

**RE-READING NĀGĀRJUNA
WITH RESOURCES FROM RICHARD RORTY**

Aleksandra S. Ilieva
Lucy Cavendish College

December 2022

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

DECLARATIONS

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee

RE-READING NĀGĀRJUNA WITH RESOURCES FROM RICHARD RORTY

Aleksandra S. Ilieva

ABSTRACT

The central aim of this dissertation is to bring into dialogue certain themes, methods, and concepts drawn from, on the one hand, the 2nd century CE Mahāyāna Buddhist thinker, Nāgārjuna, and, on the other, the Neo-Pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007). I highlight two core types of exegetical disagreement amongst Madhyamaka scholars in their philosophical readings of Nāgārjuna's central texts (the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* and the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*), and I re-articulate these debates through a Rortyan Neo-Pragmatist lens. I describe these two types of ongoing disagreement, which I characterise using the metaphor of an oscillation, as metaphilosophical and metalinguistic. They are thematically intertwined – the former is a disagreement over whether we should read Nāgārjuna as primarily engaging in *philosophy* and the latter is a disagreement over whether we should read Nāgārjuna's *statements* as primarily useful to follow for the goal of liberation or accurately capturing facts about reality. In analysing what these Western interpreters are doing in their philosophical readings, I introduce Rorty as a lively conversational partner with whom to revisit their methodological preferences and conceptual presuppositions. My aim is not to conclusively settle these exegetical debates. Instead, I propose that Rorty's work can give us some valuable conceptual resources for sidestepping their disagreements because of its extensive engagement with metaphilosophical and metalinguistic motifs in Western academic philosophy. My core argument is that by focussing on Rorty's articulation of semantic anti-representationalism, that is, the view that the function of language is not to “mirror” or re-present the world, we can reconceptualise these exegetical debates as structured by forced choices which can be avoided.

Therefore, the Rortyan (second-order) perspective that I will develop in this dissertation stands at a right angle to the (first-order) contemporary exegetical field where the idiom of representationalism is not directly opposed. I will argue that by not clearly rejecting the idioms and the imageries of representationalism from the outset, the interpretive terrain of Madhyamaka becomes associated with representationalist presuppositions, especially of a semantic variety, and it is these presuppositions that generate and sustain the exegetical debates. Once we have reconfigured, with the help of Rorty, the scholarly terrain anti-representationally and pointed to ways of bypassing these exegetical impasses, I then trace the implications of re-reading Nāgārjuna as an anti-representationalist. In so doing, I show that my proposals have the additional advantage of giving us Neo-Pragmatist tools with which to re-read Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka in a way that renders his message less exegetically tortuous and more straightforwardly intelligible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND DEDICATION

To my supervisor and friend, Ankur Barua, who took seriously my wish to learn to think like a Pragmatist, and who patiently and meticulously corrected every single one of my quasi-Platonist cognitive moves and guided me in a Rortyan direction.

Thank you to my parents and Colum for the endless support, and Nora for having more patience than any young child should be expected to have!

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Buddhism and Pragmatism: What is the Association?	5
1.2 Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: Setting the Stage	12
1.3 Rorty's Rejection of Representationalism	17
1.4 The Thematic Core: Two Impasses, Two Aims, and Anti-Representationalism.....	22
1.5 Comparative Thinking and Neo-Pragmatist Methodology	26
Chapter 2: The Metaphilosophical and the Metalinguistic Oscillations: Debating the Status of Nāgārjuna's Statements	32
2.1 Oscillating Across the Domain of Philosophy: Reason Versus Insight?	33
2.1.1 Analysing Nāgārjuna Through A Philosophical Lens	34
2.1.2 Approaching Nāgārjuna through a Literary Lens	40
2.2 Oscillating in the Medium of Language: Assertions or Rhetoric?	47
2.2.1 Rational Assertions: Nāgārjuna's Anti-Foundationalism, Anti-Realism, and Pan-Fictionalism	50
2.2.2 Literary Prose: Nāgārjuna's Deconstructive, Poetic, and Rhetorical Devices	59
2.3 "Orthodox" versus "Heterodox" Interpretations of Nāgārjuna's Viewlessness.....	67
2.4 Concluding Remarks	72
Chapter 3: Anti-Representationalism: Introducing a Novel Dialogical Space for Madhyamaka Studies	74
3.1 Metaphilosophical and Metalinguistic Considerations: Why Pragmatism?	76
3.1.1 Coping Versus Copying: An Anti-Representationalist Semantic Redescription	79
3.1.2 From Problem Solving to Redescribing	85
3.1.3 From Semantics to Vocabularies and Metaphors	90
3.2 From Transcendental Constraint to Anti-Representationalism: Moving Past the Metaphilosophical Oscillation	98
3.3 From Non-Referentiality to Anti-Representationalism: Moving Past The Metalinguistic Oscillation	109
3.4 Concluding Remarks	118
Chapter 4: Re-reading Nāgārjuna as a Rortyan Pragmatist: <i>From Realism-vs.-Anti-Realism to Representationalism-vs.-Anti-Representationalism</i>	122
4.1 Edification and Construction: Navigating from the Periphery	126
4.1.1 The Dilemma of Dialectical Participation	126
4.1.2 Z (non-)Positions, XY Spaces, and Instruments of Argumentation	129
4.2 Rejecting a Common Target: Nāgārjuna Against Representationalism	135
4.2.1 Pan-Relationalism and Dependent Origination: <i>Śūnyatā</i> as the Rejection of Representationalism.....	136

4.2.2 Addressing the Residual “Metaphysics” of Emptiness: Problems with Anti-Realism	144
4.2.3 Leaving Anti-Realism Behind: Reading Nāgārjuna Anti-Representationally ..	158
4.3 Concluding Remarks: Viewlessness from the Periphery	169
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Articulating our Purposes from the Periphery	173
Bibliography	180

Chapter 1: Introduction

“It has been well said that every explanation must start somewhere, but there is no particular place that every explanation has to start” (Blackburn 2013, 80).

Exactly where and precisely how to wedge oneself into an academically situated philosophical inquiry is perhaps the central difficulty a graduate student works with when writing their PhD dissertation on a topic similar to this one. This task is further complicated by the fact that the very characterisation of the said inquiry as “philosophical” can be deeply contested. But one must indeed start *somewhere*, and hopefully by the end of this dissertation the reader will have gained a deeper understanding of what characteristics may make a particular style of inquiry *philosophical*. Although the conversational project undertaken in this dissertation cannot be situated straightforwardly within *one* discipline, perhaps the most apt characterisation is that it is a contribution to some developing intellectual fields that promote philosophical conversations across cultural boundaries – with the caveat that the term “philosophy” is being used as a placeholder for the various forms of intellectual exercise that such dialogical attempts would involve.

As the title of this dissertation suggests, I seek to bring into a dialogical conversation certain themes, methods, and concepts from, on the one hand, the 2nd century CE Mahāyāna Buddhist thinker, Nāgārjuna, considered to be the founder of the Madhyamaka school, and, on the other hand, the American Neo-Pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007). However, this statement needs to be immediately qualified. When I use the name “Nāgārjuna” I am not suggesting that I will directly engage in the exegetical task of conducting a first-order inquiry of his texts. Instead, one starting point of this dissertation is the contemporary field of Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna. As such, my analysis of Nāgārjuna’s thought begins where first-order exegetical work has been done by various scholars who read the primary texts in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and other languages. This is why I use “Nāgārjuna”, “Madhyamaka” and “Mādhyamika” (i.e., the followers of Madhyamaka) interchangeably in this dissertation – for it does not directly contribute to debates over delineating similarities and differences across the distinct thinkers, sub-schools and commentators that can be subsumed under the umbrella term “Madhyamaka”. I do recognise that the Madhyamaka worldview has developed, across the millennia, rich and diverse

interpretive traditions (Dreyfus and McClintock, 2003);¹ notwithstanding this historical point, I will use these terms to refer to the contemporary philosophical reconstructions of Nāgārjuna's message primarily based on two of his key texts, the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* (hereafter, MMK: "The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way") and the *Vigraha-vyāvartanī* (hereafter, VV: "The Dispeller of Objections").

Next, when I indicate the name "Richard Rorty" I am, again, not primarily referring to a first-order, exegetical analysis of Rorty's texts. Instead, I am demarcating the style of philosophy associated with Rorty, namely Neo-Pragmatism. In brief, "*Classical* Pragmatism" refers to a philosophical movement that originated in America in the late 19th century and is associated with thinkers such as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952). Rorty's development of and conceptualisation of Classical Pragmatism is what we mean by "*Neo-Pragmatism*" in this dissertation. However, this term was not used by Rorty himself, who took himself to be expressing and developing the spirit of American "Pragmatism". My interpretation and use of Rorty draws on the writings of many of his recent interpreters. Moreover, I will subsume under the umbrella term "Neo-Pragmatist" or "Pragmatist" those philosophers who Rorty considered to have developed ideas from the tradition of American "Pragmatism", irrespective of whether they identified themselves as such.² Since, once again, the primary aim of this dissertation is not a genealogical exploration, we will utilise the work of any philosopher that Rorty himself incorporated into his Neo-Pragmatist vision. Thus, throughout this dissertation I will use the terms "Neo-Pragmatism", "Pragmatism" and "Rorty's Pragmatism" interchangeably. Moreover, as my primary task is to bring Rorty onto Mādhyamika terrain, I will only use those elements of his philosophy that enable dialogical exchange. Thus, Rorty's positive political vision, which plays a central role in his philosophy,³ lies outside my interest here.

To sketch the central theme of this dissertation with some broad brushstrokes, it will, firstly, isolate two core types of exegetical disagreements amongst Madhyamaka scholars in their philosophical reconstructions of Nāgārjuna and, secondly, re-articulate these debates through a Rortyan Pragmatist lens. My hope is that by shifting the conceptual focus towards a second-order analysis of *what it is* that these contemporary Western interpreters *are doing* in their philosophical reconstructions, we can introduce Rorty as a lively conversational partner with whom to discuss

¹ Where consecutive citations are from the same work, I have omitted author names after the first instance in the series.

² For example, Donald Davidson's contributions to philosophy of language will play an important role in this dissertation.

³ For example, see AOC, CIS, and Part III of ORT. (All abbreviations to Rorty's books can be found in Bibliography).

their methodological preferences and conceptual presuppositions. With the help of some insights from Rorty, I argue we can sidestep the disagreements that I will identify by re-envisioning the two opposing sides as committed to forced choices – that is, a choice structured by a basic presupposition that can be denied. The interpretive conversational space we will outline seems to be permeated by some key philosophical presuppositions that Rorty spent his academic career trying to dismantle. In short, the goal is *not* to take sides on this first-order terrain, but to re-articulate these disagreements from a Rorty-inflected philosophical perspective, so that we are able to affirm the significant points made by each exegetical side and hold them together in a single vision.

My suggestion that Madhyamaka exegetical spaces would benefit from a shift towards Neo-Pragmatism by moving past certain presuppositional disagreements has the further advantage of giving us some conceptual tools with which to re-read Nāgārjuna's message from a Neo-Pragmatist standpoint. In other words, our second-order analysis of the interpretive terrain will generate some first-order implications for how to re-read Nāgārjuna. I will trace out these implications in Chapter 4 – they are not intended to capture Nāgārjuna's "authorial intent", but are offered as a friendly Neo-Pragmatist proposal for how we might interpret Nāgārjuna in a new, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, way. So, my Rorty-inflected recommendations are "orthogonal" to the ongoing conversations amongst Madhyamaka scholars in this sense – I do not directly engage in textual disputes relating to the MMK and the VV, but I *both* develop a Rortyan second-order reflection on the key presuppositions shaping these exegetical debates *and* outline a Rortyan vision for apprehending some of the first-order contents of the MMK and the VV. The reason why I take the hermeneutic starting point of a second-level analysis to be a distinctive strength of this dissertation is that the suggestions I will offer work on two levels which are mutually reinforcing – if at the second level of analysis we can sidestep key exegetical debates and hold together the opposing points, we would have *prima facie* evidence for the suitability of a first level re-reading of Nāgārjuna in the light of these second-level analyses. If we can point to some thematic resonances between Rorty and Nāgārjuna, on the basis of which we offer this Rortyan re-reading, this conceptual overlap would give us a *prima facie* rationale for interrogating the debates from a second-level Rortyan perspective.

In short, I intend my Rortyan suggestions to modify the interpretive terrain in a way that would circumvent certain exegetical disagreements and allow for a lucid reading of Nāgārjuna's message to emerge. These suggestions are offered with a deep – that is, Pragmatism-shaped – awareness of my rootedness in specific conceptual frameworks, socio-historical locations, and cultural backgrounds. In the context of the growing popularity of Pragmatist philosophy in some

Anglophone circles, and its ongoing thematic and conceptual developments, I argue that a dialogue between Rorty's Neo-Pragmatist understanding of philosophy and contemporary interpretations of Nāgārjuna will not only help us to move past certain interpretive impasses, but also shift discourse in a new direction.

In what follows, we will review, in section 1.1, some scholarly attempts to bring Buddhism into dialogue with Pragmatism. These cross-cultural investigations have tended to focus on whether the Pragmatist *theory of truth*, according to which a statement is true if it is useful to believe it,⁴ can be mapped onto Buddhist contexts. This line of inquiry has led, I argue, to a conceptual impasse between scholars who claim that Buddhist statements are *true because they are useful* (for liberation from the cycles of rebirth: *nirvāṇa*) and those who insist that they are *useful because they are true*. Although there have been some recent scholarly attempts to bring Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism, which clearly moves away from all such theories of truth, into constructive dialogue with Madhyamaka, these comparative exercises have tended to downplay what is perhaps *the* contribution that Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism makes to Western philosophy – “[t]he heart of pragmatism is *anti-representationalism*” (Williams 2013, 129, emphasis added),⁵ namely the claim that knowledge acquisition should not be characterised with the idiom of mind re-presenting or mirroring the world. As such, the thematic core of this dissertation is this: if we begin to cultivate, along with Rorty, anti-representational ways of thinking, certain interpretive debates about how to read Nāgārjuna begin to dissolve and Nāgārjuna's message emerges as less cryptically bewildering than it is sometimes considered to be. Next, in section 1.2, we will introduce the key motifs of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka and demonstrate how the same thematic impasse – namely, between truth and utility – permeates the interpretive terrain. Then in section 1.3, we will turn our attention to Rorty's rejection of representationalism and highlight the role of anti-representationalism in his rejection of the Cartesian-Kantian motif of a theory of truth. Having given the reader some introductory resources to navigate these cross-cultural terrains, we will lay out, in section 1.4, the thematic core of the dissertation in greater detail. Finally, in section 1.5 we will conclude with some methodological reflections concerning how we might situate this dissertation in the wider field of comparative philosophy.

⁴ See, for instance, Dowden & Swartz's entry “Truth” in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “A Pragmatic Theory of Truth holds (roughly) that a proposition is true if it is useful to believe”.

⁵ Throughout this dissertation I will only add “emphasis added” to those places which I have italicized. In all other instances of italicization, the reader can assume they are in the original.

1.1 Buddhism and Pragmatism: What is the Association?

As the English word “pragmatism” suggests, the Pragmatist tradition emphasises the role of actual, real-life human practices over abstract, theoretical speculations made from a “neutral” standpoint. Pragmatism’s central motif is embodied in Michael Bacon’s (2012, vii) point that “the center of pragmatism’s contribution to philosophy is shown to lie in the resources it finds in and develops from our social practices. Pragmatism challenges the often implicit assumption that our practices are necessarily inadequate and require backup from some standard or principle which lies beyond them”. In particular, Pragmatism is generally committed to these three conceptual “pillars” – (1) “standards of objectivity come into being and evolve over time, but...being historically situated in this way does not detract from their objectivity” (Misak 2007, 2); (2) “knowledge has no certain foundations. All beliefs, no matter how strongly held, are fallible” (Misak 2007, 2); and (3) philosophy should be kept “connected to first-order inquiry, to real examples, to real-life expertise” (Misak 2007, 4). Needless to say, like any other tradition, Pragmatism is not homogenous – different Pragmatists have characterised its core philosophy in distinctive ways⁶. For our purposes, we are primarily concerned with the philosophical vision that Rorty offered by synthesising (1), (2), and (3). Before we outline this vision, we must first explore to what extent Pragmatist themes are reflected in Buddhist Studies.

Exploration, in a comparative key, of the motifs of “Pragmatism” and “pragmatic style” in Buddhist discourses is not an entirely new topic. Indeed, several Western scholars have discerned pragmatic themes in Buddhist worldviews. References to such themes in Buddhist practice and forms of life, such as a “matter-of-fact approach to problem solving” (Bacon 2012, 1), will be labelled “pragmatism” (with a lowercase “p”), whereas “Pragmatism” (with an uppercase “P”) will designate the school of American philosophy we discussed above. Due to the abundance of clearly pragmatic themes in Buddhist literature, the scholarly attempts to draw parallels with Pragmatism can be seen as a natural comparative development, although they are surprisingly scanty.

In the contemporary scholarship on the Pāli Canon, namely, the discourses of the Buddha recorded in the Pāli language, a pragmatic and anti-speculative approach has often been attributed to the Buddha (c.400 BCE). Some of these discourses (*suttas*) highlight the Buddha’s refusal to answer certain “metaphysical” questions relating to the structure of the cosmos and the nature of

⁶ For example, Richard Bernstein (1995, 55) has argued: “That what we call pragmatism is itself...*constituted* by the narratives that we tell about pragmatism... That the history of pragmatism has always – from its ‘origins’ right up to the present – been a conflict of narratives. Despite family resemblances among those who are labeled pragmatists, there have always been sharp – sometimes irreconcilable – differences within this tradition”.

the afterlife, due to their lack of utility on the path towards spiritual liberation (*nirvāṇa*). Therefore, it is difficult to deny the significance of certain types of pragmatic considerations in Buddhist visions (Bodhi 1995, 25). The Buddha's refusal to engage in these cosmological discussions as well as his clear announcement of soteriological aims have led some scholars to emphasise a pragmatic approach in his worldview over a primarily metaphysical position (Gombrich 2009, 67; Gethin 1998, 160). The famous parable of the raft, for example, where the Buddha likens his teachings to a raft which helps one to cross a body of water but is to be abandoned once one has safely reached the other shore, has been recently interpreted by Christian Coseru (2017) as marking "the pragmatic approach of the Buddha's teachings...". The significance of such pragmatic styles of reasoning has also been noted by John Powers in reference to the *Kālāma Sutta*, where the Buddha tells the Kālāma people to not accept teachings on the basis of authority or tradition and instructs them to instead use their own common sense and individual experience. As Powers (1994, 60) notes, "the testing procedures he advocates are both pragmatic and empirical: one should examine any teaching to see whether it holds up under analysis, whether it leads to successful completion of actions, and most importantly, whether it accords with experiential evidence"

Buddhist discourse was subsequently developed through the scholastic traditions of Abhidharma (c.300 BCE and later), which sought to systematise the *sūttas* of the Pāli Canon. Such systematisation was vital for Buddhist thinkers in contexts of debate where they had to defend their own argumentative stances vis-à-vis those of Brahmins, Jains, and others, and within these agonistic contexts we find the evolution of what we would today generally recognise as "philosophy", that is, styles of rational argumentation, conceptual analysis, and logical disputation. Yet, even with the emergence of the Abhidharma literature and the developing investigations into ontological motifs such as the evanescent constituents of the world (*dharma*s), the pragmatic efficacy of Buddhist teachings was not wholly disregarded. The various early Buddhist schools, such as the Sarvāstivāda and the Vātsīputrīyas, had to configure interpretive frameworks to systematise the Buddha's teachings for the purpose of "reconciling apparently contradictory statements in scripture based on their pedagogical intent" (Newland and Tillemans 2011, 5). Reconciling the statements in the Pāli Canon about the nature of the self and the world with the therapeutic and soteriological teachings of the Buddha became one such exegetical task. A standard hermeneutic strategy developed by these early Buddhists is the distinction between *nītattha* (Sanskrit: *nītārtha*) statements and *neyyattha* (Sanskrit: *neyārtha*) statements. These two terms offer a methodological tool for how the canonical proclamations of the Buddha should be interpreted – whether they should be taken literally because their meaning is "definitive", as is

the case with the former, or explained further because their meaning “requires interpretation”, as is the case with the latter (2011, 5).

In Mahāyāna literature, which emerges around the beginning of the common era, this hermeneutic principle was further elaborated into the doctrine of “two truths”, namely, conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). This principle became “a complex system of thought with highly sophisticated ontological, epistemological and semantic theories...” (Thakchoe 2022). One can argue that this growing preoccupation with hermeneutic strategy partly stemmed from the necessity of reconciling the pragmatic emphasis on seeking liberation with ontological inquiries into what there really is. As the Cowherds (Newland and Tillemans 2011, 6) explain, “seeking to construct integrated systems from the many discourses the Buddha gave to diverse audiences, early Buddhist scholars relied upon the two truths as a hermeneutic device. Only passages taken to be pointing to the final nature of reality were read as ultimate truth, while conventional truth was found in passages taken to rely upon, rather than to reject, more superficial constructs”. Thus, this distinction between two levels of truth highlights the Buddhist appreciation of the *utility* of certain concepts which, even if not *ultimately* true, *are* true in the here and now of monastic discipline aimed at liberation.

Highlighting a similar pragmatic theme, Jonardon Ganeri emphasises what he calls the “protreptic” nature of some Buddhist discourses, that is, their intention to persuade or instruct. He explains:

The implication of the famous parable of the ‘burning house’ in the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which a father cajoles his children to leave the burning house with the false promise of toys, is that the compassionate lie is a skilful way to bring about the good. The parable suggests that the Buddha’s words, although untrue, encourage people to escape the burning house that is a person’s lustful attachment to the world. (Ganeri 2007, 99)

Reflecting our earlier observations, Ganeri explains that Buddhist commentators, such as Nāgārjuna himself, argued that this kind of parabolic statement is *not* utter untruth. Ganeri notes Nāgārjuna’s statement in *Ratnāvalī* (2:35): “What is not deceitful is the truth; it is not an intentional fabrication. What is solely helpful to others is the truth. The opposite is falsehood since it does not help” (Hopkins 1998, 113; cited in Ganeri 2007, 99). The emphasis here is not only on the conceptual priority of the pragmatically useful over the relevant facts of the matter, but also on a seeming identification between truth and utility. In other words, this emphasis on pedagogic intention over fact-stating enterprise re-conceptualises such intentions as not complete falsehoods. With the gradual development of Mahāyāna Buddhism through the voluminous *sūtra*

literature, this protreptic focus was further refined with the concept of *upāya-kauśalya*, generally translated as “skill in means” (Gombrich 2009, 7) or “skilful means” (Pye 2003, 1). This concept refers to the pedagogic skill of a bodhisattva who wisely utters somewhat divergent statements to different contexts of audiences – however, all these statements are true as indexed to their particular epistemic and soteriological contexts. As such, stating propositions that are not straightforwardly compatible across differential contexts of spiritual maturity is regarded as the “skilful” pedagogic approach of a bodhisattva. Such a hermeneutic skill was presented as an epistemic virtue that was actively cultivated by enlightened individuals such as the Buddha himself, who, in several *sūtras*, displays a keen sensitivity to the specific cognitive and spiritual capacities of his audiences. Thus, he explained certain topics through concepts that he knew his listeners would understand, while occasionally he even made declarations that were inconsistent with his own declarations in other contexts. The pedagogic differences between different audiences shape the type of Buddhist discourse that would be pragmatically useful, and this context-sensitivity is a skill that only an enlightened individual can cultivate through their immense insight and compassion.

This clear recognition of a *pragmatic* emphasis in Buddhist sources has generated some comparative scholarship exploring the conceptual resonances between Buddhism and *Pragmatism*. As noted earlier, in the context of Pragmatist-Buddhist dialogues, Pragmatism is often associated with a theory of truth. As such, debates over where exactly certain Buddhist claims relating to no-self, *nirvāṇa*, and other motifs should be placed on a spectrum between pragmatic or Pragmatist concerns and ontological claims is a topic of deep disagreement in academic scholarship. In *The Notion of Truth in Buddhism and Pragmatism*, Kamala Kumari examines certain similarities between Buddhism and Pragmatism, especially concerning their views of truth and their methods of making truth claims. She demonstrates how each tradition sees truth as context-dependent and relative to a particular framework or audience. Thus, the Buddha’s Pragmatist notion of truth, according to Kumari, aims at “revealing the practical core of life” (Kumari 1987, 61). In exploring the Pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey, Kumari highlights some resonances with Buddhist visions, where truth is understood as a tool for aiding one’s liberation. The Buddhist notion of truth as oriented to practice has been compared to the Pragmatist notion of truth also by John Holder (1996) and José Cabezón (2000). For instance, Holder (1996, 444) emphasises that the “Middle Way with respect to truth is best interpreted as...a pragmatic theory of truth”, which he defines as follows: “the pragmatist view holds that truth is emergent from contexts of experience; truth is essentially a matter of warranting a belief or statement as an effective guide for action” (1996, 452). For Holder, walking a middle path

between absolutism, according to which a belief is true if it accurately copies reality, and relativism, which claims that there are no objective standards for what makes a belief true, is precisely what Pragmatism and the Buddhist tradition have in common. Likewise, Cabezón (2000, 148) refers to “Buddhist Pragmatism” and states:

Demonstrating the pragmatic efficacy of Buddhist doctrine has in large part been done by the classical Buddhist tradition itself. For example, the Tibetan *lam rim* tradition...has set forth—largely in pragmatic terms—the need for engaging in a series of sequential meditations each of which practically serves as a necessary prerequisite for the next...In these texts...what guarantees the efficacy or truth of doctrines...the pragmatist would assert, is not their correspondence to a specific state of affairs in the world, but the fact that they are practically required as stepping stones to higher ones.

Thus, the Pragmatist theory of truth “represents the most promising option for the Buddhist” because it “resonates well with the Buddhist sources” and “offers...the most fruitful starting point for the formulation of an authentically Buddhist...theory of truth” (Cabezón 2000, 148). Cabezón claims that the Buddhist emphasis on skilful means and pragmatic efficacy outweighs pronouncements of ontological claims. He points to various positions in Buddhist doctrine that are offered for their pragmatic efficacy rather than for their “objective” truth in terms of correspondence with reality (2000, 148). Thus, for Cabezón, this emphasis on the pragmatic over the objective points towards a Buddhist theory of truth that resembles the Pragmatist one.

However, some scholars ask how the Buddhist worldviews can be said to be pedagogically useful if they are not also *true*. The Cowherds have argued that although some Buddhist philosophers might accept a Pragmatist “criterion for truth”, “it is not clear that any of them would accept the view that being such as to lead to successful practice is what truth is” (Priest, Siderits and Tillemans 2011, 135). In other words, the importance of pragmatic utility does not generate a definitional *identification* between truth and utility. Therefore, some scholars have argued that the Pragmatist theory of truth does not adequately reflect Buddhist epistemic and soteriological practices. Georges Dreyfus (1997, 308), for example, critiques the work of David Kalupahana on the grounds that he “emphasized the empirical and pragmatic aspects of Buddhism and undervalued the importance of tradition as a source of truth”. We also find in Tom Tillemans (1999) a similar attempt to dissociate Dharmakīrti (c.600-700 CE), the Indian Buddhist philosopher recognised for his contributions to epistemology, from the Pragmatism of Peirce and James. Although it has been suggested that Dharmakīrti’s theory of truth is a Pragmatist one, “especially because the reliability (*avisamvādatva*) of a means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*)

consists in there being ‘confirmation of practical efficacy’ (*arthakriyāsthiti*)” (Tillemans 1999, 6), Tillemans argues that this comparative equivalence breaks down because the Buddhist message is taken to embody the way the world *actually* works, which makes this message soteriologically efficacious. Therefore, Tillemans suggests that in the work of Dharmakīrti there is “nothing...which suggests a Jamesian account along the lines of ‘the understanding/belief/statement that there is a vase/fire over there is true for us because it is in the long run most useful for us to believe that there is a vase/fire over there’” (1999, 7). Dreyfus reaches a similar conclusion and clearly states that if “this label [i.e., Pragmatism] is used with greater precision, as referring to the positions defended by thinkers such as James, Peirce, and Dewey, I think it does not fit completely Dharmakīrti and his tradition” (Dreyfus 1997, 308).

To summarise our discussion so far, a strong emphasis on pragmatic concerns in Buddhism has been generally recognised by scholars. Yet, comparisons between Buddhism and Pragmatism have tended to focus on the concept of truth across the two traditions, often understood in terms of truth’s utility, as opposed to the three “pillars” that broadly encapsulate Pragmatism’s self-understanding. This preoccupation with a theory of truth has given rise to a debate over whether Buddhists primarily put forth their worldviews as useful, which is why they are true, or as true, which is why they are soteriologically efficacious.

At the same time, there is some measure of acknowledgement in Buddhist Studies that associating Pragmatism rigidly with a theory of truth is an oversimplification. For example, Dreyfus (1997, 308) makes the following observation when he discusses the application of the label “Pragmatism” to the positions associated with James, Peirce and Dewey: “One may object that my use of the label *pragmatism* is too restrictive. For example, in recent years Rorty has proposed a form of pragmatism based less on a theory of truth than a rejection of the relevance of such a theory...Rorty’s view also raises interesting comparative questions”. As we will see in Chapter 4, if we follow Rorty who uses anti-representationalism to disconnect Pragmatism from a theory of truth, certain conceptual parallels between Neo-Pragmatism and Buddhism become apparent.

In contemporary literature, however, such resonances remain largely underdeveloped. Perhaps the most well-known work contributing to this specific area of intercultural discourse is C. W. Huntington’s *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika* (1989). The aim of this book is to develop an interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy that reworks themes from Rorty, among other Western thinkers, as a dialogical lens through which to understand Madhyamaka. In particular, Huntington draws on the Rortyan distinction between edifying and systematic philosophy, in order to argue that Madhyamaka should be read as the

former but not the latter. For Huntington, whereas edifying philosophy simply deconstructs and does not put forth any objective theses, so that the concepts that are used are discarded after the deconstructive process, systematic philosophy seeks to build theories and puts forth truth-evaluable viewpoints. Thus, Huntington's reading of Rorty emphasises the rejection of rational argumentation, the deconstruction of systematic philosophy, and the attempt to "change the subject", rather than direct engagement in philosophical debate (Huntington 1989, 10). However, such interpretations only perpetuate the sense of a sharp distinction between truth and utility, as well as the worry that the Pragmatist emphasis on utility over truth cannot resonate with Buddhist epistemic practices and soteriological goals.⁷ As we will see in Chapter 3, Rorty's Pragmatism allows us to cut through the truth versus use debate. Moreover, his methodological strategies also help to see that to "change the subject" need not be *opposed* to engaging in philosophy and argumentation.

Finally, for more recent comparative work which highlights conceptual resonances between Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka and Rorty's Neo-Pragmatism, we turn to papers by Nancy Frankenberry and Robin Brons. Frankenberry (2019, 563) argues that the two worldviews share a common commitment to the idea that "contingency goes all the way down", that is, to the claim that human practices (epistemic, moral, and so on) do not need a transcendental "grounding" deeper than the complex social practices that have evolved to help us cope with our dynamic environments. In this vein, Brons (2020, 25) foregrounds the "view-less anti-essentialism" common to both thinkers. However, although Frankenberry and Brons recognise the significance of Rorty's themes such as contingency, anti-essentialism, and anti-foundationalism for developing a dialogue with Nāgārjuna, they do not properly emphasise the central conceptual force driving Rorty's commitment to these ideas, namely anti-representationalism. As a result, they do not offer us a way to resolve the interpretive impasse – between truth and utility – that we have highlighted in this section. Before we examine this crucial notion of anti-representationalism, through which Rortyan Pragmatism offers a resolution, let us turn to Nāgārjuna scholarship and set the stage for our philosophical explorations.

⁷ For example, see Keown's (1992, 221) review of Huntington's book, where he expresses this precise worry as follows: "if the doctrine of emptiness is not saying something fundamental about the nature of reality, then it is extremely difficult to see why it should be linked exclusively to a single form of life".

1.2 Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: Setting the Stage

Recent commentators on Madhyamaka Buddhism, such as Jan Westerhoff (2009a), Tom Tillemans (2016), Jay Garfield (2002), Mark Siderits (2016), and C.W. Huntington Jr. (1989) are the influential pioneers of thinking with Madhyamaka tools across philosophical horizons. They seek to rationally reconstruct Nāgārjuna's texts in ways that would render his soteriological vision accessible to contemporary audiences and also do justice to his profound intellectual sophistication. In this section, we will familiarise ourselves with Nāgārjuna's message, and return to the Pragmatist impasse explored above.

In the MMK, Nāgārjuna's central concern is to indicate emptiness (*śūnyatā*), i.e., that all things are empty of *svabhāva*. Here *svabhāva* is a technical Sanskrit term that does not have one direct translation into English but subtly shifts its meaning depending on the dialectical context in which it is used. Nāgārjuna's declaration of emptiness is taken to be a targeted attack on two main contemporary opponents, namely the Nyāya school (c.200 BCE), which is one of the main schools of classical Indian philosophy and is characterised by its sophisticated development of logic and epistemology, and the Abhidharma school of Buddhism. Both schools, in one way or another, made use of the concept of *svabhāva* in their ontological expositions to refer to the essential nature that makes a specific object⁸ what it is; therefore, possible translations are “inherent existence” or “own being”. More precisely, “to say that something has *svabhāva* is to say that its nature is wholly its own; that is, it is not ‘borrowed’ from or dependent on those other things on whose existence it depends” (Siderits 2016, 39). In other words, *svabhāva* is the non-relational, intrinsic nature of an object. The teaching of emptiness – that is, the rejection of *svabhāva* – is developed through the doctrine of the two truths, which we noted earlier. In the Abhidharma philosophical viewpoint, the two truths indicate a “two-tier ontology”, according to which things that can be analysed into components are not “ultimately real; they are mere conceptual constructions, things that are thought to exist only because of the concepts we happen to employ (have merely *prajñapti-sat*)” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 656-657). Such objects, which populate our everyday world, are only conventionally real and any truth claims made about them are only conventionally true. However, the conceptual constructions which constitute such objects cannot themselves be “free floating”, and there must be some ultimately real entities that account for these everyday constructions by adequately “grounding” them. These entities are the *dharma*s, “which are so called because they bear their own intrinsic natures” (2013, 657).

⁸ Here, “object” is used in a broad sense of the term, akin to talk of an “object of investigation”. The Abhidharma thinkers were concerned with the *svabhāva* of *dharma*s as opposed to that of medium-sized perceptible objects.

However, Nāgārjuna seeks to highlight, in the MMK, the contradictions implicit in any arguments that presuppose *svabhāva*, and his objective is to demonstrate the *śūnyatā* of all phenomena by exposing the incoherence of the *dharma*-driven assumption that an object is “established from its own side” (Westerhoff 2009a, 200). Thus, Nāgārjuna rejects the Abhidharma two-tier ontology by claiming that the *dharma*s too are empty.

In the absence of a “master argument”, Nāgārjuna’s MMK problematises the notion of *svabhāva* in specific ontological debates through the skilful use of *reductios*. Nāgārjuna undertakes this deconstruction by responding “in an ad hoc fashion to specific debates on usual philosophical themes...His method – if we can call it one – thus seems to be a willingness to take up any thesis his opponents advance and use case by case argumentation to lead them to their own lucid abstention” (Tillemans 2017, 114). Thus, Nāgārjuna is not himself seeking to crystallise the ultimate truth of the world in the form of a systematised body of doctrines; rather, he is attempting to dismantle the notion of abiding substance and reorient individuals towards *nirvāṇa*, understood as profound emptiness.

To facilitate this soteriological transformation, in which everyday objects would be re-envisioned as empty, Nāgārjuna focuses on the motifs of causation, motion, and the self, and shows that any theory that presupposes or defends *svabhāva* is ultimately incoherent. To repeat, the “aim is not to come up with a proof that establishes emptiness once and for all, but rather to show *for each foundationalist theory the opponent puts forward* that it faces fundamental problems” (Westerhoff 2017, 99). We can exemplify this general strategy by examining Nāgārjuna’s treatment of causation, in MMK 1:1, in which he proceeds exhaustively to address every logical possibility relating to the identity or the difference of cause and effect. These are self-causation; causation from others; causation from self and other; and causation from neither (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 17). This argumentative style is called the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*), which enumerates four alternatives: a proposition is true, is not true, is both true and not true and is neither true nor not true. Nāgārjuna then demonstrates that all these four alternatives contain logical fallacies. To return to causation, the reason why the four alternatives are ultimately unsatisfactory is because all of them presuppose that cause and effect exist substantively through their grounding in *svabhāva*. So, from Nāgārjuna’s perspective, a philosophical analysis of causation is not an ontological exercise aimed at excavating the scaffolding of the world, but rather a means through which to demonstrate its emptiness. This is because cause and effect are concepts that are mediated by the context-specific needs of humans who supply regularities in order to navigate their experiential worlds. Thus, the concept of effect is to be understood as

“supplied by anticipation” and the concept of cause as “supplied by memory”, making the ontological projection of *svabhāva* explanatorily superfluous (Westerhoff 2017, 96).

In short, the strategy of the Mādhyamikas is to firmly reject those dialectical spaces that work with the notions of essence, substance, or the intrinsic nature of things. Analogous to his claim that cause and effect are conceptual posits, Nāgārjuna makes a similar point about motion and the self – both “are seen as linguistic or conceptual artifacts rather than as fundamental constituents of reality” (Westerhoff 2009a, 16). In other words, the Mādhyamika shows that the substantive theses offered by their opponents are based on a “metaphysical misapprehension whereby things...are hypostatized to have intrinsic natures” (Tillemans 2017, 112). In these settings, Nāgārjuna’s aim is to highlight the standard Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) according to which there are no ontologically stable and inherently existent objects that endure as unitary substances or bearers of transient properties. Instead, all objects – including *dharma*s – are causally related and arise based on impermanent conditions.

However, Nāgārjuna’s opponents think he is faced with a significant difficulty – if every-thing is empty of *svabhāva*, what is the status of his own statements? Are they too empty? In that case, how are we to understand the Buddha’s teachings in the first place? Are they also empty? And if so, is Nāgārjuna not, in effect, rejecting the Buddha’s own sermons on dependent origination, not-self, the *dharma* etc.? Surely Nāgārjuna cannot propound emptiness if the motif of emptiness threatens the soteriological goal of Buddhism? These objections can be crystallised as a dilemma: the first horn is that everything is empty, *except* the doctrine of emptiness itself and the second horn is that everything is empty, *including* the doctrine of emptiness. In other words, the

opponent argues that Nāgārjuna faces a dilemma whose horns are *inconsistency* and *impotence*. If he assumes his claim not to be empty, he has contradicted his own thesis of universal emptiness (because there is now at least one thing that is not empty). If, on the other hand, Nāgārjuna takes his own claim to be empty too, the opponent argues, this claim is then unable to deny the existence of independently existing phenomena that the opponent asserts. (Westerhoff 2009a, 185)

Both horns are undesirable since in the case of the former, Nāgārjuna’s position is logically undermined, and the latter seems to jeopardise his own claim for emptiness as the universal characteristic of existence as well as the fundamental wisdom of the Buddhist path. Nāgārjuna embraces the second horn and maintains that emptiness is universal and that emptiness also applies to itself, namely the concept of emptiness too is empty of *svabhāva*. When a Mādhyamika makes the statement, “all *dharma*s are empty”, this process of enunciation itself is said to be

dependently arisen in a certain causal matrix (MMK 24:18), which means that emptiness and dependent origination amount to the same statement – they are two sides of the same conceptual coin (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 277). Thus, Nāgārjuna bites the proverbial bullet, and declares that emptiness, like all conditioned phenomena, is itself a *prajñapti upādāya* – “dependent designation” (Garfield 1995, 69) or “dependent concept” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 394). This strategy has been taken to mean that Nāgārjuna does not put forward emptiness as his *ultimate position*, in the sense of a doctrinal statement, but rather offers it as a remedy for those who suffer from the delusion that worldly entities exist substantially (Westerhoff 2017, 97).⁹

Having established the (second-order) emptiness of (first-order) statements relating to emptiness, Nāgārjuna must now respond to the Nyāya critique that the Madhyamaka episteme lacks the necessary cognitive robustness to prove this very “thesis” – namely the emptiness of all phenomena. In verse 29 of the VV, however, Nāgārjuna famously replies: “If I had any thesis (*pratijñā*) that fault would apply to me. But I do not have any thesis, so there is indeed no fault for me” (Westerhoff 2010, 29). How to interpret this somewhat enigmatic proclamation remains one of the most vexed topics in Madhyamaka scholarship. Westerhoff explains that this “so-called no-thesis view is without a doubt one of the most immediately puzzling philosophical features of Nāgārjuna’s thought” (2009b, 25) and that it is “a good starting point for the discussion of Nāgārjuna’s conception of how the theory of emptiness affects our view of language” (2009a, 183). Contemporary scholars generally agree that for the Mādhyamika there is no deeper, ontologically more “real” way that things exist than their conventional reality, that is, as dependently originated and thus as empty.¹⁰

In the light of this sketch of Madhyamaka, let us return to our comparative observations in section 1.1; crucially, some of the pragmatic and the Pragmatist motifs that we have highlighted there carry over into the scholarship on Nāgārjuna. Garfield (2002, 27) states that Nāgārjuna’s claims about context-dependence point to the “remarkably pragmatic outlook of Madhyamaka philosophy”, and Westerhoff remarks that Nāgārjuna “regards individuals and properties as linguistically or conceptually mediated projections of at best pragmatic importance, but not as objective features of a mind-independent reality” (Westerhoff 2009a, 15). With this recognition,

⁹ For a strong disagreement with this “mainstream” interpretation, see Berger (2010). Since our concerns are not primarily exegetical, we will sidestep this debate and, with Garfield and Westerhoff (2011, 367), “place our faith...in the tradition”.

¹⁰ See Williams-Wyant (2017) for an alternative interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s thesis-less-ness in VV 29, which carries no philosophical ramifications but is simply a declaration made in the context of deconstruction-styled debate (*vitaṇḍā*). Nevertheless, this reading does not affect the core issue of whether or not Nāgārjuna can coherently both make positive claims (such as “everything is empty”) and proclaim the abandonment of all views elsewhere, such as in the dedicatory verse of the MMK, and at MMK 5:8, 13:8, and 25:24.

however, comes a similar interpretive impasse over the question – how far can a Pragmatist reading of Madhyamaka be extended? Here, again, we find disagreements over whether Nāgārjuna takes his statements to be primarily *true*, and *therefore* soteriologically efficacious, or vice versa. Garfield distances his interpretation of the MMK from that of Kalupahana by arguing that Nāgārjuna takes himself to be making statements that are *true* and not simply pragmatically useful (Garfield 1995, 148 n58, 252 n97). Likewise, David Burton (2004, 105) states, with respect to the MMK: “It is not that the truth of the claim is equated with its usefulness, but rather that the claim is thought to correspond to reality and thus it is useful”. Once again, we find that the recognition of certain pragmatic themes in Madhyamaka tends to centre around the bifurcation between truth and utility often associated with Pragmatism. However, the marrying of truth and utility in the Madhyamaka context is generally seen as insufficiently robust to carry the epistemic weight for Buddhist commitments to dependent origination, not-self, the possibility of enlightenment, the eightfold path, etc. Huntington (1989, 11), as we have seen, argues that Nāgārjuna is simply not in the business of truth, objectivity, or rational argumentation: the Mādhyamika’s aim is to offer us “an alternative ‘form of life’ – and to suggest a specific path by means of which it might be actualized”. Indeed, Huntington invokes William James’s Pragmatist theory of truth, which he argues is compatible with the “Mādhyamika’s analysis of truth as a function of what can be put into practice – what can be embodied in the thoughts, words, and actions that go to make up a form of life” (1989, 44). This suggests that it is not the truth, but the utility of the Buddhist “form of life” that is in the driving seat of Nāgārjuna’s vision. Likewise, Rafal Stepień (2019, 563) has recently argued that protreptic utility overrides any claims to accurately reflect the world. He states:

the authorial intent of Buddhist philosophical texts...is not primarily zetetic but protreptic; indeed, zetetic only insofar as protreptic. In other words, these texts seek to instruct the reader/practitioner as to the means toward detachment from irreality in the form of conceptual elaborations such as “self” and “truth.” The deconstruction of such fictions and consequent description of reality as it truly is (i.e., devoid of them), even where this deconstruction and description comprises the bulk of the text, is subservient to this ultimate end.

We will develop these themes in Chapter 2, where we will see that how to interpret Nāgārjuna’s “thesis-less-ness” (VV 29) is the conceptual fork at which many scholars part ways. Some are keen to take Nāgārjuna at his word, while others argue that *unqualified* viewlessness cannot be a rational option for him, given his commitment to at least some thesis (*pratijñā*) like emptiness and dependent origination. Such interpretations remain at an impasse, as I have argued, because of the presumed equivalence between Pragmatism and a specific theory which definitionally

associates truth with utility. In other words, this theory rejects the everyday assumption that “by ‘true’ we seem to mean something other than ‘conducive to successful practice’” (Priest, Siderits and Tillemans 2011, 135). However, as indicated, my general aim in this dissertation is to demonstrate that by shifting the conceptual focus away from notions like truth and objectivity and towards anti-representationalism, we can find ways to re-articulate the interpretive terrain in a way that circumvents such disagreements. So, let us now examine Rorty’s rejection of representationalism.

1.3 Rorty’s Rejection of Representationalism

One of the central contributions to Western academic philosophy that Rorty is remembered as making is his rejection of the ocular metaphor of the mind as a transparent medium for apprehending and “re-presenting” the world. This motif was first articulated in his well-known book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (PMN),¹¹ published in 1979. Over the next three decades, Rorty would develop this rejection of representationalism in several monographs and essays which articulate his Neo-Pragmatism. We will discuss in detail the motif of anti-representationalism in Chapter 3; in this section, we will highlight some key aspects of representationalism in order to understand what it would mean to reject it. We will also trace some aspects of the philosophical background of Rorty’s anti-representationalism.

According to Rorty, the mind should not be understood as a tool to “mirror nature” and thus knowledge is not to be judged in terms of more or less accurate matchings up between language and reality (that is, “re-presentations”). The metaphor of mind as a *mirror* of reality is thus an evocative articulation of representationalism. In the philosophy of mind, representationalism is the claim that “intentionality, the capacity of mental states to be about, or to represent, extra-mental objects or states of affairs, is the ‘proper mark of the mental’” (Salis 2020, 116). This variety of representationalism is intertwined with an epistemological variety, according to which “our epistemic practices aiming at knowledge strive for an accurate representation of reality” and thus “our beliefs, when true, represent things as they are” (2020, 116). These two varieties are conceptually interrelated because the assumption that the mind’s central function is to *represent* reality leads to the position that knowledge amounts to *correct* representations. In *PMN*, however, Rorty argues that such ocular images have led Western philosophers to remain overly preoccupied with epistemology, while generating futile quests for

¹¹ All references to Rorty’s books throughout this dissertation will use such abbreviations. For a full list, see the Bibliography.

a theory that would justify our knowledge claims. Crucially, Rorty argues that if we reject representationalist assumptions and idioms, we will regard theoretical inquiries into knowledge as misguided because such inquiries presuppose the need for foundations deeper than the social practices humans have developed for justifying their beliefs to each other. That is, such inquiries take for granted the representationalist starting point that there is a gulf between mind and world. Indeed, the rejection of ocular metaphors animates Rorty's move away from theories of truth *tout court* – his aim “will consist *simply* in the dissolution of the traditional problematic about truth, as opposed to a constructive ‘pragmatist theory of truth’” (ORT 127). Therefore, rather than contributing to further conversations in epistemology regarding key semantic notions, such as truth and reference, or refining current theories of truth and configuring yet another theory, Rorty's point is that “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief” (Bacon 2007, xii).

In *PMN*, Rorty diagnoses the Western philosophical tradition since Descartes as shifting between two positions, namely *scepticism* or the view that we cannot guarantee that our knowledge of the external world is accurate, and *foundationalism* or the view that there are epistemic procedures which are guaranteed means of knowledge. In other words, the attempt to provide a theory of knowledge has historically engendered an epistemological binary—*either* we have secure knowledge of the external world, usually through some kind of foundational epistemic tools that underwrite the accuracy of our knowledge claims, *or* we plummet headlong into scepticism, according to which we cannot have knowledge of the external world due to the absence of the necessary justifiers (Brandom 2021, xv). Rorty's central point is that this is a false binary, and one that should be abandoned by not viewing knowledge in terms of accurate mirror-like representation. Towards dispelling this binary, Rorty invokes the work of three analytic philosophers – W.V.O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, and Donald Davidson – and argues that their critiques of representationalism are Pragmatist in spirit and enable us to move past Cartesian and Kantian assumptions about knowledge. What makes their critiques Pragmatist, for Rorty, is their emphasis on “epistemological behaviorism” (PMN 173), namely their commitment to a method that “seeks to understand thought and behavior from a public standpoint, with differences in belief which make no difference to behavior discarded” (Bacon 2012, 96). One key problem with epistemological representationalism, as Rorty sees it, is that it attempts to demarcate a set of representations as privileged. The two kinds of privileged representations that philosophers, operating in the shadow of Cartesian images, were concerned with articulating (in order to avoid the abyss of scepticism) can be termed the “semantic given” (analytic truths such as “ $2+2=4$ ”) and the “epistemic given” (sense data such as “red blotch”) (Sachs 2015). The former would

provide a foundation for knowledge claims by suggesting that there are truths which are true by virtue of definition alone. The latter refers to raw sensations that would ground our knowledge because they are “given to us immediately in experience” (Bacon 2012, 95). Crucially, however, these two forms of privileged representations were attacked by Quine and by Sellars, and their arguments can be read as two sides of the same anti-representationalist coin (Brandom 2021, xvi). Quine’s side consists of his attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction: he famously argued that we cannot distinguish truths that are independent of any facts (analytic) from those that are true by appeal to experience and thus dependent on facts (synthetic). Quine succeeded, according to Rorty, in uprooting the assumption that something can be true by virtue of its meaning independently of the rest of one’s concurrent commitments. Sellars’s side consists of his claim that sensory experience cannot be demarcated from its conceptual articulation. What Sellars termed, equally famously, the “myth of the given” is meant to argue that preconceptual sense experience does not constitute knowledge. Their attacks on representationalism imply that justification can no longer be thought of as “a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects” – rather, justification has to be understood in terms “of conversation, of social practice” (PMN 170).

To provide further Pragmatist ammunition against representationalism, Rorty invokes Davidson’s proposal that we simply drop the paradigmatic Kantian distinction between the actively organising conceptual mind (understood as scheme) and the passively receptive material of sense experience (understood as content). Davidson’s key claim is that this scheme-content distinction involves an unintelligible dualism. In Rorty’s estimation, Davidson demonstrates this point in a Pragmatist spirit, by arguing that if we identify conceptual schemes with languages, the question boils down to whether it is possible for two languages to be wholly untranslatable. Davidson argues that for this type of radical incommensurability to be possible, *two* criteria must be simultaneously met, namely (1) the utterances made by another person are in *a certain language* and yet (2) these utterances cannot be translated into *our own* language. Now, for something to be a conceptual scheme, it must be a *language*, that is, a network of meanings, and not just a haphazard aggregate of noises. However, to claim that two such schemes are categorically distinct would mean that the *foreign* language cannot be translated into our own at all. But (1) and (2) cannot be met simultaneously, because “we cannot make sense of the untranslatability of a language and yet judge a person to be speaking a language” (Bacon 2012, 82). For to judge that someone’s utterances are a *language* is already to be able to map, even if only tentatively, what they utter into our own language by offering some provisional translations. In short, two languages cannot intelligibly be said to be radically untranslatable because to be

able to even recognise a string of sounds *as a language is to be able to translate it, however provisionally, into our own*. Thus, Davidson (1984, 192) states “we can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for the background of general successful translation provides what is needed to make the failure intelligible”. However, if we cannot make sense of multiple *schemes* which are mutually untranslatable, talk of a *single* scheme is not intelligible in the first place – “if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one” (1984, 198).

The point is that the Kantian idea of *a priori* concepts and categories that actively structure an unstructured world is unintelligible, so that “what is problematic is not so much the idea of *alternative* conceptual schemes, but the idea of a conceptual scheme *per se*” (Murphy 1990, 97). That is, Davidson is “against the idea that there is any clear point to thinking of what we do when we master language as mastering a conceptual scheme at all” (Ramberg 2008, 441). Davidson’s claim is that we cannot “distinguish between changes in our choice of which statements to hold true which result from changes in our conceptual scheme from those which result from change in our grasp of empirical fact” (Murphy 1990, 98). Davidson’s (1984, 189) argument against the scheme-content dualism is meant to show that we cannot, in principle, make the distinction that this dichotomy requires and therefore we cannot make intelligible the notion of an “organizing system and something waiting to be organized”. For Rorty, this suggests that representationalism cannot be sustained because the presupposed gulf between a structuring mind and an unstructured world is rendered unintelligible. And with this blow to representationalism, Rorty thinks that we can finally get “the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether” (PMN, 371).

With the publication of *PMN* in 1979, where Rorty’s anti-representationalist worldview was first extensively articulated, his Neo-Pragmatism continued to extend this critique with a sharper focus on a third variety of representationalism, again closely related to the first two, namely *semantic* representationalism. Contemporary Neo-Pragmatists developing Rorty’s legacy, such as Huw Price, Robert Brandom, and Michael Williams, are mostly preoccupied with finding ways to substitute semantic representationalism with semantic *anti*-representationalism. In this context, semantics is the study of linguistic meaning and conceptual content; so, to be a representationalist in one’s semantics is to hold that words “stand for” or “refer to” properties in the world and that sentences “stand for” nonlinguistic facts (Price 2013, 9). Reflecting the view of the Classical Pragmatists who insisted that “philosophy must come to terms with Darwin” (PAA 4), Rorty views humans as simply more complex animals that remain continuous with other species, rather than divinely created creatures wholly different from them. Crucially, this common

evolutionary history raises the question of “at what point in evolution organisms stop coping with the environment and start trying accurately to represent it” (Bacon 2007, 14). The unequivocal answer that Rorty gives is “never”—linguistic and epistemic practices are evolved *coping* strategies rather than *copying* ones (PSH 65). According to Rorty, this deeply Pragmatist theme is what the work of Quine, Sellars, and Davidson points to.

The reason that the semantic variety of anti-representationalism particularly concerns Neo-Pragmatists is due to what Rorty (1967) terms the “linguistic turn” in the development of analytic philosophy. According to Rorty’s historical reading, in this “turn”, the examination of language moved into the conceptual place that the theory of representation had earlier occupied in Kantian epistemology. Instead of a focus on representation in analysing the mind’s knowledge of the external world, there was now a focus on linguistic and semantic motifs. But, importantly, what this post-war style of analytic philosophy and Kantianism continued to share is their examination of “the ‘formal’ or ‘structural’ aspects of our beliefs” (PMN 162), as opposed to a delineation of their social location or cultural affiliation. In this sense, although representation is the “core concept” of pre-1900 Enlightenment epistemology, nevertheless “it has dominated philosophical thinking about the relations between mind and world ever since” (Brandom 2021, xiii) – relations that continue to be examined, post the linguistic turn, in terms of language and semantics.

A genealogy of these conceptions of representationalism versus anti-representationalism has been traced by Rorty’s student, Brandom, in his 1976 paper “Truth and Assertibility”. Here, Brandom divides the philosophy of language into broadly two traditions. The first is the representationalist tradition influenced by Frege, Russell, and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, for whom “the essential feature of language is its capacity to represent the way things are” (Brandom 1976, 137). Brandom associates the anti-representationalist tradition with Dewey and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, for whom “language is best thought of as a set of social practices. In order to understand how language works, we must attend to the uses to which its sentences are put and the circumstances in which they are used” (1976, 137). This second way of understanding the social function of language is precisely the semantic anti-representationalist point that meaning is not constituted by the referential relation between a word and a nonlinguistic object in the world. As we will see in Chapter 3, Brandom and Davidson put forth their own anti-representationalist semantic theories that, according to Rorty, enable us to move past the representationalist preoccupation with transcendental principles that would underpin our social practices. This is because, for a Pragmatist, the key message is that our social practices structure and mediate our knowledge claims, and Rorty adds that it is specifically our

linguistic practices that play this role. And any attempt to somehow “get behind” such practices is misguided.

For the purposes of this dissertation which, as has been noted, aims to apply some Neo-Pragmatist tools to Madhyamaka interpretive debates, we have to be clear about the varieties of representationalism we will be discussing. As indicated, the three varieties are deeply intertwined, even if they are conceptually distinct. We will not extensively explore the first variety pertaining to the philosophy of mind. This is because substantial dualism of mind and world, which structures Cartesian accounts of the former as the “mirror” of the latter, would not be accepted by Madhyamaka Buddhists. According to Buddhist teaching, the mind is *interrelated* with the world through the causal matrices of dependent origination. So, Madhyamaka Buddhists, and the Madhyamaka interpreters I discuss, would *ultimately* reject the mind-as-mirror variety, and in this respect they would be in agreement with Rorty. However, the question of whether, at the *conventional* level, some form of subject-object duality can be skilfully utilised as a useful fiction is a theme that will be extensively discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, in Chapter 4, we will explore the epistemological variety in our efforts to re-articulate how a Mādhyamika might understand the epistemic status of their statements at the conventional level. As we will see, by shifting discourse in an anti-representational direction, conceptual binaries opposing the primacy of substantive truth to the primacy of soteriological efficacy can be sidestepped. Finally, as we will see in Chapter 3, according to Rortyan anti-representationalists, the very distinction between epistemological inquiries into the putative foundations of the world, on the one hand, and social analyses of our practices of justification, on the other hand, must be discarded. This distinction is shaped by the semantic variety of representationalism, and so this will be a core focus of the dissertation. For Neo-Pragmatists, semantic representationalism lies at the heart of the other forms of representationalism, and thus it must be critiqued in order to fully appreciate Rorty’s deeper points about knowledge and philosophical inquiry. Moreover, some influential interpretations of Nāgārjuna, as we will see in section 1.4, are known as “semantic” because they take Nāgārjuna to be making statements about ultimate *truth*, and not ultimate *reality*. Hence, the semantic variety of anti-representationalism will be central to our explorations into how to read Nāgārjuna semantically.

1.4 The Thematic Core: Two Impasses, Two Aims, and Anti-Representationalism

Having introduced some core concepts relating to Madhyamaka and Pragmatism, I will re-articulate the two intertwined aims highlighted earlier. The first aim is to shed light on two

interpretive impasses in contemporary Western Madhyamaka scholarship by re-orienting the conversational space to anti-representationalism. One of the impasses involves the truth versus utility dichotomy explored above, which is motivated by a limited understanding of Pragmatism simply as a theory of truth or a rejection of objectivity. I will characterise this exegetical disagreement as a *metalinguistic* one. Here, “metalinguistic” is not meant in its technical sense of the branch of linguistics that deals with metalanguages, that is, systems of linguistic terminology, but simply denotes a “meta-” disagreement about “linguistic” use, namely a disagreement about the *linguistic status* of Nāgārjuna’s claims. Specifically, the metalinguistic debate is over whether Nāgārjuna took his own statements to be *merely* useful to follow for the goal of liberation or to be *true* as well, that is, to accurately capture a fact about reality. The second impasse, which is thematically intertwined with the metalinguistic, I characterise as a *metaphilosophical* disagreement about whether we should read Nāgārjuna as primarily engaging in *philosophy*. Here, by “metaphilosophy” I mean a reflective higher-order inquiry “on the methods of philosophising” (Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood 2013, 8). This metaphilosophical disagreement amongst Madhyamaka scholars involves the questions – what is philosophy and what are its methods? As we will see in Chapter 2, these two oscillations are deeply interrelated and are being disentangled only for the purpose of exposition. We will begin there with a metaphilosophical investigation into what is at stake between the two sides in their accounts of “*what would it be* for something to be a [philosophical] theory” (Ramberg 1999, 62).

My aim in the context of these interpretive debates is *not* to settle them conclusively. Instead, I propose that we turn to Rorty as a dialogical partner who can give us some valuable resources for reconceptualising these exegetical disagreements, especially because of his Neo-Pragmatist engagements with certain metaphilosophical and metalinguistic motifs in Western academic philosophy. To this end, we will work with the concept of anti-representationalism, especially of the semantic variety. For Rorty, the rejection of representationalism has far-reaching metaphilosophical and metalinguistic implications for how we should understand objectivity, rationality, and logic. Therefore, the Pragmatist metaphilosophical critique of “armchair” philosophy and Rorty’s metalinguistic critique of the assumption that the central function of language is to describe the world can help us re-conceptualise the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic debates in Madhyamaka scholarship. From Rorty’s anti-representationalist perspective, these debates are seen to be structured by forced choices which can be avoided. Therefore, this Rortyan perspective stands at right angles to the exegetical field where the idiom of representationalism is not directly opposed or rejected. I will argue that the interpretive terrain of Madhyamaka is inflected with representationalist presuppositions, *especially* of a semantic

variety. We should not be surprised that cross-cultural conversations between Buddhism and anti-representationalism have not been properly developed, because representationalism remains very much embedded in Western philosophy. Indeed, as David Macarthur and Huw Price lament: “it is surprising that representationalism itself hasn’t been more widely challenged, given that the means and motive for doing so have been popular currency for the better part of two decades” (Macarthur and Price 2007, 92).

Once we have reconfigured the exegetical terrain of Madhyamaka scholarship anti-representationally, the second aim of this dissertation is to trace certain first-order implications of reading Nāgārjuna as an anti-representationalist. As we will discuss in Chapter 2, according to the influential “semantic interpretation”, Nāgārjuna is rejecting realist semantics, that is, the view that *mind-independent* objects give words their meanings and facts in the world make our sentences true. Nāgārjuna should instead be read in terms of semantic anti-realism, according to which words do not achieve reference by corresponding to mind-independent facts. Thus, words and sentences are to be regarded as “useful fictions” – true insofar as they are conventionally useful, but false insofar as they are ultimately fictions. By building on the observations of Frankenberg (2019, 563), I will suggest that Nāgārjuna should not be read as falling anywhere on the realism versus anti-realism spectrum. I will argue that the realism versus anti-realism debate is only relevant to representationalists, and so by accepting Rortyan *semantic anti-representationalism* this debate can be avoided. I will highlight the point that to deny the representationalist notion of nonlinguistic items, whether referents of words or facts that make sentences true, is *not*, however, to endorse some sort of cosmic idealism which would deny the everyday world of chairs and tables, or claim that a new world is brought into existence simply by altering our conventions. Instead, anti-representationalism is a *semantic* point that carries *no metaphysical baggage* about how the world is or is not. In this way, I will argue that while every Madhyamaka scholar would clearly agree that Nāgārjuna is not a representationalist at the ultimate level, it would be worthwhile to read him as an anti-representationalist at the conventional level too.

In offering this friendly modification to the semantic interpretation, I do not take as a starting point the motif of truth as a “real-world” property that needs analysis. To repeat, such an analysis is meaningful only on the realism versus anti-realism spectrum – precisely the spectrum that Nāgārjuna does not indwell. Instead, I develop the anti-representationalist point that language, knowledge, and semantics are conceptually prior to the notions of truth, objectivity and reference. Thus, I will sketch an alternative account of a Madhyamaka-friendly philosophy of language – this account is not *anti-realist*, but rather *anti-representationalist*. In this way, key

Madhyamaka concepts like dependent origination and emptiness are re-read as *linguistic* entities, where “linguistic”, however, is *not* placed in opposition to “nonlinguistic”, since an anti-representationalist does not make use of the latter notion. Consequently, on my Rortyan reading, Nāgārjuna should not be read as enunciating statements in representationalist spaces. I will trace the implications of this reading for what Nāgārjuna does (seem to) say about emptiness, dependent origination, the emptiness of emptiness, and viewlessness.

I take this Rortyan move towards anti-representationalism to have the beneficial outcome of highlighting the different varieties of methodological strategies that Nāgārjuna can be read as implementing, which otherwise remain obscured when using representationalist conceptions of language and philosophy. Through the lens of Rorty’s metaphilosophical and metalinguistic insights, we can gain a new appreciation of the possible moves a philosopher can make that are yet not captured by canonical concepts like “logical inferences”, “sound argumentation” and “conceptual analysis”. As we will see in Chapter 4, the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic strategies of Rorty’s Neo-Pragmatism give us vital resources with which to bring into high relief the many *reason*-based moves open to Nāgārjuna and to re-envision Madhyamaka as a *metaphilosophy* more so than a philosophical system.

I should note at the outset that whilst my aim is to highlight some thematic overlaps between the visions of Rorty and Nāgārjuna, a survey of conceptual similarities is not the central point of this dissertation. It goes without saying that Nāgārjuna, in many respects, is not a Pragmatist, but a Buddhist. Besides the obvious differences in socio-cultural-historical locations between the two thinkers, Nāgārjuna is “ultimately” concerned with propagating the message (*dharma*) of the Buddha, which is taken to be authoritative and therefore non-negotiable in the spiritual milieu of Buddhist quests for liberation (*nirvāṇa*). This soteriological telos cannot be readily translated into the Western secular milieu of a Pragmatist philosopher for whom every theory is a socially contingent formulation. But these clear distinctions should not prevent us from seeking to creatively explore to what extent certain conceptual resonances can be traced in order to carry out the central aim of this dissertation, namely to read Nāgārjuna through a Rortyan lens, not with the aim of inducting Nāgārjuna into the Pragmatist canon, but of exploring whether the Pragmatist tradition can help us read Nāgārjuna in a way that renders his message less paradoxical or bewildering, and instead more cohesive, comprehensible and persuasive.

Having presented this summary of core arguments and aims, the final task of this chapter will be to situate this dissertation in the context of comparative ways of thinking, and comment on the specific approach to philosophy as an enterprise that informs my work.

1.5 Comparative Thinking and Neo-Pragmatist Methodology

Some of the styles of philosophising that we today call “comparative”, “intercultural” or “fusion” emerged around the middle of the last century. In particular, the comparative form of philosophising was embodied paradigmatically in the journal *Philosophy East and West*, launched in 1951 by Charles A. Moore. Comparative philosophy was developed by various scholars who sought to develop a cross-cultural approach in conceptual inquiry. Various encounters with the thought systems of “the Other” led these Western academics to re-situate themselves and their own philosophical traditions in wider conceptual networks across an increasingly globalised world.

However, what label we should ascribe to such globally oriented philosophical inquiries has become an intensely debated matter. This is because the commonly encountered terms such as “comparative”, “intercultural” and “fusion” are packaged with some problematic presuppositions; furthermore, it is not always clear what separates their supposedly distinct methodologies (Burik, Smid and Weber 2022). According to its critics, this style of comparative philosophy tends towards one-dimensional exercises of collating and comparing different ideas across philosophical traditions (Siderits 2003, xi). This enterprise usually works with the singular category of culture, which is problematic insofar as it places too much emphasis on *culture* as the only relevant unit of comparison (Weber 2013, 2014). Such an emphasis is limiting because it ignores the possibility of developing productive comparisons across the spectra of gender, class, and religion which cut across cultural affiliations. Next, the term “*intercultural*” can be packaged with the troublesome presupposition that a “culture” is a neatly isolatable unit, so that in philosophical inquiry we would bring two clearly formulated entities, from two static cultural horizons, into some kind of an extrinsic relationship. However, the concept of such a de-historicised entity – a closed, homogenous set of practices, traditions, and idioms belonging to a region or group of people – is not the best way to understand what the term “culture” means in real-world circumstances.¹²

Some philosophers have recently urged proponents of comparative philosophy to move toward “fusion philosophy” (Siderits 2003; Chakrabarti and Weber 2016). Fusion-minded philosophers would “compare philosophically” rather than “compare philosophies” (Chakrabarti and Weber 2016, 235) – thus highlighting “philosophy” as an intellectual exercise and not as a static body of doctrines. They offer “fusion” as a style of thinking that would be characterised by

¹² Also, Davidson shows that such a “conceptual scheme” cannot be individuated and thus should be discarded as a notion.

a general aim of “doing good philosophy, ideally, better philosophy than could be done in either of the compared traditions when they are secluded from the other” (2016, 28). Such styles of philosophical thinking would “spontaneously straddle geographical areas and cultures, temperaments and time periods” (2016, 22). As such, the idea of “fusion thinking” emphasises a dynamic process that is not limited to the act of tabulating similarities and distinctions, nor does it reify a particular culture as an ahistorical core. Instead, it is for those creative thinkers who “see problem-solving as central to philosophy, and who also believe that the counterpoising of distinct traditions can yield useful results in this endeavor [to solve problems]” (Siderits 2003, xi). Nevertheless, fusion philosophy too is not without its critics. It has been argued that a fusion style of viewing philosophy can promote an essentialist image of “philosophy”, which may be regarded as a clear and fixed set of formulations, and “fusers” as those somewhat maverick spirits who subsequently arrive on this stable landscape. Indeed, fusion philosophy has been accused of relying too heavily on the methods and presuppositions of analytic philosophy, that is, the style of conceptual inquiry that emerged around the turn of the 20th century and is still predominantly practised in various spheres of professional philosophy (Levine 2016, 214). The emphasis on problem-solving suggests, according to critics, that fusion thinking is not sufficiently aware of its own socio-historical situatedness and is “largely unconcerned with methodological issues” (2016, 211). This is because the idea that there is a universal activity called “doing philosophy”, which has readily universalizable methods, is itself a problematic notion.

To complicate matters further, there have been some forceful postcolonial critiques of the Western-centric nature of philosophical engagements with non-Western texts: the comparative methods employed in these engagements are said to “perpetuate colonial legacies” (Donahue 2016, 597). Amy Donohue accuses some of the Madhyamaka interpreters who will be our starting point of exploration in Chapter 2 of propagating “legacies of colonialism that persist in contemporary global capitalism” (2016, 598). This kind of criticism generally stems from the worry that Western scholars who engage with non-Western texts objectify them, even if only unwittingly, so that what is “a parochial Western subject...[is] again made to seem naturally authoritative” (2016, 598). However, this critique of European ethnocentrism has been countered by the observation that the claim of radical alterity, which motivates various standpoints in postcolonial theory, runs the risk of re-introducing racism (Chibber, 2013). On this view, we should aim at forging a critical form of universalism that would not carry with it the presuppositions of Eurocentrism. For example, fusion thinking can be articulated as a self-reflexive movement “towards a universal philosophy” through “a multiple and integral approach to the common issues of philosophy” (Liat 1951, 12) or at least towards the possibility of making

“progress toward solving philosophical problems by looking at what traditions distinct from our own have had to say about the issues with which we are concerned” (Siderits 2003, xi). In short, one response to these postcolonial worries is that in our engagements with non-Western ideas and our attempts to “fuse horizons” (to borrow Hans-Georg Gadamer’s phrase), we are *not* seeking to objectify foreign ideas since we are taking these ideas seriously as our equal interlocutors and we are not presenting ourselves merely as their “curators or as acolytes” (Cowherds 2016, 617). Therefore, according to this vision of cross-cultural philosophising, the most “otherizing” style of Orientalism would, in fact, be that which “regards those who pursue philosophy in different garb and in different idioms as so different from us that we have no right to take their views seriously or to engage in critical dialogue” (2016, 618).

Thankfully, I do not have to settle such disputes, since I am engaging with contemporary interpreters of Madhyamaka who are self-critically aware of the Western philosophical lenses they are using to read ancient Indian and Tibetan texts – lenses that they take to be well-calibrated for the task. To situate my own project and highlight my stance in these hermeneutic debates, I reiterate that the central lens of this dissertation is Rorty’s Neo-Pragmatism. On the topic of comparative, fusion, and intercultural *philosophy*, I endorse Rorty’s emphasis on the historical situatedness of *any* philosophical style. Therefore, we should not attempt to fix the boundaries of “philosophy” in an *a priori* manner since this concept should not be seen as having an intrinsic set of topics, goals, or methodologies. In the words of Rorty (1989b, 337, emphasis added):

When trying for...tiny enlargements of our current horizon [by looking to the thought systems of other cultures], there is little point in dividing it up into segments labeled “literature”, “science”, “theology”, “politics”, and “philosophy”...the point of seeking out strangers is not to attain a more comprehensive view of something we have *already identified* – something like “the world” or “the human condition”. Instead, it is to acquire slightly different needs, and thus to put together...a way of being human which never existed before. Whether that form of life will contain anything recognizable as “philosophy” is up for grabs.

Similar to Rorty’s observation that philosophy is a “distinctive cultural phenomenon” and not “a *Fach*” (i.e., topic of study) and thus has no predetermined set of “problems about its subject and method” (CP 28), in these attempts too to globalise philosophy – whether interculturally or comparatively, or through fusion methods – there are no methods or topics that can be determined *a priori*. Instead, as the conversation becomes more global and more and more voices are heard and appreciated, the ongoing discussion – whether we call it “comparative”, “fusion” or “intercultural” philosophy – will alter like any other cultural phenomenon. This development will be responsive to various socio-historical moments in ways that can only be ascertained

retrospectively, but not predicted in advance. Thus, if we acknowledge the observation of Ninian Smart (1988, 175-176) that “modern western philosophy has been the product of a number of cultural accidents, one of which is institutionalisation of universities into a departmental structure”, it becomes clear that the enterprises of comparing *philosophically* or comparing *philosophies* do not have precisely formulable boundaries. These hermeneutic disagreements perhaps point to a deeper issue, namely we can meaningfully talk about right or wrong methodologies only if we can first agree on the goal of our inquiry. And our discussion of scholarly disagreements surrounding terms like “comparative”, “intercultural”, and “fusion” highlights the Neo-Pragmatist observation that what is at stake is the *point* of such global inquiries. But, once again, I nod in agreement with Rorty (1989b, 335) when he says: “God forbid we should ever agree on ‘the point’ of the lyric or ‘the point’ of philosophy, or even on ‘the point’ of Rilke or of Plato”.

In short, “the point” of a cross-cultural philosophical inquiry such as the one this dissertation seeks to undertake cannot be pre-established in conceptual space. I argue that although *professional* compartmentalisations are somewhat unavoidable, *conceptual* demarcations are malleable and revisable. Such disciplinary essentializations have been resolutely criticised by Rorty, and are also problematic in Buddhist contexts. To what extent our Anglophone disciplinary categories of “philosophy”, “religion”, and “literature” are applicable to investigations of Buddhist thought is an ongoing hermeneutic debate with no straightforward resolution. It has been argued that the category of “religion” is neither a natural nor a universal category, but rather a socio-historical product of “a mix of Christian disputes about truth, European colonial exploits, and the formation of nation-states” (Nongbri 2013, 154). In premodern India, China, and Japan, for example, there was no institutionalised separation between philosophy and religion. Thus, both Indian and Japanese scholars have struggled, over the last century, to find conceptual equivalents for the Europe-inflected terms “religion” and “philosophy” (Nakamura 1988, 138). In the context of classical Indian thought, Sanskrit terms such as *darśana* and *ānvīkṣikī* are often regarded as closely mapping on to some Western conceptions of “philosophy”; however, these terms are sometimes associated with concept clusters, such as epistemic practice (*pramāṇa-vāda*) and quests for liberation (*mokṣa*), that are not readily translatable into Western idioms. Along these lines, Stepien (2020, 2) has recently highlighted that in the case of Buddhism “the rigid repartitioning of relevant texts as *either* literary or philosophical is often unjustified by the polyvalent texts themselves”. The assumption shaping the work of some Western scholars engaging with Buddhist sources is that “one either ‘does literature’ or ‘does philosophy’”; however, this supposition “not only forces monolithic Western

disciplinary paradigms onto heterogeneous Eastern intellectual traditions, but also flies in the face of the evidence presented by the preponderant body of classical Asian Buddhist texts” (2020, 2). This point is not limited to Buddhist texts; Stepien notes that the “understanding that the philosophical content of a work is unproblematically extractable from its literary style” is a position that has been critiqued by numerous scholars working outside Buddhist contexts as well (2020, 11-12).

Reflecting Stepien’s argument, Rorty tells us that “topics and authors which fall under the care of philosophy departments form a largely accidental, and quite temporary, hodgepodge – determined mostly by the accidents of power struggles within universities and by current fashion” (CP 30). Because of such attempts to de-essentialise “philosophy”, Rorty became (in)famous for re-imagining professional philosophy and the human purposes that philosophical inquiry can serve. By re-describing philosophy, he sought to move it away from its institutional status as the academic discipline that promotes conceptual analysis and logical proof in order to discover truth and towards a literary genre that promotes human projects of self-fashioning and a cultural politics that maximises the space for such projects (Bacon 2007, xii). Rorty’s re-description of philosophy as a literary genre lends support to Stepien’s observation that certain disciplinary divisions in Western academia are not transcendental decrees, and so these divisions should not be unreflectively projected to Buddhist Studies.

In the light of these ongoing debates, I will characterise this dissertation as an exercise of *comparative* philosophy, because one of its central concerns is a critical exploration of the aims, methods, and scope of philosophy across the conceptual borderlines of Rortyan Pragmatism and Madhyamaka (Levine 2016, 211). This dissertation will suggest that “philosophy” does not have an intrinsic method or subject matter, but this conceptual fuzziness does not mean that we cannot offer narratives about how it *has* been practised and how it *could* be practised. In the end, I am happy for my readers to decide which term – say, intercultural or fusion – they think most suitably embodies the ethos of this dissertation. Such conceptual fine-tuning should not, however, obscure its central goal – a re-envisioning of Madhyamaka Buddhism in a way that renders its message less “spookily” esoteric and more straightforwardly intelligible. If this expository aim is too “Western”, I can only say that as a Westerner trained in analytic philosophy, I find it worthwhile to develop certain aspects such as clarity, lucidity, and consistency. Yet, I have not invoked Rorty, from the vast galaxy of Western philosophers, at random. Though he was initially trained as an analytic philosopher, he became a critic of many features of the analytic tradition. Therefore, in introducing some Rortyan themes to Western Madhyamaka scholarship, this dissertation can contribute to a critical rethinking of the contours of “philosophy” in Anglophone institutions, and

such a reflectively cross-cultural, that is, *comparative*, inquiry can also address the postcolonial criticisms of European insularity.

This dissertation will now unfold as follows. In Chapter 2, we will discuss in detail the two types of disagreement – metaphilosophical and metalinguistic – in contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship. Then, in Chapter 3, we will explore Rorty’s rejection of representationalism and highlight the significance of this move for his metalinguistic and metaphilosophical outlook, which will enable us to sidestep the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic impasses discussed in Chapter 2. Bringing together the central themes of Chapter 3, we will undertake in Chapter 4 the comparative task of showing that Nāgārjuna can be re-read as a Rortyan anti-representationalist. Finally, in Chapter 5 we will conclude this dissertation with some remarks on the significance of our anti-representationalist lens in the context of contemporary scholarship on Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka.

Chapter 2: The Metaphilosophical and the Metalinguistic Oscillations: Debating the Status of Nāgārjuna's Statements

“At the depth of disagreement which separates these two philosophers, both their spades are turned...For there is no overarching ahistorical context-free criterion to which one can appeal when asked to shift from one paradigm of explanation to another” (TP 104).

The central purpose of this chapter is to accomplish some stage-setting before I can situate, in subsequent chapters, a Rortyan style of anti-representationalism in contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship. As highlighted in section 1.4, there are two interrelated types of metaphilosophical and metalinguistic debates amongst Madhyamaka scholars. We have disentangled the two only for the purpose of exposition, and this distinction will enable us to clarify what is at stake between the two sides. The metalinguistic debate over the function of Nāgārjuna's statements is to a certain extent a metaphilosophical debate too, namely over what it is for a statement to be regarded as philosophical in the first place. By the end of this chapter, we will be in a better position to appreciate the significance of the quote from Rorty above, for it will be clear that both sides of these interpretive impasses have their “spades turned” – there is no way for either side to convince the other without begging the important questions against each other.

To highlight the conceptual contours of these two types of disagreement, I propose the metaphor of an oscillation. This metaphor strikes me as particularly apt for three reasons. First, it draws our attention to a central pivot that drives and sustains the oscillation towards two opposed poles which, although distinct, are also structurally related to this pivot. Each end of the pendulum swing begins to gain significance precisely through its dialectical polarity, because each end is defined with respect to what *it* takes to be its *other*. Second, when describing ongoing intellectual discussions or surveying the state of play in a particular domain of inquiry, one might mistakenly present debates which are work-in-progress exercises as a set of static formulations.¹³ This point is particularly pertinent to contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship in English, which has been developing over the last three decades or so and has sparked various discussions that have kept scholarly interpretations in a state of re-interpretation and re-consideration. Hence, an image that underscores this dynamic process possesses expository value. Third, the oscillation metaphor, which highlights the fact that the

¹³ Cox (2004) describes an interesting historical example of this process in a Buddhist context: the act of taxonomizing solidifies what are dynamically interdependent concepts.

opposed positions stem from a shared presupposition, is reminiscent of the “rhetorical strategy that can be traced back to the Buddha” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 658). As we observed in section 1.2, the *catuskoṭi* attempts to demonstrate that all logical alternatives, namely a proposition holds, fails to hold, both holds and fails to hold, and neither holds nor fails to hold, are to be dismissed because they all share a common faulty presupposition, namely substantial existence. This deconstructive style resonates with the metaphor of an oscillation which too signals the existence of an unidentified fulcrum that is driving the back-and-forth movement. Therefore, by depicting the contemporary terrain as constituted of particular conceptual oscillations, we are led to the natural question – can these oscillations be avoided? In framing the interpretive terrain in this way, I argue that Rortyan Pragmatism offers us a path of re-description that brings into high relief the point that these oscillations represent forced oppositions that depend for their motion upon a fulcrum that need not, and perhaps should not, be utilised.

We will proceed as follows in this chapter. In section 2.1, we will introduce the metaphilosophical oscillation to highlight its significance for exegetical readings of Nāgārjuna. Then, in 2.1.1 and 2.1.2, we will provide a detailed analysis of the two opposing sides of this oscillation, in order to understand the reasons their proponents offer for their distinctive stances, as well as what they take to be unsatisfactory in the formulations of the opposing pole. In section 2.2, we will move on to the metalinguistic oscillation, where we will see that there is scholarly disagreement surrounding the linguistic function of Nāgārjuna’s claims. In sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, we will home in on the metalinguistic interpretations of each side. Then, in section 2.3 we will trace the implications of these two oscillations for how each side understands Nāgārjuna’s famous claim to hold no “thesis” (*pratijñā*). We will conclude this chapter with some remarks, in section 2.4, on what these oscillations tell us about the interpretive topography of Madhyamaka scholarship. In so doing, we will pave the way for our Rortyan re-description of this interpretive terrain in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

2.1 Oscillating Across the Domain of Philosophy: Reason Versus Insight?

The “is-Buddhism-a-philosophy-or-a-religion-debate?” is certainly not new. Since the 1970s, Western scholars have extensively debated this topic. This wider debate has sometimes been carried over to studies of Nāgārjuna, namely is he primarily *a philosopher* or primarily *a theologian/mystic*? A broad scholarly consensus has emerged which claims that Nāgārjuna is both, on the grounds that a thinker can start from scriptural premises and move towards a

soteriological conclusion, without thereby eschewing forms of reasoning completely. Nevertheless, the debate regarding how to properly interpret the cognitive status of his work is far from settled – this debate generates the metaphilosophical oscillation. The central metaphilosophical question for which we do not find a straightforward answer is: *was Nāgārjuna “doing philosophy” in the second century CE?* This question is entangled with, but is conceptually distinct from, this question: *are critical interpreters justified in “doing philosophy” today with Nāgārjuna?* The first question is partly exegetical, that is, about the contents of Nāgārjuna’s texts in Sanskrit or Tibetan: are they examples of what we would call “philosophy” today? The second question is largely hermeneutic, that is, about our method as contemporary interpreters of Nāgārjuna: should we engage with his texts in a philosophical register, regardless of what detailed textual studies might indicate their philosophical status to be? The core issue between contemporary interpreters is the first question, that is, the exegetical question, since even critics of the “Nāgārjuna-was-doing-philosophy-then” view generally have no problem with the hermeneutic strategy of “doing philosophy” *today* with Nāgārjuna so long as our philosophical conclusions are not carried over to the exegetical task of presenting Nāgārjuna’s message (Stepien 2018b). Therefore, the main contention involves a metaphilosophical dispute, namely whether Nāgārjuna’s texts should be read as styles of philosophical inquiry. One’s response to the metaphilosophical question “What, then, is philosophy?” will shape one’s reading of whether or not Nāgārjuna is engaged in philosophical inquiry.

2.1.1 Analysing Nāgārjuna Through A Philosophical Lens

While unpacking the concept of philosophy would require an entire dissertation or encyclopaedia, we will cautiously wedge our way into this metaphilosophical oscillation by indicating that some of the leading Madhyamaka scholars – Mark Siderits, Jay L. Garfield, Jan Westerhoff, and Dan Arnold – clearly take Nāgārjuna to be “doing philosophy”. I propose to collectively characterise them as “orthodox”¹⁴ scholars since their “approach to interpretation of early Indian Madhyamaka ... goes virtually unchallenged in contemporary Buddhist Studies” (Huntington 2017, 156). These “orthodox” scholars emphasise the importance of *Buddhist philosophy* in an attempt to demonstrate that it is no less sophisticated than Western philosophy and can offer insights relevant to some ongoing

¹⁴ I have chosen this term to resonate with the ancient Indian doxographical categories of *āstika* and *nāstika*. I will juxtapose “orthodox” scholars with “heterodox” scholars such as Stepien and Huntington who swing towards the opposing end of the oscillation.

Western philosophical disagreements. For example, Garfield (2015, x) explains that it is valuable for Western philosophers to see how “some particular non-Western tradition can enable one to think through philosophical problems with which one is already preoccupied, or to see how non-Western voices can participate in current discussions”. The key claim is that to the ongoing conversations labelled as “philosophy” in the Western academy, Buddhists have important voices to contribute because “[t]he concerns and methods of Buddhist philosophy and Western philosophy are sufficiently proximate to each other, sharing sufficient horizons, [so] that they are easily mutually intelligible, but [also] sufficiently distant from one another that each has something to learn from the other” (2015, xi). These “orthodox” interpreters seek to philosophise Nāgārjuna, and regard themselves as “doing real Buddhist studies” (Cowherds 2011, vii), since they think that what we mean by “philosophy” in Anglophone milieus has certain thematic and methodological overlaps with Buddhist worldviews. Thus, the Cowherds (2011, vii) emphatically state that the application of Western philosophical lenses to Madhyamaka texts is part of a proper *Buddhist* exercise.

This commitment to philosophy of course raises interesting methodological questions about Buddhist studies. Are we doing real Buddhist studies when we deploy ideas and techniques from contemporary analytic philosophy to address questions arising from seventh-century Indian debates as adumbrated in fifteenth-century Tibet? We think so. And we think that Buddhist philosophy has much to contribute to twenty-first-century Western philosophy.

Similarly, the preface to *The Moon Points Back* foregrounds its contributions as located “at the interface of contemporary logic and analytic philosophy and Buddhist philosophy” because these conceptual exercises “[deploy] a common analytic methodology” (Tanaka *et al.* 2015, xi). In short, the “orthodox” argue that there are sufficient conceptual overlaps between Buddhism and contemporary Western philosophy so that a genuine exchange of ideas is possible and meaningful.

This discernment of conceptual parallels is sometimes supported with historical observations. Siderits (2007, 5) claims that “there were trade contacts between classical India and the Hellenic world. So, it is at least conceivable that some ancient Greek philosophers and some classical Indian philosophers knew something of one another’s work”. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Buddhists and the ancient Greeks exchanged ideas relating to scepticism and logic, which might validate the supposition of a common intellectual activity, if not on a global scale, across at least Western philosophy and Indian Buddhist thought (Beckwith, 2015).

I read these “orthodox” points as the recognition that the patterns of thinking that we call “philosophy” in Anglophone circles today have resonances with Buddhist intellectual history. Therefore, the “orthodox” interpretive strategy is *not* a present-day Western superimposition on ancient Indic texts.

Moreover, it can be argued that such a hermeneutic lens is supported emically by various Buddhist sources, and especially by Tibetan doxographical commentaries. In fact, what are often recognised as “the most ‘philosophical’” of Nāgārjuna’s writings, namely the MMK and the VV, are received as such in contemporary scholarship partly because of their “universal categorization by Tibetan doxographers among the ‘collection of six texts among reasoning’” (Stepien 2019, 531). Given that the “orthodox” scholars are often proficient not only in Sanskrit but also in Tibetan, they have good grounds to argue that their philosophical lens is hermeneutically plausible. As Stepien (2018b, 1088) notes, “Nāgārjuna’s own texts, not to mention the vast commentarial literature...in premodern Indian as well as Tibetan and Chinese contexts, abound in arguments to the effect of proving or disproving theses on eminently logical grounds”.

So, *what* should we be looking for when assessing whether a text can be characterised as “philosophical”? To avoid getting swept away into the vast and turbulent ocean of “what is philosophy and what are its methods?”, we will confine ourselves to the more navigable river of “what is philosophy specifically in the context of contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship?” We can begin by citing Siderits’s definition of “philosophy” – “the systematic investigation of questions in ethics, metaphysics and epistemology...[that] involves using analysis and argumentation in systematic and reflective ways” (Siderits 2007, 5). The key emphasis here is on a distinct *method* of philosophy, namely the use of *arguments*:

an argument is just a presentation of evidence that is meant to support some conclusion. An argument always consists of two or more statements: a conclusion and one or more premises. The conclusion is the statement that the author of the argument is trying to get others (the audience) to accept. The premises are statements that the author thinks the audience is likely to already accept, and that the author thinks will show that the conclusion is more likely to be true. Giving an argument is one way of trying to persuade others of something. It differs from other forms of persuasion in that when it is properly done it engages the rationality of the audience – it leaves it up to them to determine whether or not this argument gives good reasons to accept the conclusion (2007, 2, n. 1)

Another word we can use in this context is “inference”, that is, a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and logical reasoning. What is important to note is that the concepts of

argument and inference are constellated with a range of other concepts such as rationality, evidence, justification, and truth. Understanding “philosophy” as an intellectual activity that is characterised by these concepts is one possible metaphilosophical stance, namely that of the “orthodox” interpreters. According to them, the reason why Buddhist thinkers, and Mādhyamikas in particular, should be read as *doing philosophy* is because they engage in this distinctive intellectual activity, that is, “they employ the same basic techniques of analysis and argumentation. (This is why it is appropriate to call them both [Western philosophy and Buddhism] ‘philosophy’)” (Siderits 2007, 5).

Such contemporary approaches often take themselves to be in the business of offering what Dan Arnold (2005, 7-8) has called “the best rational reconstruction”, according to which “when trying to understand someone, we attribute the best possible arguments to that person and accordingly assume that apparent failures in sense or coherence reflect our own failure to understand, rather than failings on [their] part”. Such a reconstructive enterprise is important to undertake if one takes Nāgārjuna to be primarily engaged in intellectual activities that implement methods similar to those practised in Anglophone departments of academic philosophy. So, using contemporary philosophical tools to engage in a dialogical conversation with him is not only relevant but also necessary, in order to take him seriously as an interlocutor. Reflecting this theme, Westerhoff (2009a, 3) explains what it means to read Nāgārjuna philosophically as follows: “it is not sufficient to give a mere paraphrase of Nāgārjuna’s arguments...We will have to analyse their philosophical contents, examine actual as well as possible objections, determine whether the arguments can in fact be made to work, and, if so, what kind of philosophical conclusion they support”. In Westerhoff’s *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (2018b, 284), we find a similar understanding of what it means to “do philosophy”, namely “to investigate whether the arguments presented are valid, whether the position can be defended against obvious and not-so-obvious objections, and whether the overall picture emerging is an attractive one that we might be inclined to defend”. Thus, if the construction of argumentative styles is taken to be one of the defining features of philosophy, using current philosophical notions alongside logical reasoning would allow us to better understand the Madhyamaka position. Therefore, the rules of logic used in inferential reasoning, which are an integral part of the methods of Anglophone philosophy, are of particular importance to “orthodox” scholars.¹⁵ For instance, the criterion of validity, which states that *if*

¹⁵ We shall not discuss what kind of logic different “orthodox” scholars have in mind – what matters is that *some* kind of logic is crucial to their rational reconstructions of Nāgārjuna’s reasoning. See Tillemans (1999) for a

the premises of an inference are logically interrelated, *then* its conclusion necessarily follows, is a crucial tool for judging the form of arguments. These logical rules of reasoning are, according to the “orthodox”, universally applicable to philosophical texts. Huntington (2017, 153-155) makes a similar observation when he describes this understanding of philosophy as the utilisation of “rational argument” and “intellectualized abstraction” in order to “prove or disprove any sort of universally binding theoretical claim” (2017, 157).

There is more to the “orthodox” conception of philosophy than just a method. A reason-based, inferential method seems to be plausible in reconstructing the position of a 2nd century CE Buddhist thinker because it is held that Nāgārjuna is putting forth a “unified philosophical position” (Westerhoff 2009a, 8). Arguments are piecemeal reason-based attempts at persuading an interlocutor to adopt a particular position. By presupposing a unified vision, one can begin to piece together all these different arguments as pointing towards one overarching statement. Thus, the argumentation-based method of philosophy makes sense against a background of a *single, coherent position* which is argued for with reason-based evidence. This is why Rafal Stepień (2018b, 1073) observes that situating Nāgārjuna within (Western) philosophical discourse means that Nāgārjuna’s texts would have to be “appraised according to exclusively philosophical criteria such as cogency, consistency, and coherency”. If we understand philosophy as the attempt to rationally convince others of a position through valid argumentation, the criteria used in Anglophone philosophy have to be summoned to judge the success or the failure of this attempt. Westerhoff (2009a, 8) explicitly adopts this strategy when he explains that we must reconstruct “Nāgārjuna’s philosophy as a systematic whole, as an intellectual enterprise whose parts fit together to present a unified philosophical theory”.

In short, metaphilosophically speaking, the “orthodox” strategy is guided by a hermeneutic imperative that takes “being rational” or “being logical” to capture what it means to “do philosophy” as well as to convey the primary significance of texts such as the MMK and the VV (Huntington 2017, 156). Those who swing towards the “orthodox” end of our metaphilosophical oscillation “approach [Nāgārjuna’s texts] as a logical puzzle” and reconstruct the statements in his texts in a way that makes rational, logical, and conceptual sense (2017, 158). These “orthodox” interpretations rely heavily on the tools and the presuppositions of Anglophone philosophy, which are animated by problem-solving and argumentation. But, as we have seen, the “orthodox” do not think that their reading is a *superimposition* of Western

delineation of classical, non-classical, and deviant logic. See Garfield and Priest (2003) for the relevance of “paraconsistent logic” to Madhyamaka reasoning.

paradigms onto non-Western sources, but rather offer it as a *recovery* of a shared paradigm across traditions.

It is worth emphasising in this context that these scholars do not allow the philosophical to totally eclipse the soteriological in Buddhist worldviews. Instead, their claim seems to be that philosophy is an integral part of soteriology and therefore requires sustained attention in its own right. Siderits (2007, 7), for example, states explicitly that “liberation, or *nirvāṇa* (to use the Buddhist term), is to be attained through rational investigation of the nature of the world”. Even more explicitly, he notes:

Buddhist philosophers thought that their most important claims should be subjected to rational scrutiny. This is what made them philosophers. They certainly criticized the views of other Buddhist philosophers. And there was a great deal of rational criticism exchanged between the Buddhists and other Indian philosophers. So perhaps it would actually be dishonoring Buddhism not to subject its doctrines to rational scrutiny. (2007, 10-11)

What we see here is an understanding of philosophy as a central method through which to achieve Buddhist soteriological goals.

The Buddhist tradition generally teaches that there is just one path to liberation, not four. But that path consists in the combined practice of philosophical reasoning and meditation. Indian Buddhists, like others in ancient India, thought that salvation from our unsatisfactory state was to be had through coming to know the truth about who we are and where we fit in the universe. And they thought that attaining such insights required the use of philosophical rationality. (2007, 6)

Reflecting this theme of the importance of philosophy, Westerhoff (2009a, 3) states that “since a great part of the contemporary Western studies of Nāgārjuna are interested primarily in philological, historical, or religious aspects of his works, genuinely philosophical studies have been rare. The aim of the present study is to help close this gap”. For our purposes, the point is that there are two distinct goals in Madhyamaka – philosophical and soteriological; these can be conceptually disentangled (although they are intertwined in Buddhist monastic settings), and there is a vital need for academic scholarship in Western institutions to engage with the specifically philosophical dimensions.

In conclusion, the “orthodox” seem to agree with each other in two important respects: (1) Nāgārjuna’s texts can and should be read as examples of “philosophy” (even if this characterisation is not an exhaustive description of these texts) and (2) “philosophy” is the intellectual activity carried out in contemporary academic departments that uses rational

methods, such as argumentation and logical reasoning, to prove or disprove a position. As we will now see, this metaphilosophical commitment is by no means uncontested in Madhyamaka scholarship.

2.1.2 Approaching Nāgārjuna through a Literary Lens

Now that we have examined the “orthodox” end of our metaphilosophical oscillation, we will turn to those “heterodox” readers who challenge this philosophical lens. Generally speaking, “heterodox” scholars are united in their rejection of the prioritisation of philosophy over soteriology, the extraction or distillation of specifically “philosophical” features of Nāgārjuna’s texts, and the extrapolation of Western philosophical methods to Madhyamaka worldviews. For the “heterodox”, soteriology always comes first and therefore they challenge the “orthodox” understanding of “doing philosophy” on the grounds that Nāgārjuna was *not* engaged in such a reason-driven enterprise. The central “heterodox” claim is that the kinds of intellectual activity that contemporary Western philosophers are engaged in are quite distinct from what a 2nd century Buddhist monk was doing.

From a “heterodox” perspective, the utilisation of Anglophone philosophical lenses to read Nāgārjuna, *pace* the disclaimers of the “orthodox”, is motivated by an “unacknowledged prioritisation of identifiably Western philosophical modes and models, which are, moreover, distinctly ill-suited to the material” (Stepien 2018b, 1085). These tools are “ill-suited” to the Buddhist texts which would acquire richer layers of meaning under a different interpretive exegetical lens. Huntington (2017, 176) calls into question the applicability of “orthodox” conceptions of philosophy in this way:

The elevation of a tightly circumscribed form of rational exegesis as the only acceptable mode of philosophical discourse is the result of a particular line of historical development peculiar to Western thought; following this trajectory we have arrived at a point, now, where it is difficult to conceive of philosophy as anything other than abstract, analytic, and theoretical. Still, there is no a priori justification for insisting that philosophy be limited to forms of reasoned argumentation aimed at the sole purpose of establishing rational conviction. At the very least, we should be wary of uncritically projecting our own culturally grounded presupposition onto Buddhist Sanskrit texts composed in India almost 2000 years ago.

On this understanding, the socio-historical contingency of Anglophone conceptions of “philosophy” highlights the need to move beyond them, especially in intercultural contexts of inquiry. This is because some specifically Western ways of doing philosophy may not be

readily translatable into non-Western contexts, so that we should ask “whether different traditions even try to solve the same problems, and...whether or not they understand these apparently identical problems in the same way” (Levine 2016, 213).

Perhaps the reason why the “heterodox” do not view the historical likelihood of intellectual exchanges between the ancient Greeks and the ancient Indians as justifying the applicability of our Western understanding of philosophical inquiry to Buddhism is because a sharp Platonist conceptual contrast between mystical insight and sensory knowledge is less pronounced in classical Indian milieus, where these methods were often thought of as mutually reinforcing and functioning interdependently. As Stepien (2018b, 1091) notes, this disjunction reflects “Plato’s instauration of the opposition between *doxa* and *epistêmê*” through which “Western philosophy has perceived itself as the preeminent realm of knowledge, as distinct from mere belief”. Adding further weight to this historical development, in more recent centuries, the European Enlightenment carried through the project of severing philosophy and religion. Huntington (2017, 175) lends support to Stepien’s problematization when he argues that the idea that reason is “the principal source of authority in both the natural sciences and philosophy” is itself “a fundamental presupposition of the enlightenment, one that has undergirded much of Western intellectual life since the eighteenth century”. Thus, the “orthodox” elevation of rationality as the stable hermeneutic guide with which to read Nāgārjuna is often taken by the “heterodox” to be an articulation of a specific trajectory of Western intellectual history. That is, “orthodox” appeals to rationality, reason, and logic can be seen as Western-centric, especially if in the desire to philosophise Nāgārjuna scholars end up de-religionising him – a dichotomising move that has its historical origins in certain Enlightenment styles of thinking. Such a dichotomisation, Stepien argues, is anachronistic when applied to Nāgārjuna since any methodological starting point that paints “the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’ in terms derived from the Greco-Christian complex” is “definitionally unsuited to the task of describing Indo-Buddhist thought” (Stepien 2018b, 1094). Philosophy and soteriology are interwoven in Buddhist contexts – so, it is a mistake to apply “a norm (of religious disinterestedness) developed in twentieth-century Western analytical philosophy to a third-century Indian Buddhist thinker” (2018b, 1100). This is why “the heterodox” oppose “the hermeneutical project predominant among present-day scholars...[which] is to actively overlook or downright depreciate the religious motivation of Nāgārjuna’s arguments” (2018b, 1073). Such observations are echoed by Michael Levine (2016, 223) who writes that it is not uncommon “to either deny that Buddhism is a religion at all or see [its religious dimensions] as inconsequential”.

The kind of philosophy that “heterodox” scholars want to distance us from seems to be centred on the notion of objectivity as a neutral space that we are required to occupy in order to put forth a philosophical position and justify it to others. On this view, the problem with the activity that is called “philosophy” is the presupposition that argumentation takes place in a value-free space where one can objectively judge the validity of particular inferential chains of reasoning. The “orthodox”, in their attempts to bring Nāgārjuna into Western Anglophone philosophical spaces, forget or fail to sufficiently highlight that Nāgārjuna’s ultimate aim is *not* to prove the objective truth of his position by demonstrating he can out-argue his opponents. Nāgārjuna has a deeply spiritual aim that cannot be logically circumscribed within argumentative spaces. Stepien (2018b, 1088) lucidly explains this point as follows:

Although logical principles...do hold argumentative force in Madhyamaka texts...the texts themselves make clear that the *function* of these principles differs markedly from that found in their modern Western utilization. Buddhist writers such as Nāgārjuna were engaged in a very different activity from that of...Western scholars...This activity was informed not by the purportedly detached description of metaphysical truth espoused by academic philosophers but by, firstly, the avowedly Buddhist acknowledgement of the impossibility of such detachment within the realm of *samsāric* attachment and, concomitantly, the desire to rid oneself and others of the suffering necessarily entailed in such attachment. For the Buddhist philosophical project is *irreducibly* soteriological in its orientation.

From Stepien’s perspective, the neutral space that is required to “objectively” prove one’s claim in contemporary philosophical contexts is the very space that Nāgārjuna critiques. This is because the appeal to logic or inferential reasoning sustains an attachment to these cognitive tools as ends in themselves – but Nāgārjuna’s *point* is the uprooting of all clinging. As Huntington (1989, xii) states: “Early Madhyamika explicitly claims to operate as a rejection, or deconstruction, of all attempts to create a value-free, objective view of truth or reality”. On this analysis, the enterprise of reading Nāgārjuna through the lens of philosophy is held captive to a distorted picture because “to posit logic/reason/rationality as some Archimedean point categorically removed from the ambit of conditionality [that is, dependent origination] is tantamount to affirming not only the existence of a metaphysical absolute but a position exactly antithetical to Nāgārjuna” (Stepien 2018b, 1085). However, the understanding of philosophy presupposed or defended by the “orthodox” necessitates precisely such a neutral arbiter between valid and invalid arguments, or convincing or unconvincing evidence. The problem with this metaphilosophical stance is that “Nāgārjuna takes reason to be not some objective, neutral feature of ‘how the world is,’ but as oriented, as karmically driven, as causally

constructed, as any other phenomenon” (Stepien 2018b, 1085). Because he sees reason in this way, he thinks that a philosophical lens would distort the soteriological aim of particular Buddhist teachings. Thus, on the “heterodox” reading, Nāgārjuna’s strategic employment of *reductios*, and his intriguing denial that he has a “view” or “thesis” or “proposition” (*dr̥ṣṭi, pratijñā*),¹⁶ could be taken as the recognition that an aspiration to a “God’s eye point of view” (Putnam 1981, 49), is precisely the problem.

Challenging this assumption of objectivity, Huntington (1989, xiii) describes Nāgārjuna’s style of reasoning as philosophy in the mode of “propaganda”. According to Huntington, what may initially seem to be philosophical disputation is actually something else – namely the utilisation of argumentation for soteriological ends through the pacification of conceptual proliferation. Huntington proposes a distinctive understanding of Nāgārjuna’s use of philosophy, according to which the ultimate goal of putting forward statements is to instigate a spiritual change in the audience. Any “rational” claim that is put forth is to be understood as a style of “propaganda” – it is aimed at catalysing a soteriological transformation and *not* at constructing some unified philosophical position. This understanding of rationality is “a truly radical departure from the type of philosophical enterprise through which one endeavours to discover or define an objective, value-free view of truth or reality” and is meant to put a stop to the very urge to philosophise (Huntington 1989, xii–xiii). “Heterodox” scholars read Nāgārjuna in this way because they see his deconstructive critique of *svabhāva* as precluding us from engaging in the “standard” styles of philosophising that we encounter in contemporary Western scholarship. The use of the *catuṣkoṭi* is meant to show us the conditionality of logic – logic *too*, like all other conditioned phenomena, is empty. Therefore, in reading Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka through the lenses of rationality and logic, methods proper to contemporary philosophy, we “not only misrepresent Nāgārjuna but unwittingly do a cardinal disservice to the very reason for his repeated use of the *catuṣkoṭi*, for his espousal of ‘the abandonment of all views,’ and indeed for his entire philosophical edifice; that is, to enable the practitioner to pass beyond the oppositional confines of logical thought as classically¹⁷ defined” (Stepien 2018b, 1080). The worry seems to be that by overemphasising a philosophical lens, we would miss the key aim of the Madhyamaka critique which is to “provide an antidote to the intellectual and spiritual disease of clinging” (Huntington 2017, 157), where the objects of such clinging *include* conceptual formulations of Buddhist teachings. Thus, Nāgārjuna’s aim is precisely “the

¹⁶ I use these technical words interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

¹⁷ Tillemans (1990, 3) defines “classical logic” as that which “one finds in typical Western works on formal logic”.

‘cessation of conceptualization’ (*prapañcopaśamam*) and the ‘abandonment of all views’ (*sarvadr̥ṣṭiprahaṇāyā*)” (Stepien 2019, 529), which challenges the “orthodox” insistence that Nāgārjuna is putting forth a philosophical position. Thus, as Huntington concludes, “If instilling rational conviction is philosophy’s only legitimate goal, then philosophy can only be found in the language of reason. But if, in addition to securing intellectual or rational assent, philosophy can have another purpose, that is, to inspire what might be called ‘a change of heart’, then reasoned argument may in certain instances be worse than inadequate” (Huntington 2017, 154). In short, the “heterodox” oppose not only the logical methods advocated by the “orthodox”, but also the background assumption of a philosophical position which has to be defended. This rejection is especially clear in Huntington’s evocative characterisation of the Madhyamaka strategy as “propaganda”.

Precisely this disagreement over highlighting the rational or the therapeutic dimensions of Nāgārjuna’s work culminated in a famous exchange between Huntington and Garfield (Huntington 2007; Garfield 2008), a debate that partly reflects a previous exchange between Huntington and Cabezón nearly two decades earlier (Cabezón 1990; Huntington 1992). Garfield (2008, 511) presents Huntington’s main criticism in these terms:

for a Mādhyamika, what looks like rational argument is in fact just spiritual exercise. And the point of this spiritual exercise is simply to cure one of the very need for rational argument or reason. So, to use logic and reason as hermeneutical devices is first, to stand convicted of having misunderstood the texts in the first place: if one had understood them and appreciated their force, one would never be tempted to reason. Second, it is to impose an interpretative framework on the texts that their authors would reject as a method for understanding them; any interpretation issuing from such a method would be a foreign imposition, a kind of violence to the text.

Such a position has been characterised as “irrational” by Garfield (2008, 516), who argues that “far from being irrationalists, Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are philosophers committed to rational discourse”. Likewise, Cabezón (1990, 159) expresses the worry that a complete denial of the significance of rational argumentation amounts to a cognitive style that is not philosophy at all, but rather “something more akin to therapy of the Wittgensteinian kind”. On their part, those who, like Huntington, consciously move away from the Anglophone philosophical end insist that a rational lens only leads us “to force a logical grid over the work of a writer who is so obviously and profoundly distrustful of logic” (Huntington 2007, 111). Crucially, however, they claim that avoiding such a superimposition does not mean the complete eschewal of philosophy, unless we project certain schematic forms of logical analysis as the singular

criterion of what it means to “do philosophy”. In response to Cabezón’s criticisms, Huntington cites the Rortyan distinction between “edifying” and “systematic” philosophy in order to problematise the presupposition that all philosophy is of the latter kind. What separates these two kinds of philosophy is that thinkers engaged in the former “do not construct systematic philosophical explanations of their own; rather they employ every means at their disposal to develop persuasive critiques directed at the conceptual systems presented by others” (Huntington 1992, 120). Hence, according to Huntington, building intellectual systems through the formulation of theoretical standpoints is precisely the enterprise that the Mādhyamika seeks to avoid, not least because of their “edifying” proclamation that emptiness is itself empty.

Therefore, we might present our metaphilosophical oscillation as operating not between the monolithic categories of “philosophy” and “religion”, but between a more fine-grained conception of philosophy as a cognitive style *that relies heavily on rationality and reasoned argumentation* and some other style *that does not foreground conceptual explication and reconstructive explanation*. With this re-imagination of “philosophy”, we might instead “learn to read philosophy as a kind of fiction” (Huntington 2017, 161), that is, a literary form which has the power “to open the mind and heart to an experience of wonder” in order to understand the profound soteriological significance of Madhyamaka (2017, 153). This is why the “heterodox” often offer a literary lens as a valuable supplement to philosophical tools because by expanding the intellectual horizons of what it means to “do philosophy”, we are no longer limited to the logical space of inferential reason and we can enable the religious visions of Madhyamaka to stand out more clearly.

Thus, Huntington re-envisioning what it means to “do philosophy” and criticises an overreliance on rational criteria through which to judge Nāgārjuna’s texts because of “reason’s incapacity to escape its own limits” as well as reason’s tendency to circumscribe “the primordial experience of wonder ever more tightly in a net of abstractions” (2017, 153). In this sense, ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes do not demand straightforwardly resolution – they gesture towards aporetic spaces which can catalyse a profound insight into emptiness. Hence, the “heterodox” often give conceptual weight to Buddhism as a form of literature because in literary genres visionary images can be disclosed without this disclosure taking place in the logical space of reasoning. As we observed in section 1.5, Stepien (2020, 7) highlights the interrelatedness of “philosophy”, “literature” and “religion” in Buddhist contexts. He emphasises that the latter two are what give Buddhist “philosophy” its significance: “the ‘philosophical’ value of a given text cannot be unproblematically uncoupled from its ‘literary’ and/or ‘religious’ elements”. Thus, by opening up the institutional space of

philosophy and by extending its repertoire of critical methods, Stepien suggests that besides argumentation, reason, and rationality, we ought to study the “poetical, narrativ, rhetorical, or aesthetical features” of Buddhist texts (2020, 10). To explain this point, Huntington often invokes examples from literature, such as Leo Tolstoy’s character Ivan Ilych at a moment when he is faced with the phenomenological rawness of his death. In the excerpt that Huntington (2017, 154) cites, Ivan is thinking about a paradigmatic inference from Johann Kiesewetter’s textbook of logic, namely “Caius is a man, [all] men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal”. Although Ivan knows perfectly well that this inference is valid in the abstract, *he* is not Caius and does not understand his own death in this somewhat dispassionate way. In this context, Ivan is not an objective onlooker of a logical space quarantined from the visceral fear of death. Huntington (2017, 154) explains that “Tolstoy is not explaining the way logic can only deal with death as an abstraction; he is not offering us an example of rational exegesis”. Instead, “the reader empathizes with Ivan, so that he – the reader – not only intuitively grasps the self-imposed limitations of the syllogism Ivan had memorized as a child, [but] he simultaneously transcends those limitations, to directly experience, for himself, Ivan’s stark, tremulous encounter with death – an emotionally charged confrontation that entirely eclipses the arid certitude of Kiesewetter’s Logic” (2017, 154). As I read Huntington’s “heterodox” point, to truly grasp Nāgārjuna’s message one must *transcend* the codifications of reasoning. Thus, the “heterodox” regularly emphasise *our* hermeneutic location as Western interpreters who may be conversant with the tools of Anglophone philosophy – if the Mādhyamika goal is to uproot our appeals to *anything* transcendental, this sublation applies to rationality too. So the “orthodox” insistence that certain canonical forms of rationality are universally applicable misses or obscures the Madhyamaka point. As Stepien (2019, 1090) notes, “I do not...aver (and definitely do not see Nāgārjuna averring) that reason stands removed from the net of conditionality as some kind of ‘substantive ultimate truth’ (Siderits 2003, 17) or structuring principle”. *No-thing* is transcendently valid, and especially not the statements that Nāgārjuna uses for the soteriological aim of liberation.

To sum up, the exegetical parting of ways between the “orthodox” readers and their “heterodox” critics can be characterised as follows. The “heterodox” tend to portray Nāgārjuna as *primarily* concerned with catalysing a soteriological transformation in his readers and claim that any utilisation of argumentation on his part is ultimately aimed at bringing an end to conceptual classification. Huntington, for example, explains this interpretation clearly: “I take Nāgārjuna’s soteriological concerns to be both a legitimate and integral component of his philosophical writing. My ultimate objective is to provide an orientation to his work that

prioritizes those concerns without reducing them to an intellectualized abstraction” (Huntington 2017, 155). This reference to “intellectualized abstraction” is part of what I take to be Huntington’s critique of the “orthodox” definition of philosophy. And the “heterodox” point is that an overemphasis on logic, rationality, and reasoning will impede the spiritual force of Nāgārjuna’s message – “philosophy” need not be tightly wedded to reason and rationality because Nāgārjuna’s soteriological vision is communicated not through the rational building of a unified position, but rather through evocative forms of literary rhetoric that get us to empathise with this vision, like we do with Ivan in Tolstoy’s story. For the “heterodox”, Nāgārjuna’s statements may not always be rational, but this does not make them any less evocative or less worthy of serious intellectual engagement. So, the metaphilosophical disagreement hinges on what exactly “intellectual engagement” amounts to. Both sides recognise the dual importance of soteriology and reasoning in Nāgārjuna’s writings, but they disagree on which of these two is doing most of the work. As the “orthodox” see it, reasoning, logic, and philosophy are vitally important tools with which to move toward the soteriological goal, whereas the “heterodox” regard rationality as always working in the service of soteriology.

With these observations in place, we now move on to the metalinguistic oscillation. As we will see, this oscillation is a variation of the metaphilosophical oscillation, but it is concerned not directly with what the subject of philosophy is but rather with what the function of language is, in Nāgārjuna’s work. As indicated, these two disagreements are interrelated because how one understands the nature of philosophical activity shapes how one understands the use of language in this activity. As will become clear, the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic disagreements boil down to a key debate over this question: does Nāgārjuna reject *all* views (*dṛṣṭi*) and theses (*pratijñā*) or does he reject only a qualified subset of views? To rephrase the question: does Nāgārjuna relinquish *all* views or does he (too) have *some* views?

2.2 Oscillating in the Medium of Language: Assertions or Rhetoric?

To get some leverage on the metalinguistic debate, we will first navigate some terrains in the philosophy of language in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Although this was not a central topic that Nāgārjuna was occupied with in his sociohistorical locations, linguistic concerns were not wholly absent in those Buddhist contexts. Indeed, as Westerhoff (2018a, 416) explains, Nāgārjuna was engaged in various discussions relating to language, in which he

is “often seen as arguing against the proponents of one of the six major schools of classical Indian philosophy, Nyāya”. We will now unpack what are, according to both sides of our oscillation, the implications of Nāgārjuna’s metalinguistic commitments.

The metaphilosophical oscillation is interrelated with the metalinguistic oscillation in the following way. If one reads Nāgārjuna, along with the “orthodox”, as engaged in philosophical inquiry akin to what academics working in contemporary Anglophone departments are doing, one also tends to read the linguistic status of Nāgārjuna’s claims as primarily *truth-evaluable propositions in the universal “language of reason”*. Alternatively, if one moves away, along with the “heterodox”, from this metaphilosophical position, one reads Nāgārjuna as primarily putting forth *rhetorical devices offered as healing tools of the religious imagination*. At the heart of this metalinguistic oscillation is the question: are the statements in the MMK and the VV written in the language of reason, which expresses logically systematised beliefs whose semantic content is truth-evaluable? Or should Nāgārjuna’s statements be read as protreptic instructions whose semantic content is secondary to the intended instigation of a spiritual transformation in the reader?

In response, contemporary scholarship continues to oscillate between the distinction of truth-evaluable *versus* soteriologically useful. Now, this oscillation is somewhat more subtle than the metaphilosophical one and requires greater care regarding its precise formulation. This is because whereas in the metaphilosophical oscillation, the disagreement boils down to what characterises philosophical inquiry in the first place, with one side emphasising rational criteria and the other side seeking to include criteria that cannot be codified in logical categories, in the case of the metalinguistic oscillation the difference is less substantive. Instead, it is a dispute relating to a *degree of emphasis*. We might characterise the distinction between the two poles as follows. On the one hand, “orthodox” scholars generally assume that the *primary* function of language in Nāgārjuna’s texts is to develop, express, and convey truth-evaluable propositions that outline a vision that can be characterised as philosophical, and this vision embodies a deep insight into “the metaphysics of emptiness” (Garfield and Westerhoff 2015, 1). This insight into the way things are, that is, as empty of inherent existence, distinguishes the specific soteriological path offered by Madhyamaka from, say, those spiritual techniques offered by Vedantic Hinduism. On the other hand, “heterodox” scholars tend to assume that the linguistic expressions in Nāgārjuna’s texts are *not* primarily meant to convey truth-evaluable information and if they appear to do so, this information is offered only in the service of helping the reader achieve a shift in spiritual perspective, but not to express the way things are. Huntington (1989, 57) expresses this point as follows: the “concept of emptiness is a

medicine prescribed for a specific ailment – the disease of clinging – but the prescription will have only a negative effect as long as the Mādhyamika’s language is forced into the mold of some privileged view of a transcendent, ahistorical (epistemic) truth or (ontic) reality”.

A key concept we should highlight in this context is assertoric speech, i.e., the act of making an assertion or claiming *that* something is the case. To say that the “orthodox” emphasise the truth-evaluability of propositions is another way of saying that they take Nāgārjuna’s statements to be primarily *assertions* – statements that convey what he believes to be the case, what he takes to be true, what he does not take to be true, and what he is prepared to defend. Because assertions are expressions of beliefs or facts, they can be (conventionally) *true or false*. In other words, the semantic content of Nāgārjuna’s statements, that is, what they mean, is the conceptual engine generating his message. This way of reading Nāgārjuna fits with the “orthodox” understanding of philosophy as an intellectual activity that is characterised by argumentation – for an argument is the arrangement of assertions in a specified logical order. For example, in a modus ponens – if *p* therefore *q*; *p*; therefore *q* – both *p* and *q* are assertions, namely expressions that carry semantic content, which is stated *to be the case* and therefore can be judged as true or false. This inference is logically *valid*, and it will also be *sound* if the premises are true – in the latter case, the understanding of these premises as expressions of *fact* is crucial. However, if one does not understand philosophical activity as canonically tied to such forms of inferential reasoning, one can read Nāgārjuna’s claims as rhetorical expressions that are not straightforwardly assertoric. Alternatively, they are indeed assertoric, but this characteristic is ultimately subsumed under their rhetorical telos. We will see in section 2.2.2 what kind of literary devices the “heterodox” suggest he could be using rhetorically. Suffice to say for our present purposes, the “heterodox” reason for moving away from Anglophone understandings of “philosophy” is that Nāgārjuna is not primarily in the business of conveying information – for instance, asserting *that* there is no ultimate way things are – or if he is, his statements should be understood as therapeutic tools aimed at soteriological transformation.

To introduce the metalinguistic disagreements that we are about to delve into, the “orthodox” generally interpret Nāgārjuna as rejecting *realist semantics*, namely the semantic theory that “spells out meaning and truth in terms of correspondence with a mind-independent reality” (Westerhoff 2010, 14). According to such a realist understanding of semantics, “simple names and predicates of a language acquire their meaning by connecting with things and properties in the world” (2010, 14). Nāgārjuna’s statement that everything (including statements with the word “emptiness”) is empty, because such a statement itself is a “dependent designation” (*prajñaptir upādāya*), is read by the “orthodox” as indicating his rejection of

semantic realism. The “heterodox” agree that Nāgārjuna does not take language to function in the way a realist assumes. Nevertheless, they see this metalinguistic point to be ultimately in the service of soteriology and therefore they spell out a style of using language that “allows the Mādhyamika authors to avoid the problems inherent in holding and defending a particular philosophical view, for when their aim is accomplished and the problem of reifying thought disappears, *the content and the form of the propositions are entirely inconsequential*” (Huntington 1989, 57, emphasis added). The implications of the rejection of realist semantics are not as crucial for the “heterodox” as they are for the “orthodox” because on the “heterodox” reading, Nāgārjuna’s statements are not primarily assertions in the first place. On their interpretive horizon, which accommodates literary and rhetorical devices, an account of *meaning* is not central for its own sake because such devices cannot be analysed in terms of their semantic content and formalised into information-bearing propositions. If Nāgārjuna’s statements are intended to undermine the logical space of reasoning from a soteriological perspective, even semantics, because it is located within that space, has to be subverted. We will continue to unpack the details of these two distinct metalinguistic interpretations of Nāgārjuna’s claims in order to crystallise what precisely is at stake between them. First, we will turn to the details of the “orthodox” metalinguistic stance.

2.2.1 Rational Assertions: Nāgārjuna’s Anti-Foundationalism, Anti-Realism, and Pan-Fictionalism

Generally speaking, for “orthodox” interpreters Nāgārjuna’s rejection of *svabhāva* is the rejection of any sort of inquiry that assumes that language brings us into contact with mind-independent objects that can be categorised, systematised, and taxonomised as the basic building blocks of reality. This way of understanding emptiness shapes the commonly encountered interpretations of Nāgārjuna as an “anti-foundationalist” or “anti-essentialist”. The claim that reality can be decomposed into ultimate building blocks is ontological foundationalism, and the Mādhyamika, as interpreted by the “orthodox”, rejects this position. On Westerhoff’s reading, for example, Nāgārjuna adopts “a general anti-foundationalism which does not just deny the objective, intrinsic, and mind-independent existence of some class of objects, but rejects such existence for any kinds of objects that we could regard as the most fundamental building-blocks of the world” (Westerhoff 2009a, 208). Thus, the Madhyamaka critique of Abhidharmic formulations of ontology, as outlined in section 1.2, is to be understood as a rejection of *dharma*s as playing the role of fundamental building blocks. While for the Ābhidharmika, *dharma*s are the ultimate foundations (*paramārthasat*) upon which the

conventional world (*saṃvṛtisat*) is based, in emphasising that *dharma*s too are empty of *svabhāva*, Nāgārjuna is rejecting ontological foundationalism since *dharma*s are not irreducible ontological primitives (Arnold 2006, 13) but are dependently arisen. Crucially, the assertion that *nothing* has *svabhāva* means that there is no *thing* that fits this category of ontological basis. This stance is taken to point to ontological anti-foundationalism because “the progressive paring down, that is, of the contents of the set ‘ultimately existent’” leads to the conclusion that “at this point in the hierarchy, the ‘ultimately existent’ becomes *an empty set*” (2006, 13). On such a view, while Nāgārjuna does agree with the Ābhidharmika that medium-sized objects such as chariots, laptops, and human beings are (only) conventionally real, there is a deep disagreement between them over whether these everyday entities need to be underpinned by some more primitive and ultimate ontological foundation. And Nāgārjuna says that they do not.

This thoroughgoing rejection of ontological foundations has led to certain “metaphysical” interpretations of Madhyamaka which, however, are rejected by the contemporary scholars we are investigating (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 657). This is because Nāgārjuna’s rejection of ultimate foundations has been read as a metaphysical claim about ultimate reality,¹⁸ namely that it is foundationless. Reading Nāgārjuna in this way has generated the following interpretive dilemma – *either* Nāgārjuna is a nihilist, who thinks that nothing ultimately exists, *or* he is an absolutist, who thinks that there is an ultimate way things are, but this ultimate is ineffable, beyond conceptualisation (2013, 657). This reading is avoided by *not* taking Nāgārjuna to be making statements about how things *ultimately* are. Instead, according to the “semantic interpretation”, to talk of emptiness is (only) to make a semantic point that would expose the *false ontological presupposition* that there is an ultimate way things are and therefore “there might be statements that correspond to...an ultimate nature [of reality]” (2013, 657). According to this semantic interpretation, Nāgārjuna’s point is that there simply are no “mind-independent facts that [could] make any statement true or false” (Siderits 2015, 119). This interpretation highlights not only the ontological, but also the *linguistic*, anti-foundationalism of Madhyamaka, according to which there is no “objective semantic relation between word and world” (Westerhoff 2017, 94). According to this definition of linguistic anti-foundationalism, objectivity is a relation that would be independent of all human practices. So, the denial of objectivity is the denial that the world is composed of pre-linguistic facts that are

¹⁸ In the present context, we are using the term “metaphysics” to refer to any claim that purports to describe ultimate reality or an ultimate way things are. In Chapter 4 we will highlight another definition of “metaphysics”.

independent of human practices. This reading is commonly expressed in Siderits’s pithy statement that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth (Siderits 2003, 133). Truth is a semantic relation between word and world and it is the objectivity of this relation, as grounded in practice-independent facts, that is denied.¹⁹ That is, Madhyamaka denies *realism* about truth – “a realist about truth is someone who holds that the truth of a true statement is a property that statement has *independently* of our attitudes and of the conventions we use in expressing and grasping it” (Siderits 2015, 116).

Therefore, the “orthodox” have suggested that we should read Nāgārjuna in terms of *anti-realism*, which is the philosophical position which denies that the “truth of a true statement could be [a] mind-independent property” (Siderits 2015, 116). In other words, truth is not a property that a statement has *independently* of our conventions. In this sense, Nāgārjuna can be read as rejecting both metaphysical realism *and* semantic realism, where the former is the affirmation of a mind-independent reality out there, and the latter is the affirmation of a mind-independent relation of truth that holds between reality and our statements. According to this “semantic non-dualist” interpretation, in contrast, the “only kind of truth there is is the conventional truth”, namely truth that is based on and sustained by our conventions (Westerhoff 2018a, 420). Thus, by combining ontological anti-foundationalism *and* linguistic anti-foundationalism, Nāgārjuna’s point is to be seen as *semantic* because the emptiness of *dharma*s is no longer a characterisation of the nature of ultimate reality – whether as existent or non-existent, or as effable or ineffable – but rather a characterisation of the nature of truth – that is, there is no such thing called ultimate truth because nothing has the nature of ultimate reality and therefore no statements can be made about ultimate reality. This is why in highlighting the motif of mind-dependency, the “orthodox” interpretation steers clear of ontological idealism, according to which the mental *is* the ultimate reality of everything – once we deny ontological foundations, we also deny the notion of “mind” as the ultimate nature of reality. In other words, according to this semantic interpretation, Nāgārjuna is arguing against ontological realism and semantic realism because he rejects the claims that (1) there is a mind-independent reality with a prefabricated structure waiting to be discovered (ontological realism), and (2) there is a theory that would capture that reality through an isomorphism between its conceptual scaffolding and the way things objectively are (semantic realism) (Siderits 2003, 12). The first of these claims is the rejection of *ontological* foundationalism and

¹⁹ “Truth...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” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 656). In Chapter 3, we will re-articulate the notion of truth in Neo-Pragmatist terms.

the second is the interrelated rejection of *linguistic* foundationalism, which can be seen as two sides of the realist coin. What we are left with, the “orthodox” suggest, is our conventional world and conventional truth, neither of which is mind-independent in the way a realist would assume.

It should be clearer now why “orthodox” scholars read Nāgārjuna as embracing the second horn of the dilemma sketched in section 1.2. (To repeat, the first horn is that everything is empty, *except* for the doctrine of emptiness itself and the second is that everything is empty, *including* the doctrine of emptiness.) Nāgārjuna is warning us against reifying emptiness and rejecting the interpretation that he is simply substituting the Abhidharma *dharma* theory for a “*śūnyatā* theory” where *śūnyatā* (i.e., emptiness) is projected as the ontological foundation. This is why in MMK 24:18, Nāgārjuna explicitly states that emptiness is a dependent designation – to propound emptiness is *not* to assume a mind-independent semantic relation between the word “emptiness” and some putatively objective and mind-independent referent, that is, emptiness. There is no such semantic connection between a linguistic expression (such as the English word “emptiness”) and a worldly state of affairs (such as the putative referent of “emptiness”) because the world is not “objectively carved up ‘at the joints’ into various individuals, their properties, and relations between them” (Westerhoff 2017, 102). Now, if these kinds of metaphysical realism and semantic realism are categorically rejected, the important question that the “orthodox” have to answer is this: in what sense, then, is Nāgārjuna’s declaration *that* “everything is empty” true? That is, what kind of semantic relation does the word “emptiness” and its (putative) referent *emptiness* have, now that we agree that this relation is not mind-independent? According to the semantic interpretation that the “orthodox” generally accept, Nāgārjuna is not making claims about *ultimate* reality. Therefore, they have to understand his message as conveyed by truth-evaluable propositions which are all placed at the level of *conventional* truth. Since the semantic content of these propositions is what is carrying the weight of Nāgārjuna’s message, the “orthodox” need to provide an account of how reference and truth work at this conventional level.

Such considerations have prompted “orthodox” scholars to attempt the philosophical task of articulating what kind of Madhyamaka-friendly semantic theory Nāgārjuna might accept, as well as offering what they take to be his unified philosophical position.²⁰ What we are left with is conventional truth and referential relations within the conventional domain, and

²⁰ “Nāgārjuna is very much concerned to stake out a radical and revealing position in this debate [over the function and the status of dependent origination]” (Garfield 2002, 26).

there are no mind-independent facts out there that make our statements true or false. So, we may ask: what kind of semantic theory would account for the everyday judgements of truth and falsity (for instance, “I believe *that* grass is green”) we make in the conventional world? In other words, if terms do not mean what they do because of some reference to mind-independent objects (and likewise statements are not made true by mind-independent facts or truth-makers), how do Nāgārjuna’s words mean what they do (and how do his statements have truth-value)? One reason why Madhyamaka semantics cannot be realist at this conventional level is because in arguing “for the non-existence of intrinsic nature” Nāgārjuna also “argues that the term [“emptiness”] is non-referring” since the term “emptiness” itself is empty (Westerhoff 2018a, 417). For the semantic realist like the Nyāya, the word “emptiness” means what it does because it would semantically extend, i.e., refer to some real object in the world. But, as we have just seen, Nāgārjuna cannot accept such a semantic theory since it would lead him to accept that *something* called emptiness is substantially existent. This rejection is suggested by MMK 24:18 in which “emptiness itself is asserted to be a dependent designation (*prajñaptir upādāya*). Its referent, emptiness itself, is thereby asserted to be merely dependent and nominal – conventionally existent but ultimately empty” (Garfield 2002, 36). Hence, the Madhyamaka understanding of language, to be consistent, must make space for “non-referring terms”. As Westerhoff (2018a, 417) argues, “a Madhyamaka-compatible philosophy of language would have to allow for global statements of absences, for non-referring terms, and would have to account for meaning and truth without postulating an independent, pre-existent, self-sufficient world with which our statements link up”. This is where the “orthodox” anti-realist interpretation gains leverage – for an anti-realist, the semantic relations of truth and reference are *conventional*, not objective, and therefore (only) *nominal*. This is because objects out there are what they are only because they are the referents of our own words (nominalism), and this reference relation is only established because of certain social conventions humans have developed (conventionalism). As Garfield (2002, 36, emphasis added) explains this point:

whatever is dependently co-arisen is verbally established. That is, the identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon verbal conventions. To say of a thing that it is dependently arisen is to say that *its identity as a single entity is nothing more than its being the referent of a word*. The thing itself, apart from conventions of individuation, is nothing but an arbitrary slice of an indefinite spatiotemporal and causal manifold. To say of a thing that its identity is a merely verbal fact about it is to say that it is empty. To view emptiness in this way is to see it neither as an entity nor as unreal—but instead to see it as conventionally real. Moreover, *emptiness* itself is asserted to be a dependent designation...Its referent, emptiness itself, is thereby asserted to be

merely dependent and nominal—conventionally existent but ultimately empty.

Thus, Garfield highlights the mind-dependent way in which the conventional presents itself to us, such that the relationship between our linguistic expressions and the objects they conventionally refer to is not an objective connection (as the realist claims). According to such anti-realist semantic theories, “words, whether they are used for the purposes of theory or practice, though they serve as commonly accepted currency in the transactions of worldly business (*vyavahāra*), are in the end only ideas (*prajñapti*) or metaphysical fabrications (*prapañca*)” (Berger 2010, 40). To put this point differently, anti-realist semantics takes it that words are “merely labels that do not referentially signify anything that can be taken to be an ontologically ultimate reality” (2010, 40). In place of such objective word-world relations, the “orthodox” suggest that for Nāgārjuna meaning and truth-value are derived “from their location in a system of conventions” (Westerhoff 2019, 781). Westerhoff (2018a, 418) suggests that such styles of semantics articulate the relation between language and the world as “the relation between chess-talk and chess. Chess-talk can be meaningful and meaningless, and true and false, but it does not link up with a pre-existent chess-reality. Rather, there is nothing more to chess than what is conventionally and collectively regarded as true about chess, and our chess-talk is simply part of this conventional framework”. In the same way that in chess-talk we can make meaningful statements, where our words refer to specific chess-phenomena and our sentences can be true or false in relation to specific chess-facts, so too can Nāgārjuna’s statements work in the same way. His statements are true or false relative to “facts”, but these “facts” are not objectively real and mind-independent entities. Instead, they are conventionally real and are dependently arisen from within our social matrices. In other words, Nāgārjuna’s assertions are made “true” by conventional “facts” and his terms “refer” to conventional objects that do not, however, link up with some ultimate “chess reality”. In this context, Westerhoff’s term “non-referring” denies the reference of words to ultimately existent, substantial, and mind-independent objects.²¹ So, Nāgārjuna’s assertion *that* “everything is empty” is conventionally “true” because of the conventional “fact” *that* all conventional objects lack *svabhāva*. In this sense, his words do “refer”, but (only) within a system of sociolinguistic conventions that are interdependent with human concerns, practices, and purposes. As Westerhoff (2018a, 419) notes, the Madhyamaka semantic theory is “a conception according

²¹ “In the same way mathematical entities are created by the theories mathematicians invent (given the familiar logical constraints), and when we speak about them we refer to them in a similar way as we refer to Sherlock Holmes” (Westerhoff 2018a, 419).

to which language derives its existence from a shared system of conventions that is inextricably linked with us, our actions, and our intentions”.

This way of explaining how an anti-realist semantics can help us understand the linguistic function of Nāgārjuna’s claims – where ultimate reality is denied and the conventional is not juxtaposed to anything “realer” – has led some “orthodox” scholars to suggest that Nāgārjuna’s overall philosophical position can be read as a kind of “pan-fictionalism” (Westerhoff 2018a, 419). This interpretation seems especially plausible when we think of its conceptual constituents. If we combine the semantic non-dualist insight that there is no such thing as ultimate truth (because there is no ultimate way things are independently of our human interests) with the nominalist claim that “all existence is merely nominal (*nāmamātra*)” or “all existence is “merely an abstraction (*kalpanāmātra*)” (2018a, 416), it seems we are left with what looks like a fictional world. Here, “fictional” does not mean “hallucinatory” but an intersubjectively generated reality: “Like a novel, our collective practices, including our language, our perceptual activities, our thoughts and attitudes, constitute a world against and in which truth and falsity can be measured. The standards appropriate to that world are just those that mark off truth and falsity within the fiction” (Garfield 2006, 3). So, when in the *Acintya-stava* (“Praise of the Inconceivable”) Nāgārjuna tells us that “the entire world is only name”²² (Westerhoff 2018a, 416), the “orthodox” see this nominalism as pointing to a fictionalist stance since such claims suggest that “all realities are purely linguistic – just names and concepts” (Thakchoe 2012, 427). For the pan-fictionalist, “conventional reality is something created by us, as we are collectively putting conventions into place” (Westerhoff 2018a, 420). Thus, for the Mādhyamika, “reality is fundamentally a linguistic entity” and “any extra-linguistic reality” is denied (Thakchoe 2012, 428). Hence, the substantial world we seemingly experience is like an illusion since we mistakenly take it to be mind-independent and objectively existent, but we should acquire the insight that it is generated by “language as a phenomenon such that we should spell out the existence of everything else in terms of it” (Westerhoff 2018a, 416). From an enlightened Mādhyamika’s ultimate perspective, the everyday world is perceived as not existing substantially and its fictional constitution is transparently visible. Everyone else, especially those who philosophise with the idioms of foundationalism, mistakenly take the everyday world of chairs and tables to exist substantially. Westerhoff (2018a, 421) speculates how such a fictional world might come into conventional existence: “the Madhyamaka fiction is characterized by two peculiar properties:

²² *nāmamātraṃ jagat sarvaṃ ity uccair bhāṣitaṃ tvayā.*

Vortex: The fiction itself subsumes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Bootstrapping: The creator of the fiction is created by the fiction the creator creates. The reader of the fiction is created by the fiction the reader reads”. Westerhoff (2011) specifically uses David Lewis’s game-theoretic account of the conventional nature of linguistic signs in order to demonstrate the feasibility of a completely conventional reality that bootstraps itself into existence solely based on human pragmatic needs and conventions.

In such a *pan-fictionalism*, where everything is equally fictional, the profound Madhyamaka point is that there is nothing real-er with which to juxtapose the fictions. In this sense, the conventional is as real as it gets. In everyday discourse a fictional object, like a character in a novel, for instance, Irene Adler, is said to be fictional because she is not real, while the reader or the author is real. But on this Madhyamaka view, *every-thing* is a fiction, the character as well as the reader and the author. The upshot of these observations is that if everything is equally fictional, everything is also equally real. This is why Westerhoff (2016, 372) warns us of the danger of ending up “with a theory which looks like one based on an appearance/reality distinction, where the ‘appearance’ of the world (entities existing with *svabhāva*) is ontologically underwritten by its ‘reality’ which is quite different (entities existing in a network of universal interdependence)”. Precisely by emphasising the semantic non-dualism between the two truths, however, we would understand “that for Madhyamaka there is ultimately only one truth, the conventional one” (2016, 372). So, if we adopt only the idiom of “appearance” from the appearance-reality distinction, Nāgārjuna’s philosophical position can be seen to subtly tread the middle way. Here, *everything* is an appearance or a fiction, but given that there is nothing real-er than these appearances or fictions, to say that *everything* is ultimately an appearance or a fiction is to assert that everything is conventionally real. Westerhoff (2018a, 420) articulates this interpretation as follows: “if there is only fiction we can no longer understand it in contrastive terms as what is different from non-fiction. The distinction between the two evaporates; it seems to be that when everything is fiction, nothing is”. Thus, in this Madhyamaka *anti-realism*, the “anti” loses its contrastive force: in denying mind-independent reality and objective semantic relations, and affirming a social world shaped and sustained by appearances or fictions, we do not have to gesture towards a Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena. Instead, we comfortably live within the only world there conventionally is – the quotidian world of chairs, tables, laptops, dogs, and scholars which from the enlightened perspective is fictional insofar as it is empty, even though it appears to be non-empty, that is, substantially existent, from our conventional perspectives. In

Westerhoff's (2017, 103) words: "the establishment of conventions establishes the very objects that form part of what [mistakenly] appears to us as a convention-independent world".

Developing such notions, Garfield argues that all entities have two distinct aspects, so that "mundane cognition apprehends one aspect and the awakened person's insight apprehends the other" (Newland and Tillemans 2011, 16). Once again, this solution provides a neat way to express the idea that the conventional is *real* even if, from the ultimate perspective of enlightenment, the conventional is a *fiction*. To tie this theme with the anti-realist semantic point discussed earlier, Nāgārjuna's statements are "non-referring" insofar as they refer not to a mind-independent reality, but rather to the chess-phenomena of our conventionally agreed upon chess-reality which comprises socially generated fictions. The fictionalist strategy indicates that even though statements and their referents are all fictions, they are nevertheless *useful* fictions. This strategy also highlights the crucial point "that the two truths are two *truths*, and not one truth and one falsehood....Fictional truth...is not only wholly false [from the ultimate perspective], not only deceptive, but also a kind of *truth*. To the extent that our lives are lived largely within the fiction of conventional reality, it is essential that we master conventional authoritative cognition and distinguish truth from falsehood in that domain" (Garfield 2006, 4). Thus, fictions that can be "bootstrapped" into existence for the aims, interests, and purposes of finite beings like us constitute the "vortex" of collectively established "facts" that make Nāgārjuna's statements "true".

Although there are significant differences between "orthodox" interpretations of pan-fictionalism,²³ suffice to say that the basic claim is that some version of anti-realist semantics can articulate the notion of truth in a way that is sufficiently robust for the conventional world. For instance, when we read a Sherlock Holmes story, even though this story is not ultimately true in the sense that its characters such as Irene Adler are not historical individuals, there are nevertheless statements that can be classified as true or false *within the world of that story*. While ordinary beings live in a state of delusion, the "realist" compass points with which they navigate their worldly settings are conventionally valid, but they should not mistakenly seek to plumb the depths of these settings in search of some stable foundation (thus, anti-realism). This reconstruction of the Madhyamaka message is especially appealing to those interpreters who resolutely highlight the *philosophical* cohesiveness and rationality of Nāgārjuna's thought. As indicated, they have to explain how Nāgārjuna can argue for the truth of emptiness if the notion of ultimate truth is to be undermined. As we have seen, the non-dualism of the two truths is

²³ For some discussion regarding the key differences see Siderits and Garfield (2013), and Hong (2006).

what gives their semantic interpretation its force – if the ultimate truth is that there is nothing substantially real-er that may ground the conventional, anti-realist semantics allows them to coherently state that like all true statements, Nāgārjuna’s statements too are conventionally true, even if they are ultimately useful fictions (or “dependent designations”). In the next section, we will explore the “heterodox” side of this metalinguistic oscillation and attempt to get a clear understanding of how it reads Nāgārjuna’s use of language.

2.2.2 Literary Prose: Nāgārjuna’s Deconstructive, Poetic, and Rhetorical Devices

In this section, we will explore, from a metalinguistic perspective, what it means to reject the type of logocentrism that our “heterodox” scholars view as deeply embedded in some contemporary notions of Anglophone philosophy.²⁴ This logocentrism, they argue, is especially unsuited to the study of Nāgārjuna. In our earlier observations with respect to the metaphilosophical oscillation, we highlighted the conceptual idioms of “philosophy” that “heterodox” scholars would reject if applied to a Buddhist context. Turning our attention now to their metalinguistic understanding of Nāgārjuna’s statements, we will see that these scholars give more weight to the rhetorical technique of skillful means (*upāya*) in Madhyamaka thought. Whereas the “orthodox” take *assertions*, *beliefs*, and *truth-evaluability* as explanatory primitives in their reconstructions of what they see as Nāgārjuna’s argumentative replacement of false philosophical positions (such as semantic realism) with right ones (semantic anti-realism), for the “heterodox”, the pedagogic style of *upāya* is the explanatory primitive. That is, they read Nāgārjuna’s claims as pragmatically efficacious catalysts that are not always formalizable as propositions.

So, we might say that for the “heterodox” the semantic content of Nāgārjuna’s language is not central to his overall aim. In those cases where it is, this content is to be viewed (only) as a dynamic *vehicle* which will take us from point A (*saṃsāra*) to point B (*nirvāṇa*), and not as the static *cargo* to be lifted out, examined, inventoried, and analysed. Hence, the “heterodox” offer nuanced interpretations where taking *upāya* as an explanatory

²⁴ “I am happy to go so far as to admit that any reading of a text is as valid as any other, and this on the grounds of...the deconstructive disavowal of logocentrism as per Derrida, or the dismissal of interpretive objectivity as per Gadamer...But the crucial point to make here is that the scholars I criticize [the “orthodox”], despite their vocal admission of polysemicity, do not in fact hold such open-ended intellectual commitments...Rather, these scholars remain closed to all but a single ‘right’ way of thinking, which they typically refer to as ‘common sense’ or ‘classical logic,’ but which is just as much in force when they apply deviant logics such as paraconsistency to the texts under study. For regardless of the details of their diverging approaches, they are united in accepting the universal sovereignty of ‘logic,’ ‘reason,’ or ‘rationality’ as a neutral, objective criterion by which to gauge the validity of a given claim or the cogency of a given intellectual system regardless of its historical locus” (Stepien 2018b, 1084).

primitive does not preclude the recognition of some assertions in Nāgārjuna's texts.²⁵ However, unlike the "orthodox", these assertions are not read as moving towards a philosophical Madhyamaka position, but rather as always oriented towards soteriological transformation, whose goal is the *abandoning* all positions. This is why Huntington (1989) repeatedly mentions Nāgārjuna's deconstructive strategies, use of philosophy as propaganda, and edifying techniques. Likewise, this is why Stepien (2019, 563) emphasises the "protreptic" character of Madhyamaka texts over their "zetetic" character. The latter is an inquiry into certain domains for gathering *information*, whereas the former is an inquiry into certain domains for disclosing information only insofar as it is relevant to some *further* aim.

Let us begin by returning to a worry expressed by the "orthodox" about the danger of moving away from the constraint of truth-evaluability. As articulated by Tillemans (1999, 190), "the denial of any propositional content or truth-value as applicable to any of the tetralemma's four negations" would be "insufficient, for it minimizes the role and the seriousness of argumentation in the Madhyamaka system". The implication is that if a statement is not regarded as making an assertion *that* something is the case and having a potential truth-value, this strips the statement of its significance in developing a sophisticated philosophical position. But as we observed in section 2.1.2, the "heterodox" do not place the same degree of value on the construction of a rationally constrained philosophical position. On their metalinguistic reading of Nāgārjuna's statements, attempting to understand these statements *in order to* rationally reconstruct a philosophical position is to pick up Nāgārjuna by the wrong hermeneutic handle. This is because, according to the "heterodox", in Madhyamaka thought there is a striking "disavowal of argument for argument's sake" (Stepien 2018a, 15) and Nāgārjuna's texts contain "manifold espousals of the abandonment of *all forms of intellectual positionality*" (Stepien 2019, 533). In this sense, for the "heterodox", the hermeneutic attempt should be motivated by an understanding of Nāgārjuna's statements *in order to* enable the soteriologically efficacious Madhyamaka vision of complete detachment, conceptual as well as affective, to shine forth. As Stepien (2019, 563) explains: "these texts seek to instruct the reader/practitioner as to the means toward detachment from irreality in the form of conceptual elaborations such as 'self' and 'truth'. The deconstruction of such fictions and consequent description of reality

²⁵ "Nāgārjuna's 'point about how things exist' is only 'true'...provisionally. The theses espoused by Nāgārjuna, though theses (or perhaps ~~theses~~), are only functional within the overriding...project of the abandonment of theses/views" (Stepien 2019, 565).

as it truly is (i.e., devoid of them), even where this deconstruction and description comprises the bulk of the text, is subservient to this ultimate end”. Therefore, the way to metalinguistically understand the function of language in Nāgārjuna’s statements is to highlight *upāya*, which means that his statements are not primarily philosophical attempts at cogently pronouncing a systematised set of beliefs. Hence, any hermeneutic lens that “zetetically” scans these statements for *information* and attempts the arrangement of information-carrying propositions into arguments is in danger of distorting the “protreptic” power of Nāgārjuna’s texts, which are to be seen as enacting modes of *upāya*.

Since it is the proliferation of loops of argumentations, objections, and counter-refutations that must be uprooted, let us examine how the “heterodox” seek to reverse the explanatory order that the “orthodox” offer. The latter can be summarised by Garfield’s (2015, 14) explanation that there is “a broad metaphysical account of reality, a diagnosis of the fundamental human condition that rests on that account, and a soteriological and ethical framework *resting on that diagnosis*” (emphasis added). In others, an ontological description is the (logically prior) foundation upon which the therapeutic diagnosis of the human condition rests and the soteriological discipline emerges from that description.²⁶ So, we might suggest that the explanatory weight here is carried by truth-evaluable descriptive statements about what there is (for instance, not-self and dependent origination), and these descriptive statements, because they form a *true* account, give prescriptive statements relating to soteriology and ethical living (for instance, the eightfold path) their existential significance. For the “heterodox”, however, soteriology and prescriptive statements associated with soteriological concerns underlie all dimensions of the Buddhist worldview. Thus, the diagnosis of the human condition is only a diagnosis because there is *already an existential commitment*, even if only to a minimal degree at the beginning, to the *possibility* of bringing an end to suffering.²⁷ To put this point differently, the “heterodox” hold that Buddhist forms of reasoning properly start from the perspective of the “three refuges”, namely taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma or Dharma (his teachings), and in the Sangha (the monastic community). This cognitive-affective-volitional commitment to the

²⁶ Here, we read “metaphysics” not as the declaration of some ultimate way reality is (a move that the proponents of the semantic interpretation reject), but rather as a claim *about* the conventional world, namely it is empty of *svabhāva*, it is dependently originated, and it is fictional. In Chapter 4, we will discuss two ways to understand “metaphysics”.

²⁷ “Nāgārjuna is exemplary as a Buddhist philosopher in that he conceives the rational search for abstract truth typically taken (in Western currency) to characterize the philosophical enterprise to be intelligible, let alone valuable, *only insofar as it serves the soteriological end of the religious*” (Stepien 2018b, 1095, n.29, emphasis added).

Dhamma, as proclaimed by the Buddha on the basis of his deep insight, is cultivated by a Buddhist practitioner in their everyday life, and this attitude of trust is explanatorily central. Crucially, this commitment is not primarily truth-evaluable and descriptive, but rather it is prescriptive or protreptic all the way down. So, a “metaphysical account of reality”, such as the one which undergirds Garfield’s order of explanation, is to be regarded as an explanatory concomitant or even a by-product. Elucidating this “heterodox” interpretation, Huntington (1989, 11, emphasis added) explains that “the Mādhyamika goes so far as to develop [their] own alternative conceptualization of the world – a ‘*conceptualization*’ which is ‘*no conceptualization*’, but rather an alternative ‘form of life’ – and to suggest a specific path by means of which it might be actualized”. This is why the order of explanation discussed above is of such crucial exegetical importance – if philosophy is to be explained *in terms of* soteriology, it is the latter that would constrain the former, and not vice versa.

Given these observations of how the “heterodox” metalinguistic understanding is shaped by their metaphilosophical resistance to Anglophone philosophy, we can now turn our attention to how they read the content of Nāgārjuna’s statements. It is worth mentioning, as we observed in section 1.2, that contemporary Madhyamaka interpreters generally agree on the content of the Madhyamaka message, namely emptiness. Hence, the “heterodox” agree with the “orthodox” interpretation that Nāgārjuna rejects some version of ontological foundationalism. As Huntington (1989, 39-40) affirms: “Recognition of the strictly contextual or pragmatic significance of the thoughts and objects that populate our mental and material world renders meaningless any search for a transcendental ground behind these phenomena”. I read the phrase “transcendental ground behind these phenomena” as equivalent to “ultimate ontological building blocks of reality”. Hence, Huntington would agree with the “orthodox” point that there is no further reality behind or beyond the conventional, namely there is no ultimate way things are. Thus, just as the “orthodox” semantic interpretation aims at correcting a false metaphysical presupposition, Huntington (1989, 45) reads Nāgārjuna in a similar vein, and asks rhetorically: “Which is more salutary...by weaving an endless series of abstruse arguments, in the hope of retrieving some solid justification for this presupposition of a metaphysical reality behind the appearance of everyday affairs, or simply to abandon the presupposition altogether and accept everyday, practical considerations as sufficient unto themselves?”. However, whereas the “orthodox” take their semantic anti-realism or “pan-fictionalism” as a philosophical position which can, in principle, be discussed without immediate reference to

soteriological visions,²⁸ the “heterodox” see their rejection of transcendental foundations as a repudiation of the possibility of divorcing semantics from soteriology, even for expository reasons. This is because they read Nāgārjuna’s commitment to “anti-foundationalism” as a rhetorical vehicle towards a soteriological aim that has no meaning outside the Madhyamaka message. To return to the metaphor mentioned earlier, the “orthodox” mistake would be to miss the soteriological vehicle for the enumerable cargo and by taking it out from its dynamic context, examine it as a standalone “object” – a step in the wrong exegetical direction. Thus, we hear Stepien cautioning us that “Nāgārjuna’s central teaching (of dependent co-origination as emptiness) is meant to disabuse one of suffering by enabling one to proceed along the Buddhist path toward unadulterated vision of reality (*unadulterated, that is, by any and all conceptual lenses*) (Stepien 2019, 563, emphasis added). As I read Stepien’s point, to mistake the vehicle for the cargo is to seek to cognitively grasp precisely the *adulterated* vision that Nāgārjuna wants us to pacify.

In the light of this general strategy, we begin to understand in what way the “heterodox” read the function of Nāgārjuna’s statements. Here, it is worth emphasising that there are a lot of conceptual overlaps with the “orthodox” insofar as the “heterodox” too are affirming Nāgārjuna’s use of some kind of anti-realist semantics, in the sense discussed above. The approach to meaning that the Mādhyamika uses, Huntington (1989, 57) states clearly, is “nonreferential”. Again, as with the “orthodox”, the reference relation that the “heterodox” deny is an objective connection between words and a mind-independent world. Michael Dorfman (2014, 94) explains Huntington’s use of the term “nonreferential” as follows: “meaning (in this view) is still constructed through a process of reference, although no longer a simple one; rather, references are multiplied, as each term gains its meaning through a process of contextual differentiation from other terms which in turn gain their meaning in the same manner”. As such, I read Huntington’s understanding of “nonreferential” language to be very similar to Westerhoff’s (2019, 781) claim that meaning and truth are derived “from their location in a system of conventions”. In both cases, Madhyamaka anti-realist semantics is seen as affirming a conventional reference relation that is dynamically generated through contingent socio-cultural-historical agreements and

²⁸ Siderits (2007, 180) explains that he will trace out “the soteriological consequences of the [Madhyamaka] view”. The suggestion is that, at least for expository reasons, the “view” can be separated from the “soteriological” implications. I think this is precisely what the “heterodox” reject – on their understanding, semantics is explanatorily interdependent with the aim of liberation.

developments of shared conventions by human interlocutors. Hence, Huntington (1989, 113) tells us that

the meaning of a word or concept invariably derives from its application within a context of sociolinguistic relations and not through reference to any self-sufficient, independently real object. Meaning is ever and always couched within an undulating matrix of natural interpretations that conditions concepts and perceptions, emotional and intellectual needs and desires, and ultimately, conscious and preconscious attitudes toward all of everyday experience.

Let us leave aside the question of to what extent the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” agree regarding the finer details of a Madhyamaka-friendly semantic theory. For our purposes, what is worth noting, from a metalinguistic perspective, is that there *is* a lot of overlap across the reconstructions on both sides of our oscillation – no one in the contemporary interpretive topography is denying that some dimension of “nonreferentiality” is pertinent to making sense of the key claim that emptiness too is empty. Notwithstanding this acknowledgment, there is some disagreement over the *significance* of the Madhyamaka account of meaning.

As we observed, for the “orthodox”, anti-realist semantics allows Nāgārjuna to put forth a consistent philosophical vision, and so the motif of semantic anti-realism plays a key role in their reading of Nāgārjuna’s message. In contrast, for the “heterodox”, the significance of a Madhyamaka theory of meaning that rejects realism does *not* depend primarily on the articulation of a viable alternative, namely anti-realism, but rather on the ability to illuminate Nāgārjuna’s soteriological point of the dangers of cognitive and affective clinging. As Huntington explains: “the central concepts of the Mādhyamika are inextricably linked with *a revolutionary approach to the problem of meaning as a problem of application*. Given this radically different approach to language and conceptual thought, the meaning of emptiness is to be sought not in a new definition of truth or reality, but in the concept’s uniquely *efficacious* role in actualizing a radically new form of life” (Huntington 1989, 118, emphasis added). Therefore, Huntington’s emphasis on nonreferentiality is significantly different from what we observed in the “orthodox” reconstruction called pan-fictionalism. On the “heterodox” conception of nonreferentiality, language is *performative*, namely it is used therapeutically as a soteriological catalyst. Indeed, the “heterodox” emphasise the presence in Buddhist contexts of “highly sophisticated theory and practice of performative utterance” (Stepien 2020, 4). Thus, it seems that the “heterodox” offer a nonreferential semantic account *not* as part of a consistent

metalinguistic theory, but in order to make sense of how it is possible that Nāgārjuna can put forth claims, and yet not have any views. This is possible because the nonreferential use of language is a rhetorical performance, so that the semantic is subsumed in the rhetoric and the philosophy is subsumed in the soteriology. So, even when Nāgārjuna is putting forth statements²⁹ that appear to carry semantic content, they do so (only) temporarily – until these statements have achieved their soteriological effect.³⁰ I read Huntington (1989, 57) as explaining this point here:

[t]he arguments presented in these texts are a series of corrective devices; there is no attempt to connect words to reality or to suggest that they somehow reach beyond themselves for their justification. This nonreferential use of language allows the Mādhyamika authors to avoid the problems inherent in holding and defending a particular philosophical view, for when their aim is accomplished and the problem of reifying thought disappears, the content and the form of the propositions are entirely inconsequential.

I think the “orthodox” would agree with Huntington’s first sentence, namely Nāgārjuna is doing something different from configuring a realist semantics. However, the two sides of our metalinguistic oscillation would begin to part ways with Huntington’s second sentence, which implies that it is more plausible to read Nāgārjuna not as a defender of anti-realist semantics, but as a skillful user of various rhetorical techniques, *in which the semantic content is geared towards soteriologically transformative work*. In this sense, it seems that for the “heterodox”, Nāgārjuna is not primarily engaged in articulating specific moves within a semantic space. This is because the semantic space itself is viewed by the “heterodox” as a source of cognitive-volitional clinging that involves the hypostatization of thought and the attachment to views (*dṛṣṭi*) – a theme we will return to in Chapter 4. As Huntington (1989, 114) elaborates this point: “The meaning of the philosophical and soteriological concept of emptiness must be sought for in its application in a specific regimen of training; ultimately, correct understanding must be demonstrated – not merely discussed – by a life founded on nonclinging”.

Therefore, from the “heterodox” perspective, in emphasising that Nāgārjuna is adopting some kind of anti-realist semantics, and trying to show that his statements are consistent, the “orthodox” give too much weight to zetetic inquiry. Stepien (2019, 563) argues that Nāgārjuna’s use of language is “zetetic only insofar as protreptic”, so that by

²⁹ For instance, the statement: “everything is dependently originated”.

³⁰ “Ignorance (*avidyā*) is...defined by Nāgārjuna as that which...stations one at any position at all as to reality” (Stepien 2019, 546).

focusing primarily on the semantics, the soteriological force of the MMK can be diminished. Whether the form of semantics is realist or anti-realist, it is *about* “the world” even if, as is the case with anti-realist semantics, “the world” is not a mind-independent domain but dependently arisen through conventions. But if configuring any account of reality, whether conventional or ultimate, is not the purpose of Buddhist visions, wherever such an account appears in Nāgārjuna’s texts, the “heterodox” think that it has a soteriological function that cannot be translated without remainder into propositional information. This vision reflects the “heterodox” metalinguistic understanding that language “can be exploited for a variety of literary and rhetorical effects” (Huntington 1995, 283) which are not directly replicable in logical space. Such effects are visible in “apophatic” discourse because the point of making statements in this style is to reveal something that is transcendent as “utterly immanent”. The Greek word *apophasis* means “negation, unsaying, speaking-away” and it is to be contrasted with *kataphasis*, which means “affirmation, saying, speaking-with” (1995, 283). Thus, the function of the statements in the MMK is to generate certain rhetorical effects through a skilful use of symbolic language that resists paraphrasing into *propositions*. Huntington’s basic idea is that it would be unwise to apply the same hermeneutic tools to a treatise written by Kant and a novel written by Dostoevsky. As he puts it succinctly, the aim of the MMK is not to *prove* but to *heal* (1995, 297). In short, the soteriology is activated *not* by some kind of argumentative reworking but by a form of revelatory vision that discloses. Thus, invoking the idiom of performance, Huntington (2017, 160) writes:

Understood from this perspective, Nāgārjuna’s writing is the literary equivalent of extending my hands, palms upward. A quelling of the very impulse to argument. It is, as I mentioned earlier, a symbolic form of unconditional self-surrender. It is furthermore an invitation to the reader to engage in a similar act of letting go, an immersion in un/knowing that evokes the legendary silence of the saints...This is a way of using language that pays heed to the formula routinely delivered in every undergraduate course in creative writing: Don’t tell. Show.

In this sense, the very desire to know whether all objects *are* empty and conceptualise the wonder as to how objects might exist non-substantially generates cognitive moves in the wrong direction. It is an attempt to conceptually paraphrase through *kataphasis* that which can only be (paradoxically) un-said in *apophasis*.

These “heterodox” readings are clearly opposed to styles of logocentrism, according to which *correctness about states of affairs* is the reason why soteriology works. For the “heterodox”, the problem with logocentrism seems to be that logic, semantics, and argumentation carry with them an air of neutrality that needs to be dispelled on the soteriological

pathway. Stepien (2019, 552) explains this point as follows: “Holding is always also clinging. There is no such thing as a completely objective position; one that would entail no subjective affirmation but would be affirmed, rather, with utterly detached neutrality”. Thus, Nāgārjuna is *not* making objective statements from an ultimate perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*) about how things are or are not; instead, from a perspective where there is no subject-object duality, he is seeing “reality aright” (*sub specie veritatis*) (2019, 553). Such a disclosive horizon *ostends* or manifests rather than *explains* or indicates, and it helps us to *access* or apprehend emptiness and not domesticate it within some propositional space. Stepien argues that “[e]ven relatively unquestioned views (what are typically called “assumptions”) such as logical or physical ‘laws’ necessarily entail a hermeneutic framework within which to function; one that is typically ontologically substantialist, and consequently affirmative of what for Nāgārjuna is a metaphysically false, and soteriologically harmful, view of reality” (2019, 552). Thus, in the attempt to *show* us something rather than *explain* it, Nāgārjuna is not undertaking a cognitive enterprise of trying to convince others to accept a *conclusion*. For the “heterodox”, premises and conclusions are semantically formulable propositions that one holds in a logical space pervaded by notions of *svabhāva*. Thus, Nāgārjuna cannot be advocating this logical space as the medium through which we judge the truth of Madhyamaka statements – instead, this truth is immanent to a soteriological vision. And this is why Nāgārjuna is not primarily putting forth arguments, so that Huntington (2017, 160) speaks through Nāgārjuna in the following way: “I’m not speaking like a logician, so right and wrong are irrelevant”.

2.3 “Orthodox” versus “Heterodox” Interpretations of Nāgārjuna’s Viewlessness

To re-articulate the two types of oscillations discussed above, they revolve around distinct conceptions of what makes a cognitive style *philosophical* and what kind of *linguistic* function any statement within that style would perform. These conceptual “meta” oscillations stem from first-order exegetical disagreements, which specifically revolve around Nāgārjuna’s professed “thesis-less-ness” in verse 29 of the VV.³¹ One way to articulate the two oscillations is with reference to this verse since it is a particularly clear case where Nāgārjuna’s statement can *either* be carefully qualified so as to fit the space of reasoning *or* be taken at face value, even if it seems illogical. In this way scholars oscillate between two poles: *either* Nāgārjuna’s proclamation that he has no view (*pratijñā*) is unacceptable from a logical perspective and

³¹ “If I had any proposition, this defect would attach to me. But I have no proposition. Therefore I am not at fault” (Williams-Wyant 2017, 263).

requires some qualification (presumably because Nāgārjuna's statements can be arranged in reason-shaped arguments and thus the looming threat of a paradox should be addressed) or Nāgārjuna's foremost goal is soteriological transformation and so his declaration can be taken at face value (because he is skilfully trying to guide his readers down the Buddhist path with rhetorical strategies, even if in some cases these strategies are articulated with the language of reason). On one side of the oscillation are the "orthodox" scholars who think that VV 29 is not some sort of a blatantly self-refuting claim of the form "I *am* claiming that I am *not* claiming anything". Thus, Nāgārjuna's "thesis-less-ness" should not be taken at face value since doing so would lead to a logical contradiction. For instance, Westerhoff (2010, 12) argues that VV 29 "does not amount to the paradoxical claim of someone asserting that he is not asserting anything". Instead, it is a denial that is in need of careful qualification in order to avoid a straightforward contradiction.

Thus, the central challenge for "orthodox" interpreters is that they must nimbly walk on a tightrope between affirming, on the one hand, that Nāgārjuna's statements express some views or theses, since their hermeneutic lens reads his statements as fact-stating³² propositions, and affirming, on the other hand, that these statements must avoid "the objectification of emptiness" (Garfield 2008, 525). In other words, given the declaration that emptiness is empty and the general agreement that this declaration rejects any hypostatization of emptiness itself as an ultimate reality or any objective thesis about the structure of the world, "orthodox" scholars have to offer an account of what distinguishes this reified, "bad" kind of view or thesis (*pratijñā*) from the "good" statement that Nāgārjuna is to be interpreted as offering. This is how Arnold (2005, 133) presents the paradox: "the characteristically Mādhyamika claim not to have any thesis forces...[an] interpretive choice: One can take it at face value and convict the Mādhyamika either of self-referential incoherence or of making a vacuous statement, or one can work to understand 'thesis' as specifically referring to some particular kind of thesis". In their desire to illuminate the philosophical sophistication of the Madhyamaka message, "orthodox" scholars generally opt for the second alternative and qualify the term *pratijñā*, arguing that Nāgārjuna's statement is to be read not as a logical contradiction or an epistemic nullity but as a denial of a thesis of a specific kind. "Orthodox" scholars metaphilosophically emphasise the rational, logical, and argument-based elements of philosophical inquiry, and so they sense a deep conceptual puzzle in Nāgārjuna's declaration that he has no *pratijñā*. They

³² That is, "fact"-stating, from the "orthodox" perspective of an anti-realist semantics.

assess arguments with logical criteria such as validity, and every statement expresses a *belief*, *assertion*, *thesis*, or *view* – and yet, this is the very thing Nāgārjuna declares he *does not hold*.

Thus, for the “orthodox”, there is an important sense in which the Mādhyamika *does* have something constructive to say. In the debate settings of ancient India, we may imagine a Mādhyamika responding to a *prima facie* statement (*pūrva-pakṣa*) of a defender of the Nyāya worldview in this way: “No, you are wrong. I state *that* everything is empty of inherent nature”. For instance, Garfield (2002, 46-47) argues that “Nāgārjuna is, throughout his philosophical corpus, in one straightforward sense, advancing a view, [namely] the Madhyamaka view that all phenomena are ultimately empty though conventionally real and dependently originated, and so on”. The “orthodox” suggest that we resolve the conceptual tension embodied by VV 29 by reading Nāgārjuna’s assertions not as views or theses (*pratijñā*) since they do not presuppose the *realist semantics* of the Nyāya opponent. Garfield and Priest (2003, 12) tell us that Nāgārjuna “asserts that his use of words does not commit him to the existence of any convention-independent phenomena (such as emptiness) to which those words refer”. Westerhoff (2010, 12) too states in relation to VV 29 that “[w]hat Nāgārjuna wants to say is that he does not hold any substantially existent thesis”. Specifically, “[w]hat Nāgārjuna means when he says that he ‘has no thesis’ is that none of his theoretical statements (including the claim to universal emptiness) is to be interpreted according to a semantics based on the standard [realist] picture” (Westerhoff 2009b, 37). Reflecting this anti-realist account, Garfield elaborates how Nāgārjuna’s statements can be read from two standpoints – his enlightened one and the perspective of an ordinary person. The peculiarity of the former is that Nāgārjuna’s “consciousness is directed only toward what can be found ultimately to exist, and since nothing can be so found, there is literally nothing toward which such a consciousness can be directed” (Garfield 2002, 53). For Garfield, this signals the possibility of Nāgārjuna’s speech being both (ultimately) nonassertorial *and* (conventionally) truth-evaluable. This is because:

emptiness is not the real object as opposed to the unreal object of ordinary perception; not the object that appears when false appearance is shed...to the extent that it appears as an object at all, it does so as falsely as does any table. But then the semantic story told from this perspective is somewhat different. The best that can then be said is that from such a standpoint the words ‘Emptiness is empty’ ascribe no property to any object at all: from that standpoint, they express no proposition. At that stage, there is no view to be expressed, where a view is something that can be given assertoric voice. (Garfield 2002, 53)

As I read Garfield’s point, from our conventional perspective as ordinary beings, Nāgārjuna is making truth-evaluable assertions according to some anti-realist semantics. Therefore, although Nāgārjuna’s statements are conventionally truth-evaluable (such as the statements “the sky is blue” and “snow is white”), these statements do not presuppose “the substantial existence of the referent” (here, “sky” and “snow”). These statements, which are to be properly understood as nonreferential, express nominal truth because such truth is the most any-thing in the conventional can embody. In other words, we can interpret his claims as both rational and truth-evaluable, yet not as assertions *that* something is the case *from his enlightened perspective*, because a proposition is structured with a subject and a predicate, neither of which are “visible” from this ultimate viewpoint. In this way, Garfield (2002, 56) resolves the *prima facie* contradiction of someone saying that she is not saying anything by understanding assertions as convention-relative to our ordinary perspective – the use of a conventional assertion “presuppose[s] no language-independent denotation but rather derives merely from their utility in discourse”. This absence of mind-independent facts or truth-makers to make our sentences true is precisely why an anti-realist semantics is offered by the “orthodox” as a philosophical position Nāgārjuna might accept at the *conventional level*.

However, this style of reading VV 29 is contested by the “heterodox” who argue that VV 29 should be taken as pointing towards a more radical form of negation. Thus, Stepien (2019, 530) states that “Nāgārjuna’s insistence on the abandonment of all views – including ultimately his own – constitutes his distinctive means to the thoroughgoing exhaustion characteristic of *nirvāṇa*, wherein all views, propositions, theses (*drṣṭi*, *pakṣa*, *pratijñā*) – all beliefs – are abandoned as so many subtle affirmations of an only ever empty self”. Therefore, they do not take the *prima facie* paradox of VV 29 as a philosophical problem that needs some sort of fine-tuned conceptual resolution, since for them doing such reconstructive “philosophy” is not the purpose of Nāgārjuna’s deconstructions. As we have seen, they seek to give full weight to the soteriological aim of “the abandonment of all views (*sarvadrṣṭiprāhaṇāya*)” (Stepien 2019, 529). Indeed, they argue that Nāgārjuna’s “deconstruction is consistently designed to clear the ground, as it were, of all supposed supports (metaphysical, epistemic, and doxastic), and thereby to open the Mādhyamika’s mind to *prajñā*...the enlightened awareness of emptiness” (Stepien 2019, 561). Hence, as Stepien notes, if inferential reasoning and logic are given conceptual priority in one’s rational reconstruction of the Madhyamaka message, “one is liable to take the...deconstruction of theses itself as a thesis; a danger Nāgārjuna was

acutely aware of...It is thus of the utmost importance to realize that...the deconstruction or discarding of theses, should not be construed as itself a thesis” (2019, 565).

In other words, for the “heterodox” Nāgārjuna is offering us pointers to soteriological paths, and even if his statements are formalizable (for instance, in an anti-realist semantics), they should not be thus formalised, since this cognitive enterprise inadvertently risks freighting them with more theoretical importance than they actually have. In short, the viewlessness of VV 29 should be read as unqualifiedly soteriological, since the Madhyamaka use of *reductios* points to a “viewless” state of profound insight beyond all (ontological as well as conceptual) duality. As Huntington (2007, 122-123) puts it, “the goal is to uproot altogether the very desire, or need, for rational certainty, and so to provide an anecdote [*sic*: antidote] to the intellectual and spiritual disease of clinging. This is accomplished by uncovering a logically indeterminate space between proof and disproof, affirmation and negation, consent and dissent”. This shift in emphasis means that even if we find what look like argumentative patterns in Nāgārjuna’s texts, these patterns should be regarded as pragmatic tools for soteriological advancement, and not as descriptions of reality because looking for *any* kind of view, however minimal and qualified, is already a problem: “The arguments presented in these texts are a series of corrective devices; there is no attempt to connect words to reality or to suggest that they somehow reach beyond themselves for their justification” (Huntington 1989, 57). In Huntington’s understanding, the “antiphilosophical language of the Mādhyamika” (1989, 130) suggests that although in everyday discourse our statements carry semantic content, for Nāgārjuna, this content is used for the practical purposes of generating the soteriological medicine of non-clinging, and is “totally exhausted within the sphere of the sociolinguistic context where [it is] used” (1989, 39). Therefore, any attempt to extract the semantic content outside of this soteriological context is to reinforce one’s habitual clinging – here, clinging to the possibility of objectivity. As I read the “heterodox” point, the Anglophone philosophical method, which looks for truth-evaluable propositions, reads Nāgārjuna backwards – the emphasis on truth-evaluability is another symptom of the cognitive desire to somehow “transcend everyday life” and the focus on propositional content is equivalent to the hypostatization and clinging that Madhyamaka warns against. Hence, “the soteriologically motivated necessity of abandoning all views for Nāgārjuna” (Stepien 2019, 531) is unqualified insofar as “the *holding* of a view or concept in mind is tantamount to the *grasping* at the core of suffersome attachment” (2019, 537).

If I am right in my reading of the “heterodox”, even Garfield’s explanatory bifurcation of the two perspectives rests too heavily on the attempt to uncover a semantic theory – to show,

“objectively,” how words and reality relate consistently – in order to state the information Nāgārjuna expresses in his statements. But this attempt itself is to be regarded as a (subtle) form of grasping, namely grasping at information or explanation. Thus, rather than focusing so much on *what* Nāgārjuna says, the “heterodox” claim seems to be that *how* Nāgārjuna says it by employing performative gestures, is of equal, if not greater, value. This soteriological vision points to a distinctive way of philosophising that is primarily characterised not by making and arranging assertions, but rather by the performative function of apophatic discourse that is a “vehicle for transformation”, where this transformation is not evaluable within some propositional, dialogical space (Huntington 1995, 296). For such discourse “begins simply by giving priority to the metaphorical associations of words and their resonance in lived experience, rather than focusing exclusively on their explanatory, analytic force” (Huntington 2017, 175). As we have seen, such an understanding renders *unconditional* Nāgārjuna’s claim that he has no views because any “efforts to restrict Nāgārjuna’s multiply reiterated and utterly unqualified abandonment of views to a merely ‘technical sense of proposition in the sense of *pratijñā*’ or to the relatively inconsequential domain of semantics, do undermine...the soteriological thrust of Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*” (Stepien 2019, 552).

2.4 Concluding Remarks

It is hopefully clear by now what is at stake between those who hover at the opposite poles of the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic oscillations, namely the hermeneutic lens they employ in reading a text and the conceptual priority they give either to the demand of reason-shaped explanation or to the goal of soteriological liberation. This is why the two oscillations are so deeply intertwined. Whether we take the sentences in Nāgārjuna’s texts to function primarily as argument-shaped propositions which are intended to convey information (*that* dependent origination is emptiness, *that* everything is empty, *that* emptiness is itself empty, and so on) or primarily as rhetorical devices which are to be used to catalyse a trans-conceptual awakening, is shaped by our metaphilosophical commitments. We explored how these oscillations are reflected in exegeses of Nāgārjuna’s declaration that he has no “thesis” (*pratijñā*) and we saw that these exegeses are intricately interwoven with specific metaphilosophical and metalinguistic commitments. The debates surrounding what it means to “do philosophy” and whether Buddhist texts should be read primarily as pragmatic tools towards soteriological goals or as philosophical arguments made up of truth-evaluable propositions are not new. Such interpretive disagreements and diverging

hermeneutic solutions date back as far as the early commentators writing in Pāli whose aim was to systematise the Buddha's teachings. They were received and reworked in later intra-Buddhist disagreements and, more recently, in Western scholarship. If this history is anything to go by, these disagreements are not straightforwardly resolvable. It would not be surprising if the "orthodox" are not satisfied with the "heterodox" account and protest: "Yes, but *why* does Buddhist soteriology *work* if the Buddhist vision does not also tell us *how things are*?" Here, like in many other philosophical debates, we are at a conceptual impasse. The "heterodox" can answer that such a question loses its force in the context of their redescription of philosophy as a cognitive discipline geared towards soteriology. The "orthodox" might remain unconvinced and they will ask for *arguments*. And yet, as we have seen, the "heterodox" cannot – rather, in a principled manner, would not – offer arguments of the kind their opponents demand.

So, the quote with which we opened this chapter will hopefully now appear particularly apt, for the two poles of the oscillations have their "spades" turned precisely because there is no context-free hermeneutic criterion that either pole can appeal to without begging the important questions against the other. If I am correct in suggesting that Rorty's Pragmatism can give us some pointers to bypass the conceptual contrasts that drive these oscillations, we might be able to not so much stop, once and for all, these interpretive oscillations, but rather to sketch, from our "orthogonal" perspective, a different narrative of philosophy and language that will allow us to circumvent these impasses.

Chapter 3: Anti-Representationalism: Introducing a Novel Dialogical Space for Madhyamaka Studies

[Pragmatism is] “a movement which has specialized in debunking dualisms and in dissolving traditional problems created by those dualisms” (ORT 126).

The previous chapter introduced readers to the interpretive lay of the land regarding some contemporary disagreements among scholars of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka. The thematic terrains explored there highlighted two key motifs. (1) The metaphilosophical dispute about the conceptual boundaries and the methods of philosophy, in the contexts of Buddhist Studies, is an ongoing engagement. In its articulations specifically regarding Madhyamaka, this debate revolves around the question of what criteria a text ought to meet in order for it to be considered “philosophical”, that is, it is a debate over “what philosophy should or can say” (Guignon and Hiley 2003, 33). As we observed, those scholars who swing towards the “orthodox” side tend to emphasise criteria such as logical consistency, cogency, rationality, and valid reasoning. On the other hand, the “heterodox” side foregrounds a wider range of acceptable criteria such as narrative strategy, non-discursive writing, symbolic imagination, and protreptic catalysis. They tend to downplay the significance of valid forms of argumentation in Nāgārjuna’s texts, subsuming such argumentation under the soteriological goal. This metaphilosophical disagreement is intertwined with (2) a metalinguistic debate over the linguistic function of Buddhist statements – are they primarily truth-evaluable propositions or are they merely existential catalysers which are pragmatically efficacious? Those who understand “philosophy” as the intellectual activity generally practised in contemporary Anglophone departments take the zetetic aim of rational inquiry, problem-solving, and truth-evaluability to steer the soteriological telos of *nirvāṇa*. Conversely, those who read Madhyamaka as primarily guided by the protreptic goal of *upāya*, which is said to direct rational inquiry, tend to promote a wider understanding of “philosophy” that downplays the parameters of objectivity, neutrality, logic, and reasoning, and instead points to techniques aimed at liberation from suffering.

We concluded Chapter 2 by highlighting that these two types of debates remain unresolved across a conceptual continuum. And this un-resolvability arises, as we have seen, because there is no non-question-begging way for either side to convince the other to join them at their end of the oscillation since the very presuppositions that each side operates with are what is at stake in any such attempt at a *reason*-based adjudication. Rorty has described the metaphilosophical disagreement between “analytic” philosophers who view problem-solving

and conceptual analysis as central to the activity of philosophy and “continental” philosophers who engage in “intellectual history” in practising what they see as philosophy as “a split as deep as that between religious and secular outlooks” (PCP 127). Thus, for a “heterodox” scholar to tell an “orthodox” one – and vice versa – that “the more minutely you scrutinise the sentences contained in the MMK, the more plausible my metaphilosophical and metalinguistic presuppositions will become for you” would be similar to, to invoke an example from Rorty (1993, 188), “a Galilean telling an Aristotelian that she will gradually become willing to settle for a world without final and formal causes...as she learns more about the elegant explanations of eclipses, parallax, etc., which a heliocentric model makes possible. Maybe she will, but it is not clear that she should – that there is any [logically] compelling reason to do so”.

Having articulated the conceptual contours of these interpretive impasses, we will now shift our attention to reworking some resources from Rorty who, I will argue, offers us a distinctive lens through which we can begin to move past these exegetical stalemates. The aim of the present chapter is to show both sides that their oscillations need not be sharply opposed because a Rortyan redescription of their Madhyamaka terrains can accommodate them both. Through this redescription, we will more clearly understand that there is much that the two sides agree on, the interpretive impasses notwithstanding. Then on the basis of our discussion here, Chapter 4 will argue that such a Rortyan redescription makes possible a re-reading of Nāgārjuna that allows us to synthesise the strong points of both exegetical sides.

To sketch out the pathways towards circumventing the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic oscillations, first, in section 3.1 we will see how Rorty’s Pragmatism can provide us with the conceptual tools needed to revisit these oscillations. As we will see, the central role that Rorty accords to semantic anti-representationalism in his Neo-Pragmatist philosophy carries with it implications that interrogate and run counter to philosophy’s self-image in contemporary Anglophone departments. Our focus on semantic anti-representationalism will allow us to shed light on the intertwinement of the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic commitments that shape the distinct exegetical interpretations we outlined in Chapter 2. Rorty’s Neo-Pragmatism highlights that metaphilosophy and metalinguistics are two sides of the same conceptual coin – his rejection of representationalism offers an anti-representationalist account of linguistic function *and* a vision of philosophy’s purpose that is not preoccupied with the representationalist enterprise. These Rortyan insights will then allow us to recognise that the interpretive impasses in Madhyamaka studies turn on dichotomies that an anti-representationalist would reject. In section 3.2 we will indicate how the metaphilosophical oscillation can be sidestepped by sketching how an anti-representationalist would view

argumentation and rationality, namely in social processive terms. In so doing, we will re-envision the reason versus rhetoric debate as pivoted on a forced choice that can be avoided. In section 3.3, we will then sidestep the metalinguistic oscillation too by suggesting that an overattentiveness to semantic referentiality is a representationalist concern. Thus, the information-disclosing proposition versus transformational rhetoric debate begins to lose its significance when an anti-representationalist stance is clearly delineated from the outset. Lastly, in section 3.4 we will conclude by tying together our observations, and setting the stage for Chapter 4, where we will engage in the task of re-reading Nāgārjuna from an anti-representational perspective.

3.1 Metaphilosophical and Metalinguistic Considerations: Why Pragmatism?

Pragmatism, I argue, is of particular interest to us in the context of circumventing the oscillations because of its emphasis on the interrelation of theoretical reflection, intellectual history, cultural criticism, and social location, which places it against Platonist styles of philosophising, in which the philosopher's self-image is that of "a knower of unconditional ahistorical necessities" (Rorty 1995a, 198). Because of its opposition to this conception of philosophy, Pragmatism can provide us with an apposite set of metaphilosophical commitments, according to which we cease "wanting to draw nice clear lines between philosophical questions and political, religious, aesthetic, or economic questions" (1995a, 201). In this context, Pragmatism can be read as setting itself against its own "orthodox" – that is, the Platonist-Cartesian – philosophical tradition. In this respect, we can alleviate some of the "heterodox" worries pertaining to the unsuitability of Platonist ideas in Western philosophy as a tool with which to engage with non-Western thought. The point is not that the "heterodox" interpreters clearly have Pragmatism on their side, but rather that the metaphilosophical debates in the Madhyamaka context have many conceptual resonances with debates in Western contexts over the status and the significance of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, as Rorty's understanding of the Anglophone philosophical terrain emphasises, metaphilosophy is conceptually entangled with metalinguistic commitments, so that "metaphilosophical issues – issues about what, if anything, philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued – are inseparable from issues about the nature of knowledge, truth, and meaning" (PCP 122). Therefore, Rorty's Pragmatist understanding of these issues will not only help us to sharpen the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic disagreements between "orthodox" and "heterodox" Madhyamaka interpreters, but will also, more importantly, give us a distinctive

lens through which to understand these disagreements and transcend their foundational parameters.

In particular, Rorty's emphasis on semantic anti-representationalism highlights the interrelatedness of metaphilosophical and metalinguistic commitments, which will allow us to sidestep the two types of interpretive oscillations in Madhyamaka scholarship. For Rorty, anti-representationalists are committed to a particular understanding of language as an evolving social practice that enables humans to cope with their environments rather than as transparently mirroring the world. Accordingly, anti-representationalists take a distinctive metaphilosophical stance on what philosophy can and should do. One central concern for the anti-representationalist is to discard what Jürgen Habermas (1987, 311) critiques as "logo-centrism". In this context, "logo-centrism" refers to the prevalent idea among some philosophers of language that "the linguistic function of representing states of affairs is the sole human monopoly" (1987, 311). From a Rortyan perspective, a critique of this logo-centric "fixation on the fact-mirroring function of language" (Habermas 1987, 312) is an articulation of semantic anti-representationalism – the *metalinguistic* assumption that the function of language is to "mirror" reality that Rorty sees as the root of a variety of *metaphilosophical* commitments that are representationalist in spirit and in content.

As such, Rorty's language-focused understanding of Pragmatism as anti-representationalism motivates his suggestion that we should move past semantic concerns about the meanings of words and their relations to the external world, and instead focus on types of *vocabularies* – the distinct language games we play in order to achieve different aims. This move away from "logo-centrism" allows us to recognise the many different functions that language has, only one of which is to describe entities and processes out there in the world. As such, Rorty's emphasis on vocabularies allows us to take seriously the "heterodox" prioritisation of skillful means (*upāya*) and stop worrying about the (lack of) commensurability of different vocabularies or distinct statements. This non-semantic standpoint is supported by a holistic understanding of the intertwinement of rationality and language which makes it difficult to isolate particular features – whether of concepts or of the world – as more foundational than others. To return to a theme introduced in Chapter 1, according to Sellars's famous critique, which Rorty endorses and develops, sensory experience cannot be extricated from conceptual articulation. This inescapability of the conceptual dimension highlights our hermeneutic involvements in our social practices in dynamic milieus where "word" and "world" are deeply interrelated. Therefore, the Platonist-Cartesian aspiration to somehow get beyond or behind these practices is a misguided foundationalist aspiration – one that Rorty

argues stems from and is sustained by a representationalist paradigm. Brandom (1994, xviii), for example, has argued that the only thing we can do philosophically is to “make explicit” those features that are implicit in our social practices. And these social practices are made up of, Rorty emphasises, a variety of distinct language games, all of which have different functions relating to communication, persuasion, exhortation, narrativization, and so on. The distinct vocabularies of these diverse language games equip us with different sets of novel abilities to actively respond to and change our world, and they are the driving force in our intellectual, moral, and social progress. Crucially, this dynamic constellation of language, world, and practice suggests to Rorty that philosophers need to move past the epistemological obsession with understanding the nature of truth through the idiom of representation. As he states forthrightly: “We can...isolate a sense of the term ‘pragmatism’ which will consist *simply* in the dissolution of the traditional problematic about truth, as opposed to [the construction of yet another] ‘pragmatist theory of truth’” (ORT 127). In veering away from this philosophical terrain, Rortyan Neo-Pragmatism casts aside certain “perennial” questions relating to meaning, truth, and reference, and highlights a wider range of discursive strategies open to philosophers.

In developing these standpoints, Pragmatism is animated by the three “pillars” which we mentioned in section 1.1, namely (i) objectivity as shaped by social history, (ii) fallibilist epistemology, and (iii) the importance of solving problems in real-world settings in the context of philosophical inquiry (Misak 2007, 2-4). In the three subsections of 3.1, we will understand how Rorty weaves together these three “pillars” in configuring his distinctive style of Neo-Pragmatism, in order to utilise his articulations as tools with which to sidestep the oscillations. In section 3.1.1 we will delve into how an anti-representationalist would understand linguistic function in a manner that points us away from “logo-centrism”. By recognising the explanatory prioritisation of pragmatics over semantics, we can eschew all representationalist presuppositions in favour of a holistic understanding of mind, language, and world. This will help us put the truth versus use metalinguistic oscillation to rest. Then, in section 3.1.2, we will explore the Neo-Pragmatist methodological strategy of redescription, which operates in opposition to directly arguing against a particular philosophical position, and yet is shaped and guided by reasoning. This strategy will help us understand how rhetorical strategies of this nature can nevertheless be understood as rational endeavours. Finally, in section 3.1.3, we will examine Rorty’s insistence that, given the observations of holism in section 3.1.1 and the possibility of redescription outlined in section 3.1.2, there is little point in focusing on semantics; instead, philosophers should shift their attention to the diversity of vocabularies and the ways in which different metaphors can powerfully affect, and even reshape, the

philosophical landscape. This emphasis on the creative role of metaphors further complicates the oscillation between reason and rhetoric in Madhyamaka scholarship. We will move on to indicate how these Rortyan themes can help us sidestep the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic oscillations, in sections 3.2 and 3.3, respectively.

3.1.1 Coping Versus Copying: An Anti-Representationalist Semantic Redescription

As we observed in section 1.3, for Rorty, the significance of the three arguments against analyticity, pre-conceptual awareness, and the scheme-content dualism, offered by Quine, Sellars, and Davidson, respectively, is that when taken together, they allow us to get “the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether” (PMN 371). We examined three interrelated varieties of representationalism in section 1.3, and showed that for Rorty the rejection of representationalism in *semantics* carries much of the anti-representationalist ammunition. Brandom has further tightened the conceptual link between Pragmatism and anti-representationalist semantics insofar as he reserves “the label ‘pragmatism’ for views claiming that semantic theory must answer in various ways to pragmatic theory” (Pihlström 2007, 267). In other words, *semantics* (the meaning of words and sentences) does not work in isolation from *pragmatics*, namely “theories about what one needs to *do* in order to count as applying concepts” (Brandom 2013, 96). This marks a shift from a metaphor of “copying” to a metaphor of “coping”, which dissolves the mind-world and the subject-object dualisms that sustain the representationalist paradigm. This is because, as Rorty explains:

The antirepresentationalist is quite willing to grant that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed, he or she insists on this point – the point that our minds or our language could not...be ‘out of touch with the reality’ any more than our bodies could. What he or she denies is that it is explanatorily useful to pick and choose among the contents of our minds or our language and say that this or that item ‘corresponds to’ or ‘represents’ the environment in a way that some other item does not. (ORT 5)

In other words, the anti-representationalist stresses that these word-world relations are explanatorily useless; given the enmeshment of “word” and “world”, such relations are equivalent to the empty explanation that “opium puts people to sleep because of its dormitive power” (ORT 6). Such representationalist explanations are rejected by Rorty partly on the grounds that they are opposed to the “fundamental pragmatist principle that any difference has to make a difference to practice” (PAA 61). Let us recall Rorty’s insistence that Quine, Sellars,

and Davidson are Pragmatist insofar as they are united by a common behaviourist methodology, i.e., a general commitment to human practice as the starting point of inquiry. Indeed, Brandom (2011, 56) argues that Pragmatism can be understood as the “movement centered on the primacy of the practical”. Our aim will be to explicate what this primacy amounts to in the context of philosophical inquiry and how this primacy is mutually implicated with semantic anti-representationalism. In so doing, we will gain an appreciation for the distinctive Pragmatist explanatory starting point which “inclines her towards a heightened awareness of metaphilosophical – or, as we’d prefer, *methodological* – issues” (Gascoigne and Bacon 2020, 6).

The behaviourist methodology common to Quine, Sellars, and Davidson has been re-articulated in an explicitly Pragmatist direction by Brandom (1994, 592) in terms of what he calls “methodological pragmatism”. This is the position that “the ‘point’ of our talk about the content or meaning of a linguistic expression lies in explaining (some features of the) use of that expression” (Pihlström 2007, 268). This formulation of Pragmatism as a methodological stance can be read as a further development of the behaviourism that Rorty highlighted in PMN, since in prioritising how we *use* words and sentences over the *content* of those words and sentences, we are again gesturing towards the conceptual priority of third-person observation of human behaviour. In this sense, Pragmatist theories of language, mind, meaning, and so on are all offered “from a public standpoint, with differences in belief which make no difference to behavior discarded” (Bacon 2012, 96). This difference of prioritisation highlights the fact that whether or not one is a representationalist is largely a matter of explanatory starting point – whether semantics or pragmatics. The semantic representationalist takes a different explanatory starting point from the Pragmatist in the following way:

representational notions, principally truth and reference, are taken to be *the most basic concepts* in which explanations of linguistic affairs will be given. The first part of the representationalist strategy is therefore *to provide a semantics*. The semantics has two components: one in which the basic concepts of truth and reference are explicated and another in which the remaining semantic concepts (such as meaning or conceptual content, implication, and incompatibility) are accounted for in terms of the basic concepts. The second part of the strategy is to *provide a pragmatics* in which the varied uses of various linguistic units (in the making of assertions, the asking of questions, the giving of commands, and so on) are accounted for against the background already provided in the semantics. (Stout 2004, 32)

Thus, unlike representationalists, Pragmatists give explanatory priority to the *use* of linguistic units, rather than semantic notions, and this notion of use would constrain the semantic theory

that is being developed for these units. In other words, a theory about what we *do* when we use words and concepts provides the “explanatory target” of a theory about what meaning and conceptual content *are* – and not vice versa (Brandom 2002, 42). That is, how well a semantic theory can account for our linguistic practices provides an operative constraint on which particular semantic theory is to be deemed acceptable. This emphasis on the distinct roles that words play in the quotidian processes of language is the starting point of Pragmatist accounts of language. In short, the anti-representationalist’s explanatory strategy is firmly rooted in our social practices, which is why the notions of belief, justification, understanding, and meaning cannot be neatly disentangled from each other – pragmatically speaking, knowing *what* a word means is equivalent to knowing *how* to use it correctly. Thus, Neo-Pragmatism can be understood as a methodological explanatory strategy, rather than primarily (or even exhaustively) a theory of truth.

This Pragmatist explanatory strategy has been called “top-down” insofar as it begins by studying how concepts are employed in “judgments and human action in general” (Pihlström 2007, 269). Thus, any talk of semantic content involves considerations both of knowledge (knowing-that) and of understanding (knowing-how) (Brandom 2013, 95), since using concepts in concrete circumstances and understanding what these concepts mean are mutually interrelated processes. Brandom calls this the “entanglement thesis”, according to which “meaning and understanding are coordinate concepts, in the sense that neither can be properly understood or explicated except as part of a story that includes the other” (2013, 95). Hence, the top-down perspective suggests the explanatory interrelatedness of language, thought, meaning, and practice, and this interrelatedness is called “holism”. For Pragmatists who are holists, language, justification, and knowledge are all social practices, and these social practices cannot be explained in a piecemeal manner – that is, in isolation from the variety of skills and capabilities that go into generating and sustaining any social practice. For example, Davidson’s thought experiment of a “radical interpreter” who sets out *de novo* to construct a theory of meaning is chosen by him precisely because it highlights the holistic nature of the behaviourist stance (Davidson 1984). Here, the radical interpreter is a field linguist who attempts to interpret the linguistic behaviour of natives never encountered before. We are invited to imagine “a situation where we are attempting to translate into our own language one that is completely new to us and unrelated to anything we have ever heard of, spoken by a group of people about whom we know nothing...The interpreter in this situation has nothing to go on but what she sees the native speakers do and the sounds she hears them utter” (Ramberg 1989, 65). In trying to understand what the “alien” natives are saying, that is, what their sentences and words mean,

Davidson's holistic point is that for this conceptual transaction of "interpretation" to be possible, the radical interpreter must draw on many abilities, attitudes, and commitments that allow for the successful translation of the foreign language into the familiar. In other words, "[w]hat is needed to understand the utterances of a speaker and figure out what is on her mind must be available to observation" (Ramberg 2011, 130). The most important of these background presuppositions is the "principle of charity", whereby the radical interpreter, in order to make sense of the behaviour of those she is observing, "necessarily attributes beliefs to them about the world to which they are observed responding" (Bacon 2012, 86). But in order to do this, the interpreter must charitably read the speaker's actions, motivations, and beliefs as *rational*. Thus, for Davidson, this principle is a necessary feature of interpretation and meaning because it "directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker" (Davidson 1990, 129). For understanding to happen, the interpreter must attribute to their interlocutor mostly true beliefs that accord with the coherent web of the interpreter's own beliefs; however, "if the interpreter cannot recognise a basic rationality in the speaker, there is no connection to be made, neither between utterances and action, nor between utterances and the world, and the interpreter will literally have no clue as to what the speaker might be saying" (Ramberg 2011, 131). This Davidsonian strategy demonstrates how holistic conclusions are reached about the interrelation of conceptual thought and sociolinguistic practice through a Pragmatist top-down approach.³³

These top-down Pragmatist methodological strategies can be contrasted with a "bottom-up" approach, which attempts to analyse truth, meaning, and interpretation independently of each other. For instance, a bottom-up approach to semantics will not highlight the social backdrops against which linguistic communication emerges, and instead prioritise semantic relations, such as reference, to build up a theory of meaning. Representationalists take these word-world relations to be independent from sociolinguistic practice, and they regard conceptual content as adequately explained by these relations. In particular, they

attempt to account for the semantic content of linguistic expressions and mental states by invoking various forms of word-object relations...and use these relations as the building-blocks for an account of the truth conditions and inferential relations of the sentences in which these words are involved. Representationalists thus tend to take a building-block approach to semantic explanation;

³³ A similar behaviourist strategy shapes Brandom's semantic theory known as "inferentialism"—his aim is to "make explicit" those features that are "implicit in the activities performed within our discursive practices" (Stout 2004, 35). Activities where we "observe or perceive what is going on in our environs, make inferences from one bit of acquired information to another, make inferences from beliefs to practical conclusions and then act intentionally, etc." (2004, 35).

beginning with basic blocks that are independent of any others (atomism), they proceed to show how such blocks can be combined to account for more complex judgements (bottom-up). (Wanderer 2008, 31-32)

But for the Pragmatist holist, isolating single words in this manner and asking how they gain their meaning independently of concepts relating to social practice is a mistaken question. This is because the development of certain sociolinguistic skills must be in place before a particular concept is contentful. This is why James O'Shea (2020, 117) emphasises that a central theme running through Pragmatism is an "anti-atomist...outlook on the nature of conceptual content and meaning". To be an atomist about conceptual content is to maintain that it is possible to have a single concept without having any others because concepts are not identified by their interrelation to other concepts (Weiskopf 2009, 132). In contrast, a holist opposes this conceptual atomism and maintains that "any acquisition of a single concept involves an acquisition of multiple concepts" (Kuczynski 2007, 11). That is, the content of a concept presupposes that of a whole slew of other concepts because a concept's identity is constituted by its crisscrossing relations to various other concepts – the meaning of one word is interdependent on the meanings of other words in a particular language. As Reider (2016, 8) notes, concepts are "interrelated and cannot be employed in isolation from one another, because their employment requires a shared 'logical space'". Thus, conceptual content is determined *not* by a mirroring relation with an external (that is, practice-transcendent) object, but rather by the interdependent relational connections between different concepts (i.e., the logical space), and this relationality is explained by the semantic anti-representationalist in terms of the different roles that concepts play in concrete social settings (O'Shea 2020, 117).

Reflecting these themes, Davidson argues against "building-block" theories of meaning, which begin "by specifying which bits of language tie up with which bits of reality" (ORT 10). Here, the image of "tie up" suggests that the semantic notions of reference and truth, understood representationally, are doing the explanatory work, but such an approach, for a holist, is "to go at semantics from the wrong end" (Ramberg 1989, 34).³⁴ This is because

³⁴ Although Davidson's account is a "truth-based theory of semantics" (Ramberg 1989, 40) in which the concept of truth plays a pivotal role, many have argued that Davidson's and Brandom's approaches are not at odds. Rorty explains: "I see these two men's work as complementary, and unlikely to conflict, although very different in emphasis and in terminology" (OPP 203). Regarding their *prima facie* disagreement over the role of truth in a semantic theory, Rorty says: "I am not sure that these differences between Brandom and Davidson make any difference...both agree on the indefinability of the word 'true'" (OPP 209). See Stout (2004, 44), Williams (1999), and Horwich (1998, 72) for further reasons why the differences between Davidson and Brandom are largely terminological and not substantive. Such exegetical discussions within Neo-Pragmatist philosophy of language lie outside the scope of this dissertation.

“sentences are not...*independently* meaningful in a sense richer than that of being the carriers of truth and falsehood. Sentences are meaningful only embedded in a larger structure, a language” (1989, 34). Therefore, as Bjørn Ramberg (1989, 34-35) explains, individual words have no meaning in a way that “transcends the fact that they have a systematic effect on the meanings of the sentences in which they occur” (Davidson 1984, 18), and these sentences are employed in diverse types of social transactions. Instead, meaning is imputed to “each item in the structure [of a sentence] only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which [the item] features” (1984, 22). So, for a holist, the “meaning of sentences and words are explained in terms of the role they play in the total structure [of language]” (Ramberg 1989, 35). To exemplify this point, to assume that humans had the concept of red even before the first hominid pointed to a rose and announced “red” is to get the explanatory narrative backwards. Only through the utterance “red” playing a distinct role in a social space of reasons and becoming conceptually interconnected with a slew of other concepts could “red” come to *mean* red for us. Thus, to have the concept of a mind-independent object such as a red rose is to learn to employ certain “lawful, modal, or implicitly rule-constituted generalizations” (O’Shea 2020, 117). In other words, a dynamic web of justificatory rules and relations constitutes the rule-governed application of this rose in “actual and possible experience: how a thing of this type could, would, or must behave, conceived in terms of further possible experiences” (2020, 117).

The implications of this strategy of methodological pragmatism which operates in a top-down manner can be summed up as follows: “linguistic ability, rationality, and cognitive ability are three ways of describing a single skill” (OPP 208) and “you cannot have language without rationality” (TP 23). Brandom (2002, 47) highlights this tight linkage between language and thought with his notion of linguistic pragmatism, according to which “engaging in specifically linguistic practices is an essential necessary condition for having thoughts and beliefs in a full-blooded sense”. The idea is that there is no way to talk about (rational) *thought* without also talking about *language* (Reider 2016, 9). This mutual co-constitution suggests that “what cannot be said cannot be thought” (Rorty 1993, 186) insofar as we cannot somehow get behind language and access a putatively unvarnished world from a non-linguistic horizon. Sellars’s notion of psychological nominalism too makes this point, namely “*all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities – indeed all awareness even of particulars – is a linguistic affair” (1963, 160). Precisely because there is no way “to check our language against nonlinguistic awareness” (TP 127), rational discourse is to be understood as a thoroughly dialogical process – a medium as well as a product of social

communication. This is why for holists, semantics is explanatorily derivative from, and not prior to, our sociolinguistic and cognitive capabilities.

What is important for our purposes is the recognition that a Pragmatist, in Rorty's sense of the term, is a thinker who adopts a particular methodological strategy which "starts with people doing things and asks what particular things they have to do in order to be said to use languages and to have minds" (OPP 204). As we observed, the Pragmatist anti-representationalist answer to this question is couched in descriptions of human behaviour relating to what practises humans engage in and how they successfully do so. These descriptions eschew any explanatory appeal to a mind-world or scheme-content duality since such dualities presuppose "an ability to make a distinction that is...unwarranted [in practice]" (Murphy 1990, 97). To understand the meaning of a sentence *is* to be able to know how to use it, that is, to know under what conditions it is true. But to explain how we successfully do this, it is explanatorily useless to appeal to something external to our minds that is waiting to be organised. When it comes to knowledge and meaning, the world in the form of sentence-shaped "facts" and semantic notions such as reference are explanatorily impotent. In a thoroughly anti-representationalist direction, all these notions can be relocated and redescribed within the domain of social practice.

3.1.2 From Problem Solving to Redescribing

The strategic prioritisation of pragmatics over semantics by the Pragmatist shows that the "holism involved in ascribing truth, like that involved in ascribing belief, defeats attempts to cut nonlanguage up into fact-sized chunks which stand in causal relations to sentences" (OPP 208). Instead, the representationalist semantic impulse to explain how language hooks up to the world is replaced by Neo-Pragmatist narratives of how certain (features of our) social practices have come into being. Thus, Rorty emphasises that many of the traditional problematics in the philosophy of language rely on concepts that turned out, upon careful redescription, to lack a fixed structure. For example, Davidson's account of meaning suggests that there is no such thing as "meanings", conceived of as stable individuated units waiting out there to be dis-covered by us. Instead, a Pragmatist semantic theory indicates that meaning emerges through communicative negotiations in time between interlocutors.³⁵ In emphasising the different roles that a word plays in the social matrices of language in determining meaning,

³⁵ Davidson's theory provides an "elucidation of meaning without 'meanings', entities which have so far proved to be obfuscatory rather than clarifying, and a sharpening of the foci of the empirical study of language" (Ramberg 1989, 52).

this suggests that a concept does not have *one* stable meaning waiting to be dis-covered; rather, meaning depends on use and so is subject to change. Rorty explains: “concepts are like persons – never quite the same twice, always developing, always maturing. You can change a concept by changing usage, but you cannot get a concept right, once and for all” (PCP 123). It also suggests that we should replace “beliefs viewed as representations with beliefs viewed as states attributed to persons in order to explain their behavior” (TP 128). “Beliefs”, like “meanings”, can be redescribed as the conceptual outcome of evolved human practices – beliefs are concepts that have particular useful *functions* in our social practices, but which do not representationally stand for some nonlinguistic entity out there in the world (or, specifically, in our minds). Likewise, the thought experiment involving the radical interpreter shows that the process of interpretation is open-ended and language does not have a stable structure to be analysed – “Communicative success, on this view, is a matter of transient convergence” (Ramberg 2011, 139). The point is that

Truth-theories, in so far as they illuminate what goes on in linguistic communication, do not apply to given linguistic structures – languages – with set meanings that we as users know and as learners and interpreters must figure out. Rather, the idealized radical interpreter targets, with her truth-theory, not a language that the speaker has come to possess, but the language that a speaker is producing at the moment – an idiolect. Furthermore, this target, this idiolect, is not a fixed object but something undergoing constant change. (Ramberg 2015, 221)

This dynamic unfolding in linguistic milieus cannot be analysed *a priori* and formulated as a general structure since it has no such essence – “a natural language is never a complete, clearly delineated entity” (Ramberg 1989, 61). Ramberg (2015, 223) sums up this crucial *anti-representationalist* idea about language, inquiry, and rationality as follows:

A representationalist about meaning will take it that philosophical understanding of communication is achieved by way of an adequate theoretical model of a certain kind of knowledge that a subject is supposed to possess and apply. On such a model languages may indeed also be structures of confinement; what is interpretable will depend on the semantic knowledge possessed or available to the speaker – the limits and presuppositions of such knowledge become salient philosophical themes. By contrast, as Rorty clearly sees, for...Davidson...language is a capacity for openness...And why is this? It is not because we have philosophical assurance that our schemes or practices share core beliefs, or conceptual structures, or whatever. Rather it is because to engage in linguistic interpretation... is to make new ground, new intelligibility, together.

In other words, what the thought experiment involving the radical interpreter shows is that to understand what someone means is simply to know the truth-conditions of their sentences, but this ability to apprehend meaning is not the same as having knowledge of something “stable, shared, and learned” (Ramberg 2011, 139), because the “linguistic resources of communicating agents are by their nature plastic, transformable, and adaptable in response to situations of communication they are deployed in” (2011, 140).

The implications of such anti-representationalist redescrptions are far reaching, not least because they call into question the very representationalist urge to analyse and uncover entities that allegedly lie beyond our practices. The hypostatization of such representationalist notions generates many of the “perennial” problems of philosophy that Pragmatists wish to set aside. Rather than engaging in problem-solving, a Pragmatist would instead engage in problem-*dissolving* (Ramberg 2013a, 396-397). Rorty explains why this is the case as follows:

The ambition of the atomists is to explain, as they often put it, how the mind works and how language works. The holists doubt that this is a fruitful project, because they think it a mistake to treat mind and language as entities that have either elementary parts, or a structure, or inner workings. They do not believe that there are things called “beliefs” or “meanings” into which minds and languages can be broken up. Atomists, holists believe, fail to realize that rationality – the thing that makes us special – is a social phenomenon, not one that a human organism can exhibit all by itself. (PCP 176)

The point is that re-articulating the skills that make humans distinctive, namely language and rationality, both as concomitants and as products of social practices, has significant metaphilosophical implications for what sorts of questions would preoccupy us in philosophical inquiry. To begin with, the method of conceptual analysis, which is considered to be an integral part of analytic philosophy (PCP 122), is called into question by the Neo-Pragmatist – to think about language, reason, and thought holistically is to move away from problem-solving with stable concepts and towards sketching redescrptions in the field of social history. Although anti-representationalism itself can be read as a technical position in the philosophy of language, Rorty is mostly interested in its conceptual ramifications. Part of the motivation for seeking to uproot the metaphor of the mind as a mirror (of a putatively stable world) is to *redescribe* concepts such as language, rationality, and truth in terms of social process. As Rorty explains, if one embraces holism, one must also “give up the notion that concepts such as ‘knowledge’ or ‘morality’ or ‘mind’ or ‘justice’ have permanent, structural, features that philosophers can discern, and that the vulgar may not have noticed” (PCP 123). A consequence of this holism is that “philosophy makes progress not by solving problems but by replacing old problems with

new problems – problems created by one use of words with problems created by another use of words” (PCP 127). Thus, the metalinguistic shift towards semantic anti-representationalism is concurrent with the metaphilosophical strategy of telling alternative stories about how our present-day social practices, correlated with specific concepts, came into circulation (PCP 176). In contrast, the philosophical attempt to *correctly analyse* certain concepts and *successfully resolve* certain theoretical questions is animated by a metaphilosophical vision that is tied with the representationalist metalinguistic commitment to the existence of stable entities that can be *analysed* and problems that can be *resolved*. But for Rorty, this pattern of inquiry constitutes a disciplinary self-image of philosophy that is not worth defending or sustaining.

Thus, one metaphilosophical strategy that the Rortyan Pragmatist implements is to sketch “persuasive” genealogical narratives of how a term has come to be used instead of analysing that term’s conceptual lineaments. Because conceptual content is conditioned as well as conveyed by use, philosophers can analyse how we *use* terms, but not their essential conceptual contours.³⁶ For example, David Macarthur and Huw Price (2007, 94) describe a Pragmatist about causation as someone who “asks not about the role of causation itself in human life, but about the role and genealogy of the notion, term, or concept ‘causation’”. Indeed, they suggest that such a “linguistic” approach to philosophy is the very *modus operandi* of the Pragmatist:

Pragmatism thus begins with linguistic explananda rather than material explananda; with phenomena concerning the use of certain terms and concepts, rather than with things or properties of a non-linguistic nature. It begins with linguistic behaviour, and asks broadly anthropological questions: How are we to understand the roles and functions of the behaviour in question, in the lives of the creatures concerned? What is its practical significance? Whence its genealogy? (2007, 95)

By developing this strategy that explores the operation of language in social contexts, certain philosophical problems can be avoided. In so doing, the redescribed notions are seen not as static objects to be investigated under a conceptual microscope, but rather as concepts for which a genealogical account or story can be offered that explains why and how these concepts would have emerged given their usefulness in interpersonal milieus. This is reflective of the general metaphilosophical strategy of the Pragmatist to “deflate” what are regarded as “sterile debates” (Guignon and Hiley 2003, 33) through persuasive redescription.

³⁶ “[A] philosopher’s claim to have discovered the contours of a concept will always be just a persuasive redefinition of a word” (PAP 37).

To further exemplify this Pragmatist strategy of *dissolving* problems through genealogical redescription, we can look at Rorty's interpretation of Daniel Dennett's discussion, in *Consciousness Explained*, of "qualia", that is, putative instances of subjective, conscious experience. Dennett does not directly explain the nature of qualia. Instead, in Dennett's work Rorty recognises a genealogical story that explains why humans "adopted a certain set of metaphors for talking about people" and how the "use of these metaphors produced talk of 'phenomenological data'" (Rorty 1993, 184). Rorty reads Dennett as a Pragmatist, that is, as suggesting that we can offer a sociohistorical redescription of the concept of qualia and thus be "relieved of the obligation to explain qualia" (1993, 184).

Now, from the perspective of non-Pragmatists, such a metaphilosophical strategy could very well seem "ludicrous" (1993, 185). The (non-)response of sidestepping philosophical problems in this manner is often seen as unsatisfactory from the perspective of philosophers who want a meticulously worked-out solution. In the context of Dennett's account of qualia, Rorty suggests that the disagreement between Dennett and his critics, such as Thomas Nagel and John Searle, is not so much a philosophical dispute as a *metaphilosophical* impasse. Consider Nagel's complaint, "A theory of consciousness that doesn't include mental data is like a book about Picasso that doesn't mention his paintings" (quoted in Rorty 1993, 185). According to Rorty (1993, 185), this lament makes explicit that what Nagel, Searle, Dennett, Rorty and others are demanding in their distinct philosophical inquiries into consciousness is precisely *what is at stake* – making this disagreement a metaphilosophical dispute. Crucially, Rorty shows us that there is no non-question-begging way for one side to critique the other by starting from premises that are shared by both – for, in fact, there are no such premises. For instance, Searle and Nagel see an explanatory "gap between the totality of the relations of consciousness to the rest of the universe and what consciousness is *intrinsically*" (1993, 185), while no such gap is entertained by Rorty. This dispute suggests that whether or not there is such a gap is what is at stake – does explaining the totality of relations of an object explain that object without remainder *or* is there some irreducible aspect of the object, namely what that object is apart from all those relational features, that is yet left unexplained? In other words, there is a disagreement over *what would count* as an explanation of consciousness.

For Dennett, talk of qualia in terms of intrinsic properties is simply another confused attempt to somehow get in between language and object through the positing of substantially existent qualitative "seemings" or referents for "phenomenological reports" (Ramberg 1999, 77-78). Instead, Dennett's insistence that qualia can be explained away is a metaphilosophical corrective to the philosophical urge to impose "a unique *ontological* demand on naturalistic

explanation of the phenomena of consciousness” (Ramberg 1999, 79). Here, Dennett echoes the Pragmatist metaphilosophical point that any attempt “to derive aprioristically” (Ramberg 1999, 79) scientific or metaphysical truths from ordinary talk is simply a mistaken hypostatization of some feature of our everyday linguistic practices (in this case, talk of “qualia”) that we happen to find deeply intuitive. Thus, the real problem with “qualia” is that this concept is “entirely a philosophical artifact” (1999, 79). Rather than solving problems about “qualia” through conceptual analysis, Dennett’s Pragmatist point, resonating with the Davidsonian claims about belief, language, and meaning, discussed above, is that we have created what appears to be a philosophical problem because we have incorrectly assumed that “qualia” representationally picks out a stable phenomenon with structural features to be analysed. As we will see in the next section, truth is yet another philosophical concept similarly redescribed by Neo-Pragmatists as a social phenomenon that lacks an intrinsic structure to be analysed. This is why Rorty suggests that we move away from discussions about semantics and towards discussions about vocabularies – a move that opens up a space for an understanding of philosophy as an intellectual activity that operates through a dynamic interaction between rationality and imagination.

3.1.3 From Semantics to Vocabularies and Metaphors

For Rorty, one of the central metaphilosophical implications of the Pragmatist rejection of representationalism is the recognition that “truth is not a goal of inquiry” because “the absoluteness of truth makes it unserviceable as such a goal” (TP 3). That is, it is not meaningful to speak of truth both as an iterative *process* of investigation and as an immovable *destination* out there. Rorty endorses the key theme articulated by Brandom and Davidson that truth is a concept without which our social practices of communication and rationality would not be possible. Thus, Rorty moves away from theories of truth because truth is central to the possibility of thought and language, its “objectivity” has to be retained, but it cannot be made a topic for conceptual analysis. The reason for this commitment to the un-analysability of truth is because “the understanding of [truth] is always already implicit in [making claims]” (Brandom 1994, 112). This conceptual priority means that philosophers have wrongly assumed that by discovering, through a conceptual inspection, which of our statements are true and which of them are false we could derive some sort of insight into the *nature* of truth. This Platonist-Cartesian desire to capture or reflect transcendental and unconditional truths is, in the view of Davidson (2000, 65), an example of how “[p]hilosophy was promising far more than it, or any other discipline, could deliver”. The take-home message from Neo-Pragmatists is that

while there is a lot we can say about our sociolinguistic practices of using the adjective “true”,³⁷ we cannot say anything meaningful about the nature of truth because like “qualia”, truth too lacks an essence.

To highlight these themes, Davidson offers “triangulation” as a metaphor with which to describe the holistic and dialogical milieus of rationality within which notions like objectivity, meaning, and truth can be made intelligible. Triangulation is a dynamic process, in the form of a conceptual triangle, between two speakers and their shared external world. It is only by actively *communicating* with others (and not just coordinating our actions through dispositional impulses) that we recognise the possibility of error, that is, the possibility of misapplying a concept in the social settings of linguistic practice. Davidson (2004, 8) argues that to speak of a concept at all is to speak of “cases where it makes clear sense to speak of a mistake”. This claim highlights the difference between a disposition, where one *responds* to stimuli, and language use, where one *employs* a concept – “there is no sense in saying a disposition is in error – one cannot fail to ‘follow’ a disposition” (Davidson 2000, 71). Hence, for example, “we can only say the child *thinks* something is red, or a ball, if it appreciates the distinction for itself: the child thinks something is red or a ball only if it is in some sense aware that a mistake is possible. It is classifying things, and it may have put something in the wrong slot” (2000, 71). This understanding is very similar to Brandom’s, which Jeffrey Stout (2004, 36) describes as follows: “The reason a pre-linguistic infant cannot perceive that a pie just fell off the table (in the epistemically relevant sense), even though she just watched while a pie fell off the table, is that she has not yet acquired the inferential and linguistic capacities associated with the concept of a pie”. In other words, the infant does not yet participate successfully in the norm-governed “game of giving and asking for reasons” (Brandom 1994, xviii) because she does not yet recognise the possibility of error in the inferential space. Davidson emphasises that this idea of error or misapplication is simply the inverse of the idea of truth. Only with recognition of and adherence to normative constraints is language possible, since linguistic skill is more than a disposition – it is “a norm-governed social practice” where what one says could be deemed right or wrong by fellow norm-obeyers (Wanderer 2008, 13). To understand the importance of truth in this way is to recognise the impossibility of saying anything general

³⁷ For Brandom, to apply the word “true” to a statement is simply to make the “trivial point that an endorsement of someone’s claim to know something is automatically an endorsement of what she says she knows” (OPP 210). Likewise, for Davidson, our understanding of truth is inseparable from our understanding of interpretation; therefore, a theory of truth is just a theory of meaning: “To marry truth and meaning to nothing and nobody but each other. The resulting marriage will be so intimate a relationship that a theory of truth will *be* a theory of meaning, and conversely” (ORT 154).

about truth. As Rorty explains, “Granted that ‘true’ is an absolute term, its conditions of application will always be relative” (TP 2) that is, relative to the triangulation process of trying to interpret the behaviour of other humans and successfully communicating with them.

Likewise, according to anti-representationalist redescription, “objectivity” is no longer to be viewed in terms of the way the world is beyond our context-modulated descriptions of it. This is because the notion of objectivity is explained through such processes of interpersonal communication constituted and mediated by triangulation. We must already have an understanding of truth, that is, an understanding that our own thoughts can be correct or incorrect, in order to participate in triangulation with our interlocutors. Thus, “objectivity is a structural aspect of the social-perspectival form of conceptual contents. The permanent distinction between how things are and how they are taken to be by some interlocutor is built into the social-inferential articulation of concepts” (Brandom 1994, 597). Therefore, the very delineations between subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity are just dynamic features of our social practices. As Rorty explains, Brandom “agrees with Davidson that interpretation comes first and objectivity later – that the distinction between intersubjective agreement and objective truth is itself only one of the devices we use to improve our social practices” (TP 130). This means that, as finite creatures, we are always *in media res*, namely in the hermeneutic matrices of triangulation, or the diverse language games of giving and asking for reasons. We can never stand outside these social practices and check them sideways against some pristine reality. More precisely: at no point can we compare *beliefs* with *non-beliefs*, “thereby testing for accuracy of representation” (TP 129).

For Rorty, these anti-representationalist themes suggest that we should shift our philosophical attention to the fact that languages are our “human creations” (CIS 5) and worry less about “the association between [language] and any extra-linguistic consideration” (Malachowski 2002, 101). In this way, Rorty shifts our metalinguistic gaze away from semantics and towards vocabularies, that is, towards alternative styles of language games. By diverting our metalinguistic attention away from semantic concerns relating to single sentences and directing it onto constellations of vocabularies and the metaphors that drive them, we can eschew all representationalist intuitions. Rorty’s notion of vocabularies “within which various distinctive sorts of discursive, and therefore normative assessment are in order” is to be contrasted with “things like photons and butterflies, which interact with each other only causally” (Brandom 2020, 1). This distinction between normative judgements and causal descriptions is the only useful distinction to hold on to once we reject, from a holistic perspective, the “central presupposition of Platonic philosophy: that true sentences divide into

an upper and a lower division – the sentences which correspond to something and those which are ‘true’ only by courtesy or convention [respectively]” (CP 6). By shifting our focus towards vocabularies as whole social matrices, Rorty thinks we can take seriously our recognition of the “ubiquity of language” (CP xx) and resist the urge of grounding our linguistic practices in some extralinguistic fact. Rorty explains this point as follows: “[philosophy] cannot answer questions about the relation of the thought of our time – the descriptions it is using, the vocabularies it employs – to something which is not just some alternative vocabulary” (CP xl). Thus, the upshot of the motif of a plurality of vocabularies is that it is implausible to think of one system of vocabulary as more accurately mirroring the world than another – this motif helps us to jettison representationalist word-world assumptions. In Rorty’s words, “it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these [vocabularies] better than another, of the world as deciding between them” (CIS 5) because

[w]hen the notion of ‘description of the world’ is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world [itself] decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense. It becomes hard to think that that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. (CIS 5)

This is because by focusing exclusively on individual sentences, such as “This is red” or “This is blue”, it is easy to be persuaded by the mirroring metaphor according to which the nonlinguistic state of redness or blueness is *that* which makes one of these sentences true and the other false. In other words, “it is easy to run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some nonlinguistic state of the world is itself an example of truth, or that some such state ‘makes a belief true’ by ‘corresponding to it’” (CIS 5). But by understanding language and rationality in the processive terms of the constellations of vocabularies we are generating through communication in patterns of triangulation, it becomes difficult to understand how the world could exclusively *make* the vocabulary of, for example, Freud’s psychology true. This is why Rorty says that the Pragmatist

agrees that there is such a thing as brute physical resistance—the pressure of light waves on Galileo’s eyeball...But [the Pragmatist] sees no way of transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to *facts*, to the truth of sentences. The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many *facts* are brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal

transaction...Facts are hybrid entities; that is, the causes of the assertibility of sentences include both physical stimuli and our antecedent choice of response to such stimuli. To say that we must have respect for facts is just to say that we must, if we are to play a certain language game, play by the rules. To say that we must have respect for unmediated causal forces is pointless. It is like saying that the blank must have respect for the impressed die. The blank has no choice, nor do we. (ORT 81)

Rorty's idea is that it is unhelpful to think of the world as determining, through sheer causal pressure, the specific vocabularies we use. Although it goes without saying that we are causally impacted by the world, it would be misleading to isolate "the world" as the singular cause of our multiple descriptions of it. To exemplify this point, it is misleading to say that the light waves that hit Galileo's eyeballs directly *caused* him to posit that Jupiter had moons. Galileo could have described his experience of celestial bodies in a multitude of different ways, not least because if he were located in a different intellectual and sociohistorical matrix, he may not have had the concept of a moon or a telescope at all. Habermas makes this Rortyan point as follows: the world "provides indirect answers as all its answers refer to the grammar of *our* questions" (Habermas 2013, 11).

This is why Rorty highlights the role of the imagination in philosophical inquiry, which operates partly by introducing a new range of belief-candidates. While it is often believed that philosophical progress is driven by the rigorous demands of reason-based argumentation and logical analysis in an attempt to mirror reality, Rorty tells us that philosophical topics, perspectives, and problems change throughout intellectual history as a result of the subterranean momentum of potent metaphors and new vocabularies.³⁸ As Rorty explains through a few historical examples: "Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others" (CIS 6). Such long-range intellectual shifts can only be ascertained retrospectively, and they are not consciously engineered through the rational argumentation of an individual thinker. What is responsible for the acquisition or the loss of such habits of using certain words over others – pertaining to, say, the vocabulary of

³⁸ Roy Tzohar reads Madhyamaka as a form of "anti-realist radical conventionalism" (2018, 59). It would be an interesting project to explore to what extent our reading of Madhyamaka as Pragmatist anti-representationalism rather than anti-realism resonates with the pan-metaphorical theory of meaning of the Yogācāra as articulated by Tzohar.

Galilean physics rather than the vocabulary of Aristotelian cosmology – is the persuasive power of certain pivotal metaphors that structure them.

The central characteristic of metaphors that makes them useful linguistic devices is that they can be understood in semantic anti-representationalist terms. Specifically, for Rorty, they lie “outside the pale of semantics” (ORT 163)³⁹, and are novel utterances that are intended to cause us to feel or think in a certain way. The purpose of a metaphor is not to re-present anything, but to induce a transformative psychological effect in a receiver or a group of individuals. For the Pragmatist, such evocative metaphors are the media as well as the product of the imagination, and resist straightforward translation into propositions – they are “unparaphrasable” (ORT 163). This subliminally persuasive power of imaginative metaphors propels philosophical theories in ways which are often unbeknownst to the philosophers themselves. Indeed, Rorty’s point is that:

Thinkers get hooked on particular philosophical methods or positions because, whether they are aware of it or not, they are deeply attracted by the embedding or associated images and metaphors...The salient insight here is that philosophers are very unlikely to commit themselves to a particular philosophical position or pursuit solely in virtue of what we might call ‘its formal intellectual qualities’. What keeps philosophers in the game, so to speak, and what draws them into it in the first place, is something more rich-blooded than bare assent to certain narrowly construed, intellectual claims. (Malachowski 2002, 46)

Our web of beliefs might become rewoven, for instance, due to the availability of new perceptual evidence or the introduction of a true premise or valid inference we had hitherto not considered. But these evidential or rational pathways of rewiring our beliefs do not alter our logical space, namely the structure of inferential relations that connects our beliefs. This space “remains fixed” (ORT 94), so that, as Bacon (2007, 29) indicates, “the range of truth-candidates [remains] the same”. Such piecemeal revisions of beliefs are not quite examples of the type of far-reaching shifts in intellectual inquiry that new vocabularies can generate. Such vocabularies would provide us with topics that we had hitherto not considered worthy of engagement and reflection, and therefore they can effect a “radical form of revision” by introducing “new candidates for belief” (2007, 30). These vocabularies are not expressible in the codified form of inferential chains which would neatly fit into an already established logical space.

³⁹ It lies outside the scope of this dissertation to delve into Davidson’s theory of sts (1984), which Rorty accepts. Suffice to say, for Davidson “metaphorical statements have no semantic value as metaphorical. Their meaning is the same meaning they have when taken literally, but such statements also have the pragmatic function of suggesting we think of matters in new ways” (Farrell 1995, 170).

More specifically, it is new vocabularies in the form of metaphors that can direct the goal of reweaving and recalibrating our web of beliefs. Since the content of metaphors cannot be spelled out as propositional formulas, they cannot be fitted into our existent logical space. Consequently, upon encountering a new metaphor, such as “evolution” sometime in the 1860s, we may be moved by its illocutionary force which would motivate us to alter our existent theories and our logical space in order to accommodate it. Rorty’s point is that such metaphors have the “potential to extend the frontiers of knowledge and of logical space” (2007, 30). However, besides these observations, there is not much we can say about metaphors since to say anything more is already to subsume metaphors into our current order of reasons. Thus, Rorty tells us, “[t]o ask ‘how metaphors work’ is like asking how genius works. If we knew that, genius would be superfluous” (ORT 172). In short, metaphors are not directly informative but evocative, and to evoke is not to argue within logical space but to offer an alternative vision of imaginative horizons. Thus, for example, Darwin’s theory of evolution catalysed an update of the logical space of some of his contemporaries insofar as they had to “redescribe human activities in a way that required no sudden discontinuities in evolutionary development” (Rorty 1995a, 199). Whereas before Darwin, Christian theology had stated that humans are qualitatively different from animals because they possess a spiritual soul with a unique faculty to reason, after Darwin, some thinkers began to update their logical space so that their key operative idioms were not “essence” and “discontinuity” but “process” and “continuity”. In these post-Darwinian contexts, an appeal to scripture was not sufficient to demonstrate the validity of a certain inferential move – rather, this inference had to be seen in the light of the new metaphor of evolution and correlated with developing nests of evidence from geologists, botanists, and zoologists.

So, although we may not be able to do more than gesture to the element of surprise that a new metaphor generates, we *can* describe, Rorty argues, the process through which new metaphors achieve their radical and revisionary effects (ORT 124). This is the process of “literalization” (ORT 124) where the newly arrived metaphors “die off into literalness” (ORT 169) once they are accepted by a community of speakers. Therefore, the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical is somewhat blurred, since as soon as a new metaphor begins to carry propositional information and becomes situated within conceptual frames, it ceases to be a metaphor. Hence, according to Anthony Reynolds (2000, 92), Rorty replaces the dichotomy between “metaphorical” and “literal” with “a more fundamental distinction between interpretation and literalization [respectively]: metaphors that initially resist interpretation can become pragmatically useful through a process of literalization”. This process of literalisation

is central to intellectual inquiry precisely because it requires the “mobilization of theory” (2000, 92), where new theories have to be developed in an attempt to accommodate the new metaphors. The operation of this process is why, according to Ramberg (1999, 64), on the Pragmatist conception

[a] successful philosopher...affects our sense of what is so...not simply by generating new metaphors, but, crucially, by implementing them. To implement a metaphorical expression... is to work up a complex context of theoretical and empirical use for the expression in such a way that the metaphor is sent on its way towards literalization.

Hence, this reason-guided process of literalisation, whereby a philosopher introduces new vocabularies in the form of metaphors and *simultaneously* updates older theories or creates newer theories to accommodate these very metaphors, is what renders her work distinct from that of the poet. For the Pragmatist, the “goal of implementation distinguishes the philosopher from the poet; while both may be engaged in metaphor-making, only a poet seeks to preserve the associative penumbra and evocative power of novel metaphor. As for the metaphors of the philosopher, no sooner do they burst into bloom than their creator sets fervently about stripping the living richness from them” (1999, 64). Therefore, both philosophy and poetry are distinctive styles of literature, and the key difference between them is that the philosopher, unlike the poet, actively seeks to “kill off” the newly-arrived metaphors through new theories and updated logical spaces. However, the crucial point about this philosophical process of sublation is *not* that the unfamiliar (i.e., the once-new metaphor) becomes thoroughly familiarised or domesticated into pre-existing frames, but rather that a set of familiar idioms is altered or *de-familiarised* so as to accommodate the unfamiliar. On this account, a metaphor, according to Reynolds (2000, 90), is an “unfamiliar rhetorical construct or invention *into which* what is familiar to us may be interpreted or translated. Rather than interpreting a new metaphor into our pre-existent familiar terms, the pragmatist interprets or translates what is familiar into the unassimilated alterity of metaphor”. Specifically, metaphor “drives a project involving the poetic *expropriation* of the familiar rather than the hermeneutic *appropriation* of the unfamiliar” (2000, 90, emphasis added). This is what is metaphilosophically unique about Rorty’s Pragmatist vision of what philosophy can and should do – rather than discovering or analysing, in a semantic representationalist mode, pre-existent objects, concepts, or facts, philosophy creatively re-interprets and re-describes existing vocabularies and theories in order to engage with new, imaginative metaphors.

With these Neo-Pragmatist themes in place, we will now turn our attention back to Madhyamaka scholarship and suggest some ways in which Rorty's metaphilosophical and metalinguistic observations can help us sidestep the two interpretive oscillations.

3.2 From Transcendental Constraint to Anti-Representationalism: Moving Past the Metaphilosophical Oscillation

One way to summarise the Neo-Pragmatist metaphilosophical points discussed in section 3.1 is as follows. If the goal of inquiry is not to accurately represent the world and the world itself does not come in sentence-shaped facts, then philosophy, as a discipline, should focus less on "the rational determination of general constraints on human thought and agency" and more on "the elaboration of human possibilities" (Ramberg 2013b, 51). This focus on "human possibilities" is articulated, as we noted, through the implementation of redescriptions, new vocabularies, and new metaphors. The emphasis on the cultivation of creativity through the medium of metaphor can be read as Rorty's articulation of the three "pillars" indicated earlier in this chapter. Namely, objectivity, as a product of our social practices, will "evolve over time" (Misak 2007, 2); given the anti-representationalist emphasis on language as a dynamic negotiation, knowledge too is understood as foundationless and open-ended; finally, methodological pragmatism and the behaviourist methodology remind us that philosophy should remain connected "to real-life expertise" (Misak 2007, 4). From Rorty's perspective, these "pillars" highlight the metaphilosophical theme of recognising philosophy's "transformative task" (PAP 29) which creatively offers redescriptions through new vocabularies. Once we recognise that aiming for truth and objectivity are not goals of inquiry, we would not confine our inquiry to problem-solving directed towards these goals. The alternative Rortyan metaphor-shaped methods of philosophising break down "the distinction between rational and irrational persuasion" (Farrell 1995, 169). Thus, the worry over whether Nāgārjuna is primarily arguing in the space of reasons or primarily using rhetorical devices to catalyse a soteriological vision looks like a forced choice if we see philosophy as working in an open-ended, dynamic, indeterminate space between rationality and imagination.

Specifically, we can sidestep the metaphilosophical oscillation by suggesting, with Ramberg, that it is "wrong to conceive of Rortyan redescription as a form of rhetoric which stands *in opposition* to philosophical argumentation" (Ramberg 2001, 30, emphasis added). The quotation highlights the central reason why we can put the "heterodox" versus "orthodox" metaphilosophical disagreement to rest – redescriptions *are* rational forms of argumentation,

but they are in the business not of problem-solving but of problem-*dissolving* (Ramberg 2013a, 397). To this end, we can re-articulate the metaphilosophical oscillation as not about whether rationality and argument are important philosophical tools, but rather about how we should understand rationality and argument in the first place and to what uses they can be put.

The question to be pressed at this stage is this: according to Rorty's metaphilosophical and metalinguistic re-imagining, what is the role of reason, logic, and rationality in philosophical inquiry? As we observed, rationality for a Neo-Pragmatist is simply the ability to engage in linguistic communication – to triangulate or to make correct moves in a dynamic game of giving and asking for reasons. In this sense, rationality is the dynamic “search for the coherence of our beliefs and desires” (PAP 48). Thus, from a Pragmatist perspective, an appeal to rationality as a stable and universal faculty that aims for truth is not only misleading but also intellectually superfluous. Instead, Pragmatists believe that the “reason people try to make their beliefs coherent is not that they love truth but that they cannot help doing so. Our minds can no more stand incoherence than our brains can stand whatever the neuro-chemical substrate of such coherence may be” (PAA 68). Indeed, “to strive to think logically is not to follow a methodological norm; it is just to try to think” (Ramberg 2001, 37). As Rorty's emphasis on vocabularies highlights, when we work within the confines of an established language game, we take for granted the questions it raises and the problems it seems to solve.⁴⁰ In this context, we use argumentation and inferential reasoning to make that space more and more coherent. But, as we observed, to assume that this quest for consistency and systematicity is *all* that philosophy does is to disregard the history of intellectual development which is often driven by the transformative power of evocative metaphors.

Understood in this way, argumentation, logic, and rationality are no more integral to philosophy than they are to any other form of reason-guided inquiry – in all forms of inquiry, for example, medicine, chemistry, and engineering, the aim is to put forth coherent theories to explain empirical phenomena. The difference between philosophy and these other disciplines, however, is that the latter agree not only on what the phenomena are but also on what the purpose and the aim of the inquiry are. In the case of philosophy such consensus does not exist, so that a key metaphilosophical question is: in the service of *what goal* is argumentation to be used? Rorty's contention is that precisely this question is up for grabs – through the implementation of new vocabularies the goals themselves can change. This is why Rorty urges

⁴⁰ “The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary” (CIS 8).

philosophers to discard their self-understanding that the goal of the discipline is to get something right. He states:

The term ‘getting it right’...is appropriate only when everybody interested in the topics draws pretty much the same inferences from the same assertions. That happens when there is consensus about the aim of inquiry in the area, and when a problem can be pinned down in such a way that everybody concerned is clear about what it would take to solve it. Common sense provides such consensus on many of the topics we discuss, and expert cultures provide it for many others. Within such cultures there is agreement, for example, on when a gene has been located, a chemical compound analyzed into its component elements, or a theorem proved. The members of such cultures all use the relevant referring expressions (‘gene,’ ‘element,’ ‘proof’) in pretty much the same way. They are also pretty much agreed about what exists, for shared confidence in the existence of a certain sort of entity is indistinguishable from consensus on the utility of certain referring expressions. (PCP 124)

Thus, it is a mistake to think of philosophy as such an “expert culture” – for, as a whole, it is not “and never has been, an expert culture characterized by such long-term, near-universal consensus. What consensus has existed has been local and transitory” (PCP 125). The overemphasis on the importance of rationality and argumentation in the process of problem-solving suggests that philosophy can somehow become an “expert culture” where certain stable solutions are worked out and these solutions are not subject to redescription. However, a Pragmatist emphasises that rational argumentation is often put to use for *novel* purposes in philosophical contexts. As Rorty explains: “You can have an expert culture if you agree on what you want to get, but not if you are wondering what sort of life you ought to desire” (PCP 101). The imagination and the novel metaphors it creates play a central role in the life of reason – what is taken to be a *good argument* is itself subject to change. So, one of the problems with an overemphasis on rationality and argumentation is that such cognitive pathways leave the range of truth-candidates the same – they are not the kind of instrument to use if we are looking to shift from one vocabulary to another. This shift gestures towards the malleability of rationality; what is today taken as intuitively obvious or plausible may not be seen as such in the future, a situation analogous, for example, to some contemporary secular contexts where people do not feel the need to square their beliefs with scriptural text.

Therefore, the point is not whether rationality and argumentation are useful tools for reading Nāgārjuna, but rather whether these tools need to be understood representationally, that is, in the service of problem-solving in representationalist spaces where “the picture of the mind projecting structure onto an unstructured world” (Rorty 1995b, 192) is taken for granted. If this

representationalist picture is assumed or endorsed, it creates a host of problems that need answering in terms of the representationalist vocabulary with which these problems are formulated. So, the question to be pressed for Madhyamaka scholarship, which the metaphilosophical oscillation hinges upon, is: does the appeal to rationality and argumentation require a *neutral space for the evaluation* of our statements? This is because both sides seem to equate being rational with following logic, defined as a universal and transcendentally fixed set of rules of reasoning, and this equation drives their fundamental disagreement. The “heterodox” think that these assumptions stand in opposition to Nāgārjuna’s insistence that every-thing is dependently originated. Conversely, Garfield (2015, 249) represents the “orthodox” standpoint when he claims that “[l]ogic transcends metaphysics: It is a canon of reason, not a theory of reality, and a canon of reason ought to be equally valid no matter how the world is”. Suggesting that the scope of formal reason is transcendental, he explains that “reason is...a transcendental condition of interpretation both in the sense that we can only vindicate an interpretation to the extent that we read the texts as rational, and we can only justify a reading rationally” (2015, 332). The problem with this conception, the “heterodox” tell us, is that “Nāgārjuna’s entire enterprise is aimed at undermining belief in or reliance on any ‘transcendental conditions’ – explicitly including those that structure our thinking” (Stepien 2018b, 1085). This is why the “heterodox” downplay criteria such as cogency, coherence, and reason – they read these criteria as packaged with Platonist assumptions.

But a Rortyan Pragmatist would suggest that there is no need to make such a definitional identification between reason and transcendentality.⁴¹ We can discard specifically Platonist assumptions without discarding philosophy itself. If rationality and inquiry are understood representationally, it would seem that the rules of reasoning must operate in an independent space for evaluation, or presuppose an objective and value-free perspective. This is because viewing rationality as a universal faculty “whose possession and use is demonstrated by obedience to explicit criteria” (ORT 28) is concurrent with viewing rationality as a *transcendental* faculty that structures all human thinking. To attribute the operation of this faculty to texts and thinkers we are engaging with is one way to read Davidson’s principle of charity. Garfield (2015, 249) develops this reading – to charitably interpret an author is to use

⁴¹ Jan Westerhoff describes the possibility of defining rationalism as “the belief that there are certain intersubjectively determinable features (IDFs) of statements such that if a statement we hold to be true has these features then another different statement is also true. For example, if A is true, and if “if A then B” is true, then B is true” (Smith College Buddhist Studies 2020). I read this definition of rationality as consistent with the semantic anti-representationalist one I am developing here. The only point of emphasis that might differ is that these “features”, for an anti-representationalist, would be ascribed not to *statements* but rather to *our socially contingent practices*.

the “canon of reason” because this canon is shared across all humans and enables successful interpretation. However, this is an interpretation of Davidson that a semantic anti-representationalist would resist. For instance, Ramberg (2015, 222) reads Rorty as arguing that “charity ought not to be construed as a preexisting cognitive overlap of any kind at all”. If this denial of cognitive continuity seems to “endanger rationality” (PMN 317), it should be emphasised that what is being endangered is not reasoning *per se* but a “specious sort of rationality, a philosopher’s invention, tied to the [representationalist] idea that languages or conceptual schemes are possibly treacherous mediators of reality” (Ramberg 2015, 222). Thus, as we observed in section 3.1.1, if we reconceptualise rationality and language as socially evolving skills, what is emphasised is *not* some stable, structural similarity across diverse forms of reasoning, but rather a conception of rationality that is akin to open-ended processive negotiation across dialogical interlocutors. In this sense, for an anti-representationalist the space of reasons is not bounded – the process of reasoning, that is, the game of giving and asking for reasons, is not characterised by the tracing out of a limited number of pathways. Only under the assumption that it is bounded would we think that the conceptual activities of logical analysis and valid argumentation provide us with the “explicit criteria” that allow us to “get things right”. This is because the representationalist (pre)supposes that there are concrete facts out there (such as: a cat lying on a mat) that give meaning to our sentences (such as: “the cat is on the mat”) and make our claims true. When we add to this understanding the metalinguistic claims that language’s (primary or even sole) function is to correctly describe these facts and the faculty of reasoning allows us to develop these descriptions (such as “the cat is on the mat”, therefore “the cat is *not* on the field”), we have the parts needed to sustain a stable representationalist picture. Given a stable discursive landscape and the mind’s rational ability to trace finite moves, it is through correctly following the rules of logic that the mind would succeed in capturing the relevant facts. If the discursive terrain is finite, the more we successfully respond to various objections, the closer we would move towards getting things right.

However, as we observed above in the discussion of philosophy as an “expert culture”, Rorty suggests that this vision of convergence would only make sense if we already knew and agreed upon *what it would take to get things right* – if we already are in metaphilosophical agreement as to what the aim of philosophical inquiry is. These observations suggest that in a reason-guided form of inquiry, the use of logical reasoning and argumentation in the attempt to secure agreement need not make reference to an Archimedean transcendental point. Indeed, logic itself, for a Neo-Pragmatist, is a social practice that goes hand in hand with the ability to communicate, so that logical inferences are not rendered valid or invalid “by reference to a

logical structure held to be independent of any particular practice” (Bacon 2012, 178). More specifically, the validity of a rule such as “If p then q ” does not derive “from some objective logical mechanism underlying the structure of reality, but from the fact that this principle has been applied effectively thus far within our social practices” (2012, 178). And precisely because rationality is not a transcendental faculty assisted by logic as its trusty truth-disclosing instrument, no appeals to neutral, objective spaces for evaluation are needed to adjudicate correct versus incorrect moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. To participate in the game *is* to make correct moves, and the relevant criterion of correctness is not practice-transcendent but is *implicit* in the game. Thus, debates over correctness or incorrectness are settled not by some context-transcendent Archimedean criteria, but rather, as Brandom (1994, 32) suggests, by the mutual recognition of normative statuses such as “commitment” and “entitlement” through which we acknowledge “proprieties and improprieties of conduct, [in order] to be able to treat a performance as correct or incorrect”. Such processes of adjudication do not require any “practice-transcendent norms and statuses” (Wanderer 2008, 18) – instead, “normative statuses are always social statuses, and are constituted, maintained and developed by the normative attitudes of practitioners” (2008, 19). This point can be exemplified through a sport analogy:

In sandlot baseball there are no umpires. In street soccer there are no referees. The players keep track of runs or goals and of how well everyone played...it would not improve the rules of baseball if we appended to them a chapter on the nature of scoring runs, explaining that a player who touches home plate after rounding the bases has scored only if he or she has really touched it. We would be no more enlightened if we were told that scoring a run within the game corresponds to the physical state of affairs in which the player actually touches home plate. But sandlot baseball would be a much different game if players did not feel constrained to award runs by conforming their scorekeeping to a sort of discipline. At a minimum this discipline involves attentiveness to evidence and an attempt to avoid being influenced by wishful thinking. These features of scorekeeping discipline contribute to the objective dimension of baseball as a practice. Objective inquiry includes similar features, and endeavors to extend and perfect them. (Stout 2004, 40)

In other words, “objectivity” is a dynamically developing feature that makes our practices what they are, but at no point do we need to invoke, in a representationalist register, some external criterion in order to explain these practices. Likewise, we do not need to invoke a transcendental ability to reason in a neutral space. As Stout suggests with the baseball analogy, doing so would be an empty explanation – we can play by the (tacitly endorsed) rules of the

game without such an invocation and, crucially, we can occasionally change these rules through a social consensus. Thus, redescribing philosophical activity in terms of a transition from old vocabularies to new ones makes the representationalist search for criteria external to these vocabulary shifts irrelevant.⁴²

So, the “heterodox” cautionary statements can be re-articulated as pointers to a problem not so much with philosophy per se, but with a specific articulation of philosophy, as Huntington (2020, 356-357) himself acknowledges.⁴³ Reviewing this interpretive landscape through a Rortyan lens of semantic anti-representationalism, the problem seems to be that the making of moves in the space of giving and asking for reasons is *equated with* a logical space with characteristics such as unconditional, neutral, objective, and transcendental. But, as we observed, rationality and argumentation are not faculties we have for penetrating, as it were, the real world with our mind’s rational scrutiny. At the same time, redescribed through a social practice lens, they would not be regarded as *opposing* certain rhetorical techniques that are open to philosophers (such as Rorty himself) who wish to destabilise a current conversational space. Thus, as Huntington rightly suggests, we should not operate with a narrow definition of what it means to “do philosophy”. But Huntington’s (2020, 356) own characterisation of the discipline “as exclusively conceptual, as argumentation in the service of reason, as the assertion and defense of logically coherent propositions and views” is not sufficiently fine-grained from the perspective of Rorty’s anti-representationalism. Rorty, Brandom, Davidson, and Dennett *too* work with concepts, use reason to trace conceptual connections, and offer arguments against contrasting standpoints. What they do *not* do, however, is present reason as an inherent, fixed, transcendental faculty that operates within a “natural order” (PAA 20). Thus, they are not in the business of problem-solving, insofar as their redescriptions are offered in an effort to alter the space of reasoning through the implementation of a new vocabulary (such as triangulation). Hence, when anti-representationalists conceptually articulate their positions and “argue in the service of reason”, they understand their rational activity in a way that is different

⁴² “The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of ‘arbitrary’ choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another...The temptation to look for criteria is a species of the more general temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence. That is, it is the result of the temptation to privilege some one among the many languages in which we habitually describe the world or ourselves” (CIS 6).

⁴³ “By Garfield’s standards, a text without an argument cannot be understood as a way of *doing philosophy*...This arbitrary distinction between philosophy and literature must be maintained at any cost; philosophy must be strictly defined as exclusively conceptual, as argumentation in the service of reason, as the assertion and defense of logically coherent propositions and views...Philosophy so conceived most definitely has a genealogy, historical roots that can be traced...As entrenched as it has become, this is not the only way philosophy has been understood – even in the West” (Huntington 2020, 356-357).

from a representationalist's understanding. Specifically, they suggest "changes in the uses of words by putting new words in [social] circulation" and when they argue for the benefit of these changes, they do just that, namely show how adopting these new vocabularies can "make [our current] conversation more fruitful" (PAA 124). They do not say that their new vocabulary is right, in the sense of establishing correspondence in representationalist space, and that the vocabularies they seek to displace are wrong. To turn to some examples from Rorty: "[Hegel's] *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and [Brandom's] *Making it Explicit*, like [Wittgenstein's] *Philosophical Investigations* and [Austin's] *Sense and Sensibilia*, are not books of which it is useful to ask "What exactly do they get right?" – nor even "What are they trying to get right?" It is more useful to ask: would it help to start talking that way?" (PCP 126). The conception of philosophy that Rorty is opposing here is one that the "heterodox" too oppose, since the presupposition that all there is to philosophy is problem-solving with a fixed vocabulary overlooks the interesting transformative work philosophers have historically engaged in – work that seeks to get us to question the vocabulary we are currently using through the reasoned development of redescriptions.

Hence, let us highlight that redescriptions *explain why*, or *trace the reasons why*, or *present evidence*, and these are all integral aspects of being rational. While Rortyan Pragmatists work with reason-driven parameters such as evidence-based argumentation, their aim to redescribe does not operate on the same level as problem-solving. Instead, through the game of giving and asking for reasons, Pragmatists propose new genealogical narratives, a creative process which may involve shifting the conceptual signposts and changing the reason-set for what kinds of statements count as good reasons.⁴⁴ In these Rortyan genealogical exercises, one is not arguing *against* reason itself but rather arguing *for* a different vision of how we should reason. Ramberg (2013b, 52, emphasis added) describes this delicate argumentative modality as follows:

the upshot [of such a strategy] must be that the particular framework of assumptions within which a set of pro-et-con arguments are mounted gives way. We should think of this not as a matter of our being brought to abandon specific theses, to change our minds about truth values, but...of *coming to doubt the point of determining the truth values of a range of propositions that earlier mattered to us.*

⁴⁴ For example, Davidson's redescription of objectivity in terms of triangulation, which is meant to undercut the representationalist vocabulary, renders irrelevant the previously "reasonable" verificationist question of how things which "appear to us can get us to how they really are. For the pragmatist, the point is to get away from the representationalist vocabulary that sustains the idea of this gap" (Ramberg 2011, 140).

That is, one still engages in discursive practices and continues to give reasons for one's claims, but one does not indwell a dialectical framework of "pro-et-con" arguments. Rorty (1986) outlines this methodology when he does philosophy as follows: "[I] try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on". One creative way to "change the subject" in this manner is, once again, to invoke metaphors, which may have the catalytic power to shock us or defamiliarize our everyday settings because they lie outside our customary space of reasoning. Thus, the significance that Rorty places on the use of new vocabularies and metaphors highlights his claim that argumentation is not all about problem-solving and making our beliefs cohere because the imagination "keeps proposing new candidates for belief and new things to desire" (PAP 48). As Rorty's discussion of metaphor suggests, the space of reasoning does not remain fixed because metaphors have the power to alter and expand this space. Bacon (2007, 29-30, emphasis added) explains how this cognitive rewiring works:

perception and inference, while they might alter our beliefs, *leave the range of truth-candidates the same*...A more radical form of revision is *to introduce new candidates for belief on topics of which hitherto we have been unaware*. The key example of new candidates for belief are metaphors, or 'unfamiliar noises'. Metaphors do not fit into the pre-existent order of reasons, [which is] 'a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies' [CIS 52]...However, they have the potential to extend the frontiers of knowledge and of logical space. The metaphorical or surprising use of language, for example a claim like 'love is the only law', 'history is the history of class struggle', or 'the earth whirls around the sun' were surprising when they were first uttered. The attempt to make sense of the surprise requires us to alter our theories or vocabularies in order to take account of it.

This account highlights why logical inference, generally taken to be *the* defining method of philosophy, fails to illuminate certain crucial shifts in the history of the discipline. The unilateral emphasis on rational argumentation, valid reasoning, and logical analysis that is characteristic of practising philosophy in many Anglophone institutions overlooks the multiple ways in which new metaphors can recalibrate the space of reasoning by altering the reason-set which is canonically regarded as plausible, significant, or meaningful. So, for example, when people started moving away from an Aristotelian worldview towards a Copernican worldview, they began to view the metaphor of the earth "whirling" around the sun as coherent. This shift in metaphors was interrelated with a cognitive shift in the appropriateness criteria for which reasons were seen as acceptable to justify the new Copernican beliefs (ORT 124). Thus, Rorty

explains: “when Copernicus began saying ‘The earth goes round the sun’, these sentences must have seemed merely ‘ways of speaking’...But when... the Copernicans... had finished *redescribing portions of reality in the light of these sentences*, we started speaking of these sentences as hypotheses which might quite possibly be true. In time, each of these sentences became accepted, at least within certain communities of inquiry, as obviously true” (ORT 124, emphasis added). Hence, it is the “literalization” of new metaphors (here, a “whirling” earth) that drives the conceptual machinery of philosophy.

Thus, to return to Huntington’s (2020, 355-356) characterisation of literature as making use of a “performative utterance” which is opposed to “reasoned argumentation”, we can now suggest that the philosopher’s task is *both* to take seriously the imagination’s uncharted territories shaped by metaphors *and* to rationally literalise these metaphors by updating older theories in an attempt to accommodate them in an evolving space of reasons. Therefore, Rortyan redescription should not be confused with what Huntington (2017, 160) calls “the literary equivalent of extending my hands, palms upward”. The implementation (that is, the “literalization”) of new vocabularies and the explaining away of philosophical problems through the construction of alternative genealogical narratives do not cast reason to the wind. So, rather than downplaying the idea of rationality, the “heterodox” can accept the Neo-Pragmatist redescription of rationality as the ability to make correct moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons and not regard rationality as equivalent to problem-solving with conceptual precision. As our discussions of Rortyan redescrptions has suggested, weaving rational pathways *within* an established vocabulary does not exhaust the scope of philosophical inquiry, since the catalytic role of new vocabularies and new metaphors highlights that the game of philosophy is not a bounded system with a fixed structure. In this respect, more than suggesting that reason *and* imagination or argument *and* rhetoric are useful tools for philosophy, we could argue that reason, imagination, argument, and rhetoric are all deeply interrelated and not substantively distinct activities. In this way, Rorty helps us see how we can sidestep the metaphilosophical disagreement between “orthodox” and “heterodox” scholars by seeing it as a forced choice – the basic presupposition of this choice is entangled with the representationalist assumption that rhetorical invocation and philosophical argumentation are cognitively distinct activities, where the former lies outside the space of reasoning and the latter traces a finite set of transcendently valid moves through the faculty of reason. Neo-Pragmatist re-articulations of these cognitive activities allow us to undercut this dichotomy.

In the light of these reflections, let us return to the point made by Huntington (2017, 154, emphasis added): “If instilling rational conviction is philosophy’s only legitimate goal,

then philosophy can only be found in the language of reason. But if, in addition to securing intellectual or rational assent, philosophy can have another purpose, that is, *to inspire what might be called 'a change of heart'*, then reasoned argument may in certain instances be worse than inadequate". Given our explicitly anti-representationalist lens, we can re-articulate this quote as follows: If we are convinced that we can escape our social practices, philosophy ought to be conducted by implementing the rules of logic in an effort to peer behind our practices at something beyond them. But if rationality is recognised as a dynamic feature of our practices, philosophy can have another purpose, which is to take on the task of "enlarging our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions" (PCP 124). On this redescription of rationality as a social process, prioritising problem-solving and argumentation may be, in certain instances, worse than inadequate. Thus, in philosophical inquiry, the vectors of rationality and the imagination can operate concurrently. We are better equipped to respond to a distinction offered by Huntington (2017, 155, emphasis added) between "two modes of discourse": "On the one hand, *rational argumentation*, where the symbol points toward an essentially transcendent abstraction, a strictly *conceptual solution* to a moral or philosophical *problem*; and on the other, narrative *fiction*, where the symbol becomes self-reflexive, *bringing the reader back to a truth* that is imminent and embodied, *immediately present* within the experience of reading". To this proposed dichotomy, I respond as follows. There is a middle way through this binary, namely Rorty's "conversational philosophy" (PCP 124), which *does* use logic, but *rearticulates* it as "a device for making our social norms explicit" (PAP 40). As such, philosophers can indeed engage in rational inquiry which *qua* inquiry is shaped by the inferential rules that structure our current space of reasons, but acknowledging this theme does not commit us to a neutral, objective, Archimedean vantage point since these rules are themselves features of our social practices. Moreover, through the assimilation of novel metaphors, there are rational ways to go about reweaving the space of reasons itself – for instance, one can rationally comment on our inquiries without necessarily participating in them. In so doing, one's rhetorical strategies are *shaped* by certain rules of reasoning, but not *bound* by them. As Rorty explains: "We might just be *saying something* – participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry. Perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are. Perhaps saying *that* is itself not a case of saying how things are" (PMN 371). On this understanding, philosophy is not some sublimely dispassionate adjudicator of our epistemic life. The "transformative task" is precisely to re-articulate and re-envision different aims and horizons for philosophy, offering new problems in place of old ones. Philosophy remains a driving motor of our epistemic enterprises for it leaves open the creative space for *novelty*, so that the philosopher can "think up things to

talk about, [and] envisage the outlines of a novel social practice” (PAP 55). The exercise of precisely this capacity is what separates the philosopher from the poet – the philosopher mobilises theory in an attempt to rework conceptual solutions to current problems and address new problems in the process of engaging with new metaphors.

In sum, I hope to have shown that the “heterodox” are correct to insist, echoing Rorty, that we should broaden our understanding of what it is we do when we engage in philosophical inquiry. For instance, in a discussion of John Dewey, Rorty argues that helping us to develop a sensitivity towards life around us “would be just as respectable of a goal for an academic discipline as contributing to knowledge” (1995a, 205). This is a trajectory for philosophy that I myself wholeheartedly support (and one that I hope to have shown the “orthodox” would not reject entirely); however, it would be a mistake to think that the methods by which we might contribute to developing such a sensitivity are opposed to the rational processes through which we generate knowledge.

3.3 From Non-Referentiality to Anti-Representationalism: Moving Past The Metalinguistic Oscillation

In the light of our discussion so far, the question for this section is: what can we say about the *function* of language that might help us recognise the true versus useful debate, outlined in detail in Chapter 1, as another forced choice? I suggest that both sides of the metalinguistic oscillation will find, in the Neo-Pragmatist semantic account of language that clearly eschews representationalist idioms, some useful tools with which to think about how language operates in Nāgārjuna’s texts. As we observed in Chapter 2, this oscillation relates to the importance of truth-evaluability and semantic content in Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka, as well as the explanatory order between content of information (zetetic) and soteriological transformation (protreptic). Those who veer towards the “orthodox” pole tend to view Nāgārjuna’s statements as truth-evaluable propositions underpinned by an anti-realist semantics, where the semantic content of these propositions makes the soteriology efficacious. The “heterodox” instead claim that for the Mādhyamika every statement is a soteriological catalyser – the semantic content of these statements is a constitutive part of the vehicle oriented towards the utility of achieving a spiritual transformation and carries no truth-evaluability outside of its catalytic efficacy. My aim in this section is to suggest that a Neo-Pragmatist anti-representationalist articulation of language would help us to move past this interpretive impasse too because the very “urge to decide between competing claims *in addition* to their rendering

our actions successful is [to be understood as] a hangover from representationalism” (Huetter-Almerigi 2020, 9). Once we recognise the contingency of language, redescribed as an evolving social practice that allows us to cope with our environments (rather than copy them), we will see that this explicit anti-representationalist stance allows us to set aside the truth versus use debate.

Let us begin by outlining a theory of meaning. Both the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” agree that whatever semantics Nāgārjuna is assuming or employing, it must make space for non-referring terms since emptiness is not a substantive property out there in the world. Hence, Nāgārjuna would certainly not embrace a realist semantics according to which words mean what they do because of an objective reference relation with a mind-independent world. Instead, as we saw in Chapter 2, the “heterodox” and the “orthodox” both explain the reference relation conventionally, namely Nāgārjuna’s words mean what they do by referring to conventional objects, and both the reference relation and the relevant objects are products of conventional agreements in social spaces. Now, this articulation of nonreferentiality is crucial because emptiness itself is empty – that is, the word “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) does not semantically extend to an ultimately real, mind-independent property in the world. So, the worry seems to be that if some semantic account cannot be given of how and to what exactly the word “emptiness” refers, describing *something* as “empty” would be meaningless. Having explored some themes in Neo-Pragmatist philosophy of language, I suggest that through their emphasis on nonreferentiality, both sides of the oscillation are gesturing towards semantic anti-representationalism, as introduced in section 1.3 and discussed in 3.1.1. The “orthodox” and the “heterodox” emphasis on *nonreferentiality* is in consonance with my claim that an *anti-representationalist* semantic account would serve the Madhyamaka well. However, neither the heterodox nor the orthodox explicitly affirm an anti-representationalist stance from the outset and, as a result, implicitly operate with an assumption that associates meaning with referentiality. This association shifts the explanatory focus away from the pragmatics of what we *do* when we speak a language and towards the semantics of what linguistic utterances are *about*. In so doing, the dynamic, dialogical, and open-ended character of language and meaning is not clearly highlighted and the scheme-content dualism is tacitly reintroduced. This is why, I suggest, the question of whether or not statements are true because they get things right or because they are (merely) useful looks like a good question to ask. However, by redescribing nonreferentiality in terms of anti-representationalism, we can move past this oscillation. This is because if we recognise that “meaning is contextually sensitive and interest-relative”, as I think both sides of the oscillation do, then the “conditions under which w means M cannot be

specified in a *general, theoretically illuminating way*. Explanations of meaning are *incurably local*” (Williams 2013, 133). Instead, in any particular instance, to know under what conditions a statement would be true *is* to know what that statement means. That is, meaning and reference are simply “functions of the rights and responsibilities of participants in a social practice” (PCP 138).

As we observed in section 3.1.1, a reference relation (to the world) need not be invoked to serve an explanatory function in developing an account of meaning. For example, Rorty argues that Davidson is “suggesting that we maximize coherence and truth first, and then let reference fall out as it may” (ORT 134). This is because from the holistic perspective of a radical interpreter, the uncovering of reference is not what determines meaning; instead, we must begin at the level of sentences since meaning cannot be disassociated from understanding,⁴⁵ and understanding takes place in the social settings of triangulation (Davidson) or inferential normative scorekeeping (Brandom).⁴⁶ In other words, semantics cannot be isolated from pragmatics – from cognitive capacities like belief ascription, knowledge of truth-conditions, and an implicit understanding of the possibility of error, to name a few. Thus, to understand what a sentence means is just to be able to use it: “the content of a sentence is in constant flux, and none the worse for that...the inferences drawn from and to assertions made with the sentence constitute the only content the sentence has. Inferential proprieties are not built into the structure of language, but are always up for grabs” (PCP 123). What this means is that there is no such thing as “cognitive content” that a sentence has which would somehow remain “constant in all assertions [the sentence] is used to make” (PCP 157). Therefore, semantic notions like reference are explanatorily useless in attempts to understand meaning because these notions are themselves to be explained in terms of dynamic functions of social practices.

Hence, the Neo-Pragmatist argues that a semantic anti-representationalist account allows us to resist the assumption that to explain the meaning of a word we need to invoke a reference relation. To recall our observations in section 3.1.1, for the Neo-Pragmatist the idea of words possessing a determinate meaning is misguided. On our Rortyan redescription, for a word to have meaning is just for it to have a social function in dynamic matrices of inferential reasoning – “all a concept needs to have content is for the word to function as a node in the pattern of inferences” (PAA 188). This social backdrop suggests that any word can become

⁴⁵ See the “entanglement thesis” discussed in section 3.1.1.

⁴⁶ Brandom means that when we engage in the game of giving and asking for reasons, we “keep track of each other’s commitments and entitlements, and in the social exchange of reasons” (Stout 2004, 38).

meaningful if people begin to use it in a systematic and consistent way. So, the notion of reference is a “semantic abstraction” (Ramberg 1989, 34), that is, a “posit we need to implement a theory of truth” (Davidson 1984, 222), and not something that could *explain* meaning. From Rorty’s Pragmatist perspective, such a truth-theory would be “an account of how the marks and noises made by certain organisms hang together in a coherent pattern, one which can be fitted into our overall account of the interaction between these organisms and their environment” (ORT 10).

If we understand language as a social skill that enables us to cope dynamically with our environments, the quasi-foundationalist endeavour to explain meaning through reference is mistaken. To recall our observations in section 3.1.1, Davidson’s radical interpretation brings into high relief that the radical interpreter does not use her truth-theory to target the language of a native but rather the specific utterances the native is producing at the moment – what Ramberg calls an “idiolect”. Crucially, this idiolect “is not a fixed object but something undergoing *constant change*” (Ramberg 2015, 221, emphasis added). Or, as Rorty explains this point: “Going around this [hermeneutic] circle [of attempting to understand what the natives are saying] means *not* attempting (in the manner of building-block theories of reference) to start with some ‘secure’ links, but rather going back and forth between guesses at translations of occasion-sentences and of standing sentences until something like Rawlsian ‘reflective equilibrium’ emerges” (ORT 137).

In the light of these Neo-Pragmatist reflections, I argue that both sides of the metalinguistic oscillation will find the suggestion that we shift our focus away from the motif of reference beneficial to their own understandings. The “orthodox” anti-realist appeal to a word’s location in a system of conventions and the “heterodox” account of the contextual differentiation between words that gives them their meaning, as explained in section 2.2.2, are in conceptual resonance with the Neo-Pragmatist emphasis on the *use* of a concept as what gives it its content. Having said this, Rortyan Neo-Pragmatism highlights the importance of a hermeneutic starting point that clearly eschews – from the start – any association with semantic representationalism. In fact, it is representationalism, I argue, that makes the reference relation *seem* like a good explanatory starting point with which to illuminate the nature of meaning in terms of convention. From a Rortyan perspective, the appeal to referentiality in the context of a theory of meaning can be misleading – saying that sentences gain their content from the dynamic interrelations through which they are inferentially connected, as Brandom suggests, is distinct in emphasis from attempting to say something about the “world” side of the word-world reference relation by specifying, for example, that the “world” is not mind-independent,

but is to be expressed in terms of a “‘worldless’ theory based entirely on conventions between speakers” (Westerhoff 2019, 781). The attempts of both the “heterodox” and the “orthodox” to provide semantic accounts of non-referring terms, as observed in section 2.2.2, could stem from the worry that if a word (such as “emptiness”) turns out to be empty of (empirical or conceptual) content, it is a pseudo-term. Rorty refers to Russell’s view that “non-referring singular terms [such as “witch”] are only pseudo-singular terms” (PAA 188), so that such terms which lack empirical content, and yet are used to “classify visible and tangible things”, are “pseudo-concepts” (PAA 187). And if this is the case, presumably Nāgārjuna would have to somehow demonstrate why “emptiness” is not a pseudo-concept. But a Rortyan Pragmatist would claim that this felt need can be sidestepped, by changing the subject (Rorty 1986) through redescription, rather than directly answered. Instead of taking seriously a (Russellian) opponent’s criticism that a word which does not refer is meaningless, we can shrug off the perceived threat through redescription – we do not assume that words have “meanings” which are captured through a reference relation with what they representationally denote. As Rorty tells us, Neo-Pragmatists:

have no use for this contrast between uses of words which have content and uses which do not...All the words ever systematically bandied about, by superstitious cavemen as well as by sophisticated physicists, are on a par as far as content or lack of content goes...Davidson, Sellars, and Brandom all want to claim that *any singular term that has a use is as good a singular term as any other*”. (PAA 188, emphasis added)

The point is that language does not work in the atomistic way a semantic realist (pre)supposes and the desire to explain meaning through a “bottom-up” method is to get things backwards. In the ancient Indic context, this Pragmatist critique would apply to the Nyāya understanding that words gain their meaning in terms of their reference to a mind-independent world.⁴⁷ In this sense, they are atomistic and representationalist insofar as they assume that to “know the meaning or sense of a word is to know how to pick out its referent. And once reference is secure, we are on the road to truth, that is, in a position to spell out the truth-conditions of sentences” (Ramberg 1989, 16). The Mādhyamika rejects this type of referential relation between mind and world. As Westerhoff (2010, 106) explains: Nāgārjuna “does not have to assume that simple

⁴⁷ Westerhoff (2009a, 105) describes Nyāya realist semantics: “there is a clear correspondence between the categories existing in the world, such as individuals, properties, and absences, and the expressions of language...This position should not be misunderstood as saying that any name we come up with will be guaranteed to have a referent. The Naiyāyika is not obliged to believe in yetis just because our language contains the term ‘yeti.’ The point is, rather, that when we continue to unpack such a term along the lines of ‘large apelike creature supposedly inhabiting the Himalayas,’ we eventually end up with a description using only terms that have a referent”.

terms are guaranteed to have a referent in the way the Naiyāyika says they do, or indeed that names refer at all”. In this context, I suggest that instead of worrying about how we can save the word “emptiness” from plunging into an abyss of meaninglessness, we have the Rortyan option of dismissing the very presupposition that generates this worry – that meaning has to be understood in terms of reference.

Towards addressing this worry, the “orthodox” construct a fictionalist account of how meaning works, namely through an appeal to a conventional world that we “collectively constitute” (Garfield 2006, 3). In such matrices of co-constitution, what one word designates is “*another* designation – which refers to another designation, and so on” (Gold 2015, 220). The success of our epistemic practices is to be explained by an appeal to the fact that this world of designations is conventional *reality*. Garfield (2002, 52, emphasis added) explains this point: “Indeed, the very emptiness of phenomena that makes correspondence with a convention-independent reality chimerical ensures the empirical existence of a world of conventional entities. And indeed, these entities are our referents when we use ordinary, *or even philosophical*, discourse”. It is difficult to see exactly where the “heterodox” would disagree with this style of fictionalism, but it seems the “heterodox” want to argue that philosophical discourse *cannot* make use of such referents in a way that is not ontologically heavy.⁴⁸ Along with the “orthodox”, Huntington (1989, 32) equates meaning with a word’s “application in some particular sociolinguistic community”, but denies that the Mādhyamika’s statements about emptiness are true in any way other than their utility for soteriology.⁴⁹ Perhaps his point is that any appeal to conventional *reality* (even if made up of only our designations) is difficult to reconcile with emptiness. The implication seems to be that if such statements are taken to be true in any more robust way, this will commit the Mādhyamika to making ontological statements about how things exist. Stepien (2019, 563-564) explains this idea as follows: “Nāgārjuna agrees that arguments (positions, views, theses...) ‘fundamentally aim to make a point about how things exist;’ in so doing, arguments are indeed ‘proposed as *true*’ [Arnold

⁴⁸ “Metaphysical language is incapable of justifying its claim to capture truth in a complex of ontological and epistemological propositions, for the objects to which it refers are entirely without practical consequences and are thus devoid of all reality” (Huntington 1989, 32). The implication seems to be, as Williams (1991, 196) suggests, that for Huntington, words only have their meanings in the context of everyday use and therefore “the Madhyamaka project is to undermine philosophical rationalism by showing that it is misusing language, [by] taking language to refer to an ultimate real of some sort which can be shown to be incoherent and contradictory. The goal is [to] return to the everyday context, to the everyday conventional use of language which does not give rise to these problems of ultimate reality and their attendant grasping”.

⁴⁹ He states: “the significance of the words and concepts used within the Madhyamika system derives...from their special efficacy as instruments which may be applied in daily life to the sole purpose of eradicating the suffering caused by clinging, antipathy, and the delusion of reified thought” (Huntington 1989, xii).

2005, 137]. It is just that for something to be true, that something must *be*. Being, however, is precisely what Nāgārjuna's critique refutes, since for Nāgārjuna there is no way that 'things exist,' for no things really do 'exist'". Thus, the disagreement seems to boil down to whether we should seek to develop a philosophical discourse to account for the "referents" (albeit fictional) that we engage with in conventional reality and articulate with ordinary language. I think this preoccupation with questions of reference is responsible for an over-attentiveness to semantics over pragmatics in the context of meaning, which, in turn, powers the metalinguistic oscillation.

To recall the motif of methodological pragmatism articulated in section 3.1.1, we can reverse the semantic realist's order of explanation by insisting that pragmatics has to constrain semantics, and not vice versa. In so doing, the Neo-Pragmatist forges an "intimate...connection between *truth* and *meaning*" (ORT 154) (instead of reference and meaning), Neo-Pragmatists suggest that to know what a sentence means *is* to know under what conditions it will be true in social transactions. Rorty explains that "[t]he resulting marriage will be so intimate a relationship that a theory of truth will *be* a theory of meaning, and conversely. But that theory will be of no use to a representationalist epistemology, nor to any other sort of epistemology. It will be an explanation of what people *do*, rather than of a...representing...relation in which they stand to non-human entities" (ORT 154). When the discursive landscape is redescribed in this way, there is no need to suppose, with either side of the oscillation, that we must choose between semantics and pragmatics – *either* Nāgārjuna's statements have semantic content which can be judged as true or false, and this content animates a soteriological goal, *or* Nāgārjuna's statements, if they have such content, is only a vehicle for the *use* of the statement, namely moving towards a soteriological goal, and is only true or false relative to this goal. Following Brandom, we can simply say that "particular linguistic phenomena can no longer be distinguished as 'pragmatic' or 'semantic'" (Brandom 1994, 592).

From our Rortyan standpoint, both sides of the oscillation appear to be moving within the representational paradigm that asks "what feature of the world is referred to by 'true'?" – where both sides point to the conventions of a socio-linguistic community. But with Rorty and Davidson, we can ask a different, anti-representationalist question: "how is 'true' used by the outside observer of the language game?" (ORT 132). When we redescribe the former question in the terms of the latter, the disagreement over whether claims are true because they stand for some way the conventional world is (that is, as interdependent with our linguistic practices), or they are true simply in virtue of their soteriological efficacy (and thus not truth-evaluable propositions) will no longer be a relevant question. Instead,

there is no ‘birds-eye view’ from which to decide between competing claims, but you can provide success rates. These success rates are not based on the accuracy of the object-description fit – objectivity is not guaranteed by the difference between our practice of concept application and ‘how things are.’ Claims are not ‘made true by facts,’ but they are based on [Davidson’s] triangle. Claims do not have to ‘get things right’ beyond vocabularies since if we ‘get things right’ we cope successfully with our peers and the world. In this scenario, ‘copying’ is not ensuring successful coping. The weakness of ‘copying’ lies exactly in trying to get us out of the picture – in cutting an angle which instead is needed. (Huetter-Almerigi 2020, 9)

From this Pragmatist perspective, we can re-read the “orthodox” insistence that soteriology is shaped and energised by some crucial truth-claims⁵⁰ as embodying a quasi-representationalist urge to validate Madhyamaka statements by presenting them as standing in some kind of (conventionally generated) relations in social networks. In other words, the operative image of truth is a tacit comparison, in a representationalist register, of “beliefs with non-beliefs” (PAA 167), where the non-beliefs must be something more robust than the soteriological efficacy repeatedly emphasised by the “heterodox”. Conversely, when John Taber (1998, 237) states that Nāgārjuna’s “arguments serve only to describe the interconnectedness, hence illusoriness, of all phenomena, not establish [interconnectedness] as true”, he seems to be gesturing towards the “heterodox” interpretation that truth is soteriological efficacy because the epistemic standpoints of the “orthodox” are too ontologically heavy.⁵¹ Thus, the “heterodox” claim that the Mādhyamika’s “analysis of truth [is] a function of what can be put into practice – what can be embodied in the thoughts, words, and actions that go to make up a form of life” (Huntington 1989, 44). Crucially, this form of life is the soteriological goal of *nirvāṇa*. The reason the “heterodox” seem to be motivated to take this explanatory direction is because in not wanting to invoke either beliefs or non-beliefs (outside the context of everyday language use) they cannot see any other way to make sense of Nāgārjuna’s claims. Indeed, from a representationalist perspective, they would be right – representationalism does bring with it dualisms such as mind-world, subject-object, and scheme-content. Thus, the “heterodox” opt for explaining the linguistic function of Nāgārjuna’s statements as rhetorical catalysers whose propositional content is only secondary to the rhetorical effect. But, as we observed, propositional content, *pace* both the “heterodox” and the “orthodox”, need not involve an explanatory delineation between signified and signifier, which a preoccupation with

⁵⁰ For example, Arnold (2005, 137) states that “Mādhyamika arguments are (apparent claims to the contrary notwithstanding) offered in defense of a particular truth-claim – that is, these arguments are not simply methodological or ‘therapeutic’ exercises that are equally compatible with just any ontology or metaphysics; rather, they fundamentally aim to make a point about how things exist”.

⁵¹ To recall from section 2.2.2, for the “heterodox” there can be no beliefs because both presuppose *svabhāva*.

referentiality carries with it. Rather, with the Neo-Pragmatists, we can cut through such dualisms by redescribing “the content of beliefs” in terms of “their inferential articulation, and thus their potential justificatory relations to other such beliefs” (Wanderer 2008, 24). Thus, the dualisms are dropped because “the inferential connections among sentences *suffice* to determine its semantic content” (2008, 107), where these connections and semantic content are subject to change.

In sum, if with semantic anti-representationalists we understand the function of language through the alternative metaphor of coping rather than the entrenched metaphor of copying, the significance of the “far side” of a semantic relation loses its explanatory force. Thus, because the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” operate – implicitly – with an association between meaning and reference (that is, the meaning of *x* is that which *x* refers to), they tacitly operate with representationalism. Instead, if we redescribe truth as a contingent feature of our norm-governed social practices, it becomes difficult to see why it is important to emphasise that Madhyamaka soteriology works because emptiness is true⁵² or emptiness is true because it is soteriologically efficacious.⁵³ If the representationalist dualism between signifier and signified is dropped in our explanations of meaning, the metalinguistic oscillation too is bypassed – one would not entertain something substantive out there that makes our statements (really) true and not just (merely) useful. Thus, with Rorty, we can simply say that “truth...is not an explanation of anything” (ORT 140) because to give an account of meaning one must *already* have the concept of truth. From our Rortyan perspective, we understand truth in terms of social practice so that “decisions about truth and falsity are always a matter of rendering practices more coherent or of developing new practices” (TP 129). Since our practices are interwoven with questions of utility, to prioritise pragmatics over semantics and replace the metaphor of copying with that of coping is to emphasise that our relationship to the world is never one of accurate mirroring – our human needs, desires, interests, and goals are always an inextricable part of sociolinguistic processes. So, the dichotomy between true *because* it is soteriologically useful

⁵² For example, “Emptiness, for a mādhyamika, is an ultimate truth. One *can* achieve a correct view – a view of things as they in fact are. Such a view surely should not be relinquished, for this would be to relinquish the soteriological goal of all of Buddhist practice” (Garfield 2002, 48). Likewise, “for Buddhist thinkers in general, the emptiness of the self constitutes a central philosophical position with major practical and soteriological implications” (Westerhoff 2009a, 157). Similarly, when Siderits (2007, 205) asks, “How could giving up the ideal of an ultimate truth help us overcome suffering?”, the implication is that the realisation of this ideal precedes (even if only logically, and not chronologically) the soteriology. His proposed dissolution of the paradox that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth” as the “fact that must be grasped in order to attain full enlightenment is that there is no statement that corresponds to the ultimate nature of mind-independent reality” (2007, 202) suggests that the explanatory order moves from fact/truth to soteriological efficacy.

⁵³ Stepien (2019, 532) explains that the “most ‘philosophical’ of Nāgārjuna’s works...should nevertheless prove irreducibly soteriological in orientation”.

and true *because* it is a correct articulation of the way the world is, is a binary that an anti-representationalist would not entertain. If we think of language in terms of vocabularies, as Rorty suggests we should, and re-articulate the significance of *upāya* anti-representationally, to ask if the vocabulary of Madhyamaka works better than other vocabularies to achieve a particular goal, for instance, *nirvāṇa*, is a legitimate question. But to ask if Madhyamaka works better as a constellation of vocabularies because that constellation represents some particular way things are (even if only conventionally) is a question an anti-representationalist would not address. Indeed, the holism that anti-representationalists insist upon suggests that neither language nor rationality is truth-tracking – both are social practices that allow us to cope better with our environments.

If we recognise, with both sides of our metalinguistic oscillation, the contingency of language, and also emphasise the anti-representationalist insights of Neo-Pragmatism, we begin to see the binary between persuasions, aims, and goals versus truth-evaluable descriptions as a forced choice that can be bypassed. From a Neo-Pragmatist perspective, for something to be a truth-evaluable proposition is just for it to be an assertion developed in the inferential space of giving and asking for reasons. So, this inferential space, as a social practice, is inextricably tied with the ability “to be the subject of normative *attitudes*, to be capable of acknowledging proprieties and improprieties of conduct, to be able to treat a performance as correct or incorrect” (Brandom 1994, 32). A Rortyan would not seek to separate this type of persuasive performance from descriptive (that is, fact-stating) inquiry for semantics is not divorceable from the social processes of interpretation. The exchange of reasons, an integral component of persuasion, is a vital part of the holistic practice of interpreting the statements of our interlocutors. And given the central role of metaphors which, to recall, Rorty claims lie outside semantics, the very distinction between “rational” and “irrational” persuasion loses its significance. Neat delineations between zetetic and protreptic, fact and convention, and rational and irrational persuasion are all, we now see, remnants of representationalism or representationalism-aligned images.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

In drawing together the three main sections of this chapter, I reiterate my claim that reason versus imagination, and argument versus rhetoric should not be regarded as mutually opposed. Nāgārjuna can thus be read as skilfully engaging in strategies that cannot be encapsulated by a reductive binary of rational argumentation versus poetic expression. Because

rhetorical suggestions and narrative redescriptions (too) are forms of philosophical reasoning, we can hold together in a single vision the philosophical and the literary dimensions highlighted by the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” respectively. We do not need to read Nāgārjuna through a bipolar lens of *either* reason *or* rhetoric – instead, we can read him as engaged in one dynamically unfolding metaphilosophical project.

The aim of this chapter was to argue that if we take an explicit anti-representationalist stance, the oscillations that pervade contemporary Madhyamaka scholarship can be sidestepped because they are given momentum by certain representationalist metaphilosophical and metalinguistic assumptions. Shifting discourse in a clearly anti-representationalist direction allows us to recognise why the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic commitments are deeply intertwined for the “heterodox” and the “orthodox”. Rorty’s observations crystallise the point that how one takes language to function in a particular text is interdependent on one’s metaphilosophical stance. As we have seen, according to “heterodox” metaphilosophy, claims made within the space of reasons involve an Archimedean vantage point which, however, cannot be attributed to Nāgārjuna who insists that everything is empty. They are faced with this choice: *either* Nāgārjuna is only making common-sense claims supported by a nonreferential semantics *or* Nāgārjuna’s claims are of an entirely different sort. But Nāgārjuna’s claims about dependent origination and emptiness are clearly not ordinary ones (such as “Nora likes chocolate”); therefore, by opting for the second option, they primarily read Nāgārjuna as engaging in literary rhetorical strategies that lie outside the space of reasons, and focus on soteriological efficacy (as opposed to propositional contentfulness) as the driving force behind Madhyamaka claims. In opposition, the “orthodox” claim that a nonreferential semantics that appeals to a conventional system against which truth and reference are measured is acceptable for the Mādhyamika, because the Mādhyamika, qua philosopher who operates in the space of reasons, can make use of everyday language so long as no mind-independent realism is presupposed. In the context of Madhyamaka scholarship, this choice – between representationalism and anti-representationalism – and the implications of this choice have not been sufficiently highlighted. Thus, as I hope to have shown, although neither side of the oscillation consciously develops interpretations that are representationalist, because they do not actively frame the dialogical space in terms of semantic representationalism (to be rejected) versus semantic anti-representationalism (to be endorsed), their arguments occasionally become inflected or modulated by certain representationalist anxieties, presuppositions, or imageries that lead to the impasses.

In sum, to reject a representationalist understanding of language, thought, and knowledge, a Pragmatist does not have to reject *in toto* rationality, argumentation, and assertoric speech. There are reasoned ways to articulate new visions – of the human individual and the world at large – even when one is not participating in the *established* game of giving and asking for reasons. These rhetorical strategies – which may involve metaphorical tools, genealogical reconstructions, and so on – should not be written off as blatantly anti-rational gesturing. A thinker who is seeking to alter a conversational space will have to skilfully negotiate both protreptic and zetetic elements and achieve a reflective equilibrium between the two – with neither element taking definitive precedence over the other. My proposal is that the horizon of this reflective equilibrium would become clearly visible if both sides of our metalinguistic and metaphilosophical oscillations deny, from the start, the representationalist assumption that “evidential relations have a kind of existence independent of human projects” (PAA 19). In this way, if we “cease to think of reason as a source of authority, and think of it simply as the process of reaching agreement by persuasion” (PAA 156), the concern with the zetetic versus protreptic order of value becomes obsolete, not least because persuasively seeking to generate agreement inevitably involves both elements.

Now, this chapter, which demonstrates the possibility of moving past such stalemates, has remained on an expository level of analysis. In the next chapter, we will develop these anti-representationalist themes and put them to work in re-reading Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*. In other words, we will use the semantic anti-representationalist lens articulated in this chapter to explore some interpretative contours of the *Madhyamaka* message. Hence, whereas in this chapter we spoke to the *interpreters* and outlined what they are doing in their interpretations, we will, in the next chapter, shift our focus to some *interpretations* and show what re-reading Nāgārjuna as an anti-representationalist would look like. Specifically, it will be my aim in Chapter 4 to suggest that re-read in this way, Nāgārjuna, like the Neo-Pragmatists, is not engaged primarily in the enterprise of problem-solving; instead, he is employing an alternative strategy of problem-dissolving which is to persuade us to leave behind an older vocabulary. As such, I will engage in some comparative work through which I will seek to persuade the reader that Nāgārjuna and Rorty have more in common than we might initially think. I will trace some implications of this re-reading, and suggest that Nāgārjuna should be read primarily not as an anti-*realist* but as an anti-*representationalist*. We will observe that although these terms are conceptually related, Nāgārjuna’s message can be more straightforwardly articulated through the lens of an anti-*representationalist* – and in a way that enables us to hold both “heterodox” and “orthodox” points in a single vision. It is to these tasks that we turn next.

Chapter 4: Re-reading Nāgārjuna as a Rortyan Pragmatist: *From Realism-vs.-Anti-Realism to Representationalism-vs.-Anti-Representationalism*

“If ‘nature’ is an illusion, so is ‘convention’ and so is ‘man’. Contrastive terms of this sort stand or fall together” (CP 24).

Now that we have examined how Neo-Pragmatist reflections on philosophy and language can help us mitigate the metaphilosophical and the metalinguistic oscillations in Madhyamaka scholarship, we will turn our attention to the implications of our anti-representationalist perspective for the Madhyamaka message. To this end, we ask two conceptually distinct, yet interrelated, questions: (1) what might be the style of a Madhyamaka metaphilosophy in the light of our Rortyan observations?⁵⁴ and (2) what would an anti-representationalist metalinguistic stance suggest about Nāgārjuna’s message? Both questions point to the general theme of this chapter: *if* Nāgārjuna is an anti-representationalist, what does his Madhyamaka message look like and by what means is he articulating it?

Let us begin by considering an intriguing question from Ramberg (1999, 63): “What shall we call a philosopher who on principle withdraws from ontological commitment, and who...self-consciously and unapologetically engages in a rhetorical assault on common sensibilities?”. For Ramberg, the answer is “a Pragmatist”. In this chapter, I will attempt to show that we could just as readily answer: “a Mādhyamika”. One type of “common sensibility” that Rorty opposes is representationalism, namely the semantic commitment that terms “stand for” or “refer to” nonlinguistic properties of the world. Although such representationalist commitments embody the ways some people intuitively understand their epistemic relationships to the world, Rorty’s metaphilosophical stance is to reject such intuitions – intuitions are not epistemic necessities but contingent matters of social practice. Rorty (1997, 177) urges the Pragmatist to utilise the “immodest metaphilosophical framework according to which philosophical reflection can reject...intuitions”. Even those intuitions which we think *must* be true can be reworked because they are the contingent concomitants of certain vocabularies we have become socialised into using. In this sense, accommodating intuitions,

⁵⁴ In re-reading Nāgārjuna through a Rortyan lens, when I use the term “metaphilosophy” I mean something akin to a “metacritique”. Unlike Rorty, Nāgārjuna did not have concrete views about the possible futures of the academic discipline called “philosophy”. Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna could be read as having certain things to say about the kind of inquiries his interlocutors were engaged in from a “meta” level.

as a general method, is a move in the wrong direction.⁵⁵ All intuitions are optional and subject to change along different historical trajectories, so that what seemed intuitive to Aristotle, for example, may seem implausible to us. Hence, as we observed in Chapter 3, Brandom, Davidson, and Dennett, as Rorty reads them, offer new vocabularies which allow us to move past certain representationalist intuitions about how language and reality are constituted, and help to dissolve philosophical “problems”. Thus, Pragmatists are opposed to problem-solving because it stems from a “desire to harmonize pre-existent intuitions” (Rorty 1995a, 202). Instead, to *dissolve* problems is to take seriously the “task of asking whether the vocabulary in which these intuitions are stated is a useful one” (1995a, 202). To this extent, on my reading, both Nāgārjuna and Rorty are engaging in *metaphilosophy* when they launch *metacritical* attacks on intuitive patterns of critical inquiry.

As we observed, the Mādhyamika attacks the notion of *svabhāva*, namely the assumption that objects exist intrinsically. I suggest that this critique can be read as an attempt to challenge our “common sensibilities”. In line with Westerhoff’s (2017) argument that Nāgārjuna is a thoroughgoing anti-foundationalist, the appeal to an intuition, as some kind of certain foundation on which to build our inquiries, would be problematic in the Madhyamaka context. However, our Rortyan re-reading of Nāgārjuna will bring into high relief that this rejection is motivated by more than a commitment to anti-foundationalism *within* an established discursive space (here, of the idiom of “substance”), and can be likened to a metaphilosophical stance taken from the *periphery* of this space. Like Rorty, Nāgārjuna too is “intentionally peripheral” (PMN 369) insofar as Nāgārjuna’s argumentative strategy is motivated by an attempt to steer intellectual discourse towards a new, Buddhist-motivated, and soteriologically beneficial vocabulary that would break away from pre-existing, *svabhāva*-inflected vocabularies. Both Rorty and Nāgārjuna can be interpreted as wishing to bring to an end a particular language game – for Rorty, the representationalist structures of Western philosophical milieus and for Nāgārjuna, the *svabhāva*-inflected dialogical spaces of 2nd century Indic intellectual milieus. However, these two rejections, I argue, actually target the *same* language game – representationalism. Given my metaphilosophical reading of Nāgārjuna, we will see his rejection of *svabhāva* too as a rejection of representationalism. So, I will suggest that Nāgārjuna should not be placed on a realist versus anti-realist spectrum, for Nāgārjuna is an *anti-representationalist*. As Rorty notes, “the representationalism-vs.-antirepresentationalism issue

⁵⁵ Rorty (1997, 173) faults Brandom for constructing a Pragmatist-friendly notion of “representation” (i.e., one that is explained from within our social practices), because this notion involves an attempt to accommodate certain (problematic) intuitions.

is distinct from the realism-vs.-antirealism one, because the latter issue arises only for representationalists” (ORT 2). To invoke the metaphor of oscillation again, the debates between realism and anti-realism are sustained by their shared affirmation (even if implicitly) of the explanatory utility of mind-world or scheme-content dualisms. Our metaphilosophical re-envisioning will reiterate the claim highlighted in Chapter 3 that contemporary Madhyamaka interpreters are indeed gesturing towards anti-representationalism, but this gesture does not extend to taking an *explicit* stance against representationalism, and thus the radically anti-metaphysical Madhyamaka message is partially obscured. I will suggest that Nāgārjuna, read as an anti-representationalist, is attempting to get us to deny the significance of certain questions that are raised in intellectual spaces permeated by representationalist presuppositions.⁵⁶ That is, I argue that Nāgārjuna can be read as discarding certain core dualisms that feed the representationalist presuppositions it is his aim to uproot, such as scheme-content, fact-convention, and real-fictional. While the interpretation I offer here is not in *substantive* disagreement with the “orthodox” anti-realist one, there is a significant difference in *emphasis*. My aim is to show that I and the “orthodox” are “employing different rhetorical strategies to make essentially the same points” (TP 132), but the strategy I offer has the hermeneutic advantage of taking us to the Madhyamaka message along a more straightforward conceptual route – one that also takes into consideration valuable points made by the “heterodox” side, particularly regarding the motif of complete viewlessness.

If Nāgārjuna is making *metacritical* moves, and if we can find a way to articulate these moves without importing any of the conceptual baggage he is critiquing, we are in the beneficial position of putting forth a much more radical interpretation than even the semantic interpretation introduced in section 2.2.1. This is not an easy intellectual path to navigate, but Rorty shows us that it is not impossible. On my Rortyan re-reading too, there will be no “metaphysics of emptiness” (Garfield and Westerhoff 2015, 1) because for an anti-representationalist there is no metaphysics. Emptiness, read anti-representationally, is not a proposition *about* the way things are – neither ultimately nor *even* conventionally. Of course, both the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” would agree that Nāgārjuna ultimately rejects representationalism because given dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), “mind” and “world” cannot refer to two distinct entities since they are understood as interrelated phenomenal processes. So, language cannot ultimately stand as some *tertium quid* between

⁵⁶ Thus, *pace* Arnold (2005, 137), who takes the Mādhyamika negation of a truth-claim to be a truth-claim too, I will suggest that Nāgārjuna is not denying a truth-claim, but rather primarily attempting to show us that there is no point in determining the truth-values of propositions.

mind and world, and knowledge cannot be the correct correspondence between “belief” and “reality” because the mind is interrelated with the world through the causal matrices of dependent origination. I will develop this Madhyamaka rejection of the mind-world dualism and suggest that we should “change the subject” from realism versus anti-realism to representationalism versus anti-representationalism – not only “ultimately” but *also* “conventionally”. Rorty provides us with some resources with which to offer a thoroughly anti-representationalist account of the conventional, which means that *even* the conventional need not be explained by configuring a “fictional” world.

This chapter will unfold as follows. First, in section 4.1 we will investigate the strategic routes available to a thinker who remains on a discursive periphery. In section 4.1.1 we will suggest a new imagery with which to re-conceptualise what it means to seek to bring an end to a particular language game from this periphery. Then, in section 4.1.2 we will examine the argumental instruments open to such “peripheral” thinkers and highlight their dynamic metacritical strategies as they move between criticism and metacriticism. Having sketched this style of navigating a philosophical terrain, as well as the methods by which a metacritique of an entire dialectical space can be launched, we will move to section 4.2 where we highlight some resonances between Rorty and Nāgārjuna. Here, the suggestion that both thinkers are attacking essentialism and representationalism will be developed. In section 4.2.1, we will trace some conceptual equivalences between Rorty’s pan-relationalism and Nāgārjuna’s dependent origination to show that Nāgārjuna too is a (Sellarsian) psychological nominalist and thus an anti-representationalist. Then, in section 4.2.2 we will examine the interpretive effects of our comparative endeavour and highlight how a thoroughly anti-representationalist reading differs in emphasis from “orthodox” anti-realist accounts as well as from the “heterodox” literary interpretations. By shifting the emphasis towards anti-representationalism, Nāgārjuna can be read as problematising not only an ultimate way things are, but *also* a conventional way things are, since the latter descriptions too subtly reinforce the dualism between scheme and content. Having examined how the Rortyan re-reading of Nāgārjuna has a different style and degree of emphasis from “orthodox” articulations, we will explore in section 4.2.3 the thoroughly anti-metaphysical consequences that the anti-representationalist road leads us to. Finally, in section 4.3 we will summarise the key points of this chapter.

4.1 Edification and Construction: Navigating from the Periphery

“What counts for metaphilosophy counts for language as well: there are no fixed rules, but the game is to change the rules” (Huetter-Almerigi and Ramberg, forthcoming).

In the previous chapter we recognised that Rorty’s metaphilosophical vision of the intellectual activity we call “philosophy” allows us to move past binaries such as rational versus irrational, reason versus imagination, and philosophy versus literature. As we observed in Chapter 3, by highlighting the fact that rhetorical redescriptions are forms of philosophical argumentation, we can hold together in a single vision the conceptual and the rhetorical points made by the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” interpreters respectively. We do not need to read Nāgārjuna as abruptly moving back and forth between the two – we can read him as engaged in a single dynamically complex metaphilosophical project. In so doing, Nāgārjuna’s viewlessness and thesis-less-ness can be taken as unequivocal – a stance that is expressed through metacritical attacks that are both deconstructive and transformative. Part of the answer to how this is possible lies in the Pragmatist strategy to be explained below, which allows us to read Nāgārjuna’s message “not as a matter of our being brought to abandon specific theses, to change our minds about truth values, but...of coming to *doubt the point* of determining the truth values of a range of propositions that earlier mattered to us” (Ramberg 2013b, 52, emphasis added).

4.1.1 The Dilemma of Dialectical Participation

I will now attempt to offer an exposition of Pragmatist metaphilosophy in a way that highlights the difficulty of navigating a language game from its periphery. Let us survey the terrain of philosophical conversation from a long-range perspective. In any debate or form of inquiry, there are fundamental rules of dialectical engagement that are either implicitly presupposed or explicitly agreed upon, and the participants must comply with these rules if they are to communicate in a meaningful way with one another. Whatever be the specific topic of a philosophical conversation, we may imagine its discursive or dialectical space as a circle, as indicated in Figure 1. For example, whether or not the body and the mind are ontologically distinct is a conversational topic that has been discussed across different Indic and European cultures. If we imagine this debate to take place between interlocutors in a specific tradition, it

can be useful to highlight, with respect to our circle, some of their differing positions. We place at the centre those interlocutors – depicted as X – who are engaging directly with the question and also take one particular side in opposition to the others. In this example, X might be thinkers who argue that the body and the mind are ontologically distinct entities and provide logical proofs and reasoned defences for their position, as well as critiques of the standpoints of their opponents. What unites all X is their willingness to occupy a specific position *on* this conversational spectrum. Another way of formulating this willingness is to say that all X are happy to follow the established rules of the conversation. Aside from the fundamental presuppositions such as grammar, semantics, etc., that a general form of communication relies on, there are some domain-specific presuppositions that must be established for specific agreements and disagreements to make sense. They include definitions of terms, rules of inference, conceptual implications, etc., which have to be in place so that the conversation can get off the ground and retain its dialectical momentum.

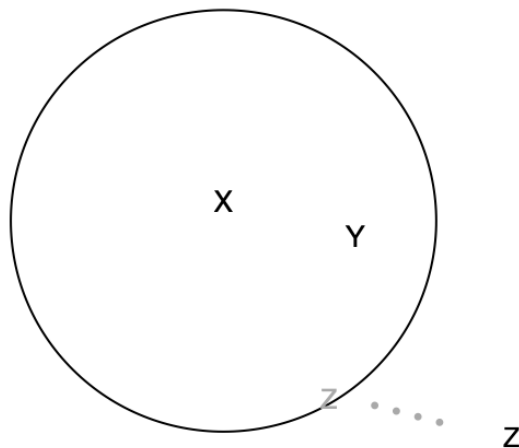


Figure 1

Let us now explore the possibility that certain participants begin to question some of the presuppositions that make the very conversation possible – whether these presuppositions are of the general kind or the domain-specific kind. To return to our circle, these participants would begin to move away from X and veer towards the periphery of the conversational space. The closer they move to this borderline, the greater the number of the presuppositions that they would be rejecting, or at least calling into question. Let us depict such conversationalists as Y. To return to our example, Y might argue that the very dichotomy of “mind” versus “body” or

“material” versus “immaterial” is based on a false substantial dualism. They might redirect the conversation towards a more phenomenological view and co-relate what is presented to us from within our experiential perspectives with the external world. The point of this example is to demonstrate a reasonable move within a conversational space that leads a participant away from a central paradigm (X) towards an underexplored peripheral possibility (Y). Crucially, however, although Y is moving towards the edges of the conversational space, Y still remains within its contours.

But how are we to depict the discursive status of those rather intriguing thinkers who embody two opposing cognitive pulls – on the one hand, they do not see the value of inhabiting this dialectical space *at all*, perhaps because they disagree with the root assumptions that structure the ongoing conversation, but, on the other hand, they *too* have to move within these doxastic spaces that place great epistemic value on continuing precisely that conversation? In other words, how should we characterise those thinkers who question or reject many of the presuppositions of the conversation, yet who somewhat paradoxically must operate within that very conversation’s discursive parameters? Such a thinker would find themselves in an epistemically delicate position that I will call the *dilemma of dialectical participation* (henceforth DDP). We will depict their position as Z. Although Z situate themselves outside the dialectical periphery due to their principled unwillingness to participate, they are nevertheless conceptually (and possibly institutionally as well) forced to enter this conversational space and provide at least some reasons as to *why* their position is what it is, namely a non-position (symbolised by the grey Z).

In other words, Z can be expected to provide a reasoned argument for why they do not seek to indwell the dialectical space – an argument that must fit or reflect the parameters of the very conversation they otherwise eschew. Hence, Z are presented with a discursive dilemma: *either* Z resolutely remains outside the dialectical space, in which case their position remains unknown to everyone inside the circle and has no impact on the philosophical conversation (and indeed Z faces the real-world threat of losing their institutional position or royal patronage) *or* Z does enter the conversational space, but runs the risk of being seriously misinterpreted because Z must operate with precisely those rules that Z otherwise rejects. If the first horn is taken, the unmitigated silence of Z is easily misinterpreted as merely a stance of ignorance, potentially giving rise to an explicit dismissal of Z by those in XY space. If the second horn is taken, we can say that Z is putting on a conversational mask which must be temporarily worn in order to explain to those within the circle why Z prefers to remain outside. However, Z may be misinterpreted in a way that undermines the significance of their stance by

characterising it as just one more of the many epistemic positions within the dialectical space, rather than as a principled refusal to be placed within the circle at all. Thus, DDP helps us bring into high relief how a Z position vis-à-vis a particular dialectical space can be, cognitively speaking, a lose-lose situation – *either* they go totally unnoticed and perish in an intellectual wilderness *or* they risk misinterpretation by becoming conceptually domesticated into the categories of XY space.

4.1.2 Z (non-)Positions, XY Spaces, and Instruments of Argumentation

With these remarks in place, we now turn to Rorty and Nāgārjuna, who I argue are two thinkers that are best conceptualised as occupying this Z (non-)position with respect to particular philosophical vocabularies while nimbly traversing the grey Z spectrum. We will explore a Z-type of dialogical methodology with which this spectrum can be traversed. In Rorty’s case, he eschews all questions motivated by representationalism and in Nāgārjuna’s case, he foregoes all discussions that presuppose *svabhāva* – and yet both have produced works that are difficult to set aside as straightforwardly anti-rational or only deconstructive. There is more to their respective articulations than just critiques of some language game – they also propose alternative visions.⁵⁷

The question for our purposes is this: by applying what methods can Nāgārjuna carry out his breaking away from XY space and movement towards Z? Or to allude to our discussions in section 3.2, by what means can he both *use* reason and yet not be *beholden to* reason? Here, we can develop a point made by Gascoigne and Bacon (2020, 8) in their exploration of how Rorty’s work builds on the deconstructive strategies of Jacques Derrida. They explain that when one wants to place oneself outside a particular conversation (or, in our terminology, when one wants to move towards Z), one is faced with two options. In the words of Derrida (1982, 135), *either* one (A) applies “against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house” *or* (B) attempts to change the “terrain in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion”. A Pragmatist would argue that in attempting to move away from discursive spaces, one has to do *both* (A) and (B). Hence, in order to respond to the “challenge of reappropriation and exclusion” (Gascoigne and Bacon 2020, 8), that is, the dilemma of *either* operating with the very rules of the conversation one otherwise wishes to uproot *or* standing so far outside this

⁵⁷ Although it lies outside the scope of this dissertation to engage with Rorty’s positive metaphilosophical and socio-political suggestions, his intellectual corpus contains much in the way of articulating alternative visions to representationalism. Likewise, Nāgārjuna espouses positive articulations of the Buddhist soteriological path, including the four noble truths, dependent origination, not-self, the noble eightfold path, momentariness, etc.

conversation that one does not get heard at all, the solution is to undertake an intellectual activity that methodically works with *both* (A) and (B). So, Z would dynamically move between (A) and (B) – Z would use whatever tools are available to break down the old terrain (A), and also alter the space of reasons by shifting the reason-set regarded as significant,⁵⁸ and in this way “map-out the [new] possibilities that have been glimpsed” (B) (2020, 8).

In charitably exploring Rorty’s rejection of representationalism it is especially important to keep (A) in mind. Even when Rorty is tearing down the edifice of representationalism with the (possibly representationalism-shaped) instruments available in the (representationalist’s) house, this does *not* mean that the instruments themselves are taken by him as anything more than useful tools for this task. Ramberg (2013b, 52, emphasis added) tells us that “[o]pposing metaphysics [“the rational determination of general constraint on human thought”] as Rorty does, may well require arguments *against specific metaphysical theses* (and one finds such arguments in *PMN*)”. However, in deconstructing or critiquing a specific thesis, Rorty does not seek to replace it with “an alternative metaphysical thesis” (2013b, 52). Therefore, Rorty would not seek to mount a fully-fledged philosophical attack against metaphysics, because “by the time you have specified what you argue against sufficiently clearly to frame an argument, the game is up; you are [already] doing metaphysics” (2013b, 52). Hence, someone in a Z (non-)position might offer a metacritical analysis of XY space through the use of instruments that are argumentative, but in this (A)-mode, the aim is to destabilise the structure from within by offering specific blows to its load-bearing walls.

Resonating with this Rortyan (A)-stance is the recognition that Nāgārjuna too never offers a “master argument” against emptiness (Westerhoff 2009a, 92). We can add some explanation to Westerhoff’s observation that “the absence of any master argument for emptiness might constitute not a difficulty, but an inescapable consequence of Madhyamaka epistemology. Since the Mādhyamika regards nothing as being intrinsically a means of knowledge, what establishes emptiness in one context might fail to do so in another” (2009a, 92). Perhaps the principled refusal to develop a master argument is an expression of a metaphilosophical commitment according to which from a Z (non-)position one enters the XY space to bring about a vocabulary *shift*, which would question the very intellectual activity of those inhabiting this space and asking a certain type of question – “a case is being mounted against the presumed point of the question” (Ramberg 2001, 25) to which distinct answers are being developed. Thus, Nāgārjuna will have (A)-type arguments against specific philosophical

⁵⁸ Such as the Copernican and the Darwinian shifts in vocabulary discussed in Chapter 3.

positions that presuppose *svabhāva*, but as a metaphilosophical anti-representationalist, he will not be tempted to construct a panoptic argument because to do so would be to stand above vocabularies as a neutral arbiter, and implicitly endorse the idea of a transcendental space of evaluation, which we have rejected in Chapter 3. Through our DDP lens, we can re-read Nāgārjuna's use of the tetralemmas as deconstructive attempts to demonstrate the problems associated with presupposing *svabhāva*. Thus, Nāgārjuna is undertaking an (A)-style immanent critique of the edifices constructed with the bricks of *svabhāva* by applying tools from *within* the dialectical space structured by *svabhāva* that he otherwise wishes to uproot.

Crucially, however, Nāgārjuna does not stop at (A). Analogously, as Ramberg (2013b, 52-53) reads Rorty, Pragmatism “even in Rorty's variety, is not principally a deconstructive philosophy”. Thus, although Huntington (1989) is correct in emphasising the power of the deconstructive method in Madhyamaka strategies, which is used on an *ad hoc* basis,⁵⁹ Nāgārjuna's employment of argumentation does not end here, even though, as we will see, his style of reasoning does not commit him to any views (*drṣṭi*). To see why, we will need to clarify Rorty's use of argumentation. Malachowski (2002, 50) explains that Rorty “aims to destabilize traditional philosophical practices and convictions [in XY spaces] rather than argue readers into rational submission regarding an alternative position [in XY spaces]”.⁶⁰ However, Rorty and Nāgārjuna perform (A), which does not seek to achieve or generate a rational consensus, in the light of an alternative vision of (B), namely anti-representationalism and emptiness. This (B)-guided transformation is an actively constructive process that allows them to *dissolve* XY spaces through alternative visions. Now, a key question is: in what sense is this dynamic combination of (A) and (B) constructive? One way to constructively system-build (as we observed in section 1.1 with respect to Rorty's definition of systematic philosophy) is to put forth truth-evaluable viewpoints in, we might add, an XY space. But for Z this clearly cannot be the goal. Perhaps there is another way to “construct” where one does put forward alternative suggestions, but these suggestions are not truth-evaluable in XY space because they aim to transform this space. Specifically, we will see that Nāgārjuna seeks to dissolve the disposition to hypostatization in XY spaces so that the significance of emptiness and dependent

⁵⁹ I think Huntington (1989) insists that Nāgārjuna is only engaging in *ad hoc*, deconstructive argumentation (i.e., “edifying philosophy”) because he was drawing primarily on *PMN* for his understanding of Rorty. However, if, with Ramberg (2013b), we re-consider the claims in *PMN* in the light of Rorty's later works, we will see that there is more to the concept of edification than deconstruction, namely Rorty presents a positive metaphilosophical vision of philosophy as cultural politics as well as a positive political vision committed to democratic liberalism. Once again, we can accommodate the “orthodox” observation that it is difficult to dismiss the significance of Nāgārjuna's positive claims.

⁶⁰ To recall our discussions in Chapter 3, this is why Rorty's strategy is to “change the subject”.

origination can be accentuated. So, from the metaphilosophical perspective of the DDP, a Z thinker's engagement with (A) as well as with (B) shows that their aim of argumentation is not simply to deconstruct "the [current] layout of people's propositional attitudes" (Ramberg 2001, 36). I suggest that their constructive (B)-engagements point to a vision that gives significance to their (A)-deconstructions of XY space. To tie this DDP lens to our discussion in the previous chapter, Z thinkers literalise *new* metaphors which give us "new candidates for belief", and this (B)-process alters the "pre-existent order of reasons" (Bacon 2007, 30) by changing the XY space in a "discontinuous and irruptive" (Derrida 1982, 135) fashion. This alteration is such because it does not simply lead us to dissolve our current beliefs in XY space, for it also leads us to re-evaluate or re-envision this space by modifying what we find salient (Ramberg 2001, 36).

Through this DDP lens, Nāgārjuna's strategy of (A)-style immanent critique can be seen as an implementation of skillful means (*upāya*), that is, the application of certain argumentative styles in order to dissolve the dialectical space that gives *svabhāva*-structured arguments their force. Those instances where Nāgārjuna is giving us (fleeting) glimpses of a radically transformed *svabhāva*-less horizon can be read as redescrptions which offer (B)-guided re-evaluations of the XY space.⁶¹ As we have seen, such redescription is a rational form of philosophical argumentation because the philosopher's task is to literalise new metaphors through the "mobilization of theory" (Reynolds 2000, 92). Therefore, we may ask: to what extent can Nāgārjuna be seen as mobilising theory for the purpose of literalising metaphors? Here, it is important to keep in mind the intellectual milieus in which Nāgārjuna was operating. According to Mahāyānā Buddhist tradition, it was Nāgārjuna who made the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñā-pāramitā*) scriptures (c.100 BCE) accessible (Westerhoff 2018b, 92). These Buddhist scriptures clearly articulate emptiness as a central theme, even if they do so in a notoriously cryptic way. As Westerhoff (2018b, 93) states: "Despite the fact that the notion of emptiness is the dominant theme of the Perfection of Wisdom texts, they do not present a great number of arguments for the claim that everything is indeed empty, nor do they discuss potential objections". In this scriptural milieu, Nāgārjuna's role was "to provide a set of arguments in support of the claims of the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*, to explicate their contents, and to demonstrate their philosophical feasibility" (2018b, 93).

⁶¹ For example, MMK 18:8 reads "All is real or all is unreal, all is both real and unreal, all is neither unreal nor real; this is the graded teaching of the Buddha" (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 200). Likewise, MMK 15:6 states: "Intrinsic nature and extrinsic nature, existent and nonexistent – who see these do not see the truth of the Buddha's teachings" (2013, 159).

From our Rortyan metaphilosophical perspective, we can characterise Nāgārjuna's role in the following way: The Perfection of Wisdom texts are expressions of visionary poetry, insofar as they are the presentation of new cosmological-spiritual-existential metaphors which interrogate our customary dualistic intuitions shaped by *svabhāva*.⁶² The central metaphor in these texts is, of course, emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Concurrently, Nāgārjuna's task, qua philosopher, is to develop a "theory" that would enable the accommodation of this new metaphor in contemporary XY spaces. For instance, Nāgārjuna's proposed conceptual equivalence between emptiness and dependent origination can be read as a (B)-illuminated "theoretical" attempt. This equivalence between *śūnyatā* (new metaphor) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (established concept) is carried out through an (A)-shaped dismantling of the notion of essence. To ensure that this dismantling does not jeopardise the Buddha's positive teachings such as not-self, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and so on, Madhyamaka undertakes a "mobilization of theory" (Reynolds 2000, 92) where the dependently originated character of everything is redescribed as the emptiness of everything. That is, emptiness is no longer a metaphor, but rather is the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination. In this way, Nāgārjuna radically transforms the layout of the XY space of Abhidharma by suggesting that emptiness and dependent origination are two sides of the same conceptual coin, and both are required in order to understand the Buddhist message.⁶³ Whereas in the Abhidharma XY space, dependent origination was explained with reference to entities with intrinsic nature (*dharmas*), the metaphor of emptiness is "literalised" by Nāgārjuna to show that dependent origination can only apply to all conditioned phenomena if it is not explained with reference to anything having an intrinsic nature. In so doing, the Mādhyamika attacks what in the Abhidharma XY space is intuitive, namely dependently originated things must have as their basis things that are not themselves dependently originated. Thus, the two moments of arguing against *svabhāva*-inflected positions through deconstructive arguments (A) and redescribing the XY space in a way that enables us to apprehend (fleetingly) the new terrain announced by the *Prajñā-pāramitā* scriptures (B) go hand in hand.

⁶² Westerhoff (2018b, 92) explains: "The Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 verses spells out the claim that 'x is emptiness, and emptiness itself is x' by going through a long list of about 200 items one by one". A dramatic example of the poetic nature of these *sūtras* is the Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter (*Ekākṣarāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*). As Westerhoff (2018b, 92) explains: "Subtracting the usual preamble and conclusion it just consists of the letter A...A is not only the first sound of the Sanskrit syllabary, but can also be prefixed to nouns and adjectives to form their negations".

⁶³ MMK 24:10 states: "The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained" (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 273); and MMK 24:18 states: "Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle way" (2013, 277).

In short, both Nāgārjuna and Rorty can be read as “drawing up, and attempting to implement, proposals for how we may, using language, do various things differently from the way we have been doing them up to now” (Ramberg 2013b, 53). These kinds of proposals are oriented towards (B)-visions since tearing down an intellectual edifice through (A)-deconstructions will not succeed in re-orienting an entire language game. Nāgārjuna can be read, like Rorty in PMN, as providing arguments in MMK against specific philosophical positions, but for the sake of preparing the space of reasons to be altered or expanded – in this case, for articulating the notion of emptiness which is wholly anti-ontological and not *about* the world. Thus, in instances when Nāgārjuna makes somewhat esoteric and *prima facie* impenetrable statements, he can be read as engaging in (B) and mapping out a new *svabhāva*-less landscape. Perhaps the dedicatory verse of the MMK can be read as an intimation of (B): “I salute the Fully Enlightened One...who taught the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming nor the going [of any *dharma*, for the purpose of *nirvāṇa* characterized by] the auspicious cessation of hypostatization” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 13). The combination of (A) and (B) gestures to the possibility of using argumentation to delicately abide in an indeterminate place where logical contraries shaped by the idioms of *svabhāva* have collapsed.

The difficulty of inhabiting such a place of conceptual indeterminacy is acknowledged by Rorty in his own context of Western academic philosophy: Rorty tells us that it is “an awkward, but not impossible position” to maintain (PMN 371). Explaining the difficulty faced by those who argue against representationalism and thus are forced to enter into XY spaces suffused precisely by the idioms of representationalism, he writes that their critique should be understood as “only their entering wedge, for then we must cease to see ourselves as *seeing* this [entering wedge], without beginning to see ourselves as seeing something else” (PMN 371). Rorty’s subtle point is that it is all too easy to appropriate anti-representationalist critiques as belonging to the very representationalist discursive spaces they wish to dismantle. Thus, when Rorty argues against representationalism, he is suggesting that rather than replace our representationalist tendencies with some updated crypto-representationalist theory, we must completely cease to “contrast a represented world with our ways of representing it” (PCP 157). More generally, Rorty writes that the difficulty that a philosopher faces in setting oneself against an established tradition is that:

qua philosopher, he is in the business of offering arguments, whereas he would like simply to offer another set of terms, *without* saying that

these terms are the new-found accurate representations of essences (e.g., of the essence of ‘philosophy’ itself). He is, so to speak, violating not just the rules of normal philosophy (the philosophy of the schools of his day) but a sort of meta-rule: the [meta-]rule that one may suggest changing the rules only because one has noticed that the old ones do not fit the subject matter. (PMN 370)

In other words, the fact that one immanently deconstructs an edifice (A) puts one’s arguments at the risk of appropriation, especially when what is intended to be destroyed is an entire dialectical space that takes for granted a particular subject-object or scheme-content dichotomy. As we have seen in Chapter 3, to deny such a representationalist dichotomy forces a shift in XY spaces that are concerned with epistemology and semantics. So, a Z (non-)position which seeks to move away from representationalism cannot be placed within these spaces because they are constituted by the dichotomies that have been dismissed.

In the light of these discussions, I think that we can similarly read Nāgārjuna as moving on the grey Z continuum when he both states *that* emptiness is a dependent concept (MMK 24:18) and declares that he has *no* thesis (*pratijñā*) (VV 29). From our metaphilosophical or metacritical standpoint, Nāgārjuna’s motif of emptiness can be read as *undermining* the XY space which is imbued with essence, in VV 29, and *reilluminating* that XY space, in MMK 24:18. This technique is useful for those who occupy a Z (non-)position relative to a particular dialectical space, and Rorty’s Pragmatism has indicated that this methodology is not as mystifying as it may seem at first glance – an attempt to alter the space of reasons may involve a utilisation of the current rules to get people to understand that a change is needed, but this attempt carries with it the risk that any appeal to the *current vocabularies* binds one to the existing dialectical space and thus the *new vocabularies* too are viewed by interlocutors as part of that space.

4.2 Rejecting a Common Target: Nāgārjuna Against Representationalism

In exploring what kind of navigational strategies a “peripheral” Z thinker could employ in order to transform a discursive space, it became clear that such a task involves a back-and-forth movement between destruction and construction, and demolition and new visions. The core problem for such thinkers is that given the dynamic character of their metaphilosophical strategies, they run the risk of being misunderstood. Nevertheless, this is a risk worth taking because of the possibilities of arguing, illuminating, and persuading rationally, whilst simultaneously eschewing the development of a thesis (*pratijñā*) or view (*dṛṣṭi*). Questions

raised in XY spaces are not directly answered by Z; instead, Z seeks to problematise these questions by envisioning newer horizons of significance.

We will now fill in this schematic outline with some content. My aim will be to demonstrate that there are deep resonances between Rorty's critique of representationalism and Nāgārjuna's critique of *svabhāva*, not just in terms of a methodology involving Z (non-) positions, but also in terms of content. I suggest we read Nāgārjuna's critique of *svabhāva* anti-representationally – that is, the statements in the MMK do not “stand for” some “objects, properties, or states of affairs at the ‘far end’ of some semantic relation” (Macarthur and Price 2007, 96), but rather can be interpreted as the Madhyamaka attempt to problematise subject-object dualisms in order to overcome the intellectual tendency of hypostatization. I will argue that Nāgārjuna can be plausibly read as an anti-representationalist in the “conventional” too, which has several implications for how we read the significance of the Madhyamaka message. In this sense, to echo the semantic interpretation offered by the “orthodox”, according to which Nāgārjuna problematizes the notion of some “ultimate way things *are*”, I suggest that if we take on board the Rortyan anti-representationalist appeal to vocabularies, Nāgārjuna can be read as also problematising the notion of some “conventional way things *are*”. This is not to say that there is *no* reality; it is rather, à la Rorty, to put representationalism-styled questions about *reality* to rest.

4.2.1 Pan-Relationalism and Dependent Origination: *Śūnyatā* as the Rejection of Representationalism

Let us begin by distinguishing two distinct ideas we might entertain when we use the word “conventional” to translate the Sanskrit terms *vyāvahārika* or *saṃvṛti*. On the one hand, we will use *conventional*₁ to refer to the ordinary, common-sense ways in which (unenlightened) humans epistemically and linguistically engage with the world. According to these *conventional*₁, that is, quotidian intuitions, the world is pervaded by essences, words refer to nonlinguistic objects, and to have knowledge of X is for a belief about X to correspond to X. On the other hand, we will use *conventional*₂ to designate the Madhyamaka claims of dependent origination and emptiness – these claims are not commonplace perceptual observations such as “the grass is green” and are instead correctives of our essence-structured notions at *conventional*₁.⁶⁴ Likewise, the Neo-Pragmatist understandings of knowledge,

⁶⁴ In MMK 24:10 Nāgārjuna says: “The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 273).

language, and world we have been discussing – for instance, holism and psychological nominalism – are conventional₂ since they are offered as correctives of our conventional₁ representationalist intuitions.

Thus, Nāgārjuna’s critique of essence is similar to the Pragmatist critical standpoints that Rorty articulates. Like Rorty, we should read Nāgārjuna too as suggesting that it is a mistake to use conventional₁ as a stable template for conventional₂. In both instances, one would be making the mistake of taking customary *ways of talking* as somehow indicative of a (yet) deeper reality. Our delineation will suggest that it is “more important to appreciate the purposes for which we agents created concepts...than to undertake the quixotic and ultimately unrevealing task of relating them in an orderly way to some allegedly fundamental ontology” (Healey 2013). Needless to say, such a “fundamental ontology” is out of the question for a Mādhyamika, but we can substitute a “conventional ontology” – that is, some conventional₂ description of the constituents of the conventional₁ world. If Nāgārjuna is read as a Rortyan anti-representationalist, his statements such as “everything is empty” would *not* be taken as conventional₂ statements *about* the conventional₁ world. Instead, Nāgārjuna would be read as a thoroughgoing anti-representationalist who skilfully inhabits conventional₂ domains without seeking to tacitly uphold a dualism between scheme and content – to say that everything is empty and dependently originated is to make a holistic and anti-representationalist claim regarding the ubiquity of language and our entangled-ness in the world, which cannot be captured through subject-object or scheme-content dualisms.

To begin with, Rorty is an anti-essentialist, and defends a position that is similar to “essence-less” *śūnyatā*. He explains: “We antiessentialists would like to convince you that it also does not pay to be essentialist about tables, stars, electrons, human beings, academic disciplines, social institutions, or anything else” (PSH 53). Moreover, as we observed in section 3.1.2, he defends what he calls “pan-relationalism”, and it has been argued that pan-relationalism has deep affinities to dependent origination (Brons 2020, 23). Like Nāgārjuna, Rorty sees these two commitments, namely anti-essentialism and pan-relationalism, as two sides of the same conceptual coin. Rorty suggests in *PSH* that if one accepts anti-essentialism and pan-relationalism, one is also a psychological nominalist of the Sellarsian kind introduced in section 3.1.1 because “to say that relations go all the way down [i.e., pan-relationalism] is a

Claims like “dependent origination” are expressed dependently on (*āśritya*) “customary” or conventional (*vyavahāra*) vocabulary. In our terminology, these claims are conventional₂ explanations of conventional₁ intuitions. In a similar way, the teaching of not-self (*anātman*) is a conventional₂ redescription of our conventional₁ intuition that we have a stable, permanent self. In his discourses, the Buddha did sometimes use the language of “person”, as part of skillful means.

corollary of psychological nominalism: of the doctrine that there is nothing to be known about anything save what is stated in sentences describing it” (PSH 54). Moreover, as became clear in Chapter 3, these commitments to pan-relationalism and psychological nominalism are specifically directed against *representationalism* because they call into question the explanatory appeal to a nonlinguistic world outside of our practices that would constrain our descriptions of it. Thus, I suggest that Nāgārjuna too, who is an anti-essentialist and a pan-relationalist, should be read as a psychological nominalist. I will use this formulaic conjunction of standpoints to argue that Nāgārjuna can be read as an anti-representationalist: anti-essentialism + pan-relationalism + psychological nominalism = anti-representationalism.

Rorty clearly rejects the notion of essence (*svabhāva*, in Nāgārjuna’s idiom). The motivating impulse for pan-relationalism is perhaps best exemplified through some reflections from number theory. If we ask, “What is the number seven?”, we can answer, “It is one less than eight” or “It is five more than two”, along with an infinite set of enumerative responses. Now, if someone re-articulates this first-order question and asks a second-order question, “Yes, but all these answers just articulate the number seven’s relationship to other numbers. What is the *essence* or the *intrinsic nature* of seven? What gives seven its very seven-ness?”, we might be bewildered. This is because although “none of [these descriptions] seems to get closer to the number”, we cannot say anything else about the number seven that could get us closer to its putative essence (PSH 53). Rorty concludes that “whatever sort of things may have intrinsic natures, numbers do not...it simply does not pay to be an essentialist about numbers” (PSH 53). Now, the point of *pan*-relationalism, as the name suggests, is that every-*thing* (all objects, concepts, phenomena, etc.) should be understood in this relational way: “there is nothing to be known about them except an initially large, and forever expandable, web of relations to other objects...There are, so to speak, relations all the way down, all the way up, and all the way out in every direction: you never reach something which is not just one more nexus of relations” (PSH 53).

This Rortyan style of pan-relationalism has been recognized as having important parallels with the Buddhist concept of dependent origination (Brons 2020, 23). Nāgārjuna equates dependent origination with emptiness, since the denial of intrinsicity (*svabhāva*) means that everything arises dependent upon – and interrelated within – a dynamic web of causal conditions. More precisely: to *be* is to be *related*, which is to be *empty* of substantiality. Nāgārjuna’s point about the emptiness of *dharma*s can be read as an extension of the motif of not-self (*anātman*) – downwards, upwards, and sideways – onto all objects. When we search for an ultimate bedrock of our existence in the form of an enduring self, all we find, upon

analysis, are evanescent matrices of five “aggregates” or “bundles” (*skandhas*) of psychophysical characteristics, such as form, volition, cognition, and sensation, none of which, individually or combined, can be taken to be a permanent self. Therefore, the self is empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva*). Likewise, when we search for the unchanging building blocks of objects, all we find are the *dharmas* which are, however, “empty” of substantiality or intrinsic existence.

Similarly, through his use of Dennett’s work on the concept of the self, Rorty develops his own anti-essentialist point in a direction that, I suggest, can be recognised as pan-relationalist in a remarkably Nāgārjunian manner. Dennett (1991, 410) argues that there is no such thing as a permanent, substantial self; instead, the self should be understood as the “center of narrative gravity” around which humans dynamically construct their selves just as a novelist configures an unfolding story. By (re)situating – and developing – their lives within narrative plots with varying temporal widths and points of significance, they interweave their selves into being. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note the *prima facie* similarity between Dennett’s claim and the Madhyamaka notion of *anātman*.⁶⁵ Rorty agrees with Dennett’s understanding of not-self and, reflecting Nāgārjuna’s universalisation of emptiness and relationality to *all* objects, Rorty (1993, 189) suggests a similar conceptual move: “My principal suggestion is that Dennett put his claim that the self is a “center of narrative gravity” in the context of the more general claim that “*all* objects resemble selves in being centers of *descriptive* gravity”. In other words, just as it is crucial in a Madhyamaka context to understand all *dharmas* as empty, so too for Rorty *all* objects should be understood as “pan-related” in the sense that they are inextricably related to the multiple descriptions we give them for different purposes.

To add weight to this comparative observation, Nāgārjuna’s declaration in MMK 24:18 that emptiness is a dependent designation (*prajñaptir upādāya*) serves to highlight the common linguistic motif between anti-essentialism and pan-relationalism, insofar as saying that “emptiness itself is empty” is simply another way of saying that “whatever is dependently co-arisen is verbally established. That is, the identity of any dependently arisen thing [such as the statement of emptiness itself] depends upon [relational matrices of] verbal conventions” (Garfield 2002, 36). For the Mādhyamika, the statement “everything is empty” just means that everything – including this statement itself – is inextricably related to our linguistic conventions

⁶⁵ For our purposes, it is sufficient that Dennett’s point is anti-essentialist (since that is how Rorty reads him), and the Madhyamaka account of not-self is similarly anti-essentialist because the self is empty of *svabhāva*.

and conceptual classifications.⁶⁶ This is because if one accepts the claim that objects lack intrinsic natures, and this claim itself is a dependent designation, a plausible way to think about dependent origination is not just as causally, but also as conceptually, dependent upon our conventional₁ linguistic idioms.⁶⁷ This theme is further supported by Nāgārjuna's statement that cause and effect are interdependent with a conceptualising mind (MMK 8:12, 10:8, 20:22, 24). As Westerhoff (2009a, 15) notes "[c]ausation is not a mind-independent, objective relation which connects objects 'which are there anyway.' It is rather something that would not exist without a substantial mental contribution; it is a conceptually constructed relation which would not exist without the conceptualizing mind".

To turn to the third component of our formula, I suggest that this reading of Nāgārjuna, which emphasises the deep intertwining of language and conceptual thought, resonates with Sellars's psychological nominalism, according to which "all awareness is a linguistic affair" (PSH 48).⁶⁸ This enmeshment is captured in Westerhoff's (2009a, 220) statement: "There is no way of investigating the world apart from our linguistic and conceptual practices, if only because these practices generate the notion of the 'world' and of the 'objects' in it in the first place". Thus, talk of the emptiness of the conventional₁ and of the conventional₂ can be read as gesturing towards psychological nominalism insofar as objects of experience are *enmeshed* with our conceptualising minds and our verbal conventions. In this context, Rorty argues that "[t]o say that relations go all the way down [i.e., pan-relationalism] is a *corollary* of what Sellars called 'psychological nominalism'" (PAA 89). If we take Nāgārjuna's commitment to emptiness and dependent origination as conceptually resonant with anti-essentialism and pan-relationalism, respectively, this conceptual parallelism suggests that a Mādhyamika would also be committed to psychological nominalism, since Rorty thinks that pan-relationalism *follows from* psychological nominalism (PAA 89). Rorty explains this move as follows:

⁶⁶ The "orthodox" anti-realist interpretation hinges on the notion of convention since what makes Nāgārjuna an anti-realist (or a fictionalist) is that meaning and truth gain their significance from within a system of conventions, rather than from mind-independent reality. I interpret their use of the term "convention" to mean an "intentional conformity to a regularity" (Ramberg 1989, 100). This concept plays a significant role in the philosophy of language of David Lewis, which Westerhoff (2011, 189-212) uses to explain conventionality for a Mādhyamika. We will see, in section 4.2.2, that for a Rortyan anti-representationalist who follows Davidson, this concept is discarded as explanatorily useless.

⁶⁷ "[T]he identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon verbal conventions" (Garfield 1995, 305). In other words, "emptiness" does not refer to an ultimately existent, mind-independent thing.

⁶⁸ Tillemans (2003) argues that the commentator Candrakīrti should be read as rejecting "the given", that is, unmediated, direct, knowledge by acquaintance. We need not concern ourselves with exegetical debates pertaining to which Mādhyamika thinkers did or did not accept this idea. For our purposes, it suffices that a rejection of "the given" has been recognised in a key commentator of Nāgārjuna. As indicated in section 3.1.1, Sellars's rejection of "the given" goes hand in hand with his psychological nominalism.

every sentence about an object is an explicit or implicit description of its relation to one or more other objects. So if there is no [direct] knowledge by acquaintance, no knowledge which does not take the form of a sentential attitude, then there is nothing to be known about anything save its relations to other things. (PAA 89)

So, to offer a description of *one* object is to offer a description of that object's relations to other objects. This is why a corollary of psychological nominalism is pan-relationalism, and pan-relationalism is intertwined with anti-essentialism, because there is no context-free description of one object such that this description would always be suitable for that object. Rorty tells us that the question "what *purpose* is this description supposed to serve?" (PAA 87, emphasis added) is inextricably tied to every attempt at describing objects, so that no one description can be more accurate than others *in abstracto*, that is, independent of the *specific* purpose behind that description.

Nāgārjuna too can be read in this Pragmatist spirit – his message signals that "carving out particular phenomena for explanation or for use in explanations depends more on our explanatory interests and language than on joints nature presents to us" (Garfield 2002, 29). This is the conceptual and linguistic enmeshment that is expressed by anti-representationalism which we have presented as the conjunction of anti-essentialism, pan-relationalism, and psychological nominalism. As Garfield (2002, 27) notes, "causal relations simply amount to explanatorily useful regularities". Thus, the Rortyan metaphor of centres of descriptive gravity, which hold together varying trajectories of description, seems a particularly apt way of indicating how we should view objects. This metaphor implies that there are no intrinsically primitive properties, putatively signified by predicates in sentences; instead, "[a]ll properties...are hypostatizations of webs of relations" (PAA 86). Thus, predicates that are treated by us as primitive, such as "green", rather than relational, such as "left-hand side", are to be regarded as primitive only because of their contextual use in describing a certain range of objects having the predicate (for instance, "green grass" but not "green sky"). This primitiveness is not intrinsic and is "relative to a way of teaching, or otherwise exhibiting, a use of the predicate" (PAA 213, n. 3).

To further apply these interrelations between anti-essentialism, pan-relationalism, and psychological nominalism to Nāgārjuna, we can add Rorty's observation that for a representationalist, knowing an object rightly "requires making some of the object's properties essential and some accidental" (PAA 87). Indeed, one dimension of the conceptual motor of representationalism is the claim that an object can, in principle, be re-presented *independent of* any contextual and relational characteristics. However, for a pan-relationalist, no properties or

predicates are *intrinsic* to an object, because “property” or “predicate” does not name a nonlinguistic feature. To say with an anti-representationalist that all objects should be visualised as centres of descriptive gravity is to say that “nothing is what it is under any and every description of it” (PAA 85). Indeed, the psychological nominalist has no use for either the *represented* or the *representing* – as if the former, as a putatively nonlinguistic item, has an inherent nature which can be captured by all descriptions. Crucially for our purposes, if Pragmatists correct our everyday intuitions at conventional₁ in terms of conventional₂, following the resonances we have been sketching, Nāgārjuna too would not take the representationalist intuitions of conventional₁ to have any explanatory value at conventional₂. That is, in his redescriptions, Nāgārjuna would “empty” the notions of essence at conventional₁ as well as at conventional₂.

Thus, the deep interconnectedness between language, thought, and reality that psychological nominalism suggests means that we should not invoke the notion of representation – at conventional₁ as well as at conventional₂ – because beliefs and language should not be mistakenly hypostatized as intermediaries between mind and world. Beliefs are simply “states attributed to persons in order to explain their behavior” (TP 128) and language, as we observed in Chapter 3, is an open-ended, dynamically evolving social practice that is a coping mechanism for humans in their diverse environments.⁶⁹ Indeed, this Pragmatist theme of hypostatization lies at the heart of the Madhyamaka account of emptiness, and lends support to our anti-representationalist reading of Nāgārjuna. Siderits and Katsura (2013, 271) present the Madhyamaka message in this way: the “true purpose of teaching emptiness is...the extinguishing of hypostatization”. This is why Nāgārjuna states in MMK 18:5: “Liberation is attained through the destruction of actions and defilements; actions and defilements arise because of falsifying conceptualizations; those arise from hypostatization; but hypostatization is extinguished in emptiness” (2013, 197). So, apprehending that no-thing has an essence or no-thing is an intrinsic property is a remedy for overcoming hypostatization (*prapañca*). Conversely, as Rorty suggests in his own context, hypostatization goes hand in hand with essentialism – the positing of intrinsic properties (“greenness”) is the hypostatization of the felt

⁶⁹ These Neo-Pragmatist themes rely heavily on Darwinian evolution, which, of course, we should not anachronistically apply onto Madhyamaka worldviews. Nevertheless, for Rorty, Darwin made it possible for “human beings to see themselves as continuous with the rest of nature – as temporal and contingent through and through” (Rorty 1995a, 197). This view is in opposition to the Platonist-Kantian ahistorical emphasis on the transcendental nature of humans as opposed to other animals. Arguably, the Buddhist commitment to cyclical existence (*saṃsāra*) and the possibility of rebirths into distinct realms, only one of which is human, makes for a better fit with Darwinian evolutionary theory, at least when compared to the Platonist-Kantian belief in timeless archetypes or noumena.

primitiveness of a predicate (“green”).⁷⁰ Indeed, Rorty’s anti-representationalist critique is aimed at the reification of ways of speaking that we have evolved in order to cope with our social environments and the view that these ways somehow capture inherent properties. Viewed through this lens, Nāgārjuna’s critique of Abhidharma philosophy is that what is otherwise a useful explanation in terms of *dharma*s is reified and projected as an objective feature of the world. However, psychological nominalism advises us to remain resolutely at the level of language and understand conceptual content as well as the meanings of words in terms of interdependent webs of relations. Siderits and Katsura (2013, 126) explain the Sanskrit term for hypostatization (*prapañca*) as follows:

The verb that we here translate as “hypostatize,” *pra + √pañc*, literally means to be prolix or excessively wordy, but in the Buddhist context it comes to have a specialized meaning...[and refers] to the drawing of conceptual distinctions, but in a way that connotes that there is something problematic about the process in question. In the Madhyamaka context the problem is identified as one of reification: taking what may be perfectly useful conceptual distinctions to indicate ultimately real entities and properties.

The Rortyan lens we are developing highlights that the Madhyamaka critique of the hypostatization of our mental and linguistic practices – as “ultimately real entities and properties” – is akin to the anti-representationalist critique of the assumption that certain everyday linguistic practices, such as the syntactical distinction between subjects and properties, mark out ontological categories in the fabric of reality. Instead, this distinction is “just a hypostatization of the relation between linguistic subject and linguistic predicate” (PSH 56). For Nāgārjuna one of the main problems associated with such dispositions of hypostatization is that they generate or reinforce a cognitive form of grasping – the “hankering after” an ultimate way that things are (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 64). As Nāgārjuna says in MMK 5:8 “But those of little intellect who take there to be existence and nonexistence with respect to things, they do not see the auspicious cessation of what is to be seen” (2013, 64). Crucially, by “auspicious cessation”, we are told, “is meant *nirvāṇa*, which is the cessation of hypostatization” (2013, 64).

To sum up, I have highlighted that there are some deep thematic resonances between Rorty and Nāgārjuna in terms of their anti-essentialism, pan-relationalism, and psychological nominalism, and therefore their anti-representationalism. My aim is to demonstrate that if we

⁷⁰ “Anti-essentialists think that the distinction between things related and relations is just an alternative way of making the distinction between what we are talking about and what we say about it. The latter distinction is...just a *hypostatization* of the relation between linguistic subject and linguistic predicate” (PSH 56, emphasis added).

can plausibly read Nāgārjuna in the light of the first three motifs, anti-representationalism follows in a Madhyamaka worldview. Since these three motifs are articulated in conventional₂, it follows that Nāgārjuna too is an anti-representationalist in conventional₂. With these articulations of Z (non-)positions in place, we will embark on the hermeneutic task of exploring how a shift in perspective from anti-*realism* to anti-*representationalism* can be used to explain the Madhyamaka conventional₂ articulations of dependent origination and emptiness.

4.2.2 Addressing the Residual “Metaphysics” of Emptiness: Problems with Anti-Realism

We have seen in section 2.2.1 that emptiness, understood as a semantic point, is read as an anti-metaphysical move against any characterisation of an ultimate way things are. Indeed, the (second-order) declaration that emptiness is itself empty is meant to prevent emptiness from being hypostatized as the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of things. Thus, Nāgārjuna’s insistence that *dharma*s are empty is meant to highlight the problems with attempting to describe how things ultimately are. Nevertheless, we might wonder: how can the Mādhyamika coherently make the seemingly positive claims they do, without, however, maintaining *any* ontological commitments? For instance, the Mādhyamika makes many claims that are central to Buddhist cosmic-existential visions such as emptiness, dependent origination, not-self, momentariness, the eightfold path towards enlightenment, etc. But crucially, Nāgārjuna states that these claims are (only) conventionally₂ true and not descriptions of how things *ultimately* are. Now, it is *prima facie* plausible that statements such as “everything is dependently arisen” and “objects lack intrinsic natures” – which use the logical structure of subject and predicate – are conventional₂ propositions *about* the status of conventional₁ objects.⁷¹ Some scholars regard the Madhyamaka claim that there are *no* ultimately existent objects, or that there is *no* ultimate way that things are, as “metaphysical” insofar as denying an ultimate way things are is itself making a claim *about* the ultimate. As Dan Arnold (2006, 13) argues, the Madhyamaka point is that the set of the ultimately existent is an empty set, but this declaration is still a declaration about *how things ultimately are*, namely *no way*. Similarly, Matthew Mackenzie (2008, 204) has suggested that Nāgārjuna is a weak ontological deflationist – although Nāgārjuna does not

⁷¹ For example, Westerhoff (2009a, 22, emphasis added) states: “This conception of *svabhāva* therefore agrees very well with a common understanding of an essence or essential property in *contemporary metaphysics*, which conceives of them as the properties an object cannot lose without ceasing to be that very object”. Siderits and Garfield (2013, 660, emphasis added) say that “both of us are committed to this view [that all things are mere *prajñapti-sat*], 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”.

think we can make any ultimate characterisation *about* the nature of reality, he does take the statements “there is no ultimate characterisation” and “everything is empty” to be true, and to this extent he is engaging in *some* type of ontological discussion.⁷² Mackenzie’s understanding of Nāgārjuna’s statements of dependent origination and emptiness as examples of “metaphysics” stems from a distinction that Mackenzie (2008, 204) highlights – what differentiates metaphysical claims from ordinary claims is that whereas the latter are common-sense idioms for talking about the world, the former mentions entities or phenomena that are not ordinary in this way. Thus, claims about *dharma*s are not straightforwardly ordinary (such as “I type on a laptop”) and are instead metaphysical. As Mackenzie (2008, 204) explains: “Some ontological claims can and should be affirmed, but to do so does not require a commitment to the ontological foundationalism that animates the project of Ontology. Indeed, according to the Mādhyamikas, the core claims of Buddhist ontology, properly understood, are empty, dependent designations, just like all other claims”. Thus, even those who espouse the semantic interpretation and state that the Mādhyamika rejects the intelligibility of an ultimate way things are, can make statements about what there is with conventional₂ idioms. Such statements, which are distinct from conventional₁ observations, are perhaps what they mean by “Buddhist metaphysics” in a Madhyamaka context.⁷³ In these appeals to “metaphysics”, the point seems to be that metaphysics need not be only about exercises in fundamental ontology at the level of ultimate truth/reality. Instead, we may engage in a residual or minimalist style of metaphysics at the level of conventional₂.

Before we continue, a few comments are in order regarding the key terms “ontological” and “metaphysical”. I will use them interchangeably, and take them to denote the results of a conventional₂ inquiry that says something *about* reality. Let us characterise the results of such an inquiry as ontology₁ or metaphysics₁. This is the weaker kind of metaphysics, according to which the aim is to shift our “theoretical gaze from linguistic starting points, at the “near end” of a semantic relation, such as a term, sentence, concept, or proposition” (Macarthur and Price 2007, 96) to the “far end” of the semantic relation, that is, to the part of “the world” that the near end “stands for”. This shift is made possible by semantic representationalism because representationalism shifts our gaze to “what we are talking *about*” (2007, 97), and thus implicitly sustains a scheme-content dualism whereby conventional₂ statements hold up the

⁷² This is metaphysics₁, to be introduced shortly.

⁷³ For example, Garfield (2002, 25, emphasis added) states that it is the “sophisticated development of the doctrine of the Two Truths as a vehicle for understanding *Buddhist metaphysics* and epistemology that is Nāgārjuna’s greatest philosophical contribution”.

conventional₁ world like a bloc before us, as it were, and says something about what it is actually like. Hence, Nāgārjuna's declaration that "everything is dependently arisen" would be an example of metaphysics₁ if taken to be offering a theoretical explanation at conventional₂ *about* the world, which is viewed from an epistemic distance as an object of study. Thus, any conventional₂ explanation that invokes representationalist notions (even if only tacitly) is metaphysical₁.

This can be juxtaposed with a stronger understanding – what we will call ontology₂ or metaphysics₂. Here we will follow Mackenzie's characterisation of Hilary Putnam's notion of the "project of Ontology", which aims to give "a philosophically rigorous account of what exists – that is, the most general features, entities and structures of being. In particular, it involves special attention to the ultimate or most basic element or elements of existence" (Mackenzie 2008, 197). Now, it goes without saying that both the "orthodox" and the "heterodox" affirm that Nāgārjuna is *not* doing metaphysics₂ (whereas Abhidharma was engaged in a style of metaphysics₂.) As Mackenzie (2008, 203) explains the Madhyamaka point, "[i]n so far as they purport to describe ultimate entities, all ontological claims misfire...if the Mādhyamikas are right, non-empty entities are impossible. Thus, the project of Ontology [ontology₂] suffers from massive presupposition failure". To recall, on the semantic interpretation, the teaching of emptiness is interpreted as the "rejection of the idea that the truth of a statement must depend on the ultimate nature of reality" (Siderits 2007, 182). Thus, Nāgārjuna rejects that there are two independent truths and adopts a "semantic non-dualism" (2007, 182) according to which there is only one kind of truth – conventional truth.

However, our delineation of conventional₁ and conventional₂ suggests a somewhat more complex story. Consider this way of understanding Nāgārjuna's statements – from an unenlightened perspective, it is conventionally₁ *true* that there is, for instance, a substantially existent teapot on an enduring table, but this statement is conventionally₂ *false* since, at the conventional₂ level of explanation, there is a dependently originated insubstantial stream of processes that we conventionally₁ refer to as a "teapot". This way renders Nāgārjuna's claims made at conventional₂ examples of metaphysics₁ because the conventional₂ redescription of "teapot" is taken to be a redescription *about* teapots, rather than about (our use of) the term "teapot".

This "aboutness" at conventional₂, however, is not the same, as the aboutness at conventional₁. To "it is true that there is a pot on the table" means simply that the state of affairs

in the conventional₁ world is such that there is a pot on the table.⁷⁴ In other words, a conventional₁ claim is true if indeed the conventional₁ world is as the claim asserts. Neo-Pragmatists can say that this kind of explanation expresses straightforward ways of understanding our conventional₁ behaviour. When I say *that* “the cat is on the mat” (conventional₁ claim), I mean that there is a furry mammal lying on the mat (conventional₁ world). When we move from saying “*that P*” to saying “*that P is true*”, we are making the same statement. Such a move, Price (2019, 136) tells us, “doesn’t change the subject”, since, in both cases, we are talking about P (here, the cat). Even if “it looks as though we are talking about *language*...really we are just talking about the *material world*, just as before” (2019, 136, emphasis added). This is an important point because it explains the triviality of these conventional₁ platitudes, namely we can easily move from statements “*that P*” to statements “*that P is true*” because there is no substantive difference between signifier and signified – the signifier (the English word “cat”) is talking about a certain material object (the cat), and this object is the signified (the furry mammal).⁷⁵ At this level of description, namely our conventional₁ linguistic practices, we could speculate that when Nāgārjuna explains in MMK 24:10 that “the ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 273), he is suggesting that any appeals to ordinary objects, for example, fire and smoke, are to be understood, semantically, in such a deflationary way.

However, in those cases where Nāgārjuna is *not* talking about the common-sense conventional₁, such as when he talks about dependent origination and emptiness, such a semantic account may not work. This is because at the level of conventional₂ explanations, this shift would not be trivial, especially if the move from these platitudes in conventional₁ to statements at conventional₂ is articulated in terms of a full-blown semantic realism of, for instance, the Nyāya variety. Here, the move would be from *linguistic* item (signifier) to *non-linguistic* item (signified), and this move is a “real shift in theoretical focus, a real change in subject matter” (Price 2013, 9).⁷⁶ Now, it goes without saying that Nāgārjuna rejects this move. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that this *representationalist slide* from signifier to signified need not take only such a strong realist form. I think that to read Nāgārjuna as a

⁷⁴ This echoes the “deflationary” interpretation of truth offered by the Cowherds (2011, 132).

⁷⁵ Price (2013, 9) explains the triviality of conventional₁ platitudes as follows: “talking about the *referent* of the term ‘X’, or the *truth* of the sentence ‘X is F’, is just another way of talking about the *object*, X”.

⁷⁶ In other words, to say that “cat” means *cat* because of a word-world reference relation that points to a mind-independent object, is no longer to trivially move from signifier to signified. Instead, at conventional₂, it is now a non-trivial shift meant to *explain* meaning by appealing to a connection between language and world that is enabled by semantic representationalism.

fictionalist or an anti-realist is to take dependent origination as a conventional₂ explanation *about* the conventional₁ world. This means that the signifier “everything is dependently originated” is true because the signified, which is, perceived as the conventional₁ world (of tables and teapots) by ordinary unenlightened beings, is *actually* a conventional₂ world (of insubstantial streams of processes), as perceived by enlightened beings. Both the conventional₁ and the conventional₂ world are *the same* signified, yet the distinction offered here highlights that if the statement “everything is dependently originated” is interpreted to mean that a teapot is actually an empty stream of processes, then the statement itself (the signifier) is read with a representationalist semantics presupposed, namely as semantically extending to be *about* the world.⁷⁷ In other words, the representationalist slide is to take *pratītyasamutpāda* to “stand for” dependent origination out there in the “the world”, albeit a linguistic world produced through and sustained by our conventions. Thus, to read the conventional_[1-2] distinction in this way is to (subtly) read it *representationally*. In this formulation, there is an implicit reliance on the representationalist slide from the near side to the far side of a semantic relation that is no longer trivial.

Moreover, to tacitly operate with the intuition of a correspondence relation is responsible for the inclination to postulate such a “synoptic” view of “something called ‘the world’” (PSH 150). This is because the trivial, deflationary correspondence relation between conventional₁ claim (“there is a teapot”) and conventional₁ world (there is a teapot) is now doing explanatory work at the conventional₂ level too – between a conventional₂ claim (everything is dependently originated) and the conventional₂ world (the teapot is an empty stream of processes).⁷⁸ I argue that these moves along quasi-representationalist pathways are responsible for the “residual” metaphysics (metaphysics₁) that lingers in even the semantic interpretation. Thus, we should read the delineation between conventional₁ and conventional₂ itself *anti-representationally* – it only indicates the Madhyamaka metaphilosophical point that any appeal, however subtle, to a mind-world or appearance-reality distinction at conventional₂, is a hypostatization of what are useful ways of speaking at conventional₁. Therefore, emptiness and dependent origination are *not* to be understood as conventional₂ explanations of

⁷⁷ Newland and Tillemans note (2011, 10): “we could begin with the widely held intuition, East and West, that a statement, a mental state or any other truthbearer presents a certain picture of how things are. Tibetan Madhyamaka commentaries regularly emphasize that if there is some particular sense (conventional or ultimate) in which this picture (...literally ‘mode of appearance’) accords...with how things are...literally ‘mode of existence,’ then we may be disposed to consider that the statement or mental state is true in that particular sense (conventional/ultimate)”.

⁷⁸ Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans (2011, 143, emphasis added) note: “conventional truth for Madhyamaka...certainly cannot be a robust correspondence notion. If there is any kind of *correspondence*, this has to be with mind-dependent entities”.

conventional₁₋₂ *reality*, but rather (Buddhist) redescription of human conventional₁ *practices* which, to follow the Neo-Pragmatists, are dynamic but mistakenly infused with substantialist idioms. That is, our distinction between conventional₁ and conventional₂ is *not* meant to explain what the conventional₁ world is “actually” like based on a conventional₂ explanation about it (namely it is an empty conventional₂ world); instead, conventional₂ statements are peripheral Z redescription that aim to prevent us from hypostatizing what seems intuitive at conventional₁, such as “that which is substantially existent is permanent”. Therefore, it is conventionally₁ *true* that there is a substantially existent teapot on my table, but the point is not that this statement is conventionally₂ *false*. Instead, the point is that two different vocabularies employed at conventional₁ and conventional₂ are used to achieve different purposes and there is no need to configure one master vocabulary that would bring them together.⁷⁹ As Rorty explains, “terminologies we employ for some purposes need not link up in any clear way with those we employ for other purposes – that we can simply let two linguistic practices coexist peaceably, side by side” (PCP 150-151).

Rorty’s insistence that our vocabularies need not be commensurable is why I agree with Garfield (2006, 5) that the term “anti-realism” “seems to be at best misleading”. However, my motivation for thinking so is somewhat different. To put it simply, calling the Madhyamaka “anti-realist” is misleading because a commitment to representationalism is shared by realists *as well as* anti-realists. Whereas Garfield thinks that “anti-realism” is misleading because it may lead us to idealism, where we forget that “emptiness amounts to conventional *reality*, which is the only kind of reality anything can have” (2006, 5, emphasis added), I argue that the issue is not about the danger of taking “anti-realism” to mean a thoroughgoing idealism or denying the importance of spatiotemporal entities in our everyday lives, but rather of shifting our theoretical gaze to the notion of “reality” in the first place. If my reading of Nāgārjuna is plausible, it accommodates Garfield’s concern because issues of idealism do not arise for an anti-representationalist. By rejecting representationalism, that is, the move from the “near” to the putatively “far” end of a semantic relation, as well as the mind-world and scheme-content dualisms that it invokes, one thereby rejects metaphysical₁ issues altogether. Indeed, to read Nāgārjuna as a psychological nominalist is to provide a different emphasis than that which the label “anti-realism” suggests – it is to say that Nāgārjuna is draining the notion of reality, ultimate as well as conventional₂, of any explanatory value. Thus, when Westerhoff (2009a,

⁷⁹At conventional₁ the purpose is to successfully drink tea, whereas at conventional₂ the purpose is to block hypostatization in our philosophical inquiries because hypostatization is soteriologically detrimental.

27) describes dependent origination as “the [triply concurrent] dependence of an object on a basis of designation, a designating mind and a term used to designate the object”, we can read this statement, through a Rortyan lens, as making the anti-representationalist point there is no way to get out of our designations and into some unvarnished conventional₂ reality that stands behind the conventional₁ world. Instead, conventional₂ statements are meant to uproot the representationalist urge to invoke a world before us.

Seen in this way, the semantic interpretation’s rejection of the strong representationalist metaphysical₂ assumption that there is an *ultimate* way the world is, falls short by not explicitly rejecting the weaker representationalist metaphysical₁ assumption that there is a *conventional* way the world is (and therefore that for conventional₂ statements to be true, they must accord with this conventional₂ world). So, we can amend the semantic interpretation and suggest that Madhyamaka rejects the idea that the truth of a statement “accords with how things are” (Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans 2011, 10). Instead, truth does not *depend on* reality in this way at all, for this understanding tacitly invokes the mirroring metaphor that anti-representationalists wish to jettison. Redescribed in a Rortyan way, there is no explanatory utility in invoking “a synoptic view of something called ‘reality’” (PCP 150) even if that “reality” is conventional (rather than ultimate) and includes our linguistic and social practices. Doing so is what makes such a quasi-representationalist explanation metaphysical₁. Thus, in terms of the DDP lens, the semantic interpretation places Nāgārjuna in a Z (non-)position relative to metaphysical₂ XY spaces. So the question “what is the ultimate way things are?” is misguided because, for Nāgārjuna, there is no *ultimate way* that things are.⁸⁰ What I suggest is that the emphasis of this hermeneutic move can be shifted anti-representationally in the following way – it is not so much that there is no *ultimate way* things are, but rather that there is no way *things are* – not ultimately, and not (even) conventionally₂.⁸¹ On our anti-representationalist reading, the teaching of dependent origination is supposed to undermine the representationalist urge to invoke a world as an

⁸⁰ See Westerhoff (2009, 128) for an account of internal versus external negation – a distinction used to make effectively the same point.

⁸¹ This point could potentially contribute to some contemporary scholarly attempts to understand the philosophical debates between the Tibetan Mādhyamikas Tsongkhapa and Taktsang. Specifically, on my Pragmatist reading of anti-representationalism we might be able to cut through the disagreements between the two Mādhyamikas by showing a way in which Taktsang’s thorough anti-metaphysical reading need not lead to a global error theory in danger of degenerating into a “dismal slough” relativism (Yakherds 2021, 72). Instead, the Pragmatist emphasis on the inescapability of social norms could take seriously Tsongkhapa’s insistence that we do have real knowledge of the conventional through reliable epistemic warrants without, however, underpinning this position with any metaphysics. In this respect, perhaps our Davidsonian account of knowledge could help us collapse the hermeneutic dualism suggested by the Yakherds (in their efforts to understand this emic debate) between anthropology (as descriptive) and epistemology (as normative). To recall, for Davidson, the normative is inescapable and, as we will see below, there is no need to posit “conventions” in an effort to understand “meanings”.

independent bloc before us. Thus, Nāgārjuna is in a Z (non-)position with respect not only to rigorously metaphysical₂ XY spaces but *also* to representationalist metaphysical₁ XY spaces. In what follows, I will show that because contemporary interpreters do not think explicitly in anti-representationalist terms from the outset, their explanations of Madhyamaka semantics occasionally become unnecessarily involved or tortuous.

As we observed, on the semantic interpretation, Nāgārjuna is read as denying that there is such a thing as ultimate *truth*, so emptiness is the “rejection of the idea that the truth of a statement must depend on the ultimate nature of reality” (Siderits 2007, 182). In this respect, since there is no ultimate way things are, all truths are fictional insofar as they fall short of corresponding to an ultimate way things are. From this perspective, Nāgārjuna is denying two interrelated realist contentions, namely “(1) truth is correspondence between proposition and reality; [and] (2) reality is mind-independent” (Siderits 2016, 13). Now, we can deny (1) and (2) in two interrelated, yet conceptually distinct, ways. In one way, we might emphasise that to deny (1) and (2) means that “reality comes to be seen as suffused with elements of mental construction” (Siderits 2016, 14)⁸² because in denying that there is some way things are *anyway*, one is saying that it makes no “sense to ask how things are, independently of concepts that reflect our needs and interests” (Siderits 2007, 182). This explanation points to fictionalism because it suggests that there is no fact, at the “far end” of the semantic relation, which could be a truth-maker. What we are left with is fictional truth, in the form of a conventional world, which is dependent on our linguistic practices and cognitive activities. However, we have a second way: if we instead unequivocally deny that there is some way *things are*, we might emphasise that the very distinction between mind-independence and mind-dependence, that is, between fact and convention, should be abandoned. In other words, we may discard the delineation between (a) some way things are *anyway* and (b) some way things are through their *interaction* with our minds because we discard the representationalist notion of a way *things are*. If one develops this strategy, one need not be a fictionalist because the very dualisms that prop up fictionalism no longer play an explanatory role. Therefore, the idea of a “useful fiction” or “conventional fact” which is relative to our linguistic practices and cognitive activities is also discarded.

⁸² This quote is an example of the – subtle – operation of the distinction between how a thing is anyway (“reality”) and how a thing is dependent on our cognitive input (“mental construction”). This is an allusion to the scheme-content distinction. See also Westerhoff’s (2009a, 15) explanation, noted earlier, that causation is dependent upon “substantial mental contribution”.

This is a very subtle contrast, and one that, to repeat, does not amount to a substantive difference between the anti-representationalism I am advocating in this dissertation and the anti-realism that some “orthodox” interpreters are espousing. Nevertheless, this difference in emphasis is important because by overemphasising the role of our conceptual constructions, mental activities, linguistic practices, etc. *in juxtaposition to* the way things are *anyway* (that is, apart from our conceptual classifications), there is a subtle movement within the confines of representationalist dualisms such as mind versus world, convention versus fact, subject versus object, and scheme versus content that *anti*-representationalism seeks to put to rest. To be motivated by the desire to capture the way *things are* is to implicitly slide in a representationalist direction.

From this resolutely anti-representationalist perspective, I suggest that the “orthodox” wish to develop an account of how things are is why they focus on conventions. In other words, to explain Nāgārjuna’s conventional₂ statements, they tacitly feel the semantic representationalist need to invoke a conventional₂ world, which those statements might accurately describe. This focus is related to their preoccupation with “referentiality”, discussed in section 3.3, because such concerns stem from representationalist idioms that have not been explicitly eschewed from the outset. Conventions are the speaker regularities that make up a language (for example, English), and they are posited to explain how linguistic competence is possible.⁸³ In focusing on referentiality, there is an implicit assumption that there is some “meaning” out there to be captured – an intuition that Davidson unequivocally rejects. Instead, meaning is to be explained through interpreting speakers’ assertions as “on the whole true” and the act of interpretation as the “ability to continuously form and reform” our developing theory of truth based on their utterances (Ramberg 1989, 104). Similar to this reification of “meaning” that Davidson’s redescription enables us to discard, Ramberg suggests that “we are tempted to introduce conventions in semantics...because...the concept dovetails nicely with our vague intuition that linguistic communication works when communicators somehow understand *the same thing* by the tokens they use” (1989, 103). Thus, an appeal to conventions explains why “snow is white” is how we may describe a wintry landscape in English, whereas “la nieve es blanca” is the correlated expression in Spanish. But, crucially, Ramberg continues, this perceived “need for conventions is another aspect of the *reification of meaning*. It is only if we see meaning as something to be captured in the words we use, and conveyed by them from one

⁸³ Ramberg (1989, 101) explains that philosophers, such as David Lewis or Michael Dummett, rely on the notion of convention to explain linguistic competency: “The mastery of a language, and hence linguistic competence, is therefore the mastery of a set of conventions”.

speaker to another, that we think there must be something connecting the speakers, some-thing – such as a language – they share, that bears meanings as a vehicle” (1989, 103). However, if with Davidson, we see language as a dynamic coping strategy, open to revision and always in flux, this is an incorrect assumption to make. As Davidson’s radical interpretation demonstrates, “knowledge of the conventions would be neither necessary nor sufficient for communication to succeed” (Ramberg 1989, 104).⁸⁴ Indeed, the conclusion of this thought experiment is that communication succeeds whether or not we speak the same language as someone else or, indeed, whether we even know what language they are speaking. Thus, Davidson’s account takes conventions to be “nothing more than a complex, and immensely valuable, practical aid” (1989, 110).

By problematising the notion of convention in explaining linguistic competence, we can reject the representationalist dualisms associated with it. Part of the reason for an intuitive contrast between “conventional” and “factual”, Rorty explains, is the Platonist *nomos-physis* (convention-nature) distinction. But the inescapability of our social practices renders this representationalist dualism obsolete. The problem with discarding only one side of the dualism (“nature”) and continuing to speak in terms of “conventions” (since there are no ultimate facts) is that this idiom invites quasi-representationalist questions such as, “to say that [fictions] are generated by conventions...suggests that these are in an important sense arbitrary. If they are arbitrary in the way in which novels are, though, then how are we to account for their usefulness?” (Siderits 2006, 17). What we see here is that in utilising terms such as “fiction” and “convention”, it becomes plausible to envisage a representationalism-styled contrast with what they are opposed to, namely “real” and “fact”. This is why Siderits asks how a convention can be useful to humans since it is not real insofar as it is generated by us. However, instead of talking about conventions, we can simply speak in terms of our “habits adopted for obvious and good reasons”, which are “persistent, but revisable” (Rorty 2000b, 101). If we talk about “convenience”, for example, instead of “convention”, we are talking about the “best way to cope with behavior rather than [talking] about ontological commitment” (2000b, 102). It is this residual ontological commitment, in the notion of “convention” which is juxtaposed with fact or nature, that is partly responsible for the traces of metaphysics₁ in “orthodox” anti-realism.

Thus, one of the reasons the metaphor of triangulation is so significant, from a Pragmatist perspective, is because it removes (residual traces of) duality *tout court*. As such, triangulation gives us some resources to articulate the key “orthodox” points without any

⁸⁴ This is, once again, an example of how a pragmatics-first approach, or a behaviourist strategy operates.

lingering dualisms, namely it is social practice all the way down, and our linguistic practices, that is, our communicative capacities, make us rational creatures. A Neo-Pragmatist would not entertain the individualistic image of discrete “minds” who share a “mutual intent to conform” (Ramberg 1989, 100), because it is not meaningful to speak of rationality without modes of social communication (already) in place. To state that “conventions might work only if they reflect ways of thinking about the world that we can all agree on” (Siderits 2007, 203) is to suggest that conventions, thinking creatures, and the world can be explanatorily disentangled. Garfield (2006, 3, emphasis added) explains that “[c]onventional truth is truth in a fiction, a fiction we collectively constitute. Like a novel, our collective practices, including our language, our perceptual activities, our thoughts and attitudes, *constitute a world against and in which truth and falsity can be measured*. The standards appropriate to that world are just those that mark off truth and falsity within the fiction”. This quote makes it clear that “fictionalist” interpretations recognise the ubiquity of language or, in our Pragmatist terms, psychological nominalism, according to which we cannot escape our linguistic practices. The appeal to a network of “conventions” as generating the “world against and in which” we can measure truth and falsity suggests that Garfield’s reconstruction makes it difficult to sustain a robust subject-object or scheme-content dualism. Nevertheless, while Garfield’s quote echoes Davidson’s triangulation, insofar as the three corners of the triangle (two speakers and their shared world) are deeply interrelated and cannot be prised apart, Garfield’s characterisation of a “fiction” as something “we collectively constitute” can be misinterpreted as an attempt to put the process exclusively into the “world” vertex by talking *about* it from a conceptual distance, as the standard against which our truth-claims are to be assessed. This characterisation could suggest that our linguistic practices and rationality are somehow independent of triangulation. But our commitment to holism and psychological nominalism would make this an unattractive interpretive option. From a Neo-Pragmatist lens, to offer a conventional₂ explanation of how different minds together “bootstrap” the conventional₁ world into being (Westerhoff 2018a, 418) or to claim that humans “all abide by the same convention” in the manner in which money has remained valuable even after the gold standard was abandoned (Siderits 2007, 203) is to put forth a picture that again raises the spectre of a mind-world distinction (although in this case the distinction is reformulated as one between mind and convention). That is, it is to offer a quasi-representationalist explanation of the conventional₂ world (a bootstrapped fictional world made up of conventions) which we generally experience as the conventional₁ world (with substantially existent tables, chairs, and teapots).

Similarly, Westerhoff's chess analogy described in section 2.2.1 has similar problematic dualistic associations or undertones. Although there is indeed no "pre-existent chess reality", Westerhoff's delineation between "chess-talk" and "chess" (2018a, 418) suggests an explanatory distinction between the two corners of the triangle where we are (our chess talk) and the third corner where the world is (chess). Needless to say, these three corners are deeply interrelated in Westerhoff's picture too, since chess is the rules and conventions established through our ongoing chess talk. But by framing the analogy in terms of conventions, the imagery invokes the possibility that our conventions are arbitrary (to echo Siderits's worry above). In Ramberg's (1989, 100) terms, the worry is that "the point of the convention could have been achieved by conformity to some regularity other than the one that actually constitutes the convention". To assume that any of the three corners of Davidson's triangle can be disentangled is to mistakenly assume that one can escape triangulation – none of the three corners "can be removed, or reduced to the others, but at the same time, each is what it is only in relation to the others" (Bacon 2007, 20). Indeed, as Rorty (2000a, 373-374) explains: "Whereas you can, in the course of triangulation, criticize any given claim about anything you talk about, you cannot ask for agreement that others shall take part in a process of triangulation, for the attempt to reach such an agreement would just be more triangulation. The inescapability of norms is the inescapability...of triangulating". This is the point that Brandom (1994, xviii) makes when he explains that all we can do philosophically is to "make explicit" those features that are already *implicit* in social practices in which we are always enmeshed. Thus, if an analogy does not clearly eschew representationalist imagery, it can invite quasi-representationalist questions about the relation between mind and world, such as: how can we agree on the conventions without presupposing that we already speak a language? And to consider such questions is to return to the residual metaphysics (that is, metaphysics₁) generated by moving representationally from language to the world.

Westerhoff (2018a, 418) himself entertains such questions: "At some point the conventions have to link up with something non-conventional, i.e. there has to be some relation between language and the world that is what it is intrinsically, and that does not simply exist dependent on human interests and concerns, as a system of conventions does". Thus, to give a conventional₂ explanation of what stands behind our conventional₁ *reality* (as inextricably tied or generated from our social conventions) invites the worry that our conventions constitute this reality. We then have to tortuously retrace our steps and qualify our explanation with caveats like "this is not...to say that those beliefs we take to be knowledge are somehow distorted by these 'subjective' elements" (Siderits 2016, 20). It is much more conceptually straightforward,

I suggest, to simply say with Rorty that the question “can we distinguish the role of our describing activity, our use of words, and the role of the rest of universe, in accounting for the truth of our true beliefs?” (TP 87) is a question that anti-representationalists simply set aside. Thus, no matter how interrelated our social environment is with our mental life, to appeal to it as *reality* is to tacitly endorse the idea that the socially generated *world* stands in relation to *us*. But to work with this representationalism-resonant image is to reintroduce the scheme-content dualism.

Thus, anti-representationalists, who think in terms of Rorty’s vocabularies, would not worry about how a world that is fictitious can “bootstrap” its way into existence through the momentum of human conventions (Westerhoff 2011). From a Rortyan lens, this worry is generated against the (implicit) backdrop of certain representationalist dualisms – to state that objects are “merely conventional truths. What this means is that what we ordinarily regard as a world of mind-independent objects is in fact only a collection of conceptual artifacts” (Westerhoff 2011, 190) or that all “conceptually created objects would completely disappear if the constructions that brought them into being were to stop” (2011, 191), is to presuppose *distinctions* such as appearance and reality, mind and world, and scheme and content. To suggest that the mind brings the world into being or that the world is (only) a conceptual construction is to not take seriously enough the implications of pan-relationalism and psychological nominalism. As Rorty explains, “the problem for anti-representationalists is to find a way of putting their point which carries no such suggestion that some mighty immaterial force called ‘mind’ or ‘language’ or ‘social practice’ – a force which shapes facts out of indeterminate goo, constructs reality out of something not yet determinate enough to count as real” (ORT 5). In this context, anti-representationalists stress that the issue of “determinacy”, that is, the delineation of the causal arrow between mind and world, is “not what is in question – that neither does thought determine reality, nor...does reality determine thought. More precisely, it is no truer that ‘atoms are what they are because we use ‘atom’ as we do’ than that ‘we use ‘atom’ as we do because atoms are as they are.’ Both of these claims, the antirepresentationalist says, are entirely empty. Both are pseudo-explanations” (ORT 5). This is why Davidson’s triangulation metaphor works so well for anti-representationalists, for on his account “the world...is not a bloc that stands in front of us but is the environment in which we are [already] *enmeshed* and from which we cannot be divided” (Huetter-Almerigi 2020, 11, emphasis added). And it is precisely this enmeshment that we should wholeheartedly acknowledge and accept, so that we no longer feel the urge to divide it through dualisms. Indeed, from a Buddhist perspective, this enmeshment is an instance of dependent origination.

In the light of these reflections on the “orthodox”, I reiterate that for the Mādhyamika, whom I am reading as an anti-representationalist, representationalist questions that tacitly operate with the scheme-content or appearance-reality distinction are precisely the kind of question they would refuse to entertain, in their effort to deconstruct the XY space. So, rather than arguing against possible answers and configuring their own, they wish, as the semantic interpretation too highlights, to expose the false presupposition that “language” and “world” can be explanatorily delineated. To allude to our discussions in section 4.1, it is not that we should change the proposition “language and world are connected by a mind-independent relation” to its opposite, namely “mind and world are connected through a mind-dependent relation”, but rather that we should be suspicious of the attempt to determine the truth-values of such propositions. We would be suspicious of the claim that Nāgārjuna’s conventional₂ explanations are representationally *about* a world. In this way, we would deny the dualisms that generate questions of “determinacy” because critiques of metaphysical and semantic realism are also critiques of the dualisms that give these positions their meaning. From his Z (non-) position, Nāgārjuna occupies neither a realist nor an anti-realist standpoint, because, as Rorty (1995b, 193) notes, “once one gives up on the project of isolating *which* articulations are ours and which the world’s, does the question of whether the world’s articulations are ‘encountered’ or ‘projected’ any longer need to be asked? If we cannot say anything about *specific* contours or articulations, is there any point in talking of such things at all?”. Rorty shows us that we do not have to take our conventional₂ redescrptions as making any statements *about* the “far end” of a semantic relation; instead, these redescrptions can be read, in a Neo-Pragmatist vein, as helping us understand our practices as inextricably linguistic and therefore blocking metaphysical₁ invocations of how things are.

In sum, I have tried to demonstrate that Nāgārjuna’s statements are read by some “orthodox” interpreters as (lightweight) ontological₁ because they do not categorically reject representationalism. So, their appeals to conventions and fictions are tinged with the representationalist scheme-content or appearance-reality distinction, which invites quasi-representationalist questions *about* the world, and providing answers to these questions leads to conventional₂ explanations of what the conventional₁ world is actually like that are metaphysical₁.⁸⁵ In other words, this representationalist assumption seems to stem from the

⁸⁵ “They agree [with the Ābhidharmikas], for instance, that most of what people say about pots, trees, mountains, and persons is conventionally true. They also agree that the things such statements are allegedly about are some type of *conceptually constructed fictions*” (Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans 2011, 142, emphasis added). This implies that what appears at conventional₁ as a mind-independent, substantially existent tree, for instance, is actually at conventional₂ a conceptually constructed fiction.

intuitive pull of the correspondence relation at our conventional₁ linguistic practices, which is carried over in the semantic formulation's denial of ultimate truth that *corresponds* to an ultimate way things are.⁸⁶ So, in the enterprise of making sense of Nāgārjuna's conventional₂ statements, which are not straightforwardly ordinary, the representationalist pull to present them as claims *about* or corresponding to a dependently originated world made up of conventions leads to intricate fictionalist metaphysical₁ explanations.

4.2.3 Leaving Anti-Realism Behind: Reading Nāgārjuna Anti-Representationally

The aim of the previous section was to demonstrate how a categorical rejection of representationalism can aid in a cogent re-articulation of Madhyamaka metaphilosophy. Now that we have examined some of the explanatory dangers of invoking (quasi-)representationalist idioms in rational reconstructions of Nāgārjuna's thought, we will attempt to bring together our discussion so far to offer a coherent and radical Madhyamaka metaphilosophical message. We have emphasised the importance for "peripheral" Neo-Pragmatists of staying resolutely at the level of language in a way that renounces the scheme-content dualism. What are the implications of reading Nāgārjuna in this way?

If we read Nāgārjuna as always remaining at the linguistic level and not shifting his theoretical gaze onto the (socially constructed) world, the possibility opens up to read him as more radically anti-metaphysical. Indeed, if my reading of Nāgārjuna as anti-essentialist, pan-relationalist, and psychological nominalist (that is, as anti-representationalist) is persuasive, then, like Rorty, he would be wary of any explanations that presuppose those distinctions that this range of commitments renders obsolete. Once again, the Rortyan "question is not 'What features does the world *really* have?'" but 'What topics are worth discussing?'" (PCP 152). So, read anti-representationally, the Mādhyamika conventional₂ redescriptions are *metaphilosophical* attacks on our cognitive tendencies towards hypostatization, and *not* philosophical statements *about* reality. If we take seriously Nāgārjuna's multiple iterations of the importance of overcoming hypostatization (*prapañca*), convention is not a useful concept for understanding Madhyamaka because to give the notions of *shared* regularities (in the form of conventions) and *shared* tokens (in the form of meanings) an explanatory role in a semantic theory is to suggest that these features of linguistic practice are more than contingent processes that arise in the context of communication. And for Nāgārjuna, the problem with any appeals

⁸⁶ Priest, Siderits, and Tillemans (2011, 142) state that "Madhyamaka never disavows the Abhidharma claim that only things with intrinsic nature could have the sort of mind-independent existence necessary for something to be an ultimate truthmaker. The upshot is that there can be no things for ultimately true statements to be about".

to stable, shared necessities is that they imply (residual traces of) *svabhāva*, and do not highlight that these seemingly necessary features are *empty*.

Thus, one of the reasons we have extensively discussed throughout this dissertation Rorty's motif of vocabularies is that it enables us to think through themes relating to language, the world, and our place in the world *without* invoking any problematic representationalist dualisms. To think in terms of vocabularies is to recognise that language games are ubiquitous and any appeal to anything outside of them is simply an "empty" gesture – "notions like 'how things are' and 'the world'...cannot explain anything because each of these is 'an empty notion of something completely unspecified and unspecifiable' [Williams 1985, 138]" (ORT 55). As Rorty explains, "there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies" (CIS xvi). Likewise, Nāgārjuna's insistence that dependent origination is ubiquitous and that this statement itself is a dependent designation gestures towards the same point, namely we do not need to search for a synoptic view of "the world".

So, consider two ways of reading the claim that whether or not there are, for example, chairs in a room "will be true in virtue of the way things are". This first way is "in virtue of the way our current descriptions of things are used and the causal interactions we have with those things". The second way is "*simply* in virtue of the way things are, quite apart from how we describe them" (TP 86). As I hope to have made clear, both Rorty and Nāgārjuna would read the claim in the first way. Based on our examination of the writings of "orthodox" scholars, I think they would agree with my analysis. However, to worry, as Siderits does, whether a Mādhyamika would have to forgo their commitment to emptiness given the latest developments of the sciences (Siderits 2011) is to be tempted in a representationalist direction. It is generated from the assumption that "science" has the necessary tools and resources with which to accurately represent the way things (conventionally) are apart from our descriptions. Moreover, it is to read the Madhyamaka statements representationally – as *about* the world. From our Rortyan perspective, similar to Arthur Eddington's famous query about whether he has two tables or one table, or Sellars's concern with how to combine the "manifest image" with the "scientific image",⁸⁷ these (pseudo-)problems arise when one assumes that there is a reality (in this case, conventional reality) out there *about* which we have to produce correct statements. The upshot of taking on board Rorty's insistence that we think in terms of multiple

⁸⁷ In these cases, the worry is how to square our experiential, common-sense image of the world – filled with tables, chairs, hopes, and promises – with the scientific picture of the world – filled with atoms, electrons, black holes, and quarks.

vocabularies is that we would not attempt to unify all our distinct vocabularies under one super-vocabulary, and the felt need to do so is a “pseudo-problem” (PAA 182). Indeed, as Rorty states succinctly:

[philosophers] should describe talk about particles, talk about beliefs, and talk about what ought to be done, as cultural activities that fulfill distinct purposes. These activities do not need to be fitted together in a systematic way, any more than basketball and cricket need to be fitted together with bridge and chess. If we have a plausible narrative of how we became what we are, and why we use the words we do as we do, we have all we need in the way of self-understanding. (PCP 181)

The point to emphasise is that once we start thinking in terms of vocabularies, and no longer feel the urge to epistemically rank these different vocabularies in terms of their correspondence to reality, we will not feel the need to “synoptically” unite our diverse language games. For the same reason that it makes no sense to ask which is the best tool qua tool – “Is the hammer or the stapler better – in general?” (Ramberg 2001, 43, n.6) – we should not ask such a question regarding specific vocabularies.⁸⁸ With Rorty, we would simply say that “All language-games are *sui generis*... But this sense of “*sui generis*” – the sense in which baseball is *sui generis*, over against soccer, jai alai, basketball, chess, and poker – is philosophically sterile” (PAA 183).

These observations lead us to ask – how is this insistence on the inescapability, incommensurability, and irreducibility of diverse vocabularies different from some kind of linguistic idealism, according to which each individual constructs their own “world” which is incommensurable with another “world”? By categorically taking an anti-representationalist stance, we can defend Nāgārjuna against the charge of linguistic idealism because the very question of realism versus idealism (or: anti-realism) would not arise for an anti-representationalist. Westerhoff (2018a, 416) highlights two important but *prima facie* conflicting statements that Nāgārjuna makes: (1) everything is language and (2) language (constituted by conceptual abstractions (*kalpanā*)) does not exist.⁸⁹ Statements like these are perplexing indeed, especially when we try to square them with the Madhyamaka insistence that

⁸⁸ Ramberg (2001, 43, n.6) explains that “we [should] evaluate vocabularies as we evaluate tools – with respect to their purposes. Moreover, such evaluation requires a degree of specificity; it will not do to say...that we might evaluate vocabularies with respect to their ability to uncover the truth. That would be like claiming to evaluate tools for their ability to help us get what we want – not for their ability to help us realize this or that particular goal, or kind of goal, but just what we want, in full generality”.

⁸⁹ In MMK 25:24 Nāgārjuna even states that “[n]o Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 304).

conventional reality is real and *is* (all there is to) reality. I will show that when read anti-representationally, these statements no longer seem deeply perplexing.

If Nāgārjuna is a psychological nominalist, the statement (L) “everything is language” can be read as an anti-representationalist acknowledgement that language is inescapable insofar as it is inextricably tied to our existence as rational, thinking creatures. This is different from reading (L) representationally as suggesting (a weak or strong form of) linguistic idealism – according to this reading, (L) makes a claim *about* reality, namely reality is constituted of language.⁹⁰ This representationalist reading would be a metaphysical₁ or a metaphysical₂ thesis. If we read (L) as saying that “the ultimate nature of reality (i.e., the world independent of our conventions) is linguistic”, this is (the stronger) metaphysics₂, and if we read (L) as saying that “the conventional₂ nature of reality (i.e., “the world” dependent on our conventions) is linguistic”, this is (the weaker) metaphysics₁. In both metaphysical₁ and metaphysical₂ readings, (L) is read through the lens of semantic representationalism because the phrase “everything is language” is taken to be a *denial* of extra-linguistic reality and an *affirmation* of reality as linguistic. In both these cases, the term “reality” *stands for* some fact external to our linguistic practices.⁹¹ However, we can read (L) without making such representationalist slides from signifier to signified and avoid the implicit image of “the world” as an “object” before us, as well as the subtle re-introduction of the appearance-reality distinction which implies that the conventional₂ is more “real” than the conventional₁ “appearances” of substantially existent mind-independent objects.⁹² Perhaps (L) is making the psychological nominalist claim that all “objects” are centres of descriptive gravity. Here, “object”, like “truth”, is to be taken as a “primitive and inexplicable concept” (PCP 15), and does not refer to anything in “the world”. Thus, to say “everything is language” is to say that every-*thing* should be understood as dependently originated in the sense that all “objects” are inextricably related to the multiple descriptions we give them for different purposes. So, the order of explanation is first and foremost an observation of our linguistic practices in invoking “objects” in diverse ways. Thus, we can coherently read (L) as remaining at the linguistic level. We cannot transcend our own multiple descriptions – as Brandom says unequivocally, there is “no realm where concepts do

⁹⁰ Recall our observations in section 2.2.1 that the “orthodox” read the Mādhyamika as a nominalist for whom “all realities are purely linguistic – just names and concepts” (Thakchoe 2012, 427).

⁹¹ Although this sounds paradoxical, since the claim is that everything *is* language, nevertheless the term “everything” is taken to stand for the nonlinguistic entity *every-thing* that is described as linguistic in nature. To say that “everything is a linguistic entity” would generate a tautology.

⁹² “[C]onventional things are illusory, false, and deceptive. But...none of this means that they do not exist. It means that they deceptively appear as though they were self-existent, that is, existing by way of intrinsic nature, when in fact they are utterly devoid of any shred of self-existence...they seem to exist intrinsically, established by their own intrinsic power, when in fact they do not exist in that particular manner” (Newland 2011, 58).

not apply” (1994, 624). Read in this anti-representationalist way, (L) is not a statement *about* “the world”.

Let us now turn to the second of Nāgārjuna’s statements, in which he seems to deny that language exists. Needless to say, if (1) is read representationally, (2) seems inconsistent with it. Westerhoff (2018a, 416) explains this problem as follows: “there seems to be a clear tension between these two assertions, with the first accepting language as a phenomenon such that we should spell out the existence of everything else in terms of it, and the second rejecting that very phenomenon”. This tension arises, once again, if we read (1) and (2) representationally. Now that we have seen how (1) need not be read representationally, let us examine how we might read (2) in a similar non-representationalist way. To a Neo-Pragmatist, the statement that “language does not exist” sounds remarkably similar to Davidson’s conclusion in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” that “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases” (1986, 446). To recall our discussion in section 3.1.1, language and rationality, for the anti-representationalist, are processive, dynamic, and evolving. So, Nāgārjuna’s statement that language, understood as abstraction or conceptual construction (*kalpanā*), does not exist, can be read as suggesting, à la Davidson, that language is not an *entity*, that is, a static, structured phenomenon that we can investigate or analyse as an object of study. In other words, “language” – a hypostatized philosophical artefact – does not exist.

Read in this way, there is no inconsistency or tension between (1) and (2), and, in fact, they are mutually interdependent and extremely significant points to emphasise for an anti-representationalist, like Nāgārjuna, whose central aim is to uproot the tendency towards hypostatization. This is because the claim that we cannot escape our linguistic practices, since they are a coping strategy with which we navigate our complex environments and through which we are said to be rational, goes hand in hand with the idea that a coping strategy is not the kind of entity we can say “exists”. Indeed, this strategy is a dynamically evolving process and not a static entity at all – so, to conceive of language as an *object* of study is to mistakenly hypostatize a process. As Ramberg (2015, 221) explains, linguistic practice involves “dynamically construing what a speaker is continuously doing, rather than decoding some thing, some fixed structure, that the speaker has or possesses and gives sequential expression to. And a speaker, for her part, making herself understood, is engaged in a process of constantly exploiting what she takes to be the interpreter’s evolving understanding of what she is doing”.

If we understand language dialogically in this way, (1) and (2) can be read as forming a critique of the representationalist XY spaces of Nyāya and Abhidharma linguistic presuppositions, according to which the “meaningfulness of thought and language...does not depend on an interpreter’s activities – it is a *target* for that activity” (2015, 221). Instead, in reading the Madhyamaka message as strategically located in a Z (non-)position relative to these XY spaces, the Davidsonian strategy of understanding language becomes a direct route towards reconstructing a Madhyamaka philosophy of language that clearly resonates with the core metaphilosophical attack on hypostatization, of any sort, in XY spaces.

Specifically, to say that Nāgārjuna occupies a Z (non-)position relative to Nyāya and Abhidharma philosophy is to highlight that there will be conversations within their XY spaces that the Mādhyamika will, as matter of principle, refuse to engage in, because these conversations presuppose *svabhāva*. This re-envisioning, with the DDP lens, of Madhyamaka methodological strategies allows us to see how Nāgārjuna, like Rorty, launches a critique of our common (and unreflectively accepted) sensibilities. For the denial of *svabhāva* is the denial of a basic intuition, namely a thing (such as a laptop) has an intrinsic nature that makes it what it is. If Nāgārjuna can be read as traversing the Z grey spectrum in the manner of a Neo-Pragmatist philosopher, he is not assuming or endorsing such ontological intuitions. Rather than use these *svabhāva*-intuitions for argumentation, he regards them as soteriologically detrimental. To exemplify this strategy, let us examine Nāgārjuna’s response to the Abhidharma “two-tier ontology”,⁹³ in terms of the distinction between conventionally real entities, such as tables, and ultimately real entities, *dharma*s:

The Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness is the claim that *dharma*s are likewise [like conventional objects] devoid of intrinsic nature... 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. (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 657)

As I read Garfield and Siderits, Nāgārjuna agrees with Abhidharma that conventional objects are *not* ultimately real because they are aggregated or partite and lack an intrinsic nature (the negative side),⁹⁴ but he disagrees that there are any impartite objects that have intrinsic natures

⁹³ This theme was discussed in section 1.2.

⁹⁴ See MMK 13:7-8: “If something that is non-empty existed, then something that is empty might also exist. Nothing whatsoever exists that is non-empty; then how will the empty come to exist? Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all [metaphysical] views. But those for whom emptiness is a [metaphysical] view have been called incurable” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 144-145). Commenting on MMK

(the positive side). Read in this way, Nāgārjuna is undermining “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” (Siderits and Garfield 2013, 657). On their reading of Nāgārjuna’s statements, whilst the Mādhyamika *agrees* that for something to be ultimately real it must have an intrinsic nature, the claim is that no such ultimately real thing can be found because emptiness is universal. Thus, the positive side of the Abhidharma two-tier ontology is denied – even *dharma*s are empty and there is no-thing that is ultimately real.

However, on the Neo-Pragmatist reading I am offering, Nāgārjuna’s verses can be read as making a stronger negation than a denial of ontological foundationalism, namely there are “objects that we could regard as the most fundamental building-blocks of the world” (Westerhoff 2009a, 208). When Nāgārjuna explains in MMK 13:8 that “Emptiness is taught by the conquerors as the expedient to get rid of all (metaphysical) views. But those for whom emptiness is a (metaphysical) view have been called incurable” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 145), we can interpret this statement, as indeed the “heterodox” do, namely *without* the qualifier “metaphysical”.⁹⁵ This is because if we read Nāgārjuna as launching a metaphilosophical critique of our common sensibilities shaped by notions of essence, he is rejecting the point of ontology_[1-2] *tout court*. Thus, whatever he is saying is meant primarily to reject representationalist moves in XY spaces, rather than put forth a position to be conceptually grasped. Hence, emptiness is taught as an “expedient”, that is, as “something that expels or purges. So emptiness is here being called a sort of purgative or physic” (2013, 145). Nāgārjuna is saying that the Abhidharma account still takes for granted certain conventional₁ trivialities and uses them as a template for further inquiry into what there is. Specifically, while it is *prima facie* intuitive that “for there to be emptiness, there must be ultimately real things to serve as the ground” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 144), this sense stems from certain platitudes at conventional₁ such as where there is smoke there is fire as its originating source, and where there is light there is a source of illumination. In these conventional₁ instances, for the intelligibility of one empirical observation (smoke or light), we must posit an empirical

13:7-8, Siderits and Katsura (2013, 144) state: “While both sides agree that some things, such as chariots and persons, are empty of intrinsic nature, the opponent holds that, for there to be emptiness, there must be ultimately real things to serve as the ground or locus of emptiness. Here Nāgārjuna agrees with the opponent that emptiness could not ultimately occur without ultimately real things that it characterized. But he does not withdraw his claim that all things are empty – that nothing whatsoever has intrinsic nature. How is this possible?...the Mādhyamika does not claim that the emptiness of things is ultimately real. To say of things are they are empty is just to say that they are not ultimately real, and their not being ultimately real is not itself ultimately real”.

⁹⁵ As we examined in Chapter 2, the “heterodox” are adamant that Nāgārjuna’s declarations against beliefs, views, and propositions must be taken at face value, and without a qualification such as “metaphysical”. See especially Stepien (2019).

foundation for that observation (fire source and light source). We have developed vocabularies at conventional₁ that allow us to make such observations for pragmatically efficacious reasons. However, if we read Nāgārjuna anti-representationally, we would *not* assume that this quotidian intuition of the need for an empirical substratum is something more than a useful way of talking that we have not had occasion to question.

So, instead of reading Nāgārjuna as taking this intuition for granted and stating: “*because* for emptiness to “ultimately occur” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 144) an ultimately real substratum is required, *therefore* emptiness does not ultimately occur because there is no such ultimately real substratum”,⁹⁶ we can re-read Nāgārjuna as follows: the very intuition *that* for something to ultimately occur, it requires an ultimately real substratum, ought to be uprooted – do not use conventional₁ intuitions as templates for conventional₂ intuitions. In other words, our conventional₁ intuitions should not guide metaphysical₁ inquiries with conventional₂ idioms, and our conventional₂ intuitions should not guide metaphysical₂ inquiries. Precisely because conventional₁ statements are *about* the conventional₁ world, it is sensible to assume that ultimate statements too must be *about* the ultimate reality, namely *dharma*s. However, just as the *dharma*s are not an ultimately existent world *about* which ultimate truth-claims can be made, so too, mind-dependent conventions do not constitute a conventionally₂ existent world *about* which conventional₂ statements are made.

Thus, perhaps Nāgārjuna opposes ontological₂ inquiry not just because there is no *ultimate way* things are, but because there is no ultimate way *things are*. We can now see that we should not read this statement as an existence denying claim because a denial of how *things are* is a representationalist claim, whereas an anti-representationalist does not either affirm or deny existential claims about a hypostatized entity called “how things are”.⁹⁷ Instead, what is denied is the semantic representationalist slide that allows for this hypostatization. So, Nāgārjuna’s rejection is not a *direct* rejection of an existence claim *about* a way things are, but rather it is an *indirect* rejection through the direct rejection of the representationalist dualities that sustain existence claims.⁹⁸ So, the point of his insistence that everything is empty and everything is language is to highlight that all these intuitions are pervaded by a faulty mind-world dualism that representationalism cannot avoid. Thus, the reason why there is no ultimate way things are is the same reason why there is no conventional way things are – “there is no

⁹⁶ As he is read by the “orthodox”.

⁹⁷ Again, the Indian philosophical distinction in terms of an “non-implicational term negation” (*paryudāsa*) and “implicational term negation” (*prasajya*) describes such a move (Westerhoff 2009, 69).

⁹⁸ Anti-representationalism, used as a hermeneutic lens, highlights the key statements in the MMK that refuse to take a stance on claims relating to being or non-being: MMK 18:8 and 5:6-7.

picture of the world such that all successful communicators share it” (Ramberg 2011, 142). Therefore, a Pragmatist would not appeal to some way things are anyway, whether conventional₂ or ultimate, in order to understand our social practices.

This theme of overcoming representationalist hypostatization, to recall our observations above, gestures towards a correction of the “quixotic and ultimately unrevealing task” of attempting to relate certain ways of talking “in an orderly way to some allegedly fundamental ontology” (Healey 2013). Thus, just as there is no use in hypostatizing the notions of convention and meaning, because these notions are based on optional intuitions, so too, we should not reify “firmly intuited constraints on what it really is to consider something as real” (Ramberg 2004, 3). To follow the Ābhidharmikas in unreflectively hypostatizing the ontological intuition that anything which is partite (such as a chariot) is not ultimately real as a constraint on what *is* real is to fall victim to clinging – it is to hypostatize the correlated intuition that only that which is impartite (that is, *dharma*) can be ultimately real and use it as a foundation for further argumentation in ontological system-building. From the perspective of the Mādhyamika, the Ābhidharmika is still clinging to the presupposition that our intuitions should determine our inquiries into what there is.

Read in this way, Nāgārjuna’s message is *not* primarily a philosophical statement about how things exist, whether ultimately or conventionally – for instance, that the class of ultimately real objects is an empty set so that there is no ultimate way things are. If he is an anti-representationalist, he would not make such “existence-denying claims” (Macarthur and Price 2007, 98) because, as we observed, to make *anti*-realist claims is to move along a representationalist trajectory from issues about language (the “near end”) to issues *about* the (fictionally constructed) world (the “far end”). Instead, Nāgārjuna is launching a radical *metaphilosophical* attack on the urge to accommodate our intuitions about how things exist or what would be required for objects to be ultimately existent. Like the Pragmatists, the Mādhyamikas treat “such ontological intuitions as symptoms to be examined, not as foundation for argument. They will see them principally as expressions of commitments to particular *vocabularies*” (Ramberg 2004, 3). Thus, the point is not to fill in ontological₂ categories (with ultimately existent entities forming an empty set), or fill in ontological₁ categories with conventions making “the world” – it is rather about the cognitive tendency or inclination to fill in these categories with conceptual formulations and thus hypostatize what are only conventionally₁ useful ways of speaking. The aim is not to lose the world, but “to lose *both* us and the world” (Rorty 1995b, 191), by no longer thinking in the contrastive terms of representationalist dualities. Indeed, as Rorty emphasises, “when we give up the notion of a

true world we give up the [contrastive] notion of an illusory world as well” (PCP 117). Anti-representationalist concepts such as social practice and triangulation allow us to cut through representationalism-shaped dichotomies whilst retaining the central Madhyamaka notion of (non-dual) truth, namely all things lack an intrinsic nature, including the very statement, “all things lack an intrinsic nature”.

We can now appreciate Stepien’s (2019, 553) insistence that “Nāgārjuna is *not* making objective statements from an ultimate perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*) about how things are or are not; instead, from a perspective where there is no subject-object duality, he is seeing ‘reality aright’ (*sub specie veritatis*)”. Now we might add that for an anti-representationalist, there is *no way things are or not*. By collapsing the scheme-content dualism, he is explaining his vision of “reality aright”, which is not *about* reality but is utterly enmeshed *within* it. He is dissolving representationalist XY spaces and showing us that there is no point in trying to determine the truth-values of propositions that extend to the “far side” of a semantic relation. That is, he is rejecting the invocation of notions of reality, whether conventional₂ or ultimate. And, crucially, in so doing, he is primarily engaged in *rationaly* dissolving and re-configuring certain dialogical spaces, underpinned by, what Buddhists take to be, soteriologically detrimental tendencies – psychological, cognitive, and linguistic. Thus, on the anti-representationalist reading I have been developing, to reject *svabhāva* and affirm dependent origination is to remain resolutely at the level of language without invoking, however tacitly, any mind-world dualism. What this means is that when Nāgārjuna speaks about the emptiness of objects, he is talking about the “emptiness” of “objects”, i.e., every-thing is description-relative. Whereas representationalism accepts the possibility of a context-free description, that is, a non-dependently-originated description, which would accurately describe what is intrinsic to an object as opposed to its (merely) relational features, Neo-Pragmatists reject this possibility. They “can see no way to decide which descriptions of an object get at what is ‘intrinsic’ to it, as opposed to its merely ‘relational’ extrinsic features (e.g., its description-relative features)” (TP 86). This amounts to the claim that there is no *context-free* description of one object such that this description would always be suitable for that object. This anti-representationalism is what allows for his conventional₂ explanations to not be metaphysical_[1-2].

So, when Nāgārjuna explains in MMK 15:2 that the definition of *svabhāva* is “something which does not depend on anything else” (Westerhoff 2009a, 25) and then denies that such a thing exists, in MMK 15:3, Rortyan Pragmatists would not read this definition of and denial of *svabhāva* as operating in ontological_[1-2] spaces. This move is instead a denial of

context-free descriptions and an affirmation of the Pragmatist idea that “to explain *all the relational properties* something has – all its causes and all its effects – is to explain *the thing itself*” (Rorty 1993, 185, emphases added). It is not, therefore, primarily an existence-denying claim of an entity called “intrinsic nature” and an affirmation of an “extrinsic nature” called “dependent origination”. Instead, it is an assault on the hypostatized idea of “nature” – an assault, to allude to our discussion of “qualia” in section 3.1.2, on the idea that there is a gap between relational properties and the thing itself. Thus, in denying intrinsicity, we also deny extrinsicity – “we are prepared to discard the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction” (TP 86). Resonating this theme, Nāgārjuna states in MMK 15:3, “Given the nonexistence of intrinsic nature, how will there be extrinsic nature (*parabhāva*)?” (Siderits and Katsura 2013, 157). To read this point anti-representationally is to say, with Rorty, that

no description of an object is more a description of the ‘real’, as opposed to the ‘apparent’, object than any other, nor are any of them descriptions of, so to speak, the object’s relation to itself – of its identity with its own essence. Some of them are, to be sure, better descriptions than others. But this betterness is a matter of being more useful tools – tools which accomplish some human purpose better than do competing descriptions (PSH 54).

Or to put the same point differently, “all our awareness is under a description, and...descriptions are functions of social needs” (PSH 49). To place the emphasis on the ubiquity of language, descriptions, and vocabularies is to suggest that Nāgārjuna is not putting forth dependent origination or emptiness as conventional² explanations *about* the world because there is no conventional^[1-2] world which confronts us in a quasi-representationalist way – so, our descriptions are not *about* an entity with a structure that could be taken as a *world*. In his reading of Davidson, Ramberg (2011, 143) argues that to say that “communicators on the whole interact knowledgeably in the world does not mean that there is *some general picture* to be uncovered that they must all share...there is no particular general picture we must have in common, no master constraints to which we are subject” (emphasis added). Analogously, for Nāgārjuna, as I have argued, there is no ultimate way things are and no conventional way things are precisely because everything is empty of *svabhāva*. And any attempt to hypostatize what are only useful descriptions is to fall into the essentialist presupposition that sentences can *be* anything but “an explicit or implicit description of [an object’s] relation to one or more other objects” (PSH 54).

4.3 Concluding Remarks: Viewlessness from the Periphery

Nāgārjuna can be seen as engaging in a Pragmatist assault on our intuitions about the conventional₁ world, without thereby speaking *about* a “deeper” reality to which these intuitions do not apply. Thus, rather than adopting a conciliatory strategy whereby Nāgārjuna’s dismissal of the notion of a mind-independent reality or an ultimate way things are “does not entail the impossibility of a correspondence theory of truth tout court” (Garfield 2002, 52),⁹⁹ we can read him as categorically rejecting any appeal to such an explanation at the conventional₂ level. Indeed, like reference, correspondence too can be jettisoned as explanatorily useless. We do not need to invoke a fictional, convention-based conventional₂ “world” in order to understand Nāgārjuna’s conventional₂ statements. Instead, we can read the Mādhyamika as making deconstructive (A)¹⁰⁰ and constructive (B)¹⁰¹ *metaphilosophical* moves from the periphery rather than philosophical ones within XY spaces. These conventional₂ redescrptions are made to undermine the representationalist urge to think in terms of representationalist dualisms – scheme-content, convention-fact, subject-object, or appearance-reality. Like Rorty, the Mādhyamika does not offer a theory of reality, because reality cannot be a theoretical object of study. To collapse representationalist dualisms is to dismiss the purpose of such investigations. Thus, we can agree with Stepien (2019, 561) that “For Nāgārjuna...to attain realization, is precisely to dispense with views propounding certain truths, certain *conceptualizations of reality*”. Truth, redescrbed along Neo-Pragmatist lines, no longer invokes a world before us against which it is measured. Instead, truth is simply an unanalysable notion without which language and thought would not be possible.

⁹⁹ Perhaps this stems from the wish to “save” fictionalism from descending into (sheer) idealism. This felt threat derives from subtly working within the parameters of the subject-object/convention-fact dualism that representationalism takes for granted. The worry seems to be that embracing the convention side is difficult to square with the Mādhyamika’s insistence, for instance, in MMK 1:6-10, that the conventional is not (utterly) non-existent or unreal.

¹⁰⁰ For example, the *reductios* could be examples of (A)-deconstruction expressed in a representationalist semantics in an effort to show how this presupposition leads to contradictions. Nāgārjuna employs *reductios* to enter the XY space and participate in it in order to demonstrate that in each case where the opponent presupposes semantic representationalism, the opponent is reduced to absurdity. Thus, Nāgārjuna’s *reductios* can be read as exposing the aporetic nature of any position put forth in a representationalist semantics at the level of conventional₁₋₂ because each position involves semantic hypostatization.

¹⁰¹ For example, we can read Nāgārjuna’s positive (B)-illuminated diagnosis of *svabhāva*-hypostatization in terms not of an active participation in the XY space, but of a peripheral strategy involving a Z (non-)position. The claim that everything is empty or dependently originated is part of a second-order reflection on why first-order inquiries in representationalist XY spaces go wrong. This kind of redescription from the periphery could be expressed in what Brandom (2013, 85-86) calls a “pragmatic metavocabulary” – a vocabulary “used to describe what the discursive practitioners who deploy the [semantic representationalist] vocabulary in question *do*”. On this reading, what practitioners in XY spaces *do*, Nāgārjuna tells us, is they hypostatize an *essence* – or a *notion* of essence – onto objects. If *svabhāva* is not expressed in a semantic representationalist vocabulary, it is not a material description of the world – it is not *about* the world.

In this respect, the Mādhyamika strategy is far more radical than making representationalism-guided moves in XY spaces – it is the Buddhist equivalent to Rorty’s claim that his version of Pragmatism “urges that philosophers perform their social function only when they change intuitions, as opposed to reconciling them” (PAA 168). We know that Buddhist monks had to participate in organised debates between other Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools; in these discursive contexts, the Mādhyamika message is offered from a Z (non-)position that is meant to undermine all of our *saṃsāra*-based intuitions, which should not be hypostatized since they are simply useful ways of speaking. Although at conventional₁ we engage in certain language games within which we make various presuppositions about language, objects, and our place in the world, a key point Nāgārjuna is making echoes Rorty’s claim that “common sense is itself no more than the habit of using a certain set of descriptions” (PSH 51). From Nāgārjuna’s Buddhist perspective, our conventional₁ cognitive and linguistic habits are entangled in experiential practices that are soteriologically detrimental. To reify these habits at a conventional₂ level of philosophical description is not only a move in the wrong *explanatory* direction (semantic representationalism), but also a move in the wrong *soteriological* direction (clinging to conceptual classification). Hence, we can read Nāgārjuna’s argumentative strategy as one which is guided by the idea that “it is not theory that helps to cure this disease of self-misunderstanding, but only the deflation of unnecessary theoretical claims” (Habermas 2013, 15). This deflation is a strategic and rational activity that remains at the periphery of certain XY spaces and feeds Nāgārjuna’s positive proposals, such as the equivalence between emptiness and dependent origination and the emptiness of *dharma*s. Like Rorty, Nāgārjuna’s metaphilosophy “seeks to train his contemporaries in a vocabulary” (2013, 12) that no longer takes the presuppositions of representationalist XY spaces for granted.

To emphasise once again, the interpretation I am offering in this dissertation is not substantively at odds with the one generally given by the “orthodox” scholars, although the emphasis is quite different. We both acknowledge the ubiquity of language and the inescapability of our cognitive and linguistic practices, but whereas a Rortyan is explicitly opposed to representationalism, the “orthodox” do not categorically distance themselves from it. In this respect, whereas anti-representationalists unequivocally eschews representationalist dualisms, we have observed that there are instances in which some “orthodox” phrasing leads us back in this representationalist direction. Thus, whereas they focus on conventions, I prefer social practices. This is because, as the quote that opens this chapter states, “if ‘nature’ is an illusion, so is ‘convention’ and so is ‘man’. Contrastive terms of this sort stand or fall together” (CP 24). An appeal to conventions often juxtaposes that which is natural or out there – the

“object”-shaped side that our “subject”-generated conventions work with and within. Therefore, the metaphor of convention is difficult to articulate in isolation from the scheme-content distinction; indeed, sometimes the “orthodox” feel the responsibility of answering questions that this distinction raises (such as whether and how accurately our conventions create and sustain the world). It is easier, I have argued, to state the point in terms of social practices because this way of speaking dissolves various intuitive dualisms and blocks certain representationalist questions. To take on board the terminology of social practices allows us to recognise that “reality has no norms of its own to offer, apart from those which we develop” (PAA 173). And when we begin to think in terms of norms and practices, we cut through the scheme-content/convention-fact distinctions because we recognise that “our linguistic practices are so bound up with our other social practices that our descriptions of nature, as well as ourselves, will always be a function of our social needs” (PSH 48). In other words, “conventions” do not stand apart from the “world” for any explanatory reason. Thus, to speak in terms of social practices is to state that there is no “us” apart from the “world” – we are contextually embedded in our ever-evolving and ever-changing practices. This is all we need to say because once we “have said that all our awareness is under a description, and that descriptions are functions of social needs, then ‘nature’ and ‘reality’ can only be [dispensable] names of something unknowable” (PSH 49). And precisely because the “orthodox” too recognise that for the Mādhyamika, there is no “reality” behind the “appearances” and no “ultimate” behind the “conventional”, the more straightforward way to convey this idea is simply to discard the representationalist dualisms entirely.

In conclusion, we have emphasised that Nāgārjuna, on our Rortyan re-reading, is thoroughly radical – he is against representationalism and therefore metaphysics of any variety. Claims relating to emptiness and dependent origination, or the statement that there is no ultimate truth, should not be read as instantiations even of a weak metaphysical₁ commitment. Therefore, Nāgārjuna’s critiques of our everyday sensibilities are rhetorical insofar as they are not metaphysical₁ claims in representationalist space, but these critiques are nevertheless, I have shown, styles of philosophical reasoning. Because I wish to take seriously the “heterodox” insistence that for Buddhists “*all concepts* (notions, positions, views, beliefs) – howsoever ‘useful’ they may be – turn out to be impediments [to liberation]” (Stepien 2019, 538), my Rortyan re-reading of Nāgārjuna recognises and highlights this theme. This is because to read Nāgārjuna as engaged in *metaphilosophy* is to recognise both (A) deconstructive and (B) constructive strategies, *but* the latter are not constructive in terms of putting forth theses or views. The anti-representationalist themes we have stressed in this chapter would be used by

the Mādhyamika for the purposes of dissolving XY spaces. The new Z (non-)position that is dynamically navigated is pervaded by emptiness, which is to say that it is a soteriological space in which redescrptions are put forth with the aim of helping sentient beings walk the path towards liberation whilst eschewing all representationalist tendencies towards hypostatization.

In this respect, the reading I offer is not an “extraction of doctrine” but an “extraction of doubt” (Ramberg 2013b, 59) insofar as the aim is to highlight Nāgārjuna’s metacritical strategy that seeks to destabilise our intuitions. Thus, the Madhyamaka strategy is not a straightforward *denial* on the XY level of discourse, that is, an attempt to get us to switch our beliefs, but rather a *meta*-denial from the periphery, that is, an attempt to get us to abandon beliefs phrased in representationalist idioms. Given the open-endedness of language, the Madhyamaka aim is to consistently redescribe linguistic practices in the soteriologically efficacious direction of anti-essentialism. Given our natural tendency at conventional₁ to assume *svabhāva*, the metaphilosophical aim of Nāgārjuna is to ensure that at least at conventional₂ we do not make this error. Perhaps those enlightened Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who possess an ultimate perspective do not engage even in conventional₁ representationally;¹⁰² but, for the rest of us, our common-sense intuitions in conventional₁ are difficult to overcome without serious and methodical Buddhist practice. However, if my interpretation carries weight, the Madhyamaka *metaphilosophical* point is that even though the unenlightened do not have such an ability at conventional₁, we have recourse to a Rortyan anti-representationalist perspective at conventional₂. This is because the philosophical problematization of representationalist discursive spaces does not itself put forth any substantive thesis or view – it is the attempt to move past all such representationalist attempts.

¹⁰² “[L]anguage and conceptualization are the fundamental afflictions (*kleśas*) leading to the suffering of sentient beings. And insofar as language itself is understood to involve conceptualization, we might simplify the previous statement by saying that conceptualization is *the* fundamental affliction” (D’Amato 2009, 42).

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Articulating our Purposes from the Periphery

“What one finds problematic is a function of what one thinks important. One’s sense of importance is in large part dependent on the vocabulary one employs” (PCP 149).

This dissertation has been a sustained attempt at developing a Rortyan redescription of a specific language game, namely the ongoing exercise amongst contemporary Buddhist scholars who are interested in understanding the message of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka. This language game, I have argued, has generated two interpretive oscillations with various impasses. I have sought to sidestep them by using a Neo-Pragmatist redescription of language and philosophy that, unlike the current language game, clearly eschews representationalism from the start. I characterised the first of these oscillations as “metaphilosophical” as it revolves around a “meta” disagreement over the boundaries and the methods of the discipline known as “philosophy” in Western intellectual contexts, and whether and to what extent the hermeneutic lens of this discipline is applicable to the Madhyamaka context. I termed the second as “metalinguistic” as it is animated by a “meta” debate surrounding the linguistic function of Nāgārjuna’s statements.

I have argued that by re-envisioning philosophy and language anti-representationally we can move past these two types of stalemates, which are interrelated precisely because of certain representationalist idioms and images that have not been rejected from the outset. Our Rortyan review of this interpretative terrain shows us the value of shifting discourse in an explicitly anti-representationalist direction. We re-articulated philosophical inquiry as not solely in the business of problem-solving, but also in problem-*dissolving* through the method of rhetorical redescription – a method which, we observed, is not in opposition to reasoning and argumentation. Moreover, by recognising the function of language as a coping process rather than a copying device, we sought to put to rest the protracted debate in Buddhist Studies as to whether soteriology or truth is in the driver’s seat while understanding Madhyamaka.

Specifically, Rorty’s metaphilosophical re-envisioning of what philosophy is and how reasoning develops suggested to us that a value-free, neutral space is not a useful presupposition to entertain regarding intellectual inquiry. By indicating the possibility of carrying out philosophical inquiry *without* such Archimedean vantage points, we demonstrated that rhetoric and argumentation should not be conceptualised as opposing each other – a philosopher can suggest rational redescriptions that enable the “literalisation” (that is, implementation) of new vocabularies. In this respect, this dissertation sought to redescribe what

Huntington (2017, 155) has emphasised to be the disagreement between the two interpretive sides: “When Nāgārjuna insists that he is not asserting anything – that he has no “proposition” (*pratijñā*), nothing to explain or prove, nothing to argue for or against – it certainly seems as if he is not committed to rational exegesis. But is that necessarily a problem? Is ‘being reasonable’ the ultimate or only criterion by which truth or value – or virtue, for that matter – could be judged?” In the light of our explorations, we can now rhetorically respond as follows: “Is it indeed the case that in making these disclaimers, Nāgārjuna is not making any reason-directed moves? If, echoing Rorty, we read Nāgārjuna as making assertions and yet eschewing all views, by working metaphilosophically from the periphery in an effort to alter XY spaces through new metaphors, it becomes apparent that there is no *one* way of understanding what “being reasonable” is”. We can say with Rorty, “I do not see why the term ‘reason’ is not as much up for grabs as the term ‘academic freedom’ or ‘morality’ or ‘pervert’” (PAA 58), or we can make the observation that “being reasonable” is what humans generally do when they think. In any case, what is at stake between the two sides of our oscillations is that an overly tight link is being proposed between “being reasonable” and “doing philosophy”. But we have argued that “being reasonable” has no more explanatory power in an epistemic context than the physiological explanation of opium’s effects as caused by its dormitive power. The meanings of social constructs shift with history, and what is considered reasonable shifts too – what counted as a persuasive argument in 1600 may not be considered as such today. Here, persuasiveness is as much part of philosophy as it is of other cognitive disciplines (such as physiology) – to attempt to clearly delineate between rational and irrational persuasion is futile.

At the end of our journey through all these themes, the reader may feel that I have not yet given a concrete definition of *what* philosophy is. But in the spirit of Rorty, the aim is to show that we do not need any such definition, for “philosophy” is subject to historical change, and there is no canonical arbiter for whether or not some argument is “philosophical”. Nevertheless, my choice of Rorty as a dialogical interlocutor has hopefully proven to be culturally productive. The concrete conceptual resonances between Rorty and Nāgārjuna are important insofar as they illuminate the methodological strategies open to those in Z (non-)positions. As we observed, the “heterodox” concern with the engrained Platonist conceptions of Western philosophy is one that Rorty too took very seriously. I hope to have demonstrated that we can shed “philosophy” of its (lingering) Platonist assumptions without, *pace* the “heterodox” reading, dismissing philosophical criteria like cogency, coherence, and consistency as lenses through which to read Nāgārjuna.

Resonating with these themes, a key conclusion of our re-reading of Nāgārjuna as an anti-representationalist is that Madhyamaka is not so much a *philosophy* as it is a *metaphilosophy*. By re-envisioning philosophical practice in a Rortyan way, we have re-read Nāgārjuna as offering Neo-Pragmatist *metacritiques* of certain discursive spaces shaped by, or tinged with, the imageries of representationalism. In so doing, we highlighted that the Mādhyamika can be read as committed to anti-representationalism and therefore as concerned with preventing slides into discussions *about* the world as well as invocations of representationalist dualisms like scheme-content and convention-fact. In particular, Madhyamaka metaphilosophy can be read as an assault on our “theoretical” tendency towards hypostatization, which carries with it certain essentialist presuppositions. So, the reason why Madhyamaka offers a “meta” style of philosophising and not a *philosophy* is because its aim is to uproot certain intuitive ways of engaging in inquiry, by training one’s interlocutors in a new vocabulary. This “training” is not equivalent to philosophical problem-solving, precisely because its intention is to make the perceived problems appear optional; however, it is also not quite the same as developing rhetorical strategies such as (simply) extending one’s palms upwards. The chapters of this dissertation show that this bifurcation of reason (expressed in problem-solving) versus rhetoric (expressed in nonconceptual gestures) operates within a representationalist compass. Instead, Nāgārjuna can be read as seeking to uproot anti-representationalist idioms, with the aim of transforming our intellectual tendencies towards a soteriologically efficacious direction.

We demonstrated these possibilities of re-reading Nāgārjuna in a Neo-Pragmatist spirit by focusing on language. Nāgārjuna’s metaphilosophy can be supported by an anti-representationalist metalinguistic strategy, and this strategy may be characterised as a Davidsonian holism in the philosophy of language, according to which linguistic communication is a dynamic process that requires no foundations, such as meanings or conventions. To reiterate, “orthodox” anti-*realism* and Rortyan anti-*representationalism* effectively reach the same conclusion. By the time the “orthodox” have suitably qualified their notion of “anti-realism”, there is not much left in this notion to suggest a substantive disagreement with anti-representationalism. Nevertheless, on my reading it would be misleading to characterise Nāgārjuna as an anti-realist because I see him as eschewing representationalist dualisms like scheme-content and convention-fact, which anti-realist positions (implicitly) rest upon or work with. Therefore, I do not read Nāgārjuna as making any claims *about* reality, whether conventional or ultimate. As such, the Madhyamaka critique

dismisses, with Rorty, two topics dear to some professional Anglophone philosophers, namely epistemology and ontology.¹⁰³

The former is rejected because once we jettison the notion of representation, there is no longer any reason to develop theories that would justify our knowledge claims. This is because such theoretical inquiries search for epistemic foundations that are deeper than the social practices humans have developed for justifying their beliefs to each other – in other words, they presuppose a gap between mind and world that must be bridged. However, our Neo-Pragmatist re-reading dismisses this gap and highlights our enmeshment in the world. The rejection of ontology follows too from anti-representationalism, which eschews discussions that semantically extend *to* the world. In this respect, the field of ontology is called into question not so much regarding its status as a discipline, but regarding its utility. It is difficult to see for what purpose an anti-representationalist would engage in metaphysical speculation *about* what there is.

Thus, shifting our attention to anti-representationalism as a *metaphilosophical* strategy with *metalinguistic* repercussions is what differentiates the present dissertation from various other recent attempts to bring Rortyan themes into dialogue with Nāgārjuna. In Chapter 1, I characterised this dissertation as an exercise in *comparative* philosophy, because one of its central concerns is a critical exploration of the aims, methods, and scope of philosophy (Levine 2016, 211) across the conceptual, temporal, and cultural borderlines of Rortyan Pragmatism and Madhyamaka. The upshot of my anti-representationalist re-reading of Nāgārjuna is that it shifts our focus *away* from the world (including the socially generated conventional world – an image that remains tinged with representationalist assumptions) and *towards* our cognitive and linguistic practices. This is a move that can be traced back to the Buddha himself who avoided metaphysical speculation¹⁰⁴ and whose core teachings involve an introspective observation of our psychophysiological streams. Indeed, the Buddha’s redescription of *karma* in terms of intentionality (*cetanā*) gestures towards the cultivation of meditative practice in

¹⁰³ The more systematic implications of such conclusions on how to interpret Madhyamaka will be addressed and developed in a future monograph based on this dissertation especially in engagement with some recent work such as Westerhoff (2020) and Garfield (2019).

¹⁰⁴ For example, in the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* (Thanissaro 2013), the Buddha refuses to answer questions about the finitude of the cosmos, the relationship between the self and the body, and the whereabouts of the Buddha after death. Read through our Neo-Pragmatist lens, the Buddha seems to be rejecting all questions *about* reality that are formulated in a representationalist vocabulary. The questions are motivated by the use of words such as “cosmos”, “self”, “body”, and “tathāgata” as semantically extending to what they are *about* rather than the recognition that they are significant not because they refer to *something* in the world, but because they have a particular function within a vocabulary. Making the mistake of sliding from language to world via semantic representationalism is precisely the error.

Buddhist life.¹⁰⁵ Thus, our *anti-representationalist* lens brings our attention back to our own conceptual and linguistic tendencies and away from the reifications of these processes as “the world”.

To conclude, this dissertation itself is an attempt at a Rortyan exercise in navigating a Z grey spectrum relative to some contemporary Madhyamaka quasi-representationalist XY spaces. From my peripheral, Rortyan standpoint, contemporary Madhyamaka scholars are in a situation where they seek to renounce representationalism with one hand, but hold on to it with the other (Rorty 2000b, 102). Across the chapters of this dissertation, I have attempted to articulate *why* letting go of representationalism is the better rhetorical strategy in terms of conveying the sophistication of the Madhyamaka message. But this is not to say that I have established the conclusive way of reading Madhyamaka with an aspiration to get something right (PCP 124). I have only tried to emulate Rorty’s recognised ability to be a “fairminded and farseeing referee” (Dennett 1993, 232) between both sides of the oscillations. In so doing, I have attempted to redescribe, somewhat orthogonally to ongoing discussions, the Madhyamaka terrain, and show how this terrain and its landmarks look somewhat different through our Rortyan lens.

The differences in argumentative and rhetorical preferences I have highlighted involve an age-old disagreement that can be traced back, in Western intellectual contexts, to two different ways of characterising the significance of the Socratic method. Either we can take the Platonist “systematising” route and home in on truth and doctrinal formulation, in an effort to get something right, or we can, with Rorty, highlight Socrates’s catalytic role of “edifying” people about how to doubt their entrenched convictions. Both styles, however, are philosophical and rational, even if distinct in their aims and strategies. Indeed, such differences are not foreign to Buddhist intellectual history. Madhyamaka was doxographically bifurcated by Tibetan commentators between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika – that is, between those Mādhyamikas who thought that a deconstructive method of *reductios* was the most skillful route, and those who found it important to offer “formal probative arguments” (Dreyfus and McClintock 2003, 6-7). Whether or not this bifurcation is exegetically accurate does not concern us.¹⁰⁶ Our point is that Rorty allows us to see how we can hold deconstruction (A) and

¹⁰⁵ The Sanskrit word *karma*, generally translated as “action”, is explained in the Buddhist context by Gethin (1998, 119, emphasis added) as follows: “a being’s *intentional* ‘actions’ of body, speech, and mind – whatever is done, said, or even just thought with definite intention or volition”.

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, it could be argued that the distinction between conventional₁ and conventional₂ resonates with the Svātantrika acceptance of multiple levels of conventional truth. In our case, conventional₁ and conventional₂ “facts” would not be understood in any hierarchical form of relationship, but rather as expressions of truth with distinct vocabularies.

construction (B) in a single vision – they are both part of the Neo-Pragmatist metaphilosophical strategy to get us to abandon certain *intuitive* ways of speaking and thinking. These ways are representationalist and are shaped by commitments to essence or intrinsicity (*svabhāva*). There are different argumentative and rhetorical strategies with which to highlight anti-representationalism, such as deconstructive-constructive strategies from a Z (non-)position, as well as specific instantiations of redescription by Davidson, Dennett, and Brandom. In the Mahāyāna traditions, skillful means (*upāya*) facilitates and accentuates the contextual flexibility of pedagogic strategies, as well as the numerous possibilities of new rhetorical attempts at conveying the message of Buddhism. What kind of strategy one prefers will depend on a lot of contextual factors, but there is no *one* philosophically correct one. Perhaps the Mahāyāna tool of *upāya*, as understood by Nāgārjuna, is meant to highlight that “We should stop trying for a unified picture, and for a master vocabulary. We should confine ourselves to making sure that we are not burdened with obsolete ways of speaking, and then ensuring that those vocabularies that are still useful stay out of each other’s way” (PCP 150). The common sense world we live in has its own particular functions, and the Buddhist redescribed world in terms of dependent origination, the four noble truths, emptiness, and liberation, has its other functions. Our aim should be to hypostatize neither and to let them co-exist peacefully.

Perhaps now, we can respond to Macarthur’s and Price’s puzzlement, mentioned in Chapter 1, over why representationalism has not been more widely challenged “given that the means and motive for doing so have been popular currency for the better part of two decades” (2007, 92). If the Mādhyamikas are right, representationalism, *pace* Rorty, is not just a socio-historically contingent conceptual development in the history of specifically Western philosophy. Rather, it is a deeply engrained cognitive tendency across humanity that is expressed, for instance, in the intuitive pull in our conventional₂ explanations to use conventional₁ intuitions as a template for further inquiry. And if Rorty and Nāgārjuna are right, our metaphilosophical stance should be aimed at uprooting our intuitions – about belief, meaning, logic, rationality, qualia, and intrinsic nature – that are powered by semantic representationalism.

I hope that the present dissertation will pave the way for dialogical spaces that make the metaphilosophical and metalinguistic commitments or leanings that shape such disagreements a topic of fruitful self-reflexive discussion in Madhyamaka Studies. Along with the “heterodox”, we can continue thinking critically about our own hermeneutic contingencies whilst also, along with the “orthodox”, we can remain committed to emphasising the

intellectual sophistication of non-Western thought systems, of which Madhyamaka is one of the most striking and rich examples.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

AOC: *Achieving Our Country* (1999a)

CIS: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989a)

CP: *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982)

OPP: *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers, 1960–2000* (2020)

ORT: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1* (1991)

PAA: *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* (2021)

PAP: *Philosophy as Poetry* (2016)

PCP: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol. 4* (2007)

PMN: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)

PSH: *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999b)

TP: *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Vol. 3* (1998)

References

Arnold, Dan. 2005. *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*. Columbia University Press.

———. 2006. “On How It Can Be Ultimately True That There Is No Ultimate Truth: Thoughts on Mark Siderits’s Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy”. *APA Newsletter on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies* 6 (1): 12–16.

Bacon, Michael. 2007. *Richard Rorty: Pragmatism and Political Liberalism*. Lexington Books.

———. 2012. *Pragmatism: An Introduction*. Polity.

Beckwith, Christopher I. 2015. *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*. Princeton University Press.

Berger, Douglas L. 2010. “Acquiring Emptiness: Interpreting Nāgārjuna’s MMK 24:18”. *Philosophy East and West* 60 (1): 40–64.

- Bernstein, Richard. 1995. "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives". In *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp, 54–68. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Blackburn, Simon. 2013. "Pragmatism: All or Some?" In *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, edited by Huw Price, Michael Williams, Paul Horwich, Robert Brandom, and Simon Blackburn, 67–84. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842498.006>.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, ed. 1995. *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli. Wisdom Publications.
- Brandom, Robert. 1976. "Truth and Assertibility". *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (6): 137–49.
- . 1994. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Harvard University Press.
- . 2002. "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms". In *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, edited by James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglen. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203996379>.
- . 2011. *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary*. Harvard University Press.
- . 2013. "Global Anti-Representationalism?" In *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, edited by Huw Price, Michael Williams, Paul Horwich, Robert Brandom, and Simon Blackburn, 85–111. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842498.007>.
- . 2020. "Rorty on Vocabularies". In *Revisiting Richard Rorty*, by Pedro Góis Moreira, 1–24. Vernon Press.
- . 2021. "Foreword". In *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, by Richard Rorty, edited by Eduardo Mendieta. Belknap Press.
- Brons, Robin. 2020. "Rorty, Buddhism, and Ethics without Essence." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 56 (1): 19–43.
- Burik, Steven, Robert Smid, and Ralph Weber. 2022. *Comparative Philosophy and Method: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Burton, David. 2004. *Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation: A Philosophical Study*. Routledge.
- Cabezón, José Ignacio. 1990. "The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika (C. W. Huntington, Jr. & Geshe Namgyal Wangchen)". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 13 (2): 152–61.

- . 2000. “Truth in Buddhist Theology”. In *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, edited by Roger Jackson and John Makransky, 25–52, Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315028002>.
- Chakrabarti, Arindam, and Ralph Weber. 2016. *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Chibber, Vivek. 2013. *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. Verso Books.
- Coseru, Christian. 2017. “Mind in Indian Buddhist Philosophy”. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/mind-indian-buddhism/>.
- Cowherds, The, ed. 2011. *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.001.0001>.
- . 2016. “Is ‘Moonshadows’ Lunacy? The Cowherds Respond”. *Philosophy East and West* 66 (2): 617–21. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43830913>.
- Cox, Collett. 2004. “From Category to Ontology: The Changing Role of Dharma in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (5): 543–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-004-8635-4>.
- D’Amato, Mario. 2009. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word”. In *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Jay L. Garfield, Tom J. F. Tillemans, and Mario D’Amato, 41–56. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195381559.003.0004>.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. *Inquiries Into Truth And Interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
- . 1986. “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”. In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, edited by Ernest Lepore, 433–46. Blackwell.
- . 1990. “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”. In *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*, edited by Alan R. Malachowski, 120–38. Blackwell.
- . 2000. “Truth Rehabilitated”. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, 65–74. Blackwell.
- . 2004. *Problems of Rationality*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198237545.001.0001>.
- Dennett, D. C. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Little Brown.
- . 1993. “Back to the Drawing Board”. In *Dennett and His Critics*, edited by B. Dahlbom, 203–35. Blackwell.

- Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press.
- Donahue, Amy. 2016. “For the Cowherds: Coloniality and Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy”. *Philosophy East and West* 66 (2): 597–617.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2016.0038>.
- Dorfman, Michael. 2014. “Putting the Madhyamaka Trick in Context: A Contextualist Reading of Huntington’s Interpretation of Madhyamaka”. *Buddhist Studies Review* 31 (1): 91–124.
- Dowden, Bradley, and Norman Swartz. 2022. “Truth”. In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/truth/>.
- Dreyfus, Georges B. J. 1997. *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan Interpretations*. State University of New York Press.
- Dreyfus, Georges, and Sara McClintock, eds. 2003. *The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Distinction: What Difference Does a Difference Make?* Wisdom Publications.
- Farrell, Frank B. 1995. ‘Rorty and Antirealism’. In *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp, 154–89. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Frankenberry, Nancy. 2019. “Consenting to Contingency after Rorty and Nagarjuna”. *Review of Metaphysics* 72 (3): 563–86.
- Ganeri, Jonardon. 2007. *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199202416.001.0001>.
- Garfield, Jay L. 1995. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2002. *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. “Reductionism and Fictionalism: Comments on Siderits’s Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy”. *APA Newsletter on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophy* 6 (1): 1–7.
- . 2008. “Turning a Madhyamaka Trick: Reply to Huntington”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36 (4): 507–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23497299>.
- . 2015. *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190204334.001.0001>.
- . 2019. *Wilfrid Sellars and Buddhist Philosophy*. Routledge.

- Garfield, Jay L., and Graham Priest. 2003. "Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought". *Philosophy East and West* 53 (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2003.0004>.
- Garfield, Jay L., and Jan Westerhoff. 2011. "Acquiring the Notion of a Dependent Designation: A Response to Douglas L. Berger". *Philosophy East and West* 61 (2): 365–67.
- . 2015. "Introduction". In *Madhyamaka and Yogacara: Allies Or Rivals?*, edited by Jay L. Garfield and Jan Westerhoff, 1–10. Oxford University Press.
- Gascoigne, Neil, and Michael Bacon. 2020. "Taking Rorty Seriously: Pragmatism, Metaphilosophy, and Truth". *Inquiry* 0 (0): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1820375>.
- Gethin, Rupert. 1998. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.
- Gold, Jonathan C. 2015. "Without Karma and Nirvāṇa, Buddhism Is Nihilism: The Yogācāra Contribution to the Doctrine of Emptiness". In *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?*, edited by Jay Garfield and Jan Westerhoff, 213–41. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190231286.003.0010>.
- Gombrich, Richard. 2009. *What the Buddha Thought*. Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Guignon, Charles, and David R. Hiley. 2003. "Introduction: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Philosophy". In *Richard Rorty*, edited by Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, 1–40. Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity – Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. Polity.
- . 2013. "'... and to Define America, Her Athletic Democracy' The Philosopher and the Language Shaper. In Memory of Richard Rorty". In *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy To Cultural Politics*, edited by Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman, and Mike Sandbothe, 9–20. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Healey, Richard. 2013. "Review of Scientific Metaphysics". 17 July 2013. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/scientific-metaphysics/>.
- Holder, John J. 1996. "The Early Buddhist Theory of Truth: A Contextualist Pragmatic Interpretation". *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (4): 443–59. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq199636443>.
- Hong, Chang-Seong, ed. 2006. *APA Newsletter on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophy* 6 (1): 1–21.
- Hopkins, Jeffrey. 1998. *Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland: Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*. Snow Lion Publications.
- Horwich, Paul. 1998. *Meaning*. Oxford University Press.

- Huetter-Almerigi, Yvonne. 2020. "Two Forms of Realism". *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 12 (1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.1868>.
- Huetter-Almerigi, Yvonne, and Bjørn Ramberg. Forthcoming. "Analytic Philosophy of Language (Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, Davidson, Kuhn)". In *Handbuch Richard Rorty*, edited by Martin Müller. Springer.
- Huntington, C. W. 1989. *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*. University of Hawaii Press.
- . 1992. "The Theatre of Objectivity: Comments on José Cabezón's Interpretations of MKhas Grub Rje's and C. W. Huntington, Jr.'s Interpretations of the Tibetan Translation of a Seventh Century Indian Buddhist Text". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15 (1): 118–33.
- . 1995. "A Way of Reading". *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18 (2): 279–308.
- . 2007. "The Nature of the Mādhyamika Trick". *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 35 (2): 103–31.
- . 2017. "Nāgārjuna's Fictional World". *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 46 (1): 153–77.
- . 2020. "The Autobiographical No-Self". In *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*, edited by Rafal K. Stepien, 339–60. State University of New York Press.
- Keown, Damien. 1992. Review of *The Emptiness of Emptiness. An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, by C. W. Huntington. *Buddhist Studies Review* 9 (2): 215–23. <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsrv.v9i2.15293>.
- Kuczynski, John-Michael. 2007. *Conceptual Atomism and the Computational Theory of Mind*. John Benjamins & Co.
- Kumari, Kamala. 1987. *Notion of Truth in Buddhism and Pragmatism*. Capital Publishing House.
- Levine, Michael. 2016. "Does Comparative Philosophy Have a Fusion Future?" *Confluence: Journal of World Philosophies* 4 (November): 208–37.
- Liat, J. Kwee Swan. 1951. "Methods of Comparative Philosophy". *Philosophy East and West* 1 (1): 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1396932>.
- Macarthur, David, and Huw Price. 2007. "Pragmatism, Quasi-Realism, and the Global Challenge". In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 91–121. Oxford University Press.
- MacKenzie, Matthew. 2008. "Ontological Deflationism in Madhyamaka". *Contemporary Buddhism* 9 (2): 197–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940802574126>.

- Malachowski, Alan R. 2002. *Richard Rorty*. Routledge.
- Misak, Cheryl. 2007. "Introduction". In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 1–6. Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, John P. 1990. *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson*. Westview Press.
- Nakamura, Hajime. 1988. "The Meaning of the Terms 'Philosophy' and 'Religion' in Various Traditions". In *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, edited by Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch, 137–51. Princeton University Press.
- Newland, Guy, and Tom Tillemans. 2011. "An Introduction to Conventional Truth". In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds, 3–22. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.003.0001>.
- Newland, Guy. 2010. "Weighing the Butter, Levels of Explanation, and Falsification: Models of the Conventional in Tsongkhapa's Account of Madhyamaka". In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds, 57–72. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.003.0004>.
- Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. Yale University Press.
- Overgaard, Søren, Paul Gilbert, and Stephen Burwood, eds. "Introduction: What Good Is Metaphilosophy?" In *An Introduction to Metaphilosophy*, 1–16. Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018043.002>.
- O'Shea, James. 2020. "How Pragmatist Was Sellars? Reflections on an Analytic Pragmatism". In *Wilfrid Sellars and Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Stefan Brandt and Anke Breunig, 110–29. Routledge.
- Overgaard, Søren, Paul Gilbert, and Stephen Burwood, eds. 2013. "Introduction: What Good Is Metaphilosophy?" In *An Introduction to Metaphilosophy*, 1–16. Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018043.002>.
- Pihlström, Sami. 2007. "Brandom on Pragmatism: Brandom Sobre Pragmatismo". *Cognitio* 8 (2): 265–87.
- Powers, John. 1994. "Empiricism and Pragmatism in the Thought of Dharmakīrti and William James". *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 15 (1): 59–85.
- Price, Huw. 2013. "Naturalism without Representationalism". In *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, edited by Huw Price, Michael Williams, Paul Horwich, Robert Brandom, and Simon Blackburn, 3–21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842498.003>.

- . 2019. “Global Expressivism by the Method of Differences”. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 86: 133–54. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246119000109>.
- Priest, Graham, Mark Siderits, and Tom Tillemans. 2011. “The (Two) Truths about Truth”. In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds, 131–50. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.003.0008>.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1981. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398>.
- Pye, Michael. 2003. *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203503799>.
- Ramberg, Bjørn. 1989. *Donald Davidson’s Philosophy of Language: An Introduction*. Blackwell.
- . 1999. “Dennett’s Pragmatism”. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53 (207 (1)): 61–86.
- . 2001. “Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy”. In *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics*, edited by Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli, 15–46. Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2004. “Naturalizing Idealizations: Pragmatism and the Interpretivist Strategy”. *Contemporary Pragmatism* 1 (2): 1–63. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000140>.
- . 2008. “Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America”. In *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 430–48. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219315.003.0020>.
- . 2011. “Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts”. In *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*, edited by Jeff Malpas, 129–45. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262015561.003.0009>.
- . 2013a. “Being Constructive: On Misak’s Creation of Pragmatism”. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 49: 396–404. <https://doi.org/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.49.3.396>.
- . 2013b. “For the Sake of His Own Generation: Rorty on Destruction and Edification”. In *Richard Rorty: From Pragmatist Philosophy To Cultural Politics*, edited by Alexander Gröschner, Colin Koopman, and Mike Sandbothe, 49–72. Bloomsbury Academic.
- . 2015. “Davidson and Rorty: Triangulation and Anti-Foundationalism”. In *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, edited by Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander, 216–35. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315771854>.

- Reider, Patrick J. 2016. *Wilfrid Sellars, Idealism, and Realism: Understanding Psychological Nominalism*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Reynolds, Anthony. 2000. "Unfamiliar Methods: Blumenberg and Rorty on Metaphor". *Qui Parle* 12 (1): 77–103. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686112>.
- Rorty, Richard, ed. 1967. *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*. University of Chicago Press.
- . 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press.
- . 1982. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/consequences-of-pragmatism>.
- . 1986. "The Contingency of Selfhood". *London Review of Books*, 8 May 1986. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v08/n08/richard-rorty/the-contingency-of-selfhood>.
- . 1989a. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press.
- . 1989b. Review of *Review of Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, by Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch. *Philosophy East and West* 39 (3): 332–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399454>.
- . 1991. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173643>.
- . 1993. "Holism, Intrinsicity, and the Ambition of Transcendence". In *Dennett and His Critics*, edited by B. Dahlbom, 184–202. Blackwell.
- . 1995a. "Philosophy and the Future". In *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp, 197–206. Vanderbilt University Press.
- . 1995b. "Response to Frank Farrell". In *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp, 189–96. Vanderbilt University Press.
- . 1997. "What Do You Do When They Call You a 'Relativist'?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1): 173–77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2953787>.
- . 1998. *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 3. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625404>.
- . 1999a. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Harvard University Press.
- . 1999b. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin.
- . 2000a. "Response to Bjørn Ramberg". In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, 370–77. Blackwell.

- . 2000b. “Response to Daniel Dennett”. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom, 101–8. Blackwell.
- . 2007. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 4. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812835>.
- . 2016. *Philosophy as Poetry*. University of Virginia Press.
- . 2020. *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers, 1960–2000*. Edited by W. P. Małecki and Chris Voparil. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108763967>.
- . 2021. *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*. Edited by Eduardo Mendieta. Belknap Press.
- Sachs, Carl B. 2015. *Intentionality and the Myths of the Given*. Routledge.
- Salis, Pietro. 2020. “Varieties of Anti-Representationalism”. In *Revisiting Richard Rorty*, edited by Pedro G. Moreira, 115–34. Vernon Press.
- Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963. *Science, Perception and Reality*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Siderits, Mark. 2003. *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*. Ashgate.
- . 2006. “Replies to Garfield, Taber, and Arnold”. *APA Newsletter on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies* 6 (1): 16–21.
- . 2007. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Ashgate.
- . 2011. “Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopīs Know”. In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds, 167–80. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.003.0010>.
- . 2015. “The Case for Discontinuity”. In *Madhyamaka and Yogācāra: Allies or Rivals?*, edited by Jay Garfield and Jan Westerhoff, 111–26. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190231286.003.0005>.
- . 2016. *Studies in Buddhist Philosophy*. Edited by Jan Westerhoff. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198754862.001.0001>.
- Siderits, Mark, and Jay L. Garfield. 2013. “Defending the Semantic Interpretation: A Reply to Ferraro”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 41 (6): 655–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-013-9195-2>.
- Siderits, Mark, and Shoryu Katsura. 2013. *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Wisdom Publications.

- Smart, Ninian. 1988. "The Analogy of Meaning and the Tasks of Comparative Philosophy". In *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, edited by Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch. Princeton University Press.
- Smith College Buddhist Studies, dir. 2020. *Madhyamaka & Methodology Symposium: Panel 2 (Jan Westerhoff, University of Durham) (Video 10 of 29)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FKsbwzvXlg>.
- Stepien, Rafal K. 2018a. "Do Good Philosophers Argue? A Buddhist Approach to Philosophy and Philosophy Prizes". *APA Newsletter on Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies* 18 (1): 13–15.
- . 2018b. "Orienting Reason: A Religious Critique of Philosophizing Nāgārjuna". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (4): 1072–1106. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy021>.
- . 2019. "Abandoning All Views: A Buddhist Critique of Belief". *The Journal of Religion* 99 (4): 529–66. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704844>.
- . 2020. "Introduction". In *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature*, edited by Rafal K. Stepien, 1–31. State University of New York Press.
- Stout, Jeffrey. 2004. "Radical Interpretation and Pragmatism: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth". In *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry, 25–52. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613906.004>.
- Taber, John A. 1998. "On Nāgārjuna's So-Called Fallacies: A Comparative Approach". *Indo-Iranian Journal* 41 (3): 213–44. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003025028235>.
- Tanaka, Koji, Yasuo Deguchi, Jay Garfield, and Graham Priest. 2015. *The Moon Points Back*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190226862.001.0001>.
- Thanissaro, Bikkhu. 2013. "'Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire' (MN 72)". *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition)*. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.072.than.html>.
- Thakchoe, Sonam. 2012. "Prāsaṅgika's Semantic Nominalism: Reality Is Linguistic Concept". *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 40 (4): 427–52.
- . 2022. 'The Theory of Two Truths in India'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/twotruths-india/>.
- Tillemans, Tom. 1999. *Scripture, Logic, Language*.
- . 2003. "Metaphysics for Mādhyamikas". In *The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Distinction*, edited by Georges Dreyfus and Sara McClintock, 93–124. Wisdom Publications.

- . 2016. *How Do Mādhyamikas Think? And Other Essays on the Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*. Wisdom Publications.
- . 2017. “Philosophical Quietism in Nāgārjuna and Early Madhyamaka”. In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri, 110–32. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199314621.013.8>.
- Tzohar, Roy. 2018. *A Yogacara Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*. Oxford University Press.
- Wanderer, Jeremy. 2008. *Robert Brandom*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Weber, Ralph. 2013. “‘How to Compare?’ – On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy”. *Philosophy Compass* 8 (7): 593–603.
- . 2014. “Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13 (2): 151–71.
- Weiskopf, Daniel A. 2009. “Atomism, Pluralism, and Conceptual Content”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79 (1): 131–63.
- Westerhoff, Jan. 2009a. *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195375213.001.0001>.
- . 2009b. “The No-Thesis View: Making Sense of Verse 29 of Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī*”. In *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Jay L. Garfield, Tom J. F. Tillemans, and Mario D’Amato, 25–40. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195381559.003.0003>.
- . 2010. *The Dispeller of Disputes: Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199732692.001.0001>.
- . 2011. “The Merely Conventional Existence of the World”. In *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds, 189–212. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751426.003.0012>.
- . 2016. “On the Nihilist Interpretation of Madhyamaka”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 44 (2): 337–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-014-9266-z>.
- . 2017. “Nāgārjuna on Emptiness: A Comprehensive Critique of Foundationalism”. In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, edited by Jonardon Ganeri, 93–109. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199314621.013.7>.
- . 2018a. “Some Remarks on a Problem in Madhyamaka Philosophy of Language”. *Ratio* 31 (4): 415–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12203>.
- . 2018b. *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*. The Oxford History of Philosophy. Oxford University Press.
- . 2019. “Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Language”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 47 (4): 779–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-017-9341-3>.

———. 2020. *The Non-existence of the Real World*. Oxford University Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard University Press.

Williams, Michael. 1999. “Meaning and Deflationary Truth”. *The Journal of Philosophy* 96 (11): 545–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2564623>.

———. 2013. “How Pragmatists Can Be Local Expressivists”. In *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*, edited by Huw Price, Michael Williams, Paul Horwich, Robert Brandom, and Simon Blackburn, 128–44. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842498.009>.

Williams, Paul. 1991. “On the Interpretation of Madhyamaka Thought”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 19 (2): 191–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00158821>.

Williams-Wyant, Matthew D. 2017. “Nāgārjuna’s No-Thesis View Revisited: The Significance of Classical Indian Debate Culture on Verse 29 of the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*”. *Asian Philosophy* 27 (3): 263–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2017.1353210>.

Yakherds, The. 2021. *Knowing Illusion: Bringing a Tibetan Debate into Contemporary Discourse, Volume 1, A Philosophical History of the Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press.