

IN SEARCH OF A MIDDLE WAY
A COMPARISON OF NĀGĀRJUNA'S METHOD,
PRASANGA, AND MARK TAYLOR'S
DECONSTRUCTIVE SYSTEM

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF
THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG, FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS

JOHANNESBURG
1998

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

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31st Day of March, 1998

For my family, my dearest parents Winnie and Philip,
my sister Christine and brother out-law Iain,
and my wonderful, loving husband Sean.
You are the best!

ABSTRACT

I explore the implications of transposing the Mādhyamikan term *śūnyatā* and the deconstructive process of Nāgārjuna anachronistically into the contemporary deconstructive debate. Deconstructionist and a/theologian Mark Taylor's book *Erring* and *nOts* are reviewed in relation to Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*. I suggest that this a-historical practice is problematical. To conflate Mark Taylor's understanding of the deconstructive term *différance* and his proposed *divine milieu* with Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* is erroneous. The terms *différance* and *śūnyatā* are distinct as they are coloured by the writers' motivations which results in different structures given to their terms and deconstructive moves. The terms also function in specific cultural and ideational milieus and this precludes the easy conflation of their terms and enterprises. The comparison of these terms may offer new and creative insights but the conflation of their terms and enterprises is simplistic and fails to consider the central concerns of the writers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude to my friend and supervisor Garth Mason for his wisdom, kindness and support. I wish to thank my family for their emotional and financial support, and for their patience. My friend Ali Neely for her faith in me when the thought of this project evoked nightmares. Finally I wish to thank the H. S. R. C. for their generous financial support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1 NĀGĀRJUNA IN CONTEXT	9
1.1 THE FOUR LEMMAS - OR LOGICAL ALTERNATIVES	11
1.1.1 <i>Nāgārjuna's method - prasanga</i>	11
1.1.2 <i>The first lemma - Self-arising</i>	13
1.1.3 <i>The second lemma - Other-arising</i>	14
1.1.4 <i>The third lemma - Arising by both cause and effect</i>	14
1.1.5 <i>The fourth lemma - Non-arising</i>	16
1.2 NĀGĀRJUNA'S SCHOLASTIC MILIEU	18
1.2.1 <i>The non-buddhist schools</i>	19
1.2.1.1 <i>Sāṃkhya as proponents of self-arising</i>	20
1.2.1.2 <i>Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika as proponents of other-arising</i>	23
1.2.1.3 <i>The Jains as proponents of both self and other-arising</i>	25
1.2.1.4 <i>The Cārvākas as proponents of non-causality</i>	27
1.2.2 <i>Nāgārjuna and his contemporary Buddhist schools</i>	28
1.2.2.1 <i>Abhidharma</i>	28
1.2.2.2 <i>Sarvāstivādin</i>	32
1.2.2.3 <i>Sautrāntikas</i>	37
1.3 NĀGĀRJUNA AND MEDITATIONAL PRACTICE - TAYLOR AND NON-PRACTICE	40
1.3.1 <i>The importance of contextualization - Distinguishing Nāgārjuna from Taylor</i>	40

2	NĀGĀRJUNA'S DOCTRINE OF THE TWOFOLD TRUTHS	49
2.1	THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TWOFOLD TRUTHS	49
2.1.1	<i>The twofold truths as a key to Nāgārjuna's treatise</i>	49
2.1.2	<i>The necessity of distinguishing the two truths</i>	50
2.2	THE OPPONENT'S MISTAKES	55
2.2.1	<i>Nilblism</i>	55
2.2.2	<i>Interpretations of the term 'śūnyatā' and the implications thereof</i>	57
2.2.3	<i>Absolutism</i>	61
2.3	TAYLOR AND SUBSTANTIALIZATION	63
2.4	NĀGĀRJUNA'S ALTERNATIVE	65
2.4.1	<i>Pratītyasamutpāda</i>	65
2.4.2	<i>Pratītyasamutpāda and the emptiness of śūnyatā</i>	73
2.4.3	<i>The realization of śūnyatā</i>	76
2.5	CONCLUSION	81
3	HEGEL, NIETZSCHE AND KIERKEGAARD – THEIR IMPACT ON TAYLOR'S DECONSTRUCTION IN <u>ERRING</u> AND <u>NOTS</u>	83
3.1	TAYLOR AND THE CARTESIAN SPLIT	84
3.1.1	<i>Nietzsche's aphorisms as Taylor's 'middle path'</i>	84
3.1.2	<i>The Western search for being or truth</i>	87
3.1.3	<i>Hegel's understanding of force</i>	92
3.1.4	<i>Kierkegaard's response to Hegel's resolution of identity-in-difference</i>	94
3.1.5	<i>Nietzsche's rejection of certainty</i>	97
3.1.6	<i>The difference between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard</i>	99
3.2	TAYLOR'S DIVINE MILIEU IN <u>ERRING</u>	102
3.2.1	<i>The substantialization of the divine milieu as scripture in <u>Erring</u></i>	104

3.3	TAYLOR'S SEARCH FOR A MORALITY BEYOND THE DEATH OF GOD	110
3.3.1	<i>The substantialization of difference/deference/ allarity/loss in <u>uOIs</u></i>	110
3.3.2	<i>Taylor's ethical concerns</i>	114
3.3.3	<i>Taylor's use of the Kierkegaardian echo</i>	117
3.3.4	<i>Taylor's dualism and the Cartesian split</i>	124
3.4	TAYLOR'S DUALISM AND NAGARJUNA'S TWO-FOLD TRUTH	125
4	TAYLOR'S A/THEOLOGY IN RELATION TO DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION AND NĀGĀRJUNA'S CO-DEPENDENT ARISING	135
4.1	DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION	135
4.2	TAYLOR AS DERRIDA'S DISCIPLE	147
4.3	DECONSTRUCTIONIST RESTLESSNESS WITHIN THE LABYRINTH OF LANGUAGE	155
	CONCLUSION	162
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	167

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention to explore the significance that Mark Taylor's recent publications, Erring: A Postmodern A/theology¹ and nOts², can offer in relation to the already existent East/West dialogue and specifically to the debate between the Madhyamikan deconstructive strategies and Western post-modern deconstruction. To date scholars such as Magliola,³ Coward,⁴ and Loy⁵ have focused on relating the originator of the Mādhyamika System or Mādhyamika *prasanga* - Nāgārjuna, to the leading philosopher of the Deconstructionist movement - Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction has its home in the literary context, Taylor's contribution introduces the system to religious scholarship. In relating the religious emphasis of Taylor's work to Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamikakārikā⁶ I hope to contribute to the existing debate. I will compare Taylor's deconstructive system, as presented in his two books, with Nagarjuna's *prasanga* method found in the MMK. My particular contribution to the debate will be to argue that Nagarjuna's treatise goes further in its 'deconstructive' pursuit than Taylor's deconstruction.

There have been a number of writers who have noticed a similarity between post-structuralist thought (particularly deconstruction) and Buddhist thought

1 Taylor M. C., Erring: A Postmodern A/theology, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984

2 Taylor M. C., nOts, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993

3 Magliola R. R., Derrida on the Mend, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, 1984

4 Coward H., Derrida and Indian Philosophy, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990

5 Loy D., "The Clôture of Deconstruction: A Mahāyāna Critique of Derrida," Indian Philosophical Quarterly 27 (1987), pp. 362-366

6 Hereafter referred to as MMK.

(particularly the Mādhyamika school) and have made comparisons.⁷ It is my contention that such comparisons are inappropriate when terms and practices are conflated without regard to their cultural thought worlds. I will be looking at the problematic nature of conflating Nāgārjuna's explication of co-dependent arising and *śūnyatā* with deconstructionist and a/theologian Mark Taylor's understanding of the deconstructive term *différance* and his explication of the divine milieu. I argue that such ahistorical analogies are problematical as firstly, Taylor's and Nāgārjuna's motivations are different and result in different structures given to their terms and deconstructive moves and secondly, their context, i.e. their cultural and ideational forms, colours their terms and motivations in distinct ways that preclude the easy conflation of their terms and enterprises.

Nāgārjuna, living in c. 2nd century B.C.E, wrote the MMK in response to the scholastic debates of his time. In his treatise he deconstructs any position that is grounded in substantial thought. Any position that attempts to classify reality in a grounded or absolute way is questioned, but equally - and of crucial importance to my study - any position that advocates non-existence or arbitrary meaning or nihilism is dismissed. Nāgārjuna's 'middle path' advocates a mental state - achieved through meditation - of non-clinging or non-classification. This is variously named *pratītyasamutpāda* (co-dependent arising) or *śūnyatā* (emptiness). This 'middle path' is not so much an advocacy of a 'view' but

7 Examples of such comparisons are: Magliola R. R., Derrida on the Mend, Purdue University Press, Indiana, 1984; Taylor M. C., 'Masking Domino Effect' in On Deconstructing Theology: A Symposium on Erring: A Postmodern A/theology in Journal of the American Academy of Religion 54, 1986; Loy D., Non-duality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988; Coward H., Derrida and Indian Philosophy, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1990; Mabbett I. W., 'Nāgārjuna and Deconstruction' Philosophy East and West 45 (1995) pp. 203 - 225; Glass N. R., Working Emptiness: Toward a Third Reading of emptiness in Buddhism and Postmodern Thought, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1995; Le Roux C., 'The postmodern - Tracy, Taylor and Dogen', Religion and Theology 3 (1996), pp. 93-108.

rather an advocacy of a mentally fluid capacity to realize co-dependent arising. To experience 'things' as arisen in a co-dependent manner is a realization of their emptiness or non-essential nature. Nevertheless at a conventional level 'things' exist due to their classification as things. They exist in this way because they are co-dependently arisen. Finally Nāgārjuna states that the conventional and the ultimate levels are exactly the same, both ungrounded and conventionally existent. This is Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness.

Taylor, writing from present-day U.S.A., also advocates a non-grounded view. In Erring, Taylor attempts to destructure the assumed hierarchic values within language by destructuring the dyadic structure and highlighting the repressed term. The dyadic structures that I speak of are found by Taylor, following Derrida, to be inherent in Western philosophic/religious and everyday thought, our heritage from Plato to the present. The extremes of truth and non-truth, found for instance in the Socratic dialogues, are recognizable as rational structures that are played out in logic, mathematics and other sciences. So if A is B and B is not C then A cannot be C. This kind of exclusive thought is driven by a search for certainty. What Taylor notes is that one term, in this case 'is' dominates the other 'is not'. So for instance in the Phaedrus, Socrates states:

Socrates: Enough appears to have been said by us of a true and false art of speaking.

Phaedrus: Certainly.

Socrates: But there is something yet to be said of propriety and impropriety of writing.

Phaedrus: Yes.

Socrates: Do you know how you can speak or act about rhetoric in a manner which will be acceptable to God?

Phaedrus: No, indeed. Do you?

Socrates: I have heard a tradition of the ancients, whether true or not they only know; although if we had found the truth ourselves, do you think that we should care much about the opinions of men?⁸

The truth is obviously the dominant term. Once the truth has been discovered, the rest is not to be cared for. It is Taylor's task to care for untruthful opinions, to highlight the repressed, and to reveal the relation between the dominant and the repressed terms. By doing so Taylor wishes to offer a religious way of being in a post-modern thought world.

What results, we discover in *Erring*, is a language-based milieu from which there is no escape to truth, completion, presence, as any of these valued as signifieds are revealed by the deconstructive process to be signifiers that have been valued and given privilege amongst other repressed signifiers. This privilege, in the deconstructive purview, is ungrounded. All signifieds are in fact also signifiers that have been privileged by a tradition in search of truth and complete understanding. Erring, wandering, nomadic thought and scripture is suggested as an alternative - the inescapable labyrinth of interpretation is embraced. Taylor does not remain, however, on the pivot of undecidability. I argue that as a result of substantialization he falls to the side of nihilism. No matter how happy Taylor advocates we will be if we would only accept it, the labyrinthian divine milieu is nihilistic, as it is a milieu where all values are levelled to signifiers in a network of arbitrary terms.

In his book *Notes*, Taylor highlights the boundary, threshold, sieve of the 'between' of differences. This sieve functions in a different way from the joyful

⁸ Edman L., (ed.), *The Philosophy of Plato*, The Modern Library, New York, 1956, p. 322

nihilistic divine milieu found in Erring. The loss of presence, truth and completion is more pronounced and Taylor's awareness of this loss is emphasized. Truth, completion and presence are still denied yet we find him standing on the threshold of the labyrinth from which a *wholly* Other approaches. Yet this Other is - in distinction to, for instance, Meister Eckhart's God beyond God which is mystically, if not intellectually, attainable - neither intellectually nor mystically available and dissolves upon approach. Taylor has to admit the inability of the network of language to attain this Other in mystical union, as union denies difference and plurality. He is consequently incapable of giving up language and is left unable to cross the threshold. To cross the threshold would be to admit to a term privileged amongst signifiers: would be, in fact, to suggest a signifier. Nevertheless, while unattainable, this Other or Not signifies enough to call a halt to the endless play of translations and through a gift of grace that echoes within language offers a yardstick on which to base ethical or moral decisions. In Mādhyamikān terms, he is left clinging to language, and consequently he is left stranded in the first of Buddha's four noble truths: Life is suffering. In Taylor's own terms, he is left, living not, forever wounded. We are told on a number of occasions in nOts that he is still on the threshold.

In both books, Taylor reacts to the bias towards presence, being and completion, that is found in Western religion and philosophy from Plato to Heidegger, and insists on the deconstruction of this prejudice wherever it is found. Nāgārjuna's project on the other hand is the deconstruction of any form of substantialization in the form of mental clinging. The distinction is a subtle one - where there is presence there is also substantialization, but Nāgārjuna was aware that where there is the advocacy of non-presence there too is mental clinging. It is Taylor's inability to cross the Cartesian threshold that reveals his mental clinging. Taylor

retains analytical, staccato, or discrete ideational thought forms. He is, following Derrida, so convinced that any form of mystical experience is an advocacy of presence, unity and being that he is unable to give up language or the net of signifiers. Language (understood in an extended sense as mental construction) is, in contrast, revealed by Nāgārjuna to be empty of inherent or essential existence and, as such, needs deconstructing, with the vitally important caveat that language, or any other ontological assertion that is deconstructed, is not left in ruins, but rather put in its place, that is in co-dependent relation with every other thing, self, other, subject, object, or concept, as this is what allows them to be deconstructed in the first place. It is not that they are unimportant or non-existent, but merely that they are empty of inherent existence. This 'giving up' of language is not a mystical experience of ultimate presence, but instead an experience of non-presence as co-dependent arising. This differs from Taylor's divine milieu because *śūnyatā* as a substantialized concept also needs to be 'given up'. Nāgārjuna's 'mystical' proclivities are a way of non-duality, a way of not giving up the mind but of the mind not clinging to this or that, or more appropriately for this comparison, to neither/nor.

While both may recognize the structure and implications of language and conceptualization, their recognitions lead to different ends. Taylor's work can be seen as a search for ways of being in the world after the conceptual death of God. He suggests solutions but not tried and tested means. Nāgārjuna on the other hand, in my opinion, outlines a map for those in search of liberation from suffering. He himself has already gone to this groundless destination. I must immediately add that the term 'destination' is easily misleading. Nāgārjuna is not going to a place beyond the one in which his followers are traversing, as conceptual reality and *śūnyatā* are revealed to be the same. Nevertheless, the

verb 'going' is the root of the word *Tathāgata*, the name given to the Buddha and translated as 'the thus gone one'. The question is, then, if Nāgārjuna has gone, who writes the MMK? The answer would be the emptied-out Nāgārjuna, the co-dependent Nāgārjuna, the Nāgārjuna that is not Nāgārjuna but a set of relations, and as a set of empty relations Nāgārjuna actively and ethically writes the MMK. This is the true application of the emptiness of emptiness. Nāgārjuna does not escape the *samsāric* reality into the realm of *nirvāna* - *samsāra* is *nirvāna*.

For these reasons Nāgārjuna and Taylor should not easily be compared but seen as operating within their 'cultural ideational forms'⁹ or thought and cultural worlds.

Nāgārjuna was writing in a specific context in India, sometime during the second century before the common era, a fertile period of scholastic debate within and outside the Buddhist schools. It was the various forms of substantialization that he perceived appearing in these schools that Nāgārjuna opposed. He was convinced that such substantialization hindered the seeker on the path to enlightenment. Non-substantialization - his experience of enlightenment - was attained, I argue, through the process of meditation. Nāgārjuna should be seen, in his larger context, as firmly rooted in the Indian tradition of yoga, and in his specific context as operating from within the Buddhist school of the Mādhyamika.

Nāgārjuna's context and the structure of his doctrine of the twofold truths are the subjects of the first two chapters of this study.

⁹ Garth Mason's terminology found in 'Nāgārjuna and Yoga: complexities in origin and tradition', *Religion and Theology* 4 (1997), pp. 229-241. is of great use here as it suggests a fluidity of thought patterns rather than confining these writers to their immediate historical contexts.

Taylor, on the other hand, reveals an unconscious bias towards Kantian dualism. His Cartesian structure and his relationship with his most prevalent predecessors - Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Derrida - are covered in my last two chapters. Unable to dissolve the boundary between the known and the unknown, Taylor asserts firstly, in Erring, the known in terms of the divine milieu, a network of devalued signifiers without a transcendental signifier to offer ethical decision or value; and secondly, in nOts, the unknown or alterity termed 'Not'. Taylor's inability to dissolve this boundary results in his suggesting an irreconcilable dualism when he argues for the impossible both 'is' and 'is not'. The liminal space that is substantialized in nOts creates a dualism that is reminiscent of the dualism found in Christian theism.

Taylor's Cartesian woundedness and Nāgārjuna's meditational practice attest to the different values that knowledge, like the different relationship between religion and philosophy, have had in the two traditions, East and West. The West has on the whole seen the two as separate enterprises, the East tends to conflate the two so that philosophy becomes a process to be realized, in other words philosophy is valued in terms of its soteriological or 'religious' ability.

In my opinion the MMK is best understood as a document advocating a soteriological goal. Taylor's work, in contrast, is best read as experimental philosophical writing with theological themes.

CHAPTER ONE

1. NĀGĀRJUNA IN CONTEXT

In this opening chapter, I explore a number of schools of philosophy whose views were in circulation at the time Nāgārjuna was writing his treatise, the MMK. I suggest that Nāgārjuna was working within a much larger milieu than the narrow school of Mādhyamika Buddhism. The MMK as an aid to meditational practice in the context of Indian yoga is then discussed. I attempt to establish that the milieu in which Nāgārjuna wrote was one where there was an assumption that knowledge was based on practice. Taylor, on the other hand, reveals a lack of practice, or rather a lack of the believed relation between practice and knowledge found in Nāgārjuna's milieu. It is my belief that Taylor cannot offer this as a solution because the possibility of knowledge and practice being coextensive with one another is not one of the possibilities available in the occidental tradition within which he writes.

Huntington notes in relation to the contextualization of Indian thought that:

An Indian or Tibetan monk would approach Candrakīrti's [Nāgārjuna's disciple] work with a rich background of information on the doctrinal issues and technical terminology of other relevant systems. . . . Modern Western readers not only lack such a context but find themselves implanted in a different tradition holding to a wide range of premises, some of them at a great remove from those which form the essential features of Candrakīrti's [in this case Nāgārjuna's] paradigm.¹

¹ Huntington, C. W. Jr. with Wangchen G. W., The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p.9

By sketching aspects of the scholastic milieu in which Nāgārjuna lived and wrote, I intend to offer a sense of the concerns and interests of the Indian philosophical milieu to which he addressed himself. It is useful to reveal the nature of Nāgārjuna's MMK as searing of substantialist thought within its particular context and in the contemporary milieu into which it has been transposed. I wish to convey that while the MMK has universal application, it was created within, and for, a specific milieu. Additionally, I suggest that Nāgārjuna was working within the wider Indian milieu, not only within the Buddhist schools.

In a short discussion of the MMK as a meditational guide, I hope to stress and emphasize the document as embedded in its larger Indian historical tradition. As a form of mental yoga the MMK is a specifically Indian treatise. Ruegg warns against the danger of anachronistically transposing and imposing Western concepts and philosophical theories on modes of thought that have evolved in different historical circumstances.² To read the MMK within the Western paradigm of logic and philosophy, and to transpose terms such as *śūnyatā* into the contemporary debates and concerns of the Western thought world, without taking the specifically Indian and Buddhist soteriological aspect of the treatise carefully into consideration would be to miss the central concerns of the work.

While the central point of this chapter is to present Nāgārjuna's treatise as embedded in a specific environment, I urge the reader to note that Nāgārjuna's final aim - the dissolution of ontological propositions - has more global implications and can be applied to any way of thought that proposes substantialist

² Ruegg D. S., 'On the thesis and assertion in the *Mādhyamaka*', Contributions on Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy, Vol. 2 (1983) p. 239 in Huntington, C. W. Jr. The Emptiness of Emptiness, p. 6

or ontological realities, be they God, Self, World or Text. It is this universal aspect of his work that I will be comparing to Taylor's work. It is possible to do this as Nāgārjuna's attack on substantialist thought is, in my view, timeless.

1.1 THE FOUR LEMMAS - OR LOGICAL ALTERNATIVES

1.1.1 *Nāgārjuna's method - prasanga*

Prasanga or the rejection of views by *reductio ad absurdum* is used by Nāgārjuna to draw out the implications of any view by showing its self-contradictory character. Every thesis is turned against itself.³ The Mādhyamika disproves the opponent's thesis, and does not respond by offering a thesis of its own but with a mentally fluid perception of co-dependent arising.

Nāgārjuna's use of four lemmas reveals that there are four logical alternatives available for any rational subject. The basic alternatives are (1) Being and (2) Non-Being. From the first two lemmas the third and fourth lemmas are derived - either the affirmation of both, (3) Being and Non-Being, or finally the rejection of both, (4) neither Being nor Non-Being. Nāgārjuna's 'middle way', we discover is a rejection of classification per se, and therefore all four possible positions available to the logical and classifying mind are denied. Phenomena are, instead, radically relational and co-dependently arisen (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Any attempt by the mind to fix reality or suggest a 'view' results in mental clinging that, in its attempt to catch the uncatchable, causes suffering. Just as it is impossible to catch the wind

³ Murti T. R. V., The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1955, reprinted 1980, p. 131

in a box or flowing water in a jar, so the ability of the mind to classify 'this' or 'that' misses what it attempts to reveal by focused activity.

Nāgārjuna begins his treatise with an attack on the forms of causality that assumed differing forms of identity-theory or substantialization. This is of central import, as *pratītyasamutpāda* or co-dependent arising can itself be seen as a form of causality. I argue in the following chapter that *pratītyasamutpāda* is, critically, not an entitative form of causality, but a form of causality that denies the existence of substantial things and insists instead on relation. Additionally Nāgārjuna's representation of the four lemmas reveals an implicit assumption of *śūnyatā* or *pratītyasamutpāda* - the realization of which is attained through the process of practice and knowledge being coextensive. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the final and ultimate alternative to the rejected four lemmas.

Nāgārjuna states in *Examination of Conditions*:

MMK I: 1 Neither from itself, nor from another,
 Nor from both,
 Nor without a cause,
 Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.⁴

Nāgārjuna states four alternative views that are meant, as previously noted, to be exhaustive with regard to causality and other categories. The first three lemmas have a form of substantialization in common, and are each other's extremes. Self-arising and other-arising are binary opposites. Both arising and other-arising are a

⁴ I have chosen to use Garfield's translation, with occasional reference to other translations. Garfield's translation is in keeping with my understanding of the twofold truth. While it uses language easily accessible to the English reader, it does not do so at the expense of the subtlety of Nāgārjuna's message. Garfield's translation can be found in: Garfield J. L., (trans.), *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Oxford University Press, New York, 1995

compromise between the previous two views, but are revealed to be yet another extreme, the extreme of hierarchized or irreconcilable dualism. Non-arising or non-causation, as the fourth extreme, is the extreme of meaninglessness or nihilism. Nāgārjuna was contemporaneous with philosophical schools espousing each of these four positions.

The first three positions upheld a model of causation involving essential properties of substantially real or ontologically real causes and are therefore rejected by Nāgārjuna in favour of co-dependent arising. The fourth position is the negative relief of the first position, Being. It argues for the position of Non-Being or non-causality, that is, for nihilism. This extreme is rejected as, like the first three positions, it causes the mind to suggest an absolute - non-causality. It denies the evidence of the conditioned reality of phenomena.

1.1.2 *The first lemma - Self-arising*

The belief that things are produced out of themselves is rejected by Nāgārjuna as there is no point in self-production or reduplication. Identity, or self-arising, does not allow for causation as it would result in the cause and the effect being identical. This is a position that does not allow for difference and in this sense absolute identity is not possible as it would result in an implausible block universe without change or difference. It could not arise in time, as time denotes change and difference. Absolute identity or self-arising is in fact inexpressible. Nāgārjuna denied the intrinsic self-substantive reality of anything, and insisted that the existence of phenomena is relative to other phenomena, which also exist in relation to others. In this sense they are empty of inherent self-existence or

essence. They are, in his terms, co-dependently arisen. The Christian creator God and Hegel's Absolute Subject are examples of arising through self or Being. It is in the wake of the conceptual death of the Absolute Subject that Taylor attempts to suggest alternatives in Erring and nQts.

1.1.3 *The second lemma - Other-arising*

Like self-arising or Absolute Identity other-arising or Absolute Difference is not possible as it leads to non-relation and the abandonment of causation. If two entities are different they are both unique and incommensurable. It is not even possible to call them 'things' as this is to identify them as belonging to a class of 'things'. Pure difference, like pure identity, is beyond thought. If a 'thing' is different from another thing there is no relation between the two. A thing cannot in this case give rise to another thing that is different to it because difference insists on non-relation. Taylor's suggestion of identity through difference appears at times in both Erring and nQts, but this position is not maintained and results in the swing from non-causation or undecidability to an irreconcilable dualism. These positions are refuted by Nagarjuna in his rejection of the third and fourth positions.

1.1.4 *The third lemma - Arising by both cause and effect*

The doctrine of causation by both self and other emerges through a juxtaposition or amalgam of the doctrine of causation from another and the doctrine of self-causation. If the entity is conceived as having two different aspects and the elements of the synthesis retain their nature and individuality to any extent, then

essence. They are, in his terms, co-dependently arisen. The Christian creator God and Hegel's Absolute Subject are examples of arising through self or Being. It is in the wake of the conceptual death of the Absolute Subject that Taylor attempts to suggest alternatives in Erring and nOts.

1.1.3 *The second lemma - Other-arising*

Like self-arising or Absolute Identity, other-arising or Absolute Difference is not possible as it leads to non-relation and the abandonment of causation. If two entities are different they are both unique and incommensurable. It is not even possible to call them 'things' as this is to identify them as belonging to a class of 'things'. Pure difference, like pure identity, is beyond thought. If a 'thing' is different from another thing there is no relation between the two. A thing cannot in this case give rise to another thing that is different to it because difference insists on non-relation. Taylor's suggestion of identity through difference appears at times in both Erring and nOts, but this position is not maintained and results in the swing from non-causation or undecidability to an irreconcilable dualism. These positions are refuted by Nagarjuna in his rejection of the third and fourth positions.

1.1.4 *The third lemma - Arising by both cause and effect*

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one of two situations arise: either the elements are absolutely different and therefore imply non-relation; or prominence is accorded to one ingredient and subordination is accorded to the other. In the first situation there is no need to suggest the third lemma - arising by both self and other - as it is a redundant repetition of the second lemma - arising through difference. In the second case there is, in Nāgārjuna's view, no ground for preferential treatment. Prominence may be given to identity by subordinating difference, and *vice versa*, but to do so is unintelligible in the case of entities, which are, as the argument for both self and other presupposes, mutually dependent and indispensable to each other. In other words, Nāgārjuna rejected the third alternative because it contains the seeds of dualism, with all the associated distortions that arise from such a view.

If, on the other hand, the elements of the synthesis do not retain their nature and individuality at all then it can be resolved in one of three ways: It could either be a redundant repetition of the first lemma - self-arising, or of the fourth lemma - a denial of entitative causality; or alternatively, if expressed as non-essential instead of non-existent, it would be indistinguishable from the Mādhyamikan standpoint and be an expression of emptiness or co-dependent arising. It is, therefore, a refutation of substantialization or mental clinging that Nāgārjuna rejected in the form of the third lemma.

In Chapter VIII Nāgārjuna states:

MMK VIII: 7 An existent and nonexistent agent
 Does not perform an existent and nonexistent action.
 Existence and nonexistence cannot pertain to the same thing.
 For how could they exist together?

And at a later stage he states:

MMK XXV: 14 How could nirvāṇa
 Be both existent and nonexistent?
 These two cannot be in the same place.
 Like light and darkness.

Taylor, acknowledging Hegel's illegitimate preference for identity, asserts the alternatives of a preferential difference and an irreconcilable dualism. In nOts he finally asserts a possible neither/nor, which should place him in the fourth lemma, but instead he substantializes these positions, which results in an uneasy wounded Cartesian dualism with a preference or slant towards difference named the 'Not'. The 'Not' haunts language and Taylor suggests that without the Not language could not appear, the Not and language are related but are held apart by Taylor who does not wish to resolve the identity-in-difference problem in terms of identity. This both language and the Not is an example of Nāgārjuna's rejected third lemma.

1.1.5 *The fourth lemma - Non-arising*

The fourth alternative, like the first two lemmas, amounts to giving up the notion of causation, as it means that things are produced at random. Murti discards this alternative on the grounds that, if no reason is assigned for the thesis it is then a mere dogmatic assertion; and it fails through sheer inanity. If, he continues, a reason is assigned, then there is a manifest self-contradiction between what is asserted and how it is asserted: for a conclusion is given (that things are produced at random without cause) derived from causally determined premises.⁵ While the first three lemmas are substantialist forms of assertion, even Non-Being is a substantialist assertion when it is conceived as 'other than', 'exclusive of', 'wholly

⁵ Murti T. R. V., The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 135

different from 'Being. In this form it is also an extreme position which is clung to, and this means that it, like the other three, is an absolute assertion. It is additionally a position of indecision, doubt and despair. An extreme is an exclusive position, an absolute assertion, an unconditional view, which is an object of clinging. As thought is not questioned and reason is not transcended, it is still a view (*dṛṣṭi*) and not the giving up of views. Nāgārjuna aimed at mental release from clinging to this or that: therefore the fourth lemma, like the three before it, is rejected. By extension, if *śūnyatā* itself is made an object of clinging, then it too is rejected.

The fourth lemma is a position in which the possibility of all description in terms of being is totally denied. The total denial of all ascriptions, even of relative description, holding the thing to *be* of such a nature that it is absolutely indescribable; that no statement, not even a conditional statement, can be made of it, is an ontological and nihilistic extreme. It amounts to saying that while the thing is absolutely there, no knowledge of it is possible. Nāgārjuna thus denies nihilism as an extreme and as a form to be clung to. Taylor's attempt in Erring to argue for erring and wandering as a form of undecidability would, no matter how attractively he attempts to describe it as a way of being, situate him in this lemma. In fact Taylor suggests various aspects of all of the last three lemmas as a response to the rejection and demise of the Western formulations of the first lemma, be it as the Death of God, the demise of the subject or the realization of the impossibility of access to absolute knowledge.

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1.2 NĀGĀRJUNA'S SCHOLASTIC MILIEU

The Buddhist rejection of substance as either essential (self-arisen) or independent (other-arisen) was originally formulated against the backdrop of the orthodox Vedic schools active during the century in which Nāgārjuna formulated the MMK. These schools were proponents of the belief in essential Being or *sat*. The Sāṃkhya are characterized by a dualism in their understanding of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* but inclined towards the substantial as permanent and universal and therefore upheld a form of monism. The Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika accepted a more pluralistic stance and accepted both substance (or ground) and modes (or individual entities) as real.

Nāgārjuna's treatise rejects the views of other heterodox schools as well as the orthodox Vedic schools. I have included a short review of the stances adopted by the heterodox Jains and Cārvākas. The Jains were representative of the third lemma or both self- and other-arising, whilst the nihilistic materialist Cārvākas were representative of the fourth lemma.

Even closer to home were the internal disagreements within the Buddhist sectarian schools. Nāgārjuna rejected the implications of the belief in the essential nature of the *dharmas* advocated by the Sarvāstivādin and was not satisfied with the Sautrāntika attempt at rectification. I conclude this section of the chapter with a brief summary of the salient points held by these schools, which crumble under the radical application of Nāgārjuna's treatise.

1.2.1 *The non-buddhist schools*

It was originally my naïve wish to discuss the Sāṃkhya and Nāgārjuna's first lemma - the assertion that no thing arises from itself - under the same heading. I soon came to realize that this is problematical. It became apparent that the internal inconsistencies that Nāgārjuna aimed to reveal resulted in the possibility of following through and rejecting all the lemmas from self-being to non-causality for any of these schools of thought. So, for instance, self-arising, as proposed by Sāṃkhya, implies, according to Nāgārjuna, redundant reduplication. If difference and change are stated, as must be done, and Sāṃkhya do, and if one is to appeal to experience, then other-arising or difference - the second view - is called for. This would seem to suggest a combination of difference and identity or self-arising and other-arising. This however also reveals internal absurdities and is rejected in the third lemma as dualistic. Substantial Being and Non-Being cannot, Nāgārjuna insists, logically exist in the same place. An alternative suggestion under the heading of both Being and Non-Being is that a duality or combination of self and other-arising (or identity and difference) exists in one Being. The amalgam, of course, has two aspects. If the elements retain their individual identities, then one does not have one Being but two. The two elements may, alternatively, be resolved by asserting a hierarchy of one over the other, but no reason can be found to value one over the other. If the elements are independent and have their own identity, then continuity and change cannot be explained as there will be no connection between elements and no movement - since each exists independently and they are irreconcilable. If the two elements of the amalgam are not conceptualized as having independent identities, then this results in a rejection of difference, change and motion and we have a block universe - a rejection of causality - and the fourth view is asserted. It is difficult, in other words,

to place the schools under one view as one extreme implies the others. Therefore, while it is conventional to speak of Sāṃkhya as holding a belief in self-arising, and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Abhidharmists as holding to difference - which is indeed their starting points - the inconsistencies in the views held by the schools can be explained under any of these heads. Nevertheless for the sake of tradition and clarity I will be following the expected format.

1.2.1.1 *Sāṃkhya as proponents of self-arising*

Sāṃkhya held that all causation is really self-causation, or in Nāgārjuna's terms 'arises from itself'. Sāṃkhya argued that for a cause to be genuinely the cause of an effect, that effect must exist potentially in that cause. They therefore advocated identity between cause and effect and thus held the theory of self-becoming. Sāṃkhya philosophers believed that the empirical world is produced by action and interaction between *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* is one and unconscious, *puruṣas* are multiple and conscious.⁶

Sāṃkhya admits the existence of the external world to be independent of the individual mind. It is therefore a form of realism, but its realism admits two ultimate realities - *Prakṛti* (Supreme Nature) and *puruṣa* (Supreme Consciousness) - and therefore can be said to be a form of reconciled dualism. Everything is, according to the Sāṃkhya philosophers, produced by atoms except intelligence, mind and ego. *Prakṛti* is the fundamental principle of all unconscious elements

⁶ Mishra R. S., *Yoga Sūtras: The Textbook of Yoga Psychology*, Anchor Press, New York, 1973, p. 6

including atoms and atomic particles. *Puruṣa* is the fundamental principle of all conscious elements.⁷

Sāṃkhya, by advocating the identity between cause and effect, suggests that things are produced out of themselves. Nāgārjuna rejected self-causation as self-production is redundant. To suggest that one thing produces another is to argue for production from difference, which would amount to a denial of the universal unchanging nature of *Brahman*, and is, notably, characteristic of the second view - arising from difference - rejected by Nāgārjuna. The Sāṃkhya argued that their doctrine of *saikārivāda* evades this problem by asserting that it does not deny all difference, as cause is continually transforming into effect. The production of a pot from clay is an example of this - the pot is certainly different from the clay, but this does not amount to a difference in substance, but only in form or in the various states of the same substance.⁸ The Mādhyamikan argument against this is that the cause (clay) and the effect (pot) are not identical in regard to their emergent forms. Either the cause is or is not identical with the effect. If difference is insisted upon, then causation cannot be asserted. Likewise, if identity is insisted upon, causation cannot be asserted. In addition to the above argument, Nāgārjuna asks:

MMK I: 5

These give rise to those,
So these are called conditions.
As long as those do not come from these,
Why are these not nonconditions?

In self-becoming, what prevents the seed from duplicating itself *ad nauseum* but instead producing the sprout, the leaves, the flowers, fruits etc., one after the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 14

other? In other words, what relates some causal connections and not others? Why does clay produce a pot and not itself or additionally, why does clay not randomly produce diamonds or rain or some other entity? Sāṃkhya of course propose that the entity is potential in the beginning, and becomes actual, that there is a difference of states, not of substances, between the cause and the effect.

The Mādhyamika reply is that if the cause is fully actual, then there is no purpose in its reproducing itself. The entity that is produced is an other and therefore cannot be identical with the cause. If the cause were partly actual and partly potential, the thing would *not be one*: it would instead contain two opposed natures. If the cause were wholly potential, then it could not manifest itself and become actual of its own accord (because by nature potential is not actual): the factor (the efficient cause) by which formless matter becomes actual must be different from it. And if it contained the efficient cause of its change within itself, there would not be any state in which it remained purely potential. For, having all the necessary and sufficient conditions for its production within itself (i.e. if the cause were self-contained and self-sufficient), it still continues to be in the potential state for an appreciable period. Then it would either not produce at all or be dependent on an external factor. This would be to give up self-causation.

So Nāgārjuna could ask of Sāṃkhya what causes *prakṛti* to pass from the state of pure potentiality to the manifest form. Sāṃkhya suggests that it is the presence of the *puruṣa* which, in the ultimate analysis, supplies the needed element of disturbance which sets *prakṛti* on its course of evolution. The Mādhyamika could reply: if the cause and effect are identical, how is one to function *as* cause, and the other *as* effect? Their natures are different. Propositions made of the one are not true of the other. The distinction between them cannot be made except on the

ground of different notions; otherwise there would be a distinction without a difference. As Nāgārjuna puts it:

MMK XX: 19 For cause and effect to be identical
Is not tenable . . .

His reasons for stating this are given in the next verse:

MMK XX: 20 If cause and effect were identical,
Produced and producer would be identical.

And if this were so, the entire universe would collapse into an amorphous, undifferentiated mass. The doctrine of self-becoming logically leads to the abolition of differences and the concentration of all causes in one, therefore to the view of non-causation.

While Sāṃkhya inclined towards the substantial, the permanent and the universal, Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika, with its empirical and pluralist bias, accords equal status to both substance and modes. This results in an argument from difference.

1.2.1.2 *Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika as proponents of other-arising*

The Nyayā maintain difference between cause and effect. Like Sāṃkhya, Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika have been categorized as realists, but they are of a different sort. The Nyayā philosopher believes that what we are directly aware of in our perception is the physical reality that exists independently of our awareness of it. The whole is a distinct reality, created by the putting together of the parts, and yet distinct from those parts taken together. There is therefore a ground from which entities arise. This substratum, unlike Sāṃkhya *Brahman*, is however, distinct from the

properties it instantiates or the property-instantiations it contains, and therefore this school can be typified as holding to the arising by difference.⁹

The Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika sustained the objectivity of relations of the whole, the universal and even of absence. Relation is real yet different from the relata (e.g. substance and attribute, whole and parts). This conception makes for the co-existence of different entities and their connection. Nāgārjuna argues:

MMK 1: 6

For neither an existent nor a nonexistent thing
Is a condition appropriate.
If a thing is nonexistent, how could it have a condition?
If a thing is already existent, what would a condition do?

If an entity is conceived as inherently existent, it exists independently and, accordingly, needs no condition or cause for its production. In fact it could not be produced if it existed in this way at all. Therefore non-causality is implied. On the other hand if a thing existed in no way whatsoever, it follows trivially that it would have no condition or cause.

The non-substantialist, like Nāgārjuna (but not like the nihilist who suggests arising by mere chance, or those that argue for non-causality), judges things only in their relationship (and I would add, only relationships and not things, and are therefore empty of self-substantiality). Matilal deduces that the realist who judges things as objects is inevitably led into accepting some relation as real or objective.¹⁰

⁹ For a comparative study that favours the Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika refer to Matilal B. K., *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134

The belief that every entity is real, even when a substratum is posited, suggests, as Nāgārjuna shows, an inevitable rejection of causation. The Nyayā-Vaiśeṣikas and Sāṃkhya, as followers of the Veda, held that the Vedas were spoken by God and hence their validity is on a par with the validity of statements made by reliable and trustworthy persons who have seen the *dharma* or the truth. Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika take each of the co-operating causes as being separate entities coming into contact with others, which are likewise separate entities. The problem posed by the lack of continuity between a 'cause' explained in terms of one factor having its 'own nature', in relation to another having its 'own-nature', is resolved by the Nyayā who accept a universal co-ordinating agency. Nyayā-Vaiśeṣika therefore appeal to metaphysical solutions to explain identity and difference and their explanation is not resolved empirically. This solution was not available to the Buddhist Abhidharmists who, as Buddhists, had to reject such a metaphysical solution.

Nāgārjuna has been variously accused of being a dualist (suggesting an ultimate truth and a conventional truth) and a nihilist (as he advocated emptiness, which was interpreted as non-existence). Both of these positions are, however, rejected by Nāgārjuna in the course of his MMK. Examples of contemporary schools holding these positions are discussed below.

1.2.1.3 *The Jainas as proponents of both self and other-arising*

Jainism, like its Buddhist detractors, was a heterodox school of thought. There were two prominent teachers of Jainism: Pārśvanātha and Mahāvīra, the latter being the systematizer of Jaina doctrines. Mahāvīra was interested in accounting for free will without having to abandon biological determinism. This compromise

compelled him to give equal consideration to the objective and the subjective. Mahavīra's explanation of existence had to accommodate both positive (Being) and negative propositions (Non-Being), together with the assumption that both are possibilities. The Jaina view is, therefore, an example of the combination of both self and other-arising in that it insists on the continuous as well as the emergent aspect of an effect.¹¹

The Jainas, according to Ramanan, are epistemological non-absolutists (relativists), but metaphysical pluralists.¹² Their position is, by its very nature, unstable: to take relativism seriously is to deny the ultimacy of difference and with the denial of the ultimacy of difference pluralism cannot stand. On the contrary, if they take pluralism seriously, they cannot be relativists. Ramanan states however, the Jainas do combine them and this involves two difficulties. Firstly, to hold that relativism is an ultimate feature of reality, is to conceive the relative phases as absolute. This is Caputo's charge against Taylor's divine milieu, as it is presented in *Erring*,¹³ which I discuss in a later chapter. The relativism of the Jainas amounts, then, to saying both 'yes' and 'no' and their pluralism amounts to a categorical 'yes'. Secondly, Ramanan continues, the pluralism of the Jainas lends itself to an interpretation that their relativism is really a syncretism, a mechanical putting together of the different elements. Every view, as much as every thing, should be interpreted as a complex of many independent reals, an understanding which is in this respect similar to that of Nyayā-Vaiśeṣikas. This is the same as suggesting the second lemma or other-arising. To suggest difference as absolute is to contradict

11 Raju P. T., *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985, p. 106

12 Ramanan K. V., *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: As Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāparamitā-Śāstra*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1966, p. 156

13 Caputo J. D., *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, *Man and World - An International Philosophical Review* 21 (1988), p. 112

the mundane nature of things as well as their ultimate nature. In the case of the extreme of both Being and Non-Being, it may be noted that when Being as well as Non-Being are alike held to be absolutely, wholly true of one and the same thing, then one cancels the other and there is nothing further that remains as the true description of the thing.¹⁴

1.2.1.4 *The Cārvākas as proponents of non-causality*

The Cārvākas were considered nihilists whose ultimate aim was not spiritual enlightenment but physical pleasure. The Cārvākas were dialectical iconoclasts of all theories, both epistemological and metaphysical. The Cārvākas maintained that perception is the only valid means of knowledge and that the processes of the world are due to their own nature, to chance, not to supernatural causation. The principle of causation, according to the Cārvākas, cannot be proven to occur in the world. Everything simply happens as it does; every event is by chance. If inference is used and it turns out to be correct, this is accidental - inferences are mere guesses. Whatever is unperceivable, such as the *āīman*, *Brahman*, heaven or anything metaphysical, was not acceptable to the Cārvākas. Whatever could not be proved to exist through the process of perception was treated as non-existent. This resulted in the assumption that the inability to prove the existence of something is the same as the ability to prove its non-existence.

The Cārvākas therefore were representatives of the fourth lemma, as they suggested that phenomena arose by chance without causation. But in its very

¹⁴ Ramanan K. V., Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: As Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāparamitā-Sāstra, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1966, p. 62

proposal is the seed of its undoing, as Nāgārjuna was aware. The Cārvākas' view that everything is as it is, that everything is due to nature, that everything occurs by chance and that nothing has a cause, contains universal propositions that cannot be supported by perception. Therefore their propositions unravel from their own side as their conclusion - phenomena arise by chance - is sought causally, that is, derived from premises rather than perception.¹⁵

1.2.2 *Nāgārjuna and his contemporary Buddhist schools*

1.2.2.1 *Abhidharma*

There are, Murti explains, two main currents of Indian philosophy - one having its source in the *ātma*-doctrine of the Upanisads and the other in the *anātma*-doctrine of Buddha. They conceive reality in two distinct and exclusive patterns.¹⁶ The Sāṃkhya and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, both holding the Veda as sacred, adhere to the *ātma*-doctrine which can be termed a Substance-view of reality. The Buddhists, on the other hand, advocate a doctrine of no-soul (*asat*) and impermanence (*annica*). While this strict classification is too rigid to represent the fluid dynamic nature of the relations between Indian philosophies, as a broad brushstroke it assists to structure my thesis into arguments between the Mādhyamika and its Buddhist opponents and the wider arguments between Buddhism and the other Indian philosophical schools just discussed.

There were various debates within the Buddhist fold during Nāgārjuna's time. Buddhist sacred literature is generally divided into three types according to the

¹⁵ Raju P. T., *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, pp. 78-103

¹⁶ Murti T. R. V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, p. 10

dominant characteristic of the piece in question: The *vinaya*, which deals with the disciplinary regulations for the community of monks; *sutta*, comprising discourses or 'sermons' delivered by the Buddha; and *abbhidharma*, scholastic texts which give detailed discussions of matters by way of explanation and genetic ordering of all key factors mentioned in the *sutta* and *vinaya* collections.

The original distinction between the discourses (*sutta*) and the scholastic treatises (*abbhidharma*), resulted in a characterization of the *sutta* as popular teachings and the *abbhidharma* as 'that which is above Dharma' or 'that which represent superior *dharmas*'. The belief that the Buddha preached the *abbhidharma* to the gods, and not to human beings, seems to symbolize the exalted position accorded it. The Abhidharmic thinkers, very active in Nāgārjuna's time, were scholastic: they defined and catalogued the *dharmas*, which resulted in extensive classifications of the factors (*dharmas*) as well as explanations that related them causally. This was shown by Nāgārjuna to be problematical as it did not accommodate a radical understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* which rejects any form of entitative transfer. While Nāgārjuna dismissed the *ātma* school's understanding of causality as inherently flawed from its primary premises, his complaint against the Buddhist schools was that their understanding of causality was incompatible with the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda*, a fundamental doctrine preached by the Buddha.

The Abhidharmic schools, in an attempt to emphasize the impermanence and 'no-self' or non-essence, *anātman*, of the self and phenomena, suggested that a soul or thing was a 'synthetic' concept. The 'ultimately' reals or 'substantially' reals were atoms. The apprehended were merely aggregates of atomic constituents. The atomic constituents of the *sensibilla* were individually

unobservable and therefore imperceptible; but collectively they created the sensible forms, or phenomena, that are *gross* and hence observable; there was however, no innate soul or *ātman*. Once the atoms in, for instance, a chair disintegrated there would be no essential 'chairness' remaining. Nāgārjuna would, of course, regard this as a lapse into identity-theory as under this argument the atoms themselves would have substance, *sat* or *ātman*.

The elements (*dharmas*), Radhakrishnan tells us, are ultimate existences, and they are classified variously in the abhidharma treatises.¹⁷ The *skandha*, *dhātu*, *āyatana* classification is the most prevalent in the schools. There is no doubt, Murti states, that the analysis of an individual into a number of states without the residue of any soul or substance is as old as Buddhism itself, and must be attributed to the Buddha himself. References to the five *skandhas* and the six *āyatanas* and *dhātus* are too persistent and universal a feature of the Nikāyas and other older Pali Canons to be ignored as later accretions. Invariably this is done to show that these are not *ātman*, nor is there any *ātman* apart from these, and that the attachment to the *ātman* is ignorance. The classification of existences into *skandha*, *āyatana*, *dhātu* (groups or collations) may be termed subjective, as the interest is predominantly in sentient experience, in the individual and his components. It is the objective classification of these moulds of thought that came to be formulated in the schools to which Nāgārjuna objected.¹⁸

The Abhidharmic literature discussed dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpada*) of existence in terms of elemental 'synergies' or conditioned factors of existence

17 Radhakrishnan S., *Indian Philosophy*, 2nd Ed., Vol. 1, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1929, p. 614

18 Murti T. R. V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, p. 184; Kalupahana D. J., *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1976, p. 107

(*dharmas*) that pertain to what we would call today both conscious and unconscious as well as extrasensory elements. They were attempting to avoid reification of concepts - by analysing the bases of the self-experience at a more profound level. Nevertheless this worthy attempt was rejected by Nāgārjuna as the attempt to identify the 'own-nature' (*svabhāva*) and the 'own characteristics' (*svalakṣaṇa*) of *dharmas*, in his view, was an unfortunate drift back into essentialist thinking. Thus, to apprehend a 'cause' in terms of one factor having its 'own nature' in relation to another having its 'own-nature' was seen to go against the original intention of the dependent co-arising notion. Nāgārjuna rejects the identifying of self-substantiated elements, which were thought to be in causal relation with each other, when he identifies dependent co-arising with 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*) and maintains that the early formulation of 'That being, this becomes' cannot occur when either existing things (*bhāva*) or *dharmas* are thought to have self-nature.¹⁹

The *abhidharma*, as mentioned, is the explanation and genetic ordering of all key factors mentioned in the *sutta* collections. The adherents of the schools that developed and emphasized the *abhidharma* texts are called Abhidharmists. These groups were the Theravādins and the Sarvāstivādin. The *Theravāda* school corresponds to the Sanskrit *Sthaviravāda*, the name of one of the two great schools separating at the time of the great schism around 346 B.C., and this small detail Prebish tells us, has caused scholars a great deal of confusion.²⁰ The logical tendency is to simply equate the two schools, but this would not be accurate. By the time of the council held by Aśoka around 250 B.C. the Sthavira school had

19 Prebish C. S., *Buddhism: A Modern Perspective*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, London, 1978, p. 39

20 Ibid.

split itself into primarily three groups: the Vātsīputriya-Sāmmatīyas, the Sarvāstivādin, and the Vibhajyavādin. In the course of time (perhaps 100 years) the Vibhajyavādin school splintered into two primary schools: the Mahīśasakas and the Theravādin. It is the Sarvāstivādin that I will be looking at in relation to the MMK, as it seems that the Theravādin - possibly due to the missionary zeal of Aśoka - had established themselves in Ceylon and eventually died out in India. The Sarvāstivādin were contemporaneous with Nāgārjuna. It is therefore the Sarvāstivādin that have been highlighted by scholars as the most likely candidates for the role of Nāgārjuna's opponents.

1.2.2.2 *Sarvāstivādin*

The Sarvāstivādin doctrines are, Prebish states, complicated and complex. The rifts and disagreements within this school are as difficult to unravel as the discussions amongst this and the other schools.²¹ For the sake of brevity, the main features of the school, rather than a detailed understanding of all the ins and outs of the various doctrines as expressed by the many teachers, will be outlined. I am aware that in doing so justice is not done to the complexity involved, but the salient points that Nāgārjuna was attempting to assert against entitative causality are highlighted. The Sarvāstivādin have been targeted as the chief contenders for the part of the opponents of Nāgārjuna (Ramanan,²² Kalupahana²³), but it is my contention that such a direct connection need not be made. I explore the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ramanan K. V., Nāgārjuna's Philosophy: As Presented in the Mahā-Prajñāparamitā-Śāstra, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1966, p. 62

²³ Kalupahana D. J., A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1992, p. 62

Sarvāstivādin's doctrines and compare them to Nāgārjuna not as *the* opponent that Nāgārjuna was addressing but as one of the *possible* opponent. Additionally a brief review of their doctrines offers an example of one school's resolutions of the problems concerning existence and being that were circulating at that fertile time in the Indian socio-historical context of c. 2nd century A.D.

The Sarvāstivādin's wanted to argue that an entity had no essence of its own, was *asaṃ*, but had the essential property of depending on its parts, causes, and so forth - an essential property, in other words, that depends critically on another. Therefore, they demonstrate an adherence to the doctrine of other-arising. Nature relies on the other having an intrinsic connection to the phenomenon in question, a connection realized in its causal powers.

Four kinds of causes, or conditions (*pratyaya*), Murti states,²⁴ are enumerated in the Abhidharmic treatises. The *nirvartako hetuḥ* is the direct cause - that which (directly) brings about the result; for example, the seed as producing the sprout. The *ālambana pratyaya* is the object-condition which is taken as the cause in the production of knowledge and mentals (*citta* and *caitta*). The *samanātrara hetuḥ* also plays a part in the production of mentals only and is the immediately preceding moment of cessation which engenders a succeeding mental state. The *samanātra* was understood as the immediately precedent cessation of the cause - like that of the seed, facilitating the emergence of the sprout. The *adhipati pratyaya* is the indirect influence, or the comprehensive and universal cause. It exerts influence over all entities except itself. It is wider in scope than all the

24 Murti T. R. V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, pp. 170 - 171

pratyayas, including the *ālumbana* which conditions only mental phenomena. It is a co-present cause.

In verse 2 of chapter one Nāgārjuna addresses these conditions. He states:

MMK I: 2 There are four conditions: efficient condition;
 Percept-object condition; immediate condition;
 Dominant condition, just so.
 There is no fifth condition.

Garfield states that this general classification of conditions is pretty standard in Indian, and especially in Buddhist accounts of explanation.²⁵ Both Murti and Garfield interpret Nāgārjuna to be making the point that none of these conditions makes reference to any causal powers or necessitation. Murti states that the points of note in the Sarvāstivāda theory of causation are that not a single entity is the cause of an effect and that the cause is different from the effect. These, he states, are the two main points in the Mādhyamika criticism of this theory.²⁴ The problematic nature of cause being different from effect results, as previously argued, in the assertion of non-causation. It has the same problematic nature of the 'relation' between self-existing entities which by definition does not admit relation, as discussed under the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika or under the second lemma.

A phenomenon, according to the Sarvāstivādin, arises by the causal functioning of the elements by way of mutual association; the thing is therefore conditionally originated and destroyed, but the basic elements themselves rest in their own nature unaffected by temporality. While the basic elements are non-temporal, their function is temporal; temporality consists in functioning. The unit of time is

²⁵ Garfield J. L., (trans.), *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 107

²⁴ Murti T. R. V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* p. 172

the unit of function. The Sarvāstivādin argued that a thing, event, or phenomenon (*dharmā*) passes through the three periods of time: past, present and future. In that process, what changes is the manner of mode (*bhāva*) of its appearance, not its substance (*dravya*). It is this substance that came to be referred to as intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).

In 'Examination of Motion', Nāgārjuna establishes his position based on the idea that a substantially real entity passes through three periods of time and that there is therefore a mover that does not change, but inexplicably changes appearance.

Nāgārjuna presupposed that there is motion or change, for if there were no change there would be a static universe and no arising. Even if the links between conditions and their consequences are empty, as the Sarvāstivādin seem to imply, the change represented by the arising of these consequences must be real. Nāgārjuna argues that from such a view a number of absurd consequences follow: things not now in motion, but which were in motion in the past or which will be in the future, would have to undergo substantial change, effectively becoming different things when they change state from motion to rest or *vice versa*; a regress would ensue from the need for the entity 'motion' itself to be in motion. Motion would, in a bizarre mental twist, occur in the absence of moving things. Nāgārjuna concludes that a reification of motion is incoherent. Motion is therefore empty. He writes:

MMK II: 2

Where there is change, there is motion.
Since there is change in the moving,
And not in the moved or not-moved,
Motion is in that which is moving.

The idea that motion is an inherently existent phenomenon implies that change or impermanence is inherently existent.

MMK II: 3 How would it be acceptable
 For motion to be in the mover?
 When it is not moving, it is not acceptable
 To call it a mover.

If motion, or the *dharmas* atoms, moves from the past to the present to the future, then it is inherently existent and should continue to exist over and above the mover. Something that is inherently existent depends on nothing for its existence. This is of course absurd, but Nāgārjuna continues:

MMK II: 4 For whomever there is motion in the mover,
 There could be nonmotion
 Evident in the mover.
 But having motion follows from being a mover.

The idea that motion is a property with an existence and merely inheres in a mover implies that movers might have, instead, its contrary, non-motion. This would result in a mover with the property of non-motion - this is a contradiction in terms and untenable. So it follows that motion cannot be thought of as an independent property.

The Sarvāstivādin, as previously mentioned, held the notion that each unit of function or moment is distinct from the others. It has a separate essence of its own and so, in essence, one moment is separate from another. The past, present and future moments are all existent and real. The elements of existence (*dharmas*) which arise and perish in the temporal flux are self-existent. This conclusion that each moment is separate from the others, belonging to an element or atom which is essentially non-relational and independent, is, according to Nāgārjuna,

erroneous. The Sarvāstivādin account of motion - that movement happens as a series of momentary flashings of these separate essences - does not. In his view, explain the sequence of past - present - future, just as a series of separate essences does not explain why clay gives rise to a pot and not some other erroneous thing. Therefore some relationship between these separate moments must be admitted. If one does not admit relationship one must admit non-causality. If on the other hand one suggests an entitative relationship or ground, the fundamental principles of Buddhism - *annica* and *anatta* - would be rejected.

The Sarvāstivādin's theory of elements or atoms as unchanging and independent is revealed as inherently problematic when they attempt to explain change. The Sarvāstivādin's cling to the distinct and separate and hold separateness to be absolute. They fail to provide for the course of phenomenal existence. Their theory of moments amounts to a denial of change and, more importantly, a denial of the Buddha's teaching of *pratīyasamutpāda*.

1.2.2.3 Sautrāntikas

The two Abhidharmic traditions, Theravāda and Sarvastivāda, were generally opposed by the Sautrāntikas, who made a persistent effort to remain faithful to the original discourses (*sutta*). They considered the discourses (*sutta*) as primary sources, while the Sarvastivādin's claimed that the *abhidharma* was the primary source. But in spite of their dependence on the discourses, the Sautrāntikas accepted the doctrine of moments and atoms, discussed above as part of the Sarvāstivādin's beliefs. Neither of these doctrines are found in the *sutta* and can

therefore be considered as later developments. These doctrines are, found in all the scholastic schools of Buddhism - Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, and Sautrāntika.

The Sautrāntikas, as distinct from the Abhidharmists, reject the theory of 'own nature'. According to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* of Śāntideva, a thing becomes, having not been before and, having become, ceases to be, because it has no substance. Kalupahana notes that this means, that by denying substance (*svabhāva*), the Sautrāntikas were compelled to admit the production or arising of an effect that did not exist earlier (*abhūtvabhāvaupāda*). The only valid form of causality for the Sautrāntikas would therefore be contiguity or immediate succession (*samanantara-pratyaya*). The radical empiricism, Kalupahana notes, found in early Buddhism is exchanged for an atomistic empiricism. This amounts to a denial of causality.²⁷

The non-identity theory (*asatkāryavada*) of the Sautrāntikas' causality - explained by contiguity - is not a convincing explanation of conditions arising and, as with the Sarvāstivādins, the lack of continuity is out of keeping with the Buddha's explanation of conditioned co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

There is no category set up by Nāgārjuna's opponents as substantially real or as substantially not-real that Nāgārjuna does not do away with. He reveals that the only understanding that makes any sense is a conventional understanding of 'reals' with the additional provision of holding everything to be co-dependently arisen or relational.

²⁷ Kalupahana D. J., *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, pp. 106-107

Co-dependent arising is realized, I will now argue, through a process of meditation practice. Knowledge, in other words, is dependent on, and coextensive with, practice. Substantialization is shown to be one or other form of illegitimate understanding of reality as existing in one or other location, be it subjective, objective or something in between. Any dualistic conception is shown to have inherent and irreconcilable inconsistencies. Reality is, in fact, by nature co-dependently arisen and cannot be represented on its own home ground in any particular location, as to do so is to privilege that location above others. Any form of conceptualization is by its nature the creation of definition, and requires the activity of choice or the activity of highlighting specifics. The nature of conceptualization, by this activity, fails to represent co-dependent arising which is unspecific. Unless conceptualization empties itself, and this includes the emptying of the subject that is doing the conceptualization, the object of conceptualization, the perceiver and the perceived, co-dependent arising or *śūnyatā*, will not be realized. This is not however, the final twist as Nāgārjuna insists that emptiness should not be ontologized or substantialized, and is 'itself' subject to co-dependent arising, since it is dependent upon conceptualization, on choice and on specifics. It is a dependent set of relations, not an entity in its own right. By this circular movement of emptiness emptying itself, reality has changed completely and not at all. This twofold understanding and reconciliation is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

1.3 NĀGĀRJUNA AND MEDITATIONAL PRACTICE - TAYLOR AND NON-PRACTICE

1.3.1 *The importance of contextualization - Distinguishing Nāgārjuna from Taylor*

On the topic of contextualization, D. S. Ruegg has noted:

The historian of the Mādhyamaka - and of Indian and Tibetan philosophy in general - must of course refrain from anachronistically transposing and arbitrarily imposing the concepts of modern semantics and philosophical theory, which have originated in the course of particular historical developments, on modes of thought that have evolved in quite different historical circumstances, and which have therefore to be interpreted in the first place within the game of their own concerns and the ideas they have themselves developed. Still, in studying Indian and Tibetan thought, the importance of religious and philosophical praxis, and of pragmatics, must receive due attention.²⁸

To review the MMK as an intellectual treatise in a logical arena created to defeat Nāgārjuna's rational opponents skillfully, would be to fulfil all of Ruegg's misgivings. The MMK was written, I believe, not only as an intellectual challenge to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools of the day, but also as an aid to meditation and a means to enlightenment - the realization of *śūnyatā*.

Garth Mason asserts that traces of yogic mental discipline found in Nāgārjuna's writings testify to the connection between knowledge and mental states, which is an indelible strand of the fabric of Indian thought and culture. Mason contextualizes Yoga as having distinctly pre-Vedic and Vedic origins. The

²⁸ Ruegg D. S., 'On the thesis and assertion in the Mādhyamaka', Contributions on Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy, Vol. 2 1983 p. 239 in Huntington, C. W. Jr., The Emptiness of Emptiness, p. 6

fundamental yogic claim is, significantly, that truth can only be reached by establishing a calm and peaceful mind. Such a state allows for the exploration of the subtle regions of interiority and shifts awareness away from grosser - or sensory-dominated - regions. The MMK, in Mason's opinion, is more than a diatribe against the Sarvastivardins and the Sautrāntikas and goes beyond philosophy to establish preparation for practice or meditation (*bhāva*).²⁹

Mervyn Sprung, in similar fashion, states that the yogic aspect of the MMK establishes a direct relationship between the state of mind and experienced reality. He argues that the Nāgārjunist wise man:

... takes things in their truth. We may describe his way of taking things as 'as if,' but that is for our purposes, not his; the everyday for the yogi could not be 'as if' because there is nothing outside of the middle way for it to be as.³⁰

Gadamer's hermeneutic circle is useful in this regard. Gadamer argues, that rather than meaning being structurally based on the process of imitation, as the traditional Western understanding has relied on for so long (that is the imitation of God by the world, the grounding of the world in the transcendent), meaningful being or world is mimetic, a performative enactment that includes us and hence is always already structured figuratively, at once ideal *and* real. What Gadamer's hermeneutic circle suggests is that interpretation is an interactive conversation, where there is a temporal fusion of horizons between interpreter and 'text' that marks the historicity of consciousness.³¹ In other words, the act of interpreting

29 Mason G., 'Nāgārjuna and Yoga: complexities in origin and tradition', Religion and Theology 4 (1997) pp. 229-241

30 Sprung M. (ed.), The Question of Being, The Pennsylvania State University Press, London, 1978, p. 127

31 Schweiker W., 'Beyond Imitation: Mimetic Praxis in Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida', Journal of Religion 68 (1988) pp. 21-38

takes place between the two poles of the reader's expectation of tradition .en
confronting the text and the subject's entrapment within time.³²

Nāgārjuna's soteriological aim is a non-dualistic way of being in the world, a state of non-clinging in which the mind does not cling to this or that. This results in the end of suffering as there is non-attachment. This is not an 'as if' experience - reality is transformed in the process of meditation into an experience of non-attachment.

F. Tola and C. Dragonetti are in agreement with Mason, Betty³³ and Sprung in placing Nāgārjuna's treatise in the wider context of Indian Yoga. They argue that Yoga was considered in India by the majority of the philosophical and religious schools as a means to reach the knowledge of the Absolute, be it called *Brahman*, *ātman* or *nirvāṇa*. The *Mādhyamika* school, in their opinion, considered that the Buddhist monk, well trained in Yoga, could achieve in the yogic trance, the Absolute conceived by him, the experience of *śūnyatā*.³⁴

While I am rigorously in opposition to Tola and Dragonetti's understanding of *nirvāṇa* and *śūnyatā* as an absolute, I agree that the MMK operated within the wider Indian framework and functioned as an aid or preparation to meditation. The following verse attests to the importance that Nāgārjuna gave to the practice of meditation:

32 Mason G., 'The Impact of Mitra and Varuna on the Development of Śūnyatā in Buddhism', *Nidan*, 8 (1996) pp.34-47

33 Betty L. S., 'Nāgārjuna's masterpiece - logical, mystical, both, or neither?', *Philosophy East & West* 33 (1983), pp. 123-138

34 Tola F. and Dragonetti C., 'Nāgārjuna's Conception of "Voidness" (*Śūnyatā*)', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 9 (1981), pp. 273-282

MMK XVIII: 15 By abandoning, that is not abandoned.
Abandonment occurs through meditation.
Therefore, through the nonexpired
The fruit of action arises.

Nāgārjuna is emphasizing at this point that merely by resolving to abandon attachment one cannot succeed. In fact, the desire to abandon attachment is a form of mental clinging. Just like a beginner cannot win a marathon just by resolving to do so, but needs diligent exercise and practice, so too, only through extensive meditation on the nature of phenomena and on the nature of emptiness (such as occurs in the preceding verses of the MMK) can these mental habits be abandoned. Once the mind has attained non-attachment, the fruit of actions, experienced through a peaceful mind and through abandonment, can be attained.

Nāgārjuna operated within an alien and specific environment, different from the one in which Taylor and the contemporary Western reader find themselves and this explains the structural differences I discuss later. At this point, however, I argue that Nāgārjuna's context, which offered meditational yoga, result in the structural differences that I point out in following chapters. Nāgārjuna's treatise was written for more than one purpose. He was embedded within an Indian milieu, in which he responded to the intellectual concerns and debates of various schools. At the same time, his greater soteriological concern placed him within the wider perspective of Indian Yoga.

Taylor suggests, in a response to a symposium on his book Erring, that:

Inasmuch as deconstructive critics subscribe to a performative view of language, it might not be unreasonable to expect similarities between the practice of deconstruction and certain Buddhist meditative and ritual practices. If silence is not the simple opposite of speech any more than

writing is the mere binary opposite of speaking, the practice of writing could be seen as a form of meditation and the practice of meditation as a form of writing.³⁵

I suggest that Taylor is, in this instance, being glib. Buddhist meditative and ritual practices move, in my understanding, to a soteriological aim, and in Nāgārjuna's case to a non-dual way of being within language and in the world - a liberation from frustration and suffering. If it is this which Taylor ascribes to meditative and ritual practice then his hopes for deconstruction seem stillborn. In a conversation with Seurlemonde on the Internet in 1996 a decade later, he states:

Once having grasped the stakes of deconstruction, it seems impossible to 'move beyond' it. Nor is it possible simply to remain with it. . . . One of the problems that deconstruction constantly faces is to articulate an ethics and a politics. As someone who has spent a good bit of time studying religious and ethical positions, I have never been much impressed by many of the discussions. The force of deconstruction - and it is considerable - is crucial. But what is to be done in the wake of such criticism is often far from clear. This is, I believe, one of the reasons so many followers of Derrida seem unable to do anything other than repeat the deconstructive moves they have mastered. I think that the exploration of so-called cyberspace creates the opportunity for interventions in cultural processes that are radically and politically significant.³⁶

It is not difficult to surmise that Taylor includes himself among the number of Derridean followers. A recent publication, "'Tracking Spirit': Theology as Cultural Critique in America", written after the above conversation, follows once again the deconstructive moves. In this article Taylor suggests the privileging of the liminal or marginal in order to balance the systematic and synthetic operations of traditional 'systematic theologies'. 'Systematic theologies' are not so much wrong,

35 Taylor M. C., 'On Deconstructing 'Theology'', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 54 (1986) p. 553

36 Seurlemonde: *Conversation with Professor Mark C. Taylor*, 1996, 5 pages
<http://www.cas.usf.edu/journal/taylor/taylor.html>

he proposes, as they are incomplete. He concludes that a theology that moves into the margins has the possibility of finding new ways to inspire discourse, which will not only contribute to the critical force of spirit in culture, but also might help revitalize theological disciplines in the academy.³⁷ We find Taylor, once again, as the following chapters will indicate, highlighting the underdog, the deconstructive move *par excellence*.

What is obvious from this article is that deconstruction in Taylor's theological form cannot be compared to Buddhist meditative and ritual practices, as it is clear that the latter serves soteriological aims. Taylor's search is consistently speculative, rather than soteriological. Taylor, a master of the deconstructive moves, is obviously dissatisfied with their results and is looking elsewhere for solutions to suffering; that is to political and cultural processes that he hopes to effect. This outward search is typical of Western solutions to the problem of suffering, in contrast to Eastern trends which tend to internalize and find solutions within. In Nāgārjuna's case this occurs by dissolving the without and the within and then reinstating both in a deontologized form. Taylor's article suggests that deconstruction has not lead him, or the world, to a liberated state or even a satisfactory way of Being. His co-authored book, Imagologies: Media Philosophy,³⁸ written after Erring and nOts, finds him looking ever outwards for new solutions to Being in the post-modern milieu. The divine milieu is substantialized in cyberspace on the Internet. His forever erring nomadic state of Being in a world without centre, posited in Erring, is a place without rest. This restlessness is a characteristic, as I will argue in my final two chapters, of both

³⁷ Taylor M. C., 'Tracking Spirit': Theology as Cultural Critique in America' in Hopkins D. N. & Davaney S. G. (eds.), Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis, Routledge, New York, 1996.

³⁸ Taylor M. C. and Saarinen E., Imagologies: Media Philosophy, Routledge, New York, 1993.

Erring and nOts. This is very different from Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā*, which is also without centre, but is exactly a non-dual place of rest. Once again this points to the distinction that Taylor, in Erring and nOts, advocates a solution still in the making, a conjecture, whereas Nāgārjuna is offering an already tested, though difficult to practice, formula.

The most significant point here is that any lightly considered statement that deconstruction can be compared to Buddhist meditational practice ignores the fact that Nāgārjuna was accessing meditational practices that had had thousands of years of refinement before he composed the MMK. If deconstruction was indeed a meditational practice it would be a mere babe, a toddler's attempt. The philosophical context in which Taylor places himself largely concentrates on understanding the world rather than refining ways of Being in it. If Taylor's loosely attached afterthought that deconstruction is a meditational form is taken seriously, then his disillusionment would suggest either a lack of practice or a flawed system. I suggest the latter is the case.

Unlike Nāgārjuna, who worked firmly within the Buddhist framework of the Four Noble Truths, deconstructionists such as Derrida and Taylor, Mason points out, suspect the integrity of tradition. They see mimesis as the will to domination and drive for presence. Mason suggests that the tendency to suspect the integrity of tradition tends to vitiate the importance of history. So, for instance, in nOts, Mason notes that Taylor makes reference to Nāgārjuna while describing Keiji Nishitani's circuminsession theory, by arguing that Nishitani 'reads Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world through Nāgārjuna's notion of co-dependent origination'. The establishment of a connection between twentieth-century Zen with second-century Mādhyamika suggests, Mason argues, a homogeneous a-

historical understanding of *śūnyatā* when, in fact, Nishitani and Nāgārjuna, separated by time and culture, have very different explications of the term.³⁹

This a/historical tendency allows Taylor to suggest:

As Altizer and Prabhu note, one of the richest points of contact can be found in the intersection of a deconstructed Christianity and Buddhism. More specifically, certain aspects of Derridean deconstruction bear a significant similarity to the form of Mādhyamaka Buddhism, or 'the *Middle Way*,' developed by Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna's attack on the entitative theory of existence (*bhāva*) by means of the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) closely resembles Derrida's criticism of the principle of identity through the notion of *différance*. Furthermore, if viewed in terms of 'codependent origination' (*pratītyasamutpāda*), *śūnyatā* approaches 'the non-original origin' that I have reinterpreted in terms of the divine milieu.⁴⁰

I suggest that, while there are certain resemblances between the two systems represented by Nāgārjuna and Taylor (for instance their deconstruction of identity, unity, and oneness), their separate cultural heritages allow for different conditions of possibility. Praxis and eight hundred years of culminated ruminations about the implications of the *anātman* doctrines (asserted by the Buddha) differentiate Nāgārjuna from Taylor. The pragmatism and praxis found in their systems are aimed toward different goals. One aims at an ethical thought system and a way of thinking about God in a post-modern Western world, the other at the experience, and consequential way of life, of enlightenment - a goal which is common to many Indian philosophies, though taking various forms.

39 Mason G., 'The Impact of Mītra and Varuṇa on the Development of *Śūnyatā* in Buddhism', *Nidan*, 8 (1996), pp. 34-47

40 Taylor M. G., 'Masking Domino Effect' p. 553

I argue in my third chapter, 'Hegel Nietzsche and Kierkegaard - their impact on Taylor's deconstruction in Erring and Not', that Taylor continues to mourn the loss of an original unity, an Eden before the Fall, while denying at the same time that there ever was such a unity or Eden. The Western mythology and ideational forms of presence and unity haunt him and leave him unable to cross over the Cartesian threshold to cure himself. Eight hundred years of a living *anātma* tradition with a founding spiritual leader to guide him (the Buddha) leaves Nāgārjuna unwounded and without loss. His traditional mythological structures were embedded within the Buddhist Four Noble Truths which advocate impermanence and no-soul. Nāgārjuna was not going against a two-thousand year old bias towards identity, unity and presence, as Taylor attempts to do. Nāgārjuna was confidently immersed in the Buddhist *śaśa* world view while Taylor remains reactive.

CHAPTER TWO

2. NĀGĀRJUNA'S DOCTRINE OF THE TWOFOLD TRUTHS

2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TWOFOLD TRUTHS

2.1.1 *The twofold truths as a key to Nāgārjuna's treatise*

An understanding of the doctrine of the two truths is the basis from which any insight into Nāgārjuna's MMK is gained. It is the springboard from which to understand Nāgārjuna's wisdom. Nāgārjuna was aware that misunderstandings of the relation between the two truths would occur. Rational thought tends to cling to one or other truth, and therefore Nāgārjuna expected that the intricate relationship between the two truths would be distorted. He saw it as his task to make clear this co-relative, non-dual relationship, for he was aware that misunderstanding could lead to the extremes of essentialism or nihilism. He wrote:

MMK XXIV: 11 By a misperception of emptiness
 A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
 Like a snake incorrectly seized
 Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

The non-dualistic realization of *śūnyatā* liberated the practitioner from suffering caused by clinging to either side of the twofold truth. To misunderstand would, therefore, result in more suffering, hence the danger of misperception. Just how these two truths are connected, Garfield states, and how we are to understand

them simultaneously, is the central problem of Mādhyamika epistemology and metaphysics, and from the standpoint of Mādhyamika, a satisfactory solution is essential for Buddhist soteriological practice and ethics.¹ It is this solution that differentiates Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* from Taylor's deconstructive attempts at emptiness.

2.1.2 *The necessity of distinguishing the two truths*

Nāgārjuna clearly states that there are two truths that need to be distinguished on the 'middle path', a conventional one and an ultimate one. Nāgārjuna emphasizes that there *is* this distinction to be made.

MMK XXIV: 8 The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.

Nāgārjuna stresses the necessity of acknowledging and understanding these two truths:

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

What should be noted, Garfield points out, is that both are *truths*, and that they are introduced as distinct.² The implication is that conventional truth is un-

¹ Garfield J. L., (trans.), *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 275

² Ibid., p. 296

intuitively and paradoxically no less true than ultimate truth. These truths, treated here as distinct, are later revealed in a subtle and masterly twist as identified and in fact identical - the movement is therefore one of recognition and then of re-recognition. Garfield translates the terms as 'truth of worldly convention' (*saṃvṛti-satya*), denoting a truth dependent upon tacit agreement, an everyday truth, a truth about things as they appear to accurate ordinary investigation and as judged by appropriate human standards; and 'ultimate truth' (*paramārtha-satya*), denoting the way things are independent of convention or, Garfield expounds, the way things turn out to be when they are subjected to analysis with the intention of discovering the nature they have from their own side, as opposed to the characteristics we impute to them.³

The goal of Mādhyamika philosophy is (contrary to Nāgārjuna's opponent's analysis of his stance) a continuance and reinforcement of the Buddha's mission - liberation from suffering caused by mental clinging:

MMK XXIV: 10. 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.

But this liberation can only be achieved, in Nāgārjuna's view, by insight into the ultimate nature of things, their emptiness or devoidness, that is their no-self-ness (*asat*), as well as the insight into the distinction between, and the relation of, the two truths. The doctrine of the twofold truths makes it clear that there is a conventional world of dependently arisen objects with properties including selves, and their properties and relations. In this conventional world there is

³ Ibid., pp. 297-8

conventional truth: The sun shines, grass is green, good and evil can be judged, people exist as individuals and they claim property rights. But there is also an ultimate truth about this world: It is empty of inherent existence. None of these objects or persons exists from their own side (independently of convention). From the ultimate point of view there are no individual objects or relations (as relation implies two or more objects) between them.

While Nāgārjuna emphasized the distinction of the two truths, he was well aware that the conventional world of things, people and their relationships presupposed a need for value and ethics as well as religious practice with its belief systems, supportive teachers and communities. Once the nature of these distinct entities were emptied, the *obvious* result would be the dissolution of ethics and values, as well as the dissolution of the religious community - hence a nihilistic and heretic reading of his message would seem inevitable.

Nāgārjuna tackles the charge of nihilism from its own side. He begins chapter XXIV, 'Examination of the Four Noble Truths', by exploring the consequences of a nihilistic interpretation of his thesis. We must emphasize here that Nāgārjuna was aware that his opponent would understand emptiness as the non-existence of conventional reality. He mimics the charge of his opponent:

MMK XXIV: 1 If all this is empty,
 Neither arising, nor ceasing,
 Then for you, it follows that
 The Four Noble Truths do not exist.

Nāgārjuna allows his opponent to claim that if the entire phenomenal world were empty, nothing would exist, including the fundamental tenets of Buddhism: The Four Noble Truths. Magliola explains that this understanding of emptiness as non-

conventional truth: The sun shines, grass is green, good and evil can be judged, people exist as individuals and they claim property rights. But there is also an ultimate truth about this world: It is empty of inherent existence. None of these objects or persons exists from their own side (independently of convention). From the ultimate point of view there are no individual objects or relations (as relation implies two or more objects) between them.

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existence would entail the absence of *dharm*a-entities and the absence of entitative causality - entitative causality is seen by the opponent as the necessary process whereby 'production' and 'destruction' occur.⁴

The Four Noble Truths are: (1) All life in cyclic existence is suffering; (2) There is a cause of this suffering, namely, craving caused by ignorance; (3) There is a release from suffering; (4) The path to that release is the eightfold Buddhist path of right view, right concentration, right mindfulness, right speech, right effort, right action, right morality and right livelihood.⁵

The Four Noble truths are the most basic tenets expressing the Buddha's theory of craving and release from craving and suffering caused by ignorance. They are interpreted by Nāgārjuna's opponent in terms of entitative causality, that is that a thing or self or mental construction causes effects upon another thing or self or mental construction - for instance the second noble truth that craving causes suffering is set up in terms of cause 'craving' and effect 'suffering'. In these terms a consequence of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness is that the Four Noble Truths are - like other phenomena and views treated by Nāgārjuna previously in the treatise - deconstructed. When Nāgārjuna asserts *śūnyatā*, and thereby rejects causality, the opponent argues, he renounces in the process the fundamental philosophical tenets of Buddhism. The opponent continues to unravel the consequence of this renunciation of the keystone of the Buddha's teaching:

MMK XXIV: 2, If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
 Then knowledge, abandonment,
 Meditation, and manifestation

⁴ Magliola R. R., Derrida on the Mend, p. 113

⁵ Garfield J. L., (trans.), The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, p. 294

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Will be completely impossible.

MMK XXIV: 3. If these things do not exist,
The four fruits will not arise.
Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.
Nor will there be the faithful

MMK XXIV: 4. If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
Nor will the eight kinds of person.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
There will be no true Dharma.

MMK XXIV: 5. If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
How can there be a Buddha
If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The three jewels are contradicted

The non-existence of the Four Noble Truths, in other words, entails the non-existence of the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Dharma, the Buddha and the Sangha. The whole point of the Three Jewels is to make it possible to attain buddhahood. The Dharma provides the philosophical insight and knowledge necessary for enlightenment; and the Sangha provides the teachers, the encouragement, the models, the opportunity for practice and other support necessary for the strenuous practice of the path. The attainment of buddhahood requires reliance on these two. It follows that if they are rejected so is the possibility of buddhahood. The opponent is charging Nāgārjuna with undermining the entire Buddhist enterprise. He concludes:

MMK XXIV: 6 Hence you assert that there are no real fruits,
And no Dharma. The Dharma itself
And the conventional truth
Will be contradicted.

The Four Noble Truths, preached by the Buddha in his first teaching after gaining enlightenment, are the fundamental philosophical tenets of Buddhism. If it were a consequence of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness that the Four Noble Truths were false or, more radically, non-existent, Garfield notes, that would constitute in this philosophical context an immediate refutation of the Buddhist position. At another point Garfield suggests that the implicit dilemma with which Nāgārjuna confronts himself (for it is, of course, Nāgārjuna who states the opponent's position) is elegant. The distinction between the two truths or two vantage points - the ultimate and the conventional - is fundamental to his own method. So when the opponent charges that the assertion of the non-existence of such things as the Four Noble Truths and of the arising, abiding, and ceasing of entities is contradictory both to conventional wisdom and to the ultimate truth, Nāgārjuna is forced to defend himself on both fronts and to comment on the connection between these standpoints.⁶

2.2 THE OPPONENT'S MISTAKES

2.2.1 *Nibilism*

Having explored his opponent's viewpoint, which at the same time reveals that he is well aware of the extent of the opponent's attack, Nāgārjuna replies that the opponent has missed the point entirely:

MMK XXIV: 7 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.

⁶ Ibid., p. 296

Author Dixie H *

Name of thesis In Search Of A Middle Way A Comparison Of Nagarjuna'S Method, Prasanga, And Mark Taylor'S Deconstructive System Dixie H * 1998

PUBLISHER:

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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