Nagarjuna’s Zero:  

Nagarjuna and his Commentators

Kātyāyana, everyday experience relies on the duality of “it is” and “it is not.” But for one who relies on the Dharma and on wisdom, and thereby directly perceives how the things of the world arise and pass away, for him, there is no “it is” and no “it is not.” “Everything exists” is simply one extreme, Kātyāyana, and “nothing exists” is the other extreme. The Tathāgata relies on neither of these two extremes, Kātyāyana; he teaches the Dharma as a Middle Way.

Saṁyutta Nikāya II. 16-17

The history of philosophy shows us how a philosopher is read through a succession of interpretations. Every age reads its great predecessors through the screen of its own conceptual frames, questions, needs, and preoccupations. Nāgarjuna would call this the level of the saṁvṛtisatya, the truth of the screen, or the vyavahārasatya, the truth of the conventional. The preconceptions and assumptions implicit in our own paradigm or episteme inflect and inform the understanding we have of the philosophers within our hermeneutic horizon. This is especially true of a remote and legendary figure like Nāgarjuna. The very dearth of background information and the terse śūtra form of exposition invites, indeed, necessitates interpretive reconstruction. The result is many Nāgarjunas beginning with those of Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti and running right up to the present-day vogue for Derridization of the great doctor.

Far from being a bad thing, however, this is all but inevitable, and the source of creative thought. A major theme of much recent critical theory à la Bloom and Derrida has been the fruitifying inescapability of interpretive misreading. Harold Bloom speaks of “strong misreading;” Wittgenstein speaks of language games. Nietzsche, James, and Rorty critiqued and undid the idea of a correct interpretation which privileges a certain vocabulary. The corollary of this line of thinking is that if none of us can avoid misreading, we must preserve a principle of charity toward readings at variance with our own favored and assumed one.

Gadamer also rejects the idea of an objective, correct interpretation that gets at the mens authoris in some unmediated final way.
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The thing which hermeneutics teaches us is to see through the dogmatism of asserting an opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural "tradition" and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen—even in the so-called sciences of understanding like history—not in relationship to the hermeneutical situation and the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event.¹

Nāgārjuna likewise can be seen as trying to transcend transcendence—the idea that we have any final, privileged, or value-free views (dṛṣṭi), theses (pakṣa) or propositions (pratijñā), the illusion that we are above things, separate from them, and see them with pure objectivity. Nagarjuna was acutely aware of the complete conditionality of our views and meanings, but he did not have the sense of their historical contingency and development that has emerged in modern thought.

The answers we get from an author depend on the questions we ask her.

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history...Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive, but always a productive attitude as well... It is enough to say that we understand in different way, if we understand at all.²

The ancient commentators and modern scholars also have had their own sets of questions and concerns and Nāgārjuna has responded to each accordingly.

Nāgārjuna has customarily been read with and through his commentators. The Milanadhyamakakārikā was itself extracted from the Prasannapada of Candrakīrti by de la Vallée Poussin. It was natural to regard its formulations as consubstantial and essentially identical to Nāgārjuna's. Thus was initiated a method, most influentially by Stcherbatsky, of expounding Nāgārjuna based on the authority of the commentaries. It is now the drift of scholarship to try and peel Nāgārjuna out of this commentarial integument. That project has its own set of problems. Be that as it may, it is at least recognized that Candrakīrti and the later commentators are reading Nāgārjuna through their own frames of reference. In the four or five centuries that separate Nāgārjuna from his commentators the hermeneutic they bring to bear must have been modified as their terminology and problems changed and different aspects of the path were accentuated to meet contemporary needs. However, given the inescapability of "misreading," one does well not to derogate this as degeneration.

¹H. Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. and tr., D. Linge, Berkeley, 1976, 28.
In his interesting little book on the sequence of interpretive fashions that have prevailed among modern Western Indologists Andrew Tucker detects three main styles of reading Nāgārjuna. Nineteenth-century idealists read Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer and their problem of appearance and reality into his kārikās. Stcherbatsky is the pre-eminent representative of this view and was followed by T.V.R. Murti. They find an absolutism in Nāgārjuna with affinities to Advaita Vedānta. The next period saw an analytic and positivist interpretation by those brought up on Russell and Carnap of Nāgārjuna as a logician and critic of metaphysical and epistemological propositions. Karl Potter and Richard Robinson are cited as representatives of the approach, but they would, no doubt, quibble at being so pigeon-holed. Then we come to what is termed the post-Wittgensteinian view of Nāgārjuna as an “anti-philosopher, primarily concerned with language, conceptual holism, and the limits of philosophical discourse.” Wittgenstein’s therapeutic dissolution of philosophical problems and his usage view of language both come into play and have an undeniable resonance with important features of Nāgārjuna. Robert Thurman and Frederick Streng are proponents of this kind of Wittgensteinian Buddhism. And finally, we might add as a fourth style the growing number of Derridean treatments of Nāgārjuna which see him as doing a kind of deconstruction, and usually a better one.

The mediaeval commentators on Nāgārjuna should be viewed in the same way as the modern fashions of interpretation Tucker has charted. His sequence of styles should be extended backwards to begin with Buddhapihitā, Bhavaviveka, and Candrakīrti. They too were interpreting Nāgārjuna with conceptual furniture, problematics, controversies, and stresses which we cannot assume were his. The problem for us is to get a clear idea what these were. In this paper I want to contribute to the work of paring Nāgārjuna apart from the commentaries, to ascertain what deformations and misreadings the commentators made, which is only to say, what interpretive orientation and active reading they brought to bear as they struggled, as we do, to formulate their understanding of this most unpin-downable of thinkers. This process of misreading should be seen as beginning with Candrakīrti et. al., rather than laying all the blame at the feet of Stcherbatsky.

On the other hand it cannot be stressed too much that overarching all the differences and controversies between and among Nāgārjuna and the later commentators is the concord of soteriological purpose that unites all “schools” of Buddhism. The continuities are always more funda-

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4 Tucker, v-vi.
mental than the doctrinal differences. To borrow a favorite metaphor, they are the waves on the surface of the ocean of dharma. Whether Abhidharma, Madhyamikas, or Yogacaras, they are a plurality within unity, and are all committed to expounding the Buddha’s teachings.

There are four principles underlie and guide the outlook of this paper. 5

Nāgarjuna is first and foremost an expositor of Buddhadharma engaged in dispelling wrong views—“heresies” has too much the sound of orthodoxy. If the Buddha and Nāgarjuna were striving to undo anything, it was Orthodoxy, the first gently, the second with diamond-cutting logic. We should see Nāgarjuna as he saw himself—an expounder of the Buddha’s teachings. Among all possible readings this seems the most sure and reliable. A strong congruence can be observed between his positions and the Suttas. He is criticizing and purifying them from the accumulated overgrowth of wrong views run rampant: the aberrations of Abhidharma dharma theory and the proliferating distortions of own-nature (svabhava) thinking (MK 15). He did this with such unparalleled trenchancy, rigor, and brilliance that it profoundly influenced all subsequent thinking about Buddhism. But the common notion that Nāgarjuna was abandoning Early Buddhist dhamma in toto and setting up a new school of philosophy called Madhyamaka is simply wrong. Nāgarjuna is a type of radical conservative. He did not intend to be a second Buddha who with a lion’s roar dumbfounds and routs the adversaries of truth as he is exalted and iconized in later hagiography. But as often happens to radical conservatives, they do inadvertently initiate a new school of thought.

Second, the continuities of doctrine between Early Buddhism, Madhyamaka, and Yogacara are more important than the differences. As a vital and dynamic tradition Buddhism engendered keen debate, heated controversy, and a strong fermentation of ideas. But that should never obscure the fundamental agreement among the early Mahāyānists. The extreme that is currently seen in need of refutation—nihilism for the Yogacaras, eternalism and substantialism for the Madhyamikas—might be a moving target, but there was no wavering in the shared aim of liberation from all wrong views. Yogacara is complementary and non-oppositional to Mad-

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5 Three books have midwived these conclusions. Ian Charles Harris, The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogacara in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, Brill’s Indological Library, Leiden, 1991 is a lucid exposition of the thesis in the title and stresses Nāgarjuna’s relation to early Buddhism as well. C.W. Huntington, Jr., The Emptiness of Emptiness, An Introduction to Indian Madhyamika, University of Hawaii Press, 1989, is an excellent discussion of Nāgarjuna’s affinities with Wittgenstein, hermeneutics, and neo-pragmatism and I have found it immensely influential. It includes a translation of Candrakīrti’s Entry into the Middle Way. And, Florin Giripescu Sutton in Existence and Enlightenment in the Lokāvatara-sūtra, A Study in the Ontology and Epistemology of the Yogacara School of Mahāyāna Buddhism, SUNY, 1991 critiques the notion that Yogacara is a form of subjective idealism. This is in line with my own view that the differences between Madhyamaka and Yogacara were overemphasized in the past.
hyamaka and emphasized the mental and psychological. Buddhadharma, meanwhile, flowed on with basic doctrinal commitment as they worked different parts of the field.

Third, the later commentators have opposed Nagarjuna the Madhyamika too sharply to the Yogacarins in their polemics against them and thus misled subsequent scholarship as to the nature of both—the prasangika-sanyavadin against Yogacara subjective idealism. Prasangika and Svetantrika were designations invented by the Tibetans, formalized and canonized by them in ritualized debate. The practice of reading Nagarjuna through his commentators has been fertile in such misconceptions. Reductio-ad-absurdum arguments, the catuksoti or tetralemma, and the concept of sanyata are skillful means (upayakausalya) and should not be frozen into a stance.

Fourth, Nagarjuna is not a nihilist, an absolutist, a logical or linguistic analyst, a pragmatist, a process theologian, or a deconstructionist. He fits into no category, and that is the point; philosophically, he moves through all these positions, and occupies none.

Nagarjuna is the father of Madhyamaka but is not a Madhyamika, just as Jesus was not a Christian, and Marx, as he famously declared, was not a Marxist. The divagations and deformations that the thought of original figures undergoes in the systematizations of his followers is too well known. Their subtleties get engraved in the stone of dogma. As Warder suggests in his provocative paper, ‘Is Nagarjuna a Mahayanaist,’ it is unclear that Nagarjuna should even be regarded as a Mahayana pandit at all or as the theoretician of the Prajnaparamita Sutras. He is not assailing the so-called Hinayana indiscriminately. Moreover, the taxonomic classifications of Prasangika-Madhyamika, Saunhtrtika-Madhyamika, Svetantrika-Madhyamika, and Svetantra-Madhyamika-Yogacara represent late developments as they were enshrined by the Tibetans and are inadmissibly applied to early Mahayana. These labels have had a vast influence on Buddhist scholarship, but it is unclear what relevance they have to Nagarjuna.

I now want to elaborate these conclusions concentrating mainly on Nagarjuna’s doctrinal continuity with early Buddhism and the validity of variant readings, in particular, the idealist. Seeing Nagarjuna as entirely constituted through a series of interpretive contexts or misreadings is somewhat like peeling away the layers of an onion—there is nothing left when you finish, and Nagarjuna, I think, would be the first to assent. The thing is to try and understand the hermeneu-

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7In M. Sprung (ed.) The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedanta (Dordrecht 1973).
tical matrices that generate different readings without judging or ranking them. Sympathetic understanding, however, should not be an exercise in relativization.

The different views had of Nāgārjuna's meaning put one in mind of the six blind men and the elephant.

It was six men of Indostan
   To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
   Though all of them were blind.
That each by observation
   Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant
   And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
   At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
   Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
   Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
   To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
   Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,
   And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
   Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
   Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
   and felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
   Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
   Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,
   Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most:
   Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
   Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
   About the beast to grope,
Than seizing on the swinging tail
   That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
   Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
   Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right  
And partly in the wrong!

J. Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

This famous parable is of Jain provenance but is usually taken in an Advaitic sense—the Elephant is the One or the Absolute Unity behind appearances. Yet it can be applied to Nāgarjuna mutatis mutandis. Besides being a simile for our disputed interpretations of him, it is even more a simile for the diversity of wrong views with which man gropes reality—the Elephant as Dharma—whether this is common experience or philosophic rationality. Nāgarjuna’s point is that all of our opinions about him or his meaning, philosophic ideas about the world, and our perceptions and conceptions about people and things in every-day life are gropings. Where the simile breaks down is if one infers that reality is One, Absolute, Eternal Thing, Soul, or Being, some supreme Ganesh behind appearances. It is easy to slip into the assumption, as Stcherbatsky did, that Nāgarjuna means that a noumenon remains behind when all views have been stripped away; śūnyatā is ontological. However, to insist on a real Elephant behind the screen of our various perceptions, opinions, and ideas runs wholly counter to Nāgarjuna’s intent. It would be to hypostatize one metaphysical view as the correct one, a completely un-Nāgarjunian procedure. But equally, he is not asserting that there is an no Elephant, that there both is and is not, or there neither is or is not an Elephant. For Nāgarjuna views are not even partly right and partly wrong. His purpose is the same as the Buddha’s—to point out the relativity of all opinions and thus tranquilize our stiff, strong adherence to any of them.

True Reality (tattva), is not conditioned by something else, is peaceful, is not elaborated by conceptual proliferation (prapañca). MK 18.9.

Nāgarjuna, like Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, is bringing to bloom the germ of thoughts found in the Buddha’s words. The lush gardens of the Mahāyāna grew from seeds in the Āgamas and Nikāyas. Recent scholarship does not see the early Mahāyānists as system-builders expounding sectarian philosophies in opposition to each other. Working within a shared heritage they were adapting traditional doctrine with certain stresses in response to certain concerns. It is a complete misrepresentation, therefore, to categorize them as nihilists or idealists. As Rahula observes about the authors of early Mahāyāna.
Their contribution to Buddhism lay not in giving it a new philosophy, but providing, in fascinatingly different ways, brilliant new interpretations of the old philosophy. But they all solidly based themselves on the ancient Canonical texts and their commentarial traditions.\(^8\)

Ironically, it was Suzuki, propagator of an idealist reading of the *Laṅkāvatāra-stūtra*, who was one of the first to downplay the divergence of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra into antithetical schools.

Most Buddhist scholars are often too ready to make a sharp distinction between the *Mādhyamika* and the *Yogācāra* school, taking the one as exclusively advocating the theory of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) while the other is bent single-mindedly on an idealistic interpretation of the universe. They thus further assume that the idea emptiness is not at all traceable in the Yogācāra and that idealism is absent in the *Mādhyamika*.\(^9\)

Nāgārjuna was not introducing some novel notion into Buddhist thought when he emphasized *śūnya*. To call him a *Śūnyavādin* erroneously establishes one aspect of his thought as the central doctrine of a school. Likewise to call the work of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu *Viṣṇāvāda* tends to over stress the attention given to *viṣṇāna*. These are skillful means and should not be set up as distinguishing marks; they are tactical emphases and nuances, but always within a fundamental harmony.

Rahula thinks that the early *Mahāyāna* writers are analogous to the Pali commentators and are exegeting the teachings in the early Suttas in a similar manner.

The *śūnyatā* philosophy elaborated by Nāgārjuna and the *cittamātra* philosophy developed by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu are not contradictory, but complementary to each other. These two systems known as *Mādhyamika* and *Yogācāra* or *Viṣṇāvāda*, explain and expound, in different ways with different arguments, the very same doctrines of *nairṛtīmya, śūnyatā*, *tathāgata, pratītyasamutpāda*, but are not a philosophy of their own which can properly be called Nāgārjuna’s or Asaṅga’s or Vasubandhu’s explanations, arguments and theories, postulated to prove an establish the Canonical teaching of *śūnyatā*, *cittamātra*, or *nairṛtīmya*. If any differences of opinion exist between them, these are only with regard to their own arguments and theories, advanced to establish the old Canonical teaching, but not with regard to the teaching itself.\(^10\)

Kalupahana is also a proponent of such a view and essentially sees the *Mūlasaṅgharakṣikā* as a commentary on the *Kātyāyanīvāda Sutta*, which it directly quotes it (MK 15.7-11), and as doctrinally based on other texts in the *Sānyuttanikāya*.\(^11\) Some scholars see quotes and references to other texts in the *Tripiṭaka*, the *Suttaṅga* and *Dhātuvibhaṅga* Sut-


\(^{10}\)Rahula, 324-330.

\(^{11}\)Kalupahana, 10f.
The continuities of doctrine between Nāgārjuna and the Suttas are so extensive that it finally makes almost no sense to speak of proto-Madhyamaka or proto-Mahāyāna strands of thought in the Tripitaka as though Nāgārjuna represents some major departure or post-development and not a spotlighting and elaboration of doctrines already there.13 Things do become more complicated when we accept as authentic the Mahāyāna texts attributed to Nāgārjuna. But more of that shortly.

Rahula also rightly underscores complementarity. Nāgārjuna’s omission of some points of doctrine should not be taken as meaning they have dropped out or been rejected. They were just not to his purpose. The task at hand was to balance current views that had gone too far in the direction of eternalism and substantialism (Saṃsāravāda). The Yogacārins, conversely, were addressing a too great swing toward nihilism (ucchedavāda), as they saw it. This dialectical deployment of a set of the doctrines in the Tripitaka as skillful means does not imply that others are repudiated. This dialectical character must always be borne in mind, for Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and the later commentators. All of them would have believed themselves to be following in the Buddha’s footsteps down the middle path (madhyamā pratipad).

Even what is thought to be Nāgārjuna’s distinctive mode of logical argument, the catuṣkoṭi, can be seen as derived from the Nikāyas, as formalizing and crystallizing the Buddha’s method. The Buddha himself regularly employs variations of open-ended, dialectical logic in his arguments for the middle way, no-self, and dependent origination—the dilemma, the tetralemma, and six-fold combinations similar to the Jain septalemma. These logical tactics are traced back to the straddling and evasive maneuvering of the “critics without a position of their own,” whom the Buddhists called “eel-wrigglers.”14

Nagarjuna like the Buddha was examining views therapeutically. His refutations are meant as antidotes to be taken in the proper dosage. Poisons are medicines when taken as prescribed. Concepts are likewise useful and provisional, but should not be clung to. Śrṇīvatā is no exception; it is an antidote to itself as well. Emptiness is empty (tānyatā tānyatā).

Empyntess is proclaimed by the victorious ones as the refutation of all view; but those who hold emptiness as a view are called incurable. MK, 13.8.

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12 For a clear discussion of these matters see Ian Charles Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 44f.
14 See Sutton II.20.135-141.
Consequently, those who attribute *sānyatā* to Nāgārjuna as his theoretical view, or have hypos-
tatized it as a transcendent reality, have missed the point. He explicitly warns against that. It is
unclear that anyone has so misconstrued him apart from certain *Yogācāra-Mādhyamikas*, but
Kalupahana believes such absolutizing phrasings can be winnowed out of the *Prasannapadā*.
Williams denies this.15

Nāgārjuna also warns against misconceiving Nirvāṇa; it is in no way separate from sam-
sara.

The extreme limit (*koṭi*) is also the extreme limit of existence-in-flux.
There is not the slightest difference between these two. MK 25.20.16

He responds to critics of emptiness that they have misunderstood the doctrine of two
truths (*satyādvaya*) and the relation of the conventional to the ultimate.

The teaching by the Buddhas of the dharmas has recourse to two truths:
The world-ensconced truth and the truth which is the highest.

Those who do not know the distribution of the two kinds of truth
Do not now the profound point (*tattva*) in the teaching of the Buddha.

The highest sense is not taught apart from practical behavior,
And without having understood the highest sense one cannot understand nirvana.

Emptiness, having been dimly perceive, utterly destroys the slow-witted.
It is like a snake wrongly grasped or magical knowledge wrongly applied.

MK 24.8-11.

Nāgārjuna was an intellectual well acquainted with the typical disease of intellectuals—
hypostasizing and reifying their conceptualizations. To sweep all that away he returns to the Bud-
dha's pacification of all speculative views.

To him, possession compassion, who taught the real dharma
For the destruction of all views to him, Gautama, I humbly offer reverence.

MK 27.30

Since all dharmas are empty, what is finite? what is infinite?
What is both finite and infinite? what is neither finite nor infinite?

Is there anything which is this or something else, which is permanent or impermanent, which is both impermanent and impermanent, or which is neither.

The cessation of accepting everything as real is a salutary (śīva) cessation of phenomenal development (prapañcika).

His intent is to prize away the grip of the subtler forms of intellectual grasping in Abhidharmikā analytical thinking. There had sprung up a tendency in the Abhidharma literature of thingifying the dhamma, the dhammas, the Truths, the Path, and even Nirvāṇa itself. Nagarjuna saw this as providing a more refined support for spiritual self-seeking, or spiritual materialism as Chögyam Trungpa puts it. Nagarjuna was reminding Buddhist intellectuals that the point was to 'let go' all that. His means of achieving that is to relentlessly demonstrate how conditioned arising (pratītyasamutpāda) empties inherent existence out of all dharmas (dharmanirātmya). The conditionality of things denies them any independent status as separate entities. They can only be provisionally designated to be such 'n such.

Things are only possible and active precisely because they are empty analogously to the function of the Indian-invented zero in mathematics. The functioning of the number system rests on śūnyā. Zero is not nothing, but the possibility of everything. When algebraic equations are solved nothing is left over, everything balances out on both sides of the equal sign. This goes for Nagarjuna's method in the Madhyamakakārikā as well—all metaphysical views zero each other out. They reduce to surd and become absurd and untenable when insisted on and clung to. This is the point of the catuṣkoṭi, the four-cornered negation refuting all four logically possible alternatives on any topic: x is y, x is not y, x is both y and not-y, x is neither y nor not-y. The sum of these alternatives is zero.

As Stcherbatsky pointed out, śūnyā was borrowed by the early Buddhists to denote bhūtakoṭi, or the concept of limit, to signify the indeterminate and void in this mathematical way, but it became confused with its synonym ambara connoting sky and empty space. Nagarjuna protested this misunderstanding of śūnyā as nothingness or emptiness of content insisting that things are devoid of inherent existence but are not merely empty or nothing, or more precisely, are epistemologically void of positive or negative assertion.¹⁷

¹⁷ Sutton II.20. 150f.
In some respects a Wittgensteinian or post-modem reading of Nāgārjuna is closer and more accurate than previous readings. Attention to the linguistic constructedness of experience and the disintegrative logic of absence and nothingness illuminates important aspects of Nāgārjuna clearly inconceivable in terms of analytic positivism. Deconstruction has, like Nāgārjuna, been accused of nihilism. In the case of deconstruction that may or may not be, but for Nāgārjuna his refutation of all positions and refusal to take a positive position can in no way be taken as falling into the extreme of nihilism. That would be in strict violation of his adherence to Buddhadharma Stcherbatsky’s Kantian-Vedantic, transcendentalistic, and absolutist view of Nāgārjuna is questionable, but in its day represented a marked advance in Nāgārjuna scholarship. For, as Tucker points out, Stcherbatsky gave intellectual credibility to Nāgārjuna and rescued him from the charge of nihilism and mere negativity, but at the price of injecting monism and absolutism into him; he recognized that Nāgārjuna was no nihilist and was not denying a reality, but he was perhaps mistaken in equating śūnyā with advaita. Stcherbatsky also had the merit of respecting the core religious dimension of Nāgārjuna; this is not always as well addressed in more recent analytic and linguistic approaches.

Any interpretation represents a unique collusion of blindness and insight as De Man puts it. Can we really say that Stcherbatsky's Kantian-Vedantic view is wholly wrong in seeing affinities with other forms of appearance-reality thinking in Nāgārjuna? Or that a Wittgensteinian or deconstructive view is now wholly superior? Was Candrakīrti entirely wrong to see transcendental elements in Nāgārjuna, if, indeed, he did so? And was Nāgārjuna only just reproducing Buddhavacana? All of these interpretations configure Nāgārjuna in distinctive ways that bring into salience certain features while perhaps occluding others. That, if anything, would seem to be Nāgārjuna’s point.

In this light none of the ancient commentaries or modern comparative interpretations can be regarded as a failure, spurious, or inferior. It would be a violation of Nāgārjuna to valorize one position over another. Fresh interpretations are devised in response to new critical concerns, not merely to solve or correct old inadequacies. They bring into focus aspects and dimensions of Nāgārjuna in accord with their own theory-laden and culturally conditioned disciplines. Certainly there is advance in our technical knowledge of texts and contexts which may justify the bruising reviews of a Paul Williams, but, in the last analysis, Nāgārjuna is not just there to be conclusively defined. The ambiguities, for instance, in Nagarjuna's concepts of śūnyatā and dharma are themselves ultimately indeterminable and irreducible to any formula. All understanding is
comparative with gaps only bridgeable by recreation. It is an on-going conversation in Rorty's famous tag, and we must eschew the rudeness of monological vision.

The question, for instance, whether Candrakīrti may or may not have skewed understanding of Nagarjuna in an idealist direction must be discussed and ascertained as far as possible, but perhaps is finally not resolvable, depending as it does on variant hermeneutic modes and a paucity of evidence. Williams contends that Candrakīrti was a true-blue Nagarjunian and no trace of absolutism can be detected in either the Prasannapadī or Madhyamakāvata ra. Kalupahana's keen eyes turn up bits of it that he believes have colored the interpretations of Stcherbatsky and others. In a good Nagarjunian way we can say both are right and both are wrong. To do otherwise would be still playing the old game of foundational one-upmanship as Rorty might say. Our interpretation is superior to your passé or defective one. Certainly scholarship might help us to adjudicate the technicalities of involved in conflicted readings, but can not dissolve them. The advantage of applying the new non-foundationalist hermeneutics to Nagarjuna is that it lets us get beyond the impasse of conflicted drṣīs to the place he desired to go—prapañcāpasamaṇa, the calming of conceptual discrimination.

As Candrakīrti glosses it in the Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way, 491:18

Ato niravaṣeṣaprapañcāpasamarthāṁ śūnyatopadīfyate
Tasmāt sarvaprapaṇcāpasamāḥ śūnyatāyāṁ prayojanaḥ.

This means that the absence of being is taught for the purpose of bringing the manifold of named things to perfect rest. That is, the purpose of the absence of self-existence in things is to bring the entire manifold of named things to perfect rest.

Looking at another such recent controversy, Williams and Lindtner are both in accord with Kalupahana's stress on Nagarjuna's continuity with early tradition, but they reject, violently in the case of Williams, the Warder thesis that Nagarjuna was not a Mahāyānist. Lindtner sees Nagarjuna

as a monk who knew and used the agamic sources of the rival and earlier traditions as well as his own, and yet was firmly and enthusiastically embedded within the Mahāyāna, the Bodhisattva tradition.19

Williams thinks it possible to regard Nagarjuna as non-Mahāyāna only by ignoring the other works of a thoroughly Mahāyāna character traditionally ascribed to him. For example, the Acintyastava mentions the Mahāyāna by name and refers to the cities of the gandharvas. Lindtner, who has done much-regarded work on this, authenticates twelve works including the Bodhisambhāra, Sutralekha, Bodhicittavivarana, and Ratnavali which contain many Mahāyāna doctrines, imagery, and language. Even if you restrict authenticity to the Mitlamadhyamakakārikā there are problems since some scholars find references in it to other Mahāyāna sutras, the Lāhkāvatāra, for example.

Williams and Lindtner do find many parallels between early Madhyamaka and pre-Mahāyāna traditions. Yes, Nagarjuna saw himself as a faithful interpreter of the Buddha, and yes, he did not intend to innovate, but the presence of the bodhisattva motivation in his work clearly places it, in their view, under the Mahāyāna umbrella. They agree with Ruegg that

in view of his place in the history of Buddhist thought and because of his development of the theory of non-substantiality and emptiness of all dharmas, it seems only natural to regard Nagarjuna as one of the first and most important systematizers of Mahāyānist thought.

Although these eminent scholars all call Nagarjuna Mahāyāna, would Nagarjuna? Since this term only came into use in the sixth century, no, terminologically speaking. But the more interesting reflection is what that term could have signified to Nagarjuna in the first or second century AD. It is not at all clear that he would have recognized himself in our use of that label, or accepted being so neatly categorized. I must agree with Kalupahana that at this stage there just was not the sharp scholastic discrimination of Mahāyāna from a pejorative Mahāyāna later made.

Nagarjuna's relations to the traditions and movements current in his own day are presently beyond the scope of our historical evidence and should not be overmuch presumed. Furthermore, the whole question of his views and affiliations is inextricably tied up with the authenticity of his oeuvre. On the one hand, the absence of any explicit discussion of Mahāyāna doctrines in the MitlaMadhyamakakārikā is no disproof of Mahāyānism in approach. On the other, even if we accept his authorship of the markedly Mahāyānist texts this does not ipso facto justify us classi-
fying him as *Mahāyānist*. The problem again arises of confining any author to one interpretation, especially an author who repudiates all interpretations. Or does he? 24

Kalupahana is at pains to downplay *Mahāyānism* in Nāgārjuna to preserve him from the associated monistic and transcendentalistic tendencies Stcherbatsky described in all strains of *Mahāyāna*; he is ever vigilant against such Brahmanical distortions creeping in. One can feel much sympathy with his *cri de cœur* that "it is now time to exorcize the terms *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* from our vocabulary." 25 This is certainly in line with Nāgārjuna's own attempt to abandon the obsession with metaphysical absolutes or grounds that dominated Indian religious and philosophical thought from the Upaniṣads to Śāntkara and tended to crop up again and again in Buddhist thinking.

The fashion now is to regard the absolutist interpretation of Nāgārjuna as dated and mistaken. Undoubtedly a non-foundational and neo-pragmatist reading supplies certain inadequacies in earlier interpretations, but, I am arguing, it is another mistake to dismiss these as just wrong if every reading is equally the child of its times, and faithfulness is fruitfulness. As Jonathan Culler writes à propos of Derrida:

> Misreading retains the trace of truth, because noteworthy readings involve claims to truth and because interpretation is structured by the attempt to catch what other readings have missed and misconstrued. Since no reading can escape correction, all readings are misreadings; but this leaves not a monism but a double movement. Against the claim that, if there are only misreadings, then anything goes, one affirms that misreadings are errors; but against the positivist claim that they are errors because they strive toward but fail to attain a true reading, one maintains that true readings are only particular misreadings: misreading whose misses have been missed. 26

The result of deconstruction is never a monism. This goes double for Nāgārjuna. The result of *prapañca* or the *catuṣkoṭi* is not a monism. Conceiving Nāgārjuna in terms of appearance and reality in the Kantian or Vedantic sense misconstrues the *Mādhyamika* Two Truths (*satyādvaya*) as

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24 Richard Robinson addresses this question in, "Did Nāgārjuna really refute all philosophical views? " *Philosophy East and West* 22 (3): 325-331. He shows how the claim to refute all constructive metaphysics by the prasanga method is something of a logical shell trick depending on reading self-contradictory terms into your opponent's view and insisting on a small set of axioms at variance with common sense. Moreover, in Chapter 24 of the *Kārikās* he departs from his avowed method and makes an existential statement when explaining why he cannot be charged by a *Hīnayānî* opponent with denying all the Buddha's teachings.

25 Kalupahana. 5-6.

26 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, London, 1883, 178. There is a passage in the *Uji* fascicle of Dogen's *Shobogenzo* which has some relevance to this discussion of the place of the true and false in the flow of time. "Even a form [of understanding] that appears to be blundering is being. On a still broader plane, the times before and after one immediately manifests the blunder are both, together with it, dwelling positions of being-time. The sharp, vital fish-slap of dharmas dwelling in their dharma-positions, is being-time. You mustn't by your own maneuvers make it a nothingness; you mustn't forcibly make it a being." Interpretations likewise can be said to dwell in their own dharma-positions beyond the only true or the merely false.
a dichotomous appearance/reality schema. Let it be reiterated, this is never the case in Buddhism. There is no reality behind appearances of which they are the manifestation. Things presence themselves as they are (yathābhūtām). There is no Reality behind them liable to be ontologized or reified as a base for supersubtilized grasping. But we must not say that such a misreading is merely an error we self-complacently correct. Undeniably Nāgārjuna was concerned to discriminate his tattva, tathā, dharmatā, śīnyatā, paramārtasatya, or yathābhūtām from any positive Ultimate Reality of the Brahmanical-Ātman-type, and warned of the danger of misapprehending them as the śāstaraṇḍa of the Hindu philosophers, but does that wholly preclude us from detecting certain family resemblances?

With the rise of functionalist, non-foundationalist thought Madhyamaka has come into fashion and acquired prestige as never before, just as Advaita Vedānta was embraced by nineteenth-century idealists. We could attribute that preference to faulty understanding, but as I hope to have shown, there is something condescending and smug in any such assumption of possessing superior knowledge because you come later in time. It behooves us always to sympathetically recognize the limits to which earlier scholars were subject. We can see theirs clearly, but can we see our own? Our view is as thoroughly and historically conditioned as theirs.

It is arguable that the resources of pomo thinking afford us a clearer, deeper picture of Nāgārjuna than any previous mode. Is this due to a Wittgensteinian and deconstructive interpretation being closer in spirit? As remarked above, the Kantian Vedantism of Stcherbatsky and Murti missed an important aspect of Madhyamaka that has been brought into focus and elucidated by post-Wittgensteinian reflections on language and the constructedness of experience, and by the deconstructionist illumination of the role of absence and otherness in thought. A Wittgensteinian analysis of language use and language games seems to have strong affinities with the Madhyamika critique of prajñāpāramitā upādāya (linguistic representation or dependent designation, are some of the translations) and prāpādika, or conceptual discrimination. The deconstructionist idea of presence as the effect or trace of absences resonates with the concepts of pratītyasamutpāda as interdependent origination and dharmanairārya or things as empty of own-being. Différence can readily be read into prāpādika when translated as conceptual proliferation or dissemination. (It should be noted, parenthetically, that Wittgenstein and Derrida have already been let in the back door by the process of translation since a privileged vocabulary is already in place when resemblances are read out of the text.) But turning Madhyamaka into pure philosophy or anti-philosophy is hardly what Nāgārjuna was about.
There seems to have been a triadic progression in our understanding of Nāgārjuna, and interpretations of Buddhism in general, from nihilist, to idealist, to non-foundationalist which has paralleled the unfoldment and development of modern philosophy. It may be that our understanding of Nāgārjuna has traversed the same dialectical terrain that Nāgārjuna had and has now arrived at the same destination because twentieth century has likewise moved from idealism, to analysis, to non-foundationalism. But, in the end, a Wittgensteinian or Derridean reading of Nāgārjuna must be seen as culture-bound as any other. It is a moment in an on-going process of understanding with its own unique character just as the idealist-monist reading of Stcherbatsky and Murti. We are correcting them as they had corrected the nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna, just as Yogācāra was rebalancing what it saw as a too great trend to nihilism by the Mādhyamikas. The medieval commentators were also engaged in such dialectical rebalancing and navigating of extremes of nihilism and eternalism. As Nāgārjuna was concerned with the dangers of eternalistic svabhāva thinking, Bhāvaviveka was concerned to defend Madhyamaka from absorption by Yogācāra and the symbolic challenge of the Brahmanical systems. Candrakīrti was concerned to defend prasangavākya, counter Bhāvaviveka’s logicism and his attack on Buddhāpālita, and refute the Yogācārins. The later commentators and the Yogācāra-Mādhyamikas were influenced by the Hindu renaissance of the Gupta era in the direction of idealism and may or may not have retrojected it into Nāgārjuna. The postmodern moment now, in turn, rebalances the idealist or purely analytic views of Nāgārjuna, and appears to approximate more closely to his pacification of all dialectical partialities and oscillations. But it must not be forgotten that forms of thought from the second century AD and the twentieth century have an ultimately incomparable contexture that can not be exhaustively reduced to each other.

27 The strengths and weaknesses of a Wittgensteinian reading are illustrated by Chris Gudmunsen in his book Wittgenstein and Buddhism, New York, 1973. He sees Mādhyamika as a Wittgenstein-like critique of the correspondence theory of truth inherited from the Sanskrit grammarians and of a theory of dharman analogous to the early Russell’s logical atomism breaking out of these constructs through linguistic and conceptual analysis. But it is not altogether clear that Abhidhārmikā scholasticism should be interpreted in precisely those terms.

28 The logical analytic moment of interpretation gave us Nāgārjuna as logician. The idea of the early Russell that the "essence of philosophy is logic," led its practitioners to pierce through the rich confusions of Sanskrit to the pure structures of the argument and thereby helped to break Nāgārjuna out of dusty idealism. But as always, something was gained, something lost in the switch from Nāgārjuna the idealist to Nāgārjuna the logical positivist: he was now seen as a constructor of cold, rigorous arguments and counterarguments; the prasangā method was accentuated and attention succinctly concentrated on the tetralemma and the void; and the mystical and religious aspects were dropped as unscientific and fuzzy metaphysics. This approach had the merit of clarifying that lack of own-being did not entail unreality as the idealists had thought. Richard Robinson was the leading exponent of this mode. He tried to eliminate all mystical paradox from the texts and completely disambiguate them of all metaphysical mysteries. Karl Potter found that the round peg Nāgārjuna did not fit very well into the square hole of behavioral psychology. For fuller discussion see Andrew Tuck, Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship, 54-73.
If Nāgārjuna is not a Prāsaṅgika, or Śānyavādin, or even, perhaps, a Mahāyānist, no more is he a Wittgensteinian or deconstructionist. We can insist that Nāgārjuna is an idealist or that he is not. We can insist on his continuity or discontinuity with the Suttas, with Yogācāra, or on the similarities or dissimilarities between Gupta-era monism and Mahāyāna. We can insist that Nāgārjuna is a purely negative dialectician who is refuting all views or has a positive position and purpose. There can be no end to seeing ambiguities and indeterminacies in all of this. Surely, it is Nāgārjuna’s message that these questions are not resolvable on the level of sanvṛti where viññāṇa, vikalpa, and prapañca hold sway.