Topoi (2013) 32:129–134
DOI 10.1007/s11245-013-9150-6

Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā*

Graham Priest

Published online: 25 January 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2013

This is a difficult, challenging, and profound book.[1] According to many philosophical traditions and schools of thought, reality has a fundamental ground or grounds. Other things depend on the ground(s) in some way for whatever form of being they have. Nāgārjuna attacks this view and explores the consequences of its rejection, notably with respect to Buddhist soteriology.

Readers will find this book hard for several reasons. First, it is written in verse form. The tradition from which Nāgārjuna comes is largely an oral tradition. In this tradition, things are often written in poetry, so that the rhythm and verse make it easier for students to memorize. When teaching, recitations of the verses (*kārikā* = verse) are accompanied by a philosophical commentary by the teacher, explaining the points being made in detail. In some texts of this kind, the author's commentary is available. In the case of the *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā* (hereafter, MMK) it is not. This is a great pity. It would surely have made many things clearer. Without it, a good deal of philosophical reconstruction is required, and this is bound to be contentious. The matter is not dissimilar to that which arises when reading Ancient Greek philosophy written in verse, such as Heraklitus or Parmenides (though at least we have the whole text in the present case).

G. Priest (✉)
Departments of Philosophy, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: g.priest@unimelb.edu.au

G. Priest
University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

G. Priest
Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, NY, USA

The second reason that readers will find this a difficult text is that, like Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, many of the things said are in the mouths of interlocutors and opponents, but this is not flagged explicitly. If one is not reasonably clear about which words belong to envisaged interlocutors, one will be entirely confused. As in the case of Wittgenstein, one has to have a rough sense of what is going on before one can judge which words are those of interlocutors. Like Wittgenstein, too, Nāgārjuna does not identify his opponents. So one also has to make intelligent guesses about this.

A third reason why readers, at least Western readers, will find this text difficult is that they have to read it in translation from the original Sanskrit, or the reasonably dependable Tibetan translations. (Translations from the Chinese translations are more problematic—in both directions, because of the quite different grammatical structure of the language.) Good translation always requires an element of interpretation. And the more difficult the text, the more scope there is for legitimate disagreements of interpretation. Hence, one may find radically different translations of some verses. Readers who cannot read in Sanskrit or Tibetan are advised to find translations by good philosophers with appropriate linguistic skills,[2] compare translations, and, to the extent possible, understand why the translators have made the choices they have. Of course, to evaluate these, one has to understand the text to a certain extent. We are again thrown into Gadamer's hermeneutic circle—at the deep end.

[1] There are several English translations. Three notable ones are: D. J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā*: *the Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991; J. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995; M. Siderits and S. Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, to appear.

[2] The three cited above are of this kind.

A fourth reason why readers, at least Western readers, will find this text hard is that it is written from within a Buddhist tradition. This does not mean that the text appeals without argument to Buddhist views (though it does this when discussing soteriological implications). But it does mean that it is necessary to understand some of the relevant aspects of the culture in which the philosophy is produced (the allusions, things that are standardly taken for granted, etc.) if one is to understand the philosophical argument. In that way, of course, it is no different from Medieval Western philosophy, with its cultural and religious embedding; or from the situation in which Asian Buddhist philosophers find themselves when engaging with Western philosophy. (One particularly important part of the context is provided by the sūtras (canonical texts) on which Nāgārjuna is drawing, in particular a bunch of sūtras called the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*.)

I will divide the rest of the review into two main parts. The first concerns what Nāgārjuna is against. The second concerns what he is for.

What Nāgārjuna is against is relatively clear. In many traditions, there is a fundamental level of reality. The thing or things in this is/are what they are in and of themselves. (The Sanskrit word actually used by Nāgārjuna is '*svabhāva*', a difficult word to translate. Literally, it means 'self-being' or 'self-nature'.) Everything else has its being in virtue of ontological dependence on the fundamental level.

Thus, in the Buddhist tradition against which Nāgārjuna is reacting, reality is ultimately made of ontological atoms (*dharmas*), and everything else (the objects of our familiar reality) are conceptual constructions out of these. But the picture is to be found in orthodox Christian theology, where God is the only independent being, and everything else is sustained by Him. It is found also in Leibniz, where reality is ultimately made up of monads, and other things are wholes made out is these. It is found, too, in the *Tractatus*, where the ultimate constituents of the world are simples, which combine into facts. Arguably, it is also to be found in Kant, where ultimate reality is constituted by noumena, and phenomena are obtained by conceptual imposition. One contemporary version of the view is held by Jonathan Shaffer, according to whom only the whole cosmos is ultimately real; every part of this is ontologically dependent on this whole.

Much of the MMK consists of arguments against the possibility that the various things that one might take to have self-being, do so. Thus, ch. 1 targets causation, ch. 2 targets motion, ch. 8 targets coming into being and passing away, and so on. Typically, the text says that the thing in question does not exist. (Motion does not exist, causation does not exist, arising and ceasing do not exist.) One might therefore interpret the text as advocating some kind of nihilism: nothing of the form 'so and so exists' is true. Such an interpretation is indeed possible, but it sits ill with the only sūtra explicitly cited in the text, *Discourse to Kātyāyana* (MMK XV: 7), in which the Buddha says explicitly that one should take a middle way between reification and nihilism. ('*Madhyakama*' actually means 'middle way'.) It is better, then, to take the statements of non-existence to mean that the thing in question does not exist with self-being; it exists, but *dependently*. (Of course, some things do not exist at all, a prime example being God —an object with self-being if there was ever one.)

Nāgārjuna marshals an impressive battery of different arguments for his end. In many places he deploys argument by cases. One form of this general strategy which is prone to catch people off-guard depends on the *catuṣkoṭi* (Greek: tetralemma, English: four corners). Given any two situations, there are four possibilities: that one holds (but not the other), that the other holds (but not the one), that both hold, or that neither hold. This situation applies, note, just as much to truth and falsity. Something may be true (only), false (only), both true and false, or neither true nor false. Since Aristotle, thinkers in the West have become accustomed to supposing that the only possibilities are the first two of these (or maybe the first two and the fourth; after all, Aristotle does seem to endorse the possibility that statements about future contingents are neither true nor false). Hence this picture about truth may be hard to get one's head around—especially if one does not understand *true* as *true only*. In fact, however, an understanding is easy, given the four-valued semantics of the logical system of First-Degree Entailment.

Anyway, often in the argument by cases, Nāgārjuna runs though the four cases of the *catuṣkoṭi*. We start with an assumption that something or other has self-being. (One must beware. This is never made explicit.) Some claim about it is then formulated, and then each of the four *koṭis* of the *catuṣkoṭi* is considered and rejected as leading to absurd conclusions. Nāgārjuna then applies a four-way *reductio* to conclude that the thing in question does not have self-being. Thus, in ch. 1 Nāgārjuna considers the possibility that something is (self-beingly) caused by itself, by another, by both, or by neither, rejecting each. And in ch. 25, which is about nirvāṇa (what that is, I will come back to below), Nāgārjuna considers the four possibilities that it exists, does not exist, both, and neither (in each case, tacitly, with self-being), and rejects each.

Often, the arguments deployed on each topic are specific to that topic. But Nāgārjuna does have one very general argument. The topic of ch. 5 is space. It has properties, such as being infinite in all directions (or whatever your preferred geometry of space is); it is the locus of events (or objects); it exists through all time, etc. Moreover, it depends for being what it is on possessing those properties (or at least some of them). Thus, if it were grey, had a trunk, and roamed the plain of Africa (or the cage of some

zoo), it would no longer be space. Hence, space depends for being what it is on possessing those properties—at least some of them, anyway. It does not, therefore, have self-being. Though the particular topic is space, it is clear that this form of argument applies to anything with properties (that is, anything)—or anyway, at least one property without which it could not be what it is.

There are many details of Nāgārjuna's arguments that one might debate. But generally speaking, the text is successful in its aims here (at least as far as this reviewer is concerned). Matters are somewhat different when we turn to the question of what Nāgārjuna is for. Part of the problem is that one has to glean this, not from systematic exposition and argumentation, but from verses (often or a rather enigmatic kind) spread throughout the text.

Given the preceding discussion, one thing seems clear. Nāgārjuna holds that everything that exists, exists in dependence on other things. That is, everything is empty of self-being, or more tersely, just empty (*śūnya*). In this sense, everything has the same ontological status. The dependence in question can be of many different kinds. An object may depend on at least some or all of: its properties, its parts, its causes (and maybe effects), and how it is conceptualized. But since everything depends on some things, there is no ultimate ground to reality. It is hard to think of a position that endorses such a view in Western philosophy. (It might be thought that the structural realism of Ladyman and others does this. But as I read this view, all things depend in the last instance on a structural relation-matrix, and the matrix itself does not depend on anything. Nāgārjuna might well be happy with the thought that objects depend on their structural matrix, but would insist that that this matrix is as empty as anything else.)

Perhaps one reason why such a view does not register in the Western canon is this. If everything is dependent on other things, we have an infinite regress. And it is often assumed that such a regress is vicious (e.g., by Leibniz, Kant, Schaffer). Rarely, however, is any *argument* given for this. Nor is it at all obvious. Readers of the text may be puzzled at this point by the fact that one form of argument used by Nāgārjuna against his opponents appeals to the claim that an infinite ontological regress is vicious (e.g., MMK VII: 3). How can he do this? A moment's reflection shows how. If you hold that every ontological regress bottoms out in things with self-being, then any bottomless regress *is* vicious. Such, however, is not Nāgārjuna's view.

So far, so good. But now the complications start. A view to the effect that there is a fundamental reality and a dependent reality, can be thought of as a view that there are two realities. In the context in which Nāgārjuna is working, these are usually called *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate reality) and *saṃvṛti-satya*. ('*Saṃvṛti*' is a somewhat ambiguous word. It is usually translated as 'conventional', and it can be understood as 'dependent on the social and linguistic conventions'; but it also carries the connotation of being deceptive.) To each sort of reality, there is a corresponding notion of truth (the true things one can say about that reality): ultimate truth and conventional truth. Warning: in Sanskrit, the word '*satya*' can mean both *truth* and *reality*. Usually it is translated as 'truth'; but in many cases 'reality' would be a better translation. This is, at the very least, a source of potential confusion.

Now, since Nāgārjuna takes everything to have the same kind of ontological status, one might expect him to dispense with one or other of these notions of truth/reality. And there are certainly places which suggest this. Thus MMK XXVII: 30 says[3]:

> I prostrate to Gautama
> Who through compassion
> Taught the true doctrine
> Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.

(Gautama is the historical Buddha.) The views in question here are views about the nature of ultimate reality. Since there are no ultimate beings (beings with *svabhāva*), it might seem there is no ultimate truth.

Unfortunately, he does not so dispense. (And this verse can equally well be accounted for by supposing that the ultimate is ineffable. More of that anon.) MMK XXIV: 8–10 says:

> The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
> Is based on two truths:
> A truth of worldly convention
> And an ultimate truth.
>
> Those who do not understand
> The distinction between these two truths
> Do not understand
> The Buddha's profound truth.
>
> Without a foundation in conventional truth
> The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
> Without understanding the significance of the ultimate
> Liberation cannot be achieved.

('Dharma' in this context means something like 'doctrine'. Liberation, we will come back to in due course.) Given his views, the distinction between the two kinds of reality that Nāgārjuna has in mind is far from clear. The best way that this reviewer can make sense of it is as follows. Everything has the same ontological status. There is therefore only one reality: the reality of dependent objects. It has, however,

[3] Quotes in this review are taken from the Garfield translation, unless otherwise stated.

two aspects. Corresponding to these two aspects are the truths correctly describing those aspects.

A useful analogy here might be something like this. My hand moves a piece of wood of a certain shape 2 cm to the right. I mate my opponent. This is one and the same event occurring in a game of chess, but there are two aspects of it: a material one, and a game-theoretic one.

What, though, are these two aspects? The conventional aspect is our *Lebenswelt*. There are passages in the MMK which might be taken to suggest that this is illusory. Thus, for example, MMK VII: 34 says:

> Like a dream, like an illusion,
> Like a city of Gandharvas,
> So have arising, abiding
> And ceasing been explained.

(Gandharvas are mythical beings.) But a careful examination of the context of this verse (and others of a similar kind), shows that it is these states, taken to have self-being, which is illusory—or perhaps a better way to put it, is that it is our (pre-enlightenment) *Lebenswelt* which is deceptive.

The *Lebensweld* is the world of things *für uns*: the world as we interpret it and give it meaning. It is real enough for all that.

What, then, is the ultimate aspect? This is the world *an sich*, the world, as it were, as seen in the view from nowhere. Again, it is important, here, not to misunderstand this. Those familiar with Western philosophy will all too easily hear this as some Kantian noumenal realm: a self-standing realm behind appearances. But for Nāgārjuna, *everything* is empty. And this applies just as much to (the) ultimate (aspect of) reality. MMK XXIV: 24 tells us that:

> Whatever is dependently coarisen
> That is explained to be emptiness.
> That, being a dependent designation,
> Is itself the middle way.

Lines 3 and 4 tell us that emptiness ('That') is as ontologically dependent as anything else (and that the middle way consists in neither reifying it nor taking it to be non-existent). How is one to understand 'emptiness' here? One might take it to refer to the property of being empty. (Just as 'redness' refers to the property of being red.) But the passage occurs in a discussion of emptiness immediately following the one quoted above, where Nāgārjuna tables the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. In this context, it is natural to read 'whatever is dependently coarisen' as a reference to conventional reality, and 'emptiness' (*śūnyata*) as a reference to ultimate reality.

But if emptiness, thus understood, is empty, what does it depend on? Conventional reality. Conventional reality and ultimate reality are interdependent aspects of the one and the same reality. Like the two sides of a coin, one could not have the one without the other.

Now, it is easy enough to say what conventional reality is like: we are all very familiar with it; but what about ultimate reality? What is that like? Almost by definition, one cannot say. It is what remains when one strips away all human imposition, and that means all language. Nāgārjuna appears to make the point explicitly. MMK XXII: 11–12 tells us that:

> 'Empty' should not be asserted.
> 'Nonempty' should not be asserted.
> Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
> They are used only nominally.
>
> How can the tetralemma of permanent and impermanent, etc.,
> Be true of the peaceful?
> How can the tetralemma of the finite, infinite, etc.,
> Be true of the peaceful?

Given that the tetralemma gives an exhaustive catalogue of things that can be said, it is clear that something is being said to be ineffable. What? The context from which these verses are taken is a discussion of a Tathāgata, a Buddha, someone who has achieved liberation. That is what is ineffable. But a few verses later, we are told that reality and a Tathāgata have the same nature, MMK XXII: 16ab:

> Whatever is the essence of the Tathāgata
> This is the essence of the world.

Indeed, it is a common view in Buddhism that the Buddha has three distinct embodiments, one of which is just reality itself, the *Dharmakāya* (reality body). So we are being told that ultimate reality is ineffable.

This does not mean that it cannot be experienced. It can (with appropriate training). But our knowledge of it can be only knowledge by acquaintance, not by description. All one can do, as it were, is point at it. It is a simple thatness (*tathāta*). That language (mental fabrication) does not apply to ultimate reality is made quite explicit at MMK XVIII: 9, which says:

> Not dependent on another, peaceful and
> Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
> Not thought, without distinction.
> That is the character of reality.

If reality is without distinctions (and the context makes it clear that it is ultimate reality that is in question), one cannot say that it is thus or so, as opposed to thus and so. That is, it is ineffable.

This verse exposes another problem, however. For line 1 appears to say that reality is not dependent on anything

else, and so is not empty. One way to restore consistency is suggested by Siderits and Katsura's translation of the verse:

> Not to be attained by means of another, free [from intrinsic nature], not populated by hypostatization, devoid of falsifying conceptualization, not having many separate meanings—this is the nature of reality.

Which suggests, not that the reality is non-dependent, but that one's acquaintance with it cannot be mediated by anything. Alternatively, one should always remembers that quantifiers have their range determined by context. Line 1 says that reality is not dependent on anything; but what anythings? The context suggests that it is not dependent on any *concept* (mental fabrication). This is quite consistent with it being dependent on other things.

But now, another issue looms. Ultimate reality is ineffable. But doesn't Nāgārjuna himself say a lot about it—for example, in the verses I have just quoted?

The issue is a familiar one from any view which maintains that some things are beyond the limits of language, and explains why these things are so. Thus, a number of medieval Christian theologians, such as Cusanus, tell us that God is ineffable *because* He is beyond all human categories. Kant tells is that one cannot apply the categories to noumena, thereby applying categories to them. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* tells us that one cannot speak of things such as form, since it is not an object, thereby speaking about it. Heidegger comes to the conclusion that the question of being cannot be answered (the answer can only be shown) because one cannot talk about being, which he has been doing since the beginning of *Sein und Zeit*.

The thinkers I have mentioned all suggest ways in which the apparent contradiction can be overcome, though none of them stands up to much scrutiny. Thus, to give just one example, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* bites the bullet, and declares most of his book devoid of meaning. Of course, if it is this, then we have been given absolutely no reason to suppose that there is something such as form—or that it is ineffable.

This is not the place to go into the matter in general. But what does Nāgārjuna have to say about it? Nothing, it would appear. Did he miss it? Unlikely. Does he draw some crucial distinction? Not evidently. Perhaps he was not worried by it. After all, he is operating in the context of the *catuṣkoṭi*, the third possibility of which is exactly that something can be true and false. Maybe we both can and cannot speak of the ultimate.

I turn finally to the soteriological applications which Nāgārjuna wishes to make of his metaphysics. Let me start by summarizing the main points of standard Buddhist soteriology. These were spelled out in the early teachings of the historical Buddha, and are sometimes called the *Four Noble Truths*. They start with a diagnosis of what we might call the human condition, which might be summarized (with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan) by saying that a person's lot is not a happy one. It is so because of the mental attitudes of attachment and aversion which we bring to things; and we have these attitudes in large part because we misunderstand the world in which we live: we do not understand that in this world, all is impermanent, and that people have no essential selves. It is possible (though amazingly difficult) to come to see reality for what it is, and so rid oneself of the attitudes, and the corresponding unhappiness. This is called awakening, enlightenment, liberation; and the state afterward is called *nirvāṇa*. So much for the summary. There is obviously much to discuss here, but in the MMK Nāgārjuna just assumes the standard soteriology. So this is not the place to go into it.

Matters soteriological feature most prominently in MMK XXIV and XXV. XXIV starts by an interlocutor objecting that if everything is empty, the Four Noble Truths do not exist. Nāgārjuna replies that the objector has simply confused being empty with not existing. This triggers the discussion of the two realities, and the nature of emptiness, which I have already discussed. Nāgārjuna then turns the tables on the opponent by arguing that in a world in which things have self-being, change is impossible, even the change of enlightenment. It is thus the opponent whose views make the Four Noble Truths false.

Chapter XXV then argues that the state of *nirvāṇa* is as empty as anything else. In the course of this, however, we find a remarkable statement—perhaps one of the most opaque in the whole *Kārikās*, MMK XXV: 19–20:

> There is not the slightest difference
> Between cyclical existence and nirvāṇa.
> There is not the slightest difference
> Between nirvāṇa and cyclical existence.
>
> Whatever is the limit of nirvāṇa
> That is the limit of cyclical existence.
> There is not even the slightest difference between them,
> Or even the subtlest thing.

Cyclical existence (*saṃsāra*) is our pre-enlightenment state (called 'cyclical' because of the Buddhist view of rebirth). So what this statement appears to be saying is that there is no difference between things pre- and post-enlightenment. This seems to make a complete nonsense of Buddhist teachings. What on earth does it mean?

Here one can but speculate. One thing that it *cannot* mean is that the *Lebenswelt* of the person who obtains enlightenment does not change. That *would* completely undercut Buddhism soteriology. So if it is not conventional

reality that is the same in the two cases, perhaps it is ultimate reality that Nāgārjuna is talking about? All conventional realities are "underwritten" by exactly the same ineffable *thatness*.

In fact, the context of the verses indeed suggests that what is being discussed here is the ultimate. The verses immediately before this repeat the claims of MMK XXIV about the ineffability of the Tathāgata, which, as we have already noted is, by implication, a point about ultimate realty. The verses immediately following go on to suggest the ineffability of some things—clearly ultimate things. And the chapter finishes with the verse:

> The pacification of all objectification
> And the pacification of illusion:
> No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
> At any time, in any place, to any person.

Clearly, the last two lines are not about conventional reality. They must be about ultimate reality.

The whole passage is therefore naturally read as one about ultimate reality. And the claim that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are exactly the same is meant to refer to their ultimate aspect (which can be covered up by a *Lebenswelt*—that, indeed, may be its deceptiveness). Of course, this presupposes that we can talk about the ultimate, but I have already discussed that matter.

This interpretation of the opaque passage may remove a certain *frisson* from it, making it look, perhaps, banal. But it does have a bite; for it implies that even in the state of *saṃsāra*, the ultimate nature of things is *present and available*. Whether or not Nāgārjuna intended it, one can imagine this being interpreted as saying that a person in *saṃsāra* is already enlightened: they just don't realize it.

To bring this review to a conclusion, let me summarize. In the MMK Nāgārjuna argues forcefully against any position according to which reality has an ultimate ground. All things are empty of self-being. He does not dispense with the notion of ultimate reality, however—though how to understand his take on this is far from clear. His position certainly has ramifications for metaphysics, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind—and if you accept the Buddhist soteriology, for this too. Again though, what these ramifications are is far from clear.

Great works of philosophy often have two characteristics. The first is that they present a tantalizing, profound, even somewhat crazy, view of the nature of reality. So it is with Plato and his theory of forms, Hume with his thoroughgoing skepticism, Kant and his transcendental idealism. The second is that the views have a depth, suggestiveness, even unclarity, which means that subsequent generations of philosophers can go back, read them, and, with new eyes, see different things in them. Thus, we do not read Plato, Hume, and Kant just as a matter of historical interest. The *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā* has both of these features. For my money, then, whether or not one thinks that the views it contains are right, it goes down as one of the great works of philosophy, on a par with the *Republic*, the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[4]

[4] Thanks go to Jay Garfield and Mark Siderits for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.