

ON WHAT IS REAL IN NĀGĀRJUNA'S "MIDDLE WAY"

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ABSTRACT: *It has become popular to portray the Buddhist Nāgārjuna as an ontological nihilist, i.e., that he denies the reality of entities and does not postulate any further reality. A reading of his works does show that he rejects the self-existent reality of entities, but it also shows that he accepts a "that-ness" (tattva) to phenomenal reality that survives the denial of any distinct, self-contained entities. Thus, he is not a nihilist concerning what is real in the final analysis of things. How Nāgārjuna's positions impact contemporary discussions of ontological nihilism and deflationism in Western philosophy is also discussed.*

Keywords: *Buddhist studies, comparative philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy, religion*

In the abstract, Nāgārjuna's basic argument is this fairly straightforward: For something to be real (*sat, sadbhūtam*), it must be permanent and unchanging. It cannot arise, change in any way, or cease to be.¹ Thus, for anything that is composed of parts (a *bhāva*) or is a basic component of our experienced world (a *dharma*) to be *real*, it must be eternal—it never comes into being from causes and conditions (since whatever is eternal never arose) or ceases (since that would be a change). It must also be unchanging during its existence (since a change would not be eternal). So too, it is not created by anything else or in any way dependent upon anything else (since it would then not have its own independent reality). Nor can it affect anything else (since that would involve a change). Thus, it must exist by its very own power. So too, its very nature cannot change in any way or be the result of any dependence upon something else. In sum, what is real exists totally independently of all other things and any causes or conditions. Thus, it must be self-contained in both its nature and existence. In short, it must exist by its own existence (*sva-bhāva*).

But, Nāgārjuna argues, if everything were permanent, unaffordable, and

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¹ The basic criterion of permanence and immutability for what is truly real is shared by Advaita Vedāntins and early Greek philosophers, not only Parmenides.

unchanging, we could never become enlightened—we would be stuck permanently in our current unenlightened state. Buddhist praxis would be meaningless, and suffering (*duḥkha*) could never be ended. Indeed, nothing would work if things existed by self-existence (since nothing totally self-contained could ever change). But we do see things arise, change, and cease to be. In fact, we see that everything internal and external is subject to arising, changing, and ceasing dependent upon causes and conditions. We see things arise (and so we must reject the extreme of complete nonexistence) and we see things cease (and so we must reject the extreme of eternal existence). Thus, self-existence is not found by experiences or by the intellectual examination of things: when we analyze a car, we find no “essence”—no “car-ness”—but only parts that in turn are also empty of “essences.”² So too, more generally: when we analyze any of our experiences and any object that we experience, we find only impermanent, conditioned phenomena. Hence, self-existence is not established (*siddha*). This means that nothing exists by self-existence. In sum, we must conclude from experience that everything is empty (*śūnya*) of self-existence (*niḥsvabhāva*) and thus nothing is actually *real* in the specified sense. No positive argument is needed to establish emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—it is simply the automatic consequence of self-existence not being established. That is, the emptiness of things follows by default and thus does not need its own supporting argument.

Thus, Nāgārjuna sees a “middle path” (*madhyama*) between “exist” (*asti, sat*), i.e., “real” in the sense of being eternal and unchanging—and total nonexistence (*nāsti, asat*) like, to use the Indian examples, a son of a barren woman or the horns of a rabbit.³ All that there actually is is the “that-ness” (*tattva*) of the phenomenal realm—a world void of anything self-contained. The enlightened can still use conceptualizations to facilitate their way in the phenomenal world, but the unenlightened make the mistake of subconsciously projecting (*prapañca*) our concepts onto what is actually there and thinking that reality is made up of a multitude of self-contained parts. But because things are not “real” but empty of any unchanging inherent existence, the Buddhist path to end suffering can work.⁴

However, Nāgārjuna’s project has an interesting consequence: since self-existence is not established, there are not real (*sat*) things, and thus it follows that there are *no*

² Nāgārjuna writes that nothing is found or *seen* (*vidyate*) rather than nothing *exists*. But I will follow the contemporary convention and use “exists.”

³ This goes back to the *Discourse to Kātyāyana/Kaccayana* of the P-li canon (*Samyutta Nikāya* II.215): the world of attachment relies on the duality of “Everything exists (*atthita*)” and “Everything does not exist (*na atthita*).” The Buddha teaches the “right view” (*sammādiṭṭhi*) of the “middle path” that avoids these extremes. When one sees the cessation of phenomena correctly, the extreme of the permanence and eternalness of existence is avoided; when one sees the arising of things correctly, the extreme of nonexistence is avoided. The text then presents the steps of dependent-arising. This is the only Buddhist text that Nāgārjuna cites (MK 15.7).

⁴ Nāgārjuna never presents this argument in the abstract. Rather, his principal text—the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*—addresses individual topics (e.g., time, action, suffering, the fundamental components of reality [*dharmas*], and a person) and shows how they cannot work if they were in fact real (i.e., self-existent and thus eternal and immutable).

realities to arise, change, or cease. So too, causation is not possible without real entities (*bhāvas*) to be a cause or effected (nor for Nāgārjuna is causation possible between self-existent entities). Thus, dependently-arisen “entities” are not real entities and do not arise (YS 19, 48). So too, “the nature of all things (*dharmatā*) is, like *nirvāṇa*, unarisen and unceased” (MK 18.7) since there are no self-existent entities to arise or cease. Nor are there real referents in the world for our words. Indeed, since words too are not real, the Buddha did not teach any real doctrine (MK 25.24, SS 69). Nāgārjuna’s *Overturing the Objections* shows how difficult it was for him to convince his opponents (there, proponents of the Hindu Nyāya school) that something could work or even exist if it was not self-existent. He sees his opponents as accepting that nothing exists except through self-existence, and thus seeing something as existing but not self-contained was inconceivable for them. That is, he sees his opponent claiming that only self-existent entities are being real (*sat*) and capable of doing anything. To them, if something is empty of self-existence, it is totally nonexistent (*asat*, *nāsti*) and powerless to achieve anything. Thus, they saw Nāgārjuna as actually having to be committed to self-existent entities just to make any arguments or he was an ontological nihilism despite his claim of a “middle way” that rejects nonexistence. Some commentators in the West today also argue that he was logically committed to ontological nihilism. The purpose of this article is to examine that claim.

1. WHAT IS “ONTOLOGICAL NIHILISM”?

The first thing to clarify is what exactly his detractors mean by “ontological nihilism” since it is so counter-intuitive—isn’t it obvious that at least something exists, and so isn’t literal nihilism impossible to maintain? Isn’t the statement “The ultimate truth is that nothing exists” both, as Jan Westerhoff says (2016, 337), “obviously empirically false . . . and straightforwardly inconsistent”? Even without some “ultimate reality,” there still are appearances, and don’t they have some reality? Nihilism cannot mean simply that something ceases or is destroyed (*uccheda*) since that thing would have had to exist in some way prior to that event—that is not like the son of a barren woman.⁵ Today in the West there are philosophers such as Daniel Dennett (1991) who believe that the self or consciousness is a groundless illusion: they do not reduce conscious phenomena to material phenomena but eliminate the phenomena themselves altogether by declaring that there is nothing there.⁶ Wilfrid Sellars (1997, 83) is not alone in claiming that in light of science “the common sense world of physical objects in Space

⁵ Thus, *uccheda* does not refer to an eliminationism in the contemporary Western sense in which the alleged reality never existed in the first place. Nāgārjuna connects annihilation (*uccheda*) with nonexistence (*nāsti*) (MK 15.8-11): whatever is destroyed could not have been self-existent (since what is real is eternal and unchanging) and thus is not real. It is not as if something that had been real came to not exist. In sum, for Nāgārjuna if something is annihilated, it is not real and thus it was nonexistent all along.

⁶ See Jones 2013, 11-12 for the distinction of reductionism and eliminationism.

and Time is unreal—that is, there are no such things.” Indeed, an illusion could be totally nonexistent—when a rope is misperceived as a snake, the snake has no existence whatsoever.⁷ But as Advaita Vedāntins would later argue, we dismiss the reality of something only in relation to the reality of something else (here, the rope).

Classical Indian and contemporary commentators who advocate a nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna do not claim that he *propounds* the extreme of nonexistence (which would go against what he explicitly states) but rather that his position logically *entails* ontological nihilism. However, they do not have one uniform view of what “ontological nihilism” is.⁸ The extreme position is that without self-existent realities (i.e., things existing through *svabhāva*), everything is an illusion—there are no external objects in any sense or any basic components of experience (*dharmas*). The Buddhist Louis de la Vallée Poussin expounded such a position: in rejecting the ultimate reality of *dharmas*, Mādhyamikas completely reject the existence of anything whatsoever—entities (*bhāvas*) are like the child of a barren woman—and thus the object described, the description itself, and the person doing the describing are all totally nonexistent (quoted in Westerhoff 2016, 352). Without some reality as a foundation, even illusions could not exist, and Nāgārjuna maintains that emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not a reality of any kind—not some absolute cosmic Void or vacuous ontological abyss out of which all phenomena emerge—but only the designation of the lack of self-existence in things (MK 13.8, 24.18). Thus, nothing exists on the conventional level (*vyavahāram*) or on the ultimate ontological level (*paramārthasatya*), and so nothing is real in any sense—the ultimate nature of reality is that there is an absolute nothingness. In the words of Jan Westerhoff, Nāgārjuna’s “arguments set out to show that the idea of a theory that represents the nature of reality at the ultimate level is a chimera” (2017, 104). In sum, in the extreme nihilistic position nothing grounds either conventional truths or ultimate truths, and thus from the point of view of the ultimate ontological status of things nothing exists.

The most sustained defenses of Madhyamaka nihilism are by Thomas Wood (1994) and David Burton (1999, 2001). Both argue that the logical implication of Nāgārjuna’s arguments is extreme nihilism, even though according to Burton Nāgārjuna did not realize it. According to Wood (1994, 280), Nāgārjuna describes reality in terms of the “sheer, unqualified, absolute nothingness” of a son of a barren woman or the horn of a rabbit. According to Burton (1999, 4, 113-114), since all entities

⁷ The rope/snake analogy is associated with Advaita Vedānta, but it may have been introduced by the Mādhyamikas, depending on the age of a certain text (see Jones 2011, 5-8). For Śaṅkara, one can deny the existence of an alleged reality only by appeal to another reality (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III.2.22). He also tries to explain how something could appear even though it did not exist by employing the analogy to a person with an eye-defect who sees two moons when there is only one (*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* IV.1.15). The Buddhist Yogācārins also faulted Nāgārjuna in that way: an appearance only is possible if there is an underlying reality (*tattva*) (see Ferraro 2017, 76-78)—the “such-ness” (*tathatā*) of the *dharmas* remains.

⁸ See Westerhoff 2016, 341-61 for various classical Indian and modern nihilistic Western positions.

lack *svabhāva*, they have merely a mind-dependent constructed existence (*prajñaptisat*) and so are ontologically nonexistent—everything, including a person, are reduced to mere concepts and thus do not exist even conventionally. All things are mere mental fabrications and names only (Burton 2001, 179). Equally important, there is nothing unconstructed—no ontological foundation—out of which or by which entities can be constructed conceptually (Burton 1999: 4). Instead, all aspects of entities are conceptually constructed (*ibid.*, 5). Thus, every object of thought and speech is utterly nonexistent. Appearances are empty and so there is nothing real behind them; indeed, even to call them “appearances” is misleading since they are totally nonexistent (*asat*) (*ibid.*, 9, 269). Thus, Mādhyamikas do not really believe in the existence of the phenomenal world or any non-phenomenal absolute (*ibid.*, 279).

I will proceed with the extreme interpretation of nihilism for this discussion: nothing exists, either conventionally or ultimately—there is no reality behind the unreal appearances. As Giuseppe Ferraro (2017, 94) says, the most consistent conclusion for a nihilist is that Nāgārjuna is describing “ultimate reality” in terms of emptiness, absence, and nothingness. Things that we take to be either ultimately or merely conventionally real are like the snake in the rope/snake analogy or like the child of a barren woman—things that have no reality whatsoever.

2. SVABHĀVA AND ŚUNYATĀ

For Nāgārjuna, *svabhāva* is whatever would give something the power to exist and to have the properties it has.⁹ Something “existing by its own inherent nature” is in no way produced by causes and conditions but exists independently of all causes and conditions (MK 24.16, VVV 22). Nor is it derived from something else that is real (MK 15.1-2).¹⁰ An entity existing through *svabhāva* is absolutely independent of all causes and conditions and thus exists by its own power: its nature and existence are due only to itself. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is characterized as what “exists from its own side.” It is not created by, or be dependent upon, any other reality (MK 1.1). What exists by its

⁹ The Abhidharmists= multiplying *dharmas* may have been the provocation that caused Nāgārjuna’s reaction, but he may be going further back to a more basic concept of “*dharma*” rather than responding specifically and only to the Abhidharmists’ conception itself. Thus, he may not have been mischaracterizing the Abhidharmists’ notion of “*dharma*,” as is often alleged, but going for a broader conception. In any case, Abhidharmists did not respond to Nāgārjuna’s attack (or to any Mahāyāna arguments).

¹⁰ Nāgārjuna does mention the possibility of “other-existence” (*para-bhāva*) (MK 15.3). Other-existence for him is simply the self-existence of something else. Thus, if there is no self-existence, there can be no other-existence (MK 1.3, 15.3, 22.9). So too, something could not be dependent on the self-existence of something else and be itself real (i.e., self-existent). Thus, other-existence cannot be the source of another self-existent reality (MK 15.1-2, 22.2, 24.9) since nothing can be the source of anything self-existent. Other-existence is different from “otherwise-existence” (*anyathābhāva*), which would be a change in an existent with *svabhāva*, which is impossible (MK 13.6) since what exists by self-existence cannot change.

own *svabhāva* has being (*sat*) and cannot be created (MK 24.33) or otherwise come into existence (MK 24.22-23) or cease to exist or be eliminated (MK 22.24, VV 67) or be affected by any action (MK 24.33). What is self-existent cannot change (MK 15.8). Such things have an internal core that is isolated from other things. The only possible relationships between things existing by *svabhāva* are complete identity and complete disconnection (e.g., MK 2.21, 6.5, 18.10; VV 21).

The implication of such independence is that, however counterintuitive it may seem, what exists by *svabhāva* must be *self-existent* (since nothing could create it) and be *eternal* (since destruction, even by its own accord, would be a change in its being). All things that exist through self-existence would be permanent (eternal) because they would have no cause and what is without a cause is permanent (VV 55). For Nāgārjuna, having an unchanging “intrinsic nature” has the same effect. It is the source of its own “essence” and is self-maintaining. Such a power would also make each entity (*bhāva*) exist distinct from all other entities—no self-existent thing could be in any way dependent upon any other thing. Thus, it would be self-contained. The two dimensions of having its own unchanging nature and existing independently of all causes and conditions are not clearly distinguished in Nāgārjuna’s works. He never discussed *svabhāva* in the abstract, but in discussing different types of alleged realities, he utilized one aspect in some places and the other in other places. But since in his use of the term “*svabhāva*” one aspect implicates the other, that is a legitimate strategy.

No English term captures the two aspects of *svabhāva*. Translators render it variously as “self-existing,” “self-being,” “self-causing,” “self-generating,” “an existent (*bhāva*) by itself (*sva*),” “own-entity,” “own-being,” “own-becoming,” “own-source,” “own-cause,” “own-nature,” “inherent nature,” “intrinsic nature,” “essential nature,” “essence,” “innate,” “substance,” or “inherent being.” Nāgārjuna uses the word in both the sense of self-existence and own-nature, and so it can be translated here as “self-existence” or “self-nature” depending on the context. It also will be characterized as “self-contained.” In addition, “*svabhāva*” sometimes means simply “by its own nature” in a non-philosophical sense, just as Nāgārjuna uses “*ātman*” (MK 10.15, 22.16, 27.4) without a commitment to a metaphysics of an eternal, unchanging self.

Aristotle’s concept of “substance” as an essence is the closest in Western philosophy to Nāgārjuna’s idea. Substance is what remains when all experienced, changing properties are removed. (It should be noted that modern empiricists question the very notion of “substance”—in John Locke’s phrase, a “something we know not what.”) But “*svabhāva*” denotes both self-existence and some unchanging nature—it is not a featureless reality distinct from all properties or attributes that sustains those properties. Nor should it be confused with matter: Buddhists have concepts for substance (*dravya*) and the perceived material form (*rūpa*). Nor does what Nāgārjuna intends involve mass or solidity. In modern philosophy, the closest is Leibniz’s idea of simple “monads”: each monad is the source of its own powers and properties (but not its own being) and all monads exist in a harmoniously working, coordinated universe

(but Nāgārjuna does not have this latter idea).¹¹ In short, unlike Western ontological concepts *svabhāva* is a metaphysical power that gives a thing both its existence and its characteristics.

For Nāgārjuna, self-existence is necessary for any thing of any type (*bhāva* or *dharma*) to be real (*sat*): there is no reality (*sat*) of an entity without self-existence (MK 1.10). But no such self-existence is found in any conventional entity (*bhāva*) (VVV 1, 17, 20) or in any ultimate component of the experienced world (*dharma*). Nothing self-contained is found when we examine any entity or *dharma*.¹² A *dharma* that is not dependently arisen is not found; thus, there is no *dharma* that is not empty (MK 24.19). So too, for things empty of self-existence to be real, things that are self-existent must first exist (so that there would be some reality that could become empty of self-existence), but nothing whatsoever exists that is without self-existence, and therefore what is empty of self-existence cannot be real (MK 13.7)—thus, there are no real *bhāvas* or *dharms* to arise or cease or to be empty. Thus, there is actually nothing to deceive us (MK 13.2).

Nāgārjuna characterizes what is without self-existence as being empty (*śunya*). This does not mean being empty of matter—it is a *metaphysical* emptiness of anything that gives something the power to be, not a space empty of all material things. Nothing is self-created or self-contained. In effect, it is an expansion of the Buddhist idea of no-self (*anātman*) to all things. Hence, Nāgārjuna discusses the emptiness of a person (MK 18) just like any other phenomenon. There is no eternal, permanent “self” to a person or anything corresponding to a “self” in other things that would give anything its own self-contained existence. Any composite thing (a *bhāva*) cannot be self-existent since it depends on its parts, but even the parts are dependent on causes and conditions and thus are not self-existent. What arises from causes and conditions cannot be self-contained in either its nature or existence—it has no intrinsic property or capacity to exist. Something that does not exist by self-existence cannot be a cause (SS 12) since it is not real (*sat*). But “emptiness” is not merely a negative conclusion: it indicates the true nature of reality (*tattva*).

The noun “*śunyatā*” is the abstraction “emptiness,” but this does not make emptiness into a metaphysical source, a transcendent absolute, or indeed any other type of reality. (Nāgārjuna uses the adjective “*śunya*” more often than the noun “*śunyatā*”

¹¹ “*Svabhāva*” is a feature all self-existent entities would share and thus is not itself a *lakṣaṇa*, i.e., the defining “mark” of a phenomenon (e.g., the wetness of water and the heat of fire) that distinguishes one phenomenon from other phenomena. Such marks are also not real (self-existent) entities (MK 5.3-5). But *svabhāva* could be treated as a necessary part of the nature of each self-contained thing’s own unique *lakṣaṇa*. (Whether “being” is a property became an issue in Western philosophy concerning whether Anselm’s ontological argument is valid.) if so, emptiness would be a global *lakṣaṇa*—part of the defining nature of each impermanent phenomenon.

¹² The absence of a *bhava*—an *abhāva*—is possible as a reality only if a *bhāva* is real (*sat*), and since *bhāvas* are not real, neither can there be any real *abhāvas* (e.g., MK 15.4-5, 25.7). The two terms are also conceptually tied together and so are not independently real in Nāgārjuna’s way of thinking (see Jones 2014, 174-77).

in the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*.) That is, emptiness is not an “essence” by which things exist. It is not a new special ontological power. It is not a property of things or any type of entity. Emptiness is not an ontological entity of any sort but only the designation for the lack of *self-existence*. That is, the term is merely a dependent designation (*upādāya-prajñapti*) of the true state of things (MK 24.18)—i.e., that everything is empty of any power to make itself self-existent. The term “emptiness” does not designate anything real (*sat*) but only the absence of anything real in the sense of being self-existent. (There is no one abstract “Self-existence” but only the alleged self-existence of different entities. So too, there is no one universal cosmic “Emptiness.”) Emptiness itself is merely another construct and thus empty of self-existence (MK 22.11, 24.18; VV 24).¹³ The claim “All things are empty of self-existence” is itself empty (as is that claim and this one). Anyone who reifies emptiness and thereby makes it into a cosmic Void or a new ontological “essence” giving things reality or a type of entity or a reality similar in any way to *svabhāva* is simply incurable (*asādhyān*) (MK 13.8)—they are hopelessly attached to seeing the world in terms of self-existent entities.

Thus, the true state of things is that everything is essenceless in both their existence and nature—all things are contingent, impermanent, changing, and dependent upon other things. What is conditioned is not one or many, being (*sat*), or nonbeing (*asat*) (SS 32). From the point of view of reality (*tattva*), there is no being or nonbeing (SS 1) since both *sat* and the lack thereof would be properties only of entities.

3. *TATTVA*: THE FORGOTTEN CONCEPT

One relevant concept is omitted in most discussions of Madhyamaka nihilism: *tattva*. The term “*tattva*” designates the sheer “that-ness” (*tat-tva*) of things (MK 15.6, 18.9, 24.9).¹⁴ “*Yathā-bhūtaṃ*” (RV 28) and “*dharmatā*” (MK 18.7) also convey the idea of the true nature of things. *Tattva* is not a transcendent reality that is the source of the phenomenal world, or an unexperientable Kantian noumenon, but is simply the phenomenal world as it really is—empty of any distinct *svabhāva*-existing objects (*bhāvas* or *dharmas*). From the point of view of reality (*tattvatas*), there is no existence (*asti*) or nonexistence (*nāsti*) of the entire cosmos (RV 38). Nor is *tattva* a self-existent entity or the lack of one—only objects are described as lacking self-existence and being

¹³ Thus, the “emptiness of emptiness” is not some mysterious claim: it merely indicates that Nāgārjuna is treating “emptiness” like any other concept—a dependent designation (see Jones 2018a, 59-61). It is empty in the same way that all conceptualizations are: it arises only dependently. The “emptiness of emptiness” has become a major theme only in contemporary accounts of Madhyamaka thought.

¹⁴ In MK 15.6, “*tattva*,” like “*satya*,” means both *truth* and *reality*: “Those who perceive self-existence, other-existence, an entity, and a non-entity do not perceive the truth/reality (*tattva*) in the Buddha’s teaching.” “*Tattvatas*” in MK 17.26 and 23.2 means “from the point of view of reality.” Siderits and Garfield (2013, 662) take these two verses to be Nāgārjuna’s opponent speaking, but even if so, this does not change Nāgārjuna’s acceptance of *tattva*.

dependently-arisen, not *tattva*. Thus, is-ness (*astitā*) is not a synonym for *tattva*—we must pass beyond “is-ness” and “is-not-ness” (RV 61) to see what is truly real.

Because his soteriological objective is to end attachments, Nāgārjuna need not say much about *tattva*—i.e., what is left over once the objects that are the objects of our desires and grasping are ended. (So too, *nirvāṇa* is not a self-existent entity [MK 25.2-16]. Nor for Nāgārjuna is *nirvāṇa* a name for *tattva*.) Only one verse depicts *tattva*. The passage reads:

[9] The characteristic of what is actually real is this: not dependent upon another, peaceful, free of being projected upon by conceptual projections (*prapañcair aprapañcitam*), free of thoughts (*vikalpas*), and without multiplicity. [10] Whatever arises dependent upon another thing is not that thing, nor is it different from that thing. Therefore, it is neither annihilated nor eternal. [11] Not one, not diverse, not annihilated, not eternal (this is the immortal teaching of the buddhas, the guides of the world (MK 18.9-11).

Tattva is free of any discrete parts that we normally cut the world up into by our thoughts (*vikalpas*) that necessarily make distinctions—it does not have the artificial borders within it that our conceptual differentiations suggest. Nāgārjuna does not give any positive substantive characterizations of reality as it truly is.¹⁵ Rather, he focuses on denying that objects are self-existent. He equates emptiness with the Buddhist metaphysics of impermanence and dependent-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) (MK 24.18, SS 68), but *tattva* is not equivalent of *śūnyatā*: *śūnyatā* is not a reality of a kind but merely a conceptual designation of the lack of self-existence to things.¹⁶ So too, *tattva* is not a higher level emptiness but only the state of phenomenal reality.

Tattva thus is simply the phenomenal realm free of our conceptual division of it into self-contained objects (*bhāvas* and *dharmas*) and is open to direct experience. It is not some hidden or transcendent reality. Nāgārjuna does not reject sense-experience of the phenomenal world as cognitive—he wants to correct our experience of the world and to see what is really there rather than our conceptual projections. Seeing *tattva* is not seeing something behind the phenomenal realm but seeing the phenomenal realm as it is without our conceptual overlay.¹⁷ Those who see reality

¹⁵ Since Nāgārjuna does not give any positive ontology of *tattva*'s properties, he is *antimetaphysical* in that sense (see Ferraro 2013), but he does accept and discuss *tattva* and thus is *metaphysical* in that sense. Thereby, he also is affirming the existence of a reality (without arguing for its existence) against the claim of nihilism.

¹⁶ What Tola and Dragonetti (1995) say about emptiness may more properly be said of *tattva*.

¹⁷ To get a sense of this, think of a Gestalt figure such as the faces/goblet: the black and white colors are reality as it truly is (*tattva*), but we impose structure on them, thereby creating illusory faces or a goblet and then treat them as distinct objects (*prapañca*). The faces or goblet do not really exist, but the colored material does. That Nāgārjuna still wrote indicates that the enlightened still had conceptualizations operating in their mind even though they do not see the phenomenal realm cut up into distinct segments following those conceptualizations. On the issue of the relation of conceptualizations and experiences, see Jones 2020.

(*tattva-darśana*) do not see objects to desire and thus do not form the dispositions underlying the actions that propel the cycling of rebirth (MK 26.10) and thus are liberated from the karmic forces driving rebirth. *Bhāvas* and *dharmas* can still be parceled out by our concepts for practical purposes—it is only as *discrete self-contained objects* that they are illusory.

This brings up the role of conceptions in unenlightened experiences. Conceptions per se are not the problem—after all, the Buddha, the best among knowers of *tattva* (SS 48), spoke, and that activity necessarily makes distinctions. Even if one wanted to argue that the Buddha was not in an enlightened state of consciousness when he taught—something few Buddhists would accept—still the fact that he spoke at all meant that the enlightened could accept the use of language. The problem is the projection of our concepts onto reality and then distorting what is truly there by seeing it as a set of distinct self-contained objects—*prapañca*.

Prapañca is projecting onto what is truly real (*tattva*) the conceptual differentiations we ourselves devise, and thereby seeing reality as a collection of discrete objects. Its importance to Nāgārjuna is indicated by the fact that it, not emptiness, is mentioned in the dedicatory verse of the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* along with dependent-arising. Translators have rendered the term “projection of plurality,” “conceptual construction,” “hypostatization,” “objectification,” “reification,” “proliferation,” and “superimposition.” It makes our subjective mental discriminations into features of reality.¹⁸ In this way, we create a false world of differentiated, isolated objects corresponding to our conceptual creations. The nature of the entire conventional world is born from *prapañca* (RV 50): through *prapañca*, we misuse our concepts to carve up *tattva* into distinct parts and end up focusing on the partness and not *tattva*. We mistakenly reify names and concepts into distinct referents, but since names and concepts can refer only to things that are discrete and self-contained, no words apply to reality as it truly is. There are no real objects in *tattva*, but *prapañca* creates a proliferation of illusory distinct objects that we take to be existing independently of each other. Thus, we should abandon the fabrications of “is” and “is not” (MK 9.12).

But *tattva* is not a collection of independent *bhāvas* or *dharmas* or itself a *bhāva* or *dharma*—it is “pacified” (*śanta*, MK 7.16, 18.9, 22.12, 23.15, VV29) since it is undis-

¹⁸ Mark Siderits equates *prapañca* with *all conceptualization*. Actually, he says “[s]uppose we take *prapañca* to mean conceptualisation” (2019, 645-646, italics added). He takes Nāgārjuna’s objective to be the cessation of all *conceptualization*, and he realizes that the claim “all conceptualization falsifies” leads to the paradox that its truth would entail its falsity (ibid., 646), but he gladly accepts that his semantic interpretation leads there. But again, the Buddha spoke and others write (including Nāgārjuna) and so not all conceptualization is rejected, only the *projection* of those conceptualizations onto *tattva* and the discrimination (*vikalpa*) of distinct objects. As noted below, the enlightenment experience is not a matter of accepting some statement (which must be a product of conceptualization) and thus does go beyond any conceptualization, but in the enlightened state one can speak and write—one can see the true nature of things without a complete cessation of conceptualization, but *prapañca* ceases.

turbed by our projection of concepts into a set of clashing independent parts. Indeed, *tattva* is free of conceptualizations—the distinct objects that our concepts produce are merely our creations. The stilling of all conceptual support and the stilling of the projection of concepts onto reality is peace (*śivaḥ*) (MK 25.24). No concepts developed for the discussion of *bhāvas* or *dharmas* could apply because *tattva* is not divided up into parts for our concepts about entities to correspond to. Since *tattva* is not an entity or collection of entities, there is nothing within it to be an alleged referent and thus it cannot be expressed in terms of the attributes of entities but only more abstractly (as in MK 18.9-10).

In effect, we see independent objects in the real world mirroring our concepts. This is seeing our concepts as instantiated in the real world. Thereby, we create the conventional world. But conceptions of independent entities never converge with reality as it really is. This includes even the distinction between experiencer and what is experienced (since neither are changeless, self-contained entities). The very discrimination (*vikalpa*) of distinct entities is the result of projecting our conceptual distinctions onto reality (MK 18.5). In short, we superimpose “self-existence” onto what is void of it. We thereby distort reality by seeing it as a mass of unconnected entities corresponding to the discrete concepts that our mind has devised. Such discriminations cause karmic acts and the resulting afflictions (MK 18.5). To be enlightened is to “still” the mind of this projection, not to be free of perceptions and concepts per se. Thus, the enlightened need not do away with sense-perceptions or concepts—they now perceive the phenomenal world as it is (*tattva*) free of self-contained entities, and they can still use whatever concepts that their culture uses to navigate in the perceived world and to teach others, but they do not project the categories that they are using onto the world (MK 22.15) and thus do not discriminate illusory entities. Thereby, the enlightened preserve both the language of conventional life and seeing reality as it truly is.

The concept “*tattva*” deserves a prominent place in discussions of nihilism, but it is barely noticed by the disputants. The one exception is Giuseppe Ferraro (2013, 2014, 2017), although he does not give *tattva* its central importance in Nāgārjuna’s scheme of things. According to Ferraro (2014, 452), Nāgārjuna is a realist since he admits the existence of a reality (*tattva*, *paramārtha*) that exists independent of at least the ordinary workings of the mind and that cannot be described or verbalized. David Burton (2001, 183-185) appears open to the possibility of Nāgārjuna affirming an indescribable “unconditioned reality” and affirming that the world is not entirely a mental fabrication, but he does not see *tattva* in those terms. In responding to Ferraro, Jay Garfield and Mark Siderits (2013, 662-663) cannot see *tattva* or *dharmatā* as evidence that Nāgārjuna posits an “inexpressible ultimate”; rather, they explain away the passages as at most being about *dharmas*. However, *tattva* is Nāgārjuna’s designation of phenomenal reality as it truly is once we remove our projection of conceptualized entities onto it—it is what is experienced once the perception of self-contained entities is ended.

4. NĀGĀRJUNA IS NOT AN ONTOLOGICAL NIHILIST

From the above discussion, it should be clear that Nāgārjuna was not an ontological nihilist: he affirmed a reality (*tattva*) even though the *bhāvas* and *dharmas* that we carve out of it are not distinct real (*sat*) entities. *Tattva* is not an entity and thus cannot be properly described as self-existent (*svabhāva*) or as a real entity. Thus, Nāgārjuna never connected *svabhāva* with *tattva* in any of his works but only with *bhāvas* and *dharmas* (e.g., MK 24.16, 24.22-23, 24.33; VVV 22). Thereby, he can affirm a reality while denying distinct real parts: he eliminates *bhāvas* and *dharmas* as self-existent, and since they are empty of *svabhāva* they are nonexistent.¹⁹ In sum, things in the phenomenal world are not isolated, real entities, and their parts in turn are empty of any self-existence, and so on all the way down. Everything is dependently-arisen. But Nāgārjuna also affirms an undifferentiated reality behind our conceptions—an ontological substratum that is not conceptually constructed. (So too, there must be some reality that does the conceptual construction.) Thus, he is not a nihilist with regard to all of reality.²⁰

For this position to hold, Nāgārjuna must, as he claims, affirm a “middle path” between the permanence and eternalism (*asti*) of entities and their complete nonexistence (*nāsti*): “Whatever is dependently arisen, we call ‘emptiness.’ Once comprehended, this indicator is in fact itself the ‘middle way’ between eternalism and annihilationism” (MK 24.18).²¹ That nothing self-exists does not mean that nothing exists in any sense. He is affirming a *mode of existence* unrelated to *svabhāva*—an existence empty of *svabhāva*. This emptiness does not reach the extreme of the total nonexistence of the snake in the rope/snake analogy or the child of a barren woman—empty phenomena are really there. While in Nagarjunian metaphysics it would be false to say “Entity *x* exists, but it lacks self-existence” or “Entity *x* is real, but it does not exist by self-existence,” this does not apply to *tattva* since *tattva* is not a self-contained entity or otherwise a conceptualized entity. But *tattva* still exists in a non-*svabhāva* sense. How to state that is not easy since in effect Nāgārjuna has made terms related to existence and reality—“real,” “exists,” “is”—terms of art: they involve self-existence, and so anything that does not involve self-existence is not real and does not exist in Nāgārjuna’s terminology. But he uses the *self-existent* mode of existence only with

¹⁹ Is Nāgārjuna therefore a “realist”? There are varieties of realisms. He is a *realist* in the sense of affirming a reality independent of our mental conceptions (*tattva*), although reality is not cut up into the objects we conceptualize and thus he is *not a realist* with regard to discrete objects (*dharmas* or *bhāvas*). He sees his opponents as realists with regard to objects. He also rejects any real referents to our concepts. Thus, he would have to reject any correspondence theory of truth for claims from the ultimate point of view without rejecting language, and thus he is not a realist with regard to any realities possibly corresponding to our conceptualizations.

²⁰ Jay Garfield (2014) argues the opposite: Nāgārjuna is not a nihilist but a “robust realist” because for him *entities (bhāvas) exist conventionally*.

²¹ Garfield (2014, 50) agrees that Nāgārjuna affirms another way of existing besides *svabhāva* (being empty), but he does not see this in terms of *tattva*.

regard to *bhāvas* and *dharmas*, not with regard to *tattva*. Nāgārjuna never applies “real” or “exists” to *tattva*. Thus, we must distinguish “real” or “exists” in his restricted sense of self-existence from “real” or “exists” as a broader category: something can be non-*svabhāva* and still be real and exist in the latter way. In this way, Nāgārjuna can deny anything exists through *svabhāva* and still affirm that it exists in another manner—and that is what *tattva* does. Thus, that everything is free of *svabhāva* and therefore impermanent does not mean that nothing exists at all. He can also explain why there are appearances of entities while the extreme nihilists cannot.

Thus, Nāgārjuna is not saying that *bhāvas* and *dharmas* do not exist but only that they do not exist as he believes that we normally take them to exist—i.e., through self-existence. It is only that they are self-contained rather than the products of causes and conditions that is rejected. That is, the existence of *bhāvas* and *dharmas* is not disputed, only their mode of existence: they exist, but they are dependently-arisen and thus are empty of independent self-existence. There is something to a “self” and other things that enables them to work, even if their entity-ness is no more than our conception. Thus, *bhāvas* and *dharmas* are not real in the restricted sense of *svabhāvā* but nonetheless do exist:

Those who understand the nature of entities see that entities are impermanent, deceptive in nature, hollow, empty (*śunya*), selfless (*anātman*), clear (*vivikta*), without a locus or objective support in the world, rootless, with no fixed abode, totally arisen from root-ignorance (*avidyā*), utterly bereft of beginning, middle and end, without a core, like the banana tree trunk (which is hollow at its core), like the castle of the Gandharvas in the sky, like an illusion thus, this whole dreadful world appears (YS 25-27).²²

Entities have the status of dreams or magical illusions—i.e., dependent on other things, arising from other things, and without any self-existent substance. *Bhāvas* and *dharmas* are in the same boat as being conditioned and arising and falling dependently, but *dharmas* are still more fundamental in Nāgārjuna’s ontology than composite *bhāvas*. *Dharmas* do not become conventional entities even though they too are conventionally designated.

As discussed, *tattva* is not the sum of all *bhāvas* and *dharmas* since they are based on our conceptions—there are no self-existent entities but rather a “pacified” reality free of self-contained parts. Nor does Nāgārjuna argue for an interconnected *whole* but only for the “that-ness” of conditioned parts. *Tattva* is not made by cobbling together

²² Like the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, Nāgārjuna likens entities (*bhāvas*) to an illusion (*māyā*), a mirage, a dream, an illusory phantasm, a reflection, a bubble, foam, a circle of light produced by spinning a torch fast, and the imaginary castle in the sky of the Gandharvas (MK 7.34, 17.33, 23.8-9; SS 36, 40-42, 66). All are meant to indicate that things are not independently real but are *impermanent and dependent* (like a magic trick on a magician) and are also *deceptive* on the surface to the unenlightened—not that the phenomena do not exist. Nor are the analogies meant to convey that some sense-experiences are veridical but all hallucinatory.

parts—to see *tattva* as composed of *dharmas* is still looking at the phenomenal realm in the wrong way and misses the character of both *tattva* and the *dharmas*. We carve out eddies in the swirling phenomena of the world according to the interests and needs reflected in our conventions, but the resulting conceptualized entities are not real in the *svabhāva* sense but only our conceptual fabrications. Nevertheless, the impermanent parts have causal power: they can do work—indeed, Nāgārjuna argues in his *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* and *Overturning the Objections* that only if entities are not self-contained can they accomplish anything and that his empty words can point out problems with self-existence and thus point out the emptiness of things. To the extent that emptiness is used in opposition to self-existence, it is merely a case of one illusory or dream reality putting an end to another illusory or dream reality (VV 23).

The fact that something eternal and immutable is no doubt real does not entail that what is not permanent is totally nonexistent. Nor for Nāgārjuna does it follow from the fact that nothing is self-existent (and thus not real in the restricted *svabhāva* sense) that nothing exists in any sense. Nor must something be self-contained to be deemed real in another sense. And Nāgārjuna specifies another mode of existence—dependent-arising. Conceptualizing things is not itself the problem—*prapañca* is, i.e., reifying and projecting our concepts onto reality (*tattva*) and seeing back a collection of self-contained entities, thereby distorting our perceptions and thinking. Things that concepts denote do not exist in the restricted sense, but the enlightened can use concepts to indicate impermanent eddies in the phenomenal world without being misled. *Tattva* is what is left when we remove the notion of conceptualized parts and thus is itself free of conceptions, but this does not mean that the enlightened cannot legitimately discuss at least a little of its nature by means of our conventional language.

5. PROBLEMS WITH NIHILISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

It is understandable that many commentators endorse a nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna's metaphysics: Nāgārjuna gives his opponents all the verbs and adjectives concerning existing or being real and ties all the terms to his restrictive sense of *svabhāva*. Nihilists see him denying reality through *svabhāva* and conclude that he has to deny reality period. Being a permanent, immutable entity is all that can be real (*sat*). But they can do that only by endorsing self-contained individual existence as the only mode of existence: with *svabhāva* as the only criterion for existence, *tattva*, like *bhāvas* and *dharmas*, cannot be real since it is not a self-existent entity, and since the parts are each unreal (*asat*), the totality of them (*tattva*) is also unreal. Thus, to describe reality in terms of emptiness is ultimately to describe it in terms of nothingness even if Nāgārjuna did not see this consequence. Nihilists end up seeing reality only in terms of objects and *svabhāva*, and so the denial of self-existent *bhāvas* and *dharmas* is the total negation of reality. Thus, the error that nihilists make is to conclude that reality (*tattva*) is just a collection of *bhāvas* and *dharmas* and since these are not real in Nāgārjuna's

restricted sense, nothing else can be real in another mode of being—in short, no fundamental real *dharmas*, no nothing. All things are just conceptual constructs (Burton 1999, 9), and there is nothing else. But *tattva* is not the totality of such entities, and, as noted above, Nāgārjuna never discussed *tattva* in terms of self-existent entities. *Tattva* is ontologically prior to the parts that we carve out with our concepts. In effect, we cut entities out of *tattva*, but *tattva* is not made up by splicing together the parts that we create.

A similar problem arises from the ambiguity of “*svabhāva*” as “intrinsic nature” or “essence.” Again, there is Nāgārjuna’s restricted sense of “*svabhāva*” as existing by something’s own nature and whose essence is eternal and immutable, and a broader sense of a “nature” of a phenomenon that continues as long as the phenomenon happens to exist but is not connected to its mode of existence. Something can have a characteristic or property that only ends when the phenomenon ends without having the metaphysical baggage of the claim that since the phenomenon has this trait that it must exist forever and be unaffectable. *Tattva* has an “ultimate nature” in the broad sense even though it is not a self-existent entity.

However, many commentators do not distinguish the two senses of “essence” and create paradoxes. For example, Jay Garfield (2014, 52) sees a fundamental contradiction: “emptiness *is* the intrinsic nature of anything that exists; hence the intrinsic nature of things is to lack intrinsic nature.” That is, “Things have no *svabhāva*, and that is their *svabhāva*.” That would indeed be a paradox. However, Nāgārjuna never said that. The situation for him can be stated without paradox: “Things are empty of self-existence (*svabhāva*), and that is their general ontological nature.” The reasoning implicit in Garfield’s line of thought must be that (1) Nāgārjuna defines *svabhāva* as being of a specific type of “nature” (one to which he adds that entities self-exist by that nature), (2) Nāgārjuna denies that anything has *svabhāva*, and therefore (3) Nāgārjuna is actually denying all types of nature (whether an entity is self-existent or not). Obviously, that conclusion does not logically follow: something can be empty of specific type of “nature” without being empty of another type.

The term “nature” need not be highjacked to mean only an “intrinsic nature” of Nāgārjuna’s *svabhāva* type. Something can be empty of anything making it self-contained, and we can call this its “nature” or “essence” without being committed to the *svabhāva* metaphysics of permanent existence. But nihilists see Nāgārjuna as committed to only one mode of being—only *svabhāva* entails existence—and so they see the lack of an “intrinsic nature” (in Nāgārjuna’s restricted sense) as leading to nihilism: the lack of *svabhāva*’s second component as an unwavering nature also means that entities cannot be eternal and thus are not real. So too, the self-nature of empty things is that they must have no self-existence and so do not exist. Thus, the intrinsic nature of the world is that there is nothing at all (see Westerhoff 2016, 338). However, for Nāgārjuna, the mode of existence for entities is emptiness, and that is the ultimate ontological nature of existing things.

Another problem concerns whether Nāgārjuna advances a view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) (MK 13.3, 13.7-8), thesis (*pratijñā*) (VV 29, VVV59), or proposition (*pakṣa*) (RV 104; see MK 2.10 and YS 50). Nihilists see only one mode of existence and so see any metaphysical position on the general nature of reality as a view and thus conclude with Nāgārjuna that he had no view. But in his works, Nāgārjuna treated “views” as only those positions based on the metaphysics of self-existence or total nonexistence (MK 13.3, 13.8, 15.10, 21.14, 24.21, 27.1-2, 27.13-14, 27.29-30; RV 43-46; YS 23, 43-54) or a reality connected to *svabhāva* (SS 21). In short, all views assume existence through *svabhāva* or the extreme of total nonexistence (see Jones 2014, 147-149, 2018a, 62-64; also see Burton 2001, 183-184). Thus, for Nāgārjuna not every metaphysical position is a technical *view*. In particular, emptiness indicates the metaphysics of *tattva* that results when *svabhāva* metaphysics is refuted. This means that the doctrine of *tattva* is a metaphysical position that lies outside of Nāgārjuna’s restricted sense of “views” connected to self-existence since emptiness is the consequence of repudiating self-existence.

Thus, Nāgārjuna is not rejecting all metaphysics—he speaks of *tattva* and the nonexistence of *bhāvas* and *dharmas*. Thereby, he can consistently speak of relinquishing all *views* (MK 13.8) and still be replacing all *svabhāva*-related metaphysics with the *tattva* ontology. And he can still claim that anyone who treats emptiness as a *dr̥ṣṭi* is incurable (MK 13.8). So too, getting rid of “views” in this technical sense does not lead to nihilism but the “middle way” of emptiness. Nihilists, however, are inadvertently treating emptiness as a *dr̥ṣṭi* when they dismiss all metaphysics as views.

A related problem concerns the “four options” (*catus-koṭi*) (MK 12.1, 18.8, 22.11-12, 25.15-18, 25.22-23, 27.13, 27.20; see RV 106, 115). Here Nāgārjuna rejects: (1) *A* exists; (2) *A* does not exist; (3) *A* both exists and does not exist; (4) *A* neither exists nor does not exist. Just as the key to Nāgārjuna’s stance on views relates to *svabhāva*, so here the key is that Nāgārjuna is denying the hidden erroneous presupposition of the four options: that things exist by *svabhāva* (see Jones 2014, 160-162, 2018a, 48-51; Siderits and Garfield 2013, 658; Ferraro 2014, 460).²³ All he is saying in the strongest way possible is that the subject to each option does not exist: if we think any of the options may be correct, we are still thinking in terms of a *svabhāva* metaphysics and not of the *tattva* metaphysics. Denying the existence of a self-existent entity is as much a matter of *svabhāva* as affirming its existence: if we are thinking in terms of “exists” or “does not exist,” we are on the wrong track since we are still tacitly thinking in terms of the existence or nonexistence of self-existent “real” entities. Thus, even the fourth option is a matter of thinking in terms of self-existent entities and so

²³ The four options are affirmed in MK 18.8 as steps in the Buddha’s progressive teaching (*anūsāsanam*), with “neither being unreal (*atathyam*) nor being real (*tathyam*)” as the highest doctrine. “*Tathyam*” more literally means “being so” or “being such” and contrasts with what is false or deceptive (*mṛṣā*). For Nāgārjuna, the fourth option corresponds to rejecting the extremes of “is not” (*nāsti*) and “is” (*asti*).

must be denied. But since nihilists see only one mode of existence, the rejection of the four options is seen as a repudiation of all metaphysics, and so all ultimate truths are denied or at best are unstatable (e.g., Garfield 2014). However, for Nāgārjuna the four options in no way reject the possibility of another metaphysics based on another mode of being: *tattva* with its dependently arisen content.

6. THE CONFUSION OF “ULTIMATE REALITY”

Contemporary nihilistic interpreters of Nāgārjuna also assert that entities would be “ultimate realities” if they existed through *svabhāva*. But since there is no *svabhāva* there are no ultimate entities. However, nihilists believe that for Nāgārjuna without an unchanging source nothing can be real: there must be at least one non-empty entity to ground impermanent phenomena or else all is unreal. Thus, since everything in Nāgārjuna’s metaphysics is dependent-arisen without an independently existing self-existent foothold, nothing ultimately exists or can be real for him—there is no ultimate ground for the entities to stand on (see, e.g., Burton 1999, 109-111). If nothing exists ultimately, then nothing (including appearances) can exist at all (Ferraro 2017, 92). But that claim is wrong. First, an infinite regress of causes grounds each cause, as Bertrand Russell argued in his famous debate with Frederick Copleston. The entire chain would be left without an explanation (contra Russell), but each cause would have an explanation and that is all that is needed for Nāgārjuna: indefinite chains of causes and conditions need no further grounding for each empty phenomenon within them to exist. Second, an infinite chain of dependent entities is not any less grounded than a reality that is claimed to somehow be “self-created” or “causeless” and just there (see Jones 2018b, chap. 5). Each alternative seems absurd to its opponents, but advocates of *svabhāva* have the same basic problem of why their reality ultimately exists. Third, Nāgārjuna does present a foundational reality—*tattva*. There need not be a transcendent reality or some unchanging “absolute” to ground entities. Rather, the perpetually impermanent phenomenal world can be the reality behind our erroneous projections. Nāgārjuna is not paradoxically claiming that groundless appearances (*bhāvas* and *dharmas*) are the “ultimate reality.”²⁴

However, Nāgārjuna uses “*svabhāva*” only in connection with *bhāvas* and *dharmas*—i.e., alleged entities of one sort or another—not *tattva*. *Tattva* is not a type of entity that is an alternative to *bhāvas* and *dharmas*. Thus, there is no ultimate entities, but there is an “ultimate reality” (*tattva*). Nevertheless, the idea of “ultimate reality” introduces confusion into these discussions of nihilism. To exist by *svabhāva* means for Nāgārjuna that something self-exists independently of all other things does not depend on causes and conditions to exist and is indestructible, and thus it is an “ultimate reality.” So too, anything “ultimately real” in the *svabhāva* sense must have an

²⁴ Jan Westerhoff (2016, 356-357) also raises the defense of mutually supporting networks of dependent relations. But I do not see Nāgārjuna arguing that rather than chains of causes and conditions.

“intrinsic nature” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 661). This leads nihilists to conclude that since nothing exists by *svabhāva*, there is nothing “ultimately real”—the only way to be ultimately real is to exist by *svabhāva*. So too, there is no “intrinsic nature” to reality, since that property is part of *svabhāva*. According to Siderits and Garfield (2013, 657), “the point of emptiness is to undermine the very idea of an ultimate reality with its ultimate nature.”

But, since Nāgārjuna gives *tattva* another mode of existence than existing by *svabhāva*, “ultimately real” can have two senses here: the restricted sense of being eternal and unchanging by existing through *svabhāva*, and a broader sense of “ultimately real”—being real *in the final ontological analysis*, i.e., real and not reducible to something else. Something can be ultimately real in the second sense without being ultimately real in the first sense. However, nihilists believe that Nāgārjuna can only mean the first, narrower sense: what is “ultimately real” must be entities existing through *svabhāva*, and since nothing exists through *svabhāva*, there is no ultimate reality in any sense and no foundation for other phenomena. According to Jay Garfield (2014, 49), conventional existence is the only kind of existence that is possible, and there is no “ultimate reality.” (Actually, with his proclivity for paradoxes, he says both that to exist conventionally is to be empty of ultimate reality [2014, 49] and that emptiness is the ultimate reality of things [2014, 50].) That is, if neither *bhāvas* nor *dharmas* are ultimately real by existing through self-existence, then there is nothing ultimately real in the final ontological analysis of things. So too, without an ultimate reality as a foundation, there are no reducible conventional realities—we are left with only unexplained appearances paradoxically having the status of the totally nonexistent child of a barren woman.

Thus, the premise that “ultimate reality” is only possible through self-existence makes nihilism seem correct—there are only empty things and nothing “ultimately real,” and so nihilism is its logical consequence. But nothing in Nāgārjuna’s corpus justifies that premise. Nāgārjuna never questioned the reality of *tattva*. He can accept that no things (*bhāvas* and *dharmas*) are ultimately real (since they do not exist by self-existence) and still affirm *tattva* in the final analysis. (And he can affirm that *bhāvas* and *dharmas* are conventionally real.) What is dependently arisen is the nature of reality in the final analysis—it is the “ultimate reality” of the world that we experience for him.

Nāgārjuna never used a Sanskrit equivalent of “ultimate reality,” although “*śūnyatā*” is sometimes translated so (e.g., Garfield 2014, 50, although he treats emptiness as a conventional reality), as is “*tattva*” (e.g., Ruegg 2000, 109). But overall, the concept is a Western insertion into the discussion and leads only to dealing with issues that are not germane to understanding Nāgārjuna. The term only leads to confusion when “ultimate reality” is restricted to existing through self-existence but then used to mean that there is no “ultimate reality” in the broader sense of being real in the final analysis. In addition, “ultimate reality” in the West has the connotations of a separate unaffected reality transcending the phenomenal realm or otherwise being

an unchanging Absolute that is the source of other realities.²⁵ It also leads theists and others to think of God. Thus, using that term may introduce a misunderstanding of Nāgārjuna since he never uses “*tattva*” or “*śūnyatā*” in those senses but keeps reality within the phenomenal realm. *Tattva* is simply the content of the phenomenal realm seen properly as free of independently existing self-contained parts. It is a reality, but calling *tattva* the “ultimate level” of reality is confusing since there is no other “level of reality”—Nāgārjuna rejects conventional entities and the *dharma* components as being unreal (*asat*) in the final analysis. But Nāgārjuna never treats *tattva* as the ontological source of *bhāvas* and *dharmas*—as if empty objects were caused by *tattva* or arise out of it. *Tattva* can be said to “absolute” in that it transcends all conceptions, but that adjective would again introduce the idea of a source or a reality apart from the flux of phenomenal reality, which does not fit Nāgārjuna’s metaphysics.

Ultimately, there is only the “that-ness” of the phenomenal world, not any more foundational or fundamental reality.²⁶ But given that status of *tattva*, it would also be confusing to say that Nāgārjuna claims that there is no “absolute” or “ultimate reality.” All in all, the term “ultimate reality” is too ill-defined to add clarity to the discussion. Calling *tattva* (or *dharmatā* or *paramārtha*) real in the final ontological analysis is sufficient: this conveys *tattva*’s status without any confusing Western overtones or implicit connection to *svabhāva*.

7. DOES NĀGĀRJUNA REJECT ALL ONTOLOGIES?

As presented here, Nāgārjuna has an implicit ontology: the “that-ness” (*tattva*) of the phenomenal world that remains after we stop projecting our conceptual divisions onto it. The objects of our conventional world (including *dharmas*) are all empty of self-existence and thus are not real (*sat*) in the final analysis, but the sheer being of the phenomena still stands. Impermanent and dependently-arisen entities still “exist,” only not as self-contained realities. That is an ontology. It affirms a distinction between reality as normally misperceived and seeing reality as it truly is. It also the distinction between two types of truths—truths about reality as conventionally conceived (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and those about reality as it truly is (*paramārtha-satya*). Nihilists, however,

²⁵ T. R. V. Murti (1955) presented a popular account of Madhyamaka along the lines of an Advaita-like “Absolute”—i.e., Nāgārjuna was only denying all doctrines about reality but was not denying the positive reality that transcends the phenomenal realm. However, unlike Advaita’s Brahman, *tattva* is not a reality transcending the phenomenal world, not conscious, and is open to sense-experience. Nor does anything in any of Nāgārjuna’s works suggest any of the absolutes adopted by some other Mahāyāna schools. Rather, what he says about *tattva* suggests only the early Buddhist and Prajñāpāramitā subject of the nature of the phenomenal realm—as discussed, *tattva* is simply the phenomenal realm free of our conceptual overlay. Fyodor Stcherbatsky (1965 [1927]) identified *nirvāṇa* and *paramārtha-satya* with *tattva* and treated them all as an absolute Void that is also a fullness out of which things arise. Also see Tola and Dragonetti 1995.

²⁶ See Jay Westerhoff (2017) for a discussion of Nāgārjuna’s rejection of foundationalism.

routinely claim that Nāgārjuna rejects all metaphysics: all metaphysics are views (*dṛṣṭis*), and Nāgārjuna rejects them all—including emptiness—so that we will have no mental objects to grasp and thus can become free of suffering.²⁷ Therefore, the empty ontology of nihilism, despite it being a metaphysics, is logically entailed by Nāgārjuna’s position.

It is certainly true that Nāgārjuna does have that soteriological purpose: his is not a disinterested philosophical project to describe reality but to show how enlightenment is possible and how the Buddhist praxis can work—if nothing could change, how could we end our current state of suffering? And it is also true that we have to remove all conceptualizations from our mind to experience reality (*tattva*) as it is: emptiness shows that there are no “real” selves or objects to crave or grasp. *Tattva* is “free of thoughts (*vikalpas*)” that make distinctions (MK 18.9). “When the domain of thought has ceased, then what can be named has ceased” (MK 18.7). Thereby, the mind is calmed, and we can see reality as it truly is. An enlightenment-experience would transcend our normal way of looking at reality, and it would go beyond any linguistic event. To use an earlier Buddhist analogy: enlightenment is not the intellectual acceptance of the idea “Water quenches thirst” but actually drinking water (*Samyutta Nikāya* II.115). Quenching our thirst by drinking water is not a linguistic event—it thus goes beyond what is expressed, and so the realization is ineffable in that way. But this does not render the storable claim “Water quenches thirst” in any way untrue. Once we have drunk water, we know what it is like to drink water and thus now know the claim in a way that we did not when relying on the testimony of others. That may change how one views water and understands the claim, but the stated truth remains the same.

So too with enlightenment: realizing the emptiness of things and the resulting direct, unmediated seeing of *tattva* (*tattva-darśana*, MK 26.10, SS 39) may initially require a state of consciousness in which our linguistic abilities are temporarily in abeyance. One then sees reality properly, i.e., free of entities existing by *svabhāva*, concepts (*vikalpas*), and conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). Not merely conception projection (*prapañca*) is abeyance but all conceptions. The stilling of all conceptual support and the stilling of the projection of concepts onto reality is “peace” (*śivaḥ*) (MK 25.24). However, even though the event of realizing the final truth is “beyond language” and “ineffable,” stating the final truth after the experiential realization of it may still be possible—those whose awareness (*buddhi*) has gone beyond “It is” (*asti*) and “It is not” (*nāsti*), and thus is free from clinging, clearly perceive the nature of conditionality (YS 1) and can state that. But at least some nihilists see all language as implicating reification and *prapañca*, and since there are no “real” (*sat*) referents for any terms, there are no ultimate truths (Garfield 2014, 47, Siderits 2019, 646). All language is conventional and distorts reality; any assertion is at best only conventionally true and nothing is ultimately true (Garfield 2014, 51, 53). Buddhist

²⁷ Giuseppe Ferraro (2014, 461) also thinks that any attempt to speculate on *tattva* is a *dṛṣṭa*) and thus detrimental soteriologically and so should be abandoned.

doctrines are reduced to a “raft” (*Majjhima Nikāya* I.22) existing within the conventional world to get us to the other shore of enlightenment and of no ultimate reality.²⁸ But these nihilists cannot explain how the Buddha could talk without resorting to claiming that the Buddha went in and out of enlightened states.

In sum, Nāgārjuna does not reject all ontologies but only *svabhāva*-based ontologies of self-contained entities existing or not existing (*dr̥ṣṭis*). He advances an ontology that shows how the Buddhist path can work.

8. “ULTIMATE TRUTH”

In addition, contemporary nihilistic interpreters believe that “ultimate reality” involves self-existent entities, and since there are no self-existent entities, there can be no ultimate truths: there is no reality to mirror any claims, and so nothing to state (or at least any “ultimate truths” are not statable).²⁹ For example, Jay Garfield (2014) believes that the level of *dharmas* is “ultimate reality” for Nāgārjuna and since *dharmas* are empty, there are no real referents for claims and thus there are no ultimate truths—all truths reduce to conventional ones. For Mark Siderits, “a statement can be ultimately true only by virtue of correctly describing an ultimately real entity,” and since there are no ultimately real entities, there are no ultimate truth (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 304; also see Siderits 2007, 180-183, 200-204). Garfield (2014, 50) also claims that since Nāgārjuna identifies dependent-arising and emptiness (MK 24.18, VVV 70, SS 68), “by implication” conventional and ultimate truth are identified—despite Nāgārjuna stating that those who do not distinguish conventional and ultimate truth do not see the profound teach of the Buddha (MK 24.9; see Jones 2014, 51-54).³⁰

For nihilists, there must be ultimate realities (self-existent entities) for there to be ultimate truths, and since there are no self-existent entities, there can be no ultimate truths. But ultimate truths are about whatever is real *in the final analysis*, not necessarily a depiction of “ultimate *entities*.” For Nāgārjuna, there is something real in

²⁸ It can be argued that the Buddha never taught a truly “ultimate truth” but only presented a path that enabled us to end our existential suffering (*dukkha*) that results from clinging to false realities (the self and objects of desire): he had no interest in reality apart from the problem of suffering, and so what reality is “in itself” apart from his soteriological concern is irrelevant—he remained agnostic about metaphysical issues related to the ultimate status of the phenomenal world and to any purported transcendent realities. This may be true, but it does not change the fact that Nāgārjuna presents a picture of reality that enables the Buddhist path to work, and he presents final “ultimate truths,” not “conventional truths,” at least within the context of the Buddhist way of life. This does not justify Siderits and Garfield’s (2013, 659) claim that “[w]hat one needs to know in order to attain liberation is that the very idea of how things ultimately are is incoherent”—nothing in Nāgārjuna’s texts justify that broader claim.

²⁹ For a discussion of the problems that such a “mirror theory” of language in mysticism, see Jones 2016, chap. 6.

³⁰ Classical Indian philosophy does not differentiate “truth” and “reality” in the term “*satya*” and related words. Thus, “ultimate truths” and “ultimate reality” become inextricably connected.

the final analysis (i.e., *tattva*), and thus there may be truths about it from the highest point of view or the highest purpose (*paramārtha*)—self-existent realities are not needed to ground the truths. Nor do we have to twist claims about emptiness into conventional truths: claims of emptiness reveal the true ontological status of conventional entities and thus are ultimate truths—conventional claims are based on treating entities as self-contained realities, and thus emptiness is false from a conventional point of view. Since ultimate truths are any truths about the true ontological status of things in the final analysis, ultimate truths and an ontology of impermanence are compatible.

Nowhere does Nāgārjuna state that ultimate truths are not storable (see Jones 2014, 54-55). Ultimate truths are not ineffable in any sense for him simply because all referents are by definition conventional. *Tattva* itself is “free of being projected upon by conceptual projections, free of thoughts, and without multiplicity” (MK 18.9), but Nāgārjuna never says that truths about it (such as that one) cannot be stated. If he thought so, he would have stated that nothing could be stated about *tattva* there. Rather, Buddhists can utilize the conventions of a language to teach ultimate truths (MK 24.10). So too, the final analysis of the ontological status of entities—how they actually exist rather than appear conventionally—can be stated, and Nāgārjuna discusses their emptiness.

In sum, truths are about whatever is real in the final analysis even if that reality is not self-existent, and they are storable: ultimate truths state the ultimately correct ontological account of reality. Nāgārjuna states that there are two types of truth, that the statement of the ultimate truths depends on conventions, and that it is based on the ultimate truths that one can become enlightened:

[8] The buddhas’ teaching of the doctrine rests upon two categories of truths (*satye*): truth based on worldly conventions (*loka-saṃvṛti-satyam*) and truth from the highest point of view (*satya-paramārthatas*). [9] Those who do not discern the distinction of these two categories of truths do not discern the profound truth (*tattvam*) in the teachings of the buddhas. [10] Without relying upon worldly convention (*vyavahāram*), the truth from the highest point of view cannot be taught. And without reaching the truth from the highest point of view, *nirvāṇa* cannot be achieved (MK 24.8-10).

[69] The ultimate truth (*paramārtha*) consists of this teaching of emptiness. The Buddha, while holding to worldly conventions (*loka-vyavahāram*), conceived the world properly. [70] Worldly doctrines (*laukika-dharmas*) are not abolished, but from the point of view of reality as it really is (*tattvatas*) the Buddha never taught a doctrine. But the ignorant do not understand what the Buddha said and are afraid of his spotless speech (*vimala-vacana*) (SS 69-70).

Once one has realized the ultimate truth, one can again utilize concepts to navigate the world and to lead others to enlightenment. Only conceptual projection is ended permanently in the enlightened state, not the use of language itself.

Mark Siderits (2007, 203-205) gives a “semantic” interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s thought rather than the more common “ontological” interpretation, such as the one presented here. That is, Nāgārjuna’s doctrine of emptiness is not about *reality* but about *what we can say about reality*, i.e., about our alleged conceptual claims to truth. Under this approach, “[w]hen a Mādhyamika says that things are empty, this is not to be understood as stating the ultimate truth about the ultimate nature of reality. Instead this is just a useful pedagogical device, a way of instructing others who happen to believe there is such a thing as the ultimate truth about the ultimate nature of reality” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 247). According to the semantic interpretation, “the point of emptiness is to undermine the very idea of an ultimate reality with its ultimate nature” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 657). All statements are conventional and actually falsify reality (Siderits 2019, 646). For Siderits, the ultimate nature of reality is something that is inexpressible and only cognizable nonconceptually because, there being no ultimately real entities to figure in truth-makers for purported descriptions of the ultimate nature of reality, no such description (including ‘inexpressible’ and ‘unconceptualizable’) can be asserted” (2015, 120-121). Siderits may reject *tattva* as a reality, but even if he accepted a reality such as *tattva*, he would still have to deny that anything could be said about it. Such a position may be defensible on philosophical grounds, but it is hard to defend from Nāgārjuna’s works: it reduces all truths to conventional truths, and Nāgārjuna is prepared to say some general things about *tattva* (e.g., in MK 18.9), as discussed above.

So too, contra Siderits, Nāgārjuna, as discussed above, accepts conceptions and does not reduce them all conceptualization to *prapañca* (contra Siderits 2019, 645). And as part of those conceptions, the enlightened can present an ontology to render understandable what was experienced in the enlightened state. Here, Nāgārjuna has an ontology of that-ness of the phenomenal world and the emptiness of conceptualized entities. And he states ultimate truths. He can use conventional concepts to depict the arising and falling of empty phenomena as dependent upon causes and conditions without projecting the idea of self-contained entities onto reality and can explain that reality in terms of its sheer that-ness.

9. CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS OF MERELOGICAL NIHILISM AND DEFLATIONISM

Ontological nihilism has become a much-discussed topic in contemporary Anglo-American metaphysics. “Ontological nihilism” here does not mean literal nothingness—in Jason Turner’s words (2011, 4), that reality is “an unstructured and undifferentiated blob, but without the blob.” No contemporary Western philosopher goes as far as nihilistic interpreters of Nāgārjuna and denies that something exists.

Rather, ontological nihilism is a form of anti-realism and reductionism concerning whether conventional objects (or any objects) exist (see Jones 2013, 13-15). That is, it is a matter of the composition of complex entities: nothing real has parts, but the parts exist. Thus, this is “compositional” or “mereological” nihilism concerning the relation of wholes to their parts—any composite entity is not actually real, only their most basic components are. Nihilists today deny that everyday objects and properties such as tables and chairs and colors are real, but they affirm either that fundamental objects exist (moderate nihilism) or that at least fundamental properties arising from the space-time continuum exist (radical nihilism).

Thus, conventional objects are reduced either to whatever are the most fundamental objects discovered in quantum physics or to the fundamental properties instantiated in space-time without there being any discrete objects. Composite objects are simply arrangements of elementary objects. Conventional language about everyday entities is not discarded since talk about “tables” and “chairs” can be paraphrased properly in terms of the true ontological parts of reality. For example, for Ted Sider (2014, 257), the statement “There are tables” can be restated as “Some mereological simples are arranged table-wise.” Both the ordinary description and the restated ontologically correct description describe the same facts. (How to restate conventional claims without a commitment to some type of objects has proved to be an issue [see Diehl 2018].) In radical nihilism, only the reality of the space-time continuum and properties is affirmed. In more extreme forms, all there really is is just atomless and structureless stuff—or to use the technical philosophical term introduced by David Lewis (1991, 20), “gunk.” Parts divide into smaller and smaller parts forever—all that is real is an amorphous lump. In a gunk universe, the true ontology has only one entry: gunk (see Le Bihan 2013). Ontological nihilisms with determinate parts or properties have more complex fundamental ontologies.

Nāgārjuna brings something new to this situation. The new developments in Western philosophy make mereological nihilism respectable, and Nāgārjuna might be called a “mereological nihilist,” even though he accepts *bhāvas* as “conventionally real”—a category not in contemporary ontological nihilists’ ontologies. But his distinction of “two truths” dovetails with the new nihilism: conventional truths are affirmed for everyday discourse, and ultimate truths are in terms of the ultimate components of reality (the *dharmas*). He also agrees that conventional truths are deceptive since the entities involved in them—*bhāvas*—are not the ultimately real components of reality: from the point of view of an ultimate ontology, tables and chairs do not exist as “real” (*sat*) entities, although there is a reality behind them.

However, Nāgārjuna differs from contemporary philosophers concerning the nature of the ultimate components of reality. The Western philosophers let physics determine what the most fundamental components are—the components are either the smallest particles in space-time or the properties arising from space-time. But Nāgārjuna sees the ultimate construction of the phenomenal world in terms of basic components of our *experience*—the *dharmas*. As a Buddhist, Nāgārjuna is interested in how our

experience of the world causes our suffering, not the nature of the world independent of our experience. Hence, his focus is on the fundamental components of experience. *Dharmas* are not material-like particles or properties, unlike the simples in physics. Also unlike the simples in physics, Nāgārjuna advocates the direct experience of *tattva* (i.e., an experience of the “that-ness” of phenomenal reality)—a topic of no interest to contemporary nihilists. In directly experiencing the components of experience, we experience the world free of our culturally-constructed categories and concepts.

In sum, Nāgārjuna’s mereological nihilism takes a different tack than do contemporary Western versions in that the ultimate simples are not material. This leads to other differences from contemporary metaphysics. As discussed above, the *dharmas*, like the entities of the everyday world (the *bhāvas*), are empty of anything that would make them self-existent (*svabhāva*). Thus, the fundamental components of our experience are not any more “real” in the sense of being self-contained realities than everyday entities. But, as Nāgārjuna’s critics argue, if the fundamental components are not real, how can this lead to anything but literal nihilism? How can Nāgārjuna be committed to something if it is not real? However, as discussed, “self-existence” is not Nāgārjuna’s only criterion for being real: *dharmas* are “real” even if they are conditioned and not self-existent.

And as discussed above, unlike a pure gunk world, Nāgārjuna also affirms a fundamental reality to the phenomena world behind our conceptions. *Tattva* has structures: *dharmas* have a genuine *structure* despite not having any self-existent substance, and the lawfulness of dependent-arising also indicates structure. The *dharmas* are not our fabrications but the components of our experienced world even though they arise and cease conditionally and thus are not self-contained entities—they are the real “factors of our experiences.” In their dharmic analyses of what is real, Buddhist Abhidharma schools distinguish dozens and dozens of *dharmas* connected to sense-experience, emotions, and other mental states, but there is only one category for “matter”—“form” (*rūpa*). And even there the *dharma* relates only to our experience, not to “matter in itself”—it is about the form of things as we *experience* them, not what they may be independent of our experience. By naming things, we give what is actually real a form—hence, the common phrase for the physical world: “name and form (*nāmā-rūpa*).” *Dharmas* are mereological simples, but *tattva* is not built out of them—it is not as if *tattva* is assembled by adding the dharmic parts together, any more than space-time for contemporary nihilists is built up from fundamental particles. Still, *dharmas* provide definite structures to *tattva* even if for Nāgārjuna they are not fixed entities but empty of any *svabhāva*. This disavowal of self-existent components distinguishes Nāgārjuna from the Abhidharma schools.

In sum, *tattva* is not empty of structured realities. But Nāgārjuna’s fundamental reality is in terms of the experienced stuff existing independently of our conceptualizations, not fundamental particles—he accepts language even though there are no fixed entities in the world to be referents. Thus, he would disagree with Jason Turner (2011) over the need for fundamental objects in how we see the world. But as

discussed, he states very little about the actual nature of *tattva*. Thus, he may well have agreed that language is object-oriented and agreed that there is a problem for any language in expressing a fundamental reality devoid of discrete objects but would not reject his ontology for that reason.

This also impacts the issue of “ontological deflation” in the sense used by David Chalmers (2009), i.e., the rejection of the entire metaphysical project of finding the fundamental elements of reality because we cannot find ultimate truths in this field. Thus, no fundamental ontology should be espoused. To be more precise, some have argued Nāgārjuna’s project entails a weak deflationism in that he refuses the ultimate reality of entities and *dharmas* but accepts the conventional world as long as we do not take it without any ontological commitments—i.e., that we do not take *bhavas* and *dharmas* to be self-existent realities (MacKenzie 2008, Gandolfo 2016). In short, Nāgārjuna deflates the ontology of conventional entities and does not espouse any ultimate ontology. In this deflationism, we can make claims about conventional entities without requiring any commitment to their ultimate reality or foundations—any claim of a fundamental ontology is a dependent designation and thus dependently arisen (MacKenzie 2008, 204). However, as discussed, while Nāgārjuna mainly discusses why there are no ultimately real entities (in the sense of *svabhāva*), he does affirm a robust reality beyond our conceptualized entities, and that makes any deflationist interpretation hard to maintain. That Nāgārjuna ends his principal world by affirming that the Buddha taught a “true doctrine” (MK 27.30) also must make deflationists scramble (see Gandolfo 2016, 220-223).

10. CONCLUSION

Nāgārjuna’s writings are terse enough to have led to a fascinating variety of interpretations—and not just on the issue of ontological nihilism—and none can be defended as obviously the best. The differences have led to many long articles and books, and the disputes seep down to translations of verses. But the equation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) with nothingness by both Jay Garfield and Mark Siderits leads to paradoxes that only confuse the issues—“The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth,” “The ultimate reality is that there is no ultimate reality.”³¹ Such contradictions would normally be a *reductio ad absurdum* of their positions, but they actually enjoy espousing paradoxes. Their denial of ultimate truths or the equation of ultimate and conventional truths explicitly also goes against what Nāgārjuna actually wrote about the “profound teaching” of the Buddha (MK 24.9) and so should be grounds to reject their positions as possibly valid interpretations of Nāgārjuna. Instead their position has become fashionable. David Burton and Thomas Woods also equate emptiness with the

³¹ Mark Siderits may have meant the claim “The ultimate is that there is no ultimate truth” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 273) only rhetorically to grab people’s attention rather than literally, but he accepts that others (including Jay Garfield) embrace the paradoxical reading (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 658). (See Jones 2018a.)

total lack of any reality. But this goes against Nāgārjuna’s “middle way” that avoids the nihilist extreme, not to mention going against all empirical evidence (Oetke 1996, 99). At least Jan Westerhoff (2016) admits that his philosophical defense of Madhyamaka’s alleged nihilism is not an argument that can be found in Nāgārjuna’s works.

Moreover, nihilism is hard to defend when there is instead a straightforward interpretation of the emptiness of entities based on verses that entail that a reality—*tattva*—remains once we stop projecting self-existence onto empty entities. The nihilists’ error centers on thinking that for Nāgārjuna either entities must be self-existent or nothing is real. But *tattva* is not made up of *bhāvas* or *dharmas*. Making *tattva* a central piece of the puzzle offers a simpler and more consistent reading of Nāgārjuna’s works, one that does not have to deny the plain meaning of passages or that boxes a commentator into the corner with paradoxes. Entities can then be free of self-existence without the specter of nihilism rising. Indeed, if Nāgārjuna’s notion of “*tattva*” were given more prominence in modern discussions of his texts, the popularity of the nihilist interpretations would dwindle away.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank the two anonymous referees of the journal *Comparative Philosophy* whose comments and questions made this a better article.

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Abbreviations

- MK *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*
- RV *Jewel Garland of Advice (Ratnāvalī)*
- SS *Seventy Verses on Emptiness (Śūnyatāsaptatikārikā)*
- VV *Overturning the Objections (Vigrahavyāvartanī)*
- VVV Nāgārjuna’s commentary on *Overturning the Objections*
- YS *Sixty Verses on Argument (Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā)*

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