

# Is *Samsāra* actually the Same as *Nirvāṇa*? A Critical Examination of Nāgārjuna's Provocative Understanding of Emptiness

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## Abstract

A recent trend in interpreting Nāgārjuna's claim that *samsāra* is the same as *nirvāṇa* is to highlight the identity of dependent origination and emptiness in Nāgārjuna's writings. Although this trend is correct in foregrounding the identity claim in this central Mahāyāna thinker's philosophy, the complexity of the claim requires interrogation. In this article I will explore various possible ways of interpreting Nāgārjuna's claim that a broad all-encompassing understanding of emptiness leads to a clear appreciation of all things. For example, some theorists place his assertion within a textual context and others place it in a historical context, while others again explore the logic of the statement. This article examines three possible interpretative models of what Nāgārjuna could mean by the interaction between conventional and ultimate knowledge: Model One – The Identity Model. Conventional knowledge is identical to ultimate knowledge; Model Two – The Equivalence Model. There is an equivalent relationship between conventional knowledge and ultimate knowledge; Model Three – The Nihilistic Model. Both conventional and ultimate knowledge are fundamentally indiscernible and therefore devoid of meaning. Hopefully, by comparing the strengths and viability of the three models, this article will contribute to a better understanding of Nāgārjuna's provocative claim that a clear understanding of things is attainable through apprehension of emptiness. Further, I will posit that the best possible model for understanding this claim is the equivalence model. But that does not suggest that the other two models do not offer useful ideas in the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's claim. It is, therefore, important to consider the contribution of each model.

**Keywords:** Nāgārjuna, *samsāra*, *nirvāṇa*, identity theory, equivalence, nihilistic, conventional knowledge, ultimate truth, two-truths, sameness.

## Introduction

In the *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* (MK) and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV) Nāgārjuna asserts that ...

All things prevail for him whom prevails this voidness. Nothing prevails for him for whom voidness does not prevail<sup>1</sup>.  
*sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate/  
sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate//*

and

For whom there is emptiness, there is [the clarity of] all things. For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing what soever. If *śūnyata* does not work, then everything does not work ...<sup>2</sup>.  
*prabhavati ca śūnyatēyaṃ yasya prabhavanti taśya sarvāthāh/  
prabhavati na tasya kiṃcin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya//*

These verses can be paraphrased as meaning that clear understanding is dependent on knowing the emptiness of everything. This curious but emphatic statement requires justification. Unfortunately Nāgārjuna does not explain his assertion, leaving readers like myself perplexed. It is not clear whether Nāgārjuna is making this claim in terms of a clear perception of phenomena, their objective truth or our understanding of phenomena.

In this article I will explore various possible ways of interpreting Nāgārjuna's claim that a broad encompassing understanding of emptiness leads to a clear appreciation of all things. For example, some theorists place his assertion within a textual context and others place it in a historical context, while others again explore the logic of the statement.

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<sup>1</sup> VV 70 in Westerhoff (2010: 41).

<sup>2</sup> MK 24: 14 in McCagney (1997: 201).

Unpacking Nāgārjuna's claim requires an analysis of his assertion that *nirvāṇa* is the same as *samsāra* (MK 25:19), because he is claiming that emptiness is constitutive of both *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. *Nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are usually seen as 'two truths' falling into the categories of ultimate truth and conventional truth. Nāgārjuna makes a qualified distinction between conventional knowledge and ultimate knowledge. Conventional knowledge arises within *samsāra*, while ultimate knowledge arises within *nirvāṇa*. The two forms of knowledge have a complex and ambivalent relationship, which needs to be explored. A better understanding of this relationship will enable us to comprehend what Nāgārjuna means by the understanding of emptiness see (MK 25:9).

This article examines three possible interpretative models of what Nāgārjuna could mean by the interaction between conventional and ultimate knowledge:

**Model One** – The Identity Model. Conventional knowledge is identical to ultimate knowledge,

**Model Two** – The Equivalence Model. There is an equivalent relationship between conventional knowledge and ultimate knowledge,

**Model Three** – The Nihilistic Model. Both conventional and ultimate knowledge are fundamentally indiscernible and therefore devoid of meaning.

I will argue that there is some strength in the Identity Model (Model One), but that ultimately it presents certain intractable philosophical problems. The Equivalence Model (Model Two) is viable but it requires invoking complex negotiation between conventional and ultimate truth. The Nihilistic Model (Model Three) is logically viable because, if ultimate knowledge is empty and conventional knowledge is also empty of substance then it seems logical that meaning must be projected onto phenomena by the perceiver, therefore meaning would always be imposed. But in terms of the affirmative assertion of clarity made by Nāgārjuna in the two quoted verses, the model's feasibility is suspect.

Hopefully, by comparing the strengths and viability of the three models, this article will contribute to a better understanding of Nāgārjuna's provocative claim that a clear understanding of things is attainable through

apprehension of emptiness. Further, I will posit that the best possible model for understanding this claim is the equivalence model. But that does not suggest that the other two models do not offer useful ideas in the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's claim. It is, therefore, important to consider the contribution of each model.

## **Critical Context**

Before expounding my own response to these verses, it is fruitful to explore the six main themes that I have observed in the scholarly reception and interpretation of MK 24:14, MK 25:19 & 20 and VV 70. Chronologically these commentators are; Kalupahana (1986), Inada (1993), Garfield (1995), Westerhoff (2010) and Siderits and Katsura (2013). (Although Inada does not offer a commentary, his translation of the MK is very helpful). Nancy McCagney offers a different interpretation of these verses by resorting to the concept of equivalence, and, as I will show, this approach holds the most explanatory power. The six hermeneutical trends are:

### 1. The Assertion that all is *śūnyatā*

All five theorists agree that Nāgārjuna is arguing for the *Madhyamaka/Mahāyāna* position that all is *śūnyatā*. However, the more recent commentaries by Westerhoff (2010: 130) and Siderits and Katsura (2013: 276), articulate the Madhyamakan view of the identity of *śūnyatā* and dependent origination in their commentaries on the verses in question (While Westerhoff comments on the debate between Nāgārjuna and his critics, his textual analysis is based on the VV and he does not comment substantially on the MK).

### 2. The Error of Substantializing

All five theorists agree that Nāgārjuna is criticizing the substantialization mentioned in debates among the *Abhidharmikas*, although they do not all mention them by name. The theorists refer to the process of substantializing in different ways – Kalupahana refers to the cause of substantializing being emotional obsession with views (Kalupahana1986: 337); Garfield makes the point that, while things may appear substantial in conventional knowledge, it is important to bear in mind that the world we live in is a matter of perception

or a state of mind (1995: 332). One can therefore relate to things as they appear or as they are in their emptiness. In more recent commentaries, Westerhoff (2010) and Siderits and Katsura (2013) emphasise the element of error in perceiving substantialisation. Siderits and Katsura maintain that claims of substance undermines the Buddha's teaching about the origin and cessation of suffering and dependent origination (2013: 276). Similarly, Westerhoff asserts that the superimposition of substance onto the world is a mistake which requires a conceptual shift in the beholder of the world (2010: 132).

### 3. Defence of Position

Of the five theorists, only Garfield's (1995: 301) and Siderits and Katsura's (2013: 276) commentaries of these verses make reference to the importance of understanding emptiness in the Madhyamakan tradition. But it is clear that Nāgārjuna's point about the inclusive nature of emptiness is Madhyamakan in character and reminiscent of emergent Mahayanian thought.

### 4. Criticism of *Sautrāntika* and *Sarvāstivādin* Traditions

The earlier commentaries of Kalupahana and Garfield (1995: 301) make reference to the debate between Buddhist traditions with whom Nāgārjuna was engaged. Kalupahana also mentions early Buddhist groups (most probably Abhidharmikan in origin) who were involved in debates with the Brahmanical traditions such as the *Sautrāntikas* and the *Sarvāstivādins* (Kalupahana 1986: 367). From the VV we can deduce that these early Buddhist groups accused Nāgārjuna of being a nihilist. Nāgārjuna's response to their criticism is that holding to emptiness does not require him to have a position (VV 30). Nihilism, by contrast, implies holding a fixed belief or view of the world.

### 5. Defence of the Buddha's Teachings

The more recent commentaries of Siderits and Katsura, and Westerhoff emphasise the idea that Nāgārjuna is writing a defense of the Buddha's teachings. Westerhoff refers to the centrality of dependent origination in understanding the Buddha's teaching (2010: 130). Siderits and Katsura make the bold assertion that when Nāgārjuna refers to 'all is possible' in MK 24;14, he, according Siderits and Katsura, is referring to the central teachings of

Buddhism (2013:176). This would mean that Nāgārjuna believes that, if one understands emptiness, the whole of Buddhist Dharma becomes clear.

6. The Relationship of *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa*

All five theorists agree that the verses in question hold that *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are inherently the same, in their emptiness. However the more recent commentaries of Westerhoff (2010) and, Siderits and Katsura (2013) assert that things can be regarded as conventionally true even though they do not exist as dependently originated phenomena. Conventional knowledge, within *samsāra*, is true according to its own terms of reference but should not be confused with emptiness.

These six themes point to possible motives that Nāgārjuna could have held for his assertion of the crucial understanding of emptiness. It is also important to note that that all these interpretations intertwine in each theorist's response, with only subtle differing emphases accorded to particular theorists.

Before beginning my exploration of the three models of interpretation, I will spend some time reflecting on the commentaries of the five theorists mentioned above on MK 24: 14 and MK 25:19 & 20, and one of VV 70. The two most notable trends are the shift from focusing solely on emptiness in the earlier commentaries to the highlighting of identity of emptiness with dependent origination in later commentaries and the unanimous agreement across all the commentaries that *samsāra* is identical to *nirvāṇa*. However in the later commentaries the assertion of identity between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is qualified by the explanation that, while dependent origination of phenomena implies their emptiness in *samsāra*, conventional knowledge is conventionally existent, despite being inherently empty. This trend indicates that the more recent commentaries of these verses are more thorough, encompassing the broad range of meaning ascribed to emptiness. The earlier commentaries and translations of Kalupahana, Inada, and Garfield assert that Nāgārjuna insists on the importance of emptiness in understanding the world. This position contrasts with the investigations of early Buddhist traditions that sought to find an atomic essentialism in the world that was consistent over time, which gave a sense of continuity to identity. The later commentators, Siderits and Katsura (2013), and Westerhof (2010), agree on the identification of emptiness with dependent origination and confining the meaning of the

verses to a defense of the Buddha's teachings and not therefore offering a view that is not in competition with other religious translations

In addition, it is worth further unpacking the view (which is held by all five theorists) that Nāgārjuna is accusing his critics of substantializing emptiness and therefore suggesting an essential distinction between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This would be equivalent to stating that emptiness is a substrate of the conventional world. By contrast, Nāgārjuna maintains that all reality is *śūnyatā*, *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. However, if one holds that *samsāra* is a different (ignorant) way of being in the same place as *nirvāṇa*, except that in *nirvāṇa* one beholds reality correctly as being empty, then the difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* boils down to perception. It is certainly true that two people can see the same movie or read the same book and derive vastly different impressions. But Nāgārjuna is saying that there is a correct way to read the book or interpret the movie. He is making an objective claim about truth or reality. If this is the case then the claim of the identity of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, must be carefully negotiated. If Nāgārjuna is arguing that *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are inherently the same, then that would allow for different interpretations of reality. There would be *nirvāṇa*-inspired, correct one and a qualified, *samsāra*-inspired one. But if one follows the identity model, there can be no distinction, no matter how subtle, between identity and *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

## The Three Models of Interpretation

### 1 The Identity Model

Nāgārjuna's opponents (the *Sautrāntrikas* and *Sarvastivādins*, among others) accuse him of nihilism in asserting that all phenomena are empty. In contrast, they were interested in finding *dharma*s that persisted over time. Nāgārjuna defends himself by asserting that, in their pursuit of finding elements of reality or *dharma*s that are continuous over time, they mistakenly interpret emptiness as a fixed view of reality. Nāgārjuna, by contrast, avers that emptiness is maintained as a 'view', which paradoxically, does not hold a fixed view of anything. Therefore all 'views', even the large Buddhist categories of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, should not be held as ontologically fixed and separate categories.

The goal of the identity model is to prove that two things are exactly the same. In this model, *nirvāṇa* must be exactly the same as *samsāra*: there is no differentiation between them. In exploring the identity model I will focus on MK 25: 19 and 20, where Nāgārjuna asserts that the limit (*koti*) for *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are exactly the same. In making this point Nāgārjuna seems to be subscribing to an identity model argument. For the identity model is to be successful *samsāra* would have to be exactly the same as *nirvāṇa* without introducing theories of compatibility, relation and variables.

### **1.1 Four Interpretations of MK 25: 19 & 20**

All the Nāgārjuna scholars whose interpretations I consulted (Kalupahana, Inada, Garfield and, Siderits and Katsura) agree in their translation of MK 25: 19 & 20 that the limit of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* is exactly the same. They appear to share the intention of establishing the relationship of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* as one of identity. It remains necessary to investigate the verity of this claim. Inada suggests that *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* have a qualitative connotation by putting ‘realm’ in parenthesis next the translation of *koti* as limit (1993: 158). Kalupahana is, however, critical of Inada’s translation of *koti* as realm. The use of ‘limit’ establishes the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* in quantitative and not qualitative terms. Although Inada’s translation of *koti* as realm does have a qualitative sense it seems to be an incorrect translation of *koti*. More accurately, the word *koti* denotes ‘edge’ or ‘limit’. It is therefore significant that a qualitative term such as ‘realm’ does not apply to the meaning of the verse. It is also important to ask why Nāgārjuna would be establishing sameness in quantitative terms in the verse?

### **1.2 Establishing a Constant**

The limit that Nāgārjuna refers to in terms of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* is emptiness. If we think of this in algebraic terms, he is establishing a constant on which to base his analysis of all phenomena. The ‘limit’ of this view is emptiness, meaning that nothing escapes it. Everything is one and the same – empty. At this point, Nāgārjuna makes a shrewd move in intimating quantity and not quality (‘limit’ points to a quantitative characteristic, not a qualitative one), because the strength of the argument lies in its simplicity. It is far easier

to defend a position of identity based on an economy of quantity rather than quality since numbers possess precision as opposed to the subtle variables of quality. Nāgārjuna elects to maintain the strength of his position via simplicity - an approach with which William of Ockham would have concurred, not to multiply beyond necessity (Flew 1983: 253). If he can establish the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, then no further explanation for the sameness of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* is required because we are talking about the same thing. On the other hand, discussion of two things begs explanations of relationship, comparison and contrast. But the success of this argument rests on his ability to prove quantitative identity<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.3 The Impact of Indiscernible Value

If one considers Nāgārjuna's claim of the identity of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* algebraically, where x is *nirvāṇa* and y is *samsāra* it would read:

$x = c, y = c$  where c is emptiness, therefore  $x = y$ .

But the equation does not make sense if the value of c as emptiness has indiscernible value. Does emptiness refer to nothing or infinity, for example? This raises a problem for identity theory because for something to be exactly the same as itself, its exact quantitative value would need to be accurately discernible. Nāgārjuna, however, defends his argument for identity based on emptiness by arguing that emptiness (MK 24:10) can only be understood via a correct understanding of conventional knowledge. At this point Nāgārjuna introduces variables into his argument to defend his argument of identity between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See Norman Swartz, *Beyond experience: Metaphysical theories and philosophical constraints*, (1991: 325) for a concise explanation of the identity theory.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Kieran Bergh for sharing his ideas on the mathematical relation between O and infinity in this regard.

## **1.4 Are Numerically-based Properties Compatible with Identity Theory?**

At this point it is important to investigate the validity of applying numerically-based properties to ontological states. When Nāgārjuna argues that conventional knowledge is true on its own, worldly terms, but empty in terms of *paramārtha* (MK 24: 8), he introduces a qualified variable into the equation. Although *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are still the same in terms of emptiness, phenomena in *samsāra* have identifiable values in terms of the conventional frame of reference. Understanding ultimate truth requires using conventional terms such as impermanence and interdependence. These values emerge in terms of the particular arrangement and coalescing of dependently originated properties. Nāgārjuna asserts the identity of emptiness and dependent origination. He supports this by pointing out that things are always in flux because they are dependently originated, and therefore they have no inherent substance or properties. The problem in defending the identity model remains, however, that one has to prove that one ‘thing’ is identical with itself. In granting phenomena a qualified existence in *samsāra*, they require explanation in terms of their relation to *nirvāṇa* in an attempt to maintain the assertion of identity between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. The introduction of qualified variables into Nāgārjuna’s philosophy (namely the properties in conventional knowledge that bear names) therefore makes the identity model untenable because it requires proof of precise identity without the necessary explanation. The strength of the identity model is its simplicity which requires no further explanation once identity is established. But if there are two components involved, such as *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, they need to share the exact same value. The introduction of a qualified separate status of conventional knowledge begs for an explanation of correlation or relatedness.

Rather than explaining the existence of qualified variables, therefore, it is worth exploring the consequences of accepting the qualified existence of phenomena in *samsāra*. In order to do this philosophers need to negotiate Nāgārjuna’s claim in MK 25:19 & 20 of the sameness of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. In the next section I will investigate if sameness could mean equivalence rather than identity in these two verses.

## 2 The Equivalence Model

Chapter 25: 19 in the MK encapsulates one of Nāgārjuna's central ideas and yet he is frustratingly vague about what he means by equating *samsāra* with *nirvāṇa*. It is possible that Nāgārjuna implies identity between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, but, as I have just shown, this is unlikely, because that would imply a substantialist/fixed view in his thinking based on an exact quantitative value of emptiness; it would entail that identity implies an exact nature<sup>5</sup>. For Nāgārjuna, the two truths are distinct but dependent, based on the distinction in the Buddha's teaching between conventional truth and higher truth (McCagney 1997: 74). So, in order to understand the verse, one must aim to avoid a notion of sameness based on identity while retaining the equality of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. In what follows I will explore the idea that sameness implies equivalence. This explanation was first propounded by McCagney, in her book, *Nāgārjuna and the philosophy of emptiness* (1997). My discussion evaluates McCagney's analysis with a view to demonstrating its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the other two models. In order to do this I will analyse whether emptiness can be identified with dependent origination without dissolving into non-dualism.

### 2.1 Sameness that is not Non-dual

The identity model is based on a non-dual framework. But, as I have shown, this model is not helpful in elucidating Nāgārjuna's meaning. Consequently, we need to find an interpretive model that retains the notion of sameness, but is not based on non-duality. If sameness is understood as dependent origination and not as an idea that has limits, then emptiness cannot be established as a constant between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, because the dependent origination would have limitless relations. Rather, if *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are equivalent because they are both *empty*, emptiness would not need to be established in quantitative terms (McCagney 1997: 96). A quantitative notion of emptiness requires a set definition of emptiness, and this may fall prey to substantial or fixed ideas.

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<sup>5</sup> Garfield (in Westerhoff *et al.* 2011: 37) argues that *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are identical due to their common basis in *śūnyatā*.

It appears that the notion of equivalence fulfils our requirements for an interpretive category. Equivalence would accept sameness while allowing for difference, such as in the case of shared citizenship of a national group despite the acceptance of different cultural groups amongst members.

If we apply the idea of equivalence to Nāgārjuna's relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, it needs to show that emptiness provides a convincing basis for equality between the two categories. According to Nāgārjuna, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is a term that has no referent and only points to the absurdity of holding fixed views. Emptiness does not point to anything beyond the phenomena (MK 14: 18). To put it another way, it is not the noun but the verb that is important, therefore contingency and process are foregrounded, not naming of identity or qualities of the object.

## **2.2 Dependent Origination: A Conceptual Basis for Equivalence**

If we are going to prove equality, we need to get away from considering *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* as 'higher' and 'lower' truths. Process and dependency in *saṃvṛti* give rise to different phenomena, which arise and cease. While ignorance imposes *svabhāva* (substantial views) on what arises, dependent origination sets phenomena in relation to each other. Therefore it is fair to say that even *emptiness*, from the view of *saṃvṛti*, is relatively experienced due to the processes of emergence and ceasing. This view of *emptiness* gives a fuller sense to VV 70 and MK 24: 14 because the chimera of fluid conventionally-named phenomena arise because of the open interdependence of phenomena. This means that all phenomena are equivalent in terms of their unfixed, indiscernible and empty natures. But from the view of *nirvāṇa*, these phenomena have no ultimate existence. In the next section we will need to examine more closely how *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* could be viewed as the same if conventionally named phenomena in *samsāra* are the same as *nirvāṇa*.

## **2.3 Equivalence of Type but not Scope**

The problem with viewing equivalence between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is that, while they are equal in terms of emptiness, they are not equal in scope. From the view of conventional knowledge, there are identifiable existences that

arise and cease due to dependent origination; but, from the view of *nirvāṇa*, nothing ultimately arises or ceases. This can be explained by conventional truth's scope being limited to the names ascribed to phenomena as they arise, while ultimate truth's scope is infinite and therefore cannot be named (McCagney 1997: 87). According to McCagney (1997: 87), *Nirvāṇa* or ultimate truth does not denote a higher level, but a broader range (McCagney 1997: 87). If the two truths are not seen as occupying different levels of truth, but rather the same level, with conventional truth denoting a narrow view and *paramārtha* denoting a wide view, this has important implications. While equivalence is determined by dependent origination, the narrow view of conventional truth must set objects in different relations with each other and establish different spatial coordinates between named phenomena. But the wide view of *paramārtha* overrides those relations in that it stresses that arising and ceasing of named phenomena do not occur<sup>6</sup>. Equivalence, therefore, is focused on the world of phenomena, but it generates a wider view. In the narrow view of conventional knowledge, phenomena are named, but in the wide view of ultimate knowledge there is nothing to be named, despite both being comprised by dependent origination. McCagney's interpretation of Nāgārjuna overcomes the problem of non-dualism, but it places the sameness of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* on ambivalent grounds: *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* are the same in their emptiness, but still different in some ways. The nature of their difference still requires exploration, though, and this can be done through an examination of the middle path.

## 2.4 The Contradiction of Scope Resolved in a Necessary Ambivalence of the Middle Path

For Nāgārjuna, 'the arising and passing of worldly events or phenomena (due to *pratītyasamutpāda*) is not ultimately reality but neither is there any reality beyond that' (drawing from MK 24: 18 and MK: 22)<sup>7</sup>. This is significant because there is a rejection of an ultimate unconditioned state of perfect peace that needs to be attained. Nāgārjuna's acknowledgement of the existence of two truths implies that they are different, but he also states that

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<sup>6</sup> MK 18 and 22 (in McCagney 1997: 181 & 192).

<sup>7</sup> In McCagney 1997: 21.

the two truths' sameness resides in their both being dependently originated. Surely there is a glaring contradiction in this statement because, as I argued earlier, something that is identical with itself must be itself? Nāgārjuna does not attempt to deal with this contradiction, but rather maintains that reality is indiscernible to the extent that it has infinitely open interdependent relations. In chapter 7: 27-30 of the MK Nāgārjuna maintains that no thing exist, arises or ceases<sup>8</sup> and yet in Chapter 24 of the MK he asserts that conventional truth, although less true than ultimate truth, is true by tacit agreement or convention. The ambivalence that is manifest in such thinking leads him to approach reality as an open process rather than as conditional, in other words, reality is a fluid set of relations rather than identifiable or cognitively fixed entities. In understanding the sameness of conventional and ultimate knowledge, it would seem the only way to work with both would be to walk a middle line between them. But this solution leads us to ask whether the middle path resolves the ambivalence between ultimate and conventional knowledge into the exact sameness claim by Nāgārjuna in MK 25: 19 and 20. In order to explore this question, I will turn to the Nihilist Model.

### **3 The Nihilist Model**

A group of Nāgārjuna's opponents, the *Abhidharmikas*, accuse him of being a nihilist. They argue that if he claims universal emptiness, then the Dharma, by implication, would not exist and neither would the Buddha himself have existed. He defends himself by arguing that they are substantializing emptiness. His view of emptiness is 'viewless' in the sense that even emptiness is empty and therefore cannot be proposed as a view. All reality is, by its nature, empty of emptiness and therefore indiscernible. Conventional knowledge still, and paradoxically, is necessary to come to an ultimate understanding of emptiness. But, for this to be effective, conventional knowledge has to be understood to be dependently originated and therefore empty.

Nāgārjuna devoted a large portion of the VV to defend his position on truth against the *Abhidharmikas*. The challenge he faces from his opponents in this text is: if he claims that there is no own-being, it is

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<sup>8</sup> In McCagney 1997: 172.

nonsensical to negate that which does not exist. His opponent's logic is encapsulated in verses 9 to 12, as follows:

9. And if there was no substance, there would also not even be the name 'insubstantiality of things', for there is no name without a referent.

10. Rather, substance exists, yet the substance of things does not exist. It has to be explained to what this thingless substance belongs.

11. To the extent to which the negation 'there is a pot in the house' is precisely a negation of an existent, your negation is a negation of an existing substance.

12. Now as this substance does not exist, what is negated by the statement of yours? For the negation of a non-existent is accomplished without words<sup>9</sup>.

Thomas Wood (1994:109) presents a nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna's response to the accusation of the impossibility of a negation of a false perception. He claims that Nāgārjuna does not dispute the charge of nihilism which his opponent levels against him. Rather, Wood believes, Nāgārjuna counter-argues that his opponent does not appreciate that his understanding of nihilism is total, which includes the statement 'all is empty'. Any statement, even one denying any own-being, does not contradict the statement, if statements only operate at a 'magical' or illusory level<sup>10</sup>. Wood's position is that, despite the fact that the world is, in his terms, a phantasmagoria, the processes of cognition, i.e. *pratītyasamutpāda*, do occur in an illusory sense (MK 7:34). Nāgārjuna asserts that by naming anything, even *śūnyatā*, the illusory world is established (*prasiddha*)<sup>11</sup>. If meaning is determined by the processes of perception from the *saṃvṛti* view, then meaning will always be conflictual, established competitively between dominant and less dominant

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<sup>9</sup> In Westerhoff (2011: 24).

<sup>10</sup> Wood (1994: 109). The argument is based on verse 23 in the VV, where Nāgārjuna argues that his understanding of negation is not contradictory because it takes place by one illusory person negating another illusory person of his or her own making.

<sup>11</sup> VV 59.

properties and qualities. In this case, meaning is established by comparison, contrast and by degrees.

For Wood, nihilism is the only alternative to a competitive meaning structure: all phenomena are unreal and hence meaningless (Wood 1994: 112). But does this imply that meaning, for Nāgārjuna, is conditional?

It is helpful, at this point, to place Nāgārjuna's understanding of ignorance within a Buddhist mindset. The *Samyutta Nikāya* 3.142 from the *Tipitaka* reads:

All form is comparable to foam; all feelings to bubbles, all sensations are like mirages; dispositions are like the plantain trunk, consciousness is but an illusion<sup>12</sup>.

In *Samyutta Nikāya* 1.135 the Buddha refers to the role causality plays in producing a false sense of self. The metaphor of the chariot is used to describe how the various parts contribute to a false sense of the whole (Kalupahana 1975: 78). The five *skandhas* produce a false sense of continuous self and a dysfunctional attachment to the objects of perception.

By contrast to the Buddha's teachings, it seems, for Nāgārjuna, sense objects are a consequence of causality or *pratītyasamutpāda*, but are not seen as a consequence of ignorance in his philosophy. It is because they appear distinct and in possession of substantive essence that they are deceptive (MK 13: 1 & 2). The intention with which they are observed can cause liberation from *dukkha*. If sense objects are substantialised, *dukkha* results. But if they are viewed as inherently empty, *nirvāṇa* is experienced<sup>13</sup>. As Wood argues, concepts are used only as a means to communicate; but, in thinking about concepts, we use conventions that cannot capture the flux of mental impressions. Language contains two contradictory possibilities: its structure can imply the concept of substance through attachment to sensory referents, but language can also refer to *sūnya* if it is used with the awareness that it is pointing to that reality of emptiness. Language is therefore not contradictory when it refers to emptiness (Wood 1994:111). In VV 57 Nāgārjuna argues:

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<sup>12</sup> In Kalupahana (1975: 86).

<sup>13</sup> MK 14: 3-8 (in McCagney, 1997: 170).

Where someone said ‘a name has a referent’, one would say then substance exists. You have to assert ‘we do not assert a name of this kind’<sup>14</sup>.

In this sense, since the name of a thing refers to something that is insubstantial, the name must also be insubstantial ‘because its emptiness is non-referring’ (Westerhoff 2010: 106). This statement replies to Nāgārjuna’s opponent’s statement in verse 9:

And if there is no substance, there would also not even be the name ‘insubstantiality of things’ for there is no name without a referent<sup>15</sup>.

For Nāgārjuna, both the term and the object referred to are *śūnya* and they need to be understood as such. When this is clear in the perceiver’s mind, no sense or meaning can be attached to anything. This, however, renders the negotiation between the two truths invalid in the nihilist model in that all is *śūnyatā*, so there cannot be two truths at all because *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are both meaningless due to their emptiness. Consequently, contradiction and ambivalence do not apply to the two truths. But while Wood’s argument for a nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s thought does carry logical weight, it does not match with Nāgārjuna’s professed intention that understanding emptiness via the two truths is the basis of understanding the Buddha’s teachings.

## Analysis

Nāgārjuna aims to explain nothing short of the nature of reality as it is experienced. This is an extremely ambitious project. His defence and explanation of his position is understandably extremely complex, but it is an exemplary object of study for its astute reasoning and insight. The difficulty of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy can be understood by means of a few simple and assertive claims. Among these are that everything is empty of substance and if the all-inclusiveness of emptiness is properly understood, then a clear appreciation of everything will follow. Nāgārjuna makes these claims in MK

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<sup>14</sup> In Westerhoff et al (2011: 37).

<sup>15</sup> Westerhoff (2011: 24).

24:14 and VV 70. Recent scholarship based on these two verses (such as Siderits & Katsura 2013; and Westerhoff 2010) highlights the identification Nāgārjuna makes between emptiness and dependent origination, whereas earlier interpretations of the verses, particularly MK 24:14, focus solely on emptiness (such as Kalupahana 1986; and Inada 1993). In terms of recent scholarship's foregrounding of dependent origination in the commentaries on these verses, my article has applied three models of truth, namely Identity, Equivalence and Nihilist, to attempt to clarify what is meant by Nāgārjuna's claim of all-inclusive clarity when emptiness is properly understood. The focus on dependent origination calls into focus Nāgārjuna's claim that *samsāra* is equal to *nirvāṇa* and the resultant complex relationship between conventional knowledge and ultimate knowledge.

The Identity Model has the potential of offering a very simple and elegant solution to the problem of the relationship to *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* based on their shared empty status. But, as I have demonstrated, the model does not allow for the role of conventional knowledge of qualified truth in Nāgārjuna's two-truths formulation.

The Equivalence Model is based on McCagney's ground-breaking work (1997). It interprets the two-truths formula as not a higher and lower truth, but rather a narrow and wide truth. McCagney's shift from a vertical to a horizontal framework in her interpretation of Nāgārjuna's explanation of the two truths allows for a better incorporation of conventional and ultimate knowledge into their shared empty status. In the Equivalence Model, conventional knowledge is not seen as a value-laden 'lesser' knowledge. It is understood as knowledge that focuses on a narrower view than ultimate knowledge, but which affords a more defined, if transitory, view of phenomena. The weakness of the Equivalence Model is that, in accepting conventional knowledge on its own relative terms, the relationship between conventional knowledge and ultimate knowledge is ambivalent and contradictory because while the two knowledge forms share a commonality in emptiness, conventional knowledge is true in its own terms, yet not true in terms of the wider perspective of *nirvāṇa*.

In an attempt to explain the contradiction that arises in the Equivalence Model the Nihilist Model (propounded primarily by Wood (1986)) was assessed. The Nihilist Model has the potential of overcoming the contradiction in the claim that conventional and ultimate knowledge are the same by pointing out that if conventional and ultimate knowledge are both

empty and meaningless, then there cannot be any contradiction between them. The problem with the Nihilist Model is that, while it may override the contradiction between the knowledge claims of conventional and ultimate knowledge, the consequence of reducing both forms of knowledge to nothing is that no understanding can result. Only meaningfulness, not meaning, can be derived from Nāgārjuna's writings in the application of this model. It is highly unlikely that this is what Nāgārjuna intended to convey in his writings, as the MK expresses, in the main, an optimistic view of meaning-making.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to assess Nāgārjuna's apparently contradictory claim in MK 24:14 and VV 70 that, if emptiness is understood, everything becomes clear. In order to explicate these claims, I drew on six commentaries that highlight the identity of dependent origination with emptiness in Nāgārjuna's philosophy. An exploration of these commentaries enabled me to abstract three models of truth, namely Identity, Equivalence and Nihilist, which can be applied to the analysis of Nāgārjuna's claim in the two verses. Each model of truth was measured for explanatory power against the two verses. The finding in the article was that the Equivalence Model provides the best framework for incorporating conventional and ultimate knowledge into the inclusive framework of emptiness by viewing the relationship horizontally and not vertically. The horizontal view of truth-claims is based on breadth and narrowness of views, while the vertical view focuses on the notions of higher and lower truths. When we consider *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* from a horizontal view, we can establish their sameness of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* based on emptiness. The only difference is that, in a narrow view of *pratītyasamutpāda*, relational objects come into view; while, in the infinite broad view of *pratītyasamutpāda*, relational objects 'dissolve' within the sheer breadth of the view. Nevertheless, the Equivalence model leaves certain ambiguities and contradictions unresolved, because the horizontal understanding of emptiness sets up conflicting truth claims within the same horizontal class of *pratītyasamutpāda*, stretching from the narrow *samsāra* view to the broad *nirvāṇa* view. The Identity and Nihilist Models contribute alternative explanations which offer some solutions for the ambivalences and contradictions in the Equivalence Model. The strength of the Identity Model

is its simplicity established within an algebraic framework. But this simplicity vitiates the inherent complexity of Nāgārjuna's thought. The Nihilist Model offers a tantalising and logical interpretation of Nāgārjuna's understanding of emptiness and for this reason is a viable hermeneutical approach to reading Nāgārjuna. But its proponents have not yet proved that nihilism was Nāgārjuna's *raison d'être* in his writings, and, in my view, this reading is difficult to sustain.

While this article does not arrive at a definitive understanding of what Nāgārjuna meant in MK 24:14 and VV 70, it is hoped that it clarifies and appraises various possible interpretive frameworks for the study of these two verses. In so doing, the article contributes to the on-going, lively scholarly engagement with the thinking of an iconic Buddhist thinker.

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