



Emptiness, negation, and skepticism in Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao

Eric S. Nelson

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This paper excavates the practice-oriented background and therapeutic significance of emptiness in the Madhyamaka philosophy attributed to Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao. Buddhist emptiness unravels experiential and linguistic reification through meditation and argumentation. The historical contexts and uses of the word indicate that it is primarily a practical diagnostic and therapeutic concept. Emptiness does not lead to further views or truths but, akin to yet distinct from Ajñāna and Pyrrhonian skepticism, the suspension of assertion. This sense of emptiness as a practice can be traced in the intercultural transmission of Madhyamaka from Nāgārjuna, its paradigmatic philosopher, to Sengzhao 僧肇, its first pivotal indigenous Chinese representative.

KEYWORDS

Nāgārjuna; Sengzhao; emptiness; negation; skepticism

1. Introduction

Buddhist emptiness (*śūnyatā*) untangles linguistic and experiential reification through argumentation and meditation. Yet, emptiness is itself frequently misunderstood and mystified, as its argumentative and analytic uses are divided from its meditative functions. Excavating its historical uses and contexts reveals its meaning as a practical rather than a theoretical concept. It is practical because it is primarily a diagnostic and therapeutic heuristic. The thesis of this paper is that the practice of emptiness does not lead to further views or truths of any kind but rather—akin to some varieties of skepticism—the suspension of assertion, affirmation, and the proliferation (*prapañca*) of concepts and perspectives. This understanding of Madhyamaka can be traced in its intercultural transmission from South to East Asia as seen in the writings attributed to Nāgārjuna, its paradigmatic philosopher, and Sengzhao 僧肇, its first original and pivotal indigenous Chinese figure.

The supporting argument, made through historical contextualization and philosophical analysis, is that Madhyamaka interprets emptiness, and correlated uses of argumentative negation (*apavāda*), as the practical suspension of assertion, breaking off attachment to views and conceptual entanglement. Madhyamaka's practical diagnostic and therapeutic strategy is analogous to yet ultimately different from paradigmatic forms of radical Ajñāna (literally, 'no knowledge') skepticism in India and Pyrrhonian skepticism in Greece to which it is commonly compared.¹ This interpretation also allows a different explanation

of the disputed ‘Sinitic’ element in Sengzhao’s Madhyamaka. His essays deploy emptiness as non-substantiality and non-affirmation (*wushi* 無是) to dissolve issues inherited from previous Chinese philosophy, such as the reality of nothingness and the relation between naming and reality. Consequently, Sengzhao is not committed to a Sinicized version of Madhyamaka that makes it less negative and more affirmative, as some have argued, and his works are more continuous with early Indian Madhyamaka than often thought.

2. The emergence of emptiness

Let us begin with a brief consideration of the emergence of the nexus of emptiness, negation, and skeptical strategies in early Buddhism. Selflessness (*anātman*) and emptiness, which classical Madhyamaka treats as equivalents, are two of the most frequently misinterpreted and contested expressions in Buddhist philosophy. It has long been disputed whether these expressions are used purely negatively or skeptically, what they are generally or specifically intended to negate or suspend, and whether they entail indirect or implicit ontological assertions about ‘that which is’ or meontological claims concerning the reality of non-being or nothingness.

The earliest historical origins of selflessness and emptiness remain unclear. Recent scholarship has claimed that neither expression appears to have a fundamental or systematic role in the earliest strata of the discourses attributed to the Buddha in the Pāli Canon. To give an abbreviated synopsis, drawing on early Buddhist sources, the teaching that there is no essential, invariant core soul or self (*attā, ātman*) emerged based on the impermanence (*anicca, anitya*) of existing beings.² The ‘empty’ (*suñña, śūnya*) initially had negative senses of bareness, hollowness, and vanity (Bodhi, 2005, pp. 946–947). Since the desolate and solitary empty place (*suññāgāra, śūnyāgāra*) served as a place for meditative practices, emptiness initially developed in the setting of meditative experience. The earliest systematic uses of emptiness accordingly refer to meditative practices and states. Emptiness was increasingly universalized as it emerged as a means of interpreting evolving Buddhist teachings of the three marks (impermanence, non-self, and existential suffering), the dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda, pratītyasamutpāda*) of self and things, and releasement (*nibbana, nirvāna*) itself.³

The early experiential practical context is crucial for interpreting the subsequent historical and conceptual shifts in Buddhist emptiness. While the classificatory systematizing of Abhidharma literature applied emptiness solely to composite entities, and not their fundamental constituents, the teaching of the radical emptiness of all simple constituent dharmas and complex constituted forms emerged as the primary teaching of the Buddha in the formation of Mahāyāna ‘perfection of wisdom’ (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature and Madhyamaka (meaning the ‘middle-most’ or ‘centering’) philosophy.⁴ Emptiness functioned in this context as a comprehensive way to interpret and practice the teachings of the Buddha that shaped their complex transmission to Central and East Asia.

The present contribution is concerned with one instructive case in the transition from this Indian context to the early Chinese adaptation of Buddhism. The early Sinitic Madhyamaka of Sengzhao has been interpreted as ‘affirmative’ in contrast to ‘negative’ Indian Madhyamaka and positioned between early Daoist and mysterious learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) discourses and subsequent Tiantai 天台 and Sanlun 三論 Buddhist lineages.

This paper reposes the question of Sengzhao's relation with early Madhyamaka and exposes paradigmatic Madhyamaka elements operative in the essays collected in the *Zhaolun* 肇論 (T1858).⁵ Focusing on practical and linguistic aspects of the significance of emptiness, I propose reconstructing several strands of the relationship between emptiness and negation in the Madhyamaka philosophies of Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao, demonstrating the centrality of the curative diagnostic and therapeutic practices of emptiness, non-imputative or non-implicative negation, and the suspension of assertion in their distinctive discourses. Emptiness and negation achieved prominence in early Madhyamaka as ways of overcoming—by putting out of play—ontological and meontological assertions and viewpoints, and the only 'affirmation' that Sengzhao allows (namely, the suchness and self-so-ness of things) occurs when all assertion, affirmation, and negation are abandoned.

After an initial overview of Nāgārjuna and the early Indian context, in which my alternative practice-oriented interpretation of emptiness is introduced, we turn to Sengzhao's interpretation of Madhyamaka. In the early Chinese debate about emptiness in the correspondence between Sengzhao and Liu Yimin 劉遺民 (c. 360–416), Liu posed a dilemma between illuminating emptiness interpreted as either existence or non-existence and as either responsive action and knowing or non-responsive indifference.⁶ Sengzhao replied that illumination and responsiveness occur precisely through emptiness as the non-imputation of existence and non-existence. Negation, non-assertion, and withholding assent entail neither a superior form of affirmation nor a fixation of negativity insofar as these denote states of neutral indifference that can no longer move and respond (*ying* 應) to conditions through emptiness.⁷ We will accordingly consider what this therapeutic suspension means and to what extent discursive-logical, meditative, and ethical practices of emptying can correlate with freely enacting the joyful serenity, generosity, and equalizing compassion attributed to the exemplary bodhisattva path.

3. Emptiness, negation, and qualified Skepticism in Nāgārjuna

It continues to be a controversial question whether Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) proposes an ontology (a theory of what there is), a radically globalized skepticism or nihilism, or a therapeutic suspension of ontological and other viewpoints.⁸ The earliest available commentaries the *Akutobhayā*, the *Middle Treatise* (*Zhonglun* 中論, T1564), which is an otherwise unavailable text attributed to Piṅgala or Vimalākṣa (Qingmu 青目), and Buddhapālita's *Mūlamadhyamaka-vṛtti* help situate and potentially answer this question, as they are prior to the formation of the later Tibetan *svatantrika*—*prasaṅgika* controversy.⁹ This important debate was inaugurated in Bhāviveka's critique of Buddhapālita's lack of autonomous syllogisms with affirmative implications and Candrakīrti's defense of refutation only by logical consequence that both presupposed the transformed philosophical milieu of Dignāga's new theory of formal syllogistic validity.¹⁰

Buddhapālita remarked in the opening pages of his commentary that asserting, conceptualizing, and debating should be suspended. Dependent origination is without annihilation and permanence and without distinction and identity (Buddhapālita, 2021, pp. 17–18). It dismantles constructed perspectives and theories to teach the liberation of beings and the suchness of things that has no intrinsic essential reality or extrinsic illusory

unreality to be given to them (Buddhapālita, 2021, pp. 18–19). The Mādhyamika therefore should not be engaged in affirming and asserting propositions about reality nor offer a general theory regarding that which is. Consequently, realism, anti-realism, idealism, monism, and other potential ontological interpretations operative in contemporary discussions are precluded to the extent that they commit to and hypostasize or reify (*samāropa*) assertions concerning reality as having an essential form.

What of alternative contemporary readings? Does the Madhyamaka suspension of affirmation entail affirming a stance such as global skepticism, nihilism, or a meontological theory of nothingness? Such interpretive strategies appear problematic insofar as they aim at negatively articulated assertions and views and thus return to hypostatization and proliferation. Madhyamaka does not only cease direct assertions concerning that which is. The assertion of opposites through argumentative negation and refutation likewise necessarily fails, as the contrary is neither proven nor affirmed through the specific negation of the proposed proposition. A key characteristic of negation in Buddhapālita and later *prasaṅgika* thinking is that its use of negation particularly denies intrinsic reality or self-nature (*svabhāva*) and does not lead to asserting or affirming the opposite of the negated proposition. Negation does not lead to truth. The prominent Tibetan *prasaṅgika* philosopher and commentator Je Tsongkhapa differentiated two kinds of negation in his *Great Commentary*: affirming implicative and non-affirming non-implicative. In Tsongkhapa's example, the negation of the color black only entails the absence of that specific color and does not demonstrate another color (Tsongkhapa, 2015, pp. 59–60).

Unlike the deployment of *reductio ad absurdum* style arguments to arrive at necessary foundational conclusions, Madhyamaka argumentation specifically negates a position through contradiction and infinite regress while not thereby deriving a thesis concerning necessary existence (as in, for instance, ontological proofs of God's existence). Indeed, most chapters of Nāgārjuna's *Fundamental Verses* proceed to negate every other alternative position and viewpoint through a fourfold negation (*catuṣkoṭi*) that negates: (1) the assertion, (2) the opposing antithesis, (3) the assertion of both-and (the unity of opposites or contradiction), and (4) the assertion of neither-nor that is identified as an assertion of existence without a cause (MMK 1.1).¹¹ Some passages suggest a fivefold negation (*pañcakotī*), possibly influenced by Ajñāna skeptical philosophy, negating the emptying middle if it is not taken as an ongoing practice but reified as another assertion and viewpoint or as mere negation and non-seeing.¹² The 'middle' itself, as a centering from and toward emptiness, is not to be asserted. This further bracketing of the middle is also observed in a pivotal source for Sengzhao. The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* is credited for Sengzhao's turn toward Buddhism and the commentary *Zhu Weimojiejing* 注維摩詰經 (*Annotations on the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*) has been attributed to him (T1775). This diagnostic and therapeutic text, concerning the medicine of emptiness and addressed to lay practitioners, states after its discussion of emptiness that the non-dual mind is without abiding, grasping, and viewing. The dialogue between Vimalakīrti and the monk Upāli clarifies how the mind does not abide inside, outside, or in the middle.¹³

Nāgārjuna's deployment of emptiness and negation without assertive conclusions appears to some readers to echo the trilemma of Pyrrhonian skepticism. It should be noted that the chapters of the *Fundamental Verses* are not uniform in the number of negations used. Chapter nineteen on time, for instance, only refutes the intrinsic reality of time. Several chapters (such as MMK 22.11) follow the paradigmatic Buddhist four-

cornered negation (*catuṣkoṭi*) to suspend four forms of assertion: a; not a; both a and not a; neither a nor not a. Other passages imply a fivefold *pañcakoti*, arguably sharing affinities with Ajñāna skeptical philosophy in which the fifth negation denies the assertion of the previous negations to arrive at a suspension of any possible assertion and negation.¹⁴ Ajñāna practitioners are portrayed unfavorably in Pāli canonical sources, where they are called slippery ‘eel-wrigglers’ (*Amarāvikkhepikas*) in their attempts to evade all assertion and negation.¹⁵

Diogenes Laërtius narrates how the ancient Greek skeptic Pyrrho of Elis learnt from his dialogues with Indian ascetics (gymnosophists) and priests (magi) agnosticism and the suspension of judgement, rejecting the just and unjust, and denying that anything existed except by custom and convention.¹⁶ Pyrrho’s skepticism is described much like the eel-wriggling criticized by early Buddhists: it determinately designates (*horizō*) nothing, not even the designating of nothing, and refutes its own designating of nothing (Diogenes, 1925, p. 487). Despite recent accounts of the possible historical connections between Buddhism and Pyrrhonism (Beckwith, 2017), these characteristics (the denial of ethics as dogmatic theorizing, the teaching of appearances only, the priority of custom, the denial of causal reasoning, and the ‘eel-wriggling’) appear closer to Ajñāna skepticism than their early Buddhist critics. Madhyamaka emerged centuries after Pyrrho and could not have influenced him. But, nevertheless, potential family resemblances are more complicated in this case due to their respective links with Ajñāna skepticism.

Akin to varieties of early Indian and Hellenic skepticism, Nāgārjuna can be analyzed as suspending affirmative ontological assertions (including claims formed through contradiction and negation) about reality in MMK and, in the related works *Dispelling Disputes* (Nāgārjuna, 2010) and *Crushing the Categories* (Nāgārjuna, 2018), a fuller array of epistemic and logical categories, inferences, and instruments. Reality cannot be known either through an inferential logic or dialectic of concepts (*tarka*), whether through affirmation or negation, nor through an epistemic analysis that requires adequately differentiating the knower and the known, and epistemic instruments (*pramāṇa*) and their objects (*prameya*). Furthermore, as in some types of skepticism, Madhyamaka strategies lead to the bracketing of ontological and epistemological philosophizing and theorizing that cannot be adequately established. These strategies lead to suspension. They can accordingly be described as diagnostic, therapeutic, and arriving at a disposition resembling skeptical mental tranquility (*ataraxia*) through the withholding of assent (*epoché*): ‘the end to be realized [skeptics] hold to be suspension of judgement [*epoché*], which brings with it tranquility [*ataraxia*] like its shadow’.¹⁷

Despite these much-discussed resemblances, the contexts, motivations, and results appear sufficiently distinct from Ajñāna and Pyrrhonian forms of skepticism that such readings neglect the particularity of classical Madhyamaka as a form of practice with its own distinctive ethics and ‘soteriology’; most notably, the constitutive roles of dependent origination, selflessness, and emptiness in Mahāyāna discourse, meditative and ethical practice, and liberation. First, Mādhyamikas enact emptiness by specifically negating intrinsic substantial existence and dismantling conceptual, logical, and linguistic fixations in argumentation through dependent origination. Secondly, beyond logical and semantic concerns, negational strategies encourage experiential liberation from fixating and limiting viewpoints. They should not lead to the affirmation, construed as a grasping fixation, of the negation, ignoring its conditionality, which would thereby transform a

deconstructive strategy into a hypostatized assertion. Thirdly, as is clear in the popular, practical, and bodhisattva path works ascribed to Nāgārjuna and his successors, as in Nāgārjuna's *Precious Garland (Ratnāvalī)* or Śāntideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, Mādhyamikas enact meditative and ethical practices of emptying the mind-and-body of attachments and delusions. The *Precious Garland* immediately begins with emptiness and proceeds to thematize its enactment through a variety of worldly, ritual, meditative, and ethical practices (Nāgārjuna, 1997). The practice of emptiness is likewise key to the Bodhisattva's wisdom and unlimited compassion in Śāntideva's paradigmatic account (Śāntideva, 1933).

Madhyamaka cannot be adequately interpreted if it is divorced from its historical conditions. Practices of emptying linguistic and experiential fixations are intertwined with the non-attachment characterized by the exemplary selfless serenity, generosity, and compassion ascribed to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In addition to Madhyamaka's 'soteriological' elements, its emphasis on the radical priority of the other in the Bodhisattva's archetypal unrestricted compassion and generosity, the other who has no borders with the self, is distinctive from the reliance on appearances and customary morality, and not a radically altruistic and responsive ethos, expressed in standard readings of Pyrrhonian and Humean forms of skepticism.¹⁸

What about applying instead the categories of nihilism (as the denial of being) and meontology (as the priority of non-being)? Nihilism has been deployed to clarify Madhyamaka statements of how all is illusory as in a dream, a mirage, and a city of Gandharvas (MMK 7.33). The expression 'nihilism' is questionable, however, given its modern existential and pessimistic connotations and insofar as it expresses the denial of existence per se or an affirmation of annihilation (extinction) or nihilation (as a meontological process) in contrast to the emptying of selfhood, substantiality, and intrinsic self-nature at stake in Madhyamaka. Therefore, 'nihilism' is overly dramatic and unnecessary as a label for the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness. This emptying is correlated in MMK with the logical negation of assertions of explicit or implicit invariant essence but never with actual annihilation or pure nullity. Indeed, this is repeatedly denied by Nāgārjuna and Buddhapālita. Nor does emptying lead to a meontology of nothingness, as it arguably does in some Daoist teachings.¹⁹ As emptiness signifies a determinate specific negation, an 'emptiness of', primordial non-being would suffer the same dismantling as its ontological opposite. Nāgārjuna and early commentaries are explicit that both existence and non-existence, being and non-being, are neither to be independently or jointly affirmed nor denied. This implies that it concerns determinate bracketing or neutralization, which again evokes skeptical philosophical strategies.

What then is specifically placed in hiatus in practices of emptying negation? Being and non-being, and consequently their conceptualization in ontology and meontology, are specifically negated as intrinsic independent realities or as permanent substantial self-natures through the logic of dependent origination and emptiness. This need not entail the affirmation of their opposite, or both the proposition and its contradiction, or neither. Existence and non-existence are revealed as neither intrinsic nor extrinsic, as assertions of the extrinsic still presuppose the intrinsic. Assertions and conceptions concerning 'is' and 'is not' are halted and things are left to themselves (that is, released) rather than annihilated in non-attachment.

The strategy of stilling suspension is palpable in expressions such as ‘ceasing’ (*nivṛtt-* in MMK 9.12, 18.7), the cessation of objectification and conceptualization (*sarvopalambhopaśamahprapañcōpaśamah*, MMK 25.24), and the ‘abandonment of all views’ (*sarvadr̥ṣṭiprahāṇāya*, MMK 27.30). This is not so much destruction then, as it is a releasement. Emptiness leaves, according to Buddhapālita’s commentary, reality perfectly as it is. True reality, he notes, does not signify a return to (negative or superior forms of) assertion about intrinsic reality. This reality as it is, also described as the fullness of suchness (*tathātā*) in which nothing is left out, is a correlate of halting and withholding assent (MMK 26.10). This therapeutic strategy of releasement contrasts with ontological explanations of Madhyamaka that affirm a higher realism, a fundamental ontological order, or an absolute truth that would reintroduce a duality between the two truths and a fissure between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* against which Nāgārjuna warns (MMK 16.10, 25.19). This correlation between emptying suspension and suchness has the advantage of razor-like simplicity in suspending the proliferation of assertions about the world and the mind, which conceal more than they reveal, and which ensnare Buddhist Abhidharma and Yogācāra teachings as well as non-Buddhist discourses. Emptiness is accordingly the easiest and simplest path.

What could be described as Nāgārjuna’s razor, or as a Madhyamaka *epoché*, has a distinctive function in contrast to the method of bracketing in Hellenistic skepticism or modern phenomenology.²⁰ Emptiness and logical negation are interconnected in the uses of dependent origination and emptiness against the reification and substantialization of words and concepts in non-Buddhist and earlier Abhidharmika Buddhist discourses. Negation and logical consequence only (*prasaṅga*) are deployed to specifically suspend intrinsic self-nature without reifying (1) affirmation, (2) negation, (3) both sides of a contradiction, or (4) a global indeterminate negation ‘without cause’. Causality and emptiness appear paradoxically interwoven in Nāgārjuna’s argumentation.²¹ The assertion of cause leads back to positive ontological assertion and proliferation. The denial of cause, which is a feature of Pyrrho’s skepticism (Diogenes, 1925, p. 509), entails the elimination of dependent origination (that is, the causal nexus) and emptiness understood as self-emptiness or a specific ‘emptiness of’. This strategy of critically using dependent origination while not producing an ontology indicates that Nāgārjuna is at most a Buddhist moderate or qualified skeptic, and not a radical Ajñāna or Pyrrhonian skeptic. He also offers a way to resolve the paradox: cause is to be neither ontologically affirmed nor skeptically negated.

The determinate specificity of emptiness underwrites the specificity of negation: it is not a negation of cause but a negation of fixation and substantiality in which form is freed rather than eliminated. This is expressed in the fundamental ‘perfection of wisdom’ teaching that form is emptiness (of intrinsic self-nature) and emptiness is form. This insight brings us to Sengzhao, a key yet still inadequately appreciated philosopher. He has been called the ‘first’ Chinese Mādhyamika philosopher and portrayed as a precursor to the systematization of Chinese Madhyamaka and the three treatises (*sanlun* 三論) school, from which his teachings differ in significant ways, as well as the ‘wild’ uses of emptiness in Tang dynasty Chan 禪 Buddhism.²² Sengzhao redeploys Madhyamaka strategies in the early Chinese Buddhist context, deploying emptiness and dependent origination to undermine a variety of substantialist perspectives, including Daoist and

Buddhist teachings that reify change and nothingness, without positing a new cosmological or ontological perspective.

4. Sengzhao and the self-emptiness of things

Madhyamaka was systematically introduced into China through the translations of the Śūnyavādin Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什) (344–413 CE) and his four primary assistants who were decisive in the propagation of the Buddhist dharma in China: Sengzhao, Daorong 道融, Sengrui 僧睿, and Zhu Daosheng 竺道生. The collected essays attributed to Sengzhao reveal familiarity with basic interpretive elements and strategies of Madhyamaka along with teachings of wisdom or understanding (*prajñā*, 般若) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*, 空) presented in perfection of wisdom literature and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*.²³

The primary focus of Sengzhao's *śūnyatā* essay ('Non-Intrinsic Emptiness', *bu zhenkong lun* 不真空論) addresses how emptiness is surrounded by thickets of conflicting arguments and conceptions and yet signifies directness and simplicity in complex variety.²⁴ The title itself is revealing. It indicates that emptiness is itself not independently essential or foundational; nor is it a mere arbitrary whim. As emptiness is also non-intrinsic, it is fundamentally self-empty. The sages do not construct, conceptualize, or impose emptiness onto things; they mirror and accord with things in their own self-emptiness.²⁵ Emptiness is first and foremost then the 'self-emptiness of things' (萬物之自虛, T1858: 152a06). This self-emptiness of each thing, including each self, problematizes naming and fixating affirmative and negative assertions about things. The distinctive Madhyamaka teaching of 'self-emptiness' is pivotal in Sengzhao's essay, even though such expressions (*zikong* 自空 and *zixu* 自虛) are explicitly used only a few times.²⁶ Self-emptiness is briefly discussed, yet not emphasized, in the early commentaries of Yuankang 元康 (T1859) and Wencai 文才 (T1860). It provocatively evokes and contrasts not only with self-nature (*zixing* 自性), which translates the Sanskrit expression *svabhāva*, but also the self-generative nothingness and self-naturing (*ziran* 自然) of early Daoist, *Yijing* 易經 commentarial, and mysterious learning sources.

Sengzhao critiqued in 'Non-Intrinsic Emptiness' the reified generalized negation and nothingness characteristic of prevalent forms of Chinese philosophy, including early Buddhist schools, for the sake of liberating the myriad things. The early Chinese notion of 'thing' (*wu* 物) encompasses physical, animal, and human entities, such that there is no hard division between self and world, as evident in modern European idealist and skeptical concerns about the reality of other minds and the external world.²⁷

The negational specificity of the self-emptiness of a thing allows Sengzhao in this essay to critically diagnose three unsatisfactory ontological and meontological teachings of emptiness that limit its negational and liberatory potential.²⁸ In the first mentalistic interpretation, emptiness refers to an empty non-intentional and non-conceptualizing mind. This view of the emptied mind fails to recognize the self-emptiness of all forms and things. In the second reductive Abhidharmic analysis, emptiness is solely applied to complex aggregated forms and not to basic constituents that are conceived as unchanged by causal relations and fundamentally real. This approach does not recognize that all constituent and elemental dharmas are also dependently conditioned and empty. The third meontological teaching of 'original nothingness' (*benwu* 本無), associated with earlier Chinese *Prajñā* schools under the influence of Daoist and mysterious learning

teachings, hypostatizes and stratifies the self-emptiness of things in a meontology of an intrinsic primordial and self-generative nothingness. It neglects the causality of mutually dependent conditionality and the inseparability of being and nonbeing. Given dependent origination, and the absence of an independent being or non-being, such generative nothingness cannot be asserted.

Sengzhao is not simply eclectically influenced by Wang Bi 王弼 and mysterious learning sources, fusing Buddhism and Daoism.²⁹ He dismantles Wang Bi's meontological prioritization of nothingness as the ultimate principle of things. Daoist and Buddhist meontological assertions about the positivity of nothingness are as impossible as ontological claims about being. This point, limited to conventional truth, can be put in the idiom of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969): the language games of being (*you* 有) and nothingness (*wu* 無), the mutually dependent causal nexus of nothingness and being, are conventionally presupposed and do not entail an independent certainty or truth about the world.

Ontological and meontological conceptualizations of a primary being or nonbeing equally miss the interdependence of emptiness and form and the non-affirmative non-implicative character of negation. In Sengzhao's Madhyamaka analysis of negation, negations of being only signify a denial of substantialized intrinsic being, while negations of nonbeing only signify a denial of substantialized intrinsic nonbeing.³⁰ Thus, he interprets the first truth of Nāgārjuna's *Middle Treatise (Zhonglun)* to mean that all dharmas have neither (intrinsic) being nor non-being.³¹

Sengzhao deploys the *catuṣkoṭi* against assertions, popular in some Chinese discourses, produced through unifying contradictions and opposites (both/and) or through the negativity of asserting neither/nor. To consider one example, what does the latter fourth corner negation, 'neither being nor nonbeing', mean? Sengzhao argued: dependent on conditions (dependent origination), bifurcated only in name (assertion) rather than in reality, being and non-being do not substantially or intrinsically exist. Consequently, eternalism and annihilationism (that is, the positing of realities as essentially unchanging or as purely illusory) designate their hypostatization as substantially existing and true independent of conditions, denying transient conditional causal and empty reality. While the refutation of eternalism undoes unchanging substantial realities (including change and movement conceived as absolutes), the refutation of annihilationism undoes fixations formed through negativity such as global or radical skepticism and nihilism that self-contradictorily maintain that everything is purely illusory.

What then is the status of the Madhyamaka teaching of the two truths (i.e. conventional and ultimate truth) in Sengzhao's essays? He states they are curative skillful means (*upāya*, *ouhe* 漚和), practiced amidst beings, which express the non-cognizing, non-affirmative wisdom of the self-emptiness of self and things, names and realities. The two truths do not assert two independent principles nor one absolute perspective. Conventional everyday truth mistakes appearances for substantial intrinsic existence; ultimate truth is the truth of the self-emptiness of substantiality. Sengzhao underscores how ultimate truth is only conditionally asserted to deny intrinsic existence, while conditional truth is only conditionally asserted for the sake of denying intrinsic non-existence and nothingness. The two truths do not assert a true or real identity nor a speculative oneness. The two are simply one in how they pause proliferating claims and views about being and nothingness, substantiality and illusoriness.

Sengzhao's hermeneutical strategy allows him to reinterpret preceding Chinese, particularly Daoist and mysterious learning, philosophy. His analysis constitutes a Madhyamaka-inspired response shaped by longstanding Chinese philosophical problematics of, as we have just considered, being and nothingness and naming (*ming* 名) and reality (*shi* 實). The dilemma of their reciprocal affiliation is not resolved but endlessly proliferated in assertions and arguments about minds and things. Echoing the equalizing simplicity and oneness of the *Zhuangzi*, Sengzhao remarks that things and I share a common root, and affirmation and negation share a common force.³² This Zhuangzian language of undoing fixed distinctions and shared oneness risks renewed ontological assertion, and, indeed, several modern interpreters have introduced an ostensive Chinese Buddhist need for affirmation in contrast to a supposedly Indian Buddhist negativity. Nonetheless, according to Sengzhao, real ontological oneness or unity cannot be asserted or imposed. He therefore does not end this essay with an ontology of the one, or a meontology of genuine elemental nothingness. Instead, Sengzhao concludes with the existential clarity, freedom, and ease of non-affirmation that can well be described as a Sinitic variety, mediated by the language of the *Zhuangzi*, of early Madhyamaka non-ontology and qualified skepticism.

In what sense is Sengzhao's strategy a moderate or qualified skepticism? This interpretation is trickier yet can be maintained with respect to the other essays attributed to Sengzhao, which will be examined in the following sections. They reveal that the suspension of assertion in middle path therapeutics conveys how the dependently originated body of the world can function (*yong* 用) in simple free stillness (*ji* 寂) (Sengzhao, T1858: 154c16–17). There is, evoking the *Daodejing*, nothing to be attained or accomplished (*wu suode* 無所得; Sengzhao, T1858: 161b17–18). Accordingly, without fixations of being and non-being, identity and difference, and intrinsic movement and nonmovement in the essay 'Things do not Shift' (*Wu bu qian lun* 物不遷論), there is no anxious compulsion to assert anything, including the Buddha and the dharma, except conditionally as compassionate pedagogical devices.

This disposition could be compared to skeptical *ataraxia* insofar as it is described as abiding in simplicity in the self-emptiness of self and others, free from both existence and non-existence, existence as either intrinsically changing or unchanging, and unensnared by the traps and snares of naming and negating. It differs from skepticism, however, insofar as this suspension in emptiness is correlated in Buddhist philosophy with release and suchness. Sengzhao depicted suchness as a tactual contact with phenomena as the genuine.³³ Whereas skepticism often presupposes an individual subject and a fundamental distinction between the self and world that cannot be overcome, non-assertion and non-affirmation are in Sengzhao's Madhyamaka ways to undo the barriers between self and world and open the world in its very suchness.

5. Self-empty wisdom without knowing

Prajñā (understanding, wisdom) is interconnected with emptiness in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature that Sengzhao explores in Daoist-infused language in his essay 'Prajñā without Knowing' (*Bore wuzhi* 般若無知). This wisdom of emptiness is elucidated here as a dark, free, still, and vacuous illuminating wisdom without grasping, affirmation, and fixed conceptual or propositional content. There are no marks, images, or words appropriate

for it. *Prajñā* is direct, uncoerced, and simple in its skillful practice; yet confused debates proliferate due to the compulsion toward assertion, as naming obsessively seeks out, grasps, and attaches, and thereby obscures things. As the movement of words is unrelenting, while nothing can be genuinely asserted, Sengzhao deploys his unrestrained 'wild words' (*kuangyan* 狂言) to undo fixed conceptions in openness to the nameless.³⁴

The use of wild words and paradoxical language, which prefigure Chan Buddhist tactics, are unfolded in his analysis of the logic of assertion. Each assertion of knowledge presupposes that there is both a known and an unknown. It thereby limits and divides what is known from that which is not known, which is incompatible with the unrestricted all-encompassing character of sagely understanding (Sengzhao, T1858: 153a27–28). That is, affirming one object or content necessarily conceals other objects and content. This passage can be interpreted in view of Zhuangzian perspectivalism that freely transitions through myriad viewpoints. Nonetheless, it principally concerns for Sengzhao how the causal nexus of dependent origination encompasses minds, words, and objects.

The Madhyamaka application of dependent origination radically differentiates Sengzhao's discourse from his Chinese predecessors. Dependent origination might appear to establish a new form of assertion, as it is taken by some readers to imply a positive relational ontology, when it only entails the emptiness of an intrinsic self-nature such that names, images, and marks are revealed as transient partial perspectives reified as substantially real. Sengzhao notes that dependent origination does not establish entities or being as such, just as its correlate emptiness does not annihilate them or establish nothingness. The 'relational holism' of dependent origination in Madhyamaka argumentation dismantles the separation of self and world, and mind and matter, without asserting the positive nature of the whole as a knowable dialectical or systematic totality.

The suspicion might remain that emptiness leads back to some variety of positivity. As Sengzhao repeatedly stated, lack of substantiality or self-emptiness can be said to characterize all things. Does this last claim imply a renewed proliferation of ontological assertion? If it is construed as an affirmation about being or nonbeing, then it has already become ensnared in conceptual propagation and the incessant flow of words. In emptying words and existence, in its dark illumination, wisdom is variously described by Sengzhao as according, meeting, mirroring, responding, and tallying by not engaging in naming, affirming, or the indirect affirming that some ascribe to negation. Sengzhao's suspension of assertion is portrayed as a free relational worldly responsiveness. This model of free unattached resonance and response, with its radically altruistic or responsive ethical implications, contrasts with radical skeptical models (for instance, as in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*) committed to dispositional indifference (*apátheia*), the denial of any ethics of the good or the art of life, and relativistically embracing the customary regional morals of everyday life when compelled to make choices.³⁵

Emptiness, therefore, applies across all phenomena through dependent origination and is enacted in linguistic and meditative practices of emptying for the sake of a disposition of free (unattached) responsiveness. First, it can be characterized as a way of undoing or deconstructing words and concepts, as assertions in their intransigent partiality are equalized through emptiness (a topic discussed further in the next section). Second, it involves meditative and ethical practices of emptying the self and its attachments.³⁶ Third, it is described as enacting a condition of Zhuangzian responsive freedom, reimagined through Buddhist lenses.

Nothingness is intertwined with the logic of paradox in Daoist and mysterious learning discourses. Sengzhao's analysis of non-intrinsic emptiness is interconnected with the non-implicative use of negation that indicates his Madhyamaka inheritance. The twofold sense of negation as affirmative implicative and non-affirmative non-implicative, discussed above in the Indian context, is also evident in Sengzhao's essays and is used to interpret the namelessness of *dao* and nothingness, denying them ontological and meontological implications.³⁷ This indicates his historical proximity to proto-*prasaṅgika* Madhyamaka associated with the commentaries of the *Akutobhayā* and, particularly, the *Zhonglun*. He can be considered a genuine Mādhyamika to the extent that in his discourses argumentation and negation enact emptiness and occur as a suspending of being and nothingness or affirmation and negation (*shifei* 是非) in their implicative sense (Sengzhao, T1858: 156b26–27).

It is historically and conceptually significant that Sengzhao distinguishes two forms of negation, evoking earlier South Asian Buddhist discourses: (1) ordinary negation as entailing an implicative or substantial assertion and (2) negation as determinate suspension. The latter is non-implicative in that it only specifically denies the grasping and affirming of intrinsic being or intrinsic nonbeing. The 'not' of this determinate non-implicative way of negating only targets a specific determinate quality of propositions and perspectives: their fixation as intrinsic. Things otherwise remain what they are in their own freedom. This art of negation is accordingly a kind of *epoché*, an emptiness correlated with touching (*chu* 觸) the dark silent illuminating fullness of suchness. This way of negation is, to expand on his example, an emptying not knowing in contrast with a knowing that asserts something else through negation or asserts nothingness as if it were another sort of being or entity.

His discussions of the fifth and sixth objections in his *prajñā* essay make the priority of pausing affirmation clear. It is the central thesis of his sixth answer. In the emptying and interrupting of affirming (*shi* 是) and matching (*dang* 當), echoing the *Daodejing* again, there is nothing that is not affirmed and matched. This should not be interpreted, however, as a form of knowing or a new dialectical or more universal level of affirmation, as this move would reify the markless as a hypostatized marklessness or yet another mark (Sengzhao, T1858: 154b13). Sengzhao's logic is more deconstructive than dialectical. The argumentation of Sengzhao's discourse on understanding through non-knowing does not lead to affirming an ontology. It rather determinately dissolves and suspends epistemological and ontological claims, calling for them to be equalized, emptied, and negated anew in the incessant flow of words that his (proto-Chan Buddhist) paradoxical language and 'wild words' interrupt and reorient.

6. Equalizing in self-emptiness

Sengzhao's discourse is more than pragmatic Buddhist-Daoist eclecticism. He systematically appropriates and transforms Daoist expressions and strategies, particularly the 'equalization of things' (*qiwu* 齊物) from the *Zhuangzi* (Zhuangzi, 2013, 17), in view of Mādhyamika self-emptiness. Zhuangzi's equalization and Nāgārjuna's emptiness dismantle sedimented distinctions, hierarchies, and stratifications between things. The employment of the Zhuangzian tactic of equalizing things in oneness need not be construed ontologically as an assertive both-and thinking or affirmative unification of contradictions.

As the second 'Equalizing Things' chapter (*Qiwulun* 齊物論) of the *Zhuangzi* already demonstrated, any posited one is already two, any 'this' (*shi* 是) is already opposed to a 'that' (*bi* 彼) and affirmation (*shi* 是) to negation (*fei* 非).³⁸ Sengzhao's text indicates how demands for and claims of a concluding affirmation undermine this Zhuangzian freedom amidst things and world and, again deploying Daoist paradoxical language, the 'affirmation' that only occurs by abandoning affirmation. This need not be paradoxically stated since the former means freedom or releasement from affirmation and the latter affirmation as assertion of a view.

What is the worldly freedom and releasement of the sages? Sengzhao maintained, as his correspondent Liu Yimin noted in his first letter, that the sages freely move through conditions without being constrained by them. They resonate with things and remain in the world while suspending fixations in illuminating emptiness, namelessness, and stillness (Sengzhao, T1858: 155a). As is evident in Liu's objection and Sengzhao's reply, this freedom does not denote an alternative higher form of affirmation: saying 'not being' deactivates assertions about being without affirming non-being; saying 'not nonbeing' neutralizes assertions about nonbeing without affirming not-nonbeing. Such ways of speaking affirm 'neither existing, nor non-existing; neither non-existing nor not non-existing'.³⁹ The therapeutic conclusion reached through this linguistic analysis is that the derivation of an ultimate affirmation and correspondence from non-affirmative emptiness only muddles and obstructs the way (Sengzhao, T1858: 157a3–4).

As the opening lines of the *Daodejing* chapter one state, the *dao* that can be asserted and affirmed cannot signify the genuine *dao* (Lynn, 1999, p. 51). Madhyamaka self-emptiness more radically clarifies how, contrary to a range of Daoist and earlier Sinitic Buddhist analyses, this non-assertion and namelessness cannot indirectly or negatively point toward a substantive primordial emptiness or nothingness. Thus, Sengzhao's practice of negation follows a strategy of emptying out linguistic and mental entanglements, without engaging in positive cosmological and ontological speculation about emptiness and nothingness. At the same time, this enactment of dark illuminating emptiness does not result in a globalized skepticism or annihilative nihilism, in which all is illusory. It is a practice of withholding assent that does not and opposes reducing its objects to nihility, just as sagely 'ignorant knowing' is responsive and co-resonant in contrast to the radical indifference attributed to some varieties of skepticism. Sengzhao's discourses are informed by the models of Nāgārjuna and Zhuangzi and prefigure Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969) in this respect: they each undermine the dogmatic presuppositions of radical skepticism with a qualified or moderate skeptical form of analysis. In Sengzhao's essays, these qualified skeptical strategies correlate with the releasement of the wondrous fullness of suchness in which functioning, mirroring, and responding are unaffirmed, uncoerced, and unhindered. The sages touch the fullness of things precisely in the dark emptiness, stillness, and simplicity of non-affirmation and non-corresponding.⁴⁰

To turn to Sengzhao's nirvāṇa essay regarding this point, he states that being and nothingness require no ordinary or extraordinary affirmation. Their neutralization in equalizing emptiness does not entail a third reality or state that would fall back into the dialectic of affirmation and negation (Sengzhao, T1858: 159a, 161b). Hence, the negation of the being and non-being in Buddhist nirvāṇa does not indicate an alternative third realm or truth. Indeed, even the tactic of non-implicative negation is merely 'borrowed' in

relation to language to indicate that nirvāṇa concerns neither being nor nothingness (Sengzhao, T1858: 159b11).

This essay accords with the priority of non-affirmation and non-implicative negation expressed in Sengzhao's other essays and correspondence. The authorship of this essay 'Nirvāṇa is Nameless' (*Niepan wuming* 涅槃無名) has been challenged by modern scholars. But given its shared features with these other writings, it is most likely either composed by Sengzhao himself or a student conversant with his style of argument. The stated purpose of this attributed essay is to elucidate nirvāṇa with and without remainder. As in the previously discussed essays, dismantling propositional assertions and mental fixations are here too elucidated as practices of emptying correlated with the measureless equalizing vacuity of nirvāṇa that is depicted with Daoist imagery.

The nirvāṇa essay relies on Sengzhao's Zhuangzian language of equalization, without making mysterious learning cosmological and ontological commitments, to elucidate the middle way: assertion and negation, being and not being, self and other, the movement of presence and absence, and myriad things and perspectives are equalized in the vast vacuity of nirvāṇa.⁴¹ Likewise, the one and the many, the high and the low, and the absolute and the relative are equalized in the no-self of nirvāṇa. Such centering and making equal through emptiness do not imply any reduction or elimination. This is clarified through an image of birds fleeing from a net: each escaping bird is uniquely itself, yet the freedom gained is the same (Sengzhao, T1858: 160a22–25). The plurality of dharmas, beings, and perspectives are thus preserved intact, as they are in their own self-ness, when the restrictive conditional boundaries of selfhood and substantiality fall away (Sengzhao, T1858: 161a).

This essay concludes by dismantling the notion of awakening as an attainment requiring affirmation. Following the *Radiant Prajñā Sūtra* (*Fanguang bore jing* 放光般若經), awakening is not attained from being, non-being, from both, nor neither. There is nothing to be attained and no real self to attain it. It is unattainable and therefore unrestricted and universally accessible. Nirvāṇa is open to all in equalization, discarding nothing at all, as the *dao* is 'attained' (that is, as released from) in the absence of attainment (Sengzhao, T1858: 161b14–19). The emptied mind appears as a relational movement, freely roaming without boundaries between self and other, affirmation and negation, 'this' and 'that', and, without calculation, capable of responding to all. This freedom is expressed in the exemplary aspirational figures of the bodhisattvas for whom there is no real duality between skillful means and wisdom, conventional and non-conventional truths, or saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. They are unattached to and unafflicted by images, things, and words while immanently matching, mirroring, and being responsively attuned within the world in its suchness (Sengzhao, T1858: 161a07).

Nirvāṇa is neither a positive nor merely negative expression, as it expresses suspension and release. This text depicts nirvāṇa as a limitless state of selfless non-attainment, with no essential difference between the myriad things and me (Sengzhao, T1858: 161a18). In this sense it universalizes Zhuangzi's image of the perfected person (*zhenren* 真人), who is without a fixed self, merit, and name (Zhuangzi, 2013, 3). As wisdom transpires through a non-knowing ignorance, and perfection in mundane imperfection, they are universally available for the multitudes. The *dao* is accordingly not beyond reach as the genuine is simply touching phenomena.⁴² This text gives

Madhyamaka discourse a primarily practical meaning. It confirms that the Mādhyamika's practices of qualified skepticism and non-affirmation are correlated with, and not perceived as inconsistent with, the wider nexus of Buddhist practices and aspirations, which encompass the life and nirvāṇa of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, even as they receive a distinctive emptying interpretation.

7. Conclusion: Madhyamaka as practical philosophy

Sengzhao's sense of freedom amidst and in touch with the world would later be reimagined in Chan Buddhist narratives and dialogues. Later Chan sources apocryphally record Sengzhao's final verses before his death, which express the freedom and emptiness of natural processes in the first and second line and of death in the third and fourth line: 'The four elements have no master, the five yins are fundamentally empty; when one faces [death's] white blade, it is like the cutting spring wind'.⁴³

The impression that Indian Madhyamaka discourses are negative and Chinese positive has proven to be an oversimplification. There are Indo-Sinitic cultural differences, but this distinction applies neither to Sengzhao, nor even to Jizang 吉藏. The inadequacy of framing Chinese Madhyamaka as positive is a topic for a more detailed discussion elsewhere. Briefly stated, both Sengzhao and Jizang clarify how emptiness brackets making claims and it does not require a commitment to substance or position. Thus, for instance, Jizang explicitly noted in his *Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises* (*Sanlun Xuan Yi* 三論玄義) how his argument that the Mādhyamika 'refutes the incorrect and demonstrates the correct' (*poxie xianzheng* 破邪顯正) should not be construed as a turn toward another variety of assertion and affirmation: 'That there are negation and affirmation, we consider "incorrect". That there are neither affirmation nor negation, we designate "correct"'.⁴⁴ It is in the pausing of conceptual and linguistic affirmation, and the very compulsion for affirmation, that the expansive existential releasement of all things in non-affirmation occurs.

The ordinary compulsion toward fixating affirmation and identification, and affirming alternative assertions through implicative negation, makes the distinctive strategies of Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao appear difficult to comprehend and assess. They call into question not only the constructed givenness and positivity of conventional familiar realities, and their conceptual and ontological elaborations, but also their negation and any potential dialectical resolution in the assertion of both-and (e.g. both a and not a) or neither-nor (neither a nor not a).

As delineated in this paper, the emptying stillness of the middle does not rest in logical maneuvering or dialectical and dialethic discourses that encompass all contradictions and differences in the affirmation of identity.⁴⁵ Emptiness is not a concept or reality to be asserted and upheld nor does it assert or destroy through negation, as negation can be used to suspend without drawing further conclusions or a new synthesis. In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, the practice of emptying enacts a curative therapeutics of illness that expunges the illness and itself.⁴⁶ One eliminates the illness in this therapy, according to Vimalakīrti and Sengzhao, and one does not eliminate the dharmas.⁴⁷ The commentary associated with Sengzhao confirms the priority of interpreting emptiness with regard to practice and a form of life. The text conveys how the body enacting its own emptiness is free from confusion, as emptiness is the body.⁴⁸ The practice of non-eliminative and

opening emptiness, indicated by the mutuality of the body and emptying, and negation, as a specific bracketing of attachment and assertion, are linked through Vimalakīrti with exemplary images or models of health amidst sickness, perfection in ordinary imperfection, and freedom and ease within karmic *samsāra*.

The Madhyamaka deconstructive razor and meditative *epoché* undoubtedly share generalizable features with ancient skeptical, phenomenological, and Wittgensteinian therapeutics. However, it has its own uniquely bodhisattva-oriented ethical and ‘soteriological’ character and offers a provocative philosophical alternative. The Mādhyamika’s suspension consists of an array of techniques of emptying self, words, and things that are situated in the context of the exemplary great compassion of the bodhisattva who bows down to uplift the abject (Sengzhao, T1858: 158a10). Sengzhao noted the concurrence of emptiness and practice, stating that as the mind becomes emptier, practice becomes more extensive.⁴⁹

The practice-oriented diagnostic and therapeutic reading of emptiness proposed in this paper reflects its historical development and systematic role. It offers an alternative to reconstructions of Madhyamaka as a theoretical and speculative philosophy and rejoins the discursive, meditative, and ethical practices of emptiness that other readings have disconnected. Emptiness signifies primarily a ‘practical concept’: it signifies enacting emptying with respect to self and world.⁵⁰ Sengzhao takes this to mean dwelling in simplicity through discursive negation and meditative emptiness is correlational or simultaneous with suchness. It is without any need for suchness to be asserted or affirmed. It requires no ‘yes’ or ‘no’. This is not simply a Chinese innovation, even as Sengzhao interweaves it with Zhuangzi’s equalizing of yes and no, this and that (Zhuangzi, 2013, 10). Nāgārjuna stated that: ‘No Dharma whatsoever was ever taught by the Buddha to anyone’ (MMK 25.24). There is no need for it, because where there is emptiness, there are all things and where there is no emptiness there is nothing at all (Nāgārjuna, 2010, p. 41).

Notes

1. On Ajñāna skepticism and its relation to Buddhism, see Jayatilleke (1963). On Pyrrhonian skepticism and its possible relation to Buddhism, see Beckwith (2017). Ajñāna appears to be the most likely shared source for Buddhist and Pyrrhonian skeptical strategies.
2. See *Samyutta Nikāya* 22.22 in Bodhi (2005), pp. 871–872.
3. As in Pāli Buddhist texts such as the *Culasuññata Sutta*, *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (the Sanskrit *Samyuktāgama* is cited in Madhyamaka sources), and the *Mahasuññata Sutta*. On the early meanings and development of emptiness, compare Choong (1999).
4. On the history and forms of Indian Madhyamaka, see della Santina (1986); Ruegg (1981).
5. Essays attributed to Sengzhao are contained in volume T1858. All Taishō Tripiṭaka, the standard Chinese Buddhist canon, references are to volume and passage number (for example: T1858: 155b03).
6. See Sengzhao, T1858: 155b03 and 155b08.
7. On their correspondence and its disputes, which directly concern Sengzhao’s reliance on skeptical and paradoxical language drawn from Madhyamaka and Daoism, see Streif (2014).
8. MMK will be cited by chapter and verse. Translations are adopted from Nāgārjuna (2013). On Nāgārjuna’s larger context and thought, see Walser (2005).
9. For an overview of Indian Madhyamaka sources, see della Santina (1986); Ruegg (1981). For early Chinese Madhyamaka sources, see Cheng (1984); Liu (1994); and Robinson (1967).

- Svatantrika*, retrospectively attributed to Bhāviveka, maintains that Madhyamaka uses external autonomous syllogistic reasoning (*svātantra*) to refute a view. *Prāsaṅgika*, retrospectively attributed to Candrakīrti's critique of Bhāviveka, maintains that it only uses the 'logical consequence' (*prasaṅga*) of the view to immanently refute it as self-contradictory.
10. Reconstructions and formalizations that adopt logical theories after Dignāga, as well as contemporary logical theories such as dialetheism (Priest, 2018), are of course legitimate. They are unfamiliar within the contexts of Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao's adaptation of Madhyamaka which is the primary focus of the present contribution.
 11. That is, the assertion of neither-nor is construed as denying dependent origination and asserting causelessness. On the context and logic of the *catuṣkoṭi*, see Priest (2018); Westerhoff (2006).
 12. On Ajñāna skepticism and Buddhism, see Jayatilleke (1963), pp. 117–140; on skepticism and the fivefold *pañcakoti*, see Mills (2018).
 13. See the early Chinese translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* (*Weimojie Suo Shuo Jing* 維摩詰所說經), T475: 541b17–18.
 14. Compare Jayatilleke (1963), pp. 135–140.
 15. Such as *Brahma Net (Brahmajāla) Sutta* 23–28 (Walshe, 1995, pp. 80–81).
 16. Diogenes (1925), p. 475. He did not distinguish different forms of Indian thought and the description could well involve a conflation of different elements.
 17. Diogenes (1925), p. 517; also compare Sextus (1933), p. 9.
 18. Sextus Empiricus remarked: 'we follow a line of reasoning which, in accordance with appearances, points us to a life conformable to the customs of our country and its laws and institutions, and to our own instinctive feelings' (Sextus, 1933, p. 13). Hume (1993) pursues a moderate skeptical critique of dogmatism and radical skepticism for the sake of 'common life'. Practicing emptiness, which encompasses emptying appearances and feelings, leads to great compassion according to Nāgārjuna (1997) and Śāntideva (1933). Although often ignored in recent scholarship, this practical and ethical dimension informs the agendas of the more philosophical texts. The relation between antinomian ethics and 'altruistic' or 'responsive' ethics in forms of Buddhism such as Chan is considered in Nelson (2020), pp. 119–138. On Nāgārjuna's complexly mediated and rich context, see Walser (2005). On varieties of South Asian and European skepticism, see also Mills (2018).
 19. On Daoist and mysterious learning discourses of nothingness, see Chai (2010); Chai (2014); Nelson 2020.
 20. Edmund Husserl's phenomenological *epoché* aims to open a new sphere of inquiry, knowledge, and assertion in relation to things as they show themselves. The Madhyamaka *epoché* might indicate the things themselves, if suchness can be so interpreted, but suspends the promise of knowledge and assertion.
 21. On the problem of emptiness and causality, see Siderits (2004).
 22. Conze (1985), p. 61 and 103. Paradigmatic accounts of Sengzhao and Chinese Madhyamaka in English are found in Cheng (1984); Liebenthal (1968); Liu (1994); and Robinson (1967).
 23. On the context and use of wisdom (*prajñā*) in Sengzhao, compare Thompson (2008).
 24. Sengzhao, T1858: 152a02.
 25. 'wuzhi zixu 物之自虛' (Sengzhao, T1858: 152a06 and 153a02).
 26. See Sengzhao, T1858: 152a06, 152b09, 153a02.
 27. Buddhism is often depicted as idealistic, even though it is missing the constitutive or transcendental subject that characterizes modern European varieties of idealism.
 28. On Daoism and meontology, see Chai (2014). On Sengzhao's use of Daoist language and sources, see Tan (2008).
 29. On nothingness in mysterious learning and Wang Bi, which initially shaped early Chinese Buddhist conceptions of emptiness and became a target of Sengzhao's criticism, see Chai (2010) and Nelson (2020).
 30. '非有非真有, 非無非真無耳' (Sengzhao, T1858: 152a22).

31. '諸法不有不無' (Sengzhao, T1858: 152a29). The reference is uncertain, perhaps it is (following Yuankang) to T1564: 7c16–17 ('若使無有有, 云何當有無? 有無既已無, 知有無者誰?') or T1564: 7c24 ('虛空非有亦非無').
32. '物我同根, 是非一氣' (Sengzhao, T1858: 152a12). Compare *Zhuangzi*, chapter two: 'Heaven and earth were born together with me; the myriad things and I are one' (天地與我並生, 而萬物與我為一).
33. The expression '*chushi erzhen* 觸事而真' (Sengzhao, T1858: 153a05) suggests a tactile bodily entwining with genuine suchness.
34. Sengzhao, T1858: 156a03. This Zhuangzian expression is used in T1858: 153a23, 153c27, 156a03. Interestingly, Sengzhao does not use the expression *wangyan* 妄言 (wild nonsensical words) that more frequently appears in the *Zhuangzi* to indicate a deconstructive reorienting linguistic strategy. On 'deconstructive' linguistic strategies in Daoism and Chinese Buddhism, see Wang (2003).
35. A standard argument against radical skepticism is the performative impossibility of consistently practicing or living radical agnostic doubt and indifference amidst daily affairs that require reliance on habit and custom (Hume, 1993, p. 28). The indifference model can, however, be construed as aspirational or regulative, as in Pyrrho's remark that the skeptic strives for this state of mind despite human weaknesses (Diogenes, 1925, p. 479). Diogenes notes that some skeptics aim at a state of mild gentleness (*prautēs*) rather than indifference (*apátheia*) (Diogenes, 1925, p. 519). Sengzhao's responsiveness (*ying*) model has an anti-perfectionist element of recognizing how wisdom occurs in ignorance and perfection in imperfection, such that absolute states of perfection, indifference, and so on, are unnecessary. Also note that the exemplary bodhisattvas are often described as radically altruistic. Since they are no longer limited by the boundaries of self and other, and they are compassionate without following a dogmatic rule or norm to be so, thus avoiding the critique of dogmatic ethics made by Sextus Empiricus, they are in a sense beyond both self-absorbed egoism and self-sacrificial altruism. One might accordingly speak of an ethics of releasement and responsiveness instead of a dogmatic form of altruism and vision of the good.
36. On the underemphasized ethical elements of Sengzhao's discourse, see Yen (2019).
37. See, for instance, the summary of this strategy in Sengzhao, T1858: 150c20–22.
38. See Zhuangzi, 2013, 10 and Sengzhao, T1858: 156b26–27.
39. '言其非有者, 言其非是有, 非謂是非有; 言其非無者, 言其非是無, 非謂是非無。非有, 非非有; 非無, 非非無。' (Sengzhao, T1858: 156b26–7).
40. '*wushi, wudang* 無是, 無當' (Sengzhao, T1858: 154b05).
41. Compare his statements '齊觀即己莫二' (Sengzhao, T1858: 159b28) and '齊萬有於一虛' (Sengzhao, T1858: 156c21).
42. '然則道遠乎哉? 觸事而真' (Sengzhao, T1858: 153a04).
43. '四大元無主, 五陰本來空, 將頭臨白刃, 猶似斬春風。' (Sengzhao, T2076: 435a29).
44. '破邪顯正。答夫有非有是此則為邪。無是無非乃名為正。所以命篇辨破邪顯正。' (Sengzhao, T1852: 7a07–8). On the question of non-affirmation in Jizang, see Zhang (2018) and Rogacz (2015).
45. On contradiction and indeterminacy in Sengzhao's philosophy of language, see Ho (2013). Note that I see paradoxes in Sengzhao as having a performative and experiential transformative function through disorientation and reorientation rather than leading to assertions about the unity of contradictions.
46. See T475: 545a13–17; also compare Sengzhao, T1858: 152b09 and the Vimalakīrti commentary T1775: 377a13.
47. Compare T475: 545a13–17; T1775: 377a13; and T1858: 152b09.
48. See the commentary in T1775: 328a04–7.
49. '心彌虛, 行彌廣' (Sengzhao, T1858: 160c23).
50. Of course, following Wittgenstein, if meaning is use and use is practice, then all concepts are, in the end, practical. 'Practical concept' means more specifically one that has its import in being repeatedly performatively enacted in the context of other communicative, meditative, and ethical practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Primary Chinese Electronic Sources

- CBETA: *Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection*. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <http://www.cbeta.org> [cited by Taishō Tripitaka volume and passage number].
- T475. Unknown Author(s), *Weimojie Suo Shuo Jing* 維摩詰所說經 [Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra], trans. Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T0475>
- T1564. Longshu 龍樹 (Nāgārjuna), *Zhonglun* 中論 [Mūlamadhyamakakārikā], notes by Piñgala (Qingmu 青目), trans. Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1564>
- T1775. Attributed to Sengzhao and colleagues, *Zhu Weimojiejing* 注維摩詰經 [Annotations on the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra]. Accessed December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1775>
- T1852. Jiza ng 吉藏, *Sanlun Xuan Yi* 三論玄義 [Profound Meaning of the Three Treatises]. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1852>
- T1858. Sengzhao 僧肇, *Zhaolun* 肇論 [Discourses of Zhao]. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1858>
- T1859. Yuankang 元康, *Zhaolun shu* 肇論疏 [Commentary on the Zhaolun]. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1859>
- T1860. Wencai 文才, *Zhaolun Xinshu* 肇論新疏 [New Commentary on the Zhaolun]. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1860>
- T2076. *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 [Jingde Lantern Records]. Retrieved December 29, 2022, from <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T2076>

Other Sources

- Beckwith, C. I. (2017). *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's encounter with early Buddhism in Central Asia*. Princeton University Press.
- Bodhi, B. (Trans.). (2005). *Connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications.
- Buddhapālita. (2021). *Buddhapālita's commentary on Nāgārjuna's middle way (Buddhapālita-Mūlamadhyamaka-Vṛtti)* (I. J. Coghlan, Ed.). Wisdom Publications.
- Chai, D. (2010). Meontology in early xuanxue thought. *Journal of Chinese philosophy*, 37(1), 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12171>
- Chai, D. (2014). Daoism and wu. *Philosophy Compass*, 9(10), 663–671. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-03701008>
- Cheng, H.-L. (1984). *Empty logic: Madhyamika Buddhism from Chinese sources*. Philosophical Library.
- Choong, M. K. (1999). *The notion of emptiness in early Buddhism*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Conze, E. (Ed.). (1985). *The large sutra on perfect wisdom: With the divisions of the Abhisamayalankara*. University of California Press.
- della Santina, P. (1986). *Madhyamaka schools in India*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Diogenes. (1925). *Lives of eminent philosophers*. (R. D. Hicks ed., Vol. 2). Harvard University Press.
- Ho, C. H. (2013). Ontic indeterminacy and paradoxical language: A philosophical analysis of Sengzhao's linguistic thought. *Dao*, 12(4), 505–522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-013-9347-9>
- Hume, D. (1993). *An enquiry concerning human understanding*.
- Jayatilleke, K. N. (1963). *Early Buddhist theory of knowledge*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Liebenthal, W. (Ed.). (1968). *Chao lun: The treatises of Sengzhao*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Liu, M. W. (1994). *Madhyamaka thought in China*. Brill.

- Lynn, R. J. (Ed.). (1999). *The classic of the way and virtue: A new translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. Columbia University Press.
- Mills, E. (2018). *Three pillars of skepticism in classical India: Nagarjuna, Jayarasi, and Sri Harsa*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nāgārjuna. (1997). *The precious garland: An epistle to a king* (J. Dunne & S. McClintock, Eds.). Wisdom Publications.
- Nāgārjuna. (2010). *The dispeller of disputes: Nāgārjuna's Vīgrahavyāvartanī* (J. Westerhoff, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Nāgārjuna. (2013). *Nāgārjuna's middle way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (S. Katsura & M. Siderits, Eds.). Wisdom Publications. [cited as MMK with chapter and verse].
- Nāgārjuna. (2018). *Crushing the categories (Vaidalyaprakaraṇa)* (J. Westerhoff, Ed.). Wisdom Publications.
- Nelson, E. S. (2020). *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429399145>
- Nelson, E. S. (2020). Language and nothingness in Wang Bi. In D. Chai (Ed.), *Dao companion to Xuanxue 玄學 [Neo-Daoism]* (pp. 287–300). Springer.
- Priest, G. (2018). *The fifth corner of four: An essay on Buddhist metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi*. Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, R. H. (1967). *Early madhyamika in India and China*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rogacz, D. (2015). Knowledge and truth in the thought of Jizang (549–623). *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, 16(4), 125–138.
- Ruegg, D. S. (1981). *The literature of the Madhyamaka school of philosophy in India*. Harrassowitz.
- Śāntideva. (1996). *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (K. Crosby, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Sextus. (1933). *Outlines of pyrrhonism* (R. G. Bury, Ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Siderits, M. (2004). Causation and emptiness in early Madhyamaka. *Journal of Indian philosophy*, 32(4), 393–419. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:INDI.0000044422.42295.6a>
- Streif, C. (2014). *Die Erleuchtung des Nordens: Zum Disput zwischen Sengzhao und Liu Yimin über die Bodhisattva-Idee des Mahayana*. [The enlightenment of the North: On the dispute between Sengzhao and Liu Yimin on the Mahayana Bodhisattva idea]. Harrassowitz.
- Tan, M. (2008). Emptiness, being and non-being: Sengzhao's reinterpretation of the Laozi and Zhuangzi in a Buddhist context. *Dao*, 7(2), 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-008-9050-4>
- Thompson, J. M. (2008). *Understanding Prajñā: Sengzhao's "wild words" and the search for wisdom*. Peter Lang.
- Tsongkhapa. (2015). *Ocean of reasoning: A great commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (N. Samten & J. L. Garfield, Eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Walser, J. (2005). *Nāgārjuna in context: Mahayana Buddhism and early Indian culture*. Columbia University Press.
- Walshe, M. (1995). *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Wisdom.
- Wang, Y. (2003). *Linguistic strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The other way of speaking*. Routledge.
- Westerhoff, J. (2006). Nāgārjuna's catuskoṭi. *Journal of Indian philosophy*, 34(4), 367–395. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-005-6172-4>
- Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*. Harper and Row.
- Yen, W. H. (2019). The ethical implications of Sengzhao's concept of the sage. *Asian Philosophy*, 29(1), 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2019.1579429>
- Zhang, E. Y. (2018). *Po: Jizang's negations in the four levels of the twofold truth*. In Y. Wang & S. Wawrytko (Eds.), *Dao companion to Chinese Buddhist philosophy* (pp. 189–216). Springer.
- Zhuangzi. (2013). *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. (B. Watson, Ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.