# The Cosmology of Mādhyamaka Buddhism and its World of Deep Relationalism

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## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the cosmology within Nāgārjuna's thought, the foundational philosopher in the Mādhyamaka Budhist tradition. Nāgārjuna weaves a carefully reasoned path – the 'Middle Way' – between substantialism and nominalism. Yet his emphasis on Śūnyatā ('Emptiness') is widely misinterpreted in the West as leading to nihilism when read with little consideration of its twin element, Pratītyasamutpāda (defined as 'Dependent Origination', or my preferred nomenclature 'Interdependent Co-arising'). I argue that these two concepts, when unified, can overcome the trappings of both nihilism and of nominalist existence that seem to hold such a fixation in the metaphysical assumptions of many theories of IR. In particular, I show how this dialectic of Emptiness and Interdependent Co-arising provides a unique philosophical expression of the unity of all things within a cosmology of deep relationalism without the need of ontotheology. This alternate foundation offers a far more complex understanding of relations and intersubjectivity and thus provides a reorientation for a genuine cosmopolitan politics.

## Keywords:

Mādhyamaka; Emptiness; nihilism; relations; cosmopolitanism.

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*"This being, that exists; through the arising of this that arises. This not being, that does not exist; through the ceasing of this that ceases."*

~ From the *Upanisa Sutta*

## Introduction

One of the more recent 'turns' in IR theory has seen theology rise to prominence in an alleged *post-secular* world (Mavelli, 2014). This conception of the post-secular tends to stand in for the crises in contemporary world order in the face of the resurgence of religious identity in political community and unabashed theological commitments in contemporary political ideologies/movements. This identarian fixation on increasingly dogmatic religiosity (whether of eschatological Christians or of ISIS as leading examples) are part of the broader response against alienation and displacement endemic to the world of late capitalism: An expression of worldlessness, the subsumption of the individual in mass society, the uprooted self who 'does not belong to the world at all' but who yearns desperately to overcome the unbearable existential anxiety of aloneness. The post-secular turn has led to a problematic revision of history in IR: in this new narrative the bifurcation between religion and modernity is not only assumed but is believed to have resulted in a world in which the secular momentarily triumphed, successfully purging theology from the political just as much as it had done from science in the modern-era. In this story, we are now witnessing the return of the repressed: the monster of religion wrongfully banished who is now reeking its vengeance on the secular world that scorned it. We are still in what Nietzsche rightfully diagnosed as a sickness, the "great nausea," waiting for the "victor over God *and* nothingness" [my emphasis added] (1990).1

Yet the political has never been autonomous in the way post-secular advocates assume. Religion has always been central to the construction of world politics, not just in the myriad social forces and cultural systems of the world, but the juridical forms of the international order itself. Here, religion is pervasive at *all* levels of world politics: within the constitutions of many states, the metaphysical conception of human rights, and even the foundational concept of sovereignty itself. This paper does not aim to contend the (mis)reading of post-secular historians but to contribute toward a form of thinking through *cosmologies* without the need for extravagant metaphysics and the seductive trappings of ontotheology which is what I fear this post-secular turn is retreating to. I demonstrate how Mādhyamaka philosophy offers a relational ontology whose cosmological foundation escapes the need for ontotheology in the first instance. In particular, I show how the unity of the twin concepts of Śūnyatā ('Emptiness') and Pratītyasamutpāda (defined as 'Dependent Origination' or my preferred nomenclature 'Interdependent Co-arising'), weaves a path between substantialism and nominalism. According to Nāgārjuna, phenomena do not arise, remain, or cease as *intrinsically* existent. Rather, all dharmas (or 'phenomena') dependently originate upon all other dharmas. This is captured in the *Upanisa Sutta* that expresses how through the arising of something that another thing else arises and conversely, how through the ceasing of something that another thing ceases. It is this cosmological foundation that cancels essentialism, theism, and nihilism at a single stroke. For all three of these beliefs are errors derived from reified metaphysical systems that morph into grand illusions of ontotheology. Against these follies, Mādhyamaka opens a path (dare I say a 'Middle Way') for us to move beyond the binary of secular/post-secular in IR – and even more importantly, to reach a more complex understanding of relations and intersubjectivity in world politics that could revitalise a cosmopolitan political project.

The broad intention of this chapter is to push toward what Ling (2014) would have described as 'worlding' IR theory and its understanding of the secular and transcendent. The metaphysics that IR theory has inherited is very particular, largely ignorant of different conceptions that predate it by millennia. If we are to be in anyway concerned with developing a meaningful comparative philosophy to understand world politics our approach to metaphysics must be both historical and 'worlded', that is, to be able to see how different times and peoples pondered metaphysical questions and how these genealogies relate within, and contest, the dominant metaphysical assumptions of today. The various metaphysical systems that have developed across humanity are not separate: they interpenetrate, debate, and merge with each other. Civilisations are *always* in discussion, and their metaphysical systems highly porous (see Cox, 2003). So, what if we begin to tell another history of the secular/transcendent that have arisen in response to vastly different social and political problems? Here, I am concerned with bringing into IR theory the conceptions of Emptiness and Interdependent Co-arising that emerged in ancient India during its Axal Age revolutions through the thought of Nāgārjuna and his most famous text the *MūlaMādhyamakakārikā* (*The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*). It should be noted that Mādhyamaka Buddhism rejects both extremes of reified metaphysics: either beliefs of nihilism or of theological 'knowledge'. It refuses to ask impossible metaphysical questions beyond our own conventional wisdom as it considers these ultimately unanswerable. Within Mādhyamaka lies a conception of Emptiness and Interdependent Co-arising that is non-theological, instead resting on a cosmology without need of illusory knowledge of god. That is, it conceptualises Emptiness/Interdependent Co-arising as ontological and practical questions – *not* one of ontotheology. Of course, Mādhyamaka practitioners have a soteriological interest in reading these concepts in ways to assist the release of spirit (i.e. to move *from* Saṃsāra), but this transcendental' application goes alongside its abstract form (or its 'mundane' application) in the phenomenal world. Here, the concepts of Emptiness/Interdependent Co-arising are equivalent to a cosmological understanding of the conditioned genesis of all dharmas (as phenomena) in, and through, each other.

According to Mādhyamaka, there is an indivisibility of cosmos (in ontological terms) and creation is part of it. Posed in this way, debate does not get bogged down in the ghosts and goblins of our ontotheological imaginations but instead focuses on the relations and conditions between phenomena within the so-called 'Two Truths': the 'conventional' or 'provisional' truth and the 'ultimate' truth. The phenomenal world is ultimately empty (Śūnyatā) of an inherent self or essence but exists as dependent on other phenomena (*Pratītyasamutpāda)* and our conventional perceptions thereof. There are two sides to this dialectical coin. On the one, the metaphysical nature of the 'world' is said to be logically indeterminable for us in the phenomenal world. Running to one's own conception of god in the face of the logical conundrum posed by Emptiness/Interdependent Co-arising is not an answer but merely a reaction to the ambiguity or the unknowability of the transcendent. It requires us to look deeper to what there is – or what we think/experience/perceive is there – by our conventions. Above all, Mādhyamaka calls for us to problematise our reified metaphysical assumptions that lie deeply embedded within the core of most, if not all, theological beliefs. The other side, is to embrace Emptiness, to lose notions of self-being and nominalism, amidst the radical interdependency of and between all things. Behind impermanency is no master magician but a universe of relations in the history/time of matter/cosmos; forever interacting, transcending, transforming and in which nothing is ever lost but merely changes through the conditions of what I have termed elsewhere as '*the* between' (Brincat & de Groot Heupner, 2020).

This argument is made in three sections. Firstly, I contextualise the debates to which Emptiness and Interdependent Co-Arising were developed by Nāgārjuna. The second and

substantive part of the chapter then outlines the concepts of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) and *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Dependent Origination) in which I emphasise the relational quality of Mādhyamaka cosmology and how it exposes the absurdity of both essentialism and nihilism. I conclude by speculating on how this cosmology of the Mādhyamaka tradition leads to a world view of deep relations and intersubjectivity, offering a fundamental realignment to how we conceive of 'relations' in IR and one that promises a greater cosmopolitan solidarity.

### The context of debate: Emptiness and the Axial Age

As Jaspers described it, the Axial revolution in Ancient India brought forth those who would ask the most "radical questions." From the metaphysical speculation of the Upanishads, to philosophical systems ranging from scepticism to materialism, in this period "[t]he most contradictory possibilities were essayed… opposites which nonetheless remained related to one another, created unrest and movement to the very brink of spiritual chaos…" (1953: 1-2). The East Ganges basin, East of Patna, was the focus of this Axial revolution (Kulke, 1986: esp. 374). Between Vedic orthodoxy of the western India and an emerging heterogeneous society in the east lay fertile grounds for intense social and intellectual disputes that would propel India's historical development during the middle of the first millennium BCE. During this Axial period *vāda* (or *vāda-vivāda*, defined as a bifurcating or divisive debate),2 arose as the 'art of philosophical disputation' in which everything from the beliefs and rituals of Vedic orthodoxy and its dominant social codes and moral norms "came under fire" (Matilal, 1985: 1-22). As Matilal affirms: "No subject was considered to sacred for criticism and refutation" (Matilal, 1985: 9-10). Arguably Nāgārjuna was one of its finest and last great thinkers of this age. In his thought that initiated the tradition of Mādhyamaka Buddhism – the Middle Way – and in which the concepts of Emptiness and Interdependent Co-Arising were pushed to their dialectical extremes, leading to a profound and unique understanding of our world as *relations* between all things.

The intensity of these debates into the nature of reality was not some purely intellectual exercise but went to the core of Indian society in this Axial period. Indeed, the question of duality was the very hinge on which social life pivoted. Accordingly, so much relied on the interpretation of the passage in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "...of the non-real there is no coming to be: of the real there is no ceasing to be" (2007: II, 16). It is reported that the Cārvāka insisted on scepticism and materialism (not just on philosophical grounds but as a means to resist the growing power of the Brahmins), a God was not necessary to account for the world (a claim linked to the speculative cosmology of Books One and Ten of the *Rig Veda* that purportedly gave credence to materialism) (see Radhakrishnan, 2009: 231). In the *Upanishads*, the cosmos becomes the interplay of two worlds: Purusha/Brahma (the eternal, spirit and Ultimate Reality) that was manifested in Ātman (the soul), *and*, Prakṛti (materiality or nature) that was manifested in Māyā. Here, the phenomenal world was not unreal but temporary, changing, and only *apparently* real (*Vyavaharika*). It was thereby relatively unimportant in comparison to the *eternal* that was unchanging consciousness. The emphasis of the *Upanishads* was to go beyond the mere 'appearance' of such materiality to the eternal Brahma that was ultimately 'real'. At this level, dialectical thinking was aimed at piercing the 'veil of Māyā' as the illusion or givenness of appearances because it was deemed to deceive people in what they think or perceive of the world (see *Sarvasara Upanishad*, 1914: 17).

Casting this argument in theological terms (and in ways that solidified the social status of the Brahmin priests) placed considerable pressure on the dialectical elements of the Vedas and sutras – especially the problem of duality based on the aforementioned passage from the

*Bhagavad Gita*. In this reading, the primary reality of Brahma contained within itself the source of *all* motion and change, forming the root of its non-dualistic monism (Radhakrishnan, 1970: 141-146). The gnosticism of the *Upanishads* was to show, through parable, that the Ātman of the individual soul was the same as the eternal Brahman, the universal soul: "Thou art that," or "Thou, the individual, art identical with the ultimate principle of things." (Renou, 1963: 9). For the Brahmins – championed most forcefully in the thought of Adi Shankaracharya (Shankara) much later (circa 800 CE) and the key figure in the Hindu revival against Buddhism – sought to advance a non-dualistic monism in which materiality was the unreal and Brahma unknowable through it. Shankaracharya claimed that the real is that whose negation is impossible: the Self – as immortal, without beginning or end, and identical with Brahma – could not be refuted (Shankara quoted in Chadha, 1998: 173). Material reality had no ontological status in this cosmology but was nevertheless perceived as a spatial, temporal, and causal order by human-beings. Hence, there could be "no non-existence" of external entities as suggested by Siddhārtha Gautama (the historical Buddha) because "external realities are perceived" (Shankara, 1965: 418ff). At the same time, non-duality exists *a priori* but cannot be expressed in terms of being/non-being because Ātman is not of the world of materiality but of Brahma. The separation of the material world from Brahma is an illusion and only on the basis of the experience of the Absolute and attainment of knowledge/experience of the Ātman that unreal/illusion (Māyā) is overcome (Devaraja, 1962: 16).

It is within this milieu of competing metaphysical systems of duality that the concept of Emptiness was propelled as a defining philosophical, religious, and political concept of the era – indeed, the concept was the frontline battle across all orthodox and heterodox schools in Axial Age India. In Advaita, the very question of cosmic origins led to the logical contradiction between two worlds (or non-dualism) and the conclusion either of materialism, or, that the phenomenal was somehow *less* than and *subordinate* to, Brahma. It is here, emerging through the Sramanas movement (alongside Cārvāka, Nyāya and Jainist thought amongst others), that Buddha around 500 BCE would come to reject all such positions and instead posit Pratītyasamutpāda (which can be defined as Dependent Origination, Dependent Arising, or Interdependent Co-arising) and Śūnyatā (typically translated as Emptiness) as an affinity or co-terminous with each other. This is the cornerstone of Mādhyamaka's relational ontology: rather than a creator God, a nihilistic world of Nothingness, or the Vedic and Hindu concept of the Self/Ātman, there is Emptiness which equates to Interdependent Co-arising.

## Nāgārjuna on *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) and *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Dependent Origination)

Within this philo-historical context of India's Axial age, the Mādhyamaka school would make a sustained critique of all forms of metaphysical extravagance and aim this directly against emergent Advaita philosophy and nihilism (amongst other targets) as exemplars of such forms reification. This section outlines this argument as developed in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna and his most important work the *MūlaMādhyamakakārikā* (Nāgārjuna, 1995) (hereafter the '*Middle-Way*'). For clarity I will also discuss his *Vigrahavyāvartani* that illustrates Nāgārjuna's dialectical method deployed in the *Middle-Way*, and, parts of the *Akutobhayâ* commentary, a text that offers explanatory notes on the *Middle-Way* that is also attributed to him. Nāgārjuna, typically placed as living around 150–250 CE, is outside of the formal Axial date-range but speaks to its most fundamental themes. It should be noted that there have been a litany of interpretations of his thought that perhaps reflect more of each interpreter than they do of Nāgārjuna's concepts themselves (see Douglas, 1971: 76-96). My interpretation is similarly coloured and whilst I recognise the internal diversity within this tradition of thought, and its various disagreements, I deliberately emphasise the relational

quality of Mādhyamaka cosmology as it is this aspect that contains the counter against validating ontotheology in the ways in which this post-secular turn in IR endangers. The paper is broader call to move to onto-cosmology rather than onto-theology as the epistemic foundation for metaphysics precisely because it can be dialogued on and disputed, rather than rely solely on appeals to authority or unknowns. Rather than recasting IR as a theo-political discourse (that in my view would be disastrous), Nāgārjuna offers a cosmology without the vanities of theology or trappings of metaphysical extravagance and can replace nominalist and essentialist ontologies in IR with those of relations of co-origination and radical interdependency. This leads to a far more inclusivist historical approach, a richer account of social complexity, and has profound ecological implications too. In the context of this volume, it offers an antidote both to the disenchantment of the secular and the resurgent dogmatism of religion today.

The *Middle-Way* is a commentary on Buddha's teachings, utilising the notion of Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda)* as the 'middle-way' between substantialism and nominalism. The idea of Dependent Origination and its correlate, Emptiness, are the defining principles of Buddhism and had, of course, been explicated centuries before Nāgārjuna. In many respects, he was merely clarifying these concepts and, in his own way, bringing followers back to the 'correct' path outlined by Gautama. These concepts are consistently expressed in oppositional terms throughout the *Saṃyukta-āgama* (chapters 7, 12, 13) and early Buddhist scriptures: "*It is not one nor different*," that "*It is not permanent nor discontinuous*," that "*It is not coming nor going*," and that, "*It neither exists nor not exists*." Known as the 'Connected Discourses', for obvious reasons, these statements are conjunctive and made to show the inherent relation between all things. It establishes the basic principle of Dependent Origination as within the opening quote of this paper the many different translation revolve around the notion that : '*from this arising, that arises; with this ceasing, that ceases*'. Quite simply, within this ontology, *all* phenomena and *all* things are viewed as relations of dependency. At its core is the realization that everything is conditioned, there is no permanent identity, nor independent existence, nor uncaused cause, and that all things stand in relation to one another. Condition (pratyaya) in this tradition of though is *not* cause: it is an "event, state, or process" that can be appealed to when explaining another "event, state, or process" (Garfield, 1994: 222). From this inherent relationalism or dependency of a multiplicity (or infinity) of conditions, springs the idea that all things are co-originary with each other, ultimately impermanent, and in a process of continuous change (flux) that never ceases.

Nāgārjuna affirms that phenomena only *appear* (in a conventional sense) to arise, change, and cease, but in an *ultimate* sense they do not arise, change, or cease as intrinsic phenomena – that is as something that has inherent nature or essence. If something exists independently it needs no conditions for its production. Instead, according Nāgārjuna all phenomena are 'empty' of an intrinsic nature or essence that would give them an independent existence. In this logic, 'Emptiness' is also empty; and as such, is co-terminous with Dependent Origination. What any thing is 'empty' of is the emptiness of a separate self, of being intrinsic, of independence. Rather, everything is best seen as an 'inter-being' with all others; the form and appearance of something is empty but is ultimately full of everything in the cosmos of space/time/matter. Though Nāgārjuna would perhaps shy away from such a positive thesis, within his ontology it is only because of Emptiness that everything is possible at all. As one of the more accessible translations expresses it: "We state that conditioned origination [Dependent Origination] is emptiness. It is mere designation depending on something, and it is the middle path. Since nothing has arisen without depending on something, there is nothing that is not empty" (1995: Verses 24.18 and 24.19). Translated as 'Emptiness' in English,

Śūnyatā appears strange, even contradictory to Western thought, something akin to 'nothingness' or 'voidism' with attendant implications towards nihilism. Moreover, it grates against common-sense understandings of the substance and essentialism of objects that are usually regarded as independent and whole – especially within the dominant modes of though in IR theory. As such, we must fight against the tendency to think of 'emptiness' in ontologically objective terms (i.e. nothing as *something*), just as against common-sensical ideas of the separateness and independence of objects in which the concept of a thing is negated by 'No-thing'. Instead, Emptiness holds that all phenomena are devoid of an immutable or determinate, intrinsic nature.3

The cosmology is consistent with contemporary physics that 'we are all made of stardust', the molecules that compose us existing at the Big Bang, undergoing myriads of transformation in the billions of years between then and us. There is a popular quotation from Thich Nhat Hanh (2017) affirming that the elements that we are made of have taken many different forms across time – the water we drink was once a cloud, the food was once sunshine, and that we *are* therefore these things across time too. He insists this is not a question of some belief in reincarnation but the history of life on earth: an historical given, not theology. There are many other tributaries into this type of thinking within Buddhism. In the Pali canon, the two dimensions of human experience, the mundane (or phenomenal) and the transcendental, are both governed by the single principle of Dependent Origination.4 As explained by Bhikkhu Bodhi, at the mundane level Dependent Origination "expresses the invariable concomitance between the arising and ceasing of any given phenomenon and the functional efficacy of its originative conditions" (Bodhi, 1995). These conditioned or dependent dharmas are seen to be in constant flux – and so those who cling to them for stability, 'craving' for solidity, are found wanting. Far from being the ground of satisfaction we unreflectively take them to be – and actually go so far as to reify by building illusory ontotheological precepts around them - the realisation of the flux inherent to the phenomenal destabilises thought, pushing it to think beyond this contradiction. In its mundane form, Dependent Origination compels mind to a dialectical understanding of relations and flux in the world – the knowledge constitutive interest here can be in understanding and promoting these relations of dependency. Yet in its transcendental form (and attendant soteriological interests), it leads to disenchantment with the mundane and is thus believed to be a key step in the process of release (Bodhi, 1995).

Nāgārjuna's introduction of the Mādhyamaka was made at the time when the doctrines of substantialism/eternalism were flourishing and just as Brahmanism was undergoing systematization under the Upanishads (Phuntsho, 2005: 38). Contained within his refutation of substantialist standpoints was an underlying dialectical analysis that led to a systematic, rational formulation of Buddhist thought through an apophantic approach to the concept of Emptiness: that is, *what there is not*, rather than *what there is* (see Murti, 1998: 7-9). That is, he asked how are things 'empty' and what are they 'empty' of, rather than what things constitute reality. According to Nāgārjuna, things lack self-existence because they are dependent on conditions and relations so that despite the appearance of identity, stability, and independence of objects they are, ultimately, 'empty'. In this view, empirical appearance *equates* to ontological Emptiness. But, as Phuntsho makes clear, the various Mādhyamaka schools do not agree on what things are 'empty' of (Phuntsho, 2005: 4-5). The Yogācāra asserted, for example, that Emptiness was the absence of ontological duality in which the external world was a projection of mind (and hence their common designation as *idealists*). An exemplar was Vasubandhu's claim that external world is 'neither one thing, nor is it many atoms' (which was the view of the Nyāya school) from which he concluded that the world does not exist in any independent form (cited in Burtt, 1955: 175). This position was attacked by

many others, perhaps the most effective being Candrakirti in *Prasangika Mādhyamaka* who showed that such a position merely reified self-consciousness as awareness, thus leading back to the problems of idealism: the domination of mind over reality. Others, like Prāsaṅgika, followed the dialectical *reductio ad absurdum* to negate any inherent identity and therefore reach Emptiness. This, in turn, was opposed by the exegetical method of Svātantrika that took a more structured syllogistic form to make positive assertions with argumentation and reasoning about Emptiness (Phuntsho, 2005:34, 43).

Setting aside these many important debates to instead focus on relations within Mādhyamaka cosmology, I will here outline some of the implications of this unique conception of Emptiness for a critique of nihilism. The *Saṃyukta-āgama* (Chapter 9) states:

> The eyes (and all senses) are empty;
> The law of permanency and change is empty;
> I and mine are both empty.
> Why is it so?
> Because this is the nature of things.

While this passage seems to skirt the fallacy of affirming the consequent and is presented as self-evident rather than explained, it is the mutual implication of Emptiness with Dependent Origination that allows Mādhyamaka to overcome both the ontological substantialism of an absolute/eternal (as in Ātman/Brahma or the atomism of Nyāya), and, nominalism that could lead to nihilism. As verse 15:10 of the *Middle-Way* (1995) asserts:

> To say 'it is' is to grasp for permanence. To say 'it is not' is to adopt the view of nihilism.
> Therefore, a wise person does not say 'exists' or 'does not exist'

In this way, substantialism is rejected because if eternal nature were assumed (as within Vedic/Hindu?Advaita philosophy), it would preclude any causal interaction, origination, or change. Nāgārjuna was particularly adept at showing how the theory of eternalism and substance breaks down at its extremes because whatever originated in this way must also be subject to cessation (Warder, 2000: 361). Nominalism too was rejected through this method as something designated as ucchedavāda – most closely translated as annihilationism of the soul with the body, and therefore more akin to atheism than nihilism. It overlaps with nihilism (natthitāvāda) conceived of, and rejected by Buddhism, not just as the belief in the death of consciousness with the body but also because of its tendency to allege that nothing has causal effect, and/or that nothing can be known, and/or its belief in the absoluteness of Nothing. Its grasp for impermanence is also a form of reification.

To demonstrate the faulty logic of the metaphysics of nihilism, Nāgārjuna deployed the concept of Śūnyatā to the philosophical problem of causation, highlighting the contradictions that emerge when either attempting to determine ultimate First Cause (or creation) and that of an independent object (identity). A focus on *cause* through relations and conditions of dependency is a key theme across all Buddhist schools. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* (the *Book of Discipline*) reports that the Buddha taught how "all things" spring from conditions and several Sutras in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (1959: 361ff) repeat this idea of a chain of dependency that is distinct from other conceptions of causation. The dialectical impetus across all of Nāgārjuna's reflections on Emptiness is to push beyond a simplistic notion of change as 'cause/effect' to one pertaining to a deeper relationalism of conditions. Buddha problematized the notion of

*asmin sati idam bhavati* (variously translated as "when this is, that arises" "When this was, then this comes") because at either moment the effect or the cause disappears in its transference to the other stage so that there is no actual relation, only fragments of a moment. Depending on one's vantage of this moment, there is an absolute separation between the cause and the effect: only that which precedes it is observed. The object too, would lose any permanency in time. Instead, Buddha sought to draw attention to the realization that every *thing* and every *event* is the result of previous *things* and *events* by which he arrives at the notion of 'Dependent Arising': no *thing* or *event* is born of itself. Though this is rarely the focus of most commentaries on the Buddha, at the core of this idea of Dependent Arising is a relational cosmology as the fundamental condition of the phenomenal world. Here, *saṅkhāra* (the idea of formation through conditions) becomes the active term for this idea of 'conditioned arising', 'dependent origination,' or 'interdependent co-arising' because it is both 'that which *is* put together' and 'that which *puts* together'. The cosmos is the relations of 'the-between'. It is precisely this notion of the conditionality of the phenomenal that cancels essentialism, theism, and nihilism at a single stroke. Whether termed dependent, interdependent, or conditioned, this ontology confers the idea that every *thing* and every *event* is, and moves through, necessary relations of dependency. At the same time, it shows why Śūnyatā is not the 'Emptiness' in the way assumed in Western thinking. It is not 'nothingness', in fact it is the opposite, as I will outline further below.

Mādhyamaka (and Yogācāra too) were developed as 'antidotes' against essentialist biases in other metaphysical systems (see Kalupahana, 1986). Instead of speculating about subjects for which experience could give no answer – such as the origins of the universe, the nature of reality, or the essence of the soul – Interdependent Co-arising and Emptiness avoided "mysterious entities" being fabricated by our minds in order to account for first causes (Muraly, 1998: 62). An exemplar of the negative dialectical method, Nāgārjuna showed the logical impossibility of eternalism/substantialism when related to cause: if effect is identical with cause then there is nothing new emerging; if cause and effect are different, there is no continuity or necessary relation other than that presupposed by thought. In other words:

> "… if substance were to arise as a result of causes and conditions, it has to be made. This would be inconsistent with the very definition of substance. If it is not made then it is unique and has no relationship to or is not dependent on another" (Muraly, 1998: 63).

Garfield offers a similar explanation:

> "…if one views phenomena as having and as emerging from casual powers, one views them as having essences and as being connected to the essences of other phenomena. This, Nāgārjuna suggests, is ultimately incoherent, since it forces one at the same time to assert the inherent existence of these things, in virtue of their essential identity, and to assert their dependence and productive character, in virtue of their causal history and power. But such dependence and relational character, he suggests, is incompatible with their inherent existence" (1994: 224)

Through such (negative) dialectical reasoning, Nāgārjuna exposed how all such categories were therefore contradictory: that if one assumes entities exist by themselves (svabhāva, 'self-becoming' or that which develops 'within outwardly'), then they must be unconditioned and uncaused. As interrogated by Nāgārjuna:

"The 'own-nature' (of a thing) cannot be generated by causal conditions... For, if the 'own nature' is generated by causal conditions, it would be (artificially) created. Now, how could 'own-nature' be (artificially) created? For, 'own nature' is what is non-artificial (uncreated) and independent of others" (quoted in Matilal, 1985: 315).

'Emptiness', then, goes to the error of thinking that believes objects/subjects to be independently existent, that is, existing apart from conditions and relations from which they are a part. Here, the inflection or meaning of Emptiness is an 'emptiness of essence': the affirmation that phenomena have no intrinsic nature by themselves. It offers a mundane yet practical account of all things as dependent on conditions without metaphysical reification or exuberance and, according to Garfield, brings thought back to "sober, pragmatic skepticism" (1994: 232).

The nihilist could assert that that if the entire phenomenal world were 'empty' then nothing would in fact exist. That is, if there is no intrinsic being, then there can be no appeal to the conditions of any and all phenomena. This is, at the conventional level, absurd. According to Nāgārjuna, such a position is assuming – worse reifying – a metaphysical belief of the phenomenal "as a discrete entity with an essence." That is, according to this logic, Emptiness must also be an entity, an inherently existing entity, i.e. the Nothing as *something*. As Garfield posits: "To adopt this view of emptiness is indeed to deny the reality of the entire phenomenal, conventional world. It is also to ascribe a special, nonconventional, nondependent hyperreality to emptiness itself. Ordinary things would be viewed as nonexistent, emptiness as substantially existent)." But it is the reifier who, by "virtue of denying the emptiness of these phenomena, denies their existence" (Garfield, 1994: 230). Absolute negation, in the nihilistic sense, is impossible because it necessarily presupposes affirmation of *something*. An alternative is required for the foundation of nihilism other than mere reified metaphysical systems of identity.

Nāgārjuna also overcomes the second nihilistic assumption of a-causality in *Vigrahavyāvartani*. Written after the *Middle-Way* it clarifies his views on sūnyatā and svabhāva and is directed against those who "have not understood the meaning of the Emptiness of the things" (especially the Nyāya school) (See Nāgārjuna, 2005: XXII). Whereas Nāgārjuna in the *Middle-Way* assigns a preeminent role to Prajñā (the insight into ultimate reality) as a critical faculty against appearances, accepted convention, common-sense, and experience, this is more overtly coupled to a second movement, prasaṅga, the method of reductio ad absurdum in *Vigrahavyāvartani*. Through this dual method Nāgārjuna pushes all objections to Dependent Origination to their extremes, exposing the inner contradictions of such thought. Firstly, he argues that why are all things empty is because all things dependently originate (pratītyasamutpanna), as outlined above. A thing is not nothing, nor is it intrinsic to itself, but is related and dependent on others. He explains how 'intrinsic nature' means independence. Things that dependently originate lack intrinsic nature because they are dependent on other conditions. If one is unaware of such dependent origination things may *appear* to arise as existents, remain for a time, and then subsequently cease – this is the reification of nominalism that traps nihilism. As explained by Berger, if physical matter undergoes constant change and therefore a person is always in flux, "the effect of an individual's deeds do not in any literal way fall on the same individual who initiated the action... [this is] tantamount to a more general a-causalism, as it implies that causal processes cannot be intelligibly discerned or tracked in nature or conduct" (Berger, 2017: 112). For adherents of Mādhyamaka, this was not just a philosophical and practical problem but a soteriological one, for without this condition one could not track moral norms or transgressions nor have motivation to samsara.

This critical aspect also allowed Nāgārjuna to address the other pressing question raised by nihilism regarding how anything can be asserted at all: for if all things are devoid of an intrinsic nature, then such a thesis must equally be devoid of intrinsic nature, that is, be 'empty'. Nāgārjuna would reply that such a belief system arises from the misunderstanding of Emptiness and Dependent Origination: all phenomena and all human action "are possible only in this relational world of becoming," so that when we stand an object in relation to other, it deprives it of its all-encompassing character (Johnston and Kunst, 2005: 91). This is his positive attempt at pushing thought to give up on believing the intrinsic nature of a thing as it *appears* to us. They only appear to us without their history or manifold relations. Viewed in this light, Nāgārjuna can be seen as to not deny the ontological foundations of everything (and thus elide to the nihilist extreme that there *is nothing*) but to demonstrate the shallow acceptance of appearances in those metaphysical systems that do not grasp the relational and conditional inherence in, and of, all things/events as the basis of reality. For nihilists (just like substantialists), reify their metaphysical assumption of nothing, forgetting conventional knowledge, relations, and conditions of dependence. According to Hayes, what Nāgārjuna opposed was the idea of being as fixed and permanent nature (or identity), *not* that it does not have distinguishing features (2003: 10). The 'in-itself' "is nothing but an arbitrary slice of an indefinite spatiotemporal and causal manifold" (Garfield, 1994: 229) but at the same time, Nāgārjuna does not reject causal relations so long as the *relata* are not accorded unique, non-dependent status. The radical contextualism of Emptiness pushes thought to confront the conditions and relations that inhere in things without which they do not have substance or are 'empty' – conditions and relations that are lost, denied, and abrogated by notions of eternalism/essentialism. In this thinking, if we strip away the layers from 'being' like the outer shells of a Babushka-doll, removing the relations and conditions that encompass it, we would eventually arrive at a point of no substance – and, according to Mādhyamaka, the same is true if we interrogated the concepts of Ātman or Brahma whose 'ultimacy' would likewise be reduced to emptiness. The danger in such metaphysical systems is that mind becomes attached to the constructs of object-identity that it has made, believing they are real; or perhaps worse, attached to the constructs of its ontotheology that mind has merely imagined.

Overcoming the "reified view of causality" is the pragmatic end of Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic (Garfield, 1994: 238). This demystification of change primes thought to go further into how conditions and relations form the locus for phenomenal change without any need to defer to fleeting moments of causation, ultimate First Causes, or metaphysical assumptions of identity. As explained by Liberman, Nāgārjuna refutes causal realism *not* causality per se: something can cause something without cause having intrinsic nature. These are *conditions*. Rather than seeing objects as holding some fixed essence and focusing on this (assumed) object-identity, Buddhist dialectics pushes towards seeing change as conditioned events (dharma). The method is to place subject/object in relations or conditions of each, in order to reach what I would call a fully mediated position in space/time. In this logic, events do depend on other events; composites are composed of their parts; subjects are historical – all things are mediated. For example, Nāgārjuna sought to refute the view of the Samkhya (Hindu) school which claimed that in the example of the change from the seed-to-sprout-to-sapling, that there is *essence*: the seed forms a continuum with the sprout, through which there is production or development *from* the self or substance (i.e. seed to sprout, sprout to sapling, and sapling to tree). According to Nāgārjuna however, if a seed had essence it would endure, so the sprout could never arise from it. If the seed did cease to exist, then nothing could cause the sprout (see Liberman, 2007:151).

In making these arguments, Nāgārjuna is acutely wary of reifying Emptiness in his own way by erecting a duality between object and Emptiness. The way around this predicament was to posit that emptiness and the phenomenal are not two separate things but two characterizations of the *same* thing. The point is not to see beyond the emptiness of 'the table', for example, as if it were an illusion in order to move some more 'real' table-entity that lies behind it, but to see the table as convention, as dependent on conditions of causal activity that we then conventional ascribe to it. As explained by Garfield, the table:

> "is a purely arbitrary slice of space-time chosen by us as the referent of a single name, and not an entity demanding, on its own, recognition and a philosophical analysis to reveal its essence. That independent character is precisely what it lacks…" (Garfield, 1994: 220)

Conventional statements can still be made of the table, but it is wisdom to perceive that phenomenal reality as described merely through conventional truths are nevertheless Empty.[5] The Rope-Snake story is key to understanding this principle. The story is often used to demonstrate the absence of subject/object (as "I" or "me") and for distinguishing between valid and invalid designations. The story refers to how one may in dim-light confuse a rope for a snake, thus showing how thought can produce conceptual error and false perceptions. What comes out of the Rope-Snake story is not the self/other binary but that the object is absent of any inherent or conventional quality until we designate it as such (this can be seen as superimposition of thought by the subject and by convention). The object is what we give it, what we think of it, and what we experience of it, and thereby label such a phenomenon as a 'rope' or a 'snake' accordingly. One can see Nāgārjuna here emphasising negation in order to interrupt our cognitive processes that mistakenly posits own being (svabhāva) onto experience itself, that is, his negative dialectic is an attempt to disturb identitarian logics by exposing how they may be confused, erroneous, or false. I think Adorno would agree.

Substituting *conditions* for *causes* is one of the key developments in Nāgārjuna's dialectical approach, for rather than looking to determine regularity in cause/effect (which is merely a verbal designation made by the describer on this process that is reduced to moments), causal links are apprehended as equivalent conditional relations (Garfield, 1994: 234). This is why such a conception of Emptiness cannot lead to nihilistic conclusion because Emptiness is itself dependent and conventional: we are left with relations and conditions, not *Nothing*. For the same reason, the objection from Nyāya that 'Emptiness' is itself 'empty' misses the mark. Rather, Emptiness is 'existence' of a specific kind:

> "The existence that emerges is a conventional and dependent existence. Motion does not exist as an entity on this account, but rather as a relation – as the relation between the positions of a body at distinct times, and hence as dependent upon that body and those positions… [in this way] we bring motion, change, and movable and changeable entities back from the brink of extinction" (Garfield, 1994: 237)

At the same time, this offers a means of moving away from the tendency (especially pronounced in Western thought) of hypostatising being/non-being as separation – something that occurs because of the tendency of common-sensical apperception that assumes the static, independent identity of objects. For in such thinking it is impossible to conceive of the same object – its reified 'identity' – in a different time/position/composition without annihilating it. The entire thrust of the *Middle-Way* is to show that no object or phenomena, thing, or concept, is either independent (unitary in-itself) or other (independent of correlates and therefore

ultimately Nothing). Nāgārjuna's 'middle-path' is to help thought find safe passage between either pitfall without falling in. On this point, Nāgārjuna's juxtaposition of light and darkness in reference to the same spatio-temporal moment is illustrative. Here, he shows the logical absurdity of common-sense thinking that requires light and dark to meet in space/time to explain the phenomenon of illumination. Ichimura translates the relevant passage as:

> Wherever [i.e. in reference to the meeting point in space and time] light illumines darkness,
> darkness also obstructs light [anvaya and vyatireka together].
> Wherever there is light there should be no darkness [because they are exclusive).
> How [then] could light illumine anything? (see Ichimu'ra, 1988: Sect. IV 973)

Light and dark cannot exist at the same moment without being conventionally absurd. By placing light and darkness in reference to the same spatio-temporal moment, Nāgārjuna brings out the context in which the contradiction is revealed. Nāgārjuna taught the idea of relativity in a similar way. In the *Ratnāvalī* he gives the example that shortness exists only in relation to the idea of length. That is, 'short' and 'long' are not due to intrinsic nature of a thing, only in relation to each other. The determination of a thing or object is only possible in relation to other things or objects.

Garfield suggests the central argument of the *Middle-Way* is how it establishes a critical three-way relation between Emptiness, Dependent Origination, and conventional understanding. That is, emptiness and the phenomenal world are but two characterizations of the same thing and the apparent identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon our conventional understandings of it (Garfield, 1994: 219). The conventional/ultimate are so closely interrelated that they could not be separated – they "coincide with each other" and though "they are not identical" they are not a "duality" either. Nihilism attempts to specify the intrinsic essence of a thing/phenomena but this an identity only by convention. When pushed to its extreme – whether through reductio ad absurdum or negative dialectic – it is shown to lack ultimate or independent existence. When we see that everything is dependent on conditions, a relational world emerges and one in which everything can occur. However, Nāgārjuna does not give us a fully-fledged *analytic* theory of Emptiness, as some have claimed (i.e. Abe, 1985: 93). Indeed, for some (including myself) his thought may even be unsatisfying in its insistence on negation. I would contend, however, that rather than focusing on the negative dialectical scaffolding by which his argument is made, it is better seen as an approach to thinking through to the conditioned nature of all phenomena. This is in itself a remarkable contribution: conditionality in dialectical thought remains fundamental to its effectiveness for studying social life in IR today because it is properly basic to understanding the relational basis of all things, not just in terms of the philosophy of internal relations, or the interrelations of all things externally, but in terms of historical development of the world itself.

## Lessons for IR?

Nāgārjuna's attempt to overcome the false appearances of dualism and identity through negating them offers important lessons for IR in its post-secular turn. Nāgārjuna's achievement was his recognition of the fundamental conditional and relational quality of human experience of the phenomenal world that could be understood by us conventionally and without need of ontotheological mystification. Arguably, this held the potential that could have opened the door to a deeper understanding of *intersubjectivity* within a Buddhist sociology. Yet this was not the interest of the Mādhyamaka tradition that remained soteriological. The implications of its

cosmology share far more common ground with those of speculative or 'new' physics, such as Paul Davies, and should not be reduced to mere Apophatic theology as some have suggested by over-emphasising negation in Nāgārjuna's method. Rather, as explained by Sharma (1960: 93-99), he shows us two things. Firstly, how 'world-objects' (dharma) when taken to be ultimately real are all found to be self-contradictory and relative – they are mere appearances. And secondly, how the empirical reality of all phenomena remains to our conventional understanding. Whilst appearances are devoid of ultimate reality, they can be grasped through their relations and conditions in a relative and conventional sense. It is this aspect of Mādhyamaka philosophy – and why it designates itself as the 'middle-path' – which can be highly productive for rethinking world politics.

The question is how can we go about unpacking this fundamental insight into relations and conditions in the context of the post-secular turn? Given that Nāgārjuna's interests were soteriological rather than socio-political, this task can only be speculative.6 I contend there are least two lessons we can draw. Firstly, if Nāgārjuna's critique of substantialism and nihilism through his pragmatic scepticism and the method of negative dialectics is successful – a thesis I have affirmed throughout this chapter – then the basis of those IR theories that remain so reliant on these metaphysical foundations are eroded. Religious discourses have proven resilient not just because of the powerful structures of privilege built around the community of believers but because their ontotheological basis are immune to reason and evidence from those outside it. They are ideology in purist form. Here, the post-secular turn is shown to be leaning dangerously close to retreating to ontotheological precepts when the aim should be the sociological investigations of the conditions and relations in which theological imaginings are deemed to be required or believed by human subjects. We must explore what aspects of disenchantment within modernity and alienation of late capitalism render this retreat to religion so pronounced in contemporary world politics?

Secondly, and far more importantly, the emphasis on Emptiness and Dependent Origination as co-terminous may allow us to reimagine relations of intersubjectivity in world politics. Some champion that the post-secular will stretch political imagination. Yet unlike the diverse, open-ended form of development implied in Nāgārjuna's cosmology, the imaginative form of religion is closed in on-itself. That is, the authority of its ontotheology, whether textual, or otherwise, stands in as Truth. Imagination is forced into a proscrustean bed and deliberately stunted. Here, Hobbes' political theology is perhaps the antithesis of Mādhyamaka as it is pure nominalism, deployed to cut away from view all forms of horizontal relations (or associations) other than the vertical hierarchy from subject to Leviathan. Hobbes admits his state of nature is purely of his imagination and the Leviathan is built on this artifice (1860, III: 115). Nāgārjuna shows us a way out of the delusion yet powerful rhetorical construct by affirming the conventional reality of those relations and condition that Hobbes deliberately obscures to justify his political project: for Nāgārjuna relations are a given of the cosmos, not mere patterns imposed by a sovereign.

In this way, Mādhyamaka cosmology, given its basis in relations/conditions, offers a metaphysical system that could contribute to the project of cosmopolitanism towards socio-ecological harmony through non-hierarchy. For exa ple, my preferred nomenclature of 'Interdependent Co-Arising' resonates with the contemporary Western Buddhist of popular figures like Thich Nhat Hanh and the concept of 'interbeing'. He shows how *The Heart Sutra* reveals not the Nothing (nihilism) of Emptiness but its *Fullness* from which he develops the idea of 'interbeing', a term that emphasises interdependence of all things and embraces the positive aspect of Emptiness as it is lived and acted with a sense of connection between and

through all things. It is a means to challenge the suffering in the phenomenal world, not just to seek release from it. The implications are profound not just for grounding politics in conditions of intersubjectivity but also regarding nature and the manifold relations therein. It is this impetus that can be highly useful for reorienting cosmopolitan thought in IR – one that looks to the conditions of how such social relations arise, sustain, and move. One example of how this could inform an alternate basis for a cosmopolitan politics comes from Ardent. Ardent's solution to nihilism is political community of rememberance and dialogue, a natality of new beginnings and rebirths. This offers one way to help re-orient cosmopolitanism towards the potentialities within conditions of co-dependency by and through a responsibility to others and nature. It is not some limited 'being-with-one-another, being-in-the-polis' (i.e. Heidegger's *Miteinandersein*) – the racialized politics of the volk – but a genuine universality based from the conditions and relations of 'the between'. This is just one example of how, in this world of conditions of dependent arising/emptiness, we can bring though back to the world of motion and change through the relations that constitute it.

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1 Of course, Nietzsche sought to overcome this malaise and looked toward the day when Christian values *and* nihilism were overcome.
2 I thank Jonardon Ganeri for a discussion on this point.
3 There is an important connection here with Plotinus and Mādhyamaka that should be taken up in further research. For a similar comparison between Plotinus and Vasubandhu see Sabo, 2017: 494-505.
4 The *Upanisa Sutta* (the 'Discourse on Supporting Conditions') in the *Samyutta Nikaya* formalises this position.
5 Nāgārjuna claims throughout that he does not negate anything, for there is nothing to be negated. That is, as all things are empty, there is neither a thing to ne negated nor a negation (2005: LXIII). It is important to note that non-conventional truth of the ultimate are incapable of expression through conceptual or other perceptual attachments and hence should not be a point of speculation that would be merely ego-drive.
6 Nāgārjuna argues that because of our reification conventional thinking many of us naively perceive things as substantial. It is this predisposition to delusion that lies at the basis of all suffering.