Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro

Mark Siderits · Jay L. Garfield

Abstract　In a recent article in this journal, Giuseppe Ferraro mounted a sustained attack on the semantic interpretation of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, an interpretation that has been championed by the authors. The present paper is their reply to that attack.

Keywords　Nāgārjuna · Madhyamaka · Emptiness · Semantic interpretation

Given Nāgārjuna's philosophical significance, it is hardly surprising that he attracts a great deal of interpretive literature, classical and modern; given the terse nature of his texts, it is hardly surprising that scholars disagree about how to interpret his Madhyamaka position. One family of readings is what has been called the semantic interpretation. In a recent article in this journal, Giuseppe Ferraro mounted a sustained attack on this interpretation, specifically targeting our views.[1] Since our views differ from each other in some important ways, our reply will not be entirely univocal.[2]

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[1] Ferraro (2013). All further references to this article will be given by page number in parentheses.

[2] Ferraro seems not to fully recognize the differences between our respective readings of Madhyamaka. This comes out when he expresses puzzlement over Garfield's claiming both that Nāgārjuna is fully rational and that there are contradictions contained within Nāgārjuna's view (p. 210). For a dialetheist, the assertion of a contradiction need not be irrational. The reader interested in the details of the disagreement between us over the place of contradictions in Madhyamaka might want to consult the essays in *Philosophy East and West* vol. 63 no. 3, a special issue devoted to the controversy over an earlier essay by Jay Garfield, Graham Priest and Yasuo Deguchi entitled 'Buddhist Contradictions'.

M. Siderits (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Seoul National University (emeritus), Seoul, South Korea
e-mail: msideri@ilstu.edu

J. L. Garfield
Yale-NUS College, Singapore, Singapore

What exactly is it that the semantic interpretation interprets semantically? Ferraro takes it to be the Madhyamaka doctrine of two truths (p. 216), but that is not exactly what either of us says. First, a word of clarification is in order. In English the word 'true' is used principally to characterize statements and beliefs; it is the content of statements and beliefs that may be said to be true or false. One does sometimes encounter expressions like 'a true friend', and a friend is neither a statement nor a belief. But this expression is readily understood as short for 'someone who can truly be said to be a friend', and to say of someone that they are a friend is to make a statement. Truth, so understood, is a semantic property. To say of a statement that it is true is to say something about its relation to how things are in the world, and that relation is usually understood to be semantic in nature.

To say of something that it exists, on the other hand, is not to characterize it semantically but instead metaphysically; it is to say that the entity in question enjoys a certain ontological status. Now Buddhist philosophers from the time of early Abhidharma distinguished between the *paramārtha* or ultimate and the *saṃvṛti* or conventional, and they drew this distinction with respect to two different spheres, the semantic and the metaphysical. Thus a given statement might count as true either ultimately or instead only conventionally, and a given purported entity might on investigation turn out to be real either ultimately or else only conventionally. Sometimes the terms *satya* and *sat* are used to qualify the respect in which something is either ultimate or conventional, with the first indicating truth and the second indicating existence or reality. But this is not always done. One can generally tell, however, which of the two is meant in a given instance.[3] In the secondary literature on Madhyamaka one sometimes encounters statements to the effect that this or that entity or property is an 'ultimate truth', but this represents a conceptual confusion.[4]

What we intended the semantic interpretation to be an interpretation of is the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, the claim that all *dharma*s are devoid of *svabhāva* or intrinsic nature. The doctrine of emptiness has implications for the Abhidharma distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, so the semantic interpretation of emptiness will likewise affect how we understand that distinction. But the question with which we began is what to make of the claim that all *dharma*s are devoid of intrinsic nature. Abhidharma had, of course, established that any purported entity that is partite or is conceptually analyzable lacks intrinsic nature (i.e., could not have its nature in the unaccompanied state). For that reason such things are, they held, not strictly speaking or ultimately real; they are mere conceptual constructions, things that are thought to exist only because of the

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[3] Cf., e.g., *Madhyamkāvatāra* 6.28, where Candrakīrti acknowledges that '*saṃvṛti*' is used differently when applied to a belief and when applied to an entity.

[4] For the most part Ferraro avoids conflating the properties of being conventionally/ultimately true with being conventionally/ultimately real, but not always. Thus, e.g., 'Emptiness … is declared 'empty', that is, conventional, not ultimately true' (p. 212). What emptiness is in fact said to be is conventionally real. Nonetheless, he accuses us, and in particular Garfield, of equivocating, or of not even seeing this distinction (pp. 205–208). However, the passages he cites in fact *explicitly* draw this distinction, and address the relation between these two senses of *satya/bden pa/truth.* It would appear that Ferraro has simply not understood the passages he quotes, particularly that from pp. 207–208, which aims to distinguish precisely the two meanings Ferarro claims he conflates.

concepts we happen to employ (have merely *prajñapti-sat*). But Ābhidharmikas believed that such conceptual constructions could not even be thought to exist were there not ultimately real entities of some sort. These, they argued, are the *dharma*s, which are so called because they bear their own intrinsic natures. In Abhidharma we thus find a two-tier ontology: those entities such as chariots, armies, trees and persons that are only conventionally real—that we take for real because the corresponding concept proves useful in daily life; and the *dharma*s, which are ultimately real and so exist independently of our interests and cognitive limitations.

The point of this two-tier ontology for Abhidharma was to explain how it could seem to most people that there is an enduring 'I' when in fact there is only a causal series of aggregates of impermanent, impersonal *dharma*s. The two-tier ontology allows us to say that what are generally taken as truths about chariots, trees, armies and persons, being about things that are only conventionally real, are only conventionally true, whereas statements describing what *dharma*s there are and how they are arranged are ultimately true. Since chariots and the like are conceptual constructions of aggregates of *dharma*s, it can then be claimed that conventionally true statements, while not strictly speaking true, are nonetheless useful in part because of the facts about those aggregates of *dharma*s. (A conceptual construction is a kind of cognitive shortcut.) But in order to overcome the ignorance that perpetuates suffering one must grasp the ultimate truth, particularly with respect to the composite entities we call persons.

The Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness is the claim that *dharma*s are likewise devoid of intrinsic nature. If this is true it means that nothing is ultimately real. For notice that the Mādhyamika does not disagree with the negative side of the Ābhidharmika's ontological doctrine—that such aggregates as the chariot, the tree and the person are only conventionally and not ultimately real. The disagreement is over the positive side—whether there is anything whatsoever that strictly speaking exists. Madhyamaka says there is not. This is what makes the metaphysical nihilist interpretation seem so plausible to Madhyamaka's foes.[5] Those more sympathetic toward Madhyamaka may take the lesson to be that while there is such a thing as how things ultimately are, this can never be cognized using concepts, since all conceptualization involves superimposing on what is ultimately real a nature that is a mere fabrication. (On this interpretation there is only one ultimately true statement: that the ultimate nature of reality is beyond conceptualization.) We hold, though, that neither of these two 'metaphysical' interpretations of Madhyamaka emptiness could be correct given Nāgārjuna's repeated insistence that he does not have a metaphysical view, an insistence that Ferraro, we believe, does not take seriously enough, as it is patently inconsistent with his own reading.

According to the semantic interpretation we propose as an alternative, the point of emptiness is to undermine the very idea of an ultimate reality with its ultimate nature, and along with this idea the notion that there might be statements that correspond to such an ultimate nature. This would have Nāgārjuna employing a

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[5] Friends of Madhyamaka assume that Mādhyamika philosophers were smart enough to see the performative contradiction involved in supposing metaphysical nihilism to be true—that then at least the thought that it might be true must exist, so the supposition is refuted.

rhetorical strategy that can be traced back to the Buddha. When the Buddha was asked whether the enlightened person continues to exist after death he said no, but he likewise said no when asked whether the enlightened person ceases to exist after death, both exists and ceases to exist, or neither exists nor ceases to exist. The point of all these negations, it turns out, is not that the post-mortem state of the enlightened person transcends conceptualization.[6] It is rather that all four questions share a common, false presupposition: that there are such things as persons, and so enlightened persons.[7] When Nāgārjuna reduces to absurdity every attempt by the Ābhidharmika to say how ultimately real *dharma*s exist and operate, the point might be that the Abhidharma project is based on a false presupposition: that there is such a thing as the ultimate truth or how things are *anyway*. And the reason one might wish to reveal this presupposition as false could be that while the Abhidharma project is an important part of the path to liberation, in the end its conception of an ultimate truth represents a final obstacle to release from suffering.[8]

The slogan Siderits came up with to express this is the now-notorious 'The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth'. Of course this sounds paradoxical. But here as well he was following a well-established model. When in *Milindapanha* King Milinda asks Nāgasena whether the infant Milinda is the same person as the present adult king, Nāgasena replies that infant and adult are neither the same one (numerically identical) person nor are they two (numerically distinct) persons. This reply sounds paradoxical, since it would seem that a given adult and a given infant must be either one person or two. But here the paradox is functioning rhetorically as a sort of head-snapper, a way of making the audience work out for themselves how and why this might be asserted. In the case of 'The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth', what needs working out is the parameterization that renders the statement non-paradoxical. Siderits soon discovered that some readers (Garfield and Priest among them) wanted to retain the paradoxical reading. (Perhaps he should have used an emoticon to indicate that the statement was not meant to be taken fully at face value.) So he began to attach a subscripted disambiguation of 'ultimate truth' to show how parameterization renders the statement benign—how something ostensibly of the form 'p and not-p' should be read as really saying 'in respect R, p, but in respect S, not-p'.

The disambiguation he had in mind is:

> ultimate truth$_1$: what one needs to know in order to attain liberation
> ultimate truth$_2$: how the ultimately real things ultimately are

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[6] In fact the fourth of the four possibilities, that the *arhat* neither exists nor does not exist after death, is usually understood to mean that the post-mortem state of the *arhat* is inconceivable or unconceptualizable. It is thus noteworthy that the Buddha rejects this *koṭi* or lemma as well.

[7] The negations are thus of the 'verbally bound' or commitmentless variety (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*), functioning like illocutionary negation. This has important consequences for Madhyamaka uses of the *catuṣkoṭi*.

[8] For more on the soteriological significance of emptiness understood in accordance with the semantic interpretation see Siderits (2003).

The slogan then becomes: 'What one needs to know in order to attain liberation is that the very idea of how things ultimately are is incoherent'.[9] Ferraro claims (p. 206) that Siderits had no justification for this exegetical move, but that is false. One of the few things Nāgārjuna says about ultimate truth is that without grasping it one will not attain nirvana.[10] As for ultimate truth$_2$, it is well known that the Abhidharma enterprise of cataloging the *dharma*s is meant to facilitate our coming to know how the world actually is once all mere conceptual constructions have been stripped away. It is equally clear that Nāgārjuna aims to show that there could be no *dharma*s to catalog. If these were all that was left for ultimate truth to be about, then it seems reasonable to conclude that he thinks liberation is to be attained by discarding the notion of how things ultimately are. The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.

Now, as noted, Garfield agrees with Siderits in part here, but disagrees in part. Garfield does indeed argue[11] that the Siderits slogan is apt, but also that it aptly characterizes a paradoxical position; that Nāgārjuna's claims to the inexpressibility of ultimate truth land him in paradox, and that the commitment to emptiness as the intrinsic nature of things, and to the analysis of emptiness as absence of any intrinsic nature, are paradoxical. He hence argues that there are both semantic and ontological paradoxes lurking. Ferarro claims to fail to understand how Garfield can also assert that Nāgārjuna's position is cogent, believing that only a consistent theory can be cogent (p. 210). This simply betrays his lack of familiarity with contemporary logic, and in particular the techniques of paraconsistent logic that Garfield, Garfield and Priest, Priest and Garfield, Priest and Deguchi[12] have used to interpret Nāgārjuna. In these papers these authors have defended this reading at length. We direct Ferraro's attention to those defenses.

While Ferraro grasps that Siderits seeks to render the seeming paradox benign by disambiguation, there is an extremely confusing passage (pp. 206–207) in which he appears to misunderstand the point Siderits was making. First he accuses Siderits of committing the fallacy of equivocation. This is doubly surprising given that the slogan was never meant to express an argument (and so could not be a fallacious argument), and given as well that equivocation usually proceeds by suppressing an ambiguity whereas Siderits was in fact at pains to bring out the ambiguity. Second, the ambiguity Ferraro locates is between 'ultimate' when characterizing a statement or belief, and 'ultimate' when characterizing existence or reality. But Siderits' 'ultimate truth$_1$' and 'ultimate truth$_2$' both concern statements or beliefs.

Having foisted his own distinction on this disambiguation, Ferraro then purports to derive from the slogan the further implication that the conventional truth is that

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[9] Another way to put this might be that after treading the Abhidharma path one must finally abandon the conception of truth—the metaphysical realist conception—that is crucial to that path, and stop taking what are merely useful ways of talking as though they gave us insights into the ultimate. Note, by the way, that to see this as equivalent to saying that the ultimate is beyond all verbal expression is to persist in supposing that a useful way of talking gives us insights into the ultimate.

[10] See MMK 24.10cd. For the totality of what he says about ultimate truth (24.8–24.10) see Siderits and Katsura (2013):272–274.

[11] See Garfield (1996) and Nāgārjuna and Limits of Thought' in *Empty Words* (2002).

[12] Deguchi et al. (2008), Garfield (2008); and the papers cited in footnote 11.

nothing appears to be a mere conceptual construction. But this is bizarre. For one thing, it is not clear that anything at all follows about conventional truth or the nature of what is conventionally real from the statement that the notion of ultimate truth is incoherent. Second, it is not true that ordinary people ordinarily believe that nothing is a conceptual construction. Once the idea of a conceptual construction is explained adequately, people will readily agree that the average Wisconsin taxpayer is a conceptual construction. Perhaps Ferraro meant to say that nothing in our folk ontology—which includes such things as chariots, armies, trees and persons, but not the average Wisconsin taxpayer—is ordinarily taken to be a conceptual construction. If so, then it is likely that he is correct. But one does not need to derive this from emptiness. If it is true then it would seem to be a simple fact about how people talk and think.

Similarly, when Ferraro turns to Garfield, who draws the same distinction, he first quotes a passage (p. 207) in which Garfield characterizes conventional existence in ontological terms, and then (p. 208) quotes one in which Garfield characterizes the truth of utterances in semantic terms. The equivocation he claims to find is very hard to see.

Ferraro's real difficulty with the semantic interpretation seems, though, to be that he finds it inconceivable that there could be things that borrow their natures from other things (and are thus mere *prajñapti-sat*) without there being things that have their natures intrinsically. And both of us are committed to this view, and to the position that this is Nāgārjuna's view. It is indeed difficult to see how this might be. Indeed there has recently been a lengthy debate in analytic metaphysics over whether there could be purely dispositional properties in the absence of categorical properties that ground them, and Ferraro might look to the 'nay' side of that debate to seek support for his intuition that universal *niḥsvabhāvatā* is inconceivable. But Madhyamaka does have a battery of arguments that purport to show the impossibility of things with intrinsic nature.[13] Ferraro takes issue with the 'gold standard' analogy we both use to illustrate how universal emptiness might obtain. But his criticism misses the point.

Here is how the analogy goes: While many people feared that when their paper currency was taken off the gold standard it would lose all value, this did not in fact occur. The thought behind the fear was that something without intrinsic value (mere paper) cannot have value unless that value is grounded in something with intrinsic value, gold. By analogy, then, it may be possible, despite our fears, that conventional truth retains its usefulness even if there is no such thing as ultimate truth to ground it. Ferraro complains (p. 212) that paper currency could not have value unless there were real goods for the buying and selling of which it could be used. This is true but irrelevant. The question was whether anything could have instrumental value if nothing had intrinsic value. And since nothing does have intrinsic value, while things do demonstrably have instrumental value, it must be possible. The reason nothing has intrinsic value (in the relevant sense) is that being valuable is a dispositional property, and no dispositional property is intrinsic. Even

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[13] And indeed much recent work in non-well-founded set theory and non-well-founded mereology makes this point formally as well. See Priest (2009), for more on this, and for its connections to Madhyamaka.

gold could not be said to have value were it to exist in the *lonely* or unaccompanied state.[14]

Those who support the semantic interpretation regard it as distinct from, and superior to, the metaphysical nihilist interpretation of emptiness. Ferraro complains, though, that the two are in fact indistinguishable (p. 214). For, he says, both interpretations have the Mādhyamika claiming that things exist only conventionally, that ultimately there are no *dharma*s, and that nothing else can be said to be ultimately real. What Ferraro overlooks, however, is that the metaphysical nihilist holds it to be ultimately true that nothing exists, whereas on the semantic interpretation Madhyamaka denies that there is such a thing as ultimate truth, and so denies that this or any other statement is ultimately true. The metaphysical nihilist is doing metaphysics, whereas the anti-realist Mādhyamika wants us to stop trying to do metaphysics.

Indeed this is the point of Garfield's comparison of Madhyamaka to Pyrrhonian skepticism. Just as the Pyrrhonian sceptics claimed to have no position on the ultimate nature of reality, Nāgārjuna claims to have no position: on the Pyrrhonian side, the modes from relativity show that we can't make sense of the ultimate nature of reality; Nāgārjuna's analysis of all phenomena as lacking intrinsic nature, Garfield argues, shows the same thing.[15] Ferarro seems to miss the point of this analogy.

Ferarro accuses Garfield of 'axiomatic formulations' designed to avoid nihilism (p. 213), citing Garfield's claim that emptiness is not non-existence, but rather the emptiness of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). He claims that this is in the end a nihilistic reading, and compares it to that of Wood and Burton, who *do* believe that emptiness for Nāgārjuna is nihilism. But Garfield's analysis is in fact that of Candrakīrti, who manifestly affirms the conventional reality of the conventional world, and Tsongkhapa, in his analysis of the object of negation for Madhymaka (*dgag bya).*[16] It is hardly axiomatic, and may be the only cogent reading of chapter 24 of *MMK*, in which Nāgārjuna urges that emptiness is consistent with the reality of the world. This analysis is carefully defended canonically, and is hardly 'axiomatic'.

Ferraro is well aware that Nāgārjuna sets out to show no *dharma* can have intrinsic nature. He also agrees with Abhidharma that in order for something to be ultimately real it must have intrinsic nature.[17] He thus recognizes that in order to support the interpretation of emptiness that he prefers, according to which there is an unconceptualizable ultimate reality, he must explain how this unconceptualizable reality can escape the many *reductio*s of the Madhyamaka dialectic and be something with intrinsic nature. Here is what looks to be his response to this challenge: 'Yet … there is no necessity that we attribute to a whole the same

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[14] Of course one might believe that gold has intrinsic physical and chemical properties that make it valuable to people. But even were this so, its value would not be intrinsic.

[15] See Garfield (1990, 1995), in *Empty Words.*

[16] See Cowherds (2011), especially chaps. 2 and 3.

[17] See, for instance, 'it is thus possible to conceive of a type of emptiness without svabhāva alongside a supreme reality that does possess intrinsic existence [sic]' (p. 216, n. 99). We assume that by 'intrinsic existence' Ferraro means *svabhāva*, which should be translated as 'intrinsic nature'.

characteristics that belong to the units of which it is composed' (pp. 214–215). The idea appears to be that even though no individual *dharma* has intrinsic nature, the whole that is constituted by them may, so there may be an ultimate reality after all. But if this whole is constituted by the many *dharma*s, then it borrows its nature from them and does not have an intrinsic nature. That the nature of a whole is necessarily extrinsic was the view of Abhidharma, and it is endorsed by Madhyamaka, e.g., at MMK 1.12, and 20.23. Moreover, Ferraro never tells us how his Mādhyamika is to escape the paradox of ineffability: his unconceptualizable ultimate reality must be ineffable, yet to describe it as unconceptualizable is to describe it and so to 'eff' the supposedly ineffable.

Finally there is Ferraro's appeal to Nāgārjuna's uses of the terms *tattva* and *dharmatā*, which he claims show that for a Mādhyamika there is an ultimate reality with intrinsic nature (p. 216). In MMK Nāgārjuna uses *tattva* four times (at 15.6, 18.9, 24.9 and 26.10), and the related *tattvatas* twice (at 17.26 and 23.2); *dharmatā* occurs just once (at 18.7). *Tattva* (literally 'that-ness') can mean either truth or reality, and the *–tas* ending functions like English *–ly*. While *dharmatā* could mean 'nature-ness', in Buddhist contexts it often functions as a synonym for 'intrinsic nature'. There is nothing in these terms themselves, then, that requires them to be understood as referring to something that transcends all language and thought, so we must look at how they actually get used to see if they furnish support for the thesis of an inexpressible ultimate. At 15.6 and 24.9 we have the phrase 'the *tattva* of the Buddha's teachings'; in both cases 'truth' seems like an appropriate translation. The claim at 15.6 is that those who take there to be intrinsic and extrinsic nature, existence and non-existence, fail to understand the truth of the Buddha's teachings. At 24.9 the claim is that in order to understand the truth of the Buddha's teachings one must understand the distinction between the two truths. The occurrences of *tattvatas* at 17.26 and 23.2 are best thought of as meaning 'ultimately real'. But here Nāgārjuna is characterizing the views of an opponent concerning certain *dharma*s thought by them to be ultimately real. So none of these show Madhyamaka commitment to an ineffable ultimate.

The occurrence of *tattva* in the phrase *tattvadarśana* at 26.10 looks more promising; there it is said that the wise person, due to seeing *tattva*, is not an agent (i.e., does not accumulate new karma and so is destined for the cessation of suffering). While *tattva* here could be either 'truth' or 'reality', this is at least open to the reading that what is cognized is an unconceptualizable ultimate. Unfortunately for this reading, however, Candrakīrti explains that the wise one sees nothing at all, so this occurrence does not help the cause.

That leaves 18.9 and 18.7 (the sole occurrence of *dharmatā*). These verses are part of a longer passage (18.6–18.9) that discusses the core teachings of emptiness of person (*pudgala-nairātmya*) and emptiness of *dharma*s (*dharma-nairātmya*) as 'graded teachings', the first emptiness being the subject of verses 6 and 7, the second being the subject of verses 8 and 9.[18] The overall thrust of the passage is that insight into non-self is not sufficient for liberation; its full attainment requires realization of the emptiness of all entities. This is because the source of suffering is

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[18] We owe this insight into the structure of this passage to Shōryū Katsura.

not merely hypostatization (*prapañca*) concerning the 'I', as Ābhidharmikas assume, but hypostatization concerning anything. That is, the ignorance that leads to suffering consists not just in taking the notions of 'I' and 'mine' as more than merely useful devices and as having real (conception-independent) referents. Instead it consists in doing this with respect to any term, and so with respect to the very notion of a *dharma* that Abhidharma thought could be used to explain why 'I' and 'mine' do not really refer. Release from suffering consists in no longer taking there to be anything more than just how we usefully interact with things. It is in this context that we get 'The nature of things [*dharmatā*] is to be, like nirvāṇa, without origination or cessation', as well as the claim that 'the nature of reality' (*tattvasya lakṣaṇam*) is devoid of conceptualization and hypostatization.

These look like they may support Ferraro's thesis. But the likening of reality to nirvāṇa is actually no help, for if we look closely at the examination of nirvāṇa in MMK 25 we discover that its nature is, once more, to fail to be ultimately real.[19] As for what the 'nature of reality' is said to be, this is put entirely in negative terms: free of intrinsic nature, not populated by hypostatization, devoid of falsifying conceptualization, not having many separate meanings. Since it is agreed that nothing lacking intrinsic nature can be ultimately real, this seems to rule out the possibility that what is being referred to here is an inexpressible ultimate. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that in the preceding verse the thesis 'all is neither real nor unreal' is said to be a 'graded teaching' (*anuśāsana*), and thus not to be taken as ultimately true in the Abhidharma sense. The 'neither real nor unreal' option is, of course, the one that holds there to be something that is beyond all discursive thought and conceptualization. It seems, then, as if none of Nāgārjuna's uses of *tattva* or *dharmatā* can be taken to prove that he posits an inexpressible ultimate.

The upshot is that if we continue to interpret Madhyamaka as a form of metaphysical realism—as a system that holds that the truth of an assertion must have ultimate grounding in how things objectively and conception-independently are—then we shall have to take it as a form of metaphysical nihilism. Since we have difficulty imagining that Nāgārjuna was so stupid as to affirm a position that is obviously self-refuting, we take this as evidence that his intention was to get us to question the metaphysical realist conception of truth that, in combination with the *reductios* on theories featuring things with intrinsic nature, leads to metaphysical nihilism. We agree with Ferraro that it is difficult to see how one might abandon the metaphysical realist conception of truth. What this suggests is that perhaps the best strategy for vindicating it might be to see whether Madhyamaka really has shown that nothing could have intrinsic nature. But we suspect that such vindication may prove difficult to achieve.

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[19] The argument for this, at MMK 25.2–25.16, involves the examination and rejection of all four possibilities: that nirvāṇa is an existent, non-existent, both, and neither. The rejection of the last is of particular importance, since the thesis that nirvāṇa is neither existent nor non-existent is usually understood to amount to the claim that nirvāṇa is real but transcends all conceptualization (and so cannot be said to be either existent or non-existent).

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