

## Outlines of a Pedagogical Interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s Two Truths Doctrine

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**Abstract** This paper proposes an interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s doctrine of the two truths that considers *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha-satya* two visions of reality on which the *Buddhas*, for soteriological and pedagogical reasons, build teachings of two types: respectively in agreement with (for example, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths) or in contrast to (for example, the teaching of emptiness) the category of *svabhāva*. The early sections of the article show to what extent the various current interpretations of the Nāgārjunian doctrine of the *dve satye*—despite their sometimes even macroscopic differences—have a common tendency to consider the notion of *śūnyatā* as a teaching not *based on*, but *equivalent to* supreme truth. This equivalence—philologically questionable—leads to interpretative paths that prove inevitably aporetic: indeed, according to whether the interpretation of *śūnyatā* is ‘metaphysical’ or ‘anti-metaphysical’, it gives rise to readings of Nāgārjuna’s thought incompatible, respectively, with anti-metaphysical and realistic types of verses traceable in the works of the author of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* (MMK). On the contrary, by giving more emphasis to the expression *saṃupāśritya* (“based on”), which recurs in MMK.24.8, and therefore, by epistemologically separating the notion of *śūnyatā* from the notion of *paramārtha-satya* (and of some of its conceptual equivalents such as *nirvāṇa*, *tattva* and *dharmatā*), we may obtain an interpretation—at once realistic and anti-metaphysical—of the theory of the two truths compatible with the vast majority (or even totality) of Nāgārjuna’s verses.

**Keywords** Nāgārjuna · Two Truths · Samupāśritya · Śūnyatā · Upāya

### Abbreviations

- AKBh Akutobhayā  
AST Acintyastava

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ChL	Chung-lun
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
LSt	Lokātītastava
MA	Madhyamakāvatāra
MMK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
PP	Prasannapadā
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
ŚS	Śūnyatāsaptati
VP	Vaidalyaprakaraṇa
VV	Vigrahavyāvartanī
YŞ	Yuktisāstikā
YŞvr	Yuktisāstikā-vṛtti

## Introduction

Contemporary studies on Mādhyamika thought have subjected Nāgārjuna’s two-truths (*dve satye*) doctrine to multiple and often contradictory readings, each of which appears more grounded in specific passages and arguments, but at the same time in apparent contrast with other unequivocal textual data found in the work of the author of the MMK. Thus, none of the various interpretations of the Nāgārjunian *dve satye* currently seem capable of asserting themselves as particularly or definitively more founded and convincing than others.

This apparent exegetical *impasse* may be proof in favour of the pessimistic thesis by authors such as Griffith or Tillemans, who consider the works of Nāgārjuna “insufficiently precise and systematic”<sup>1</sup> and define themselves as “increasingly skeptical about current attempts to say in meaningful philosophical terms what Nāgārjuna *himself* really meant”.<sup>2</sup> If this were so, Bronkhorst’s admonition that interpretative activity ought to be founded simply on an author’s wording,<sup>3</sup> thence “discard false interpretations”,<sup>4</sup> and ultimately “get ever closer to the correct interpretation of the text”,<sup>5</sup> would express, at least in the case of Nāgārjuna, a naïve and utopian point of view: the inability of Nāgārjuna scholars to give us readings of his thought coherent with *all* passages in his works would not then be due to an underestimation of certain aspects of his wording, but rather to inaccuracies and

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<sup>1</sup> Griffiths (2000, p. 24).

<sup>2</sup> Tillemans (2001, p. 519).

<sup>3</sup> “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”, Bronkhorst (1993, p. 503).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

other vices intrinsic to the very wording of the author of the MMK.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the fact that many of his scholars, less drastic (or realist) than Griffith or Tillemans, believe they can still find some coherence in his words (interpreting him as a nihilist, absolutist, anti-realist, skeptic, etc.), could confirm the point of view expressed by Tuck:<sup>7</sup> when reading Nāgārjuna, the phenomenon of *eisegesis*<sup>8</sup> emblematically takes place, that is, the tendency by readers to *project inside* the work they are reading characteristics (and idiosyncrasies) of their own philosophical background.<sup>9</sup> The discovery of coherence and method in Nāgārjuna's works would not in this case derive from characteristics belonging to his texts—objectively obscure and incoherent, but from substantial twists of meaning and projections acted out by his contemporary readers.

In contrast with conclusions of this kind, this paper argues that the multiplicity, partiality and incoherence (with one aspect or another of Nāgārjunian wording) that we find in current interpretations of the doctrine of the two truths are not due to intrinsic faults in the text and are not, therefore, inevitable. On the contrary, they seem to be due to a crucial fault common to the interpretations themselves; indeed, independently from their even conspicuous differences, they do share a double assumption that, when compared to the *exact wording* of the MMK author, in my opinion lacks substance. This double assumption consists in the belief: (a) that exegetical activity in Nāgārjuna's two truths doctrine should, directly and above all, consist of the attempt to answer the question: *what are the two truths?* (b) that *śūnyatā*—independently from the meaning of this notion—is equal to the supreme truth (*paramārtha-satyā*). The several attempts to explain the meaning of the *dve satye* by the various studies devoted to it thus become attempts to explain, first and foremost, the exact meaning of the concept of *paramārtha-satyā as emptiness*.

This very double assumption, however, on the basis of Nāgārjunian wording, can, in my opinion, be challenged—in the crucial *kārikā* 8 of MMK.24, Nāgārjuna states that “the Buddha’s teaching is based on (*samupāśritya*) two truths”. The textual element “*samupāśritya*”, according to the interpretation presented in these pages, forces the exegete of Nāgārjuna to begin her interpretative path not from the question “*what are the two truths?*”, but instead from the question “*what teachings are, respectively, based on* one or the other truth. This will lead to considering emptiness not a definition or an attempt to describe the supreme truth, but rather a teaching *based on it*.

<sup>6</sup> Among scholars who consider Nāgārjuna's philosophy definitely imprecise or incoherent we can include those who, like Robinson (1972) or Hayes (1994), affirm that the ambiguity of the author of the MMK is voluntary and planned: moved by merely ‘sophistic’ and *destructives* intentions against the points of view of his adversaries, Nāgārjunian dialectics is merely a “shell games” or a “trick” (Robinson 1972, pp. 325, 331) intrinsically connotated by ambiguity and equivocation.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tuck (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Tuck actually talks of *isogenesis*—a misconstrued term, however (indeed, the prefix *iso*, is not appropriate to communicate the idea of ‘intentionality’ and ‘introduction’ that Tuck has in mind).

<sup>9</sup> Tuck argues that, in the case of Nāgārjuna, the various twentieth century interpretations of his thought derive from the philosophical background of his scholars, respectively idealistic, analytical or post-Wittgensteinian.

This different approach to the question of the two truths enables us to obtain a new reading of it, here called, for reasons I shall explain later in this text, ‘pedagogical interpretation’. The aim of this paper is to present this interpretation trying to show how, compared to others possible readings of the *dve satye*, it appears coherent with a greater quantity of textual data from Nāgārjuna.<sup>10</sup> The textual horizon (and limit) of this article is, therefore, the *wording* of Nāgārjuna. Undoubtedly, to evaluate the interpretative approach of a doctrine such as the two truths, a double confrontation with the vast *commentarial tradition* on Nāgārjunia’s work and its *contextual dimension* cannot be ignored. Several necessarily synthetic reflections on these two aspects form part of the final section of this paper.

## Common Interpretations and Respective Textual Difficulties

Following Siderits’ suggestion on the doctrine of emptiness,<sup>11</sup> we can distinguish between the multiple interpretations (laying aside many of their sometimes even macroscopic peculiarities) of the Nāgārjunian theory of the two truths according to two great categories: (1) “Realistic Metaphysical” interpretations (hereafter RMInts), which consider supreme truth (*paramārtha-satya*) an existing and somehow characterizable dimension,<sup>12</sup> and (2) “Anti-Realistic Metaphysical interpretations (hereafter ARMInts), which believe that the true sense of Nāgārjuna’s discourse is denying the existence of supreme truth and affirming the existence exclusively of ordinary reality (*saṃvṛti-satya*).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The greater coherence (with Nāgārjunian wording) claimed by the pedagogical interpretation compared to other readings of the two truths is not equivalent to saying, in this paper at least, that it also claims to be ‘truer’ compared to these readings. It would seem inappropriate here to take a stand in favour of those theses that within contemporary epistemological debate—in opposition to theories that authorise positions of substantial epistemological and exegetical anarchy—justify the use of categories such as ‘true’, ‘likely’ or ‘false’ (of which for, example, Bronkhorst—cf. Footnotes 4 and 5—makes use) to qualify interpretations respectively more or less respectful of an author’s *wording*.

<sup>11</sup> “As concerns the meaning of this doctrine [...], there is a wide array of competing views, with little evidence of an emerging consensus. It is nonetheless possible to see these different readings of emptiness as falling roughly into two kinds, which I shall call ‘metaphysical’ and ‘semantic’”, Siderits (2003, p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> “By a metaphysical interpretation of emptiness, I shall mean any interpretation that takes the doctrine to be intended to characterize the nature of reality”, ibid., p. 10.

In this sense, within the RMInt interpretative typology, we can also include the recent approach by Shulman (2007), which considers Nāgārjuna substantially a proto-yogācārin idealist. The peculiarity of this reading is that supreme truth is not characterizable as a reality existing outside our minds (“Things are not objectively «out there»”, ibid. p. 165), but is equivalent to—in order to avoid nihilism—“ideation” itself, i.e. “conceptuality as responsible for the creation of reality” (ibid). The fact that Shulman himself further states (ibid., p. 166) that this very “ideation” should be considered “unreal as-well”, seems to remove his interpretation from the category of idealism and address it towards nihilism (which is in turn an RMInt, insofar as it is a position with a final point of view on reality in itself).

The peculiarity of Shulman’s interpretation determines that, though it appears as an RMInt, it does not find its textual support in (and actually finds it difficult to deal with) that series of verses (cf. footnote 14) that more typically and frequently make up the philological base of RMInts.

<sup>13</sup> A typically ARMInt reading is the ‘semantic’ one offered by Siderits, whose ultimate synthesis is: “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth—there is only conventional truth”. Siderits (2003, p. 11). For a critical assessment of the semantic interpretation, cf. Ferraro (2013).

The interpretations of the first type find their main textual foundation in those passages (hereafter referred to as PRIVers, i.e. ‘*Pro-Realistic Interpretations Verses*’) where the author of the MMK speaks of a transcendent dimension, of a *tattva* beyond thought and discursivity, of a somehow accessible *nirvāṇa*.<sup>14</sup> ARMInts, on the other hand, “take seriously”<sup>15</sup> first of all those phrases and reasonings (hereafter AMIVers, i.e. ‘*Anti-metaphysics Interpretations Verses*’) where Nāgārjuna states he has no ‘position’ of his own,<sup>16</sup> affirming that any argument of his (starting from his arguments on emptiness) should be considered void<sup>17</sup> or that the *nirvāṇa* is no different from the *samsāra*.<sup>18</sup> Now, what acts as a philological base to RMInts (a supreme truth—i.e. a *tattva*, a *dharmaṭā*, a *nirvāṇa*—exists) obviously contrasts with readings that affirm that the ultimate sense of Nāgārjuna’s discourse is to deny the existence of a supreme truth; besides, Nāgārjunian passages in support of ARMInts are clearly in friction with interpretations that give Nāgārjuna a transcendental dimension *posed* as an absolute, nothingness, emptiness, absence of own-nature, dependent co-origination, or any other possible *definition* of *paramārtha-satya*.

Of course, both ‘realistic metaphysical’ and ‘anti-realistic-metaphysical’ interpreters have often tried, sometimes with some authentic argumentative acrobatics,<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Emblematic verses in this typology could include MMK.18.9: “Independent, at peace, not shattered by mental proliferation, non-conceptual, without semantic differentiation: this is the nature of reality [*tattvasya*]”; MMK.15.6: “Those who see ‘own nature’ [*svabhāva*] and ‘other nature’, being and non-being, do not see the reality [*tattva*] in the Buddha’s doctrine”; MMK.25.9: “That same conditioned and dependent entity that comes and goes, [when] unconditioned and independent, is described as *nirvāṇa*”, or YS.5: “Those who do not see reality believe in *samsāra* and *nirvana*, [but] those who see reality believe in neither”, translation: Lindtner (1997, p. 75).

<sup>15</sup> The Mādhyamika—Siderits (1988, p. 324) observes—“is to be taken at his word when he proclaims that emptiness is itself empty”.

<sup>16</sup> VV.29: “If I had a thesis, the difficulty [you accuse me of] would apply to me. However, I do not hold any thesis (*pratijñā*). Therefore there is no defect in my position”.

<sup>17</sup> MMK.XXII.11: “«empty», «non-empty», «empty-non-empty», «neither empty nor non-empty» should not be said; however, it is asserted in a conventional sense (*prajñapti-arthā*)”, or MMK.XIII.7: “If there were something non-empty, there would also be something empty; [yet.] there is nothing non-empty; how could something empty exist?”.

<sup>18</sup> MMK.25.19-20: “There is not the slightest difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*; there is nothing different between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. What is the limit of *nirvāṇa*, is just the same the limit of *samsāra*. Between them there is nothing different”.

<sup>19</sup> We could quote, for example, the expedient underwritten by some neo-nihilistic interpreters of Nāgārjuna who, faced with the verses where the author of the MMK declares he rejects not only being, but non-being too, argue that he is not actually rejecting nothingness, but rather *the existence of non-existent entities* (cf. Wood 1994, p. 133).

Or we could also quote arguments by those ‘metaphysical’ interpreters (for example Tachikawa 1997, p. 27; Sprung 1979, pp. 13–16; or even, more implicitly, Nagao 1992, pp. 13–22) who to escape from the aporias their reading seems to stumble over, attach to Nāgārjuna the substantial tripliation of levels of truth: as well as an effectively transcendent and unutterable supreme truth and a *saṃvṛti-satya* corresponding to the ordinary epistemic dimension, these authors also find in Nāgārjunian thought the presence of a ‘hybrid’ epistemic sphere, a sort of *saṃvṛti-paramārtha* (or *paramārtha-saṃvṛti*) where supreme truth can supposedly express itself. An epistemic sphere that, despite being traceable in some *Svātantrika-mādhyamika* treatises (such as, for example, the distinction between *aparyāya* and *paryāya-paramārtha*, which recurs in the *Madhyamakārtha-samgraha*; or that between the *paramārtha* dimensions, which Bhāviveka—in the *Tarkajvālā* to *Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārikā* 3.26 and 4.72—defines *lokottara* and *śuddhalaukika-jñāna*), has in my opinion no precise textual fundament in Nāgārjuna.

to explain those Nāgārjunian passages that more explicitly oppose their own reading. I have tried in other works of mine<sup>20</sup> to prove that none of these attempts to solve the enigma set by Nāgārjuna—the enigma of a philosophy that on the one hand talks about a transcendent truth and on the other affirms that it is saying nothing and not defending any position—come across as fully satisfying. Both types of interpretative paths (RMInts and ARMInts) end up attaching to Nāgārjuna arguments and procedures that, when they not openly contradict the assumption (shared by several scholars) that his philosophy respects (at least) the principle of non-contradiction,<sup>21</sup> seem to question the “assumption of rationality” and the principle of “maximization of cogency”<sup>22</sup> with which it would seem appropriate to approach the founder of the Madhyamaka school.

It would at this point seem inevitable, given the difficulties met by the main contemporary Madhyamaka scholars in finding satisfactory solutions to Nāgārjuna’s apparent aporias, to give up and conclude—with Griffith and Tillemans<sup>23</sup>—that *there is no way of finding a solution* to the question of the ultimate sense of Nāgārjuna’s discourse on the two truths. This kind of surrender, however, could only be justified (1) if it were proven that the responsibility of our interpretative difficulties is really due to imprecisions and logical vices of Nāgārjunian wording and not to fundamental faults common to various exegetical procedures; (2) if it were actually confirmed that Nāgārjuna’s words do not allow further interpretations beyond those that have so far been produced by contemporary scholars. If it were so,

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Footnote 19 continued

Shulman—who, as previously mentioned (cf. footnote 12), sets forth an idealistic RMInt verging on nihilism—falls into difficulty with PRIVers even more than with AMIVers: the former, in fact, speak of a ‘reality’ apparently independent from the way we perceive it. And this would seem to contrast with an idealistic interpretation. Faced with such an aporia, Shulman (2007, p. 146, footnote 21), on the one hand trims down the problem (citing just two verses where Nāgārjuna speaks of an “ultimate and unconditioned reality”), and on the other suggests (without, however, arguing in what way) that other passages contrast these PRIVers; finally he surprisingly settles the question stating that, supposedly, “terms such as *tattva*, *dharmaṭā*, and *nirvāṇa*” are not used by Nāgārjuna “as a description of an actual state, but rather as a poetic description of a truth that exists only in the realms of the imagination”.

Or else, with ARMInts in mind, we could mention the exegetical operation of authors such as Garfield or Siderits who, faced with the difficulty of fitting their readings with a fair amount of Nāgārjunian passages, believe they can cut the Gordian Knot and sacrifice one of the two truths arguing that Nāgārjuna’s two truths are identical (cf., Garfield 2009, p. 27) and that, therefore, there exists *just a single truth* (cf. Siderits 2007, p. 203).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ferraro (2012).

<sup>21</sup> The well-known study by Bugault (1983) on the logic and dialectics of the MMK concludes that Nāgārjuna’s philosophy always respects the law of non-contradiction (and, at least partially, that of excluded middle—i.e. insofar as the latter affirms that two contradictory propositions cannot both be true, while the possibility they are both false remains open). The idea of a Nāgārjuna respectful of the law of non-contradiction is generally accepted by other scholars who have dealt with the matter (cf., for example, Seyfort Ruegg 1981, p. 41; Hayes 1988, p. 58; McEvilley 2002, p. 475—the latter, on the basis of an exegesis of VV.70 which I find rather disputable, argues that the law of non-contradiction is broken by Nāgārjuna *only once*).

<sup>22</sup> “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”, Garfield (2008, p. 515).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. footnotes 1–2.

the hypothesis of a substantial unintelligibility of the MMK author would begin to definitely take shape.

However, as I shall try to show in the next section, neither of the two conditions can be said to apply.

## Śūnyatā as Supreme Truth

Irrespective of the peculiarities of their readings, all the main authors who have dealt with the doctrine of the two truths throughout the modern history of Nāgārjuna studies have more or less explicitly considered emptiness (often equated, as Nāgārjuna's text certainly allows,<sup>24</sup> to *pratītyasamutpāda*) as the answer to the question *what is supreme truth?* Peculiarities and divergences between the various readings emerge afterwards, when it comes to establishing the exact meaning of the concept of *śūnyatā*. But, indeed, at the root of the specific interpretative paths, we find the idea that emptiness (whether or not equivalent to dependent co-origination) *is* or *defines* supreme truth: both the authors—‘nihilists’<sup>25</sup> or ‘absolutists’<sup>26</sup>—who defend RMInts, and those who support ARMInts,<sup>27</sup> as well as those whose reading of Nāgārjuna could perhaps be considered to cross over both RMInts and ARMInts,<sup>28</sup> set forth their interpretation of ultimate truth beginning from an understanding of the concept of emptiness.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., for example, MMK.24.18, VV.22.a, ŚS.68 or, in the *stava corpus*, LSt.22.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Wood (1994, p. 193): “The highest truth (*paramārtha-satya*), according to which all dharmas are void [...]”; Tola and Dragonetti (1995, p. xiv): “The true reality (*paramārtha-satya*) can be designated with the words *svabhāvaśūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda*”. Oetke too, in affirming that “the central tenet of Nāgārjuna’s doctrine can be described by the sentence that on the level of the highest truth there is nothing of any kind” (1991, p. 317), is implicitly stating, as for example seems clear from his subsequent analysis of the relationship between *śūnyatā* and *pratītyasamutpāda* (ibid., pp. 320–321), that ultimate truth is equivalent to emptiness.

<sup>26</sup> Typically Scherbatzky (2003, p. 37): “In the ontological sense *śūnya* is the void which is also fullness. [...]. It has been identified with Nirvāṇa, with the Absolute, with Paramārtha-sat (the Supreme Reality), with Tattva (Reality)”; less explicitly, Murti: “Paramārtha Satya or Absolute Truth is the knowledge of the real as it is” (1980, p. 144); “Śūnyatā is not only the negation of drṣṭi (view, judgment), but it is Prajñā” (ibid., p. 160); “Prajñā is knowledge of the entire reality once for all” (ibid., p. 178); more explicitly McCagney (1997, p. 79): “The higher truth is *dharma*s are open-ended (*śūnya*).”

Those scholars who, as mentioned in footnote 19, tend to triplicate Nāgārjunian epistemology, also identify the fundamental *saṃvṛtic* definition of *paramārtha* in emptiness.

<sup>27</sup> Those authors who like Siderits or Garfield attach to supreme truth above all an epistemological sense (“a fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment” [Siderits 2007, p. 202], or a “correct view—a view of things as they in fact are” [Garfield 2002, p. 48]), believe that *paramārtha-satya* itself is equivalent to the intuition of the emptiness of things, i.e. of their inexistence in themselves or of their exclusively conceptual existence: “Emptiness, for a mādhyamika, is an ultimate truth” (Garfield 2002, p. 48).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Seyford Ruegg (1981, pp. 46–47), who affirms that *śūnyatā*, within the MMK, should be considered a synonym of *paramārtha*: “To indicate reality Nāgārjuna has there [in the MMK] confined himself—apart from the well-established words *nirvāṇa* and *śūnyatā*—to the terms *paramārtha* (xxiv. 8, 10), *tattva* (xviii.9 and xxiv.9) and *dharmatā* (xviii.7)”; or Sprung (1973, p. 43), who in a list of possible conceptual equivalents of *paramārtha-satya* in Nāgārjuna, positively includes, among others (basically *tattva*, *dharmatā* and *nirvāṇa*), *śūnyatā*.

There is very little, if any, explicit textual support for the equivalence between emptiness and supreme truth in Nāgārjuna's works.<sup>29</sup> However, the authors who presume it evidently deem it possible to argue that it is *implicitly* contained in Nāgārjunian wording. In fact, if we analyse the decisive chapter 24 of the MMK (on which any argument on the *dve satye* must be necessarily based), we can observe that Nāgārjuna introduces the theory of the two truths in response to an opponent who, in the first 6 verses of the chapter, describes what would appear to be the 'dangers' of emptiness.<sup>30</sup> Against this objection, Nāgārjuna first accuses his opponent of "not understanding the purpose of emptiness, emptiness itself and its sense",<sup>31</sup> and then affirms that "the teaching of the Law of the *Buddhas* is based on two truths".<sup>32</sup> This argumentative procedure would seem to mean that Nāgārjunian emptiness is immune to such criticism, *insofar as* it is a teaching with a supreme epistemological *status*; a superior *status*, in any case, to the *saṃvṛti* type of truth (whatever *saṃvṛti-satya* may actually be). In other words, because to defend his theory of emptiness Nāgārjuna brings in the two truths, it would seem plausible to conclude that *paramārtha-satya* is equivalent to *śūnyatā*.

Now, before dealing with the question whether this conclusion can really be justified on the basis of Nāgārjuna's wording, we can observe that the equivalence between emptiness and supreme truth appears in direct correlation with the aporias (of both the metaphysical and anti-metaphysical interpretations) described in "[Introduction](#)" section. Indeed, if emptiness has some sort of characterization (as 'nothingness', 'the absolute', or any other 'metaphysical' definition of emptiness),

<sup>29</sup> In the works of the *yukti corpus* the only passages where we find an actual approximation (which is not a full and incontrovertible equivalence) between the notion of supreme truth and emptiness are verses 68 and 69.a of ŚŚ: "Since all things are empty of own-being, the incomparable Tathāgata teaches dependent co-origination regarding things. The ultimate meaning consists in that!" (Translation: Lindtner 1997, p. 117). Concerning this passage we can first of all observe that, independently from the recognised trustworthiness of Tibetan translations, these are verses for which the original Sanskrit is not available to us; secondly, strictly speaking, the text talks about 'ultimate meaning' (*don dam pa'i, paramārtha*) and not about the 'truth of ultimate meaning' (*don dam pa'i bden pa*, i.e. *paramārtha-satya*); thirdly, as the title of the work mentions *seventy* stanzas and the (three) versions available to us consist of 73 verses, it is legitimate to hypothesise that the text has undergone some interpolations.

In the *Stava corpus*, in ASt.52 we find: "this is the supreme reality: the teaching whose subject is the lack of own nature". In this case too we can make some considerations: first of all, the hymns, compared to the *yukti* (logical and theoretical) works, offer a less rigorous approach to the philosophical issues they deal with. As Seyfort Ruegg observes (1981, p. 31): "In several of the hymns we find a positive conception of absolute reality (paramārtha) and a cataphatic approach to it, and these features distinguish the hymns philosophically from the apophaticism which characterizes the theoretical scholastic treatises comprising Nāgārjuna's Yukti-corpus". Secondly, the Nāgārjunian authorship of ASt has been questioned (for example by La Vallée Poussin—cf. Seyfort Ruegg 1981, p. 31, note 76—or by Gnoli 1979, p. 12) more often than that of other hymns.

Therefore, though this footnote presents textual data favourable to the equivalence *śūnyatā = paramārtha-satya*, it does not seem to me they can be considered as a sufficient or particularly decisive proof to contrast an interpretation—like the one presented in these pages—which excludes that Nāgārjuna's philosophy is based on this equivalence.

<sup>30</sup> MMK.24.1 "If all this is empty, [then] there is neither origination nor cessation; this entails, for you, the non-existence of the Four Noble Truths". The five following stanzas of MMK.24 list a series of other doctrines and institutions that, in absence of the four noble truths, would in turn be put into question.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. MMK.24.7.

<sup>32</sup> MMK.24.8: *dve satye samupāśritya buddhānām dharmadeśanā*.

this is equivalent to a metaphysical characterization of supreme truth; but then in what sense can the AMIVers be explained, i.e. those passages where Nāgārjuna states that he has no position and that emptiness should be understood as empty? Would a *qualification* of supreme truth not then be a final position? On the other hand, if—in line with ARMInts—we take the term *śūnyatā* not to be denotative<sup>33</sup> and supreme truth (insofar as it is *equivalent* to emptiness) not to be anything but the discovery of the conventionality and conceptuality of all possible phenomenal entities, how then can PRIVers, where Nāgārjuna talks of the existence of a transconceptual *tattva*, be explained?

In sum, taking emptiness to be the equivalent of supreme truth, independently from the way emptiness itself can be interpreted, inevitably seems to lead to an overall reading of Nāgārjuna's thought that is incongruent with crucial points in his work.

At this point it becomes first of all necessary to understand whether the equivalence relation between *śūnyata* and *paramārtha-satya* should be considered definitively established and unquestionable (and hence the previous aporias inevitable) or whether Nāgārjunian wording does not instead allow us to consider another type of relation between the two notions; secondly, it is also necessary to verify whether, starting from a reformulation of the relationship between emptiness and supreme truth, it may not be possible to obtain a reading of the two truth doctrine less problematic, and more coherent with Nāgārjuna's thought.

## The Two Truths and the Teachings Based on them

### Teachings Based on the 2 Truths

If, observing Bronkhorst's invitation to confront the different exegetical hypotheses with the “the exact wording” of the author under examination, we evaluate the equation ‘supreme truth = emptiness’ according to Nāgārjuna's words, we notice that it is neither obvious nor inevitable. No parts of the MMK or VV—i.e. of the two most reliable works of the *yukti corpus* from the textual point of view—that talk about *śūnyatā* authorize the conclusion that it should be considered a *predicate* of *paramārtha-satya* (of *tattva*, *dharma-tā* or *nirvāṇa*). On the contrary, the latter term (and its synonyms), throughout Nāgārjuna's works (except in the two points stressed in footnote 29), never seems to occur as the subject of synthetic judgments.

As we said in the previous section, the main textual support to the judgement ‘supreme truth *is* emptiness’ (whatever the latter may be) is verse MMK.24.8, where Nāgārjuna seems to free emptiness from the objections in the previous verses, by saying that it is a teaching of the *supreme* kind. However, if we re-read the verse in question, we can observe that Nāgārjuna does not speak of doctrines *equivalent to* two truths, but of teachings (*dharma-deśana*) *based on* (*samupāśritya*) two truths.

The semantic weight of the expression “based on” forces us, in my opinion, to review our exegetical approach to the subject of the two truths: in fact, instead of

<sup>33</sup> “The phrase, ‘the ultimate nature of reality’ is a non-denoting expression”, Siderits (1980, p. 333).

starting from the question *what are* the two truths, the term *samupāśritya* suggests to begin our interpretative work from the issue of *which teachings are based* on one truth and which on the other.

The difference between *being equivalent to* and *being based on*, far from being a trivial semantic nuance, is relevant and considerably significant. Indeed, whilst a teaching *equivalent to* a truth is necessarily an ‘*a posteriori* description’ (or at least an attempt at a description) of the latter, the meanings we can give to the metaphor by which the former is *based* on the latter are more than one: for example, a teaching may simply respect the logic of the truth it is based on, it may be inspired by the latter or it may promote its achievement; in any case, it would be a different type of relation from that of identity, which links two terms posed as equivalent. Thence, whilst in the case of equivalence between a teaching and a truth it becomes possible to speak of the latter simply by illustrating the former, a teaching *based on* a truth does not necessarily supply any kind of indication about this truth.

If, therefore, we emphasise Nāgārjuna’s statement that Buddhist teachings *are based* on two truths, the first step towards understanding what they *are* should be to ask ourselves *what teachings are based on them*.

### *Catvāry-ārya-satyāni and Śūnyatā as Saṃvṛti and Paramārtha-samupāśritya Teachings Respectively*

Nāgārjuna’s words in MMK.24 give no explicit indications for an immediate answer to the question of which concepts and doctrines are to be considered based on ordinary truth and on supreme truth respectively. It is also possible to think that *all* of the Buddhas’ teachings are based on *both* truths. However, if we take the *incipit* of MMK.24, the most compelling reading—which reflects the one (introduced at the end of the previous section) that led to considering emptiness an equivalent of supreme truth—seems to be that the teaching on the Four Noble Truths (and of its corollaries) is based on ordinary truth, whilst the teaching on emptiness is based on supreme truth. Other possible readings seem to lead to interpretative hypotheses that are either unlikely<sup>34</sup> or inconsistent with the dramatic framework of the text under scrutiny.<sup>35</sup>

As a textual confirmation of this hypothesis (and the path taken so far) we can quote ŚŚ.1, which states: “Though the Buddhas have spoken of duration, origination, destruction, being, non-being, low, moderate, and excellent by force of worldly convention, [they] have not done [so] in an absolute sense”.<sup>36</sup> The Tibetan *dbang gis*, conveyed by Lindtner with *by force of*, corresponds—if, of course, we take the translation

<sup>34</sup> For example, the hypothesis that the teaching of the Four Noble Truths is based on supreme truth, while that of emptiness is based on ordinary truth.

<sup>35</sup> The hypothesis that the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and that of emptiness are both based on both truths does not allow us to understand in what sense verse MMK.24.8 could be a *reply* to the objection of the first six verses.

<sup>36</sup> Translation: Lindtner (1997, p. 95).

<sup>37</sup> *Vasa*: “dwelling, residence” (Monier-Williams 1986), from *vās*: “habiter, demeurer | passer, s’ejourner; rester” (Huet 2012).

to be really faithful to Nāgārjuna's original Sanskrit—to the Sanskrit ablative *vaśāt*,<sup>37</sup> synonym of *upādāya*,<sup>38</sup> which in turn is equivalent to *samupāśritya* in the meaning of *based on*. This verse, therefore, corroborates first of all the idea that the relation between the teachings of the *Buddhas* and the two plains of truth is not one of identity or equivalence, but one of dependence (of the *dharma-deśana* on the *dve satye*); secondly, the fact that the '*jig rten snyad dbang gis* ("founded on worldly convention") doctrines are those characterized by notions such as 'duration', 'origination', 'destruction', and so on, is another point in favour of the idea that a doctrine like the Four Noble Truths (which undoubtedly makes use of such notions) is *saṃvṛti-samupāśritya*; while the doctrine of emptiness, which questions and refutes these very notions, is based on supreme truth.

### *Other Paramārtha-samupāśritya Teachings*

As well as the teaching of emptiness, strong textual evidence also allows us to consider other Nāgārjunian doctrines *based on* supreme truth. Crucial in this sense is the controversial stanza MMK.24.18.<sup>39</sup> According to my reading, this stanza fundamentally states two things: (1) that the teaching of emptiness must be considered equivalent both to the teaching of dependent co-origination<sup>40</sup> and to that of 'the middle path'<sup>41</sup>; (2) that these teachings, far from being *ultimate definitions* of supreme truth, are philosophical proposals *based on* supreme truth.

The *vexata quaestio* over the sense of the expression *prajñaptir upādāya* in MMK.24.18<sup>42</sup> can, I think, be solved by connecting the gerundive *upādāya* to the *samupāśritya* of the previous verse. *Upādāya*, in 'hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit', can be conveyed as: "on the basis of [...], in view of, in consideration of, on the ground of, because of [...]",<sup>43</sup> in the same way, therefore, as *samupāśritya*. If Nāgārjuna, in MMK.24.8, stated (implicitly) that emptiness is a teaching based on supreme truth,

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Edgerton (1996, p. 145).

<sup>39</sup> "What is «dependent co-origination» we call «emptiness» ; this is a dependent convention, and it is what we call «middle path»".

<sup>40</sup> The equivalence *śūnyatā* = *pratītyasamutpāda* is explicitly confirmed elsewhere in Nāgārjuna's works (cf. footnote 24).

<sup>41</sup> The sense of this triple equivalence, summed up briefly, seems to be: to say that the ideas of things arise in mutual dependence (that they are, in other words, *pratītyasamutpanna*) is the same as saying that things are 'void of essence (*svabhāva*)'; this is also equivalent to saying that things neither *are*, nor absolutely *are not*.

<sup>42</sup> Among the large variety of translations for *prajñapti upādāya* we can quote: Nagao (1992, p. 190): "a designation based upon (some material)"; Pandeya and Manju (1991, p. 47): "use of language in relation to a thing"; Oetke (2007, p. 13): "designation on some basis"; Robinson, cit. in Berger (2010, p. 42): "designation overlaid (on emptiness)"; Kalupahana (1991, p. 339): "dependent upon convention"; Inada (1993, p. 148): "provisional name"; Garfield (2009, p. 31), Huntington (1989, p. 50): "dependent designation"; Arnold cit. in Oetke (2007, p. 2): "relative indication"; Wood (1994, p. 204): "provisional teaching"; May (1959, p. 237): "designation métaphorique".

Definitely non-literal (and implausible) is the meaning conveyed by Sprung (1979, p. 238): "a guiding, not a cognitive, notion, presupposing the everyday"; questionable from the grammatical point of view is the recent suggestion by Berger (2010, p. 47): "once acquired"; lacking any sense, in my opinion, is the translation by Streng (1973, p. 28): "This apprehension, i.e., taking into account (all other things)"

<sup>43</sup> Edgerton (1996).

it would be reasonable to conjecture that in MMK.24.18, where he declares that emptiness (equivalent to ‘dependent co-origination’ and to ‘the middle path’) is a ‘convention’ or a ‘conceptual construction’ (*prajñpatir*) based on (*upādāya*), he is implying *paramārtha-satya* itself as an indirect complement of *upādāya*. In this case, verse 18 would therefore repeat what we have said before—emptiness is based on supreme truth—with the addition that, as well as emptiness, *pratītyasamutpāda* and the notion of *madhyamā-pratipad* too should be considered *paramārtha-samupāśriya* (or *paramārtha-upādāya*).

### Dve Satye

The first phase of our interpretative path leads us to conclude that, while the teaching of the Four Noble Truths (and of its corollaries) can be considered based on ordinary truth, that of emptiness, and of its conceptual equivalents (*pratītyasamutpāda* and *madhyamā-pratipad*) is *paramārtha-samupāśriya*.

This confronts us with the question of *what the dve satye are* from a different position to that (which, as we have seen, is inevitably aporetic) taken by those who confront it by trying to immediately define the supposed conceptual equivalents of the *dve satye* (identifying first of all emptiness as a noun predicate of supreme truth): indeed, having now at our disposal a series of teachings *based on* the two truths, we should be able to *deduce* their meaning starting from the characteristics of the teachings themselves.

Considering, therefore, the doctrines of the Four Noble Truths and of emptiness, the first thing we ask ourselves is whether we can identify in these any distinctive epistemological features that would allow us to distinguish between them. The answer is most certainly positive: first of all, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths is built respecting the category of ‘individual substance’; emptiness theory (as *niḥsvabhāvata* of all the *dharma*s), on the other hand, is equivalent, precisely, to the exclusion of that same category. Indeed, the *āryasatyāni* start from the datum of *individual* suffering, they identify its *specific* causes and, lastly, propose a path to put an end to it *individually*. The Nāgārjunian doctrine of emptiness, on the contrary, by setting in more philosophically elaborate terms<sup>44</sup> what in the *sūtra prajñāpāramitā* is often expressed directly and axiomatically, *empties* the noble truths (and any other possible teaching) of any potential substantiality.

The second relevant distinctive epistemological feature of a Buddhist teaching such as the *āryasatyāni* is that it respects the category of transitive causality, according to which x causes y ( $x \rightarrow y$ ): *dukkha* is undoubtedly presented as a *product* of *taṇhā*; and the eightfold path *determines* the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. On the other hand, the Nāgārjunian version of the *pratītya-samutpāda*—which we take to be equivalent to that of emptiness and, therefore, like the latter *based* on supreme truth—puts forward the idea of a mutual causality ( $x \leftrightarrow y$ ) and, in any case, denies<sup>45</sup> that the category of transitive causality can be reconstructed in rational terms.

<sup>44</sup> Consider, for example, the explicit, unequivocal denial of the noble truths in the *Hṛdaya-sūtra*.

<sup>45</sup> Typically in MMK.I.

Thirdly, while the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths seems to fully respect the categories of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’,<sup>46</sup> the conception of the middle path (another *paramārtha-samupāśritya* teaching) states that both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ are untenable positions.<sup>47</sup>

Hence we can conclude that the Four Noble Truths make use of specific notions (derived from the more general categories of substance, causality, being and non-being)—such as, for example, those of ‘duration’, ‘origination’, ‘destruction’, and others pointed out in ŚS.1—systematically confuted, especially in the MMK, by Nāgārjuna’s *paramārtha-samupāśritya* teachings.

### *Samvṛti-satya*

So, on *saṃvṛti-satya* are based teachings<sup>48</sup> that, though they do not in themselves qualify as ‘conventional truth’, are, however, constructed respecting the categories of individual substance, transitive causality, being and non-being, as well as several other more specific notions; categories and notions Nāgārjuna dedicates himself to confuting in several chapters of his MMK.

If, bearing this fact in mind, we ask what conventional truth consists of, we can reasonably identify in it the way ‘common man’ (but also, undoubtedly, the metaphysical *ābhidharmika*) epistemically relates to the real—that is, projecting upon it the idea of *svabhāva*. My hypothesis is then that *saṃvṛti-satya* is nothing more than the ordinary cognitive approach; i.e. that which appears *real* to the world or, in other words, common sense. As Bhāviveka explains, the *saṃvṛtic* dimension is equivalent to statements like: “entities such as form, etc., arise, stay, and pass away”, “Devadatta goes”, “Viṣṇumitra eats”, “Somadatta meditates”, “Brahmadatta achieves liberation”.<sup>49</sup>

*Satya*, then, which has a generally ambiguous meaning in Sanskrit (one that oscillates between an epistemological and an ontological sense<sup>50</sup>), in this particular context seems to have a purely epistemological sense: what is *seen as* or *considered* real. In this sense, the critique coming from both Brahmanic and Yogācāra Buddhist environments,<sup>51</sup> according to which the Madhyamaka contradicts itself in defining

<sup>46</sup> For example, suffering *exists* in the first truth (*idam dukkham*) and ceases, i.e. *no longer exists*, in the third (*idam dukkhanirodha*).

<sup>47</sup> Consider, for example, verses such as MMK.5.8, 15.7, 15.10 or 18.6.

<sup>48</sup> Significantly, Candrakīrti, questioning the “sense of teachings the object of which is not supreme (*deśanāyā prayojanam-aparama-arthayā*)”, includes in these, as well as the four *āryasatyāni*, also Buddha’s teachings on the *skandha*, the *dhatu*, the *āyatana* and the *pratītyasamutpāda*- (cf. PP.494.6-7): all doctrines centred on the categories of individual substance and transitive causality (the notion of *pratītyasamutpāda* Candrakīrti refers to is evidently the original canonical one, centred on an idea of transitive and non-mutual causality).

<sup>49</sup> Translation: Uryuzu (1971, p. 33).

<sup>50</sup> “[satya] can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as «real» or «actual thing»” Gethin (1998, p. 60).

<sup>51</sup> The *Mīmāṃsaka* Kumārila Bhaṭṭa typically asks: “there can be no reality in «saṃvṛti» (Falsity); and as such how can it be a form of reality? If it is reality, how can it be «saṃvṛti»? If it is false, how can it be real?” (Ślokavārttika, V.3.6—Translation: Ganga Nath Jha 1983, pp. 119–120). The *Yogācārin* Dharmapāla makes similar observations (cf. Lindtner 1981, p. 163).

‘true’ (*satya*) what is actually false (*saṃvṛti*), is unfounded. Indeed, *saṃvṛti-satya* is not a supposed (but necessarily non-existent) *reality* plan alternative to the *reality* of the *Buddhas*; it is simply a way of seeing things *believed to be true* in the dimension of worldly transactions (*loka-vyavahāra*). Therefore, Bhāviveka can conclude, conceptions belonging to the *loka-saṃvṛti* dimension “are not false because they are worldly conventional”.<sup>52</sup>

### *Paramārtha-satya*

The epistemological specificity of emptiness doctrine, of dependent co-origination and of the middle path is, as we have mentioned, the fact that they contradict the main logical categories on which ordinary truth is based.<sup>53</sup> In short, in a rigorously apophatic way, the teachings based on supreme truth simply affirm that reality does not correspond to the vision we ordinarily have of it: the phenomenal level and the dimension of the *dharma*s are both equally lacking the substantiality that common sense and ‘realistic-pluralistic’ philosophies respectively assign to them. The dichotomies being/non-being, identity/difference—structural and unavoidable at the level of *saṃvṛti-satya*—are confuted by *paramārtha-samupāśritya* teachings.

Given these general epistemological characteristics of teachings based on supreme truth, what could the latter consist of? Undoubtedly of a *truth*, i.e., keeping to what we concluded for *saṃvṛti-satya*, of a ‘vision of the world’, a cognitive modality of relating to reality. A vision which, apart from the ‘analytic’ qualification of *parama*,<sup>54</sup> we can only connote negatively: a way of ‘knowing’ different from the ordinary; hence a mode in which the categories of individual substance, of transitive causality, of being and non-being do not operate. On the basis of teachings based on supreme truth—which are, after all, our only source for dealing with the question of the meaning of *paramārtha-satya*—, we can say no more about it. Which is therefore equivalent to saying that supreme truth can only be *posed*, proposed as an epistemic alternative to ordinary truth, but is by no means *qualified* or *described*.

In Kantian terms, *paramārtha-satya* is never in Nāgārjuna’s text the subject of synthetic judgments, but only of the following analytic judgment: supreme truth is an attainment (*artha*) of epistemic (*satya*) kind, which transcends (*parama*) ordinary (logical-discursive) cognitive experience.

<sup>52</sup> Translation: Uryuzu (1971, p. 33).

<sup>53</sup> By stating that Nāgārjuna’s discourses contradict the ‘logical categories’ of ordinary truth, I am of course not implying that he also breaks the ‘rules of logic’ (for which cf. footnote 21).

<sup>54</sup> «Ultimate» (*parama*) indicates that it is the supreme (*uttama*)”, Bhāviveka, *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa*, cit. em Lindtner (1981, p. 172).

## 'Skill in Means' (*upāya-kauśalya*)

### Pedagogical Contingencies and Didactic Register

A crucial question that presents itself at this point is understanding *why* the *Buddhas* use this double philosophical register: why does the Buddha Śakyamuni—who, by definition, enjoys the supreme level of truth—often use (beginning with his first sermon) the *saṃvṛti-samupāśritya* register? Why are not all his teachings *paramārtha-samupāśritya*, like Nāgārjuna's? Could not this alternation of teachings based on one or the other truth be a sign of the ambiguity or uncertainty that some authors detect in the teaching of the Buddha<sup>55</sup>? And, furthermore, should Nāgārjuna's philosophy, entirely based on the supreme epistemic modality as it is, not be considered *superior* to the Buddha's?

To answer these questions it is necessary at this point to introduce in the path taken up to this point the notion of *upāya-kauśalya*, which notwithstanding its utmost importance has, according to many,<sup>56</sup> been underrated or neglected in modern Buddhological studies.

In the light of this notion, the use of different philosophical registers—sometimes based on the vision of ordinary men, sometimes on that of the enlightened—is no more than a pedagogical expedient by the *Buddhas* to instruct and 'motivate' their interlocutors, who have different levels of maturity at the philosophical and spiritual level.

According to the circumstances, therefore, it is sometimes necessary for the *dharma-deśanā* to respect the categories (of individual substance and so on) of ordinary truth. In fact, as Āryadeva explains, "Just as a barbarian cannot be guided in a foreign language, ordinary people cannot be guided except by way of the ordinary".<sup>57</sup> With a great pedagogical acumen, Āryadeva also notes how a teaching that contrasts too sharply with the disciple's vision of reality could 'traumatize' the latter, inhibiting any further progress on the path of Dharma. Thence, "that for which someone has liking should first be assessed. Those who are disinclined will not be vessels for the excellent teaching".<sup>58</sup> While, on the other hand, in the case of disciples who are better equipped intellectually, it becomes possible and necessary to change register and propose teachings contrasting and contradicting ordinary truth.

In my opinion it is of great significance that those which are traditionally considered the Buddha's first two speeches<sup>59</sup>—where the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and that of *anattā* (the philosophical antecedent of *śūnyatā-vāda*) are introduced—are respectively built complying with ordinary truth and in contradiction with it. In this way, it is as if in his first two sermons the Buddha were offering

<sup>55</sup> "[T]he Buddha is found often to make equivocal statements. [...] [T]o many the Buddha sounds obscure, ambiguous, or paradoxical" Narain (1997, p. 8).

<sup>56</sup> Cf., for example, Pye (1978, p. 1); or Schroeder (2004, p. 10).

<sup>57</sup> *Catuhśatakaśāstra-kārikā*.194, translation: Sonam (2008, p. 196).

<sup>58</sup> *Catuhśatakaśāstra-kārikā*.110, translation: Sonam (2008, p. 139).

<sup>59</sup> The *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* (SN.56.11) and the *Anattalakkhana-sutta* (SN.22.59).

the main coordinates of his pedagogical programme: his teachings sometimes will reflect the vision of ordinary men, and at other times will be based on the vision that transcends *samvṛti-satya*.

The fact that Nāgārjuna makes exclusive use of the *paramārtha-samupāśritya* pedagogical register simply indicates that his target is an audience devoted to a substantialist (hence in some ways *samvṛtic*) vision of reality, but also a philosophically mature one: one with “wings”<sup>60</sup> well-developed enough to bear the impact of ‘traumatic’ teachings such as those on emptiness, etc.

### The Pedagogical Purposes of Nāgārjuna’s *Paramārtha-Samupāśritya* Teachings

Now, the fact that the teachings of the Buddhas depend on the abilities and ideas of their interlocutors determines the fact that no explanation of reality can be considered final and definitive. We cannot say that the doctrine of *anattā* or that of emptiness are, in absolute terms, *more true* than the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. This because, as we have said previously, the teachings do not express the truths they are based on, nor do they correspond to them.

The fundamental category to justify a doctrine is not its truthfulness, but its *effectiveness*. The notion of *upāya* consists in the idea that words, that philosophy, are not an end, a point of arrival, but only a means: they should be considered—as the Buddha stresses in a well-known passage of the *Mahātaṇhāsaiṅkaya-sutta*<sup>61</sup>—as a raft (*kullūpamāṇ*), “to be used to cross the stream, and not with the purpose to cling on to it”.<sup>62</sup> What the Buddha’s disciples should do is “not adhere” (*na allīyetha*) to his teachings, nor “hoarding them” (*na kelāyetha*), not make them “the object of their own greed” (*na dhanāyetha*), nor treat them “as if they were a property” (*na mamāyetha*).

Returning, then, to Nāgārjuna and his *paramārtha-samupāśritya* teachings, it is crucial to bear in mind that, in the light of the notion of *upāya*, they should not be understood as a definitive philosophical proposal, as a metaphysics valid in all circumstances. On the contrary, Nāgārjuna’s reasoning are only valid within the specific context they are pronounced in; that is of a critique of the *ābhidharma*ka schools (and first and foremost of the Sarvāstivāda school) which—evidently forgetful of the Buddha’s call not to adopt any point of view as definitive—built a (realistic-pluralistic) metaphysics which they then ‘wrapped around’,<sup>63</sup> themselves and clung on to.

To talk about the void, of mutual causation, of middle path, therefore, has no absolute sense, it is not meant to be a description of reality in itself, but only a pedagogical and soteriological device to contrast the typically ‘philosophical’ tendency to absolutize theory and mistake the raft for the shore to reach.

<sup>60</sup> “[T]he intellectually inept [...] may be destroyed, like a bird with undeveloped wing feathers thrown from its nest”, Candrakīrti, YŚvṛ ad YŚ.30, translation: Loizzo (2007, p. 182).

<sup>61</sup> MN.38.

<sup>62</sup> MN.38: *kullūpamāṇ dhammāṇ desitāñ ājāneyyātha nittharaṇathāya no gahaṇatthāyā*.

<sup>63</sup> As the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (DN.1) explains, to speculate on the different metaphysical theories is equivalent to being caught in a net, from which it is impossible to free oneself.

It is possible to suppose that, had he not been addressing interlocutors who absolutized a ‘substantialist’ vision of reality, but ones who instead defended, for example, nihilist positions, Nāgārjuna would not have used a negative language like that of emptiness. Moreover, it is fundamental for the audience he addresses not to make the mistake of considering his teachings absolute, but to understand instead their merely instrumental sense.

Nāgārjuna, to conclude, is not putting forward a *metaphysics* alternative to that of *sarvāstivādin*; ‘emptiness’ and ‘non-emptiness’—as we are reminded in MMK.22.11—do not define an ultimate vision of things: they are talked about “for contingent purposes” (*prajñapti-ar�am*); *śūnyatā* and its conceptual equivalents (*pratītyasa-mutpāda* and *madhyamā-pratipad*) are simply “a convention founded (*prajñaptir-upādāya*) [on supreme truth]”; and again, “emptiness was defined by the *Buddhas* as a ‘means for the relinquishing’ (*nihsaranam*) of all points of view”.<sup>64</sup> As Ganeri<sup>65</sup> notes, Nāgārjunian formulas on emptiness should be considered a sort of Trojan horse: their purpose is not that of settling in the Buddhist disciple’s mind, but to ‘burn’ together with all other metaphysical theories.

### Peculiarities of the Pedagogical Interpretation

The definition of ‘pedagogical interpretation’ given to this reading of Nāgārjuna’s thought wants to stress the fact that the two truths, far from being in themselves the *object* of the speeches of the *Buddhas*, are rather the *epistemic base* of their teaching. The various images, doctrines and reasonings through which the teachings of the *Buddhas* are structured and develop—all in any case finalized to the attainment of supreme truth—are constructed according to the different pedagogical needs imposed by the interlocutors to which they are directed.

In relation to the previous classification, which divided between RMInts and ARMInts the various readings of Nāgārjuna’s thought that we can trace today, the pedagogical interpretation occupies a peculiar position: it is, in fact, insofar as it recognizes the existence of a vision of *reality* transcending the ordinary epistemic level, a *realistic* reading; on the other hand, as it does not put forward any definition of that reality, and actually contrasts the tendency to attach a predicate to *paramārtha*, it qualifies as an ‘anti-metaphysical reading’.

### A Comparison of the Pedagogical Interpretation with the Nāgārjunian *wording*

The interpretative path so far undertaken has led us to the conclusion that the two truths are no more than two different epistemic modalities, i.e. two different cognitive approaches to reality: 1) the ordinary approach, focused on the categories of substance, causality, and on the various other categories (qualitative, quantitative, spatiotemporal, relational, and so on) inherent to substance. A ‘truth’ which, being ordinary, is easy to recognize and perfectly familiar to us (which perhaps also

<sup>64</sup> MMK.13.8.a-b: *śūnyatā sarva-drṣṭinām proktā nihsaranam jinaiḥ*.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Ganeri (2007, p. 105).

explains why Nāgārjuna does not feel the need to linger over it); 2) the extraordinary epistemic approach, that of the *Buddhas*, which sets itself beyond any reasoning or discursive account, and which is instead, as MMK.18.9 reminds us, the ‘pacification’ (*sānta*) of ‘mental proliferation’; of this, all that can be said is that it is ulterior compared to ordinary truth.

Now, it is possible to build a ‘pedagogy’ on both these epistemic levels: teachings based on *saṃvṛti-satya*—for a philosophically less mature audience—follow the logical categories of the latter; *paramārtha-samupāśritya* teachings, on the other hand, addressed to an intellectually more sophisticated audience, only limit themselves to denying these categories, bringing out their limits, incongruities and their definitive untenability.

It is decisively important to stress once more that there is no identity between ‘truths’ and ‘the teachings based on them’: a teaching like the Four Noble Truths, respectful of the logical categories of ordinary truth, can under no circumstance be said to be ‘an ordinary truth’ in itself. In the same way, emptiness and its conceptual equivalents *are not* supreme truth, but only discourses constructed in contradiction with the categories of ordinary truth. Of supreme truth Nāgārjuna coherently preaches nothing and actually opposes any attempt at qualifying *paramārtha-satya*: his conception, therefore, should be understood as rigorously anti-metaphysical.

These conclusion must now be examined according to Nāgārjuna’s wording.

The RMInts and ARMIInts mentioned in “[Introduction](#)” section clashed respectively with verses of the AMIVer and PRIVer type, thus proving to be philologically questionable. The interpretative proposal presented in these pages, on the other hand, centred on the distinction between *satya* and *dharma-deśanā*, seems capable of withstanding the double challenge represented by those same verses.

### Pedagogical Interpretation and PRIVers

The pedagogical interpretation seems immediately in synch with PRIVers. Indeed, it does not deny a supreme, transconceptual and transdiscursive epistemic dimension, possible to reach through the precepts of the Eightfold Path. The ordinary mode of seeing and conceiving things can be transcended by an extra-ordinary cognitive modality, the *nirvāṇa*, the ‘truth of the supreme level’, the vision of the *tattva*—i.e. of reality as it is in itself, free from ‘substantialistic’ projections typical of common man’s cognitive approach.

#### *MMK.24.10.a-b*

One somewhat problematic passage for the pedagogical reading could be MMK.24.10.a-b, which reads:

Without relying upon the conventional (*vyavahāra*), the supreme is not displayed.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate.*

This verse, by asserting the propaedeutic nature of the *vyavahāra* (i.e. of *samvṛti-satya*<sup>67</sup>) towards *paramārtha*, could be understood as saying that ordinary truth *gives verbal expression* to ultimate truth; the latter is indeed silent and ineffable; however, at least one of its dimensions would be susceptible to being expressed, via logical and linguistic instruments that belong necessarily to the *samvṛti* level.

This reading is of course a strong point of those RMInts that—taking their inspiration from the *svātantrika* passages that distinguish between two dimensions of *paramārtha-satya*—try to face the challenge posed by the AMIVers by means of a substantial tripartition of Nāgārjuna's epistemology.<sup>68</sup>

A good confirmation of the idea that in MMK.24.10 Nāgārjuna is asserting that *saṃvṛti-satya* expresses (the ‘wordly’ dimension of) *paramārtha-satya* is to be found in ChL *ad* MMK.24.10: “The ultimate meaning is entirely dependent on words and expressions, and words and expressions are mundane and conventional. Therefore, without reliance on the conventional and the mundane, the ultimate meaning cannot be expounded”.<sup>69</sup>

The interpretation of ordinary truth as an *expression* of supreme truth naturally opposes the pedagogical reading proposed here, according to which the two truths are two different ways of relating to reality cognitively.

However, this is definitely not the only possible interpretation of the verse in question. In the laconic commentaries by Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti,<sup>70</sup> the propaedeutic nature of *samvṛti-satya* towards *paramārtha* is presented generically. The former states: “that which is quite beyond the discrimination in the absolute cannot be understood without relying upon something”<sup>71</sup>; the latter—after introducing the verse and limiting himself to paraphrasing it<sup>72</sup>—concludes: “initially ordinary truth, as it has been defined, must necessarily be accepted, for the fact that [it] is a means for the attainment of the *nirvāṇa*. Like a container for those who want water”.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>67</sup> The equivalence between *loka-vyavahāra* and *loka-samvṛti-satya* is explicit both in Bhāviveka (“the worldly-conventional [*lokasaṃvṛti*] is worldly designation [*lokavyavahāra*], translation: Uryuzu 1971, p. 33) and Candrakīrti, who, after proposing other meanings of ‘ordinary truth’, explains that it could mean ‘convention’ (*samketa*) and precisely *lokavyavahāra* (PP.492.11-12). The latter, Candrakīrti (ibid.) goes on to explain, should be understood as “characterized by signifier and signified, knowledge and known object, and so on.” (*sa cābhidhānābhidheya-jñānajñeyādi-lakṣaṇah*).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Footnote 19.

<sup>69</sup> Translation: Bocking (1993, p. 343).

<sup>70</sup> The conciseness and approximation of Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti's commentaries *ad* MMK.24.10 is quite surprising if we consider the relevance the verse in question seems to have in the economy of the discourse Nāgārjuna develops in MMK.24. A possible conjecture is that the two commentators, uncertain about the sense to give to the advocated propaedeutic nature of ordinary truth compared to the supreme, choose to be cautious and substantially limit themselves to reasserting what is already contained in the commented text: i.e. that *saṃvṛti-satya* is useful for and functional to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>71</sup> Translation: Uryuzu (1971, p. 35).

<sup>72</sup> PP.494.8-9: *laukikam vyavahāram-anabhyupagamya [...] aśakya eva paramārtha deśayitum*.

<sup>73</sup> PP.494.14-15: *nirvāṇa-adhigama-upāyatvād-avaśyam-eva yathāvasthitā samvṛtirādar-eva-abhyupeyā | bhājanamiva salilārthineti*.

Now, a generic reading of MMK.24.10—that is, one that simply states that *saṃvṛti-satya* is necessary and indispensable for attaining *paramārtha*, without going as far as saying that it *gives verbal expression* to supreme truth itself—is perfectly compatible with the pedagogical interpretation. According to the latter, in *pādas* a-b of MMK.24.10, Nāgārjuna is simply affirming that the Buddhist formative path must in any case start from the teachings based on conventional truth; to immediately present *paramārtha-samupāśritya* discourses to disciples lacking *saṃvṛti-samupāśritya* notions could be misleading and hazardous.<sup>74</sup> As already observed, the fact that the *anattā-vāda* speech of the Buddha follows the teaching on the Four Noble Truths is not accidental: without having undergone an education based on the *vyavahāra* vision, speeches like those about emptiness, on mutual causality, or about the middle path would not be understood correctly.

It is also possible to observe that this reading of the verse under examination appears—compared to the reading that makes *saṃvṛti-satya* equivalent to a worldly, or in any case discursive, dimension of *paramārtha*—more coherent with the ‘dramatic context’ of chapter 24 of the MMK: it is not clear in what way the idea that conventional truth is a means of *expressing* the (ineffable) supreme truth could constitute a reply to an objection, like that of the first six stanzas, which pointed out the potential contradiction between the teaching of emptiness and that of the Four Noble Truths.

#### *MMK.24.10.c-d*

Some doubts as to the interpretation set forth in these pages could also arise in the second part of MMK.24.10:

Without reaching the supreme, *nirvāṇa* cannot be realized<sup>75</sup>

This verse may be pointing not to the equivalence between supreme truth and *nirvāṇa* (as the pedagogical interpretation argues), but to the propaedeutic nature of the former towards the latter, which would then have to be considered a distinct ulterior dimension with respect to *paramārtha*.

Undoubtedly, a distinction between *paramārtha* and *nirvāṇa* would not be problematic for the pedagogical interpretation alone, but for several other readings of the *dve satye* in Nāgārjuna<sup>76</sup>: in what sense could *nirvāṇa* be a further level with respect to a truth defined as *supreme*? Should perhaps *nirvāṇa* be understood as an ontic dimension, which could be reached starting from the supreme epistemic

<sup>74</sup> Cf. footnotes 57, 58 and 60.

<sup>75</sup> *paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇam nādhigamyate //*

<sup>76</sup> A reading of this kind could, however, once again be a point in favour of the tripartition of Nāgārjunian epistemology. Sprung reads the verse in this sense: “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, distinguishing between the higher (more true) truth about everyday things (*paramārtha*), i.e. that things are *sūnya*, and the realization of that truth in enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*”, Sprung (1979, p. 16). Such a reading obviously marks a change in Sprung’s interpretation of this verse, since we also find in his work (as remarked in footnote 28) the idea that *paramārtha-satya* and *nirvāṇa* are synonyms.

dimension? But in what way would such an idea be congruous with those passages—typically, for example, MMK.25.19–20—that seem to exclude the fact that *nirvāṇa* is a level of reality different from the ordinary?

In any case, the conclusion that *paramārtha* is a dimension anterior (and inferior) to *nirvāṇa* and separated from it, is definitely not the only one that the letter of the verse being examined authorizes: it is also possible to take Nāgārjuna’s words in the simple sense that “*nirvāṇa* cannot be reached without supreme truth” because supreme truth is *nirvāṇa*. This, moreover, seems the sense in which Candrakīrti reads the verse: he defines ordinary reality as a means for reaching *nirvāṇa* directly (i.e. without going through an intermediate stage, a supreme one, but one supposedly inferior to *nirvāṇa*).<sup>77</sup> Candrakīrti, in other words, by not quoting in his commentary the expression *paramārtha* that Nāgārjuna uses in *pāda c* of the verse, shows that he considers *paramārtha* itself not a precondition of *nirvāṇa* and something distinct from it, but one of its conceptual equivalents.

### Pedagogical Interpretation and AMIVers

The pedagogical interpretation suggests that Nāgārjuna *says nothing* which is directly referable to the supreme epistemic level. *Paramārtha-satya* is never the subject of synthetic judgments; so it is impossible to establish for it any non-analytical predicate. The peculiarity of Nāgārjuna’s thought—within the vast family of philosophers who in the history of universal thought preach the existence of an extraordinary cognitive dimension—is precisely his programmatic refusal to offer any kind of definition for the ineffable and his attack against any attempt at a conceptual approximation of the unconceivable. In other words, the most authentic and original characteristic of his thought is the condemnation of any kind of ‘metaphysics’.

All this is fully coherent with the AMIVers: emptiness is not a *description* of supreme truth; it is simply a *pedagogical expedient* (conceived on the basis of the extraordinary vision) to contrast and question the ordinary mode of relating cognitively to the real. Insofar as it is a pedagogical expedient, it does not have absolute validity, but is valid only under specific circumstances. For this reason Nāgārjuna can say that *śūnyatā* is a “convention” (*prajñapti*) or a “means” (towards the specific finality of “getting rid of” [*nihṣaranam*]), and that we speak about it “for contingent purposes” (*prajñapti-arthaṁ*). The worst mistake the reader of Nāgārjuna could make is just that of turning what is only a *means*—a raft—into an end, i.e. into a definitive position, into a metaphysics of emptiness. Whoever were to carry out an operation of this kind could quite rightly be defined as “incurable” (*asādhyān*).<sup>78</sup> So, when Nāgārjuna talks about ‘emptiness’, he is not putting forth—within a ‘philosophical market’ rich in metaphysics like the Indian—his personal proposal for defining supreme truth. In this sense, he can rightly say he “has no position”. Indeed, emptiness cannot be said to be *his* position, because outside the context in which Nāgārjuna proposes it—polemical with his coreligionists, excessively tangled up in substantialist descriptions of reality in itself—he

<sup>77</sup> Cf. footnote 73.

<sup>78</sup> MMK.13.8.d.

would most likely not defend it. In this sense, finally, the sense of the (Candrakīrtian<sup>79</sup>) formula “emptiness of emptiness” also becomes comprehensible: emptiness is not a discourse with an ‘own nature’, i.e. with an epistemological autonomy; but rather, like all other concepts examined by Nāgārjuna, it is ‘contingent’ and ‘conventional’. It is a question, therefore, of a notion co-originated in mutual dependence with its conceptual counterpart: non-emptiness; i.e. the substantiality present in the teachings of the *ābhidharma* schools that Nāgārjuna opposes. Lacking the idea of substance, the idea of emptiness too loses meaning and fades away.

#### *MMK.25.19-20*

A potential obstacle to the pedagogical interpretation—centred as it is on the *distinction* between two epistemic dimensions, the ordinary and the extraordinary—could consist in the aforementioned (cf. footnote 18) equation between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* proposed by Nāgārjuna in MMK.25.19-20.<sup>80</sup>

A possible reading of these two *kārikās* could lead to the (typically ARMInt) conclusion that ultimately for Nāgārjuna truth is only one.<sup>81</sup> However, it seems to me that there are founded reasons<sup>82</sup> to understand this equation as the simple idea that the two truths should not be understood as relating to two different *realities*: the object of the *two* visions—the ordinary one of *samsāra* and the extraordinary one of *nirvāṇa*—is the same. *Nirvāṇa*, in other words, is not equal to the attainment of *another level of reality*, of an ontological dimension beyond ordinary vision: in short, the *reality* of *samsāra* and of *nirvāṇa* is the same. *Samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are only two different epistemic dimensions, two different modes of cognitively relating to the unique reality: the first mode superimposes upon reality, primarily and fundamentally, the idea of *svabhāva*; of the second mode, instead, it is not possible to say anything, except that it is, precisely, a different and ulterior mode with respect to the ordinary.

So, stanzas MMK.24.10 and MMK.25.19-20, potentially problematic for the pedagogical interpretation, prove to be susceptible to readings perfectly coherent with it. Only verses ŠS.69 and ASt.52<sup>83</sup> in the end remain more sharply in contrast with this type of interpretation: not too much, if we consider everything that opposes RMInt and ARMInt readings. Comparison with the Nāgājunian *wording* seems, in conclusion, to give strength to the interpretation of the doctrine of the two truths set forth in these pages.

<sup>79</sup> It is in MA.185-186 that Candrakīrti talks of *stong nyid stong nyid*, i.e. of *śūnyatā-śūnyatā*.

<sup>80</sup> *na samsārasya nirvāṇāt kiṃcid asti višeṣanam / na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid asti višeṣanam // nirvāṇāsyā ca yā kotiḥ kotiḥ saṃsaraṇasyā ca / na tayor antarām kiṃcit susūkṣmam api vidiyatell*

<sup>81</sup> Cf. footnote 19.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Bugault (1992) and Ferraro (2012).

<sup>83</sup> Cf. footnote 29.

## Commentarial and ‘Contextual’ Dimensions of Nāgārjuna’s Thought

As well as a direct comparison with Nāgārjuna’s words, an exegetical proposal of a doctrine by the author of the MMK should take into consideration at least another two dimensions: that of the ancient commentarial tradition that accompanies his writings and that of the scholastic philosophical context within which he lived and worked.

### Methodological Considerations on the Use of the Commentaries

The words and exegetical points of view of the author of the AKBh, of the author of the ChL,<sup>84</sup> of Buddhapālita, Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti, can undoubtedly be taken as elements favourable or contrary to one or another interpretational hypothesis for the Nāgārjunian text; in my opinion, however, from the methodological point of view, the analysis of Nāgārjuna’s verses and the evaluation of his commentators’ wording are philological operations that should be kept apart.<sup>85</sup> As Oetke observes (as part of a discourse aimed at reducing the weight to attach to the ‘exegetical traditions’ in understanding the words of a given author<sup>86</sup>): “interpretation of utterances is ‘autonomous’ in the sense that under normal circumstances it does not rely on interpretations made by other subjects”.<sup>87</sup>

It seems to me that the expression *normal circumstances* can be understood in the sense that we can consider *normal* those situations where the text to interpret is ‘readable’, i.e. internally consistent, significant and lacking any macroscopically ambiguous or contradictory passages. Resorting to the point of view of Nāgārjuna’s commentators would appear absolutely unavoidable, and inseparable from the exegetical operations concerning the meaning of his philosophy,<sup>88</sup> only in the hypothesis—for example in those by Griffith and by Tillemans quoted above<sup>89</sup>—that Nāgārjuna’s words are imprecise, deceptive and do not allow to identify an univocal and coherent meaning. However, at least in the case of the doctrine of the two truths, Nāgārjuna’s words and arguments do not seem to lead to a definitive exegetical *impasse*. On the contrary, like we have tried to show in these pages, a reading of his thinking consistent with his most significant verses is possible.

<sup>84</sup> Providing that, of course, the versions of AKBh and ChL available to us are not two different translations of the same original Sanskrit text.

<sup>85</sup> Only if it were proven that AKBh is an *auto*-commentary, then obviously its reading could not be separated from that of the MMK. The thesis of a Nāgārjunian paternity for the AKBh, however, does not seem to me to be seriously upheld by any of the authors who have most seriously devoted themselves to establishing the paternity of Nāgārjuna’s works.

<sup>86</sup> “The limitations of the relevance of an ‘exegetical tradition’ need to be clearly recognized” (Oetke 2003, p. 462).

<sup>87</sup> Oetke (2003, p. 461).

<sup>88</sup> For example, coherently with his scepticism regarding the opportunity to detect “what Nāgārjuna himself really meant”, Tillemans suspects that the reading of the MMK is impossible “apart from how he was interpreted” (Tillemans 2001, p. 519).

<sup>89</sup> Cf. “Introduction” section.

A second observation is that, in all cases, independently from the actual ‘readability’ of the Nāgārjunian text, to give the ancient commentators a determinant and conclusive weight in relation to our conclusions on the MMK, we should assume that their readings always faithfully reflect the sense of the commented text; and hence that they should in any case be considered preferable to what we understand today of Nāgārjuna’s text. However, evidence like that presented by Shulman on Candrakīrti’s interpretation of the crucial first verse of MMK.2,<sup>90</sup> proves that such an assumption is untenable.

In short, the comparison between our reading and the wording of the ancient commentators appears as an undoubtedly important exegetical operation, but different from and additional to the analysis of Nāgārjuna’s words themselves. Therefore, rather than a reading of Nāgārjuna *through* his commentators, it would seem methodologically more correct to read Nāgārjuna *and* his ancient interpreters. The observations by the latter (favourable<sup>91</sup> or contrary<sup>92</sup>)—significant with regard to a scrutiny of their specific comprehension of the MMK, and crucial to understanding any ambiguous Nāgārjunian words or phrases—should not condition or alter our reading of those passages in which the sense of Nāgārjuna’s words presents itself more clearly or unequivocally.

### The Pedagogical Interpretation and the Nāgārjunian Scholastic Environment

A different aspect from the relation between Nāgārjuna and his commentators, is the comparison between the interpretation of a Nāgārjunian theory and the ‘contextual’ dimension we should consider it part of. On the basis of the data available to us, it is not possible to establish any accurate or definitive features of this dimension, but only some general coordinates: firstly, for example, we can consider Nāgārjuna’s doctrines as part of the initial phase of *mahāyāna* thinking;<sup>93</sup> secondly, his

<sup>90</sup> The analysis by Shulman (2010) of verse MMK.2.1 and of those verses (MMK.3.3, 7.14, 10.3 and 16.7) where MMK.2.1 is cited by Nāgārjuna, inevitably leads to the conclusion that “the idea expressed by Nāgārjuna is different from the one made by Candrakīrti” (Shulman 2010, p. 406). At the end of his analysis, Shulman’s conclusion is that “we need not blindly accept Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamaka* as an utterly faithful exposition of Nāgārjuna’s thought” (*ibid.*, p. 409).

<sup>91</sup> Cf., for example, Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka’s observations on conventional truth quoted in footnotes 48 and 49.

<sup>92</sup> For example, Candrakīrti, accounting for MMK.15.2, states (cf. PP. 264.11–265.1) that *dharmatā* can be considered the ‘proper nature’ (*svabhāva*) of the *dharma*s, i.e. their *prakṛti* and, ultimately, *their śūnyatā*: hence, an equivalence (between *dharmatā* and *śūnyatā*) which contrasts with the thesis defended in this paper that emptiness *is not* a qualification for supreme truth (providing that the gloss by Candrakīrti—who, in commenting MMK.24.8, in line with the pedagogical interpretation, excludes that there “can be an application [*pravṛttiḥ*] of words or knowledge to supreme truth”—is not an element contrary merely to my thesis that *dharmatā* is a conceptual equivalent of *paramārtha-satya*, *tattva* and *nirvāṇa*. If this were the case, Candrakīrti’s qualification of *dharmatā* as *śūnyatā* would not also imply the equivalence of *śūnyatā* itself with *paramārtha-satya*).

<sup>93</sup> Doubts regarding Nāgārjuna’s Mahāyānism were advanced by Warder (1973) and to some extent shared by Kalupahana (1986, pp. 1–8). However, in opposition to Warder, and hence in favour of the thesis that Nāgārjuna is definitely a *mahāyāna* author, the textual and contextual arguments presented by authors such as Seyfort Ruegg (1981, pp. 6–7), Bugault (1994, p. 216), Lindtner (1997, p. xxii), or Gómez (2000, p. 120) appear convincing.

reflections must evidently be read as being in contrast with theses and philosophical notions prevailing in *ābhidharmika* scholastic environments; more specifically, his main polemical target seems definitely to be the metaphysics of the Sarvāstivāda school. Additionally, Walser—in a monograph entirely devoted to defining Nāgārjuna's context<sup>94</sup>—argues in favour of the hypothesis that the author of the MMK was a monk of the Mahāsāṅghika order, probably close to the Prajñaptivāda sub-sect and in good philosophical relations with the (*pudgalavādin*) environments of the *Saṃmitīya* school.<sup>95</sup>

Now, taking this framework, however approximate, to be to a good extent reliable, any incompatibility of a particular reading of Nāgārjunian thought with one aspect or the other of it would be, in my opinion, definitely more problematic than a contrast with one or another sentence from commentaries sometimes written several centuries after Nāgārjuna's time. This because, as Walser<sup>96</sup> also observed, it is precisely in the sectarian environment Nāgārjuna belonged to that he had to first of all gain credit; in order to divulgate his thought and find followers and material resources for the preservation and reproduction of his works, Nāgārjuna had to submit to his brothers doctrines capable of appearing as *buddhavacana* ("word of the Buddha") or, at least, in tune with the philosophical positions, interests and 'academic schemes' of the monastery hosting him.

However, first of all we might observe that the concepts of 'compatibility' or of 'philosophical harmony' are obviously rather elastic: it is also possible to think that for a position to be considered valid in a proto-*mahāyāna* environment it could, providing it does not openly contradict that environment, depart from or considerably innovate its philosophical heritage. Secondly, the contextual framework—Mahāsāṅghika, somehow in harmony with *pudgalavādin* and *prajñaptivādin* environments—conjectured above (following Walser) remains decisively generic: about the Mahāsāṅghika order, we cannot even be sure whether it had an Abhidharma of its own,<sup>97</sup> and of the Prajñaptivāda and Saṃmitīya sects too we know very little and nothing first hand.

Given these considerations, the comparison between the pedagogical interpretation and the scholastic-sectarian environment to which the founder of the Madhyamaka school<sup>98</sup> probably belonged to, could limit itself to demonstrating that this reading does not openly contradict, and possibly is in some sort of continuity, with the few aspects of that contextual framework.

<sup>94</sup> Walser (2005).

<sup>95</sup> Cf., in particular, ibid., pp. 224–263.

<sup>96</sup> Cf., in particular, ibid., pp. 123–152.

<sup>97</sup> On the question whether the Mahāsāṅghikas did have an *abhidharma-piṭaka*, Walser concludes that: "The preponderance of evidence [...] suggests that the Mahāsāṅghika did have an abhidharma piṭaka, or at least some sects of it did" (Walser 2005, p. 213).

<sup>98</sup> By defining Nāgārjuna the *founder of the Madhyamaka school* I do not mean that he was such in any conscious way. Receiving Saito's observation, it is plausible to think that "Nāgārjuna recognized himself only as a «Śūnyatāvādin» in his *Vigrahayāvartanī* (VV) and *Vaidalyaprakarana*, and not as a «mādhyamika» or «dBu ma pa»" (Saito 2007, p. 155). Only Bhāviveka, later followed by Candrakīrti,—"opposing the then influential Yogācāra tenet of the 'Three natures'", ibid.—would then coin the expression *mādhyamika*, or *mādhyamika-vādin* (defining himself as such).

Now, the ideas brought forth in these pages—that Nāgārjuna’s project consists in a teaching of emptiness as *niḥsvabhāvatā*<sup>99</sup>; that this teaching is equivalent to a conception of *pratīya-samutpāda* as mutual causality<sup>100</sup>; that these teachings are not to be considered a new metaphysics of emptiness, but only appropriate means (*upāya-kauśalya*)<sup>101</sup> to deal with particular audiences—all appear very much in harmony with a *mahāyāna*, *anti-sarvāstivādin* and *prajñaptivādin* context like the one conjectured above.

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<sup>99</sup> Therefore, a teaching mainly directed at contrasting the fundamental *sarvāstivādin* notion of *svabhāva*.

<sup>100</sup> A conception that, therefore, seems particularly close to the notion of *anyonya prajñapti* (“interdependent designations”): i.e. a concept that, as Walser observes, must have been particularly well-developed in Prajñaptivāda school environments. Starting from the analysis of translations into Chinese and Tibetan of the *Samaya-bhedoparacana-cakra*, Walser concludes that the *prajñaptivādin* philosophical project must have contained a theoretic overcoming (of an already *mahāyāna* token) of the *sarvāstivādin* conception of the *dharma*s, reconsidered as *anyonya prajñapti* and hence as ontologically (and epistemologically) inconsistent (cf. Walser 2005, pp. 221–222).

<sup>101</sup> The notion of *upāya-kauśalya* is well known to be central within the *mahāyāna* philosophical sensibility.

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