

DEMYSTIFYING THE SAINT:

JAY L. GARFIELD'S RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION OF
NĀGĀRJUNA'S MĀDHYAMAKA AS THE EPITOME OF
CONTEMPORARY CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

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Tammikuu 2011

ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural philosophy approaches philosophical problems by setting into dialogue systems and perspectives from across cultures. I use the term more specifically to refer to the current stage in the history of comparative philosophy marked by the ethos of scholarly self-reflection and the production of rational reconstructions of foreign philosophies. These reconstructions lend a new kind of relevance to cross-cultural perspectives in mainstream philosophical discourses. I view Jay L. Garfield's work as an example of this.

I examine Garfield's approach in the context of Nāgārjuna scholarship and cross-cultural hermeneutics. By situating it historically and discussing its background and implications, I wish to highlight its distinctive features. Even though Garfield has worked with Buddhist philosophy, I believe he has a lot to offer to the meta-level discussion of cross-cultural philosophy in general.

I argue that the clarity of Garfield's vision of the nature and function of cross-cultural philosophy can help alleviate the identity crisis that has plagued the enterprise: Garfield brings it closer to (mainstream) philosophy and helps it stand apart from Indology, Buddhology, area studies philosophy (etc). I side with Garfield in arguing that cross-cultural philosophy not only brings us better understanding of other philosophical traditions, but may enhance our self-understanding as well. I furthermore hold that his employment of Western conceptual frameworks (post-Wittgensteinian language philosophy, skepticism) and theoretical tools (paraconsistent logic, Wittgensteinian epistemology) together with the influence of Buddhist interpretative lineages creates a coherent, cogent, holistic and analytically precise reading of Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis operates on two levels. For one, it attempts to provide a general overview of the task of approaching, interpreting, and working with culturally distant philosophical systems. This involves asking questions concerning hermeneutics, metaphilosophy, methodology and the philosophy of (cross-cultural) scholarship. The second level, which is more specific, examines the recent trend of self-conscious scholarship in cross-cultural philosophy, as represented and personified by Jay L. Garfield, whose philosophical projects have bridged the gap between cross-cultural philosophy and the act of philosophizing, i.e., *doing* philosophy by creating *new* perspectives. I believe that Garfield's holistic take on the issue, together with his lucid arguments for the necessity of cross-cultural philosophy, epitomizes the current maturation process of the enterprise and can provide the much-needed momentum for bringing cross-cultural perspectives from the margins of philosophy to the center stage.

1.1 CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

The terms 'comparative philosophy' and 'cross-cultural philosophy' are sometimes used interchangeably to denote a subfield of philosophy in which philosophical problems are approached by "intentionally setting into dialogue sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams."¹ The stereotypical cross-cultural dialogue takes place across the East/West -axis: the "West" refers to the Euro-American cultural sphere usually represented by a Western scholar trained in Western philosophy and the "East" is represented by ancient Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, or Japanese (etc.) texts. It should be noted, however, that comparative/cross-cultural philosophy encompasses a multitude of streams, dispositions, procedures and objectives.

The term 'comparative' in 'comparative philosophy' suggests that we have two or more philosophical systems, traditions or streams that we compare, contrast or sometimes allow to

¹See Littejohn's (2005) entry "Comparative philosophy" at Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP), available at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/comparat/>

interact productively. While much of philosophical activity involves such comparisons, comparative philosophy tends to look for streams that are *very* different from one another. This is why comparative philosophers are often led to discuss the possibility of the traditions in question being incommensurable, i.e., lacking a common ground, basis, or factor that would make genuine interactions or comparisons possible or meaningful². Many scholars have concluded that the reconciliation and accommodation of outwardly disparate systems is, in some cases at least, possible and appropriate. However, the lack of reflection on the nature and task of the comparative philosophical enterprise has also produced a great variety of naive assimilations and other examples of academic excess. Crossing cultures is therefore not a simple matter.

Contemporary scholars seem to have better awareness of the threats present in comparative projects than their predecessors. Displays of chauvinism in particular are frowned upon and earlier comparative works are studied and deconstructed to reveal cultural bias and ethnocentrism. But recreating a culturally distant philosophical system in the image of one's own or evaluating it by one's own (tradition-dependent) standards is not the only vice that a comparative philosopher might commit. At the other extreme, we find groundless deference and reluctance to criticize a tradition perceived as profounder than - and therefore superior to - one's own. Another common fault has to do with the inability to realize that traditions evolve and are seldom univocal or monolithic. This "perennialist" tendency fossilizes philosophical streams and turns them into things-of-the-past, even if the systems in question still have living proponents.

A growing awareness of the many dangers involved, and a related insistence on scholarly self-reflection, mark the current chapter in comparative philosophy. Today, many academics working in this field prefer to call themselves *cross-cultural* philosophers. This might be due to a desire to stand apart from the previous (sometimes misguided) comparative efforts, to draw attention to the fact that *crossing* boundaries of *culture* invokes a very unique set of questions (especially when it comes to hermeneutics), and/or to combat the fallacious understanding of comparative philosophy as consisting of mere comparisons of already-existing viewpoints. Garfield in particular has emphasized the creative aspect of the enterprise that produces new cross-cultural viewpoints, streams and critiques. In many ways, therefore, the use of the term 'cross-cultural' marks the

² Those Western scholars who believe that eg. Asian thought is radically and fundamentally different from Western philosophy (i.e., that the two are incommensurable), might still engage in "area studies philosophy" (eg. 'Indian Philosophy' or 'Chinese Philosophy'), in which the comparative/cross-cultural aspect is downplayed.

transition (or the desire to shift) from definitional ambiguity, unreflected methodology and scholarly naivete into self-conscious, creative and critical enterprise.

In the name of reflection, I wish to explicate shortly what it is that I find appealing in cross-cultural philosophy. First and foremost, it is simply an extension of what has been my personal project, i.e., exposing myself to different ways of thinking and ways of life and letting them mix and fuse in my own thinking. I believe I have benefited from such exposure: not only have my mental flexibility and imaginative powers been enhanced, but I also feel I now have a richer reserve of perspectives at my disposal. I cannot think of any definite reasons for why such benefits could not take place in philosophy as well. The analogy may seem futile, but the fact is that more and more interaction is taking place between traditions that used to be relatively insulated. We have already seen inter-faith dialogue that has succeeded in creating mutual understanding and constructive co-operation, as well as various cross-cultural undertakings in psychology, psychiatry, sociology, political science (and so on) that have cleared off some of the Western ethnocentrism in human/social sciences.

The perceived ethnocentrism of Western philosophy has encouraged some scholars to actively pursue cross-cultural studies. However, the majority of Western philosophers has shown very little concern for the proposed cultural bias and its possible confounding/limiting effects. To this day, cross-cultural, comparative and area studies philosophy remain strongly marginalized: their perspectives rarely enter mainstream journals, seminars or discourses and non-Western philosophers (and cross-cultural philosophy itself) are seldom mentioned in philosophy encyclopedias³ or university lectures. This marginalization and segregation connects to my second motive for becoming a student of both alien philosophical systems and of cross-cultural philosophy itself: I believe that the reluctance of mainstream Western philosophers to acknowledge Asian (etc.) systems of thought as “real” philosophy reflects not only their culturally biased definition of philosophy, but also their stereotypical and naive (mis)understanding of the concerns and contents of these systems.

³ The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP) provides a general entry for ‘Comparative Philosophy’ (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/comparat/>), the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) does not (although there is a slightly more specialized entry by David Wong for Comparative philosophy of Chinese and Western sources: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comparphil-chiwes/>). Wikipedia currently has no entry for either cross-cultural or comparative philosophy, but the cross-cultural and comparative efforts of some philosophers have been mentioned in the entries dedicated to them.

It should be noted that the term ‘cross-cultural’ in itself is somewhat neutral⁴ and that cross-cultural philosophers can also discredit foreign philosophical systems by making their inconsistencies, errors and faults visible. However, many believe that the real task of a cross-cultural philosopher is to find the kind of framework in which the system begins to *make sense*. This means that one’s own theoretical and conceptual “baggage” is allowed to undergo change as well. By importing and exporting ideas, methods, and theoretical tools, scholars are also creating common ground for future cross-cultural projects.

The transportation of meaning (etc) from one context into another is a difficult mission: we are crossing a boundary that exists (or is perceived to exist) between cultures. But what does this crossing entail? Over-emphasizing the boundary sometimes tempts us to (mis)perceive philosophical traditions as monolithic, static, univocal, or even incommensurable, but we cannot deny its existence either (not from the start at least). One task of the cross-cultural philosopher is therefore to problematize the boundaries and the act of crossing them. This is why hermeneutics plays an important part in the meta-level discussions of the discipline. It would be naive to assume that cross-cultural interpretation did not differ from interpretation within a culture.

It is one thing to acknowledge that distinct cultures and traditions have a level of uniqueness to them and another to claim that this uniqueness constitutes an absolute boundary. An important step is to acknowledge the diversity of philosophical systems within a single tradition. The talk of “Western” or “Eastern” philosophy is a gross oversimplification and highly misleading, for there is a multitude of philosophies to be found within both traditions. Some of them are probably genuinely different and irreconcilable, but sometimes the goals, methods and arguments are sufficiently close relatives to allow for fruitful interaction. It might be clearer not to invoke the East/West -distinction at all, but I argue that the terms can also be used in a self-conscious way that recognizes the diversity and variation. Instead of Western philosophy, we have western philosophies; instead of Eastern thought, we have eastern thinkers. I believe this is how the words are used by many contemporary cross-cultural philosophers and I intend to do the same. My use of the terms does not involve essentialist dichotomizing, but should be understood as drawing attention to the *cross-cultural* aspect of the enterprise, to the fact that cross-cultural philosophers

⁴ in the sense of not being ideologically charged like, for example, the concepts of ‘multiculturalism’ or ‘transculturation’. Cross-culturalism connects to cultural interactivity, i.e., exchange across cultural boundaries, but is not essentially linked to the requirement to portray other cultures favorably etc.

leave the comfort of their home tradition and venture into the unknown and unfamiliar. In this context, “West” is the name given to the familiar and “East” to the unfamiliar (or *vice versa*).

I have chosen to discuss the cross-cultural philosophical enterprise with reference to the philosophy of Nāgārjuna and his followers (Mādhyamikas⁵). This should not be taken to imply that I am attempting to advance a thesis of what Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is about. It is not in my interests to enter exegetical debate. Not only do I currently lack the lingual competence to study Nāgārjuna’s texts in their original Sanskrit (or as Tibetan or Chinese translations) which would arguably be crucial to the task, but my knowledge of Asian philosophy *per se* is still quite rudimentary. This results in an inability to satisfactorily contextualize Nāgārjuna’s thought making my hypothetical interpretative efforts vulnerable to all kinds of biases. I therefore (thus far) lack the cultural proximity needed to make sense of ancient Indian texts, but since I am now mainly concerned with the meta-theory, theory and praxis of cross-cultural philosophy, I believe my above-mentioned shortcomings may be excused.

The broad context of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is Buddhism. The concept of ‘Buddhism’ itself is European in origin: it was invented approximately three centuries ago to identify what we now understand to be a Pan-Asian tradition dating back to some 2500 years. Although the concept has gradually received global acceptance, there is still no consensus about its definition. On a very general level the term groups together the thoughts, practices, institutions, and values that relate to the historical Buddha and possess some unifying character. As such it reaches over a multitude of different “buddhisms” that come with distinct emphases, practices and philosophical viewpoints. Emphasizing the diverse and cumulative nature of Buddhism has led to it being divided up into more manageable segments.⁶

Mādhyamaka is one such segment. This philosophical school built on Nāgārjuna’s thought continues to attract following among Tibetans and other Himalayan peoples, certain East-Asian Mahayana communities and more recently also the Western Buddhist practitioners. It has a long history and an extensive *corpus* of independent philosophical treatises and commentarial texts (together with devotional texts and hymns etc.). *Mulamādhyamakakārikā* (hereafter: the MMK), Nāgārjuna’s *magnum opus*, is widely regarded as the most important Mādhyamaka text ever written. The works

⁵ Mādhyamaka is the name of the philosophical school, the Mādhyamikas are its proponents.

⁶ eg. Reynolds & Hallisey 1987: 335-336.

of subsequent Mādhyamikas, especially those of (Indian) Candrakīrti and (Tibetan) rJe Tsongkhapa, have also been widely studied.

1.2 NĀGĀRJUNA

Interpreting Nāgārjuna's philosophy has been - and continues to be - a source of great controversy for Asian Buddhists. The diversity in Western readings is perhaps even greater, however. The serious academic study of Nāgārjuna and Mādhyamaka philosophy was initiated in the 20th century by the Belgian Indologist Louis de La Vallée Poussin⁷ and his Russian confrère Fyodor Stcherbatsky⁸. Stcherbatsky's work came to be of particular importance, not only to the scholarly study of Mādhyamaka thought, but to the study of Buddhist philosophy in general. After a period of relative neglect, it was in his footsteps that the famous Indian scholar T.R.V. Murti continued. Murti's Kantian approach was further joined by Frederick Streng's religious phenomenology, Kenneth K. Inada's Zen perspective, Richard Robinson's analytically oriented studies and David Kalupahana's Theravadin/pragmatist interpretation of Nāgārjuna (and so on). More recent contributions have come mainly from North American academics such as the Tibetologist Jeffrey Hopkins and the philosophers C.W. Huntington, Jan Westerhoff, Nancy McCagney and Jay L. Garfield.

Nāgārjuna's significance in the development of Buddhist philosophy (especially Mahāyāna thought) is remarkable. While it has been claimed that Western scholarship tends to exaggerate his influence, the importance cannot be altogether denied. Not much is known of the initial reactions to Nāgārjuna's philosophizing, but today he is recognized as a patriarch by many Mahāyāna schools. In Joseph Walser's (2001: 1) words: "To find someone of comparable stature in other religions, one would have to look to Augustine of Hippo or, perhaps, to Moses Maimonides." In his philosophy of emptiness, Nāgārjuna systematically attacks the notion of *svabhāva* ('own-being' or 'intrinsic existence') and claims that nothing exists in its own right. This sets the background for discussions

⁷ of the "Franco-Belgian school" of Buddhist studies.

⁸ of the "Leningrad school".

of causation, time and movement as well as philosophical analyses of Buddhist soteriological goals and processes.

The fact that Nāgārjuna has captured the attention of so many Western (and Western-minded Asian) scholars can be partly explained by the above-mentioned historical effect he had on the developing Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition⁹. In all simplicity, Nāgārjuna's influence was too great to be ignored by Buddhologists and comparative philosophers. Another reason for the noticeable popularity might be found in the structure and style of Nāgārjuna's argumentation. Despite the seeming opacity, Nāgārjuna has a way of presenting his thought (in his more philosophically oriented texts at least) in a systematic and rigorous manner that might appeal to the academic Western mindset. The complex relationship between religion and philosophy in the West (a culture-specific phenomenon, one might add) may condition some philosophers to view the work of religious thinkers in a generally negative light or at least as inferior to secular philosophies. Nāgārjuna's rational arguments may therefore serve as a justification for taking his thought seriously as philosophy proper and help bridge the gap between philosophy and religion.

Today it seems that almost anything can be, and has been, said about Nāgārjuna. Some scholars are sympathetic, others are not. Some attempt to evaluate, others strive to understand. Some treat Mādhyamaka as a philosophical relic while others try to bring its insights into the 21st century. Some find similarities between Nāgārjuna's thought and that of Western philosophers, others compare his writings to those of other Asian thinkers and the rest remain skeptical about such comparative endeavors altogether. There are those who hold that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is merely a re-statement of the fundamental teachings of the historical Buddha and there are others who see it as representing a radical and innovative turn in the history of Buddhist thought. Nāgārjuna has been called a dialectician, a mystic, a skeptic, a monist, a pluralist, a relativist, a nihilist and an absolutist, while some have suggested that none of these Western categories applies to him. All in all, the scholarly disagreement surrounding Nāgārjuna and his philosophy is astonishingly diverse and intriguing.

Nāgārjuna is therefore a chameleon of a sort, capable of taking many forms. Often he seems to be mimicking his interpreter: he is asking the same questions, sometimes even offering the same

⁹ nowadays a pan-Asian religion stretching from the Indian, Nepalese, Bhutanese and Tibetan Himalayas to mainland China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Russia.

answers. This is why Nāgārjuna *scholarship* itself is such a fascinating subject that can illuminate the many aspects of (cross-cultural) interpretation. The fact that Nāgārjuna has attracted the attention of such a great number of scholars with different intellectual backgrounds and hermeneutical methods, has turned his philosophy into a mirror that over the decades has reflected both the trends of Western philosophy and the trends of cross-cultural interpretation.

Against this background, it is perhaps easier to see why I have decided to limit my discussion of cross-cultural philosophy to studies of Nāgārjuna and Mādhyamaka. The writings of this semi-mythical ancient thinker are much revered in many Buddhist traditions, and while most of his Western interpreters would agree that he is one of the most (if not *the* most) difficult philosophers to interpret, they are still willing to devote their time, mind and heart to the task. Taken as a whole, Nāgārjuna scholarship offers a rather nice panoramic view of the field, especially when used as a background for Garfield's dealings with Mādhyamaka.

1.3 JAY L. GARFIELD

This thesis has been inspired by the recent developments in cross-cultural philosophy. The growing awareness of the subtle (and sometimes gross) aspects of the enterprise has encouraged scholars to spend more time studying themselves and their actions. The ethos of objectivity and scientific detachment has been largely replaced by the ethos of self-consciousness. There are few scholars that would personify this ethos better than Jay L. Garfield who has dedicated a couple of decades to the study of Buddhist thought and of the hermeneutical, political/ethical and methodological issues involved in cross-cultural interpretation and philosophizing.

I will include a brief exposition of the history of Western Nāgārjuna scholarship. This is provided to serve as a demonstration of the way our theoretical commitments and intellectual backgrounds affect our interpretation as well as to highlight the distinct features of Garfield's approach to, and reading of, Nāgārjuna's thought. I often agree with Garfield's conclusions and findings but what matters more is that I find his style of doing (and writing about) cross-cultural philosophy refreshing and thought-provoking. He has provided clearly articulated (sometimes polemical) views on the nature and goals of the enterprise and his approach is holistic and critical.

Garfield engages in what he himself calls “tentative and open-ended query of (his) own philosophical activity (2005: 230)”. At this point, one might (rightfully) ask why not choose a cross-cultural philosopher with less polished views about her activities (for surely there would be more to reveal). If it was my goal to merely uncover and deconstruct, such a choice might be in order, but I believe it is also important to discuss the positive accomplishments of scholars as well as to consider where their work might be leading us. I argue that Garfield’s approach might be taking the enterprise into a very fruitful direction by showing how it can have contemporary relevance for mainstream philosophy. That said, the fact that Garfield seems to value openness and transparency does not in any way indicate that there is nothing to criticize in his approach. Surely his work, like that of any other cross-cultural philosopher, deserves the kind of critical scrutiny his predecessors have been subjected to.

At this point, a bit of background information is in order. To begin with, Garfield is first and foremost a *philosopher*, not a Tibetologist, a Buddhologist, or an Orientalist in the old-fashioned sense, even though he has mastered Tibetan language and is familiar with the Tibetan (monastic/scholastic) culture. Second, his approach to philosophy in general is cross-cultural. In addition to his professorship in a number of Western institutions, he is an Adjunct professor in the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (in India) and the director of the Five College Tibetan Studies in India Program (at Smith College). He has lived in India studying, teaching, and sharing ideas and he sees all these activities as important aspects of cross-cultural projects¹⁰.

Garfield’s approach to the interpretation of Nāgārjuna is likewise cross-cultural. He reads Nāgārjuna from the point of view of the Indo-Tibetan Mādhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika tradition, but as a Western philosopher presenting a philosophical text to his colleagues. As a firm believer in the possibility and necessity of cultural exchange in philosophy, he vigorously defends opening up to alien traditions. In his essay titled ‘Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative’ (2002), he writes:

¹⁰ Garfield 2002: 248-250.

Ignoring the philosophical traditions of other cultures in fact, whether we like it or not, continues the colonial project of subordinating those cultures to our own. The project was “justified” by the white man’s burden of bringing civilization to the benighted heathen, a burden of which we can only make sense if we deny their manifestly existent intellectual traditions the epistemic status we grant ours. Giving the Western philosophical tradition pride of place as “philosophy” while marginalizing in our departments or in our individual life all other traditions, if the arguments I have offered are cogent, hence implicates us directly in institutional racism. (Garfield 2002: 260.)

It should be noted that Garfield’s work with Buddhism (and Buddhists) is not limited to Mādhyamaka philosophy. He has also studied and worked on Yogacāra (the idealist Mahayana school) as well as Buddhist ethics etc. While expounding on this work would certainly be interesting, I have decided to exclude it from my current investigation. I believe that an exposition of Garfield’s work with Mādhyamaka philosophy and cross-cultural hermeneutics is enough to paint a picture of what he is doing and for what purposes¹¹.

1.4 OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

Garfield places a lot of emphasis on contemporary philosophizing and so do I. This manifests in many ways. For one, I wish to show that culturally distant (and cross-cultural) perspectives themselves can be of contemporary relevance to Western philosophers. Second, I believe that in order to portray this contemporary relevance, we need lucid program declarations, thought-provoking views, and demarcations to first enhance *bona fide* discussion among cross-cultural philosophers about the nature and goals of the enterprise. Since I find Garfield to be a textbook example of such action, I have chosen him as my protagonist. I am well aware that the way I tell the tale of cross-cultural philosophy is just one way of telling it and as such it is neither right nor wrong.

I will employ an analogy of (post-modern) narrative therapy which is based on the conception that our ability to function as happy, self-contained individuals is deeply connected to the way we

¹¹ If I were to defend Garfield’s exegesis of Nāgārjuna’s thought, it would become crucial to outline his reading of Yogacāra. This is because Garfield argues that understanding the similarities and differences between the two schools is important for understanding either of them individually. Yogacāra thought therefore forms a part of the framework in which Garfield interprets Nāgārjuna (and other Mādhyamikas).

narrate (or do not narrate) our lives. A coherent and clear narrative provides the tools needed for navigating and making sense of our everyday life, perceiving possibilities and solving problems. In a similar vein, cross-cultural philosophy might benefit from such “therapy”. The existence of many alternative narratives is not a problem (even our individual identities are arguably many-storied), but the total non-existence of coherent, clarifying, auxiliary ones is. I believe the time has come to organize, structure, argue and criticize.

Garfield is interested in creating cross-cultural philosophical positions and fusing ideas from different traditions. Such fusion cannot take place before we have some understanding of the alien tradition(s) we are dealing with. This brings us to questions concerning interpretation and hermeneutics. What happens when we interpret? What makes interpretation possible and what could hinder it? What does it entail that we are crossing cultures and traditions?

If the somewhat chaotic history of cross-cultural philosophy had already been narrated in some clear way, it would be easier to write about Garfield in the context it provides. But, because cross-cultural philosophy (which is a social construct and as such contingent) continues to be marginalized and to suffer from identity crisis, I am faced with many partial (sometimes conflicting) narratives. There is a lot of confusion and discontinuation to be found in them and numerous gaps to be filled. Therefore, in these current circumstances, I feel the need to take many sidesteps. I hope they will demonstrate how much *choosing* takes place in cross-cultural philosophical work: there are different conceptual frameworks and tools, contexts, methods, translations (etc.) available. The choices might not always be conscious, but they take place nonetheless.

To help keep track of things, I will now provide an overview of what will follow. Parts **2** and **3** deal with Nāgārjuna. The proper context of his thought is a matter of hot debate and, in order to shed light on this controversy, a short historical account of Buddhism and a biographical account of Nāgārjuna is helpful. Part **2** therefore explains what it means that Garfield follows the Mādhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika interpretation as expounded in the Tibetan monastic universities. Part **3** consists of a general overview of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy as presented in the *Mulamādhyamakakārikā*.

When it comes to part 4, I am much indebted to Andrew P. Tuck's work in cross-cultural hermeneutics as presented in *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (1990). At the core of Tuck's exposition is the vision that we should constantly work to reinterpret earlier scholarly readings and reveal their interpretative biases. As he himself explains:

Rather than contributing one more theoretical discussion of hermeneutics, or offering one more attempt at textual exegesis, this study examines the degree to which specific interpretations of a specific text have been determined by factors often apparent only from the standpoint of another interpretative era or perspective. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the often stated principle that, rather than an ahistorical search for a preferred method or philosophy of interpretation, the enterprise of interpretation is inherently historical. (Tuck 1990: vi.)

I will rely on Tuck's characterization and expound it shortly with a few additions on my part.

Part 5 is an exposition of Garfield's Nāgārjuna: Nāgārjuna the skeptic, the philosopher of philosophies, the "positionless" conventionalist. This requires defining skepticism, discussing Garfield's interpretation of various aspects of Nāgārjuna's philosophy and showing how Garfield employs Nāgārjuna's (reconstructed) arguments as philosophical 'medicine' or 'therapy'. Part 6, on the other hand, deals with cross-cultural interpretation and fusion of traditions, and conceptualizes further the difference between comparative and cross-cultural philosophy. Part 7 then brings all this together and envisions the future.

When it comes to Garfield, I will make use of his translation of and commentary to (the Tibetan version) of Nāgārjuna's *Mulamadhymakakārikā* as presented in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (1995); an essay titled 'Nāgārjuna's *Mulamādhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*): Chapter 24: Examination of the Four Noble Truths' published in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings* (2009), a translation (with Geshe Ngawang Samten) of the 15th century Tibetan Buddhist scholar rJe Tsong khapa's philosophical commentary on the MMK published as *Ocean of Reasoning* (2006); and a collection of essays published as *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (2002). These texts cover a time period of roughly 15 years (many of the essays of *Empty Words* had been previously published in academic journals such as *Philosophy East and West* and *The Journal of Indian Philosophy and Religion*).

I write this thesis as a student of philosophies (Eastern, Western and cross-cultural) for philosophers with similar backgrounds as my own. The language and concepts I use, reflect this choice. I also

write as a proponent of the inclusion and incorporation of cross-cultural perspectives into mainstream philosophy in the West. I believe such a scenario would profit everyone interested in the serious investigation of philosophical problems and perhaps also rectify the unjust power differential between Western and non-Western philosophical systems. I furthermore write as a Buddhist practitioner interested in approaching my spiritual tradition “from the outside” and making sense of it in a different framework. I wish to point out, however, that my interest in non-Western philosophical systems is by no means limited to Buddhism and that my being a Buddhist does not entail adherence to any particular philosophical school.

All in all, my thesis is that Garfield’s rational reconstructions steer clear from orientalism and perennialism and represent true fusion (not mere comparison) of culturally distant philosophies. They are thoroughly cross-cultural and thoroughly philosophical and therefore stand apart from history of philosophy, Religious studies, Buddhology, Indology, Tibetology, area studies philosophy and so on. As such, they help identify and define cross-cultural philosophy as a separate discipline and bring it closer to mainstream philosophy, which is arguably where it belongs.

Cross-cultural philosophy may therefore come to represent, not only a minor subfield of philosophy, but a general approach to philosophizing - an approach which recognizes the continuity of philosophical activity across cultures. The similarities (in philosophical concerns, methods and solutions) provide the common ground for cross-cultural projects and the differences constitute a reason for undertaking them: such projects may help make philosophy (everywhere) richer, more self-reflective and less ethnocentric.

PART 2: NĀGĀRJUNA IN CONTEXT

This chapter is not meant as an exhaustive discussion of the (archaeological and textual) evidence concerning the actual life events of a historical person; it is merely an attempt to locate Nāgārjuna in the long line of Buddhist thinkers, in the context of Indian Sectarian Buddhism and the developing Mahāyāna movement. Much of our understanding of the (probably) 2nd century Indian thinker is tentative and speculative since, instead of reliable historical accounts, we have myths, legends and conflicting/impartial biographical information to work with. The fact remains, however, that Nāgārjuna's texts in themselves are difficult to make sense of and we need to somehow contextualize him in order to decipher the meaning(s) of his terse and abstract assertions. We cannot get inside Nāgārjuna's head, but understanding the socio-cultural and intellectual environment of his time may nonetheless provide illuminating insights.

2.1 BUDDHISM

Since Nāgārjuna was first and foremost a *Buddhist* philosopher, it is in place to discuss shortly the history of Buddhist thought before and after Nāgārjuna's time. The failure to locate Nāgārjuna within the Buddhist tradition has, according to some, resulted in serious misinterpretations of his thought. As human thought necessarily develops out of a historical context, it is justified to assume that Nāgārjuna expected his audience to be familiar with the Buddha's teaching as well as some of the content of the philosophical debate of his time (including Abhidharma discussions). It is generally agreed upon that Nāgārjuna is (quite fiercely) attacking *something* with his philosophy, but it is the content of that 'something' which divides scholars into separate camps. Whether it was the Abhidharma philosophy as a whole, the views of a particular philosophical school, or perhaps speculative metaphysics in general, we can look to historical evidence for some clarification.

2.1.1 Categorizing Buddhism

There are many ways to portray the history of Buddhist thought and to break it down into smaller pieces. Following the Buddhist historians Bu-Ston and Tāranātha, we can divide it into three periods along philosophical lines. The first period, as represented by the early Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda, emphasizes the ‘no-self’ (*anātman*) doctrine and the reality of universal constituents (*dharmas*). The second phase is characterized by Mādhyamaka philosophy and the introduction of the idea of ‘ultimate emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena. The third phase, respectively, is the period of philosophical idealism as represented by the Vijñānavāda (Consciousness-Only) school. The obvious weakness of this kind of portrayal is that it blindly focuses on a few aspects of Buddhist thought and does not acknowledge any significant developments after the 5th century CE.¹² It could perhaps be added for the sake of clarity that these philosophical ‘phases’ are not so much distinct periods as they are different ‘modes’ that in part co-existed and continue to do so.

A somewhat well-known schema is based on the polemical divisions within the Buddhist community into three “vehicles” (*yānas*) that are characterized by different understanding of the process and the goal of salvation. Hīnayāna (a pejorative term coined by the early Mahāyānists which translates as “lesser vehicle”) elaborates a gradual process of individual salvation and distinguishes between three different types of spiritual attainments. Mahāyāna (“greater vehicle”) also views the path to salvation as gradual, but recognizes only the attainment of fully enlightened Buddhahood as its soteriological goal. Vajrayāna (“diamond vehicle”), the esoteric/tantric form of Buddhism, accepts the basic outline of the Mahāyānist approach, but argues that emancipation can be attained fast. Needless to say, this kind of division attracts the criticism of being extravagantly simplistic in its overemphasis on certain traits as extreme differences and in its exclusion of the developments after the 1st millennium CE. The gap between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna has sometimes been exaggerated in the West where it has become customary to view Mahāyāna as a revolutionary movement through which the aspirations of a restless laity managed to overcome an oppressive, conservative monastic establishment. Research suggests, however, that the opposition between the laity and the monastic establishment was not as sharp as has been proposed.¹³ The

¹² eg. Reynolds & Hallisey 1987: 335-336.

¹³ eg. Reynolds & Hallisey 1987: 336.

philosophical differences between Hīnayāna and (early) Mahāyāna too were probably somewhat milder than has been suggested.

It may be in part due to this schema that Nāgārjuna, who is generally held responsible for explicating the general outline of Mahāyāna philosophy, has been read as a great innovator introducing radical reforms into Buddhist thought. There are some scholars (such as David Kalupahana) who have even rejected the commonly held view that Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist (especially in the sense of later Mahāyāna), claiming that such a portrayal results in grave misinterpretations of his philosophy¹⁴. Others (such as Garfield) continue to read his work in the light of subsequent Indian and Tibetan Mahāyāna developments.

Buddhism can also be categorized into cultural forms (Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan etc.) and this kind of division has been successfully applied to the more recent phases of Buddhist history. As Buddhism spread beyond India, different aspects of it came to be emphasized in each new locale resulting in a variety of interpretations and practices. Dividing Buddhism among cultural lines naturally conceals, to an extent at least, the capability of the Buddhist tradition to transcend the boundaries of culture, politics and nationality.¹⁵ In the case of temporally distant Indian philosophers, such as Nāgārjuna, much of contemporary scholarship remains indebted to Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese translations, interpretations and commentaries. The blurring of cultural boundaries is clearly visible in the work of Garfield, who, in addition to relying on the well-established Tibetan commentarial tradition, has also collaborated with contemporary Tibetan scholars.

2.1.2 Shakyamuni and the Birth of Buddha-Dharma

Nāgārjuna has sometimes been read as offering a legitimate interpretation of the original teaching of the historical Buddha. Many of the basic concepts, themes and logical tools he employs already exist in early Buddhist discourses and, therefore, his ‘philosophy of emptiness’ *can* be understood

¹⁴ See Kalupahana 2006 (first published in 1986).

¹⁵ Reynolds & Hallisey 1987: 336 and Akira 1993 (1990): 1.

as a continuation of the Buddha's pronounced dislike of theories and metaphysical speculation and as a re-interpretation of the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* as universal relativity.¹⁶ Regardless of whether Nāgārjuna is read as an innovator or as a restorer, it seems safe to assume that the "Buddha-word" provided a natural supporting (and restricting) structure for his philosophical activities.

The roots of Buddhism can be found in the *śramaṇic* movement of the 6th century BCE at a time when important social and religious changes were taking place in India. The religious goals of the *śramaṇas* (who were forest-dwelling ascetics) provided a challenging alternative to the (Indo-Aryan) Brahmanic religion and social order. The *śramaṇas* were mainly interested in questions concerning the existence and functioning of karmic cause and effect and the most influential and widespread "heterodox" systems that arose from the movement are Buddhism and Jainism.¹⁷

The founder of Buddhism is called Shakyamuni Buddha (Siddharta Gautama). Western scholars agree on the historicity of Shakyamuni and many accept the years 563 to 483 BCE as the *least problematic* dating for his life. Assuming some reliability to the legend of his life, the history of Buddhism would begin in about 528 BCE, when Shakyamuni was 35 years old and delivered his first sermon, which (most likely) dealt with the avoidance of the extremes of ascetism and luxurious living; the Four Noble Truths¹⁸; and the doctrine of *anātman* with its accompanying *skandha* theory^{19,20}

Individual Buddhists have interpreted Shakyamuni's message differently, making it difficult to know which of the doctrines attributed to him are veritably his. It is likewise problematic to determine the extent to which early Buddhism had an accompanying metaphysics. Early literature would suggest that renunciation and abstention from conflict were considered primary, but there are

¹⁶ See eg. Della Santina 1986(a): 1-6.

¹⁷ See eg. Gómez 1987: 351-352 and Akira 1993: 16-18.

¹⁸ The four truths are: (1) suffering as an inescapable fact of life, (2) "thirst" (*trsnā*) as the cause of suffering, (3) the extinction of suffering as the eradication of that thirst and as emancipation and (4) the "Eightfold Noble Path" (also known as the "Middle Path") as the way that leads to the cessation of suffering. (eg. Akira 1993: 41-42.)

¹⁹ The theory according to which the body and mind can be analyzed into five groups or aggregates to demonstrate the teaching of no-self (*anātman*). According to this theory, a person is composed of these constantly changing aggregates which entails that a person's self is impermanent. The clinging to the idea of permanent self leads to suffering. (Akira 1993: 43-44.)

²⁰ See eg. Gómez 1987: 354-355 and Akira 1993: 31.

theoretical and metaphysical underpinnings to be found in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the “Three Marks” (*trilakṣaṇa*) view of existence²¹. Shakyamuni’s general approach was probably more *empirical* than metaphysical and various references to his unsympathetic attitude towards speculative thought can be found in Buddhist texts. His central teachings would suggest that he saw the world as morally ordered, and in addition viewed it in procedural terms emphasizing change and interconnectedness.²²

The birth of Buddhism as an institutionalized religion saw the beginning of the process of classification and explanation of the doctrines. The monk-scholars became concerned with deciding upon the set of “original teachings” and formalizing the practice of exegesis. The first big schism in the community resulted in a split into two schools²³ and subsequent subdivisions totalled in approximately thirty schools and subschools²⁴ in the *abhidharma* period.²⁵

2.1.3 Sectarian Buddhism and Early Mahāyāna

The scholastic *abhidharma* period was characterized by the construction of complex systems of soteriology involving descriptions of ethical and contemplative practice as well as philosophical argumentation. The doctrinal differences between the schools circled around a relatively small number of issues raised by the *sūtra* tradition, the most important being the relationship between (conditioned) *samsāra* and (unconditioned) *nirvāna* and the functioning of *karma* as the means of transportation between the two. The most influential school of this period was probably Sarvāstivāda, whose doctrines are generally viewed as a major point of departure for the emerging Mahāyāna.²⁶

²¹ i.e., that existence is characterized by impermanence (pali *anicca*), suffering/unsatisfactoriness (pali *dukkha*) and no-self (pali *anattā*).

²² Gómez 1987: 355; Akira 1993: 42-43; and Gowans 2003: 29, 34-35.

²³ i.e., Sthaviravāda and Mahāsāṃghika.

²⁴ Buddhist tradition recognizes eighteen (Gómez 1987: 361).

²⁵ Gómez 1987: 361.

²⁶ See Gómez 1987: 364; King 1999: 86-87; and Walser 2005: 193.

While the concept of *karma* was arguably central to *abhidharma* discussions, the notion of *dharma* occupied an important place as well. In early Buddhism, *dharmas* were seen as fundamental existents, the “building blocks” of various phenomena. The number of *dharmas* was not fixed, however, nor were they seen as substantial, eternally existing entities (only *nirvāna* was thought to have the qualities of eternity and truth). *Abhidharma* scholars then defined *dharma* as something having its own identifying mark, which makes it clearly recognizable and distinguishable from others. In their eagerness to classify, the schools produced different lists of *dharmas*: the Sarvāstivādins, for example, explained existence by dividing it into seventy-five *dharmas*.²⁷ Walser (2005: 210) holds that the Sarvāstivādins understood *dharmas* as possessing unchanging essence (*svabhāva*) thus adding a criterion for what constitutes as “real”. Burton (2001: x-xi), however, argues that they did not claim that the *dharmas* are not themselves dependently originated, but claimed only that they have an existence independent of the constructing activities of the mind.

It has been suggested that the rigidity of the *abhidharma* systems set the stage for a reaction that would lead to the creation of new forms of Buddhism.²⁸ When it comes to the actual emergence of Mahāyāna, however, very little is known. It is frequently suggested that in its beginning stages Mahāyāna was probably an underground movement considered heretical and a collection of distinct groups rather than a single unitary community.²⁹

Based on Chinese sources, it can be argued Mahāyāna communities existed at least as early as the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, but due to the virtual invisibility of Mahāyāna in the archaeological record, there is reason to believe that they existed as a movement within established Buddhist sects or perhaps (to an extent) outside of Buddhist institutions altogether. In his tentative exposition of the rise of Mahāyāna, Walser (2005) draws attention to local (monastic) politics. He speculates that it may have been in the best interests of Mahāyānists to keep a “low profile” and not develop a “brand name” until they formed a majority within the local monastic community.³⁰

²⁷ Akira 1993 (1990): 47-49, 147, 179.

²⁸ See eg. Gómez 1987: 364.

²⁹ Akira 1993: 243 and Walser 2005: 22-24. Akira (1993: 270-271) finds that there are three sources that appear to have made significant contributions to its rise. To start with, Mahāyāna probably developed out of one (or several) of the existing sects (Mahāsāṃghika being the prime candidate). Secondly, the biographical literature that stressed the importance of faith in the Buddha might have played a part. And finally, the various stupa worship cults (that were primarily a lay phenomenon) seem to have been of some importance.

³⁰ Walser 2005: 22-24, 30, 54-55, 57-58.

Nāgārjuna is claimed by the Mahāyānists as one of their own and he is often portrayed as the father of Mahāyāna philosophy (and as one of the first Mahāyāna teachers)³¹. Some Mahāyāna scriptures were composed before Nāgārjuna's time and traditionally Nāgārjuna's MMK is treated as a sort of a philosophical commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (most Mahāyāna sūtras in themselves do not advocate clearly articulated philosophical views). It should be noted, however, that there is no unequivocal support for this claim. All in all, early Mahāyānists stressed the teaching of non-substantiality and developed it well beyond anything found in earlier forms of Buddhism³² and the new *sūtras* (probably composed by the early Mahāyānists, although claimed the highest antiquity) began to move away from the general direction of the older scholastic traditions and canonical redactors³³. Although Mahāyāna is often viewed as radically different from the *abhidharma* (Hīnayāna) Buddhism, the actual differences might be less pronounced.

It seems safe to assume that Mahāyāna was probably not well established, either institutionally or financially, in India until the 5th century CE³⁴ and at the time of Nāgārjuna (2nd century), it was still a minor movement. The most important element in the institutionalization of Mahāyāna was perhaps the establishment of Buddhist universities in which the elaboration of Buddhist doctrine became the most important goal of Buddhist monastic life. The (later) scholastic tradition of the Mahāyāna may be divided into three schools: Mādhyamaka, Yogācāra (Vijñānavāda) and the school of Sāramati. The first two dominated the intellectual life of Mahāyāna in India.³⁵

³¹ eg. Gómez 1987: 372.

³² Akira 1993: 4-8

³³ Gómez 1987: 366.

³⁴ eg. Walser 2005: 89.

³⁵ Gómez 1987: 372.

2.2 LOCATING NĀGĀRJUNA

Nāgārjuna may or may not have been a Mahāyānist, but he is now generally considered to be the first major philosopher of the movement and an influence to all its schools³⁶. Eventually some of his writings were placed in the Chinese canon and in the *Bstan-'gyur* (commentarial teaching) section of the Tibetan canon. The extent to which Nāgārjuna made an immediate impact on contemporary Indian thought is not known.³⁷ In fact, it is not even conclusively known when he lived, where he lived and how many different “Nāgārjunas” might be grouped under a single name. Locating Nāgārjuna is therefore a complex task.

2.2.1 The Legend(s) of Nāgārjuna

At the heart of the problem lies the fact that there are no firsthand historical accounts of Nāgārjuna’s life. In the various Mahāyāna texts, dates ascribed to his life and work cover a range of five hundred years and he is often credited with extraordinary feats suggesting an intention to edify rather than to record actual events. Many contemporary scholars hold that there are at least two, and perhaps several, Nāgārjunas whose careers formed the basis of the Nāgārjuna legend.³⁸ The literary sources being mythical and contrasting (legends of Nāgārjuna were compiled for over a thousand years in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan) and the fact that the MMK focuses exclusively on doctrinal and logical issues without any cultural references that would help to date it, scholars are always working with partial information and fallibilist proof therefore being able to produce only tentative solutions.³⁹ While some scholars claim that Nāgārjuna could have lived as early as 50 CE or as late as 280 CE, most place his life between 150 and 250.⁴⁰

³⁶ eg. Gómez 1987: 372.

³⁷ Streng 1987(a): 291.

³⁸ Streng 1987(a): 291 and Warder 2000: 357-358.

³⁹ Walser 2005: 60, 66.

⁴⁰ See eg. Streng 1987(a): 291.

The earliest available description of Nāgārjuna's life is by the Chinese translator Kumārajīva. In his account, the young Nāgārjuna uses the art of making himself and his friends invisible to visit the women's quarters of the royal palace. His friends are then killed by the palace guards while he alone is able to escape. Moved by this experience, Nāgārjuna becomes a mendicant. According to another legend, Nāgārjuna was able to master the Pali canon in just 90 days, but was not satisfied with the results. A mythical serpent (Naga) king, impressed by his pursuit of deeper knowledge, then presented him with the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. Nāgārjuna again mastered the *sūtras* quickly and propounded the teaching skillfully, defeating many opponents in debates. While the traditional accounts are highly mythical in content, some elements seem to be supported by archeological and textual evidence. For example Nāgārjuna was said to have been born into a brahmin family and in his texts one finds a critique of Brahmanic thought and a sophisticated level of scholastic debate.⁴¹

Due to the possibility of multiple Nāgārjunas (as well as other confounding factors), it cannot be stated with conviction which of the texts ascribed to Nāgārjuna were actually written by the same philosopher who wrote the MMK. The list of works that were *probably* written by the same person is *usually* seen as including the following philosophical treatises: *Vigrahavyavartani* (Reply to Objections), *Śūnyasaptati* (Seventy Verses on Emptiness), *Yuktisastika* (Sixty Verses on Reasoning), and *Vaidalyasūtra* (Devastating Discourse). In addition to these Nāgārjuna perhaps wrote *Suhrlekha* (To a Good Friend) together with some other devotional hymns and possibly *Ratnavali* (Precious Garland).⁴² Two of Nāgārjuna's philosophical treatises (the MMK and *Vigrahavyavartani*) are extant in Sanskrit. Many others exist as Tibetan and Chinese translations.⁴³

Scholars have tended to view the MMK as a response to the Sarvāstivādin *abhidharma* and/or as relating to the Mahāyānist *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings. It seems fairly certain that the *abhidharma* played some part in Nāgārjuna's philosophical activities. As Frederick Streng (1987) argues:

While there is no historical evidence that Nāgārjuna practiced the Abhidharma mode of contemplation at any time of his life, his detailed criticism of the basic notions, causal explanations, and logical structure common to this analysis indicate his deep familiarity with the psychological and philosophical aspects of the Abhidharma approach to religious knowledge. (1987(a): 292.)

⁴¹ ref. Streng 1987(a): 291.

⁴² eg. Warder 2000: 357.

⁴³ eg. Streng 1987(a): 291.

However, there is a lot of scholarly debate on the questions of whether or not Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist, whether he was the critic of the whole of *abhidharma* philosophy or just one of its schools and whether his main aspiration was to reinstate or to renovate.

2.2.2 Nāgārjuna the Mahāyānist: A Critical View

The roots of Mahāyāna Buddhism are often suggested to be in the doctrines and practices of the Mahāsāṃghika school⁴⁴. Walser claims that it is likely that Nāgārjuna, too, spend at least a portion of his career in a Mahāsāṃghika monastery. Walser argues that a full understanding of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy requires an understanding of the theories with which he was working. He therefore defies the trend in Buddhist scholarship to view Mahāyāna as having as its prime objective to refute the *Abhidharmists* and notes that if early Mahāyānists really did exist as minority groups within *Abhidharmika* monasteries, their (scholarly) activities would be subject to certain sanctions. As a result, they would have to employ creative strategies to make their doctrines more acceptable. If we adopt Walser’s depiction of Nāgārjuna’s life, we accept that Nāgārjuna was working under very different restraints than the later Mādhyamikas (and other Mahāyānists) and that his relationship to *Abhidharma* was probably far more complex. Walser himself adheres to a view that Nāgārjuna only refuted *some abhidharmika* standpoints while generally approving others.⁴⁵

Walser therefore discusses Mahāsāṃghika doctrine as a (possible) framework for Nāgārjuna’s philosophy and claims that Mahāsāṃghikas were, in fact, quite comfortable with discussions about emptiness (although their version of emptiness was slightly different from Nāgārjuna’s) and that they were also willing to blur the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned reality in a manner similar to Nāgārjuna’s.⁴⁶ To claim that Mahāsāṃghikas might have been relatively

⁴⁴ Unfortunately no surviving collection of *Abhidharma* materials can be identified as a Mahāsāṃghika *Abhidharma Pitaka* and as a result not enough is known about this school.

⁴⁵ See Walser 2005: 212-215, 224-225, 233. As he (2005: 226) himself writes: “Mahāyāna’s survival depended far more on making friends than on conquering enemies. For this reason, Nāgārjuna’s arguments should be examined in terms of the alliances they that they forge instead of merely whom they attack. For example, Nāgārjuna at times argues against the Sarvāstivādins, but he is doing so in the presence of an invisible onlooker - his home monastery. Furthermore, although Nāgārjuna does refute the “views” of some schools, a close reading of his texts will show that he carefully avoids attacking others. The *abhidharma* arguments that he upholds provide a better picture of the doctrinal atmosphere of the monastery in which he lived and how he sought to get into their good graces.”

⁴⁶ Walser 2005: 232.

comfortable with Nāgārjuna's main philosophical notions, is naturally not to deny there being any restraints on Nāgārjuna's activities. For example, the lack of explicit mention of Mahāyāna notions can be seen as a strategy to make the philosophical teaching less controversial in the eyes of those in power. Nāgārjuna can be seen as making characteristically Mahāyānist propositions and arguments, but couching these arguments in clandestine allusions to doctrines, texts, and laws that were already part of the established canon. Walser speaks of the "parasitic strategies" of Mahāyāna and suggests that if the Mahāyānists would succeed in passing their texts off as "word of the Buddha", the host monastery would be obliged to preserve and reproduce them.⁴⁷

Walser's approach is refreshing. He attempts to *supplement* philosophical studies of Nāgārjuna and takes into consideration the demands of the (social and institutional) context in which Nāgārjuna wrote, emphasizing that authors tend to write to imagined audiences anticipating their criticisms. Walser is furthermore opposed to taking Nāgārjuna's identity as a Mahāyānist philosopher as a pre-existing given and attempts instead to see it as an identity that Nāgārjuna is actively weaving out of the threads available⁴⁸. He writes:

The statement "Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist" is a modern academic myth, not because it is false, but because it is too easy. Explanatory power is lost in exchange for ease of categorization. (Walser 2005: 265.)

Nevertheless, in Walser's exposition, Nāgārjuna *is* a Mahāyānist (even if his Mahāyānist identity is not fixed, but dynamic and changing) seeking out ways to ensure the monastic reproduction of his texts and of his Mahāyānist notions cleverly disguised as legitimate elaborations on the "Buddha-word" (Walser himself seems to suggest that they were not). However, there are those who believe that the lack of reference to Mahāyāna sūtras in Nāgārjuna's works actually speaks for the possibility that he was *not* a Mahāyānist. A.K. Warder (2000 (1970)), for one, holds that Nāgārjuna's real position might have been not to take sides in a provocative controversy between the Abhidharmists and the early Mahāyānists. Above all, Warder sees Nāgārjuna opposed to the general tendency of the Abhidharma discussions to hypostatize certain philosophical concepts and to superimpose on the real universe metaphysical constructions.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See Walser 2005: 13, 89, 153.

⁴⁸ Walser 2006: 265.

⁴⁹ Warder 2000: 358-359.

While Warder was among the first academics to openly contest the generally held view that Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist, he is not the only one to do so. David Kalupahana (2006: xvii-ix, 5-8), one of the Buddhist scholars to have translated the MMK into English, views Nāgārjuna as a protector of early, orthodox Buddhism and not as a Mahāyānist renovator. He claims that Nāgārjuna and (his highly influential Mahāyānist commentator) Candrakīrti are upholding two different philosophical standpoints: Nāgārjuna remains faithful to the Buddha, but Candrakīrti moves more towards a Vedāntin interpretation. Kalupahana's Nāgārjuna is therefore a grand commentator on the "Buddha-word" (the MMK being a commentary on the *Kaccayanagotta-sutta*) and his philosophy is, above all, a restatement of the empiricist and pragmatic philosophy of Shakyamuni.

A very influential Mahāyānist philosophical school was born out of Nāgārjuna's writings. Mādhyamaka - the School of the Middle - continues to attract following and is seen by some as the most perfect interpretation of the Buddhist teaching. Mādhyamaka is not a univocal tradition, however. Some of the subsequent developments and schisms are outlined in what follows in order to contextualize Garfield's approach.

2.3 SOME MĀDHYAMAKA DEVELOPMENTS

Indian Mādhyamaka may be historically divided into three stages: early, middle and late. The early period includes Nāgārjuna's founding philosophical activities as well as those of Aryadeva (Nāgārjuna's direct disciple) and Rahulabhadra. The middle period saw the composing of commentaries works on Nāgārjuna's treatises and is characterized by the split of Mādhyamaka into two subschools: Prāsangika and Svātantrika. The names of the schools are not attested in any Sanskrit texts and were probably coined by later Tibetan doxographers based on the first adopting *prasanga* (reductio ad absurdum) and the second *svatantra-anumana* (independent syllogism) as a means of establishing the truth of the Mādhyamaka philosophy. The philosophers of the last period were influenced by the Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti, belonged mainly to the Svātantrika school and had an appreciation for the Yogācāra philosophy.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See Yūichi 1987: 71-74; Della Santina 1986(a): 21; and Warder 2000: 368.

2.3.1 The Mādhyamaka Split: Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika

Nāgārjuna often used dilemmas and tetralemmas in his argumentation and Buddhapalita (c. 500 CE), one of his classical commentators, saw *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasanga*) as the main method of Mādhyamaka argumentation. The Prāsaṅgika (Consequence) school of Mādhyamaka was therefore “founded” by him (although the name ‘Prāsaṅgika’ was probably never used in India, as mentioned above). According to the proponents of this school, philosophers have to confine themselves to the critique of opposing views (establishing internal inconsistencies in them and thus undermining their position from within) instead of putting forward independent arguments. Candrakīrti (c. 550-600 CE) wrote numerous treatises expounding this interpretation of the Mādhyamaka philosophy and Śāntideva - another famous Indian Buddhist - also tended toward the Prāsaṅgika.⁵¹

The well-known exponent of the Svātantrika (Autonomy) interpretation was Bhāvaviveka (c. 500-550 CE). He was Buddhapalita’s great critic and was later, in turn, criticized by Candrakīrti. Bhāvaviveka was influenced by Dignāga (the reformer of Buddhist logic and epistemology) and argued that Mādhyamikas had to employ *categorical syllogisms* to prove the truth of their philosophy.⁵² The Svātantrika stance thus allowed the Mādhyamaka to maintain its involvement in the wider scholastic context and disciplinary framework of Indian philosophical debate.⁵³

It is not easy to determine what were the actual reasons behind the Mādhyamaka split. The original texts of the Svātantrika schools with only two exceptions have been lost in Sanskrit and Svātantrika philosophy is now virtually extinct even among Tibetans. The controversy that started in India was actively pursued in Tibet over the course of several centuries, but eventually Mādhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika became the orthodox philosophy of the four major sects.⁵⁴

The Tibetan scholar bSod-nams Sen-ge maintained that the principal issue in the split was epistemological/pedagogical: Prāsaṅgikas and Svātantrikas differed over the question of the

⁵¹ See eg. Yüichi 1987: 72-74 and Gómez 1987: 373.

⁵² eg. Yüichi 1987: 73-74.

⁵³ King 1999: 139.

⁵⁴ Della Santina 1986(a): xv-xvi.

character of the arguments which were to be employed by the Mādhyamaka in order to bring about an understanding of the Mādhyamaka doctrine in its opponents. According to this view, there would be no great ontological or philosophical differences between the schools. rJe Tsong khapa, on the other hand, held that there *is* a philosophical difference and that it has to do with the acceptance of a particular kind of real existence of entities (i.e., by virtue of their characteristic marks) on the part of Svātantrikas.⁵⁵

2.3.2 Chinese and Tibetan Elaborations

The monastic communities of San-Lun, T'ien-t'ai (Tendai), Hua-Yen (Kegon) and Ch'an (Zen) in China and Japan as well as all the Tibetan sects have included aspects of the Mādhyamaka teaching as part of their understanding of the Buddha's teaching⁵⁶. In China it was Kumārajīva (350-409) who first introduced Nāgārjuna's philosophy. Chi-tsang (549-623) saw the thought of Nāgārjuna and Aryadeva as the core of the Buddhist doctrine and founded the *San-lun* ("three treatises") school. The tradition flourished during the early T'ang period, but later gave way to Yogācāra. A Korean monk by the name of Ekan introduced *San-lun* to Japan where it became recognized as one of the six schools of the 7th century Nara period. In China and Japan, however, the prosperity of Mādhyamaka was short-lived and was overtaken by popular Buddhism as propagated by traditions such as Pure Land and *Ch'an/Zen*.⁵⁷

The first Tibetan Mādhyamika scholar was Ye-'ses-sde who wrote in his *Lta-ba'i khyad-par* (*Differences in Doctrines*) about the history of Indian Mādhyamaka and its division into Yogācāra-Mādhyamakas and Sautrāntika-Mādhyamakas. During the 9th and 10th centuries, Buddhism (as interpreted by Jnānagarbha, Santiraksita and Kamalasila) flourished in India, but later suffered persecution by King Glan-dar-ma. In the 11th century, Buddhism was re-established by Atisa, an Indian scholar who emphasized Candrakīrti's and Śāntideva's understanding. Ni-ma-grags (1055-?) further translated Candrakīrti's works and was probably the first to use the names Prāsaṅgika and

⁵⁵ Della Santina 1986(a): xvii-xviii.

⁵⁶ eg. Streng 1987(a): 293.

⁵⁷ Yüichi 1987: 76-77.

Svātantrika. rJe Tsong khapa (1375-1419) synthesized the Mādhyamaka with the *tantras* and was arguably the most influential Mādhyamaka scholar in Tibet.⁵⁸ It is told that Tsong khapa, in his early thirties, became dissatisfied with his own understanding of the deeper points of the Mādhyamaka and set out to study the literature of the *tantras* more widely, even though his scholastic teachers discouraged him in this interest. Following a vision of Nāgārjuna and Buddhapalita, he reached enlightenment and became very outspoken about his views.⁵⁹

Today Mādhyamaka philosophy is mainly alive in Tibetan communities. The study of Mādhyamaka texts is a relatively common practice in the monastic universities of Tibetan Buddhism (both inside Tibet and in exile) and interpretative controversies are still being debated upon. In Garfield's approach, Nāgārjuna is therefore treated as a 'Mādhyamika' (even though Nāgārjuna himself never used the term and, as far as we know, did not see himself as a founder of a philosophical school) and read in the light of the tradition that was born out of his philosophical activity. This kind of choice might be contested by stating that after Nāgārjuna's death, the Mādhyamaka tradition necessarily saw a number of modifications and perhaps came to incorporate into itself certain philosophical ideas that were not part of Nāgārjuna's original vision (Kalupahana has suggested that these modifications were, in fact, quite radical⁶⁰). However, as Garfield appears to see it, in order to arrive at an understanding of what an alien tradition (philosophical or otherwise) is about, one of the best methods is to interact with the living representatives of that tradition or perhaps even *become* a representative of that tradition.

In interpreting Nāgārjuna, there are actually many different Nāgārjunas to choose from: Nāgārjuna the renovator, Nāgārjuna the protector of the original teaching, Nāgārjuna the Buddhist practitioner, Nāgārjuna the rigorous philosopher, Nāgārjuna the Mahāyānist, Nāgārjuna the founder of Mādhyamaka, Nāgārjuna the enlightened teacher (employing skillful means of directing people towards liberation) and so on. While these different Nāgārjunas sometimes overlap, pretending that there is only one is likely to lead to a very narrow understanding of the field and perhaps, more importantly, to a false hope of achieving the objectivist goal of one 'correct' interpretation of his system.

⁵⁸ Yüichi 1987: 76.

⁵⁹ Thurman 1987: 73.

⁶⁰ See Kalupahana 2006.

To realize that Nāgārjuna scholarship is always pre-structured and prejudiced (and that this is not unambiguously a 'bad' thing) is important for both the interpreters and their critics. In the (earlier) works of Western scholars, a discerning reader sometimes finds a tendency to portray one's conclusions as the final word on the matter (perhaps a symptom of scholarly arrogance) and one's methodological choices as the only correct approach. That the diversity of different readings might actually be a positive thing, is a relatively recent view.

PART 3: AN OVERVIEW OF NĀGĀRJUNA'S PHILOSOPHY

The purpose of including the discussion above has been to demonstrate why it would be naive to assume that Nāgārjuna's philosophy can be adequately presented *as it is*. The argumentation in the MMK is concise (and somewhat laconic) leaving numerous gaps to be filled by the reader. Without a sufficient framework, an attempt to decipher the meaning behind Nāgārjuna's words is likely to fail. The multitude of different frameworks available accounts for the multitude of different interpretations. However, before discussing how Nāgārjuna has been read and labeled by Western scholars, it is necessary to outline some of the basic concepts of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. By no means is this an attempt to exhaustively examine all aspects of Nāgārjuna's thought – I will focus on the ones that have been emphasized in the West, because some familiarity with them is required to make sense of what will be discussed in part 4. Some (more or less controversial) issues are discussed in subsequent chapters and many are excluded altogether.

3.1 MULAMĀDHYAMAKAKĀRIKĀ

Mulamādhyamakakārikā is generally seen as Nāgārjuna's major philosophical work. It is also the only work that is unequivocally known (*by definition*, one might add) to be written by him. The treatise deals with the concept of emptiness and employs *reductio* arguments to present it. It consists of 27 chapters and its name can be roughly translated as "Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way". While the MMK is the text that Nāgārjuna scholars primarily work with, frequent references are being made to other texts (eg. *Vigrahavyavartani* and *Śūnyasaptati*) as well. In this relatively short exposition of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, I will focus exclusively on the MMK (although, since I am dominantly making use of the English translations and interpretations of Western scholars, there is no way of knowing the extent to which these translations and interpretations have been shaped by the content of other works).

I believe that concentrating on the MMK is a justified choice, since it is Nāgārjuna's *magnum opus*, it forms a coherent whole and it deals with the core issues of Mādhyamaka. Furthermore, it would be time-consuming to include all (or even few) of the treatises (possibly) written by Nāgārjuna.

I have worked with three very different English translations of the text by Garfield (1995), Kalupahana (first published in 1986) and Inada⁶¹ (first published in 1970). Academic translations have also been put forth by Streng (1967), Sprung (1979) and McCagney (1997). In addition to these six, two non-academic translations have been written by Batchelor (2000) and Luetchford (2002). The fact that the MMK has been translated eight times, is probably an indication of both its popularity and the controversiality surrounding its interpretation.

The text has a somewhat clear structure. According to Garfield (1995: 92), it roughly falls into four sections: the first focuses on fundamental theoretical constructs in Buddhist ontology (ch. 1-7), the second deals with the nature of the self and subjective experience (ch. 8-13), the third is concerned with the external world and the relation of the self to objects (ch. 14-21), and the fourth addresses issues associated with the ultimate truth (22-27). David Kalupahana (2006: 27-31) also divides the MMK into four major sections, but in a slightly different manner: in his analysis, the first section consists of the first two chapters and deals with causation and change, the second (ch. 3-15) and the third (ch. 16-26) attempt to establish the non-substantiality of phenomena and the non-substantiality of an individual respectively, whereas the fourth (ch. 27) is an explanation of the highest form of freedom, which is freedom from ideological constraints.

Despite the structured analysis, Nāgārjuna's argumentation is not always easy to follow: the theme is deep and subtle and the author is following the conventions of his time and place which, to us, sometimes appear strange. The situation is not hopeless, however. Garfield finds that the "uniformity of the philosophical methodology" and the "clarity of the central philosophical vision" provide enough fulcrum for exegesis.⁶² Many scholars would agree with this, even if their understanding of the central philosophical vision itself might be very different.

⁶¹ Inada interprets Nāgārjuna as a mystic and is not as philosophically oriented in his rendition as are Garfield and Kalupahana. For this reason, I have concentrated on Kalupahana's and Garfield's readings. I wish to point out, however, that while I see Inada's rendition as offering very little to the present discussion (in the context of cross-cultural philosophy), I do not deny its value in other discussions and contexts.

⁶² Garfield 1995: 87-88.

3.2 THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMPTINESS

It is a commonly held view that Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyata*) represents a refinement and extension of the ancient Buddhist doctrine of 'no-self' (*anātman*), i.e., the denial of the substantial reality of the self and what belongs to the self. However, the critique of our common notions of reality expressed by *śūnyata* is much more radical than that the critique implicit in *anātman*.⁶³ Nāgārjuna's "great emptiness" is the emptiness of everything. It is therefore the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) about phenomena.

3.2.1 Emptiness as the Denial of Intrinsic Existence

The various Buddhist traditions all tend to reject the idea of an essential self (*ātman*) as an unwarranted and unverifiable metaphysical postulate. The *skandha* (aggregate) theory is used to illustrate that there is no such *ātman* underlying the changing stream of events that constitute the mind-body complex. In fact, it is the philosophical notion of *anātman* (*no-self*) that fundamentally differentiates Buddhist doctrines from Brahmanical ones. In a nutshell, Buddhist philosophy (for most parts, at least) is process philosophy. Buddhist philosophers have generally accepted that there is some kind of causal continuity throughout our (physical and mental) lives but rejected the view that there is an underlying identity holding the process together. The Buddhist model of reality therefore does not divide the world up into fixed substances (that possess qualities), but recognizes only a stream of causally connected qualities.⁶⁴

The description above might be oversimplified since there exists a multitude of different Buddhist philosophies (some of them including substantialist notions too). Quite often Nāgārjuna's 'philosophy of the middle' is seen as the most radical rendition of the Buddhist doctrine, because it denies that anything could exist in the absolute sense, in its own right. A very good method to understand Nāgārjuna's notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), is to ask what it is that things lack, i.e., what are they empty of. Nāgārjuna's answer would be that they are empty of *svabhāva*. Throughout the

⁶³ See eg. Gómez 1987: 370.

⁶⁴ See King 1999: 78-82.

history of Nāgārjuna scholarship, different English terms have been employed to explain *svabhāva*: Inada (1993) and Kalupahana (2006) use ‘*self-nature*’, Garfield (2005) opts for ‘*essence*’. All in all, *svabhāva* is probably best understood as intrinsic, independent existence. Therefore, to say that things do not possess *svabhāva*, is to say that their existence depends on something (their arising and ceasing is conditional), and because their existence is dependent, it is also impermanent. In the Indian context, this means that phenomena are ultimately non-existent (because real existence implies permanence).

Most scholars hold that it is important to understand Nāgārjuna’s emptiness as *svabhāva-sūnyatā* (emptiness of essence) or *ni-svabhāva* (no-essence) and therefore not as mere nothingness (i.e., nihilism⁶⁵). As Garfield writes:

(...) we must be hermeneutically cautious, paying careful attention to Nāgārjuna’s use of the term *existent* (*satah, yod pa*) and its negative contrastive “nonexistent” (*asatah, med pa*). For Nāgārjuna is worried here about the false opposition between inherent existence and complete nonexistence, as opposed to conventional existence or nonexistence. (...) for a thing to exist inherently is for it to exist in virtue of possessing an essence; for it to exist independently of other entities, and independently of convention. For a thing to be completely nonexistent is for it to not exist in any sense at all - not even conventionally or dependently. (Garfield 2002: 29.)

Therefore, even if Nāgārjuna considers things to be empty of existence in the “absolute sense”, he wishes to establish that things *do exist* in some other way. This is often read as an emphasis on the *conventional* existence of phenomena. One way to such a view is to think of the world as a web of interdependent phenomena - phenomena that are arising, changing, and ceasing due to various causes and/or conditions. To say that they have no essences is simply to outline this dependent character of their existence.

Śūnyatā as *svabhāva-sūnyatā* can be seen as a descriptive claim that all phenomenal existence is conditioned and transitory. Often it is understood as a re-evaluation of what can be known or said (an epistemological point). This is because, when taken literally as a (dogmatic) metaphysical position, it certainly does appear to be leading to nihilism, even though Nāgārjuna himself explicitly denies this by stating:

⁶⁵ Even though there *are* scholars (such as Burton 2001) who have suggested that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of emptiness (regardless of the purposes he himself had in mind) entails nihilism when critically appraised.

We say that this understanding of yours
 Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
 And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
 As a consequence you are harmed by it. (MMK 24.7 in Garfield 1995: 296.)

Traditionally, Nāgārjuna's denial of *svabhāva* has been seen as a rejection of *abhidharma* theorizing (and perhaps all ontological speculation). Instead of seeing the doctrine of emptiness as a denial of reality, many choose to understand it as denial of (substantialist) *theories* about reality. While it can be argued (*contra* this view) that Nāgārjuna himself certainly appears to be making statements about reality, they are perhaps statements of a different order.

3.2.2 Emptiness as Dependent Arising

In the MMK, 'emptiness' is explicated with reference to other concepts. In the previous section, it was explained in negative terms, i.e., as a rejection of the notion that things possess *svabhāva*. However, in a very famous passage of the MMK, Nāgārjuna employs positive characterization and equates emptiness with *pratītya-samutpāda*, (i.e., dependent origination):

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
 That is explained to be emptiness. (MMK 24.18 in Garfield 1995: 304.)

Or, as Kalupahana translates it:

We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. (MMK 24.18 in Kalupahana 2006: 339)

And furthermore in Inada's words:

We declare that whatever is relational origination is *śūnyatā*. (MMK 24.18 in Inada 1993: 148.)

These different renditions are given here in order to demonstrate the difficulty in translating some of the Sanskrit philosophical concepts into English⁶⁶. However, the common translations of

⁶⁶ The concept of *śūnyatā* has been translated as 'voidness', 'emptiness' and more recently as 'openness'.

pratītya-samutpāda as ‘dependent arising’, ‘dependent co-arising’, ‘dependent origination’, or ‘relational origination’ all convey the same idea: things depend on other things for their coming into being.

The concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* is arguably central to Buddhist philosophy and has been subjected to many interpretations throughout its history. In the context of Mādhyamaka thought, it is commonly understood as *interdependence* and sometimes as *relativity*. In Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, therefore, *pratītya-samutpāda* is the dependent, conditioned existence of ultimately empty phenomena. As fundamentally a non-substantialist theory of causation (as Garfield, Kalupahana, and many other scholars see it), it is an essential part of the philosophy of emptiness.

Already in the historical Buddha’s teaching of causality, beings and events were linked to other beings and events through the chain of causation. The Buddha himself (most likely) used the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* and promulgated it against a background of four contemporary theories of causality. These are (i) self-causation, (ii) external causation, (iii) a combination of self-causation and external causation and, (iv) a denial of both self- and external causation (a view probably advocated by certain skeptics who did not recognise any form of causation).⁶⁷ Nāgārjuna lists the same theories in the very first verse of the MMK and rejects them all:

Neither from self nor from another,
Nor from both,
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (MMK 1.1 in Garfield 1995: 105.)

Or in Kalupahana’s “empiricist” translation:

No existent whatsoever are evident anywhere that are arisen from
themselves, from another, from both, or from a non-cause. (MMK 1.1 in Kalupahana 2006: 105)

Since the next verse (1.2) outlines the different types of conditions (*prataya*) without denying them, Garfield holds that Nāgārjuna is arguing *against* the existence of causes (*hetu*) and *for* the existence of conditions that are best understood as events, states or processes that possess no causal power, but have some explanatory value.⁶⁸ Garfield perhaps stresses Nāgārjuna’s views on causation more than

⁶⁷ Kalupahana 1987: 485.

⁶⁸ This view, as Garfield himself openly declares, is controversial and is better supported by the Tibetan version of the text. He argues, however, that drawing this distinction “makes good, coherent sense not only of this chapter, but of *Mulamādhyamakakārikā* as a whole (1995: 103)”.

scholars generally do, but the conventionalist theory of causation that he advocates, sits seamlessly in the framework of general anti-essentialism.

Kalupahana describes that the theory of self-causation was seen by the Buddha to entail a belief in *permanence* and a recognition of a permanent and eternal *ātman* (an unverifiable entity to the Buddhists). External causation, on the other hand, was seen to imply the existence of an external *svabhāva* which would render the human being a “mere automaton” (and effectively do away with moral responsibility). The Buddha called this the theory of *annihilation*, respectively. Together the theories of permanence and annihilation were thought to reflect the two extreme views on causality, while the Buddha’s own notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* was presented as the “middle position”.⁶⁹

The Buddha was concerned with the empirical fact of arising phenomena. He therefore rejected the dichotomy described above. In his teaching (eg. *Discourse to Katyayna*), *pratītya-samutpāda* was promulgated as the ‘Twelve-fold chain of causation’ accounting for the processes of human bondage and freedom (a topic of utmost importance to the Buddha), but he applied the concept to explain most other aspects of human existence as well.⁷⁰

In the Abhidharma period, metaphysical speculations began to emerge, however. Kalupahana (1987: 487) mentions the Sarvāstivādin acceptance of *svabhāva* in things and the Sautrāntika notion of a transmigrating personality and holds that these go against the Buddha’s non-substantialist view of *pratītya-samutpāda*. Therefore Nāgārjuna’s use of the concept, in Kalupahana’s perspective at least, is mainly a rejection of the substantialist views of these schools:

Restatement of the principle of “dependent arising” without having to posit a substantial connection (*svabhāva*) between a cause and an effect (as the Sarvāstivādins did), or to emphasize their difference (as the Sautrāntikas did), seems to be the foremost concern of Nāgārjuna. (Kalupahana 1987: 487.)

In the hands of the Mahāyānists, the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* became an universal theory of relativity. As Garfield (2009: 26-27) sums up, dependence in the Mahāyāna tradition is explained in three ways: (i) all phenomena depend for their existence on complex networks of causes and conditions, (ii) all wholes depend on their parts, and parts on the wholes they help make up, and (iii)

⁶⁹ Kalupahana 1987: 485.

⁷⁰ Kalupahana 1987: 485-487.

all phenomena depend for their identities on conceptual imputation. Therefore, to exist is to exist conventionally.

In Nāgārjuna's view, too, *everything* (*dharmas* included) is dependently arisen and thus empty:

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist. (MMK 24.19 in Garfield 1995: 304.)

By equating emptiness with dependent arising in this passage, Nāgārjuna is stating that the concepts are fundamentally interrelated: things are empty *because* they are dependently arisen and emptiness is the emptiness of dependently arisen phenomena only (i.e., the realm of emptiness is the realm of dependent arising and nothing more). While emptiness has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of causal substratum (in the sense of the Vedāntin Brahman), I will follow Garfield's understanding of emptiness as having only 'adjectival' status. Emptiness is therefore always viewed in relation to something (namely, to arising phenomena), and never *in itself*, in the sense of an absolute reality behind conventional appearance. Garfield (2009) explains this as follows:

The emptiness of any phenomenon is dependent on the existence of that phenomenon, and on its dependence, which is that in which its essencelessness consists. Emptiness is itself dependent, and hence empty. (...) To be empty of essence is simply to exist only conventionally. The conditions of conventional existence are interdependence and impermanence, which (...) for Nāgārjuna, entail essencelessness. (Garfield 2009: 27.)

It appears to be of utmost significance to Nāgārjuna to state that emptiness itself is dependent and not something that exists independently or intrinsically. This then brings us to a part of Nāgārjuna's thought which Garfield sees as his "deepest philosophical achievement (2009: 27)", namely, the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness.

3.2.3 The Emptiness of Emptiness and the Theory of Two Truths

When Nāgārjuna states that everything is empty, this includes emptiness itself (*śūnya śūnyatā*, i.e., *empty emptiness*). If emptiness itself was not empty, Nāgārjuna's doctrine would, after all, entail substantialist ontology (and it seems quite clear that this is not Nāgārjuna's intention). The emptiness of emptiness can be articulated as follows: "The emptiness of something is itself a

dependently co-arisen property of that thing (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 92).” The passage 24.18 of the MMK, that was quoted in part before, in its entirety reads:

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way. (MMK 24.8 in Garfield 1995: 304.)

What is important here is that Nāgārjuna not only equates emptiness with dependent arising, but explicitly states that emptiness is a *dependent designation*. According to this three-way relation, whatever is dependently co-arisen (that is, everything) is empty of essence and furthermore *depends upon verbal convention*. But, as Garfield sees is, the concept of ‘emptiness’ too depends upon verbal convention and its referent (i.e., emptiness itself) is likewise merely dependent, nominal, and ultimately empty. Garfield reads this passage as describing multiple “middle paths”: (i) emptiness itself is to be understood as empty, (ii) the dependently originated world should likewise not be seen as neither nonempty nor as completely nonexistent (iii) convention is neither ontologically insignificant nor ontologically efficacious, and (iv) the very relation between emptiness and dependent arising is dependent and empty.⁷¹

Another way to see it is to state that emptiness is nothing more than a relative hypothesis. Just as the concept of ‘emptiness’ is arrived at by negating both existence and non-existence (in the Indian sense), it itself must also be “negated”.⁷² The concept therefore has therapeutic value: it is a “fabrication intended to counteract other fabrications (Jones 1978: 496)”. Nāgārjuna often claims that he has no position and these claims can perhaps be understood in this soteriological/emancipatory context: if the doctrine of emptiness is seen as designed to combat the harmful essentialist/substantialist notions which (in the Buddhist framework) are seen as the cause of attachment and hence the cause of suffering, Nāgārjuna’s doctrine is not to be mistaken as yet another (final) “view” on ontology:

The victorious ones have said
That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view,
That one has accomplished nothing. (MMK 13.8 in Garfield 1995: 354.)

⁷¹ Garfield 1995: 305-307.

⁷² Ikeda 1977: 142.

In Inada's translation, the verse reads:

The wise men (i.e., enlightened ones) have said that *śūnyatā*
or the nature of thusness is the relinquishing of all views.
Yet it is said that those who adhere to the idea or concept
of *śūnyatā* are incorrigible. (MMK 13.8. in Inada 1993: 93.)

Inada's interpretation, in which emptiness is the "nature of thusness" and as "man's perfected pure state of being without the normal elements of defilements or attachments (1993: 14)" and furthermore as "the basis of all *dharma*s (1993:143)", paints a picture of "Nāgārjuna the mystic" who is trying to do away with all conceptual thinking and uses logic simply to destroy logic. Garfield's Nāgārjuna, however, places some value on conceptual thought. This is an important divide for Western interpreters.

Related to the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness is the theory of Two Truths. The two truths are the ultimate (*paramārtha-satya*) and the conventional (*saṃvṛti-satya*). In Garfield's understanding, they differ in the sense that the ultimate truth is the object of enlightened knowledge and is liberating, while the conventional truth is apprehended through mundane cognitive processes.⁷³ To Nāgārjuna, this theory (and its correct interpretation), is highly significant:

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

Those who do not understand
The distinction between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth. (MMK 24.8-9 in Garfield 1995: 297-298.)⁷⁴

Modern (and ancient) controversy concerning the meaning of the doctrine is extensive⁷⁵. As Garfield notes, it might appear that the distinction between the conventional and the ultimate refers to a distinction between appearance and reality and that conventional truth represents mere illusion, while emptiness (as the ultimate truth) is real⁷⁶. While the theory has often been interpreted in this

⁷³ Garfield 2009: 27.

⁷⁴ In Kalupahana's translation the two truths are "truth according to worldly convention" and "truth in terms of ultimate fruit" (2006: 331).

⁷⁵ eg. Kalupahana 2006: 331.

⁷⁶ A view which, according to Kalupahana, was held by the *abhidharma* philosopher Vasubandhu from the Sautrāntika school (2006: 332-333.)

manner, Garfield holds that, since emptiness too is fundamentally *essenceless*, conventional truth is no less real than the ultimate and the ultimate no more real than the conventional. In fact, in a deep sense, the two truths are identical.⁷⁷ As the next verse (24.10) of the MMK reads:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved. (MMK 24.10 in Garfield 1995: 298.)

Conventional truth clearly plays a part on Nāgārjuna's path to emancipation. It does not, however, explain why the two truths should be considered "identical". Garfield (1995) clarifies this view in his discussion of the verses 24.9-10:

(...) understanding the ultimate nature of things just is understanding that their conventional nature is merely conventional. (...) second, and perhaps less obscurely, in order to explain emptiness - the ultimate nature of all phenomena - one must use words and concepts and explain such things as interdependence, impermanence, and so forth. And all of these are conventional phenomena. So both in the end, where the understanding of ultimate truth is in an important sense the understanding of the nature of the conventional, and on the path, where the cultivation of such understanding requires the use of conventions, conventional truth must be affirmed and understood. (Garfield 1995: 299.)

Hence, in Garfield's understanding, emptiness is seen as an *aspect* or *characteristic* of conventional reality (rather than an ultimate reality) and the ultimate truth is the truth that all existence is conventional. King (1999) appears to adhere to a similar view: teaching the ultimate truth involves the correct application and understanding of the limits and uses of conventional truth. Furthermore, realizing that entities are conventionally real, but ultimately devoid of essence, is the realization of the highest truth. Even though the two truths *seem* to be diametrically opposed in their implications, if we do not recognize some degree of truth in conventional entities, the doctrine of emptiness certainly does become indistinguishable from nihilism.⁷⁸ In Garfield's understanding too, it is precisely the theory of two truths which allows Nāgārjuna to defend his doctrine against the charges of nihilism.⁷⁹

Kalupahana (2006: 335), in his attempt to root Nāgārjuna's doctrine in empiricist notions, explains Nāgārjuna's teaching to be derived from the experience of "the empty" (i.e., the experience of the

⁷⁷ Garfield 2009: 27.

⁷⁸ King 1999: 144.

⁷⁹ Garfield 2009: 27.

empty *phenomena*). Turning emptiness into an abstract conception therefore transforms Nāgārjuna's teaching into a metaphysical doctrine. As Kalupahana writes:

“Emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) distinguished from “the empty” (*śūnya*), “non-substantiality” (*nairatmya*) separated from “the non-substantial” (*nairatmya-dharma*) or “dependent arising” (*pratītya-samutpāda*) differentiated from “the dependently arisen” (*pratītyasamutpanna-dharma*) would be unidentifiable and therefore nonsensical as any other metaphysical conception that Nāgārjuna was endeavoring to refute. (Kalupahana 1986: 85.)⁸⁰

Therefore, in short, the core of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is the conception of emptiness which we here understand as the universal denial of absolute existence (although some former interpreters such as Murti have made the exception with the case of emptiness itself). This is closely related to the concept of dependent arising (which is also the Buddhist theory of causation) according to which the coming into being of things (i.e., their arising) depends on causes and conditions (or just conditions, if we accept Garfield's distinction). In Nāgārjuna's texts, the two concepts are very closely related (although the exact nature of their relationship has seen many formulations in the hands of Western scholars). The theory of two truths has likewise been interpreted in a variety of different ways. All in all, there is very little that all the interpreters of Nāgārjuna's texts would agree upon. Only the centrality of the concept of emptiness would probably meet this requirement.

Next I will present yet another overview, this time turning to the history of Western Nāgārjuna scholarship in order to demonstrate how strikingly extreme the interpretative differences can be and how salient the power of *isogesis* becomes in a panoramic view of the field. Furthermore, by describing the general trends in Nāgārjuna scholarship (once again this is a somewhat sketchy exposition, for a sketchy exposition is all that is needed here), it will perhaps become easier to see why Garfield reads Nāgārjuna the way he does.

⁸⁰ It would be interesting to compare Garfield's and Kalupahana's renditions of the MMK in greater detail for many reasons. For one, their hermeneutical approaches are radically different. Kalupahana reads Nāgārjuna's verses mainly in light of early Buddhism and treats the MMK as a commentary on the Buddha's teaching. He is cautious in studying Nāgārjuna's thought in the framework of subsequent Mādhyamaka developments, he is extremely critical of T.R.V. Murti's “Vedāntin” interpretation that favors Candrakīrti's (Prāsaṅgika) commentary and is more sympathetic to the Svātantrika interpretation (as exposed by Bhavaviveka and other “positive” Mādhyamikas)⁸⁰. Garfield, on the other hand, takes precisely this Indo-Tibetan (Prāsaṅgika) commentarial tradition as his starting point and reads Nāgārjuna (using the Tibetan versions of his texts) with reference to Mādhyamaka scholars such as Candrakīrti, Śāntideva and rJe Tsong khapa. Secondly, Kalupahana's Nāgārjuna remains firmly in the Buddhist context as an empiricist attempting to refute the heretical (metaphysical) views of the Sautrāntikas and Sarvāstivādins and return to the original teaching of the Buddha. Garfield, however, sees Nāgārjuna as a (skeptical) philosopher whose philosophical notions may have relevance outside the Buddhist context as well (and does not seem very concerned with comparing Nāgārjuna's views to those of the historical Buddha or the *abhidharmikas*). Yet, despite these differences in approach, both scholars hold that the primary purpose of Nāgārjuna's philosophy was to criticize essentialist/substantialist views and to place the conventional in the forefront.

PART 4: TRENDS AND SHIFTS IN NĀGĀRJUNA SCHOLARSHIP

In his book *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship - On the Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (1990), Andrew P. Tuck examines the role that Western philosophy has played in the interpretation of Nāgārjuna. This results in a vivid and illuminating case-study in cross-cultural hermeneutics that arguably has relevance outside Nāgārjuna scholarship as well. In this chapter I shall follow the general outline proposed by Tuck with a few additions where I have found them appropriate (especially when it comes to recent interpretations that are not included in Tuck's exposition). All in all, the discussion here is meant as a sort of a cross-section of the field and as a generalized typology of different approaches. It should be noted that Tuck too seems more interested in painting the bigger picture than in systematically critiquing the exegetical endeavors of individual scholars. For my purposes, this will suffice.

4.1 UNFOUNDED ANTIPATHIES: NĀGĀRJUNA THE NIHILIST

According to Tuck, the prevailing 19th century (Western) view of Buddhism was that it was a philosophy of negativism, nihilism and apathy. As a result, scholars were quite willing to dismiss it as being “horrible and naive” (as Saint-Hilaire put it) and as hopelessly inferior to Western traditions. The few defenders of Buddhism emphasized its functioning as a force of social reform in India and demanded each Buddhist tradition to be evaluated separately. The “defense” against the charge of nihilism was either to ignore the whole issue or to sacrifice one school (which inevitably meant Mādhyamaka) to the opponents. Therefore, before the second decade of the 20th century, the principal question was whether it was Buddhism as a whole or just Mādhyamaka school that had to be discarded as “annihilationist”. There were no defenders of Nāgārjuna.⁸¹ Tuck himself explains this early Western antipathy towards Buddhism as follows:

⁸¹ Tuck 1990: 33-34.

The Buddhologists' terminology of "annihilation," "extinction," and "nihilism" discloses an obsession with the metaphysical and a mistrust of any system that bypasses questions of ontology. Burnouf's⁸² principal concern was whether the individual is ultimately "absorbed" into a transcendental ground of existence or totally "extinguished" in *nirvāna*. And for all the scholars who followed him, the suspicion that the Buddhist *nirvāna* was in fact nothing - that there was no realm of reality behind the veil of appearance - made European acceptance of Buddhist philosophy impossible. (Tuck 1990: 35.)

Historically speaking, nihilism can be seen as the number one charge issued against Mādhyamaka philosophy (both in India and in the West). According to the advocates of the nihilist interpretation, emptiness equals *nonexistence* (fair and square) and the MMK, at first sight, does seem to support this understanding. By refuting the absolute existence of *all* entities, by denying that *anything* could be said to exist in its own right, Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* easily becomes understood as nothingness. Nāgārjuna himself anticipates this kind of criticism and in the MMK defends his philosophy by stating that the opponent has not understood the meaning of emptiness and is attacking imaginary targets.⁸³

Most modern scholars are sympathetic to Nāgārjuna's concerns and view the nihilist interpretation as a *misinterpretation* that misses the point of Nāgārjuna's argumentation. There are some contemporary scholars, however, who have defended the nihilistic understanding. David Burton (2001), for one, critically examines three divergent interpretations of Nāgārjuna (namely, Nāgārjuna's philosophy as (i) skepticism, (ii) mysticism and (iii) nihilism), and finds the last to be the most tenable. According to Burton, Nāgārjuna was not consciously advocating nihilism, but that serious appraisal of his philosophy (in its appropriate historical context) shows that it does entail just that. Another example is by Thomas E. Wood (1995). He argues that nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy need not be unsympathetic and that the nihilist Mādhyamaka position may, in fact, be defended:

The nihilist view is a radical one, but I am not quite sure that it is philosophically untenable, i.e., that it is actually refutable as being *incoherent*. The view does not seem to involve any logical inconsistencies, and it may be possible to defend it against epistemological criticism as well. (Wood 1995: 278.)

⁸² Burnouf was a French Orientalist who, for example, translated the Lotus Sutra (*Le lotus de la bonne loi*, 1852) and authored *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (1844).

⁸³ You have presented fallacious refutations
That are not relevant to emptiness.
Your confusion about emptiness
Does not belong to me. (MMK 24.13 in Garfield 1995: 301.)

These contemporary appraisals reflect serious approach to Nāgārjuna's thought and are therefore quite a different thing from the 19th century emotional (and more or less groundless) dismissal of Mādhyamaka philosophy. However, they have received very little support from the majority of Nāgārjuna/Mādhyamaka scholars and do not reflect the contemporary "mainstream" view.

4.2 ALONG KANTIAN LINES: NĀGĀRJUNA THE ABSOLUTIST

The next generation of interpreters, in order to save the MMK from charges of nihilism, attempted to show that there was something metaphysically *real* in Nāgārjuna's system. These scholars were much influenced by the neo-Kantian (and neo-Hegelian) philosophy and used it as a conceptual framework for their interpretive efforts. Nāgārjuna's reputation was established by these "idealists".⁸⁴

Following the Kantian disjunction between *noumena* and *phenomena*, the idealist interpretation of Mādhyamaka (and of the theory of two truths) would proceed like this: there are two levels of reality - the conditioned/empirical level (*saṃvṛti-satya*) produced by the cognitive intellect and the ultimate/absolute level (*paramārtha-satya*), which is immediately perceived in something called "pure sensation". Therefore, in Mādhyamaka philosophy, these scholars found "Kantian epistemology without the limits Kant placed on metaphysics".⁸⁵

Fyodor (Theodor) Stcherbatsky, one of the pioneers of serious Mādhyamaka scholarship, argued that Mādhyamaka was a philosophy of "radical monism" which advocates ultimate oneness of all reality.⁸⁶ In his view, Buddhist ultimate reality is a transcendent, unintelligible non-concept, while *momentariness* (i.e., the discontinuous flow of causal entities) is to be seen as the true metaphysical principle. It should be noted that Stcherbatsky's treatment of Mādhyamaka was formally identical to his interpretation of other Buddhist schools: he viewed them all as examples of Kantian idealism.

⁸⁴ Tuck 1990: 54.

⁸⁵ Tuck 1990: 38.

⁸⁶ See Tuck 1990: 37.

The “something real” in Nāgārjuna’s system was emptiness as the “real ground of existence”⁸⁷ and the Mādhyamaka philosopher was portrayed as repudiating causality, condemning all logic, and favoring mysticism and revelation in soteriological considerations. The unifying claim was that Buddhist philosophy *in all of its forms* was focused on man’s inability to conceptualize ultimacy and was therefore to be seen as a precursor to Western idealist philosophy.⁸⁸

Professor T.R.V. Murti, an Indian scholar (and a devout Hindu practitioner) trained in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, continued on Stcherbatsky’s path. His work came to have a remarkable effect on Buddhist scholarship, as Tuck vividly describes:

Stcherbatsky’s Kantian reading, as interpreted by Murti, had become so influential that it was now the standard view for both European and Indian scholars. Through the export of German idealism, European imperialism had thus triumphed in the philosophical as well as the economic and political arenas. (Tuck 1990: 53.)

Murti (like Stcherbatsky before him) labels Mādhyamaka philosophy as absolutism and assumes that absolutism is identical with monism. He therefore reads Nāgārjuna as advocating a view of reality as an undifferentiated unity (comparable to *Brahman*). However, Murti still wavers in his overall analysis of Nāgārjuna’s thought: he acknowledges Nāgārjuna’s denial of interest in (substantialist) metaphysics and a condemnation of speculation about the nature of ultimate reality, but also views his philosophy as an attempt to reveal the essential nature of *śūnyatā*, i.e., that the absolute is the universal, impersonal reality of the world.⁸⁹

Murti tries his best to portray Mādhyamaka as one of the “three absolutisms of Indian philosophy”, together with Vedānta (Brahmanistic) and Vijñānavāda (Mahāyāna Buddhist). Unlike Stcherbatsky, however, he does attempt to differentiate between Vedānta and Mādhyamaka⁹⁰ and admits having trouble understanding the relation between the absolute and phenomenal existence in Mādhyamaka

⁸⁷ Much like Sankara’s (c. 700 CE) *nirguna Brahman* (i.e., the supreme reality that is without attributes) in the Brahmanistic (Advaita Vedānta) tradition. Sankara (also known as Samkara or Sankaracarya) is considered to have been the most influential of the Hindu philosophers. In his writings, he generally subordinates philosophizing to the goal of spiritual salvation, adheres to a view of non-dual absolute reality (*Brahman*) and holds that the inner self/soul (*ātman*) of individuals is identical with *Brahman*. (See eg. Lorenzen 1987: 64-65.) Sankara’s Vedāntin notions have influenced Western interpretations of many Asian philosophical systems. As King (1999) writes: “In the West the popular image of ‘Eastern philosophy’ is that it is world-denying, mystical and monistic in nature. Broadly speaking, this image is a caricature of one particular school of Hindu Philosophy - the Advaita Vedānta of Sankara.”

⁸⁸ See Tuck 1990: 40-47.

⁸⁹ Tuck 1990: 47-48.

⁹⁰ Tuck suggests this is mainly for personal reasons, i.e., that Murti would feel the need to avoid the equivalency of Buddhist and Hindu thought, because he himself is a devout Hindu (1990: 50).

philosophy. He notes that Nāgārjuna denies the notion of a causal substratum (while *Brahman* clearly acts as a causal substratum in Vedānta) and sees this as a lack of theoretical relation on the causal/metaphysical level. He then concludes that the view that emptiness itself is empty would only lead to infinite regress. In the end, Murti virtually equates *śūnyatā* with *Brahman* and states that Vedāntin absolutism is of the metaphysical kind, while Mādhyamaka absolutism is primarily “epistemological” in nature. In short this would mean that Mādhyamaka offers no definite positions on questions of ontology and posits distinctions only between categories of ideas (and to some extent adjudicates knowledge claims). Furthermore, in Murti’s view, all absolutisms are ultimately reducible to the Mādhyamaka position of “no-position”.⁹¹

Murti therefore argues that Mādhyamaka philosophy is centered around the *intuition* of a transcendental reality. The apparent problem here is that Nāgārjuna himself does not postulate any category of ultimate existence (epistemological or metaphysical) that could be said to act as a ground for phenomenal existence. As a consequence, Murti is forced to suggest that Nāgārjuna understands the Absolute as something that transcends discursive thought and is unreachable through philosophical investigation. Tuck argues, however, that Murti’s inability to find a Kantian “dual commitment” (i.e., commitment to the absolute reality of the *thing-in-itself* and the notion of the constituting capacity of the mind), leaves the tension in Murti’s reading unresolved. He also argues that Murti’s idealist presuppositions make it a philosophical given that the world as ordinarily perceived cannot be taken as real making the choice necessarily between reality and unreality. Hence for Murti, Mādhyamaka philosophy simply *has to* contain (if it is not nihilism, that is) a belief in an ultimately real *noumenal* realm.⁹²

Peter Della Santina, in ‘The Mādhyamaka and Modern Western Philosophy’ (1986) discusses (in addition to other ‘comparative’ efforts) the attempts to interpret Mādhyamaka along Kantian lines and notes the following:

(...) it is when the real heart of Kant’s philosophy, the doctrine of the noumenal and the phenomenal, is reached that there is a greater temptation to see apparent coincidences and yet an even greater danger that a facile identification of actually diverse philosophies will engender misunderstanding rather than appreciation (Della Santina 1986(b): 49).

⁹¹ Tuck, 1990: 48-51.

⁹² Tuck 1990: 51-53.

Della Santina therefore condemns the application of ill-fitting philosophical labels on Mādhyamaka and warns against the “fascination with a conceptual analogy”:

The Mādhyamaka’s advocacy of the ultimate truth has led T.R.V. Murti to call it absolutism. Although in all fairness it must be said that he does so in order to save the Mādhyamaka from the charge of nihilism, does he do it justice in clothing it with another threadbare garment from the wardrobe of philosophical labels (...) ? (Della Santina 1986(b): 49.)

While the Absolutist interpretation of Nāgārjuna (and Mādhyamaka) has been *historically* influential, most contemporary scholars find the use of a Kantian idealist lens unjustified and inappropriate due to the lack of explicit reference to the *thing-in-itself* in the texts of the Mādhyamikas. Kalupahana, for one, holds that the language utilized by Nāgārjuna “does not permit such a flight into the realms of the Absolute”.⁹³ Garfield (together with Priest) likewise openly criticizes the Kantian approach:

For Western philosophers, it is very tempting to adopt a Kantian understanding of Nāgārjuna (as is offered, for example, by Murti 1955). Identify conventional reality with the phenomenal realm, and ultimate reality with the noumenal, and there you have it. But this is not Nāgārjuna’s view. The emptiness of emptiness means that ultimate reality cannot be thought of as a *Kantian* noumenal realm. For *ultimate* reality is just as empty as conventional reality. (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 92.)

To sum up, the Kantian interpretative framework (although nowadays rejected and even ridiculed) was historically very important because it marked the starting point of cross-cultural efforts to *understand* Nāgārjuna. Even if Nāgārjuna the Idealist has been long dead, he paved the way for many other subsequent Nāgārjunas.

4.3 ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHERS: NĀGĀRJUNA THE DIALECTICIAN

The non-Idealist way to write about Nāgārjuna came with scholars trained in analytic philosophy in the 1950s. In this new framework, Nāgārjuna was mainly seen as a dialectician who constructed careful arguments and counter-arguments to defeat philosophical opponents. The “mystic intuitions

⁹³ Kalupahana 2006: 86.

of the saint” were no longer considered important, while the *logical analysis* of Nāgārjuna’s philosophical arguments was.⁹⁴ In Tuck’s words:

The older poetic comparisons of Nāgārjunian verses with lines from Kant and Hegel were no longer considered truly philosophical, or even reputable scholarship. Instead, the rage to quantify, logically analyze, and symbolically restate the teachings of Nāgārjuna was now overwhelming. (Tuck 1990: 55.)

The “analytic” Nāgārjuna did not claim the conventional world to be unreal or less real than the absolute; he claimed only that it is empty of *svabhāva*. The purpose of Nāgārjuna’s argumentation was thus seen to be to prove that the notion of *svabhāva* is internally inconsistent, and that the world cannot be shown to contain intrinsically real entities or relations. The task of modern scholars was respectively understood to be to analyze whether Nāgārjuna was actually saying something *meaningful* and whether his arguments could stand up to modern methodology.⁹⁵

Richard Robinson, as one of the first analytic interpreters of Nāgārjuna, criticizes the “metaphysical” approach of earlier scholarship that seeks to answer our questions rather than identify *Nāgārjuna’s* questions. He writes:

Several fundamental limitations of the metaphysical approach are now apparent. It has tried to find comprehensive answers without knowing the answers to the more restricted questions involved, such questions as those of the epistemological and logical structure of the system. (...) The present need is for sectional studies of the Mādhyamikas, observing the priority of synchronic studies over diachronic studies and isolating classes of problems for detailed inquiry. (Robinson 1957: 292.)

Fifteen years later he is still propagating the same approach:

The questions asked by modern investigators of Nāgārjuna have often been too fancy, too abstruse, and not specific enough to permit piecemeal verification. But surely, in the “Age of Analysis”, we should be able to free ourselves from Baroque philosophical methods. (Robinson, 1972: 308.)

Robinson therefore excludes “extra-logical observations” from his study and focuses on the formal structure of Nāgārjuna’s argumentation. In Robinson’s view, Nāgārjuna attempts (through his refutational strategy) to anticipate *any* philosophical position that might assume the possibility of existential ultimacy. Robinson claims, however, that Nāgārjuna defines *svabhāva* for his own

⁹⁴ Tuck, 1990: 54-55.

⁹⁵ Tuck 1990: 54-57.

purposes as a self-contradictory idea and therefore (due to a lack of analytical expertise!) his logical program fails. Robinson's Nāgārjuna is thus an ambitious, yet *ultimately unsuccessful*, dialectician.⁹⁶ In his own words:

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick is now quite clear. It consists of (a) reading into the opponent's views a few terms which one defines for him in a self-contradictory way, and (b) insisting on a small set of axioms which are at variance with common sense and not accepted in their entirety by any known philosophy. (Robinson 1972: 331.)

The analytically oriented philosophers were somewhat successful in their critique of the idealist (or metaphysical) bias in previous scholarship and in their attempt to clarify some of the presuppositions of Indian philosophy. For the first time Nāgārjuna's verses were explicated without resort to mystical formulations and there was a shift in emphasis from soteriology to philosophical rigor.⁹⁷ However, many of the logical analyses of Nāgārjuna's system bore unsympathetic conclusions. For example R. H. Jones in 'The Nature and Function of Nāgārjuna's Arguments' (1978) argues that Nāgārjuna does not succeed in establishing the dependent origination of things (since there are many logical alternatives to the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*) and that his scheme reduces to a paradox: he begins with observing change and proceeds by arguing that if any process of change is possible, then no real entities can enter in and that if no real entities are involved, then the process itself is *not* possible.⁹⁸

Tuck mentions Karl Potter who, in a slightly different tone, describes Nāgārjuna's thought as a "leap" philosophy, i.e., as a view that (like skepticism) denies that there are causal chains leading to complete freedom, but that (unlike skepticism) does not deny that freedom is possible. Potter therefore finds there to be an "insoluble paradox" in Mādhyamaka perspective and concludes that Nāgārjuna does not seem to "believe in the power of the human mind to unravel the mysteries of the universe".⁹⁹

In Tuck's conclusion then, the analytic interpreters were unable to comfortably claim Nāgārjuna as one of their own. Nāgārjuna's doubts about the validity of rationality and the reliability of linguistic representation clearly made him something other than "an early Indian equivalent of a Russell, an

⁹⁶ See Tuck 1990: 59-62 and Robinson 1972.

⁹⁷ See Tuck 1990: 63-64.

⁹⁸ Jones 1978: 496.

⁹⁹ ref. Tuck 1990: 71-72.

Ayer, a Carnap, or the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*”. What was problematic was Nāgārjuna’s apparent denial of the ultimate value of theories and knowledge. Regardless of whether they sided with this thesis or not, all interpreters agreed that Nāgārjuna seemed to doubt that language could express or describe reality with any degree of exactitude.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, during this period, Mādhyamaka was “recognized both as an idiosyncratic logical and conceptual analysis of the various metaphysical and epistemological positions existing at the time, and as an irrational soteriological mysticism (Tuck 1990: 80)”. Thus it would appear that despite their emphasis on the logical aspects of Nāgārjuna’s thought, these scholars were not able to satisfactorily do away with the perplexing strangeness and vagueness that had plagued the interpretations from the previous period of Nāgārjuna scholarship.

For the sake of comparison: Garfield & Priest acknowledge Nāgārjuna’s “seeming willingness to embrace contradictions” on one hand, and his endorsement of the law of contradiction (in his *reductio* arguments) on the other, and state that “making sense of all this is sometimes difficult”. They, however, conclude that “Nāgārjuna is simply too committed to rigorous analytical argument to be dismissed as a mystic”.¹⁰¹ The choice that allows them to see Nāgārjuna’s argumentation as rigorously analytical (and not as mystical or irrational) is the choice of ‘inconsistency-tolerant’ (i.e., paraconsistent) logic¹⁰²:

(...) to charge Nāgārjuna with irrationalism, or even with an extreme form of dialetheism according to which contradictions are as numerous as blackberries, is, in part, to charge him with thinking that contradictions are true in the standard conventional realm. Though this view is commonly urged (see, for example, Robinson 1957, Wood 1994), it is wrong. Though Nāgārjuna does endorse contradictions, they are not of a kind that concern conventional reality, *qua* conventional reality. (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 92.)

Therefore, Garfield and Priest state that Nāgārjuna does not assert that there are contradictions *in the conventional realm* (although they do acknowledge that this claim relies on a careful and controversial reading and reconstruction of Nāgārjuna’s thought) and that the (limit) contradictions¹⁰³ *that actually are being asserted* refer to statements about the *ultimate nature of*

¹⁰⁰ Tuck 1990: 74.

¹⁰¹ Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 86-87.

¹⁰² Priest is one of the prominent (if not *the most* prominent) contemporary dialetheists. Dialetheism is a form of paraconsistent logic and a view that there are some *true contradictions* (a view about sentences, not relations). A view that *all* contradictions are true amounts to *trivialism*. (See eg. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-paraconsistent/>.) More of this in 5.3.2.

¹⁰³ i.e., contradictions at the limits of thought (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 89.)

reality.¹⁰⁴ Garfield and Priest discuss the logical structure of Nāgārjuna's argumentation in a method akin to that of the earlier analytic philosophers, but due to different theoretical tools, they are able to draw more sympathetic, and perhaps more comfortable (at least in the sense of eliminating the apparent 'strangeness') conclusions:

Demonstrating that Nāgārjuna's two linked limit paradoxes satisfy a schema common to a number of well-known paradoxes in Western philosophy (the Liar, Mirimanoff's, the Burali-Forti, Russell's, the Knower, to name a few) goes further to normalize Nāgārjuna. We thus encounter him as a philosopher among familiar, respectable philosophers, as a fellow traveler at the limits of epistemology and metaphysics. The air of irrationalism and laissez faire mysticism is thus dissipated once and for all. If Nāgārjuna is beyond the pale, then so too are Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 105.)

The approach that Garfield and Priest propagate, belongs to the next "era" in Mādhyamaka scholarship - the era that Tuck dubs 'post-Wittgensteinian'. It seems that it is within this particular framework that Nāgārjuna's thought (by far) sits most comfortably (although future developments and paradigm shifts may reveal problems that lie hidden to us here and now). Much of the (apparent?) compatibility might be due to the fact that the limits of thought and expressibility are now (post-Wittgenstein) being seriously discussed in the West and it has become possible to view philosophy as having therapeutic value.

4.4 POST-WITTGENSTEINIAN PERSPECTIVE: NĀGĀRJUNA THE THERAPIST

The post-analytic, post-Wittgensteinian phase in Nāgārjuna scholarship brought back the old comparative tendencies that had been prominent during the Idealist decades. However, instead of being read as "Kantian" or "Hegelian", Mādhyamaka philosophy was now seen as possessing striking similarities to Wittgenstein's thought. Also, and for the first time, the comparison went both ways¹⁰⁵:

¹⁰⁴ See Garfield & Priest 2005: 89, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Tuck 1990: 76-77.

Unlike the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpreters who had dismissed Nāgārjuna as a nihilist, the idealist metaphysicians who had seen him as describing the split between appearance and reality, or the logical-empiricist interpreters who had criticized him for insufficient logical rigor, this new generation of scholars began to read his *Mādhyamakakārikā* as if it were an explanatory gloss on the *Philosophical Investigations*. In many cases, Wittgenstein's remarks also began to be interpreted as if he might have been a Mādhyamika Buddhist (...). (Tuck 1990: 75.)

In this new framework, Nāgārjuna's assertions about the ontological "emptiness" of the objects of language and conceptual thought sounded less strange to the scholars who were now thinking of *meaning as use* rather than *meaning as representation*. Furthermore, Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna were both seen as offering liberation from the essentialist view of the world. As Tuck writes, the obsessions with scientific certainty and logical structure were replaced by an "interpretation build on the various forms of philosophical holism, relativism, and contextualism (1990: 79)". As a result, Nāgārjuna's ideas began to appear "modern" and relevant to the 20th century philosophical discussions.¹⁰⁶ This trend to grant Nāgārjuna's though contemporary relevance has stuck.

The post-Wittgensteinian scholars tend to place the emphasis on interdependence and on the socially grounded criteria of meaning. The observed similarity between dependent origination and meaning as use offers a background against which Mādhyamaka is often¹⁰⁷ read as a metaphilosophical critique of the language of philosophy.¹⁰⁸

Frederick Streng and other post-Wittgensteinians (especially Robert Thurman and Nathan Kantz) criticize the earlier interpreters for refusing to take seriously Nāgārjuna's own understanding of the status of his teachings. The labeling of Mādhyamaka as nihilism is seen as a result of taking the negativistic terminology and the dialectical strategy out of their functional context. What these interpreters had missed, was the traditional Buddhist position of the mere conventionality of language that Nāgārjuna, too, is seen as advocating¹⁰⁹:

From the first verses of his text, they argue, Nāgārjuna explicitly denies any ontological first principles or metaphysical substrata. And, once again, a traditional Buddhist position is invoked: the refusal to discuss metaphysically oriented issues. (Tuck 1990: 83.)

¹⁰⁶ Tuck 1990: 77-79.

¹⁰⁷ Although it should be noted that Frederick Streng, one of the most influential (early) proponents of this interpretation, was careful to differentiate between the audiences of Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein and to remind his readers that Nāgārjuna had in mind - not the mistakes of professional philosophers - but the salvation of all human beings (ref. Tuck 1990: 79-80).

¹⁰⁸ Tuck 1990: 79-80.

¹⁰⁹ Tuck 1990: 81-82.

The Buddhist preference of soteriology over ontology is therefore seen, not as an indication of the ineffability of ultimate reality, but as revealing essentialist habits of verbal expression. The theory of two truths is likewise seen as referring to two “language-games” instead of two distinct realities. Understood this way, both the absolutist and the nihilist interpretations appear (symmetrically) misleading. Furthermore, if Nāgārjuna’s claims are taken as “grammatical” (rather than ontological), a lot of the seeming controversiality and paradoxality of his argumentation is removed: his “nonposition” (i.e., his assertion that he does not hold or want to hold a philosophical position) begins to make sense when compared to that of Wittgenstein’s, whose portrayal of philosophy as a process of therapy offers a comfortable interpretative context for the *Buddhist* Nāgārjuna: ¹¹⁰

Nāgārjuna’s goal is to eliminate delusive, conceptual habits of mind (to use psychological construction) and to avoid holding absolutism, nihilism, or even *śūnyatā* as a philosophical position (Tuck 1990: 91).

Śūnyatā is therefore taken as a self-referential term: instead of attempting to be the “true” view of reality, it is a provisional, heuristic term for the nature of the universe as seen without absolutistic mental constructions. In the same manner, *nirvāna* is seen as a term designating a “state unencumbered by philosophical concepts and unmediated by the language of existence and nonexistence” and *paramārtha-satya* (i.e., the “higher” of the two truths) as a special, *aphilosophical* state of awareness.¹¹¹

Not everyone has been impressed by the apparent ease with which the post-Wittgensteinian have brought East and West together, however. Peter Della Santina, still skeptical of the comparative enterprise, writes the following:

Wittgenstein is something of an anomaly in the Western tradition, but Nāgārjuna’s philosophy occupies a central place in what can easily be termed the predominant Buddhist religious tradition. Moreover, Wittgenstein’s tilt towards soteriology, refreshing as it is in the context of the Western philosophical tradition, supplies only a shallow and timid suggestion of freedom compared with the dramatic and radical transformation of experience offered by the Mādhyamaka. (Della Santina 1986(b): 52.)

¹¹⁰ Tuck 1990: 83-91.

¹¹¹ Tuck 1990: 91.

Della Santina (like Streng etc.) thus seems to be primarily concerned about the downplay of the soteriological motive in the Mādhyamaka. In his view, reading Nāgārjuna as a language philosopher means ignoring the immediate context of his philosophy, i.e., the Buddhist quest for spiritual liberation. While there is probably some truth to this, I would still argue that the framework of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy offers an interpretative framework that has produced many fruitful readings of Nāgārjuna (sometimes in collaboration with Asian Buddhists, whom one could certainly assume to be aware of the soteriological implications in Nāgārjuna's thought). The obvious problem with (over)emphasizing "the religious" is that it tends to widen the gap between Mādhyamaka and Western philosophy and perhaps even make them appear incommensurable. Naturally this is not to say that the "gap", if it exists (and it probably does to some extent), should be ignored - clearly it is an important issue. But just like it would be naive to completely ignore Nāgārjuna's religiosity, it would perhaps be equally naive to hold that his *Buddhist* philosophy is somehow radically different from all *non-Buddhist* philosophy.

Within the post-Wittgensteinian framework, Nāgārjuna has been read (for example) as a *kind of a deconstructionist* (eg. Ian W. Mabbett's 'Nāgārjuna and Deconstruction' 1995 and C.W. Huntington's *The Emptiness of Emptiness* 1989) and as a *kind of a skeptic* (eg. Garfield's 'Epokhe and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West' 2002 (1990) and 'Emptiness and Positionlessness: Do the Mādhyamika Relinquish All Views?' 2002 (1996)). These interpretations, though arguably isogetical and "Westernized", do find some interesting affinities between Mādhyamaka and Western philosophy and - more importantly - are able to reconstruct these affinities without violently assimilating one tradition into another at the cost of ignoring some of its key aspects (as is perhaps the case with the Absolutist interpretation). Mabbett writes:

(...) I began with the belief that in the comparison, these two systems of thought from such different cultural environments must be radically incommensurable, and that the plotting of similarities could only be *jeu d'esprit*. The further I advanced, however, the more genuinely significant the similarities seemed to be. (Mabbett 1995: 203-204.)

C. W. Huntington (1983) follows Chris Gudmunsen's (the author of *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* 1977) approach in viewing Mādhyamaka dialectic as a critique of the correspondence theory of truth (i.e., that a sentence is true when it corresponds to a fact) and of its corollary, the "referential" theory of meaning (i.e., that an expression has meaning if there is a corresponding object). He therefore finds the Mādhyamaka view of language and conceptual thought to be "non-referential" which would entail that (i) the *truth value* of a collocation of words or concepts derives from its

being used in a manner that may be seen as somehow consistent with the conceptual matrix of the sociolinguistic community in which it occurs and that (ii) the *meaning* of a word or concept derives from its usage in some particular sociolinguistic community, and not from its reference to any real object.¹¹² In *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (1992) Huntington¹¹³ portrays Mādhyamaka as a radically deconstructive, edifying, pragmatic, and anti-essentialist philosophy¹¹⁴ and writes:

Recourse to the insights of post-Wittgensteinian pragmatism and deconstruction provides us with a new range of possibilities for interpreting *The Entry into the Middle Way*¹¹⁵ and other early Mādhyamika treatises, for what we learn in our encounter with these texts is in every way a function of the tools we bring to our study. (Huntington 1992: 9.)

Huntington stresses, however, that he has used the ideas of Wittgenstein and other modern philosophers as a hermeneutical tool only, since he holds that “no one-to-one correspondence between two philosophical traditions separated by so much time and space does or can exist (1992: xiii).” Garfield seems to share this general attitude, but is slightly less cautious in his discussion of Mādhyamaka in relation to Western skepticism and contemporary postmodern philosophy of language and epistemology based on the critical work of Wittgenstein, for he speaks of “intriguing parallels” and “powerful affinities in method and in detail”.¹¹⁶

Garfield’s treatment of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy falls into the category of rational reconstructions. He is more interested in finding ways to make it cogent (to us) than in providing critical appraisals (in the spirit of Burton and the logicians of the previous “era”). In his rational reconstruction Garfield relies on the tools available to him, which are Wittgensteinian (and post-Wittgensteinian) notions about language and about the role of philosophy. In this way Garfield is just as immersed in the conventions of his time as were his predecessors. The only difference is that he seems much more conscious of this influence than they were.

¹¹² Huntington 1983: 325-326.

¹¹³ The second part of the book is written in collaboration with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen.

¹¹⁴ See eg. Huntington 1992: 9, 39, 136.

¹¹⁵ A Mādhyamaka text composed by Candrakīrti in the 7th century CE.

¹¹⁶ Garfield 2002: 49-50.

PART 5: GARFIELD'S INTERPRETATION OF NĀGĀRJUNA

Western philosophy plays an important part in Garfield's reading of Nāgārjuna. Yet what Garfield wishes to accomplish is much more complex and subtle than simply imposing his (post)Wittgensteinian (post)analytic and (post)modern framework on Mādhyamaka thought. He is striving at an amicable synthesis of two philosophical traditions: by acknowledging his own situatedness in the Western philosophical tradition on one hand, and Nāgārjuna's situatedness in the cumulative Buddhist tradition on the other, he sets out to walk the tightrope between them. This results in a rather elegant reconstruction of Mādhyamaka as a skeptical, conventionalist, and anti-essentialist philosophy.

5.1 PREJUDICES REVEALED

As we already know, Garfield's Nāgārjuna is the first Mādhyamika, the grand old man of an influential Buddhist philosophical school, whose treatises are read in the light of a vast Indo-Tibetan commentarial tradition. Garfield therefore views Nāgārjuna as a Mahāyānist whose philosophical insights have influenced the development of Mahāyāna itself. Biographical accuracy does not concern him much: he acknowledges that not much is known and that a choice has to be made between various interpretative frameworks. He justifies his own choice by arguing that the Tibetan interpretative lineages provide distinct and illuminating ways of reading Nāgārjuna that deserve to be made known also in the West^{117,118}

The Tibetan Geluk-pa (dGe-lugs-pa) scholastic lineage¹¹⁹ in particular has influenced Garfield's reading. The impact of the authoritative commentaries by rJe Tsong khapa and other Geluk

¹¹⁷ Garfield 1995: 88.

¹¹⁸ The following passage is one of the many examples of how Garfield understands Nāgārjuna the philosopher: "So the Nāgārjuna whose views I am exploring is an evolving figure, rooted in the life and writing of a first or second century Indian monk, of whom we know but little, but whose literary life and identity extends through a complex, sophisticated, and contested textual and philosophical tradition in India and Tibet and in the West. (Garfield 1995: 97.)"

¹¹⁹ One of the four major lineages/philosophical schools of Tibetan Buddhism which was founded by rJe Tsong khapa (and whose current head is the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso) and which, in addition to its emphasis on compassion, greatly values Nāgārjuna's and Candrakīrti's teachings on emptiness. The other three lineages are known as Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya. The latter two appear not to have influenced Garfield's views in any important way.

masters¹²⁰, together with oral commentaries from contemporary Tibetan monk scholars¹²¹ can be seen in Garfield's work. The Nyingma-pa¹²² interpretation also plays a part, especially when it comes to deciphering the final chapter of the MMK (i.e., "The Examination of Views"). The Tibetan scholastic tradition is heterogenous and Garfield states that he never consistently sides with any particular faction (while arguing that his reading never conflicts directly with that of Indian Candrakīrti).¹²³

Despite being somewhat heavily influenced by Indian and Tibetan Prāsaṅgika developments, Garfield is presenting a Western reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's thought. His intention is to introduce Nāgārjuna's insights in contemporary philosophical discourse (for he does not wish to remain a mere *historian* of philosophy). When it comes to his translation of (and commentary on) the MMK, it is not meant as "an edition of the text for Buddhologists" but as a representation of a relevant philosophical text to the philosophers of today.¹²⁴ The challenging task is to translate ancient Buddhist concepts into the language of contemporary philosophy without completely uprooting them from their home tradition. Mādhyamaka arguments must therefore be presented "in Western philosophical terms while situating them in their Buddhist context¹²⁵".

Cross-cultural philosophers thus have a dual role as both preservers (of the original concerns, contexts etc.) and reformers (introducing new conceptualizations, arguments and analyses). Garfield writes:

¹²⁰ eg. dGe-'dun-grub and mKahs-grb-rJe

¹²¹ many of which come from the Drepung Loseling Monastic University

¹²² Nyingma is oldest of the Tibetan Buddhist schools (founded in the 8th century) and hails Padmasambhava (Tib. Guru Rinpoche) as its "founder".

¹²³ See Garfield 1995: 97-98. It should be noted that depending on one's prejudices/commitments, siding with Candrakīrti can be seen as a strength or a fault. For (Tibetan) Mādhyamika-Prāsaṅgikas, it is usually a strength and since Garfield is interested in Nāgārjuna as an evolving Mādhyamaka figure, it is appropriate that Candrakīrti's commentaries play a part in his reading. This is not to say that Garfield is blindly following Candrakīrti's exposition, but that he *agrees* with what he understands to be Candrakīrti's view. Naturally the interpretation of Candrakīrti's texts poses similar challenges as that of Nāgārjuna's and agreeing with Candrakīrti refers to agreeing with a certain interpretation of Candrakīrti. For critical accounts of siding with Candrakīrti, see eg. Kalupahana (2006) and Burton (2001).

¹²⁴ Garfield 1995: vii-ix, 88.

¹²⁵ Garfield 1995: 97.

For what makes this a great text is not simply that we can extrapolate its significance into our own context, but that in reading it, to borrow Gadamer's metaphor, we are able to fuse its textual horizon with our own. It is the bringing to the present of Nāgārjuna's own concerns, insights, and arguments that is revelatory, (...). And, for this fusion of interpretive horizons to be possible, we must, as much as possible, respect the original horizon of the text. (Garfield 1995: 96.)

We can see Garfield as applying for a kind of a philosophical dual citizenship, that would (in theory at least) grant him access into two distinct traditions. But what makes one eligible and how much familiarity with - and respect for - the original context of the foreign system is required? If we want horizons to fuse, simple assimilation is not acceptable. But even though we might never gain access to Nāgārjuna's *own* concerns, insights, and arguments, we can study Buddhism and Indian thought to move *closer* to them. This is probably what Garfield means in the passage quoted above. Naturally, whatever we come across will be filtered through our own concerns and insights (we cannot suddenly become *tabula rasas*), but the contents of that-which-we-already-know are not fixed, but subject to change. We might therefore be able to gradually incorporate some Buddhist "prejudices" into our conceptual frameworks.

I believe Garfield succeeds in this. His reconstruction is Western, but not *all* Western. For one, Nāgārjuna remains Nāgārjuna and does not become a mirror image of Western philosophical heroes: not Kant or Russell or even Wittgenstein. Garfield portrays him as a unique, original thinker, who can offer us something *new*. Also, some aspects of Garfield's interpretation remain characteristically Buddhist (see chapter 5.3.3 in particular). This speaks for openness and respect for non-Western philosophical ideas (and perhaps even ideals). As Garfield himself states, some of Nāgārjuna's concerns, problems, theses, and arguments are recognizable cousins of ours, but many are *not*¹²⁶.

We always read something into the texts we interpret, but we have some choice when it comes to the conceptual frameworks, hermeneutical methods and contextualizations - our incentives guide our work. Garfield's reading is carefully constructed to lay the groundwork for further philosophical cross-fertilization. His Nāgārjuna is therefore not a mere relic, but is actually continuing his age-old project of combatting essentialism. This Nāgārjuna is bold (some would say a little *too* bold) in his willingness to transcend the boundaries of culture and time, but at the same time he is extremely

¹²⁶ Garfield 1995: 95.

interesting, extremely outspoken, and extremely versatile in many philosophical arenas. He might help us find new solutions to old problems as well as find new problems, build bridges, enable and enhance communication and cooperation across cultures, further our self-understanding and provide tools and means to further further it.

Garfield, in his “deliberately sympathetic reading”¹²⁷, rationally reconstructs Nāgārjuna’s system to make it approachable and plausible *to us*. The few “inconsistencies” that cannot be abolished, argues Garfield, *are there because they need to be*, i.e., because Nāgārjuna works at the limits of reason and these limits are where contradictions naturally abide. This is why Nāgārjuna’s paradoxes are not viewed as the weakness of his philosophy, but as its strength (see 5.3.2.2).

One more aspect of Garfield’s approach to Nāgārjuna should be mentioned. In his reading of the MMK, two chapters in particular are emphasized: Chapter 24 (dealing with the identity of emptiness, dependent-arising, and the emptiness of emptiness) and chapter 15 (arguing for the identity of nirvāna and samsāra). In addition to this, a lot of weight is placed on Nāgārjuna’s views on causation (chapters 1 & 7).¹²⁸ These choices, together with the ones described above, provide the breeding ground from which Nāgārjuna the Skeptic arises.

5.2 NĀGĀRJUNA THE SKEPTIC

Garfield reads Nāgārjuna as a proponent of skepticism. While he is certainly not the only Western academic to advocate such a reading, his rendition of Nāgārjuna’s skepticism is rather unique. To understand what Garfield is getting at, we must first discuss some definitions of the skeptical enterprise and see what Garfield means when he claims that Mādhyamaka formulations may shed light on some important features of skeptical philosophy. After discussing Garfield’s reconstruction of ontology and epistemology *à la* Nāgārjuna, I will turn to his cross-cultural philosophical therapy designed to weed out essentialism. Finally, in order to see how Garfield treats Nāgārjuna’s

¹²⁷ Garfield 1995: 99.

¹²⁸ See eg. Garfield 1995: 93-94.

apparently paradoxical arguments, I will discuss his views on the limits of reason and on the relationship between the conventional and the ultimate.

5.2.1 SKEPTICISM EAST AND WEST

There are many ways to understand skepticism: we can view it as something the ancient Greeks invented and the subsequent European philosophers answered to (i.e., as a Western enterprise) or we can treat it as a cross-cultural phenomenon, as Garfield does. In his reading, Nāgārjuna's philosophy (especially the Prāsaṅgika interpretation of it) is portrayed as a close relative of Western skepticism, albeit not identical to it. Let us now turn to definitions of skeptical philosophy.

Gisela Striker (1996) argues that skepticism is characterized by two features: a *thesis* that nothing can be known and a *recommendation* that one should suspend judgement¹²⁹. Striker holds that the two features are logically independent of each other (since the thesis is not sufficient to justify the recommendation) and that both are susceptible of different interpretations and therefore cannot determine the details of a sceptical philosophy. Striker also notes that skepticism has recently had a renaissance among (Western) philosophers and that our picture of ancient (Greek) scepticism has become more precise and subtle.¹³⁰

Greek skepticism is usually viewed as having been divided into two separate schools (or, better yet, two general types): the Pyrrhonist and the Academic. The Academics (allegedly) asserted that there is no knowledge and the Pyrrhonists left this question open. Therefore the skepticism of the Academics is often viewed as “mitigated” or “dogmatic” (on the grounds that they *claim to know*

¹²⁹ Striker also holds that while the ancients probably considered the thesis and the recommendation to be of equal importance, in modern times the thesis has generally been the more prominent feature (1996: 93).

¹³⁰ Striker 1996: 92-93, 135.

something, i.e., that there is no knowledge), while the Pyrrhonist type is described as “radical” and “undogmatic” (because they do not even claim to know that there is no knowledge).¹³¹

Many scholars would argue that Nāgārjuna is making statements about *how things really are*, therefore making it impossible to describe his philosophy as skepticism, at least in the sense of Greek skepticism. Yet there are those who disagree. Edward Conze (1963), for one, has suggested that the European philosophical system nearest to Mādhyamaka is, in fact, that of Greek skepticism.¹³² Thomas McEvilley (1982) has gone even further and claimed that it is “hard to identify any significant difference in purpose and effect, between Sextus’ dialectic and Nāgārjuna’s”. McEvilley sees both Pyrrhonism and Mādhyamaka as “transformational dialectics” and finds affinities in their forms of argumentation.¹³³ Therefore, unless one is willing to discard these perspectives as simple naivete and wishful thinking, the definition of skepticism (and the status of Nāgārjuna’s arguments) should be reconsidered.

If the most important mark of a skeptic (in Antiquity) was that she had no doctrines, one can inquire into the status of the arguments that she used to convince herself (and others). It would appear that the skeptic felt that she could adopt the premises from a dogmatic opponent and then show that nothing can be known (of that subject). These arguments would only be valid for the relevant dogmatist, but the skeptic might eventually generalize her position - the Academic would say that no knowledge is possible and the Pyrrhonist (following Sextus) could say that we cannot know how things are *in their own nature*, for we can only know how they *seem to be*. The difference between dogmatic and skeptical knowledge claims could be described as follows: a dogmatic attempts to

¹³¹ See eg. Striker 1996: 136 and Popkin 1987: 341. This is Striker’s (1996: 136) exposition of the birth of Pyrrhonism: “It seems that a proper Pyrrhonist school or movement came to exist only during the lifetime of Aenesidemus, who probably lived in the first century B.C. He is said to have been an academic, who - perhaps from disillusionment with the dogmatic turn of the Academy of his times - attempted to revive a more radical form of skepticism and preferred to appeal to the older Pyrrho instead of the academics Arcesilaus and Carneades. For us, the most important members of this school are Aenesidemus himself, whose writings have been lost, and Sextus Empiricus. Here, as presumably in Plutarch’s essay, Pyrrhonists and Academics should be understood to be adherents of Aenesidemus’ school and of the New Academy, respectively.”

¹³² See Conze 1963: 15. It should be noted, however, that Conze finds the parallel to be closest with Pyrrho (360-275 BCE) and barely perceptible with Sextus (160-210 CE). Conze interestingly argues that Sextus seems to be motivated by disputatiousness and the desire to score debating points rather than by a positive interest in mental repose and that while this attitude may be found in later Buddhist logicians, the Mādhyamikas are still motivated by liberation. (1963: 15-16.) Conze’s understanding of Buddhism in general and of Mādhyamika in particular, seems to favor mystical, monistic interpretation that emphasizes soteriology. This is a “prejudice” very different from Garfield’s.

¹³³ McEvilley 1982: 16-17.

make claims about how things really are, while the skeptic limits herself to saying how things appear to her (making no claims to universal validity).¹³⁴

There is something of an analogy to be found in the Buddhist attitude toward knowing, especially if we reconstruct some of the arguments. The Buddhist view that no *svabhāva* exists could be interpreted as stating that there are no final truths, no certainty about the nature of things. The Buddhist negative attitude towards “extremist” (dogmatic) metaphysics could therefore perhaps be interpreted as a form of skepticism. In fact, the historical Buddha himself refused to answer certain questions of metaphysical nature. There are many interpretations of his silence. One is that he knew the limits of knowledge realizing that all metaphysical positions were relative. Therefore he would not engage in metaphysical speculation. Perhaps in this sense, it could be argued that the Buddhists also suspended judgement about things in their own nature and made claims only about what appears to us (i.e., that things *appear* to be impermanent, that attachment *appears* to lead to suffering, that certain meditative practices *appear* to bring happiness etc.).

While there is perhaps some justification for such a juxtaposition (especially when discussed with reference to the dogmatic opponents of the skeptics and the extremist metaphysical theories that the Buddha reacted against), the analogy still seems futile. The skeptics found it necessary to suspend judgement, *all* judgement (with one exception in the case of the Academics) and give up the quest for certain knowledge, while the Buddhists clearly did not - in fact, they propagated all kinds of doctrines and came up with a great variety of methods (rational and supra-rational) for approaching ultimate truths. Now some might argue that to Buddhists philosophy had (and has) merely therapeutic value and that their doctrines are correctly viewed as medicine prescribed for specific illnesses (and therefore not to be mistaken to entail actual philosophical positions). But this would beg the question, for even if the doctrines were *only* instrumental (and this view, in itself, can be contested), their purpose was to guide practitioners towards a state in which phenomena are *known* as they really are.

All in all, there are many features that help us differentiate (different forms of) Buddhism from Greek skepticism. For one, the Buddhists did enter philosophical debates armed with philosophical views of their own (and therefore did more than just accept the premises of a dogmatic opponent). Second, in one sense or another, they did hold their doctrines to be true (or at least *trueer* than other

¹³⁴ Striker 1996: 137.

doctrines). Thirdly, there was a specifically skeptical *śramaṇa* school in India that was easily distinguishable from the school of the Buddha. As Kalupahana argues:

The Buddha clearly distinguished his philosophy from that of his contemporary, Sanjaya Bellatthiputta, who refused to make any pronouncements, through fear that he would be found fault with. It makes no sense to assume that the Buddha, after criticizing the two extreme views, avoided propounding any view or observed complete silence. Such an assumption would undermine the authenticity of almost all the doctrines attributed to the Buddha (...). (Kalupahana 2006: 13.)¹³⁵

In Kalupahana's argumentation, a skeptic is someone who does not make any pronouncements, does not adhere to a view. The Buddha does, *ergo* he is not a skeptic. The same reasoning can be found in Burton's (2001) examination of the skeptical interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. At the core of Burton's appraisal is the opinion that Nāgārjuna had views and a position of his own and, because skepticism is characterized by not-knowing, Nāgārjuna cannot be labeled a skeptic. Burton proposes that Nāgārjuna's teaching of emptiness is to be seen as a negative dogmatic knowledge claim.¹³⁶ What Burton and Kalupahana have in mind here, is *global* scepticism (i.e., skepticism about *all* knowledge), which - by definition - is incompatible with dogmatism of any kind. In Burton's view, had Nāgārjuna been a skeptic, he should have accepted the possibility that the views of his opponents might be right. Yet he did not, but clearly stated that it is *wrong* to see entities as possessing *svabhāva* (i.e., that ontological views based on *svabhāva* are incorrect). In Burton's conclusion: "Nāgārjuna is confident that he knows how things actually are. He is, then, profoundly unsceptical (2001: 41)."¹³⁷

The question of Indian skepticism in general is complex. Dipankar Chatterjee (1977) argues that there is no *thorough* system of skepticism to be found in the Indian philosophical tradition. In Chatterjee's understanding, the form of systematic calling of knowledge-claims into doubt never developed, because Indians seldom doubted the possibility of attaining knowledge by intuitive, mystical means, or by other methods. While some Indian *śramaṇic* "radicals" (such as the Buddha, the Jains or the Cārvāka-materialists) did criticize the Vedic dogmas and the Vedic way of

¹³⁵ The school of Sanjayin/Sanjaya is usually known as the Agnostic school of Indian thought. The advocates maintained that no conclusive knowledge about any of the matters debated by philosophers can be attained and that philosophical speculation in general is confusing and harmful. Unlike the Greek skeptics, who appear to have had some interest in debate, these Indian *śramaṇas* seem to have advocated friendship, since they saw argument leading to bad tempers and a loss of peace of mind. (Warder 2000: 41.) The agnostics maintained that knowledge was not necessary for salvation, but that ascetic austerity was. (Matilal 1985: 480-481.)

¹³⁶ Burton 2001: 40.

¹³⁷ Burton 2001: 41.

knowledge, they never doubted the possibility of knowledge *per se*.¹³⁸ In Chatterjee's account, therefore, skepticism joined with (or leading to) mysticism is not skepticism proper. Bimal Krishna Matilal (1985), on the other hand, holds that the skeptical tradition in India formed a very important component of major mystical traditions. He reads Nāgārjuna's "skepticism" too as pointing to mysticism, to the ineffability of the ultimates.¹³⁹

The disagreement above boils down to the understanding of the relationship between skepticism and mysticism: can they co-exist as two different aspects of one (spiritual) tradition or are they fundamentally opposed and impossible to combine. The thing that Chatterjee and Matilal agree on, is that skepticism in India never existed as a separate tradition, but was linked to mystical practice. But this view has also been contested. Even if we are to accept the view that Indian 'skeptics' (with perhaps the exception of Sanjayin and his followers) did *know* something, this knowing does not necessarily have to be of supra-rational, intuitive, or mystical kind. If we can let go of the view that a skeptic must suspend judgement on all matters, we can perhaps find more fruitful juxtapositions.

The distinction between *global* and *local* skepticism is important here. While Pyrrhonism is arguably global, there can be different types of *theoretical* skepticisms (both global and local). Skepticism can be seen as offering an account, not only of the possibility of human knowledge, but of its limits. As Hans Sluga (2004) describes:

Where other epistemological theories claim that such-and-such constitutes knowledge because..., skeptical theory argues that what is thought to be knowledge is, in fact, not because.... This theoretical skepticism can be more or less global. (...) Theoretical skepticism then becomes a local skepticism about something - as, for instance, skepticism about the external world or about the existence of other minds. (Sluga 2004: 99.)

A type of skepticism which is skeptical about philosophical theorizing can also be global or local (metaphysics, ethics, or even logic). Sluga examines Wittgenstein's thought and notes that even though Wittgenstein was pronouncedly anti-skeptical (to an extent that he actually dismissed skepticism as "nonsensical"), he still wrote in a strikingly skeptical tone. In Wittgenstein's vision, we need to dissolve the entire body of epistemological and ontological doctrines and reveal how realism, idealism, solipsism (etc.) are nothing but houses of cards. Wittgenstein thus remains

¹³⁸ Chatterjee 1977: 195-200.

¹³⁹ Matilal 1985: 479, 482. (For an examination of a parallel phenomenon in the West, see Charles W. Swain's 'Doubt in Defense of Faith' (1968) in which he discusses the phenomenon of religious apologetics based on philosophical skepticism.)

committed to some features of the traditional philosophical practice and seeks to understand the fascination with philosophical theories, but holds that the task of philosophy is not to bring forth new philosophical propositions but to *clarify* existing ones.¹⁴⁰

It is in Wittgenstein's criticism of essentialism that many contemporary scholars find parallels to Nāgārjuna's philosophy. As Nayak (1979) writes, Mādhyamaka philosophy is to be seen as "critical philosophy devoid of all essentialist picture-taking and metaphysical commitments" and therefore as a challenge to "all those who sneer at Indian philosophy as mystical, dogmatic, metaphysical, theologically biased, or even obscurantist, and whatever".¹⁴¹ Therefore, if we are to understand Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism and his vision of the therapeutic role of philosophy as skepticism, it is perhaps not too outlandish to claim that Nāgārjuna too could be included in the ranks of skeptics. For those willing to define the concept loosely, the conclusion might be, as Sluga puts it, that there are "as many distinct types of skepticism as there are creative skeptical thinkers (2004: 115)." Instead of attempting to classify different 'skepticalisms' into neat and narrow categories, we can perhaps treat 'skepticism' as an umbrella concept that naturally permits diversity and plurality. For, as Kjellberg (1994) reminds us, every tradition has its skeptics. He warns, however, that people are skeptical for different reasons: "Even when the arguments in favor of doubt are quite similar, they can be doing surprisingly different work depending on the surrounding structure of beliefs and values."¹⁴²

When Buddhist (or any non-Western) philosophers are juxtaposed to Western ones, it is often (implicitly) asked what is lacking in the thought of the Buddhist counterpart (think of Nāgārjuna and the "lack" of systematic suspension of judgement, for example). Garfield, however, seems to be employing a somewhat different strategy. He groups together philosophers (East and West) with pronounced skeptical attitudes (global or local) and says "this here is skepticism". This is then Garfield's point of departure and not some fixed definition of what skepticism is and/or should be.

¹⁴⁰ Sluga 2004: 99-100, 102, 106, 109-111.

¹⁴¹ Nayak 1979: 482, 490.

¹⁴² Kjellberg 1994: 111.

5.2.2 THE SKILLFUL SKEPTIC

To Garfield, skepticism is a cross-cultural phenomenon that has representatives in both Eastern (Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti and rJe Tsong khapa etc.) and Western (Sextus, Hume, and Wittgenstein etc.) philosophical traditions. The uniqueness of Garfield's interpretation (and approach) becomes particularly salient when he argues that the Buddhist skeptics are *more explicit* about certain features of the skeptical method than their European confreres: Garfield suggests that in Mādhyamaka philosophy (i) the theory of the relation of skeptical positions to dogmatic ones is more carefully explicated, (ii) the nature of suspension of judgement (or "positionlessness") is more explicitly characterized and (iii) the relations between skeptical methodology and the role of convention in the life of the skeptic is more apparent. Garfield therefore sees the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamaka formulation of skepticism as offering "expository advantages" that can help illuminate "certain obscurities in the skepticism of Europe".¹⁴³

This seems like a bold move. Not only is Garfield arguing that Nāgārjuna's thought can be categorized as skepticism, but he seems to suggest that Nāgārjuna (and his followers) can actually *teach* us something about skepticism. Of course this is not to say that Nāgārjuna and his followers were somehow better skeptics or better philosophers than Sextus, Hume and Wittgenstein. What Garfield seems to be getting at is that Buddhist skepticism, by emphasizing certain aspects of the enterprise, offers a new way of understanding the skeptical enterprise. This new understanding comes with new relevance: Garfield goes as far as to claim that his work may serve as a "programmatic beginning for a cross-cultural expository defense of skepticism as a moderate solution to the problems posed by metaphysical extremism (2002: 6)."

Garfield explains the differences in skeptical formulations to be the result of different cultural contexts. The Western skeptics mainly reacted to theories of (positive) dogmatists, but the Buddhists were dealing with two types of extremes: the reificationist (asserting the *ultimate reality* of something) and the nihilist (philosophically denying the existence of that which - at least in some sense - clearly exists). Garfield then argues that it is the "failure in the European formulation of skeptical arguments to be explicit on this distinction (that) leads to the easy and dangerous conflation of skepticism with nihilism, and the attendant disparagement and rejection of

¹⁴³ Garfield 2002, 5.

skepticism¹⁴⁴". By emphasizing the "essentially constructive character" of skeptical argument, Garfield wishes to demonstrate how skepticism may, in fact, offer solutions to the challenges posed by nihilistic critiques of reificationist positions. For, in order to steer clear of any metaphysical presupposing, the skeptic can neither assert a position nor its negation. Garfield's (skillful) skeptic does not enter this misguided discourse at all.¹⁴⁵ She suspends judgment, not because of the observed equipollence of opposing theories, but because she rejects their premises.

Garfield then analyzes the constructive side of the skeptical enterprise to consist of two (philosophical) procedures: (i) *inverting the order of explanation*, because the explanans itself is understood as problematic, obscure and grounded in what was originally problematized by the skeptical challenge, and (ii) *appealing to social conventions* in the skeptical reconstruction of our metaphysically/epistemologically confused discourse.¹⁴⁶

Garfield's skeptic thus sets out to cure "*philosophical ills*" symptomized by the obsessive search for epistemologically or ontologically primitive foundations of knowledge, meaning, explanation, or morality that undergird our collective epistemic, linguistic, scientific, and moral practices. Garfield reads Nāgārjuna as arguing that conventional should be understood as conventional, i.e., as empty of any reality or foundation beyond convention.¹⁴⁷ It is therefore the negative attitude towards reificationist metaphysics systematically applied, and an emphasis on the conventional that, according to Garfield, make a skeptic:

Nāgārjuna, like Western skeptics, systematically eschews the defense of positive metaphysical doctrines regarding the nature of things, arguing rather that any such positive thesis is incoherent and that, in the end, our conventions and our conceptual framework can never be justified by demonstrating their correspondence to an independent reality. Rather, he suggests, what counts as real depends precisely on our conventions. (Garfield 1995: 89.)

Garfield criticizes Kantian readings of Nāgārjuna by pointing out that inherently existent emptiness (i.e., emptiness as the ultimate reality) would render the phenomenal world completely nonexistent, because the reification of emptiness would require us to be "nihilistic" about the phenomenal world (just as the reification of the phenomenal world depends upon viewing emptiness nihilistically). In

¹⁴⁴ Garfield 2002: 6.

¹⁴⁵ Garfield 2002: 8-9.

¹⁴⁶ Garfield 2002: 10-11.

¹⁴⁷ Garfield 2002: 12.

Garfield's understanding, the extremes of reification and nihilism both depend on the presupposition that to exist is to exist inherently - the only difference is what the inherent existence is ascribed to. This is why Garfield's Nāgārjuna argues that to exist is to exist conventionally and that both conventional phenomena as well as their (so-called) ultimate natures exist *in the same way*: as empty. Emptiness and the phenomenal world are therefore not distinct from one another - they are merely two characterizations of the same thing.¹⁴⁸

It is therefore not the 'not-knowing' that defines skepticism. Nāgārjuna, for one, *knows* that the reificationist theories of how the things are in their real nature are *wrong*. He furthermore *knows* that our views about things are embedded in conventions. In fact, he *knows* that there is nothing beyond the conventional. As Garfield and Geshe Ngawang Samten write in *Ocean of Reasoning* (2005):

It is important to bear in mind that for Nāgārjuna the use of *reductio* arguments is no mere rhetorical device, but reflects his commitment to refraining from characterizing any nature of things because of his commitment to the incoherence of the very *idea* of the nature of things. (Garfield & Samten 2005: xxi.)

To state that Nāgārjuna's *reductio* is not a mere rhetorical device is to say it reflects a deeper philosophical point (and is therefore not a mere mystic's trick). Nāgārjuna knows things and makes assertions, but his assertions are not dogmatic in the sense that they would attempt to characterize the essence of anything. To Nāgārjuna, the only "essence" to be found is that there is no essence (and essencelessness itself is not an essence) and hence Nāgārjuna denies the coherence and utility of the very concept.¹⁴⁹ This is why Nāgārjuna relentlessly refutes all theories about the essence of things, including emptiness itself. Yet, in the end, what we are left with, is not a formless void, but the "actuality of the entire phenomenal world as recovered within the emptiness".¹⁵⁰

Garfield's analysis of Nāgārjuna's philosophy (much like his analysis of the skeptical enterprise *per se*) does not merely acknowledge what is being denied and rejected, but also what is being affirmed. Contrary to Kantian readings, Garfield does not undermine the conventional (the phenomenal). He wishes to show that the view that things are essenceless and thus do not exist inherently is, in fact, compatible with the statement that things are conventionally real. The crux of Garfield's

¹⁴⁸ Garfield 1995: 304-305.

¹⁴⁹ Garfield 1995: 100.

¹⁵⁰ Garfield 1995: 90-91, 94-95.

interpretation of Nāgārjuna can therefore be found in his contention that Nāgārjuna disavows the search for ontological foundations of the conventional.

Some critical observations are in order, however. As Garfield himself declares, his reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's thought is based on a somewhat controversial reading of the first chapter of the MMK dealing with causation (more of this in **5.1.3.2**). Also, to claim that Nāgārjuna's argumentation is skeptically motivated requires placing much emphasis on epistemology. This is problematic because Nāgārjuna himself seems to refrain from *explicit* epistemological considerations while, on the other hand, there is a pronounced soteriological underpinning in everything he writes (an aspect that Garfield seems to bracket at times). Garfield certainly acknowledges Nāgārjuna's religious goals and writes about "a specific psychological emphasis (1995: 107)" in his philosophy, but his depiction of Nāgārjuna as a skeptical philosopher nonetheless appears to imply that what was seen by Nāgārjuna to lead to spiritual emancipation in one context, can lead to philosophical clarity in another.

Garfield's understanding of the nature and function of the skeptical enterprise is not entirely traditional. Therefore, to claim that Nāgārjuna cannot be labelled a skeptic because he does not always suspend judgment, is not convincing here (at best, it succeeds in challenging Garfield's portrayal of skepticism). However, the relationship that exists between Nāgārjuna's views and his skeptical silence, is subtle and deep and requires some clarification.

5.2.3 SKEPTICISM AND VIEWS

On more occasions than one, Nāgārjuna declares that his is the view-of-no-views and that he has no thesis to advance or proposition to make. Yet at the same time, he seems to be doing just that - advancing theses and making propositions. Western scholars have provided different solutions to this apparent paradox: some argue that Nāgārjuna's assertions are not really assertions, but performatives designed to combat unhealthy notions (i.e., Nāgārjuna is providing "antidotes" to harmful views and nothing else). Others suggest that Nāgārjuna is using logic against logic (to undermine it) because he propagates intuitive, direct means of attaining knowledge. Garfield, on the other hand, claims that Nāgārjuna is consciously advancing a view, but one that is free from

essentialist underpinnings and therefore fundamentally different from the views that it is attacking. For the sake of clarity, Garfield is *not* arguing that non-conceptual gnosis has no place in Nāgārjuna’s “system”, but he *is* arguing that the philosophical component of the system is, in fact, rigorously philosophical.

5.2.3.1 Nāgārjuna’s Right View

The Tibetan gelukpas hold that Nāgārjuna is not propagating the relinquishment of *all* views, but simply the ones that are *false*. Garfield, too, reads Nāgārjuna as a rigorous philosopher who carries out systematic, rational analyses and advocates a “view” that has both epistemological and ontological dimensions.

In all simplicity, Nāgārjuna’s right view (*qua* Garfield) is that our world is *thoroughly conventional*. This is to say that all essentialist metaphysics are, in the end, untenable and implausible, because they are based on fallacious presuppositions of what it is to exist. Nāgārjuna says that things both exist and do not exist. Yet this is not mysticism, but a valid philosophical point, because it states that things exist in the *conventional* sense, but do not exist in the *absolute* sense.¹⁵¹ This is how Nāgārjuna’s system becomes demystified.

As Garfield writes in his commentary on the MMK, Nāgārjuna’s view is “apparently paradoxical, thoroughly empty, but in the commonsense view not only of causation, but of the entire phenomenal world”. In Garfield’s analysis, therefore, Nāgārjuna replaces “the apparent common sense that is deeply metaphysically committed with an apparently deeply metaphysical but actually commonsense understanding of the phenomenal world”.¹⁵² The “apparent common sense” is the view that things are fixed and have an unchanging component to them. This is “deeply metaphysical” because no such component is evident to us – we cannot *observe* the essences, we can only philosophically postulate them. On the other hand, to say that things are empty is simply to accept that they are conventional. This entails that we let go of the popular essentialist myths that,

¹⁵¹ See eg. Garfield 2002: 57.

¹⁵² Garfield 1995: 123.

according to Garfield, plague many of our philosophical discourses and, according to Nāgārjuna, create attachment and suffering.

Garfield's Nāgārjuna recognizes that the phenomenal world is in a state of flux. Things are constantly changing - this is something we can observe. Essence (*svabhāva*), on the other hand, is by definition something fixed and unchanging and also something unobservable. Hence the view of emptiness is compatible with the empirical reality of impermanence and change, the arising and ceasing of conventionally existent phenomena. So let us now plow into Nāgārjuna's views on causation.

5.2.3.2 Conventionalist Regularism and the Emptiness of Causation

To recap, Garfield's Nāgārjuna claims that we cannot make sense of the idea of a thing's nature. Therefore not even emptiness can be understood as the true nature or essence of things. Nor should it be reified into some kind of substantial reality behind the world of appearance, for it is simply the name for the lack of any such reality. This is to say that emptiness itself is empty of essence. It *depends* upon the things it characterizes and exists *conventionally* as a verbal designation. As Garfield explains, the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness is more explicitly characterized by Candrakīrti, who offers it as an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophical system. Garfield follows in Candrakīrti's footsteps and claims that the doctrine in its embryonic form can already be found in the opening chapter of the MMK.¹⁵³

The chapter deals with causation in general, and with *pratītya-samutpāda* in particular. In Garfield's rendition, Nāgārjuna argues for the emptiness of causation and therefore rejects the idea of causal powers. Nāgārjuna does this by distinguishing between two views of *pratītya-samutpāda* that rely on the notion of causes (skt. *hetu*, tib. *rguy*) and conditions (skt. *pratyaya*, tib. *rkyen*), respectively. Causes possess causal power to bring about their effect, while conditions are simply employed as useful *explanans*. Garfield (somewhat controversially) claims that Nāgārjuna explicitly argues

¹⁵³ Garfield 2002: 25-27.

against the existence of causes and for the existence of conditions and hence characterizes a view of causation that relies simply on regularities.¹⁵⁴

Hetu's power to bring about its effect is part of its essence. *Pratyaya*, on the other hand, is simply an event, state, or process that can be appealed to in explaining another event, state, or process. The main difference, therefore, is that with *pratyaya*, there is no metaphysical commitment to a connection between *explanandum* and *explanans*. In short, it is a view of causation that has no place for real causal activity. However, Garfield argues that such a view still permits us to explain and predict the arising of phenomena. Adding active forces or potentials, he claims, contributes nothing of explanatory utility to this.¹⁵⁵

Nāgārjuna's (*qua* Garfield) theory is based on the empirically observed net of conditions behind phenomena. Stripped of all essentialist presuppositions, it is commonsensical: the common sense sees the world as a network of dependently originated things and does not posit a "real" causal nexus anywhere. In this conventionalist account of causation, it is argued that explanatory interests and conventions for individuation and classification of things determine both *explanans* and *explanandum*. Garfield himself sees this as a moderate and sensible approach to explaining.¹⁵⁶ As he describes:

(...) we explain a phenomenon when we identify it as of a kind; when we connect occurrences of things of that kind with the occurrence of other related phenomena; when we connect the macroscopic and easily observable with the microscopic and harder-to-observe; when we place it within a network of events, purposes, and connections that form patterns enabling rational action, prediction, and cognitive access to the world. (2002: 72)

Such *conventionalist regularism* can be understood as a midpoint between the extremes of the reification of causation (i.e, the causal power view) and nihilism (denying causation). In Garfield's own words:

To assert the emptiness of causation is to accept the utility of our causal discourse and explanatory practice, but to resist the temptation to see these as grounded in reference to causal powers or as demanding such grounding. Dependent origination simply is the explicability and coherence of the universe. Its emptiness is the fact that there is no more than that. (2002: 33.)

¹⁵⁴ Garfield 2002: 27; 71.

¹⁵⁵ Garfield 2002: 27-28.

¹⁵⁶ Garfield 2002: 37, 72.

The important thing here is that Nāgārjuna appears to be drawing a connection between the causal power view of causation and an essentialist view of phenomena on one hand, and between the condition view of dependent arising and a conventional view of phenomena on the other. Garfield argues that Nāgārjuna does this because he realizes the centrality of causation to metaphysics: things are empty, because they are dependently originated. Therefore, emptiness and dependent arising are closely correlated.¹⁵⁷

There are some commonly recognized problems with the regularity view, however. We should consider whether causation is just regularity (the constant conjunction or succession of events) as contingently true generalizations or a *necessary* connection between two events or things. It would be naive to suppose that regularity is accidental, but what can be the necessary connection (without the power to bring about an effect)? It would seem as if one is forced to either take the essentialist/realist/reificationist way out or to admit that one has no answer to the question and perhaps deny causation altogether (nihilism). Garfield, however, argues that Nāgārjuna avoids these extremes by noticing that they both rely on essentialist presupposition. In Garfield's view, the conventionality of phenomena is the prerequisite for causation, which can only be the regularity of "when this exists, that will exist".¹⁵⁸

The regularities, patterns and connections we observe are embedded in further regularities, patterns, and connections. Garfield argues that there is no explanation of why the world is interdependent, because "there is no such well-defined totality to explain". Explanatory questions are local and attempting explanations of the possibility of explanation itself is meaningless.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Garfield 2002: 30, 33.

¹⁵⁸ See eg. Chinn 2001: 56-57, 59.

¹⁵⁹ Garfield 2002: 72-73.

5.2.3.3 Conventions as the Foundation of Ontology

Nāgārjuna's account of explanation and causation grounds ontology in the conventions that underly our interests and categorizations.¹⁶⁰ Garfield therefore argues that Nāgārjuna's view is accurately described as conventionalism. But let us now get back to the *emptiness* of dependently arisen things, i.e., the aspect of Nāgārjuna's system that touches upon the ultimate.

From the first chapter of the MMK, we now move to the 24th. The famous passage (i.e., 24:18 that was quoted earlier) equates emptiness with dependent arising (conventional reality) and, if we are to side with Garfield's interpretation, implies that they are *both* conventional. Garfield states that the reification of emptiness¹⁶¹ is unacceptable to Nāgārjuna¹⁶². He sees the properties of emptiness, dependent-arising, and conventional identity (i.e., the identity of a thing depends upon verbal conventions) as co-extensive.¹⁶³

The doctrine of the Two Truths is important here. The ultimate truth about phenomena is that they are empty of essence; the conventional truth is the truth about things as they appear to accurate ordinary investigation. Things are conventionally existent, but ultimately empty. Yet these are two *truths*, not truth and falsehood. The distinction, therefore, is not between appearance and reality. But how exactly does Nāgārjuna defy this step? Garfield argues that the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness does crucial work here. When emptiness is understood to be empty itself, it is no more or less real than any conventional phenomenon.¹⁶⁴ It might seem nihilistic to state that what is ultimately real is empty of reality but one must keep in mind that emptiness, for Nāgārjuna, is impermanence, dependence, and conventional identity. Emptiness is not distinct from conventional phenomena (it is *their* emptiness) and because it has no identifiable essence. The emptiness of a table is the emptiness of a table, nothing more.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Garfield 2002: 73.

¹⁶¹ despite being a view not uncommon in Buddhist philosophy

¹⁶² Garfield offers the passage 24:18 as support for this (2002: 35).

¹⁶³ Garfield 2002: 33, 36.

¹⁶⁴ Garfield 1995: 297; Garfield & Samten 2005: xx; Garfield 2002: 36.

¹⁶⁵ Garfield 2002: 37-38.

Garfield sees the emptiness of emptiness as the most radical step in Mādhyamaka philosophy and argues that it saves the dialectic “from falling into metaphysical extravaganza” and “brings it back to sober pragmatic skepticism”.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, in Nāgārjuna’s system (*qua* Garfield), convention is neither ontologically insignificant (because it determines the character of the phenomenal world) nor ontologically efficacious (because it is empty). Extraconventional facts are rejected, because explanatory utility is relative to human purposes and theoretical frameworks.¹⁶⁷

The distinction between the Two Truths is thus fundamentally a distinction between two kinds of objects of knowledge. The conventional truth deals with entities, properties, etc. posited by ordinary, unreflected awareness, science, philosophy and so on. The things we say about these phenomena, in this domain, to the extent that they are true by the standards of human convention, are conventionally true. Ultimate truth is truth independent of convention. Its domain is therefore the class of entities that exist independently of convention - the phenomena as they are independent of language or the ontology induced by language and thought. The fact that emptiness is what we find on such an analysis makes it legitimate to say that emptiness is an ultimate truth (indeed the only one) and the domain of ultimate truth.¹⁶⁸

5.2.4 GARFIELD’S ANTI-ESSENTIALIST THERAPY

Garfield’s Nāgārjuna rejects the general essentialist framework that both nihilism and reification presuppose. Yet he denies neither the relationships of mutual dependence between phenomena nor the conventional existence of those phenomena. Garfield himself also adheres to this view:

I think that Nāgārjuna is not only right about the fundamental importance of causality, and dependence more generally, to our understanding of reality and of human life but also that his own account of these matters is generally correct. Given these two premises, it follows that our conduct of natural science as well as the pursuit of our moral life should be informed by Nāgārjuna’s account of these matters. (Garfield 2002: 69)

¹⁶⁶ Garfield 2002: 39-40.

¹⁶⁷ Garfield 2002: 36, 41.

¹⁶⁸ Garfield 2002: 60.

The Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths was presented in the form of a medical diagnosis and a plan of treatment: it describes a disease and its symptoms, identifies its cause, outlines what freedom from this disease would be like, and prescribes the course of treatment required to attain this healthy state.¹⁶⁹ The goal of the Buddha was complete freedom from suffering and the illness he was attempting to cure was of a psychological kind (for he saw the extremist metaphysical views as a source of confusion and attachment). Nāgārjuna too can be seen as working within this Buddhist soteriological framework and it is not very likely that he himself would have ascribed philosophy much value apart from being transformational and emancipatory (as a step on the path towards enlightenment). Some would argue that this is the rightful framework where Buddhist philosophy should always remain, that it should never enter the world of secular philosophical discussion (where it would inevitably become misinterpreted). Others disagree, however, and hold that while (for example) Nāgārjuna's arguments make sense in the Buddhist context, they can be meaningful in a different one as well.

As described before, Garfield is not satisfied with taking Nāgārjuna's thought as a philosophical relic. He holds that the work of ancient Buddhists may be seen as providing us with relevant and meaningful perspectives in contemporary philosophical discussion. Therefore, when he reads Nāgārjuna as a skeptic, he has in mind a goal much more ambitious than to merely label the thought of a 2nd century thinker and leave it at that. He brings Nāgārjuna to the present, familiarizes him with the conceptual frameworks and philosophical problems of our time (and place) and then asks what he has to say about it. To criticize Garfield for taking Nāgārjuna out of his original environment would be beside the point, because *this* Nāgārjuna is not the Buddhist monk who once attacked the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika metaphysical doctrines. Perhaps he is better described as a hybrid of Nāgārjuna and Garfield. Or as a kind of a cross-cultural skeptic. Whatever the case, Garfield argues that Nāgārjuna's work "provides a genuinely distinctive perspective on a set of problems and projects that we share (1995: 95)".

In 1972, Robinson concluded his study of the logical aspects of Nāgārjuna's thought by stating that if Nāgārjuna actually succeeds in his attempt to combat the metaphysical doctrines of this time, this success is extremely limited. However, he proposed that a "neo-Mādhyamika" might try to apply Nāgārjuna's technique to the presuppositions of new philosophies.¹⁷⁰ This is perhaps a good

¹⁶⁹ Gowans 2003: 31.

¹⁷⁰ Robinson 1972: 327.

description of what Garfield is trying to do. He is a neo-Mādhyamika on a mission to cure philosophy (East and West) from dogmatic illness - an illness which engenders “endless sophistical dialectic” and blocks clear thinking about language, explanation, morality, and ontology¹⁷¹. In Garfield’s view, much of contemporary philosophy is seriously and dogmatically ill. His own work he sees as a programmatic beginning for a new dialogue in which the Eastern and Western perspectives are brought together and in which the skeptical enterprise is seen as a much-needed corrective to some contemporary philosophical confusions.¹⁷²

Garfield himself participates in philosophy of science, and argues that Nāgārjuna’s conventionalist notions can be of use there. He takes as his starting point the co-existence of multiple levels of explanation (and of accompanying ontology) in contemporary science¹⁷³ and argues that attempts to establish one level of explanation as fundamental are misguided. He then proposes that the Mādhyamaka understanding of *pratītya-samutpāda*¹⁷⁴ might provide a way out of such meaningless debate¹⁷⁵. Garfield holds that the urge to privilege one level over another emerges as a consequence of a doctrine regarding the locus of genuine causation, while the Mādhyamaka analysis of explanation and causation gives rise to ontological generosity. This is because *pratītya-samutpāda* has multiple, multidimensional, inter- and intra-level character and it focuses on the notion of the explanatory work that entities on these multiple levels can do. Naturally, the standard desiderata of good theories matter (eg. economy, elegance, predictive power etc.), but Garfield argues that this is *all* that matters. Therefore, the debates cannot be solved on *a priori* grounds.¹⁷⁶

But Garfield is not only concerned about Western philosophy and does not limit his anti-essentialist and conventionalist critique there. In fact, Garfield takes Nāgārjuna’s arguments and uses them

¹⁷¹ Garfield 2002: 13.

¹⁷² Many philosophers believe that an important task of philosophy is to answer the skeptic, i.e., to show that what the skeptic denies to be possible is not only possible, but actual. In Garfield’s view this can be seen as a form of “philosophical resistance” (in the psychoanalytic sense) where philosophers end up with the very disease of which the skeptic intends to cure them. Garfield on the contrary suggests that we take the skeptic’s arguments seriously and cautiously and do not confuse skepticism with nihilism.

¹⁷³ For example, the flexing of the arm can be explained by neurophysiology, psychology etc. (Garfield 2002: 74.)

¹⁷⁴ Which he understands as a relative of the Quinean view, i.e., to exist is to exist conventionally and dependently and here the relevant conventions are those of scientific theory and the relevant dependencies are given by the laws discovered by science. (2002: 74.)

¹⁷⁵ Garfield’s examples of such misguided attempts are Churchland’s venture to establish the ontological primacy of the “low”-level phenomena of physical science and Fraassen’s effort to disparage the “unobservable” in favor of its manifest entities. (2002: 74.)

¹⁷⁶ Garfield 2002: 74-76.

against Nāgārjuna's successor Dharmakīrti who claims that the belief in rebirth is a precondition for the cultivation of *bodhicitta*¹⁷⁷. Garfield argues that this is not consistent with Nāgārjuna's account of causation because it goes beyond mere interdependence and posits a substantial basis for it.¹⁷⁸ Garfield further holds that Dharmakīrti's views entail a subtle form of self-grasping, a belief in the substantially existent self when no such entity can be verified:

Nothing holds the self together; nothing holds the causes to their effects. Raw interdependence is all we encounter, and there is no hope of an explanation to end all explanations. That is the manifestation, in the philosophy of science and in the existential understanding of the nature of self, of the abyss of emptiness into which Dōgen much later commands us to leap. (2002: 85.)

Garfield's Nāgārjuna encourages us to let the efficacious occult cement of the world vanish and to affirm the empirical world.¹⁷⁹ But can this really be *all* that a Buddhist philosopher commands of us? Nāgārjuna might have been at pains to affirm the empirical world (in order to save his *philosophical* system from the charges of nihilism), but is it not a Buddhist practitioner's goal to transcend the empirical world and to go beyond it in one way or another? I believe Garfield succeeds in providing support for a view that this "beyond", in Nāgārjuna's system, is not an ultimate reality in the metaphysical sense (i.e., permanent and substantial ground of existence like the Hindu *Brahman*), but Buddhist enlightenment is still arguably something more than simply adopting an anti-essentialist world-view - it is *direct awareness* of the world as it is. Needless to say, this is where Garfield must leave behind the comfort of Western philosophical terminology and attempt to conceptualize matters that Western philosophers have tended to dodge.

¹⁷⁷ i.e., the wish to attain enlightenment (for the benefit of all beings) or the "thought of enlightenment" as the primary aspiration of the bodhisattva (i.e., Mahayana practitioner).

¹⁷⁸ Garfield 2002: 76, 80-81, 84.

¹⁷⁹ Garfield 2002:85.

5.3 NĀGĀRJUNA AND THE ULTIMATE

Garfield balances between making sense of Nāgārjuna's arguments in their home (Buddhist) tradition and offering a contemporary philosophical account of his system. When he reads Nāgārjuna as a skeptic, he largely focuses on Nāgārjuna's rejection of essentialist metaphysics and uses this as a starting point for his own "curative" endeavors. I believe this is a justified move in the context of Garfield's cross-cultural philosophy, but does not paint the whole picture of Nāgārjuna. Therefore he must discuss another Nāgārjuna too: Nāgārjuna the enlightened.

5.3.1 MYSTICISM REVISITED

Let us take recourse in the views of the two Indian scholars introduced earlier. Chatterjee and Matilal both hold that Indian 'skepticism' (although Chatterjee would oppose this nomination) is always connected to some mystical notions. Furthermore, Della Santina and many other scholars emphasize the soteriological framework in which Indian philosophy is (almost exclusively) seen as operating and holds that, if this context is ignored, Indian philosophy ceases to be Indian philosophy.

What about Garfield's Nāgārjuna? It is sometimes difficult to see where Nāgārjuna the 2nd century Buddhist philosopher ends and Garfield's reconstructed Nāgārjuna begins. This is because, on many occasions, Garfield Nāgārjuna's methods and arguments appear very (post)modern and Western. However, Garfield does make a serious attempt at accounting for the aspects of Nāgārjuna's thought that still, despite of Garfield's careful demystification, seem strange and perhaps even anti-rational to a contemporary Western reader. Garfield, however, argues that they are not so, relying on paraconsistent logic to show that the apparent contradictions in Nāgārjuna's philosophizing do not need to be deemed illogical or mystical¹⁸⁰. But before discussing Garfield's views on Nāgārjuna and the limits of thought, some contextualization is in order.

¹⁸⁰ These issues are mainly dealt with in 'Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought' (2002) with Graham Priest.

In the course of Nāgārjuna scholarship, some scholars have suggested that his philosophy attempts to be logically consistent and rational (eg. Robinson, Hayes and Jones) while others have held that the logic is only employed to destroy logic, to prove its inadequacy in approaching the ultimate (eg. Inada and Betty). The MMK has been read as both an extremely logical exposition and as a mystical manifesto. David Loy (1984), on the other hand, has argued that the correct way to understand Nāgārjuna's philosophy is to perceive it holistically and dynamically as a philosophical moment in an evolving "way of liberation" and, instead of trying to force it into the categories of either philosophy or mysticism, we should perhaps change our own views on how the philosophical enterprise relates to soteriology¹⁸¹. To Western ears, this sounds like a radical suggestion. Nevertheless, since it would appear that Nāgārjuna's (and many other Asian philosophers') thought has both rational and supra-rational elements, scholars might benefit from questioning and investigating the dichotomy.

To view Nāgārjuna as an rationalist or as an irrationalist (or as anything at all) arguably depends on the set of philosophical spectacles (eg. Kantian, Vedāntin, Wittgensteinian) of the interpreter. In fact, interpretations tend to reveal more about the interpreter than the interpreted. Loy holds that the Western readings fall into two major categories, i.e., the classical ones (eg. Stcherbatsky and Murti) that emphasize the distinction between empirical phenomena and the noumenal absolute, and the more recent ones influenced by contemporary analytic philosophy (eg. Streng & Gudmunsen) in which emptiness is understood as a meta-system and as a term which does not refer to anything in the world, but rather indicates the inability of all language to refer to anything. In Loy's view, both these interpretative traditions are one-sided and hence misleading: they emphasize one of the two main aspects at the expense of the other. The faults of the Kantian approach have already been discussed and need not be re-stated here. When it comes to the linguistic approach of the "Wittgensteinian" scholars, Loy argues that they ignore the religious context of Nāgārjuna's thought and therefore cannot capture the complete meaning of Mādhyamaka.¹⁸² There is some truth to this. In the end, it boils down to the question of motivation. As Dick Garner (1977) reminds us, the ordinary language-philosopher aims at freedom from philosophical worry while Nāgārjuna aims higher to quietude¹⁸³.

¹⁸¹ Loy 1984: 444.

¹⁸² Loy 1984: 437, 441, 443.

¹⁸³ Garner 1977: 176.

The general definition for ‘mysticism’ offered by the Stanford (online) Encyclopedia of Philosophy is “a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions”. What has primarily interested Western philosophers, has been the (allegedly) knowledge-granting “mystical experiences”. In some spiritual traditions, the experiences are (allegedly) of a supersensory reality, but many Buddhist traditions make no such claim and cultivate experiences of “unconstructed awareness” instead.¹⁸⁴ This is what Schlomo Biderman (1989) probably has in mind when he writes about Nāgārjuna’s “minimal mysticism” as mysticism without ontological presuppositions and as independent of any metaphysical world-view¹⁸⁵.

If we understand mystical experience as non-conceptual knowledge, Nāgārjuna’s system (like, perhaps, *any* Buddhist system) arguably has some room for it. However, Garfield criticizes fiercely interpreters that label Mādhyamaka as mysticism and argues that such a view is to shirk the hermeneutic burden of making sense of a text. He likewise argues that such readings are hard to justify, given the relentlessly rational and meticulously argued character of the MMK. Garfield therefore takes upon himself to provide a coherently rational reconstruction of Nāgārjuna’s *prima facie* paradoxical verses.¹⁸⁶

In Garfield’s account, the Mādhyamaka right view is that all phenomena are ultimately empty though conventionally real and dependently arisen. By adopting this view, one can attain liberation from the suffering of *samsāra*. This is because the suffering is rooted in false views. This is more or less consistent with the Geluk interpretation of the passage 13:8 of the MMK.¹⁸⁷ The passage reads:

The victorious ones have said
that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
For whomever emptiness is a view
That one has accomplished nothing. (13:8 MMK in Garfield 1995: 212)

¹⁸⁴ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/> (References are made to Takeuchi 1983 and Griffiths 1993)

¹⁸⁵ Biderman 1989: 63.

¹⁸⁶ Garfield 2002: 46.

¹⁸⁷ Garfield 2002:47.

However, ‘emptiness’ is but a dependent designation and therefore, when Nāgārjuna claims that he has no view, he means it. This is because, as Garfield holds, emptiness is not a thing, not an existent, not something that can be ‘viewed’. This is consistent with the Nyingma understanding.

To sum up, then, Nāgārjuna’s ultimate truth is that there is none (just like the ultimate nature of things is that there is no ultimate nature). This seems paradoxical and it should, for - if we are to trust Garfield - we have now traveled to the limits of what can be said.

5.3.2 NĀGĀRJUNA AND THE LIMITS OF REASON

Garfield argues that Nāgārjuna asserts paradoxes because the reality itself is contradictory. Therefore, regardless of whether it is his intention or not, Nāgārjuna succeeds in pointing out the limits of reason. Needless to say, this is a view that cannot be justified with a logic that demands consistency. If contradictions are understood to *always* entail triviality then we must either claim that Nāgārjuna’s paradoxes are not really paradoxes or to succumb to a view that he is either an irrationalist who does not believe in the power of logic in the first place or, alternatively, a failed logician. In order to show that Nāgārjuna’s contradictions are not only contradictions, but *true* contradictions, Garfield then turns to dialetheism.

5.3.2.1 Paraconsistency and Dialetheism

Paraconsistent logics challenge the contemporary logical orthodoxy that inconsistency leads to triviality, i.e., that the logical consequence relation \models is explosive (detonate). In any explosive logic $\{A, \neg A\} \models B$ for every A and B (*ex contradictione quodlibet*, ECQ, i.e., contradiction entails everything) is a valid inference. Paraconsistent logics are systems that are not explosive (and hence require a consequence relation in which the ECQ is blocked) and can therefore be employed in inconsistent, but non-trivial theories. Paraconsistency *per se* is a property of a consequence relation.

The weakly paraconsistent research program assumes that the world is consistent and its aim is to provide an account of situations in which some of the information under consideration is presumed to be in error. The stronger paraconsistent research program, known as dialeth(e)ism, does not share this background assumption, but holds that inconsistent theories may, in fact, be accurate descriptions of the world (while some advocates of dialetheism, such as Garfield, believe in the inconsistency of the world, this is not required: mere agnosticism about its consistency is enough). In all simplicity, dialetheism is the view that there are true contradictions. When taken to its extreme (that all contradictions are true) it becomes triviality (that everything is true). Thus, if dialetheism is to be differentiated from triviality, it then must be paraconsistent¹⁸⁸.¹⁸⁹

When it comes to Nāgārjuna, we are dealing with apparent *dialetheias* (i.e., true contradictions where both A and $\neg A$ are true and, as a consequence, some inferences of the type $\{A, \neg A\} \models B$ must fail). In general, contradictions and inconsistencies *seem* to be better tolerated in the Eastern traditions. However, many Western scholars, after studying these traditions, have suggested that the contradictions encountered are not, in fact, contradictions. One method is to claim that the contradictions are not to be taken literally, but should be understood as metaphors. Another method is known as *parameterisation*, i.e., the claim that the contradictory assertion is ambiguous and therefore true in one disambiguation and false in another.¹⁹⁰ In the account of Garfield and Priest (2002), on the other hand, the apparent paradoxes are treated as *dialetheias* and hence a form of paraconsistent logic is required. As they write:

(...) we are concerned with the possibility that Nāgārjuna, like many philosophers in the West, and indeed like his many Buddhist successors - perhaps as a consequence of his influence - discovers and explores true contradictions arising at the limits of thought. (...) to those who share with us a dialetheist's comfort with the possibility of true contradictions commanding rational assent, for Nāgārjuna to endorse such contradictions would not *undermine* but instead would *confirm*, the impression that he is indeed a highly rational thinker. (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 86.)

¹⁸⁸ It should be noted, however, that paraconsistent logic itself does not have to be dialetheist (in fact, many paraconsistent logics validate the Law of Non-Contradiction ($\models \neg(A \wedge \neg A)$) (LNC) even though they invalidate ECQ).

¹⁸⁹ See Aberdein & Read 2009: 682-684 and 'Paraconsistent Logic' on *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* available from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-paraconsistent/>

¹⁹⁰ On Eastern *dialetheias* and Western interpretation of them see 'Dialetheism' on *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dialetheism/>

5.3.2.2 Nāgārjuna the Dialetheist

To begin with, Garfield and Priest, in ‘Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Reason’ (Garfield 2002: 89) notice an interesting pattern in theories (West and East) which attempt to theorize about the limits of thought. The pattern is that such theories tend to run into contradictions. These contradictions at the limits (i.e., *limit contradictions*) have a specific structure that can be analyzed into two parts:

- (i) *Transcendence*: that a certain view (usually about the nature of the limit in question) itself transcends that limit (cannot be conceived, described etc.), and
- (ii) *Closure*: that the view is within that limit¹⁹¹.

Together the pair describes a structure that Garfield & Priest refer to as *Inclosure*, i.e., that there is a totality Ω and an object o and that o both is and is not in Ω . To explain the structure in greater detail, they then add an operator δ which, when applied to any suitable subset of Ω gives *another* object that is in Ω . The limit contradiction arises when δ is applied to Ω itself, since this gives an object that is both within and without Ω .¹⁹²

Garfield & Priest rely on Nāgārjuna’s distinction between the two truths and state that the true contradictions that Nāgārjuna *does* endorse do not concern conventional reality (*qua* conventional reality). In fact, Nāgārjuna takes *reductio* arguments to be decisive in this realm (even though some interpreters have argued that Nāgārjuna himself does not see the contradictory consequences of the opponent’s premises as problematic, but is merely presenting a consequence unacceptable to a consistent opponent, which is to say that he himself does not accept the LNC even though he employs it).¹⁹³ The seeming contradictions concerning the conventional are not contradictions because Nāgārjuna is rejecting the *presuppositions* of the assertions and hence the framework in which the debate takes place. For example, when he rejects assertions such “space is an entity” and “space is a nonentity” (MMK 5:7), he is actually rejecting the excluded middle for the kind of assertion that the opponent is making, because the assertion is based on illicit ontological

¹⁹¹ The Closure argument is often practical, because the Closure is demonstrated in the act of theorizing about the limits. (Garfield 2002: 89.)

¹⁹² Garfield 2002: 89.

¹⁹³ The scholars note, however, that this is based on careful and sometimes controversial reading of Nāgārjuna’s dialectic, even though such a reading is defended by some in the canonical tradition (Garfield 2002: 93.)

presupposition. Rejection of the law of the excluded middle in a particular context is therefore not to be confused with rejection of non-contradiction, for Nāgārjuna does view the contradictory consequences of positions in the standard conventional realm to be fatal to those positions.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, as the scholars write:

Nāgārjuna is not an irrationalist. He is committed to the canons of rational argument and criticism. He is not a mystic. He believes that reasoned argument can lead to abandonment of error and to knowledge. He is not of the view that the conventional world, however nominal it may be, is riddled with contradictions. (Garfield & Priest in Garfield 2002: 96.)

In this framework, when Nāgārjuna does assert contradictions, they have to do with the ultimate. The first true contradiction concerns the assertion that everything is empty. This is an ultimate truth about ultimate reality, but since everything is empty, there is no ultimate reality and therefore, no ultimate truths. (Or, through a different line of reasoning: to express anything in language is to express truth that depends on language. Therefore it cannot be an expression of the way things are ultimately. All truths are therefore conventional.) When Nāgārjuna states that “emptiness is the relinquishing of all views” (MMK 13.8), he means views about the ultimate nature of reality. And yet he adheres to such views himself.¹⁹⁵

This reading naturally goes against the contention that Nāgārjuna never asserted anything himself (and therefore did not contradict himself) and merely rejected the assertions of his opponents. Garfield and Priest grant some plausibility to this alternative, but hold that there are too many passages in the MMK in which positive assertions are being made to make such a rendition fully coherent. They likewise reject the reading in which Nāgārjuna’s apparent ultimate truths are in fact conventional truths, on the grounds that the truth of emptiness is the way that a thing is found to be in the end of an ultimate analysis of its nature. Therefore, if we are to accept Garfield & Priest’s reasoning, Nāgārjuna cannot be saved from inconsistency: we are faced with a clear paradox of expressibility.¹⁹⁶

Nāgārjuna uses both positive and negative forms of *catuṣkoṭi* - this is evident. But Garfield & Priest argue that he uses this distinction to differentiate between the perspectives of the Two Truths. Positive *catuṣkoṭi* are asserted from the conventional perspective and negative *catuṣkoṭi* are applied

¹⁹⁴ Garfield & Priest 2002: 92-95.

¹⁹⁵ Garfield & Priest 2002: 96-97.

¹⁹⁶ Garfield & Priest 2002: 98-99.

to where the limit of expressibility (and the contradictory situation at that limit) are found.¹⁹⁷ For a characterization of the ultimate perspective (which, if the characterization is correct, cannot be done), consider the following:

“Empty” should not be asserted,
 “Non-empty” should not be asserted.
 Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
 These are used only nominally. (MMK 22:11 in Garfield 1995: 280)

The positive tetralemmas assert that conventional phenomena exist conventionally and can be characterized from that perspective only, because ultimately nothing exists or satisfies any description. The negative tetralemma states the same and therefore contradicts itself for if its assertion is true, it only asserts its own nonassertability.¹⁹⁸

The paradox of expressibility (dealing with epistemology) can be found in Western philosophies too. That Nāgārjuna’s paradox has the structure of an inclosure contradiction (hence satisfying a schema common to a number of well-known paradoxes in the West such as “the Liar”), might help “normalize” Nāgārjuna in the eyes of Western philosophers, because, as Garfield & Priest put it, “if Nāgārjuna is beyond the pale, then so too are Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger”.¹⁹⁹ But it is the other one of Nāgārjuna’s paradoxes that is distinct from the paradoxes asserted in the West (even though it too shares the same inclosure structure) and hence capable of expounding something new to us.

This uniquely Nāgārjunian dialetheia has to do with the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. It can be expressed as follows: ultimately things are empty, but emptiness is the lack of essence and therefore things must lack emptiness. Or in other words: “emptiness is the nature of all things; for this reason, they have no nature, not even emptiness.” Therefore the conclusion of Nāgārjuna’s fundamental ontology is that there can be no fundamental ontology - and so we have arrived at another paradox.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Garfield 2002: 99-100.

¹⁹⁸ Garfield 2002: 100.

¹⁹⁹ Garfield 2002: 102-104. For more information, see Priest’s (2002) illuminating study *Beyond the Limits of Thought*.

²⁰⁰ Garfield 2002: 101.

Again, an advocate of an alternative reading might hold that Nāgārjuna is not really making assertions about emptiness, but Garfield & Priest could reply with the previous counter-argument. A different strategy would be to state that even though Nāgārjuna is asserting that everything is empty, emptiness is to be understood as an accident, not an essence. Garfield & Priest hold, however, that in Nāgārjuna's view, things *do not just happen to be empty*, but emptiness is a necessary characteristic of a thing, its nature (even if this nature is that there is no nature).²⁰¹

One might view limit paradoxes as indicating a limitation of language (especially if one assumes that the world itself is consistent and that an *adequate* language could mirror this consistency). Yet Garfield & Priest argue that Nāgārjuna's system provides an ontological explanation for the paradoxes. This is simply because, in Nāgārjuna's understanding (if Garfield & Priest decipher it correctly), reality really has no nature. And because it has no nature, nothing can be said about it. Essencelessness induces non-characterizability, but emptiness *is* the ultimate character. Paradoxical linguistic utterances are therefore grounded in the contradictory nature of reality. The world itself is inconsistent and certain contradictions are hence veridical.²⁰²

It is therefore the destruction of the “myth of the deep”, i.e., the elimination of the ontological myth, that Garfield & Priest see as Nāgārjuna's greatest contribution to contemporary philosophy. The myth is destroyed when we travel to the limits of the conventional just to find that there is nothing beyond it:

Penetrating to the depths of being, we find ourselves back on the surface of things and discover that there is nothing, after all, beneath those deceptive surfaces. Moreover, what is deceptive about them is simply the fact that we assume ontological depths lurking just beneath. (Garfield & Priest 2002: 101.)

Nāgārjuna is therefore going where reason takes him: to the transconsistent.²⁰³ While the analysis of Nāgārjunian limit contradictions is most carefully worked out in ‘Nāgārjuna and the limits of Thought’, Garfield expresses similar views in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, in which he states that there is a dynamic philosophical tension between the Mādhyamika account of the limits of what can be coherently said and its analytical ostension of what can't be said without paradox but must be understood. Already here Garfield describes Nāgārjuna's project as a “logical tightrope act

²⁰¹ Garfield & Priest 2002: 101-102.

²⁰² Garfield & Priest 2002: 102.

²⁰³ Garfield (& Priest) 2002:104.

of the very limits of language and metaphysics” and states that this is not the same as “incoherent mysticism”.²⁰⁴

5.3.3 GONE, GONE, GONE BEYOND: DIRECT AWARENESS

Garfield & Priest succeed in producing a logical account of Mādhyamaka which does not require dismissing any of its aspects as incoherent or mystical. This is not to say that readings that embrace irrationality would be wrong or even inferior (even if Garfield thinks they are). What they do lack, however, is contemporary relevance to rational philosophical discourse, which is Garfield’s primary arena.

Garfield has succeeded in demonstrating *how* Nāgārjuna *could be* read as something else than an irrationalist or a mystic. But has he been able to comfortably account for the role of spiritual enlightenment in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy? Based on the discussion so far, Nāgārjuna could just as well be a secular philosopher interested merely in pointing out flaws in philosophical views and discourses without any overarching soteriological motivation. But Nāgārjuna *was* a Buddhist monk and it is a valid assumption that Buddhist monks concern themselves with spiritual liberation.

The title of this chapter includes a translation of a part of the famous (*Prajñāpāramitā*) mantra: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā!* (roughly translated: gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awakening, hail!). The imagery of crossing beyond to the other side (of a river etc.) is a popular metaphor for enlightenment. The “other side” is understood as non-conceptual *nirvāna* as opposed to conceptual *samsāra* and it is arguably the preferred destination of all Buddhists. However, if we are to accept Nāgārjuna’s depiction, the sphere of *nirvāna* (the ultimate) and the sphere of *samsāra* (the conventional) are one and the same and the only difference is the way things are *perceived*.

²⁰⁴ Garfield 1995: 102.

Garfield needs to justify his rational account of Nāgārjuna's system and he does this by emphasizing the (Geluk) understanding of the spiritual path as involving reasoning²⁰⁵:

The goal of Mādhyamika philosophy is liberation from suffering. But that liberation, on Nāgārjuna's view, can only be achieved by insight into the ultimate nature of things - their emptiness - and indeed into the ultimate nature of emptiness which we shall see is emptiness again. But this insight can only be gained through reasoning and hence through language and thought. (Garfield 1995: 298.)

But even though much of his analysis of Nāgārjuna deals with Nāgārjuna's eradication of the "myth of the deep", Garfield discusses the topic of non-conceptual knowledge, particularly in 'Emptiness and Positionless: Do the Mādhyamika Relinquish All Views?' (2002). While this might be uncomfortable territory to a Western philosopher, it would probably be even more uncomfortable *not* to discuss it, given Garfield's determination to read Nāgārjuna as offering a coherent philosophical system. In fact, Garfield explicitly argues that it is precisely with the inclusion of the epistemological standpoint of an enlightened *arhat*, who directly perceives emptiness, that Nāgārjuna's MMK truly begins to make sense. Garfield therefore proposes that Nāgārjuna is writing from two epistemic standpoints (reflected in the use of positive and negative *catuskoṭis*): that of the ordinary philosopher and that of the *arhat*.²⁰⁶

Emptiness is not the real object as opposed to the unreal objects of ordinary perception. Therefore, statements about emptiness (eg. "emptiness is empty") ascribe no property to any object at all and hence express no proposition. Here Garfield pays attention to the Nyaya-influenced logico-semantic context of Nāgārjuna's argumentation²⁰⁷. As a kind of Fregean realism, it dictates that meaningful assertions are meaningful because they denote or express independently existent propositions. The sense of Nāgārjuna's words, however, does not presuppose a language-independent denotation, but derives from their utility in discourse. Nāgārjuna therefore does not disclaim the truth of his

²⁰⁵ For the sake of comparison: the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism places much emphasis on meditation, personal transmission of esoteric teachings and other supra-rational methods of realization. The appreciation for the philosophical doctrine of emptiness, on the other hand, is included in the Geluk lineage (mostly because the founder Tsong khapa himself valued Nāgārjuna and Candrakirti). This is not an absolute distinction, however, and both lineages incorporate a vast array of practices and methods, but it does offer an insight into why Garfield, having collaborated mostly with Tibetan scholastics from the Geluk and Nyingma lineages, finds it so easy to discuss the doctrinal aspect of emptiness apart from the experiential.

²⁰⁶ Garfield 2002: 52, 58.

²⁰⁷ Nyaya was 'the school of logic', one of the six "orthodox" (*astika*) schools of Hindu philosophy.

utterances, but the nonconventional ontological ground for that truth. Therefore, when he says that he asserts no proposition, he is merely stating that language (like any other phenomena) is empty.²⁰⁸

In Garfield's analysis, Nāgārjuna's positive tetrallemmas are statements about conventional entities - statements that can be easily demystified with ontological qualifiers such as "conventionally" and "ultimately". For example, everything is (conventionally) real and (ultimately) not real, both (conventionally) real and (ultimately) not real, neither (ultimately) real nor (conventionally) not real (18:8 of the MMK). These assertions thus become consistent and also appropriate (i.e., such things *can* be said). As we know, when it comes to ultimates, the tetrallemmas are negative. This is because the *arhat* sees things as independent of conventions. The philosopher can make different kinds of assertions about conventional entities but for the *arhat*, no entities exist. Therefore, when it comes to the ultimate, nothing can be said.²⁰⁹

Garfield clarifies this with the Sanskrit distinction between *darśana* (direct awareness) and *dr̥ṣṭi* (view) and argues that Nāgārjuna never denies the value of *śūnyatā-darśana* but remains skeptical about the idea of *śūnyatā-dr̥ṣṭi*. This is because, in order to have a view, there must be something that is viewed. Therefore emptiness must be a thing and things exist either ultimately or conventionally. Now here is the problem: from the conventional standpoint, there is no emptiness, and from the ultimate standpoint, no entities exist. Hence emptiness cannot be a thing and in the strict sense, we cannot have views about it. However, since emptiness is what we find when we analyze things in isolation of the ontology induced by our conventional language (i.e., what the *arhat* perceives), it is legitimate to say that it is the ultimate truth as well as the domain of ultimate truth.²¹⁰

Therefore, emptiness is both the ultimate truth about phenomena and a dependent designation (nominal). Here Garfield uses Tibetan terminology to make the distinction salient between the truth of emptiness and the truth of conventional entities. While the truth about conventional entities is both *tha snyad yod pa* (something nominal whose status as an entity derives from the ontology induced by language) and *kun rdzob yod pa* (something that presents itself falsely as existing inherently), only the first applies to emptiness. To someone who perceives emptiness, there is no

²⁰⁸ Garfield 2002: 53-54, 56.

²⁰⁹ Garfield 2002: 57- 58.

²¹⁰ Garfield 2002: 58-60.

delusion of inherent existence. Therefore, even if emptiness cannot be an object of knowledge, it can be known. Assertions about it, however, indicate no proposition.²¹¹

If we now take recourse in the doctrine of the Two Truths, we can see that they provide two perspectives from which emptiness may be known. Conventionally we can speak about anything, even emptiness (in an ordinary philosophical discourse, emptiness *is* an existent), but in such a discourse, emptiness does not appear *as it is*, but comes in disguise. From the ultimate standpoint, on the other hand, emptiness can truly be known as emptiness, as a mere negation (in objectless knowledge). In a nutshell, therefore, emptiness is an ultimate truth, but not an ultimate existent.²¹²

Nāgārjuna writes:

Without a foundation in the conventional truth
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved. (The MKK 24:10 in Garfield 1995: 298.)

To Garfield, this means that it must be possible to talk one's way into the ultimate perspective. Conventional truth is the ladder to be kicked away, the perspective to be transcended. Once this is accomplished, we enter a vision of reality as an interdependent realm of essenceless relata. Here language becomes self-undermining and nothing can be said. Thus everything we *say* about emptiness is convention-dependent. But to treat emptiness as an entity or a property can be a vehicle that transports us toward an inexpressible understanding of it. In a technical sense, if we say that "emptiness is empty", there is no entity "emptiness" or property "empty" and therefore such a sentence does not assert a proposition. Garfield argues that sentences like this are best understood as pure denials. If a position is a position regarding the nature of things, the Mādhyamika has no position. If a proposition is an extralinguistic entity that stands as the semantic value of a sentence, the Mādhyamika has no proposition. If a view is a view of an entity, the Mādhyamika has no view.²¹³

This brings us back to Nāgārjuna's understanding of the function of language. According to Garfield, he holds that because things have no nature, language cannot be expected to characterize

²¹¹ Garfield 2002: 60-61.

²¹² Garfield 2002: 62-65.

²¹³ Garfield 2002: 65-66.

such nature. There is no correspondence to language-independent phenomena, because there are no language-independent phenomena. And furthermore, the exposition of emptiness is really an exposition of the incoherence of the notion of an entity. This is not a mystical posit of an ineffable truth, but simply a recognition of the inability to make assertions from a nonperspectival perspective, together with the recognition that perspectives are ontologically determinative. To say that things are natureless, is not to say that naturelessness is their nature. It is simply a useful designation, a ladder, a finger pointing at the moon.²¹⁴

How does all this relate to the views of other scholars? Dupré (1987) claims that Nāgārjuna asserts the transcendence in which all distinctions vanish. To him, *nirvāna* is the Absolute in itself as the undivided Oneness of the ultimate reality. In such a framework, Nāgārjuna attempts to overcome the very interconnectedness of all dependent being (and of existence itself), and since this is logically impossible, nothing remains but the road to total silence. The liberating wisdom, therefore, is the opposite of cognitive and consists in mystical silence.²¹⁵ Garfield would probably accept that distinctions vanish in nirvana (it is non-perspectival, after all), but the talk of “the Absolute” and the “ultimate reality” together with the downplay of logic and rationality stand in opposition to his view.

Della Santina, on the other hand, accepts the use of logical arguments, but merely as a means of leading people gradually to a comprehension of the existential import of Mādhyamaka philosophy.²¹⁶ As such this need not be in discord with Garfield’s understanding of the Buddhist path. Della Santina does not deny reasoning as a valid means and Garfield does not deny the goal. The real discord abides in the understanding of the philosophical import of the “means”: Della Santina seems to be proposing that the means can only derive their meaning from the original context; Garfield holds that the means can work as means for different ends and in different contexts.

We might find something of a kindred spirit in Biderman (1989), who describes Nāgārjuna as a radical skeptic who accepts the possibility of nirvāna. He argues that the link between the two need not be as paradoxical as it may first appear - that mystical experience can be seen to stem from the

²¹⁴ See Garfield 2002:66-68.

²¹⁵ Dupré 1987: 250.

²¹⁶ Della Santina 1986(a): 219-220.

skeptic's suspension of judgement, i.e., from the realization that we do not possess any certain knowledge of the world or of ourselves.²¹⁷ In Garfield's interpretation, the distinction between the conventional and the ultimate is a difference in the way phenomena are conceived or perceived. Biderman's view is similar (although less analytically rigorous and clear): he argues that Nāgārjuna discards "useless questions", chooses the phenomenal world as the meeting ground for skepticism and religion and as the framework within which the process of release occurs. Liberation, therefore, is not a change of essence, but a change of status. The difference between the conventional and the ultimate is not metaphysical and when the philosopher stops searching for the fixed and stable, *samsāra* remains *samsāra*, but ceases to cause suffering.²¹⁸ Although Biderman's 'mysticism' is arguably not the same as Garfield's 'conventionalism', they are based on a similar kind of an insight- Needless to say, Garfield places much more value and emphasis on Nāgārjuna's philosophical argumentation.

Finally, King (1999) holds that the language of emptiness can be seen as deconstructive meta-language or meta-theory that dismantles fixed views (*dr̥ṣṭi*) by showing their inconsistencies and the unwarranted conclusions derived from their premises. The ultimate truth is expressed through the language of conventions, which accounts for the skillful and purposeful use of concepts.²¹⁹ Of the four interpretations presented here, this is probably the closest relative of that of Garfield's.

5.4 THE LAUNDRY: NĀGĀRJUNA, GARFIELD AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

To sum up, Garfield's Nāgārjuna is Nāgārjuna demystified and reconstructed. Such a rational and rigorous philosopher is in itself a valuable addition to the stock of Nāgārjunas created by Buddhists, Buddhologists and comparative/cross-cultural philosophers worldwide. Garfield's reading is holistic and systematic - it attempts to account for all aspects of Nāgārjuna's thought, even the ones that are markedly Buddhist. It is also coherent, meticulous, and cogent - carefully constructed and carefully articulated - a work of a philosopher trained in precise blow-by-blow analyses. Yet at the same time

²¹⁷ Biderman 1989: 62-63.

²¹⁸ Biderman 1989: 65, 68, 73.

²¹⁹ King 1999: 143.

it is creative and innovative - a fresh perspective and a fresh approach to Nāgārjuna scholarship - shockingly in the swim, offering the kind of present-day relevance that Western depictions of ancient Asian philosophies rarely achieve (try as they might). Finally, although being presented in “Western” attire, it is markedly cross-cultural - the fruit of long-term cooperation with Tibetan scholars.

The weaknesses, on the other hand, are the obvious trade-offs of the above-mentioned strengths. When inviting Nāgārjuna to take part in present-day philosophical discourse, it becomes unavoidable that he must leave 2nd century India. Something is therefore lost. Not that one could ever grasp the original context fully (because one can never leave her own behind), but it nevertheless evokes the question of limits. How much can be reconstructed? Where is the boundary that separates Nāgārjuna as seen through the lens of contemporary philosophy from contemporary philosophy that employs reconstructed Nāgārjunian concepts to its own ends? If Nāgārjuna is merely the empty shell filled with Garfield’s own conceptual and theoretical baggage, Garfield’s reconstruction is nothing but another violent assimilation or worse. Yet it would seem that Garfield takes Nāgārjuna’s own arguments seriously and strives to *understand*. In his hands, Nāgārjuna continues to evolve without becoming separate or discontinuous from earlier (Buddhist) interpretations.

We cannot criticize the idea of rational reconstructions *per se* without certain presuppositions concerning the process and goals of interpretation. Unless we are willing to embrace the objectivist view, we must acknowledge that our own context will play a part, regardless of how aware we are of this influence. In Garfield’s case, the influence is conscious and deliberate. He argues that interpretation (and cross-cultural interpretation in particular), always involves tightrope walking - balancing between the (sometimes) opposing demands of two (or more!) contexts. In fact, there are multiple tightropes that at points intersect, creating a kind of a tangled hermeneutical spiderweb. Choices have to be made and choices have consequences: they enable and they limit, they highlight and they mask. What Garfield wishes to highlight is the contemporary relevance of the philosophical import of Nāgārjuna’s thought. He brackets the soteriological at times, because he believes Nāgārjuna’s arguments can be cogent without it and can do different work in different contexts. They always attempt to undermine essentialism, but essentialism itself can cause different types of damage. It may affect our psychological and spiritual well-being, and also poison our philosophical discourses.

If we adopt the view that Buddhist philosophy is nothing but artful, intricate word-play, Garfield's analysis is problematic. But nothing forces us to adopt such a view and even if something did, we could argue that Garfield demonstrates how that word-play can be rational. That is, even if Nāgārjuna himself was more of an irrationalist than rationalist (or a mystic in disguise), what stops us from relating to his writings from a rational perspective? Perhaps Nāgārjuna would have done the same, had he had the contemporary theoretical tools at his disposal.

The stereotypical image of a Buddhist practitioner is a Zen monk immersed in meditation or speaking in koans. This is an accurate depiction of one Buddhist approach, but it does not paint the whole picture. Once again we need to be reminded of the great variety of buddhisms existing in the world: some appear markedly rational (up to certain limits, at least), others anti-rational; some philosophical, others mystical. Therefore, to dismiss Garfield's work on the grounds of it treating Buddhist philosophy as philosophy (and not as soteriology) does not quite suffice. Nāgārjuna's thought might very well be inspired by soteriological considerations and *still* be analytically valid and interesting.

To claim that Buddhist philosophy is, in fact, proper philosophy (i.e., rational, systematic, critical discussion of fundamental problems) is not to claim that philosophy is *all* there is to Buddhism. We do not need to ask whether Buddhism is a philosophy or a religion. The simplest solution is to reject the either/or logic and conclude that 'Buddhism' encompasses a variety of beliefs, attitudes, philosophical doctrines and spiritual practices. Maybe there are as many buddhisms as there are buddhists. Therefore, to conclusively settle the question of the status of philosophy in Buddhism, seems naive. Even within the Western philosophical tradition, it would yield many answers.

Finally, Garfield's interpretation of Nāgārjuna reflects Garfield's project of bringing distinct philosophical perspectives into a dialogue and creating new ones. And this is a great contribution to cross-cultural philosophy and probably to our (philosophical) self-understanding as well. What this Nāgārjuna says to us is familiar enough to make sense but weird enough to challenge. Perhaps it is what Nāgārjuna would say to us if he was here today and had been familiarized with our terminology and methodology. Perhaps it does not even matter what such hypothetical Nāgārjuna would say.

Needless to say, Cross-cultural philosophy is many things. It is theory and practice. It is hermeneutics, politics and ethics. It is the past, the present and the future. It is tightropes and spiderwebs, different levels of abstraction. It is goals and incentives, hopes and fears. It is people interacting with people, texts, and traditions. It is boundaries and ways to cross or transcend those boundaries. It is moving back and forth and in circles, stepping into the unknown and emerging anew. And all these aspects intertwine like threads in a rope. Even though I attempt to unravel this rope a bit to get a closer look at separate components, I see the components as mutually dependent, parts of the same whole.

The next part is dedicated to hermeneutics, because I argue that cross-cultural philosophy (at this point) should not be discussed without relating it to cross-cultural hermeneutics. This is because interpretation and understanding across cultures is not as simple a matter as it may first appear and many contemporary cross-cultural philosophers (eg. Garfield 1995, 2002 and Huntington 1992) have incorporated detailed discussions of hermeneutics in their writings. The notion of boundary (between cultures or traditions) is important here and it invites us to problematize what it is that the boundary separates. What are traditions and how do they relate to other traditions? Do they form a continuum or are they radically discontinuous? In addition to these theoretical considerations, I believe it can also be illuminating to discuss the hermeneutical approaches and methods of scholars. This connects theories to praxis.

PART 6: PHILOSOPHY ACROSS CULTURES

The earlier exposition of Garfield's Nāgārjuna portrays the practical application of Garfield's general across-cultural agenda that will be discussed in this section. I will begin with a short discussion of cross-cultural hermeneutics (6.1) after which I will tackle some of the political issues involved in moving across the cultural boundaries (6.2). The third chapter (6.3) discusses Garfield's program for cross-cultural philosophy and the fourth (6.4) typologizes Western approaches to culturally distant systems of thought, once again in the context of Nāgārjuna scholarship.

6.1 CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

When we travel to a strange country we encounter laws, customs, languages, and norms that are different from the ones we are used to. Great many times we feel lost, not quite sure how to behave and how to interpret the behavior of others. Often we feel self-conscious and aware of our outsider status, realizing that there is something that remains hidden from us. However, if we have enough time and determination, we may study the language, interact with the locals (maybe ask them for advice), read books about the country's history and culture, listen to its music and watch its movies – in short, do everything we can to culturally acclimatize ourselves. And then in time, if we are persistent enough, patterns begin to emerge, things start to make sense and instead of chaos we see structure and logic.

The same applies to cross-cultural philosophy. When we approach a text, a theory, or a system of thought belonging to an alien philosophical tradition, we inevitably find ourselves feeling a little bit lost - things just do not quite add up: some aspects seem logical, but others do not. We therefore need to achieve a level of familiarity before we can even begin to understand. However, when it comes to philosophical activity, there is more that needs to be done than mere cultural acclimatization. We need to be analytical and critical and ask ourselves what it *means* to understand: what is the dynamic at work and what does it entail. And furthermore, when it comes to cross-cultural philosophical activity, we need to problematize our outsider status and discuss what the

cultural boundaries are and what it means to cross them. And then, if we are willing and consider it useful and/or appropriate, we may attempt to come up with suggestions on how to approach the task of cross-cultural interpretation, that is, articulate (more or less) systematic methods to do the job.

6.1.2 WHAT GOES ON IN INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is a complex task. The complexity is amply demonstrated by the great diversity in readings of Nāgārjuna. Some of the interpretative discrepancy may be explained by arguing that interpreters sometimes make mistakes, that there are “wrong” interpretations or at least less plausible or less cogent ones. But even if we were to exclude those readings that the *majority* of *contemporary* academics and Buddhist scholars would somewhat willingly discard as *misinterpretations*, we would still be left with a great variety of renditions. There is a joke that vividly demonstrates this reality: How many Buddhist scholars are needed to change a light bulb? An internationally respected committee of academics, after deliberating all night, conclusively failed to agree on the meaning of the word ‘light bulb’. Meanwhile the sun came up.

These days, most scholars would happily side with Andrew P. Tuck in arguing that when we read a text, we inevitably read something into it. At first sight, this seems like a sensible conclusion that neatly accounts for the discrepancy. When we interpret something, we bring something of ours into the process and because individual interpreters have different “somethings”, the results are naturally different. Yet the same scholars, who seem so willing to embrace interpretative plurality, also hold that we cannot read *just anything* into a text. Again this is backed up by common sense: we cannot (for example) seriously claim that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of emptiness is actually about the absolute existence of red-eyed giants with wax candles for fingers²²⁰, because there is nothing in his texts that would provide sufficient support for such an absurd conclusion. But what exactly qualifies as sufficient support? We have some scholars suggesting that Nāgārjuna was not a philosopher at all, but a mystic and a saint, and others arguing that his thought is the most rigorous kind of philosophy to be found on the face of the earth. Amazingly, both stances seem to enjoy some level of textual support. Of course we could now blame Nāgārjuna for writing such cryptic texts and

²²⁰ Although we *could* argue that Nāgārjuna’s employment of the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* would explain the (conventional) existence of such creatures, if they were to arise.

argue that, since we obviously cannot agree on what it is that he is or is not saying (except for that he is probably not writing about red-eyed giants), we should simply abandon the task of trying to interpret him. But if we were to discard Nāgārjuna's philosophy on these grounds, we would probably have to discard the works of most (if not all) philosophers.

Therefore, what we have is a number of readings and an intuition that some of them are better than others. All we need now is some criteria for evaluating and ranking them. We have already seen that looking at textual support does not usually solve the dispute. Interpretation is a holistic project and a passage that counts as textual support for a specific reading in one interpretative framework might do the opposite in a different one. However, sometimes the lack of textual support seems somewhat obvious. A classical example would be Murti's reading which is not only contradicted by Nāgārjuna's own explicit arguments, but also portrays a huge, unsubstantiated leap from what Nāgārjuna is explicitly saying (things are empty of *svabhāva*) to what Murti claims he is implicitly saying (emptiness is the *svabhāva* of things). Yet in most interpretations, the leaps involved are less dramatic making it difficult to *objectively* evaluate them.

At this point, we could perhaps turn to the text's home tradition, for it certainly provides some guidelines for interpretation. It would be somewhat preposterous to claim that Nāgārjuna's goal was (for example) to refute the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths or the notion of *anātman*, because these are probably the most anti-Buddhist philosophical steps one could take.²²¹ To be a Buddhist philosopher is to accept a certain framework and to operate within certain parameters. Even if Nāgārjuna himself would have resisted and rebelled against them, it is unlikely that his works – if considered heretical – would have come to be restored and reproduced. But once again the example given was an extreme one, for most interpretations are much more difficult to rebut on the basis of Buddhism, which is a multifaceted tradition and quite tolerant of philosophical diversity. Furthermore, the Buddhists themselves disagree over the correct interpretation of Nāgārjuna's system: instead of a Buddhist consensus we have distinct interpretative lineages that can hardly provide us with a single truth-about-the-matter. But again some interpretations *may* be discredited on this basis. For example, Wood's (1995) view that Nāgārjuna was consciously advocating

²²¹ It would be another story to claim that Nāgārjuna's philosophy, despite his intentions, *entails* those things, but to argue that Nāgārjuna is consciously advocating such positions would be the same as to argue that a Christian philosopher is trying to prove that God does not exist or that a logical positivist is relying on mystical knowledge in his analytical activities.

nihilism is not very plausible in this context. To be simultaneously a nihilist and a Buddhist (or an advocate of any religion) certainly does seem contradictory.

Therefore, if we now accept that we cannot approach the text objectively (i.e., we cannot have access to the meanings Nāgārjuna himself ascribed to his writings) and acknowledge the unequivocalty of the Buddhist (commentarial) tradition, maybe we should give up the quest for the 2nd century Indian Nāgārjuna's mindset. After all, it is not what Nāgārjuna himself wished to accomplish, but *what his arguments entail* that should interest us *as philosophers*. To focus on what lies before our eyes (i.e., the structure and logic of the philosophical argumentation), to conduct systematic and detailed analyses and to draw our conclusions from this rigorous activity certainly does sound like the way to go. This is probably what the Analytic philosophers (from the '50s onwards) had in mind and to give credit where credit is due, much of contemporary Nāgārjuna/Mādhyamaka scholarship owes them for clarifying the ancient concepts and arguments used. Yet something is wrong with this picture. First of all, this kind of activity is not as objective and "scientific" as it may first appear: we need to interpret, contextualize and make decisions *before* we can analyze and evaluate. By ignoring Nāgārjuna's overall concerns and grand objectives, we cannot get out of making choices. And furthermore, by focusing on details and isolating arguments as specific objects of study, we might be missing the forest for the trees. It is a valid argument that Nāgārjuna's philosophy (and perhaps most philosophies) should be approached holistically. All we need is to think about the blind men in the famous Indian tale. They came across an elephant and depending on where they approached the animal from, made one-sided and contrasting claims about what elephants are like.

Let us now consider the *rational reconstructions* of Nāgārjuna's thought that not only attempt to represent an ancient Buddhist philosophical system holistically, but in a way that makes sense to us right here right now. This is ambitious (and potentially hazardous) because philosophies always develop at a certain time in a certain place, express concerns that are relevant in a particular cultural context and base themselves on (tacit) assumptions that we often do not share²²². Considering that our presuppositions and frameworks are often radically different from those of ancient

²²² The relationship between religion and philosophy is an obvious example of this. In the Western world, philosophy and religion are generally seen as distinct and opposed (sometimes even portrayed as forming a dichotomy) and religious philosophy is rarely granted the status of philosophy proper. In India (and in Asia in general) the two have, not only peacefully co-existed, but productively mixed. Quite often Eastern philosophizing operates within the framework of soteriological considerations (and derives its motivation from them), while being rigorous and systematic in conduct and argumentation. (For Garfield's discussion of philosophy and religion, see eg. 2002: 256-257.)

philosophers, it might be wise to conclude that we can never really find the common ground needed to understand their thought, but instead are doomed to deal with relics and phantom philosophies that cannot be brought back to life.

Maybe so, but ancient philosophies *are* being read and studied and commented upon by contemporary scholars. The philosophical works of ancient Greeks, for example, continue to attract attention and most would assume that it is indeed possible for us to arrive at an adequate understanding of what they are about. Therefore, when it comes to cross-cultural philosophy, perhaps it is not the temporal distance but the *cultural* distance that creates an unbridgeable gap between the interpreter and the interpreted. After all, the works of the pre-socratics and especially those of Plato, Aristotle and subsequent Hellenistic philosophers are part of *our* tradition and *our* cultural heritage. Their concerns and arguments have partly determined the ways our philosophical tradition has developed and thus, in a way (as Whitehead has famously proposed), European philosophical tradition really does consist of a series of footnotes to Plato.

Thus, when it comes to our own ancestors, there is something *shared* that seems to grant us access into their landscapes of meaning. But if the membership of the same cumulative philosophical tradition is a prerequisite for understanding, then cross-cultural philosophy is in grave trouble indeed. Are we now forced to conclude that philosophies simply cannot be approached “from the outside”? It certainly does seem likely that the access to Nāgārjuna’s thought is easier to contemporary Buddhists, for clearly Nāgārjuna has influenced the development of their intellectual traditions (we might even modify Whitehead’s statement and claim that “Mahayana philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Nāgārjuna”). If we believe that sharing the same tradition makes all the difference, then perhaps we should conclude that contemporary Mahayanists are the only people who can say something meaningful about Nāgārjuna’s philosophy. Such a conclusion (when generalized) would limit our philosophical investigations to our own traditions and, as it appears, many philosophers find this completely acceptable. However, since this would effectively put an end to cross-cultural philosophy and because cross-cultural philosophy continues to be done, there must be those who disagree.

Philosophical activity across cultural boundaries may be difficult but it is not necessarily impossible. When it comes to Western philosophers interested in Buddhist (or other Asian or perhaps Middle-Eastern or African) thought, we could ask if it is possible for them to go and apply

for a membership in that tradition. What we need to figure out is how fixed and stable such memberships are, if it is possible to step out of one tradition to get acquainted with another and if it is possible to hold multiple memberships simultaneously. In order to answer these questions, we then need to consider what traditions are exactly. Are they unilateral, are they flexible, are they accessible from the outside and can they be fused? If we are to conclude that traditions are flexible and commensurable enough to permit cross-cultural philosophical endeavors, we then need to discuss the political and ethical issues involved.

The plethora of questions related to interpretation in general, and to cross-cultural interpretation in particular, is discussed in cross-cultural hermeneutic theories. If hermeneutics is understood as the study of the nature and method of interpretation and understanding, cross-cultural hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation and understanding across cultural boundaries. General hermeneutic theories often presume the cultural proximity of the interpreter and the interpreted and hence require some clarification and/or modification to better fit the purpose of the cross-cultural enterprise. One of the most influential theories of understanding is Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic and many of his notions are accepted by most cross-cultural philosophers as well. Let us now discuss the basics of this theory.

6.1.2 GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The term *prejudice* has a negative sound to it. In our everyday understanding it is something that hinders, restricts and prevents us from seeing clearly and making informed decisions. Prejudices are “wrong” and “bad”, nothing but obstructions we need to free ourselves of in order to see things as they are. Yet in the 1960s, the German Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed a different take on the issue: he argued that prejudices constitute our being and are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous. In fact, they are a prerequisite to - and a condition for - understanding, since they provide the *initial directness* of our ability to experience. If we were completely free of prejudice (and therefore completely unbiased), we could not experience or understand anything at all - the world and all its things would be rendered mute.²²³

²²³ See Gadamer 1976: 9.

In his theory, Gadamer adopts Heidegger's insistence on the historicity of being and understanding. He argues that true historical thinking takes account of its *own* historicity (and not just of that of the 'object'). The so-called object of interpretation is merely a phantom and more adequately understood as a *relationship* between the interpreter and the interpreted - a unity of both. Furthermore, to accept our own historicity is to accept that we are inevitably prejudiced. This is where the tradition comes into picture, for it is the grand source of much of our "bias". Gadamer states that belonging to a tradition makes knowledge possible, precisely because we share fundamental prejudices with it.²²⁴ As he writes:

Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a relation to the object that comes into language in the transmitted text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition out of which the text speaks. (Gadamer 1979: 262.)

Yet tradition is not something we can command. Gadamer sees it as a language that expresses itself like a 'Thou'. It therefore stands in a relationship with us.²²⁵ The *linguisticity* of the text is important, because it means that the text has an expressive force that resists being exhausted by a single interpretative framework. One of the important aspects of Gadamer's model of understanding is that it is *dialogical*: the interpreter interacts with the text which (according to some at least) adds a "moral" quality to the experience.²²⁶

Gadamer therefore holds that understanding is productive (and not just reproductive) and that the meaning of a text *always* goes beyond what its author had in mind: when we understand something we are not retracing a past meaning but sharing a present one.²²⁷ Therefore, as DiCenso (1990) summarizes, Gadamer's approach to understanding is "thoroughly reflexive and interactional²²⁸." As such it stands in opposition to more author-oriented hermeneutics (associated with the so-called psychological approach) of Gadamer's predecessors: Schleiermacher first discussed the problem of

²²⁴ See Gadamer 1979: 262, 324, 267.

²²⁵ Gadamer 1979: 321.

²²⁶ eg. DiCenso 1990: 109.

²²⁷ Gadamer 1979: 254, 262.

²²⁸ DiCenso 1990: 94.

authorial intent and Dilthey held it possible to revive the truth of the text found in the author's thoughts, for he believed that this would remain untouched and unaffected in the course of time.²²⁹

To Gadamer, the meaning of a text is in a state of flux: it changes as our prejudices change and it is a product of reciprocal (and unpredictable) interaction. Therefore our understanding of a text is always *contingent* and *local*. Naturally this means that Gadamer opposes simple objectivism, according to which we can arrive at an objective truth about the correct interpretation of a text. But, even though Gadamer accepts plurality, he wants to steer clear of "anything-goes" relativism and holds that we can have criteria for distinguishing right interpretations from wrong ones.²³⁰ This is problematic because objectivism and relativity are often seen as antithetical and incommensurable: either the text possesses a determinable, unchanging meaning or it is likely to mean just anything. While this either/or paradigm has been challenged by arguing that there exists, in fact, a viable middle position between the two, to this day the question of whether Gadamer's theory entails thorough-going, radical relativism (i.e., whether interpretative pluralism precludes the availability of criteria for validity in interpretation) is a question much debated upon.²³¹

At the core of Gadamer's theory is the opposition of the reification of fixed perspectives, made worse by attempts to posit "original" meanings and establish "objective" methodologies.²³² Gadamer himself wishes merely to clarify the conditions under which understanding takes place and not develop a procedure of understanding.²³³ Instead of focusing on what should be done, philosophical hermeneutics therefore attempts to describe *what we always already do* when we understand something²³⁴. Gadamer does state, however, that methodologically conscious understanding attempts to make prejudices conscious "so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves". Therefore, despite the fundamentally enabling function of presuppositions, the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" is not acceptable.²³⁵ All in all, Gadamer's views can be summarized as follows:

²²⁹ See eg. DiCenso 1990: 83-84.

²³⁰ eg. Weberman 2000: 45.

²³¹ See eg. DiCenso 1990: 85-86 and Weberman 2000: 62-63.

²³² eg. DiCenso 1990: 90.

²³³ Gadamer 1979: 262.

²³⁴ eg. Weberman 2000: 48.

²³⁵ See Gadamer 1979: 239.

Gadamer's articulation of the nature and task of hermeneutical understanding *is* his theory of truth. Understanding is a process that occurs in relation to what has been disclosed through past cultural activity: it is historical. It functions within the linguisticity that characterizes historical knowledge and self-knowledge: it is hermeneutical. It provides means of disclosing and transforming the finite perspectives of the inquirer: it is critical. (DiCenso 1990: 82.)

Many of the views expressed in Gadamer's magnum opus *Truth and Method (Wahrheit Und Methode)* now enjoy wide acceptance and popularity, but some have also met criticism. DiCenso argues, for example, that Gadamer's dialogical model based on the personification of a text is contradictory because the text, being inseparable from the interpretive process, cannot function like an autonomous Thou. Gadamer's acceptance of the traditional paradigm that a text is locked into a relationship of dependency upon the presence of human beings, together with the conversational model of understanding imposes the priority of the subject upon the text.²³⁶ It is therefore not a true dialogue that takes place.

Gadamer's understanding of a tradition as an unilateral and univocal whole has been contested too. For the purpose of comparison we may consider the views of Richard Rorty. He sees tradition as something much more ambiguous and acknowledges the existence of many competing traditions, both within and without the Western one. It could be argued that Gadamer's hermeneutic, despite its pronounced anti-objectivism, is still in some ways a hermeneutic of retrieval (of meaning or truth), while Rorty - who is more of a deconstructionist - sees hermeneutics as a therapeutic philosophy.²³⁷ As Bouma-Prediger (1989) writes:

Rorty's anti-realism and relativism represent the now familiar post-modern admonition that we must give up the search for certitude, the quest for foundations, and ultimately the pursuit of truth, in favor of the more modest search for stimulating conversation. (Bouma-Prediger 1989: 323.)

To Rorty, Gadamer's theory is just another attempt at achieving the 'comfort of consensus'. In his view, all such efforts are naive because we are embedded in our language-game. There is no merging with other language-games, because they are radically incommensurate with our own. Therefore Gadamerian 'interpenetration' simply cannot occur and the only way to achieve an

²³⁶ See DiCenso 1990: 109-111.

²³⁷ ref. Bouma-Prediger 1989: 323.

inclusive agreement is for one side of the alleged “conversation” to abandon its original language-game while undergoing a Kuhnian conversion to the alternative vocabulary.²³⁸

Thus, if we are to accept Rorty’s views, we could argue that Gadamer was simply not bold enough to embrace the post-modern implications of his anti-objectivism. We could then give up the search for (essentialist) criteria for judging interpretations, acknowledge the fundamental relativity implicit in the process of understanding and focus on deconstructing readings that already exist or create new ones with the understanding that they are always inevitably being done in our own image. In a way this is what Tuck has been doing and it has provided us with illuminating re-readings of the history of Mādhyamaka scholarship. Yet most scholars are not willing to accept this level of relativity. The ideal of a true dialogue in which horizons fuse and meanings are *shared*, is still going strong.

6.1.3 CROSS-CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS

We should now backpedal a bit and see what Gadamer means by dialogue exactly. Gadamer’s idea of understanding is that it is reciprocal interaction which *demand a change in us*. The individual horizons of the participants can fuse because they are not stable or fixed and because our prejudices (the building parts of our horizons) can change. But this sounds a bit simplistic, naive even, for Gadamer’s theory seems to assume that the participants in a conversation (be they texts or persons) are enjoying *equal power*. This is hardly the case in real-life situations, especially when participants come from different cultures. The economic and political asymmetry between countries (and continents) is reflected in intellectual encounters and even if individuals themselves were willing to overcome this inequality, the power structures might not permit it. Hence it can be argued that Gadamer’s theory quite effectively ignores (or even masks) the fact that the world is not a playground for individuals with equal status and power, but instead is filled with inequality, injustice and uneven distribution of resources (more of this in 6.2).

²³⁸ See Grippe 2007: 97-98.

Another problematic issue (from the point of view of cross-cultural philosophy) is Gadamer's insistence on commonality. For only to a degree that the interpreter shares a tradition with the object of understanding, will she be able to understand it. In other words: we can only understand what we can empathize with and we can only empathize with something with which we share a common background of meaningfulness (consisting of practices, linguistic structures, concepts, beliefs, values etc.). *Truth and Method* largely focuses on the temporal axis of interpretation. This also explains its preoccupation with tradition, because the tradition provides commonality, while temporal distance is seen as a productive possibility. But, as David Weberman (2000) notes, when it comes to distance and separation operative in cross-cultural (or even interpersonal) understanding, Gadamer has very little to say. Weberman himself suggests that this limitation is explained by the historicity of Gadamer's own interests and his cultural background. He was, after all, working from within a somewhat unified German (or European) high culture (more unified than today) which was tradition-oriented and strongly backward-looking. Weberman however argues that Gadamer's theory can be seen as claiming legitimacy and a constitutive role for pre-commitments *in general*, whether owing to temporal or cultural (or even biographical) factors.²³⁹ Therefore it is possible to modify Gadamer's views and reconstruct his hermeneutic to better suit the needs of cross-cultural philosophy (instead of completely dismissing it) and this is what has already been done by many cross-cultural philosophers.

We may now turn to the views of cross-cultural philosophers who are more explicit about the role of cultural distance. C. W. Huntington (1992), for one, agrees with Gadamer that hermeneutic activity "rests firmly on the preconscious forms of linguistic and cultural prejudices peculiar to our historical situation" so that when we encounter and attempt to interpret a foreign system of thought, there is simply no other choice than to use the conceptual equipment already at our disposal. The most vital challenge faced by scholars is to make their own (and their readers') prejudices entirely conscious. Scholars should furthermore convey through their work the sense of wonder and uncertainty of coming in terms with the original text.²⁴⁰ This sounds like markedly Gadamerian jargon, but Huntington is far too post-modern to embrace some of Gadamer's goals. In fact, he sides with Rorty in stating that certitude and dialogue are ideals that cannot be realized and holds that we should focus on becoming aware of our own stand-points and then leave it at that.

²³⁹ See Weberman 2000: 49-50, 56- 57.

²⁴⁰ Huntington 1992: xiii, xiv.

On a slightly different note, Charles A. Moore (the founder of the journal *Philosophy East and West*) in the fourth East-West Philosopher's conference in 1964 explicated two important goals for the comparative studies in philosophy. First, he argued that we need to strive for *greater mutual understanding* of Asia and the West, and second, that we need to work to expand the horizons of the philosophers from both traditions toward *the total perspective* which is demanded of philosophy and philosophers everywhere.²⁴¹ In David Edward Shaner's (1986) understanding, this means that we must recognize that cultural boundaries are "meaningful only against the background of noticing differences between language, culture, and history" and that hermeneutic theories should not be of the kind to suggest that in order to understand others we need to "leave home and live in the desert of the between". One again the Gadamerian imperative is invoked: scholars must acknowledge their historicity and locate themselves in time and space. For, as Shaner writes, "it is only on the basis of one's keen awareness and sense of place (...) that one develops sensitivity to what is other".²⁴² Shaner then quotes Ninian Smart's suggestion to systematize the ambiguities of one's conceptual framework and utilize them to one's advantage:

To acknowledge the ramifications of an institutionalized conceptual framework is the first step in freeing oneself from its encrusted habits. The task of the comparative philosopher, then, is to be aware of how presuppositions, working at the axiomatic level, influence entire cultures. The awareness itself encourages transplanting alternative ideas across boundaries as potential sources of stimulations, clarification, and creativity. In this way, philosophical problems East and West can borrow from one another in order to resolve, or, perhaps more accurately, dissolve, culturally engrained antinomies. (Smart ref. Shaner 1986: 147-148.)

Shaner's view is optimistic (some would say utopian). He argues for the possibility of a global perspective and a novel (partly) *shared* conceptual framework. He furthermore states that we must work to "deconstruct" our methods and procedures (he uses the term 'deconstruct' in the sense that we must become explicitly aware of the self-referential character of the hermeneutic method we employ). He openly embraces the variety of different hermeneutic approaches to comparative philosophy and suggests that we give up the search for unity and a single universally accepted hermeneutic theory and appreciate the richness of perspectives that results in a variety of studies.²⁴³

But once again the problem of relativism emerges. If we are to embrace conceptual tolerance, how can we keep it from becoming methodological nihilism? While many scholars would argue that

²⁴¹ ref. Shaner 1986: 144.

²⁴² See Shaner 1986: 144.

²⁴³ Shaner 1986: 148-151.

some hermeneutic theories and some interpretations are better than others, very few have attempted to come up with specific criteria for evaluation and assessment. Based on the views of Rorty, Huntington, and Shaner, we might even conclude that such criteria are not needed in the first place. We must simply engage in conversation and “deconstruction” and with our growing awareness of the structures at work, we may then be able to produce more self-conscious readings. Even if our readings will not “improve”, at least we may take the understanding of the hermeneutic activity itself from the theoretical level to the practical.

Following Tuck’s example, we may argue that analyzing and reinterpreting earlier scholarly works is crucial to the hermeneutic pursuit. When it comes to Nāgārjuna scholarship, Tuck sees visible improvement in scholars’ willingness and ability to reflect upon their own standpoints:

The philosophical era I am calling post-Wittgensteinian (which can just as easily be termed post-Heideggerian, post-modern, or simply, post-Second World War) is characterized by the idea that it is more self-conscious than earlier periods and by its suspicion of any and all theoretical commitments. (Tuck 1990: 89.)

Tuck readily admits that it is impossible to discard all professional, cultural, and psychological determinants, but (like most contemporary scholars) he swears allegiance to the ethos of self-awareness. Interpretation is always isogetical and while acknowledging this might do some harm to scholars’ pride (because “moderation is never exciting” as Tuck sarcastically remarks), it neither invalidates work nor offers interpretative license.²⁴⁴

Many aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic now seem to belong to the “mainstream” hermeneutic theory (these include the “positive” conception of prejudice and the imperative to engage in critical introspection) and even the more radically relativist notions are often articulated with reference to Gadamer’s views. Jargon concerning the power of the tradition, dialogical interaction, fusing horizons (and so on) is very common. In a way Gadamer’s views have been incorporated into the prejudice bank of our time: they have come to enjoy general acceptance and they often constitute the starting point for hermeneutic theories. Yet the fact that Gadamer’s notions operate on a very general level (and in this manner are somewhat vague) allows for different interpretations and modifications. Garfield’s standpoint, too, springs from Gadamerian notions, as the choice of terminology in the following statement clearly demonstrates:

²⁴⁴ Tuck, 1990: 96-98.

A reader is a structure of prejudices, anticipations, and views: an occupant of a horizon whose interaction with that of the text constitutes the phenomenon of understanding. For a text to be understood is, however, for the horizon of the reader to be altered thereby, and for her attendant prejudices, questions, and sensibilities to change. (Garfield 2002: 237.)

Therefore, for Garfield, “interrogating a text is always interrogation with interest” and, in the process, some features are made salient while others are suppressed, certain intertextual relationships are privileged, and particular commentarial traditions are selected. It is therefore quite clear that Garfield does not succumb to objectivist views (even though he sometimes does speak of Nāgārjuna’s *own* concerns etc.). In fact he argues that understanding always involves “blindness”, because when we contextualize and foreground a text, we unavoidably select *against* something.²⁴⁵ This is all very Gadamerian, yet there are other features of Gadamer’s theory that Garfield problematizes and criticizes.

For one (as mentioned earlier), Gadamer’s conception of tradition as unilateral and radically distinct from other traditions is problematic because it cannot account for cross-cultural understanding. This is why Garfield argues that we need a more general hermeneutic approach for global scholarship and “a practical guide to talking across borders with the purpose of achieving some mutual understanding”.²⁴⁶ Garfield himself rejects the notion of the integrity and relative insularity of traditions (a notion that is presupposed by most contemporary hermeneutic theories, he argues). He furthermore holds that the view, according to which it is the (shared) tradition that provides the context that enables textual meaning and understanding, is far too simplistic. The possibility of crossing traditions becomes highly problematic, if our cross-cultural endeavors are seen as stepping outside of the circle²⁴⁷ which makes understanding possible.²⁴⁸

Garfield also suggests a *pragmatic turn* in our hermeneutic theory and argues that we should view the acts of interpretation and discussion as central constitutive components of traditions: texts should be seen as “texts-being-read” (and not as independent objects of study) and our interactions with our colleagues and students should be considered central to our intellectual life.²⁴⁹ Therefore,

²⁴⁵ Garfield 2002: 238.

²⁴⁶ Garfield 2002: 231-233.

²⁴⁷ Garfield refers here to the Heideggerian-Gadamerian hermeneutic theories and to the mutually implicative hermeneutic circles of (i) the meaning of the text as a whole and the meaning of its parts, (ii) the text as an answer to its predecessors and as seen through subsequent commentary and (iii) the relationship between the reader and the text. (See 2002: 236-237.)

²⁴⁸ Garfield 2002: 234, 237-238, 244.

²⁴⁹ Garfield 2002: 237.

while being clearly aware of the challenges faced in cross-cultural interpretation, Garfield's outlook is generally optimistic. He argues that cultural distance can also be useful, for it may reveal that which lies hidden to the denizen of a culture. This is because understanding is only possible when we are "far enough from our object to see it more completely and so to reveal that which it conceals from anyone in its neighborhood".²⁵⁰ Therefore, in Garfield's account, it is not only temporal distance which has a productive role in interpretation, but cultural distance as well.

When discussing Mādhyamaka, Garfield emphasizes that he is working with a living tradition and therefore finds it crucial to interact with its contemporary representatives. Garfield is thus actualizing the ideal that R. Panikkar articulated in 1971: the civilization of ancient India is still alive today and scholars would do themselves well to acknowledge the evolution of the features of Indian thought up to present day in order to avoid "arbitrary, lop-sided results". Therefore, when it comes to hermeneutics, Panikkar sees the articulation of the *homological principle* (i.e., that only from a homogenous context could a concept be properly understood) as a positive achievement, because the realization that there are no absolute categories which can serve as absolute criteria for judging all philosophical traditions of the world helps combat the colonialist tendencies in Indology and comparative philosophy. He however holds that "utterly rigorous and exclusive application" of this principle would "paralyze the critical faculties and prevent all progress".²⁵¹ In short, this would mean that we could never say anything about culturally distant systems of thought and that, as a result, cross-cultural (or comparative) philosophy would not be possible.

Panikkar solves this tension by invoking a second principle: the *dialogical principle*. This refers to the person's awareness and understanding leading her to see inadequacies which she feels justified to criticize from her own perspective. The dialogical principle at work may lead to a much deeper self-understanding as well as to better understanding of the other. In order to balance between the two principles, scholars furthermore need a *co-ordinating method*.²⁵²

What we can gather from this short exposition of cross-cultural hermeneutics, is that it is much indebted to Heideggerian-Gadamerian view of the process of understanding (with some post-modern developments), but that it is forced to problematize its conception of tradition. Therefore,

²⁵⁰ Garfield 2002: 235.

²⁵¹ Panikkar 1971: 173-176.

²⁵² Panikkar 1971: 176-177.

while Gadamer was mainly concerned with the temporal axis of interpretation, it has been (and continues to be) the work of cross-cultural philosophers to account for the cultural axis. Many appear to hold that cultural distance does not only create a challenge (or a barrier) to interpretation, but has some positive, productive effects as well. To invoke the old analogy, if you are a traveler in a strange country, there are certain aspects of the culture that you do not see *but*, on the up-side, there are also some that you see far more clearly than the locals do. Distance is therefore neither all good nor all bad.

One method to minimize the weaknesses and maximize the strengths is the cross-cultural co-operation of scholars. Some contemporary Western scholars (eg. Huntington, Garfield and Thurman), have opted for this. Not only is it beneficial to have an informant and a teacher when approaching an alien culture, but such co-operation might result in new *cross-cultural* perspectives and notions. When it comes to Mādhyamaka philosophy, there are actual living representatives of the tradition and it does seem like a fruitful possibility to try and engage them in conversations and joint projects. But once again there are things that need to be considered beforehand, we cannot just go and interact.

This is where political and ethical considerations enter the stage. While these are questions that many cross-cultural scholars have chosen to ignore, I believe they must be acknowledged to take the ethos of awareness seriously. We are immersed in our traditions and our traditions come with views of and attitudes toward other traditions. It would be foolish to ignore this and believe that interaction between cultures can occur without presupposition and prejudice. Not only is this ethical question, but it may (and probably will!) affect the outcome of such interaction. If we are to steer clear of the lop-sided results that Panikkar warned us about, we need to address these matters and work to find ways to enhance equality and create *mutual* understanding.

6.2 BOUNDARIES AND POLITICS

Interpretation and understanding across cultures arguably carries many problems. The question of whether or not these problems can be solved (or dissolved) seems to divide scholars roughly into two groups: the optimists and the pessimists: the optimists usually acknowledge the challenges

posed by distance, but argue that with a right kind of sensitivity and caution these challenges can be overcome. They furthermore hold that cross-cultural endeavors of this nature are (or at least *can be*) illuminating rather than misleading.

When it comes to actual *comparisons* of systems of thought from different traditions, scholars are generally less optimistic. This is probably because comparisons of this sort tend to involve the process of assimilation in which one of the philosophies (usually the culturally distant one) is absorbed into the conceptual framework provided by the other. While in some cases this may actually enhance understanding, there is a risk of “superficial equations” as Della Santina (as one of the most fervent critics of comparative efforts) puts it. Furthermore, it should be noted that philosophical comparisons are sometimes undertaken with a goal of securing the respectability for one of the systems involved (again, usually the “alien” one), which is hardly a fruitful motivation, since it does no justice to the intrinsic value of the system and quite often leads to a situation where similarities are being exaggerated and differences neglected.²⁵³ It does seem that some comparative endeavors have a certain apologetic undertone to them, causing them to secularize or “Westernize” the philosophies in question in order to make them appear more “philosophical”. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1971), critical of what he dubs “fantastic excesses” (i.e., absurd comparisons between philosophical traditions that have completely different levels of inspiration), notes the same tendency and writes:

The Western students of Oriental doctrines have usually tried to reduce these doctrines to “profane” philosophy; and modernized Orientals, often burdened by a half-hidden inferiority complex, have tried to give respectability to the same doctrines and to “elevate” them by giving them the honor of being in harmony with the thought of whichever Western philosopher was in vogue. (Nasr 1971: 53.)

While Nasr’s view might be slightly exaggerated and polemical, there is definitely some truth to it. Nowadays scholars are perhaps a little less outrageous (and generally more cautious) in their comparisons, but Eastern philosophical systems certainly continue to be compared and contrasted to those Western ones that are currently enjoying popularity. All in all, there seems to be a fine line between rational reconstructions and violent assimilations and what counts as the first to some, is an example of the second to others.

²⁵³ For Della Santina’s critique see eg. 1986(b): 41.

To contextualize this phenomenon, we need a broader perspective, for it is perhaps the reluctance of the *majority* of Western philosophers to get acquainted with alien philosophical traditions that causes comparative and cross-cultural philosophers to sometimes exaggerate the similarities. Garfield, in his ‘Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative (2002)’ refers to this mainstream reluctance as “a late moment in postcolonial racism”.²⁵⁴ In Garfield’s view, such an exclusion is the failure of those in powerful or prestigious positions to take seriously other standpoints making the political issues involved more salient. Even on a much more general level Garfield wishes to challenge the contentment with a particular location in the cultural space:

It is hard to seriously entertain the thought that Western music is the tradition that interprets aural beauty correctly, or that Japanese Buddhist philosophy is the standpoint from which to investigate the fundamental nature of reality, or that German hermeneutic theory is the uniquely adequate framework for interpretation and criticism. Given the availability of distinct positions in this cultural space, it then becomes something of an epistemic imperative to view matters from several rather than from one of them, just as a survey of physical terrain requires triangulation. (Garfield 2002: 246.)

Garfield sees it as a *moral obligation* of Western academics to interact with alien traditions, but warns about the pitfalls of orientalism. Garfield understands ‘orientalism’ as the intellectual wing of colonialism and reminds that not only does the colonialist history condition the way we read literature and respond to the scholars of non-Western cultures, but also the way these scholars read our literature and respond to us. Our history furthermore conditions our conception of what a textual tradition is and what constitutes the boundary across which traditions confront one another.²⁵⁵

Therefore, in order to steer clear of orientalism, scholars must be willing to encounter an *active* form of intellectual life, instead of simply viewing the tradition as a “fossilized sequence of texts”. This further requires genuine interaction on terms of equality, instead of treating the living scholars of the foreign traditions as either “informants” or “oracles”. In the beginning stages of a genuine dialogue, collegial relations must be *negotiated* and this involves examining, questioning and -

²⁵⁴ Garfield 2002: 253.

²⁵⁵ Garfield 2002: 231. The post-colonialist context of contemporary philosophizing has been, and continues to be, discussed and problematized by cross-cultural scholars. Antipathies experienced toward the hegemony of Western thought may cause some academics to defy the pressure to discuss Eastern philosophical systems in relation to Western ones. A person might argue that Eastern systems of thought *in themselves* must be worthy of academic attention and that the respectability of a tradition or a doctrine must not depend on its affinities (real or imagined) with Western philosophy. But can we, by simply abstaining from making cross-cultural comparisons, free ourselves from post-colonial mentality? If we side with Garfield, we must conclude that this mentality pervades our very being and is *already there* when we approach an alien tradition. Therefore, regardless of whether we are to make explicit comparisons or not, the power inequality remains and thus cannot (or at least *should* not) be ignored.

when necessary - revising our views of each other. Garfield warns cross-cultural philosophers of the situation where the collegial relations are presupposed, the work of the subordinate tradition is assimilated as an object of study and the superordinate tradition can congratulate itself on having “broadened its horizons”.²⁵⁶

One way to enhance the equality of the situation and to bring about deeper understanding is to make one’s own tradition available to one’s interlocutors. Garfield argues that it is not enough to be a student, but one should teach one’s own tradition as well (knowledge is power, after all).²⁵⁷ As noted before, Gadamer’s understanding of conversation and dialogue not only requires, but *assumes* this kind of symmetry. Garfield’s account is more aware of the power structures at play. He acknowledges that “Euro-American academics meet Tibetan or Indian academics on terms of unequal power²⁵⁸”, but holds that there are ways to correct this power differential.

At this point, one might argue that Garfield’s account is naively optimistic if he believes that individuals have such power. For even if two scholars could find a way to enter a dialogue on equal power (and even this would be extremely difficult because it requires a great deal of conscious examination and modification of the prejudices at work), the global power structure would remain largely unaltered continuing to influence the interaction as well as its outcome. This is particularly the case when the results of such an interaction are being presented to the general public. If, for example, the Tibetan scholarly tradition is not recognized as producing respectable philosophy by the majority of Western philosophers, surely this will be reflected in the way the results of cross-cultural research are presented and received. Naturally this is something that may change *in time* and the works of Western academics such as Garfield may provide the necessary motivation for such a shift. Even if we were to hold that Garfield’s ideals are in part utopian, it may still be beneficial to *try* to actualize them anyway.

Garfield’s insistence on reciprocity arguably may help *reduce* the power differential (even if it does not eliminate it completely). If we hold (*contra* Rorty) that Gadamerian dialogue is possible, it certainly helps if the interlocutor can act as a colleague instead of just a source of information. Furthermore, if dialogue is seen as requiring commonality, it is only fair that this commonality goes both ways. There is a difference between “my dialogue with you” (which is not true dialogue, but

²⁵⁶ Garfield 2002: 246-247.

²⁵⁷ Garfield 2002: 250.

²⁵⁸ Garfield 2002: 231.

an example of what Garfield calls ‘orientalism’) and “our dialogue”. Naturally there are many ways to define ‘dialogue’ and these definitions largely determine the views on the possibility of true dialogue, but I argue that the concept is best understood here as a general openness towards one’s interlocutor and a willingness to undergo change in one’s views, opinions, and even frameworks. For example, if we adopt the ethnocentric view that Western philosophy is philosophy proper while Asian philosophy is tainted by soteriological concerns, there is arguably very little room for the serious and systematic study of neither the culturally distant philosophical system(s) nor our own. Therefore ‘dialogue’ may even be understood as a hermeneutical approach to cross-cultural philosophizing: an approach which is truly cross-cultural (and not just comparative) and truly critical (of one’s own viewpoints as well). It is this hermeneutical ideal and starting point (in which the understanding of the inevitably prejudiced nature of interpretation is implicit) that distinguishes rational reconstructions from violent assimilations.

In cross-cultural philosophy, scholars are forced to look for middle paths between certain extremes and often find themselves in a crossfire of demands. For example, we should not render an alien tradition incommensurate to our own (for what would be cross-cultural in this?), but we should not simply re-create it in our image either. We should not be overtly eager to assess and evaluate (for understanding should come first), while *mere* understanding itself might not be desirable in the long run. And finally, we should not treat ancient philosophies as mere relics (especially if the tradition is still alive), but we should not uproot them from their historical context either. All in all, it seems much easier to state what we should not do than to explicate what should be done. The analogy of a middle path may succeed in describing the subtleties of the hermeneutical process, but it does not provide any clear instructions. In a similar vein, Garfield employs the tightrope metaphor and writes:

In commenting on Nāgārjuna’s text, I am constantly aware of walking a philosophical and hermeneutical tightrope. On the one hand, one could provide a perfectly traditional commentary on the text - or better, a translation of one of the major Sanskrit or Tibetan commentaries - or a transcript of oral commentary by a recognized scholar of the tradition. Such a commentary would explain in great detail the way the text is seen from the perspective of its home tradition and the background of Buddhist controversies to which the text responds. (...) On the other hand, one could try to comment on the text by presenting a theory of what Nāgārjuna would have said had he been a twentieth-century Western philosopher. (Garfield 1995: 95-96.)

Finding the middle position between these two options is of particular importance to Garfield who is motivated by the prospect of the kind of cross-cultural philosophy that goes beyond both Buddhology (and Indology etc) and comparative philosophy. He is not interested in providing

historical accounts of Indian philosophies or pointing out similarities and differences between Buddhist and Western systems of thought. Unlike many Western philosophers working with alien traditions, Garfield is mainly interested in creating new philosophy. His investigations are therefore primarily philosophical and only secondarily philological and/or historical.

6.3 GARFIELD: FROM COMPARATIVE TO CROSS-CULTURAL

Once more let us backpedal to Gadamer's views. One of the important aspects of his philosophical hermeneutic is that it criticizes the idea of a hermeneutic "method" which - for him - is a *predetermined systematic approach* to interpretation. His opposition stems from the view that such a fixed mode of investigation constricts the scope of inquiry by determining what kind of questions will be asked and what will be subjected to doubt while concealing and taking for granted its own standpoints. As DiCenso notes, this creates an impression that Gadamer is denouncing careful scientific inquiry in favor of a vague openness and as a result many scholars have rejected this "strained polemic" against all method. However, it would probably do us good to understand that Gadamer's characterizations and definitions of 'method' themselves are historical (and perhaps outdated). Arguably they are still relevant with reference to what can be called methodological objectivism (which does not retain reflexive openness), but many contemporary "methods" are clearly methods of a different kind, or in a different sense of the word.²⁵⁹

For example, Garfield's methodological considerations are clearly designed to *enhance* reflexive openness and critical examination of one's prejudices. They are strongly rooted in pragmatic concerns and fundamentally opposed to utopian ideals of objectivity (although Garfield's approach does invoke above-mentioned *ethical* ideals that some may consider utopian). Garfield delivers his views and suggestions as a philosopher hoping to find a way to make true dialogue possible across traditions, because for him, this is a fundamental prerequisite of meaningful cross-cultural philosophy.

²⁵⁹ See DiCenso 1990: 90-92.

Garfield knows what he talks about. Not only has he spend decades working with Asian scholars and philosophical systems, but he has put a considerable time and effort into specifying and critically evaluating the conditions for such cultural interchange. Above we saw that Garfield rejects Gadamer’s definition of a tradition. He argues that we should think of our respective positions “not separated by walls but as distant in a continuous space”. A level of shared background is required, but it is something that can be built together. After all, true interchange presupposes “enough proximity on certain dimensions to talk, and enough distance to see”.²⁶⁰ In many ways this is the coming together of Panikkar’s homological and dialogical principles discussed above and as we have seen, Garfield also has some suggestions when it come to the co-ordinating method required to find a balance between the two.

Garfield’s ideas are practical, pragmatic and down-to-earth. In a way his hermeneutic is Gadamer’s theory stripped of its black-and-white definitions and strict oppositions. As such it becomes much more universal and is more easily applied to changing conditions. On the other hand, one could claim that Garfield is not really saying much, but serving mostly empty rhetoric. The talk of creating dialogues and negotiating collegial relations is not really a systematic theory and perhaps not even a very systematic program for action. Therefore, when it comes to theoretical standpoints, Garfield does not seem to have much to offer. Then again, interpretation *is* a changing, multidimensional process and perhaps, in the end, the only thing we *can* really say about it is that both proximity and distance are required. In Garfield’s view, nothing (traditions, textual meanings, individual standpoints, dialogical situations, interpersonal relationships etc.) is fixed and stable. This in itself can be seen as a strong theoretical statement (and a very Nāgārjunian one too).

All in all, Garfield’s writings have a markedly pragmatic undertone to them: the theoretical is always conjoined with practical suggestions or examples, the hermeneutic theory is intertwined with discussions of the hermeneutical method. The positive side-effect of this is that the political, ethical, interpersonal (and so on) aspects of cross-cultural philosophizing ignored by some of the more abstract theories, are being reflected upon here. For example, when discussing the proximity that understanding demands, Garfield explains how he himself saw it fit to enter a Tibetan Buddhist transmission lineage:

²⁶⁰ Garfield 2002: 240.

No matter what the attitude is in the United States to lineage, my understanding of the Buddhist texts I read is enhanced by appreciating that role in the Buddhist tradition, and my willingness to enter into a transmission lineage gives me an access to interactions otherwise unavailable, as well as new perspectives. (Garfield 2002: 249-250.)

The approach Garfield advocates takes time and effort: he himself has learned a new language, spend time abroad building collegial relations, studying and teaching, entered a Buddhist lineage and become accustomed to Tibetan culture, translated Buddhist texts into English (once in collaboration with a Tibetan lama) and brought the things discovered and created back to the West, taught them at universities, wrote books about them and incorporated them into his own philosophical projects. But while Garfield's example shows that (this kind of) cross-cultural philosophy requires great commitment and perseverance, it can also be seen as proof of its possibility.

Garfield himself explicitly states that he is not interested in comparative philosophy in the sense of juxtaposing texts from different traditions. Instead he wants to create new perspectives with a multiplicity of texts, perspectives and hermeneutical traditions. His enterprise is that of a modern philosopher who uses culturally distant viewpoints as illuminating and inspiring resources in his own philosophical activities. Therefore his work claims contemporary relevance and is openly reconstructive and creative, self-conscious with regard to its starting points and willing to take a stand.

Garfield is not only working to produce cross-cultural perspectives, but to advance the cause of cross-cultural philosophy itself, to consolidate its position as an important and irreplaceable branch of philosophy and as a way out of institutional and intellectual racism. Garfield's tone might sometimes strike as polemic, but this might be needed to create discussion. As a cross-cultural philosopher, he automatically becomes the underdog (as the postcolonial academic context dictates) and therefore it is no surprise that his arguments, especially those directed against the deep-rooted ethnocentricity of the majority of Western philosophers, have a lot of fire to them. Then again, when *doing* cross-cultural philosophy and especially when interpreting culturally (and quite often also temporally) distant thinkers, Garfield's approach is rigorous and systematic, resulting in carefully articulated standpoints.

The step that Garfield takes from comparative to cross-cultural may provide the much-needed momentum for bringing Asian perspectives into mainstream philosophy. Comparative philosophy

with its emphasis on straightforward juxtapositions maintains and reifies the distinction between East and West and may therefore actually hamper the development of cross-cultural approaches to philosophy. This is not to say that we should simply ignore the differences between culturally distant perspectives, for it is certainly possible to acknowledge and appreciate these differences without invoking simplistic distinctions bordering on dichotomies. Such distinctions arguably possess some heuristic value, but are far too naive and misleading to guide serious philosophical investigation. Neither the Western nor the Eastern philosophical tradition is univocal or unidimensional enough to justify such a classification. As mentioned earlier, it would be more constructive to acknowledge that there exists a multitude of philosophical perspectives within both. The perspectives that are culturally distant from us can be radically different from or strikingly similar to our own, but most often are something in between. A thing to remember is that this is also the case *within* our own tradition. If we are willing to group together the ideas of such diverse thinkers as Plato, Sextus, Descartes, Nietzsche, Hume, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Putnam, and Rorty (to name a few) and collectively call their work ‘philosophy’, surely we can also make room for philosophers from other parts of the world. And it is not post-colonial guilt that should guide our encounters (for Asian philosophies should not be our charity cases), but a realization that the perspectives and understanding (co-)created might be (mutually) beneficial to all participants.

Obviously I am not arguing that every philosopher needs to engage in cross-cultural endeavors, but I am suggesting that cross-cultural (and culturally distant) perspectives are accepted as relevant additions to our philosophical knowledge base, not because we are striving at political correctness, but because these perspectives not only *deserve* our recognition and respect but can be *useful* to us as well.

6.4 APPROACHES TO NĀGĀRJUNA RECONSIDERED

After discussing cross-cultural interpretation and philosophy on a more general level, it is time to once more turn our gaze to our case study: Nāgārjuna scholarship. We know now that there are many choices that have to be made before interpretation can take place. As Garfield puts it, we must select from different aspects, interpretive traditions etc. and this selecting always involves selecting

against. I am not claiming that scholars make all these choices knowingly, or that it would even be possible for a scholar to approach Nāgārjuna's thought in an entirely self-conscious way. I am merely pointing out that choices are being made - either consciously or unconsciously - and that they account for the plurality of approaches we encounter. Earlier I argued that cross-cultural philosophy involves the search for various middle paths between extremes. These extremes are not mere theoretical possibilities, but often reflect the actual choices that some cross-cultural philosophers have made in the past (or continue to make today). Because we can learn from looking back, it may be useful to typologize the approaches to Nāgārjuna once more. This is not a chronological exposition in the spirit of Tuck, but focuses more on methodological and hermeneutical choices.

To begin with, we can distinguish between attempts to describe and attempts to evaluate. In 1986, Della Santina argued that scholars and students "would do well to see themselves as explorers seeking to uncover new areas of knowledge, rather than as arbiters attempting to settle conclusively the philosophical problems which they study²⁶¹". Even though our understanding of Nāgārjuna (and Mādhyamaka philosophy in general) has grown since Della Santina delivered this statement, there is arguably still some relevance to his words, for we are still in the process of charting an unknown territory, encountering a lot of "strangeness" in Nāgārjuna's thought. But the obvious downside of such a goal is that we will not be able to bring Nāgārjuna's philosophy to life, and therefore, as long as we are satisfied with our role of the explorer, we can never engage in a productive cross-cultural enterprise: we can neither seriously examine nor apply Nāgārjuna's arguments.

When we encounter foreign traditions and discourses, a certain level of humility is demanded of us. It would be naive and arrogant to assume from the start that non-Western philosophies are somehow inferior. However, we should not get tangled up in this humility and too attached to the idea of a fundamental difference and an unbridgeable gap between our home tradition and the one we are studying. If we do, any culturally distant philosophies will remain mere isolated curios without any contemporary relevance. As Daya Krishna noted in 1965, Indian Philosophy has been "more an antiquarian's interest, a study of something dead and gone, a preserve for the Indologist, something relevant only to the student of ancient India, its thought and its culture". As a result, Indian philosophy has not been understood as carrying any relevance to contemporary philosophical discussion (not even in India). Panikkar blames the scholars who have proposed that Indian

²⁶¹ Della Santina 1986(a): xv.

philosophy is (perhaps) something profounder and deeper, but fundamentally different from what goes under the name of ‘philosophy’ today.²⁶² The tendency to view Asian thought as something belonging to the past can be found in some of contemporary scholarship as well. While there is something to learn from this vision (for we should not overlook the fact that Nāgārjuna’s thought did develop in 2nd century India), there is nothing that would unambiguously dictate that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy could (or should) only make sense in that cultural and historical context.

The attempts to assess and evaluate obviously relate to the view that we can make sense of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy despite of cultural and temporal distance. For example, Burton (2001) strives not only to ascertain the possible meanings of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, but hopes to philosophically examine and critically appraise them. Burton feels it is a crucial step from simple exposition to place Nāgārjuna’s thought under rational scrutiny.²⁶³ There is some truth to this, for if we are to appreciate Nāgārjuna’s thought as philosophy (proper), we must be able to critically discuss its perceived shortcomings and inconsistencies. The inclination toward critical evaluations probably reached its zenith in the hands of analytic philosophers, at least if we choose not to take seriously the 19th century emotional depictions of Mādhyamaka as an unworthy and fundamentally inferior system of philosophy (and I would suggest that we do not, for such naive displays of ethnocentric arrogance have no place in serious scholarship). The earlier interpreters, in their eagerness to save Nāgārjuna from charges of nihilism attempted to *understand* the Mādhyamaka as a coherent whole (even if their efforts were probably not as successful as they would have hoped), while the analytically trained philosophers held it necessary to attend to Nāgārjuna’s argumentation. The paradigm shift (if we can even speak of one) was not this clear-cut, of course, for these two approaches existed - and in their modified forms still exist - side by side.

Another related dimension is whether we attempt to rationally reconstruct Nāgārjuna’s thought using conceptual tools from our own tradition or to present his philosophy as it appears rooted in the Indian Buddhist conceptual framework. Garfield’s approach is intentionally sympathetic and he attempts to reconstruct Nāgārjuna’s philosophy in such a way that it *becomes cogent*. Scholars like Burton have employed a more text-critical approach wishing to, as Della Santina puts it, “settle conclusively the philosophical problems” involved. Both these approaches come with problems. In the case of rational reconstructions, we may ask how far can one go before the text’s meanings in its

²⁶² Krishna 1965: 37.

²⁶³ Burton 2001: ix-xii.

home tradition are being violated (or, to use the previously employed analogy, how much baggage are we allowed to bring?). Garfield succeeds marvelously in making Nāgārjuna's philosophical notions stand on their own (as philosophy), but when he employs Nāgārjuna's (reconstructed) arguments in his discussion of contemporary Western philosophical problems, he may be crossing an invisible line. It is justified to ask whether a true fusion of horizons is taking place or whether it is just Garfield's horizon taking over Nāgārjuna's. Despite all his best efforts to take the middle way between traditions, Garfield's Nāgārjuna is still Nāgārjuna reconstructed to the core. Rortyan hermeneutics (of *re-interpretation*) would find no fault in this (in fact Rorty claims that our interpretations are always conducted in our own image and that we can merely assimilate the text to serve the purpose we have in mind), yet most scholars are not willing to embrace this more or less relativistic conclusion. For example, Conze and Della Santina might criticize Garfield's choice to reconstruct Mādhyamaka in the image of a secular philosophy, when it is clear that it is embedded in soteriological concerns. Others might go even further and claim that by reconstructing Mādhyamaka as a philosophy, Garfield has already missed the point. The question boils down to this: how much can we reconstruct before Nāgārjuna's philosophy ceases to be *Nāgārjuna's* philosophy?

In Burton's case we encounter an implicit promise of objectivity, which is - needless to say - highly problematic. Even the most meticulously text-critical study always involves interpretation and choice. As Huntington declares, the final truth cannot be discovered within the pages of a text²⁶⁴. In fact, Burton's hermeneutic strategy seems somewhat unreflected in this respect. However, his unwillingness to take Nāgārjuna's status as the greatest Buddhist philosopher of all time for granted is refreshing. It could almost be described as a general trend in Nāgārjuna scholarship to sweep the inconsistencies found under the carpet. Only a few scholars have been willing to entertain the possibility that Nāgārjuna's philosophy could be, in fact, bad philosophy.

At this point, we should distinguish between different kinds of "sympathetic" approaches. Some scholars have indeed been guilty of whitewashing Nāgārjuna's philosophy by ignoring some of its apparent problems or by invoking the mystical, irrational (etc.) interpretation. I am not suggesting that such interpretations (by philosophers) need automatically be labeled "whitewashing", but I am pointing out that they *may* have been inspired by the will to "save" Nāgārjuna from criticism. Furthermore, while they are cogent to an extent (and supported by some of Nāgārjuna's own

²⁶⁴ Huntington 1992: 125-128.

assertions), they do have the downside of undermining Nāgārjuna's contributions as a *philosopher*. Sometimes Nāgārjuna's arguments are defended by stating that their import is very subtle and that if there is a problem, it is probably a problem in our understanding and not in Nāgārjuna's argumentation. Again, this might very well be so, but at the same time such statements are precarious, because they are based on a vague intuition that somewhere hidden lies a key - something that makes all the problems vanish. The reasoning behind this seems to be: Nāgārjuna is a great philosopher and therefore, if his philosophy appears inconsistent, it must be because of us. Luckily such naive hero-worship is not the only option. Garfield's approach is sympathetic on one hand, but rigorous, punctual and thorough on the other (the same applies to Huntington, for example). While Garfield does accept the vision of Nāgārjuna as a great philosopher, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate *why* and *how* this is. Naturally many scholars do not agree with Garfield's choices (eg. the employment of certain theoretical tools and the controversial, albeit justified, readings of some of central passages of Nāgārjuna's MMK), he does succeed in what he sets out to do: presenting a valid philosophical system to philosophers.

It is therefore possible to be sympathetic without being apologetic. While Garfield does talk a great deal about institutional racism propagating a global philosophical perspective, he does not need to explain the strangeness of Nāgārjuna's thought by invoking the view that there are fundamental differences between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions (to be clear, Garfield acknowledges that differences exist, but holds that they are not great enough to render our traditions incommensurate). Garfield's Nāgārjuna is a Buddhist philosopher, but a philosopher nevertheless.

Presenting Nāgārjuna's philosophy using conceptual tools from a different philosophical tradition is extremely dangerous but potentially rewarding (at this point we can bring into mind Garfield's tightrope metaphor). Let us now return to the question of soteriology. It is more than fair to ask whether Garfield may be charged with downplaying the primary motivation of Nāgārjuna's thought. Bear in mind Nāgārjuna's warning that to whomever emptiness becomes a view, she has missed its point. Garfield consistently interprets this as a rejection of the substantialist understanding of *śūnyatā* and as a warning not to enter distorted and ontologically confused philosophical discourse. This much is cogent, but we could now argue that Nāgārjuna, if he were here today, might have a thing or two to say about Garfield's philosophical activities as well. For, to Garfield, emptiness does not become an essentialist view, but a view nevertheless. He seems satisfied with the conventional

level of things, while Nāgārjuna (as a Buddhist) might view this as an example of unhealthy attachment.

Most scholars (eg. Della Santina 1986(a): 220) acknowledge that Mādhyamaka is first and foremost a soteriological philosophy designed to produce an existential transformation in the individual. It is therefore more than just an intellectual exercise. But emphasizing the soteriological tends to come with a cost. We need only to look at Murti's work to see how the stress on religiosity (and in this case, Indian religiosity) may lead to grouping together of all Indian philosophies with an underlying claim that they share the same metaphysical commitments. Another possible outcome is to view Nāgārjuna as a mystic (eg. Betty 1983 & 1984 and Inada 1993). The reasoning behind this would be that because Nāgārjuna comes from a tradition that, to an extent at least, embraces mystical knowledge and mystical formulations and because his philosophy does contain some seemingly paradoxical statements, it must be, therefore, that Nāgārjuna too is a mystic. Once again, it is not that this kind of interpretation would be necessarily wrong. But it does seem a little suspicious that Nāgārjuna would go through all that trouble to provide philosophical arguments just to argue in the end that none of that matters, especially when some of the philosophical reconstructions (the one by Garfield being a model example) do not in any way go against any of the fundamental Buddhist teachings. In fact, Garfield's interpretation fits quite seamlessly in the Buddhist framework of impermanence and interconnectedness. Therefore, even though an interpretation holds relevance to contemporary Western philosophy, it does not necessarily have to be at odds with the Buddhist tradition. But how about attempting to prove that Nāgārjuna's philosophy has a counterpart in the West? After all, it is quite a different thing to claim that Nāgārjuna's philosophy might have some contemporary relevance than to claim that Nāgārjuna can be seen, for example, as a proto-Wittgensteinian or a proto-Derridean thinker.

In 1963, Edward Conze argued that while some philosophical parallels are incidental and fortuitous, others can be fruitful and significant. He then differentiated between "perennial" and "sciential" modes of philosophy and argued that Nāgārjuna's thought may be fruitfully compared to Western perennial philosophical traditions (i.e., those of Greek skeptics and gnostics of the Middle Age), but not to modern philosophies, because there is a fundamental opposition in interest and a "mutual hostility"²⁶⁵. It should be noted, however, that at this point certain post-modern developments that appear to have bridged the gap between Mādhyamaka and Western philosophy had not yet taken

²⁶⁵ Conze 1963: 9.

place. While Nāgārjuna continues to be compared to Greek skeptics (very strongly in McEvelley and to an extent in Garfield), comparisons are also being drawn to language philosophy and deconstruction (eg. Mabbett 1995; Huntington 1992 and Garfield 1995 & 2002).

As we now know, Garfield's approach goes beyond the comparative enterprise. By describing Nāgārjuna's philosophy as a sort of skepticism, he is not just exposing the similarities and differences between Western schools of skepticism and Mādhyamaka, but is employing Nāgārjunian arguments in his discussion of modern-day philosophical problems and (what he sees as) biases. In this way he is attempting exactly what Moore prophesied the task of comparative philosophy to become, i.e., to use the different frameworks to undo some of the institutionalized frameworks and approaches to philosophy. In many ways this is what truly qualifies as philosophy across boundaries. Of course this is not to say that Garfield's approach is without problems. He is facing the same challenges as all other cross-cultural scholars and his choices also come with pros and cons. But if Garfield succeeds in what he has set out to do, i.e., in bringing forth a paradigm shift in cross-cultural philosophy, surely we will see more discussion on the subtleties of this enterprise in the future. Garfield carries the burden (and probably enjoys the excitement) of being a forerunner and a prophet of global philosophy and while some of his ideas and notions are arguably controversial, he is creating the kind of stir that is needed to critically examine and modify the prejudices of a discipline.

As a conclusion, the multitude of hermeneutic theories, hermeneutical methods and theoretical frameworks results in a variety of interpretations, perspectives and theories. All of them can find some level of support, and are also susceptible to criticism. If we accept the Gadamerian (or better yet, Rortyan) framework and conclude that interpretative pluralism should be tolerated because of the inescapable prejudicial dynamics of understanding, do we have to embrace the conclusion that everything can be said and, on the flip side, nothing conclusive can? I would argue (in the spirit of Gadamer) that it is not *all* relative. By re-interpreting earlier scholarly works, by revealing their biases, it will become clearer why certain interpretative choices have been made. Acceptance of interpretative plurality does not mean that we cannot discuss, examine, analyze and deconstruct the interpretations of others and our own. When it comes to Nāgārjuna's philosophy, there are many things that *can* be said about it, but this does not entail triviality. Even if we cannot find explicit criteria for judging interpretations (even if there is an intuitive component to the process), our

deconstructive investigations can help us see more clearly. Every self-reflective scholar engages in this kind of activity from the very beginning.

The fact that there is plurality is a positive thing really. The existence of a single correct interpretation is not only a myth, but a somewhat useless myth. This is where my view approaches that of Rorty's. It is the conversation and discussion which *in itself* is the goal. Arriving at certainty would mark the end of the discussion, but if uncertainty is tolerated and conversation keeps going, we can continue to learn, continue to reconstruct and continue to deconstruct. It is not only about understanding an alien philosophical tradition, but understanding ourselves. After all, as the popular proverb dictates, the shortest way to yourself goes around the world.

PART 7: CONCLUSIONS

I have followed Della Santina's suggestion to set out as an explorer seeking to uncover new areas of knowledge instead of an arbiter attempting to settle conclusively the problems I study. Even though Della Santina's suggestion was originally directed at comparative philosophers, I believe it applies even better to (meta)theoretical discussions of cross-cultural philosophy itself. While I actively participate in the ongoing discussion by arguing that some views are perhaps more fruitful than others, it is not in my interests to advance a rigid definition of cross-cultural philosophy. I echo the ethos of awareness (as the prejudices of my time dictate) and believe that the strength of rational reconstructions is that they are (or at least set out to be) philosophical, systematic and capable of building stronger bridges between the various traditions and viewpoints available to us today. I do not claim that philological approaches are pointless or inferior, but I argue that they are better suited to Indology (etc.) than to cross-cultural philosophy. Therefore I hope that this thesis has been read as an *exposition* of (or perhaps an *expedition* into) Garfield's work as an embodiment of cross-cultural philosophy as *world philosophy*: the fusion of philosophical traditions giving rise to new perspectives, systems, and views.

7.1 NĀGĀRJUNA SCHOLARSHIP AND CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Western Nāgārjuna scholarship illuminates beautifully the impact of our philosophical trends and of the various hermeneutical approaches to cross-cultural interpretation. I have hoped to engage in what Tuck calls 'philosophy of scholarship': the metatheoretical discussion of interpretative frameworks and approaches. Therefore I have been more interested in what Western interpreters have said *about* Nāgārjuna (and *why*) than in what Nāgārjuna himself has said. Part 3 is therefore not my thesis on how Nāgārjuna should be read, but a general presentation (albeit inevitably biased and prejudiced) of what the majority of contemporary Western scholars would agree to be the key

aspects of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. As such it paints a picture of 'Nāgārjuna generalized' or 'Nāgārjuna stereotyped' and is only provided as background information for parts 4 and 5.

The same applies to part 2. I have not wished to advance a thesis on who Nāgārjuna was (and what his incentives and scholastic affiliations were), but to show that the mystery surrounding the historical figure gives interpreters a choice between various interpretative contexts. Even if we knew more about Nāgārjuna's life, this would be the case, albeit perhaps to a lesser extent. Buddhism is not a homogenous tradition, but encompasses a lot of diversity, numerous schools and sub-schools. Nāgārjuna can thus be read in the light of the teachings of the historical Buddha (for the Buddha-word provides the very general parameters for what Buddhist philosophy can be) or the Abhidharmic discussions of his time (when he can be seen as defying the whole of Abhidharma theorizing or entering the debate by siding with certain school(s) and attacking other(s)). Another option is to approach his thought in the light of what it gave rise to, i.e., the Mādhyamaka philosophical tradition. Here the choice is between two different Mādhyamaka sub-schools (if one is to accept the Tibetan formulation of the division into Prāsaṅgika and Svatantrika as an accurate portrayal). If Prāsaṅgika is chosen, yet another choice has to be made between the different interpretative lineages found in Tibetan scholasticism (and perhaps in certain Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese buddhisms).

Roughly speaking, we can choose between Nāgārjuna the *commentator and preserver* of the original teaching of the Buddha, Nāgārjuna the *critic* of the Abhidharma and Nāgārjuna the *innovator and founder* of Mādhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. Of course these options are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that the historical Nāgārjuna actually fulfilled all these roles. However, interpretations of his philosophy tend to stress one of the above.

Part 4 has been an exposition of the historical conditioning in Nāgārjuna scholarship. We all come with conceptual and theoretical baggage that we cannot completely ditch. Even though such expositions are always simplified (the paradigms are not as clear-cut in real life), the fact remains that the vogues in Western philosophy tend to become the vogues in cross-cultural interpretation. This is only natural because we need theoretical angles and conceptual frames of reference to organize and make sense of what we encounter. But this does not entail that our interpretations are necessarily determined by factors that lie outside our control. Our philosophical tradition (like the Buddhist one) is heterogenous and diverse enough to allow some freedom of choice. Furthermore,

if we work to retain reflexive openness, we are perhaps able to critically examine whether some theoretical frameworks (or hermeneutical approaches) actually fit better than others. And this may even help us gain new insights into those frameworks as Garfield's work with skepticism clearly demonstrates.

This brings us to cross-cultural hermeneutics and hermeneutical methods (part 6). Scholars naturally have different takes on what is appropriate and what is not. Some are critical of the whole of cross-cultural philosophical enterprise, claiming that there are radical differences between culturally distant philosophical traditions (eg. Conze, Della Santina). This usually boils down to the discussion of the import and effect of the soteriological motivation often (but not always!) found in Eastern systems of thought. There are those who claim that not only do Western and Eastern philosophies speak different philosophical language, but that the observation that Western philosophies tend to be secular and Eastern philosophies tend to be inspired by soteriological goals renders them radically incommensurate. The opposite side of the debate holds that even though the context and role of philosophy might vary across cultures, the same critical, reflective and systematic approach can be found all over the world.

When it comes to philosophical hermeneutics, cross-cultural scholars need to account for the cultural axis of interpretation (that Gadamer etc. largely ignored). I side with Garfield, who views traditions as ambiguous, non-static and diverse. Not only do I find this to be an accurate description of traditions, but I argue that it is a necessary premise for cross-cultural philosophical activity. In order to work with philosophical streams across cultures, we need to defy dichotomies that render the boundaries of traditions absolute. It is therefore important to view traditions as linked in continuous space and to look for a common ground that enables genuine interaction. This common ground can be built as a joint venture of scholars across cultures. One simple method (advocated by Garfield) is to share traditions with our Asian (etc.) interlocutors: to become students and teachers.

Dealing with a multitude of very different interpretations, many cross-cultural interpreters have felt the push to find criteria for ranking them. I side with Rorty who argues that there can be no certainty, no single truth. This does not mean, however, that we cannot discuss and deconstruct. There may be no *absolute* criteria available, but we can still evaluate readings in terms of elegance, clarity, cogency, economy, utility and so on. Such conversation arguably enhances our self-reflection and affects the direction the enterprise is taking.

The conversations of the past have led us to a phase of cross-cultural philosophizing that recognizes rational reconstructions as a valid hermeneutical approach. The opposition of text-critical and reconstructive approach is not as black-and-white as it seems. In fact, they form a continuum: readings are always text-critical (to an extent) and reconstructed (to an extent). However, the debate here is an interesting one. While both can offer advantages, I would argue that the hermeneutic theory often connected to the first is problematic. If we hold that the meaning can be found on the pages of the text and especially if we hold that there is only *one* correct meaning hidden there, we are dangerously undermining the effects of our own prejudices. In a way, all interpretations are reconstructions. I would propose, however, that the difference between the textual exegeses and rational reconstructions is that the latter attempt to be more cross-cultural, philosophical and of higher contemporary relevance than the former. This is especially true with Garfield's rational reconstructions, but similar ambitions can be found in the work of Huntington (eg. 1992), Mabbett (1995) and Garner (1977).

The fact that rational reconstructions tend to be philosophically rigorous and interesting helps build wider and stronger bridges between our respective traditions than Buddhologist, Indologist, Tibetologist (etc.) interpretations have been able to. If Asian (etc) philosophical perspectives are to enter mainstream Western philosophical discourses, it is probably through such endeavors. Because the prejudicial nature of interpretation is clearly acknowledged and even embraced in them, they tend to exhibit a lot of openness and reflexive quality. Furthermore, the aspects of interpretation that go ignored in traditional exegeses, are often explicitly discussed. I side with Garfield in arguing that political factors play an important role in how we approach alien philosophical traditions and their exponents, how we understand them and how we present our understanding to our colleagues in the West. Garfield's suggestions on how to negotiate collegial relations with the living representatives of traditions and how to actively create commonality can be seen as a first step in the direction of politically reflective and self-conscious scholarship. Instead of just presupposing equality (i.e., ignoring the issue), we should actively attempt to build and enhance it.

7.2 GARFIELD'S PROJECT

Garfield's cross-cultural program is serious, systematic, and avant-garde. By being both creative and rigorous, it carries within itself a lot of potential for change. Hopefully one day this change will manifest as mainstream recognition and acceptance of cross-cultural philosophy.

Garfield's interpretation of Nāgārjuna the Buddhist philosopher emphasizes the philosopher aspect. Interestingly enough, this emphasis (and the related demystification) is carried out in the Buddhist context of Nāgārjuna's thought, employing Buddhist interpretative lineages together with Western conceptual frameworks and theoretical tools. Some might see Garfield's approach as seriously undermining Nāgārjuna's so-called religiosity by confusing his incentives and goals with those of secular philosophers. In itself this is an accusation that should be taken seriously. In Garfield's defense, however, I would like to reply the following:

- (i) Garfield's interpretation has been influenced by Tibetan *Buddhist* interpretations and it even sides with them to some extent. Furthermore, the stereotypical understanding of Eastern "religiosity" is an oversimplification that needs to be questioned. There are different types of religiosity and different takes on the issue of the relationship between spiritual goals and practices and philosophical activity. Many Buddhist traditions value critical, rational reflection and even though it is usually employed in the context of soteriological framework, this does not necessarily mean that it could not have any relevance outside of it. In fact, there is nothing that dictates that Buddhist "religiosity" should be somehow fundamentally opposed to rationality. Buddhism, especially in its beginning stages, did not adhere to any markedly supernatural beliefs, but was generally opposed to such tendencies found in Brahmanistic tradition(s). In other words, even if Nāgārjuna himself was trying to combat the "essentialist" bias because it was seen as breeding attachment and suffering, it can still be the same essentialist bias that many Western philosophers are interested in today (albeit for different reasons).
- (ii) Garfield is trying to build bridges between philosophical traditions: he is looking for a common ground. He is also a philosopher who values rational, systematic and critical analysis. As a result, it is only natural that he focuses on this-worldly philosophical

problems. This does not mean, however, that his interpretations would somehow clash with the Buddhist goal of (spiritual) emancipation.

- (iii) Even though Garfield steers clear of much “buddhological jargon” (as described by Arnold 1999), he is not trying to hide Nāgārjuna’s tolerance of “mystical” means of acquiring knowledge (even if he rejects the mystical, anti-rational interpretation of his philosophy). Garfield *also* gives a lot of consideration to those aspects of Nāgārjuna’s thought that do not necessarily coincide with contemporary Western philosophical concerns. This speaks of a respect for the Buddhist context.
- (iv) Finally, it is Garfield’s conclusion that Buddhist philosophy has a lot to offer to our philosophical discourses worldwide. Therefore criticizing his work by claiming that he is undermining the fact that Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist would seem beside the point. It would mean blindly accepting the East/West –dichotomy and perhaps confusing the philosophical approach with the text-critical one (or the buddhological approach with the philosophical one). In contemporary cross-cultural philosophy, Garfield’s approach is perfectly legitimate approach, even if it is not the *only* one.

It is not uncommon that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is described in negative terms as *anti-essentialist*, *anti-foundationalist*, *anti-metaphysical*, or even *anti-philosophical*. Garfield, on the other hand, gives much thought to the positive aspects of Nāgārjuna’s thought. Garfield’s Nāgārjuna is not opposed to philosophy *per se*, but only to philosophy that embraces the “myth of the deep” and is obsessed with the search of ultimates. This Nāgārjuna himself advocates a conventionalist philosophical view which is neither world-denying mysticism nor irrationalism, but perfectly rational. Such a reading is arguably controversial, but in itself cogent and interesting.

Garfield’s rational reconstructions are conducted with care. The way he is employing and bringing together the prejudices of the Tibetan commentarial tradition and of contemporary Western philosophy is truly cross-cultural. His reading is also holistic. Therefore it could perhaps be described as a synthesis of the incentives of the two previous eras or paradigms (*à la* Tuck) of Nāgārjuna scholarship: it adopts the sympathetic, holistic approach of Stcherbatsky and Murti as well as the rigorously analytical method of Russell, Jones etc.

The transition from the interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s system to creation of cross-cultural perspectives is smooth: Garfield is approaching Nāgārjuna as a cross-cultural philosopher and

Nāgārjuna's reconstructed insights are continuous with Garfield's own critique of essentialism. What Garfield has succeeded in showing is that cross-cultural philosophy can do more than simply celebrate diversity or produce futile comparisons. It may act as a catalyst for better self-understanding and offer clarification to contemporary problems. Garfield, with his analytic precision and thoroughness on one hand and his "postanalytic" willingness to discuss ethics, metaphysics, and other grand topics on the other, creates philosophy that is self-conscious, daring, interesting, and up-to-date. He carries this out rather relentlessly, in the spirit of Nāgārjuna

7.3 WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Cross-cultural philosophy still has no clear identity. What is needed is more discussion, more deconstructions of earlier comparative and cross-cultural endeavors and clear program declarations such as that of Garfield's. I believe this is an important step before cross-cultural philosophy can seriously demand respect and recognition.

Today non-Western philosophies have not yet fully entered mainstream philosophical discourses in the West. Asian philosophy is still largely marginalized and the names of Nāgārjuna, Sankara, rJe Tsong khapa and Dogen remain unknown to most. The prevalent ethnocentricity appears to be often based on blind prejudice instead of active research. There is nothing reflective, systematic, or critical about this. Even if there were some fundamental differences between our respective philosophical traditions, to claim so should be a conclusion of serious investigation and not a presupposition.

If we are to believe Garfield, the inclusion of culturally distant philosophies might not only bring forth better understanding of those philosophies, but of our own as well. By considering what our Asian colleagues have said - and are saying - we are forced to consider how this relates to our own tradition. Garfield's work has shown how cross-cultural perspectives can challenge Western philosophical understanding. This is not a minor advantage –such projects should be welcomed and encouraged.

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