

INCOMMENSURABILITY OF TWO CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY: DEPENDENT ORIGINATION AND EMPTINESS IN NĀGĀRJUNA'S *MMK*

Tao Jiang

Department of Religion, Rutgers University
tjiang@rci.rutgers.edu

Introduction

In the history of mainstream Western and Indian philosophical discourse there is a clear recognition of the tension between various conceptions of ultimate reality, such as form, substance, essence, soul, and creator, and conceptions of conventional reality, such as matter, property, accident, body, and creatures. The leading strategies to deal with this tension often follow one of two lines, either (1) to pronounce incommensurability between the two by maintaining that ultimate entities are real and conventional entities unreal or illusory—for example, Plato and Śāṅkara—or (2) to reconcile the tension by arguing that ultimate entities are foundational and conventional entities derivative—for example, Aristotle and Madhva. In both cases, reality is bifurcated into two distinct domains, with the ultimate elevated to the higher realm and the conventional to the lower. Both strategies consider conventional entities to be dependent on ultimate and/or other conventional entities in some fashion, but do not view ultimate entities to be dependent on either conventional or other ultimate entities. That is, between conventional entities there is mutual dependency: between ultimate and conventional entities there is only a one-way dependency, with the latter depending on the former but not the other way around. Between ultimate entities, there is no relationship of dependency whatsoever. Clearly these traditions tend to privilege conceptions of ultimate reality over those of conventional reality, often resulting in sacrificing the reality of the world and our experience of it, despite countless sophisticated and ingenious efforts to reconcile the tension between the two—for example, Spinoza and Ramanuja.

The present essay challenges such a fundamental bias in navigating this tension prevalent in the history of mainstream philosophical discourse both in the West and in India. It seeks to shed new light on the nature of the tension between the two conceptions of reality through a reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter *MMK*). I argue that Nāgārjuna's philosophical deliberation exhibits a clear recognition that conceptions of ultimate and conventional reality are, in the final analysis, incompatible and that most of the effort to reconcile the tension has resulted in sacrificing the reality of the world and, as such, is misguided. I make the case that Nāgārjuna stands out as one of the few major thinkers in the history of philosophy, Western and Indian, who fully recognize the tension between the two conceptions of reality and vigorously argues for their incommensurability. However,

Nāgārjuna flouts the mainstream approach, both in the West and in India, which tends to sacrifice the conventional reality. First, he rejects the bifurcation of reality into ultimate and conventional by calling into question our naturalized but naive understanding of the ultimate and the conventional. Second, he repudiates any conception of ultimate reality—which turns out to be empty—and embraces a radicalized conception of conventional reality—which is the only reality for him. Third, and most importantly, in so doing he problematizes the subtle presence of ultimate entities within our understanding of the world and radicalizes such an understanding by cleansing it from any ultimate element, such as substance and essence, et cetera.

I make my case by probing into the two different modes of reasoning behind conceptions of conventional and ultimate reality. More specifically, I argue that conceptions of ultimate reality are the result of genic reasoning, whereas conceptions of conventional reality result from generative reasoning. Let me first define how the two terms, generative and genic, are used in this essay. They refer to two different modes of reasoning. To explain something by examining what is existentially and/or conceptually prior to it as its conditions, causes, or constituents—its generation as it were—is a generative mode of reasoning. In other words, an appeal to any form of relationality is generative reasoning. By contrast, to explain something by investigating what it is irreducibly itself—the ground of its gene,¹ as it were—with no relation to anything else whatsoever, either conceptually or existentially, is a genic mode of reasoning. Put differently, genic analysis is understood as a non-relational mode of analysis here.

Corresponding to these two modes of reasoning, two kinds of entities can be conceived of: genic and generative. Genic entities, such as essence, substance, the basic “building blocks” of the world like atoms and God, are independent and self-sufficient; they are not relational in the sense that their existence and/or analysis do not depend on anything else, while they are regarded as the ground of other existences and can be invoked to explain other forms of existence. Existentially, genic entities are the ground of reality; conceptually, any analysis of the world or our experience of it that appeals to genic entities marks the end of such an analysis, beyond which there is nowhere else to go. Clearly genic entities belong to the realm of ultimate reality mentioned above. By contrast, generative entities, for example a desk, are dependent on others, for example wood or a carpenter, in their coming into being, both existentially and conceptually, and thus there is nothing that is irreducibly itself in a generative entity, in the way that a genic entity like essence is; generative entities are relational, and their existence and analysis necessarily depend on other entities, be they genic or generative. Therefore generative entities belong to the domain of conventional reality introduced earlier.

Nāgārjuna, in his discussion of the notion of emptiness and its relation to the idea of dependent origination, makes a powerful case for the mutual exclusivity between the genic/ultimate and the generative/conventional conceptions of reality. Furthermore, he radicalizes our understanding of conventional reality by making it thoroughly generative, free of any genic element. In so doing, he promotes the thor-

oughly generative conception of reality (which follows dependent origination), and repudiates the genic conception of reality (which turns out to be empty), employing emptiness as the weapon to cleanse the generative domain of dependent origination from the taint of any genic element. Thus understood, the world is bottomlessly deep and infinitely intelligible, regulated by innumerable possibilities of conditioning.

Experientially, such a vision of thorough generativity is available only to those who have achieved a total cognitive transparency with no reifying mental activity or reified mental objects, however subtle, standing in the way of such an objectless transparency. In this connection I will argue that Nāgārjuna is making a powerful case against any reification—and distortion—of reality, especially at the subtle level of advanced meditative cognition. That is, emptiness can be fruitfully reinterpreted as Nāgārjuna's effort to fend off subtly reifying, hence distortive, cognitive activities in certain advanced Buddhist meditation states, reflected in the reification of atomistic *dharmas* as ultimate reality. Based on this new understanding of the relation between dependent origination and emptiness, I would like to propose a new line of interpretation of certain key verses in Nāgārjuna's *MMK* in order to demonstrate the explanatory potential for such an approach.

Before delving into Nāgārjuna, I want to point out that this essay is meant to be primarily reconstructive, not strictly historical. It is an attempt to think about the nature of rationality and reality with and through Nāgārjuna. With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us take a look at how dependent origination and emptiness embody these two modes of reasoning in Nāgārjuna's *MMK*, how he makes the case for the incommensurability between two conceptions of reality as the result of such reasoning, and why he embraces the generative conception of reality while rejecting the genic one. In the course of our discussion we will also explore the cognitive value in this way of interpreting emptiness and dependent origination as it pertains to Buddhist meditation.

Dependent Origination: A Generative Analysis

The importance of the doctrine of dependent origination in Buddhism cannot be overestimated.² It is traditionally formulated as “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises,”³ and “When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases,”⁴ and is also represented in the famous scheme of the twelve links of suffering and “rebirth.”⁵ It is an attempt to strike a middle ground between various “extreme” views held by the Brahmanic thinkers and some materialists. In David Kalupahana's words, “Dependent arising is the middle path presented by the Buddha between the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, of strict determinism and chaotic indeterminism, of absolute reality and nihilistic unreality, of permanent identity and absolute difference.”⁶ A well-known classical discussion on this subject can be found in the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, wherein the Buddha elaborates the right view in relation to the two extreme views to an inquiring Kaccānagotta:

This world, *Kaccāna*, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.

This world, *Kaccāna*, is for the most part shackled by engagement, clinging, and adherence. But this one [with right view] does not become engaged and cling through that engagement and clinging, mental standpoint, adherence, underlying tendency; he does not take a stand about ‘my self.’ He has no perplexity or doubt that what arises is only suffering arising, what ceases is only suffering ceasing. His knowledge about this is independent of others. It is in this way, *Kaccāna*, that there is right view.

‘All exists’: *Kaccāna*, this is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’: this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle: ‘With ignorance as condition, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as condition, consciousness. . . . Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, cessation of consciousness. . . . Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.’⁷

That is, dependent origination, instead of treating things as either substantive or non-existent, explains them by appealing to the conditions upon which they arise. Put differently, things in the world are neither substantively real nor simply non-existent, but instead have only dependent existence, subject to various conditions. In arguing that existence is contingent on conditions, dependent origination espouses a world-view that rejects the independence of beings and embraces their interdependence. Clearly, dependent origination embodies the generative mode of reasoning as defined above.

Due to its canonical status, the doctrine of dependent origination is at the center of intense Buddhist scholastic debates among early Buddhist thinkers, the *Abhidharmikas*, who sought to clarify some of the Buddha’s teachings. At the core of the debate is the issue regarding the scope of dependent origination, namely how far dependent origination can go. In this connection, the *Abhidharmikas* distinguish two kinds of entities: ultimate and conventional. An ultimate entity is atomistic, known as *dharma*. According to Mark Siderits:

The universally agreed upon definition of a *dharma* is: that which bears its own essential nature (*svabhāva*). The basic thinking here is that all partite entities must borrow their essential properties from parts: the characteristic shape of the chariot is a function of the shapes of its parts, its utility as a means of transport is a function of various interrelations among its parts, and so forth. Thus, whatever does not borrow its essential properties from other things, but instead bears that nature as its own, must be ultimately real and not a mere mental construction. . . .

. . . [T]he *svabhāva* criterion of *dharma*-hood yields a uniform way of telling whether something is ultimately real or merely a mental construction: is it analytically findable, or does it dissolve upon analysis?⁸

Put simply, a *dharma* is an ultimate entity, defined as that which possesses an intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*. A *dharma* is singular, unconstructed and non-dissolvable upon analysis. It does not depend on anything else either for its existence or for its analysis, but rather defines itself in terms of its intrinsic nature and exists by virtue of such a nature. As Noa Ronkin succinctly puts it, a *dharma*, in possession of an intrinsic nature, is self-defined and independent of other entities, both conceptually and physically.⁹ Therefore, a *dharma* is ultimately real. According to the Abhidharmikas, to deny the ultimate reality of *dharma*s is tantamount to the annihilationism rejected by the Buddha. This makes *dharma* a genic entity. On the other hand a conventional, or partite, entity necessarily involves constructions, both physical and conceptual. It is an aggregate that comes into being by virtue of its dependence on *dharma*, into which it can be reduced and analyzed. This makes a conventional entity generative, and as such it is ultimately unreal since it does not and cannot stand on its own.

Curiously, however, according to the Abhidharmikas, the genic entity of *dharma* is also causally connected with other *dharma*s. This means that, for the Abhidharmikas, a *dharma* is impermanent and changes from moment to moment; it is causally connected in the flow of momentary atomistic events¹⁰ and is subject to dependent origination, although it is unclear what can possibly explain the dharmic change and causality other than an *ad hoc* assertion. Nevertheless, such a stipulation of *dharma* makes it a generative entity. Consequently, the Abhidharmikas regard *dharma* as both a genic and a generative entity. Through such a maneuver, the Abhidharmikas wish to steer clear of the annihilationist trap the Buddha rejects by maintaining that *dharma* is the ultimate, irreducible unit of reality in possession of an intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) while trying to stay committed to the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination by insisting that *dharma* is also subject to dependent origination. To put it crudely, the Abhidharmikas want to eat their cake (generative *dharma*) and have it too (genic *dharma*).

However, by stipulating that a *dharma* is both genic and generative, the Abhidharmikas make the notion of *dharma* unintelligible by cramming two conflicting and mutually exclusive attributes into it, dependence and independence. More specifically, a *dharma* cannot be both dependent in following dependent origination and independent in possessing a non-originated intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). By introducing a non-originated element, *svabhāva*, into the realm of dependent origination, the Abhidharmikas inject genic elements into the generative domain, thus touching one of the central nerves of metaphysical speculations in the world's major philosophical traditions, namely the tension between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality. While the Abhidharmikas might or might not have been aware of the tension between the two conceptions of reality, I make the case that Nāgārjuna's critique of the Abhidharmikas' conception of *svabhāva* as well as his overall philosophical project is predicated on a clear recognition of the tension involved.

For Nāgārjuna, the very premise of the Abhidharmika's interpretation of dependent origination is flawed since it leaves the basic units of reality, genic *dharma* and its *svabhāva*, unaccounted for, hence taking them outside the generative realm

of dependent origination that is the world. Clearly, the Abhidharmikas' conceptualization of *dharmā* à la *svabhāva* is a veiled attempt to insert a genic element into the generative domain of dependent origination. Nāgārjuna maintains that, in the final analysis, genic and generative conceptions of reality are incommensurable. Nāgārjuna clearly sees an unbridgeable conceptual gap between the two conceptions: if reality is conceived of generatively, it cannot also be genic at the same time.¹¹

Let us take a closer look at how Nāgārjuna makes his case for the incommensurability between generative and genic conceptions of reality. The tension between the two is manifestly evident in chapter 15 of the *MMK*, which is devoted to the discussion of *svabhāva*, translated as essence by Jay Garfield here:

Essence arising from
 Causes and conditions makes no sense.
 If essence came from causes and conditions,
 Then it would be fabricated.¹²

How could it be appropriate
 For fabricated essence to come to be?
 Essence itself is not artificial
 And does not depend on another.¹³

In these verses Nāgārjuna makes a sharp distinction between essences on the one hand and causes and conditions on the other and argues that essences cannot be generated by conditions or causes. It should be clear that in Nāgārjuna's examination of *svabhāva* he is arguing that a genic entity cannot be dependent on either another genic entity or a generative entity, consistent with our definition of the genic and the generative. In fact, to call something a generative "entity" is problematic since "entity" is a genic concept; it is more appropriate to call the generative a "process" or an "event" rather than an "entity." Nāgārjuna embraces the generative, but rejects the genic. If there were essence, it had to exist by itself. That is, if something were genically real, for example essence, it would not have been generated (fabricated or constructed in Nāgārjuna's word) by conditions. Nāgārjuna cannot be more unambiguous about the incommensurability between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality.

Jan Westerhoff, in his article "The Madhyamaka Concept of *Svabhāva*: Ontological and Cognitive Aspects,"¹⁴ tries to clarify the concept of *svabhāva* by differentiating its two dimensions, ontological and cognitive. Westerhoff uses the categories of Nāgārjuna's best-known commentator Candrakīrti to discuss the various aspects of *svabhāva*, namely essence-*svabhāva*, substance-*svabhāva*, and absolute-*svabhāva*.¹⁵ The essence-*svabhāva*, "which equates *svabhāva* with the specific qualities of an object and contrasts them with those qualities it shares with other objects serves mainly epistemological purposes. It provides a procedure for drawing a line between a variety of objects with shared qualities and thereby allows us to tell them apart."¹⁶ The substance-*svabhāva*, as defined by Candrakīrti, "is not artificially created and not dependent on anything else."¹⁷ This "is contrasted with conceptually constructed or

secondary (*prajñaptisat*) objects and equated with the mark of the primary ones (*dravyasat*).¹⁸ According to Westerhoff, “the elaborate Mādhyamika criticism of the notion of *svabhāva* is directed against this stronger notion of substance-*svabhāva*, rather than against essence-*svabhāva*.”¹⁹ While this is true of Candrakīrti, it is not so obvious in the case of Nāgārjuna, and, indeed, I am arguing that it is not the case with Nāgārjuna. Instead, Nāgārjuna does not make any distinction between substance and essence, for good reasons.

Even if we can grant that, as presented by Westerhoff, essence-*svabhāva* has a legitimate epistemological role to play in terms of identifying an object, this identification can and does lead to the reification of essence, as played out in the history of the Abhidharmikas’ deliberation of *svabhāva*, hence making the epistemic essence into some *de facto* ontological substance. Furthermore, identification of an object through the cognition of its essence does not address the origination of such an essence, as Nāgārjuna points out repeatedly throughout his *MMK*, for example 24:16. All of these can help to explain why Nāgārjuna does not make an explicit distinction between substance-*svabhāva* and essence-*svabhāva* in his discussion of *svabhāva*, and his rejection of *svabhāva* includes the rejection of both substance-*svabhāva* and essence-*svabhāva*.²⁰

Westerhoff lists a third *svabhāva* by Candrakīrti, the so-called absolute *svabhāva*, defined thus: “Ultimate reality for the Buddhas is *svabhāva* itself. That, moreover, because it is itself nondeceptive is the truth of ultimate reality. It must be known by each one for himself.”²¹ Since, according to Westerhoff, this absolute *svabhāva* eventually collapses into the essence-*svabhāva* in Candrakīrti’s analysis, our analysis of the latter applies to the former. Given the genic/generative distinction made in this essay, both substance-*svabhāva* and essence-*svabhāva* are clearly cases of the genic, and, for Nāgārjuna, neither is compatible with the generative conception of reality embodied in the teaching of dependent origination.

If the generative conception of reality is more grounded in our experience whereas the genic conception of reality relies more on philosophical speculations, it is not hard to see that Nāgārjuna’s acceptance of the generative and his rejection of the genic point to his fundamental commitment to the human experience. Furthermore, since the Buddhist project of awakening is rooted in the Buddha’s experiences, from suffering to enlightenment, much of the Buddhist philosophical effort is devoted to a better understanding of the human experience in its full gamut.

However, the appeal to experience in explaining Buddhism has one special problem: according to Buddhism, most, if not all, of our experience is the product of ignorance, hence unreliable as the source of knowledge. The key to the Buddhist enlightenment project is precisely the transformation of the way we experience the world from the ignorant mode to the enlightened one. Still, Nāgārjuna’s endorsement of the generative makes it clear that he does not dismiss every facet of our everyday experience as the product of ignorance or delusion. On the contrary, his philosophy validates the general contour of our everyday experience as regulated by dependent origination. Rather, ignorance arises only when aspects of our experience are reified, leading to the substantialization of certain aspects of the world. More importantly,

our reificatory distortion of reality is not limited to the everyday mode. It happens in certain advanced meditative states as well. That is, reification takes place on multiple levels of cognition, from the everyday mode all the way up to advanced states of meditation. Reification of *dharmā* vis-à-vis its *svabhāva* can be seen as one especially potent, albeit subtle, form of distortion of which the vast majority of people are largely unaware but is keenly experienced by certain advanced practitioners of Buddhist meditation.

In this connection, it is interesting to observe that the initial impulse to postulate *dharmā/dhammā* by the Abhidharmikas arises from the need to account for a particular kind of experience. Noa Ronkin acutely observes that the initial positing of *dharmā/dhammā* is to account for “the smallest psycho-physical unit, that is, a single moment of consciousness.”²² As such, it can only be reached and experienced in certain advanced meditative states. This means that behind the theory of *dharmā* lie important meditation experiences by some advanced practitioners. Furthermore,

the advent of the *dhammā* theory and its associated doctrines of atomism and momentariness gradually led the evolving Abhidharma schools into reifying experience, if in a different manner from the advocates of eternalism and the holders of substance metaphysics. This tendency to reify experience formed part of a broader process of terminological and doctrinal generalization, in which the concept of *svabhāva* played a dominant role. It is within the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika framework that one finds what may be reckoned the culmination of this process.²³

That is, the *dharmā/dhammā* theory is the product of the reification of certain advanced meditative experiences. If a Buddhist theory plays a guiding role for Buddhist meditation practices, it is not difficult to see that the reification of *dharmā* vis-à-vis the postulation of *svabhāva* can lead to a subtle distortion of reality as experienced by these advanced practitioners. To put it simply, *dharmic* moments come and go, just like any other mental phenomena and episodes, albeit in a more refined and subtle form; to fixate on these moments and to treat them as some ultimate entities give rise to subtle reification and distortion of the perception of the thoroughly generative reality. As we will see in the following, Nāgārjuna’s elaboration of emptiness is precisely an effort to correct this subtle form of mental reification at certain advanced stages of meditation so as to help Buddhist meditators achieve final release from the bondage created by the subtly genic distortion of the generative reality, which is perniciously difficult to overcome.

Emptiness: A Genic Analysis

As we have just observed, instead of meandering out of the generative realm of dependent origination by postulating some genic entities like *dharmā* (à la *svabhāva*) as the ultimate reality, Nāgārjuna stands by the generative realm of dependent origination. We will see in this section that Nāgārjuna uses the idea of emptiness to refute the substantialist tendency in the Abhidharmikas’ effort to inject the genic elements of *dharmā* and *svabhāva* into the generative domain of dependent origination.

Nāgārjuna defends the Buddha's view of the dependent nature of existence by arguing that, outside the nexus of constitutive relationality and interdependence, existence is empty in and of itself. Garfield makes this plainer:

[T]o say that the table is empty is hence simply to say that it lacks essence and importantly *not* to say that it is completely non-existent. To say that it lacks essence . . . is to say . . . that it does not exist "from its own side"—that its existence *as the object that it is—as a table*—depends not on *it*, nor on any purely nonrelational characteristics, but depends on us as well. . . . The table . . . is a purely arbitrary slice of space-time chosen by us as the referent of a single name and not an entity demanding, on its own, recognition and a philosophical analysis to reveal its essence. That independent character is precisely what it lacks on this view.²⁴

In other words, nothing can be found when examined from its own side or from itself without resorting to any relationality or generativity. The existence or analysis of anything can take place only in relationship to others. There is nothing in itself. This is the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in Nāgārjuna's philosophy. Emptiness means that things-events in the world lack *svabhāva*. It does not mean that nothing exists in the world, although it has often been misunderstood as advancing such a nihilistic understanding of the world.²⁵ Nāgārjuna insists that only when the world is devoid of *svabhāva*, namely when it is empty, can it exist. That is, the world can and does exist, only emptily.

Despite the fact that emptiness is a direct rejection of *svabhāva*, the two notions actually share the same mode of reasoning, that is, genic. Their difference is that, when an entity is examined from its own side, without relying on anything else, *svabhāva* is found in one case while nothing can be found in the other. Because of the conceptual difficulties associated with the notion of *svabhāva* in explaining the world as we have seen, Nāgārjuna argues that the world has to be empty if it is real. For Nāgārjuna, the world is an empty reality. Clearly Nāgārjuna employs genic reasoning to demonstrate that if we are to analyze any entity in the world genically, nothing actually turns up. He concludes that every existence in the world must be genically empty.

The curious aspect of using genic reasoning to investigate the world lies in the fact that it has no corresponding genic entity. Indeed, emptiness employs genic analysis to demolish any genic entity since it turns out that there can be nothing that is conceivably genic without compromising the generativity of the world. This means that emptiness is not another entity or reality. If it were, it would have impeded the generativity of the world. Rather, it is the very antithesis of any genic conception of entity or reality. Emptiness moves us away from cognizing the world in terms of entities and leads us right back into the generative realm of events and processes. Furthermore, the generative realm of dependent origination is also transformed by the realization of its genic emptiness, in that emptiness radicalizes dependent origination by making it thoroughly generative, without any genic element that is independent of others.

Such a radicalization of dependent origination is evident from the very beginning of the *MMK*. In the dedicatory verses, Nāgārjuna comes out swinging:

Whatever is dependently arisen is
Unceasing, unborn,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Not coming, not going,
Without distinction, without identity,
And free from conceptual construction.

On the face of it, Nāgārjuna appears to be juxtaposing two sets of contradictory attributes to predicate reality, namely dependent origination and non-dependent origination (unceasing, unborn, etc.). However, such an apparent contradiction is due to his switch of perspectives when discussing the same reality, from the generative in the first line to the genic in the rest. That is, whatever is generatively real is also genically unreal or nonsensical. It is meaningless to attribute any property to the genic since the subject of such attributions does not even exist. To use a stock example, it is nonsensical to say that the present king of France is tall or short. Therefore, attributes such as unceasing, unborn, unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, and without identity are meant to convey the sense that there is no subject to which these terms can be attributed. In other words, there is simply *nothing* generative to predicate, since “thing” is a genic concept and does not make sense generatively. Furthermore, from the perspective of the generative, any predication eventually leads to the reification of the subject of that predication, resulting in a conceptual fabrication or imposition. Only by repudiating predications²⁶ (since, from Nāgārjuna’s perspective, predications—even negative ones—*imply* a genic entity that is being predicated) can the dependent origination of the world be freed from any conceptual construction and the generativity of the world be fully recognized. Clearly Nāgārjuna rejects the genic, root (subject) and branch (predications).

However, doesn’t Nāgārjuna’s effort make dependent origination genic?²⁷ In other words, by cleansing the generative realm of dependent origination of any genic element, which is what Nāgārjuna has done if my argument holds, hasn’t he made dependent origination de facto genic since it seems that dependent origination marks the end of analysis, a hallmark of the genic? Such a charge would have been valid only if dependent origination were objectified or reified into an abstract principle that existed in some Platonic heaven, a separate realm of reality that Nāgārjuna rejects. Without any genic element, the ontological distinction between the abstract and the concrete collapses since their distinction depends on privileging the abstract as genic or ultimate. As we will see in the following discussion, without this ontological distinction between the abstract and the concrete, dependent origination becomes a pragmatic guide for our analysis of the world but does not itself pose any end point for analysis at all. There is no dependent origination *itself* to speak of, independent of events and processes of the world. Dependent origination appeals to a process of analysis without positing an absolute end point. Any analytical end point

is nothing but a temporary pause in our analytic effort, depending on what an analyst hopes to accomplish and what can be accomplished in a given context.²⁸

Be that as it may, how does Nāgārjuna deal with the specter of infinite regress if no genic entity is allowed to end the apparently endless generative process of analysis? Nāgārjuna is clearly cognizant of the problem of infinite regress. In another work of his, the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, he uses the issue of infinite regress as a weapon to discredit his opponent's effort to establish any absolutely valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*):

If the *pramāṇas* are established through other *pramāṇas*, then there is an infinite series (*anavasthā*).

Neither the beginning nor the middle nor the end can then be established.²⁹

Nāgārjuna observes that since a valid means of knowledge does not establish itself but depends on other means of knowledge, at no point can absolutely or independently valid *pramāṇas* be established. What is especially interesting to us is that Nāgārjuna sees infinite regress as a weapon to challenge his foundationalist opponent, rather than as a problem in itself.³⁰ As is well known, Nāgārjuna's favorite forms of argument are the tetralemma and *reductio ad absurdum*. He does not seem to be bothered by the specter of infinite regress at all since he never addresses such a concern as a problem in itself. Such an apparent lack of vigilance against infinite regress as a problem on Nāgārjuna's part is rather curious, given his clear awareness of the problem, and it deserves some probing.

As we have observed previously, Nāgārjuna clearly recognizes the incommensurability between the generative and the genic conceptions of reality. This means that the analysis of the generative can never reach a genic ground. Therefore, to move from the generative to the genic in order to avoid the ghost of infinite regress requires an unwarranted philosophical leap with the sole purpose of putting a stop to the ongoing analysis, however arbitrary and artificial that stop is. From Nāgārjuna's standpoint, it is much more fruitful to view infinite regress as a practical problem instead of a metaphysical problem. As a practical problem, it can be dealt with through a pragmatic analysis of what we want to achieve and what can be achieved in a given situation. The purpose of analysis is accounted for by the dominant condition in Nāgārjuna's scheme (chapter 1 of the *MMK*).

For example, when we analyze the disaster that happened in New Orleans in August 2005, depending on what we hope to achieve and what is achievable, our analysis can vary a great deal. The efficient condition was obviously Hurricane Katrina, and the immediate condition was the collapse of the levees. However, many other factors were involved, such as the abhorrent level of poverty in the city; the lingering legacy of racism; the responses or lack thereof from various levels of the federal, state, and local governments; the impact of global warming; the location and design of the city; the maintenance, or lack of maintenance, of the levees; and the drain on critical domestic resources due to various costly ongoing international involvements. The list goes on, and each factor on the list also has its own conditions.

Depending on the purpose of our analysis and what we hope to accomplish, in the short or long term, the direction of our analysis can vary drastically, from local to global or even the cosmic, from the physical to the political, historical, or even the cosmological. This means that the purpose of our analysis is constitutive of the analysis. We should not decide a priori what the end point, a genic entity, ought to be in any particular analysis; nor should we pretend that any end point is, historically speaking, more than a temporary pause, conditioned by our goals, needs, and ability in a given situation that is infinitely complex.

Therefore, from Nāgārjuna's perspective it is unnecessary to postulate some genic entity as something ultimate in order to put an end to the generative analysis since this would result in a closed system when analyzing the world. Instead, the world is thoroughly generative and infinitely intelligible, and there is no room for any genic entity in the generative domain of dependent origination. If certain genic entities are postulated for analytic purposes, these entities should be recognized as nothing more than postulates, at best representing some temporary pauses, albeit useful *within the specific context of an explanatory scheme*, in our endless quest for answers. Consequently, emptiness sweeps away any genic residue within the generative domain, and in so doing radicalizes dependent origination by making its realm thoroughly generative, bottomlessly deep, and infinitely intelligible.

A Genic/Generative Reading of the MMK

In order the better to appreciate the usefulness of the genic/generative paradigm in understanding Nāgārjuna's philosophy, let us take a look at chapters 24 and 25 of the *MMK*, which have been celebrated as the climax of the text, using genic and generative analyses as the interpretative device.

Chapter 24 starts with an accusation by Nāgārjuna's hypothetical opponent that if everything is empty, it is tantamount to rejecting the Buddha's teachings, the Buddhist community, and the Buddha, hence invalidating the whole Buddhist enlightenment project that is premised on the three. It is obvious that the opponent equates emptiness with non-existence. Nāgārjuna defends the teaching of emptiness this way:

If you perceive the existence of all things
In terms of their essence,
Then this perception of all things
Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.³¹

Effects and causes
And agent and action
And conditions and arising and ceasing
And effects will be rendered impossible.³²

This very much echoes Nāgārjuna's argument in chapter 15, where he discusses the notion of essence, *svabhāva*. That is, if we perceive and analyze things genically, their generativity becomes impossible due to the incommensurability between the

genic and the generative, as we have examined earlier. This means that the perception of essence excludes the possibility of perceiving conditions and causes and vice versa. Therefore,

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.³³

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.³⁴

MMK 24: 18 is the *locus classicus* of the discussion on the relationship between emptiness and dependent origination. Here Nāgārjuna resorts to the Sanskrit sentential structure—*yaḥ . . . tām* (what is . . . that is . . .)—to make the point that the two concepts have the same domain of applicability, namely that they predicate exactly the same range of objects. To say that something arises by depending on conditions is to say that it is empty. Because all existences are dependent on conditions, they are all empty. To deny the emptiness of something is to deny its dependent existence, which is tantamount to denying its very existence:

If dependent arising is denied,
Emptiness itself is rejected.
This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.³⁵

Because an entity cannot be both generatively and genically real at the same time, if it is generatively real (whatever is dependently co-arisen) it must be genically unreal (empty); if it is conceived of as genically real (a non-empty or non-dependently arisen thing, for example the Brahmanic notion of *ātman* or the Abhidharmika's *dharma*) it cannot also be simultaneously conceived of as generatively real (does not exist empirically, conventionally, or experientially). In other words, there is an inverse correspondence between generative reality and genic emptiness. To deny the generative reality of the world (dependent arising) is to deny its genic emptiness. Nāgārjuna argues for the validity of the generative conception of the world and its correlating genic emptiness in order to preserve the worldly conventions according to which everything in the world changes in keeping with various conditions. That is, a generative world has no place for any genic entity. The world is generatively real and, at the same time, genically empty.

Emptiness is not another reality, but rather the negation of any genic reality:

If emptiness itself is rejected,
No action will be appropriate.
There would be action which did not begin,
And there would be agent without action.³⁶

This is the flip side of the same point made in the verse above. That is, to reject the genic emptiness of the world is to reify the world. Reification of the world does not make it more real. Instead, such a move would actually rob the world of its generative reality and would lead to the negation of the world and of the basic contour of our experience. Nāgārjuna is using emptiness of genic entities to validate the thoroughly generative nature of the world:

If there is essence, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.³⁷

Genic entities are immutable, timeless, permanent, eternal, and static whereas generative entities are the exact opposite, that is, mutable, temporal, impermanent, changing, and dynamic. If we reify the world into some genic reality, it would mean that such a world cannot change. This would contradict the fundamental characteristic of the world and the basic contour of our experience, namely change. Nāgārjuna has clearly come down on the side of generative reality, which is the world as we experience it and our lives as we live it. In asserting the emptiness of any genic entity, Nāgārjuna rejects the genic conception of reality and regards it as incompatible with the generative reality of the world.

Reality can be conceived of either generatively or genically, but not both. In advancing the teaching of emptiness, Nāgārjuna is reaffirming the generative discourse of dependent origination and reinterpreting reality as exclusively generative without any involvement of genic elements such as intrinsic nature or essence (*svabhāva*) or irreducible units of existence (*dharma*). From Nāgārjuna's perspective, much of the mainstream philosophical discourse either mixes up the two in its muddled understanding of reality or compromises the reality of the world. A case in point is the Abhidharmikas, who, in defining *dharma* as both foundational and changing, are either (a) conceptually inconsistent and incoherent by confusing the genic and the generative conceptions of reality by trying to hold onto both in their explanation of the world, or (b) agnostic about the origination of *dharma* and its *svabhāva* since their theory cannot, in principle, explain how a *dharma* can change other than by asserting, *ad hoc*, that it is dictated by the *dharma's* own nature (*svabhāva*) even though *svabhāva* is not subject to any further conditioning:

If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit.
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist.³⁸

Whoever sees dependent arising
Also sees suffering
And its arising
And its cessation as well as the path.³⁹

Here Nāgārjuna applies the right understanding of emptiness to the Four Noble Truths and points out that only when they are empty can suffering arise and cease. In other words, only genic emptiness, or what is genically empty, is compatible with the thoroughly generative reality; if the world is not understood as genically empty, such an understanding would be incompatible with the generative world as it would hinder the continuous generativity of the world. Only within the thoroughly generative reality, namely the lived world, can the Four Noble Truths make any sense, since this reality is predicated on the understanding of such a generative world.

One question is often raised in this connection: why should anyone follow the Buddha's teaching, rather than other teachings, since they are all ultimately empty anyway according to Nāgārjuna (even when emptiness is correctly understood)?⁴⁰ Behind such an accusation—that Nāgārjuna has rendered the Buddha's enlightenment unintelligible and has denied the possibility of any path toward it—lies the perceived inability on the part of Nāgārjuna to account for the reason why the Buddha's teaching should be considered better than others if all teachings are empty. However, on this question Nāgārjuna's response is decidedly unambiguous: only the Buddha's teaching, as Nāgārjuna demonstrates in his defense of the Four Noble Truths, is thoroughly generative and genically empty.

This brings us to a crucial point in understanding how a theoretical construct is evaluated respectively in the genic and the generative paradigms. In the genic paradigm, the generative is illusory. Therefore, a conceptual hierarchy is established in such a way that the value of the generative is measured by its approximation to the genic. Of course, the generative always falls short but its degree of reality is determined by how close it is to the genic, since the highest value within the genic paradigm is always placed on the absolute, the eternal, and the changeless, all of which are taken to be the characteristics of the perfect and the ultimate, namely the genic. In stark contrast, under the generative paradigm, the genic is illusory. Accordingly, an evaluation of any theoretical effort in the generative paradigm does not depend on the approximation of its conceptual postulates to the genic, which is rejected as illusory, but rather on the degree of generativity such an effort brings about in our understanding of the world and on the transparency it leads to in our cognition of the world. The less reification and objectification a theoretical construct brings about in our cognition of the world, the more generative and transparent the world becomes to us, and the better and more effective such a conceptual effort is. The best kind of generative conceptual system is one that is able to effectuate a complete cognitive transparency that does not allow any reifying activity or reified object to hinder the realization of the world as thoroughly generative, bottomlessly deep, and infinitely intelligible.

This can help to explain Nāgārjuna's rather daring, or bizarre, claim that he has no view.⁴¹ Scholars have been debating whether it is at all possible to critique others while not committing oneself to a view. However, using our genic/generative framework, we can see that a view, understood as the ground of philosophical critiques, is a genic concept considered illusory within the generative paradigm. If we have

established that Nāgārjuna's philosophy operates within the generative paradigm, it makes perfect sense that he would shun any genic entity, for example a view. It would have been self-defeating if he were to insert a genic entity, such as a view, into his thoroughly generative framework.⁴² Nāgārjuna is making the case that his philosophy, and the Buddhist project, is ultimately self-erasing. In this respect, Nāgārjuna's defense of the Buddhist enlightenment project offers a powerful demonstration of how a thoroughly generative theoretical construct is supposed to work:

The pacification of all objectification
And the pacification of illusion:
No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
At any time, in any place, to any person.⁴³

Genically and ultimately, *Dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha), Buddha, time, place, and person are all nonsensical; no meaningful assertion can be made about anything genically since a thing only makes generative and conventional sense. Generatively and conventionally, there was *Dharma* that was taught by the Buddha, at some point in time and place to some people; this is the world we live in, cleansed of any reification or illusion.

For Nāgārjuna, only the teaching of the Buddha is genically empty, which means that a genuine Buddhist teaching is one that does not posit any ultimate genic entity to impede the cognitive transparency of the thoroughly generative world. The Buddha's teaching eventually erases itself rather than perpetuating itself. By contrast, other teachings perpetuate themselves because they either (a) confuse generative and genic entities, leading to the postulation of certain entities for explanatory purposes but subsequently reifying them into something genic in order to justify their postulation, or (b) sacrifice the generative in order to save the absolute validity of the genic, leading to the compromise or even rejection of the world and the general contour of our experience. Nāgārjuna takes it upon himself to restore the true spirit of the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, which also provides the rationale for the Four Noble Truths. Such a teaching is generative, through and through, echoing the world that is generative, through and through.

It is in this light that the following verses should be interpreted:

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention
And an ultimate truth.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

Conventional and ultimate truths are two different ways of understanding the world, generative and genic respectively. Generatively and conventionally, there is the

world; genically and ultimately, there is nothing. The significance of the ultimate truth lies in its radicalization of the conventional truth by exposing that what we mean by the generative or conventional is usually more than what is truly generative or conventional because it almost always involves some genic entities that are postulated to explain the conventional or generative but are not themselves conventional or subject to generative analysis, for example substance, essence, and other genic entities. Nāgārjuna's effort lays bare, and rejects, this subtle insertion of the genic/non-conventional entities into the generative/conventional realm of dependent origination that is represented by the Abhidharmikas. In order for the conventional to be truly conventional, it has to be thoroughly generative, which is, eo ipso, genically empty.

Paradigmatically, there is an inverse correspondence between generative reality and genic emptiness on the one hand and generative emptiness and genic reality on the other. Normatively, Nāgārjuna only accepts the generative conception of reality, namely dependent origination, and its inverse correspondent of the genic emptiness, while rejecting the opposite pair, since a non-generated, immutable, and eternal genic reality is contrary to the most basic contour of our experiences.⁴⁶ His teaching of emptiness is a way to free the generative realm of dependent origination from any distortive presence of genic residue. Therefore,

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) and *nirvāṇa*.
There is not the slightest difference
Between *nirvāṇa* and cyclic existence.⁴⁷

Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*,
That is the limit of cyclic existence.
There is not even the slightest difference between them,
Or even the subtlest thing.⁴⁸

Saṃsāra is the result of reification and attachment. Or, with regard to our terminologies here, it is the result of confusing the generative and the genic conceptions of reality. The end of *saṃsāra* means the cleansing of the genic from the generative domain and the realization of the inverse correspondence between generative reality and genic emptiness. The ending of *saṃsāra* itself is *nirvāṇa*. This is why *nirvāṇa* should be understood as the end of *saṃsāra*, not as a separate world for the enlightened. As Nāgārjuna interprets it, the Buddha's teaching can best be understood as promoting a vision of the world that is generatively real but genically empty. Only when the world is genically empty can it be generatively real. Genically, there is nothing; generatively, there is the world. To preserve the generativity of the world, any genic elements have to be rejected due to the mutual exclusivity between the genic and the generative. If there could be anything genic, for example essence, substance, soul, God, et cetera, it would not be findable generatively since it would not be a possible object of experience, to use Kantian terminology.

For Nāgārjuna, what makes the Buddha's teaching more effective than the other teachings is that it alone exhibits the understanding of the inverse correspondence

between generative reality and genic emptiness, resulting in its eventual self-erasure and fostering an objectlessly transparent cognition of enlightenment. Any reifying mental activity or reified object, however subtle, would constitute an obstruction to such a thorough transparency of the enlightened cognition. The other teachings, on the other hand, either (a) compromise, even reject, the world or (b) fail to recognize the incommensurability of the two with the consequence of reifying and distortive cognitions at multiple levels due to the fact that the genic constantly get in the way of appreciating the thorough generativity of the world and the cognitive transparency of the enlightened vision.

Reification, at various levels, is a subtle form of distortion that the Buddhist tradition has been trying to deal with. Emptiness is precisely the culmination of such an effort, and hence can best be interpreted as non-distortion of the generative reality, all the way, up (to *nirvāṇa*) and down (to *saṃsāra*). In other words, emptiness does not negate the generative reality, the only reality for Nāgārjuna. On the contrary, it is the very affirmation of such a reality, cleansed of any reified element. It is the non-distortion of the generative reality, thus advancing a radically different way to engage the world that is cognitively transparent and freed from any distortion and attachment, everyday as well as meditative.

Conclusion

This essay provides a new conceptual framework to discuss Nāgārjuna's philosophy outside the immediate context of scholastic Buddhism. I have framed the discussion in terms of his challenge to the strategies that have been developed, within the mainstream philosophical discourse both in the West and India, to deal with the tension between two conceptions of reality, genic and generative. Accordingly, Nāgārjuna is one of the few prominent world philosophers who have fully recognized what is at stake and have attempted to solve the core tension between the genic and the generative conceptions of reality.

The uniqueness of Nāgārjuna's effort can be seen in at least two aspects. First, he adamantly rejects bifurcating reality into two distinct realms and instead argues for one reality that is thoroughly generative and genically empty, hence bottomlessly deep and infinitely intelligible. Second, he makes a rigorous case for the incommensurability between two conceptions of reality, and in the end rejects the genic conception while embracing the generative as a way both to validate the lived world and to transform the way it is experienced. His appeal to emptiness is meant to free our cognitions of the generative world, whether on the everyday gross level or on the meditative subtle level, from any distortion by genic reifications.

Nāgārjuna's discussion of dependent origination, emptiness, and their relation can be viewed most fruitfully within such a framework. That is, the relation between dependent origination and emptiness can be best understood as the achieved meditative cognition that sees an inverse correlation between generative dependent origination of the world and its genic emptiness. In their distinct ways they both point to the same and only reality that is generative through and through, with dependent

origination playing the constructing role and emptiness the guarding role. Both help Nāgārjuna to keep his commitment to the Buddhist enlightenment project, which promotes a transparent and non-distortive mode of experiencing and engaging with the world while guarding against any trace of distortion, however subtle or edifying from the everyday and the meditative perspectives.

Let me conclude by briefly addressing the issue of relativism that is sometimes raised in connection with Nāgārjuna's philosophy, even though it is not really problematized within the Indian context.⁴⁹ The kind of relativism relevant to our discussion here is derived from a reading of Nāgārjuna's project in terms of his rejection of a convention-transcendent truth as the ultimate adjudicator of conventional truth. This is especially difficult given the overwhelming success of modern science and its claims about the world. As Jan Westerhoff nicely summarizes it:

Even a cursory acquaintance with the history of science will show that we are where we are now only through a persistent process replacing beliefs we once held to be true but no longer do. But it seems hard to explain what our justification for this shift is if it is not trying to bring our beliefs into greater accord with the way things are. All we ever seem to be dealing with according to the Madhyamaka view is a purely immanent notion of truth where the only kind of truth we have access to is a reflection of conventional human practices and agreements.⁵⁰

According to Westerhoff, the difficulty with Nāgārjuna's internalist theory of truth is its embrace of conventionality, which seems to compromise our ability to adjudicate various truth claims based on different conventions without the possibility of going outside conventions. If Nāgārjuna's philosophy entails that any conventional claim of truth is as valid (or invalid for that matter) as any others, relativism seems to be the natural conclusion.

However, this way of framing Nāgārjuna's philosophy ignores the significance of ultimate truth in his project. More specifically, it does not take into account the radical transformation of the conventional truth entailed by his presentation of ultimate truth. Nāgārjuna is not simply describing that all conventional truths are merely conventional and equally so. He is also prescribing that in order for a conventional truth to be true, it has to be thoroughly generative. The value of ultimate truth in his philosophy is precisely the demand it places on the conventional truth to be thoroughly conventional, in a clear recognition that the conventional truth within the naive attitude is full of genic entities, hence not thoroughly generative and conventional. The resort to ultimate truth in Nāgārjuna's philosophy is not simply to affirm the conventional truth as such within the naive attitude, but rather to make the conventional truth *thoroughly* conventional, reflecting the inverse correspondence between the generative reality and the genic emptiness when it comes to the enlightened cognition of the world. As a result, both the conventional and the ultimate are transformed and radicalized from the ignorant and naive to the enlightened, in the sense not just that the conventional truth of generative reality is conventional when *compared* with the ultimate truth of genic reality (due to the incommensurability between generative reality and genic reality), but rather that the conventional truth of generative reality is

thoroughly conventional and generative when *paired* with the ultimate truth of genic emptiness.⁵¹

Consequently, there is no need to go outside conventionality to adjudicate various truth claims. Within the realm of the conventional, some claims are truer than others because the degree of generativity in the former is higher than in the latter, not as arbitrary assertions but as empirically and experientially verifiable cognitions. The more a theory promotes a generative understanding of the world, the more it demonstrates its infinite intelligibility; the more it helps to cultivate the objectless cognitive transparency, the truer that theory is. Even though all theoretical constructs are ultimately empty, none, except the Buddha's teaching, reflects such emptiness *within* the theories themselves. In Nāgārjuna's interpretation, the Buddha's teaching is not just internally coherent, but, more importantly, it alone exhibits genic emptiness within itself.

Such an account of Nāgārjuna's philosophical project is entirely compatible with the modern scientific project that is premised on an infinite intelligibility of the world, even though it might be far-fetched to claim that Nāgārjuna's Buddhism is scientific due to the vast difference in the specifics of their methods and in the purposes of the two projects. Nevertheless, they do share a commitment that, as long as there is something left, it needs to be examined, and the *inquiry*⁵² goes on, forever.

Notes

I would like to thank Jay Garfield and Jan Westerhoff for their constructive suggestions to an earlier version of this article. The critical readings of the two anonymous reviewers also made this a better essay. Needless to say, all errors and inadequacies are mine alone.

- 1 – My coinage of the term “genic” clearly has some etymological connection to the word “gene.” However, since the commonly used adjectival form for the word gene is “genetic,” my term “genic” is meant to convey the sense that it is the ground of gene.
- 2 – The title of David Kalupahana's book *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1975) makes clear the crucial position of dependent origination in Buddhist philosophy. The translation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (Sk. *pratītyasamutpāda*) as dependent origination or causality will not concern us here. See Kalupahana (p. 54) for the etymological analysis of the term.
- 3 – Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 38.19.
- 4 – Ibid. 38.22.

- 5 – Ibid. 38.17 ff. Also see *Mahānidāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on Origination*, in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, by Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995).
- 6 – David Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 16.
- 7 – *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 12:15(5), in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, trans. from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 544.
- 8 – Mark Siderits, “Buddhist Reductionism,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 4 (1997): 455–478, at p. 471.
- 9 – Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), p. 109.
- 10 – David Burton, *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna’s Philosophy* (Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon, 1999), p. 91.
- 11 – On the other hand, if reality is conceived of genically, it cannot also be generative at the same time. We can easily see why philosophers like Parmenides and Śāṅkara embrace the genic reality while rejecting the generative reality.
- 12 – *MMK* 15:1, in Jay L. Garfield, trans. and comment., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 39.
- 13 – *MMK* 15:2, in Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 39.
- 14 – Jan Westerhoff, “The Madhyamaka Concept of *Svabhāva*: Ontological and Cognitive Aspects,” *Asian Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2007): pp. 17–45.
- 15 – Ibid., p. 18.
- 16 – Ibid., p. 20.
- 17 – Ibid., p. 21.
- 18 – Ibid., p. 20.
- 19 – Ibid., p. 23.
- 20 – Garfield does not seem to accept such a view, as he translates *svabhāva* as “essence” regularly in his rendition of the *MMK*, especially in chapter 15, which is devoted to the discussion of *svabhāva*.
- 21 – Westerhoff, “The Madhyamaka Concept of *Svabhāva*,” p. 30.
- 22 – Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics*, p. 108.
- 23 – Ibid., p. 109.
- 24 – Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, pp. 89–90.

- 25 – Nāgārjuna through the ages has been accused of being a nihilist in India despite his claim to the contrary. Although contemporary Western Buddhist scholarship is largely sympathetic to Nāgārjuna, some remain skeptical of his own claim. David Burton, in his *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy*, has provided the most comprehensive defense of the nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy in recent literature.
- 26 – This also explains the Buddha's silence on many occasions, since to talk about anything is to reify it, even when it is non-existent.
- 27 – This question is raised by an anonymous reviewer.
- 28 – Nevertheless, an interesting issue emerges in this connection with respect to the possibility of discussing the generative without appealing to any conception of the genic. The question is posed by an anonymous reviewer this way: with the disappearance of the abstract/concrete distinction and the recognition that all existents are thoroughly generative, not genic, can the *fact* about the world—that “all things are thoroughly generative, not genic”—remain stable at all? Without such a conceptual stability, how can any discussion of the generative be meaningfully conducted since the ground of any discussion would keep shifting? These questions are concerned with two issues: first, can a linguistic convention operate generatively? Second, are linguistic/conceptual references independent of a linguistic convention?

For the first question, from the generative perspective, a linguistic convention, along with its conceptual reference, changes, and such changes are contingent on various conditions, although the relative stability of the linguistic/conceptual references can foster the illusory sense of a Platonic world of formal intelligibility. In the generative realm, change is the reality by default, and stability (both linguistic and conceptual) is the one that needs to be accounted for, not by appealing to its embodiment or reflection of the genic, which has been rejected by the generative, but by the various configurations of conditions that make possible different degrees of temporary stability. In other words, from the perspective of the generative, stability cannot simply be assumed, but needs to be explained. Furthermore, our need for linguistic and conceptual stability is pragmatic in nature, and the resort to the metaphysical realm of the genic to explain the linguistic/conceptual stability does not pass the test of Ockham's razor, to use a popular Western standard.

The second question concerns the possible autonomy of the linguistic realm or at least the autonomy of its conceptual reference. The autonomy of the linguistic/conceptual realm from the changing world assumes the genic nature of the former. However, from the perspective of the generative, there would not have been any such *fact*—that “all things are thoroughly generative, not genic”—without a linguistic convention that structures the world for us as intelligible. Outside any linguistic context, there is no “fact” to talk about since a fact is the construction of a linguistic convention. Words (and sentences) do not

simply refer to their objects; they also construct their objects in the human engagement of the world. Put differently, words refer to what they construct, which means that language is constitutive of the very intelligibility of the world so constructed and referred to. Of course, such a construction does not necessarily make linguistic/conceptual reference arbitrary. Rather, it is the result of our various practical needs within certain lived conditions. Due to this element of construction in our linguistic/conceptual activities and their constitution in the very intelligibility of the world for us, we cannot formulate such a world by relying on a linguistic convention and then think that somehow the world so constructed still makes *sense* to us without that very linguistic convention. This is clearly reflected in *MMK* 25:24, where Nāgārjuna states that the Buddha did not teach anyone anything at any point. I will have a more detailed interpretation of this verse using the genic/generative scheme later in this essay, but suffice it to say that for Nāgārjuna any linguistic construction of the world makes no sense outside that linguistic convention.

- 29 – Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, trans., *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: Vīgrahavyāvartanī* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), p. xxxii.
- 30 – For a more detailed analysis of Nāgārjuna’s discussion of infinite regress and his opponents’ responses, readers may find it helpful to refer to Bimal Matilal’s explanation in chapter 2 of his *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 31 – *MMK* 24:16.
- 32 – *MMK* 24:17.
- 33 – *MMK* 24:18.
- 34 – *MMK* 24:19.
- 35 – *MMK* 24:36.
- 36 – *MMK* 24:37.
- 37 – *MMK* 24:38.
- 38 – *MMK* 24:39.
- 39 – *MMK* 24:40.
- 40 – *MMK* 24:1–6 is a good example of this, even though the challenge by the opponent is premised on an erroneous, nihilistic, understanding of emptiness.
- 41 – This is most explicitly demonstrated in *Vīgrahavyāvartanī* (verse 29). In *MMK* 13.8, Nāgārjuna puts it this way: “The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. For whomever emptiness is a view, that one will accomplish nothing.” For a more detailed discussion of the issues involved, readers can refer to Jan Westerhoff’s *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 9.

- 42 – We have already noted that the generative paradigm itself does not become a genic entity earlier in the essay because there is simply no genic entity left within the thoroughly generative domain and there is no “generativity” itself to talk about outside the relationality of the world.
- 43 – *MMK* 25:24.
- 44 – *MMK* 24:8.
- 45 – *MMK* 24:10.
- 46 – In this regard, Śaṅkara can be seen as adopting the exact opposite pair of the correlate, namely the pair of the genic reality of *ātman/Brahman* and the generative emptiness (or illusoriness) of the world.
- 47 – *MMK* 25:19.
- 48 – *MMK* 25:20.
- 49 – See Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka*, p. 222 n. 42.
- 50 – *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 51 – *MMK* 24:10.
- 52 – As opposed to simply making unverified and unverifiable assertions.