

Chapter XXIV

Examination of the Four Noble Truths

While Chapter XXIV ostensibly concerns the Four Buddhist Truths and the way they are to be understood from the vantage point of emptiness, it is really about the nature of emptiness itself and about the relation between emptiness and conventional reality. As such, it is the philosophical heart of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. The first six verses of the chapter (XXIV: 1–6) present a reply to Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness by an opponent charging the doctrine with nihilism. The next eight verses (XXIV: 7–14) are primarily rhetorical, castigating the opponent for his misunderstanding of Mādhyamika. The positive philosophical work begins with XXIV: 15. From this point Nāgārjuna offers a theory of the relationship between emptiness, dependent origination, and convention and argues not only that these three can be understood as correlative, but that if conventional things (or emptiness itself) were *nonempty*, the very nihilism with which the reificationist opponent charges Mādhyamika would ensue. This tactic of arguing not only against each extreme but of arguing that the contradictory extremes are in fact mutually entailing is, as we have seen in earlier chapters, a dialectical trademark of Nāgārjuna's philosophical method. In this chapter, it is deployed with exceptional elegance and acuity.

The opponent opens the chapter by claiming that if the entire phenomenal world were empty, nothing would in fact exist, a conclusion absurd on its face and, more importantly, contradictory to fundamental Buddhist tenets such as the Four Noble Truths (XXIV: 1–6) as well as to conventional wisdom:

1. If all of this is empty,
 Neither arising, nor ceasing,
 Then for you, it follows that
 The Four Noble Truths do not exist.

The Four Noble Truths are: (1) All life in cyclic existence is suffering. (2) There is a cause of this suffering, namely, craving caused by ignorance. (3) There is a release from suffering. (4) The path to that release is the eightfold Buddhist path of right view, right concentration, right mindfulness, right speech, right effort, right action, right morality, right livelihood. The Four Noble Truths, preached by the Buddha in his first teaching after gaining enlightenment, are the fundamental philosophical tenets of Buddhism. If it were a consequence of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness that the Four Noble Truths were in fact false or, more radically, nonexistent, that would constitute in this philosophical context an immediate refutation of the position. This is not because these assertions are articles of faith, in the sense of revealed doctrine, but because anyone arguing within this framework has accepted the arguments for them.

2. If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
 Then knowledge, abandonment,
 Meditation, and manifestation
 Will be completely impossible.

Once we reject the Four Noble Truths, the essential ingredients of Buddhist practice become unintelligible. Knowledge of the ultimate nature of things becomes impossible since all of the knowledge gained in this tradition is knowledge of things that accords with the truths. Abandonment of error and craving, and eventually of cyclic existence, becomes unintelligible without the context of the analysis contained in the truths. Meditation loses its point. The

eightfold path becomes a path to nowhere. This all amounts to a rejection of the entire Buddhist Dharma, one of the three jewels in which Buddhists take refuge, the others being the Buddha¹⁰⁷ and the Sangha, or the spiritual community of Buddhist practitioners and teachers.

3. If these things do not exist,
The four fruits will not arise.
Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.
Nor will there be the faithful.
4. If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
Nor will the eight kinds of person.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
There will be no true Dharma.

These verses highlight these implications regarding the Dharma, but also point out that the rejection of the Four Noble Truths entails the nonexistence of the Sangha. For absent practice and the fruits of the path—that is, realization and accomplishment—there will be no practitioners and realizers.

5. If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
How can there be a Buddha?
If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The three jewels are contradicted.

The whole point of the Dharma and the Sangha is to make it possible to attain buddhahood. The Dharma provides the philosophical insight and knowledge necessary for enlightenment; and the Sangha provides the teachers, the encouragement, the models, the opportunity for practice, and other support necessary for the strenuous and perseverant practice of the path. The attainment of buddhahood requires reliance on these two. So, if they are rejected, so is the possibility of buddhahood. So, the opponent charges, Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness, in virtue of undermin-

107. Not only the historical Buddha, but also the possibility of buddhahood in general and one's own future buddhahood in particular, a point emphasized by the Most Ven. Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche in oral comments.

ing the Four Noble Truths, denies the existence of the three refuges and makes Buddhism itself impossible.

6. Hence you assert that there are no real fruits.
 And no Dharma. The Dharma itself
 And the conventional truth
 Will be contradicted.

The implicit dilemma with which Nāgārjuna here confronts himself is elegant. For as we have seen, the distinction between the two truths or two vantage points—the ultimate and the conventional—is fundamental to his own method. So when the opponent charges that the assertion of the nonexistence of such things as the Four Noble Truths and of the arising, abiding, and ceasing of entities is contradictory both to conventional wisdom and to the ultimate truth (viz., that all phenomena are dependent, impermanent, merely arising, abiding momentarily and ceasing, and only existing conventionally, empty of inherent existence), Nāgārjuna is forced to defend himself on both fronts and to comment on the connection between these standpoints.

Nāgārjuna launches the reply by charging the opponent with foisting the opponent's own understanding of emptiness on Nāgārjuna. Though this is not made as explicit in the text as one might like, it is important to note that the understanding Nāgārjuna has in mind is one that, in the terms of Mādhyamika, reifies emptiness itself. This will be made more explicit in XXIV: 16:

7. We say that this understanding of yours
 Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
 And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
 As a consequence you are harmed by it.
8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
 Is based on two truths:
 A truth of worldly convention
 And an ultimate truth.

This is the first explicit announcement of the two truths in the text. It is important to note that they are introduced as two *truths*,

and that they are introduced as distinct. This will be important to bear in mind later. For it is tempting, since one of the truths is characterized as an ultimate truth, to think of the conventional as “less true.”¹⁰⁸ Moreover, we will see later that while the truths are introduced as quite distinct here, they are in another sense identified later. It will be important to be very clear about the respective senses in which they are distinct and one. The term translated here as “truth of worldly convention” (Tib: *kun-rdzob bden-pa*, Skt: *saṃvṛti-satya*) denotes a truth dependent upon tacit agreement, an everyday truth, a truth about things as they appear to accurate ordinary investigation, as judged by appropriate human standards.¹⁰⁹ The term “ultimate truth” (Tib: *dam-pa'i don gyi bden-*

108. See, for instance, the comments of Murti (1985) on this verse:

The *paramārtha*, however, can be understood and realized only negatively, *only as we remove the saṃvṛti*, the forms which thought has already, unconsciously and beginninglessly, ascribed to the real. The real is to be *uncovered, discovered and realized* as the reality of appearances. In the order of our discovery, the removal of *saṃvṛti* must precede our knowledge of the *paramārtha*. (p. xxvi [emphasis in the original]).

As we shall see, this analysis of the distinction between the two truths as an appearance/reality distinction is explicitly rejected by Nāgārjuna in XXIV: 18, 19. I agree with Kalupahana (1986), who notes that “*ārtha* as well as *paramārtha* are truths (*satya*). The former is not presented as an un-truth (*a-satya*) in relation to the latter, as it would be in an absolutistic tradition. Neither is the former sublated by the latter.” But Kalupahana goes a bit too far when he continues, “There is no indication whatsoever that these are two truths with different standing as higher and lower” (p. 69). For there is clearly an important sense in which, despite their ontic unity, the ultimate truth is epistemologically and soteriologically more significant than the conventional. Kalupahana also errs in my view when he characterizes the two truths as “two fruits” and, hence, as different but complementary moral ideals (p. 332). In his zeal to see Nāgārjuna as a non-Mahāyāna philosopher and as a Jamesian pragmatist, I fear that he distorts the central epistemological and metaphysical themes of the text.

109. It should be noted that both Sanskrit and Tibetan offer two terms, each of which in turn is often translated “conventional truth.” Sanskrit presents “*saṃvṛti-satya*” and “*vyavahāra-satya*.” The former is delightfully ambiguous. “*Saṃvṛti*” can mean *conventional* in all of its normal senses—everyday, by agreement, ordinary, etc. But it can also mean *concealing*, or *occluding*. This ambiguity is exploited by Mādhyamika philosophers, who emphasize that the conventional, in occluding its conventional character, covers up its own emptiness.

Candrakīrti’s commentary to this verse distinguishes three readings, reflecting three distinct etymologies: “*Saṃvṛti*” can mean concealing; it can mean mutually dependent; it can mean transactional, or dependent on linguistic convention. The latter is captured exactly by the second term “*vyavahāra*,” which simply means

pa, Skt: *paramārtha-satya*) denotes the way things are independent of convention, or to put it another way, the way things turn out to be when we subject them to analysis with the intention of discovering the nature they have from their own side, as opposed to the characteristics we impute to them.

9. Those who do not understand
The distinction drawn between these two truths
Do not understand
The Buddha's profound truth.
10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.

The goal of Mādhyamika philosophy is liberation from suffering. But that liberation, on Nāgārjuna's view, can only be achieved by insight into the ultimate nature of things—their emptiness—and indeed into the ultimate nature of emptiness, which we shall see to be emptiness again. But this insight can only be gained through reasoning and hence through language and thought. And the truth that is to be grasped can only be indicated through language and thought, which are thoroughly conventional and which can only be interpreted literally at the conventional level. It is important to see here

transactional—determined by convention. Tibetan presents not only “*kun-rdzob bden-pa*,” which literally means costumed, or disguised, picking up on one of the meanings of “*saṃvṛti*,” but “*tha-snyed bden-pa*,” which means nominal, or by agreement, picking up the other meaning. Because these two Tibetan terms are, according to most Tibetan interpretations of Mādhyamika, identical in extension, they are often treated as synonymous. This is a bit unfortunate for when we come to the parallel pair of terms for conventional existents, “*kun-rdzob yod-pa*” and “*tha-snyed yod-pa*,” this coextension breaks down in an important case: emptiness is a nominal (*tha snyed*) existent, but not a concealing (*kun-rdzob*) existent.

See Nagao (1989), pp. 40–59, and (1991), pp. 13–16, for additional discussion of the Sanskrit etymologies and of the sense in which the conventional truth is a truth.

Kalupahana (1986), however, argues (p. 88) that whenever Nāgārjuna uses the terms “*saṃvṛti*” or “*vyavahāra*,” he “was referring to moral conventions of good or bad.” He argues that the relation between the two truths is a relation between an ideal life and conventional morality. This claim about usage, however, seems just plain erroneous.

that Nāgārjuna is not disparaging the conventional by contrast to the ultimate, but is arguing that understanding the ultimate nature of things is completely dependent upon understanding conventional truth. This is true in several senses: First, as we shall see, understanding the ultimate nature of things just is understanding that their conventional nature *is merely conventional*. But second, and perhaps less obscurely, in order to explain emptiness—the ultimate nature of all phenomena—one must use words and concepts and explain such things as interdependence, impermanence, and so forth. And all of these are conventional phenomena. So both in the end, where the understanding of ultimate truth is in an important sense the understanding of the nature of the conventional, and on the path, where the cultivation of such understanding requires the use of conventions, conventional truth must be affirmed and understood.¹¹⁰

11. By a misperception of emptiness
 A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
 Like a snake incorrectly seized
 Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

110. See Streng (1973), pp. 92–98, and Huntington (1989), pp. 48–50, for a similar analysis. (But Huntington places a bit too much emphasis on specifically social convention in his analysis of the conventional truth, neglecting the role of what the Mādhyamikas call “primal ignorance,” or the “innate disposition to reify,” embodied in our ordinary cognitive tendencies, which may, in fact, be ontogenetically more fundamental than the specifically social conventions to which they give rise and that then reinforce them. See esp. pp. 52–54.) This analysis contrasts sharply with Murti’s (1973) assertion that “the Absolute [ultimate truth] is transcendent to thought . . . phenomena in their essential form” (p. 9). This view of the ultimate truth as an absolute standing behind, or in opposition to, a relative truth of the conventional, as a Kantian noumenal world stands to a phenomenal world, is quite contrary to Nāgārjuna’s doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness. See also Murti (1955) for an extended defense of this reading and Sprung (1973), esp. pp. 43–46, for another argument for a radical discontinuity between the two truths. Tola and Dragonetti (1981) agree with this view of Mādhyamika as nihilistic with regard to the conventional truth: “As a consequence of their argumentation and analysis, the Mādhyamikas deny the existence of the empirical reality, of all of its manifestations. . . .

As a result . . . there remains (we are obliged to say) ‘something’ completely different. . . . That ‘something’ is the true reality” (p. 276). Crittenden (1981) is in substantial agreement with this view.

Curiously, even Nagao seems to succumb to this temptation to absolutize emptiness when he turns to his analysis of the ultimate truth, despite his emphasis on the identity of the two truths when he is elucidating the conventional. See Nagao (1989), pp. 71–72, 75–76.

The Mādhyamika doctrine of emptiness is subtle and is easily misinterpreted. In particular, it is often misinterpreted as a thoroughgoing nihilism about phenomena. This is so not only among classical Indian critics of Mādhyamika, in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical schools, but also among Western critics, who have sometimes regarded it as completely negative.¹¹¹ In this respect, Mādhyamika philosophy has suffered from the same fate as much Western sceptical philosophy, including that of the Pyrrhonians and of Hume and Wittgenstein, all of whom were at considerable pains to warn readers against interpreting them as denying the existence of ordinary entities, but all of whom have been repeatedly read as doing so. Nāgārjuna is here charging the opponent represented in the opening verses with interpreting the assertion that a phenomenon is empty as the assertion that it is nonexistent. Nothing, Nāgārjuna will argue, could be further from the truth.¹¹²

111. E.g., Stcherbatsky (1930), Robinson (1967), and Wood (1994).

112. Wood (1994) on p. 202 says that he is

unable to find anything in MK 24 to support [the non-nihilistic] interpretation of MK 24.7–11. . . . According to [the non-nihilistic interpretation], we would have to read MMK 24 as follows. According to Nāgārjuna, the doctrine that everything is void does not mean that everything is unreal or nonexistent; it only means that everything is empty in the sense that everything arises and perishes through a process of dependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*); and the critic must be taken as criticizing this position.

Wood then argues correctly that no Buddhist opponent would criticize the doctrine of dependent co-origination. This is in fact the cornerstone of Wood's nihilistic reading of the text, as it must be. For this chapter clinches the non-nihilistic interpretation. So, a few things deserve note: While Wood cannot find anything in this chapter to support such a reading, commentators including both Buddhapālita and Bhāvaviveka, as well as Candrakīrti and Tsong Khapa, not to mention a host of modern Western and Tibetan scholars, have found quite a bit there. Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva also insists in *Catuhśataka* on a non-nihilistic reading of emptiness. In fact Wood does have the necessary gloss on the verses in question just right. But he misses the position attributed to the opponent entirely. The opponent need not be represented as denying that phenomena are codependently originated. Rather the opponent is failing to see that that dependent co-origination is emptiness. He hence sees the attribution of emptiness as the denial, rather than the assertion, of codependent origination. Hence the entire remainder of the chapter is devoted not to arguing for emptiness, nor to arguing for the reality of codependent origination, but rather to arguing for their identity. To miss this is to miss the entire point of the text.

12. For that reason—that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult to understand and to learn—
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it.
13. You have presented fallacious refutations
That are not relevant to emptiness.
Your confusion about emptiness
Does not belong to me.

Nāgārjuna here simply denies that his view sustains the nihilistic reading, while granting that if one treats emptiness as nonexistence, all of the absurd conclusions that the opponent enumerates indeed follow. But, Nāgārjuna continues in XXIV: 14, the interpretation of the entire Mādhyamika system depends directly on how one understands the concept of emptiness. If that is understood correctly, everything else falls into place. If it is misunderstood, nothing in the system makes any sense:

14. For him to whom emptiness is clear,
Everything becomes clear.
For him to whom emptiness is not clear,
Nothing becomes clear.¹¹³
15. When you foist on us
All of your errors
You are like a man who has mounted his horse
And has forgotten that very horse.

Here is the idea behind this image, a standard trope in classical Indian rhetoric: A man with a herd of horses thinks that he is missing one and accuses you of having stolen it. As he rides around and counts his horses, he always comes up one short. But you point out to him that the one he is accusing you of stealing is in fact the very one he is riding but has forgotten to count. Likewise, Nāgārjuna is saying, the opponent who confuses the Mādhyamika

113. The Tibetan term translated as “clear” here is “*rung-ba*” which literally means *suitable*, or *appropriate*. But while that makes sense in Tibetan, it clearly doesn't in English, and the context indicates “clear” as the word that best captures the meaning.

analysis in terms of emptiness with nihilism is charging Nāgārjuna with a nihilism that is in fact his own. Nāgārjuna will argue, that is, that while the opponent claims to preserve the reality of the three jewels, the Four Noble Truths, and dependently arisen phenomena against Nāgārjuna's nihilism, Nāgārjuna himself can explain the reality of these things, though it will turn out that on the opponent's view they must be nonexistent!¹¹⁴ At this point the positive philosophical program of this chapter begins.

16. If you perceive the existence of all things
 In terms of their essence,
 Then this perception of all things
 Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.

There are two related assertions contained in this critical verse: First, at the conventional level, the opponent, in virtue of thinking that to exist is to exist inherently, will be unable to account for dependent arising and hence for anything that must be dependently arisen. As Nāgārjuna will make explicit later on, this will include such things as suffering, its causes, nirvāṇa, the path thereto, the Dharma, the Sangha, and the Buddha, as well as more mundane phenomena.

But secondly and more subtly, since the opponent is seeing actual existence as existence as a discrete entity with an essence, it would follow that for the opponent the reality of emptiness would

114. But see Wood (1994), pp. 115–16, for a dramatically different reading (of the parallel verse in *Vigrahavyāvartanī*—but the points all go over) of this verse. Wood interprets emptiness as complete nonexistence and reads Nāgārjuna as a thoroughgoing nihilist. So he interprets Nāgārjuna as asserting that if one sees conventional phenomena as real in any way, one is in trouble and that philosophical problems vanish only if one sees all apparent phenomena as illusions. In offering this interpretation, Wood notes that Nāgārjuna often characterizes phenomena as like dreams or mirages. That is indeed so, but his interpretation of that simile is itself problematic. For a thing to be like a mirage or a dream is for it to exist in one way (as, e.g., a mirage), but to not exist in the way that it appears (as water). To put the point another way: Mirages *really are* mirages, but are *not* really water, though they might *appear* to be. So conventional phenomena, according to the simile, *really are* empty, dependently arisen, nominally real phenomena, but are *not* substantial, inherently existent phenomena, though they might *appear* to be. So, pace Wood, it is not Nāgārjuna, but his opponent who is the nihilist here. See also Padhye (1988), esp. pp. 61–66, for a good critical discussion of the nihilistic reading.

entail that emptiness itself is an entity, an inherently existing entity at that. To see emptiness in this way is to see it as radically different from conventional, phenomenal reality. It is to see the conventional as illusory and emptiness as the reality standing behind it. If Nāgārjuna were to adopt this view of emptiness, he would indeed have to deny the reality of the entire phenomenal, conventional world. This would also be to ascribe a special, nonconventional, nondependent hyperreality to emptiness itself. Ordinary things would be viewed as nonexistent, emptiness as substantially existent. (It is important and central to the Mādhyamika dialectic to see that these go together—that nihilism about one kind of entity is typically paired with reification of another.) This view is not uncommon in Buddhist philosophy, and Nāgārjuna is clearly aware that it might be suggested by his own position. So Nāgārjuna's reply must begin by distancing himself from this reified view of emptiness itself and hence from the dualism it entails. Only then can he show that to reify emptiness in this way would indeed entail the difficulties his imaginary opponent adumbrates, difficulties not attaching to Nāgārjuna's own view.¹¹⁵ This brings us to the central verses of this chapter:

17. Effects and causes
 And agent and action
 And conditions and arising and ceasing
 And effects will be rendered impossible.

Again, this verse is to be read at two levels: At the conventional level, the opponent, through reifying phenomena in order to preserve their conventional reality, will deny the possibility of any

115. So, for instance, when Wood (1994) writes on p. 161 that “[he does] not think that there is a non-nihilistic sense of the phrase ‘does not exist,’” he is succumbing to the very view that Nāgārjuna criticizes here—the view that to exist is to exist inherently and that to not exist inherently is not to exist at all. The non-nihilistic sense of “does not exist” is in play when Nāgārjuna, in providing a *reductio* on the opponent's view, is taking inherent existence as the meaning of “existence.” Given that understanding, Nāgārjuna can quite easily say that, e.g., the self does not exist while retaining his commitment to its conventional existence. He can also say that no inherently existent phenomena exist at all without denying the conventional existence of conventional phenomena.

kind of dependence, impermanence, or action. But more importantly, if Nāgārjuna's analysis of these things as empty meant that they were nonexistent and that only emptiness exists, then Nāgārjuna himself would be denying the empirical reality of these phenomena. That is, not only would an inherently existent phenomenal world be devoid of change, dependency, and so forth, but inherently existent emptiness would render the phenomenal world completely nonexistent.

This defines the straits between which the middle path must be found, as well as the presupposition that generates both extremes: The extreme of reification of the phenomenal world depends upon viewing emptiness nihilistically; the extreme of reification of emptiness requires us to be nihilistic about the phenomenal world. A middle path must reify neither and hence must regard emptiness, as well as all empty phenomena, as empty. Both extremes presuppose that to exist is to exist inherently. They only disagree about whether this inherent existence is properly ascribed to conventional phenomena or to their ultimate nature. Nāgārjuna will deny exactly that presupposition, arguing that to exist is to exist conventionally and that both conventional phenomena and their ultimate natures exist in exactly that way. The next verse is the climax of the entire text and can truly be said to contain the entire Mādhyamika system in embryo. It is perhaps the most often quoted and extensively commented on verse in all of Mahāyāna philosophy:

18. Whatever is dependently co-arisen
 That is explained to be emptiness.
 That, being a dependent designation,
 Is itself the middle way.
19. Something that is not dependently arisen,
 Such a thing does not exist.
 Therefore a nonempty thing
 Does not exist.

These two verses demand careful scrutiny and are best discussed together. In XXIV: 18, Nāgārjuna establishes a critical three-way relation between emptiness, dependent origination and verbal convention, and asserts that this relation itself is the Middle Way toward which his entire philosophical system is aimed. As we shall

see, this is the basis for understanding the emptiness of emptiness itself. Nāgārjuna is asserting that the dependently arisen is emptiness. Emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things. They are, rather, two characterizations of the same thing. To say of something that it is dependently co-arisen is to say that it is empty. To say of something that it is empty is another way of saying that it arises dependently.¹¹⁶

Moreover, whatever is dependently co-arisen is verbally established. That is, the identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon verbal conventions. To say of a thing that it is dependently arisen is to say that its identity as a single entity is nothing more than its being the referent of a word. The thing itself, apart from conventions of individuation, has no identity. To say of a thing that its identity is a merely verbal fact about it is to say that it is empty. To view emptiness in this way is to see it neither as an entity nor as unreal—it is to see it as conventionally real.¹¹⁷

Moreover, “emptiness” itself is asserted to be a dependent designation (Tib: *brten nas gdags-pa*, Skt: *prajñaptir-upādāya*),¹¹⁸ Its referent, emptiness itself, is thereby asserted to be merely dependent and nominal—conventionally existent but ultimately empty. This is hence a middle path with regard to emptiness.¹¹⁹ To view

116. Padhye (1988), pp. 66–67, also emphasizes this corelativity of emptiness and dependent arising.

117. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in oral remarks (Columbia University 1994), says:

Since dependent co-origination is used as a premise to argue for the lack of inherent existence of things, it can't be independent of it. Lack of inherent existence must always be understood as negative and as a feature of conventional reality. . . . In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* these two truths—dependent co-origination and emptiness—are taught as two perspectives on the same reality.

118. See Nagao (1991), pp. 190–94, for a useful discussion of alternative renderings of this compound and of the interpretive issues raised in translating it. Nagao himself opts for “a designation based upon (some material).” I find this both awkward and misleading; it commits Nāgārjuna univocally to “some material” as the designative basis for emptiness, submerging the metalinguistic reading. Both seem to me to be clearly intended by the text.

119. Compare to Murti (1973):

Relativity or mutual dependence is a mark of the unreal. . . . For the Mādhyamika, reciprocity, dependence, is the lack of inner essence. *Tattva*, or the Real, is something in itself, self-evident, and self-existent. Reason, which understands things through distinction and relation is a principle of falsity, as it distorts and thereby hides the Real. Only the Absolute as the unconditioned is real. . . . (p. 16)

the dependently originated world in this way is to see it neither as nonempty nor as completely nonexistent. It is, viewed in this way, conventionally existent, but empty. So we have a middle path with regard to dependent origination.¹²⁰ To view convention in this way

This represents as clear a statement as one would like of the position that the conventional/ultimate distinction is a version of an appearance/reality or phenomenon/noumenon distinction, a position I read Nāgārjuna as at pains to refute. As Murti says later in this essay (p. 22), "I have interpreted *sūnyatā* and the doctrine of the Two Truths as a kind of Absolutism, not Nihilism. Nāgārjuna's 'no views about reality' should not be taken as advocating a 'no-reality view.' "

Nagao (1991) concurs with Murti on this point: "The Twofold Truth is composed of *paramārtha* (superworldly or absolute) and *saṃvṛti* (worldly or conventional). These two lie sharply contrasted, the former as the real truth, and the latter as the truth concealed by the veil of falsehood and ignorance" (p. 46). Now while Nagao, to be sure, is less disparaging of the conventional truth than is Murti, noting the alternative etymologies of "*saṃvṛti-satya*" and allowing that "... the Twofold Truth opens a channel by which language recovers itself in spite of its falsehood and ignorance," he emphasizes that "the 'silence' of *paramārtha* is true 'Wisdom' " (p. 46) Hence in the end, he agrees with Murti on the critical interpretive claim that the two truths are radically distinct from one another and that the conventional truth is not in fact a truth in any straightforward sense. See also Napper [1993] and Hopkins [1983] for a similar interpretation.

There are two things to say about this interpretation: First, as Nāgārjuna would be quick to point out, absolutism is not the only alternative to nihilism. Mādhyamika is an attempt to forge a middle path between precisely those two extremes. And second, to say that a rejection of absolutism is a rejection of the reality of the world tout court is to presuppose exactly the equation of existence with inherent existence that is the target of Nāgārjuna's critique. To the extent that "reality" is interpreted to be absolute reality, Nāgārjuna indeed advocates a "no-reality view." But to the extent that we accept the Mādhyamika reinterpretation of "reality" as conventional reality, no such consequence follows.

Streng (1973) agrees:

Because Nāgārjuna's ultimate affirmation is *pratītyasamutpāda*, any conventional affirmation that might suggest an absolute, in the form of a dogma or doctrine, is avoided. Even *sūnya*, *asvabhāva*, *Tathāgata* or *pratyaya* cannot be transformed into absolutes. . . .

. . . The highest awareness, which is needed for release from *svabhāva*, is not the result of moving from the finite to the infinite, but the release from ignorance about the dependent co-origination of anything at all. *Paramārthasatya*, then, is living in full awareness of dependent co-origination. . . . (p. 36)

120. Nagao (1989) puts this point nicely:

When the birth-death cycle itself is empty, when there is nothing that exists permanently as its own essence; when, without self-identity all the functions of beings depend upon others, then dependent co-arising is emptiness and emptiness is dependent co-arising. . . .

is to view it neither as ontologically insignificant—it determines the character of the phenomenal world—nor as ontologically efficacious—it is empty. And so we also have a middle way with regard to convention. Finally, given the nice ambiguity in the reference of “that,” (*de ni*), not only are “dependent arising” and “emptiness” asserted to be dependent designations, and their referents hence merely nominal, but the very relation between them is asserted to be so dependent and hence to be empty.

This last fact, the emptiness of the relation between the conventional world of dependently arisen phenomena and emptiness itself, is of extreme importance at another stage of the Mādhyamika dialectic and comes to salience in Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*. For this amounts to the emptiness of the central ontological tenet of Nāgārjuna’s system and is what allows him to claim, despite all appearances, that he is positionless. That is, Nāgārjuna thereby has a ready reply to the following apparent *reductio* argument (reminiscent of classical Greek and subsequent Western challenges to Pyrrhonian scepticism): You say that all things are, from the ultimate standpoint, nonexistent. That must then apply to your own thesis. It therefore is really nonexistent, and your words, only nominally true. Your own thesis, therefore, denies its own ground and is self-defeating. This objection would be a sound one against a view that in fact asserted its own inherent existence, or grounded its truth on an inherently existing ontological basis. But, Nāgārjuna suggests here, that is not the case for his account. Rather everything, including this very thesis, has only nominal truth, and nothing is either inherently existent or true in virtue of designating an inherently existent fact. This is hence one more point at which ladders must be kicked away.¹²¹

These morals are driven home in XXIV: 19, where Nāgārjuna emphasizes that everything—and this must include emptiness—is

... The real is suchness where there is an identification of emptiness and dependent co-arising whereby empty non-being “hollows out” every trace of inner selfhood. (p. 15)

See also Ng (1993), esp. pp. 16–18.

121. See Garfield (unpublished) and Streng (1973), chap., 4 for a similar interpretation of these verses and the correlative arguments.

dependently arisen. So everything—including emptiness—lacks inherent existence. So nothing lacks the three coextensive properties of emptiness, dependent-origination, and conventional identity.

With this in hand, Nāgārjuna can reply to the critic: He points out (XXIV: 20–35) that, in virtue of the identity of dependent origination and emptiness on the one hand and of ontological independence and intrinsic reality on the other, such phenomena as arising, ceasing, suffering, change, enlightenment, and so on—the very phenomena the opponent charges Nāgārjuna with denying—are possible only if they are empty. The tables are thus turned: It appeared that Nāgārjuna, in virtue of arguing for the emptiness of these phenomena, was arguing that in reality they do not exist precisely because for the reifier of emptiness, existence and emptiness are opposites. But, in fact, because of the identity of emptiness and conventional existence, it is the reifier who, in virtue of denying the emptiness of these phenomena, denies their existence. And it is hence the reifier of emptiness who is impaled on *both* horns of the dilemma he presented to Nāgārjuna: Contradicting the ultimate truth, the opponent denies that these phenomena are empty; contradicting the conventional, he is forced to deny that they even exist! And so Nāgārjuna can conclude:

20. If all this were nonempty, as in your view,
 There would be no arising and ceasing.
 Then the Four Noble Truths
 Would become nonexistent.

The argument for this surprising turnabout *reductio* is straightforwardly presented in the subsequent verses:

21. If it is not dependently arisen,
 How could suffering come to be?
 Suffering has been taught to be impermanent,
 And so cannot come from its own essence.

The first noble truth is the truth of the existence of suffering. The opponent charges Nāgārjuna with denying the existence of suffering through asserting its emptiness. But, Nāgārjuna points out, since emptiness is dependent origination, when the opponent

denies its emptiness, he denies that suffering is dependently originated. But he agrees that all phenomena are dependently originated. He thus is forced to deny the existence of suffering. But for Nāgārjuna, since existence amounts to emptiness, the assertion of the emptiness of suffering affirms, rather than denies, its existence.

22. If something comes from its own essence,
 How could it ever be arisen?
 It follows that if one denies emptiness
 There can be no arising (of suffering).

The second noble truth is that suffering has a cause. But, again, if the opponent asserts the nonemptiness of suffering, he asserts that it does not arise from causes and conditions. Yet Nāgārjuna's analysis shows that it must, in virtue of its emptiness, be so arisen and thus accords with the second truth.

23. If suffering had an essence,
 Its cessation would not exist.
 So if an essence is posited,
 One denies cessation.

Similarly, the third noble truth is the truth of cessation. But inherently existent things cannot cease. Empty ones can. Nāgārjuna's analysis thus explains the third truth; the reifier contradicts it.

24. If the path had an essence,
 Cultivation would not be appropriate.
 If this path is indeed cultivated,
 It cannot have an essence.
25. If suffering, arising, and
 Ceasing are nonexistent,
 By what path could one seek
 To obtain the cessation of suffering?

The fourth truth is the truth of the path. Again, the path only makes sense, and cultivation of the path is only possible, if suffer-

ing is impermanent and alleviable and if the nature of mind is empty and hence malleable. The path, after all, is a path from suffering and to awakening. If the former cannot cease and the latter does not depend on cultivation, the path is nonexistent. But it is the analysis in terms of emptiness that makes this coherent. An analysis on which either the phenomena were inherently existent or on which emptiness was and the phenomena were therefore nonexistent would make nonsense of the Four Noble Truths. Nāgārjuna now turns to the implications for this line of argument for the three jewels, the Sangha, the Buddha, and the Dharma:

26. If nonunderstanding comes to be
 Through its essence,
 How will understanding arise?
 Isn't essence stable?

If ignorance is real and thus for the opponent inherently existent, there is no possibility of replacing it with insight. Therefore the cultivation of Buddhist practice is impossible, or at least pointless.

27. In the same way, the activities of
 Relinquishing, realizing, and meditating
 And the four fruits
 Would not be possible.
28. For an essentialist,
 Since the fruits through their essence
 Are already unrealized,
 In what way could one attain them?

So the essentialist has a dilemma if he wants to maintain the possibility of a community of practitioners (the Sangha) and of a path for them to practice: Either the ignorance in which they find themselves and that serves as the impetus to practice is inherently existent, in which case practice is bound to be inefficacious, or the understanding they hope to achieve is inherently existent, in which case there is no need to practice since it is already present and no use in practicing since its existence is independent of practice.

29. Without the fruits, there are no attainers of the fruits,
Or enterers. From this it follows that
The eight kinds of persons do not exist.
If these don't exist, there is no spiritual community.

The consequence of this is that there is no Sangha. The existence of the Sangha is entirely dependent upon the existence of the path and of the possibility of the fruits of the path—increasing degrees of realization since the Sangha is, by definition, the community of practitioners of the path.

30. From the nonexistence of the Noble Truths
Would follow the nonexistence of the true doctrine.
If there is no doctrine and no spiritual community,
How could a Buddha arise?

But it would also follow that there is no Dharma—no true Buddhist doctrine since that is grounded on the existence of the Four Noble Truths. And finally, as Nāgārjuna emphasizes in XXIV: 31, 32, since the attainment of buddhahood depends upon the study and practice of the Dharma within the context of the spiritual community, the opponent's view, unlike Nāgārjuna's, has the consequence that no buddha can arise. Moreover, if the Buddha and enlightenment were each inherently existent, they would be independent and could hence arise independently, which is absurd. To be a buddha is to be enlightened, and vice versa:

31. For you, it would follow that a Buddha
Arises independent of enlightenment.
And for you, enlightenment would arise
Independent of a Buddha.
32. For you, one who through his essence
Was unenlightened,
Even by practicing the path to enlightenment
Could not achieve enlightenment.

Nāgārjuna has hence demonstrated that any reification, whether of the conventional or of the ultimate, ends up, paradoxically, denying the existence of the very things it reifies. And any

reification renders the most fundamental Buddhist philosophical insights and practices incoherent. A thoroughgoing analysis in terms of emptiness, on the other hand—one that includes the understanding of the emptiness of emptiness—renders the entire phenomenal world as well as emptiness itself comprehensible as nominally existent, empirically actual, and dependently arisen—real but essenceless. At this stage, Nāgārjuna shifts to the charge leveled by the opponent in XXIV: 2 that no practice is intelligible in the context of emptiness and argues that, on the contrary, practice is intelligible only in that context. The argument is a reprise of earlier moves, and so is rather straightforward:

33. Moreover, one could never perform
 Right or wrong actions.
 If this were all nonempty what could one do?
 That with an essence cannot be produced.

Nāgārjuna now turns to the moral dimensions of the extreme positions and their consequences for the Buddhist doctrine of karma, specifically with regard to the consequences for one's own life of one's actions. Nonempty phenomena, such as the opponent wishes to posit, are seen, on analysis, to be static. But practice and action require dependence, change, and a regular relation between one's actions and one's future state. So in the preceding verse, Nāgārjuna notes that in a static, nonempty world, we can't even make sense of the possibility of action. He then points out (XXIV: 34) that even were action possible, in virtue of the impossibility of change and dependence in an essentialist universe, there would be no consequences of those actions. For to be a consequence is to be dependent, hence to be empty, hence from the standpoint of the essentialist—whether reificationist or nihilist—nonexistent.

34. For you, from neither right nor wrong actions
 Would the fruit arise.
 If the fruit arose from right or wrong actions,
 According to you, it wouldn't exist.
35. If, for you, a fruit arose
 From right or wrong actions,

Then, having arisen from right or wrong actions
How could that fruit be nonempty?

The reificationist develops a strict dichotomy between things that exist inherently and things that are completely nonexistent. That dichotomy exhausts the ontological domain. But neither possibility for understanding the nature of practice, the practitioner, or the fruits of practice makes sense of action. If the relevant phenomena are granted inherent existence, their essence precludes development and change. If, on the other hand, they lack essence and hence, for the reifier, are completely nonexistent, there literally is no practice, in any sense.¹ But if they are conceived of as empty and hence empirically and conventionally real, yet essenceless and dependent, the possibility and purpose of practice fall out straightforwardly. So it is the reifier, not Nāgārjuna, who makes action and soteriology impossible, and Nāgārjuna and not the reifier who rescue them from ontological oblivion.

36. If dependent arising is denied,
Emptiness itself is rejected.
This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.

Recall the other horn of the dilemma in XXIV: 6. The opponent charged Nāgārjuna not only with contradicting fundamental Buddhist tenets, but with contradicting the conventional truth as well. Nāgārjuna has responded up to this point to the first charge, turning it back on the opponent. He now does the same with the second.

Nāgārjuna suggests that to assert the nonemptiness of phenomena and of their interrelations when emptiness is properly understood is not only philosophically deeply confused, but is contradictory to common sense. We can make sense of this argument in the following way: Common sense neither posits nor requires intrinsic reality in phenomena or a real causal nexus. Common sense holds the world to be a network of dependently arisen phenomena. So common sense only makes sense if the world is asserted to be empty. Hence it is the opponent, not Nāgārjuna, who disagrees with the conventional truth.

The standpoint of emptiness is hence not at odds with the conventional standpoint, only with a particular philosophical understanding of it—that which takes the conventional to be more than merely conventional. What is curious—and, from the Buddhist standpoint, sad—about the human condition, on this view, is the naturalness and seductiveness of that philosophical perspective.¹²²

This, of course, is the key to the soteriological character of the text: Reification is the root of grasping and craving and hence of all suffering. And it is perfectly natural, despite its incoherence. By understanding emptiness, Nāgārjuna intends one to break this habit and extirpate the root of suffering. But if in doing so one falls into the abyss of nihilism, nothing is achieved. For then action itself is impossible and senseless, and one's realization amounts to nothing. Or again, if one relinquishes the reification of phenomena but reifies emptiness, that issues in a new grasping and craving—the grasping of emptiness and the craving for Nirvāṇa—and a new round of suffering. Only with the simultaneous realization of the emptiness, but conventional reality, of phenomena and of the emptiness of emptiness, argues Nāgārjuna, can suffering be wholly uprooted.

Let us consider now more carefully what it is to say that emptiness itself is empty. The claim, even in the context of Buddhist philosophy, does have a somewhat paradoxical air. For emptiness is, in Mahāyāna philosophical thought, the ultimate nature of all phenomena. And the distinction between the merely conventional nature of things and their ultimate nature would seem to mark the distinction between the apparent and the real. While it is plausible to say that what is merely apparent is empty of reality, it seems

122. This point requires emphasis. For Nāgārjuna is not merely speaking to and correcting philosophers. He is no Berkeley, suggesting that his own position is that of common sense and that only a philosopher would reify. In fact, it is fundamental to any Buddhist outlook, and certainly to Nāgārjuna's view, that one of the root delusions that afflicts all non-buddhas is the innate tendency to reify. But that tendency is raised to high art by metaphysics. Nāgārjuna intends his attack to strike both at the prereflective delusion and at its more sophisticated philosophical counterpart. But in doing so, he is not denying, and is in fact explaining, the nonmetaphysical part of our commonsense framework—that part that enables us to act and to communicate and, especially for Nāgārjuna, to practice the Buddhist path.

nihilistic to say that what is ultimately real is empty of reality, and as we have seen, the Mādhyamika are quite consciously anti-nihilistic. But again, when we say that a phenomenon is empty, we say, *inter alia*, that it is impermanent,¹²³ that it depends upon conditions and that its identity is dependent upon convention. Do we really want to say of each phenomenon that its emptiness—the fact that it is empty—is itself impermanent; itself dependent on something else; itself dependent upon conventions? It might at least appear that even if all other properties of conventional entities were so, their emptiness would be an eternal, independent, essential fact.

It may be useful to approach the emptiness of emptiness by first asking what it would be to treat emptiness as nonempty. When we say that a phenomenon is empty, we mean that when we try to specify its essence, we come up with nothing. When we look for the substance that underlies the properties, or the bearer of the parts, we find none. When we ask what it is that gives a thing its identity, we stumble not upon ontological facts but upon conventions. For a thing to be nonempty would be for it to have an essence discoverable upon analysis, for it to be a substance independent of its attributes, or a bearer of parts, for its identity to be self-determined by its essence. A nonempty entity can be fully characterized nonrelationally.

For emptiness to be nonempty would be for it to be a substantial entity, an independent existent, a nonconventional phenomenon. On such a view, emptiness would be entirely distinct from any conventional phenomenon. It would, on such a view, be the object of correct perception, while conventional phenomena would be

123. To be sure, both in the *Abidharma* literature and in most Māhāyana metaphysical literature, space is regarded as permanent, despite being a conventional phenomenon. There are two things to say about this apparent counterexample: First, on general metaphysical grounds the claim is suspect. Whether one argues along Kantian lines, or from general relativity theory, space apparently shares, from the transcendental point of view, the impermanence of all other phenomena. But second, and for the purposes of understanding this text, more importantly, Nāgārjuna never asserts the permanence of space and repeatedly associates emptiness with impermanence. I would thus argue that other Māhāyana literature to the contrary notwithstanding, nothing in Nāgārjuna's presentation of Mādhyamika entails the permanence of space or indeed of any other entity.

the objects of delusive perception. While conventional phenomena would be dependent upon conventions, conditions, or the ignorance of obstructed minds, emptiness, on such a view, would be apparent precisely when one sees through those conventions, dispels that ignorance, and overcomes those obstructions. Though such a position might appear metaphysically extravagant, it is hardly unmotivated. For one thing, it seems that emptiness does have an identifiable essence—namely the lack of inherent existence. So if to be empty is to be empty of essence, emptiness fails on that count to be empty. Moreover, since all phenomena, on the Mādhyamika view, are empty, emptiness would appear to be eternal and independent of any particular conventions and, hence, not dependently arisen. The two truths, on such an ontological vision, are indeed radically distinct from one another.

But this position is, from Nāgārjuna's perspective, untenable. The best way to see that is this: Suppose that we take a conventional entity, such as a table. We analyze it to demonstrate its emptiness, finding that there is no table apart from its parts, that it cannot be distinguished in a principled way from its antecedent and subsequent histories, and so forth. So we conclude that it is empty. But now let us analyze that emptiness—the emptiness of the table—to see what we find. What do we find? Nothing at all but *the table's* lack of inherent existence. No conventional table, no emptiness of the table. The emptiness is dependent upon the table and is, therefore, itself empty of inherent existence, as is the emptiness of *that* emptiness, and so on, ad infinitum. To see the table as empty, for Nāgārjuna, is not to somehow see "beyond" the illusion of the table to some other, more real entity. It is to see the table *as conventional; as dependent*. But the table that we see when we see its emptiness is the very same table, seen not as the substantial thing we instinctively posit, but rather as it is. Emptiness is hence not different from conventional reality—it is the fact that conventional reality is conventional. Hence it must be dependently arisen since it depends upon the existence of empty phenomena. Hence emptiness itself is empty. This is perhaps the most radical and deep step in the Mādhyamika dialectic, but it is also, as we shall see, the step that saves it from falling

into metaphysical extravagance and brings it back to sober pragmatic scepticism.¹²⁴

37. If emptiness itself is rejected,
 No action will be appropriate.
 There would be action which did not begin,
 And there would be agent without action.

Without viewing the world as empty, we can make no sense of any human activity. Action would be pointless since nothing could be accomplished. Any existent action would have to have been eternal, and anyone who is an agent would be so independently of any action since agency would be an essential attribute.

38. If there is essence, the whole world
 Will be unarising, unceasing,
 And static. The entire phenomenal world
 Would be immutable.

Without viewing the world as empty, we can make no sense of impermanence or dependent origination and hence no sense of change.

39. If it (the world) were not empty,
 Then action would be without profit.
 The act of ending suffering and
 Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist.

Perhaps most important from the standpoint of Buddhist phenomenology and, though not hard to see, easy to overlook: We are driven to reify ourselves, the objects in the world around us, and—in more abstract philosophical moods—theoretical constructs, values, and so on because of an instinctual feeling that without an intrinsically real self, an intrinsically real world, and intrinsically real values, life has no real meaning and is utterly hopeless. Nāgārjuna emphasizes at the close of this chapter that this gets

¹²⁴. That is, scepticism in the Pyrrhonian, or Humean sense: See Garfield (1990).

things exactly backward: If we seriously and carefully examine what such a reified world would be like, it would indeed be hopeless. But if instead we treat ourselves, others, and our values as empty, there is hope and a purpose to life. For then, in the context of impermanence and dependence, human action and knowledge make sense, and moral and spiritual progress become possible. It is only in the context of *ultimate nonexistence* that *actual existence* makes any sense at all.

40. Whoever sees dependent arising
 Also sees suffering
 And its arising
 And its cessation as well as the path.

Nāgārjuna closes as he opens, with the Four Noble Truths, this time connecting them not negatively, as in the beginning, to emptiness, but positively, to dependent arising. Understanding the nature of dependent arising is itself understanding emptiness and is itself the understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

It is absolutely critical to understanding the dialectical structure not only of this chapter but of the entire text to see that this doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness that is the central thesis of Mādhyamika philosophy emerges directly from XXIV: 18. For the emptiness of emptiness, as we have just seen, simply amounts to the identification of emptiness with the property of being dependently arisen and with the property of having an identity just in virtue of conventional, verbal designation. It is the fact that emptiness is no more than this that makes it empty, just as it is the fact that conventional phenomena in general are no more than conventional and no more than their parts and status in the causal nexus that makes them empty.

Paradox may appear to loom at this point. For, one might argue, if emptiness is empty, and to be empty is to be merely conventional, then the emptiness of any phenomenon is a merely conventional fact. Moreover, to say that entities are merely conventional is merely conventional. Hence it would appear optional, as all conventions are. Hence it would seem to be open to say that things are in fact nonconventional and therefore nonempty. This would

be a deep incoherence indeed at the heart of Nāgārjuna's system. But the paradox is merely apparent. The appearance of paradox derives from seeing "conventional" as functioning logically like a negation operator—a subtle version of the nihilistic reading Nāgārjuna is at pains to avoid, with a metalinguistic twist. For then, each iteration of "conventional" would cancel the previous occurrence, and the conventional character of the fact that things are conventional would amount to the claim that really they are not, or at least that they might not be. But in Nāgārjuna's philosophical approach, the sense of the term is more ontological than logical: To say of a phenomenon or of a fact that it is conventional is to characterize its mode of subsistence. It is to say that it is without an independent nature. The fact that a phenomenon is without independent nature is, to be sure, a further phenomenon—a higher order fact. But that fact, too, is without an independent nature. It, too, is merely conventional. This is another way of putting the strongly nominalistic character of Mādhyamika philosophy.

So a Platonist, for instance, might urge (and the Mādhyamika would agree) that a perceptible phenomenon is ultimately unreal. But the Platonist would assert that its properties are ultimately real. And if some Buddhist-influenced Platonist would note that among the properties of a perceptible phenomenon is its emptiness and its conventional reality, s/he would assert that these, as properties, are ultimately real. This is exactly where Nāgārjuna parts company with all forms of realism. For he gives the properties a nominalistic construal and asserts that they, including the properties of emptiness and conventionality, are, like all phenomena, merely nominal, merely empty, and merely conventional. And so on for their emptiness and conventionality. The nominalism undercuts the negative interpretation of "conventional" and thereby renders the regress harmless.

So the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness can be seen as inextricably linked with Nāgārjuna's distinctive account of the relation between the two truths. For Nāgārjuna, as is also evident in this crucial verse, it is a mistake to distinguish conventional from ultimate reality—the dependently arisen from emptiness—at an ontological level. Emptiness just is the emptiness of conventional phenomena. To perceive conventional phenomena as empty is just

to see them as conventional and as dependently arisen. The difference—such as it is—between the conventional and the ultimate is a difference in the way phenomena are conceived/perceived. The point must be formulated with some delicacy and cannot be formulated without a hint of the paradoxical about it: Conventional phenomena are typically represented as inherently existent. We typically perceive and conceive of external phenomena, ourselves, causal powers, moral truths, and so forth as independently existing, intrinsically identifiable, and substantial. But though this is, in one sense, the conventional character of conventional phenomena—the manner in which they are ordinarily experienced—to see them this way is precisely not to see them *as conventional*. To see that they are merely conventional, in the sense adumbrated above and defended by Nāgārjuna and his followers, is thereby to see them as empty, and this is their ultimate mode of existence. These are the two truths about phenomena: On the one hand, they are conventionally existent and the things we ordinarily say about them are in fact true, to the extent that we get it right on the terms of the everyday. Snow is indeed white, and there are indeed tables and chairs in this room. On the other hand, they are ultimately nonexistent. These two truths seem as different as night and day—being and nonbeing. But the import of this chapter and the doctrine we have been explicating is that their ultimate nonexistence and their conventional existence are the same thing. Hence the deep identity of the two truths. And this is because emptiness is not other than dependent arising and, hence, because emptiness is empty.

Finally, at this stage we can see why Chapter I opens the text. The discussion of the emptiness of conditions and their relation to their effects is not only essential groundwork for this central argument, but in fact anticipates it and brings its conclusion to bear implicitly on the whole remainder of the text, allowing us, once we see that, to read the entire text as asserting not only the emptiness of phenomena, but that emptiness understood as empty. To see this, note that this entire account depends upon the emptiness of dependent origination itself. Suppose for a moment that one had the view that dependent arising were nonempty (not a crazy view and not *obviously* incompatible with, and arguably entailed by,

certain Buddhist doctrines). Then from the identification of emptiness with dependent arising would follow the nonemptiness of emptiness. Moreover, if conventional phenomena are empty, and dependent arising itself is nonempty and is identified with emptiness, then the two truths are indeed two in every sense. Emptiness-dependent arising is self-existent, while ordinary phenomena are not, and one gets a strongly dualistic, ontological version of an appearance-reality distinction. So the argument for the emptiness of emptiness in Chapter XXIV and the identity of the two truths with which it is bound up depend critically on the argument for the emptiness of dependent origination developed in Chapter I.

Having developed this surprising and deep thesis regarding the identity of the two truths, Nāgārjuna turns in the next chapter to the nature of the relation between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa and the nature of nirvāṇa itself.