

CADUCITAS AND ŚŪNYATĀ: A NEOPLATONIST READING OF NĀGĀRJUNA

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper I am addressing the question whether Nāgārjuna's doctrine should be understood as a theory that describes reality itself (ontology) or as a theory of our relation to reality (epistemological, logical, psychological, etc.). To answer this question, I propose to compare Nāgārjuna's concept of emptiness to that of 'caducity', a key element in the ontology of Renaissance Neoplatonist philosopher Francisco Patrizi. By showing that these concepts are similar, I argue that Nāgārjuna's standpoint can be considered as that of ontology.*

Keywords: *Buddhism, comparative philosophy, Madhyamika, metaphysics, Nāgārjuna, Neoplatonism, ontology*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is something unusual about the contemporary debates around Nāgārjuna: Many of the questions around which they revolve do not concern, as one may expect, the internal consistency of Nāgārjuna's philosophy, but its general sense and the objects to which its conclusions apply. L. Stafford Betty pointed out this aspect in his famous article "Nāgārjuna's Masterpiece" some forty years ago:

But most of this discussion is between critics challenging *each other's* interpretation of Nagarjuna rather than Nagarjuna himself. And what challenges are aimed directly at him are mostly based on his *conclusions* – specifically, whether they are nihilistic or imply some kind of positive Absolute – and not on how he arrived at these conclusions. (Betty 1983, 123)

What has changed since then is that the choice between nihilism and a 'positive Absolute' has evolved into a choice of a higher level. It is not so much the negative or positive option in ontology (nihilism or absolutism) that stands in the foreground, but the choice between ontology, as a theory of being, and a higher-level criticism of our

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interaction with being (epistemology, logic, soteriology, psychology, etc.). Thus, the most fundamental question is not that of internal consistency: ‘What are the arguments in favor of Nāgārjuna’s position, and what are its fallacies?’, but: ‘Does Nāgārjuna argue that things as such are empty, or does he try, from a higher point of view, to dissociate the grasp of the mind from its supposed object?’ Simply put, does Nāgārjuna have an “ontological commitment”¹ or should his teaching be understood as an ontologically un(der)determined criticism of a higher type?

One way to answer this higher-order question is to look at an ontology that presents, at a certain level, structural similarities with Nāgārjuna’s doctrine, and that allows to put a common set of philosophical assumptions – regarding the categories in which the system unfolds, the reasoning, the language, etc. – into perspective. The idea behind this comparative approach is that, if we are in doubt about the systematic orientation of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, identifying structural similarities in other philosophies, of which we know what their implications and background are, can help us to find a more or less firm ground to rearticulate Nāgārjuna’s philosophy. My method in realizing this aim will be punctual, which means that I will not reconstruct an ontology in general notions and compare it to Nāgārjuna; what I intend to do is to look at one text passage in detail, identify the conceptual network implied in it, reconstruct this network, and show how its structures can be interpreted as mirroring the structures implied in Nāgārjuna.

The author to which I will resort is the Renaissance philosopher Francisco Patrizi, a Neoplatonist philosopher who played a major role in the revival of ancient metaphysics in 16th century Italy. I will choose a chapter from his main work in which the structure of being as being is discussed under the strong influence of the Neoplatonist fourfold gradation of being. In this text, the way Patrizi describes finite being appears strikingly close to the way Nāgārjuna establishes the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things. This description of finitude and its immediate correspondences in Nāgārjuna are the core of the argument by which I will suggest that, since both Nāgārjuna and Patrizi talk about similar things in similar terms, and since Patrizi represents ontology in the classical sense, there is at least one way in which Nāgārjuna can also be read as an exponent of ontology as ‘science of being as being’. This reading will observe the difference in ambition by which both systems are driven. Patrizi is, of course, a metaphysician; Nāgārjuna’s ultimate aim lies in the existential realization of ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*), which is liberation. Nevertheless, since this realization articulates itself in ontological categories, there is at least one sense in which Nāgārjuna can be read as a metaphysician, and in which, if the difference in goal is observed, the parallel can yield important philosophical insights.

As for the structure of this paper, I will proceed in three steps. First, a brief account of the ontologically undetermined position will be given. I will call this position ‘epistemological’ but include in it all positions that either minimize ontological implications or exclude them on the basis of the assumption that Nāgārjuna does not talk about things themselves, but of our habits of representing them (epistemological

¹ Tanaka 2009, 109 ; Cheng 1982, 8.

in the strict sense), structuring their representations (logical, semantic, conceptual), interacting with them (soteriological), accepting or refusing them (psychological) etc. In this first step, I will recur to some of the most popular interpretations of the four last decades and outline their basic implications.

In the second step, I will shift to a different cultural context and outline the ontology of Francesco Patrizi, with a special attention to his system of gradated being and the principle of ‘caducity’ (*caducitas*), which defines finite being. I will also briefly show how this classification is grounded in Neoplatonism (Plotinus, Proclus).

In a third step, I will isolate the concept of caducity and show in what way it can help us to understand Nāgārjuna’s concept of emptiness. In particular, I will analyze the sense of the concept in the concept of Neoplatonist ontology, the limits of the comparison, and in what way the concept can be used as a point of entry into a greater ontological reading of Nāgārjuna.

Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is neither comparative nor intercultural. My goal is not to demonstrate that there is a certain compatibility between Neoplatonism and Nāgārjuna. What I want to show is that the attempts to read Nāgārjuna from an ontologically underdetermined stance – with the idea that such a stance can guarantee philosophical neutrality or at least prevent the projection of the terminology of classical Western metaphysics into Mahāyāna – leads, if it is understood in an exclusive sense, to a distortion of Nāgārjuna’s teaching. This distorted Nāgārjuna, presenting himself as a philosopher of language who ultimately accepts the existence of the world and the validity of everyday experience, may appear closer to a vision of him that has become popular in Western readings, but such compatibility does not mean that we have found the ‘true’ Nāgārjuna.

2. THE DOMINANT TREND IN NĀGĀRJUNIAN STUDIES

The assumption that Nāgārjuna’s theory should not be read from the standpoint of ontology (or metaphysics in the broader sense of a theory about reality) is reflective of a contemporary tendency in Buddhist philosophy. Basic doctrinal elements such as the refusal of particular statements about the world, the soul etc. (the *avyākāṭāni*), the twelvefold chain of dependent arising etc. are being interpreted as disconnected from things themselves, or at least, as having a primarily subjective meaning.

Giuseppe Ferraro gives an example of this reading of Nāgārjuna and its projection back into Buddhism in his recent paper on the relation between Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. Ferraro straightforwardly states that Nāgārjuna’s point of view corresponds to “an ‘antimetaphysical’ stance already manifest in the Buddha’s word” (Ferraro 2020, 420). In a footnote, Ferraro refers, inter alia, to the *Kaccānagottasutta*, in which the Buddha dismisses the extremes of existence and nonexistence.² This reference is

² “A clear ‘antimetaphysical’ attitude can be detected in those canonical discourses in which the Buddha does not answer to metaphysical questions like the existence or non-existence of the self (see *Ānandasutta*, *Saṃyutta-nikāya* IV.10.419 or *Cūlamālunkya-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikāya* II.2.122–8), outlines the middle path between being and non-being (*Kaccānagotta-sutta*, *Saṃyutta-nikāya* II.1.15), exhorts his disciples to not grasp to his own teachings (for example, *Mahātaṇhasaṅkaya-sutta*, *Majjhima-nikāya*

meaningful insofar as it prefigures the dismissal of these extremes in Nāgārjuna. Nevertheless, there is a questionable side to this reasoning. If Ferraro draws on the *Kaccānagottasutta* as evidence for the Buddha's antimetaphysical stance to support his antimetaphysical reading of Nāgārjuna, his argument begs the question, and his conclusion rests on ill-founded presuppositions, viz. that Nāgārjuna is an antimetaphysician because the Buddha is, and the Buddha is because Nāgārjuna also is.

If the Buddhist standpoint is not metaphysics, what are we to do with doctrinal elements that imply objectivity – elements that appear as constant and invariable processes such as dependent origination? Eviatar Shulman answered this question in his paper on *pratītyasamutpāda*. He understands this concept as having the primary sense of “mental conditioning” and “dialectics of subjectivity”.³ Although Shulman allows “ontological implications” in dependent origination, he suggests that “we should be careful not to over-emphasize the point” and that “its true context is psychological”.⁴ This means that although dependent origination relies on the language of causality and implies realities that do not appear exclusively mind-related (*rūpa*, form; *bhava*, life/existence, etc.), we should understand this language not as describing realities outside of the mind, but as relating to the categories of our interaction with reality. On a positive side, this constitutes a strong argument for the necessity to understand the functioning of the mind before trying to understand the world – an idea central to all philosophical traditions. But it also forces us to dismiss the prospect of Buddhist metaphysics and, with it, a metaphysically coherent categorization of suprasensible entities such as *dhyānas* (that have the ambiguous status of extramental and intramental realities⁵). If we take objective categories to have subjective meaning, the question about the structure of reality vanishes.

Although Shulman does not go that far himself,⁶ it seems only natural to apply this subject-centered understanding of dependent origination to the doctrine of emptiness (in which dependent origination plays a major role) and to assume with Matilal – whom Shulman quotes – that Nāgārjuna has a “non-committal attitude in ontology”⁷. Nāgārjuna could, in his case for the emptiness of all things, be talking not about things themselves, but about the functioning of the mind and its representation of things. In this sense, his dialectics could reflect the dynamic of subjectivity, and not that of reality. I will now outline this point of view and different interpretations of Nāgārjuna that derive from it.

First, to understand the repudiation of ontology in Nāgārjuna, it is necessary to determine the two basic forms it can assume. Such repudiation can immediately follow

I.4.396–414), or simply gets rid of any *diṭṭhi* (*Brahmajāla-sutta*, *Dīgha-nikāya* I.1).” (Ferraro 2020, 420 n°55)

³ Shulman 2008, 315.

⁴ Shulman 2008, 309.

⁵ What Griffiths says of the four *ārūpyadhātu*-s, that they “are, in Buddhist thought, both cosmological spheres and altered states of consciousness” (Griffiths 1999, 17), applies to the *dhyāna*-s in a similar way.

⁶ In fact Shulman affirms that “Nāgārjuna’s denial of *svabhāva* is nothing less than an ontological theory” (Shulman 2012, 359)

⁷ Matilal 2005, 317, quoted at Shulman 2012, 358.

from the realization that nothing exists: if there is no existent thing, there can be no ontology. In that case, ontology should be rejected because its specific field of objects is null; but the root of the rejection is itself ontological insofar as it follows a reflection on the dynamics of being and rests on the assumption that being can be considered as such – which is the standpoint of ontology. On the other hand, the repudiation of ontology can also express an anterior philosophical decision, i.e. ‘I refuse to practice ontology because I don’t admit that the human mind can have any insight in the structure of being’ or, with specific respect to Nāgārjuna, ‘I refuse to think that the doctrine of emptiness concerns reality itself’. Although it is evident that Nāgārjuna’s doctrine does not culminate in a theory of reality, but in ultimate liberation (and since liberation is from finite reality, in a dissociation from that reality), this liberation articulates itself on the ground that finite reality is opposed to liberation; that is to say: liberation takes place through the overcoming of finite reality. In this case, one cannot simply disregard reality, or refuse to acknowledge the reasons why it is insufficient in terms of coherence and permanence (viz. why all things are empty of *svabhāva*); the will to liberate oneself be motivated by reasons why the normal state of existence is unalterably deficient.

While the first form of anti-ontologism can be considered an ontological gesture itself, the second form amounts to a straightforward, gratuitous rejection – a rejection that can be called “dogmatic” insofar as it precedes the confrontation with Nāgārjuna himself, and thus rests on the choice to transfer his arguments for the dismissal of substantiality to a metaphorical level, as if he was talking not about the lack of substance in things, but of our deficient representation of these things. Such rejection can be found, for example, in Streng’s interpretation of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, according to Mervyn Sprung:

Śūnyatā is not metaphysics, nor an object of cognition, it is an aid to the removal of human afflictions. The higher truth is not an absolute, it is a power aiding release from the need of an absolute. This emphasis on the soteriological purpose of Mādhyamika thought is, it seems to me, a move in the right direction; I can understand its purpose in no other way.⁸

The “other way” that Sprung cannot understand is that of philosophers like Karl Jaspers, who saw in the doctrine of emptiness a form of metaphysics culminating in transcendence.⁹ The basic opposition between Sprung and this view is that for Sprung, the doctrine of emptiness is not a theory of things but a theory of salvation that does not need to rely on metaphysics. It aims to free the mind from its “need of an absolute” and not to describe what the absolute is.

A similar point was made by Daye in his reconstruction of Mādhyamika. He says:

This reflexive third order concept of emptiness is derivative and logically dependent on the two concepts of dependent (or relational) origination and own-being. The Mula-Madhyamika Karikas holds that emptiness is a reflexive designation (*prajñapti*); it is a

⁸ Sprung 1979, 22.

⁹ This is how Liebenthal summarises Jasper’s interpretation, Liebenthal 1961, 15-17.

descriptive device which has no ontological import. In fact to reify emptiness is again to make a category mistake. Emptiness is a third order context-restricted term; emptiness denotes or designates nothing.¹⁰

Here Daye excludes that emptiness, as a concept, refers to any ‘thing’ whatsoever. Given that it has no object, it cannot constitute a basis for any object-relative theory. If then, we take ontology or metaphysics in the wider sense as such an object-relative theory – a theory of reality – we must conclude that Nāgārjuna’s standpoint is indeed anti-metaphysical.

These ‘epistemological’ interpretations of Nāgārjuna, that deny that emptiness has an objective scope of validity or implies the ‘Absolute’, and that locate it in the mind or other realms of subjectivity, can assume various other forms: emptiness can be interpreted as having a semantic¹¹, conceptualist¹², logic¹³, properly epistemological¹⁴ or soteriological¹⁵ meaning. In all these cases, emptiness does not determine the structure of reality but the structure of human interaction with reality. Thus, it cannot function as an element in any construction of metaphysical or ontological type.

The question arises why all these interpretations presuppose, under different perspectives and with different methodologies, the same basic assumptions. Why is Nāgārjuna participating in post-metaphysical discourse? – Andrew P. Tuck has addressed this question in his survey on the history of Nāgārjunian studies in the West. Although Tuck’s short monograph was published in 1990, its threefold classification of Western standpoints in the study of Nāgārjuna – idealist, analytic, anti-philosophical – still appears to be in accordance with more recent scholarship. One could add that what Tuck conceived as a history of interpretation revealed itself to be organic rather than successive, insofar as the “analytic turn in interpretation” (Tuck 1990, 28) was not simply superseded by later trends, but is still represented among the approaches to Mādhyamika (in the shape of e.g., logical interpretations such as dialetheist logic). From Tuck’s point of view, the development in Nāgārjunian scholarship mirrors the various shifts of paradigms in philosophy. His analysis makes it possible to understand why, to nineteenth century German philosophers, Nāgārjuna appeared as a metaphysician close to their own views, and why, to the analytic and empiricist, as well as to the “post-Wittgensteinian Asianists” (Tuck 1990, 77), Nāgārjuna also appeared as one of their own. As a further implication, Tuck’s analysis also suggests that the paradigm shifts in scholarship are not to be explained in terms of philosophical argumentation, but that they express intellectual and cultural changes on a greater scale. When Nāgārjuna is read in Anglo-Saxon postwar philosophy, the dynamics in the background of the reading are different from those who implied in early twentieth century Germany. This does not mean that appropriations of Nāgārjuna cannot be

¹⁰ Daye 1975, 92.

¹¹ Siderits 2003.

¹² Spackmann 2014.

¹³ Dialetheism, cf. Garfield & Priest 2003.

¹⁴ Kaluphana’s standpoint has been described as “empiricist positivism” (Mayer 2009, 192).

¹⁵ See above, Sprung 1979, 22.

discussed beyond their cultural horizon, but it means that the unawareness of that context can lead to the danger of parochial views and misappropriations of Nāgārjuna.

Revisiting Tuck's conclusions lies beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, two points of methodological relevance can be added to his conclusions. First, although Tuck's plea for the historical and cultural relativization of Nāgārjuna-interpretations is, in one respect, conclusive, it should nevertheless not be forgotten that Nāgārjuna belongs to Indian antiquity, that his background is religious, and that there are many other aspects to his work and person that connect him to a certain world and period of time. In this sense, the decision to read Nāgārjuna in the light of Brahmanic idealism, theology, and the ancient world etc. cannot be dismissed on the ground of the assumption that these worldviews have become alien to contemporary minds. Tuck's 'relativism' (although he rejects this label) must be mitigated in this sense that certain interpretations are, by virtue of their historical and cultural accuracy, closer to Nāgārjuna than others. Second, while it is evident that the only solution to the problem – which is, in fact, not so much of salutation than a makeshift – is to remain "self-conscious" about "all professional, cultural, and psychological determinants" (Tuck 1990, 96), one can use this invitation to at least temper claims to objective validity. To say, with Daye, that emptiness "has no ontological import" means that emptiness is bereft of a meaning that it could, potentially, imply. Thus, the right handling of the interpretational problem would be to avoid claiming that one has found the "true" Nāgārjuna, and to manifest enough "intellectual license" (Tuck 1990, 97) to challenge the most common interpretations – which is what the present paper aims to do.

To summarize thus far: There is a debate around the general sense of Nāgārjuna's theory, according to which the import of emptiness lies either in the description of subjectivity, or in a theory about reality. We have now seen that, corresponding to a similar position held in the study of some general features of Buddhism (dependent arising etc.), there is a tendency, in the study of Nāgārjuna, to constrain emptiness dialectics to the relation to being, and thus, to the subject that faces being. As subjects, we are unable to go beyond the network of dependently arisen phenomena and our knowledge is bound to this network. In the end, Nāgārjuna says nothing about the world itself, but only about our misaligned access to it.

3. FRANCESCO PATRIZI'S NEOPLATONIST ONTOLOGY

From the standpoint of Buddhist anti-metaphysics, the Renaissance Neoplatonist philosopher Francesco Patrizi appears as the very example of a metaphysician who has entangled in the snares of mental self-affliction. He presumes to establish a comprehensive system of the cosmos and seeks answers to the questions Ferraro's Buddha has discarded, such as the eternity of the world and the survival of the soul.

Nevertheless, one concept in Patrizi's main work, the *New Philosophy of All Things* (*Nova de universis philosophia*¹⁶), stands out as particularly relevant to the question of

¹⁶ Since no recent edition is available, I will be referring to the edition of 1591. In the references I indicate the book (lib.), the folium (fol.r or v) and the column.

Nāgārjuna's philosophy. With Nāgārjuna, the question that arose was: Is there an ontological commitment to the philosophy of emptiness? To define a method that allows an answer to this question, I announced that I would resort to an intercultural perspective. Accordingly, I will now take a closer look at a specific concept in the *New Philosophy* whose explanative value reveals a certain parallelism with Nāgārjunian emptiness. Since this concept has, on one hand, its roots in Neoplatonist ontology, but can, on the other hand, as I will show, be put in relation to emptiness, it seems impossible to dismiss ontological readings of Nāgārjuna or even to privilege epistemological readings on the ground of the assumption that Buddhism and the doctrine of emptiness are incommensurable with Western metaphysics. Or, to put it differently: By taking up the example of an ontological concept in the West, and by showing that a concept in Nāgārjuna can be likened to it, I hope to show that the correspondence thus established can serve as a starting point to elaborate a more nuanced picture of Nāgārjuna's philosophy as a whole.

Before I give an outline of this concept and its similarity to emptiness, I will briefly delineate the structure and aim of the *New Philosophy*.

Patrizi's project is to erect a metaphysical system that accounts for the first principles, the structure, and the dynamic of the world as the realm of being. The literary structure of *New Philosophy* itself is fourfold. It starts with an analysis of light as the governing principle of the universe, a traditionally Neoplatonist topic (see the idea of Light, ἀνγή and φῶς, in Plotinus; e.g., Enn. VI, 7, 37, 21-27; also *Lichtmetaphysik der Griechen*, Beierwaltes 1957). In the second part, Patrizi discusses the classical problem of the first principles, i.e., the question what the ground of being is, a topic of primary interest since antiquity (Origen and Damascius wrote treatises 'On the [First] Principles' περὶ [τῶν πρώτων] ἀρχῶν). The third part deals with the cosmic soul/psyche, and the last part with the cosmic order, from a metaphysical and natural perspective.

Elaborating the philosophical system of Patrizi in a comprehensive way is a task not solely beyond the scope of this paper, but also a task that research has only started to embrace quite recently.¹⁷ While recent scholarship has addressed Patrizi's position in Renaissance philosophy (Nejeschleba & Blum 2014), his interpretation of Plato and Proclus (Leinkauf 2010 & 2014), his contribution to music theory (Prins 2014), philosophy of nature and poetics (Akopyan 2019), a full understanding of his metaphysics and their historical sources still requires from the reader to delve into the mostly unedited primary texts. A few articles (such as Deitz 1999) broach the general structure of Patrizi's metaphysics, but e.g., on the specific question of the Neoplatonist fourfold ontological gradation and its influence on Patrizi's terminology, it will still be necessary to confront Patrizi himself. The idea that I will be isolating will thus have to stand by itself and lack the greater context of scholarly appreciation, which has, by contrast, been given to Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, and other Renaissance

¹⁷ See e.g. Schiffler 1996, Ryan 2002, Deitz 1996, 1999 and 2006. The greatest lack is that of a comprehensive synthesis that sheds light both on Patrizi's sources and the structure of his system. Deitz 1999 discusses Patrizi's ontology and mentions Proclus as well as absolute being and non-being (141, 153s.), but he does not reflect the Neoplatonist fourfold scheme.

thinkers. Nevertheless, since it is evident that Plato and, as the main sources, Plotinus and Proclus stand at the origin of the fourfold gradation, it will be possible to contrast Patrizi's own version with these sources at least.

In tracing back Patrizi to his roots in ancient Neoplatonism, I follow Thomas Leinkauf's recent publication on this question (Leinkauf 2014, 380f.):

His actual reference point in ancient thought [...] is Platonic philosophy and especially Neoplatonic thought. Even more specifically, and equally in the singular knowledge of the texts as well as in the hermeneutical depth of penetration, this reference point is the complicated theoretical configuration of the late Neoplatonists: Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius.

Leinkauf shows, in great detail and with a solid grounding in Neoplatonic studies (Beierwaltes, Halfwassen, Dodds), how Patrizi conceives the relation between the first principle and the cosmic order (Leinkauf 2014, 392-398). This principle, the "One", acts as a support for finite beings, and can thus be negatively related to Nāgārjunian emptiness, insofar it serves as the primary *svabhāva* through which all other beings can exist as derived *svabhāva*. But before developing the parallel, let us first have a look at Patrizi's text.

In his 13th treatise¹⁸ on "being and essence" (*esse et essentia*), Patrizi discusses the concepts of substance, essence, Being in the two senses of *ens* and *esse*, and nothingness. Among these concepts, 'Being' in the sense of *ens* will stand at the center of our interest. The general concept of Being allows the further distinctions of eternal and perishable Being, the first one comprising things such as ideal Forms, which are invisible and indestructible realities, and the second one comprising corporeal and visible reality. But before discussing the relations between these concepts, it is necessary to adduce some basic clarifications on the choice of this chapter and its importance for the understanding of emptiness.

First, it should be noted that the 13th chapter is not to be read under the assumption that the ontology it expresses is innovative in its basic tenets, or that its content has a purely informative aim. In fact, Patrizi's Neoplatonist ontology is essentially determined by its opposition to Aristotelean ontology, and should be read as a polemicizing revitalization of Neoplatonism against the prevalence of Aristotelean metaphysics in earlier Christian philosophy. In the 13th chapter, this opposition manifests itself through a) Patrizi's way of redefining the classical terminological network of οὐσία, ὑπόστασις, *substantia*, *essentia*, against the traditional understanding; b) his appeal to the Platonic „simple forms“ (*formæ simplices*¹⁹) and the One against the Aristotelean restriction of the highest realities to the supercelestial spheres; c) his emanationist understanding of the cosmic order, in which Being is a product of the One.²⁰ Trying to understand the structure of Patrizi's ontology is thus a task that must,

¹⁸ Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 28^b.

¹⁹ Patrizi 1591, lib. 13 fol. 29^a.

²⁰ Cf. Patrizi 1591, lib. 13 fol. 29^a.

if the aim is non-polemical and non-oppositional, be detached from the function of the chapter in the context of Patrizi's anti-Aristotelianism.

Second, while isolating one of the levels of Patrizi's gradation model is philosophically possible (since this model reflects an older tradition), this move does not immediately follow the dynamics of the 13th chapter. In this chapter, the existence of eternal substances (*substantiæ non corruptibiles*) is induced from the givenness of perishable substances (*substantiæ corruptibiles*).²¹ It is evident that these perishable substances do not stand at the center of Patrizi's interest, and it would be misleading to consider them as essentially relevant to the main question. Why should they, in that case, be considered separately?

This leads over to the third remark. The reason why Patrizi's description of perishable beings can help us to interpret Nāgārjuna is that a) these beings appear as a middle realm between Being (*verum ens, bhāva*) and Non-Being (*vere non ens, abhāva*) in the same way as *śūnyatā* is identical to neither of these extremes, following the logic of the *caṭuṣkoṭi*; b) terminologically, the notion of *caducitas* around which the description revolves can serve as an appropriate translation of *śūnyatā*, as we shall see later on; c) through the identification of structural and terminological correspondences, a new possibility arises to interpret the doctrine of emptiness without downgrading its references to Being and Non-Being to mere word-plays or paradoxes, i.e. by reading it as a coherent philosophy with ontological groundwork. I will now go over to establish these reasons by interpreting selected passages from Patrizi's 13th chapter.

In this chapter, Patrizi lays out an ontological scheme in which a certain *mode* of Being is ascribed to the different types of beings that can be found in the universe, visible and invisible:

the eternal things are “truly Being” (*vere ens*),
nothingness is “truly Non-Being” (*vere non ens*),
and in between these two stand the perishable things as “not truly Being” (*non vere ens*).

When Patrizi further establishes that the perishable beings “depend on the eternal ones as their root”²² (which he does to prove the necessity of admitting the existence of these eternal beings), he calls the perishable beings “caducous” (*caduca*). *Caducitas* is the property of that which is “*inclined or ready to fall*” (Charles & Marchant 1927, 76; from *cado*, “to fall”), or, more abstractly, it is Being with a tendency to nothingness. Caducity is thus a mode of “not truly Being”; it is the mode by which the unstable things of our world, that are subject to origination and perishing, exist.

What kind of ontological model are we facing when we look at Patrizi's hierarchy of Being? It is the Platonic and Plotinian model of three- or fourfold being, structured by the realization of what can be called substantial autonomy, that is, by the ability to exist by one's own means. Thus, what is “truly Being” is inalterable and free from accidents, it is substance; what is caducous or “not truly Being” has a middle position

²¹ Cf. Patrizi 1591, lib. 13 fol. 28^va.

²² *Et caduca ab aeternis, veluti a sua radice pendeant.* (Patrizi 1591, lib. 13 fol. 28^va.)

between substance and nothingness, it exists, but it is subject to causation and destruction; what is “truly Non-Being” is primarily matter, i.e. that which is nothing by itself.

This ontological model has its roots in Plato’s juxtaposition of the noetic realm, which is “that which truly is” (ὃ ἐστὶν ὄν ὄντως Phaed. 247e), with the sensible realm, i.e. “that which is less” (τοῦ ἥττον [...] ὄντος Resp. 585b). Plato also recurs to the notions of truly and not truly Being in the *Sophistes* (238c, 240b) where he describes the relation between an image and its model, which shows that the vocabulary of gradated being is not specific to cosmology but falls in the general categories of ontology, i.e., of Being as such. In terms of ontology, the climax of speculation around the notions of Being and Non-Being is represented by the *Parmenides*, where this dichotomy structures the hypotheses of the One.

The philosophical offspring of this model in later antiquity is so complex that it is impossible to engage with it in a paper that aims at a different question, which is why I am restraining myself to giving a few explanations on how it made its way to Patrizi.

Later Neoplatonism²³ admitted a more complex form of the model, that comprises not three but four terms. One famous example of this model can be found in Proclus’s commentary on *Tim.* 27d: “This is way some of the ancient [philosophers] designated the noetic realm as ‘truly Being, the psychic realm as ‘not truly Being’, the sensible realm as ‘not truly Non-Being’ and matter as ‘truly Non-Being’”²⁴. While this statement is made by Proclus primarily with regard to the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, other reconstructions of the same model also played an important part in the Middle and Neoplatonist debates around the structure of the *Parmenides*. Here the gradated model of Being served as a founding to understand what the ontological status of the different forms of the One is.²⁵

While it is also attested in Marius Victorinus, the Chaldean Oracles etc., its presence in Patrizi can be explained by two factors: Patrizi’s translation of Proclus, and Marsilio Ficino’s commentary on Plotinus, in which Ficino reformulates the doctrine of evil presented in *Enn.* I, 8, 3. In this chapter that deals with evil, Plotinus refers to the grades of:

“that which is beyond Being” (τὸ ἐπέκεινα τῶν ὄντων),
 “Being” (τὰ ὄντα),
 “Non-Being” (τὸ μὴ ὄν)
 “and complete Non-Being” (τὸ παντελῶς μὴ ὄν).

In his commentary, Ficino transposes this division to:

²³ Kohnke discusses Proclus in particular but dates the roots of the model to Marius Victorinus, cf. Kohnke 1957, pp. 32-40.

²⁴ διὸ καὶ τῶν παλαιῶν τινες ὄντως μὲν ὄν καλοῦσι τὸ νοητὸν πλάτος, οὐκ ὄντως δὲ ὄν τὸ ψυχικόν, οὐκ ὄντως δὲ οὐκ ὄν τὸ αἰσθητόν. ὄντως δὲ οὐκ ὄν τὴν ὕλην (in *Tim.* ed. Diehls 1903, 233).

²⁵ E.g. in Moderatus: Hubler 2010. In the same book, John D. Turner also makes some precise observations about the model, Turner 2010, 156, especially footnote 79 with the reference to Hadot’s extensive work.

“that which is above Being” (*quid super ens*),
 “true Being” (*ens verum*),
 “not true Being” (*non verum ens*),
 “true Non-Being” (*verum non ens*),

and adds a further subdivision of Non-being into

“complete Non-Being, which is nothingness” (*omnino non ens, id est nihilum*),
 “truly Non-Being, which is the primary matter of the world” (*vere non ens, id est materiam mundi primam*) and
 “not truly Being, which is the form that pervades matter and the caducous composite” (*non vere ens, id est formam materiae inhaerentem compositumque caducum*) (Ficino 2021, 182-184).

The localization of the caducous things on the level of “not truly Being” is parallel to Patrizi’s model, and while the structural parallelism can be explained by the common appeal of both authors to Plotinian and Proclean ontology, the mentioning of ontological “caducity” substantiates the hypothesis that Patrizi has drawn his inspiration in this specific conceptual and terminological respect from Ficino.

The question arises what the specificity of Patrizi’s excursus on this question is. The answer lies in the elaborate way in which Patrizi describes ontological caducity as a sort of poise between absolute Being and absolute Non-Being. While in most reconstructions of Plato’s model, the emphasis lies on the symmetry and exclusivity of the four positions, we find in Patrizi an ingenious description of the uncertainty of finite being, that is, of the unstableness of caducous things:

It is as if they [the caducous essences] had fallen from true Being, and if, fading away into nothingness, they vanished completely, or if they had almost entered nothingness and held a middle position between true Being and Non-Being (or nothingness). For as long as they exist and possess existence, they resemble Being. When they have undergone destruction, they either completely vanish into nothingness, or hide themselves in its womb, so as to appear absorbed in it. And when they have ceased being, they become non-beings. But while they appear as beings, they are in reality non-being beings. All that is not truly Being, ‘is’ not truly. As long as it is, it seems to be ‘Being’. And as it ‘is’ not truly, it cannot be truly said that it is. Therefore, it is non-being Being. They [these essences] are the middle between truly Being and truly Non-Being, that is: ‘nothingnesses’. Those [that truly are,] are truly beings and should be called so; it is never false to say that they are beings, and it is always true to say that they are beings. This applies to the caducous things only in the most diminished way. Before they have arisen, it is false to say that they are beings. And after they have perished, it is false to say that they are beings. Henceforth, the caducous things are not true essences, nor true substances, nor true beings. They have fallen from the true things and are interposed between the true things and nothingness.²⁶

²⁶ *Et quasi ab ente vero abscissæ, et recisæ in nihilum fere abierunt, aut ad ipsum accesserunt prope, et medio quodam loco, inter ens verum, et non ens, seu nihilum constiterunt. Namque dum existunt, et*

In this difficult passage, Patrizi shows with an unusual discursive audacity how caducous things can be reduced neither to Being nor to non-Being: they are the state of being non-Being, where being is only an appearance, but where the appearance is still sufficiently stable to prevent identification with pure nothingness. Thus, the realm of caducity is ontologically undecidable: it is Non-Being, thereby being neither Non-Being itself, nor Being.

A further difficulty is that Patrizi does not make any attempt to situate his own ternary model in the greater context of the Neoplatonist gradational system. He does define what “true beings” are: they are “those [beings] that are what they are with reference to themselves and not to something else; and they consist in themselves; and they are simply essences.”²⁷ It is evident that the only entities that match these ontological criteria are the Platonic ideas, which are “simple forms, not in need of any subject, consisting in themselves, remaining in themselves, having their substance in themselves, abiding in themselves”²⁸. Furthermore, it seems evident that the caducous things consist, by opposition to the eternal things, in finite entities, i.e., in entities whose subsistence is not ideal but composed of form and matter. Patrizi’s realm of “non truly Being” thus corresponds to the visible world (κόσμος αἰσθητός) in the Platonic sense. But while this repartition seems legitimate, it does not resolve the problem of the missing fourth element: that of “the psychic realm” (τὸ ψυχικόν). The fact that Patrizi does not elaborate the gradation could be explained by the aim of the 13th chapter, which is to expose the flaws of the Aristotelean conception of substance as composed of matter of form. In this respect, it seems evident that the focus can lie only on those composites and the true eternal things, while the distinction between of the middle realm and that of nothingness has no immediate relevance for the question.

I am briefly summarizing what should be retained from Patrizi’s ontology as presented in the 13th chapter of *Panarchia*. – There are three ontological realms: genuine Being (truly Being), caducity (not truly Being) and nothingness (truly Non-Being). Genuine Being is self-containing and self-substantiating; caducity is a middle realm between Being and nothingness or Being with a tendency to nothingness; nothingness itself is complete Non-Being. This ontological gradation does not apply to

hyparxin habent, enti sunt similes. Postquam vero corruptionem subierunt, vel in nihilum abierunt penitus, vel ita se se intra sinum eius abdiderunt, ut credantur in nihilum esse redactæ. Itaque postquam esse desierunt, non entia sunt facta. Dum vero entia apparebant, entia non entia vere erant. Omne enim id, quod non vere est ens, vere non est. Dumque est, ens esse videtur. Et quia vere non est, ens dici vere non potest. Est ergo ens non ens. Medium itaque inter vere entia, et vere non entia, hoc est nihila. Illa vero vere entia, et sunt, et dici debent, de quibus numquam falsum fuerit dicere, ea entia esse, et de quibus semper verum fuerit dicere, entia esse. Quod caducis minime contingit. De quibus antequam orientur falsum erit dicere, esse entia. Et postquam interierint, falsum erit dicere esse entia. Igitur caducæ res, nec veræ essentiæ, nec veræ substantiæ, nec vera entia sunt. Sed a veris deciduæ, et inter veras, et nihilum interpositæ. (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 28^a.)

²⁷ [E]a, quæ id ipsum, quod sunt, sui sunt, et non alterius. Et quæ in se consistunt. Et quæ simpliciter sint essentiæ. (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 28^vb-29^a)

²⁸ formæ simplices, nullo egentes subiecto, in se consistentes, in se stantes, et in se substantes, et in se constantes (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 29^a).

the same things under different aspects, but it describes the different realities according to their inherent structure and principles.

4. A NEOPLATONIST READING OF NĀGĀRJUNA

Let us now go back to Nāgārjuna and see in what way Patrizi's ontology can help us understand what the senses and fields of application of "emptiness" is. I will discuss this question with specific respect to the two options mentioned at the beginning: the sense of emptiness is either to criticize the misinterpretation of mental representation as the substance of things (epistemological reading) or to describe the structure of reality (ontological interpretation). To do so, I will proceed in two steps: First, I will cursively read a few selected verses from Nāgārjuna's MMK to show in what way a parallel structure can be identified; second, I will show in what way this parallel is not diminished by the contradictions between Patrizi's and Nāgārjuna's philosophical background, but confirmed in its affiliation to a general ontological domain.

It is clear from what has been said that the pivotal Mādhyamika concepts *śūnyatā*, *svabhāva* and *abhāva* (these two representing the extremes of eternalism and nihilism) correspond, in a surprising way, to Patrizi's Neoplatonist ontological categories: *svabhāva* as that which subsists independently (not by virtue of something else, *non alterius*) is 'true Being', *abhāva* is 'true Non-Being' and *śūnyatā* is 'caducity' as the realm of nothingness appearing as something. If we look e.g., at the chapter on *svabhāva* in Nāgārjuna's MMK, we can see how its conceptual structure points to the Neoplatonist ontology. In MMK 15,3, Nāgārjuna asks: "How can there be other-Being when the *svabhāva* is non-existent?"²⁹ The thought behind this rhetorical question is that, if we try to justify the existence of a thing by referring to its conditions, the conditions will suffer from the same deficiency, i.e., they will also be lacking *svabhāva* and be ontologically instable. While Nāgārjuna accepts the deficiency, Patrizi posits, on the in the same line of thought, but on the opposite end, the Neoplatonist idea of a "universal principle"³⁰ constituted by "the One itself", "from which every existence proceeds"³¹. The One is the superior ground of Being, the primary "existence in itself and by itself"³² from which all other existence – the other-Being (*parabhāva*) – derives. Nāgārjuna further says that "it is not possible for a *svabhāva* to come about from causes and conditions"³³ – and that is precisely what defines the One: it is what it is "in and by itself" (*in se, et per se*). Accordingly, with Nāgārjuna, the dependently arisen things are "neither terminated nor eternal"³⁴, since their dependence on causes on conditions prevents them both from being eternal and from being destroyed (since other things, that could destroy them, do not exist). This corresponds, in Patrizi's words, to the

²⁹ *kutaḥ svabhāvasyābhāve parabhāvo bhaviṣyati*, MMK XV,3.

³⁰ *omnium principium* (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 29^a).

³¹ *ipsum unum [...] a quo omnis hyparxis prodiit* (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 29^a).

³² *hyparxis in se, et per se [...] a quo omnis hyparxis prodiit* (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 29^a).

³³ *na saṃbhavaḥ svabhāvasya yuktaḥ pratyayahetubhiḥ*, MMK XV,1.

³⁴ *tasmān nocchinnaṃ nāpi śāśvatam*, MMK XVIII,10.

position of the caducous things “between true Being and Non-Being”³⁵, in the realm between eternal entities and nothingness, where they stand as “non-being Being” (*ens non ens*).

Among these different layers of correspondence, it is particularly the *śūnyatā-caducitas* parallel that functions as a relaying element. Empty/caducous things are emulations of Being, i.e. appearances with a semblance of ontological consistency, that cannot withstand verification and thus reveal their tendency to nothingness. They are neither Being nor Non-Being. The reason of their deficiency is their finite constitution: Their existence is not self-grounded. Both emptiness and caducity describe this lack of consistency, either as being unsubstantially “inflated” (*śūnyatā*) or as “falling” into nothingness (*caducitas*). In this sense, the concepts are parallel with regard to their function, their position in the system, and their metaphysical nature; and on that ground, Nāgārjuna can be read as a metaphysician in the same way as Patrizi is.

This cursory reading shows in what way an metaphysical reading Nāgārjuna can be practiced, and for what reasons one can draw on Neoplatonist ontology to corroborate that reading. But it furthermore suggests two things that should be kept in mind to understand the relevance of the parallel.

First, the parallel is not an extrinsic paradigm forced onto the doctrine of emptiness; it reflects latent possibilities that are contained in the doctrine itself. In this sense, it presents itself as a meaningful new access to a coherent representation of what Nāgārjuna’s position is.

Second, and most importantly, it is essential to appreciate both the conceptual parallels and the contradictions between the Buddhist and Neoplatonist dynamics, and to understand why these contradictions do not affect the parallel itself. While it is true that there is a direct correspondence between the two sets of categories, they seem incompatible on the level of the assumptions they presuppose and their consequences. That is to say, they are parallel insofar as they describe the same modes of Being, but they are fundamentally different in that they do not allow the same modes of Being to be actually given. On Nāgārjuna’s side, the concept of self-substantiating Being is introduced solely to explain why things fall short of genuine Being. In the end, “the beings that lack *svabhāva* have no being-ness”³⁶. *Svabhāva* does not refer to a type of Being that can possibly exist. It expresses the mere failure of subsistence under the conditions that it defines. A being cannot exist by itself, given that all that exists, either in the mind or the world, is a result of causes and conditions, in one of the four senses that Nāgārjuna retains in MMK 1,4.

The situation is fundamentally different in Neoplatonism: Here the emphasis lies on the eminence of ideal and genuine Being, while the lower ontological realms exist only as dilutions of that Being. In Patrizi’s text, the presence of caducity is so notable because of its existential resonance, but it is only a middle realm between original true Being and nothingness.

³⁵ *inter ens verum et non ens* (Patrizi 1591, lib. 3 fol. 28^va).

³⁶ *bhāvānām niḥsvabhāvānām na sattā vidyate*, MMK I,10.

The same contradiction applies to *abhāva* and nothingness. Nāgārjuna rejects it on the same grounds than he rejects Being: “there is neither Being nor Non-Being”³⁷. The emptiness of all things is not identical with immediate non-existence or nothingness. It is constituted by dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and forms a principle of ontological instability. While all things fall under this principle, they are deprived of their identity – their nature or “thingness” – but they are not equivalent to Non-Being. One could say that they are pending between existence and nothingness, but they are not further away from existence than from nothingness. Nothingness has the same function in Nāgārjuna than *svabhāva*: together, they constitute the frame of the only “thing” that can realistically be admitted, that is, emptiness.

In Neoplatonism, nothingness is matter, in opposition to form. It is pure potentiality and supports material forms in the realm of caducous things. Seeing that it has a positive function, it cannot be reduced to Nāgārjunian *abhāva*, which is just as absurd and unconceivable as *bhāva*.

Nevertheless, the contradiction holds true only as long as the immanent view of the system is not distinguished from its general form. Nāgārjuna rejects all positive and negative extremes, both genuine Being and nothingness, and he admits only emptiness as the middle way between these extremes. On the other side, Patrizi admits all three realms as meaningful states of Being. This contradiction presents itself as a conflict in the ideological framework (Buddhist impermanence and Aristotelean substantiality, οὐσία) of both philosophies. But the point that should be observed is that this conflict does not lead to the disintegration of the structural correspondences in which it articulates itself. In fact, both theories describe the structure and principles of Being itself. For Patrizi, being is threefold: ideal Being, finite Being and Non-Being. The focus lies, of course, on ideal Being, since in ancient metaphysics, the main point of interest are the general principles of substance or Being. For Nāgārjuna, Being is one-fold, suspended between the impossibility of self-substantiating Being and nothingness, as a “mean between the positive and the negative, or Being and Non-Being” (Raju 1954, 702). Although in one model, all modes of Being are admitted as given, and in the other model, there is nothing else than finitude, both models participate in an ontological discourse that has to be considered in its own value.

A parallel phenomenon can help to understand the sense of this assumption. Classical Neoplatonism, particularly Plotinus, rejects the idea that the world has a starting point in time, and finds the concept of a creator (apart from the relative notion of creation present in Plato’s *Timaeus*) absurd. On the other hand, Neoplatonist Christian philosophers, as e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius, fully embrace the idea that the world has a beginning and that it was created. Here, neither the theological assumptions on the Christian side, nor the Plotinian handling of the basic categories of time and causality can cast any doubt on the affiliation of both models: They are two examples of philosophical cosmology, each driven by its own goals and assumptions; but the problems in which these goals and assumptions are reflected share the common ground of cosmology. In a similar way, Nāgārjuna’s and Francesco Patrizi’s reflections of the

³⁷ *na bhāvo nābhāvo*, MMK V,7.

mode of being differ in their orientation towards liberation (Nāgārjuna) and anti-Aristotelean polemics (Patrizi); but the philosophical considerations by which these orientations are supported can be referred to the same domain, which is the question of Being.

This takes us back to the initial question of the general sense of Nāgārjuna's doctrine. It is now clear that the problem of ontological commitment ought, in the light of the parallelism with Neoplatonism, be reconsidered.

With Francesco Patrizi, it is evident that there is not only an ontological commitment, but that the question is that of ontology itself: What is Being *as* Being? How can Being be characterized with relation to its immanent principles? What are its primary divisions? It should be evident by now that these questions cannot simply be turned down on the ground of emptiness, or at least, that they cannot be dismissed as meaningless. The standpoint on which Nāgārjuna stands has implications for the way we think of Being, and it can, in that respect, be called ontological; and, while the results of that ontology are incompatible with Greek, Western medieval or even Renaissance ontologies – given that, with few exceptions, none of these systems would argue that nothing whatsoever is real –, the assumption that something can be said about Being in the most general sense holds true on both sides.

If then, there is not only an ontological commitment, but if the doctrine of emptiness as a whole can be understood as ontologically grounded – as a system of the principles of Being –, the attempts to give a one-sided anti-metaphysical representation of Nāgārjuna cannot be deemed appropriate. Even if such attempts are made with hermeneutical caution – for example, because certain terms or structures may appear untranslatable with regard to the concepts of Western metaphysics –, they cannot exclude or deny the common ground on which Nāgārjuna and classical metaphysics stand.

Jan Westerhoff gave a good example of such – carefully founded – caution in his analysis of *svabhāva*. Although he agrees that there are several meanings to *svabhāva* that allow ontological interpretations (he calls them “essence-*svabhāva*”, “substance-*svabhāva*”, etc.), he remarks

that the concept of *svabhāva* does not have any straightforward equivalent among the concepts discussed in the history of Western philosophy. This is not to say that it is a fundamentally alien concept, but merely that it combines a number of features which we do not see thus combined in the Western context. (Westerhoff 2007, 18)

Westerhoff's doubt that the term may not have any Western correspondent is justified insofar as no such correspondent has been identified.³⁸ But one step further

³⁸ One thing that can be noted here is that, on the ground of etymology, a corresponding term can be found: *sva* is related to *ἔ* and *σφέ* (Pokorny 1959, 882) and *bhū* to the verb *φύω* (Pokorny 1959, 146). If *ἔ/σφέ* is rendered, as a prefix, by *αὐτο-*, the whole compound can be translated as *αὐτόφωτος*, i.e. ‘that which has grown or sprung from itself’. Although it would be exaggerated to claim that this term was of common usage in antiquity, it can be found in a philosophical sense in e.g., Nonnus of Panopolis (Ypsilanti & Franco 2020, 272), where it designates the metaphysical status of the divine person of the

can be taken, and the question be raised: Why is there no such equivalent? The reason is not that there are no structural equivalents, since ontologies such as the Neoplatonist or Aristotelean contain similar ideas of ontological independence and self-grounded substance. What makes *svabhāva* difficult to translate is that its systematic framework has no equivalent in classical Western metaphysics. That is to say: there are no metaphysics of emptiness in the West, and, consequently, there is no theoretical framework for a concept that expresses the utter impossibility of self-grounded existence. Any loosely corresponding concept will manifest a background that contradicts Nāgārjuna's doctrine. ('Aseity' for example will be close to *svabhāva*, but it will be accompanied by a fundamentally different resonance, coming from medieval theology.)

Nevertheless, this hermeneutical problem should not, as suggested, be considered definitive. While it is true that *svabhāva* does not correspond in all respects to truly Being (*vere ens*), due to *svabhāva* being per se impossible, Patrizi's concept of caducity can structurally, functionally and terminologically be related to emptiness. In the same way as Patrizi calls the finite, visible world caducous, Nāgārjuna's final claim that "all things are empty"³⁹ can be interpreted as metaphysics of finitude that describe what is the case in the world: 'All things are neither Being nor Non-Being, but the middle position of apparent Being on the verge of nothingness'.

This suggestion allows us to understand why certain attempts to relocate Nāgārjuna in the context of contemporary philosophy cannot but miss the dynamics inherent to *śūnyavāda*. The Cowherds collective announce their project of reconsidering Nāgārjuna in the following way:

Are we doing real Buddhist studies when we deploy ideas and techniques from contemporary analytic philosophy to address questions arising from seventh-century Indian debates as adumbrated in fifteenth-century Tibet? We think so. And we think that Buddhist philosophy has much to contribute to twenty-first-century Western philosophy. (Cowherds 2011, vii)

It seems bold to advertise the deployment of analytic philosophy in Buddhist studies when the presence of analytic philosophy in the study of Buddhism has remained, until now, unquestioned as a phenomenon and unascertained by philosophical research. Before such deployment can take place, the question should be raised what its legitimacy is, apart from being one possible and tentative approach. These problems are not at all circumstantial or negligible, because they essentially affect our image of Nāgārjuna. If we start with the premise that Nāgārjuna's references are the Kantian standpoint of the inaccessibility of what lies beyond conceptually imparted sense-data and Wittgenstein's early project of dissipating language-created

Father. In this function, it is "straightforward" both with regard to etymology and meaning. *αὐτοφύης* is another synonym, that can be found e.g., in Plotinus, Enn. VI, 5, 1, 2s. A famous, but etymologically unrelated candidate would be *ἀθροπόστατον*, i.e. "that which substantiates itself" (see Beierwaltes 2001).

³⁹ *sarvabhāvānām śūnyatv[a]*, MMK 27,29.

entanglements,⁴⁰ it is evident that we will have to rearrange his theoretical framework completely, shift the focus to the distinctions of language and object of reference, perception and reality etc., and cut off the systematic correspondences that could allow us to understand him from the standpoint of ancient philosophy. But the question remains: Why should we accept these premises?

At this point, proponents of the analytic interpretation might object that reading Nāgārjuna from the standpoint of classic metaphysics takes us back to the first half of the 20th century, to a time when it was still acceptable to dismiss Nāgārjuna's philosophy as metaphysical nihilism, or at least to Murti and the Indian scholarship of the 1950s and 60s, and that such a reading is, hermeneutically speaking, too naïve for contemporary debates. – To this objection, I respond that hermeneutical simplicity is not necessarily a sign of neglect. On the contrary, Occam's razor invites us to reduce the premises of our interpretational approach to the strict minimum. And with Patrizi's Neoplatonist ontology, such a minimal set of premises is given: ontological gradation, a realm of finitude and the principle of inherent insufficiency that defines this realm.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to contribute to the debate about the question if Nāgārjuna should be read through the lens of anti-metaphysicism, as represented by Pali-texts alluding to the *avyākatāni*. I have given several examples of this point of view and I have identified the claim that emptiness is a non-referential concept as its basic assumption.

In the second part, I have analyzed the ontology that Francesco Patrizi elaborates in the 13th chapter of the *Panarchia*-part in his main work, *Nova philosophia*. I examined the concept of *caducitas* in particular, with the objective of establishing a basis for a parallel with Buddhist emptiness.

In the last part, I have shown in which way the fact that Patrizi's ontology manifests structural parallels with Nāgārjuna's doctrine allows us to understand emptiness not as an "empty concept", but as the concept that designates the emptiness of things in the same way than Patrizi's *caducitas* does. Emptiness describes the principle of dissolution in the finite world. It does not disunite the external world and the mind, but reveals something about Being as Being – which makes it an ontology in the primary sense.

The conclusion that I am drawing is of course not that analytic positions should wholly be discredited. The revival of Nāgārjunian studies is, in part, due to the analytic interest in the discursive, logical, and sceptic features of *śūnyavāda*. Nevertheless, the rejection of metaphysics seems to have become too much taken for granted in both the approach to the Buddhism of the Pali-canon and to Nāgārjuna. I hope that, by shedding

⁴⁰ Peter Della Santina admits that his knowledge of Western philosophy is limited, but he still ventures to say that Kant and Wittgenstein appear as good starting points to understand Nāgārjuna, cf. Della Santina 1986, 41.

light on one philosophical intersection, I have been able to suggest that many more points of contact with classical metaphysics still remain unexplored.

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