

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Indian Buddhist and
Continental Christianate Critiques of Ontology:
An Exercise in Interreligious Philosophical Dialogue**

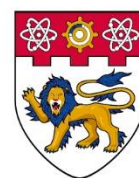
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RAFAL K. STEPIEN

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SCHOOL OF
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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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**Indian Buddhist and Continental Christianate
Critiques of Ontology:
An Exercise in Interreligious Philosophical Dialogue**

Rafal K. Stepień

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Abstract

This article sets out to place in interreligious philosophical dialogue certain critiques of ontology elaborated in Indian Buddhist and Continental Christianate contexts. On the Buddhist side, it focuses on the Indian Madhyamaka philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), while Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is taken as representative of the Continental tradition. Following a methodological explanation of, and theoretical justification for, the project of “interreligious philosophical dialogue” as well as the use of “Christianate” throughout the paper, it introduces the critiques levelled at any and all ontological projects – understood as efforts to comprehend “being” – by these representative philosophers working within two over-arching religio-philosophical traditions. In the final section, the paper situates this dialogue within relevant contemporary scholarly debates, and thereby highlights its distinctive approach.

On Interreligious Philosophical Dialogue*

The Western and Buddhist philosophical traditions (for all the disparities between, and within, them) both begin with conversations. The *Dialogues* of Plato and the *Discourses* of the Buddha are presented as a series of exchanges in which truth, rather than being expounded *ab initio ex cathedra*, is arrived at through a series of questions and answers: In the beginning, it seems, there was no Word, but rather a conversation. Indeed, one wonders what word it could have been that was not spoken by and to someone.

In this article, in keeping with the spirit of their own inquiries and following in the wake of several recent studies on related topics, I propose to put these two philosophical traditions in interreligious philosophical dialogue with each other.¹ Aware of the immense diversity of thought to be found in both, I will limit myself to but a summary engagement with two representative thinkers. On the Buddhist side, my focus will be directed upon the Indian Madhyamaka philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250), though with reference also to his classical commentator Candrakīrti (c. 600-650), for I believe (and will attempt to demonstrate) that his understanding of (or rather, critiques of) ontology bears fruitful comparison with certain strands of modern Continental thought. Regarding this latter, I will focus my discussion on the thought of the later Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) – that compulsory reference point for all contemporary Continental conceptions of metaphysics – as a means toward briefly examining what I perceive to be illuminating intersection points between the Heideggerian and Nāgārjunian critical ontological projects.² Throughout, and owing to the usual constraints of time and space, I will generally limit myself to a discussion of ontological issues (indeed, to critiques not of any particular ontologies but of the ontological project itself: the effort to comprehend “being”), leaving aside such vast fields of thought as epistemology, ethics, and hermeneutics.

Prior to delving any further, however, a few words are in order as justification of my terming this discussion “interreligious philosophical dialogue”. This moniker moves from greater to lesser controversiality as we move along the three words constituting it. Thus, that the placing side-by-side of arguments from diverse thinkers spanning two over-arching philosophical traditions in an effort to allow them, and so us, to enter into conversation over what are (thereby seen to be) common interests and interestingly overlapping approaches to ontology, as instantiated in the pages that follow, counts as dialogue, I see as incontrovertible. As for the philosophicality of the traditions, I choose here to simply deflect the controversy by leaving aside the claims (still all-too-common) among professional Western philosophers to the effect that Buddhist philosophy (or any other

* This article has benefitted greatly from comments received by three anonymous peer reviewers, who will recognise my indebtedness to them at multiple junctures in what follows. My gratitude goes to them all for the intelligence and care with which they treated the initially submitted manuscript.

¹ “Interreligious philosophical dialogue” could also, but even less felicitously, be rendered as “interreligious/interphilosophical dialogue”, or “inter-religious/philosophical dialogue”, but I have opted for what I take to be the least cumbersome phrasing. The recent studies I refer to include most notably: Steven Burik, *The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking: Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009; Bret W. Davis, “Beyond Philosophical Euromonopolism: Other Ways of – Not Otherwise than – Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West*, 69.2 (April 2019): 592-619; Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (eds.), *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988; Ralph Weber, “How to Compare?” – On the Methodological State of State of Comparative Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 8.7 (2013): 593-603; Jason Wirth, *Nietzsche and Other Buddhas: Philosophy after Comparative Philosophy*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019.

² Given Heidegger’s infamous exclusion of all but “Western-European philosophy” from the realm of philosophy proper (see Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, (trans.), New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1958, 29-30), and given, moreover, Heidegger’s insistence on the incommensurability of terms embodied in different languages and/or stemming from different philosophical traditions (see for example his discussion of the necessarily alien nature of “aesthetics” – a “European” term – to Asian thinking, in “A Dialogue on Language” in Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, Peter D Hertz, (trans.), New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971, 1-56), Heidegger himself would have been opposed to the very premises undergirding my project here. Not only do I feel methodologically justified in utilising the thought of a given philosopher for purposes different (or even inimical) to their originally intended ends (a standard method in all constructive work in philosophy), I must admit to taking particular satisfaction in effectively forcing a notorious and unapologetic racist such as Heidegger into dialogue with a non-European interlocutor he would not, on those very grounds, have admitted as a conversation partner.

non-Western philosophy for that matter) should not be accounted philosophy as both tangential to this article's concerns and in any case philosophically unjustifiable.³

As for my qualification of what follows as an *interreligious* philosophical dialogue, this necessitates some further attention. The first point to acknowledge is that, while the religiosity of Nāgārjuna is undisputed (in the sense that he clearly self-identifies as Buddhist), the relevance of that religiosity to his philosophical project, not to mention the religious status of the other philosopher dealt with here (Heidegger), are highly controversial.⁴ In support of qualifying my discussion as *interreligious*, then, I refer above all to the fact that I speak, in the title to this article, of not Christian but *Christianate* philosophy, and it is in the sense of "Christianate" (and not necessarily "Christian") that I see the ontological positions of a Continental philosopher such as Heidegger as relating to religion. But what is "Christianate"? Briefly put, the distinction I propose here between "Christian" and "Christianate" functions analogously to that made by Marshall Hodgson between "Islamic" and "Islamicate" to stand "for what we may call religion and for the overall society and culture associated historically with the religion" respectively.⁵ Unfortunately, despite their evident conceptual utility, Hodgson's terms have not found general acceptance with scholarship concerned with Islam, and equivalent terms such as the Christian/Christianate dichotomy I am proposing here have found practically no application to other religious spheres. What better place than a forum for discussion of interreligious topics, however, in which to apply a term coined in the context of scholarship on one religion to scholarship on another? And what more apt use of such a term than in the context of an expressly interreligious discussion?

It is in this sense, then, that the study that follows of Indian Buddhist and Continental Christianate critiques of ontology is to be considered an exercise in interreligious philosophical dialogue. It is hoped that, in highlighting meaningful departures for further conversation across traditions as it goes, this article will go some way towards demonstrating both the general benefits of comparative, interreligiously dialogical approaches to philosophical problems, and the specific relevance of Indian Buddhist thinkers to modern Western philosophical concerns.

A Buddhist (Critique of) Ontology

In order for meaningful dialogue to occur, each individual voice must first be allowed to state its position. It is thus necessary at the outset to outline the major concerns around which the philosophical project of Nāgārjuna (and Candrakīrti) revolves. Nāgārjuna is generally considered to be the founder of the Madhyamaka or Middle Way School of Buddhist philosophy also sometimes referred to as the School of Emptiness (*śūnyatāvāda*) or, in China, the Three Treatise (*Sanlun* 三論) School.⁶ Although a great many works have been attributed to Nāgārjuna over the centuries, current scholarship accepts the following six titles as indisputably his:

- 1) *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* / *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (MK)⁷
- 2) *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā-kārikā* / *Sixty Stanzas on Reasoning*⁸

³ Readers interested in pursuing the relevant debates from a variety of Buddhist perspectives are invited to consult the contributions in Rafal K. Stepien (ed.), *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies* 19.1 (2019), special issue: "Buddhist Philosophy Today: Forms and Theories."

⁴ I discuss Heidegger's relationship to Christianity in the section on "Continental (Critiques of) Ontology" below.

⁵ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. 1: "The Classical Age of Islam," Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 57.

⁶ The three treatises in question are the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* or *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Zhong lun* 中論), the *Dvādaśamukhaśāstra*, *Dvādaśanikāyaśāstra*, *Dvādaśadvāraśāstra*, or *Dvādaśadvāraka* (as variously reconstructed into the supposed original Sanskrit) or *Treatise on the Twelve Gates* (*Shi-er men lun* 十二門論), both attributed to Nāgārjuna in the Chinese tradition, and the *Śatakaśāstra* or *One Hundred Verse Treatise* (*Bai lun* 百論) by Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva (3rd century CE). These were all translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什 344–413 CE) around the beginning of the 4th century CE.

⁷ The best translations into English are Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 (from the Tibetan) and Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013 (from the original Sanskrit). For an English translation from the Chinese version, see Brian Bocking, *Nāgārjuna in China: A Translation of the Middle Treatise*, Lewiston, ID: Edwin Mellen, 1995.

⁸ For texts, studies, and translations, see Joseph John Loizzo and the AIBS Translation Team (trans.), *Nāgārjuna's Reason Sixty with Chandrakīrti's Reason Sixty Commentary*, New York, NY: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia

- 3) *Śūnyatāsaptati / Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*⁹
- 4) *Vigrahavyāvartanī / Dispeller of Objections*¹⁰
- 5) *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa / Treatise on Pulverisation*¹¹
- 6) *Ratnāvalī / Precious Garland*¹²

Many other titles, meanwhile, continue to linger in the limbos of dubious attribution.¹³ Fortunately, the situation regarding Candrakīrti's works appears to be much clearer, with just two major texts attributed to him: the *Prasannapadā Madhyamakavṛttih* or *Clear Words*, a commentary to Nāgārjuna's MK,¹⁴ and the *Madhyamakāvātāra* or *Introduction to the Middle Way*, which Peter Fenner, in his book-length study of it, considers to "encapsulate [the] central characteristics" of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka school.¹⁵ In the exposition that follows, I will be treating Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti as equally representative of the Mādhyamikas, even though I am aware that some five centuries of philosophical debate separate them, and that part of the thrust of the latter's arguments was directed against opponents, such as Bhāvaviveka (c. 500-578), posterior to the latter. Nevertheless, Candrakīrti's works constitute a deliberate effort to expound clearly the teachings of Nāgārjuna, so much so that the Tibetan tradition regards him as the "ultimate" disciple of Nāgārjuna himself.¹⁶ Indeed, in what follows, I understand the term "Madhyamaka" to refer, rather indiscriminately, to the teachings of these two philosophers, along the lines adopted by Dan Arnold when he proposes that "Madhyamaka", for Candrakīrti, "just means the thought of Nāgārjuna as accurately discerned by Candrakīrti".¹⁷

The Madhyamaka school is centrally concerned with the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Emptiness is, in the various Buddhist traditions, a notion arising from the Buddha's observation that there is no inherent, unchanging, independent foundation underlying the ceaseless flow of inter-dependent phenomena (*dharma*s). The notion of emptiness is thus indissolubly linked to the Buddha's denial of a real self (*ātman*). Thus, for example, we find Ānanda, one of the Buddha's principal disciples, asking him: "Venerable sir, it is said, 'Empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what way, venerable sir, is it said, 'Empty is the world'?" The Buddha responds: "It is, Ānanda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'Empty is the

University and Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies and Tibet House, 2007; C. Lindtner, *Nāgārjuniana – Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1982.

⁹ See Lindtner, *Nāgārjuniana*; C. Lindtner, *Master of Wisdom: Writings of the Buddhist Master Nāgārjuna*, Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1986; Fernando Tola & Carmen Dragonetti, *On Voidness: A Study of Buddhist Nihilism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995; Ram Chandra Pandeya and Manju, *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy of No-Identity*, Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1991; David Ross Komito, *Nāgārjuna's Seventy Stanzas: A Buddhist Psychology of Emptiness*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987.

¹⁰ For the most recent study and translation into English, see Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī: The Dispeller of Disputes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. See also Yoshiyasu Yonezawa, 'Vigrahavyāvartanī Sanskrit Transliteration and Tibetan Translation,' *Naritasan Bukkyo Kenkyujo kiyo* 31, 2008.

¹¹ For the most recent study and translation into English, see Jan Westerhoff, *Crushing the Categories: Vaidalyaprakaraṇa by Nāgārjuna*, Boston, MA: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies and Wisdom Publications, 2018.

¹² For translation and study, see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland: Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007.

¹³ See for example N. McCagney, *Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Openness*, Maryland, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1997, 2; R. A. F. Thurman, *The Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsong Khapa's Essence of True Eloquence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, 26; and Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 5-6, for the six-text position. Alternative views, however, are proposed by for example Lindtner, who states that, apart from the MK, "twelve other texts must be considered genuine" (Lindtner, *Nāgārjuniana*, xx), and Douglas Berger, "Nāgārjuna," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/nagarjun/>, who lists a total of ten works. The whole issue of the difficulty of attribution to Nāgārjuna is amply discussed in D. S. Ruegg, *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*, Boston, MA: Wisdom, 2010, 19-22.

¹⁴ See Mervyn Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979. This has been superseded by Anne MacDonald, *In Clear Words: The Prasannapadā, Chapter One*, Vol. 1: "Introduction, Manuscript Description, Sanskrit Text," Vol. 2: "Annotated Translation, Tibetan Text," Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015.

¹⁵ See Peter Fenner, *The Ontology of the Middle Way*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990, 4. For a translation of the text and highly sophisticated philosophical engagement with it, see C. W. Huntington with G. N. Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.

¹⁶ See Thurman, *Central Philosophy*, 41.

¹⁷ Dan Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005, 257 (italics removed).

world.”¹⁸ Indeed, the Buddha maintained that the self is empty in that it, like most phenomena, is impermanent (*anitya*) and dependently originating (on which notion, see below). It is important to note that the Buddha maintains a distinction between those phenomena considered *asamskrta* or unconditioned and those considered *samskrta* or conditioned.¹⁹ “Self” is understood to be conditioned, and thus empty, while phenomena such as space or *nirvāṇa* are taken to be unconditioned, inherently possessed of “self-nature” (*svabhāva*), and thus substantially “real”. This distinction between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena led to a great deal of list-making among the Ābhidhārmikas, the writers of the so-called Higher Teaching, in whose works “existence is analysed and reduced to a specific number of discrete *dharma*s as mental and physical factors of existence”.²⁰ These unconditioned phenomena, though considered by the Ābhidhārmikas as being ultimately empty of self, are termed ‘primary existents’ in that they are understood to exist irreducibly, unlike conceptual constructs such as “person” or “table”.²¹

The Mādhyamikas took issue with precisely this distinction, effectively maintaining that such a teaching did not take emptiness far enough. Nāgārjuna agrees with the Buddha’s insight according to which anything that arises due to conditions can have no inherent self-nature in that its very identity depends on what conditions it: a teaching known as *pratītya-samutpādaḥ* or dependent co-origination.²² He further claims, however, that all phenomena, without exception, fall within the purview of dependent co-origination, thereby collapsing the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena. As such, he maintains that *all dharmas* are empty, including *nirvāṇa*, self, and even emptiness itself. As Arnold summarises:

If... there is nothing irreducibly existent in the first place, then it becomes reasonable to say that the self has precisely and only the same sort of “existence” that anything *could* have – namely, *dependent* or *relative* existence. Or, if by “existence” one means independent, ultimate existence, then one would have to say... that neither the self *nor* the analytic categories of Abhidharma have any “existence” at all.²³

I would argue that the abolition of the earlier duality between conditioned and non-conditioned phenomena, or substantial existence and absolute non-existence, is what Nāgārjuna understands the true doctrine of the Middle Way to signify. In other words, emptiness is the true Middle Way, as Nāgārjuna himself expressly declares:

Dependent co-origination
That we call emptiness
This, a relative designation
Is itself the middle way.
(MK:24:18)²⁴

¹⁸ The *Salāyatanaṣaṃyutta* of the *Salāyatanaṣavagga* in Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, 1163.

¹⁹ See for example the *Cūlasuññata Sutta* in Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, 2nd ed, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001, 970.

²⁰ S. C. Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism: A Survey*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, 78.

²¹ See Jan Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 99-107; and Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2000, 134-5 for a summary of the issues involved. Williams identifies the *Prajñāpāramitā* or Perfection of Wisdom school as embodying a stance in opposition to that of the Ābhidhārmikas. On his account, the *Prajñāpāramitā* school denies the existence of any primary existents, claiming instead that both secondary constructs and the Abhidharmic irreducibles are in fact secondary existents (see Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 261).

²² See Nāgārjuna MK:15:1: “Self-nature cannot come about through dependent co-origination, since dependently co-originated self-nature would thereby become contingent. How could there be contingent self-nature? Self-nature is not contingent, nor can it be dependent on another being.” Note that references to the MK here and throughout cite the chapter and verse number as per standard practice. Given the emphasis in this article on interreligious philosophical dialogue, I have not seen need to include the original Sanskrit text.

²³ Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 167 (italics in original).

²⁴ See Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 274 fn101 for a discussion of various translations of this verse.

Candrakīrti too declares quite openly that “dependent origination has these specific names: emptiness, relative indication, [and] middle path”.²⁵ Crucially, emptiness as here defined implies neither nihilism (i.e. the view that nothing exists – a notion known as ‘the extreme of non-existence’) nor substantialism (i.e. the view that emptiness is a really existing ultimate reality or essence – “the extreme of existence”).²⁶ Both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are explicit in their denunciations of such a position. Nāgārjuna states:

“It exists” is grasping for eternalism
 “It does not exist” is the viewpoint of nihilism
 Therefore the wise should not depend
 On either existence nor non-existence.
 (MK:15:10)

And Candrakīrti echoes in characteristically less oracular tones:

[T]hat which has no origination from an essence does not have existence; and since there is [also] no cessation of what is not originated from an essence, it [also] does not have non-existence. Hence, since it is free from the two extremes of being and non-being, emptiness – defined as everything’s non-origination from an essence – is said to be the middle path, i.e., the middle way.²⁷

Emptiness for the Mādhyamikas is thus tantamount to a universalisation to all phenomena of the Buddha’s teaching of no-self (*anātman*) on the basis of dependent co-origination. There can be no substantial self for there can be no thing that exists independently of others. Therefore, “all that is real in the end is the fact of *relationship*: the abstract state of affairs of there being no existents that are not ‘dependently originated’ or ‘relatively indicated’.”²⁸ This truth, of course, must also apply to the truth of emptiness, which is why Nāgārjuna admits that emptiness itself is empty. Since things can only exist inter-dependently, to say that emptiness is itself empty is, in effect, the only way to say that it exists at all. We are thus left with a universe bereft of (epistemological) ultimate truth or (ontological) absolute being. For it to be, being would need to be characterised by self-being (*svabhāva*), and would thus amount to a stasis from which all traces of becoming would be absent. As Nāgārjuna puts it, “If all were not empty, nothing could come about or perish.”²⁹ We would thus be left with a world populated with changeless, eternal beings existing independently of all causal relations.³⁰ Rather, a thing’s ontological status must lie between the two extremes:

Things have no essential nature
 because they are seen to change into something else.
 Things do not lack an essential nature
 because things are emptiness.
 (MK:13:3)

Likewise, there can be no arriving at any ultimate truth, for the only ultimate truth is that there can be no ultimate truth. Or, to put it in Arnold’s words: “The epistemic situation is (like all existents) constitutively *relational*, necessarily involving the interdependence of subject and object.”³¹ To explain: Nāgārjuna does

²⁵ Cited in Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 171 (italics removed, addition in original).

²⁶ See the *Nidānasamyutta* of the *Nidānavagga* in Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 544 for the *locus classicus* on the two extremes.

²⁷ Cited in Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 170-1 (italics and additions in original).

²⁸ Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 167 (italics in original).

²⁹ MK:24:20. For a discussion of this point, see Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 147. See also in this regard MK:24:33: “What could the non-empty do? For self-being cannot act.”

³⁰ See Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka*, 91-127, and 200-02 regarding causation. According to Westerhoff, “Supposing there were such things as [self-existing] substances, Nāgārjuna argues that they could not stand in the relation of cause and effect” (200). Similarly, such *svabhāvic* “substances could not come into existence or go out of existence; besides being changeless they also have to be eternal” (202-3).

³¹ Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 183 (italics in original).

elaborate a distinction between conventional truth (*saṃvṛtti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*).³² On this conception, although things conventionally do appear to possess self-being, this is ultimately seen to be not the case, on the basis of dependent co-arising/emptiness. However, Nāgārjuna would be forced into contradiction were he to maintain that emptiness itself is an ultimate truth in the sense of a truth universally valid independently of causes and conditions. Such a claim, of course, would imply that the truth of emptiness is itself not subject to the truth of emptiness, thereby invalidating the truth-status of emptiness. Nāgārjuna avoids such a regress by denying that he holds any position whatsoever. This is the famous ‘thesis of no-thesis’, most eloquently enunciated in his *Dispeller of Objections*:

If I held any thesis
This fault would apply to me
But I do not hold any thesis
So I have no such fault.
(*Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29)³³

Nāgārjuna is explicit about applying this no-thesis even to the notion most commonly considered his definitive thesis: “One who adopts emptiness as a view is thereby pronounced incurable.”³⁴ How are we to understand this? While a great deal of ink has been spilt debating this point,³⁵ I tend to agree with C. W. Huntington’s view that such an insistence upon working out what Nāgārjuna ‘really means’ is itself symptomatic of the clinging to views and positions which Nāgārjuna’s project aims to disabuse us of.³⁶ For the philosophical arguments of Nāgārjuna (or Candrakīrti) are not ultimately aimed at any abstract arrival at absolute truth but, rather, can only be meaningfully understood as means enabling the seeker to see *through* all truths and conceptualisations, and most fundamentally those ontological categories such as becoming and passing, being and non-being, that hinder him or her from the attainment of the true ‘thusness’ or ‘suchness’ (*tathatā*): the defining characteristic of the *Tathāgata*, or Thus-Gone / Thus-Come One: the Buddha. As Nāgārjuna says:

“Empty” should not be said
“Non-empty” too should not be said
Likewise with “both” and “neither”
These are but ways of speaking.
(MK:22:11)³⁷

The Mādhyamikas’ “ways of speaking” are thus soteriologically expedient means (*upāya*) aimed at conveying those grievously attached to views and truths onto the farther shore, not of *nirvāṇa* understood as ultimate truth, but of neither-*nirvāṇa*-nor-*saṃsāra*,

Not ceasing, not arising
Not annihilated, not eternal
Not identical, not different
Not coming, not going.
(MK:0:1)

³² See MK:24:8: “The teaching of the doctrine by the Buddhas is based upon two truths: conventional worldly truth and ultimate truth.”

³³ For an alternative translation and discussion, see for example Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka*, 183; Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Vigrahavyāvartanī*, 61ff.

³⁴ MK:13:8. For a discussion of this verse as it fits into Nāgārjuna’s larger scheme, see Thurman, *Central Philosophy*, 153ff.

³⁵ Westerhoff, for example, devotes his entire analysis of Nāgārjuna’s stance on language to this issue. See Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka*, 183-98.

³⁶ See in this regard Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, 107ff; and Rafal K. Stepien, “Abandoning All Views: A Buddhist Critique of Belief,” *The Journal of Religion* 99.4, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019, 542ff.

³⁷ See also Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 102: “At the ultimate level, even talk of ‘emptiness’ is to be finally given up: as the things which are said to be empty do not ultimately exist, one cannot even say that ‘they’ are ‘empty.’”

Only thus, in being between being and nothingness, can the enlightened one be simply “thus”.³⁸

A Continental (Critique of) Ontology

Let us turn our attention now to some of the many ways in which the Madhyamaka positions (or non-positions) adumbrated above can engage in meaningful dialogue with modern Western philosophical issues. If my description of Madhyamaka philosophy has been summary, my engagement with one of its modern Continental counterparts will, unfortunately, have to be even more so. Nevertheless, in pointing toward regions of significant overlap among the subset of Indian Buddhist and Continental Christianate philosophies considered here in their approaches to, and critiques of, foundationalist ontologies, I hope at least to stimulate still further interreligious philosophical dialogues on these and related topics.

Martin Heidegger’s deep and complex relationship to Christianity has been the subject of substantial scholarly debate.³⁹ In 1937 we find Heidegger himself owning that “my entire path so far has been accompanied by a silent engagement with Christianity,”⁴⁰ though of course that “path” was complicated not only by a philosophically as well as personally important conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism in 1915-16, but also by a “turn” (the famous and controversial *Kehre* in his thinking during the 1930s) that ultimately led him to an avowed *Destruktion* of theology and emancipation of philosophy from it.⁴¹ From this point on, Heidegger came to distance himself emphatically from what he saw as the bias toward ‘being’ in the Western metaphysical and Christian theological traditions (which he saw as deeply intertwined). Indeed, in his pursuit of “a fundamental elaboration of the question of being”, Heidegger explicitly states – already in 1927 – that “The question of being attains true concreteness only when we carry out the deconstructing of the ontological tradition”;⁴² that is, in a turning away from the ontological categories inherited from the Greeks and systemic theologians. Plato, on Heidegger’s reading, did not so much join the stasis of the Parmenidean One to the flux of the Heraclitean Many as separate them into two irreducibly disjunct spheres, privileging the former. In so doing, Plato hypertrophied the noumenal Ideas into self-identical essences (which thus alone really *are*), and subjected phenomena into self-different existents (which thus, strictly speaking, *are not*). The late Heidegger’s philosophical enterprise can be seen as the effort to at least point out, and ideally undo, this inherited disjunction in Western philosophy by systematically replacing this Being irreducibly rent into essence and existence with *Da-sein*: the Being-there in which are grounded both.

In order to accomplish his enterprise, Heidegger calls upon the phenomenological method which, on his understanding, “dictates for itself neither a ‘standpoint’ nor a ‘direction’, because phenomenology is neither of these and can never be as long as it understand itself.”⁴³ Rather, phenomenology strives to get, famously, “to the things themselves.”⁴⁴ These “things” (which the Mādhyamikas would have readily identified as *dharmas*; i.e., phenomena) are thereby liberated from the ontological categories to which they had been subjected, and

³⁸ See also in this regard MK:25:19: “Between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* there is no difference at all; between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* there is no difference at all.” Dan Arnold (*Buddhists, Brahmins and Belief*, 172) glosses this to be saying that “the ‘ultimate truth’ (*nirvāṇa*) does not consist in something fundamentally different in kind from ‘conventional’ reality (*samsāra*); rather, what is ‘ultimately true’ is simply the fact that there *is* nothing fundamentally different from the world as conventionally described” (italics in original).

³⁹ Bret Davis has compiled relevant passages from throughout Heidegger’s own writings in Bret Davis, “Heidegger on Christianity and Divinity: A Chronological Compendium,” in Bret Davis (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, Durham: Acumen, 2010. The major study of the relationship between (Western) philosophy and (Christian) theology in Heidegger’s thought, with references to all the relevant secondary scholarship, is Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

⁴⁰ Cited in Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology*, 136.

⁴¹ Perhaps the most widely cited among Heidegger’s critiques of Christian philosophy is that of his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (trans.), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014 [1935]). For a critique of Heidegger’s critique which also insightfully charts the relevant scholarly literature and debates, see Joseph G. Trabbic, “A Critique of Heidegger’s Critique of Christian Philosophy,” in *Introduction to Metaphysics, Religious Studies* 53, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, “The Task of a Deconstructing of the History of Ontology,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, New York, NY: Continuum International, 2003 [1927], 52 & 56.

⁴³ Martin Heidegger, “The Phenomenological Method of the Investigation,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, New York, NY: Continuum International, 2003 [1927], 57.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, ‘Phenomenological Method’, 57.

are thus allowed to simply “open into their clearing”, to simply be “thus”, as they are, without the superimposition of any conceptual apparatus to detract from their pure manifesting. Only thus, claims Heidegger, can any thing truly be: “*Ontology is possible only as phenomenology*”⁴⁵ in that only by freeing phenomena from the entification of being can they be experienced in their becoming.⁴⁶

I would argue that Heidegger’s repudiation of the Western metaphysical bias toward “being” arrives at an understanding of things that finds important parallels in the writings of the Madhyamaka Buddhists. Heidegger aspires, firstly, to a position, a thesis, which yet – in its phenomenological thrust – seeks not to define, to delimit a thing, but rather to let it simply speak for, or from, itself. In so doing, he effectively renounces any metaphysical substance to his sayings, in a way not dissimilar to the Mādhyamikas’ renunciation of a thesis. Furthermore, in his late writings, Heidegger echoes these latter in attaining to an understanding of things devoid of what they would call *svabhāva* or self-being. Rather than accept the entification of things implicit in ordinary grammatical linguistic practice, he forges a gerund from “thing” (as in, for example, the statement: “The thing things”⁴⁷) so as to better express their processual nature. This practice is indicative of his distrust of language, and particularly of philosophical terminology, to adequately express the phenomenological thrust of *Da-sein*; a distrust shared by the Mādhyamikas, who – it will be recalled – spoke of their tenets as “but ways of speaking”. Finally, the late Heidegger echoes the Madhyamaka Buddhists in opening a space in Continental Christianate metaphysical thought (*thought*, not philosophy,⁴⁸ and *Christianate*, certainly not Christian⁴⁹) for that betweenness, that neither-this-nor-thatness, in which alone things can, on this understanding, “be”. Surely Nāgārjuna (and Candrakīrti) would have appreciated the nuanced relationality between the two sides of being expressed in the following statement:

man is holding the place open for the complete other of being, so that in its openness there can be such a thing as being present (Being). This nothingness which is not being but *is* just the same, is nothing negative. It belongs to being present. Being and nothingness are not side by side. One intercedes on behalf of the other in a relationship, the amplitude of whose essence we have scarcely considered yet.⁵⁰

Critiques in Dialogue: In Lieu of Conclusions

Much more could be said (and has been said) about the critiques of ontology launched by Nāgārjuna and Heidegger. Much more could be said, moreover, about the influences they had on subsequent thinkers (hard to exaggerate in both cases) and on how these latter could meaningfully be placed in dialogue with one another, or indeed – moving beyond the range of individuals – on how the overarching philosophical traditions within which they are each historically situated could inter-engage, or for that matter have historically engaged.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Heidegger, ‘Phenomenological Method’, 65 (italics in original).

⁴⁶ See also in this regard Martin Heidegger, “The Question of Being,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, New York, NY: Continuum International, 2003 [1955], 136: “*the question as to the essence of Being dies off, if it does not surrender the language of metaphysics, because metaphysical conception forbids thinking the question as to the essence of Being*” (italics in original).

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971 [1951], 177.

⁴⁸ See in this regard Martin Heidegger, “What is Called, What Calls for, Thinking?” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, New York, NY: Continuum International, 2003 [1952].

⁴⁹ In overtly attempting to overcome the foundationalist metaphysics at the foundation of Christianate philosophy, Heidegger embodies one of those instances where ‘Christianate’ approaches ‘un-Christian’. For, as Hodgson states in justifying the need for the very distinction (*Venture*, 57), “much of what even Muslims have done as a part of ‘Islamic’ civilization can only be characterized as ‘un-Islamic’ in the first, religious sense of the word”... and is in this sense Islamicate even if non-, or downright un-, Islamic.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, ‘The Question of Being’, 146. For a more extended discussion of Heidegger *vis-à-vis* Nāgārjuna, see Matthew Kapstein, *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Boston, MA: Wisdom, 2001, 205-20.

⁵¹ The historical influences of Heidegger on Buddhist thought (along with possible Buddhist sources for some of Heidegger’s own ideas), have been the subject of much study. Heidegger was an acknowledged cornerstone in the edifice of Japanese Buddhist philosophy that came to be known as the Kyoto School and associated most closely with Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990). Although broadly Mahāyānist (and more specifically Zen) in orientation, the Kyoto School was not explicitly identified with Madhyamaka, and therefore lies beyond the scope of present concerns, which are in any case not to chart historical influences. Nevertheless, for further details see e.g. Graham

Quite apart from such efforts to expand the remit of the endeavour, I could of course delve much more deeply into the overtly religious aspects of these and other such critiques of ontology. If the foregoing accounts have been necessarily brief (or perhaps: if the attempt to place two major philosophers, each of whom has been the subject of entire libraries of exegesis, into conversation within the confines of a single article has been ludicrously superficial...), then I can but encourage the critic to initiate further work. For in addition to placing in interreligious philosophical dialogue the Indian Buddhist and Continental Christianate critiques of ontology undertaken by Nāgārjuna and Heidegger, and thereby hopefully highlighting certain significant points of parallel among these nonetheless highly divergent thinkers, it has also been my aim in composing the foregoing to underline the need for much more (*much* more) fruitful work that could yet be done in placing these and many other philosophers both Eastern and Western (such as Vasubandhu, Bhāvaviveka, or Dharmakīrti... Derrida, Rorty, or Quine...) in dialogue.

In conclusion, then (or rather in lieu of conclusions), I would like to proffer this sample of interreligious philosophical dialogue as exemplifying a form of thinking undervalued in contemporary scholarship. For this article sits – admittedly and deliberately – uneasily within the academic disciplines with which it could most readily be identified: interreligious relations, (global) philosophy (of religion), and of course religious studies. Efforts to place the thoughts and thought-systems of diverse religious and philosophical traditions have been ongoing for a long time, much longer than the history of the academic study of religion. In the contemporary sphere, such efforts have thankfully gone well beyond the Orientalist project of subsuming one tradition in, or into, the terms of another... which is not to say Orientalism has been wholly dispensed with.⁵² In place of subsumption (perhaps Hegel would say *supersession*), however, much recent work has been consumed with an effort to *fuse* philosophies stemming from diverse thought traditions. Such “fusion philosophy”, as it has come to be called, is most closely associated with the work of Mark Siderits, a scholar of Buddhist and (or as) analytic philosophy, though it has seeped into, or overlaps with, nominally alternative approaches such as “cross-cultural philosophy”, “integrative philosophy” and, of course, even some forms of the historically much older enterprise of “comparative philosophy”.⁵³

Rather than attempting to “fuse” or “integrate” irreducibly varying traditions (or indeed certain critiques of ontology therein), I have preferred to take my methodological bearings from the “dialogical philosophy or imparative philosophy” espoused by Raimundo Panikkar.⁵⁴ Drawing on the etymological root of “imparative” from *imparare*, Panikkar develops his alternative approach according to which imparativists may “learn by being ready to undergo the different philosophical experiences of other people.”⁵⁵ Crucially, such imparative philosophy is “open to dialogical dialogue with other philosophical views, not only to dialectical confrontation

Parke (ed.), *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987; Reinhard May (ed.), *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East-Asian Influences on his Work*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1996; Lin Ma, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008; Bret W. Davis, Brian Schroeder, and Jason M. Wirth (eds.), *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011; Bret Davis, “Heidegger and Asian Philosophy,” in François Raffoul and Eric S. Nelson (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 459-71.

⁵² For my own recent critique of unacknowledged orientalist leftovers from the Buddhist context, see Rafal K. Stepień, “Orienting Reason: A Religious Critique of Philosophising Nāgārjuna,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86.4 (2018): 1072-106.

⁵³ Siderits' position on fusion philosophy has been elaborated in various publications starting with Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*, London: Ashgate, 2003. It has been adopted and adapted by numerous scholars, including in various ways and varying extents those associated with Jan Westerhoff, “The New Madhyamaka,” 2015, available at: <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/new-madhyamaka>. For ‘cross-cultural philosophy’, see Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002. For ‘integrative philosophy’, see Robert Cummings Neville, “Beyond Comparative to Integrative Philosophy,” *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophy* 2.1 (2002): 20-23 (which volume includes several other contributions to the ongoing debate as to the status and role of ‘comparative philosophy’). Finally, for a series of recent critiques and counter-critiques of Siderits' position, see Michael Levine, “Does Comparative Philosophy Have a Fusion Future?” *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies* 4, 2016; Michael Nylan and Martin Verhoeven, “Fusion, Comparative, ‘Constructive Engagement Comparative,’ Or What? Third Thoughts on Levine's Critique of Siderits,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 1 (2016): 119-26; Mark Siderits, “Response to Levine,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 1 (2016): 128-30.

⁵⁴ Raimundo Panikkar, “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” in Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch, (eds.), *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988: 116-36, 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

and rational dialogue...⁵⁶ or, for that matter, the problem-solving approach characteristic of fusion philosophy. The first criterion of “imparative philosophy” is therefore that in practicing it we should “be aware that most philosophies regard themselves as unique and often as ultimate. Thus we cannot justifiably compare, that is, bring together (*com*) on an equal (*par*) footing, that which purports to be unique and uncomparable.”⁵⁷ If such a stance applies to “most philosophies,” then it applies *a fortiori* to philosophies grounded in religious traditions: claimants to ultimacy if any there are among human intellectual systems. It is on this basis, then, that I leave the critiques I have adumbrated simply “in dialogue”, in lieu of “conclusions” that would inevitably foreclose philosophising with forced fusions, enact dialectical syntheses where there are to be found but critiques of theses themselves.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 128-29.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 127. In an earlier paper, Panikkar claims that “there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as Comparative Philosophy, and consequently Comparative Philosophy of Religion. The concept is inherently self-contradictory since philosophy claims to be ultimate in nature, yet for philosophy to be comparative there must be a neutral basis outside of the philosophies compared.” See Raimundo Panikkar, “Aporias in the Comparative Philosophy of Religion,” *Man and World* 13 (1980): 357-83, 357.

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About the Author

Rafal K. Stepien is a scholar of religion, philosophy, and literature. His research is inter-disciplinary, cross-regional, and poly-glottic, ranging among Buddhist and Islamic texts composed in Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian. He is primarily a specialist of Indian and Chinese Buddhist philosophy and literature, but cultivates a complementary interest in Arabic- and Persian-language Islamic philosophical and literary texts. He has published widely in these fields, including in the form of his recent edited book *Buddhist Literature as Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy as Literature* (SUNY 2020).

At Nanyang Technological University, Rafal is Assistant Professor in Comparative Religion within the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme (SRP) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). Previously, he was the inaugural Cihui Foundation Faculty Fellow in Chinese Buddhism at Columbia University, the inaugural Berggruen Research Fellow in Indian Philosophy at the University of Oxford, a Humboldt Research Fellow in Buddhist Studies at the Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University, and Assistant Professor of Asian Religions at Hampshire College.

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The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.



SRP Programme aims to study various models of how religious communities develop their teachings to meet the contemporary challenges of living in plural societies. It will also deepen the study of inter-religious relations, formulate models for the positive role of religions in peace-building and produce knowledge to strengthen social ties between communities. The Programme seeks to be at the forefront in the development of scholarship and applied knowledge on the roles of religion and inter-religious relations in plural societies today.

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