The Apology of Nāgārjuna

Annotations to the Mūlamadhyamakākarikā

Matura Thesis

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He, O men of Athens, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.

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1. Introduction

Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist monk and scholar of Indian origin and is often regarded as the founder of Madhyamaka Buddhism, one of the two great schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism[1]. Precious little is known about the specifics of his life, though it is reasonably certain to assume that he was born somewhere in India around the second century CE.[2] All of the major sources on his life are of mythological character and are meant for pedagogical and not historical purposes. There are two major recounts of his life: The Tibetan sources claim that Nāgārjuna was predicted to lead a life of a mere seven years, but the great Buddhist master *Saraha* overheard Nāgārjuna recite Vedic poems and, touched by the youngster's intelligence, advised the young Nāgārjuna to renounce the worldly life, if he desires to live. Nāgārjuna then received the full vows of a monk and was known as *Bhikshu-shri*. When the land around the monastery was struck with famine, Nāgārjuna took up alchemy, synthesising gold in order to feed the people and ensured the monastery's survival for twelve full years. Because this was considered unseemly of a monk, Nāgārjuna was expelled from the monastery. He then had to build a thousand stupas in order to redeem his deeds, which he achieved with the help of mythical serpents called *Nāgas*, after which he was known as *Nāgārjuna*, the noble serpent[3]. The Chinese source recounts that Nāgārjuna and some of his friends once seduced the King's mistresses by means of magical yogic powers. Nāgārjuna was the only one who survived this audacity and later retired from the worldly life in order to find enlightenment. He was such a powerful magician and meditator that he was invited to the bottom of the ocean, where the magical realm of the Nāgas lies. There he found the *wisdom literature* of the Buddhist tradition, the Prajñāpāramitā sutras, which he returned to the world, earning him the honorific title of *Nāgārjuna*[4].

Iconographic deptiction of Nāgārjuna in *Buddhist Iconography* (Chandra 1991).

Regardless of these obviously rather fantastical hagiographies, extremely few details of Nāgārjuna's life are known to us. Indeed, it is even unclear how long precisely Nāgārjuna

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[1] Hayes 2019.

[2] For a thorough reconstruction of the historical Nāgārjuna the reader may be referred to Joseph Walser's formidable *Nagarjuna in Context* (Walser 2005).

[3] Berger 2019.

[4] Berger 2019.

lived, some claim six-hundred years other hold three-hundred as more accurate[5]. There is obviously little historical evidence for either of these legends, in fact it is even possible that there existed more than just one Nāgārjuna over time whose works are now known under this collective name. Regardless of these hagiographical ambiguities, there is a lot more certainty about what Nāgārjuna has written throughout his life, most notably among all his work, is the Mūlamadhyamakākarikā, the fundamental wisdom of the middle-way, hereafter referred to by its acronym: the MMK. The MMK has been regarded as *the* foundational doctrine of Madhyamaka Buddhism and Nāgārjuna as its author is now regarded by many Buddhists as a quasi-divine figure.

It is this thesis' intention to defend Nāgārjuna against a series of accusations and flawed interpretations with which both the author and his work have been charged with throughout both Western and Eastern intellectual history. Indeed, I deem it necessary to present a sort of *Apology of Nāgārjuna* in order to restore his reputation against those who have too hastily discarded him as a charlatan and sophist, as had been necessary with another great philosopher who was unduly brought before trial. In order to achieve this an – admittedly fictitious – trial will be re-enacted in which Nāgārjuna will face three of the most damning accusations, in order for them then to be refuted by an equal number of creditable defenders. However, whether Nāgārjuna may be acquitted of all the charges pressed is a question beyond this thesis' scope and a definitive conclusion on the cogency and potency of Nāgārjuna's world-view will not be reached. In this matter the reader will never hear the absolute truth – but only ever the evidence.

Still, I cannot deny that in this trial I feel more inclined to the role of the attorney than to that of the prosecutor, for I am convinced that this text merits every moment of its lecture and deem it a great misfortune that it has not gained sufficient traction in the intellectual discourse to be widely read, perhaps even outside the narrow abuttals of Western academia. Due to the naturally occurring difficulties with such a foreign and novel text I suggest to occassionally take up a more tolerant than critical perspective concerning the text. Even in its flaws the MMK is highly original and enticing, rife with valuable lessons not only about Eastern philosophy but about our own manner of thought as well and it is most unfortunate that Nāgārjuna still is virtually unheard of in this hemisphere. Indeed, the text has only been known in the West since the beginning of the 20th century and all serious translations of it have been conceived in the past thirty years or so. Fortunately, it has recently aroused significant interest in miscellaneous fields: Among them particle physics[6], philosophical existentialism[7] and popular Buddhism[8].

These developments are most welcome but could not have been possible without a great number of remarkable translations recently published by some of the most reputable Indologists to date. Most notably among them: Mark Siderits[9] , David J. Kalupahana[10] and Jay L. Garfield[11]. The latter of which will be used as the textual basis of this

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[5]Nagarjuna 1993, p. XVI.

[6]Kohl 2012.

[7]Franklin 2012.

[8]Gyamtso 2003.

[9]Nagarjuna 2013.

[10]Nagarjuna 1986.

[11]Nagarjuna 1995.

thesis. There are a number of reasons why this translation may be preferred: Firstly, Garfield has translated many other works by various Buddhist authors throughout his career. Additionally, Garfield has been a prolific scholar on Indian Buddhism and has held many rather cogent positions on most of the subjects expressed in the text. His excellent commentary on the MMK[12] is a sterling example of this. Furthermore, Garfield has – which unfortunately is not given with all translations – preserved the original lyrical structure of the text and therefore presents a particularly accurate representation of the original work. Moreover, his translation is probably the most easily procurable, certainly in continental Europe. In short, much of this thesis is owed to Jay L. Garfield and his laudable work, not only as the key translator of the MMK but also of Tsongkhapa's *Ocean of Reasoning*[13] as well as co-author of a highly readable chapter in Graham Priest's *Beyond the Limits of Thought*[14] on Nāgārjuna's philosophy.

All Sanskrit terms employed in this thesis will be written in their original diacritical form[15] and are put in *italics*, except for titles and personal names. The work is split in three main chapters ensued by some short, final remarks. Ideally, in the end the reader would have seen the various complications any exegete of the MMK encounters and will then be able to more easily follow the fourth chapter: the actual exegesis of the text. Now it is not possible to offer a complete and comprehensive interpretation of the MMK in its entirety here, but as will be seen, the major conclusions drawn in it may be extracted from a very short number of verses. By thoroughly examining these parts we may deduce a rather cogent interpretation in the end. Before however it must be said that the MMK is an ancient and enigmatic text, hence, reconstructing its position perfectly is highly difficult if not outright impossible. At some point however a cogent position is more powerful than a textually, historically and religiously convincing one and it is therefore not completely inconceivable that some parts of this thesis may not adequately represent the historical Nāgārjuna's world-view. But then again, there may not have been such a thing as an historical Nāgārjuna in the first place.

The reader must excuse me for some further preparatory remarks: First things first, it should be said that the main manner of argument employed by Nāgārjuna is nearly always from the perspective of a foreign argument, seldom in the MMK does one find an actual, original position of Nāgārjuna's, despite the lack of any quotation marks. This is not unlike how a Sceptic would argue[16]: Examining a different argument in order to refute it. Nāgārjuna had a very clear audience in mind all throughout the text: the MMK is meant for a well-educated and privileged class of Indian monks who were very well acquainted with the Buddhist doctrine and the contemporary philosophies of the time. This is particularly important because Nāgārjuna is, in a way, a philosopher *ex negativo*: most of the text deals with refuting a given interlocutor and it is the rare exception for Nāgārjuna to actually take up a position at all. Lastly, the MMK is often considered

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[12]All translations are listed under the entry *Nagarjuna* and not by the names of the respective translators in the bibliography. In this case Nagarjuna 1995, pp. 84-359.

[13]Tsongkhapa 2006c.

[14]Priest 1995.

[15]While some scholars, notably among them Alan Watts, refuse this form of transliteration categorically and while it is true that they will not be particularly handy to the unacquainted reader, their use has become best-practice in the field over the past decades.

[16]Cf. Chapter 3.2.1 on Sextus Empiricus.

a primarily religious source, which is not quite adequate either. While it may be true that it treats a fundamentally religious matter[17], that of *enlightenment* or *Buddhahood*, Nāgārjuna bases this on a primarily philosophical and logical structure. That is to say, Nāgārjuna does not rely on intuition or divine spark but rather on a theoretical structure in which any argument is only as strong as it is valid. While it would be unjustified to read Nāgārjuna as a mere esoteric[18], he is, without a doubt, a radically negative philosopher and it will be seen that much of his doctrine is based on a transcendence of the ordinary or conventional realm. In this sense Nāgārjuna does offer some sort of soteriological position, considering that this transcendence or, as Nāgārjuna puts it himself, relinquishment is strongly associated with the Buddha and the *tathāgata* (the "one who has thus gone").

In any way, it will be of utmost importance to the reader to be rather conciliate in the beginning of his lecture, for it will require much willingness of his to rethink in order to properly understand this most singular text. Many of our well-settled preconceptions are cast into doubt by it and the manner in which this is done is equally foreign to us. This makes the MMK so interesting, for it gives us the rare opportunity to observe a very novel and initially estranged manner of thought, which may help revise our own in the end. Nonetheless, the reader ought not to cast upon the MMK the very manner of thought one tries to examine or else this exercise will have been futile from the beginning. As Nāgārjuna puts it:

When you foist on us
All of your errors
You are like a man who has mounted his horse
And has forgotten that very horse.[19]

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[17]At least if we consider Buddhist doctrine as religious, which in and of itself is an unproven premise.
[18]See chapter 3.1.1.
[19]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 69, Chapter XXIV, Stanza 15.

2. The Catuṣkoṭi

The Buddha told Ananda, "[...] It is like when someone points his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, that person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also."

The Gautama Buddha in the
Śūraṅgama Sūtra

It is not at all surprising that a text which is acutely foreign to any Western reader's mind in a great number of regards uses an equally strange and foreign manner of argument. The biggest such difference being the logical figure known as the *catuṣkoṭi* (literally the "four corners"), also known under its Western name, the *tetralemma*. Just with any text, it is very important to have thoroughly understood the manner of argument first in order to fully comprehend the conclusions reached. The MMK is no exception.

As the name *tetralemma* suggests, there is a strong relation between it and the logical figure well known to us as the *dilemma*. Just as the *di*lemma is defined by *two* equally untenable positions between one must choose, the *tetra*lemma is defined by *four* equally undesirable outcomes. However, this simple nomenclature should not distract us from the underlying complexity of the *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma. This logical and rhetorical figure lies at the heart of the MMK's argumentative structure and is a staple among Buddhist texts in general. To a western reader the tetralemma will seem rather strange, even redundant, fortunately however, one may follow the MMK's argumentation without ever accepting the tetralemma as given: The tetralemma does not as much *replace* the dilemma as it *expands* it. This is not to say that the tetralemma is unimportant for a thorough comprehension of the Madhyamaka doctrine but the ultimate conclusions are, though less plausibly, also accessible to a Western reader in opposition to the tetralemma's basic composition.

Just like the entire text the tetralemma itself is, in some sense, nothing but a pedagogical measure: Just how the MMK sets out to show the path to enlightenment and liberation, i.e. to Buddhahood, the tetralemma offers a means of thoroughly ridding the novices, who were the likely audience of such a text, of any given concept in order to eventually bring them to the point of the "relinquishing of all views"[20]. Now it is important not to forget that Nāgārjuna does not agree with any position in the tetralemma nor does he believe that there is another position possible. Essentially Nāgārjuna attempts to undermine a given concept, so one can be liberated from it, by showing that no position, no conception thereof, may possibly exist on it. The sum total of all positions on a given matter is, in the Buddhist tradition at least, defined by the tetralemma. Thus, if we as Western readers take the two new positions as unthinkable right away we should reach the same conclusions as well.

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[20]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 83, Chapter XXVII, Stanza 30.

2.1. The Dilemma

Despite its argumentative redundancy, there is no thorough comprehension of the MMK feasible without also thoroughly understanding the tetralemma. But before the intricacies of the tetralemma shall be explained in even greater detail, its actual form should first be presented. Without having a formal understanding of the tetralemma, no exegesis of the text will be possible. In order to proceed from the known to the unknown we shall begin with the traditional dilemma first.

As it will be characterised here, the dilemma is a choice between one proposition (p) or its negation ($\neg$ p). In a sense this is merely a specific case of the more general class of dilemmas: usually, dilemmas are characterised by two *different* choices (p and q). I would however argue that in any true dilemma $\neg$ p implies q because else there would be no real binding choice from the beginning and hence no dilemma. If $\neg$ p is accepted as a possible alternative position then this position is by default one possible solution to the dilemma. This might seem an unnecessary step, but it will make the notation significantly simpler. Thus, following notation of the dilemma shall be used for the further enquiries:

0.1 $\neg$ (p $\wedge$ $\neg$ p)
0.2   p $\vee$ $\neg$ p
1.   p $\rightarrow$ a
2. $\neg$ p $\rightarrow$ b

C. a $\vee$ b

One key characteristic of any dilemma, as well as any tetralemma, are the two, or four, equally untenable conclusions that follow from every position, therefore rendering any one of them undesirable. This is exactly the way Nāgārjuna employs the tetralemma: Firstly, proving that every one of the four lemmas leads to an untenable outcome and finally concluding that therefore *no* position on it is admissible. Nāgārjuna's way of employing the tetralemma is of exclusively negative nature: In a sense, the tetralemma is used as a four-way *reductio ad absurdum.*

Any reader mildly acquainted with Western logic will invariably be surprised by the first two premises (0.1 and 0.2) added in this formulation of the dilemma. Indeed, strictly logically speaking they are absolutely redundant. However, the two new lemmas of the tetralemma stem precisely from doubting the apodictic truth of these two (usually implicit) premises, as shall be presently seen.

2.2. The Tetralemma

Now what does it mean to doubt the first premise: 0.1 postulates nothing else than that it is impossible that both choices are simultaneously possible. This is also known as the *principium non-contradictionem* and is an integral part of Western logic.[21] For a Buddhist, including Nāgārjuna, this need not be true, to them it is indeed a mere *convention*.[22] It is at least conceivable – albeit implausible – that p and ¬ p are true at the same time. The learned reader will immediately see a great number of problems with this position and these concerns will be treated with the rigidity they deserve in chapter 3.1.1. For the moment being, let it rest at this and take the MMK's word for it. Not least because it seems that there have actually been Buddhist scholars who have taken up a similar position on some of the problems discussed in the text, therefore necessitating the treatment of this position as well, if the MMK is to claim authority. Thus, the first new lemma is formulated by claiming that: p ∧ ¬ p.

The fourth lemma is an interesting case as well: The dilemma postulates that the choice given is mandatory, but this equally need not be the case. There is at least the possibility that neither of the options seem appealing and therefore one just does not act at all. This equates to doubting premise 0.2, which is also known as *tertium non datur* (lat. the third does not exist) but indeed a third (or rather fourth) exists: Neither, not p *and* not ¬ p. From these still rather rudimentary considerations a first version of the tetralemma may be extrapolated:

I. p
II. ¬ p
III. p ∧ ¬ p
IV. ¬ (p ∨ ¬ p)

Unsurprisingly, a sizeable number of flaws have evaded our initial examination; the rest of this subchapter will be devoted to eliminating them. Let us firstly turn to the fourth *koṭi* (lemma), which in its present state reads as "it is not true that either p or not-p", or rather this is how it *should* read. Unfortunately, De Morgan's laws let the fourth *koṭi* collapse into the third one, thus, making this formulation basically worthless.[23] It might now seem appealing, to just express this without the parentheses: ¬ p ∧ ¬ ¬ p. But then again, a double negation just annihilates itself: ¬ ¬ p → p. Thus, again the fourth *koṭi* collapses into the third. So much to the fourth *koṭi*.

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[21]Cf. 3.1.1.

[22]This is not all too surprising: In some sense the MMK's very quintessence is the realisation that *everything* is conventional. There is no apparent reason why this should not extend to this case as well.

[23]For a full statement of De Morgan's laws the reader may consult the technical appendix. The laws essentially regulates how to proceed with negations before a bracket and are applicable in every propositional algebra and should therefore apply to our formulation of the tetralemma as well. At least, if it is supposed to remain within the realm of classical logic. For a complete prove of the collapse of this *koṭi*, the reader may be referred to the technical appendix.

Despite the many, miscellaneous problems the third *koṭi* suffers from, Priest[24] additionally points out that the tetralemma is supposed to be mutually exclusive, so that no one *koṭi* can be applied in simultaneity with any number of other *koṭi*s. This premise is not at all fulfilled with the third *koṭi*, given that p ∧ ¬ p entails the first two lemmas: p and ¬ p respectively. Let it be noted, that these problems still stand secluded from the even more profound danger of accepting contradictions[25]. However, it makes little sense to delve into these content-based quarrels before one has even thoroughly grasped the very structure of the matter discussed. Thus, it should be our foremost preoccupation to resolve some of these formal shortcomings first before we already dismiss the *catuṣkoṭi* entirely.

There are different approaches to formulating the tetralemma more cogently: One possibility is to use quantifiers (i.e. ∀ *for all* and ∃ *there exists some*) as suggest Robinson[26] or Tillemans[27], however their approach suffers from a number of problems[28] and seems quite removed from the actual textual basis. Fortunately, there is another alternative: One could doubt the negative translation and claim that a double negation does not result in no negation, which Westerhoff[29] probably proposes most convincingly. He does this by basing his interpretation on two different types of negation in Sanskrit: *paryudāsa* and *prasajaya*. European languages do not usually express this difference clearly and we mostly rely on context and pre-knowledge to decipher the meaning, however with Nāgārjuna this distinction might be of greater significance. The following thought-experiment might help in elucidaing the difference:

The sentence "The cellar in my house is not dark." implies (in English as in logic) that the room is lit. This is a good example of an implicational negation (*paryudāsa*): Whenever a room is not dark it *must* be lit. But what if my house has no cellar? In this case a non-implicational negation (*prasajaya*) would be applicable: It states nothing else that this sentence is wrong for whatever reason. The relation between subject and predicate may be flawed either because the predicate is wrong, which might include a case of implicational negation, or because the subject is flawed, in this case due to its non-existence.[30]

These considerations would still be quite meaningless in and of themselves, given that they do not *prima facie* appear to resolve our problems. With them however we may formulate a (partially) non-implicational formulation of the tetralemma. The notation proposed by Priest[31] is one such example. What Priest proposes are so-called truth-predicates: T<p> and F<p>. The advantage here is that ¬ T<p> does not imply F<p> and vice versa, because they need not be implicational. Though they can be. Importantly a double negation still annihilates, because despite T<p> not implying ¬F<p> any longer, ¬ ¬ T<p> still implies T<p>. Still, the two truth-predicates remain fundamentally separate and have no real relation to each other, unlike p and ¬ p would have, and can

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[24]Priest 2010.

[25]This concerns will be examined more closely in the subchapter on Aristotle (3.1.1), Priest (3.1.3) and Wittgenstein (3.2.3) later in this thesis.

[26]Robinson 1957.

[27]Tillemans 1999.

[28]Some reasons and further explanations may be found in the technical appendix.

[29]Westerhoff 2006.

[30]Because *prasajya*-negations are more general in type they ought to be given as default, whereas a *paryudāsa*-negation should always be stated explicitly.

[31]Priest 2010.

therefore co-exist where an implicational (*paryudāsa*) negation could not: T<p> ∧ ¬ T<p> is impossible[32] This relation remains implicational and therefore will not render an acceptable form of contradiction.

This might seem like an arbitrary *ad hoc* approach to solving the problem, but by combining Priest's more intuitive syntax with Westerhoff's reasoning one may deduce a reasonably convincing formulation of the tetralemma, which is not only intuitive but reasonably close to the way the tetralemma is employed in the actual text. The following structure shall be used as the formal basis for understanding Nāgārjuna's argumentation for the rest of this thesis:

I.   T<p> ∧ ¬ F<p>
II. F<p> ∧ ¬ T<p>
III. T<p> ∧ F<p> (or B<p>)
IV. ¬T<p> ∧ ¬ F<p> (or N<p>)

In a sense, the first and second lemma are now defined as implicational, even across predicates, while that is not the case with the third and the fourth. One might ask if T<p> and F<p> (as well as their negations) could not just as well act as independent *koṭi*s, due to the possibility of them being non-implicational. For instance, T<p> could be true while ¬ F<p> is false, the formulation with "∧" does not account for this possibility. This however would just equate to the third *koṭi*.[33] Now, it is not inconceivable that someone could claim that T<p> is just true independent of the others (T<p> ∧ 0) which is a statement that does not collapse into any of the previous *koṭi*s nor into the implicit statement and thus should be considered an independent *koṭi* itself. However, any truth-predicate necessarily will have *some* value for any given proposition.[34] Thus, either T<p> and F<p> holds or T<p> and ¬ F<p>; either the third or the first lemma will therefore apply. The same is true for F<p>. This notation has the additional advantage that every lemma is defined by the negation of all three others[35] and that every lemma is therefore completely autarchical without implying or collapsing into another.

Despite all this, finding a thorough formulation of the *catuṣkoṭi* was never a matter of debate among Indian scholars of the time and the text certainly shows no marks of this. The *catuṣkoṭi* was sufficiently clear to Nāgārjuna's readership at the time and could be accepted without proof and certainly without employing propositional algebra. Though in order to convince a modern reader of the tetralemma's comprehensiveness and therefore of Nāgārjuna's general soundness and cogency, this difference must, firstly, be made clear and then, secondly, transferred into a logically sound environment, which includes prin-

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[32]While it is possible to violate this convention in the same way the two conventions 0.1 and 0.2 were violated, it is not at all necessary to this formulation of the tetralemma. All that it would do is complicate the third lemma (which would then read as: (T<p> ∧ F<p>) ∨ (T<p> ∧ ¬ T<p>) ∨ (F<p> ∧ ¬ F<p>)), further removing this formulation from its use in the text. Priest 2010 proceeds in the same manner.

[33]See chapter A.3 for a detailed proof.

[34]Indeed, this follows from the premise that T<p> and ¬ T<p>, and F<p> respectively, are implicationally negational: If: ¬(T<p> ∧ ¬ F<p>) ∧ ¬ (F<p> ∧ ¬ F<p>), from which follows: (T<p> ∨ ¬ T<p>) ∧ (F<p> ∨ ¬ F<p>), then, there is no p for which only T<p>/¬T<p> or only F<p>/¬F<p> holds.

[35]Again see chapter A.3.

cipally a fundamental independence of all the four *koṭi*s.[36] Given that the here proposed formulation suits these predicaments best, it will remain its definition for the rest of this thesis and will return in the following chapters regularly.

It is important that all four lemmas remain autarchical of each other because, as already mentioned, the tetralemma is by nature a pedagogical tool. It is not meant itself as a means of expressing any given truth but rather acts like a ladder with ever higher rungs. Entering a new rung means leaving all the lower ones behind and thus neither the third nor the fourth lemma should be able to co-exist with any of the others.[37] Roughly speaking, each position may be attributed to a particular position in the path to enlightenment: The first lemma represents the position of the common man and the conventional realm, the *idée reçue* if you so will. The second lemma is what is the *conventional* conception of the Buddhist doctrine; what the ordinary man believes that the Buddhist think. The young monk at the beginning of his initiation however will believe that both positions are somewhat true, thus entering the third lemma. In the eyes of a Buddhist master this is already a step closer to the truth although still fundamentally flawed. The wise monk on the contrary will find both these positions absurd and reach the fourth lemma. By transcending even this last position, the wise monk will attain true Buddhahood. We will pass through all these four positions in chapter 3.

Some final remarks to end with: Firstly, as discussed above, it is crucial that the tetralemma is absolutely comprehensive. How exactly that is the case, may be unclear at first, given that there is a seemingly infinite amount of other possibilities (e.g. a fifth *koṭi* which is the combination of the third and fourth), however all other combinations inevitably collapse into another *koṭi* and thus are of no merit.[38] Secondly, there is a different, and equally coherent, position concerning the tetralemma – that easily remains within the norms of Western logic without using such a novel notation – with which the reader has been spared for so far. This position will appear shortly. Lastly, it must be added that these considerations would have most likely seemed rather bizarre and absurd to the historic Nāgārjuna and were certainly of only little (if any) concern to him. One reason Nāgārjuna employed the tetralemma was certainly due to his readers, who considered this to be the *ne plus ultra* of logics. One could be tempted to skip these strenuous and seemingly futile discussions (particularly considering that Nāgārjuna would have probably done so too), but in order to properly defend Nāgārjuna against his accusers, that is, to make him appear as convincing, coherent and cogent as possible one must need to have thoroughly understood the logical landscape in which Nāgārjuna and his peers operate first.

Despite the importance of the *catuṣkoṭi* however it is decidedly *not* Nāgārjuna's intention to prove it right. As we will see Nāgārjuna has a quite ambivalent relation to the tetralemma: on the one hand he considers it a comprehensive display of all possible logical states and employs it throughout the text. On the other hand, his ultimate intention is neither to prove the tetralemma right nor to show where which *koṭi* is applicable. Rather the MMK attempts to move far beyond the tetralemma itself. These considerations will be

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[36] A partial proof of this was attempted in the technical appendix. See A.3.
[37] As has been proven in A.3.
[38] Again see A.3.

laid out in further detail in chapter 3 and we shall presently turn our attention away from these meta-logical deliberations. May the reader however be warned from one common error, which will also be revisited in chapter 3: confusing the above stated "ultimate aim" of the MMK with the fourth *koṭi*, because despite their superficial similarities, ontologically and soteriologically speaking, they could not be further apart.

2.3. Exegesis of the Catuṣkoṭi

In this subchapter some excerpts from the MMK will be presented in order to show how Nāgārjuna employs the *catuṣkoṭi* in the text itself. Furthermore, it will become painfully clear that the *catuṣkoṭi* does absolutely play a pivotal role in the MMK. Whereas the first few chapters of the MMK, which are mostly examinations of concepts traditionally found in Buddhist ontology, still possess a more dilemmatic than tetralemmatic structure, everything past chapter XV is stained all over with elements of the *catuṣkoṭi*.[39] It has been claimed in chapter 2.2 that the reason why the *catuṣkoṭi* plays such a pivotal role in the MMK is, because by refuting it, Nāgārjuna can prove that there is no coherent position possible on the matter discussed. The passages presently discussed are particularly sterling examples of this. A particularly clear passage is found in Stanzas 11 in Chapter XXII:

"Empty" should not be asserted.
"Nonempty" should not be asserted.
Neither both nor neither should be asserted.
They are only used nominally.[40]

Essentially, Nāgārjuna refutes all four possible positions on the phenomenon of emptiness thereby refuting emptiness in its entirety. Using the handy notation developed above the stanza reads:

I.   ¬(T<e> ∧ ¬ F<e>)
II.   ¬(F<e> ∧ ¬ T<e>)
III. ¬(T<e> ∧ F<e>)
IV. ¬(¬ T<e> ∧ ¬ F<e>)

In fact, logically speaking, this equates to saying nothing at all[41] because no other position is conceivable in this case. This is exegetically particularly significant, given that what is treated here is emptiness itself. We still unfortunately lack the necessary context in order to fully appreciate the scope and relevance of this passage, but let it be said, that *emptiness* is one of the defining characteristics of the MMK and what is said here may be regarded as one of the quintessences of the entire work. This point will be further expanded upon in the succeeding chapters.

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[39]This is not to say that there are no earlier examples in the text but the *catuṣkoṭi* only really comes into full play afterwards. The third and fourth *koṭi* are absurd enough on their own to be ignored when it comes to these modest examples.

[40]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 61, Chapter XXII, Stanza 11.

[41]See the technical Appendix A.3.

Another particularly clear example of the *catuṣkoṭi* would be Chapter XXV on *nirvāṇa* (literally "blown out", referring to an ultimate state of soteriological release). As usual, Nāgārjuna begins with taking up the argument that *nirvāṇa* exists (T<n> ∧ ¬ F<n>) and employs two *reductios*. The first one goes:

If nirvāṇa were existent,
Nirvāṇa would be compounded.
A noncompounded existent
Does not exist anywhere.[42]

The statement that there are no non-compounded existences has already been, allegedly, proven by Nāgārjuna in chapter XIII and therefore is taken for granted here. A compounded existence is defined as an entity whose essence is assembled by a multitude of other parts. The classical example is a chariot: A chariot itself has no essence, because its essence is defined by its parts (i.e. the wheel, the axis etc.), who themselves however are mere compounded phenomena again.[43] Compounded phenomena however are all flawed and part of cyclical existence, which *nirvāṇa* precisely tries to transcend. If *nirvāṇa* were compounded, it would itself be part of *saṃsāra*, i.e. conventional reality or cyclic existence. Hence, if *nirvāṇa* were to exist it would need to be non-compounded, but, as it has been seen, everything is compounded. The other *reductio* reads:

If nirvāṇa were existent,
How could nirvāṇa be nondependant?
A nondependant existent
Does not exist anywhere.[44]

Basically, this argument repeats the claim that *nirvāṇa* cannot be part of *saṃsāra* because everything in *saṃsāra* is dependent. As Garfield points out, the *nirvāṇa* "is by definition, liberation from all that characterizes saṃsāra"[45] and therefore can neither be dependent nor compounded. Contrary to the lay-man's opinion, which is captured in the first lemma, it is not true to say that "*nirvāṇa* exists". This leads directly to the second position raised: that *nirvāṇa* does *not* exist. Which would seem like a sensible conclusion from the two proceeding objections. Against this Nāgārjuna raises another two objections in stanzas 7 and 8 respectively:

If nirvāṇa were not existent,
How could it be appropriate for it to be nonexistent?
Where nirvāṇa is not existent,
It cannot be a nonexistent.

If nirvāṇa were not existent
How could nirvāṇa be nondependant?
Whatever is nondependant

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[42]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 73, Chapter XXV, Stanza 5.
[43]See Garfield's commentary to Nagarjuna 1995, pp. 207-215.
[44]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 74, Chapter XXV, Stanza 6.
[45]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 326.

Is not nonexistent.[46]

Stanza 7 seems rather confusing: Why can *nirvāṇa* not be "a nonexistent"? The reason for this is that *nirvāṇa* is literally a transcendence of the ordinary world, the world of *saṃsāra*. To claim that *nirvāṇa* does not exist still places it into this realm; just how saying that a room is not-lit means it is dark which still is a predicate of *saṃsāra*, whereby *nirvāṇa* would not truly be independent. For a thing not to exist it must have existed in some way before – even just as a thought – which would already be enough to foist on it the very predicates of *saṃsāra* that *nirvāṇa* is supposed to transcend. Due to the impossibility of attributing properties of *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa* one must exclude both its positive and negative existence because *saṃsāra* both includes existence and non-existence. It makes neither sense to call *nirvāṇa* red nor non-red, nor existent nor non-existent these are inappropriate (and irrelevant) predicates. One could also argue that if *nirvāṇa* were non-existent, its non-existence would be dependent on the fact that it existed, therefore it could not be a transcendence of the plane of ordinary existence. But the reason why someone would claim that *nirvāṇa* was non-existent in the first place was in order to circumvent it being placed into the conventional realm; making this attempt futile from the beginning[47]. The mistake here is that in order to attribute a predicate to *nirvāṇa*, *nirvāṇa* needs to exist; which has just been proven to be absurd. Stanza 8 turns this around: If *nirvāṇa* were truly non-existent, then there is no way to attribute to it any predicate. Thus, saying that "*nirvāṇa* does not exist" would be absurd as well. Ergo, the second lemma (F<n> ∨ ¬ T<n>) falls as well. Then the tetralemma continues in stanzas 11 to 14:

If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent
Passing beyond would, impossibly,
Be both existent and nonexistent.

If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and nonexistent,
Nirvāṇa would not be nondependant.
Since it would depend on both of these.

How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
Nirvāṇa is uncompounded.
Both existents and nonexistents are compounded.

How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and nonexistent?
These two cannot be in the same place.
Like light and darkness.[48]

Basically, because *nirvāṇa* is dependent in either case the combination of both is pointless.

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[46]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 74, Chapter XXV, Stanza 7–8.
[47]For a concise differentiation between the ordinary or conventional and the ultimate see chapter 3.1.2.
[48]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 74–75, Chapter XXV, Stanza 11–14.

Furthermore, if someone would pass into *nirvāṇa* she, or he, would be both existent and non-existent.[49] Even worse, *nirvāṇa* would then depend on someone both existing and not existing which means *nirvāṇa* (again) would be dependent, which is absurd[50]. A similar point is made in the third stanza quoted: If *nirvāṇa* is supposed to be uncompounded, it cannot consist of existence and non-existence, viz. of two *compounded* phenomena. After having seen the inadequacy of the first two lemmas, the third one (T<n> ∧ F<p>) is gone as well. Now to the last *koṭi* (¬ T<n> ∧ ¬ F<n>):

Nirvāṇa is said to be
Neither existent nor nonexistent.
If the existent and the nonexistent were established,
This would be established.

[...]

Then by whom is it expounded
"Neither existent nor nonexistent"?[51]

The problem here is that the fourth *koṭi* assumes that either *nirvāṇa* exists or does not exist, that is to say, that either one of these attributes *could* hold but that they do not in this special instance. This is essentially the same mistake as with the second lemma: Not only is it wrong to attribute positive predicates to the *nirvāṇa*, it is equally flawed to attribute their negations; given that both these predicates are part of *saṃsāra*. *Nirvāṇa* transcends both existence and non-existence *and* their respective negations.[52] As has been demonstrated above, neither position is coherent in and of itself. As Garfield puts it: "[I]t makes no sense for nirvāṇa to exist. And it makes no sense for it not to exist. So of each, the negation can't be assigned any coherent meaning. And conjoining two pieces of nonsense only yields further nonsense."[53] Garfield additionally points out that it is unclear who could possibly claim such insight: Someone who still is in *saṃsāra* clearly cannot, why would anyone believe him? But someone in *nirvāṇa*, that is someone who has transcended conventional truth, cyclic existence and all error does not expound this either, why would he? Just like the true Buddha did: He who has achieved *nirvāṇa* will not spoil it by expressing it in language.[54] In fact, he could not, even if he wanted to. There are no longer any means to express this in, because this would require the transcendence of the conventional to pass through conventional means, i.e. language. As Nāgārjuna puts it:

Having passed into nirvāṇa, the Victorious Conqueror [Buddha]
Is neither said to be existent

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[49]It becomes awfully clear here that Nāgārjuna, contrary to what Priest occasionally suggests (see chapter 3.1.3), does not easily accept contradictions. It seems that Nāgārjuna becomes more willing to accept (or rather examine) contradictions as cogent positions when the subject matter is particularly abstract and removed from ordinary experience. As is the case with the *nirvāṇa*. But where this is not given, he is rather averse to blatant contradictions (e.g. someone becoming both existent and non-existent).

[50]It might seem tempting to doubt that *nirvāṇa* is non-dependent, however this is precisely its definition. This would equate to claiming that it does not exist.

[51]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 75, Chapter XXV, Stanza 15-16.

[52]Which need not be non-existence and existence as Westerhoff points out (see 2.2).

[53]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 330.

[54]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 330.

Nor said to be nonexistent.
Neither both nor neither are said.[55]

The first two lemmas have already been proven to be wrong, conjoining both does not help either. But not even to say that *neither* holds is correct: one ought not to assign *existence* to *nirvāṇa* , nor ought one to assign *non-existence* to it – one ought not to assign anything to it. Hence, we get the following notational structure:

$$\neg \ (T{<}n{>} \ \wedge \ \neg \ F{<}n{>}) \ \wedge \ \neg \ (\ F{<}n{>} \ \wedge \ \neg \ T{<}n{>}) \ \wedge \ \neg \ (T{<}n{>} \ \wedge \ F{<}n{>}) \ \wedge$$
$$\neg \ (\neg \ T{<}n{>} \ \wedge \ \neg \ F{<}n{>})$$

Which annihilates itself to nothing.[56] This is indeed the ultimate conclusion drawn by Nāgārjuna: *nirvāṇa* is itself nothing but *saṃsāra*. Even *nirvāṇa* – the ultimate enlightenment, the relinquishing of all error – is itself erroneous, a mere convention like everything in *saṃsāra*. But he who realises this may finally pass from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*. In other words:

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence [saṃsāra] and nirvāṇa.
There is not even the slightest difference
Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.[57]

Something that is empty is part of the conventional realm (that is *saṃsāra*). Something is defined as empty if there is no cogent position on it, that is a concept that cannot be understood by any one of the four lemmas. This is an integral part of the structure of argumentation used in the MMK. Nāgārjuna requires the *catuṣkoṭi* for this because the concepts discussed are increasingly abstract and in their growing distance to common-sense experience they become more and more appealing to someone interpreting them in the sense of the third or fourth *koṭi*. To prevent this from happening, Nāgārjuna needs to refute these as well in order to be able to claim that there is indeed *no* possible position on this given matter. However, as will be seen in more close detail in the following chapter, it is Nāgārjuna's genuine intention to transcend all of these positions.

Fortunately, the MMK's bread and butter play out in a very short amount of actual text and therefore it is not absolutely necessary to accept or even understand Nāgārjuna's position on *nirvāṇa*. At some point Nāgārjuna pierces so deep to the very root of the problem that it suffices to examine this single argumentation closely in order to understand the MMK in its entirety; the remaining chapters may then be regarded as mere additional evidence. For this reason, chapter 4 will treat a part of the MMK which I deem particularly pivotal in this argumentation although the major positions from most of the later chapters will be regarded in the development of our interpretation in the chapter 3. But in order to follow this line of argumentation it is prerequisite that the reader is acquainted with the *catuṣkoṭi* as thoroughly as possible.

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[55]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 75, Chapter XXV, Stanza 17.
[56]See chapter A.3.
[57]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 75, Chapter XXV, Stanza 19.

3. The Trial

Those who know do not speak;
Those who speak do not know.

Lao Tzu in the *Dao De Jing*,
Chapter 56

Whereas the previous chapter was devoted to giving the tetralemma a definitive form, this chapter is principally aimed at interpreting the actual meaning and exegetical significance thereof. Nāgārjuna's MMK has been regularly discussed, interpreted and expanded in Eastern (as well as in Western) philosophy and theology and thus there are many positions that Nāgārjuna has been charged with throughout the centuries the text has persisted – some more cogent than others. Now, it is completely illusionary to claim to be able to treat any of these positions in a just manner here, given the restricted space at disposal. Rather, these positions shall be used as stubs which may help elucidate some of the core (mis-)conceptions concerning the MMK. Hence, the original sources will only be superficially treated and only insofar as they are relevant to the comprehension of the text itself.

Firstly, Nāgārjuna's accusers will be heard, each presenting one of three allegations: unintelligibility, nihilism and emptiness. These accusations will not be presently addressed. Only afterwards, in proper judicial manner, will each accusation be refuted by one of the three defenders. Each defence bringing us one step closer to the ultimate comprehension of the text.

3.1. The Accusers

3.1.1. Aristotle

While it is rather anachronistic to envision Aristotle as a firm critic of Nāgārjuna given that these two men lived roughly four centuries apart, the comparison between the two is still rather useful due to the fact that Aristotle is somewhat of a "founding father" of Western logic and may act as a stand-in for the majority of Western thought. Three key points of critique stand out: Firstly, Aristotle would argue against violating the *principium non-contradictionem* as was done in the third lemma; secondly, Aristotle would disagree with violating *tertium non datur* as was done in the fourth lemma; and lastly, Aristotle would doubt that Nāgārjuna has any position whatsoever. The first of these objections already seems rather damning. As Aristotle explains:

[...] [I]t will be impossible for the same thing to be and not to be, except by equivocation, as e.g. one whom we call "man" others might call "not-man"; but the problem is whether the same thing can at once be and not be "man", not in name, *but in* fact.[58]

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[58] *Metaphysics*, Γ.4, 1006b17-22. The accentuation is adopted from the original.

Even in the notation proposed in chapter 2.2 the third *koṭi* still violates this rule. For Aristotle this is pretty damning: the tetralemma abandons one of the most fundamental principles of (Western) logic, proven to excess by every field conceivable. Aristotle even calls it "the most certain of all principles"[59]. This is the same accusation raised in Aristotle's second critique: Violating *tertium non datur* is utterly inconceivable and leads to nothing but absurdity. Nāgārjuna however refutes these two principles rather nonchalantly, how the third or fourth *koṭi* would actually function in the real world – not to mention where one would find them applicable – is of no concern to him.

These two laws lie at the heart of our conception of the world. Our very notion of truth is partially based on the attempt of excluding any contradiction. A proposition is wrong if and only if its content is in *contradiction* with reality. Categorisation of the external world – a fundamental principle of both the sciences and our mind in general – is to some degree a means of safeguarding ourselves from contradiction. The statement "Seven is a big number" may be true if applied to the number of fingers on a hand but seven grains of sand would not be a particularly big beach. Nonetheless, we would not say that "seven" is a contradictory phenomenon because the categories *beaches* and *fingers* are completely separate. When phenomena are distinguished into temporal and spatial categories it is done to the same effect: Kyoto is not "the capital of Japan and not the capital of Japan", it *was* the capital and now *is* no longer. The principle of *tertium non datur* is equally important. One simple way of proving that $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational is proving that its opposite is absurd and whatever is the opposite of false is true. But if there exists a third value then this conclusion becomes invalid.

There are two main arguments for the last objection that Nāgārjuna lacks any original position. The first reason is simply due to the fact that Nāgārjuna seemingly rejects every position he puts forth. He refuses to be tracked down to any rigid and original opinion. But what worth does a philosopher have who does not say a word? Furthermore, if Nāgārjuna has no position how could he examine the positions he claims to disprove? Disproving a position requires a position of itself, hence, Nāgārjuna is himself contradictory. The second argument follows from the objections above under a principle known as *ex falso sequitur quodlibet*. Out of contradiction everything follows. This phenomenon, which is also known as "deductive explosion", is rather damning, considering that literally any proposition can therefore be proven to be right. Not only does this mean that Nāgārjuna is even more contradictory, given that he would have to hold both every positive position as well as its negation, but if Nāgārjuna were to hold every position, dialectically speaking, he would hold no position at all. Once more, Nāgārjuna would become not only unoriginal but absurd. In the eyes of Aristotle, such a man "is really no better than a vegetable"[60].

Aristotle might conclude that Nāgārjuna's system of thought is contrary to progress, logic and the very concept of truth; his unintelligible writings are the work of a madman and esoteric[61] and should only be read in a religious context. For Aristotle there is no insight to be had reading the MMK in a philosophical or logical manner. If there is any truly unifying message, insight or meaningful conclusion to be found in it is impossible to

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[59] *Metaphysics*, Γ.4, 1006a3-4.

[60] *Metaphysics*, Γ.4, 1006a14-15.

[61] Of which there were many at the time, see Tantrayāna Buddhism. Cf. Thorp 2017.

reach it in this preposterous manner of argumentation. Someone who doubts the very foundation of logic and language will not be able to express oneself by these very means. Whatever it is that Nāgārjuna attempts to say it remains utterly unintelligible.

3.1.2. Tsongkhapa

Interpreting Nāgārjuna as accepting contradictions is – as has been seen above – rather ruinous. Yet not all agree that this is the case and indeed most Buddhist exegetes – who arguably have a lot more authority on these matters than any Western interpreter – do not concur with this position. Je[62] Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) is, together with Candrakīrti, probably the most widely known Buddhist exegete of Nāgārjuna. Tsongkhapa – literally translated as the man from the Onion Valley – was a Tibetan scholar and lived nearly a millennium after the MMK was written[63], hence, while he is still considered as an important source on Nāgārjuna, his position should not be overestimated. Now Tsongkhapa does not take Nāgārjuna to accept any contradictions, instead he suggests using two ontologically completely separate planes of reality: "ultimate" and "conventional". Crucially, what is conventionally true can still be ultimately wrong, and vice versa, which resolves any contradiction.

Gilt bronze statue of Tsongkhapa on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Priest and Garfield[64] explain the meaning "conventional reality" three-way based on the works of Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650)[65], who is unfortunately not yet comprehensively translated into English. The first meaning of "conventional" is "ordinary" or "everyday". A proposition based on common and regular empirical evidence. It is "ordinarily" true that someone brushes their teeth before they leave the house, evidently some exceptions apply here. The second definition would be "truth by agreement", whose meaning is closer to that of a "convention". For instance, the tradition that people greet each other by shaking their right hand is just a convention, whose truth is entirely dependent on it being upheld. If people suddenly were to greet each other with the left hand, this "conventional truth" would vanish. In a third sense, "conventional" means "nominal", a matter of arbitrary definition. It is nominally true that a fox and a wolf are mammals, but only because we – who ever that includes – have, for no *bona fide* reason, defined all lactating animals as such. These categories are useful but not set in stone. The term "wolf" is "nominally" part of the category of all animals starting with the letter 'W' in German as well as in

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[62]This honorific title is not actually part of Tsongkhapa's proper name but functions as an expression of his rank just like "Sir" or "Lord" would in English.

[63]Tsongkhapa 2006d.

[64]Priest and Garfield 1995, pp. 253-254.

[65]Huntington 1989, pp. 33-34.

English, but in other languages, like French or Italian, it would not. Although all three definitions are rather similar, this last one is of particular significance.

Tsongkhapa now assumes that it is Nāgārjuna's intent to prove that conventionally everything is *śūnyatā* (empty). Empty may therefore also be defined by those phenomena of whom it is incorrect to claim any of the four positions of the tetralemma. The term of "emptiness" is also very closely linked with the term of "essence" which shall be revisited in chapter 4.2. In a nutshell, everything that lacks essence is also empty. Tsongkhapa summarises his ideas of conventional truth thusly:

[F]or the mind to establish anything as an object of conventional truth, it must depend on the refutation of its ultimate existence. Although such things as pots and cloth are conventional truths, when they are perceived by the mind, the mind does not necessarily perceive the meaning of "conventional truth." This is because, although such things as pots and cloths, appear like illusions, although they do not exist essentially, the mind that perceives them does not necessarily also perceive the fact that they really are nothing but illusions. Therefore, it is not reasonable to say that such things as pots and cloths are conventional truths from the perspective of the common people who do not have the madhyamaka view [...]. Therefore from the perspective of their minds, such things as pots, which are ultimately existent from their perspective, are conventional objects from the perspective of the āryas [the nobles or the exalted], to whom things appear illusionlike.[66]

Thus essentially, Tsongkhapa here differentiates between the perspective of the "common people" and the so-called "āryas". What is *ultimately* true for the *common* man is merely conventionally true for the truly enlightened, for whom the object *ultimately* lacks essence and therefore is empty. The phrase "ultimate reality" is harder to define and there is no shared consensus among the different schools of interpretation on what exactly this is supposed to mean. It is clear however that for Tsongkhapa "ultimately real" basically equates to saying "not-real"; as becomes clear in the quote above. Usually, the term "ultimate" is linked with the *nirvāṇa*, which we already encountered in the last chapter, or the *tathāgata* (literally "one who has thus come", meaning the Buddha who is "beyond all coming and going").[67] The ultimate truth is what comes after *saṃsāra* (cyclical existence) and the more transitory phenomena of the conventional world. Through the ultimate truth one achieves enlightenment and only those who are enlightened attain it. Let us take for example the following stanza:

Everything is real and is not real.
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This is Lord Buddha's teaching.[68]

Tsongkhapa would read the first two verses as saying that something is conventionally/ultimately real or conventionally/ultimately unreal. Only with the third one, does the difference between ultimate and conventional truth become relevant, as it explains that something can both be conventionally real and ultimately not real. However, it cannot

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[66]Tsongkhapa 2006a, pp. 483-484.
[67]All definitions taken from Berger 2019.
[68]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 49, Chapter XVIII, Stanza 8.

be the other way around. On the one hand it would just be too easily refuted[69] and on the other hand it would be in stark contrast with any position of the Madhyamaka school and certainly to Nāgārjuna's world-view. The fourth one would say, that something is neither ultimately/conventionally true nor ultimately/conventionally untrue.[70] This interpretation evades any contradiction and places Nāgārjuna nicely into a broader Buddhist tradition: the two-truth-doctrine. Conventional truth is empty, meaningless, not-real; while only the ultimate reality is *real*. This in and of itself would indeed offer an interesting interpretation, with the added advantage that Nāgārjuna remains within the boundaries of both classical Western logic and orthodox Buddhist teaching. The only caveat: Everything within the *conventional* realm – crucially among them: language – is *ultimately* unreal. As Tsongkhapa puts it himself:

If what language expresses existed ultimately, that would have been taught, but what language expresses is repudiated, that is to say, it does not exist. Therefore, the Buddhas have not taught that it does, even the slightest bit.[71]

This means that nothing really exists, this indeed what Tsongkhapa was trying to communicate to us the entire time: Ultimately everything is unreal, nothing exists. Therefore Tsongkhapa indeed proposes a *nihilistic* interpretation of Nāgārjuna. As will be seen in the further chapters, this is not completely removed from Nāgārjuna's original position and it already gives us a broad overview of the MMK's ultimate soteriological conclusion, but there are few problems with this interpretation, which shall be examined in chapter 3.2.2. Whereas Aristotle confined himself to believing that the MMK teaches a purely negative doctrine, therefore remaining in the stage of comprehension manifest in the second *koṭi*, Tsongkhapa already got closer to liberation by seeing the reality and truth of the conventional realm in contrast to the ultimate – thereby attaining the third *koṭi*. But Nāgārjuna would not be Nāgārjuna if this position would not be annihilated as well. Some objections to Tsongkhapa will be thoroughly revisited in chapter 3.2.2 because it is not far from right to claim that Nāgārjuna is nihilistic.

3.1.3. Priest

The year is 2019. Contradictions are considered unacceptable by all philosophers. *All*? No, one small philosopher motivated by the indomitable drive to prove Aristotle wrong still holds out against classical logic. His name: Graham Priest, the foremost defender of a position commonly referred to as *paraconsistency* or *dialetheism*. He himself defines dialetheism bluntly as the position that "there are true contradictions"[72]. Priest has been the author of a sizeable amount of highly original and enticing work not only on the matter of dialetheism but also on Nāgārjuna and Buddhist logic in general. In fact, a not insignificant part of this thesis is owed to his work and the positions expressed

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[69]Think of the example of the wolf, this is certainly *true* in a nominal sense.

[70]How this fourth lemma is to be understood or why Nāgārjuna would even need it in the first place, Tsongkhapa is not able to explain to us.

[71]Tsongkhapa 2006c, p. 382.

[72]Priest 1995, p. 271.

by him are of striking cogency and coherency (though not consistency).[73] Our concern however, is not in how far such a system is potent[74] and we will have to gloss over most of Priest's positions concerning the cogency of a paraconsistent logic. Priest's treatment of Nāgārjuna roots back well into the 20th century and thus there is no way one can do justice to all the different – and regularly *evolving* – positions that Priest has held throughout the past decades. Nonetheless, there are a few propositions of Priest's with which we will still have to contend, but let it be said, that Priest's considerations[75] do come unusually close to doing Nāgārjuna justice and that they bear profound similarities to the position developed later in this thesis. Three positions stand out as particularly problematic:

Firstly, Priest claims that Nāgārjuna employs *reductios ad absurdum* and not *reductios ad contradictionem*[76]. This difference might seem trivial and indeed their consequences are rather similar but *reductios* play a key role in the MMK and therefore it is important to have thoroughly understood them. Priest is absolutely right in pointing out that it is precisely *not* Nāgārjuna's intention to prove that the tetralemma holds *true* but that it *fails*: "Thus in ch. 1 [Examination of Conditions] Nāgārjuna considers the possibility that something is (self-beingly) caused by itself, by another, by both, or by neither, rejecting each"[77]. This four-way *reductio* is the reason why the type of *reductio* one is dealing with does very much matter. Now Priest – in an attempt to read Nāgārjuna as a firm dialetheist – claims that Nāgārjuna's *reductios* are a result of a conclusion that is *merely* absurd, viz. not absurd as a result of a contradiction. This might seem pettifogging, but it does carry quite some exegetical significance with it. For example, in chapter XV Nāgārjuna refutes the claim that "something existed before but does not now" as erroneous because it "entails the error of nihilism"[78]. Clearly, a proposition is reduced to an unacceptable conclusion (i.e. nihilism), a classical *reductio*, no doubt. But why this conclusion is unacceptable matters. According to Priest, nihilism is just an inherently absurd conclusion and can never be accepted, but this begs the question why it is absurd. The answer is, because it *contradicts* empirical evidence, or put differently, because it is in *contradiction* with the truth. If Nāgārjuna (or for that matter anyone) would proceed paraconsistently here as well, there would be no *reductio*. Now it is not Priest's position that *everything* is paraconsistent; but why assume Nāgārjuna to be paraconsistent only in some very specific part of his argument if one could very well do without it as well? Furthermore, Nāgārjuna is not exactly a fervent supporter of paraconsistency, the argument for this comes from Priest himself: Nāgārjuna explicitly *refutes* the third *koṭi* and does not accept it. Hence, even the one aspect in which Nāgārjuna seemed evidently paraconsistent, turns out to be a misconception entirely. Thus, we may refute this objection right away.

Secondly, Priest claims that "emptiness" is part of the *catuṣkoṭi*. Emptiness has already been briefly touched upon in the subchapter about Tsongkhapa. Importantly, emptiness

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[73]Good examples of these are Priest's book *In Contradiction* or his shorter papers "What Is So Bad About Contradictions?" and "Can Contradictions Be True?"

[74]Only inasmuch as it is relevant to Nāgārjuna. Though it will turn out that accepting contradictions plays a much smaller role than it might seem.

[75]At least as it is expressed in *Beyond the Limits of Thought*.

[76]Priest 2010, p. 41.

[77]Priest 2013, p. 130.

[78]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 11 Cf. chapter 4.2 for a closer examination of this.

is closely tied to the rebuttal of all *koṭi*s: only because Nāgārjuna refutes all possible conceptions of essence or independent existence does he reach the conclusion that "all is empty". This is precisely the reason, why it is so important that the *catuṣkoṭi* be comprehensive: Because if all four positions are untenable for a given concept, there is no tenable position at all on it and thus the concept itself is flawed and empty. Adding "empty" as a fifth position would disprove this entirely. Now Priest nowhere explicitly states that emptiness is part of the *catuṣkoṭi* but the manner in which he characterises emptiness suggests reading him so: Priest argues that just like with a dilemma any tetralemma gives way to an additional state not initially anticipated in its initial formulation and just like with the dilemma one could equally deny all positions[79] (as Nāgārjuna does). Apart from T<p>, F<p>, B<p> and N<p>[80] there would be E<p>, empty. Priest proposes to read Nāgārjuna as propounding *emptiness* as the ultimate truth. The immediate problem that follows is the *emptiness of emptiness*: How can Nāgārjuna claim "empty" as a doctrine if everything, including his doctrine, is to be taken as empty. Priest would simply interpret this paraconsistently and do away with the matter thusly.

Priest might actually have been on the right track, but for the moment being, his interpretation still foists some rather problematic views on the MMK with which we will have to contend in the next three chapters. Reading the MMK paraconsistently would mean to deny it the possibility of expressing anything and interpreting Nāgārjuna as *empty*.

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[79]Priest 2010.

[80]True, false, both true and false and neither true nor false.

3.2. The Defenders

These three accusations will be treated individually by another three philosophers: the defenders of Nāgārjuna. With their help, we will be able to deduce an interpretation of Nāgārjuna that greatly exceeds those presented above. Additionally, it will be seen that Nāgārjuna – though clearly thoroughly rooted in Buddhist religious and philosophical tradition – is very much competent to produce original and cogent positions, able to rival those of his Western counterparts.

3.2.1. Sextus Empiricus (On Behalf of Pyrrho of Elis)

The connection between ancient Scepticism (or more precisely Pyrrhonism) and Madhaymaka Buddhism is not entirely new and has been subject of some number of scientific works.[81] Nonetheless, there are important similarities between Madhyamaka Buddhism and Scepticism. There is in fact some historical evidence that these two great schools of thought collided. Pyrrho – the founder of the most prominent school of Greek Scepticism – followed Alexander the Great on his conquest of India and while there, met some early Buddhist masters[82]. The similarities in both content and form are thus not a mere accident but indeed one of the first instances of intellectual exchange between Western and Eastern thought. Reading Nāgārjuna as a Sceptic might seem unusual but does offer a few key insights which will be later expanded upon in this subchapter.

Just like any Sceptic, Nāgārjuna fundamentally doubts that what we conceive as "real" is indeed real. How each reaches this conclusion is rather different: Nāgārjuna uses the *catuṣkoṭi* in order to show that a concept is flawed (or empty), whereas someone like Sextus would claim *isosthenia* (parity between two opposing arguments from which neither seems more convincing)[83] – their conclusions however are strikingly similar. One important analogy is that both Nāgārjuna and Sextus take up foreign arguments and act as if they would be in agreement, just to then demonstrate that this argument leads inevitably to the absurd and unacceptable. Both Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka Buddhism are heavily based on reducing the arguments of their opponents to absurd conclusions, thereby, forcing them to abandon their initial positions. This however may be said of any philosopher or critical thinker. The key difference is that neither school replaces this void with any position of their own. One is left to stumble in the dark, so to speak. Pyrrhonists call this "epoché"[84], Nāgārjuna prefers "relinquishing of all views"[85]. Furthermore, both Sextus and Nāgārjuna employ this manner of argument in order to achieve a higher goal of fulfilment.[86] In the case of ancient Pyrrhonism this would have been *ataraxia* (mental imperturbability) as a result of *epoché*, through which one finally could gain *eudaimonia*

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[81] Cf. McEvilley, "Pyrrhonism and Madhyamika", Saber, *Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism* or Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism*.

[82] Kuzminski 2008, p. 35.

[83] Kirchner and Michaëlis 1917, p. 296.

[84] Kirchner and Michaëlis 1917, p. 183.

[85] Nagarjuna 1995, p. 83, Chapter XXVII, Stanza 30.

[86] See also Empiricus 1994, p. 10 I.XIII.25-30.

(happiness, fulfilment)[87] . This is mirrored in Madhyamaka-Buddhism, albeit that instead of *eudaimonia*, the ultimate goal is *tathāgata* (liberation, Buddhahood) which is the path to *nirvāṇa*[88] (ultimate wisdom and enlightenment, the transcendence of cyclical existence). Take the following passage by Sextus:

Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts [isosthenia], we come first to suspension of judgement [epoché] and afterwards to tranquillity [ataraxia].[89]

It is this tranquillity, this imperturbability of the mind, that is the driving force of Pyrrhonism. The Sceptic is no longer vexed by belief and the search for truth; through silence he has attained serendipity.

The causal principle of Scepticism we say is the hope of becoming tranquil. […] The chief constitutive principle of Scepticism is the claim that to every account an equal account is opposed; for it is from this, we think, that we come to hold no beliefs.[90]

The Sceptics cannot have "beliefs" about their experience but they do not claim that these experiences are indeed the real object, they exclusively discourse about their experience. Nāgārjuna's position is not at all distinct from this. [91] Even in the things they seem to have a position on, they do not: When a Sceptic claims that he has no belief, he does not believe in this either, for this statement is self-defeating:

Thus, if people who hold beliefs posit as real the things they hold beliefs about, while Sceptics utter their own phrases in such a way that they are implicitly cancelled by themselves, then they cannot be said to hold beliefs in uttering them. […] [I]n uttering these phrases they say what is apparent to themselves and report their own feelings without holding opinions affirming nothing about external objects.[92]

In some sense Nāgārjuna has a similar problem: In order to achieve the "relinquishment of all views" he in some sense needs to relinquish this view as well. This will turn out tob e vitally important, but for the time being, it suffices to see that Nāgārjuna is sort of self-defeating as well. Having no view is a view in and of itself. Thus, when Nāgārjuna claims that "everything is conventional" or that "all is empty" the very statement itself is included. This is not to say that Nāgārjuna cannot refute a given position, he can still consider a premise correct even if he holds it to be untrue. This however limits Nāgārjuna's argumentational realm of possibility to a *reductio ad absurdum*, which indeed we find all throughout the text. Sextus explains that even a Sceptic is able to apprehend a given preposition even if he does not believe in it, just like a Stoic can apprehend an Epicurean, all while still believing in the Stoa. A Sceptic can just as well investigate these matters

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[87]Cf. Malte Hossenfelder's introduction to his German translation of Sextus' Outlines, Empiricus 1985, pp. 31-32.

[88]Kirchner and Michaëlis 1917, p. 708.

[89]Empiricus 1994, p. 4 I.IV.8.

[90]Empiricus 1994, pp. 5, I.VI.12.

[91]Cf. chapter 3.2.3 on Wittgenstein.

[92]Empiricus 1994, pp. 6-7 I.VII.15.

for he, like anyone, is capable of thinking not only about the *real* but also about the *unreal*[93]. This means that Nāgārjuna is perfectly justified in taking up these arguments and it also explains why a Sceptic is not self-defeating: He must not doubt himself, for there is nothing to doubt. This is true for Nāgārjuna as well. In some sense Nāgārjuna is even willing to refute his own position as well, as will be seen in chapter 3.2.3. By having no position himself, he cannot contradict himself nor can he be himself refuted. Nāgārjuna explains this in another work called the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (the "dispelling of debates"):

If I had any thesis, that fault [of being self-defeating] would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me.[94]

Having established these parallels, let us turn our attention to Aristotle's objections: Firstly, if Aristotle would be right, Nāgārjuna would in fact believe in the *law of the excluded middle* just as much as he would not, because as we have seen, out of contradiction everything follows; thus, it follows as well that Nāgārjuna does believe that the third does not exist (and that it does exist). Nonetheless, the observation is absolutely valid that Nāgārjuna does not think of the *law of the excluded middle* in the same way Aristotle or Western logic does. Still, it must be said that this interpretation overestimates the significance of contradictions in the MMK, given that – as we have seen with Priest – Nāgārjuna's aim is precisely *not* to prove that the tetralemma holds but that it does *not*. And then again, another objection raised was that Nāgārjuna "lacks any original position of his own", if this were true, how could Nāgārjuna contradict himself if he says nothing? Rather Nāgārjuna needs the third *koṭi*, in order to show that there really is no coherent position on the matter discussed (e.g. essence), else one could claim that something does have and does not have essence, which would make this argument futile.

Furthermore, it must be said that *tertium non datur* is still just a convention and thus is itself not necessarily true. It will be seen that an important realisation of the MMK is that "everything is conventional", viz. also *tertium non datur*. While Aristotle does not claim that it is necessarily true he still claims that it is "the most certain of all principles"[95] because else no sound debate is possible. Priest[96] does however show that – in some cases – this convention does not necessarily have to hold true. Sometimes, accepting contradictions is in fact, the saner approach.[97] But despite all that, Nāgārjuna does not contradict himself, this position is based on a misconception of the MMK, where one ignores that Nāgārjuna uses interlocutors to demonstrate his points.[98] Contradictions are always the result of an incoherent position of one of the interlocutors or a result of

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[93] Empiricus 1994, pp.67-69 II.I.1-10.

[94] Westerhoff 2010, p. 9 verse 29. The interpretive intricacies of this statement greatly exceed the scope of this thesis and much would still need to be said. Although his positions do vary quite strongly from the ones developed here, I suggest reading Westerhoff's short essay called "The No-Thesis View: Making Sense of Verse 29 of Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī" (Westerhoff 2009) and also the commentary to the above cited translation for further explanations on this matter.

[95] *Metaphysics*, Γ.4, 1006a3-4.

[96] Priest 1993.

[97] One famous example is the *liar's paradox*, which Priest would interpret paraconsistently (i.e. the man *both* lies and does not lie), Priest, *In Contradiction*. Additionally, Priest does this with one of Zeno's paradoxes in "On a Version of One of Zeno's Paradoxes", Priest 1999.

[98] This is also the reason for the striking prominence of the word "if" in the text.

Nāgārjuna attempting to formulate some version of the third *koṭi*. Again, the reader may be reminded that Nāgārjuna claims very little of his own and what he says his certainly not contradictory but rather straightforward.

Now to the accusation that Nāgārjuna is a purely negative philosopher. Firstly, there is nothing wrong about being a "negative philosopher" – it is just boring. Still Nāgārjuna is not exclusively negative, as a Sceptic he certainly tends to be rather careful in stating anything that claims to be *true*, but that does not mean he lacks any opinion whatsoever. Nāgārjuna repeatedly claims – and this is indeed the ultimate conclusion of the MMK – that "all is empty" and that nothing is ultimately true. This is also Mark Siderits' position who claims that "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth"[99]. How this is meant to be understood and how this is not itself contradictory[100] will be explained in the next subchapter 3.2.2. For the moment it suffices to say that Nāgārjuna does have a position, albeit the most negative one imaginable. In some sense, the very lack of a unifying message is the MMK's unifying message.

Alas, it becomes evident that Nāgārjuna's MMK may only be secondarily read as a religious text, despite its soteriological significance, and the many – admittedly rather fantastical – legends about him should not distract us from the hardened core of his work, which absolutely merits a thorough and genuine philosophical treatment. And while it may be true that absolute Scepticism is impossible, Nāgārjuna does not believe nothing (nor believe *in* nothing), instead all he says is that everything is only conventionally true. That the word "blue" starts with a B is not refuted by Nāgārjuna, but it is only true because it has been arbitrarily defined as such, if the colour blue would have been called "green" this would no longer hold true. It is *conventionally* true but has no "real" relation to the proper world, this truth is a mere consequence of a set of pre-defined principles out of which one can derive certain propositions, whose truth-value is exclusively dependent on these principles. How one treats the problem raised by Priest.[101] that Nāgārjuna is "thinking the unthinkable" is more difficult and will be attempted in a later subchapter[102]. But it is certainly not true to claim that Nāgārjuna is an unintelligible esoteric lunatic who has nothing interesting to say. It is to be expected that a work, which is nearly two thousand years old and has been written in a geographic, cultural and linguistic context completely foreign to us Western readers, will be all but an easy-read. This however should not hinder us from at least attempting to comprehend this fascinating, original albeit challenging work.

3.2.2. Siderits

After having demonstrated that Nāgārjuna is not as inconsistent as initially thought, the second accusation, that of nihilism, will be refuted. Because there are indeed a few problems with Tsongkhapa's – or any two-truth-based – interpretation: Firstly, this way

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[99]Siderits 2003.

[100]Given that the sentence "All is empty." does include itself and thus, as has been mentioned, is a sort of *liar's paradox.*

[101]Cf. Subchapter 3.1.3 on Priest.

[102]Cf. Subchapter 3.2.3 on Wittgenstein.

of reading Nāgārjuna promotes an idea of exclusivity. Only the privileged few know the real truth and may live beyond the plane of the purely conventional. Furthermore, as we have seen, this interpretation entails nihilism.

As Siderits points out, any so-called "metaphysical interpretation", that is an interpretation, which "takes the doctrine to be intended to characterise the nature of reality"[103], e.g. Tsongkhapa's, leads inevitably to nihilism. This might not be clear immediately, but saying that *only* the ultimate is real, or rather that everything is ultimately unreal, implies that the conventional world is not real either. In a sense, the very separation between the conventional and ultimate reality insinuates that the one is real while the other is quasi illusionary. Which is no different from nihilism. This however is problematic because Nāgārjuna explicitly states that nihilism is erroneous[104] and is therefore to be avoided, which would mean he still contradicts himself. Priest[105] as well as Ferraro[106] additionally point out that Nāgārjuna presents the ultimate truth as ineffable and unintelligible, perhaps only accessible through intuition. If we take this premise to hold, Tsongkhapa's interpretation would be even more inconsistent. Additionally, the MMK's ultimate conclusion would again – just like with Priest – be part of the *catuṣkoṭi*, viz. the third koṭi, and thus, be part of the very realm Nāgārjuna attempts to disprove. This is dangerous, given not only that Nāgārjuna clearly refutes all koṭis but also because this would then again render a form of the problematic *emptiness of emptiness*[107].

One way to avoid this would be to interpret ultimate reality as completely beyond the scope of all thought, merely accessed by some intuitive grasp.[108] The MMK would then be a sort of preparatory exercise in order to receive true enlightenment[109]. But then the MMK would be of purely religious interest, for it could not conceivably propose anything of interest, logically or philosophically speaking. This interpretation is already pretty absurd but it is not completely wrong, just fruitless. Siderits proposes an interpretation not completely distinct from the one above, at least concerning the conclusion, but very different concerning its argumentative approach.

Siderits agrees with Tsongkhapa that it is Nāgārjuna's goal to prove that everything is conventionally empty. Where this interpretation errs is in assuming that there is another plane of reality entirely in which things are not empty. As Siderits puts it "The ultimate truth is that there is no truth"[110]. Importantly, Nāgārjuna does not claim that there is *no* truth. Siderits argues that any metaphysical interpretation "pre-suppose[s] metaphysical realism", the position that "there is such a thing as how the world is"[111]. In this case the metaphysical reality, the true state of things, would be that everything is unreal. But as Siderits points out, the ultimate and the conventional reality are just two sides of the same coin and *not* two different coins. It might seem that this is indeed Tsongkhapa's

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[103]Siderits 2003.

[104]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 11.

[105]Priest and Garfield 1995.

[106]Ferraro 2013.

[107]Cf. The subchapter 3.2.3 on Wittgenstein for a closer examination.

[108]Some scholars have claimed that this is what Tsongkhapa meant, but it is certainly not the impression one gets reading his *Ocean of Reasoning*.

[109]Siderits 2003.

[110]Siderits 2003.

[111]Siderits 2003.

position, however Tsongkhapa still considers "emptiness" in relation to *reality*, but as Siderits[112] demonstrates, emptiness is a question of *truth*. When Tsongkhapa claims that pots and cloth are only conventionally real[113], he means that the "common man" is just not capable of truly understanding that pots do not ultimately exist, his mind is not in accordance with the facts. Siderits explains the difference thusly:

[T]he statement "Krsna drove the chariot" would be conventionally true. By contrast, a statement is said to be ultimately true if and only if it corresponds with reality, and neither asserts nor pre-supposes the existence of any conceptual fictions.[114]

Conventionally the statement would be true, given that it is *conventionally* in unison with what we take as fact. But the statement that "Krsna did not ultimately drive the chariot" does pre-suppose that there is a state of things reflecting reality, that is, metaphysical realism. But a proposition that pre-supposes an unproven, Nāgārjuna would claim *unprovable*, premise cannot be ultimately true. Furthermore, Tsongkhapa's statement pre-supposes that "Krsna" and "chariot" are not empty in order for the sentence to be wrong and unreal as a whole. Again, violating the second pre-condition in order for a statement to be ultimately true. But just like with the non-existent cellar, in an ultimate sense, Krsna *neither* drove the chariot *nor* did he not.[115] This is itself another step towards enlightenment: understanding that there is also no ultimate truth.

Instead of a metaphysical interpretation, Siderits proposes a semantic exegesis of Nāgārjuna. "Thus, to say that all things are empty is, on [sic!] the semantic interpretation, to say that no statement can be ultimately true"[116]. The question now is less of what is *real* and *unreal* but what is *true* and *untrue*. In that regard we have saved ourselves from the perils of outright nihilism. Now however, we have to deal with the *liar's paradox* for the statement "all is empty" is itself empty. Even ultimate reality is only conventionally true[117], conventional truth is the only truth there is: The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.

This leaves us with a set of conventions that now lack any direct relation to the proper, ultimate reality. Their truth is not at all impaired by this realisation[118] but, no matter what we think, say or believe, ultimately there is no such thing as *true* truth. But it is neither correct to say that "Krsna drove the chariot" nor to say that this is incorrect.

In a sense Nāgārjuna is an *epistemological* nihilist, though he does believe in the truth of the convention in expressing the conventional truth, but he is certainly no *metaphysical*

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[112]Siderits 2003.

[113]Cf. Subchapter 3.1.2 on Tsongkhapa.

[114]Siderits 2003.

[115]This might resemble the fourth *koṭi*, but it is important not to prematurely identify *ultimate reality* with the *catuṣkoṭi*.

[116]Siderits 2003.

[117]Siderits himself calls this "semantic non-dualism" Siderits 2003.

[118]Just like the word "blue" still starts with a B. Siderits uses the example of *paper money*, which initially was backed with precious metals like gold and silver, until eventually, this exchange was dropped. Ultimately, the money was now worthless apart from the value of the ink and paper it was printed with. But conventionally it still retained its value because people did not stop accepting it as currency. Cf. Siderits 2003.

nihilist. Perhaps a true, ultimate reality exists beyond the conventional realm, but it will remain inaccessible to us either way. We are trapped in the conventions of language and logic and Nāgārjuna is quite keen on making these limitations painfully evident to us readers. But does this not all still mean that Nāgārjuna is an inconsistent thinker? Is the statement "ultimately there is no ultimate reality" not still contradictory? Was Aristotle perhaps right after all. Either we refute the contradiction by talking about two different "ultimate realities" or we agree to some form of contradiction. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna has to resolve the problem of attempting to utter the unutterable: the very goal of the MMK is to pierce this conventional realm and reach the proper, ultimate reality, but as has been seen, the ultimate reality lies far beyond, unreachable to the human mind.

3.2.3. Wittgenstein

In order to sufficiently answer these objections, we must resort to one notorious Austrian thinker: Ludwig Wittgenstein. There are really two contradictions with which alas one must contend. As Ferraro[119] correctly points out, the idea that "the ultimate truth is that there is no truth" may only be consistently understood by distinguishing between two different "ultimate realities", which is rather absurd, or else agreeing to a contradiction. This is very similar to the point that Nāgārjuna seemingly attempts to utter the unutterable. Indeed, these two objections are so closely linked that they will be treated here simultaneously.

The first of Priest's accusations was that "emptiness" is part of the tetralemma, which Priest explains by applying the *catuṣkoṭi* on itself[120]. There are two main problems with this position: firstly, there is the self-contradictory *emptiness of emptiness*. Siderits suffers from this as well when he claims that "the ultimate reality is that there is no reality"[121]. The other problem being that the *catuṣkoṭi* is supposed to be transcended, the end of this transcension would be the notion of *emptiness*, hence it would be absurd to claim that it could be part of the *catuṣkoṭi*. In order to follow Nāgārjuna here, it is important to realise that the MMK is in some sense an act of compassion: Nāgārjuna descends from his superior position down to the struggles of the intellectual mortals to guide their path to *tathāgata* (Buddhahood). As has been pointed out, this is quite similar to a Sceptic who must also take up a foreign position in order to refute it. In the case of Nāgārjuna however, one does not merely descend from a position of Scepticism but from a position of silence – the silence of the Buddha[122]. True *tathāgata* goes beyond just refusing certain positions and transcending more or less easily refutable claims, rather, Nāgārjuna transcends logic and language itself. This might seem grandiose and megalomaniacal, but it is not at all removed from the core of the Buddhist doctrine. To achieve *tathāgata* one must transcend *saṃsāra* (cyclical existence). But why should language and logic not be part of cyclical existence? Nāgārjuna says:

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[119]Ferraro 2013.
[120]Priest 2010, p. 42
[121]Siderits 2003.
[122]Nagao 1991c.

What language expresses is nonexistent.
The sphere of thought is nonexistent.
Unarisen and unceased, like nirvāṇa
Is the nature of things.[123]

The ultimate truth is truly not expressible in language, it is indeed ineffable – wherefore
Nāgārjuna must remain silent as well. But there is no other way to acquire it than through
conventional truth, viz. language. This now leads us to the first objection that of the
paradoxical *emptiness of emptiness* which indeed is itself another reason why considering
emptiness part of the *catuṣkoṭi* is so extremely problematic. Seeing empty as being part
of the *catuṣkoṭi* would mean that emptiness, which is arguably the only positive position
that Nāgārjuna puts forth, would be part of the *catuṣkoṭi* as well and therefore would only
be conventionally true. This then would render a complicated and perplexing formulation,
wherein the statement "all is empty" is itself empty .[124] Even worse, Priest defines E<p>
by using the *catuṣkoṭi* on the *catuṣkoṭi*: Either the *catuṣkoṭi* holds, or it does not, or it
does and does not, or it neither does nor does not[125]. The last one would then render
E<p>[126].

Not only does this not hold up in Priest's own propositional formulation of the *catuṣkoṭi*[127]
this position is even somewhat contrary to his own work: In *Beyond the Limits of Thought*
Priest proposes that there are certain ideas, concepts or propositions beyond the grasp of
the human psyche[128]. Buddhist "ultimate reality" would exactly be such a transcended
realm of truth. Priest finds thinkers willing to go "beyond the limits of thought" all
throughout philosophical history: Ancient Sceptics, Kant, Hegel and certainly Wittgen-
stein would be sterling examples. In order for Nāgārjuna to be enshrined into this priv-
ileged group as well, he would need to express something beyond mere convention. But
how could that be if the MMK would be trapped in conventions to the very end?

The self-defeating nature of Priest's argument is not even wrong *per se* it is just not
thought through to the very end. Nāgārjuna's position is absolutely self-defeating, but
that is its very point. Nāgārjuna attempts to bring the reader as close as he can to the
ultimate truth – i.e. how far one can get by using only conventional conceptions –, but then
he must transcend this position by realising that it is indeed self-defeating. The ultimate
truth however is the very lack of any such truth. This realisation however is only possible
through the abandonment of deceptive language, through the "relinquishing of all views",
because the ultimate truth – by nature of its transcendence of the conventional realm,
which includes language and logic – cannot be expressed in terms of the conventional. By
moving through the *catuṣkoṭi* one may rid oneself of these flawed conceptions, moving
ever closer to the ultimate reality which indeed is the very absence of any reality. By
refuting even the last lemma we have made a step outside the vicious cycle of truth and

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[123]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 49, Chapter XVIII, Stanza 7.

[124]Priest sees no problem in this, because he would read the liar's paradox as paraconsistent, viz. he
lies and does not lie. But this still poses some serious logical problems and it is not clear whether
Nāgārjuna would agree with this.

[125]Priest 2010, pp. 42-47.

[126]It is unclear what the third *koṭi* would mean in this context.

[127]Cf. The technical appendix A.3.

[128]Priest 1995, pp. 3-4.

untruth, we have for once gone beyond our own conceptual shadow. We have pierced Priest's "limits of thought". As Wittgenstein claims:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.[129]

This is the manner of argument Nāgārjuna has been trying to lay out the entire time: moving up the rungs of the ladder until finally even the ladder itself can be thrown away, until even the fourth lemma may be transcended, and the reader is finally not only enlightened but liberated.

But is the *principium non-contradiction* not the very precondition of thought, of order, of existence? Does he, who misperceives it not invariably end in the darkness of thought, wherein neither the real nor the conceived exists any more? There is no thought in contradiction. Nāgārjuna's answer to all these questions is an invariable: yes. He is willing to accept this, it is precisely the reason why the ultimate conclusion *must* be that there is no conclusion, that indeed there is no more thought. Nāgārjuna's Scepticism exceeds mere *epoché*, it is not the *suspension* of judgement, it is its *elimination.*

This position is certainly unlike what Wittgenstein had in mind. Still, in their Scepticism these two philosophers are not completely unlike and the conclusion that "everything is conventional" or put differently that there is a realm exclusively within our mind, through which whatever we conceive as true is created, could have been posited by Wittgenstein as well. But the two act differently in knowledge of this insight: Wittgenstein is mainly focused on showing that philosophical enquiry is majoritarily futile and should restrict itself to a subordinate position as *adlatus* of the natural sciences:"[...] Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language"[130]. Nāgārjuna is more extreme in a sense, he does away with language entirely. Nāgārjuna does not see empirical evidence and scientific methodology as a surrogate to these elementary misconceptions, even if such concepts had existed at the time. Whereas Wittgenstein's idea of the "bewitching language" notably excludes the sciences, Nāgārjuna would have seen them no different from any other flawed concept in existence. The terms of science are equally conventional and empty. This is probably the conclusion Wittgenstein would disclaim the most. But Nāgārjuna refutes all language and begins to merely utilise these conventional truths in order to set out the path to relinquish them. Unlike the ancient Sceptics Nāgārjuna no longer awaits an answer, in a perplexing sense, he has found it. Nothing but compassion is the reason that he descends from his high-ground down to the still-mortals who have not yet attained the absolute Buddhahood, the *tathāgata.*

This is precisely the reason why it is so dangerous to express *empty* as part of the *catuṣkoṭi*, truly speaking, it is beyond it. We ought not to just agree that, for whatever reason, emptiness is contradictory – but we should follow Nāgārjuna to the very end and relinquish ourselves of this view equally. When Siderits claims that ultimately there is no ultimate

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[129]Wittgenstein 1922, §6.54.
[130]Wittgenstein 1968, §109.

reality or truth, he shows us the one singularity that Nāgārjuna opens to us in order to attain this very ultimate reality. Something ultimately real would be a convention that is somehow inseparably linked with proper reality – but to Nāgārjuna this never given, everything is empty and therefore merely conventional. By riding ourselves of these conventions we can approach this one logical singularity ever closer until eventually, by what is perhaps the only way to breach the very limits of our thought, we may briefly transcend this realm and experience this utter void that is the "relinquishing of all views" and truly reach the *tathāgata*. For an ephemeral moment we have attained whatever ultimate reality we may ever gain. But like with a dream that one immediately forgets there is no way to tell anyone, not by means of language nor logic, what lies in this far-off realm.

Not even the fourth *koṭi* offers us a safe-haven against the perils of the conventional realm and we must therefore transcend it as well. Priest is right in explaining that the ultimate conclusion of the MMK is not any of the four positions of the *catuṣkoṭi*; but this is a flaw by design. Nāgārjuna needs this last bit of contradiction to offer us the last rung of the ladder towards enlightenment and Buddhahood. He must, in a last destructive act, refute himself in order to achieve the very "relinquishment of all views" that he was after the entire time. As Alan Watts puts it in the *The Way of Zen*:

[T]he greater part of Nagarjuna's work was a carefully logical and systematic refutation of every philosophical position to be found in the India of his time. [...] It must therefore be repeated that the negations apply, not to reality itself, but to our ideas of reality. The positive and creative content of the Sunyavada [The doctrine of emptiness, a synonym for the "middle way".] *is not in the philosophy itself, but in the new vision of reality which is revealed when its work is done, and Nagarjuna does not spoil this vision by trying to describe it.*[131]

This is the root of Buddha's silence. Many canonical texts claim that the Buddha never uttered a single word. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya it is told that when Vacchagotta asked the Buddha "Is there a self?" the Buddha remained in utter tranquillity. When Vacchagotta asked "Then there is no self?" the Buddha again remained silent. Neither of these positions are correct: the ultimate truth Vacchagotta was after could not be attained by any conventions the Buddha could have uttered. The real problem is that Vacchagotta asked these questions in the first place. Rather he should have stayed silent as well.[132] Achieving this silence is the ultimate goal of the MMK. Nāgārjuna just had more compassion with us than the Buddha with Vacchagotta: Nāgārjuna brings us as close to the realisation of the ultimate as he possibly could. Nāgārjuna at least tells us where we erred. But then he must retire himself as well by annihilating even his very own doctrine – for this last step towards enlightenment cannot be achieved by anyone but ourselves.

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[131]Watts 1957, pp. 66-67.
[132]Saṃyutta Nikāya IV.XXXXIV.10, Geiger 1997.

4. Exegesis

This chapter will entirely be devoted to the exegesis of the MMK. After having established how (and how not) to interpret Nāgārjuna, this chapter will serve as a sort of *Feuerprobe* of this interpretation. It might be surprising, that only one chapter will be dealt with here, but because many of the most important extracts from the text have already been mentioned above, it is not absolutely necessary to closely examine all the chapters, not least, because chapter XV expresses the ultimate conclusion of the MMK very concisely. Nāgārjuna's examination on essence, may help elucidate the meaning of emptiness (*śūnyavāda*). But to begin, a short summary of the position developed above:

4.1. In Summary

It has been seen that Nāgārjuna has a very clear objective in mind while writing the MMK, his final aim being the relinquishing of all views and, through this, the attainment of Buddhahood. Furthermore, Nāgārjuna is not really interested in proposing any positive position and rather attempts to disprove any position. In this regard he is very similar to the ancient Sceptics. Unlike the Sceptics however, Nāgārjuna does not see himself as someone "still searching" but believes strongly in the fundamental flawedness of logic and language. His Scepticism therefore goes further than that of the Pyrrhonists, insofar as Nāgārjuna's Scepticism fundamentally doubts the very concept of language and logic itself and not only specific positions therein. To prove this, he uses a logical figure called the *catuṣkoṭi* or *tetralemma*. Importantly, it is not his aim to prove that any one of the four *koṭi*s holds true but rather that all fail, thereby disproving the concept examined (e.g. desire or motion) as flawed and therefore empty. As we have seen Nāgārjuna doubts the premise that there is any ultimate reality and goes so far as saying that ultimately everything is conventional.

There is no difference between the ultimate and the conventional, for everything is conventional. This however means accepting that even the statement "all is empty" is empty. As has been seen with Wittgenstein this is the only way one may pierce the limits of thought. The ultimate realisation is the lack thereof. Now it is important not to confuse this realisation with the fourth *koṭi*. Fundamentally, true *tathāgata* may only be achieved through the negation of language, the fourth *koṭi* still is part of the construct to be overcome, it is still part of the problem. This is the realisation of emptiness, which is defined as a "lack of *svabhāva*". *Svabhāva* itself may be roughly defined as existence through

itself, meaning that it precisely does not exist *relative* to and *dependent* on others. Not surprisingly this mirrors quite closely the definition of *essence*. In order for an object *not* to be empty it must possess essence, if it does so, it has *svabhāva*. Only what has essence will be ultimately true. Siderits explains:

The test for something's having intrinsic nature is to see if it retains its nature after being either divided up or analyzed. Thus the chariot is not ultimately real precisely because its nature is not to be found among its parts.[133]

Basically, essence is the set of all attributes that follow necessarily from the existence of an object. It is *essential* for fire to be hot. But it is not necessary for the chariot to have, for instance, a wheel: a chariot that lacks a wheel will still be recognisable as a chariot. Existence through essence, i.e. *svabhāva*, would therefore not depend on any cause or condition, because it would itself be its own cause and own condition. It would therefore be ultimately real. But as Robinson explains:

Svabhāva is by definition the subject of contradictory ascriptions. If it exists, it must belong to an existent entity, which means that it must be conditioned, dependant on other entities, and possessed of causes. But a Svabhāva is by definition unconditioned, not dependant on other entities, and not caused. Thus the existence of a Svabhāva is impossible.[134]

Nāgārjuna now argues that everything originating in causes and condition, which encompasses everything, will inevitably lack *svabhāva* and therefore be empty. From this Nāgārjuna extrapolates that it is neither correct to claim that "ultimately nothing ever exists", also known as *nihilism*, nor to claim that "ultimately everything always exists", in the Buddhist context referred to as *eternalism*. These realisations will make the considerations in chapter 4.2 much easier to follow. The question whether things possess *svabhāva* is of crucial significance for the MMK and its treatment is as complex as it is exegetically relevant. Ultimately however, it is not Nāgārjuna's concern to posit any positive position but to retire from all this phenomenological non-sense and thereby to achieve the ultimate enlightenment or "the relinquishment of all views"[135].

This is the truth taught by the Buddha and Nāgārjuna – who is also known as the *Second Buddha*[136] in Tibetan Buddhism – displays this very compassion too: He, who has already achieved the *tathāgata*, descends down to our inferior realm of the conventional to teach the way out. In order to reach the *tathāgata* one must transcend *saṃsāra*, cyclic existence, which is only feasible by realising that "all is empty". Proving this requires Nāgārjuna to show that everything which is conventional is empty and that everything is conventional. Something is empty if there is no cogent position on it, viz. the *catuṣkoṭi* does not hold, because the *catuṣkoṭi* is the sum of all positions. There is no other way to the ultimate reality than through the convention.

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[133]See Siderits' commentary to his translation of the MMK: Nagarjuna 2013, p. 153.
[134]Robinson 1957, p. 299.
[135]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 83, Chapter XXVII, Stanza 30.
[136]Berger 2019.

4.2. Chapter XV Examination of Essence

The reason why chapter XV is so pivotal in the MMK is that the concept of "essence" extends to every object in existence and indeed the conclusions that follow from this chapter lie at the very heart of the Nāgārjunian doctrine. Whereas the first few chapters were devoted to simpler concepts in order to acquaint the reader with his style of thought, Nāgārjuna now sets out to pierce the problems of the conceptual world at their very root by showing that essence itself is empty and that therefore by extension everything is empty. Therefore, it generally suffices to study this chapter attentively in order to follow the ultimate conclusions Nāgārjuna draws in the last chapter. As said in the previous chapter, Nāgārjuna will prove essence to be flawed by demonstrating that no position of the tetralemma can hold. Hence, the first position examined is simply that essence exists. But because everything that exists is caused and conditioned, this is a premise held not only by Nāgārjuna but by many Buddhists, then essence would also have to be caused and conditioned:

Essence arising from
Causes and conditions makes no sense.
If essence came from causes and conditions,
Then it would be fabricated.

How could it be appropriate
For fabricated essence to come to be?
Essence itself is not artificial
And does not depend on another.[137]

Essence being caused and conditioned goes against the very definition of essence as "absolute being, [...] neither created nor relative to others"[138]. This is already enough of a reason in order to refute the phenomenon of essence as it is usually perceived, hence, the first lemma already fails. Admittedly, this is a rather weak argument[139] but Nāgārjuna will take up the existence of essence later on. However, that essence cannot be "fabricated" seems rather convincing: fabricated essence would be *artificial* and not *essential*. Essence cannot be created because either one would have to know what is essential to the object before it has essence, which is absurd, or its essence is arbitrarily defined and therefore does not express what is *essential* to that object[140].

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[137]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 1-2.

[138]Nagao 1991b, p. 212.

[139]The part about condition however seems rather convincing: If essence would depend on condition however – viz. that under different conditions, different observers, perceive an object differently – essence would be relative. For example, to me my hand *seems* to be pointing to the right, for someone standing in front of me, it *seems* to be pointing to the left. If we accept that in both cases the hand stays the same, its direction cannot be part of its essence, because a difference in essence will result in a difference in existence, given that essence is precisely defined as that, which gives an object its existence. But even if these objections are not convincing, it is rather clear that *essence* as it was defined in Nāgārjuna's times is not really conceivable if it were to exist.

[140]The way this could be resolved is to say that whatever is *arbitrarily* defined as essence is also what is indeed *essential*. In a sense this is also what Nāgārjuna does: Essence is itself just a matter of nominal definition, but therefore it is *empty*.

One might think that this already is enough: Nāgārjuna has demonstrated what he needed to demonstrate, essence is not thinkable. But the MMK would not be the MMK if there were no other positions to be examined. Because perhaps there really is no essence but the objects of the conceptual realm still remain intact. Why could existence not be thought of without essence. This is now where the *catuṣkoṭi* comes in: The first position did not hold up (i.e. T<e> ∧ ¬ F<e>) now anyone who desires to attain the Buddhist wisdom would now jump to the conclusion that essence does not exist (i.e. F<e> ∧ ¬ T<e>) but this is not at all the position of the Buddha and hence Nāgārjuna needs to refute it as well. Because saying that "essence does not exist" is still an empty and conventional phrase. Thus, the next position examined will be:

If there is no essence,
How can there be difference in entities?[141]

This position carries two flaws: Firstly, essence has a very dualistic nature. On the one hand it defines positively what something is, but it also defines what something is not. Truly an *entity* is the result of both *essence* and *existence*. As Nāgārjuna says:

If there are essences and entities
Entities are established.[142]

It marks the line between what is a butter lamp – and what is not. Without such a line there would be no difference between a butter-lamp and a non-butter-lamp. One could not distinguish between something existent and non-existent. Nāgārjuna asks:

Without having essence or otherness-essence,
How can there be entities?[143]

It helps to think of essence and existence as *form* and *content*. Existence defines *that* something is. Essence however defines *how* it does so. And just like content without form, there can be no existence without essence. The moment something *is*, there must be some way *in which* it is. One could think that form may exist without content but this will turn out to be absurd later on as well. It is clear however that existence without essence would be absurd, without this there would be no way to distinguish a yak-butter-lamp from a cow-butter-lamp and vice versa.[144] This position invariably leads to some form of nihilism. The problem with this position is explained in stanza 4:

If the entity is not established,
A nonentity is not established.
An entity that has become different
Is a nonentity, people say.[145]

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[141]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 3.

[142]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 4.

[143]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 4.

[144]And importantly, there would also be no way to distinguish between a yak-butter-lamp and non-yak-butter-lamp. This means that something is indistinguishable from nothing, which is nihilism.

[145]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 5.

This is the self-negating nature of nihilism: Existence is by nature a dialectic concept, if nothing exists then there is nothing that exists and therefore there is no way of realising the difference between existence and non-existence. The middle-way we are after therefore is not only a middle-way between essence and non-essence but also between the concepts of "nihilism", nothing exists, and "eternalism", everything is unchanged. This separation is of particular importance to a Buddhist author like Nāgārjuna because the Buddha explicitly refused both these positions.[146] Eternalism claims that existence is just a direct consequence of essence: Because essence cannot change existence cannot either.[147] In a sense, eternalism negates any difference between existence and essence. That means it also claims that essence exists. Nāgārjuna now puts forth another argument:

If existence were through essence,
Then there would be no nonexistence.
A change in essence [however]
Could never be tenable.[148]

If existence is "through essence" – and essence cannot change – then existence cannot change either. This means that existence cannot move from existence to non-existence. Siderits explains: "If there were things that ultimately existed because they had intrinsic nature, they could not cease to exist. If intrinsic nature is not dependent on causes and conditions, then something's having that nature is not dependent on any other factor. But this should mean that there could be no reason for it to lose that nature–and thus cease to exist."[149] This has the additional problem that then everything that exists must have done so for ever and will do so for ever and that equally everything that does not exist must have done so for ever and will do so for ever. And because we know that everything did not exist at some point, nothing can exist now. Which again entails nihilism:

"Whatever exists through its essence
Cannot be nonexistent" is eternalism.
"It existed before but doesn't now"
Entails the error of nihilism.[150]

One could now claim then that every possible change already has its corresponding essence existing. Considered be the flame of a butter lamp, first lit and then extinct. One could now claim that the flame itself changes, it transmigrates from one essence, essence-lit, to another, essence-extinct. This would however require these two essences to be existent before and, if every essence gives necessarily way to one existence, both the lit and the extinct flame would exist simultaneously, which again is nihilistic. Although form could conceivably exist without content, these essences cannot exist without existence: Firstly, essence cannot just linger around in the void, its establishment is dependent on some existence. Secondly, this would equate to the problem that essence would have to exist and therefore would need to have essence, because existence without essence is not possible

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[146]Saṃyutta Nikāya II.XII.15, Geiger 1997.

[147]This might seem absurd (although not much more absurd than the position of nihilism) but remember that some seven hundred years before, Parmenides posited a very similar world-view.

[148]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 8.

[149]Nagarjuna 2013, p. 161.

[150]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 11.

as has been demonstrated above with the second lemma – which leads to a *regressus ad infinitum*. This vicious cycle can be circumvented by claiming that there is no essence. But if there is no essence, nothing can be distinguished and without being able to distinguish existence from non-existence, there can be no existence – which entails nihilism once more. This leads Nāgārjuna to the following argument:

If there is no essence,
What could become other?
If there is essence,
What could become other?[151]

Without essence nothing exists and nothing can change. Without essence there is no way of distinguishing between the pre-change-object and the post-change-object which makes change impossible. But if essence exists and existence is bound to it, change would be impossible because essence cannot change: In order for something to change it must remain the same object, in order for it to do so, there must be some essence accounting for this permanence. But if the essence stays the same throughout this process, how can there be change, for change in essence is impossible.[152] If essence would exist without existence being bound to it however, then essence would exist separately, which yields a *regressus*.

The question "What could become other?" goes much further than one might initially think because creation is as well a sort of change: if nothing changes then either everything exists forever statically, which equates to the flawed position of eternalism, or nothing is ever created and cannot change from non-existence to existence, which entails the error of nihilism – both positions are therefore to be refuted. So either way, things changing cannot be explained by the concept of "essence", not by its existence nor its lack thereof.

One could extrapolate a pro-eternalistic argument out of this by claiming that due to the very reason that "change" is unthinkable there can be no such thing; but as has been seen eternalism is itself absurd and might even entail nihilism. Thus, the first two lemmas and their respective positions, nihilism and eternalism, have been thoroughly refuted. But what about the third? Well in this case Nāgārjuna sort of glosses over it. He refuses this position due to the fact that the Buddha refuted both these positions and hence a good Buddhist should not believe in either position but should relinquish himself of both. To Nāgārjuna it does not seem very sensible to conjoin these two pieces of non-sense. As Nāgārjuna puts it later on in the chapter:

The Victorious One [Buddha], through knowledge
Of reality and unreality,
In the *Discourse to Katyāyāna*,
Refuted both "it is" and "it is not".[153]

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[151]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 39, Chapter XV, Stanza 3.
[152]If the the *quiddity*, the very being that makes something to be, would change, then a new thing would emerge. However, this argument becomes much less convincing if an *accidental* change is differentiated from an *essential* one.
[153]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 7.

The word "both" is to be taken in a broad sense here, not only should both "it is" and "it is not" be separately refuted (i.e. $\neg (T \wedge \neg F) \wedge \neg (F \wedge \neg T)$) but also their conjunction (i.e. $\neg (T \wedge F)$) Hence all three position ought to be refuted. The ultimate conclusion therefore being that things neither have nor have not essence, neither exist nor do not exist. This would be the fourth lemma (i.e. $\neg T<e> \wedge \neg F<e>$) but as we know ultimately the MMK transcends this position as well. Nāgārjuna makes it very clear that:

Those who see essence and essential difference
And entities and nonentities,
They do not see
The truth taught by the Buddha.[154]

This is precisely what Nāgārjuna's intent was all along: demonstrate that every conception of essence invariably leads to absurdity. Through demonstrating this, Nāgārjuna is able to relinquish us from this view and helps us overcome our conventional barrier, bringing us one step closer to the *tathāgata* and true Buddhahood. Essence is a particularly crucial chapter in the MMK, not only is *essence* proven to be flawed, by extension, the entirety of the conceptual realm is refuted as conventional. Essence defines the border between the object and the non-object if we lose this there is no more distinguishing between anything – the world dissolves itself into contradiction and chaos. Through thorough examination we may resolve these categories into nothingness and see that they have no relation to, no basis in, the proper world[155] – which is to say that they are mere conventions.

These realisations are very explicitly stated here, and chapter XV may be seen a sort of turning point in the MMK. The chapters before were meant more as an introduction and their scope is limited to the matters discussed. But with chapter XV, Nāgārjuna finally comes to very root of the problem: Our very conception of reality is flawed and must therefore be overcome . The true Buddha sees himself as an illusion and doubts even his doubt, he rests in silence and awes at the world in *tathātā*.[156]

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[154]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 40, Chapter XV, Stanza 6.

[155]Which might not even exist in the first place.

[156]Watts explains this term, which should not be confused with the related but separate term *tathāgata*, thusly: "The Sanskrit word *tat* (our "that") is probably based on a child's first efforts at speech, when it points at something and says, "Ta" or "Da." [...] [P]erhaps the child is just expressing its recognition of the world, and saying "That!" [...] *Tathata* therefore indicates the world just as it is, unscreened and undivided by the symbols and definitions of thought. A Buddha is a Tathagata, a "thus-goer", because he is awakened to this primary, nonconceptual world which no words can convey, and does not confuse it with such ideas as being or non-being, good or bad, past or future, here or there, moving or still, permanent or impermanent." Watts 1957, pp. 67-68.

5. Conclusion

Thus goes the middle way. Between reification and nihilism; error and silence; the true and the untrue. It might seem paradoxical to attempt to explain a doctrine that fundamentally doubts the very possibility of being explained. But there is no other way to the Nāgārjunian way of thought but by the means of logic and language and indeed it is precisely what all great Buddhas did: utter the unutterable. There is no other way to the ultimate truth than through convention. Having disproven every conception of ultimate truth, every metaphysical proposition, by demonstrating their inevitable relativity, one may finally indulge in the *Mūlamadhyamakākarikā*, the fundamental wisdom of the middle way[157]. As one of Nāgārjuna's disciples – Āryadeva – put it in the *Catuḥśataka*:

Just as barbarians cannot be led
By speaking another language,
One cannot lead ordinary beings
Without using ordinary means.[158]

Reading Nāgārjuna is not easy – understanding him, is even harder. The Nāgārjunian way of thought is perhaps the most moderate form of absolute intellectual radicalism. The middle way – despite its name – is far from being conciliatory; not even to those who seek its lore. The oftentimes rather capricious terminology employed, the extremely laconic manner of writing and the regular references to canonical Buddhist teaching, leave (not only) the Western reader regularly confused and boggled at the sheer complexity of this text. Surprisingly however, much of this vocabulary is not completely foreign to a Western reader either, much of what is expressed in the MMK – particularly in the first few chapters – do resemble some Western world-views. Either way, the principles, ideas and manner of argument of the Madhyamaka school are as challenging as they are enticing.

There are still many questions to be raised regarding the cogency of the ultimate conclusion reached and Nāgārjuna is not the only, probably not even the best, defender of this peculiar position. Particularly the first few chapters seem rather implausible nowadays. It would require a sizeable bit of re-formulation of Nāgārjuna's work in order to make these convincing to a Western contemporary reader, the original text may only give as a brief glimpse of this. Furthermore, it is not exactly clear whether Nāgārjuna's teachings

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[157]Watts 1957, p. 62.

[158]Unfortunately, Āryadeva's work has not been comprehensively translated into any major European language, hence the excerpt given in Tsongkhapa, "Examination of the Self and Phenomena", p. 383 has been used as a surrogate.

are even compatible with non-Buddhist and non-monastic life. Although I would tend to speculate that it is not completely inconceivable to live in a world of mere conventional truth and still go on with life as if nothing had changed. As Priests puts it:

In traversing the limits of the conventional world, there is a twist, like that in a Möbius strip, and we find ourselves to have returned to it, now fully aware of the contradiction on which it rests.[159]

In a sense, it might not even be desirable to live aloft the Nāgārjunian ladder and perhaps it suffices to have – for once – breached our limits of thought just to then return back to them, despite Nāgārjuna certainly wanting us to transcend these flawed conceptions once and for all when he exclaims in the very last stanza of the MMK:

I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.[160]

Still, the MMK offers a surprisingly elaborate epistemological review of our perception and thought and challenges us to see many long-considered truths as mere conventions. Such a profound insight into the proceedings of our mind, a true paradigmatic change in the way we perceive our perception, has no real rival in the West until Kant. That Nāgārjuna was able to deduce these problems, although perhaps not solve them, is an astonishing feat. The MMK's insights are valuable far beyond their mere philosophical-historical significance and remain relevant to this very day, indeed, if executed thoroughly, the MMK's system of thought may just as well enable us to move beyond the boundaries of our mind, even if this still does not enable us to grasp the *Ding an sich.*

In this regard, it is my solemn hope that this thesis has helped to rid Nāgārjuna and the MMK of some of the most prevalent misconceptions that it has been so often faced with and it is my genuine conviction that anyone who looks at the evidence hitherto presented will acquit the MMK of the charges pressed. Even if putting Nāgārjuna on trial may not have proven his innocence, it has somehow inculpated those who accused him. Seldom does one find a work of such great literary, philosophical and religious significance so woefully disdained. If nothing else, this Matura thesis may help elucidate a most enlightening chapter of intellectual history often disregarded in our contemporary Western discourse, to the mutual benefit of both the enlighteners and the enlightened.[161]

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[159]Priest 1995.

[160]Nagarjuna 1995, p. 83, Chapter XXVII, Stanza 30.

[161]At this point I would like to thank those who have probably most enlightened me, this being my advisor Adrian Häfliger whose challenging but enticing feedback has immeasurably ameliorated this thesis as well as my co-advisor Dr. Pierrefrancesco Basile . I would also like to thank my classmate Tobias von Arx for setting up the website. I equally owe much thanks to a great number of other people, who I cannot all list here, whom I have given a, at times barely legible, draft of this paper and whose patience and determination have helped make this thesis as lucid and readable as it possibly could be. This thesis could not have been feasible without them and I extend my heartiest and humble gratitude towards them.

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Leif Garrelt Sieben

Appendix

A. Technical Appendix

A.1. Prove of the Collapsing Fourth Koṭi by Means of De Morgan's Law

De Morgan's laws:

I. $\neg (p \lor q) \iff \neg p \land \neg q$
II. $\neg (p \land q) \iff \neg p \lor \neg q$

Assuming that De Morgan's first law holds. The fourth *koṭi* collapses into the third:

1. $\neg (p \lor q) \iff \neg p \land \neg q$
2. $\neg (p \lor \neg p)$
3. $\neg p \land \neg \neg p$

C. $\neg p \land p$ QED.

A.2. Quantifiers in the Tetralemma

Tillemans[162] suggests following notation:

a. $\exists x p$
b. $\exists x \neg p$
c. $\exists x(p \land \neg p)$
d. $\exists x(\neg p \land \neg \neg p)$

Robinson[163] has a slightly different take on it, the problems however persist: Firstly, there is no evidence in the text that this is what is meant nor do other Indian thinkers use a model similar to this. Secondly, the fourth *koṭi*, still collapses into the third. Thirdly, as Priest[164] points out the quantifiers in the third and fourth *koṭi*, are empty because indeed there exists no x for which p and $\neg$ p hold, thus this last-ditch attempt at saving classical logic has failed as well. However, there is an interpretation much more cogent than this one, which does not work with quantifiers quite as explicitly as is done here but has some similarity: the two-truth-doctrine. It claims "that there exists some x in the *conventional world* for which there exists $\neg$ x simultaneously in the *ultimate world*". Basically, we have two quantifiers which are used in unison here. This is an entirely coherent approach but suffers from another array of problems completely, as has been seen in chapter 3.1.2.

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[162] Tillemans 1999.
[163] Robinson 1957.
[164] Priest 2010.

A.3. Combinations of Koṭis

In this chapter two things shall be proven: Firstly, it shall be proven that the notation is indeed autarchical and comprehensive in regard to every single lemma. This is most easily done by demonstrating that the negation of all the other lemmas always yields the missing one: E.g. ¬ I. and ¬ II. and ¬ III. giving the IV. Secondly, it shall be shown what happens if all four lemmas are simultaneously negated. Lastly, it shall be proven that the notation proposed in chapter 2.2 is indeed mutually exclusive. Therefore, all possible combinations of lemmas will be examined. If the tetralemma would not be comprehensive, Nāgārjuna's entire argumentation would falter. Any combination of the *koṭi*s by means of a logical junction (i.e. ∨ or ∧) and/or a negation ¬ should therefore not render a new, independent *koṭi*. Nor should it be possible that two different lemmas co-exist simultaneously, e.g. the I. and the II. being true. A partial re-formulation of an already stated *koṭi* will not be regarded as independent, as far as its proposition is already sufficiently covered by the *catuṣkoṭi* itself (i.e. x ∈ C). Nor will any part of the following implicit statement be counted as an independent *koṭi*, given that it is fundamentally, what we set out to prove in the first place:

CS.: $(T^{165} \wedge \neg F) \vee (F \wedge \neg T) \vee (T \wedge F) \vee (\neg T \wedge \neg F)^{166}$

Which is in fact nothing else but a reformulation of the necessary definition that neither T ∧ ¬ T nor F ∧ ¬ F can both, simultaneously, be the case:

¬ (T ∧ ¬ T) ∧ ¬ (F ∧ ¬ F)
⇒ (¬ T ∨ T) ∧ (¬ F ∨ F)
⇒ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ (F ∧ ¬ T) ∨ (T ∧ F) ∨ (¬T ∧ ¬ F)

This equates to saying that one of the *koṭi*s must hold[167] and that the negation ¬ is still implicational as we have defined it in chapter 2.2[168] Thus no re-formulation of this implicit statement may be seen as an independent lemma. Nor will any statement like T or ¬ F be seen as independent because the constraint also dictates that both predicates always need to have some value and therefore no predicate can exist independently. For example, with T, either ¬ F or F must hold and hence it is either equal to the first or the third lemma. For this reason, we may safely ignore any position that is based exclusively on a single predicate. We shall begin our examination with the non-negated conjunction ∧, which will prove to always result in some violation to the proposition that T and ¬ T and/or not F and ¬ F. :

---

[165]For ease of use T<p> will hereafter be referred to as T and F<p> as F respectively.

[166]See chapter 2.2, p.9.

[167]Although the statement above does not make this clear, it should be noted that the *koṭi* should not apply simultaneous of each other. A very precise statement would use ⊕ (i.e. either one and not both) instead of ∨ (i.e. either one or both) but this naturally follows from the constraint below that: ¬(T ∧ ¬ T) ∧ ¬ (F ∧ ¬ F).

[168]This might actually be seen as the sole weakness of Priest's notation: It still requires one convention. Claiming that T ∧ ¬ T however would just be another form of the third lemma and if one replaces ∧ with ∨ in the first two lemmas then the comprehensiveness of the *catuṣkoṭi* is still conserved. Intuitively, logically and didactically using the convention however is probably more sensible and is certainly much closer to the way Nāgārjuna argues.

I. $\wedge$ II: $(T \wedge \neg\ F) \wedge (F \wedge \neg\ T)$
$\Rightarrow (T \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge (F \wedge \neg\ F)$

I. $\wedge$ III: $(T \wedge \neg\ F) \wedge (T \wedge F)$
$\Rightarrow (T \wedge T) \wedge (\neg\ F \wedge F)$

I. $\wedge$ IV: $(T \wedge \neg\ F) \wedge (\neg T \wedge \neg\ F\ )$
$\Rightarrow (T \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge (\neg\ F \wedge \neg\ F)$

II. $\wedge$ III: $(F \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge (T \wedge F)$
$\Rightarrow (F \wedge F) \wedge (\neg\ T \wedge T)$

II. $\wedge$ IV: $(F \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge (\neg T \wedge \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow (F \wedge \neg\ F) \wedge (\neg\ T \wedge \neg\ T)$

III. $\wedge$ IV: $(T \wedge F) \wedge (\neg T \wedge \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow (T \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge (F \wedge \neg)$

Obviously, no connection of multiple lemmas by $\wedge$ will give any better result due to the nature of the conjunction. If only one combination is not possible then the entire conjoined term cannot ever be the case. This also explains why any given combination with $\vee$ will not be feasible either. If one is to claim that, for example, the I. or (i.e. $\vee$) II. holds then it should actually read as *either* I. *or* (i.e. $\oplus$) II. because, as has been seen above, both cannot hold true. But then this formulation is nothing but an incomplete, and therefore incorrect, formulation of the implicit statement CS. Using the negation $\neg$ only leads to another incomplete formulation of the CS.-proposition:

I. $\neg\ (T \wedge \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow \neg\ T \vee F$[169]
II. $\neg\ (F \wedge \neg\ T)$
$\Rightarrow (\neg\ F \vee F)$
III. $\neg\ (T \wedge F)$
$\Rightarrow \neg\ T \vee \neg\ F$
IV. $\neg\ (\neg\ T \wedge \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow T \vee F$

Neither of these positions expresses anything new and can therefore safely be ignored. In fact, one great advantage of Priest's notation is that all four lemmas are defined relative to each other in the sense that negating any three of them will always yield the missing fourth one[170]:

I. $\neg(F \wedge \neg\ T) \wedge \neg\ (T \wedge F) \wedge \neg\ (\neg T \wedge \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow [(\neg\ F \vee T) \wedge (T \vee F)] \wedge (\neg\ T \vee \neg\ F)$
$\Rightarrow [T \vee (T \wedge \neg\ F) \vee (T \wedge F)] \wedge (\neg\ T \vee \neg\ F)$

---

[169]Either both are the case, then this equates to the second lemma. Or only $\neg$ T is true and then the fourth would be the case. Or F holds up then this would equate to the third lemma. Remember that to every p both predicates need to have some value.

[170]And negating two yields the other two as disjunctive possibilities.

$\Rightarrow$ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ [(T ∧ ¬ F)] ∧ (¬ T ∨ ¬ F)]
$\Rightarrow$ (T ∧ ¬ F)

II. ¬ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ ¬ (T ∧ F) ∧ ¬ (¬ T ∧ ¬ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∨ F) ∧ (¬ T ∨ ¬ F)] ∧ (T ∨ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [¬ T ∨ (¬ ∧ ¬ F) ∨ (F ∧ ¬ T)] ∧ (T ∨ F)
$\Rightarrow$ (F ∧ ¬ T) ∨ [(¬ ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∨ F)]
$\Rightarrow$ (F ∧ ¬ T)

III. ¬(T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ ¬(F ∧ ¬ T) ∧ ¬(¬T ∧ ¬ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∨ F) ∧ (¬ F ∨ T)] ∧ (T ∨ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ (T ∧ F)] ∧ (T ∨ F)
$\Rightarrow$ (T ∧ F) ∨ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∨ F)]
$\Rightarrow$ (T ∧ F)

IV: ¬ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ ¬ (F ∧ ¬ T) ∧ ¬ (T ∧ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∨ F) ∧ (¬ F ∨ T)] ∧ (¬ T ∨ ¬ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ (T ∧ F)] ∧ (¬ T ∨ ¬ F)
$\Rightarrow$ (¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ [(T ∧ F) ∧ (¬ T ∨ ¬ F)]
$\Rightarrow$ (¬ T ∧ ¬ F)

Hence no other lemma is logically possible and thus the tetralemma is indeed comprehensive. This realisation will be vital for the further proceedings of the MMK's argumentation. Alas, it is very interesting to note what happens if one is to negate all lemmas: Annihilation. As will be seen in chapter 3.2.3 this is exactly what Nāgārjuna was attempting the entire time:

¬ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ ¬ (F ∧ ¬ T) ∧ ¬ (T ∧ F) ∧ ¬ (¬T ∧ ¬ F)
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∨ F) ∧ (¬ F ∨ T)] ∧ [(¬ T ∨ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∨ F)]
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∨ (T ∧ F)] ∧ [(¬ T ∧ F) ∨ (¬ F ∧ T)]
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (¬ T ∧ F)] ∨ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (¬ F ∧ T)] ∨ [(T ∧ F) ∧ (¬ T ∧ F)] ∨ [(¬ T ∧ F) ∧ (¬ F ∧ T)]
$\Rightarrow$ [(¬ F ∧ ¬ T) ∧ (¬ T ∧ F) ∧ (F ∧ ¬ F)] ∨ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∧ ¬ T)] ∨ [(T ∧ ¬ T) ∧ (F ∧ ¬ T) ∧ (T ∧ F)] ∨ [(¬ T ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (F ∧ ¬ F) ∧ (T ∧ F)]
$\Rightarrow$.