

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

DON'T STOP BELIEVING: AN ARGUMENT AGAINST BUDDHIST SKEPTICISM

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Ethan Mills' *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa* is an ambitious book. I say ambitious because the discussion of each of his three pillars really warrants its own book, and the attempt to identify a "tradition" of skepticism about philosophy in Classical Indian thought by relating each thinker to one another and to proto-skeptical trends in even earlier thought is also a really ambitious undertaking. I am not sure Mills' attempt has established that there is such a tradition or that each of the thinkers is a skeptic about philosophy, however, the work Mills has done has laid the foundation for a lot of interesting and fruitful future work. Mills has successfully set the ball rolling, as it were, in provocative and insightful ways. I am really glad to be able here to make my small contribution to the conversation Mills' book will no doubt continue to inspire.

My comments on *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India: Nāgārjuna, Jayarāsi, and Śrī Harṣa* focus on the argument, presented mostly in chapters 2 and 3, for the claim that the Buddhist thinker Nāgārjuna is plausibly read as a skeptic about philosophy and thus constitutes one of the three pillars of skepticism in classical Indian philosophy. Mills characterizes skepticism about philosophy as being composed of a family of therapies (as opposed to views) that have as their goal the suspension of philosophical theorizing. Mills identifies several features that are common among skepticisms about philosophy, including the use of philosophy to undermine itself and the avoidance of drawing any theoretical conclusion. Sceptics about philosophy generally advocate, explains Mills, for the "whole-sale refusal of the project of forming conclusions within epistemology and other areas of philosophy," and thus are best characterized as engaging in "a form of intellectual therapy with the goal of creating a mental coolness wherein one's impulse to form beliefs (at least about philosophical matters) is dissipated" (Mills 2018, xxvii).

Mills argues that the skeptical interpretation he defends is the most successful at reconciling two competing tendencies in Nāgārjuna's works: (1) Claims to the effect

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that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva* (I will leave this important term untranslated for now but will come back to it) and (2) statements to the effect that he, Nāgārjuna, has no view. Since tendency (1) claims seem to be the articulation of a view, tendency (2) claims are puzzling. Hence, the tension. Mills argues that reading Nāgārjuna as a skeptic about philosophy makes the best sense of these two competing tendencies in his work. Tendency (2) expressions are, according to Mills, reflective of Nāgārjuna's final skeptical stance. Tendency (1) claims are merely provisionally adopted as the first step in a two-step dialectical progression that culminates in skepticism. Tendency (1) claims and arguments help undermine the realist philosophical positions of Nāgārjuna's Naiyāyika and Ābhīdharmika opponents. But the anti-realist view reflected in tendency (1) claims—that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*—must like the views of the opponents also be abandoned, resulting in the complete abandonment of all philosophical views. One is led to abandon tendency (1) claims, argues Mills, by coming to realize that they involve an internal contradiction. He explains,

In the first phase Nāgārjuna argues in favor of a thesis of emptiness and against essence (*svabhāva*). Here Nāgārjuna can profitably be understood in anti-realist terms. In the second phase Nāgārjuna demonstrates that, while the thesis of emptiness undermines all other philosophical views, it also undermines itself, thus leaving one without any views, theses, or positions whatsoever (*ibid.*, 35).

According to Mills, the claim that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva* is self-refuting. Realizing this, he argues, leads the reflective Buddhist to abandon philosophy and adopt the quietist attitude, reflected in tendency (2) expressions.

Mills thinks that the claim that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*—a thesis he calls the “thesis of universal emptiness” (*ibid.*, 26) (hereafter: TUE)—is self-refuting because

[t]he thesis of emptiness would simultaneously possess and lack the characteristic of being empty (it possesses the characteristic by stipulated definition and lacks it due to the content of the idea of universal emptiness) (*ibid.*, 35).

Here Mills points out that as a universal thesis, TUE also applies to itself—a point that Nāgārjuna himself makes clear. Therefore, the thesis itself, as Mills puts it, “possesses...the characteristic of being empty.” Yet Mills here argues that it could not have this characteristic “due to the content of the idea.” About this content Mills states that “[w]hatever else anti-realism may be, it is a philosophical theory, one that purports to explain something about how things are; that there really is no mind-independent reality” (*ibid.*, 34). The problem Mills sees here is that insofar as the thesis of universal emptiness makes a claim about how things are, it is ascribing an essence (*svabhāva*) to them. This, in effect, makes the claim a non-empty one because it is stating a truth that is true in virtue of how things are essentially. Mills thus concludes that “emptiness...cannot have the characteristic of emptiness that would

form the content of a view about emptiness” (Mills 2018, 38). Yet given the universal scope of the thesis, the thesis *is* supposed to be empty. The result appears to be a contradiction. It is this contradiction that is supposed to motivate the move from tendency (1) claims to the adoption of the skeptical stance reflected in tendency (2) expressions.¹

The main problem I see with Mills’ position is that TUE is not self-refuting. And if it is not self-refuting, then there is no dialectical movement from tendency (1) claims to tendency (2) expressions. And without the dialectical movement we again find ourselves without a resolution of the tension between tendency (1) and tendency (2). And given that the motivation Mills cites for accepting his skeptical interpretation is that it is able to resolve this tension, if the thesis of universal emptiness is not self-refuting, the motivation for taking tendency (2) statements as expressing a skeptical position and using this as the interpretive frame through which to understand Nāgārjuna’s thought is lost.

Furthermore, the anti-realist interpretation, defended by the likes of Jan Westerhoff and Mark Siderits (and myself), *does* offer a way of reconciling the apparent conflict between tendency (1) and tendency (2) claims.² These anti-realists resolve the tension by making explicit what is, they argue, implicit in the texts given the context of discussion. The anti-realist argues that in tendency (2) claims Nāgārjuna means to deny only that he has any views that presuppose the realist metaphysics and epistemology of his opponents. These opponents define what a view is—its intentional content and its truth conditions—in terms of a realist metaphysics. Since Nāgārjuna denies those realist presuppositions, he denies he has ‘views’ as his opponents understand them.

I argue that since the anti-realist interpretation can reconcile the two tendencies, and the skeptical interpretation cannot, the anti-realist interpretation continues to be the most plausible interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s texts. I say this, of course, with the recognition that the hermeneutic situation with respect to Nāgārjuna’s texts is difficult. The texts are cryptic and the historical context is opaque. The best we can do is offer interpretations that are consistent with the historical and textual evidence we have. Examination of that evidence, I argue, reveals that the apparent contradiction Mills sees in TUE is the result of equivocating between two different uses of the term ‘ultimate’ (*paramārtha*) in early Buddhist literature and, relatedly, not being clear about what it is that Nāgārjuna is and is not denying when he denies that any phenomenon has *svabhāva*. Examination of the historical context of Nāgārjuna’s thought helps to disentangle the equivocation, revealing that TUE does not in fact undermine itself.

¹ In the conclusion of his book, Mills makes clear that his argument for the inconsistency of TUE is developed from arguments made by Garfield and Priest (2002, 2003) for the slightly different conclusion that TUE is paradoxical. Garfield and Priest embrace the paradoxical nature of TUE and use it to argue for a dialethist interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s work. Mills on the other hand takes Garfield and Priest’s arguments to show that TUE is self-contradictory and concludes that Nāgārjuna intends TUE to be ultimately rejected in favor of skepticism about philosophy.

² See for example Westerhoff (2009, 2010) and Siderits (2000, 2015, 2016).

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SVABHĀVA

The best evidence we have for what *svabhāva* is in Nāgārjuna's historical context, and thus what Nāgārjuna is denying in TUE, is provided by Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra* and by the early Abhidharma compendium the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā* (hereafter: *Mahāvibhāṣā*)—both roughly contemporaneous with Nāgārjuna.³ The *Nyāyasūtra* is the canonical text of Nāgārjuna's Naiyāyika opponents. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* presents the kind of reductive analysis that informs the understanding of *svabhāva* of Nāgārjuna's Ābhidharmika opponents, as well as introducing a specifically ontological distinction between ultimate (*paramārtha*) and conventional (*prajñapti/samvṛti*) truth.⁴ If Nāgārjuna aims to engage with the philosophy of his day, we should expect Nāgārjuna to be responding to the understanding of *svabhāva* that is presented and defended in these texts, as well as to the distinction drawn in earlier literature between what is ultimate and what is conventional.

The first important thing to note about Nāgārjuna's position relative to these texts is that he does *not* mean to deny the claims of commonsense in denying that phenomena have *svabhāva*. Nāgārjuna and his Naiyāyika and Ābhidharmika opponents share a commitment to commonsense. By this I mean that they agree that, as we ordinarily assert, there are different kinds of things that are classified into kinds in virtue of having certain characteristic features. They also agree that there are accurate and inaccurate ways to represent those things and the world they constitute. All sides acknowledge, for example, that seeds give rise to sprouts, that cows have dewlaps, that smoke is evidence of fire, and that horned rabbits don't exist. This is particularly evident in the use of reductio-style arguments (*prasaṅga* and *tarka*) by Nāgārjuna and his Naiyāyika opponents that argue against the opposing view by attempting to show that that opposing view fails to conform to the type of commonsense views articulated above. For example, in verse 70 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (hereafter: *VV*) Nāgārjuna states that

For whom there is emptiness, there are all things. For whom there is no emptiness, there is nothing whatsoever (Westerhoff 2010, 42).

In chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter: *MMK*), he also says the following:

24.14 All is possible when emptiness is possible. Nothing is possible when emptiness is impossible.

24.16 If you look upon existents as real intrinsically, in that case you regard existents as being without cause and conditions.

³ The dates for these and Nāgārjuna's text are contentious but the best evidence so far suggests that these texts represent ideas from roughly the same historical period—2nd Century CE. For more about Nāgārjuna's historical context see Walser (2005) and Westerhoff (2009).

⁴ For my discussion of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* I am relying on Cox (2004).

24.17 Effect and cause, as well as agent, instrument and act, arising and ceasing, and fruit—all these you thereby deny.

24.38 The world would be unproduced, unceased, and unchangeable, it would be devoid of its manifold appearances, if there were intrinsic nature. (Katsura & Siderits 2013, 276-277 & 287)

Similarly, the Naiyāyika Vātsyāyana in his commentary to *Nyāyasūtra* 4.1.38 argues that

if there were non-existence [*abhāva*] (as alleged by the Buddhists) things would be indescribable and featureless, they would not have distinctive properties captured in common ideas about being and so on. But we do find such properties. And thus it is not the case that everything lacks substantial existence [*svabhāva*] (Phillips and Dasti, 98).⁵

An examination of these kinds of arguments reveal that all parties in the dispute are committed to presenting views that are in conformity with commonsense. Each argument seeks to show that the world of our ordinary experience would not be possible if the opponent's view were correct and on that basis concludes that the opponent's view must be mistaken. No one, including Nāgārjuna, wishes to deny the claims of commonsense. Each party in the debate seeks to defend a position that is consistent with it.

So in TUE, Nāgārjuna is not denying that phenomena exist and have a nature. One way to make this point is to say that Nāgārjuna accepts that there is *bhāva*, at least in some deflated sense of the term '*bhāva*', a Sanskrit term that means existent, being, or nature. Mills agrees with this point insofar as he considers Nāgārjuna's arguments to target specifically *philosophical* claims, while leaving ordinary discourse untouched. What Nāgārjuna specifically denies is that phenomena have or are *svabhāva*—the term '*svabhāva*' at first pass means something like *self-nature* or *own-nature*.

We can best understand what it is that Nāgārjuna is denying when he denies that phenomena have, or are, *svabhāva* by examining the way the concept of *svabhāva* was used by its proponents in Nāgārjuna's (most likely) historical context. As the section of Vātsyāyana's commentary quoted above indicates, in the *Nyāyasūtra*, the term '*svabhāva*' is used to indicate those properties of an entity that determine the kind of thing an entity is. Things with the same nature, the same *svabhāva*, are the same kind of thing.⁶ Gautama thus uses *svabhāva* to explain *bhāva*; in fact, in verse

⁵ It is worth noting that the Naiyāyika is not here accurately representing the Madhyamaka position by characterizing the view as "*abhāva*." *Svabhāva* and *bhāva* are the same for the Naiyāyikas and so they often conflate the two senses in characterizing the Buddhist position. This conflation is evident in the conclusion they draw that specifically cites *svabhāva* as the subject of their reductio argument. The reductio would not go through unless they understood *svabhāva* and *bhāva* to be the same.

⁶ Vātsyāyana, in his commentary on verse 4.1.38 uses the ontological categories of the Vaiśeṣika as examples to help illustrate this point. What makes something a universal (*sāmānya*), for example, is that is common to, or inheres in, many substances. A universal is the kind of thing (*bhāva*) that is repeatable across instances (Dasti & Phillips 2017, 97-98).

4.1.38 he equates the two. Entities, he says, are determined by their *svabhāva*. Furthermore, in Nyāyasūtra 4.1.39-40 *svabhāva* is specifically characterized as being intrinsic as opposed to relational. It is argued that a being must first have its own, intrinsic nature—its *svabhāva*—in order for relational properties to even be possible. Gautama argues for a being to exist and have a nature at all—for it to be a *bhāva*—it must have *svabhāva*, i.e., a nature that is intrinsic to it.

In the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, we see *svabhāva* also being used to classify entities. For example, for these Ābhidharmikas, what makes an earth *dharma* an earth *dharma* is that it is a token of solidity—the defining characteristic, the *svabhāva*, of earth. Unlike the Naiyāyikas, however, the Ābhidharmikas use the notion of *svabhāva* to mark an ontological distinction between entities (*bhāvas*)—those that are fundamental (*dravya-sat*) and those entities (*bhāvas*) that are ontologically dependent (*prajñapti-sat*). Only the former are said to have, or rather to be, *svabhāva*—to have their own, intrinsic, non-dependent nature (Cox 2004, 569-570). For example, a pot’s solidity is due to its being composed of earth *dharma*s, which are themselves tokens of solidity. A pot’s solidity is not, therefore, an intrinsic characteristic (a *svabhāva*) of the pot but rather a dependent one. According to these Ābhidharmikas, none of the pot’s features are intrinsic. The pot derives its being and its nature from the nature of its more fundamental constituents. The force of the ‘*sva*’ in this Abhidharma context thus indicates non-reducibility and ontological fundamentality.

These early Nyāya and Abhidharma texts demonstrate that the force of the ‘*sva*’ in ‘*svabhāva*’ for both these traditions is to indicate a nature (*bhāva*) that is intrinsic to the thing in question. In light of all this, if we are being charitable, I think it is reasonable to conclude that when Nāgārjuna says all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*, what he is denying is specifically that phenomena have their natures intrinsically—that their *bhāva* is explained in terms of *svabhāva*. So the debate can be summarized in the following way: the Naiyāyika maintain that all *bhāva* are *svabhāva*, the Ābhidharmika maintain that some *bhāva* are *svabhāva*, and Nāgārjuna maintains that no *bhāva* are *svabhāva*. The debate between these thinkers concerns the role that *svabhāva* plays in accounting for and explaining *bhāva*. Nāgārjuna maintains it plays no role, while the Naiyāyikas and the Ābhidharmikas think it does.

The claim that no *bhāva* are *svabhāva*, or what amounts to the same thing, the claim that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature, becomes problematic for Mills when he takes it as itself attributing an intrinsic nature to phenomena—the intrinsic nature of lacking an intrinsic nature. However, it seems to me that this reading should be precluded given that Nāgārjuna famously states in MMK 24.18 that emptiness -- being empty of intrinsic nature—is itself empty. If being empty of intrinsic nature is itself empty of intrinsic nature, then we should not read the claim that some entity is empty as a claim about its intrinsic nature. Keeping a distinction between *bhāva* and *svabhāva* in mind, it stands to reason that Nāgārjuna’s whole point is to challenge the assumption that ascribing a nature to something entails ascribing an intrinsic nature to it. However, this is not how Mills understands TUE. He *does* read TUE as ascribing a kind of *svabhāva* to phenomena: the *svabhāva* of having no *svabhāva*. It is this

contradictory or paradoxical ascription that Mills argues is the impetus for the dialectical move from phase 1 anti-realism to phase 2 quietism.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE ULTIMATE (*PARAMĀRTHA*)

The impetus to read TUE as attributing a no-*svabhāva svabhāva* to things stems from understanding the claim to be ultimately true and then conflating two distinct senses of what it means to be ultimate (*paramārtha*): a hermeneutical sense and an ontological sense.

In Buddhist philosophy, the distinction between ultimate and conventional truth first arose from a hermeneutical distinction made in early *sūtra* literature between those of the Buddha's teachings that require interpretation and those whose meaning is explicit. This distinction later came to be described as a distinction between two kinds of truth: conventional (*saṃvṛti*) truth and ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth. Karunadasa (2006) explains that in this hermeneutic context, both truths are equally truths—there is no hierarchy between them. The difference concerns what it is that a hearer understands when an ordinary statement is made. The idea informing this sense of the distinction between ultimate and conventional truth is that the wise person, paradigmatically the Buddha, has an understanding about the nature of reality that is superior to that of an ordinary person. So whereas an ordinary person thinks of people and objects as enduring, substantial possible sources of happiness, a wise person understands that the desire and attachment to such things is really a source of deep suffering because they are really dependent, impermanent, and non-substantial. Both the ordinary person and a Buddha see the same phenomena, but the Buddha has a deeper understanding of their nature than the ordinary person.

For example, the conventional statement 'There is a person in the chariot' can be recognized as true by both the wise and the unenlightened. However, the wise understand the claim in a way that does not engender suffering because they understand persons and chariots to be dependent, impermanent, and non-substantial. For those unenlightened who have a hard time understanding the claim in such a way, the deeper nature of persons and chariots can be made more explicit—it can be drawn out—in relation to ultimate statements such as 'persons are impermanent and lack substance (*ātman*),' which directly state the Buddha's insights about the nature of reality—what the wise know. Ultimate truths thus do not invalidate or cheapen the truth of conventional statements. On the contrary, they provide a richer, enlightened perspective on the reality that such conventional statements truly describe.

The above hermeneutic use of the distinction, which I will designate 'ultimate₁' and 'conventional₁', came first. A distinctively ontological sense of the distinction between ultimate and conventional arose later in the context of Abhidharma reductive analysis. I will designate this sense of the distinction 'ultimate₂' and 'conventional₂'. In line with the understanding of *svabhāva* that we see in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, these Ābhidharmika Buddhists use this ontological sense of 'ultimate' and 'conventional' to distinguish between two ways in which something might be said to be real. On the one hand there is "conventional reality" (*prajñapti* or *saṃvṛti*) which is the world of

our commonsense experience that is composed of ordinary, composite objects such as cows, pots, and people. In contrast to this, there is an underlying “ultimate reality” (*dravya*) that is composed of the fundamental entities with *svabhāva*, called ‘*dharmas*,’ on which conventional reality depends. Statements about what is ultimately real are described as ultimately true when they correspond to the way the world ultimately is. These statements directly refer only to entities that are ultimately real. On the other hand, statements about conventional entities are described as conventionally true when they correspond to the way the world conventionally is – a way that in turn depends on how things stand at the ultimate level.

In early Buddhist literature there are, therefore, two different notions of ‘ultimate’ (*paramārtha*) at play. The qualifier ‘ultimate’ in the phrases ‘ultimate reality’ or ‘ultimate truth’ can thus be understood in two different ways:

Ultimate₁: reality/truth as it is known by the wise (i.e., enlightened beings like the Buddha)

Ultimate₂: A technical sense introduced by the Ābhidharmikas to indicate reality that is fundamental, i.e., real existence (*dravya*) that is determined by *svabhāva* and the truths regarding that reality.

Ultimate₁ reflects a hermeneutic use of the distinction between ultimate and conventional. Ultimate₂, developed later in Abhidharma texts like the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, on the other hand, has ontological implications that ultimate₁ does not have.

The ultimate truth of TUE only entails that it ascribes a no-*svabhāva svabhāva* if we take its ultimate truth in the second, ontological sense. But I see no reason to read it that way. Nāgārjuna’s Ābhidharmika opponents equate ultimate₁ with ultimate₂ because of their metaphysics. According to them, the deep insight of the wise, ultimate₁, is precisely the knowledge of what is fundamentally real, ultimate₂. However, given that Nāgārjuna rejects that metaphysics, I see good reason to deny he would equate them in the same way—the way required in order to generate the contradiction that would undermine tendency (1) claims thereby motivating the dialectical move to Mills’ proposed skeptical position. Especially at the relatively early dates that Nāgārjuna was writing, I do not think we can presume that ultimate₁ and ultimate₂ are accepted by all Buddhists as being coextensive.

The equivocation that results in taking TUE to be paradoxical or self-refuting I think goes like this:

- (1) TUE is ultimately₁ true.
- (2) Ultimate₂ truth is truth about how the world fundamentally is (i.e., what is ultimately₂ real)
- (3) Therefore, TUE expresses how the world fundamentally is (i.e., what is ultimately₂ real)
- (4) TUE states that all phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*.
- (5) Therefore, the world is fundamentally without *svabhāva*, (i.e., what is ultimately₂ real is without *svabhāva*.)

- (6) What the world is fundamentally, what is ultimately₂ real, is determined by its *svabhāva*.
- (7) Therefore, the world has the fundamental nature of having no fundamental nature (i.e., the *svabhāva* of what is ultimately₂ real is to be without *svabhāva*).

One arrives at the self-contradictory or paradoxical (7) only by first equivocating in (3) between ultimate₁ truth and ultimate₂ truth. (3) only follows from (1) and (2) if one equivocates in this way. Nāgārjuna clearly takes TUE to be ultimately true. The question is, in what sense? Given the various criticisms Nāgārjuna levels against the kind of Abhidharma metaphysics that underpins the ontological distinction between ultimate₂ and conventional₂, I think it stands to reason that he has the hermeneutic distinction in mind. If that is right, then the argument that paradox or self-contradiction result from TUE rests on an equivocation.

Westerhoff (2009) also addresses the concern that TUE is self-defeating and comes to a similar conclusion as I do here. Also citing historical evidence, he differentiates between *three* different senses of '*svabhāva*': essence-*svabhāva*, which is equivalent to the deflated notion of *bhāva* I have been using, substance-*svabhāva*, which is an ontological notion equivalent to *svabhāva*, and absolute-*svabhāva*, which is a notion introduced by a later commentator on Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, to explain the sense in which emptiness is the ultimate nature of all things, the ultimate truth. In Candrakīrtian terms, the problematic argument outlined above understands the notion of absolute-*svabhāva* in terms of substance-*svabhāva*. This is the reading that is required in order for TUE to generate paradox: TUE denies that entities have substance-*svabhāva* but then in identifying their absolute-*svabhāva*, thereby attributes a substance-*svabhāva* to them. Westerhoff argues, however, that ascribing absolute-*svabhāva*, emptiness, to all things is not to ascribe a substance-*svabhāva* to that thing. Rather, absolute-*svabhāva* is a way of describing the essential-*svabhāva* of things (46). In other words, in describing the ultimate nature of things in the sense of absolute-*svabhāva*, what Nāgārjuna is doing is describing the ordinary nature of things (their *bhāva*) as understood by someone who does not falsely project substance-*svabhāva* onto them. Candrakīrti's absolute-*svabhāva* on Westerhoff's reading has the sense of ultimate₁ and Westerhoff's claim that Candrakīrti's absolute-*svabhāva* constitutes essence-*svabhāva* not substance-*svabhāva* would be that the ultimate₁ truth is that nothing is ultimately₂ true. Since 'ultimate' is being used in two different ways in the claim, no paradox results.⁷

Understood this way, TUE is unproblematically applied to emptiness itself. The claim that emptiness is empty amounts to the view that lacking *svabhāva* is not itself a *svabhāva*, or in other words, that lacking intrinsic features is not itself an intrinsic feature. Since to ascribe a nature to something is not necessarily to ascribe an intrinsic nature, we need not think of the lack of intrinsic nature as itself a kind of intrinsic nature. In fact, the claim that emptiness is empty seems to follow from the notion of

⁷ This is a point made also by Siderits when explaining why the paradoxical sounding slogan "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth" is not actually paradoxical. Siderits explains that the paradox is resolved by disambiguating two different senses of the term 'ultimate' (Siderits 2007, 202).

emptiness itself. Emptiness as Nāgārjuna understands it is a second-order property that depends on the nature of the first-order characteristic features an entity has. This makes having or lacking *svabhāva* itself a dependent property. If those specific, first-order characteristics are not had intrinsically, as Nāgārjuna demonstrates again and again in the MMK, then it follows that the entity does not have *svabhāva* as a second-order property. If the features an entity has are not intrinsic, then the second-order property of lacking *svabhāva* (if it can be characterized as a positive property at all!), which depends on those dependent properties, would also be dependent. The dependence of the first-order properties would extend to the second-order properties that in turn depend on them. So it makes perfect sense on Nāgārjuna's view that emptiness would itself be empty since emptiness, itself understood as a characteristic, is the kind of characteristic (like being long or being a whole) that depends on other characteristics, which are themselves empty.

3. THE ULTIMATE₁ TRUTH IS THE CONVENTIONAL₂ TRUTH

On the reading I am advocating here, Nāgārjuna's TUE is a claim about the world of our commonsense experience. TUE claims that that world is not really divided into entities that are ultimate₂ and conventional₂ because there are no ultimate₂ entities. In this sense everything can be said to be conventional₂, although in the absence of the contrasting class of ultimate₂ entities it is unclear exactly what this amounts to. All we can say for sure about conventional₂ entities is that they lack *svabhāva*. Ultimate₁ and conventional₁ truth concerns the ordinary, conventional world. However, insofar as ordinary people often, maybe inevitably, project the notion of *svabhāva* onto things, they lack the wisdom of the wise ones who see the ultimate₁ truth that the conventional world lacks the *svabhāva* that the unenlightened project. It is just one world that is known by both ordinary people and the wise, the wise just understand it better, without delusion.

That TUE is intended as a conventional₂ truth is supported by passages such as MMK 24:18, which states

That which is dependently originated, that we declare to be emptiness. This emptiness being itself dependent (*prajñapti*), that is the middle way.⁸

In the first line of this verse Nāgārjuna explains that anything that is dependently originated has emptiness as its nature. In other words, things that have their nature in dependence on other things do not have their natures intrinsically. They lack *svabhāva* and are thus empty. There is some controversy on how to interpret the second line of this important verse.⁹ However, one common way to read Nāgārjuna holds that he is explicitly including emptiness itself among the phenomena that are dependent and empty. He uses the term '*prajñapti*' here, which is the term the

⁸ My translation made in consultation with Katsura and Siderits (2013) and Garfield (1995).

⁹ See, for example, Berger (2010, 2011), Garfield and Westerhoff (2011).

Mahāvibhāṣā uses, as we saw above, to indicate the ontological status of ordinary objects. The Ābhidharmikas consider ordinary objects to be *prajñapti* and not fundamentally existent (*dravya*) precisely because they lack intrinsic natures and derive their nature from what the Ābhidharmikas consider to be more fundamental things. Describing emptiness as *prajñapti* suggests that Nāgārjuna considers emptiness to be of a kind with all other ordinary, conventional *bhāvas*. If it is the nature of things to be empty, then that nature of being empty is also not intrinsic. And this is a perfectly sensible thing to say given that lacking an intrinsic nature is not the kind of nature that could be intrinsic.

If dependently-arisen natures are non-intrinsic ones, and thus not ultimately₂ real (*dravya*) by the criteria laid out by early Abhidharma texts, then on Nāgārjuna's view all phenomena are at best conventionally₂ real (*prajñapti-sat*) or relationally real (*āpekṣika-sat*) by that standard. But the ontological distinction between ultimate₂ and conventional₂ entities is drawn on the presumption that there is some ontological foundation grounded in the notion of *svabhāva*. Since Nāgārjuna denies that there is any such foundation, the distinction collapses. All there is, on Nāgārjuna's view, is conventional₂ reality. In this respect, Nāgārjuna's view is not that different from that of the Naiyāyikas who also reject the notion of levels of reality. There is, according to these thinkers, just the one reality of commonsense. However, unlike the Naiyāyikas, Nāgārjuna does not take that reality to itself serve as a realist ontological foundation. Rather, he denies the sense of positing such a foundation in the first place. He does not, however, deny that world of commonsense and, given that this world is the only world for him, TUE must be about that world.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued here that there are good reasons not to read TUE in a way that results in it undermining itself. And if I am right about this, I see little motivation for reading Nāgārjuna as a skeptic about philosophy. Without the dialectical move between tendency (1) and tendency (2) claims, such a reading does not reconcile them, and given that the anti-realist interpretation does offer a way to do so, it remains the most plausible interpretation of Nāgārjuna's work. I therefore conclude that Nāgārjuna is not, after all, one of the pillars of skepticism in classical India.

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