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# The Madhyamaka Speaks to the West

*A philosophical analysis of śūnyatā as a universal truth*

by Robert McGuire

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of a Doctor of  
Philosophy in Theology and Religious Studies

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## Gratitude...

to Gen Kelsang Tharchin. for the dharma.

to Paul, Dave and all my sangha friends. for the debates and discussions.

to that unforgettable group of people in Ayrshire. for listening patiently and loving  
unconditionally.

to my parents and my brothers. for the support and the laughter.

to my friends. for the escapism.

to Lucy. for the kindness and the stoicism.

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I have been taught, and I have come to understand, that through the increase of wisdom  
and compassion in this world, all living beings may eventually become free from suffering  
and find lasting happiness and inner peace.

Whatever merit this work may have is dedicated to that end.

## Abstract

Through a philosophical analysis of realist interpretations of Madhyamaka Buddhism, I will argue that the Madhyamaka is not well represented when it is represented as nihilism, absolutism or as some non-metaphysical alternative. Indeed, I will argue that the Madhyamaka is misrepresented when it is represented *as* anything; its radical context-sensitivity entails that it cannot be autonomously volunteered. The Madhyamaka analysis disrupts the ontic and epistemic presuppositions that consider inherent existence and absolute truth to be possible and necessary, and so the ultimate truth, śūnyatā, is not an absolute truth or ultimate reality. However, I will argue that śūnyatā does qualify as a *universal* truth and should be understood as a context-insensitive, non-propositional truth in a non-dual dependent-relationship with the multitudinous context-sensitive, propositional truths. This analysis will prove helpful in an investigation of those tensions, discernible within Buddhist modernism and the discourse of scientific Buddhism, that arise when Buddhist apologists claim a timeless modernity and a non-hostility with respect to contemporary worldviews. I will argue that apologists can resolve these tensions and satisfy their intuitions of timelessness, but only if they are willing to foreground the crucial distinction between their Buddhist worldview (their context-sensitive propositional truths) and their Madhyamaka attitude *towards* that worldview (the context-insensitive truth of śūnyatā). I will go on to generalise this result, showing that this Madhyamaka analysis opens up the possibility for frictionless co-operation between any and all worldviews, and that we therefore have a philosophical basis for a workable and sensitive theory of worldview pluralism. I will find it necessary to defend this position by demonstrating that, despite its context-insensitivity, the ultimate truth's non-dual relationship with conventional truth mitigates against moral and epistemic relativism. I will further substantiate my claim as to the universal truth of śūnyatā by showing that, in Karan Barad's 'agential realism', we find a revealing example of śūnyatā being articulated from within a non-Buddhist context. Thus, I hope to demonstrate some of the good effects of the Madhyamaka message, and show that this message can only be communicated clearly when it is distinguished from the discourses of Buddhism. In this manner, not by giving it a voice but through finding its voiceless authority, I hope to enable the Madhyamaka speak to the West.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

In this thesis I will be attempting to help the Madhyamaka speak to the West. From this, two things are clear: firstly, that I think the Madhyamaka has something important to communicate; secondly, that I believe the Madhyamaka is not yet speaking clearly in this contemporary context.<sup>1</sup>

The Madhyamaka has a deeply important message regarding the ultimate nature of reality; the ultimate truth of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). It will be part of my project to argue for and defend the universal truth of *śūnyatā* and to motivate this realisation through indicating the personal and interpersonal benefits of such a realisation. From the point of view of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the realisation of *śūnyatā* is typically understood as constitutive of enlightenment, and thus is the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. With due caution as to the possibility of devotional hyperbole, I wish to agree with this sentiment while making sense of these claims within a more contemporary, secular, axiology.<sup>2</sup> In presenting the importance of *śūnyatā* I will principally be talking in terms of the elimination of existential suffering through the resolution of tension and conflict in personal, interpersonal and social spheres. Furthermore, I hope to emphasise that the recharacterisation of ontic and epistemic concerns that are enacted through a realisation of *śūnyatā* provide new opportunities to resolve entrenched oppositions and conflicts in Anglo-American philosophical discourses.

I feel that, where the Madhyamaka is given a contemporary voice, the message is typically not spoken clearly. The tendency towards miscommunication is discernible both in hermeneutical attempts to locate and represent the historical Madhyamaka as well as in modernising attempts to engage Madhyamaka Buddhism with dominant contemporary worldviews. It will be part of my project to argue that, given the typical means of presentation of the Madhyamaka, *śūnyatā* is being subtly but systematically misrepresented.

Briefly stated, the miscommunication arises when Nāgārjuna (the putative historical founder of the Madhyamaka) is characterised, either implicitly or explicitly, as autonomously volunteering

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Madhyamaka' usually refers to a particular philosophical position or analytical approach found in some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Thus the Madhyamaka is typically associated with *Madhyamaka Buddhism*. I will use the term in this traditional way, but I also hope to emphasise a sharper use of the term where 'the Madhyamaka' refers to the attitude or stance with respect to reality that is encouraged in Madhyamaka Buddhism. This distinction will prove important as it will be a substantive aim of this thesis to argue that the Madhyamaka attitude can and should be enacted independently of Madhyamaka Buddhism. 'The West' here refers colloquially to the sphere of modern, Anglo-American, philosophical discourse and the ways of living and being in the world that are informed by the standards of rationality and objectivity that dominate those modes of discourse.

<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to suggest that contemporary secular axiologies are superior to the ancient 'spiritual' axiologies more readily associated with Buddhist thought. I seek to articulate the importance of *śūnyatā* in these terms because they are assumed to be the dominant axiological forms of the intended audience of this thesis.

some truth or truths. As will become clear, the purely critical and dialectical method of the Madhyamaka and the context-insensitive nature of śūnyatā ensures that the meaning and importance of śūnyatā cannot be autonomously volunteered. The Madhyamaka is not a self-supporting structure, but rather is an analysis *of* structure; it is not a worldview but an attitude *towards* worldviews. As śūnyatā is constituted by the absence of *svabhāva* (inherent existence), the transformative meaning and soteriological function of śūnyatā is only felt in its deconstructive influence upon a svabhāvic worldview. Thus the Madhyamaka cannot be volunteered in a vacuum. It cannot be independently constructed or defined. As both the Madhyamaka method and śūnyatā are self-consciously empty of inherent existence, there is an immediate incoherence when either is presented as inherently existing, autonomously meaningful or independently self-supporting.

We can say, perhaps, that the Madhyamaka is necessarily *mis*represented when it is represented at all. The Mādhyamika fails to speak clearly immediately upon being given something to say. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Mādhyamika does have something important to share, to demonstrate, to communicate. I hope to make it clear, however, that this Madhyamaka message must be shared without the Madhyamaka being considered as an autonomous structure or śūnyatā being considered as an absolute truth. Śūnyatā must itself be understood as empty.

This crucial point regarding the emptiness of emptiness is widely acknowledged by Nāgārjunian scholars, and the claim that the Mādhyamika present no positive thesis is also well known. Yet, as I intend to demonstrate throughout this thesis, despite these acknowledgements the deep and profound implications of the emptiness of emptiness are often misunderstood and the demands of positionlessness are typically underestimated. It will be part of my method to illuminate patterns of affirmation in the presentation of the Madhyamaka that allow that presentation to retain the form of a dogmatic worldview and that so-called śūnyatā to retain traces of svabhāva.

It will be a central aspect of this thesis to demonstrate how it is that the Madhyamaka can communicate this transformative understanding of śūnyatā without falling into this pattern of affirmation and absolutisation. This will only become possible if we resist the temptation to positivity formulate a Madhyamaka position. The Mādhyamika does not need to be given a ‘voice’, but allowed to stand in dialectic reflection, and so to ‘speak’ of śūnyatā with a voiceless authority.

## Methodology

In describing my intended approach there is a risk of circularity. Understanding śūnyatā entails a radical recharacterisation of familiar ontic and epistemic frameworks and my method operates within these recharacterised frameworks. The circularity then is that to make full sense of my methods I must fully explain my understanding of śūnyatā, the very thing which demands a prior explanation of my methods. I cannot hope to fully defend my methods here without replicating the major points which I require them to address. I can only announce my methods here with brief gestures towards their justification. The justification for the methods will only become fully apparent in their operation. Indeed, there is no meaning to justification independent of their effectiveness; their effectiveness constitutes their truth.<sup>3</sup>

I should emphasise at the outset that my project here is not a hermeneutical one. I am not arguing that mine is the ‘correct’ interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness. I am not investigating Nāgārjuna, but rather joining Nāgārjuna in his investigations. I am thinking *with* Nāgārjuna and not *about* Nāgārjuna. For me, the Madhyamaka is understood well when it is understood as an activity one should engage *in* rather than a structure one should engage *with*. I am not studying the Madhyamaka, but rather attempting to enact the Madhyamaka. I hope to demonstrate how the Madhyamaka analysis offers an opportunity to understand and realise the ultimate nature of reality: śūnyatā.

I do not know what Nāgārjuna (if he existed) actually meant when he wrote his texts. I do not believe it is possible to gain this knowledge, and I do not feel this as a loss.<sup>4</sup> Even if it were

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<sup>3</sup> At any point of tension or paradox, we could linger and pick at its knots until we found the truth of śūnyatā. Śūnyatā can be revealed at any moment, resolving the apparent paradoxes, impasses and aporia (Nāgārjuna and I would agree with Derrida that a structure always contains the seeds of its own deconstruction). I will resist this temptation, instead allowing the tensions to gradually erode the svabhāvic presuppositions which are the conditions of possibility for that very tension. This is a strategy, and not a necessity. We do not need to follow the gradual reduction and marginalisation of svabhāva, but rather can witness its immediate disappearance. To illustrate this point we can consider the traditional Buddhist pedagogic device of the chariot. The emptiness of the chariot is demonstrated through showing how it is nought but a collection of non-chariots (wheels, chassis, carriage etc). From the Madhyamaka point of view this moment of tension and paradox is all that is required to realise the emptiness of all things. We need not follow the traditional movement which then goes on to realise the emptiness of the parts. The dialectical movement of the Madhyamaka is not from wholes to parts then to parts-of-parts; it is not a perpetual reductionism. The dialectical motion of the Madhyamaka is a single step in a hitherto overlooked direction; unorthodox and unorthogonal. An instant motion (paradox intended) from inherently existing chariots to conventionally existing chariots. In other words, if we understand the Madhyamaka analysis as *displacing* svabhāva rather than *negating* svabhāva, then we fail to understand the Madhyamaka.

<sup>4</sup> My point here is not just that to uncontroversially locate Nāgārjuna’s actual intention is so difficult as to be impossible. My point is that, under the Madhyamaka epistemology there is no meaning to ‘actual intention’. The crucial operator here is ‘actual’ which functions in this context as ‘objective’ or ‘inherent’. The epistemic weight that is supposedly carried by these terms is lifted by the Madhyamaka analysis. The ontic quest for firm foundations in our empirical and hermeneutic endeavours is discontinued under the Madhyamaka.

somehow locatable, it would not particularly matter to me what Nāgārjuna ‘actually’ meant.<sup>5</sup> The authority and importance that I grant the Madhyamaka comes from my own intellectual and practical engagement with it, and not from its putative historical source. What matters to me is the experience and understanding of śūnyatā that becomes available through contemplating and applying the Madhyamaka method. What I take to be of central importance is the Madhyamaka *effect* and not the particular propositional content designed to provoke that effect.

For me, the Madhyamaka goal is enlightenment; an epistemologically, ontologically and soteriologically transformational insight into the ultimate nature of reality. Speaking loosely we can say that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, enlightenment is not the removal of *wrong* views in order to hold *right* views, but rather the removal of the *wrongness* of views in order that views can be held *rightly*. In other words, enlightenment is not achieved through adopting a particular, uniquely true, set of propositions. Rather, it is an attitude towards conventionally true propositions such that they are understood as non-dual with the ultimate, non-propositional, truth.<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind it makes little sense to equate either śūnyatā or the Madhyamaka with any particular set of propositions or worldview. Thus, it might be said that, while hermeneutics is an interesting and important discipline that can help illuminate the historical Madhyamaka tradition, it has little to do with the Madhyamaka soteriological project. Part of my intention in this thesis is to make it clear that to equate śūnyatā and the Madhyamaka analysis with the culturally located literary output of the historical figure of Nāgārjuna is necessarily to misrepresent or misunderstand śūnyatā and the Madhyamaka analysis. The distinction being drawn here between Madhyamaka Buddhism and the Madhyamaka method will perform a central role in this thesis. It is my hope that through foregrounding this distinction much of the philosophical confusion and ambiguity around śūnyatā can be dispelled.

All this being said, I will nevertheless elect to talk in terms of ‘Nāgārjuna’s intention’ and the ‘Madhyamaka point of view’. Such phraseology may seem to implicate me in a hermeneutical project, and it may appear that I claim to speak for the historical Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition. It is my intention, however, that no such hermeneutical commitment follows from this vocabulary. To be clear, I will use ‘the Madhyamaka’ to mean ‘the Madhyamaka as I

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps I should say instead that it would not matter to my argument, or to my thesis. It may be disingenuous to suggest that it would not matter to me *personally*. I am not so unattached as to have no trace of personal investment. This, however, should have no effect on whatever strength or robustness my argument may have. It is my hope that my thesis is free from the effects of nostalgic attachment, even if I personally am not.

<sup>6</sup> I will expand upon and justify this notion of a non-propositional truth in more detail below. I acknowledge that within dominant epistemic structures a ‘non-propositional truth’ would likely be considered a category error.

understand it'. I will allow the qualifier to drop out in the interests of parsimony, and to make an indirect point regarding the impossibility of locating an objective or absolute truth.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, when I talk about 'Nāgārjuna' or 'what Nāgārjuna tells us', I am using this proper name as a place-holder for 'the archetypical Mādhyamika'. I would suggest that I am not alone in this method of communication, but it is perhaps less usual to acknowledge and emphasise it. It follows that, even if there were some way to locate and represent uncontroversially the actual intent of the putative author 'Nāgārjuna' and the actual meaning of śūnyatā as he understood it, and that this turned out to be different from my understanding of śūnyatā, then this would have no great effect on my project. All it would do would be to problematise my stylistic decision to use 'Nāgārjuna' and 'the Madhyamaka' as representations of the means of realisation of śūnyatā which I wish to promote.

If all this is true, then why make this particular stylistic choice? I think that, despite the apparent hubris, there may be an impulse of humility. I was prompted and encouraged to my understanding of śūnyatā through texts attributed to Nāgārjuna (and the Mādhyamika thinkers that followed him), and through the effort of my teachers who self-identified as Madhyamaka Buddhists.<sup>8</sup> It would seem disingenuous to distance myself from that heritage, despite my wish to distance śūnyatā from any historicity or particular context. Furthermore, I do not need to reinvent the wheel. The Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition offers intellectual infrastructures that are useful to think with and which support the realisation of śūnyatā. Again, this does not require that I locate and transport the 'actual' Madhyamaka Buddhism into a contemporary context. It is enough that there are culturally located and context-sensitive resources out of which a necessarily new context-sensitive heuristic framework can be constructed.

None of this suggests, however, that the content of my thesis is unfalsifiable or invulnerable to criticism. However, as I do not make any hermeneutical claims, my position *is* invulnerable to hermeneutical criticism. What follows could well be confused and mistaken, but any mistakenness must be in terms of whether it makes sense on its *own* terms, and not whether it makes sense as an interpretation of the historical Nāgārjuna.

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<sup>7</sup> It is precisely the aim of the Madhyamaka to critique the possibility of such absolute truth claims. It will turn out that all propositional truths are context-sensitive and are attended by a retinue of unspoken qualifiers detailing the specificities of that context.

<sup>8</sup> Again, to locate myself and to acknowledge the structure of any unconscious conditioning I may have, my introduction to Madhyamaka Buddhism has principally been through the teachings and writings of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso and his students, who self-identify with the Gelugpa Buddhism of Je Tsongkhapa.

## Saying the unsayable: the Madhyamaka method

The Madhyamaka cannot be volunteered in a vacuum, but needs to be presented with respect to some svabhāvic worldview. There is no meaning to communicating the Madhyamaka beyond demonstrating its effect. Therefore, my method of communicating the Madhyamaka message will be to demonstrate the Madhyamaka effect with respect to contemporary svabhāvic worldviews. This method can be demonstrated with respect to any svabhāvic worldview, but in this context there is an added utility in demonstrating it with respect to alternative interpretations of the Madhyamaka.

Briefly stated, the Madhyamaka method is to dialectically critique conceptual binaries in such a way that the tense and polarised opposition between them is resolved. This is achieved through showing that each element in the binary is dependent upon the other and thus lacks the independent existence that is required to ground such polarised opposition. The philosophical and soteriological purpose of this critique is to refute this notion of independent, or *inherent*, existence (*svabhāva*). From the Madhyamaka point of view the principle obstacle to enlightenment is the mistaken view that existing things exist by way of svabhāva. This mistaken view, this *svabhāvic assumption*, is an impulsive and precognitive habituation present in all unenlightened beings.<sup>9</sup> Due to the tenacious and unconscious operation of the svabhāvic assumption, it is regrettably possible to grasp Nāgārjuna's dialectical method without grasping the deep ontic and epistemic repercussions of enacting that method. In such cases the svabhāvic assumption survives the Madhyamaka critique, and the result is typically an interpretation of the Madhyamaka as either nihilist or absolutist. These alternatives are sometimes called the 'two extremes'.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, to demonstrate the Madhyamaka effect, I will enact a Madhyamaka analysis of one nihilistic and one absolutist interpretation of the Madhyamaka. On one level this will straightforwardly show the flaws in nihilistic and absolutist interpretations of the Madhyamaka. However, my hope is also that through treating each analysis as a case study they will together serve as a general examination of the svabhāvic impulse and its tendency to pull philosophical inquiry into either of the two extremes. Thus I hope that my analysis of the two extremes will

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<sup>9</sup> This statement is not dogmatically true but tautologically true. I use 'enlightened beings' to describe those beings that have brought about a complete cessation of the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.

<sup>10</sup> They have this name as they are extreme articulations of the basic existential polarity established through the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. This is to say that, under the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, 'existence' means 'inherent existence' and things are either absolutely existent (leading to some form of absolutism) or they are absolutely non-existent (leading to some form of nihilism). Thus nihilist and absolutist worldviews are macroscopic articulations of the microscopic and momentary bivalent gesture of the svabhāvic operation; the impulsive categorisations of things into the rigid binary framework of inherently *is*, or inherently *is not*.

simultaneously serve as critique of all svabhāvic worldviews. This will include the more recent and more sophisticated interpretations of the Madhyamaka that would distance themselves from either of the two extremes yet still, in my opinion, retain subtle forms of the svabhāvic gestures that generated the more extreme nihilist and absolutist readings. In examining how traces of the svabhāvic assumption can survive an intelligent application of Nāgārjuna's arguments, I hope to demonstrate the operation of the svabhāvic assumption in its most subtle forms. This is particularly useful as clarifying the operation of the svabhāvic assumption is the means whereby we clarify the meaning of emptiness.

The Madhyamaka method is to demonstrate that a view is inconsistent, incoherent and unstable *on its own terms*. In particular, the Madhyamaka method is to identify instability in philosophical views and trace that instability to the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, in order to bring about a cessation of that assumption. Therefore, a central aspect of my method will be to draw attention to instances where the svabhāvic assumption is unconsciously operating in the structure of a worldview. Indeed, from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, any trace of the svabhāvic assumption constitutes a crucial flaw in a worldview, and on those grounds alone we should abandon such views. This may seem to be a triumphalist pseudo-argument, akin to a rigid monotheist arguing that any view which denies the existence of God is necessarily wrong. There is, however, much more to the Madhyamaka rejection of svabhāva than such a comparison allows. The Madhyamaka is not a worldview which just *happens* to dogmatically reject svabhāva. The Madhyamaka is not a worldview at all, but rather is an attitude towards worldviews. In particular, the Madhyamaka is the attitude that realises that svabhāva is an unworkable and unnecessary notion. Svabhāva is unworkable in that an inherently existing thing cannot be in any form of relationship, and so cannot perform whatever function it was hypothesised in order to perform. Svabhāva is unnecessary in that the intuitive appeal of inherently existing things can be satisfied by dependently originated (non-inherently existing) things. The realisation of śūnyatā is constituted in the realisation that svabhāva is impossible and unnecessary. This explains the Mādhyamika's vilification of svabhāva and their attitude with respect to svabhāvic worldviews. Furthermore, the Madhyamaka analysis gives good reasons for accepting svabhāva as a site of instability in whatever structure it is included. These considerations provide a philosophical credibility to the Madhyamaka strategy of considering the unconscious operation of the svabhāvic assumption to be a fatal flaw in any system.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the course of this thesis, I hope to make

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the uncritical or unconscious operation of *any* underlying assumption is a site of vulnerability in a philosophical position. One must announce and defend any underlying assumptions that inform a worldview, or face justified criticism for failing to do so. It is, however, precisely the Mādhyamika's point that the svabhāvic assumption *cannot* be defended. Thus we see how the Madhyamaka method can be purely dialectical and negative; their only agenda is to bring their interlocutor to the realisation of the

it clear that endorsing the svabhāvic assumption is not merely mistaken from some particular point of view, but is *universally* mistaken. As svabhāva is supposed to be necessary and possible, when in fact it is *unnecessary* and *impossible*, svabhāva is mistaken with respect to *itself*. Thus wherever it is posited, it is always mistaken, and so it is universally mistaken.

## Structure of the thesis

In Chapters 2-4 I will, as I have indicated, locate myself in the landscape of contemporary expositions of the Madhyamaka through a critical appraisal of what I take to be extreme interpretations of the Madhyamaka. I will begin to draw out and defend the conclusion that, if the Madhyamaka is not a worldview but an attitude towards worldviews, then the Madhyamaka method must be distinguished from Madhyamaka Buddhism. I will note the tension this creates for apologists wishing to give the Madhyamaka a voice in contemporary western discourse.

In Chapters 5-6, I will go on to investigate ways in which the Madhyamaka is currently being presented with respect to dominant western ways of thinking and being. Given that the Madhyamaka is typically presented in association with Madhyamaka Buddhism, I will focus my attention on the persisting narrative of Buddhism's compatibility with science. I will join Donald S. Lopez in his criticism of this narrative, agreeing that Buddhism is not naturally compatible with science, but rather any compatibility is achieved through a process of propositional compromise that sacrifices much of Buddhism's distinctive content, and consequently weakens its ability to challenge contemporary ways of thinking and being. This conclusion puts pressure on the project within Buddhist modernism to formulate a Buddhism that functions within or alongside modern scientific paradigms. I will note in particular the tension that apologists enter into when they argue simultaneously for the timeless truth of Buddhism as well as its adaptability to contemporary contexts. In doing so, however, I will draw attention to the way in which these encounters, and Lopez's response to them, implicitly endorse a particular epistemological framework in which true propositions are considered 'abrasive'. It will turn out that abrasive propositions are predicated upon the svabhāvic assumption, and so I will draw a general conclusion that, given the way such encounters are typically enacted, the middle way is not being spoken for. On this basis I will go on to advance an alternative mode of encounter that is informed by śūnyatā rather than by svabhāva.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are not *abrasive*, but *frictionless*. I will suggest, therefore, that Buddhism and science (indeed *any* group of conventionally true

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indefensible presuppositions that underlie their own worldview. The Mādhyamika does not *need* to offer any positive thesis.

worldviews) can frictionlessly co-operate without the need to enter into propositional conflict or compromise. Thus, I hope to offer a resolution for the identified tension in Buddhist modernism through reframing the distinction between timeless truth and contemporary adaptability in such a way so that they are no longer mutually incompatible. In doing so, I will trade upon and further delineate the crucial distinction between Madhyamaka Buddhism and the Madhyamaka analysis. The timeless truth is the context-insensitive ultimate truth of śūnyatā which the Madhyamaka analysis reveals. This timeless truth operates in non-dual relationship with the context-sensitive conventional truths that constitute the impermanent and adaptable form of the Madhyamaka tradition.

I will also begin to show how the Madhyamaka metaphysics<sup>12</sup> provides a basis for a radical yet workable worldview pluralism. As conventional truths are frictionless there is no ground for conflict between empty worldviews. Given that all worldviews are empty and can be realised as such, then, if the Madhyamaka analysis is universally applied, there will be no grounds whatsoever for conflict between worldviews. By this I hope to convey, not just a lack of philosophical conflict, but a lack of ideological conflict amongst the individuals and communities who subscribe to those worldviews. In doing so it is my hope to at least begin a philosophical demonstration and defence of the Madhyamaka claim that a profound inner and outer peace follows naturally from the realisation of śūnyatā. In other words, I wish to articulate the soteriological claims of Madhyamaka Buddhists in terms of the frictionless ontic and epistemic frameworks enabled by the Madhyamaka analysis.

In Chapter 7 I will find it profitable to distinguish my position from that attributed to D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki's position resembles my own in that he argues that the central soteriological work of Buddhism is done by a realisation of the universal reality that is necessarily not a product of any one tradition and is achievable from within any tradition or worldview. The risk with such a strategy is that it seems to imply that enlightenment is entirely unrelated to the moral structures typically inculcated by religious or spiritual traditions. Furthermore, it seems odd that the complex and demanding spiritual practices advised by religious traditions should have nothing whatsoever to do with enlightenment. In short, it would seem to follow that enlightenment makes no moral demands. Suzuki's Zen is often characterised in this way by his critics, and so, given its resemblance to my position, I will spend some time explaining how it is that my position avoids such criticisms. The difficulty here will be to show how it is that śūnyatā avoids relativism through constraining conventional truths, while simultaneously avoids dogmatism through denying the

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<sup>12</sup> I use this term with some caution, as it is a point of some contention as to whether the Mādhyamika are doing metaphysics or not. I will explain and defend my view that the Mādhyamika must be considered as deconstructively addressing the metaphysical structures that are informed by svabhāva, and so are best understood as doing metaphysics through *undoing* metaphysics.

possibility of ultimately true propositions. I will achieve this through drawing an important distinction between context-*independence* and context-*insensitivity*. Moral relativism and an amoral enlightenment only follow if śūnyatā is misunderstood as context-independent; as having nothing whatsoever to do with the conventional world. I will argue that although śūnyatā must be understood as independent of any *particular* context, it cannot be independent of *all* contexts; śūnyatā is context-*dependent* while being context-*insensitive*. Given this important distinction we can allow a non-dual relationship between the universal ultimate truth and the various conventional truths. This non-dual relationship will be used to explain the importance and utility of spiritual practice as well as the soteriological advantage of morally praiseworthy attitudes and values.

In Chapter 8, I will marshal supportive evidence for my claim that śūnyatā is not a Buddhist construct, but is a universal truth accessible from within alternative worldviews. I will do so through an analysis of Karan Barad's 'agential realism'. Barad's position is formulated with respect to contemporary theoretical physics and is an attempt to tease out the overlooked, yet profound, implications of the results of quantum experiments. I will argue that agential realism is functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka and reaches the same radical conclusion regarding the impossibility of inherent existence. What is particularly interesting and useful here is that Barad explicitly distances herself from the extant narrative that quantum theory somehow corroborates the introspective claims of eastern 'mystical' traditions. Given this lack of sympathy, we can be reassured that Barad's analysis is prompted entirely by western secular-scientific axiological concerns, and is grounded in standards of objectivity and rationality that are acceptable to the contemporary West. The fact that Barad's analysis reveals the ultimate truth of śūnyatā and an ontic and epistemic framework functionally equivalent to that of the Madhyamaka, will be a great support to my thesis.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, will serve as a summary of my conclusions as well as an opportunity to discuss areas of potential interest opened up by those conclusions. Having found its voiceless authority, the Madhyamaka will be able to speak to the West. It is my hope that, given the opportunity, the Madhyamaka will have much to offer contemporary discourses and will take the conversation in new and interesting directions.

## Chapter 2 - Nāgārjuna as a Nihilist

From the Madhyamaka point of view, the two extreme interpretations of the Madhyamaka, nihilism and absolutism, are products of the svabhāvic assumption. Before beginning my analysis I will unpack this just a little more in order to introduce two useful concepts I will employ in this analysis.

The operation of the svabhāvic assumption forces questions of existence to be addressed in a binary and bivalent fashion: to exist is to inherently exist, everything else is inherently non-existent. There is nothing vague or grey or flexible about this polarity, the binary opposition produced is rigid, exhaustive and exclusive (Garfield, 1995, p. 313). As will become clear, any rigid binary opposition is critiqued and disrupted by the Madhyamaka analysis, but this particular polarity is the principle target. This *existential polarity* between inherent existence and inherent non-existence is the fundamental symptom of the svabhāvic assumption and uncritically endorsing this polarity is a clear indication that the middle way has been overlooked. As we shall see, approaching Nāgārjuna with the existential polarity in mind forces either a nihilist or absolutist interpretation. We can note that, despite the apparent diametric opposition between these two extreme views they both share a common, and unexamined, commitment to inherent existence and the existential polarity.

The second useful notion is that of the *ontological project*. Following Mackenzie (2008), who himself follows Putman (2005), the ‘project of Ontology’ is that philosophical endeavour which seeks to generate an accurate taxonomy of what ultimately exists together with an account of how it is that this ultimate reality is represented (and misrepresented) in our everyday experience (MacKenzie, 2008, p. 197). The ontological project is:

characterised 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, 2002, p. 12)

We can note that pursuing the ontological project entails a prior commitment to the existential polarity. To pursue this project, one has already decided what existence *is*, and on that basis seeks to identify those things that do exist as opposed to those that do not. I will agree with MacKenzie that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, the ontological project suffers from “massive presupposition failure” in that it is based on the assumption that “the conventional world and our ordinary assertions about it *need* an ultimate foundation” (2008, p. 203). For the Mādhyamika, “explanation does not require such an occult metaphysics” (Garfield, 2002, p. 14), and their project is to show the incoherencies that arise from the svabhāvic assumption and to offer a

satisfying account of a conventional reality that is empty of inherent existence. The Mādhyamika “reject and avoid” (MacKenzie, 2008, p. 198) the ontological project; they do not provide an alternative ontology, but an alternative attitude *towards* ontology. It can be understood as a “meta-ontological” (*ibid*) position that eschews the svabhāvically loaded question ‘what is real?’ in favour of the importantly prior ‘what is reality?’ Thus the uncritical pursuit of the ontological project is an indicator of the svabhāvic assumption and evidence that the middle way has been missed.

With the existential polarity and the ontological project firmly in mind, the form of Nāgārjuna’s arguments encourage a nihilistic or absolutist reading. Nāgārjuna’s arguments show that, under the terms of the existential polarity, *nothing* qualifies for existence. Thus, the only coherent result of the ontological project is an ultimate reality void of content. Crucially, the intended *effect* of these arguments is to disrupt the existential polarity and to bankrupt the ontological project. Yet, if this effect is missed, and the existential polarity and ontological project are uncritically maintained, then Nāgārjuna’s provocative arguments are easily misunderstood. Either Nāgārjuna is heard to say ‘*nothing* exists’ (nihilism) or ‘no *thing* exists: that which exists is not a *thing*’ (transcendental absolutism). I will discuss the absolutist form of this misunderstanding in Chapter 3, here I will focus on nihilistic form.<sup>13</sup>

The nihilistic interpretation has been, and is, a popular one:

[The Mādhyamika doctrine of emptiness] is often misinterpreted as a thoroughgoing nihilism about phenomena. This is so not only among classical Indian critics of Mādhyamika, in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical schools, but also among Western critics, who have sometimes regarded it as completely negative. (Garfield, 1995, p. 300)

Nāgārjuna’s contemporaries “with hardly a single exception” (Wood, 1994, p. 236) regarded the Mādhyamika as promoting a nihilistic view,<sup>14</sup> and the majority of the initial wave of western interpretation agreed with that conclusion (*ibid*, p.1). It is not difficult to appreciate how Nāgārjuna can be interpreted in this way. His argument can be seen as a reaction to the reification

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<sup>13</sup> I hope it will become clear, however, that despite their apparent diametric opposition the nihilistic and absolutist presentations of the Madhyamaka are very much alike. Both arise from the same fundamental oversight (that the existential polarity survives the absence of inherently existing things) and the same fundamental misunderstanding (that Nāgārjuna is pursuing the ontological project rather than refuting the ontological project).

<sup>14</sup> Wood’s assumption that these earlier charges of nihilism are of the same kind as his own present nihilistic interpretation may be unwarranted, for as Nagao points out: “Nihilism in the Indian context, however, referred to the negation of a future life as the fruition of ethical and religious good acts. Its counter position was the so-called realist position that affirmed a future life. Both are ethical oriented and have little ontological significance” (1991, p. 173).

of the Abhidharmists,<sup>15</sup> who present Buddha's argument for anātman as refuting the independent existence of the self and other constructed entities, while establishing a more fundamental reality constituted by truly existing *dharma*s. For the Abhidharmists a dharma "keeps hold of its own essential qualities" (Nagao, 1991, p. 164). They are the fundamental constituents of reality and ground our everyday experience. "Each and every dharma is seen as real, substantive, and existent" (*ibid*, p.165), whereas the self is empty. Therefore Nāgārjuna's position that *sarva-dharma-sūnyatā* 'all *dharma*s are empty' would have been easy to understand as a deeply radical move and as an unabashed and thoroughgoing nihilism (Wood, 1994, p. 3). As Garfield says, "it seems nihilistic to say what is ultimately real is empty of reality" (2002, p. 38).

As Nāgārjuna's strategy is to show how any putative inherently existent entity cannot possibly be maintained under scrutiny, and that all things are *sūnyatā* (often, and arguably unhelpfully, translated as 'void'), the tendency to read him as a radical nihilist is understandable. Indeed Wood claims that the *prima facie* interpretation of Nāgārjuna position is obviously nihilism, "pure and simple" (1994, p. 1). This would indeed follow as, for those committed to the existential polarity, if there are no entities (ontologically present, inherently existing things) then there is *nothing*.

Taking Wood as an example, we can see in more detail how an allegiance to the ontological project and habitual polarised thinking can lead to a nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna, and how it is possible to build a credible, if mistaken, characterisation of Nāgārjuna as a nihilist. Through identifying the unconscious operation of the *svabhāvic* assumption and locating points of internal instability in Wood's position, I will attempt to show how it is that Wood's nihilistic Madhyamaka is mistaken, not just with respect to the Madhyamaka, but with respect to *itself*. In the process I will demonstrate the Madhyamaka effect and show how the middle way avoids the extreme view of nihilism.

## Nāgārjunian disputations

Thomas Wood's book *Nāgārjunian Disputations* (1994) is a sustained defence of a nihilistic interpretation of Nāgārjuna. Wood maintains that a nihilistic interpretation is the most obvious interpretation of Nāgārjuna, and the one that is most respectful to the textual evidence and to the Mādhyamika as intelligent philosophers. Wood accepts, however, that non-nihilist interpretations are "clearly" the "dominant force in Mādhyamika studies" (*ibid*, p.1). Wood argues that, rather than being driven by a sense of exegetical thoroughness, non-nihilist interpretations are motivated by a sense that "to impute nihilism to the Madhyamakas is to take them to have been fools" (*ibid*, p.8), because nihilism is "philosophically untenable and manifestly foolish or absurd"

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<sup>15</sup> See (Nagao, 1991, pp. 163-166), also (Streng, 1967, pp. 29-35).

(*ibid*, p.2). Wood takes the contrary view, insisting that in order to be respectful to the Mādhyamika as credible and intelligent philosophers we need to take their nihilism seriously. Although Wood himself agrees that the nihilist conclusion seems “unacceptable” (*ibid*, p.13) and that consequently “there *must* be something wrong with the Mādhyamika dialectic” (*ibid*, p.12), he nevertheless holds the Mādhyamika in high regard as radical philosophers willing to stand firm in their own convictions and accept the ‘uncomfortable’ nihilistic conclusions of their philosophy. I hope to make it apparent just where Wood’s grasping at the existential polarity leads his interpretation astray. I should first of all make it clear that Wood is uncritically employing the existential polarity.

Wood characterises the Madhyamaka as “essentially a non-ontological or nihilistic idealism” (*ibid*, p.11), in which the dharmas “do not exist at all, either in reality or appearance” (*ibid*, p.2). In presenting the Madhyamaka in such a way Wood betrays his realist assumptions with respect to the ontological project. When Wood equates ‘non-ontological’ with ‘nihilism’ he tells us that, for him, to exist is to be ontologically present, and any position that denies ontological presence can only be nihilistic. Furthermore in presenting ‘reality and appearance’ as a self-evident and fundamental distinction, he discloses his natural sympathy with the ontological project. It is clear that Wood cannot countenance any sort of existence other than ontological presence. When he says “to exist is to exist *objectively*” (*ibid*, p.9) and “without duality, existence is a meaningless notion” (*ibid*, p.10), he means to say that unless we are employing an ontological subject-object distinction whereby what ‘really’ exists is the ontologically isolated object, then ‘existence’ has no meaning.<sup>16</sup> He also understands ‘exists’ to mean something like objective *findability*, strongly indicating his ontological realism:

Since appearances cannot be found by their very nature ... the nihilists hold that appearances are *unreal*, i.e. that they do not exist. (*ibid*, p.265)

He also takes it that to say that something is śūnya is to be a nihilist with respect to that something:

The Mahāyāna doctrine that all dharmas are empty is simply a generalisation of the Hīnayāna doctrine that the self is empty. Although both are in a sense nihilistic doctrines, there is an important difference between them, for the Hīnayāna is only a nihilistic doctrine with respect to the *self*. The Mahāyāna is more radical, because it denies the existence of both self and dharmas. (*ibid*, p.4)

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<sup>16</sup> Wood criticises idealist thinkers for trying to maintain some notion of existence after having denied the reality of the material world. Yet, later he allows that some kind of idealist epistemological theory could be generated to make sense of patterns in our experience, as long as it did not confer any kind of existence upon the ‘objects’ of this phantasmagorical reality (Wood, 1994, p. 208).

And later:

According to the [nihilistic interpretation] ... “śūnyatā” in the Madhyamaka simply means emptiness in the sense of non-existence. (*ibid*, p.170)

It is clear that, for Wood, when Nāgārjuna says that something is śūnya, he means to indicate that the thing in question does not exist in any way, and that he is a nihilist with respect to that object. Therefore, when Nāgārjuna argues for universal śūnyatā, Wood can do nothing but conclude that the Madhyamaka is a universally nihilistic position. We can see that his conviction in Nāgārjuna’s nihilism comes, not so much from his reading of Nāgārjuna’s arguments, but more from his predispositions regarding the meaning of ‘existence’, and the fundamental validity of the ontological project.

Further evidence for Wood’s polarised thinking can be found in his assumption that any non-nihilist interpretation must be some kind of absolutism. According to Wood, any non-nihilist interpretation is best understood as an epistemological theory arguing, not for the śūnyatā of *dharma*s, but for the śūnyatā of *theories* of *dharma*s (*ibid*, p.4). A non-nihilist interpretation insists that *dharma*s *do* exist but in some kind of logically indeterminate way. They say that there *is* some kind of ontologically present ultimately reality, but that our theories cannot “adequately express the way things are” (*ibid*). They argue that “reality (and therefore the *dharma*s) are beyond linguistic description and logically indeterminate” (*ibid*, p.159). The comparisons with Kantian metaphysics are clear here, and Wood later goes on to reject the non-nihilist interpretation on the grounds that:

If Nāgārjuna had only rejected all *conceptually imaginable* positions, his philosophy would be compatible with the Kantian doctrine of a Ding an sich! (*ibid*, p.149)

Thus he takes any non-nihilist interpretation to be positing some kind of Kantian ineffable absolute. Wood then argues that Nāgārjuna rejects ineffable *dharma*s as much as conceivable ones, and so would have no truck with Kant’s noumenal realm. Wood points out that “Nāgārjuna rejected the *dharma* theory because he thought that there *were* no *dharma*s, not because he thought that the *dharma*s were transcendental and ineffable” (*ibid*, p.149). He takes it that, as Nāgārjuna does not accept an ineffable noumenal realm, he *must* be a thoroughgoing nihilist. What is instructive to note here is that Wood sees these two alternatives as mutually exclusive and exhaustive. He makes his position plain when discussing what he takes to be the essential non-nihilist arguments for a logically indeterminate absolute:

If, in the final analysis, interpreting the Mādhyamikas comes down (as it surely does) to choosing between the fundamental laws of logic, on the one hand, and nihilism on the other, I would like to suggest that one gives the Mādhyamikas a good deal more credit by attributing the nihilist position to them... (*ibid*, p.251)

Wood understands that either Nāgārjuna is a nihilist or he is an absolutist; either he asserts an ineffable ontological *something* or he asserts that there is an ontological *nothing*. For Wood there is no third option, he never seems to consider that the underlying notion of a realist ontology is questionable. For Wood, 'to exist' can only mean 'to be ontologically present', and 'to not exist' means 'ontologically absent'. He understands *śūnyatā* to be ontological absence or void, and therefore concludes that Nāgārjuna is arguing for universal non-existence; a radical and unwavering nihilism.

## Wood's non-origination

Wood's main argument for the nihilistic interpretation falls out from his interpretation of Nāgārjuna as arguing for non-origination. Wood makes a clear case for reading Chapter 1 of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as a refutation of any kind of origination whatsoever. He quotes the first four verses (counting the two introductory verses) (*ibid*, p.48):

No cessation, no origination, no destruction, no permanence, no identity, no difference, no coming and no going:

I pay homage to the Fully Awakened One, the best of teachers, who has taught dependent co-origination, the quiescence of all phenomena, the auspicious.

Entities never originate, at any time or at any place, either from self, from others, from both, or from no cause.

There are only four causal conditions: the primary, the objective/supporting, the proximate and the superordinate. There is no fifth.

He then summarises his interpretation of these verses and chapter as a whole (*ibid*, p.49):

- 1- There are four and only four ways in which things might arise (MMK 1.4)
- 2- Things do not arise in any of these four ways (MMK 1.1a, 1.5-1.15).
- 3- Therefore, things do not arise at all (anutpādam).

Furthermore, he concludes:

If all the possible ways in which things *could* arise can be shown to be impossible (as MMK 1 asserts), then the obvious conclusion to draw (given the fundamental Buddhist principle that nothing exists that is unoriginated) is that nothing whatever exists. (*ibid*, p.63)

It is Wood's view that those who wish to interpret Nāgārjuna non-nihilistically must indulge in dubious logical and hermeneutical manoeuvres in order to represent this chapter as anything other than an "unmistakably nihilistic view" (*ibid*, p.49). Wood notes, with some degree of surprise, that the non-nihilist interpretations maintain that after even Nāgārjuna's *catuṣkoṭi* (four-way negation) of arising in the third verse, there still remains some kind of arising that is inexplicably immune (*ibid*, p.56). He also notes (*ibid*, p.57) that non-nihilist interpreters are quite insistent that Nāgārjuna needs to be using *prasajya-pratiṣedha* (which Wood translates as 'propositional negations') rather than *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha* (which Wood calls 'term-negations').<sup>17</sup> That is, in his negations Nāgārjuna is carefully not implying, or affirming, any other thing. Based on these two observations, Wood attributes to the non-nihilist interpreters the view that, precisely because *prasajya* negations exclude *any* kind of implication or affirmation, the four negations of the *catuṣkoṭi* together cannot imply that there is no arising whatsoever. According to Wood, the non-nihilist position on the *catuṣkoṭi* is that:

Nāgārjuna denied simpliciter (i.e. *prasajyavat*) that things arise from self (and similarly for the claim that things arise from others, from both, and from no cause), but did not assert simpliciter that things do not arise at all. (*ibid*, p.63)

Therefore Wood has the non-nihilists saying that there is an option for some *other*, mysteriously anonymous, kind of arising. Wood expresses confusion as to how the non-nihilists could attribute such a view to Nāgārjuna, when Nāgārjuna is clearly at pains to preclude any kind of arising other than the ones enumerated and refuted. Furthermore Wood is dumfounded as to the non-nihilists' insistence on Nāgārjuna using *prasajya-pratiṣedha*. For, in Wood's view, the only reason to insist on the use of *prasajya-pratiṣedha* is to ensure that there *is no* other way of arising possible.

## Defending a non-nihilist interpretation

It remains to be seen whether Wood's characterisation of the non-nihilist interpreters he refers to is a fair representation of their views, and it will not be my project here to defend their particular

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<sup>17</sup> These terms can also be found rendered as 'non-implicatory / implicatory negations' or 'non-affirming / affirming negation'. A non-affirming negation does not contain within it any implicit affirmation of any positive statement, whereas an affirming negative does. It is important to keep in mind that a term negation is "really an affirmation" (Galloway, 1989, p. 3).

positions. I will merely argue that Wood's reading of Nāgārjuna's verses, and his understanding of the non-nihilist's response to those verses, are not the only interpretations available. I will show that a non-nihilist interpretation exists which does not carry the faults that Wood assumes all non-nihilist interpretations must carry. What is particularly illuminating, I think, is how Wood's arguments here demonstrate his unexamined grasping at the existential polarity and the nihilistic repercussions this has on his interpretation of the Madhyamaka.

The point that really stumps Wood about non-nihilist interpretations is the suggestion that Nāgārjuna argued for anything other than the non-origination of things, especially when that position is so clear from the Nāgārjuna's opening chapter (*ibid*, p.63). Wood needs to hold this view of non-nihilist interpretations as, for him, the non-origination of things can be nothing other than nihilism, and the non-nihilists claim not to be nihilists. Therefore the non-nihilists must be accepting some kind of mysterious, unnamed arising that survives the refutations of the *catuskoṭi*. He characterises the non-nihilist interpreters as indulging in a logical fallacy that turns on a twisted interpretation of the meaning of *prasajya-pratiṣedha*.

Wood is driven to attribute such strange and confused views to his opponents because he cannot countenance the possibility that one could accept that Nāgārjuna is arguing for non-origination of things, but yet still not be a nihilist. The fact that, for Wood, either one must interpret Nāgārjuna's argument here as nihilistic (due to his arguments for non-origination), or one must assume some alternative form of arising *of the same ontological kind* as the other four just refuted, shows that Wood only has inherently existent arising in mind. For Wood, either things *inherently* arise (and become ontologically present and therefore existent), or they are simply non-existent. It is Wood's grasping at this existential polarity that forces him to adopt the *prima facie* nihilistic interpretation, and ascribe this mysterious and fallacious view to his opponents.

What Wood misses though, is the shift in meaning of 'existence' that occurs once the ontological project has been rejected. As long as the existential polarity is being grasped, then 'existing thing' can only have one meaning, it must mean 'ontological presence' and entail inherent existence. Yet if these realist assumptions are relaxed, then 'existing thing' need not mean that at all. To speak more precisely, we can say that Nāgārjuna is arguing for the non-origination of *svabhāvic* things as opposed to the non-origination of things *simpliciter*. In other words, Nāgārjuna rejects the inherent existence of things, but not their existence *simpliciter*. The Madhyamaka analysis allows us to be straightforwardly nihilistic with respect to inherently existing things, while offering an account of the (non-inherent) existence of existing things.<sup>18</sup> For Wood, of course, there can be no

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<sup>18</sup> In the above translation and commentary Wood has Nāgārjuna talking about 'entities' while he himself uses the term 'thing'. While these terms seem to be synonymous for Wood, I prefer to make a distinction between them. The word 'entity' is problematic in that it has (in my opinion) strong connotations of

distinction between ‘existing things’ and ‘inherently existing things’, as to exist can only be to exist by way of inherent existence. Yet this assumption is exactly what the Madhyamaka seeks to challenge, and it is only upon the relaxation of this assumption that the middle way becomes apparent. As Nagao says:

What is negated here, however, is not the fact of origination, but the fact that, so long as ‘origination’ is claimed as reality having its own ‘self-nature’, it cannot originate from itself or from something other. Instead, when it has ‘no self-nature’, that is, when the belief in a substantive ‘self’ is negated and all is empty – then every instance of origination is established just-as-it-is. (1991, p. 180)

Nāgārjuna will later reclaim a meaningful sense of non-inherent existence, and so a meaningful sense of ‘existing thing’ that is commensurate with the impossibility of inherent existence. It is this sense of ‘thing’ and ‘things arise’ that a non-nihilist interpretation (may) be trying to articulate.<sup>19</sup> In failing to spot the opportunities for a meaningful recharacterisation of ‘existence’ or ‘arising’ in the absence of inherent existence or inherently existing arising, Wood misses the crucial point of the Madhyamaka analysis and so misses the middle way.

### **Non-affirming of entities**

We can see another instance of Wood missing the point when we try to make sense of his interpretation of the non-nihilists’ stress upon *prasajya-pratiṣedha*. As we have seen, Wood understands the non-nihilists as latching on to this distinction in an attempt to rescue some form of origination from Nāgārjuna’s *catuṣkoṭi* through arguing that the non-affirming negations of the four kinds of origination do not together imply non-origination *simpliciter* (1994, p. 63). I agree with Wood that such an interpretation of the argument is incredible, and turns on a rather tenuous interpretation of *prasajya-pratiṣedha*. However, even if the thinkers to whom he directs this criticism actually hold this view (which is by no means clear), Wood is wrong to present this as the only non-nihilist interpretation of the argument.

Wood takes it that if ‘entities do not arise from self’ was an affirming negation, we would be left with a sense of ‘entities that arise *not from self*’. In other words, an affirmation of some other kind of arising, namely arising from other (*ibid*, p.62). Wood is mystified as to why non-nihilist interpreters would insist on such non-affirmation as such inferences are explicitly negated by the

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independence and inherent existence. Therefore I prefer to use the term ‘thing’ as a necessarily general indicative gesture to refer to, but not reify, existing things. When I use it, ‘entity’ is intended to be synonymous with ‘inherently existing thing’.

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned, at this point I am not attempting a defence of the particular position that Wood cites as representative of the non-nihilist interpretation. Suffice to say that this is a line that a non-nihilist interpretation could follow.

subsequent terms of the *catuṣkoṭi*. Yet there is a more subtle form of affirmation which Wood misses, and which explains why the non-nihilist interpreters should emphasise the non-affirmation of the negation. If the negation was affirming, we could be left with a sense of ‘entities *that do not arise from self*’; an inherently existing *lack* of arising-from-self. This, in combination with the remaining negations of the *catuṣkoṭi*, would result in the affirmation of an inherently existing non-arising, or non-production. We are left with some exotic form of entity that is subject to, or instantiates, non-production. The intended target of Nāgārjuna’s analysis is missed, the existential polarity is retained and nihilism (or absolutism) is the result.<sup>20</sup>

These considerations can help explain the meaning of the statements made by Wood’s non-nihilist opponents. For example, Wood quotes Bhāvaviveka (as found in Galloway):

This negation ‘not from themselves’ must be understood in the sense of *prasajya-pratiṣedha* ..... If you grasp it as *paryudāsa*, [the phrase will] affirm that [there are] things [which] are not produced, since it [*paryudāsa*] has affirmation as its primary objective. Teaching the non-production [of things positively], it will differ from the traditional doctrine [of the *Madhyamaka*]. For a *sūtra* says that if you practice the non-production of matter, you deviate from practicing the perfect wisdom. (Galloway, 1989, p. 26)

Here Bhāvaviveka reiterates that it would be a grave error (a ‘deviation from perfect wisdom’) to allow our negations to implicitly affirm anything. Wood understands Bhāvaviveka as making the weaker point that an affirming negation will affirm some other kind of origination (1994, p. 56). I would, however, take it that the affirmation Bhāvaviveka warns us about is the possibility of understanding non-origination in the ‘positive’ sense of being an inherently existent lack of origination; an affirmation of inherently existing things-which-are-not-produced. This is, I think, the meaning of Galloway’s statement: “a ‘positive’ implication of an annihilationist kind” (1989, p. 7). While Wood dismisses this point as meaningless or mistaken (1994, p. 55), I take it that Galloway is gesturing towards the important possibility of the refutation of inherently existent production being understood as an assertion of inherently existent non-production. In other words, an ontological *absence* is, in a sense, a positive thing.<sup>21</sup> To assert an ontological absence is to assert a void ontology, and to positively imply the validity of the ontological project and all its

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<sup>20</sup> The negation of inherently existing production is being affirmed as inherently existing non-production. This inherently existing non-production would be cashed out as either an inherently existing absence (nihilism), or as inherently existing presence that is not produced (absolutism).

<sup>21</sup> To say that there is an absence of funds in my bank account is to affirm the existence of my, regrettably empty, bank account. To positively assert an ontological absence is to affirm the existence of the ontological realm, somehow *containing* this absence.

attendant ontic and epistemic presuppositions. That Wood misses this point indicates that, for him, the validity of the ontological project is beyond question.

All of this indicates the importance of understanding Nāgārjuna's method as being purely negative and radically non-affirming. Nāgārjuna should not be understood as volunteering a position that things do not exist, for then he would be guilty of 'teaching the non-production of things positively' that Bhāvaviveka warns us about. Nāgārjuna should not be understood as positively asserting anything *about* anything. For, as Streng puts it, "to direct attention to 'a thing' is the first step in the direction of affirming a self-sufficient entity" (1967, p. 37). Similarly, Nāgārjuna should not be understood as presenting a theory about 'things', and how they do or do not arise. As Galloway notes: "any such theory would be wrong from the Mādhyamika point of view because it would presuppose a real 'thing' of which arising could validly be predicated" (1989, p. 7). It is important that Nāgārjuna should be understood as engaging in the purely dialectical and deconstructive strategy of the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika, whereby he negates his opponents' views about ultimate reality without offering his own. He offers no competing theory, not because he doubts the ability of conceptual theories to encounter ultimate reality (as an absolutist reading would have it), but because he rejects the most fundamental term of his opponents' views of reality (that there is an independent reality there to view) and so need not, indeed *cannot*, volunteer his own view of *that* reality. Nāgārjuna is, with delicate force, engaging in "an analysis refusing to characterise the nature of anything precisely because it denies that we can make sense of the idea of a thing's nature" (Garfield, 1995, p. 90).<sup>22</sup> Nāgārjuna does not seek to displace his opponents' 'false' views with his own 'true' one, but seeks to critique his opponents' assumptions around svabhāva and to thereby help them remove the limiting and painful flaws in their own worldviews. In using non-affirming negations, Nāgārjuna is able to address the ontological pictures of his interlocutors without becoming personally implicated in their mistaken assumptions that there is an independently existing ontological realm.

So the target of this catuṣkoṭi should be understood as *inherently existing* arising, or the inherent existence *of* arising. Understood in this way we see Nāgārjuna as critiquing the underlying presuppositions regarding the nature of reality that informs the nihilist (and absolutist) interpretation; it is an analysis of *how* things exist, not *which* things exist. Here, then, is a non-nihilist (and non-absolutist) interpretation of the opening verses of the

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<sup>22</sup> Note that Garfield is choosing to talk of 'a *thing's* nature' – in a way in which Streng has just problematised. Despite this difference in choice of communication method, I take it they both are making the same point and are not, in fact, in disagreement. Such editorial decisions regarding the use of words have to be made, and made carefully and consciously. It is an inescapable problem of our language, that nouns will seem to imply entityhood, and different writers have adopted different methods in their attempts to resolve Nāgārjuna's apparently paradoxical position. Streng is right to problematise use of the term 'a thing', and Garfield is also right to use it in the way he does.

*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* that avoids Wood's objections. I hope it is clear that it is Wood's grasping at the existential polarity that makes it impossible for him to see this middle way, and forces him to conclude that Nāgārjuna was a nihilist.

## Nāgārjuna's non-nihilism

As I have said, the Madhyamaka effect is the realisation that *svabhāva* is impossible and unnecessary, and so there is a dual function to Nāgārjuna's dialectic. Roughly speaking, this is achieved through initially explaining that existing things *do not* exist inherently (thereby showing that *svabhāva* is impossible and avoiding absolutism), and then *on this basis* explaining how it is that existing things *do* exist conventionally (thereby showing that *svabhāva* is unnecessary and avoiding nihilism).<sup>23</sup> As Streng puts it:

The 'emptiness' which denies any absolute, self-sufficient being also establishes existence (i.e., existence empty of any self-existent reality) through dependent co-origination; emptiness is neither an absolute monism nor nihilism. (1967, p. 80)

The first step of Nāgārjuna's project is then, in a sense, straightforwardly nihilistic; he is saying unequivocally that the *dharma*s (the inherently existing entities posited by the Abhidharmists) do not *in any way* exist. Wood, unwilling or unable to consider alternatives outside of the existential polarity, pays exclusive attention to this first nihilistic step, and takes Nāgārjuna's arguments for the impossibility of *svabhāva* to be an argument for the impossibility of any form of existence. Crucially, Wood fails to follow Nāgārjuna in his second step where he argues for the conventional, non-inherent, existence of things; Wood does not get the point that *svabhāva* is *unnecessary*.

It will be illuminative to see what Wood makes of the sections where Nāgārjuna emphasises that *svabhāva* is unnecessary. There are three crucial moments in Nāgārjuna's dialectic which serve to collapse the existential polarity and forge the middle way that is neither absolutism nor nihilism. These are the emptiness of emptiness, the equation of *śūnyatā* and *pratītya-samutpāda*, and the non-duality of the two truths. I will outline the way in which Wood manages to miss the import of each of these crucial points, and how he is able to maintain a nihilistic interpretation despite

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<sup>23</sup> Garfield makes the point (2002, p. 43) that when the subtleties of the two truths are fully appreciated, and Nāgārjuna's arguments are read with the emptiness of emptiness in mind, then this characterisation of Nāgārjuna's methodology is too simplistic. Nāgārjuna is not, in fact, *initially* arguing for the non-existence of things and then *later* reclaiming some form of existence. When Nāgārjuna argues for the non-existence of non-empty things on the grounds that they are dependent upon other things, he is *at one and the same time*, arguing negatively against inherent existence and arguing positively for conventional existence. He is, in each chapter of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, clarifying the nature of the existence of the things that constitute our world. However, despite this important observation, considering Nāgārjuna's method in terms of a two step process remains a useful heuristic device.

Nāgārjuna's best efforts. Again, I hope to make clear that it is Wood's polarised thinking and unconscious commitment to the ontological project that forces his hand. Then I will indicate how it is that these moments offer an alternative to the svabhāvic assumption and so enact the Madhyamaka effect.

### Emptiness of emptiness

If non-emptiness were anything at all,  
Then emptiness could also be something.  
But since non-emptiness is nothing at all,  
How could emptiness be something?

The conquerors have declared emptiness  
to be the cessation of all speculative views.  
Those who hold a speculative view of emptiness  
are declared to be incorrigible.

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā Ch.13 v.7-8)<sup>24</sup>

For a clear understanding of the Madhyamaka, it is crucial to appreciate that emptiness is also empty. Nāgārjuna emphasises this point in order to compensate for our reificationary impulse to understand śūnyatā as an inherently existing entity that constitutes an ultimate reality somehow transcendent to, and responsible for, our given reality. Wood reads the above verses as merely making the point that emptiness is not a positive thing – an uncomplicated reading, as this is exactly what a nihilist *would* say (1994, p. 174). Wood has Nāgārjuna saying that ultimate reality consists of nothing, and that “śūnyatā is absolute non-existence” (*ibid*, p.178). Wood understands the motive of these passages to be the avoidance of absolutism through stressing that śūnyatā is not some mysterious, ontologically present, entity (*ibid*, p.279).<sup>25</sup> Nāgārjuna's point is, however, a little deeper than this. He means to emphasise that śūnyatā is neither a positive something nor a negative something. He is trying to correct against the misunderstanding that would take śūnyatā to *be* nothingness or absolute non-existence. We should not take śūnyatā to be a thing; this means not only an absolute (which Wood catches) but also *a nothingness* (which Wood misses).<sup>26</sup> To take śūnyatā to be a nothingness, or void, is to fall into nihilism and is to miss the point of the

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<sup>24</sup> Wood's translation (1994, p. 288)

<sup>25</sup> In this misunderstanding we can see Wood reading non-affirming negations as affirming negations: 'emptiness is not a thing' becomes 'emptiness is nothing'

<sup>26</sup> We can think of śūnyatā as a disruption of the identity function and the meaning of 'is'. In our instinctive usage (which is informed by the svabhāvic assumption), the verb, 'to be', tends to denote entityhood. It is this reificatory impulse that Nāgārjuna is questioning.

Madhyamaka analysis. Nāgārjuna is not telling us that ultimate reality is nothingness, but that there is no such thing as ultimate reality (as conceived by his realist opponents). He is not saying that such an ultimate reality is non-*existence*, but that such an ultimate reality is non-*existent*. Again, Wood is missing the point that an ultimate reality of absolute non-existence is still an ontologically significant something.

Understood like this, the motive of these passages is not so much a caution against absolutism, but rather a caution against nihilism. Indeed, this would make more sense, as it would seem that the bulk of the work against absolutism has already been carried out in the negation of any inherently existing thing. These verses, in fact, are where Nāgārjuna begins ‘pulling back’ from the extreme of nihilism and explaining the validity of conventional existence (Garfield, 2002, p. 42). Wood thinks that a non-nihilist interpretation of these passages has Nāgārjuna conceding something back to the reificationist. Wood is right that any step back towards reificationism would be a concession to the absolutists (and would thus be in a confused conflict with the negative dialectic we have seen up until now), but this is not Nāgārjuna’s move here. It is open to a non-nihilist interpretation to have Nāgārjuna move *away* from nihilism, without moving *towards* absolutism. A move in a direction not open to Wood, as it lies off the beaten track of the existential polarity.

### Wood’s existential polarity

If nirvāṇa is not an existent thing,  
how could it be a non-existent thing?  
Wherever there is no existence,  
there is no non-existence either  
  
If nirvāṇa were a non-existent,  
how could it be non-dependent?  
For indeed there is no non-existent thing  
that is not dependent.

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā Ch.25 v.7-8)<sup>27</sup>

We can see Wood’s commitment to the existential polarity in his nihilistic interpretation of the above verses. Wood acknowledges that the *prima facie* reading here is a denial of the non-existence of nirvāṇa, and yet in the subsequent two verses Nāgārjuna denies that nirvāṇa *does* exist (1994, p. 180). Nāgārjuna is rescued from contradiction, says Wood, because in these

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<sup>27</sup> Wood’s translation (1994, p. 302).

verses he is using existence and non-existence as *contrary* terms rather than *contradictory* ones.<sup>28</sup> For Wood, the fact that Nāgārjuna treats the terms as contrary here shows us that Nāgārjuna was of the opinion “that at least one member of the dichotomy ‘existence’ / ‘non-existence’ must be true *when these terms are treated as contradictory ones*” (*ibid*). That is, despite the apparent contradiction of these verses, Wood takes it that either existence or non-existence holds. In other words, Nāgārjuna still operates within the existential polarity: one of the poles must be the *actual* truth. Naturally, Wood suggests that Nāgārjuna favours non-existence (*ibid*).

It would seem that Wood’s only motive for reading the terms in a contrary sense, rather than in the more natural contradictory sense, is to avoid the very ‘contradiction’ that Nāgārjuna was aiming for. Nāgārjuna is showing that, because existence and non-existence *are* unavoidably related to each other (as opposite poles on the existential polarity) then *both* are empty. Independent non-existence is as just incoherent as independent existence. Nirvāṇa *is* therefore neither inherently existent nor inherently non-existent. The tension that Nāgārjuna sets up here is supposed to apply critical pressure to the svabhāvic assumption. Wood’s attempt to relieve that pressure by other means indicates his commitment to the existential polarity and his blindness to contingent nature of the svabhāvic assumption.

When non-nihilist interpreters try to tease out the mechanics of the emptiness of emptiness by arguing that “if two opposite concepts or terms stand in a relation of complementary correlation in the framework of dichotomous conceptualization .... the negation of one necessarily involves the negation of the other” (Ruegg, quoted in *ibid*, p. 174), Wood disagrees. Wood thinks that this would imply:

that the statement that all things arise and perish is just as true (even at the level of absolute truth) as the assertion that things do not arise and perish there. (*ibid*)

Which cannot be true, says Wood, because the Mādhyamika hold that pratītya-samutpāda is only true “from the standpoint of phenomenal truth” (*ibid*). Wood is forced to think along these lines due to his grasping at the two truths as being distinct and referring to two different levels of reality.<sup>29</sup> I will look at Wood’s misunderstanding of the two truths in more detail shortly, but suffice to say here that the implied point that Wood rejects as incompatible with the

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<sup>28</sup> Two contrary terms can both be false at same time, and the negation of one does not imply the other.

<sup>29</sup> Note his use of the word ‘there’ in the above quote, suggesting a very literal and realist picture of ultimate reality as a location, or realm.

Madhyamaka is precisely the one Nāgārjuna is making. In as much as neither statement is an ultimate truth, both statements *are* equivalently 'true' from the point of view of ultimate truth.<sup>30</sup>

### **Collapsing the polarity**

The problem is that, due to his habitual polarised thinking, Wood keeps the ontological project in mind overlong. He reasons that, if ultimate reality contains all those things that are inherently existent, and Nāgārjuna has shown that no things are inherently existent, then ultimate reality is void, non-existence, or nothingness. The Madhyamaka non-nihilist interpretation here is that non-existence and existence are themselves dependently related (upon each other) and as such are *both* empty. Yet it is Wood's position that "śūnyatā is absolute non-existence, and as such is not dependent upon any real entity" (*ibid*, p.178).

Wood does appreciate one way in which non-existence is dependent upon existence; if we understand non-existence to be the cessation of something previously existent, then this non-existence is dependent (*ibid*, p.181). Wood argues that, although this sort of cessation is important for Abhidharmist thinkers, the Mādhyamika's non-existence is different because nothing has *ever* (inherently) existed (*ibid*, p.183). So Wood's emptiness (non-existence) is not dependent in this way. Wood concludes that, although Nāgārjuna did intend to refute this *dependent* non-existence "śūnyatā as absolute, non-dependent, non-existence was never repudiated" (*ibid*, p.182).<sup>31</sup>

Wood, however, does not notice the more subtle way in which non-existence is always and necessarily dependent upon existence. Wheeling out the long-suffering king of France to illustrate the point, Wood is stumped as to why anyone would insist that there can be no non-existence without existence, as:

if the non-existence of the king of France is dependent on the existence of some other thing, what *is* the other thing on which it is dependent? (*ibid*, p.181)

The point he misses is this: without any notion of existing things, we have no need of the notion of non-existence. Once all existing things have been negated then the notion of non-existence

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<sup>30</sup> Another way of thinking about this is to consider that the supposed conflict between these supposedly opposing views only holds if both are taken to be potential candidates for absolute truth. This conflict is relieved through realising the conventional nature of truth. We may, if we wish, go on to inquire as to which of these statements is the most useful way of thinking about things, given a particular context. In this sense there is a distinction to be made between these *alternative*, but not *opposing*, views. This flexibility and absence of conflict that becomes possible when true propositions are understood as *frictionless* rather than *abrasive* will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6 (see p. 144).

<sup>31</sup> We can note here that Wood, perhaps incautiously, refers to śūnyatā as 'absolute'. Wood seems to miss that even though it is absolute non-existence, his śūnyatā is still an absolute.

ought not to have any psychological purchase. The fact that it typically *does* retain a psychological purchase does not testify to the non-relatedness of non-existence, but rather to the fact that our conceptual apparatus is pre-reflectively informed by the existential polarity. If there never *has* been, nor ever *could* be 'existence', what grounds would we have to consider anything as 'non-existence'? This is what the non-existence of the king of France is dependent upon: *existence itself*.

An analogy may illustrate the point more clearly. In 'Flatland' there are only two dimensions, so the third dimensional polarity of 'up/down' has no meaning there.<sup>32</sup> We should realise that, as soon as everything is two dimensional (and any third dimensional aberrations from this state were shown to be impossible) then all third dimension talk must cease (or at least be relegated to fantasy). So Flatland is not, in fact, flat. 'Flat' is a third dimensional notion and has no place in Flatland. Flatland lacks a third dimension – this negation does not entail the affirmation that Flatland possesses flatness. To consider Flatland to be 'flat', or to embody 'absolute flatness', is to carry over a third dimensional notion into a context where it has no place. The point is this: In the three dimensional world 'flat' means the lack of any third dimensional variation – yet in Flatland (which it would be tempting to characterise as 'the place where there are no third dimensional variations') *things are not flat*. Once the third dimension is entirely negated what you have left is not *flat*.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, once the existential polarity is entirely negated, what remains is not *non-existence*, not even *absolute* non-existence. To consider ultimate reality to be non-existence is to carry over an existential notion into a context where it has no place. Wood attacks non-nihilist interpretations for taking śūnyatā to be a mysteriously affirmed and inherently existing *something*. Yet, in his enthusiasm, he misses that *his* śūnyatā is being surreptitiously affirmed and reinforced as an inherently existing *nothing*. In fact, Nāgārjuna's non-affirming negation 'absence of inherent existence' does not affirm an inherently existent absence.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I am borrowing this world from Edwin A. Abbott and his 1884 novel '*Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*'.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the moral of this story is in many ways the reverse of that expressed by Abbott in his original formulation. In the original, 'evolution' was mapped to the discovery of *more* dimensions and the issue was the difficulty the two-dimensional characters had in opening their mind to the richer ontology of a three-dimensional world. Here we have the opposite problem: Nāgārjuna is trying to lead us to the realisation of *fewer* 'dimensions', and we see the difficulty we have in getting our heads around this sparser ontology of a non-inherently existing world. A world that is "metaphysically 'less'" but "religiously 'more'" (Streng, 1967, p. 81).

<sup>34</sup> If Wood were to argue that this is merely a critique of the *notion* of non-existence, and not of non-existence itself, he would not be doing much more than expressing his ontological assumptions that there must be something real underpinning our notions. *He* may have this bias operating, and *he* may need for there to be something there, but he claims to be representing the Mādhyamika, and he knows that *they* do not need there to be something there. What Wood does not realise is that in insisting that there *really is*

## Śūnyatā = pratītya-samutpāda

We say that dependent co-origination is emptiness.

That is a conventional, dependent designation.

That alone is the middle path.

(Mūlamadhyamakakārikā Ch.24 v.18)<sup>35</sup>

Wood acknowledges that Chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and in particular verse 18, are often used by non-nihilist sympathisers to justify their non-nihilist interpretation; for if śūnyatā is pratītya-samutpāda then it cannot be absolute nothingness. Yet Wood feels able to offer a nihilistic reading to support his thesis. The way in which he does this will be instructive to investigate.

### Wood's view: dependent *un*origination?

Wood agrees (*ibid*, p.159) that the prima facie reading of these verses is problematic for a nihilistic interpretation, yet he is driven to reinterpret them nihilistically on the grounds that dependent origination is obviously incompatible with Nāgārjuna's non-origination (*ibid*, p.125). So in these verses where Nāgārjuna appears to equate śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda, Wood's essential point is that:

Since Nāgārjuna believed that things are *un*originated, he clearly was committed to the view that the doctrine that things are *dependently* originated was a provisional teaching. (*ibid*, p.193).

Therefore:

[I]t is unlikely that the Mādhyamikas believed that emptiness and dependent co-origination could be identified (except as a conventional designation, i.e., one that may be unavoidable for teaching an inferior type of disciple or student). (*ibid*, p.170)

Indeed this, Wood claims, is why Nāgārjuna immediately 'qualifies' (*ibid*, p.125) his equation of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda with the caveat that it is a "conventional, dependent designation" (*ibid*, p.193). Wood cannot countenance any kind of thing other than a self-existing thing, and so no kind of dependent origination other than that which is applied to self-existing

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non-existence there, he is collapsing into his personal ontological assumptions and is doing the Mādhyamika an injustice. Nāgārjuna is trying to tell us is that there is not even a *there* 'there'.

<sup>35</sup> Wood's translation (1994, p. 296)

things. So for Wood's nihilistic Nāgārjuna, pratītya-samutpāda is actually a self-refuting argument for *non*-origination (*ibid*, p.193). Wood, therefore, paraphrases Ch.24 v.18 as saying:

[W]hile "śūnyatā" certainly cannot be identified with dependent co-origination or relativity in the final sense, the śūnyatā = pratītya-samutpāda equation, taken as a conventional or dependent one, can be efficacious in leading the individual to the highest truth of universal voidness. (*ibid*)

So, as we can see, Wood takes Nāgārjuna to be straightforwardly arguing that the nihilistic śūnyatā is the ultimate truth while dependent origination and the other teachings of the Buddha are merely provisional truths. Nāgārjuna's opponent is simply a Buddhist who mistakenly holds Buddha's teachings on pratītya-samutpāda to be ultimate truths, when they are, along with teachings on the self, merely provisional, preliminary teachings (*ibid*, p.205). Wood feels that *either* a realist pratītya-samutpāda *or* a nihilistic śūnyatā are ultimately true. He has the opponent arguing for the ultimate truth of pratītya-samutpāda and the meaninglessness of śūnyatā, and he has Nāgārjuna arguing for the ultimate truth of śūnyatā and the merely provisional truth of pratītya-samutpāda.<sup>36</sup>

### Nāgārjuna as a Hīnayānist?

According to Wood, a non-nihilist interpretation relies on the equation of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda as being an "absolute and final" truth (*ibid*, p.203). This cannot be right, insists Wood, as if the equation is "taken literally" then "the whole difference between the Hīnayānist view of causation and the Mahayanist view would vanish" (*ibid*, p.125).<sup>37</sup> As Wood puts it (*ibid*, p.126), the Abhidharmists take the irreducible dharmas to be empty in a relational sense (lacking independent-existence, or self-existence) while other, reducible, phenomena are empty in a non-relational sense (lacking inherent existence, which for Wood and the Abhidharmists means being non-existent).<sup>38</sup> Wood takes it that the difference between the Madhyamaka and

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<sup>36</sup> The ease with which Wood misses the point here shows the strength of his unconscious commitment to the ontological project. He does not consider for a moment that there could be some sense in which things *do not* originate and yet *do* arise through dependent origination. Nāgārjuna's middle way *consists* in the observation that we can, with careful qualification, make sense of this apparent paradox. Wood's lack of careful qualification (or recognition of the possible need for careful qualification) betrays his confidence in the ontological commitment carried by the unequivocal meaning of 'existing things'.

<sup>37</sup> Wood uses the term 'Hīnayānist' to refer to Abhidharmist thinkers. 'Hīnayāna' (*lesser vehicle*) is a pejorative term that stands in unfavourable contrast to 'Mahāyāna' (*greater vehicle*), and both terms are anachronistic to Nāgārjuna's time. Wood's decision to use the pejorative here is presumably to highlight the absurdity of the non-nihilist interpretation as he understands it. However, as there is a strong anti-triumphalist sentiment and a pluralistic aspiration motivating this thesis, I will elect not follow Wood in this practice.

<sup>38</sup> It seems here Wood is utilising a distinction that was to become crucial in later debates within Tibetan Buddhism. This is the distinction between two forms of emptiness: self-empty 'Rangtong' and other-empty

the Abhidharma is that the Mādhyamika are “bold” and “uncompromising” (*ibid*, p.45) enough to advance from the ‘weaker’ Abhidharmist position of śūnyatā being merely lack of self-existence (which is compatible with śūnyatā = pratītya-samutpāda), to the ‘stronger’ position of śūnyatā being absolute non-existence (which is incompatible with śūnyatā = pratītya-samutpāda). With “ruthless consistency” (*ibid*) the Mādhyamika follows the reductionism through to its uncomfortable conclusion: *everything* is unreal and non-existent (*ibid*, p.160). Wood concludes that, “[s]ince no entities were recognised in orthodox Buddhism apart from the dharmas, this is a very explicit statement of *nihilism*” (*ibid*, p.161).

For Wood, any non-nihilist interpretation which attempts to take Nāgārjuna’s equation of pratītya-samutpāda and śūnyatā seriously is effectively backtracking on the significant contribution of the Madhyamaka through reimplementing the Abhidharmist theory that Nāgārjuna has been at pains to critique. This is because both Wood and the Abhidharmists agree that dependent origination requires there be some inherently existing things, *doing* the dependent originating. However, it is this very assumption that Nāgārjuna is challenging in these verses; the distinctive Madhyamaka contribution is that things arise through dependent origination *despite* their lack of inherent existence. Wood is making the very mistake that Nāgārjuna is correcting for in these verses: that śūnyatā necessarily entails nihilism and the concomitant relegation of pratītya-samutpāda to the status of provisional truth. Wood has Nāgārjuna bite this bullet and accept that śūnyatā is nihilistic and the teachings of pratītya-samutpāda, together with the equation of pratītya-samutpāda with śūnyatā, are merely provisional truths that skilfully lead followers to the ultimate truth of voidness (*ibid*, p.193).

Wood is right that the Madhyamaka are uncompromising in their pursuit of the radical conclusions of universal pratītya-samutpāda. Yet their conclusion is different from that which Wood draws on their behalf. Nāgārjuna’s project is, in fact, to demonstrate that the radical result from the extension of the Abhidharmist critical project is a middle way that is neither nihilism nor reificationism; the impossibility of inherent existence wrecks the ontological project and radically recharacterises the existential polarity.

### **Collapsing the polarity, again.**

Wood’s reading is an easy mistake to make. This is why Nāgārjuna makes a point of anticipating it, and warning us against it. Again, the problem is that the existential polarity is being carried too far into the deconstructive analysis. As Wood points out, under the Abhidharma the dharmas were

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‘*Shentong*’. Where this distinction is employed, emptiness itself is understood to be empty in a different way from everything else, thus they are able to absorb the advice that emptiness is also empty without being forced to realise the middle way. I will discuss this distinction in more detail in Chapter 3 (see p.64).

considered to be real and everything else was understood in comparison to be unreal (*ibid*, p.125). ‘Real’ things were inherently existing, ultimate truths and the occupants of ultimate reality. ‘Unreal’ things were inherently non-existing, conventional truths and the illusory ‘occupants’ of phenomenal reality. It is important to note that this distinction is founded on the svabhāvic assumption, and takes the possibility and necessity of inherent existence for granted.

As discussed above, the reductionism that brought Abhidharmist thinkers to this position was not continued into the domain of the dharmas. It was left for the Mādhyamika to continue the analysis to its “logical conclusion” (*ibid*, p.45) through arguing that *nothing* can be ultimately real (inherently existent), as the very notion is incoherent. Here is the crucial juncture, and where the utmost care must be taken. Here is where Wood and Nāgārjuna part company, despite Nāgārjuna’s attempts to warn us of the difficulty. Once we have discovered the absolute lack of (ultimate) reality and (inherent) existence, it would be a terrible mistake to conclude without qualification, as Wood does, that *everything is unreal* and *non-existent*. This is to carry the dualistic conceptual structure out of its proper context. It is to fail to realise that as soon as *nothing* is real then our previous criterion for the existential polarity or the real-unreal polarity, have to be abandoned altogether or fundamentally revised.

Here is the edge of the seemingly paradoxical nature of Nāgārjuna’s position. Once our analysis has shown that everything is unreal, it no longer is strictly appropriate to claim that everything is unreal. Once a polarity is disrupted (through one pole being entirely negated), then the established meaning of that polarity breaks down and the utmost care needs to be taken if we still wish, or need, to think or talk in terms of that polarity. Without checking this tendency then we will be left, like Wood and Nāgārjuna’s opponent, struggling to reconcile śūnyatā with pratītya-samutpāda. This is the case because pratītya-samutpāda was always understood to be the mechanics of the interrelation of *real* things (the dharmas), and śūnyatā seems to entail that all things are *unreal*.

Nāgārjuna is trying to demonstrate that, once we realise that there is no inherent existence anywhere, the entire meaning of pratītya-samutpāda and the two truths radically changes. This is what understanding emptiness (and in particular, the emptiness of emptiness) achieves; a new appreciation for the two truths that makes conventional truths work:

Their non-existence – their emptiness – is hence itself non-existent in exactly the sense that they are. Existence – of a sort – is hence recovered exactly in the context of an absence of inherent existence. (Garfield, 2002, p. 43)

Wood misses this and takes any non-nihilist interpretation to necessarily be claiming that ‘something is real’, thereby demonstrating his commitment to the existential polarisation that

*either* nothing is real (nihilism) *or* something is real (absolutism). He takes any attempt to qualify the apparently nihilistic result to be a step back towards absolutism. A non-nihilist Nāgārjuna must here be “taking it all back” and conceding that “as he is using the term ‘śūnya’, things are not *really* void after all.”(Wood, 1994, p. 204).

However, to avoid nihilism, Nāgārjuna need not concede some kind of inherent existence to the reificationist. Nāgārjuna can move away from nihilism *without* moving towards reificationism. This is true because Nāgārjuna, unlike Wood, is not stuck upon the existential polarity. Nāgārjuna’s negations are importantly non-affirming; to negate (inherent) existence is not to affirm (inherent) non-existence. Liberated from polarised thinking we can reject one pole without adopting the other.<sup>39</sup> That this is even possible is completely unthinkable to Wood, due to his implicit grasping at the existential polarity as a fundamental and unquestionable constituent of reality. I hope to have shown that this grasping forces him at every turn to misinterpret Nāgārjuna as a thoroughgoing nihilist.

So, *pratītya-samutpāda* is an argument for nihilism with respect to inherently existing things, yet it is also an argument *against* nihilism simpliciter. In other words, *pratītya-samutpāda* is an argument *for* conventional (non-inherent) existence. For Wood, dependent origination is a provisional teaching leading to the ultimate truth of non-origination; it is an argument for nihilism. For Nāgārjuna, dependent origination is a conventional truth describing the manner of conventional existence; it is an argument against nihilism (indeed, an argument against either extreme). Nāgārjuna is clarifying the nature of things. Existing things are conventionally existent and ultimately empty.

Nāgārjuna’s argument here in Chapter 24 is precisely an attempt to guard against Wood’s sort of thinking. Nāgārjuna is telling us that *śūnyatā* is not nihilism, because it is non-dual with *pratītya-samutpāda*. *Śūnyatā* is the ultimate nature of conventional reality; lacking inherent existence, conventionally existent things arise through dependent origination. It is nothing but a pernicious assumption that we require some inherently existing and ultimately ‘real’ things to ground our experience. Indeed, as Nāgārjuna argues throughout this chapter, if things were inherently existent, the Buddhist conventional truths, the teachings of Buddha, would cease to function. It turns out that:

the functions the opponent thought could only be served by an inherently existent phenomenon can, in fact, be served only by empty phenomena. (Garfield, 1995, p. 92)

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<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, the Madhyamaka method is demonstrating that in rejecting (the inherent existence of) one pole we also reject the (inherent existence of) the other pole.

Wood, in fact, does grasp this point:

Paradoxically, one might say, one cannot explain things by supposing that they are real – one can only explain them by supposing that they are unreal. (1994, p. 115)

Yet he is still driven to misinterpret due to a more subtle grasping at inherent existence. He knows that the Mādhyamika do not need there to be anything ultimately real grounding our experience, but it seems that he overlooks his own unconscious need for an inherently existing ground. Wood misses that his nihilistic śūnyatā, which he attributes mistakenly to Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika, is still something ultimately real and inherently existent. Thus, there is an internal incoherence within Wood's position that justifies our opinion that his view is mistaken, not just with respect to the Madhyamaka, but with respect to itself.

## The two truths

The two truths distinction is found throughout Buddhism but is understood differently by different schools. Broadly stated, when considered ontologically, the distinction contrasts inherently existent, or *real*, things (ultimate truths), with the merely conventionally existing, or *unreal*, things (conventional truths). When considered epistemologically, the distinction contrasts the actually true (ultimate truths) against the provisionally or pragmatically true (conventional truths).<sup>40</sup> In each case conventional truths are not really truths at all; they are secondary, inferior and ultimately false. The two truths, as so characterised, are clearly distinct and relate to different 'levels' of reality or truth. This is the way the two truths are understood by the Abhidharmists, and by Wood. However, in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna recharacterises the two truths. He disrupts the rigid binary between them, and presents them as non-dual.

It will be useful to note the way in which Wood's rendering of the two truths is forced through his enthusiasm for the ontological project and the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, and how such a view encourages his nihilistic reading of Nāgārjuna. This will give us a useful framework against which to compare the results of a non-dual rendering of the two truths, and to show how such a view reveals the middle way.

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<sup>40</sup> We should note that a rigid distinction between ontology and epistemology is exotic and anachronistic to Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. From the Madhyamaka point of view, there is a non-dual interdependence between the apprehending consciousness and apprehended objects. There is a mutual entailment (and thus a cyclical definition) that exists between what we might call the epistemologically true (true conceptions or propositions) and the ontologically true (existing things). As will be discussed below (see p.47), this mutual entailment of knowing and being suggest that, if we do insist on approaching the Madhyamaka with the categories of 'ontology' and 'epistemology' in mind, then Madhyamaka is best understood as *ontoepistemological*.

## Wood's two truths

Wood operates within traditional Abhidharmist notions of the two truths, taking them to be an uncomplicated and exclusive distinction between provisional, pragmatic, 'truths' and the final, ultimate, truth (*ibid*, p.128). Conventionally true things, such as the self, are accepted as true and existent merely with respect to convention, but are in fact ultimately false and non-existent. The self, although considered a conventional truth, is ultimately unreal or non-existent. So, according to Wood, the Abhidharmists were straight-forwardly nihilist about things that were merely conventionally true (*ibid*, p.4). On this system the dharmas alone are ultimately real. When tracking the philosophical transition from the 'Hīnayāna' to the Madhyamaka, Wood keeps the same dualistic understanding of the two truths in mind. All that changes for Wood is that which constitutes ultimate truth. The nature of ultimate truth, and its relationship to conventional truth, remains unchanged. When Nāgārjuna argues that even the dharmas are śūnya, and 'merely' conventionally true, Wood can do nothing but conclude that Nāgārjuna is a nihilist with respect to dharmas, and therefore a nihilist with respect to *everything*.

Wood makes a mistake here, for while it may be true that the Abhidharmists were nihilists about conventional truths, it does not follow that Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika were too. Wood is grasping at a rigid polarity between the two truths that is not appropriately applied to the Madhyamaka, as it relies on the uncritical endorsement of the possibility of inherent existence.

We can see the difficulties that this oversight generates for Wood in his attempts to offer a coherent reading of Chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* while maintaining a rigid dualism between the two truths.

## Just a conventional designation?

When Wood is presenting his nihilistic interpretation of Ch.24 v.18, he draws particular attention to Nāgārjuna's characterisation of the equation between śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda:

If Nāgārjuna believed that, in the final analysis, things were unoriginated, then he could not have taken the teaching that things are empty in the sense of being *dependently* originated as the final teaching of the Buddha. This is surely why, after saying that dependent origination is the same thing as emptiness ... Nāgārjuna adds that this is a conventional designation ... (1994, p. 195)

Wood says this qualification provides "clear evidence that Nāgārjuna took the emptiness = dependent co-origination equation to be untenable *in any literal sense*" (1994, p. 193). Here it seems that 'literal' is doing the job of showing that Wood takes it that a dependent/conventional

designation is not an ultimately *real* designation. This would be a natural response for Wood, for with a dualistic conception of the two truths conventional truths are not *really* true. As Garfield says: “it is tempting, since one of the truths is characterized as an ultimate truth, to think of the conventional as ‘less true’” (1995, p. 297).

We can see more evidence for Wood’s dualistic view of the two truths and the way in which it forces him to misunderstand Nāgārjuna’s identification of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda, when Wood claims that:

clearly, the phrase “conventional, dependent designation” (prajñaptir upādāya) is intended to tell us that the pratītya-samutpāda = śūnyatā equation has a spin on it. (1994, p. 193)

Why does it need to be a spin? Why cannot the equation *just be* a conventional, dependent designation? This indeed is the very point Nāgārjuna is making: that identification is done conventionally, rather than ultimately (or ontologically). For Wood, identification must be something more than conventional designation (for conventional designation is just a ‘spin’ on *actual* identification). With the ontological project in mind, the real work of identification is done at an ontological, ultimate level. Importantly, Wood takes this to be *obvious*, as it is ‘clear’ that the conventional designation cannot *itself* be the mechanics of identification.

Furthermore, Wood emphasises the fact that Nāgārjuna claims that the opponent’s misunderstanding in this chapter comes directly from a misunderstanding of the two truths. As we have seen, the only way that Wood can make sense of this is to interpret the opponent as having mistaken pratītya-samutpāda and the compatible Abhidharmist śūnyatā (lack of self-existence) as ultimate truth, whereas in actual fact the Madhyamaka *śūnyatā* (absolute non-existence) is the only ultimate truth. Wood asks:

If Nāgārjuna had meant anything else, what could he have meant by invoking the distinction between the two truths in his counter attack against the traditionalist critic? That the critic had taken the śūnyavāda to be a provisional or inferior truth, and the aśūnyavāda as the final or pāramārthika view? (*ibid*, p.204)

Moreover, Wood leaves us in no doubt as to his interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s two truths, and his derogatory attitude toward conventional truths, when he paraphrases Nāgārjuna as saying:

When the doctrine of pratītya-samutpāda is taken as a doctrine of origination (i.e. as a teaching that merely specifies *how* things arise), rather than as a doctrine of non-origination, it belongs to the realm of falsehood, to the realm of mere designation. (*ibid*, p.199)

From these points we can see two things. Firstly, that Wood is still holding on to a dualistic notion of the two truths and ascribes to Nāgārjuna the same notion of the two truths as found in the Abhidharma. Secondly, that it is this very oversight that forces Wood to interpret Nāgārjuna nihilistically.<sup>41</sup> We can perhaps see there is an inevitability about this; as long as we leave our notion of the two truths undisturbed, then Nāgārjuna is most authentically read as a nihilist. Garfield points this out:

[O]n such a nihilistic reading, the appearance/reality distinction that is forced can only coincide with the conventional reality/emptiness distinction, resulting in a denial of reality to the mundane world and a reification of emptiness itself. (2002, p. 42)<sup>42</sup>

As long as ‘ultimate truth’ means that which is true of all the ultimately real things or of ultimate reality itself, and as long as Nāgārjuna is understood as saying that there are no ultimately real things, then Nāgārjuna’s ultimate truth, śūnyatā, is an expression of nihilism. Yet, from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, this is not what ‘ultimate truth’ means anymore. Now that the existential polarity has collapsed and a realist ontology shown to be incoherent, Nāgārjuna’s two truths have a quite different meaning.

### **Nāgārjuna’s two truths.**

It will be helpful now to attempt an explanation of how I understand Nāgārjuna’s presentation of the two truths. In particular we can note how it is that we can make sense of a non-duality between the two truths and how such a move makes clear the middle way between Wood’s extremes.

### **Ultimate truth**

For Nāgārjuna ultimate truth is śūnyatā, the lack of inherent existence. Although śūnyatā is an ultimate and universal truth, śūnyatā is not an absolute truth or an absolute reality. Śūnyatā, like everything else, is empty of inherent existence. Ontologically speaking, we can say that the Madhyamaka analysis is not an analysis of *what* exists, but rather is an analysis of *how* things exist. The conclusion the Mādhyamika offer is that things do not *inherently* exist (by virtue of their own self-nature), but rather they *conventionally* exist (by virtue of dependent origination). Things

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<sup>41</sup> Burton seems to agree with Wood here: “If, therefore, as Nāgārjuna seems to say, the ultimate truth is that all entities are conventional truths in the Abhidharma sense, then it seems to follow that – unwelcome as the conclusion might be to Nāgārjuna himself – in fact nothing whatsoever exists at all. Nāgārjuna is, as his opponents contend, a nihilist” (2001, p. 110).

<sup>42</sup> Garfield is here talking about a nihilistic reading forcing a particular characterisation of the two truths, but it is equally true that this particular characterisation of the two truths will force a nihilistic reading.

exist *because* of śūnyatā, not *despite* śūnyatā. We can say that śūnyatā is not so much an ultimate reality, but the ultimate nature of reality.

Epistemologically speaking, from the point of view of the svabhāvic assumption, inherent existence is the condition of possibility for ultimately true propositions. As we have seen, the mere *possibility* of such absolute, ultimate truths entails a two-tier epistemology in which conventional truths are given a secondary epistemic status. On such a dualistic system, conventional ‘truths’ are ultimate falsities. For Nāgārjuna, however, the rejection of svabhāva entails the rejection of ultimately true propositions. If there is no inherently existing ultimate reality, then there is no *ground* for ultimately true propositions; there is nothing for them to be true *of* (Siderits, 2003b, p. 12). Mark Siderits makes this point by saying “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth” (1989, p. 231). This is a useful slogan but I feel it must be unpacked a little more to avoid confusion.

Given the svabhāvic assumption, ultimate truths are accurate articulations of the way things are in ultimate reality; they are true propositions about ultimate reality and thus they are ultimate truths. Śūnyatā, however, means that there *is no* inherently existing ultimate reality behind or beyond this immanent conventional reality. We can consider this observation ‘about’ ultimate reality (that there is none) as the only ultimate truth.<sup>43</sup> There are no ultimately true *propositions* (because there is nothing for them to be true *of*), yet there *is* an ultimate truth: *śūnyatā*. I will express this through saying that there is an ultimate truth, but it is *non-propositional* (nisprapañca).<sup>44</sup> Following MacKenzie we can qualify Siderits’ slogan through adding the post script: “at least, there is no ultimate truth in the sense required to pursue the project of Ontology” (2008, p. 203). The (ontologically loaded) ultimate question ‘what is the nature of ultimate reality?’ is being answered by the (ontologically disarming) ultimate truth: ‘there is no such ultimate reality’. So, Nāgārjuna’s response here is not some pragmatic sleight of hand, nor is it some kind of mystical evasion, but rather it is a legitimate answer to an unconsciously biased question.

Through talking of a non-propositional truth, I hope to evoke the sense in which a realisation of śūnyatā is a transformative event that is in some sense informative with respect to reality but without being conceptual or propositional in character. I should unpack this point as there may be a concern that a ‘non-propositional truth’ is at best uninformative and at worst incoherent. Burton, for one, questions how a non-conceptual state, a “mental blankness” (2001, p. 83), “akin

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<sup>43</sup> Garfield and Priest present an interesting defence of the logic of this apparent paradox (Garfield, 2002, pp. 86-105)

<sup>44</sup> I acknowledge that rendering *nisprapañca* as ‘non-propositional’ is not uncontroversial. Again, as my project is not hermeneutical, I am not overly troubled by any such controversy. My argument does not turn on the accuracy of this translation.

to deep sleep" (*ibid*, p.65), could possibly "yield knowledge about the nature of reality" (*ibid*). He asks "what truth could be conveyed by such an experience, and what bearing could it possibly have on life?" (*ibid*, p.83).<sup>45</sup> I take it, however, that Burton's conclusion only holds when the validity of the ontological project is presupposed.<sup>46</sup> The assumption that non-conceptual consciousness must be 'blank' is predicated upon a prior commitment to ontological realism and epistemic dualism. It assumes the impossibility of unmediated knowledge of reality, and so the cessation of conceptualisation (or the unawareness of conceptualisation (*ibid*, p.77)) can only be a withdrawing of discrimination with respect to reality. Like Wood, Burton misses that the Madhyamaka analysis disrupts the ontic and epistemic frameworks with which he approaches Nāgārjuna. For, if the ontological project is abandoned in the way I have been suggesting, and the svabhāvic assumption is brought under examination, it is possible to make sense of a non-propositional yet informative truth.

The realisation of śūnyatā is not so much a realisation of what is true or what exists, but a realisation of what truth *is* and what existence *is*. It is an insight into the nature of truth and reality and the relationship between them.<sup>47</sup> It is important to appreciate that this insight is a non-affirming negation; the realisation of a significant absence. Crucially, the cessation of a mistaken conception ('existing things exist inherently') need not immediately affirm an unmistaken conception ('existing things are dependent related').<sup>48</sup> Through the cessation of conception, we bring about a cessation of the svabhāvic assumption and we 'learn' that the svabhāvic assumption is optional. We 'learn' that the svabhāvic assumption is something that we have been *doing* and is something that we can *stop doing*. We stop misunderstanding the nature of reality and so we realise the true nature of reality. From the Madhyamaka point of view it is important to appreciate that the 'ignorance' that is dispelled through a realisation of śūnyatā (the svabhāvic assumption) is an active misunderstanding, not simply an insufficiency of knowledge (Hopkins, 1996, p. 417). Burton approaches his analysis with the contrary view; that one's

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<sup>45</sup> Burton finds it "difficult to see what soteriological benefit could be derived from such mediation" (2001, p. 82) as he operates under the assumption that it is "knowledge of how things actually are that produces liberation" (2002, p. 336).

<sup>46</sup> For Burton, "Nāgārjuna does not provide a convincing answer to the question 'how are things actually?'" (2001, p. 211). I would argue that Nāgārjuna's analysis does not satisfy this question precisely because that is not the question Nāgārjuna addresses.

<sup>47</sup> I will tend to use, 'insight into' rather than 'knowledge of' in such contexts because (as Burton consciously stresses and unconsciously demonstrates), 'knowledge' is too readily associated with propositions and concepts. According to Burton (and he takes his statements to be self-evident, which suggests that these are also the dominant assumptions regarding such terms) there can be no such thing as non-conceptual knowledge (2001, p. 63). Knowledge is knowledge *of* something and that something must be discriminated and picked out by concepts (*ibid*).

<sup>48</sup> This is in contrast to Burton's soteriological model which assumes that "the ignorance about the transient nature of entities must be eradicated, and the correct understanding of the impermanence of entities must take its place" (2002, p. 328).

ignorance “is a lack of awareness rather than an active misapprehension” (2002, p. 330). It is important to note that this formulation falls out directly from an uncritical pursuit of the ontological project; if knowledge is accurate correspondence with the ontological reality, then ignorance can only ever be a weak or incomplete discrimination that must be rectified with an active and accurate apprehension of reality. Given that Burton’s approach takes for granted the very ontic and epistemic structures that the Madhyamaka seeks to disrupt, his analysis will never yield the middle way.

So, when I say that non-propositional truth is informative, I do not mean to say that in realising śūnyatā we gain new *information* about reality. I agree with Burton that a non-conceptual experience cannot deliver new information about or knowledge of reality. Such formulations are necessarily dualistic, and so are unavoidably conceptual and propositional. When I say that a non-propositional truth is informative, I mean to say that such a realisation profoundly *informs* our reality. The non-propositional truth informs us as to the nature of propositional truth and so informs our conceptual behaviours. This non-conceptual insight informs all of our conceptual experience without entering into such experience as conceptual information. I will unpack this point in more detail shortly.

### **Conventional truth**

Since ultimate truth is not that which is true of ultimate reality, but rather the insight that there *is no* such ultimate reality, then conventional truth is not that which is ‘true’ of conventional ‘reality’. The consequence of the lack of a transcendent ultimate reality is a radically revised epistemological structure whereby the only true propositions are conventional truths. Since they are not playing second fiddle to esoteric ultimate truths, conventional truths really get to be *true*:

Once we conclude that the notion of how things are, independently of our interests and limitations, is incoherent, this derogation of conventional truths to the status of mere second best will fall away. (Siderits, 2003b, p. 13)

Without the assumption that there needs to be real, ontologically present, things grounding our conventionally conceived experience then we understand the importance and validity (independent of whether they match-up with ‘reality’) of these conventions:

To view convention in this way is to view it neither as ontologically insignificant – it determines the character of the phenomenal world – nor as ontologically efficacious – it is empty. (Garfield, 1995, p. 306)

Conventional truths are just the things that are true about reality, given that it is śūnya:

One might say that 'practical truth' is Ultimate Truth applied to everyday living.  
(Streng, 1967, p. 95)

Things are *true*, things *exist*, not ultimately or absolutely, but with respect to convention:

It is these practices that give sense to the talk about objects, and not the existence of substance. (Garfield, 2002, p. 7)

Conventional existence is not some fantasy existence, although it is a constructed and fabricated existence. Nāgārjuna hopes to reassure us that we need not feel threatened by this. Inherent existence has always been impossible and thus the 'existence' we have gotten used to has only ever been conventional existence. Indeed, as Siderits puts it:

Once one has thoroughly assimilated the belief that all things are conceptually constructed, the 'mere' in the phrase 'mere conceptual fiction' will drop out. Indeed, one will soon revert to referring to objects by their ordinary names: rivers will be rivers, and mountains will be mountains. (2003b, p. 19)

We can relax our qualifiers and simply say 'exists' without the unnerving addition of 'conventionally' and certainly without the derogatory 'merely'. However, in those contexts where clarity is important, and philosophical disagreement turns on how 'exist' is being understood, the qualifiers must remain. It is crucial to keep in mind, however, that the qualifier 'conventional' has lost its connotations of illusion and falsity. Conventional truths are *not* ultimately false but non-ultimately *true*. To consider something to be conventionally existent is to grant it a meaningful, stable and coherent existence.

### **Non-duality of the two truths**

Since there are no intrinsically different objects of knowledge, the distinction between 'mundane truth' and 'ultimate truth' does not pertain to different objects of knowledge, e.g., the world and ultimate reality. It refers, rather, the *manner* by which 'things' are perceived. (Streng, 1967, p. 39)

For Nāgārjuna, the two truths are non-dual in that they are not contrasted against each other, or independently referring to two 'levels' or 'domains' of reality. Garfield says they have an "ontic unity" (1995, p. 297). Existing things do not exist ultimately, but they do exist conventionally. To say this is not to explain the contents of two levels of reality (the void ultimate realm and the indeterminably cluttered conventional realm), but is to explain the *way* in which existing things exist.

This relationship between ultimate and conventional existence does not mean, as it would do with the dualistic understanding of the two truths, 'in reality things do not exist, but conventionally it is convenient to talk as if they do'. Such a characterisation is still grounded in the existential polarity and continues to contrast 'actual' reality with 'mere' appearance. To say that existing things do not exist ultimately, but do exist conventionally, is to say that the only way in which existing things have ever existed is by way of conventional designation and dependent origination.

To explain the non-duality of the two truths is to clarify the meaning and ontological commitment carried by the notion of 'existing things'. The ultimate truth is that there is no inherently existing thing to which 'thing' refers; the ultimate truth of things is their emptiness. The conventional truth is that there is a conventionality existing thing to which 'thing' refers; the conventional truth of things is their existence through conventional designation. To exist, *just is*, to be a conventional designation, and to be a conventional designation is to be empty:

[I]ts identity as a single entity is nothing more than its being the referent of a word.  
(Garfield, 1995, p. 305)

Thus the non-duality of the two truths disrupts the ontological project and problematises the rigid distinction between ontology and epistemology. Indeed, given the intimate non-dual relationship between conventional truth and conventional existence the Madhyamaka is perhaps best understood as an *ontoepistemology*.<sup>49</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view, "[o]ntology and epistemology merge, since 'to know' is 'to become'" (Streng, 1967, p. 169).

From the Madhyamaka point of view the inherent existence we see in existing things is the illusory product of the *svabhāvic* assumption, and so there is no need to infer an inherently existing ultimate reality to account for it:

If we see that the 'becoming' is a fundamental ontological category denying the static 'being' then there is no need for a static ontological substratum to undergird a 'process of becoming'. (Streng, 1967, p. 81)

Thus, from the Madhyamaka point of view the two truths do not each refer to one level of a two-tier reality that generates the plethora of rigid binaries such as appearance-reality, ultimate-conventional, real-unreal and so on. Recharacterising the two truths as non-dual disrupts such rigid binaries and collapses such polarised thinking as both truths refer, in different ways, to the reality of radical becoming:

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<sup>49</sup> I will discuss this term more thoroughly in Chapter 8.

Nāgārjuna demonstrates that the emptiness of emptiness permits the 'collapse' of the distinction between the Two Truths, revealing the empty to be the everyday, and so saves his ontology from a simple-minded dualism. (Garfield, 2002, p. 105)

It is important to note that 'non-duality' does not entail 'identity' or 'unity'. There is a conventional, but not ultimate, distinction to be drawn between the two truths.<sup>50</sup> 'Non-duality', indicates a lack of *inherent* duality, but *without* asserting the presence of an inherent unity. It reminds us that there is a useful distinction to be made, but that that distinction is not an ultimate feature of reality. The equation *of* and the distinction *between* ultimate truth and conventional truth is, like all equations and distinctions, a conventional designation (Hopkins, 1996, p. 418). In other words the 'two truths' analysis also applies to the two truths: each truth is conventionally conventional and ultimately empty.

The non-duality of the two truths allows that the presence of a meaningful ultimate truth does not erode or belittle the meaningfulness of conventional truths. The one (non-propositional) ultimate truth does not stand behind or beyond the *merely* conventional truths. Rather, the ultimate truth is non-dual with the multitude of conventional truths. Conventional truths are true *because* of ultimate truth, not *despite* ultimate truth. Importantly, conventional truths are not ultimate falsities; they are non-ultimately *true*. From the Madhyamaka point of view there *are no* ultimate falsities.

For this crucial non-duality between the two truths to work, it is important to emphasise the non-propositional nature of ultimate truth as well as the non-ultimate truth of true propositions. It is crucial that no propositional truth is taken to be an ultimate or absolute truth. This is an important point as attempts to express ultimate truth in propositional and conceptual terms can be attempted and these positive articulations can be mistaken for ultimate truths. Yet it is crucial that those conventional truths that speak of ultimate truth are no more ultimately true than any other conventional truth.

I think an analogy may help us here. Consider the sentence: 'words are marks on paper'. For the purposes of this analogy the conventional truth is that this sentence is made up of individual meaning-bearing words. The ultimate truth is that this sentence is made up of marks on paper. There are two points I hope to pick out in this analogy. Firstly, that the words of the sentence communicate ultimate truth without themselves being ultimately true. Secondly, that there is a

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<sup>50</sup> This mirrors the conventional, but not ultimate, distinction that the Madhyamaka draws between ultimate and conventional reality. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 4 the Madhyamaka analysis does not dispense with this distinction, but reframes it as conventional rather than ultimate. The Madhyamaka analysis does not replace dualism with monism, but draws attention to the conventional (non-ultimate) nature of dualism and so 'replaces' inherent dualism with conventional dualism.

subtle incoherence in assuming that the ultimate truth of words can be communicated in the system within which words have meaning.

The ultimate truth of words cannot be communicated by any *particular* words, because it is always already being communicated by *all* words. Words cannot be asked to more clearly present their being merely marks on paper. They do not hide that reality; they are *constituted* by that reality. However, this reality can be obscured by our habitual and pre-cognitive tendency to construct words *as words* and not as marks on paper.<sup>51</sup> The ultimate truth of words is communicated in a system of meaning-delivery outside of the system within which words deliver meaning. This must be the case as the system within which words deliver meaning is a system in which words are *not* marks on paper, for it is a system within which words are *words*.

Now, one way of prompting an insight into the ultimate truth that words are marks on paper is through writing the sentence: 'words are marks on paper'. Again, the words 'words are marks on paper' are not uniquely equipped to directly communicate the ultimate truth as all words do it all the time. These words are, however, uniquely equipped to communicate the ultimate truth *indirectly* through triggering the shift in attitude that allows any and all words to communicate it *directly*. The crucial point is this: in the very moment that these words embody their unique ability, they disrupt the system within which they have this unique ability. They promote their own demotion; in their moment of truth they reveal themselves as no more ultimately true than any other words. The meaning the words deliver disrupts the system within which they have *privileged* meaning through drawing attention to the system within which they are *meaningful*. They refute the existence of inherently meaningful words through drawing attention to the existence of conventionally meaningful words.

Similarly, the non-ultimately true propositions that attempt to articulate the non-propositional ultimate truth are not any more ultimately true than any other proposition. Indeed, the conditions under which some propositions seem more ultimately true than others are the very conditions under which the ultimate truth is being obscured: the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. These soteriologically useful conventional truths are, however, well equipped to *indirectly* communicate ultimate truth through promoting the shift in attitude that reveals ultimate truth everywhere. This shift in attitude is a shift to appreciating the possibility of non-propositional truth: something that is importantly true but that cannot be directly expressed

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<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this pre-cognitive tendency can be so ingrained that it can be difficult to bring about its cessation. This is true to such an extent that it can come as somewhat of a moving revelation to witness a page of words transform into a page of black marks. It is easy to forget that this form of construction is optional and contingent.

in propositional terms (as it addresses and disrupts the system within which propositions alone express truth).

As in the analogy, there is a subtle incoherence in assuming that the meaning of ultimate truth can be communicated within the system in which propositions have meaning. It is a truth that 'transcends' the system of propositional truth; it is a non-propositional truth. Far from being uninformative, the non-propositional truth of śūnyatā is profoundly informative as to the nature of propositional truth and is a necessary prerequisite for an unmistaken understanding of the non-duality of the two truths. It is only once we understand ultimate truth that we can understand the way in which non-ultimate truths express ultimate truth. As Nagao puts it:

[S]uchness (expressed) in words is recovered and established only when śūnyatā, which is 'suchness without words', is presupposed. (1991, p. 48)

Once we understand the two truths to be non-dual then we can understand Nāgārjuna's equation of śūnyatā with pratītya-samutpāda. From the Madhyamaka point of view śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda mutually entail one another; to arise through dependent origination *just is* to lack inherent existence. The ultimate truth of existing things (their emptiness) ensures and confirms their conventional truth (their dependent related existence). Śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda are non-dual in just the same way that the two truths are. *This is why*, in Chapter 24, Nāgārjuna claims his interlocutor has misunderstood the two truths. The opponent takes the ultimate truth of śūnyatā to confirm the ultimate falsity of pratītya-samutpāda and so rejects śūnyatā as nihilistic. Once the two truths are understood unmistakenly, the truth of śūnyatā entails the truth of pratītya-samutpāda. Śūnyatā *explains* existence, rather than negates existence.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I hope to have shown in detail how it is that Wood is able to sustain a nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamaka. Wood appreciates Nāgārjuna's nihilistic arguments against inherently existing things: that dependent relationship entails the absolute lack of inherent existence; that inherently existing things could not function and so functioning things (including Buddha's teachings) cannot be ultimately true; and that inherently existing things are not required to explain or ground our experienced reality. However, due to Wood's unexamined conviction in the existential polarity, he is unable to follow Nāgārjuna in his arguments against nihilism: that absolute non-existence does not itself inherently exist; that śūnyatā is not an absolute void but rather the dependent relatedness of all things; and that the two truths are

non-dual and so there is an important and credible sense in which conventional truths are *true* and conventionally existing things are *real* and *existent*.<sup>52</sup>

I hope to have made it clear that all Wood's misunderstandings can be reduced to only one root misunderstanding: his assumption that 'existence' unequivocally means 'inherent existence'. From the Madhyamaka point of view, we can say that Wood's only problem is the svabhāvic assumption. This impulsive endorsement of inherent existence forces Wood to maintain a realist ontology and a dualistic epistemology. Consequently, his reading of Nāgārjuna's criticism of inherent existence leads him to posit ultimate reality as being constituted by inherently existing non-existence.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Wood's position forces a dualistic notion of the two truths which denies any kind of credible reality to conventional truths. In short, Wood's unconscious commitment to inherent existence wrecks his reading of Nāgārjuna.

### Is Wood's Nihilism Self Defeating?

Metaphysical nihilism comes about as close to being self-refuting as any philosophical doctrine one can imagine. (Siderits, 2003b, p. 10)

It is interesting to note that, although Wood insists that the Mādhyamika were nihilists, he understands this to not exclude phenomenological 'experience' (so long as we understand these 'experiences' are neither real, existent, nor experiences *of* anything). Wood is willing to accept an "accommodation of sorts" between his nihilistic śūnyatā and an unreal world of purely phenomenological experience, whereby "the phantasmagoria can torment us even though they are *not* real" (1994, p. 208). Wood takes it that the Madhyamaka is well summarised, by S. N. Dasgupta, as 'nihilistic idealism' or 'pure phenomenalism' whereby "everything is reduced to mere appearances – or to be more exact, to nothing but a sequence of 'it seems that...' statements" (*ibid*, p.266). So Wood's nihilism is not of the sort that we, along with Siderits (quoted above), would intuitively consider self-refuting. Whereas we would tend to take some form of idealism to be antithetical to nihilism, Wood tells us that:

[A]ccording to the Mādhyamikas, a thorough-going, absolutely consistent idealism entails nihilism, for in its purest form, idealism is *nothing but* a pure phenomenalism, and as such is non-ontological – even *anti*-ontological. (*ibid*, p.261)

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<sup>52</sup>To be specific, truths are *non-ultimately* true, real things are *non-independently* real and existing things are *non-inherently* existent.

<sup>53</sup> So, as Nagao points out: "Nihilism (*nāstika*), while claiming to represent a non-substantiality (*niḥsvabhāva*), shows itself to be, in fact, a kind of realism (*svabhāva*). (1991, p. 44)

Wood, speaking for Nāgārjuna, does not deny a phenomenological realm, but rather he denies that the phenomenal realm is *real*, or *existent*. The phenomenal realm is a realm of illusion and “even these illusions, qua illusions, do not exist!” (*ibid*, p.208). Therefore, Wood presents a soteriological picture such that:

Ultimately, everything is non-existent and void. Saṃsāra is that voidness when it is obscured with the apparent defilements of the unreal, phantasmagoric movie.

Nirvāṇa is the same voidness when these pictures no longer appear. (*ibid*)

We can see here, perhaps, the ways in which Wood’s interpretation is actually frustratingly close to the middle way. Indeed, Wood agrees entirely with Stcherbatsky (who is presenting the Mādhyamika as *non-nihilist*) in his understanding of the propositions that the Mādhyamika held (*ibid*, p.239), yet Wood is dumbfounded as to how these propositions should not be understood as nihilistic. It seems to Wood that “anyone who holds such positions is almost by *definition* a nihilist” (*ibid*, p.239). Could it be that there is more agreement in the interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s position than the disparate conclusions as to the *implications* of these interpretations would seem to suggest? It might almost be tempting to consider Wood as merely *mislabelling* Nāgārjuna’s position as nihilistic rather than truly misinterpreting it.

However, although the distinctions are subtle, the consequences of these distinctions are profound. Upon investigation there can be no doubt that Wood’s interpretation is different from Nāgārjuna’s in a dramatically nuanced way. Wood does not spend time elaborating on the more positive aspects of his interpretation of the Madhyamaka as pure phenomenology, rather he merely gestures towards this as a possible defence against the epistemological problems raised by the notion of nihilism (*ibid*, p.278). It is not clear, however, exactly how he would cash this out and it seems to me to be a difficult position to maintain. For Wood, non-existence must mean ‘absolutely non-existent’ and so it is hard to understand in what way the phenomenal realm can be said to be happening if it cannot be said *in any way* to exist. It is clear that Wood wants to retain ‘exists’ for exclusive use in reference to the ontological realm, and so it remains to be seen how he would existentially characterise the ‘contents’ of the phenomenal realm. Again, we can see the tension in Wood’s interpretation. While Nāgārjuna can understand the experienced world as conventionally existent and containing conventional truths, Wood does not have that move open to him. He is forced to wrestle clumsily with some kind of absolutely non-existent, yet

somehow experientially vivid, realm of pure phenomenology in which every experience is equally illusory and untrue.<sup>54</sup>

We can see the crucial distinction raising its head once again here. The difference between Wood's interpretation and Nāgārjuna's middle way is that Wood stubbornly retains both an unequivocal notion of the meaning of 'exists' and a realist dualistic ontology. In keeping these elements, he is forced into his reification of śūnyatā as an absolute nothingness that lies behind or beyond the phenomenological realm. He keeps the realist ontology and a dualistic epistemology that retains 'truth' and 'exists' for exclusive use in reference to the ultimate realm. Thus, even if some epistemological theory could be built to make sense of the purely phenomenological realm (and make the soteriological path even *possible*), nothing 'there' could be said to be true or existent; it would be a realm of nothing but falsehood and illusion. Furthermore, Wood (although he does not realise it) could be charged with maintaining at least one inherently existing entity: the absolute void of śūnyatā.<sup>55</sup>

So, there seems to me to be a confusion in Wood's interpretation. He is willing to characterise the Madhyamaka as "non-ontological - even *anti*-ontological" (*ibid*, p.261), which would seem to suggest a one-level (non-dual) reality. He will also accept that, despite our realist intuitions to the contrary we do not *need* some ontologically 'real' foundation to ground our phenomenological reality (*ibid*, p.278). Furthermore, he seems to deeply appreciate that independent self-existence is an entirely incoherent notion. All of this strongly suggests that Wood is approaching the middle way. Yet, he seems to trip almost at the very last. He is able to overlook that his śūnyatā has become reified, is inherently existent, and is constitutive of a discrete ontological level of ultimate reality. So, despite his insistence that the Mādhyamika were non-ontological, Wood's own realist intuitions force him to present Nāgārjuna as retaining an essentially realist ontology.<sup>56</sup> All of this demonstrates Wood's blindness to the middle way and confirms that he is not merely mislabelling the Mādhyamika as nihilists, but is indeed misrepresenting them. I hope to have shown how, despite its subtlety, this spectre of self-grasping contaminates Wood's intuitions and radically distorts his reading of Nāgārjuna.

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<sup>54</sup> Although, despite not spelling it out, I would assume Wood would take provisional truths to be those illusory and ultimately untrue 'things' that lead individuals to the ultimately truth that 'all things are non-existent'. So some distinction on a pragmatic level would be made.

<sup>55</sup> Note the similarities here with a Murtian Absolutist view (which will be considered in detail in Chapter 3): a realist ontology and a dualist epistemology, with the conventional realm considered as illusion. The only significant difference between Wood's nihilism and Murti's absolutism is whether śūnyatā is posited as an ineffable (logically indeterminate, infinitely transcendent) *something* or an absolute *nothing*. Both are just attempts to explain the conceptual unreachability of śūnyatā, and both are, in the end, a form of absolutism that miss the middle way for exactly the same reasons; the inability of the interpreter to suspend the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.

<sup>56</sup> Again, we see here that Wood's interpretation contains internal incoherence and is therefore mistaken with respect to *itself*, and not just mistaken with respect to the Madhyamaka.

## A non-absurd alternative?

With all this in mind, we can conclude that Wood tries, but fails, to articulate a coherent form of non-absurd nihilism. Interestingly, however, Jan Westerhoff (2014) has recently formulated a nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamaka that may succeed where Wood's has not. Westerhoff, much like Wood here, suggests that an ontological nihilism is compatible with meaningful and functional appearance, as long as the nihilist is "happy to postulate appearances all the way down" (*ibid*, p.25). He suggests that the Madhyamaka could be profitably presented as nihilist through combining eliminativism ('that which is non-foundational does not exist in any way') and non-foundationalism ('there are no non-partite, foundational things'). Neither eliminativism nor non-foundationalism are obviously absurd and so, reasons Westerhoff, it is perhaps not so obvious that a combination of the two should be absurd (*ibid*, p.23). He therefore formulates a non-absurd yet nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamaka which avoids the problems typically associated with nihilistic views (*ibid*, p 34).

While I agree with Westerhoff's interpretation of the Madhyamaka, I would personally hesitate to consider that interpretation to be a nihilist one. Despite denying the existence of inherently existing things, the Madhyamaka does not deny the existence of existing things; the Madhyamaka *explains* the existence of existing things.<sup>57</sup> Rather than follow Westerhoff in the rehabilitation of nihilism through identifying a non-absurd formulation thereof, I would rather retain 'nihilism' as a strawman that exclusively refers to an absurd extreme, and find some other means of expressing the nihilistic, but non-nihilist, Madhyamaka. It is worth dwelling over this point, however, as Westerhoff's observations are valuable and bring out points important to my thesis. In particular, in emphasising that the formulation the Madhyamaka "relies essentially on specific theories that postulate or imply *svabhāva*" (*ibid*, p.36), Westerhoff draws attention to the lack of inherent existence of the Madhyamaka and the radical context-sensitivity of its application. Furthermore, it will be profitable to note that the disagreement between Westerhoff and myself is, I think, over the merits and risks of our respective strategies, rather than over the philosophical meaning and function of the Madhyamaka.<sup>58</sup>

Westerhoff argues that, given that positive presentations of the Madhyamaka are inevitably (mis)understood in terms of one or other of two extremes (*ibid*, p.36), Madhyamaka apologists

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<sup>57</sup> Another important point, which may be obscured if we allow the Mādhyamika to be received as nihilists, is that the Mādhyamika do *not* assert the lack of inherent existence. A Mādhyamika does not assert *anything*, but rather refutes the mistaken *svabhāvic* assumptions embedded in the views of others.

<sup>58</sup> This is precisely the form that we should expect a disagreement between two Mādhyamikas to take. Any dispute can only be with respect to the *effect* of propositions, rather than their content. The debate is over how well things function, and not over how well they correspond with reality.

should anticipate this bivalent tendency and utilise it to their advantage.<sup>59</sup> He suggest an “equilibrium principle” (*ibid*, p.37), which, given the Madhyamaka’s “opponent-relative” form (*ibid*, p.36), entails presenting the Madhyamaka in terms of the contrasting extreme to that held by the interlocutor. Given the contemporary dominance of the “naturalistic realist” (*ibid*, p.37) attitude, Westerhoff suggests that, in this context, we would do well to present the Madhyamaka as a form of nihilism in order to take advantage of the provocative contrast.

Westerhoff shares the concerns of the Tibetan scholar dGe ‘dun chos ‘phel, who worries that if the nihilistic aspect of the Madhyamaka is underemphasised its profound relevance will be missed (*ibid*, p.35). I take it that Westerhoff’s point is that, given the svabhāvic assumptions of the non-Mādhyamika interlocutor, the Madhyamaka message will be received with the question: ‘does this negate my everyday world or not?’ To answer this question in the affirmative emphasises the lack of inherent existence and the nihilistic aspect of the Madhyamaka. Answering in the negative emphasises conventional existence and the non-nihilistic aspect of the Madhyamaka. Westerhoff agrees with dGe ‘dun chos ‘phel that, given current realist dispositions, the Madhyamaka apologists should answer this question with a nihilistic ‘yes’. I would agree that, of the two responses, the affirmative is the more useful (in the context specified). However, as I am sure Westerhoff would agree, neither answer is unproblematic in as much as they both implicitly affirm (and therefore subtly endorse) the realist presuppositions embedded in the question. Therefore, my personal preference would be to respond to the question by directly criticising those realist presuppositions.

Answering the svabhāvically loaded question, rather than critically addressing it, sets the discussion off on a problematic trajectory. No doubt the intention is to correct that trajectory later, but it seems to me a risky strategy. I feel that deliberately presenting the Madhyamaka as ontological nihilists constitutes, perhaps in the slightest possible way, an engagement in the ontological project. Playing the ontological game even for the briefest of moments reinforces the svabhāvic assumption in the opponent. The slightest gesture towards a common ground of understanding occludes to some extent the true target of the Madhyamaka analysis.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> These are not the ‘two extremes’ as I have formulated them above, although there is, I think, a relationship. Here Westerhoff refers to the extremes of naive realism (nihilism with respect to the ultimate coupled with the reification of the conventional) and radical error theory (nihilism with respect to the conventional coupled with reification of the ultimate). The two extremes, in whatever form, fall out of the svabhāvic assumption and an adherence to the existential polarity; interpretations are formulated in extreme terms due to the assumption that things either inherently exist (reification) or do not exist at all (nihilism).

<sup>60</sup> This subtle point marks the important difference between the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika and the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika, a point which I will elaborate upon in Chapter 3 (see p.72).

Presenting śūnyatā positively for pragmatic benefit and pedagogic/soteriological effect in such a way can be understood as a contemporary example of skilful means (upāya). It is my view, and I will expand upon this later (see p.159), that the cost of such skilful means outweighs the benefits. In volunteering a positive interpretation of the Madhyamaka, even when explicitly emphasising its context-sensitivity as Westerhoff does, there is an unavoidable slurring of śūnyatā.<sup>61</sup> I would rather frame the context-sensitivity of the manifestation of the Madhyamaka in terms of an inability to volunteer a positively constructed interpretation, rather than an ability to volunteer a positively constructed, but opponent-dependent, interpretation.

In my view, we should not interpret the Madhyamaka as nihilism, or absolutism, or anything else for that matter. To do so is to invite a reificatory transformation into a dogmatic and independently existing Madhyamaka view. The Madhyamaka should be understood primarily (perhaps exclusively) in terms of the effect that it has on svabhāvic worldviews, as radically context-sensitive, as thoroughly dependently-originated, and as empty of inherent existence.

### **Nāgārjunian refutation**

It has also been my intention to demonstrate that unless svabhāva is unmistakably identified and taken as the target of Nāgārjuna's analysis, the middle way is missed. Svabhāva can only be considered as a target if it is considered as contingent, as something possibly unnecessary. The thing that makes svabhāva so difficult to expunge is that it is considered so self-evidently necessary that it becomes invisible and unquestionable. Thus the unconscious operation of the svabhāvic assumption is a clear indication that the middle way has yet to be encountered. Throughout *Nāgārjunian Disputations*, it is clear that Wood sees the interpretative choice as being between absolutism (that śūnyatā is an ineffable Absolute that is somehow operating behind the scenes) or nihilism (that śūnyatā is absolute non-existence, somehow standing silently behind the scenes). In presenting it as such a stark choice, we can discern the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. We can see that an unconscious allegiance to the existential polarity generates the fundamental interpretative bivalence that restricts the Madhyamaka to either nihilism or absolutism.

Wood assumes that any non-nihilist interpretation consists in arguing for some (inherently) existing thing or things that escapes Nāgārjuna's analysis. Clearly no inherently existing thing *does*

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<sup>61</sup> It is true that a Mādhyamika can offer positively constructed worldviews without ontological commitment. Once śūnyatā has been realised, true propositions no longer imply a corresponding ultimate reality. However, if our presentation is intended to carry a pedagogic function then it is necessarily being formulated for an audience under the sway of the svabhāvic assumption. Therefore, although a Mādhyamika *can* coherently offer positively constructed (but empty) worldviews, I would suggest that they should not. Their svabhāvically inclined audience will certainly reify whatever positive content they are presented with, and thus the Mādhyamika is unwittingly implicated in a misrepresentation of śūnyatā.

escapes the analysis (even śūnyatā, pratītya-samutpāda and nirvāṇa are all explicitly śūnya) and so Wood takes the nihilistic interpretation to be the only credible interpretation (missing the glaring inconsistency generated through his positing of an inherently existing nothingness).

Despite personal misgivings about nihilism, Wood argues that since a non-nihilist interpretation is not right, a nihilistic interpretation must be right. It is his project to show that Nāgārjuna argued well for nihilism, Wood himself is not advocating it. Wood finds the position radical, but neither untenable nor indefensible (1994, p. 266), indeed he respects Nāgārjuna for “sticking to his guns” (*ibid*, p.204) and accepting the counter-intuitive consequences of ‘his’ nihilistic position.

I hope it is clear that, for Wood, the middle way is closed. The middle way that Nāgārjuna is attempting to express *just is* the removal of Wood’s unexamined assumption about the nature of existence and the dualistic ontological structure that this assumption requires. Despite understanding Nāgārjuna’s arguments, Wood misses the deeper implications of those arguments. He is thus able to retain his realist assumptions, albeit at a very subtle level, all the way through his interpretation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. This leads him to a position that, despite on one level being very close to the middle way, is on another level profoundly distant.

## Chapter 3 – Madhyamaka Absolutism

In order to present the crucial stage of the Madhyamaka dialectic, it will be useful to show how the Madhyamaka is distinct from an absolutist worldview. I will use T.V.R Murti's interpretation of Nāgārjuna as a case study. Granted, Murti's interpretation is somewhat dated now and dominant trends in Nāgārjunian hermeneutics have moved on from such explicitly absolutist presentations. Yet these more contemporary interpretations, which show promise in that Nāgārjuna is understood as neither nihilist nor absolutist, do not necessarily avoid those reificatory impulses that generated the extreme interpretations of the middle way. Such interpretations tend to present Nāgārjuna as somehow avoiding or evading metaphysical questions, or as being neutral with respect to different metaphysical views. In my opinion, such non-metaphysical readings are risky as, from the Madhyamaka point of view, no-one is metaphysically neutral. As Mackenzie puts it, "it is not clear that our ordinary, first order discourse is as ontologically innocent as the deflationist takes it to be" (2008, p. 205). The latent operation of the svabhāvic assumption will establish a tendency towards ontological realism. Thus non-metaphysical readings risk leaving our svabhāvic assumptions untouched. This is, in my view, a grave misrepresentation of the Madhyamaka. Nāgārjuna *should* threaten our metaphysical views. Not through the introduction of an alternative view of his own, but through undermining the realist presuppositions that generate and inform our metaphysical views.

With this in mind, I wish to analyse Murti's explicit absolutism in order to emphasis what I take to be the crucial steps, both in the reifying operation of the svabhāvic assumption, and in the soteriological operation of the Madhyamaka analysis. I wish to show that the middle way 'between' nihilism and absolutism is not found through not-doing (avoiding) metaphysics, but through un-doing (deconstructing) metaphysics. In other words, while I agree with those contemporary interpretations that reject absolutist interpretations of Nāgārjuna, I do think there is important clarifying work to be done with respect to *how* to reject absolutist interpretations.

Before addressing Murti directly, I wish to spend a little more time explaining and justifying my methods and motives in this chapter.

### Unacknowledged Absolutism

From the Madhyamaka point of view, a *realist* worldview is one that is founded upon an unexamined, or philosophically endorsed, assumption that inherent existent is possible and necessary. Nāgārjuna's dialectic (taking its lead from the abhidharmic reductionism) insists that relational things cannot be inherently existent (which realists read as 'cannot be real'). Nāgārjuna

relentlessly demonstrates that the inherently existing things his contemporaries posit cannot possibly function in the way they are supposed to and thus are refuted as incoherent. A realist is put under pressure by Nāgārjuna to locate that which is real (by their standards). Nāgārjuna's dialectic advances and they are forced to retreat to ever more subtle objects that may account for reality (as they understand it). If one takes Nāgārjuna seriously, one cannot maintain the inherent existence of any functioning or relational thing. Thus realist intuitions can only be satisfied in the light of these arguments through adopting a form of absolutism where that which inherently exists is non-relational and absolute.

Nāgārjuna can be understood as saying that inherently existing things must be entirely independent absolutes. This is an essential part of his strategy, but this is not his position as such. This is an unnoticed (and unwanted) proposition in the positions of realists. Nāgārjuna points out this fact about inherent existence and then holds the realists to account over it. Nāgārjuna's project is to refute inherent existence itself, and not the inherent existence of relative things and thus affirming an absolute. The purpose of this radical dialectic is not to prove absolutism, but rather to force a recharacterisation of the reality of relational things. We can understand the Madhyamaka method as a *reductio ad absurdum* of any realist position through showing that it forces nihilism or absolutism.<sup>62</sup>

As I will demonstrate in greater detail below, Murti accepts Nāgārjuna's arguments, but misses their existential repercussions and so endorses an explicitly absolutist worldview. Furthermore, I think we can discern a similar oversight operating in many contemporary, putatively non-absolutist (and non-nihilist) interpretations of the Madhyamaka. Rather than take the Madhyamaka as a metaphysical theory regarding the nature of reality (and therefore as nihilism or absolutism), more contemporary interpretations follow what Tuck has identified as a 'post-Wittgensteinian' trend (1990, p. 28) in which Nāgārjuna is read as "antiphilosophical" (*ibid*, p.93) or as offering a "metaphilosophical critique of the language of philosophy" (*ibid*, p.80). David Cooper considers this "prevailing" interpretation to be a form of quietism as it seeks to silence the pseudo-problems of philosophy and simply "leave everything as it is" (2002, p. 9). Siderits rejects the quietist label, preferring to call such non-metaphysical interpretations 'semantic' interpretations, but is in agreement with Cooper that such interpretive forms are the

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<sup>62</sup> Wood's hermeneutical process can be read as running a *reductio* against absolutism, and thus forcing nihilism. Murti's process too, can be understood in parallel terms. Murti does not so explicitly attack nihilistic interpretations, but as I will demonstrate it is clear that, for Murti, nihilism is so obviously absurd that absolutism can be the only way to read Nāgārjuna. Both understand Nāgārjuna as running *reductio* against inherently existing *things*, but both miss that the principle target here is inherent existence *itself*, in its general and context-insensitive form. Thus both Murti and Wood retain one polarity, the existential polarity, and they find themselves polarised upon that ground. Nāgārjuna is running a *reductio* against *both* absolutism and nihilism, the point being to force the middle way through undermining the shared assumption underpinning both of these extremes and so, by extension, any realist position.

only serious alternative to absolutist and nihilist (that is, *metaphysical*) interpretations (2003b, p. 9). If Siderits and Cooper are accurate in their assessment of the interpretative landscape then we can, in broad terms, say that the nihilist and absolutist readings are only avoided through presenting Nāgārjuna as doing something *other* than metaphysics.

While I agree with this shift away from metaphysically realist interpretations, I am concerned that the *manner* in which metaphysical interpretations are rejected subtly retains traces of the svabhāvic assumption. In my view, any binary or reactionary gestures present in the construction of 'non-metaphysical' interpretations indicates, just as we see in Murti, an acceptance of Nāgārjuna's conclusions while misunderstanding the existential repercussion of those conclusions. Non-metaphysical interpretations unmistakably understand Nāgārjuna as making toxic the entire existential polarity and highlighting the irresolvable tension in locating oneself on that polarity at all. Yet the way this conclusion is digested does nothing to depolarise the existential polarity and thus subverts the purpose of Nāgārjuna's analysis. If our goal is the eradication of the svabhāvic assumption, then we cannot afford to step silently away from the ontological project. It is, in my view, crucial that Nāgārjuna is seen as *addressing* metaphysics and not as *avoiding* metaphysics. Metaphysics is addressed, not through critiquing particular theories and producing an alternative, but through exposing and problematising the underlying assumptions that set the parameters for metaphysical theorising.

### **Raw svabhāvic impulse**

As we shall see, for Murti there is nothing in experience that suggests or demands an inherently existing Real except the very fact of experience itself. Murti's Real is posited only to appease the instinct that there *must* be something there to ground reality. Therefore, in Murti there is an opportunity to see the svabhāvic operation at its roots, before it becomes overly implicated in more elaborate structural reification. I hope to isolate the basic svabhāvic impulse and discuss it in its most general and fundamental form: simply the impulse that *something* must inherently exist. This will be useful given my wish to emphasise the general and context-insensitive aspect of the svabhāvic operation. This is important as it is in the generality that svabhāva and śūnyatā operate. If, upon realising the emptiness of a spoon, one turns their soteriological attention to the remainder of the cutlery drawer, emptiness has not truly been realised; it is nothing particular about the spoon that establishes its emptiness. If emptiness is understood unmistakably then the realisation of the emptiness of *any* object is the realisation of the emptiness of *all* objects (Hopkins, 1996, p. 408). Thus, to understand emptiness we have to understand it in the

generality.<sup>63</sup> For example, a traditional trope for explaining emptiness is through a mereological analysis of a chariot. Discussing the emptiness of the chariot in terms of its being nothing but the collection of its parts can seem to be a specific comment on chariots, which is why the mereological analysis quickly moves on to the emptiness of each part (in terms of *its* parts). To get the true message of śūnyatā, however, each of these mereological movements must be understood as a case study for the generality. The crucial point is that *whatever* is investigated in this way will be shown to be empty. The Madhyamaka analysis does not *displace* inherent existence (to the parts, or parts-of-parts), but rather *disappears* inherent existence. One does not, and should not, follow the trail of svabhāva to its hidden lair. The impossibility of svabhāva should be realised immediately in its universal generality. This immediacy is central to the understanding of śūnyatā.<sup>64</sup> In the Madhyamaka dialectic there is no sublation or synthesis. The Madhyamaka dialectic is always already moving on, it never concludes. So perhaps ‘movement’ is not the best metaphor for the Madhyamaka dialectic as the Madhyamaka ‘moves’ in dialectical stillness. The hope is that eventually the realist is forced to notice that what they are truly defending is not some particular set of inherently existing things, but inherent existence *in general*. The impulse to defend has its roots *here*, in the generality. Again, It follows that the Madhyamaka critique must operate in the generality. Its generality is a necessary quality that allows it to be applied to any and all svabhāvic postulates, any and all entities.<sup>65</sup> It is nothing *particular* about entities that the Madhyamaka analysis critiques, but rather something quite *general*: their entityhood.

The purpose of this chapter is not so much to defend Nāgārjuna against the charge of absolutism, but to explore the motivating intuitions that, under the influence of the svabhāvic assumption, generate realist interpretations of the Madhyamaka. Making the distinction between these motivating intuitions (why inherent existence *seems* necessary) and the svabhāvic assumption (the conclusion that inherent existence *is* necessary) is important as the intuitions need to be treated sympathetically while the assumption must be relentlessly refuted. Through looking at *why* svabhāva is deemed necessary, and at what Murti's absolute is postulated to *do*, we can discern the attraction of the svabhāvic assumption. The hope is that through realising that these motivating intuitions can be satisfied *without* positing an inherently existent absolute, the svabhāvic assumption loses its appeal and so becomes vulnerable to criticism.

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<sup>63</sup> In a sense we are looking at emptiness in the abstract, but without the absolutist connotations of ‘abstraction’. The generality of śūnyatā is immanent within the particular. Abstract-particular is another rigid binary that the Madhyamaka disrupts.

<sup>64</sup> This talk of immediacy need not exclude a long and gradual process of training and approximation. Yet the moment of unmistakable realisation of śūnyatā is necessarily immediate. Such points help us appreciate the non-conflict between the subitist and gradualist approaches to enlightenment. I discuss this more fully in Chapter 8 (see p.185).

<sup>65</sup> Recall, I use ‘entities’ to refer exclusively to supposed inherently existing things.

In this chapter I will identify those motivating intuitions and show how these co-operate with the svabhāvic assumption to generate an absolutist interpretation of the Madhyamaka. Through using Murti's absolutism as a test case, we can see how the svabhāvic assumption can survive an application of the Madhyamaka analysis through limiting the scope and duration of that application. Given Murti's imperfect application of the Madhyamaka dialectic his svabhāvic assumption persists in a simple but subtle form. Through investigating *how* it persists, we will discern what I take to be crucial moments in the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. Identifying these moments in Murti will assist in our identification of them in contemporary interpretations. As, given Murti's willingness to acknowledge his absolutism, such reificatory impulses are less concealed than they are in putatively non-absolutist interpretations. Thus I will argue that, despite the unpopularity of absolutism, forms of unacknowledged absolutism persist in contemporary presentations of the Madhyamaka.

I think it will be useful to notice three related motivating intuitions operating in Murti's realist interpretation of the middle way: the avoidance of nihilism; grounding important polarities such as real-unreal and truth-falsity; and establishing the possibility of soteriology.

## Avoiding nihilism

Despite their seemingly diverse conclusions, there is a deep similarity between Wood and Murti's interpretation of the Madhyamaka. Both are in agreement that Nāgārjuna's arguments demonstrate that there is no thing that can be independent and absolute; every thing is interdependent and so no thing can qualify as 'real'. Under the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, 'real' is understood to mean 'independently real and inherently existing' and so, given this criterion, Nāgārjuna's conclusion that 'everything is unreal' must be cashed out as either nihilism ('nothing is real') or transcendental absolutism ('that which is real is not a determinate thing'). In other words, while a nihilist takes Nāgārjuna to be critiquing reality itself, an absolutist takes Nāgārjuna to be critiquing our views of reality. In this sense, both Wood and Murti (and the extreme views which they represent) presuppose and uncritically endorse the distinction between ontology and epistemology. Approaching Nāgārjuna with these categories in mind is a cause for concern however, as it suggests an endorsement of the ontological project. If we are asking ourselves the rigidly bivalent question 'is Nāgārjuna talking reality or about our views of reality?' then we have already dogmatically decided on the nature of reality and have missed the middle way. Indeed, the Madhyamaka resists categorisation as either an ontology or an epistemology, and is perhaps best understood as an *ontoepistemology*.

Murti presents the Madhyamaka as a 'no views of the real' attitude rather than a 'no-reality' view (1980, p. 234), stressing that the "denial of the views of the real is not denial of the real" (*ibid*, p.218) for denying the real would be self-evidently nihilistic (*ibid*, p.330). It seems that Murti accepts the same interpretative bivalence as we noted in Wood, but opts for the alternative reading. In this sense then, the most immediate and instinctive motivation for an absolutist reading is simply the avoidance of nihilism.

Murti attempts to formulate an interpretation of the Madhyamaka using a general absolutist model. He takes it that every absolutism "has to formulate the distinction of Reality and Appearance and the two truths" (*ibid*, p.312), and that "the Real as the Noumenon has to be contrasted with phenomena which are but appearance" (*ibid*, p.243). The philosophical and soteriological goal of these absolutist systems is seeking freedom from illusion, from mere appearance, in order to approach or understand that which is truly real (*ibid*, p.299). Salvation is sought through the purification of the faculty of knowing (*ibid*, p.13), in order that the Real is known unmistakably and Freedom is attained (*ibid*, p.224). Murti presents the Madhyamaka absolutism as a dialectical criticism of the philosophical opposition established between the ātma (of the Sāṃkhya and the Vedānta) and anātma (of the Abhidharma) traditions (*ibid*, p.57). While the ātman tradition denies the reality of change and difference and describes the fundamental reality as changeless, the anātman tradition rejects oneness and asserts plurality and change as the fundamental reality. Murti takes it that the Madhyamaka 'view' is the middle position, which is really the *no-position* (*ibid*, p.329). This middle way resolves the opposition through transcending *all* conceptualisation and realising that fundamental reality is neither being nor becoming, neither unity nor change. Indeed, the fundamental reality, the Real, is "free from all empirical predicates and relation" (*ibid*, p.228).

On this interpretation Nāgārjuna advocated for "the rejection of the competence of Reason to comprehend reality" (*ibid*, p.128) and promoted the "utter negation of thought as revelatory of the real" (*ibid*, p.140). The absolute, the Real, is encountered only in the radical absence of the conceptual operation of Reason, and thus is "essentially Indeterminate" (*ibid*, p.235) and utterly transcendent to everyday experience (*ibid*, p.13). The Madhyamaka analysis, therefore, is an epistemological critique where the "sole concern" is the "purification of the faculty of knowing" (Murti, 1973, p. 13) and "the emphasis is on the correct attitude of our knowing and not on the known" (*ibid*, p.14). For Murti, "the Mādhyamika does not deny the real; he only denies doctrines about the real" (1980, p. 218). Murti agrees that no relational or determinate thing can be real, but assumes that if nothing were real then nihilism would follow. Thus Murti posits an absolute Real which instantiates the qualities of inherent existence. The Real is "something in itself, self-evident and self-existent" (*ibid*, p.139). This is in contrast to the unreal which is relative,

dependent and “lacks a nature of its own” (*ibid*, p.229). So, in line with the absolutist model, Murti retains a rigid appearance-reality binary where ‘reality’ is the transcendent Real and ‘appearance’ is the illusory realm of relational and determinate entities generated by obfuscating thought-forms.

For Murti, then, there must be an equivocation in the understanding of ‘emptiness’. The first sense is the same as Wood’s, where *śūnyatā* entails unreality and non-existence:

Pratītya-samutpāda, the cardinal doctrine of Buddhism, means, according to the Mādhyamika, the dependence of things on each other, their having no nature or reality of their own (*nissvabhāvatva* or *śūnyatā*). (*ibid*, p.122)

The second sense is applied uniquely to the Real. The Real “is *Śūnya*, devoid of every kind of determination” (*ibid*, p.229) and “devoid of thought-determinations (*śūnya*)” (*ibid*, p.122). For Murti, “[the Mādhyamika’s] absolute is not void, but *devoid* of finitude and imperfection” (*ibid*, p.332). So, whereas the first sense has connotations of ‘void’ and entails non-existence, the second sense connotes ‘devoid’ and entails existence. This distinction enables Murti to retain an inherently existing absolute and to formulate a theory which maintains the *svabhāvic* assumption in the face of Nāgārjuna’s arguments.

This equivocation in the meaning of *śūnyatā* is also seen in the distinction between *Rangtong* (self-empty) and *Shentong* (other-empty) interpretations of *śūnyatā* in Tibetan Buddhism. In very broad terms, the Shentongpa agree with Murti that *śūnyatā* is empty in a different way from which all other things are empty. For them, *śūnyatā* is *other-empty* because “if all were self-empty, since self-empty is nothing, that which was to be established [*śūnyatā*] would have been negated” (Hookham, 1991, p. 22). Rangtongpas disagree and insist that *śūnyatā* must be empty in the same way as everything else, for otherwise it would be self-existent and *svabhāva* would not have been fully negated (*ibid*, p.27). Much like Murti, the Shentongpa wish to “alert the practitioner to the presence of a dynamic, positive Reality that is to be experienced once the conceptual mind is defeated” (*ibid*, p.23). Interestingly, this Shentongpa teaching is understood as the final stage in a pedagogic sequence which has the Rangtongpa analysis as a precursor. Unlike Murti, who (in my view) does not take the dialectic far enough, the Shentongpa consider their view to be a subtle and corrective *addition* to the ruthless negation of those Mādhyamika that are exclusively Rangtongpa. The concern is that the negation of the reality of things (the realisation of self-emptiness) will continue impulsively and counter-productively even upon the desired cessation of conceptualisation. The Shentongpa fear that the Reality of Buddhajñāna will be refuted by the over-earnest Rangtongpa Mādhyamika and so the Shentongpa approach is applied

as a final corrective (*ibid*, p.23). It teaches us how and when to cease the dialectic negation.<sup>66</sup> In my view, this reificatory emphasis on the positive qualities of śūnyatā is not required. It is an unnecessary dogmatisation of the subtle repercussions of Nāgārjuna's conclusions, which *do* allow for positive qualities of a conventionally existent buddhahood.<sup>67</sup> There is a natural 'corrective' within the Madhyamaka method that 'rescues' it from nihilism; the collapse of the existential polarity. The dialectic negation will stop of its own accord when the svabhāvic assumption ceases. To think otherwise is to mistake the object of negation; it is the inherent existence of things, and not the things themselves which is being negated.

According to Hookham (*ibid*, p.29), the 'exclusive Rangtongpa' position found in the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika approach of Gelugpa Buddhism is a minority view in Tibetan Buddhism. However, due to their rigorous emphasis on philosophy and their "penchant for scholarship" (*ibid*, p.17), their approach is disproportionally represented in western Buddhist studies. The Gelugpas, of course, claim that theirs is the most orthodox of the Tibetan traditions, but Hookham offers reasons to doubt this claim (*ibid*). Indeed, among Tibetan scholars it is "invariably the Gelugpas themselves" who recognise their philosophy as the most orthodox (*ibid*). Hookham suggest that this alone should "cast serious doubt about this claim" (*ibid*).<sup>68</sup> Interestingly then, if all this is true,

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<sup>66</sup> Again, this is a very broad sketch of a complex distinction. Indeed, there is an interesting concession to the pedagogic utility found in the dialectical tension between these two readings, where each can be seen as a corrective for the other (Hookham, 1991, p. 23). This immediately suggests, however, that neither view is the ultimate truth and that the tension can and should be resolved through the Madhyamaka method. Polarised opposition between Rangtong and Shentong is only encountered by those who assume inherent existence. The Madhyamaka is neither Rangtong (as defined against Shentong) nor Shentong (as defined against Rangtong), nor both nor neither. A Mādhyamika understands both as conventional truths and finds a context-sensitive utility in each. This is why a pedagogic utility can be located in the space of dialectical tension between them.

<sup>67</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view, the mere utilisation of positive terms is not in itself a commitment to the inherent, absolute or independent existence of the entities or properties apparently referred to by those positive statements. Once the two truths are understood as non-dual, true propositions establish *conventional* existence, and not *inherent* existence. The impulsive reification that attends positively asserted statements is an aspect of the svabhāvic assumption and is not an integral part of statement-making. A Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika can, and will, talk in positive terms in particular pedagogic and soteriological contexts, offering a positive picture of tattva, śūnyatā or prajñā. Such behaviour is not necessarily at odds with the Prāsaṅgika strategy of pure dialectical criticism, as positive assertions are not taken to be ultimate truths.

<sup>68</sup> Here is an interesting warning against the appropriation of historical authenticity (orthodoxy) in an attempt to bolster the profile of one's philosophical position. Despite my personal sympathies with the 'exclusive Rangtongpa' position of the Gelugpas, I cannot help but concede Hookham's point here. It is dubious to claim orthodoxy (and thus charge alternative presentations with *unorthodoxy*) when the historical roots for such a claim are tenuous and vulnerable. It presents a duplicitous picture and undermines the very purpose in making such a claim (which, I would suggest is a pedagogic upāya calculated to increase prestige). This being said, however, we should also be aware that the claims for orthodoxy attributed to the Gelugpas by Hookham may not be accurate. If, for the sake of argument, these Gelugpas do understand and inhabit the middle way, then they have depolarised the orthodoxastic binary. It may be that the Gelugpas merely claim to present the unmistaken understanding of Buddha's teachings (which for them is neither a historical nor a hermeneutical claim), and that this claim has been *received* as a claim for orthodoxy. For the Madhyamaka, orthodoxy is of no concern whatsoever; timeless authority has nothing to do with historical fidelity. I will discuss these points more thoroughly in Chapter 6.

then the dominant discourses in Tibetan Buddhist scholarship is something closer to a Murtian absolutism than the middle way. It would seem that, far from being an outdated relic, a Murtian reading of Nāgārjuna has a great attraction, particularly perhaps to those of an explicitly soteriological persuasion. In Chapter 4, I will show how these soteriological concerns can be addressed without the need to introduce an equivocation into ‘śūnyatā’ and posit an inherently existing absolute.

In my view, Murti accepts Nāgārjuna’s arguments, but without grasping the purpose of those arguments. Murti burdens himself with a cumbersome and inherently existing Real simply due to the assumption that denying the Real is necessarily nihilistic (1980, p. 330). Yet the denial of the Real is *precisely* the purpose of Nāgārjuna’s analysis.<sup>69</sup> Nāgārjuna tells us that for reality to be as we (mistakenly) take it to be, it must be entirely independent and not relative in the least. He also tells us that the opposing poles in a polarity are necessarily mutually dependent. These two points together entail the conclusion that our understanding of reality is fundamentally mistaken; no such independently existing reality exists, and the appearance-reality polarity must collapse into a non-dual ontoepistemological reality. Murti seems to accept both of these points individually while refusing to accept the entailed conclusion. He somehow misses that his position retains polarities (based on the fundamental appearance-reality distinction) that escape his own critique.

Nāgārjuna denies that which is *independently* real (the ‘Real’), but without denying that which is *dependently* real. In many ways, Murti’s inability to appreciate that there is any meaningful sense of ‘real’ apart from ‘independently real’ is his only misstep.<sup>70</sup> Nāgārjuna’s purpose is to refute the realists’ criterion for reality, not to transfer its application on to some hypothetical and hypostatized Real. Murti’s lingering allegiance to the svabhāvic assumption forces him to keep a dualistic epistemology and realist ontology in mind overlong. Such polarised and polarising structures should collapse along with all the other polarised structures that Nāgārjuna and Murti critique. If he allowed the existential polarity to collapse, Murti would find that he could satisfy his anti-nihilistic intuitions without having to adopt a cumbersome and philosophically incredible Real. This oversight introduces an internal incoherence into Murti’s position. Murti recognises that the Madhyamaka system is “all dialectic and no doctrine” (*ibid*, p.vii) yet his interpretation retains the crucial character of dogmatism and fails to follow the Nāgārjunian dialectic to its radical conclusion. Murti retains the most subtle, understated and apparently innocent view of

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<sup>69</sup> Here I am using ‘Real’ with the capital letter as a short hand for ‘inherently existent and independently real’. By using the term (and the capitalising gesture) I do not endorse such a Real. I use it only to hold realists to account over *their* endorsement of such a Real.

<sup>70</sup> This blindness to any form of existential qualifier is one way of talking about the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. If this is Murti’s only misstep, then we can perhaps begin to justify the claim that it is nothing but the svabhāvic assumption that forces absolutist readings of Nāgārjuna, and realist worldviews in general.

reality there can be; simply that there is a reality there. Whereas with Wood, the oversight was in missing that an absolute lack of inherently existing things was itself an inherently existing thing. With Murti, the oversight is in missing that the absolute lack of views of reality is itself a view of reality.

Murti appreciates that the Mādhyamika do not criticise specific contents of views in order to generate their own content, so he has them criticise content in *general* (*ibid*, p.162). For Murti the target is any conceptual content to views of reality, and so he generates a contentless view of reality; a Real that is essentially indeterminate and transcendent to reason. Yet, in understanding Nāgārjuna this way, he misses the true depth of the Madhyamaka analysis. From the Madhyamaka point of view, the target is neither a specific content, nor is it content in general. The targets of the Madhyamaka analysis are the svabhāvic presuppositions embedded in view-forming behaviour itself. It is not about the content (which Murti appreciates), but it is about the attitude towards content (which Murti misses). The Madhyamaka analysis is importantly insensitive to content. Murti is close to achieving this in as much as his analysis is insensitive to *positive* content, but he falls short of true content-insensitivity in his privileging of the absence of content. For Murti the absence of content, the cessation of thought-forms, yields the Real as it is in itself, and thus the point of the Madhyamaka analysis is subtly missed entirely.<sup>71</sup>

Reacting against views of reality with a refusal to offer a view misses the point and does not constitute a cessation of presuppositions with respect to ultimate reality. The ontological project is still being pursued. Even if we are silent with respect to ultimate reality, the very fact that it is *there* limits and directs our interpretative processes to the exclusion of the middle way. We see this writ large in Murti but also, I think, in more subtle forms in contemporary non-absolutist interpretations. Those who favour a non-metaphysical interpretation make a similar slip when they form their responses as an antipathetic reaction against metaphysical interpretations. Like Murti, such a gesture rejects content rather than attitude. Murti and Wood have both shown us that a cessation of all positive content does not necessarily ensure a cessation of the svabhāvic assumption, so the cessation of all metaphysical speculation does not ensure the cessation of metaphysical realism. The Madhyamaka must *address* metaphysics, not *avoid* metaphysics. The Madhyamaka project is not to support a nihilist, absolutist or non-metaphysical worldview, and nor is it to decide 'none of the above'. The Madhyamaka project is to inquire into the existential attitudes and view-forming behaviour involved in *all* of the above, and to encourage an

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<sup>71</sup> Murti takes it that the therapeutic purpose of the Madhyamaka analysis "is to void the mind of this tendency to conceptualise the real" (1980, p. 336). We can see, however, that he has got this the wrong way round. From the Madhyamaka point of view the goal is not the cessation of conceptualisation of the real, but rather the cessation of reification of our conceptualisations. It is useful for our purposes here to note that Murti's fundamental misunderstanding arises from the svabhāvic assumption; the ingrained assumption that there *must* be an independently existing reality.

appreciation of śūnyatā and the non-duality of the two truths. We can say, perhaps, that the Madhyamaka does not offer an alternative view of reality, but offers an alternative reality to views.

## Locating the True

We have noted that Murti's absolutism is an attempt to complete the ontological project and is a form of ontological realism. This is attended, as we would expect, by a correspondence theory of truth. In the uncritical adoption of such a theory, we see another motivating intuition behind realist interpretations of the Madhyamaka: the intuition that some form of inherent existence is required to ground truth and to avoid an unwelcome relativism.

Crudely stated, a correspondence theory of truth is one where true statements are true by virtue of their accurate correspondence with the way things really are. Unmistaken knowledge (truth) presents reality as it is in itself, mistaken knowledge (falsity) presents reality in a way other than it is. Such a contrast between mistaken knowledge and unmistaken knowledge establishes the rigid appearance-reality binary and the realist ontology that come with it. A rigid distinction between the two truths is also established. Ultimate truths correspond to the way things really are, they are the truth of reality. Conventional truths are 'true' merely with respect to the realm of appearance and are ultimately false.

It is clear that Murti endorses such a theory of truth, when he argues that a Real ground is necessary to account for the sense of illusion and falsity we have with respect to our ordinary experience:

... if there were no transcendent ground, how could any view be condemned as false.  
A view is false, because it *falsifies the real*, makes the thing appear other than what it is in itself. Falsity implies the real that is falsified. (*ibid*, p.234)

In other words, without a Real there would be no meaning to the 'falsity' that the Madhyamaka identifies in views of reality. Such views are false because they misrepresent the Real (which is uniform, isolated and indeterminate) as appearance (which is diverse, relational and determinate). Furthermore, Murti's soteriological concerns mean that it must be possible to encounter the Real as it truly is, and so the Real must really be the way it appears to the purified faculty of knowledge (*ibid*, p.235). All of this is problematic from the Madhyamaka point of view, as it relies on the presence of an inherently existing ultimate reality. Such a reality is necessary both to ground the notion of a 'way things really are', and to ensure that ultimate truths *true* in the way that conventional truths are not. Furthermore a correspondence theory requires a strong

polarisation of appearance-reality and a clear ontic distinction between the two truths. It is therefore embedded in the very epistemic and ontic structures that the Madhyamaka seeks to disrupt.

Of course, for my purposes here it is not enough that Murti is mistaken from the point of view of the Madhyamaka. I need to demonstrate that Murti is mistaken from his *own* point of view. As Murti knows, the Mādhyamika reject views as false due to their internal incoherence:

Rejection of views is not based on any positive grounds or the acceptance of another view; it is solely based on the inner contradiction implicit in each view. (*ibid*, p.128)

Murti accepts that the Mādhyamika do not assess the truth of their opponents' views through contrast with their own, for the Mādhyamika do not volunteer their own views.<sup>72</sup> Yet Murti contradicts himself, and retains a subtle form of 'contrasting against', when he takes the Mādhyamika to "reject every view as falsification of the real" (*ibid*, p.234). In other words, for Murti's realist Mādhyamika, views are false when contrasted against the True Real. In fact, the Mādhyamika merely point out that the objects that the realists take to be independently existent and so (by their standards) real, cannot be independently existent and so are (by their standards) unreal; dogmatic views are false only in contrast against *themselves*.<sup>73</sup> Despite claiming his Madhyamaka dialectic is a non-affirming negation (*ibid*, p.132), Murti has shifted the non-affirming negative 'it is not the case that these things are ultimately true' into the affirming negation 'the ultimate truth is not these things'. In doing so, Murti posits his Real as ultimately true and goes against his own insistence that the negation of a thesis does not entail the acceptance of a counter-thesis (*ibid*, p.132). Furthermore he inaugurates a process whereby his inherently existing Real, that is necessarily transcendent to experience and utterly beyond determination and conception, is unconsciously and illegitimately attributed with properties and characteristics. Wishing to retain the meaningfulness of important polarities (such as true-false, appearance-reality) while positing an ultimately true Real, Murti cannot avoid grounding these polarities in that Real. In so doing he implicit and illegitimately characterises this indeterminate absolute as Real and True.<sup>74</sup> These *sotto voce* determinations introduce an instability into Murti's position through implicating his Real in the relativity of experience, and robbing it of both its

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<sup>72</sup> Speaking precisely it is only the Madhyamaka-Prāsangika that maintain this stance, the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika do advance counter-theses (Murti, 1980, p. 132).

<sup>73</sup> We can account for Murti's oversight through appreciating that his svabhāvic assumption presents the inherent existence of the Real as being a self-evident and unquestionable Truth, rather than a dogmatic view.

<sup>74</sup> Murti's Real is also characterised-in-capitals as Indeterminate (1980, p. 235), the Unconditioned (*ibid* p.158), the ultimate Norm (*ibid* p.235), the Noumenon (*ibid* p.243), Nirvāṇa (*ibid* p.229), Infinite (*ibid* p.219), Transcendent (*ibid* p.142), Ideal (*ibid*), Intuition (*ibid* p.227), Freedom (*ibid*) and Deity (*ibid*).

absolutist and transcendental credentials.<sup>75</sup> If we accept Nāgārjuna's arguments that the poles of a polarity are mutually dependent and relative, then we have to accept that is true for *all* polarities, including true-false and appearance-reality.

Murti is aware, I think, of this tension. He senses the disruption to the existential polarity, but impulsively resists its collapse. Murti understands that the Real is "incommensurable and inexpressible" (*ibid*, p.231), but realises that he is nevertheless implicated in some form of affirmation. Thus he attempts to engage in a form of affirmation that is "more universal and positive than affirmation" (*ibid*, p.160) in order to mysteriously determine the Indeterminate:

Śūnyatā is negation of negations; it is thus a re-affirmation of the infinite and inexpressibly positive character of the Real. (*ibid*)

Murti knows that such affirmations cannot be ordinary as they attempt to 'refer' to that which is transcendent to reason and beyond determination. Perhaps his use of capitalisation is an attempt to articulate that his referent lies outside of (or fits poorly within) his adopted forms of discourse. The typographical shift from 'real' to 'Real' could be seen as an attempt to present the Real as somehow different from the lower-case (lower-caste) real that is in mutual relationship with appearance. Yet saying it in capitals does not evade the problem, for these references are not employed merely as a semantically empty placeholder for an inexpressible absolute, but they are intended to deliver meaning and express *function*.<sup>76</sup> The problem for Murti is not just that his Real is too transcendently marvellous to be the referent of mundane conceptualisations, but that its radical transcendence forbids it from performing the function that it is posited in order to perform. A transcendent Real cannot enter into experience or act as the stable ground for any experiential polarities; it cannot be the True that accounts for falsity, it cannot be the Real that accounts for unreality. Not only should an absolute, unrelational and inert reality not be *called* 'real' or 'true', but it should not *be* real or true. Recharacterising it as being Real and True does not solve the problem, for if these properties are truly transcendent they cannot operate as universal surrogates for the function and meaning we encounter in the real and the true. Indeed, Murti agrees with Nāgārjuna that an absolute must be entirely unrelated, and such an absolute

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<sup>75</sup> The point here is not just that there is an incoherence in conceptualising reality as unconceptualisable or determining reality as being indeterminate. As Burton suggests, this objection is not entirely convincing as it could be the case that reality "*is that sort of matter about which nothing can be conceived, except that it is unconceptualisable*" (2001, p. 56). My point here is that such a formulation is unacceptable by *Murti's* criterion. Murti needs the Real to be utterly transcendent to all conception. A "two-tier hierarchy of conceptuality" (*ibid*), which allows a small number of privileged conceptualisations of reality, is unsuitable for Murti's project. Again, the Madhyamaka project does not critique views through showing incoherencies with respect to the way reality truly *is* or *could be* (as Burton seems to be doing in his philosophical critique), but critiques views through showing incoherencies with respect to *themselves*.

<sup>76</sup> We can also see this evasion through capitalisation in Hookham's sympathetic treatment of the Shentongpa: "Emptiness of Other (Shentong) refers to Ultimate Reality, which is said to truly Exist because it is empty of existence, non-existence both and neither" (1991, p. 15).

can neither function nor interact (*ibid*, p.229); it necessarily exists entirely independently and alone as the “sole Reality” (*ibid*, p.251). The suspicion is raised that Murti is attempting to have his Cake and eat It.

In his use of capitals and his attempts to articulate a non-deterministic form of affirmation, I think that we see Murti struggling to make sense of his Madhyamaka intuitions within ontic and epistemic structures which cannot contain them. Murti gets that the Madhyamaka analysis radically disrupts conceptual and epistemic norms, but insufficiently reflects these disruptions in his own modes of discourse.<sup>77</sup> The challenge Nāgārjuna sets us, and which Murti fails, is to suspend the need to characterise the absence of a rigid conceptual polarity in terms of the polarity we have just disposed of.<sup>78</sup> If we dispose of all conceptual polarities then we cannot characterise what we ‘have left’ in any way (including as ‘uncharacterisable’, or even ‘Uncharacterisable’).

As I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, the insight that no conceptual determination is ultimately true should prompt us to reject the correspondence theory of truth, rather than attempt a displacement of Truth outwith the reach of determination. We are forced to conclude (as Nāgārjuna intended) that there is no independently existing ultimate reality, conceptually accessible or otherwise. Murti misses this and assumes an uncritical stance on truth and falsity, not realising that, were he to relax his assumptions around the ontological project, then both ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ would shift their meaning such that a Real ground is not required to ground that polarity. Such a ground is only necessary *within* Murti’s system, it is not universally necessary. A conventional true-false distinction and appearance-reality distinction can survive the collapse the ontological project.

### **Anti-realist realism.**

This particular realist impulse that we see in Murti, where a meaningful sense of truth requires grounding in inherent existence, is also discernible in a more subtle form in non-metaphysical interpretations. Taking Siderits as an example I think we can discern a destabilising trace of realism, even in an explicitly anti-realist account. Given that Siderits’ position is explicitly akin to the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika, I will discuss their position here too.

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<sup>77</sup> I am sympathetic with the difficulty faced in attempting to articulate a Madhyamaka understanding in forms of discourse deeply informed by the svabhāvic assumption, but I think that Murti’s attempts to do so are doomed from the outset. It is a weak and ineffectual strategy to attempt to articulate Madhyamaka intuitions *within* svabhāvic modes of discourse. One cannot append a capital letter and an air of mystery and hope that it somehow captures the intuition of an immanently transcendent ground that escapes the radical criticism of the Madhyamaka. In my view, if the forms of discourse cannot contain one’s intuitions then one can only progress by directly critiquing the forms of discourse themselves.

<sup>78</sup> Again, we noted the same difficulty in Wood’s nihilistic interpretation.

Unlike Murti, Siderits and the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika do not accept the independent existence of an absolute that somehow escapes pratītya-samutpāda. They understand that all existing things are dependently related. Yet they feel a similar intuitive pull of the True, and attempt to find some means whereby true and existing things can be distinguished from false and non-existing things. Siderits acknowledges that both himself and the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika adopt a 'highly mitigated' form of essentialism in order to account for a shared and grounding sense of 'truth' (albeit it context-sensitive)(2003a, p. 192). This allows that, given a particular cannon of rationality (Siderits, 1989, p. 240), or set of 'hard-core' common sense intuitions (MacKenzie, 2008, p. 206),<sup>79</sup> we can make meaningful distinctions between those things that are existent/true and those things that are non-existent/false. This is 'essentialism' because *within* these particular common contexts then some things *do* exist, and some things *are* true. These properties of existence and truth *inhere* within those dependently originated objects. For Siderits, this essentialism allows that within some meta-context (constituted by a "common core of shared beliefs" (1989, p. 245), a "shared way of life"(2003a, p. 206) or a "shared set of ethical norms" (*ibid*)) alternative cultures can, if they wish, compare and contrast their alternative practices and conventions to determine which is better (*ibid*). There is always the possibility of 'better' (thus relativism is avoided), but no sense of 'best' (thus absolutism, or dogmatism, is avoided) (*ibid*, p.206).

Importantly, these criterion for truth and existence need to be somehow *shareable*, they need to be in some way common and accessible to the various members of a truth-sharing community. This sense of shareable truth is important, thinks Siderits, to avoid relativistic results. Siderits takes it that, due to their inability to volunteer a position, the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika cannot present a coherent non-relativistic pluralism (1989, p. 245), but rather propound "a kind of linguistic idealism"(1997, p. 82). Whereas the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika, with their ability to assert shareable conventional truths, have the means to compare and contrast alternate conventional truths and thereby avoid both relativism and dogmatism while maintaining a workable pluralism (Siderits, 1989, p. 245).

The Svātantrika argue that, in order to be validly established, conventional truths (conventionally existing things) must appear to unmistaken minds (Hopkins, 1996, p. 450). They consider this necessary to ground the distinction between existing things (conventional truths) and non-existing things (conventional falsities) (Siderits, 2003a, p. 195, n. q). Given that the appearing objects of these putatively unmistaken minds are inherently existing things, the Svātantrika are

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<sup>79</sup> MacKenzie problematises Siderits' position and presents this 'shared' basis as a workable alternative. From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, both Siderits and MacKenzie suffer from the same flaw of retaining a very subtle sense of svabhāva under the impression that such an inherently existing common basis is required to avoid relativism.

committed to the inherent existence of these dependently originating objects (Hopkins, 1996, p. 436). For the Svātantrika, then, existing things are *inherently* dependently related.<sup>80</sup> This is why the Svātantrika are willing to volunteer autonomous arguments for the truth of śūnyatā; as conventional truths are validly established by the minds of ordinary beings, there is a common ground of understanding upon which to have meaningful discussions about the nature of these conventional truths. Like Siderits, the Svātantrika feel that conventional truths are in some sense *sharable*; they and their interlocutors disagree about the ultimate nature of the *same* existing thing. This requires that existing things exist, to some degree, from their own side, i.e. *inherently*.

However, from the Prāsaṅgika point of view, that truths are shareable, that the ‘same’ object can be discussed, that the ‘same’ context can be operated within, suggests that these enduring and sharable things are in some sense independently existing. The truth of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda entails a radical and universal impermanence with respect to existing things and conventional truths. Conventional truths and conventionally existing things do not last a single moment, and are necessarily unique to each moment and to each individual. In other words, the context to which the existence and truth of existing thing are sensitive is rather more fluid than Siderits allows. The context is continuously enfolding and reconstituting itself and so there is no possibility of endurance or commonality. To endure for even one moment is to exist in some way independently of context. Similarly, to be sharable, to be *common* to more than one context, is to exist in some way independent of context. To be shareable means that the existence of the shared thing is an inherent existence; its truth, its existence, however fleeting, is established to some extent from its own side, by virtue of its own essence.

For Siderits there is no ultimate reality independent of mind, so the ultimate reality of things is their being dependent upon mind. In other words, the ultimate reality of things is their conventional reality. Rejecting any form of ultimate truth, Siderits suggest that all truths and all existing things are ultimately conventional.<sup>81</sup> We can say perhaps that, very subtly, Siderits has fallen into the two extremes. He denies any form of existence to ultimate reality and ultimate truth, and subtly asserts the inherent existence of conventional reality and conventional truth; he is subtly absolutist with respect to conventional reality and subtly nihilist with respect to ultimate reality.

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<sup>80</sup> This is opposed to the Prāsaṅgika view which takes the dependent relatedness of existing things to itself be a dependently originated designation. For the Prāsaṅgika things are conventionally conventional, not ultimately conventional.

<sup>81</sup> Effectively equating the ultimate with the conventional, Siderits insufficiently distinguishes the ultimate nature of things from their conventional nature, and his semantic non-dualism slips into a semantic monism. From the Prāsaṅgika point of view, the ultimate reality of things is their emptiness. The only ‘essence’ of things is their essencelessness. That existing things are dependently originated is their conventional nature, while their ultimate nature is emptiness. This distinction, the non-identity of the non-dual two truths, is crucial for an unmitigated understanding of the Madhyamaka.

So, just like Murti, Siderits and the Svātantrika look to some form of inherent existence in order to provide a stable ground for the true-false polarity. Despite distancing themselves from absolutist interpretations, their interpretations retain subtle forms of the absolutist impulse: the assumption that some form of inherent existence is necessary to secure the meaning and function of important polarities. Mitigated or not, this essentialism is a departure from the middle way. Furthermore, it is an unnecessary departure as the ultimate truth of śūnyatā and the conventional truth of pratītya-samutpāda (when understood as non-dual) are grounds enough for a non-relativistic and functional distinction between truth and falsity.<sup>82</sup>

## Prajñā and soteriology

A particular concern for Murti regarding the groundedness of reality is the possibility of soteriology. An interpretation of Madhyamaka Buddhism ought to make sense of the reports of contemplatives as to the possibility of a soteriologically rewarding intuition of śūnyatā, as well as the textual evidence that suggests there are important positive connotations and content with respect to ultimate reality (Murti, 1980, p. 47). Indeed, as the soteriological goal in Indian philosophy, and arguably in all soteriological and philosophical contexts,<sup>83</sup> is understood in terms of the removal of ignorance or illusion in order to unmistakably experience reality, then there is an obvious soteriological concern should it turn out that there is no ultimate reality which can be experienced directly and unmistakably.

Again, the Shentongpa share Murti's concerns, arguing that for buddhahood to be possible and for it to be significantly different from ordinary experience, an absolute reality is required (Hookham, 1991, p. 34). If ordinary experience is the nature of suffering because it is impermanent, dependently related and conditioned then surely, the intuition goes, enlightened experiences must be eternal, independently existing and unconditioned. Or, if this is refuted, it seems as if enlightened experience, although similar to ordinary experience in being impermanent, dependently related and conditioned, is somehow different enough to account for the reportedly supermundane qualities of a Buddha. As Hookham puts it: "How can the Buddha be a refuge for beings if He and/or His Qualities are compounded and subject to destruction?" (*ibid*, p.46). It

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<sup>82</sup> I will explore this point in more detail in Chapter 7.

<sup>83</sup> I do not think it is too much of a stretch to characterise, in a general way, all soteriological traditions as truth-seeking projects, and all truth-seeking projects (which would include secular scientific endeavours) as trading upon an appearance-reality distinction of some kind. Even where truth-seeking is apparently discouraged (in, perhaps, religious traditions where truth is unquestionably located within the revealed doctrine of that tradition), truth-believing is a virtue. In each case unmistakable confidence in the nature of reality is a soteriological end in itself. This is true even for secular truth-seeking projects; finding the truth of reality is an unquestionable good and an end in itself. Indeed, in this sense, scientific and secular truth-seeking projects turn out to be soteriological in character. I will unpack this point in detail in Chapter 8.

seems to realists, like Murti and the Shentongpa, that there has to be something *more than*, something *behind*, something *transcendent to*, the empirical mundanity of ordinary existence in order for a religious worldview to be soteriologically meaningful:

[Ś]ūnyatā serves a soteriological purpose and is religiously motivated.... But how can this purpose be secured if nothing is left over as Real, after the rejection of all things as relative? (Murti, 1973, p. 23)

Furthermore, under the realists criterion for reality, this ‘more than’ must exist independently of everyday experience. Thus an inherently existing absolute reality is posited to account for the possibility of soteriology.

This position proves difficult to maintain, however, as Nāgārjuna’s argument for universal *pratītya-samutpāda* tells us is that independently existing things cannot participate in relationship. Murti accepts this argument, agreeing that to be in relationship, or to have the capacity to be in relationship (which amounts to the same thing), is to be essentially subject to causation and “causal or other relations obtains essentially between appearances only; it is a mark of the unreal” (1980, p. 242). Therefore, the Real is necessarily “beyond the possibility of any change or limitation” (*ibid*, p.234), and has “always been of one uniform nature” (*ibid*, p.233). Attempting to maintain both these points simultaneously, Murti works his way into a terrible tension. If everything relational is unreal, his Real cannot relate. If the Real cannot relate, then how can it be a part of the soteriological process?

Murti attempts to navigate this tension through suggesting that nothing is ‘really’ changing. There is no ‘real’ relationship, it just seems that way due to ignorance, “there is novelty epistemically, not ontologically” (Murti, 1980, p. 219). Murti is aware that, given this lack of real relationship, the soteriological process is difficult to explain:

[T]he Vedānta and Vijñānavāda, owing to their identification of the real with Ātman or Vijñāna, are seemingly more able to provide a bridge between the world of appearance and the Absolute. The transition seems easier. The Mādhyamika by his insistence on the sheer transcendence of the absolute and his refusal to identify it with anything met with in experience appears to do violence to our accustomed ways of approach. (*ibid*, p.236)

Murti suggests that the Mādhyamikas consciously neglect to explain the pertinent mechanics due to their abstinence from metaphysical speculation (*ibid*, p.242). This is not an oversight in their exposition, but rather a skilful means to avoid undue confusion in their interlocutors. Murti seems to suggest that the relationship is merely unexplained, rather than unexplainable.

It is certainly true that, due to their rejection of an ultimate reality (in the sense required by the ontological project), a Mādhyamika does not offer metaphysical theories regarding ultimate reality. Murti, however, fails to collapse the polarity between appearance and reality and retains a commitment to the ontological project. Therefore, notwithstanding the ineffable and trans-rational nature of his Real, we are within our rights to expect some kind of explanation of the soteriological dynamic whereby this Real is encountered. The problem for Murti is that, given his position with respect to the noumenal Real and its involvement (or lack of it) in phenomenal appearance, this dynamic is frankly unexplainable (rather than merely unexplained).

What is important to notice here is the very different notions of ‘obscuration’ that are functioning in the traditional forms of absolutism Murti mentions and in the Madhyamaka absolutism that Murti is forced to construct. Crudely stated, in the traditional absolutist model the Absolute appears in experience in a distorted manner, and its true nature is misunderstood due to the distortions (*ibid*, p.59). The soteriological transition here is easy enough to understand: we experience polarities, one pole is grounded in the real while the other pole (and hence the entire sense of ‘polarity’) is constituted by distortion and illusion. As we remove the distortion the sense of polarity dissipates, and we see ever more clearly the absolute reality that is all there has ever been. Murti’s Real, however, is epistemically distant (*ibid*, p.237) and ordinary experience is in no sense a distorted or incomplete encounter with the Real (*ibid*, p.13). The polarities we live with in ordinary experience are *entirely* illusory and unreal as neither pole is grounded in the Real. For Murti, thought-forms entirely obscure the Real and so “a progressive realisation of the absolute” is incompatible with the Madhyamaka analysis (*ibid*, p.220). There can be no sense of greater or lesser degrees of distortion or misrepresentation of the absolute in everyday experience. Murti acknowledges, therefore, that “the relation between the two is not made abundantly clear” and that this could be considered a “drawback in the Mādhyamika conception of the Absolute” (*ibid*, p.237).<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps Murti is aware of this tension, as an oscillation is discernible in his position. He sometimes appears to offer a more traditional understanding of obscuration:

the relation between the Absolute and phenomena is not that of otherness; the absolute, looked at through the categories of Reason (thought-forms), is the world of phenomena; and phenomena, devoid of these falsifying thought-forms, are the Absolute. (Murti, 1980, p. 251)

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<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, Murti here seems curious as to what the ‘relation’ between the absolute and everyday things might be, seemingly missing that there must be *no* relation (due to the independent existence of the Absolute).

Here Murti seems very close to equating the world of phenomena (minus falsifying thought-forms) with the Absolute. He is aware that there is a “vital sense” in which the Absolute is “identical with [phenomena] as their reality” (*ibid*, p.86). This is more like the Madhyamaka as I understand it, and suggests that Murti may have a more nuanced interpretation of Nāgārjuna than I grant him here in my necessarily broad characterisation. It does seem that Murti’s instincts are rooted in the middle way, but his svabhāvic assumption forces flaws and incoherencies into his formulation of those intuitions. Given his insistence regarding its inherent existence, Murti cannot account for the influence that the ‘falsifying thought-forms’ have over the Absolute. Given Murti’s burdensome standards for reality, if there is a relationship then the Absolute is unreal. Yet, if there is no relationship how does the falsifying happen?

All of this makes the soteriological transition from appearance to reality not only difficult to explain, but *impossible*. In the traditional absolutist model it is the fact that appearance is grounded in reality that makes the transition between them possible. This groundedness is only possible if there is an acknowledged relationship between reality and appearance and the Real enters into experience in a distorted or incomplete form. Murti does not seem to appreciate that through characterising his Real as independently existing he breaks any form of relationship between appearance and reality.<sup>85</sup> Without this relationship there is no principled reason why the cessation of appearance should necessarily yield reality.

Murti may try to defend his position here by arguing that he identifies the Real with Intuition (*ibid*, p.220), and hope that that explains why the removal of thought-forms should reveal the Real, as “with the purification of the intellect, Intuition (*prajñā*) emerges” (*ibid*, p.217). This, however, would just shift the problem from the Real to Intuition. The problematic relationship is now between extra-ordinary Intuition and intra-ordinary conceptual thought. Either there is a relationship between them or there is not. If there is, then Intuition (and so, because they are identical, the Real) is not absolute. If there is not, then why should the subsidence of thought patterns yield non-dual knowledge?

In one attempt to explain the soteriological process, it seems as if Murti is trying to smuggle in a form of relationship which does not entail mutual dependence. Murti recognises the need for a relationship between the “exalted Being (God)” and “finite creatures” in order to account for soteriological ambition (*ibid*, p.226). He notes that the two “cannot differ in kind”, but also

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<sup>85</sup> It is important to notice that, despite being mistaken from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, it is nevertheless intuitive to imagine a reality that is entirely *independent* of its appearance. In contrast, it is deeply counterintuitive to imagine a reality that is entirely *unrelated* to its appearance. An important aspect of the Madhyamaka method is drawing attention to the absurdity of the inherent existence assumed necessary to qualify as ‘real’. This absurdity starts to make itself felt when we accept Nāgārjuna’s point that independent existence necessarily entails unrelatedness. From the Madhyamaka point of view, an independently existing reality should be just as counterintuitive as an unrelational reality.

realises that there must be some difference in order to sustain the religious consciousness (*ibid*). His view seems to be that:

Any relation, even the relationship of worshipper and worshipped, presupposes a fundamental unity which provides the platform for these differences that are relative. (*ibid*)<sup>86</sup>

Therefore the “non-difference” between the relata entails that they are each “aspects of a more basic being - the Absolute” (*ibid*). Therefore, to maintain the privilege of the tathāgata over ordinary beings:

the relations of the Deity (tathāgata) to the Absolute (prajñā, śūnyatā) is one-sided; the former depends on the latter, and not vice versa. (*ibid*, p.225)

Thus Murti is forced to introduce the possibility of a one-sided relationship, the dissymmetry of which is hard to maintain in the light of Nāgārjuna’s analysis. Again, this oscillation and inconsistency is evidence of Murti’s Madhyamaka intuitions being derailed by the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.

### **A contemporary parallel**

Again, we can see a similar tension in more contemporary interpretations. In Cooper (2002) we discern a subtle sympathy with Murti's position, whereas in Siderits (2003b) we see a subtle antipathy.<sup>87</sup> Siderits would discount these trans-rational religious sentiments, whereas Cooper would account for them in a less ontologically committed way.

As we have seen, Siderits rejects as incoherent the notion of anything ‘more’ than the relative and conceptualised empirical realm. The Madhyamaka tells us, he says, that the notion of an ultimate reality independent of mind is incoherent and that all meaning, all truth, is relative to some canon of rationality. There is no ultimate meaning, and no *need* for ultimate meaning, beyond the meaning which we create in our relationships with others and in our societal conventions. For semantic theories, like Siderits’, śūnyatā leaves everything as it is (Cooper, 2002, p. 9). Soteriology

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<sup>86</sup> Here we see a very telling indication of Murti’s formulation of relatedness and the absolute: for relatedness to be possible there must be an underlying, unitary, platform; a “subjacent ground” (Murti, 1980, p. 235). This formulation, however, is antithetical to the Madhyamaka view of śūnyatā and runs counter to the Nāgārjunian argument that Murti supposedly accepts. Nāgārjuna’s point is exactly that mutual dependence and relationship forbids underlying, unitary platforms (a Real ground); for such a platform would itself be in relationship with that which it supports.

<sup>87</sup> I do not mean that Siderits is subtle in his rejection of Murti, for he is rather explicit (2003b, p. 11). What I mean here is that Siderits subtly reacts *against*, or defines his position *against*, Murti's and in doing so enters an antipathetic, and polarised, relationship with it. Such ‘reacting against’ betrays a set of shared assumption and reinforces the polarised thinking that arises from them.

is the process of realising the impossibility of ultimate truth, coming to terms with the mere conceptual fiction of our conditioned, constructed reality and giving up the notion that “there is *the right way for a life to go*” (2003b, p. 18). There is no need to grant positive content or transcendent meaning to śūnyatā, for to introduce such a thing can only be to lapse into metaphysical realism and absolutism.

Cooper, however, feels that non-metaphysical, or ‘quietist’, interpretations miss too much of what is religiously and soteriologically important in Buddhist thought. He feels that if śūnyatā ‘leaves everything as it is’, then it is hard to accommodate the sense in which the doctrine of emptiness is supposed to provide “a measure for one’s life” (2002, p. 18). Furthermore, we need some kind of positive content or aspect to śūnyatā in order to offer a soteriological account of the “momentous, positive and life-transforming” (*ibid*, p.12) experience of contemplatives and a hermeneutical account of the textual evidence (*ibid*, p.13). Cooper recognises that, to avoid the transcendentalist or the nihilistic interpretation, śūnyatā cannot be “disjoint from the conditioned world” (*ibid*), yet he wishes to account for positive characterisations of śūnyatā as, for example, the ‘font and source’ of the empirical world (*ibid*). He takes it there must be a subtle dissymmetry to the relationship between the ultimate and the conventional, something more than the “bare equation of emptiness with dependent origination” (*ibid*, p.12) offered by the quietists. This dissymmetry is illustrated metaphorically through the relationship between a cloud and the raindrops:

No emptying cloud without raindrops, and no raindrops without clouds emptying:  
but the emptying cloud is a 'source' of the raindrops in a way that they are not a  
'source' for it. (*ibid*, p.18)

To somehow accommodate this, Cooper sees it as important to reject the mutual dependence between śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda:

The direction of dependence or reliance is supposed to be one way - of the empirical  
upon emptiness - and not a two-way one. (*ibid*, p.13)

Just as Murti does, Cooper acknowledges that it “may, to be sure, be difficult to grasp” (*ibid*) how this dissymmetry can be accommodated without somehow isolating, and thus absolutising, śūnyatā. Yet, in his subtle antipathetic reaction against quietist interpretations, Cooper feels this is a difficulty that must be faced. He is unwilling to commit to absolutism in the way that Murti does, yet we can see that Cooper follows Murti closely in his intuitions and his responses. It remains to be seen how Cooper intends to square these intuitions, but for my purpose here his behaviour acts as a clear example of how absolutist tendencies have not disappeared, despite the lack of self-proclaimed absolutists.

What is interesting in this context is the assumption that, in order to account for the sense in which śūnyatā is understood as a font or source, and to resist the deflationary gestures of the quietest, a dissymmetry must be introduced. In doing so Cooper demonstrates a shared assumption with the quietist (that full symmetry entails the impossibility of any sense of ‘transcendence’, or something ‘more’) and locates himself on a polarity of opposition with them.<sup>88</sup> Another way of framing the basis for their polarised oppositions is that they share the assumption that anything ‘more’ needs to be *inherently or independently* ‘more’. This assumption is the svabhāvic assumption, and Cooper and Siderits’ willingness to enter this tension suggests that, for them, the middle way has not yet been found. From the Madhyamaka point of view, the slightest dissymmetry in relatedness suggests an equivocation in the meaning of śūnyatā and thus a Shentongpa or Murtian absolutism. However, the symmetry that the Madhyamaka insist upon does not lead to the conclusion assumed by both Cooper and Siderits (and Murti and the Shentongpa). There is no need to decide whether we reject the conclusion and adopt Cooper’s absolutism with respect to the ‘more’, or accept the conclusions and adopt Siderits’ nihilism with respect to the ‘more’.

Cooper is right to resist the quietest interpretation and remain unsettled at the prospect of abandoning the sense of transcendence in śūnyatā. Yet he locates himself in an unnecessary tension through assuming an inherently existing transcendence. Siderits is also right to identify a philosophical (and soteriological) utility in the resolution of that tension through coming to terms with the lack of transcendence. Yet he locates himself in unnecessary tension through assuming an inherently existing lack of transcendence. The Mādhyamika finds a middle way through this tension by critiquing the assumption that Cooper, Siderits, Murti and the Shentongpa all share; that the satisfaction of the Buddhists’ soteriological intuitions requires an inherently existing ground. In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, śūnyatā can be understood as both transcendent (as something ‘more’ than this) and immanent (nothing ‘more’ than this). Śūnyatā is context-dependent, yet context-insensitive; it is independent of any *particular* context, while being dependent upon context in *general*. In this weak sense śūnyatā is the source of conventional truths in a way in which conventional truths are not a source of śūnyatā. This ‘dissymmetry’ does not grant an independent existence to śūnyatā, however, but rather details the manner of its dependency.

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<sup>88</sup> We can note the very subtle, table-pounding dogmatism in both their gestures: ‘There *must*, be something more’, ‘there must *not* be anything more’. Again, the very fact that these thinkers consider themselves to be in some kind of opposition is suggestive of dogmatism and crypto-realism. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 6, from the Madhyamaka point of view there is either table-pounding dogmatism or frictionless co-operation. There is no such thing as non-dogmatic opposition. Siderits catches the dogmatism in the realist’s table pounding (2003b, p. 17) but misses, I think, that his polarised opposition (‘There is *not* such a thing as how the world mind-independently is!’) must be equally as dogmatic.

As mentioned, there is nothing necessarily wrong with employing positive articulations around śūnyatā. The problem is merely that such articulations invite reification by the svabhāvic assumption. Rejecting without qualification any positive characterisation of śūnyatā is an overreaction, and establishes a mistaken trajectory in the understanding of the Madhyamaka. Similarly, it is also unhelpful to *accept* without qualification any positive characterisation of śūnyatā. The real issue here is in the qualifications. Rather than dispute whether or not śūnyatā has positive characteristics, the question could profitably be shifted to a discussion of the *nature* any positive characterisations associated with śūnyatā, and how this can be squared with the relentlessly negative dialectical strategy of the Madhyamaka.

## Conclusion

It is my view that understanding Nāgārjuna's argument while failing to grasp the radical ontic and epistemic recharacterisations that are the effects of those arguments, results in a realist interpretation of Nāgārjuna that necessarily misses the middle way. This realism has traditionally resulted in either an absolutist or a nihilist interpretation. In this chapter I have identified motivating intuitions that encourage an absolutist reading over a nihilist.

Although Nāgārjuna is not an absolutist, his arguments do lead to absolutism in the sense that, given universal pratītya-samutpāda, anything 'real' (by realist standards) must be an unrelational and isolated absolute. Nāgārjuna's purpose, of course, is to expose the absurdity in the realists' notion of 'real' in order to bring about a cessation of the svabhāvic assumption. Absolutism arises when one refutes the independent reality of relational things, yet impulsively retains that assumed sense of independent reality and applies it to a hypothesised and hypostatized absolute.

As I hope to have made clear, a Madhyamaka absolutism contains irresolvable tensions. Absolutists seek the Real ground, but Nāgārjuna tells us that there can be no such thing. A ground must stand in relationship with that which is grounded, and so the ground is *dependent* upon the grounded. Any ground must be relative and thus, by the standards of the absolutists, unreal. It follows that a Real ground is an internally incoherent notion; if it is a ground it cannot be Real, and if it is Real it cannot be a ground. Thus, an absolute Real cannot perform the function which is posited in order to perform. It proves impossible to have a Real that is self-existent and utterly transcendent to experience, and yet remains accessible through intuition.

It is hoped that the criticisms in this chapter are not reserved for those defending an explicitly absolutist reading. We have also noted that contemporary non-metaphysical interpretations retain subtle traces of these realist presuppositions. In considering Murti we have identified in a

general sense the realist moments that inform an absolutist reading. I hope to have demonstrated that we can identify these same moments in contemporary non-metaphysical and putatively non-absolutist interpretations. The lingering intuition that crucial dualistic paradigms such as true-false and appearance-reality are beyond question, encourages realist interpreters to underestimate the extent to which Nāgārjuna's arguments destabilise those paradigms. The influence of these dualistic structures outlasts their superficial disavowal.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, then, absolutist tendencies are still strong in contemporary interpretative discourses. With this in mind, I hope to have shown that a Madhyamaka critique of a Murtian absolutism retains a contemporary relevance. The Madhyamaka solutions to the realist tensions discernible in Murti have an application in the identification and resolution of those same tensions found in subtle and subterranean forms in contemporary non-metaphysical interpretations.

### **Do we need the real?**

Nāgārjuna is asking us to release our grasping at an ultimate, inherently existing reality behind or beyond the given reality of conditioned appearance. As we can see from Murti's elaborate and sophisticated refusal to follow this advice, there is a strong intuitive undercurrent against releasing this grasping; it sounds impossibly nihilistic to say there is no ultimate, inherently existing reality. If we think about this point carefully, we can tease out the issue that triggers our defensive intuition and disarm it, in order that the middle way can open up for us.

While it seems necessary that there be a reality behind this appearance, we have to realise that this only seems necessary from a dualistic point of view. If we assume the appearance-reality division is a fundamental aspect of the way things are, then from that point of view we certainly *do* need an underlying reality. To deny this underlying, inherently existing reality from *within* this system feels as if we are being left with only an ungrounded and illusory appearance, devoid of the meaning and cohesion that its foundational reality provided. If we think the reality of our appearance is provided by something Real that is different from appearance, then the denial of the Real will indeed seem threatening.

However, this instinct is mistaken. It is easy to forget that in denying the existence of an independently existing reality behind the given reality, we are denying the presuppositions that generate a rigidly dualistic appearance-reality polarity. The denial of the Real should destabilise the appearance-reality polarity and so radically disrupt our expectations as to the consequences of that denial. Crucially, the collapse of the polarity means that the denial of an independently existing, underlying reality does not leave us with mere appearance 'on its own'. We are not left

with one side of the polarity struggling with the unwelcome consequences of having to live without its partner. To stand fully in 'appearance' and deny 'reality' is to force a dramatic rethink about what both 'appearance' and 'reality' *mean*.

The Madhyamaka analysis collapses the appearance-reality polarity and reassures us that the existential security we crave does not require an inherently existent reality, but is provided quite satisfactorily by a conventionally existent reality non-dual with śūnyatā. It is only when we open ourselves to the possibility of doing without a Real that we can begin to appreciate the middle way. In this next chapter I will go on to show in more detail what this middle way looks like and how we can answer Murti's motivating intuitions without requiring a Real.

## Chapter 4: Non-absolute Middle Way

We have seen how Murti's absolutist reading of Nāgārjuna is philosophically flawed. The irresolvable tension in the position comes from Murti's commitment to the ontological project and his subsequent unwillingness to release his grasping at the 'fundamental' distinction between appearance and reality. Murti's unwillingness is motivated by a wish to account for fundamental intuitions about the soteriological function of prajñā, and the psychological need for a groundedness to reality and truth. I have noted above that Nāgārjuna's arguments are intended to collapse the appearance-reality polarity and to recharacterise the two poles as non-dual. In this chapter I will show in some detail just how this would work and how Murti's motivating concerns can be answered without recourse to a Real Ground. In doing so I hope to show that Nāgārjuna offers us a coherent and soteriologically satisfying position which avoids Murti's absolutist difficulties without trading them for nihilistic concerns.

### The process of determination

As discussed above, Murti accepts Nāgārjuna's arguments for universal pratītya-samutpāda and understands that all relational things are unreal. Murti reasons that, if all determinate and conceptually discriminated things are relational then reason does not, and cannot, encounter the absolute and non-relational Real (1980, p. 139). For Murti, the Mādhyamika argue that all thought-distinctions are "purely subjective" and falsify the real (*ibid*, p.128). So the Madhyamaka method is to "transcend all views and standpoints that cramp our understanding and make reality an appearance" and so "[e]very view must be given up to reach the real as it is" (*ibid*, p.330). Murti retains ontological realism and a correspondence theory of truth while recognising the failure of conceptual determination to contact reality. Thus he posits a trans-rational Real that truly is the way it appears to Intuition (*ibid*, p.227).

We noted above that, despite endorsing a rigid appearance-reality binary, Murti cannot accommodate the relationship between appearance and reality within his realist metaphysics. He enters a tension whereby the Real (which, as an absolute, cannot relate) is nevertheless in some form of relationship with appearance. Murti misses the mutual dependence (and so, by his standards, the *unreality*) of reality and appearance. There is a similar tension and oversight in his treatment of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Murti recognises that there is an important relationship between the possibility of subjective error and the notion of objective truth (the 'way things really are'). Indeed, he uses this relationship as an argument for the Real:

If there were no unconditioned (nirvikalpa, tattva or dharmatā) to which we are denied access in thought, there could not be the consciousness of the subjectivity of thought. (*ibid*, p.140)

Yet, the fact that subjectivity and objectivity are relational should, for a Mādhyamika, reveal their mutual dependence and lack of independent existence. In other words, Murti's observations (the subjectivity of all views) and his conclusion (the objectivity of a transcended Real) are themselves *relative* truths. Murti moves from a plurality of relative truths (that each worldview is, by its own standards, subjective) to a single absolute truth (that all worldviews are *inherently* subjective). This is a significant and unwarranted move and betrays, once again, Murti's commitment to a rigid appearance-reality binary. In taking 'all views are subjective' to be an absolute truth Murti establishes a dogmatic system of his own; a no-view-of-reality view of reality. Murti allows the negation of views to be the establishment of another view, and thus, by his own standards, he fails to achieve the middle way. Again, we can note the familiar result of the Madhyamaka analysis: once *all* views are subjective, the subjective-objective polarity is disrupted and the meaning of both poles must be fundamentally recharacterised. Here, it is important to notice that the rigidity of the subjective-objective polarity depends upon the possibility of objective truth *of the kind that constitutes one pole of that polarity*. That is, a propositional, conceptual access to ultimate reality.

In other words, the realist ontological and epistemological structures that Murti operates within are predicated upon the possibility of rational access to reality. Our dualistic and realist assumption that 'there is an ontological reality behind our epistemological appearance', relies upon our sense that determination is theoretically able to bridge the gap between reality and appearance. If we did not make determinations about the way reality is behind appearance, we would have no reason to posit the appearance-reality division. There is an interdependence between the two such that our confidence in the appearance-reality division is predicated upon our confidence in the process of determination, which is itself predicated upon our confidence in the appearance-reality division.<sup>89</sup> Under this system, then, the very *meaning* of 'the way things really are' is provided by determination.

It follows then that once we accept that the "rejection of all views is the rejection of the competence of Reason to comprehend reality" (*ibid*, p.128), we ought to immediately revise our understanding of the appearance-reality division, as this division presupposes the fallible ability of reason to comprehend reality. So, a failure of determination to determine ultimate reality does

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<sup>89</sup> Their interdependence entails that they are *mutually established* and therefore arise *simultaneously*. To wonder which is prior to the other is to consider them as independent entities.

not mean that ultimate reality is Indeterminate.<sup>90</sup> To recognise the failure in determination is to say that there *is no* 'way things really are'. It is to realise that determination does not *bridge* the epistemic gap; determination *establishes* the epistemic gap. Our dualistic presuppositions and realist metaphysics should collapse upon the realisation of the nature of determination. This is precisely the purpose of the Madhyamaka analysis.

The fact that 'the way things are' is interdependent with conceptual discrimination entails, of course, that there is no 'way things are' independent of conceptual determination. This uncomplicated entailment is, in fact, an exposition of the non-duality of the two truths; the realisation of the lack of an independently existing ultimate reality is non-dual with the realisation of an interdependently existing conventional reality. We can say, perhaps, that there is no meaningful sense of the 'way things *really* are', because there *is* a meaningful sense of the 'way things are'. Reciprocally, of course, there is a meaningful sense of the 'way things are', because there is no meaningful sense of the 'way things really are'.<sup>91</sup>

### **Consequences of the collapse - a colourful analogy**

This radically recharacterised 'way things are' has a number of important consequences that help us to make sense of Nāgārjuna's position and to understand how Murti's concerns can be alleviated and his intuitions accounted for without his Real. I will outline the points with an analogous analysis of colour, and then move on to the case in hand. We will find the points easier to grasp in the analogy, as our instinctive grasping at the reality of colour is much less than our instinctive grasping at the reality of *reality*.

Say we argued, not unreasonably, that all colour is subjective; that all talk of colour *in the world* is strictly mistaken as any impression of colour is determined (in part) by the subjective observer and then projected on to the world. We accept the radical failure of colour determinations to articulate the world as it is in itself, we realise that the world can have no absolutely (non-subjectively) true colour determinations made of it. Having fully accepted this point, we need to realise that it would be a grave error to uncritically consider the world as it is in itself (independent of colour determinations) to be *colourless*. 'Colourless', as the term is commonly understood, is part of the conceptual polarity of colour determination. It is the successful colour determination of no-colour. So, although the world may well be *without colour*, it is a grave error to consider it 'colourless'. The risk is that we allow some subtle residue of chromatic realism to

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<sup>90</sup> 'Indeterminate' is itself a determination. It requires that successful determination took place that just happened to determine nothing; it requires a successful foray across the epistemic gap that comes back empty handed.

<sup>91</sup> The important qualifier 'really' is here connoting 'independently real and inherently existing'.

slip back into our worldview. The intuitive thought that ‘the world must be a particular coloured way’ may survive the realisation that all colour is relative to the subject, and may compel us to smuggle a colour term outside of its proper context. If even a trace of chromatic realism survives the analysis of the radical subjectivity of colour, then the philosophical purpose of that analysis is missed. The point was to refute colour realism, not to transfer it to some abstracted and reified ‘colourlessness’.

This may seem like a pedantic point, but the consequences are deeply significant. The realisation that all colour is subjective should entirely inhibit any chromatically realist impulse. It should stop us asking ‘what colour is the world really?’ It should stop us even trying to imagine a world without colour. It should bring us to a realisation that, for us, *colour and the world are non-dual*. The two cannot be separated except in abstraction. For us, the world cannot appear without colour, and colour cannot appear without the world. This non-duality we discover with respect to colour and the world is a way of describing the fact that colours exist as conventional determinations arising in dependence upon a basis (the without-colour world), and a chromatic conceptual framework. Colour exists when the world is encountered via a chromatic framework. The sense of the world and colour being two independent things in relationship is merely a conventional schema. There is no inherently existing colour in the world, but there is no inherently existing colour in the framework either. *There is no inherently existing colour anywhere*. Colour arises and exists in mutual dependence upon a basis of imputation (the without-colour world) and the imputation itself (the chromatic thought-forms).<sup>92</sup>

Understanding this brings out another important point. We can appreciate that, because the world is not really colourless, then the experience of colour in the world is not necessarily a *distortion* of the world. It may be a *representation* of the world, but it is not a *misrepresentation* of the world. Seeing the world in a colourful way would only be a misrepresentation of the world if the world *really was* colourless. The appearance of colour is not illusion, nor is it mistaken; it does not falsify the world. It is merely the unavoidable consequence of encountering the world with a chromatic conceptual framework. The mistake would be to forget this fundamental interdependence of world and colour and to consider *either* element to be independent. The illusion is the appearance of *independently existing* colour.

The conclusions we should reach is that colour is dependently originated and conventionally existent. In dependence upon the world and conception, colour arises. There is a mutual contribution; the colour we perceive is not substantially different from the world, it is a manifestation of the world. Thus the ultimate truth of colour (that, given its dependent

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<sup>92</sup> It is also important to realise that the basis of imputation of colour and the imputation of colour, are mutually dependent upon each other too.

origination, there is no inherent existence to colour) establishes the conventional truth of colour (that, given its lack of inherent existence, colour exists through dependent origination) and vice versa.

Despite this, we can still make some theoretical sense of the notion of the world *on its own*. Not in the sense of ‘what it is like with all the colour taken away’, but in the sense of ‘what it is like in the cessation of colour judgments’. So, although we would expect all colour to cease along with the cessation of colour judgments, we can understand the world is unaffected by this cessation. The world is just as it was; it is just that we are no longer conceiving of it in colour terms. If we wished to discuss or theorise about the world in the absence of colour determination, we have to agree that the world is neither coloured nor colourless (nor both nor neither). We are left with the semantic gesture: It is just as it is, it is just so. It is *such*.<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, this without-colour world is ‘independent’ of our conceptual framework only in the sense that it can theoretically survive the cessation of colour judgments. It is *not* independent in the sense of being *behind or beyond* our colour judgments when they are in effect. The way it theoretically appears in the cessation of colour judgments is not the way it *really is* all the time, behind our illusory and confused colour judgments. If we were to iron a crumpled cloth, the fact that the cloth can survive the removal of its crumples does not mean that the cloth *really is* smooth all the time *behind* the crumples. The crumples are not alien entities obscuring the true cloth. The crumples *are* the cloth.

Another important point that this colourful analogy helps us appreciate is that the basis for any colour discrimination is out there in the world. All the subject does is encounter this basis in a chromatic manner; the colour *conditions* are ‘out there’.<sup>94</sup> The subject does not create the conditions, merely describes them. Certainly there is a degree of subjective conditioning in the descriptive process; psychological and personal conditions being laid down by the observer, his society and language community, for example. But the *external* conditions (the basis, the distortions, the fluctuations in the medium which dictate the practical ‘correctness’ of the conventional determination), are out there already. The world is a *dynamic* basis; changes in colour experience are in part accounted for by changes in the external colour conditions. This brings out yet another important consequence of the subtle reification that Murti engages in. If we do succumb to the temptation to consider the world to really be colourless, and thereby smuggle in a residue of chromatic realism, it fixes the chromatic nature of the world. It leaves us

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<sup>93</sup>In the analogy, of course, there are still things we can say about the world in non-chromatic language. However, when considering *śūnyatā* itself, there is *nothing* we can say, as it is *any* and *all* determinations we are problematising; we are truly left with only ‘suchness’ left to say.

<sup>94</sup> Although we must be careful and realise that they are not, by themselves, colour conditions; they are just what they are innocent and unaware of their collective contribution to ‘colour’ in the eye of the beholder.

in the position that the world truly and irrevocably *is* colourless. The world is uniform and unchanging with respect to colour and all sense of change and variation in colour is entirely illusory.

So, to summarise the colourful analogy: if all colour determinations are subjective then we realise that there is no independent reality to colour and so the world is neither coloured nor colourless. Colour has its reality by way of mutual dependence between a dynamic basis and conceptual determination; it is conventionally existent. The experience of a coloured world is neither mistaken nor illusory. Despite being without inherent colouring, the world is not chromatically inert; it is the dynamic basis for meaningful colour determinations. The world and colour are non-dual; colour is a manifestation of the world.

These insights have direct analogous parallels in the exposition of śūnyatā and the relationship between the non-dual two truths. We may, however, encounter greater resistance in accepting these points when the target is ontological realism and inherent existence *itself*, rather than colour realism and inherently existing colour.

### **The nature of the illusion and the truth of convention**

In the colour analogy, we began with the realisation that colour determinations do not pick out (or fail to pick out) colour realities, but are implicated in the creation of the colour realities we experience. Here we begin with the realisation that determinations do not pick out (or fail to pick out) determinate realities, but are implicated in the creation of the determinate realities we experience. Nāgārjuna's arguments show that the objective, independently existing reality we take ourselves to be fallibly encountering in experience cannot be maintained. The radical relatedness of all concepts shows that no object of reason can be real (in the sense presupposed by the realists). For Nāgārjuna, all properties and characteristics (including that of 'existing') are, in a sense, 'subjective'.

As we have seen, Murti's intuitive thought, that 'the world must be a particular (determinate) way', survives his application of the Madhyamaka analysis. Murti mistakenly smuggles a deterministic concept outside of its proper context and concludes that the failure of determination entails that the Real is inherently indeterminate. In doing so, he misses the whole point of the Madhyamaka analysis. The point was to refute and inhibit the realist impulse, not to transfer its application to some abstracted indeterminate Real. The failure of determination should radically disrupt our realist presuppositions and stop us asking 'what is real?' It should stop us even trying to imagine reality in the absence of conceptual determination. It should prompt the

realisation that, for us, determinate appearances (conventional truths) and reality (ultimate truth) are non-dual; the two cannot be separated except in abstraction.

This non-duality we discover is a way of describing the fact that the determinate things we encounter in everyday experiences arise through experiencing reality in conceptual, determinate terms. For us, reality does not appear except in determinate forms and determinate forms do not appear in the absence of reality. Conventionally existing things are manifestations of śūnyatā, and śūnyatā does not (ordinarily) appear to us in the absence of these conventional manifestations; śūnyatā *just is* its conventional manifestations. The sense of reality and appearance being independent realms in some form of relationship is merely a conventional schema. There is no inherent existence in reality, neither is there inherent existence in appearance. This non-duality tells us that *there is no inherent existence anywhere*. Existing (determinate) things arise and exist in mutual dependence upon a basis of imputation (śūnyatā) and the imputation itself (conceptual thought-form).<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, as reality is not inherently indeterminate, the experience of determinate things need not be understood as a distortion of reality. Such appearance may be a *representation* of reality, but they are not a *misrepresentation* of reality. The appearance of determinate things is not illusory, and nor is it mistaken. Such appearances do not falsify reality, they are merely the unavoidable consequence of experiencing reality from within a conceptual framework. Murti notes that we have a “natural disposition to bifurcate and conceptualise” (*ibid*, p.219), he also talks about a “natural metaphysical disposition” (*ibid*, p.140) to indulge in speculative philosophy and establish dogmatic views about what the world is really like. He seems to assume that these two dispositions are the same thing (or at least he insufficiently addresses the distinction), when he suggests that:

[T]he primordial error consists in the intellect being infected by the inveterate tendency to view Reality as identity or difference, permanent or momentary, one or many etc. These views falsify reality. (*ibid*, p.217)

However, the subtlety of the middle ways comes out when we realise that these two dispositions can come apart. The ‘primordial error’ is not to view Reality through conceptual determinations, but the reification of those conceptual determinations. In the absence of this assumed inherent existence of the objects of bifurcation and conception, there is nothing mistaken or illusory about encountering reality in bifurcated and conceptual terms. The illusion is not the *appearance* of determinate, relational things (conventional truths), but rather the *inherent existence* of those

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<sup>95</sup> Again, this relationship between basis of imputation and the imputation itself should be understood as non-dual. No sense of inherent distance or separation is implied or required.

things (Hopkins, 1996, p. 543). In dependence upon śūnyatā and conceptual thought-forms, existing things manifest. The determinate, conventional reality we live within is not substantially different from śūnyatā; it is a *manifestation* of śūnyatā. Thus the ultimate truth of things (that, given their dependent origination, they lack inherent existence) establishes the conventional truth of things (that, given their lack of inherent existence, they exist through dependent origination) and vice versa.

Despite this non-duality between śūnyatā and conventional reality, we can still make some sense of the intuition that śūnyatā can manifest 'on its own'. As mentioned, there is an important exception to the co-incidence of śūnyatā and conventional reality, and that is in the non-conceptual ('direct') meditative equipoise of śūnyatā. It is said that in such a practice the discriminating operation of conception can be brought to cessation, and the emptiness of śūnyatā is experienced directly and in an unconditioned form. Śūnyatā does indeed manifest in the absence of conceptual conditioning. Importantly, however, this is not to be understood as revealing śūnyatā 'as it is in itself'. From the Madhyamaka point of view, the conditioned manifestations of śūnyatā are no more or less 'śūnyatā' than the unconditioned manifestation. Thought-forms and conventional truths do not, in themselves, obscure śūnyatā; they are non-dual.

This is an important difference from Murti's understanding, and we can appreciate that his picture is confused by the svabhāvic assumption. As we have seen, for Murti, the illusory thought-forms are opaque and obscure the Real, and their cessation grants epistemically novel access to the Real. We can see Murti's confusion when he says:

Reason which understands things through distinction and relation is a principle of falsity, as it distorts and thereby hides the real. (1980, p. 139)

It betrays a subtle reification to say that a distortion in the Real *hides* the real. 'Hides' suggests a covering over, a separation caused by the addition of a foreign substance. 'Distortion' does not entail any separation or addition. If you crush (distort) a tin can you do not *hide* or obscure the can, you merely (re)present it in a particular way. Epistemic obscuration would only take place upon the *reification* of the crumples in the can. Such unwarranted reification considers the crumples to be *independent* of the can, taking them to be foreign bodies that must be removed in order to make possible an encounter with the true, unblemished Tin Can that lies behind or beneath them. Because Murti considers the Real *hidden* by thought-forms we can see that, even when realising their radical subjectivity, Murti is subtly reifying them. If we suspend this reification, we appreciate that thought-forms (conventional truths) do not obscure śūnyatā (ultimate truth) but

thought-forms, in an important sense, *are* śūnyatā. In just the same way as the crumples, in an important sense, *are* the tin can.

Therefore, śūnyatā can appear, in a sense, independently from conceptual determination, but only in the sense that it survives the cessation of such conceptual operations. None of this means that śūnyatā *inherently* exists independently of (behind or beyond) conceptual determinations. Conceptual activity subsides into its own emptiness, like waves subsiding into their own ocean. Nothing alien is ‘removed’ from śūnyatā in order to reveal it in its ‘natural’ and unconditioned state. Indeed, if we understand the lack of conditioning as itself a particular conditioned state (in the same way that being penniless is a particular financial state), then śūnyatā is always dependent on some conditioned state.<sup>96</sup> So, śūnyatā is independent of any particular conditioned state, but not independent of conditioned states in general. I will say that śūnyatā is *context-insensitive*, but *context-dependent*.<sup>97</sup>

It also follows from this that existing things are not other than their appearance. Existing things just are how they appear.<sup>98</sup> We have stopped looking for a reality *behind* the appearance; appearance and reality are realised to be non-dual. Caution is due here, however, for (as is always the case when making an apparently positive statement of fact) there is a risk of reification. The risk here is that appearance-reality is taken to be *inherently* non-dual. To be clear, from the Madhyamaka point of view, to say that things are non-dual is to say that they are not *inherently* dual; any duality is not a real fundamental division but is established by convention.<sup>99</sup> The inherent existence of the duality is refuted and its conventional existence is established.

If we miss this point then, like Murti and Siderits, we end up asserting some form of inherent non-duality between reality and appearance. As we have seen, Murti attempts to cash this out in terms of a uniform and unchanging Real that transcends the unreality of bifurcating conception. For Murti, inherent non-duality means a rejection of conventional reality (the appearance of reality) as entirely unreal; reality is radically transcendent to ‘appearance’. Siderits makes a similar

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<sup>96</sup> Note the similarities here with the Madhyamaka analysis of Wood conducted in Chapter 2. There, we encouraged Wood to appreciate that absolute non-existence was still an existential state in order to highlight the incoherence in positing an inherently existing non-existence. Here we encourage Murti to appreciate that absolute unconditionedness is still a conditioned state in order to highlight the incoherence in determining the inherently Indeterminate.

<sup>97</sup> I will expand upon this important distinction in Chapter 7 (see p.168).

<sup>98</sup> There is, of course, a risk in emphasising that things just are how they appear. For, unless we are an enlightened being, the impulsive operation of the svabhāvic assumption ensures that the appearance of conventional truths is attended by the appearance of inherent existence. The Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika advice is to overcome this appearance of inherent existence in order that the reality of empty appearance can be directly encountered. Existing things are just how they appear to those who have overcome this mistaken appearance (Hopkins, 1996, p. 417).

<sup>99</sup> This, importantly, does not mean that the reality is otherwise; ‘established by convention’ has lost its connotations of ‘falsification’. For this to sound unsatisfying and incomplete is to retain a hunger for the Real. It is nothing but svabhāvic sentimentality, the subterranean rumblings of thwarted substance-seeking.

slip, but falls in the opposite direction. As mentioned above, and as will be explored in more detail shortly, Siderits suggests that we can give no content to the notion of a mind-independent ultimate reality, and so takes it that there can be no ultimate reality to things beyond their conventional reality. For Siderits, inherent non-duality means a rejection of ultimate reality (a reality behind appearance) as entirely incoherent; 'reality' is reductively identical to appearance.

Non-duality, when understood unmistakably, navigates between these two extremes. The reality of appearance is neither radically transcendent to that appearance nor reductively identical to that appearance. There is an ultimate nature to reality that is distinct from the conventional nature, without existing independently of that conventional nature. The ultimate nature of reality is its emptiness. The śūnyatā *from* which, and *as* which, all of conventional reality manifest.

### **A dynamic basis**

Śūnyatā is, in an important sense, manifest all the time. The crumpled can is no more or less *the can* than the uncrumpled can is. Provided we are not obscuring it by reifying the crumples, the can is always directly present to us. Similarly, śūnyatā is always directly present to us. The only 'obscuration' comes from the reification of the transitory manifestations of śūnyatā. Whether manifest as a conditioned appearance of things and relationships (in saṃsāric or nirvāṇic experience), or manifest as a non-conditioned universal (in a non-conceptual state of meditative absorption), all experience is on the basis of śūnyatā. We understand that śūnyatā is the dynamic basis of both ordinary and enlightened experience.

The picture I present here bears some resemblance to the 'three-nature theory' of the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda school, whereby the other-dependent nature of reality is the basis for both the worldly imagined nature and the enlightened consummated nature (Nagao, 1991, p. 182). We can appreciate that this theory is an attempt to systematise and articulate the sense that there is something in common between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (they have the same basis of imputation), as well as something different (the imputations are different). However, it is important to keep in mind that this useful heuristic is not an expression of the way things (inherently) are. As Streng says, from the Madhyamaka point of view:

metaphysical statements were not meant to be unassailable semantic pillars on which to construct a system of necessary propositions; rather they were mental prods to induce an apprehension which was validated by its success in putting an end to suffering. (1967, p. 157)

There is doubtless a pedagogic utility in thinking and talking in terms of śūnyatā as a ‘basis’ and, like the Yogācāra, I will take advantage of this utility.<sup>100</sup> It is important, however, to be alert to the risks of reification. Indeed, as Nagao has pointed out, this reification did occur within the Yogācāra tradition. Following on from Nāgārjuna and his exposition of śūnyatā, early Yogācāras were explicit that the three natures were “not only affirmative and existential, but [were] also negative and empty” (Nagao, 1991, p. 185). They developed their three nature theory with “the theory of ‘three non-natures’ in its immediate background and it is therein that emptiness can be seen” (*ibid*). However, the later Vijnānavādins began to reify this system and claimed that “cognition is the unique and ultimate existence” (*ibid*, p.187). Thus we end up with the realist view of the Yogācāra-Vijnānavāda school where “this notion of ‘basis’ reflects the fundamental reality of the world, the substructure of reality” (*ibid*, p.81). I share Nagao’s concerns that such a “realism of mind-only that annihilates all other things” is a divergence from the Madhyamaka point of view (*ibid*, p.187). Therefore, when I speak of a basis I am not speaking of some form of ‘fundamental substructure’ that lies behind appearance. As I have said metaphors of ‘behind’ seem to suggest that there is something of substance *in front*. If we are not careful with such metaphors we can end up on a Vijnānavādin trajectory of reification. The sense of ‘basis’ that I am attempting to work with here is a basis of *imputation* and not a basis of *substance*. The basis of imputation is not behind the imputation or the imputed thing; it is immediate and immanent with ‘it’. Indeed, in an important sense it *is* the imputed thing. The basis of imputation does not pre-exist the imputation, and neither the basis nor the imputation pre-exist the imputed thing. These three are mutually established and interdependent. The basis is not independently existing. It is not a ‘separate’ nature or world.

### **The no-view-of-reality view of reality**

In the most general and fundamental sense, Murti misunderstands the therapeutic purpose of the Madhyamaka analysis. He takes it that “the antidote is to void the mind of this tendency to conceptualise the real” (1980, p. 336). From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, the antidote is not so much to stop conceptualising the real, but rather to stop reifying our conceptualisations. Murti leaves the reificatory attitude untouched while bringing about a cessation of conceptual thought-forms, thinking that this is what a no-view-of-reality attitude

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<sup>100</sup> Both Hookham (1991, p. 26) and Nagao (1991) go beyond the mere recognition of utility and suggest that the Madhyamaka is *incomplete* without the support and augmentation of the Yogācāra. Now, while I will employ this notion of ‘basis’ as a useful heuristic, I do not mean to suggest that the Madhyamaka is incomplete without it. Such a suggestion seems to grant some essential soteriological efficacy to the conventional truths of the Yogācāra system. In Chapters 6 and 7 I will attempt to make it clear that, while the Madhyamaka analysis allows that some conventional structures can be more soteriologically effective than others, it is necessarily the case that no particular conventional structure is necessary for the realisation of śūnyatā. Any conventional framework that is autonomously constructed in order to articulate śūnyatā can only be an upāya, and is necessarily unnecessary.

entails. Given this approach, that which is experienced in the cessation of conceptualisation is reified into an absolute reality and taken to be the way things have always truly been. As we have seen, this conclusion constitutes a dogmatic view, and so Murti ends up with a no-view-of-reality view of reality.

Rather than follow Murti in the wholesale rejection of worldviews, the Madhyamaka encourages a revision of our attitude towards worldviews. The Madhyamaka analysis disrupts the rigid distinction between ontological reality and our epistemological encounter with that reality. The appearance-reality polarity collapses into a non-dual ontoepistemological reality where existing things and true discriminations arise in mutual dependence upon each other. When conventional truths are understood as empty, indeed as emptiness *itself*, our views are not *of* reality but rather our views *are* reality.

## Neither realism nor anti-realism

Before concluding this chapter though showing how Murti's motivating intuitions are met by the non-absolute middle way, I should take a little time to distinguish my position from the anti-realist interpretation of the Madhyamaka associated with Mark Siderits. As I have mentioned above, I see problems in Siderits' 'quietist' interpretation of the Madhyamaka. It is the way in which we frame a non-absolutist response to the failure in determination that distinguishes the Madhyamaka (as I understand it) from Siderits' anti-realist presentation.

Siderits notes the incoherence in both the nihilistic and absolutist positions, in as much as they both uncritically endorse metaphysical realism despite acknowledging that the Madhyamaka project is to refute metaphysical theories without positing their own (2003b, p. 11). For Siderits, the Madhyamaka is not intended to characterise the nature of reality (*ibid*, p.10), but rather is a semantic theory that denies the possibility of an ultimate truth and forces the rejection of metaphysical realism (*ibid*, p.13). The Madhyamaka rejects the distinction between ultimate truth and conventional truth (*ibid*), insisting that "there can be no truth apart from the contingent institutions and practices of social existence" (*ibid*, p.18).

While I agree with much of this, I do think that Siderits retains some shared assumptions with Murti and, in an antipathetic response to metaphysical interpretations, overreacts and misses the middle way. As we have seen, an important site of opposition between Siderits and Murti is the matter of whether there is something outside of the relative, something 'more' that escapes the conditioning influence, something that grounds the polarities of appearance-reality and truth-falsity. We noted that Siderits' rejection of something 'more' was based upon the

assumption that the only possibility for a non-relative, non-conditioned ground is an inherently existing absolute. Thus both Murti and Siderits subscribe to this particular realist premise, and it is this shared assumption that allows them to stand in polarised opposition. Murti bites the bullet and embraces and defends an inherently existing absolute. Siderits bites his own bullet and insists that we come to terms with the incoherence of such a non-conditioned basis for our soteriological ambitions.

Once again, from the Madhyamaka point of view we can avoid any bullet-biting altogether. The fact that the intuitive appeal of an unconditioned ultimate reality can survive the refutation of its inherent existence is missed by both Murti and Siderits. Missing the non-dual relationship between ultimate reality and conventional reality introduces a tension into Siderits' presentation. In order to clarify the distinction between the semantic interpretation of the Madhyamaka and the Madhyamaka as I understand it, I will briefly point out some of the difficulties I see in Siderits' interpretation.

### Traces of ontic realism

Broadly speaking, metaphysical realism claims that ultimate reality is a particular determinate way, and that accurate knowledge of this reality is possible via a correspondence theory of truth (Siderits, 2003b, p. 12). While rejecting metaphysical realism entails that 'existence' as a concept is not applicable to 'reality',<sup>101</sup> it does not quite deny the inherent existence of reality. There is, I think, an important sense in which an inherently existing mind-independent reality is still *there*. Siderits emphasises that Reason does not create ex nihilo (*ibid*, p.21 n.9), but rather co-creates, individuates, discriminates and categorises. In doing so it establishes the *concepts* of 'mind' and 'world', but in virtue of the co-operation between mind and world. Reason establishes the meaning of 'meaning', 'existence', 'reality' and so on, such that any sense of conceptualisation or articulation of 'mind-independent reality' is incoherent. Yet it would seem that Siderits has a mind-independent reality *there*, ensuring that his anti-realism is not linguistic idealism (*ibid*). Considered in this light, we can see that Siderits' position is a semantic theory informed by an assumed nature of reality. Although it is not explicitly a view of mind-independent reality, it is a view of mind-*dependent* reality that tacitly and obliquely adopts a silent opinion with respect to mind-independent reality. There is supposedly no content to this opinion, as the opinion is that we cannot give content to such a notion (Siderits, 1988, p. 324). Yet, I think that even in this 'no content' opinion there *is* a trace of content.

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<sup>101</sup> There are scare quotes on 'reality' as the concept of identity is not strictly applicable to 'it' either.

According to Luke Brunning (2014, p. 256 n.13), Siderits has said that, for him, 'insight' into śūnyatā is an absence of any epistemic attitude whatsoever (presumably this means no epistemic attitude with respect to mind-independent reality). Yet this absence 'with respect to' still, I think, subtly affirms the existence of mind-independent reality; a reality with respect to which we cannot have epistemic attitudes. If this characterisation is close to the mark, then we can discern in Siderits, a *sympathetic* gesture to that which we identified in Murti. Murti's breakdown in reason's ability to discriminate the Real saw him affirming properties and characteristics to the Real. Siderits, despite critiquing Murti on this very point, retains a trace of this affirming gesture: Siderits' epistemic silence with respect to mind-independent reality affirms the bare presence of such a reality. This subtle commitment to a mind-independent ground guides Siderits' intuitions as to the impossibility of giving content to the notion of such a reality. Such a commitment requires that Siderits disallow any sense whatsoever of an ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Without this commitment, then the consequences of śūnyatā would be understood differently; as providing non-conditioned knowledge of the universal nature of reality, rather than rendering such a notion incoherent. So, an inherently existing underlying reality, although strictly meaningless within Siderits' system, can be seen to contribute in some way to the way in which meaning is constructed within that system. Like the cosmologists' dark matter, its presence can be inferred despite it being necessarily imperceptible.

Contrary to Murti's opinion, the possibility of unmistakable, non-dual intuition of the ultimate nature of reality does not entail that an ultimate reality exists in the way in which it appears to this non-dual intuition. Siderits is right to dismiss such unwarranted reification, but he over-corrects when he rejects any possibility of non-conditioned intuition of the ultimate nature of reality. As we have seen, Siderits rejects an ultimate standpoint as incoherent. His view entails that the final truth of things is their conventional truth; their only nature is their conventional nature. Siderits considers this position to be semantic non-dualism; the (recharacterised) ultimate truth *just is* the (recharacterised) conventional truth.<sup>102</sup> This, however, is not the non-duality of the two truths as I understand it. Siderits effectively reduces ultimate truth to a convenient fiction arising within the domain of conventional truth. This seems to me to be a semantic *monism*, and we can note that it is a subtle mirror-image of Murti's epistemic response to the conflict of reason. For Murti the only truths are ultimate truths, while for Siderits the only truths are conventional truths.

As discussed above, the denial of one party of a polarised binary should prompt a depolarised recharacterisation of *both* parties. The collapse of metaphysical realism enlivens and reassesses

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<sup>102</sup> This recharacterisation is the pragmatic movement 'back' to naive realism while retaining the insights accumulated through the anti-realist journey; where one ironically engages with their conventional reality behaving, for pragmatic reasons, *as if* ultimate truth were possible (Siderits, 2003a, pp. 184-185).

the meaning of ‘conventional truth’, just as it enlivens and reassesses the meaning of ‘ultimate truth’. From the Madhyamaka point of view, non-duality suggests that ultimate reality and conventional reality are distinct yet mutually dependent. The hierarchy between them is collapsed, without all distinction between them being lost. The ‘mere’ drops out of conventional truths; what is true from the conventional standpoint is no longer understood as provisional and second rate as compared to ultimate truth. Similarly, we can say that the ‘actual’ drops out of ultimate truth; what is true from the ultimate standpoint is no longer understood as absolute and privileged over conventional truths. The possibility of ultimate truth does not render conventional truths as ultimately false. This is, I think, a better formulation of semantic non-dualism.

### Soteriological concerns

Siderits is well aware that one of the main problems faced by semantic interpretations of the Madhyamaka is that they can seem soteriologically underwhelming. It can be hard to see why a non-metaphysical interpretation can account for the transformative effect that the realisation of śūnyatā is supposed to offer. Siderits responded by suggesting that realisation of śūnyatā was never intended to do all the soteriological work, but is a subtle, ancillary corrective to the Abhidharmist view of non-self (2003b, p. 15). For Siderits, the suffering that Buddhist soteriology aims to overcome is the existential suffering that comes from clinging to a false belief in an ‘I’ (*ibid*). Therefore the main purpose of the Buddhist soteriological path is to “learn to live without the illusion of a self and with the knowledge that the person is a mere useful fiction” (*ibid*, p.16). The bulk of *this* work is done through the Abhidharmist theory of non-self. However, given our “tendency to think of oneself as the author of one’s life narrative” (*ibid*), the possibility of discovering the ultimate truth of reality and living in accordance with that reality may invite the construction of a life narrative and thus a “subtle form of clinging” may arise (*ibid*, p.17). A realisation of śūnyatā is seen to complement the central realisation of non-self as it “undermines the last vestige of clinging, the belief that there is a mind-independent ultimate truth” (*ibid*, p.18).

In a recent paper, Luke Brunning (2014) outlines a confusion discernible in Siderits’ presentation of the soteriological process. Although I think that Brunning overstates the force of his critique, I agree that he successfully locates an interesting point of instability in the semantic interpretation. Brunning notes that Siderits’ criticism of metaphysically realist views<sup>103</sup> is of their tendency to

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<sup>103</sup> Brunning takes ‘*metaphysical views*’ to be the targets of Siderits’ critique, whereas I am making a point of framing the targets as ‘*metaphysically realist views*’. This is an important distinction, and I think that missing this accounts for Brunning’s confusion with respect to Siderits’ position. I take it that, in endorsing the Abhidharmist theory of non-self (which is a metaphysical view), Siderits is not critiquing all metaphysical views. His advice, rather, seems to be that we should not take śūnyatā to be a metaphysical theory, but rather a semantic one. A semantic interpretation of śūnyatā critiques the metaphysical realist assumptions that attend metaphysical views; it advises us to hold our metaphysical views without a metaphysically

allow the construction of a life narrative. Siderits' problem with metaphysically realist views is that they are "veiled forms of self-assertion" (*ibid*, p.249). This is true, it would seem, even if the view is not of a "narrative form" (*ibid*). That is, even if there is no self being explicitly endorsed by the content of the worldview:

The existence of a narrative is connected, necessarily, to the notion of a narrator, and in virtue of this fact the assertion of narrative is a form of self-assertion. This causes suffering because it grounds forms of self attachment. (*ibid*)

So, according to Brunning, the problem that Siderits identifies is not so much about the content of a worldview, but about the possibility for that worldview to be asserted (as a narrative) and for the locus of that assertion (the narrator) to be subject to clinging:

Therefore, even though someone no longer believes in any metaphysically concrete self, they can still fail to recognise they are inferentially committed to the existence of a locus or subject of the narrative that interests them, or that they regard as true. (*ibid*, p.248)

Indeed, given that objective (mind-independent) truth is impossible under Siderits' analysis, the semantic interpretation may even *reinforce* the sense of an asserting narrator as "the only context within which statements have a truth-value is a narrative-based one" (*ibid*, p.253). So, in drawing attention to the way in which our true views of the world are relative to conceptual schemes, Siderits subtly foregrounds the narrator and thus allows an "insidious form of clinging" that may be "subtler, and therefore more pernicious, than that of the views he criticises" (*ibid*, p.253). Having made this useful observation, Brunning goes on to suggest that Siderits' critique centres on the necessarily self-affirming operation of assertion,<sup>104</sup> and thus that any view that is asserted invites clinging. So, concludes Brunning, in as much as the semantic interpretation can be (and is) asserted, Siderits' anti-realist view is no better off than a metaphysically realist view in its tendency to subtly promote clinging at a self.

Brunning is right that realising Siderits' śūnyatā does not stop views being asserted or having a narrative form, but he is wrong to assume that there is no change to the operation of assertion. Brunning's critique assumes that *any* sense of self, *any* locus of assertion, entails clinging and is an obstacle to the soteriological project. Yet the reason that Siderits takes śūnyatā to supplement the Abhidharmist view is precisely because it *disables* the subtle self-affirming operation of assertion and view-forming behaviour. Brunning misses that it is only when our truths are asserted as

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*realist* attitude. Thus, the targets of Siderits' critique are metaphysical interpretations of śūnyatā and metaphysically realist views.

<sup>104</sup> Here, 'self-affirming' refers to an affirmation of *a* self, rather than an affirmation of *itself*.

*ultimate* truths that the locus of assertion, the narrator, will be the subject of clinging. I take it that it is Siderits' view that if the metaphysically realist assumptions can be suspended (through a realisation of *śūnyatā*), then the subtle self-affirming operation of view-forming behaviour is unproblematic as the self thus affirmed is understood as dependently originated and conventionally existent. If this is true then Siderits escapes Brunning's critique. However, if this is true, if it is not the metaphysical view, but the metaphysically realist attitude *towards* that view that makes the soteriological difference here, then the abhidharmic reductionism should not carry the soteriological weight that Siderits ascribes to it. If problematic clinging is overcome, not by getting rid of the narrating self, but through realising the conventional truth of the narrating self, then why does Siderits insist that we follow the Abhidharmists in getting rid of the *narrated* self? A conventionally existing self is not a soteriological obstacle.

Siderits, of course, would agree that a conventionally existing self is not an obstacle. He argues that the self as a convenient fiction is useful and necessary when we know that such a self is "actually no more than a causal series of sets of ephemeral psychophysical elements" (2003b, p. 16). Yet in this instance he seems to miss that the meaning of conventional truth changes dramatically under the Madhyamaka. The Abhidharmists accept the possibility of ultimate truths and, for them, conventional truths are contrasted negatively with the ultimate truth of the *dharmas*. Thus, for the Abhidharmists, the conventional truth of the self entails the ultimate falsity, the *non-existence*, of the self. As Siderits knows, introducing *śūnyatā* radically recharacterises the relationship between conventional and ultimate truth. Siderits relies on the fact that the reality of *śūnyatā* means that the only truths there are are conventional truths. Yet this entails that conventional truths are no longer ultimate falsities, but rather are non-ultimately *true*. Similarly, the conventional existence of the self is no longer the non-existence of the self, but the non-inherent existence of the self. If Siderits wants to account for the soteriological work done by this Madhyamaka shift then he cannot simultaneously retain the soteriological standards of the supplanted system. If we adopt the Madhyamaka criterion for conventional truth, it is incoherent to maintain the soteriological priority of non-self theory; in allowing *śūnyatā* to do *any* work, it must do *all* the work.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Or perhaps Siderits takes the forms of clinging to be different in kind. In his presentation of the ancillary role of *śūnyatā*, Siderits is already committed to the possibility of clinging at self-as-subject in the absence of the clinging at self-as-object. It would seem to follow that Siderits would be similarly committed to the possibility of self-affirming *content* in the absence of the self-affirming *attitude*; that a soteriologically problematic clinging at self could occur simultaneously with a realisation of *śūnyatā*. Given that this is a contradiction in terms from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, this may be a difficult position to defend hermeneutically. I will not, however, pursue this hermeneutical argument; it is not enough to argue that Siderits' view of the Madhyamaka is different from mine, or different from the 'actual' Madhyamaka as located in the texts. My project here is to show that non-Madhyamaka interpretations of *śūnyatā* are

Siderits seems to miss that, once the dharma-theory is reframed as conventional truth, it puts unbearable pressure on his epistemic pragmatism and his notion of 'ironic engagement'. MacKenzie makes this point too, suggesting that Siderits' position is "unstable" as "once the traditional dichotomy between conventional and ultimate reality has been overcome, it is no longer clear what 'ironic engagement' amounts to" (2008, p. 205). The point in the Abhidharmist distinction between the two truths was that, during everyday activities, we could act *as if* there were persons, despite our clear and liberating knowledge that ultimately there are only impersonal dharmas. How does Siderits imagine this ironic engagement operating under the Madhyamaka recharacterisation of the two truths? Siderits retains the Abhidharmist commitment to the view that accepting the truth of dharma theory is the means whereby we eliminate existential suffering. Yet dharma theory is now understood as a conventional truth and so, employing ironic engagement, Siderits would have us live *as if* dharma theory were ultimately true, when we know that in fact there is no ultimate truth. But how would this work in everyday life? Would Siderits have us operate at a meta-ironic level? Should we engage in everyday life *as if* there are persons while simultaneously acting *as if* there are only dharmas? Does existential suffering resume every time we leave our meditation cushion?

There is a deep confusion here, I think. This confusion can be resolved, however, if we allow that the soteriological importance of dharma-theory was only ever ancillary to the real soteriological work of realising śūnyatā. This immediately suggests the Madhyamaka picture which grants *all* the soteriological work to śūnyatā while acknowledging the practical benefits of the theory of non-self. Siderits, however, cannot follow the Madhyamaka here as, under the semantic interpretation, a realisation of śūnyatā 'leaves everything as it is'. Adopting an anti-realist stance towards our views does not itself influence the content of those views. If this is all there was to the soteriological project, we are left facing the prospect of an enlightenment that makes no moral demands; a practitioner could become enlightened while holding any worldview whatsoever, as long as it was experienced as empty. This absurd and unpalatable position is often attributed to D. T. Suzuki and I will discuss in detail in Chapter 7 how it is that the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika analysis avoids such relativism without relying on the covert essentialism introduced by Siderits and the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika. Briefly stated, it is only if śūnyatā is understood as more than a merely semantic theory that a realisation of śūnyatā does influence the content of empty worldviews; all worldviews are empty, but not all worldviews survive the realisation of their own emptiness.

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mistaken on their *own* terms. Having said this, however, Siderits does hold *himself* to a hermeneutical standard and so he may feel the pressure of this line of argument.

## Meaning and Metaphysics

Siderits' whole project seems to be predicated upon a rigidly dualistic distinction between metaphysics and semantics. I hope to have sufficiently outlined the problematic repercussions of this binary opposition, and the way in which Siderits overbalances and oscillates about the middle way. The trace of dualism and realism that is retained subverts the coherence and function of the Madhyamaka. The presence of a mind-independent basis for mind-dependent reality entails the impossibility of any sense of non-conventional truth. This forces a semantic monism in which inherently existing conventional truths are required to avoid relativism. This, together with a tenuous slurring of the two-truth schema to account for the soteriological effectiveness of both śūnyatā and dharma-theory, leaves the semantic interpretation with much to be desired.

The truly non-dual position that I wish to demonstrate is neither 'actually' metaphysical, nor 'merely' semantic. If one sees a substantial difference between metaphysical theories and semantic theories then the middle way is closed. Instead of suggesting a semantic interpretation *rather than or at the exclusion of* a metaphysical interpretation, it would seem to me to be more in keeping with the Madhyamaka sentiment to depolarise that distinction and suggest that the Madhyamaka is a semantic-metaphysical position (an ontoepistemology). This mutual dependence between meaning and metaphysics, between knowing and being, is the middle way.

It is, in my view, a misrepresentation of the Madhyamaka to suggest that it is avoiding metaphysics. Nāgārjuna is neither doing metaphysics (he is not engaging in the ontological project), nor is he *not* doing metaphysics (he is no quietist). Perhaps it can be helpful to consider him as *undoing* metaphysics. However, he is also undoing *semantics*. Indeed we can understand the Madhyamaka as undoing whatever it is that is being done.<sup>106</sup> This critique can be broadly applied to any rigidly non-metaphysical interpretation of the Madhyamaka. If a non-metaphysical interpretation is offered in a reaction *against* metaphysical interpretations, we can begin to suspect that a binary opposition is in play and thus that the middle way has already been overlooked.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> By this I hope to capture the sense in which the Madhyamaka analysis depolarises tensions but without refuting conventional distinctions. A deconstructive, but not *destructive*, movement.

<sup>107</sup> As I hope to have illustrated here, being in polarised tension with an alternative view requires that there is an underlying shared assumption, and such a shared assumption must be an inherently existing (i.e. *ultimate*) truth. Thus a polarised view in a binary opposition is necessarily *not* the middle way. The middle way does not operate within polarised opposition. It is constituted by the frictionless transcendence of opposition through depolarisation. Furthermore, as Derrida (amongst others) has taught us, all constructed assertions are always already located in opposition with their negations. This is why the Madhyamaka cannot be positively or autonomously presented *as* anything. It can only be demonstrated with respect to some other constructed view. Thus, any positive presentation of the Madhyamaka is a misrepresentation of the Madhyamaka.

## Answering intuitions

By accepting Nāgārjuna's conclusions while missing the profound repercussions of those conclusions, a realist will interpret the Madhyamaka as either some form of nihilism or some form of absolutism. In Chapter 3, I noted those motivating intuitions that, under the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, generate a tendency towards absolutism and away from nihilism. We saw how Murti insists on an absolutist interpretation as the only means whereby we can satisfy the motivating intuitions concerning the groundedness of reality and truth and the possibility of soteriology. I have noted recapitulations of Murti's absolutist themes in contemporary non-metaphysical interpretations. I identified a common assumption in absolutist and non-metaphysical interpretations whereby the satisfaction of these motivating intuitions required some form of inherent existence.

I will briefly conclude this chapter through showing that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, we can satisfy the realists' motivating intuitions without positing any form of inherent existence.

## Grounding reality and truth

Murti was motivated to read Nāgārjuna as an absolutist by his strong intuitions regarding the groundedness of reality and his desire to avoid a nihilistic result. I think we can share Murti's intuitions that a nihilistic worldview is at worst philosophically incoherent and at best psychologically and soteriologically unsatisfying. We feel that there needs to be something enduring and foundational to our experience. We can see Murti trying to accommodate this intuition throughout his interpretation:

The absolute as nirvāṇa is conceived by some as the cessation of all desires and aversions. This implies that it was not existent before the destruction. The absolute then would be as much subject to temporal limitations as the desires and aversions on whose cessation it supervenes. (1980, p. 229)

For Murti, the Real must be there all along behind appearance for otherwise it would be impermanent and dependent. This sense of a lasting and fundamental basis cannot be satisfied with a Real that arises for the first time upon the cessation of illusion. In Murti's restricted system such a lasting and timeless ground must be an inherently existing and inherently unconditioned Real. Under the recharacterisation of reality and appearance that we find upon adopting the middle way we can make sense of this intuition and find our enduring, yet dependently related, basis. It is precisely because the ultimate nature of reality (*śūnyatā*) is *not* independently existent, and is in a non-dual dependent relationship with everyday conventional reality, that we can rest

assured that there is a lasting ground to experience. The ultimate emptiness of reality is not a threat to our sense of groundedness, but is rather the *source* of our sense of groundedness.

Because we do not need the ultimate nature of reality to be inherently unconditioned, we can understand its immanence, and its transcendence, in a way that Murti cannot. This immanent transcendence was difficult for Murti to explain as he was stuck within a rigid appearance-reality duality. Having freed ourselves from this cumbersome polarity we are much better placed to explain this important relationship. Śūnyatā is the dynamic basis for the non-illusory thought-forms which condition and are conditioned by conventional reality. As a basis, it is straightforwardly immanent to its manifestations and also straightforwardly transcendent to them (in that it is necessarily, although not inherently, distinct from its manifestations; it is that which is manifesting). With this in mind, we can appreciate that, although not *enduring* in the sense of being a self-existent absolute, śūnyatā is *lasting*. It outlasts any particular context because it is context-*insensitive*. As the basis for any and all contexts it is always already the case, it is always already *true*. The non-uniform, non-static, non-inherently existing śūnyatā is the ‘lasting’ and ‘universal’ basis for our experience. It should satisfy our need for groundedness despite, indeed *because of*, its emptiness.

Again, the Madhyamaka does not deny reality, but denies the assumption that reality is necessarily founded upon inherent existence. Through abandoning the ontological project we realise we do not need to look *behind* or *beyond* conventional reality for the somehow-more-real ultimate reality. If we stop *looking* we will see directly, in the midst of the particularity of the everyday, the universality of śūnyatā. Conventional reality and ultimate reality are non-dual. So, in effect, there is just *reality*. A reality that is conventionally pratītya-samutpāda and ultimately śūnyatā. This non-dual reality accounts for the intuition that reality and truth must be somehow ‘more than’ the appearance of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’, but without requiring an inherently existing True Real.

### **The possibility of Prajñā**

We have seen that Murti wishes to account for the claims that, in prajñā, there is the possibility for a non-dual intuitive encounter with the Real as it truly is in itself. Murti fears that if there is no transcendent Real to which Intuition gives privileged access then the Madhyamaka ends up looking like a soteriological impotent positivism (*ibid*, p.332). We have seen that Murti reifies the Real as the absence of any falsifying subjective determination, and therefore considers non-dual knowledge to yield ultimate truth. Prajñā, or Intuition, sees things as they really are:

The Absolute is that intrinsic form in which things would appear to the clear vision of an Ārya free from ignorance. (*ibid*, p.235)

It is this picture, perhaps more than anything else, which supports Murti's intuitions about an inherently existing Real that is unconditioned and Indeterminate. If non-dual intuition sees the truth of reality, and non-dual intuition experiences reality in an unconditioned, indeterminate and absolute (non-relative) form, then the true nature of reality (now, 'the Real') must be Indeterminate, Unconditioned and Absolute.

While I would agree with Murti that the attainment of prajñā is soteriologically significant and that the references to this experience as yielding access to the true nature of reality are meaningful, I wish to do so without implying an independently existing Real that inherently embodies the characteristics experienced in the non-conceptual intuition of śūnyatā. As has been discussed above, from the Madhyamaka point of view, the non-propositional ultimate truth is not opposed to, or incompatible with, propositional conventional truth. Ultimate truth has nothing to do with conditionedness, but rather is to do with our attitude towards the conditioning. In other words, a mistaken view is not one that has conditioned content, but one that takes its content (whether conditioned or unconditioned) to be inherently existent. It follows that a non-conceptual awareness of śūnyatā is not the only unmistaken awareness. Granted, it will be the case that, given this particular means of approaching ultimate truth,<sup>108</sup> the *first* unmistaken mind will be a mind of non-dual, non-conceptual direct awareness. This does not mean, however, that what appears to this non-conceptual unmistaken awareness is *the* ultimate truth, or the way that śūnyatā always, invariably and *truly* is. The cessation of conceptualisation is a means to a soteriological end and not a soteriological end in itself. The goal is the cessation of reification, and this is initially achieved by bringing about a cessation of all possible objects of reification.<sup>109</sup> It is the cessation of the svabhāvic assumption that constitutes unmistaken awareness.<sup>110</sup> Thus, while there is a *coincidence* of unmistaken awareness and

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<sup>108</sup> There are other soteriological strategies that do not emphasise the cessation of conceptualisation in the same way as is being discussed here. For example, the generation-stage meditations of Tantra emphasise meditation on the non-duality of emptiness and pure appearance.

<sup>109</sup> Although this is by no means straightforward and automatic. It is perfectly possible to habitually reify the impulsively affirmed content of the supposedly contentless experience of prajñā. Murti's Real is a case in point.

<sup>110</sup> Although it will suffice for our purposes here, it is worth noting that 'the svabhāvic assumption' is a rather broad term in relation to the more fine-grained distinctions found in the philosophy of Madhyamaka Buddhism. In particular, there is an important distinction drawn between the mistaken conception of svabhāva and the mistaken appearance of svabhāva. From the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika point of view, for all non-enlightened beings, all appearance is mistaken in that conventionally existing things appear mixed with an appearance of their inherent existence (Hopkins, 1996, p. 450). Mistaken conception is the subsequent impulse to *assent* to that mistaken appearance (*ibid*). I use 'the svabhāvic assumption' as a course-ground concept that refers to both the appearance and the conception of svabhāva. To be clear then, the cessation of the svabhāvic assumption (as I put it) does not refer only to the cessation of mistaken conception, but also the cessation of mistaken appearance.

śūnyatā-as-unconditioned-and-indeterminate, there need not be an *identity*. This is precisely why it is said that an enlightened being can arise from this non-dual, non-conceptual meditation and, for them, śūnyatā (ultimate truth) appears simultaneously with dualistic conceptual thought-forms (conventional truths).<sup>111</sup> Śūnyatā is known unmistakably alongside the unmistakable knowledge of conventional reality; the two truths are realised as non-dual. As long as we are not engaged in the svabhāvic assumption, and are clear in our realisation of the ultimate and conventional nature of reality then we are directly and unmistakably encountering śūnyatā, even in a conditioned state. As Streng points out, the presence of these conditioned structures is not incompatible with salvation:

Salvation is *immediately at hand* but *not identical* to the present situation. Spiritual life is lived in practical life, within the structure of existence, but without the bondage of these structures. (1967, p. 159)

This point can be framed in terms of a distinction between the *cessation* of conceptual thought and the *śūnyatā* of conceptual thought. If we miss this distinction then we miss the whole point in the Madhyamaka analysis. Śūnyatā is not constituted by the cessation of falsifying conceptual thought. Śūnyatā is not identical to the unconditioned state. The cessation of conceptual thought is merely one strategy whereby we can approach a realisation of śūnyatā. As Galloway points out, śūnyatā:

is in no sense part of the system in the way zero is a part of the mathematical system ... it subsists in the positive statement as well ... our zero statement could be a step in the direction of śūnyatā, as an upāya, but not ontologically. (1989, p. 28)

Again, the crucial soteriological insight is the cessation of the svabhāvic assumption. It is this cessation that constitutes 'seeing things the way they are'. Under the Madhyamaka, this no longer means gaining privileged access to the way things have been all along and in themselves, but rather that we are gaining insight into the intimate non-dual relationship between ontology and epistemology. This ontoepistemological insight tells us that the way things are experienced is definitive of the way they are. Crucially, we realise that this insight is just as true of conditioned experience as it is for unconditioned experience. This is the true achievement of buddhahood and

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<sup>111</sup> Murti accepts that post-enlightenment "phenomenalisation" occurs amongst the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (1980, p. 141). I would argue, however, that this is not possible given his formulation of the soteriological process. It would seem that, on his reading, this "conscious assumption of phenomenal form" (*ibid*) would require that either his Real become non-uniform or the Buddhas' experiences become re-contaminated with ignorance. The former option would be impossible under his system, and the latter would surely be incompatible with the understanding of a Buddha as one who is free from ignorance. Nāgārjuna can explain this process with much greater ease as, for him, 'phenomenalisation' need not be a falsification of śūnyatā.

the non-duality of the two truths; with the final cessation of the svabhāvic assumption conventionally existing things are experienced directly as manifestations of śūnyatā.

I hope it is clear that the Madhyamaka offers us a non-absolutist model that provides the soteriological security and psychological satisfaction that Murti believes is only available within an absolutist model. Nāgārjuna's argument for the relativity and interdependence of all things extends even to Murti's cherished notions of Truth and Reality and so destroys the fundamental presupposition of any absolutist theory. This is achieved without adopting nihilism or relativism. It turns out that our sense of existential groundedness and the soteriological value of truth are better served by rejecting the ontological project, following Nāgārjuna's advice and adopting the middle way.

## Conclusion

The central problem with absolutist interpretations has been identified as a misunderstanding of non-duality. I hope to have shown that metaphysical views (represented by Murti) and non-metaphysical views (represented by Siderits) do not fully appreciate the epistemic and ontic repercussions of Nāgārjuna's arguments. In each case, rigid binaries are retained under the mistaken assumption that they are necessary to avoid nihilism or relativism.

Non-duality is entailed by the symmetrical equality between śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda; śūnyatā needs to be empty in the same way as everything else. Semantic interpretations appreciate this point and so are an improvement upon metaphysical interpretations, which retain a sense in which śūnyatā is not fully subject to pratītya-samutpāda. However, this perfect symmetry needs to be clearly distinguished from identity in order to avoid the over-reaction of the semantic interpretations. From the Madhyamaka point of view, the non-duality of the two truths (here expressed in the non-dual relationship between śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda) are non-identical as well as non-different. Thus non-duality not only locates the middle way between nihilism and absolutism, but also the middle way between metaphysical interpretations and semantic interpretations (between transcendentalism and quietism).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> As I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, this distinction is important in the construction of a soteriologically satisfying Buddhist modernism. In distancing itself from absolutist, transcendental pictures, contemporary quietist interpretations of Madhyamaka Buddhism risk becoming secularised and accommodated within contemporary (i.e. scientific materialist) metaphysics. The alternative seems to be the surrender of rationality in order to embrace the ineffable transcendent. However, from the middle way, we can accept an important sense of 'mystical' transcendence without the supposed surrendering of reason. We cannot afford to be quiet about transcendence, about extra-ordinariness, about the 'super-natural'. We must speak in defence of the ultimate reality of śūnyatā, but we must learn to speak non-

In making clear how to operate non-dualistically and how to engage in non-dualising critique, I hope to indicate a pattern as to *how* to critique, or ‘reject’ a worldview. This is a crucial aspect of the Madhyamaka method; a Mādhyamika necessarily critiques realist views only on grounds accepted by the realist. A Mādhyamika critiques svabhāvic worldviews by drawing attentions to internal incoherence, rather than by offering their own alternative and superior view. This is important as, if criticism is carried out by comparison, then some mutually acceptable ground is being presupposed; a ground upon which the alternative views polarise in opposition. As we have seen, to be a common constituent of more than one worldview, such a positively constructed ground must be to some extent inherently existent. It transpires that, at the very least, what worldviews in polarised opposition have in common is the very svabhāvic presupposition that the Madhyamaka seeks to criticise. Thus, it is revealed that a willingness to locate one’s interpretation of śūnyatā in a polarised opposition with alternative interpretations is evidence of the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.<sup>113</sup>

Of course, from the Madhyamaka point of view, all worldviews have *being empty* in common; śūnyatā is a shared, indeed a *universal*, ground. However, as insight into śūnyatā is non-propositional and context-insensitive, it cannot operate as a ground for polarised opposition and nor can it be used (even pedagogically) as a ground for criticism by comparison. Therefore the only form of critique that makes sense under the Madhyamaka is the Prāsaṅgika method; there is no common ground between a realist and a Mādhyamika, as there is not one thing upon which they agree. A Mādhyamika only really has one ultimate truth (the impossibility of inherent existence), and this truth is precisely what is denied by the realists who take for granted the *necessity* of inherent existence. It follows that there is no sense in enacting any kind of propositional comparison between a Madhyamaka worldview and a realist worldview. Such a comparison would leave the crucial matter (the dispute over the possibility of svabhāva) unaddressed. So the Madhyamaka method must begin (and, as it turns out, *end*) with drawing attention to the operation of the svabhāvic operation within their interlocutor’s worldview and the internal incoherence that arises from it. The Madhyamaka critique is not, in fact, a critique of the content of a worldview but is a critique of the reification of that content.

These observations can be seen to put pressure on contemporary Madhyamaka apologists. If a realisation of śūnyatā is understood to be a universally desirably soteriological goal, but śūnyatā cannot be positively presented, how should a Mādhyamika approach their compassionate pledge

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dualistically, in order that the affirmation of the transcendent is not a negation (or a denigration) of the imminent, empirical everyday.

<sup>113</sup> From these observations it also follows that any positively constructed presentation of the middle way is problematic. The extent to which a positively constructed view is a definition *against* its negation is the extent to which a polarised opposition is in effect.

to assist all beings to enlightenment? If what I have said above is true, a Mādhyamika should have no interest in enacting a propositional comparison between their own empty worldview and the svabhāvic worldviews of those around them. Yet we see many examples of just such a propositional comparison being enacted by apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism. There is indeed a tension here, and it should be resolved in order to assist the Madhyamaka to speak clearly to the West. This tension is perhaps particularly apparent in contemporary discourses of the similarity between ‘Buddhism’ and ‘science’, and so I will treat this subject in some detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5 – The Encounters Between Buddhism and Science.

In Chapters 2-4 I discussed some of the ways in which the Madhyamaka message is interpreted and understood in terms of contemporary western philosophical categories and frameworks. I hope to have identified a crucial area of tension in such hermeneutical projects in as much as identifying the Madhyamaka message with any positive, propositional content is to misrepresent the Madhyamaka message and to miss the middle way. In making this critique I hope to have demonstrated my own interpretation of the Madhyamaka message and sufficiently distinguished myself from those interpretations that I critique. I concluded my analysis by noting a tension whereby, if my characterisation of the Madhyamaka was accurate, then the Madhyamaka should not be introduced into a new context through propositional comparison with worldviews indigenous to that context. I will now explore some of the ways in which apologists attempt to communicate their understanding of Madhyamaka message to the contemporary West and demonstrate how this tension manifests and gives rise to significant practical problems and philosophical concerns.

I will, therefore, be looking at Buddhist modernism; those forms of Buddhism that have “emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity” (McMahan, 2008, p. 6). In particular I will be investigating the “discourse of scientific Buddhism” (*ibid*, p.90), the well-established narrative of Buddhism’s compatibility with contemporary scientific worldviews and its suitability for appropriation by modern, rational society. The volume of literature surrounding this discourse suggests that I am not alone in considering it to be a crucially important conversation for Buddhist modernists. Given the way that scientific-secular ways of thinking have shaped popular conceptions of the criterion for truth and the nature of reality, Buddhism must prove itself in this domain if it wishes to gain cultural credibility as a rational and meaningful approach to life and living. As such, the discourse of scientific Buddhism offers an important opportunity for the Madhyamaka to speak to the West.

I will critically assess this discourse, looking at the way in which encounters between traditional Buddhism and modern scientific worldviews have been, and continue to be, enacted.<sup>114</sup> We will note that there is a strong intuition amongst apologists for Buddhist modernism that the Buddha’s

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<sup>114</sup> Before beginning I would briefly address an overarching complication with attempts to discuss or enact encounters between science and Buddhism. Over time and place the construction of the identities ‘science’ and ‘Buddhism’ has always changed. There is no stability to the concepts or uncontroversial referents of the terms. In employing these terms I do not wish to suggest that I have found an uncontroversial basis of these identities, or even that I have my own particularly defined referent for these terms. I critically approach these identities as I find them in the arguments and discussion of others, I do not advance or utilise these concepts myself. In this sense my criticism and discussion is of a thoroughly Madhyamaka-Prāsāṅgika form. I use the terms as I find others using them, but minus any assumption regarding the inherent existence of their referents.

teachings contain timeless, universal truths that are suitable to operate within or alongside modern scientific worldviews. Despite these claims I will agree with Donald Lopez (2008, 2012) that, given the way such encounters are enacted, we should abandon the project of Buddhist modernism lest Buddhism should become marginalised and demythologised away to nothing. Buddhism is not naturally compatible with science, but rather compatibility is achieved through a process of propositional compromise that sacrifices much of Buddhism's distinctive content and consequently weakens its ability to challenge contemporary ways of thinking and being. As well as these pragmatic concerns, there are deeper philosophical inconsistencies that arise from attempting to formulate a Buddhism that simultaneously enjoys both ancient authority and a contemporary relevance.

While surveying this landscape, however, I will draw attention to the way in which these problems arise only due to the implicit endorsement of a particular epistemological framework, in which true propositions are considered 'abrasive'. I will argue that this assumption, discernible both in the discourse of scientific Buddhism and critical responses to that discourse, is at odds with the Madhyamaka understanding of śūnyatā; taking true propositions to be abrasive propositions is a symptom of the svabhāvic assumption. It follows that this discourse of scientific Buddhism is not an example of a Madhyamaka discourse. The Madhyamaka message is not being heard here.

While performing this analysis I will offer a Madhyamaka alternative to this mode of discourse and so demonstrate how it is that the Madhyamaka message can be communicated and what becomes possible thereby.<sup>115</sup> Thus I hope to distinguish a claim I will make, that śūnyatā is universally accessible from within alternative worldviews (including scientific-secular worldviews), from the claims embedded in the discourse of scientific Buddhism. In doing so, I hope to account for the apologists' intuition that Buddhism embodies timeless truth without entering into the identified tensions typically found in Buddhist modernism.

### Three modes of encounter

In examining the different ways in which the encounter between science and Buddhism has taken place, I will use the schema presented by Jose Cabezón (2003). Cabezón surveys the history of the

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<sup>115</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are not abrasive, but *frictionless*. I will suggest, therefore, that Buddhism and science can *frictionlessly co-operate* without the need to enter into propositional conflict or compromise. Importantly, however, such encounters are not examples of the Madhyamaka speaking to the West but rather are the results of the Madhyamaka *having spoken* to the West. The Madhyamaka message makes frictionless co-operation possible, but it is not a party in such an encounter. This understanding turns on the clear distinction being made between the tradition of Madhyamaka Buddhism, and the Madhyamaka attitude associated with that tradition. These points will be unpacked in detail in Chapter 6.

various encounters between science and Buddhism, and characterises them as falling into three broad categories; conflict, compatibility and complementariness. I will briefly sketch these three modes of encounter so as to outline the different attitudes towards the meeting of traditions. Although the historical details and variegated manifestations of these encounters are certainly fascinating, they are unimportant for our purposes here. My interest is in discerning the general strategies employed to enact an encounter between science and Buddhism and problematising the underlying philosophical assumptions that motivate these strategies.

Cabezón initially and briefly discusses a mode of engagement that he calls *conflict/ambivalence* (*ibid*, p.41). This first mode is typical of the earliest phase of encounter between the traditions and is characterised by an emphasis on difference (*ibid*, p.49). The other is seen as something substantially different that must be rigorously avoided (in order to protect the integrity of one's own tradition) or which can be safely overlooked or inconsequentially tolerated (without risking the integrity of one's own tradition). In this mode the other is typically amorphous and poorly delineated from its surroundings (*ibid*, p.42). Cabezón notes that, while the distinctions have tended to become sharper in the more nuanced forms of engagement (*ibid*, p.57), where the conflict mode persists there also persists a vagueness in the discrimination of the other (*ibid*, p.43) that may contribute to the disinterest in engagement. Cabezón does not spend much time discussing this mode of engagement as it is really a description of a lack of engagement. No conversation or discourse takes place. The other is either resisted or ignored. We can note, however, that in either gesture there is a contrast felt between one's own propositional content and the propositional content of the other. The other is saying substantially different things, and so there is no sense in which a propositional compromise can be (or needs to be) attempted.

The second mode Cabezón identifies is that of *compatibility/identity*. This mode "emphasises similarity rather than difference" (*ibid*, p.44) and the two traditions are regarded as similar or, in extreme cases, identical. The similarity is sometimes presented in terms of method, but it is more typically a similarity of content that is considered. The motivating impulse behind such comparisons seems to be a wish to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Buddhism, to provide a "defence against modernism" (Lopez, 2008, p. 192) and demonstrate its invulnerability to science (as opposed to traditional Christianity which was suffering at the hands of scientific progress) (Cabezón, 2003, p. 46). Cabezón identifies a narrative of Buddhism as the religion of science, "an interior science, a mind science" (*ibid*, p.48). As we shall see, in order to achieve this compatibility, there is a willingness reduce Buddhism "to its highly philosophical elements abstracted from any living context" (McMahan, 2008, p. 114) in order to reveal the scientific 'essence' of Buddha's teaching. Cabezón recognises that this mode of engagement (particularly

when presented as *identity* rather than mere compatibility) is now often considered naive (although by no means is it entirely absent from contemporary discussion) (2003, p.46).

The third, and most nuanced, mode of engagement is that of *complementariness*. Here, rather than tenuously focus on either the differences or the similarities, both are openly acknowledged. Therefore “complementarity as a mode of engagement lies somewhere between the first two modes: negotiating both similarities and differences” (*ibid*, p.49). This balancing act is achieved through designating separate domains within which each discipline operates alone. This division can be presented ontologically (the traditions are looking in the same way at different domains) or methodologically (the traditions are looking at the same domain in different ways). The hope is to create a more egalitarian resolution which respects the contribution and integrity of each tradition:

Unlike conflict/ambivalence as a mode, the logic of complementarity eschews the kind of triumphalism in which one of the two spheres emerges as victorious over the other. Unlike identity/compatibility as a mode, by holding firmly to the notion of irreconcilable differences it refuses to allow either Buddhism or science to be reduced to the other. (*ibid*, p.50)

With this mode of encounter, science and Buddhism encounter each other in a mutually profitable, wholistic interaction that results in a better, more complete worldview that incorporates both domains/methods (*ibid*, p.50). Importantly, this new worldview will be neither traditional science nor traditional Buddhism but an original creation, a ‘new and improved’ worldview. Typically the result of this compatibility will be a worldview with the technological convenience and robust rationality of science but with the moral authority and soteriological efficacy of Buddhism.<sup>116</sup> The explicit motive behind such an engagement is typically the hope that Buddhism can reinvigorate science with “the spirit of ethical responsibility” (*ibid*, p.55) and counteract “this tendency of modernist science to create a rift between nature and its observer, and between matter/body and mind” (*ibid*, p.56). The hope is therefore that Buddhism can act “as a force for reenchancing the world” (*ibid*).

### **Abrasive propositions**

If we take this schema to be a fair representation of the discourse, then we can discern an underlying assumption operating within that discourse. Each mode of engagement considers

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<sup>116</sup> Although, the sense of ‘soteriological’ may not retain its full import (i.e. the horizons of human potential may be limited through the merger with science). Indeed, I intend to show that, even if the engagement is sympathetic to Buddhist soteriology and claims to retain the full significance of the term, that a complementarity engagement with science wrecks the soteriological potential of the Buddhist contribution.

'science' and 'Buddhism' to be more or less identifiable traditions, each constituted by a particular collection of propositions, and which considers those propositions to be *abrasive*. By 'abrasive' I mean that such propositions are taken to be the sorts of things that really can conflict and are in competition for the truth. With abrasive propositions, when enacting an engagement between two traditions, if the content of the propositions are incompatible (either by virtue of their assumed ontological commitment or their assumed axiological basis), then we must choose which proposition is to be retained and which is to be jettisoned or adapted. In other words, apparently incompatible propositions are taken to truly be incompatible and some work must be done in order to resolve this incompatibility and to facilitate harmonious engagement.

The conflict mode of engagement does not attempt to ameliorate this abrasion, and in this sense is not so much an engagement as a recognition of the impossibility of engagement. I will consider this mode no further here, as my interest lies in those modes that attempt to navigate this abrasion in the hope of a productive and interesting engagement. In such attempts we see that some kind of propositional compromise is attempted in order to avoid the abrasion. In order to claim compatibility one must avoid abrasion through being selective as to which propositions we ascribe to each tradition. The complementary mode enacts a protectionist strategy that allows apparently incompatible propositions to restlessly cohabit, as long as each keeps to its own domain. The very fact that such a division is deemed necessary indicates that propositions are being considered as abrasive.

Cabezón notes that compatibility and complementary modes of engagement both have a methodological variant. These methodological comparisons, through characterising Buddhism and science as *disciplines* constituted by particular concerns and methods, rather than as *traditions* constituted by particular propositions, may seem to stand outside of this framework of abrasive propositions. I will argue in detail below, however, that the methodological comparisons do not escape this critique. It will prove to be problematic to characterise Buddhism as purely methodological; it is hard to imagine that there is no proposition constitutive or definitive of Buddhism. Furthermore, I will question whether a *pure* methodology is possible at all, since methodological research cannot get off the ground without at least *some* propositional presuppositions regarding the research apparatus and its relationship with reality.

Thinking more deeply about abrasive propositions we can see that their abrasiveness comes only from the assumption that they are in competition for *ultimate* truth. Ultimately true propositions claim to be grounded in, or made true by, the inherently existing way things are. It is the invariance and fixedness of this putative ultimate reality that results in the invariance and fixedness of the propositions about such a reality. It is precisely this invariance and fixedness that makes such propositions abrasive. In other words, abrasive propositions are predicated upon the

svabhāvic assumption; abrasive propositions are ultimately true propositions. I will develop the implications of this more fully later, but for now we can note that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, there is no such thing as an abrasive proposition. The only ultimate reality is śūnyatā, and so there are no ultimately true (and thus abrasive) propositions. It follows, then, that a Mādhyamika would need to neither endorse nor defend an abrasive proposition. Furthermore, a Mādhyamika would never need to defend themselves (or their worldview) *against* an abrasive proposition. For a Mādhyamika, all propositional truths are conventional truths. Conventional truths are grounded in, or made true by, the conventionally existing way things are. Their truth is not established by an invariant ultimate reality, but is context-sensitive; there is no sense in thinking of propositions as being in competition for *the* conventional truth. Thus, there is no sense of conflict or friction between alternative conventional truths. Conventional truths are non-abrasive, or *frictionless*.

It will be useful to keep this distinction in mind as we look in detail at the problems facing the discourse of engagement between Buddhism and science. I hope to show that the significant problems therein only hold given the assumption that true propositions are abrasive propositions. I will go on to show that, under the Madhyamaka, we can reimagine what ‘encounters’ between worldviews look like. As is typical of a Madhyamaka analysis, we shall see that, far from making interaction impossible and meaningless, it is only when traditions are understood as being empty that interaction becomes possible at all.

## Problems with compatibility

Donald Lopez (2008, 2012) strongly criticises the narrative of Buddhism’s compatibility with science, employing a rigorous historical analysis to argue that such claims are misleading and self-defeating. Buddhism *tout court* is demonstrably incompatible with science (indeed, Buddhism *tout court* is demonstrably incompatible with *itself*), and so claims of compatibility depend upon there being an identifiable ‘essence’ of Buddhism. Work must be done to sift the essential from the inessential, the crucial from the ‘merely’ cultural. In Buddhist terms, we can say that work is done to discriminate the absolute, ultimate and final teachings from the relative, conventional and provisional teachings. This work is done in order to extract the fundamental essence of Buddhism, so that this essence can be shown to fit within or alongside modern scientific worldviews. Lopez identifies the crucial problem with this strategy:

Once the process of demythologizing begins, once the process of deciding between the essential and the inessential is under way, it is often difficult to know where to stop. The question then is which Buddhist doctrines can be eliminated while allowing Buddhism to remain Buddhism. Can there be Buddhism without Mt Meru? can you play chess without the queen? (Lopez, 2008, p. 72)

The problem is that Buddhism becomes *too* flexible, it becomes difficult to arrive at a principled defence of whatever propositions we take to be essential to Buddhism.<sup>117</sup> If we do stop the demythologising process somewhere it is hard to justify why we stopped there and not somewhere else.

Even if we could somehow identify a true essence of Buddhism and were able to boast that this essence is compatible with current scientific findings, then this compatibility would only last until the next scientific discovery displaces currently accepted theories. If you are seeking to gain legitimacy for your ultimately true propositions, then you had better not draw parallels with current science; the conflict is just deferred into the future, and it would be hard to make this same move twice and hope to retain any kind of integrity. Science is always changing, and with this in mind it seems faintly ridiculous that there has always been a recurrent message of compatibility (*ibid*, p.129). Lopez roundly criticises those who argue that Buddhism is “modern, au courant, up to date with the latest scientific discoveries”, joking that in fact “it has been, for far more than a century” (*ibid*, p.216).

Lopez also argues that there are important interdependent links between different elements of Buddhism. Those who feel that there are unessential elements that Buddhism can do without often overlook the importance of these elements to the broader cohesive picture (*ibid*, p.70). For example, Lopez suggests that without the traditional cosmology of Mount Meru (often considered to be a clear cultural extravagance and an unessential element of Buddhism), there is no location for the six realms of saṃsāra (2012, p.77). Without this ‘container’ there can be no ‘contents’ (Lopez, 2008, p. 72) and the mechanics of rebirth and karma (typically considered as essential element of Buddhism) are put under pressure. As Lopez puts it, “Mount Meru ... is a slippery slope” (*ibid*).

As I read Lopez, he does not have an issue with scientists or modern philosophers, sociologists, psychologists etc, reading Buddhist texts or listening to Buddhist teachings and extracting useful insights and useful methods. Lopez merely wishes to ensure that we do not consider these

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<sup>117</sup> The Mādhyamika, of course, would say we *should* go all the way as all Buddhist doctrine is inessential. There is no essence to Buddhism, in the same way there is no essence to anything. The only essence is essencelessness. Having said that however, Lopez’s point retains its strength against anyone who *does* wish to stop somewhere and keep some propositions as ultimate truths, i.e. anyone but a Mādhyamika.

insights and methods to be either traditional Buddhism or the 'true essence' of traditional Buddhism. Lopez surveys the rich and varied texture of Buddhism's history, emphasises that there is no uncontroversial essence of Buddhism (*ibid*, p.216) and argues that the scientific Buddhism identified by apologists is a modern creation that bears little resemblance to Buddhism as it is lived and understood by the various Buddhists of the world (2012, p. 15). Tracking the emergence of this 'scientific Buddha', Lopez argues that this Buddha has no quarrel with science precisely because he has been created with this role in mind; apologists have not stumbled upon the miraculously modern essence of Buddhism.

Lopez makes a good point, I feel. What work is being done in claiming the extracted elements are the 'essential Buddhism'? Why is it important to the engagement that we still get to call the extract 'Buddhist'? The claims are not made merely in the spirit of accurate citation, there is meant to be some extra effect (beyond that of the natural effect of the insight or method itself) of recognising the extract as 'Buddhism' or even 'Buddhist'.<sup>118</sup> For Lopez, and I tend to agree, the motive can only be political; the preservation and exercise of power. The Buddhist may wish to use Buddhism's putative compatibility with science as a means to help Buddhism remain relevant and powerful in the modern world (Lopez, 2008, p. 33), or to use science as a defensive weapon:

Whether to counter the missionary's charge that Buddhism was superstition and idolatry, or to counter the colonialist's claim that the Asian was prone to fanciful flights of the mind and meaningless rituals of the body, or to counter both, science proved the ideal weapon. (*ibid*, p.32)

### **Timelessness and Skilful means**

Lopez attacks the discourse of scientific Buddhism through problematising the means of identifying and extracting the 'essence' of Buddhism from the complex and colourful Buddhist milieu. Without a principled means of extraction, scientific Buddhism is unable to deliver the ancient authority that it is extracted specifically to provide. However, as Lopez is well aware, within Buddhism there is a recognised mechanism for identifying the definitive meaning or 'essence' of Buddhist teaching: the mechanism of skilful means (*upāya*). This is an uncontroversial

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<sup>118</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view, this tendency to ascribe ancient authority to a contemporary practice may be one of the principle obstacles to the Madhyamaka speaking clearly to the West. As will become clear, it is precisely my point that one should be satisfied with replicating the *effect* of the Madhyamaka insight. Any 'legitimacy' or 'authority' comes only from this effect and not from its putative source. It only confuses the matter when one tries to associate the effect with any particular tradition. Such political concerns are entirely redundant and tragically undermine whatever benign intention may have motivated the engagement in the first place. It leaves one open to the justified criticism of thinkers like Lopez and the resulting loss of authority reflects poorly on the advertised effect. The reason why the effect is valuable is not because it is 'authentic Buddhism'; it is valuable because it reduces suffering. It is valuable because it *works*.

element of the Buddhist tradition<sup>119</sup> and accounts for the multitude of different Buddhisms that there are and have been in the world, each claiming to announce the definitive teachings of Buddha. The mechanism of upāya allows Buddhist apologists to disagree on which of Buddha's teachings were the final and definitive truths (*nitartha*), and which were merely provisional, pedagogic devices (*neyārtha*). This allows apologists to present innovation as elaboration (*ibid*, p.45) and makes possible a propositional flexibility without loss of authority.

Therefore, it could be argued that such 'selective readings' as we find in the discourse of scientific Buddhism are perfectly principled and have many precedents in the historical evolution of Buddhism. Those that would wish to continue this adaptation into the contemporary West through arguing for the compatibility of Buddhism with science are free to employ the same tried and tested exegetical method.<sup>120</sup> On this characterisation of skilful means, one can argue that, despite presenting propositions that are contrary to the findings of science (e.g. that the world is flat and Mount Meru stands at its centre), Buddha was not personally mistaken with respect to reality. Rather, he was being skilful in presenting his teachings with respect to the world that his audience understood. So, while Buddha may have *taught* untruths for skilful reasons, the Buddha, being omniscient, held all and only ultimately true propositions (Lopez, 2008, p. 61).<sup>121</sup> This is certainly how Lopez characterises the strategy of skilful means:

All schools of Buddhism, therefore, employed devices ... to distinguish what the Buddha had said in accordance with the exigencies of the moment from what the Buddha in fact knew ultimately to be true. (*ibid*)

While recognising the historical reality of such adaptations, Lopez points out the "apparent contradiction" in the "proliferation of doctrine in the Buddha's name while continuing to claim a single and unchanging truth (variously identified across time and tradition)" (2008, p. 215). According to Lopez, Buddhists hold that 'Buddha's wisdom' is the propositional content of Buddha's enlightenment, and that these propositions are timelessly and eternally true (2012, p.

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<sup>119</sup> Although there is unending controversy within Buddhism with regard to which teachings are definitive and which are provisional, the distinction itself is uncontroversial and widely employed.

<sup>120</sup> Although, as McMahan points out, while there is nothing new about approaching the Buddhist cannon asking which teachings are provisional and which are definitive, "the contemporary hermeneutical situation is unique ... in that for the first time, non-Buddhist discourse is increasingly being used to decide this question" (2008, p. 116). This shift of authority may threaten the legitimacy of the modern application of this traditional theme.

<sup>121</sup> An alternative response, of course, is to bite the bullet and accept that Buddha mistakenly held untrue propositions as true. That, for example, he made an honest (but ultimately unimportant) mistake in thinking that the world was flat, when in fact it was round. This strategy has been at times employed by H. H. The Dalai Lama (Lopez, 2008, p. 62). This seems like a curiously weak response as it ends up having all the same problems as a skilful means defence, but without any of the benefit (the point in the skilful means defence being to retain a sense of omnipotence to the Buddha, which is useful for the development of faith).

14).<sup>122</sup> If this is correct, it follows that the claim that the teachings of the scientific Buddha are the final, ultimate truths of Buddhism, necessarily renders the teachings of his ancient precursor as merely provisional, mythological or, less euphemistically, *false*. This result clearly challenges the many Buddhists and Buddhisms that the apologists for the scientific Buddha claim to be representing. Furthermore, this claim and the willingness to reformulate Buddha's wisdom to match contemporary discoveries, is a recurring theme in the history of Buddhism's relationship with science. Taking a historical overview of this narrative, it can seem gratuitous to insist that, despite the protestations of all previous apologists, *this time* the articulation is the *actual* content of Buddha's enlightenment.<sup>123</sup> The tension is clear; apologists wish to enjoy the flexibility of a malleable Buddhism whilst simultaneously recruiting the stability and authority of a timeless truth. Yet, one cannot achieve both aims while remaining consistent or credible. The authority one seeks through appeal to Buddha's wisdom is threatened by the willingness to compromise, or even reinvent, the propositional content of that wisdom.

I think Lopez is right to problematise this utilisation of the mechanics of skilful means and the notion of timelessness, although it does leave him in a curious position of somehow protecting from secularisation a Buddhism which he cannot locate.<sup>124</sup> The Mādhyamikas would, I think, share Lopez's concerns, but without finding themselves in the same uncomfortable position due to their reformulation of upāya and the wholesale rejection of definitively (ultimately) true propositions. I intend to show later that Lopez is missing an importantly different way of understanding the timelessness of Buddhist wisdom, in which this wisdom is timeless precisely because it is context-insensitive and non-propositional. Thus I hope to offer a more generous interpretation of the impulse to defend the timelessness of Buddha's wisdom. However, notwithstanding this point, Lopez's criticism stands for any attempt at propositional engagement between science and Buddhism, and any attempt to identify a propositional 'timeless' essence of Buddhism.

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<sup>122</sup> Given that enlightenment is understood as the realisation of ultimate truth, then this characterisation of Buddha's wisdom follows directly from the assumption that ultimately true propositions are possible.

<sup>123</sup> One could of course claim that the previous claim of skilful means was itself skilful means and it is really only *this time* that you are serious. However, such moves begin to erode the mechanics of skilful means which rely upon the listener having confidence in your statements. More on the mechanics of skilful means below.

<sup>124</sup> It is hard to place what it is that Lopez considers to be the referent of 'Buddhism', and there seems to be an inconsistency in his position. Although he acknowledges that the 'original' Buddhism is so occluded that it is possible that the tradition is "only accretion" (2008, p. 214), and also that it is impossible (philosophically, I think, and not merely pragmatically) to locate the essence of Buddhism, he at other times claims to have a sense of what is essential to Buddhism. For example, when he balks at a Buddhism without the six realms (*ibid* p.72).

## Domestication of the dharma

Lopez argues that the narrative of compatibility begins as an attempt to protect the integrity of Buddhism against western colonial influences, and that this impulse is retained in the ongoing project of securing and maintaining a place for Buddhism in the modern and modernising world (2008, p. 33). Given this motivation, these projects risk becoming self-defeating in as much as they inaugurate a process of accommodation through sterilisation. Buddhism *could* adapt to science, but in doing so it would lose its exotic and provocative qualities and its potential to challenge dominant contemporary paradigms. Lopez is concerned about a “domestication of the dharma” (2012, p. 77), and fears that too much of what is important about Buddhism is being surrendered in an attempt to integrate with science. He feels that such a project is “limited and limiting” (*ibid*, p.8), as the Buddhism being presented is stripped of much of what is considered essential in traditional contexts. Science claims to, or at least *aims* to, account for all of reality. If Buddhism is rendered habitable within science then what contribution is that Buddhism able to make? The goals and motives of Buddhism are restricted through being appropriated within a scientific framework; the horizons of the possible are limited to what scientists consider possible. Enlightenment risks being reduced to little more than achieving optimum brain states for the course of this one brief life. Buddha risks being reduced to little more than a nice person (Lopez, 2008, p. 216). In order to offer something new to the modern western context Buddhism must adapt to speak the language of modernity, but in doing so it risks becoming so adapted and accommodated that it loses all power to critique (McMahan, 2008, p. 260). Lopez would rather that we pay attention to what he sees as genuine and irresolvable incompatibilities between science and Buddhism (2012, pp. 122-132), suggesting that this dissonance should be embraced as “this incompatibility carries with it a particular power” (*ibid*, p.79).

I find Lopez’s arguments here strong and compelling. Buddhism cannot engage with science without conflict and this conflict cannot be eased without Buddhism surrendering an ever increasing portion of its propositional content. Buddhism enters a path of diminution, its value, its meaning, its ability to provoke and challenge being eroded by the advances of science. Lopez foresees the unhappy terminus being a thoroughly accessible, thoroughly secularised and thoroughly sanitised ‘Buddhism’.<sup>125</sup> We can note, however, that with his uncritical endorsement of ultimately true propositions, Lopez does not speak for the Madhyamaka. In framing his criticism in such a way, Lopez enters into and uncritically endorses a framework of abrasive propositions; his argument addresses how best to *respond* to the abrasion, the abrasion itself is

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<sup>125</sup> We can note that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, we could argue that any form of Buddhism that argues for or defends ultimately true propositions is already secular in as much as its final soteriological function is lost; the crucial soteriological insight being the lack of inherent existence and therefore the impossibility of ultimately true propositions.

never questioned. This being said, Lopez's objections are strong against those who endorse abrasive propositions and who attempt to engage Buddhism with science in the compatibility mode. If we hold a view of Buddhism and science such that they are constituted by their own collection of ultimately true propositions then we should agree with Lopez that any kind of compatibility is impossible without adapting one or both traditions beyond all recognition.<sup>126</sup>

## Problems with complementarity

The complementary mode of engagement seeks to avoid the problems of the compatibility mode of engagement through discriminating separate ontic domains or epistemic methods with respect to which Buddhism and science can each have complete authority. The hope is that in making this distinction the apparently incompatible propositions can be retained without adaptation and this new, expanded worldview is an improvement upon either of its constitutive worldviews.

However, this more nuanced and subtle mode of engagement retains the problems of the compatibility mode; the problems are merely shifted to a more nuanced and subtle level. The problem now becomes finding a principled basis for the choice of boundary line between the designated domains. It is by no means straightforward or uncontroversial to limit either science or Buddhism to a particular domain. It seems clear that both science and Buddhism are intended to be taken as wholistic and total. It is a tenuous departure from either tradition to argue that it is not, in itself, complete.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, Cabezon acknowledges that such talk of domains must not be understood in a literal sense:

Dialogue can be stunted by a dichotomising logic of strict complementarity that is taken too literally, and applied too strongly, by a structuralist logic of binary opposition creating impermeable categories that cease to operate as metaphors and come to be believed as real. (2003, p. 58)

He points out that, while protectionism is a tempting peace-keeping strategy:

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<sup>126</sup> Indeed, it would seem to be the case that if we push Lopez's thinking quite hard then traditions should not be able to adapt or change at all. We can see a familiar pattern here, similar to Nāgārjuna's method. Lopez is pointing out the unintended and unexpected consequences of understanding traditions to be constituted by ultimately true propositions; that those traditions cannot change, adapt or interact in any way. Lopez's conclusion is different from Nāgārjuna's however. Lopez seems to conclude that traditions cannot survive an adaptive encounter without losing their original identity. Nāgārjuna concludes that there is no such thing as ultimately true propositions; the tradition never had an original identity to lose.

<sup>127</sup> I do not mean 'complete' in the sense of *concluded*, but rather in the sense of *wholistic*. Scientists certainly do not profess to have completed their truth-seeking project, indeed they are typically at pains to point out the merely provisional nature of their claims. I mean to express the sense in which scientific worldviews are taken to account for every domain and aspect of reality. There is nothing left for other traditions to explain; the explanatory range of science is, in principle if not in practice, complete.

[T]he *truth* is that both Buddhism and science are highly complex, totalizing worldviews that defy the literalist and strict structuralist attempts to delimit them. (*ibid*, p.59)

So, although metaphors of dominion can be pragmatically useful in framing dialogue, ultimately:

[S]uch segregationist metaphors are, like all metaphors, artificial. They are artificial because scientific claims impinge, and sometimes impinge *negatively*, upon Buddhist ones, and vice versa. (*ibid*, p.60)

Another strategy that may seem to avoid this criticism of artificial and unprincipled boundary-making would be to line the division up along the traditionally recognised ultimate/conventional division found in Buddhism. Conventional truth would be the dominion of science whereas ultimate truth could be reserved for Buddhism. The Dalai Lama, for one, seems to favour this kind of model (Lopez, 2008, p. 34). However, Lopez points out that scientists and Buddhists do not stick to their respective sides (*ibid*, p.34). Moreover, as we have just discussed, even within Buddhism there is no uncontroversial consensus on the division (*ibid*).

We can see that the problems faced by the complementary engagement are in effect much the same as with the compatibility engagement. Some work needs to be done in order to manage the demonstrably incompatible propositional content of each tradition and that reconstituting effort introduces a subjective element that is difficult to justify and which robs the engagement of the credibility and authority that it is supposed to have.<sup>128</sup> These practical problems are substantial, but from the Madhyamaka point of view there are deeper concerns of a more philosophical nature.

### Shared metaphysical basis

As Cabezón and Lopez point out, Buddhism and science both claim to understand and explain the fundamental nature of reality, and thus every part of reality. An attempt to divvy up that reality between them is not only problematic in the sense outlined above, but there is a deeper metaphysical concern too. The suggestion that it is even *possible* to share reality with each other implies a common metaphysical basis; it requires that 'reality' be unequivocally understood by both parties. Unless the fundamental nature of ultimate reality as understood within each tradition is made explicit and compared *first*, then any dialogue will be compromised and of

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<sup>128</sup> The whole point in the narrative is that Buddhism *itself* is complementary with science *itself*. If an ambiguity and subjectivity is noted in the way that Buddhism is located, this surely robs the narrative of its force. The apologists need to claim that the Buddhism they have located is the *actual* Buddhism, lest their observations regarding complementarity become uninteresting and underwhelming.

limited benefit.<sup>129</sup> The engagements will be characterised by either misunderstanding (as both or either party tacitly assumes that the other holds the same view about the nature of ultimate reality as they do) or by condescension and wary tolerance (as both or either party allows that the other can contribute to their worldview but only in an inclusivist manner). In either case the engagement does nothing to alter each party's fundamental view of reality. Another way of framing this point would be to say that, as soon as we open up a constructive dialogue between traditions or worldviews we are bound to an implicit affirmation of a shared metaphysical basis. There must be a shared ground in order for any sort of comparison or engagement meaningful, and so the assumption that comparison and engagement *could* be meaningful implies a mutual acceptance of a common ground. Indeed, as we have seen, this is precisely the problem that the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika sees in the discursive strategy of the Madhyamaka-Svātantrika.

Because the fundamental nature of reality is typically so differently understood in scientific traditions and in Buddhist traditions, there is only limited benefit in attempting engagement in either the compatibility or the complementary mode. Even if we can find grounds of agreement in certain areas, or establish exclusive domains in which each tradition can operate independently, the fundamental points regarding the ultimate nature of reality remain in unresolved conflict. Eventually, when we reach the really fundamental and really *important* issues "intellectual antagonism will be unavoidable" (Cabezón, 2003, p. 59). Importantly, it is not just the intellect that will be attacked here. The ultimate nature of reality has great bearing on soteriology as it determines the ultimate nature of human (and non-human) beings and what is possible for us; these are not inconsequential matters. It seems to me that we should begin our engagements on these deeper issues, because without compatibility at this fundamental level any compatibility or harmony we perceive elsewhere is only apparent.<sup>130</sup>

### Wallace's metaphysical agnosticism

B. Alan Wallace's strategy requires more attention. Through making a strong distinction between science and scientific materialism and presenting science and Buddhism as disciplines rather than traditions (more constituted by their attitudes and methods than by their propositions), Wallace presents a form of the complementarity mode of engagement that seems less vulnerable to the

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<sup>129</sup> In *Universe Next Door* (2009), James W. Sire offers a catalogue of worldviews expressed as the answers to eight basic questions. The question he asks first is: 'What is prime reality - what is really real?' His point being that this question is surely the foundation upon which all worldviews are constructed.

<sup>130</sup> It should be clear that I am talking about metaphysics here and not cosmology. The cosmological incompatibility is Lopez's point and is somewhat less subtle. Lopez's concern is that the *big* pictures conflict, whereas I am talking about the *deep* pictures; the nature of ultimate reality. Missing this distinction is a hallmark of the svabhāvic assumption. Discussing what is real without first explicitly establishing what reality *is*, is to uncritically endorse the ontological project and to miss the middle way.

philosophical problems outlined above. I intend to show, however, that his presentation does not escape this criticism.

Wallace is careful to make a clear distinction between the scientific methodology and the philosophical position of scientific materialism, which he takes to be a “dogma that far transcends the domains of empirical science” (2003, p. 17). He points out that the two are so closely associated that it is common to take ‘science’ to entail scientific materialism (2008, p. 86). Emphasising this distinction is important because, while scientific materialism makes implicit and explicit claims to the actual nature of reality and therefore carries ontological commitments, science *itself* does not. The discipline of science is, or at least *should be*, metaphysically neutral; it is agnostic as to the nature of reality (*ibid*, p.106). It is not so much science but the dogma of scientific materialism that “presents formidable obstacles to any meaningful collaboration between Buddhism and science” (Wallace, 2003, p. 10). Thus, it is Wallace’s hope that:

Once science is freed from the ideological shackles of scientific materialism, its modes of open-minded inquiry may well complement those of Buddhism and other ancient contemplative traditions. (*ibid*, p.20)

Similarly, Wallace characterises Buddhism as a discipline of introspective empiricism rather than a dogmatic tradition. Wallace emphasises that Buddhism is “based on empirical knowledge” (2008, p. xi), and that Buddhists “experientially and rationally” investigate the nature of reality (*ibid*, p.xiii). In presenting Buddhism in this way he distances himself from the exotic cosmological propositions associated with Buddhism. Unlike Lopez, Wallace does not consider such “untenable claims” (*ibid*, p.147) to be constitutive of Buddhism. Acknowledging that unessential dogmatism has crept into both disciplines Wallace wishes to “reintroduce a spirit of true empiricism into the study of both religion and science” (*ibid*, p.106). His project, therefore, is to offer a picture whereby each discipline can contribute to a greater whole through collaboratively employing their alternative means of unbiased, empirical truth-seeking.

Through setting up the engagement in such a way Wallace improves upon the naive presentation by attempting to address the underlying metaphysical assumptions of each tradition. He does this by characterising science and Buddhism as disciplines of pure empiricism with no dogma or metaphysical assumptions to defend. Despite this improvement, I do not think that Wallace’s efforts avoid the philosophical, pragmatic, and soteriological concerns outlined above. I think that

he underestimates the demands and overlooks the consequences of being truly unbiased, and that he misses the deeply radical nature of truly empirical investigation.<sup>131</sup>

## Unbiased science

The problem is that, even if we understand science as a metaphysically agnostic discipline of unbiased truth-seeking, this does not entail that the *scientists themselves* will be without bias. Wallace should be aware that, according to Buddhists (and in particular the Mādhyamikas, who Wallace sees himself as representing), unenlightened beings have an innate tendency to assume the possibility and necessity of inherent existence. This impulsive reifying tendency promotes a pre-cognitive materialist bias and will generate realist assumptions about the content of our worldviews.<sup>132</sup>

Wallace tries to engage science and Buddhism in the abstract, hoping to enact an encounter between metaphysical neutral science and an ontologically flexible Buddhism. While it may well be that science in the abstract is metaphysically neutral, real live scientists rarely are. Wallace may profitably theorise about what could and should be the case, but real transformation of real people will not be achieved in the way he suggests. Engagement, in practice, does not occur between two disciplines, but rather between the worldviews of the dialoguing individuals who are representing those disciplines. Without addressing the metaphysical assumptions that we have good grounds to expect individuals to be carrying, Wallace merely shifts the conflict out of sight (and out of mind).

We should expect that, on some level, each individual impulsively takes their true propositions to be *ultimately* true and any objects referred to by these propositions to be inherently existent.<sup>133</sup> To leave this impulse unaddressed is a great risk. Without challenging it directly (as Nāgārjuna does), we should assume that the svabhāvic assumption will operate continuously and subconsciously and that any dialogue or engagement carried out will be limited and confused by this cognitive error.

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<sup>131</sup> Although, as I will elaborate below, I remain unclear as to whether Wallace is truly mistaken or if he is attempting a pedagogically motivated upāya. Either way I hope to show that the position he outlines does not withstand critical scrutiny and so fails, even as skilful means.

<sup>132</sup> Indeed, from a Madhyamaka point of view, there is no such thing as a metaphysically neutral individual. Either we intellectually or innately hold worldviews with respect to inherently existing ultimate reality, or we realise śūnyatā. Either option constitutes a metaphysical stance.

<sup>133</sup> This would be true, I suspect, even if publically they accept their theories merely as working hypotheses. This claim is evidenced when individuals become upset and defensive when their hypotheses are criticised. I appreciate that the pure scientific method would not encourage such defensiveness, but I wonder how true that is in practice.

## Unbiased Buddhism

Another difficulty for Wallace is that it is not strictly possible to characterise traditional Buddhism as unbiased truth-seeking. As Lopez points out, Buddhism is in a sense a “profoundly conservative tradition” (2012, p. 44). The content and experience of enlightenment is well documented, there is nothing unexpected, no new discoveries. In presenting Buddhism as unbiased empirical truth-seeking Wallace is significantly diverging from any traditional presentation of Buddhism. We can see this also in his willingness to abandon traditional views, the “residue of dogmatic beliefs, superstitions, and purely cultural elements” that “tarnish” the pure pursuit of “spiritual knowledge” (Wallace & Hodel, 2008, p. 165).

Furthermore, in contrast to this flexibility, Wallace himself seems to defend particular Buddhist views (particularly the immateriality of mind but also reincarnation and miracle powers) as importantly true (*ibid*, p.147). Wallace claims that in Buddhism “it is patently obvious that numerous truth claims are made concerning a wide range of subjective and objective phenomena” (2003, p.23). Wallace seems to feel that it is important to maintain some propositions as true articulations of the way things are in reality, lest one begins to look like some kind of radical postmodernist<sup>134</sup> and falls prey to the significant problems that Wallace sees therein.<sup>135</sup> Wallace strongly defends Buddhist knowledge claims against the postmodernist critique:

Numerous Buddhist contemplatives have made the astonishing claim, allegedly based on their own experiences, that humans *can* meditatively train their minds to such a degree that they can experientially discover the reality of individual experience following death and prior to conception. And they make other

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<sup>134</sup> I will not overly concern myself with locating or defining ‘postmodernism’ or with identifying who these ‘postmodernists’ might be. I use the word as I find it used in Wallace. My interest is in what we can learn about Wallace’s presuppositions from the way he distances himself from ‘postmodernism’ as *he* understands it.

<sup>135</sup> Wallace strongly rejects the postmodern conclusion that culturally conditioned experience or investigation cannot yield insight into a shared objective reality:

When presented with the suggestion that any type of religious experience reveals an aspect of reality, or the suggestion that there may be common insights between, say, Buddhism and science, postmodernists commonly respond with alarm or derision. Their metaphysical assumptions simply do not allow for such an occurrence as a matter of principle. (2003, p. 21)

This seems to me to be a curious argument for a Mādhyamika to make and betrays, I think, a subtle misunderstanding (or an attempt at upāya). There can be no common insights of the kind that Wallace seeks to defend, for he wants different worldviews to *share* common propositions. To be able to share a proposition would require that that proposition be ultimately true (as sharing requires the independent existence of the shared thing), and thus that there be a shared objective reality. However, an objective reality (shared or otherwise) is exactly what the Madhyamaka refutes. The only common insight (and it is here that the Mādhyamika parts ways with Wallace’s postmodernist strawman) can be the non-conditioned insight into śūnyatā. This, crucially, is a non-propositional insight into the non-duality of ontoepistemological reality and does not entail an inherently existing ultimate reality.

extraordinary truth claims about the nature and capacities of human existence, including the possibility of realizing the ground of being and achieving enlightenment. But postmodernists refute *in principle* the possibility of any such knowledge. (*ibid*, p.23)

My concern here is that Wallace seems to be taking 'knowledge' to be unequivocal. Surely a Mādhyamika would agree that the sort of knowledge that the postmodernists critique *is* impossible, but that the sort of knowledge that Madhyamaka Buddhists claim to have and hold as importantly and transformative true is perfectly possible. For a Mādhyamika, 'knowledge' does not mean unconditioned access to ultimate reality. Either Wallace is betraying a misunderstanding of the Madhyamaka, or he is taking a grave risk in intentionally misrepresenting the Madhyamaka for the purposes of pedagogy.

In his apparent unwillingness to give up any and all propositions we can detect once again a seemingly arbitrary distinction between the essential and the inessential Buddhist propositions. Thus Wallace's position fails to distinguish itself sufficiently from the problematic modes of complementarity and compatibility. Furthermore, Wallace's apparent desire to maintain some propositions as importantly true speaks against his central claim for Buddhism as unbiased truth-seeking. It may be thought that holding propositions as true does not necessarily constitute a bias as long as one is willing to surrender these truths if they should turn out to be mistaken. Wallace may well be open to changing his mind about these statements if they should turn out under scientific investigation to be false, despite his confidence that independent introspective research will corroborate these claims and his hope that extrospective investigation will add support (2008, p. 147). However, even if he is willing to surrender these truths, his position still represents a subtly biased view, for it still presents the *possibility* of objective truth and thus entails a dualistic epistemology a realist ontology (in other words, the pursuit of the ontological project). The view that Wallace presents is *not* unbiased, but retains an unexamined assumption about the structure of reality.

In locating himself within the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition Wallace inherits the subtle tension found there between the adamant rejection of any and all views about the way things *really* are, and the apparently dogmatic acceptance of Buddhist doctrines such as reincarnation and the four noble truths. Much of the controversy surrounding Nāgārjuna and the Mādhyamika comes from their apparent rejection of the truth in these doctrinally important teachings. As we have seen, this tension is resolved through insisting that these Buddhist teachings are conventional truths. They are not ultimately true and yet they function to produce their advertised results (they are non-ultimately true). It is precisely this conventional nature of Buddha's teachings that, in the context of cross-cultural dialogue and engagement with science, should inhibit any impulse to

defend them as absolute, objective or ultimate truths. In other words, Wallace is operating within the framework of abrasive propositions. In granting propositions the power to refute or support each other, Wallace assumes their abrasiveness. From the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are not vulnerable to refutation nor are they amenable to support; they are frictionless. This follows from the fact that their truth is not founded in some invariant ultimate reality, but is founded in their context-sensitive utility.<sup>136</sup> Wallace, however, seems to feel that these core Buddhist ideas are the results of introspective empirical truth-seeking, and that they can be profitably (and seamlessly) combined with the results of the extrospective empirical truth-seeking of science. He takes scientific discovery to be a genuine discovery of the way the world is, and not merely a convention established by mutual agreement and independent verification, and he argues that the discoveries of Buddhist contemplatives are equivalent (2003, p. 9). In equating the epistemic function of scientific knowledge and Buddhist knowledge, Wallace presents a suspiciously realist view of Buddhist ontology and epistemology.

We should understand that according to the Madhyamaka, any 'Buddhist' framework is entirely constructed and 'merely' conventional. Therefore, these apparently essential propositions that Wallace seeks to protect are *not* the result of unbiased truth-seeking. They are not what the Buddha, or Nāgārjuna, 'discovered' in their personal investigation into the nature of reality. They 'discovered' only *śūnyatā*. According to the Madhyamaka, the *only* result of unbiased truth-seeking is *śūnyatā*, because *śūnyatā* is the only ultimate truth. Another way of putting this is that, according to the Madhyamaka, all propositional truths are conventional truths and conventional truths are, by definition, conceptually constructed from within a particular, indeed *unique*, context. In this sense we can say that propositional truths are necessarily biased; propositional truths are always from a particular point of view. Thus, from the Madhyamaka point of view, no proposition, Buddhist or otherwise, will necessarily fall out of the truth-seeking project. No proposition is essential for the soteriological project. Reincarnation, for example, is not an ultimate truth. In my view, Buddha taught about reincarnation in just the same way that he taught about a flat earth; because it was a familiar aspect of the worldview of his students.<sup>137</sup> His

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<sup>136</sup> This is not to suggest the relativistic conclusion that the truth of a conventional truth is self-sustained or invulnerable to criticism. Conventional truths should always be open to re-evaluation and under constant self-criticism; they are tools reforged each time they are reached for.

<sup>137</sup> In the Kalama Sutra, Buddha is recorded as presenting a somewhat agnostic and disinterested stance towards past and future lives:

'If there is a world after death, if there is the fruit of actions rightly and wrongly done, then this is the basis by which, with the break-up of the body, after death, I will reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world.' This is the first assurance he acquires.

'But if there is no world after death, if there is no fruit of actions rightly and wrongly done, then here in the present life I look after myself with ease — free from hostility, free from ill will, free from trouble.' This is the second assurance he acquires.

four noble truths may have been an original formulation, but arguably they are little more than an encouragement to engage in empirical introspection and critical analysis; they are not a list of ultimately true propositions.

Wallace is of the opinion, however, that the existence of such things as past and future lives is empirically and independently verified by professional contemplatives. Thus a belief in reincarnation need not be dogmatically accepted but can be empirically justified. Wallace's hope of discriminating empirical realities from cultural dogma is threatened by the suggestion that there are traditional Buddhists who would claim that Mt Meru is also established by the direct perception of accomplished meditators (Lopez, 2008, p. 72). Furthermore, despite Wallace's suggestions to the contrary,<sup>138</sup> the professional contemplatives of alternative traditions would dispute these claims; if Katz's (1978) extensive research of the reported results of mystical investigation are accurate a Christian mystic, for example, would 'discover' different things in their empirical research and their professional opinion would differ.<sup>139</sup>

It is my view, and perhaps this is controversial, that 'unbiased Buddhist' or 'truth-seeking Buddhist' are oxymoronic statements. The true unbiasedness required for meaningful empirical truth-seeking entails holding no propositions as ultimately true (or even anticipating particular propositions to turn out to be ultimately true). However, identifying with a tradition of any kind means holding or anticipating some propositions as ultimate truths. If we are truly embarking upon unbiased truth-seeking it makes little sense to identify with a tradition, for identifying with a tradition is to decide in advance what is true.

Of course, given that our sense of identity is innately conditioned in sociohistoric ways, we are already and unavoidably located within a 'tradition' (or rather an overlapping set of 'traditions'). The point I am making is not that we must extract ourselves from any and all conditioning contexts before we can begin unbiased truth-seeking. Indeed, such a thing would be

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The point apparently being that it does not matter how things really are (or, with a Madhyamaka spin, there is no meaning to 'how things really are'), the teachings are pragmatically good advice on how to be, rather than teachings on how things are. (*Kalama Sutta* translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, [www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html](http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html)).

<sup>138</sup> Wallace talks of the introspective empiricism of "professional contemplatives" (2003, p.9) and seems to include contemplatives from non-Buddhist traditions in this category (2008, p.134). With the caveat, perhaps, that they are underdeveloped as compared to "the great contemplative traditions that emerged from India" (*ibid* p.136). In suggesting a homogeneity of methodology across "contemplative traditions" (*ibid* p.142), and expressing hopes that their results can complement the extrospective empiricism of science, Wallace seems committed to the view that professional contemplatives operating from within alternative spiritual traditions will confirm each other's introspective results.

<sup>139</sup> Perhaps Wallace's analogy between the Buddhist introspective empiricism and the scientific extrospective empiricism could bear the weight of such differences of professional opinion in contemplatives, although the postmodern creep is evident. Such disagreement highlights the lack of consensus amongst empirical researchers and draws us towards the sort of instrumentalist perspective that Wallace seeks to avoid.

impossible.<sup>140</sup> The point here is that unbiased truth-seeking requires, and is *constituted by*, the realisation of the ultimate truth *of* our context. This is opposed to the svabhāvic truth-seeking strategy of attempting to realise ultimate truth *from* our context. As we have seen, such a project is misguided as the truths we find are unavoidably indexed to our truth-seeking apparatus; we cannot hope to find truly objective propositional truths. The Madhyamaka truth-seeking project, however, does not seek propositional truths and so is able to avoid this incoherence. Indeed, we can perhaps say that the Mādhyamika does not seek truth at all, but rather seeks to understand the *nature* of truth. This non-propositional insight into śūnyatā is, like propositional truths, *dependent* upon context. However, unlike propositional truths, it is *insensitive* to context.<sup>141</sup>

### Unequivocal ‘truth’

Yet another way to frame this point is that, unless one is truly unbiased (and I hope to have shown that this significantly more demanding than Wallace seems to admit) then ‘truth-seeking’ or empirical investigation will not mean the same thing. We have seen that Wallace presents science and Buddhism more as disciplines rather than traditions. He characterises science and Buddhism as similar in their commitment to unbiased truth-seeking, the only difference being in their respective emphasis on extrospection and introspection. However, while it may well be true to say that both disciplines share a commitment to truth-seeking, it is by no means clear that ‘truth’ is understood unequivocally. Indeed, as a Mādhyamika, Wallace should be aware that ‘truth’ means something very different to a Mādhyamika than it does to anyone else. To present a view whereby science and Buddhism can co-operate in a wholistic empirical truth-seeking project strongly implies (or, at the very least, tacitly allows the assumption to follow unchecked) that both disciplines mean the same thing by ‘empirical truth-seeking’. It requires that they share a common view of the function and capacity of our epistemological function and its relationship with our ontology.

Unless ‘truth’ is defined beforehand then there is great risk and little point in any mode of engagement. If the meaning of ‘truth’ is spelled out and there is disagreement then there is no

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<sup>140</sup> The prejudiced rejection of all tradition is itself a pre-judged (and hence dogmatic) tradition. This is, I think, the difficult point made with cryptic eloquence by J. Krishnamurti. Although this is a recurring theme throughout his work, just one example can be found in his (2010, p. 68).

<sup>141</sup> The indigenous context of the unbiased truth-seeker does not matter. This is the importance of ‘unbiased’. This is the crucial operator that disempowers the context from informing and thus affecting the truth-seeking project. So although the individual has their particular contextual conditioning they do not take any of it for granted as absolutely true. Their willingness to question everything and overturn even the most fundamental assumptions ensures that their context is no obstacle to their project. To realise the ultimate truth (the emptiness) of our context does not require stepping outside of our context, indeed if anything it requires us to more deeply acknowledge our contextual locatedness. We must become deeply aware of our contextual conditioning in order to thoroughly expunge our realist attitude towards the most subtle aspects of our conditioning.

basis for meaningful engagement; both parties are in fact talking past each other. If there is agreement that ‘truth’ means correspondence with ontological reality (as we would perhaps expect from the scientist camp) then, as we have seen with Lopez’s criticisms, there is little mileage in attempts to engage. If there is agreement with the Madhyamaka’s notion of ‘truth’ then there is no real need to worry about the compatibility or complementariness of each other’s propositions (for they are understood as frictionless). So the very fact that Wallace pursues complementariness in the way he does shows that he still holds an abrasive theory of propositions (or he is attempting skilful means).

Wallace’s hope that together the two forms of empiricism can contribute to a greater understanding of reality turns on the assumption that it is possible for two individuals to investigate the ‘same thing’ by different means.<sup>142</sup> However, such an assumption is deeply problematic from the Madhyamaka perspective. For an object to be encountered from different contexts, would require that the object be in some sense context-independent and so in some sense inherently existent.<sup>143</sup> According to the Madhyamaka, there are no inherently existing objects; existing objects are context-sensitive to such an extent that they are always already unique, personal and momentary. Conventionally existing things are radically impermanent and there is little sense in talking *realistically* about the ‘same’ object over time or across contexts. All talk of ‘sameness’ has conventional, not ultimate, meaning.<sup>144</sup>

The hope that there is a ‘way things really are’ that alternative truth-seeking projects employing alternative empirical methods can each encounter and independently corroborate, is antithetical to the Madhyamaka. From the Madhyamaka point of view, there is no ‘way things really are’ other than śūnyatā. This ultimate truth, however, is not a context-independent, substantial reality to be investigated and documented in propositional terms. Śūnyatā is the ultimate nature of reality, not an independently existing ultimate reality itself.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> For example Wallace expresses hopes that neuroscientists will become ever more encouraged to extrospectively investigate consciousness itself, and then they will be able to cooperate with contemplatives who have already been introspectively investigating consciousness for centuries (2008, p. 164).

<sup>143</sup> Wallace typically uses the word ‘phenomenon’ rather than ‘object’. This could just be a result of his Tibetan schooling, or it may be a deliberate attempt to avoid the ontological connotations of ‘object’. Either way there is still an incoherence; If there is no ontological commitment then the phenomena are necessarily personal. Two people cannot individually encounter the *same* phenomenon.

<sup>144</sup> Perhaps Wallace is making the subtle Svātantrika error of considering the conventionally established interdependent existence of objects to be an inherent existence, thus accounting for the apparently shared experience of ‘it’.

<sup>145</sup> It is true (and this is a substantive point which I will elaborate upon in the following chapter) that any truth-seeking project can (if approached in an unbiased manner) facilitate an insight into śūnyatā. Thus independent corroboration of the ultimate truth of śūnyatā *is* possible across worldviews. This however, is importantly different from Wallace’s point, as the ultimate truth of śūnyatā is non-propositional and context-insensitive while retaining a crucial context-dependence.

## Dividing reality

I hope to have shown that the complementarity mode of engagement is no better than the compatibility mode. The sophistication of agreeing discreet domains of operation for science and Buddhism only displaces the conflict to a later date or to a deeper state. I have outlined Wallace's version of complementarity as a more nuanced and thought-through attempt and, although I am sympathetic with his project, I detect some subtle but crucial faults.

Wallace insufficiently addresses the innate bias of self-grasping and thus allows an engagement that risks secularisation of Buddhism through it becoming accommodated within a *svabhāvic* worldview. Furthermore, Wallace is open to the charge of incoherence as his putatively unbiased Buddhism dogmatically retains an 'intellectual and emotional allegiance'<sup>146</sup> to particular Buddhist ideas such as reincarnation and the immateriality of mind. Wallace owes us an explanation as to why some ideas such as Mt Meru are 'cultural tarnish' when others, such as reincarnation, are not.

I think there is a naivety (perhaps over-ambition?) in hoping that scientific empiricism will be able to prove the reality of these elements of Buddhism, as if a sceptical lack of enthusiasm were the only obstacle. Even if the scientists are able to suspend their materialistic assumptions and "loosen the shackles of antiquated prejudice" (Wallace, 2003, p. 147) such that they are willing to engage in open-minded interdisciplinary investigation, the empirical methods they employ will limit what can be accepted. Even without the bias of scientific materialism, the very fact that their investigative framework is set up as *extrospective* determines in advance the sorts of things they will be able to establish. It is hard to imagine what extrospective proof there could be of the law of karma, for example. So while it may be true that an improved worldview can be found through complementing extrospective empiricism with introspective empiricism, once that divide is established and taken for granted then nothing can cross it.

This is true even though, as mentioned above, the very divide is problematic. An inner-outer divide is certainly not an inherent feature of the world,<sup>147</sup> but it is not the supposed inherent existence of the divide that makes it impossible to cross. Once the convention is established then the rules of that very convention forbid a crossing of the divide; extrospective access to introspective data (and vice versa) is impossible *by definition*. Again we can see that the philosophical problems of these modes of encounter are all self-contained. We are not so much

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<sup>146</sup> This phrase is from Wallace's own definition of 'dogma' (2003, p. 11).

<sup>147</sup> The supposedly impartial and unbiased truth-seeking that each discipline undertakes in their own respective domains (or in their own respective ways) is already compromised by the tacit agreement of boundaries. They have pre-judged the domains and on that basis have begun 'unbiased' truth-seeking. Who is checking the unbiased nature of the initial division? Moreover, is not there already an assumption in place that reality is *divisible*? Do they take themselves to have carved nature at its joints?

advancing counterarguments or alternative points of view, but rather pointing out the internal incoherencies produced by the svabhāvic assumption.

As I have alluded to above, it remains unclear to me whether Wallace is misunderstanding the Madhyamaka or merely misrepresenting it for pedagogical purposes. His apparent willingness to trade upon an unproblematic division between matter and mind is, from the Madhyamaka point of view, a mistake. However, at places he does seem to adopt a more recognisably Madhyamaka position and argue for the merely conventional nature of this division and their non-absolute existence (*ibid*, p.124). It may be that he is employing upāya, but I cannot help but detect an inconsistency.<sup>148</sup>

In conclusion, I feel there is both philosophical and pragmatic harm in Wallace's position (albeit quite subtle). The philosophical harm is a background incoherence that makes his position vulnerable to discreditation. The pragmatic harm is that it encourages a kind of inclusivism; it delays or displaces the unavoidable and fundamental conflict. Without framing the underlying metaphysics as the principle battleground, the encounters will be fraught with misunderstanding, unnecessary conflict and mirageous isomorphisms.

## Conclusion

I hope to have shown that, as long as we take either Buddhism or science to represent a body of opinion on the way the world truly is, or to be constituted by ultimately true, abrasive propositions, then there is no possibility of a constructive dialogue or a meaningful encounter between them. Surveying Lopez's position, I have argued that his criticisms are sound and decisive against those who would attempt such an encounter while holding an abrasive theory of propositions. Buddhism enters a propositional conflict that it cannot hope to win, all the while risking ridicule through navigating the tension inherent in claiming ancient authority alongside contemporary flexibility. Wallace's complementarity appears to circumvent this issue through addressing metaphysical assumptions and regarding Buddhism and science as metaphysically neutral disciplines rather than dogmatic traditions. Despite this attempt, I have argued that Wallace retains a commitment to the ultimate truth of some Buddhist propositions (or, at the very least, a commitment to a particular epistemological structure such that there is the *possibility* of ultimately true propositions), and thus his project is no better placed than anyone

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<sup>148</sup> As will become clear in the following chapter, it is my view that such attempts at skilful means are not skilful in the least. Temporarily misrepresenting truth in an effort to make it more acceptable and accessible (until such times as the 'actual' truth may be communicated or personally realised) may be an effective strategy when there is a willingness to believe and an openness to transformation, but in the sceptical atmosphere of academic and philosophical discourse it is counterproductive and misleading.

else's. On this understanding, Buddhism and science will never be able to meaningfully co-operate or unproblematically engage, as the only things that count as essentially Buddhist and essentially scientific (the propositional cores of the traditions), are the very things that cannot interact without antagonism.<sup>149</sup> In other words, the very notion of engagement between abrasive worldviews contains a fundamental incoherence: if a worldview is substantial enough to warrant an engagement, it is too substantial to engage.

Having thus demonstrated the intractable flaws in the framework of abrasive propositions, I now wish to explore what becomes possible outside of this framework. I will argue that it is only when we follow the Madhyamaka and give up any and all ultimately true propositions that we can even begin to make sense of dialogue and engagement between worldviews. It is my hope that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, we can find an alternative approach whereby the timeless truth of Buddhism can engage with contemporary scientific-secular worldviews while avoiding the tensions and incoherencies outlined above. In doing so I will present a Madhyamaka mode of engagement and demonstrate how it is that the Madhyamaka can speak to the West.

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<sup>149</sup> Indeed, this impossibility of engagement is nothing particular to science or Buddhism. I hope it is clear that the above analysis is applicable to any and all worldviews that would attempt an engagement. The very fact that two worldviews would seek an engagement indicates that there is some kind of overlap of interest or domain of operation. Such an overlap will always prove to be a site of friction. If there is no overlap, there will be no friction, but also no motivation to enact an engagement.

## Chapter 6 – A Madhyamaka Response: Frictionless Co-operation

I hope to have demonstrated that the modes of encounter Cabezón outlines rely on an ontic and epistemic structure at odds with the Madhyamaka; they each assume that true propositions are abrasive propositions grounded in an invariant ultimate reality. This assumption leads to the encounters being enacted in terms of propositional conflict or compromise, and establishes intractable difficulties and incoherencies in the discourse of scientific Buddhism. The project of giving Buddhism a contemporary voice with which to speak to the West is problematic in that either Buddhism loses its individuality through propositional compromise or it stands in irresolvable conflict. In either case, the underlying intuition that Buddhism is possessed of a timeless relevance and is in some sense non-hostile with respect to contemporary secular-scientific worldviews, cannot be accounted for (beyond political self-interest), or coherently satisfied. The frustration from the Madhyamaka perspective is that this theme of conflict-or-compromise is entirely unnecessary. All this work is fruitless and merely serves to distract from the essential problem; the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.

In this chapter I will show how the Madhyamaka analysis can resolve the tensions outlined above. I want to show how meaningful engagement only becomes possible in the absence of the svabhāvic assumption, and I would offer a more generous account for the intuitions around the timeless truth of Buddhism. I want to show how it becomes possible for Buddhism to speak to the West only after the Madhyamaka message (that true propositions are non-abrasive) has been understood. In making this clear I hope to distinguish my project from those that volunteer a positive interpretation of the Madhyamaka and who strive to give the Mādhyamika a voice with which to speak to the West. In my view the Madhyamaka effect can only be enacted negatively and deconstructively; the Madhyamaka message cannot be spoken, but must be communicated with a voiceless authority.

### Insubstantial security

We noted above that, under the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, there will be a hesitancy to give up the ultimate truth of the core propositions constituting one's tradition. The fear is that without any ultimately true propositions, there is no *substance* to the tradition and thus no value in offering it up for engagement. However, it is exactly this core of abrasive propositions that makes engagement impossible. Again, if a tradition is substantial enough to warrant engagement it is too substantial to engage.

We may profitably think of this tension in terms of a trade-off between stability and flexibility. On one hand, we seek the security of a worldview grounded in ultimate reality; there is an existential satisfaction in feeling that we have some kind of privileged access to the truth. On the other hand, in this multi-cultural world, we also understand the problems of narrow-minded dogmatism and so would like to be flexible and adaptable in the integration of alternate and exotic worldviews and traditions; there is an ecumenical satisfaction in relinquishing privileged access to the truth. In propositional terms there is a tension between holding propositions as ultimately true (and hence stable, but abrasive) and holding propositions as conventionally true (and hence flexible, but insubstantial). At one extreme we have a kind of realist dogmatism, where there is one special set of ultimately true propositions (typically one's own) that directly articulates and reveals objective reality. At the other extreme we have some kind of radical postmodernism and social constructivism, where all propositions are conventionally constructed and just not the sorts of things that can objectively access ultimate reality.

We have noted that those sympathetic to the discourse of scientific Buddhism and who wish to enact an encounter between Buddhism and science will typically attempt to find a compromise position between these two extremes. The hope is to characterise their worldviews as *both* stable (containing objective truths grounded in ultimate reality) *and* flexible (willing and able to compromise and adapt). We observed a pattern whereby some propositions were deemed merely conventionally true while others were deemed ultimately true. This throws up two problems: firstly, there is a difficulty in offering a principled and philosophically defensible justification for the choice of where to draw the line between essential and inessential propositions; secondly, due to retaining a propositional core of abrasive ultimate truth the propositional conflict is not in fact resolved, but is merely postponed and displaced until deeper matters arise. Unwilling to accept the consequences of either extreme, such apologists are forced to enter the tension of finding a compromise between the two. I hope to have shown, however, that any moderate position between the two extremes carries the deep contradictions one would expect from a compromise of opposites.

In this characterisation we can see that dogmatism and relativism are set in binary opposition, and thus a polarity is established between them. The Mādhyamika agrees that both dogmatism and relativism are unwelcome extremes, but insists that the solution is not found through locating some compromise position *within* that polarity. The Madhyamaka solution is to disrupt the polarity in order to transcend it. In so doing a middle way is established that is neither dogmatism nor relativism but enjoys the good qualities of both. From the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are both satisfyingly stable and satisfyingly flexible.

As discussed briefly above, we can see a partially strong occurrence of this assumed polarity in the work of Wallace. We have seen how he operates under the assumption that to relinquish all foundational, ultimately true propositions would lead to a problematic 'postmodernism'. According to Wallace, a postmodernist strategy entails an unwelcome relativism and subjectivism towards truth and "appears to present a recipe for the collapse of all intellectual and empirical rigor in the pursuit of understanding" (2003, p. 22). Wallace reacts against a postmodern strawman of his own devising, employing the absurdity of his strawman's conclusions as an argument for the necessary retention of abrasive propositions. Wallace is not alone in response. As we have seen, the reification of truth (or the grounds of truth) in order to avoid relativism is a common pattern in the discourse.<sup>150</sup>

We could well question the fairness and accuracy of this somewhat reactionary characterisation of a 'postmodernist' strawman. When used in this way, there is typically no clear indication of which writers or theories this seemingly pejorative term is intended to reference. Indeed, it is not at all clear that a body of work could ever be identified that could be uncontroversially labelled 'postmodernism'. Suffice to say that the philosophical discussions that explore meaning in the absence of ultimately (context-independently) true propositions are rather more complex and subtle than their strawmen surrogates. However, such a defence of the 'real' postmodernism is not necessary here. It is enough for our purposes to investigate the motives and assumptions underlying the construction of the strawman. It will be instructive to note the unwelcome features of this strawman, and in particular the way in which these unwelcome features are seen as inevitable consequences of giving up propositional access to ultimate reality. In this way, through seeing the work that ultimately true propositions are supposed to do, we can gain insight into the metaphysical assumptions laced throughout the construction of these encounters.

The postmodern strawman relinquishes all ultimately true propositions and maintains that all views of reality are unavoidably constructed and culturally located. As such, true propositions cannot be said to articulate, capture or connect with the unconstructed ultimate reality. Thus the constructed world of merely conventional truths floats free from the actual, ultimate, state of affairs. It is this lack of ultimate ground to our true propositions that entails the radical relativism that the strawman is accused of. If truth and meaning are merely conventional constructs, then surely anything is up for grabs; conventional truths just do not seem stable enough to ground morality, truth and meaning.

It is important to note two related points. Firstly, both the postmodern strawman and those that have constructed it assume the existence of an underlying, inherently existing, ultimate reality.

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<sup>150</sup> Recall that in Chapter 3 we noted this pattern of behaviour in realist interpretations of the Madhyamaka and traced it to the operation of the svabhāvic assumption.

The question is whether or not we can gain privileged, unconstructed access to this ultimate reality; the existence of this underlying reality is itself beyond question. The second point of interest is that the strawman's position is regarded as the unavoidable and inevitable result of abandoning ultimately true propositions. There is no consideration of an alternative result of surrendering ultimately true propositions; there is no possibility of a middle way. As long as there is an ultimate reality that is a particular way, then either we have some form of propositional access to that ultimate reality (dogmatic realism) or we do not (relativism). Thus the rigid binary between their dogmatic realism and their strawman opponent is evidence of the uncritical endorsement of the svabhāvic assumption.

As we have seen, however, it is precisely this assumption and the rigid binaries that arise from it that the Madhyamaka analysis seeks to refute. In the Madhyamaka, we have a means whereby we can dispense with ultimately true propositions without falling into the extreme of relativism. The crucial difference between the postmodern strawman and the Madhyamaka is that the Madhyamaka realises that the 'failure' of propositions to 'encounter' ultimate reality means that there is no need to continue positing this hypothetical 'ultimate reality'.<sup>151</sup> The strawman is making the same mistake as Murti in assuming that the Real is still there despite it never having been conceptually encountered and it contributing nothing to our conventional experience. The unwelcome consequences of relativism only follow from the universal constructedness of truth if we assume that there is an unconstructed reality *behind* or *beyond* the constructedness.

The strawmen deny the assumed connection between ultimate reality and conventional reality, whereas the Mādhyamika deny the assumed *duality* between ultimate reality and conventional reality. This can often appear quite similar because both deny representationalism and reject ultimately true propositions. The consequences, however, are quite different. The denial of connection leaves the strawmen floating free from the ultimate ground of reality, lost in their own constructedness and relativism. The Mādhyamika, however, do not suffer this difficulty. In distancing Nāgārjuna from his absolutist interpretations I hope to have shown that from the Madhyamaka perspective our various radically constructed experiences are nonetheless each grounded in a shared basis. This ground does not stand unaffected and inert behind or beyond our constructed experience, but is the dynamic non-dual basis of this constructed experience. This universal basis is foundation enough to counter the charge of relativism. The Mādhyamikas agree with the postmodern suggestion that there is no context-independent truth (and so distance

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<sup>151</sup> We should recall that this is the strawman we are discussing here. It may well be that if we were to investigate some real 'postmodernist' thinkers, we would find that there are some who approach and articulate a position functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka. Indeed, there is an interesting and growing body of work discussing parallels between Nāgārjuna and philosophers such as Derrida (Magliola, 1984) and Foucault (Wicking, 2011). A full survey of these discussions, however, would be too much of a diversion here.

themselves from dogmatism), but allow that there is one context-*insensitive* truth (and so distance themselves from relativism).<sup>152</sup>

Another criticism that is typically levelled against the postmodernist is that of hubris bordering on incoherence. In claiming that *everyone else* is mistaken in thinking that there are ultimately true propositions, it would appear that postmodernists are claiming to hold the one and only ultimately true proposition. As Wallace puts it, “whatever the merits of postmodernism, modesty is not its long suit” (2003, p. 22). Interestingly, this charge of arrogance/self-refutation is a familiar one to the Madhyamaka. It is also a popular criticism of Nāgārjuna’s position that in denying the ultimate truth of all propositions he is either tacitly excluding his own statement (and hence arrogant and incoherent) or he is including his own statement, thereby refuting himself along with everyone else, and thus lapsing into paradox.

The Mādhyamika can defend against this criticism through pointing out that she fully intended this argument to cover her own statement, but that from the Madhyamaka point of view failing to be ultimately true no longer entails being ultimately false. It is important to remember that the Madhyamaka analysis simultaneously refutes the possibility of ultimately true propositions *and* ultimately false propositions. This is achieved through refuting the ground upon which that polarity rests: an inherently existing ultimate reality. Perhaps some of the tension here comes from talk of the Madhyamaka as expressing an ultimate truth at all, when it explicitly rejects the notion of ultimately true propositions. It is worth clarifying this potentially confusing point. Any statements that a Mādhyamika makes about ultimate truths (for example, that there are none) is of a difference epistemic kind than those putative ultimate truths to which such statements pertain. They are not presented as alternative candidates for *that* kind of truth, but rather a *refutation* of that kind of truth. Indeed, to the extent to which they are formulated in propositional terms, the Mādhyamika’s ‘ultimate’ truths are in fact conventional truths. Propositions regarding the ultimate nature of reality or the nature of ultimate truth are, like all propositions, context -sensitive and conventionally constructed.<sup>153</sup> Again, from the Madhyamaka

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<sup>152</sup> What counts as a conventional truth is not merely widespread agreement, but is constrained by the universal ultimate nature of reality (śūnyatā). A conventional truth is not absolutely true, but is true *with respect to* its context. However, śūnyatā is the nature of all possible contexts and so all conventional truths must be true with respect to śūnyatā, as well as with respect to its particular set of contextual conventions. In this way the universal, context-insensitive truth of śūnyatā ensures that Madhyamaka worldviews are not relativistic. This will be unpacked further and explored more fully in Chapter 7.

<sup>153</sup> It is important to note that the Madhyamaka conventional truth regarding the impossibility of ultimately true propositions is, despite its context-sensitivity, a *universal* truth. What I mean by this is that, wherever and whenever ultimately true propositions are asserted, they are mistaken. This follows from the fact that they are not mistaken through the contingencies of some ultimate reality, but they are necessarily, indeed *tautologically*, mistaken. True propositions must be in some form of relationship with their truth-maker. Yet ultimate reality is independently existent and so cannot be in relationship, thus ultimately true propositions (propositions made true by relationship with ultimate reality) are internally incoherent.

point of view, conventional truths no longer stand in unfavourable contrast with ultimately true propositions, even though there is an important sense in which śūnyatā is the ultimate truth. We can say that ultimate truth, *śūnyatā*, is non-propositional; not so much a truth itself as a realisation of the nature of truth.<sup>154</sup> This one non-propositional ultimate truth does not relegate the myriad conventional truths to an epistemic second-place. Ultimate truth informs us of the epistemic status of conventional truths; they are no longer ultimately false, but are non-ultimately *true*.

So, having distinguished the Madhyamaka from the ‘postmodernist’, I hope to have shown how we can reject all abrasive propositions without lapsing into relativism. From the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are frictionless conventional truths that provide security and consistency but without being predicated upon an assumed inherently existing reality. Thus, under the non-duality of the two truths, true propositions have the frictionless flexibility of ‘postmodernist’ conventional truths, and the stable security of the ‘dogmatic’ ultimate truths.

With this in mind, we can go on to see how engagement between traditions constituted by such conventional truths can be enacted.

## A Madhyamaka mode of engagement

It should be clear that the sort of encounter that the Madhyamaka facilitates is quite different from those we have looked at before. As I have argued above, the Madhyamaka is not itself a worldview, but rather is a comment on the nature of worldviews.<sup>155</sup> Therefore there is no meaning in an engagement between *the* Madhyamaka worldview and the scientific worldview (for example). The alternative I propose is that applying the Madhyamaka analysis to any and all worldviews solves the problems of encountering which I have outlined above. Thus, understanding and applying the Madhyamaka makes possible a new and successful mode of encounter between any and all worldviews.

I am, therefore, suggesting two distinct operations, and it is important to keep the distinction clear. The first operation, which is the central endeavour of the thesis, is to show that the Madhyamaka insight into śūnyatā is a universal truth that can, and should be, applied to any and all worldviews. Importantly, I will make it clear that this ‘transportation’ of an apparently

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<sup>154</sup> We should note that, despite articulating ultimate truth, this last sentence is, like all true sentences, a conventional truth.

<sup>155</sup> This is true from the Madhyamaka point of view, at least. Critics of the Madhyamaka dispute this point and, as mentioned above, charge the Mādhyamikas with either hubris or incoherence. I hope to have made it clear above, however, that the equivalence of śūnyatā and pratītya-samutpāda and the non-duality of the two truths are *refutations* of the ontological project and not attempts to *complete* the ontological project.

‘Buddhist’ idea into a non-Buddhist worldview is not itself an engagement between worldviews. This ‘transportation’ of śūnyatā is *not* an example of the new mode of engagement that it itself makes possible. Making this clear is important, for it is the context-insensitive, non-propositional nature of the Madhyamaka insight that is central to a clear understanding of the insight itself and to my thesis in general.

Secondly, it will become apparent that this ‘transportation’ of the Madhyamaka into any and all worldviews makes possible a new mode of encounter between any and all worldviews. Again, it is crucial to realise that this is established as an indirect by-product of my central endeavour, and is not my central endeavour itself. I will no longer be talking about an encounter between science and Buddhism *per se*, but rather about how applying the Madhyamaka insight to worldviews allows a new frictionless mode of encounter between those worldviews. That this new mode of engagement can be applied to the traditions of Buddhism and science is beside the point, and it is not as a result of such an encounter that my central endeavour is achieved.

### **Transportability of śūnyatā**

As I have indicated above, the three modes of encounter outlined by Cabezón are each characterised by the conflict and compromise of abrasive propositions. These propositions are abrasive because they are taken to be ultimate truths. They conflict because such engagements are attempts to transport these propositions from their original, culturally located, context and to introduce them into a new cultural environment. I hope to have shown that such projects of transportation are deeply problematic on both a philosophical and a practical level. A transportable proposition must be a context-independent one (as it needs to be able to leave its indigenous context while retaining its identity), and therefore it must be an absolute truth. As such, however, it is entirely inflexible and fundamentally abrasive within *any* context.<sup>156</sup> In short, if a proposition is deemed substantial enough to leave its indigenous context, it is too substantial to be repatriated into a new one.

From a Madhyamaka point of view, the philosophical and pragmatic failure of the modes of encounter discussed above demonstrates the unavoidable incoherence that arises when we attempt to posit and work with ultimately true propositions. For the Mādhyamikas there are no ultimately true propositions, as all propositions are dependently arisen conventional truths and thus entirely conditioned and context-sensitive. However, the Mādhyamikas do recognise an ultimate truth, and it is this ultimate truth that I propose to ‘transport’.

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<sup>156</sup> Such propositions are abrasive and cannot settle within *any* context, including, somewhat paradoxically, the indigenous context from within which they are identified. This is another example of the internal incoherence entailed by positing ultimately true propositions.

The Madhyamaka ultimate truth is constituted by the realisation of the lack of inherent existence, the cessation of the svabhāvic assumption. This means that this ultimate truth is applicable to any worldview that is informed by the svabhāvic assumption, i.e. any non-Madhyamaka worldview.<sup>157</sup> It is important to note that the Madhyamaka analysis is not a critique of the particular content of the worldviews, but is a critique of the assumed inherent existence of that content. It is this context-insensitivity that gives credibility to the claim that śūnyatā is a universal truth applicable to any and all worldviews.<sup>158</sup>

Although we have become *aware* of śūnyatā through a particular cultural context, it is not itself embedded within a particular context. It is not a cultural construct and so is free to be unproblematically ‘transported’. Of course, talk of ‘transportation’ is only figurative here. Introducing śūnyatā into a worldview does not *add* anything, or bring in anything exotic from elsewhere. The Madhyamaka analysis merely draws attention to the emptiness of the target worldview from *inside* that target worldview. If you (a Mādhyamika) should wish to convince me (a non-Mādhyamika) of the emptiness of my worldview, you would not need to discuss your own worldview or bring it into propositional comparison with mine. Your approach would be to critically address the internal instability and incoherence of my worldview and trace that instability to the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. It is this purely critical and negative methodology that gives the Madhyamaka-Prāsaṅgika their name, and their reputation as frustrating debate partners.

### **Applicability to all worldviews**

There may be a concern, however, that introducing śūnyatā to a worldview may refute or destroy that worldview. It is important to note that Nāgārjuna’s Buddhist contemporaries also felt that śūnyatā was threatening to the integrity and functionality of their Buddhist worldview. An important element of Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is the defence of the Madhyamaka against the claim that it renders Buddhism nihilistic or incoherent. As I hope to have already made clear, Nāgārjuna is able to show that, not only does śūnyatā *not* negate the function and coherence of the Buddhist worldview, but that śūnyatā *explains* the function and coherence of that worldview. Indeed, Nāgārjuna argues that nihilism or incoherence follow from holding worldviews as *non-empty* (Garfield, 1995, p. 308). Conventionally existent and functional distinctions (as between real-unreal and true-false, for example) survive the collapse of

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<sup>157</sup> This statement is more tautological than triumphalist. As I will make clear below a ‘Madhyamaka worldview’ is any worldview that is understood as empty, so a non-Madhyamaka worldview is one that is understood as non-empty.

<sup>158</sup> I feel secure in saying ‘any and all’ worldviews because it is importantly applicable to non-Madhyamaka worldviews, and it is clearly (but redundantly) applicable to Madhyamaka worldviews. I am assuming this division is exhaustive.

ontological realism and epistemological dualism. It does not weaken a worldview to realise that its putative ultimate truths are ‘merely’ conventional truths. In fact it makes the worldview stronger in as much as the philosophical incoherence that arises from trying to accommodate inherently existing things is dispelled.

It might be thought, however, that Nāgārjuna’s arguments only show that *Buddhist* worldviews are compatible with śūnyatā. There may be a concern that my appeal to introduce śūnyatā into all worldviews is some covert form of inclusivism or proselytisation. I would emphasise that this is not the case, and that performing a Madhyamaka analysis on non-Buddhist worldviews does not somehow transform them into Buddhist worldviews. It is nothing specific about Nāgārjuna’s target worldview (the dharma theory of the Abhidharma Buddhists) that makes it yield to the Madhyamaka analysis. The Madhyamaka analysis does not critique the *content* of worldviews. The Madhyamaka ultimate truth does not threaten or displace the ‘ultimate truths’ of the worldview to which it is applied, but rather recharacterises them as conventional truths. Indeed, in an important sense, nothing is changing, nothing is being lost; the target worldview has been empty *all along*. We do not need to be concerned that applying the Madhyamaka insight to our worldview shall necessarily compromise that worldview. Realising the emptiness of a worldview can only be an improvement upon that worldview. When we realise that the Madhyamaka is a tradition-neutral insight into the nature of worldviews, there is no reason to assume that śūnyatā is any more amenable to a Buddhist worldview than it is to a scientific one. All worldviews are equivalently empty, Buddhist worldviews are not more empty than any other.

Yet, there is a tension here. When it is suggested that, under the Madhyamaka analysis, ‘nothing changes and nothing is lost’, it may seem that there is no *effect* of the analysis. If nothing changes, what is the soteriological point of undertaking such a project? I will address this important point in detail in the next chapter. For now it will suffice to note that although nothing *need* change (as all worldviews are always already empty), we can anticipate that things *will* change (the new-found flexibility of conventional truths will change the way we construct, and are constructed by, our worldviews). Therefore, while it is true that all worldviews are empty, it will turn out that not all worldviews survive the realisation of their own emptiness. The nature and function of this non-dual relationship between ultimate truth and conventional truths will be explored in detail in the following chapter. For now, I merely wish to emphasise the lack of a causal or necessary link between any particular worldview and śūnyatā. In doing so I hope to make clear that śūnyatā is a context-insensitive, universal truth and can and should be applied to any and all worldviews.

This, then, is the explication of the first operation. I will now explore the second operation by demonstrating the new mode of engagement that is made possible through the success of the first.

### **Frictionless co-operation**

The second operation that I am proposing is a new mode of engagement made possible through applying the Madhyamaka insight to any and all worldviews. I will say that two Madhyamaka worldviews can encounter one another in a mode of engagement best described as *frictionless co-operation*. By *frictionless* I hope to convey the sense that if an individual is presented with an alternative and logically incompatible<sup>159</sup> worldview he does not need to feel threatened and labour to determine which proposition is true; propositions are no longer abrasive or in competition for the absolute truth. By *co-operation* I hope to convey the sense that an individual can adapt her own dynamic worldview through borrowing propositions or practices from any and all worldviews; the truth of propositions is no longer fixed by ultimate reality, and so there is a radical propositional flexibility across and within any and all worldviews.

I should be clear about what I mean by ‘a Madhyamaka worldview’. As has been said before, the Madhyamaka analysis is constituted by the rejection of the svabhāvic assumption and so the cessation of realist and reificatory attitudes towards worldviews. A Mādhyamika comments upon the assumed ultimate truth of his interlocutors’ svabhāvic worldview without presenting his own for propositional comparison.<sup>160</sup> Therefore, when I talk about a Madhyamaka worldview I do not mean to refer to some particular worldview, but rather to any worldview that is held in the absence of the svabhāvic assumption. In other words, a worldview held in a Madhyamaka manner. A Madhyamaka worldview is any worldview that is self-consciously constituted by conventional truths understood as non-dual with ultimate truth; a worldview informed by śūnyatā rather than svabhāva.

Therefore, in this way of speaking, a Madhyamaka worldview is not necessarily a Buddhist worldview. There are plenty of Buddhist worldviews that are held in a non-Madhyamaka manner. Similarly, there are doubtless many Madhyamaka Buddhists who hold their worldview in a

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<sup>159</sup> By this I mean that the semantic content of the propositions are logically incompatible. For example ‘Jesus is the son of God’ and ‘Jesus is not the son of God’ would be logically incompatible propositions. In other words, propositions that would be in conflict if understood as abrasive.

<sup>160</sup> One would assume that Nāgārjuna held some kind of Mahāyāna Buddhist worldview (although this assumption is brought into question by A.K.Warder (1973)). However, it is not important to me or to this thesis what worldview Nāgārjuna actually held. The important thing is that he argued effectively for the emptiness of all worldviews. Having done so he, like everyone else, is at liberty to hold whatever empty worldview he wants.

non-Madhyamaka manner.<sup>161</sup> Again, I intend this phrase ‘Madhyamaka worldview’ to be tradition-neutral and to refer to the stance towards the worldview rather than the content of the worldview itself. I am not referring to the Buddhist tradition of the same name.

Madhyamaka worldviews are constituted by only conventional truths, and conventional truths are frictionless. The abrasiveness of propositions comes only from the assumption that they are in competition for ultimate truth, where the truth of a statement is provided by its relationship with ultimate reality. It is the invariance and fixedness of the truth of such propositions that makes them abrasive. The truth of conventional truths is not established by an invariant ultimate reality, but is context-sensitive and established by its functionality within a given context. Alternative propositions can be compared and assessed for their various merits and functionality on whatever ground one wishes, but the essential relatedness and conditionedness of this truth should not be forgotten; it is true because it functions well given the context.<sup>162</sup>

Unlike ultimate truths, there is no sense in alternative conventional truths being in competition for *the* conventional truth. Thus there is no sense of friction between apparently incompatible conventional truths. Conventional truths are not true *simpliciter*, but are true with respect to a particular context. Similarly, conventional existence is not existence *simpliciter*, but existence with respect to a particular context. It follows that conventional truths are impermanent; their truth, their identity, is dependent upon the ever-shifting context and is (re)established in each moment. By extension then, the ‘truth’ or suitability of any worldview is dependent upon the particular, impermanent and momentary, context. Unlike those working with abrasive propositions, we do not need to settle on one propositional framework as being the ultimate truth and stick with it no matter what.<sup>163</sup> Different propositional frameworks, different worldviews, may prove useful in

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<sup>161</sup> If the above criticisms of Wallace’s presentation of the Madhyamaka are unmistakable (and he is in genuine error rather than utilising skilful means), then there is at least one example of a Madhyamaka Buddhist with a non-Madhyamaka worldview. Wallace’s attitude towards his worldview does not match the propositional content of his worldview; despite intellectually accepting the impossibility of ultimately true propositions, his attempts to enact a complementarity engagement betray a residue of grasping at the ultimate truth of Madhyamaka propositions.

<sup>162</sup> As I have discussed above (and will explore in further detail in Chapter 7), the fact that this context includes the universal conventional nature of reality protects against a radical relativism. Conventional truths are true with respect to convention and the universal conventional nature of reality. Furthermore, and I will also unpack this in detail in the next chapter (see p.177), a universal motivating force that I shall call an ‘impulse to painlessness’ ensures that there is an unproblematic rendering of ‘well’ in ‘functioning well’.

<sup>163</sup> This sense of ‘settling’ on a worldview retains a lingering and subtle dualism and *svabhāvic* longing; it carries connotations of fixedness and context-insensitivity. Settling will risk reinforcing our conditioning through a subtle toleration of the notion that this worldview is the best for me regardless of any changes in my context and circumstances. It risks transmuting our fluid and frictionless truths into solid and abrasive Truths.

different contexts and we have (or, at least, we can develop)<sup>164</sup> a choice in each moment as to which conventionally true framework we employ in the constitution of our experience.

Indeed, this shifting of worldviews in dependence upon context is an uncontroversial practice and an examination of this mechanism will help clarify the meaning of the co-operative mode of engagement. To illustrate the point we can think of the particle physicist who spends her working day relating to a world constituted entirely of microscopic quantum particles, but spends her evenings relaxing at home relating to a world of macroscopic objects such as armchairs and television sets. These two worldviews, each technically incompatible with the other, are allowed to co-operate in enriching the repertoire of experience available to the individual.<sup>165</sup> These alternative worldviews operate alongside each other, and thus *together*, without cognitive dissonance. There is nothing too counterintuitive in considering this individual as *choosing* which worldview to adopt given the context.

Now, a realist might not articulate this phenomenon in terms of ‘choosing’ our worldview, but rather in terms of a shifting of our epistemic standards. Dissonance is avoided here only because we know that only one of the co-operating worldviews is ultimately true. On the realist system, the two truths are discrete, and so ultimately false but conventionally ‘true’ views regarding armchairs and television sets can co-operate with the ultimately true view of particle physics. When relaxing, in ‘low’ epistemic standards, the physicist will indulge in macroscopic discourse about the existence of armchairs and television sets. When pushed into ‘high’ epistemic standards, however, the particle physicist will be (or at least, should be, if they wish to remain consistent) ready and willing to defend the view that there are no such things as armchairs, televisions, or particle physicists. For the realist there is one worldview that is ultimately true, while there is one (or more) conventionally true worldview that can be employed for pragmatic purposes and in ‘everyday’ epistemic environments. Such ‘merely’ conventionally true worldviews can co-operate unproblematically, it is only ultimately true worldviews (those worldviews that claim to be true in high-standard epistemic environments) that conflict.

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<sup>164</sup> We can note in passing that some forms of meditative practices and mindfulness training could be understood as developing the capacity to *exercise* the choice we have in our manner of constructing our worldview and thus our experienced reality. This is an interesting and important point, but one which I do not propose to explore here.

<sup>165</sup> Recall, worldviews are always indexed to an individual. Speaking more accurately, the interdependent elements of the world-worldview-viewer triad mutually establish each other’s existence. I should emphasise that, in framing the discussion in such terms, I do not mean to uncritically endorse a reified entity, ‘the individual’. My choice in discursive practice here is itself a reflection of my context: a modern, post-enlightenment ‘West’. I have chosen to use these terms not because they are absolute truths, but because they are part of my own indigenous intellectual context and I take them to be familiar parts of the indigenous intellectual context of my intended audience.

The Madhyamaka mode of engagement allows a similar degree of dissonance-free flexibility with respect to worldviews, but without the hierarchy of truths and the abrasive core of ultimately true propositions. The Madhyamaka mode of frictionless co-operation is not restricted to those propositions that are ‘merely’ conventionally true, and so is not restricted to ‘low’ or ‘everyday’ epistemic standards. Madhyamaka conventional truths are frictionless and true in even the most rigorous epistemic environments. From the Madhyamaka point of view there are no ultimately true propositions and true worldviews are constituted entirely by conventional truths. Therefore, alternative co-operating worldviews can be each equivalently true. We can choose to employ whichever framework suits our needs and wishes best in the given circumstances, and whichever we choose is true at that time and in that context. We do not need to consider one worldview to be the ultimate truth; indeed we need to ensure that we do *not*.

In the co-operative mode of engagement between alternative worldviews, the introduction of exotic propositions need not replace or displace indigenous propositions; there is no sense of conflict and no need for compromise. Engagement in the co-operative mode is an invitation to add potentially useful or meaningful propositions into our cognitive and experiential repertoire. We have a greater variety of ways in which to formulate our reality, ways which may prove to meet our needs and serve our interests more effectively and immediately than our current ones. The mode of frictionless co-operation allows genuine, if recharacterised, engagement between any and all worldviews. We should note, however, that there is now no *need* for traditions to engage with one another. With abrasive propositions one was compelled to enact some kind of conflict or compromise in order to settle the matter of who was *right*. This is no longer the case with frictionless propositions, as alternative conventional truths, and thus alternative worldviews, can co-habit without conflict or compromise. When *śūnyatā* is realised, engagement is possible but unnecessary. When *svabhāva* is assumed, engagement is necessary but impossible. This new and entirely optional form of engagement does not threaten the truth or stability of either tradition, but only opens up the possibility to increase the repertoire of experience, meaning and understanding available to the participants in that engagement.

This mode could be applied to the engagement between a scientific worldview and a Buddhist one (whatever those labels may signify for whoever is enacting the encounter). It is not my project here to discuss what sort of hybrid (perhaps ‘symbiotic’ may be a better term?) worldview such an encounter may result in. I do, however, have opinions and interests with respect to how some of the traditional practices and attitudes found in the various Buddhisms could be of use in the predominantly secular West. I think the typical ‘western scientific’ worldview (if we could identify such a thing) would be well served by the integration of some elements of a ‘Buddhist spiritual’ worldview, particularly in the areas of soteriology, axiology and the pursuit of wellbeing.

The details of this, however, are not germane to my thesis. It is my hope merely to have shown how such an integration is only possible once we have adopted a Madhyamaka attitude towards our worldviews.

Despite the clear parallels with Wallace's project, I hope to have sufficiently distinguished my Madhyamaka strategy from his complementary mode of engagement. Our goals and intuitions are indeed similar; I too hope for a wholistic worldview that borrows from and enjoys the good qualities of both science and Buddhism and I see no grounds for conflict between science and Buddhism. In Wallace's presentation, however, he was unable to satisfactorily defend his intuitions and demonstrate the possibilities of reaching his goal. Wallace's subtle commitment to abrasive propositions made wholistic engagement impossible. The Madhyamaka analysis resolves the abrasive propositional conflicts between worldviews by demonstrating that there are no such things as ultimately true propositions, that conventionally true propositions are quite sufficient for our needs, and that conventionally true propositions are non-abrasive. In other words, the Madhyamaka reassures us that there is no need to attack our opponents or defend our point of view. Such pugilistic metaphors are inappropriate as without inherent existence there are no grounds for conflict.

The compatibility and complementarity modes of engagement of both share the intuition that there is no ground for conflict between Buddhism and science, and they both cash that out in different ways. I hope to have shown that these efforts are ineffectual, and now we can see more clearly why. They do not get to the real reason why conflict is unnecessary and thus traces of conflict and abrasion are found in these attempts at peaceful engagement. Conflict comes only from the clashing of abrasive propositions. Non-Madhyamaka's are unwilling to give up the ultimate truth of their core propositions, for they worry that the propositions would then be ultimately false. From this grasping at an abrasive core of ultimately true propositions, it follows unavoidably that such svabhāvic worldviews will abide in relentless conflict. Only when the two truths are realised as non-dual does it become possible to relinquish the ultimate truth of the core propositions of one's tradition without that tradition becoming ultimately false. Conventional truths are non-abrasive as they are not in competition for the *actual* context-independent truth. It follows that Madhyamaka worldviews, which are constituted by frictionless propositions, do not conflict with other worldviews (whether they be Madhyamaka or otherwise).<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> It may seem odd to say that Madhyamaka worldviews do not conflict with non-Madhyamaka worldviews, when they would seem to be founded upon diametrically opposed metaphysical attitudes. However, we need to be careful, as framing our concerns in terms of 'diametrically opposition' is a hangover of the svabhāvic assumption. The important difference between a Madhyamaka worldview and a non-Madhyamaka worldview is not in the propositional content but in the attitude towards this content. The Madhyamaka understands that propositions are non-abrasive and thus any sense of abrasion and

## Soteriological risk assessment

It may be thought that this pluralistic result may bring with it an unwelcome side-effect, particularly with respect to those soteriological traditions that would seem to rely upon their constitutive propositions being regarded as invariant ultimate truths. In other words, those traditions whose soteriological mechanisms rely heavily upon faith. The Madhyamaka method of dispelling all ultimate truths and the emphasis that I have put on the mechanism of pragmatic choice in the selection of our worldview, would seem to undermine the determination and devotion understood to be required by spiritual traditions. As Kelly J. Clark has commented in his defence of religious exclusivism: “Interpretative schemes concerning human welfare and meaning work best when they are believed to be true” (1997, p. 319). The natural concern that Clark expresses is that, having lost the security of absolute truths, there is nothing left to motivate individuals to develop and maintain a soteriological worldview.

If it is the case that the Madhyamaka analysis disrupts faith-based soteriological traditions to the point of failure, this may cast some doubt on to my claims to be presenting a workable basis for an ecumenical pluralism. It would be a curious and problematic result if faith-based soteriological traditions did not survive the realisation of their own emptiness. This is an important point that is worth dwelling upon, but I do not propose to do that in detail here. Although, I hope that a few points of clarification can offer some reassurances. Again, it is crucial to remember that the Madhyamaka analysis does not critique existence, knowledge and faith *simpliciter*, but merely critiques the assumption that existence, knowledge and faith are grounded in *svabhāva*. The Madhyamaka analysis did not do away with existence and truth, but recharacterised them such that they are meaningful and stable without being inherent or substantial. Similarly, the Madhyamaka analysis does not do away with faith, but recharacterises it such that it is meaningful and effective, but without being reliant upon some inherent, absolute, state of affairs. Just as the refutation of inherent existence is not nihilistic, but is the very condition of possibility for meaningful, coherent and functional conventional existence, so too is the refutation of dogmatic doxastic structures the very condition of possibility for meaningful, coherent and functional faith-based systems.

‘Conventional truth’ is no longer a euphemism for ‘ultimate falsity’, and thus the shift from absolute truths to conventional truths is not as damaging to faith as Clark and other religious exclusivists seem to think. The lack of absolute truth is not an ‘uncertainty’ or a ‘certainly not’.

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conflict is mistaken and unnecessary. Thus, even the propositions ‘existing things lack inherent existence’ and ‘existing things are inherently existent’ are, from a Madhyamaka point of view, non-abrasive. Madhyamaka propositions just *do not conflict*. They are not competing for ultimate truth and it is only in such a framework that conflict would arise. The only conflict is that which is internal to the *svabhāvic* worldview.

Non-ultimate truth is a *certainty*. A certainty borne, not from an unwieldy objective reality, but from a conventional reality non-dual with śūnyatā. With conventional truth we can be certain of the *function*, because that is what makes the conventional truths *true*; that they function as described (Hopkins, 1996, p. 542). We are confident (we have *faith*) in the beneficial *effect* of a proposition or praxis.<sup>167</sup> With unwavering faith in this context-sensitive soteriological function we are well equipped with the devotion and resolve necessary to overcome personal vacillations and maintain a soteriologically transformative worldview. Established religious and soteriological traditions, even if they rely heavily upon faith in absolute truths, need not fear the Madhyamaka analysis. Their soteriological and social structures will (to the extent to which they are conventional truths) remain untouched by the revelations of śūnyatā. They can remain standing even without their foundations of dogmatism and absolute existence.

In these brief points, I hope to have shown that the shift from ‘absolutely true’ to ‘conventionally true’ is not as dramatic as Clark would assume. However, I do not mean to suggest that it will be an easy transition, and more discussion would be required to fully explore the repercussions and difficulties that might arise. I merely hope to have shown that such a transition is *possible*; conventional truths are quite sufficient for a stable and workable doxastic soteriology.

With these concerns addressed, I hope to have shown how the Madhyamaka analysis of the non-duality of the two truths allows a stable yet flexible conventional truth that navigates the tension between dogmatism and relativism. On this basis, I have offered a sketch of how worldviews constituted by such conventional truths could be brought into a voluntary engagement of frictionless co-operation in order to open the possibility for a more wholistic and versatile worldview. I will now explore the impact this mode of engagement may have upon the discourse of scientific Buddhism and Buddhist modernism.

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<sup>167</sup> Indeed, one could argue that faith-in-effect is all faith has ever been and that faith in absolute truth or absolute existence is a reificatory subversion born from the svabhāvic assumption. For example, the certainty that monotheists seek in the existence of God is not merely in His existence, but rather it is in the effect His existence has on *them* or, more charitably, on all His creatures. The motivating concern for faith is not so much that there is Justice, but that justice will be *done* (i.e. that things will function in a just way). The worry is not so much that heaven exists *simpliciter*, but that I (and others) will *experience* heaven. The things posited in an ontology are there to support confidence in the lived experience, the function, the *meaning* of those things. The fundamental error, however, is our instinctive assumption that things must inherently exist in order for the sought-after function and meaning of those things to *function* and to *mean* something. The importance that we quite rightly place on meaning and function is unconsciously transferred to the reified entities supposedly *providing* that meaning and function. From the Madhyamaka point of view, such reified entities are impossible and do not exist in any way. This is no loss, however, as they are really quite *unnecessary*. The tragedy is, of course, that those who are compelled by reason to reject the incredible ontology of soteriological traditions feel consequently obliged to reject the soteriological *function* too. This is a horrible misunderstanding; the function is prior to the entity, not the other way around. Thus we can (and should) reject the entity, but we need not (and should not) reject the function.

## The Madhyamaka response to Madhyamaka Buddhism.

It is worth revisiting some important aspects of the discourse of scientific Buddhism in the light of these Madhyamaka insights. I will discuss how this new mode of engagement satisfies the Buddhist apologists' intuitions regarding the timeless truth of Buddhism, but without generating the problems identified by Lopez. I will go on to look at a tension that this analysis introduces into the apologetic strategy of the Madhyamaka Buddhists. In particular I will argue that a sharper distinction needs to be drawn between their *Buddhism* and their Madhyamaka attitude *towards* their Buddhism.

### An all-new timeless truth

We noted earlier that the timelessness of Buddhist wisdom has often been used as a justification for claims that Buddhism is forever modern and compatible with science. I argued that Lopez was right to be suspicious of this justification when it was employed to enact a propositional comparison between a particular extract-of-Buddhism and the science *de jour*. However, I also indicated that from the Madhyamaka perspective there is an important and philosophically justifiable sense of the timelessness of Buddha's wisdom. Through making this clear we can offer a more generous interpretation of this familiar appeal in the discourse of scientific Buddhism. We can recall that, given the operation of the svabhāvic assumption, there are such things as ultimately true propositions and these truths constitute the content of Buddha's enlightenment. It is this propositional core of Buddha's wisdom that is putatively compatible/complementary with the contemporary wisdom of science. On this reading 'timeless' means eternal, unchanging and inherent. The problems of such abrasive, absolute, ultimately true propositions have been discussed at length above; with the ever-changing content of science being continuously equated with the timeless Buddhist wisdom we end up with the absurd result that the unchanging and timeless propositional core of Buddha's wisdom is adaptable, flexible and always up-to-date.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, there are no ultimately true propositions and thus no timelessly true propositions. True propositions are conventional, context-sensitive and impermanent. However, as has been discussed above, śūnyatā is context-insensitive and so the non-propositional ultimate truth is *always* relevant and, in that sense, a timeless truth. To be clear, śūnyatā is not context-*independent*; it is not timelessly true due to being an untouchable and eternal absolute, but rather is timelessly true due to being the ultimate nature of all possible contexts. If we take insight into śūnyatā as constitutive of 'Buddha's wisdom' then we can appreciate that 'Buddha's wisdom' is timeless and context-insensitive but without the difficulties

outlined above. Buddha's wisdom is context-insensitive because it is a non-propositional wisdom; it is not a worldview itself but an insight into the nature of any and all worldviews.

With this understanding we can, in a sense, "maintain simultaneously the authority of the ancient and the immediacy of the modern" (Lopez, 2012, p. 190). This paradox is, for Lopez, a conclusive argument against the efficacy and legitimacy of appeals to timelessness. However, with the Madhyamaka analysis in mind, and if we tread carefully, we can find a middle way that resolves this paradox. What I hope to convey here is not some kind of *identity* between the ancient and the modern, but rather a frictionless non-duality. We can discover an *absence of conflict* between ancient authority and modern immediacy, a conflict that is unavoidable in an abrasive framework. Briefly stated, we first of all note that the attraction of 'ancient authority' is not so much a historical concern as a concern with the *timeless*; 'ancient authority' is 'timelessly true' unhelpfully rendered in temporal terms. Then, with the non-duality of the two truths we can simultaneously enjoy the security and authority of the timeless *ultimate* truth, as well as the flexibility and immediacy of impermanent *conventional* truths.

### **Wellspokenness**

We have here an important alternative understanding of 'timelessness' that seems to have been overlooked in Lopez's discussion. It will be illustrative to note an alternative understanding of skilful means that is similarly overlooked. Again, we can note that it is the operation of the svabhāvic assumption that forces the error.

In Lopez's discussion of upāya he notes that there is a later formulation of upāya that arose out of the Mahāyāna tradition and in which the word of the Buddha is understood to be, by definition, anything that is *well-spoken (subhāṣita)* (2008, p. 214). The criterion for that which is well-spoken (the word of the Buddha) is that:

[I]t should be known to be the word of the Buddha if it is meaningful and not meaningless; if it is principled and not unprincipled; if it brings about the extinction of the afflictions of desires, hatred and ignorance, and not their increase; and if it sets forth the qualities and benefits of nirvāṇa and not the qualities and benefits of saṃsāra. (*ibid*, p.215)

Lopez suggests that the crucial question for the integration of science and Buddhism is 'is science well-spoken?' (*ibid*). He follows this up with an interesting secondary question, asking 'and what is rendered provisional thereby?' (*ibid*). In asking this second question Lopez indicates that he understands the mechanics of wellspokenness to be a direct extension of the earlier formulation of upāya whereby the declaration of the 'new' as definitive (well-spoken) renders the 'old' as

merely provisional. Thus his concern is that the ‘new’ scientifically sanctioned teachings are presented as the *actual* propositional content of Buddha’s enlightenment (*ibid*). This requires that all the ‘old’ teachings that conflicted with science be rendered as merely provisional, and ultimately false (*ibid*, p.63). Lopez is forced to continue thinking in terms of provisional-definitive upāya as he is committed to the possibility of ultimately true propositions.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, there are no ultimately true propositions and it is unnecessary and mistaken to carry over the displacement mechanics of the provisional-definitive upāya to the upāya of wellspokenness. Just as the definition above suggests, from the Madhyamaka point of view well-spoken propositions are those conventional truths that generate a soteriological *effect* in the listener. Well-spoken propositions are not ultimate truths, they are conventional truths that facilitate a realisation of ultimate truth. This means that deciding that a ‘new’ proposition is well-spoken need not affect the wellspokenness of any ‘old’ propositions. Under this new criterion, scientific propositions could turn out to qualify as ‘the word of Buddha’ if they performed some soteriological function. That is, if they contributed to a diminishing of the svabhāvic assumption. Unlike Lopez’s formulation, however, to grant that a particular proposition is well-spoken does not entail the claim that such propositions were the “content of Buddha’s enlightenment” (*ibid*, p.129).<sup>168</sup>

So, on this interpretation of upāya, a Mādhyamika who wished to share Buddha’s wisdom would employ well-spoken propositions on an entirely ad-hoc basis. Saying whatever is most appropriate and functional in order to promote a soteriological shift in the listener.<sup>169</sup> This formulation accounts for the wide variety of Buddhisms that there are and have been. Importantly, having dispensed with even the most meagre of axiomatic propositions, the domain of wellspokenness can extend beyond Buddhist traditions, and even beyond recognisably ‘religious’ traditions. Any propositional framework can be employed to prompt a realisation of ultimate truth and thus any propositional framework can generate well-spoken propositions. A teaching can be in any ‘language’ and still qualify as the ‘word of Buddha’.

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<sup>168</sup> Importantly we should remember that no proposition is *inherently* well-spoken. We need to remember that conventional truths are impermanent and context-sensitive. Part of that context is the individual who constructs (and is constructed by) that proposition. Thus what counts as soteriologically effective depends, to some extent, upon the individual; the proposition that is articulated is not the same one that is heard.

<sup>169</sup> This may appear unpalatable and to have connotations of dupliciousness, where rather than say what is true the Mādhyamika says what best fits with their agenda. We need to recall that, in effect, ‘true’ just means ‘useful’ now. There is no alternative form of truth against which we can unfavourably compare this conventional truth. Furthermore, the Mādhyamika’s agenda is universal enlightenment, and we can be reassured that this is a universally desirable end. Indeed, the Mādhyamika’s activities can be understood as compassionately generating the best possible conditions within which their interlocutor can realise their *own* fundamental agenda (the achievement of painlessness). I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 7.

It is instructive to note that it is nothing special about science which gives rise to the perennial narrative of compatibility (beyond, perhaps, its cultural credibility and the prestige to be gained by Buddhism through association). It may be thought that, as Wallace suggests, it is the fact that science is non-dogmatic and evidence-sensitive, that makes it particularly well suited for engagement with Buddhism.<sup>170</sup> It is this sensitivity to evidence that grants scientific worldviews much of their current credibility, particularly when contrasted favourably with alternative worldviews (typically 'religious' worldviews) whose constitutive truths are understood as evidence-insensitive. However, as we are learning here, a flexibility with respect to content is not enough. One must be flexible with respect to the epistemological process and the criterion for truth, and it is here that science can be particularly stubborn and dogmatic. As insight into śūnyatā is a critique of ontic and epistemic presuppositions, and not a critique of propositional content, it is intransigence in precisely these areas that blocks the communication of 'Buddha's wisdom'. To assume that the propositional flexibility demonstrated by science within its own epistemic paradigms is suggestive of an increased compatibility with 'Buddha's wisdom' indicates that we are uncritically endorsing those paradigms. So the intuition that science is somehow *more* amenable to encounters with Buddhism is, in fact, subtly informed by the svabhāvic assumption.

### Triumphalism

With this in mind, we can also make sense of the apparent triumphalism we can sometimes see in the discourse of scientific Buddhism. Cabezón notes that, as well as being understood as compatible with science, 'Buddha's wisdom' can also be presented as ultimately unchallenged by science and as somehow trumping any kind of scientific intelligence (2003, p. 45). As Lopez has clearly established, within the framework of abrasive propositions such sentiments can be little more than dogmatic triumphalism. However, from the Madhyamaka point of view, we can appreciate that Buddha's wisdom is constituted by an important shift in the nature of 'knowledge' and therefore *does* transcend any knowledge-claim (scientific or otherwise). This is not because it is *more true*, as a triumphalist reading assumes, but because it is an insight into the nature of truth. 'Buddha's wisdom' is properly understood as a realisation of the nature of the epistemological process and its intimate relationship with ontology. Unless our epistemic operations are carried out in the light of this insight we truly are 'blinded by ignorance'. Thus there is a principled reason to assert that such svabhāvic operations may yield useful and functional propositions but will never yield enlightenment (they will never yield ultimate truth).

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<sup>170</sup> It is interesting to consider, however, that all traditions are, on their own terms, non-dogmatic and evidence sensitive. No-one is self-consciously dogmatic or insensitive to evidence, they simply have an alternative understanding of what counts as evidence. That this point is overlooked demonstrates the unquestioned privileging of the scientific epistemic framework that is so typical in the discourse of scientific Buddhism.

One would only be guilty of triumphalism if, after rejecting science's (or anyone else's) ability to ascertain the propositional ultimate truth, one were to claim to have found the propositional ultimate truth. Unfortunately, this is exactly what any Buddhist operating within the framework of abrasive propositions ends up doing. Unless the two truths are understood as non-dual then the basic epistemic process informed by the *svabhāvic* assumption is left uncriticised. The assumption that there is an ultimate reality that is propositionally accessible through ultimate truths remains intact. If this is the tacit assumption then there is no basis *but* triumphalist dogmatism to assert that Buddha uniquely realised ultimate truth and to maintain the timeless authority of Buddha's wisdom.

Therefore, neither the timelessness of Buddha's wisdom nor the well-spokenness of contemporary propositions is a licence to consider Buddhism as anticipating science. Lopez is quite right to use the absurdity and gratuity of such claims as an argument against the discourse of scientific Buddhism. The appropriation of scientific discovery into a Buddhist meta-narrative in this way is clearly politically motivated and works against any pluralist project of mutually respectful engagement.<sup>171</sup> Yet, with the *Madhyamaka* in mind, we can begin to understand the flexibility with respect to the timeless authority of 'Buddha's wisdom' we see in such discourses. From the *Madhyamaka* point of view, it is not the propositional content of a tradition that makes it a vehicle for 'Buddha's wisdom' but rather the awareness of the emptiness of that propositional content. The special, timeless truth that Buddhism has to offer this contemporary context is insight into *śūnyatā*, and apologists are quite right to sense that this ultimate truth is non-hostile (unhelpfully rendered as 'compatible') with modern scientific worldviews. This non-hostility only operates, however, if we appreciate that this ultimate truth is not a Buddhist proposition, but rather a non-propositional insight into the universal nature of reality. This is why confusion arises when apologists clumsily attempt to cash out their intuition of timeless non-hostility in terms of propositional compatibility.

### **The *Madhyamaka* analysis and *Madhyamaka* Buddhism**

We may begin to see some of the difficulties this analysis produces for *Madhyamaka* Buddhists. Insight into *śūnyatā* is a universal and timeless truth only because it is non-propositional, and if it is non-propositional it cannot be presented as a specifically Buddhist construct. Given its

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<sup>171</sup> I am conscious of this and wish to distance my *Madhyamaka* solution from any kind of triumphalist behaviour. This is why I have used scare quotes around references to 'Buddha's wisdom' and 'word of the Buddha'. In a sense I am being somewhat deflationary about Buddha's wisdom. In making it nothing more than a synonym for insight into *śūnyatā* (which is a universally available context-insensitive realisation accessible and accessed from within any and all worldviews) I am intentionally robbing it of political weight. In the end, there is nothing particularly Buddhist about Buddha's wisdom.

context-insensitivity, it is not possible to present śūnyatā as being a part of the propositional content of any tradition or worldview.

Whether a worldview is a Madhyamaka worldview or not depends, not on its content, but upon how that content is held. So, while it may well be the case that some Buddhist traditions employ the Madhyamaka analysis and consider śūnyatā to be the ultimate nature of reality, śūnyatā is not a construct of that tradition. There may be, embedded with a Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition, a context-sensitive way of talking *about* śūnyatā and offering advice in developing the realisation thereof, but that is beside the point. Śūnyatā *itself* is necessarily context-insensitive. *The transformative power of śūnyatā comes precisely from its independence from any particular context.* To present any Buddhist proposition as being essential to a realisation of śūnyatā is to misrepresent ultimate truth as being dependent upon, or a product of, a particular context. It is therefore incoherent, misleading and ultimately self-defeating to claim śūnyatā for one's own tradition. Thus there is no need to defend any particular worldview or proposition as necessary for the soteriological project (which is constituted by the realisation of śūnyatā).<sup>172</sup> Particular propositions may well be necessary for 'Buddhism', but they cannot be necessary for soteriology.

This is the crucial, and perhaps unforeseen, consequences of the universal truth of śūnyatā; there is an important distinction to be made between the Madhyamaka *analysis* (a critical analysis of svabhāva in order to realise ultimate truth) and Madhyamaka *Buddhism* (a worldview constituted by a collection of conventional truths). This distinction helps us discriminate two important, and separate, projects. The first is the introduction of the Madhyamaka analysis to the West, and the second is the introduction of Madhyamaka Buddhism to the West.

The first project employs the Madhyamaka analysis to reveal the ultimate truth of any and all worldviews, and demonstrates that non-ultimately true propositions are sufficient to ground a meaningful and functional worldview. The second project seeks to encourage the adoption of a Madhyamaka Buddhist worldview through promoting the psychological, philosophical and soteriological benefits thereof. These two projects are clearly associated with the two operations I discussed above. This first project is the 'transportation' of śūnyatā. This second project is an example of the frictionless co-operation mode of engagement. Importantly, we can note that the success of the second project is necessarily predicated upon the success of the first. Furthermore, the success of the first project is dependent upon it being clearly distinguished from the second. It follows that making clear this distinction is crucial for the success of either project.

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<sup>172</sup> In fact from the Madhyamaka point of view, there is a need *not* to defend any particular worldview as essential to soteriology.

This distinction also helps us avoid Lopez's criticism that "those who would account for the adaptability of Buddhism through the facile claim that Buddhism has always been antiessentialist run the risk of allowing Buddhism to be everything and nothing" (2008, p. 216). Through understanding the distinction between the antiessentialism of śūnyatā and the conventional truth of Buddhism, we can account for the adaptability of Buddhism while agreeing with Lopez that Buddhism is neither everything nor nothing (*ibid*). Having found the middle way and accepted the non-duality of the two truths we can make a move unavailable to Lopez; the ultimate truth *is* antiessentialist and does account for the flexibility of Buddhism. However, the ultimate truth's non-duality with the non-ultimate (conventional) truths of Buddhism rescues that Buddhism from relativism. We can agree with Lopez that Buddhism is neither everything nor nothing, it is *something*. It is a conventionally existent something that is both adaptable and yet constrained.

We noted above a tension in Buddhist modernism due to the conflict between Buddhism and science being resolved through propositional compromise and accommodation. This came with the loss of Buddhism's individuality and ability to provoke and challenge. With abrasive propositions we had to choose between compatibility with science on the one hand, and individuality as a stimulating worldview on the other. From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, we can do both. The cessation of conflict, the non-hostility, comes from the universal truth of śūnyatā. The potential for stimulation comes from alternative conventional truths. The crucial point here is that we can claim non-hostility without claiming identity. Importantly, we can note that the non-hostility arises from ultimate truth and not from the conventional truths. The non-hostility has nothing to do with the propositional *content*, but rather it arises from the awareness of śūnyatā and the attendant awareness of the frictionlessness *of* that propositional content.<sup>173</sup>

This way of thinking introduces tension into the apologetic strategies of Madhyamaka Buddhists. For the Mādhyamikas there are no ultimately true propositions, and thus there is no core of ultimately true propositions at the heart of Buddhism. A Mādhyamika, therefore, cannot be seen to defend the ultimate truth of any Buddhist proposition. Moreover, since there is no *need* to

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<sup>173</sup> Another way of expressing the resolution we find here is to consider how it is that part of the concern in Buddhist modernism is to show that Buddhism can be presented as being without beliefs or dogma (Stephen Batchelor (1997) is a good example of this). This is contested by those who point to all the beliefs and dogmas that Buddhism has (a good example here is, as we have seen, Lopez (2008, 2012)). We can make sense of this apparent conflict now. Buddhism, indeed *any* tradition, is constituted by beliefs and 'dogmas' (axiomatic truths that cannot be adjusted without losing the identity of that tradition). However, if we can say that the intuited purpose of Buddhism is to generate some degree of understanding and realisation of śūnyatā, then we can say that the Buddhist *effect* is without beliefs and dogmas. Once this distinction is made and clearly understood then the conflicting intuitions can be accommodated. We can say that authentic Buddhism is anything which authentically generates the Buddhist effect. Thus there is nothing dogmatic about authentic Buddhism, despite all the Buddhisms that there are being constituted by dogma.

defend conventional truths (as they do not operate in a framework of conflict or compromise), it follows that a Mādhyamika cannot be seen to defend the truth, conventional or otherwise, of any proposition.<sup>174</sup> Once again, adopting the Madhyamaka perspective leads us into a paradox of sorts: the precious something that Buddhists seek to protect is really just the insight that *there is nothing to protect*.

Given this consequence, it follows that apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism cannot participate in compatibility or complementary modes of engagement, or enter into discourses of propositional compromise. To do so would be to subtly endorse abrasive propositions and thus misrepresent śūnyatā. We have seen how this works in some detail in the above analysis of Wallace, where he advances the modest hope that scientific empiricism and Buddhist contemplative empiricism, stripped of their metaphysical assumptions, can be mutually supportive in building a wholistic worldview. We can also note that even the apparent flexibility in being willing to *yield* to propositional conflict, as advocated by the Dalai Lama (Wallace & Hodel, 2008, p. 147), entails a assumption of propositional conflict and so an abrasive theory of propositions. In as much as these apologetic strategies, employed here by learned and experienced Madhyamaka Buddhists, grant propositions the power to refute or support each other, they seem to miss (or at least misrepresent) the frictionless nature of conventional truths and thus the ontic and epistemic implications of śūnyatā. The non-duality of the two truths means that there can be no sense in propositional corroboration or refutation. Such relations between propositions entail the very abrasiveness which has been dispensed with. The Mādhyamika's point is that it does not really matter what the propositional content of your worldview is, as long as they are all understood to be empty conventional truths.<sup>175</sup>

This aspect of the nature of conventional truth can be missed, or suppressed, by apologists in their enthusiasm to present their tradition as the bearer of ancient authority. Unless the Madhyamaka analysis has been presented *first*, then the latent operation of the svabhāvic assumptions ensures that appeals to 'ancient authority' will be understood in a propositional sense. Apologists making this claim are committed to defending propositions that were true

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<sup>174</sup> It might be thought that, in Chapter 24 of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna defends the truth of the four noble truths, which in that context serve to represent all Buddha's teachings. However, Nāgārjuna is better understood as defending śūnyatā against the charge that it refutes the four noble truths (Garfield, 1995, p. 301). Nāgārjuna is not arguing *for* anything; he is merely pointing out the mistake in his interlocutor's position that assumes that the emptiness of the four noble truths entails their falsity.

<sup>175</sup> That is to say, It does not matter in terms of the soteriological goal. In other terms we can say that it does matter; worldviews can be adapted and improved with respect to mundane goals. For example, modern scientific attitudes to contagious disease are much more successful for health than medieval ones. Even in terms of pedagogy and preparation for enlightenment, we could argue that some worldviews are better than others. It is crucial, however, to the unmitigated understanding of the Madhyamaka and to the possibility of a workable pluralism that we accept that no worldview is more ultimately true than any other. Worldviews are not the sorts of things that can be ultimately true.

*there-and-then* and are still true *here-and-now*. Apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism need to take great care here, as it is confusing and misleading to suggest that conventional truths ‘survive’ a shift in context. Conventional truths are impermanent and do not survive the passing of a *moment*, never mind the passing of a millennium. It may well be the case that some Buddhist propositions are conventionally true in this modern context, but this would not be because ‘they’ have *retained* their truth across contexts. Impermanent things do not retain *anything*, not even their identity, across contexts. It follows that conventional truths are always already *new*. They are necessarily contemporary creations and, as such, cannot be the bearers of ancient authority in the way apologists can suggest.

Again, to reconcile our intuitions of timelessness, ‘ancient authority’ needs to be understood as an appeal to the timeless, non-propositional truth of śūnyatā, and cannot be exclusively associated with any proposition or any tradition. In as much as it understands the truth of śūnyatā and can assist in the understanding and realisation thereof, Madhyamaka Buddhism is, in an important sense, a bearer of ancient authority. However, this weight is not borne by any *proposition* contained within that tradition. Apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism need to be careful not to suggest otherwise in their enthusiasm to promote the teachings of their tradition.

### **Skilful means**

Rather than frame this behaviour as a misunderstanding of the Madhyamaka position, it could be more generously explained as an attempt at skilful means.<sup>176</sup> There is much that could and should be said about the complex political and pedagogical pressures that might encourage a Madhyamaka Buddhist to conflate the two projects and emphasise the authority and stability of their Buddhist tradition at the cost of the intelligibility and traction of their Madhyamaka insight into śūnyatā. There is no space here for the discussion these points deserve, and it would take me too far afield from the purpose of this thesis to do so. However, we can speculate that one pressure that might drive this strategy would be the wish to be taken seriously in discourses dominated by the assumption that true propositions are necessarily abrasive. Rather than attack that epistemic presupposition first, the temptation would be to present Madhyamaka Buddhist propositions as being true, *on those terms*. That is, to explicitly state, or at least allow the assumption to go unchecked, that Madhyamaka Buddhists protect and promote a core of ultimately true propositions. Thus the pedagogic utility may be considered to outweigh the philosophical cost. After all, śūnyatā is difficult to understand and even harder to realise completely, and so it is easy to understand the appeal of a strategy that postpones that task while

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<sup>176</sup> Interestingly, there would be no way of resolving the ambiguity between skilful means or genuine error, even through direct questioning. The mechanics of skilful means requires that their behaviour be defended without confessing the use of skilful means.

allowing preparatory intellectual and spiritual nourishment in the interim. That being said, however, it is my view that more attention needs to be paid to the long-term practical, philosophical and soteriological consequences of the wilful slurring of the two projects. If the Buddhist agenda is principally soteriological, and soteriology is constituted by an unmistakable realisation of śūnyatā, then we should question the skilfulness of a strategy that systematically, albeit subtly, misrepresents śūnyatā in order to further Buddhist agendas.

On the assumption that a workable worldview pluralism is universally desirable then it is arguable that the time has passed for the pedagogical and political mechanisms of appeals to ancient authority. These mechanisms rely upon the possibility of unique propositional access to ultimate reality and consequently make pluralistic engagement impossible by inviting discourses of propositional conflict and compromise. We can still enjoy the pragmatic, social and soteriological support of a particular tradition; one need not reject the conventional functionality of any tradition or worldview. We must, however, be prepared to renounce the ultimate authority of *all* traditions.

## Conclusion

I have offered a Madhyamaka analysis of the pre-existing modes of engagement between Buddhism and science. I hope to have shown that the philosophical and pragmatic problems of these modes arise from the unconscious operation of the svabhāvic assumption and the impulsive pursuit of the ontological project. I indicated how these problems are solved by the application of the Madhyamaka insight into śūnyatā and the non-duality of the two truths. I suggested that the application of the Madhyamaka analysis to participating worldviews allows a new and successful mode of engagement, and I briefly outlined what this mode of engagement might look like. I hope to have shown that, from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, we can overcome the internal and external conflict that can arise upon the meeting of alternative worldviews and enjoy a frictionless co-operation within and across worldviews. On this understanding our worldviews are substantial enough to provide the support we crave without being so solid as to be abrasive. Madhyamaka propositions and worldviews are frictionless and non-hostile despite being grounded in a universal reality. We find a principled reason to assert a timeless and universal truth that is accessible from within any and all worldviews and is not exclusive to any one worldview or tradition. Furthermore, in the cessation of conflict, friction and confusion that is made possible through the Madhyamaka analysis, we can see signs of the therapeutic and soteriological effect of insight into śūnyatā.

I hope to have shown that it is only in the light of śūnyatā that Buddhism can defend its claim of non-hostility with respect to modern scientific worldviews while avoiding the tension and criticism outlined in the previous chapter. It would seem that Madhyamaka Buddhists, with their understanding of śūnyatā, are well-placed to navigate this tension, but only if they radically foreground the context-insensitivity of śūnyatā and the non-propositional nature of ultimate truth. This shift in emphasis amounts to a clear distinction being made between the Madhyamaka analysis and Madhyamaka Buddhism, each with its own distinct project and agenda. The Madhyamaka message must be distinguished from any voice given to Madhyamaka Buddhism; the two messages are garbled when communicated together and so neither message gets across.

Furthermore, as frictionless co-operation between positively constructed worldviews only becomes possible once the non-duality of the two truths is realised, it is crucial that the Madhyamaka message be communicated as neither a worldview itself nor as dependent upon any particular worldview.<sup>177</sup> In emphasising this I hope to have demonstrated the importance of presenting the Madhyamaka message in purely negative and deconstructive terms. Volunteering positively constructed interpretations of the Madhyamaka, giving it a voice, necessarily disrupts the communication of śūnyatā. Despite this, I hope to have shown the means whereby the universal truth of śūnyatā can be communicated. The voiceless authority of the Madhyamaka must be allowed to cut through the clamour of conflict and compromise, so that those raised voices can subside into the respectful and rewarding conversation of frictionless co-operation.

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<sup>177</sup> The Madhyamaka message cannot be spoken, as it is *bespoke*. There is no particular collection of propositional content that constitutes ‘the Madhyamaka message’, as it will take a form specific to the svabhāvic worldview under analysis. Indeed, the Madhyamaka message is best understood as the *effect* this bespoke content generates. The propositional content is necessarily bespoke (as it is context-sensitive) although the effect can be the same (as it is context-insensitive).

## Chapter 7: Addressing Concerns

Some of the claims I have made here may appear somewhat controversial, so I should take time to clarify what I mean and pre-emptively address some possible concerns. I have said that the Madhyamaka insight is not best understood as a 'Buddhist' notion, and by this I hope to emphasise the non-constructed and context-insensitive nature of śūnyatā. To fail to press this point and allow śūnyatā to be considered a specifically Buddhist idea risks conflating ultimate truth and conventional truth. It invites the misunderstanding that an awareness of śūnyatā is via an ultimately true proposition, and that śūnyatā itself is an inherently existing ultimate reality.

The claim that the Madhyamaka Buddhists and I wish to make is that śūnyatā is the ultimate nature of reality (the ultimate nature of all existing things). To make this universal claim and remain consistent Madhyamaka Buddhists must relinquish any privileged access to or ownership of śūnyatā. Śūnyatā cannot simultaneously be Buddhist truth and a universal truth.<sup>178</sup> Where special care needs to be taken is in the following point: although I am arguing that śūnyatā is context-*insensitive*, I do not mean to say that it is context-*independent*. I am not arguing for some special experience or insight that somehow transcends all cultures and traditions and can be articulated and realised independently of any tradition.

It is a context-independent articulation of ultimate truth such as this that is associated with the Zen of D.T. Suzuki. There is an established body of literature critical of his view and I will briefly outline this critical landscape in the hope that it will serve as a useful picture against which to more carefully define my thesis. The main critiques that I wish to focus on are those to do with morality and praxis. In brief, the criticism runs that, if the soteriological experience is independent of any context and achievable within a variety of mutually exclusive (and even morally dubious)

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<sup>178</sup> By this I mean that if a view is Buddhist (i.e. a product of a Buddhist worldview) it cannot be a universal truth (at least without adopting the kind of exclusivist dogmatism that is antithetical to my project). The context-sensitive nature of propositional truth forbids the 'same' truth being both Buddhist and universal. However, if we wish to talk about śūnyatā we are forced to use some conceptual framework. Thus we *would* wish to say that the ultimate truth as expressed through the conventions of Madhyamaka Buddhism is a conventionally true expression of the ultimate nature of reality. However, employing 'universal ultimate truth' and 'Madhyamaka Buddhism's ultimate truth' as unproblematically synonymous is, at the very least, *risky*. Such an approach very much appears to be making a political move and attempting to accommodate alternative worldviews into a Buddhist meta-narrative. One must first relinquish all political influence or dominance over the ultimate truth (through realising the emptiness of the Buddhist ultimate truth) and only then carefully reclaim a conventional connection. So, while emphasising the tradition-neutrality of śūnyatā, I will use Buddhist vocabulary such as 'Buddha's wisdom', 'Madhyamaka insight' and (of course) 'śūnyatā'. However, as I have said before, I am using these terms in a politically deflated way. I am fully aware of, and I try to explicitly foreground, the conventional nature of these determinations. One has no alternative but employ a convention of speech (neologising does not escape this, but merely establishes a new convention). My choice is to employ the Buddhist conventions but in a carefully and consistently qualified way so as to minimise the risk of reification and politicisation. I have made this choice in order to benefit from the intellectual and philosophical infrastructure of the Madhyamaka Buddhists; there is no need to reinvent the wheel here.

worldviews, then what purpose does spiritual practice serve? What purpose does morality have? Does the ultimate truth's independence from context not mean that it is morally neutral? These are pressing concerns and, if they turn out to have teeth, would surely be counterintuitive results for a soteriologically-minded enterprise and would certainly undermine the philosophical credibility such a project. Given the passing resemblance between Suzuki's project and my own, these criticisms levelled against Suzuki could well be turned upon me. It will therefore be useful to show how my position escapes these criticisms and, in doing so, I will further clarify the nature and function of the Madhyamaka as I understand it.

## Suzuki's Zen

I will briefly outline the critical landscape of the discussion surrounding Suzuki's Zen. I will make no effort to discriminate Suzuki's position from his critics reading of his position, and I will not advance my own reading of Suzuki's position. To do so would take me too far away from the central point of this thesis and the specific purpose of this section. It is enough for my purposes here that I show that my own position avoids the charges levelled against Suzuki by his critics.<sup>179</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, around the time of the Meiji restoration in Japan, Suzuki led a group of lay intellectuals on a modernising project to introduce Zen to the West (and reintroduce it to the East) in such a form that it would survive alongside scientific disciplines and modern 'western' values. He is now widely considered to be "the single most important figure in the spread of Zen in the West" (Sharf, 1993, p. 12). In his writings, Suzuki identifies a "spirit of religion", which is "that element in religion which remains unchanged through its successive stages of development and transformation" (1963, p. 23). He characterises this essential spirit of Zen as a transcendent experience (1955, p. 62), and then universalises this experience, claiming that it is the basis for all worldviews:

As I conceive it, Zen is the ultimate fact of all philosophy and religion. Every intellectual effort must culminate in it or rather must start from it, if it is to bear any practical fruits. (1927, p. 254)

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<sup>179</sup> In other words, I do not need to offer my own interpretation of Suzuki as I am not attempting to distinguish my own position from Suzuki's 'actual' position (if we can even make sense of such a thing). I merely hope to distinguish my own position to the picture of Suzuki generated by his critics. It is not important to my project whether his critics are fair or accurate in their representation. I am not attempting to defend Suzuki against his critics, but to pre-emptively demonstrate that such criticisms do not apply to my position. Suffice, perhaps, to say that my only disagreement with Suzuki would be if he did indeed intend to present a view as to what Zen Buddhism really means. I would disagree with Suzuki here not because I have an alternative opinion as to the real meaning of Zen Buddhism, but because I would disagree with the notion of 'really means' that is in play.

Therefore, this special Zen-experience is separated from traditional Zen Buddhism and understood as a soteriological mechanism applicable to a multitude of variegated and apparently mutually exclusive worldviews:

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy with a set of concepts and intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death and this by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible to adapt itself almost to any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or a political or economic dogmatism. (Suzuki, 1938, p. 36)

Even in this brief sketch we can see the similarities between his general moves and the moves I am making in this thesis. We both seem to be claiming that the soteriological work of Buddhism is done by a non-conceptual realisation that is not bound to any one tradition and is the basis for all worldviews.

Given this characterisation, it is easy to read Suzuki's position as promoting a transcendent soteriological experience entirely independent of any cultural context or worldview. Suzuki's critics are certainly quick to characterise his position in such an absolutist way:

Suzuki's Zen parts company with any version of traditional Buddhism. It becomes a 'system' that can be aligned to any philosophy, whatever its provenance or its ethical flaws. (Nāgapriya, 2010, p. 12)

For in insisting that Zen could be, and indeed should be, distinguished from its monastic "trappings" these writers effectively severed Zen's links to traditional Buddhist soteriological, cosmological, and ethical concerns. Once wrenched from its institutional and ethical context, this free-floating Zen could be used to lend spiritual legitimacy to a host of contemporary social, philosophical, and political movements, from dadaism to Kyoto philosophy, from new-age hedonism to fascism. (Sharf, 1994, p. 43)

This absolutist reading of Suzuki and the other Zen modernisers' view of the relationship between the Zen-experience and traditional Zen Buddhism is spelled out in particular detail by Sharf. He writes that for these Zen modernisers, the 'pure experience' of the Zen-experience becomes:

... precisely the kind of idealism that [William] James sought to critique — an ontological ground capable of guaranteeing epistemological certainty — which would, in short order, serve as the intellectual foundation for a new school of Japanese philosophy, as well as for a revamped Zen mysticism. (1993, p. 22)

The unsettling thing about such a picture would be that the particular context, the particular worldview, is irrelevant to and entirely independent of the soteriological effect of the Zen-experience. The Zen-experience transcends all conditioned characteristics; it is itself neither good nor bad. Thus, with respect to the Zen-experience, the context is neither obstacle nor support; the context is entirely irrelevant to the Zen-experience.

We can tease out two particular ways in which this is disturbing to our intuitions regarding what Zen Buddhism, or any religious tradition, is meant to look like.<sup>180</sup> Firstly, if the context is inconsequential and unrelated to the Zen-experience then what does this say about traditional Buddhist practice, and the practices found in the other religious traditions that are similarly grounded in this Zen-experience? The traditions are purportedly a soteriological vehicle, established specifically to make this salvific experience possible, but Suzuki seems to be claiming that no one worldview (religious or otherwise) is any better placed than any other to support the realisation of Zen-experience. Indeed, his critics take it that Suzuki is committed to the conclusion that there are no necessary conditions for this transformative experience:

While he is surely correct that the aim of Zen practice is to realise a state of spiritual awakening (the 'intuitive' experience that he refers to), it is also important to recognise that this awakening does not happen in a vacuum but requires a carefully prepared context. This context includes ideas and beliefs as well as rigorous spiritual practices. In emphasising the 'intuitive' characteristic of Zen experience, Suzuki seems to ignore the conditions necessary to prepare for this experience. (Nāgapriya, 2010, p. 11)

Secondly, if the soteriological ground of the Zen-experience has nothing to do with the content of the worldview from within which it is experienced, then what does that say about the moral

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<sup>180</sup> Although I will only treat these two problems here, these are not the only controversial points in Suzuki's position. We can also appreciate that Suzuki's position is vulnerable to the familiar charges of triumphalism and the illegitimate extraction of an essence. I have, however, already treated the structure of these arguments and I do not feel that I need to go over them again here as the pattern is much the same. Again, it is of little interest to me whether Suzuki's Zen (or indeed my own position) has any traditional legitimacy or historical pedigree. It is not my concern, for example, that Suzuki's modernised Zen is as much a product of western intellectuals, such as William James, as it is of the teachings of Buddha (Sharf, 1993, p. 21). Such observations are entirely beside the point and, as we have seen in the discussion of timelessness in Chapter 6, a preoccupation with securing ancient authority suggest that the ultimate truth is being mistakenly understood in propositional terms.

stance of the enlightened individual? It would seem that no moral condition is any more 'enlightened' than any other, and soteriology has no effect upon morality. Suzuki seems happy to accept this curious conclusion:

Morality always binds itself with the ideas of good and evil, just and unjust, virtuous and unvirtuous, and cannot go beyond them... Zen is, however, not tied up with any such ideas; it is as free as the bird flying, the fish swimming, and the lilies blooming.  
(1955, p. 13)

Clearly, the risk is that in presenting the Zen-experience as value-neutral and adaptable to any and all worldviews, one must also strip it of any moral component, "allowing Zen to be co-opted by any regime no matter what its ethical underpinnings" (Nāgapriya, 2010, p. 14). Suzuki's critics note uncomfortable examples of this dubious moral standing in Suzuki's marrying the Zen-experience with the lifestyle of the warrior samurai and his apparent endorsement of Japanese nationalist aggression (Victoria, 1997).<sup>181</sup>

## Binary thinking

In briefly sketching out the landscape of the criticism of Suzuki's Zen, I hope to have made it clear that his critics construct a picture of Suzuki such that the universal nature of his Zen-experience entails that the context (the propositional and axiological content of the practitioner's worldview) is irrelevant to the realisation of this experience. If it is a transcendent experience, then it must be inherently and entirely transcendent; there can be no relationship whatsoever between the content of the worldview and the Zen-experience. Given this lack of relationship between context and the soteriological experience, it would seem that the unwelcome consequences outlined above unavoidably follow.

We can see the strong binaries operating here; the sort of binary thinking which is indicative of *svabhāvic* grasping. It seems that, either the context is relevant and inherently important, or it is irrelevant and inherently unimportant. Either some tradition has some ultimate truths, or all truths are relative and equally irrelevant to ultimate truth. With these strong binaries in place, Suzuki's Zen is interpreted as some kind of absolutist position, radically divorced from the conditioned context of all worldviews. As I have said above, I am making no effort to distinguish Suzuki's 'actual' position from the position attributed to him by his critics. It may well be that Suzuki is being misrepresented by his critics due to their blindness to the middle way. Precisely

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<sup>181</sup> I say 'apparent' because although his critics widely agree and take it to be an uncontroversial fact that Suzuki allowed his Zen to be co-opted into Japan's wartime activities, this point is disputed (Satō, 2008). Again, it is not my project here to position myself within this debate, but merely to show that my own position does not carry the faults that Suzuki's critics see in Suzuki's position.

where this binary thinking and svabhāvic bias enters the communication stream is not important to my purpose here. It is enough to show that such svabhāvic thinking is in effect and that it limits the interpretative options and forces an absolutist reading that radically divorces Suzuki's Zen from the content of all worldviews.

This is an important point that again serves to distinguish my project from a more hermeneutical one. I am not attempting to argue that some particular author presents the middle way, or does not. I am trying to show how svabhāvic thinking *in general* makes appreciation of the middle way *in general* impossible. I am trying to demonstrate (and thus communicate) the middle way through showing up the faults in svabhāvic thinking, paying particular attention to svabhāvic (and therefore flawed) attempts to articulate the middle way. Given their interpretation of Suzuki, his critics are quite right to criticise 'him'. I wish, however, to show that their pictures are mistaken, not with respect to Suzuki's *actual* position, but *internally* mistaken. Their pictures are mistaken due to the presence of their svabhāvic assumption and I wish to demonstrate what becomes possible in the absence of that assumption. I wish to show that a Madhyamaka alternative is possible which escapes such criticism and functions to satisfy the intuitions that seemingly motivate such attempts. My point is that a workable alternative is possible, and not that Suzuki presented that alternative.<sup>182</sup>

When we relax the svabhāvic assumption we allow an alternative to these strong binaries and increase our interpretative options. We can make sense of the relationship between the ultimate and the conventional only when we understand them as non-dual; when the universal emptiness of all worldviews is not mistakenly understood as being independent of all worldviews. I will now attempt to show how, from the middle way, we can make sense of my pluralistic claims for the universality of śūnyatā without being lumbered with the philosophical problems that Suzuki's critics attribute to him.

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<sup>182</sup> This may seem obtuse, but in my view this is the only way to communicate the Madhyamaka message. As the Madhyamaka message is constituted by the realisation of śūnyatā and the only obstacle to such a realisation is the operation of the svabhāvic assumption within the worldview of the recipient of message, then the communication of the message depends entirely on the attitude and receptivity of the recipient. There is no meaning in drawing a svabhāvic listener's attention to the 'correct' presentation of śūnyatā and hoping that that will automatically ensure the communication of the Madhyamaka message. Indeed, there is no such thing as the 'correct' presentation of śūnyatā, just more or less effective ones given a particular context. The Madhyamaka method is to critically address the svabhāvic assumptions of their interlocutor. One draws the svabhāvic listener's attention to their own svabhāvic assumptions in order that they come to suspend those assumptions and realise śūnyatā. This is the only 'correct' presentation of śūnyatā: a necessarily ad-hoc and bespoke critical analysis of the recipient's svabhāvic assumption. Here, then, I am drawing attention to the svabhāvic assumptions in the view attributed to Suzuki, tracing incoherencies in that position to those assumptions, and showing what becomes possible in the absence of those assumptions. Even if I wanted to volunteer my own interpretation of Suzuki, such a project could only distract and detract from the Madhyamaka method as I understand it.

## The insensitivity of emptiness

The critical picture I have sketched of Suzuki's Zen has the spiritual essence as some kind of 'pure experience', achievable within and applicable to any and all worldviews. As I have pointed out, this is an absolutist picture, with the soteriological experience transcendent to context in the sense that it is *independent* of all conditioned contexts. From the Madhyamaka point of view, however, insight into śūnyatā is not a special pure experience, transcendent to all other impure experiences. Śūnyatā is not an absolute. Rather, insight into śūnyatā is an insight into the empty nature of any and all worldviews that enables the collapse of ontological realism and epistemological dualism. Perhaps we can say that śūnyatā is not a special pure experience, but a special attitude that purifies experience such that *all* experiences are pure (uncontaminated by the svabhāvic assumption).

This is a different sense of transcendence then. Rather than 'transcendence' implying a standing outside of, or an independence from some domain, it articulates more a sense of permeation of the whole domain. In the sense that an ocean transcends any and all of its waves but is not separate from, or independent of, those waves. Thus to say that śūnyatā transcends all conditioned contexts does not mean that it is independent of *all* contexts. It may be meaningful to say that śūnyatā is independent of any context in *particular*, but that does not mean it is independent of all contexts in general. Indeed, śūnyatā is necessarily dependent, as it is always an emptiness *of* something. Thus even śūnyatā is empty and dependently originated. Therefore, when I say that Madhyamaka soteriology is constituted by insight into śūnyatā and that this insight is non-propositional and accessible from within any and all worldviews, I am not arguing for the context-*independence* of śūnyatā, but rather the context-*insensitivity* of śūnyatā.

Another way of framing this is to consider the manner in which this universal truth is presented. In the picture of Suzuki's Zen that I have outlined above, there is a sense in which this universal truth is able to be presented or articulated independent of any context.<sup>183</sup> If this is the case, and if ultimate, universal truth is *presented*, or *offered* as something to be grasped and attained, then there is a grave risk, if not a certainty, of it being misunderstood as a particular state of mind, or state of being, distinguishable and distinguished from all the other (less true/meaningful/enlightened) states. In other words, if it is presented *positively* one would

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<sup>183</sup> Suzuki would not claim that the Zen experience can be easily articulated in words, as "the highest and most fundamental experiences are best communicated without words; in the face of such experiences we become speechless and stand almost aghast" (1955, p. 65). However, he does allow that a Zen master "adept in the use of a medium [of communication]" can utilise this medium in a way that "directly points to his Zen-experience" (*ibid* p.66). Again, this formulation that Suzuki offers is somewhat inconclusive as to whether he thinks śūnyatā can be articulated positively or only indicated through negation. However, his critics clearly read it in the positive sense and we can at least say that Suzuki could have been more careful in his presentation if he wished to avoid the connotations of a positive, or absolutist, reading.

naturally take it to be a constructed, independently existing state.<sup>184</sup> A special, pure state, desirable over and against a variety of other impure states.

Again, we can see the difference between this strategy and the approach that I suggest. I am not saying that the Madhyamaka method should be separated from all worldviews and presented independently of them. On the contrary, I am committed to the view that such a thing is impossible. I am pointing out that the Madhyamaka attitude is not itself a worldview but is applicable to any and all worldviews.<sup>185</sup> My point is not that *śūnyatā* can be presented independently of anything else, but that as a non-propositional truth it is not bound to any worldview in particular. It cannot be introduced positively; it can only be demonstrated negatively with respect to some worldview. As soon as it is offered positively it is part of a conditioned structure and it is no longer *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā* cannot be presented, as it is always already present. For example, gold cannot be isolated and presented separately from any and all golden things. Yet gold is independent of any gold thing in particular. It does not matter what the golden thing *is*, but there needs to be at least one golden thing in order for there to be gold. Gold is insensitive to its form; it is gold no matter what form it is in. I will say that gold is not *independent* of golden things, but gold is *insensitive* to golden things.

Thus, the ultimate, universal truth that is independent of any particular context cannot be articulated independently from all contexts. This tension explains the air of mystery that surrounds Suzuki's Zen and that his critics pick up on and claim to be an obfuscating politic of elitism (Nāgapriya, 2010, p. 19); It need not be an elitist move to say that the universal truth cannot be articulated to those who do not see it for themselves. It *cannot* be articulated positively and in isolation, it can only be demonstrated negatively and deconstructively with respect to some svabhāvic worldview. In refusing to associate his Zen with any particular worldview and adopting a rigorously subitist approach Suzuki is forced into silence.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Of course, a Mādhyamika sees the oxymoron in the phrase 'constructed and independently existing'. We can see that a blindness to the paradox in such statements is a symptom of the svabhāvic assumption.

<sup>185</sup> We can see some of the difficulties in communication and the limits of language operating here. To say that the Madhyamaka attitude is 'applicable to any and all worldviews' semantically suggests that such an attitude stands outside of any and all worldviews. The difficulty is in the dualising effect of the verb structure; to be 'applicable to' seems to entail being 'independent of'. Perhaps 'can be applied in conjunction with' would be a little better, but 'in conjunction with', despite more explicitly referring to a conjoined whole, can still be read dualistically. In the end, there is no way to avoid inviting a reificatory reading. The work, as I see it, is not to adapt the language to make reification impossible, but to consistently point out the internal incoherence of the reified language structure and to foreground the conventional nature of any dualism.

<sup>186</sup> There is another way of unpacking the suggestion that the middle way cannot be articulated to those who do not realise it already. The rigid binaries established through the operation of the svabhāvic assumption are typically taken for granted as unavoidable features of reality. Thus, unexamined self-grasping establishes a hegemonic discourse within which the middle way (which does not operate within these rigid binaries) cannot be articulated.

## **A non-dual relationship**

Here, I am emphasising that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, there is a non-dual relationship between the two truths and between the non-conditioned and the conditioned. The fact that śūnyatā is context-insensitive rather than context-independent allows that there be a relationship of sorts between the constructed context (some worldview) and its non-constructed basis (śūnyatā). Contrary to how it is assumed on an absolutist reading, the worldview is *not* entirely irrelevant to, and substantially disconnected from, śūnyatā. We shall see that, in order for there to be a meaningful relationship between the immediate conventional reality and the transcendent ultimate reality, these realities cannot be understood as discrete entities. Neither of them can be rejected as illusory. Rather they need to each be understood as non-dual, dependently originated, conventionally existing realities. Through unpacking this non-dual relationship between a worldview and its emptiness I hope to be able to show that the flaws of neglecting praxis and moral relativism that Suzuki's critics see in Suzuki do not apply to my approach.

## **The importance of compassion: avoiding moral relativism**

The work here is to navigate the tension between negating any inherent ground or basis for morality while maintaining a meaningful incentive and justification for our moral sensibilities. We will therefore be able to explain the privileged position that morality holds in religious and spiritual worldviews, even in the absence of absolute realities and absolute truths. From the Madhyamaka point of view, the lack of an inherently existent ground for our moral sensibilities does not entail moral relativism. Despite there being no inherent ground for morality, a conventionally existing morality can be reclaimed. This conventional morality will prove quite sufficient to account for our moral intuitions and to provide a stable basis that avoids relativism. We can ground our moral sensibilities in the empty conventional nature of reality by virtue of the non-dual relationship between śūnyatā and conventional reality. Furthermore, as we shall see, some worldviews will not be sustainable (or rather, will not be sustained) in the light of the realisation of their own emptiness. We shall therefore be able to establish a meaningful connection between morality and śūnyatā.

The assumption that śūnyatā's independence from any particular context leads to moral relativism is driven by a misunderstanding of the two truths. Without appreciating the non-duality of the two truths, saying that the ultimate truth is not identical to any particular worldview seems to entail that all worldviews are entirely equal in their ultimately falsity. This equality of ultimate falsity sets up a picture whereby the content of all worldviews (the putative conventional truths) are entirely irrelevant to the realisation of śūnyatā (the ultimate truth). This fundamental

irrelevance and lack of relationship between the ultimate truth and the various conventional truths entails a relativism that seems to disrupt both epistemic and ethical truth-seeking projects. Conventional truths seem to float free from any universal, ultimate truth and so their 'truth' is constituted by nothing but internal cohesion.

However, with a Madhyamaka understanding of the non-duality of the two truths we can appreciate that there *is* a relationship between the ultimate and the conventional. Recall that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, conventional truths are not ultimate falsities. Conventional truths are no longer *merely* conventionally true, but have an increased epistemic credibility; they are non-ultimately true. Conventional truths are not true merely with respect to convention, a putative truth does not become conventionally true merely through a sufficiently large and stubborn-minded community deciding that it is true. The two truths are non-dual, so conventional truths need to be true with respect to convention *and* with respect to ultimate truth. Part of what distinguishes conventional truths from conventional falsities (existents from non-existents) is their coherence alongside emptiness, thus a dependently originated chair is a conventional truth but an inherently existing chair is not. In other words, conventional truths need to be coherent with each other *and* with *śūnyatā*. The Madhyamaka distances itself from dogmatic realism through insisting that there is no inherently existent ultimate reality that grounds the truth of our ultimate truths. Yet relativism is avoided through the insight that there is a dependently-originated ultimate nature that participates in grounding the truth of conventional truths.

### **Morality grounded in reality**

One reason why moral relativism is typically greeted with horror and dismay is a strong intuition that moral truths are grounded in the way things are. It is psychologically unpalatable to accept that moral truths are nothing but a widely accepted convention. When a community makes moral claims, they do not intend 'moral' to simply mean 'that which we have all agreed to value as moral'. They intend their morality to connect with something deeper. They assume that their morality is *really* moral, and connected somehow with reality, with the way things are. The convention reaches beyond its insular remit and purports to connect with and speak on behalf of reality, the way things are. It is not enough that a convention enjoy 'surface' cohesion, whereby the convention is coherent within a communities' agreed use of terms and within the woven fabric of their social and cultural norms. Conventional truths must also exhibit a 'deep' cohesion, the truths must be coherent with the way things are.

Thus, for relativism to hold there needs to be no accessible 'way things are'. What needs to be made clear, however, is that from the Madhyamaka point of view there *is* an accessible 'way

things are' in which we can ground and justify a universally conventional morality. From the above discussion of conventional truths we can appreciate that if moral truths are understood as conventional truths, then we need not fear relativism. From the Madhyamaka point of view, we can adopt a view whereby moral truths are grounded in our non-inherent ultimate nature. Moral truths are true with respect to convention *and* with respect to the empty way things are. From the Madhyamaka point of view there is more to being moral than simply behaving in the way your community agrees is 'moral'.

As I have said, the Madhyamaka effect is to realise that *svabhāva* is impossible and unnecessary, and so there is a dual function to the Madhyamaka method. The first function is the negation of inherent existence and ultimately true propositions; there is no inherently existing ultimate reality behind or beyond our experienced reality. The second function is more positive, it is the recharacterisation of conventional truths such that they offer a meaningful and useful structure for our experienced reality; to exist conventionally is quite sufficient to ground the meaning and coherence that we encounter in our lived experience. The negative function shows that *svabhāva* is impossible through emphasising *śūnyatā* and ultimate truth. The positive function shows that *svabhāva* is unnecessary through emphasising *pratītya-samutpāda* and conventional truth. I have tended, and will tend to, emphasise the negative aspect.<sup>187</sup> However, we must also keep the positive operation in mind. Indeed, it is crucial that these two operations be understood as non-dual.

In emphasising *śūnyatā* and the negative operation I have been repeatedly employing the sentiment that 'there is no way things really are'. I continue to maintain that this is the case, but I should clarify my meaning by saying that this need not exclude a meaningful 'way things are'. The crucial modifier 'really' invokes inherent existence and ontological realism, and there is certainly no *inherently existing* way things are. However, if we are willing and able to suspend our reificationary impulse, we can appreciate that there *is* a 'way things are'. The way things are is *empty*. The way things are is *dependently originated*. There is a universal ultimate nature to all things and that is *śūnyatā*. This is not an absolute reality, but nonetheless it is a *universal* reality. Things also have a universal conventional nature; that of being dependently originated. The universal conventional nature of *pratītya-samutpāda* is what rescues the Madhyamaka from

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<sup>187</sup> This is important, as until *svabhāva* is understood as impossible the positive aspect (where the stability and function of conventional truths is emphasised) may be taken as autonomously constructive (as endorsing absolute truths). Again, it is crucial that the Madhyamaka method does not autonomously volunteer constructed content, but merely critiques the inherent existence of whatever content there is. Furthermore, as Westerhoff has stressed (2014), it is important that our worldview does feel threatened by the negative aspect of the Madhyamaka analysis. The bite of nihilism must be felt, for indeed something significant, relevant and present (although not *inherently* present) is being negated.

relativism. The universal ultimate nature of śūnyatā is what rescues the Madhyamaka from dogmatism. This is important to realise as the assumption that we have no nature, just because we lack an inherent nature, is another svabhāvic hangover.

Another important point is that, like śūnyatā, this universal conventional nature is independent of any particular worldview. This is not to say, of course, that it is independent of all worldviews in general; like śūnyatā it is the nature of all worldviews and thus necessarily dependent upon worldviews. This independence of any particular worldview is what can give it the appearance of a 'view from nowhere', for in a sense it *is* an 'external' standard by which to assess worldviews. We can assess a worldview in terms of how well it realises, understands and embodies its own nature. Thus worldviews can be compared against each other on these terms, but without that requiring a universal standpoint independent of all of them. It is enough that there is a universal standpoint independent of *any* of them. In this way relativism is avoided, but without requiring an inherently existing ground.

### **How our nature effects our morality**

We saw that Suzuki's critics responded negatively to the suggestion that the essence of Zen was morally neutral. This response arises from an intuitive wish that moral characteristics and behaviour be grounded in our true nature and that soteriology and morality are related in some way. In other words, we take it to be the case that the enlightened individual should necessarily embody and express morally praiseworthy characteristics such as compassion, wisdom and patience. Such intuitions are supported by the religious worldviews themselves and their descriptions of the surpassing moral character of their saints and deities. When the context-insensitivity and lack of inherent properties of ultimate reality are emphasised, it can seem that there is no way to secure this picture. It can seem that if śūnyatā is neither inherently good nor bad, then the enlightened individual could just as easily be immoral than moral. There seems to be no connection whatsoever between the soteriological insight into śūnyatā and moral behaviours or attitudes. However, following from the discussion above, the Madhyamaka point of view offers us a solution to this problem. The fact that we have a shared, universal nature helps us avoid moral relativism, because we now have a justifiable reason for privileging some behaviours and attitudes over others. I intend to show that our universal conventional nature dictates a 'right' and 'wrong' way to live. Furthermore, the 'right' way to live will be expressible as morally praiseworthy characteristics, thus answering our intuitions that enlightenment should entail morally praiseworthy traits.

I have argued that the universal ultimate nature of reality (*śūnyatā*) entails that all living beings (along with everything else) have a universal conventional nature, irrespective of what their worldview or tradition considers to be their nature. The fundamental problem, from the Madhyamaka point of view, is that we are confused or ignorant with respect to the ultimate nature of reality and therefore do not understand our conventional nature. Thus, despite all beings sharing a universal conventional nature, it is possible (and regrettably common) to live in the denial and rejection of this conventional nature. Although our nature is one of dependent origination, we are perfectly capable of constructing a mistaken picture of our self and our world as being independent, substantial and inherently existent. In doing so, we do not become any less empty or dependently originated, and our world remains exactly as empty and dependently originated as it always was. We can say that these sorts of mistaken attitudes are *deluded* or *wrong*.<sup>188</sup> Not 'wrong' with respect to some inherent state of affairs, but 'wrong' with respect to the universal conventional nature of things. In short, If we live as if we inherently exist, we live wrongly. If we live as if we are empty-yet-conventionally existing we live rightly.

We can attempt an analysis and exploration of this point, but it must be done with respect to some schema or conventional structure. Given some structure we can assess it against its own conventional, dependently originated, nature. I will talk here about 'compassion' and 'selfishness' as paradigmatic moral operators, but in doing so I do not mean to privilege those systems that rely on these terms, nor do I mean to suggest that 'compassion' is an inherent property of an enlightened being. Certainly 'compassion' has a lot of currency in Buddhist traditions, but I think it is relatively unproblematic to see it as a fundamental component of any putatively moral system.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> These terms are clearly lifted from the Buddhist tradition. Although this picture of morality that I am outlining is recognisably informed by Madhyamaka Buddhism, I am attempting a tradition-neutral explanation of the relationship between *śūnyatā* and morality. I am consciously avoiding simply offering a straightforward, traditional Buddhist view on this for two reasons: Firstly, if I had to explain how *śūnyatā* entails morality with recourse to a particular Buddhist tradition, it would introduce a tension to my efforts to explain how a *tradition-neutral* *śūnyatā* accounts for the morality and praxis found in different traditions. Secondly, in my experience, Buddhist traditions will often rely on skilful means and pedagogic slurring to explicate the relationship between the path of wisdom (insight into *śūnyatā*) and the path of method (praxis and morality). For example, with regards to the qualities of a Buddha or saintly bodhisattvas, we often find a narrative of surpassing excellence, the vast collection of merit and the perfection of all good qualities. Such a constructive and acquisitional view of morality, typically seen in a gradualist approach to enlightenment, is, in my view, a pedagogical device which subtly misrepresents *śūnyatā*. It is easier and more psychologically palatable to aim for a constructed, positive state than a deconstructed, negative state. Despite its pedagogical benefits, such a strategy invites a philosophical friction and the risk of reification.

<sup>189</sup> Just what 'compassion' means within different systems will of course be somewhat different, yet any differences in definition here do not affect my analysis. It will be part of my project here to show that despite any differences in the conceptual, context-sensitive, understanding of 'compassion', there is a context-insensitive universal basis that explicates the significance and motivates the meaning of these various 'compassions'.

Compassion, as I am using it here, is a wish for there to be no suffering, regardless of who it is that experiences the suffering.<sup>190</sup> As such it denotes a de-emphasis of division between individuals and has connotations of acceptance, tolerance, empathy, connection and interconnection. We can see that it is a basic impulse to painlessness in the absence of an inherent division between self and other.<sup>191</sup> The impulse to painlessness expands through the 'boundary' of self and encounters the other. This characteristic, although typically understood positively and as a constructed property of a person, speaks more to the enlightened state than it does to the unenlightened state. Our dependently originated nature entails that there is no inherent division between self and other.<sup>192</sup> Compassion pays no heed to any putative difference or division between self and other. Thus compassion is an attitudinal expression of our universal conventional nature. Compassion is therefore informed by, and encourages, the wisdom realising śūnyatā.

Selfishness, as I am using it here, is an overbearing pre-occupation with one's own suffering alone. As such it strongly emphasises and reinforces the sense of division between self and other and has connotations of rejection, intolerance, enmity, isolation and independence. We can see that it is a basic impulse to painlessness accompanied by a strong and uncritical acceptance of an inherent division between self and other. The impulse to painlessness rebounds against the boundary of self and neglects the other. This characteristic speaks more to the unenlightened state than it does to the enlightened state. Our svabhāvic assumption introduces an inherent division and inherent dualism between ourself and others. Selfishness assents to, and operates within, this supposed division. Thus selfishness is an attitudinal expression of our ignorance towards our universal conventional nature. Selfishness is therefore informed by and reinforces the svabhāvic assumption.

Note that compassion does not require that there be *no* difference between self and other, only that there be no *inherent* difference. Williams (1998, p. 111) argues that a conventional difference (i.e. the mere fact that we speak meaningfully and usefully of 'self' and 'other') is enough to create the conditions of possibility of selfishness. Thus he argues against the theory, promoted by Shantideva, that it is "possible to draw an *ought* from an *is*" (*ibid*, p.104). I think Williams is mistaken here, he appears to miss the middle way through focussing his discussion on whether or

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<sup>190</sup> Note that I have been careful to present compassion quite explicitly as a non-affirming negative. A more typically formulation might be that compassion means 'the wish to alleviate the suffering of others'. This formulation subtly, and unnecessarily, affirms the division between self and others and affirms a self towards whom the wish to be free from suffering is not directed.

<sup>191</sup> I take a basic impulse to painlessness to be unproblematically and uncontroversially applicable to all sentient beings.

<sup>192</sup> Chögyam Trungpa puts this well: "When a person develops real compassion, he is uncertain whether he is being generous to others or to himself because compassion is environmental generosity, without direction, without 'for me' and without 'for them'" (2002, p. 98).

not there is *some* difference or *no* difference between self and other (*ibid*, p.111). Williams does not discuss a shift in the *nature* of any difference, nor the possibility of a shift in *attitude towards* any difference. It is in precisely these sorts of shifts that the Madhyamaka locates the conditions of possibility for compassion and/or selfishness.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, to be selfish requires not just that there be some discrimination between 'self' and 'other', but that there be an inherently existent division between self and other. Only such an inherent division could account for the selfish attitude that one's own self is inherently *more* important than the other. Selfishness is the view that 'only my pain is painful' or 'my pain is more painful than the pain of others'. Compassion simply is the view that 'pain is painful'.

Thus a compassionate worldview is soteriologically superior to a selfish one, despite being neither 'closer' to enlightenment nor more empty in nature. Its emphasis on connectedness and unity speaks more to the enlightened realisation of dependent origination than it does to the svabhāvic assumption of discrete identity. To relate with compassion is thus *natural*.<sup>193</sup> To relate with selfishness is *unnatural*. This is true despite the ultimate reality being empty of inherently existing 'compassion'; the conventional designation 'compassionate' is not inherently applicable to śūnyatā. In a sense then 'compassion' is just as applicable to śūnyatā as 'selfishness' is (in as much as neither is truly applicable to śūnyatā due to śūnyatā lacking any inherent properties). This is what Suzuki may have in mind when he makes points such as: "what we consider good or bad from the worldly point of view is neither good nor bad, for it has only a relative value" (1955, p. 73). This compassionate nature that I am arguing for is not an inherent nature. I have argued that 'compassion' is conventionally true with respect to the self-consciously empty life whereas 'selfish' is conventionally false with respect to the self-consciously empty life.<sup>194</sup> Thus compassion is an expression of our universal conventional nature. The person living in awareness of śūnyatā and embodying their dependently originated nature will instinctively behave in ways such that 'compassionate' would be an appropriate term to use for their behaviour (such a designation would be accurate with respect to convention). Similarly, their behaviour would be such that describing it as 'selfish' would be mistaken. This accuracy and mistakenness is not established in relation to the inherent facts of the matter (there are no inherent facts of the matter), but rather established by convention. This convention is not 'free-floating' and independent of śūnyatā but is non-dual with it. Thus, what counts as true within that convention is constrained by, and so to an extent, *determined* by śūnyatā, despite śūnyatā having no determinate properties.

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<sup>193</sup> Here, I do not mean for 'natural' to connote 'typical' or 'common'. Sadly, such compassionate attitudes are rather rare. I mean 'natural' to refer to our universal conventional nature.

<sup>194</sup> I must include 'self-consciously' here as all lives are empty. The unfortunately reality of the situation is that not all empty lives are well described as 'compassionate'.

To illustrate this point by way of analogy, we can consider wetness and water. Strictly speaking, water on its own is neither wet nor dry. Wetness and dryness are secondary properties; they are descriptions of the tactile experience of water by a sensible being. Only when approached from within this tactile framework will water be 'wet'. So, although being inherently neither wet nor dry, it will be a conventional truth (within the tactile framework) that water is wet. Similarly, it will be conventionally false that water is dry. So the meaning and value of 'wetness', despite not being grounded in an inherent property of water, is still grounded in water and its conventionally existent manifestations within the tactile framework.<sup>195</sup>

### **Living rightly and the impulse to painlessness**

I hope to have shown a credible link between the realisation of śūnyatā and our moral sensibilities. We can see that the wish to understand reality unmistakably (the wish to be without epistemic error, to live rightly) is linked with the wish to live well with respect to reality (to behave morally, to live rightly). Indeed we can say that both senses of 'living rightly' (the epistemic and the axiological) are non-dual in as much as they both reach their conclusion in the realisation and embodiment of the true nature of our self and our world. The impulse of truth-seeking is a sense that there is something wrong: 'this is not right'. The impulse for morality is a sense that there is something wrong: 'this is not right'. Both are an impulse to align ourselves (either our knowing or being) with the way things are. This does not change upon realising that there is no (inherent) way things are. We can align both our knowing and our being with śūnyatā and with our universal conventional nature. Thus we can make sense of the non-duality of these projects. When we realise that the cessation of all mistaken views about our world and our self, and in particular the mistaken view that our world and our self are inherently dualistic, we live rightly in both senses; we are unmistakable with respect to the way things are and we are unmistakable with respect to the way to be. This impulse accounts for both morality (the path of method, how to *be* in the world) and rationality (the path of wisdom, what is *true* in the world). We can say, perhaps, that there is an epistem-axiological impulse to seek truth and to live truly; wisdom and goodness are simultaneously achieved and are non-dual. Thus, from the Madhyamaka point of view, an 'is' does, in a sense, lead to an 'ought'.

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<sup>195</sup> This analogy, like all analogies, has its limitations. There is a clear dualism in the analogy which I do not wish to be carried into the case in hand. In the analogy the water can be on its own, and can be approached (or not) by the tactile sense and the associated epistemic framework. Furthermore, the analogy would seem to suggest that water has primary properties that are actually its own, perhaps 'being H<sub>2</sub>O' for example. Śūnyatā cannot be 'on its own' and has no properties of its own. It is necessarily in a non-dual, dependently originated, relationship with the conventional framework in question. Similarly, the conceptual framework does not 'approach' śūnyatā, but is a manifestation of it.

This is a useful connection to have made, and it is satisfying in its vindication of our moral sensibilities and its avoidance of moral relativism. It does not, however, settle things unproblematically. Recall that the issue currently being addressed is that if the applicability of śūnyatā to any and all worldviews is emphasised, we can be left wondering what motivates the adoption of moral worldviews. It could be argued that, even with this link between śūnyatā and morality, there still seems to be nothing stopping a realised Mādhyamika from adopting and maintaining a morally problematic worldview. To settle this point I would make one more connection. In emphasising the connection between ontoepistemology and morality and trading upon the dual meaning of ‘living rightly’, I do not mean to suggest that the impulse to live rightly is merely an intellectual pursuit, or that it falls out of a rational demand to avoid incoherence and inconsistency. The impulse to live rightly is more instinctive and basic than that. It is connected with the basic impulse to avoid suffering, unease and friction; the impulse to painlessness.

I have already argued that conventionally false views can be considered deluded and mistaken. The crucial point here is that deluded and mistaken views are *painful* to hold and are the true origins of suffering or dis-ease.<sup>196</sup> This is not just to say that deluded or mistaken views *lead* to suffering through setting up impossible expectations and inviting frustration, disharmony and isolation. While agreeing with that, I would like to say more. I mean to say that the very *holding* of them, or the presence of them in our embodied experiential framework, is unavoidably and immediately experienced as discomfort and dis-ease.<sup>197</sup> The lived experience of the tension and inconsistency that arises from holding mistaken views about ourselves and our world is *tense* and *insecure*. It *feels* wrong to hold a wrong view. There is a sense of ‘something is not right here’, a prickly frustration, a deep unsettledness. The epistemaxiological impulse ‘something is not right here’ is an unsettled feeling, an irritant and thus a source of pain and discomfort. Pain, or dis-ease, is an unpleasant feeling. Unpleasant feelings come from a tension or friction between the way things are and the way we wish them to be. Pain and dis-ease, therefore, arise from the rejection or denial of the way things are. Pain is “impeded willing” (Murti, 1980, p. 221). In other words, conventionally false views generate, and are generated by, the painful rejection or denial of the way things are. We can see that, tragically, delusions also encourage further deluded attitudes and thus a vicious cycle of suffering and dissatisfaction arise from ignorance and the

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<sup>196</sup> Siderits suggests ‘dis-ease’ as a more accurate translation (rather than the more usual ‘suffering’) of the Sanskrit term that is in play here: *dukkha* (2007, p. 20).

<sup>197</sup> In traditional Buddhist terms, this existential suffering that comes merely through living within the influence of mistaken views would come under the third of the three categories of suffering, sometimes referred to as ‘pervasive suffering’, or the ‘suffering of conditioning’. Again, I say this just for the sake of transparency and as a matter of interest, I do not wish to shore up my arguments through appeal to an existing tradition. In attempting a tradition-natural explanation I do not have the luxury of recruiting the prestige or authority of an existing tradition. What I am saying needs to be universally (although not inherently) true and not just true from a particular point of view.

svabhāvic assumption. This, in my view, is the dark and painful mechanism that Buddhists characterise as ‘the prison of saṃsāra’.

We may ask, if deluded views are painful, what motivates individuals to hold them or traditions to enshrine them in dogma? From a Madhyamaka point of view we would say that once again, the culprit is the svabhāvic assumption. Without realising śūnyatā, we are subject to the motivating influence of the absolute truths we mistakenly encounter in our worldviews. By this I mean that we are bound to react to the absolute truth of the propositional content of our worldview. There is a clear motive for holding such a worldview; it is *true* and there is nothing I can do about that truth. All we can hope to do is make the best of it given the way the world is. In this way the svabhāvic assumption sets us up as the disempowered victim of circumstance. However, having realised śūnyatā, we no longer have the assumption of absolute truth forcing our assent to a conventionally false (and thus *painful*) worldview. There is no longer any ‘external’ motivation to maintain allegiance to these worldviews, and so, because holding conventionally false propositions as true is uncomfortable, these mistaken views will be relinquished.

So, as has been said, it may seem that there is nothing stopping an enlightened Mādhyamika from choosing to maintain, for example, a Nazi worldview.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, as I have been emphasising, the fact that all worldviews are equally empty entails that there *is* nothing stopping our enlightened Nazi from choosing to maintain their commitment to Nazism, should they so wish. However, the caveat ‘should they so wish’ is an important one. For no-one *would* wish to hold a Nazi worldview. This is true because simply *holding* such a conventionally false worldview causes pain *to the one holding it*. It is a divisive and antagonistic worldview, and the divisive thought is a painful thought. Without the weight of absolute truth lending the painful thought a sense of inevitability, we can easily shrug it off and find a more serviceable (i.e. painless) thought. The Nazi was *always* in pain, the divisive and conventionally false nature of their worldview is a source of dis-ease and discomfort. Their ontological realism, however, displaced the true origin of this dis-ease. Under the influence of the svabhāvic assumption, the discomfort is assumed to be coming from the way things really are, and the means of removing the suffering is assumed to be in changing the way things really are. In this case (if, for the sake of argument, we can reduce Nazism to the proposition that the Aryan race is inherently superior to other races and the natural order will only be achieved through ensuring the dominance of the Aryan race), the Nazi sees non-Aryans as the origin of their dis-ease and their removal as the source of their future painlessness. The irritant (the origin of the suffering) is projected out into ‘the world’. So too is the satisfaction (the

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<sup>198</sup> I am here, of course, utilising the Nazi tradition as the paradigm of doctrinal immorality. I have no doubt that the reality of the situation was rather more complex than this lazy stereotype allows. As may be becoming clear, I do not accept that there are inherently immoral individuals or deliberately and self-consciously immoral traditions. I merely needed an example and the Nazi’s sprang to mind.

cessation of the suffering). Thus the impulse to painlessness sends the Nazi of on a tragically misinformed mission to eliminate the non-Aryans. In other words, the nature, the origin and the solution to suffering are misunderstood. Thus the impulse to painlessness is subverted into a fruitless and self-defeating quest for painlessness in the world as constructed through a painful worldview.<sup>199</sup>

The realisation of śūnyatā shows the Nazi that the dis-ease is not, in fact, coming from the non-Aryans and consequently that their elimination will not guarantee satisfaction and painlessness. The irritant is understood to be the *mistaken view* and thus satisfaction can be achieved through simply dropping that view. One unmistakably understands the origins and the means to the cessation of suffering. The impulse to painlessness will mean that conventionally false propositions are immediately discarded. Therefore, despite there being nothing stopping one who has realised śūnyatā from adopting a morally problematic worldview, in practice this will not be the case. Having realised śūnyatā one realises the conventional nature of reality, and thus the creative potential for choosing which views to adopt. Alongside this new-found empowerment, the impulse to painlessness ensures that no-one would voluntarily adopt a morally problematic (i.e. a conventionally false) worldview.

Perhaps the point can be spelled out like this: while it is important to appreciate that nothing *need* change, we can anticipate that things *will* change. The point here is to navigate around the assumption that there is some causal or necessary link between any conditioned state and śūnyatā. Nothing *need* change because all worldviews are always already empty. But things *will* change because realising śūnyatā will change the way individuals construct (and are constructed by) their worldviews. This is the therapeutic (and soteriological) function of the realisation of śūnyatā. Through a cessation of ignorance, wisdom is experienced. Having realised the origins of suffering and the means of bringing about a cessation of those origins, the suffering is immediately dropped. Realising śūnyatā is the condition of possibility for the cessation of all mistaken views and thus all dis-ease and suffering.

This link between human fulfilment, morality and realising the ultimate truth is, of course, widely understood and promoted from within the various Buddhisms. We also do not have to look far to find statements of the connection between correct views and satisfaction/peace/happiness in other religious and spiritual traditions. Such is the typical formulation of any soteriological project.

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<sup>199</sup> Clearly this is a formulation of the four noble truths as found in Buddhism. While openly acknowledging this influence on the position being outlined, it is my hope to present, as much as possible, an intuitive and traditional-neutral explication of the connection between existential suffering, the realisation of śūnyatā and the removal of mistaken views. I hope to make it clear that this position falls out quite naturally from the non-duality of the two truths. Thus, rather than seeking to reinforce my position through appeal to the four noble truths, if anything I am seeking to reinforce the validity of the four noble truths through appeal to my position.

Indeed even in secular truth-seeking projects it is typically assumed that locating the truth will bring satisfaction and happiness. However, as I have been attempting to provide a tradition-neutral explication, I have consciously avoided recruiting any of these established formulations, and instead have tried to elicit and emphasise an intuitive sense in the connection. I hope in this brief sketch to have demonstrated that we can make sense of this connection without simply accepting Buddhist (or any other tradition's) doctrine and thus jeopardising our tradition-neutral credentials. Having made this connection, we have an elegant and intuitive explanation of the truth-seeking impulse and the moral impulse; both are conventional manifestations of the basic impulse to painlessness. We sense, and sense unmistakably, that in 'living rightly' we will find solace, satisfaction and peace.<sup>200</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view, this peace and satisfaction is the felt experience of relinquishing any and all mistaken views through the realisation of our ultimate nature and the embodiment of our conventional nature.

Through emphasising the non-dual relationship between the two truths, I hope to have shown how it is the case that the ultimate truth of reality grounds the truth of conventional truths. Thus, despite the lack of an inherent nature to reality, the conventional nature of reality is enough to determine a 'right' way to live. I have shown how it is that, despite all worldviews being equally empty, *realising* this emptiness will affect the choice of worldview of the enlightened individual. In other words: all worldviews are empty, but not all worldviews survive the realisation of their own emptiness. Thus I hope to have demonstrated that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, there is a necessary connection between śūnyatā and morality and so the charge of moral relativism is avoided.

## The importance of spiritual practice

The second issue to be addressed is that of praxis. We saw above that having śūnyatā entirely independent of any context led to the counterintuitive result that spiritual praxis was pointless. If the context is entirely irrelevant to the realisation of śūnyatā, then there can be no justification for religious traditions promoting the soteriological benefits of some particular worldview. From the Madhyamaka point of view, and bearing in mind that śūnyatā is context-insensitive rather than context-independent, we can find a resolution to this apparent problem.

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<sup>200</sup> Unfortunately, it is rare that our critical projects ever take us so deep as to question the underlying svabhāvic assumption. Thus our well motivated projects are set off on an unprofitable and often counter-productive trajectory.

## Equally empty but not equally inherently existent

I continue to maintain that insight into śūnyatā is possible from within any and all worldviews. This is necessarily the case as all worldviews are equally empty and it is therefore theoretically possible for this emptiness to be realised. However, while this is true in *theory* (and it is, in my view, crucial to a unmistakable and trouble-free understanding of śūnyatā that this truth-in-theory be emphasised), in *practice* the content of particular worldviews will make a pragmatic difference to how easy or difficult a realisation of the emptiness of that worldview will be.

The realisation of śūnyatā is the realisation of the lack of inherent existence. Thus the only obstacle to a realisation of śūnyatā is the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. What is important to appreciate here is that, while all views are equal with respect to śūnyatā, they are not necessarily equal with respect to how much they incorporate or encourage the svabhāvic assumption. This is true despite the fact that all unenlightened beings are under the constant influence of the svabhāvic assumption.<sup>201</sup> The extent to which the structure of a view relies upon and propagates the svabhāvic assumption is the extent to which it will be increasingly difficult in practical terms to realise the emptiness of that view.<sup>202</sup>

With the above discussion in mind we can appreciate that worldviews can vary in their mistakenness with respect to the conventional nature of reality. The fundamental mistake is the svabhāvic assumption, whereby we mistake the conventional existence of things for inherent existence, and the conventional truth of a view for an absolute truth. Without this fundamental mistake, no other mistaken view can get off the ground for, as we have seen, no-one would adopt a mistaken (and therefore painful) view unless the svabhāvic assumption forced their hand. Thus mistaken views indicate the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. Furthermore, the degree of mistakenness of a worldview (the quantity of mistaken views making up the worldview) indicates the degree to which the svabhāvic assumption is operating, as each mistaken view requires a new layer of reification. Therefore, the fewer mistaken views there are the weaker the svabhāvic assumption and the easier śūnyatā will be to realise. Thus, in general, conventional truths are less susceptible to the influence of the svabhāvic assumption than conventional falsities are. In the case of a conventional truth, the svabhāvic assumption is purely impulsive and is not encouraged explicitly by the content of the proposition. Conventional falsities actively reinforce the svabhāvic assumption through the divisive nature of the content. They take the basic reifying impulse and

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<sup>201</sup> It is tautologically true that, without having realised śūnyatā, the svabhāvic assumption is in operation. Thus all worldviews will be approached with the mistaken assumption that the experienced duality is an inherent duality.

<sup>202</sup> I will talk about 'views' as being the constitutive elements of a worldview.

run with it, building it into its very structure such that they can be used as the foundation for further mistaken views.

Another way of thinking about this is to consider that the svabhāvic assumption turns conventionally existing dualities (distinctions) into inherently existing dualities (divisions). It takes differences to be inherently existent differences, it takes identities to be inherently existing identities. The reification sunders and divides along the conventionally established distinctions. There are no divisions in conventional reality, only conventionally established, and constantly (re)constituting, distinctions. Thus divisions and divisive thinking are evidence of the svabhāvic assumption, and the more divisions there are the more the svabhāvic assumption operates. Like a spider-web made visible and substantial through winter frost, the svabhāvic assumption lingers along the conventional distinctions and makes them appear more solid than they are.

For example, developing a compassionate view rather than a selfish one will represent a decrease in mistakenness with respect to the conventional nature of reality. This is true even if this compassionate view still retains the overlay of reification that we would anticipate in those who are yet to realise śūnyatā. It is still meaningful to say that the compassionate view is less mistaken, less deluded, and less divisive, and thus that it represents a net decrease in the strength of the svabhāvic assumption. Another consideration is that, because the inherent existence of objects is not a property inherent in them but a mistaken projection of the svabhāvic assumption, we should not expect it to be a static quantity or to be uniformly distributed. The extent to which the svabhāvic assumption influences our view is somewhat fluid and situational. For example, the significance and importance of an object affects how strong our svabhāvic impression of it is. Indeed, a typical pedagogical method for realising śūnyatā is to consider the emptiness of relatively unimportant things (such as chariots, lamps and tables) before applying the same process to things that are more important (such as the self and the body) and therefore susceptible to greater degrees of reification.

Again, we can make intuitive sense of these observations without simply accepting the evidence of these Buddhist techniques. The more a thing is valued, the greater prominence it has in our worldview. This greater prominence will entail a stronger conventional distinction surrounding it, and this stronger distinction will become a stronger division when approached with the svabhāvic assumption. Furthermore, we can imagine that its privileged position will have it more deeply connected into the wider network of our personal value structures. So, like the keystone of a bridge, it becomes crucial for the integrity of the greater structure. Thus, as the keystone acts as the focus of the forces in a bridge, this privileged object acts as a focus of the svabhāvic assumption throughout the greater structure. With both these factors contributing to an increase

in the svabhāvic assumption I hope it is clear that the emptiness of such an object will be harder to realise.

So, although all things are equally empty, they are not equally subject to the svabhāvic assumption. Therefore, the degree to which they appear to be inherently existent, and consequently the ease with which their emptiness can be realised, is not fixed. With this in mind, then, we can establish credible grounds for arguing that some worldviews are more soteriological efficacious than others; worldviews that elicit a lesser degree of the svabhāvic assumption will be more conducive to a realisation of śūnyatā. So the praxis that soteriological traditions encourage could be articulated as attempts to shift the individual's worldview into one from within which śūnyatā is more easily realised.

Adopting moral worldviews that more closely express the conventional nature of reality are soteriologically preferable as they represent shifts to less mistaken, less deluded ways of being. This diminution of mistaken views will be experienced as a reduction in dis-ease and an increase in peace and stability of mind. These are conditions typically cited as useful preparations for the realisation of śūnyatā, and we can appreciate the truth in this given the entailed reduction in the svabhāvic assumption. Furthermore, the spiritual ontology and symbolism employed in ritual practice could be seen as more closely expressing our universal conventional nature. The point in such practice would be to recondition the individual such that their worldview becomes more aligned with the conventional nature of reality. Again, being 'aligned' with the conventional nature of reality does not mean more closely matching the ontological way things really are; two worldviews with quite different propositional content could in theory be equivalently 'aligned' with the conventional nature of reality. Like iron filings in a magnetic field finding equilibrium through becoming aligned to the field, they are not necessarily uniform in their orientation despite each being aligned to the same field.

Thus the moral teachings and ritual practice that soteriological traditions promote are ways to bring about better conditions for the realisation of śūnyatā. Such worldviews are better placed for the realisation of śūnyatā, the only truly soteriological insight. Importantly, this needs to be understood as different from saying that such worldviews are 'closer' to enlightenment. Such a characterisation is tempting, and we can appreciate the motive behind the use of metaphors of proximity as a pedagogical encouragement, but strictly speaking it is misleading. It introduces the possibility of misinterpreting śūnyatā as a constructed and conditioned goal. On this mistaken characterisation the conditions established by a soteriological worldview are desirable because they represent a move closer to the perfect condition of enlightenment. From the Madhyamaka point of view, śūnyatā is not a particular condition and so all conditioned states are equivalently 'close' to śūnyatā. Yet some conditions are soteriologically preferable because there are fewer

conventionally false views operating.<sup>203</sup> Less attention is being paid to any divisions and there are fewer divisions being established. Thus there is a reduction in the strength of the svabhāvic assumption and therefore less obstruction to a realisation of śūnyatā.

A useful way of framing this discussion may be in terms of the debate, extant within some Buddhist traditions, between those that present enlightenment as an immediate, spontaneous event ('subitists'), and those that present it as the hard-won result of a gradual process of training ('gradualists'). Suzuki's Zen is an example of the subitist approach, and we have seen the way in which such an approach appears to deny the importance of praxis and thus enters an abrasive encounter with those who advocate the importance, indeed the *necessity*, of praxis in a gradual approach to enlightenment.

In broad terms, the subitists emphasise that nothing needs to change in order for śūnyatā to be realised. We do not need to engage in 'spiritual practice' nor must we participate in rigorous moral trainings. We can simply realise śūnyatā through a radical acceptance of '*what is*' in the present moment. The gradualists emphasise that we must change in order to prepare for and move towards enlightenment. Moral reconditioning is advocated and elaborate practices are encouraged. We must train for many years (many *lives* even) in order to collect or create the conditions required for realisation of śūnyatā and enlightenment.

From the middle way we can see that these two approaches are not in conflict *per se*, but are merely emphasising different aspects of the way things are. The subitists emphasise the lack of ultimate truth of all worldviews and thus the context-insensitivity (sometimes misrepresented as context-*independence*) of śūnyatā. The risk is that in appearing to reject praxis and morality, one can make the subtle error of adopting a reactionary worldview that is anti-practice and a-moral, and in doing so, miss the import of the context-insensitivity of śūnyatā. This slip comes about through underestimating the importance of conventional truths and through conflating conventional truths and conventional falsities. The gradualists, on the other hand, emphasise the conventional truth of some worldviews and thus the importance of the context-*sensitivity* (sometimes misrepresented as context-*dependence*) of the accessibility of śūnyatā.<sup>204</sup> The risk is that in appearing to reject non-soteriological worldviews, one can make the subtle error of taking soteriological worldviews to be *necessary* for the realisation of śūnyatā (and in doing so miss the

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<sup>203</sup> From the Madhyamaka point of view there can be no mistaken views until śūnyatā is realised, although not all views are deceived (Hopkins, 1996, p. 450). Up until that point all views are mixed with the impulsive svabhāvic assumption and therefore all views are mistaken in as much as they take themselves to be views of an inherently existing reality. However, we can still say that soteriologically useful worldviews have fewer mistaken views.

<sup>204</sup> Note here that it is the accessibility of śūnyatā, and not śūnyatā itself, which is context-sensitive. As I have been arguing above, the ease of realisation of śūnyatā is sensitive to context in a way in which śūnyatā itself is not.

true meaning of śūnyatā).<sup>205</sup> This slip comes about through overestimating the importance of conventional truths and conflating conventional truth and ultimate truth.

As long as these two strategies are understood as contradictory then we can say that the middle way is not being understood. From the middle way we appreciate that conditioned things are not the obstacle to realising the non-conditioned nature of reality, but the *reification* of conditioned things is the obstacle. As we have seen, conditionedness (conventional truth) manifests out of the non-conditioned (ultimate truth) and the non-conditioned manifests as conditionedness. Through accepting such a non-dual relationship between the two truths, we can accept and utilise both these strategies. From the Madhyamaka point of view these apparently contradictory strategies can frictionlessly co-operate.

So, despite all worldviews being equally empty and so equivalently ‘close’ to enlightenment, there are suitable grounds on which to contrast worldviews in terms of soteriological efficacy. To attempt a risky slogan: all worldviews are equally empty, but not equally inherently existent.<sup>206</sup> There is therefore a soteriological utility in promoting some worldviews over others, and advocating spiritual practice and moral attitudes in order to enact this shift in worldview. However, this promotion must be carefully done so as not to over-stimulate the reificatory impulse and force an abrasive relationship with alternative worldviews. Indeed, as I have discussed above, there is a problematic incoherence in endorsing abrasive propositions in the name of soteriological utility. In my view the cost of such a strategy far outweighs any benefits.

## Conclusion

Through unpacking the non-dual relationship between ultimate and conventional truths I hope to have demonstrated that the Madhyamaka method avoids the problems attributed to Suzuki’s Zen. I have emphasised that conventional truths are true with respect to the empty way things are, and not merely true with respect to convention. On this basis I argued for a universal conventional nature that provides foundation to conventionally true moral frameworks. Furthermore I argued that, despite having no *inherent* properties, the enlightened being can be consistently characterised by conventional properties and these are morally praiseworthy

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<sup>205</sup> In other words, we can allow the content of our soteriological worldview to become an obstacle: “With the growth of an intention such as the cultivation of bodhichitta, there is always the hazard of making where we are going more important than where we are” (Preece, 2009, p. 141).

<sup>206</sup> This, like all slogans, needs unpacking. On one level it is clearly incoherent; emptiness *just is* the lack of inherent existence, so to be equally empty entails being equally inherently existent. Yet, on another level the slogan does communicate something useful. The meaning, of course, is that inherent existence is never truly present and the degree to which things *appear* inherently existent is the degree to which the svabhāvic assumption is operating. In fact, neither śūnyatā nor inherent existence is something that truly operates in degrees; everything has always been empty and nothing has ever been inherently existent.

properties. I also have shown why it is that immoral worldviews will not be adopted once śūnyatā is realised, despite being just as empty as moral worldviews. Thus the charges of moral relativism or an amoral soteriology are avoided. Similarly, I was able to show that, even with the context-insensitivity of śūnyatā in mind, there is still an important place for praxis and spiritual training. I hope to have demonstrated that soteriological praxis is the deliberate cultivation of a worldview that is less hospitable to the svabhāvic assumption and thus more amenable to a realisation of śūnyatā.

When looking at Suzuki's work and his critics' responses, we can see that more care needs to be taken either in the initial presentation or in the interpretation. If insight into śūnyatā (or whatever the essence of spiritual enlightenment is) is presented as, or taken to be, an experience or realisation *independent* of any and all worldviews, then the difficulties the critics outline will necessarily follow. From the middle way we can appreciate that the realisation of śūnyatā is independent of *any* particular context, but it makes no sense to think of it as independent of *every* particular context.

In using the critical landscape surrounding Suzuki's Zen to more clearly present my position, I hope to have demonstrated the pluralistic possibilities opened up by the Madhyamaka analysis. If śūnyatā is an attitude towards worldviews rather than a worldview itself, then it is applicable to any and all worldviews. No tradition can lay claim to śūnyatā, thus we have a sound basis for frictionless flexibility and pluralism. However, although this attitude towards worldviews is insensitive to the content of the worldviews, the content is *not* insensitive to the attitude. Realising śūnyatā does affect the content of a worldview in as much as it makes possible the voluntary relinquishing of painful mistaken views. Similarly, and in a somewhat reciprocal way, śūnyatā contributes to establishing the truth of conventional truths and helps determine what sorts of worldviews are conducive to realising śūnyatā. Thus although śūnyatā is insensitive to context, the ease of *realisation* of śūnyatā is not. Thus we avoid relativism and have a sound basis upon which to assess worldviews against each other for their soteriological efficacy. In brief: worldviews are not in competition for ultimate truth because there is no inherently existent universal nature, but worldviews can be compared against each other in terms of conventional truth as there is a conventionally existent universal nature. Thus the Mādhyamika can enjoy an elegant and genuine pluralism without fear of relativism.

## Chapter 8: Madhyamaka Physics

As mentioned, my claim that the non-propositional ultimate truth of śūnyatā is a universal truth, and not a Buddhist construct, will be substantiated if I can show that this ultimate truth has been discovered from within alternative cultural contexts. In particular, given the dominance of scientific-secular ways of thinking and being in the West, it will be supportive to show that śūnyatā has been articulated from within a scientific-secular context. In this chapter, I will argue that at least one interpretation of quantum physics offers an analysis of reality that is functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka analysis.<sup>207</sup> If the following comparative analysis is unmitigated then śūnyatā has been approached and meaningfully articulated entirely independently of Madhyamaka Buddhism and independently of any ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ concerns.

Of course, there is nothing new about drawing parallels between the Buddhist view of ultimate truth and quantum physics. However, as has been discussed above, such engagements typically operate within the complementarity or compatibility modes of engagement. They seek to favourably compare propositions or to demonstrate the explanatory gaps that quantum theory leaves open for a Buddhist intervention. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, such abrasive modes of engagement are fraught with pragmatic and philosophical difficulties. My project here is of an entirely different kind. I am not comparing two worldviews, but rather two analyses of the nature of worldviews. If it should turn out that these two meta-views are similar, it would in no way imply or suggest that their indigenous contexts (quantum physics and Buddhism) are similar. I am not trying to gain scientific support for any kind of Buddhism. I am not making political claims or attempting to include the scientific project within a Buddhist meta-narrative. My purpose here is to gain support for my claim that śūnyatā is independent of any particular worldview and is a universal truth.

I will now outline Karan Barad’s interpretation of Niels Bohr’s quantum theory, and in the non-dual ontoepistemological framework so described I will discern a functional equivalency with the Madhyamaka analysis.

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<sup>207</sup> I should emphasise here that by ‘functionally equivalent’ I hope to convey an equitable and entirely horizontal power-relation as between peers; the synonymy is symmetrical. There is nothing to the truth of a conceptual framework over and above its functional suitability. Thus ‘functional equivalence’ can be entirely apolitical because neither articulation is what is *actually* happening; neither characterisation is a derivative or a corruption or a reflection of the other. The problems of politicisation and meta-narratives only arise when one takes there to be some ultimately real or absolutely true referent beyond functional suitability. Only when some sort of ownership or primacy of meaning is assumed does politics come into it. When all existence, meaning and truth is understood as conventional, power dynamics can disappear.

## Bohr's philosophy-physics

The philosophy-physics<sup>208</sup> of Niels Bohr as interpreted and extrapolated by Karen Barad in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) is, in my view, an example of a non-Buddhist truth-seeking project yielding independent insight into śūnyatā. I will outline Barad's presentation in some detail showing the parallels and isomorphisms with the Madhyamaka. In particular I will argue that Barad-Bohr articulate notions that are functionally equivalent to śūnyatā, pratītya-samutpāda and the non-duality of the two truths. In doing so I hope to offer convincing support for my claim that śūnyatā is not a Buddhist construct but a universal truth.

### Bohr's śūnyatā

In quantum physics the 'measurement problem' is that we cannot observe or measure a property of an object without affecting that property. This has always been known, but under classical physics it was considered that either the effect of the measurement was negligible or that, if we wished, we could nevertheless accurately determine the property (through establishing the effect our measurement had on the property and using that to calculate the value it would have had had we not interfered). In other words, classical Newtonian physics assumed a Cartesian, dualistic epistemology and its attendant realist ontology (Barad, 2007, p. 106). However, the move to ever more microscopic objects of measurement, together with the shift to thinking of reality as quantised, forced a rethink of this uncritical view (*ibid*, p.108). At a microscopic level the effect of measurement becomes non-negligible,<sup>209</sup> and the quantised nature of the measuring apparatus means that there is a hard limit to how unobtrusive we can make our measuring devices. In fact, it turns out that it is impossible to simultaneously measure the property and measure the effect of the measurement.<sup>210</sup> It is thus no longer possible to maintain the assumption that we can

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<sup>208</sup> Barad (2007, p. 97) makes the point that, for Bohr, the two were always considered inseparable.

<sup>209</sup> Although this is relevant in as much as it has forced this issue to be resolved, the relative magnitude of the measurement effect is not really the issue. As Barad emphasises, the philosophical consequences of the indeterminacy effects still hold at the macroscopic level (2007, p. 110). The crucial point, as will become clear, is really just that measurement interactions *happen*, and that these cannot be determined simultaneously with the desired measurement.

<sup>210</sup> For example, we can consider using a single photon to measure the position of an electron. One would work out the position of the electron through the position of the rebounded photon on a photographic plate. This result would be affected, however, by the impact the photon had with the electron. If we wished to work out how the interaction with the photon affected the electron, and thus adjust for this effect, we would need to be able to record the post-collision momentum of the photon (in order that the momentum transferred to the electron, and hence the displacement caused by the impact, could be calculated). Thus, if we wished to both measure the property *and* the effect of the measurement we would need to simultaneously record the post-collision position *and* momentum of the photon. The simultaneous measurement of these properties is physically impossible as the measuring apparatuses required for each of these measurements are mutually exclusive (position is measure with a fixed plate while momentum is measured with a movable plate). This is a very brief recapitulation of an example treated in detail by Barad (2007, p.110-113).

measure what a property would have been without having been measured; there is an essential indeterminacy with respect to any measurement-independent property (*ibid*, p.113).

The familiar and popular interpretation of these facts and the resultant indeterminacy is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.<sup>211</sup> Heisenberg understands the indeterminacy in an epistemological sense and works with the picture that there is a fundamental uncertainty with regard to objective properties. Significantly, framing the indeterminacy in such a way retains the assumption that there is such a thing as an objective measurement-independent property, although we cannot know what it is without uncertainty.

Bohr, however, realised that the consequences of the measurement problem are in fact much more radical. Bohr's crucial insight was to realise that our familiar notions of objective properties are *defined by* and *dependent upon* our ability to measure them. Bohr notices that 'momentum' means 'that property which we measure in this particular way'. Similarly, 'the momentum of X' is really just the outputted results of a particular experiment that we have designed to enact 'momentum measurement'. Bohr tells us that, since the concept of an objective property comes *after* our assumption that we are making successful measurements, there is no such thing as an objective property that we cannot measure. An objective property *is* a measurement.<sup>212</sup> As Barad puts it:

For Bohr the analysis of these conditions rests on the crucial insight that concepts are meaningful, that is, semantically determinate, not in the abstract but by virtue of their embodiment in physical arrangement of the apparatus. (*ibid*, p.117)

*This* is why we cannot determine position and momentum simultaneously. Not merely because measuring position disturbs the momentum and vice versa (as Heisenberg would have it), but because 'position' and 'momentum' are concepts embedded within mutually exclusive apparatuses.<sup>213</sup> It is not merely that position and momentum cannot both be known (measured)

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<sup>211</sup> This popularity is despite the fact that Bohr publically critiqued Heisenberg's interpretation and Heisenberg publically conceded the point and added a postscript to his famous paper in which he acknowledges that there are "flaws in reasoning" in his position (Barad, 2007, p. 115).

<sup>212</sup> It makes little sense to talk of an unmeasurable measurement. It is also problematic to assume that properties are more than their measurement, given that the measurement necessarily came first. This is similar to the points made in Chapter 4 criticising Murti's absolutist assumption that the failure of determinations to connect with the Real entails that the Real is transcendent and inherently indeterminate. Heisenberg seems to make the same realist error in maintaining the hypothesis that there is a 'way things really are', despite realising the instabilities in the epistemic process that led us to posit the 'way things really are' in the first place.

<sup>213</sup> Heisenberg's treatment of the mutual exclusivity of position and momentum is rather less nuanced than Bohr's. Heisenberg merely notes that as we decrease the width of a photon beam (in order to enact ever more precise measurement of position), we unavoidably increase its momentum (and therefore its ability to disturb the momentum of the measured object). Thus Heisenberg identifies an indirect relationship

at the same time, but that position and momentum cannot *be* at the same time. For Bohr, “[t]he issue is not one of unknowability per se; rather, it is a question of what can be said to simultaneously exist” (*ibid*, p.118).

Whereas Heisenberg takes the indeterminacy as an epistemological issue (hence the shift from ‘indeterminacy’ to ‘uncertainty’), Bohr realises that we need to take the indeterminacy seriously on an ontological level. Bohr, in the spirit of true empiricism and unbiased truth-seeking, is willing to surrender our most fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality:

Making the ontological nature of the indeterminacy explicit entails a rejection of the *classical metaphysical assumption that there are determinate objects with determinate properties and corresponding determinate concepts with determinate meaning independent of the necessary conditions needed to resolve the inherent indeterminacies.* (*ibid*, p.127)

So, not only are measurement-independent properties rejected as incoherent, but so are the independently existing objects that are supposed to bear those properties. For Bohr, “objects are not already there; they emerge through specific practices” (*ibid*, p.157). Under Bohr’s exhaustive analysis, the apparently innocent revelation with respect to the difficulties in making precise measurements of properties, has led to the collapse of the familiar Cartesian notion of independently existing objects. As Bohr himself states:

The recognition that the interaction between the measuring tools and the physical systems under investigation constitutes an unsuspected limitation of the mechanical conception of nature, as characterised by attribution of separate properties to physical systems, but has forced us, in the ordering of experience, to pay proper attention to the conditions of observation. (quoted in *ibid*, p.126)

We can see that, like Nāgārjuna, Bohr is willing to follow his analysis through to its radical conclusion and accept the counter-intuitive consequences, without allowing the metaphysical bias towards inherent existence to interfere. For Bohr the ultimate issue is that “*quantum theory exposes an essential failure of representationalism*” (*ibid*, p.124) and:

Bohr’s philosophy clearly contests the Cartesian (inherent, fixed, unambiguous) subject-object distinction in a way that undermines the very foundation of classical epistemology and ontology. (*ibid*, p.125)

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between the degree of determination of position, and the degree of determination of momentum (Barad, 2007, p. 116).

In other words, Barad-Bohr argue for śūnyatā, the lack of inherent existence. They advocate a cessation (or at least a radical revision) of the ontological project and argue for the incoherence of the notion of 'the way things really are'. I do not think it is much of a stretch to equate Bohr's 'view' of ultimate reality as equivalent to Nāgārjuna's. That is, Bohr's critical analysis of the consequences of the measurement problem reveals the truth of śūnyatā.

### **Bohr's pratītya-samutpāda**

For Barad-Bohr, then, there is no sense in asking what things are *really* like independent of our measurement apparatus. There is no sense in properties that pre-exist our measurement of them. Similarly, there is also no sense in talking about properties or objects in the abstract, as if they are merely ideas with no ground in exteriority whatsoever. There is an essential interdependence between concepts and properties, between meanings and things (*ibid*, p.127). In recognising this mutual entailment and co-creative relationship, Barad-Bohr avoid the essentialism of traditional realism, without sacrificing all sense of objectivity and embracing idealism and relativism (*ibid*, p.129). Like Nāgārjuna, they are able to disrupt and so transcend such polarised opposition.

For Barad-Bohr, properties have neither *meaning* nor *being* independent of measurement. There is an essential semantic-ontic indeterminacy that is resolved only with measurement (*ibid*, p.120). Thus the measurement apparatus, the meaning of the measurement and the objective property being measured are mutually interdependent. This wholistic and non-dual interdependent arrangement is what Bohr considers to be the phenomenon to which the measurement applies:

... the notion of position cannot be presumed to be a well-defined abstract concept; nor can it be presumed to be an individually determinate attribute of independently existing objects. Rather position has meaning only when an apparatus with an appropriate set of fixed parts is used. Furthermore, any measurement of position using this apparatus cannot be attributed to some abstract, independently existing object but rather is a property of the *phenomenon* - the inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies. (*ibid*, p.139)

Whereas in classical physics and its attendant Cartesian epistemological structure we thought in terms of *interaction* of independently existing agencies, in Bohr's philosophy-physics we have a picture of the agencies *intra*-acting:

Since individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge from their intra-action. (*ibid*, p.128)

‘Intra-action’ is a neologism introduced by Barad to describe the counterintuitive dynamic between the dependently originated constituents of a measurement process. It simultaneously captures the sense in which these agencies are in relationship with each other *and* are dependent upon that relationship for their existence. For Bohr “phenomena are ontologically primitive relations” (*ibid*, p.139) and “relata do not pre-exist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions” (*ibid*, p.140).<sup>214</sup>

The relata, the intra-acting agencies, are therefore dependently originated and this dependent relationship is another way of talking about their lack of inherent existence:

It is important to note that the “distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense. That is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they do not exist as individual elements.* (*ibid*, p.33)

In other words, Barad-Bohr are articulating their acknowledgement of *pratītya-samutpāda*; the meaningful and functional existence of dependently originated things, non-dual with śūnyatā.

### **Bohr’s two truths**

For Bohr the pressing concern was to make scientific sense of the counterintuitive results of these experiments. Despite his rejection of representationalism there is “something importantly realist about Bohr’s formulation” (*ibid*, p.129). Bohr was strongly motivated to maintain a meaningful sense of science’s cherished ‘objectivity’. In particular he wished to capture the sense of objectivity as that which accounts for the independent reproducibility of experiments:

Objectivity for Bohr is not a matter of being at a remove from what one is studying, a condition predicated on classical physics’ metaphysical belief in individualism, but a question of the unambiguous communication of the results of reproducible experiments. (*ibid*, p.174)

However, having rejected the familiar notion of measurement-independent properties, what *does* account for this reproducibility? What is the meaning of the result of an experiment? Bohr reasoned that, as the measuring apparatus and the material process are mutually implicated in resolving the indeterminacy and determining the ontic-semantic result of the experiment, then

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<sup>214</sup> As Barad points out, Bohr has shown us that “in a sense, there are no noumena, only phenomena”. This of course entails a shift in meaning of ‘phenomena’ as it is no longer defined against the noumena. It should therefore be clear that ‘phenomena’ is not being used in the Kantian or phenomenological sense (Barad, 2007, p. 429 n.18).

*that* is what the measurement refers to. The phenomenon being measured must include the apparatus, indeed:

... the unambiguous account of proper quantum phenomena must, in principle, include a description of all relevant features of the experimental arrangement. (Bohr, quoted in *ibid*, p.119)

For Bohr, then, the possibility for objectivity is in the resolution of indeterminacy through the selection of apparatus (*ibid*, p.174). As a replacement for the 'Cartesian cut' that traditionally delineated the independently existing measured properties from the independently existing measurement device, a 'Bohrian cut' is enacted through the selection of particular apparatus (*ibid*, p.115). Having enacted this cut, then, within the context of that phenomenon, an 'objective' (reproducible and unambiguously communicable) measurement is made. So, for Bohr, objectivity is *constituted* by the unambiguous communication of results made possible by the Bohrian cut enacted through the selection of a particular experimental arrangement (*ibid*, p.143). He reasoned that as long as all relevant features of the experimental arrangement were reproduced then the results are reproducible; this reproducibility constitutes objectivity.

Barad notes, however, that this notion of objectivity is "mere intersubjectivity" (*ibid*, p.174) and relies on an uncritically established 'exterior' human who independently selects the experimental procedure (*ibid*, p.144). This humanist element represents a weakness and an oversight in Bohr's position which Barad shores up through her development of the ontological repercussions of Bohr's philosophy-physics. I will speak in more detail about Barad's contribution below, but for now I will briefly introduce her elaboration on the conditions for objectivity. Barad focuses on the observation that traditionally the condition for objectivity is *separability* and *exteriority* (*ibid*, p.173). As mentioned, these are traditionally established by the inherent division between object and subject provided by the taken-for-granted Cartesian cut. Having rejected this inherent cut, Barad needs to account for the sense of separateness that is evident in our experience. After all, once the measurement is happening the semantic-ontic indeterminacy is demonstrably resolved. There is a separation enacted, and the intra-acting agencies arise in a well-defined way. Barad-Bohr must offer an account of this cut that does not rely on the Cartesian myth and allows for the exteriority-within-phenomena that we find in the intra-acting agencies. Barad calls this 'agential separability':

The notion of agential separability is of fundamental importance, for in the absence of a classical ontological condition of exteriority between observer and observed, it provides an alternative ontological condition for the possibility of objectivity. (*ibid*, p.140)

For Barad-Bohr, given that they reject the notion of independently existing objects, this separateness is neither “an inherent feature of how the world is” nor “mere illusion, an artifact of human consciousness led astray” (*ibid*, p.137). Barad-Bohr’s formulation rejects both these extremes along with the inherent divide that they are founded upon. Wishing to account for both “the feelings of volition and the demand for causality” (*ibid*, p.130), their formulation captures the co-creative and interdependent relationship between the intra-acting agencies. Separation requires some kind of cut, Barad realises this. It cannot be an objective Cartesian cut (with human agency impotent and uninvolved), equally it cannot be a humanist cut, like the Bohrian cut seems to be (with human agency uncritically and independently maintained). With the notion of intra-activity, “agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit” (*ibid*, p.177) and is shared between all the intra-acting elements. Thus, Barad calls the cut enacted through intra-activity the *agential cut*. This cut “enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy” (*ibid*, p.140) and within this resolution the intra-acting agencies are established.<sup>215</sup> This agential cut enacts and is enacted by the intra-activity within the phenomena (*ibid*, p.139). The intra-acting agencies (the object and the subject) are mutually implicated as co-creative participants in the very agential cut which establishes their determinate existence:

Cuts are agentially enacted not by wilful individuals but by the larger material arrangements of which ‘we’ are a ‘part’. The cuts that we participate in enacting matter.<sup>216</sup> (*ibid*, p.178)

The circularity that threatens here indicates that the notion of causation has also been recharacterised through Barad-Bohr's revision. In problematising the Cartesian cut between object and subject, Barad-Bohr are discarding the framework in which traditional notions of causality are considered. Under the Cartesian system we assume that the ‘cut’ between subject and object is a given, based on the inherent qualities of the object and subject; in other words, that the nature of the *entities* enacts the cut between them. Some are willing to countenance the

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<sup>215</sup> This is one way of spelling out the middle way that Barad-Bohr and Nāgārjuna find between traditional realism and post-modern social constructivism. The distinction between traditional realists and some kind of social constructivist is in their views on the flow of power, or causal agency. A materialist realist will say that the world causes our impressions of it (the world is the agent, the mover) whereas our phenomenal experiences are pure effect (we are impotent, we are the moved). A social constructivist or suchlike will say that our concepts create our world (we are the agents) we are the cause and the world as it appears is the effect. They can be characterised as arguing over the direction of the flow of power across the Cartesian divide. Both Barad-Bohr and Nāgārjuna reject this inherent divide and thus the dilemma as to where to attribute the causal agency is resolved through being transcended.

<sup>216</sup> This last sentence may seem difficult to parse correctly. In what I take to be a deliberate ploy to destabilise our realist reading habits, Barad can sometimes take a playful approach to language. Here she is, I think, employing the dual meaning of ‘matter’ to express two sentiments. The first is that ‘we participate in enacting cuts that matter (i.e. that are meaningful)’. The second is that ‘matter (i.e. material processes) is enacted by the cuts that we participate in’. I will unpack this more below.

polarity of this view; that the cut we make determines the interacting agencies. However, it is difficult to accept the middle way 'between' these polarities: that the cut is enacted by the very agencies that the cut makes determinate. This difficulty comes from our dualistic assumption that a cause must be inherently distinct from, and inherently prior to, its effect. We should realise that this causal framework collapses along with ontological realism and epistemological dualism, and that Barad-Bohr's non-Cartesian framework radically recharacterises causation. It is Barad's view that:

Changing patterns of difference are neither pure cause nor pure effect; indeed, they are that which effects, or rather enacts, a causal structure, differentiating cause and effect. (*ibid*, p.137)

So, once the agential cut is enacted and the indeterminacy has been resolved, we can talk meaningfully of the causal efficacy of objective properties and objects. However, this is true without requiring the inherent, independent existence of a particular cause, or indeed of causality in general. The causality and objectivity we observe within the resolved indeterminacy are relative to the phenomenon of which it is a part. Note too that the sense of the cause being prior to the effect is also true-within-the-phenomena, despite both 'cause' and 'effect' being interdependently (i.e. *simultaneously*) originated.<sup>217</sup> We can therefore meaningfully say that the measured object *caused* the mark on the measuring apparatus, but we should keep in mind that this causality arises locally within the phenomenon in dependence upon the agential cut enacted by the intra-acting agencies. In other words, the causation is not inherently existent, but conventionally existent. A cause is not independently existent and distinct from its effect, but exists in mutual dependence upon its effect.

The similarities between Barad-Bohr's retention of objectivity and Nāgārjuna's two truths may not be immediately obvious. As discussed above, the Madhyamaka formulation of the non-duality of the two truths is a deconstructive response from within a particular cultural context in which 'the two truths' was an established epistemological framework. We should therefore not expect Barad-Bohr's deconstructive response to *their* indigenous dualistic epistemology to be articulated in the same terms. However, it is my view that Barad-Bohr's non-dual epistemological defence of objectivity is functionally equivalent to the way that Nāgārjuna's non-dual two truths defends a meaningful sense of conventional truth.

We can recall that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, the non-duality of the two truths resolves the tension experienced between the ultimately true *reality* and the merely

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<sup>217</sup> Indeed, for Barad, time itself is enacted intra-actively and is not an inherent feature of reality (*ibid* p.178).

conventionally true *appearance*. This is achieved through disrupting this polarity and showing the appearance-reality duality to be conventionally, rather than inherently, established. The ultimate truth about ultimate reality behind appearance turns out to be that there *is no* ultimate reality behind appearance, and so, in an important sense, the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. The meaning of ‘conventional truth’ then shifts as they are no longer set up in unfavourable opposition with ultimate truths. Given that context-independent truths are impossible, the context-dependent truth of conventional truths no longer marks them as ultimately false. Conventional truths are now the only kind of truths there are, and their groundedness in the context-insensitivity of *śūnyatā* ensures they are non-ultimately *true*. In their rejection of context-*independent* truths the Mādhyamikas avoid the extreme of dogmatic realism (that assumes there is an independently existing ultimate reality that grounds our true propositions). In their acceptance of one non-propositional context-*insensitive* truth they avoid the extreme of ‘postmodern’ relativism (that assumes our true propositions are entirely unrelated to the independently existing ultimate reality).

Similarly, Barad-Bohr’s formulation is a response to the tension between the objectively true reality (the way things really are) and the subjective appearances of that reality. It is precisely this tension that the measurement problem brings to the fore, and which Bohr realises can only be resolved through a radical revision of the epistemological assumptions underlying the subject-object duality. In the process it becomes apparent that the cherished objective truths that science seeks with such enthusiasm have been impossible all along. The meaning of ‘objective truth’ then shifts as it is no longer set up in *favourable* opposition to subjective ‘truth’. Objective truths are now implicated in an essential context-sensitivity.<sup>218</sup> In their rejection of measurement-independent objects and properties Barad-Bohr avoid the extreme of dogmatic realism (that assumes there is an independently existing ultimate reality that grounds our true propositions). In their defence of objectivity-within-phenomenon they avoid the extreme of ‘postmodern’ relativism (that assumes our true propositions are entirely unrelated to the independently existing ultimate reality) (*ibid*, p.138).

Despite their different articulations, I hope it is clear that the epistemological pictures that are presented by Nāgārjuna and Barad-Bohr are functionally equivalent. In each case there is a response to a rigidly dualistic system that bears a tension between secure, grounded, context-independent truths (that we ideologically strive towards) and flexible, ungrounded, context-sensitive ‘truths’ (that, in practice, we regrettably find ourselves employing). In each case

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<sup>218</sup> Importantly, the sense of ‘objective truth’ that is reclaimed after the collapse of dualism does not carry the same connotations and ontological commitment that ‘objective truth’ had before the collapse. This is not an inherent existence within-a-domain that the Madhyamaka Svātantrikas advocate or is found in a recent attempt to investigate parallels between quantum physics and Madhyamaka Buddhism (Paul, 2013).

this dualism is problematised and rejected. In each case a non-dual structure is presented in which a secure-yet-flexible and grounded-yet-context-sensitive truth is retained. Thus, in each case, a middle way between the extremes of dogmatism and relativism is found.

## Leaving the laboratory

As mentioned, Barad indicates certain limitations to Bohr's analysis, suggesting that he focussed a little too tightly on scientific practices. Barad extrapolates a more complete vision of this new epistemic and ontological framework. Barad's presentation is more nuanced and is, in my opinion, in an ever closer harmony with the Madhyamaka analysis. It is instructive and increasingly supportive to my project to see Bohr's formulation of the non-dual relationship between measured property and measuring apparatus extended to articulate the non-dual relations between world and worldviewer.

Barad points out that, in keeping his focus on the laboratory, Bohr retains a shade of an inherent divide between the scientific and the social (the non-scientific) (*ibid*, p.169). Bohr seem to take for granted the clinical separation that the laboratory conditions are suppose to provide, and in the process overlooks the fact that influences from outside the laboratory may (and in fact, demonstrably *do*) contribute to the measuring apparatus.<sup>219</sup> Barad's point is that Bohr's notion of 'apparatus' is too limited and has a premature and unaccounted-for boundary:

The logic of Bohr's own argument undercuts the conception of the apparatus as a static and bounded laboratory setup and the human as the set designer, interpreter, and spokesperson for the performance of nature. (*ibid*, p.161)

Barad follows the implications of Bohr's theory further than Bohr himself does, making the ontological implications fully explicit. If Bohr is right, then *no* boundary or division can be taken for granted as inherent. Just as we cannot discern an inherently given line between the measured and the measuring, we cannot allow ourselves to uncritically assume a line between the measuring apparatus and the wider context of its embodiment:

Apparatuses are not static laboratory setups but a dynamic set of open-ended practices, iteratively refined and reconfigured. (*ibid*, p.167)

We cannot take for granted, as Bohr seems to, the division between persons and the world. People are enmeshed in intra-active relationship as much as anything else. As Barad points out:

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<sup>219</sup> Barad outlines a fascinating historical example of how the apparatus of a particular experiment includes "class, nationalism, gender, and the politics of nationalism" (2007, p. 165 fig.15), not to mention a warm bed and a bad cigar (*ibid* p.161).

Determinately bounded and propertied human subjects do not exist prior to their 'involvement' in naturalcultural practice. (*ibid*, p.171)

*Everything* is implicated in dynamic intra-activity, not just quantum events and their measuring apparatuses. Barad extends the analysis so as not to be limited to microscopic physical properties being revealed to the quantum physicist in the laboratory, but to cover, quite generally, the sense of "part of the universe making itself intelligible to another part in its ongoing differentiating intelligibility and materialization" (*ibid*, p.176).

### **Barad's agential realism**

In Barad's extrapolation, rather than talking of the intra-action between objective properties and laboratory apparatus, she talks more generally of the intra-action of *matter* and *discursive practices*. The way she uses these terms and the relationship between them is important to understand. For Barad, 'matter':

does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing. A congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity. (*ibid*, p.151)<sup>220</sup>

'Discursive practices' are not simply language conventions but are:

specific material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted. (*ibid*, p.148)

Just as, for Bohr, there was no inherent division between the property measured and the measurement apparatus, for Barad:

Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather, *the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity* ... Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior... Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. (*ibid*, p.152)

It is important to Barad to distance herself from the subtle anthropocentrism of Bohr's account. She emphasises that her discursive practices are not human practices or even "anthropomorphic placeholders for projected agency of individual subjects" (*ibid*, p.149). Agential realism is a

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<sup>220</sup> Compare with Streng's 'radical becoming' (1967, p. 36).

*posthumanist* account that does not take for granted the boundary between human and non-human (*ibid*, p.136).<sup>221</sup> Barad is clear that:

Human bodies and human subjects do not pre-exist as such; nor are they mere end products. Humans are neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming. (*ibid*, p.150)

Similarly, Barad wishes to distance herself from the representationalist assumption that matter is in a “passive and blank slate” (*ibid*, p.150) waiting inertly to be labelled and categorised by the human subject. She emphasises that “the dynamics of intra-activity entail matter as an active ‘agent’ in its ongoing materialization” (*ibid*, p.151). As pointed out above, it is peculiar to a dualistic framework to debate over where the dominant agency lies. In Barad-Bohr’s non-dual account it is crucial to make it clear that both ‘sides’ of the agential cut are mutually implicated in the ongoing agential configuration of reality. Thus Barad articulates a middle way between dogmatic realism and ‘postmodern’ relativism, and presents a picture whereby we can:

take account of material constraints and conditions once again without reinscribing traditional empiricist assumptions about the transparent or immediate givenness of the world without falling into the analytical stalemate that simply calls for recognition of our mediated access to the world and then rests its case. (*ibid*, p.152)

Barad will often employ the dual meaning of ‘matter’ to capture the dependent origination of matter and meaning that arises from the agential resolution of semantic-ontic indeterminacy. Thus we can say that intra-actions *matter*, indicating the simultaneous and mutual establishment of *meaning* (what matters to the subject) and *physical substance* (the matter constituting the object). What *matters* is set by the intra-activity in which the material conditions and the discursive practices are mutually implicated. This in turn is implicated in the enactment of further phenomena:

Mattering is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences. (*ibid*, p.137)

In the context of a particular phenomenon, the indeterminacy is resolved by an agential cut and there are clearly defined discursive practices (apparatus) and clearly defined material processes (objective properties). However, lest we should reify these clearly defined elements, Barad points out that:

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<sup>221</sup> Indeed, Barad eschews all rigid boundaries and binaries: posthumanism “does not presuppose the separateness of any-‘thing’” and “does not take separateness to be an inherent feature of how the world is” and yet, just as we see in the Madhyamaka, “neither does it denigrate separateness as mere illusion” (Barad, 2007, p. 136).

The apparatuses of bodily production, which are themselves phenomena, are (also) part of the phenomena they produce: phenomena are forever being reenfolded and reformed. (*ibid*, p.177)

Thus Barad presents a “relational ontology” (*ibid*, p 139) where phenomena are the basic unit (relational ‘atoms’) (*ibid*, p.151) and the intra-activity of material-discursive practices enact an agential cut through which determinate boundaries are realised. Thus for Barad:

Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena. (*ibid*, p.140)

The fact that the indeterminacy is at once ontological and semantic, and that *matter* happens simultaneously through the agential cut, entails that this is a picture where *knowing is being*:

Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. (*ibid*, p.185).<sup>222</sup>

Indeed, Barad points out that these notions are best understood together and should never have been considered as separate:

The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. *Onto-epistem-ology* - the study of practices of knowing in being - is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that we need to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (*ibid*, p.185)

*Ontoepistemology* is another neologism of Barad’s (and one that we found expedient in the above articulation of the Madhyamaka).<sup>223</sup> We can, I think, appreciate that this is an alternative articulation of the non-duality of the two truths. Rather than wrestle with the difficulty of making

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<sup>222</sup> Again, compare with Streng’s: “knowledge and ‘becoming’ are coextensive; one becomes what he knows” (1967, p. 36). Interestingly, like Barad, Streng also finds it useful to recruit the equivocal meaning of an English word to capture the non-duality between ontology and epistemology. For Streng the word ‘realise’ is useful in this regard “in the sense that man can be said to ‘realise’ certain possibilities. He both ‘knows’ and ‘becomes’ the possibilities” (*ibid* p.38).

<sup>223</sup> Indeed, it is through this term that I was fortunate enough to stumble upon Barad’s work. When working on my presentation of the Madhyamaka I found myself unsatisfied with the assumed distinction between ontology and epistemology and found myself blending the terms into ‘ontoepistemology’. Googling the portmanteau I discovered Barad had already coined the term and, after further research, that her thinking was functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka (as one might expect given that they independently demanded the same neologism). I recount this here as anecdotal evidence for the independent suitability of the term to both Barad and Nāgārjuna and to detract from any charges of ‘wedging in’ Barad’s notion with respect to the Madhyamaka.

sense of the distinction and relationship between what truly *is* and what is truly *known*, it is understood that what exists *just is* that which is known.

### **Non-abrasive truth**

For Barad-Bohr, objective knowledge is made possible (despite the rejection of representationalism and inherent existence) through the change of referent for knowledge from independently existing objects to *phenomena*. Thus objective knowledge, or truth, is established in a meaningful and satisfying way, despite the lack of an inherently existing objective referent. 'Truth' in this system is not correspondence with the way things are in ultimate reality, and neither is it merely widespread consensus. Objectively true statements are secure and unambiguous enough to account for scientific repeatability and to counter relativism, yet their embeddedness within a particular material-discursive practice allows them to be flexible enough to avoid propositional hostility. In other words, as for Nāgārjuna, Barad-Bohr's true propositions are frictionless. For example, Bohr's epistemological framework arose from a need to make sense of the wave/particle duality in quantum physics, and the great virtue of Bohr's system is that it gives a satisfying account of this paradoxical result.

Within a traditional epistemological structure, the propositions 'light is a wave' and 'light is a particle' are clearly in conflict. A decision has to be made and the definitive conclusion reached. Unfortunately for the traditional realist the empirical facts defy a realist interpretation. There are experiments that prove beyond doubt that light is a wave, but there are also experiments that prove beyond doubt that light is constituted by particles (*ibid*, p.100). It seems like the question 'what is light really like?' has a paradoxical answer. However, Bohr's revised epistemological framework is able to supply a satisfying and empirically congruent explanation of what is going on. Bohr tells us that the question 'what is light really like?' is loaded with a mistaken metaphysical assumption that things are a certain way independent of our measurements. Bohr helps us realise that we do not need to decide which is the *actual* truth regarding the nature of light because there is no such thing as the 'actual' truth independent of our measurement apparatus. The empirical validity and objective truth of the experimental results are established through the intra-action of the light (the material processes) and the apparatus used in each case. So, like Nāgārjuna, Bohr will advise us that light *is* ('is' denoting 'inherently-is') neither particle nor wave, nor both nor neither. This is not because light inherently-is something else, but because the notion of 'inherently-is' is incoherent. What light 'is' depends upon how we are measuring 'it'. The objective truth of light's nature is not inherently fixed prior to the measurement, but is embedded in its intra-action with particular measurement apparatuses.

Thus, on Bohr's view, objectively true propositions are frictionless (or at least trivially non-hostile). The propositions 'light is a wave' and 'light is a particle' are not necessarily incompatible with each other, for they are incomplete. For Bohr, a statement of objective knowledge would have to include more information, such as 'under experimental conditions X, light is a wave'. This is not in conflict with 'under experimental conditions Y, light is a particle'. The conflict only arises when the objective truth of these statements is understood as being grounded in measurement-independent properties. When the condition of possibility for objective truth is understood as being exteriority-within-phenomena, rather than *inherent* exteriority, the apparent abrasiveness of true propositions disappears (*ibid*, p.198). The parallels with the Madhyamaka are clear; propositions are satisfyingly and non-trivially true despite not referring to inherent properties. Barad-Bohr's objective truths-within-phenomena are functionally equivalent to the frictionless conventional truth of the Madhyamaka.

## The soteriological dimension

Of course, as I have discussed above, there is an important soteriological effect associated with the Madhyamaka analysis. If my claim here is that agential realism is functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka, then I need to explain the apparent absence of this soteriological dimension in Barad's work. If agential realism is functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka and reveals śūnyatā and the non-duality of the two truths, and if śūnyatā is the crucial soteriological operator, then it would seem to follow that agential realists realise śūnyatā and attain enlightenment in the same way as Mādhyamikas purportedly do. This may seem absurd to claim that agential realists, despite their notable lack of soteriological discourse, nevertheless attain the reportedly profound and soteriologically transformative state of enlightenment. Surely Professor Barad would have made some comment had she unexpectedly achieved Buddhahood.

There is much to be unpacked and explored here, and I am quickly running out of the space required to do justice to an important and interesting line of discussion. I can only hope to offer a few sketches to show that there is no obvious obstacle to my thesis here. I will maintain that Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka and Barad's agential realism are functionally equivalent, even with respect to their soteriological implications, but that this need not entail the triumphalist absurdity of an accidental enlightenment achieved in the absence of a soteriological motivation. I hope to achieve this through making two brief points. Firstly, that simply subscribing to either the Madhyamaka or agential realism does not itself constitute enlightenment, and we can perhaps account for a soteriological advantage that Buddhists might have over quantum physicists without this being located in a functional difference between the Madhyamaka and agential realism.

Secondly, that under the recharacterisation of ‘soteriology’ that the Madhyamaka implies, we can discern a form of soteriological motivation in any truth-seeking project.

### From understanding to realisation

First of all, the comparison here is between agential realism and the Madhyamaka, *not* between quantum physics and Buddhism. Again I wish to distance my point here from any discourses regarding the ‘mystical’ implications of quantum physics. Like Barad (*ibid*, p.67), it is not my intention to contribute to this confused and misleading discussion. I do not mean to suggest that there is something about quantum physics that makes it innately soteriological, but rather that Barad’s agential realism reveals the empty conventional truth of quantum physics and thus creates the conditions for a realisation of śūnyatā from within that secular-scientific worldview. Therefore, the charge that I may seem vulnerable to is not that quantum physicists should all be enlightened, but that *agential realists* should all be enlightened.

This consequence does not follow from my claims, however. Not all agential realists are enlightened, and this is true for the same reason that not all Mādhyamikas are enlightened: it is one thing to understand and reflectively endorse the reality of śūnyatā and the non-duality of the two-truths, it is quite another to deeply and pre-reflectively embody such an attitude to the extent that no trace of the svabhāvic assumption remains.<sup>224</sup> In the former case we grasp śūnyatā and its implications, but not so thoroughly as to entirely disrupt the impulsive operation of the svabhāvic assumption; we still operate within the framework of inherent existence. I will say that we *understand* śūnyatā, yet we are ‘unrealised’ and ‘unenlightened’. In the latter case we accept śūnyatā and its implications so deeply that we bring about a complete cessation of the svabhāvic assumption; we do not operate within the framework of inherent existence in the least. I will say that we *realise* śūnyatā, and we are ‘realised’ and ‘enlightened’. I have not emphasised this distinction up until now, and have tended to use the term ‘Mādhyamika’ to refer to a ‘realised Mādhyamika’. I should clarify however that it is, of course, entirely and regrettably possible to be an unrealised Mādhyamika.

So, despite there being a soteriological advantage to understanding and reflectively endorsing śūnyatā, such an understanding does not constitute enlightenment. An unrealised agential realist will have ceased to reflectively endorse inherent existence and so (as discussed in Chapter 6) their

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<sup>224</sup> Although I am using a ‘Buddhist’ term (‘enlightenment’) to refer to the soteriological dimension of the realisation of the ultimate nature of reality, I hope to do so without political or triumphalist overtones. Again, I am being more deflationist than triumphalist. Using a Buddhist term does not mean that Buddhists have got it *right*, or got it *first*. Enlightenment is nothing about the content, but all about the effect. Thus the enlightened experience could be achieved and articulated without any need to employ Buddhist words or images. Śūnyatā will not be discovered with ‘© Siddhartha’ branded on its base.

worldview will be more conventionally true and so there will be a corresponding decrease in dis-ease and friction. Given Barad's emphasis on the ethical and axiological implication of agential realism, the moral developments that constitute this soteriological effect can be accommodated within an agential realist secular-scientific worldview.

It is an important aspect of Barad's conclusions that, just like Madhyamaka truth-seeking, agential realist truth-seeking yields a basis for our ethical intuitions:

An empirically accurate understanding of scientific practice, one that is consonant with the latest scientific research, strongly suggests a fundamental inseparability of epistemological, ontological and ethical considerations. (*ibid*, p.26)

Agential realism, like the Madhyamaka, is an axiological theory, as well as an ontological and epistemological theory. Agential realism opens up the possibility of an "ethico-onto-epistemology – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being" (*ibid*, p.185). It turns out that, just as there is an incoherence in being an immoral Madhyamaka, there is an incoherence in being an immoral agential realist.<sup>225</sup> For the agential realist there is an "ethical call ... embodied in the very worlding of the world" (*ibid*, p.160).

For the full soteriological effect of enlightenment, a progression from an *understanding* of śūnyatā to a *realisation* of śūnyatā must be enacted. It may be the case that the differences in structure between Buddhism and quantum physics give a Mādhyamika an advantage over an agential realist in this regard. The Mādhyamika and agential realist each find unorthodox success in their truth-seeking project through understanding the *emptiness* of their truth-seeking project. They each realise that there must be an important shift in the understanding of 'truth' and 'reality'. Yet, given that each truth-seeking project is undertaken from within a particular context or conceptual structure, the truth-seeking discourse of those particular contexts may continue to inform the subsequent truth-seeking behaviour of those that have understood emptiness from within that context. One difference in truth-seeking discourse between Buddhism and quantum physics at play here is the degree to which each tradition recognises an epistemic distinction between *understanding* and *realisation*.<sup>226</sup> Discourses suggesting that intellectual understanding is insufficient for bringing about the full soteriological effect of knowledge may be more readily found within Buddhist contexts than within the secular-scientific context. It would not be difficult to argue that the soteriological, introspective narratives found in Buddhist worldviews would

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<sup>225</sup> Of course, this 'incoherence' does not entail an 'impossibility'. Displaced or unaddressed cognitive dissonance is all too possible, and so in the absence of a realisation of śūnyatā there is nothing, beyond this internal incoherence and cognitive dissonance, stopping a Mādhyamika or an agential realist holding attitudes and values that would be considered immoral.

<sup>226</sup> I acknowledge that I am using 'Buddhism' and 'quantum physics' somewhat broadly, but these categorisations, however crude, will suffice for the purpose at hand.

more readily support the deepening, personal experience of śūnyatā than would the epistemological, extrospective narratives found in scientific worldviews. It is easier to imagine the agential realist physicist remaining content with their theoretical understanding of śūnyatā than it is to imagine the same behaviour in a Madhyamaka Buddhist.

Despite this difference, I think it is fair to say that agential realism makes a realisation of śūnyatā *possible* in exactly the same way that the Madhyamaka does, and so their functional equivalence holds even in terms of the soteriological implications. That Madhyamaka Buddhism encourages a realisation of śūnyatā in a way in which agential realist accounts of quantum physics may not, points to differences in the structures of *Buddhism* and *quantum physics*, and does not detract from the functional equivalence of the Madhyamaka and agential realism.

### Accidental enlightenment

Even if we can be reassured that a soteriologically efficacious agential realism *can* emerge from a secular-scientific worldview, it may nevertheless seem absurd and triumphalist to suggest that an agential realist *accidentally* achieves that which the Mādhyamika deliberately sets out to achieve. Can it be credibly maintained that, even without a soteriological motivation, the agential realist achieves the esteemed soteriological effect cherished by generations of Madhyamaka Buddhists? We should note however, that framing a concern in such terms overlooks the context-insensitivity of the criterion by which I consider the two analyses functionally equivalent. As I hope to have made clear, both analyses offer the same context-insensitive resolution (śūnyatā) to the same context-insensitive problem (svabhāva).<sup>227</sup> Therefore, we should be able to formulate a context-insensitive motivation that accounts for the emergence of the Madhyamaka and agential realism from their respective contexts.

I think we can say that both Nāgārjuna and Barad are motivated by a functionally equivalent desire to resolve philosophical incoherence and cognitive dissonance found within their respective traditions; the epistemaxiological impulse ‘something is not right here’ generates a restless integrity that seeks resolution through embarking upon a truth-seeking project. Notably,

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<sup>227</sup> There is nothing to similarity beyond functional equivalence, and so ‘same’ here should be understood as ‘functionally equivalent’. Of course, Barad does not claim to be refuting svabhāva (presumably, having never considered the term ‘svabhāva’). Similarly, Nāgārjuna does not claim to be offering a philosophical solution to the measurement problem in quantum physics (presumably, having never considered such a problem). Despite the different culturally located expressions, the mistaken assumption that is targeted by each analysis is functionally equivalent and thus ‘the same’. The difficulty here is that there is no ‘neutral’, culturally *dis*-located, way of expressing or even thinking about this common mistaken assumption. It is *not* that case that both articulations are each culturally located interpretations of the same, uninterpreted (or uninterpretable) thing. In order to articulate these points I must choose and adopt some form of discourse. If I privilege Madhyamaka forms of discourse over agential realist forms, it is not because I consider them more *true*, but merely more *familiar*.

however, Nāgārjuna and Barad both distinguish themselves from their respective peers by making the crucial realisation that the assumed dualistic and realist structure of reality cannot withstand critical analysis. Unsatisfied with the traditional assumptions regarding the possibility of absolute truth, they each make the important reflexive step of turning their truth-seeking projects into interrogations of truth itself. In doing so they overcome the limited and limiting influence of their truth-seeking context and allow their investigations to become *unbiased*. This cessation of bias is a non-affirming negation and thus is context-insensitive; the good result of this cessation is the ‘same’ regardless of the context.<sup>228</sup> Thus the Madhyamaka and agential realism emerge as the result of alternative biased and context-sensitive truth-seeking projects each culminating in an *unbiased* (and thus context-*insensitive*) critique of inherent existence and absolute truth. Each of these instigating context-sensitive truth-seeking projects are therefore functionally equivalent in that they each lead to an understanding of the context-insensitive ultimate truth of *śūnyatā*.

Despite their functional equivalence, the way in which these truth-seeking projects will be *framed* and *articulated* depends, of course, upon the particular context. In Buddhist contexts, we may see the motives and goals of truth-seeking framed principally in soteriological terms. While in secular-scientific contexts they are perhaps framed principally in ontological terms.<sup>229</sup> That functionally equivalent concerns and resolutions are articulated in different terms from within different contexts should not surprise us; positively constructed articulations must be formed in context-sensitive terms. Nevertheless, I feel that there is space for a context-insensitive sense of truth-seeking; the deeply felt intuition that understanding the truth of reality is important, worthwhile, and an innate good. Couched in negative terms (the reduction of confusion, the cessation of ignorance), such a project loses its constructive connotations and becomes suitable as a universal, context-insensitive operator.

Furthermore, if we take *biased* truth-seeking to be a necessary precondition for *unbiased* truth-seeking, and if we link truth-seeking to the impulse to painlessness, then there is an important sense in which *all* truth-seeking projects *are* soteriological (regardless of their

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<sup>228</sup> As discussed above (see p.126), by ‘unbiased’ I do not mean the absence of conditioning, but rather a shift in the attitude towards our conditioning. Thus the unbiased Madhyamaka Buddhist and the unbiased agential realist physicist are similar in their attitude towards the content of their worldviews, without necessarily having similar content.

<sup>229</sup> Although, of course, this distinction between soteriological and ontological concerns does not have a fixed currency across contexts. Indeed, the soteriological character of Buddhist truth-seeking would only be understood as being in contrast with the ‘sober’ and ‘rational’ character of secular-scientific truth-seeking from within a context where religious and philosophical concerns have been “prised apart as distinct and independent cultural practices” (Garfield, 2002, p. 257). While such a separation has been in effect in Western philosophy and science since the European Enlightenment (*ibid* p.256), it useful to keep in mind that in the Buddhist context religion and philosophy are “connected parts of a seamless cultural artefact” (*ibid* p.257).

context).<sup>230</sup> Granted, it is only when the truth-seeking becomes unbiased that the soteriological effect becomes possible, so I do not mean to imply that all truth-seeking projects are soteriologically *successful*. Nevertheless, we can say that, to the extent to which they are instigated by the impulse to painlessness, all truth-seeking projects are soteriologically *motivated*.<sup>231</sup> We can also consider that, unless prematurely terminated through an unacknowledged dogmatism (as we see in Murti and Heisenberg for example), biased truth-seeking should ideally culminate in unbiased truth-seeking.<sup>232</sup> As the incoherencies of the svabhāvic assumption become harder to displace, a rigorous and exhaustive analysis should eventually take a reflexive turn and interrogate the subtle svabhāvic presuppositions that inform and direct that very truth-seeking project; truth-seeking will eventually find that there is no truth to seek.<sup>233</sup> Thus I find it meaningful to describe all truth-seeking projects as ‘soteriological’ in as much as they seek to reduce and eliminate dis-ease through the removal of mistaken views, and, if maintained rigorously to their radical conclusion, they will succeed in eliminating the source of dis-ease (svabhāva) through gaining insight into śūnyatā.

While recognising that much more can be said on these points, I hope to have shown that the absence of traditionally recognisable ‘soteriological’ discourses in agential realism is not an obvious obstacle to my argument that agential realism is functionally equivalent to the Madhyamaka.

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<sup>230</sup> This ‘impulse to painlessness’ is discussed and defended above (see p.177).

<sup>231</sup> In support of these claims we can note that regardless of context it is typically taken for granted that truth-seeking is a good in itself. Even in the most aggressively scientifically-secular contexts the notion that living in accordance with the truth *is* good and *feels* good is emphasised. It is, for example, an important part of Richard Dawkins’ new atheist project to (quite correctly) reassure his audience that religious discourses do not have privileged access to wonder, awe, majesty and ethical compulsion. Interestingly, Dawkins also seems to recognise the epistemaxiological impulse to truth-seeking: “I think there is a curious desire in humans, maybe not all humans, but certainly in me, to put things right” (quoted in *the Guardian*, 9th June 2015).

<sup>232</sup> Of course, I do not mean to suggest that this is an easy or automatic process; the svabhāvic assumption runs deep and can easily become implicated in vicious cycles of self-reinforcement. The degree of rigour and open-mindedness required to notice and surrender the svabhāvic assumption makes such realisations rare. Nevertheless, it is important that the simplicity of cessation is kept in mind. If we have ever tried to give up a bad habit we can appreciate that stopping impulsive and unnecessary behaviour is necessarily *simple*, but rarely *easy*.

<sup>233</sup> Ken Wilbur (2001) argues that this is precisely the experience of some of the great exponents of the ‘new physics’. The results of quantum experiments revealed to them the limits of reason, and so their ongoing investigations led them to become mystics (*ibid* p.9). Their truth-seeking switched to an alternative and intuitive form of investigation and to matters of the Spirit (*ibid* p.8). While I do not agree with Wilbur’s seemingly rigid binary between (the ultimate falsity of) mediated knowledge and (the ultimate truth of) unmediated knowledge (*ibid* p.6), or his vestigial dualism between ontology and epistemology such that ‘public’ realities are *available to* (rather than *intra-actively established by*) suitably trained truth-seekers (*ibid* p.18), his curation of the mystical writings of these physicists does support my suggestion that rigorous and open-minded truth-seeking from within the context of scientific-secular worldviews will yield soteriological fruits.

## Conclusion

In this brief presentation of Barad's agential realism I hope to have made it sufficiently clear that, like Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, it captures the realist intuition that there is an objective ground that we, the subject, are in meaningful and productive relationship with, yet it does so without the metaphysical excess of an inherently existing ultimate reality. Like Nāgārjuna, Barad presents a view in which apparently dichotomous polarities are rendered harmonious: despite their lack of objective existence, things are not merely subjective projections; despite enjoying a reassuring form of exteriority and continuity, existing things are not independently or inherently existent; despite the cultural constructedness of our world and the impossibility of a non-conceptual articulation of it, we are not plunged into relativism.

In drawing attention to the equivalence of the Madhyamaka and agential realism, my intention has been to gain support for my thesis that śūnyatā is a universal truth, accessible from within any worldview, and is not a uniquely Buddhist construct. I have achieved this, I hope, through arguing that śūnyatā has been articulated and defended from within a secular-scientific context. We have seen that Barad independently corroborates Nāgārjuna's insight that there is no realm of ultimate reality behind or beyond our experienced reality. Furthermore they agree that despite this apparent loss, we are not lumbered with a nihilist stance towards meaning and being; we do not need inherent existence to account for objective knowledge of semantically and ontologically determinate things.

Again, it should be emphasised that I am not interested in arguing for propositional similarities between quantum physics and Madhyamaka Buddhism. Similarly, I am not claiming to have found 'scientific proof' of any Buddhist tradition or proposition. In my view, the Madhyamaka is not Buddhist, agential realism is not scientific, and *neither* are propositional. My argument is that agential realism (which arose from within a scientific-epistemological context) and the Madhyamaka (which arose from within a Buddhist-soteriological context) are similar in their articulation of a non-dual ontoepistemological structure of reality. *Neither* are in the business of offering views of reality, but *both* offer an *analysis of* views of reality (Barad, 2007, p. 230). It has been my project to show that the results of these independent analyses are functionally equivalent. Thus, the truth of the Madhyamaka insight into śūnyatā has been independently corroborated from within a secular-scientific context. Similarly, the truth of the agential realist insight into a semantic-ontic indeterminacy resolved through agential intra-activity has been independently corroborated from within a Buddhist context.

## Chapter 9 – Conclusions and Opportunities

The purpose of this thesis has been to help the Madhyamaka speak to the West. I am by no means the first to attempt this, and so I began through critiquing those existing interpretative projects which seek to give a voice to the Madhyamaka. In particular I addressed those cases in which the Madhyamaka is represented as nihilism or as absolutism (or as some non-metaphysical alternative). A pattern was discerned where, despite understanding and accepting Nāgārjuna's arguments, the deep ontic and epistemic repercussion of these arguments were overlooked. I attempted to draw attention to those occasions where, due to this oversight, the svabhāvic assumption survived the application of the Madhyamaka analysis. I hope to have shown that this behaviour is evidenced in a residual commitment to binary thinking and the polarised opposition of concepts. The ontic and epistemic presuppositions that generate such bivalence are the very presuppositions exposed and critiqued by the Madhyamaka analysis. Working uncritically within the svabhāvically loaded frameworks of ontological realism and the correspondence theory of truth, generates tension and incoherencies in such interpretations of the Madhyamaka. Interpreting Nāgārjuna as *completing* the ontological project rather than *critiquing* the ontological project leads inevitably to either the extreme of nihilism or the extreme of absolutism. Throughout my analysis I have emphasised that when the Madhyamaka message is presented in terms of these svabhāvic structures it is necessarily misrepresented.

I also argued that the more contemporary, non-metaphysical interpretations (such as Siderits' semantic non-dualism), do not successfully eradicate the influence of the svabhāvic assumption. Indeed, to the extent to which they are constructed in bivalent tension with metaphysical interpretations, we can immediately discern a rigid and problematic binary in play. Despite a willingness to give up the svabhāvic frameworks that informed earlier interpretations and to present the Madhyamaka as neither absolutist nor nihilist, the residual influence of those structures is discernible. In particular, I demonstrated how polarised thinking around the nature of the two truths wrecks the soteriological mechanism of the Madhyamaka analysis. There is a grave risk of such interpretations abandoning any contrast between conventional and ultimate truth, and so 'leaving everything as it is'. In their wish to avoid absolutist implications, such interpretations have the Madhyamaka address truth and meaning *rather than* metaphysics and ontology. In my view, however, the Madhyamaka does not remain silent with respect to metaphysical reality nor does she offer an alternative view of metaphysical reality. The middle way opens up a hitherto unforeseen alternative to resolve metaphysical quandaries through critiquing the realist presuppositions embedded within them. The Madhyamaka neither does metaphysics nor avoids doing metaphysics, but *undoes* metaphysics.

The purpose in performing a Madhyamaka critique of these interpretations of the Madhyamaka was to communicate the Madhyamaka message. This was achieved, I hope, in two ways: indirectly and directly. The Madhyamaka message was communicated *indirectly* by showing what the Madhyamaka is *not* through exposing traces of bivalence and internal incoherence in alternative interpretations of the Madhyamaka. The Madhyamaka message was communicated *directly* by enacting the Madhyamaka effect. That is, through exposing the svabhāvic assumption in some worldview, tracing internal incoherence and dis-ease to that assumption and demonstrating how svabhāva is both impossible and unnecessary. It is important to note that neither the direct nor the indirect communication of the Madhyamaka message involves volunteering an autonomously constructed interpretation of the Madhyamaka. This is quite deliberate, as, in my view, such a thing is impossible. Indeed, while showing that these particular representations of the Madhyamaka are misrepresentations of the Madhyamaka, I have been at pains to illuminate a more general and more pressing point: that the Madhyamaka is misrepresented when it is represented *at all*.

The Madhyamaka is an *effect*. It is the transformative insight into śūnyatā that comes from realising the impossibility and unnecessariness of *the very svabhāva that we were previously committed to*. As this effect only makes sense in contexts where there is a predisposition towards svabhāva, it follows that this effect cannot be generated in a vacuum. The Madhyamaka analysis must be with respect to some svabhāvic worldview. Indeed, if there were no svabhāvic assumption, there would be no Madhyamaka, as the Madhyamaka is just that which refutes svabhāva and so ‘reveals’ śūnyatā. On its own it is nothing, in the sense that there is no meaning to ‘on its own’. There *is no* ‘on its own’, no *ab solus*, no absolute. Although śūnyatā is context-insensitive, the Madhyamaka analysis is necessarily context-sensitive. It will always be a bespoke response to the particular context in which the svabhāvic assumption is found. Indeed, the transformative power of the Madhyamaka lies precisely in its independence from any particular context. To attempt to volunteer a positively and autonomously constructed presentation of the Madhyamaka is to overlook or suppress this crucial context-sensitivity, and thus to obscure the transformative power of the Madhyamaka analysis.

Through emphasising the context-sensitivity of the propositional content of the Madhyamaka and the central importance of the context-insensitive *effect* of those contents, I hope to have opened up an alternative domain of interpretative discourse for those interested in propagating the Madhyamaka message. The important question is not ‘how can we best interpret and present the Madhyamaka content?’ but ‘how can we best enact the Madhyamaka effect?’ This shift to soteriological effect over hermeneutical content is both an example of the Madhyamaka having spoken to the West, and the condition of possibility for it to continue to speak to the West. It is

my hope, then, that this thesis contributes to the same soteriological project in which Nāgārjuna was engaged. In this sense I hope that this thesis is a 'good representation' of the Madhyamaka; not a repetition of 'the' Madhyamaka content, but a replication of the Madhyamaka effect.

### **Timelessness and frictionlessness**

Drawing out the implications of the context-sensitivity of the Madhyamaka analysis, I argued that, from the Madhyamaka point of view, true propositions are frictionless rather than abrasive. Furthermore, I demonstrated that it is only when true propositions are understood as frictionless, that meaningful engagement between alternative worldviews is possible. In the context of the ongoing engagement of Buddhism with science, I argued that the Madhyamaka Buddhist is justified in sensing a lack of conflict with respect to science, but that this is not due to a fanciful correspondence between the propositional content of Buddhism and science, but rather is due to the frictionlessness of the Mādhyamika's propositions.

Furthermore, through emphasising the context-insensitivity of śūnyatā, I drew attention to the timeless relevance of the Madhyamaka analysis and the ongoing possibility of the soteriologically satisfying realisation of śūnyatā. Madhyamaka Buddhists, therefore, are also justified in feeling a timeless authority associated with their tradition. They are mistaken, however, if they take this authority to be carried by any propositional content, as the only timeless truth is the non-propositional truth of śūnyatā. Indeed, given its non-propositional and context-insensitive character, there is no sense in including śūnyatā as a constitutive part of any tradition. Whether or not a worldview is a Madhyamaka worldview depends, not on its content, but upon how that content is held. Therefore, while it may well be the case that some Buddhist traditions adopt the Madhyamaka attitude and recognise the ultimate truth of śūnyatā, śūnyatā is *not a construct of that tradition*. There is necessarily no necessary connection between the propositional content of that tradition and the non-propositional truth of śūnyatā. The tradition may well contain a context-sensitive and positively formulated means of *achieving* the realisation of śūnyatā, but this is beside the point. Śūnyatā itself is necessarily non-propositional and context-insensitive, and it is therefore incoherent, misleading, and ultimately self-defeating to claim śūnyatā for one's own tradition.

It is, therefore, a substantive conclusion of this thesis that apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism must make a clear distinction between their Buddhism and their Madhyamaka attitude towards that Buddhism. There are therefore two distinct apologetic projects being attempted: the introduction of a Buddhist worldview to the West and the introduction of the Madhyamaka analysis to the West. Although both projects are worthwhile and important in their own way,

apologists who do not recognise or sufficiently emphasise the distinction between them undermine their ability to achieve *either*. If the conventional truths of Buddhism are presented as ultimate truths, a subtle incoherence is introduced which obscures the timeless relevance of ultimate truth and the frictionless applicability of conventional truths. Although I have not had the time to discuss this point as deeply as I would like, in Chapter 6 I touched briefly upon possible reasons why Madhyamaka Buddhists may, with compassionate intent and in the name of skilful means, deliberately slur the distinction between these two projects and encourage the exclusive association of ultimate truth with (their particular form of) Buddhism. While these skilful means may bring good results in a pedagogical context, I hope to have shown that these incoherencies may be significant stumbling blocks in the reception of Madhyamaka Buddhism by the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. So we must ask, does the strategy of skilful means make the Madhyamaka more or less accessible to the contemporary West? Does the subtle philosophical incoherence introduced through its association with traditional Buddhism deny, or merely delay, the Madhyamaka's acceptance in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition? Will the Madhyamaka be able to speak clearly to the West *without* the philosophical endorsement of the academic establishment? These are important questions but there is no space here to attempt to address them. Suffice to say that this tension in the conversation between Madhyamaka Buddhism and the West needs to be clearly understood in order to make sense of its trajectory up until now, and to help define it's trajectory in the future. It is my view that, if they wish to enact their compassionate motivation to bring about its soteriological effect, Buddhist apologists for the Madhyamaka should be ready and willing to surrender the putative authority of their Buddhist propositions.

### **Pluralistic opportunities**

This conclusion is to be welcomed for the interesting pluralistic possibilities that it opens up. In my explication of frictionless co-operation (in Chapter 6), I feel I have begun the epistemic and axiological groundwork for a viable 'worldview pluralism'.<sup>234</sup> Given that Madhyamaka worldviews engage in a mode of frictionless co-operation, and given that any worldview can become a Madhyamaka worldview, then through the application of the Madhyamaka analysis alternative worldviews can harmoniously abide in frictionless co-operation. Within the Madhyamaka ontoepistemological framework, apparently mutually incompatible worldviews can each be equivalently and meaningfully true. Any semantic incompatibility of the propositional content

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<sup>234</sup> While theories of religious pluralism seek to resolve the problem of religious diversity, worldview pluralism improves upon this through critiquing the assumed distinction between religious and non-religious worldviews (just what the supposed distinction *is* is for those who endorse it to spell out), and attempting to resolve the more fundamental problem of worldview diversity.

does not entail an ontic incompatibility, as the truth of true propositions is not grounded in ontological reality. True propositions are conventional truths and thus non-abrasive.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 7, this frictionlessness is achieved without falling into ethical or epistemic relativism. I hope to have shown that the Madhyamaka offers a middle way between ungrounded relativism and realist dogmatism. By foregrounding the context-insensitivity of śūnyatā and the non-dual relationship between the two truths, I have shown how true propositions are constrained by the nature of reality without corresponding to the contents of reality. Conventional truths are true with respect to their context and true with respect to śūnyatā. Therefore, while all worldviews are empty, not all worldviews will survive the realisation of their own emptiness. I argued that those worldviews that survive are morally praiseworthy worldviews, and those that do not are morally questionable ones. Indeed, from the Madhyamaka point of view, our moral intuitions are justified by and grounded in the ultimate nature of reality. The Madhyamaka analysis offers a satisfying and universal (although not absolute) answer to the question of *what* is good, and *why*. Thus ethical and epistemic relativism are avoided without the need to employ the bankrupt and abrasive notion of absolute truth.

I recognise that much more work is required to defend and unpack these points and to generate a fully formed theory of worldview pluralism. In particular, perhaps, to allay concerns that may be felt regarding the applicability of the Madhyamaka analysis to non-Buddhist worldviews. It may be thought that an 'atheistic' ultimate truth would be incompatible with a 'theistic' worldview (although, of course, with their exotic pantheon of divine beings, many forms of Buddhism would seem to qualify as 'theistic' worldviews). It may also be thought that a 'mystical' ultimate truth would be incompatible with a 'rational' worldview (although, of course, with their emphasis on debate and reasoned arguments many forms of Buddhism would seem to qualify as 'rational' worldviews).<sup>235</sup> These concerns can be addressed (on a philosophical level at least) without too much difficulty, but to do so would be outwith the scope of this thesis. Suffice to say, perhaps, that understanding ultimate truth as non-propositional and context-insensitive should reassure us that śūnyatā is neither theistic nor atheistic, neither rational nor mystical. It is crucial to appreciate that applying the Madhyamaka analysis to a non-Buddhist worldview does not somehow make it more 'Buddhist'. Again, the association of the Madhyamaka analysis with Madhyamaka Buddhism is understandable, but also problematic if it threatens the apolitical and context-insensitive credentials of śūnyatā.

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<sup>235</sup> Again, just what these 'opposing' concepts might refer to, and the nature of their opposition, is for the concerned parties to spell out. By using these examples I do not mean to endorse the independent existence of these concepts or the putative tension between them. I am merely trying to imagine what difficulties others might see; I do not see these difficulties myself.

Another, related opportunity arises from my analysis of truth-seeking. In Chapter 8, I enacted a comparative analysis of the Madhyamaka and agential realism, and I was able to show that, despite arising from within a secular-scientific context, Barad-Bohr's truth-seeking project results in the exposure and critique of the svabhāvic assumption and therefore articulates the universal truth of śūnyatā. Indeed, I went on to argue that all truth-seeking projects, in as much as they are motivated by the epistemaxiological impulse to painlessness, are soteriologically motivated and will, in the absence of dogmatic resistance, yield insight into the universal truth of śūnyatā. This result opens up interesting theoretical opportunities and could be, I hope, expanded and developed into some form of 'common core' theory of truth-seeking.

Again, the context-insensitivity of the ultimate truth would give such a theory an advantage over the forms of common core theory found in the philosophy of mysticism. Briefly stated, the problems that thinkers like Katz (1978) and Burton (2001, p. 64) have with such theories is that they cannot countenance a non-conceptual/non-conditioned/non-propositional experience that is in any way meaningful or informative as to reality. Thus, if the ultimate truth is meaningful, it must be conceptual and thus context-sensitive (and this would seem to forbid any commonality of ultimate truth across contexts). On the other hand, if the ultimate truth is to be context-insensitive (which would seem to be required for a common core theory to get off the ground), it must be non-conceptual and thus meaningless. This tension only holds, however, under the auspices of the ontological project. With such realist presuppositions in place, the only way for ultimate truth to be insensitive to conceptual context is for it to be somehow behind or beyond that conceptual context (and thus *unknowable*). In other words, the svabhāvic assumption forces context-*insensitivity* to imply context-*independence*. With the Madhyamaka understanding of the non-duality of the two truths, however, we can appreciate that ultimate truth is context-insensitive and yet context-dependent. As I have argued above (see p.43), under such conditions it becomes possible to make sense of an informative yet non-propositional truth accessible from within any propositional context.

From the Madhyamaka point of view, all truth-seeking projects find their resolution in śūnyatā. Not because they are coincidentally creeping towards the same wonderful state, but because they are gradually eroding the same woeful mistake. With truth-seeking understood as a process of negation, then the claim that needs substantiated is not so much that all truth-seeking projects result in śūnyatā, but that all truth-seeking projects are predicated upon the svabhāvic assumption. I certainly do not claim to have satisfactorily addressed this point, but I do hope to have instigated a profitable line of discussion, and I am optimistic as to the results of a fuller analysis. It is my view that the epistemaxiological impulse to painlessness is only felt when one is

ignorant of the ultimate truth of śūnyatā.<sup>236</sup> As discussed above (see p.177) the dis-ease that motivates the impulse to painlessness arises from the operation of the svabhāvic assumption. The impulsive reification turns functional distinctions into abrasive and isolating divisions and creates confusion and longing through impossible promises of permanence. Thus, the motivating intuition that ‘something is not right here’ will only be felt in the presence of the svabhāvic assumption and, if all truth-seeking projects are instigated by that epistemaxiological impulse, then it follows that all truth-seeking projects are predicated upon the svabhāvic assumption. In other words, truth-seeking is only undertaken by those who feel separate from truth and, as ultimate truth is always already immanent, the only thing that can account for a sense of separateness is the misrepresentation of reality generated by the svabhāvic assumption. Again, much more can and should be said on these points, but for now I hope it is clear that there are interesting and profitable opportunities opened up through the Madhyamaka analysis.

It is my hope, therefore, that at least one consequence of the Madhyamaka speaking to the West is the possibility of a compassionate and intelligent worldview pluralism. The many problems of worldview diversity can be solved through realising the non-duality of the two truths, whereby the multitudes of cherished conventional truths that frictionlessly co-operate with each other, are each non-dual with the universal ultimate truth. This is a truly pluralistic result, rather than a crypto-inclusivist one, as the universal ultimate truth is shown to be the final result of all truth-seeking projects and not a Buddhist construct.

## Conclusion

Although I have produced many words here, the Madhyamaka message is indeed voiceless as it is constituted by a non-affirming negation: simply śūnyatā. The positively formulated utterances of a Mādhyamika are not themselves the Madhyamaka message, and they are not articulations of how reality truly is. These vocalisations are employed in the hope of effecting change in those who hear them. This effect is produced by drawing their attention to their own svabhāvic assumption in order to demonstrate its impossibility, while offering reassurances that it is unnecessary. Despite having to be performed ‘out loud’, such performances are only to assist in the cessation of svabhāva, and so indirectly communicate the voiceless message of śūnyatā. As Shantideva is said to have said, towards the end of his Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life:

Buddha taught all the method practices explained above to enable us to complete the training in wisdom realising emptiness. (Shantideva, 2002, p. 147).

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<sup>236</sup> I use ‘ignorant’ rather than ‘unaware’, not to bring in pejorative connotations, but to emphasise the fact that the svabhāvic assumption is an unwelcome presence, rather than an unfortunate absence.

From this point of view, all the many Madhyamaka voices that have been heard are only to silence svabhāva in order to enjoy the sound of śūnyatā. The Madhyamaka message is not so much a finger pointing to the moon, as a finger to the lips in a voiceless gesture of cessation.

This point, I think, runs deeper than that which is suggested by the parable of Buddha's raft or Wittgenstein's ladder. These metaphors are useful and evocative, but have their limitations in that they each seem to speak of a valuable (albeit temporary) construction. There is a risk of a subtle misunderstanding here as, from the point of view of the Madhyamaka, there is no boat and there is no ladder. There is no valuable construction that is useful for a time but becomes useless. Rather, the Madhyamaka is a valuable *deconstruction* that manifests only in dependence upon the very problem which it seeks to eliminate. Indeed, we need no ladder as we are not striving to climb *up* but rather to climb *down*. We are climbing down from the unexamined assertions of the svabhāvic assumption; we are getting off our svabhāvic soapbox. Similarly, we need no raft as we are not trying to cross the ocean of saṃsāra, rather we have stopped struggling and started floating; we are perfectly buoyant without the weight of inherent existence dragging us down.

The value that the Madhyamaka brings is its ability to bring about a cessation of something painful and unnecessary that is already in effect. One of my Buddhist teachers used to say that attachment to saṃsāra is like holding on to a red-hot iron bar; despite receiving advice that we should release our grasp, we respond through gripping on evermore tightly. Like the gesture of dropping the iron bar, the truth-seeking gesture should be one of openness and release. For the Madhyamaka to speak to the West it is important that the philosophical and hermeneutical approach to the Madhyamaka message be carried out with that same attitude of openness and release. Rather than trying to capture, pin down and preserve Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, we would do better to let it fly, let it live and interact (or *intra-act*) in the contemporary context. Crucially, should they wish their Madhyamaka message to be heard, apologists for Madhyamaka Buddhism must be willing to release their grasping at their Buddhist conventional truths. The rungs of the ladder could turn out to be the red-hot iron bars. The raft could turn out to be the burning house of saṃsāra.

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