earlier remark that the precise target of Nāgārjuna’s criticisms often remain unclear. I believe it is this tendency both Buddha and Nāgārjuna were trying to guard against, and is evinced by the resistance found in their texts against any such linear form of reading that places unconditional faith in the fidelity of address. So long as we continue to cling onto the notion of a true Dharma (as a claim or address) taught by a Buddha (subject) to an addressee (or hearer) we continue to tacitly believe in certain metaphysical assumptions (predicating presence and existence) of linearity or continuum that serves as the foundation for our everyday understanding. It is also in this sense that Loy quotes Nietzsche: “I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar” (qtd. in Loy, 1999: 245). It is in understanding one’s own claim as such, even if it is *prima facie* counter-intuitive, that leads to the pacification of objectification and illusion.

I believe Loy raises a very good question for our purposes at this juncture: “Does this mean that the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is too foreign to our usual ways of understanding the world to be understood on its own terms?” (1999: 246). I argue instead that this raises the more insidious question whether we can hope to understand anything on its own terms at all according to Nāgārjuna, even though this is precisely the way we try to understand the world

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<sup>38</sup> This recalls the earlier argument that stresses the significance of one’s own context that one brings to bear upon both thinkers, or indeed the subject of any discourse.

in our everyday lives. While this may seem that I have contradicted myself above, this is altogether a different point. In arguing earlier that a hermeneutical approach to both thinkers needs to address them on their own terms as far as possible I am also stressing that we cannot simply divorce *śūnyatā* and *différance* from the conceptual systems they inhabit respectively for purposes of comparison. Loy refers to our common sense understanding of concepts (emptiness, causality, time, etc.) and how we believe they name an essence, an independently existent entity. Put simply, what would an understanding of *śūnyatā* on its own terms amount to, completely foreign and dissociated from *pratītya-samutpāda*? I doubt it would make very much sense, and if so it would be almost certainly nihilistic, though this has not stopped philosophers and critics from doing so. As a result, we ignore Nāgārjuna's warning that, "For whomever emptiness is a view,/ That one will accomplish nothing" (MMK XIII: 8). I believe this would be similar to what Derrida called the lure of metaphysics. This extends the problematic of hermeneutics not only to comparative approaches, but also to Buddhist philosophers working within their own field. Therefore, it would be unfair to place the entire burden of justification on the yoke of cross-disciplinary approaches just as it would be impractical to demand consistency (in method) amongst the variant sub-schools of Buddhism.

Loy has made several attempts thus far to bridge this cross-disciplinary divide, and the term "deconstruction" first appears in the article, "The Mahayana Deconstruction of Time" (1986), two years after the publication of Magliola's book in 1984. While the term was only mentioned in passing in that article, Loy's later contribution to Coward's book, "The Deconstruction of Buddhism" (1992), saw him engage directly with some of the issues in Derrida. In that paper, Loy drew parallels between Derrida and Nāgārjuna through a discussion of *différance* and *śūnyatā* – which not surprisingly was Magliola's strategy six

years earlier. Loy, however, acquitted himself better than Magliola in that paper, and this led to the publication of an article in the following year, titled “Indra’s Postmodern Net” (1993). I believe this demonstrates not only the significance of Magliola’s work but also how quickly deconstruction has been adopted and taken into the fold of East-West comparative analysis. Is this because post-modern thought and culture have fallen so far off that it stands in dire need of Buddhist healing, or is it in the post-modern theories of Derrida that Buddhist studies may be revitalised? These are questions that may only be answered in hindsight, though the fecundity of Derrida’s deconstructive practice has certainly not been lost on Buddhist philosophers. As mentioned earlier, the switch from oral to written culture in India had certainly played a significant role in the long history of Buddhism. It is not difficult to imagine, then, how theories of writing might affect it as well, because for Loy (as well as others) the philosophical non-site from which to question philosophy itself is *différance* and *śūnyatā*, along with the implications both might have for textuality (1992: 234).

For instance, Loy takes the metaphor of Indra’s Net from the Yogācārin *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* which was later adopted by the Chinese *Hua-Yen* tradition as a trope for Derrida’s “unthinkable structure” of a structure without centre (1992: 236). The fundamental trope is that of the *mise-en-abyme*, represented by infinite jewels hung in an infinite net such that each jewel mirrors all the other jewels in its infinite relatedness stretching across the entire cosmos. Loy’s immediate disclaimer was that Nāgārjuna himself would not have accepted such onto-theological trope (1992: 236) though he proceeds to read it as a form of textuality extending beyond language. He goes on to claim, however, that:

To emphasize Nāgārjuna’s point, the metaphor of Indra’s Net does not actually refer to our interdependence, for that would presuppose the existence

of separate things which are related together. Rather, just as every sign is a sign of a sign, so everywhere there are traces and those traces are traces of traces. (1992: 237)

It is not clear to me exactly which point of Nāgārjuna's was Loy referring to, especially as he made it quite clear himself that Nāgārjuna would have disapproved of such a trope. In fact, I found it a rather strained argument altogether, as the Yogācārin text itself postdates Nāgārjuna and despite that is called on to support Loy's claim to cohere with Derrida's notion of textuality. This reading is in direct contradiction of Nāgārjuna's assertion that *pratītya-samutpāda* is *śūnyatā*, because a textuality extending beyond language in this manner would undoubtedly entail some cement of the world that exists, regardless whether one chooses to call them traces or traces of traces. Also, I doubt very much that the *mise-en-abyme* trope in itself is capable of drawing out the full implications of Derridean trace.

Another instance that is exemplary of the comparative approaches to date take the following form:

Sunyata, like difference, is permanently 'under erasure', deployed for tactical reasons but denied any semantic or conceptual stability. It 'presupposes the everyday' because it is parasitic on the notion of things, which it refutes. (Loy, 1992: 234)

While it may be argued that both *śūnyatā* and *différance* operate *sous rature* in both systems the more significant implication is not drawn here – that for Nāgārjuna, all language and the views it makes possible must also be placed *sous rature* as well. Also, it would not be

entirely correct to say that *śūnyatā* is parasitic on the notion of things (or really, *svabhāva*), such that *śūnyatā* depends on the self-essence of things it then refutes – this would cast Nāgārjuna’s refutations in the mould of a negative theology, which not coincidentally is the title of the book in which the chapter is found. Instead, Nāgārjuna would make the following point: it is *because* that all phenomena are *śūnya* that things present themselves in the conventional, dependent way that we have come to view them.

Nevertheless, I believe Loy is right in pointing out that Nāgārjuna’s “real target is that automatized, sedimented metaphysics disguised as the world we live in” (1992: 241), which he also calls “the repressed metaphysics of commonsense” (1992: 234). Having said that, it is also my view that the current unsatisfactory state of comparative approaches lie precisely in seeking out parallels between the two thinkers. This is not to say that there is nothing in common between them – nothing could be further from the truth – but rather, there is a real *rapprochement* in their work that is potentially luring, such that whatever parallels we do find becomes (in Loy’s own words) *pyrrhic* as such. Or, in other words, the need for a philosophical solution causes the problem, and that perhaps is the secret of the secret. It is not so much that reason allows itself to be discovered, according to Loy’s brief account of the Greek discovery of reason (1992: 245), but rather that all discoveries are possible precisely because of reason and we do not stumble upon it one fine day in the way we stumble upon innocuous occurrences and facts – parallels included. We simply find correspondences where we look out for them, though whether this adequately addresses the *rapprochement* between both thinkers remains a different question. This also highlights the need for an alternative methodological framework that is conceptually consistent, which I will develop in the following chapter.

## § *Resistance to Comparative Analysis*

In considering both Derrida and Nāgārjuna, the problematic of method presents itself in the form of a double-bind: How to do justice to both thinkers without (at the same time) necessarily homogenising their thought into a common horizon? This double-bind is quite literally for me *pas de méthode* – it entails at once no adequate method, given their radical differences, to impose a common basis for comparison, and yet also a step. This is especially true if one considers that the problems raised by both thinkers are such that philosophy is unable to dismiss, but is also unable to affirm. I will go into further detail regarding the nature of this problem and the “step beyond philosophy” that it involves. In claiming that *the method is the argument*, I argue then that a study of these two thinkers cannot be divorced from the methodological assumptions that such a study may presuppose *a priori*. If we understand Derrida and Nāgārjuna as opening up a non-philosophical site – whether we choose to give it the name of *śūnyatā*, *khōra*, or even the mythic ‘between’ – then such a site that utterly eludes the “logic of the *logos*” (Derrida, 1998a: 231) is *de jure* inadequate to serve as basis for comparison, or indeed any form of ratiocination. To present the problem in a shorthand manner: How should one proceed to delimit between two overlapping forms of emptiness? Or draw a distinction between two methods that argue precisely against the principle of identity, because if no such identity may be established, how can the necessary difference be drawn to make such a distinction?

These questions cannot be easily dismissed in advance, either through the setting up of a discursive framework, or the hegemonic imposition of method. It remains, thoroughly, a question of method, and at the level of its discourse in *working through* Derrida and Nāgārjuna we take the beginnings of such a step outside philosophy. In this manner I also

acknowledge a certain deconstructive stance, though for reasons that will be made clear later, this “stance” or “attitude” in question can never become a “position”, for there is nothing to occupy, and nothing to defend. Before I go any further I will first consider some of the usual ways that such a study may take, and how they destine us to detours and cul-de-sacs:

1. Comparative analysis – preliminary sorties into the field of comparative analysis looking at Derrida and Nāgārjuna (e.g. Magliola and Loy) have been far from satisfactory, because it inevitably focuses upon imposing similarities while smoothing over differences between them. If similarities are significant then more so the differences, for it is in their differences that one may locate the value of their respective discourse. Furthermore, from a cultural-intellectual perspective there are marked differences which should be maintained and not effaced simply for sake of economy, especially if one considers that Derrida is a secular thinker whilst Nāgārjuna is religious.

2. A corollary of the above takes the form of an imposition, and the issue of the relevant application of either theory is problematic as it consists in mapping one theory (or its key term) onto the other in a mode of commensurability. Furthermore, the questions we ask determine in advance the answers we obtain. Gadamer calls this the hermeneutic priority of the question, arguing that: “[A] question has been put wrongly when it does not reach the state of openness but precludes reaching it by retaining false presuppositions. It pretends to have an openness and susceptibility to decision that it does not have” (1989: 364). The mapping of a theory onto another would fail in this regard to respect the specificity of its terrain. Derrida himself

writes: “The opening of the question, the departure from the closure of a self-evidence, the putting into doubt of a system of oppositions, all these movements necessarily have the form of empiricism and errancy” (1997: 162). It is my view that approaches claiming to deconstruct emptiness are, for this reason, subject to foreclosure in methodically setting up its conceptual framework. While this involves a hermeneutic circularity that perhaps cannot be entirely avoided, the horizon of the question should not be restricted in such a way that it results in the foreclosure, rather than disclosure, of knowledge. For this reason, approaches that claim to ‘deconstruct emptiness’ or ‘emptying deconstruction’ are, in my view, *a priori* untenable.

3. The second point may be supported by the fact that key concepts of *différance* and *śūnyatā* resist definition. That being the case, it would be conceptually inconsistent to proceed upon some common basis (to either compare or apply) for the simple reason that there is no such ground available. This also vitiates any attempt at analysis, by reducing the features of their work to a simple origin or element capable of answering ‘What is...?’ that is also the instituting question of philosophy (see also Derrida, 1997: 19). In other words, we do not ever arrive at some essence designated by the nominal terms so as to submit them under analysis. This does not mean, however, that it is therefore impossible to adopt an argumentative style addressing how these concepts may be deployed, so long as we do not depart from the theoretical context of its deployment.

Given the above, I argue there is no philosophically neutral register wherein we may

objectively conduct with impunity the critique of our own (philosophical) methods, as the very concepts of method and analysis are problematised by both thinkers. It would then be conceptually inconsistent for me to proceed as if I were able to rigorously distinguish between what the thesis is *about* at the discursive level, from what it actually *does* at the performative level.

This is especially so when we consider that both thinkers take on their respective philosophical traditions through a keen critical awareness and rigour toward their own methodological practices, by working through in a self-reflexive manner the sedimented metaphors that constitute philosophy. This is the first positive claim I make regarding the *modus operandi* of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna, that both undertake an immanent critique of philosophy without claiming an absolute point of departure nor a transcendental position:

The step “outside philosophy” is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from it. (Derrida, 1978: 359)

In placing this “step outside philosophy” within scare-quotes philosophy is unable to delimit the metaphorical drift in which it finds itself, nor does this thereby absolve us of the responsibility demanded by such a step. Gasché makes this clear: “To exceed the discourse of philosophy cannot possibly mean to step *outside* the closure, because the outside belongs to the categories of the inside” (1986: 169). If so, then the possibility of such a step becomes highly problematised, as it is always reappropriated into the fold of metaphysical discourse.

Derrida claims in “White Mythology” that “philosophy [is] a self-eliminating process of generating metaphor” (1974: 9). I argue this “self-eliminating process” identified by Derrida to be the fundamental anxiety of philosophy, to which he is also prone: “[I]f no one can escape this necessity, and if no one is therefore responsible for giving in to it, however little he may do so, *this does not mean that all the ways of giving in to it are of equal pertinence*” (1978: 356, emphasis mine).

One of the reasons why a comparative analysis approach is unsatisfactory to me lies in drawing parallels (which is yet another metaphor) in an attempt at self-justification. I am, however, more concerned with the *value* of considering both these thinkers together rather than what they might *mean*, because if one were to take them seriously, we never quite arrive at some notion of “truth” which Derrida demystifies as:

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses [...]. (1974: 15)

In this way we begin to understand Derrida’s rather contentious claim that: “this was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic” (1978: 354). Chapter Five on Derrida opens with a detailed discussion of this specific claim. What I am doing here is employing a Saussurean conceit of the linguistic system to extrapolate a way of determining the value (through differences) of both thinkers whose key concepts have no proper referents

(without positive terms). The notion of *value* here therefore emphasises the relative dependency of both thinkers under consideration without recuperating them into some reified meaning or truth. What I am doing here is similar to Derrida in that peculiar moment in Of Grammatology, when he deploys the theme of supplementarity in a self-reflexive fashion to demonstrate what it does:

*It happens that this theme [of supplementarity] describes the chain itself, the being-chain of a textual chain, the structure of substitution, the articulation of desire and of language, the logic of all conceptual oppositions [...]. (1997: 163).*

It is appropriate, because “it tells us in a text what a text is” (Derrida, 1997: 163), in the same way that I argue for the *value* of considering both thinkers by working through, in a section on methodology, how such notion of method is always *en abyme*, that it can never be made into a method proper, that it escapes all vectors of appropriation. Through engaging with both thinkers in this manner our own methodology is thus implicated, reiterating the inseparability of both discursive and performative axes (which for me is also another way of stating the interface between theory and practice).

The significance of this particular deconstructive gesture leads me to my second positive claim about both Derrida and Nāgārjuna, that they both occupy a similar position of being *in medias res*. This implies that we find ourselves in the middle of things, in a conditioned existence of relative dependency, in the absence of a clear beginning or end<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida would argue that there is no escape from the metaphysical orb, urging that “We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot take the scent into account, has already taught us it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely” (1997: 162).

Note that such notions of a clearly defined beginning or end belong to the logocentric, metaphysical discourse of pure reason. Derrida calls this “philosophy proper”, to which he juxtaposes empiricism as another name for nonphilosophy in its attempt to depart from its metaphysical categories. This *prima facie* contradicts the first claim I made earlier, *viz.*, that both undertake an immanent critique of philosophy. Significantly, however, Derrida focuses on the *value* of empiricism, which he locates in the opposition between philosophy and nonphilosophy itself. As Derrida argues, the *departure* from the metaphysical orb is radically empiricist. To depart from the metaphysical orb also means to get *outside* of its categories. If it were the case that such departure were made with relative ease then Derrida would be doing no more than merely setting up an antithesis to that of philosophy. Instead, he points out the *value* of this nonphilosophical site as consisting in the “incapability to sustain on one’s own and to the limit the coherence of one’s own discourse, for being produced as truth at the moment when the value of truth is shattered [...]” (1997: 162). This means that we have to understand the departure in terms of getting outside the categories of philosophy. Except that the *outside* is constructed by the *inside*, and we remain firmly within the interiority of philosophical categories. On the other hand, the interiority of philosophy may only be defined in relation to its exteriority, and the valuable insight to be drawn here is that philosophical discourse is itself just as incapable of sustaining on its own. Furthermore, this value cannot be logically drawn solely from either position of inside or outside, but emerges from an exchange (or, if one prefers, passing through an interchange) between the two that is thoroughly economic. To insist upon meaning here would be to hypostatise what is indeterminate and fluid. I would have to reconcile this nonphilosophical site with that of philosophy proper, so that it does not entail a transcendental position that would be just as susceptible to the very charges of imposition or violence mentioned earlier:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. (Derrida, 1997: 24)

One might say that this non-philosophical site is inscribed within the corpus of philosophy itself, if by such inscription we mean an irreducible reference to a radical alterity of the Other (Gasché, 1986: 158). Put in a different way, non-linearity interrupts the linearity of traditional philosophy, even as the latter depends upon the former and is conditioned by it. It has, however, recently become “vogueish” to celebrate non-linearity and alterity as a form of critical intervention, though I fail to see how this may be so *on its own*. In fact, this cannot be maintained “on its own”, being the flip side of the same coin, but depends upon the very linearity it is meant to interrupt. That being the case, *to posit absolute alterity would be to secretly hanker after the dream of absolute presence*. Also, how may we characterise this peculiar movement of deconstruction that inhabits the very structures it deconstructs? This will be discussed in the following section.

A number of points may be made at this juncture: firstly, it establishes the proximity (and *rapprochement*) between the deconstructive approach of Derrida and the *prāsāngika* method of Nāgārjuna. Some scholars might consider Nāgārjuna a nihilist, just as others might consider Derrida as undertaking a negative theology. While such a reading may *seem* at times warranted given the ostensibly negative (or even apocalyptic) tone of both thinkers, I argue, however, that this fails to address the critical edge of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna in their capacity to serve as a form of corrective to our philosophising impulse:

The victorious ones have said  
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.  
For whomever emptiness is a view,  
That one will accomplish nothing. (MMK XIII: 8)

I will gloss this quote for our present purposes here by saying that the human impulse to philosophise is so deeply entrenched that if we were told that emptiness leads us to relinquishing all views we would, to all intents and purposes, hold on to that as yet another (supplementary) view, gladly exchanging chains for fetters. From a Buddhist perspective, this attachment (or in a “philosophical register” one might call reificationism) is a fundamental human condition, and one that leads to suffering. Secondly, we may understand with this notion of attachment the manner in which we “inhabit *in a certain way*” these mental constructs. It means that it is impossible to have a view from nowhere, and certainly not a transcendental one from whose vantage point we may *objectively* postulate (and examine) categories of being and time, when in fact they are more like *objectifications* instead. The corollary of this point is dependence and relation – if there is no structure, there can be no dismantling whatsoever, nor can there similarly be any notion of an “ultimate” truth without the “conventional”. Nāgārjuna makes this clear: “Without a foundation in the conventional truth, / The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught” (MMK XXIV: 10). I will only note here that this manner of “inhabiting *in a certain way*” is radically different from the Heideggerian notion of “dwelling”. Thirdly, it recalls my earlier claim that there is no philosophically neutral register in which such a critique may employ:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to

shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida, 1978: 354)

Finally, taking into consideration the foregoing points, this opens up a non-linear space within the corpus of philosophy itself: the non-philosophical site does not lie beyond the horizons of philosophy like some marginalia as such, but constitutes and calls into question that very dividing (and indeed, divisible) line between “inside and outside”, along with the entire host of oppositions held in its reserve. I have stressed in this section that a study of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna cannot be divorced from our own *a priori* methodological assumptions, because of this keen awareness towards their own methods. The step beyond philosophy does not simply mean exceeding the metaphysical orb, but the opening of a non-philosophical site within the fabric of philosophy itself, such that any notion of method is always *en abyme*, unable to arrive at the ontico-analytical ground it presupposes. In the absence of such grounds I argued that it would be conceptually inconsistent to proceed by way of a comparative analysis, yet this neither dismisses nor absolves us of the responsibility of our own methodological step. In the following section I will consider the possibility of a deconstructive method, and how it informs our own methodology to engage fruitfully with both Derrida and Nāgārjuna.

## § *Upāya and Bricolage*

The previous section established the resistance to adopting a comparative analysis approach through the figure of a double-bind, which I argued also presented itself as a *step*. Before venturing further, a possible criticism might be that I have, in spite of my own caveats, applied a deconstructive method in the process. The aim of this section is to defend against such a charge, along with understanding what such a step entails, and where it might possibly lead. I claimed earlier that it is Derrida's anxiety that provides us the necessary critical resources here in thinking through and addressing the various methodological issues at stake. Two points need to be made: firstly, the attribution of such anxiety to Derrida does not constitute a negative judgement in any way. Secondly, Derrida's keen awareness of this anxiety is manifest in his extensive writings on the status of writing and language, allowing him to articulate a methodological rigour that is at once *de trop*, and yet, necessary. I would hazard the provocative claim here by saying that if Derrida allows for such methodological rigour, it is because there is not one for him in the first place:

All the same, and in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique* and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction [...] I would say the same about *method*. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. (1991b: 273)

This recalls my third point in the previous section regarding the possibility of a

deconstructive analysis and how it is not motivated by a reductive methodology. The *method of the method is there is no method (pas de méthode)*, though this does not prevent one from being *methodical*. This claim should not be dismissed as being merely disingenuous, and I shall demonstrate here the implications of such an assertion.

How do we make sense of this rather contradictory claim then, especially if this question of method is also an exorbitant one for him? In saying there is not one method for Derrida in the first place, I am also calling to attention his belief that there can be no singular method – either as a set rule, or one capable of systematisation – that may be uniformly applied to every possible context, nor is it formalisable in advance: “I have no simple and formalizable response to this question [‘What is Deconstruction’]. All my essays are attempts to have it out with this formidable question” (Derrida, 1991b: 274). The choice of diction here is significant: in referring to all his *essays* (which has the etymological implications of trial and attempt) rather than a *magnum opus* (despite his considerable output) Derrida implies there is no sense of formal closure nor completion. He remains insistent upon this throughout his writings, and a quick glance suffices to demonstrate this:

The supplement is always unfolding, but it can never attain the status of a complement. The field is never saturated. (Derrida, 1974: 18)

Stating it in the most summary manner possible, I shall try to demonstrate why a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather, why its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated. (Derrida, 1988a: 3)

[The tower of Babel] exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing,

of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics. What the multiplicity of idioms actually limits is not only a ‘true’ translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression, it is also a structural order, a coherence of construct. There is then (let us translate) something like an internal limit to formalization, an incompleteness of the construct.

(Derrida, 2002: 104)

What Derrida foregrounds here for us is the formidable process of struggling, “to have it out” with what he sees as his response and responsibility all at once, in attempting to resist reappropriation and domestication by the logos. This anxiety, or how to *respond* when called to account by the other, cannot be anticipated in advance, but rather is dependent upon the various contexts that present themselves. It is thus symptomatic that much of Derrida’s writings are in response to colloquiums, lectures, or even correspondences (e.g., “Letter to a Japanese Friend”). The theoretical implication to be gleaned here, is that if there is no possibility of completion or saturation of the field, then it is also fair to say that there is no adequate method, and along with this, the ancillary assumptions of *adaequatio*, commensurability, and truth.

It also raises a hermeneutical problem which is central here – the impossibility of a singular true translation. What may we understand by this? The dream of a singular true translation would have to be identical with what it seeks to communicate (an idea, concept, or signified), in a relationship of total commensurability. The antinomy is that such a translation, were it possible, would *ipso facto* cease to be one, as it no longer stands in a secondary order to the primary intention it was meant to translate in the first place. It would

become properly idiomatic. Indeed, this problem of hermeneutics (which includes interpretation as well as translation) is arguably a defining feature of both Deconstruction and Buddhism. I will recall here Katz's earlier remark that while there is no uniformity of letter in the Buddha's teaching there is nevertheless a uniformity of purpose. This is significant, as it coheres with the "method without method" approach that I am urging here. I argue that this allows Buddha, along with Nāgārjuna, to assert contrary claims at times depending upon context. This ability to gradate the level of discourse by taking into consideration the addressee's level of competency or disposition (Skt. *āśaya*) attests to their skill-in-means (Skt. *upāya-kauśalya*). The Sanskrit term *upāya* translates into "expedient means", whilst *upāya-kauśalya* refers to the skill of the Buddha in adopting appropriate and varied means in their choice of method (Murti, 1955: 350). I should like to spend some time looking at this seemingly innocuous concept, which implies more than sheer virtuosity, and which I also believe is significant to a critical appreciation of the *modus operandi* of both Nāgārjuna and Derrida.

Recalling my first positive claim regarding Derrida and Nāgārjuna – viz., that both undertake an immanent critique of philosophy – I shall here further qualify this by adding that its efficacy is augmented as a result of *upāya-kauśalya*. Schroeder claims: "*Upāya* rejects the idea that metaphysics precedes praxis or that liberation requires theoretical speculation. It is therefore profoundly philosophical and represents a critical, self-reflective moment in the Buddhist tradition" (2000: 560). What we may infer from this is that theory and praxis are not separable, and further, that such praxis is not formalisable *a priori*, but is to a certain degree a form of corrective to metaphysical speculation. In what way does this vouchsafe such praxis to be "critical" and "self-reflective" then – especially if by praxis we also mean method – within the context of an immanent critique that is purportedly common

to both Derrida and Nāgārjuna? I argue that for such method to be possible it would have to turn in upon itself, as, according to Derrida, method is itself a philosopheme that is subject to deconstruction (1991b: 273). To demonstrate this I will look at the various metaphors concerning method, and trace how the philosopheme loses itself in the drift of the various mythemes that constitute it.

What is of interest here is that the term *upāya* with the root *i* has connotations of “to go” or “to bring one up to something”, not unlike a step on the ladder. This is significant to what we are trying to establish here, as to how we might conceive of such a step outside of philosophy, *sans* method. It also finds its expression *par excellence* in the metaphor of the raft in the *Majjhima-Nikāya* where Buddha describes his teachings as rafts to cross over to the other shore, but is meant to be left behind upon one’s arrival and not held onto. The other famous example is of Buddha as an exemplary physician administering the correct medicine to those seeking a cure to their malaise. This quality is never separate from *prajñā* (trans. wisdom), and is listed as one of the ten *pāramitās* (trans. perfection) in Mahāyāna Buddhism, reiterating the inseparability of theory and praxis. Further, this concept of *upāya* is most commonly demonstrated (rather than defined) through Buddhist parables, and famously in Zen koans as absurd *non sequiturs* leading to enlightenment. This also suggests an attitude of openness (and resistance to formalisation) owing to its fundamental incompatibility with reification, just as in a similar manner there is no singular panacea for universal ills. Derrida’s reworking of Plato’s *pharmakon* comes to mind here. In fact, the very same medicine, far from being therapeutic, can be lethal:

By a misperception of emptiness

A person of little intelligence is destroyed.

Like a snake incorrectly seized

Or like a spell incorrectly cast. (MMK XXIV: 11)

It is for this reason that Nāgārjuna refuses characterising emptiness as a view (Skt. *dr̥ṣṭi*), though it is capable of calling into question and exhausting all others: “For whomever emptiness is a view,/ That one will accomplish nothing” (MMK XIII: 8). Therefore, I argue that Nāgārjuna deploys emptiness as a strategic move, not unlike “a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. [For reasons] of *economy* and *strategy*” (Derrida, 1978: 35). In claiming that emptiness is thus deployed as a strategic move we also situate its usage within, and dependence upon, the specific contexts that arise.

Schroeder points out that, “the most significant feature of upāya, however, is that the ability to *respond* compassionately or achieve liberation does not depend on a metaphysical *analysis* of the world” (Schroeder, 2000: 562, emphasis mine). Derrida’s anxiety consists in the fact that we cannot respond in advance by seeking refuge in some predetermined method that always points to the truth in a mode of *alētheia*. To see why method and deconstruction will never do for Derrida we would have to look at the term deconstruction itself, and trace its borrowing from Heidegger, who in turn had borrowed the idea creatively from Husserl. Heidegger names phenomenology as the method for doing philosophy, following Husserl’s tripartite division of this method into reduction, construction and destruction. Heidegger argues that construction in philosophy entails destruction (*destruktion*) as a critical process in which traditional concepts are necessarily employed as one’s heritage, before de-constructing (*abbau*) them to the sources from which they are drawn. This is necessary for Heidegger, as he argues:

The store of basic philosophical concepts derived from the philosophical tradition is still so influential today that this effect of tradition can hardly be overestimated. It is for this reason that all philosophical discussion, even the most radical attempt to begin all over again, is pervaded by traditional concepts and thus by traditional horizons and traditional angles of approach, which we cannot assume with unquestionable certainty to have arisen originally and genuinely from the domain of being and the constitution of being they claim to comprehend. (1975: 22)

In other words, the destruction of traditional concepts require the construction of new angles of approach. There is certainly a lexical proximity between *abbau* (trans. dismantling) and *destruktion*, as between destruction (analysis) and construction (synthesis). Recalling an earlier quote by Derrida, “the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*” (1991b: 273). The term deconstruction must therefore differ from itself before coming into Derrida’s employ, as for him (unlike Heidegger) there is not some ontological ground of Being that may serve as an originary source. Furthermore, to the extent that method entails analysis, the notion of a deconstructive method thus becomes, strictly speaking, an oxymoron.

In place of method, it might make more sense to speak of technique and *techné* instead, and it is not surprising that Lévi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage is given due emphasis by Derrida: “If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*” (Derrida, 1978: 360). This is in contrast to the engineer who questions the

universe, capable of constructing the totality of his discourse *ex nihilo* and becoming its absolute origin. From a deconstructive point of view such a step beyond philosophy is untenable, even if it orients. Interestingly enough, the *bricoleur* according to Lévi-Strauss is also a characteristic of medicine-men and story-tellers, and that it is mythopoetic. Without going into further detail here, I would like to hint at this *rapprochement* between bricolage and *upāya*, as it is fruitful in demystifying for our purposes here any concept of method.

Returning to the fold of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Nāgārjuna is credited by myth with retrieving the *Prajñāpāramitā* (trans. Perfection of Wisdom) *sūtras* from the realm of the nāgas (serpent-kings) beneath the ocean for dissemination, whence his namesake is thus derived. This myth is properly apocryphal (Gk. *ἀπόκρυφα*, ‘hidden away’), and the teachings are *terma* (trans. hidden treasure), to be kept hidden and guarded in reserve till such propitious time in future when conditions are right and people are ready to receive them. Due to his skill in explicating Buddha’s teachings Nāgārjuna is also widely considered to be the “second Buddha” that was prophesied by the Buddha himself in re-turning the Wheel of Dharma:

In Vedālī, in the southern part, a Bhikshu most illustrious and distinguished [will be born]; his name is Nāgāhyvaya, he is the destroyer of the one-sided views based on being and non-being.

He will declare my Vehicle, the unsurpassed Mahāyāna, to the world; attaining the stage of Joy he will go to the Land of Bliss. (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*; Sagāthakam: 165-166)

Legends abound regarding his exploits as an alchemist enjoying unnatural long life only to be

ended by a single blade of kusha grass, all of which contributed to his mythic stature in Buddhist philosophical history. Most biographical accounts (and there are many competing versions) regarding Nāgārjuna attempt to underscore his significance within Buddhist history, either as a way of introducing the recondite thinker to a Western readership, or situating him within a particular lineage (such as the Mahāyāna-Hinayana debate). There is, however, an allegorical significance which has not been addressed thus far to my knowledge. If Lévi-Strauss is correct in opining that myths are anonymous by nature, this raises all sorts of conceptual difficulties along with the practical reality of attributing authorship to Nāgārjuna. Lindtner (1982) attributes fourteen texts as written by Nāgārjuna while the traditional estimate is higher, with some texts dating as late as the eighth or ninth century. These difficulties were highlighted in Mabbett's detailed survey of the various sources relating to the historical Nāgārjuna, and he was forced to conclude that, "We must give proper weight to the default hypothesis that the association of the name Nāgārjuna with a profusion of tantric and quasi-scientific texts is a demonstration of the absorptive power of the legend originating in a single historical Nāgārjuna, the author of Madhyamaka" (Mabbett, 1998: 346). The sole unanimous agreement amongst scholars regarding Nāgārjuna's definitive authorship is the MMK, though as "the author of Mādhyamaka", the proper name itself also designates a discourse of the middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*).

I am here interested in the allegorical elements of this myth and its symbolism, which is compelling for me in understanding the "method without method" that I am forwarding. As mentioned earlier, *upāya* is listed as one of the ten *pāramitās* in Mahāyāna Buddhism and is never separate from *prajñā* – in fact, wisdom is always presented in conjunction with practice within Buddhist iconography. It is therefore significant and not simply fortuitous to me that an anonymous figure (we do not know his actual name) is credited with salvaging the secret

teachings. One might well argue that the proper name – “Nāgārjuna” – emerges only as a result of this performative act, thus fulfilling the prophecy. The nāgas themselves are an interesting hybrid of both human and serpent-like attributes, and they recall the traditional symbolism of the snake in terms of wisdom and renewal, both of which are crucial for the dissemination of the hidden texts. The name is appropriate, for it not only designates the provenance (from the nāgas) of the otherwise apocryphal texts, but also marks its dependency as a nominal term – we never quite arrive at the identity it is supposed to demarcate. The underwater realm is an ideal place for the hidden texts, as the Dharma itself is often characterised as an ocean of boundless wisdom.

What is boundless is also non-differentiated, and in salvaging the texts Nāgārjuna visits the underwater dwelling of the nagas but significantly *he does not dwell*, coursing instead back and forth. This mode of coursing in perfect consummation of both wisdom and practice escapes the binary logic of either/or, and the merit of Nāgārjuna’s MMK is that it attempts to communicate its insights (or *prajñā*) – which are otherwise only attainable through meditative practice (Skt. *dhyāna*) – through philosophical knowledge (Skt. *jñāna*). As a result, Nāgārjuna is able to respect the law of non-contradiction as well as the excluded middle, deploying them in the tetralemma (Skt. *catuṣkoṭi*) against his opponent’s arguments and yet without becoming attached to them. His underwater sojourn (as the realm of non-differentiated wisdom) and subsequent return to dry land (as the realm of the quotidian and binary logic) is allegorical of this coursing between two forms of discourse (conventional and ultimate), which is succinctly expressed in his doctrine of Two-Truths. Nāgārjuna demonstrates this in an exemplary fashion in the MMK where he disarticulates the very same tools he employs by pushing them to their logical conclusion (Skt. *prāsaṅga*), where the binary distinctions themselves collapse in order to communicate an experience (of

enlightenment) that is, by definition, ineffable.

The *rapprochement* between Nāgārjuna and Derrida is uncanny, and perhaps we might be in a better position now to appraise what some other scholars have said about both thinkers. Mabbett claims: “[P]eople like Jacques Derrida and people like Nāgārjuna are seeking to give form – a self-referring and self-canceling form – to the same vision [...] that can, perhaps, be shared by widely different cultures” (1995: 204). Mabbett’s approach was to identify similar themes and issues in both Nāgārjuna and Derrida to see how their respective approaches mirrored each other, though if he is correct it does raise conceptual difficulties in the possibility of mirroring a form that is at once “self-referring and self-canceling”. Note that while I am in general agreement with Mabbett, what I wish to draw attention to here is the difficulty in imposing a methodological framework that is conceptually consistent in what it purportedly sets out to do. Loy gives us a more explicit account:

Nāgārjuna’s more rigorous deconstruction is a classic example of how the second strategy devours the first: head swallows tail, and nothing remains – no nirvana, no Buddha, no teaching at all. One result of this was Zen, whose practice negated any theory, even though it was a particular theory that justified that practice and made it possible. Only meditative practice can actually end *prapañca* and open up a new mode of experience. (1988: 256)

Loy’s assertion that only meditative practice can end *prapañca* (trans. conceptual proliferation) recalls what we have just mentioned in the preceding paragraph. If *prajñā* (trans. wisdom) leads to the annihilation of conceptual proliferation then the challenge would be to communicate that wisdom within a discourse that does not add to the sum total of

prevailing concepts. Or, at the very least, the articulation of such *prajñā* must involve the disarticulation of the very discourse intended to make it accessible to others. The philosophical ingenuity of Nāgārjuna lies in his skilful deployment of *śūnyatā* as a non-concept to challenge and refute sedimented concepts (such as causation and time) within the sphere of *jñāna* but yet outstripping its horizons. If I maintain here that *śūnyatā* is a non-concept, it is only in contradistinction to others like causation where it is assumed there is an identifiable essence. On the other hand, my general disagreement with Magliola's characterisation of what he deems to be Nāgārjuna's method is that it places too much emphasis on the *catuṣkoṭi* itself (i.e., relying solely on *jñāna*) without sufficient consideration of the Two-Truths doctrine and its relation to *śūnyatā*. While a careful consideration of the *catuṣkoṭi* in Nāgārjuna is desideratum towards understanding his philosophical method, this nevertheless has to be situated within the context of its deployment; a purely logical approach to Nāgārjuna ultimately fails to address the very limits of that logic itself, as its remit does not extend beyond conventional truth (Skt. *saṃvṛti-satya*) where it is then held in suspense.

What emerges from these separate accounts, however, is a peculiar form which I will relate to yet another myth:

For it had no need of eyes, as there remained nothing visible outside of it, nor of hearing, as there remained nothing audible; there was no surrounding air which it needed to breathe in, nor was it in need of any organ by which to take food into itself and discharge it later after digestion. Nothing was taken from it or added to it, for there was nothing that could be; for it was designed to supply its own nourishment from its own decay and to comprise and cause all processes, as its creator thought that it was better for it to be self-sufficient

than dependent on anything else. He did not think there was any purpose in providing it with hands as it had no need to grasp anything or defend itself, nor with feet or any other means of support. For the seven physical motions he allotted to it the one which most properly belongs to intelligence and reason, and made it move with a uniform circular motion on the same spot; any deviation into movement of the other six kinds he entirely precluded. And because for its revolution it needed no feet he created it without feet or legs. (Plato, 1965: 45-46)

The Ouroboros was the first living creature created according to Plato, and as the symbol of wholeness and infinity, was considered an archetype by Jung. It is a recurrent image found across different cultures, and, within the Hindu tradition, the coiled *Adishesha* is one of the primal beings of creation and king of all nagas. As well as symbolising eternal return and self-reflexivity, the ouroboros is also a purifying sigil in alchemy because of its transformative nature. Being “made to move in the same manner and on the same spot, within his own limits revolving in a circle”, it moves without moving – it would be more accurate to characterise this movement as coursing within itself, between the clash of binary opposites. The cyclical course it holds runs counter to linearity and eschatology, as there is neither beginning nor end that may be rigorously determined. I view this tail-devouring serpent to be the figure *par excellence* of what various scholars have characterised as Nāgārjuna’s “self-referring and self-canceling” method: “[Nāgārjuna’s] dialectic is an ‘uroboric’ or self-destroying path: first it wipes out conceptual proliferations (Skt. *prapañca*, Grk. *typhos*), the habit of projecting linguistic distinctions ontologically, then it erases itself too” (McEvelley, 1982: 12). As *śūnyatā* has no ontic status whatsoever, this supports my earlier claim that it should be considered as a non-concept instead. It also clarifies the method without method

approach that I have been urging here.

In what way does this recall the movement of deconstruction and its process of dismantling, if it does not move from without to within, nor within to without? Its efficacy lies in the parasitic virulence coursing within the very structures to be deconstructed, inhabiting it “*in a certain way*” (Derrida, 1997: 24) without affiliation nor alienation. It also recalls Derrida’s assertion, that “philosophy [is] a self-eliminating process of generating metaphor” (1974: 9) in coming to terms with its own discursive anxiety and need to establish a firm (and perhaps ontological) ground for doing so. A truly *ex orbitas* transgression would only reinforce those very limits to be purportedly breached, and it is not surprising that Derrida himself remarks: “All these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique” (1978: 354). Such a circle, Gasché would claim, is not merely a “*circulus vitiosus*”, but “is a circle into which one has to come in the right way if one wants to think *at all*” (1986: 164). I argue here that the ouroboros (as figure of self-destroying path) is not merely tangential to aporia (as figure of unpassable path), and at its interstices beckons a step that is not pinned down by the twin legs of *arche* and *telos*. If I claim that legs are strictly not needed in taking the beginnings of such a step, it is only because we do not climb the tetralemmatic ladder in a linear fashion leading beyond the enchanted circle.

I have attempted to present here a form of methodology that is conceptually consistent by coursing a path between both thinkers. In identifying a method without method to be the *modus operandi* of both thinkers as a methodical *step* I discussed the strategic significance of *upāya* due to its openness, as a way of circumventing traditional notions of methodology and its *a priori* theoretical assumptions. In translating this skill as *techné* within a *bricoleur*

discourse we also established that a transcendental position of critique is unnecessary, as the coping strategies we adopt are contingent, and in turn dependent upon the various contexts that arise. This would account for Nāgārjuna's no-position view along with Derrida's insistence that Deconstruction is not, and cannot, be made into a method. The allegorical reading of the myth surrounding Nāgārjuna foregrounds his skill in coursing between two apparently divergent forms of discourse without contradiction, which I argue is manifest in his Two-Truths doctrine. It also highlights the peculiar self-referring and self-cancelling vision attributed to both thinkers, identified in the myth of Ouroboros, coursing between binary oppositions and crossing them out at the same time. In doing so I argue that with both Derrida and Nāgārjuna any notion of methodology has to be reinscribed as a conceptual game of snakes and ladders, thus shifting its emphasis from the programmatic to the problematic. *Where there is a step there is also slippage*, insofar as any notion of destination also necessarily includes, amongst its various postulates, what Derrida would call "destinerrancy". Such a discursive step cannot be posited without the necessary twin legs of *arche* and *telos*, i.e., without first founding the inviolable grounds upon which to build a fabulous construct (or *kalpana* of towering proportions) leading beyond the enchanted circle. The programmatic ultimately becomes problematic, however, as we do not simply transgress towards the other shore of our discourse, one step after another, clinging all the time onto this necessary guardrail of hermeneutical method. I therefore agree with Derrida that this methodical crutch has only protected without ever having opened a reading, though in dispensing with it altogether we would also find ourselves cast into differential drift without so much a pole of reference.

## § Causality and Conditionality

This chapter focuses on causality and conditionality found in MMK I to defend a *prāsaṅgika* reading of *pratītya-samutpāda*, by taking into consideration Garfield's (1994) proposed distinction between causes (Skt: *hetu*, Tib: *rgyu*) and conditions (Skt: *pratyaya*, Tib: *rkyen*). In doing so I shall consider some of the objections raised by Chinn (2001) against Garfield, and demonstrate how Chinn's objections are unfounded. I will also evaluate the significance of Nāgārjuna's refutation of causation (*viz.*, that causation is empty) such that it does not entail nihilism with recourse to moderate skepticism. I argue Nāgārjuna's emptiness of emptiness should be considered a sceptical rather than an ontological thesis, which allows us to recover our common sense understanding of causality without meanwhile denying the utility of our explanatory practices. This does not, however, deny that the sceptical thrust of Nāgārjuna's analyses do not have any ontological consequences whatsoever, though a conflation between the two inevitably leads to nihilism. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a clear understanding of the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* dialectic as positively anti-metaphysical despite its paradoxical double-bind, which has led Garfield to describe it as a "logical tightrope act at the very limits of language and metaphysics" (1995: 102). I have also included a dialectical structure of the chapter for purposes of clarity. This may be found in Appendix A (see Fig. 2: Dialectical Structure of MMK 1).

In what respect should Nāgārjuna be considered anti-metaphysical, and further, what would be the positive value in his refutation of causation (and indeed, of all views)? In relinquishing all views (Skt. *dr̥ṣṭi*) including causation does Nāgārjuna not hold on to yet another view? This question raises a host of issues that I will not go into further detail at this point. It suffices to indicate that if Nāgārjuna does not hold a view supplementary to those he

has refuted, then the Mādhyamika dialectic suspends judgment by purging both thesis and antithesis that share and assume a common metaphysical ground presupposing their respective positions. Garfield makes this clear:

To suspend judgment in this sense [i.e. in a constructive manner] is to refuse to assent to a position, while refusing to assert its negation, since either assertion would commit one to a false or misleading metaphysical presupposition. To suspend judgment is hence to refuse to enter into a misguided discourse. (1990: 290-91)

This suspension of judgement becomes a form of therapy curing us of the philosophical malaise that consists in giving, clearing, and establishing the grounds for epistemological claims to truth-hood. These grounds themselves are assumed capable of providing an explanatory bedrock in terms of existence and essence. To say Nāgārjuna is anti-metaphysical would be to reject the essentialism of these ontological foundations underlying our reified epistemological claims and/or beliefs by suspending them altogether. This sceptical rejection, however, does not simply deny that anything exists, which would become a nihilist (and hence ontological) thesis. In fact Nāgārjuna himself warns against this conflation of skepticism and nihilism, because it answers still to a metaphysical demand for grounding even if it stands diametrically opposed to what is rejected.

The paradoxical double-bind of *Mādhyamaka* consists in “the tension between the desire to characterise the ultimate nature of things and the recognition that all characterization is conventional” (Garfield, 1995: 102). It is also an enabling constraint, however, and the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* method of *reductio ad absurdum* draws upon the resources of

language and metaphysics to expose its very limits *via media*, as its middle path (Skt. *madhyamā-pratipad*). To say that all “characterization is conventional” would imply a philosophy of language that does not place faith in the law of correspondence such that signs always point and correspond to their referents. The alternative would be to remain silent and silenced by grammatical injunctions acting in metaphysical complicity. It is therefore significant to note what Nāgārjuna says must be understood in a provisional sense, and with this proviso in hand we are better equipped to approach the apparent paradoxes found in the MMK.

Nāgārjuna begins the MMK with a chapter devoted to causation, and the central concept addressed is *pratītya-samutpāda* (trans. dependent co-origination). It is formally expressed in the *Nikāyas* as such below, along with the twelve limbs of dependent origination:

When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be, on the cessation of this, that ceases. (*Samyutta Nikāya* 2.28)

It is worth our while to consider why Nāgārjuna began specifically with causation. After all it seems the most obvious place to begin, though it is not always clear why this should be the case. In pointing out the obvious I refer also to our common sense understanding of causality: *viz.*, causes produce effects (relation) or effects follow from their causes (temporality) such that there is uniformity in the world. While causation remains one of the most fundamental (and debated) questions of philosophy, we nevertheless subscribe to a general principle of causality in our daily discourse in order to explain and make sense of the world. In fact we

take it for granted, though what is simultaneously given and withdrawn in the process are certain metaphysical implications. It is hardly surprising many scholars assume Nāgārjuna felt it incumbent upon him to begin with Buddha's doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* in presenting a Buddhist world-view. This assumption fails to do Nāgārjuna justice, however, and in fact it remains a matter of contention as to what precisely Nāgārjuna was trying to do in this first chapter, for reasons I will adumbrate below.

Kalupahana (1986) believes this establishes Nāgārjuna's aim of defending Buddha's doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* as a grand commentator without attempting to reject it. In reading Nāgārjuna as an "empiricist *par excellence*" Kalupahana stresses the continuity of Buddhist intellectual history from its earlier stage of pragmatic realism (1986: 81). He draws support from Nāgārjuna's dedicatory verses as referring to "a positive core of the Buddha's teachings," claiming that "such an interpretation would leave dependent arising as the position from which the Buddha rejected the metaphysical or absolute views" (1986: 103). This is a contentious claim by Kalupahana, which would effectively align Nāgārjuna with the *svātantrika* instead of the *prāsāṅgika* tradition, and is furthermore not a widely held view in both ancient and modern scholarship. Kalupahana further notes (and summarily dismisses) that Candrakīrti (700 CE) devoted more than one tenth of the *Prasannapadā* commenting on MMK I:1 within a *prāsāṅgika* framework, in which he severely criticises Bhāvaviveka (500 CE) for holding that a Mādhyamika could forward autonomous (Skt. *svātantra*) arguments as counter-theses to his opponents.

Garfield's reading of the MMK, on the other hand, coheres with Candrakīrti's *prāsāṅgika* reading of Nāgārjuna in attributing the emptiness of emptiness as a no-position view to Nāgārjuna. Garfield (1994) is committed to demonstrating the philosophical climax

of Nāgārjuna's argument at MMK XXIV:18 is already anticipated from the very beginning. In fact, Garfield suggests re-reading MMK I (and indeed, the remaining chapters) with the insights of MMK XXIV:18 as an interpretative fulcrum. This he claims will demonstrate exactly how MMK XXIV:18 is to be understood, along with a right view regarding causality in Buddhist philosophy. It is of interest to note that both Garfield and Kalupahana claim their approaches lend coherence to the structure of the MMK – with the former identifying MMK I:10 as the central verse of the first chapter while the latter MMK I:3 – even if their readings diverge on mutually exclusive grounds. Garfield further notes: “divergences in interpretation of the MMK often determine the splits between major philosophical schools” (Garfield, 1994: 219). This is certainly true, and we shall see how this takes on a huge significance in Chapter Six, when Loy takes MMK XXV to be the key chapter of the MMK instead.

While this may be taken to underscore the equivocal nature of the MMK (whether through Nāgārjuna's apparent lack of coherence or not), I argue that this demonstrates how exegeses remain subordinate to a philosophy of reading (and its demand for coherence and grounding) such that we are not any more free of the problems we purport to highlight and address which are already anticipated by the text itself. In light of this, a critical awareness towards the methodological problems of Buddhist hermeneutics is therefore necessary in order to acknowledge the reasons for our hermeneutical choices. Also, if we believe that the propositions in the MMK are to be understood in a conventional manner, it would take an unwarranted leap of faith to claim some paradigmatic reading that is capable of establishing some absolute truth from them. In what follows I will consider Garfield's proposed reading of MMK I in his paper. As Chinn's objections to Garfield favour Kalupahana's translation of MMK I, I will evaluate his translation and commentary where possible for mutual illumination. Both versions of the MMK may be found in Appendix B.

## § *Cause and Condition: A Hermeneutic Distinction*

Garfield's aim in his paper is to argue for the emptiness of emptiness in Nāgārjuna's MMK, where every phenomenon is subjected to analysis in terms of emptiness, including emptiness itself. Garfield locates the climax of Nāgārjuna's argument at MMK XXIV:18, where the emptiness of emptiness is asserted along with the unity of two truths. He proceeds to re-read the first chapter of the MMK in light of this doctrine, claiming it is already anticipated from the beginning, thereby shifting the analysis from the emptiness of causation to the emptiness of emptiness. Garfield argues that doing so demonstrates exactly how MMK XXIV:18 should be read and why a proper understanding of causality is central to Buddhist philosophy from the very beginning (1994: 222). Garfield's aim in doing so is not merely pedagogical, but to attach a positively non-nihilist tone to Nāgārjuna. This is because an understanding of the emptiness of causation risks nevertheless becoming nihilistic, such that one might assert emptiness in place of causation. As will be demonstrated in this section, this would amount to a reification of emptiness itself (i.e., treating emptiness as non-empty). This is untenable according to Nāgārjuna, and he consequently submits it to a thorough-going analysis to demonstrate how emptiness is itself empty. Therefore a great deal of interpretative stake rests upon Garfield's application of the doctrine in reading MMK I, and specifically, his proposed distinction between causality and conditionality. I will first address the controversy surrounding Garfield's distinction – which lies in the ambiguity of the Sanskrit term *kriyā* – before moving on to Garfield's deployment of this distinction to make sense of MMK I.

Garfield begins by claiming that Nāgārjuna distinguishes between two possible views of dependent origination in MMK I: “one according to which causes bring about their effects in virtue of causal powers and one according to which causal relations simply amount to

explanatorily useful regularities” (1994: 222). The former view of dependent origination refers to a realist understanding of causality, whilst the latter refers to what Garfield calls a conventional understanding of conditionality. What I will note here is that our common sense understanding subscribes to the causal realist view as a matter of custom or habit, and the emptiness of causation reinscribes not only this causal realist view but more importantly, what we understand by the term “convention”. Garfield defends the latter view as Nāgārjuna’s doctrine of the emptiness of causation, and proposes a hermeneutic distinction between causes (Skt: *hetu*, Tib: *rgyu*) and conditions (Skt: *pratyaya*, Tib: *rkyen*):

When Nāgārjuna uses the word ‘cause’ (*hetu* [*rGyu*]), he has in mind an event or state that has in it a power (*kriyā* [*Bya Ba*]) to bring about its effect, and has that power as part of its essence or nature (*svabhāva* [*Rang bZhin*]). When he uses the term ‘condition,’ on the other hand (*pratyaya* [*rKyen*]), he has in mind an event, state, or process that can be appealed to in explaining another event, state, or process, without any metaphysical commitment to any occult connection between explanandum and explanans. (1994: 222)

It should be pointed out there is an immediate shift from ontology (the substantial property of a cause in its essence) to epistemology (the functional property of a condition in explanation). This “venturesome claim” (1999: 91) is admitted to be controversial even by Garfield himself. The point of contention here is the Sanskrit term ‘*kriyā*,’ which is usually translated as ‘activity’ or ‘action,’ whereas ‘power’ is reserved for ‘*bāla*’ or ‘*shakti*’ in Sanskrit and ‘*stob*’ in Tibetan. In translating *kriyā* as ‘power’ instead of ‘action’ Garfield defends his proposed distinction on hermeneutical grounds, arguing it “makes the best philosophical sense of the text” (1995: 104, fn. 16).

Kalupahana on the other hand chooses to translate *kriyā* as ‘activity’ in MMK I: 4 where the term appears for the first time:

Kalupahana’s translation reads:

Activity is not constituted of conditions nor is it not non-constituted of conditions. Conditions are neither constituted nor non-constituted of activity.  
(1986: 108)

While Garfield’s translation reads:

Power to act does not have conditions.

There is no power to act without conditions.

There are no conditions without power to act.

Nor do any have the power to act. (1994: 3)

Kalupahana’s gloss on MMK I: 4 discusses the term *kriyā*, which can convey two meanings: “First, it can refer to an inherent activity, a power or potentiality (*śakti*) in something to produce an effect (*artha*). Activity would then be an embodiment of a condition (*kriyā pratyayavatī*) or a condition would be an embodiment of activity (*pratyayā kriyāvantaḥ*)” (1986: 108). This substantive interpretation of *kriyā* corresponds to Garfield’s proposed interpretation of *hetu* (trans. cause), which inherently possesses this power as part of its self-nature (either as an embodiment or being constituted by it). Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects this, and is maintained in Garfield’s translation. Kalupahana points out a second meaning “that can be attributed to both *kriyā* and *pratyaya*, namely, the pragmatic view which defines both in terms of the effect (*artha*)” (1986: 109).

In other words, a condition is so-called by virtue of its dependence upon the effect, and it is inappropriate otherwise to maintain either condition or effect remain as such on its own. For conditionality (Skt. *pratyaya*) to be asserted it must depend upon its effect. This functional sense is maintained in the second and third lines of Garfield's translation, where 'power to act' here is to be read in its functional capacity. The precise form of dependence does not lie in some efficacious power thought to inhere in conditions as part of their nature, and the substantive sense of this putative 'power to act' (what it can do, as its ability) is maintained in the first and fourth lines of Garfield's translation. In other words, Kalupahana's translation captures only the substantive aspect of *kriyā*, while Garfield's translation allows for a more nuanced understanding of *kriyā* in both its functional (second and third line) and substantive (first and fourth line) aspects.

We might be committed to a view that causal powers do have conditions, though we would have to account for how these conditions in turn have the power to cause the initial causal powers posited, on pain of an infinite regress. Or, according to the proponent of causal powers, such "power to act" does not have conditions (the claim made in the first line), because on the causal realist's account it is by definition independent as an essence. This, however, renders it *de facto* incapable of dependent arising within a causal history. Garfield's proposed distinction clarifies the discussion, in considering whether conditions should be understood in the ontological or epistemological register in respect of dependent arising. In other words, *kriyā* could be understood in terms of causality with its ontological implications or conditionality with its epistemological focus set out above, though both interpretations are in fact mutually exclusive. Such conflation is deeply problematic, as it threatens to completely misconstrue the meaning of dependent origination as taught by the Buddha.

Furthermore, in translating *kriyā* into ‘activity’ or ‘action’ as commonly understood in our daily language, we would have already imposed our reading of it as a form of embodiment, by conflating both causality (as essence) and conditionality in giving rise to things.

Kalupahana’s interpretative choice is therefore *prima facie* faithful to Nāgārjuna’s text while Garfield’s proposed distinction is deemed controversial as an aberration from canonical texts. We may, however, trace the reasons for this difference to MMK I: 1. Kalupahana’s translation reads:

No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause. (1986: 105)

Kalupahana believes the four types of causal events referred here are comparable to those mentioned by the Buddha at *Samyutta Nikāya* 2.19-20 (1986: 105). Juxtaposing Nāgārjuna’s usage of *utpanna* (trans. arisen) in the MMK and the Buddha’s usage of *kata* (Skt. *ḥṛta* translated as done) in the *Nikāya*, Kalupahana claims the *Upaniṣads* served as a background to the Buddha’s teaching, where “the substantial self (*ātman*) was looked upon more as a ‘personal agent,’ than as a substantial principle (*svabhāva*, *prakṛti*, etc.)” (1986: 105). If so, it would then make sense to translate *kriyā* as activity (as Kalupahana has done) with this notion of *agency* in mind in relation to dependent arising. It is debatable, however, whether Buddha himself would have accepted such an imputation, especially because he forwarded a no-self (*anātman*) doctrine in opposition to the *Upaniṣadic* tradition.

Nāgārjuna would most certainly not, and Garfield provides further justification for his proposed distinction in his footnote to MMK I: 1:

Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects the existence of efficacy and pointedly uses the word ‘cause.’ He denies that there are such things. Nowhere in Chapter I is there a parallel denial of the existence of conditions. On the contrary, in I: 2 he positively asserts that there are four kinds of them. To be sure, this could be read as mere partitioning of the class of effects that are described in Buddhist literature. But there are two reasons not to read it thus: First, Nāgārjuna does not couch the assertion in one of his ‘it might be said’ locutions. Second, he never takes it back. (1995: fn. 16, 104)

This is in fact corroborated by Kalupahana himself, who notes with regard to MMK I: 2 that “while the four causal theories mentioned in I.1 are categorically denied by Nāgārjuna, no such denial is made of the four theories of conditions (*pratyaya*)” (1986: 107). If the term *kriyā* is equivocal such that Nāgārjuna denies it in a significant (i.e. ontological) sense while endorsing it in a pragmatic (or epistemological) sense then Garfield’s proposed distinction would be philosophically sound even if it comes at the cost of philological fidelity. To be sure, Garfield himself made it clear from the outset that his translation was not philological in intent, even though his reading in general is philosophically more faithful to Nāgārjuna than Kalupahana’s, a significant point which is attested by various scholars in the field. As a preliminary note here I shall point out Chinn’s objections to Garfield’s distinction overlook this equivocal significance of *kriyā*, and is never contested by him. I hope this brief excursus makes a case for Garfield’s proposed distinction by addressing the controversy surrounding the proper translation of *kriyā* in Nāgārjuna.

## *§ Regulative Theory of Dependent-Origination*

In this section I will employ Garfield's distinction between causality and conditionality as an interpretative fulcrum to Nāgārjuna's MMK, discussing the emptiness of causation and the regulative theory of dependent origination. While I am not convinced that Chinn's objections are tenable due to a fundamental misrepresentation of Garfield's position, it is also unclear what he was trying to establish in forwarding an alternative two-sided approach (scientific and semantic) to *pratītya-samutpāda*. What is highlighted as problematic in the course of Chinn's objections, however, is the notion of convention, along with the Buddhist doctrine of Two-Truths. This is critical to our purposes here, for Nāgārjuna's refutation of causation lies in understanding the emptiness of emptiness as an epistemological thesis rather than an ontological position. I believe Garfield's proposed distinction between causality and conditionality to be particularly useful in this regard, as it makes clear the significant differences between refuting causation on grounds of scepticism from those of nihilism. A truly sceptical refutation would suspend altogether the ontological debate mired in realist and anti-realist positions.

What does it mean to say causation is empty, for surely it makes more sense to believe that such things as causal powers exist? After all it seems to be the most obvious principle governing our phenomenal world. One only needs to point to the flicking of switches and the sprouting of seeds in our daily lives for support, which may also be expressed by the general formula: "X causes Y". This, however, immediately presupposes a number of assumptions, that: 1) X and Y occupy different time-slices in a temporal sequence; 2) X and Y are distinct if and only if they are different in a substantial sense, which means they exist inherently allowing us to differentiate them. A corollary of this argues for self-

causation (in the case of the sprouting seed) by inserting X and X<sup>1</sup> instead, though this would mean that both X and X<sup>1</sup> are at least similar if not identical; and 3) the intermediary causal link somehow relates both X and Y. It is critical to point out here the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* does not simply refer to a phenomenology where every existent is inextricably connected in some cosmic causal network, but rather arising in dependence upon others. A great deal hinges upon the nature of this dependence, and while it is alluring to conceive of it as a form of causal link Nāgārjuna will argue nothing can be further from the truth.

How is an emptiness of causation view preferable over our common sense accounts in explaining daily phenomena? When Nāgārjuna says causation is empty he says, *inter alia*, that it is empty of inherent existence and lacking in essence. This lacking in essence does not, however, entail non-existence (or nihilism), because on Nāgārjuna's account this would mean the existence of a nonexistent entity; and a nonexistent entity (through its possessing an essence, even if characterised negatively) cannot arise dependently. A belief in the existence of causal links serving as some cement-of-the-universe is *prima facie* appealing till we find that nowhere in nature do such purported causal nexuses emerge by cleaving at its joints (Garfield, 1994: 223). This is in fact a metaphysical lure rooted in ontology: if things do exist (in a substantive realist sense) then the causal relations between them must *ipso facto* exist. Nāgārjuna argues this is untenable on at least two counts: Firstly, if such entities exist through possessing an identifiable essence they would therefore be independent and no such causal relation may obtain. Secondly, as pointed out earlier, if such causal powers did exist we would have to posit a further relation relating the cause to its effect on pain of regress, else we would be committed to positing an uncaused cause in contravention of *pratītya-samutpāda*. Garfield makes this clear:

If one views phenomena as having and as emerging from causal powers, one views them as having essences and as being connected to the essences of other phenomena. [...] This forces one at the same time to assert the *inherent existence* of these things, in virtue of their essential identity, and to assert their *dependence* and *productive* character, in virtue of their causal history and power. But such dependence and relational character is incompatible with their inherent existence. (1994: 224)

Garfield argues according to Nāgārjuna that: “by showing causation to be empty, we show all things to be empty, even emptiness itself” (1994: 238). It is here that Garfield’s distinction becomes significant in highlighting the respective connections between “a causal-power view of causation [with an] essentialist view of phenomena on the one hand, and between a condition view of dependent arising [with a] conventional view of phenomena on the other” (1994: 224).

Having denied four views of causation Nāgārjuna positively asserts four kinds of conditions in MMK I: 2 – efficient, percept-object, immediate and dominant conditions. Flicking a switch to turn on a light would constitute an efficient condition, and there is nothing about my desire to see in an otherwise dark room that exerts an occult force directly responsible for the occurrence of light. It would merely be a dominant condition as the purpose or end for which the action is undertaken, whilst the actual occurrence of light lies in the emission of photons as a chain of immediate conditions. None of these conditions need appeal to a notion of causal power that is inherently existent, and each is just as valid in answering the question “Why?”. Conditions therefore amount to useful explanans of effects

(explanandum), though in doing so we do not ascribe them any causal power but rather depend upon our explanatory interests instead. Once conditionality is understood in this manner, regularities instead of quasi-causal links account for the relation between certain event pairs over others. Garfield adds: “Explanation relies on regularities. Regularities are explained by reference to further regularities. Adding active forces or potentials adds nothing of explanatory utility to the picture” (1994: 224). To ask how regularities are possible on such a view would be incoherent according to Garfield: they are what make explanation possible in the first place and not something in themselves that can be explained (1994: 248, fn. 7).

This does not mean, however, that we are able to maintain a rigorous distinction between explanans and explanandum with the former containing potentially what the latter has actually:

The essence of entities  
Is not present in the conditions, etc. ...  
If there is no essence,  
There can be no otherness-essence. (MMK I: 3)

The first two lines of the stanza support the claim made earlier. In the next two lines that follow, if there are no individual essences there cannot be substantial differences by means of which we may characterise phenomena (explanandum) independently from their conditions (explanans), nor can we rigorously claim the relation between conditions (explanans) and phenomena (explanandum) to be located in some notion of otherness-essence (Skt. *parabhāva*), as being distinct (such as the essence of a table to depend upon its parts). The

point is a subtle one, as given the lack of essential difference things are interdependent, yet due to this very interdependence there can be no otherness-essence (which is presumably the criterion for dependence in the first place in case of the table and its parts).

Put simply, just as essences do not exist independently, otherness-essence cannot exist as well because if it did, its very existence would imply in turn the existence of essence, therefore vitiating any notion of dependence. The admission of such an otherness-essence relies on that other having an *intrinsic* connection to the phenomenon in question, a connection that is assumed realised in the causal efficacy of that other. Now, to dismiss conditions under a regularity view to be mere cosmic coincidence (see also MMK I: 12) would be begging the question, as the implied criterion of necessity already presupposes a real causal link sufficiently robust to link real phenomena. For Nāgārjuna, the absence of such a link is due to the absence of such phenomena in the first place.

Therefore in exploiting conditionality as explanans under a regularity view we merely demonstrate how they answer pragmatically to our explanatory interests rather than having some ontological basis (or correspondence). This is the hidden relation between human praxis and reality that we otherwise fail to grasp in our insistence upon necessity and linearity, by demanding some special connection linking consequents to their proper antecedents. Conditionality as such is incompatible with linearity, else we would be committed to a view foisted by the causal realist that non-empty effects may be somehow produced *ex nihilo*, from empty conditions. Once we admit the possibility of such non-empty effects, however, they would in turn become non-empty conditions themselves. That being the case dependent origination would become impossible, because if things do possess essences they cannot then be dependent. This violates our common sense view because we experience these things

precisely as being dependent.

The irony is that the causal realist in fact violates the common sense view he purportedly upholds by arguing for the existence of real causal links, whilst the *prima facie* counter-intuitive emptiness view of causation justifies our common sense practice within the pragmatic sphere of daily discourse. Garfield argues that dependent origination is a midpoint between the extremes of reificationism and nihilism, “achieved by taking conventions as the foundation of ontology, hence rejecting the very enterprise of a philosophical search for the ontological foundation of convention”(1994: 226). This notion of convention reinscribes the hidden relation between praxis and reality, such that philosophy is no longer capable of providing the explanatory bedrock for our beliefs and/or claims. This, however, does not mean we are simply replacing one form of analysis with another and, as we shall see in the following section, understanding the role of convention is critical to a correct appraisal of emptiness along with dependent origination.

## *§ Two-Truths and the Emptiness of Causation*

While it may seem upon first sight that in arguing for the emptiness of causation we merely reverse the relationship between convention and ontology, this reversal contains a reinscription of what we understand by convention such that it is not simply a textualist or anti-realist position. This section will consider the role of convention within the doctrine of Two-Truths to understand the emptiness of causation such that it avoids the charge of nihilism. This is significant, for if the philosophical enterprise consisted in the search for the ontological foundation of convention it would seem that this reversal installs emptiness (in a nihilist or anti-realist sense) instead in the form of a negative dialectic. If, however, the anti-metaphysical thrust of the Mādhyamika dialectic is able to reject ontology without falling into nihilism it would have left the ontological framework altogether as an alternative middle path between the extremes of essentialism and nihilism. It is here that Nāgārjuna's doctrine of Two-Truths becomes critical. We shall also consider the nature of emptiness and the emptiness of emptiness to fully appreciate this significance of convention before addressing Chinn's objections to Garfield in the following section.

Nāgārjuna's doctrine of Two-Truths and *śūnyatā* formed his two major contributions in the history of Buddhist philosophy. While they were radical shifts, they were not entirely divorced from tradition. The Two-Truths doctrine was found in embryo in the *Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra* where a distinction was also made between *nītārtha* (clear) and *neyārtha* (obscure) meanings. This distinction highlights the methodological issues concerning Buddhist hermeneutics, though what is of particular interest to us at this juncture is that the Buddha mentions a middle path between the extremes of essentialism and nihilism when asked about 'right-view' by Kāccāyana:

‘Everything exists,’— this, Kaccayana, is one extreme. ‘Everything does not exist,’— this, Kaccayana, is the second extreme. Kaccayana, without approaching either extreme, the Tathagata teaches you a doctrine by the middle. (*Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra*)

We may draw from this a preliminary support – to a certain degree – for Nāgārjuna against the putative charge of nihilism. It is also here that Nāgārjuna’s notion of convention as the middle ground between both ontological extremes becomes useful in our understanding of *śūnyatā*. McCagney (1997) claims that Nāgārjuna’s use of *śūnyatā* was inspired by the metaphor of space in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* due to its fundamental indeterminacy (and hence its emptiness). We shall also consider some aspects of McCagney’s discussion on *śūnyatā* where possible for mutual illumination with Garfield.

While all this seem straightforward enough, Nāgārjuna does nevertheless make a series of perplexing claims in the MMK. He first claims that there are two truths, and he later identifies them as one. He argues that the phenomenal world upon analysis is found to be empty, and goes on to claim that emptiness is itself empty, though it leaves the question begging: empty of what precisely? The claim regarding the two truths is first made explicit in Chapter 24 of the MMK:

The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma

Is based on two truths:

A truth of worldly convention

And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand

The distinction drawn between these two truths

Do not understand

The Buddha's profound truth. (MMK XXIV: 8-9)

The two truths are presented here as clearly distinct, in the form of an ultimate truth (Skt. *paramārtha-satya*) and a conventional one (Skt. *saṃvṛti-satya*). This distinction is later collapsed in MMK XXIV: 18, and Nāgārjuna is either inconsistent or remaining purposefully indirect here. Recalling the *Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra*, where a corresponding distinction is made between *nītārtha* (plain and clear meaning) and *neyārtha* (indirect meaning requiring further explanation), I argue that this bivalence attests to the *upāya* (trans. skill-in-means) of the Buddha's teaching in accordance to the aptitude of his listener. What needs to be stressed here is that the ultimate truth is not a form of absolutism such that it disparages and falsifies the conventional. In fact, the emphasis is on understanding the *distinction* itself and not simply that there are two truths that allow us to understand the teaching of the Buddha. The ultimate truth is certainly not transcendental in any sense, as we established in the preceding section that such radical difference is not possible due to *parabhāva*, but instead immanent insofar as it depends upon the conventional truth to emerge. Each is just as valid as the other, and if we consider the ultimate truth as being *neyārtha* and the conventional as *nītārtha*, I argue that the Buddha's ability (*upāya*) to freely switch between both modes of discourse is possible precisely due to the indeterminacy of *sūnyatā*.

Garfield fails to point this out, and the charge of inconsistency would certainly apply if we simply read Nāgārjuna at face value. In other words we would have to subscribe to a

hermeneutics that takes the conventional to be more than merely conventional, searching for some essence behind what is represented. Similarly, the “right-view” to take with regards to the MMK does not lie in the promulgation of an absolute truth (of emptiness), as what is asserted in language can be nothing more than conventional (and hence provisional) – even when it asserts the ultimate nature of things. The point is a subtle one, though it is what prevents us from lapsing into hermeneutical correspondence. *Upāya* demonstrates therefore a critical awareness of the methodological problems in our very tools of analytic discourse. Garfield provides, however, a useful gloss on conventional truth, which may be rendered in Sanskrit as either *saṃvṛti-satya* or *vyavahāra-satya*. Drawing upon Candrakīrti’s commentary, Garfield presents three distinct etymologies – the term *saṃvṛti* may mean transactional, which is neatly captured by *vyavahāra*; it may also mean conventional in the everyday sense of the word, such as common sense. It may also mean nominal, or established by linguistic convention. There is another significant sense to *saṃvṛti*, which means concealing or occluding. Garfield claims: “the conventional, in occluding its conventional character, covers up its own emptiness” (1995: 297-8, fn. 109). In other words, the conventional truth masks the fact that it is merely conventional in the senses adumbrated above, and this characteristic of conventional truth is precisely what the ultimate truth demystifies.

That being the case, in what sense is the ultimate truth considered ultimate? We turn here to the philosophical heart of the MMK where Nāgārjuna asserts a three-way relation between emptiness, dependent origination and convention:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen

That is explained to be emptiness.

That, being a dependent designation,  
Is itself the middle way. (MMK XXIV: 18)

Here Nāgārjuna asserts the emptiness of *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination), such that emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct (and indeed, diametrically opposing) things but different characterisations of the same thing. Whatever is dependently co-arisen is established by verbal convention, and as a dependent designation it is nothing more than the referent of a word. What we call the identity of a thing is in fact due to conventions of individuation, as “an arbitrary slice of an indefinite spatiotemporal and causal manifold” (Garfield, 1994: 229). This leads Garfield to claim: “To say of a thing that its identity is a merely verbal fact about it is to say that it is empty. To view emptiness in this way is to see it neither as an entity nor as unreal – it is to see it as conventionally real” (1994: 229). “Emptiness” is thus asserted to be a dependent designation, and its referent is itself dependent and nominal, which also means it is “conventionally existent but ultimately empty” (Garfield, 1994: 229). Therefore emptiness is itself empty. Garfield further points out that given the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘that’ (skt. *De Ni*) in the third line, not only are “dependent arising” and “emptiness” asserted to be dependent designations and thus nominal, but the very relation between them is asserted to be dependent and thus empty as well (1994: 229). Convention, dependent arising and emptiness are all equally dependent upon each other and *ipso facto* all three are claimed to be empty because we do not arrive at some essence whatsoever. A significant point to note here is that if convention, emptiness, and dependent arising were ultimately empty it would not make sense strictly speaking to say that Nāgārjuna *identifies* them, as there is no such determinable basis upon which to do so. The fact that *śūnyatā* has no corresponding referent denies any such move (to identify them) in the first place: “That *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are both *śūnya* does not make them the same. The term

‘*śūnyatā*’ has no referent or correspondent within ordinary discourse by which the two could be compared for sameness” (McCagney, 1997: 95). I therefore agree with McCagney when she urges: “the term ‘*śūnyatā*’ is a caveat ‘about’ the truth of *saṃvṛti* and has no meaning, no use, no function, within conventional discourse or truth” (1997: 96). The relation that holds is one of logical *equivalence* (in terms of mutual entailment) but not logical *equality* (in being identified). For a detailed analysis of this relationship please refer to McCagney (1997: pp. 95-97).

With this in hand, we can return to the problem of two truths and Nāgārjuna’s purported inconsistency when he later claims there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*:

There is not the slightest difference  
Between cyclic existence and *nirvāṇa*.  
There is not the slightest difference  
Between *nirvāṇa* and cyclic existence.

Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*,  
That is the limit of cyclic existence.  
There is not even the slightest difference between them,  
Or even the subtlest thing. (MMK XXV: 19-20)

While it is the ultimate truth that there is not the slightest difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, this does not falsify the conventional truth that teaches *nirvāṇa* as the cessation of *saṃsāra* and is thereby distinct from it. If that were not so, then cultivation of the Middle

Path would not be possible and no liberation from suffering would be achieved, thereby violating conventional sense. If it were maintained (in the ultimate or absolute sense), however, that the truth of *nirvāṇa* is different from the truth of *saṃsāra*, then a starkly dualist perspective emerges and the Two-Truths remain two in every sense so as to be completely independent of (and hence transcendent to) each other. Suffering would be unceasing and there would be liberation without anyone attaining it, violating *both* ultimate and conventional sense. Nāgārjuna therefore makes it clear:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation is not achieved. (MMK XXIV: 10)

As they depend upon each other in order to emerge, it follows they are both empty. Therefore, Nāgārjuna's notion of two truths is only nominal, as it must be, presented within the language of conventional discourse. The charge of inconsistency therefore fails.

To understand how emptiness is itself empty we have to determine what kind of existence it pertains to in order to avoid falling into nihilism. Recalling what was mentioned earlier in this section about convention being the middle ground between ontological extremes of essentialism and nihilism, we will now consider a brief taxonomy of the types of existence employing this understanding of two truths just established. I argue that conventional existence (insofar as it is dependently originated) is the middle path between inherent existence and inherent non-existence. Nāgārjuna claims:

Something that is not dependently arisen

Such a thing does not exist.

Therefore a nonempty thing

Does not exist. (MMK XXIV: 19)

Here Nāgārjuna claims that everything, including emptiness, is dependently arisen and hence lacking inherent existence: “nothing lacks the three coextensive properties of emptiness, dependent-origination, and conventional identity” (Garfield, 1994: 230). It also makes clear what type of existence Nāgārjuna has in mind when analysing phenomenal objects – they occupy a mode of conventional existence: “Nāgārjuna defends the conventional existence of phenomena, he will urge that none of them ultimately exist – that none of them exist independently of convention with identities and natures that they possess in themselves” (Garfield, 1995: 101). Within the scope of Two-Truths we may then view phenomenal objects in terms of their conventional or ultimate character. The conventional character of conventional phenomena is to view them as having inherent existence, or indeed the corollary of inherent non-existence. We also ascribe categories of reality or unreality to things according to a binary logic (‘is’ or ‘is not’), such that we may make claims that there are indeed tables in this room or not. In doing so, however, we commit a descriptive fallacy, because to view things in this way is to see them as being more than merely conventional. If whatever is conventional is dependently arisen it is then also non-inherently existent, and the descriptive fallacy consists in assuming *a priori* that linguistic characterisations we make are conditioned by its inherent existence or inherent non-existence – the essence or “table-ness” of the thing at hand was never in question, but merely verified or refuted. The ultimate character of conventional phenomena is to see them as simply nothing more than being conventional in the ways we have noted, without falling into either error of essentialism or

nihilism. Garfield claims: “the standpoint of emptiness [as the ultimate truth] is not at odds with the conventional standpoint, only with a particular philosophical understanding of it – that which takes the conventional to be more than merely conventional” (1994: 230). This is the metaphysical lure in the way we view the world which, according to Buddhist perspective, is a falling to attachment and hence, the cause of suffering (Skt. *duḥkha*).

To understand the emptiness of emptiness Garfield suggests we consider what it means to be non-empty: “For a thing to be nonempty would be for it to have an essence discoverable upon analysis; for it to be a substance independent of its attributes, or a bearer of parts; for its identity to be self-determined by its essence. A nonempty entity can be fully characterized nonrelationally” (1994: 231). Through its lack of inherent existence, it would seem emptiness fails on that count at least to be empty. If all phenomena were viewed to be empty then emptiness itself would be nonempty – eternal and independent, underlying the multitudinous appearance of conventional phenomena. The two truths would then be radically different at an ontological level. Instead, Garfield suggests analysing a conventional entity such as a table to demonstrate its emptiness, that there is no table apart from its parts, nor are we able to identify any such thing as the essence or “table-ness” in question. Having concluded the emptiness of the table due to this lack of an identifiable essence, we turn to that very emptiness itself – the putative emptiness of the table – only to find *nothing other* than the very table’s lack of inherent existence. It turns out that emptiness itself is dependent upon the table, and cannot be posited non-relationally in its absence. Garfield therefore concludes:

Emptiness [as the ultimate reality] is hence not different from conventional reality – it is the fact that conventional reality is conventional. Therefore it

must be dependently arisen, since it depends upon the existence of empty phenomena. Hence emptiness is itself empty. (1994: 232)

In this way the emptiness of emptiness is critical to the deep identity of the two truths, and the difference between the conventional and the ultimate lies in the difference between how phenomena are perceived – which is an epistemological rather than ontological difference.

## § *The Charge of Anti-Realism*

We have established in the preceding section the critical role of convention within the doctrine of Two-Truths and how it relates to the emptiness of emptiness as an epistemological rather than an ontological position. We will consider in this section some of Chinn's objections to Garfield, specifically the controversy surrounding MMK I: 10 and the charge of anti-realism against Garfield. While there are numerous inconsistencies in Chinn's objections such that they do not constitute in my view a real challenge to Garfield, they nevertheless demonstrate for our purposes a number of things which we are trying to establish in this chapter: 1) Garfield's proposed distinction between conditionality and causality allows for a more rigorous analysis of *pratītya-samutpāda*, without confusing dependent-arising and causation; 2) the significance of convention becomes clearer as we consider some of the points Chinn raises, and I believe the confusion in his account is due to a fundamental failure to understand what Garfield means by convention; and 3) Chinn's misreading of Nāgārjuna is symptomatic of a reificationist tendency that might lead to emptiness itself becoming a view.

Chinn objects to Garfield's account of *pratītya-samutpāda* on the basis that emptiness of causation entails anti-realism by the latter's position, and emptiness as a view itself is alleged to be untenable by Chinn due to the paradox of self-refutation. This objection is premised upon Chinn's belief that the true doctrine referred to in the final verse of the MMK is not *śūnyatā* but *pratītya-samutpāda* instead – a specious distinction in my view – such that the truth of dependent-arising is capable of silencing all philosophical speculation (2001: 54). Chinn's strategy therefore is to shoe-horn Garfield into an anti-realist position by arguing that Nāgārjuna in MMK I was committed to demonstrating the futility of speculation regarding

the true nature of causation, such that we should renounce any theories of causation whatsoever (2001: 63). Garfield, however, warns against adopting such anti-realist views in a later paper, which is given here:

I will not use the pejorative term ‘antirealist,’ for, in the context of Madhyamaka, that begs important questions both about the appropriate sense of ‘reality’ and about what kinds of phenomena we might identify about which to be realists. Moreover, for a prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika like Nāgārjuna, there is an additional problem: how do we identify the common object necessary to generate a realist/antirealist debate? (2001: 521)

Chinn’s solution to this was to deflect the discussion of MMK I to that of dharma-like entities, and whilst he mentions at length “real” objects and phenomena it is unclear what status he accords to them within the structure of Two-Truths. In asking questions such as “What is the *real meaning* of one thing causing another?”, the question that goes begging is what should count as real in the first place, and that is necessarily predetermined by one’s own philosophical orientation. Notably, Chinn’s analysis completely avoids any discussion of the Two-Truths doctrine, which would otherwise present a serious impediment to him according categories of reality/unreality within a conventional/ultimate framework.

The first part of Chinn’s paper focuses upon the controversy found in MMK I: 10, reworking Garfield’s translation of that verse through a series of premises to demonstrate how the conclusion (*viz.*, that causation is empty) does not follow, favouring Kalupahana’s version instead and finally arguing (rather inconsistently, in my view) that MMK I was really talking about *dharmas* rather than phenomenal objects. The second part focuses more on

language and how we might make sense of the term “causation” along with “cause and effect” through a quasi-Wittgensteinian analysis, proposing an alternative two-sided principle of *pratītya-samutpāda* that does not seriously detract from (nor indeed vitiate) Garfield’s account which he took such meticulous pains to controvert.

If I claim that Chinn’s misreading is symptomatic of a reificationist tendency, this is betrayed by his own perplexing anxiety when he repeatedly asks why is it not legitimate to talk about causation (see Chinn, 2001: pp. 56, 59, 60, 66) without offering any answer to his own rhetorical questions. Ironically, this tendency finds expression in his disingenuous attempt at distancing himself from such a tradition:

Philosophers, of course, have no interest in such mundane “factual” problems as the particular cause of someone’s mental condition. Their concern is with serious questions about the *foundations* of things, believing that we cannot take even the most familiar of things for granted or at their face value. In this case, they would be concerned with the *very idea* of causation or cause and effect, with the general question of “what makes anything the cause of something.” They would worry about the possibility that there is really no such thing as a cause-and-effect relationship, no *objective fact of the matter* behind our causal discourse. (2001: 64)

Chinn’s objection to Garfield’s regularity theory of *pratītya-samutpāda* really lies in his belief that “causation, in short, cannot just *mean* regularity, the constant connection or succession of events” (2001: 56); it is the *very idea* and need for grounding that drives him to postulate erroneously that what is at stake in MMK I are not phenomenal objects but

*dharmas*; the latter were considered ultimately real in an earlier (*Abhidharma*) phase of Buddhist philosophy that constitutes our experiential world (2001: 62). This claim is, however, untenable, and will be discussed along with others below. Also, I object to Chinn’s usage of the term “causation” when discussing *pratītya-samutpāda* – this leads to undue confusion because the former in daily discourse is loaded with metaphysical assumptions and as such I will only consider its usage valid within the realm of conventional truth. To employ the two terms synonymously is to conflate two mutually exclusive meanings without due justification. Furthermore, as noted above, Nāgārjuna explicitly talks about conditions with regard to *pratītya-samutpāda* in MMK I rather than causation *per se*. The criterion of necessity that we demand of causality does not apply to dependent arising, nor to conditionality for that matter.

Given that the point of controversy surrounds verse MMK I: 10, the respective translations of this verse by Garfield and Kalupahana are presented below:

If things did not exist  
Without essence,  
The phrase, “When this exists so this will be,”  
Would not be acceptable (Garfield, 1995: 4)

Since the existence of existents devoid of self-nature is not evident, the statement: “When that exists, this comes to be,” will not be appropriate.  
(Kalupahana, 1986: 113)

For sake of brevity, the formula “When this exists so this will be” will be read as expressing

the truth of dependent arising or *pratītya-samutpāda*. Garfield’s translation states that if things do exist with essence then *pratītya-samutpāda* is not acceptable. This criticism from the perspective of ultimate truth is ascribed to Nāgārjuna as an attack on the causal realist that continues to the end of the chapter. Kalupahana’s translation states, however, that because things without self-nature (or essence) are not empirically given in experience therefore *pratītya-samutpāda* is not acceptable; or conversely, that *pratītya-samutpāda* is acceptable only because things *do appear* to have essence. This is diametrically opposed to Garfield’s translation, and as noted by Chinn sounds more like a causal realist’s objection to regularity theory from verses 11 to 13, concluding with verse 14 that neither causal realist nor regularity approaches are satisfactory (2001: 60, 61). It is of interest to note that though this is the ostensible strategy adopted by Chinn to reject Garfield, he later abandons this approach to postulate a different reading. According to Chinn, this would amount to a rather inconsequential argument in the first chapter of the MMK; and he prefers Kalupahana’s translation as the expression, “not evident” (*na vidyate*), is taken to mean, “not found in our experience” (Chinn, 2001: 61).

The general line of argument Chinn takes is deeply convoluted. He first rejects Garfield’s translation of verse 10 with a series of premises and appeals to Kalupahana, bemoaning the weak conclusion to the chapter entailed by the purported causal realist objection – even though Kalupahana himself agrees that the verse constitutes a Nagarjuna-like criticism (1986: 114). Chinn then rehabilitates the latter’s translation to refer to *dharma*s (theoretical, metaphysical entities) even though his initial appeal is premised upon Kalupahana’s rendering of that verse as referring precisely to phenomenal objects. Inconsistency notwithstanding, it is not clear to me precisely what is Chinn’s objection to Garfield in the first place.

I will now return to Chinn's initial rejection of Garfield's translation by adumbrating below the premises he develops from verse 10:

- a) Causation exists only because the things in the phenomenal world lack an essence (or are not independent substances). (2001: 57)
- b) Causation exists only because phenomenal things (the things we experience) exist only by convention and are not things in themselves. (2001: 59)

Recalling the earlier caveat regarding the term 'causation' it should be pointed out that Chinn does not refer to dependent arising nor *pratītya-samutpāda* in his premises, and whilst both translations of verse 10 concern themselves with the acceptability or appropriateness of the formula asserting the truth of dependent arising, Chinn prefers to talk about whether causation *exists* or not. This is not mere pedantic nitpicking, but rather, it also reflects his philosophical orientation. Premise a) forms the rejoinder to the causal realist, denying what he is insisting upon, *viz.*, that causation is a relationship between independent substances with essential natures (Chinn, 2001: 57). Chinn charges that premise a) is false and contrary to what Nāgārjuna would hold: "In fact, he would hold, with the causal realist, the *exact opposite*. To see the things in the phenomenal world as causally dependent or dependently arising *is* to see them as things with an essence" (2001: 57). This is where the conflation becomes misleading, because on the level of conventional truth this is indeed the case in our daily experience of the world. To be causally dependent in the sense significant for the causal realist is to establish relations between things that exist in an inherently existent manner, though dependent arising pertains to non-inherent existence. To claim that Nāgārjuna *agrees*

with the causal realist is unjustified even if he makes the point in a conventional sense. Furthermore, Chinn quotes Garfield out of context in order to support his argument: “We typically perceive and conceive of external phenomena, ourselves, causal powers, moral truths, and so forth as independently existing, intrinsically identifiable and substantial” (Garfield qtd. in Chinn, 2001: 58). Chinn pointedly excludes what Garfield says immediately after this: “But though this is, in one sense, the conventional character of conventional phenomena – the manner in which they are ordinarily experienced – to see them in this way is precisely not to see them *as conventional*” (Garfield, 1994: 233). In setting up premise a) and arguing contrary to it with regards to causation Chinn has already taken the conventional to be more than merely conventional, while Garfield’s translation talks about the ultimate character of conventional phenomena.

The development of premise b) follows upon a fundamental misreading of convention: “if nothing in the phenomenal world inherently exists, if there are no things in themselves, this must mean that *everything exists as a matter of convention*” (Chinn, 2001: 58). What Chinn intends by his emphasis is to say that everything exists *because of* convention, so that he can go on to claim *vis-à-vis* Garfield: “[O]utside our conceptual and linguistic framework, these things are *nothing*. They simply do not exist” (2001: 58). Besides the question begging as to how the causal realist might possibly establish the things-in-themselves outside of a conceptual and linguistic framework, to say they simply do not exist also means they are inherently non-existent, whereas conventional existence refers to non-inherent existence. It would be more correct to say that everything exists in a conventional manner; the shift from noun to adjective is significant here, as the former establishes convention as the absolute ground for existence (hence entailing anti-realism) while the latter suspends existence by referring to it in a provisional sense.

In the second part of his paper Chinn offers a two-sided principle to *pratītya-samutpāda*: a scientific and regulative principle along with what he calls a semantic principle. The former states that “*pratītyasamutpāda* can be taken, on the simplest, most rudimentary level, to refer to this universally accepted practice and belief that everything has a cause, that every phenomenon is *dependently arisen*” (Chinn, 2001: 64). This affords us no new insight whatsoever, nor is it clear how Chinn’s proposed taxonomy challenges Garfield’s distinction between causality and conditionality in any way. The semantic principle is basically “the doctrine of the *mutual dependency* of concepts and beliefs in both the systematic and historically contingent sense”, which argues that the very meaning of the term “causation” is “constituted by its place in a web of other concepts and beliefs” (Chinn, 2001: 65). This is opposed to what Chinn calls a denotative or essentialist theory of meaning such that “we want to know the essential nature (*svabhāva*) of causation, the ‘thing’ denoted by that term” (2001: 66). While the semantic principle offers greater promise, Chinn fails to address the concept of convention and Two-Truths in relation to language.

Finally, Chinn commits a fatal error in his reading of Garfield and MMK XXIV: 18, when he alleges of Garfield that: “He takes the statement in 24: 18, ‘that [the dependent arising], being a dependent designation is itself the middle way,’ to mean, ‘existence depends on designation’ or verbal convention” (2001: 68). Recalling what was established earlier regarding MMK XXIV: 18, the second “that” in question refers to emptiness rather dependent arising, which Chinn has falsely assumed here. To foist the anti-realist charge upon Garfield on basis of this misreading that “existence depends on designation” oversimplifies what Garfield was trying to establish regarding convention in the broadest sense of the word. Our common sense views the world as being one in which everything is

inextricably connected by force of custom. This view of the world is possible only if the relations are empty in the first place, and the *prima facie* contradiction reinscribes whatever we understand about convention and language such that there is no philosophically neutral register for our daily discourse. However, I will point out here that an alternative is afforded by taking on the notion of convention within the structure of Two-Truths, which Garfield believes leads to the “demystification of this apparently mystical conclusion” (Garfield, 1994: 229).

## *§ Language and the Universal Problematic*

This chapter on Derrida will consider how he engages with the problem of the Other through his linguistic interventions within philosophical discourse. To do so, I will first locate a key moment in which Derrida asserts the intrusion of the Other, manifesting itself as the absent centre of any structural ensemble. This moment is where Derrida claims that language invaded the universal problematic. Now, to the extent that all human discourses are constituted by language this has serious implications indeed with regard to its universal status<sup>40</sup>. It also means that the intended object of any discourse is never fully present as a result of this movement of signification, which Derrida names *différance*. Of course, this affects Derrida's own deconstructivist discourse as well, which in turn necessitates a concatenation of impossible names supplementing each other without saturating the field. As I have argued earlier, Derrida's refusal to identify with his discourse (and in particular *différance*) is the result of a keen methodological awareness. I will develop a narrative in this chapter tracing the conceptual development of this key moment as it unfolds throughout his work. It has been argued by many scholars (including Magliola and Loy, whom we shall consider next in Chapter Six) that Derrida was reacting against the principle of identity. Now, this may not be entirely wrong, but one could just as easily argue that Derrida was celebrating the alterity of the Other. Or perhaps that by taking on the traditional metaphysical concepts he is thus acknowledging his intellectual debts. My point is that, as a heterological discourse in itself, Derrida's writings do not easily lend themselves to systematisation. In fact, this has been roundly criticised by others as exhibiting an obscurantist streak. This may not be entirely unfounded, though it has to be placed in its proper context: this criticism is itself

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<sup>40</sup> This also recalls my initial characterisation of Derrida's work as a form of linguistic quantum mechanics, precisely because of its devastating universal scope.

premised upon a pair of conceptual opposites, see-sawing between the lucid and the ludic. As a result, the narrative I am after is necessarily *bricoleur* and contingent, ranging across several texts (whilst making detours around some and avoiding yet others). This is unavoidable, though in doing so I hope to restate the problematic in a much simpler manner:

[I]t was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. *This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic*, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never *absolutely present outside* a system of differences. (Derrida, 1978: 353-4, emphasis mine)

What does Derrida mean by claiming that language invaded the universal problematic? What precisely is this problematic to begin with, and in what way is it universal? I believe this passage contains, in embryo, the general orientation of Derrida's *oeuvre*, and is therefore worth attending to in articulating the nature of this universal problematic. Firstly, Derrida claims that the centre cannot be thought of as a “present-being”, this compound word highlighting both the (being) presence and (being) present on the basis of *Es gibt*. Secondly, this centre has no natural site, as i) it is always supplemented by an infinite number of sign-substitutions; and ii) it has no resting place where it may dwell *in situ*. The former accounts for the charade of impossible names that Derrida is so fond of – they are impossible precisely because they can never attain the identity to which they aspire; while the

latter emphasises the manner in which we may inhabit these structural ensembles, though significantly, we do not dwell. Derrida writes: “I therefore admit to a purity which is not very pure. Anything but purism. It is, at least, the only impure ‘purity’ for which I dare confess a taste” (1998: 47). There is, according to Derrida, a logic of contamination that is always at work. These names are impossible as a result of a fundamental incommensurability between name and referent. Their identity is always defined only in relation to others, whence the impure purity. There is, therefore, no natural residence or address in which a concept may be fixed in its essential identity without this necessary reference to the other.

The centre is also the mid-point equidistant from every point on the circumference, and as we have argued thus far, the middle is not a position and cannot be made into one. The mistake we make is to treat it *as if* it were a fixed point or an essence without due reference to the relata it distributes or gathers. To do so would be to treat the centre as non-empty, as a present-being that occupies a determinable locus or position: “The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play” (Derrida, 1978: 352). What does Derrida mean then, when he claims in the absence of this ground or centre that everything became discourse (*L. discursus*, running back and forth)? The absence of a transcendental signified obviates the ontological premise upon which the notion of play is traditionally predicated. It is not so much the ontological ground that precedes play, but rather the effects of play (within a system of differences) that stages the performativity of language and its fabulous copula, giving rise to the illusion of

Being<sup>41</sup>: “Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around” (Derrida, 1978: 369). Gadamer remarks: “the movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement” (1989: 103). The implication of this along with Derrida’s assertion that everything is discourse means that “we” are, in spite of ourselves, effects of play where “all playing is a being-played”, such that “the game masters the player” (Gadamer, 1989: 106)<sup>42</sup>. This is, in every sense, ground-breaking. Not because of its novelty, but because it breaks open the question of Being as the universal problematic that was hitherto capable of underwriting the systematic play of differences. To which Gadamer adds, “discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question” (1989: 363).

What does language have to do with this then? Derrida would claim that: “However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others” (1997: 6). Language constructs (rather than reflects) the world for us, determining how we orient ourselves in our daily experiences. It is also the medium constituting all human discourses, and, *ipso facto*, the medium of the hermeneutic experience – hence its status as a universal problematic: “The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence [...] when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign” (Derrida, 1991a: 61). This does not mean, however, that

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<sup>41</sup> This echoes Garfield’s rejection of the ontological extremes in establishing a middle position: “That midpoint is achieved by taking conventions as the foundation of ontology, hence rejecting the very enterprise of a philosophical search for the ontological foundation of convention” (1994: 226). However, it has to be pointed out that Garfield’s (along with Nāgārjuna’s) deployment of the term “convention” is more subtle than the everyday notion of consensus and agreement within a linguistic community. Convention or *vyavahāra-satya* (trans. conventional truth) has to take into account the economic relations (in a Derridean sense) determining the state of play within a structural ensemble.

<sup>42</sup> This is certainly pertinent when Derrida extends this to the question of personal identity and language in Monolingualism of the Other.

everything can or should be reduced to structural linguistics, to which the charge of textualism would certainly be valid. Derrida makes this clear: “To deconstruct was also a structuralist gesture or in any case a gesture that assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic. But it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented [...]” (1991b: 272). The discursive trajectory of this desedimentation aims at unsettling the founding metaphors that philosophy (as a discourse) has otherwise taken for granted, and is thus diametrically opposed to philosophical reductivism in seeking to establish an entitative identity:

All sentences of the type ‘deconstruction is X’ or ‘deconstruction is not X’ *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know, one of the principal things at stake in what is called in my texts ‘deconstruction’ is precisely the delimiting of ontology and above all of the third person present indicative: *S is P*. (Derrida, 1991b: 275)

In claiming that everything became discourse, Derrida is not naively postulating that the world *is* text<sup>43</sup>. Rather, in working through the metaphors that constitute philosophical discourse Derrida calls the distinction (between world and text, literature and philosophy) into question. If reductivism is the metaphor for *S is P*, then metaphor itself is a metaphor (or name) for this fundamental lack of identity, which nonetheless invokes and is in turn dependent upon, the principle of identity itself. This dependency (or parasitism) is a key feature of all human discourses, to the extent that we never arrive at the intended object of one’s discourse. Precisely because it is constituted by language, standing in place of (and for)

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<sup>43</sup> Likewise, and perhaps more significantly, Derrida is *not* saying that the world *is not* text. Both assertions remain, for him, unsatisfactory within the purview of binary logic. In fact, I find the spirit in which this assertion is made to be not entirely dissimilar from that in the *Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra*.

the thing itself. This also means that: “A precise and exact language should be absolutely univocal and literal [*propre*]: non-metaphorical. The language is written and pro-regresses, to the extent that it masters or effaces the figure in itself” (Derrida, 1997: 271). This non-metaphorical language is what passes off as ordinary language, as the language of philosophical discourse in an ontologically neutral register. This argument is specious, and if we were to follow it, *au pied de la lettre*, philosophers would be obliged to barter *quid pro quo* at the market place with as many words as there are things (or concepts), each with its proper name – defeating the very purpose of language in the first place. To which Literature has an elegant riposte: *quid multa?* Gadamer argues, however, that: “The conceptual world in which philosophizing develops has already captivated us in the same way that the language in which we live conditions us. If thought is to be conscientious, it must become aware of these anterior influences” (1989: xxv).

The subtle difference between Gadamer and Derrida here is that, while the former rightly urges the vigilance of thought towards the effects of its conditioning, the latter would also argue that this self-reflexivity of consciousness is never complete, by coinciding with itself (thus becoming self-identical): “The *supplement* is always unfolding, but it can never attain the status of a *complement*. The field is never saturated” (Derrida, 1974: 18, emphasis mine). Derrida’s claim that everything is discourse clearly extends to his own deconstructivist discourse, “for [the] incapability to sustain on one’s own and to the limit the coherence of one’s own discourse, *for being produced as truth at the moment when the value of truth is shattered*, for escaping the internal contradictions of skepticism, etc.” (1997: 162, emphasis mine). Gadamer’s caveat above is insightful, though it does not, however, preempt nor absolve us from the very conditioning effects of our (arguably discursive or dependent) existence, which finds eloquent expression in Derrida: “*wherever we are*: in a text where we

already believe ourselves to be” (1997: 162). Quite simply, we are unable to think outside of language, even if it furnishes us with all the very tools to speculate upon the (im)possibility of such a departure<sup>44</sup>.

Derrida forces us to rethink what we understand by metaphor and language, along with its role in determining the character of our thoughts and the inability of the philosophical discourse to produce and sustain its transcendental signified (as truth). A possible criticism here is that Derrida has, in the process, elevated metaphor to the very status it contests, thereby supplanting metaphysics with metaphor. In fact, Derrida is acutely aware of this hazard, and demonstrates his theoretical acumen by pointing out that, “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Derrida, 1978: 354). Two issues need to be highlighted here: Firstly, Derrida’s admission of fallibility does not necessarily constitute an error in itself, nor is it simply a form of intellectual disclaimer. In fact, this is very much taken for granted by some philosophers who are otherwise blind to this process of re-appropriation on part of the logos. Secondly, the model of supplementarity forwarded by Derrida not only takes into account his own critical intervention and its insinuation into logocentric discourse, but also necessitates the charade of impossible names to avoid any particular metaphor/trope from becoming instituted as the governing one capable of saturating the field. I argue that the inner logic of Derrida’s discourse demands this unceasing hermeneutical vigilance, ranging from one trope (or name) to another. In characterising this vigilance as unceasing rather than eternal I am also stressing the dynamism of this on-going struggle or engagement demanded as our response. What is

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<sup>44</sup> One of Magliola’s criticisms of Derrida is that he remains mired in textual play and is therefore in need of Buddhist healing, though I fail to see how or from what privileged extra-linguistic position is this utterance made possible.

eternal for me remains *fixed* or given, reified through the passage of time and answers to no one, for the simple reason it cannot be questioned.

This repetition is played out at the level of his discourse, though *what repeats is the same but not identical*<sup>45</sup>. Rather than dismissing such repetition as so much philosophical verbiage, it is perhaps more likely the case that a singular lack of identity leads to the ensuing performance of this interminable hermeneutical questioning at the level of its discourse, as this notion of identity is always inscribed within a space of differentiability that cannot be homogenised. These names – aporia, babel, *différance*, economy, *khōra*, pharmakon – are impossible, because, according to Derrida: “A name is a proper name when it has only one sense. Or rather, it is only in this case that it is properly a name. To be univocal is the essence, or rather the *telos*, of language” (Derrida, 1974: 48). It is for this reason Derrida insists that, “[f]or us *différance* remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical” (1991a: 75). These names therefore have to be deployed in a strategic manner – in a continual engagement that nevertheless acknowledges their contingency as well – without reifying them in the process. Note I have referred to them as names or metaphors rather than concepts, though Gasché would argue (in what amounts to the same thing) that:

Philosophical concepts would be entirely homogeneous if they possessed a nucleus of meaning that they owed exclusively to themselves – if they were, in other words, conceptual atoms. Yet since concepts are produced within a discursive network of differences, they not only are what they are by virtue of other concepts, but they also, in a fundamental way, inscribe that Otherness

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<sup>45</sup> The same repetition is also found in Nāgārjuna’s writing, which has led Sprung to omit, on this basis, certain chapters of the MMK in his translation.

within themselves. (Gasché, 1986: 128)

If so, then Derrida has managed to split the conceptual atom in its ideal unity, by demonstrating the disjunction between name and referent. These names will continue to haunt his discourse, even though I would also agree that notions of spectrality are somewhat *de trop*. This is not intended as an indictment of Derrida's writing. In fact, Nāgārjuna regularly refers to apparitions and conjurers as a *leitmotif* in the MMK. What is unfortunate, however, is when the *disturbance* heralded by the *revenant* becomes a *distraction* in itself. While this might attest to its metaphorical fecundity (much like the term deconstruction itself), the result is that Deconstruction is everywhere and nowhere, from fashion to architecture to demolition companies from Sussex: "Deconstruction; 'the careful, controlled, removal or isolation of specific elements forming part of, or contained within, an existing structure'" (Protech-Deconstruction Specialists). This definition is not necessarily wrong, but it is far from being correct. The point I am making is, more than any other concept, deconstruction has transgressed the usual genres of discourses into the collective consciousness in an unheralded manner. If it is the name for a universal problem, it has also become a "brand" with universal appeal (through its application). Like quantum mechanics, the problem of language is never one among others.

The shift to names or metaphors highlight the fissure within the purported unity of concepts in their lack of identity, leading Gasché to argue that Deconstruction "borrows its notions, names or 'concepts' from philosophy in order to name what is unnamable within its closure [...] the borrowed concepts not only designate something entirely different from what they referred to before but also suffer a mutation of meaning" (1986: 167). As I have demonstrated above, deconstruction itself suffers a mutation of meaning through this process

of borrowing. The difference between a critical and a casual form of borrowing lies in explicitly acknowledging one's debts, which deconstruction does. The former is called citation; the latter, plagiarism. This form of borrowing is economic, for it situates the otherwise utopian and atopic concepts within a discursive framework "that compounds with the forces that try to annul it while simultaneously unhinging them" (Gasché, 1986: 168-69). Derrida is not deluded by the fact that "metaphor remains in all its essential features a classical element of philosophy, a metaphysical concept" (1974: 18). Far from being an instance of theoretical ineptitude, Derrida would argue this metaphorical supplementarity means that: "concept is a metaphor, foundation is a metaphor, theory is a metaphor; and there is not meta-metaphor for them" (1974: 23). In fact, any notion of a "meta-" position itself remains a metaphor. There is no absolute point of departure, and for good reason<sup>46</sup>. Derrida claims that these metaphors "can only be perceived around a blind spot or a deaf point" (1974: 28). The myth of a clear and transparent reason can only perpetuate its own discourse by trying to catch its shadow in a specular desire of self-invagination, turning itself inside out, even though "the outside belongs to the categories of the inside" (Gasché, 1986: 169)<sup>47</sup>.

It is for this reason Derrida asserts: "I do not teach truth as such; I do not transform myself into a diaphanous mouthpiece of eternal pedagogy" (1988b: 4). This also explains in part Derrida's penchant for maddening chiasmic inversions such as: "philosophy, as a theory

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<sup>46</sup> I will recall here briefly Garfield's regulative theory of dependent origination and how, while regularities allows for explanation, they are not themselves explainable. The optical metaphor (where to see is also to understand) "which opens up under the sun every theoretical point of view" (Derrida, 1974: 28) illustrates this point perfectly: the eye sees not itself. There is no vantage point from a position of absolute exteriority that affords panoptic vision over the field under consideration, and even if such a position were indeed possible, it would be blind to what allows it to see.

<sup>47</sup> Nāgārjuna makes a similar point:

That very seeing does not see  
Itself at all.  
How can something that cannot see itself  
See another? (MMK III:2).

of metaphor, will first have been a metaphor of theory” (1974: 56). These chiasmic utterances are *maddening*, because they pivot around a fundamental blind spot of reason. Before we dismiss this intellectual posturing as being facile or disingenuous we shall have recourse to Gadamer: “All questioning and desire to know presuppose a knowledge that one does not know; so much so, indeed, that *a particular lack of knowledge leads to a particular question*” (1989: 366, emphasis mine). We know, only because we do not know; this is the enabling constraint of thought, where the conditions of possibility also become its conditions of impossibility:

Yet we should not say that Reason is *powerless to think this*; it is constituted by that lack of power. It is the principle of identity. It is the thought of the self-identity of the natural being. It cannot even determine the supplement as its other, as the irrational and non-natural, for the supplement comes *naturally* to put itself in Nature’s place. (Derrida, 1997: 149)

By claiming that everything became discourse in the absence of a transcendental signified Derrida removes the ontological ground for play within structural ensembles. This is similar to rejecting the philosophical search for the ontological foundation of convention in Garfield’s reading of Nāgārjuna. In doing so, Derrida also opens up philosophy as a discourse to its Other (in this case Literature), and argues how the notion of an ordinary language masquerades its fundamental lack of identity by standing in place for something else. What Derrida calls metaphor names this fundamental lack, which is in turn supplemented by a charade of impossible names in order to be conceptually consistent, as “an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of *identification* endures”(Derrida, 1998: 28, emphasis mine). In doing so, Gasché argues:

“Deconstruction does not merely destroy metaphysical concepts; it shows how these concepts and themes draw their possibility from that which ultimately makes them impossible” (Gasché, 1986: 175). Language (and specifically writing) inscribes the structural and economic relations to an Other constitutive of self-identity and essence. In the following section we will consider the effects of such inscription and argue how this notion of alterity cannot be absolute. Hence, while Derrida ranges through the various tropes or metaphors that constitute philosophical discourse, they necessarily take the form of detours as the concept under consideration is never fully present in a decisive manner:

*Our question is still identity.* What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging? (Derrida, 1998b: 14, emphasis mine)

§ *The (M)other of Heterological Discourse*

The previous section established the universal problematic posed by language, with the result that everything became discourse. What Derrida calls metaphor names a fundamental lack in the principle of identity, and I have argued that the inner logic of his heterological discourse necessitates no single name is capable of saturating the field. This section will consider the orientation towards the Other within a heterological discourse. This orientation is not simply moving towards (i.e., in terms of linear progression), but also coming from, the Other. An exemplary instance of this ambivalent, “pro-regressing” orientation towards the Other is found at the moment of asserting one’s self-identity. It should be noted that when Derrida talks about identity, he does not only refer to self-identity, but also a process of identification<sup>48</sup>. These assertions can only take place within language, though the articulation of one’s self-possession results in dispossession by language, leading Derrida to claim: “We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language

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<sup>48</sup> From a Mādhyamika perspective, this reificationist tendency manifests itself through distinctions of “is and is not” in language, leading to either false views of eternalism or nihilism respectively. The Mādhyamika adopts a certain attitude towards language, though I am hesitant to call it a “philosophy of language” as such. Nāgārjuna’s MMK may not explicitly address the problem of language, though it does deploy the *catuskoṭi* as the Four-Cornered Negation to negate and exhaust all logical possibilities of the copula *to be*. Language, for the Mādhyamika, fall within the spectrum of conventional truth (within the structure of Two-truths). This also means that it has only provisional status. Nāgārjuna is deeply aware, however, of the reificationist tendency that language supports in its bivalence, and is very specific about this:

To say “it is” is to grasp for permanence.  
To say “it is not” is to adopt the view of nihilism.  
Therefore a wise person  
Does not say “exists” or “does not exist.” (MMK XV: 10)

And,

What language expresses is nonexistent.  
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.  
Unrisen and unceased, like nirvāṇa  
Is the nature of things. (MMK XVIII: 7)

I will not here speculate why Nāgārjuna does not present an explicit critique (or philosophy) of language in the MMK. See (Garfield, 1995: 280-82) for a discussion regarding ostensive language and its role within Two-truths.

by which we attempt to seize it” (1997: 141). This maddening logic of dispossession raises a complex of questions: “But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property?” (Derrida, 1998b: 17). I will attend to this shortly, and the central paradox I hope to address here is this: *the language one hears oneself speak is at once the most intimate, and intimidated, by the other*. Derrida considers the possibility of such a private language, as belonging exclusively to oneself, and to which one’s unique identity belongs – this he calls monolingualism: “I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me” (1998: 1).

What lies at the very heart of the problem is the possibility of someone claiming: “my own language”, or specifically: “I have only one language; [yet] it is not mine” (Derrida, 1998b: 1). What does this really mean, and what is so problematic about it? Derrida’s above remark on possession is deliberately cryptic, as it frustrates any straightforward attempt at deriving a univocal meaning – in this manner he is, arguably, *playing for keeps*. This style of writing has certainly not endeared Derrida to analytic philosophers believing in the sobriety of sound and valid argumentation. In rejecting their allegations of sophistry, however, I shall not sue for erudition either; rather, I am inclined to see it more as a form of percipience on Derrida’s part. Once we consider that language is not a transparent tool, the manner (and style) in which one employs it becomes significant. Derrida’s style is certainly exorbitant in this regard, and a surfeit of performativity overruns the constative element of his propositions, not necessarily, however, to the detriment of the point he is trying to *demonstrate*. In fact, Derrida argues: “One cannot speak of a language except in that language. Even if to place it outside itself” (1998: 22). This conflation of theoretical

understanding (i.e., language is never clear and straightforward as we think), along with its practical demonstration allows him to be conceptually consistent, frustrating or dispossessing our hermeneutical enterprise in the process. In doing so, Derrida consequently demonstrates how language bears the necessity of its own critique as the relation between performative and constative axes are pushed to their limits.

I have attempted to reinterpret the above statement by isolating the propositions as premises in a logical form; I have also considered redeploying it in the *catuṣkoṭi* form used by Nāgārjuna. The truth is, neither method yields satisfactory results; there is always some form of contradiction or equivocation that impedes a coherent reading. “Is language in possession”, should this be taken to mean that language is *in our* possession, or that language is in possession *of us*? How does one decide, before moving on to its predicate, either as a “possessing possession” or “possessed possession”, when it is unclear what is to be predicated (L. *praedicatum*: *prae* [beforehand] + *dicare* [make known]), as its property? Furthermore, what does “possessing possession” mean, as a possession that threatens to possess us (or language) just as we (or language) possess(es) it (or us)? This is even before we move to the 2nd order predicates of “possessed in exclusive possession” or “possessing in exclusive possession”. By this point, one is quite justified in asking, “who possesses what”, or “what possesses whom”? What is being staged here for us is the very conceptual inconsistency (or indeed, impossibility) of property and possession, along with corollary questions of belonging and identity; they are demonstrated to be undecidable, and one should not expect what is undecidable to fall neatly into truth-tables or logical form. It also points to the ambivalence that language supports in its bivalency, for which my remarks about Derrida’s style above are pertinent towards understanding his conceptual scruples. Having said this, however, it is not entirely impossible to represent the “flawed” premises

using such logical methods, though it does not tell us *decisively* what the utterance is about. We end up becoming just as lost, because the premises branch off into completely *other* directions. It is precisely for the same reasons that I have my reservations about *over-reading* into the *catuṣkoṭi* as a means of understanding Nāgārjuna. While it is perfectly justifiable to demand that Derrida write unequivocally and “get to the point”, that, however, necessarily misses the very point of its performance.

Now, it is one thing for Derrida to say – quite straight-forwardly – that language is never completely in our possession, while remaining in perfect control of his utterance (thus demonstrating the very opposite of what he is saying, like a Cretan liar); and quite another thing altogether to demonstrate it in the way that he has, *viz.*:

A *heterological* enterprise that compounds with the forces that try to annul it while simultaneously unhinging them by inscribing or generalizing them differs from a *contradictory* discourse – that is, from one that, owing to theoretical weakness or to deliberation, accommodates contradictions in an otherwise homological discourse – in that it explicitly assumes a critical responsibility by *unflaggingly problematizing* its own status as a discourse borrowing from a heritage the very resources required for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. (Gasché, 1986: 168-9, emphasis mine)

It is in this manner I understand Derrida’s discourse as heterological, rather than a

contradictory one<sup>49</sup>. While it is one aspect of a heterological discourse to admit contradictions without necessarily reconciling them, the defining hallmark for me lies in its *assumption* of critical responsibility. Which is always *owed* to the other, as debts. This state of indebtedness circulates within the economy of the same, and this circulation (either as movement of signification in its discursive trajectory or orbit; or even as movement from conventional to ultimate truth in Nāgārjuna) may underscore the relatedness or dependency of concepts, but it this form of dependency is no longer underwritten by Being.

Considering whatever has been said thus far, what we can agree upon is that the term possession (and property) proves more problematic than we otherwise think. What does possession name then, other than the relation negotiating between the self and the other within a closed economy? Is that relation possible? Yes, to the extent we may make intelligible utterances about it, as the proprietorship of an object by a subject. No, in the sense that this proprietorship is always *en abyme*, a self-vitiating relation. In other words, this relation of possession is predicated upon the possibility of there being no relation in the first place: “Consequently, anyone should be able to declare under oath: I have only one language and it is not mine; my ‘own’ language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other”

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<sup>49</sup> For reasons that should be clear by now, Nāgārjuna’s discourse is certainly not a contradictory one, in that he does not forward any autonomous (Skt. *svātantra*) arguments against his opponents:

When an analysis is made through emptiness,  
If someone were to offer a reply,  
That reply will fail, since it will presuppose  
Exactly what is to be proven.

When an explanation is made through emptiness,  
Whoever would find fault with it  
Will find no fault, since the criticism will presuppose  
Exactly what is to be proven. (MMK IV: 8-9)

This also demonstrates the *rapprochement* between the *prāsaṅgika* and deconstructivist methods as being heterological, i.e., by “borrowing from a heritage the very resources required for the deconstruction of that heritage itself”.

(Derrida, 1998b: 25). What does Derrida intend with this monolingualism, and in what capacity does he sue for it, considering that he also speaks (or writes) more than one language? Derrida marks this with a double postulation:

1. *We only ever speak one language – or rather one idiom only.*
2. *We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure idiom.*

(1998: 8)

What is intended as *monolanguage* is the possibility of the idiomatic (Gk. *idiōma*: private property, peculiar phraseology; from *idiousthai*: to make one's own, or private). Now, one could either dismiss Derrida's claim as pure disingenuousness on his part; or one is obliged to engage with what is *expressly* a private problem of belonging or possession. Before going further, it has to be noted that this monolanguage (or the pure idiom) does not preclude the possibility that one might be effectively bilingual, or even trilingual:

One can, of course, speak several languages. There are speakers who are competent in more than one language. Some even write several languages at a time (prostheses, grafts, translation, transposition). But do they not always do it with a view to an absolute idiom? and [*sic*] in the promise of a still unheard-of language? (Derrida, 1998b: 67)

What does this entail then? If this monolanguage does not preclude, but indeed necessarily includes, by holding in reserve, the possibility of different languages then it is clear that this monolanguage is anything but *monological*. But there is also another sense in which this monolingualism is an absolute idiom, belonging resolutely to oneself, as the core of our

linguistic being from which our various utterances originate; and always with a view *towards* this absolute idiom, as its key or master language.

This particular notion of monolanguage is closely affiliated with what we commonly call a mother tongue, this affiliation (L. *affiliat-* adopted as a son) raising at once issues of filiation and inheritance:

If (as we are saying along with others, and after them) there is no such thing as *the* language, if there is no such thing as absolute monolingualism, one still has to define what a mother tongue is in its active division, and what is transplanted between this language and the one called foreign. What is transplanted and lost there, belonging neither to the one nor the other: the incommunicable. (Derrida, 1998b: 7- 8)

The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable. *To inhabit*: this is a value that is quite *disconcerting* and equivocal; one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia. (Derrida, 1998b: 58)

Derrida here challenges what we understand by a mother tongue, and how we commonly distinguish it from what is thus considered foreign. In this regard one may also call it the *native* tongue, though this cannot be divorced from issues of *nativity* and origin. Speaking of his own identity as a French-Algerian, Derrida writes: “When I said that the only language I speak is *not mine*, I did not say it was foreign to me. There is a difference. It is not entirely

the same thing, we shall come to it” (Derrida, 1998b: 5). This presents a paradox: surely something that is “not mine” has to be considered “foreign” or “alien”, and in what way is the French language both Derrida’s mother tongue without belonging to him at the same time? We need to attend closely to the conceptual fecundity of this mother tongue and its relation to what Derrida is urging as monolingualism.

Derrida has first raised the difficulty in asserting one’s self-identity, and I have argued that this assertion necessarily takes place within language, making it present, by presenting what is absent through the detours of language as a discourse of the (absent) self: “The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence” (1991a: 61). We are, however, dispossessed in the very attempt of claiming this self-possession through the medium of language, leading Derrida to claim: “The specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me is also a law of language (1997: 141). This bid for self-possession is compounded when we realise that the very tools we employ do not belong to us. This is counter-intuitive, as the common understanding of language is that it mirrors faithfully what we intend, whence the specular dispossession that Derrida wrote of. To make this more explicit, Derrida talks about monolingualism and the pure idiom as the core of our linguistic being, going through the detour of the mother tongue; in doing so Derrida returns the discourse to a more familiar territory (in every sense of the *oikos* and domestic scene), if only to aggravate the subsequent sense of de-familiarisation. Clearly, we conceive of our mother tongue as our most intimate possession, one that is necessarily given, as our linguistic inheritance, the language in which we *think*, silently allying unspoken speech with our notion of selfhood in an ideal unity. In this respect it belongs naturally to us, for we *recognise* ourselves in its immediacy without interval nor second. Perhaps it would be more precise to say second-*ary*, not in a derivative sense, however, as this manner of linguistic-existential recognition is necessarily specular.

What we also call narcissism names this doubling act of anamnesis and amnesia: the former a pair of doppelgänger, recollecting each other in mimicry; the latter a mutual forgetting of the mirror, resulting in singular calamity. The fecundity of this mother tongue lies in its nativeness (local vs. foreign, rootedness vs. transplantation) and nativity (birthright, origin), though they also serve as a double interdict annulling each other:

Certainly, everything that has, say, interested me for a long time – on account of writing, the trace, the deconstruction of phallogocentrism and ‘the’ Western metaphysics (which I have never identified, regardless of whatever has been repeated about it ad nauseum, as a single homogeneous thing watched over by its definite article in the singular; I have so often and so explicitly said the opposite!) – all of that could *not* not proceed from the strange reference to an ‘elsewhere’ of which the place and the language were unknown and prohibited even to myself, as if I were trying to *translate* into the only language and the only French Western culture that I have at my disposal, the culture into which I was thrown at birth, a possibility that is inaccessible to myself, as if I were trying to translate a speech I did not yet know into my ‘monolanguage,’ as if I were still weaving some veil from the wrong side [...]. (Derrida, 1998b: 70)

This Franco-Algerian identity, this “only language and the only French Western culture” at Derrida’s disposal is necessarily contingent – what we call our inheritance is more properly a form of adoption, and there is nothing necessary about this facticity of “thrownness”. Worse, in Derrida’s case the monolanguage foisted upon him is in fact the argot of the coloniser, by definition a foreign tongue, into whose tapestry he is now weaving, always “from the wrong side”. Its nativity lies in its status as an originary language according to which others are

translated, and “always with a view to this absolute idiom”. Gasché argues that:

An origin has no meaning whatsoever without such a possible space that it engenders and orients. It follows from this that an origin is necessarily an inscribed origin. In order to be a selfsame origin, it must irreducibly relate to an Other in general, and in order to be the origin *of* something, it must harbor the possibility of becoming other. (1986: 159)

This originary mother tongue thus inscribes the strange reference to an “elsewhere”, its maternal harbour at once shelter and harbinger of this possibility of becoming other. It is, without a doubt, the most spectacular form of invagination. Consequently, we do not dwell within this differential space except by inhabiting it, fastened by the twin moorings of exile and nostalgia, suspended in “a sort of relationship without relationship” like a half-severed umbilical cord (Derrida, 1998b: 71). For these various reasons it would be more consistent to view the mother tongue as “the monolanguage *of* the other. The *of* signifies not so much property as provenance: language is for the other, coming from the other, *the* coming of the other”(Derrida, 1998b: 68). In the hyphenated French-Algerian identity the mother tongue is a *möbius mot* without interval, its hyphenated disjunction ensconced in a powerful ventriloquism, silencing twin crests of displacement and alienation within the horizon of its parenthesis, *viz.*, what I am now obliged to call the (M)other tongue:

The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes,

and bombs. (Derrida, 1998b: 11)

If I have chosen to capitalise this M within parenthesis, it is not to confer upon it any legitimacy nor transcendence, despite its collusion with either the dominant language of the master, or its status as a meta-language; both these breaches do not take place in the absence of a context, and its limits (ironically, the very same ones put in place to silence dissent above) are reaffirmed by the burgeoning parenthesis it seeks to transgress:

Now, since a transgression must, in order to affirm itself *as transgression*, conserve and confirm in one way or another that which it exceeds, insofar as it *is* only with respect to the limit it crosses, it can only consist of a sort of displacement of the limits and closure of the discourse. To exceed the discourse of philosophy [or any other form of discourse for that matter] cannot possibly mean to step *outside* the closure, because the outside belongs to the categories of the inside. (Gasché, 1986: 169)

This is a subtle point, and one that is highly significant in Derrida's approach. Just as the self is dispossessed by the language of the other, this notion of otherness itself cannot be absolute, but must depend upon that which it surpasses, exactly like a sort of relationship without relationship. To the extent that the (M)other tongue is impossible as an absolutely Other language, it also marks the possibility of a differential space within heterological discourse<sup>50</sup>:

One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is the other in *différance*, one is the *différance* of the other

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<sup>50</sup> I am inclined to view Nāgārjuna's assertion that the limits of *saṃsāra* are the limits of *nirvāṇa* as such an utterance within a differential space.

(Derrida, 1991a: 71)

Compare this with Nāgārjuna,

A different thing depends on a different thing for its difference.

Without a different thing, a different thing wouldn't be different.

It is not tenable for that which depends on something else

To be different from it.

If a different thing were different from a different thing,

Without a different thing, a different thing could exist.

But without that different thing, that different thing does not exist.

It follows that it doesn't exist.

Difference is not in a different thing.

Nor is it in a nondifferent thing.

*If difference does not exist,*

*Neither difference nor identical things exist.* (MMK XIV: 5-7, emphasis mine)

To understand the effects of this inscription we shall have to take a detour to understand this movement or displacement of signification. It will also demonstrate how this monolingualism is incapable of becoming a meta-language in its own right.

We have thus far established the originary status of the mother tongue, that is, to the extent that we may understand it as “the obliterated origin of absence and presence” that is in

*différance* (Derrida, 1997: 143). I will not here rehearse its differing and deferring movements, except to point out that this necessarily takes place within a certain economy:

The same, precisely, is *différance* (with an *a*) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same [...]. (Derrida, 1991a: 70)

This notion of economy takes into consideration the differential relationship between concepts within a structural ensemble, as “the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another”. As I will argue here and in the following section, we may give this equivocal passage the name of translation, though it also inevitably marks its impossibility. Two points need to be made at this juncture: Firstly, this notion of economy takes on a completely different dimension within Nāgārjuna’s notion of Two-Truths, as *vyavahāra-satya* (trans. conventional truth); in exploring its infrastructural possibilities through Derrida we not only understand why this otherness is never absolute, but we also address how the notion of *parabhāva* (trans. otherness-essence) is strictly untenable within *pratītya-samutpāda*, just as Nāgārjuna has argued above that: “It is not tenable for that which depends on something else/ To be different from it”. Secondly, I will reiterate Derrida’s point here that the purpose of doing so is *not* simply to see the opposition erase itself<sup>51</sup>, though whatever conceptual efficacy they possess is ultimately annulled or suspended, on the basis

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<sup>51</sup> This is central to my disagreement with Magliola’s and Loy’s reading of Derrida, in their wanton application of *sous rature* like some magical eraser.

of this inscription that marks their impossible property or essence: “A concept is thus constituted by an interval, by its difference from another concept. But this interval brings the concept into its own by simultaneously dividing it. *The property of a concept depends entirely on its difference from the excluded concept*” (Gasché, 1986: 129, emphasis mine). This is the sense in which these various concepts or names are considered *impossible*, insofar as they continue to be conceived upon a fundamental lack, especially when it is the lack of an impossible attribute (essence)<sup>52</sup>. Having said that, however, it is not necessarily wrong to claim such a lack exists; just as Derrida has borrowed the notion of a mother tongue, if only to invalidate it subsequently – it is quite a different thing altogether to insist upon this lack as being somehow *essential*: “This abiding ‘alienation’ [*aliénation à demeure*] appears, like ‘lack,’ to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, it alienates no *ipseity*, no property, and no self that has ever been able to represent its watchful eye” (Derrida, 1998b: 25). These are two related moments of the same movement, and if we cannot even make such utterances with relative impunity then the technical precision of our philosophical speculation only serves to make absurdists of us all<sup>53</sup>.

I will turn to Gasché here for his incisive characterisation of inscription:

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I shall marshal Garfield’s reading of Nāgārjuna to lend further support here: “The lack of inherent existence that is asserted is not the lack of a property possessed by some entities but not by others, or a property that an entity could be imagined to have, but rather the lack of an impossible attribute” (Garfield, 1994: 235). What is intended by inherent existence (*svabhāva*) here cannot be divorced from its concomitant attributes of essence and independence, or being self-identical. In this way we also establish both their relatedness and dependency, but this dependency is no longer grounded in Being.

<sup>53</sup>

In the same way Nāgārjuna urges that:

Those who do not understand  
 The *distinction* drawn between these two truths  
 Do not understand  
 The Buddha’s profound truth.

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,  
 The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
 Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
 Liberation is not achieved. (MMK 24:9-10, emphasis mine)

*Position* here translates the Hegelian concept of *Setzung*, the determination of one with regard to an Other, or to something in contrast with it. Position is thus a form of constitution by means of which something becomes what it is through its relation to something other. *Inscription*, however, does not signify such a relation; on the contrary, it is the determination of positional constitution, of the relation of the same and the Other, for it demonstrates that this position refers to something that cannot in any case be posited – the alterity of the Other – since this alterity is itself the ground of possibility of a positing self. Inscription in this sense refers to an irreducible reference to Other, anterior to an already constituted subject that presupposes this reference as well as that which such a subject constitutes through positioning. (1986: 158)

What is clear from this is that inscription differs from position, in that it is not a dialectical (op)position, *viz.*, “a form of constitution by means of which something becomes what it is through its relation to something other”. This relationship remains fairly straightforward, falling within the purview of binary logic. What is revealed, however, is that this otherness cannot be maintained *on its own*, either as absolute alterity or *parabhāva*, and the notion of relation itself becomes suspended in a differential impasse, “produc[ing] what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible” (Derrida, 1997: 143). To paraphrase Nāgārjuna quoted in italics above, if the absolute other does not exist, neither can any notion of difference, and therefore neither different nor identical things exist as a result (MMK XIV: 7). Gasché calls this an instance of intermediary discourse, “concerned with a middle in which the differends are suspended and preserved, but which is not simply a dialectical

middle” (1986: 151, emphasis mine).

With this in hand, we can now return our discussion to the originary mother tongue, along with Gasché’s notion of inscription: “The alterity *in general* to which inscription refers is the possibility of sameness. For that very reason it is also the possibility of becoming different, other; and indeed, such a possibility must affect all self-present and selfsame origin if it is to be the origin of something” (1986: 158). There is no unbroached origin that could serve as the master language like some rosetta stone in orienting our varied utterances:

But what remains insurmountable in it [monolingualism of the other], whatever the necessity of legitimacy of all the emancipations, is quite simply the ‘there is language,’ a ‘there is language which does not exist,’ namely that there is not metalanguage, and that *a* language shall always be called upon to speak about *the* language – *because* the latter does not exist. (Derrida, 1998b: 69)

The absence of this meta-language (as absolutely and resolutely Other) means that the definite article remains, to all intents and purposes, lost at sea; meanwhile, we are thrown into absolute translation in our monolingual obstinacy without a source language:

He [the monolingual] is thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language [*langue de départ*]. For him, there are only target languages [*langues d’arrivée*], if you will, the remarkable experience being, however, that these languages just cannot manage to reach themselves because they no longer

know where they are coming from, what they are speaking *from* and what the sense of their journey is. (Derrida, 1998b: 61)

As one might appreciate, the problematic trajectory of this equivocal passage is also a question of translation. What I have established here is how the other in heterological discourse cannot be absolute, even as it impinges upon our sense of identity. This other is simultaneously grounds and ungrounds, and the inscribed relation is no longer that of a dialectical middle, but always in a sort of relationship without relationship. In looking at the mother tongue and its conceptual fecundity I have managed to address the paradox of how the language we speak is at once the most intimate and intimidated by the other, marking both its disjunction and ventriloquism. I also established that there is no natural property of language as its essence, just as the pure idiom remains an ideal dream of translation, in that it is incapable of serving as the meta-language because it is never resolutely Other. Consequently, I argue that we find ourselves lost in translation, because of this equivocal passage from one to another. In the next section I will trace the possibility of this translation along with the economics surrounding its discourse. In doing so, I will also situate it within its proper domestic tableau, with God the Father now laying down the double interdict as YHWH and Babel – the former an untranslatable name, the latter an idiom of confusion.

## § *The Economics of Translation*

I opened this chapter on Derrida with the structuralist problematic of the centred structure; specifically, at the moment where – as a result of its absence – Derrida claims that language invaded the universal problematic. For Derrida, this meant that everything became discourse, and as the centre can no longer be thought of as a present-being this also removed the ontological grounds for the “play of signifying references that institute language” (Derrida, 1997: 7), based upon “a fundamental *immobility* and a reassuring *certitude*” (Derrida, 1978: 352, emphasis mine). This loss of fundamental immobility (or fixity) is highly significant to this section on translation, and it also meant that any notion of entitative identity is thus impossible and henceforth only named by metaphor through the *detours* of language. Derrida calls this white mythology, naming the incapability of metaphysics to sustain on its own “[a] sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present *logos*” (1997: 15). According to Derrida, philosophy is characterised by this self-eliminating process of generating metaphor. I wish to argue this non-fixity is a key aspect of Derrida’s work, and that the movement of play, *différance*, “is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general” (Derrida, 1991a: 63). This is equally fascinating as it is frustrating. It is fascinating because of this equivocal passage between a charade of proper names, each presupposing and implicating the other. It is frustrating, because every single one of them are consequently demonstrated to be impossible. The possibility of their dependency is therefore predicated upon the impossibility of their independence. For a concept to possess an essence in its univocity means it is necessarily autonomous and independent; and if Derrida claims *différance* to be the *possibility of conceptuality* through the very movement of play, he is not simply reacting against the principle of identity. More

importantly, I believe he is *affirming* their relative dependency.

This is where my reading of Derrida differs from Magliola and Loy, in their shared focus on Derrida's reaction against the principle of identity. As I have maintained throughout, this is not necessarily wrong, though in opposing *différance* against any stable notion of identity they inevitably perform the same reification that Derrida took pains to avoid. This gives them licence to lament that, while Derrida has deconstructed logocentrism he remained nonetheless mired in signs, without *attending* in detail to what the deconstruction consisted in. I believe this lament to be symptomatic of such economic misreading. To put things into perspective, it would not be acceptable to say – certainly not for Magliola and Loy – that while Nāgārjuna has systematically *emptied* the fundamental categories of the phenomenal world he is left with nothing but emptiness (i.e., nihilism). Certainly, this is a view forwarded by some readers of Nāgārjuna – while I maintain that this is incorrect I will also, nonetheless, stress its necessary possibility – though the concept of *śūnyatā* (assuming for sake of argument it is one) cannot be divorced from its context of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which would otherwise invalidate such a view. Similarly, Derrida's deconstruction of any entitative identity cannot be understood outside of this context of play. In fact, Derrida insists upon this, quite (in)famously in the dictum, “*il n'ya pas de hors-texte*” (1997: 158), even though this is marshalled against him to demonstrate *ad nauseam* the very opposite of what he is saying. To which an adequate rejoinder may be found just moments prior to that assertion, where Derrida urges that critical production needs to recognise and respect the classical exigencies and be clear, or else it would authorise itself to say almost anything.

I have chosen to highlight this dependency in my exegesis of Derrida, by attending to the filial ties between domesticated (Gk. *oikos*, household) concepts circulating within an

economy (Gk. *oikonomia*, *oikos* + *nomos*) of signs. This thought of economy cannot be separated from the law (Gk. *nomos*), for the economic is implied within the nomic itself: “as soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is *nomy*, there is economy” (Derrida, 1992: 6). The suffix *-nomy* is related to the Greek term *nomos* (trans. law), as well as *nemein* (trans. distribute). It makes sense then to ask what does economy describe, and what is its relation to translation? It describes an originary scene – the Tower of Babel<sup>54</sup> – where God the Father institutes this economy by laying down the law. There is, at that very moment, partition (L. *partiri*, divide into parts) and parturition (L. *parturire*, be in labour). Before going further, I have mentioned previously that the trajectory of this equivocal passage from one term to another is fundamentally a question of translation. Consequently, we find ourselves lost in translation, because there is nothing necessary about an equivocal passage: there are always different routes, meandering paths. Derrida claims: “In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but *in another sense*, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible” (Derrida, 1998b: 56-7). In attending to Derrida’s account of the Tower of Babel I hope to demonstrate this economic nature of translation, tracing its circulation as both gift and debt within the context of the family household, according to the law as translation. To understand translation as an equivocal passage is to understand this duplicitous movement: coming and going, at once gift and debt, sent and returned, tendered and rendered, annulled and acquitted.

The Tower of Babel traces the origin of languages and the birth of nations. What is exemplary about this account and its relation to translation? According to Derrida:

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<sup>54</sup> “Des Tours de Babel.” The title can be read in various ways. *Des* means “some”; but it also means “of the,” or “about the.” *Tours* could be towers, twists, tricks, turns, or tropes, as in a “turn” of phrase. Taken together, *des* and *tours* have the same sound as *détour*, the word for detour. To mark that economy in language the title has not been changed. (Translator’s Note, Derrida, 2002: 134)

This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as* impossibility. Now, in general one pays little attention to this fact: it is in translation that we most often read this narrative. And in this translation, the proper name retains a singular destiny, since it is not translated in its appearance as proper name. (2002: 109)

There is, on the one hand, the origin of languages through the multiplication of tongues which is thus condemned to translation, at once necessary and impossible. Yet, on the other hand, we necessarily read this story *in translation*, except for the proper name Babel – which is always rendered as Confusion – though in doing so it is no longer a proper name but a common noun: “[Babel] is not only a proper name, the reference of a pure signifier to a single being – and for this reason untranslatable – but a common noun related to the generality of a meaning” (Derrida, 2002: 105). For this reason, Derrida maintains that by rendering the proper name Babel as *Bavel* (confusion) we are not actually translating it: “It comments, explains, paraphrases, but does not translate” (Derrida, 2002: 109). What exactly is Derrida’s point, for we *clearly* understand what Babel means<sup>55</sup>?

The etymology of Babel as confusion is, in fact, apocryphal. By pointing out that we read this story in translation I believe Derrida highlights its necessarily *post*-Babelian nature, i.e., after the confusion of our tongues. I would argue here it is therefore immaterial whether

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<sup>55</sup> To make things simpler, take for example the proper name “Derrida”, regularly used in the question to students: “Have you brought your Derrida today?” The proper name designates the French-Algerian thinker as a person just as it is used metonymically to stand for the discourse that he made famous. There is a certain circularity to the proper name Babel, for it not only designates the confused discourse that mistranslates it (whence its impossibility), it is also the name of a necessary but impossible translation given by God.

we read this biblical narrative in English, Latin, or French, or any of our *received* tongues<sup>56</sup>. Nevertheless, what is named henceforth by this proper name – Babel – is universally translated (or at least ostensibly so) as “confusion”, with a certain monolingual obstinacy, “by a kind of *associative confusion* that a unique tongue rendered possible, one *thought* it translated in that very tongue, by a common noun signifying what *we* translate as confusion” (Derrida, 2002: 104-5, emphasis mine). This is inherently problematic. A proper name is, by definition, untranslatable. God’s name, YHWH, resists translation; indeed we are condemned to translation precisely *in his name*, Babel, after the interdict confounding all tongues. Babel therefore names this interdict given by God to the city and its tower:

*And therefore the name thereof was called Babel, because there the language of the whole earth was confounded: and from thence the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of all countries. (Gen. 11.9, emphasis mine)*

Scholars believe the city is Nimrod’s Babylon, though it is never explicitly named as such, and it is clear that Babel names the city and tower (not simply the confusion) from which God banished the Semites. I will point out here with Derrida that the proper name Babel is *kept in the original* – even in our translated versions of the narrative – and we have confusedly translated it in our post-Babelian tongues *as such*. That we can all agree upon, no matter what language we speak, by maintaining the proper name in the original so that it speaks the universal idiom of confusion, even as it confuses all idioms. In this way I argue that we are still trying “to make a name for ourselves” with this very name Babel, “in a universal tongue which would also be an idiom, and gathering a filiation” (Derrida, 2002: 107); even if it means we are unified only in our collective confusion. Derrida continues:

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<sup>56</sup> In this way, I also view the mother tongues into which we are born as our linguistic inheritance, taking the form of a gift.

“[...] at the very moment when pronouncing ‘Babel’ we sense the impossibility of deciding whether this name belongs, properly and simply, to *one* tongue. And it matters that this undecidability is at work in a struggle for the proper name within a scene of genealogical indebtedness” (2002: 111). I will say that Babel belongs to all tongues (in their generality) and to none (on its own), condemning us to the singular destiny of this equivocal passage between translation and its impossibility:

He destines them to translation, he subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible; in a stroke with his translatable-untranslatable name he delivers a universal reason (it will no longer be subject to the rule of a particular nation), but he simultaneously limits its very universality: forbidden transparency, impossible univocity. (Derrida, 2002: 111)

The nature of this equivocal passage cannot be divorced from its economic circulation, and we find at the moment of its institution a domestic scene of partition and parturition. The former because of the exile imposed upon the Semites, by dividing them into tribes and scattering (distributing) them. The latter because stemming from this division (between native and foreign, father and mother) is also the inauguration “of the multiplicity of idioms, of what in other words are usually called *mother tongues*” (Derrida, 2002: 105, emphasis mine).

Recalling what I have established in the previous section regarding the conceptual fecundity of this mother tongue: “the monolingualism of the other would be that sovereignty, that law originating from elsewhere, certainly, but also primarily the very language of the Law. And the Law as Language” (Derrida, 1998b: 39). This law from elsewhere is God: “In

giving his name, a name of his choice, in giving all names, the father would be at the origin of language, and that power would belong by right to God the father. And the name of God the father would be the name of that origin of tongues” (Derrida, 2002: 105). Now, in the post-diluvian age of Babylon there was one common language to all:

And the earth was of one tongue, and of the same speech. And when they removed from the east, they found a plain in the land of Sennaar, and *dwelt* in it. (Gen. 11.1-2, emphasis mine)

As I have argued before, there can be no form of dwelling without this necessary sense of rootedness in monolingual idiom. This is critical to my reading of Derrida’s Babel: in order to dwell the Semites built a city, and more importantly a tower, if they were to survive a second deluge living in the plain, just as in the same way we wish to dwell in our mother tongue as a maternal harbour. In fact, I am tempted to read the deluge as a flux of non-differentiation, in its capacity for washing away the conceptual dualisms inherent in our language. It is appropriate that the Semites dwell *in the plain*, because their common idiom also meant that there was no concept of foreignness which would otherwise require translation – a conflation of topos and topic. The flux presented by the deluge, therefore, I argue, is directly opposed to this fixed form of dwelling, as it threatens to engulf everything in its path. I will also here recall the underwater sojourn of Nāgārjuna, and the distinction between dry land (as the realm of binary logic) and the sea (as the realm of non-differentiation). Perhaps we might one day better understand this intimate relation between our bipedal mode of existence and our need for what is called a ground or support, along with its twin dialectical oppositions. It comes as no wonder to me, therefore, that Derrida is preoccupied with the *pas* (step), the *démarche*, the gait and twin legs of Socrates and Plato, in

his attempt to articulate this relationship and its errancy. The problem with this towering construction as I see it, however, is not that the tower may reach heaven itself, but “to make a name for themselves” in the process of doing so. To make a name is also to construct a paradigm in which to dwell<sup>57</sup>. This directly contravenes God’s sovereign right, and amounts to nothing less than a declaration of independence from God. Derrida claims: “Translation, the desire for translation, is not thinkable without this *correspondence* with a thought of God” (2002: 116). Without this notion of correspondence, which is also a form of dependence that underwrites the meaning of our utterances, there would be linguistic catastrophe. Which, arguably, is what the Tower of Babel is about.

Derrida had chosen to read in this biblical story a narrative of colonial violence by the Semites, universalising their idiom in the desire of bringing reason to the world. I argue that this linguistic imperialism proclaims itself by gathering its people and erecting a tower at its centre, saying *come*. What I will point out here, which Derrida does not, is there is a two-fold nature to this imperative that is doubled in the narrative: it is mentioned twice by the builders and twice in relation to God, and in it we may trace the countervailing movements of this (dialectical) confrontation between the Council of Man and the Council of God. The first mention by the builders expresses a unifying, centripetal orientation and their desire to dwell, calling them to gather brick and mortar. The second mention by the builders expresses their aspiration, to raise *upwards* a tower that may reach the heavens. In doing both the builders make a name for themselves, dwelling in its fixity. In this regard I view the tower as a logocentric structure devised by its builders, in their desire to assimilate and totalise. God *comes down* to view the construction and is understandably displeased, though I should also point out there is no logical necessity for God to *come down* just to view what is happening –

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<sup>57</sup> And in this respect I would also maintain that this biblical story is arguably the most vivid and exemplary account of *kalpana* (Skt. thought-construction) we have in language.

he is, after all, by definition, omniscient. This coming down from on high opposes the vaunting aspiration of the builders to reach upwards. Unfortunately, however, there is no compromise, no middle ground in this narrative. God exhorts the heavenly host to follow him: “Come ye, therefore, let us go down, and there confound their tongues, that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen. 11.7). In this instance, God’s exhortation, *come*, expresses disunity and centrifugal (dis)orientation that he imposes upon the builders, scattering them and multiplying their tongues. *Come* is at once incitement and exhortation, coming from below and above respectively. While one may choose to read in this nothing more than linguistic ambivalence, what I am committed to arguing, however, is that this ambivalence also stresses for me the equivocal passages leading to and coming from the other, such that we never decisively attain the other shore of our discourse. It also stresses that any conception of *différance* cannot be understood in terms of uni-directionality if it is also to be the possibility of conceptuality in general. To use a term employed by Derrida earlier, it “pro-regresses”; and I argue we cannot fully understand the significance of this narrative without taking into consideration these countervailing movements. In doing so, however, I am not simply stressing the structural symmetry of these movements, instead, they cancel each other out, *coming together* and *coming undone* all at once.

All of this happens at Babel, not as the seat of confusion that we previously thought, but at the gate of God, derived from the Babylonian *bab-ilu* (*bab* - gate and *ilu* or *el* - God). It is at the gate of God where YHWH anointed all languages and imposed their necessary translation. How should we make sense of this then? I believe this gate to be exemplary in its own right<sup>58</sup>, as it inaugurates fall and exile. At the structural level of the narrative, the gate of God also locates the undecidable point mediating the dialectical opposition between Man

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<sup>58</sup> I also believe that a reading of this gate in conjunction with the gateless gate (*mumonkan*) of Zen Buddhism would be fruitful, though this would also take me beyond the scope of Nāgārjuna in the MMK.

and God. I argue that we cannot think of this gate without the necessary thought of its opening and closing, as entrance and exit, to keep out and let in. In other words, this gate necessitates passages of translation, and in passing through the gates (or not) it determines whether we are admitted in communion with God or banished by excommunication: “That is what is named from here on Babel: the law imposed by the name of God who in one stroke commands and forbids you to translate by showing *and* hiding from you the limit” (Derrida, 2002: 132-3). The opening and closing of a gate captures both this limit and its oscillation. It is therefore appropriate that God anoints all languages at this gate, because to anoint is also to name, to christen. I will argue this leads us inexorably to yet another gateway – Jesus Christ. The title “Christ” (Gk. *khristos* - anointed, from *khriein* - anoint; translating the Hebrew term *māšīaḥ*, the Messiah as anointed one) is significant here, as it is also only *through* him that we approach God. Further, the baptismal water recalls for me the water of the deluge, in their common cleansing properties. Both have a specifically purgative effect with regard to sin, regardless of its punitive (deluge) or redemptive (baptism) capacities. And if I have chosen to read in these waters the flux of non-differentiation<sup>59</sup>, I will support such a reading by extending and tracing this concept of sin to the moment of its inception, to Adam and Eve, when both ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The sin (or error) then, on such a reading, consists in making binary distinctions within dualist knowledge. I argue that this belongs to the remit of God, as demonstrated in the divine act of Creation, where God not only calls light and darkness into existence, but more significantly, does so by *dividing* one from the other. In this case then, I argue that it would seem dualist knowledge is redeemed by, and possibly predicated upon, the possibility of non-differentiation as its other.

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<sup>59</sup> This flux of non-differentiation, here as before, in both the biblical story and the legend surrounding Nāgārjuna, is understood in terms of *advaya* rather than *advaita*. The reason for this distinction will be made apparent in the following chapter.

What, exactly, then is the threat presented by this deluge that compels the Semites to build? If I am correct in reading it as a flux of non-differentiation, the deluge not only engulfs everything in its path, but more importantly, in doing so, it over-runs all forms of constructed limits and perimeters – entire walls, bridges, and ramparts:

What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a ‘text,’ of what I still call a ‘text,’ for strategic reasons, in part – a ‘text’ that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. (Derrida, 1991: 256-57)

Does this then mean that the deluge is like a text? By no means. The amorphous flux presented by the deluge is also the space of differentiability<sup>60</sup>, and for it to have meaning it requires Babel, the proper name, as a context to delimit and control its borders. I believe we cannot make sense of a text without this necessary reference to a context, even as it always threatens to encroach upon and over-run its banks. I will turn to Aporias for an understanding of this limit:

No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness. Therefore the context neither produces nor guarantees impassable borders, thresholds that no step could pass [*trespasser*], *trespass* [in English in the original], as

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<sup>60</sup> What is the difference between non-differentiation and differentiability? The answer is same difference, though this does not mean they are therefore identical, which they are not. We may also understand it as the economy of the same, where there is a difference in this notion of the same, not necessarily from itself, but also within itself.

our anglophone friends would say. (Derrida, 1993: 9)

It is clear in this way why a context is incapable of *exhausting* the reserve (and reservoir) of a text, nor the meanings it might engender, no matter how rigorously we might try to delimit it. According to a law of economy, where there is partition there is also parturition. The dynamic relationship between a text and its context is always locked in an interminable state of contestation. What is exemplary about Babel in this regard is that it names both diaspora and dissemination, and therefore, quite literally, the very opening of linguistic flood-gates. To make the same point in a different manner, I would draw an analogy between Babel and the founding of a city by drawing a circle in the sand. Babel, the absolutely self-proper name, becomes a circle coinciding with itself. We may represent this graphically with the letter O. Its perimeters or walls keep out the flux, by attempting to dwell in what is otherwise uninhabitable. Indeed, dwelling is possible only by fixing and reifying these perimeters, in an attempt to control its infrastructural trajectories and/or lines of flight. What I call passages of translation names these extra-orbital crossings and nomadic wanderings, always trespassing a certain threshold or doorway. This inevitably results in catastrophe (Gk. *katastrophē*, overturning, sudden turn. *strophē* - turning), an overturning that transfigures (or better yet, translates) the O of the circle to become the *O* of a tunnel, undermining the sedimented infrastructural desire for totalisation. It is by no coincidence this overturning takes the form of a flipping over, always the flip side of the same coin, though what we mean by *the same* is no longer identity nor even identical to itself. It is in this way I understand Derrida's claim: "This border of translation does not pass among various languages. It separates translation from itself, it separates translatability within one and the same language" (1993: 10).

All of this forces us to rethink what we understand by text and the passages of

translation to which it destines us, passing through gates, borders, and customs. According to Derrida, in giving the name Babel, God himself enters a relation of indebtedness: “At the moment when he imposes and opposes his law to that of the tribe, he is also a petitioner for translation. He is also indebted. He has not finished pleading for the translation of his name even though he forbids it. For Babel is untranslatable” (2002: 118). In tendering a name of his choice God also institutes an economy of translation in which “[t]he translator is indebted, he appears to himself as translator in a situation of debt; and his task is to *render*, to render *that which must have been given*” (Derrida, 2002: 112, emphasis mine). To render is also to give back, to perform a restitution of meaning that is commensurable to the original. Derrida claims: “This motif of circulation can lead one to think that the law of economy is the – circular – return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home” (1992: 7). It would seem a matter of good economic policy to keep the circle squared in the name of reciprocity, though this, however, also points to the impossibility of the pure gift as such:

From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense and essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt. (Derrida, 1992, #30120@ 23)

This also means the economic nature of the gift takes the form of an annulled gift caught in an *elliptical* circle. Consequently, we cannot separate this notion of indebtedness from a notion of foreign exchange. Benjamin claims: “[...] all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of *coming to terms* with the foreignness of languages” (1992: 75, emphasis mine).

How do we begin to do so, this coming to terms with the other, and more importantly, *on whose terms*? In giving the name Babel along with its irreducible multiplicity of tongues, we are also called to account, to present or render an account that sends this gift back whence it came. Derrida points out the difficulty in doing so: “From the origin of the original to be translated there is fall and exile. The translator must redeem (*erlösen*), absolve, resolve, in trying to absolve himself of his own debt, which is at bottom the same – and bottomless” (2002: 121). What is the task of the translator then, “to redeem in his own tongue that pure language exiled in the foreign tongue” (Derrida, 2002: 121), when this redemption is also a form self-acquittance, despite the fact that we are implicated within the structure of an annulled gift? How do we begin to redeem ourselves when there is no originary tongue, when all our tongues are precisely foreign as well, in a state of exile, always trying to come home? The undecideability of this dilemma may be presented thus:

On the one hand,

[I]t will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, so long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; you see, never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was. (Derrida, 1998b: 2)

And on the other,

Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages [...] *languages are not strangers* to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, *interrelated* in what they want to express. (Benjamin, 1992: 73, emphasis

mine)

Such that,

The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of *integrating* many tongues into one true language is at work. (Benjamin, 1992: 77, emphasis mine)

The problem, such as it is, is always a matter of reconciliation, which is also to say, a coming to terms with the other. This reconciliation can not occur in the absence of an acknowledgement, or indeed acceptance, of this foreignness: “One can take it as a certain experience of hospitality, as the crossing of the threshold by the guest who must be at once called, desired, and expected, but also always free to come or not to come” (Derrida, 1993: 10-11). If the passages of translation necessitate a certain movement, we can no longer understand this movement on the basis of a legal tender<sup>61</sup>, changing from one hand to another. Similarly, we do not simply decide to arrest or halt, with one hand or the other, at a particular moment or another, the originary effects of something to determine the cause of another (either as target or source), without also necessarily slipping into regress: “Babelization does not therefore wait for the multiplicity of languages. The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself” (Derrida, 1993: 10). This hospitality is what allows a language “to summon the heterological opening that permits it to speak of something and to address itself to the other”(Derrida, 1998b: 69). The foreignness heralded by this heterological

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<sup>61</sup> This would also mean there is a kernel of meaning that may be identified or made commensurable according to a fixed correspondence or exchange rate. This would also imply its possible return or restitution.

opening (Babel) ultimately bears the necessity of its dissolution, as we stand before its gate, with outstretched arms, saying, *Come*.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to present and trace the development of Derrida's thought as a heterological discourse. In doing so, I have stressed throughout the significance of the movements that necessarily obtain within such a discourse, whether we choose to understand them in terms of slippage or *différance*. Beginning with the absent centre, I demonstrated how Derrida has split the conceptual atom, or more properly, the atomisation of concepts through the detours of metaphor, according to the principle of identity. Subsequently, we also understand that there can be no pure (or independent) notion of identity, which is always threatened or contaminated by the notion of an Other. Perhaps the source of one's identity may be located within the principle of alterity instead then, with this notion of an absolute Other. We find, however, that at the moment of self-assertion we are dispossessed by a monolingualism of the other. The possibility of this monolanguage is also known as the mother tongue, though it also contains the irreducible effects of inscription. Far from belonging to us (or to a simple Other), this mother tongue also marks the possibility of a differential space, such that we are thrown into absolute translation without any source language. Finally, in this section, the discussion on translation takes into consideration the economic principles governing its passage or circulation, through forwarding my own translation of a text that stresses both its necessity and its impossibility. I also argued that we cannot arrest or halt at any point the differential movement in which a concept may be found, without also necessarily attending to it, by carefully unhinging it from its conceptual chain. Without doing so, I believe we risk reifying the very concepts under consideration, and in borrowing them we also adopt them provisionally, employing them as critical leverage to summon the heterological opening of language. In doing so, we also stretch the limits of what

we still call a text, though this notion of textuality can no longer be separated from the dependency and errancy it necessarily presupposes.

## *§ A Tao of two Halves*

Having considered both Nāgārjuna and Derrida separately, my focus now turns to Magliola and Loy in this chapter. Before doing so I shall explain the reasons for this chapter and the structural framework it provides towards the thesis. This chapter attains a certain closure in itself, and concludes the discursive trajectory that I began with the literature review in Chapter Two. This does not, however, mean it is conclusive in any strict sense. If the literature review formed a conceptual springboard for me to engage with the various issues I have addressed thus far; then this chapter fulfils the function of revisiting and consolidating insights that have remained latent during the course of my engagement. If I have left these gaps hitherto open, it is because I did not wish to impose any over-arching discursive trajectory that might otherwise threaten to stifle the clarity of Derrida's and Nāgārjuna's thought in their own right. The problem for me with Magliola's and Loy's engagement with both thinkers is that they have imposed a teleological unfolding in their treatment of the key concepts. This means that both have decided in advance what Derrida and Nāgārjuna are about from the very beginning, along with the ends to which they are consequently subjected and deployed as mere logical way-points. I will support this claim by pointing out how both critics seem to extract key passages or concepts without necessarily *respecting* the contexts in which they are situated, only to part ways at one point or another, hastening towards what they saw as its logical conclusion. The conclusions both critics arrive at are, in fact, incompatible with either Derrida or Nāgārjuna. I believe this to be the inevitable result of a hegemonic imposition of hermeneutical method, which necessarily takes place from a plane of exteriority with respect to the text(s) under consideration. However, as I have pointed out in the chapter on methodology, such attempts at *ex orbitas* transgression can only serve to reinforce those very limits to be breached, or reinstate them in a subtler form than before. In

terms of their general structural framework, Magliola's strategy is to identify a four-fold argument in Derrida that is in turn mirrored by the tetralemma (recast as four-fold negation) in Nāgārjuna. Loy, on the other hand, identifies three forms of nonduality, each leading to the other, in order to extract a core theory of nonduality using both Derrida and Nāgārjuna. I will point out here that despite the avowed intentions of both critics to "go beyond" philosophy they continue nonetheless to subscribe to a linear methodological framework. This for me is conceptually inconsistent at the level of their hermeneutical discourse.

Of course, I am well aware there are necessarily discursive movements and trajectories that cannot be avoided. In the same way, this chapter performs a backward-looking movement as counterpoint to the forward-looking orientation provided by the literature review. I intend for my discourse on Derrida and Nāgārjuna to perform its own invagination here, turning in upon itself, as its *démarche*. As I have maintained throughout, I understand the path-based hermeneutics as adopting a middle path between Derrida and Nāgārjuna, though I have yet to identify thus far what precisely this middle path consists of. I shall demonstrate, with Magliola and Loy, that the middle path I have chosen to take is between the drift of differentialism (Magliola) and the stasis of nondualism (Loy). What is exemplary for me about these two critics is that they exhibit the very indecision of a consistent discourse on Derrida and Nāgārjuna – just as I have argued earlier in the Tower of Babel – in the countervailing centrifugal disorientation that is characterised by differential drift in Magliola, and the centripetal reappropriation characterised by nondualist stasis in Loy. The centre, as we well know, cannot hold. It is therefore for this reason that it would be conceptually untenable for me to characterise my own middle path in any other identifiable manner. One may rightly allege therefore that this path-based hermeneutics is thus parasitic or bricoleur.

Having said that, this chapter will open with Magliola, to be followed by Loy. This is not simply for reasons of chronology, but because, in a significant way, Loy takes over where Magliola left off. This section on Magliola traces the differential movements that he sees in both Derrida and Nāgārjuna. The following section focuses on Loy's metaphor of Indra's Net as its central organising principle, and I will range across a number of Loy's texts as he attempts to subsume Buddhism, Vedānta, and Taoism into a core doctrine of nonduality. To the extent that both are fascinated by Derrida's affirmation of a new form of knowing through the deconstruction of language, they are also inclined to view this necessarily in terms of a non-linguistic and non-conceptual knowledge, as the *Other* of philosophy. Such a line of inquiry may only go one of two ways: either one is obliged to shift into mystic mode proclaiming differential going-ons *à la* Magliola; or one goes the way of absolutism, enshrined in shrouds of ineffability over a nondual stasis *à la* Loy. Both find the resources to do so in Zen Buddhism, though where Magliola loses himself in concatenating differential drift Loy reins in with a singular net of cosmic proportions.

That for me is absolutist, and in accordance with everything I have argued thus far regarding discourse and translation, I will make the following claim: *Absolutism is a context without horizons*<sup>62</sup>. This is not to say it is without walls. In fact, its very *raison d'être* is to construct walls. It appears we have not wandered far from the fabled Tower. The fundamental problem of both critics in my view is that they fail to sufficiently inhabit the systems they are critiquing, choosing instead to dwell in *similarities* by either bridging (Magliola) or homogenising (Loy) them. This justifies in part my earlier criticism that both

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<sup>62</sup> In this way it also explains why absolutist renditions do not translate things very well, for there are no contexts to pass through and contest, and in their comparative approach both have failed to translate (in the strict Derridean sense) the nuanced specificities of their intended subject.

critics fail to respect the contexts necessary for their mutual translation. It is also in such a context, I argue, that it would be more fruitful to understand the model of *rapprochement* as being ensconced in a relation of *familiarity without similarity*. It has to be admitted that some of the perennial philosophical problems addressed by Derrida and Nāgārjuna are indeed *familiar*, certainly when one considers the general economy of the concepts in which they are found and circulated. If, however, we understand both Derrida and Nāgārjuna as employing a method of no-method, it would be conceptually inconsistent then to proceed by establishing a common ground between them, especially when both Derrida and Nāgārjuna have argued for the groundlessness of any such putative grounds: “Deconstruction repeats or mimes grounding in order to account for the difference between a ground and that which is grounded, with what can no longer be called a ground” (Gasché, 1986: 154-55). While a possible objection might be that one cannot theorise in a self-made vacuum in the absence of a coherent framework, I believe this might be circumvented to some degree with the understanding of *rapprochement* I am forwarding here. Familiarity<sup>63</sup> allows us to understand this relation in an equivocal manner (as simultaneously grounds and ungrounds), whereas similarities demand a univocal correspondence by effacing any differences between them:

[I]t is, of course, impossible and pointless to completely recast Nāgārjuna’s positions as those with which we in the West are familiar and to replace his technical terminology with ours. For Nāgārjuna is not a Western philosopher. He is an Indian Buddhist philosopher whose work we approach through a vast Asian Buddhist commentarial literature. And while many of his concerns, problems, theses, and arguments are *recognizable cousins* of ours, many are not, and there are genuine differences in outlook. This is what makes

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<sup>63</sup> This notion of familiarity also underscores the filial relations that obtain between concepts, giving rise to each other through their circulation within a certain *oikos-nomos*.

Nāgārjuna's work so exciting to read and to think about – *it provides a genuinely distinctive perspective on a set of problems and projects that we share.* (Garfield, 1995: 95, emphasis mine)

As we shall see, this is largely ignored by both Magliola and Loy in their attempt to found a common ground that will subsequently allow them to “go beyond” Derrida with Nāgārjuna. This is *prima facie* patronising, though in the attempt to heal Western metaphysical psychosis through Eastern mysticism, I argue, this fails to do justice to the clarity of Nāgārjuna's MMK by exoticising it. In this chapter I will attend to the stress points of their respective discourses in order to unhinge them, one by one. To do so, I shall issue three pairwise censures drawn from Derrida and Nāgārjuna over the course of this chapter to serve as critical leverage into their texts, beginning with the pair below:

To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language. This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. *Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything.* But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading. (Derrida, 1997: 158, emphasis mine)

For him to whom emptiness is clear,

Everything becomes clear.

For him to whom emptiness is not clear,

Nothing becomes clear.

When you foist on us

All of your errors

You are like a man who has mounted his horse

And has forgotten that very horse. (MMK XXIV: 14-15)

Magliola's differential "off/track" reading of Derrida and Nāgārjuna was the first significant attempt at engaging both in a creative manner. It was provocative in its own right, eliciting varying degrees of admiration and admonition. It also set the path for Loy later: an example of this is evident in Loy (1988: 254) citing Magliola's translation (1984: 32-3) of a key passage in "Différance" that differs from the original in Derrida (1991a: 66). I will only point out here that this departs from usual scholarly practice, though such lapses (conceptual or otherwise) are frequent in the emergent Derrida-Nāgārjuna discourse. Perhaps one of the most glaring lapses occurs when Magliola attempts to justify his own theoretical approach: "Throughout this chapter, I identify myself with a body of Nagarjunist scholarship which is very substantial (perhaps dominant) and which is most current" (Magliola, 1984: 93). The endnote to this claim, however, states something rather different: "I shall cite my authorities shortly, but let me make clear now that when 'building a case' it shall be my practice, especially when dealing with matters other than *śūnyatā*, to adduce evidence from *all competent Buddhologists*" (Magliola, 1984: 208, emphasis mine). I am not sure if Magliola has indeed considered *all* existing scholarship (we shall leave the issue of competence aside

for now), because while he cites established Buddhist scholars such as Inada, Murti, Sprung, and Streng; it is also Inada who provided the most scathing criticism of all in his review of the book:

Magliola has indeed used *utmost license* in interpreting Buddhist texts and translations from various sources but he should keep in mind that the contribution by Stcherbatsky, Sprung, Streng, Suzuki, Matilal, Misra, Inada and others are mere interpretations. They are guides to Buddhist thought and must be used judiciously. *Interpretation of interpretations* is risky and to go beyond them, although always a disederatum [*sic*], one must proceed with utmost caution and indeed proceed at one's own risk. (Inada, 1985: 222, emphasis mine)

I agree with Inada's censure regarding Magliola taking liberties in his account of Buddhist philosophy, by "extract[ing] concepts from the corpus of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, nay the whole of Buddhism, merely to suit one's purposes" (Inada, 1985: 220). I believe Inada's charge of "interpretation of interpretations" to be somewhat unfounded, however, as Magliola does not provide *his own* reading of the texts he cites<sup>64</sup>; they are given as if they were self-explanatory, leaving the reader with the burden of an interpretative gestalt because of the various lapses and inconsistencies in his understanding of fundamental concepts in Derrida and Nāgārjuna.

Magliola's own point of departure lay in what he saw as the common ground

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<sup>64</sup> For example, in the thirty-odd pages devoted to Buddhist Differentialism, Magliola had managed to include just about the entire text of Matilal's article on the doctrine of Two-truths, along with huge tracts from Streng and Zen parables littered everywhere in between.

between Derrida and Nāgārjuna: “I found that Derridean deconstruction and Nagarjunist Buddhism, the former to dismantle the principle of identity, the latter to dismantle an entitative theory of *dharmas*, resorted to the ‘same’ logical techniques” (Magliola, 1984: ix). Further, this notion of identity is always dualistic: “In its most classic form, logocentrism posits a ‘transcendental signified’ (or absolute Origin) whose ‘voice’ (or transcendental signifier) is so immediately and essentially ‘proximate’ to its ‘other half’ (its ‘originating factor’, that is, the Origin), that the two ‘halves’ constitute a supreme Identity” (Magliola, 1984: 3). Taking into consideration Garfield’s caveat about recasting Nāgārjuna’s theses, I will point out that mind is considered the sixth organ in Buddhist philosophy. This also means then it avoids the usual mind-body dichotomy or subject-object relationship otherwise prevalent in the West. Also, it would not be strictly correct to identify a common basis between Derrida and Nāgārjuna in their rejection of logocentrism. This will be made clear shortly. The two halves that Magliola refers to above is the dialectical relationship constituting the signifier-signified dyad:

Thus to study the principle of identity, that is, how things are self-identical (‘whatever is, is’), is to study language. When ‘I’ identify a thing as self-identical, the formula is, “‘I’ identify you as ‘such-and-such’” (and the identification is a binary combination of ‘originating factor’ and ‘expression,’ of ‘signified’ and ‘signifier,’ no matter whether understood in a narrower or broader sense). Derrida’s strategy will be, then, to assault the principle of identity, that is, the theory of signified and signifier, as it functions in explanations of language and of how language composes the identity of things. (Magliola, 1984: 6)

The same logical techniques in question refer to the four-fold arguments<sup>65</sup> that Magliola characterises of Derrida on the one hand, and the tetralemma (recast as the *catuṣkoṭi*, or fourfold negation) in Nāgārjuna on the other. This constructs a neat logical structure of two halves for Magliola to “build his case”. What is referred to as the *same* (logical techniques) is significant here, however, as it also unwittingly characterises the relation between Magliola’s differentialism and Loy’s nondualism despite their ostensible differences. While this seems a reasonable account of both Derrida and Nāgārjuna, the “logical” aspect is ultimately relegated to the back-seat of a suffix – the epistemological challenge invariably turns into an *onto*-logical reappropriation. This shift is a direct result of one’s progression along the ladder<sup>66</sup>.

The Tao unity of opposites is the fundamental trope employed by Magliola, and as a leitmotif it allows him to delve *between, a/mid, and athwart*<sup>67</sup> the Tao and its homogenising effects to achieve a differential liberation (or “going-on”) that he sees in Derrida and Nāgārjuna: “Derridean activity is a differential ‘between’ which cleaves (or better, eludes/elides) the ‘Taoist’ unity of opposites, or any other organicism” (Magliola, 1984: xi). Magliola further characterises this as “the between in between conventional betweens”

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<sup>65</sup> Magliola believes that Derrida assaults the principle of identity by employing the principle of arbitrariness, which refers to the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. This in turn leads to the principle of *le dédoublement*, the principle of *l’effacement*, and finally the principle of dissemination and the trace). I will not rehearse here the progression from one argument to the next, except to point out that each argument is placed *sous rature* by the following step, according to how well it “‘approximates’ the ‘way things really are’ better than [the] other alternatives” (Magliola, 1984: 27).

<sup>66</sup> As I have pointed out separately, rather than building a bridge Magliola is actually constructing a ladder. This architectonic trope is particularly enduring, not least because of Wittgenstein’s contribution in recent times, for it also recalls pillars, ziggurats, and towers. I will also point out here that this trope cannot be maintained in the absence of teleological orientation, along with the necessary steps demanded by it. Where Magliola believes he is employing the Tao trope of flux and differentiability he is actually straddling the twin guardrails of Derrida and Nāgārjuna; though in building towards what he sees as its logical conclusion Magliola inevitably dispenses with the specific contexts in which the borrowed concepts (deployed as steps) are lodged.

<sup>67</sup> These are taken from Magliola’s chapter titles, and his aim is to emphasise movement and transgression through typographical play and neologism. In the absence of a rigorous theoretical framework, however, this ends up becoming more ludic than lucid, and is the reason why Derrida’s caveat applies here. It is also the reason why I hesitate here in writing “Taoist”, because I reserve doubts about Magliola’s characterisation of what he sees as its philosophical project.

(Magliola, 1984: 41). As before, I would point out here with Nāgārjuna that:

Where there is no beginning or end,

How could there be a middle?

It follows that thinking about this in terms of

Prior, posterior, and simultaneous is not appropriate. (MMK XI: 2)

This criticism would certainly be valid once we move from this “differential between” to a hypostatised differentialism. What Magliola intends by “organicism” is the absolutism exhibited by logocentric systems of thought, and he ultimately turns to Zen philosophy, in particular, to what he characterised as “differential Zen”. This was to separate what he saw as “Nāgārjunism” in Zen from the remaining logocentric elements that he also called “centric Zen” (1984: 96). What I find intriguing, however, is that this distinction was never contested nor commented upon by Loy, considering that he is a qualified Zen teacher *and* by Magliola’s reckoning he would fall under the category of “centric Zen” in positing a nondualist ground. Magliola characterises centric Zen as such: “[I]ts whole effort is to transcend *logos* understood as the language of *is* and *is not* and to achieve the ‘undifferentiated center’ (of course, ‘undifferentiated center’ is just a permutation of *logos*, in the specialized Derridean terms we have already worked through at such length)” (1984: 97). This undifferentiated centre is also where Loy would identify a core theory of nonduality, and Magliola goes so far as to claim: “The supreme self-identity, indeed the only self-identity in the ultimate sense, is centric Zen’s *śūnyatā*” (1984: 97). There is perhaps no real need for Loy to debunk Magliola, as both differential and centric Zen (which we shall accept for sake of argument) will turn out to be flip sides of the same coin.

While I understand the general reason for this particular Tao trope (*viz.*, that deconstruction ‘dissolves’ or ‘destructs’ dialectical oppositions), it is nevertheless awkward, for in its application to a discourse on Derrida and Nāgārjuna it necessarily presupposes an existing dualism (cast in black-and-white) between *śūnyatā* and *différance*. This points to a theoretical misconception in Magliola that persists in Loy, *viz.*, “the key to [deconstructive] critique is that absolute negation destroys the possibilities of ‘things’ as such, i.e., self-identical *entities*” (Magliola, 1984: 34). With this notion of destruction in hand, Magliola is thus able to envision a logical method that climbs the tetralemmatic ladder (or the four-fold argumentative structure of Derrida), where each rung destructs the preceding order (1984: 118), leaving the “glimmer” of *différance* (and *śūnyatā*) to shine through under erasure, as the “forever-altering movement” that is “going on” (1984: 42). A particular example of this is when Magliola employs the fourfold argumentative structure of Derrida to recast what he sees as Nāgārjuna’s methodological procedure in the MMK:

The employ of *dédoublement* to entrap adversaries in dilemma, and then the dialectical playing out of whatever first lemma has been shown self-contradictory, until the whole tetralemma which has been ‘set in motion’ exhausts itself, together forms a *logical sequence* that Nagarjuna [*sic*] uses throughout the twenty-seven chapters. (1984: 108, emphasis mine)

This characterisation is called into question by Inada, as it imposes an overtly linear structure to the MMK in terms of this logical sequence (1985: 220). Further, this treatment of Nāgārjuna also renders him indistinguishable from Vedānta philosophy, where Brahman (as its supreme identity or transcendental signified) sublates the preceding orders of truth-claims. Indeed, this is ultimately what Loy does in order to extract a core theory of nonduality.

Nevertheless, Magliola is careful to point out this does not mean that both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are engaged in negative theology<sup>68</sup>, despite their deployment of negative dialectic (as *via negativa*): “we can say Derrida radicalizes the process of defining by negative reference, and he does so by making negative reference absolute (i.e., no nucleus of identity survives the process; the nucleus is *effaced*)” (1984: 25). On the subject of absolute negation in Nāgārjuna, Inada claims: “Nāgārjuna would be hard pressed to justify an absolute denial or negation of objects of beings [*sic*], nor is his philosophy programmed to absolutely negate, deconstitute and constitute a directional trace” (Inada, 1985: 220). One cannot simply recast conceptual terms from one context to the next without its necessary translation. What is really being negatively defined through the destruction of entities for Magliola is consciousness (Skt. *viññāna*), such that Derrida becomes a “modified phenomenologist” (1984: 27):

If we adjust our scopes again and broaden our language, we can see that Derrida, in a very general way, is translating the workings of negative theology to the ‘rational’ but unconscious workings of everyday mind. As negative theology defines God only by what God is *not*, the human mind, for Derrida, always defines by negative reference and only by negative reference. (Magliola, 1984: 24)

Magliola makes it clear that while Derrida adopts negative reference (from the “workings of negative theology”) he does not engage in negative theology: “[...] Derrida corrodes away any transcendental nucleus such as a Supreme Identity (whereas negative theology obviously must grant a Transcendental Nucleus to which all negative referents are the contradictory)”

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<sup>68</sup> Loy makes the contrary claim, however, with respect to Derrida and Nāgārjuna: “Derrida points to the ‘hyperessentiality,’ the being (or nonbeing – an hypostatized *śūnyatā* can work as well) beyond Being whose trace lingers in most negative theologies, infecting them with a more subtle transcendental-signified” (Loy, 1992: 248-9).

(1984: 24-25). The privileging of consciousness (Skt. *vijñāna*) mentioned above also leads to what Magliola calls the “Derridean quandary” in terms of a latent Cartesianism of “mind and outside” that he alleges of Derrida. In doing so, he also paves the way towards Yogācāra and Zen.

To make this clear, Magliola argues: “By proving the theory of presence is false does not mean one necessarily forwards a theory of non-presence as its logical contradictory” (1984: 35). While it is clear that non-presence here is merely the flip side of the same (ontological) coin, Magliola also points out that:

But the greater danger, warns Derrida, is not that we mistake formulae as adequate for difference [*sic*], but rather, that we hypostatize, that we ‘name’ the ‘glimmer’ we cannot formulate, and thus behaviorally treat the underwriting not as writing but as Logos. *Perpetual drift becomes a mystical Ineffable. For to ‘name’ means to frame within the relational presence of a signifier and signified, and thereby assuage man’s psychic need for control of the mysterious.* The temptation is for man to worship what he does not know. (Magliola, 1984: 41, emphasis mine)

This process of reification arrests the otherwise disseminatory effects of *differánce*, though Magliola fails to heed his own caveat: “Since *that which survives* absolute negative erasure cannot be an identity, i.e., a ‘whole’ constituted by signifier and signified, I shall call it the ‘Derridean *else*’” (1984: 28). What follows this assertion then is particularly ironic: “Derrida resorts to such techniques [of non-synonymic substitution] because each of them, in its own way, tends to undercut what he regards as the threat of reification, a kind of hypostasis of

ideas, and hence a deceptive recovery of a theory of identity” (Magliola, 1984: 29). Magliola’s solution around this is the extensive use of scare-quotes throughout his book, employed in what he understands to be “the spirit of Derrida’s performance of ‘crossing out’ or ‘putting under erasure’” (1984: 13). In Magliola’s case, however, this is used to *mask* the fact that he has performed the very threat of reification that he otherwise cautions us against.

Magliola’s aim is to affirm these differential “going-ons” that eludes the totalising effects of logocentrism: “Differentialism, I shall argue, deconstructs all logocentrisms but re/appropriates according to a dissemination which I call variously the Buddhist trace, *śūnyatā*, the differential ‘going-on’” (1984: xi). While Magliola correctly identifies the differential movements in Derrida and Nāgārjuna, the shift from adjectival (differentiality) to substantive (differentialism) also marks the difference between a descriptive and ascriptive characterisation. What differentiality *describes* is a state of interdependency, whereas differentialism *ascribes* ontic status to what cannot be defined, the suffix *-ism* marking a system or complex of philosophical concepts *grounded* in some axioms that are taken to be central and/or apodictic<sup>69</sup>. A relevant objection here may be found in Nayak: “If anything beyond *śūnyatā* is adhered to it will itself amount to an incurable ‘ism’ which Buddha had taken much pain to overthrow” (1979: 486). This reminds us that *śūnyatā* is an empty designation, and as a signifier there is no referent “standing behind” it. I am thus unable to accept the notion of a “Buddhist trace” forwarded by Magliola, and as a characterisation of *śūnyatā* it is deeply misguided:

I shall argue that Nagarjuna’s *śūnyatā* (“devoidness”) is Derrida’s *différance*,

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<sup>69</sup> This recalls the descriptive fallacy discussed in Section 4.4, such that one takes the conventional to be more than merely conventional, and how we commit this mistake under a regulative theory in section 4.3, when we wrongly ascribe causal powers to conditions. See also (Arnold, 2001: 248; Nayak, 1979: 483).

and is the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes but which constitutes directional trace [...] They can savor and create the exquisitely esthetic (think of Zen painting, ceramics, gardens, poetry); yet I argue, they are doing all this *as* trace, as indeed, Derridean trace! (1984: 89)

Inada's response here is equally emphatic: "Now, I may have a dim notion of the Derridean trace but Taoist and Zen masters, being earthy creatures, constantly remind their charges that 'birds fly but do not leave any traces.' [...] Likewise, then, there are no traces left in Zen painting, ceramics, gardens and poetry. *If there are, those works of art are not Zen inspired*" (Inada, 1985: 220-1, emphasis mine). Consequently, while Magliola celebrates the differential going-ons that Derrida and Nāgārjuna purportedly "frequents" we are not, however, privy to the party. Not to put too fine a point to it, Magliola has reified differentiability in the process of celebrating it, and while the "indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, [but] never *opened*, a reading"; in dispensing altogether with the context in order to transgress towards what he saw as the Derridean *else*, Magliola is consequently thrown into absolute translation without so much as a pole of reference. This does not seem to bother Magliola too much, however, as he dryly remarks: "Derrida would deny almost all, if not all, of my above account of his thinking and its behavior" (1984: 28).

This is my translation of Magliola's thesis:

Nagarjuna's Madhyamika 'philosophy', as we shall see, teaches the 'and/or' which is *between* the 'and/or' of existence and non-existence, identity and non-identity, causality and non-causality. I shall argue in this chapter that Nagarjuna's Middle Path, the Way of the Between, 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. (Magliola, 1984: 87)

I can only assume here that the “‘and/or’ which is *between* the ‘and/or’ of existence and non-existence [etc.]” refers to differentiability, and that in “tracking” the Derridean trace Magliola also refers to the differential movements (as movements of *différance* in its non-synonymic substitutions) that circulate within any structural ensemble. It is clear what Magliola meant by “going beyond Derrida” is also the *step* beyond language, to the “unheard-of thought” (as the silent reserve of *śūnyatā* that is later redeployed as nondual reality in Loy), for which “Nagarjuna attains a *supplémentation* (permit me, please, the earnest jest) that Derrida never quite does” (1984: 93). This is because, while “it is not [Derrida’s] intention to deconstruct everyday behavior” (1984: 47); “with the collapse of the sign, [however,] ‘our entire world and language would collapse’” (1984: 48). This anxiety “stems from a latent Cartesianism, an irremediable split between ‘mind’ and the ‘outside’”, such that “[Derrida] cannot concede a ‘knowing’ which is not consciousness-bound and logical” (1984: 124). Note that once again this privileges consciousness (Skt. *viññāna*) which is central to the *viññānavāda* doctrine of Yogācāra (see also Section 2.2), such that it is consciousness that is considered to be *śūnya* instead. It is also from the Yogācārin *Avatamsaka Sūtra* that Loy appropriates the metaphor of Indra’s Net, which was adopted by the Chinese Hua-Yen tradition that later developed into the Sino-Japanese Ch’an/Zen tradition. We are thus trying to make sense of Nāgārjuna (and Derrida) through the extended looking-glass of Zen as if they were entirely commensurable without any discernible differences. It is in this context that Magliola speculates: “One senses Derrida is indeed *on the verge* (from Latin, *vegere*: to bend, to be at the turn) of *someway* else, if not a something else, but surely he is not yet broken out of the turn” (1984: 48). This

is not the case with Nāgārjuna, however, as the “reinstatement of the logocentric” may be found in his assertion that “*saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*”, so we can still “have it both ways” (1984: 87) with the doctrine of Two-truths, thus freeing “the differential mystic to shift to and fro between the logocentric and differential, according to what the situation-at-hand requires” (1984: 127). The choice is between silence and philosophical verbiage (characterised by concatenating differential drift)<sup>70</sup>. My translation, before anyone should raise objections, is not disrespectful – hardly so – because it performs the *dédoublement* that Magliola’s text never did: it respected the context of not taking things into context. Better yet, this oscillating “disrespect-respect” indeterminacy allowed me to put some clarity on his thesis using his own supplementary splices.

There is another *supplémentation*, however, which further demonstrates the virtue of philosophical silence:

Hogen of Seiryō went to the hall to speak to the monks before the midday meal. He pointed at the bamboo blinds. At this moment, two monks went and rolled them up. Hogen said, ‘One [has] profit; the other [has] loss’ (Magliola, 1984: 123, qtd. as in original)

While Magliola distinguishes between what he called differential and centric Zen he fails to provide any rigorous distinction between them, such that Zen koans and parables are marshalled *regardless* to supplement his reading of Buddhist concepts. Magliola believes the above *mondo* captures “the beauty of the Buddhist Two Truths [...] and their unexpected *dénouements*” (1984: 123). Magliola draws from this: “Blyth’s differentialist commentary

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<sup>70</sup> And it appears there are two further forms of silence, one empty and the other pregnant. We shall consider this notion of pregnant silence in Loy.

does not deliver the expected distinction between enlightenment and unenlightenment, but rather a lesson in the Two truths” (1984: 123). He declines to comment exactly what the lesson in Two-truths consisted. However, with this very supplement – [has] – Magliola also demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of the concepts he is marshalling towards his arguments. The criticism here may take one of two forms: the weaker argument would point to this as an instance of isogetical interpretation, such that, given the latitudes of interpretation made possible by the non-teleologically motivated (i.e., equivocal) koans, one sees what one wishes to see in support of one’s hypothesis – in short, a hermeneutical circularity. The stronger argument will point out that while one may speak of profit and loss, these terms remain conventional and make sense only within the context of everyday discourse. While they cancel each other out, this does not open the path then to some ineffable absolute substratum underlying the phenomenal world. Once we see this, it would be untenable to hold that the ultimate truth disparages the conventional – we do not refute the everyday world (as being illusory) with some hypostatised notion of truth, this would be the position of Vedānta. What constitutes Buddhist ultimate truth as promulgated by Nāgārjuna simply lies in the conventional status of linguistic thought-constructions (Skt. *kalpana*), which demonstrates its provisional status (as *prajñapti*, or conventional designation) through its self-vitiating distinctions (such as profit/loss, self/other, etc.): “All dependently arising entities are conceptually constructed (*prajñapti*), and in this sense their arising is unreal” (Burton, 1999: 99). Surely, it would not make sense, even to a Zen master, to say that one *has* profit/loss – the verb here is *exorbitant*. Translating this to our discussion at hand, we have also established such possession to be logically impossible in Derrida; while Nāgārjuna would argue this form of possession as attachment leading to false *dr̥ṣṭi* (view). This dangerous supplement, [has], fulfils a lack that was never there to begin with, just as its original silence should have been left *empty*.

To better understand this notion of empty silence I will turn to Magliola's reading of the Two-truths doctrine. Magliola cites Streng: "Unenlightened man constructs his existence through his discrimination and produces emotional attachments in the process. As long as his knowledge is *discriminatory*, i.e. [only] about 'things', man is simply producing the energies (*karma*) to continue this fabrication" (1984: 125, emphasis mine). This is not wrong, though once we juxtapose this with Nāgārjuna we have an apparent contradiction:

Those who do not understand

The distinction drawn between these two truths

Do not understand

The Buddha's profound truth. (MMK XXIV: 9)

How should we reconcile this apparent contradiction concerning distinction, such that it is denied in one sense and upheld in another? I argue that to be able to discriminate between these two senses of distinction is also to understand the Buddhist Two-truths, which is, at heart, yet another distinction. To the extent that we may make discriminations of the phenomenal world through language, these discriminations remain conventional, as are the phenomena under consideration. All phenomena are conventional, and we are unenlightened insofar as we continue to take the *conventional to be more than merely conventional*. In other words, we believe they exist *inherently*, as being non-empty. This is the mistake that leads to suffering within Buddhist perspective. The profound truth of this distinction is that it was never simply a case of privileging *either* conventional *or* ultimate truth, *on their own*, but precisely to demonstrate the dependency between them that is "off/logical" (to employ Magliola's terminology), and it is because of these off/logical limits that the Two-truths may

be thus delimited and distinguished, so that Nāgārjuna is able to claim “*saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*”. In other words, what MMK XXIV: 9 asserts is not only the ability to distinguish between conventional and ultimate truths, but, more importantly, to discern that this distinction is itself conventional; it also implies that the Two-truths cannot be understood as “things” that could be discriminated in the sense Streng had intended<sup>71</sup>. I draw further support here from Garfield: “Manjuśri indicates that the distinction between the conventional and ultimate is itself dualistic and hence merely conventional (from *Vimilakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*) therefore the only proper attitude to adopt is silence” (Garfield, 1995: 325). This does not mean, however, that silence is thereby accorded to *śūnyatā* because it is some ineffable, extra-linguistic, reality that supervenes upon the phenomenal world.

Without a proper understanding of emptiness (i.e., that emptiness is itself empty), it is not possible to understand this distinction between Two-truths as being empty. This failure may be demonstrated in the way Magliola had chosen to translate emptiness as “devoidness” (following Sprung) in order to capture what he sees as its double movement of negation and constitution:

‘Devoidness’ as a translation evokes negation (the Latin prefix *de* meaning ‘completely.’ so we have ‘devoid,’ or ‘completely void’); and ‘devoidness’ also evokes constitution (the Latin prefix *de* meaning ‘away from.’ so we have ‘devoid,’ or ‘away from voidness’). (1984: 89)

While I grant this is somewhat preferable to the “Voidism” rendered in other translations, it is

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<sup>71</sup> See also section 4.4 where I argued the right-view to take with respect to the MMK does not lie in the promulgation of some absolute truth of emptiness. Whatever we assert through language cannot be anything more than conventional, even when it apparently asserts the ultimate nature of things.

hardly appropriate when Magliola glosses *śūnyatā* as “BETWEEN ‘easy come, easy go,’ AND ‘hard to come by’” (1984: 104). In fact, it appears that Magliola does not seem to understand the import of MMK XXIV at all. He cites Inada’s translation of MMK XXIV: 18 in support of his claim that, “The *action* which is dependent co-arising, and which comes within the range of pure negative reference *sous rature*, Nagarjuna calls *śūnyatā*” (Magliola, 1984: 115-16):

We declare that whatever is relational origination [dependent co-arising] is *śūnyatā*. It [*śūnyatā*] is a provisional name (i.e., thought construction) for the mutuality of being [dependent co-arising] and, indeed, it is the middle path. (MMK XXIV: 18, Inada’s translation)

Now, the “action” referred to by Magliola *should* be understood in its functional rather than substantive capacity<sup>72</sup>. What is placed *sous rature* is the substantive element of *pratītya-samutpāda*, not its functional description. This is incompatible with Inada’s translation of *pratītya-samutpāda* as “relational origination” (non-dependent non-origination would be more appropriate), such that Magliola understands it to designate “the mutuality of being”, which may be discerned from his various *supplémentations*. We have established this earlier in Section 2.3, where we discussed how Inada misconstrues the gerund and extending it to read “for the mutuality (of being)”. The notion of “relational origination” is awkward, and “mutuality of being” is worse, because nothing originates strictly speaking and thus no conception of beings are mutually entailed by *pratītya-samutpāda*. Thus, we also demonstrate that Magliola’s understanding of the term “action” to be substantive which is counter to the

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<sup>72</sup> This recalls the hermeneutical distinction between causes (Skt. *hetu*) and conditions (Skt. *pratyaya*) forwarded by Garfield in Section 4.2. The “action” here proper to *pratītya-samutpāda* is *pratyaya* and not *kriyā* (power *possessed* by a cause to bring about its effect). Magliola’s characterisation of *śūnyatā* thus fails the litmus test provided by this distinction.

MMK, unless he does not see any difference at all between these two aspects.

In order to maintain his translation of *śūnyatā* as “devoidness” (even though there is no notion of any non-empty void that one needs to turn away from), Magliola marshals further support using translations of MMK XXIV: 14 from Inada and Streng<sup>73</sup>. I will juxtapose this with Garfield's translation, which is already provided in the above censure:

Inada's translation:

Whatever is in correspondence with *śūnyatā*, all is in correspondence (i.e., possible). Again, whatever is not in correspondence with *śūnyatā*, all is not in correspondence. (MK XXIV: 14 IN) [Inada adds the note: “The meaning conveyed here is that *śūnyatā* is the basis of all existence. Thus, without it, nothing is possible” p. 147.]

Streng's translation:

When emptiness (*śūnyatā*) ‘works,’ then everything in existence ‘works.’ If emptiness does *not* ‘work,’ then all existence does *not* ‘work.’ (XXIV: 14 S)

In Inada's translation, if *śūnyatā* is the basis of all existence such that the phenomenal world is either in correspondence with it or not then this would be the instatement of an Absolute – one could just as easily insert “God” here and it would make no real significant difference. It further supports my earlier claim that Magliola fails to understand the action designated by *pratītya-samutpāda*. Streng's translation is better, stressing the functional rather than the substantive with the term, *work*. The term, existence, remains awkward though, because it is

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<sup>73</sup> Both translations may be found in (Magliola, 1984: 116), and as I have quoted ad verbatim along with Magliola's interpolations I am providing the reference here instead to maintain clarity.

an ontological term placed in a functional relation<sup>74</sup>. Garfield's translation avoids the difficulties of both (as cited above), and he supplements this with a footnote: "The Tibetan term translated as 'clear' here is '*rung-ba*' which literally means *suitable*, or *appropriate*. But while that makes sense in Tibetan, it clearly doesn't in English, and the *context* indicates 'clear' as the word that best captures the meaning" (1995: 301, fn. 113, emphasis mine). What is the context then? This assertion comes after MMK XXIV: 13 in which Nāgārjuna denies a nihilistic reading of *śūnyatā* by his opponents, such that if emptiness *were* treated as *nonexistence* (or non-empty Void), then all the absurd conclusions alleged by his opponents from verses 1-6 would entail. This turning of tables onto his opponents is arguably Nāgārjuna's philosophical *coup de grâce* in the MMK. It is *not appropriate* to treat *śūnyatā* either as a basis of correspondence, or reverting to some implicit notion of existence by viewing it as absolute negation. Magliola is clearly confused in his understanding of Buddhist concepts – *what* is there ultimately to be negated, and from the turning away of *what* is de-voidness meant to designate? In the spirit of taking things in its proper context, I shall allow Nāgārjuna his rightful *dénouement* here with the missing verse 13:

You have presented fallacious refutations  
That are not relevant to emptiness.  
Your confusion about emptiness  
Does not belong to me. (MMK XXIV: 13)

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<sup>74</sup> See also section 4.2 where I discussed activity as an embodiment of both functional and substantive conditionality.

§ *The Safety Net of Nondualism*

It comments, explains, paraphrases, but does not translate. (Derrida, 2002: 109)

The victorious ones have said  
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.  
For whomever emptiness is a view,  
That one will accomplish nothing. (MMK XIII: 8)

We have seen with Magliola in the previous section how kicking away the ladder reveals the glimmer *en abyme* that is forever-altering, and also, how we consequently find ourselves cast adrift in this textual freedom without a pole of reference. In this respect, Loy is arguably more astute than Magliola, for he understands that one should never attempt to kick away the ladder without so much as a safety net. And not just any net will do for this differential drift, barring a nondual stasis. Loy characterises three types of nonduality: negation of dualistic thinking, nonplurality of the world, and nondifference of subject and object (1988: 17). He then proceeds from one argument to the next, in a similar fashion to Magliola. Loy argues: It is because of our dualistic ways of thinking through language that we also perceive the world pluralistically, as a collection of discrete objects, one of them being me (i.e., within a subject-object dyad). Once we are able to negate dualist forms of thinking, this way of viewing the world changes, such that the discrete phenomenal are not really distinct anymore but constitutes some integral whole (1988: 21). If so, then this notion of negation or deconstruction must be understood in a primarily destructive sense, though in dismantling logocentric identity (which is established through a signifier-signified dyad)

through arguing for their mutual dependency neither Derrida nor Nāgārjuna hypostatise this form of dependency itself, which otherwise becomes ontological in nature – Loy would prefer the term “spiritual” instead, when talking about this nondual reincorporation into the One Mind.

In opposition to the dualist forms of philosophical knowledge is the ultimate nondifference of self and object. I am somewhat bemused, therefore, that after having deconstructed dualist thinking and its essentialist categories of identity, Loy should forward this nondifference of self and object as nondual mind that is *śūnya*, because one might just as easily read this nondifference as the “becoming-object” of the self (i.e., self-objectification), thus perpetuating a subtler form of reification. But perhaps there is no significant difference between the two, as this nondualism also becomes the absolute unifying principle of all phenomena. Loy argues: “the world is not really experienced as a whole if the subject that perceives it is still separate from it in its observation *of* it” (1988: 25). For Loy, this nonduality achieves a true liberation *outside* of philosophy, though Derrida also warns that for such contrary values to be in opposition (e.g., inside and outside), one of them “must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition” (1991c: 130). It is also in this context that I consider Loy to be engaged in a form of Kantian transcendental critique, as opposed to the immanent critique of Derrida, or the *prāsaṅgika* approach of Nāgārjuna. The difference lies in the hermeneutical *telos* towards which his critique is oriented. This for me is patently clear in Loy privileging Chapter 25 (Examination of Nirvāṇa) over Chapter 24 (Examination of the Four Noble Truths) of the MMK. Not only does this depart from the general scholarship in the field, I believe it also preserves a latent disposition in Loy’s discourse towards a certain *-ānta* (Sanskrit suffix for end or limit) by focusing on the status of *nirvāṇa* as a nondual reality rather than the epistemological nonduality of the Buddhist

Two-truths as forwarded by Nāgārjuna in MMK XXIV.

To see how this is so, a hermeneutical distinction needs to be made regarding nonduality, such that it is significant in a way for Loy that is at odds with whatever I have argued thus far about Nāgārjuna. Failing that, it would indeed seem justified to attribute absolutism to Nāgārjuna. Murti makes this very clear for our purposes here:

A distinction must, however, be made between the *advaya* of the Mādhyamika and the *advaita* of the Vedānta, although in the end it may turn out to be one of emphasis of approach. *Advaya* is knowledge free from the duality of the extremes (*antas* or *dr̥ṣṭis*) of ‘Is’ and ‘Is not’, Being and Becoming etc. It is *knowledge freed* of conceptual distinctions. *Advaita* is knowledge is knowledge *of* a differenceless entity – Brahman (Pure Being) or Vijñāna (Pure consciousness). The Vijnānavāda [*sic*] although it uses the term *advaya* for its absolute, is really an *advaita* system. ‘*Advaya*’ is purely an epistemological approach; the *advaita* is ontological. (1955: 217)

This distinction is not lost on Loy, however, as he points out that: “Mādhyamika cannot be said to assert nonduality at all, since it makes few (if any) positive claims but confines itself to refuting all philosophical positions. Mādhyamika is *advayavāda* (theory of not-two, here meaning neither of two alternative views, our first sense of nonduality) rather than *advaitavāda* (the theory of nondifference between subject and object, our third sense)” (1988: 28-9). Nevertheless, Loy maintains that nonduality will always refer to this third sense unless otherwise noted (1988: 30). The difference, as I have argued thus far – and is also pointed out above by Murti – lies ultimately in one’s emphasis of approach. What does this mean then?

Loy has ultimately reified the *anti*-dualist thesis of Mādhyamaka into the *ānta* (trans. end) of nonduality, and this cannot be established without resorting to philosophical speculation. Nayak cautions, however, that: “[T]here is no further scope for talking about the existence of a transcendental Absolute in *śūnyavāda*, which strictly speaking is not a *vāda* or ‘ism’ at all, but is simply a model of philosophical activity leading to the critical insight into the nature and function of concepts which in its turn gives us *nirvāṇa* or freedom from all sorts of *kalpana* or thought-constructions” (1979: 483).

Therefore, while I acknowledge that Loy has a much better grasp of Buddhist concepts in general than Magliola, this form of grasping persists nevertheless at the level of his discourse, in its attempt to transgress and reach the other shore (which is also how *nirvāṇa* is commonly characterised), by “transcend[ing] philosophy itself and all its ontological claims” (Loy, 1988: 4). To put the same argument in a different manner, Nāgārjuna points out that emptiness (or *nirvāṇa*) is the relinquishing of all views. A common metaphor used to demonstrate this form of relinquishing is to say that the candle flame has “gone out”. Now, to posit this emptiness as being absolute would be to attempt to go where the flame has gone. This is absurd, and while Loy’s arguments employing Nāgārjuna and Derrida may seem valid, I take issue with the ends to which they are deployed, ultimately invalidating the core theory of nonduality he is attempting to construct with their conflation. Therefore, while Loy might argue that: “Each alternative deconstructs the other, leaving no residue of ‘lower truth’ to interfere with the inexpressible ‘higher truth.’ In classical Mādhyamika fashion, the analysis is parasitic upon the problematic duality and *ends in a silence which reveals a different way of experiencing*” (1986: 21, emphasis mine); this dissolution does not mean that one is therefore justified in hypostatizing it as an absolute entity, as being non-empty. While I have mentioned at various junctures that there is a

soteriological dimension within Buddhist hermeneutics, I have also stressed that this notion of soteriology cannot, however, be conceived in terms of a hypostatized or non-empty entity.

How does Loy characterise this particular end? He claims:

The important thing in Buddhism is that the coming-to-rest of our using names to take perceptions as self-existing objects actually deconstructs the ‘objective’ everyday world [...] we unfind ourselves ‘in’ the *dream-like world* that the Diamond Sutra describes, and plunge into the horizontality of moving and light surfaces where there are no objects, only an incessant shifting of masks; where there is no security and also no need for security, because everything that can be lost has been, including oneself. (1992: 250, emphasis mine)

While I note the poststructuralist terminology here, I will not, however, raise the vexatious question as to how we should understand the term “objective” here. Rather, I am genuinely curious as to how such an end might be even vaguely edifying for anyone? More specifically, what form of existence would that take? Now, compare this with Garfield’s commentary on MMK XXV: 19-20, which Loy takes to be central to the MMK: “To be in *nirvāṇa*, then, is to see those things as they are – as merely empty, dependent, impermanent, and nonsubstantial, but not to be somewhere else, seeing something else. [...] Nagārjuna is emphasizing that *nirvāṇa* is not someplace else. It is a way of being here” (Garfield, 1995: 332, emphasis mine). This is at odds with the dream-like world that Loy finds himself in. Nonetheless, I have also pointed out that *nirvāṇa* is commonly characterised as “the other shore”, which would seem to support Loy’s claim. I will point out here that one needs to realise that this

characterisation remains conventional, and this “other shore” is not simply found *there or elsewhere*. Even if one should persist in believing the efficacy of some Derridean *else*, I will then refer to the etymology of the word “else”, taken from the Old English *el-lende*, meaning, “in a foreign land”. Now, if Garfield claims that for Nāgārjuna *nirvāṇa* is a way of being *here*, it also then means we are here in a foreign land. And in accordance with everything I have argued thus far, we are always inhabiting within this foreign land, even if we should like to dwell in it. Now, I am certain that an entire host of valid objections may be raised at this point, and indeed I stress this must be possible, because what I have forwarded is a translation that is itself oriented by certain hermeneutical choices. The virtue of my rendition – as far as I would like to believe – is that it violates neither conventional nor ultimate Buddhist truths. Loy, however, would like to efface them altogether by extending the twin ends of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* into a multidimensional web of cosmic interdependence. The key verses that Loy takes to be central to the MMK are given below:

There is not the slightest difference  
Between cyclic existence and *nirvāṇa*.  
There is not the slightest difference  
Between *nirvāṇa* and cyclic existence.

Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*,  
That is the limit of cyclic existence.  
There is not even the slightest difference between them,  
Or even the subtlest thing. (MMK XXV: 19-20)

The significance of these verses for Loy will be apparent once we consider the trope of

Indra's Net. A consequence of this, however, is that Loy argues: "It is becoming obvious that we cannot discriminate ourselves from the interdependent web of life without damaging (and perhaps destroying) both it and ourselves. Awareness of mutual identity and interpenetration is rapidly developing into the only doctrine that makes sense anymore, perhaps the only one that can save us from ourselves" (1993: 483). Loy did genuinely believe in the efficacy of a theory of interdependence, that it would be able to explain and make sense of the world that we live in, and to that extent I can agree with him. In fact, I would point out that our discussions thus far have been engaged in such a theory of interdependence, though it has yet, as a discourse, to summon its own heterological opening. This shall be addressed in the conclusion. Loy's mistake, however, is proceeding to claim this fact of interdependency into a universal principle (as a non-dual sameness that is self-identical) against essentialist thought. Such a view is ultimately untenable, from both deconstructive and Mādhyamika perspectives.

Before going any further, I have to emphasise that my account of Loy spans a number of his works, each dealing with various aspects of nonduality, in order to address the critical junctures where he borrows from Derrida and Nāgārjuna. As I have argued thus far, the nondual vision forwarded by Loy is absolutist and incompatible with both thinkers, even though it is also in their conflation that he finds the resources to support his reading of Indra's Net in Hua-yen<sup>75</sup>, before moving ultimately towards meditative practice in Zen as the nonphilosophical site *par excellence*. A preliminary criticism of Loy here is that he has homogenised entire traditions into the common fold of Mahāyāna Buddhism: "In Yogācāra the claim that experience is nondual, in all three of our senses, attains full development and

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<sup>75</sup> Though the trope of Indra's Net appears in his writing as early as 1988, its full implications are not drawn out till later, where arguments from Derrida and Nāgārjuna are marshalled explicitly to support his nondualist thesis.

explicitness, and so it is fitting that with that claim Buddhist philosophy may be said to have *reached its culmination*” (1988: 30, emphasis mine). This form of homogenisation is problematic, and is only cursorily acknowledged by Loy. In doing so, Loy also stresses Nāgārjuna as a Mahāyāna thinker instead of *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika*. He does admit, nevertheless, that *śūnyatā* and *différance* may be subject to metaphysical reincorporation, even pointing out this has repeatedly happened in later Buddhism.

To Nāgārjuna’s admonition that those for whom *śūnyatā* is a view are incurable, Loy replies, “the question why so many people seem to be incurable must be addressed” (1992: 234), only to add:

I shall not review the controversies about whether Yogācāra is an idealism (therefore a reversion to logocentrism) and how compatible it is with Mādhyamika, except to emphasize that its methodology was different: rather than offering a logical analysis of philosophical categories, it attempted to work out the implications of certain meditative experiences. (1992: 234-5)

For a thorough-going nondualist this assertion nevertheless conserves a binary distinction between what is to be considered philosophy and nonphilosophy. It also points to a bifurcation between Buddhist theory and practice, which should otherwise be in conjunction. Finally, it questions the viability of reading Nāgārjuna as a Mahāyāna thinker, as he would almost certainly reject Loy’s nondualist conclusion. As Magliola had warned earlier, somewhat prophetically, perpetual drift becomes a mystical ineffable (1984: 41). It then comes as hardly surprising when Loy laments: “Derrida’s freedom is too much a textual freedom, that it is overly preoccupied with language because it seeks liberation through and

in language – in other words, that it is logocentric” (1992: 239). To the dualism between signifier and signified in language Loy thus supplements another dualism, between that of language and silence:

With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can notice that Nāgārjuna’s critique of such dualisms itself generates another dualism, one that during the following millennium would become increasingly problematical: that between language and silence. This dualism became so important because it reflects an essential and perhaps inescapable dualism at the heart of Buddhism: between delusion (of which language is a vehicle) and enlightenment (*to which silence is believed to point*). (1999: 250, emphasis mine)

As we recall from the previous section, the choice is between silence and philosophical verbiage. Loy made this remark partly to explain the relation between Dōgen and Nāgārjuna, juxtaposing the former’s literary approach to the latter’s dialectical approach towards language, such that “in each case there is a parallel with deconstructions in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*” (Loy, 1999: 255). It is also from here that we have to distinguish between a pregnant silence and an empty one.

For now, the step beyond philosophy (and Derrida) would therefore consist in the step beyond language. This is because if all language is logocentric (a common claim made by both Magliola and Loy), then the only possibility for the step beyond philosophy promulgated by Derrida has to be found *outside* the domain of philosophy and its dualistic categories of language. Loy, however, takes this notion of non-philosophical site literally, opposing the meditative practice of *zazen* in Ch’an/Zen Buddhism to “the ‘other’ of

philosophy, [as] the repressed shadow of our rationality, dismissed and ignored because it challenges the only ground philosophy has” (Loy, 1993: 485). In doing so, Loy will instate *śūnyatā* as a nondual net extending its infinite textual relations like some miraculous web across all of reality. The price of this as I see it, however, is a schizoid stasis petrified into silence. This, I argue, is the result of taking emptiness itself as a view. Ultimately, the strategy common to both Magliola and Loy is to argue that Derrida’s deconstruction does not go far enough, that it fails to deconstruct itself (for the simple reason that Derrida arrives at his insights through language, and thus, *ipso facto* incomplete):

From the nondualist perspective, the problem with Derrida’s radical critique of Western philosophy is that it is not radical enough: his deconstruction is incomplete because it does not deconstruct itself and attain that *clôture* which, as we have seen, is the opening to something else. This is why Derrida remains in the half-way house of proliferating ‘pure textuality,’ whereas deconstruction could lead to a transformed mode of experiencing the world. (1988: 249)

Loy views this pure textuality as a form of bad infinity that tends to become increasingly ludic (1988: 249), even though I should point out here that it is precisely this textual freedom (notably, of graft and citation) that allows him to extrapolate these claims about textuality to the whole universe in the first place (see Loy, 1992: 235; 1993: 481). Where Magliola argues that to study the principle of identity is to study language, Loy claims: “In Derridean terms, the important thing about causality is that it is the equivalent of textual *différance* in the world of things. If *différance* is the ineluctability of textual causal relationships, causality is the *différance* of the ‘objective’ world” (Loy, 1992: 247). The onto-theological trope of

Indra's Net becomes then the figure *par excellence* of nondualism extending beyond language through its conflation of textuality and *śūnyatā*<sup>76</sup>.

I wish to take a detour here to point out that this “outside” of philosophy also means, for both Magliola and Loy, outside of the Western philosophical tradition. But in doing so we face an immediate problem, because we would have to establish, on the one hand, a common rejection of logocentrism in both Western and Eastern philosophies, in order to justify the extrapolation of the latter's insights to bear upon whatever discussion at hand. This not only confirms “the enduring attraction of logocentrism and onto-theology, not just in the West but everywhere” (Loy, 1992: 238), but also the perpetuation of this centrist mode of thinking in the form of a barely-masked ethnocentrism. On the other hand, assuming that this common rejection of logocentrism is indeed valid, then the resources of this “Other” from which we seek a corrective to our malaise is not so alien after all. Unless, of course, one seeks recourse to a brand of Eastern mysticism capable of outstripping Western rationality so as to cure it of its metaphysical psychosis, just as Magliola had pointed out: “Any philosophy of presence can be disproven. The contradictory which unseats the conclusion of a philosophy of presence is also illogical” (1984: 35). The net result is that we privilege the non-logical (I hesitate to say, “illogical”), quasi-mystical insights of the East to undo the entrenched rationalism of the West, while remaining unassailable in the process – for who can argue with the ineffable? Thus, we perpetuate not only the very logocentric discourse that we seek to contest, but also a back-handed Orientalism, for Reason would always seem to be the sole province of Western philosophy. This reinforces my earlier claim in Section 1.2 that the distinction between Oriental and Occidental thought had always depended upon the criterion of rationality. It also recalls Thurman's caution against exoticising Eastern thought as non-

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<sup>76</sup> This was meant to be commensurate with Derrida's notion of an unthinkable structure without centre, though this is incompatible with the absolute nondualism that Loy posits.

rational or mystical. Where I have consistently argued that the *prima facie* mysticism of Nāgārjuna (and the purported obscurantism of Derrida) actually demystifies the myth of common sense; Loy would end up celebrating this mysticism as being superior, in *outstripping* the confines of rationality. Such an approach, in my view, is guilty of either ethnocentrism or a back-handed Orientalism, but it cannot be innocent of both. In this respect then, Loy's nondualist solution is arguably the *pièce de résistance* to this dilemma by ultimately collapsing these dualisms altogether (of East and West, Self and Other, Text and World). This is not to invalidate the possibility of cross-cultural discourses and its interactions, but rather, to point out that one does not facilely attain the hoped-for plane of exteriority with ease.

I will now turn to the discussion of Loy's Indra's Net, which may be traced in embryo from a passage in Of Grammatology:

In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer simple origin.  
(Derrida, 1997: 36)

Magliola had earlier employed this to forward what he called the *dédoublement* argument from Derrida (1984: 9). Now, the same passage is employed by Loy to draw parallels between Derrida and Hua-yen philosophy in terms of a multi-dimensional textuality that extends beyond language:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net

that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.... [I]t symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous mutual identity and mutual inter-causality<sup>77</sup>. (Loy, 1992: 235-6)

Loy immediately states, like Magliola did before, that Nāgārjuna would not accept such an onto-theological trope, for obvious reasons, but maintains nevertheless that the metaphor is not without value (1992: 236). What Loy wishes to demonstrate with this metaphor is cosmic interpenetration and lack of self-presence, and, recalling here the strategic value of MMK XXV: 19-20 for Loy, one may say that he has extended the twin ends of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* to coincide into *an absolute context without horizon*. Put in another way, Loy is here forwarding his theory of interdependence by extending Derridean textuality as infinite *parabhāva*: “That this textuality (literally, ‘that which is woven, web’) extends beyond language means that right now you are reading more than the insights of Mahāyāna Buddhism, as interpreted by me: for in this page is nothing less than the entire universe”

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<sup>77</sup> The original text is taken from Francis H. Cook, Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977: 2).

(Loy, 1993: 482). Loy claims that such a world is non-hierarchical, as there is no centre, or if there is one, it is everywhere (1992: 236). He also claims that it is non-teleological, in the absence of a simple origin and end, but this “implies not the meaninglessness of life but its *meaningfreeness*<sup>78</sup>. Meaning may not be fixed, but it is not lacking. Life becomes *play*; yet it has always been play: the issue is whether we suffer our games because they are the means whereby we hope to ground ourselves somewhere in Indra’s Net, or whether we dance freely within the Net because we *are* it” (Loy, 1993: 484). While Indra’s Net may seem at first sight to be formally similar to the medium of differentiation, it fails to account for the dynamism of differential drift. Non-synonymic substitution is not the same as mirroring, and more importantly, reflection only takes place in a linear plane. The kaleidoscopic expansion afforded by this trope also leads to what I would characterise as a schizoid vision, such that everything is reflected in everything else.

Loy believes his account to be a contemporary restatement of Mādhyamika: “Indra’s Net, in which everything functions as a cause for everything else, is a more ‘positive’ and metaphysical way to restate Nāgārjuna’s denial that anything has self-existence” (1993: 485). Loy believes this to be a shrewd, positive re-affirmation of Nāgārjuna’s negative dialectic: If everything is a cause for everything else they then cease to be causes, insofar as we do not arrive at any effects. Loy admits this is a limitation of Hua-yen, from which he will ultimately part ways: “There is a practical problem with Hua-yen: it casts its net too wide. To say that something is caused by everything else in the universe is so general that it is also useless; in daily life we need a more efficient causality which correlates one cause with one effect” (1993: 486). In other words, this notion of causality needs to be grounded somehow,

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<sup>78</sup> Loy intends with this neologism to designate what is *between* meaningfulness and meaninglessness. As is the problem of taking things too literally, *one fails to translate*, except by awkward and redundant *supplémentations*. This criticism is not reserved solely to Loy, but applies to Magliola as well. This is the result of subscribing to a rigid hermeneutical methodology.

even though the premise that Loy began with – viz., the absent centre of textuality, or the emptiness of causation – meant that there is no longer a transcendental signified capable of grounding our concepts. The solution to overcoming this for Loy lies in identifying with the general structure of textuality itself as Indra’s Net. If there is no single transcendental signified that governs the web of textual relations, then it is that general field of textual relations that supplants and provides the ultimate ground:

If each jewel in Indra’s Net mutually conditions and is conditioned by all the others [i.e., *pratītya-samutpāda*], then to become completely groundless is to become completely grounded, not in some particular [transcendental signified that we have already jettisoned], but in the whole web of interdependent relations. The supreme irony of my struggle to ground myself is that it cannot succeed because I am already grounded – in the totality. *I am groundless and ungroundable insofar as delusively feeling myself to be separate from the world; I have always been fully grounded insofar as I am the world.* (Loy, 1993: 489, emphasis mine)

The first part of Loy’s argument here may be answered retrospectively with a point made earlier in Section 3.1, where I argued that the human impulse to philosophise (and in particular, to reify) is so deeply entrenched that if we were told emptiness leads to the cessation of all views, we would persist in holding that as another view in order to ground us. *We summarily surrender the causal link of dualism to the unbridled yoke of nondualism, and this continued manner of grasping may be demonstrated with Nāgārjuna:*

“I, without grasping, will pass beyond sorrow,

And I will attain nirvāṇa,” one says.

Whoever grasps like this

Has a great grasping. (MMK XVI: 9)

The latter part of Loy’s argument above is in fact spurious, specifically, when he asserts, “I am groundless and ungroundable insofar as delusively feeling myself to be separate from the world”. Within the perspective of the MMK, it is precisely because of the persisting psychological certitude and belief in my own self-identity as an independent agent *separate* from the world that I thus feel *grounded*. In other words, I subscribe to an implicit dualism between self and the world. This is our everyday understanding of reality. We may agree that such a view is deluded, because the entities under consideration, myself and the world, are equally empty because of *pratītya-samutpāda*. Loy would characterise this as nonplurality of the world. The dualism collapses as a result of that. But that does not necessarily commit us to the logical opposite of nondualism as an absolute identity found in the nondifference between subject and object: “I have always been fully grounded insofar as I am the world”. If that were the case, then there is no need for cultivation of the path, for there is ultimately no prospect of cessation.

More importantly, how do we begin to identify with this Net? I should point out here that the dissolution of dualism leads, for Loy, towards the plenitude of nondual sameness. This effectively condemns us to a nondual stasis, despite whatever Loy might say: “Letting go of myself and merging with that nothingness leads to something else: when consciousness stops trying to catch its own tail, I become nothing, and discover that I am everything – or, more precisely, that I can be anything” (1993: 504). This notion of “letting-go” is significant here for Loy in identifying with Indra’s Net, and he argues that the move beyond language is

an attempt to *liberate* rather than *eliminate* concepts into a nondual realm which is ultimately recuperated into the One Mind<sup>79</sup>. This is because:

As long as we identify with language at all, even with language as a whole, we are still trying to retain a self-existing ground which reveals that we are still anxious about our feared lack-of-ground. Later we shall see how meditation – letting-go of all thought/language – is necessary if we are to resolve the problematical dualism between language and the objectified world we live ‘in.’ (Loy, 1993: 489)

As mentioned earlier, meditation is the nonphilosophical site that unseats logocentrism, for Loy also sees in this the intimate relation between meditation, letting go of oneself (through linguistic forgetfulness), and finally identifying with the Net: “*‘Forgetting’ itself is how a jewel in Indra’s Net loses its sense of separation and realizes that it is the Net.* Meditation is learning how to die by learning to ‘forget’ the sense-of-self, which happens by becoming absorbed into one’s meditation exercise” (Loy, 1993: 503). This also means that letting go of oneself is to forget the linguistic dualisms of knowledge (*jñāna*) in order to realise (through *prajñā*) the nondual nature of the Net: “The relationship between names and things is the archetypal signifier/signified correspondence, and *the nondualist goal is nothing else than its complete deconstruction*” (Loy, 1988: 250, emphasis mine). Therefore, in stressing meditation as a non-linguistic practice Loy also finds there the wherewithal of *prajñā* (or wisdom as non-conceptual knowledge) to contend with *jñāna* in order to transcend philosophy altogether. Nayak argues, however, that: “There is no implication in the Mādyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna of *prajñā* (wisdom) as consisting in the knowledge of

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Loy cites a Chinese Ch’an master as saying: “The One Mind can take in all minds and return them to the One Mind, this is the meaning of Indra’s Net” (Loy, 1993: 505).

an Absolute Reality; when one realizes the *śūnyatā* or *naiḥsvābhāvyā* (essencelessness) of all concepts and desists from indulging in all sorts of thought-constructions, that is the state of *prajñā* or wisdom” (1979: 485). We will also recall here that McCagney had made a similar point regarding Nāgārjuna employing *jñāna* rather than *prajñā* to refute his opponents in the MMK. In pointing this out I am not disparaging the significance of *prajñā*, nor am I consequently privileging *jñāna* as the only valid means of attaining enlightenment. What I wish to stress here is their relative dependency – one is the cessation of the other – and to point out the dialectical opposition between *prajñā* and *jñāna* as constructed by Loy to be yet another *kalpana* in itself. Also, we should note that deconstruction is employed here in a destructive sense, and this is meant to cohere with Candrakīrti’s characterisation of *nirvāṇa* as the utter dissipation of ontologising views. Loy goes on to claim: “Once *pratītyasamutpāda* is used to ‘dissolve’ *svabhāva*, then the lack of ‘thingness’ in things implies a nondual way of experiencing in which there is no awareness of cause-and-effect because one *is* the cause/effect. Again, each pole ‘deconstructs’ the other, and what remains is inexpressible in the dualistic categories of language” (Loy, 1986: 16). I can fully agree with Loy here that once any form of entitative identity has been deconstructed or demonstrated to be empty this leads to a nondual (i.e., *advaya*) apprehension of worldly phenomena, though this does not justify the ontological sleight-of-hand he performs with the claim: “one *is* the cause/effect”. This assertion is *advaitic* in the sense significant for Loy that is not upheld in Nāgārjuna’s MMK: he would rightly argue that one should not say “is” or “is not”. *This ontological sleight-of-hand inevitably requires the complicity of silence to mask its operations.*

What is ultimately inexpressible in language is *śūnyatā*, and Loy provides a gloss of the term to support his argument: “They derive from the root *su* which means ‘to be swollen,’

both like a hollow balloon and like a pregnant woman; therefore the usual English translation ‘empty’ and ‘emptiness’ must be supplemented with the notion of ‘pregnant with possibilities’” (1992: 233). In order to understand the fecundity of this silence and its significance towards Loy’s core theory I shall trace its inception to Mahākāśyapa, the first Ch’an/Zen patriarch. In the Flower Sermon Buddha held a white flower in his hand, twirling it, while saying nothing to the *sangha* (trans. assembly). Only Mahākāśyapa smiled, whereupon Buddha affirmed his enlightenment. The significance of this sūtra not only establishes Mahākāśyapa as Buddha’s successor, but it also formed the basis of a unique emphasis on wordless and direct transmission from teacher to disciple, thus establishing an uninterrupted lineage from Mahākāśyapa to Ch’an/Zen. This also developed into the doctrine of sudden enlightenment which is unmediated by language. It is not difficult to see its significance towards Loy’s theory of nonduality, whence his stress on *zazen* as the nonphilosophical site *par excellence*. Note that I have stressed *wordless* rather than *silence*, for the reason that silence may be re-interpreted as expressing the ineffable nature of *nirvāṇa*, and in doing so, predicating silence onto *nirvāṇa* as some existent entity. This is what I believe Loy ultimately wishes to interpret the silence of *śūnyatā*. Nayak makes the position very clear for us:

One may say that the justification for silence on the part of the philosophically enlightened person lies not in the inscrutable nature of some absolute outside the world of our ordinary discourse; the explanation lies in the essencelessness or *śūnyatā* of the concepts which are only conventionally useful or *saṃvṛti satya*. A philosopher with the critical insight of *śūnyatā* is noncommittal with regard to contending metaphysical thought-constructions; this constitutes his *tūṣṇimbhāva* or silence. (1979: 488)

I would justify the hermeneutical choice of wordless over silence as it best demonstrates this noncommittal attitude towards contending thought-constructions. In other words, we are not *silenced* by the “absolute outside” that Loy believed silence to be pointing towards. I argue instead that silence points to nothing, is *nothing other* than the cessation of such reference, linguistic or otherwise. Of course, Loy’s nondual vision goes beyond this absolute outside, by dissolving any such notions of inside and outside altogether into a petrified stasis: “Our minds need to realize that they are *ab-solute* in the original sense: ‘unconditioned.’ Meditative techniques decondition the mind from its tendency to secure itself by circling in familiar ruts, thereby freeing it to become anything” (1993: 505).

Loy’s claim that our minds are thus free to become anything seemingly invalidates my criticism of his nondualist position as being static. I shall demonstrate this need not be the case. A support of this may be found in Loy’s criticism of Derrida:

Derrida understands that all philosophy, including his, can only ‘reinscribe,’ but for him the sole solution is to disseminate wildly, in the hope of avoiding any fixation into a system that will subvert his insight. *One wonders what freedom can be found in such a need to keep ahead of yourself.* In contrast, we have the nondualist example of a Zen master, who plays with language – moving in and out of it freely – because he is not caught in it. His laconic expressions emerge from / are one with an unrepresentable ground of serenity, and although they cannot directly point to this ground, there are ways to suggest it for someone else. (1988: 256, emphasis mine)

I believe it should not be necessary to rehearse here the reasons why Derrida needs recourse to non-synonymic substitutions. Indeed, this is a common complaint of both Magliola and Loy. What is *inconsistent*, however, is the criterion according to which such differential drift is denied any positive implications for Derrida but is held to be positively affirmed by Zen. I will draw the relevant passages here from both Magliola and Loy:

Magliola:

The Master wrenches the viewpoint of the monk this way and that, so he might learn to live the going-on of alterity. And so he might learn that alleged centers are not to be foisted onto the differential flow; rather, alleged centers are really a matter of shifting perspectives, and the adept is one who can control these shifts at will. *Buddhist différance, in other words, belongs to no viewpoints, but can be regarded from all viewpoints.* (1984: 102-3, emphasis mine)

Loy:

The *anātman* doctrine of Buddhism is often contrasted with the Upaniṣadic identification of *ātman* with Brahman [...] but these two extremes turn out to be identical: the Buddhist ‘no-self’ is indistinguishable from the ‘all-Self’ of Vedānta, *for the shrink to nothing is to become everything.* (1986: 15, emphasis mine)

What is immediately apparent above is the shift between dialectical extremes affirmed by both Magliola and Loy. Recalling the significance of *Kaccāyānagotta-sūtra* to Nāgārjuna’s MMK, the only appropriate reply here would be: without approaching either extreme, the

Tathāgata teaches a doctrine by the middle. Nayak’s remark eloquently sums up for me here both differential drift and the shifts between dialectical extremes of Magliola and Loy:

Freedom from all sorts of metaphysical vagaries is the ideal for the Mādhyamikas. *One concept leads to another, one idea leads to the other, and this is alright in its sphere.* But metaphysicians make an illegitimate use of these concepts, thereby falling into the trap of absolute confusion and inconsistencies. *Philosophical insight consists in avoiding these extreme metaphysical positions* by a perfect understanding of these concepts as being *śūnya* or *niḥsvabhāva*, that is, as devoid of essence. (1979: 488, emphasis mine)

This trap of absolute confusion and inconsistencies also means that we no longer know how to act in the face of absurdity entailed by such radical nondual revision – indeed, we are petrified into stasis entailed by a nondualist reality, because we no longer know how to make sense of our being in the world. This not only violates conventional truths, but also vitiates the very aim of Loy’s theory of interdependency that he began with. This is most glaring when Loy addresses the issue of ethics:

That is the origin of the ethical problem we struggle with today: without some transcendental ground such as God or Buddhanature, what will bind our atomized selves together? Again, there is an answer in Indra’s Net. When my sense-of-self lets go and disappears, I realize my interdependence with all other phenomena in that all-encompassing net. It is more than being dependent on them: when I discover that I *am* you, the trace of your traces, the ethical

problem of how to relate to you is transformed. *We don't need a moral code to tie us together if we are not separate from each other.* (1993: 500)

This argument is specious, and may be easily demonstrated with a counterfactual: say for example I am standing trial for mass genocide, and I proceed to justify my actions (or non-actions, by Loy's reckoning) by pointing out that I have not killed anyone, for the simple reason that everyone is me, and if I were guilty as charged I would not be standing here in the first place, because that would mean I have killed myself in the process. But strictly speaking, I would not even be on trial to begin with, for there is no concept of an Other that might otherwise call me to account. Clearly, this is untenable, and I do not know of any moral philosophy, Buddhist or otherwise, that might affirm such a position. This rejection of a moral code also means, ultimately, that, *nondifference results in indifference*. I argue this is the result of absolutism (as a context without horizon), because there are no longer passages of translation (that always presuppose some boundary or limit) through which one may engage ethically with the other. This nondualist stasis violates both ultimate and conventional truths in Buddhism, and runs counter to the path-based hermeneutics I am forwarding.

What I have done in this chapter is to course a middle path between the philosophical extremes of Magliola's differentialism and Loy's nondualism, though upon analysis, both extremes would turn out to be rather similar. I have also demonstrated the untenability of their positions, through intervening at the stress points of their discourse with my understanding of Derrida and Nāgārjuna established previously. As I have consistently argued, there is nothing particularly mystifying about either Derrida or Nāgārjuna. This misconception only arises when one attempts to understand the step beyond philosophy in a radically absolute manner. This results in absurd or inconsistent conclusions which obtain so

long as one persists in methodological hegemony – as I have stressed, the method, if there ever was one, can only be a method of no-method. In doing so, I should also maintain that my refutations do not constitute any judgements, negative or otherwise, regarding Zen Buddhism. To do so is to base interpretation upon interpretation. What I have demonstrated, however, is that both critics' renditions of Zen are incompatible with Nāgārjuna (of which he is a precursor), and not necessarily capable of providing the heterological opening that both allege Derrida misses. Both do so in order to attain the other shore of their discourse, though as both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are only too well aware, this can only be achieved at the cost of arrogating one's being in finitude to the mistaken presumption of infinitude, in the form of an impossible step:

I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the operations of childbearing – but also with a glance toward those who, in a society from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.

(Derrida, 1978: 370)

We say that this understanding of yours

Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness

And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.

As a consequence you are harmed by it. (MMK XXIV: 7)

## § *In-Conclusion: Heterological Avenues*

I had pointed out at the beginning that the initial idea which prompted this thesis was that of relation. However, while relations are readily apparent in our daily lives, we do not find this relation itself, nor the categories it presupposes (e.g., causality, time, space and being), existing anywhere *on their own*. This meant that while our common sense view of the world understands these relations in terms of being, we never quite arrive at the very thing itself, and in spite of that we continue to dwell in the ontological grounds of *our own making*. This necessarily involves some latent form of metaphysical speculation in our desire to produce something from nothing, even though this attempt to lift ourselves above (*meta*) the flux (*physis*) is as efficacious as pulling oneself up by the boot-strings. This is untenable, as Derrida and Nāgārjuna have demonstrated separately. Both have done so, however, by approaching the problematic from diametrically opposed trajectories, converging around the same gaping hole in our understanding. This, in turn, led me to consider the possibility of relating both as a means of engaging with the general hypothesis that *everything has a context, insofar as they are dependently arisen*. I was interested in the form of hermeneutical consciousness that was oriented towards a structure of openness, to articulate an alternative way of understanding our existential relatedness in the absence of being. To do this I proposed a path-based hermeneutics as a middle path between deconstructive *démarche* and *mādhyamika mārga* in order to address the various linguistic, epistemological and ontological implications of this aleatory relation/no-relation. I was also aware that these paths ultimately diverge, though what interested me was the possibility of their intersection (and interaction).

Once this is established, it would appear there is no logical necessity governing these

relations, in the absence of some transcendental signified, and it also became clear that this notion of relation can no longer be understood in terms of a dialectical middle or between, along with the conceptual opposites it distributes, according to a binary logic of is/is-not. This is because *any form of identification cannot be divorced from objectification*. This effectively eliminates Being (and its corollary, non-Being) from serving as an identifiable absolute substratum, though we have yet to account for some other way of understanding our phenomenal world. There is no third way, however, in the form of some radically other shore at which we may decisively arrive. *To posit absolute alterity would be secretly to hanker after the dream of absolute presence*. Not only is this counter-intuitive, it is also aggravated by the fact that we are implicated in the very act of its observation. This also accounts for my first positive claim regarding Derrida and Nāgārjuna, *viz.*, that both do not claim an absolute point of departure position *vis-à-vis* the metaphysics they are critiquing, which also necessitates that there cannot be a determinable method in advance. Any such notion of method would still be metaphysical, a wondrous raft leading to some mythical, transcendent shore. This is counter to the immanent critique of Derrida, as well as the *prāsaṅgika-mādhyamika* approached espoused by Nāgārjuna. As I have argued extensively in the chapter on methodology, both Derrida and Nāgārjuna are acutely aware of the methodological implications of their respective strategies, such that for both, *the method is the argument*.

The implication of this was that both no longer dwelt in ontological categories of thought, and it is for this reason one may claim that *différance* and *śūnyatā* are not merely non-conceptual, they are, strictly, a-conceptual, while at the same time allowing for the possibility of conceptuality in general. In the absence of an alternative position both inhabited the metaphysical systems they were critiquing. Further, this form of inhabiting cannot be reified into a fixed, determinable position, and in pointing out that this form of inhabiting

cannot be reified into a fixed position, I would have to supplement this inhabiting as being *in medias res*. This, however, can only be understood in terms of the countervailing movements and pro-regressing flux that constitute its discourse, coming together and coming undone at once. This made sense, given the open-ended nature of the problematic in question – if this relation can no longer be understood within categories of is/is-not then it also points to what I saw as its necessarily equivocal or undecideable status. This also meant that no single way is proper to it, that it can go by many different names through the detours of language. The challenge, however, is how to proceed in a consistent manner without impinging upon either Derrida or Nāgārjuna, in seeking to establish some common ground when both thinkers have precisely argued against the groundlessness of any such putative grounds. This has to be circumvented in a way that would cohere both without homogenising them into a common horizon. If that were the case then there would be no need for their mutual translation. This is possible by addressing their *rapprochement* as being ensconced in a relation of *familiarity without similarity*.

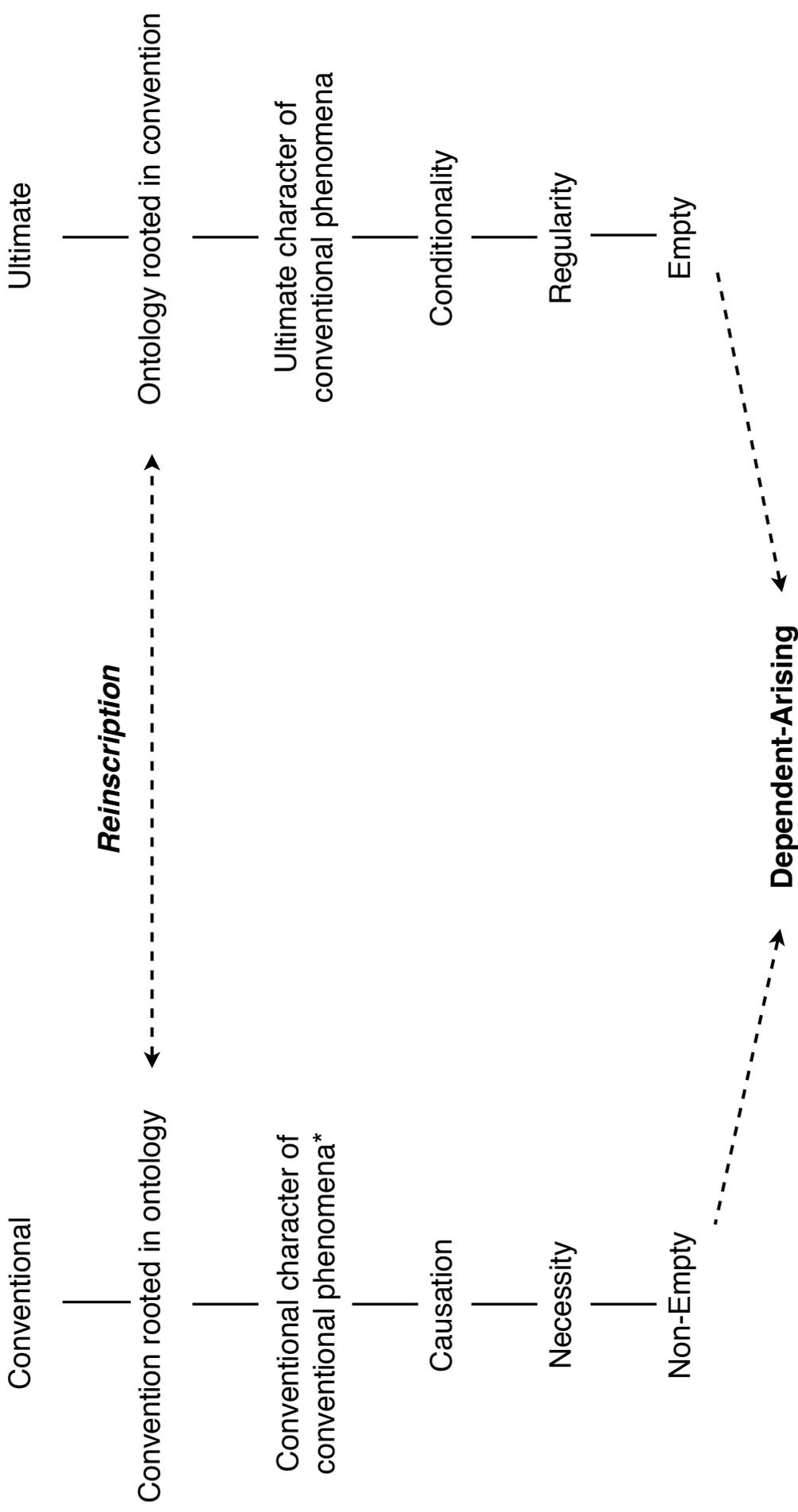
By doing so I was able to avoid equating *différance* with *śūnyatā*, though this also meant that I was thus obliged to engage with their strategic deployment in their respective contexts. I will not rehearse here the arguments where I offered my own readings of *différance* and *śūnyatā*. This can only be done by inhabiting within the discourse from which the terms are borrowed and attending to them closely, in order to elicit a heterological opening that would lend itself to possible mutual illumination and translation. Such an opening gradually emerges in my refutation of Magliola and Loy by dismantling their discourse from within, and as I have pointed out in the process, we are always *here*, inhabiting within a foreign land, even if we should like to dwell in it. In accordance with a path-based hermeneutics I would affirm this opening in the figure of the pilgrim, either as *le*

*juif errant* or ambulant monk, summoned by a call that is at once inviting and menacing, always saying, *Come*.

# *Two-Truths Doctrine*

*Reificationism* →

→ *Scepticism*



\*All phenomena as far as Nāgārjuna is concerned – insofar as they are dependently arisen – are conventionally existent.

Fig. 1. Heuristic Structure of Two-Truths

## *Dialectical Structure of MMK I*

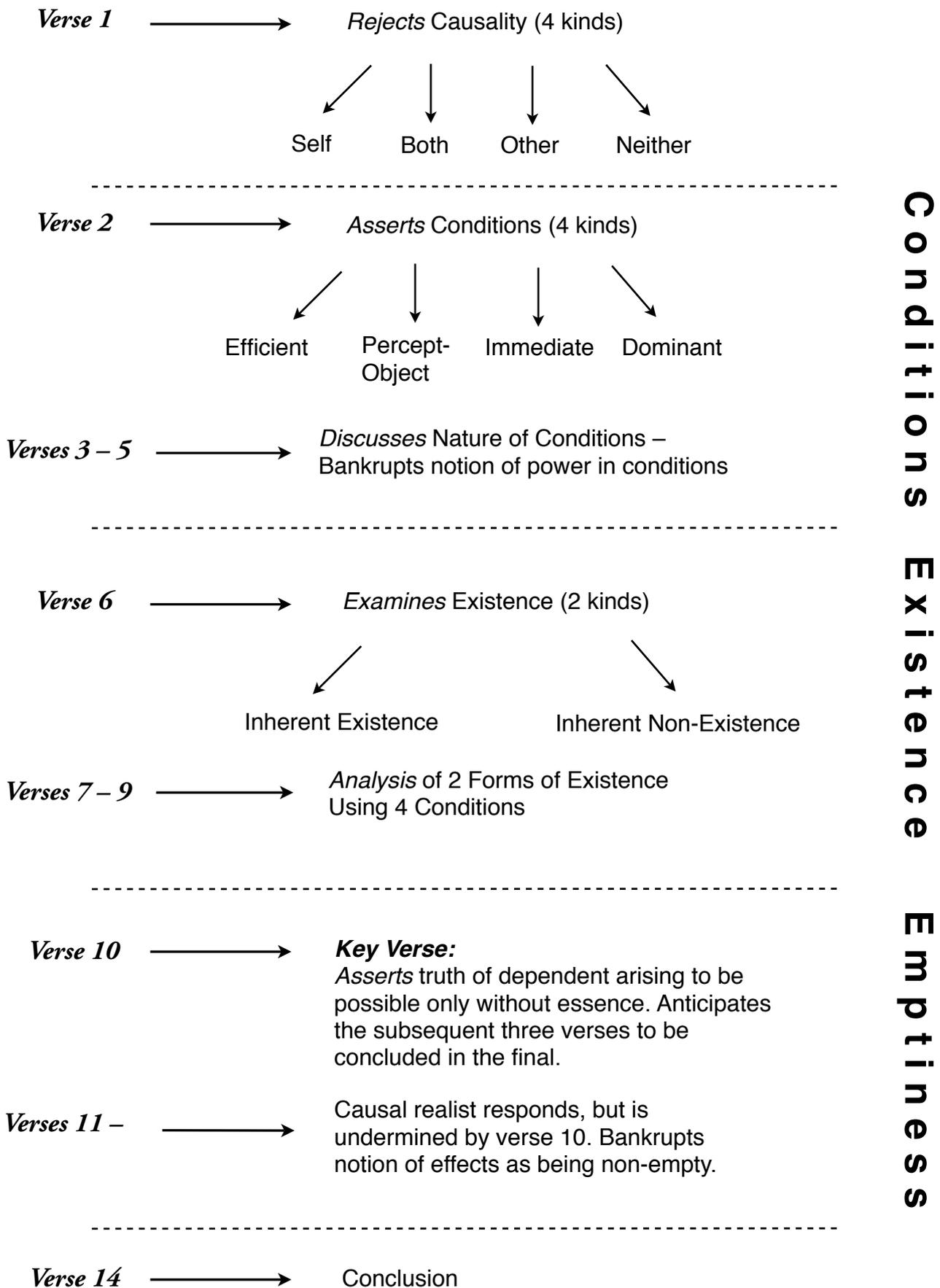


Fig. 2. Dialectical Structure of MMK

# Kaccayanagotta-Sutta

**T**HUS HAVE I HEARD: THE BLESSED ONE WAS ONCE LIVING AT Savatthi, in the monastery of Anathapindika, in Jeta's Grove. At that time the venerable Kaccayana of that clan came to visit him, and saluting him, sat down at one side. So seated, he questioned the Exalted one: "Sir [people] speak of 'right view, right view.' To what extent is there a right view?"

*"This world, Kaccayana, is generally inclined towards two [views]: existence and non-existence. To him who perceives with right wisdom the uprising of the world as it has come to be, the notion of non-existence in the world does not occur. Kaccayana, to him who perceives with right wisdom the ceasing of the world as it has come to be, the notion of existence in the world does not occur.*

*The world, for the most part, Kaccayana, is bound by approach, grasping and inclination. And he who does not follow that approach and grasping, that determination of mind, that inclination and disposition, who does not cling to or adhere to a view: 'This is my self,' who thinks: 'suffering that is subject to arising, arises; suffering that is subject to ceasing, ceases,' such a person does not doubt, is not perplexed. Herein, his knowledge is not other-dependent. Thus far, Kaccayana, there is 'right view.'*

*'Everything exists,'—this, Kaccayana, is one extreme.*

*'Everything does not exist,'—this, Kaccayana, is the second extreme.*

*Kaccayana, without approaching either extreme, the Tathagata teaches you a doctrine by the middle.*

*Dependent upon ignorance arise dispositions; dependent upon dispositions arise consciousness; dependent upon consciousness arises the psychophysical personality; dependent upon the psychophysical personality arise the six senses; dependent upon the six senses arises contact; dependent upon contact arises feeling; dependent upon feeling arises craving; dependent upon craving arises grasping; dependent upon grasping arises becoming; dependent upon becoming arises birth; dependent upon birth arise old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair. Thus arises the entire mass of suffering. However, from the utter fading away and ceasing of ignorance, there is ceasing of dispositions; from the ceasing of dispositions, there is ceasing of consciousness; from the ceasing of consciousness, there is ceasing of the psychophysical personality; from the ceasing of the psychophysical personality, there is ceasing of the six senses; from the ceasing of the six senses, there is ceasing of contact; from the ceasing of contact, there is ceasing of feeling; from the ceasing of feeling, there is ceasing of craving; from the ceasing of craving, there is ceasing of grasping; from the ceasing of grasping, there is ceasing of becoming; from the ceasing of becoming, there is ceasing of birth; from the ceasing of birth, there is ceasing of old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, dejection and despair. And thus there is the ceasing of this entire mass of suffering."*

*MMK I: "Examination of Conditions" (Jay L. Garfield)*

1. Neither from itself nor from another,  
Nor from both,  
Nor without a cause,  
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.
  
2. There are four conditions: efficient condition;  
Percept-object condition; immediate condition;  
Dominant condition, just so.  
There is no fifth condition.
  
3. The essence of entities  
Is not present in the conditions, etc ...  
If there is no essence,  
There can be no otherness-essence.
  
4. Power to act does not have conditions.  
There is no power to act without conditions.  
There are no conditions without power to act.  
Nor do any have the power to act.
  
5. These give rise to those,  
So these are called conditions.  
As long as those do not come from these,

Why are these not non-conditions?

6. For neither an existent nor a non-existent thing  
Is a condition appropriate.  
If a thing is non-existent, how could it have a condition?  
If a thing is already existent, what would a condition do?
7. When neither existents nor  
Non-existents nor existent non-existents are established,  
How could one propose a “productive cause?”  
If there were one, it would be pointless.
8. An existent entity (mental episode)  
Has no object.  
Since a mental episode is without an object.  
How could there be any percept-condition?
9. Since things are not arisen,  
Cessation is not acceptable.  
Therefore, an immediate condition is not reasonable.  
If something has ceased, how could it be a condition?
10. If things did not exist  
Without essence,  
The phrase, “When this exists so this will be,”

Would not be acceptable.

11. In the several or united conditions  
The effect cannot be found.  
How could something not in the conditions  
Come from the conditions?
12. However, if a non-existent effect  
Arises from these conditions,  
Why does it not arise  
From non-conditions?
13. If the effect's essence is the conditions,  
But the conditions don't have their own essence,  
How could an effect whose essence is the conditions  
Come from something that is essenceless?
14. Therefore, neither with conditions as their essence,  
Nor with non-conditions as their essence are they any effects.  
If there are no such effects,  
How could conditions or non-conditions be evident?

*MMK I: "Examination of Conditions" (David J. Kalupahana)*

1. No existents whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause.
2. There are only four conditions, namely, primary condition, objectively supporting condition, immediately contiguous condition, and dominant condition. A fifth condition does not exist.
3. The self-nature of existents is not evident in the conditions, etc. In the absence of self-nature, other-nature too is not evident.
4. Activity is not constituted of conditions nor is it not non-constituted of conditions. Conditions are neither constituted nor non-constituted of activity.
5. These are conditions, because depending upon them these [others] arise. So long as these [others] do not arise, why are they not non-conditions?
6. A condition of an effect that is either non-existent or existent is not proper. Of what non-existent [effect] is a condition? Of what use is a condition of the existent [effect]?

7. Since a thing that is existent or non-existent or both existent and non-existent is not produced, how pertinent in that context would a producing cause be?
8. A thing that exists is indicated as being without objective support. When a thing is without objective support, for what purpose is an objective support?
9. When things are not arisen [from conditions], cessation is not appropriate. When [a thing has] ceased, what is [it that serves as] a condition? Therefore, an immediate condition is not proper.
10. Since the existence of existents devoid of self-nature is not evident, the statement: “When that exists, this comes to be,” will not be appropriate.
11. The effect does not exist in the conditions that are separated or combined. Therefore, how can that which is not found in the conditions come to be from the conditions?
12. If that effect, being non-existent [in the conditions] were to proceed from the conditions, why does it not proceed from non-conditions?

13. The effect is made of conditions, but the conditions are themselves not self-made. How can that effect made of conditions [arise] from what is not self-made?
  
14. An effect made either of conditions or of non-conditions is, therefore, not evident. Because of the absence of the effect, where could conditions or non-conditions be evident?

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