

On the Self-Undoing of Madhyamaka Philosophy

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The higher truth, for the wise, is a matter of silence

~ Candrakīrti

0 Introduction

The 2nd Century Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna is the widely regarded as the most significant Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha himself. The core doctrine of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka ("middle way") philosophy, insofar as there can be said to be a "core doctrine" at all, is that of "emptiness" (śūnyatā). Yet, while there is widespread agreement among contemporary commentators about what this term conventionally signifies, there is no consensus as to what it is in which the doctrine expressed by it ultimately consists. The peculiar feature of this "doctrine" is that, when we really try to spell it out, it seems to undermine or "undo" itself. That, Nāgārjuna seems to suggest, is precisely the point:

Emptiness is taught by the conquerers as the expedient to get
rid of all views
But those for whom emptiness is a view have been called
incurable, (XIII.8)

Such statements (and there are several of them) seem critical to understanding Nāgārjuna's basic philosophical project. The vast majority of contemporary readings, however, systematically fail to do them justice, all qualifying "view" in some way so as to exclude emptiness, properly understood, as among the class of things to get rid of. On such readings, emptiness is, at the end of the day, some determinate philosophical position to be held onto. In this paper, I propose an alternate reading, one according to which the true doctrine of emptiness really is one that undoes itself, and so, at the end of the day, there is no doctrine at all onto which one could possibly hold. Though I am not aware of anyone articulating this reading quite as I do here, I do not claim that this is a novel reading.¹ My main aim here, however, is not merely to advance some particular reading to be placed alongside the others, but, rather, to advance a reading that catches the others in its net, such that, in undoing itself, it undoes them too.

Here's the plan for the paper. In Section One, I lay out three readings of the doctrine of "emptiness" that can be found in the contemporary literature: metaphysical readings, epistemological readings, and semantic readings. I lay out fundamental philosophical problems facing both metaphysical and epistemological readings, holding off a critical discussion of the semantic reading for what follows. Then, in Section Two, I introduce the basic exegetical puzzle regarding Nāgārjuna's apparent rejection of all philosophical views, even that of emptiness, and I propose that we at least try to read Nāgārjuna "resolutely," taking it that he really means what he seems to say in saying the words that he does. In Section

¹Given the rejection of the thesis thesis and what might be classified as a "therapeutic" reading (Arnold, 2006), one might think that C.W. Huntington (1989, 2007) is a close comparison, but, as I note below, there is actually quite a far gap between the reading developed here and that put forward by Huntington which situates Nāgārjuna as necessarily opposed to the sort of analytic reconstruction I develop here. As I also note below, Smith (2021) has recently pointed out the possibility of the sort of reading I develop here, though he does not actually develop a reading of the text. See also Smith for a comparison of this sort of reading with that proposed by Gandolfo (2016), with which the sort of reading advanced here has definite similarities.

Three, I put forward the basic reading according to which Nāgārjuna’s apparent doctrine of “emptiness” really is *empty* in the sense of lacking semantic content. Thus, there simply is no view of “emptiness” that one could possibly hold. In a very brief Section Four, I provide a new resolute reading of the famous Zen aphorism about mountains just being mountains. In Section Five, I conclude.

1 Three Readings of Emptiness

There are, as I’ll carve things up here, three main kinds of readings into which the vast majority of views on emptiness in the contemporary literature can be sorted.² First, there are *metaphysical* readings which maintain that Nāgārjuna is putting forward a metaphysical thesis about the nature of ultimate reality. Second, there are *epistemological* readings which maintain that Nāgārjuna is instead putting forward a epistemological thesis concerning the justification we might have for any claim about ultimate reality. Finally, there are *semantic* readings which maintain that Nāgārjuna is principally concerned to put forward a semantic thesis about the coherence of the very notion of ultimate reality. Though I take this categorization to be relatively exhaustive of the views in the secondary literature, I don’t take it that all commentators to fall neatly into one of the three categories articulated here. It is easy to slip from one reading to another, and many commentators are prone to such slippage. Indeed, as we’ll see below, one particularly slippery contemporary commentator—Jay Garfield—can be seen as occupying all three categories at various points and with different co-authors. Still, these three sorts of views, are,

²I focus on contemporary—and, in particular, analytic—commentaries here, putting to the side (at least for the most part) the extensive commentarial tradition in India by commentators such as Bhāviveka, Buddhapālita, and Candrakīrti as well the extensive commentarial tradition in Tibet by commentators such as Tsonkhapa and Gorampa. The question of how exactly to classify these classical commentaries according to this schema, and whether any of them can be viewed as in line with the alternative I endorse, is not addressed here.

I take it, conceptually distinct. Let me explicate each of them in turn.

1.1 Metaphysical Readings

A metaphysical reading is, in some sense, the most straightforward reading Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, proceeding directly from what the text simply says and taking it more or less at face value. It's clear that, in the first instance, it is *things* that are empty, and what they are empty *of*—what they lack—is inherent existence, intrinsic nature, or “own-being” (svabhāva). It's also clear that the classical Buddhist distinction between “two truths,” a “conventional truth and an ultimate truth” (XXIV.8), is somehow essential to an understanding of the position of emptiness. Conventionally, there seem to be such things such things as tables and chairs, tigers and trees, people, and so on, which have a kind of independent existence. This apparent independent existence, however, is a product of a process of linguistic and conceptual hypostatization or reification (prapañca), whereby, without being fully conscious that what it is that we're doing, we *reify* our modes of speaking and thinking, crystallizing these subjective modes into what we take to be objective entities: things in the world that are what they are independent of our speaking and thinking. The things we generally take to exist in everyday life—tables, tigers, people, and so on—all fall within this category. Though they surely can be said to “exist independently” in an ordinary sense of the term, they don't *really* exist independently; this apparent independence, inherent existence, or “own being” is a product only of our linguistic and conceptual reification. On a metaphysical reading, Nāgārjuna's basic philosophical claim is that nothing has the sort of inherent existence we're naturally inclined to take things to have. Ultimately, there is nothing that is truly independent, existing in and of itself, but only things that are dependent, existing in dependence on causes and conditions, where these causes and conditions essentially include our own linguistic and conceptual conventions. Emptiness thus

seems to be a metaphysical view about the ultimate nature of things: their lacking inherent existence. Indeed, as Nāgārjuna seems to say in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXIV.18, it is the *same* view as dependent origination; the former characterizes phenomena *negatively*, in terms of how they *don't* exist (inherently), and the latter characterizes phenomena *positively*, in terms of how they *do* exist (dependently).

There are a range of ways to spell out a metaphysical view along these lines.³ Still, however one characterizes what it is for things to be empty, a metaphysical view of this general sort faces a basic philosophical problem. On such a view, Nāgārjuna's basic metaphysical thesis is that nothing has an intrinsic essential nature; whatever being things can be said to have is always dependent, both on other things and our linguistic and conceptual conventions. It seems, however, that having *this* kind of being—being dependently originated and so empty—is to have

³In spelling the position out, one clearly needs to avoid attributing to Nāgārjuna a metaphysical position he explicitly rejects, namely, *nihilism*, according to which nothing at all is real (though some metaphysical interpreters such as Wood (1994) have endorsed nihilistic interpretations). Metaphysical readers thus tend to put the thesis as one of universal metaphysical relationalism or anti-foundationalism. On the first sort of metaphysical reading, ultimate reality is an “interdependent realm of essenceless relata” (Garfield 1996, 65), where nothing exists in and of itself and all that exists “does so inasmuch as, and only inasmuch as, it relates to other things,” (Priest 2009, 467). Summing up this relationalist view of emptiness, Graham Priest (2009) says “To be empty is to exist only as the locus in a field of relations,” and he goes on to give a mathematical specification of what it is to exist in this way. Westerhoff (2017) suggests we might alternately try to spell out this sort of relationalism along the lines of the “ontic structural realist” view proposed by Ladyman and Ross (2010). The second kind of metaphysical reading—not incompatible with the first (perhaps a necessary compliment to the first)—focuses less on the relationality of things as such and more on the structure of the metaphysical relations that things bear to one another, spelling out emptiness as a kind of metaphysical anti-foundationalism. On such a reading, to conceive of something as having *svabhāva* is to take it to be metaphysically foundational in the sense that we are supposed to be able to appeal to it in order to explain the existence of other things but which itself does not metaphysically depend on anything else. Emptiness, the universal rejection of *svabhāva*, is the view that nothing is metaphysically foundational in this sense; everything is metaphysically dependent on other things. There are different ways to hold such a view, with versions of metaphysical infinitism (Priest and Bliss 2014), coherentism (Arnold 2012, 2019), and what Alison Aitken (2021) calls “indefinitism” proposed in the literature.

just the sort of intrinsic essential nature that a metaphysical reading is committed to denying.⁴ Spelling this out just a bit, the idea that emptiness is essentially the nature of things is directly tied to the claim that the emptiness of all things is indeed a metaphysical position, and thus has the modal force characteristic of such positions: necessity. This fact contrasts the emptiness of all things with, for instance, the “tableness” of some things. The existence of tables can be understood as “merely conventional” in virtue of the fact that certain changes in our modes of speaking and thinking would result in a conceptual scheme devoid of tables, and, in such a case, nothing would have the property of being a table. In the case of emptiness, however, admitting such contingency would amount to thinking that, if we were to change our modes of speaking and thinking, this would result in a case in which things lacked the property of emptiness and so possessed inherent existence, being what they are independent of our modes of speaking and thinking. That can’t be the case given the metaphysical thesis of emptiness, and so emptiness must not be a merely conventional, contingent nature of things but, rather, the ultimate, essential nature of things. But that is what is necessarily ruled out by the metaphysical thesis of emptiness. Emptiness, as a metaphysical doctrine, seems to undermine itself.

An initial response to this problem, suggested by Jay Garfield (1994), is to insist that nothing has an essential nature of emptiness because nothing essentially exists. So, while every phenomenon that exists is empty and could not be otherwise than empty, it’d be wrong to say that any phenomena is “essentially empty” in a problematic sense, since no phenomenon is essentially existent. The emptiness of tables, for instance, depends on the existence of tables, since, without tables, there can be no emptiness of them. Since tables are only conventionally existent, depen-

⁴Though I present this simply as a philosophical problem, as is standard in the literature, it is not hard to articulate this as exegetical problem, pulling an argument from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* itself that makes this point. See, in particular, the refutation of the intrinsic nature of the dhātus in V.

dent on conditions and conventions, the emptiness of tables is likewise merely conventional, dependent on just those conditions and conventions on virtue of which tables can be counted as conventionally existent. Likewise for emptiness of anything else. In general, whenever we speak of “emptiness,” we’re at least implicitly speaking of the emptiness of whatever is conventionally existent, and, since whatever is conventionally existent is just that—conventionally existent—so too is emptiness. That, on this reading, is what it is for emptiness to be empty. However, while this response may work for the emptiness of particular conventional existents, it’s hard to see how it could work for the emptiness of conventional reality as a whole. A metaphysical reading is clearly committed to the claim that the *whole network of conventional existents* is such that the nodes of that network have the kind of reality that conventional existents have, and this fact, about the network of conventional existents as a whole, whatever they are, seems to characterize its intrinsic nature. However the conventional existents change (and change they can and do), that nature of the network as a whole does not. The network, it seems, has an essential intrinsic nature. But if all things are really empty, that’s just what it can’t have. The basic problem remains unresolved.

A more radical response to this problem, proposed by Garfield and Priest (2003), is to claim that, on Nāgārjuna’s view, ultimate reality is contradictory: reality both has the essential nature of emptiness and does not have it, lacking any essential nature.⁵ The fact that such a response to apparent contradiction is a genuine theoretical possibility is largely owed to Priest himself, who has done more than anyone to show that there need not be anything incoherent about admitting contradictions; there are perfectly tractable paraconsistent logics that don’t admit the classical principle of *ex falso quodlibet*, according to which anything follows

⁵See also Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2008). It’s not clear, from reading Garfield’s work, whether he changed his mind in dealing with this sort of problem or if the two different sorts of responses are responses to two different incarnations of the problem, as I have laid out the dialectic here.

from a contradiction.⁶ Garfield and Priest take themselves to be able to maintain, therefore, that Nāgārjuna’s view is *contradictory*, without thereby being *incoherent* in a problematic sense.⁷ Perhaps, ultimately, this is the position to which a metaphysical reader is forced. It is hard, however, to maintain such a position. Indeed, as I reflect on what it is that Garfield and Priest want me to do, maintaining that ultimate reality both *does* and *does not* have an intrinsic nature, I find that what they want me to do seems downright impossible.⁸ Rather than being able to maintain both contradictory propositions at once, I find myself going in a circle from one to the other. I suppose first ultimate reality does have an intrinsic nature, that of emptiness. To have the nature of emptiness is to lack any intrinsic nature. In that case, ultimate reality doesn’t have any intrinsic nature—not even that of emptiness. Rather than being able to hold this negative conclusion in conjunction with the positive supposition that I originally made, this negative conclusion that I come to in thinking through what emptiness is seems to *undo* the positive supposition of emptiness that I had originally made.⁹ Now, this is simply a report about what I find when I reflect on my attempt to adopt the sort of position that Garfield and Priest want me to adopt, not an argument against Garfield and Priest’s

⁶See especially Priest (2006a). It’s worth being clear that I do not intend to be discouraging the development of paraconsistent logics in the remarks that follow; it is just dialetheism that I find unbelievable.

⁷Of course, in one sense of “incoherent,” any view that is contradictory is incoherent; the two contradictory claims fail to cohere with each other. The problematic sense of “incoherent” whose applicability to Nagarjuna’s view is denied is a sense that more closely resembles that of “nonsensical.”

⁸Several authors, perhaps most notably Eric Marcus (2021), have recently argued that clear-mindedly believing the conjunction of a proposition and its negation (“unclouded by distraction, repression, etc”) is indeed metaphysically impossible (Marcus, 107). See also Kimhi (2021) and Rödl (2018) for claims of this sort.

⁹This is just how I find things in the case of the liar sentence (“This sentence is false”) to which Priest also influentially endorses this dialetheist approach. I suppose first that it’s true. This then brings me to the conclusion that it’s false, and so it can’t be true. This negative conclusion that I come to in reasoning about what it is for the sentence to be true undoes my original supposition that it is true. Here too, I find myself going in circles rather than being able to steadfastly maintain that it is both true and it is not true.

view.¹⁰ I suspect, however, that many will find this view unbelievable in just the way I have described—not in the sense that they will simply find it exegetically or philosophically implausible, but in the sense that they will find themselves literally incapable of believing it, try as they might.

1.2 Epistemological Readings

Given the problems that come with taking emptiness to be a metaphysical view, many commentators prefer to reject the claim that Nāgārjuna puts forward any metaphysical view at all. If that's so, what sort of view could emptiness be? One obvious candidate answer to this question is to say that Nāgārjuna's philosophical position is really an *epistemological* one. On an epistemological reading, Nāgārjuna is not putting forward a positive or negative metaphysical thesis on the nature of ultimate reality, but, rather, maintaining a purely negative epistemological thesis concerning the putting forward of either positive or negative metaphysical theses regarding the nature of ultimate reality. Among primarily Western philosophical audiences, epistemological readings often get their footing from a comparison of Nāgārjuna with the Ancient Greek skepticism, exemplified by Sextus Empiricus. In a recent monograph defending the skepticism of Sextus, Alan Bailey (2009) puts the Ancient skeptical position as "The view that no claim is rationally preferable to its contradictory" (9), and it is clear how one can read Nāgārjuna in an epistemological manner as holding just such a skeptical view with respect to claims about ultimate reality. Indeed, his arguments often take the form of showing that, for

¹⁰If I were to construe it as an argument, the point would be that for any proposition p , to think p is to adopt a *positive* attitude towards p , one of acceptance. To think *not- p* , on the other hand, is to adopt a *negative* attitude towards p , one of rejection. These two attitudes are, as Kimhi (2021) would put it, "psycho-logically" impossible. Priest's (2006b) response to this sort of argument, is to reject the claim that affirming the negation of some proposition entails rejecting that proposition. I find that I lose my grip on what the meaning of negation even is if I try to disentangle negation from rejection, but pressing this point against Priest and Garfield would involve getting into hairy issues in the metaphysics of belief, and I don't intend to get into these metaphysical tangles here.

any position about ultimate reality that one might take, that position, it's negation, both, and neither are all unacceptable. One can see the application of this methodology as yielding a purely negative epistemological position regarding claims about ultimate reality.

One recent articulation of an epistemological reading of Nāgārjuna, drawing on this comparison, comes from George Dreyfus and Jay Garfield (2021).¹¹ Dreyfus and Garfield contrast this sort of reading with a metaphysical reading as follows:

“[O]n a more skeptical [than metaphysical] interpretation, we might think that this realization [that things lack *svabhāva*] can never be cashed out as a definitive understanding of how things really are. When we look for how things are, we always come up empty. We can never reach their true nature.” (6).

At least so described, the negativity of Nāgārjuna's position is of a solely epistemological rather than metaphysical sort; the position is not that things definitively lack a true nature, but, rather, that no definitive position on the true nature of things can ever be reached. Dreyfus and Garfield go on to say,

“All what we can do is to use various formulations that will help us to relinquish the instinctive commitment to the idea that there must be a way that things really are,” (6).

Importantly, on this sort of reading, relinquishing the commitment to the claim that there *is* a way things really are does not amount to undertaking the contradictory commitment that there *is no* way things really are. Rather, one is to withhold commitment and put nothing in its place. This reading thus ends up yielding a position of *suspension of judgment*, where one holds no position, affirmative or negative, towards any claim about the nature of ultimate reality, including the claim that ultimate reality

¹¹I choose this piece as a representative example of an epistemological view, but see also, for instance, Mitail (2005, 113-132).

does or doesn't have a nature.¹²

Truly epistemological readings of this sort, however, are hard to maintain. In an influential comparison of Madhyamaka philosophy and Ancient skepticism thirty years prior, Garfield articulates the relevant notion of suspension of judgment as follows:

“To suspend judgment in this sense is to refuse to assent to a position, while refusing to assert its negation, since either assertion would commit one to a false or misleading metaphysical presupposition. To suspend judgment is hence to refuse to enter into a misguided discourse,” (Garfield 1990, 290-291).

Here, Garfield implies the “suspension” involves more than the merely negative epistemological stance that we can't reach the true nature of things; it involves the positive stance that the discourse in the context of which the question about the true nature of things is posed is misguided. In this case, however, speaking of “suspending judgment” with respect to a question is a somewhat misleading. If a question is simply confused, misguided, or based on a false presupposition, the correct response to it is not to “suspend judgment.” To take a mundane and familiar example of presupposition failure, if you ask me whether the King of France is bald, I will refuse to assent to an affirmative or negative answer, but it would be quite odd to say that the attitude I take with respect to this question is “suspension of judgment.”¹³ There is nothing here with respect to which

¹²Formally speaking, this is an equally legitimate response to paradox as the paraconsistent approach advanced by Priest, aligning more with the *non-transitive* approach to semantic paradoxes like the liar (Ripley 2013). Spelling this out a bit, let ϵ be the claim that things are ultimately empty. Whereas the paraconsistent approach has us assert ϵ and $\neg\epsilon$, the non-transitive approach will have us neither assert ϵ nor deny ϵ . Formally, we can say this and maintain classical logic by interpreting the logical turnstile as expressing that affirming all the sentences on the left and denying all the sentences on the right is “out of bounds” (See Restall 2005). Thus, we have $\epsilon \vdash$, meaning that affirming ϵ is out of bounds, and $\vdash \epsilon$, meaning that denying ϵ is out of bounds, but because we deny the Cut rule, we don't have \vdash , that the empty position is out of bounds, which, with the structural rule of Weakening, would yield explosion.

¹³I assume a Fregean rather than Russellian account of definite descriptions here, just

I am suspending judgment. I know there is no king of France, and so I know there is no answer, positive or negative, to this question; it's based on a mistaken assumption. Recognizing this implication brings us to the third kind of reading.

1.3 Semantic Readings

Many commentators have wanted to say something more than what the purely negative epistemological reading, yet without maintaining a positive metaphysical thesis. This brings us to the *semantic* reading, according to which the reason that one should not take no position towards any claim about the nature of ultimate reality is that the very notion of ultimate reality is incoherent.¹⁴ As Garfield (1996) puts the position, contrasting it with the wholly negative epistemological view characterized above,

“[T]he fundamental philosophical error is to propose a characterization of the nature of things. This is so [. . .] not because the nature of things is elusive but because there is no nature of things—because the very concept of an essence is itself incoherent,” (49).

Mark Siderits famously puts this thought with the following seemingly paradoxical dictum: “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth,” (Siderits 1989, 231). Though more metaphysically minded readers might interpret this dictum along the lines of Garfield and Priest (2003), Siderits has a more modest reading in mind. Though, on its face, this dictum seems paradoxical, Siderits (2003) resolves the apparent paradoxicality by disambiguating two senses of “ultimate truth.” The sense of “ultimate truth” that the Madhyamaka maintains is coherent and, indeed, exists, is “the truth that brings about liberation” whereas the sense of “ultimate

for the purpose of the example, but if you think, with Russell, the sentence “the King of France is bald” is straightforwardly false, modify the example accordingly.

¹⁴

truth” that the Madhyamaka denies the existence or even coherence is that of the nature of reality independent of mental and linguistic conventions (13). Thus, the dictum expresses the thought that liberation is achieved through recognition of the fact that the very notion of “ultimate truth” is incoherent; conventional truth is the only kind of truth that there is or could possibly be.

It is, ultimately, semantic readings that I am principally concerned to reject here, and the grounds on which I’ll reject such readings are principally philosophical grounds. Before doing that, however, let me introduce the intertwined exegetical problem that will provide some textual motivation for the philosophical grounds on which I’ll reject the semantic reading.

2 The Thesis Thesis and Its Opposite

Metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic readings of emptiness, different as they are, all have some fundamental element in common. All three views take it that Nāgārjuna holds some philosophical thesis concerning ultimate reality. That is, they all are committed to *some* form of what I’ll call the “(philosophical) thesis thesis,” the claim that Nāgārjuna maintains some philosophical thesis regarding ultimate reality, be it metaphysical thesis, an epistemological thesis, or a semantic thesis.¹⁵ At the end of the day, we’re supposed to come away from *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* with some sort of philosophical thesis that we are able to hold. It is clear, of course, that metaphysical readings maintain the thesis thesis. Likewise, epistemological readings, as I have spelled them out here, maintain that there *is* something that is ultimate reality but that we can have no justified position on it, since no position can be rationally preferred to its contradictory. That semantic readings are committed to the thesis thesis is perhaps less clear. Still, existing semantic readings generally sum up

¹⁵I henceforth suppress the parenthetical “philosophical.”

the position with a determinate philosophical thesis. For instance, one common way to put the philosophical thesis that is maintained through a semantic reading is by saying that “there is only conventional truth,” (Siderits 2003, 13), or, to put the same point negatively, that “the very idea of how things really are, independently of our (useful) semantic and cognitive conventions, is incoherent,” (Siderits and Katsura 2013).

So, the vast majority of contemporary readings are committed to the thesis thesis. The problem is that Nāgārjuna seems to reject it.¹⁶ Considering first just the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, he seems to reject the thesis thesis in verse XIII.8:

Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get
rid of all views
But those for whom emptiness is a view have been called
incurable, (XIII.8)

He then echos the same rejection of the thesis thesis in the concluding verse of the treatise:

I salute Gautama, who, based on compassion, taught the true
Dharma for the abandonment of all views (XXVII.30)

Now, the Sanskrit word that gets translated as “view” here is *dr̥ṣṭi* which comes from the root *dr̥ś*, meaning *to see*. So, though “view” here is used to express the having of a philosophical position, the visual flavor of the word that is present in English is present in the Sanskrit as well. A view is a way of seeing things, a vision of how things are. Emptiness, on a metaphysical reading, clearly must be such a view—a view of all things as dependently arising—and metaphysical readers, for instance, in the Tibetan tradition, speak of insight into emptiness as a kind of “special seeing” (Napper 1989, 20). Non-metaphysical readers might think that their view (or, better, thesis or position) is not in question on

¹⁶See Ruegg (2000, 105-232) for the most extensive discussion of the sorts of passages that follow.

these grounds. Yet, in other writings such as the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and the *Yuktiśaṣṭikākārikā*, Nāgārjuna's also rejects holding any thesis (pratijñā) or position:

If I had some thesis, the defect would as a consequence attach to me. But I have no thesis, so this defect is not applicable to me (VV 29, Westerhoff 29).

Great souls are beyond dispute,
They assume no position.
For those who have no position,
How can there be any opposition? (YŚ 50, Loizzo 125)

The idea that the Madhyamika holds no position is emphasized repeatedly by Nāgārjuna's most celebrated commentator, Candrakīrti. Speaking on behalf of Madhyamikas, he says, clearly and explicitly, "we advance no thesis of our own," (Sprung 1979, 38).

These passages present an obvious exegetical difficulty. When you read them—for instance, when you read the one occurring at the end of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* where Nāgārjuna calls for the reader "to get rid of all views"—you're immediately inclined to think, "But you just spent twenty-seven chapters explaining why emptiness was the *correct* view. Clearly, you can't mean that we should get rid of *that* view. *Right?*" What could Nāgārjuna possibly mean here?

This classical response to this issue, most prominently espoused by the 14th century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa and his followers, is to say that speaking of relinquishing "all views" is really just shorthand for relinquishing all *false* views, or, more specifically, all views according to which things have inherent existence (Tsongkhapa 2006, Napper 1989, 114-115). The basic exegetical strategy here is to qualify "view" in some way so that the scope of Nāgārjuna's rejection of "all views" excludes the view of emptiness. Though Tsonkhappa is a metaphysical reader, this general exegetical strategy is widely shared by proponents of epistemological and semantic readings alike. For instance, in translating XIII.8 of

the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Siderits and Katsura (2013) write “get rid of all [metaphysical] views,” putting “metaphysical” in brackets to bring out what they take to be implicit in the text: that when Nāgārjuna says that those for whom emptiness is a view are “incurable,” he means, specifically, those for whom emptiness is a *metaphysical* view. On Siderits’s proposal, emptiness is a philosophical view that we should hold onto, but it’s a *semantic* view about the very notion of ultimate truth rather than *metaphysical* view about what the ultimate truth really is.

Westerhoff (2009) take a related though somewhat different line.¹⁷ According to Westerhoff,

What Nāgārjuna means when he says that he “has no thesis” is that none of his theoretical statements (including the claim of universal emptiness) is to be interpreted according to a semantics based on the standard picture, (2009, 198).

The “standard picture” is one that conceives of things as having inherent existence, and a semantics based on this picture is one according to which sentences are made true by combinations of inherently existing objects, properties, and relations. So, to reject the claim that one has a “thesis” or “view” in this sense is to reject the claim that one is putting forward a sentence or proposition that can be made true in this sort of way.¹⁸

Despite the differences, Tsonghappa, Siderits, and Westerhoff all qualify “view” or “thesis” in some way so that the scope of Nāgārjuna’s rejection doesn’t include all philosophical views as such, but only views of a particular sort or views conceived of in a particular way.¹⁹ Given

¹⁷Westerhoff is especially focused on that he has any “thesis” (pratijñā) in verse 29 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. I do take the line Westerhoff provides to be correct for the verses preceding 29, where Nāgārjuna explicitly states that his “speech does not exist substantially,” (28). I take it that Verse 29, however, involves one further turn of the crank, expressing positionlessness proper.

¹⁸Garfield (1996, 2008) proposes a similar characterization, as does Arnold (forthcoming).

¹⁹Another way of attempting to cope with this problem, which I do not consider here, is to maintain that the ultimate metaphysical nature of reality is ineffable—beyond the

the prevalence of seemingly unqualified rejections of views or theses in Nāgārjuna's writings, there is something unsatisfying about these sorts of responses, but most contemporary commentators see no plausible alternative. The opposite of the thesis thesis is, of course, the *no-thesis* thesis, the thesis that Nāgārjuna maintains no philosophical thesis whatsoever. This position is widely regarded by analytic commentators to be so obviously implausible to warrant no more than quick mention and dismissal. For instance, in his commentary on verse 29 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* Westhoff tells us:

Nāgārjuna does not make the obviously false claim that he asserts no theses whatsoever. After all, there are the *Mulamadhyanamakarikā*, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, and so forth, all of which are filled with philosophical theses and thereby contradict this way of understanding Nāgārjuna's verse.

Though I quote Westhoff here, this is a widely shared sentiment. Siderits and Katsura regard "metaphysical" in XXIV.8 as among a class of "words the Sanskrit equivalents of which are not in the original verse itself but without which the verse simply does not make sense."²⁰ It seems that charity simply requires attributing to Nāgārjuna. To reject the thesis thesis, most commentators think, is to plunge into irrationality. The very idea of a *rational* reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's philosophical system simply requires that we attribute to him *some* philosophical theses. Notably, C.W. Huntington Jr. (2007), one of the few commentators who does reject the thesis thesis, accepts this basic conditional, and thus applies *modus tollens*, rejecting the very project of rational reconstruction as an attempt "to force a logical grid over the work of a writer who is so obviously and

reach of language. Thus, when Nāgārjuna claims that emptiness should not be a view, he is expressing the fact that it lies beyond what can be captured in language. It cannot be a view in that sense. Nevertheless, emptiness *is* the ultimate truth about reality and awareness of this truth can be reached but only non-conceptually.

²⁰They don't note that, in doing this, they are ruling out some of the most prominent and influential readings in the interpretative tradition.

profoundly distrustful of logic,” (111). In a now classic reply, Garfield (2008) appeals to the Donald Davidson’s (1984) “principle of charity,” arguing that the attribution of rationality to an author whose text we are interpreting is a “transcendental condition of interpretability,” (516).

Davidsonian charity, however, is not the only kind of interpretative charity that one might deploy in reading a philosopher. James Conant (2020) proposes an alternative: what he calls “Wittgensteinian charity.”²¹ He spells out this distinction as follows:

“Davidsonian historical charity begins by trying to come up with an interpretative scheme that seeks to maximize the number of (what by our lights are) truths uttered by the subject of interpretation; it then works out from there, incorporating as much of what the subject says into its scheme as possible, eventually setting aside the subject’s most puzzling remarks that cannot be incorporated into this scheme as, at best, very poorly expressed and, at worst, false. [. . .] Wittgensteinian historical charity involves starting at the opposite end: with the most puzzling things that the subject seems moved to say, especially if she appears to be deeply attached to saying them; it gradually works out from there to an appreciation of the dialectical situation in which she finds herself—one that allows us to understand why she is moved to say precisely those things in just that way, using exactly those words,” (563-564)

It’s clear how this distinction applies to this case. All of the readings about are, we might say, “irresolute” with respect to the puzzling remarks of Nāgārjuna in which he appears to claim he has no views, wavering in the face of them and qualifying in various ways for the sake of Davidsonian charity, ending up with views according to which these remarks are “at best, poorly expressed and, at worst, false.” The alternative, of course, is a “resolute reading,” one which starts with these most puzzling remarks—

²¹I’m not quite sure why Conant calls this sort of charity “Wittgensteinian.” Of course, as I explain below, this is the kind of charity that is at work in Conant’s reading of Wittgenstein, but Wittgenstein *himself* does not seem to be a practitioner of it, which is what the name suggests.

the remarks that seem, in the words of Westerhoff, “obviously false”—and working out from them to a reading that enables us to understand not only how Nāgārjuna could mean what he says, but, indeed, why he is moved to say just what he does in just the way that he does.

There is, as Joshua William Smith (2021) has recently suggested, a model for reading Nāgārjuna in this sort of way: Conant and Cora Diamond’s “resolute reading” of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.²² A resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is simply a reading in which this method is applied its most puzzling remarks, most notably, the penultimate section 6.54.²³

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense (*unsinn*), when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

Conant and Diamond read Wittgenstein resolutely in, first, taking it that by “nonsense,” he really means *nonsense*—not some sort of quasi-nonsense that somehow still manages to signify, but regular old nonsense—and then working out a reading of the text as a whole from there. On the reading they provide, the *Tractatus*, which apparently aims to picture language as such and its relation and the world—something which turns out to be impossible according to *Tractatus* itself—achieves its true aim only insofar as the appearance of sense that sentences of the work have given rise to dissolves, revealing the work as a whole to be nonsense, just as Wittgenstein says.²⁴ Now, it’s almost impossible to avoid seeing the comparison of this passage of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* to these passages

²²For notable expressions and developments of such a reading, see, for instance, Diamond (1988), Conant (2000, 2004), and Kremer (2001).

²³See Conant and Bronzo (2017) for a characterization of a resolute reading along these lines.

²⁴Of course, implying that there is one thing called “*the*” resolute reading, characterizable in this way, is to grossly oversimplify, not taking account of the many different interpretive lines that may still all be characterized as “resolute.” Still, I take something like this characterization to be relatively paradigmatic of a resolute reading.

of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and one is unlikely to get through any paper on this issue in Nāgārjuna written by an analytic philosopher without this comparison brought up at some point (I apologize to my reader that this paper is not an exception to that rule).²⁵ As Smith points out, this comparison has traditionally functioned to support metaphysical readings according to which Nāgārjuna's sentences point to some ineffable ultimate reality that lies beyond what can be linguistically articulated.²⁶ On a resolute reading, however, such passages can be taken to be indicative of a distinctive sort of philosophical methodology in which a philosophical system established only for it to undone from the inside.²⁷

Conant describes the activity of engaging with the *Tractatus* as achieving its aim only when the "illusion of sense" that the sentences of the work have given rise to is "exploded from within," (Conant 198). To those familiar with Madhyamaka philosophy, this language of Conant's will be immediately reminiscent of the metaphor Candrakīrti appeals to with reference to the *Kāśyapaparivarta Sutra* in order to explicate verse XIII.8.²⁸ Emptiness is a kind of philosophical *purgative*, something one

²⁵See Tuck (1990, 74-93) for an general overview of comparisons between Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein. The obvious methodological problem with such comparisons is there is no more exegetical consensus on Wittgenstein than there is on Nāgārjuna. It is clear that there are passages of both bear a resemblance to the other, but, for each of these pairs of passages, one can import one's preferred and contentious reading of Nāgārjuna to Wittgenstein and vice versa, and so it's often not clear what the comparison actually ends up accomplishing at the end of the day.

²⁶See, for instance, Mitail (2002),

²⁷Though the *Tractatus* is the obvious object of comparison, there are several other works of philosophy that deploy this sort methodology. One of my favorite examples is a little-known book from by John Lange (1970) called *The Cognitivity Paradox*, and Thompson Clarke's (1972) significant "Legacy of Skepticism" can plausibly be read in this way (and, indeed, bears quite a few striking similarities to the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that, sadly, I do not have the space to expound here). For my own more literary venture into this sort of self-undoing philosophy, see my short book of dialogues *Talking In Circles* (Simonelli 2014).

²⁸"It is, Kāśyapa, as if a sick man were given a medicine by a doctor, but that medicine, having removed his ills, was not itself expelled but remained in the stomach. What do you think, Kāśyapa, will this man be freed of his sickness? No indeed, illustrious one, the sickness of this man in whose stomach the medicine, having removed all his ills remains and is not expelled, would be more violent. The illustrious one said: In this

consumes in order to expel all philosophical views. The crucial point of the metaphor is that, if the purgative genuinely does its job, it must be expelled itself along with the poison. Likewise, emptiness must be expelled along with all the views that are expelled through it. In other words, it must expel itself. Let's see how it does.

3 The Emptiness of "Emptiness"

Madhyamaka philosophy begins with the distinction between two truths. As Nāgārjuna says,

The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths:
conventional truth and ultimate truth, (XXIV.8)

Nāgārjuna tells us that, in order to explain emptiness—the ultimate truth concerning all things—we must start at the conventional understanding of what things are:

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, (XXIV.8)

The conventional truth is basically the world as it appears to us in ordinary experience. There seem to be such things such things as tables and chairs, tigers and trees, people, and so on. To take a mundane example, there seems to be something that it is to be a table—a way for something to be such that, if something is that way, it's a table. We might refer to this "something" as "the property of being a table" or "tableness" for short. However, when we investigate tables so as to try to comprehend their ultimate nature—what such things really are—we don't find any

sense, Kasyapa, the absence of being is the exhaustion of all dogmatic views. But the one for whom the absence of being itself becomes a fixed belief, I call incurable," (Sprung 1970, 151).

tableness. What we find are boards and planks, nails, and so on, as well as various ways in which we relate to them (putting stuff on them, sitting by them, and so on) such that it makes sense to call them a “table.” Whatever “tableness” a given table might be said to have, it’s not inherent in it, but, rather, dependent on other things. This point might not seem so surprising or profound in the case I’ve just described, but this sort of case is generally intended as an analogy to warm us up for cases that are likely to seem much more surprising or profound. The most important application of this point in Buddhist philosophy is with regard to one’s own self. When we look for the self—some intrinsic identity that each of us has as the person we are—we come up empty. All we ever find is this mental event or that one, this toe or that finger, this parent or that friend, and so on. Of course, we do have *conventional* identities as people. The conventional identities, however, like a table’s identity as a table, are just that: merely conventional. Ultimately, there is no such thing that is each of our “selves.”

Now, this point is agreed upon between Nāgārjuna and his Buddhist predecessors. The Abhidharma metaphysicians that Nāgārjuna was principally reacting against thought that, though there aren’t inherently existing tables, and there aren’t even inherently existing selves, there still must be *some* things that inherently exist.²⁹ It can’t be the case that *everything* is merely conventional in the sense explicated above. There must be a level of reality consisting in things existing in themselves that *explains* the conventional level of reality in which we operate in everyday life. The constituents of this ultimate level of reality—the ultimately real things—are the ultimately simple *dharmas* which depend on nothing themselves and on which all other things depend.³⁰ Unlike tables and

²⁹The canonical expression of the sort of Abhidharma metaphysics to which Nāgārjuna is reacting is Vasubhandu’s *Abhidharmakośa*, though it didn’t appear until a few centuries after Nāgārjuna.

³⁰It is no accident that, in early Indian Buddhism, the same word “dharma” expresses both the Buddha’s teaching and the fundamental elements of reality, though the exact relation between the two uses of the term is a matter of some controversy. For discussion

persons which merely exist conventionally, these dharmas are taken to exist inherently, in and of themselves. Nāgārjuna's fundamental insight that distinguishes him from his Abhidharma forebearers is that this point about tables and persons applies *completely generally*. No matter what kind of thing we supposedly have, when we look in it for some intrinsic nature—something inherent in it in virtue of which it is and is just what it is—we come up empty. Nāgārjuna's fundamental philosophical thesis, if he can be said to have any such thesis, is that nothing has the sort of intrinsic existence that the dharmas posited by the Abhidharma metaphysicians are supposed to have. We literally cannot make sense of things as existing in this way.

Nāgārjuna's basic philosophical strategy is simply to consider the various ways in which we might try to make sense of such things and show that we cannot do what we take ourselves to be able to do. For instance, we are inclined to think of such things as causing or giving rise to other such things. Nāgārjuna shows, however, that, insofar as we're thinking about such things as inherent existents, we can't possibly make sense of any causal connection obtaining between them. To give just a taste of Nāgārjuna's philosophical method, the basic argument here proceeds by way of dilemma: the effect is either already present in the cause or the it is extrinsic to the cause.³¹ If the effect is already present in the cause, then there can be no causal connection, since we don't have two separate things to be connected. If the effect is extrinsic to the cause, then there's no causal connection since there is no connection between the two things that are supposedly connected.³² This is not the place

see Cox (2004).

³¹Technically, the argument proceeds by tetralemma, with the further alternatives of "both" and "neither." Following standard commentary, I take the rejection of these two alternatives to follow straightforwardly from the rejection of the first two alternatives, with the "both" alternative having the problems of both and the "neither" alternative ruled out by the exhaustiveness of the first two alternatives.

³²Note, that, while Nāgārjuna's arguments on causality are often assimilated to Hume's skeptical arguments, Nāgārjuna's argument is more general, and, as such, much stronger. I read Hume as presupposing a conception in which effects are extrinsic

to explicate and defend this argument.³³ The important point for our purposes is that conclusion of the argument is not that inherent existents don't cause each other, nor is it even that it is impossible for inherent existents to cause each other. Rather, the conclusion is that the very notion of a causal connection obtaining between inherent existents breaks down under rational scrutiny; we can't make any sense of the idea such a relation obtaining between such things. In the same way, Nāgārjuna argues that we cannot make sense of the idea of an inherent existent moving, acting towards an end, and so on.³⁴ These sort of arguments generalize to the claim that we can't make sense of *any* relations obtaining between such things, nor can we make sense of such things as bearing any properties. Indeed, we can't make sense of such things at all. The very thought of such things as inherent existents dissolves under rational scrutiny.

I will simply suppose, for the purposes of this paper, that Nāgārjuna's arguments to this effect succeed. With this supposition on board, let us return to the question of what emptiness is. Emptiness, recall, was the emptiness of inherent existence. More precisely, the property of being empty just is the property of lacking inherent existence. As such, the intelligibility of the notion of emptiness clearly depends on the intelligibility of the notion of inherent existence. If the notion inherent existence lacks sense, so does the notion of something's lacking it. As Garfield (1996) says in a different context "the negation of nonsense must itself be nonsense"

to causes and working out that, with "cause" and "effect" understood in that way, we can't make sense of the notion of a causal relation at all. In Nagarjuna's argument, this is simply one horn in a dilemma consisting in exhaustive and equally problematic alternatives.

³³For critical discussions, see Hayes (1994, 308-315) and Robinson (1972). For a defense, see Siderits (2004).

³⁴The argument I've just sketched is the main argument in I, though it's left largely implicit there. For a related argument against ontological dependence that brings out the basic structure of this argument more clearly, see X. See also Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakavatara* VI.8-21 (Candrakīrti 2004). Against movement, see *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* II. Against acting towards an end, see VIII. For a general (though, in my opinion, philosophically dubious) argument against defining characteristics, see V.

(55). Nāgārjuna argues, however, that the notion of inherent existence *does* lack sense; it dissolves under rational scrutiny. Accordingly, so does the notion of emptiness. So, there is nothing that is expressed, in the context of Madhyamaka philosophy, by “emptiness.” “Emptiness,” as a supposed doctrine, is quite literally *empty* in the sense of being without semantic content. That is why, at the end of the day,

“It is empty” is not to be said, nor “It is is not empty.”
nor that it is both, nor that it is neither; [“empty”] is said only
for the sake of instruction (XXII.11)

What instructional value could emptiness hold, however, if the very notion of emptiness lacks sense? It is, once again, an “expedient to get rid of all views.” Which views? Not just views according to which things have inherent existence (though of course those views too), but *any* views that could arise in the dialectical context in which Madhyamaka philosophy takes place. Recall the basic distinction from which Madhyamaka philosophy begins: the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. The intellegibility of this distinction is predicated on the possibility of making sense of the constituents of ultimate reality, whatever they are, as existing in and of themselves. It is ultimately this very distinction that the “doctrine” of emptiness functions to undo. To undo this distinction, however, is to undo all of Madhyamaka philosophy. In just this way, Madhyamaka philosophy undoes itself.

We’ve already seen how emptiness, considered as a metaphysical doctrine, undermines itself. If, ultimately, all things are empty, then there is no way that things ultimately are, not even empty. The point here is not, as Garfield and Priest say, that there is some “ontological contradiction” at the heart of reality, but, rather, as Siderits puts it, that “the very notion of ultimately reality lacks sense.” It may seem, then, that I am simply articulating a version of the semantic reading. Here, however, there is a further turn of the crank, for we can ask *what* notion is purportedly expressed by the term “ultimate reality” when we utter the the phrase

“the very notion of ultimate reality lacks sense.” It seems that in order to even make sense of the view at which we’ve arrived, we must grasp *what it is* that we take ourselves to be rejecting as nonsensical. This presents itself as a kind of puzzle, and we can see this particular puzzle regarding the notion of ultimate reality instance of a general puzzle about rejecting something as nonsense. In some way, it is the intensional analogue of Quine’s (1948) famous puzzle about claiming that something doesn’t exist. Quine’s problem was that truly saying, for instance, “Pegasus doesn’t exist” seems to require referring to Pegasus and predicating the property of non-existence of him, but if Pegasus doesn’t exist, there’s no Pegasus to refer to, and so it seems that one cannot truly say that he doesn’t exist. Quine’s solution was to regard the proper name “Pegasus” really as a kind of definite description, “the pegasizer,” thus allowing us to say that the claim that Pegasus does not exist is true just in case nothing pegasizes. The problem here, however, is to say, “The very notion of ultimate reality doesn’t make sense” requires us to make sense of the very notion that we’re claiming doesn’t make sense in order to predicate the property of failing to make sense of it. There is no analogous solution since it is an intensional notion from the start that we’re supposed to be rejecting as nonsensical.

Of course, this puzzle is not a genuine paradox. There is a clear way of making sense of nonsense. When we say, for instance, that Lewis Carroll’s poem *Jaberwocky* doesn’t make sense, this is not to be understood as the claim that the thoughts expressed in the poem don’t make sense. Rather, it is to be understood in terms of the fact that the strings of words (or, in this case, strings of syllables that together constitute merely apparent words) fail to express any thoughts at all, merely appearing to do so. Likewise, when we say that the notion of ultimate reality doesn’t make sense, this is properly understood as saying that the string of words “ultimate reality,” when used in the context of Madhyamaka philosophy, doesn’t express any concept at all. It is not that there *is*

some concept which is incoherent: the concept of ultimate reality. Rather, it's that the very words "ultimate reality," ultimately, lack sense. Now, words get their sense from their use, and the basic use to which the term "ultimate reality" is put, in Madhyamaka philosophy, is to distinguish between two realities: "conventional" and "ultimate." These two terms are reciprocally sense-dependent in that either of their senses is constituted precisely by its relation to the other in their joint ability to draw this distinction. If the term "ultimate reality" lacks sense, then so does its opposite, "conventional reality," as the very opposition relative to which either of these terms have their sense breaks down. Accordingly, not only Siderits's negative dictum "there is no ultimate truth," but also his positive dictum, "there is only conventional truth" (Siderits 2003, 13), expresses nothing.

On this reading, the very distinction between conventional and ultimate truth—the very distinction Madhyamaka philosophy takes as its starting point—is undone through Madhyamaka philosophy. In this way, Madhyamaka philosophy undoes itself. But didn't Nāgārjuna say that "The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth"? If that distinction is undone, then there is no Dharma teaching of the Buddha at all. Of course, that is just what Nāgārjuna says:

"No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone," (XXV.24)

4 Mountains are (Really) Just Mountains

In a recent paper, Garfield and Priest (2009) propose to expand our understanding of Nāgārjuna by drawing our attention to the following famous Zen aphorism:

Before I studied Zen, mountains were mountains, and water

was water. After studying Zen for some time, mountains were no longer mountains, and water was no longer water. But now, after studying Zen longer, mountains are just mountains, and water is just water

They provide an elaborate series of diagrams to show how, during the study of Zen but prior to full awakening, all propositions come to be regarded as bearing a fifth truth value: not true, false, both, or neither—not *t*, *f*, *b*, or *n*—but *empty*—*e*. After Buddhist awakening, there is then something new, in addition to the mountains and the water: this fifth truth value, *e*, which is *there* but to which, ultimately, no proposition gets assigned, each being assigned its ordinary, conventional truth value. On this reading, mountains are no longer *just* mountains, not, at least, in the mind of the Zen master; they now are mountains that bear a relation (albeit a negative one) to this fifth truth value, and so they no longer are just what they were before. I don't think this proposal is in the spirit of this aphorism. I propose we read this aphorism resolutely: *mountains are just mountains, and water is just water*.

5 Conclusion

I have given, in broad strokes, an account of the self-undoing philosophical strategy inherent in Madhyamaka. I hope, by doing this, I have made clear how eschewing any version of the “thesis thesis” does not amount to eschewing logic, rationality, or philosophical rigor. In contrast to the opinions of authors like Garfield and Westerhoff, an analytic reconstruction of Madhyamaka philosophy does not require attributing to Nāgārjuna any philosophical theses. The question remains as to how Madhyamaka philosophy, so understood, relates to the larger Buddhist practice into which it is integrated in the various strands of Mahayana Buddhism. An account of how a self-undoing philosophical system can be integrated into Buddhist practice to function as soteriological tool is well beyond

the scope of this paper.³⁵ It should be clear from what I have said in this paper, however, that the sense in which Madhyamaka philosophy is to be integrated into Buddhist practice is *not* as a philosophical view, especially not one that provides some sort of theoretical justification for Buddhist practice. If someone is understanding Madhyamaka as a philosophical view, then the proper response to their question of how Madhyamaka is to be integrated into Buddhist practice is to say that there is *nothing* to be integrated into Buddhist practice. There is no Madhyamaka view; there is just Buddhist practice. In this way, rather than *theoretically justifying* Buddhist practice, Madhyamaka functions to *return us to* Buddhist practice. Now, orientation towards Buddhist practice is characterized by the Buddha as “Right View” (sammā-diṭṭhi).³⁶ Notably, Right View is the *first stage* in the Noble Eightfold Path, consisting in nothing more than the acknowledgment of the four noble truths. This acknowledgement constitutes the first step one takes towards the liberation of suffering for all sentient beings. The Madhyamaka insight, on the other hand, is the *final moment* in the development of Buddhist understanding.³⁷ Thus, the theoretical insight that lies at the end of the Buddhist intellectual path ultimately does nothing more than return us to the practical orientation with which we began. When one grasps this fact, it can be tempting to think that *this* is the true meaning of “emptiness.” I hope it’s clear that the thing to do in response to this thought is to acknowledge it with a chuckle and let it go.

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³⁶Dīgha Nikāya 22.

³⁷At least, this is how it has been canonized in the Tibetan tradition.

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