

A Criticism of M. Siderits and J. L. Garfield's 'Semantic Interpretation' of Nāgārjuna's Theory of Two Truths

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Abstract This paper proposes a critical analysis of that interpretation of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the two truths as summarized—by both Mark Siderits and Jay L. Garfield—in the formula: “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth”. This ‘semantic reading’ of Nāgārjuna’s theory, despite its importance as a criticism of the ‘metaphysical interpretations’, would in itself be defective and improbable. Indeed, firstly, semantic interpretation presents a formal defect: it fails to clearly and explicitly express that which it contains logically; the previously mentioned formula must necessarily be completed by: “the conventional truth is that nothing is conventional truth”. Secondly, after having recognized what Siderits’ and Garfield’s analyses contain implicitly, other logical and philological defects in their position emerge: the existence of the ‘conventional’ would appear—despite the efforts of semantic interpreters to demonstrate quite the contrary—definitively inconceivable without the presupposition of something ‘real’; moreover, the number of verses in Nāgārjuna that are in opposition to the semantic interpretation (even if we grant semantic interpreters that these verses do not justify a metaphysical reconstruction of Nagarjuna’s doctrine) would seem too great and significant to be ignored.

Keywords Nāgārjuna · Two truths · Semantic interpretation · Siderits · Garfield

Abbreviations

MA *Madhyamakāvatāra*
MMK *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*
PP *Prasannapadā*
RV *Ratnāvalī*

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ŚS	<i>Śūnyatāsaptati</i>
YṢ	<i>Yuktiṣaṣṭikā</i>
VV	<i>Vigrahavyāvartanī</i>

Introductory Remarks

In the field of contemporary studies devoted to Madhyamaka, an explanation of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the two truths that currently enjoys great consideration is the reading Siderits has defined as 'semantic interpretation'.¹ This reading directly challenges other interpretations of the same doctrine—arising since the second half of the nineteenth century (if we retain the only hermeneutic project definable as 'contemporary indology'²)—that are grouped under the definitions 'realist', 'metaphysical' or 'metaphysical-realist'.³ These readings all share the belief that supreme truth (*paramārtha-satya*) indicates the existence of a transcendent dimension beyond the plane of ordinary truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*, equivalent to the ordinary mental sphere of thought and discursiveness), and that this same supreme truth may in some way be qualified. Metaphysical interpretations are then distinguished one from the other by how they describe *paramārtha-satya*: nihilistic interpretation conceives ultimate reality as equivalent to pure nothingness; other

¹ Given that Siderits' interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness concerns "not the nature of reality, but the nature of truth" (Siderits 2003, p. 11), and given that "truth is considered a semantic concept" (Siderits 2007, p. 182, note 3)—"because to understand the meaning of a statement you need to be able to say what would make it true" (ibid.)—the author, as an alternative to the 'metaphysical-realist' interpretations (see footnote 3 further on), defines 'semantic' as his own reading of the doctrine of the two truths.

² Ruegg's description (1981, p. viii) of the medieval Tibetan scholars of Nāgārjuna as "Indologists *avant la lettre*" has opened up discussion in the ambit of *mādhyamika* modern studies on the validity of speaking of 'non contemporary indology'. Personally, I tend to agree with Huntington (1995, p. 693): "[I]n referring to the Tibetan as Indologists we may all too easily lose touch with the fact that the Tibetan project was from its inception quite different from the project of the modern philologist. [...] [O]ur admiration for Tibetan scholarship need not blind us to the fundamental disparity between their methodological presuppositions and our own".

³ This is in keeping with the definition proposed by Siderits (1988, p. 311): "[M]etaphysical realism has three key theses: (1) truth is correspondence between proposition and reality; (2) reality is mind-independent; (3) there is one true theory that correctly describes reality". This definition is basically confirmed by Tillemans (2004, p. 230) who—in agreement with the conclusions of Haldane and Wright (1993), and along the lines of the article "Realism and Antirealism" of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*—declares: "[T]he fundamental core of realism is a fusion of two ideas, deference to the independent and objective facts that make true beliefs true and self-assurance that we can know these facts".

Metaphysical-realist interpretations of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of two truths would consequently be any interpretation that "takes the doctrine to be intended to characterize the nature of reality", Siderits (2003, p. 10).

readings offer more or less positive descriptions, such as: 'One', 'Absolute', 'Openness', 'emptiness', 'dependent co-arising' or other possible characterizations.⁴

Semantic interpretation, in opposition to these readings, yet distinguishing itself from any possible scepticist interpretation of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna,⁵ proposes an explanation of the *dve satye* that not only rejects the possibility that ultimate truth can be described, but that it may even be established as such. Thus, according to this reading, only conventional truth would exist. Interpreters of this exegetical trend draw upon certain emblematic verses by Nāgārjuna to suggest a solution to the problem of the two truths that, according to Siderits' formula, may be summarized in the statement: "The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth".⁶ The supreme truth proposed by Nāgārjuna would therefore be the affirmation that no other plane of reality beyond the one of our immediate experience exists. Specifically, the objective of the Nāgārjunian philosophical project would be to reject the belief—intrinsically rooted in our way of interacting with the things of the world—in an ultimate, real and independent existence of empirical objects.

The purpose of this paper is to defend the view—notwithstanding the absolute importance of the exegetic work on *mādhyamika* philosophy undertaken by Siderits and Garfield,⁷ whose analyses and reflections are essential for anyone today who endeavors to critically approach the thinking of Nāgārjuna and his followers—that their⁸ semantic reconstruction of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the two truths would appear defective and improbable.

⁴ Given the definitions in the preceding note, the idea that ultimate truth corresponds to pure nothingness, just as its characterization as something other than zero—both being *qualifications* of ultimate truth—are to be considered metaphysical-realist positions. As confirmed by Siderits (2003, p. 10), the metaphysical interpretation of emptiness may take the form of two "different readings: nihilism, and the view that ultimate reality is ineffable and beyond the reach of discursive rationality".

⁵ A 'Pyrrhonian' interpretation of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna is presented, for example, in some of the writings (1986, 2002) by B. K. Matilal (who, in any case, as regards the use of the term 'scepticism' in reference to Nāgārjuna, asks readers "not to dispute too much over mere labels, but to pay attention to the formulation of a position", Matilal, 1986, p. 50), by Hayes (1988) or by Garfield (1990) himself. A more specific and precise parallelism between the Nāgārjunian positions and those of Hellenistic scepticist tradition has, however, more recently been presented by McEvilley (2002) and by Kuzminski (2007). Yet, according to Siderits, semantic interpretation should take a distance from this reading of Nāgārjunian philosophy: "Nāgārjuna ought not be thought of as a Pyrrhonian sceptic. He thinks *we can know* that all things are empty", Siderits (1997.I, p. 77) [Author's italics].

⁶ Siderits (2007, p. 182). On more than one occasion, Garfield (for example, Garfield 1995, p. 91, note 7; 2002, p. 99) cites, and subsequently endorses, Siderits' formula.

⁷ Conceptual elements ascribable to a semantic reading of the Nāgārjunian theory of the two truths could already be noted in the analyses of those authors—for example, Gudmunsen (1977), or Streng (1973)—who, 'Wittgensteinly', interpret *mādhyamika* thought as a rigorous philosophy of language. Nevertheless, it is in Siderits' exegetical work (specifically 1988, 1997.I, 1997.II, 2003, 2007) and in Garfield's work (specifically Garfield 1994, Garfield 2002, 2009) that the interpretation presently under review achieves, in my opinion, full maturity, being defined in clearer and more explicit terms. The present paper will therefore particularly refer to the studies that these two authors devote to *dve satye*.

⁸ Of course, in assimilating the readings of Nāgārjuna expressed by these two authors, the intention is not to suggest that their readings coincide perfectly or that they overlap. On the contrary, on some occasions the two authors take quite divergent exegetic courses.

For example, we note Garfield's statement (1995, p. 214, note 74) that he is "neither completely comfortable with Siderits's construction of the contemporary realism-antirealism debate nor with his location of Nāgārjuna on the antirealist side"; or we might also consider the interpretation of the first

The polemical objective of this paper may be questioned from the positions of those who, from within the contemporary epistemological and hermeneutical debate, are critical of such notions as ‘objectivity’, ‘meaning’, ‘truth or ‘intention’. Tuck,⁹ for example—basing his ideas on the contributions of those writers¹⁰ who, during the last century, sent the ideals of ‘textual objectivism’ and the ‘recovery of the original textual meaning’ into crisis—defends the position that true *exegesis* is not possible; *exegesis* being understood as the act of, etymologically, ‘pushing out’ the *authentic meaning* of a text. He asserts it is rather the phenomenon of *isogesis* that is inevitable. That is, the tendency of the reader to *insert* or *project* into the text concepts and meanings that come from his or her own cultural and philosophical background.¹¹

According to these epistemological presuppositions, there would be no sense in undertaking an exercise—such as the one presented in these pages—that criticizes a determined reading of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the *dve satye* on the basis of a presumably weak philological plausibility or correspondence to a series of textual data assumed to be objective.

Yet, contrary to this conclusion, and in support of the idea that to criticize the plausibility of the semantic interpretation of the philosophy of Nāgārjuna is an epistemologically correct exercise, we may naturally turn to those authors who, from within this same epistemological debate, defend positions that differ from those invoked by Tuck.¹² Seemingly this would be all the more legitimate (thus,

Footnote 8 continued

chapter of the MMK (and, in general, of the concept of *pratyaya*) proposed by Garfield (cf. 1995 and 1995, pp. 102–123) and contested by Siderits (1997.II); or, finally, the Garfieldian tendency to conclude that he would classify the philosophy of Nāgārjuna as ‘scepticist’ (see, for example, Garfield 1990), against Siderits’ explicit refusal (see, for example, 1997.I, p. 77) to find in this same philosophy any traces of Pyrrhonism.

Nevertheless, as regards their interpretation of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the *dve satye*, their conclusions ultimately coincide: on more than one occasion (see note 6 above), Garfield sums up his own point of view on the question by appealing to Siderits’ formula that concludes that ultimate truth is the inexistence of ultimate truth.

⁹ Cf. Tuck (1990).

¹⁰ Tuck cites as his points of reference first and foremost Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, Sellars and Kuhn; but also: “The Anglo-American New Criticism of William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, F.R. Leavis, and William Empson [...]. And more recent textualists and ‘postcritics’ as Barthes, Said, Foucault, Derrida, Gadamer, Bloom, and Rorty”, Tuck (1990, p. 14).

¹¹ “[I]t is undeniable that readers of Indian texts unwittingly engage in a kind of *isogesis*, a ‘reading into’ the text that often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the text being interpreted”, Tuck (1990, pp. 9–10).

We note the word *isogesis* is, in any case, not constructed very satisfactorily: indeed the prefix *iso* does not have the idea of ‘introduction’ or ‘insertion’ in its semantic spectrum that Tuck (*ibid.*) attributes to it. Rather, as the opposite of *ex-egesis*, a term such as *eis-egesis* (or perhaps *in-egesis*) would seem more suitable.

¹² The positions and authors cited by Tuck may be countered, for example, by Popper’s concept of *verisimilitude*, the Fregean position of *thinking objectively*, Russell’s theory of *logical atomism* (and Wittgenstein’s premises on the same theory), the contributions of the Vienna Circle on linguistic reflection, the responses (by Popper, Putnam, Kripke, Newton-Smith and other more recent authors) to the positions (especially as expressed by Kuhn and Feyerabend, but already implicit in the work of the second Wittgenstein and other authors to whom Tuck refers) of the *incommensurability* (of scientific theories), or to those (by Quine and Duhem) of the *indeterminacy of translation* and the *inscrutability of reference*.

apart from any further argument against Tuck's positions) in that Siderits and Garfield themselves base their interpretative work on the assumption that dialogue *is possible* with philosophical traditions that, though dissimilar in their purpose and methodologies from those of the 'contemporary Western' tradition, are nevertheless constructed in respect of the rules of rational-logical thought. As Garfield, for example, observes:

As interpreters, we are obliged at least to the cogency of our own interpretative arguments. But we are also obliged to maximize the cogency of the texts we read [...]. In adjudicating between competing interpretations of a text, we choose the one that assigns to it the most cogent position, and the cogency is hard to make sense of without a background assumption of rationality.¹³

Such a point of view is far from considering (*à la* Tuck) Buddhist philosophy as belonging to a *framework* that is essentially incommensurable with our own. Instead, it presupposes that the *mādhyamika* texts may be interpreted in the light of a "trans-historical and trans-cultural rationality"¹⁴ and that they may be "assessed in terms of the standards of philosophy (understood here as the evaluation of the validity and soundness of arguments)".¹⁵ This is also confirmed by Siderits in the introduction to his *Buddhism as a Philosophy*.¹⁶ He declares that his objective is not only to present the conclusions of the Buddhist philosophers, but to evaluate their arguments as well: "We will try, in short, to see how well Buddhist doctrines stand up to the test of rational scrutiny".¹⁷

It is precisely in the name of this 'assumption of rationality', with which Garfield and Siderits approach Nāgārjuna's philosophy, that the semantic interpretation of the doctrine of the two truths appears disputable in the first place: in my opinion, it does not 'maximize the cogency' of the Nāgārjunian text.

Secondly, it would be worthwhile to recall considerations of J. Bronkhorst's review of Tuck's text. For example: "We can, and we actually do, refine our understanding of a text by confronting it again and again with the principal evidence we have, viz., its exact wording. In this way we can discard false interpretations".¹⁸ To refer to semantic interpretation as an absolutely 'false' reading, or one to 'discard' would seem excessive. Nevertheless, if we remain faithful to the Nāgārjunian wording, Siderits and Garfield's reading emerges at least problematic.

Moreover, Siderits demonstrates that he is aware that his interpretation is in disagreement with some of the passages of Nāgārjuna's work. To defend his point of view, he does not call upon its indubitable textual reliability set against a presumed unreliability of the various metaphysical-realist readings.¹⁹ Instead, to support his

¹³ Garfield (2008, p. 515).

¹⁴ Burton (2001, p. 12).

¹⁵ Burton (2001, p. 11).

¹⁶ Siderits (2007).

¹⁷ Siderits (2007, pp. 11–12).

¹⁸ Bronkhorst (1993, p. 503).

¹⁹ "[T]extual evidence can be cited in support of either of these two interpretations", Siderits (1988, p. 324).

position in favor of an antirealist reading, Siderits turns to extratextual considerations.²⁰ Yet, in so doing, he appears to implicitly side with those scholars who defend the impossibility of resolving the divergent interpretations of Nāgārjuna's philosophy by way of the criteria of total coherency of *all* (or, at least, most of) the passages of the philosopher's work.²¹ They claim that to reconstruct the thought of the author of the MMK, it is necessary to have recourse to considerations (for example, such as the point of view of his commentators²²) that differ from it and come after the immediate date of Nāgārjuna's wording.

This 'exegetic pessimism' in terms of the possibility of obtaining a reading of Nāgārjuna that is totally coherent with what emerges in his texts seems to me unjustified. Personally, I am convinced that the various pieces of the puzzle that Nāgārjuna offers to us may be fitted one into the other in a satisfactorily coherent way. Nevertheless, my personal point of view on the question of the *dve satye* in Nāgārjuna is not the subject of this paper. Its sole objective—*destruens*—being as indicated previously.

Section “[Weaknesses and Incongruities of the Metaphysical Interpretations](#)” of this paper will present the main incongruities of the 'metaphysical' interpretations to which Siderits and Garfield propose an alternative reading. Section “[Outlines of Semantic Interpretation](#)” will undertake to reconstruct the main features of the semantic interpretation of the two truths. In “[Formal Weakness of Siderits and Garfield's Discussion of *dve satye*](#)” section, the apparent formal weaknesses of the interpretation proposed by Siderits and Garfield will be presented: it would appear that Siderits and Garfield's explanation of the theory of the two truths contains a series of implicit elements that, if not clearly expressed, make the explanation itself seemingly incomplete or contradictory. Finally, “[Logical and Philological Weaknesses in Semantic Interpretation](#)” section contains some of the more specifically philological and logical weaknesses of the semantic reading.

Weaknesses and Incongruities of the Metaphysical Interpretations

It is worth noting that semantic interpretation—aside from the question of its plausibility—proposes an alternative to the metaphysical readings of Nāgārjuna's thought which do effectively show defects: very succinctly (and thus passing over even the quite important differences that characterize the various metaphysical-realist readings), we note that the metaphysical approach to *say something* on

²⁰ “[I]nterpreting Nāgārjuna as an anti-realist allows us to attribute to him a more coherent and defensible position than results from viewing him as a sceptic and crypto-Vedāntin”, Siderits (1988, pp. 324–325).

²¹ Griffiths (2000, p. 24), for example, argues: “Nāgārjuna's works are [...] insufficiently precise and systematic to make debates about what he really meant, philosophically speaking, very useful. Interpretation of the corpus in India shows major divergences, as does that in the West. I do not think that the appeal to the texts will resolve such divergence”.

²² Tillemans (2001, p. 519), for example, claims: “I personally am increasingly skeptical about current attempts to say in meaningful philosophical terms what Nāgārjuna *himself* really meant apart from how he was interpreted”.

Nāgārjuna's ultimate truth necessarily conflicts with a series of historical-philosophical and logical textual data—data that are extremely reliable, if not by now commonly adopted.

Firstly, for example, let us consider the series of passages in which Nāgārjuna declares that he has no positions,²³ or in which he defends the need to eliminate all *dr̥ṣṭi*²⁴: this makes it problematic to attribute philosophical *positions* to Nāgārjuna such as those that claim that “[o]n the level of highest truth there is nothing of any kind”,²⁵ or positions that define supreme truth as a type of absolutism.²⁶ Indeed, from the time of the Buddha,²⁷ nihilism and substantialism have been ‘philosophical positions’ that typically bear the epistemological status of *dr̥ṣṭi*, both equally distant from the theoretical ideal of the ‘Middle Way’.

Secondly, in addition to these difficulties of a textual nature—above all as regards the nihilistic reading²⁸—a series of important obstacles of a ‘contextual’ or historical-philosophical nature also exist. From the painstaking study on Nāgārjuna's context by Walser,²⁹ we conclude that, very succinctly, Nāgārjuna was at least for part of his ‘spiritual career’ a (*mahāyāna*) monk of the Mahāsāṅghika order. He was most probably close to the circles of the Prajñaptivāda sub-sect, with good philosophical relations with the *saṃmitīyas* followers of the Pudgalavāda order, and staunchly opposed to the Sarvāstivāda School.³⁰ Therefore, if Nāgārjuna nurtured any hopes that his thought might be perceived as *buddhavacana*, or at least greatly in syntony with the ‘word of the Buddha’ (absolute conditions—as Walser again observes—for his monastery to devote material resources for the preservation and reproduction of his work), it would seem quite improbable that Nāgārjuna could successfully defend and impose positions—such as nihilism—that were manifestly opposed to the explicit declarations of the

²³ We recall as a notable example the famous *nāsti ca mama pratijñā* (“I have no positions”) in VV.29.

²⁴ We recall Nāgārjuna's final homage to the Buddha, celebrated as the master of a *Dharma* that leads to the “elimination of all points of view” (*sarva-dr̥ṣṭi-prahāṇāya*); or of course, to the assertion in MMK.13.8, in which emptiness is declared “means to the abandonment of all points of view” (*dr̥ṣṭīnām nihsaraṇaṃ*).

²⁵ Oetke (1996, p. 59).

²⁶ We have in mind, for example, not only the ‘classic’ Stcherbasky's and Murti's descriptions of ultimate truth as One, Universal Relativity or Absolute; but also the frequent definition of *paramārtha* itself as *śūnyatā* in some of the many non-nihilist senses that serve to interpret this notion.

²⁷ For example, of course, the *Brahma-jāla-sutta* (*Dīgha-nikāya*.1) and the *Kaccānagotta-sutta* (*Saṃyutta-nikāya*, *Nidāna-vagga*.12.15) may be cited.

²⁸ The nihilistic reading of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, from Stcherbasky's interpretative work, seemed definitively surpassed already in the twenties. Yet, it has made a comeback and today is still supported in the works of authoritative Madhyamaka scholars such as Wood (1994), Burton (2001), Tola and Dragonetti (1995), Oetke (for example, 1991 and 1996), and others.

²⁹ Walser (2005).

³⁰ “Nāgārjuna appropriates and rehabilitates certain key concepts from the Mahāsāṅghika and Pudgalavādin (especially the Saṃmitīya) *abhidharma* and uses these key terms and concepts to find fault with the Sarvāstivādin's concept of *svabhāva*” Walser (2005, p. 261).

Buddha, and were not recognized as Mahāsāṅghika philosophical patrimony (nor of the other *ābhīdharmika* schools).³¹

Thirdly, provided that certain metaphysical interpretations could offer convincing solutions to the apparent textual and contextual aporias found up to now, they must then deal with a further obstacle, this time of a logical nature: how may *to say something* (as, by definition, metaphysical readings do) on supreme truth not be a contradiction to the very characteristics of transcendence, non-conceptuality and the ineffability with which Nāgārjuna presents this same ultimate plane³²? Would not an epistemological plane defined as *nirvikalpa*, *anānārtha* and *prapañcair aprapañcita* totally exclude the possibility of being ascribed attributes—such as ‘pure nothingness’, ‘non-duality’, ‘absoluteness’, ‘emptiness’, ‘relativity’—with characteristics so strongly connoted on the conceptual and semantic planes?

There is an attempt (noted in a series of interpretations legitimately qualifiable as metaphysical) to get around this last obstacle through the doubling of the two truths.³³ Thus, in addition to two *pure* dimensions (a totally transcendent *paramārtha* and a *saṃvṛti* that simply corresponds to the ordinary epistemic dimension), a third hybrid level results: a *paramārtha-saṃvṛti* (or a *saṃvṛti-paramārtha*), in which supreme truth *expresses itself* through ordinary truth.³⁴ Yet, in my opinion, this solution is not convincing: it inevitably leads either to the tripartition of Nāgārjunian epistemology,³⁵ which is problematic in that Nāgārjuna unequivocally refers to *dve satye*; or to notions (such as a *paramārtha-satya* which is inexpressible and yet expressed, or a *saṃvṛti-satya* that conceals just as much as it

³¹ Not only are the nihilistic readings found to be problematic on the historical-philosophical level: there are also many ‘metaphysical-realist’ interpretations that may be criticized on the basis of ‘contextual’ considerations. For example, as Siderits notes (1988, pp. 324–325), the defense of an absolutist metaphysics would deprive the Madhyamaka of exposure and originality in terms of the *advaita* position of the Vedānta.

³² See, for example, typically, MMK.18.9: “Independent (*aparapratyayaṃ*), at peace (*śāntaṃ*), not shattered by mental proliferation (*prapañcair aprapañcitaṃ*), non-conceptual (*nirvikalpaṃ*), without semantic differentiation (*anānārthaṃ*): this is the nature of reality (*tattvasya*)”.

³³ In the works of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti—and in other *mādhyamika* contexts—supreme truth, just as ordinary truth, is occasionally presented as bipartite (*paramārtha* as *suddhalaukika* and *lokottara*, or as *aparyāya* and *paryāya*; *saṃvṛti* as *saṃvṛti-satya* and *saṃvṛti-mātra*, or also as *tathya* and *mithyā*); nevertheless, neither Bhāviveka nor Candrakīrti attribute these subdivisions to Nāgārjuna, though they would have had the opportunity to do so in their comments *ad* MMK.

³⁴ For example, Nagao (1992, p. 46), declares: “[A]lthough *paramārtha* transcends *vyavahāra* and is ‘silent’, it has no other means by which to reveal itself than by worldly and conventional expressions”; or May (1978, p. 241): “*Saṃvṛti-satya*, as it were, is the metaphorical designation of *paramārtha-satya* [...]. All designations of *paramārtha-satya*, including the word ‘*paramārtha-satya*’ itself, are *saṃvṛti-satya*”; or according to Tachikawa (1997, p. 27), who considers ordinary truth (just as distinct from ‘ineffable’ ultimate truth as from mere ‘language’) as the “verbalization of ‘ultimate truth’”.

³⁵ Sprung (1979, p. 16), in his comments on MMK.24.10, explicitly asserts: “The distinctions used [...] between the transactional world (*saṃvṛti*), the higher truth (*paramārtha*) and *nirvāṇa* support the view that Mādhyamika worked with three truths, not two”.

reveals³⁶ of supreme truth) that are extremely ambiguous and therefore in disagreement with the conviction—widely shared by those who have studied the relationship between Nāgārjuna and the rules of logic³⁷—that “Nāgārjuna’s reasoning is clearly based on the principles of contradiction and exclusion”.³⁸

Outlines of Semantic Interpretation

To circumvent the previously mentioned obstacles of a philological, historical-philosophical and logical nature that emerge from the metaphysical-realist positions, the defenders of semantic interpretation adopt an exegetical strategy that differs from that of the triplication of Nāgārjuna’s epistemology. Instead, they prefer to recognize the existence of one plane of truth only. Both Siderits and Garfield come to the conclusion, at the end of their analysis, that the position of the author of the MMK is that *ultimate truth does not exist* and that everything is *conventional only*. This position, explains Garfield, is not a true *pratijñā* or a *drṣṭi*, since *pratijñā* and *drṣṭi* can only be defined as those points of view that claim to be ultimately true, or that describe a reality that claims to be ultimately true.³⁹

Siderits and Garfield reach this conclusion after following an interpretative process that is based upon the analysis of the Nāgārjunian concept of emptiness—understood, assuredly, as *niḥsvabhāvatā* or ‘absence of *intrinsic being*’.

According to the *ābhidharmika* speculation—which forms the main polemical target of Nāgārjunian critical enquiry—‘to possess *svabhāva*’ means ‘to be ultimately real’, that is, to enjoy a *dravya* ontological state. In fact, it is the possession of *svabhāva* that, at least within *sarvāstivādin* reflection,⁴⁰ bestows upon the *dharma*s precisely the substantial consistency that allows them to be ontologically distinguished from those purely ordinary (*prajñapti-sat*) entities (people or things⁴¹) around which our ordinary mental experience revolves.

Consequently, to evoke *sarva-dharma-śūnyatā* means, first of all, to question the *ābhidharmika* realist-pluralist ontology: to say that the *dharma*s are empty, means that it is impossible to attain an ultimate, ‘atomic’ and ‘substantial’ point to our

³⁶ Nagao (1992, pp. 13–22), in his exegesis of the expression *saṃvṛti-satya*—based upon certain passages in the writings of Candrakīrti and Sthiramati—concludes that this indicates a “covering-manifesting” dimension. Similarly, Garfield (2002, p. 60) declares: “This term [i.e. *saṃvṛti-satya*] enjoys one of the most delightful ambiguities of any philosophical term in any tradition. For it can literally mean ‘convention’ [...]. But it can also mean *obscured, concealed, occluded, disguised*”.

³⁷ See, for example, Bugault (1983).

³⁸ Seyfort Ruegg (1981, p. 41).

³⁹ “[A] position in the relevant sense is a position regarding the nature of things [...]. And according to Nāgārjuna and his followers, the function of language is not to characterize the nature of things, because things have no nature”, Garfield (2002, p. 66).

⁴⁰ In other *ābhidharmika*s areas, for example that of the Theravāda, the notion of *dharma* is not conceived in such substantialist terms: as Ronkin (2005, p. p. 111), observes, the *theravādin* “did not use the category of *sabhāva* to denote *dravya* and rejected the very Sarvāstivāda equation of a *dharma* with *dravya*”.

⁴¹ For example, in the ‘classic’ context of the *Milinda Pañha*, Nāgasena and the chariot.

analytical exercises.⁴² Our substantialist vision of reality dissolves when subjected to analysis. Any imaginable entity ends up revealing itself to be nothing other than a conceptual construction and devoid of correspondence to anything real whatsoever.

Yet, if no entity can possess *svabhāva*—that is, no entity that is conceivable as ultimately real—and if all is nothing other than conceptual construction, then to say that *all is empty* is to say that *nothing ultimately exists*. According to Siderits and Garfield, this is the only meaning that may be given to the concept of ‘supreme truth’: what is only and ultimately real is that nothing is ultimately real, and everything is conventional only.⁴³ *Paramārtha-satya* is nothing more than the *discovery* of the solely ordinary existence of entities that make up our everyday lives.⁴⁴ Therefore, supreme truth, according to a formula repeatedly cited in the writings of Siderits and Garfield, is that *ultimate truth does not exist*.

The great error of metaphysical-realist positions is that they *reify* the notion of emptiness. They transform this notion from a concept that aims to indicate the inexistence of any ultimate reality, into *ultimate reality* itself. Based on the datum that individual entities are declared ‘empty’ by Nāgārjuna and, therefore, ultimately inexistent, his metaphysical interpreter wrongly proceeds to conceive of the *real* and *ultimate existence* of a dimension termed ‘emptiness’ to be understood as ‘absolute’, ‘one’, ‘pure void’ or any of the many other characterizations that realist interpretations have attributed to *śūnyatā*.

This exercise of transforming emptiness into a *reality* that transcends individual inexistent entities, would be precisely—continues semantic analysis—what Nāgārjuna explicitly asks us to avoid (for example, in MMK.24.11⁴⁵ or MMK.13.8⁴⁶). The metaphysical-realist interpreters of Nāgārjuna become precisely the figure of the customer evoked in Candrakīrti’s image:⁴⁷ a customer who, confronted with a shopkeeper who claims he has no merchandise, insists on *buying* such ‘a non-merchandise’ (*na paṇya*).⁴⁸

⁴² Tillemans (2001, p. 509) observes that a crucial characterization (particularly highlighted in the post-Nāgārjunian *mādhyamika* reading) of the concept of *svabhāva* is its logical *findability*: to say that *x has its own nature* is the same as saying that “*x* and its properties are findable when one searches logically, or equivalently, that *x* and its properties have the ability to withstand logical analysis”.

⁴³ [A] semantic interpretation [...] takes the claim that all things are empty to mean that [...] there is only conventional truth”, Siderits (2003, p. 11).

⁴⁴ “[S]uppose 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 [...]. So we conclude that it is empty. But now let us analyze that emptiness [...]. What do we find? Nothing at all but the table’s lack of inherent existence. [...]. To see the table as empty [...] is to see the table as conventional, as dependent” Garfield (2002, pp. 38–39); “Emptiness, for a *mādhyamika*, is an ultimate truth. One can achieve a correct view—a view of things as they in fact are”, Garfield (2002, p. 48).

⁴⁵ “Emptiness, when misunderstood, perverts the man who lacks intelligence, just as a snake that is wrongly seized or a magical formula that is mispronounced”.

⁴⁶ “The victorious [*buddhas*] declared that emptiness was a means to eliminate all points of view (*dṛṣṭinām*). Yet, anyone who takes emptiness as a point of view may be considered incorrigible”.

⁴⁷ PP.347.6–7.

⁴⁸ The same image is also mentioned by Bhāviveka and by Buddhāpālita, with few variants (respectively, one speaks of an employer who tells his employee that he does not have wages to give him, the other, generically, of someone who declares to another to not have anything to give him), in their commentaries *ad* MMK.13.18.

The *mādhyaṃika* therefore, “is to be taken at his word when he proclaims that emptiness is itself empty”⁴⁹: even emptiness, just as any other ‘entity’, is nothing other than a conceptual construction to which nothing ultimately truly corresponds. Of course, Siderits and Garfield are well aware of the objection that most immediately would be made to their interpretation: how can pure ‘conventionality’ exist, without a *real* basis from which the conventional might be termed as such⁵⁰? Both authors respond to this objection by using the example of the banknote⁵¹ which, though devoid—since the disappearance of the *gold standard*—of real (that is intrinsic) value, would possess a value derived “from the convention of treating it as a medium of exchange”.⁵²

Finally, as regards the significance of a philosophical exercise that negates the ultimate existence of any entity, our authors have a good hand in indicating that this meaning is definitely soteriological: “On the semantic interpretation of emptiness, the truth that liberates is the insight that there can be no truth apart from the contingent institutions and practices of social existence. It liberates because it undermines the last vestige of clinging, the belief that there is a mind-independent ultimate truth”.⁵³

Formal Weakness of Siderits and Garfield's Discussion of *dve satye*

A formal weakness of semantic interpretation, in my opinion, is the fact that it does not seem to be completely aware of its implications. What Siderits and Garfield *explicitly* say about the *dve satye* contains *implicit* aspects that, until they are deduced and articulated, cause the two authors' reading of Nāgārjuna to be incomplete, and not wholly intelligible. Thus, before examining what would appear to be the ‘substantial’ weaknesses of the ‘semantic’ proposal, it would be worthwhile to reconstruct it formally; that is, to define, from the elements with which Siderits and Garfield propose their interpretation, everything that it truly, yet implicitly, contains.

Equivocal Interpretation of Satya/Truth

An aspect that is as important as it is insufficiently highlighted or pondered in the discussion on the two truths by Siderits and Garfield, is the equivocal use of the term

⁴⁹ The concept of “emptiness of emptiness”, in fact, is found in Nāgārjuna only implicitly (we might recall, for example, emblematic verses such as MMK.22.11, or the same MMK.13.8, that speak about emptiness as a concept that should under no circumstances be considered definitive). Explicitly, this is stated by Candrakīrti, for example in MA.185–186, in which he evokes *stong nyid stong nyid*, that is, *śūnyatā-śūnyatā*. See also Siderits (1988, p. 324).

⁵⁰ “The objection, in other words, is that you can't have truth without a metaphysical theory about the ultimate nature of reality”, Siderits (2007, p. 203).

⁵¹ Cf. Siderits (2003, p. 13 and 2007, p. 203) and Garfield (2009, pp. 26–27).

⁵² Siderits (2007, p. 203).

⁵³ Siderits (2003, pp. 17–18). Garfield also claims: “The identity of the Two Truths has profound soteriological implications for Nagarjuna”, Garfield (2002, p. 92).

satya, and their rendering of it in English as *truth*. Indeed, when Siderits offers an explanation of the formula “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth”, the author claims—with no particular justification for such an exegetical exercise, nor with a consideration of its consequences—that the two recurrences of ‘ultimate truth’ must be understood in two different ways:

ultimate truth¹ : a fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment;
 ultimate truth² : a statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality. The semantic interpretation then takes the doctrine of emptiness to mean: the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth².⁵⁴

Clearly, the first meaning belongs to the domain of epistemology, whereas the second is an ‘ontological’ meaning: *paramārtha-satya* (hereafter ‘PE’) is a mental event, an insight, that consists in the view that no *paramārtha-satya* whatsoever exists in an ontological sense (hereafter ‘PO’), that is, a truth equivalent to the *reality* of something that exists by itself, that possesses *svabhāva*.⁵⁵

If these uses of ‘ultimate truth’ did not differ, then the Sideritsian formula would be chargeable with the liar paradox: to say that ‘it is true that nothing is true’—without distinguishing two meanings in the first and in the second ‘true’—would, in fact, be an affirmation that if true, would be false (there would be, indeed, at least one true thing), if false, true (if also ‘nothing is true’ is false, then that would confirm the *truth* of the statement that ‘nothing is true’). Therefore, that the statement ‘nothing is true’ is false, is necessarily true).

Yet, precisely, if Siderits’ recourse to two meanings of *satya-truth* keeps his formula from being accused of being fallacious in one sense, it cannot keep it from being defective by the fallacy of equivocation: why, in fact, use the same term

⁵⁴ Siderits (2007, p. 202). This formula is supported by Garfield, whose treatment of *paramārtha-satya* is, indeed, in syntony with the Siderits’ point of view: also according to Garfield, ultimate truth is: (a) “a correct view—a view of things as they in fact are” (2002, p. 48); (b) “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” (1995, p. 298).

Therefore, according to Garfield too, a meaning of ultimate *truth* exists that is (a) epistemological, that is, equivalent to the discovery of the inexistence of *realities* of the type (b), that is, things possessing their own nature and independent from our way of conceiving them.

⁵⁵ It might be argued that the ambiguous use (epistemological and ontological) by Siderits and Garfield of the term *truth*, is authorized by the fact that the Sanskrit equivalent *satya* is just as ambiguous. Indeed, according to Gethin (1998, p. 60), *satya* “can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as ‘real’ or ‘actual thing’”. Etymologically, the word *satya* betrays an ontological origin; on the other hand, in the Buddhist field, the epistemological meaning seems to prevail. Finally, it may also be observed that classical Indian philosophy does not appear to draw a clear distinction between the fields of epistemology and ontology (in this regard, the term *artha* might be considered emblematic for its semantic range varies from the ontological meaning of ‘object’, to the semantic-epistemological meaning of ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’). It is a fact, however, that in modern philosophy, epistemology and ontology are two clearly distinct areas and that the words *truth* and *reality* have different semantic ranges. Moreover, granted that Gethin’s observation is valid for Buddhist philosophy, it remains to be demonstrated that Nāgārjuna, in his (rare) use of the term *satya*, had in mind an ambiguous meaning (ontological as well as epistemological) of this word. In conclusion, in a study of Nāgārjuna’s doctrine, it does not seem philologically correct to interpret the philosopher’s use of *satya* by a term—*truth*—used at times in its (legitimate) epistemological sense, and at others in its (disputable) ontological meaning of *reality*.

(*paramārtha-satya*) to express different and irreducible meanings? By disambiguating Siderits' phrase, a reformulation is possible in these terms: ultimate *truth* (PE) is that nothing exists that may be qualified as ultimate *reality* (PO); in other words—pursuing the thread of Siderits' argument—everything is *prajñapti-sat* only, that is, *saṃvṛti satya*.

Nevertheless, this formula, centered upon a double meaning of *paramārtha-satya*, necessarily implies, as a corollary, that *saṃvṛti-satya* also has two meanings. If, in fact, the view of things as devoid of *svabhāva* is ultimate *truth* (PE), then, the view of things as possessing *svabhāva* will not be an ultimate *truth*, but ordinary or conventional, therefore, *saṃvṛti-satya* in the epistemological sense (SE). And, if I define ultimate *reality* (PO) as an entity that possesses substantial existence (*dravya-sat*), then conventional *reality* (SO) will indicate, ontologically, a solely conceptual existence of things (*prajñapti-sat*).

In other words, Siderits' position, "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth", must be completed by the formula—which is only implicit in the author's discussion, but logically necessary—"the conventional truth is that nothing is conventional truth": that is, everything (except, of course, that which is obviously not, using a Bhāvivekan terminology, *mithyā-saṃvṛti-satya*, which is all that is the result of dream, mirage or hallucination), to the mind of the ordinary man, appears as substantial, possessing *svabhāva*, and a way of being of the *dravya* type. This formula may be explained by paraphrasing Siderits in the following terms:

*conventional truth*¹: mental condition of the non-enlightened man; *conventional truth*²: affirmation of the only conceptual, mind-dependent existence of things. *The semantic interpretation then takes the doctrine of emptiness to mean: the conventional truth*¹ *is that nothing is conventional truth*².

And further paraphrasing—with, finally, a disambiguated statement: the conventional *truth* (SE) is that nothing appears as conceptual *reality* (SO).

The equivocal meaning of *saṃvṛti-satya*—latent, as it is expressed, in Siderits—clearly emerges in the treatment of the subject of the two truths as proposed by Garfield. Yet, never does Garfield explicitly tell us that he is using the concept of 'conventional truth' in two senses, one epistemological, the other ontological. We get the impression that Garfield himself is not actually conscious of the equivocality with which he treats this concept. On page 51 of *Empty Words*,⁵⁶ for example, we find: "real phenomena are conventionally existent. To be conventionally existent is to exist dependently, to possess one's identity nominally, to be essenceless and impermanent"—here we are dealing, therefore, with the ontological definition (SO) of conventional truth: in other words, things *exist* dependently, that is, devoid of ontic autonomy (that is, according to that ontological modality, we recall, that is the subject of the PE view), simply in the form of *prajñapti-sat*. Nevertheless, in the same paper, and only a few pages previous to the above quote, Garfield affirms: "conventional phenomena are typically represented as inherently existent. We typically perceive and conceive of external phenomena, ourselves, causal powers, moral truths, and so on as independently existing, intrinsically identifiable, and

⁵⁶ Garfield (2002).

substantial”⁵⁷; or in other words, “[t]he conventional truth has as its domain all entities, properties, and so on posited by ordinary, unreflective awareness, science, philosophy”.⁵⁸ Here then is the epistemological meaning (SE)⁵⁹ of *saṃvṛti-satya*—conventional truth as the way in which things appear to the ordinary consciousness, that is, possessing *svabhāva* or ultimately real.⁶⁰

Paradoxes and Expositive Inconsistencies of Semantic Interpretation

Siderits’ and Garfield’s failure to clarify any of what is implicit in their analysis of the two truths; the fact that the meanings they attribute (intentionally or not) to *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti-satya* are not sufficiently identified or highlighted; and, finally, the little reflection given to what lies behind their implications—all negatively condition the authors’ general treatment of the main themes of the *dve satye*. Indeed, since Siderits and Garfield do not specify in what sense—epistemological or ontological—they refer to conventional truth or ultimate truth, this often results in paradoxical statements that seem in marked contradiction to their other affirmations.

For example, when Siderits claims that (a) “[a]ccording to the semantic interpretation, [...] there is only one kind of truth. [...] there is only conventional truth”,⁶¹ this appears to contradict statements such as (b): the “ultimate truth—the truth that brings about liberation—is that there is no ultimate truth”.⁶² Without further explanation, these statements contradict each other: according to the first, no ‘ultimate truth’ exists; the second, however, affirms that *there is* an ‘ultimate truth’ (one, in fact, that can lead to liberation). For these two statements to co-exist without being a contradiction, Siderits would have to specify that in case (a), he is talking about ‘truth’ in an ontological sense. That is, that there are no ultimate *realities* of the PO type—that is, *dravya* entities—and that the only ontological modality of things is to be SO, *prajñapti-sat*, or conventional *realities*. Yet, in case (b), the first use of ‘truth’ is epistemological, not ontological: an ultimate *truth*

⁵⁷ Garfield (2002, p. 39).

⁵⁸ Garfield (2002, p. 60).

⁵⁹ “We see here that Nāgārjuna is drawing a logical distinction between two epistemological standpoints”, Garfield (2002, pp. 57–58).

⁶⁰ Surprisingly, nevertheless, in the work of the same Garfield, we find another way to describe the conventional cognitive approach to reality that is contrary to (and irreconcilable with) what has just been presented. Commenting verse 36 of MMK.24, our author, contradicting his interpretative point of view just presented—for which “we typically perceive and conceive of external phenomena [...] and so on as independently existing, intrinsically identifiable, and substantial”—affirms: “Common sense neither posits nor requires intrinsic reality in phenomena [...]. Common sense holds the world to be a network of dependently arisen phenomena” (1995, p. 313, and 2002, p. 37). In this sense, then, ‘conventional truth’ would be equivalent to the view, in the present paper, that corresponds to PE.

Given that the point of view cited in the body of the text (for which conventional truth, in the epistemological sense, is SE) is more coherent with the rest of the Garfieldian treatment of the theme of the two truths, I will pass over this second point of view in this present paper.

⁶¹ Siderits (2007, p. 203).

⁶² Siderits (2003, p. 13).

(therefore, PE) *exists*, it is liberating, and consists in the vision of the insubstantiality of all things.

Notwithstanding, it is possible to claim that Siderits' awareness (which is explicit in the previously quoted passage⁶³) that his use, at least, of *paramārtha-satya* is ambiguous, would ensure that his conclusions are not in actual violation of logic. Yet, it is unquestionable that—clearly breaking with Siderits' usual style in his papers when he takes the reader by the hand and seemingly walks him or her through the various passages and possible implications of the arguments he is developing—when it comes to the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the two truths, Siderits demands of his reader the laborious task of independently reintegrating, reconstructing and reworking his analyses. Nevertheless, what eventually results is a logically coherent interpretation of this doctrine—though implausible, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the next section of this paper. Indeed, it is an interpretation that, once reconstructed, may be expressed succinctly in these terms: ultimate *truth* is the vision of the inexistence of any ultimate *reality* [therefore, only conventional *realities* exist]; conventional *truth* is the belief that things are not conventional *realities* [but ultimate *realities*].

In Garfield's case, the situation is more complex, if not to say quite tortured. Because the author is apparently unaware that his use of *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti-satya* is ambiguous,⁶⁴ he is often obliged to perform veritable acts of dialectical acrobatics in order to avoid the conclusion—inevitable in the end—that Nāgārjuna's reasoning is, after all analysis, paradoxical and incompatible with the rules of logic. It would seem that after having at length avoided (or removed) the intrinsic ambiguity in his analysis of the concept of *satya-truth*, Garfield must finally settle accounts with it.

Indeed, as he treats the subject of ultimate truth he declares: "Ultimate truths are those about ultimate reality. But since everything is empty, there is no ultimate reality. There are, therefore, no ultimate truths".⁶⁵ A few lines after this, Garfield comments that in MMK.24.19, Nāgārjuna is "telling us about the nature of ultimate reality. There are, therefore, ultimate truths. Indeed, that there is no ultimate reality is itself a truth about ultimate reality and is therefore an ultimate truth".⁶⁶ Obviously, if here Garfield does not clarify that he is using (equivocally) 'ultimate truth' in two different ways—the latter being in an epistemological way (for which *there is* ultimate truth), and the former in an ontological way (for which *there is not* ultimate truth)—his presentation is inevitably contradictory: basically, he affirms that there are no *ultimate truths*,⁶⁷ but there is *ultimate truth*.

⁶³ See footnote 54.

⁶⁴ We observe that when (see footnote 6 above) Garfield quotes and supports Siderits' formula (*the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth*), the former does not explicitly repeat the distinction that Siderits himself draws between the two meanings attributed to *paramārtha-satya*.

⁶⁵ Garfield (2002, p. 96).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ We note that the plural use ('ultimate truths') of *paramārtha-satya* has not been traced in any part of Nāgārjuna's work, and that justification for this use only appears in *mādhyamika* commentarial literature.

Or similarly, when Garfield sums up his reflection on the concept of emptiness⁶⁸ (that, *in a certain sense*, is ‘ultimate truth’⁶⁹), our author is forced to conclude that as concerns the question of its existence, the answer is “a definite ‘yes and no’”.⁷⁰ Here again, if Garfield were to clarify the ambiguities inherent in his position, instead of giving a paradoxical response (such as “yes and no”), he could say: “yes” *in an epistemological sense* (emptiness, *qua* ultimate truth, exists as PE) and “no” *in an ontological sense* (emptiness does not exist as PO).

Garfield, in not recognizing his equivocal use of the concept of *satya-truth*, has no alternative but to attribute a contradictory position to Nāgārjuna. After a series of passages that truly put his readers’ sense of logic to the test,⁷¹ Garfield’s inevitable conclusion is: “There is then no escape. Nāgārjuna’s view is contradictory, clearly a paradox of expressibility. Nāgārjuna succeeds in saying the unsayable”.⁷²

Yet, not even this is Garfield’s final position on Nāgārjuna’s thought. Rather, according to the author of *Empty Words*, in Nāgārjuna the contradictions form part of an organic philosophy that respects the rules of logic: “Nāgārjuna is not an irrationalist. He is committed to the canons of rational arguments and criticism. He is not a mystic”.⁷³ The contradictions in Nāgārjuna’s thought “would not *undermine* but instead would *confirm*, the impression that he is indeed a highly rational thinker”.⁷⁴

How a philosophy that contains contradictions and inconsistencies⁷⁵ precisely in its theoretical core (that is, in the doctrine of the two truths) may be considered ‘highly rational’ (that is, by definition, totally without contradiction) and ‘not mystical’, is an enigma that I feel Garfield does not satisfactorily resolve (and, in fact, we might ask ourselves if it is an enigma *that can be resolved*). Nevertheless, Garfield could avoid having to deal with this thorn simply by recognizing all of the implications inherent in his treatment of the concepts of *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha-satya*. That is, if he were to agree that, in his support of Siderits’ idea that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth”, he too is implicitly saying that the ‘ultimate *truth* (PE) is that ultimate *reality* does not exist (PO)’ and, conversely, ‘that conventional *truth* (SE) consists of the idea that things possess *svabhāva* (PO)’.

⁶⁸ Garfield’s conclusions, also in the case of his analysis of emptiness (for example, Garfield 2002, pp. 61–62: “emptiness can be known but [...] it is not a possible object of knowledge, [...] we can say true things about it, but [...] those assertions in some sense indicate no proposition”, that is, emptiness may be grasped, even though “there is no object, no entity to be perceived”, *ibid.*p.64) are constructed on the basis of the exegetic exercises of Tsong kha pa and his followers. Yet, as previously defended (see footnote 2 above), it would be doubtful that the approach of these latter to Nāgārjuna’s doctrine would be compatible with the principles and methodologies of the contemporary indological project.

⁶⁹ Emptiness “is an ultimate truth, even if not an ultimate existent”, Garfield (2002, p. 65).

⁷⁰ Garfield (2002, p. 63).

⁷¹ For example: “when Nāgārjuna appears to assert ultimate truths, he is not *really* asserting anything. His utterances have some other function. [...] [I]n these utterances Nāgārjuna is not performing a speech act at all”, Garfield (2002, p. 97).

⁷² Garfield (2002, p. 99).

⁷³ Garfield (2002, p. 96).

⁷⁴ Garfield (2002, p. 87).

⁷⁵ “Nāgārjuna’s view is inconsistent” (although not “*incoherent*”), Garfield (2002, p. 273).

The following section of the present paper will be devoted to a criticism of this interpretation of the theory of the two truths.

Logical and Philological Weaknesses in Semantic Interpretation

As we consider the two parts of the statement that synthesizes the semantic interpretation of the *dve satye*, the second half of the statement—"conventional *truth* (SE) consists of the idea that things possess *svabhāva* (PO)"—is, in my opinion, irreproachable as regards the interpretation of Nāgārjuna's thought. The ordinary way of seeing things and interacting with them is to consider them 'real', substantial, and possessing *svabhāva*. The *saṃvṛtic* (that is, the *saṃsāric*) condition, on an epistemological level, is characterized precisely by the tendency to conceive of things in the mode of ontic autonomy and to 'project' or to 'superimpose' these conceptions on a reality that is devoid of substantiality. The verses of the MMK, observes Candrakīrti, were written by Nāgārjuna purposely "to oppose the superimposition (*adhyāropa*) of a false own-nature (*svarūpa*)"⁷⁶—in other words, to put an end to the conventional way of conceiving the world.

The difficulties that render semantic interpretation implausible all emerge from the first part of the statement: "the ultimate *truth* (PE) is that ultimate *reality* (PO) does not exist".

The Impossibility of Conceiving the Conventional Without the Real

A first evident logical weakness of semantic interpretation is that concepts such as 'conventionality' or 'conceptual being' are inconceivable without admitting some idea of reality or independent being. Therefore, the phrase "ultimate *reality* (PO) does not exist and everything is only conceptual *reality* (SO)" is inconsistent from a logical point of view. Indeed, if we exclude that 'real' might exist beyond the conceptual, we are not 'eliminating reality' but are rather saying that the conceptual is the only 'real'. This is nothing more than an idealistic position for which, *à la* Hegel, the only real is the rational-conceptual. Now, idealism—apart from the question of whether it may truly be considered an interpretation of Nāgārjuna's doctrine, as recently defended by Shulman⁷⁷—is one of the metaphysical-realist positions from which semantic interpretation (or at least Siderits' reading⁷⁸) claims to take a distance.

Semantic interpreters, in opposition to this logical proof, state that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of something that is conventional only, without it being real and without it deriving its existence from any ultimate reality of the PO type.

⁷⁶ PP. 58.10: *viparīta-svarūpa-adhyāropa-pratipakṣeṇa*.

⁷⁷ Cf. Shulman (2007).

⁷⁸ The Yogācāra School, though it negates the existence of a reality that is independent of our own impressions, believes that these impressions *ultimately exist*. It is for this reason that Siderits considers the position of this school a variant of the point of view that affirms that "there does exist something that is ultimately real", Siderits (2007, p. 181).

As an example of this possibility, both Siderits and Garfield, as mentioned previously, have recourse to the institution of money. Siderits states that since the end of the gold standard, the value of a banknote is in no way intrinsic, nor does its value derive from anything other than the function (of exchange) that people who belong to a given monetary system *conventionally* recognize in it.

This, in my opinion, is an extremely weak example: not only does it apparently fail to confirm Siderits and Garfield's position (that it is possible to conceive of anything that is purely conventional, without the need for anything real as its basis); but in addition, it would seem to confirm quite the opposite: the conventionality of a banknote, indeed, is based on the *reality* of the values that it represents. If *real goods* did not exist, it would not be possible, nor would it make any sense, to create a monetary system. Similarly, it is unquestionable that for Nāgārjuna, Nāgasena's *individuatō* and Milinda's chariot are *prajñapti-sat* and *samāropa/adhyāropa* phenomena; yet such conventionality and such projection must necessarily occur upon a foundation.

There is only one logically plausible way to conceive of the statement "there is no ultimate truth, and all is conventional truth"—it is by understanding 'ultimate truth' in the PE sense, and 'conventional' in the SE sense. It is not, therefore, as semantic interpretation proposes, in the sense of an implausible proposition such as: "there is nothing ultimately real (PO) and everything is only conventional-conceptual (SO)"; but rather: there is no other supreme way (PE) *to see things*, other than the ordinary, and everything *is* as it appears ordinarily (SE), that is, real, substantial or *ātmic*. From a logical point of view, this is a perfectly valid proposition and certainly one that might be shared by a large part of humanity. Yet, in denying that the ordinary epistemic dimension is connoted by *avidyā*, this could also be the complete antithesis of the Buddha's teaching and traditions derived from it. What is more, it is quite certain that this was not what Siderits or Garfield intended either.

Lack of Philological and Logical Grounds for the Affirmation That "All is Conventional"

Semantic interpreters may argue that, aside from any other considerations, their position—"the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate reality"—enjoys substantial textual support. Nāgārjuna constantly reiterates that *every* aspect of reality that he has analyzed is 'dependently co-arisen' and 'empty of own-nature'. Emptiness itself—that is, the concept that might aspire above all others to the status of 'ultimate reality'—is declared 'empty', that is, conventional, not ultimately true.⁷⁹ Consequently, if Nāgārjuna's objective is to philosophically develop the *mahāyāna* intuition of the emptiness of *all* possible *dharmas*,⁸⁰ then we must conclude that his final point of view is that *all* is empty and conventional.

Now, despite the apparent soundness of this reasoning, it is not logically and philologically irreproachable. Although Nāgārjuna declares that *individual dharmas* (material and non-material) are conventional, he does not at any point in his work

⁷⁹ Here, again, we might refer to the paradigmatic verses 13.8 and 22.11.

⁸⁰ For example: *iha śāriputra sarva-dharmāḥ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇā (Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra.IV.1)*.

state that *the whole*, that is, *the totality of real*, is conventional. Nor is there apparently any logical or empirical necessity that would oblige us to defend the idea that the characteristics of individual entities that constitute a whole would also belong to the whole itself: the characteristics of a totality, a container, or a complex system might differ from the characteristics of their parts,⁸¹ and the characteristics of the whole are not logically deducible from those parts.

Therefore, though it is true that individual *dharma*s are empty, without textual confirmation or the existence of logical necessity, the position that *all* is conventional would be unfounded and arbitrary.

Formal Indistinguishableness Between Nihilism and Semantic Interpretation

E. Chinn, in his analysis of the “antirealist” position adopted by Garfield to interpret Nāgārjuna,⁸² concludes that this “verges at times on nihilism”.⁸³ Indeed, the arguments used by ‘semantic’ interpreters to attempt to distance their reading from nihilism are unconvincing. Siderits by and large avoids direct confrontation with the hypothesis of nihilism in Nāgārjuna: he limits himself to relegating this position to the family of the metaphysical.⁸⁴ Garfield, on the other hand, seems more concerned about having his explanations of the two truths perceived as nihilist and tries to avert this possibility through axiomatic affirmations:

[T]he emptiness of all phenomena that Nāgārjuna defends is not *nonexistence*: to be empty of essence is not to be empty of existence. Instead, to exist is to be empty. [...] To be empty of essence is simply to exist only conventionally [...]. This doctrine allows him to defend his account of emptiness of all phenomena from the charge of nihilism.⁸⁵

Yet, if we analyze the reasoning of interpretations that are convinced of Nāgārjuna’s nihilism, we see that their arguments do not differ substantially from Garfield’s. Many of the conclusions of such authors as Burton, Wood, Oetke or Narain (limiting ourselves to some of the neo-nihilistic readings, that is, post-Stcherbatskian) seem indistinguishable from the semantic positions. According to Burton, for example,

⁸¹ A very simple example would be to think of a sum of prime numbers—that is not a prime number.

In Brahmanic schools, this principle might be encountered, for example, in the Vaiśeṣika system: one of the axioms of this *darśana* states that the ‘wholes’ (*touts*) “sont des entités indépendantes, différentes de leurs parties constituantes”, Bronkhorst (1992, p. 96).

Contemporary reflection on ‘complex system’ and ‘emergent properties’ also defend this same tenet. For example, as Gazzaniga (2012, p. 71) explains: “A complex system is composed of many different systems that interact and produce emergent properties that [...] cannot be reduced to the properties of the constituent parts”.

⁸² We recall again, that in any case, Garfield (see footnote 8 above) declares that he is not completely comfortable with the Siderits’ classification of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy as an ‘antirealism’.

⁸³ Chinn (2001, p. 68).

⁸⁴ Siderits (2003, p. 10).

⁸⁵ Garfield (2009, p. 27).

Nāgārjuna means that dependently arisen entities do not have *svabhāva* in the Abhidharma sense, i.e. they are not *dravyasat*. Which is to say that they are *prajñaptisat*. [...] Dependently originating entities have, like a dream or an illusion, an existence which depends solely on the constructing activity of the mind.⁸⁶

Wood affirms: “[W]hat the Mādhyamika texts, assert, typically, is that the claim that dharmas exist and arise and perish [...] is true only from the standpoint of phenomenal truth”⁸⁷; while, Oetke explains: “On the level of highest truth there is nothing of any kind”.⁸⁸

It is far from clear how affirmations of this sort might be distinguished from the semantic point of view. Indeed, Garfield and Siderits, just as the nihilist interpreters, claim that things exist only conventionally or conceptually; they affirm, just as the nihilist interpreters, that from the ultimate point of view, *dharmas* do not exist; and, just as they, Garfield and Siderits declare that there is no other reality that transcends *dharmas*. The statement H. Narain uses to sum up his reading of the *paramārtha* of the *mādhyamika*—“The highest wisdom consists in the non-apprehension of any *dharmas*, of anything whatsoever”⁸⁹—could just as well have been written by Garfield or Siderits. The only difference is that though Narain, from this position, goes on to conclude that “the philosophy taught by these texts is pure and simple nihilism”,⁹⁰ semantic interpreters refuse this label. Nevertheless, in the end, this seems nothing more than a question of putting different labels on interpretative positions that are in fact indistinguishable.

Moreover, we may also note that nihilist readings of Nāgārjuna seem to be afflicted by precisely the same weaknesses indicated in the previous sections regarding semantic interpretation: (1) nihilism, too, claims that it is possible to conceive of a conventional/conceptual/illusory existence without recognizing any reality upon which convention might be built. The world would thus be a hallucination that rises from nothing, that is, from the absence of any objective or subjective foundation from which (or in which) this hallucination might be produced. Now, of course, there is no particular problem in saying that our mental world of images and ideas derives from nothing, or that there is nothing beyond this—however, in that case, there would be no sense in defining this world as a hallucination or a convention: without a *noumenon*, the phenomenon becomes *reality*. (2) nihilism too, superficially, takes for granted the logical cogency (unfounded philologically) of passing from the affirmation that single individual entities (or *dharmas*) are inexistent, to the conclusion that therefore *all* is inexistent, and that ultimate reality is nothing. Yet, as we have seen, there is no necessity that

⁸⁶ Burton (2001, p. 99).

⁸⁷ Wood (1994, p. 174).

⁸⁸ Oetke (1996, p. 59).

⁸⁹ Narain (1997, p. 100).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

we attribute to a whole the same characteristics that belong to the units of which it is composed.

In short, in my opinion, two positions that basically say the same thing and seem to show the same weaknesses are indistinguishable: semantic interpretation is indeed—notwithstanding Siderits' cursory dismissal of nihilism,⁹¹ and despite Garfield's attempts to take a distance from it—a form of nihilism (unless the supporters of Nāgārjuna's nihilism object to having their reading called 'semantic'!). If this is the case, in addition to the weaknesses already indicated, and to those presented in the following section, semantic reading must defend itself against all the possible, specific objections (some of which Siderits and Garfield have pointed out themselves) to Nāgārjuna's nihilistic interpretation.⁹²

Tattva, Dharmatā, Nirvāṇa, Paramārtha

In my opinion, all of the objections to semantic interpretation presented up to now are decisive; they remain secondary only to the great evidence in Nāgārjuna's work, and in that of his commentators, of the recurrent and unequivocal idea of a plane of *reality* that transcends conceptuality (therefore, of *something* beyond the *prajñapti* dimension). Keeping only to the MMK (but recalling that this same concept occurs in other writings attributed to Nāgārjuna⁹³), and taking into consideration solely the points in which we find explicit recurrences (yet not forgetting the many verses in which the same ideas are expressed implicitly⁹⁴), stanzas such as 15.6,⁹⁵ 18.7,⁹⁶ 18.9,⁹⁷ in which *reality* is evoked in PO terms, are in no way negligible.

The terms *tattva* and *dharmatā* should be considered synonyms of *paramārtha*, and also of *nirvāṇa*⁹⁸. They indicate a reality that transcends conceptuality, a reality,

⁹¹ Siderits, (2007, p. 181), cuts down *metaphysical nihilism* hypotheses as simply "unpalatable". Elsewhere, (2003, p. 10), the same author had settled the question of nihilism by pointing out: "What is more difficult to see is how one might suppose that a substantial number of seemingly sensible persons could have held such a view".

⁹² For example—as pointed out in "Weaknesses and Incongruities of the Metaphysical Interpretations" section of this paper—nihilist interpretation does not seem to take in due consideration the scholastic context in which Nāgārjuna developed his philosophical reflection.

⁹³ Considering only the *yukti* corpus, (if we included the *stava* corpus, the number of examples would be even greater), we refer to explicit verses such as YṢ.5, ŚS.1 or RV.105.

⁹⁴ For example, MMK.5.8, 18.12, or the entire chapter 25.

⁹⁵ "Those who see identity [*svabhāva*] and otherness [*parabhāva*], being and not-being do not see the reality [*tattva*] in the teachings of the Buddha."

⁹⁶ "Where the range of the mind ceases, what can be expressed verbally also ceases; indeed, true reality [*dharmatā*], like *nirvāṇa*, is neither created nor destroyed."

⁹⁷ See footnote 32 above.

⁹⁸ Both Seyfort Ruegg (1981, p. 46), and Sprung (1973, p. 43), when they consider the notions of *tattva*, *dharmatā*, *nirvāṇa* and *paramārtha*, conclude that they are equivalent. As a further conceptual equivalent, both authors would add *śūnyatā* to these: a matching that, in my opinion, is not confirmed by any specific verse in Nāgārjuna's work, and therefore is disputable (Ferraro 2012).

Further doubt might arise in MMK.24.10 as regards the relationship between *paramārtha* and *nirvāṇa*. When Nāgārjuna states: "Without having reached the supreme level, *nirvāṇa* cannot be attained (*paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate*)", perhaps does he not intend—just as the same Sprung (1979) does (see footnote 35 above), in contradiction with Sprung (1973) recalled in this note—to

therefore, that cannot be apprehended by the cognitive tools of ordinary epistemic dimension. This reality has a configuration identical to PO, the very PO whose existence the semantic (and nihilistic) interpreters totally refute. Thus, in the light of Nāgārjuna's wording, the affirmation that “no ultimate reality exists and there are only conventional realities” is not defensible.

The wording available to us confirms without a doubt Nāgārjuna's denial of an ultimate and definitive ontic *status* that corresponds to the *single concepts* he has considered; that is, it is true that he affirms that the *phenomenal entities* (contrary to what we believe, ordinarily, in the cognitive SE dimension), and the *dharmas* themselves, are SO (*prajñapti-sat*) only, and not PO (*dravya-sat*); and it is also true—a crucial point—that he considers this emptiness to be empty, therefore, SO.⁹⁹ Yet, there is not one verse that would confirm that Nāgārjuna accepts the sole and exclusive existence of reality of the SO type, and consequently, that he excludes the existence of *any reality* of the PO type. Indeed, in a series of explicit and implicit elements in Nāgārjuna's work (and in those of his commentators), we find confirmation of the presence of a dimension—*tattva*, *dharmatā*, *paramārtha*, *nirvāṇa*—that does not seem in any way definable in SO terms, but rather one that possesses the quality of the intrinsic existence (PO) systematically denied to single phenomena (but also to hidden *dharmas*) of which our ordinary vision (SE) consists.

In conclusion, although that part of semantic interpretation that affirms that “conventional truth is the belief in the substantial reality of things” finds total confirmation in the words of Nāgārjuna and his commentators, it may not likewise be said that he means that “the ultimate truth is that there is no independent reality”: after having been shown logically incongruous, this claim is also unfounded from a philological point of view.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that the position (that opposes the semantic refusal of any type of PO in Nāgārjuna) defended in “*Tattva, Dharmatā, Nirvāṇa, Paramārtha*” section—that

Footnote 98 continued

distinguish two planes, affirming that the first is preliminary to the second? It is not within the scope of this paper to treat this question. In any case, Candrakīrti's commentary seems to exclude this possibility and supports the equivalence of *paramārtha-nirvāṇa* (the interpretation of the other commentators is, nevertheless, more uncertain).

⁹⁹ The ‘emptiness of emptiness’—that is, the only conventional existence (*prajñapti*, SO) of emptiness—would imply the emptiness of *paramārtha* (therefore its inexistence as PO) only under the condition that *śūnyatā* were, in fact, synonymous with *paramārtha* (and with *tattva*, *dharmatā* and *nirvāṇa*). This, in fact, is supported—in agreement with both contemporary (see, for example, footnote 98 above), and ancient readings (see, for example, PP.264.11-265.1, in which Candrakīrti defines *śūnyatā* as one of the conceptual equivalences of *dharmatā*)—by Garfield (2002, p.48), “[e]mptiness, for a mādhyaṃika, is an ultimate truth”, and, indirectly, by Siderits (2007, p.202): “[e]mptiness is] a fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment”.

However, when distinguishing between *śūnyatā* and *paramārtha* (as, in my opinion, it is not only possible, but necessary to do), the characteristics of the former do not affect the latter, and it is thus possible to conceive of a type of emptiness without *svabhāva* alongside a supreme reality that does possess intrinsic existence.

in Nāgārjuna the idea of a plane of supreme reality *is present*, one that transcends the ordinary epistemic dimension—seems to conflict with many of the very aspects, as seen in “[Weaknesses and Incongruities of the Metaphysical Interpretations](#)” section, that show realist-metaphysical interpretations defective: the possible textual confirmations of a statement such as “Nāgārjuna defends the existence of a PO” do not eliminate the fact that other textual elements in Nāgārjuna seem to deny this.

For example, (1) the affirmation that Nāgārjuna's thesis is that a plane of 'ultimate reality' does exist is in contradiction to his unequivocal statements of 'not to possess a thesis'. Moreover, (2) if ultimate reality transcends conceptuality and discursiveness, would not positing this contradict these aspects? And, (3) in Nāgārjuna's philosophy, would not the recognition of the existence of a 'reality' make this same philosophy a 'substantialism'? And, if so, how can it claim to be a 'middle way' between nihilism and substantialism? (4) Does the fact that emptiness is itself empty not mean that the concept of 'ultimate reality' is also empty, and therefore devoid of *svabhāva* and without independent existence¹⁰⁰? Finally, based upon Siderits' observations,¹⁰¹ is it possible to add (5): how might the position of an 'independent reality', one that transcends the conventional and phenomenal dimension, distinguish itself from the *advaita* conclusions of the Vedānta school?

Metaphysical-realist readings (associated with the idea of the existence of an independent reality of the PO type) criticized by semantic interpretation, are not, in fact, fully successful in their attempt to give satisfactory answers to these queries. Personally, I believe *there is* a—non-metaphysical—reading of Nāgārjuna capable of reconciling the affirmation of the existence of PO with the five factors of criticism highlighted in the previous paragraph.¹⁰² Nevertheless, the point being made in this paper—beyond the question of whether or not (as, for example, Griffiths and Tillemans claim¹⁰³) a solution exists that can reconcile the verses in which Nāgārjuna speaks of 'ultimate reality' with those that seem to refute the idea of a PO—is to declare the incorrectness of an exegetic exercise such as the semantic one that cuts the Gordian knot and eradicates precisely the concept from which the apparent aporias are triggered. Indeed, it is not an exegetically legitimate procedure to eliminate textual proof—above all macroscopic, as in the case of the Nāgārjunian *tattva-paramārtha*—on the basis that, if admitted, this would cause apparent conflicts with other textual or contextual aspects. Of course, by excluding the idea of an independent reality in Nāgārjuna, the five previous points of criticism would be resolved immediately. Nevertheless, such an elimination would produce other, certainly greater problems: indeed, neither Nāgārjuna's wording nor the 'assumption of rationality' with which we programmatically approach his thought, allow us to ignore the idea of a 'subject' or of a 'supreme purpose' in his doctrine.

In conclusion, therefore, the *paramārtha-satya* in Nāgārjuna cannot be the *absence of paramārtha* advocated by semantic interpretation.

¹⁰⁰ The response to this last remark, of course, would depend upon the question evoked in the previous two notes: are *paramārtha* and *śūnyatā* truly conceptual equivalences?

¹⁰¹ See footnote 20 above.

¹⁰² See Ferraro (2012).

¹⁰³ See footnotes 21 and 22 above.

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