Madhyamaka is Not Nihilism

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Introduction

Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE) is the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy, and easily, after the Buddha himself, the most influential philosopher in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. Despite the great consensus on his philosophical and doctrinal importance, there is little consensus, either in the canonical Buddhist and non-Buddhist literature of India, Tibet and East Asia, or in the contemporary secondary literature of European and Asian Buddhist Studies regarding the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's work. In virtue of his distinctive doctrine that all phenomena are *empty (śūnya)* and that nothing exists ultimately (*paramartha),* but that things only exists *conventionally* (*vyvavahāra/samvṛti),* he has often been accused of defending nihilism. (Matilal 2002, Wood 1994) His assertions in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way)* and in *Vigrahavyāvartanī (Reply to Objections)* that he defends no thesis, and his willingness to deny all four limbs of certain tetralemmas (*catuṣkoṭi)* add fuel to this fire.

I will argue that this nihilistic reading of Nāgārjuna is unjustified, and that Nāgārjuna is in fact a robust realist, offering an *analysis,* not a *refutation* of existence. On that analysis to exist is to exist conventionally, and ultimate existence is in fact an incoherent ontological fantasy. I focus on what many take to be the sharpest case for extreme nihilism, Nāgārjuna's negative *catuṣkoṭi.*

1. The negative tetralemma in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXII:11

In the chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* entitled *Examination of the Tathāgata,* Nāgārjuna asserts one of the more challenging and paradoxical of his famous tetralemmas:

> We do not assert "empty."
> We do not assert "nonempty."
> We neither assert both nor neither.
> They are asserted only for the purpose of designation. [*Ocean* 447]

Tsongkhapa (14th-15th C CE), following Candrakīrti (6th C CE) closely, comments as follows:

> We do not say that because the Tathāgata is *empty* he is *nonexistent*, because that would be to commit the error of deprecating him. Moreover, the Tathāgata has been shown to be essenceless. Because we aspire to present the undistorted meaning, nor do we say that he is *nonempty*—that is, that he exists *inherently*.
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> We do not assert both of these; nor do we assert neither that he exists nor does not exist because *ultimately,* none of these four alternatives can be maintained. On the other hand, if we did *not* assert these *conventionally,* those to whom we speak would not understand us. So, from the standpoint of the conventional truth and for conventional purposes, we say "empty" and "non-empty," "both empty and non-empty," and "neither empty nor non-empty." We say these having mentally imputed them from the perspective of those people to whom we are speaking. Therefore, we simply say that "they are asserted for the purpose of designation." [*Ocean* 448]

The tetralemma Nāgārjuna asserts in the root text might seem to be about as nihilistic as one can get, denying not only the possibility of asserting anything, but also the possibility of denying anything (and certainly it has been read that way, both by his classical Indian interlocutors, especially the Nayāyikas, and by such contemporary commentators as BK Matilal and Thomas Wood, *op. cit.*). On the other hand, Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa, in commentary, take some of the sting out of this reading by substituting a *positive* tetralemma in its place, and distinguishing between two philosophical perspectives: an ultimate perspective and a conventional perspective.

In brief (see Cowherds 2010; Garfield 1995, 2001; Newland 2011; Westerhoff 2010 for more detail) conventional perspective is that of ordinary human consciousness, filtered through conceptual thought, language and our collective and individual modes of taking up with the world. The ultimate perspective is that of a fully awakened being—a buddha—from which all things appear as empty of any intrinsic identity or essence, as interdependent, and independent of their presentation by conceptual thought, or as described by social or linguistic conventions. While they argue that we can't say anything at all from the ultimate perspective in virtue of its transcendence of the discursive, there is quite a bit that we can say from the conventional perspective. Understanding why Madhyamaka is a rejection, not an embrace, of nihilism requires us to attend to these two

truths, but also to much else, much of which can be examined through the prism of this verse.

In what follows, I will show how Madhyamaka ideas about logic, and about the nature of metaphysical dialectic allow us to unpack this tetralemma, to understand its relation to its positive shadow and thereby reveal a decidedly realistic attitude emerging from the rhetoric of emptiness. The analysis I offer here is not new, and owes much to Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa. I have also defended much of this both on my own in numerous essays, and with the Cowherds in our recent polygraph *Moonshadows*. But the refraction through the prism of this particular tetralemma and its commentary offers a new perspective, and may allow us to see how different colors in the Nāgārjunian spectrum combine to illuminate emptiness as an affirmation, not a denial, of the actuality of the world.

This essay is not intended to provide an introduction to Madhyamaka thought in general, or even to the thought of Nāgārjuna in particular. I will have to presuppose a basic familiarity with this landscape. The interested reader is directed to the more general presentations I cite in this paper. I do expect, however, that even for those readers to whom Madhyamaka is *terra incognita*, some of this will make sense. If so, I hope that it will provide a stimulus to venture further into the world of Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka, a philosophical world that repays its visitors with rich insights. As the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced in the West and in the Anglophone world more generally matures, and attends more regularly to non-Western voices, it is increasingly important that we learn to read and to take seriously Asian voices.

2.   Madhyamaka and 4 valuations

As then Richard Routley noted a few decades ago (Meyer and Routley 1972, 1973; Plumwood and Routley 1982), Nāgārjuna scooped Meyer and Dunn (1972) by a few millennia in proposing a four-valued approach to logic (or at least a four-way-valuational approach, as the set of truth *values* remains binary—only the assignment function goes quatrinary). On this way of thinking, sentences can be (just) true, (just) false, *both* true and false, or *neither* true nor false. Nāgārjuna's concern was not the semantics of conditionals, per se, but was closely related to the concerns that led to a four-valued semantics for relevant logics. In particular, Nāgārjuna was concerned with the

possibilities of presupposition failure as well as the possibility of a deeply paradoxical reality and the need to reason in these logically challenging environments. Similar concerns, of course, motivate the Meyer-Dunn semantics for Relevant Logic, and the gappy and glutty worlds it requires.

So, we often see in Nāgārjuna's work the *catuṣkoṭi,* or four-corners, a partition of logical space with regard to a proposition into four possibilities: true, false, both or neither. Nāgārjuna's approach to the tetralemma is distinctive in that he does not always see these as four *alternatives*. We see instances in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* in which all four *koṭis* are affirmed (such as that in chapter XIII in which it is said that the self exists, does not exist, both does and does not exist, and neither exists nor does not exist), and instances in which they are all denied, as in the verse on which we focus here. In this case, as we have seen, while all are denied in the root verse, the commentary explains that joint denial through an implicit joint affirmation in a different register.

The joint denial indicates the perspective of ultimate truth, the standpoint from which all phenomena are apprehended as empty. From that perspective, Nāgārjuna argues, nothing at all can be said, since language itself implicates reification, the imputation of intrinsic identity to its putative referents. There are several ideas at work here, and to develop them all would take as far afield. But quickly: In this chapter, Nāgārjuna is concerned with the Tathāgata (an epithet of the Buddha, literally meaning *thus-come* or, *thus-gone,* depending on how the compound is parsed), and so with how the world appears from the perspective of full awakening. He is asking first what is *ultimately true.* And the answer is, "nothing." When we assert anything, we implicate the reality of the referent of the subject term, and the qualification of the subject term by a property. But ultimately, nothing exists, and properties, from a nominalist Buddhist perspective, are all fictional. So, from the ultimate standpoint, every sentence we utter is misleading.

So even to say that the Tathāgata is *neither empty nor non-empty* is impossible ultimately, since for him to be *ultimately neither empty nor non-empty* would be for the state of being neither empty nor non-empty to be his ultimate or intrinsic nature, and that would undercut Nāgārjuna's insistence that emptiness is the emptiness of *any* intrinsic nature. This is an important issues. Earlier in the text, (XV:7,8) Nāgārjuna reminds us

that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views, and that anyone for whom emptiness becomes a view is hopeless. In his careful gloss of this verse, Candrakīrti compares someone who takes emptiness to be the intrinsic nature of things to someone who, upon hearing that a shopkeeper has nothing to sell, asks for some of that nothing. Emptiness really is the lack of any intrinsic nature, or any nature that things have ultimately, not an ultimate nature to replace others. More of this below.

On the other hand, as Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa emphasize, from the conventional perspective, we can *assert* all four *koṭis*. We can say that the Tathāgata is empty—after all, he lacks any intrinsic nature; that he is non-empty—that is, emptiness is not his intrinsic nature; that he is both empty and non-empty—that is, he lacks intrinsic nature, but does not do so intrinsically; and that he is neither empty nor non-empty—neither intrinsically empty nor actually non-empty.

Note the use of parameterization at the conventional level, contrasting with the univocal non-assertability at the ultimate level. That is, at the conventional level, each of the four *kotis* is asserted in a slightly different voice, with qualifiers such as "intrinsically" or "not intrinsically" implicitly qualifying the predicate *empty*. At the ultimate level, on the other hand, there is no such need for these insertions. Note also that at the conventional level the *catuṣkoṭi* does not involve us in paradox—the four assertions, suitably parameterized, are mutually consistent—while at the ultimate level the tetralemma takes us straight to paradox, since we are forced to say what we cannot say. (See Garfield and Priest 2003 for more on these paradoxes.) The elegance of Nāgāruna's analysis, we will see consists in the demonstration that these tetralemmas in fact encode identical ideas and that the consistent conventional truth is identical with the paradoxical ultimate truth. This insight indeed is Nāgārjuna's most profound contribution to ontology, and explains why his analysis of reality as empty is realistic, not nihilistic.

3.   The importance of identifying the object of negation

As I said above, the charge of nihilism is not a new indictment for Madhyamaka. Not only classical Indian non-Buddhist philosophers, but also Buddhist philosophers who subscribed either to the realistic, but reductionist Śrāvakayana schools or to the idealist Yogācāra accused Mādhyamikas of nihilistically denying the reality of obviously real

entities (fundamental dharmas to which all of reality reduces or consciousness, respectively) in virtue of the doctrine that all phenomena are empty. We will return to Nāgārjuna's own reply to this charge in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* below. But for now, it may be instructive to introduce Tsongkhapa's approach to rebutting this charge, developed in several of his important treatises, including *Great Exposition of the Path to Enlightenment* (2000)*, Ocean of Reasoning* and *Elucidation of the Purport of Madhyamaka* (not available in a Western language)*. The Cowherds develop this idea in detail in *Moonshadows (op. cit*.), but we can sketch the important points here in short compass.

"Emptiness," Tsongkhapa emphasizes, requires a parameter. We must specify that of which an empty thing is empty. The room in which I write is indeed empty of elephants, but it is not empty of people. When I leave, the room will be empty of people, but not of furniture, etc… If I were to remove all of the furniture, it would still not be empty of air. To assert simply that something is empty is hence not to assert anything at all. We must add what Tsongkhapa calls "a qualifying phrase" in order to complete the assertion. He emphasizes that emptiness is a negation, indicating the absence of something—and the kind of negation relevant to emptiness in the Mādhyamika's sense is an external, or non-implicative negation, not projecting an alternative property or entity of which the empty thing is full. So, in order to understand the claim that something is empty in Nāgārjuna's sense, we must identify what Tsongkhapa calls "the object of negation," (*dgag bya)* or the property that is denied to inhere in the subject in question.

The opponent who regards Madhyamaka as nihilistic, Tsongkhapa argues, mis-identifies the relevant object of negation as *mere existence.* If this were the object of negation, then to say that all phenomena are empty would be to say that all phenomena lack even mere existence, and that would of course to say that everything is non-existent, a nihilistic position if ever there was one. But, Tsongkhapa argues, this is a mis-reading of Nāgārjuna and his followers. The correct object of negation, he urges, is not *mere existence,* but rather *intrinsic existence.*

 The Sanskrit word here is *svabhāva,* and translation into English is a notorious can of worms. I have often used *essence* to capture its meaning, and that is OK. Others have

used *substance, substantial existence, self-nature, self-being, own-being, essential existence, etc…* Many of us are now settling on *intrinsic nature.* But no English expression captures the Sanskrit perfectly. The idea is this: To have *svabhāva* is to exist independently, to have a property (a *svabhāva)* that makes the thing the thing it is, to be capable of existing as that thing independently of anything else. Tsongkhapa argues that the primal confusion that Buddhists regard as conditioning attraction and aversion—and hence as the very root of the existential suffering Buddhism aims to eradicate—consists principally in the projection of this kind of existence onto entities. This includes the attribution of this kind of existence to our selves and all of the objects of our experience, as well as to any fundamental constituents in we might believe that these entities consist. Emptiness, as articulated by Nāgārjuna, Tsongkhapa argues, is the absence of *this* kind of existence or property.

To be empty of intrinsic identity, according to Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa, is hence not to be non-existent, but rather to exist interdependently, relationally, non-essentially, conventionally. To assert that things are empty, then, is not to assert that they are non-existent, but to assert that nothing has any essence, any intrinsic identity or reality, that to see the world in terms of substantially existent phenomena is a fundamental metaphysical error. This insight in turn grounds Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the two truths or two realities—conventional and ultimate truth/reality. (The Sanskrit *satya* denotes either truth or reality, and different readings may be appropriate in different contexts.)

Conventionally, there are people, dogs, tables and chairs, and each of these things has countless properties, prosaic and profound. These things exist dependently upon one another, and on their parts, and their status as entities, as well as the properties they have, depend upon other entities as well as upon our own cognitive and sensory apparatus and social, cognitive and linguistic conventions. As a consequence, ultimately, there are no such things, and no such properties. To exist conventionally is precisely to be empty of ultimate reality. The ultimate truth is that everything is empty; that nothing is ultimately real, not even emptiness. It too, is only conventionally real, only the emptiness of empty things. If emptiness were more real than that, then conventional reality would indeed be less than full reality, since it would be a second grade existence contrasting with a

possible first-grade existence, but with no such contrast, conventional existence is the only kind of existence that is possible.

4.   *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV:18-19

Before returning to the tetralemma with which we began, it is instructive to examine two other well-known verses of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* verses that many take to be the very heart of the text, and indeed the heart of Madhyamaka philosophy itself. The 18th and 19th verses of chapter XXIV, the investigation of the four ennobling truths, appear as the climax of a response to an interlocutor anticipated in the opening verses of the chapter. This interlocutor is clearly a Śrāvakayana Buddhist, who Nāgārjuna imagines charging him with nihilism. In verse 1, we hear the opponent complaining:

> If all this is empty,
> There would be neither arising nor ceasing.
> And for you, it follows that
> The four noble truths do not exist. [*Ocean* 472]

After a cascade of *reductio* consequences, the opponent concludes at verse 6:

> Hence you undermine the fruits
> As well as the profane:
> The Dharma itself
> And all mundane conventions. [*Ocean* 476]

The opponent's position here is clear. Madhyamaka is nihilism, and Nāgārjuna's philosophical position is not merely inconsistent with Buddhist doctrine, it flies in the face of ordinary reason, making a hash of everyday life and common sense. It is in the context of this charge that we encounter verses 18 and 19:

> That which is dependent origination
> Is explained to be emptiness.
> That, being a dependent designation
> Is itself the middle way. [*Ocean* 503]
>
> There does not exist anything
> That is not dependently arisen.
> Therefore there does not exist anything
> That is not empty. [*Ocean* 505]

These verses repay careful reading and contemplation. In the first, Nāgārjuna identifies dependent origination and emptiness, and by implication, conventional and ultimate truth. He then asserts that this identification is itself merely conventional, and hence empty, and

that it, and its emptiness, constitute the middle path between reification nihilism he is concerned to limn. Let us consider each point in turn.

First, to be dependently originated—to exist in dependence on causes and conditions, in relation to other things, and to have an identity dependent on conceptual designation, is what it is to be empty. Note that to exist in this way is *not* to be non-existent; instead, for a Mādhyamika, it is the only way to be *real*. When we consider things carefully, Nāgārjuna suggests, that is how everything exists. Emptiness, then, is *not* non-existence.

But nor is emptiness—although it is the ultimate reality of things—*more* real than anything else, than any conventionally real thing. For emptiness is a dependent designation—merely a verbal formula; dependent origination is merely a dependent designation; and even the fact of their identity is merely a dependent designation, a way of taking things. Hence all are empty of intrinsic identity. Emptiness is only the emptiness of empty things, not a self-subsistent universal. It, too, is therefore merely conventionally real. The conventional reality of things is their emptiness, and hence their ultimate reality. And so the two truths—conventional and ultimate; the world of dependent arising and the emptiness that is ultimate reality—are identical.

This, Nāgārjuna asserts, is the *middle way*. Why is that? To take emptiness to be distinct from dependent origination, or to take emptiness to be ultimately real, and everything else to me merely conventionally real would be, as Tsongkhapa felicitously puts it, to fall into both extremes simultaneously. Emptiness would be reified as an ultimately existent phenomenon, and conventional reality would be deprecated as a second-class existence, as illusion. We would then be stuck with an inaccessible real world and an illusory world we are condemned to inhabit. Only by understanding the real world as empty of intrinsic reality, by understanding the emptiness of intrinsic reality to be interdependence, and so by understanding reality to be causally and conventionally interdependent can we take reality, ourselves, and our analysis of being itself seriously. Emptiness is not on this view an *alternative to* existence, but an *analysis of* existence.

5.   Two ways to read the negative tetralemma and its positive counterpart
So, let us return to the tetralemma with which we began and consider two ways of reading it in the context of this understanding of emptiness. Let us recall the tetralemma.

> We do not assert "empty."
> We do not assert "nonempty."
> We neither assert both nor neither.
> They are asserted only for the purpose of designation

There are two ways to read the verse and its positive image, and each is illuminating. First, we can think of the verse itself straightforwardly in terms of presupposition failure. On this reading, when Nāgārjuna recuses himself from each of the four *koṭis* of the *catuṣkoṭi*, he does so to indicate that he is speaking from the ultimate perspective (or at least attempting to do so, indicating the impossibility of *actually* doing so). As we noted at the outset, since all language is conventional, and since it can only designate what exists conventionally, any assertion can at best be conventionally true. The last line affirms this. Conventionally, we can say any of these things; ultimately none, because the presuppositions of assertion—the reality of referents and the possibility of instantiating properties are not satisfied from that perspective. This is the reading with which we began.

But there is a second, slightly deeper, way to take this tetralemma and the positive shadow to which Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa direct our atttention, one that takes us closer to the heart of Madhyamaka and dispels once and for all any nihilistic reading. This reading illuminates the deep paradox Nāgārjuna finds at the heart of reality. When Nāgārjuna says "we do not assert 'empty'" he indicates that to say that phenomena are empty is fundamentally contradictory; it is to say that they have no intrinsic nature at all; but since to exist is to be empty, emptiness *is* the intrinsic nature of anything that exists; hence the intrinsic nature of things is to lack instrinsic nature. (See Garfield and Priest, *op. cit.)* But Nāgārjuna does not assert "non-empty," either. To do so would also be contradictory. It would be to assert that things have intrinsic nature, which is, for a Mādhyamika, incoherent. Each of the first two *koṭis* is thus, in some sense, non-assertable, or at least, not *consistently* assertable.

To assert *both* is a plain contradiction, as is to assert neither, since they are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. So, on this reading, the negative tetralemma indicates the fact that ultimate reality is deeply paradoxical. To say anything about it, to maintain any of the four alternative positions, lands us in paradox. Silence would appear to be the only way to maintain consistency. But even silence can only achieve consistency if it is

articulate silence—the silence of Vimalakīrti, not the silence of Śāriputra, in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*. But even that silence, if it is articulate at all, lands us in paradox. For it says both that nothing can be said, and *that*.

On the other hand, the fourth line still indicates the positive shadow tetralemma. *Conventionally* we do assert all four of these, and each, from a conventional standpoint, is entirely unproblematic. That positive version might *appear* to be the contradictory tetralemma; after all, its first two *kotis* are the negations of one another, and the third and fourth are explicit contradictions. But, in virtue of its straightforward parameterization, it is in fact consistent. Conventionally, we can certainly assert that all phenomena are empty; after all, they are dependently arisen; we can assert that all phenomena are not empty (ultimately), both conventionally empty and ultimately non-empty, and neither ultimately empty nor ultimately non-empty. Easy. Conventional reality, the only reality we inhabit, is the domain of speech and of all truth.

But as the fourth line of the root verse indicates, and as XXIV:18, 19 explain, the assertible positive tetralemma is just the other side of the non-assertability of any of the limbs of the negative tetralemma. It is because emptiness is dependent origination— because the ultimate truth and the conventional truth are in the end identical—that it is true conventionally that all things are empty, that it is true that their emptiness is the ultimate truth; and that ultimately that cannot be true, simply because *nothing* is ultimately true.

It is because we can say nothing from the ultimate standpoint that the conventional is the only standpoint we have, and so the only framework within which truth is possible, including this truth. And it is for this reason that we need all four possibilities represented in the *catuskoti*. We need to be able to talk about getting it right, getting it wrong, speaking when only contradictions can reveal the truth and when all speech fails. The *catuṣkoṭi* is therefore not a mere rhetorical flourish in Nāgārjuna's hands; it is a reflection of the structure of emptiness and its relationship to reality. It is the only logic adequate to a Madhyamaka metaphysics, the only logic that can express that metaphysics in a way that reveals both its paradoxical character and its throroughgoing realism.

6.   Conclusion: Conventional existence is real existence.

This brings us back to where we started. The negative tetralemma is taken by most critics of Madhyamaka, by most who would see it as a species of nihilism, as the most decisive evidence for that reading. After all, it does seem to say explicitly that nothing whatever is true. We have seen not only that it provides no evidence for that reading, but that when unpacked, the negative tetralemma is in fact a profound logical and rhetorical device for exploring the positive ontological significance of the Madhyamaka doctrine that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature.

But in reading the tetralemma this way, we have also seen that the negative tetralemma is equivalent to the positive tetralemma it projects. Everything that is unsayable from the ultimate perspective is assertible from the conventional perspective, and not accidentally so. It is emptiness that makes sense of conventional reality, and conventional reality that explains emptiness. A proper understanding of emptiness thus entails the identity of the two truths. But if that is so, to take the emptiness of all phenomena seriously is to take the conventional reality of all phenomena seriously. And to take reality seriously is precisely to deny nihilism. From the standpoint of Madhyamaka, to be empty is hence not to be nonexistent, but rather is the only possible way to exist.

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