



# Social Origins of Buddhist Nominalism? Non-articulation of the “Social Self” in Early Buddhism and Nāgārjuna

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**Abstract** In the following, it will be argued that Nāgārjuna (ca. 150 CE) adopts a Buddhist nominalism that encompasses not only a position towards abstract entities, but resonates with a nominalist perspective on the “social reality” of persons. Early Buddhist texts, such as the Suttanipāta, argue that human persons defy a classification in hierarchic “classes” (*jāti*), because there is no moral substance, e.g. of Brahmins. Differences between individuals do not exist by nature, since it is the individual that realizes difference according to the specific personal realization of action (*karman*) and moral cultivation. Buddhist “nominalism,” therefore, has at least one of its central roots in a rejection of a socially privileged “selves,” a stratified social hegemony, and religious truth claims. Nāgārjuna, on his part, radicalizes nominalism as a threefold correlation of the “non-articulated self,” a “non-articulated” reality, and finally, a “non-articulated” dimension even within all concepts, names, and designations. In this vein, Nāgārjuna’s *śūnyavāda* can be seen as a consequent attempt to neutralize unwanted social and psychological consequences of ontological language-use. Nāgārjuna even self-critically questions the position that the workings of a Buddhist path of liberation can be articulated, which seems to be a remarkable parallel to certain roots of Western nominalism.

**Keywords** Buddhism · Pali Buddhism · Nominalism · Nāgārjuna · No-self · Two truth · Non-articulated reality

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## The Social Origins of Buddhist Nominalism?

Nominalism—in the broadest perspective, any philosophical view in which concepts (of universals or abstract entities) are replaced by names (*nomina*)—is not only an attitude towards the use of language. “Nominalism” has become a well-established Western designation for the philosophical position of Nāgārjuna (and especially Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka), but also Vasubandhu (*Abhidharmakośa*), Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and other philosophers in the Indian and Tibetan tradition (cf. Dunne 1998).

In the following, I will present an interpretation of Nāgārjuna that will aim to show how Nāgārjuna builds on a Buddhist nominalism that encompasses not only a position towards abstract entities, but resonates with a nominalist perspective on the “social reality” of persons expressed in pre-Nāgārjunian Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Nāgārjuna, on his part, radicalizes nominalism as a correlation of the “non-articulated self,” “non-articulated” reality, and a “non-articulated” dimension even within all concepts, names, and designations. In other words, I will ask if the *śūnyavāda* entails a consequent attempt to neutralize unwanted psychological, but also social consequences of ontological language use. Though this will be my question addressed to early Buddhist and Nāgārjuna’s works, I will not argue in favor of the view that “silence” is the goal aimed for in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy. A “non-articulated” reality overrules a special state within communication—silence. “Non-articulation” is not only a reaction, or a “psychic state,” but a more encompassing strategy of disidentifying with essentialist language use. Being part of a society of privileged individuals and classes which had developed a complex strategy in order to justify social hegemony and religious truth claims, Indian Buddhists up to Nāgārjuna, an even more so, Dharmakīrti and Vasubandhu living in a historical epoch of reinvigorated Brahmanism, were aware of the central meaning of the connex between the “social self” and “worldly parlance” (or “conventional truth”) for the coming-together of suffering. As such, it bears aspects of a response to unchallenged worldly conventions, caste-based superiority, disrespect, oppression, or other, more sublime processes of “othering.” Is the emergence of nominalist conceptions of language in itself a reaction to these social practices? Buddhist thought on language largely delegitimizes any attempt to justify that concepts directly refer to reality—should we read this as a social philosophy, too?

More specifically, I will argue that the doctrinal question which made nominalism socially relevant was the view that a person can only be described nominally. In consequence, early Buddhist texts emphasize that there is no way to express a “metaphysical self”; if at all, merely the conditionality of actions of a person can be expressed (or, to put it more freely, syntax can be addressed, not semantics). The question of how to conceptualize the “person” marked the initial problem which called for a more thorough analysis of worldly discourse and the

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the participants of the conference “Language in the Traditions of Madhyamaka Thought” (Huafan University, Taipei, 2014) and especially Mattia Salvini, for helpful corrections and comments.

nature of concepts,<sup>2</sup> leading to a “philosophy of language” *avant la lettre*. If reality as “thusness” can not be articulated in concepts, all attempts to justify a “substantial moral self,” a “natural” social hierarchy, etc., will be in vain. Assuming that the “conventional” is to be grasped as “social,” consisting of “worldly conventions” that reflect language and communicative practices of a social community,<sup>3</sup> we should, in consequence, acknowledge that the social aspects of “conventional truth,” i.e., worldly truth expressed by conventional language, are crucial for Nāgārjuna’s nominalist analysis of conventional language.

In this reading, Nāgārjuna made the attempt to give a coherent account of “conventional language” (i.e., the social world of selves, language use, and conceptualizations). Even more, Nāgārjuna self-critically questions the position that the workings of a Buddhist path of liberation can be articulated, which seems to be a remarkable parallel to certain strands of Western nominalism. Given that the “person” (the “self”) as a social construct—reified in conventional language and either eternalized as *ātman*, or disconnected from all agency in fatalist philosophies—initiated the viewpoint of nominalism, subsequent questions arise: Does the generalization of “nominalism,” which seems to be a late canonical or early post-canonical development, still receive its validity from the analysis of the “person”? How does the “articulated social world” of the first-person perspective correlate to “non-articulation”? Does the refusal to hold philosophical assertions in discourse, which could be translated into the social world as the aim to debase philosophical fundamentalism and contentious, polemical, and warlike philosophical dispute (cf. the title of Nāgārjuna’s *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, “Treatise to prevent vain discussions”), reflect a certain affirmation of “conventional truth”? How can an (assumed) non-articulated sphere—a sphere not structured by language—be addressed? Finally, if Nāgārjuna expresses the aim to live with a pacified mind within a world of nominal attributions and exalted, reified, and harmful ontological assumptions: does he still imply a critique of social realities reaffirmed through conventional language? Or does he express a more “psychological” attitude towards suffering induced by the subliminal, language-structured “self”? Methodologically, an important means to study the social sphere within philosophy is conceptual metaphor theory. Following this approach, I will analyse relevant metaphors, arguing that even in philosophical texts metaphors are telling examples of the life-world of the respective philosophers.

## “Nominalism” and Social Reality

In the West, nominalism has, in the narrowest sense, become the term to define approaches which deny the existence of ‘abstract entities’.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, “nominalism” pertains to positions which declare that abstract entities such as

<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇananda opens his classical study of the early Pāli tradition with the words: “The analysis of the nature of concepts constitutes an important facet of the Buddhist doctrine of Anattā (‘not-self’)” (Ñāṇananda 1971, preface).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Chakrabarti and Siderits (2011), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> “‘Nominalism’ refers to a reductionist approach to problems about the existence and nature of abstract entities; it thus stands opposed to Platonism and realism. Whereas the Platonist defends an ontological

qualities or relations are first and foremost to be treated as “nomina,” “designations,” or linguistic “expressions,” and not as equivalents to a state of affairs of the “real world.” This does not entail that every “nominalist” is a constructivist, although this has often been the consequence. Nominalism, however, designates the methodological decision to start philosophical analysis with a pertinent analysis of the nature of concepts. Historically, Western nominalism, as endorsed by Peter Abélard (1079–1142), William of Ockham (ca. 1288–1347) and others, has been developed as an answer to metaphysical questions, too. By some medieval realists, qualities, relations or classes were taught of as existent by their own nature. In contrast, nominalists argued that realistic interpretations of abstract entities will denigrate the sovereignty of God. If even God had, for example, to acknowledge the “in-built nature” of goodness, he is not completely free. Accordingly, important nominalists advanced their approach as a critique of “rational theology” and “realism,” and a means to re-establish God’s unconditional autonomy.

In this context, the philosopher Edward Conze, who later became an eminent scholar of Prajñāpāramitā literature, published an instructive article, “Social Origins of Nominalism,” in which he situated Western nominalism in medieval and early modern society. Conze correlated the rise of nominalist doctrines with “class tasks” of the emerging “bourgeoisie”: “By insisting on the doctrine that faith cannot be proved rationally, Nominalism prepared for the secularization of knowledge, and for an elimination of theological consideration from our knowledge of the world” (Conze 1975, p. 98). Knowledge aims no longer to grasp ontological essence, but “at the control of events,” enabling also the rise of the sciences: “Ontology as a rational discipline begins to lose ground rapidly. Not the things in themselves but their signs and symbols become the true objects of science” (Conze 1975, p. 101). In consequence, nominalists no longer accepted feudal authorities and a Church arguing for a natural basis of its inner hierarchy. Instead, they became aware of a chaotic society, largely unregulated, and in which all structured order is of human origin. In consequence, Conze concludes, not only sciences, but also capitalist economy could flourish, because “class-conscious bourgeois” did not accept sacralised ontological structures of “nature,” or human “nobility,” respectively (Conze 1975, pp. 100–101, cf. Conze 1976). However, notwithstanding the nominalist critique of certain features of feudal society, Western nominalism did not offer an interpretation of “personhood” or the “self” as mere concepts and designations. Metaphysical presuppositions of God being a “person”, and human persons being created in the image of God, seemed to set a border not allowed to be crossed.

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Footnote 4 continued

framework in which things like properties, kinds, relations, propositions, sets and states of affairs are taken to be primitive and irreducible, the nominalist denies the existence of abstract entities and typically seeks to show that discourse about abstract entities is analysable in terms of discourse about familiar concrete particulars” (Loux 1998, s.v.).

## The Origins of Buddhist Nominalism: “Names,” Not “Selves,” of Persons

For my purpose, “nominalism” shall designate the entire attitude regarding the use of conceptual language as it is already described in Pāli and Āgamic Buddhist texts. The Buddha introduces the concept of “worldly speech,” as said above, primarily in contexts which deal with the “self.” In the *Poṭṭhapāda-Sutta*, he argues thus:

‘In just the same way, Citta, from the cow we get milk, from the milk curds, from the curds butter, from the butter ghee, and from the ghee cream of ghee. And when there is milk we don’t speak of curds, of butter [...], we speak of milk; when there are curds we don’t speak of butter [etc. ...]. So too, whenever the gross acquired self is present, we do not speak of the mind-made or formless acquired self; whenever the mind-made acquired self is present, we do not speak of the gross or formless acquired self [...]. But, Citta, these are merely names [p. *loka-samaññā*], expressions [*loka-niruttiyo*], turns of speech [*lokavohārā*], designations in common use in the world [*lokapaññattiyo*], which the Tathāgata uses [*voharati*] without misapprehending them [or: ‘without taking them seriously’, *aparāmasanti*]’ (D I.202, tr. Walshe 1995, p. 169).

Here, “nominalism” does not merely consist of a philosophical theory regarding the status of abstract entities. In contrast, it describes an attitude towards the use of concepts in actual speech acts. In the example given, the Buddha’s discussion arrives at the topic of various kinds of “self”—the physical, bodily self; the mind-made self (the “I-function”); and the formless self. The differences between these selves are explained by using metaphors of milk products, which become, in artificial processing, curds, butter, and finally, cream of ghee. The latter is a highly refined, almost colourless, tasteless and transparent fluid, which we may take as a metaphor for the “formless self.” Following the metaphors, all states can be apprehended, but only one at a time. They are distinct ‘states’ of the ‘self,’ which can be brought forth on purpose (see the initial discussion in the *Poṭṭhapāda-Sutta*). It is, therefore, not adequate to use designations which refer to absent forms of ‘self’, as long as they are not intentionally developed by the practitioner. Taking the simile alone, one should conclude that the Buddha seeks to show that one may speak only of ‘abstract entities’ if they are intentionally produced and *present* (such as the “milk” can intentionally be refined to various other, artificial products). But then, however, follows the conclusion which relativizes the whole discourse on different “selves” once again: These terms are, *even if used when their referent is present*, namely, in one of the three forms of ‘self,’ solely ‘worldly names’ and ‘designations’ (i.e., ‘worldly’ speech acts, distinctions, and ‘names’).

Nominalists, therefore, make use of worldly names and distinctions, but do not take them “seriously,” even if the referent is easily identifiable. Not to take them seriously opens the way to use words without presupposing that one ‘is in hold of’ the designated objects by using designations. In other words, nominalism disentangles words and objects and encourages the user to disidentify with both

sides.<sup>5</sup> This enables to start an analysis of designations only. Interestingly, this position is elsewhere illustrated with the fact of the plurality of languages.<sup>6</sup> Thus, one should establish a ‘non-attached’ attitude towards worldly speech (P. *vohāra*, Skt. *vyavahāra*), namely: “These venerable ones utilize it for this purpose,’ and thus saying he utilizes it without grasping [*anabhinivesa*]” (MN 139).<sup>7</sup>

A socially important context, however, in which this Buddhist attitude emerged, is the claim of Brahmins to be by birth part of certain “morally superior” caste (P. *jāti*—which is actually also a grammatical term for “kind” or “class,” cf. Patañjali, *Mahābhāṣya*, *vārttika* 35–44). In the *Suttanipāta*, this claim of a “distinction by birth” (*jāti-vibhaṅga*) is rejected in regard to humans, whereas, in contrast, plants, which are not capable to change intentionally their form or behaviour, may show certain “signs” (*liṅga*): “Consider grass and trees. Although they do not profess [any difference], their distinguishing mark [p. *liṅga*] arises from their species; manifold indeed are their species” (Sn 601; tr. Norman 2001, p. 80). Humans, the Buddha proceeds, have no distinguishing “cultural” marks which arise from their species: “This [difference] is not found individually among men in respect of their own bodies, but among men difference [*vokāra*] is spoken of as a matter of designation [*samaññāya pavuccatī*]” (Sn 611; tr. Norman 2001, p. 80). For humans, however, “classes” (*jāti*) do not exist by nature, because they are able to set distinctions according to their personal realization of actions, morals and ethics: “For what has been designated name and clan in the world is indeed a [mere] name. What has been designated here and there has arisen by common assent [<sup>8</sup>] [...]. Not by birth does one become a brahman; not by birth does one become a non-brahman. By action one becomes a brahman; by action one becomes a non-brahman” (Sn 648–50; tr. Norman 2001, pp. 83–84).

Humans are, of course, not only able to become “Brahmin like” by virtuous actions, but also in danger to lose such a status through unwholesome behaviour. There is no “class” of Brahmins, but only a “name” for a variable group of persons with a morally superior Brahmanic conduct (*brahmacarya*). In other words, the self, or any ethical substance, cannot be articulated in a trans-empirical way—it pertains to observable action only. Interestingly, and most consequently, this early text correlates the emergence of “differences,” the “difference-making activity,” and the resulting awareness of differences of humans. However, Richard P. Hayes, who

<sup>5</sup> In regard to nominalism, there are certainly more precise definitions possible—compare the discussion on *apoha* in Arnold (2012), Siderits (2006) and Siderits et al. (2011).

<sup>6</sup> In the *Araṇavibhaṅga-Sutta* (MN 139), the nominalist attitude, i.e. to use language without identifying words and objects, and without being “attached” (Skt. *abhiniveṣa*, P. *abhinivesa*) to words, becomes obvious: “When it is said: ‘One should not affect the dialect of the countryside, one should not deviate from recognized parlance’, in reference to what is this said? [...] In this case [...] in different districts they know [the different words for ‘begging bowl’, JS] Pāti ... Patta ... Vittha ... Sarāva [...] Piṣṭa. Thus as they know the word as this or that [...], so does a person, obstinately clinging to it, explain: ‘This indeed is truth, all else is falsehood’” (MN 139; tr. Horner 1959, p. 282 [M III. 234]).

<sup>7</sup> The same attitude in the *Dīghanakha-Sutta* [M II. 196]: “A Bhikkhu whose mind is thus liberated [...] does not agree [*saṃvadati*] or disagree [*vivadati*] with anyone [...], he makes use of expressions common in the world but without being attached to them” (tr. Pérez-Remón 1980, p. 298).

<sup>8</sup> Sn 648: *Samaññā hesā lokasmiṃ nāmagottaṃ pakappitaṃ. Sammuccā samudāgataṃ tatha tatha pakappitaṃ.*

translates “the differentiation among human beings is assigned through names” (Hayes 1988, p. 80), suggests to read this not as “nominalist,” because, strictly speaking, the existence of distinguishing marks of non-human natural species is not denied.<sup>9</sup> Having defined nominalism as a specific language use, it is, for me, nevertheless justified to designate the respective passages as nominalist.

To summarize, nominalist views of concepts, and a nominalist use of language in early Buddhism become visible with a critique of essentialist, ontological claims in regard to a class-specific, super-empirical moral personhood. Buddhist nominalism may therefore be seen as motivated by a social impulse, namely, to overcome a society in which a certain class attributes itself “birth rights”.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the defence of ontological claims in regard to a moral substance of persons is not the only source of nominalism. Epistemic and psychological first-person aspects of “disidentifying” with one’s “self” are of equal importance, as shall be demonstrated below.

### Selves and Artefacts: The Chariot Metaphor for Nominalism

A crucial example for the intimate relationship between the nominalist conception of language and the concept of the “self” is the famous chariot-allegory, found in *Milindapañha*, but also in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*. In the *Milindapañha*, being asked by king Milinda about his name, the monk Nāgasena replies that he is known by the name “Nāgasena,” which is, however, only a common designation for worldly use—a “person is not to be found there.”<sup>11</sup> It is important to note the “first-person perspective” of Nāgasena. He does not speak of other people being “no persons,” but of not identifying *him* as a “puggala.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, the king concludes, “there is no Nāgasena.” At this point Nāgasena offers the famous metaphorical allegory of a chariot, which has been quoted and utilized by many Western interpreters and philosophers, such as Derek Parfit.<sup>13</sup> Again, all single parts, this time of a chariot, are listed, and it is now on the king’s side to decline any identification of the “chariot” with its single parts. The king is forced to accept that on account of all single parts of a chariot the “appellation, designation, as a current usage, as a name” arises in dependence. Likewise, Nāgasena adds, should the

<sup>9</sup> I.e., nominalism in the way some centuries later “universals”—*sāmānya, jāti*—were by some declared to be grasped as “particulars”—*vyakti, svalakṣaṇa*—only.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Conze did not, at least to my knowledge, in his later work on Buddhist thought, comment on the “nominalist” strand in Buddhism from his earlier point of view.

<sup>11</sup> *na h’ettha puggalo upalabbhati*, Mil (ed. Trenckner 1880) I.25.13.

<sup>12</sup> Hearing this statement, Milinda replies: “If, revered Nāgasena, the person is not got at, who then is it that gives you [...] almsfood, lodgings and medicine, who is it that makes use of them; who is it that guards moral habit, practices (mental) development [...]; who is it that kills a living being [...]? If, revered Nāgasena, someone killed you there would be no onslaught on creatures for him” (Mil 25–26; tr. Horner 1991, pp. 34–35). Nāgasena, in turn, does not offer a direct counterargument but remains silent. The king proceeds by interrogating if a person might be identified by his hairs. Nāgasena denies. The king goes on to list all possible elements of a person, including consciousness—but nowhere can, according to Nāgasena, a “person” be found—including the option of a fully “external,” unbound soul (Mil 26).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Parfit (1984, pp. 502–503, 280–282); cf. Siderits (2006), and Farrington (2007).

designation “Nāgasena” be understood; but “according to the highest meaning a person is not to be found here.”<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, what is missing in the otherwise convincing allegory of the chariot is the functionality of the chariot as chariot. Even though the dialogue with the chariot-simile begins by the king claiming that he *travelled* to Nāgāsena on a chariot (i.e., with his function), the king does not interrupt the ontological enumeration of single parts being “the chariot.” He could have answered: What serves the function of a chariot is called “chariot”—if something is able to execute its main function, to serve as a horse-drawn means for fast travel, it can be called “chariot.”<sup>15</sup> According to this functional paradigm, one may define every human artefact, especially in the realm of technology, as a thing for a special purpose, and intentionally build for that purpose.

Why is this aspect of the chariot’s functionality as definition lacking in the simile?<sup>16</sup> One might argue that it is left unconsidered because functionality would undermine the attempt to resolve the problem of “names” and “persons.” Being paralleled with the status of a “person,” or, to be more precise, illustrating the adequacy of using merely the name of a person, one will indeed not ask if a “person” can be identified with a basic “function.” Probably, therefore, the aspect of the function was deliberately skipped. If a chariot is named ‘chariot’ because it serves the function of a chariot and had been built for that purpose, it might have provoked the question what the respective “function” of a person shall be. Persons, in contrast to artefacts, do not exist to serve “functions”—they exist as an outcome of karmic conditionality. Finally, it could be possible that the allegory neglects functionality because it was a shared opinion of the interlocutors that chariots did not serve one main function but several heterogeneous ones. Here we should again become aware of the social dimension of nominalism. Looking at other instances in which chariots are mentioned in the Nikāyas or in the *Milindapañha*, it becomes immediately clear that they serve various “functions”: they are a means of displaying royal dignity, military power, or a symbol for wealth.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, “deconstructing” the chariot in terms of its parts, and to signify a “chariot” as a dependant designation, will, in consequence, deconstruct the symbolic functions of chariots too. Power, wealth, hegemony, status, and, possibly, of a royal ātman-passenger driven into paradise, are likewise targeted. This, in turn, backfires on the concept of the “person” (*puggala*): The person shall disidentify with its empirical person and its social existence—being as such reified through conventional

<sup>14</sup> Mil 27; tr. Horner (1991, p. 37).

<sup>15</sup> Surely, “chariots” can also be miniature chariots as toys (cf. the toy carts in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, ed. Vaidya, p. 51.16-52), or otherwise dysfunctional (a chariot with a broken pivot pin); nevertheless, these designations are dependent on usual chariots and their functionality.

<sup>16</sup> One may opine that this signifies a special problem of early Indian epistemology and ontology, namely that artefacts, human institutions, and the ontology of physically given things, qualia, etc. all count “ontologically” as the same (cf., in this respect, Searle’s distinction between “brute facts” and “institutions,” e.g., money).

<sup>17</sup> Moreover—although I am unable to demonstrate a dependency in terms of reception in the case of the *Milindapañha*—chariots had already earlier been used in early Indian literature as an allegory for the *ātman*’s capability for liberation (e.g., *Kaṭha-Up.* 3.3).



language-use of others. Dis-conceptualizing one's "self" will, it is hoped for, cut off all substantialized attributes, and, especially, self-conceit which follows fame, power, status, etc. The consequence of nominalism, however, does not imply any ethical relativism. It is a "regulative idea" for the first-person—a psychological stratagem. In Indian texts up to Nāgārjuna, the doctrine of "no-self" has—by its adherents—never been assumed to relativize the status of a living human being (e. g., as "life-force," *jivitīndriya*) from a third-person perspective.

## Disidentifying with the "Language of the Self"

An important background for Nāgārjuna's understanding of language is the doctrine of "dependent co-arising" (*pratīyasamutpāda*). In its two "full" versions, it explains in twelve interrelated conditions the origination (anabolism), and the cessation (catabolism) of suffering. In the Nikāyas, there are, however, important pre-stages of the "full" version, which are highly enlightening for understanding the Buddhist views on the emergence of the erroneous concept of a "substantial self," and the proliferating language.<sup>18</sup> The "self," in consequence, is dissolved in a process of "impersonal" conditions. In the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (D I. 40–45) it is argued that all speculation on the eternity of the world, one's own self (*ātman*), its continuation after death, etc., are brought forth from "sense-contact," which is also one of the middle terms of "dependent co-arising." That unguarded contact of senses with empirical objects will lead to feelings, clinging, and metaphysical speculation is only convincing if "contact of the senses" with their respective "objects" is already mediated by conceptual, discursive thought (P./Skt. *vicāra*). In other words, the "object" of the senses as such is already identified by names, designations, and concepts. "Objects" are not simply there, but part of "language proliferation" (P. *papañca*).<sup>19</sup> Conventional language is conceptualized as equivalent to certain sense-contacts and perceptions, and not as a 'medium' of thought. This fits very well with other pre-stages of "dependent co-arising," e.g., in the *Mahāpadhānasutta*, which argues for an interdependence of "name and form" and "consciousness" (*nāmarūpappaccayā viññāṇam* and vice versa, D II. 32). In another text in the context of "dependent co-arising," Sāriputta explains that "language proliferation" (P. *papañca*) is interdependent with "sense-contact" (cf. A II. 161). In this context,

<sup>18</sup> It can be shown by a close analysis of MMK 26. 1-12, that Nāgārjuna was well aware of these pre-stages as genealogy.

<sup>19</sup> Precisely this is expressed in another Nikāyan text, namely, the *Nibbedhika Sutta* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*. The text argues that by the six sense-contacts perception (Skt. *saṃjñā*) arises; and proceeds: "These are the six kinds of perception: the perception of form, of sound, of smell, of flavor, of tactiles, and of ideas. 'And what is the cause for perception to arise? Contact is the cause [...]. 'And what is the effect of perception? From perception, I tell you, monks, conventional language use arises [*vohāra-vepakkam bhikkhava saññāṇam vadāmi*]. For if a person perceives something it is expressed in the words: 'I have this kind of perception'. This, monks, is called the result of perception. – 'And what is the cessation of perception? In the cessation of contact, monks, consists the cessation of perception; and this exactly, the way leading to the cessation of perception, is noble eightfold path [...]' (A III.410; AN VI.63, [my transl.]).

*papañca* should be translated as “language proliferation.”<sup>20</sup> The idea of a “pacification of language proliferation,” or, a more liberal translation, “pacification of the named world” (P. *papañcavūpasamo*),<sup>21</sup> will become a prominent concept for Nāgārjuna. It seems to me that the term *prapañcōpaśama* encompasses both the “subjective horizon” of proliferation as an activity of the discursive human mind, but also an “objective horizon,” namely, the chaotic, sensually experienced world, pluralized by language. Possibly, the term brings to the foreground that both the pacification of the subjective and the objective horizon (or epistemic and ontological proliferation) are interrelated processes. Not surprisingly, there is passage in the *Suttanipāta* which identifies the root of “language proliferation” in the “ego-conceit” (P. *asmimāna*).<sup>22</sup> Important here is the first-person-perspective on language proliferation and the thought “I am.” In consequence, mindfulness in regard to language proliferation should start by reducing the language-based process of articulating one’s own self: “Suppose, friend Ānanda, a young woman – or a man – youthful and fond of ornaments, would examine her own facial image in a mirror [...]: she would look at it with clinging, not without clinging. So too, it is by clinging to form that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging. It is by clinging to feeling ... to perception ... to volitional formations ... to consciousness that ‘I am’ occurs, not without clinging” (S III. 105; tr. Bodhi 2000, p. 928).

To summarize: In early Buddhist texts, nominalist language views, and the respective use of language, are primarily put forth in the context of the “person,” or the “self.” It is accompanied by new concepts in morality, placing the actual deeds of persons above social claims to “essential” moral superiority by birth. On the other hand, nominalism in regard to the “self” forms part of a soteriological strategy of reducing “language proliferation,” culminating with a thorough “disidentification” with one’s own empirical, but also with one’s social “self.”

## Nominalism as “Deverbalisation” of the Social Self and the Conventional World

Can we lend plausibility to our assumption that Nāgārjuna’s critique of language is still strongly motivated by the use of language in the social world, namely, the social construction of a substantial “self” which is personally adopted through reification of a “self” and its “possessions”? In MMK 18, which examines the *ātman* and, most significantly, introduces for that purpose the “tetralemma,” it is argued

<sup>20</sup> cf. Nānananda (1971, pp. 5–7), ‘the tendency toward proliferation in the realm of concepts.’

<sup>21</sup> Cf. also the *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad* I. 12; Skt. *prapañcōpaśama*.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Being a thinker, he would put a stop to the whole root of what is called “diversification” [i.e: the thought] “I am,” said the Blessed One [*mūlaṃ papañcāsaṅkhāya iti bhagavā mantā asmīti*]. ‘Whatever internal cravings there are, he would train himself to dispel them, always being mindful’ (Sn 916; tr. Norman 2001, p. 120). Cf. Sn 874: “‘When he has not an apperception of apperceptions (*na saññasaññī*), when he has not an apperception of non-apperception (*na viśaññasaññī*), when he does not apperceive (*no pi asaññī*), when he does not have apperceptions without an object (*na vibhūtasaññī*), for him who has attained to this, form ceases, for apperception is the cause of dispersions and conception (*papañcāsaṅkhā*, probably better: conception of dispersion)’ (tr. Gómez 1967, p. 144).

that the conceptualizations of a possessive self ('mine', *ātmīya*) and the process of "I-making" must be destroyed in order to end "grasping" (*upādāna*). "If 'mine' and 'I' are destroyed – in regard to the internal [self] and the external [world] – grasping ceases too" (MMK 18.4). Nāgārjuna, applying the "*pratīdvandvin*"-metalogic<sup>23</sup> to characterize the argument 'If A is an unreal object, it follows that also non-A has to be unreal', declares: "If no *ātman*, purity, permanence and the blissful are known [or, do not exist], then *anātman*, impurity, impermanence and suffering cannot be known [or, do not exist] either" (MMK 23.22).

If, again, the "grasping self" (*grahīṭṛ*), the grasping, and the grasped are correlated through conceptual language, it is important to pacify all three (cf. MMK 18.15). Nāgārjuna therefore explains the "person" to be "empty" (cf. MMK 24.32-40; cf. already S IV. 54)—not in the sense that there is an "ontological non-self," but that there is, finally, no "doer" (Skt. *kartṛ*, cf. MMK 17.29-30). In the same mood, Nāgārjuna uses an allegory to explain how the doer and the deed are dependently originated "illusions."<sup>24</sup> In the *Ratnāvalī*, Nāgārjuna re-actualizes the Nikāyan "mirror"-metaphor<sup>25</sup> we encountered above:

The mental and physical aggregates arise / From the conception of I which is false in fact. / How could what is grown / From a false seed be true? Having seen thus the aggregates as untrue, / The conception of I is abandoned, [*skandhān asatyān dṛṣṭvaivam ahaṃkāraḥ prahīyate* |] / And due to abandoning the conception of I / The aggregates arise no more. [*ahaṃkāraprahāṇāc ca na punaḥ skandhasambhavaḥ* ||30||] Just as it is said / That an image of one's face is seen / Depending on a mirror [*yathādarśam upādāya svamukhapratibimbakam* |] / But does not really exist [as a face], [... *na kiṃ cid api tattvataḥ* ||31||] So the conception of I exists / Dependent on the aggregates, / But like the image of one's face / The I does not at all really exist [*ahaṃkāras tathā skandhān upādāyopalabhyate | na ca kaś cit sa tattvena svamukhapratibimbavat* ||32||]<sup>26</sup>

"No-self" is combined with a soteriological goal: If the conception of the "I" ceases, there is no longer an amassing of "action" (*karman*), and if "action" ceases, there is no longer "birth" (cf. RĀ I.35; likewise RĀ II.124; cf. MMK 23.23-24). Nāgārjuna holds that the conception "I" arises on the basis of the empirically perceived psycho-physical constituents (*skandhas*) of the person—just like the "reflected image" (*pratibimba*) in the mirror allows to hold one's face as something real. Accordingly, he concludes: "Likewise, without depending on the mirror [or: not

<sup>23</sup> Using the *pratīdvandva*, "antagonistic pair," as a descriptor of these argumentative practices, as has been suggested by Schayer (1931, p. 36).

<sup>24</sup> *yathā nirmitakaṃ śāstā nirmimūtarddhisampadā | nirmīto nirmimūṅānyam sa ca nirmitakaḥ punaḥ || tathā nirmitakākāraḥ kartā yat karma tatkr̥tam | tadyathā nirmitenānyo nirmīto nirmītas tathā ||* MMK 17.31-2 "Just as the Teacher by his supernatural power fabricates a magical being, so with regard to the agent [or "doer," *kartṛ*, JS], which has the form of a magical being, and the action that is done by it, it is the case where a second magical being is created by a magical being" (Skt. text and tr. in Siderits and Katsura 2013, p. 191; cf. Westerhoff 2009, p. 163).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. for the metaphor in Buddhist thought (Wayman 1974).

<sup>26</sup> RĀ I.29-32; Skt. according to Hahn (1982); tr. Hopkins (2007, pp. 97-98).

having taken the mirror], the reflected image of the face is not seen, even so without [seeing] the constituents, the ‘I’ will not be perceived” (*yathādarśam anādāya svamukhapratibimbakam | na drśyate tathā skandhān anādāyāham ity api* ||33||; RĀ I.33).

The observation underlying this technique to “disidentify with the mirrored” may be further elucidated by applying Jacques Lacan’s Western psychoanalyst theory of a “mirror stage.” Lacan theorized that at certain stage of their development, infants are able to recognize their own image in the mirror. “It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image” (Lacan 2006, p. 76). This does not only imply that they, for the first time, can grasp their own body image—at the same moment, they are able to identify themselves, their outer appearance, as the “one” addressed by others in discourse. For Lacan, this entails the emergence of the structure of subjectivity, for infants are learning the semantics of saying “I” more or less parallel to the “mirror stage.” The “ego,” for Lacan, is an outcome of the process which culminates in the identification with one’s own image, which is imaginary (or part of the “imaginary order”), because the child may never come to a full grasp (or mirrored representation) of its own body—leading, finally, to a permanent alienation, or the attempt to overcome the discordance. One may only see, while looking at the mirror, a mirrored face, and one’s own body from a certain perspective. The imaginary identification with one’s own ego is therefore deeply interwoven with language, because what other people *say* about one’s body, and about oneself, will become, as Lacan demonstrates in various examples, an integral part of the conscious and ‘subconscious’ self.

However, in Nāgārjuna’s mirror-metaphor, it is again a first-person perspective on the “no-self.” As Nāgasena advises the king, in our words, ‘please do not assume that my name designates me as a substantial reality, because I will not do it on my part’, Nāgārjuna’s mirror metaphor advises the individual to practice ‘disidentification’ with the mirrored image for himself. If selflessness is declared from the first-person view, it is not only declared *from* the first person, but also a soteriologically relevant strategy *for* the first person. All instances I could find in early Indian Buddhist texts do emphasise the agent’s view about himself, assuming an “I-maker” (*ahamkāra*). Therefore, other terms such as “I-conceit” (*asmimāna*)<sup>27</sup> should legitimately be understood as a description of a certain intentional-volitional state, which is the basis of karmic unwholesome deeds. However, we must remind ourselves that Nāgārjuna, by introducing an advanced concept of “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*), stresses the point that also a “non-self” cannot be declared as “real.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Farrington points to the fact that overcoming self-conceit (*asmimāna*) is conceptualized as a matter of self-training (*sikkhitabba*); in a conscious body there will be no construction of “I” or “self-conceit” (Farrington 2007, p. 70, with reference). The “I-deceit” (*ahamkāra*) as the root cause of “self” is also to be found in Śāntideva, *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (IX). Solely “first-person training” will overcome it.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. RĀ II. 102-103; cf. Nāgārjuna’s “Letter to a Friend,” verses 48–49; Jamspal et al. 1978.

## Overcoming the Articulated World: Nāgārjuna's Radicalization of Nominalism

Nāgārjuna was, as it seems, aware of the Āgamic thoughts on the interrelated aspects of “names,” “persons,” “selves,” and the unwholesome conceptual proliferation. But were the aforementioned “social dimensions” of nominalist language-use still of importance to him? To locate the social dimension of nominalism in Nāgārjuna, it will be necessary to take a broader look at his central “triangulation,” namely, dependent origination *as* emptiness *as* dependent designation.

Various opinions have been voiced to whom his śāstric works are mainly addressed.<sup>29</sup> Many of his works, especially the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and his letters, are addressed to interlocutors or incorporate quotes from opponents. This is relevant in respect to Nāgārjuna's written statements which were by him obviously not merely as “text” but as communicative interventions, a written replacement for direct dialogue. If treated as such, the communicative situation may, at least to a certain degree, exert an influence on the arguments offered. Nāgārjuna's texts comprise—as do the larger number of Nikāyan ‘texts’—certain social speech acts, too. His “method”—a problematic term—does not distinguish in a strict sense between presuppositions and conclusions, or “content” and “method.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Nāgārjuna (and, for that matter, also G.W.F. Hegel) did not develop a pure “philosophy of language.” Moreover, Nāgārjuna's central topoi—such as *śūnyatā*, dependent co-arising, “reductio ad absurdum” (*prasaṅga*), the two truths (*satyadvaya*), Samsāra and Nirvāna, arguing without assertions (*pratijñā*, cf. Ruegg 1983, 1989), or the scheme of four alternatives (*catuṣkoṭi*)—may all be seen as essential and legitimate points to start with the interpretative venture. To prioritize one of them while leaving others behind seems to be more an outcome of the desire for philosophical systematization, but it does not do justice to Nāgārjuna, who, in my eyes, saw these elements as interrelated topics.

Already in the dedicatory verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna portrays “dependent co-arising” (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as taught by the Buddha as a “blissful” means to dissolve “conceptual proliferation” (*prapañcōpaśamaṃ śivam*).<sup>31</sup> This connection to language might irritate if one considers the fully developed, twelve-membered chain. The relation of the latter to “conceptual proliferation” becomes more obvious if one considers the canonical pre-versions of the middle part of the “dependent co-arising” which dealt with the topic of

<sup>29</sup> “Any philosophical text needs to be read within its socio-historical context. More to the point, Nagarjuna's philosophy as presented in the [... *MMK*] is argumentative, and the opponent or opponents are unnamed. The range of interpretations that one may give to any of the arguments in the *Kārikā* is limited, at least in part, by the assumptions that one makes about whom Nagarjuna is arguing against” (Walser 2002, p. 210).

<sup>30</sup> In this respect, Nāgārjuna resembles dialectical philosophy, such as the fusion of method (operation) and content (subject matter) in G.W. F. Hegel (“Method is the consciousness of the form in which its own content moves itself”; “Methode ist das Bewußtsein über die Form der inneren Selbstbewegung ihres Inhalts”) (Hegel 1986, p. 49).

<sup>31</sup> De Jong, however, did not incorporate these verses in his critical edition.

conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). However, it seems that Nāgārjuna treats the causal nexus here as kind of supra-structure. We may interpret that Nāgārjuna holds that in the perspective of non-articulation, there is neither origination (the anabolism of suffering), nor cessation (catabolism)—no worldly causality at all (MMK XXI. 11 “For you it may be given that coming-into-existence and dissolution can be observed [*drśyate*]. But one perceives coming-into-existence and dissolution only by delusion [*moha*]”).<sup>32</sup>

But how should the thought of “dependent co-arising” lead to the pacification of conceptual proliferation? Any answer may have to clarify how Nāgārjuna uses concepts in philosophical argumentation, and how he comments on his own usage. This leads us directly to the crucial verse in Nāgārjuna main work, in which dependent co-arising is paralleled with emptiness (*śūnyatā*): MMK 24.18 “Dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), this we declare as ‘emptiness.’ This [emptiness] is a provisional designation (*prajñapti*); and, indeed, the middle way.”<sup>33</sup>

There has been an extensive discussion regarding this stanza. Based on a comparison of other instances of *prajñapti* (designation, notion) and *upādāya* in Nāgārjuna’s work, Douglas L. Berger offers the reading that Nāgārjuna did not opt in this verse for a “nominalist” view on technical terms such as “emptiness,” but accepted them as “referentially accurate descriptions of the world as it is” (Berger 2010, p. 41). Accordingly, he translates: “Whatever is conditioned co-arising, that is emptiness, we claim. This notion (emptiness), once acquired, is truly the middle path” (Berger 2010, pp. 46–47). This reading, based largely on an interpretation of this isolated verse, undermines the usual “nominalist” and “conventionalist” reading by Indian and Tibetan Buddhist successors of Nāgārjuna (especially Candrakīrti) as well as of contemporary scholars of Nāgārjuna. Therefore, it has sparked a debate on the most plausible reading.<sup>34</sup> Garfield and Westerhoff offer various counterarguments, mainly based on the authoritative readings of the later Indian and Tibetan tradition, whereas Mattia Salvini could demonstrate a central grammatical misunderstanding in Berger’s translation.<sup>35</sup> In my eyes, Berger fails to contextualize his reading of this verse in Nāgārjuna’s work. In fact, his interpretation considers other instances of the two crucial words of the phrase *prajñaptir upādāya*;<sup>36</sup> yet, it does not show how the reading of the respective verse is consistent with other important philosophemes in Nāgārjuna’s work—the four alternatives, the dissolution of language proliferation, etc. If the term *śūnyatā* should be read as having an ontological reference, it would become the new absolute. In contrast, the

<sup>32</sup> If “origination” of something is always relational, dependent on conditions, but “empty” (*śūnya*) of any inherent existence (and, therefore, “tranquil” (*sānta*), cf. MMK 7. 16), the quality of “origination” (*utpāda*), the *modus operandi* of “dependent co-arising,” becomes itself an imaginary category. The whole coming-into-existence of suffering (which was the explanation aimed for in the “traditional” twelve-membered formula): Is it only a question of a deluded perspective?

<sup>33</sup> *yaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tāṃ pracaḥṣmahe | sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā* || Cf. Salvini’s translation and discussion (Salvini 2011, p. 242).

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Garfield and Westerhoff (2011).

<sup>35</sup> See Salvini (2011).

<sup>36</sup> As Schayer (1931) says, a “pseudo-concept, a verbal hypostasis,” or Garfield, translating the Tibetan *brten nas gdags pa*, “a dependent designation” (1995, p. 304).

commentary *Akutoḥbhayā*, held to be an autocommentary by Nāgārjuna,<sup>37</sup> explains *prajñaptir upādāya* thus: “This is a dependent designation, this is the middle way. If something existent has ‘being’ (Skt. *astitva*), then it has come into existence dependently, and is designated dependently.”<sup>38</sup>

In sum, *śūnyatā*, as every other word, becomes meaningful only in dependence on other words. Nevertheless, for Nāgārjuna, *śūnyatā*, similar to other concepts, exerts a certain agency. Whereas the common use of other concepts usually goes along with reification (reification of non-existence included), “emptiness”—still a concept, though—irritates, because it aims to undermine reification. The agency of *śūnyatā* is, in other words, a “metonymic” one, directed at language use as such: Like a drop of dish liquid transforms at once the surface tension of water, the concept of emptiness transforms, if understood correctly, all “reificatory” language use. There is, however, no sufficient reason to believe that the designation “emptiness” is a concept more privileged than other concepts to inform about “reality”: MMK 22.11 “One should neither say ‘empty’, nor ‘non-empty’, and also not ‘both together’ or ‘neither of them’. Only for the purpose of (convenient) communication (*prajñapti-artham*) one may speak like this.”<sup>39</sup>

Having in mind the “pre-stages” of dependent co-origination that correlate sense-contact and *prapañca* as quoted above, the idea of a world-dependent proliferation of language, and language-dependent amplification of the world, seem to be the background for Nāgārjuna’s concise statement that even the designation “empty” is to be included in conventional language. This means nothing less than an interdependent co-origination of terms and referents. Yet, if every term of the conceptual language is “empty” of any kind of “self-nature,” while still correlated to some kind of conventionally expressed-*cum*-sensed life-world, the question arises if, on the syntactical plane, or in respect to a “philosophical grammar” of a sentence, a statement may be “definitely” true that argues with some kind of a *nihil est sine ratione* of emptiness: There “is” no phenomenon (*dharma*) that could originate “without condition” (*apratītya*): 24.19 “A kind of phenomenon (*dharma*) that originated without condition is not known. Therefore, no phenomenon is known which is not empty.”<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, there is no ontological “anchor.” Moreover, I would hold that for Nāgārjuna this does also pertain to the plane of designations, concepts and “signs.” Verse 27 of the *Śūnyatā-saptatikārikā* (*sTong pa nyid bdun cu pa’i tshig le’ur byas pa*) explains: “[Neither can] from the definiendum (or basis of characteristics, Tib. *mtshan gzhi*, Skt. *lakṣya*) the definiens (or sign/characterization, *mtshan nyid*, Skt. *lakṣaṇa*), [nor can] from the definiens the definiendum be established, [nor] is the

<sup>37</sup> Cf., Westerhoff (2009, p. 21).

<sup>38</sup> *de ni brten nas gdags pa yin te | de nyid bu ma’i lam yin no | de la dngos po ’ga zhis yod pa nyid yin na | de ni brten nas ’byung ba dang brten nas gdags pa yin pas |* (TT, Derge edition, mdo, vol. 17, 34a–114a, here 103b).

<sup>39</sup> *śūnyam iti na vaktavyam aśūnyam iti vā bhavet | ubhayaṃ nobhayaṃ ceti prajñaptiyarthaṃ tu kathyate.*

<sup>40</sup> *apratītya samutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate | yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate.*

definiendum grounded in itself. Nor do both establish themselves vice versa, because a non-established cannot establish another non-established.”<sup>41</sup>

In the conventional world, a sign is needed to explicate the identified object (cf. *Lokātitastava*, verses 128–139). On the other hand, a sign cannot exist without an identified “something”, because otherwise it would not be possible to call it a sign. If both of them are not capable to establish the correlation between them, there must be a third dimension which renders them useful—namely, emptiness. This is expressed in the VV again, verse 70: “For whom there is emptiness, there are all things. For whom there is no emptiness there is nothing whatsoever.”<sup>42</sup> Emptiness, however, cannot be a “perspective,” or “view-point,” because it has been declared by Nāgārjuna as not being a “view” (*drṣṭi*) (MMK 13.8). Emptiness is held to “neutralize” any position asserted through sense-perception. Nevertheless, the conventional metaphor of “seeing emptiness” is still prevalent. MMK 5.8 elaborates that those “seeing” (*paśyanti*) existence or non-existence will “not see the auspicious pacification of the visible” (*na paśyanti draṣṭavyopaśamaṃ śivam*). If “emptiness” cannot be perceived, and does not consist of an absolute referent which could be defined again in positive terms, it is not possible for language to refer directly to “emptiness.” Thus, the introduction of “two truths” becomes necessary (24.7–8). Highest truth can be “shown” (*deśyate*), which does not mean that it can be expressed, but only pointed at (in a Wittgensteinian sense): 24.10 “Without relying on worldly language use (*vyavahāra*), highest truth cannot be shown; without having arrived at highest truth, Nirvāṇa cannot be reached.”<sup>43</sup>

This well-known verse allows locating Nāgārjuna’s argumentative “metadiscourse” within his own theory. It aims not to overcome “worldly language,” but uses worldly language in order to make its in-built reifying assumptions apparent. If one considers both “truths” as epistemic perspectives, and, at the same time, as different forms of “language use,” it is possible to construe four possible combinations. Nāgārjuna may speak ...

1. conventionally (*samvṛtitaḥ*) on ‘worldly truth’;
2. conventionally on ‘highest truth’ (*paramārtha*);
3. ‘from the highest truth’ (*paramārthataḥ*) on conventional, ‘worldly truth’;
4. from the highest truth on the ‘highest truth.’

Which of these theoretical possibilities do apply? The first modus can easily be described: everyday speech on worldly matters conceptualized as real (which is obviously not Nāgārjuna’s aim—not even in his moral letters). The fourth modus

<sup>41</sup> *mṣhan gzhi las gzhan mṣhan nyid las | mṣhan gzhi grub par rang ma grub || phan tshun las kyang ma grub ste | ma grub ma sgrub byed min ||*; translated with the *Śūnyatāsaptatīrtī*; cf. Lindtner (2011, p. 46).

<sup>42</sup> Westerhoff (2010, p. 41). Skt. *prabhavati ca śūnyateyaṃ yasya prabhavanti tasya sarvārthāḥ | prabhavati na tasya kiṃ cin na prabhavati śūnyatā yasya*. Westerhoff’s reading is possibly inspired by the Tibetan translation with “*srid pa*” (cf. Ruegg 2010, p. 400). I would take *prabhavati* more literally (*prabhū*, “to appear, to come forth, to become visible”; MMW 684, s.v.) and would thus suggest as translation: “For whom emptiness becomes visible, for him all things become visible. Nothing will become visible to him, for whom emptiness does not become visible” (cf. the parallel verse in MMK 24.14: ... *śūnyatā ... yujyate* = for whom emptiness fits / is provided / is pertinent ...).

<sup>43</sup> *vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na deśyate | paramārtham anāgamyā nirvāṇaṃ nādhigamyate*.



does not seem to apply either. If highest truth is non-conceptual, non-discursive and not (to be) articulated, there is only an indirect way to address this, namely by “pointing” (non-conceptually) out “something.” Or, to put it another way, it seems to consist of a “deverbalization” of one’s own mind, preparing thereby the non-discursive mind as a means to realize non-verbal existence. “Deverbalization” supposes, of course, a “verbalization” of the world, which arose as a social process. In MMK 18.7, we read: “Where the mind’s functional realm ceases, the realm of words also ceases. For, indeed, the essence of existence (*dharmatā*) is like *nirvāṇa*, without origination and destruction” (tr. Inada 1970, p. 115).<sup>44</sup> It has been suggested that, for Nāgārjuna, an appropriate response might be to remain silent *after* having articulated “conventionally” that highest reality is “peaceful” and “tranquil” (*śānta*). In the words of D.S. Ruegg: “only silence — a philosophically motivated refraining from the conceptualization and verbalization that belong to the discursive level of relativity and transactional usage — is consi-de-red to correspond in the last analysis to *paramārtha*, which is as such inconceivable and inexpressible in terms of discursivity” (Ruegg 1981, p. 34). However, a “non-articulated x” is no referent. Accordingly, it seems not appropriate to say that “silence” as “quiescence” (cf. the discussion in Ho 2010, pp. 166–168) may correspond to an ontological reality of “non-articulation.” If that would be the case, Nāgārjuna could have communicated an existential imperative “remain silent”—what he obviously did not do. “Non-articulation,” in other words, does not predominantly hold silence in high esteem, but points to the “not-articulated” within all articulation—expressed with Wittgenstein: “If only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered.”<sup>45</sup> To summarize, I do assume that both modi—the first and the fourth—are not adequate to describe Nāgārjuna’s philosophical endeavour.

So, does he speak conventionally on highest truth (2), or the other way round (3), or, alternating, in both modi? Conventionally on “highest truth”—yes, if “highest truth” is not to be conceptualized on a “designation-referent” basis (exemplified with the term “*śūnyatā*”). “Highest truth” is addressed, as a topos, designated in conventional statements, which, however, “cross out” the referent. For example, the total sum of the “four alternatives” (*catuṣkoṭi*), which encompass all possible semantic alternatives, is at the same time in some instances declared to be applicable (e.g., MMK 18.8)—the so called “positive tetralemma,” and “not applicable” (the “negative” one). Declaring, additionally, conventional language to be necessary for pointing out (or to) “highest truth,” one may safely conclude that Nāgārjuna regards his own speech as meaningful to demonstrate something of “highest truth.” In regard to the third modus, namely, to speak from “highest truth” on conventional truth, it seems worth noting that Nāgārjuna did not qualify explicitly his statements as *paramārthataḥ* or *samvṛtitaḥ*. If he would have done this, he would have introduced “absolute” terms, which would cause the unwanted

<sup>44</sup> *Abhidhātavya*, the “realm of words,” could also be translated as “what should be named/said,” and “the mind’s functional realm” (*cittagocara*) as “range of the mind’s [sense] perceptions.”

<sup>45</sup> “Wenn man sich nicht bemüht das Unaussprechliche auszusprechen, so geht nichts verloren. Sondern das Unaussprechliche ist,—unaussprechlich—in dem Ausgesprochenen enthalten!” (Letter, 9.4.1917; Schulte ed. 1980, p. 78).

unwholesome identification with conceptual language again. One may assume that “highest truth” is experienced in some kind of “yogic perception,” but, again, Nāgārjuna does not say so. Probably, the perspective of “highest truth” is some kind of “non-conceptual” certainty (the mere “suchness,” *tathatā*); eventually pertaining not to semantic aspects, but merely to causal relations expressed in the syntax or logic of a philosophical statement. But how should such statements be meaningful if they have a “definite” form, but no contents?

To me, there is only plausible interpretation, namely, that conceptual language is conventionally used throughout, but, if expressed from the perspective of “highest truth,” its conventionality is instantaneously “crossed out” (to use an expression of Heidegger and Derrida). It must be unconventional to convey its non-conventional meaning—by using tetralemmata and other paradoxes, e.g., the full identification, “without the subtlest difference,” between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (MMK 25.19-20; cf. *Ratnāvalī* vs. 41 and 64). Paradoxes inform the conversation partner that a “conventional truth” (still within language) is still interfering and affecting every effort to go beyond the conventional. The third and the fourth *modi* are, therefore, intertwined. The therapeutic aspect of the third *modus* is, in other words, to acknowledge that conventional truth will always be related to conventional speech. In consequence, even designations such as the “real” (*tattva*), “reality” (*dharmatā*), “without language proliferation” (*aprapañcita*) etc. must altogether be conventional designations, and may merely “point” in a certain direction:

18.9 “Not dependent on something other, quiet, not proliferated through language proliferation, without imaginative conception, without multiplicity: These are the signs of the real.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna holds that *śūnyatā* may execute some agency in regard to the “conventional” (i.e., *prapañca*): MMK 18.5 “Liberation (*mokṣa*) comes about through disruption of karma and defilements. Karma and defilements stem from imaginative (and dichotomizing) conceptualization (*vikalpa*), from language proliferation. Language proliferation, however, is destroyed in emptiness.”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Getting back to the assumed social origins of nominalism, it is obvious that Nāgārjuna, while still aware of the initial context in which the theory of “conventional language” and “conceptual proliferation” did emerge—namely, the articulation of a substantial “moral” self—did not offer analysis of the “self” in his social environment. In this respect, his nominalism may be seen as emancipation from specific social backgrounds. It does not target social hierarchies of feudal society in particular; yet, truth claims in regard to any privilege of the “self” as moral substance are certainly included.<sup>48</sup> With all other social constructs of a normative nature (*svabhāva*), they become neutralized with *śūnyatā*. In the latter

<sup>46</sup> *aparapratyayaṃ śāntaṃ prapañcāir aprapañcitaṃ | nirvikalpam anānārtham etat tattvasya lakṣaṇam.*

<sup>47</sup> *karmakleśakṣayān mokṣaḥ karmakleśā vikalpataḥ | te prapañcāt prapañcas tu śūnyatāyāṃ nirudhyate.*

<sup>48</sup> Cf., for the later tradition, Eltschinger (2000).

sense, there is indeed a “non-articulation” of the “social self”—its individuality, in general, does not matter.

However, in contrast to Nikāyan Buddhism, Nāgārjuna is confronted in his social environment with new ways of “conceptual proliferation”—the emergence of non-Buddhist schools and their description of language, but also of Buddhist systematizations (Abhidharma) and worldly practices of institutionalized monastic Buddhism (cp., in this context, his telling metaphor of a “promissory note” in MMK 17.15 in the context of *karman*, taking Gregory Schopen’s research on money lending practices of Buddhist monasteries as background).<sup>49</sup> “Conventional language,” being pervaded by new worldly concepts (such as currency-based money), dogmatic assumptions in regard to the bodies of the Buddha, relics, etc., and also more formalized ontological categories (e.g., Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika), entails, in consequence, more subtle forms of identification with conceptual language.

Actually, Nāgārjuna acknowledged the power of language and its social efficacy, which can be seen in his famous metaphor for the wrongly conceived “emptiness,” able to ruin a slow-witted person: It is like an “incantation wrongly executed” (*vidyā ... duṣprasādhitā*, MMK 24.11). If a spell can be dangerous, it is held to be powerful—though we may not be able to deduce from this passage how Nāgārjuna may have explained its efficacy. If, however, the complexity of society and philosophy increases, the reduction of complexity is more demanding—his effort to show the nominalist nature of all conceptual language by enacting the concept of *śūnyatā*, or broadening *puḍgalanairātmya* to *dharmanairātmya*, may be understood in this way, too.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Schlieter (2013).

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