



# Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu on the principle of sufficient reason

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## Abstract

Canonical defenders of the *principle of sufficient reason* (PSR), such as Leibniz and Spinoza, are metaphysical foundationalists of one stripe or another. This is curious since the PSR—which says that everything has a ground, cause, or explanation—in effect, denies fundamental entities. In this paper, I explore the apparent inconsistency between metaphysical foundationalism and approaches to metaphysical system building that are driven by a commitment to the PSR. I do so by analyzing how Indian Buddhist philosophers arrive at foundationalist and anti-foundationalist positions motivated by implicit commitments to different versions of the PSR. I begin by introducing the Buddhist *principle of dependent origination* (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as a proto-PSR that is restricted to causal explanation. Next, I show how Vasubandhu’s Sautrāntika Abhidharma metaphysics is shaped by a qualified commitment to both causal and metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR. I then reveal how Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka metaphysics is driven by an unrestricted and exceptionless commitment to causal and metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR. Finally, I consider how Nāgārjuna’s account may put him in a unique position to respond to a common contemporary objection to the PSR from necessitarianism. I conclude by addressing a competing interpretation on which Nāgārjuna is best understood as an anti-rationalist rather than an uber-rationalist, as I characterize him.

**Keywords** Nāgārjuna · Vasubandhu · Principle of sufficient reason · Dependent origination · Metaphysical grounding · Foundationalism

The parent of a young child who has just learned the magical question, “why?” is confronted by the fact that chains of explanation seem to be unending, regardless of how mundane or bizarre the starting place. Worse yet, *any* statement looks susceptible to it. Even the putative showstopper, “Because I said so,” is not impervious to “why?”—or so the reflective parent must at least privately concede. Observations

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like this support intuitions endorsing the *principle of sufficient reason* (PSR), which says that everything has a ground, cause, or explanation. As intuitive and commonsensical as this principle may seem at first blush, this thoroughgoing demand for intelligibility has largely fallen out of favor as the recourse to alluringly convenient brute facts has become commonplace. Yet, those rising to the challenge of the PSR have advanced some of the most ambitious—and least commonsensical—systematic philosophical projects in the global history of philosophy.

Canonical defenders of the PSR, such as Leibniz and Spinoza, are metaphysical foundationalists of one stripe or another. This is curious since, on its face, the PSR precludes fundamental entities and facts. Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder comment, “What is perhaps most puzzling about the rationalist tradition is the steadfast certainty with which the PSR was often accepted. For the PSR in effect denies that there are fundamental facts, i.e. facts that are not grounded by anything else” (2012: 5). While Correia and Schnieder find this puzzling because they take the denial of fundamental facts to be far from obvious, I would like to focus on a different puzzle related to this same observation, namely: the apparent inconsistency between (i) metaphysical foundationalism and (ii) so-called rationalist approaches to metaphysical system building that are driven by a commitment to the intelligibility of the world in general and to the PSR in particular. I will approach this puzzle by analyzing how members of an alternative “rationalist tradition” of Indian Buddhist philosophers arrive at both foundationalist and anti-foundationalist positions implicitly motivated by different versions of the PSR, in both its causal and metaphysical grounding permutations. Specifically, I will focus on the role of the PSR in helping to shape the metaphysical systems of foundationalist Sautrāntika Abhidharma Buddhists as represented by Vasubandhu’s (c. fourth–fifth century) *Autocommentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, AKBh) and that of anti-foundationalist Madhyamaka Buddhists as represented by Nāgārjuna’s (c. second century) *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, MMK).

Proponents of metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR will owe some response to the so-called Agrippan Trilemma concerning the structure of grounding relations, which says that one must accept at least one of the following three alternatives, each of which seems to undermine the PSR when the relation of metaphysical explanation is understood as irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive:

- (i) A fundamental fact/entity, which might be (a) ungrounded or (b) self-grounding
- (ii) An infinite regress of grounding
- (iii) Mutually grounding facts/entities

But lemma (i) option (a) *ungrounded facts/entities* is a direct violation of the PSR, and option (b) *self-grounding facts/entities* would violate the irreflexivity of metaphysical explanation. Alternatively, (ii) an infinite regress of explanation with no final ground would seem to amount to no explanation *at all*. Finally, (iii) mutually grounding facts/entities look to be viciously circular, violating the asymmetry of metaphysical explanation. As I will show, Vasubandhu embraces a version of lemma (i) with his admission of ungrounded and self-grounding entities and

facts. Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, would accept a version of lemma (ii) on which chains of grounding are unending, or indefinite in length, while also allowing for instances of (iii) mutually grounding facts/entities. I will reveal how Vasubandhu's and Nāgārjuna's respective commitments to different versions of the PSR lead them to endorse these competing alternatives and suggest that Nāgārjuna is in fact the more faithful friend of this principle.

To begin, I will introduce the Buddhist *principle of dependent origination* as a proto-PSR that is restricted to causal explanation. Next, I will show how Vasubandhu's foundationalist Sautrāntika Abhidharma metaphysics is shaped by a qualified commitment to both causal and metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR. I will then reveal how Nāgārjuna's anti-foundationalist Madhyamaka metaphysics is driven by an unrestricted and exceptionless commitment to causal and metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I will consider how Nāgārjuna's account puts him in a unique position to respond to a common contemporary objection to the PSR from necessitarianism. I conclude by addressing a competing interpretation on which Nāgārjuna is best understood as an anti-rationalist rather than an uber-rationalist, as I characterize him.

## 1 Buddhist "rationalism" and the principle of dependent origination as a proto-PSR

The remarkably strong form of rationalism running through many of the scholastic traditions of Sanskrit Buddhist philosophy has, I think, been underemphasized. This rationalist inclination is evident, for instance, from the identification of inferential reasoning (*anumāna*) as the source of knowledge for claims concerning the nature of things that are of central soteriological importance, such as the negation of a substantial self (*anātman*), universal momentariness (*kṣaṇikatva*), and the rejection of intrinsic natures (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), all of which run radically counter to how things *seem* to exist based on ordinary experience.<sup>2</sup> This rationalist bent is also

<sup>1</sup> I consider these authors non-chronologically to illustrate representative pictures within Sanskrit Buddhist philosophy instantiating first a limited commitment to the PSR and then an unrestricted commitment. I thus use Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika Abhidharma as a useful, though anachronistic, point of contrast to help reveal the implicit role of the PSR in Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Still, Nāgārjuna's project may in many respects be understood as a response to diverse Ābhidharmikas among his own contemporaries—even though these did not include an account mapping precisely onto Vasubandhu's.

<sup>2</sup> In Buddhist texts, one frequently encounters claims about the preeminence of perception (*pratyakṣa*) as a source of knowledge. This is related to the commonsense notion that seeing is ordinarily a more reliable guide to the knowledge of the existence of particular things in the world than is inference. Moreover, among many Buddhist schools of thought (notably excluding Madhyamaka), perception is thought to directly acquaint us with ultimately real particulars, while inferential cognition necessarily involves concepts that distort the way things exist. It is also important to note that when it comes to realizing the truth of claims such as selflessness and momentariness, it is a special sort of non-conceptual mental/intellectual perception—yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*)—which is the kind of knowledge-event that has soteriological efficacy. Nevertheless, Buddhists are primarily concerned with truths about the nature of things that are utterly at odds with *ordinary* perception, and a sound inference yielding knowledge of such truths (e.g., selflessness and momentariness) is commonly held to be instrumentally indispensable for achieving a yogic perception of them.

evident from a rather strong, though tacit, commitment to the intelligibility of the world (*intelligibility principle*), which comes through in a marked optimism in our epistemic capacities. For instance, arguments from ignorance are not uncommon in these traditions, as in Vasubandhu's case against the existence of a substantial self on the grounds that we can have no knowledge of its existence by means of either of the two principal epistemic sources: perception and inference.<sup>3</sup> Taking this to generalize, Vasubandhu looks committed to a position on which, if I cannot underwrite a claim either rationally or empirically, then not only would the belief in that claim be unjustified, but I am entitled to conclude that the claim is *false*.

This *intelligibility principle* operates in tandem with another implicit commitment, a version of the *principle of parsimony*,<sup>4</sup> according to which, if I can supply a coherent explanation for something by appealing *only* to things of which I have direct knowledge (regardless of how unintuitive or non-commonsensical the explanation may seem), then I am *not* entitled to postulate the existence of any unperceived entity in order to play some explanatory role (regardless of how intuitive or commonsensical the existence of that entity may seem).<sup>5</sup> This inclination to suppose that the world is intelligible also comes through in a pervasive reliance on versions of the *principle of non-contradiction* and the *principle of sufficient reason*. In what follows, I will gesture to ways in which Vasubandhu's and Nāgārjuna's metaphysical systems might be understood as the output of differing attempts at following this same set of principles through to their logical conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> AKBh 9; 461,3–5: *kathaṃ punar idaṃ gamyate skandhasaṃtāna evedam ātmābhidhānaṃ vartate nānyasmin nabhidheya iti | pratyakṣānumānābhāvāt |*; “But how is it known that there exists no referent of the designation ‘self’ apart from the continuum of bundles alone? Because there is no perception or inference [that yields knowledge of the existence of such an entity]” (translation mine unless otherwise noted). It is worth noting that, in addition to perception and inference, Vasubandhu also accepts testimony (*śabda*) as a source of knowledge, but in seeking to prove a Buddhist principle to a non-Buddhist audience, guidelines for debate prohibit the citation of a source of testimony that is not accepted by all parties. Vasubandhu uses this same strategy to reject the ultimate reality of unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) dharmas, each of which he understands to be a mere negation (*pratisedhamātra*) or non-existence (*abhūta*) (AKBh ad 2.55d). See Kellner (2017) for an analysis of this line of reasoning in AKBh 9 as an argument from ignorance, where she argues that this same strategy is operative in Vasubandhu's case for idealism in the *Vimśikā*. Siderits (2021) has argued, lines of reasoning of this sort might more charitably be characterized as “arguments from lightness,” insofar as they are driven by an implicit commitment to a principle of parsimony.

<sup>4</sup> Siderits (2021), for instance, has emphasized the importance of this “principle of lightness” in driving the system-building in Buddhist philosophy in general, as particularly evident in the Sautrāntika Abhidharma tradition represented by Vasubandhu's AKBh.

<sup>5</sup> While this principle plays a central, though implicit, role in arguments denying the existence of a substantial self, one might also observe it at work in other Buddhist arguments aimed at ruling out a range of entities, such as real universals, real relations, real substances, mind-independent matter, and a creator God. There are, of course, a great many things accepted by Buddhists that do not look to be ordinarily perceptible or inferable. To accommodate such commitments, Dharmakīrti would later distinguish between two sorts of imperceptible things that require different kinds of inferences to establish: (i) things that are imperceptible (*parokṣa*) due to certain obstructing factors, which are knowable from an inference that operates through the force of actual objects (*vastubalapravṛttānumāna*); and (ii) things that are “radically imperceptible” (*atyantaparokṣa*) to ordinary cognizers, which are knowable from an inference based on testimony (*āgamāśrīūnumāna*). For a recent discussion of this, see Eltschinger (2020).

The central, though implicit, role of the PSR in driving metaphysical system-building in many traditions of Sanskrit Buddhist philosophy has been almost entirely overlooked, with the notable exception of Amber Carpenter, (2014).<sup>6</sup> But a proto-version of this principle is hiding in plain sight as a commitment unifying the diversity of Buddhist schools of thought, ranging from dualist to idealist traditions and foundationalists to anti-foundationalists. This is the *principle of dependent origination* (PDO, *pratītyasamutpāda*), according to which all conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) things are dependently originated, meaning that they come into being in dependence on causes and conditions; in other words, there is a cause, ground, or explanation for the existence of every conditioned thing. Indeed, the entire Buddhist project of resolving the problem of suffering, as formalized in the four noble truths, is based on the claim that the present state of affairs—that is, our experience of suffering in this life—is not a brute fact, but has a causal explanation, and therefore a contrary state of affairs is possible given a different set of causes and conditions.

It is worth noting that the terms translated as “cause” (*hetu*) and “condition” (*pratyaya*) in the context of dependent origination each have semantic ranges that connote explanation more generally. For instance, in addition to “cause,” *hetu* also commonly means “reason” or “ground,” being one of the standard terms referring to the reason supplied in an inferential argument as the justificatory ground for a thesis (*pratijñā*). Most generally, *hetu* refers to the category of things supplied in response to the question, “why?” Similarly, in addition to meaning “condition,” *pratyaya* also commonly means “explanation,” “ground,” or “basis.” Accordingly, while the PDO most directly demands that *entities have causes*, it may also be understood as demanding that *states of affairs have causal explanations*.

Most early discussions of dependent origination in the discourses (*sūtras*) of the Buddha pertain to the “twelve links of dependent origination” (*dvādaśāṅga-pratītyasamutpāda*), which describe the causal process by means of which individuals continually take rebirth in cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). In these passages, the Buddha claims that all the features of our existence—including our motives, our actions, and the stages of our life cycle—have causes and conditions on account of which they come into being; he further claims that in the absence of these conditions, none of these phenomena and stages of existence would occur.<sup>7</sup> Yet, we also find formulations of dependent origination as a general principle in these early discourses, as in, for instance, the following passage from the *Nidānasamyukta*:

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, Carpenter (2014: 13) makes the only mention of the resemblance between the Buddhist commitment to dependent origination and what European philosophers would later call the PSR.

<sup>7</sup> See Cox (1993) for an account of the development in early suttas of the doctrine of dependent origination from referring to the twelve links into a more general theory of causation. See also Schulman (2008) who argues that the concept of dependent origination in the earliest Buddhist sources relates only to mental processes and implies that all things are conditioned by consciousness.

PDO “If this exists, that exists; from the arising of this, there is the arising of that.”<sup>8</sup>

We might understand this as an articulation of a principle of causal explanation concerning entities that come into being, i.e., conditioned things.<sup>9</sup> This formulation is reminiscent of proto-PSRs in classical Greek philosophy, e.g., Parmenides’ statement, “And what need would have impelled it, later or earlier, to spring up—if it began from nothing?”<sup>10</sup> and Plato’s claim that, “everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause.”<sup>11</sup> As Yitzhak Melamed and Martin Lin, (2023) have pointed out, Plato’s claim does not amount to an endorsement of an unrestricted PSR since he admits of the existence of things that do *not* come into being and which therefore do not require a cause or reason, e.g., the disorderly motion that preexists the Demiurge’s creation of the world by imposing order. Still, this might be understood as a causal version of the PSR restricted to non-eternal things that *do* come into being. Similarly, given that some Buddhists accept the existence of “unconditioned” (*asaṃskṛta*) things, such as space and particular sorts of cessation, which do not originate in dependence upon causes and conditions,<sup>12</sup> we might characterize the general Buddhist PDO as a proto-PSR restricted to causal explanation concerning conditioned things that *do* come into being.

<sup>8</sup> As cited in Vasubandhu’s AKBh: *asmin satīdaṃ bhavati asyotpādād idaṃ utpadyate iti* | (AKBh ad AKK 3.28ab; 139,1). Cf. the Pāli of this formulation in the *Dasabala Sutta* of the *Nidānasamyutta* which includes what might be characterized as the inverse formulation: “When this is, that is. Once this arises, that arises. When this is not, that is not. Once this ceases, that ceases” (trans. Shulman 2008: 298); *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imass’ uppādā idaṃ uppajjati. imasmiṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodha idaṃ nirujjhati* (*Samyutta Nikāya* 12.61).

<sup>9</sup> Vasubandhu, for instance, clarifies that, in sūtras such as these, the reason that the Buddha focuses on dependent origination as it applies to living beings—when in fact it applies to both animate (*sattva*) and inanimate (*asattva*) things—was in order to instruct individuals on how to overcome ignorance given its role in their own cyclic existence (AKBh ad AKK 3.25). He cites other sūtras wherein the Buddha explains (i) dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as well as (ii) dependently originated (*pratītyasamutpanna*) dharmas as referring to all conditioned things (AKBh ad 3.28ab).

<sup>10</sup> Fragment B8 9–10; trans. J. Barnes (1987: 82–83).

<sup>11</sup> *Timaeus* 28a; trans. Zeyl (2000: 13).

<sup>12</sup> In Abhidharma lists of ultimately real things, such as the seventy-five dharmas of the Sarvāstivāda, there are commonly three unconditioned dharmas: (i) space (*ākāśa*) understood as the absence of obstruction, (ii) the cessation of contaminated dharmas and rebirth, which is attained through analysis (*pratisamkhyā-nirodha*), and (iii) the cessation of the arising of future dharmas, which is not attained through analysis, but can be said to exist by virtue of the absence of the causes for their arising (*apratīsamkhyā-nirodha*). Vasubandhu (AKBh ad 2.55d) explains that, according to Sarvāstivādins, unconditioned things cannot *have* causes or results since they exist outside of time, but one of them—cessation attained through analysis—can *be* an effect of a sort. And all of them can *be* causes of a sort; specifically, Sarvāstivādins hold that unconditioned things can be efficient causes (*kāraṇa-hetu*) insofar as they do not obstruct the arising of any other dharma.

## 2 The PSR and its taming in Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika Abhidharma

Dissenting from competing Abhidharma Buddhist schools of thought, Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika Abhidharma rejects the reality of unconditioned things,<sup>13</sup> insisting that everything is beholden to the PDO: *whatever* exists is dependently originated. As he states in his AKBh, “nothing is independent since everything comes into being in dependence on conditions.”<sup>14</sup> Vasubandhu, thus, looks committed to an apparently *unrestricted* application of the PDO understood as a causal version of the PSR.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, once we get a more complete picture of the Sautrāntika ontology in place, it will instead become evident that *qualified* versions of both causal and metaphysical grounding varieties of the PSR are operative in this system.

### 2.1 Vasubandhu on causal explanation

To begin fleshing out Vasubandhu's understanding of the PDO, let us look to his analysis of the *Nidānasamyukta* passage cited above: “[i] If this exists, that exists; [ii] from the arising of this, there is the arising of that.” One might reasonably wonder what the difference is between clauses [i] and [ii]. As Vasubandhu explains:

- [i] *If x exists, y exists* clarifies that *x* is not the exclusive cause of *y* owing to the impossibility of a single cause being wholly responsible for the existence of any given effect.
- [ii] *From the arising of x, there is the arising of y* clarifies that *x* temporally precedes *y*.<sup>16</sup>

We might, then, formulate Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika interpretation of the PDO as follows:

PDO<sub>S</sub>            If *x* exists, then *x* comes into being due to some causes (*y*, *z*, etc.),  
                          (i) none of which is exclusively responsible for the existence of *x*  
                          and (ii) each of which temporally precedes *x*.

Several notable features of Vasubandhu's account of causation are readily apparent from this formulation. First, causes temporally precede their results. This is in keeping with Vasubandhu's insistence that causation is an asymmetric relation, a point on which he disagrees with other Abhidharma traditions such as the Vaibhāṣika, who accept instances of symmetrical causation (*anyo'nyaphalārthena*) between mutually supporting causes that exist simultaneously, for instance, a

<sup>13</sup> *sarvam evāsaṃskṛtam adravyam iti sautrāntikāḥ* | (AKBh ad 2.55d; 82,4).

<sup>14</sup> *nāsti kasyacit svāntṛyam | pratīyāparatantrā hi sarve bhāvāḥ pravartante* | (AKBh 9; 477,3).

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Vasubandhu insists that all things are both (i) caused, i.e., they are “dependently originated” (*pratīyasamutpanna*), and that they themselves are also (ii) causes for other things, i.e., they are implicated by the phrase “dependent origination” (*pratīyasamutāda*) (AKBh ad 3.28ab).

<sup>16</sup> See AKBh ad 3.28ab; 138,25–139,6. This is one of several explanations that Vasubandhu considers.



cognition (*citta*) and a mental activity (*caitta*).<sup>17</sup> Still, one point on which these Abhidharma traditions agree is that all causal relations are irreflexive; nothing can be a cause or condition of itself, just as a knife cannot cut itself (AKBh *ad* 2.51).

Second, the PDO<sub>S</sub> also makes explicit that Vasubandhu (along with Buddhists in general, for that matter) is committed to plural causation, by which I refer to the claim that no single cause can be wholly responsible for the existence of anything—including the totality of things. Plural causation rules out the possibility that a unitary creator God, unitary prime matter, or anything of the like could be responsible for the origination of the world,<sup>18</sup> and it also entails that no single cause can necessitate the occurrence of any effect(s). Instead, everything arises in dependence on a complex (*sāmagrī*) of causes and conditions. Incidentally, Buddhists like Vasubandhu are not only committed to what I am calling “plural causation,” but also to causal pluralism, which says that causation does not refer to just one kind of relation. According to many Abhidharma accounts, up to six kinds of causes (*hetu*) and four kinds of conditions (*pratyaya*) are collectively responsible for the arising of a given effect.<sup>19</sup> Some causes directly contribute to the origination of the result, while others only indirectly contribute by not obstructing the result—yet all are classified as a cause in the broadest sense of being a reason for something’s existence (*kāraṇa-hetu*).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> On the class of “co-existent cause” (*sahabhū-hetu*), see AKK 2.50. The four elements are also said to stand in this sort of causal relation with one another. Vasubandhu rejects this kind of cause (AKBh *ad* 2.51d) and argues that one can only figuratively say that any cause produces its result in the present moment, when in fact, at the time that the result occurs, the cause has already ceased to exist (AKBh *ad* 2.59c). The Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika acceptance of symmetrical causal relations would preclude such relations being transitive, as causal relations are often supposed to be. While Vasubandhu may be committed to the transitivity of causal relations, this property is not explicitly discussed.

<sup>18</sup> See AKBh *ad* 2.64d for Vasubandhu’s argument against the possibility of a creator God as the single cause of the world.

<sup>19</sup> See Vasubandhu’s presentation of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika enumeration of six kinds of causes and four kinds of conditions in AKBh *ad* 2.49–73. There is a partial overlap in these lists: while all causes are also conditions, not all conditions are causes: the immediately preceding condition (*samanantara-pratyaya*) and cognitive object condition (*ālabana-pratyaya*) are *not* causes, and these two sorts of conditions are restricted to explaining cognitions and mental states. While Vasubandhu recognizes all four kinds of conditions, he does not accept all six kinds of causes; for instance, he rejects the co-existent cause as noted above.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of causal pluralism in Vasubandhu vis-à-vis Plato, see Kamtekar (*forthcoming*), where she identifies a helpful respect in which the two varieties of the efficient cause (*kāraṇahetu*) might be understood as causes in the productive sense and causes in the dependence sense. These two varieties of *kāraṇahetu* when understood as a cause in the most general sense are (i) a cause that is a primary reason for something’s existence (*pradhānaḥ kāraṇahetuḥ*), as a seed is to a sprout, and (ii) a cause that is a subordinate reason for something’s existence by virtue of not obstructing (*anāvāraṇa*) its origination, as is the damp soil that does not obstruct the growth of a spout (AKBh *ad* 2.50a). Interestingly, Sarvāstivādins do not even require that a cause in this second non-obstructive sense be in principle *capable* of obstructing the origination of the result, precluding a counterfactual account of this sort of causation. The outcome is that for any given thing (*x*) that originates, every non-*x* thing is a non-obstructive cause for the origination of *x*. And since Sarvāstivādins accept the reality of dharmas in the three times, this includes not only past and present things, but even future things, which have themselves yet to originate. This also includes unconditioned things that are said to exist outside of time. Since Vasubandhu denies the ultimate reality of non-present and unconditioned things, these things could not be causes in this—or any—sense on his view (AKBh *ad* 2.55d).



Finally, a third important feature of Vasubandhu's account of causation follows from the PDO<sub>S</sub> when taken together with his commitments to the irreflexivity and asymmetry of causal relations, namely, that all causal chains are without beginning. There can be no first cause or first set of causes; there can be no cause that is itself uncaused. As Vasubandhu states,

“Thus, the cycle of existence is without beginning.” [AKK 3.19d]

For, supposing there *were* a beginning, it would be without a cause. And if one thing existed without a cause, then in that case, *everything* could manifest without a cause. And it is observed that a seed has the capacity to give rise to a sprout, etc. due to strict spatiotemporal regularity, and likewise for fire with respect to cooking, etc. Thus, there exists no actual thing that is without a cause. Moreover, the theory that a permanent cause could exist has already been rejected [owing to the incompatibility between permanence and causal efficacy]. Therefore, cyclic existence in fact has no beginning. However, since birth occurs in dependence upon causes, an end to cyclic existence due to the destruction of its cause *is* possible, just as for a sprout when its seed is burned.<sup>21</sup>

Here, Vasubandhu supports his commitment to a beginningless chain of causation by arguing that a single violation of the PDO<sub>S</sub> would vitiate the demand for causal explanation in general, entailing the absurd consequence that *everything* could originate without a cause.

To begin to clarify the scope of the PDO<sub>S</sub>, it is first important to note that only positive entities—and not absences—have causes, as implied by Vasubandhu's argument for universal momentariness from destruction (*vināśitvānumāna*; AKBh ad 4.2–4.3b). Here, he argues that the cessation of anything cannot itself have a cause, since, strictly speaking, cessation is merely an absence, or a non-existence; and since non-existences are not properly *things*, they do not have causes. For this reason, everything *by its very nature* exists for only a moment, automatically going out of existence immediately after coming into being. Now, in addition to demanding that entities themselves have causes, the PDO<sub>S</sub> may also be understood as demanding that all actual states of affairs have causal explanations. And we may further apply a version of this principle to truths concerning the existence of actual entities; in other words, any true existence claim about any actual entity will have a causal explanation. This parallel application of a principle to both things and truths about things would seem natural in this intellectual context and is reflected by the fact that the semantic range of the Sanskrit term commonly translated as “truth”—*satya*—may

<sup>21</sup> *ity anādhivavacakraṁ* | [AKK 3.19d] ... *ādau hi parikalpyamāne tasyāhetukatvam eteṣu saṁjeyeta sati cāhetukatve sarvaṁ evedam ahetukaṁ prāduḥsyāt* | *dr̥ṣṭam cāṅkurādiṣu bījādīnāṁ sāmārthyam deśakālapratīnīyamād agnyādīnāṁ ca pākajādiṣu iti nāsti nirhetukaḥ prādurbhāvah* | *nītyakāraṇāstītvavādāś ca prāg eva paryudastah* | *tasmān nasy eva saṁsārasyādīḥ* | *antas tu hetuḥsayāt yuktaḥ* | *hetvadhīnatvājjanmano bījakṣayādivāṅkurasyeti* | (AKBh ad 3.19; 130.20–131.2). While the succession of births may end for an individual, it is a more contentious question whether cyclic existence can/will end for all sentient beings, who are often said to be numberless, or limitless. Nāgārjuna, for instance, claims that cyclic existence has no beginning *or* end (MMK 11.1).

also include “existence” or “reality.” So, for example, when Vasubandhu defines the theory of two truths (*satyadvaya*)—which refers to the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*)—he does so by explaining two ontological statuses: conventionally reality and ultimately reality.<sup>22</sup> And, significantly, as it turns out, only ultimately real things are beholden to the PDO<sub>S</sub>.

## 2.2 From causal to metaphysical explanation

A look at Vasubandhu’s presentation of this twofold ontology—ultimate and conventional reality—indicates that (i) not only is there is an important sense in which his commitment to a causal version of the PSR is *qualified* insofar as it applies only to ultimately real things, but also that (ii) a metaphysical grounding version of the PSR is operative in his Sautrāntika system. Sautrāntika ultimate reals (*paramārtha-sat*) are also referred to as “substantial reals” (*dravya-sat*), but they do not conform to a standard substance-property ontology on which properties inhere in a substratum-like substance, which may persist despite changes in its accidental properties. Rather, ultimate reals are momentary simples that are more akin to property instances or tropes.<sup>23</sup> Given that they are also causally efficacious, this might also be best understood as an event-ontology, or action-ontology, rather than a thing-ontology, with each ultimate real enacting its unique sort of causal efficacy and immediately self-destructing. Nevertheless, ultimate reals *do* have intrinsic natures, which capture their defining characteristics. As Vasubandhu explains:

If something is no longer cognized upon being divided into parts, then it is conventionally real. For example, a pot is like this since, once it has been broken to pieces, one no longer cognizes the pot. And if something is no longer cognized upon having been mentally abstracted from other things, then it too should be known as conventionally real. For example, water is like this since once properties such as color, etc., have been excluded, one no longer cognizes water... If the cognition of something persists even after having been divided into parts or excluded from other properties, then it is ultimately real. For example, matter is like this, since, once some object has been divided into atoms, or else once it has been mentally abstracted from properties such as taste, etc., the cognition of the intrinsic nature of matter persists. One should also regard feeling, etc., to be like this.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Whether conventional reality constitutes an ontological status proper or is instead a mere negation of something’s ultimate reality has been a topic of recent dispute; see, for instance, McDaniel’s (2019a, 2019b) interpretation of Vasubandhu’s Abhidharma as a kind of ontological pluralism, with responses from Brenner (2020) and Guerrero (2022).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Goodman (2004).

<sup>24</sup> AKBh ad 6.4: *yasmin navayavaśo bhinne na tadbuddhir bhavati tat saṃvṛtisat / tadyathā ghaṭaḥ / tatra hi kapāśo bhinne ghaṭabuddhir na bhavati / tatra cānyānapohya dharmān buddhyā tadbuddhirna bhavati taccāpi saṃvṛtisat veditavyam / tadyathāmbu / tatra hi buddhyā rūpādīndharmān apohyāmbubuddhir na bhavati / ... tatra bhinne’pi tadbuddhir bhavaty eva / anyadharmāpohe’pi buddhyā tat paramārthasat / tadyathā rūpam / tatra hi paramāṇuśo bhinne vastuni rasārthān api ca dharmān apohya buddhyā rūpasya svabhāvabuddhir bhavaty eva / evaṃ vedanādāyo’pi draṣṭavyāḥ / (334,3–6; 8–10).*

Here, Vasubandhu explains that the mark of something that is merely conventionally real, as opposed to something that is ultimately real, is that the object in question is no longer cognized once it has been either (i) actually or analytically divided into proper parts, or (ii) analytically abstracted from other property instances. Sautrāntikas like Vasubandhu are mereological nihilists of a sort, insofar as composites—understood as anything that can be broken down physically or analytically into proper parts—do not count as ultimately real. Instead, all composites, like pots and persons, are conventionally real and are conceptually constructed in dependence (*upādāya prajñapti*) upon some ultimately real basic parts, such as spatially partless particles (momentary instances of obstruction) and temporally partless moments of consciousness (momentary instances of cognizing).

Salient features of these two ontological categories may be summed up as follows:

Ultimately real = substantially real ( <i>dravyasat</i> )	Conventionally real = nominally real ( <i>prajñaptisat</i> )
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possesses an intrinsic nature</li> <li>• Caused and causally efficacious</li> <li>• Simple</li> <li>• Ontologically fundamental and conceptually primitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does <i>not</i> possess an intrinsic nature</li> <li>• <i>Neither</i> caused <i>nor</i> causally efficacious</li> <li>• <i>Not</i> simple</li> <li>• <i>Neither</i> ontologically fundamental <i>nor</i> conceptually primitive</li> </ul>
<i>E.g., spatially partless particles, temporally partless moments of consciousness</i>	<i>E.g., persons, porcupines, pancakes</i>

For the present purposes, there are two noteworthy implications of Vasubandhu's characterization of these ontological categories: First, the PDO<sub>S</sub>—as a principle of causal explanation concerning (facts about) entities that originate—applies only to (facts about) ultimately real things. That is because only ultimately real things participate in causation. And since ultimate reals are necessarily simple, composites are neither caused nor have causal efficacy themselves. That means, for example, that were one to ask for the cause(s) of the totality, or the world-whole, this question, according to Vasubandhu, would be ill-formed.

Second, on this picture, conventionally real things are metaphysically grounded in ultimately real things. If something is conventionally real (like a table, chair, person, or porcupine) as opposed to a mere fiction or pseudo-entity (like a hobbit or a jackalope), then it must be grounded in ultimately real, simple fundamentalia. One *could*, then, sensibly inquire about the metaphysical ground of the totality, which would consist in a survey of all the ultimately real fundamental entities.

In short, we might sum up a Sautrāntika version of the PSR as saying:

PSR<sub>S</sub>            Every ultimately real thing has ultimately real causes, and every conventionally real thing has ultimately real metaphysical grounds.

To begin to spell this out in more detail, let us start by pulling apart two versions of the PSR, one which demands an explanation for the existence of things (PSR<sub>E</sub>) and one which demands an explanation for the properties of things (PSR<sub>P</sub>):

PSR <sub>E</sub>	If $x$ exists, then there is some thing(s) in virtue of which $x$ exists.
PSR <sub>p</sub>	If $x$ is F, then there is some thing(s) in virtue of which $x$ is F.

How, then, should we understand these two versions of the PSR in relation to Vasubandhu's two ontological categories? First, when it comes to ultimately real things, the explanation for their *existence*, as demanded by the PSR<sub>E</sub>, will be causal:

*Sautrāntika causal version of the PSR for ultimately real things*

PSR <sub>SCU</sub>	If $x$ is ultimately real, then the fact that $x$ exists is wholly due to, or explained by, some ultimately real causes ( $y$ , $z$ , etc.).
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In response to the PSR<sub>p</sub>, however, the properties of ultimately real things are explained, at least partially, by their respective intrinsic natures:

*Sautrāntika grounding version of the PSR for ultimately real things*

PSR <sub>SGU</sub>	If $x$ is ultimately real and $x$ is F, then the fact that $x$ is F is at least partially due to, or explained by, $x$ 's intrinsic nature.
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Consider, for example, some ultimately real fundamental bit of matter  $m$ : (i)  $m$ 's existence is explained by its ultimately real causes; (ii)  $m$ 's property of solidity is explained by its intrinsic nature; and (iii)  $m$ 's relational property of being to the left of fundamental particle  $p$  is explained by (a)  $m$ 's intrinsic nature, which accounts for why it is the sort of thing that could be spatially located *at all*, (b)  $m$ 's ultimately real causes, which account for why it exists at a particular time and place, (c) the existence and properties of the ultimate real  $p$ , as well as (d) the ultimately real momentary cognition that considers  $m$  in respect of  $p$ .<sup>25</sup> Relational properties themselves cannot be among the final explanatory grounds for anything, since, being necessarily complex, they are not ultimately real.

When it comes to conventionally real things, which cannot participate in causal processes, both their existence and their properties are explained, at least in part, by the existence and properties of some ultimately real things in which they are grounded:

*Sautrāntika grounding version of the PSR for conventionally real things*

PSR <sub>SGC</sub>	If $x$ is conventionally real and $x$ is F, then (i) the fact that $x$ exists and (ii) the fact that $x$ is F are explained by the existence and intrinsic natures of some ultimately real things ( $y$ , $z$ , etc.).
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Consider, for example, a conventionally real forest fire: (i) the forest fire's existence is explained by the existence of the ultimately real material fundamentalia ( $m$ ,  $n$ ,

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most important *at least apparently* relational property ascribed to ultimate reals is causal efficacy. While each ultimate real's particular sort of causal efficacy is supposed to follow from its intrinsic nature, it would seem that it must also be grounded in the intrinsic nature(s) of the kind(s) of ultimate real(s) that it is capable of causing.

etc.) in which it is grounded as well as the momentary cognition that conceptually constructs ⟨forest fire⟩ on the basis of *m*, *n*, etc. (where angled brackets denote a concept)<sup>26</sup>; (ii) the forest fire's property of *heat* is explained by the intrinsic natures of the ultimate reals in which it is grounded (*m*, *n*, etc.); and (iii) the forest fire's relational property of being five miles from town is explained by (a) the intrinsic natures of the ultimate reals in which it is grounded (*m*, *n*, etc.), which account for their being the sorts of things that could be spatially located to begin with, (b) the ultimately real causes of *m*, *n*, etc., which account for why they exist at the particular time and place that they do, (c) the existence and properties of the ultimate reals in which the relatum, town, is grounded, as well as (d) the ultimately real momentary cognition that considers the forest fire in respect of the town.

The role of cognition in conceptually constructing conventional entities on the basis of some fundamental parts, carving out ordinary objects as conventional unities, and considering them in relation to other things might be clarified by taking a closer look at how Vasubandhu describes the relation between a conventional real and the ultimate reals in which it is grounded. At first pass, this relation looks to be mereological insofar as a conventionally real composite is grounded in the ultimately real basic parts that constitute it.<sup>27</sup> But Vasubandhu also characterizes it as a dependence relation of a sort, claiming that a conventionally real thing is conceptually constructed *in dependence upon* some ultimately real things. And he offers two different ways of spelling this out.<sup>28</sup> He first points to the fact that the ultimate reals are the referents of the conventionally real conceptual construct.<sup>29</sup> And these ultimately real referents are what are *in fact* perceived when we take ourselves to be perceiving some conventional entity. For example, Vasubandhu explains that the conventionally real ⟨person⟩ (*pudgala*) is a conceptual construct that refers to some ultimately real percepts, which may include basic psychological and physical constituents.

A second way that Vasubandhu explains the dependence relation that obtains between a conventionally real thing and the ultimate reals in which it is grounded is by appealing to a causal role that ultimate reals play in prompting the *mental act*

<sup>26</sup> Its existence might be further explained by the ultimately real causes of *m*, *n*, etc.

<sup>27</sup> As Loss (2016) sums up, the grounding relation is one of two prevailing accounts of the relation between the whole and its parts, with the other being the “composition as identity,” on which the whole is nothing over and above its parts but is identical with the parts that compose it taken collectively. This second view is based on the intuition that, as Lewis (1999: 83) puts it, mereology is “ontologically innocent.” There is a case to be made that Vasubandhu's understanding of the relation between conventionally real wholes and ultimately real parts is better understood on the composition as identity model. However, those inclined to take the conventionally real category seriously and read Vasubandhu as an ontological pluralist (e.g., McDaniel, 2019a) may opt for the grounding model, as suggested here.

<sup>28</sup> Here, I draw on Vasubandhu's debate with the Vātsīputrīyas in AKBh 9 on the status of the conceptual construct (*prajñāpti*) ⟨person⟩ (*pudgala*) and the precise manner in which it depends on the psycho-physical aggregates (*skandhānupādāya*). While these two ways of explaining the dependence relation are presented as a dilemma for the Vātsīputrīyas, Vasubandhu ultimately claims that both these interpretations of the relation amount to his own view.

<sup>29</sup> *kim idam upādāyēti | yady ayam arthaḥ skandhānām lakṣyate teṣv eva pudgalaprajñāptiḥ prāpnoti | yathā rūpādāmlambya teṣv eva kṣīraprajñāptiḥ |* (AKBh 9, 461,22–23).

of conceptually constructing.<sup>30</sup> We have said that conventional entities themselves cannot strictly speaking be caused; nevertheless, the momentary *mental act* of conceptually constructing some conventional entity *is* ultimately real and is causally instigated by the ultimately real things that are the percept. These ultimately real percepts each bear causal efficacy as part of their intrinsic natures, and one way that this causal efficacy is expressed is through impacting the sense faculties to help bring about a perception of them, which in turn acts as a condition for the mental act of conceptually constructing some conventional entity, which then refers back to them.

To illustrate: if some entity—say, a saguaro cactus—is conventionally real (and not a hallucination), then it is necessarily grounded in some ultimately real irreducible bits of matter, which (i) are the percept and referent of the conceptual construct ⟨saguaro cactus⟩, and which (ii) play a causal role in precipitating the mental act of conceptually constructing ⟨saguaro cactus⟩ by coming into contact with the sense faculties. To sum up, in Vasubandhu's Sautrāntika: every ultimately real thing has causes, and every conventionally real thing has metaphysical grounds. The existence of ultimate reals is explained by plural causation, and the properties of ultimate reals are (at least partially) explained by their intrinsic natures. Ultimate reals themselves are ungrounded entities and their non-relational properties are self-grounding.<sup>31</sup> When it comes to conventionally real things, both their existence and properties are explained by plural grounding,<sup>32</sup> that is, by the existence and intrinsic natures of some ultimately real things.

Finally, I take it that these Sautrāntika versions of the PSR are modally strong insofar as it is necessarily true, and not merely contingently true, that every ultimate real has some causes and that every conventional real is metaphysically grounded in some ultimate reals. Empirical falsification is not just impossible, but nonsensical. There is no explicit distinction in Buddhist thought between necessary and contingent truths. Nevertheless, Vasubandhu—and Nāgārjuna too, as we will see—aim to show that violations of their respective versions of the PSR are incoherent and therefore metaphysically impossible, implying that things are necessarily beholden to these principles.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> When explaining this dependence relation using the example of the person and the aggregates, Vasubandhu states that the aggregates are the cause of (the mental act of) conceptually constructing ⟨person⟩: *skandhānām pudgalaprajñāptikāraṇatvāt* | (AKBh 9, 461,24–5). While Vasubandhu does not elaborate on the meaning of *kāraṇa* (cause) in this context, when laying out the taxonomy of six kinds of causes in his AKBh, this term is used to refer to the primary cause (*kāraṇahetu*) responsible for bringing something into existence. On Vasubandhu's account of the *kāraṇa-hetu*, see AKBh ad 2.50a; when understood as one of the four kinds of conditions, the *kāraṇa-hetu* is classified as the dominant condition (*adhipati-pratyaya*) (see AKBh ad 62d).

<sup>31</sup> Here, I take it that the intrinsic nature of an ultimate real is self-grounding, though it might instead be characterized as ungrounded.

<sup>32</sup> The demand for *plural* grounding, incidentally, rules out any sort of priority monism.

<sup>33</sup> Attributing claims concerning existential modality to authors such as Vasubandhu and Nāgārjuna is not uncontroversial, and the place of metaphysical modality in this intellectual context merits further research. See note 53 below for more detailed discussion on this point.

From this sketch, we can see that Vasubandhu is what Michael Della Rocca, (2021) would call a “PSR-tamer” insofar as he accepts the PSR but restricts the scope of its application. To such a picture, Madhyamaka philosophers like Nāgārjuna would object that Sautrāntika Ābhidharmikas have not fully appreciated the implications of the *principle of dependent origination*, which demands that all things dependently originate in a way that includes, but is not limited to, causal dependence, and which effectively rules out fundamental, ungrounded entities with intrinsic natures. They would object that a causal explanation is an incomplete response to the demand of the PSR<sub>E</sub> and that an appeal to anything’s intrinsic nature to meet the demands of the PSR<sub>P</sub> is either a viciously circular form of self-explanation or else amounts to the PSR-violating recourse to brute facts.<sup>34</sup> Instead, Madhyamaka philosophers will insist that—as called for by their interpretation of the *principle of dependent origination*—all things are necessarily beholden to unrestricted causal and metaphysical grounding versions of the PSR.

### 3 The unrestricted and exceptionless PSR in Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka

Nāgārjuna is well-known for his critique of realist accounts of causation. As such, one might naturally think that he (like Hume) is a critic of the PSR. However, as I will try to show, Nāgārjuna might instead be cast as one of history’s most uncompromising defenders of this principle. Indeed, we find an explicit statement of (the obverse, or negative equivalent, of) an unqualified version of the PSR as a general principle in Nāgārjuna’s MMK:

PSR<sub>M</sub>            “There is nothing whatsoever for which there is no cause/reason (*hetu*).” (MMK 4.2c2d)<sup>35</sup>

Given the context of this claim, Nāgārjuna most obviously has causal explanation in mind here. However, as discussed earlier, the Sanskrit term *hetu*, which features in this claim, counts both “cause” and “reason” among its principal meanings. As evidence in support of reading the meaning of *hetu* here as inclusive of “explanation” broadly construed, we can look to a remark from one of Nāgārjuna’s commentators, Bhāviveka (c. sixth century):

If those who claim that there are no causes/grounds/reasons (*hetu*) both (i) wish to prove to us that everything is without a cause/ground/reason (*hetu*) and

<sup>34</sup> In response, Vasubandhu might appeal to a strategy like that proposed by Dasgupta (2016), on which only substantive facts are beholden to the PSR, but what he calls “autonomous facts,” such as definitions or essential facts like “x has such and such intrinsic nature” are not apt for grounding/explanation. Of course, since Nāgārjuna rejects the existence of essences, or intrinsic natures, he would deny that there are any autonomous facts; there can be no category of facts that is not apt for explanation. And even if one maintained that definitions are not grounded in real essences, Nāgārjuna would insist that there will always be extrinsic grounds that explain why something is the way that it is.

<sup>35</sup> *na cāsty arthaḥ kaścid ahetukaḥ kvacit* (Ye, 2011: 68).



(ii) wish to establish this proof by adducing a reason (*hetu*), then they contradict their own position.<sup>36</sup>

While one might suspect a spurious form of equivocation in this line of thought, Bhāviveka clearly takes the meaning of *hetu* here to include both “cause” and inference-warranting “reason.” And, as with Vasubandhu, while Nāgārjuna is most directly referring to entities in making claims of this sort, he too vacillates between talk of reality and truth owing to the broad semantic range of *satya*, and accordingly, the  $PSR_M$  might apply to both entities and truths about the existence of entities. Thus, the  $PSR_M$  says that (i) everything has causes and grounds and (ii) any truth concerning the existence and properties of any actual entity may have both causal and metaphysical explanations.

### 3.1 Madhyamaka arguments for the $PSR_M$

While Nāgārjuna dismisses out of hand the possibility that something could exist without an explanation, his commentators provide arguments in support of this claim,<sup>37</sup> some of which are similar to Vasubandhu’s argument for the PDO that we looked at earlier. For instance, Buddhapālita (c. fifth–sixth century) formulates the following reductio argument in support of the  $PSR_M$ :

Nothing arises without a cause/reason, since otherwise it would absurdly follow that [i] everything could/would originate anytime from anything, and [ii] all effort would be pointless.<sup>38</sup>

We might reconstruct the first line of reasoning as follows:

- P1 If something originated without a cause/reason, then its arising would be inexplicable.
- P2 If the origination of anything is inexplicable, then everything could/would originate from anything at any time.
- P3 Everything does not originate from anything at any time.

<sup>36</sup> *rgyu med par smra ba dag kho bo'i phyogs ni thams cad rgyu med pa las'grub par'dod la | bsgrub par bya ba ni gtan tshigs kyis'grub par'dod na ni phyogs snga ma dang'gal lo* || (PP 919).

<sup>37</sup> Nāgārjuna makes this claim in MMK 1.1 as well as MMK 4.2, and his commentators supply similar explanations when commenting on both these stanzas. In what follows, I draw from both contexts. Of course, in MMK 1.1, Nāgārjuna also denies that something could originate from a cause that is either the identical to or distinct from it. However, he rejects these possibilities for things that purportedly have an intrinsic nature. As he makes clear, particularly in MMK 24, he does *not* deny dependent origination in general as it applies to conventionally real things, all of which necessarily lack an intrinsic nature. Bhāviveka likewise clarifies in MHK 3.159ab that, from the conventional standpoint, things *do* arise from causes that are distinct from them.

<sup>38</sup> *rgyu med pa las kyang skye ba med de | rtag tu thams cad las thams cad skye bar thal bar'gyur ba'i phyir dang | rtsom pa thams cad don med pa nyid kyi skyon du'gyur ba'i phyir ro* || (BP ad MMK 1.1, 10,21–23); Sanskrit as preserved in PsP (195,5–6): *ahetuto notpadyante bhāvāḥ sadā ca sarvataś ca sarvasambhavaprasaṅgāt* ||. Buddhapālita provides the same argument in support of Nāgārjuna’s claim in MMK 4.2 (cited above): *don gang yang rgyu med pa can ni / ma mthong zhing [Saito: zhin] gang du yang ma bstan te | rtag tu thams cad las thams cad'byung bar thal bar'gyur ba'i phyir dang rtsom pa thams cad don med pa nyid kyi skyon du'gyur ba'i phyir ro* || (BP ad MMK 4.2, 60,9–12).

∴C Therefore, nothing originates without a cause/reason.

The grammar of this first absurd consequence that Buddhapālita identifies as resulting from a violation of the  $PSR_M$  is ambiguous between whether everything “could” or “would” originate from anything at any time. While the first interpretation looks straightforward, on the latter interpretation, the thought may be that one violation of the demand for explicability would vitiate the  $PSR_M$  and entail a kind of explosion. The second absurd consequence that Buddhapālita identifies is parasitic on the first: if the demand for explicability were nullified and anything could/would follow from anything else at any time, then all effort—that is, all goal-directed action—would be pointless.

Bhāviveka provides his own argument in support of the  $PSR_M$  appealing to both reason and commonsense:

“[Not without a cause/reason] does anything anywhere ever arise.” [MMK 1.1cd]

Why is this the case? The thought is as follows: [i] there is no inference which demonstrates that something could arise without a cause/reason, and [ii] the claim that something could arise without a cause/reason is false since it is defeated by both inference and common knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

While both Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka suggest that the  $PSR_M$  is commonsensical, once we appreciate that Nāgārjuna’s version of this principle demands that everything have both causal and metaphysical grounding forms of explanation, the picture of the world that results turns out to be far from commonsensical indeed. Bhāviveka once again alludes to the broader notion of explanation intimated by the  $PSR_M$  when he comments,

As for the way in which common knowledge defeats [the claim that things could originate without a cause/reason]: it is common knowledge that whatever exists in this world originates from causes, just as a cloth has threads as its causes, and a grass hut originates from grasses.<sup>40</sup>

With these examples of a cloth originating from the threads that constitute it and a grass hut from grasses, Bhāviveka points to a conception of explanation that looks less causal (in the diachronic sense) and more metaphysical, suggesting a mereological grounding principle on which composites are grounded in the parts that constitute them.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *dnegos po gang dag gang na yang || skyes pa nam yang yod ma yin || zhes bya ba'i skabs yin no || ci'i phyir zhe na | de ston pa'i rjes su dpag pa med pa'i phyir dang || rjes su dpag pa dang || grags pa'i gnod par'gyur ba'i skyon yod pa'i phyir yang ngo zhes bya bar dgongs so ||* (PP 918). Cf. *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* 3.194–195.

<sup>40</sup> *grags pa'i gnod pa ni jig rten'di na yod pa dang de ni rgyu las skye ba grags te | dper na rgyu spun dag las snam bu dang | rtsi rkyang dag las sab ma skye ba la sogs pa bzhin no ||* (PP 918).

<sup>41</sup> In classical Indian philosophy, causal accounts of constitution are not uncommon. For instance, according to Naiyāyikas and Vaiśeṣikas, whose ontology in general is regarded as commonsensical for the intellectual context, wholes (*avayavin*) inhere in their parts (*avayava*), and parts, such as eternal atoms, are the “inhered-in causes” (*samavāyi-kāraṇa*) of wholes, such as ordinary material objects. Simi-

### 3.2 The Madhyamaka ultimate truth and untaming the PSR

Nāgārjuna would regard what I am calling the  $PSR_M$  to be a version of the *principle of dependent origination*, but, as I have indicated, the dependence he has in mind outstrips causal dependence and is inclusive of a kind of mereological grounding as well as the dependent conceptual construction (*prajñaptir upādāya*)<sup>42</sup> that Vasubandhu used to characterize the metaphysical grounding relation that obtained between conventional and ultimate reals on his view. However, Nāgārjuna is an ontological egalitarian of a sort. There is only *one* ontological category that can ever be instantiated: conventional reality. And the  $PSR_M$ —in both its causal and grounding varieties—applies equally to all things in that category. To see why, let's turn to an analysis of Nāgārjuna's central commitment, the Madhyamaka ultimate truth: the universal negation (or “emptiness”) of an intrinsic nature.

The term translated here as “intrinsic nature,” *svabhāva*, most literally means “own being,” and Nāgārjuna interprets it as a strong form of ontological self-sufficiency that belongs to something by its very nature, such that if *x* has an intrinsic nature, then it both exists and is the kind of thing that it is without depending on anything else. So, we can say:

If *x* has an intrinsic nature, then there is nothing extrinsic to *x* that partially or exclusively explains the fact that *x* exists or the fact that *x* is F.

Challenging the Abhidharma view of what having an intrinsic nature entails, Nāgārjuna insists that the relevant form of explanation here is inclusive of both causation and grounding. The implication is that causal dependence is a kind of ontological dependence. The thought is that something cannot very well claim to bear its nature or properties intrinsically in any strict sense if it owes its very existence to other things—whether those things be causes, parts, or cognitions. In other words, if *x* lacks ontological independence, then given that *x* is not in a position to claim full responsibility for its own existence, it can hardly claim full responsibility for any of its properties, which must be at least partially due to, or explained by, that on which *x* ontologically depends. And if *x* is not fully responsible for its own existence or properties, neither can it be the explanatory ground for its own existence or properties.

Since *having* an intrinsic nature, on Nāgārjuna's view, amounts to a kind of ontological independence, which is precluded by the *principle of dependent origination*

Footnote 41 (continued)

larly, Sarvāstivādin Ābhidharmikas claim that the four great elements (*mahābhūta*) are the cause (*hetu*) of all the derivative forms of matter which have the great elements as their intrinsic nature (MVŚ 663a; Dhammajoti, 2009: 197).

<sup>42</sup> See MMK 24.18, where Nāgārjuna identifies dependent origination with emptiness, and in turn identifies emptiness with dependent designation: *yaḥ prattīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe | sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā* || (Ye, 2011: 426). And see, for instance, Salvini (2011) for an argument based on grammatical analysis in support of reading Nāgārjuna as equating *upādāyaprajñapti* with *prattīyasamutpāda*, as Candrakīrti does in his PsP *ad* MMK 24.18.

understood as the  $PSR_M$ , he sees the denial of intrinsic natures as entailed by the  $PSR_M$ :

There exists nothing whatsoever that is not dependently originated.

Therefore, nor does there exist anything whatsoever that is not empty. [MMK 24.19]<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, the universal negation of an intrinsic nature entails that there is nothing that is *not* grounded in, or explained by, something else—viz., the  $PSR_M$ . To *have* an intrinsic nature, then, is to violate the  $PSR_M$ . The  $PSR_M$  and the universal negation of intrinsic nature are thus mutually implicative. In fact, Nāgārjuna explicitly equates them, saying, “Dependent origination is that which we call emptiness,”<sup>44</sup> and Buddhapālita likewise claims that the ultimate truth, which we have glossed as the universal absence of an intrinsic nature, *just is* dependent origination.<sup>45</sup>

Let us look at this picture by contrast with Vasubandhu’s Sautrāntika account surveyed earlier. Recall that having an intrinsic nature was one of the defining criteria for the Sautrāntika ontological category of ultimate reality. One outcome of the Madhyamaka universal negation of an intrinsic nature, then, is the emptying of this category. Since nothing has an intrinsic nature, nothing is ultimately real. Instead, whatever exists is merely conventionally real. Now, according to Sautrāntika, only ultimately real things could participate in causation, and thus only ultimately real things were beholden to the causal version of the PSR, which said:

*Sautrāntika causal version of the PSR for ultimately real things*

$PSR_{SCU}$       If  $x$  is ultimately real, then the fact that  $x$  exists is wholly due to, or explained by, some ultimately real causes ( $y$ ,  $z$ , etc.).

According to Nāgārjuna, since nothing is ultimately real, the antecedent of the  $PSR_{SCU}$  is never satisfied, so nothing is beholden to this principle. Yet Nāgārjuna argues that participation in causation is possible *only* for something that lacks an intrinsic nature, and thus only for conventionally real things.<sup>46</sup> Madhyamaka amendments to the Sautrāntika twofold ontology might be summed up as follows:

<sup>43</sup> *apratītyasamutpanno dharmah kaścīn na vidyate | yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo’pi dharmah kaścīn na vidyate* || (Ye, 2011: 426).

<sup>44</sup> MMK 24.18ab, trans. Siderits and Katsura (2013: 277); *yaḥ pratītyasamutpāda śūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe* | (Ye, 2011: 426).

<sup>45</sup> *rtēn cing’brel par’byung ba zhes bya ba don dam pa’i bden pa mchog tu zab pa* | (BP 1,23–2,1).

<sup>46</sup> See MMK 1, 24, etc.

Ultimately real ( <i>empty category</i> )	Conventionally real ( <i>only instantiated category</i> )
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possesses an intrinsic nature</li> <li>• <del>Caused and causally efficacious</del></li> <li>• Simple</li> <li>• Ontologically fundamental and conceptually primitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does <i>not</i> possess an intrinsic nature</li> <li>• <del>Neither caused nor causally efficacious</del></li> <li>• <i>Not</i> simple</li> <li>• <i>Neither</i> ontologically fundamental <i>nor</i> conceptually primitive</li> </ul>

The ultimately real category is now empty, but causal efficacy now qualifies the conventionally real category—the only actually and possibly instantiated category.

The Mādhyamika would thus amend the PSR<sub>SCU</sub> to apply universally, yet he would also insist that a causal explanation is not a *complete* explanation for the existence of anything:

*Madhyamaka causal version of the PSR*

PSR<sub>MC</sub>      If  $x$  exists, then the fact that  $x$  exists is partially due to, or explained by, some causes ( $y, z$ , etc.).<sup>47</sup>

Why is causal explanation a necessarily incomplete explanation on this view? Since everything that exists is conventionally real, then a critical part of the story of how anything exists will involve (i) metaphysical grounding explained in terms of the mereological dependence of a composite on its proper parts and (ii) dependent conceptual construction, as discussed earlier in the Sautrāntika context, i.e., that conventionally real things are conceptually constructed in dependence on some collection of more basic constituents. But the Madhyamaka story is importantly different since the ultimate reals, as the final ground, have been eliminated from the picture.

We said that Vasubandhu was committed to the following grounding version of the PSR restricted to ultimately real things:

*Sautrāntika grounding version of the PSR for ultimately real things*

PSR<sub>SGU</sub>      If  $x$  is ultimately real and  $x$  is F, then the fact that  $x$  is F is at least partially due to, or explained by,  $x$ 's intrinsic nature.

Once again, since Nāgārjuna denies the possibility of any ultimately real entities, nothing is beholden to this principle. Moreover, Nāgārjuna would insist, the PSR<sub>SGU</sub> violates the PDO understood as a full-blown PSR insofar as it allows for self-grounding entities and fundamental facts about the essential natures of things.

We also said that Vasubandhu was committed to the following metaphysical grounding version of the PSR restricted to conventional entities:

<sup>47</sup> Mādhyamikas who accept the existence of unconditioned things would instead endorse the following version of this principle restricted to conditioned things: Necessarily, if  $x$  exists and  $x$  is a conditioned thing, then the fact that  $x$  exists is partially due to, or explained by, some causes ( $y, z$ , etc.).

*Sautrāntika grounding version of the PSR for conventionally real things*

$PSR_{SGC}$  If  $x$  is conventionally real and  $x$  is F, then (i) the fact that  $x$  exists and (ii) the fact that  $x$  is F are explained by the existence and intrinsic natures of some ultimately real things ( $y, z, etc.$ ).

Here too, Nāgārjuna would object, the appeal to fundamental entities and their intrinsic natures as a final ground of conventional reals violates the PDO. However, the Mādhyamika could amend this principle to be a grounding version of the PSR that applies equally to everything, all of which are in fact conventionally real:

*Madhyamaka grounding version of the PSR*

$PSR_{MG}$  If  $x$  exists and  $x$  is F, then (i) the fact that  $x$  exists and (ii) the fact that  $x$  is F are at least partially due to, or explained by, the existence and properties of the non- $x$  things ( $y, z, etc.$ ) in which  $x$  is grounded.

According to the Madhyamaka story, if any object we take up for analysis—say our saguaro cactus—is conventionally real (and not a hallucination), then it is necessarily grounded in some more basic parts. Yet each of these more basic parts exists in precisely the same manner, being conceptually constructed in dependence upon their own parts, and so on, *ad indefinitum*. The qualifier “at least partially” in the  $PSR_{MG}$  accounts for the fact that the existence of conventionally real things will have a causal explanation in addition to a metaphysical explanation. Yet it also functions to allow for the fact that certain relational or extrinsic properties of conventionally real objects—say the property of the saguaro cactus being fifteen meters above the aquifer—may be explained *not only* by the things in which the saguaro cactus is grounded, *but also* by other things, such as the aquifer, its spatial properties, and the more basic things in which the aquifer is grounded, etc.

To sum up, then, for Mādhyamikas like Nāgārjuna, whatever exists is merely conventionally real and is subject to both causal and grounding versions of the PSR, which might be expressed by the following revised version of the  $PSR_M$ :

$PSR_M^*$  If  $x$  exists and  $x$  is F, then (i) the fact that  $x$  exists and (ii) the fact that  $x$  is F are due to, or explained by, the existence and properties of some non- $x$  things ( $y, z, etc.$ ).

The explananda ( $y, z, etc.$ ) for the explanans ( $x$  or  $Fx$ ) may include (i) mental and/or material causes and conditions, (ii) mental and/or material parts, as well as (iii) a mental act of conceptually constructing  $\langle x \rangle$  on the basis of some parts ( $y, z, etc.$ ) or considering  $x$  in respect of some other thing.

Given that Nāgārjuna confines his application of the PSR to conventionally real things, one might at first glance suppose that he is a “PSR-tamer” similar to Kant who restricts the scope of the PSR to the domain of human experience. Yet, Nāgārjuna does not exclude ultimately real things from the scope of the PSR because they are beyond the ken of human epistemic faculties. Nor does he remain agnostic

about the possibility of a noumenal world of mind-independent entities. Rather, he argues that ultimately real things are, upon analysis, incoherent and thus metaphysically impossible. Nāgārjuna, then, looks committed to an exceptionless version of the full-blown PSR. The PSR applies to *whatever there is*, and *whatever there is* is merely conventionally real.

### 3.3 Indefinite and circular chains of explanation

The Madhyamaka insistence that the explanandum and explanans be non-identical is in keeping with most standard accounts of an explanatory relation in general, the metaphysical grounding relation, and the causal relation, all of which are ordinarily supposed to be irreflexive. So, while the  $PSR_M^*$  on its face rules out fundamental/brute facts and ungrounded entities, the irreflexivity of the relation that it implicates further rules out self-explanatory facts and self-grounding or self-caused entities.<sup>48</sup> However, an unending chain of explanation is not obviously precluded by the  $PSR_M^*$  alone and might instead be recognized as precisely what this principle demands.

The Madhyamaka exceptionless commitment to the PSR yields not only beginningless *causal* chains of explanation, but also unending chains of metaphysical explanation. Yet, importantly, these chains are *indefinite*—though not straightforwardly infinite—in length. By “indefinite,” I refer to a potential, structural infinite on which there is always more than one may specify; one will never arrive at a limit. This can be contrasted with an actual, quantitative infinite. Given that everything is, in a sense, mind-dependent on this view insofar as things are conceptually constructed on the basis of some parts, there is no mind-independently infinite chain of explanation.<sup>49</sup> Rather, the claim is: were one to investigate any given chain, one would never arrive at a final explanation. There will always be a prior cause, more basic parts, and a further ground. Indeed, it is unclear whether Indian philosophers like Nāgārjuna were ever actually working with the concept of a quantitative or mathematical infinite. Yet concepts like limitless/endless (*ananta(ka)*) and immeasurable (*aparimāṇa*) were commonplace. Similarly, the Sanskrit term for an infinite regress, an endless series, *anavasthā*, is suggestive in its etymology of lacking a resting place, not finding a foundation, or falling without stopping. Like these concepts, Madhyamaka chains of metaphysical explanation conform to the notion of indefinite understood as a potential, rather than an actual, infinite.<sup>50</sup>

Nāgārjuna would agree with Vasubandhu that asking for a causal explanation for the totality is an ill-formed question, yet he would say so for different reasons. As

<sup>48</sup> See MMK 7.13 for an explicit rejection of reflexivity in the context of dependent origination.

<sup>49</sup> There *could* in principle be an infinity that were mind-dependent and nonetheless actual and quantitative, so long as the mind in question could conceive of an actual infinite—perhaps the mind of an omniscient God or a Buddha. Nevertheless, the mind-dependent feature of Nāgārjuna’s world is generally discussed with respect to ordinary, non-omniscient minds, and so the sort of infinite implicated here must conform with the capacities of such minds.

<sup>50</sup> This means that the world is not mind-independently gunky (or junky). See Aitken (2021) and (2023) for an account of the Madhyamaka structure of reality as a kind of metaphysical indefinitism. Cf. Bliss and Priest (2018: 70–71) and Priest (2018) who argue that Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka is a kind of metaphysical infinitism. Westerhoff (2016: 356) has suggested that both coherentism and infinitism are defensible accounts of Madhyamaka.



discussed above, for Vasubandhu, the totality cannot properly be said to have a cause because only simple things can participate in causation and the totality is a composite. Nāgārjuna, on the other hand, denies the possibility of mereological simples,<sup>51</sup> which means that everything that participates in causation is necessarily a composite. Nevertheless, he would insist that we cannot pinpoint a cause or complete set of causes responsible for the totality because there is no *determinate* totality.

Nāgārjuna's world is characterized by a thoroughgoing metaphysical indeterminacy that outstrips semantic or epistemic indeterminacy. The *existence* of the conventionally real unities into which the world might be carved up is determined only to the extent that we have (mentally or physically) carried out the carving. But that does not mean that at any given moment  $t_1$ , there is a determinate number of conventional entities constituting the totality that is decided collectively by all the minds in the world at  $t_1$ . Neither is there a determinate number of conventional entities that could collectively constitute the complete ground for the totality at  $t_1$ . Instead, the fact that any given object is necessarily analytically divisible into indefinitely many parts—and thus indefinitely many conventional entities—is settled a priori. A complete accounting of the set of all things is, then, in principle ruled out. And so, where Vasubandhu's picture at least theoretically allows for a sensible response to the question of a metaphysical grounding explanation for the totality, according to Nāgārjuna, this question too would be ill-formed.<sup>52</sup>

A final—though by no means trivial—wrinkle in this story is that Mādhyamikas generally accept certain instances of *symmetrical* grounding relations, which is standardly thought to be asymmetric. As we saw, Vasubandhu insisted that grounding relations between conventional and ultimate reals were not only irreflexive, but also asymmetric. Yet, Mādhyamikas permit instances of mutual grounding, as in, for example, the relation between parts and a composite: the existence of parts (as parts) might be explained by the existence of the composite that they jointly constitute, just as the existence of a composite (as a composite) might be explained by the existence of its parts. There are no fundamentalia to demand a strict asymmetric metaphysical priority relation between any two things, and, on this view, there is no non-conventional reason to privilege one direction of grounding over another. Nevertheless, Mādhyamikas are uncompromising in denying reflexive explanatory or dependence relations of any sort. In fact, we might regard the denial of intrinsic natures as entailing the denial of reflexive explanatory relations and imagine that Mādhyamikas would charge Vasubandhu with violating his own commitment to irreflexivity by his appeal to the intrinsic natures of ultimately real entities as grounds of their own non-relational properties.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., *Ratnāvalī* 1.71 and *Śūnyatāsaptati* 32, where Nāgārjuna argues that since there are no simples, neither can there be a determinate multiplicity.

<sup>52</sup> See Westerhoff (2020) on the impossibility of absolutely general quantification on a Madhyamaka-inspired picture which he calls “irrealism.”

### 3.4 The $PSR_M^*$ and necessitarianism

The commitment to indefinite chains of explanation may endow Nāgārjuna with helpful resources for fending off an influential contemporary objection to the PSR, which alleges that the PSR entails necessitarianism, viz., the position that all truths are necessary truths. Jonathan Bennett (1984: 115) and Peter Van Inwagen (1983: 202–04; 2002: 104–07) both advance versions of this argument, which we might roughly summarize as follows: Suppose that the PSR is true and that there are some contingent truths. Now, consider the conjunct of all contingent truths,  $C$ . Given the PSR, there must be an explanation for  $C$ , and that explanation,  $E$ , must itself be either a necessary truth or a contingent truth. If  $E$  is a necessary truth, then that would absurdly entail that  $C$ —and thus all contingent truths themselves—are necessary.  $E$  must therefore be a contingent truth. But if that is right, then  $E$  must be a conjunct in  $C$ , entailing that  $E$  is self-explanatory, thereby violating the PSR.

The Madhyamaka commitment to a thoroughgoing metaphysical indeterminacy looks incompatible with necessitarianism. But a more direct response to this worry may be derived from the fact that it turns on the possibility of the conjunction of all contingent truths, something Nāgārjuna would deny. As noted above, there is no explicit distinction between contingent and necessary truths in Buddhist thought. Nevertheless, I suggest that Nāgārjuna would take the  $PSR_M^*$  to hold necessarily. And while this principle most obviously governs entities, it might also apply to contingent truths concerning actual entities (for there are no necessary, but only contingent, beings on this view).<sup>53</sup> Given that, as discussed above, the set of conventional

<sup>53</sup> For Nāgārjuna, there are, however, necessary non-existents; e.g., since having an intrinsic nature is incoherent, and thus metaphysically impossible, anything that *has* an intrinsic nature is a necessary non-existent. It should be emphasized that attributing metaphysical modal claims to Sanskrit Buddhist philosophers is not uncontroversial. It is commonly observed that classical Indian philosophy in general lacks a clear account of logical or metaphysical modality. As Jan Westerhoff (personal correspondence) as helpfully pointed out, Sanskrit Buddhist philosophers regularly use stock examples of necessary non-existents (e.g., the child of a barren woman) interchangeably with stock examples of contingent non-existents (e.g., sky flowers), which indicates a lack of attention to the distinction between contingent and necessary non-existence. Nevertheless, while these philosophers did not categorize these sorts of examples differently, it is not altogether obvious that they *would not* regard examples of apparently contingent non-existents like a sky flower as in fact involving some sort of conceptual inconsistency that might deem them necessary non-existents. For instance, if ⟨flower⟩ includes among its defining criteria that it is something that grows on the earth (i.e., if a necessary part of what it *means* to be a flower is to be something that grows on the earth), and if ⟨earth⟩ and ⟨sky⟩ are definitionally mutually exclusive loci, then ⟨sky flower⟩ may look like an incoherent concept, and thus a necessary nonexistent. Regardless of the status of these sorts of examples, just because these thinkers did not draw an explicit distinction between contingent and necessary truths/entities does not mean that they did not take themselves to be making claims that carried the force of existential necessity and/or possibility; some notion of existential modality is, I suggest, at least implicitly operative in this intellectual context. For instance, one frequently finds existential claims affirmed or denied with universal qualifiers and supported by mutually exclusive and exhaustive destructive dilemmas/tetralemmas, which might be understood to entail that the claim is taken to hold universally and necessarily. One might even look to MMK 1.1 for such an example, where Nāgārjuna negates the possibility of the origination of any existing thing possessing an intrinsic nature, qualified by temporal and locational universality (MMK 1.1 *na... jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacana kecana*), which is supported by a destructive tetralemma that is taken to be exhaustive. I propose that, were we to present Nāgārjuna with the contingent vs. necessary distinction, he would agree that, for example, the universal absence of an intrinsic nature—and thus the universal absence of violations of the PSR—is a necessary

entities is indefinitely extensible, so too is the set of contingent truths concerning conventional entities. Thus, there can be no conjunction of all contingent truths. Indeed, Samuel Levey, (2016) has proposed a response to the Bennett-van Inwagen argument from the indefinite extensibility of contingent truths, and though I cannot explore the details here, I suggest that Nāgārjuna might help himself to a similar response.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion: Nāgārjuna the uber-rationalist or anti-rationalist?

Returning to the Agrippan Trilemma where this journey began, the foundationalist friend of the PSR would no doubt insist that the Madhyamaka admission of instances of symmetrical grounding is viciously circular and that an indefinite chain of explanation amounts to no explanation at all.<sup>55</sup> But neither endless grounding chains nor symmetrical grounding relations are as controversial as they once were.<sup>56</sup> And while the structural properties of grounding relations may remain up for debate, a Mādhyamika on my characterization would insist that admitting unending chains of explanation is the *only* way to be a faithful friend of the PSR. It is, rather, a chain of explanation that terminates in a brute fact or a self-grounding fact—like a fact about intrinsic natures—that is no explanation at all.

Still, some readings of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka would concede the point and deny the commitment to *any* intelligibility principle, including the PSR. After all, Nāgārjuna, who primarily occupied himself with the enterprise of deducing absurd consequences from the theses of his foundationalist opponents, famously denied holding any thesis himself—a remark that has left him open to interpretive labels ranging from a skeptic to a global anti-realist, and from a nihilist to a quietist. Moreover, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*, on which Nāgārjuna's system is based, consistently describe all things as *without* a ground (*apada*, *gzhi med/gzhi ma mchis pa*),<sup>57</sup> which at first glance might be read as a flat rejection of the PSR. However, the

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Footnote 53 (continued)

truth, and that the very purpose of demonstrating the logical inconsistency of some *existent* thing possessing an intrinsic nature is to rule out the metaphysical possibility of any such thing.

<sup>54</sup> See also Walters (2022) for a response to Levey's argument from the indefinite extensibility of contingent truths.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, Kris McDaniel (2019b: 235) has pointed out that the indefinite extensibility response to the Bennett-van Inwagen argument would yield a hierarchy of increasingly more fundamental facts, and comments that, "if this is the price one must pay for salvaging the PSR, better to consign the PSR to the wrecking yard."

<sup>56</sup> For example, the metaphysical possibility of infinite chains of grounding or ontological dependence has been defended in one way or another by Schaffer (2003), Cameron (2008, 2022), Bohn (2009, 2018), Bliss (2013), Tahko (2014), and Morganti (2014, 2015). Both E. Barnes (2018) and Thompson (2018) argue that ontological dependence is non-symmetric rather than asymmetric and that it can hold symmetrically, with Thompson making a case for what she calls "metaphysical interdependence," Morganti (2018) defends a kind of metaphysical coherentism, and Cameron (2022) argues for a kind of holism involving circular dependence chains.

<sup>57</sup> For instance, one passage from the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in Ten-thousand Lines (Dasasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā)* reads: "This sacred doctrine is groundless, owing to the non-apprehension of the ground of physical forms, and similarly, owing to the non-apprehension of the ground of

term translated as “ground” here might also be translated as “foundation,” and thus as referring to a *final* ground.

But if chains of explanation are indefinite in length, then we can never arrive at a *complete* explanation of anything, and—in that respect—nothing is ever *fully* intelligible. So, there is a sense in which the demand for thoroughgoing intelligibility itself ultimately pushes Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka beyond the limits of intelligibility; this exercise in observing an uncompromising commitment to the PSR seems to have shown that complete intelligibility is unattainable. Nevertheless, Nāgārjuna recognizes that the absence of a *final* ground—which is the ultimate nature of things (*tattva*)—is itself fully intelligible insofar as this negative fact may be directly realized. While this ultimate truth, as a version of the PSR, might be provisionally paraphrased as *the necessary absence of a final ground*, or *the necessary absence of fundamental facts/entities*, when describing it as the object of direct realization, Nāgārjuna claims that it is, strictly speaking, ineffable and non-conceptual.<sup>58</sup> Language and concepts cannot adequately express, represent, or latch onto the mere absence of a final ground. But intelligibility need not necessarily trade in language and concepts, and according to Nāgārjuna, the only thing that is *in a sense* fully intelligible—the ultimate nature of things—*cannot*.<sup>59</sup>

**Abbreviations** AKK: *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu in Pradhan (1975); AKBh: *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu in Pradhan (1975); BP: *Buddhapālita Madhyamakavṛtti* of Buddhapālita in Saito, vol. 2 (1984); MMK: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna in Ye (2011); PP: *Prajñāpradīpamūlamadhyamakavṛtti* of Bhāviveka in Bstan’gyur dpe bsdur ma, text no. 3080, vol. 57, 905–1486; PsP: *Prasannapadā* of Candrakīrti, in MacDonald (2015)

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Footnote 57 (continued)

feelings, perceptions, formative predispositions, and consciousness, and in the same vein, owing to the imperceptibility of the ground of [all other attributes and attainments], up to and including omniscience” (trans. Padmakara Translation Group 2023, 23.30).

<sup>58</sup> See MMK 18.9 for these two features listed among five characteristics of (the realization of) *tattva*. In PP *ad* MMK 24.8, Bhāviveka identifies *tattva* with the ultimate truth, explaining that, etymologically, (i) it is “ultimate” since it is the ultimate object (*paramārtha*) of non-conceptual cognition (*nirvikalpajñāna*), and (ii) it is a “truth” since it obtains universally.

<sup>59</sup> For helpful comments and discussion, I would like to thank Michael Della Rocca, Jay Garfield, Mark Siderits, and Jan Westerhoff, audiences at the Columbia Philosophy Faculty Works-in-Progress Workshop and Method, Theory, and Reality, as well as an anonymous referee.

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