

Nagarjuna, Shunyata and Anatman

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Abstract

The charge of nihilism in relation to emptiness is a charge that is all too familiar to the Madhyamika. This paper attempts to explain and extrapolate Burton's nihilist objection to Madhyamaka Buddhist thought and dispel it with primary recourse to original writings by Nagarjuna and subsequent commentators such as Candrakirti. I examine how the Madhyamika can avoid the trappings of nihilism whilst simultaneously arguing that conventional phenomena (persons and entities) are empty of intrinsic existence or essence, thus illustrating how Madhyamaka philosophy works as a cogent Middle Way between nihilism and eternalism.

To this end, I have split the paper into four distinct but interrelated sections, with each one laying the groundwork for the next and building upon the last. The four topic areas subsumed under our main endeavour to refute Burton's claim of nihilism are; I: Emptiness and its Foundations, II: Emptiness and Nihilism, III: The Madhyamika Method and IV: Emptiness, the Noble Truths and the Two-Truth Position. Each section attempts to deal with the subtleties of both Madhyamaka thought and Burton's criticisms with the eventual goal being vindication of Nagarjuna's school of Buddhism in virtue of the no-view goal that characterises enlightenment: the Madhyamika aims to relinquish all views, not engage in metaphysical jostling to score points. I conclude by arguing that Burton's criticisms are incorrect because he has misunderstood or misconstrued the conventional Madhyamaka position by attacking a metaphysic that is of no great importance to the wider Madhyamaka project and by misunderstanding precisely what emptiness is by reifying it as some sort of obscure substratum.

Introduction

Does emptiness as expounded by Madhyamaka philosophy necessitate nihilism? There is a consistent line of objections that argue that Nagarjuna and his commentators fall into nihilism unwittingly via their arguments for the emptiness of entities, and in order to begin to answer this important question, we will first need to undertake some groundwork to contextualise Nagarjuna's philosophy. Nagarjuna saw his philosophy as a back-to-basics 'original Buddhist' response to the Abhidharmika projects that dominated the Buddhist landscape when he lived and wrote, and in Section I, I will further develop the thesis that Nagarjuna was trying to assert emptiness as a necessary truth implicit within the Buddha's original teachings. We shall see that his reasons for doing this are not at all obscure, but are, he thinks, rooted in the Buddhist doctrines of dependent origination (interdependence) and impermanence

(change). Section II will see us assess the implications of emptiness for phenomena, objects and persons: we lay the foundations to begin to answer what I consider to be the most dogged refutation facing the Madhyamika: the charge of nihilism. Specifically, we will look to David Burton's allegations of nihilism and examine how they impact Madhyamaka philosophy. Following on from this, Section III will present an examination of the Madhyamika method; the means by which the Madhyamika argues for emptiness. This will allow us to assess the nihilistic charges made in Section II and give us some insight into how Nagarjuna and subsequent adherents use a negative method to convince the objector to relinquish their stance. I aim to argue that Madhyamaka philosophy at large is doctrineless and uses the negative method to achieve a total relinquishing of views in order to negate attachment and subsequently remove suffering. Section IV will attempt to tie emptiness, the Four Noble Truths and the Two-Truth method together by highlighting exactly how the Madhyamika places emptiness at the heart of the Noble Truths and how the conventional viewpoint differs from, impacts upon and to some degree leads one to the ultimate viewpoint. We will discuss why this is significant and how correctly realising the conventional truth in order to progress toward the ultimate truth can aid the Madhyamika avoid charges of nihilism. My main text for achieving these aims will be the Garfield (1995) translation of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna's seminal text. Our principal chapters for this endeavour will be Chapters XVIII and XXIV (Examination of Self and Entities; Examination of the Four Noble Truths), as I feel that out of the entire work, these chapters are pivotal if we wish to refute the charges of nihilism that we find ourselves presented with. However, in order to appreciate the background within which Nagarjuna was writing and developing his thought, I will firstly spend some time outlining the Buddha's teaching of selflessness according to the Mahavagga and Kaccayanagotta Sutta – this can, I hope, provide the stepping stone we require to place Nagarjuna's philosophy in some sort of context. The end product of this endeavour will be, I hope, an exposition and defence of Nagarjuna's position regarding emptiness of phenomena and persons, and so by extension, a rebuttal of Burton's nihilism objection.

I: Emptiness and its Foundations

Nagarjuna's formulation (it is misleading to refer to it as a 'doctrine', as we shall see later) of 'emptiness' (*shunyata*) is not explicitly synonymous with the Buddha's teaching of selflessness (*anatman*), but is an extension of selflessness in that it argues that essence is lacking from all phenomena. This complements the early Buddhist teaching that experienced phenomena do not possess any associations of 'I' or 'mine' and thus should not be clung to. Nagarjuna's project was to argue that all entities are without essence in any form – a progression that he thought was merely consequent to the Buddha's original teachings regarding dependent origination and the lack of essential selves in humans: put like this, the entire endeavour seems utterly uncontroversial. However, Nagarjuna's views on essentialism were in stark contrast to the Abhidharma views of the time, and I believe that this was mostly down to his conviction that the Buddha himself had implicitly refuted the notion of essentialism in any meaningful sense. With this in mind, it is worthwhile for us to examine how the Buddha formulated his own view of selflessness before we determine how and why Nagarjuna wanted to take it a step further and apply emptiness to persons and phenomena.

Firstly, it is useful for us to note exactly what the Buddha was rallying against, and this was, not to put too fine a point on it, the concept of *atman* present in the Hindu Vedas. The *atman* points to an essential self that sits outside of space and time. It is simple, unitary, persistent and unchanging. It is 'the innermost reality of the individual, the subtle essence' (Lipner, 2010: p53). The problem here for the Buddha (and later for Nagarjuna) is the implication of an eternal or unchanging essential self. Buddhism is a philosophy and religion built entirely on the basis of life as a continual karmic flux of causally conditioned phenomena governed by dependent origination and, more importantly, the maxim

in the Fourth Noble Truth that there is an end to suffering: the Buddha would struggle to claim that humans have an essential self that is born ignorant and into suffering and yet despite this essential nature, can somehow change to become enlightened and end suffering – after all, if something is, for example, essentially red, how can we say that we can change this nature to make the thing essentially blue?

It is precisely this elaboration on the Buddha's position that the Madhyamaka school founded by Nagarjuna propagates: the very fact that the atman is essential means that it is necessarily unchanging and indeed unchangeable. In turn, this means that the presence of an essential self makes accounting for the inner change that the Buddha propagated as the means to reach enlightenment (and subsequently end suffering) very difficult indeed – how can we change the unchangeable? In virtue of this apparent contradiction, any concept of a permanent, essential self must be eschewed. This is not to say that there is a permanent self or ego of some description that can be somehow quashed or removed via praxis. Nor does it mean that there is a permanent self and it is just easier or better for Buddhist praxis if the practitioner simply does not speak of it: Nagarjuna does not identify a concrete, existent essential self whatsoever – instead, he argues that all phenomena are empty of essence or self-existence.

To understand why this is the case, some perspective on both the Buddha's position (and Nagarjuna's subsequent position) can be found in the Simile of the Snake. Here, the Buddha gives a list of associations with which it is incorrect to identify a permanent, unchanging self. This wrong-view includes 'Look[ing] on what [one] has seen, heard, sensed, known, experienced, pursued and pondered in [one's] mind as [one's own]' (Gethin, 2008: p162), or in other words, reconciling any aspect of subjective human experience as representative – either in whole or in part – of the self. This maxim is important because within the Buddhist paradigm (we cannot lose sight of the fact that Nagarjuna was a religious writer who was primarily concerned with soteriology), any I-notion (me, mine) is both a symptom of and a source of bondage to suffering (duhkha) through desire and attachment as described in the First Noble Truth:

'This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering. Presence of objects we hate, is suffering; Separation from objects we love, is suffering; not to obtain what we desire, is suffering. Briefly, the fivefold clinging to existence is suffering.' (Mahavagga [of the Vinaya], 6: 19-20)

In addition to the Buddha's position regarding the non-existence of an essential self, both he and Nagarjuna think that clinging to an 'I' in any substantial form is to propagate one's own suffering indirectly. Surprisingly, the reasoning behind this counter-intuitive claim is actually relatively simple. Whilst Buddhism does not deny that there are things in life that we experience as pleasurable – indeed, the Mahavagga has already mentioned that there are objects that 'we love' in existence – ultimately, these pleasurable experiences all inevitably lead to suffering. How? Well, it is basically down to misperception: we enjoy something because we find it pleasurable (insofar as it makes us fleetingly happy) and we subsequently cultivate attachment to the pleasure, and then (erroneously) to the object. Owing to our attachment to this pleasure and the object of pleasure, we then try to replicate and reproduce this pleasure: pleasure which we have already said is necessarily fleeting and impermanent. Conventional realisation that this pleasure is impermanent (we know that eating a cake will not usually instil a permanent, deep happiness in us, for example) leads us back to the beginning of the circle: we grasp at this attachment to pleasure, gain pleasure temporarily and then experience varying degrees of anguish until we can procure this pleasure again (paraphrased from H.H. The Dalai Lama, 2000: pp50-51).

How this relates to the self and I-notions may not be clear to the non-Buddhist, but the logic goes along the following lines: the common denominators in all of this are the subject of experience and the object of pleasure; the reified essential self to which all of these pleasurable experiences (and painful experiences) occur, and the reified 'pleasurable' inanimate object. Attaching substantial existence to the self and worrying about satisfying desires of the 'I' that we reify is a root cause of our suffering. To put it simply, once we fully realise that the self and the 'I' that we identify with is nothing more than a misperception – a collection of aggregates subject to dependent origination rather than one simple, unified essential entity that we 'are' – we realise the futility in attaching value to the satisfaction of desires that we think stem from this permanent self. Similarly, the object that we perceive as pleasurable is also mistakenly reified – it has no essential part that makes it pleasurable. With this in mind, the aim of the Buddhist path is to both remove attachment to objects and fleeting feelings such as pleasure, and to remove attachment to this notion of a substantial, essential 'I'. Success will break the cycle and rid us of the erroneous perception that entities can exist independently outside of ever-changing interrelated contexts.

With this said, it is important to note that Nagarjuna does not deny that we perceive a conventional 'I'. It would be silly to say that we do not feel a sense of something that it is to be 'us'. For Nagarjuna, though, this is merely due to myriad dependently-arisen phenomena being experienced through the dependently-arisen skandhas (aggregates of personhood: form; sensation; perception; volition; consciousness). There is nothing about our experience that necessitates there being an essential self – it is possible for us to experience without there being an unchanging subject doing the experiencing. It is the Madhyamika view that any notion of essence should be jettisoned on account of both its inaccuracy as an ontological claim (where, upon analysis, can we find our essential self?) and its uselessness as a moral starting point for Buddhist praxis (how can we reach enlightenment via praxis if change is impossible owing to our essence?): the self that we identify and reify naturally – the conventional I – is empty of essence.

It can be argued that Nagarjuna's denial of essential selfhood and focus on the primacy of dependent origination stems from teachings attributed to the Buddha himself and were merely reassertions and slight elaborations on the Buddha's own words: I certainly think that this is how Nagarjuna saw his endeavours in the Mulamadhyamakakarika. We can see how this might be the case if we consider the Kaccayanagotta-sutta:

'By and large, Kaccayana, this world is supported by (takes as its object) a polarity, that of existence & non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one... ...'Everything exists': That is one extreme. 'Everything doesn't exist': That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle...' (Thanissaro Bikkhu, 1997).

This passage is profoundly relevant to Nagarjuna's project – the sutta specifies that holding that everything exists is an extreme point of view, and holding that nothing exists is the flipside of the same coin: both are incorrect, hard-line positions. Subsequently, the wise practitioner approaches from the middle (Madhyamaka does, after all, translate as 'Middle Way') and does not commit to either essentialism or nihilism. If we apply this principle to the problem of selfhood, then Nagarjuna does not want to completely affirm nor completely deny that there is a self of some description: we have already seen that he does not deny the conventional 'I' (the feeling of self that is imminent to us all) as long as it is empty of essence – he only denies the essential 'I' that we reify. There are reasons for this disdain

toward essence: Nagarjuna's contemporaries were the Abhidharmika theorists that posited dharmas: necessarily existent, basic elements that account for all mental and physical phenomena, and so by extension manifest as part of the thing we mistakenly call 'self' (Bartley, 2011: p30). The Sarvastivadins wanted to use dharmas to explain persistent characteristics in persons and objects, however, their account of dharmas is lacking in terms of explaining precisely what they are and how they work, and fraught with difficulties such as incoherence about how they interact with each other and how (or why) there are 'two-worlds' (Donnelly, 2013: pp74-76).

That the Abhidharmikas posited unconditioned essential features of reality at all is too far a step away from the Buddha's teachings according to Nagarjuna: we have seen above that the Buddha specifically warned against the position that everything exists – for Nagarjuna, dharmas necessarily entail this position owing to their having essence and their timeless existence in an unconditioned realm. Further to this, Nagarjuna thinks that under the Sarvastivadin account, dharmas are necessarily detached from dependent origination (as they are unconditioned). It could be claimed that this does not make much practical difference as they reside in an unconditioned realm and migrate to the conditioned realm only to manifest experiential phenomena. They then do this as part of conditioned dependent origination in our conventional sphere of experience, and so whilst they are distinct from dependent origination in one realm, they are very much a part of it within this realm. However, I think that this position is surely countered by Nagarjuna in the opening verse of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* when he states that nothing can arise from itself, from something else, from both itself and something else, or from no cause whatsoever in any realm (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* I:1).

Within this context, Nagarjuna is responding to the idea that a dharma can reside timelessly as an unchanging, un-arisen entity in an unconditioned realm: if a dharma is self-existent and unconditioned, then it cannot have caused itself as this would indeed be a cause and condition and timeless, eternal things cannot be caused or conditioned! Similarly, it cannot have been caused by something else, as this too is a cause and condition. Furthermore, it makes no sense to say that something has been caused from nothing, as this is to make a mockery of what we understand by 'cause'. The conclusion that we are left with as a result is either the absurdity that the dharmas can still inexplicably fit within this framework, or the more sensible position that they simply do not: they are empty of essence and they too must be subject to dependent origination.

Nagarjuna challenged the Sarvastivadin account of dharmas on the basis that all phenomena are empty of essence and subject to dependent origination: this does run contrary to the Abhidharmika stance which sees timeless dharmas migrate from an unconditioned realm, and as such it is clear to me that the Sarvastivadins held dharmas as eternal in at least some sense. As a result, I feel that Nagarjuna challenged them both ontologically and epistemically even if he did not directly say so: we cannot categorise empty phenomena as eternal or timeless as this would be to separate them necessarily from dependent origination, and so the nature of dharmas is surely left open to question via Nagarjuna's method even if their existence (in a broad sense) is not questioned.

We have seen in this section how Nagarjuna formulated his doctrine of emptiness as a logical step forward from the teachings of the Buddha. We needed to look only to the *Kaccayanagotta Sutta* and the *Mahavagga* to see the bases that Nagarjuna was working from: the Buddha himself warned against taking up either an essentialist or nihilist position in no uncertain terms, and Nagarjuna thought that if essentialism was true, then there was no chance of change – if there was no chance of change, then there was no option of liberation. That the Abhidharmika schools (specifically the Sarvastivadins) pondered essential qualities in any sense at all was a direct contravention of the Buddha's original teachings for Nagarjuna, who quite literally saw essentialism as being a phenomenal anchor within the

karmic flux; a starting point or base where there ought not to be one. Subsequently, we saw all concepts around essence shunned – be it in persons or phenomena – by virtue of the conflict with original Buddhist doctrine.

II: Emptiness and Nihilism

In the last section, we saw how Nagarjuna came to the conclusion that essentialism necessarily contradicted the Buddha's own teachings in the Kaccayanagotta Sutta, and why he thought that to posit essentialism in any description was to exclude dependent origination – a key Buddhist doctrine – from some aspect of reality. For Nagarjuna, there is nothing controversial in his assertion that persons are empty of essence and entirely subject to dependent origination just like any other existent phenomenon. However, it does seem counter-intuitive for the non-Buddhist reader to say that we have no 'self', 'I' or 'me', especially given that vast swathes of the population seem to speak indiscriminately of the 'soul' or the 'real me'. Is to deny the presence of an essential self then to deny the existence of persons in any recognisable fashion?

The largest criticism that the Madhyamika continually has to face is that of nihilism. David Burton contends that Nagarjuna's philosophy necessarily entails nihilism whether he intended to or not: the emptiness of entities – be they persons or objects – must entail the non-existence of entities (Burton, 1999: p90). In other words, if persons are empty then it must be the case, according to Burton, that persons do not exist, and Nagarjuna has committed to nihilism. A portion of the debate here once again lies with dharmas and how they exist and operate. In order to understand this, we need to recognise that Burton thinks that the Abhidharmikas had it right, or in any case, were more correct than Nagarjuna, and is tackling the issue of selfhood from 'the other side', as it were. Whilst still adhering to the Buddha's teaching of no-self, the Abhidharmika (and, presumably, Burton) does not accept that the person is empty in the broad sense given that the person is constituted of dharmas that necessarily have essences – entities can, on this view, have determinate individual essences and still be subject to dependent origination. If persons and entities are empty of essence, then Burton contends that the person is reduced to mere concept and cannot exist even conventionally. In other words, there must be something unconditioned that provides the basis of construction for the conditioned – we have seen how in the Abhidharma doctrines this is provided by the dharmas. It is a familiar line in Western analytic philosophy: it is not often that somebody will willingly commit to an infinite regress of causes. The philosopher generally aims to conceive of the grounding ground, or the first cause. It is, however, less of a concern in traditional Buddhist soteriology and philosophy where everything is famously explained in a circular fashion. The Buddha himself identified the 'twelve links' – a circular account of every possible experiential mental and physical phenomena: ignorance; volition; consciousness; name and form; faculties and objects; contact; sensation; craving; attachment; becoming; birth; old age and death (Gethin, 2008: pp210-213). With this in mind, it is easy to see how Burton arrives at this conclusion: as we said in the previous section, Nagarjuna has rejected that anything can exist independently of anything else in the very first verse of the Mulamadhyamakakarika (and then spent the rest of his treatise developing this notion). Burton aims to show that Nagarjuna must necessarily commit to nihilism via a sort of misplaced idealism. We will see how he reaches this conclusion, and how I intend to demonstrate that his arguments might be incorrect.

As Burton is approaching this issue from the Abhidharmika position, it is important that we recognise what this position entails. In the first section, we saw Nagarjuna's attitude to dharmas, and at this point it is prudent to go a little more in depth as to the Abhidharmika formulation of dharmas. As we have already seen in Section I, dharmas are the foundational components of the world; they are irreducible to any parts and so are in this sense basic and have an own-nature or essence that distinguishes each type

of dharma from the other types of dharma (seventy-five types in all)(Burton, 2001: pp90-91). Burton specifies that according to the Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma, there are four categories of conditioned (samskrita) dharmas (form; consciousness; consciousness-factors; non-consciousness conditioned factors) and only one category of unconditioned dharmas (asamskrita): the seventy-five types of dharma fall into one of these categories (Burton, 2001: p91).

The conditioned dharmas are, as the name suggests, wholly subject to dependent origination in that they have the characteristics of birth, impermanence and decay, but pointing this out is not a rebuttal of Nagarjuna's point in any real terms and seems to me to be mere assertion rather than argument. Burton appears to be simply stating that the Abhidharma gives an account of how dharmas with essences can work within a Buddhist paradigm. He is right – it does. However, Nagarjuna is not saying that the Abhidharma does not offer an account of how dharmas can work within the Buddhist paradigm; he is saying that the account itself is incorrect in virtue of its essentialism. Such a stance, claims Burton, means that at the very least – nihilism notwithstanding – Nagarjuna must commit to the position that there are no unconditioned dharmas. I think that this is also true. However, I have already argued in Section I that Nagarjuna's method necessarily leaves precisely how dharmas exist and operate open to question without seeking to make any further assertions about them. Nagarjuna's endeavour is, as I see it, a doctrineless philosophy concerned with illustrating the absurdity of essentialism rather than pushing an alternative doctrine to be clung to and propagated, and so I am not convinced that this line of attack is a comprehensive, convincing rebuttal of any sort.

As a consequence of Burton's interest in Nagarjuna's formulation of emptiness (and his own project of refuting it), Burton predictably pays particular attention to chapter XVIII of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Examination of the Self and Entities). This is perhaps Nagarjuna's seminal elaboration upon selfhood, entities and their emptiness. Here, Burton appears to categorise Nagarjuna as some sort of idealist (temporarily, at least) by specifically arguing that the whole of chapter XVIII could be an exercise in establishing the mind-dependence of entities, concepts and persons (Burton, 2001: p101). This would mean that Nagarjuna thinks that objects and entities do exist, but that their existence is as conceptual constructions of the mind rather than actual concrete entities independent of the mind. The unintended outcome of this idealist position is, according to Burton, nihilism: if all entities are empty of essence and thus conceptually constructed, then there can be – as we have seen in Nagarjuna's objections to unconditioned dharmas – no unconditioned/unconstructed bases out of which the conditioned and constructed entities can be built (Burton, 2001: p109). If this is the case, then – according to Burton –not only are we falling into nihilism regarding persons and entities, but it also follows that it is pointless to speak of discovering the ultimate truth or of enlightenment: if the Four Noble Truths are mere conceptual constructions with no inherent reality, then what is the function in accepting them? They are relegated to figments of our imagination. Similarly, if there is no substantial existence behind a person, what is it to change our habits and reach enlightenment?

However, I think that Burton has missed a trick here. If we analyse chapter XVIII of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* not as a standalone representation of the entire Madhyamaka philosophy, but in context with the rest of the treatise (particularly chapters XXIV and XXVII), we can see for ourselves what Nagarjuna thought and possibly reach a different conclusion. Firstly, though, we will look at chapter XVIII on its own merit. This chapter aims to argue that entities arise only in a context of innumerate causes and conditions because they lack inherent essential existence. To put it slightly differently, emptiness provides the very basis needed for entities to arise, change, decay, and so on. Is this to fall prey to the very infinite regress that Burton seeks to avoid? In the very first verse, Nagarjuna writes:

'If the self were the aggregates,

It would have arising and ceasing (as properties).
If it were different from the aggregates,
It would not have the characteristics of the aggregates.’ (Mulamadhyamakakarika, XVIII:1)

At first glance, this passage may seem contradictory: it appears as if Nagarjuna is saying that the self is simultaneously equivalent to the skandhas and not equivalent to the skandhas. However, when we consider what we said in Section I – that Nagarjuna is disputing the existence of a permanent self rather than a sense of self – the passage is not as problematic. Jay Garfield argues that all Nagarjuna is doing here is stating that the bases of Buddhist psychology are empty: if we posit a permanent self that is identifiable with the skandhas, then we must concede that our permanent, inherently existent and essential self is in a constant state of flux, open to change and always being conditioned by outside factors. Obviously, we would be loathe to say this – how can the self be permanent in any recognisable sense if it is always changing and arising/ceasing? Similarly, if this posited self is distinct from the skandhas, then the relationship between skandhas and person becomes arcane at best and completely unknowable at worst. In any case, if the self was entirely distinct from the skandhas, we would be put in the bizarre position of claiming that whatever sense experience occurs to whatever skandha is somehow distinct from what is happening to me as a conventional person (Garfield, 1995: p246). How can we address this problem? Well, Nagarjuna has an answer for this, too:

‘If there were no self,
Where would the self’s (properties) be?
From the pacification of the self and what belongs to it.
One abstains from grasping onto “I” and “mine”.’ (Mulamadhyamakakarika, XVIII: 2)

This is crucially important. The last two lines of the karika outline Nagarjuna’s solution to the problem of selfhood and its subsequent attachments: if we stop trying to think of a substratum in which the properties we associate with the self inhere, we simply see attributes as causally-conditioned associations that merely exist rather than exist in something. Only then do we break the cycle of reification of both self and other entities: we saw in Section I that both the Buddha and Nagarjuna think the reification of self and entities propagate suffering, and in this passage, we can see Nagarjuna hint at a conventional I – that is, the feeling of a sense of I; one that does actually have properties. It is important to note that neither I nor Nagarjuna are claiming that there is a permanent self on a conventional level. When I speak of a ‘conventional I’, I am referring only to the sense of self that is apparent and immediate to all of us who have not achieved liberation. We must tread carefully with our use of ‘self’ here, for as Candrakirti writes, ‘Not only does [the self] not constitute the basis for ego-clinging on the ultimate level, it [the self] has no existence even on the level of conventional reality’ (Madhyamakavatara, 122). He is not disputing that we have a sense of I that is apprehended, but arguing that this does not constitute anything that should be termed ‘self’: ‘self’ necessarily has connotations of permanence and inherent existence.

Can we reconcile the position of no-(essential) self and still speak about a conventional ‘I’? Burton thinks not: as we have already seen, he thinks that to speak of a person as empty (of essential self) or as mere conventional conceptual designation (the perceived conventional I) is to reduce both to mental constructs and deny their reality, thus slipping into nihilism. Taken individually, it is easy to see how Burton might argue that these karikas present a nihilistic view. However, we will see that far from reaching into nihilism (or eternalism, for that matter), Nagarjuna does indeed take the Middle Way that Burton concludes cannot lead to anything but nihilism. I hope to show in the next section that he achieves this without slipping into the throes of nihilism at all.

III: The Madhyamika Method

Perhaps Nagarjuna's apparent dichotomy in *Mulamadhyamakakarika* XVIII: 2 is not as problematic as it first appears. It is widely acknowledged that the Buddha graduated his teachings depending on the ability and understanding of his students. Such a method makes perfect sense to us in a modern context, too: when I began my philosophy degree, we did not delve into the intricacies of modal logic in the first week. Following this, the argument for the Madhyamika is that even if it were possible to merely communicate the realisation of emptiness directly as a doctrine (we have already stated that viewing emptiness as a doctrine is inaccurate, and it would also vastly understate – neglect, even – the experiential and meditative aspect vital to this realisation), the novice would not be equipped to grasp the full gravitas of the teaching.

As such, the realisation of emptiness must be guided through several stages, beginning with the coarse and crudest type of rejection of essentialism, and ending in the subtlest (Lobsang Gyatso, 2001: pp52-53). To visualise how this might work, think of crossing a river on a raft (a popular Buddhist metaphor): the raft is useful to us only for as long as it takes us to complete our journey across the river. From then, it is pointless to carry the raft with us, and so the wise among us discard it.

Furthermore, it can be said that the Madhyamika has no doctrine. In the *Prasannapada*, Candrakirti writes that the Madhyamika 'pursues his own thesis only until the adversary gives up his', and this recurring sentiment is indicative of why I think that positing the Madhyamika conception of emptiness as a doctrine in its own right is inaccurate (*Prasannapada*, 19). Is it sensible to say that Nagarjuna therefore wants to eventually refute doctrinal Buddhism rather than redefine or add to it? This would fit with his wider project of pushing the realisation of emptiness as the key to liberation: if the doctrines that the Buddhist practitioner is adhering to are wrong, then liberation will not be accessible or achieved. The only concern of the Madhyamika, then, is realisation of emptiness and not developing or critiquing metaphysical bases for the experienced world outside of this pursuit. If we bear this in mind, we look back on Nagarjuna's critique of the Abhidharma in a different light: he is not refuting their metaphysical perspective in favour of replacing it with his own metaphysic per se, but rather refuting the Abhidharma metaphysics in order to propagate a 'no-view about reality' (Nayak, 2001: p15).

Depending on our stance regarding this explanation of Buddhist methodology as a whole (and Madhyamika methodology specifically), we can either accept that talk around a mundane, conventional I is permitted as a mere stopgap on the greater path, or we can, as Burton presumably does, rubbish it as an incongruence that confuses the Madhyamika position. In my opinion, Burton makes a fatal error by confusing Madhyamika refutations of Abhidharma positive assertions as doctrines in themselves, and whilst he claims to be sympathetic to Nagarjuna's project of whittling down doctrine until the realisation of emptiness, I do not think that he has fully grasped either the methodology or the real aim. The Madhyamika is characterised by their lack of positive assertions about reality. Nagarjuna himself wrote:

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

Given that Nagarjuna was concerned with propagating the 'Middle Way' between both eternalism and nihilism (everything exists versus nothing exists) as per the Buddha's own teachings in the *Kaccayanagotta Sutta*, it appears to me that his attack against the Abhidharma is concerned only with the idea that dharmas exist with a permanent essence that can exist in the past, present and future, and not against the existence of dharmas as a whole. To elaborate, his enterprise simply has no need for dharmas insofar as the Madhyamika is not concerned with making positive assertions or arguments for

metaphysical bases – dharmas do not concern Nagarjuna. For this reason, it is true that Nagarjuna does not challenge their existence explicitly or directly even if his method does leave their mode of existence open to question. This being the case, then Nagarjuna is emphatically not arguing that all entities are conceptually constructed only in the mind, nor is he committing to the notion that they exist in some other way – he simply advocates no view at all. As we can see in the above karika, Nagarjuna wants the practitioner to disseminate all views – that is to say that the Madhyamika should hold nor make any positive claims about reality. In practical terms, this stops any notion of formulating a Madhyamika metaphysics dead in its tracks, as there is no room for discourse on what does or does not inherently exist. Nayak put it rather succinctly when he said that ‘a Madhyamika thinker... has no metaphysical axe to grind’ (Nayak, 2001: p18).

Consequently, I think that Burton has missed the point somewhat and is actually presenting a classic example of the very reification that the Madhyamika seeks to destroy. Whilst he and other Buddhist schools/scholars expend time and energy looking for a first cause to ground all entities and persons, Nagarjuna is not at all concerned with this reification: Nagarjuna is concerned only with reiterating what he thinks is implicit within the Buddha’s original teachings and providing a method by which we can reach enlightenment. The Buddha himself said that he did not want his words to be a ground for metaphysical debate or to be adhered to merely in virtue of some arbitrarily assigned truth value (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2010). With emptiness, Nagarjuna is sidestepping any metaphysical bickering by arguing for the futility (and outright absurdity) of debating metaphysical positions! Burton would, of course, likely respond that emptiness is in and of itself a positive statement about the nature of reality: we are, after all, arguing that other conceptions of selfhood are incorrect in virtue of emptiness. This is again, I argue, a misunderstanding: emptiness itself must necessarily be empty of essence, lest the Madhyamika drift into contradiction and undermine her entire project. For Nagarjuna, holding emptiness as mere view is, as we have seen, incorrect: emptiness is not something real to be uncovered or realised as ‘real’ in contradistinction to ultimately unreal objects of conventional perception – we cannot have a view of emptiness in virtue of its emptiness. After all, ‘Emptiness is the relinquishing of all views’.

With all this in mind, I am inclined to ask whether our current debate with Burton around Nagarjuna’s philosophy is somewhat misguided – Burton is rallying against Nagarjuna on the grounds of the purely metaphysical charge (dharmas, essence and ultimate grounds for dependent origination) of nihilism. Whilst this is important for many Western (and some Buddhist) philosophers, we have already seen that the Buddha did not want there to be any metaphysical disagreements surrounding his words (at least in the social context in which he lived and spoke), only doctrines to be utilised for correct practice that can be abandoned after use (remember the raft?). He remained famously silent on the ‘big’ questions, seeing them as a distraction from addressing the here and now. It should also be obvious by now that the metaphysics are of minimal concern to Nagarjuna, too. What is crucial is the recognition of emptiness of everyday phenomena in order to further Buddhist praxis and to reach enlightenment, and this sits squarely within the paradigm first outlined by the Buddha. It then follows that Nagarjuna accepts the twelve links as a comprehensive account of all possible phenomena and so is not at all worried about discovering or justifying a basic entity or substratum from which everything else can emanate.

Just as Burton is forming part of his critique of Nagarjuna on the basis that Nagarjuna is either misinterpreting or misunderstanding Abhidharma doctrine outside of its own context, I contend that he too misinterprets and misrepresents Nagarjuna’s project in relation to its context as a reiteration of the Buddha’s original teachings. Whether or not we think this metaphysical niggling is important is of course open to much more debate than my wordcount allows, but it is important for us to note that

Nagarjuna does not seek to create a metaphysical framework as his end product – he actually seeks to remove views that he sees as obstructing wisdom and truth rather than instil new ones – these too would obscure wisdom and truth and further remove us from liberation! To this end, Nagarjuna’s eventual ‘deeper’ view of ‘neither self nor no-self’ can begin to make more sense. It is simply the Middle Way between selfhood and no-selfhood:

‘That there is a self has been taught,
And the doctrine of no-self,
By the Buddhas, as well as the
Doctrine of neither self nor nonself.’ (Mulamadhyamakakarika, XVIII: 6)

Can this make sense? Well, surprisingly, maybe it can: we have already said that the Madhyamika is not concerned with establishing a metaphysical position as such, but with removing views. If we take this as our central tenet, all the Madhyamika is really saying is that clinging to either a position of self or a position of no-self is still clinging to something. Neither a conception of self nor a conception of no-self actually aligns with an existent entity from the ultimate viewpoint. Ergo, by not subscribing to either, the Madhyamika is staying true to the same Middle Way that he has been concerned with sticking to all along – the Middle Way avoids metaphysical extremes and recognises the uncharacterisable nature (for lack of a better word) of existence.

I hope that I have illustrated how the method of the Madhyamika affects their philosophy: we see metaphysical extremes discussed, negated and abandoned in favour of a Middle Way that aims to make no positive metaphysical assertions about the nature of reality or the entities that appear to exist within it. Nagarjuna appears to have thought that metaphysical attacks against his philosophy were doomed to failure instantly, owing to the fact that they posit a metaphysic in the first place! As such, Burton’s criticisms of emptiness and its formulation would be repudiated by the Madhyamika as a shining example of precisely the sort of clinging that the Madhyamika aims to subdue and remove via their negative method. In the next section, I will attempt to tie this together by demonstrating how and why Nagarjuna placed emptiness at the very heart of Buddhist praxis in relation to the central tenets of the entire Buddhist worldview in all of its variations – the Four Noble Truths.

IV: Emptiness, the Noble Truths and the Two-Truth Position

We now move forward to chapter XXIV of the Mulamadhyamakakarika – The Examination of the Four Noble Truths. This is vital in contextualising the Madhyamaka school’s philosophy and consolidating the rest of the Mulamadhyamakakarika – Jay Garfield argues (correctly, in my view) that this chapter is really about the nature of emptiness itself, its relation to our conventional reality, and the construction of a negative argument refuting nihilistic charges (Garfield, 1995: p 293). I will extrapolate Nagarjuna’s means to achieve this and show how Nagarjuna provides a convincing negative argument against nihilism.

It is with regard to the Noble Truths that we can really see why Nagarjuna and his subsequent commentators were so keen to avoid metaphysical jousting, but it is also here that Burton’s argument can appear to gather some veracity by proxy. As we saw in the prior sections, Burton contends that if all phenomena are given reality only in virtue of conceptual constructs and not in virtue of essential existence of some type, then it follows that nothing exists objectively and the Madhyamika slips into nihilism. This is not a new criticism, and in karikas 1 and 2 of chapter XXIV, Nagarjuna’s opponent claims that if everything is empty, then the Four Noble Truths cannot exist:

‘If all of this is empty,
Neither arising, nor ceasing,

Then for you it follows that
The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
Then knowledge, abandonment,
Meditation, and manifestation
Will be completely impossible.’ (Mulamadhyamakakarika, XXIV: 1-2)

We can see in this objection where Burton might have got his inspiration – the positions of the objector and of Burton are close. Though not identical in content, they both have nihilism as their conclusion. Whereas Burton is primarily concerned with the existence of concrete entities such as persons, trees and so on, this objector is taking the same line of attack to try and refute Nagarjuna at the very core of his Buddhist practice: simply put, if the objector can prove that Nagarjuna’s position contradicts or somehow precludes the Noble Truths, then there is no discussion to be had – he simply cannot hold his position and still claim to be a Buddhist.

As such, I feel that this section constitutes the absolute crux of Nagarjuna’s project. In earlier sections I have examined how the Madhyamika approach might impact everyday understanding of phenomena: empty persons, existence of entities and so on. I also argued that such metaphysical niggling was really something of a by-the-by for both Nagarjuna and the long line of commentators in his wake: Nagarjuna is only concerned with providing a method with which to escape suffering because of his Buddhist beliefs and his acceptance of the Four Noble Truths. So how can Nagarjuna and the Madhyamika respond to the charges made against them by the objector?

The Madhyamika defence hinges on the objector’s misunderstanding of emptiness and a misunderstanding of the Two-Truth position. As we have already stated elsewhere in this paper, emptiness is not the ‘true essence’ of existence; such reification of emptiness is as erroneous as the reification of any other concept or entity. The objector is, Nagarjuna holds, foisting their own misunderstanding of emptiness onto Nagarjuna – putting words in his mouth, if you will:

‘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.
The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.’ (Mulamadhyamakakarika, XXIV: 7-8)

The Two-Truth position (conventional; ultimate) is primary here and warrants some exposition. Garfield argues that the Two-Truths have a unity between them. That is to say, that both are ‘true’ to equal degrees insofar as one is not presented as an untruth in relation to the other, and one is not sublated by the other. What is true for Garfield, though, is that the ultimate truth takes precedence for the Buddhist soteriological ends, but this is not to place one over and above the other (Garfield, 1995: p297). Initially, it seems as though Garfield’s reading may present a problem, however; I cannot help but wonder that if one truth is given precedence on soteriological grounds (realisation of the ultimate as a release from suffering), then surely it is simply given precedence ipso facto?

Khensur Rinpoche writes that conventional truths include all of the perceived phenomena that we see around us, whilst ultimate truths are the emptiness(es) of these phenomena from inherent existence (Khensur Jampa Tegchok, 2012: p232). A superficial reading of this might agree with Garfield’s

reading that both truths are 'true' – at least from their respective referential frames. It might, however, jar with his argument that neither sublates the other: for the unenlightened, conventional truths are indeed 'true', but similarly, for the awakened, the ultimate truth is true seemingly at the expense of the conventional – the ultimate truth for Khensur Rinpoche trumps the conventional on at least some level because it reveals the truth about how entities actually exist rather than how they appear to exist (Khensur Jampa Tegchok, 2012: p232). Garfield – correctly, in my view, given the eventual importance of relinquishing views – rejects this reading of an appearance/reality distinction as out of context with the rest of the text (Garfield, 1995, p297), and stops just short of equating the Two-Truths with each other completely, writing that 'the understanding of ultimate truth is in an important sense the understanding of the nature of the conventional truth...' (Garfield, 1995: p299). It is likely that from the conventional viewpoint that Garfield and I both presumably occupy, the ultimate truth and complete realisation of it is the higher ideal – it is here that we see the relinquishing of views that Nagarjuna earlier championed as the hallmark of the enlightened Madhyamika. If we switch this around and ask if it is true that for an enlightened being, their position of ultimate truth is still the higher ideal, I think it is obvious that the answer has to be 'yes'. However, it is clear now what Garfield meant when he said that the Two-Truths were equally weighted: although he came dangerously close to wholly equating the two (erroneously), his initial thought that they are too important to each other to rank in terms of 'more true' or 'less true' is, I feel, correct. How can this be? Is it as simple, then, as saying that the difference between the Two-Truths is a shift in outlook and frame of reference? It seems to me that there is an irrefutable contingency between the ultimate truth and the conventional truth: we express – or at least try to guide people towards realising – the ultimate truth through writings such as the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, and this means that the ultimate truth is, in effect, being pursued through conventional means – we are still grasping at views in order to attain a different, progressive view in order to realise emptiness and remove views. Indeed, we would struggle to conceive of any alternative means of pursuit or communication! To relate this back to *karikas* 1 and 2 (of *Mulamadhyamakakarika* XXIV), the Madhyamika response is simply to say that the Four Noble Truths are conventional truths: they exist conventionally in that we can assess their truth in relation (to link back to dependent origination) to the observable world that we inhabit. As they are conventionally true, they are useful to us on our quest to realise the ultimate truths. This is where the close similarity but also significant differences between conventional truth and ultimate truth are most applicable: Garfield thinks that to realise conventional truths (interdependence, the Four Noble Truths and so on) basically is to realise ultimate truth (emptiness), but whilst I can agree to a very close correlation, it also seems obvious to me that the two are not the same.

To elaborate, I appeal to Khensur Rinpoche, who expresses this ever so succinctly when he writes that 'The fact that the two truths are one nature does not mean that they are the same thing' and continues to argue that for two things to be 'the same' requires that they be nominally identical: this would mean that they share the precise same name and be the precise same thing (Khensur Jampa Tegchok, 2012: p233). Obviously this is not the case: the conventional truth might be incredibly closely connected to the ultimate truth, but it is not the same: if it were the same, the two ways of referring to it would be redundant. As a crude example (but one that performs our task more than adequately), we can again borrow a word or two from Khensur Rinpoche: if a table is conventionally true (insofar as we apprehend it, it has the characteristics that consensus agrees a table should have and is subject to dependent arising, decay and so on), then we can say 'yes, there is a table'. However, this conventional truth does nothing to speak of the table's emptiness – if we merely say 'there is a table', it is not conveying anything about the emptiness of the table. Similarly, speaking of the emptiness of the table is not identical with speaking of the table *qua* table (Khensur Jampa Tegchok, 2012: pp236-237).

As a result, we can say with some degree of confidence that whilst the Two-Truths are not the same, they are incredibly closely related and that conventional truths, when viewed from an ultimate perspective, are false in one important sense – they are views. This need not be a problem, though; we said earlier in the paper that Buddhist teachings are graduated and we can see them as a raft to be utilised to get past the river, but discarded once we traverse the difficult terrain. I do not see why this cannot also be the case here; once the enlightened mind has seen ultimate truth (emptiness), then the views held at the conventional level can simply be dispersed.

How, we may ask, does all this affect the Noble Truths? Well, we have seen that the objection is simply false, for it is not the case that emptiness necessitates that nothing exists: we have seen the Madhyamika argue that things do exist, just not in the manner that the unenlightened mind perceives them to. Similarly, we now know that the Noble Truths are conventional truths to be used to reach the ultimate position. Further, to hold that emptiness is false would be to hold that dependent origination is false, as we said in Section I. In this case, the Buddha's teaching of the Noble Truths actually do become problematic – if the objector is arguing that emptiness is false, then they are, according to Nagarjuna, in effect stating that nothing can change as dependent origination must too be false. We can see how this argument is going to unfold – if dependent origination is false and there is no arising, ceasing, change or development and decay, then how can suffering arise? Such a position is necessarily a contravention of the First Noble Truth (suffering exists) as well as the Second Noble Truth (suffering has a cause) – how can we account for the existence of suffering if it is not dependently arisen? If it were to exist under its own power, then it must have an essence; this in turn means that suffering cannot be changed or ended. This is of pivotal importance: for suffering to have an essential existence would preclude it from dependent origination and thus make it very difficult for the Buddhist to account for the impact of the Buddhist path – how do we change what is basic, immutable and thus unchangeable? This issue is sidestepped completely, though, if we realise that suffering (along with every other conventionally existent phenomenon) is simply empty of essence.

For Nagarjuna, the final nail in the coffin of the objector's argument is delivered with the realisation that the Fourth Noble Truth (the Buddhist path to suffering's cessation) can only be true in virtue of emptiness because without emptiness, no change is possible for or in any phenomenon at all. Nagarjuna has turned the objector's own argument against the objector to illustrate how – contrary to the objection – nihilism is not the necessary conclusion of Madhyamaka philosophy. Ironically, though, we can see that the objection itself does spell trouble for the Noble Truths. Subsequently, it is not the Madhyamika that is misguided, but the objector.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we now return to our initial question – does emptiness as expounded by Madhyamaka philosophy entail nihilism? We have seen why Nagarjuna was keen to eschew any notion of selfhood for all phenomena and entities as a means both to relieve suffering and also to eventually end suffering. We also discussed how we must be careful to avoid the reification of emptiness, as it would be very easy for us to fall into the trap of holding emptiness to be a 'true' representation of some sort, or a substratum that is eternal and independent of entities – this would not be nihilistic, but it would be eternalistic, and for the Madhyamika, this is just as undesirable an outcome. It must be the case, as mentioned earlier, that emptiness is itself empty if the Madhyamika wants to make any sense. This is to say that if we attempt to analyse emptiness – to find it – we see nothing except a lack of inherent existence. Emptiness is not a substance, entity or existent essence, but a lack of all these things.

To briefly demonstrate this, let us return to the table example. We can disassemble a table in our minds to visualise of all its constituent parts; legs, tabletop, screws et cetera. But if we tried to look for the table's emptiness, what would we find? We cannot strip down its parts and discover some thing that emptiness is, but rather we find that we cannot find anything except the table's lack of essential, inherent existence. The table is simply dependent – this is the realisation of emptiness. This cannot be the same as nihilism: the table still exists, for we are looking right at it!

As a result, I simply cannot agree with Burton that emptiness leads to nihilism. We have seen how Nagarjuna and his subsequent commentators sought to refute essentialism not to push an agenda that says 'nothing exists', but rather 'nothing inherently exists' – something markedly different. I have argued that the Madhyamika does not – in accordance with traditional Buddhist teachings (the twelve links) – require nor desire a *causa sui*. Consequently, Burton's appeal to an essential, necessary metaphysical grounding ground for the subsequent dependent origination of all entities is misplaced and entirely irrelevant to the Madhyamika thinker who is primarily concerned with the 'relinquishing of views' to negate attachment to entities for a soteriological ends. Following this line of thought, the importance of emptiness to the Four Noble Truths has been demonstrated in Section III, namely that change requires emptiness and the Four Noble Truths all hinge on change – if there is essence it is necessarily immutable and cannot be changed. If it cannot be changed, how do we end suffering? Similarly, the Two-Truth method has, I hope, been shown to provide the tools needed for the Madhyamika to progress her thought from conventional to ultimate without falling into any traps of nihilism or contradiction outlined in this paper.

All in all, I hope that I have gone some way to demonstrating the coherence of Nagarjuna's formulation of emptiness, the veracity of the Madhyamika method, and why I do not believe that Nagarjuna's philosophy necessitates nihilism. I am convinced that Burton's objections are either irrelevant to the Madhyamika or misrepresentative of the Madhyamika position, and it is my sincere hope that I have justified and vindicated my own position in this paper.

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