

## Negative Dialectics in Nāgārjuna's Thought as a Critique of Substantialist Ontology in Contemporary Western Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines the negative dialectic method in Nāgārjuna's thought as a philosophical approach to dismantling the ontological assumption of permanent existence (svabhāva), which is dominant in the Western philosophical tradition and tends to be essentialist and individualistic. This study was conducted as a response to the existential and social crises that arise from dualistic and non-relational ways of understanding reality. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes Nāgārjuna's key texts, namely the *Mūlamādhymakakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, through close reading techniques and critical discourse analysis to reveal the structure of the arguments and the philosophical assumptions embedded within them. The results show that Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic consistently rejects intrinsic existence and demonstrates that all phenomena are interdependent. This understanding gives rise to a compassion-based ethical perspective (*karuṇā*) as a logical implication of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), encouraging the formation of a more relational and empathetic consciousness. The implications of this research lie in its contribution to the development of a global ethic based on interdependence, which can be applied in social policy, education, and environmental conservation. This research asserts that emptiness is not nihilism but rather a philosophical foundation for building collective solidarity. The originality of this research lies in its attempt to connect Nāgārjuna's classical thought with contemporary challenges in a cross-cultural manner. This approach expands the role of negative dialectics as a tool for critiquing and transforming social consciousness towards a more inclusive and compassionate ethics and politics.

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## Introduction

Amidst the current global dynamics, the world community is facing an ontological crisis that affects the way it perceives itself and the world (Beck & Levy, 2013). Contemporary social realities are shaped by individualistic and essentialist thinking tendencies that emphasize human existence as a separate entity with innate properties. This understanding is reflected in educational, economic and political systems that tend to emphasize competition, private ownership and domination over nature. Within this framework, human relations and interconnections with the environment are often marginalized, even ignored. As a result, the modern world is experiencing acute existential alienation, reflected in increasing feelings of separation, social anxiety, and ecological crisis.

This phenomenon is not isolated but is underpinned by the dominant paradigm in Western philosophy, which has historically emphasized the subject-object dichotomy and the notion of the fixed nature of things (Mohammed, 2024). This conception developed through the legacy of classical and modern thought, reinforcing the construction of reality as a collection of independent and stable entities. In philosophy, this is evident in the emphasis on essentialism and rationalism, which overlook the dimension of interdependence. Consequently, philosophy loses its critical power in understanding reality as a relational and dynamic process, which is at the core of human existence in the real world.

The popularity of Buddhism in today's global public discourse is often reduced to individualized forms of therapy (Gleig, 2019), such as mindfulness or self-help (Nehring & Frawley, 2020; Payne, 2016), which do not address the critical and systematic aspects of Buddhist philosophy itself. These practices tend to be adopted without a deep philosophical understanding, thus losing their transformational power. In fact, Buddhism, particularly the *Mādhyamaka* school developed by Nāgārjuna, offers a highly complex and profound philosophical framework for understanding reality as a web of interdependent causal relationships (*pratītyasamutpāda*), as opposed to a fragmented worldview (Brincat, 2020).

Thus, there is an urgent need to re-examine the fundamental teachings of Buddhist philosophy not just as a system of ethics or spiritual practices, but as a philosophical tool capable of providing an alternative to the ontological crisis plaguing contemporary society. Re-presenting Nāgārjuna's thought in dialogue with contemporary philosophy is an important step toward enriching our understanding of the world and the self. In particular, the negative dialectic approach developed by Nāgārjuna opens the way to see reality not as a fixed entity, but as a mutually presupposing relation. This perspective is necessary to challenge and dismantle the individualistic assumptions that have been deeply embedded in modern social constructionism and philosophy.

A number of previous studies have reviewed Nāgārjuna's thought from various perspectives. Divino (2025) and Kalupahana (1969, 1986) places his dialectic in the context of early Buddhist thought, while Walser (2015) emphasizes the historical and cosmological setting that influenced the formation of his ideas. Dastur (2024), Garfield (2022) and Westerhoff (2009) argue that Nāgārjuna's negative dialectical approach is not a form of nihilism, but a middle ground between

eternalism and nihilism. Kumara (2024), Siderits (2017) and Tubali (2023) interprets Nāgārjuna's thought as a philosophical therapy to liberate from metaphysical entanglements. Meanwhile, cross-disciplinary approaches such as that developed by Coseru (2015), Hashi (2015) and Varela et al., (2017), demonstrate the connection between Buddhist philosophy and cognition as a phenomenon that is embodied and embedded in the social environment. Other studies explore the connection between Nāgārjuna's thought and quantum physics and ecology (Beckwith, 2015; Garfield, 2013; McEvilley, 2012; Mukhopadhyay, 2019).

Although there are many in-depth studies on Nāgārjuna's thought, most of them are reconstructive or historical-textual, without further exploring its practical relevance to contemporary ontological issues. Additionally, the contribution of the negative dialectical method to dismantling essentialist thought structures in Western philosophy has not been systematically explored. Furthermore, there have not been many studies that explicitly position Nāgārjuna's thought as a philosophical bridge in a transcultural effort to present a critical and actual relational way of thinking toward current global social issues.

This research aims to examine and apply Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic method as a philosophical tool capable of responding to ontological challenges in contemporary philosophy, particularly in dismantling assumptions about fixed and separate existence (*svabhāva*). By focusing on the relationship between emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and mutual dependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), this study seeks to offer a relational framework that can enrich global philosophical discourse and serve as the basis for developing a worldview that is more interdependent and not trapped in subject-object dualism.

The research is based on the hypothesis that Nāgārjuna's negative dialectical approach not only offers a critique of essentialist thinking structures but also provides a new ontological foundation based on relations and conditions. Through the systematic unraveling of contradictions in the *svabhāva* assumption, as well as the assertion that reality emerges from relations of interdependence, this study argues that Nāgārjuna's thought can serve as a philosophical strategy to dismantle the reification of individuals and fixed entities in Western social systems and philosophy. As such, this method is important not only for philosophy but also for shaping a more holistic and civilized way of viewing the world.

## Method

This research focuses on the thought of Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, particularly as manifested in his major texts such as *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* (Nāgārjuna, 1995) and *Vigrahavyāvartani* (Nāgārjuna, 2005). The units of analysis in this study are textual artifacts that represent Nāgārjuna's thought, particularly with regard to the negative dialectical method, the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the principle of interdependent causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The focus of the research is on how these texts, when analyzed as a whole, form a distinctive relational cosmology, which constitutes Nāgārjuna's main contribution to the *Mādhyamaka* tradition.

This research employs a qualitative approach (Dodgson, 2017; Mey, 2022) with a textual study design and critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015; Wall,

Stahl, & Salam, 2015). This method was chosen as it is well-suited for exploring complex philosophical meanings in classical Buddhist texts. The two main approaches used are textual analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as formulated by Fairclough & Fairclough (2015). CDA was selected because it allows researchers to uncover the ideological structures and philosophical assumptions embedded in texts, as well as power relations and meanings in discourse construction. This approach also facilitates the reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's dialectical arguments, which are often implicit and paradoxical.

The primary data sources for this study are Nāgārjuna's core texts, particularly *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* and *Vigrahavyāvartani*, which are analyzed through recent academic translations (Nāgārjuna, 1995, 2005). Additionally, secondary data in the form of scholarly literature, journal articles, books, and relevant documents discussing the historical context and philosophy of Nāgārjuna were utilized. This secondary literature was drawn from academic databases as well as curated bibliographies of scholars who have specifically examined Nāgārjuna's dialectical and cosmological approach.

Data were collected through close reading of the primary texts (Brummett, 2018), conducted carefully to identify argument structures, key terms, and discursive patterns in Nāgārjuna's philosophical narratives. This process involved textual exegesis, or in-depth textual interpretation, of key passages in Nāgārjuna's work. Secondary data collection was carried out through systematic searches in academic databases, as well as cross-referencing the bibliographies of related scholarly works. No survey or interview instruments were used, given the textual-philosophical nature of the research.

The analysis was conducted in two main stages. The first stage involved content analysis concerning the key themes in the texts, such as negative dialectics, emptiness, and causal relationships. The second stage applied Fairclough & Fairclough (2015) Critical Discourse Analysis, which involves examining the text at the linguistic, intertextual, and sociocultural levels. The results of these two approaches were then synthesized to form a comprehensive understanding of Nāgārjuna's relational cosmology and its contribution to the critique of ontological assumptions in contemporary Western philosophy.

## Findings

### ***Dialectic in Nāgārjuna's Thought as a Method of Relational Criticism and Antidote to Dogma***

To understand Nāgārjuna's philosophical method, the first step is to understand the concept of dialectic, as this is the main approach employed to dismantle the concepts of substance (*svabhāva*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Dialectic itself is an enigmatic concept, as there is no single definition or fixed form of argument that can be definitively said to represent "dialectic," but rather a variety of different interpretations (Blunden, 2012). For Nāgārjuna, dialectics is not a closed system but rather a dynamic and critical way of thinking—an intellectual stance that constantly tests every truth claim, especially those of a dubious nature. This method is designed to address questions that cannot be definitively proven or demonstratively verified, and can only be accepted through argumentation or logical possibility. In this context, Shiyān et al., (2024) and Brincat, (2024) describe

dialectics as an "antidote to dogma," as it rejects untestable beliefs and keeps the mind open. Instead of clinging to unproven beliefs, dialectics encourages comfort in uncertainty and warns that intellectual stagnation is the most dangerous form of thinking.

In the Western philosophical tradition, dialectic is often reduced to the ideas of Hegel or Marx, and as such, it is frequently misunderstood or even denigrated. However, dialectics has much deeper historical roots and is cross-cultural. Nāgārjuna's dialectical method needs to be understood within the broader intellectual history, as formulated by Karl Jaspers through the concept of the Axial Age, where various civilizations, such as Ancient India, developed dialectical thinking methods in parallel in response to metaphysical questions about the transcendent (Brincat, 2021). During this period, dialectical forms of thinking emerged as long-held myths began to be questioned, and the position of humans in the cosmos was reconsidered. During Nāgārjuna's lifetime, around the second century CE, metaphysical discussions in India remained intense. Although the time of mystics, ascetics, and wandering monks had passed, philosophical questions derived from the Vedas, *Aranyakas*, *Upanishads*, and epics remained central to intellectual life.

In this context, the *Mādhyamaka* (Middle Way) school developed. While Siddhartha Gautama had earlier popularized the Middle Way as an ethical guideline to avoid attachment, Nāgārjuna elevated it to the level of philosophy. He viewed human existence as being "in between"—that is, between the real and the imaginary, between the transcendent and the phenomenal, between substance and emptiness. This liminal notion can be likened to the concept of *metaxy* in Greek philosophy, which refers to an existence "in between" two polar oppositions. In this context, the dialectical way of thinking developed by Nāgārjuna emphasizes the epistemological aspect—that is, how we can discuss questions that cannot be proven with reasonable arguments. Dialectic thus becomes a method of truth-seeking through authentic criticism of dubious claims. Therefore, this method is often manifested in the form of dialogue, in which the opponent's argument is examined based on their own frame of mind (similar to Socratic dialogue), or by pushing the argument into collision with itself, a technique known as negative dialectic, as applied in *Vigrahavyāvartani* (Nāgārjuna, 2005).

It was this negative dialectical method that led Nāgārjuna to various profound philosophical insights. The aporia (conceptual impasse) at the center of his approach was the negation of *sūnyatā* (emptiness) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (interdependent arising) against *svabhāva* or the notion that a thing becomes itself independently and has a fixed nature (intrinsic essence or sole cause). In his work *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna explains that all phenomena (*dharmas*) have no intrinsic existence, but are dependent on other phenomena. As Hanh (2008) explains:

"This exists, therefore it exists. It is nonexistent, because it is nonexistent. It becomes, because it becomes. It ceases, because it ceases."

By negating all conflicting claims, Nāgārjuna shows that phenomena do not arise, do not remain, and do not cease independently, but rather always appear in a web of causal relationships. This is where it is important to understand the Sanskrit term *svabhāva*, which Gangadean, (1979) explains as 'the assumption of atomicity'

and 'static consciousness' that includes concepts such as 'atomisation, independence, substance, existence, entity'. For Nāgārjuna, the phenomenal world is essentially empty (*śūnya*) of any fixed substance or identity. All concepts of fixed nature are only conventionally valid and dependent on external conditions. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is thus everything that arises interdependently and becomes the ontological foundation of the doctrine of emptiness. This view also refutes the earlier doctrine of *Sarvāstivāda* which still recognises certain essential properties in dharmas as markers of their identity.

In conclusion, for Nāgārjuna, dialectic is not merely a logical technique, but rather an open, non-dogmatic, and radically critical philosophical stance. It allows one to penetrate and transcend conceptual contradictions, not for the sake of finding a final answer, but for the sake of clarity, logical consistency, and liberation from cognitive illusions. It is the profound legacy of Nāgārjuna's dialectical method that it is an approach that constantly aborts the human tendency to take concepts as absolutes, in favour of maintaining radical openness in the quest for spiritual knowledge and wisdom.

### ***The Negative Dialectical Method in Nāgārjuna's Thought***

The crux of Nāgārjuna's rejection of both the substantialist and nihilist positions lies in his use of a distinctive negative dialectical method, namely the analysis of the concept of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) through the approach of 'what does not exist' instead of 'what does exist' (Murti, 2013). This approach is brought into sharp focus in *Vigrahavyāvartani*, which serves as a prime model for the explicit application of this method. The work is structured in a question-and-answer format, in which Nāgārjuna responds to various objections to his theory of *Śūnyatā*. All these objections are shown to be logical fallacies or statements that 'miss the mark' and from there, he exposes the internal contradictions of any argument that maintains intrinsic existence (Murti, 2013; Westerhoff, 2010).

Nāgārjuna's approach serves to push his opponent's premise to its logical extreme, thus exposing its inherent absurdity or contradiction. To this end, he often employs the methods of *regressus ad infinitum* and *reductio ad absurdum* (Nāgārjuna, 1995). In addition, he also makes use of a classical Buddhist logical tool known as *Catuṣkoṭi* or 'four corners of negation,' which is used to show that none of the four possibilities (existence, non-existence, both, nor neither) can be logically sustained.

Through this method, Nāgārjuna carries out a critique of reification, which is a thinking error when we treat an abstract concept or thing as if it were a concrete and tangible entity. Puhakka (2003) calls this an attempt to 'wake us up from the spell of reality' or a form of critique of the human tendency to replace true reality with mental constructions of subjects and objects. This error occurs when we detach things from their relationships and conditions and give them an independent existence or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Nāgārjuna believed that it is this realised form of thinking that causes suffering, as it creates the illusion of a fixed entity that never existed.

*Śūnyatā* in this case does not mean absolute or nihilistic emptiness, but rather an affirmation that everything lacks *svabhāva*, and therefore everything is interdependent (*Pratītyasamutpāda*). This understanding leads us to read the *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* as educative steps of the Middle Way that show how claims

about intrinsic existence will always lead to contradictions. Robinson (1957) explains that anyone who proposes the existence of *svabhāva* will be caught in the contradiction between eternity and mortality. *Svabhāva*, being defined as unconditional and independent, becomes impossible to exist as it contradicts the nature of phenomena which are always conditional and interdependent.

However, the rejection of *svabhāva* does not mean that we are left without anything. Rather, what we have are relations and connections between phenomena, which in philosophical terms is referred to as metaxy, 'the-in-between'. This is where Nāgārjuna sometimes falls short in his refutative elaboration. Even so, in all his forms of negation, there is one common principle that the phenomenal world (*saṃsāra*) is emptiness itself, and emptiness is not something that transcends phenomena but reality itself in its most fundamental form (Stcherbatsky, 1965).

This view is confirmed through the doctrine of the Two Truths of conventional truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*) as explained in *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* chapter 24 and *Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra*. They are not dualisms, but rather two ways of seeing the same world. Conventional truth is the way we live and interact through everyday language and concepts, while ultimate truth is the recognition that all things are empty of intrinsic existence. The Middle Way serves to navigate between the two extremes of the substantialist and nihilist poles.

An example of an analogy often used in this context is René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, which depicts a pipe and the words 'This is not a pipe'. The image is indeed not a true pipe, but its representation. Similarly, phenomena in the *Mādhyamaka* view do not have a fixed nature, but exist as representations that depend on context and relations. What Nāgārjuna emphasizes is not the rejection of conventional reality, but that we should not equate these conventional concepts with absolute reality.

This brings us to the principle of relativity in Nāgārjuna's method (Robinson, 1957) where all conceptual understanding is limited and context-dependent. No entity or subject exists in isolation. All identities are relative. Therefore, vantage point is an important element. Ollman (2003) explains that in dialectics, each point of view reveals some aspects of reality, obscures others, and is blind to others. Therefore, the dialectical method requires us to constantly shift our point of view from a particular analysis to a holistic understanding, then back, and so on.

Nāgārjuna devised the method to keep the mind moving and this endeavour was continued by Candrakīrti, particularly through the *Prāsaṅgika* approach that uses *reductio ad absurdum* to show that things have no independent existence. In the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Candrakīrti expounds on the non-existence of the intrinsic essence of elements such as fire or the body, and explains that everything only exists relationally. Even in early Buddhist philosophy, the Buddha had taught that language can give false existence to concepts through the process of categorization and naming. Nāgārjuna continues this legacy by pointing out that logical fallacies in thinking about phenomena also give birth to ontological errors.

Herein lies the greatest significance of Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic approach where he reveals that the metaxy of existence is the basic essence of all things. Our relationships are part of our being. Much of Western philosophy has overlooked this, as it tends to get caught up in a nominalist approach that separates

subject and object. In religious contexts, this results in the worship of the 'self' and the separation of the 'soul' from time and space. In contrast, *Mādhyamaka's* contribution to the philosophy of internal relations echoes the Buddhist teaching that 'He who sees the Dharma, sees *pratītyasamutpāda*.' Ultimate and conventional truths are not different in that they point to the same reality from two different perspectives.

Thus, instead of making positive claims about substance, Nāgārjuna opts for a negative approach so as not to allow for an implicit revival of the idea of intrinsic existence. As discussed in the dialogue between Khenpo Tenzin Norgay Rinpoche and Dr. Phuntsho, the *śūnyatā* approach is safer than the declarative approach because it does not leave room for ego formation, the concept of *ātman*, or the idea of an eternal soul. The understanding of *svabhāva's* nothingness is the basis for letting go of attachments, towards the realisation of ultimate reality, and ultimately, liberation from suffering.

For those of us in philosophy, the greatest legacy of Nāgārjuna's system is the relational ontology of the idea that existence cannot be understood as something independent, fixed, or isolated, but always as the result of interdependent relationships. This is the logic and reality of the Middle Way that does not lead to an absolute void, but to a deep understanding of the fabric of existence.

### ***Emptiness as Relation and its Implications for Compassionate Ethical Politics***

As explained earlier, Nāgārjuna's negative dialectical method systematically rejects subject/object dualism by negating the notion of an individualized entity that stands alone and arises from itself what is referred to as intrinsic Being or existence that has *svabhāva* (Gullette, 2020). By denying the existence of this fixed essence, the dialectical method forces the mind to constantly move through shifting vantage points, which in turn enables the unfolding of reality as a dynamic, interconnected, and ever-evolving relational network. In this context, the world is understood not as a collection of independent entities, but rather as a system of interdependent relationships, where each existence depends on the others, and vice versa (Gangadean, 1979). This view is explicitly stated in the concluding verse of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* I:18 (Nāgārjuna, 1995):

"...since nothing comes into existence without depending on something else, nothing is non-empty."

This statement can be reversed to emphasize the same meaning "Since there is nothing that is not dependent, everything arises jointly with everything else." This statement underscores the central tenet of *pratītyasamutpāda* (interdependent arising) as the foundation of phenomenal reality, while reinforcing the understanding that emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not nothingness, but rather the absence of absolute and independent existence. Nāgārjuna goes further by stating that:

"Every relational existence is neither essentially identical nor distinct from the object to which it is related" (Nāgārjuna, 1995).

This statement carries two important implications. Firstly, it asserts that all forms of relational existence are not *svabhāva* entities, because if an entity truly had a fixed nature, then the categories of identity and difference would not apply to it. Secondly, this assertion entails the recognition that all phenomena are relational in that we are neither completely identical, nor completely different from the other entities we are related to. This is where the concept of 'difference within unity' is

defended. This understanding is not simply an acknowledgement of diversity, but a deep appreciation that our existence always involves others and we exist through relationships, not as separate atomic entities.

It is this understanding of relationship as process that is at the heart of the Middle Way, which is the central doctrine of *Mādhyamaka* (Garfield, 2001). In this teaching, the term *saṅkhāra* (formation formed through conditions) plays an active role in describing existence as a conditioned and interdependent process. As such, the cosmos is no longer understood as an arrangement of fixed entities, but as a network of relations that form the ‘in-between’ (*metaxy*). We have no intrinsic existence, but we are the nexus of all mutually constituting relations.

This view has profound implications for ethics and politics. When reality is understood as a network of interdependent relationships, then any action towards another such as a human, living being, or nature becomes an action towards a connected part of ourselves. There is no truly separate ‘other’. Therefore, the ethical approach that emerges from this philosophy of relationship is that of active compassion. We are compelled to act with compassion not because of external moral doctrines, but because of the deep recognition that our existence is a shared existence.

Thus, the recognition of emptiness as relation not only rejects metaphysical dogmatism, but also fosters a deep ethical awareness that to protect, care for and love others is a form of maintenance of our own relational existence. The Middle Way is not a neutral compromise position, but a way of thinking and living that rejects egoistic and nihilistic extremes, while building an ethical-political foundation based on interdependence.

## Discussion

This research finds that the method of *dialectical negation* in Nāgārjuna’s thought not only functions to dismantle the illusion of intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*), but also generates a new understanding that existence is relational and interdependent. Through the frameworks of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *pratīyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), all entities do not exist independently but through their interconnection with other entities (Nāgārjuna, 1995). This awareness forms the basis for the ethics of compassion (*karuṇā*) because, by understanding the non-existence of entities standing on their own, attachment logically ceases (Gangadean, 1979).

This finding explains that the concepts of *śūnyatā* and *pratīyasamutpāda* in Nāgārjuna’s thought are not only ontological but also transformative in shaping human consciousness. Through the method of *dialectical negation* which rejects the existence of *svabhāva* (fixed essence), Nāgārjuna dismantles the essentialist thought structures deeply rooted in Western philosophical traditions and social systems (Garfield, 2022). This marks a shift from a paradigm of fixed ontology towards an understanding of relational reality, where reality is shaped by mutually supportive relationships between entities (Brincat, 2020; Westerhoff, 2009).

In this context, the dualism of subject-object and individualism—which are dominant characteristics of modern education, economy, and politics—become problematic as they create separation and alienation from the interdependent structure of reality (Beck & Levy, 2013). The relational awareness formed through

the framework of *Two Truths* (conventional and ultimate truths) not only encourages profound philosophical reflection but also nurtures an ethical consciousness logically tied to the importance of compassion and responsibility towards others as inseparable parts of the self (Gangadean, 1979; Garfield, 2001; Varela et al., 2017).

This finding strengthens the arguments of contemporary thinkers such as Garfield (2014, 2022), Westerhoff (Westerhoff, 2010), Williams (Williams, 2000), and Loy (Loy, 2019), who have developed readings of *karuṇā* (compassion) within the Mādhyamaka Buddhist framework. Wagner (2025) further reinforces this view by emphasizing the epistemological value of Buddhist teachings in addressing modern scientific and ethical dilemmas. His analysis highlights the need to bridge empirical materialism with transcendental ethical insight, particularly through the Buddhist emphasis on relational existence and moral responsibility, which resonates with Nāgārjuna's vision of interconnected reality. Garfield interprets *karuṇā* as the foundation for a democratic ethics based on limited responsibility towards others. Westerhoff emphasizes that *karuṇā* is not merely a moral imperative but a direct implication of the understanding of emptiness. Williams views *karuṇā* as a reflection of practical awareness of interconnection, while Loy and Garfield expand this to ecological ethics.

In line with Nāgārjuna's philosophy of *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*, emptiness is not understood as absolute non-existence, but as the rejection of intrinsic essence in all phenomena (Fernández, 2008; Macor, 2024). Therefore, *karuṇā* that arises from awareness of emptiness does not only address personal ethical demands but also holds social and ecological relevance, as it implies an inseparable interconnection between beings and their environment (Clark, 2008).

Furthermore, Nāgārjuna's critical approach, which prioritises the method of *prasaṅga*—showing the absurdity of the opponent's assumptions without presenting a positive thesis—offers methodological inspiration in reinterpreting *karuṇā* as an action free from claims of absolute truth, but still rooted in care for others. Nāgārjuna's critique of language (Ho, 2010; Westerhoff, 2019) strengthens the argument that *karuṇā* cannot be confined by conventional linguistic categories, but must be understood within the framework of the two truths: conventional and ultimate (Tillemans, 2009).

This research offers two important updates. First, it systematically explores the relationship between *karuṇā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* in contemporary social and ecological contexts, an area that has been largely overlooked by previous studies that focused more on personal ethics or metaphysical logical frameworks. Second, this research proposes a critical hermeneutical approach to compassion within Mādhyamaka, going beyond traditional metaphysical readings and linking it to contemporary ethical-political praxis (Bilimoria et al., 2017; Brincat, 2020).

What distinguishes this study from previous research is the emphasis on the direct connection between Nāgārjuna's relational ontology and contemporary ethical-political praxis, including its ecological dimension. By showing that the rejection of *svabhāva* logically results in a relational ethics, this study bridges classical Buddhist philosophy with the collective ethical needs in facing global social and environmental crises. Thus, Nāgārjuna's *dialectical negation* is understood not

merely as a philosophical strategy but as an instrument of social consciousness transformation that is inclusive and collaborative.

Ideologically and historically, these findings challenge the nominalist and individualist paradigms within the Western tradition, while simultaneously opening space for inter-traditional dialogue in the development of a transformative, cross-cultural ethical framework. Functionally, this philosophy can reconstruct political and ethical theory from a Buddhist perspective that rejects substantialism. Ethics is no longer positioned abstractly, but experienced through the relational life of everyday existence.

However, from a dysfunctional perspective, this approach may encounter resistance in modern societies that continue to uphold individualism and prioritize personal interests. The conceptualization of emptiness as an ethical foundation may be regarded as overly speculative and insufficiently pragmatic, particularly within the political sphere, which is often characterized by competing interests and complex power dynamics. Based on these findings, social and environmental policy directions can be formulated using relational approaches as the underlying framework. In practice, this can be actualized through public policies that emphasize interconnectedness—such as sustainable development initiatives, the strengthening of community-based social security systems, and ethical education that cultivates a collective awareness of the individual's interdependence with the environment. Instilling the values of *karuṇā* (compassion) from an early age, through both formal and non-formal education, constitutes a vital strategy for shaping a generation that is not only critically engaged, but also empathetic towards the interconnected nature of the world.

## Conclusion

This research concludes that Nāgārjuna's philosophy, particularly through the concepts of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (interdependent arising), offers a compelling response to contemporary philosophical challenges related to nominalism and individualism within the Western philosophical tradition. The negative dialectical method employed by Nāgārjuna systematically deconstructs claims of ultimate existence (*svabhāva*) by negating assumptions regarding entities as independent and intrinsically existent. By revealing the contradictions inherent in the notion that phenomena can arise, persist, or cease independently, Nāgārjuna demonstrates that all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence and can only be understood in terms of relational interdependence. This insight does not result in nihilism; rather, it fosters an awareness of social reality as a network of mutually constitutive relations and intersubjectivities.

This study significantly contributes to the development of philosophical scholarship, particularly in the comparative discourse between Buddhist thought and Western philosophy. By showing that Nāgārjuna's negative dialectic is not only logically coherent but also ontologically and ethically transformative, this research positions *śūnyatā* as a relational principle that underpins interconnected social existence. The findings contribute to contemporary philosophy by offering a novel conceptual framework that bridges metaphysical inquiry and political ethics grounded in compassion and interdependence. Methodologically, the study

illustrates how negation can serve not only as a tool for deconstructing dogma, but also as a means of cultivating a more inclusive and relational mode of consciousness.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It focuses on textual and philosophical analysis of Nāgārjuna's works without exploring their practical implications in contemporary socio-political contexts. It also does not engage with interpretations from other Buddhist traditions, such as Yogācāra or Tibetan schools. Future research could expand this work through interdisciplinary approaches, exploring the application of śūnyatā in areas like environmental ethics, conflict resolution, or compassion-based policymaking.

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