Dialectics in M?dhyamaka Buddhism and What It Can Teach International Relations

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This article is part of the *Buddhism and International Relations* article series, edited by Raghav Dua. The series aims to ignite a genuine interest in how Buddhist philosophy and practices can and do intersect with, and influence, various facets of international relations.

There is a rich tradition of dialectics within the many schools of Buddhist philosophy. Whilst it is impossible to cover the richness of all these forms of analysis and debate, the Mādhyamaka school (or the 'Middle-Way') resonates strongly with the interests of IR because of its unique account of relations that stem, in large part, from its use of dialectical analysis. Negative dialectics remains the hallmark of the Middle-Way as conceived by Nāgārjuna around the 2nd Century, and even today the 14th Dalai Lama is quite open in his favour toward dialectical thinking (Central Tibetan Administration, 2010). The Gelugpa School in Tibet continues its centuries-old dialectical practice as a way to integrate analytical reasoning alongside sutra, tantra, and yogic practices with dialectics as one of the five main curriculum topics in Geluk monastic institutions (Duckworth, 2022). Even though this sometimes tends to scholasticism, the goal, then as now, is for thinking to not fall into either side of substantialism/eternalism (the view of an unchanging self and *permanent/causeless creator – or the belief in Being*) or nihilism (that there is nothing and no continuity – *or the belief in Non-Being*) (see *Institute Of Buddhist Dialectics*, 2013).

In an earlier article in this series, Long (2023) has shown how the Buddhist ontology of *aradically interdependent and impermanent world* offers a very different way of thinking through ourselves and IR. In this short article, I will complement this approach, aiming to show how dialectics in Mādhyamaka pushes our thinking to go beyond the 'common-sensical' appearance of the object/subject as separate, independent, static, and to replace this with conditions and relations as inherent to all things. In particular, I will focus on Nāgārjuna's dialectical method, its scepticism, its emphasis on negation, and how it ultimately deepened the Buddhist conceptualization of Śūnyatā ('Emptiness') and Pratītyasamutpāda ('Dependent Origination' or what I prefer to call 'Interdependent Co-arising' as this better captures its relational content) leading to a profound notion of relations within our phenomenal world – for a detailed discussion see Brincat (2020). I conclude by showing that this cosmology of deep relationalism has profound implications for how we can think of the 'We' – the 'cosmopolis' and the 'earth'– in IR today.

Dialectics in Mādhyamaka

Nāgārjuna (conventionally placed between 150–250 CE) is widely seen as the founder of the Mādhyamaka tradition and one of the greatest of all Eastern philosophers (see Westhoff, 2009). In the milieu of Indian society during this time, intense metaphysical debate revolved around the nature of reality. The Buddhist tradition refuted the substantialist/eternalist viewpoint and dualism or non-dualism, instead positing Śūnyatā (Emptiness) as co-terminous with Pratītyasamutpāda (Interdependent Co-arising). There are many variations of this idea of *asmin sati idaṁ bhavati*, perhaps the most clear being: *"This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This comes to be, because that comes to be. This ceases to be, because that ceases to be"* (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999, 221-222). This central teaching of Gautama Buddha was pondered by Nāgārjuna in the*MūlaMādhyamakakārikā* (*The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*) (Nāgārjuna, 1996). He posited that phenomena do not arise, remain, or cease as *intrinsically* existent but that all dharmas (or 'phenomena') dependently originate upon all other dharmas. Emphasis is

on the use of the word intrinsic here – the Sanskrit term svabhāva for something that is deemed to be 'self-becoming' or have its 'own-nature' (i.e. disconnected and mono-causal). Gangadean defines svabhāva expansively as "the assumption of atomicity" and "static consciousness" and he notes how several formal concepts are associated with it including "atomicity, independence, substance, being, existence, entity" (1979, 42).

According to Nāgārjuna the phenomenal world is ultimately empty (Śūnyatā) of any such things, whether an inherent self or essence or identity – these exist only in a conventional sense as dependently on other phenomena (Pratītyasamutpāda) and our perceptions thereof. This is linked to the doctrine of the Two Truths in Mādhyamaka (not to be confused with dualism), that holds there are the *ultimate* and the *conventional* truths. The latter, is the world of empirical appearance, common-sense, and language; the former, of enlightenment and analytical understanding. Without understanding the conventional, the ultimate cannot be understood; and without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation from samsāra (the cyclical world of rebirth) cannot be achieved (Nāgārjuna, 1996, 24: 8–10). This way of thinking through ontology, cosmology, and being, is one in which relations and conditions are in view, not nominalism and causation. Powering Nāgārjuna's refutation of substantialist/eternalist standpoints is an underlying negative dialectical analysis of the concept of Emptiness that he pursued via the question of *what there is not*, rather than *what there is*. (Murti 1955, 7-9). I will try to draw out elements of Nāgārjuna's dialectical method more clearly as it may appear obscure for those in IR.

The sceptical attitude and 'suspension of judgement'

Mādhyamaka maintains a sceptical attitude to knowledge claims but an open disposition to learning as a dialogical process with the genuine pursuit of truth as its aim. The dialectical method is not about winning an argument but leading to better truth claims about matters that cannot be demonstrated. It has been shown that there was contact and philosophical influence between Greek Pyrrhonian scepticism (defined by its suspension of judgement) and early Buddhism with similarities in their dialectical system and modes of argumentation well-documented (McEvilley, 1982). Both dialectical approaches focus on the terms and tenets used by the interlocutor, so debate is restricted to logical argument by the opponent – this is encapsulated in Nāgārjuna's notoriously famous but quixotic statement: 'I do not have any thesis' [or judgement] (see Neale, 2014, 40). Nāgārjuna claims throughout *Vigrahavyāvartani* (2005, XVIII) that he does not negate anything (in the sense of cancelling or annulling), for there is nothing to be negated. That is, as all things are empty, there is neither a thing to be negated nor a negation (2005: LXIII).

Whilst some see Nāgārjuna as being arrogant or purely nihilistic here, McEvilley (1982, 17) surmises that the real "purpose and effect" of Nāgārjuna's dialectic is for the suppression of belief in real (intrinsic or svabhāva) entities or their absence and thus the pacification of conceptual proliferation that causes suffering. It is believed that when we no longer grasp at notions of real or unreal entities – that is, entities that possess svabhāva ('own-being' or 'own-becoming' or something 'non-dependent') – it can help us achieve nirvana/liberation as it stills the mind from seeking ultimate causes and immutable essences, or what Buddha called things beyond reason (atakkāvacara) and 'imponderable' (avyākṛta) (Nāgārjuna, 2020,1.42). Now leaving aside the soteriological interest of Mādhyamaka in nirvana, what we can take in IR is how to think through the phenomenal world that is revealed by Mādhyamaka as full of entities (subjects and objects) that Interdependently co-arise through their relations. These are not separate, fixed, or atomised as they first appear to us (a view held uncritically by most mainstream IR theories).

Negative Dialectics – but never *total* negation

So how does Nāgārjuna arrive at this relational ontology of the Middle-Way? Here it should be noted there is considerable debate on whether this should be read as ontological or as rejecting ontology, and others who suggest the method deals with epistemology – far too large a topic for this paper (see Jones, 2020). However, given this provides insight into questions of the cosmos and what is in it and out of it, I believe the term ontology is broadly applicable. The key is the negative dialectical method, or the 'double refutation', which some have said *is* the 'Middle Path' in a methodological sense because Nāgārjuna's arguments always contain the 'double refutation' – one denying the presence, one the absence of the *probandum* [the thing needing to be proved]. This procedure ensure that the two possible answers to a question, the assertion and the denial, are always covered (Liebenthal, 1948, 30). Nāgārjuna's approach is to expose the contradictions that arise when statements are made to identity and intrinsic

being, especially pronounced in doctrines of substantialism/eternalism.

What Nāgārjuna does is to push such claims/tenets to their logical extreme to show their ultimate absurdity – to *negate* them. For these reasons, *regressus ad infinitum* is often invoked in Nāgārjuna's negative dialectical process (1996, I: 1, VII: 3; VV 32). This "destructive dialectics" is clearly Nāgārjuna's favoured style, even a "monotonous method" according to Robinson (1957, 292), that he constantly deploys to expose these transgressions. One of Nāgārjuna's most famous lines of questioning is an exemplar of this process, he asked: "How could Nirvana be both existent and non-existent? These cannot be in the same place" (1996, 25.14). Similar to Aristotelian dialectics, the hypothetical syllogism is Nāgārjuna's principal form of inference but because he "values brevity above formal completeness" he leaves out propositions of the inference if the reader can supply them from the context (Robinson, 1957, 297).

Nāgārjuna's version of negative dialectics still resonates with the modern understanding of the term. But whereas the modern referent is to a restless form of thinking that does not proceed or expect some transcendent ground or to find fixity/stability in concepts (i.e. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* in which there is always a remainder or the 'non-identical'), Nāgārjuna examines the "extensional relations between terms, between concepts and properties ascribed to them by definition" (Robinson, 1957, 293). More important is the shared connection between Nāgārjuna's negative dialectics and the modern variation in overcoming what we now call reification. Puhakka explains this is what Nāgārjuna means by needing us to awaken from the 'spell' of reality (2003, 134-145) – which is a play on the long-recognised problem in Buddhism of human sentience and its tendency to let our mind's designation of subjects/objects stand in for the real.

To paraphrase Puhakka, we are not typically aware of ourselves when we take something 'A' as 'real'. Rather, the assumed reality of 'A', "takes us" – it has us in its spell as soon as we claim to be aware of its identity and fix upon this. However, it is impossible to take 'A' to be real without, at least momentarily, ignoring or denying that which it is not ('not-A'). So, this act – the act of our thinking when we conceptualise and hold to the identity of 'A' – necessarily involves some degree of unconsciousness or lack of awareness. That is, we 'reify'. This is how the 'spell works' – it "takes us unawares" (Puhakka, 2003, 134-145). And we do it to ourselves. We do it when we abstract an object/subject from its relations and conditions and assume it has some intrinsic substance of its own. Nāgārjuna argues that because of our reified, conventional thinking many of us naively perceive things as substantial or intrinsic. It is this predisposition to delusion that lies at the basis of all suffering. It should be noted that this 'spell' of reification over our thought is the very same villain of 'Verstand' in Hegel's *Logic* which his version of dialectics attempts to overcome too (Jameson, 2009, 82).

Nāgārjuna is focused on exposing the limitation of reason that transgresses this boundary and sneaks in claims that do not hold to scrutiny. McEvilley has shown there is always a special emphasis on the denial of partial identity or the sameness-difference dichotomy here in Nāgārjuna dialectics (McEvilley, 1982, 6). The *Vigrahavyāvartani* (2005) illustrates Nāgārjuna's negative dialectical method almost excessively and does so in a 'question-answer' format in which he replies to a series of specific objections against his own theory of Emptiness (Westerhoff, 2010). All of the objections are exposed as fallacies i.e. 'statements that variously miss the target' and thus Nāgārjuna demonstrates the self-contradictory character of *any* such views (Murti, 1955, xvii).

The 'four-cornered negation'

Going a little deeper into this analytic, Nāgārjuna uses the famous 'four-cornered negation' (the 'Catuṣkoṭi') as part of his dialectical arsenal. The Catuṣkoṭi was part of earlier Buddhist thought but Nāgārjuna further developed it as an investigative tool to help understand Emptiness. Nāgārjuna uses it to eliminate any possible logical affirmation of either independent causation or an independent thing in-itself (i.e. something *intrinsic*, svabhāva). The process negates each of the four predicates: that A is neither B (being), nor not-B (non-being), nor both B and not-B (as both), nor neither B nor not-B (as neither). Any of the four theses, when pushed to their extreme via the process of 'The Middle-Path of Eightfold Negation' (which is the Positive and Negative configurations of the Catuṣkoṭi thus making it 'Eightfold'), is sublated. So, just for example, if we strip away the layers from 'Being' like the outer shells of a Babushka-doll, removing the relations and conditions that encompass it and compose it, we eventually arrive at a

point of no intrinsic substance.

Reworked via this method, we can see how the ultimate claim of the *MūlaMādhyamakakārikā* (Nāgārjuna, 1996, 21.14) is the articulation of this contradiction that "He who posits an entity [svabhāva] becomes entangled in eternalism and nihilism, since that entity has to be either permanent or impermanent" (Robinson, 1957, 297). This is the conclusion that we can also read into Verse 18 of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* regarding aggregates of the self (1996, I: V18): Nāgārjuna's negation exposes how any such arguments ultimately become self-contradictory: that if one assumes entities exist by themselves (as 'self-becoming' or that which develops 'within outwardly'), then they must be unconditioned and uncaused. As Robinson concludes, Nāgārjuna's logic reveals that "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, dependent on other entities, and possessed of causes. But a svabhāva is by definition unconditioned, not dependent on other entities, and not caused. Thus the existence of a svabhāva is impossible" (1957, 300).

More important than revealing this logical contradiction, however, is that the process of 'Eightfold negation' reveals Emptiness (Śūnyatā) as the 'Ninth' proposition or configuration of the Catuṣkoṭi. This is beyond conceptual thought to grasp – it is what Dignāga would later call 'apoha', that is, something that is known only by exclusion. How we categorise a particular concept about a subject/object is not a property inherent to that subject/object but the capacity of that particular concept to have such an affect on us or how we conventionally understand that subject/object. This is where the danger of reification comes in as discussed earlier. This also highlights the relativity behind Nāgārjuna's approach, a principle he 'extols' (Robinson, 1957, 292). In the words of Nāgārjuna (1996, Verses 24.18 and 24.19):

We state that conditioned origination [Dependent Origination] is emptiness. It is mere designation depending on something, and it is the middle path. Since nothing has arisen without depending on something, there is nothing that is not empty.

Emptiness is in all and thus the phenomenal world (*Samsāra* – the cyclical world) is *Śūnyatā* too. But Emptiness is neither transcendental, nor nihilistic, for there is no difference between the absolute (as the inherent nature of everything) and the phenomenal (the conventional, relative way, as it appears to us) (see Stcherbatsky, 1965, 45).

This does seem confusing, almost circular reasoning. And there is the argument that this is ultimately a self-defeating method, that Nāgārjuna's arguments must also be in-themselves empty, and that his negative dialectics is purely destructive or worse sophistic. Related to these criticisms is the view that Nāgārjuna's 'dialectical extremism' is just another form of craving and attachment (see Kalupahana, 1969, 101-102). Such views tend to the idea that his dialectics is "uroboric" (it 'eats itself') leading to nothingness/nihilism by first wiping out conceptual proliferation and then itself (see McElvey, 1982, 13). But this oversteps Nāgārjuna's mark. For Nāgārjuna is intending to show that no conceptual system can hold absolutely to the specific question of causation and substantialism/eternalism – that is, any concept about the 'Is' that refers only to what exists through svabhāva (with its 'own-nature' or identity as "permanent, fixed, unproduced, unstopped, and unchanging") are not sustainable (jones, 1978, 488-489). It does not mean to refute all philosophical positions (see Robinson, 1972), nor result in a dogmatic scepticism or negation of all things. As stated by Garfield (1994), although this may seem strange to Westerners (especially those in IR), Nāgārjuna seeks to overcome the "reified view of causality" – this is the pragmatic end of his negative dialectic (Garfield, 1994, 238).

Viewed in this light, Nāgārjuna's negative dialectics performs the function of highlighting the reification of reason that takes place when such fixed determinations of svabhāva are alleged or assumed. As Murti qualifies, "Negation is not total annulment but comprehension without abstraction" (1955, 128). And as he continues later on, what abstraction it exposes and removes is how: "By its defective procedure dogmatic metaphysics [including substantialism/eternalism] wrongly understands the transcendent in terms of the empirical modes; [and how it] it illegitimately extends, to the unconditioned, the categories of thought that are true within phenomena alone" (Murti, 1955, 332). As such, the negative dialectical procedure necessarily leads to the suspension of judgment about non-evident beliefs because it reveals their contradictory basis – this includes things such things as dogma, reification,

and absolutes in our thinking, but also things like magic, miracles, and the supernatural in our metaphysical or belief systems.

What does this mean for us? Emptiness as Relations

In Nāgārjuna we find a more complete working through of a dialectical method that removes the subject/object distinction and thus abolishes any notion of an independent, self-arising, individual entity (Gullette, 1975). As expressed by Gangadean, with the recognition that 'I am not an independently existing individual, and that there are no atomic individual entities,' then attachment to such entities ceases – or should do logically (Gangadean, 1979, 45). So, for Gangadean, Mādhyamaka offers a 'transformational dialectic' (1979, 22) which purports to move consciousness beyond any of these false determinations of svabhāva to Śūnyatā, a view that all the categories of existence are somehow metaphorically constructed. This of itself would be a huge win for IR, helping us to move beyond any ontological theories built around nominalism – so everything from Liberalism to Hobbes would be in question. But more important are the ontological commitments of the approach to the conventional world, i.e. the phenomenal world, that is revealed as one in which "to be an other-existent entity is dependent upon self-existent, and vice versa" (Gangadean, 1979, 43). This is a radical position. Nāgārjuna claims that: "Any existence which is relational is indeed neither identical to nor different from the related object" (1996, 18.10). On the one hand, this means a relational 'entity' is not a real (svabhāva) entity, for if it were, the categories of identity and difference would apply (but this is not to say it is *nothing*, only that it is not *intrinsic* to itself). On the other hand, this means that all phenomenal things are shown to be relational: we are neither identical to nor different from those things to which we are related. The implications of such a philosophical and ontological position are huge for it recasts as relations between ourselves and nature, in all space and time, as one.

The demystification or 'dispelling' that Nāgārjuna provides of svabhāva primes thought to go further into how relations and dependence form the conditions of the phenomenal world without any need to defer to fleeting moments of causation or metaphysical assumptions of identity. Crucially, understanding relations and dependence as a process *is* said to be the 'Middle-Way' – the core of its doctrine by leading Buddhist scholars like Garfield (2002, 84). Through it, thought moves from a static conception of causation (which is ultimately illusory) to causal activity within and between relations of all things. From this condition of inherent relationalism and dependency, springs the idea that all things are co-originary with each other, ultimately impermanent, and in a process of continuous change (flux). Here, *saṅkhāra* (the idea of formation through conditions) becomes the active term for this idea of a conditioned, relational development as, 'Interdependent Co-arising'. Our cosmos is revealed as the relations of 'the-between'.

Conclusion

Relations have recently become central to IR in the so-called 'intersubjective turn' as we begin to engage with the questions of the ontological status of reality (Kessler, 2012, 253). Indeed, there have been attempts to engage this question of substantialism and relationalism (Jackson & Heo, 2022) – albeit without engaging with Mādhyamaka or dialectics. So let me conclude by drawing two rather sharp implications from all this dense philosophy (there are many others, but I will limit myself here).

Firstly, it undercuts all theories with a nominalist, atomised ontological foundation. And there are many of these in IR. For example, when Liberalism or the Hobbesian mindset begins with nominalism as substance, under which humans are devoid of relations within community and/or nature, all the political horrors that stem from that view – that we can exploit others and the ecosystem for profit, that life without authoritarian government would be 'brutish and short' – are finally seen to be rooted in the 'spell' of reification. Enchanted by their own cognitive missteps by which they misunderstand reality, their thoughts and practices are stuck. Dialectical thinking can help get thought moving again.

Secondly, the dialectical approach of Mādhyamaka provides insights into our global social life and its infinite relations. It is more than just adding reflexivity. It is about the need to place relations as the fundamental ontological category. On the one hand, this can lead to enriching our conception of our cosmopolitan community because relations are shown to be truly global in remit and also historically situated. Here its linkages to Dialectical Critical Realism are myriad (see Patomäki, 2002). On the other, it places as central our relations with nature (the cosmos) as

part of ourselves, and thus resonates with many of the newly emerging approaches in IR such as social-ecology and the multispecies view (Fishel, 2023).

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