

HPPH7019
BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY –
MAHAYANA AND ZEN APPROACHES

Assignment 2 – Essay
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Question:

*Make a comparative analysis of the concept of
Sunyata in the Madhyamaka school and Yogacara
school*

Shades of emptiness

A comparison between Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra

The concept of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) is one of the most discussed notions in Buddhism, because it originates in the earlier Buddha's teaching. Particularly, emptiness is regarded as a central concept in the Mahāyāna philosophy.¹ Among the various Mahāyāna schools, two of them have considered the notion of emptiness as their fundamental standpoint: the Mādhyamaka school and the Yogācāra school.² However, it is generally agreed that these two schools have used the term 'emptiness' with rather different meanings, hence generating theoretical disputes on different worldviews.³

In this essay, I will make a comparative analysis of the concept of emptiness in the Mādhyamaka school and the Yogācāra school. The first paragraph

¹ I refer to Mahāyāna as a philosophy for a matter of simplicity, but scholars are aware that Mahāyāna is much more than that. For instance, it has been characterized as «a particular vision of what the final motivation and goals of serious practitioners should be» (Williams [2000], p. 102). For studies on the origins, nature, and literature of Mahāyāna philosophy, see Blumenthal [2013]; Williams [2000], pp. 96-111; Williams [2009], pp. 1-62. For an introduction to philosophical (especially metaphysical) issues in various Mahāyāna schools, see Westerhoff [2013], pp. 134-144.

² For other uses of the concept of emptiness in other Mahāyāna schools, see Burton [2013]; Harvey [2013], pp. 138-149.

³ As noted by Harvey [2013]: «The term 'emptiness' has a range of meanings in the Mahāyāna. When the term is used, one always needs to try to discern if it refers to a kind of lack – and if so, what kind (e.g. of inherent nature) – or to a positive reality that is lacking in certain negative features» (p. 127). The concept of emptiness is so relevant in Buddhist philosophy, that some scholars have contended that a Buddhist ontology is only possible, not as an ontology of being or existence like in Western philosophies, but as an ontology of emptiness. See e.g. Nagao [1991], pp. 155-187, who analyzes the ontology of emptiness in Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra. For emptiness regarded as a Mahāyāna ontological doctrine, see Conze [1967], pp. 76-79

presents some basic pre-Mahāyāna concepts, which may help to understand how the two schools conceptualized emptiness. The second paragraph is dedicated to an explication of the notion of emptiness in Mādhyamaka, whereas the third one is devoted to the explanation of the notion of emptiness in Yogācāra. Finally, the fourth paragraph draws a comparison between the two conceptions of emptiness by highlighting their similarities and differences.⁴

1. Some pre-Mahāyāna notions

The meaning of the word ‘emptiness’ in the Mahāyāna philosophy depends on – and develops from – some other Buddhist notions and theories that were formulated in the pre-Mahāyāna tradition. For this reason, a comparative analysis of the notion of emptiness in Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra schools can helpfully be approached by briefly introducing the pre-Mahāyāna foundations of the Mahāyāna concept of emptiness. Particularly, I will schematically refer to the notions of middle path, dependent origination, non-self, and two truths, which are all interconnected and grounded on the Buddha’s teachings.⁵

The main goal of these teachings is the liberation of every sentient being from existential suffering. This suffering may be generated by multiple factors, but one of the most relevant generators of suffering is the attachment to things, ideas, other beings – and finally us. In turn, attachment is possible only if we believe that the objects of our attachment exist as independent objects of desire. Nevertheless, according to the Buddha, this belief is basically false.

⁴ My understanding of the Buddhist notions and theories used for this essay is profoundly indebted to many books and collections of essays, in particular Nagao [1991]; Gethin [1998]; Williams [2000]; Irons [2008]; Williams [2009]; Emmanuel [2013]; Harvey [2013]; Garfield and Westerhoff [2015].

⁵ For an introduction to the Buddha’s philosophy, see Gowans [2003]; Emmanuel [2013], pp. 1-68; Siderits [2023]; Velez [nd].

Consequently, the origin of our suffering can be traced back to our ignorance of how reality is, and suffering can be extinguished through attaining authentic knowledge of reality. Nevertheless, the cessation of suffering should be pursued by neither relying on the self-indulgence of seeking for sensual pleasures (because it generates continuous unsatisfaction, and hence suffering) nor dedicating to the self-mortification of ascetism (because extreme deprivation produces pain, and thus suffering). For this reason, the Buddha's practice of liberation from suffering is known as the "middle way between two extremes", or simply the "middle path".⁶

A major teaching of the middle path is the principle of dependent origination, which was realized by the Buddha himself during his enlightenment. According to this principle, the existence of every phenomenon depends on a combination of multiple previous causes and conditions. Each entity can arise only if the correct network of causes and conditions is present; if this correct network is not present (or ceases to exist), then the entity does not arise (or ceases to exist). For example, a molecule of water can be generated only if two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen are properly combined; if there is no atoms of hydrogen and oxygen around (or they are separated when properly combined), then the water molecule cannot be generated (or ceases to exist as such). Overall, if everything is subject to the principle of dependent origination, then everything is subject to arise, change, and pass on – even suffering itself is destined to cease.⁷

⁶ The principles of the existence of suffering and its origin or cause, the possibility of extinguishing suffering, and the practice which leads to the cessation of suffering are four basic truths taught by the Buddha. For a presentation of these principles, see Williams [2000], pp. 41-56; Gowans [2003], pp. 117-157; Siderits [2023], § 2; Velez [nd], §§ 3.b-3.c.

⁷ For a presentation of the principle of dependent origination, see Williams [2000], pp. 62-72; Velez [nd], § 3.d.

The notion of dependent origination spreads its effects on another key Buddhist teaching: the doctrine of non-self. According to this idea, by applying close examination we can finally realize that every person is a bundle of ever-changing mental and physical elements and processes (like matter, feelings, perceptions, thoughts), where nothing stable and impermanent can be found. Only the combination of these elements and processes gives rise to each person, but an unchanging, autonomous core of personality, like an everlasting soul, is nowhere to be found.⁸ The idea that persons does not have an independent self has been extended to every other composite entity: everything that can be divided into more fundamental parts do not own any substantial existence, because their existence depends on the aggregation of something else. For instance, a house is an aggregate of many items: walls, windows, doors, and so on, which in turn are made up of bricks, glass, wood, and so forth. Only the ultimate constituents of the world – the “building blocks” that make up all the composite things and cannot be divided further – can be said to exist independently, since their existence is based upon nothing else.⁹

The doctrine of non-self allows to shed further light on the notion of middle path. If persons do not have any substantial self, then there is no reason for you to cling to something independent and permanent in yourself as it were your real “you”. Similarly, there is no reason for you to fear the idea that your real self would be nullified with death, given that such a self does not exist. Consequently, the Buddha’s middle path is traced, not only between self-indulgence and self-mortification, but also between the two opposites of “eternalism” (the idea that the substantial self exists eternally) and “annihilationism” (the idea that such a

⁸ For a presentation of the doctrine of non-self, see Williams [2000], pp. 56-62; Gowans [2003], pp. 61-116; Siderits [2023], § 3; Velez [nd], §§ 3.d-3.e.

⁹ See Nagao [1991], pp. 163-166; Priest [2013], pp. 215-216.

self is destroyed at death). Thus, the principle of dependent origination illuminates the middle path as a way between those two extreme positions.¹⁰

Moreover, when generalized to all compound entities, the doctrine of non-self draws relevant implications for the so-called theory of two truths. According to this theory, we can distinguish between two types of truth: a “conventional truth” and an “ultimate truth”, which are based upon two levels of reality. As suggested, the world appears to be divided into two levels: a primary level of basic indivisible components (which is how the world really is) and a secondary level of composed entities (which is how the world appears to most people). Given that the countless composite things are not ultimately real because their existence depends on the existence of the indivisible particles which compose them, what we predicate of the composite beings can only be conventionally true: we speak of humans, animals, plants, artefacts, landscapes, celestial bodies, ideas, and so on, but they are not properly existing. Only the reality of the basic simple items or processes which constitute them can be predicated as ultimately true, because these final elements are what really exist.¹¹

Just to roughly recapitulate: the Buddha’s therapeutic aim is based on the fundamental teaching of dependent origination, which implies that every compound being (both persons and things) does not have a substantial nature. For this reason, we can speak of them only conventionally, “as if” they were existing for real by possessing a substantial nature.

¹⁰ See Gowans [2003]: «Both eternalism and annihilationism falsely presuppose that there is a self. The Buddha often presented his own view – that there is no self, but an enlightened person attains Nibbāna after death – as an alternative to these two positions» (p. 153).

¹¹ For a detailed overview of the theory of two truths in Indian philosophy covering both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna thoughts, see Thakchöe [2024]. See also Arnold [nd], § 2.a for a succinct presentation of the two-truth theory in a pre-Mahāyāna context.

Since they lack an enduring self, the teaching of dependent origination is properly understood as a middle path between eternalism and annihilationism. After this concise presentation of some basic pre-Mahāyāna notions and principles, we can focus on the theories of Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra schools to better appreciate how they have treated the concept of emptiness.

2. Emptiness in the Mādhyamaka school

The origins of the Mādhyamaka school can be traced back to the Indian philosopher and monk Nāgārjuna. The school's name can be translated as "middle path" or "centrism", but the school is also known as "doctrine of emptiness". These names indicate the importance given by the Mādhyamikas to the concepts of middle path and emptiness.¹² Indeed, Nāgārjuna's main work, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, is aimed at explaining the authentic meaning of the Buddha's middle path.¹³

According to Nāgārjuna, the middle path can be best understood by recurring to the combined concepts of dependent origination and emptiness. In a famous passage of his work, the concepts of dependent origination, emptiness, and middle path relate to each other.¹⁴ Firstly, he equates dependent

¹² For a general introduction to the Mādhyamaka philosophy, see Arnold [nd]. For general introductions to Nāgārjuna's philosophy, see Berger [nd] and Westerhoff [2024]. For a presentation of the concept of emptiness in the context of the theories of the Mādhyamaka school, see Nagao [1991], pp. 173-181, 211-214; Gethin [1998], pp. 237-244; Williams [2000], pp. 140-152; Williams [2009], pp. 63-83; Harvey [2013], pp. 114-127. A complete critical study on Nāgārjuna's philosophy with a specific focus on the concept of emptiness is Burton [2001a].

¹³ This entire philosophical work by Nāgārjuna has been translated and analytically commented in Garfield [1995].

¹⁴ See *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, XXIV, 18: «Whatever is dependently co-arisen / that is explained to be emptiness. / That, being a dependent designation, / is itself the

origination to emptiness by stating that everything whose existence is based on dependent origination is characterized by emptiness or – to put it differently – if *something* is dependently originated, then it is empty. It is important to note that, in this context, ‘to be empty’ does not mean ‘to be nonexistent’, but means ‘to be dependently originated’, which in turn means ‘to lack independent existence’.¹⁵ The reasons of this meaning – and those of the equation of emptiness and middle path – will be clarified soon.

For now, let’s consider another passage, in which Nāgārjuna adds something crucial to his reasoning: the universality of emptiness.¹⁶ *Everything* is empty, because everything is dependently originated. If everything is dependently originated, then nothing exists independently; and if everything is deprived of independent existence, then nothing does have a “self” or an essence. Therefore, everything is empty of independent existence, and hence of intrinsic nature: not only the persons and any other composite being, but also the basic components of reality, which some pre-Mahāyāna philosophies had considered as

middle way». This is one of the most widely quoted and commented stanza from Nāgārjuna’s works. For analytic comments on this passage and related ones, see Garfield [1995]. For a further analysis of this passage, even in comparison with passages from the Yogācāra school, see Nagao [1991], pp. 189-200.

¹⁵ See Nagao [1991]: «*Śūnyatā* is originally defined as “non-substantiality” [...]. Non-substantiality, however, does not mean the non-existence of things as it is sometimes misunderstood to mean; it merely means that beings, or things, are not really reality in themselves, that they do not possess “substantiality” and that they exist only in the manner of dependent origination» (p. 41). On the opposition between emptiness and intrinsic existence, see also Williams [2009], pp. 68-71; Burton [2013], pp. 152-154; Westerhoff [2024], § 2.

¹⁶ See *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, XXIV, 19: «Something that is not dependently arisen, / such a thing does not exist. / Therefore a nonempty thing / does not exist». For comments on this stanza, see Garfield [1995].

independently existing.¹⁷ At this point, to understand how dependent origination equates to emptiness, it is useful to investigate the relationship of dependence.

According to the Mādhyamaka school, the relation of dependence of an entity from another one can be threefold. Firstly, mereological dependence, which refers to the part-whole system: the part is related to its whole, and in turn the whole is dependent on the correct organization of its parts. Secondly, causal dependence, which relates to the cause-effect link: every being is what it is (including existing) due to a close net of causes and effects. Thirdly, conceptual dependence, which refers to the idea that nothing exists independently from the conceptualizing activity: a thing would not be “that particular thing” without a mind thinking about it.¹⁸

To exemplify these relations of dependence, let’s consider a tree. The existence of a tree depends on the existence of its parts: roots, trunk, bark, branches, leaves (mereological dependence). Also, the existence of a tree would not be possible without the right set of causes: seed, soil, water, sunlight, and so forth (causal dependence). Lastly, the tree can be regarded as the outcome of the applications of mental categories like “living being”, “plant”, “green”, and so on – and, in turn, even these concepts depend on other concepts like “life”, “shape”, “colour”, etc. (conceptual dependence). Given this scenario, we may realize that the tree is “selfless” or “essence-less”, meaning that it is empty of independent existence

¹⁷ As some scholars have argued, the Mādhyamikas considered the concept of ‘intrinsic nature’ applied by their predecessors to the basic components of reality as equivalent to – or entailed by – the concept of ‘independent existence’, so that they can refute the former by refuting the latter. On this possible shift in meaning, see e.g. Williams [2009], p. 68; Harvey [2013], p. 117. I will not assess whether this shift in meaning is logically compelling or not.

¹⁸ For an illustration of the three modes of dependency, see e.g. Harvey [2013], pp. 118-119; Priest [2013], pp. 218-219; Westerhoff [2013], p. 135.

from other things acting as mereological, causal, and conceptual conditions. Its existence depends on those conditions which, if mutated or removed, would lead the tree to change or cease to exist. This type of reasoning can be applied to anything else, up to the conclusion that anything is empty of independent existence.¹⁹

To argue for the pervasiveness of emptiness, Nāgārjuna has developed a peculiar method of argumentation. Instead of providing a “master argument” against his opponent’s theses, he addresses objections on a case-by-case basis by applying the so-called “tetralemma”.²⁰ This type of argument considers the opponent’s proposition P, which generally is a proposition asserting the existence of something substantial and independent. By close inspection of P, we can state one of the following alternatives: «P is true» (affirmation), «P is false» (negation), «P is both true and false» (both affirmation and negation), «P is neither true nor false» (neither affirmation nor negation). These four possibilities are considered as complete and exhaustive – that is, a fifth option is excluded. Then, through the method of *reductio ad absurdum*, Nāgārjuna derives absurd or incoherent consequences from each one of the four cases. Finally, the patent absurdity of these consequences forces the objector to reject his initial proposition P on the independent existence of a substantial nature. Hence, emptiness as universal

¹⁹ On the dependence of concepts on other concepts, see e.g. Harvey [2013]: «All such concepts, and the more general ones of subject and object, are meaningful only in relationship to each other. Similarly, what is short depends on what is long; for long and short are correlative concepts. By such reasoning, Nāgārjuna even says that the ‘unconditioned’ [...] is conceptually dependent on the conditioned, its opposite» (p. 118). It is easy to understand how this logic of dependency can be replicated to almost every concept.

²⁰ See Sideritis [2015], p. 121.

dependent existence follows logically.²¹ Nāgārjuna has applied the tetralemma to many theses asserting the independent existence of entities, from causation to personal identity, from movement to time.²²

The universality of emptiness has allowed Nāgārjuna to make a second conceptual move: the equation of emptiness to the middle path.²³ The statement that everything is empty of independent existence has two relevant implications. On one hand, nothing does have independent existence: it is not the case that the table in front of me would continue to exist independently as the very same table, if the rest of the cosmos ceased to exist, because nothing has a non-relational, non-dependent type of existence. On the other hand, everything is somehow existing, because everything is characterized by a particular sort of existence (dependently originated), so it is not the case that nothing exists at all: the existence of the table completely depends on its parts, external causes, and mental categories – but nonetheless the table exists. What is really at stake, then, is not whether things exist or not, but how – in which form – they exist. Therefore, based on Nāgārjuna’s arguments on universal emptiness, the Mādhyamaka school has been able to reinforce the Buddha’s teaching of dependent origination as the middle path between two extreme positions: the extreme of “substantialism”, according to which something does have independent existence, and the extreme of “nihilism”, according to which nothing really exists. In this way, the Mādhyamikas

²¹ The tetralemma, which arguably was applied by the Buddha’s himself, is known as *catuṣkoṭi* in Indian logic. For a logical analysis of the *catuṣkoṭi* with special reference to Nagarjuna’s philosophy, see Priest [2010].

²² On Nāgārjuna’s and Mādhyamaka general argumentative method, see Williams [2009], pp. 71-76; Harvey [2013], pp. 121-124; Westerhoff [2024], § 3; Berger [nd], §§2-3. Nāgārjuna’s arguments against the substantiality of causation are presented in Westerhoff [2013], pp. 136-138.

²³ See quotation in note 14.

have connected dependent origination to the middle path via the medium of emptiness.²⁴

Within this theoretical background, the Mādhyamikas can reformulate the pre-Mahāyāna theory of two truths.²⁵ The distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth can be drawn only from the viewpoint of the enlightened person who has understood emptiness. To an unenlightened observer, everyday things appear as autonomous, self-sufficient entities: they are not conventional, but real. However, from the enlightened perspective, the world is apprehended for what it is – as a conventional construction of entities which are empty because they do not possess independent existence from each other. Indeed, according to the ultimate truth, nothing in the world exists in a substantial form: everything is fundamentally empty. Therefore, we could claim that the ultimate truth is that there is no absolute reality, because everything is unsubstantial, by lacking independent existence and being empty of essential nature. In this frame, even the idea of ultimate truth is empty, because it is not separated from the idea of conventional truth: on one hand, emptiness as ultimate truth is what reveals things as conventionally existing; on the other hand, the ultimate truth can be taught and understood only by using conventional tools like words, concepts, and arguments. Then, the comprehension of the conventional truth manifests its importance for understanding the ultimate truth.²⁶

²⁴ See e.g. Harvey [2013], pp. 120-121. This interpretation is not the only possible. For instance, Priest [2013] interprets the Mādhyamaka path as the middle between the extremes of realism (represented by pre-Mahāyāna schools) and idealism (represented by Yogācāra).

²⁵ See Willams [2009], pp. 76-79; Harvey [2013], pp. 119-120; Priest [2013], pp. 219-220.

²⁶ See *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, XXIV, 10: «Without a foundation in the conventional truth, / the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. / Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, / liberation is not achieved». For comments on this stanza, see Garfield [1995]. On

On these bases, Mādhyamikas can contend that even emptiness does not have independent existence: emptiness itself is devoid of intrinsic nature, because emptiness lacks autonomous existence (given that everything is dependently originated). Indeed, emptiness can exist solely in dependence of the existence of those entities which are empty. This idea – the emptiness of emptiness – allows the Mādhyamikas to avoid the extreme position of substantialism applied to emptiness, by rejecting those interpretations that reify emptiness into an eternal, absolute substratum like Brahman of Hindu religion. Emptiness is not an ultimate reality.²⁷

What about the opposite position of nihilism? The Mādhyamaka notion of emptiness has been considered with great suspicion by some critics, especially Yogācārins, who accused the Mādhyamikas of nihilism: the claim that everything is empty would imply nothingness; but if nothing exists, the critics contend, then the Buddha's teachings themselves do not exist. Therefore, living the spiritual life suggested by those teachings is impossible. However, Mādhyamikas have argued that this objection rests on a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word: 'emptiness' does not mean non-existence or nothingness, but it refers to a particular form of existence – that is, dependent or relative existence. Accordingly, they can state that "nothing exists independently" or "everything exists dependently",

this topic, Harvey [2013] highlights the connection between conventional truth and liberation from attachment: «The real ultimate truth is that all things discussed in terms of conventional truth are empty of ultimate, essential reality; they are, indeed, conventional. Seeing them thus is wisdom, leading to nonattachment to conventional realities» (p. 119).

²⁷ The relevance of the idea of "emptiness of emptiness" for preventing the reification of emptiness itself – and hence avoiding substantialism – is acknowledged by many scholars. See e.g. Williams [2000], p. 148; Williams [2009], pp. 70-71; Burton [2013], p. 153; Priest [2013], pp. 219-220; Westerhoff [2013], p. 136.

which does not imply the total negation of existence. Thus, by equating emptiness with dependent origination, the Mādhyamikas can re-affirm emptiness as the middle path between the extremes of substantialism (“something exists independently”) and nihilism (“nothing exists at all”).²⁸

Nevertheless, this rebuttal of the charge of nihilism has not convinced the Yogācārins, who in turn have elaborated a different account of emptiness to avoid the nihilist outcome that they regarded as entailed by the Mādhyamaka conception.

3. *Emptiness in the Yogācāra school*

The foundation of the Yogācāra school is attributed to the Gandharan brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu. As its name suggests, the school was mainly interested in developing the practice of yogic meditation. However, the school is also known with the name of “consciousness-only” or “mind-only”, because one of its fundamental tenets is that only consciousness or mind exists independently, whereas everything else is a mental construct dependent upon the activities of consciousness. Consequently, according to the Yogācārins, the basic texture of reality is ultimately mental.²⁹ To realize how the concept of emptiness was explicated in this framework by Yogācāra to avoid the (supposed) nihilism of Mādhyamaka, it is important to

²⁸ I would not go into details on whether the Mādhyamaka theory of emptiness equates to – or entails – nihilism. However, some detailed studies discussing this problem are Burton [2001b]; Priest [2009]; Siderits [2015]; Westerhoff [2016]; Ferraro [2017].

²⁹ One of the classic texts containing many Yogācāra ideas is the fundamental *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Discourse of the Descent into Laṅkā*), which was translated and commented by Suzuki [1978]. For a general introduction to the Yogācāra philosophy, see Szanyi [2024]. For a general introduction to Vasubandhu’s philosophy, see Gold [2022].

understand a pair of their core theories: the eight consciousnesses and the three natures.³⁰

Let's begin with consciousness. Although the practice of yogic meditation constitutes the preferential way for the meditator to realize that consciousness is the sole reality, the Yogācārins have also developed logical arguments to support their thesis. One of the most notorious arguments starts from the evidence that there are mental experiences that do not correspond to any existing objects – e.g., optical illusions or hallucinations. In these experiences, there is nothing “out there” which corresponds to real entities, but everything is “inside the mind”. The Yogācārins then generalize this type of events to every perception. Even in the case of apparently mind-independent objects (like a mountain), what we are conscious of are only mental representations of the object (its shape, dimension, colour, solidity) from which we infer the independent existence of the object itself. However, even the inferred object thought as mind-independent is still a mental construction.³¹ Notwithstanding, if we perceive mental constructions, there must be something which fabricates these representations and the existence of which does not depend on the fabricated images. The Yogācārins argue that this active being is the consciousness.³²

³⁰ For a presentation of the concept of emptiness in the context of the Yogācāra theories, see Nagao [1991], pp. 181-187, 214-216; Gethin [1998], pp. 244-249; Williams [2000], pp. 152-160; Williams [2009], pp. 84-102; Harvey [2013], pp. 127-138. For studies on the idea that the Yogācāra concept of emptiness is a reaction to the alleged nihilistic conception of Mādhyamaka, see King [1994] and Ferraro [2020]. For a study on the Yogācāra contribution to the notion of emptiness which emphasizes the concepts of Karma and Nirvana, see Gold [2015].

³¹ For a presentation of the Yogācāra arguments on the mind-dependency of reality, and the consciousness as sole reality, see e.g. Williams [2009], pp. 92-94; Harvey [2013], pp. 133-134; Westerhoff [2013], pp. 139-144; Gold [2022], § 4; Szanyi [2024], § 3.

³² As stated in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, LXIV, 154: «Multiplicity of objects evolves from the conjunction of habit-energy and

Their theory of the eight consciousnesses explains how the experienced reality is fabricated or dependently originated. By relying on pre-Mahāyāna pictures of mind, the Yogācārins accept the six traditional types of conscious mind: the consciousnesses associated with the five organs of sense (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch) plus the mental consciousness, which synthesizes the sense data and experiences mental events. Additionally, they distinguish two further layers of consciousness which underpin the previous ones and act subliminally: the defiled mental consciousness and the storehouse consciousness, which is the foundational layer. Roughly put, this fundamental level contains the “karmic seeds” of one’s past habits, actions and deeds, the flourishing of which generates one’s experiences and phenomenal world according to the principle of dependent origination. However, the defiled mind, which is affected by the defilement of individuality, is responsible for partitioning the flux of experiences by superimposing on this flow the dualistic concepts of internal and external, subject and object, self and other, and so on. In particular, the defiled mind erroneously identifies the storehouse consciousness as an internal, stable subject of experience (the “grasper”) and the outcomes of its working as the external, independent objects of its perception (the “grasped”). Therefore, the defiled mind is the origin of a self-deceptive vision of reality, where the outputs of storehouse consciousness are masqueraded as perceptual inputs of external objects.³³ In short,

discrimination; it is born of Mind, but is regarded by people as existing outwardly: this I call Mind-only. The external world is not, and multiplicity of objects is what is seen of Mind; body, property, and abode – these I call Mind-only» (see Suzuki [1978], p. 133). This conclusion about the firm existence of mind was considered with suspicion by the Mādhyamikas, who accused the Yogācārins of misinterpreting the Buddha’s middle path, given their apparent tendency towards substantialism (see Harvey [2013], p. 130).

³³ See Thakchöe [2015], pp. 74-75.

according to Yogācāra, everything we are conscious of derives from the combined activities of the eight consciousnesses.³⁴

The doctrine of the eight consciousnesses is a theory of mind connected to the theory of three natures, because these “natures” are distinct aspects or characters of reality as conceived by the consciousness. In turn, the theory of three natures – which can be interpreted as a response to, or re-interpretation of, the Mādhyamaka theory of two truths – explicates the Yogācāra notion of emptiness.³⁵ According to this theory, all phenomena possess three aspects, which are different perspectives from which the one and same reality can be considered. The first aspect is the “fully conceptualized nature”. This aspect, which is created by the defiled mind, is the world naively imagined as composed of things existing independently from the consciousness which perceives them. At this level, then, the most erroneous discrimination projected by the defiled mind is the dichotomy between an internal subject and an external object, intended as separate, self-standing entities.

The second aspect is the “other-dependent nature”. According to the Yogācārins, this is the level of dependent origination, which consists in realizing phenomena as a flow of mental impressions and perceptions arising in dependence upon each other according to causes and conditions. It is this stream of interconnected experiences which is mistakenly divided into subjects and objects. However, when one discovers through meditation that the subject-object distinction is only an unreal superimposition caused by

³⁴ For an analysis of the theory of the eight consciousnesses, see e.g. Williams [2009], pp. 97-100; Harvey [2013], pp. 130-133; Szanyi [2024], § 2.

³⁵ See Siderits [2015], pp. 115-117. Some scholars have seen continuity between the two-truth theory and the three-nature theory (see e.g. Westerhoff [2013], pp. 144), while others have argued that the latter is a criticism of the former (see e.g. Yao [2014]).

the defiled mind, then the third aspect of experience emerges. This aspect – the “fully accomplished nature” – is a vision of reality in its purity and clarity, since it refers to the absence of duality (or the presence of non-duality) between consciousness and its objects. Objects are correctly apprehended as inseparable from the consciousness which perceives them, because they are products of the consciousness, not things existing independently. In short, the fully accomplished nature is the other-dependent nature deprived of the fully conceptualized nature.³⁶

Let’s illustrate this three-aspect theory with the example of water perceived in a desert mirage. The image of water, if mistakenly conceived as real water, is the fully conceptualized nature of the phenomenon. The image of water understood as a representation generated through the processes of consciousness is the other-dependent nature of the phenomenon. The image of water finally realized as a mere mental image without any objective, mind-independent referent is the fully accomplished nature of the phenomenon. From this perspective, the fully accomplished nature refers to the actual absence of water in the mirage.³⁷

Within this framework, the concept of emptiness acquires a new meaning. According to the Yogācāra thought, the vision of the fully accomplished nature is the vision of reality developed through yogic meditation. It is the phenomenal world understood from the perspective of the enlightened mind, which sees reality in its “suchness” or “thusness” by removing any duality.³⁸ Once the world is viewed in its

³⁶ For an analysis of the three-nature theory, see e.g. Williams [2009], pp. 88-92; Harvey [2013], pp. 134-136; Szanyi [2024], § 3.2. Thakchöe [2015] provides an analysis of some Mādhyamaka interpretations of the three-nature theory.

³⁷ The three-nature theory has been illustrated with several classical similes, one of the most notorious of which is the simile of the “magic show”. See Nagao [1991], pp. 67-74, who presents many similes and how they are connected to the theory.

³⁸ See e.g. Harvey [2013], pp. 136-138, in particular: «This ‘nature’ [of all phenomena: emptiness] is also known as

fully accomplished nature, it is regarded as devoid of permanent, self-standing entities which are separated and independent from consciousness. This is what the Yogācāra school means primarily for 'emptiness': the absence of a real dichotomy between subjects and objects. In this sense, the fully accomplished nature of reality is its emptiness, meaning that reality is empty of the subject-object duality.³⁹

This apprehension of emptiness can be attained only when our vision of the world has switched from the fully conceptualized nature (the everyday naïve worldview of contraposed, substantial subjects and objects) to the fully accomplished nature (the enlightened comprehension of reality as a non-dualistic flux of mental events and processes). Emptiness then manifests itself to the meditator only at the level of the fully accomplished nature.⁴⁰ Since emptiness means the absence of the subject-object dualism in the other-dependent nature, then emptiness entails the absence of independent existence of phenomena from consciousness.⁴¹ On these bases, the Yogācārins can affirm that, *contra* the Mādhyamikas, this notion of emptiness does not entail nihilism, but presupposes the very existence of the other-dependent flow of phenomenon which is declared to be empty of dualities, because this flux of experiences can be said "empty of something" only if the flux exists.⁴²

thusness [...], the inconceivable as-it-is-ness of reality. As the knowledge which knows it has totally transcended the subject/object illusion, it is the very thusness which it knows. Thusness is the very nature of reality and the three 'natures' are just three different perspectives on it, of varying degrees of adequacy» (p. 136).

³⁹ See the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, XXVII, 74-76 (in Suzuki [1978], pp. 65-68). On the concept of emptiness as absence of the subject-object duality, see Williams [2000], pp. 157-158; Williams [2009], pp. 91-94; Burton [2013], pp. 154-156.

⁴⁰ See Nagao [1991], pp. 185-186.

⁴¹ See Blumenthal [2013], pp. 93-94.

⁴² By discussing Vasubandhu's position, Williams [2009] claims that «when we hold that something is empty, we mean that one

In this context, the other-dependent nature appears as the middle path between the fully conceptualized nature and the fully accomplished one. Indeed, as some scholars have acknowledged, the passage from the former nature to the latter one is possible only via the mediation of the other-dependent nature.⁴³ In summary, just like the Mādhyamaka school, even the Yogācāra school maintains a close connection between the concept of emptiness and those of dependent origination and middle path.

4. Comparison between notions of emptiness

Based on what previously presented, now we can draw a comparison between the conceptions of emptiness in Mādhyamaka school and Yogācāra school. To my understanding, we can highlight similarities and differences mainly in relation to the following aspects: independent existence, dependent origination, the middle path, and the therapeutic goal of the Buddha's teachings.⁴⁴

One of the major similarities is that, for both schools, emptiness means a lack of independence of the existence of beings. However, they differ in what their existence is dependent on. For Mādhyamaka,

thing is empty of another. Hence in all that negation something remains, and what remains exists there as a reality. This school, therefore, holds that something exists» (p. 93). For the idea that emptiness must entail the existence of a substratum (i.e., that which is said to be empty), see King [1994], pp. 664-668; Yao [2014], pp. 328-330

⁴³ The analysis of the three-nature theory offered by Nagao [1991], pp. 61-67, cogently argues the thesis that the other-dependent nature is the medium between the other two natures.

⁴⁴ Some relevant studies on the comparison between the concepts of emptiness in the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra schools are Nagao [1991], pp. 155-187, 209-218; Burton [2013], pp. 152-155; Harvey [2013], pp. 149-150. My understanding of the different notions of emptiness is indebted to these studies.

phenomena lack any independence from relationships with other phenomena in terms of mereological, causal and conceptual relations, because everything depends on everything else – nothing excluded. Differently, for Yogācāra phenomena lacks any independence from the consciousness which perceives them – that is, the dependently originated reality is empty of the subject-object duality, since it is fundamentally a construction of the consciousness, which is the only existing entity.⁴⁵ Consequently, for Mādhyamaka nothing can be said to exist independently, not even emptiness itself, while for Yogācāra every entity does have dependent existence except one – the consciousness, which is the referent of emptiness as deprivation of the subject-object duality.⁴⁶ In this way, the Mādhyamikas do not need – and indeed reject – a foundational level for grounding their concept of emptiness, whereas the Yogācārins try to design a theory of emptiness founded on the existence of the causal flux of experiences generated by the consciousness.⁴⁷

The above-mentioned point should make clear that for the two schools the term ‘emptiness’ does have a basic negative connotation, because in both conceptions it denotes an “absence” of something (of intrinsic existence in everything for the Mādhyamikas; of subject-object dualism in the reality for the Yogācārins). For Mādhyamaka, emptiness is a radical negation, because it is not simply the negation of independent existence, but it is also the negation of negation itself when it is regarded as a positive datum: in other words, emptiness is not a self-standing reality, since emptiness itself is empty. However, as some scholars have shown, for Yogācāra ‘emptiness’ possesses also a positive connotation: not only does it

⁴⁵ This point has been variously recognized by many scholars: see e.g. Williams [2000], pp. 157-158; Williams [2009], pp. 92-94; Blumenthal [2013], p. 93; Harvey [2013], pp. 149-150.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Harvey [2013], pp. 137-138.

⁴⁷ See Nagao [1991], pp. 53-57, 200; Westerhoff [2013], p. 144.

denote the absence of something, but it also refers to the “presence” of this absence in the consciousness. Indeed, the Yogācārins argue that emptiness is meaningful only if it is predicated of something, but that something must exist, and emptiness must exist in it, otherwise the concept of emptiness would be meaningless.⁴⁸ This double structure (positive and negative) would be a special feature of Yogācāra interpretation of emptiness. Even though some Mādhyamaka critics have contended that this notion of emptiness is self-contradictory, seemingly the Yogācārins have embraced this alleged contradiction of emptiness as both “presence” and “absence”.⁴⁹

Thanks to these connotations (as a total negation of every positive stance in Mādhyamaka and as a positive-negative ambivalence in Yogācāra), emptiness becomes a good candidate as a middle term between extremes. According to both schools, indeed, emptiness must be intended as a middle path between two opposite perspectives: Mādhyamaka describes emptiness as a middle between substantialism and nihilism, whereas Yogācāra as a middle between the fully conceptualized nature and the fully accomplished one.⁵⁰ The equation between emptiness and the middle path is possible because the two schools relate emptiness to dependent origination: in the Mādhyamaka philosophy, everything is empty of intrinsic existence because it is dependently originated (that is, neither substantially existing nor totally nonexistent), while in the Yogācāra philosophy, emptiness is achieved with the realization that the dependently originated world is devoid of subject-

⁴⁸ See references in note 42.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Nagao [1991], pp. 51-60, who considers this ambivalence as a peculiar feature of the concept of emptiness in the Yogācāra school. Nagao has also argued that this double structure of positivity-negativity, affirmation-negation or ascent-descent is dynamic and can be found in the most important concepts of Buddhist philosophy (see Nagao [1991], pp. 201-208).

⁵⁰ See Nagao [1991], pp. 214-216.

object dualism (that is, the other-dependent nature is fully accomplished when purged of the fully conceptualized one).⁵¹

Since both schools consider their conception of emptiness as the most appropriate interpretation of the middle path taught by the Buddha, they accord to the apprehension of emptiness a fundamental role on the way towards the liberation from suffering. In this sense, they completely adhere to the therapeutic intent which is common to all Buddhist schools. For both Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra, one pivotal step to the cessation of suffering is achieved through the release from the attachment to oneself, others, and the things, which in turn is based on ignorance and false beliefs. From the Mādhyamaka viewpoint, attachment can be dissipated by recognizing the unsubstantiality of everything, so that there are no essential, independent entities which someone can cling to. Likewise, from the Yogācāra perspective, attachment can be dissolved by coming to realize that there is not really any object which someone can anchor on, because the dichotomy between subject and object is illusory, being a fictitious projection of the mind. In summary, for both schools, emptiness is the necessary condition which makes the liberation from suffering possible.⁵²

However, there could be detected a subtle difference between the two schools in the way they teach how to attain emptiness as a means of liberation. Although neither of them denies the relevance of a combined use of theoretical tools and practical means, Mādhyamaka seems to mainly stress the application of logical analysis for understanding emptiness, whereas Yogācāra appears to principally rely on the dedication

⁵¹ For a study on the relationships between emptiness and dependent origination in Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra, see Chowdhury [2017].

⁵² Some studies on the therapeutic aim and soteriological importance of emptiness in the two schools are King [1994], pp. 672-674; Gethin [1998], pp. 249-250; Siderits [2003]; Burton [2013], pp. 161-162.

to meditative practice for emptiness to emerge.⁵³ Notwithstanding, on one hand, it is evident that the Yogācārins did not discard logical arguments to explain and defend their theses, principles, and methods, while on the other hand, some scholars have proposed that the Mādhyamikas used Nāgārjuna's arguments on emptiness as objects of meditation for practitioners.⁵⁴ Anyway, despite their different emphasis on philosophy and meditation, the therapeutic goal of the two schools is a common ground which place them firmly in the tradition of teachings inaugurated by the Buddha over twenty-five centuries ago.⁵⁵

In conclusion, this essay has made a comparative analysis of the concept of emptiness as applied by Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra, two major Buddhist schools of the Mahāyāna tradition. Particularly, emptiness has been discussed by focusing on its relations to the concepts of dependent origination and middle path. As argued, the two schools share a notion of emptiness (considered as the absence of independent existence) which stresses conceptual

⁵³ See Siderits [2015], who stresses this difference in "methodology" between the two schools.

⁵⁴ See Nagao [1991], p. 214; Williams [2000], pp. 79-81. For an appreciation of how the philosophies of the two schools were interconnected by an analysis of the thought of their founders, see e.g. Shulman [2015]. For historical attempts of connecting the theoretical views of the two schools, see Blumenthal [2013], pp. 95-97.

⁵⁵ All the points above are masterfully summarized by Harvey [2013]: «While the Mādhyamikas and Yogācāras had their philosophical differences, they both had Buddhahood as their goal, and can be seen as being complementary in their approaches. The Mādhyamikas had an analytical, dialectic approach to reality, emphasizing wisdom; the Yogācāras emphasized meditative concentration and the withdrawal of the mind from sensory phenomena. Just as the early Buddhists sought to transcend limiting attachment by seeing phenomena as impermanent, painful and non-Self, so the Mādhyamikas sought this by seeing them as 'empty' of inherent nature/existence, and the Yogācāras sought it by seeing perceived phenomena as mental constructions» (p. 129, slightly adapted).

connections with the fundamental principle of dependent origination, the Buddha's teaching of the middle path, and the therapeutical purpose of Buddhism. On the other hand, the essay has outlined some divergencies between the use of the concept by the two schools: differences in connotation, in its foundational role, and in ways of achieving emptiness. Nevertheless, relying on their doctrinal consonances, someone may ask whether the divergencies between these two notions of emptiness are only superficially incoherent with each other, and whether they can be ultimately regarded as compatible at a deeper level.⁵⁶ But this is a matter of investigation for another essay.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ This problem is well articulated as an open question by Nagao [1991]: «Due to these differences, one can assume that there is, or could be, a considerable difference between the two schools concerning their idea of *śūnyatā*. [...] Or rather, are we to say that in spite of these questions, the difference, if any, is negligible when contrasted to the vast universality and ultimacy of ideas such as *śūnyatā*, the Middle Path, and co-dependent origination?» (p. 199). On a more general level, the question of whether the philosophical views of the two schools are consistent with one another is the topic of the studies published in Garfield and Westerhoff [2015].

⁵⁷ My sincere gratitude goes to the fellow students of the *Buddhist Philosophy* postgraduate course and to the course teacher, Professor Shengmiao, for the insightful lectures and discussions on the topics of this essay. Any errors or misunderstandings in these pages are solely my responsibility.

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