

The relation of akasa to prativityasamutpada in Nagarjuna's
writings

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To Juliet, my wife, whose love, acceptance and graceful realism made this thesis possible.

To Sinead and Kieran who teach me everyday

I would like to thank Professor Deirdre Byrne for her intellectual support and editing the thesis

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Summary of thesis:

While much of Nāgārjuna's writings are aimed at deconstructing fixed views and views that hold to some form of substantialist thought (where certain qualities are held to be inherent in phenomena), he does not make many assertive propositions regarding his philosophical position. He focuses most of his writing to applying the *prasaṅga* method of argumentation to prove the importance of recognizing that all phenomena are *śūnya* by deconstructing views of phenomena based on substance. Nāgārjuna does, however, assert that all phenomena are empty and that phenomena are meaningful because *śūnyatā* makes logical sense.¹ Based on his deconstruction of prevailing views of substance, he maintains that holding to any view of substance is absurd, that phenomena can only make sense if viewed from the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. This thesis grapples with the problem that Nāgārjuna does not provide adequate supporting arguments to prove that phenomena are meaningful due to their *śūnyatā*. It is clear that if *saṃvṛti* is indiscernible due to its emptiness, *saṃvṛtisatya* cannot be corroborated on its own terms due to its insubstantiality. But how does viewing phenomena as empty make them meaningful? Scholars who base their understanding of how meaning is established in Nāgārjuna's thought based on Candrakīrti's interpretation of his two-truths formulation, which grants both *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* truths their distinctive truth-values, tend to prove the distinctive truth of *saṃvṛti* in terms of its linguistically-based, conventional status.² I am critical of this approach and argue, instead, that an explanation of how phenomena are meaningful due to their emptiness is found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*'s (PPM)'s use of metaphoricity. Rather than seeing the two truths as distinctive, I argue that *saṃvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya* both make sense based on their metaphorical relationship in that they are both *śūnyatā* and that phenomena point to, or are metaphors for, the all-inclusive *śūnyatā* of reality akin to understanding of *ākāśa* in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* which although experienced cannot be cognitively grasped.

Key terms: Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā*, *saṃvṛti*, *paramārtha*, *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, metaphoricity, *ākāśa*, *pratītyasamutpāda*.

¹ MK 24: 14 (cited in McCagney 1997:201); VV 70 (cited in Westerhoff 2010:130).

² Garfield (Chapter 2: 23-38) and Tillemans (Chapter 9;151-166) (in Westerhoff et al, 2011)

Declaration

I declare that “The relation of akasa to pratityasamutpada in Nagarjuna’s writings” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references

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List of Abbreviations

VV – *Vigrahavyāvartanī*

MK – *Mūlamadyamakakārikā*

Rgs – *Ratnaguṇasaṃucaya-gāthā*

PPM – *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*

Aṣṭa - *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*

Rt – *Ratnakūta*

SS – *Śūnyatāsaptati*

Note on Translations used

I have used primarily Nancy McCagney's translation of the MK (1997) in *Nāgārjuna and philosophy of openness* and Jan Westerhoff's translation of the VV (2010) in *The dispeller of disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Where not otherwise stated these two translations serve as my primary texts for translations on Nāgārjuna's writings.

Chapter One

Introduction

1. The central problem

While much of Nāgārjuna's writings are aimed at deconstructing fixed views and views that hold to some form of substantialism or *svabhāva* (where certain qualities are held to be inherent in phenomena), he does not make many assertive propositions regarding his philosophical position. He devotes most of his writing to applying the *prasaṅga* method of argumentation to prove the necessity of recognizing that all phenomena are *śūnya* by deconstructing views of phenomena based on substance. Nāgārjuna does, however, assert that all phenomena are empty and that phenomena are meaningful because *śūnyatā* makes logical sense.¹ Based on his deconstruction of prevailing views of substance (see parenthesis above explaining substantialism), he asserts that holding to any view of substance is absurd, that phenomena can only make sense if viewed from the standpoint of *śūnyatā*. This thesis grapples with the problem that Nāgārjuna does not provide adequate supporting arguments to prove that phenomena are meaningful due to their *śūnyatā*. It is clear that if *saṃvṛti* (conceptual or conventional

¹ MK 24: 14 (cited in McCagney 1997: 201); VV 70; (cited in Westerhoff 2010: 130).

knowledge) is indiscernible due to its emptiness, *saṃvṛtīsatya* (conceptual or contextual truth) cannot be corroborated on its own terms due to its insubstantiality. But how does viewing phenomena as empty make them meaningful? Scholars who base their understanding of how meaning is established in Nāgārjuna's thought based on Candrakīrti's interpretation of his two-truths formulation, which grants both *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* truths their distinctive truth-values, tend to prove the distinctive veracity of *saṃvṛti* in terms of its linguistically-based, conventional status.² I disagree with this approach and argue, instead, that an explanation of how phenomena are meaningful due to their emptiness is found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra's* (PPM)'s use of metaphoricity. Rather than seeing the two truths as distinctive, I maintain that *saṃvṛtīsatya* and *paramārthasatya* both make sense based on their metaphorical relationship in that they are both *śūnyatā* and that phenomena point to, or are metaphors for, the all-inclusive *śūnyatā* of reality. The two clearest statements of Nāgārjuna's assertion that phenomena make sense due to their emptiness are:

All things prevail for him whom prevails this voidness. Nothing prevails for him for whom voidness does not prevail.³
*sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/
 sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate//*

and

For whom there is emptiness, there is [the clarity of] all things. For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing what soever.

If *śūnyata* does not work, then everything does not work⁴

² Garfield (Chapter 2: 23-38) and Tillemans (Chapter 9;151-166) in Westerhoff et al, 2011

³ VV 70 in Westerhoff (2010: 41).

*prabhavati ca śūnyatēyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvāthāh/
prabhavati na tasya kiṃcin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya//*

The use of *yujyate* in MK 24:14 and *prabhavati* in VV70 suggest that phenomena are experienced as immediate (*yujyate*) and engagingly (*prabhavati*) related and when *śūnyatā* is fully understood. Both these terms allude to meaningful encounters with phenomena due to their emptiness. Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā*, therefore, does not imply that his philosophy is nihilistic. My thesis will demonstrate why this is so. In particular, in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, (VV) Nāgārjuna was at pains to defend his argument against criticisms of nihilism. But in both *Mūlamadyamakakārikā* (MK) 24:14 and VV 70, *śūnyatā* is presented, not as a critique of phenomena, but, rather, as an integral part of their presentation. *Śūnyatā* in these verses is not an experience of unmitigated voidness, but rather of causal flux. But, in making his defence of *śūnyatā* against the charges of nihilism from his opponents, Nāgārjuna introduces meaning in order to bolster his argument. He suggests that without a correct understanding of *śūnyatā* nothing makes sense. Unfortunately he does not offer an argument as proof for this claim. Instead, he relies on the experience of *śūnyatā* in *bhāvāna*.⁵ In Chapter 2 I argue, following Nancy McCagney's assertion, that *śūnyatā*, as Nāgārjuna uses the term, conceptually corresponds to *ākāśa*; the yogic experience of *śūnyatā* is mediated by a yogic experience of space as described in the in the PPM.⁶

⁴ MK 24: 14 in McCagney (1997: 201).

⁵ MK25: 24 (in McCagney 1997: 210).

⁶ McCagney (1997: 22).

In grappling with the problem of making sense of Nāgārjuna's claims regarding meaning I will focus specifically on MK 24:14 and VV 70. In these verses Nāgārjuna attempts to establish a clear view of reality by undoing the confusion arising from mistaken attribution of own-being or *svabhāva* to phenomena (a substantive object). He shows that the only way a thing can display own-being is via its activity, as ably demonstrated by the Abhidharmikas.⁷ But this association between activity and substantive essence obscures the correct perception of a thing-in-itself (to borrow Kant's phrase) in that activity is confused for objective reality.⁸ If one ascribes essence to activity, phenomena are granted power to act because their defining activity is seen to provide them with a degree of autonomy.

Nāgārjuna moves to establish a clear view of reality by basing his argument on causality – a shrewd rhetorical move, which ensures him his opponents' attention, since they would also look to causality to understand how phenomena establish a certain sensory impression. But Nāgārjuna proves to be a highly astute argumentative adversary in this instance. From the first chapter in the MK, he shifts the argument away from the anticipated focus on dynamic causal relations to delusion. He achieves this by adopting the *prasaṅga* method of argumentation to show the absurdity of believing in autonomous action. If we doubt that activity possesses essence, we will then try to explain how conditions arise through claiming that phenomena are dependent on one another. But in the Humean sense, how can one ever be sure that conditions are the

⁷ Williams (2000: 92 and 115).

⁸ MK 1: 6 (in McCagney 1997: 138).

result of certain causal activity?⁹ Nāgārjuna is aware of this problem and holds that as long as the error of perception is maintained, the correct understanding of phenomena will be overlooked.¹⁰ I maintain that his argument in MK 24:14 and VV70 corresponds to certain phrases and concepts in the PPM which incorporate metaphoricity in its logic. A good example is found in *Ratnaguṇasamūcayagāthā* (Rgs) 20 13 & 14:

Having taken hold of the two parachutes of skill in means and of wisdom,
Considers dharmas as empty, signless and wishless.¹¹

In this verse meaning is described, through the metaphor of two parachutes, as skilful means and wisdom. Knowledge of *śūnyatā* is dependent on the ability to combine the skill of acting in the world with Wisdom. The result of this combined knowledge is the awareness of *śūnyatā*, which is described in the PPM in akasic terms, i.e. *apratīhistita* (not settling down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp). I explore these akasic connotations in detail in Chapter Two.

Similarly, Nāgārjuna's deconstructive analysis of causal conditions and effects leads him, at the end of Chapter One in the MK, on the one hand, to a contradictory and confusing set of assertions about conditions and, on the other hand, to beg for a semantic solution that is neither object-related nor conceptually bound. Phenomena and conditions are akasic in character, as described in the PPM in the terms *apratīhistita* (not settling down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp):

⁹ Scruton (1996: 124); Hume (1910: 3).

¹⁰ MK 1: 4 (in McCagney 1997: 138).

¹¹ Conze (1990: 46).

Verse 11

The effect is not in the conditions either separately or together.
How could that which is not in conditions be from conditions?

Verse 12

Moreover, if the effect, nonexistent in those conditions, is set in motion
From those conditions, why is it not set in motion from no conditions?

Verse 13

The effect is created by conditions, but the conditions are not created by
themselves.

How can an effect created by conditions be from what is not created by
itself?

Verse 14

The effect is created neither from conditions nor from no conditions.
How can an effect be obtained from nonexistent conditions and no
conditions?¹²

It seems that Nāgārjuna is attacking consistency as a basis for truth-claims by showing that conditions are erroneously conceived causal relationships and are hence perceptual delusions. The only logical position, then, is to hold that phenomena are indeterminate in nature, neither derived from other conditions nor from non-conditions.¹³ If Nāgārjuna holds to this position of indeterminacy, he would not be able to make his final assertion that phenomena work or make sense because of *śūnyatā*. If phenomena are indeterminate in nature, they must be meaningless. The root of the confusion lies in the contradictory assertion that the truth of phenomena is that they are true but meaningless. This leads to the question of how phenomena work or make sense due to *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna implies that phenomena are true and meaningful because they are *śūnyatā* in the sense that they work and can be logically accounted for. Therefore, what

¹² McCagney (1997: 139).

¹³ Garfield argues that questions such as, “why can we see in the room at night?” are explained due the dominant condition “because the light is on”. He argues that the explanation using the dominant condition does not require causal substantiation (1995: 5). I believe that such an argument falls short of what Nāgārjuna is claiming about understanding phenomena when *śūnyatā* is understood in that if meaning is derived from the dominant condition meaning would only have relative value.

is delusional is not the existence of phenomena, but the imposition of own-being onto phenomena. These issues are explored in Chapter Three, where I demonstrate that concepts, objects and statements always evade clear identification of fixed meaning and are, therefore, always relatively interpreted and indeterminate. Meaning, for Nāgārjuna is, therefore, a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). In other words if meaning is contingent on *śūnyatā* the verb/process element prevails over the nominative function of language.¹⁴

Chapter Four argues that, in identifying *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, Nāgārjuna makes the necessary logical move to establish phenomena as meaningful and reasonable. He does this by reflecting the logic utilised in the PPM, where finite objects are used to reflect the infinity of *śūnyatā*, specifically through connecting *śūnyatā* with the experience of *ākāśa*. This logic utilises the literary technique of metaphoricity in the PPM, where phenomena are metaphors for *śūnyatā*, rather than being indeterminate objects: phenomena are not necessarily based on ignorance but rather, are actual expressions of *śūnyatā*. MK 16:10 offers a good example of this metaphoric logic, reminiscent of that used in the PPM:

Neither is *nirvāṇa* only *saṃsāra* nor is *saṃsāra* removed away. Where there is *nirvāṇa*, there is *saṃsāra*. Which is falsely discriminated from which?

¹⁴ McCagney (1997: 19).

In order to approach the problem I have outlined in this section, I will first outline my conceptual and theoretical approach to Nāgārjuna. Second, I will explain the methodological approach used in the thesis.

2. Theoretical and conceptual approach

My approach in this thesis is primarily philosophical. Its objective is not so much to contextualise Nāgārjuna's writings in order to understand their meaning, but rather to read them philosophically. I do not mean to ignore the importance of historicity and historicisation. I, however, want to avoid the argument that limits ideas to certain historical moments, common to Foucauldian approaches to knowledge.¹⁵ Such an approach runs into the logical paradox that all knowledge is contextual, even the argument that 'all knowledge is contextual'. In contrast, I aspire to disrupt the narrowing influence of a contextualising hermeneutic; to break open the conditioned interpretations of the texts; and finally, to see the texts' meaning as offering a transhistorical challenge to the reader. Such an approach does, however, require sensitivity to the prevailing mindset or historical traditions of the epoch. In this thesis, the Indic and Buddhist mindset is centrally relevant. Used in this way philosophy is akin to mythology because both mythology and philosophy force their audiences to look at their objects afresh, untethered from received interpretations and open to the ancient questions posed about

¹⁵ Foucault (1980: 197). In *The Order of things* Foucault argues the épistemes define the conditions of possibility of knowledge within a particular epoch.

reality.¹⁶ If a text is read purely as an historical document, it only exists for the reader in relation to other texts in its close contextual vicinity. But, if a text is read primarily in terms of its attempts to communicate wisdom and meaning, it is able to abide, to some extent, in its own free space, reflecting itself in relation to insight and its pursuit of wisdom, which, to some extent, transcends time and language. Such a philosophy can be evaluated in terms of whether its logic provides meaningful assertions to the reader. My approach is, therefore not primarily historical, although I am interested in highlighting the broad Indian mentality that influenced Nāgārjuna's thought. Nāgārjuna's writings may have earned him the title of "Father of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism". This claim is, however, not easy to defend because *Mahāyāna* predates his writings. Certain scholars, nevertheless, assert that he was a champion of the *Mahāyāna* tradition.¹⁷ But he does not deliberately align himself with any school of thought. It is for this reason that his writings are of such interest. Although completely Buddhist in their expression and approach, Nāgārjuna's writings keep counsel with no factions or individuals and yet pronounce a philosophy so influential that it remains, in importance, second only to the Buddha's teachings in the *Mahāyāna* tradition. He is critical of certain ideas, which seem to be akin to the ideas of the Abhidharmists including the *Sarvāstivādins*: yet he offers no conspicuous thesis in response.

¹⁶ In the process of attempting to read Nāgārjuna using this philosophical approach, I will not consider his commentators in detail, such as Buddhpaṭita, Bhāviveka or Candrakīrti, although I am critical of Candrakīrti's interpretations and his subsequent followers' commentaries, such as Tsong Khapa. The philosophical approach that I am employing requires a close reading of the texts themselves. Bhāviveka's commentaries require substantial critiques in themselves, which this thesis does not allow for. My explanation of the philosophical approach in this paragraph is influenced by Breyten Breytenbach's response to the contention that reading needs to guard against being constricted by contemporary hermeneutics and recover its elementary force (2008: 152).

¹⁷ Walser (2010: 2 & 3); Warder (1980: 352).

Recent studies highlight the difficulty of the historical approach when applied to Nāgārjuna.¹⁸ Most prominently, the challenge is that the historical figure of Nāgārjuna is so hard to pin down. In the following pages, I will tackle this problem in Nāgārjuna studies.

Establishing the historical conditions within which Nāgārjuna lived is unfortunately not an easy task. Nāgārjuna scholars are reticent to offer dates for Nāgārjuna's life.¹⁹ Not only is there a paucity of information available about Nāgārjuna's life (most of which appears mythical), but also there is the more prevailing difficulty of piecing together the timbre of the period from recorded oral fragments and memories. Nevertheless, concerning Nāgārjuna's historical context, Walser (along with Lamotte²⁰) argues that Nāgārjuna lived in the third century CE. This assertion is based on evidence found in Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Daśabhūmikāśāstra* by Nāgārjuna dated between 265 CE and 313 CE and Kumārajīva's writings, which refer to a date of death for Nāgārjuna in the third century, by mentioning that, one hundred years after the death of Nāgārjuna, Kamārajīva lived at Ch'ang-an between 401-13 CE.²¹

Walser argues that Nāgārjuna's benefactor was a Sātavāhana king. He therefore would have lived during the Sātavāhana Dynasty, who reigned over most of Southern and central India for about 400 years, from 230 BCE until about 220 CE.²² But there are

¹⁸ Walser (2010); Schopen, in Williams (2000: 104).

¹⁹ Walser (2010: 59).

²⁰ Lamotte (1988).

²¹ Walser (2010: 62).

²² Wolpert (1993: 75).

many conflicting references to where he lived. Candrakīrti places him in southern India, the Jain tradition locates him in Gujarat and the *Siddha* tradition mainly at Nālanda in the North.²³ It is for this reason that Mabbet argues (echoed by Lamotte concerning the many Nāgārjuna legends and stories) that Nāgārjuna “is an enigma”, with many theories about his dates and habitats but no reliable proof as to their veracity.²⁴

There are also many mythical accounts of Nāgārjuna’s life that form part of his hagiography. The earliest legends about Nāgārjuna were compiled by Kumārajīva and translated into Chinese in about 405 CE.²⁵ Walser argues that these legends serve a literary function: giving Nāgārjuna credibility or legitimation for his audience. Seen in this light, the diversity of legends about Nāgārjuna’s life speak to different audiences, including the *Mahāsāṃghika*, *Abhidharmika*, *Sthavirvāda* etc.²⁶ the legend about his relationship with the *Nagas* and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (PPM), as recorded by Kumārajīva, is aimed at establishing the profound connection between Nāgārjuna’s thought and *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* (PPM), which goes beyond legitimation or edification. This legend is of central importance to my thesis, which, in a similar vein emphasises the similarities between Nāgārjuna’s thought and the PPM. It argues that reading Nāgārjuna is enriched by an awareness of the PPM tradition. culture. In order to appreciate the correspondences between Nāgārjuna’s texts and the PPM we need to be aware of the emerging philosophy in the PPM of the *akasic* nature of experience and phenomena and how this resonates with Nāgārjuna’s understanding of the identity of

²³ Walser (2010: 66 & 67).

²⁴ Walser (2010: 60 & 67).

²⁵ Walser (2010: 66).

²⁶ Walser (2010: 67 & 68).

śūnyatā and *pratītyasamutpāda* . Foremost in this emerging tradition of thought in the PPM is the idea that all reality is *śūnya* and symbolised by *ākāśic* experience, which is characterised by indeterminacy. The use of symbolism in connecting *ākāśa* to *śūnyatā* in the PPM is useful in understanding Nāgārjuna's thought. Conze argues that Nāgārjuna's thought is a philosophical articulation of the PPM.²⁷ This assertion invites a symbolic reading of Nāgārjuna's work, particularly in relation to his two-truths formulation. Although Nāgārjuna only mentions the two truths in two verses in the *Mūlamdahyamikārikā* (MK), I argue that his formulation of the two-truths idea makes sense in terms of the metaphoric logic in the PPM, where visual and experiential objects are used to point to the inexpressible truth of *śūnyatā*.²⁸ This thesis uses symbolism, in the sense which Joseph Campbell states that the "first function of a mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe *as it is*".²⁹ Symbols do not function as similes or perform an allegorical purpose. Instead they operate along the lines described by the Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who maintained that the symbol participates in reality with that which "it renders intelligible".³⁰ Symbols are not contrived connections between signs and their referents. Rather, as Goethe avers,

There is a great difference, whether the poet seeks the particular for the sake of the general or sees the general in the particular. From the former procedure there ensues allegory, in which the particular serves only as a illustration, as example of the general. The latter procedure, however, is

²⁷ Conze (1967).

²⁸ MK 24: 9 and 10 in McCagney (1997: 200-201).

²⁹ Campbell (1976b: 4).

³⁰ Abrams (1988: 185).

genuinely the nature of poetry: it expresses something particular, without thinking of the general or pointing to it.

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept always remains bounded in the image, and is entirely to be kept and held in it, and expressed by it.

Symbolism (however) transforms the phenomenon into idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and even if expressed in all languages, still would remain inexpressible.³¹

Coleridge's and Goethe's concepts of symbolism where the phenomenon points to that which is inexpressible within itself informs my understanding of the level of metaphoricity that Nāgārjuna tacitly applied to his writing, based on the metaphoric logic in the PPM, in arguing that phenomena at the *saṃvṛti* view share the same *śūnya* with ultimate *śūnyatā* from the *paramārtha* view.

In order to expose the way Nāgārjuna uses a similar form of logic as in the PPM, I show, via the application of philosophy of meaning and analytical reasoning,³² that Nāgārjuna's propositional claims in MK 24:14 and VV 70 make sense when read in the context of the metaphorical logic of the PPM. Meaning theory explores how the symbolic function of words and sentences converge with experience to provide understanding,³³ while analytical theory assesses consistency of conceptual understanding between the predicate and the subject.

³¹ Abrams (1988: 186).

³² Flew (1983: 12 and 225).

³³ Scruton (1996: 101-111 and 251-270). The philosophy of meaning has to incorporate theories of truth. Similarly, the idea that words and sentences need to correspond to experience has to incorporate notions of truth. To this end I will consider the Correspondence and Coherence theories of truth in this thesis.

When approaching meaning as a philosophical question it is crucial to be aware of the debates that have taken place, mostly in the field of theory of language. To begin with, Frege connects language and truth on the basis on three conclusions:

1. The unit of meaning is the sentence, which expresses a complete thought,
2. A sentence has a truth-value; and truth-value is the 'preferred value' of every meaningful sentence.
3. The thought expressed by a sentence is given by its truth-conditions: these are the conditions which determine when it is true.³⁴

Following Frege, Stevenson, Grice, Searle, Davidson, Putman and Kripke (to name a few) have grappled with these ideas. But, as Scruton suggests, the question of truth "is less fundamental than 'assertibility'" due to the fact that language cannot grasp or verify a transcendent notion of truth, therefore meaning could refer to a lesser claim of assertibility.³⁵ Scruton does, however, make an interesting point when he asserts that the debates surrounding Frege's philosophy of language do not consider the function of language beyond literal meaning. He argues:

Metaphors, for example, introduce a wholly new dimension of meaning. A metaphor does not describe a connection so much as create it. It may be full of contradictions, and yet mean all the more on account of it:

I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

³⁴ Scruton (1996: 251).

³⁵ Scruton (1996: 260).

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself

And falls on the other side

The concentration of meaning in that tumble of equestrian images goes far beyond the sense and reference of the terms.³⁶

Following these claims, I argue that Nāgārjuna's assertion about meaning in MK 24:14 and VV70 is better understood if viewed within framework that utilises metaphoricity in the form used in the PPM. My application of the philosophy of meaning and analytical reasoning, however, does take cognisance of the fact that Nāgārjuna lived and worked within an Indian philosophical framework. Indian philosophy is founded on the understanding that knowledge and truth are experienced. Indian philosophy gives primacy to experience, with regard to the non-*Āryan* Vedic traditions.³⁷ In these traditions, and consequently in Nāgārjuna's writing, Truth is not represented as an abstract or conceptual condition and therefore cannot be approached purely from a Rationalist point of view.

Based on his Indic assumptions, Nāgārjuna argues in MK 24:14 and VV 70 that conceptual phenomena or mental phenomena imposed with conceptual meaning make sense due to the experience of phenomena as *śūnyatā/pratītyasamutpāda*. In Chapter Two of this thesis, I argue that his notion of *śūnyatā* can only be understood from the perspective of the PPM, where *śūnyatā* is likened to the experience of *ākāśa*. But he is not merely arguing that truth is experienced. As a result of equating *śūnyatā* and

³⁶ Scruton (1996: 268).

³⁷ Hamilton (2001: 9).

pratīyasamutpāda, the experience of emptiness leads to a semantic understanding of empty phenomena. In Chapters Three and Four I employ analytical philosophy and philosophy of meaning (as explained above) in order to establish whether MK 24: 14 and VV 70 make rational sense in terms of Nāgārjuna's combining the meditational experience of *śūnyatā* with an understanding of *pratīyasamutpāda*. Nāgārjuna applies *prasaṅga* reasoning to show that purely conceptual reasoning (i.e. reasoning that does not employ metaphoricity) is absurd. But he claims in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 that conventional or conceptual truth (truth based on fixed sign to object relations) makes sense if viewed in relation to non-conceptual/*paramārtha* truth without offering reasoned argument in support. This thesis therefore assesses Nāgārjuna's claims about phenomena making sense in terms of *śūnyatā* in terms of analytical reasoning and the symbolic functioning of meaning in relation to experience.

In applying the functioning of experience with reasoning to understanding Nāgārjuna's thought it is necessary to draw on the Indic understanding of experience. Western thought tends to conflate experience with perception.³⁸ The Indian view of experience, by contrast, separates experience and perception. Perception is associated with belief

³⁸ A good example of the conflation of experience and perception is seen in the writings of Hume, such as:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, colour or sound, etc. I never catch *myself*, distinct from some such perception. (2000) .

Some Western philosophical schools, such as Phenomenology, have gone some distance in correcting this mistaken confluence of experience with perception.

in Indian thought, particularly in Buddhist philosophy. When perceptions of experience become fixed in the mind, an incorrect belief about the experience develops. Nevertheless Indian philosophy is certainly not immune from such a mistaken confluence. In Chapter Four, I delve into a similar error, made by the Abhidharmists in confusing the perception of a thing's function with its nature. I argue that a significant part of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of establishing meaning is devoted to correcting the mistaken perceptions of phenomena that were being promulgated in early Buddhist traditions.

3. Contribution to existing research

Nāgārjuna scholarship falls generally into three categories: historical, translation-commentary and philosophical. These three broad categories are not discrete; in fact, most Nāgārjuna scholarship contains elements from all three categories, with only the emphasis leaning either toward historical contextualization, translation-commentary or philosophical analysis. Most recently, the historical approach is exemplified by Joseph Walser, *Nāgārjuna in context: Mahāyāna Buddhism & early Indian culture*.³⁹ But Walser's impressive book comes in the tradition of many other historical studies of Nāgārjuna, for example, Mabbett⁴⁰ and Vetter.⁴¹ This scholarship has performed an important role because it establishes the contemporary philosophical issues within Buddhism, of which Nāgārjuna would have been aware and would have referred to.

³⁹ 2010.

⁴⁰ 1998. Mabbett provides a useful contextual reading of Nāgārjuna, while also comparing him to poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers, such as Derrida.

⁴¹ 1992.

They provide a valuable resource for reading translations and commentaries of Nāgārjuna's texts, such as Garfield,⁴² Inada,⁴³ Kalupahana,⁴⁴ Lindtner⁴⁵ and McCagney.⁴⁶ Often a particular translation and commentary will carry the interpretive shadow of the translator's philosophical leanings, such as Garfield who writes with a Tibetan influence. Historical approaches can alert us to areas of sectarian, theoretical or epoch-related interpretation, along the lines of Schweitzer's study into the historical Jesus.⁴⁷ However, historical contextualization can limit our understanding of a text by limiting the text to its temporal arena. Such a method may lead the results of the study to be situated in purely temporal terms, thereby attenuating the value of the text outside a narrowly circumscribed context.⁴⁸ This is particularly relevant in the case of Nāgārjuna, where the quiddity of the text is focused on insight into the nature of reality. Although it is a polemic against rival philosophical views, its primary focus is soteriological and therefore it grapples with fundamental ontological questions. Its purpose is far broader than winning doctrinal debates. The philosophical depth of the MK is diminished if it is read solely in relation to other contemporary Indian philosophical texts and sects. In addition, the MK should be read as a text with a specific relationship to the foundation of Indian thought, in particular its questions about the nature of reality. Heidegger⁴⁹ makes a telling remark in this regard: "Man's nature," we read, "is to be founded in relation to something else ... to comprehend man one must transcend the specifically

⁴² 1995.

⁴³ 1993.

⁴⁴ 1986.

⁴⁵ 1982.

⁴⁶ 1997.

⁴⁷ Schweitzer (1931).

⁴⁸ As Schweitzer concludes in *Quest for the historical Jesus*, the historical Jesus is a mystery to the contemporary reader (1931: 478).

⁴⁹ Heidegger, 1964: 20 & 22.

and merely human, the subjective.” Modern applied sciences have disenabled and stripped us of meaning or, more accurately, what he terms the “ground of meaning” because their method emphasizes practical value to the detriment of speculation and in the process we have become alienated from our deepest experience of Being.

My study is historical in the radical sense in that it delves into the root ideas, which, I believe, informed Nāgārjuna’s thought. I do not merely contextualize his usage of terms such as *śūnyatā*. I aver that historical and contextual approaches should identify specific relations with other related texts, but must also explore aspects that appear only as traces, spectral glimpses, only vaguely discernible in the text, which may have almost faded from textual view, for example MK 26:10, which deploys a form of symbolic logic reminiscent of the PPM. In addition, I apply an analytical approach to inquire into the consistency of Nāgārjuna’s logic. Even though analytical philosophy is not reducible to logic or visa versa, the analytical approach is a useful tool, particularly at a propositional level, to examine the function of logic.⁵⁰ It is for this reason that this thesis participates, primarily, in the philosophical body of literature on Nāgārjuna.

Early philosophical approaches to Nāgārjuna, for example Murti⁵¹ and Ramanan,⁵² attempted to achieve a broad understanding of his philosophy. For example, this is well exemplified by Murti when he explains the two main currents of Indian philosophy, one

⁵⁰ In following an analytical approach I do not distance myself from the evidence a mystical element in Nāgārjuna’s writings particularly where he acknowledges the limits of conventional concepts (MK 15: 10)

⁵¹ 1955.

⁵² 1978.

having its source in the *ātma*-doctrine of the *Upaniśads* and the other in the *anātma*-doctrine of Buddha. These currents conceive of reality in two distinct and mutually exclusive patterns. The *Sāṃkhya* and *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, both holding the Veda as sacred, adhere to *ātma*-doctrine, which can be termed the substantive view of reality. Buddhists, on the other hand, advocate a doctrine of no-soul (*anātman*) and impermanence (*anitya*).⁵³ With this broad brushstroke through the history of Indian thought, Murti indelibly draws his line on the canvas and sets his context. It is a context that other scholars have also used unproblematically, namely Raju.⁵⁴ In opposition to such approaches, I ask whether it is meaningful to separate Buddhist and Vedic thinkers into two distinct camps. Can we safely assume that Nāgārjuna knew nothing of the Vedic tradition, that he had never studied or even heard any of the *Upaniśads* recited? Did Buddhism not emerge within Indian philosophy out of the rejection of the Vedic tradition by the Upanisadic movement? Even if Nāgārjuna had rejected the notion of *sat*, can we say with absolute certainty that he was not in any way influenced by any idea or nuance in the Upaniśadic or Vedic tradition? A similar question can be posed about broad distinctions between *Mahāyāna* and *Theravāda*, as Schopen has highlighted.⁵⁵ Garfield underscores this point when he states that the four arguments for causality mentioned by Nāgārjuna in MK 1:1 and 1: 2 are pretty standard in Indian thought, including Buddhist explanations.⁵⁶

MK 1:1 Neither from itself, nor from another,
Nor from both,

⁵³ Murti (1955: 10).

⁵⁴ 1985.

⁵⁵ 2000.

⁵⁶ 1995:107.

Nor without cause,

Does anything whatever, anywhere arise

MK1:2 There are four conditions efficient condition
 Percept-object condition; immediate
 condition;
 Dominant condition, just so
 There is no fifth condition⁵⁷

Indeed *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, *Cārvākas*, Jains and *Sāṃkhya*, for example, all grapple with the same issues pertaining to causality and the relation between arising entities.

Some Indologists adopt a softer approach to Buddhist scholarship in general and Nāgārjuna studies in particular and do not make sweeping divisions between traditions. De Wijesekera⁵⁸ and Jennings,⁵⁹ for example, examine Buddhist realizations against the backdrop of the knowledge from which it emerged and which Nāgārjuna would have been aware of. Cohen⁶⁰ questions the distinct categorisation of *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* in Buddhist studies. Cohen and Schopen base their argument on the appropriate historical claims of *Mahāyāna* and *Theravāda* monks living in the same monastery. Similarly, if one can establish a context for the overlapping of Vedic and

⁵⁷ McCagney (1997: 137).

⁵⁸ 1994.

⁵⁹ 1948.

⁶⁰ 1995.

non-Āryan/Buddhist ideas, then those claims are appropriate. Stafford Betty,⁶¹ Sprung⁶² and Tola & Dragonetti⁶³ examine the MK in relation to the wider context of Indian Yoga.

Critics in this category, using less rigid categories based on historical evidence, would no doubt be critical of philosophical approaches to Nāgārjuna that make comparisons between Deconstruction Theory and Buddhism in general, and Nāgārjuna in particular. They would complain that such analysis ignores too much of the culture of thought in order to establish a meaningful context in which to make comparisons. These deconstructionist scholars attempt to establish the human condition in a world liberated from metaphysics as a common context. They ask the questions that Heidegger urged us to address: those pertaining to the meaning of being and the search for the ground of being. They are daring and creative in their sweeping cross-cultural comparisons — a welcome relief from the constricting categorisation mentioned earlier. Their attempts, however, falter in the end because the insights of deconstruction differ markedly from the conclusions of Nāgārjuna's philosophical process. The reason for their differing results is that their cultural assumptions differ markedly from Nāgārjuna's.

Some of these comparisons fall into the category of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, for example Corless;⁶⁴ but the majority participate in broader East-West philosophical dialogues and focus specifically on comparing deconstructive thinkers and *Mahāyāna* Buddhists. The body of writers that make comparisons between Buddhist and

⁶¹ 1984.

⁶² 1978.

⁶³ 1994.

⁶⁴ 1990.

poststructuralist thought is numerous, including Magliola,⁶⁵ Loy,⁶⁶ Coward,⁶⁷ Mabbet,⁶⁸ Glass⁶⁹ It is my contention that such comparisons are inappropriate because they conflate terms without regard for the cultural worlds from which they originate. Deconstruction's founding position is one where subject and authors are fragmented into a multiplicity of conflicting voices. It is a landscape of radically relativized and nomadic concepts. Nāgārjuna's conceptual landscape, by contrast, is grounded on *pratītyasamutpāda*. Though devoid of an experiencing subject, its coordinates are orientated towards the pursuit of insight through yoga.

In the MK Nāgārjuna deconstructs any position that is grounded in substantial or premises based on own-being. Any position that attempts to classify reality in a grounded or absolute way is questioned, but equally, any attempt to advocate a position of non-existence, arbitrary meaning or nihilism is dismissed. Nāgārjuna's 'middle path' advocates a mental state – achieved through meditation – of non-clinging or non-classification, termed either *pratītyasamutpāda* or *śūnyatā*. This 'middle path' is not so much a 'fixed view' as the advocacy of a mentally fluid capacity to perceive co-dependent arising as pre-eminent in the chain of causality. In order to experience 'things' as arisen in a co-dependent manner we need, according to Nāgārjuna, a realization of their emptiness or non-essential nature. Nevertheless, at a conventional

⁶⁵ 1984.

⁶⁶ 1988.

⁶⁷ 1990.

⁶⁸ 1998.

⁶⁹ 1995.

level 'things' or phenomena exist due to their classification as things. They exist in this way because they are co-dependently arisen. Finally, Nāgārjuna states that the conventional and the ultimate levels are equivalent, both ungrounded and conventionally existent.

On the surface poststructuralist writers, such as Glass,⁷⁰ seem to be offering similar ideas. They offer a non-grounded or non-substantive view by deconstructing assumed hierarchical values within language by unpacking the dyadic structure of language and highlighting the repressed term. Deconstructionists aim to show that Western philosophy since Plato has always favoured the dominant term in a dyadic opposition. Once truth is established, the repressed term is silenced. Deconstructionists, such as Derrida, want to show the relation between the terms. The consequence of deconstruction's project is a milieu where Truth, completion and presence are denied. To admit truth would be to grant one signifier a privileged position.

Nāgārjuna's project is to deconstruct any form of substantialization in the form of mental clinging. The distinction between deconstruction and Nāgārjuna's philosophy is a subtle one. For deconstruction, where there is presence there is substantialization, but Nāgārjuna was also aware that, where non-presence is advocated, there is mental clinging, which inevitably leads to substantialization. Where deconstruction foregrounds the constant deferral of meaning within language, Nāgārjuna exhorts us not simply to accept concepts, but to understand the set of relations that have conditioned each

⁷⁰ 1995.

concept into what it has historically become. In this sense Deconstruction is a product of post-Nietzschean Western thought, while Nāgārjuna is firmly entrenched in the Indian thought world of the second century, which emphasized yoga and its relation to understanding of the nature of reality. Coward writes,

For Buddhists, and Nāgārjuna in particular, language (including scripture) expresses merely imaginary constructions (*vikalpa*) that play over the surface of the real without giving us access to it.⁷¹

This is misleading because play in Nāgārjuna's terms is not born from a dyadic opposition but, rather, a consequence of the co-dependent arising of all phenomena. For Nāgārjuna no phenomena arise at the expense of others.

Could a similar criticism be levelled against scholars using the philosophical approach who analyse Nāgārjuna's writing using Western analytical tools of reason, such as Garfield,⁷² Siderits⁷³ and Westerhoff⁷⁴? The assumption made by these scholars is that both Buddhist and Western texts are written within a rubric of the strictures of rational argument and these strictures afford them their meaning. Nāgārjuna, in the MK for example, uses an Indian form of reasoning (*prasaṅga*) which appears to contradict the imagined dialogic partner. But this does not make him a rationalist or an 'analytical' philosopher. In this I agree with Jayatilike's position that the Buddha was not a

⁷¹ 1990: 135.

⁷² In Westerhoff et al (2011).

⁷³ 2003 & 2007.

⁷⁴ 2009.

rationalist philosopher.⁷⁵ Nāgārjuna, however, does apply *prasaṅga* reasoning and criteria, thus unwittingly providing Western philosophers who are interested in Buddhism comparable substance to work with. Garfield, Tillemans and Mario D'Amato⁷⁶ offer a new development in the analytical approach to Buddhist philosophy, including Nāgārjuna scholarship, in observing that

A great deal of the most fruitful cross-cultural engagement has involved western philosophers generally regarded as analytical in bent attending to Buddhist philosophy, and scholars of Buddhist philosophy finding much of use in contemporary western philosophy written by those often dominated analysts. We will not speculate as to why this might be the case, but we do note that this engagement has been broad, encompassing work in logic, the philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.⁷⁷

One fruitful area of cross-cultural sharing lies in the fact that Nāgārjuna's theory of causality (*pratītyasamutpāda*) offers interesting and useful ideas for Western analytical philosophy. For instance, Nāgārjuna's use of the *catuṣkoṭi* in asserting that a phenomenon can simultaneously exist, not exist, both exist and not exist and neither exist nor not exist remains one of the most creative approaches to contradiction in either Western or Eastern traditions of philosophy.⁷⁸ Garfield and Priest⁷⁹ take the approach further when they explain that Nāgārjuna is doggedly analytical in his approach and therefore the fact that he asserts glaring contradictions is seen as evidence that he is committed to rationality. They do not claim that Nāgārjuna had explicit views about

⁷⁵ Jayatilike (1980) argues that the Buddha employed a variety of reasoning approaches, i.e. categorization, question and counter question, rejection of irrelevance and analytical reasoning.

⁷⁶ 2009: xviii.

⁷⁷ D'Amato, Garfield, Tillemans (2009: xviii).

⁷⁸ MK, 1: 139.

⁷⁹ 2003.

logic. They do, however, think that Nāgārjuna's views can be rationally reconstructed. They maintain that, while a cornerstone of Western rationality is consistency, certain Western thinkers, namely, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida also incorporate contradiction as a methodological device to ease the weight brought to bear on thought by the demands of consistency.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, other analytical philosophers, for example Westerhoff⁸¹ and Siderits,⁸² assess Buddhist philosophy, including Nāgārjuna's thought, in terms of Western philosophical methods in an attempt to analyse the level of consistency in Buddhist thought.⁸³ My methodological approach in this thesis finds most affinity with the latter. By contrast, Newland,⁸⁴ Garfield⁸⁵ and Dreyfus,⁸⁶ for example, read Nāgārjuna by combining the Western analytical approach with a Candrakīrti and Tibetan reading of his work. These scholars are influenced by studies in the 1990s, which looked at the influence of Candrakīrti on early Indian *Madhyamaka*⁸⁷ My thesis takes issue with this approach, which shifts the interpretation away from what I see as PPM-influenced assumptions in the text towards more Tibetan ones. Most importantly, the use of *ākāśa* in the PPM as a description of *śūnyatā* conceptually allows the claim in MK 24:14 and VV 70 that phenomena make sense in terms of *śūnya* to be understood as dependently related to the two-truths assertion in MK 24:8. Candrakīrti's argument that the two truths represent different cognitive natures does not allow MK 24:14 and VV 70 to be understood in relation to MK 24:8.

⁸⁰ 2003: 19.

⁸¹ 2009.

⁸² 2003.

⁸³ Siderits, for example, considers Buddhist thought in terms of the Western categories of Realism and non-Realism, an approach this thesis also adopts.

⁸⁴ In Westerhoff (2011).

⁸⁵ In Westerhoff (2011).

⁸⁶ In Westerhoff (2011).

⁸⁷ Huntington (1994).

4. Methodology

As stated above, Nāgārjuna does not only write within a Buddhist mindset: his assumptions and conceptual framework occur within the broad Indic metaphysical and epistemological setting of his day. In order accurately to apply analytical reasoning and the philosophy of meaning, a method of reading his texts will be employed that is sensitive to the broad ambit of influences that impact on each text. For this reason my argument draws most on the work of the scholars I enumerate in the following section. Research on Nāgārjuna tends to take the form of studies concerning, for instance, his logical method or interpretations of chapters or verses in the MK, which highlight particular complexities or elucidations in his thought.⁸⁸ Intrinsic to many of these studies is an emphasis on history and context.⁸⁹ I believe, however, that Huntington⁹⁰ is right when he utilizes De Jong and Reugg to argue that Western Buddhologists have been too concerned with historicization and too little with the Buddhist mentality. He writes that the nineteenth-century method of studying Buddhism continues into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by way of history, which attempted to understand the development of Buddhist thought by linking it to events, facts and historical data. He makes the point that Western academics place too much importance on what he calls 'historical dimensions'. The problem with this approach is that India's spiritual life

⁸⁸ Vetter (1984) and Wayman(1988).

⁸⁹ Tola and Dragonetti (1994).

⁹⁰ 1994: 14.

cannot be so easily compartmentalized within historical contexts.⁹¹ The reason for this historical approach is difficult to find, other than arguing that a cultural study requires sensitivity to difference and plurality. In this light the Western mode of temporal analysis cannot be unilaterally used for the study of other cultures. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian, in his work, *Time and the Other*, makes the point that the anthropologist tends to deny the discrete uniqueness of the other and perceives others as synchronous with the researcher's perceptions and emphases, thereby creating the impression of "a common, active, 'occupation', or sharing, of time".⁹² I would extend this argument to suggest that no one method of studying culture can be utilised uniformly for the study of all cultures, for this would be committing the offence against which Fabian warns us of denying the others' cultural and ideational space. In a similar vein De Jong avers that Buddhologists need to study the "Buddhist mentality".⁹³ This is a possibility (if the Buddhologist happens to be Western) due to the communicability between different cultural ideational forms because all philosophers share similar reasoning categories.⁹⁴ Nevertheless certain ideational forms exist within Buddhist thought and are found radically, that is at a root level within Indian culture, rather than within specific historical contexts. What I mean by radical history is an approach which operates from a far wider

⁹¹ 1994:14.

⁹² 1983: 31.

⁹³ Huntington 1994: 14.

⁹⁴ See Gellner (in Hollis and Lukes 1982: 186). Gellner makes the point that relativists often accuse rationalists of being insensitive to the cultural circumstances that produce assumptions about the nature of reality. His response is that relativists make the mistake of conflating two questions: i) Do we live in the same world? and ii) Are the basic features of humanity alike? (Hollis and Lukes 1982: 186).

Relativists, according to Gellner, tend to ignore the second question and focus on the first, arguing that we live in a divergent world with many distinct culturally based perceptions of reality, which cannot be drawn together to represent the same objective reality. By contrast, Gellner suggests, anthropologists can understand foreign cultures, given sufficient sensitivity and experience.

ambit of understanding than the specific historical context, i.e. that of conditionality. The conditions which come to bear on events or a text are not only specific conditions, but rather interrelated causal effects, some specific and regional while other influences may be broader, fitting into more generalized cultural mindsets. Krüger,⁹⁵ working from the naturalist/empiricist philosophical lineage of Hume, Whitehead, Jung and William James, argues that individual, society and Nature (Cosmos) are continually interpenetrating each other. Reality is a constantly changing network of interrelated factors. Individuals are indelibly connected to this interplay. Their shared sensory and intellectual experience is always a fluid reciprocal process. Krüger⁹⁶ terms this process 'conditionalism' because he believes that world-views and subjective views participate in a 'dynamic interplay of interdependent, mutually conditioning forces and relations'. Cultures and philosophies are loosely identifiable systems that emerge from the fluid interaction between the three levels of the individual, society and Nature. Any attempt at understanding cultural or intellectual systems must, therefore, take into account the complex interpenetrating of factors which condition life-worlds and thought forms. The focus is on the regional aspect of the text or individual, rather than the tracing the exact processes of interaction of inter-regional and inter-cultural movement. Here Heidegger's use of the terms 'horizon' and 'field' are useful because they confine the locus of study to what is empirically apparent; but Heidegger radicalizes the examination of a region by drawing attention to the multiplicity of factors which condition and form our scholarly perception of it.⁹⁷ With this in mind, I will explore the Buddhist

⁹⁵ 1985.

⁹⁶ 1995: 21.

⁹⁷ Heidegger (*Discourse on Thinking*, 1966: 65)

mindset that informed Nāgārjuna's thought, but in order to do so I will gather influences from yogic that is pre- and non-Aryan thinking that helped condition his thought. I will examine one of these thought-forms in India, namely the two-tiered structure of gross and subtle mental states, and explore how this thought pattern assisted in conditioning Nāgārjuna's philosophical texts. In this light I will draw from the understanding of reciprocity in Huntington's work. Although Huntington equates De Jong's and Reugg's methodological approaches, I think Reugg improves De Jong's argument when he suggests that there is 'no hard and fast dividing line ... between the philosophical and religious in either India or Tibet, for instance a term such as *dharma* is found in both Buddhism and Hinduism which is a foundational term in both Hinduism and Buddhism'.⁹⁸ To extrapolate on Reugg's point, our examination of thought forms such as the gross-subtle formulation or the two-truths formulation should not focus only on the Buddhist mentality, but should also take cognizance of a looser, less rigidly confined Indian Yoga mentality, with its roots in non-Aryan culture, which in itself is constantly subject to change and dynamism due to its relationship with other cultures and thought forms.

A text's identity, positioning and relevance are established both consciously and unconsciously by drawing elements from its thought culture. All texts must remember and pay homage to its larger thought-world culture in order reside within the horizons of cognate discourse.

⁹⁸ 1994: 14.

Krüger⁹⁹ introduces the helpful metaphor of collages to describe what I mean by cognate textuality.

The internal conditionalistic pluralism of a group includes the collage character of its ideas, practices and forms of organisation: they form a collection, with components deriving from various sources. Groups borrow (and steal) if an item appears to be necessary, useful or attractive. In a conditionalistic perspective, real, historical, concrete religions are composites, putting-together from various sources. Technically speaking, they are all syncretistic. This makes for heterogeneity as far as the collection as a whole is concerned, and for ambiguity as far as the constituent items are concerned. They may form a pleasing whole to their adherents or a jarring jumble to their detractors. Meaning is con-text.¹⁰⁰

These collages are, according to Krüger, developed from 'complex whirlwinds'. He writes:

[t]he multi-factoral interaction between groups adds up to more than a jumble of events. As much as individual groups would insist on their own identities and would insist on their own identities and would take pains to appear and to be different from others, there is also a mutual attraction, a collective constitution of a shared world, a mutual interpenetration, a larger 'identity' in some stage of being in the making or of breaking up.¹⁰¹

These whirlwinds, I argue, are conditioned consciously and unconsciously by the mind to appear 'real, concrete and historical' and what results is an ostensible thought-world culture. If we view this narrowly, it will appear ordered, but it will appear increasingly chaotic the broader our view becomes. Herein lie the two most important elements of

⁹⁹ 2003.

¹⁰⁰ 2003: 60.

¹⁰¹ 2003: 54.

thought-worlds: their conditioned existence, contrived through perception and the complex interplay between coherence and chaos manifested as contradiction.

5. Conclusion

In looking at parallels between the PPM's use of *ākāśa* and Nāgārjuna's identification of *pratīyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā* in this thesis, I will assess the consequence of indiscernibility of concepts and phenomena on his assertions and the need to incorporate the PPM's use of metaphoricity to clarify the failings of indiscernibility in his thought to produce meaning.

CHAPTER TWO

Ākāśa in Nāgārjuna's thought

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I set out the central problem of the thesis, namely that Nāgārjuna asserts in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 that all phenomena are meaningful if one understands *śūnyatā*, but unfortunately does not explain how he reaches this conclusion. I indicated that Edward Conze's argument regarding Nāgārjuna's philosophical connection to the PPM is helpful in finding a solution to this problem, despite the problem of establishing an historical link between MK and the PPM, because he points convincingly to the similarities between the PPM and Nāgārjuna's thought. Nancy McCagney develops Conze's argument by arguing that the meaning of *ākāśa* as experiential openness in the PPM corresponds with Nāgārjuna's use of *śūnyatā* in the MK. My argument is that *ākāśa*, as used in the PPM, provides a basis for understanding Nāgārjuna's assertions in MK 24: 14 and VV 70, using metaphorical logic, that the experience of the indeterminacy of phenomena points to the akasic aspect of *śūnyatā*.

This chapter is concerned with a sub-problem that emerges from the central problem of Nāgārjuna's paucity of explanation regarding why an understanding of *śūnyatā* makes phenomena meaningful. The sub-problem is: if phenomena make sense with a clear understanding of *śūnyatā*, under what conditions does a clear understanding

of *śūnyatā* emerge? In this regard I follow McCagney's argument that *śūnyatā* described as *ākāśa* is founded on experiences in meditation. Hence, my theoretical solution to this particular problem is that a clear understanding of *śūnyatā* occurs in meditation with the experience of meditational objects (or the experience of observing phenomena during meditation). In this regard I will focus on certain aspects of Nāgārjuna's use of the term *śūnyatā* that suggest a description of meditative experience akin to the PPM's use of *ākāśa* denoting the immeasurable and boundless state of mind where there is nothing to settle in (*anālaya*) and nothing to grasp (*anāgrahā*)¹ to describe the akasic experience of immeasurability and boundlessness.

Most of Nāgārjuna's writing takes the form of logical arguments against the *Sarvāstivādins* and the *Sautrāntikas*, who maintained that certain experiences of elements of phenomena (or *dharmas*) reflect the reality of those phenomena. Nāgārjuna maintained that their arguments exhibited the flaw of imposing *svabhāva* onto phenomena, which ran contrary to the Buddha's teachings of insubstantiality as encapsulated in the notion of *anattā*. He follows the *Mahāyāna* trend of elevating *śūnyatā* to Absolute reality (although it could be argued that for Nāgārjuna emptiness is not an absolute): but, for him, *śūnyatā* becomes paradoxical. It implies contrasting senses as change, no change, no origination, no cessation, no coming, no going, neither self nor no-self.² Nāgārjuna is not merely arguing that all phenomena are empty of own-being, he is making a profound point – despite the contradictory nature of *śūnyatā*, phenomena make sense due to their indeterminacy. Yet for Nāgārjuna

1 See Conze's translations of *Rgs* 15: 8 (1990: 37) and *The Questions of Suvikarantavikrāmin* (1973: 38).

2 MK 1 gives a clear outline of these paradoxes.

this claim is unexplored.

This chapter argues that Nāgārjuna's claim that phenomena makes sense due to an understanding of *śūnyatā* is gleaned from the meditative experience of indeterminacy and supported by rational analysis of phenomena.³ Such an argument resembles the PPM's logic, which is founded, not on reason, but on the meditative experience of akasic boundlessness. While his writing is presented as dialectical argument against his opponents, scholars such as Conze and McCagney argue that his motivation is to explain the doctrine of the PPM.⁴ It is difficult to prove this claim and, as a consequence, the historical links made between the PPM and Nāgārjuna are purely speculative. But what Conze and McCagney do by highlighting the similarities between the PPM and Nāgārjuna's thought is to establish that both offer a view of Buddhist thought so sufficiently different from early Buddhism to warrant an explanation and inference of non-Buddhist influence. But this is not the concern of the present thesis. Significant for the philosophical issues of this thesis is that both the PPM and Nāgārjuna claim that phenomena are identical or equivalent to *śūnyatā* and that this realization is based on meditational experience.⁵ In Nāgārjuna's thought, for example, there are aspects that seem not to form part of a logical argument and seem to be descriptive of a meditative state of mind of non-discriminating open spatiality. The most obvious of these statements are those made in the MK that describe a state where nothing occurs, where things both exist and do

3 Conze writes that the neglect of the importance of meditating on emptiness in *Madhyamaka* by writers such as Murti presents an inaccurate belief that Nāgārjuna derived his thought from philosophical reasoning, "when in fact they derive from meditational experience" (1967; 22).

4 McCagney (1997: 22).

5 Harvey (2005: 97-98 and 103).

not exist and whereof nothing can be stated⁶. But he does not offer instructions for meditative practice that resemble Buddhaghosa's *VisuddhiMagga* in texts ascribed to him. He does, however present a way of viewing phenomena that requires yoga (practice and discipline), and that, he claims, results in peace of mind.⁷ This chapter explores the description of objects of meditative experience, in Nāgārjuna's writings, as a set of complex (non-linear), fluid and interrelated ideas. I argue that his representation of meditative objects in his writing establishes the condition for meaning for the correct understanding of reality.⁸

In order to comprehend Nāgārjuna's understanding of meditative objects,⁹ it is helpful to understand the paradoxical factors contributing to Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā*, e.g. while something arises, nothing arises and while things arise due to conditions, no conditions exist.¹⁰ Nāgārjuna's paradoxical conception of *śūnyatā* shares many of the tenets of the analogy of *śūnyatā* in PPM as *ākāśa* e.g. while the experience of *ākāśa* can be identified, nothing specific can be uttered about the experience.¹¹

6 MK 15: 6, 24:1 and 25:2 4.

7 MK 1:1, 5:8, 18:9, 24: 8 and 25: 24.

8 Nāgārjuna's understanding of reality will be explored in depth in chapters Four and Five. The argument in these chapters is that reality is all-inclusive, renouncing nothing of it perceiving it in the correct manner.

9 "Meditative objects" refers to any sensory experience during meditation, including mental objects. The mind is the sixth sense in Indian thought and generates mental "objects" during contemplative states. See the *Mahasatipatthana sutta*, specifically the Eighth and Ninth Meditations on mindfulness of mind and phenomena. But for Nāgārjuna the meditative object is dependently originated and therefore cannot be seen in isolation from other phenomena.

10 MK 1.

11 The Dharma should be attained as nothing to settle in (*anālaya*) and nothing to grasp (*anāgrahā*) (Conze 1967: 37, *Rgs* xv, 8).

The PPM is an amalgam of meditative experience, mythology and reflective Wisdom. Its ideas derive from non-*Āryan* culture but are not distinctively Buddhist from the point of view of early (agamic) Buddhism. McCagney follows Conze, in arguing that the roots of the PPM lie in Palaeolithic Mother Goddess worship that originated in Southern India.¹² While this argument is, again, difficult to support due to lack of evidence, it does present a hypothetical solution to the PPM's possible non-Buddhist influences which led to the idea of emptiness distinct from agamic Buddhism in that *śūnyatā* is evident in everything and not limited to the wisdom of the *arhat*.¹³ Similarly, Nāgārjuna's understanding of meditational objects is characterised by fluidity, interdependence and equivalence between conditionalism and non-conditionalism (*saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*) due to their co-origination.¹⁴ According to Nāgārjuna, any view that is held to be more correct than any other view is emblematic of erroneous thinking. Reality cannot be grasped by (or within) a thought system that discriminates and separates in this way. The experience of the *śūnyatā* of meditational objects is inexpressible in reductionist terms.¹⁵

In order to explore Nāgārjuna's representation of meditative objects, I will develop the argument advanced by Nancy McCagney, who highlights three concepts that

12 Conze, 1967: 125

13 Harvey, 2005: 96.

14 It bears noting here that Conze makes a distinction between two emphases in Mahāyāna on the path to spiritual realisation between *prajñā* and *dhyāna*. He argues that Mādhyamaka emphasised *prajñā* and Yogācāra, *dhyāna* (1967: 144). While this distinction might be true, it would be incorrect to then assume that Mādhyamikans did not integrate meditation into their spiritual practice as he confirms earlier in the same text on page 22.

15 MK 27 Newland and Tillemans (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 20) identify the development of intentional objects in later Buddhist thought. Meditational objects are similar to intentional objects in that intentional objects can be used as objects of meditation to assist the subject to realise their emptiness.

define the emergent sense of *śūnyatā* in the PPM. These are: *apratīhistita* (not settling down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp).¹⁶ In the early sections of the PPM *śūnyatā* as nothing to settle in (*anālaya*) and nothing to grasp (*anāgrahā*) is likened to *akāśa*, particularly in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (*Aṣṭa*), *Ratnakūṭa* (Rt) and the *Ratnagunasamcayagāthā* (Rgs) *sutras*.¹⁷ The meditative experience is likened to *akāśa* in these texts because of its sense of expansiveness, non-discriminateness and ineffableness.¹⁸ McCagney argues that Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* shares these three attributes due to the fact that he identifies *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, (the originless co-origination of all phenomena) which encapsulates the interdependent and fluid nature of all phenomena.¹⁹

McCagney translates *śūnyatā* as “openness” to capture the akasic qualities of the meditational experience of *śūnyatā* in the PPM. She then also translates *śūnyatā* in the MK also as openness to show that the translation in both cases works semantically. Openness is a useful translation of *śūnyatā* because it expresses the cognitive and linguistic understanding of wisdom in the PPM, in which objects in the sensory world point to the experience of akasic *śūnyatā* when viewed meditatively, without the mind imposing any factors. The akasic experience of phenomena (in terms of the PPM) and the indiscernibility of phenomena (in terms of Nāgārjuna's thought), which are conveyed by the experience of openness in meditation, prevent the experience of phenomena being confused with their perceived metaphysical

16 McCagney (1997: 22).

17 McCagney (1997: 22).

18 McCagney (1997:22) and Conze (1990: 181).

19 McCagney (1997: 58).

function.²⁰ The result of this confusion leads to the world's objects erroneously acquiring metaphysical properties.²¹ Instead, I will argue that, in Nāgārjuna's thought, a sense of openness gives meaning to the phenomenal world.

In this chapter, therefore, I return to Conze's discovery of similarity between the PPM and Nāgārjuna's MK to show how *ākāśa* is used in the PPM to direct attention away from a limited and finite view of phenomena towards an infinite experience of *ākāśa* and how a similar pattern exists in Nāgārjuna's thought in the form of linking *śūnyatā* to *pratītyasamutpāda*. In order to achieve this, I distinguish between meditative objects and reified objects. Meditative objects are experienced within the inclusive scope of the complex and interconnected relations between phenomena, while reified objects result when one views phenomena based on distinctiveness and distinguishing characteristics, which develop into metaphysical attributes. This latter process "brings forth" a fictitious world based on ignorance, where sensory data are projected onto abstract categories and function as metaphors for abstract categories, leading to confusion between what a thing is and its perceived function. By contrast, as I argue in Chapter Four, meditative objects are metaphors for *śūnyatā*, and the world that is "brought forth" by these metaphors is fluid and empty of metaphysical

20 Anderson argues that Kalupahana's view of Nāgārjuna's position regarding *nirvāṇa*'s identity with *saṃsāra* emphasises a positivistic interpretation of the Buddha's teachings rather than an indication of tension in Nāgārjuna's interpretation of the Buddha's teachings concerning the nature of the self (1990). He argues that the oceanic experience of Wisdom cannot be described, which inclines towards positivism. But Anderson argues that that does not mean that depth of understanding beyond empirical presentation does not exist (1990: 6). My argument is that the gap between enlightened knowledge and empirical knowledge is bridged by the use of metaphoric logic as evinced in the PPM.

21 My argument is that *śūnyatā* gives rise to specific and transient characteristics. This position stands in opposition to the view that the two truths formulation asserts two types of truth, conventional and absolute. In this interpretation conventional truth is viewed as merely established via mutual consent. My argument, based on Nāgārjuna's statements in MK 24:14 and VV 70, is that *saṃvṛti* is perceived as expressing qualities precisely due to its fundamental *śūnya* status.

qualities and fixed categories.²²

In this chapter I will show how Nāgārjuna sets up the framework for identifying *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda* as the central condition of all meaning. This is achieved via statements that are meditationally inspired, rather than linguistically and logically developed. These meditational statements show strong resonance with references to akasic experiences in the PPM. They point to the experience of meditational objects as fluid and non-reductive, so that the experience is separate from the perceived functions of these objects. In this way the mind is able to experience the emptiness of objects.

The chapter has four sections. First, I trace the textual roots of the non-*Āryan* yoga tradition in the PPM and Nāgārjuna's thought. Second, I focus on the philosophical ideas of non-dualism and dualism, which emerged from textual expressions of yoga, and their impact on Nāgārjuna's argument. Thirdly, I show how descriptive statements, derived from the meditative experience of *ākāśa*, about the nature of reality provide ground for Nāgārjuna's philosophy of *saṃsāra*, its equivalence with *nirvāṇa* and the identity of *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*. Finally I explore *yoga* in Nāgārjuna's writings in relation to the akasic elements in the PPM in order to explore how he avoids the philosophical pitfalls associated with dualism and non-dualism.

²² See Newland and Tillemans's distinction between the translation of *satya* as truth when referring to an object and its semantic notion (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 4-50).

2. The impact of the Indian tradition of Yoga on the PPM and on Nāgārjuna's thought

The origins of yoga are unclear. There is archaeological evidence in the form of carved statues, depicting figures in meditative position, found in the Indus valley dating back as far as 3000 BCE and perhaps further back in history.²³ The early inhabitants of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, as well as the surrounding network of cities, were neither Hindu nor *Āryan*.²⁴ Little is known about their culture or what caused their demise, so very little can be deduced from the seated figures. Yet from their artefacts that remain we can observe evidence of meditative practice in the form a seated figure in yoga posture and an earth mother figure. Clearer evidence of yoga traditions is found in the *Atharvaveda*, *Puranas* and *Tantras*, which provide lists of *mantras*. These are *bīja* (seed) *mantras* that, when repeated, focus and still the mind so that the “practitioner appropriates its essence”.²⁵ There is, therefore, evidence that yoga existed in *Āryan* traditions, either separately from non-*Āryan* traditions or influenced by them. Evidence of yoga is also found in both early and later forms of Buddhism. The PPM is a Buddhist example of a *bīja mantra*, where the root, *pram*, contains the truth of the “eternal void”.²⁶

Conze argues for a link between the PPM and earth mother worship by asserting

23 This figure has been termed the “proto-Shiva” (Kulke and Rothermund 1986: 2).

24 There is an argument which stems from Indian nationalist sources (Aurobindo (1992) and Dayananda) that posits an Indian origin for Indo-European culture, rather than the more accepted position of Aryan migration around 1500 BCE. A recent proponent of this hypothesis is Frawley (2010).

25 Eliade (1970: 215).

26 Eliade (1970: 215) and Conze (1973: 10).

that earth mother worship existed in matriarchal Dravidian South Indian culture (such as in Savaism's association with Śakti). Here a link with yoga through inwardness, intuition and contemplation is possible. As opposed to the male iconography connected to Northern Buddhism in the form of the male founder, the PPM contains female iconography and the celestial *Bodhisattva Taras*, born of the protector and all-compassionate *Avalokitaśvara*, who is usually depicted as bare from the waist and full-breasted. In addition, the PPM is written in the feminine grammatical form.²⁷ In contrast to the male sense of the Buddha as father-founder of the religion, the PPM is seen as a form of Wisdom that is approached intuitively. The logic used is contemplative rather than argumentative. Learning is achieved through identification with its message and by absorbing its knowledge.²⁸

While it is very difficult to prove a link between early earth mother worship in South India and the PPM due to a lack of archaeological evidence, there is a “feminine” sense of *śūnyatā* articulated in the PPM as non-measurable, boundless, all-encompassing and open. *Ākāśā* is used in the PPM to encapsulate *śūnyatā* in all these senses. The PPM's interpretation of *śūnyatā* is significant because it is undoubtedly at variance with older forms of Buddhism in its feminine metaphoricity rather than the more masculine, agamic Buddhism.

I argue that the common assumption concerning yoga, in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, is that the mind should be made tranquil for it to perceive Truth. The predominant example of this is found in the *Yoga Sūtras* (1.2). The *Yoga Sūtras*

27 Conze (1967:80 and 243).

28 Conze (1967: 80).

were compiled by Patañjali between the fifth and the second centuries BCE. The *Śūtras* train the mind to observe movements of thought and actions in the mind and then to correct these actions (Iyengar 1993: 2). In psychological terms, *vṛttis* (mental agitations) are observed and stilled. Bringing the mind to a state of stillness allows *samāpatti* to take place, which is coming face to face with the Self. This sounds reminiscent of the process of *rtavrdhah* in *Rg* 1.2, which implies, according to Aurobindo, contact with the Truth or touching, leading to Truth-consciousness.²⁹ In order to be able to observe the operations of the mind, the practitioner needs to be able to distinguish between gross and subtle mind. Here a two-tiered approach is adopted, which prefigures the distinction made by Kapila (the founder of *Sāṃkhya*) between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*. It seems that a two-tiered formulation is important for Yogic practice because, for the mind to be tranquil, it must be able to rest in a state that does not cling. In this state, when agitated thoughts have ceased, the mind is able to observe sensory impressions without allowing them to affect its equanimity. In other words, i.e. *Prakṛti* must be observed from *Puruṣa* (*Yoga Sūtra* 1.3).

Similarly, in Nāgārjuna's MK, *saṃvṛti* must be seen in relation to *paramārtha*.³⁰ In both philosophies, the two tiers of the mind function together and the practitioner is led ultimately to perceive the distinctiveness and the complementarity between them. Therefore the two tiers of mind are more accurately rendered as two truths, which the mind apprehends in Nāgārjuna's thought. In the *Yoga Sūtras* *atmā* is the inward aspect of mind, which is identified with the soul and the seer, and *citta* is associated with the outward phase of the mind, namely the created or sensorily constructed

²⁹ Aurobindo (1992: 72).

³⁰ MK 24: 6 & 7.

consciousness. Chapter 4 v 25 of the *Yoga Sūtras* reads:

For one who realises the distinction between *citta* and *atmā*, the sense of separation between the two disappears.³¹

This paradoxical statement implies that, when one perceives mental fluctuations as insubstantial in themselves, the distinction between them and their source disappears. In MK 18: 7 these two aspects of truth are rendered as follows:

Unrisen and unceased, like *nirvāṇa* is the nature of things.³²

The common thread that runs through the two quotations from the *Yoga Sūtras* and the MK is that spiritual realisation is seen as interdependently related to mental and worldly activity. This conceptual thread is also found in the PPM. A common motif in PPM *sūtras* is a focus on experienced reality as a way to attain Wisdom, founded on the experience of the akasic emptiness of objects. Verse 13 of the *Vajraccedika Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* reads:

The Buddha asked, “What do you think, Subhuti? World honoured One, is there nothing about which the Tathāgata preaches?”

Subhuti replied, “The Tathāgata has nothing to teach, World Honoured One.”

“What do you think, Subhuti? Are there many particles of dust in the 3000 chiliocosms Universes)?”

“Very many, World-Honoured One.”

“Subhuti, the Tathāgata says that these particles of dust are not particles of dust that is why they are truly particles of dust. And what the Tathāgata calls chiliocosms are not in fact chiliocosms. That is why they are called chiliocosms.”³³

31 In Iyengar (1993: 257).

32 MK18: 7 in McCagney (1997: 182).

33 Suzuki (1935: 27). It is interesting to note that some translations of this verse (specifically Conze (1973) and Cleary (1991)) translate the verse along the lines “that the universe is not the universe, it

This verse points through paradox to the fact that a particle only really makes sense when the perceiver fully grasps the nature of the infinite that comprises it. The logic that underlies the Buddha's questions to Subhuti is directing his thought to the awareness that objects' distinctiveness is due, paradoxically, to their emptiness. Indiscernibility, oddly, brings about discernibility; and conversely, discernibility leads to an awareness of emptiness, rather than acting as a veil that hides the reality of emptiness. The implication of this logic is that by meditating on the interdependent and relational character of the phenomenal world, wisdom concerning the nature of reality will be attained.³⁴ This logic is also utilised by Nāgārjuna in MK 24: 14, and needs careful scrutiny. Following the PPM, Nāgārjuna asserts that *saṃvṛti* can be utilised as a tool to experience and understand *śūnyatā*. *Saṃvṛti* is without purpose, meaning or value; but if it is approached from a standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda*, objects are shown to be necessarily *śūnya*, resulting in the mind not having to become stressed or agitated by either negating the perception of the object or substantialising it. But if the mind approaches objects from the starting point of belief in fixed concepts and substantial bodies, this will reveal discordance and conflict in thought due to the contradictions that result from sustaining these positions.

It is now clear why Nāgārjuna is so often hailed as the founder of *Mahāyāna*. His assertion that a peaceful mind is dependent on ceasing to project concepts onto

is called the universe" (Cleary 1998: 112). This translation does contradict the fundamental *Mādhyamāka* position of identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. It slips into the Tibetan interpretation, followed by Candrakīrti, of upholding a distinction between the two truths. I will explore this issue in more detail in chapters 3 and 4.

³⁴ This type of logic is recurrent in the Diamond Sutra. See also Chapter 6 (of the *Diamond Sutra*), where Subhuti argues that the Buddha taught no trends of thought, "[t]herefore they are called trends of thought" (Conze 1973: 134). This line of logic is maintained throughout the *Diamond Sutra*.

phenomena is not world-denying: rather, it underscores the recognition of equivalence between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* since everything is empty of own-being and therefore worthy of functioning as an intentional meditational object.³⁵ The flow of phenomena across the mind's eye becomes, in later *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*, the *bījas* for developing higher states of awareness through examination of the inherent *śūnyatā* of phenomena and the relations between phenomena. Nāgārjuna's identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratīyasamutpāda* means that the dependent origination of phenomena, together with sensory instruments of perception, is an integral part of *tattva*. The universal reach of dependent origination means that no particular view can do justice to its vast interrelatedness and the interdependency of sensory instruments and the objects of knowledge (*prameya*).³⁶ This is why the MK avers – in chapters 24 and 27 respectively – that the Buddha did not teach anything and that there is no view.

In both Patañjali's yoga and the Buddha's teaching, *nirodha* is central. *Nirodha* is used both by the Buddha in the third noble truth and Patañjali in the *Yoga sūtras* 1.2. But *nirodha* does not imply a rejection of world's phenomena. Indeed, in later Buddhist philosophy, the awareness of *tattva* is enabled through the *nirodha* of experience and perception. David Brazier's celebrated book, *Zen Therapy* (2001), argues that the term *nirodha* suggests protection or containment against agitation. He bases his argument on the dissection of the term into "*rodha*" or "earth bank" and "*ni*" meaning "tie down".³⁷ The term suggests protection from the consequences of a

35 MK (Dedication); MK 5: 18; MK 18: 9 and MK 25: 24.

36 Garfield, J.L., in Westerhoff et al (2011: 28).

37 Brazier (2001: 91).

part of the mind that misinterprets the phenomena of the mind. In both the Buddha's and Patañjali's teaching, the result of *nirodha* suggests a withdrawal from sensory perception, but not necessarily a collapse of consciousness or a cessation of the duality of subject and object that is constitutive of individual consciousness.³⁸

Nāgārjuna's use of *nirodha* in MK 26: 11 and 12 follows the basic yogic idea that ignorance is the root of *saṃsāra* and that yogic *bhāvanā* should be based on true knowledge of phenomena.³⁹ But the practice of meditation, for Nāgārjuna, develops the skill of perceiving the interdependence between phenomena or between what is perceived and the processes of perception. *Bhāvanā* is, for Nāgārjuna, continuous reflection and interaction with *saṃvṛti* without the idea of an underlying substantial soul, Self or a dualistic relationship between the self and the world. His understanding of yoga, therefore, differs from the dualism of *sāṃkhya/yoga* and the *Advaitā Vedānta* of Śankara because, rather than rejecting or transcending the physical world, Nāgārjuna reinterprets *saṃvṛti* so that it is free of mental impositions.

Garfield interprets MK 17: 15-17 to mean that, in order to abandon attachment to habitual mental impositions on phenomena, i.e. 'confusing existence with inherent existence', one needs to engage in "extensive meditation on the nature of phenomena and causal factors that bring about its emergence".⁴⁰ Here the emphasis is on the fact that all that exists in reality are emerging and ceasing phenomena

38 Garfield argues that phenomena are conventionally true. In his view, a mirage is not an illusion, it is an actual mirage. A mirage is only deceptive if it is mistaken for water (in Westerhoff et al, 2011: 30).

39 McCagney (1997: 212).

40 Garfield (1995: 236-237).

without essence. In his 1995 text, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the middle way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Garfield argues for the identity of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* based on the logic that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are only concepts and neither actually exists.⁴¹ Here he is slipping into a non-dualistic model, which will eventually result in the denial of perceptual events. Recently, though, Garfield has altered his position, saying that, while a mirage is an illusion, it is an actual perceptual event. I understand this to mean that, on careful observation, it may be divested of imposed metaphysical attributes.⁴² This example uses perceptual illusion to demonstrate that *saṃvṛti* is never anything other than illusory in itself, but with meditation it is perceived in relation to *paramārtha*.

Meditative objects are both limited and unlimited. For Nāgārjuna, the limited scope of *saṃvṛti* can be used by analytical thought and meditation to perceive and experience ultimate truth.⁴³ In this way, *saṃvṛti* can be used as a means of communication to point to *paramārtha*. *Śūnyatā* can be experienced in *saṃvṛti* if limited views (i.e. *saṃvṛti*) are understood to point beyond themselves to dependent origination. Here Nāgārjuna echoes the logic of the PPM, where meditating on objects allows objects to refer beyond themselves, but in doing so their very existence is verified. Nāgārjuna shows in the MK that phenomena make sense as a result of the interrelation of perceiving functions.⁴⁴ When phenomena are correctly understood to be dependently originated, they are seen to be without substance, indeterminate,

41 Garfield (1995: 236).

42 Garfield in Westerhoff et al (2011:30).

43 MK 24: 9 and 24:10.

44 MK 18: 7.

fluid, unlimited yet context- bound.⁴⁵ In relation to this point, I am in accordance with McCagney's position that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* must be seen in equivalent or relational terms, rather than as identical.⁴⁶ I argue that there is an underlying logic that contradicts the identity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This logic is apparent in the *Diamond Sutra* verse 13. The notion of identity implies that a fixed unit is the same as another fixed unit. But *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not fixed units. Their "nature" is unfixed and fluid, so the best description of their relationship is in terms of equivalence and not identity. Despite the fact that the PPM translates as "knowledge that lies beyond",⁴⁷ it describes experience, rather than a transcendent realm, as the ultimate reality.⁴⁸ For this reason I disagree with Conze's description of PPM literature as world-denying. On the contrary the PPM's use of *ākāśa* encompasses phenomenal and non-phenomenal experiences as opposed to the *Āryan* speculations about the immortality of the soul in the *Vedas* and *Upaniśads*, such as the *Katha Upaniśad*: 6 and *Rig Veda* 10.14.2.

3. Nāgārjuna's solution to the problem of dualism and non-dualism in Yoga

The problem that Yoga deals with is that the world appears stable, reliable and substantial and yet is the result of ignorance and the cause of suffering. Yoga's roots

45 MK 17: 20.

46 McCagney (1997: 960).

47 Conze (1973: 108).

48 Interestingly, my argument here also diverges from Conze's point that the PPM propounds another-worldly philosophy.

in non-*Āryan* thinking should give it a this-worldly, experience centred philosophy. Indeed, the PPM and Nāgārjuna's writing seem to follow this trajectory of thought. Indeed there is convincing evidence that *Yoga-Sāṃkhya* philosophy also developed from non-*Āryan* roots.⁴⁹ However, the central problem with *Sāṃkhya-yogic* philosophy is its perceived need to situate itself in a particular metaphysical and abstract framework in order to explain the perceived world. There are two metaphysical explanations for investment in the perceived world in Indian *Yoga*, according to Feuerstein: the first is non-dualism and the second is dualism.⁵⁰ The *yoga* that culminates in *Advaitā Vedānta* follows the monistic trend and dualistic *yoga* culminates in *Sāṃkhyadarśana* and *Yogadarśana* where *puruṣa* is separate from *prakṛti* (however it must be noted that in *Sāṃkhya* it is *puruṣa* that is separate from matter, the other aspects of mind are part of *prakṛti*). The metaphysical frameworks of dualism and non-dualism emerge from opposing assumptions about the relationship between consciousness and objects. Dualism holds that thoughts are separate from objects in the world whereas non-dualism does not perceive a separation between the operations of thought and the physical world: ideas are either seen as physically produced or the world is an extension of the operations of the Mind. Therefore, in terms of *Āryan* thought, *Yoga*'s purpose of calming the mind needs to be understood within the assumptions of dualism and non-dualism; either thought is caused by the activity of consciousness or it is the result of sensory impingements from the physical world onto the mind.

The ontological frameworks of dualism and non-dualism relate to the basic Indic idea

49 Viyogi (2002: 113).

50 Feuerstein (1996:3 & 4).

of the Mind's inherent structure. It is crucial to understand the Indic view of Mind as a three-tiered hierarchy in order to understand Indic metaphysics. *Citta* is the highest aspect of mind and recognises phenomena pre-linguistically. *Citta* enables one to see the essence of phenomena. It provides a mental map of our world and our passage through the world. *Buddhi* resides below *citta* and it enables the mind to reason and discriminate truth from falsity, but also enables creative engagement with the world. *Manas* is the discursive aspect of mind. Its major function is to control the senses and to express what *buddhi* feeds it. *Manas* also sorts and categorises information to feed to *buddhi*. It requires an intelligent operator because, in and for itself, it is unable to reason and discriminate or be creative.⁵¹

In Vedic philosophy as expressed in *Yoga*, *Sāṃkhya* and *Vedānta*, the mind must be transcended in meditation, prayer and karma so as to experience Absolute Self. Transcendence is seen to be enabled by the split in the Mind between gross and subtle elements (gross – *manas*, subtle – *buddhi* and *citta*) allowing the mind to experience ever subtler aspects of Self until eventually the mind is transcended altogether.

A logical problem arises when *Āryan*-influenced Yoga attempts to explain the experience of Absolute Self. The description of the experience of transcendence in Vedic texts, such as the *Upaniśads*⁵² and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*,⁵³ holds that knowledge

51Hodgkinson (2006: 146-150) This a very generalised summary of Vedic thought. Variations between schools occur for example, in *Sāṃkhya* *buddhi*, *manas* etc are transcended but not *puruśa*, which experiences liberation. *Advaitā* also says that the atman-Brahman has cit or consciousness.

52 Chāndogya 8.7.1.

53 *Bhagavad-Gītā*

6:8.

is an experience of total, substantial conscious Self (*Ātman/Brahman*). The subject fixed-term referent, stable and completely knowable after the Mind attains liberation. Both non-dualism and dualism attempt to explain how Absolute Self is experienced. *Brahman/Ātman* is a fixed point of reference, which can be identified as “you-are-that” (*tat tvam asi*). *Advaitā Vedānta*, as developed by Śankara, avers that the stable Self is all-pervasive. At the conventional level, *ātman* is known as *saguṇa* or divinity with qualities, and, at the transcendent level, the Divine is experienced without qualities or *nirguṇa*.⁵⁴ In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* the Self is experienced in renouncing the material world. Kapila’s *Sāṃkhya* philosophy has a clear influence on this aspect of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.⁵⁵ But neither *Advaitā Vedānta* or *Yoga-Sāṃkhya* can explain how the mind experiences a transcendent Ultimate Reality if the Mind itself is transcended. In order to explain this apparent contradiction, I argue that *Āryan* forms of yoga have to invert the epistemological framework by confusing mental concepts with reality.

Vedic traditions such as *Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* view mind as pre-existing and non-causal in origin and this includes the Mind’s structure.⁵⁶ In the Vedic tradition the Mind is seen as an instrument to learn about the substantial conscious Self. The Mind learns about the Self through a dialectical alternation between pure experience of the Self in yoga, the material world and the revealed word. The *Vedas* and the

54 Radhakrishnan (1962: 459).

55 Radhakrishnan (1962: 519-581).

56 I am aware that referring to “Indian philosophical traditions” presents historical questions concerning context and temporal accuracy. But unfortunately philosophical schools, such as *Vedānta* or *Sāṃkhya* are presented as traditions without much focus on philosophical development. In some cases, for instance in the case of the relationship between Gaudapada and Śankara Radhakrishnan attempts to discern between the thought of the two thinkers (1962: 463). It may in some instances be useful to speak about “proto Vedānta” or “proto *Sāṃkhya*”, but this must only be done in awareness of the trap of imposition of categories.

Upaniśads describe a direct experience of the absolute by the *rishi* and guru, but the study of these revelations must be seen in relation to personal meditative experience, due to the connection made in Indian *darśana* between truth and transcendental experience.

The application of the general Indic view of the Mind in *Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* differs according to the number and definition of these categories of the mind's capacities. In *Vedānta* the Mind acts as a conduit for sending external experiences to the Self via four categories of *manas* (feelings and sensations from the external world) and *ahaṃkāra* or ego, which is responsible for the individual's sense of I-ness, along with *buddhi*, the intellect and decision-making faculty, and *citta* (or memories that are recalled by the lower mind and the ego). Vedic yoga explains the relationship between the sensory world and transcendent truth by dividing Mind into different levels and ascribing different functions to each level. This is particularly the case with *Sāṃkhya* and *Vedānta*, where mind is seen as a stable state with various levels with different functions. In contrast, *Yoga* ascribes all activities of Mind to *citta*: reacting to sensory impressions; collection and recall of memories; and subtle activities such as withdrawal from sense, inner focus, meditation and *Samādhi*.⁵⁷

But it is the contention of this thesis that confusing reality for function leads to the error of giving metaphysical status to objects according to their function. In this instance, the functioning of the Mind to collate, categorise, conceptualise and recall sensory experiences, together with experiencing subtle aspects of inner attention,

57 Tignait (1983: 173-176).

erroneously establishes the essence of the Mind as a tool that learns the truth. The Mind in Nāgārjuna's philosophy is seen as a metaphysical entity whose function is to realise transcendental Truth. But any notion that perceives the Mind in this way, as an essential entity that has the ability to learn about transcendental truth, is illogical. Other than observing the functioning of the Mind, there are no grounds for ascribing substance to it. There are no logical grounds for arguing that the Mind can transcend itself, since, if we perceive phenomena as devoid of essence, there is nothing to transcend. Second, if the Mind is to transcend itself, how can it learn about a Self that is totally other than itself?

The non-dualism of *Advaitā Vedānta* attempts to overcome this problem by suggesting that the divine is all-pervasive and that *Īśvara* establishes *māya* as a learning tool to assist people in attaining true knowledge of *Brahman* by utilising the Mind's faculties of *manas*, *buddhi* and *citta* and learning to transcend them. It is not logical to argue that perfect truth establishes illusion in a non-dualistic framework, because it would be contradictory to each nature (i.e. truth and illusion). Nevertheless, for the arch-non-dualist, Śankara, to argue that *Brahman* is all-pervasive, he must entertain the contradiction of Truth spawning illusion. Even though he does not err, along with Plato, in establishing the existence of perfect Form by way of proof of imperfect form, he does allow mental concepts, such as soul and self, to become metaphysical properties for no other reason than that they are functions of higher mental categories (*citta* and *buddhi*). 58

58 Radhakrishnan (1962: 55).

Equally, the dualist argument that spirit is trapped and beguiled by matter is illogical. This argument presupposes that the mind has forgotten its true nature in spirit (*prakṛti*) and has identified itself with matter due to its agitated mental processes. It is possible that the mind attaches itself to its own mental forms and sensory impressions in a confused belief that they are real. But that does not necessarily imply that the mind is essentially composed of spirit. The mind may not be an entity or a substance and therefore would not be able to have its true identity in spirit. But, because the mind is able to function subtly by observing inner processes, its essence is assumed to be spirit. In pursuing this error of thought, we see how a dualistic framework cannot be used to support a non-dualistic, non-material one.

Both dualism and non-dualism in *Āryan yoga* are framework inversions in that they erroneously justify perceiving concepts such as Mind, Self and Soul as abstract entities by confusing mental activities with essential properties. In fact, there are no logical grounds for aligning mental processes with absolute truth and, by so doing, inverting the epistemological framework.

The Buddha also saw the problem inherent in a concept of mind/Mind (where mind is a non-transcendent entity and Mind is a transcendent entity) and tried to avoid the complexities associated with it. This position is articulated in early Buddhism, which avoids a clear definition of Mind. In addition, these texts do not reify the mind and do not put forward the idea that the Mind needs to be transcended in order for liberation to occur. In Theravada Buddhism, *citta*, *vijñāna* and *manas* are seen as synonyms

and all indicate consciousness.⁵⁹ While the notion of Mind was firmly established in Indic epistemology, it developed slowly in Buddhism. The Buddha held, in general, that there is no fixed point of reference in either the perceiver or the object of perception. He termed his spiritual approach *nāmarūpa*, which indicates his understanding of the fluid and interdependent relationship between mental activity and the recognition of physical form. The Buddha emphasised the importance of developing an awareness of mindfulness of these karmic processes in the *Satipattana sūtra*. He emphasised the crucial role *karma*, and particularly, intentional karma plays in shaping the world as opposed to unintentional karma such as breathing or defecating.

For this reason Nāgārjuna focuses on *pratītyasamutpāda* with reference to the Buddha's focus on actions and the consequences of action. Nāgārjuna aims to show that *nirvāṇa*, *saṃsāra* and mental aspects arise interdependently. Nāgārjuna never used the term mind and only the later philosophical school of *Yogācāra* pulled the concept into its epistemological framework, arguing that, through the process of meditation, the mind experiences its own nature. The closest Nāgārjuna comes to discussing mind is in his use of the term *cittagacore*, which is the 'range of thought' presented to the mind. He does not entertain a notion of mind. Rather he is concerned to purify mental activity through meditation and reason to reveal that *cittagacore* is empty and fluid.⁶⁰

Nāgārjuna avoids the problems inherent in Indian epistemology by not aligning

59 Keown (2004: 62).

60 MK 18: 7.

himself with either dualism or non-dualism. Nāgārjuna's understanding of *yoga*, however, is conditioned, not merely by the PPM or by his response to the *Abhidharmikas*, but, to some degree, by the larger network of ideas in his cultural and philosophical milieu. If one considers *yoga* in Nāgārjuna's writings from the wider Indian perspective, and not merely from the view of the PPM, the factors that influenced his thinking are revealed as more complex and nuanced than has been recognized by previous commentators. Although Nāgārjuna does not fall into any of the problems associated with non-dualist and dualist thought, his understanding of meditation or *yoga* must be considered within a framework of the wider Indian understanding, within *yoga*, of dualism and non-dualism.

It is worth reiterating here that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is neither dualistic nor non-dualistic and he does not refer to mind in any of his writings. But his distinction between *saṃvrtisatya* and *paramārthasatya* shares similarities with several other concepts of a two-tiered reality. This is found in the differentiation between *purūṣa* and *prakṛti* in *Sāṃkhyadarśana*, Chapter Two of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Chapter One of the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali and Śankara's separation of Brahman into *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* in that Nāgārjuna's two-truths formulation and the dualistic philosophies of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* depict two types of mental reality — subtle and gross or conditioned and unconditioned. These are distinct, but not exclusive: a calm and subtle mind can comprehend Absolute Truth while participating in sensory existence. This raises the philosophical question of whether reality is dualistic or non-dualistic. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and *Yoga Sūtras*, the play of *prakṛti* at the gross level conceals the truth of *puruṣa* at the subtle level, but both *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* are substantially

real. In the non-dualism of *Advaitā Vedānta*, the play of *Maya* is illusory and Brahman/Atman is the only reality – but Brahman can be known either with qualities (*saguṇa*) or without qualities (*nirguṇa*).

It is important to note that, for Nāgārjuna, reality is not non-dual, neither is it dual. It is not substantial, but, while it is empty of *svabhāva*, it is not absolutely insubstantial or nihilistic.⁶¹ The flow of *pratītyasamutpāda* is characterised by *śūnyatā*, but in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda* conditioning occurs.⁶² From the ultimate point of view, phenomena have no status other than their *śūnya*, which implies their contingency, impermanence, dependency and impermanence.⁶³ In this way Nāgārjuna tries to overcome the pitfalls in both the dualistic and non-dualistic models of yoga.

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Nāgārjuna's two-truths formulation echoes the Indic epistemological and metaphysical structures that underpin its understanding of mind as divided between two types of experience — qualitative and non-qualitative. His epistemology does not involve the transcendence of a higher non-qualitative experience over a lower qualitative form of experience. Nāgārjuna attempts to overcome the problems inherent in dualism and non-dualism by arguing

61R 61

62 MK 24:18 and 19,SS 1 and 32.

63 Jones (2010) and Burton (1999) challenge Nāgārjuna's logic pertaining to *pratītyasamutpāda*. Jones argues that, while the passion and the passionate person are interrelated and interdependent, the person existed prior to being passionate. Burton offers a more fundamental criticism of Nāgārjuna's logic when he argues that,

It is certainly true that a tree, for example, in order to be known is dependent on a knowledge episode. But from this it does not follow that the tree itself is dependent for its existence on the knowledge of it! (1999: 147)

However, I argue that both Jones and Burton are ascribing an unfounded *apriori* status to the subjects of their enquiry. I maintain that it is impossible to make empirical claims of knowledge about objects *apriori*. To assert such a claim is to confuse belief for knowledge.

that the two truths are neither one nor hierarchically distinctive. He argues, instead, that *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are equivalent in every way, due to their shared *śūnya*, but distinctive according the way they are viewed in the same way that a panoramic landscape can be view from different perspectives. In this regard his two-truths framework contrasts with the Vedic idea that knowing involves knowledge of a stable absolute substance. Nāgārjuna’s approach to *pratītyasamutpāda* differs diametrically from the Vedic approach to truth. For Nāgārjuna, knowledge is process-orientated. Knowing happens as a consequence of a process that cannot be transcended. It is always indiscernible, fluid and open. But, by understanding that process, *śūnyatā* is realised.⁶⁴ This allows for creative involvement with *saṃvṛti*. *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are only known here and now. The purpose of the MK is to teach that the created conceptual world is unbelievable. Any fixed idea, even absolute *Brahman*, is contradictory to dependent co-origination. Process does not allow for fixity of views, even of the most transcendent of concepts. Nāgārjuna’s argument against *svabhāva* is that the idea of absolute identity is contradictory in the presence of change. Absolute identity is, like any concept, impossible to sustain within a framework of *pratītyasamutpāda* (even a notion of relative identity is contradictory within this framework).⁶⁵ This line of reasoning leads me to conclude that, while Nāgārjuna was influenced by the broad Indic epistemological categories that surrounded his investigation, his “ontology” was unique in its interrogation of dualistic and non-dualistic frameworks.

64 VV 70 and MK 24:14. Nāgārjuna’s assertion that phenomena make sense if one understands *pratītyasamutpāda* is well expressed in these two verses.

65 VV 70. In Nāgārjuna’s logic, identity makes sense in terms of akasic boundlessness. Siderits, by contrast, argues that Bodhisattvas adopt an ignorant view of identity through compassion (2003: 207). But Verse 14 in the *Diamond Sutra* states, “World Honoured one, this manifestation of truth is not a form: therefore the Realized One is called the manifestation of truth” (Cleary 1998: 114), which echoes Nāgārjuna’s logic.

Nāgārjuna questions whether substantiality (either in the form of dualism or non-dualism) and indeterminacy can co-exist. In so doing he insightfully prefigures the direction Buddhist philosophy will take in the future in the form of *vajrayāna* and Tibetan Buddhism, and pre-emptively cautions against the errors of substantialising mind and consciousness.⁶⁶ Nāgārjuna is careful not to present a model of thought that would suggest a form of consciousness, either as an entity in process, like a "stream of consciousness", or a contained entity sub-divided into different categories, where some are more conscious than others.⁶⁷ He presents knowledge as a consequence of mental activity, but it is not in consciousness or mind. In this way he does not fall into the trap of confusing function for essence. Mental activity is part of the larger, open process of dependent-origination, which is neither totally conditioned nor unconditioned. I believe that Nāgārjuna is able to avoid the error of confusing function for metaphysical entity (as I will demonstrate in the next section) precisely because he follows the same logic as the PPM. The next section will explore the grounds for my interpretation.

4. The roots of the meditative experience of insubstantiality in Indian thought and its expression as *ākāśa* in the *Prajñaparāmīta Sūtras* and in Nāgārjuna's thought

66 MK 1: 1.

67 MK 24 and MK 18.

According to De Wijesekera,⁶⁸ the Buddha was the first teacher in India to give a central place to insubstantiality in his thought system. De Wijesekera argues that the Buddha's contribution to Indian philosophy was in the notion of cessation (*nirodha*), which he discovered in the eighth *Jhānic* state of meditation. The preceding seven *jhānas* were realizations already discovered by his previous Vedic teachers.⁶⁹ De Wijesekera notes that the Buddha called himself *Brahma Bhuta* and that he was born into an atmosphere that was charged with the prevailing religious ideas of his day.⁷⁰ Much of his teaching was a challenge to Vedic culture and philosophy. For example, he replaced the substantialist thought, which was grounded in the Vedic thought of his day, with the insubstantialist notion of *skandhas*.⁷¹ It is unique to Buddhism, according to De Wijesekera, that the only *skandha* that survives death is consciousness — although even this is subject to impermanence.⁷² De Wijesekera's claim is complex, however, because he notes that insubstantialistic thought can be found in the *Bṛihadārayaka Upaniśad* where the phrase "*neti neti*" is used.⁷³ This implies that a notion of insubstantiality, which does not hold any concept as ultimate, precedes the Buddha's teachings.

The earliest expressions of meditational experience of insubstantiality can be found in the *Vedas* in the two gods *Mitrâ-Varuna*. For example, in the *Mitrâ-Varuna* sections of *Rg* 1.2 space is implied in words like *brhut* (v8) and *urukshya* (v9), which

68 De Wijesekera 1994.

69 De Wijesekera (1994: 49 & 50).

70 De Wijesekera (1994: 7 & 11).

71 De Wijesekera (1994: 47).

72 It is interesting to note that the *Majjhima Nikāya* 38 specifically rejects the idea that consciousness survives death.

73 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*: 4.4.22 .

are fundamental terms used to describe meditative clarity and tranquility. Viyogi utilises this evidence when he argues that these two gods are hybrid non-Aryan gods.⁷⁴ *Mitrâ–Varuna* describe an insubstantial experience of light as the truth. In the *Vedas* the paired gods *Mitrâ-Varuna* and *Indra-Vayu* set up the tiered psychological states of ultimate Truth and intellectual Truth. Nāgārjuna follows the same structure of thought when he sets up the categories of ultimate Truth and conventional Truth. What is even more interesting is that both philosophies make the ultimate point that the two Truths are, if not identical, in close proximity to each other. In the hymns of the two paired gods *Mitrâ-Varuna* and *Indra-Vāyu*, the understanding is, that when thought occurs at the level of *rtam*, it becomes brilliantly clear and takes on the quality of Truth-Consciousness. Similarly, for Nāgārjuna, conventional Truth is not separate from Ultimate Truth. *Śūnyatā* allows the two conditions of knowledge to reside together without privileging either of them.⁷⁵

In order to understand Nāgārjuna’s attempt to reconcile the experience of the world with the experience of *nirvāṇa*, I argue that we need to take cognisance of the larger Indic debates on yoga. It seems rather strange that very few Buddhologists recognize the importance of the fluidity of thought patterns between Buddhism, pre-*Āryan* and Vedic traditions, with the notable exception of a few, such as De Wijesekera, who examined the Buddha’s realizations against the backdrop of the knowledge from which he emerged and which he would have been aware of. As noted above, the Buddha established his distinctive teaching while remaining ensconced in a larger Indian thought framework, which included *Āryan* motifs.

74 Viyogi (2002: 266-268) links *Mitrâ* to the Persian god *Mithra*.

75 Mason (1996) and Aurobindo (1992: 41-77).

The Buddhist understanding of insubstantiality, however, became more sophisticated over time and was able to resolve the problems arising from the experience of insubstantiality and the world. Newland and Tillemans argue that Buddhist philosophy represented truth in two ways: as statements having truth-value and objects having truth-value, but it is probably more accurate to understand the term “object” as referring to an intentional object or object of consciousness. In *Mahāyāna* there is perhaps a greater emphasis on the truth-value of intentional objects than statements because objects were understood to be, not merely a teaching tool for the Buddha’s *dharma*, but rather an integral part of *tattva*⁷⁶ and the causal network of *pratīyasamutpāda*. In this regard intentional objects are either in accord with *tattva* or in discord with *tattva*. The truth of an object therefore lies in its being identified with *śūnya* rather than projecting fixed properties and concepts onto phenomena. Objects therefore become the intentional meditational objects on *śūnya*. Newland and Tillemans observe two conflicting notions of truth: truth statements and truth value in objects. While semantics and the accurate perception of objects might articulate different views of truth, it can still be argued that the PPM *sūtras* provide a way for truth statements and truthful perception of objects to be linked, through the application of metaphoricity. The use of the term *ākāśa* in the PPM alludes to the emerging idea of objects as metaphors for *śūnyatā*. The literal meaning of an object is indiscernible in the sense that objects do not have a fixed meaning within even the largest framework, such as consciousness. Thus, for example, there may be an accurate answer to a question, but that answer is not independent of the particular

76 In Westerhof et al (2011: 2).

context of the enquiry that is dependently originated and, hence, empty. In the *Abhidharma* things are defined according to their function in a mental event. The defining quality of the 94 *dharmas* that were identified by the *Ābhidharmikas* was their activity,⁷⁷ whereas in the PPM objects point beyond their particular activity and context towards *sūnyatā*. I argue that Nāgārjuna was attempting to critique the encroachment of essentialist thinking amongst the *Ābhidharmikas* with regard to their definition of *dharmas* by placing the experience of objects within a fixed experiential context. He wanted to expose the falsity of any thought that strove to essentialise the a thing according to its function and, correspondingly, he wanted to show the emptiness of things by unravelling both the nature of the object and the observer of the object. By doing so, he argues, he would return to the kernel of the Buddha's teaching of overcoming the roots of *dukkha*, where objects are imbued with the magical power of providing happiness through their function of serving our needs. Thinking errors occur when one places objects within a fixed framework, such as the world or consciousness. When objects are set within a limited framework they cannot be understood as infinitely open. The result is that objects derive their 'power' from their perceived context, which leads to confusing function for essence. This is because their function is understood in terms of the limited scope of the perceived context. By contrast, the PPM places perceived objects in the context of *ākāśa*, which is to be read as a synonym for *tattva*, and "emptiness".

In Chapter 2 of *Rgs*, Wisdom is likened to *ākāśa*. The constituting aspects that determine the person and their perceptual knowledge are not to be identified with

77 Williams (2000: 91).

Wisdom.

9. Form is not wisdom, and wisdom is not form,
Just as with feeling, perception, will and consciousness.
They are not wisdom and wisdom is not them.
Wisdom is like space, without a break or crack

10. The nature of supporting conditions is boundless,
As the nature of beings is boundless
As the nature of the space is boundless
Just so the wisdom of the world-knowers is boundless.⁷⁸

In this scheme experience does not denote an actual referent, either conditioned or unconditioned.⁷⁹ In addition, experience does not denote a contextualised subject:

The leader himself was not stationed in the realm which is free from conditions,
Nor in things which are under conditions, but freely he wandered without a home.⁸⁰

But yet despite *ākāśa* being without context or supporting conditions, objects retain their identity and contextual support. In this regard, Rgs 27: 8 reads:

A bird dwells in the sky (space), but does not fall down. A fish dwells amidst water, but does not die. Just so the bodhisattva who through the trances and powers has gone beyond,
Dwells in the empty (*śūnya*), but does not reach the blessed rest.⁸¹

78 In Conze (1990:14).

79 Rgs 27.8-9.60 (in McCagney 1997: 23).

80 Conze (1990: 13).

81 Conze (1990: 60).

The logic that is expressed in VV70, where specificity and characteristics are due solely to *śūnyatā* and not to essential characteristics, is already nascent in such statements in the PPM.⁸²

Here we see the emergence of the idea, which underpins the Bodhisattva ideal, that the highest wisdom is *śūnyatā* and must be understood as *pratītyasamutpāda*, not cessation. The meditational experience of the *śūnya* of objects enables *pratītyasamutpāda* to be understood. Indeed in the *Asta* the identification of Wisdom, *ākāśa* and *śūnyatā* is becoming explicit.

Supported by space is air, and (by that) the mass of water;
By that again is supported this great earth and the living world.
If the foundation of the enjoyment of the deeds of beings
Is thus established in space, how can one think of that object?
Just so the Bodhisattva, who is established in emptiness,
Manifests manifold and various works to beings in the world,
And his vows and cognitions are a force which sustains beings.
But he does not experience the Blessed Rest; for *śūnyatā* is not a place
to stand on.⁸³

Similarly in the early section of *The 8000 Lines*, the *Bodhisattva* is

not discriminating, comprehends all dharmas as empty, signless and unimpeded. Without any dualism he seeks in wisdom for enlightenment.

⁸² See Garfield and Thakchöe in Westerhoff et al (2011: 73). They compare the arguments of Tsongkhapa and Gorampa and find that Tsongkhapa's position leads to the contradiction of holding a form of truth from the *saṃvṛti* view and Gorampa's position holds that conventional truth is entirely false. The authors concur that both positions underline the ambivalent status of conventional truth in Indian *Madhyamaka*. My argument is that if *Madhyamaka* is a descendent of the PPM, then the indiscernibility of concepts and ideas does not point towards ambivalence. Rather, indiscernibility has a more profound metaphoric function.

⁸³ *Rgs* 20, 5 in Conze (1990: 45).

Devoted to the foremost perfection of wisdom is that Yogi.

An unobstruction of the space-element by the firmament cannot be found any where by any one. Just so the wise Bodhisattva, course in wisdom is just like open space and he courses calmly and quietly.⁸⁴

Later in the same text the very "Perfection of Wisdom" is equated with purity and space, which is attained by learning the "Perfection of Wisdom" and by practicing Yoga (1973: 158). Yogic meditation is described in the PPM either as a trance or contemplation. It is explained that the perfection of wisdom is attained by a series of thoughts "which are inclined towards all-knowledge,"⁸⁵ which is the psychological state where the mind neither takes hold of anything nor settles down in anything.⁸⁶ By implication and crucially, objects' existences are not rejected in this state of mind. In this respect the dynamism of *śūnyatā* is expressed where space "is an existing nothing; it both exists and does not exist",

And so the long-lived Subhuti said this to Bhagavan;
This is a perfection of what is not because of the existence of space.
This is a perfection equal to the unequalled because all events cannot be recognised. This is a perfection of clarity because *śūnyatā* is beyond limit.⁸⁷

Nāgārjuna's argument could be seen to have developed this line of thought into his assertion in VV70 that in order to understand existences of things one must understand *śūnyatā*. *Aṣṭa* 9: 205 reads:

Bhagavan: so many signs, so many attachments. What is the cause?
From signs comes attachment ... The nature of events is not past, nor

84 Conze (1973: 57).

85 Conze (1967: 191).

86 (1967:182).

87 *Aṣṭa* Ch 9 in McCagney (1997: 24).

future, nor present, it lies outside the three periods of time and for that reason, it cannot possibly be converted, cannot be treated as a sign, or as an objective support, and it cannot be seen, nor heard, nor felt, nor known.

Subhuti: Deep is the nature of events.

Bhagavan: ... because of having clarity.

Subhuti: The nature of clarity is the perfection of wisdom. I pay homage, O Venerable one, the perfection of Wisdom.

Bhagavan: Also the nature of all events is clarity. And the nature of clarity is the perfection of Wisdom. What is the cause of this ...

Bhagavan: It is just because of their nature that events are not something. Their nature is no-nature and their no-nature is their nature because all events have not two marks but one mark only, no mark. So because of this, all events are not realized. ... There are not two natures of events, just one is the nature of events. And the nature of events is no-nature and no-nature is the nature of events. It is thus that all the limits of attachment are gotten rid of.⁸⁸

VV 70 and MK 24:14 also combine the ideas of the nature and no-nature of phenomena into one and the same instance. But Nāgārjuna takes the point further by arguing that phenomena become clear or make sense due to their emptiness.

There is a suggestion of this argument in the following verse from the *Larikavatāra Sūtra*:

Here is no inherent nature in any being, consequently, here is no true verbal description.

Thus inexperienced fools separate the use of *śūnyatā* from *śūnyatā*.⁸⁹

This implies that attachment occurs when the use of a thing is confused for its essence. Hence, without understanding the lack of inherent nature in phenomena, there is the potential of confusing function for the reality of phenomena. The result of this error of judgement is the construction of dispositions, as expressed in MK 26: 10 and 11. But that is not to presume that what is being described is nihilism. It is,

88 In McCagney (1997:30).

89 In McCagney (1997: 35).

rather, the case that nothing can accurately be named or defined, although it can be utilised by “skilful means”. Conze suggests that skilful means requires a reinterpretation of the illusory world. The most radical break from traditional Buddhist thought, which the PPM advances and Nāgārjuna echoes, is that *nirvāṇa* itself is illusory.⁹⁰ This reinterpretation of traditional belief suggests that all concepts and intentional objects “exist” only as metaphors for reality. But as metaphors, used by skilful means, they cannot be held in nihilistic terms. Indeed, Nāgārjuna extends this argument in his identifying *pratītyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā* in that the metaphor exists as *śūnyatā*. This strategy is not yet apparent in the *Rgs*, although a skilful use of metaphoricity is suggested in *Rgs* XX: 11-20, for example:

14

Just so the wise Bodhisattvas, having stood in compassion,
Having taken hold parachutes of skill in means and of wisdom,
Considers dharmas empty, signless and wishless,
Though he does not experience the Blessed Rest, he nevertheless
sees the dharmas.⁹¹

It is my contention that Nāgārjuna follows the same idea of the centrality of metaphoricity in the PPM in his understanding of the world by showing that dependent origination is emptiness: in other words, the arising and ceasing of phenomena due to *pratītyasamutpāda* is a way for the mind metaphorically to grasp the inexpressible quality of *śūnyatā*. But he does not embrace the PPM’s understanding of the Bodhisattva, who offers a bridge to progress from illusion to *nirvāṇa*.

90 Conze (1967:12) and *Rgs* II v.5 and 3 (in Conze 1990:13).

91 Conze (1990: 47).

5. The meditative experience of *ākāśa* in Nāgārjuna's writings

Nāgārjuna's philosophical approach strongly resembles the method in the PPM of using the phenomenal world to shift focus from a limited view to unlimited or open experience. His rhetorical use of *prasaṅga* shows the absurdity of maintaining a view of phenomena as independent categories. He asserts that things make sense due to causal interrelatedness and inherent nothingness,⁹² although he does not prove his position, but merely makes a bald claim after deconstructing substantialism. This is perhaps due to the fact that he is influenced by the PPM sutras, which are founded in an *akasic* formless meditative experience and not rational thought.⁹³ This position, however, establishes a contentious area in the PPM's thought-system, which struggles to find an appropriate relationship between the world and the world beyond (or *nirvāṇa*) because the phenomenal world refers to the reality beyond, and then the philosophy tends to be world-denying.⁹⁴ Nāgārjuna makes an important contribution to this thinking by shifting emphasis from the indiscernibility of phenomena to causality. While maintaining that *saṃvṛti* is mirage-like, he never questions the reality of causality and the impact causality has on *saṃvṛti*. Indeed causality is the 'essence' of *pratītyasamutpāda*, which he equates with *sūnyatā*. By upholding the primacy of causality, Nāgārjuna shifts the emphasis from phenomena to relationality and dependency. Nāgārjuna wants to show that spiritual peace can be experienced

92 VV 70.

93 Conze (1967: 128).

94 Conze (1967: 131).

by contemplation and meditation on dependency of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. His point is that *saṃsāra* shows no distinction from *nirvāṇa* when both are correctly viewed from a position of interrelated dependency.

Nāgārjuna develops the PPM's use of the phenomenal world to explain ultimate reality by using the common Indic differentiation of two truths (namely, conventional or conceptual truth and absolute or non-conceptual truth). Nāgārjuna adapts the two-truths formulation to his own thought where *tathatā* is a result of the correct understanding of the interdependency between *saṃvṛti*, the conceptual view, and *paramārtha*, the non-conceptual view. *Paramārtha* refers to the highest view of interrelatedness, where things cease to be distinct and *saṃvṛti* refers to a confined view of reality, where phenomena are fleetingly apparent. His adaptation of the two-truths formulation is neither dualistic nor non-dualistic, i.e. he neither renounces the phenomenal world nor accepts its existence. In verse 7 of chapter 18 Nāgārjuna argues that, when thought quietens, nothing can be independently identified because there is no stable foundation on which to establish meaning. Mind, senses and the objects of the senses are all and equally dependently originated. In this sense it is better to read the use of *nivṛtte* in this verse as denoting senses and sense objects being quietened or retreated from, rather than renounced, as is the more common translation, because "renunciation" is suggestive of the view Nāgārjuna opposes.⁹⁵ Later in verse 9 this translation of *nivṛtte* as "quieten" is reinforced by the use of the word *sāntam* (composed mind), which does not suggest renunciation, but, rather, a

95 I find McCagney's translation of *nivṛtte* as "renounce" in MK 18:7 misleading because it does not make sense to renounce something like thoughts that has no real existence.

balanced perspective on the world. In verse 8 Nāgārjuna asserts that the Buddha's teaching about reality should not be forced into conceptual constructs:

Everything is factual, nonfactual, both factual and not nonfactual.⁹⁶

Peace is therefore attained through non-projection onto phenomena and knowledge of the dependent origination of phenomena. The consequence of these spiritual practices is that *cittagocare* (the range of thought) has been quietened but not renounced.⁹⁷

Nāgārjuna's interpretation of the two-truths formulation relies so heavily on causality that his understanding of causality requires close scrutiny. In the *Dedication* to the MK Nāgārjuna writes:

I greet the best of teachers, that Awakened One,
Who taught liberation, the quieting of phenomena, interdependent
origination.⁹⁸

Clearly, for Nāgārjuna, the Buddha's teaching is based on the relationship between liberation, the quieting of phenomena (not renunciation of phenomena) and interdependent origination. Causality is not linear for him.⁹⁹ He is not concerned with errors that would arise from wrong assumptions about the beginnings and endings of

96 MK 18:8 in McCagney (1997: 182).

97 See Dreyfus in Westerhoff et al (2011: 89). Dreyfus explores the consequences of a sceptical approach to Nāgārjuna's knowledge claims. If one approaches Nāgārjuna's claims about the two truths from the basis of meditative practice, the consequence of adopting or not adopting a sceptical approach do not pertain because conventional mental impressions are not denied or accepted conventionally: their mental impact is merely quietened.

98 In McCagney (1997: 137).

99 MK 20: 19.

casual sequences; nor does he argue that correct action leads to release from the world. For him, *pratītyasamutpāda* is an interrelated network of relations. But that raises a pertinent question about the processes of causal consequences: in other words, what is the role of karma? Nāgārjuna followed the Buddha in asserting that the fruits of karma are continuous: they are not dependent on the continuity of action in a certain direction, such as towards enlightenment. Chapter 17 of the MK focuses specifically and pertinently on causality. In verse 6 Nāgārjuna maintains that karma goes on into perpetuity. In verses 14 and 15 Nāgārjuna makes claims that come closest to underlying substance than in any of his *oeuvre*. He states regarding karma:

14. What is imperishable is like a promissory note and an action like a debt. It has four kinds of elements and it is indeterminable in primordial substance.

15. The imperishable is not abandoned by the act of abandonment or by unabandoned meditation,
Therefore, by means of the imperishable, the fruit is born out of action.

These two verses, however, need to be read in the context of verse 10:

Since from thinking there is continuity and from continuity, origin of thought, thought is prior to thinking. Therefore, there is neither disruption nor permanence.

Chapter 17 is one the most intriguing chapters in the MK. Nāgārjuna's references to the imperishability of karma, the source of thought and primal substance seem to run directly contrary to his central philosophy of emptiness. In addition the logic

employed in the chapter suggests that mindfulness of what is present in the mind (thought) is prior to action or thinking. Mindfulness is awareness of causal relations.¹⁰⁰ But mindfulness is not accomplished without engagement with karma. Mindfulness and karma are therefore interdependently related. The spiritual process being described here again echoes the logic expressed in the PPM, that is, the interrelated perspectives of engaging with limited and fixed phenomena and views but allowing the latter metaphorically to point to a limitless point of view via the infinite network of causal relations in *pratītyasamutpāda*. For Nāgārjuna the interrelation between karma and mindfulness suggests the interrelation between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* in that karmic interaction is held together due to emptiness and the awareness of such emptiness.

Tibetan Buddhist scholars do not hold this view of an all-inclusive causality. Sonam Thakchöe, for example, draws a distinction between the knowledge attained in meditative equipoise “where rational insight is seen as playing a dominant role” and subsequent attainment.¹⁰¹ She follows Tsongkhapa’s *Candrakīrti* influence, which leads phenomena to be perceived as having two attributes, namely the ultimate and the conventional. I do not see any support for this view in Nāgārjuna’s MK. On the contrary Nāgārjuna establishes the equivalence between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.¹⁰² Following Tsongkhapa, Thakchöe argues that only in the Buddha’s state of enlightenment is attainment experienced simultaneously with meditative

100 MK 17: 6-10 in McCagney (1997:176-178).

101Westerhoff et al (2011 et al: 50).

102 MK 25: 19.

equipoise.¹⁰³ Again I do not see any justification for such linear logic. Rather it is more likely that Nāgārjuna intended to assert that practice (*bhāvanā*) entailed a necessary shared experience of *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*. I do not agree with Thakchöe's view that, prior to enlightenment, *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* occupy an either-or relationship. In my view, their relationship is one of both-and. This approach allows *saṃvṛti* to be experienced, not as restricted to fixed views, but rather as dynamic and imbued with creative potential.

Following MK 24: 14:

To whomsoever emptiness makes sense,
Everything makes sense.
To whomsoever emptiness makes no sense,
Nothing makes sense.¹⁰⁴

Nāgārjuna establishes the equivalence between *pratītyasamutpāda* and *sūnyatā* on the basis of working with *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* together as a form of meditation, the identity between the two aspects are not meant as a result of practice but as a means.¹⁰⁵ His two-truths formulation must not be understood as a way of separating views of reality. Rather it operates to show how the truth of *sūnyatā* is reflected in both the conceptual and the ultimate views of reality and how an accurate understanding of the function of emptiness in viewing concepts enables an understanding of emptiness from the ultimate view of reality.

103 Thakchöe in Westerhoff et al (2011: 50).

104 McCagney (1997: 201).

105 Ibid.

Nāgārjuna sets up the MK as posing a new way of thinking of reality by not affirm any view of reality. Rather, the analytical and logical analyses of Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakan* thought could be understood against the backdrop of the deeper structural forms of his text, which convey aspects of non-Aryan Indian culture, particularly with regard to their open and inclusive cultural understanding of *saṃgha* and the meditative experience of *ākāśa* if a link between yoga and Nāgārjuna can be shown. *Yoga* developed from non-Aryan society and expressed the non-distinctive, all-inclusive experience of *ākāśa*. Together with being a diatribe against the *Sarvāstivādins* and the *Sautāntikas*, the MK is structured in such a way that, as Stafford Betty¹⁰⁶ argues, it goes beyond merely cognitive philosophy and becomes a mental preparation for meditation. Betty writes that the logic in the MK functions as an effective means of communicating a mystical vision of reality. Although I do not agree with Stafford Betty's use of "mystical" in relation to Nāgārjuna's philosophy, I appreciate the argument that Nāgārjuna's logical analysis serves to enhance practical activity and *akasic* meditational experience of *śūnya* and therefore is not simply a polemic or only an analytical exercise.

Nāgārjuna devotes most of his writing to using the *prasaṅga* method of argumentation in order to show the inconsistencies in holding to a notion of *svabhāva* in objects. He wants to prove that all phenomena are *śūnya* as a consequence of disproving *svabhāva*. But *śūnyatā*, by his own admission, is not a binary opposite of existence, that is, non-existence: correctly understood, it is neither

106 (1984: 135).

existence nor nonexistence.¹⁰⁷ He ably shows, by using *prasaṅga*, that imposing *svabhāva* on objects is absurd. But he does not inquire into the absurdity of holding perceiving objects as simultaneously existence and non-existence. This implies that the contradictory middle position between existence and non-existence is more a meditative experience of reality than a logically held position.

The Buddha was reluctant to answer questions about the nature of reality. He responded to questions of this nature with silence.¹⁰⁸ Nāgārjuna follows this strategy and thus operates strictly within a Buddhist mindset. For example, in the MK Nāgārjuna says that the Buddha's *dharma* is expressing nothing that can be conceptualised.¹⁰⁹ He does, however, state that *saṃsāra* is equivalent to *nirvāṇa*, therefore *saṃvṛti* has the capacity to describe reality or *dharmatā*. But he draws attention to the importance of the ability to understand reality through quietening the mind's response to phenomena.¹¹⁰ It could be argued that this experience is the flow of *cittagocore* (the range of thought) without substance.¹¹¹ This explains why the chapters in MK do not end at 25 with *Nirvāṇa*, but go on to prescribe the problem of views (*dr̥ṣṭi*), the nature of perception and its potential for bondage or liberation. Nāgārjuna's conclusion focuses on meditation, which, I maintain, is significant.¹¹² But what does Nāgārjuna understand by the experience of ultimate reality in a state of meditation? I argue that Nāgārjuna's approach to *sūnyatā* is all-inclusive yet not non-dualistic. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is an infinitely large network of interconnected causal

107 MK 18:8.

108 *Majjhima Nikāya* 72.

109 MK, 25:14.

110 MK Dedication.

111 MK, 18:7.

112MK 26: 11.

connections. Any limiting of this view results in a substantial view of causality, where a phenomenon is understood to cause something else to occur. In terms of meditation practice, though, Nāgārjuna is not merely suggesting that one should observe the flow of phenomena in the “range of thoughts” (*cittagocore*). This approach would be no different from early forms of Buddhist meditation. His approach is to be aware of the interconnectedness between phenomena, thereby bringing their emptiness to awareness, not only their arising and ceasing. For Nāgārjuna, peace is a consequence of the recognition of *pratītyasamutpāda*.¹¹³ From the *saṃvṛti* point of view, choice determines condition. But Nāgārjuna argues for equivalence between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and it follows that no choice of view is better or truer than any other. There is equality of choice from the point of view of *paramārtha*, based on the recognition that all views are *śūnya*.¹¹⁴ Nāgārjuna identifies *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, which implies that all views and conditions are interdependent and the equality between these two key concepts results in freedom from views.¹¹⁵ When views become fixed into conceptual rigidity, they are assumed to exist substantially. Conceptualisation causes anything that is perceived to be imprisoned in false and rigid views. To avoid this, perception must be based on peace and openness (*śūnyatā*). In this way perception is identified with *pratītyasamutpāda*. This implies that sensory objects are “free of being projected upon by conceptual properties, free of thoughts that make distinctions without multiplicity”.¹¹⁶ The freedom that is invoked here implies freedom from sharp

113 Jones argues that Nāgārjuna uses the *catuṣko ṭi* to show that all possible claims to *svabhāva* are eliminated. He bases his argument on Mk 25;16, Mk 27;18 and 27:28 (2010: Kindle ebook location 3087).

114 MK 24: 18.

115 MK 5: 6, 12: 5,25: 5,27:18 and 27: 28.

116 Jones 2010 (Kindle ebook location 3399); see also MK 18: 9-11.

distinctions and, discrete parts. Freedom, in practice, is an antidote to the experience of the world interpreted as conceptual categories.

Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* does not offer a transcendental view of reality. On the contrary, it offers a feasible view of reality that does not contradict common sense.¹¹⁷ Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* does not vary from the accepted Buddhist view of *tattva* or *dharmatā*.¹¹⁸ In this view no transcendental or metaphysical reality is propounded: the only reality is the phenomenal world as it is, without mental projection.

Yogic discipline allows for the experience of conventional reality, but grounds the understanding of that world in emptiness. In this sense Nāgārjuna insists that conventional truth is the only realm in which insight is gained. But meaning that comes to us via sensory and intellectual activity is unreliable. Reality is only reliable according to its own criteria, that is, from the point of view of emptiness. Therefore the truth of any phenomena only resides in its status as *śūnya*. Any other apparent quality should not be reified. Any verbal account of reality is bound to be false because it is based on terms derived from conventional concepts. Even the ontological concept of emptiness or *śūnyatā* cannot be applied. Nāgārjuna most often uses the term *śūnya* to apply to phenomena without evoking a metaphysical

117 This argument contradicts the argument followed by Tibetan scholars, such as Rje Rimpoche, who follow Candrakīrti's argument that all views are untrue from a *saṃvṛti* point of view and unreal from the ultimate point of view. This argument suggests a separation between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*, which contradicts MK 24: 19. In MK 13: 17 Nāgārjuna asserts that there is nothing that is not empty and therefore nothing can contradict emptiness. This allows for reality to flow "precisely that way the phenomenal world work[s]" (Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 3158).

118 MK 15: 6, 22: 8, 24: 9 and 18: 7.

explanation.¹¹⁹ Yet, interestingly, while the experience of *śūnya* has the effect of calming verbal differentiation, it paradoxically also affirms the common-sense world or the world we know. While the early Buddhist teachings expressed the sense of *anattā* to communicate non-identity, the PPM texts contributed fullness to the concept of *śūnya*, through its association with *ākāśa*.

For Nāgārjuna, however, *nirvāṇa* is equivalent to *saṃsāra* and *saṃsāra* is equivalent to *nirvāṇa*. This means that the very nature of *saṃsāra* is dependent on *nirvāṇa* and the very nature of *nirvāṇa* is dependent on *saṃsāra*. Nāgārjuna's notion of *pratītyasamutapāda* takes the middle way between existence, non-existence, existence-and-non-existence and neither-existence-nor-non-existence. What this means is that nothing exists independently. Therefore any ontological position referring to the self or the world should be refrained from. Nāgārjuna opens the MK (1: 1) with the lines:

Never, nowhere do any beings occur arisen from themselves, from others, from both or from no cause.

He goes on to assert that there are only four conditions, cause, supporting condition, contiguous condition and dominant condition. Therefore he asserts that:

Indeed, no self nature of beings occurs in conditions of beings
Since self-nature is not present, other natures are also not present.

119 Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 3391). Some scholars, such as Huntington (1994), use the phrase "the emptiness of emptiness" to de-ontologise the term "emptiness". I personally find the phrase clumsy. In my view translating *śūnya* as openness captures the sense of the term without turning it into an abstract noun.

Simple causality cannot explain conditions either:

Causal efficacy is not associated with conditions, causal efficacy is not associated with non-conditions, conditions are not associated with causal efficacy or non causal efficacy.¹²⁰

But if, nevertheless, conditions exist from the *saṃvṛti* view, what accounts for them? Nāgārjuna introduces this two-truths formula later in the MK to explain why conditions are observed from the conventional point of view. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Nāgārjuna's philosophy is closely related to the PPM. The PPM reinterprets the world along the lines of perfect knowledge, in which the phenomena of the world point to an experience of freedom and openness rather than the world of conventional experience. Nāgārjuna's use of the two-truths formulation shows that conventional truth points to ultimate truth in a metaphorical sense. But the metaphoricity implied in the relation of conventional truth to ultimate truth is made possible by Nāgārjuna's assertion that *śūnyatā* is identical to *pratītyasamutpāda*. The processes of conditioning and causality are possible because of the inherent emptiness of objects, and, more importantly, the experience of emptiness (or *akasic* openness) in terms of the fluid flow of sensory experience. *Saṃsāra* is therefore not renounced or discounted in Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* philosophy: rather, it is contextualised within the broader philosophical field of *prasaṅga*, *paramārtha* and *pratītyasamutpāda*.

The point I make in this chapter is that Nāgārjuna wants not only to point out the failings in texts such as those of the *Abhidharma*, but to establish a 'viewless' (MK

120 In McCagney (1997:137-138).

27: 30) approach to understanding the nature of reality based on the meditational experience of *ākāśa*. Such an approach cannot only consider analytical approaches. It needs to incorporate meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic approaches as well. From the *saṃvṛti* point of view phenomena are mistaken for having real existence. But, upon rational examination, their emptiness and openness are laid bare. The *paramārtha* point of view is not conceptual and therefore is an unmediated experience, beyond language. Such an experience must to be based in meditation, because only through meditation can these concepts be experienced.

The two-truths formulation is used by Nāgārjuna to synthesise cognitive and meta-cognitive approaches to understanding. The two-truths formulation has its roots in the broad Indian thought system: for example the motif can be found in the *prakṛti-Puruṣa* in *Sāṃkhyashastra*. The MK sets itself up as a text which does not offer a theory, but only deconstructs other prevailing philosophies; but it does, I maintain, operate within the larger Indian hermeneutic circle and contains voices and traces from other Indian thought-systems from the non-Aryan tradition, primarily the PPM. But in asserting the equivalence between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* Nāgārjuna does indeed offer a theoretical position, adding his own twist to the two-truths Indian formulation.

Nāgārjuna remains unclear how *saṃvṛti* is to be understood on its own terms. In the last verse of Chapter 24 in the MK, on the one hand, he states that the Buddha's teaching never amounted to anything substantial; but, on the other hand, he does not deny the Buddha existed. Later *Madhyamakans*, such as *Candrakīrti*, in an

attempt to improve clarification, maintained that objects have two aspects: the conventional and the ultimate. While *paramārtha* provides a sense of openness, *saṃvṛti* provides a sense of confinement to fixed concepts and views. The sense of being confined, which is associated with *saṃvṛti*, is the basis for ignorance. Confinement results in seeing objects as real. Understanding in a state of ignorance is, therefore, focused on knowing the object in order to gain “worldly knowledge”. However, such conceptual knowledge is necessarily vague because concepts are applied to phenomena that are in a continuous state of transition. The sense of openness or *śūnya* is the diametrical opposite to ignorance, where understanding is based on viewing objects as empty of substance. But the question still remains: Can the Buddha’s worldly existence, or, for that matter, any existence be possible without imposing metaphysical conceptual frameworks? Chapters Three and Four will explore this question in detail.

Nāgārjuna argues in the MK that space and time are invented by *vikalpa* and *prapañca*.¹²¹ This process is often interpreted along the lines of MK 16:10,¹²² and occurs due to *samāropa* (superimposition) in the similar way that *Advaitā* Vedantins use *adhyāsa*.¹²³ In *Advaitā Vedānta* the illusion of separation is superimposed on *Brahman* or non- dual substance. The concept of imposition in Nāgārjuna’s thought is misleading because it seems to imply levels of cognition. In Buddhism, though,

121 MMK 26:10

122 Westerhoff (2009: 48).

123 It is interesting that in the *Vijñānavāda* school, as found in the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra samāropa* is paired with *apavāda* as a dual category. In this context *samāropa* establishes substance as it does not exist and *apavāda* repudiates what does actually exist. In combination both realism and nihilism are illusory. The middle path between nihilism and realism is asserted in ‘presentation-only’ (*vijñapti-mātra*). All things are presentations of consciousness (Nagao. and Silk, 2000: 347-353).

there is nothing on which illusory states can be imposed. In this regard the two-truths formulation can be misleading in that the assumption is that *saṃvṛti* is imposed on *paramārtha*, but to believe this would be a mistaken retention from Vedic thought structures. In early Buddhist philosophy, which certainly influenced Nāgārjuna, *citta* is synonymous with *vijñāna* (consciousness) and *manas* (intellect).¹²⁴ The processes of the mind are not hierarchically structured, but, rather, horizontally understood. There is, therefore, no level of mind that needs to be overcome or transcended. Rather, the flow of *pratītyasamutpāda* can be viewed either from narrow limits, that is, from the perspective of *saṃvṛti*, or broadly, from the perspective of *paramārtha*. These two views are epistemologically and metaphysically indistinguishable from each other from the frame of emptiness.¹²⁵ The *akasic* experience of *apratīhistita* and *anālaya* informs both experiences. Nāgārjuna interprets the *akasic* experience described in the PPM as *pratītyasamutpāda* – an interconnected fluidity of motion that, depending on one’s purview, reveals interconnected phenomena or, from the widest view, nothing at all. The narrow view of *saṃvṛti* is occupied primarily with the arising and ceasing of phenomena. When *citta* is activated, due to ignorance of the processes of *vikalpa* and *prapañca*, the arising and ceasing of phenomena of *pratītyasamutpāda* appears as if one is a phenomenon in relation to other phenomena. However, Nāgārjuna posits that what arises and ceases is experienced as *apratīhistita* and *anālaya* when understood from the vantage point of *pratītyasamutpāda*. In fact, the flow of dependent relations between phenomena can only be understood from the view of *saṃvṛti*’s open and non-fixed nature, which is

124 Keown (2004: 171).

125 Nāgārjuna’s use of the term *cittagocare* describes the “flow of phenomena across the realm of mind” (McCagney 1997: 42).

equivalent to *paramārtha*. This view is most ably reflected in VV 70 and raises significant question marks about the authenticity of MK 26 (This point is clarified in Chapter Four). Nevertheless, the point remains that Nāgārjuna argues that all phenomena are empty in themselves.

The central issue in the next two chapters is that if phenomena are empty, fluid and indiscernible, Nāgārjuna needs to account for why they allow us to navigate the world via cognitively mapped patterns with such accuracy. A second question is why the imposition of concepts onto phenomena is so effective in producing a workable understanding of the world.

Nāgārjuna's central proposition is that *saṃvṛti* makes sense due to the experience of *ākāśa*, which he interprets as *pratītyasamutpāda*. As I have pointed out above, he offers no argument or rational substantiation for this claim. It seems, therefore, that we have to infer that his claim is experientially verified in meditation. In Chapters Three and Four I argue that although Nāgārjuna refers to meditation or *bhāvanā* as a necessary component of his *prasaṅga* method, reading and understanding Nāgārjuna requires a subtle inter-textual awareness. Chapter 3 explores how the experience of *ākāśa* affects the perception of phenomena, which accordingly become understood as indeterminate. Nāgārjuna's surprising and apparently contradictory claim is that things make sense (or derive meaning) due to their innate nature as *śūnyatā*, and are therefore not indeterminate at all. The logic observed in the PPM of focusing on the phenomenal world to explain the experience of infinite emptiness is based on the literary function of metaphoricity, as I explore in Chapter

Four. In this chapter I unpack Nāgārjuna's debt to the *PPM*, with particular reference to *Rgs* 20: 11-20, and a special emphasis on verse 14:

Having taken hold of the two parachutes of skill in means and of wisdom,
Considers dharmas as empty, signless and wishless.¹²⁶

126 Conze (1990: 47).

Chapter Three

Implications of *ākāśa* in Nāgārjuna's thought

1. Introduction

My central argument, in this thesis, is that we can better understand Nāgārjuna's claim that *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are equivalent, and therefore offer seamless meaning if properly understood, if we explore *śūnyatā* as *ākāśa* along the lines that McCagney suggests.¹ My argument is that the openness that *ākāśa* in the form of "nothing to settle in" (*anālayu*) and "nothing to grasp" (*anāgrahā*)² allows for interpenetration and communicability between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*, enables phenomena to be meaningfully understood in relation to their true "nature" as *śūnyatā* if seen within the light of the metaphoric logic utilised in the PPM. This chapter, however, focuses on the problem that if *śūnyatā* is interpreted as *ākāśa*, along the lines of nothing to settle in (*anālayu*) and nothing to grasp (*anāgrahā*),³ then the implication is that concepts are indeterminate and contextually variable. Concepts, objects and statements not only have a variety of meanings dependent on the causal networks that give rise to them, but the indeterminacy of their referential function enables concepts and statements to be applied in a variable manner. The consequence of entertaining the indeterminacy of

¹ McCagney (1997).

² Conze 1990:37 (*Rgs* 15: 8) and Conze (1973: 38).

³ Conze 1990:37 (*Rgs* 15; 8) and Conze (1973: 38).

phenomena based of the “sunyatic”/akasic view is that, while it is true that phenomena are indeterminate due to their basis in *śūnyatā*, they therefore must function to obscure meaning. Such a confusion between truth and meaning is not what Nāgārjuna is asserting in MK 24: 14 and VV 70. The solution to this problem will be explored in Chapter Four in terms of metaphoric logic.

The interpretation of *śūnyatā* as the experience of openness, which I am exploring in this chapter, derives from the (non-Āryan) perspective, as articulated in the PPM, where *śūnyatā* is associated with the notion of *ākāśa* (space), which has clear connotations of openness. In this sense, concepts, objects and statements always evade clear identification and fixed meaning and are therefore always openly interpreted and indeterminate, contained by a range of possible interpretation within the contingency of dependent origination. Meaning is, therefore, a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination). In other words, if meaning is contingent on openness, the verb/process element prevails over the nominative function of language.⁴

In my view, *saṃvṛti* (conceptual knowledge) is fundamentally based on indeterminacy, which informs *saṃvṛti*'s central processes — *vikalpa* (separation into concepts) and *prapañca* (the play of concepts). Indeterminacy is associated with notions that are related to *ākāśa*, such as *apratīhistita* (nothing to settle down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp).⁵ *Vikalpa* and *prapañca* can also be mistakenly applied to *saṃvṛti* to reify objects in the attempt to project/inject/ascribe stability onto a

⁴ McCagney (1997: 19).

⁵ McCagney (1997: 22).

necessarily indeterminate system. But *vikalpa* and *prapañca* are not necessarily processes based on ignorance (as I will show in the course of Chapter Four).

In Chapter Two the logic of *śūnyatā* interpreted as openness was explored from an historical literary perspective from Conze's⁶ and McCagney's⁷ perspectives. Based on their argument I suggested that the logic in the PPM bear a striking resemblance to the logic used by Nāgārjuna in his writings, particularly with regard to use of the phenomenal to refer symbolically to emptiness when viewed from the perspective of meditative objectives.

Specifically Chapter Two focused on the experience of *śūnyatā as ākāśa* in meditation as explored in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (PPM). This understanding of *śūnyatā* in the PPM provides the basis for the equivalence of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* in Nāgārjuna's philosophy from the perspective of *śūnyatā* as experienced in meditation. It was argued that Nāgārjuna follows the same line of logic in the PPM of engaging with *saṃvṛti* in order to come to an understanding of the equivalence of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*.

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring the consequences of ceasing reification in pursuit of akasic indeterminacy. Nāgārjuna argues that the problem with *saṃvṛti* is the tendency to project own-being onto sensory data; but when reification does not take place, meaning is seen as contingent on dependent origination and therefore Nāgārjuna

⁶ Conze 1967.

⁷ McCagney 1997.

implies that meaning is context-bound and fluid. But while it is true that dependent origination points to contextual meaning, the influence of *ākāśa* on perceiving phenomena is that they are indiscernible and not merely contextual. It therefore follows that if phenomena are indiscernible they are ultimately meaningless.⁸

The chapter is critical of current interpretations of Nāgārjuna's two-truths formulation, based on Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa (e.g. Garfield in Westerhoff et al 2011), which part ways from the southern Indian understanding of *śūnyatā* in *akasic* terms and place too much emphasis on the nominative aspect of human existence. This chapter will examine the nature of space in order to show that the two-truths framework makes better sense in terms of an *akasic*, process-orientated interpretation of *śūnyatā* as highlighted in Conze's writings and developed by McCagney.⁹ I will focus specifically on the idea of indeterminacy that the *ākāśa* influence connotes. I will argue that *saṃvṛṭtisatya* and *paramārthasatya* are equivalent in that both are experienced as indeterminate in different ways. But while Nagarjuna's argument makes logical sense, I will suggest that his assertion in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 of phenomena making meaningful sense due to their *śūnya* does not hold.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides a philosophical background to Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā*. The second section examines the

⁸ Tillemans (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 153) makes an interesting point when he argues that relativism is the result of attributing equal truth-status to opposing statements. In this sense, then, non-realism will always result in relativism.

⁹ Conze 1967; McCagney 1997.

problems of describing *śūnyatā* in either realist or non-realist terms. The third section looks at the centrality of causality in Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* and his identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*. The fourth section focuses on the crucial role of the akasic characteristic of indeterminacy in the identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, from both the relative and ultimate points of view. Finally, the fifth section focuses on the impact of indeterminacy on the two-truths formula. But while the akasic influence allows Nāgārjuna to make his radical philosophical move of identifying *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*, his assertions in MK 24:14 and VV 70 require further supporting argument, I believe.

The focus on meditational experience that runs through Nāgārjuna's writings introduced the topic of the present chapter.¹⁰ In the previous chapter I explored Conze's and McCagney's argument that Nāgārjuna's philosophy draws from a non-Āryan Indian mindset, which also influenced certain aspects of Āryan culture, early Buddhism and the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (PPM) I suggested that there is evidence that the same line of non-Aryan influence in *Yoga darśana* and *Sāṃkhyadarśana*. I argued that the same non-Aryan thought patterns, concerning attaining an experience of unboundedness, non-individuated and inclusive understanding of *śūnyatā* (openness) resulting in profound peace through yoga and meditational experience occur in Nāgārjuna's thought *śūnyatā*. So where as in the previous chapter I explored the sub-problem of under what under what conditions does a clear understanding of *śūnyatā* emerge? In this chapter I

¹⁰ McCagney (1997: 22). See also MK7: 16, 18:7-8 and 26:11.

will explore the sub-problem that it is still unclear what *śūnyatā* as a meditational experience of openness, as expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, means in *Mādhyamāka* philosophy. Therefore this chapter will focus on the philosophical challenges in interpreting *śūnyatā* as *ākāśa* in Nāgārjuna's writings, in order to resolve the central problem of the thesis of how does understanding *śūnyatā* ensure that phenomena makes sense?

I argue, in this chapter, that Nāgārjuna's approach to the relationship between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* is non-specific and dependently related. By 'non-specific' I mean that Nāgārjuna affirms different interpretations of the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*, which are contradictory if not held from the view of *śūnya*. In this sense *śūnyatā* is open and indeterminate.¹¹ This makes a philosophical analysis of Nāgārjuna's writings challenging because there is a logical inconsistency in his thinking if the terms of his argument are seen as fixed, reified categories. At different points in his texts Nāgārjuna affirms the following propositions:

- Acceptance of *saṃvṛti* as condition of ignorance¹²
38 – How could something that ceases when ignorance ceases not clearly be only a mental creation of that ignorance?
- Acceptance of *saṃvṛti* as being dependently originated¹³
1:12 – Moreover, if the effect, nonexistent in those conditions, set in motion from those conditions, why is it not set in motion from no conditions?
- Acceptance of the non-reality of *saṃvṛti*, therefore it need not be opposed or negated¹⁴

¹¹ Garfield argues that meaning depends on conventions that are dependently derived, not due to causal efficacy but rather due to the 'explanatorily useful regularities' of conventions (1994: 2-4). Such an argument falls short of explaining the strong claims to meaning made by Nāgārjuna.

¹² *Yukti-shāstrikas* 37 and 38 (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 1541).

¹³ MK 1: 12 (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 126).

¹⁴ *Yukti-shāstika* 3 (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 1490).

3 – If entities were in fact real, then why isn't their absence accepted to be liberation from the cycle of rebirths?

- *saṃvṛti* needs to be renounced¹⁵
Thus from the cessation of errors, ignorance is stopped. Where ignorance has ceased, disposition, etc, is stopped
- *saṃvṛti* needs to be quietened but accepted as a conditioned phenomenon¹⁶
- 18:9 – Unconditioned by another, peaceful, not constructed by means of false imaginings, free from false discrimination and without purpose, this is the mark of reality.¹⁷

There is a central contradiction in Nāgārjuna's thinking that at once seeks to oppose *saṃvṛti* as reification or *samāropa*, while also accepting that *saṃvṛti* occurs due to dependent origination and this contradiction can only be understood within a rubric that interprets *śūnyatā* as openness.

I argue that, while Nāgārjuna's central method is *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasaṅga*), his identification of *pratīyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā* means that he embraces non-coherence in his thinking (non-coherence means that that there is not a necessary relationship between word of thing. Non-coherence does not imply incoherence from Nāgārjuna's perspective). Paradoxically, he shows that this approach enables us to make sense of events and relationships between events due to the association between *śūnyatā* and the sense of openness (*ākāśa*). Such an association means that truth is an experiential value rather than a referential value between subject and object. Nāgārjuna's conflicting and contrasting views of *saṃvṛti* imply that he does not value

¹⁵ MK 23: 23 (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 558).

¹⁶ MK 18: 9 (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 442).

¹⁷ MK 18: 9 (in McCagney 1997: 182).

meaning as an iterable or repeatable notion. In fact he means exactly the opposite. If meaning were made of repeatable values, then it would imply that substantial entities were involved. Rather, because meaning is due to dependent origination, it implies that meaning is fluid and dependent on context. This unorthodox approach raises the question of whether it is adequate.

By viewing *śūnyatā* in relation to openness, I part ways with Madhyamikan scholars, who follow Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa in arguing that objects have dual values of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*, such as Garfield¹⁸ and Thakchoë (2011).¹⁹ Garfield, for example, argues that the illusion of water in a mirage is true in relation to the conditions that give rise to it, i.e. the illusory water is not not a mirage. His argument suggests that the mirage is “real” for the perceiver, while it is also real in its illusory status. By contrast, if *śūnyatā* is understood as openness and *paramārtha* is equivalent to *saṃvṛti*, then it is plausible to argue that *saṃvṛti* manifests different aspects of openness dependent on the context.

This is a vastly different approach from Vedic philosophy. In the Vedic tradition the experience of a stable, unmediated, non-individuated experience of Being evolved into the Upaniśadic philosophy of *brahman–ātman* in the *Upaniśads* and, in Śankara’s philosophy of *Advaitā Vedānta* , this experience gave rise to the notion of absolute,

¹⁸ Westerhoff et al 2011.

¹⁹ Westerhoff et al 2011.

transcendent, all-pervasive Spirit without qualities, called *nirguṇa*.²⁰ By contrast, in the non-Vedic tradition the experience of spirituality is associated, according to Conze,²¹ with the matriarchal Mother Goddess, which was experienced in the changing of the seasons and the fluidity of all movement. These this-worldly influences are apparent in the early Buddhist idea of *saṃgha, anicca and anattā* (by this I mean the latter Buddhist central tenets carried no metaphysical import). Nāgārjuna's writings gave a firm foundation to these ideas by emphasising causality, the emptiness of all phenomena and process as the basis for meaning.

2. Early Buddhist philosophy

In order to investigate the claims to meaning in Nāgārjuna's philosophy it is necessary to examine the roots of Buddhist philosophy, because these early philosophical notions were focused on establishing certainty, clarity and definition within different types of human experience. The Buddha never presented his *Dharma* philosophically. Instead, his *Dharma* had a healing and soteriological focus with the aim of diagnosing the causes of and release from suffering.²² Nāgārjuna's writings participated in the later Buddhist philosophical tradition, which began with the *Abhidhamma*. It is accepted by

²⁰ Raju (1985: 408).

²¹ Conze (1967: 125).

²² Garfield, however, argues that Nāgārjuna is largely soteriological in his approach in that his aim is to overcome grasping and craving (1995: 314). In this regard, A.C. Grayling makes an interesting observation about philosophy: "Philosophy is far more accurately conceived of as a form of prophylaxis, part of the anticipation of living, involving thought in advance about how one would try to brace oneself in grief, or how one would try to cling to ideals and principles, beliefs and hopes, even when one is profoundly depressed, or faced with failure" (2006: 4). This contrasts with the Buddha's soteriological approach.

Buddhist scholars that Nāgārjuna, in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, addresses his argument against the *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* philosophical movements (although *Sauntrāntika* was not an ordained lineage. In the sense that we have no evidence that it had a monastic code of its own and may just have been a *Sarvāstivādin* subsect and does not invalidate it as a philosophical movement). His aim was to establish a firm foundation for the *Dharma* without getting lost in debates about the properties of phenomena. It has been argued that he wanted to re-emphasise the Buddha's teaching of *anattā* apart from the malaise that existed in the debates about the nature of mental phenomena between the *Sarvāstivādins* and the *Sautrāntikas* within the *Sthaviravāda* sect.²³ For Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* is Buddhism's central philosophy. But Nāgārjuna believed that Buddhism had lost its way in its thinking about this central concept. The roots of the confusion can be traced back to early Buddhist philosophy in the *Abhidharma*, the aim of which was to enumerate all possible human experiences. Eighty-two experiences were identified and defined: eighty-one were classified as conditioned *dharmas* (Pali, Sanskrit *dharma* or elements of existence) and one experience, *nibbāna*, was marked out as being unconditioned.²⁴ This enquiry seems to have been premised on granting the experience of mental phenomena a unique status. The question that arose amongst monks was: "what is the nature of such unique mental

²³ Krüger (2007: 58).

²⁴ The distinction between subjective and objective is often blurred in Buddhist philosophy. Terms such as existence and experience seem to overlap, although it would be rash to venture a mystical understanding. For example, at times Nāgārjuna seems to be referring to objects of experience as experiences of consciousness and, at other times, consciousness seems to be responding to raw data. Indeed, it seems to me that *pratītyasamutpāda* is a middle ground between what is disclosed and what remains undisclosed about existence, although my leaning is towards a phenomenological rather than a dualist approach because Nāgārjuna's understanding of *saṃvṛti* is more constructionist than not.

objects?”²⁵ The *Sarvāstivādins* and the *Sautrāntikas* parted ways on this question. The *Sarvastivadins* argued that mental objects were inherently unconditioned, despite the fact that they all were subject to arising and cessation. Accordingly, mental objects always possess independent own-existence, or *svabhāva*. The unique, unconditioned status of mental objects allows them to be known as *dharmas* or “as they really are”. The roots of this thinking lie in the *Abhidamma*, where all experiences were recognised to have unique characteristics. The *Sarvāstivādins* separated *dharmas* into two groups: primary existents or *dravyasat*, which are sensory data; and secondary existents, constructed out of primary existents, concepts and conceptual existents (*prajñāptisat*).²⁶

The issue for the *Sarvāstivādins* was the impermanence of all *dharmas*, in particular those that existed in the past and those that will exist in the future. The challenge was to work out the nature of their unique existence and how they related to each other. The *Sarvāstivādins* explained *dharmas* as existing both a-temporally and temporally. A *dharma*’s a-temporal nature gives it its own existence and allows it to be known in

²⁵ In Indian metaphysics the mind is seen as one of the senses. Ideas are considered as sense-objects and are therefore placed in the same category as material objects (Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 1869).

²⁶ Williams (2000: 93). Burton argues that when Nāgārjuna refers to entities that are empty of *svabhāva* he means *prajñāptisat*. This vitiates Nāgārjuna’s argument against the *Abhidharmikas* because, according to Burton, the *Abhidharmikas* always kept the concept of dependently originated entities separate from the concept of dependently designated entities (*prajñāptisat*). Lack of *svabhāva* could only be proved in that system if the dharma can be shown to have parts, and to call the causes and conditions “parts”, as Nāgārjuna does, is to do violence to the very notion of parts. Walser counters this argument by referring to the *Sumyutta Nikāya* 1:552, which the *Sarvāstivādins* would have accepted. All Nāgārjuna has to do then to convince the *Sarvāstivādins* is to show that there are no existents, therefore all is empty of own being (Walser 2010: 242 & 243).

abstract terms. This was particularly useful in recognising the *dharma* of past and future objects and concepts. However, all *dhammas* become active in the present when the right conditions arise and they bring about an experiential effect.²⁷ Their essence is derived from the actions in the world. Whether primary or secondary existents exist in the past, present or the future, they were argued to exert an effect on each other because they have own-being even after cessation. The only way this can make sense is if there exists an a-temporal substratum of *dhammas*. They therefore operate as "ontological glue" on each other and for each other.

The *Sautrāntikas* were monks who held that the Buddha's *sutras* were the only valid authority. They rejected the existence of *dhammas* in three time periods and held that the only reality was the present *dharma*, since *dhammas* can only exert activity in the present. Each *dharma* has an indivisible momentary existence in time (that is, it does not have an a-temporal existence), but, similar to the *Sarvāstivādin* view, it has its *dharma* through its characteristic activity and influence in the world.²⁸ Cessation arises almost simultaneously with existence. So closely are existence and non-existence associated that their intertwining goes beyond linguistic explanation. The closest

²⁷ There seems to be a contradiction in the logic here. Either *dharma* derives its *svabhāva* from its a-temporal quality, or its *svabhāva* is linked intrinsically to its characteristic activity. It is difficult to understand how *svabhāva* can be associated primarily with both a mental object's temporal and a-temporal qualities.

²⁸ Williams (2000: 118) points out that a dialogical relationship existed between the *Sarvāstivādins* and the *Sautrāntikas*. In many monasteries both groups coexisted and engaged in hermeneutical discussion. This is an important point to bear in mind. A similar dynamic occurred in monasteries later on when Theravada and Mahayana monks also lived in the same monasteries. Scholars such as Harrison and Schopen maintain that it is inaccurate to view *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* as being discrete schools within Buddhism based on inscriptional evidence found in monasteries (in Williams 2000:104). I find this an important piece of research because it implies that meaning is arrived at dialogically and is not a result of pure reasoning detached from historical context.

language can come to approaching a description of this dynamic is a continuous process devoid of substance or being.²⁹

According to the *Sautrāntikas*, perception is a construction (*savikalpa*) from the unconstructed thing seen (*nirvikalpa*). *Savikalpas* plant seeds of erroneous perceptions in the mental continuum, which give rise to a “constructed mental reality” For this argument to make sense, as it did for the *Sarvāstivādins*, a continuum of subtle mental consciousness that connects momentary experiences is posited.³⁰ The notion of a substratum of consciousness is not clarified by either the *Sarvāstivādins* or *Sautrāntikas*.³¹ It seems to be an “adhesive” that binds reality in both of their frameworks; but neither group explores it fully.³²

In early Buddhist philosophy the need to reify experience led to a struggle to integrate concepts with sensory data, giving rise to a struggle to integrate impermanence with identifiable experiences of objects. This is an on-going debate in Buddhist philosophy and many of Nāgārjuna’s commentators have participated in it. Certain early Buddhist philosophers, such as the Abhidharmists, maintain that it is simply not sensible to argue that experiences cannot be categorised in a normative sense. But the earliest accounts

²⁹ Nāgārjuna also addresses the doctrine of momentariness in the *Ratnāvali*, where he argues that it can neither be affirmed or denied (*Rt* 1: 66-77). But his position is that momentariness is valid only if “those moments are empty” (Walser 2010: 263).

³⁰ Williams (2000: 121).

³¹ The notions of a-temporal *dhammas* and subtle consciousness were developed later by the *Yogācarins* into a very sophisticated form of psycho-philosophy, but is difficult to ascertain how far particularly the *Sautrāntikas* developed an idea of subtle consciousness by themselves.

³² Williams (2000: 111-122).

of the Buddha's teachings represent objects as purely obscurational and therefore arbitrary in terms of the principles of *anicca* and *anattā*. The notion dharmas as identified in Abhidharma seems to an imposition on the Buddha's teachings. Later Madhyamikan philosophers, such as Candrakīrti, attempt to integrate relative with ultimate values by maintaining that objects have both aspects. In contrast to these scholars, my argument in this chapter is that Nāgārjuna does enough to overcome the issue of phenomenal experience if *śūnyatā* is interpreted along the lines of *ākāśa* as set up in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* by identifying *pratītyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā* and thereby showing that conventional knowledge exists as a result of mutual dependence.³³ The question of how mutual dependence leads to meaningful understanding between phenomena requires deeper reflection, which will be undertaken in Chapter Four.

2.1 The emergence of Nāgārjuna's understanding of emptiness

The importance of the two absolutely authentic texts by Nāgārjuna, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MK) and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist philosophy can be likened to the effect of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* on Western thought if one considers the impact Nāgārjuna's thought on *śūnyatā* had on later Buddhist thought. Nāgārjuna's explanation of *śūnyatā* had profound implications for meaning, not only in Buddhism but in the Indian philosophical tradition, in that his

³³ Newland and Tillemans in Westerhoff et al (2011: 14).

arguments show the erroneous logic³⁴ in substantialist thought. He developed his two-truths framework from the earlier Buddhist two-truths framework that distinguished conventional knowledge from ultimate knowledge.³⁵ This framework influenced the division between *nirguṇa* and *Saguṇa* in *Advaitā Vedānta* and shaped later *Mahāyāna* philosophy in *vijñānāvāda*, *vajrayāna* and Zen schools of Buddhism. But the key issue in Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* is his identification of it with *pratītyasamutpāda*. In this regard *śūnyatā* is better translated as openness, I maintain, following the influence of *ākāśa* in the *prajñāpāramitāsūtras*. Nāgārjuna's highlighting of *pratītyasamutpāda* has several very important implications. First, *saṃsāra* is equivalent to *nirvāṇa*, therefore the two truths, *saṃvṛti satya* and *paramārthasatya*, are equivalent forms of knowledge in that they are both infinitely open.³⁶ Second, following logically from the latter, the two-truths notion is a flat framework rather than hierarchical; therefore reality is shared, open and hence radically non-dualistic. It is only in the state of ignorance (*avidyā*) that grasping (*tṛṣṇā*) occurs and the inequality of value places conflicting meaning onto representations.³⁷ I argue that the two-truths framework and Nāgārjuna's proposition that all phenomena are empty of own-being have profound metaphysical implications for meaning and purpose. Later Buddhist traditions struggled with his argument and in varying ways rejected it as nihilistic and therefore

³⁴ It is argued by various scholars, such as Kalupahana, that Nāgārjuna's thought represents pragmatic philosophy rather than theoretical philosophy. This chapter, in part, argues that pragmatism is an unfortunate term to describe Nāgārjuna's work because it implies an over-emphasis on *saṃvṛti*. Such an argument places too much reliance on sensory data and therefore cannot attain the inclusive sense of knowledge that Nāgārjuna proposes (1986: 88-90).

³⁵ McCagney (1997: 84).

³⁶ MK 25: 19 (in McCagney 1997: 209).

³⁷ McCagney (1997: 104).

unsustainable.³⁸ By contrast, I argue that Nāgārjuna was not nihilistic and that it is the criticism of his philosophy that leads to nihilism, as it is founded on an illogical attachment to the perceived world, its acquired meaning and “concreteness”.

Importantly, the third implication of his two-truths formulation is that knowledge is non-fixed, insubstantial, non-referential and mysterious. This means that renouncing reification is crucial. This third implication raises certain problems, which I will explore in this chapter and the next. But making sense in *saṃvṛti* is possible because the world is presented as navigable. This implies that the two epistemological processes that are associated with *saṃvṛti* (*vikalpa* and *prapañca*) are reliable. But it also presents a world that logically should not exist. If the conceptual world is empty, then why should it exist? Nāgārjuna does not explain why knowledge splits between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*, nor does he explain why knowledge is a reliable source of information beyond his broad term explanation of dependent-origination. He does highlight the prevalence of reification in *saṃvṛti*, but he is not clear that *saṃvṛti* will cease when imposition and projection are ceased. This means that the imaginings of *vikalpa* are not fixed, but open to be seen contextually and are interdependently related to other concepts and objects. Nonetheless, I aver that mutual dependency is not an adequate framework for establishing coherent meaning due to its inherent relativity.³⁹

³⁸ Williams argues that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which preceded Nagarjuna, struggled to find a place for his philosophy, arguing that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy amounted to nihilism, despite Candrakīrti and Bhavaviveka’s attempts to interpret Nāgārjuna’s work in a more mainstream *Mahāyāna* context (2000: 149).

³⁹ Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 28-35). Garfield argues that the two truths, *paramārthasatya* and *saṃvṛtisatya*, are reliable sources of knowledge in terms of the cognitive instruments which produce

In this thesis I argue that Nāgārjuna's reading of *śūnyatā* as *pratītyasamutpāda* resolves the philosophical problem of semantic inconsistency within a philosophical system based on non-realist principles. Samsaric and nirvanic equivalence shifts knowledge to process from a normative orientation based on the indeterminacy of phenomena in that causality is identified with Wisdom or truth. This chapter questions whether knowing in terms of process orientation as a consequence of recognising the flow of *pratītyasamutpāda* and the interdependence between representations provides an adequate condition for meaning. In order to answer this question, I will examine Nāgārjuna's logic in terms of his defence of the indeterminacy of phenomena. My argument includes a defence of McCagney,⁴⁰ who holds that contradiction must be accepted as a fundamental facet of Nāgārjuna's thought due to the unfixed referent, given that words do not have a fixed denotative meaning. I maintain that Nāgārjuna is able to present a coherent argument in favour of dependently originated phenomena due to his understanding of reality and philosophy as infinitely open systems. As a result he identifies the difficulty of confusing activity for essence as found in earlier forms of Buddhism, such as the *Abhidharma*, which attempts to integrate impermanence with identifiable experiences of objects, as shown in both *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika*. But while Nāgārjuna's logic, based on *pratītyasamutpāda* and derived from akasic

them. He follows the argument by Candrakīrti that views objects belonging to two epistemological categories – *paramārtha* and *samvṛt*. These two instruments are a consequence of dependent-origination. While dependent-origination provides a logical consequence for a view of knowledge that is non-fixed, insubstantial and non-referential, it does not explain how meaning occurs. Chapter Four argues that the use of metaphoricity as derived from the PPM offers a viable explanation for how meaning occurs within Nāgārjuna's dependent-origination framework. Tillemans (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 163), however, follows the route of *upāya* where the two truths are not seen as identical or equivalent but rather that the two truths are seen as rungs on a ladder to truth i.e. they function as learning devices .

⁴⁰ McCagney (1997: 112).

indeterminacy, is coherent, his argument does not clearly explain how meaning arises in the experience of an identifiable yet empty object.

3. Realism and non-realism

In order to clarify the ideas of subtle and a-temporal consciousness that post-*Abhidharma Sarvāstivādin* and *Sautrāntika* monks were wrestling with, I will turn to similar debates in Western philosophy between realism and anti-realism. Realism, particularly with regard to universals, holds that the properties of things exist without any causal factors bringing them into existence; that is, they exist abstractly. For the anti-realist, however, a square, for example, could only exist if it existed in the world. Both realism and anti-realism face logical problems. Plato, the arch-realist, had difficulty in explaining how a particular property related to its abstract counterpart. His idea of Forms held that perfect abstract forms had their imperfect copies in the world. But he could not establish a clear demarcation between abstract and concrete categories.⁴¹ For example, the property of “greyness” in the imperfect copy, for example in my wife's Mitsubishi, becomes an abstract form of “greyness” at some undetermined point. It is, however, impossible to identify when this occurs. The danger is that the image of greyness slips into infinite regress of imperfect copies because “greyness” always seems to have a spatio-temporal existence: even when I am driving my red Fiat from Johannesburg to Pretoria and thinking of “greyness”, the image has spatio-temporal co-

⁴¹ Cratylus 439-440 in Jowett (2011: 55).

ordinates. Plato also tried to argue that concrete objects participate or share in universal qualities, but the vagueness of his description undermines it. Plato does not make explicit how such sharing occurs in abstraction. For instance, is it an infinite quantity, or does sharing with concrete objects diminish the abstract quality in some way, perhaps? Idealism in India does not interrogate the relation between concrete objects and abstract universals to the degree that Plato attempted. In Indian philosophy, which is permeated by idealism but is not entirely grounded in the latter, each person observes the world from their own standpoint, caught in the reciprocal relation between *prameya* and *pramāna*. A person, then, is encased in their own subjective experience.⁴²

The *Sarvāstivādins'* and *Sautrāntikas'* could be positing of a substratum of consciousness suggesting an exploration into realist-type thought where *dharma*s are seen to have inherent properties. The monks would then encounter similar difficulties in confirming these posited inherent properties.

Anti-realists, by contrast, argue that phenomena can be explained by any of three methods: conceptually, nominally, or by tropes.

⁴² This trend of thinking is discussed in Sarma's *Reign of realism in Indian Philosophy* (1937).

The Buddha's teachings articulate views that are close to an anti-realist position; and, indeed, so do Nāgārjuna's texts.⁴³ However, anti-realism also faces challenges, which a non-essentialist, such as Nāgārjuna, would have to answer. If properties are held to be conceptual, then reality falters at being totally dependent on mind. This is absurd, as is obvious when we suggest that Pluto did not come into existence when it was discovered in 1930, despite the fact that it is not empirically verifiable. Common-sense tells us so. Nāgārjuna is not campaigning for a Berkeleyan world view; but we (and he) still need to clarify what it means for an object to be a conceptual construct. If nominalism determines the properties of phenomena, then we are still working with abstracts because a class must be, in some way, an abstract entity. Finally, the idea of tropes implies that objects have particular qualities. But if particulars have specific tropes, how do tropes relate to the context of experience? For example, if I look at the cream phone on my desk, I would like to know how the trope of individual creaminess of the phone on the desk is shared with other cream objects.⁴⁴ In terms of these challenges, Nāgārjuna's argument that phenomena are dependently arisen and that *śūnyatā* is the basis of all existence⁴⁵ needs to be closely interrogated.

Nāgārjuna appears to be challenging an encroachment of "Realism" into *Sthaviravāda*. The a-temporal property of *dharma*, which both *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* (despite their emphasis on momentariness) fall back on, suggests that *dhammas* have an abstract existence independent of temporality. This is not to advocate that Nāgārjuna

⁴³ See Siderits (2003: 150)

⁴⁴ Swartz, N., 1991: 263-267.

⁴⁵ Inada (1993: 147).

would be in agreement with the anti-realist position. He would also question the anti-realist view of sensory phenomena as having specific existent properties, as he maintains that things are fundamentally empty.⁴⁶

Nāgārjuna finds a distinguishing line of argument, not just against the *Abhidharma* line of thought, but also theoretically against realism and anti-realism. He criticises his opponent's obsession with defining the properties of sensory phenomena by arguing that there cannot be inherent sensory phenomena because there is no perceiver to perceive them. In his view, identity, sensory instruments and sensory phenomena have an interdependent relation with each other.⁴⁷ Chapter 9: 6-8 of the MK reads:

6 Nothing exists prior to
All such things as seeing.
Another one of such things as seeing

⁴⁶ Siderits (2003: 150-157) argues that anti-realism offers a view of knowledge that occupies the middle ground between “deflationism about truth and epistemologized truth”. By this he means that anti-realism does not imply that, because knowledge is contextual, we should therefore deny the possibilities of knowing anything. Knowing can rely on certain testable assumptions. This argument unfortunately presents a very simplified view of anti-realism. Siderits does not explain what he means by anti-realism in terms of the different types of anti-realism discussed above. However, his point is well made and forms the basis of my argument later in this chapter. Contextual knowledge is not invalidated by its relativity. A context, though propositionally grounded, can and often does offer a large enough epistemological “space” with enough stability to make predictable statements. Certain statements, such as those specifying the distance between Cape Town and Johannesburg, are set within very stable propositions and conditions. Some thinkers, such as Priest, Siderits and Tillemans (in Westerhoff et al 2011), explore the limits of deflationary truth to the point of questioning the value of absolute truth. This position seems to be approaching the Prāsangika School of Madhaymaka who refrained from notions of absolute truth as opposed to the *Svāntantrika-Mādhyamika* ascribed to Bhavaviveka who did assert an absolute truth. In their attempt to explain conventional truth in terms of Aristotelian logic of the excluded middle, they do not take into account Nāgārjuna's understanding of *prāṭītyasamupāda* in relation to understanding phenomenal objects.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Dreyfus and Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 118). They argue that Patsab Nyimadrak, the translator and commentator of Candrakīrti's works, reading of Nāgārjuna avoids the realist problem because, for him, *Madhyamikan* arguments do not set out to prove truth or falsity, but “rather debunk our naïve assumptions that things exist the way they appear to us.” This argument would have to account for what Nāgārjuna means in VV 70 for example. Surely his position, in this verse, is not merely one of debunking naïve epistemology.

Discloses another at another time
7 If it does not exist
Prior to all of such things as seeing,
How could it exist
Prior to each of such things as seeing?

8 If the seer itself is the hearer itself,
And the feeler, then
For it to exist prior to each of these
Would make no sense.⁴⁸

While this quotation makes logical sense in dispelling the myth of prior existences as absurd, it does not explain how phenomena are meaningfully encountered in the light of *pratītyasamutpāda* and how they have their basis in *śūnyatā*. To expand on the absurd idea that Pluto only came into existence on its discovery in 1930, Nāgārjuna indeed seems to be making a similar claim. But in VV 70 and MK 24: 14 he does not suggest such an absurd reality. By contrast, he asserts that phenomena and concepts make sense if we see them in the light of *śūnyatā*. In the next section I will explore how Nāgārjuna attempts to establish the conditions of meaning within a framework of *śūnyatā*.

4. The importance of indeterminacy in Nāgārjuna's identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*

Instead of dwelling on the issues of *dhamma* or *dharmas* that concerned the *Abhidharmists*, *Sarvāstivādins* (who were a form of Abhidharma) and *Sautrāntikas*, Nāgārjuna returned to the Buddha's original focus of causality, which provided the

⁴⁸ McCagney: (1997: 159)

foundation of his understanding of *anattā* and *anicca*.⁴⁹ Causality, according to the Buddha, was not self-caused (as in monism), nor externally caused (as in dualism). It was not subject to any of the flaws inherent in either eternalism or annihilationism, determinism (although this is debatable according to Charles Goodman)⁵⁰ or accidentalism. The Buddha understood cause as a dynamic and complex set of interdependent and contextual factors. But it was also universal in its reach across an infinite number of worlds, time and space. The two early Buddhist concepts of *Idappaccayatā* (*idampratyayatā* in Sanskrit) or conditionality and *paticcasamuppāda* (*pratītyasamutpāda* in Sanskrit) or dependent origination, were the root ideas of his understanding of causality. It is a complex set of interdependent influences that causes each context or condition to be constantly evolving or devolving.⁵¹

Nāgārjuna directly refers to *śūnyatā* neither being eternalism or annihilationism when referring to *Samyaktāgama* 301 (*Samyutta Nikāya* (SN) 12:15) or the Buddha's discourse to *Kātyāyana* (*Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*) in MK 15: 7. The sutta reads:

Everything exists: That is one extreme
Everything does not exist: That is the second extreme
Avoiding these two extremes the *Tathāgata* teaches the *dhamma* via the
middle way⁵²

⁴⁹ Kalupahana, (1986: 31).

⁵⁰ Goodman (2009: 151)

⁵¹ Krüger, (1995: 102).

⁵² Kalupahana (1975: 79).

Kalupahana argues that the entire MK should be read as a commentary on the Buddha's Discourse to Kātyāyana.⁵³ There is merit in this assertion because Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* is inclusive in nature: it should not be identified exclusively with *saṃvṛti* or *paramārtha*, neither should it be identified with nihilism or substantialism. Indeed, attaching *śūnyatā* to any concept creates a misunderstanding of its meaning. But it seems reductionistic of Kalupahana to suggest that Nāgārjuna is only commenting on Sutta 12: 15 in the SN. Surely Nāgārjuna would have read more suttas that preceded and followed it in the SN, which may have informed his thinking. For example, SN12:61 (Assutavā Sutta) concerns the way causality impacts on the fluidity between non-existence and existence. It reads:

When this is, that comes to be;
With arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, that does not come to be;
With the cessation of this, that ceases.⁵⁴

The Buddha describes causality in this *sūtta* as sets of conditions that mutually interconnect through complex causal strands. When one thing is grasped it transforms the understanding simultaneously not only of what is being grasped, but also the actor who is doing the grasping, namely mind, consciousness, body or another actor in terms of the Buddha's 12 *nidāna* development of ignorance due to *pratītyasamutpāda*. Nāgārjuna describes this process in MK 26 in his explanation of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is clear that if you refer to SN 12: 15 you are in effect referring to the entire sutta 12 on *pratītyasamutpāda*. I believe, though, that Nāgārjuna is not reiterating the 12 *niddāna*

⁵³ Kalupahana (1986: 5).

⁵⁴ *Tipitaka: The Pali texts*. Archived online at: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.061.than.html>, first accessed 2 August 2012.

understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda*, but rather redefining *pratītyasamutpāda* in terms of its identity with *śūnyatā*, thereby inverting the use of *pratītyasamutpāda* as a means to understand emptiness rather than to understand the processes of ignorance. In this regard Chapter 26 of the MK does not fit logically into Nāgārjuna's revised interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda* in terms of its identity with *śūnyatā*. For this reason I concur with Jones's suggestion that Chapter 26 may not be authentic, when compared with the rest of the text's authorship.⁵⁵

Based on SN chapter 12, we can infer that the Buddha's understanding of causality was framed by the logic of the interlinked casual chain of the twelve *Niddānas* explained in various sections of the *Suttapitaka*. In these sections the Buddha explains how conditioning occurs through repeated contact with sensory objects.

Nāgārjuna's approach to causality is concerned with deconstructing sensory constructs and concepts in order to lay bare the inherent emptiness or *śūnyatā* of all primary and complex sense objects by applying the logic of *pratītyasamutpāda* in which he includes the notion of *idampratīyayātā*. He identifies causality with emptiness.⁵⁶ He understands emptiness as the middle ground between eternalism and annihilationism when he argues that existents are only conceptual constructs.⁵⁷ He wanted to rescue the

⁵⁵ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2321-3522).

⁵⁶ Williams (2000: 145).

⁵⁷ Nāgārjuna refers specifically to the *Discourse to Kātyāyana* 11: 17, where the Buddha rejects the view that all exists and all does not exist. The middle way is presented as a middle way between the two views. Nāgārjuna in MK 15: 10-11 interprets this to mean the rejection of views that everything is eternal and that everything is annihilated. It is interesting to note that Joseph Walser (2005: 170-171) argues that

Buddha's *Dharma* from contemplations on ideas of own-being, but also wanted to prevent the notion of insubstantiality in the *Dharma* from slipping into annihilationism.⁵⁸ Thus, as Williams avers, emptiness became synonymous with dependent-origination: all things are subject to causes and conditions. This includes the origination of *dharma*s that are empty of primary, substantial existence. This implies that all things are sensory or conceptual constructs, according to Nāgārjuna.⁵⁹

But does this mean that Nāgārjuna wanted to make the same absurd claims as the conceptualist anti-realists, namely that things exist only as mental constructs? (The example relating to Pluto, which I cited earlier, demonstrates the internal contradictions of these claims.)⁶⁰ Williams argues that the *Madhyamaka* position of empty primary existences is untenable due to its ultimate nihilism.⁶¹ Rather than ascribing a divine creative power to perception, Nāgārjuna challenges the existence of inherent nature by appealing to the logic of transformation. He therefore refutes the claim that perception proves existence. On reflection, he argues, all objects are in a state of transformation and this only makes sense if described in terms of causality. In addition, an inherent quality could not transform into another quality. Transformation, according to Nāgārjuna, implies two assumptions: first, that things have no inherent nature and, second, that all

such views may have been very contentious at the time amongst non-Mahāyāna Buddhists (in Jones 2010: Kindle ebook location 2083).

⁵⁸ Williams makes a similar point when he argues that the signature of a *Madhyamika* is the "universalization of the idea of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) ... Thus it should come as no surprise to find in *Madhyamaka* sources emptiness equated with dependent origination (MK 24: 18)" (2000: 140).

⁵⁹ Williams (2000: 150).

⁶⁰ In Lockean terms, such conceptualist thinking argues that things have secondary existence without any primary existence.

⁶¹ Williams (2000: 149).

transformation is a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Nāgārjuna argues in Chapter Thirteen that a quality cannot prevail against transformation:

4 - If there were nature
How could there be transformation?

If there were inherent existence then

5 - A thing itself is without transformation
Nor is transformation in something else,
Because a young man does not age,
And because an aged man does not age either. (add a reference here)

But this logic does not make Nāgārjuna necessarily a non-realist. The thrust of his argument is that it is ludicrous to ascribe a nature to sensory constructs because they are always in a state of transformation. Anti-realist⁶² logic asserts that if perception holds a singularity of reference, then surely three axioms apply:

1. It is qualitatively identical to itself.
2. It is numerically identical to itself
3. Whatever is numerically identical is qualitatively identical.⁶³

Nāgārjuna challenges the anti-realist logic that a thing's qualities are identical to themselves because perception is unreliable and tends to impose values on sensory data that are non-existent. Even at a microscopic level there is continual flux and a

⁶² The terms anti-realism and non realism are used interchangeably by philosophers. See for example that Swartz uses the term non-realist (1991: 263) and Siderits uses the term anti realist (2003;91).

⁶³ Swartz (1991: 230).

mental construct is merely a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda*.⁶⁴ It is, therefore, erroneous to identify a thing as an independent, separate entity. Here I find Nāgārjuna's argument wanting because causality is also subject to the vagaries of perception. Perception can err in determining the sequence or complex of events that give rise to an event.⁶⁵

Nāgārjuna maintains that meaning is established without conceding either to "realism" (substantialism) or "anti-realism" (constructivism) by emphasising causality. He does this by identifying *pratītyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā* in chapter 24 of the MK.⁶⁶ He bases this identification on understanding causality as interrelatedness and interdependence. Therefore *śūnyatā* cannot be defined as either having a quality of emptiness or a having a complete lack of qualities. *Śūnyatā* is the process of *pratītyasamutpāda* and hence cannot, as Williams avers, be nihilistic because there is never a final state of nothingness.

⁶⁴ In MK 14: 5-6 Nāgārjuna argues that we cannot talk about a thing being identical to itself because that presumes it possess own-being. A perceived thing is a relational product of three contributing causal facets: the act of seeing, the one who sees and the object. A thing therefore cannot be compared to itself without considering its contributing relational properties.

⁶⁵ The realist retort to this position is that not all concepts are subject to inaccuracies of perception that mistakenly ascribe individual nature. Numbers, for example, are exempt from these flaws: one plus one will always equal two, no matter what conditions are present. With this retort we are heading back to a Platonic framework of ideals, but we have already discussed the problem Plato had in establishing his realist structure. Swartz avers: "Two thousand years of mathematics has proceeded apace with no viable explication of number at all" (1991: 245). But the intuitive sense of the concept of number has not been further explained. Despite the difficulties with Plato's Forms, it is hard not to be a reluctant realist for the sake of establishing consistency in meaning in the face of an intuitive sense of things containing primary qualities and mathematical and empirical testability.

⁶⁶ MK 24: 18 (in McCagney 1997: 202).

Nāgārjuna explains how knowledge of the constantly transforming process of *pratītyasamutpāda* can be attained. His notion of causality is not linear. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is universal, lying beyond time and space (but not in an abstract metaphysical sense). Perhaps this is the best way to interpret his confusing reference to primordial substance in Chapter 17: 14 of the MK. Though the senses may construe causal relations, they do not represent the actual imperceptible causal network of relations. Verses 14 and 15 in Chapter 17 lay down his understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda/śūnyatā*. It is indeterminable, imperishable and primordial. *saṃvṛti* is born from it and therefore shares its “nature”.

14. What is imperishable is like a promissary note and an action like a debt. It has four kinds of elements and it is indeterminable in primordial substance.

15. The imperishable is not abandoned by the act of abandonment or by unabandoned meditation, therefore, by means of the imperishable, the fruit is born out of action.

Verse 10 issues a corrective warning. Though *saṃvṛti* shares its “nature” with its origin, that origin is neither substantial nor discrete.

Since from thinking there is continuity and from continuity, origin of thought, thought is prior to thinking. Therefore, there is neither disruption nor permanence.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Chapter 17 in the MK is intriguing. Scholars such as Kalupahana, Inada, Garfield and McCagney interpret verses 10, 14 and 15 in different ways. The difficulty that these verses present is that they allude to ideas such as substance (*prakṛti* in verse 14) that clearly have no place in the common lexicon of Buddhist thought. Although it is clear that Nāgārjuna is not positing a notion of eternal substance, he is pointing to the role of thought, the origin of thought and mindfulness in recognizing the state of phenomena as neither permanent nor non-permanent. Garfield (1995) is reluctant give expression to substance, but in doing so he loses the importance of the role of mindfulness being articulated in the chapter. He translates *prakṛti* as “nature is neutral”, which does not lend itself to the sense of mutual dependence being expressed. Kalupahana (1986) and McCagney (1997: 177) hold to the accurate translation of *prakṛti* as “primordial substance but highlight the indeterminacy related to the term. Inada (1993), perhaps the finest translator of Nāgārjuna, offers the most accurate translation by including both

While the mind engages in *saṃvṛti* it is also always situated in the insubstantial, non-conceptual origin of thought as well.⁶⁸ Newland makes use of the phrase that phenomena make sense by “being posited through the force of awareness.”⁶⁹ Due to his reliance on Tsong Khapa he errs in suggesting that the “force of awareness is purely reducible to conventional consciousness”.⁷⁰ But surely Nāgārjuna is arguing in verse 15 that cognitive action and awareness of emptiness are dependently related.

In this thesis I explore the way the mind is understood by Nāgārjuna, not as an entity, but in relational terms. Equally, I examine how mindfulness is not accomplished without engagement with karma. The spiritual process described here echoes the logic expressed in the PPM, that is, by engaging with limited and fixed phenomena and views but viewing them from a limitless/akasic point of view, which is derived from the use of *ākāśa* in the PPM to explain the “nature” of *śūnyatā* (as explored in Chapter Two). For

mutually dependent aspects of the realm of action and the indeterminate standpoint of *prakṛti*, which in this sense refers to the deepest awareness or *śūnyatā*.

⁶⁸ In MK 17: 4 mindfulness is identified as the means by which false ideas are overcome. Again mindfulness suggests the mutual dependency of words, deeds and *śūnyatā*. Newland in Westerhoff (2010: 57) follows Tsong Khapa’s and Candrakīrti’s position regarding the two truths, namely that there are two cognitive objects related to the two types of truth. His reasoning runs into contradictions and is unable to argue that Nāgārjuna’s two-truths doctrine only makes sense in terms of the interdependence of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. Newland argues that *saṃvṛti* is distinctly identifiable. This forces him to argue that *saṃvṛti* is a lower level of truth than *paramārtha*. These two assumptions lead him to the contradictory assertion that “these worlds are external to – but never independent of – our minds”. He, therefore, chooses to remain on the fence regarding the existence of an omniscient mind. Nāgārjuna is proposing that the two-truths formulation makes sense in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Therefore it does not make sense to separate *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*.

⁶⁹ Newland in Westerhoff et al (2011: 63).

⁷⁰ This argument is supported by Berger (2010: 14), when he argues that Western translations of MK 24: 18 have been influenced by Candrakīrti’s analysis of language being purely conventional. Berger argues that such an idea is illogical when applied to this verse because, if the identity of *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā* is only meaningful at a conventional level, then Nāgārjuna’s point does not make sense because it does not refer to anything true or real.

this reason I cannot agree with Garfield⁷¹ when he argues, along with Candrakīrti, for two distinct objects, according to either *saṃvṛti* or *paramārtha* views, that conventional truth is its own kind of truth and is appropriate to conventional epistemological instruments. Nāgārjuna's understanding of causality runs contrary to this view. By contrast, *pratītyasamupāda* is all-encompassing and therefore the view of distinct view of conventional phenomena can only be entertained from a position that incorporates *paramārtha*.

4.1 Conze, McCagney and the PPM hypothesis

Edward Conze argues that Nāgārjuna's thought, particularly in the MK, is a philosophical expression of the PPM.⁷² The act of viewing what is limited, i.e. objects, from a limitless point of view, which is so prevalent in the PPM, is captured in Nāgārjuna's identification of *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda*. What Nāgārjuna means by *śūnyatā* in its identity with *pratītyasamutpāda* is unique and challenging, and McCagney offers a most fruitful explication of his ideas.⁷³ Her translation of *śūnyatā* as openness rather than emptiness or voidness adds a very useful element of space to *śūnyatā* that emptiness or related terms do not capture.⁷⁴ But, even so, she maintains

⁷¹ Garfield in Westerhoff et al (2011 36-37).

⁷² Conze (1967:144) and McCagney (1997: 22).

⁷³ McCagney 1997.

⁷⁴ I do not mean to suggest that McCagney is the sole Buddhist scholar who interprets *śūnyatā* as openness. Indeed, Masao Abe uses the term "boundless openness" regularly in *Zen and Western Thought* (1989: 21). What is germane to this thesis is that McCagney makes the connection between openness and the use of *ākāśa* in the PPM because of the use of metaphoric logic in the PPM that is similar to Nāgārjuna's logic in the MK. I will explore this similarity in Chapter Four.

that the akasic sense of *śūnyatā* derives from the oldest PPM sutras such as the *Aṣṭa*.⁷⁵ The problem with terms like emptiness in describing *śūnyatā* is that they tend to be object-related – e.g, all phenomena are empty of own-being. Her connotational move of including the spatiality of openness has the effect of encompassing the experiential element of the emergent interdependence of phenomena. The translation of *śūnyatā* as openness suggests that *śūnyatā* is not a noun but a dynamic verb that captures the experience of inclusive wideness and indiscernibleness.⁷⁶

The association of *ākāśa* with *śūnyatā* and wisdom in certain PPM *sutras* notably the *Aṣṭa* therefore can be read into Nāgārjuna’s use of *śūnyatā*. This implies, according to McCagney that *śūnyatā* connotes descriptive terms such as, *alākṣaṇa* (signlessness), *apraihistita* (not settling down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp).⁷⁷ *Śūnyatā* therefore, is more accurately understood as denoting an experience of akasic openness rather than the inherent quality of an object.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ McCagney (1997: 22).

⁷⁶ It would be technically correct to translate the verb form of *śūnyatā* as opening. Openness is classified grammatically as an abstract noun, although opening can still be used as a noun, for example: “The opening of an art exhibition.” I will continue to use openness, as McCagney does, due the problem of clarity that arises in articulations around verb-dominated sentences, for example, “It is raining.”

⁷⁷ McCagney (1997: 20 and 22).

⁷⁸ Thakchoë (in Westerhoff et al, 2011: 41) argues that *pratītyasamutpāda* implies that epistemological instruments (*pranāma*) have relevance in terms of “their principle epistemological objects (*prameya*). This argument resembles Garfield’s argument that conventional knowledge must be taken seriously at the conventional level, despite its falsity from the *paramārtha* level. While it is true that Nāgārjuna does argue that senses and sense objects are mutually related, he also argues in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 that *saṃvrti satya* and *paramārthasatya* are mutually related and that the two types of truth are possible due to their interrelatedness. That suggests that *prameya and pranāma* are not only related to either *saṃvrti* or *paramārtha*, but also that they are epistemologically possible due to their basis in *śūnyata*. This idea is further developed in Chapter Four, where it is argued that the only way *prameya* can be viewed as *śūnyatā* is metaphorically.

Likewise, wisdom is likened to space as well. Wisdom cannot be reduced to noun form produced by the processes of cognition or the identifying of *pramana* (the tools of knowing) with *prameya* (the object of knowledge). Wisdom, like space, is dependently originated from boundless supporting conditions.⁷⁹ Candrakīrti interprets Nāgārjuna differently. He maintains in the *Madhyamakāvātara*, which Tsong Khapa follows in “Ocean of Reasoning”,⁸⁰ that objects make sense because they are empty, but he also holds that the *prameya* are dependently arisen and distinct from *paramārthasatya*. There is a contradiction in his thought that holds to a qualified distinctive dependent-origination of *saṃvṛti* in that there are two kinds of knowledge instrument, according to him. In the light of Nāgārjuna’s argument in MK 24: 14 and VV 70, such a qualified separation between the types of knowledge of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* does not make sense.⁸¹ Candrakīrti’s interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s two-truths formulation, therefore, does not clarify Nāgārjuna’s argument in MK24: 14 and VV 70. Candrakīrti echoes Nāgārjuna’s assertion that emptiness of intrinsic nature makes sense because emptiness is dependent arising.⁸² My central argument in this thesis, therefore holds for Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti: while the identity of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* is logical, it does not necessarily follow that phenomena make sense due to their emptiness. On the contrary, according to the PPM, the perfection of wisdom is synonymous with *śūnyatā*. It is a path, not an end. It is immeasurable, boundless and free. It is, however, difficult to put a name to *śūnyatā*: even the notion of voidness gives

⁷⁹ 1997: 22.

⁸⁰ Tsong Khapa 2006.

⁸¹ According to Candrakīrti, “All things bear two natures (*rūpa*) found (*labdha*) by correct and false views. The object of those who see correctly is said to be “reality” (*tattva*) and the object of those who see falsely is said to be “conventional existence” (*saṃvṛtisatya*)” *Madhyamakāvātara* VI.23 (Westerhoff et al 2011: 58).

⁸² *Madhyamakāvātara* in Westerhoff (2010: 52).

it shape and definition. Following the *Aṣṭa*, Nāgārjuna argues that space neither exists nor does it not exist.⁸³ Indeed, wisdom and *śūnyatā* are like space in that they cannot be grasped, nor do they provide support or any type of framework if translated as emptiness or nothingness.

According to McCagney, Nāgārjuna is influenced by the PPM in his understanding of *śūnyatā* by ascribing to it the sense of *ākāśa* or space.⁸⁴ Conze argues that this sense of *ākāśa* was likened to the experience of ultimate reality in the PPM.⁸⁵ But such a view of space is not specific to the PPM. Space is inherently open and empty in general Indic metaphysics: “space and *nirvāṇa* are considered ‘unconditioned.’ Space in Indic cosmology is basically the absence of anything and so it is unconditioned”.⁸⁶ In identifying *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda* Nāgārjuna shows how the space-like experience of *śūnyatā* applies both to infinite wideness in the form of ultimate Truth or *paramārtha* and to causal interconnectedness of sensory data in the form of relative truth or *saṃvṛti*.⁸⁷ It is important to remember that, for Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* is *pratītyasamutpāda* and therefore is always in the process of change and conditioning.⁸⁸ So, while Nāgārjuna applies the basic Indic understanding of space to his understanding of *śūnyatā*, this applies equally to *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. His specific

⁸³ 1997: 25.

⁸⁴ 1997: 22.

⁸⁵ Conze (1967:125).

⁸⁶ Jones (2011: Kindle ebook location 1924).

⁸⁷ MK 25: 19 and 20.

⁸⁸ MK 18; 20.

understanding of *śūnyatā* emerges from the akasic-orientated sense of *śūnyatā* in the PPM in that its indiscernibility and focus on process are seminal.

4.2 Is *śūnyatā* as openness contradictory to the two-truths formulation?

If *śūnyatā* is understood as emptiness, it becomes trapped by its status as nomenclature and therefore cannot avoid being a concept with a name.⁸⁹ The translation of *śūnyatā* as openness finds accord with my argument that, for *śūnyatā* to be meaningful, it must be process-orientated and not refer to a particular concept or form (*prameya*), including the concept of emptiness. But, if *śūnyatā* is translated as openness, how does Nāgārjuna negotiate between the implications of ultimate (*paramārtha*) and relative (*saṃvṛti*) truth? *Śūnyatā* needs to provide universal equality of meaning and not relative meaning for it to produce harmony, peace and an escape from *duhkha*.

Chapter 25: 19 in the MK encapsulates one of Nāgārjuna's central ideas; and yet he is frustratingly vague about what he means by equating *saṃsāra* with *nirvāṇa*. It is possible that Nāgārjuna implies an identity between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, but unlikely, because that would imply a substantialist view in his thinking; it would entail that

⁸⁹ In this vein, Jones argues that Nāgārjuna would best be classified as a radical nominalist in Western philosophical terms (2010: Kindle ebook location 2659).

identity implies an exact nature.⁹⁰ McCagney maintains that, for Nāgārjuna, the two truths are distinct, based on the distinction made in the Buddha's teaching between conventional truth and higher truth.⁹¹ But she also argues that the two truths have a relation of equivalence. Regrettably, she does not explore the logic of her argument sufficiently. McCagney maintains that it is important to hold the distinction between the two truths for the purposes of ensuring that *pratītyasamutpāda* does not dissolve into non-duality.⁹² She argues that "*saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are equivalent because they are both *śūnya*."⁹³ All the same, *śūnyatā* cannot be likened to a unifying substance. From the view of *saṃvṛti*, *śūnyatā* is a term that has no referent and only points to the absurdity of holding fixed views. It is interdependence that defines *pratītyasamutpāda* and not identity. To put it another way, it is not the noun but the verb that is important. It is important that dependency and process are foregrounded, not naming of identity or qualities of the object.

Process and dependency in *saṃvṛti* give rise to different arising and ceasing phenomena. While ignorance imposes *svabhāva* on what arises, conditioning does set phenomena in relation to each other. Therefore it is fair to say that *akāśa*, from the view of *saṃvṛti*, is relatively experienced due to the processes of emergence and ceasing. This view of *akāśa* gives a fuller sense to VV 70. The chimera of *saṃvṛti* makes sense because of the openness established between phenomena. But from the view of

⁹⁰ Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 37) argues that *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are identical due to their common basis in *śūnyatā*.

⁹¹ McCagney (1997: 74).

⁹² McCagney (1997: 95).

⁹³ McCagney (1997: 96).

paramārtha there is no arising or ceasing and this aspect of Truth is not adequately incorporated into such an understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda*.

The problem with viewing equivalence between *samsāra* and *nirvana* is that, while they are equal in terms of *śūnya*, they are not equal in scope. *Saṃvṛti*'s scope is limited, while *paramārtha*'s scope is infinite.⁹⁴ *Paramārtha* does not denote a higher level but a broader range.⁹⁵ If the two truths are not seen as occupying different levels of truth, but rather the same level, with *saṃvṛti* denoting a narrow view and *paramārtha* denoting a wide view, this has implications that McCagney does not acknowledge. While equivalence is determined by dependence on *pratītyasamutpāda*, the narrow view of *saṃvṛti* must set objects in different relations with each other and establish different spatial relations. But the wide view of *paramārtha* overrides those relations in that arising and ceasing are seen not to occur.⁹⁶

McCagney explains the difference between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* by arguing that, for Nāgārjuna, "the arising and passing of worldly events or phenomena (due to *pratītyasamutpāda*) is not ultimately reality but neither is there any reality beyond that" (drawing from MK 24: 18 and MK: 22).⁹⁷ This is significant because there is a rejection of an absolute unconditioned state of perfect peace that needs to be attained. But Nāgārjuna's acknowledgement of the existence of two truths implies a distinction

⁹⁴ McCagney (1997: 87).

⁹⁵ McCagney (1997: 87).

⁹⁶ MK 18 and 22 (in McCagney 1997: 181 & 192.)

⁹⁷ 1997:21.

between the two truths, but he also states that the two truths are perfectly equivalent (which would then lend support to Garfield's contention that *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are identical). Surely there is a glaring contradiction in this statement because, as I argued earlier, something that is identical with itself must be itself? Nāgārjuna does not attempt to deal with this contradiction, but rather maintains that Reality is indiscernible to the extent that it is akasically open. In chapter 7: 30 Nāgārjuna maintains that "In identity, neither a being nor a non-being happen."⁹⁸ The agnosticism prevalent in his thinking leads him to approach reality as an open process rather than as conditional i.e. reality is fluid rather than identifiable of cognitively fixed.

4.3 The role of imagination in *pratītyasamutpāda*

Nāgārjuna derives his understanding of relative truth from Indic philosophy, where conceptual discrimination causes reality to be divided and separated into discrete parts. In Nāgārjuna's thought this results in his two-truths philosophy, in which he divides truth into *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. For him *saṃvṛti* is due to *vikalpa* (conceptual discrimination, or what is imagined) and *prapañca* (conceptual play).⁹⁹ What is imagined is indiscernible and therefore results in fictional conceptual play between related concepts. Concepts, for Nāgārjuna, are neither true nor false: they are merely functions of *saṃvṛti*.¹⁰⁰ This leads to the question, how does *vikalpa* arise in *saṃvṛti*? If reality is

⁹⁸ In McCagney (1997: 172).

⁹⁹ McCagney (1997: 106).

¹⁰⁰ MK 18: 8 & 9 (in McCagney, 1997).

inherently open (or *śūnya*) then why do we experience *saṃvṛti* at all? *Saṃvṛti* is not a consequence of *avidyā*, as it is in *Āryan* philosophy. Rather, it is a misinterpretation of *saṃvṛti* to believe that it is based on *avidyā*. The imposition of own-being onto concepts due to ignorance causes a dissonance to occur between *tathatā* and the constructed world or *saṃvṛti*.¹⁰¹

Nāgārjuna describes *saṃvṛti* as a flow of interrelated conditioned states¹⁰² (*dharmatā*). These are a result of *vikalpa* and *prapañca* (conceptual play and the discrimination of multiple entities).¹⁰³ Yet what is constructed in *saṃvṛti* is inherently indiscernible.¹⁰⁴ Nāgārjuna argues that these entities are real, are not real and are neither real nor not real.¹⁰⁵ *Saṃvṛti* is therefore inherently contradictory and concepts and objects are indiscernible. The only way that concepts can describe *dharmatā* is via conceptual contradiction, for example, “not one, not diverse, not annihilated, not eternal”.¹⁰⁶

According to Nāgārjuna’s two-truths formulation, however, *tathatā* is a result of the correct understanding of the causal interdependency between *saṃvṛti* – conceptual reality and *paramārtha* – ultimate reality, which is a clear view of reality as it is. *Paramārtha* is the highest view of interrelatedness, where things cease to be distinct. In

¹⁰¹ This issue will be dealt with in Section 5.

¹⁰² Mk 18: 10.

¹⁰³ MK18: 5 (in McCagney 1997: 181).

¹⁰⁴ Based on this assertion by Nāgārjuna I find Garfield’s argument that mirages have identifiable certainty implausible. The very fact that he accepts the non-foundationalism of knowledge surely must imply that knowledge of mirages is contextual, unstable and equivocal.

¹⁰⁵ MK 18: 8 (in McCagney 1997: 182).

¹⁰⁶ MK 18: 9 (in McCagney 1997: 182).

verse 7 of chapter 18 Nāgārjuna says that, when thought is quietened, nothing can be independently identified because there is no stable foundation on which to establish fixed meaning. Mind, senses and the objects of senses are dependently originated. It is more accurate, I maintain, to read *nivṛtte* in terms of senses being quietened or retreated from rather than renounced.¹⁰⁷ Later in verse 9 this translation of *nivṛtte* as “quieten” is reinforced by the use of the word *sāntam* (composed mind). In verse 8 Nāgārjuna asserts that the Buddha’s teaching about reality should not be forced into conceptual constructs, even if the conceptual construct is absolute renunciation of relative truth, as Nāgārjuna writes in the MK:

Everything is factual, nonfactual, both factual and not nonfactual.¹⁰⁸

Peace of mind is therefore attained in non-projection onto, and full knowledge of, the dependent origination of phenomena. But that does not acknowledge the role of imagination and imagined objects in *pratītyasamutpāda* according to Nāgārjuna. In accepting the two-truths formulation within his philosophy of *pratītyasamutpāda*, he acknowledges that what is held to be produced or still to be produced is imagined and these *vikalpa* contribute to what is dependently originated.

4.5 The akasic characteristic of indeterminacy

¹⁰⁷ I find McCagney’s translation of *nivṛtte* as “renounce” misleading because it does not make sense to renounce something like thought that has no real existence.

¹⁰⁸ MK 18: 8 (in McCagney 1997: 182).

Nāgārjuna merely presents his reader with the two-truths formulation and explains the emergence of *saṃvṛti* as a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda*. But, if his logic is teased out, the only way discrimination can take place and thereby produce *saṃvṛti* is, paradoxically, if all things are interrelated. Things, concepts and imaginings therefore exist not because of their inherent nature but — precisely the opposite — because of their lack of substance and their interrelatedness. Nāgārjuna states,

How can that which is evident in terms of self-nature rise again?

Therefore, for one who contradicts emptiness (openness), there exists no arising.¹⁰⁹

The substanceless, interrelated and interdependent processes of *vikalpa* and *prapañca* give rise to fluid variations in qualities that mutually arise from *śūnyatā*. It is in this sense that Nāgārjuna argues that the limit of *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*.¹¹⁰ Both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are open. While there is the tendency in *saṃsāra* to superimpose substance on dependently originated phenomena, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are equally empty. Therefore *saṃsāra* does not need to be transcended to attain *nirvāṇa*. *Saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are merely two ways of viewing what is *śūnya*.¹¹¹ It is, therefore, a mistake to emphasise the dual aspect of the two truths. Nāgārjuna wants to show that the two views, while different in scope, are views of the same reality of *śūnyatā*.

¹⁰⁹ MK 24: 22. The same idea is echoed in MK 24: 14 and VV 70, but the latter two verses seem to propose a semantic dimension to understanding that MK 24: 22 does not assert.

¹¹⁰ MK 25: 19 (in McCagney 1997: 209).

¹¹¹ Here I agree with McCagney and disagree with Garfield that a basis in *śūnyatā* does not prove identity between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*.

Despite the fact that Nāgārjuna borrows from the broad Indic metaphysical structure in upholding the Indic twofold nature of reality, his aim is epistemological and not metaphysical. He perceives in the dual epistemological structure a possibility to escape from its state of confusion, caused by essentialising objects, and realise *nirvāṇa*. The mind can learn from the limited relative view of *saṃvṛti* about the highest view of reality — *paramārtha*. Knowledge of *paramārtha* cannot be gained on its own terms. It requires the interrelation between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* ways of knowing.¹¹² A careful study of *saṃvṛti* allows Nāgārjuna to show how the relative value of *saṃvṛti* is developed dependently. In making this move, he strategically sets up two notions of space: it is infinitely open prior to arising and ceasing, and dependently open as a result of arising and ceasing, which he calls *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. Both are inherently empty, but they differ in terms of how emptiness is expressed. This move allows him to escape from reliance on absolutes and abstract properties as a way of establishing meaning. His claims cannot be termed metaphysical because even his claim is empty and therefore without value. Ignorance leads to the mistaken understanding that existence in the universe is shaped by absolute categories including space. Absolute space is a “God’s eye view” of any object’s coordinates. Such an idea is impossible to uphold from a perspectivist position. Relative space allows individuals to understand space in relation to specific coordinates.¹¹³ Relative space is dependent on the recognition of objects¹¹⁴ and the construction of spatial relationships between them. But, in introducing the

¹¹² This idea is shared by Thakchoë (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 46).

¹¹³ MK 5: 1(in McCagney 1997: 148).

¹¹⁴ Swartz (1991: 306-308).

notion of *saṃvṛti* (the flow of conditioned openness or *ākāśā*), Nāgārjuna is able to engage with relative space without having to invoke a weak idea of absolute space. He espouses a view of space from the view of *paramārtha*, which logically reveals infinite openness without conditions, as a consequence of showing that *saṃvṛti* is based on *śūnyatā* through the application of *prasaṅga*. He is able to show that *saṃvṛti* presents relative and contradictory information through *reductio ad absurdum* argumentation (*prasaṅga*). *Prasaṅga* is a method of argument that seeks to establish if there are non-contradictory grounds for a thing's existence. The criteria applied to the argument are, first: that the thing is known conventionally; second: that there are no other conventional cognitions that contradict it and, third: that reason does not contradict its perceived existence.¹¹⁵ Nāgārjuna wants to argue that the consequence of this is that meaning can only be derived from subjective, relational perspectives in a relative spatial frame. By doing so Nāgārjuna is able to introduce the notions of perspective and relative value in order to prevent space becoming a substance-imbued abstract property. But, significantly, the indiscernible quality of *saṃvṛti* due to the vagueness of the referent allows language to approach a meaningful understanding of *paramārtha*. For example, the statement "all is empty space" is acceptable because all referents in *saṃvṛti* are opaque, contradictory and substanceless. Therefore the vagueness of phenomena cannot only be ascribed to their conventionality, in the manner in which Saussure argues in terms of the vagueness of the signifier. For Saussure, the signifier is vague because its existence has no foundation across time, space or in relation to other

¹¹⁵ Warder (1970: 468).

phenomena.¹¹⁶ In Nāgārjuna's thinking, phenomena can only be explained in terms of the flow of interrelated conditioning factors.

Nāgārjuna's argument is valid when he explains that there cannot be education about *śūnyatā* or infinite space on its own terms because, in openness, no learning is necessary – there is clear awareness of emptiness. The quality of relative space established by *vikalpa* and *prapañca* allows Nāgārjuna to examine the indiscernible nature of concepts and things without recourse to the rigidity of absolute and abstract terms.¹¹⁷

5. Indeterminacy, *akasic* influence and the two truths

The identity of *śūnyatā* and *pratīyasamutpāda* suggested by Nāgārjuna implies that it is not necessary for a referent to be linked to a concept, but neither does it imply that the world of concepts should be shunned.¹¹⁸ Concepts, like *dharmas*, are constructions of the mind due the processes of *pratīyasamutpāda*: they can be used by the mind but ultimately they are open and cannot be grasped.¹¹⁹ Terms should be used, not according to rigid definitions, but rather according a sense of meaning that best suits the context – that is, by skilful means. To use words rigidly is to perceive a world that does

¹¹⁶ Culler (1976: 16).

¹¹⁷ MK 24: 8 (in McCagney 1997: 200).

¹¹⁸ 1997: 27.

¹¹⁹ 1997: 29.

not exist. The world should be perceived without settling down and without attachment. The following terms in the *Dharma* describe the indiscernible character of reality: *tathatā* (suchness), *dharmatā* (reality as it is), *dharmadhatu* (space or the universe), *bhutakoti* (limit of reality), *śūnyatā* and *visuddhi* (purity).¹²⁰ These terms do not point to any transcendent place or teleological goal because there is nothing to aim at. McCagney shows support for this view in her translations of emptiness as openness in the MK:

MK, 13: 8

The conqueror taught (*śūnyatā*) openness as the refutation of all views

But those who hold (*śūnyatā*) openness as a view are called irremediable¹²¹

In the light of this verse, no concept should be reified, and this is particularly relevant to terms such as *śūnyatā*. Nāgārjuna states:

MK 22; 11

I am not saying that *śūnya* (open) could exist or *aśūnya* (not open) could exist, or both or neither,

They are only for the purpose of teaching.¹²²

¹²⁰ 1997: 30.

¹²¹ McCagney (1997: 169).

¹²² McCagney (1997: 194).

Although *vikalpa* is normally translated as “proliferation of separate concepts”, McCagney prefers translating *vikalpa* as “conceptual play”.¹²³ In her analysis, concepts become loosely attached to repeated experiences and set in a “range of thought” that Nāgārjuna calls *cittagocare*, the closest he comes to a psychological understanding of mind.¹²⁴ Conditioned things and concepts are constantly changing and are therefore not fixed independent entities. But by examining *saṃvṛti* and subjecting it to *prasaṅga* to prove the inconsistency of conceptual formulation, the mind is able to stop substantialising conventional knowledge and perceive openness as the primary condition of objects and consciousness.¹²⁵ Vagueness and contradiction, rather than being an undermining aspect of his philosophy, becomes its determining factor in pointing towards the openness of all things. In verse 10 of Chapter 18 he concludes that whatever arises dependently cannot be named. Its indiscernibility is marked by its not being identifiable and yet not being entirely indistinguishable. All things are aspects of the “substanceless process” of *dharmatā*. *Tattva* is free of differential entities.

In contrast, some philosophers, such as rJe Tsong Khapa,¹²⁶ explain the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* by arguing that things, according to Nāgārjuna, exist at both the levels of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*, therefore things exist both in relative and absolute space. Tsong Khapa follows Candrakīrti’s interpretation of MK 24: 8 in arguing

¹²³ McCagney (1997: 20).

¹²⁴ MK 18: 7 (in McCagney 1997: 182).

¹²⁵ McCagney points out that Nāgārjuna does not use the term “mind” in any of the texts ascribed to his authorship. Instead, he uses phrases such as that are inclusive of mental activity. I argue that Nāgārjuna avoids using the concept “mind” because he does not want to essentialise any particular aspect of the dependent origination process in *saṃvṛti* (1997: 43).

¹²⁶ 2006: 485.

that phenomena have two natures, conventional and ultimate.¹²⁷ This approach is a gross oversimplification of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of two truths. William of Ockham would raise a finger of objection to Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa's interpretation, in that there seems to be multiplication of entities beyond need.¹²⁸ By granting phenomena two natures, Nāgārjuna's view of *pratītyasamutpāda* is vitiated. The first problem that arises is that conventional phenomena acquire an obscurational nature¹²⁹ somewhat akin to *māyā* in *Advaitā Vedānta*, even though, in Buddhism, the object is always an intentional object because of mental projection, whereas in *Advaitā* the object is inherently illusory. But second and more significantly, perceiving objects as having two natures does not allow for the full import of *pratītyasamutpāda* to be appreciated. Garfield, in following Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the two truths, "ring fences" mutual dependence to *saṃvṛti*. In this way conventional phenomena also have a true nature when seen interdependently as "mundane conventional truth".¹³⁰ In addition, *paramārtha* is also perceived as possibly having two natures: conventional and ultimate. The obvious flaw in this approach is that, in order to justify it, it is necessary to produce a confusing array of categories. In arguing that conventional cognitive objects are partly deceptive it inadvertently grants power to the object. This of course is impossible if they are empty of self-nature. Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa, who follows him, fall into the same error that the *Abhidharmikas* fell into by ascribing a nature to an object based on its perceived activity or the experience of that activity. The issue is how to understand intentional objects so that they are not interpreted according to

¹²⁷ Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 24 quoting *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI. 24).

¹²⁸ Flew (1983: 253).

¹²⁹ *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6: 23 in Tsong Khapa (2006).

¹³⁰ Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 24).

how they are experienced. I explore this issue in the next chapter. Here it suffices to mention that it is more important to focus on the essence of the intentional object than its function. In order to achieve this, more emphasis needs to be placed on *pramana* than on *prameya*. In that way the power to deceive that is granted to objects is vitiated by awareness of how the object is formulated. For when I engage in an act, such as cooking, I do not think of the pots and pans, or even myself as a cook, as conventional truth or as ultimate truth. The experience in its totality is dependently originated. The experience of cooking is valuable and meaningful precisely because the conventional objects used, the recipe, ingredients, knives, pots and pans are dependently brought together to produce a meal. The meal is not inherent in any of the utensils but neither is the meal independent of the utensils. Through the act of cooking, cooking makes sense. This idea is related to MK 17:14 where Nāgārjuna argues that the force of Karma only makes sense in terms of the awareness of emptiness.

But in order to lay the foundations for this exploration I argue that *pratītyasamutpāda* is an all-encompassing notion. This implies that *saṃvṛti* has an interdependent relationship with *paramārtha* and vice versa, establishing the two-truths framework. Nāgārjuna is offering a way to reinterpret living in the world, not with obscured or imposed meaning, but with a sense of indeterminacy and fluidity and contextual meaning, although I question whether Nāgārjuna's understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* is clear enough to provide such meaning. Through a clear and all-inclusive

understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda*, concepts that are useful in the world are translated to reflect their true nature in *śūnyatā* when set in relation to the *paramārtha* view.¹³¹

In Chapter 24: 14 of the MK, Nāgārjuna writes:

For him to whom emptiness makes sense,
Everything makes sense.
For him to whom emptiness does not make sense.
Nothing makes sense.

And similarly in VV 70:

For whom there is emptiness, there are all things. For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing what so ever.

Perception, in combination with *prasaṅga*, enables the development of a clear non-metaphysically projected view of reality. Nāgārjuna's argument in the MK maintains that phenomena in a *saṃvṛti* view are created by *vikalpa* and *prapañca* and only appear to be real. But this activity is only revealed when seen against the backdrop of *pratītyasamutpāda*.¹³² Thus the mind's epistemological operations of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are understood to be interdependent and integrated. If *saṃvṛti* is founded on openness, it will not seek to define itself in terms of its own categories, values and specific time/space co-ordinates but rather in terms of its interdependence with *paramārtha*. But, equally, it will not seek to define itself in terms of *paramārtha*, because that would fall into the trap of establishing *nirvāṇa* as a fixed referent. Both *paramārtha* and *nirvāṇa* cannot be seen as unconditioned because that would ascribe own-being to

¹³¹ I have quoted these two verses previously in the thesis, but they bear repeating here because they are the focus of my argument throughout the thesis.

¹³² MK 24: 40 (in McCagney 1997: 206).

them. The logical conclusion is for Nāgārjuna to argue that *nirvāṇa* is both conditioned and not conditioned or both or neither.¹³³ Here Nāgārjuna leads up to his most challenging assertion — that all truth is conventional.¹³⁴ Both *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* must be seen in relation to *pratītyasamutpāda*. For this reason I maintain that chapter 26 in the MK is very possibly spurious, because it lays emphasis on an idea of *pratītyasamutpāda* founded on the *niddana* that lead to conditions and suffering. In this schema *nirvāṇa* would logically have to be unconditioned.¹³⁵ Rather, if *śūnyatā* is translated as openness, it suggests that liberation lies in not a mental state projected onto reality but in an inclusive awareness of *pratītyasamutpāda*. This is captured in McCagney’s translation of chapter 22: 10-16 of the MK where she translates *śūnyatā* as openness:¹³⁶

10
 And thus the one the one who clings is clinging to what is everywhere
 open.
 How is open *Tathāgata* known by means of what is open?
 11
 I am not saying ‘what is open’ or what is not open’ could exist or ‘both’ or
 ‘neither’. They are said only for the purpose of teaching
 13
 You are grasped and destroyed by grasping false imaginings that the
Tathāgata ‘exists’
 Or ‘does not exist’. He would be imagined to be the same as one is
 deceased
 14
 in what is open by nature, this thought:
 ‘The Buddha exists or does not exist after death’ does not occur

¹³³ MK 25: 3 (in McCagney 1997: 206).

¹³⁴ MK 22: 11 (in McCagney 1997: 194).

¹³⁵ McCagney (1997: 94 & 100).

¹³⁶ McCagney (1997: 193 and 194).

Nāgārjuna explains the Four Noble Truths in terms of the two-truths structure in Chapter 24 of the MK. The Four Noble Truths are, in his understanding, a tool to assist the mind to integrate the two levels of truth. Once the mind is integrated, *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are understood to be equal in truth but different in scope. *Saṃvṛti* is local and *paramārtha* is broad.¹³⁷ The integrated mind has no further need for the Four Noble Truths, which are housed in *saṃvṛti* and they lose their purpose.

Chapter 24: 10 in the MK implies that *saṃvṛti* has the capacity to communicate the sense of *paramārtha*. But in reading Nāgārjuna's writings it becomes clear that the conceptual explanation of *saṃvṛti* is fluid. Nāgārjuna asserts in MK 7: 34 that

As illusion, as dream, as an imaginary city in the sky, so have arising,
endurance and destruction been illustrated.¹³⁸

Nāgārjuna means by this that concepts have no actual content. But he does not go so far as to say they have no existence. Concepts exist in relation to their "nature" in *śūnya* as a fluid process (*dharmatā*) and, in this sense, concepts only make sense if they are identified with *śūnya*. Nāgārjuna describes, for example, different and conflicting views on *saṃvṛti* including:

¹³⁷ McCagney (1997: 87) writes: "Attainment, the one who attains and the path to attainment are open-ended and so indistinguishable." Here McCagney equates *saṃvṛti* with a fixed view, but I disagree with her. It is not necessarily the case that local conditioning must lead to fixed views (McCagney 1997: 79). If that were the case, then equivalence between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* would not make sense. I aver that *dukkha* occurs when a local view is taken as fixed and imposed on *paramārtha*.

¹³⁸ In McCagney (1997: 157).

- Acceptance of *saṃvṛti* as condition of ignorance¹³⁹
- Acceptance of *saṃvṛti* as being dependently originated¹⁴⁰
- Acceptance of the non-reality of *saṃvṛti* therefore it need not be opposed or negated¹⁴¹
- *saṃvṛti* needs to be renounced¹⁴²
- *saṃvṛti* needs to be quietened but accepted as conditioned¹⁴³

These contrasting views of *saṃvṛti* make sense if *śūnya* is not understood as an abstract concept or an entity but rather as a process whose very "nature" is impermanence and indeterminacy.

Yet Nāgārjuna does not present a single view on the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. The akasic sense of *śunyāta* is conveyed in his differentiated way of interpreting *saṃvṛti*. *Saṃvṛti*, therefore, offers a view of *śūnya* which is limited in scope but not limited in terms of its referent – *pratītyasamutapāda*. Nāgārjuna's point is that meaning does not reside in fixed concepts. Rather, concepts are a consequence of the fluid process of interconnected activity. While it is true to argue that phenomena are empty due to *pratītyasamutapāda*, it does not necessarily follow that phenomena will make sense because, as I have shown, the result is conceptual indiscernibility. In fact *pratītyasamutapāda* could lead to a multiplicity of meanings resulting in contradiction and confusion. This issue will be further explored in the next chapter, where I argue that the contradictory meanings that result from fluid processes only make sense if viewed against the backdrop of *śunyāta*. In order to demonstrate this, I will show that the

¹³⁹ *Yukti-shashtikas* 37 and 38.

¹⁴⁰ MK 1: 12.

¹⁴¹ *Yukti shashtikas* 3.

¹⁴² MK 23: 23.

¹⁴³ MK 18: 9.

relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* makes sense if understood in terms of metaphoricity since viewing *saṃvṛti* as a metaphor for *paramārtha* resolves the issues of indeterminacy in the relationship between the two views.

Chapter 4

The role of symbolism in the two-truths formulation

1. Introduction

This chapter builds on the argument concerning the indeterminacy of objects that was expounded in the previous chapter. In Chapter Three I argued that Nāgārjuna attributes the indeterminacy of referents to their dependency on *śūnya*. I showed how his understanding of *śūnya* was influenced by, first, the PPM's use of the term to refer to an experience that is pervaded by *ākāśa*, and, second, his identification of *śūnya* with *pratītyasamutpāda*. I concluded that Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnya* needs to be interpreted in fluid terms, which emphasise its nature as a process, rather than the more common nominative approach, which leads to meaning from *saṃvṛti* being contextually based, multiple, relative and unstable. While this process-orientated view of objects explains conventional truth-claims and knowledge, it does not explain how objects make sense to us despite the contradictions that arise due to the non-realist leanings of *saṃvṛti* epistemology.

The present chapter focuses on the sub-problem of how naming terms should be interpreted in Nāgārjuna's works if interpreted along the lines of the *akasic* influence from the PPM, as posited by McCagney and Conze. Nāgārjuna does not take issue with meaning arrived at through common sense from the *saṃvṛti* point of view, where terms are perceived to have pragmatic connections to referents, based on consensus. But his use of *prasaṅga* is aimed at exposing the absurdity of reifying things by assuming the reality of the connection between words and objects without acknowledging the interdependence with *paramārtha*. This chapter builds on my previous argument by exploring the function of the designator in language if words and concepts are understood to designate *śūnya*.

I argue that designators or nouns have their basis in intentionality and have two distinct symbolic functions from the *saṃvṛti* point of view. They can symbolise the state of ignorance, where terms are assumed to refer to substantial objects; or they can symbolise a state of wisdom, where terms are understood to refer to the indefinable, infinite "nature" of *śūnya*. I maintain that Nāgārjuna employs *prasaṅga* to unseat the symbolic function of terms in the idiom of ignorance in order to awaken the symbolic function of terms in the idiom of wisdom.

In terms of his intentional paradigm, the challenge that Nāgārjuna has to face is that the world (*loka*) is comprehensible and navigable, despite the contradictions that his *prasaṅga* analysis highlights. Nāgārjuna shows that the common-sense notion of the world, which is comprised of separate causal relations, is contradictory if it does not

acknowledge its interdependence with *paramārtha*. In addition, his identification of *śūnyata* with *pratītyasamutpāda* intimates that there is a correct way of engaging with terms within the fluidity of *saṃvṛti* – that is, to perceive the world of separate nominative categories and objects in subjective *a posteriori* relations — as fundamentally empty and causally dependent on emptiness. It is only in this sense that the equivalence between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* can be understood. But in order to grasp the nature of the equivalence of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, the symbolic logic used in the PPM to explain the nature of Wisdom needs to be recognised in Nāgārjuna’s thought.¹

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section distinguishes meaning based on *pratītyasamutpāda* from meaning derived from common sense. The second section compares theories of truth: the coherence theory, the correspondence theory and the identity theory within the contexts of nihilism and *pratītyasamutpāda*. The third section argues that the identity theory of truth provides the most appropriate explanation for how meaning is established by *pratītyasamutpāda*. The fourth section argues that, based on the logic developed in the PPM, where finite objects in the world can be reinterpreted to represent the infinite and open character of Wisdom, bare perceptual objects, words and concepts are best understood as metaphors for *akasic* infinity based on the southern Indian understanding of *śūnyatā*.

¹ See the references to *Rgs* in my Chapter 2 and to Chapter 10.11-20 in Conze (1990: 153–161).

2. Meaning based on *pratītyasamutpāda* vs meaning based on common sense

From a common-sense point of view, things are perceived to arise due to a set of complex contextual and causal relations. Meaning is dependent on the existence of what is perceived through common sense. Nāgārjuna is, however, proposing a radical change, in fact an inversion of the common-sense way of seeing the world. According to him, phenomena, as discrete units, are purely mental in that they are derived from the mental process of *vikalpa* and *prapañca*. The *saṃvṛti* view of separate objects produced by *vikalpa* and *prapañca* is contradictory and only provides pragmatic meaning; it should not be confused with the viewpoint of objects from *pratītyasamutpāda/śūnyatā*.² The difference between common sense and *pratītyasamutpāda* is that, from a common-sense point of view, objects change due to the interrelated physical relations of phenomena, whereas in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*, change is due to the emptiness of the flow of *dharmatā*.³ *Pratītyasamutpāda* is not a view of causality, but rather an explanation of how causality occurs. In order to live in the conventional world, one needs to adopt its conventional categories and concepts.⁴ *Saṃvṛti*, however, is shown

² MK 24: 9 & 10.

³ MK 23: 10-24 and 36-37.

⁴ Berger asserts that Madhyamaka and Vijñānavāda conventional knowledge is understood to be purely conventional and hence noun based. He is influenced by Candrakīrti's position that objects have two distinct truths and hence *saṃvṛti* is only conventional and contextual and represent nothing existing in

by Nāgārjuna to be absurd on its own terms in that it contains the contradictory elements of change, causality and permanent identity. Phenomena cannot be simultaneously permanent and dependently originated, which is why an act of intentional decision is required in order to view *saṃvṛti* from the point of view of *śūnyata*. *Saṃvṛti* only makes sense if recognised to be equivalent to *paramārtha* in terms of emptiness but not identical to it in terms of breadth of view.⁵ In this sense *pratītyasamutpāda/sūnyatā* is neither an abstract quality nor a heavenly realm. In fact, it is exactly the opposite of these notions' severance from common reality. It does not invalidate the senses, conceptual categories or the elements because they are all produced by *pratītyasamutpāda*. But their basis in *pratītyasamutpāda* rids them of any metaphysical status obtained through reification, especially in terms of being or non-being. Nāgārjuna does not deny the apprehension of objects by consciousness. Even if perceived objects are illusory, they remain perceptual events.⁶ Such perceptions do not require the perceiver to posit the existence of an "entity" in the physical object or any "bare particulars" about the object, which distinguish it. Rather, the primitive recognition of the physical object suffices. This implies that objects emerge due to *vikalpa* and *prapañca* in *saṃvṛti* as a consequence of *pratītyasamutpāda*, prior to being complicated by metaphysics or analysis. In this respect, Swartz offers a useful insight. According to him, perception of the physical object precedes relative space and place.⁷ Swartz calls

reality (2011:8). Such a distinction between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* does not fit into Nāgārjuna's schema of the interdependence of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*.

⁵ VV 70.

⁶ Garfield in Westerhoff et al (2011: 26).

⁷ While Swartz's description of primitive concepts shares interesting parity with perceptual events or "bare particulars", Nāgārjuna would disagree that such bare concepts occur prior to the categories of space and place.

such objects primitive concepts – concepts that cannot be explained in terms of derived concepts.⁸

Nāgārjuna is proposing that one should work with the perceptual events, concepts and categories that make up the world without giving them any metaphysical or absolute status.⁹ All phenomena are empty/open of substance, according to him. But does his argument hold any pragmatic merit? For one thing, it is very difficult to effect an inversion in thinking that is required to shift perception onto a purely mental plane, due to the sensory qualities of objects. Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna argues that peace depends on making this inversion in thinking and perceiving. This is a radical and challenging conceptual move, because meaning derived from object relations, as in non-realism, is lost when substance (which possesses apprehensible properties) is shown to be a mental projection. How can it be meaningful to live in the world of conventional truth with the awareness of its fundamental absurdity that would arise from this cognition?¹⁰ In order to answer this question, we need to examine what constitutes meaning in the (*saṃvṛti*) conventional view of separate objects. Meaning is derived in Nāgārjuna's system of thought via two approaches: nominal and *a posteriori*. Nominal meaning is attained through the application of appropriate hermeneutics of words and concepts to the context. Meaning is derived *a posteriori* from the interdependent relations of the

⁸ Swartz (1991: 307-8).

⁹ VV 70.

¹⁰ Garfield and Priest (2003:14) argue that at the root of understanding Nāgārjuna's epistemology is his use of paradox, for example: "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth". I argue that paradox is not central to understanding why Nāgārjuna claims that understanding *śūnyatā* makes things meaningful. Paradox predominates if the two truths are held to be distinct. My point in this thesis is that if paradoxical statements are held to be true, such statements cannot be true and meaningful. If, as Nāgārjuna, argues that understanding *śūnyatā* leads to a clear and immediate understanding of things, then he must be asserting a form of thought that overcomes paradox rather than embracing it.

lived experience. From a nominal point of view, statements are meaningful in a context where there is agreement on the terms and concepts being used. From an *a posteriori* point of view, mental objects and concepts develop meaningful relations around the focal point of the subject of the experience. The idea that links nominal and *a posteriori* approaches to meaning is the recognition of separate objects that can be enumerated distinctly. Such recognition does not require the employment of any ontological categories. They are mere objects in the perceiver's consciousness.¹¹ But, significantly for Nāgārjuna, the act of recognising and enumerating distinct objects of consciousness is due to their fundamental, shared value of *śūnyatā/pratītyasamutpāda*, which allows for the emergence of dependently originated but distinct characteristics.¹² For example, Chapter Five of the MK is devoted to a discussion of space. It is clear from the opening verse that Nāgārjuna wants to dispel any notion of metaphysical identity:

Space does not occur prior to some characteristics of space.
If it would exist prior to having a characteristic, it follows that there would
be space without a characteristic.¹³

If one considers other chapters in the MK, such as Chapter Nineteen on time, one can glean Nāgārjuna's basic response to all aspects of *saṃvṛti*. Nāgārjuna wants to show that the tendency of the mind is to give mental objects a substantial status, which does not make logical sense under scrutiny. In Chapter Nineteen he argues that none of the three aspects of time (past, present or future) can be essential. If, for example, the present and the future are dependent on the past, then the present and the future

¹¹ Schwartz (1991: 181 and 267).

¹² MK 18 and 19.

¹³ MK 5: 1 (in McCagney 1997: 148).

should exist in the past. The absurdity of this statement lays bare the erroneous assumptions of past, present and future being substantial concepts. None of the three aspects of time, therefore, can exist. It is, rather, dependent origination that gives rise to the apparent existence of past, present and future. Similarly, space cannot be a stable or absolute structure. It has to be seen as arising through dependent origination. Space, from the *saṃvṛti* view, is a consequence of a continuous process of multiplying, separating, dividing, conferring and imposing the relative value of forms onto each other. Therefore space cannot be separated from its constituents, and neither can one constituent be isolated as a separate entity.¹⁴ Nāgārjuna's affirmation of the *śūnyatā* of all phenomena is critical in understanding the equivalence of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*.

The difficulty meaning faces from the *saṃvṛti* view is that there is an inevitable conflict between consistency and hermeneutic confusion (which highlights the inevitable relativity of phenomena). Consistency and confusion are, obviously, mutually exclusive. If, according to Nāgārjuna, *dukkha* is a consequence of a confusion of imposing a stable value on *saṃvṛti*, then his understanding of the cure for *dukkha* would require an attentive intention to attain clear, logical thought to correct the misconceptions in *saṃvṛti*. If thought seeks clarity and consistency, the mind must reject the assumption that conceptual knowledge makes sense due to common-sense epistemologies or those that are non-realist-based. For example, when I see Denzil, my colleague, in the common room I recognise him to be the same colleague I had lunch with yesterday.

¹⁴ Siderits argues (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 170) that causes and conditions are not all connected: but, in my view, the notion of space as articulated by Nāgārjuna provides a conduit for all causes and conditions to be connected. .

Common sense informs me that, despite the fact that our conversations expressed completely different points of view on the two days, I can achieve this dexterous act of recognition because I hold a commonly held concept of him. Yet Nāgārjuna argues that holding a fixed view of my colleague in my mind contributes to my *dukkha*, despite its obvious pragmatic advantages. According to him, my recognition of my colleague is due to his emergent characteristics, which are dependently originated. Wood offers a way to interpret my changing experiences of my colleague. He argues that statements in *saṃvṛti* are indeterminate and, the more we are open to indeterminacy, the less *dukkha* we will experience.¹⁵ Denzil may hold different views on different days without causing confusion if identity is understood as a consequence of *śūnya*. If one applies the *catuṣkoṭī*¹⁶ to this experience of indeterminacy it would look like this (I will discuss the *catuṣkoṭī* in more detail later in this chapter):

This is the same Denzil I had lunch with yesterday.
 This not the same Denzil I had lunch with yesterday.
 This is both the same Denzil and not the same Denzil I had lunch with yesterday.
 This is neither the same Denzil nor not the same Denzil I had lunch with yesterday.

Wood, however, argues that such arguments make Nāgārjuna a nihilist.¹⁷ He refers to VV 22 and 23 to prove his point:

¹⁵ Wood (1994: 114). He is referring to VV 70 and 66 here: all things exist dependently and therefore “cannot be found within the totality of causes and conditions”.

¹⁶ 1. Is p
 2. not P
 3. both P and not P
 4. neither P nor not P

¹⁷ (1994: 109).

22

The dependent existence of things is said to be emptiness, for what is dependently existent is lacking substance.

23

Suppose one artificial being were to hinder another artificial being, or an illusory man would hinder one brought about by his own illusory powers. This negation would be just like that.¹⁸

Nāgārjuna argues that it is only possible to recognise my colleague in different contexts over time if I base my view of him on *śūnya* (i.e. openness and indeterminacy). Therefore I recognise particular nominal and *a posteriori* characteristics paradoxically because of *śūnya*.¹⁹ I cannot provide evidence for the substantiality of my colleague beyond my dependently originated experience of him, but, at the same time, I need not allow my view of him to collapse into nihilism. I can choose to see him as infinitely open without fixed conceptual constraints. Does the awareness of *śūnya* necessarily indicate nihilism or does *śūnya*, for Nāgārjuna, provide a basis for knowledge as opposed to ignorance, which is based on fixity of views?

The idea of a split between knowledge (*vidyā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) is firmly established in Indian philosophy. The concept of *adhyāsa* in *Advaitā Vedānta* describes the process whereby the mind superimposes false perceptions and attributes onto Reality, producing the state of ignorance. The earliest Indian philosophy to articulate a

¹⁸ Westerhoff et al (2011: 27).

¹⁹ McCagney argues that Nāgārjuna is critical of the *catuṣkoṭī* and the law of exclusion by asserting “not differentiated and not identical” in MK 1 (Dedication) which seems to issue a criticism of the fourth step in the argument, but is closer to the third stage (1997: 111 and 137). I agree with McCagney’s argument here, but in asserting that identity can be both identical and differentiated, she needs to draw on other linguistic techniques in order to make her use of symbolism meaningful in such an ostensibly contradictory assertion.

split between knowledge and ignorance is *Sāṃkhya*. Importantly, there is no external creator (*Īśvara*) or God in this system. According to its purported and mythical founder, the sage Kapila, a disturbance in Spirit (*puruśa*) causes the dormant state of matter, or *prakṛti*, to become active. It sub-divides into the values (*gunas*) of purity (*sattva*), maintenance (*rajas*) and chaos (*tamas*). These three values are in a state of conflict with each other and for the attention of Spirit. Each value predominates for a time until it is superseded by another value. The fluctuating periods of dominance amongst the *gunas* gives rise to the cycles of nature. After the initial disturbance in Spirit, Spirit enters a state of confusion and forgets its own nature. In the quest to re-cognise its own identity it mistakenly identifies with *prakṛti* and its various values.²⁰

Richard Garbe argues that Kapila's system of *Sāṃkhya* philosophy influenced Buddhism²¹ in four important ways:

1. Its atheism. There is no Creator God or explanation for the existence of *prakṛti* or *puruśa*.
2. The activation of ignorance through engagement with the senses.
3. The causal chain of ignorance causing entrapment in ignorance.
4. Identification with spirit or a sense of undifferentiated wideness.

The origin and nature of the idea of ignorance in Vedic thought is unclear. The concept was developed in Buddhist philosophy into an idea that resembled the Western idea of the unconscious, in that what is created by the mind is projected onto an "external

²⁰ Raju (1986: 304-36).

²¹ De Jong (1997: 34 and 35) and Garbe (1897: 46).

reality”²² It is therefore important to see Nāgārjuna’s understanding of ignorance from within the Buddhist mindset. The *Samyutta Nikāya* 3.142 reads:

All form is comparable to foam; all feelings to bubbles, all sensations are like mirages; dispositions are like the plantain trunk, consciousness is but an illusion.²³

In *Samyutta Nikāya* 1.135 The Buddha refers to the role causality plays in producing a false sense of self. The metaphor of the chariot is used to describe how the various parts contribute to a false sense of the whole.²⁴ The five *skandhas* produce a false sense of continuous self and a dysfunctional attachment to the objects of perception. The causal processes that give rise to a false sense of self are unconscious and remain unconscious to consciousness or *vinnana*, which is the illusory product of the causal relatedness of the *skandhas*.²⁵

For Nāgārjuna, sense objects are a consequence of causality or *pratītyasamutpāda*, but are not seen as a consequence of ignorance in his philosophy. Rather, it is because they appear distinct that they are deceptive.²⁶ The intention with which they are observed can cause liberation from *dukkha*. If sense objects are substantialised, *dukkha* results. But if they are viewed as inherently empty or open, *nirvāṇa* is experienced.²⁷ As Wood argues, concepts are used only as a means to communicate; but, in thinking

²² Raju (1986: 140 & 150).

²³ Kalupahana (1975: 86).

²⁴ Kalupahana (1975: 78).

²⁵ Krüger (1995: 95-98).

²⁶ MK 13: 1 & 2.

²⁷ MK 14: 3-8 (in McCagney, 1997: 170).

about concepts, we use conventions that cannot capture the flux of mental impressions. Language contains two contradictory possibilities: its structure can imply the concept of substance through attachment to sensory referents, but language can also refer to *śūnya* or openness if it is used with the awareness that it is pointing to a reality beyond itself. Language is not contradictory when it refers to emptiness.²⁸ In VV 57 Nāgārjuna argues:

Where someone said “a name has a referent,” one would say then substance exists. You have to assert “we do not assert a name of this kind.”²⁹

In this sense, since the name of a thing refers to something that is insubstantial, the name must also be insubstantial “because its emptiness is non-referring”.³⁰ This statement replies to Nāgārjuna’s opponent’s statement in verse 9:

And if there is no substance, there would also not even be the name “insubstantiality of things” for there is no name without a referent.³¹

For Nāgārjuna, both the term and the object referred to are *śūnya* and they need to be understood as such if wisdom is to prevail. This renders the *catuṣkoṭī*, or the law of the excluded middle, invalid in that all is *śūnyatā* and therefore contradiction does not apply.

Nāgārjuna’s understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* recognises the unconscious element of ignorance, but differs from the Buddha’s understanding of causality (see Assutavā

²⁸ Wood (1994: 111).

²⁹ In Westerhoff et al (2011: 37).

³⁰ Westerhoff (2010: 106).

³¹ Westerhoff (2011: 24).

Sutta). For Nāgārjuna, causality is not the root of ignorance, whereas the Buddha firmly held it to be so. Nāgārjuna believes that ignorance occurs when causality is misinterpreted as links between causal networks, rather than being a result of dependently originated characteristics. He uses the idea of superimposition, which he terms *samāropa*³², to explain how the false sense of substantiality is perpetuated in the *saṃvṛti* view. The state of delusion occurs when raw, conditioned, momentary states in *saṃvṛti* are erroneously seen to be meaningful without their dependence on *śūnya*. Therefore perceptions are a consequence of dependent origination and not of common-sense objects in physical relationship with each other.

But how is the mind to heal its split nature between knowledge and ignorance (fixed views) in terms of Nāgārjuna's arguments if its tools (objects and concepts) are flawed and subject to deception by unconscious tendencies that cause ignorance? Or, to put the question another way, if Nāgārjuna's central aim in the MK is to show that the use of fixed concepts is illogical if viewed from the perspective of *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasaṅga*), how then can the conceptual view, *saṃvṛti*, be used to realise knowledge?³³ Nāgārjuna argues that the only way to approach *saṃvṛti* is from the inverted standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda* where phenomena make sense because of

³² MK 16:10

³³ Siderits argues (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 171) that *paramārtha* can only make sense conventionally. But, surely, according to Nāgārjuna, conventional objects do not make sense when subjected to *prasaṅga* and therefore they may be true conventionally within a limited understanding of truth. Siderits defends his argument of defending *Nyāya* epistemology which is object related (Westerhoff et al 2011: 178). However, such a view ignores the importance of role *śūnyatā* plays in Nāgārjuna's thought to explain change, including change in knowledge. Siderits's account of development in knowledge does not include Nāgārjuna's view of *śūnyatā*, which is a crucial element of the occurrence of change (Westerhoff et al 2011: 180). See, for example, MK 13: 3-8, MK 15: 8, MK 15: 11, MK 16: 1, Rt 66-70, SS: 30, *Vaidalya-prakana*: 59, MK 7: 33-34 and MK 13: 3.

their interdependence as opposed to the commonly held position that phenomena make sense because they are perceived. This, I argue, implies an inclusive philosophy. *Saṃvṛti* should be approached from an awareness of total inclusivity, where what is denoted is indeterminate and not, as it appears to common sense, as determinate. In this way it conveys the same sense of *ākāśa* as expressed in the PPM. By implication, what is held as a fixed determinate (through the reification of perception and phenomena) is untrue and what is viewed in an indeterminate capacity is true.³⁴ Indeterminacy is the result of awareness of both the conscious (*saṃvṛti*) and unconscious processes of knowledge (*paramārtha*). This position incorporates the conventional processes of cognition with the unconscious processes of cognition. The unconscious processes of cognition are the unperceived causal forces that bring about the objects and flow of perception.³⁵ The production of a fixed concept is, then, a result of the mind splitting its unconscious from its conscious aspect.³⁶

2. Theories of truth

Western philosophy appeals to one or more of three theories of truth when determining the truth of a statement: the coherence theory, the correspondence theory and the

³⁴ Note that that the author makes a distinction between the truth of a statement and its meaning. If a statement is true it is not necessarily meaningful.

³⁵ See MK 17: 14. Here Nāgārjuna displays an inclusive approach when he argues that causality follow a karmic continuum in combination with an unspecified substance or nature. In addition, verses 9 and 10 stipulate that the continuum emerges from mind, which incorporates both actions, fruits and unconscious nature.

³⁶ This aspect of Nāgārjuna's thought seems to prefigure Henri Bergson's thought in "Memory and matter" (1911). Bergson draws a distinction between automatic memory, which is habitual, unreflective and stimulus-driven, and conscious memory. Conscious memory incorporates the spirit (unconscious) with the mechanical (conscious) memory of the body.

identity theory. These have all been used throughout Western philosophy as arbiters of meaning and truth, but also have relevance to the way Nāgārjuna establishes the validity of his argument in that these theories of truth relate to reasoning strategies in Eastern *darśana*, namely, *Nyāya* and *prasaṅga*.

When meaning is established purely from the view of *saṃvṛti*, it operates according to a coherence theory of truth; it is founded on the idea that language establishes meaning through the logical interrelation between concepts. In this theory, language cannot point beyond concepts to material things. Such a theory holds that a round square is not meaningful because the two concepts do not correlate, but the statement, 'a peaceful sleep' is meaningful because of the correlation between the two concepts. But a unicorn or a Pegasus is meaningful, not because of their logical possibility in the world, but because they exist as acceptable concepts in our frame of reference. It is important to recognise, in terms of the coherence theory of truth, that concepts are invented, not discovered. This implies that the world of *saṃvṛti* is created by the mind.

Correspondence theories of truth, such as that propounded by the *Nyāya* school, assume that "language must correspond or 'link up with the world at some fundamental level via a denotation relation".³⁷ This means that various properties, such as "hornness" and "horseness", must denote a meaningful relation in the real world for the statement to be meaningful, in the case of a unicorn. If this is not possible the statement is nonsensical.

³⁷ Westerhoff (2009: 57).

In my view, Nāgārjuna is appealing to what Western philosophy would call an identity theory of truth. The identity theory of truth holds that the truth of the statement is identical to the referent. This theory of truth aims to overcome the problem of the correspondence theory where a statement only approximates the truth. But if a proposition can be proven to be true via logical argument, then the fact is identical to the statement. He is arguing that, for statements to be meaningful, they need be identified with *pratītyasamutpāda*. But this can only obtain if through an idea resembling the identity notion of truth where concepts and objects are viewed as symbols of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is therefore misleading to argue that the objects are identical to *pratītyasamutpāda*. This is why I maintain in Chapter Three that *saṃsāra* is equivalent to *nirvāṇa*, and not identical. In my understanding of the identity theory of truth, the use of objects, symbols, sentences or truth-bearers can be identical to objects or truth-makers. Identity theory does not necessarily need to refer to an idea of reality as unifying the sensor with that which is sensed, as Bradley uses it.³⁸ My use of the identity theory of truth explains Nāgārjuna's belief that objects and concepts are *śūnyata* and therefore inexpressible. The identity theory of truth allows concepts and objects to be viewed as symbols to point to their true value as *śūnya*. Nāgārjuna does not follow the *Nyāya* method of reasoning. For him truth does not need to establish a connection to real object. Any phenomena or concept, even "unicorn", is a symbol of

³⁸Flew (1983: 48). Recently Trenton Merricks has also used the identity theory of knowledge to argue for the meaningfulness of the Christian trinity of three divine persons and one God (in Crisp, Davidson and Van der Laan 2006: 299).

pratītyasamutpāda in that any concept or phenomenon is a consequence of dependent origination.

The inclusive approach is clearly elucidated through a study of Nāgārjuna's response to his critics in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), and particularly via Wood's and Westerhoff's interpretations of the text. Nāgārjuna had to devote a large portion of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV) to defend his position on truth against the *Abhidharmikas*. The challenge he faces from his opponents in this text is: if he claims that there is no own-being, it is nonsensical to negate that which does not exist. His opponent's logic is encapsulated in verses 9 to 12.

9. And if there was no substance, there would also not even be the name "insubstantiality of things," for there is no name without a referent.

10. Rather, substance exists, yet the substance of things does not exist. It has to be explained to what this thingless substance belongs.

11. To the extent to which the negation "there is a pot in the house" is precisely a negation of an existent, your negation is a negation of an existing substance.

12. Now as this substance does not exist, what is negated by the statement of yours? For the negation of a non-existent is accomplished without words.³⁹

Wood's⁴⁰ and Westerhoff's⁴¹ interpretations of Nāgārjuna's answer to this objection – to the possibility of a negation of a false perception — agree about which philosophical school Nāgārjuna was responding to in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Wood and Westerhoff

³⁹ Westerhoff (2011: 24).

⁴⁰ Wood 1994.

⁴¹ Westerhoff 2009.

maintain that Nāgārjuna's critic was an *Abhidharmika*⁴² who subscribed to Nyāya logic.⁴³

Wood and Westerhoff differ significantly on the question of whether Nāgārjuna was a nihilist or not. Wood argues that Nāgārjuna does not dispute the charge of nihilism which his opponent levels against him, but rather, counter-argues that his opponent does not appreciate that his understanding of nihilism is total, which includes the statement "all is empty". Any statement, even one denying any own-being, does not contradict the statement, if statements only operate at a "magical" level.⁴⁴ Westerhoff, by contrast, introduces a more nuanced perspective on the mind of the perceiver than Wood is using. He argues, following Candrakīrti,⁴⁵ that as long as we assume that the object of perception and the object of negation are all dependently arisen objects rather than entities existing in their own right, we can deny their existence without antecedently having to regard them as real.⁴⁶

Wood's position is that, despite the fact that the world is, in his terms, a phantasmagoria, the processes of cognition, i.e. *pratītyasamutpāda*, do occur in an illusory capacity. Westerhoff, however, argues that, when Nāgārjuna argues for negation, it means he is arguing against the perception of conceptual and independent

⁴² Wood (1994: 108).

⁴³ Westerhoff (2009: 54).

⁴⁴ Wood (1994: 109). The argument is based on verse 23, where Nāgārjuna argues that his understanding of negation is not contradictory because it takes place by one illusory person negating another illusory person of his or her own making.

⁴⁵ Although I am critical of Candrakīrti's argument, which separates objects into two categories (*paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*), I agree with his argument regarding the *sūnyatā* value of all objects.

⁴⁶ Westerhoff (2009: 63).

objects of consciousness. The word used for perception in verse 65 is *graham*, which means to grasp. In the present sense it means to reify concepts and independent objects. These, he argues, are imposed (*samāropa*) on the flow of *pratītyasamutpāda* in the *saṃvṛti* view.⁴⁷ The only way for *saṃvṛti* to be meaningful and have consistency in meaning is, paradoxically, if names do not have fixed referents in the world and if it identifies with *pratītyasamutpāda* as in my rendition of the identity theory of truth, which utilises concepts and objects as symbols for *śūnyatā*. Rather, Nāgārjuna asserts that by naming anything, even *śūnyatā*, the illusory world is established (*prasiddha*).⁴⁸ If meaning is determined by the processes of perception from the *saṃvṛti* view, then meaning will always be conflictual, established competitively between dominant and less dominant properties and qualities. Meaning in the latter scenario is therefore established by comparison, contrast and by degrees (that is, via the Correspondence and Coherence theories of Truth).

I am in more agreement with Westerhoff than with Wood. Westerhoff's suggestion, that *pratītyasamutpāda* occurs in isolation from the mental processes of reification. is closer to my argument than Wood's contention that *pratītyasamutpāda* occurs in an illusory capacity. Nevertheless, I differ from Westerhoff in that I maintain that the objects of consciousness that emerge as a consequence of *vikalpa* and *prapañca* are not necessarily the result of reification. Raw objects of consciousness emerge as an effect of emergent characteristics from *pratītyasamutpāda*, since *vikalpa* and *prapañca* are included within the processes of *pratītyasamutpāda*. But how can meaning be

⁴⁷ Westerhoff (2009: 48).

⁴⁸ VV 59.

established in identification with *pratītyasamutpāda*? For Wood, nihilism is the only alternative to a competitive meaning structure: all phenomena are unreal and hence meaningless.⁴⁹ But does this imply that meaning is conditional? It does if I perceive myself as an empty form in the *saṃvṛti* view, because the only meaning I could derive would be from the meaning I give to the objects and myself in my experience. For Westerhoff, *pratītyasamutpāda* occurs in processes of cognition and gives rise to our understanding of objects as experiential events. If I apply the identity theory of truth to *pratītyasamutpāda*, terms and objects connect directly with Reality: that is, they identify with the broad, non-specific, indeterminacy of reality. Nāgārjuna asserts that inclusive phrases such as “all is *śūnyata*” are meaningful despite their inherent indeterminacy. This statement is meaningful because my experience is inclusive of causality and the indeterminacy of impermanent things.⁵⁰ For example, if my wife leaves the armchair where she was sitting to retire to bed, it makes no sense to describe my experience by fixed, non-causal statements, as follows:

- Wife seated in armchair
- Armchair minus wife (armchair ~ wife).
- Wife in bed

In this situation, only the set of indeterminacies and casual interrelations gives meaning to the event: my wife sat in the armchair in the lounge, was alert and engaged with me, grew tired and was no longer alert, stood up from the armchair and left the lounge to climb into bed. This experience would not be possible if I held substantialising views about my wife, the armchair, lounge and bed. This observation occurs from a *saṃvṛti*

⁴⁹ Wood (1994: 112).

⁵⁰ VV 70.

point of view where arising and ceasing of phenomena takes place. But from the highest "view" of *paramārtha*, nothing happens because all phenomena simply continue in their essentially fluid and open conditions.⁵¹ The occurrence of arising and ceasing is meaningful if held from the vantage point of *paramārtha*, because it allows for the fluidity of phenomena without causing conceptual contradictions to appear in my reasoning. Common sense interprets the event through the lens of transformation, but Nāgārjuna shows in MK 13: 4-5 that transformation implies an absurd notion of causality, where a substantial identity changes into a totally different substantial identity. Indeed, the only view that is meaningful is if the entire perceptual event is empty and the concepts used refer to indeterminate categories.⁵²

The statement "all is empty of own-being" is shown by Nāgārjuna to be meaningful if read as inclusive of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* epistemologies, rather than merely object-discerning epistemologies from the *saṃvṛti* view. I take Nāgārjuna's defence of his position on the negation of own-being in the VV as a negation of what does not exist and therefore not as a negation at all.⁵³ Read in this light, that statement links to MK 22: 11 and 24: 18, where Nāgārjuna indicates a state of affairs without making a metaphysical statement. To argue that a phenomenon is *śūnya* is not to argue, nihilistically, that it is not there or does not exist. To say that it is natureless does not mean that it is not real; in this, I differ from Wood's view that there is nothing but unreal

⁵¹ The sense of elevated view is erroneous. It is corrected by understanding *śūnyatā* as space where *paramārtha* is seen as offering a broader view, rather than an elevated one.

⁵² See also MK 24: 37.

⁵³ VV 62–63.

appearances⁵⁴ in the *saṃvṛti* view.⁵⁵ Instead, Nāgārjuna's assertions in VV 70, MK 24: 40, MK 24: 36 and 24: 18 are founded on including the conscious (intentional actions) and unconscious processes (unintentional and processes such as breathing, blood circulation or subtle forms of interdependent causality that occur outside of the realm of cognitive awareness) of cognition that take place of cognition.

3. The validity of identity theory

If *pratītyasamutpāda* is the basis of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, then the two notions of truth, *saṃvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya*, are not distinct categories. The two-truths formulation that Nāgārjuna puts forward is not dualistic, as shown in verses like MK 24: 10. Therefore a relation between the two categories exists. But what can be deduced about this relationship? First, by definition, *paramārtha* is wider than *saṃvṛti* truth. Jones suggests that chapter 26 in the MK was not authored by Nāgārjuna because its logic is out of character with the rest of the document in establishing *pratītyasamutpāda* as the cause of ignorance. If we accept this, then Nāgārjuna did not intend *saṃvṛti* to be negated by *paramārtha* (*niddāna* negated by *nirvāṇa*).⁵⁶ Second, but paradoxically, the idioms of the two truths are separate and distinct. *Saṃvṛtisatya* is concerned with distinct objects and concepts, whereas *paramārthasatya* is concerned with truth beyond

⁵⁴ Wood (1994: 116).

⁵⁵ See Garfield (in Westerhoff et al 2011: 29).

⁵⁶ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2330 –3522). Jones, however, argues that, while it is plausible that Nāgārjuna did not write Chapter 26 due to its logic contradicting the logic in the rest of the MK, it is also possible that *pratītyasamutpāda* sets up the conditions for ignorance but is in itself equal to *śūnyatā*. I will discuss this argument later in the chapter.

concepts. The last verse of Chapter 25 (verse 24) and the arguments made in Chapter 27 concur that there are no views or concepts, even leading to the radical implication that the Buddha's teaching did not occur, whereas *saṃvṛti* is based on concepts. But in clarifying the relation between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* Nāgārjuna makes his most radical philosophical move, echoing the assertion in *Prajnaparāmīta hridaya* that "form is emptiness/emptiness is form".⁵⁷ Nāgārjuna asserts a similar relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. One of Nāgārjuna's most enigmatic formulations in Chapter 25: 19 of the MK reads:

There is no distinction whatever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*
There is no distinction whatever between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.⁵⁸

This statement develops from the previous chapter, where Nāgārjuna states in 24: 10:

Higher truth is not taught independently of common practice.
Liberation is not accomplished by the unattainable higher truth.⁵⁹

These verses allude to two facets in Nāgārjuna's position on the meaning of the relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. First, he establishes that an interdependent relation exists between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*; and second, he argues that no distinction can be made between these two conditions. The above two statements reveal that the relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is not dualistic. But, due to their interdependent status,

⁵⁷ Nāgārjuna extends the idea of emptiness beyond that found in the *Heart Sutra* when he argues that emptiness is derived from *pratītyasamutpāda*.

⁵⁸ McCagney (1997: 209).

⁵⁹ McCagney (1997: 201). McCagney's translation of this verse may be misleading in that her translation could be read as saying ultimate truth is unattainable. Kalupahana (1986) translate this line more accurately, "without understanding the ultimate fruit, freedom is not attained" (p 333)

neither is it monistic. So which theory of truth can be used to make sense of Nāgārjuna's claims? The correspondence theory and the coherence theory of truth both function in terms of the relation between statement and form: that is, statements refer either to accepted concepts or objects. Therefore the correspondence theory of truth cannot be applied to this relationship, due to the claim that two different objects of knowledge are equivalent (along the same lines as an apple cannot be a pear) and the coherence theory cannot be applied because of the contradictory claims of the two conditions regarding objects, that is, in the *samvrti* paradigm, objects do "exist" and from a *paramārtha* view objects do not exist. Ultimately the notion of existence of form does not make sense in terms of the notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* in *Madhyamaka*.⁶⁰

The problem with both the coherence and correspondence theories of truth is that they operate within a structure of meaning being ascribed to a particular form. What is required for meaning to make sense in the framework of *pratītyasamutpāda* is a non-referential meaning structure. In my view, the only way to make sense of Nāgārjuna's argument concerning the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is in terms of identity theory. Nāgārjuna's view of the relation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is explained in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are embedded in the "causal" processes of *pratītyasamutpāda*. In identifying with *pratītyasamutpāda*, meaning is no longer dependent on form, but rather on *śūnyatā*.

⁶⁰ MK 9: 12.

Before considering the meaning of *saṃsāra* in relation to *nirvāṇa*, it is important to understand the processes of *pratītyasamutpāda* that give rise to conditions in *saṃvṛti*. *Saṃsāra* is the experience of the phenomenal world from the view of *saṃvṛti*. But how does this experience take place? Chapter Four in the MK is focused on the *skhandas*. Nāgārjuna's argument in verse one is aimed at establishing the identity of *pratītyasamutpāda* with material form:

Material form separated from the cause of material form is not obtained.
And the cause of the material form separated from material form is not seen.

In verse 7 Nagarjuna continues the same argument for the other *Skandhas*:

Feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and dispositions in general, as well as the totality of beings follow the same rule as material form.⁶¹

Nāgārjuna establishes the identity of *pratītyasamutpāda* and all the *Skandhas*, including the interdependence of the processes of cognition in the *Skandhas*. *Pratītyasamutpāda* cannot be separate from the world of form, but for fixed concepts to form, a further reification process needs to occur, with the added causal ingredients of thirst and grasping.

By establishing the centrality of *pratītyasamutpāda* in the production of *saṃvṛti* and the identity of *saṃvṛti* to that which has no conditions, *nirvāṇa*, Nāgārjuna discounts

⁶¹ In McCagney (1997:146-147).

dualism or any correlative way of thinking about causality. Therefore the equivalence between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is that they are both *śūnyatā* and therefore are identical to *pratītyasamutpāda*.

It is now necessary to explore the origins and derivation of *pratītyasamutpāda* itself. Nāgārjuna explains in Chapter 1: 4 of the MK that it can only be described as indeterminate:

Causal efficacy is not associated with conditions, causal efficacy is not associated with non-conditions, conditions are not associated with causal efficacy or non efficacy.⁶²

It is important to remember that, by identity, Nāgārjuna does not mean equality. Nāgārjuna's understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* is of process, not of discrete entities interacting. It therefore makes no sense to separate cause and effect.⁶³ But the cause is not identical with the effect. This leads us to enquire to what extent propositions can be meaningful regarding *pratītyasamutpāda*. Some examples are: the cause of the river flowing is the flowing river and not the flowing river; or the cause of *pratītyasamutpāda* is and is not *pratītyasamutpāda*.⁶⁴ Nāgārjuna seems to side with an identity theory of truth in that the truth of the statement is identical to the state of affairs, rather than accepting the contradictions arising from either a correspondence theory of truth, which embraces substantial form and change, or coherence theory, which embraces conceptual

⁶² McCagney (1997: 138).

⁶³ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2667).

⁶⁴ MK 20: 24.

consistency.⁶⁵ Despite its vagueness, *pratītyasamutpāda* is Nāgārjuna's denoting referent, which brings consistency to his logic purely on the grounds that nothing is being asserted and therefore the argument cannot be contradicted or denied. Nāgārjuna argues that, for there to be meaning, there must be consistency in the denoting referent. It is not enough to see the referent as an illusion that obscures a real, abstract truth. The truth is the experienced event. His point is that *pratītyasamutpāda* provides consistency in terms of the equivalence between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. If all denoting referents are equal in their *śūnyata* status, meaning can be applied equally in all contexts and situations.

The argument for the universal applicability of meaning requires a closer examination of semantics. It is important, here, to understand Nāgārjuna's sense of *śūnyatā*. According to Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* must be understood from the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda*. All space, time and phenomena are subject to dependent origination. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is all-inclusive. This also applies to the experience of *nirvāṇa*. Therefore Nāgārjuna does not go along with the *Abhidhamma* view that *nirvāṇa* is the only unconditioned experience. If *pratītyasamutpāda* is universal in its applicability, then *nirvāṇa* logically must stand on an equal footing with *saṃsāra* in their conditioned status. His critics in the VV argue that this argument is contradictory because it is

⁶⁵ See, for example, Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans in Westerhoff et al (2011), who discuss correspondence theory as fitting into a realist paradigm whereas coherence theory fits into an idealist framework. They also discuss the pragmatic and verifiability theories of truth. They opt for a deflationary theory of truth, which they term a "weak sort of correspondence theory" (Westerhoff et al 2011: 139). But, as they note, even the deflationary theory of truth cannot deal with the contradictory notion in *Madhyamaka* that things exist and do not exist from the absolute view.

illogical to have a name without a referent.⁶⁶ But Nāgārjuna removes the absolute status from *nirvāṇa* and *paramārtha*. He explains in VV 48-51 that the object (*prameya*) cannot be separated from the means of knowledge (*pramāna*). Both have their basis in *śūnya*.

It is now necessary to explore what Nāgārjuna understands by terms and objects, and this is the focus of the next section.

4. Metaphoricity

Nāgārjuna saw his philosophy as an orthodox account of the Buddha's *Dharma*. But the central tenets of his thought differed from the earlier tradition of Buddhist thought. Where *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* were seen by the earlier tradition as opposites, Nāgārjuna saw them as equivalents based on *pratītyasamutpāda*. Where *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā* were seen as opposites, he saw them as identical. The two-truths formulation was based on an early Buddhist view, posited in *Samyutta Nikāya*, where words should not presume to present a meaning beyond their conventional denotational meaning.⁶⁷ This distinction was later developed in commentaries on the *Tripitaka* into two terms — *nītatha* (higher) and *neyyattha* (conceptual) terms were developed in later commentaries on the *Anguttara Nikāya* and the *Kathāvatthu*. These refer to two kinds of

⁶⁶ VV 8-9.

⁶⁷ McCagney(1997: fn 126).

discourse, rather than two kinds of truth.⁶⁸ The premise here is that knowledge is determined by discourse.

Nāgārjuna's formulation of two truths seems to have been influenced by the assumption that *saṃvṛti* is not invalidated by *paramārtha*: it is merely a limited or wider view.⁶⁹ Nāgārjuna's formulation of *pratītyasamutpāda* as interdependence between the two truths is not a cyclical conceptual trap of 12 *nidānas* established through perception (*graha*), as established in the Buddha's Dharma.⁷⁰ In the *Majjhima Nikāya* of the *Sutta Nipata*, *nibanna* is a psychological state – the highest, unconditioned experience and the cessation of consciousness.⁷¹ Such a state is directly opposite to *paticca samutpada*, *saṃsāra* or the human condition. The goal was to break the chain of *paticca samutpada* in order to eliminate suffering.⁷² Instead of following this argument, Nāgārjuna equates *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.⁷³ For Nāgārjuna, *pratītyasamutpāda* shows the absurdity of holding phenomena as having *svabhāva* and affirms the peaceful experience of treating arising and ceasing as dependently originated. *Pratītyasamutpāda*, for Nāgārjuna, is, therefore, not a foundation for *dukkha*. Rather, it is a philosophical and soteriological idea that foregrounds the recognition of interdependence and process, but does not reduce recognition to sameness.⁷⁴ In the

⁶⁸ McCagney (1997: 84).

⁶⁹ Jayatillike (1980: 116).

⁷⁰ McCagney (1997: 98).

⁷¹ McCagney (1997: 56).

⁷² McCagney (1997: 57).

⁷³ MK 24: 19.

⁷⁴ McCagney (1997: 114). See also MK 7: 16.

opening verse of the MK, Nāgārjuna lays the foundation for describing the enlightened state:

I greet the best of teachers, that Awakened one, who taught liberation, the quieting of phenomena, interdependent origination which is non-ceasing and non-arising, non-momentary and non-permanent, non-identical and non-differentiated, not come and not gone.⁷⁵

Nāgārjuna's understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* shares far more with the *akasic* understanding of *śūnyatā* expressed in the PPM than with *agamic* Buddhism. This idea is substantiated by the *akasic* sense with which Nāgārjuna invests *pratītyasamutpāda* in MK1: 1. Nāgārjuna's statement in MK 1: 1 is significant for what is to follow in the text because it provides a succinct framework for his philosophy: he proposes to explore the limits of the Buddha's teaching on *anattā*. In showing himself to be a devotee of the Buddha's *Dharma*, Nāgārjuna wants his reader to be reassured of where his commitments lie. But in his explication of *pratītyasamutpāda* he immediately shifts the notion away from the framework of the 12 (*nidāna*) linked causal chain of suffering and points to the new direction that he intends to follow the MK.⁷⁶ Based on this statement, no categorical statement about *pratītyasamutpāda* can be made. It is entirely *akasic* in nature. Concepts are fluid, absurd and contradictory (as *prasaṅga* reveals). It is important, therefore, to understand what *saṃvṛti* is. The external world exists as a condition, but not in a reified form. Nāgārjuna states in MK 23: 8:

⁷⁵ McCagney (1997: 137).

⁷⁶ MK, 24:13. Nāgārjuna argues that that the twelve-fold causal chain does not apply to his notion of *śūnyatā*, which is identified with *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Physical form, sound taste touch smell and events are all made up of imaginary cities in the sky, like dreams and mirages.⁷⁷

This statement needs to be seen in relation to MK 24: 14, where Nāgārjuna states:

Because openness works, therefore everything works.⁷⁸

In Nāgārjuna's philosophy, the perceived world (*loka*) is not merely an illusion, as in *Advaitā Vedānta* (although sometimes in *Advaitā Vedānta* the perceived world is distinguished from illusions). It occurs due to the flow of *dharmatā*.⁷⁹ Form, therefore, does not dictate meaning. Using this logic, Nāgārjuna turns the tables on the arguments by his opponent in the VV, where words and concepts are seen to refer unproblematically to objects. Nāgārjuna points out that this argument implies that *svabhāva* and *pratītyasamutpāda* can coexist.⁸⁰ According to Nāgārjuna, meaning is dependent on *pratītyasamutpāda*, or an indeterminate view of reality. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is based on the understanding of the interdependency of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. The indeterminacy of *pratītyasamutpāda* makes the referent necessarily ambivalent and contradictory.⁸¹ From the higher truth, or wider view, the arising and ceasing of perceptual objects does not take place. But at the lower truth, or

⁷⁷ McCagney (1997: 196).

⁷⁸ McCagney (1997: 201).

⁷⁹ MK 21: 1 and 2.

⁸⁰ VV 57-59.

⁸¹ McCagney (1997:113).

narrower view, objects are true until they are analysed into fixed concepts. They are “real” in relation to their non-fixed, *akasic* “nature” and cannot be seen as real once their utility has ceased. Knowledge of reality is, therefore, knowledge of *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Nāgārjuna argues that it is contradictory to argue simultaneously for *svabhāva* and impermanence while, from the view of *saṃvṛti*, meaning is sustained despite impermanence and absence of identity. To return to the example of my wife leaving the lounge and retiring to bed, the sequence of events makes sense to me if I hold a set of contradictory assertions equally in my mind. My experience of her is non-momentary, otherwise I would doubt my sanity. Yet it is also non-permanent, otherwise she could not grow tired. The person who is now in the bedroom is non-differentiated from the person who was in the lounge and yet is non-identical, due to the fact that she was alert and now is sleepy. In thinking along these lines, Nāgārjuna is not a nihilist because knowledge does not correspond to something formal or categorizable. Knowledge of *pratītyasamutpāda* is *ākāśa*-inspired descriptions of indiscernible conditions that resemble *sūnyatā* in the PPM. These are: *apratihistita* (not settling down), *anālaya* (nothing to settle in) and *anāgrahā* (nothing to grasp).⁸² In the early sections of the PPM *sūnyatā* is likened to *ākāśa*, particularly in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (*Aṣṭa*), *Ratnakūta* (Rt) and the *Ratnagunasamcayagāthā* (Rgs) *sutras*.⁸³

⁸² McCagney (1997: 22).

⁸³ McCagney (1997: 22) and The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines Ch 7, 3, 23 (Conze, E Trans.).

I aver that Nāgārjuna presents a framework for the Buddha's *Dharma* that is simultaneously inclusive of both *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*.⁸⁴ *Nirvāṇa* cannot be separate from *saṃsāra*. Despite this, very recent publications still make the mistake of separating *saṃvṛti* from *paramārtha*. Jones, for example, answers the question, "Does the table exist?" by saying: "It depends on the context, conventionally but not ultimately."⁸⁵ The problem with this answer is that it is not consistent with Nāgārjuna's understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda*. First, there is no separate context for *paramārtha*. Second, *saṃvṛti* cannot be separated from *paramārtha*. Nāgārjuna is an empiricist, always concerned with what is presented to his senses. The bare particulars or characteristics of sensory objects are recognisable, not in themselves, but due to the fluid process of *pratītyasamutpāda*. The world is negotiable and comprehensible because *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are inseparable: they are two sides of the same coin. Nāgārjuna does not argue that the presentation of the table is an illusion. His point is that, in recognising phenomena against the backdrop of *pratītyasamutpāda*, reification is falsified. But Nāgārjuna does not argue that conditioning or the emergence of bare particulars is falsified by *paramārtha*. Rather, conditioning is a characteristic of *saṃvṛtisatya* that occurs in relation to *paramārtha*.⁸⁶ His concern is that the view of conditioning must not be fixed or reified.⁸⁷ Knowledge of *pratītyasamutpāda* is the inclusive awareness of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. It is my contention that such inclusive awareness of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is meaningful if understood from the vantage point of the *akasic*

⁸⁴ MK 24: 10.

⁸⁵ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2917). Jones may be making a simplistic point that objects exist conventionally but to ultimately. But that point still does not show a clear understanding of MK 19:25

⁸⁶ VV 70.

⁸⁷ MK 18: 7.

description of forms of knowledge i.e “nothing to settle in” (*anālayu*) and “nothing to grasp” (*anāgrahā*).

Nāgārjuna sets up a contradictory set of assertions in MK 28: 8 to show that *paramārtha* is not absolute (because it is still a concept) and neither does *paramārtha* falsify *saṃvṛti*. The limited view of *saṃvṛti* seems to challenge its equality with *paramārtha*. But if the referent for both *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* is *pratītyasamutpāda*, then their equality rests on both being *śūnya* (or open). It may seem that *saṃvṛti* is relative truth and *paramārtha* ultimate truth and, for conceptual reasons, such a division is pragmatic. But it is a mistake to view *saṃvṛti* as separate from *paramārtha*. *Saṃvṛti* makes sense because of *paramārtha* and understanding *saṃvṛti* also provides conceptual tools for an accurate grasp of *nirvāṇa*. But learning cannot be guided by concepts and forms that extend beyond their context: words and meaning only have contextual applicability and need to be approached from the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda* and not from a position that imposes fixed meaning. Therefore, from the *saṃvṛti* view, contradiction seems to occur due to the focus of characteristics and bare particulars, but they are only apparent if viewed from the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda*. Surprisingly, such a “view” from the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda* resembles common sense more than a rarefied mystical or spiritual view. Spirituality is superadded when the recognition of *pratītyasamutpāda* is linked with not holding fixed views or making judgements.⁸⁸ If contradictions are perceived due to grasping and fixed views, then ignorance has

⁸⁸ 1997: 103.

supplanted knowledge.⁸⁹ Nāgārjuna maintains that, where *śūnyatā* is perceived, nothing is asserted or projected, including contradictions.⁹⁰ No arising and ceasing exists if there is no *svabhāva*. But that does not mean that there is an empty void. Indeterminacy precludes higher truth from being separate from *saṃvṛti*.⁹¹ Things are true in a conventional sense until they are analysed as things in and of themselves. Their meaning resides in their *akasic* nature informed by *pratītyasamutpāda*. Nāgārjuna applies the *catuṣkoṭī* to describe the *akasic* meaning of events in MK 18: 8:

All events are really so, not really so, both really so and not really so,
neither really so nor not really so.⁹²

But significantly for my argument, the *catuṣkoṭī* is not used by Nāgārjuna to assert contradictory truths. Rather, he uses a logical form to illustrate the indeterminate nature of referential statements.⁹³ The indeterminacy in phenomena points to the interdependence of events. Nāgārjuna does not reject the four statements of differentiation, non-differentiation, identity and non-identity, but neither does he accept them. What occurs is indeterminate. *Śūnyata*, according to Nāgārjuna, is a positionless position, with nothing to grasp and nothing to project.

Words and phenomena, therefore, do not have a fixed term of reference and attempts by the mind to project fixed meaning will cause the mind to suffer. Each phenomenon

⁸⁹ 1997: 85-89.

⁹⁰ 1997: 112.

⁹¹ 1997: 79.

⁹² Garfield (1995: 250).

⁹³ In the MK Nāgārjuna applies the two main forms of logic, namely the excluded middle (MK 25:14) and the law of non-contradiction (MK 8: 7).

needs to be treated as a condition that is meaningful in that instance. Each moment is understood in the instant of the unfolding of *pratītyasamutpāda*. *Śūnyata* is becoming; therefore, things and phenomena do not have existence apart from the view of dependent origination.

It is significant that Nāgārjuna argues that *saṃsāra* is the same in every way as *nirvāṇa*, because he implies that conventional truth, despite its tendency (through ignorance) to produce reified forms, is identical to *paramārtha* in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*. From the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda* there can be no exclusion, because no statement holds categorically. The absence of foreclosure implies inclusion. If there is thirst, grasping arises and identification results. Separation leads to exclusion. This sets up Nāgārjuna's critique of own-being because, if all is *pratītyasamutpāda*, there cannot be a separate independent being that is without cause, permanent and unchanging. *Sūnyata* is becoming; *svabhāva* is existence. This implies that there is no view of *paramārtha* separate from *saṃvṛti* because they are interdependent. In other words, neither realism nor anti-realism obtains in relation to phenomena because both forms of knowledge foreclose on understanding.

This type of logic presented by Nāgārjuna stands in direct contrast to accepted Indian logic as articulated in *Nyāya* and which resembles the correspondence theory of truth, which maintains that reasoning must be rooted in an empirical object.⁹⁴ Statements can relate to physical objects either as simple or complex designators. Either a statement

⁹⁴ Ruja (1985: 200-209) mentions that *Nyāya* argues that knowledge is formed from perception, inference, verbal knowledge (testimony) and comparison.

combines elements of reality which accord truthfully with the world, for example, “the man and the woman live as a married couple in the house,” or statements stand in an erroneous relation to the world, for example, “the man and the frog live as a married couple in a mushroom”.⁹⁵ But both true and erroneous statements must be built from denoting terms that relate to the world. Therefore, as Westerhoff maintains, “simple designators will always refer to the world but complex designators may or may not do so.”⁹⁶ But, by introducing *saṃvṛti* as a form of reality, Nāgārjuna places all statements into the non-denoting category. Westerhoff argues pertinently “that concepts are established by way of convention,” and “There is no ready made world of simple denoting terms.”⁹⁷

It is still possible to use simple designators in Nāgārjuna’s argument, as long as they are understood not to be independent but rather appearing along with a set of “dependence relations at the same time”.⁹⁸ As Westerhoff argues:

The *Madhyamika* thinks that an unreal entity such as water in a mirage or the appearance of *svabhāva* can very well be the object of an erroneous cognitive state and also be able to be referred to in a true sentence because it has become the object of a cognitive state, the source of the error is not located exclusively in the erroneous combination of individually existing properties mirage is a simple yet erroneous perception. As long as we assume that the object of perception and the object of negation are all dependently arisen objects rather than entities existing in their own right, we can deny their existence without antecedently having to regard them as real. Even though the term ‘water in the mirage’ is non-denoting, since there is water in the mirage, there is still something created by the interplay

⁹⁵ Westerhoff (2009: 55).

⁹⁶ Westerhoff (2009: 57).

⁹⁷ Westerhoff (2009: 59).

⁹⁸ Westerhoff (2009: 60).

of our senses, light, and heat on which the presence of water is superimposed, which we can subsequently deny. Similarly our language and general cognitive habits can, the Mādhyamika argues, create the unreal superimposition (*samāropa*) of *svabhāva* which Nāgārjuna's arguments set out to refute.⁹⁹

A statement, then, need not apply to anything actual to be intelligible. The statement, "The unicorn frolicked in the meadow" is intelligible in a fantasy idiom due to the fact that unicorns are accepted fantasy creatures. Similarly, propositional statements may seem unintelligible, given the meaning of words, but the referent may be an unknown context. For example, the statement, "the priest was fondly remembered as being a good husband" is not necessarily nonsensical. Based on the set of propositions informing the statement, it would appear that the statement is nonsensical. But should the statement be set within a different set of propositions, for example, it could describe a priest who lived before Pope Leo's I declaration, in the late 4th century, that priests may not marry. Other possibilities include: there may be a priest in the future who is renowned for being a great family man; or the statement may refer to an Anglican priest. The meaning of statements is neither purely propositional nor purely based on correspondence. Rather, meaning is derived from more complex relational factors, which an awareness of *pratīyasamutpāda* allows for. Nāgārjuna's point is that the properties of phenomena are rooted in certain conditions and the processes of understanding are equally dependent on those conditions. But, significantly, all conditions and epistemological categories are rooted in *pratīyasamutpāda*. Due to the fact that *pratīyasamutpāda* is all-inclusive, it is important to bear in mind that any condition is interconnected with a host of other conditions and, therefore, the

⁹⁹ Westerhoff (2009: 63).

propositions that hold in one condition probably hold for a number of other conditions.¹⁰⁰

But a *Naiyāyika* could argue that the refutation of the existence of such a priest does not make sense because he does not exist based on a combination of the coherence and correspondence theories of truth, despite the possibility that the statement is empirically verifiable. By contrast, the proposition, “the priest was fondly remembered as a good husband” could be accepted as meaningful within a *pratītyasamutpāda* framework of meaning because the conditions for it to make sense would be understood to be dependently originated and not fixed to definite simple designators.¹⁰¹

It remains important to remember that naming concepts is a process of cognition. Concepts are invented, not discovered.¹⁰² There is no way to prove that a concept denotes anything in the actual world.¹⁰³ Empiricists always find difficulty in providing incontrovertible proof for the existence of an external world. This presents definite epistemological problems for nouns and noun-favouring statements. For example, what does the noun phrase “married priest” refer to? Nouns are therefore necessarily indeterminate. Equally, a verb- or process-orientated statement, such as “it is raining” is

¹⁰⁰ If, as Nāgārjuna argues, *śūnyatā* is all-inclusive, it prefigures the notion of absolute *śūnyatā*, as conceived by Nishida and Nishitani (of the Kyoto School), who combined Western ideas of emptiness with Buddhist ideas of emptiness (Cestaro 2010: 17).

¹⁰¹ Chinn argues that Nāgārjuna’s understanding of meaning is pragmatic rather than drawing on coherence. Ideas and concepts are applied appropriately in the different contexts. He therefore argues that Nāgārjuna does not entertain an essentialist view of meaning, which would hold to a causal theory of power. But he does promote the common Buddhist view of causality, along the lines of “when this, then that”, which avoids causal explanation (Chinn 1990: 12). I agree with his sentiments that meaning remains tied to this world and that meaning occurs with the growth of enlightened consciousness (1990: 16). But such an argument requires a better theory of meaning than pragmatism to explain how the world becomes meaningful due to dependent origination. Nāgārjuna states in VV 70 that when *śūnyatā* is understood, all things become clear. I do not believe he is arguing that we should not try to explain dependent origination. We merely should not try to explain it without nurturing our consciousness towards enlightenment (Chinn 1990: 17).

¹⁰² Swartz (1991: 105).

¹⁰³ Swartz (1991: 237).

also indeterminate because while rain is happening, the function of “it” in the statement is indeterminate.

The indeterminacy of nouns and verbs in statements presents problems for understanding and navigating the world. Nevertheless, people are very proficient at understanding and getting about in the world. Nāgārjuna explains our dexterity in the world in terms of his two-truths formulation. He works with a radical form of empiricism in that he denies the existence of properties and yet recognises that they occur due to *pratītyasamutpāda* in relation to particular conditions. In my view, Nāgārjuna is arguing for a form of nominalism and a *posteriori* epistemology that is not founded on an objective world, but rather on dependently originated conditions. For example, meranti is known to carpenters as a durable wood that is suitable for exterior light construction. However, meranti grows uncultivated in the temperate rain forests of Malaysia. Therefore, the carpenter’s choice of meranti is dependent on the climate he/she is building in. If the climate is temperate, the structure will have a longer life and be less susceptible to marine borers than if the climate is wetter or drier. So, while the hardness of meranti to withstand inclement weather is understood by carpenters, its “hardness” is understood differently in different contexts. It is necessary, by extension, that we live with a fairly well-grounded sense of concepts’ meanings; but those meanings must not be mistaken as applying to a real substance.

Even if the property of a thing is shown to differ according to conditions, however, there is still a case for arguing that we are operating with a loose sense of metaphysics. Even if Nāgārjuna argues for dynamic interdependence, which invalidates any belief in inherent properties, if a set of conditions remains relatively stable, that allows for predictability in naming properties.¹⁰⁴ But Nāgārjuna's point is that such naming must always be cognizant of dependent factors originating from *pratītyasamutpāda*. For example, fire occurs with heat but curdled milk is not inherent in milk.¹⁰⁵

Nāgārjuna argues that even *śūnyatā* is not an absolute term, similar to the contingent qualities of any phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ It obtains due to its interdependence with *saṃvṛti*, in the same way as *saṃvṛti* obtains due to its interdependence with *śūnyatā*. What defines *śūnyatā* is its openness and indeterminacy. It is no one thing, and possesses no particular nature. Nāgārjuna wants to avoid all metaphysics. But is indeterminacy a strong enough argument against metaphysics? Certainly it does guard against dogmatic thinking. However, there is a danger that the statement "all things are empty of own-being" may lead to an uncritical, non-interrogatory approach to the properties of phenomena. Science convincingly demonstrates the merit in experimentation through trial and error in coming to an understanding of the "nature", loosely formulated, of our world and the objects that comprise it. Conversely, even if, as Nāgārjuna argues, the

¹⁰⁴ Siderits argues that "the denial that anything bears the intrinsic nature of a means of knowledge is not tantamount to the denial that we are justified in taking ourselves to know certain things. It is one thing to deny that justification can be context-invariant; it is quite another to deny that anything ever justifies a belief" (2003: 150). He makes this argument to affirm that there are justifiable conventional means of knowledge.

¹⁰⁵ MK 10 and MK 13: 6.

¹⁰⁶ Even if it is argued that *śūnyatā* is absolute in the sense that is the nature of all phenomena without exception it is not an absolute because that understanding of *śūnyatā* is contingent indeterminacy.

world is a result of the mind's ability to fragment the *dharmatā* into conceptual bits and then perceive something "real" in those invented bits, it is still surprising that the mind can negotiate this mere collection of "mirages and phantasms".

Plato grappled with the same dilemma of the relation between things and their metaphysical status. He posed the question, "Could there be two identical objects?" because, according to his logic, each object would be developed from a particular form.¹⁰⁷ Plato argued that qualitative identity was possible without numerical identity on the basis that representation is reproducible. He, therefore, would not shift from the realism that informed his thinking.

Similarly, Nāgārjuna's thought is informed by the non-realism of the Buddha's teachings. Nāgārjuna introduced the concepts of interdependent two-truths formulation and dependent origination, which are rooted in the Buddha's understanding of causality, into Buddhist discourse about the nature of reality. Therefore it is not through access to metaphysical truths that we understand the world but, rather, by way of interrelated meanings and consensus formation. Interrelatedness implies that there are no discrete phenomena and that all is in constant flux.¹⁰⁸ It is true that phenomena are inexpressible, not discrete but not entirely non-apparent from the *saṃvṛti* view. It is also true that phenomena are produced by the mind via *pratītyasamutpāda*. So in terms of the two-truths formulation, what is the function of bare objects or, to put the question

¹⁰⁷ Plato (1974: 596 a-d.).

¹⁰⁸ It could be argued that this is a metaphysical statement but I follow Nāgārjuna's defense in the VV by arguing that a statement that affirms no substance is not a proposition.

another way, what is the difference between the mind producing mere bare objects and creating meaning from them or imposing own-being onto them?

If terms, for Nāgārjuna, do not refer to metaphysical realities or to clearly distinguishable things in the world, then, in terms of the two-truths formulation, I argue that their function is to act as symbols for *pratītyasamutpāda*. Symbols are signs that point to an inexpressible truth and function as tools to communicate about that which defies language.¹⁰⁹ The indeterminacy of signs refers to the *akasic* nature of *śūnyata*. The mind produces bare objects, which are characterised by indeterminacy. However, they have discernible characteristics, which enable us to comprehend and relate to them. But this does not imply that they have a metaphysical status. Nāgārjuna's argument shows that the mind's productions are empty of own-being. At the *paramārtha* level, no phenomena arise. At the same time, Nāgārjuna does not want to suggest that the truth is that nothing occurs. MK 7: 33 suggests that while, from the *paramārtha* view, no conditioning exists, conditioning does occur from the *saṃvṛti* view as a necessary component of *pratītyasamutpāda*. I suggest that the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is best understood as *saṃvṛti* being symbolic of *paramārtha* based on the experience of *saṃvṛti*'s indeterminacy. This is the only way to escape the problem of metaphysics that Nāgārjuna faces is his claim that all phenomena are empty. Words,

¹⁰⁹ In replying to the criticism that I have just made a statement that is inexpressible, my response, though insufficient, must be, while language points non-referentially to inexpressible truth, I am working with a conventionally accepted version of both language and truth even as I remain aware of its limitations.

concepts, statements and the world are best interpreted as metaphors for *pratītyasamutpāda*. While the mind produces bare objects through the processes of *vikalpa* and *prapañca*, the two-truths formulation gives these mental productions the function of referring to reality in symbolic form. This logic follows from the logic in the PPM, where finite objects are reinterpreted to represent the infinite character of Wisdom. It is important to note that such logic does not produce multiple concepts of different types of metaphysical knowledge as in Gnostic hierarchy of secret knowledge. Rather, objects, terms and concepts are the sole material Nāgārjuna works with.

Westerhoff et al wrote *Moonshadows: conventional truth in Buddhist philosophy* (2011) in order to grapple with four questions relating to *saṃvṛti*:

- What is conventional truth?
- What is true about conventional truth?
- How flexible is conventional truth? How much can it be revised?
- What are the implications of all this for how we live our lives?

They derive these questions from Candrakīrti's understanding of conventional knowledge¹¹⁰. My thesis offers a critique of their starting point on Candrakīrti's view that objects have two natures — ultimate and conventional. Each nature is apprehended by corresponding cognitive processes. The implication is that objects are understood differently according to the level at which they are apprehended. But this contradicts the assertion in VV 70 and MK 24: 14 that the same cognitive processes that understand emptiness underpin the clear cognition of all objects. The point pursued in this thesis is that while it is true that knowledge cannot be conceived in substantialist terms,

¹¹⁰ (Madhyamakāvata vi: 23, see Tsong khapa, 2006).

Nagarjuna's claim that objects are meaningful due to their rootedness in *pratītyasamutpāda* requires further exploration and explanation. Candrakīrti's attempted explanation falls into contradiction in his assertion that objects have two natures when he maintains that conventional phenomena are understood as ultimate when their essence is seen as emptiness.¹¹¹

In order to explore Nāgārjuna's proposition in VV 70 and MK 24: 14, the two-truths concept needs close scrutiny. If *saṃvṛti* is understood accurately, it is comprised of bare perceptual objects, which neither exist nor do not exist.¹¹² The erroneous imposition of *svabhāva* onto perceived objects occurs because of the false idea of personal consciousness or ego, which emerges as the last of the *skandhas* as an imposition on the 'flow of consciousness'. The false sense of personal substance is then projected onto other objects. Projection is a modern idea, introduced as recently as the twentieth century, related to the idea of the mind being split between the conscious and unconscious mind in Freudian psychoanalysis. The formation of ego-consciousness in Buddhism is also an unconscious process, simply because there is no conscious awareness of the process. The processes of cognition are therefore split off from meaning, which is either false or true, therefore, due to unconscious projection onto bare perceived objects. In dividing objects into two natures, Candrakīrti perpetuates the splitting off of processes of cognition from the act of cognition (i.e. the ego). In effect,

¹¹¹ Tsong Khapa (2006: 484).

¹¹² Westerhoff (2009: 35-38). I make a distinction between the notion of the bare particular, which Nāgārjuna rejects because that would mean the existence of mind-independent objects (as Westerhoff points out) and bare perceptual objects, which are a crucial aspect of a meditative observation of *dharmatā*.

arguing for objects' dual natures is a consequence of a split mind because it perpetuates an absurd belief that objects have two natures, conceptual and non-conceptual.

In order to grasp the assertion made in VV 70 and MK 24: 14 the two truths need to reflect the whole mind, as expressed in the meditative experience of *ākāśa*, and not a split mind. Such a meditative experience is observant of mental objects, but is not attached or agitated by them. At the same time it neither rejects nor suppresses them. My argument is that this *akasic* experience of mind is best conceived philosophically through a metaphorical interpretation of the identity theory of truth. From the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda*, meaning is established by viewing objects, terms and concepts as symbols of openness and emptiness in that they are produced by the mind whose nature is openness and emptiness. Conversely, if objects are viewed as having two natures, objects symbolise a mind that is split and ignorant of its own nature. Nāgārjuna's argument, which follows the view of *śūnyatā* in the PPM, is that the Wisdom that lies beyond is attained through acknowledgement with and reinterpretation of words, concepts and objects in the world into alignment with an experience of the whole mind.¹¹³ But that does not mean that ultimately *saṃvṛti* is transcended. Rather, reality is experienced by participating in a non-attached fashion in *saṃvṛti* or, to put it more succinctly: in order to understand reality there needs to be engagement in dependently-originated process reality. Understanding reality needs to be approached via conceptual tools, but the production of these tools needs to be viewed as pointing to

¹¹³ MK 24:1-10

the dependently-originated processes that gave rise to them. I argue, therefore, that the only way to understand the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* is to see the relationship through the lens of metaphoricity where *saṃvṛti* is symbolic of and “points to” *paramārtha*. If the equivalence of *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* is correctly understood in the process of engaging with the flow of *pratītyasamutpāda* in a non-attached fashion, then there is awareness of right knowledge. In this regard it is easier to conceive of the relation between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* when *saṃvṛti* is viewed as symbolic of the indeterminacy as *paramārtha*. This means that *saṃvṛti* is engaged in a creative and open manner, without judgement or limitation.

The symbolic relationship between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* is apparent when MK 16: 10 is compared MK 26: 10. MK 16: 10 reads:

*Na nirvāṇasamāropo na samsārāpakasaṅgaṃ/
Yatra kas tatra samsāro nirvāṇaṃ kiṃ vikalpyate*¹¹⁴

But MK 16: 10 needs to be read in the light of MK 26: 10:

*Saṃsāramūlān saṃskārān avidvān saṃskaroty atah/
Avidvān kāraḥ tasmān na vidvāṃs tattvadarśanāt*¹¹⁵

Samskaroty in the above lines means “to put together” or “to compose”. This indicates that Nāgārjuna is not arguing for superimposition in the same sense as a constructed

¹¹⁴ McCagney (1997: 174).

¹¹⁵ McCagney (1997: 212).

map is imposed on terrain. Rather, in his view, an incorrect interpretation of events is transposed onto dependent origination. From the perspective of the identity theory of truth, the processes of *pratītyasamutpāda* are inherent in the terms, concepts and objects produced in the *saṃvṛti* view, therefore the projection of meaning is unnecessary. *Saṃvṛti* naturally refers to and resonates with *paramārtha*: neither view is rejected or constructed, as MK 16: 10 succinctly states:

Neither is *nirvāṇa* only *saṃsāra* nor is *saṃsāra* removed away. Where there is *nirvāṇa*, there is *saṃsāra*. Which is falsely discriminated from which?

Both *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* occur to the observant mind due to *pratītyasamutpāda*.¹¹⁶

Liberation is experienced through the natural reinterpretation of terms and objects as symbols for their natural empty state along the lines of their natural state pointing to the inexpressible empty silence. Nāgārjuna's assertion that *nirvāṇa* is the same as *saṃsāra*¹¹⁷ must be understood from the starting point of an understanding of their reality as *śūnyatā*. At the level of perspective it does not make sense to assert identity between the two views purely in terms of the ambit of their differing views because this would viciate the 'nature' of the view. However, the equivalence of the two views allows

¹¹⁶ Garfield makes a similar suggestion but does not explore the matter in enough depth when he states, "through addressing the question of the potential existence of an event in its conditions, Nāgārjuna hints at this concealed relation between praxis and reality" (in Garfield 1994: 5). Garfield does not venture into exploring whether Nāgārjuna wants to advocate experience as meaningful. He argues, instead, that, "dependent origination simply is the explicability and coherence of the universe. Its emptiness is the fact that there is no more to it than that" (1994: 8). It is interesting that Garfield does not discuss Chapter 17 of the MK, which, as I argued in Chapters 2 and 3, requires a combination of both cognitive and non-cognitive facets of the mind.

¹¹⁷ MK 25: 19.

for a metaphorical relationship where the indiscernibility of *saṃvṛti* objects are seen as instances of the inexpressible truth of *śūnyatā*.

Invoking Chapter 26 may contradict my previous suggestion of a different authorship to this chapter in that the idea of the Twelve Chain understanding of *pratītyasamutpāda* contradicts Nāgārjuna's assertion of the equivalence of Nāgārjuna *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*. But this point is overridden by Jones' argument that in equating *pratītyasamutpāda* with *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda* from the *saṃvṛti* perspective offers the condition for desire but it is not the cause of desire.¹¹⁸ He notes that Nāgārjuna makes the distinction between cause (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratīyā*) in MK 1: 2.¹¹⁹ Desire begins in an active "misapprehension of reality".¹²⁰ If emptiness is equated with *pratītyasamutpāda*, what arises cannot be affirmed but neither can it be denied – "it is a matter of dependency and a process of becoming".¹²¹ The mistake occurs when what arises is seen as distinct and independent¹²². But speaking of what arises without falling into misapprehension of reality requires an alternate use of language, one that creates the conditions for meaning and, ultimately, for Wisdom.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2338-3522).

¹¹⁹ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2338-3522).

¹²⁰ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2338-3522).

¹²¹ Jones (2010: Kindle ebook location 2338-3522).

¹²² See fn 55.

¹²³ Garfield explains the difference between *hetu* and *pratīyā* in Nāgārjuna's usage as follows:

When Nāgārjuna uses the word "cause" (*hetu*), he has in mind an event or state that has in it a power (*kriya*) to bring about its effect, and has the power as part of its essence or nature (*svabhava*). When he uses the term "condition", on the other hand (*pratīyā*), he has in mind an event, state or process that can be appealed to in explaining another event, state or process, without any metaphysical commitment to any occult connection between explanandum and explanans" (1994:4).

While this distinction is useful, I think Garfield does not take the distinction between *hetu* and *pratīyā* far enough to fully grasp Nāgārjuna's intention in Chapter 1 of the MK.

Reading MK16: 10 in connection with MK 26: 10 reveals the antecedent influence of the PPM's use of metaphors in Nāgārjuna's thought. In MK 16: 10 the inseparability of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is affirmed. In MK 26: 10 the wise are described as not manufacturing separate identities for objects but, rather, seeing objects as instances of inexpressible reality that require no further mental construction other than being dependently originated expressions of *śūnyatā*.

Hence the ignorant compose dispositions, roots of *saṃsāra*.
Therefore, the ignorant create while the wise, seeing reality, do not.

Given the logic contained in MK16: 10 and MK 26: 10, MK 24: 14 and VV 70 affirm that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* work because *śūnyatā* works.¹²⁴ This means that the defining properties of concepts and objects make sense because of *śūnyatā/pratītyasamutpāda*. It is my contention that Nāgārjuna's claim in MK 24: 14 and VV70 that concepts and objects are meaningful due to their *śūnyatā/pratītyasamutpāda* status can only obtain if *saṃvṛti* has a metaphorical relationship with *paramārtha*. There is no other way properties can be held without their either having realist/metaphysical properties or non-realist, contextually imposed properties. But if properties refer to *śūnyatā/pratītyasamutpāda*, then they are seen as "conditions" that make sense

¹²⁴ McCagney (1997: 201).

because they are conditionless.¹²⁵ Their identifiable conditions can only be symbols for their true *śūnya* reality.¹²⁶

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have probed the manner in which Nāgārjuna argues for complete absence of own-being and metaphysics. This is the key to his radical innovation in philosophy. The absence of own-being is best understood in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*. The equivalence between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* makes sense in terms of the logic of *pratītyasamutpāda*, which, I have argued, derives from the conception of *ākāśa* and metaphor in the PPM. Identification with *pratītyasamutpāda* has several very important implications. First, it implies that no aspects of *pratītyasamutpāda* can be excluded or denied since *saṃsāra* is equivalent to *nirvāṇa* in that both derive their identity from *pratītyasamutpāda*. Second, Nāgārjuna's two-truths framework is "flat" rather than hierarchical, therefore reality is equally shared and equally open.¹²⁷ Experience refers to no metaphysical or contextually derived properties. Instead, it refers meaningfully to the awareness of emptiness or dependent origination. Only in the state of ignorance does grasping occur and inequality places

¹²⁵ In MK 1: 5 Nāgārjuna does not deny the "existence" of conditions as experiential objects, but he denies their substantial existence. The ineffable nature of experience cannot be explained by metaphysical categories or by contextual causality.

¹²⁶ I see similarities between my argument for a symbolic connection between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* and Priest's argument that the structure of *śūnyatā* can be mathematically described as the totality of well-founded sets within in which all other sets are relationally embedded. In this way he argues that the problematic notion of indeterminacy is overcome because all conditions or relational sets participate in the determinative structure of *śūnyatā* (2009: 9-13).

¹²⁷ I do not mean by 'flat' to imply a non realist notion of truth. Rather, I mean that truth makers are arrived at via the understanding of dependent origination that allows all things to be understood.

conflicting meaning onto representations, such as when objects are seen to have dual natures. Third, the idea of knowledge inferred in *pratītyasamutpāda*, as open, non-fixed, insubstantial and non-referential makes sense if objects in and of the world are metaphors of an *akasic*, non-verbal emptiness. While being pragmatic, we can negotiate a world that substantially does not and cannot exist and yet makes sense from the vantage point of an inexpressible silence. This chapter has demonstrated that the equivalence between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* makes sense if viewed from a lens of metaphoricity where *saṃvṛti* is understood to symbolise the openness and indeterminacy that is characteristic of *śūnyata*.

Conclusion

This thesis focuses on Nāgārjuna the philosopher, and, in particular, the aspects of his thought that deal with the nature of things and their meaning. The majority of Nāgārjuna's writings are devoted to deconstructions, using the *prasaṅga* method of argumentation, of his opponents' views – the *Sarvāstivādin* and *Sautrāntika* positions that uphold some form of substantialism. As a result, research into Nāgārjuna's writings tends to focus on analysing *pratītyasamutpāda* or the relationship between *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha*. By contrast, the main part of my thesis does not focus on Nāgārjuna's debates with his opponents. My concern is to make sense of his thought, and specifically to focus on a neglected area in Nāgārjuna scholarship, namely the consequences of his thought for our understanding of meaning, particularly because he indicates in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 that the application of his thought is experiential meaning.

Although Nāgārjuna does not make many assertive propositions regarding his philosophical position, he does assert that all phenomena are empty and that phenomena are meaningful because *śūnyatā* provides a sense of being engaged with them (*yujyate*)¹ and the experience of them is immediate or manifest (*prabhavati*).² Phenomena, therefore, according to Nāgārjuna, only make sense if viewed from the standpoint of *śūnya*. In this regard he makes two crucial assertions: first, that *śūnyatā* is

¹ MK 24: 14.

² VV 70.

identical to *pratītyasamutpāda* and second, that there is “no distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*”.³ While he devotes much of his writing to applying the *prasaṅga* method to prove the necessity of recognising that all phenomena are *śūnya* and thereby asserting that causality needs to be based on emptiness by deconstructing views of phenomena based on substance, he does not give much attention to explaining his second claim, namely that phenomena make sense due to *śūnyatā*. This thesis, therefore, grapples with the latter issue – that Nāgārjuna does not provide adequate supporting argument to prove that phenomena are meaningful due to their *śūnyatā*.

Reality, for Nāgārjuna, is opposite from the materialist, stoical position, where phenomena and events stand as sobering correctives to mental impositions. But he is also not an idealist or a monist in that, for him, events or conditions are both real and not real. He is adamant that *saṃvṛti*, if seen on its own terms, i.e. from the point of view of *paramārtha*, is not substantially real. My argument in this thesis is that if *saṃvṛti* in itself is nothing, it therefore “is” as it is interpreted and susceptible to interpretations based on ignorance. However, *saṃvṛti*, Nāgārjuna avers, is most accurately understood in terms of *paramārtha*. So while *saṃvṛti* is not identical to *paramārtha*, there is a relationship of equivalence between the two of them. This relationship of equivalence is best described in terms of metaphoric logic where *saṃvṛti* points to *paramārtha*. While phenomena appear unsolicited on the mental landscape, due to *vikalpa* and *prapañca*, they may be reinterpreted, ignorantly, as substantial objects or as metaphors for ultimate reality or *śūnyatā*.

³ MK 25: 19 (in McCagney 1997: 209).

I explored three subsidiary problems in search of a solution to the problem of understanding the claim that Nāgārjuna does not explain, namely why the experience of phenomena are meaningful when *śūnyatā* is properly understood. These are:

- Under what conditions does a clear understanding of *śūnyatā* emerge?
- What does *śūnyatā* as a meditational experience of openness, as expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras* as *ākāśa*, mean in *Madhyamaka* philosophy?
- How does the experience of *pratītyasamutpāda* make phenomena philosophically meaningful?

The solution to the first subsidiary problem is that a clear understanding of *śūnyatā* emerges with an experience of meditational objects as *akasically* indeterminate and open. The solution to the second sub-problem was that phenomena in *Madhyamaka* philosophy are indeterminate and contextually meaningful. But this solution, I maintain, is insufficient in terms of the claims that Nāgārjuna makes regarding phenomena making sense if understood in terms of *śūnyatā*. While it is understood that Nāgārjuna wants to stipulate that phenomena can only make sense in terms of immediacy and engagement in the present, such an understanding of the present requires an unbounded experience of the processes of *pratītyasamutpāda* as expressed in MK 17: 20:

Openness (*śūnyatā*) is not disruption, and *saṃsāra* is not permanence. The imperishability of the two actions is the teaching elucidated by the Buddha.⁴

⁴ In McCagney (1997:178).

Phenomena are, therefore, not to be experienced in their immediacy in a limited contextual fashion; but neither are they to be discounted as inconsequential for them to be experienced as meaningful. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is all-inclusive. The argument for the universal applicability of meaning requires a closer examination of semantics. It is important, here, to understand Nāgārjuna's sense of *śūnyatā*. According to Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā* must be understood from the standpoint of *pratītyasamutpāda*. All space, time and phenomena are subject to dependent origination. . Meaning is, therefore, not derived in terms of coherence with its contextual coordinates, but rather via an identity theory of truth that identifies phenomena with an open and all-encompassing sense of conditioning. The understanding of meaning that Nāgārjuna is proposing, along the lines of engagement (*yujyate*) and immediacy (*prabhavati*), occurs within the context of time and space being conditionally existent. But this view does not lead him to pessimism. The meaning of circumstance and phenomena seems to reside in terms of his understanding of causality, which is not defined in terms of nature or activity, but rather by a form of metaphoric logic that, at every instance, points to infinite or boundless conditioning. In this sense every immediate instance of engagement with phenomena sheds light on the boundless nature of reality when *śūnyatā* is understood.

In Chapter Two I argued that Nāgārjuna's logic displays striking similarities to the logic in the *Prajñāparāmita Sūtras* (PPM). Such an assertion seems to give weight to Edward Conze's argument that Nāgārjuna's writings, particularly in the *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*, are a restatement of the PPM. But I do not go so far as to aver that my findings corroborate Conze's position because there is very little historical evidence that links

Nāgārjuna's thought to the PPM, although useful future study could closely analyse and compare the linguistic and logical features of the MK and the *Aṣṭa*. This kind of study would be pertinent based on the findings of this thesis, namely that the logic used in the PPM leads to a form of metaphoricity which, I argued, is reflected in Nāgārjuna's assertion that "everything makes sense, for him to whom *śūnya* is clear" and "because *śūnyatā* interpreted as openness is engaging, everything is engaging" (or so we can roughly paraphrase VV 70 and MK 24: 14). This thesis never set out to establish a historical derivation for the logic utilized by Nāgārjuna in these two verses. Rather its method was philosophical, to examine the similarities between the metaphoric logic in the PPM and compare it with Nāgārjuna's logic in MK 24:14 and VV70. The basis of this logic lies in the interpretation of *śūnya* as openness, along the lines of *ākāśa* rather than emptiness. In this regard I defer to Nancy McCagney's work, where she explores the associations of *ākāśa* (boundlessness, wideness and openness) with *śūnyatā* in the PPM.⁵ As with Conze's claims about the relation between the PPM and Nāgārjuna's writings, it is difficult to prove the connection; but my thesis shows that interpreting *ākāśa* with *śūnyatā* significantly enriches our reading of Nāgārjuna's thought based on the recognition of the similarities of logic between the PPM and Nāgārjuna. This leads to the realisation that Nāgārjuna is not merely engaging in logical argumentation with an opponent in his writings. He also bases his thought on a deeper meditational experience of infinity and spaciousness akin to that described in the PPM and grafting that experience onto his logic with the assistance of metaphoricity.

⁵ McCagney 1997.

In Chapter Three I argued that *saṃvṛti* is indiscernible due to its emptiness, and that *saṃvṛtisatya* cannot be corroborated on its own terms. I was, and remain, critical of scholars who apply Candrakīrti's interpretation of the two-truths formulation, which grants both *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* their distinctive truths. The consequence of this approach is the need to prove the distinctive veracity of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* in each object. But this schema does not explain how seeing phenomena as empty makes them meaningful in the sense of *yujyate* and *prabhavati*. In Chapters Two and Four I sought to offer an explanation for what Nāgārjuna means when he asserts that *saṃvṛti* makes sense when *paramārtha* is understood according to his criteria of "engaging" and "immediate".

If Nāgārjuna wants to maintain that understanding *śūnyatā* makes things meaningful, he needs to move beyond the problem of relativity, which I raise in Chapter Three, namely if meaning is contextually situated, it is not a sufficiently stable foundation to support his claim for clarity of understanding phenomena. Nāgārjuna is a philosopher and therefore he is not content merely to rest on the notion that one's experience of meditational objects provides clarity of meaning, as I show in Chapter Three: relative truth does not offer the certainty for meaning to obtain, despite the fact that the realisation of relativity is grounded on the awareness of phenomena's emptiness. Crucially, Nāgārjuna needs to proffer a logical explanation for why *śūnyatā* provides phenomena with clear meaning. I showed in Chapter Two that Nāgārjuna is not consistent with his own definitions of *saṃvṛti*. So, despite his assertion that phenomena are clearly understood when *śūnyatā* is understood, he appears to not be consistent in his own exploration of

this idea. But in identifying *śūnyatā* with *pratītyasamutpāda* and intrinsically associating *nirvāṇa* with *saṃsāra*, he suggests a stable foundation for understanding phenomena, but he is, unfortunately, not explicit about how such a stable foundation is obtained. In Chapter Four an explanation for how phenomena are meaningful, both in terms of engagement and immediacy, due to their emptiness, was provided in the PPM's use of metaphoricity. In terms of Nāgārjuna's writings, rather than seeing the two truths as distinctive, I maintain that *saṃvṛtīsatya* and *parāmārthasatya* both make sense in terms of their metaphorical relationship in that they are both *śūnyatā* and that phenomena point to or are metaphors for the all-inclusive *śūnyatā* of reality. Nāgārjuna's two best examples of his assertion that phenomena make sense due to their emptiness are,

All things prevail for him whom prevails this voidness. Nothing prevails for him for whom voidness does not prevail.⁶
*sarvaṃ ca tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/
 sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya na yujyate//*

And

For whom there is emptiness, there is [the clarity of] all things. For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing whatsoever.⁷
*Prabhavati ca śūnyatēyam peabhavanti tasya sarvāthāh/
 Prabhavati na tasya kiṃcin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya//*

The point of this thesis has been to emphasise the importance of the claims to meaning and understanding made in MK 24: 14 and VV 70 in Nāgārjuna's philosophy. His philosophy is neither nihilistic nor positivistic (as recent writings suggest in focusing on

⁶ VV 70 in Westerhoff (2010: 41).

⁷ MK 24:14 in McCagney, (1997: 201).

the role of *saṃvṛti*⁸). But if he is neither nihilistic nor positivistic, his assertion of meaningful engagement with phenomena when *śūnyatā* is grasped needs to be understood, I aver, within the metaphoric logic embedded in the *Prajñāpāramita sūtras*. Such an approach has wider implications for the entire field of Nāgārjuna scholarship and Buddhist philosophy. If Nāgārjuna's philosophy is to be understood within the framework of metaphoric logic it suggests intriguing psychological elements in his thought that point to his understanding of how knowledge and ignorance are produced. Moreover, if this thesis concerning Nāgārjuna's understanding of knowledge and Wisdom being grounded in the all-inclusive thought of metaphoric logic can be shown to obtain logically and psychologically, then such thought could assist to bringing a useful Buddhist contribution to global challenges that require complex human rights interventions.

⁸ Westerhoff, 2011, for example Chapter 2 and Chapter 12.

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