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4 Substantialism, Essentialism, Emptiness: Buddhist Critiques 5 of Ontology

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10 **Abstract** This article seeks to introduce a greater degree of precision into our
11 understanding of Madhyamaka Buddhist ontological non-foundationalism, focuss-
12 ing specifically on the Madhyamaka founder Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE). It
13 distinguishes four senses of what the ‘foundation’ whose existence Mādhyamikas
14 deny means; that is, (1) as ‘something that stands under or grounds things’ (a
15 position known as generic substantialism); (2) as ‘a particular kind of basic entity’
16 (specific substantialism); (3) as ‘an individual essence (a *haecceity* or *thisness* of that
17 object) by means of which it is identical to that very object, to itself’ (modal
18 essentialism); and (4) as ‘an essence in the absence of which an object could be of a
19 radically different kind or sort of object than it in fact is’ (sortal essentialism). It
20 then proceeds to delineate the Madhyamaka refutation of the specific substantialist
21 position in terms of its argued denial of *dharma* as basic entity; of generic sub-
22 stantialism and modal essentialism in terms of its argued denial of *svabhāva* as both
23 foundation for and essence of putative entities; and of sortal essentialism in terms of
24 its argued denial of essentialist conceptions of conceptual thought (*vikalpa*), mental
25 construction (*prapañca*), and in short the entire domain of ratiocination (*kalpanā*),
26 by means of its notion of conceptual imputation (*prajñaptir upādāya*)—a denial
27 strictly speaking ontological, but of what are putative epistemic entities. The final
28 portion of the article explains the relationship of ontological to other forms of non-
29 foundationalism according to Madhyamaka.

30

31 **Keywords** Substantialism · Essentialism · Emptiness · Non-foundationalism ·
32 Madhyamaka · Nāgārjuna

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34 1 Mandate & Scope

35 The aim of this article is a limited one: to introduce a greater degree of precision
36 into our understanding of Madhyamaka Buddhist ontological non-foundationalism.¹
37 Contemporary scholars of Madhyamaka and other strands of Buddhist philosophy
38 (and beyond) have translated key Sanskrit terms such as *svabhāva* in diverse ways,²
39 and glossed them in similarly various ways to support what is now an impressive
40 array of conceptual interpretations of the metaphysics they are thus said to express.
41 Indeed, even confining ourselves to the Madhyamaka founder Nāgārjuna (c. 150–
42 250 CE) alone, Ethan Mills is right to note that he “has been interpreted as a nihilist,
43 mystic, anti-realist, empiricist, skeptic, deconstructionist, irrationalist, philosopher
44 of openness, transcendental metaphysician, philosophical deflationist, and more”
45 (Mills, 2018: 26). Now, it would doubtless prove foolish in the extreme to rush in
46 attempting to clear the ground of all this philosophical overgrowth in the search for
47 some underlying *ur*-sense (a path even *devadūtas* would surely fear to tread).
48 Instead, the aim of this article is the far more modest one of analysing the ‘non-
49 foundationalism’ globally characterising Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka metaphysics
50 into four specific senses (on which more anon), and in so doing to nuance our
51 understanding of just what it is that relevant philosophical elaborations are
52 discussing.

53 I call Nāgārjuna’s position ‘non-foundationalism’ rather than ‘anti-foundational-
54 alism’ because I consider the latter to imply an active counter-position (an espousal,
55 in other words, of a particular, negative, view: a form of *paryudāsa-pratiṣedha*, as it
56 were) whereas the former I use in a sense meant to be negatory without being
57 negative, denoting mere refutation with no subscription to an alternative, or
58 opposing, view (thus akin to *prasajya-pratiṣedha*). Since I am of the (textually
59 supported if controversial) view that Nāgārjuna espoused the ‘abandonment of all
60 views’ (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇāya*), I consider this non-implicative non-foundationalism
61 to be preferable to the ascription to him of an anti-foundationalism implicative of a
62 certain view, howsoever negative.³ Such preliminary terminological matters aside,
63 though limited in its strict purview the article nonetheless potentially holds
64 significant implications for a great many debates and discussions, be they in
65 Buddhist philosophy (Indian or otherwise), Indian philosophy (Buddhist or
66 otherwise), or metaphysics (of whatever stripe or provenance).

67 In what follows, I use ‘foundationalism’ as an umbrella term to denote any and
68 all of the various species of philosophical position premised upon or arguing for the

¹ I thus consider this article as complementary to Jan Westerhoff’s study of what he terms Nāgārjuna’s ‘ontological non-foundationalism’, ‘epistemological non-foundationalism’, ‘linguistic non-foundationalism’, and ‘non-foundationalism about truth’ (Westerhoff 2017, p. 94). While I limit myself to the first of these, the discussion below will show that I parse the distinctions he elaborates in slightly different manner, such that a form of what Westerhoff calls ‘epistemological non-foundationalism’ also falls within the purview of my discussion here.

² Thus, Westerhoff notes that “This term can be rendered into English in different ways: ‘inherent existence,’ ‘intrinsic nature,’ ‘own-being,’ and ‘substance’ are some of the alternatives that have been suggested in contemporary literature” (Westerhoff 2017: 94). I return to discussion of such terms in § 3.3 below.

³ For a sustained defense of this interpretation of Nāgārjuna, see Stepien (2019).



69 existence of a *foundation* to ontology. ‘Non-foundationalism’ thus denotes the
70 converse view, the critique of foundationalism, as expressed in exemplary manner
71 by Mādhyamikas starting with Nāgārjuna. In order to adequately understand the
72 Madhyamaka critical arguments, I firstly distinguish four senses of what the
73 ‘foundation’ whose existence Mādhyamikas deny means; that is, (1) as ‘something
74 that stands under or grounds things’ (a position known as generic substantialism);
75 (2) as ‘a particular kind of basic entity’ (specific substantialism); (3) as ‘an
76 individual essence (a *haecceity* or *thisness* of that object) by means of which it is
77 identical to that very object, to itself’ (modal essentialism); and (4) as ‘an essence in
78 the absence of which an object could be of a radically different kind or sort of object
79 than it in fact is’ (sortal essentialism). I then proceed to delineate the Madhyamaka
80 refutation of the specific substantialist position in terms of its argued denial of
81 *dharma* as basic entity; of generic substantialism and modal essentialism in terms of
82 its argued denial of *svabhāva* as both foundation for and essence of putative entities;
83 and of sortal essentialism in terms of its argued denial of essentialist conceptions of
84 conceptual thought (*vikalpa*), mental construction (*prapañca*), and in short the entire
85 domain of ratiocination (*kalpanā*), by means of its notion of conceptual imputation
86 (*prajñaptir upādāya*)—a denial strictly speaking ontological, but of what are
87 putative epistemic entities.⁴

88 It should be evident to the reader that the topics under consideration here are of
89 central importance to any understanding of the ontological positions criticised by (or
90 for that matter espoused by) the Madhayamaka school founded in India by
91 Nāgārjuna in the second-to-third century of the common era, and thence of
92 relevance also to any of its direct or indirect intellectual heirs as well as opponents.
93 Given that an admittedly generous but not at all unjustified interpretation of just
94 who these comprise would include a great swathe of Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and
95 Japanese Buddhist philosophers as well as their multifarious interlocutors stretching
96 across the last eighteen centuries or so, I would hope that the pages that follow
97 contain material of interest to scholars well beyond the relatively narrow confines of
98 Madhyamaka studies *per se*. As for scholars of this latter, while I have obviously
99 benefitted enormously from prior studies in the process of arriving at the
100 observations I proffer, I have preferred on the whole in the present article to set
101 out my reading in a manner relatively uncluttered with references to the voluminous
102 secondary literature. This is not to say that I have eschewed such reference
103 completely, of course, for my discussion is geared toward moving contemporary
104 philosophical expositions of Nāgārjuna’s metaphysics forward, and so it has
105 naturally proven both conceptually necessary and descriptively elucidatory to
106 situate my contribution within this arena. But sometimes it is well to let one’s
107 thinking unfold without burdening it overly with the authority of authorships past.

108 One final caveat to note at the outset is that, while my title refers broadly to
109 ‘Buddhist Critiques of Ontology’, the purview of my analysis is largely restricted to
110 the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, and this as textually elaborated in his *Fundamental*

⁴ I thus differentiate the position taken here from what Westerhoff terms ‘epistemological non-foundationalism’, which he defines as “the view that epistemic instruments and objects do not have their nature intrinsically” (Westerhoff 2017: 94).



111 *Verses on the Middle Way* or *Mūlamdhyamaka-kārikā* (hereafter MK),⁵ with the
112 occasional reference to the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV)⁶ where this has proven directly
113 relevant to the broader discussion centred on the MK. Indeed, though I do attempt
114 (at least in passing) to relate Nāgārjuna's thinking on philosophical debates
115 surrounding substance and essence to earlier modes of Indian Buddhist thought, this
116 is undertaken only so as to more adequately specify the Madhyamaka contributions
117 thereto. Such confinement of my ambit is motivated by four reasons. Firstly, I
118 subscribe to the consensus view that accepts the MK as both the foundational and
119 paradigmatic text of the Madhyamaka school, and moreover the single most clear
120 and ample source of Nāgārjuna's metaphysics. To introduce extended discussions of
121 other texts standardly ascribed to Nāgārjuna—such as the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā-kārikā*,⁷
122 *Śūnyatāsaptati*,⁸ *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*,⁹ *Ratnāvalī*,¹⁰ and *Suhrillekha*¹¹, with their *inter*
123 *alia* epistemological and ethical agendas—would inevitably dilute the senses of
124 relevant metaphysical terms extrapolatable from Nāgārjuna's usage and argumen-
125 tation in the MK.

126 Secondly, there is the sheer unsurpassed importance of Nāgārjuna for all later
127 elaborations of Madhyamaka thought; since he is the progenitor of these and the
128 *sine qua non* origin of any understanding of them, my conclusions as to Nāgārjuna
129 may nevertheless be extrapolated, with all the necessary provisos, to many other
130 thinkers within, and beyond, the tradition. On this point it is worthwhile noting that I
131 deliberately forego citing the commentarial and otherwise explicative works of the
132 intellectual heirs to Nāgārjuna I have adverted to above. As specialists know all too
133 well, the commentarial literature on the MK in the various classical languages of
134 Buddhist discourse is vast. There just is no way to do justice to this literature within
135 the scope of a single article (or even a single monograph for that matter), and to
136 attempt to do so would open me to legitimate charges of cherry-picking. As such, I
137 have felt that it is methodologically more prudent to remain focussed on the MK as

⁵ The Sanskrit text of the MK I source primarily from Siderits and Katsura (2013), which itself follows the edition by de La Vallée Poussin (1970) [1913] as modified by Ye (2011), though I have also referred to De Jong and Lindtner (1977), as also to Pandeya and Manju (1991) and McCagney (1997). Translations are my own, though I have benefited most from reference to those by Siderits and Katsura (2013) from the Sanskrit and that by Garfield (1995) from the Tibetan.

⁶ For the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, see the Sanskrit edition by Johnston and Kunst reprinted in Bhattacharya 1978 and 1986, the transliterated Sanskrit version prepared by Yonezawa (2008), the transliterated verses in Lindtner (1997), and the translation and commentary in Westerhoff (2010).

⁷ For the *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā-kārikā*, see Lindtner 1982, pp. 102–119 / 1997: 174–175 for the twelve Sanskrit verses he has identified from various sources, and Lindtner 1982, pp. 102–119 / 1997, pp. 72–93, Loizzo 2007, and Tola & Dragonetti 1995 for English translations from the Tibetan.

⁸ For the *Śūnyatāsaptati*, see the translations from Tibetan in Lindtner 1982, pp. 34–69 / 1997, pp. 94–119, Tola and Dragonetti 1995, pp. 72–81, Pandeya and Manju 1991, pp. 140–148, and Komito 1987: 79–95.

⁹ For the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*, see the translation and commentary in Westerhoff 2018.

¹⁰ For the *Ratnāvalī*, see the extant portions of the original Sanskrit, as well as the canonical Tibetan translation and the Taisho edition of the Chinese version of the text translated by Paramārtha (真諦, 499–569; that is, the 寶行王正論: T 1656), in Hahn 1982, and for translations and commentaries see Dunne and McClintock 1997, Hopkins 1998, and Jampa Tegchok 2017.

¹¹ For the *Suhrillekha*, see the translations and commentaries in Della Santina 2002 and Padmakara Translation Group 2013.



138 the textual basis of my reading, in the hope that this reading will prove all the more
139 cogent and compelling thereby.

140 This ties in directly with my third reason for the circumscription of sources,
141 which is that there is of course the need to delimit one's scope somewhere in any
142 work of scholarship—a need all the more keenly felt in the necessarily limited
143 context of a standalone article—so I can only hope to be forgiven for according with
144 what is in any case incumbent upon anyone working on related (or for that matter
145 unrelated) topics. And finally, there is the fact that my intention here is not to focus
146 overmuch on the minutiae of Madhyamaka textual exegesis, but rather to glean
147 some more general, and generalizable, philosophical insights from Nāgārjuna's
148 overall non-foundationalist stance. To put this another way, while the arguments
149 and conclusions I present within this article are supported by what I hope is an
150 adequate data set of primary source materials (or perhaps what should more
151 accurately be admitted is an inevitably and thus hopelessly *inadequate* such data
152 set), this remains a work on (or of) Indian Buddhist philosophy, not philology. The
153 text of the MK has of course been studied for many centuries, and even the
154 philological study of it in European languages now has a long and venerable history.
155 The text as we have it is thus well-established, and I neither see the need to go over
156 well-worn ground nor feel qualified to augment the specifically *philological*—as
157 opposed to *philosophical*—strand of the scholarship.

158 **2 Foundationalisms: Substance & Essence**

159 Before we get to Buddhism, of the Madhyamaka or any other kind, let us first
160 identify some of the major senses in which the terms of our discussion, 'substance'
161 and 'essence', have been treated in the Western philosophical context. Hopefully,
162 this will make the ensuing discussion of Buddhist analyses clearer insofar as it will
163 allow me to be as precise as possible about what senses of these terms Nāgārjuna
164 was using in his critiques. It should be emphasized that the senses of relevant terms
165 and positions I present are by no means exhaustive. As we all know only too well,
166 philosophers East and West have proven themselves acutely adept at discriminating
167 ever-finer senses of their terms of discussion (indeed, perhaps notoriously so), and
168 all the more so when dealing with terms so central to metaphysics throughout many
169 centuries and across even more numerous schools of thought as 'substance',
170 'essence', and their ilk. (As Howard Robinson notes, with just a hint of perceptible
171 exasperation, in his survey, "Almost all major philosophers have discussed the
172 concept of substance and an attempt to cover all of this history would be
173 unwieldy"—Robinson, 2020: §2). So before anyone malign the absence in my
174 discussion of Platonic formal, Spinozan monist, or Wigginsian individuation-based
175 forms of substantialism, or for that matter of Aristotelian kind, Leibnizian maximal,
176 or Kripkean origin forms of essentialism, say, to say nothing of the myriad Buddhist
177 elaborations of ontological terms spanning Madhyamaka and beyond, India and
178 beyond... I beg understanding and forgiveness: as I am concerned here to arrive at
179 philosophical precisizations of relatively general extrapolative applicability, I have
180 necessarily foregrounded what are uncontroversially accepted to be the prototypical



181 senses of relevant ideas rather than remain forever bogged down in philological or
182 terminological hair-splitting.

183 2.1 Generic & Specific Substantialism

184 The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives two major senses to the term
185 ‘substance’. Firstly, and more generically,

186 The philosophical term ‘substance’ corresponds to the Greek *ousia*, which
187 means ‘being’, transmitted via the Latin *substantia*, which means ‘something
188 that stands under or grounds things’. According to the generic sense, therefore,
189 the substances in a given philosophical system are those things that, according
190 to the system, are the foundational or fundamental entities of reality.
191 (Robinson, 2020)

192 This is the general sense of the term ‘substance’ called upon, for example, in the
193 abstract to the conference on *Being, Substance, and Essence in Indian Philosophy:*
194 *The Heart of the Matter* held at Trinity College Oxford in 2019, when it speaks of
195 “atoms, time, eternal substance, the field of consciousness, or some basic ‘stuff’ or
196 ‘ground’ (*satya, dravya, vastu, pradhāna, prakṛti, aśraya, avasthā*, or intrinsic *sv-*
197 *abhāva*), that accounts for the world” (Trinity, 2019).

198 But there is also another sense of ‘substance’:

199 The second use of the concept is more specific. According to this, substances
200 are a particular kind of basic entity, and some philosophical theories
201 acknowledge them and others do not... According to this usage, it is a live
202 issue whether the fundamental entities are substances or something else, such
203 as events, or properties located at space-times. (Robinson, 2020)

204 Here we are dealing with a use of ‘substance’ which limits it to what we might call
205 entities, objects, or things. Material atoms such as those fundamental to the
206 Vaiśeṣikas would certainly count, but so would analyses in terms of process or event
207 if these are properly defined.¹²

208 In sum, then, we have a generic and a specific sense of substance. From these
209 may be extrapolated the philosophical positions of generic substantialism and
210 specific substantialism, which may be taken to hold that such substances (or
211 minimally such a substance in the singular) do (or does) indeed exist. Generic
212 substantialism and specific substantialism are therefore irreducibly ontological
213 positions in that they make an explicitly ontological claim as to what is. This claim,
214 moreover, be it in generic or specific form, relates to not just one or another
215 putatively existent entity but, given the nature of this substance as defined, the very
216 basis for ontology itself.

¹² Thus, Robinson’s specification that “This conception of substance derives from the intuitive notion of individual *thing* or *object*, which contrast mainly with properties and events” (Robinson 2020, emphases original) is indeed valid on an “intuitive” level, but not necessarily if we are concerned to define this sense of ‘substance’, and thus the specific substantialism that ensues from it, in a more precise manner.



217 2.2 Modal & Sortal Essentialism

218 Turning to essence, a standard definition applicable to a variety of sub-types has it
219 that “*Essentialism* in general may be characterized as the doctrine that (at least
220 some) objects have (at least some) essential properties” (Robertson Ishii and Atkins
221 2020, emphasis original). Unfortunately, this does not get us very far, for we are
222 immediately left with the question of what ‘essential properties’ are. For present
223 purposes, I will restrict discussion to what are perhaps the two most widely held
224 conceptions thereof: those in terms of modal and sortal essentialism.¹³

225 According to modal essentialism, it is metaphysically necessary that any given
226 object have an individual essence (a *haecceity* or *thisness* of that object), by means
227 of which it is identical to that very object, to itself. According to this conception, a
228 thing cannot be that thing without a certain thingness that makes it that thing, and
229 without which it would not be that thing. In other words, “*P* is an *essential property*
230 of an object *o* just in case it is necessary that *o* has *P*... Putting this into the language
231 of possible worlds that philosophers often adopt, *P* is an *essential property* of an
232 object *o* just in case *o* has *P* in all possible worlds” (Robertson Ishii and Atkins
233 2020, emphasizes original). Modal essentialism thus amounts, in its basic form, to the
234 claim that there exists what John Locke referred to as a ‘real essence’.¹⁴

235 As for sortal essentialism, this relies on the understanding that “an object could
236 not have been of a radically different kind—at least for certain kinds—than it in fact
237 is” (Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2020: §4). Thus, I could not be me if I did not belong
238 to the kind or sortal category ‘human’, the table at which I am sitting could not be
239 what it is if it did not fall under a general sortal category such as ‘human-made
240 object’, and so on. Sortal essentialism can thus be construed as the claim that such
241 sortal essences exist, since without them no *thing* would be the thing which it is, and
242 thus would no longer *be* in any meaningful sense, for if object *o* could be bereft of
243 any of the characteristics of the sort of objects object *o* is accepted to be, then it no
244 longer makes sense to speak of the object as an object *o* at all. If it does exist, it does
245 so in a sense necessarily meaningless to us or any other user of identity markers as
246 identifying properties of certain existents.

247 Now, a moderate sort of sortal essentialist may be willing to grant that only *some*
248 objects are endowed with essences, and thus that only some sorts are essentially
249 founded. This would allow identity marking of those objects that contingently
250 happen to be non-essentially founded; that is, founded on non-essential—indeed,
251 presumably conventional—grounds.¹⁵ The provision of convincing explanations as

¹³ Regarding the widespread nature of the conceptions I discuss, see e.g. Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2020: “A modal characterization of the distinction between essential and accidental properties is taken for granted in nearly all work in analytic metaphysics in the latter half of the 20th century.”

¹⁴ For a discussion of Locke on substance relevant but tangential to my own, see Robinson 2020: §2.5.

¹⁵ In a non-sortal context, Quine appears to have entertained (though not supported) a view analogous to this regarding the attributes of an individual object in characterizing what he calls ‘Aristotelian essentialism’ as “the doctrine that some of the attributes of a thing (quite independently of the language in which the thing is referred to, if at all) may be essential to the thing, and others accidental” (Quine 1966: 173–174, cited as pp. 175–176 of the 1976 edition in Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2020: §3). That Quine was not enamoured of this view is clear, *inter alia*, from his affirmation that “necessity resides in the way



252 to why and how certain objects in the world should be sortally identifiable
253 *essentially* and others *non-essentially* is an urgent precondition for the cogency of
254 such a position. Happily, we do not need to delve into such arcana here, for such a
255 position, representing as it does a weakened version of sortal essentialism, is not of
256 direct interest to my purposes. Indeed, to the extent that some objects are not
257 sortally identifiable on essential grounds, those objects no longer fall under the
258 rubric of sortal essentialism. Instead, it is precisely those objects that *are* sortally
259 identifiable on essential grounds that relate to my argument, whether they comprise
260 the totality or only any less than total quantity (above zero) of the objects in the
261 world.

262 3 Buddhist Non-Foundationalisms

263 In now proceeding to apply the notions I have adumbrated above to the Buddhist
264 context, it behoves me to admit, first of all, that there is inevitably a degree of
265 falsification involved in any attempt to understand a given philosophical system in
266 the anachronistic—and ‘anachoristic’ (Stepien, 2018: 1092)—terms of another. This
267 is only exacerbated in instances such as the present where I am attempting the
268 constructive task of translating, as it were, Nāgārjuna’s Sanskritic Madhyamaka into
269 terms current in contemporary English-language philosophical parlance. Thus, for
270 example, my use of the very terms ‘substance’ and ‘essence’ throughout this article
271 is problematic inherently, in the sense that all translation is traitorous (*traduttore*
272 *traditore*), and also contingently, since terms we will soon be dealing with such as
273 *dharma* and *svabhāva* (or for that matter the aforementioned *satya*, *dravya*,
274 *vastu*, *pradhāna*, *prakṛti*, *aśraya*, *avasthā*...) glossed as potential equivalents or
275 analogues in fact possess quite different etymologies, intellectual histories, and
276 hence senses. Nevertheless, to press this point ultimately leads to the solipsistic ‘one
277 man’s land’ of private language theory (see Wittgenstein 2009: §§244–272, pp. 95–
278 101), and since I take it that conceptual equivalencies can and do obtain across
279 linguistic divides, I do not see the endeavour undertaken here to be irredeemably
280 hobbled by such concerns.

281 Turning, then, to Buddhist philosophy, I take it to be uncontroversial to assert
282 that the tradition as a whole may legitimately be characterized as non-foundationalist
283 overall. This is not to discount certain concepts—such as the *pudgala* or person
284 of the Pudgalavādins, the *paratantra-svabhāva* or dependent nature of the
285 Yogācārins, the *tathāgatagarbha/foxing* 佛性 or Buddha-nature of various
286 Mahāyāna schools, for example—which have been interpreted as (crypto-)foundationalist
287 by classical and modern exegetes (and critics). But it is to emphasise,
288 firstly, that these are defended as *non*-foundationalist posits by their proponents and,
289 secondly, that these are peripheral to the general opposition to any substantial or
290 essential foundation to ontology found already, and amply as well as clearly,

Footnote 15 continued

in which we say things, and not in the things we talk about,” not to mention his more general dread at the prospect of being led “back into the metaphysical jangle of Aristotelian essentialism” (Quine 1966: 174).



291 expounded in the Buddha's own *Discourses*, and elaborated by the preponderant
292 bulk, if not in fact the entirety, of Buddhist philosophers thereafter.

294 This is certainly not the place to rehearse what I consider to be a largely
295 undisputed position; nor to attempt to produce what would be a near-infinite list of
296 textual instances in support of it. Instead, I want to proceed to an account of the
297 specifically Madhyamaka forms of non-foundationalism as found in Nāgārjuna's
298 MK. Given what I take to be the context-dependent nature of Nāgārjuna's
299 arguments, the senses in which he employs the terms at his disposal differ in
300 dependence upon the given interlocutor and/or argument under consideration. In
301 making this point, I am referring to the observed fact that "there is no master
302 argument for emptiness", be it in the works of Nāgārjuna or of any other
303 Mādhyamika, and that therefore Madhyamaka non-foundationalist arguments need
304 to be seen as functioning in an "opponent-relative" manner (Westerhoff, 2016:
305 372).¹⁶ As such, I second Jan Westerhoff's suggestion that:

306 In addressing the question of how to best interpret Madhyamaka I would
307 therefore like to suggest something that might be called the "equilibrium
308 principle" (or, if we prefer, the middle way interpretation of the Middle Way):
309 justifying our choice of interpretive framework relative to what theory the
310 Madhyamaka arguments are primarily pitched against, and keeping in mind
311 that the dominant understanding of Madhyamaka might well be influenced by
312 characteristics of its opponent position in the way just described. (Westerhoff,
313 2016: 373)

314 In the context of Madhyamaka non-foundationalist arguments, this means in the first
315 instance understanding as clearly as possible just which kind of foundationalism
316 Nāgārjuna (or any other Mādhyamika) is seeking to refute at any given point in any
317 given work. Let us turn, then, to look at instances where Nāgārjuna is identifiably
318 arguing against generic substantialism, specific substantialism, modal essentialism,
319 and sortal essentialism.

320 3.1 Buddhist Specific Substantialism

321 Let us look firstly at the *specific* notion of substance I introduced, according to
322 which a substance is a particular kind of basic entity. A fine candidate for this kind
323 of substance within the Buddhist context is *dharma*. The term '*dharma*' in a
324 substantial sense is most readily associated with the Abhidharma school. The

¹⁶ See also Westerhoff 2017: 97, where the absence of any "master argument" for universal emptiness" is explicated with recourse to "Madhyamaka's view of its own function"; that is, to act "not as a final philosophical theory to replace all others, but as a medicine administered to those who are suffering from the illusion of substantial existence" – a medicine tailored to the individual illness (i.e. form of foundationalism) under treatment. Whether or not one agrees with this understanding of the function of Madhyamaka arguments (or of Mādhyamikas' view of that function), it is worthwhile noting what is surely a conceptually and methodologically valuable concomitant feature of the dependent nature of Madhyamaka arguments, which is that, insofar as dependent in this manner, they discursively embody a highly significant aspect of the substantive content they convey, and moreover thereby obviate a potential charge of inconsistency.



325 Ābhidhārmikas set about distinguishing between what only apparently exists and
326 what really does. As is well known, they accepted the mereological reductionism of
327 the early Buddhist analysis, according to which all wholes, all putative selves or
328 *ātman*s, from chariots to you and me and all other conditioned phenomena, are
329 reducible to their parts, and therefore have only dependent existence, and therefore
330 do not have any independent, substantial, essential existence. Indeed, the
331 Ābhidhārmikas took this insight and ran with it, as it were, claiming in the process
332 that only impartite entities—things with no parts—are ultimately real.

333 We can thus acceptably think of the Ābhidhārmikas as searching for the basic
334 constituents of reality, for some ultimately irreducible substance or atomic particles.
335 The Ābhidhārmikas called these basic entities *dharmas*. For them, *dharmas* are the
336 unconstructed, underlying mental and physical real constituents of existence; the
337 substance of reality. We certainly seem to have here a Buddhist affirmation of
338 specific substantialism, according to which *dharmas* exist as *dravyasat* beings.

339 3.2 Buddhist Generic Substantialism

340 Before we turn to the Madhyamaka critique, let us look at generic substantialism,
341 the idea that there may be a non-thing-like substance, a general kind of substance at
342 the bottom of reality. I will treat generic substantialism alongside modal
343 essentialism, for (as we will see in a moment) Nāgārjuna criticizes both under a
344 single overarching term: *svabhāva*.

345 At first glance, early Buddhism would seem to countenance a general substance
346 to reality, where this is understood as one or more foundational or fundamental
347 bases to reality. Buddhism begins, after all, with the Buddha's analysis of and
348 ultimate insight into the nature of reality, so there must be just such a nature, right?

349 Now, apart from its specialized usage by the Abhidharma school, the term
350 '*dharma*' is also the term the Buddhist tradition uses to characterize itself as a
351 whole. It has been defined by Rupert Gethin as "that which is the basis of things, the
352 underlying nature of things, the way things are; in short, it is the truth about things,
353 the truth about the world" (Gethin, 1998: 35), and Peter Harvey has similarly called
354 dharma "the 'Basic Pattern' of things" (Harvey, 2013: 26). This seems to constitute
355 just the kind of generic substance we are after: the fundamental characteristic of
356 reality.

357 Moreover, according to standard Buddhist analysis, to perceive 'the fundamental
358 mode of existence of all things' correctly is to perceive all things as characterized by
359 what are known as the three characteristics of conditioned existence (*trilakṣaṇa*):
360 impermanence, suffering, and no-self, or *anitya*, *duḥkha*, and *anātman*. So we seem
361 to have a threefold characterization of reality fundamentally understood in standard
362 Buddhist thought. Reality (or, more precisely, conditioned reality) is essentially
363 characterized by these three characteristics, such that any and all conditionally
364 existent things are necessarily characterized by them. We will come back to these
365 points.



366 3.3 Buddhist Modal Essentialism

367 What I want to focus on now is the *modal essentialist* claim that it is metaphysically
368 necessary that any given object have an individual essence. The primary Sanskrit
369 technical term used by Nāgārjuna to designate the essential, unchanging thinghood
370 of a thing, that which makes it it and not another, is *svabhāva*. So what is *svabhāva*?
371 We can translate it literally as ‘own-being’ or ‘self-being’, or perhaps more
372 idiomatically as ‘self-nature’ or ‘intrinsic nature’.¹⁷ It is the idea that each and every
373 entity *is* some unchanging essential thing or self. My *svabhāva* makes me me; it
374 cannot change, or else what I really am would change, and so I would no longer be
375 me from moment to moment. And my *svabhāva* cannot be dependent on anything
376 else; it is self-dependent. Otherwise, what I am would be dependent on what I am
377 not, and this would make me, at my most fundamental level, not me, which runs
378 against the very definition of *sva-bhāva*, own-being. Readers familiar with Aristotle
379 may recall his general and exhaustive account of the things that there are at the
380 beginning of the *Categories*. According to that account, it is substance (*ousia*) that is
381 unique in that it is independent. The items in the other categories all depend in
382 various ways on substance: qualities are the qualities of substances; quantities are
383 the amounts and sizes that substances come in; relations are the way or ways by
384 which substances stand *vis-à-vis* one another, etc. But Greek *ousia*, like Sanskrit
385 *svabhāva*, is understood to be that on which all other characteristics of an entity
386 depend but which is itself independent.

387 4 Madhyamaka Non-Foundationalisms

388 4.1 Śūnyatā

389 It is, I take it, uncontroversial to declare that the central term of Nāgārjuna’s
390 Madhyamaka philosophy, emptiness or *śūnyatā*, may readily be construed as the
391 absence of any such (generic or specific) substance or modal essence; that is, the
392 absence of *svabhāva*. Mādhyamikas like Nāgārjuna took issue with the
393 Ābhidhārmikas’ distinction between things that are constructs and things that are
394 not. They effectively maintained that such a teaching does not take the Buddha’s
395 insight into selflessness far enough. For Nāgārjuna agrees with the Buddha’s claim
396 that anything that arises due to conditions can have no inherent self-nature in that its
397 identity depends on what conditions it. He says:

398 *Svabhāva* cannot be
399 Arisen from causes and conditions
400 *Svabhāva* arisen from causes and conditions

¹⁷ As noted above, among various other alternatives extant in the scholarly literature, Westerhoff also proposes ‘substance’ (Westerhoff 2017: 94).



401 Would be produced¹⁸

402 In other words, you cannot have *svabhāva*, which is definitionally independent, that
403 turns out to be dependent.

404 Nāgārjuna famously goes on to make the further claim that all phenomena,
405 without exception, fall within the purview of dependent co-origination, thereby
406 collapsing the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena. As
407 such, he maintains that *all dharmas* are empty. Contrary to the Ābhīdhārmikas'
408 stance, for the Mādhyamika there are no specifically substantial *dharmas* that
409 fundamentally ground being. This, however, does not entail that phenomena are not
410 (it is not a collapse into nihilism),¹⁹ but rather that they are empty of self-being
411 (*svabhāva*) insofar as they are irretrievably enmeshed in the web of dependent co-
412 origination.

413 So what is dependent co-origination? Emptiness by another name. As Nāgārjuna
414 says in the celebrated verse 24:18,

415 Dependent co-origination

416 That we call emptiness²⁰

417 Indeed, in the final analysis, it turns out that, for Nāgārjuna, if things were *non-*
418 *empty*, not dependently co-originated, we would be left with no phenomena existing
419 at all. Substantialism and essentialism, in whichever of their varieties, turn out to
420 effectively constitute precisely the nihilism that his interlocutor in Book 24 of the
421 MK was accusing him of. Indeed, according to Nāgārjuna it is only through an
422 understanding of the things of the world as dependently co-originated phenomena
423 that we can even posit a world, for otherwise nothing at all is seen or found (*na*
424 *vidyate*):

425 Since no non-dependently co-originated thing

426 At all is found

427 Therefore no non-empty thing

¹⁸ MK:15:1: *na sambhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ / hetupratyayasambhūtaḥ svabhāvaḥ kṛtaḥ bhavet*. Since various senses of the polysemic term '*svabhāva*' are at play here and in subsequent passages cited, I have preferred to leave this untranslated and to explicate it as per the particular context in the surrounding text. Garfield (1995: 39, 220) renders this occurrence as 'essence', while Siderits and Katsura (2013: 154) prefer 'intrinsic nature'.

¹⁹ The issue of the nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka leads to paths too tortuous to tackle here, all the more so since they are (thankfully) tangential to the topic at hand. Allow me thus to merely state in passing that I consider a reading of Nāgārjuna that takes him to be a nihilist to be spurious on the grounds that it runs directly counter to Nāgārjuna's understanding of both of the two extreme views (*antagrahadṛṣṭi*) of eternalism (*śāśvatavāda*) and annihilationism/nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) as counter to the 'middle way' (*madhyamā pratipad*) of the Madhyamaka; I cite MK:15:10 as textual support:

"It exists" is grasping for eternalism
"It does not exist" is the viewpoint of nihilism
Therefore the wise should not depend
On either existence nor non-existence

Sk. *astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīty ucchedadarśanam / tasmād astitvanāstīve nāśrīyeta vicakṣaṇaḥ*.

²⁰ MK:24:18ab: *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe*.



428 At all is found²¹

429 In other words, contrary to ordinary realist notions that we can only make sense of
 430 the world by positing things / beings / entities that are substantially well-founded (be
 431 it in either the generic or the specific sense), or for that matter that are self-identical
 432 on modally essentialist grounds, Nāgārjuna points out that, if the objects of the
 433 world were so, if they were *non-empty*, then we would be left with no phenomena
 434 existing at all—or at the very least not existing in any way standard realists of any
 435 stripe would accept. For, if I may be permitted a borrowing from the Kantian
 436 terminology underpinning later Continental phenomenology, the objects of the
 437 world are accepted—by Nāgārjuna’s foundationalist opponents as by foundation-
 438 alists generally—to be not noumenal things-in-themselves abstracted from and
 439 incompatible with sensible intuition but phenomena: empirical appearances sensibly
 440 cognizable as such, which is to say sensibly cognizable as arising and ceasing in
 441 accordance with causally and conditionally interactive factors.

442 Nāgārjuna makes this point in a variety of places. For example, in response to his
 443 interlocutor’s objection in the opening verse of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* that

444 If the *svabhāva* of all things is not found anywhere
 445 Your statement, lacking *svabhāva*, cannot refute *svabhāva*²²

446 Nāgārjuna counters that

447 For whom there is emptiness there are all things
 448 For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing at all²³

449 This final verse clearly echoes MK:24:14, according to which

450 All is acceptable for whom emptiness is acceptable
 451 Nothing is acceptable for whom emptiness is not acceptable²⁴

452 And it is in the context of MK:24 that Nāgārjuna presses his point home that a non-
 453 empty world would not be one recognizable as the causally interactive one we abide
 454 within. In a classic *prasaṅgic reductio*, Nāgārjuna takes the foundationalist to task,
 455 claiming

456 If you regard existents
 457 As with *svabhāva*
 458 Then you regard existents
 459 As without causes and conditions

²¹ MK:24:19: *apratītya samutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate / yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate.*

²² VV:1: *sarveṣāṃ bhāvānāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaś cet / tvadvacanam asvabhāvaṃ na nivartayituṃ svabhāvaṃ alam.*

²³ VV:70: *prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ / prabhavati na tasya kiṃ cin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya.*

²⁴ MK:24:14: *sarvaṃ ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate / sarvaṃ na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate.*



- 460 Effect and cause
461 Actor, means of action, and act
462 Arising and ceasing
463 And result are denied²⁵
- 464 In other words, if things existed with an intrinsic *svabhāva* (strictly speaking a
465 tautological phrase), they would not originate on the basis of causes and conditions.
466 The world of a modal essentialist or specific substantialist would be populated with
467 changeless, eternal beings existing independently of all causal relations.
468 The problem is slightly different for the generic substantialist, for whom the
469 things of the world would be ontologically reducible or assimilable to their
470 necessarily causeless and conditionless, and therefore likewise unchanging, ground.
471 As such, the problem would be moved down (or up, depending on one's
472 metaphorical orientation to metaphysics...), but would not essentially change (pun
473 very much intended). Whichever way we slice it, then, this means that, if things
474 really existed in the way we normally (in our deluded, generically or specifically
475 substantialist or modally essentialist way) take them to exist, nothing could happen.
476 Why so? Well, we normally, unreflectively assume that each thing exists as an
477 individual, independent, entity; one that does not rely on others to be. But if this
478 were true, it would mean that no thing could interact—because, after all, each would
479 be independent. So no interaction could occur, no change could occur... nothing at
480 all could come about or cease. We and all other things would be eternally
481 unchanging, God-like blocks.
- 482 Nāgārjuna thus presses the point home that
483 Moreover, no-one could ever enact
484 Lawful or unlawful actions
485 With what is non-empty what can be done?
486 Nothing can be done with what has *svabhāva*²⁶
- 487 ...
- 488 Unoriginated and unceased
489 Unchanging
490 Without manifold appearances
- 491 Would the world be if *svabhāvic*²⁷
- 492 Nāgārjuna here argues that any of the forms of foundationalism under discussion
493 ends up denying the phenomenal existence of the very things it sets out to support.

²⁵ MK:24:16–17: *svabhāvād yadi bhāvānām sadbhāvam anupaśyasi / ahetuṣu pratyayān bhāvāṃs tvam evaṃ sati paśyasi // kāryaṃ ca kāraṇaṃ caiva kartāraṃ karaṇaṃ kriyāṃ / utpādaṃ ca nirodhaṃ ca phalaṃ ca pratibādhase.*

²⁶ MK:24:33: *na ca dharmam adharmam vā kaście jātu kariṣyati / kim aśūnyasya kartavyaṃ svabhāvaḥ kriyate na hi.*

²⁷ MK:24:38: *ajātam aniruddhaṃ ca kūṭasthaṃ ca bhaviṣyati / vicitrābhir avasthābhiḥ svabhāve rahitaṃ jagat.*



494 A thoroughgoing analysis in terms of emptiness, on the other hand, renders the
495 entire phenomenal world comprehensible as nominally existent, empirically actual,
496 and dependently arisen—real but unfounded. In other words, real in the only way
497 reality could be real: as empty. This is Nāgārjuna’s response to the proponent of
498 modal essentialism and substantialism—be this generic or specific as defined earlier.
499 His critique is aimed just as much against his Ābhidhārmika fellow-Buddhists as at
500 non-Buddhist interlocutors: any and all of the relevant forms of ontological
501 foundationalism are included in his non-foundationalist deconstruction.

502 4.2 Śūnyatāsūnyatā

503 But what about the claim that the Buddhist Dharma constitutes “the ‘Basic Pattern’
504 of things”, or the Buddha’s characterization of conditioned existence in terms of the
505 *trilakṣaṇa* of impermanence, suffering, and not-self? Should these be understood as
506 modally essentialist positions, would it not follow that Nāgārjuna’s own analysis,
507 according to which emptiness characterizes all phenomena without exception, is
508 likewise a form of modal essentialism? Indeed, it would... were it not for the fact
509 that Nāgārjuna does not exempt emptiness itself from his non-essentialist critique.

510 Indeed, we here arrive at the all-important point that Nāgārjuna’s point about
511 emptiness relates not only to empty phenomena, but to emptiness too. This is the
512 famous Madhyamaka doctrine of *śūnyatāsūnyatā*, the emptiness of emptiness.²⁸ To
513 grasp it, we need to understand that, since the modal essentialist understands
514 existence to be necessarily characterised by intrinsic self-identity or haecceity, and
515 since s/he understands Nāgārjuna to be claiming that emptiness exists, s/he therefore
516 understands Nāgārjuna to be claiming that emptiness exists in just such intrinsically
517 self-identical manner. Were this the case, it would set up a radical duality between
518 empty phenomena on the one hand, which would not essentially exist, and
519 emptiness on the other hand, which would.

520 To see emptiness in this way is to see it as radically different from conventional,
521 phenomenal reality. It is to see the conventional as illusory and emptiness as the
522 reality standing behind it. This would be to ascribe a special, nonconventional,
523 nondependent hyperreality to emptiness itself. It would, in other words, amount to a
524 form of metaphysical dualism according to which the conventional world is not
525 *really* real, in contradistinction to an essentially real ultimate reality, which
526 Nāgārjuna calls emptiness but which could very well be accounted some kind of
527 metaphysical foundation.

528 This critique fails, however, for the simple reason that emptiness is no exception
529 to Nāgārjuna’s critique of *svabhāva*; it is not some Reality with a capital ‘R’ over
530 and above merely phenomenal, conventional reality. Emptiness too is empty,
531 nothing more than a ‘dependent designation’, as he puts it in the third *pāda* of

²⁸ Note that ‘the emptiness of emptiness’ (*śūnyatāsūnyatā*) is not strictly speaking a Nāgārjunian phrase, but is rather to be found in the *Madhyamakāvātāra* commentary by Candrakīrti no longer extant in Sanskrit (for a translation of the relevant verse, 6.186, see Huntington 1989: 180).



532 MK:24:18.²⁹ Indeed, given the tight internal coherence among the various facets of
 533 Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, it should come as no surprise to find that there is in fact a
 534 mutually reinforcing relationship at work between Nāgārjuna’s overall espousal of
 535 universal emptiness as equivalent to the non-foundationalism of the totality of the
 536 objects of the world and his more specific disavowal of emptiness as itself a
 537 metaphysical foundation. The emptiness of emptiness is entailed by emptiness, for
 538 since there is and can be no exception to emptiness (on pain of contradicting and
 539 thus invalidating it), emptiness itself cannot constitute any such exception. This
 540 means that, if universal non-foundationalism as espoused by Nāgārjuna is to be
 541 taken at face value, it and any other form of such non-foundationalism necessarily
 542 entails what could be called the non-foundedness of non-foundationalism itself. It is
 543 this which vouchsafes, for Nāgārjuna, the ongoing realization of reality, its
 544 manifestation as causally conditioned phenomenality (that is, as emptiness). This
 545 explains why Nāgārjuna is able to state, in the auto-commentary (*svavṛtti*) to the
 546 very final verse of his *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, that

547 For whom there is emptiness there are all things, mundane and ultimate. Why?
 548 For whom there is emptiness there is dependent co-origination; for whom
 549 there is dependent co-origination there are the four noble truths; for whom
 550 there are the four noble truths there are the fruits of religious striving and there
 551 are all special attainments; for whom there are all special attainments there are
 552 the three refuges of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha.³⁰

553 Clearly related as it is to the defence of the Four Noble Truths in MK:24, this
 554 passage effectively demonstrates that the repudiation of a modal essentialist
 555 understanding of emptiness not only ensures the concept retains logical cogency
 556 (emptiness is no counter-example to emptiness) but also serves to buttress the
 557 critique of generic and specific substantialism we have previously seen emptiness to
 558 announce.

559 4.3 *Prajñaptir Upādāya*

560 The reference to dependent designation (or conceptual dependency) in MK:24:18,
 561 coupled with the related point as to the mutually imbricated nature of the various
 562 facets of Nāgārjunian non-foundationalism, brings me to the second variety of
 563 essentialism I introduced: sortal essentialism. Indeed, I freely admit to having ridden
 564 rather roughshod over what are in fact exquisitely nuanced—and endlessly debated

²⁹ See MK:24:18cd: “This, a relative designation / Is itself the middle way.” Sk. *sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā*. For further discussion of the points raised in the preceding paragraphs, see (among countless other treatments) Garfield 1995: 304–308, Garfield 2015: 61–71, Siderits and Katsura 2013: 277–278, Arnold 2005: 169ff.

³⁰ VV:70 auto-commentary:

yasya śūnyateyaṃ prabhavati tasya sarvārtha laukikalokattarāḥ prabhavanti / kiṃ kāraṇam / yasya hi śūnyatā prabhavati tasya pratīyasamutpādaḥ prabhavati / yasya pratīyasamutpādaḥ prabhavati tasya catvāryāryasatyāni prabhavanti / yasya catvāryāryasatyāni prabhavanti tasya śrāmaṇyaphalāni prabhavanti sarvaviśeṣādhighamāḥ prabhavanti / yasya sarvaviśeṣādhighamāḥ prabhavanti tasya trīṇi ratnāni buddhadharmasamghāḥ prabhavanti.



565 —positions and arguments in the preceding section not only because of my afore-
566 stated unwillingness to parse Nāgārjuna’s text (and my peers’ multiple interpreta-
567 tions thereof) in still another sense from those proposed heretofore in favour of
568 bringing to the fore the overall contours of his non-foundationalism in a bid to
569 crystallize its purport, but also because I wanted to reserve further discussion for an
570 aspect of Nāgārjuna’s non-foundationalism that has received relatively little
571 attention (relative, that is, to the prolific abundance afforded to the foregoing
572 topics). The category of sortal essentialism brings out what I take to be a crucially
573 important yet under-appreciated feature of Madhyamaka non-foundationalism; that
574 is, its negation of ontologically foundational status to what are epistemic phenomena.

575 Understandably given my focus on substance and essence, most of the discussion
576 hitherto has focussed on ontological issues; issues regarding being/existence. If my
577 rendering has been at all clear, the reader should be convinced that Mādhyamikas
578 such as Nāgārjuna denied that there exists any generic or specific substance or
579 modal essence, any kind of ontological foundation to reality. But Madhyamaka
580 philosophy also denies that there exists any kind of epistemological foundation to
581 knowledge, and it is this feature that I want to bring out now under the rubric of
582 sortal essentialism. Before providing my account, however, there are two
583 preliminary points to note.

584 First, it should be evident (from the preceding discussion if nothing else) that
585 Madhyamaka arguments in support of non-foundationalism, if successful, effec-
586 tively refute *all* forms of sortal essentialism. This is perhaps most apparent if we
587 interpret the critique in conventionalist terms (regarding which, see below), for we
588 thereby find what were taken to be essence-grounded sorts denuded of their
589 essentialist foundation, reduced to the status of mere conventional designations. But
590 whether or not we adopt a conventionalist interpretation, the point to note is that my
591 account of Madhyamaka non-foundationalism in terms of the denial of specifically
592 epistemic entities putatively identified as such on sortal-essentialist grounds is not
593 meant to be exhaustive: Madhyamaka non-foundationalism in the form of sortal-
594 non-essentialism is an ontological position functioning on putative entities of all
595 (conventionally designated) sorts, epistemic and well beyond.

596 Second, I would like to underline that my account of the Madhyamaka critique
597 of sortal essentialism as predicated of these putative entities identifiably epistemic
598 in nature (such as epistemic instruments and objects, *pramāṇas* and *prameyas*
599 respectively) differs from (and, as I see it, complements) Westerhoff’s discussion
600 of what he calls the Mādhyamikas’ denial of “Epistemological foundationalism [,
601 which] is here understood as the claim that there are certain epistemic instruments
602 (such as perception, inference, analogy, or testimony) that by their very nature
603 transmit knowledge” (Westerhoff, 2017: 99). In his discussion, Westerhoff is
604 evidently focussing on pan-Indian *pramāṇa* theory, concerned as this is with the
605 ‘reliable warrants’ (*pramāṇas*) for epistemic claims. His references to perception,
606 inference, analogy, and testimony relate to *pratyakṣa*, *anumāṇa*, *upamāṇa*, and
607 *śabda* (this last also standardly translated as ‘word’, ‘authority’) respectively, and
608 we are led to infer that the Madhyamaka critique he presents would apply
609 likewise to the two other *pramāṇas* we find proposed, namely *arthāpatti*
610 (postulation, presumption, derivation from circumstance, circumstantial



611 implication), and *anupalabdhi* (non-cognition, non-perception, non-apprehension,
612 negative proof). Westerhoff is right to assert that Nāgārjuna's argument
613 "demonstrates that epistemic instruments and the epistemic objects they give us
614 access to are related to each other by mutual dependence. There cannot be one
615 without the other, and as such the property of being either cannot be understood
616 as being possessed by anything intrinsically" (Westerhoff, 2017: 100). But while
617 this argument from mutual dependence is perfectly valid, my own account takes a
618 different tack.

619 For I am focussing here on the Mādhyamikas' critique of essentialist conceptions
620 of conceptual thought (*vikalpa*), mental construction (*prapañca*), and in short the
621 entire domain of ratiocination (*kalpanā*), by means of their notion of conceptual
622 imputation (*prajñaptir upādāya*). In explicating this topic, Jay Garfield states that
623 Mādhyamikas "argue that entities are dependent for their existence on conceptual
624 imputation. The... idea is this: the entities and properties we experience in the world
625 depend for their reality and identity on our... conceptual apparatus, for their
626 existence as the entities we encounter" (Garfield, 2015: 33). Now, this claim may
627 perhaps most easily be parsed in one of two ways. On the one hand, the Yogācāra
628 school is typically taken to understand conceptual imputation as entailing a form of
629 idealism. "On this account, the phenomena we experience are dependent on our
630 conceptual imputation simply because they are all really nothing more than
631 projections of our consciousness, mere ideas and not external phenomena"
632 (Garfield, 2015: 33–34). By contrast, the Madhyamaka interpretation may perhaps
633 most readily be taken as a kind of conventionalism.³¹ Although the world presents
634 itself to us as given, as so rather than not-so, on the Mādhyamika's conventionalist
635 interpretation, this is a cognitive illusion. Why so? Well, the Mādhyamika is acutely
636 aware of the subjective role in constructing the world. It is a truism that we sentient
637 beings all experience things differently, and radically so. But given that this is the
638 case, "Which is the real world? Who sees it aright? Which viewpoint is unimpaired?
639 Which is distorted?" (Garfield, 2015: 34).

640 The Mādhyamika's reply is of course to assert that there is no 'right' or 'wrong'
641 way to perceive the world at all; indeed, "the question doesn't make sense"
642 (Garfield, 2015: 35). And this is so not only because different subjects perceive the
643 putative entities putatively populating the world as different objects: conceptual
644 imputation as understood by the Madhyamaka school is not just a form of subjective
645 relativism. The question does not make any sense because, on the Madhyamaka
646 view, it is philosophically just plain incoherent to posit any substantially existing
647 subject perceiving any substantially existing object at all. The fact that there is no
648 fact about the world means that "the world we inhabit, and the standards of truth
649 appropriate to it, depend upon our sensory and conceptual apparatus" (Garfield,
650 2015: 35). Phenomena not only depend upon conceptual imputation to be

³¹ The conventionalist reading is most closely associated with Jay Garfield; see Berger 2010 for a critique in light of an alternative reading of the crucial verse MK:24:18, Garfield and Westerhoff 2011 for a response, and Berger 2011 for a rejoinder. For the purposes of the present article, I take the conventionalist interpretation as at the very least justifiable, but see no need to enter into this particular exegetical fray on the grounds that my interpretation of Nāgārjuna's non-foundationalism in terms of its repudiation of sortal essentialism stands independent of the particular view one takes on conventionalism.



651 constituted as those very phenomena, there is nothing else, no *svabhāva* or *ātman*,
652 no essence or substance to them at all, so conceptual imputation is all there is to
653 phenomena.³²

654 Whether or not one subscribes to the conventionalist interpretation of
655 Nāgārjuna's philosophy of language, a corollary point relates to the conventionality
656 of the sortal categories according to which the sortal essentialist metaphysically
657 sorts reality. Indeed, the references to what a given sortally categorized object is
658 'accepted' to be and to the 'us' constituting the community of identity marker users
659 in my introductory characterization of sortal essentialism (see §2.2) already
660 foreshadowed the construal of the sortal essentialist position I am adverting to here,
661 which may be formulated as the observation that Nāgārjuna would ascribe
662 conventional truth status (*saṃvṛti-satya* or *vyavahāra-satya*) to the very sortal
663 categories sortal essentialism posits. Note that I am not speaking here in general
664 about the status (conventional or otherwise) of the linguistic and conceptual tools
665 *saṃsārically* situated subjects use to characterize *saṃvṛti-sat* reality *per se*, but
666 rather about the particular tools the sortal essentialist upholds as the categorial
667 frames uniquely, pre-eminently, or (in the theory's weakest form) minimally
668 correspondent to ontological fact; that is, *sorts*. Nor is the point to be mistaken as
669 relating to sortal essentialism itself as a metaphysical view; rather, to reiterate, it
670 relates to the *sorts* sortal essentialism posits. For, as an aside, I am content to admit
671 that it is logically cogent (albeit conceptually cumbersome) to subscribe to the
672 position that both (a) sortal essentialism holds necessarily/ultimately (that is, as
673 *paramārtha-satya*), and (b) the sorts sortal essentialism actually mandates in a given
674 world are merely conventional. (To put this another way, sortal essentialism may be
675 modally characterised by metaphysical necessity while the sorts it mandates may be
676 modally characterised by metaphysical possibility). Whatever the metaphysical
677 status of the theory overall, the point here is that sortal essentialism does not entail
678 the ascription of essential status to the sorts into which it categorizes the objects of
679 the world. The sortal essentialist may object that I am begging the question here,
680 presupposing the conventional nature of what are posited to be, contrariwise,
681 essential, but to this I would respond that sorts are and must be conventional, and
682 hence dependent upon convention-users, by definition. There can be no sortings
683 without sorters; a world absent of a community of convention-reliant subjects
684 identifying objects as sortally categorized in such-and-such a manner would simply

³² For reference, contrary to the prevailing interpretation according to which "Nāgārjuna's thought has been seen to embrace an overarching linguistic conventionalism in which words, whether they are used for the purposes of theory or practice, though they serve as commonly accepted currency in the transactions of worldly business (*vyavahāra*), are in the end only ideas (*prajñāpti*) or metaphysical fabrications (*prapañca*)" (Berger 2010: 40), Berger contends that

Nāgārjuna, rather than advocating the mere nominal or conventional status of terms such as *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā*, demands that they be accepted as both pedagogically useful and even referentially accurate descriptions of the world as it is... Nāgārjuna then proffers no systematic, all-embracing philosophy of language as falsification in the MMK [MK], but rather warns us only against certain theoretical, desire-driven habits of "self"-preservation in its use. (Berger 2010: 41, 58)



685 and by definition not contain any such sorts. As Jay Garfield proposes to put it in a
686 manner independent of “whether Buddhist ontological doctrine is conventionalist,
687 idealist, antirealist, or whether Buddhism is an ontologically neutral phenomeno-
688 logical doctrine... sortals are our conceptual constructions” (Garfield, 2015: 27).
689 This I see as a natural and necessary corollary of the fact that “essentialism about
690 natural kinds does not entail sortal essentialism” (Robertson Ishii and Atkins, 2020:
691 §4). For although natural kinds may exist—and may even exist on the basis of
692 *essential* differences—without any community of identifiers in existence to
693 appreciate that fact, these natural kinds still would not constitute sorts, for
694 specifically *sortal* essentialism implicitly relies upon a distinction between the
695 avowedly essential nature of the characteristics according to which the objects of
696 the world are sortable and the necessarily convention-dependent nature of the sorts
697 into which those characteristics (and thus the objects to which they are ascribed) are
698 in actual (contingent) fact sorted.

699 Now, regardless of what one makes of this last point regarding what I take to
700 be the necessarily conventional nature of the sorts sorting the sortal essentialist’s
701 reality, for our purposes the more general point as to the metaphysical absence of
702 essential foundations to epistemological posits means that the Mādhyamika does
703 not set out to give one more answer to the question ‘what is ultimately real, or
704 true, or valid?’ or ‘what is the substance, the essence, of things?’, but rather to
705 demonstrate that any and all such claims are fundamentally misguided. Misguided
706 because they all make an unjustified assumption: they assume that beneath or
707 behind or beyond all this messy changeable conventional reality (*saṃvṛti-satya*)
708 there is something clear, unchanging, ultimate (*paramārtha-satya*): a substance or
709 essence which founds ontology and grounds epistemology. From Nāgārjuna’s
710 Madhyamaka perspective, the guiltiest metaphysical presupposition of them all is
711 precisely the view that, ultimately, there is or are some such foundation or
712 foundations undergirding things; some base that really exists ontologically, that
713 truly obtains epistemologically, that validly holds logically.

714 4.4 The Empty Realms of Ontology

715 In the final instance, then, Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka non-foundationalism—be it in
716 the form of a rebuttal of generic or specific substantialism, or of modal or sortal
717 essentialism—is thus seen to apply to ontological, epistemological, and indeed even
718 logical spheres. While I have provided a hopefully convincing or at least coherent
719 combination of textual evidence and explicit extended argumentation in support of
720 this view, in this final section of the article I will also venture to make a further
721 proposition, which is that Nāgārjunian non-foundationalism also applies, *mutatis*
722 *mutandis*, to ethical, aesthetic, and other spheres, and does so not only because all
723 spheres of human intellection and action are, on his account, dependently co-
724 originated and therefore unfounded, but also because Nāgārjuna effectively reduces
725 the claims of foundationalists of all stripes to their properly ontological roots.
726 Westerhoff hearkens to this point in discerning that Nāgārjuna’s arguments collapse
727 what the foundationalist takes (and must take) to be a fundamental distinction



728 between ontology and epistemology,³³ but the point goes beyond epistemology. For
729 at root, whether the foundation posited be posited in terms of substance or essence,
730 whether it be designed to demonstrate the existence of ‘something that stands under
731 or grounds things’, ‘a particular kind of basic entity’, ‘an individual essence
732 (a *haecceity* or *thisness* of that object) by means of which it is identical to that very
733 object, to itself’, or ‘an essence in the absence of which an object could be of a
734 radically different kind or sort of object than it in fact is’, and whether it function as
735 a means to the attainment of truth, beauty, goodness, or whatsoever other ‘reality’,
736 Nāgārjuna’s critique finds it unfound.

737 This takes us back to my initial characterization of Nāgārjuna’s position as non-
738 implicative non-foundationalism (as opposed to anti-foundationalism implicative of
739 a certain view—see §1), and to his concomitant refusal to posit emptiness (let alone
740 anything else) as the final word on metaphysics. If in this final section I may be
741 permitted an enlargement of my frame of reference to Madhyamaka authors beyond
742 Nāgārjuna, I would like in this regard to call on his somewhat divergently minded
743 intellectual descendants Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti. Bhāvaviveka (or some like
744 interlocutor)³⁴ asks the relevant question of Candrakīrti in the latter’s *Prasanna-*
745 *padā*: “Do those with deep insight really have no conclusive argument?” To which
746 Candrakīrti provides eloquent answer:

747 Who can say whether they do or they don’t? For those with deep insight the
748 truth of the highest meaning is a state of silence. This being so, how is there
749 any possibility of discursive thinking out of which we might find either a
750 conclusive argument or no real argument at all?³⁵

751 I find such absence of any ‘*real* argument’ to be the uniquely appropriate stance for
752 Nāgārjuna to take regarding philosophizing given his non-foundationalist philos-
753 ophy. An article about anything at all, then, and most perspicuously one such as this
754 about substance and essence, not only turns out, on Nāgārjuna’s reckoning, to be not

³³ For reference, Westerhoff states:

The defender of existence by *svabhāva*, it may be argued, has to uphold the distinction between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (how we find out about it) as fundamental. But Nāgārjuna’s arguments threaten that distinction. Since we can never know whether something is a reliable epistemic instrument without taking into account the epistemic objects at the same time, ontology and epistemology become inextricably linked. Therefore there cannot be a fundamental distinction between them, and thus we cannot have one side of the divide being characterized by objects existing in the way they do intrinsically, by *svabhāva*. (Westerhoff 2017: 94)

My point is that this is true, but applies, *mutatis mutandis*, not only to ontology and epistemology.

³⁴ The interlocutor has been variously identified; see Garfield 2008: 511, fn. 7 for an enumeration of these; the thrust of Candrakīrti’s response is not significantly altered by identifying his interlocutor as someone other than Bhāvaviveka.

³⁵ Translation and Sanskrit text (from Vaidya’s edition: Vaidya 1960) in Huntington 2007: 124:

[Bhāvaviveka:] *kiṃ khalu āryāṇām upapattir nāsti?* [Candrakīrti:] *kenaitad uktam asti vā nāsti veti / paramārtho hyāryāṇām tūṣṇimbhāvaḥ / tataḥ kutas tatra prapañcasambhavo yadupapattir anupapattir vā syāt?*

Garfield (2008: 512, fn. 8) and Arnold (2005: 146) provide alternative translations of this passage.



753 about any *thing* at all, but to make no point... which surely makes for a fitting place
756 to end.

758 Declarations

759 **Conflict of interest** The author declares that he as no conflict of interest.

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