

14 Adorno and Emptiness

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I

It is not uncommon to hear from different directions that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* fails as either philosophy or as theory that can find a unity with practice. There are many reasons for Adorno's gradual slide into neglect and indifference. Yet it is likely that *Negative Dialectics* is ignored or dismissed because its *aims* cannot be assimilated to either the main thrust of the Western philosophical tradition or to the vast majority of attempts to offer alternatives. Adorno could be far enough ahead or outside of the curve in the West that the aims of *Negative Dialectics* are not sufficiently grasped, and the work as a whole remains open to misplaced judgments. It might, then, be useful to look outside the West for movements that share at least similar aims and procedures in order to better position to understand that work. This is admittedly an unfamiliar procedure: to look outside one's own culture, in this case to the Madhyamika philosophy that initiates and underpins much if not all of Mahayana Buddhism, for something like an analogue that will aid in grasping something that appears to be inside it. But if this "inside" work is in fact a radical challenge to the very culture in which it appears, to look to the outside may help in its appreciation. This encounter would not remain a one-way street. Adorno also offers something to Buddhism that it has not been able to develop (much) on its own: a relation to the "project" of liberation as historical and social.

Madhyamika philosophy and its founder and chief proponent Nagarjuna (first to second century CE) are frequently compared to and aligned with the sceptical tradition in the West, Wittgenstein's attack on essentialism,¹ the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead,² and more

recently Derridean deconstruction.³ More interesting is the frequent and correct characterization of Nagarjuna's thought as a "negative dialectic."⁴ Long before the appearance of a thoroughly negative dialectics in the West, albeit in radically different circumstances and with different means, there arises a thoroughgoing and comprehensive attack on what Adorno will later term "identity thinking," one that will be refined over many centuries, reanimate a world "religion," and result in a profusion of myriad schools and practices of enlightenment. Nagarjuna owes the impetus for his new direction in Buddhist philosophy to Buddha's famous silence on metaphysical questions, to the clash of opposing metaphysical positions in Indian philosophy, and to what he perceived as the tendency in earlier Buddhist thought (the Abhidharma schools) to hypostatize the analysands of self, things, and experience (the five aggregates) and their relations (the twelve links of dependent origination) to the point where metaphysical claims about a fundamental and unchanging reality were tacitly re-emerging.

For Nagarjuna and his Buddha, the stubborn persistence of such "views" (*drsti*) was not a matter to be met with anodyne indifference. It would be vital to the practice of liberation from the suffering of cyclic existence to repeat the Buddha's silence much more loudly. That silence was not simply impatience with matters diverting attention and energy from more important pursuits. Silence on such matters was for Madhyamika philosophy the enunciation of a *critical* perspective,⁵ which took "views" to be more than symptomatic, to be the actual performance of the "root delusion" perpetuating the repetition of grasping and attachment at the heart of *dukkha* (the suffering and discontent referred to in the first noble truth). The constant flow and fluctuation of desire and aversion, including the desire for the continuation of desire and the desperate fear of its annihilation, are paralleled in the drive to find and believe in, to hold and possess permanence, independence, timelessness, and indestructibility. On the plane of conceptually mediated experience there is inherently generated a hypostatization and reification of entities. Abstractions become more real than the flux of experiential conditions from which they were abstracted. They are, as idealism discovers, the most transcendent and indestructible things, and not separate from the "I" that conceives them. The race is on to posit somewhere the inherent existence of a Reality that transcends or subtends the flow in experience, whose apparently fixed and independent elements are themselves in a state of transience and relation. Such positing, whether explicit or implicit, whether by metaphysicians or in commonsensical

belief, is the generation of *drsti*. For Nagarjuna, the proper Buddhist perspective becomes radically critical and takes the analysis of the root delusion down to the very level of the conceptual as such, in that the concept carries with it the appearance of permanence, invariance, and the power of indestructibility; also the promise of being able to explain and account for what appears (at least to the conceptualizing agency) to be the non-conceptual, to generate the other out of itself.

For Nagarjuna, the problem of hypostatization went well beyond the older concern in Buddhism to avoid the notions of a permanent self or the complete non-existence of self, “eternalist” or “annihilationist” extreme views. Instead, he “understood the basic message of Buddha to be the elimination of all hypostatic theorizations.”⁶ All of the fundamental categories of metaphysics could be demonstrated to be ultimately unreal, though conventionally useful. Attainment of the ultimate perspective, in which liberation takes place in the silence of mental fabrication, is itself dependent, however, on categories, thoughts, and language that do not escape convention, even though they are to be left behind. Thus Nagarjuna extends his destructive analysis to include concepts of time, motion, cause, agency, elements, becoming, actions, wholes, process, and even relations. This list is not exhaustive. Nagarjuna’s method is anything but piecemeal, and its scope is universal. It does not aim at the refinement of the conceptual schematizations of experience but at their thoroughgoing destruction, when conceived of as composed of essences, of permanent, self-identical entities in relation with one another, when, in other words, concepts or the phenomena to which they refer are taken to have “inherent existence” (*svabhava*). However, when concepts are thoroughly known to be subject to dependent origination (to the causal-relational processes to which all things are subject), when this knowledge includes even the concept of dependent origination and phenomena are not reducible to one ultimate reality, the phenomenal world is recovered as or in its suchness. And the conventional understandings of phenomena will allow and even, for some of Nagarjuna’s progeny, require empirical judgments of relative truth and falsehood.⁷

Nagarjuna’s famous tetrallemmas, his negations of all possible forms of assertion (S is P; S is not-P; S is both P and not-P; S is neither P nor not-P) convict various “views,” and views as such, of incoherence. They do this negatively, primarily by *reductio ad absurdum*, by driving all *drsti* towards awareness of their own inherent incoherence (which might appear in the forms of tautology, mutually exclusive contradiction, or

infinite regress); and they do this through exploiting the dependence of views on (1) the apparently real, i.e., apparently inherently existent but actually reified entities that are the bases of assertions, and (2) a basic and inescapable dilemma of identity and difference in the reification of the entities that become the bases or referents of assertions, “the dilemma of their identity or difference”:⁸ entities, that is, essences with permanent and invariant identities, cannot be what they are, cannot possess identity, without negating, without *not* being other entities; entities as such, as instances of identity, presuppose differences from other entities. But difference, in its turn, also presupposes the very identity it must negate to be different. With one stroke, but a stroke repeated in many different contexts, both the extreme views, those of eternalism and nihilism, along with all their implications, are convicted of incoherence because each presupposes and negates the other. They are incoherent because, when driven to their logical conclusion, they cannot account for the experience of which they are the abstraction. The real is neither a single, self-identical, unchanging, unified entity or system; nor is the real what difference without identity would necessitate, that is, “such radical discontinuity, disjunction and lack of intelligibility that even the most mundane things would become incoherent and inexplicable.”⁹ Garfield’s authoritative commentary refers to this basic dilemma of identity as following from the requirements of inherent existence:

If an entity is inherently existent [is an essence or is self-identical], it must be independently established as an entity with its own nature. So no entity could be established as inherently existent through dependence on any other entity [i.e., through difference]. Only inherently existent entities could be independent. To establish something as inherently existing through its dependence on something else is incoherent. So since entities can be established neither through independence [which would be tautological], nor through dependence [which follows from difference], there is no way to establish anything as an entity in its own right.¹⁰

But if there are no entities in their own right, no self-identical essences within or at the bottom of the phenomenal, it might seem that there is nothing, that nothing has being. What Nagarjuna is doing, however, is leading his reificationist interlocutors away from the assumption, given by formal logic and promoted by language in its necessary employment of substantives, that to exist is to exist inherently. If to exist means

to exist inherently, to be independent, eternal, invariant, to possess a self-nature, then there are only two alternatives: either there is a being or beings (or the Being of beings) or there is nothing.

Nagarjuna's dialectic is sufficient to destroy the first alternative, but it would be a gross error to suppose that this necessarily implies the second alternative, nihilism, because opposition of the two alternatives is itself a function of the logic of identity and difference. Existence is not a negative function of nothingness. The only thing that is a negative function of nothingness is *inherent* existence, own-being. The point is to get outside this logic, and this does not yield nothing; instead it yields sunyata or emptiness, and ultimately, liberation from the suffering perpetuated in the repetition of samsara.

Emptiness is the central non-negative category of the Madhyamika systems and remains central in succeeding Mahayana movements. Literally, *sunya* means "void" (and sunyata = voidness). This has allowed the attribute of nihilism to be attached repeatedly to Madhyamika philosophy. But it cannot be judged nihilistic because sunyata is not used as a predicate of the Real. Nagarjuna himself points out that "'Empty' should not be asserted. / 'Nonempty' should not be asserted. / Neither both nor neither should be asserted. / They are only used nominally."¹¹ Madhyamika, despite the accusation that the rejection of metaphysical views necessarily implies the acceptance of an alternative metaphysics, takes no position on the ultimately real and holds no *drsti*. Its language does not assert, but "ostends."¹² To hold no view of ultimate reality means that one should also consider "emptiness" to be empty. But this does not amount to a view, since sunyata does not refer to an essential void beyond illusory appearances. Sunyata is not a substance independent of its attributes but points instead to the essencelessness and lack of identity of the categories constituting both conventional and metaphysical views of reality.¹³ Nagarjuna is able to deflect the charge of nihilism because, having extricated himself negatively from the consequences of the dialectic of identity and difference, he does not and need not share the assumption of his reificationist opponents that "existence and emptiness are opposites."¹⁴ To demand essence or inherent existence of reality is, for Nagarjuna, actually to subscribe to an untenable theory of the real, which, if true, would make it impossible for things to exist. The equation of existence with inherent existence results in the paradoxes, contradictions, and absurdities of his opponents' views. As the upshot, his negative dialectics of the realization of sunyata means undoing the "force of the delusion of reification,"¹⁵ which becomes in

metaphysics a redoubling of the world into the apparent and the real. But sunyata is not a reality hidden from appearance; to know it means to recognize the very conventionality of the real-as-reified.

It frequently becomes tempting to forget that the *madhayamika*, the middle path, does not mean the assertion of an Absolute, whether that absolute is conceived to be accessible or, like the Kantian noumenal, not accessible to mind. Thus, even though Nagarjuna's is a critical philosophy with significant parallels to Kant, the similarities can be overdrawn. Like Kant, Nagarjuna conceives of the categories as generated a priori and not by association.¹⁶ But sunyata does not refer to a noumenal reality, taken as an absolute, which the categories of the understanding cannot reach and whose extension into the non-empirical embroils reason in paralogsms and contradictions. Nagarjuna has no necessary but unknowable ground for the empirical world.¹⁷ Yet there is clearly something like absoluteness in the suchness that is not a notion, in the freedom from conceptual construction. C.G. Nayak puts this nicely: "It is not that the Reality of an altogether different order hidden behind the appearance is grasped in wisdom, but it is like something getting revealed in our understanding which was all the while there unnoticed in front of us."¹⁸ It is not possible anymore, on this basis, to make a truly strict distinction between the apparent and the real, or between *explanans* and *explanandum*, and all dualisms are necessarily brought radically into question, without the reassertion of any monism. Nagarjuna does not merely reject all positive thought constructions *about* a reality that transcends phenomena, he rejects all assumptions that a transcendental reality *exists*.¹⁹

It thus turns out that the removal of essentialist thought-constructions, the dis-identification of things and the de-reification of concepts results not in something or in nothing or both (Hegelian "becoming"?), or neither. But how can the real as suchness (itself a non-concept), as *sunya*, be *not neither* something nor nothing? To put the question in this form (to ask even negatively about identity) is already to distort Nagarjuna's meaning. He is here rearticulating but also refining and radicalizing the most central doctrine of the Buddha, the dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) of all things. He announces this in the dedicatory verse: "I prostrate to the perfect Buddha / ... who taught that / Whatever is dependently arisen is / ... without identity, / And free from conceptual construction." Against earlier Abhidharma schools, which took dependent origination to imply causal laws according to which evanescent momentary things appear, Nagarjuna takes *pratityasamutpada*

to refer to the interrelation of experiences and their concepts as always mediated by the dilemmas of identity and difference. Neither something nor nothing should be asserted if both something and nothing, and therefore neither something nor nothing, are dependently arisen, that is, internally related through both identity and difference, neither of them having a fixed essence of their own, not able to establish their own identity (or pure difference) outside of all relation.²⁰ Sunyata is not something mysterious inhering in the phenomenal but simply the dependently arisen phenomenal world in its lack of essence(s). Emptiness and the dependently arisen phenomenal world are not two distinct things, but alternative characterizations of the same thing.²¹ The first is (only) *apparently* negative to the point of being nihilistic; the second (only) *apparently* positive to the point of being metaphysical. In reality there is neither nihilism nor metaphysics, but the middle path. This is not to say that the lack of mystery means the absence of wonder.

To say that sunyata and *paratityasamutpada* are obverse and reverse also means it remains possible to make true and false statements, but only in conventional terms. Concepts are rejected only from the ultimate standpoint, and Nagarjuna makes a crucial distinction between the conventional and ultimate truth. The ultimate truth cannot even be reached except through the terms of the conventional. Conventional terms, along with the frameworks of identity and difference they carry along with them, are not arbitrary. But they are partial, interested, and themselves determined. *Given* the conventions that prescribe identity to concepts, empirically true or false statements can be made.²² The problem is that the dilemma of identity and difference makes it impossible for those conventions of identification to establish criteria that distinguish things absolutely from their conditions. From their own side, things remain free "in essence" from the identities and differences conceptually imputed to them, which establish essence.²³ That is, they do not inherently exist, they are empty, they are dependently arisen. The point is to be able to use such conventional terms and truths up to a point, the point at which the necessarily reified terms are taken to be the real. For Nagarjuna, therefore, a central distinction is the distinction between causes and conditions. A cause would be an event or state that, as part of its essence or nature, has the power to bring about an effect. Conditions are similarly events, states, or processes that can be used to explain other events, states, or processes but without any commitment to hidden or purely logical connections between *explanandum* and *explanans*. The connection of conditions to effects is therefore neither

through absolute difference nor absolute identity.²⁴ Dependent origination thus means the lack of inherent existence in phenomena, their emptiness.

The distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is not the distinction between illusion and a transcendent reality. The relation of the ultimate truth to the conventional or the ultimate truth about the conventional is that the conventional is simply conventional; the identities it plays with are functions of the play of identity and difference that inhere in our grasping. Its terms and relations are empty of inherent existence. The dialectic is put in play to get us to see we are enmeshed in such a predicament, "trapped in conventional reality through the force of the delusion of reification"²⁵ and that we can emerge from it. "The ultimate truth is that every concept is *sunya* in the sense of being essenceless, and when one is firmly entrenched in this truth he is said to have realized the highest truth ... as distinguished from the conventional truth ... and that is all. That is why it is said to be *tathata*, that is thusness or suchness."²⁶ Or as Garfield puts it, "When all error is abandoned and we see the world aright, we are no longer ignorant of the true nature of things. But this is not because we then apprehend things and their true nature. Rather we apprehend that there are no things, per se, and that those posited from our side have no nature to understand."²⁷

One of the most surprising and productive consequences of emptiness as the middle path was the breakdown in the strict distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana* (or liberation), without which the rise to such prominence in the Mahayana of the bodhisattva ideal with its limitless compassionate action on behalf of all sentient beings, would be difficult to imagine. The notion that "*samsara is nirvana*" is often incorrectly attributed to Nagarjuna, for whom such a judgment of the ultimate identity of opposites would be nonsensical. The negation of an absolute difference does not imply the necessity of an identity.²⁸ *Nirvana*, although it cannot be positively described, is not something non-existent. It is the release from the identification through which *samsara* is reproduced as the belief in and grasping after inherently existent entities.²⁹ *Nirvana* or liberation is not a different place or a future time, but another way of being here and now; not escape from the world, but awakened and enlightened engagement with it.³⁰ "*Nirvana* is thus non-different from critical insight par excellence which is free from all essentialist picture thinking."³¹ Such insight cannot be conveyed by way of representations. Instead it finds its expression not in positive theorizations and in remaking the world, but in silence, "the highest end for

a philosophically enlightened person."³² For Nagarjuna, referring to action in the sense of grasping, of trying to make something one's own, or capable of being one's own, "The root of cyclic existence is action. / Therefore the wise one does not act. / Therefore the unwise is the agent. / The wise one is not because of his insight."³³

Although critical-destructive, the soteriological purpose is central. It is certainly not an end in itself but is meant as a vehicle of deliverance. Nagarjuna makes use of the stock Buddhist metaphor of the raft that can and should be left behind, once the far shore is reached. Negative dialectics is meant to disappear and negate itself once its aims are achieved. In exploding essentialist thought-constructions through the exposition of their fundamental incoherence, it is aimed at the root conditions of endless misery: "Action and misery come from conceptual thought. / This comes from mental fabrication. / Fabrication ceases through emptiness."³⁴ Deliverance from reifying thought is deliverance from the egoism in which one grasps after material things, achievements to call one's own, and especially one's own identity. To realize the emptiness of these things is to accept that they neither exist absolutely nor fail to exist. They are insubstantial, transient, and unworthy of the furious and inevitably frustrated passion directed to them. "There is little scope for indulging in a rigidly self-centered existence arising out of a desperate clinging to immutable essences on the part of one, be it an individual or a nation as a whole, who simply takes *sunyata* seriously, not to speak of one who has realized the truth of *sunyata* in *nirvana*."³⁵

In the history of Mahayana Buddhism, taking *sunyata* seriously led to the replacement of the *arhat* ideal with that of the bodhisattva. The *arhat* eliminates in himself or herself all passions and suffering, while the bodhisattva, through the realization of the emptiness of the distinction between samsaric existence and nirvana, becomes engaged in/by the vow to strive for the salvation of all sentient beings. As Gad Horowitz points out in response to Robert Magliola's Buddhist deconstruction,³⁶ Buddhism seems to lack an account of the *ethically obligatory* quality of such a vow. He suggests that the insight into emptiness is, at bottom, the ethical discovery of the for-the-other of the human self, as understood in the work of Emmanuel Levinas: "The obligation, in the darkness of the Other ... is the no-space in which the light of insight-compassion can appear."³⁷ Thus Buddhism could benefit from a "Western" insight into its own condition of possibility. Sakyamuni's enlightenment was itself due to the ethically obligatory bodhisattva

vow experienced prior to his historical moment of enlightenment, after which he was faced with the decision of whether to teach or not. I will suggest in sections II and III below that Buddhism might also be able to benefit from Adorno's transposition of negative dialectics into the realm of the natural-historical, the socio-individual reproduction of samsaric suffering.

II

Adorno and Nagarjuna are separated by enormous cultural and historical differences. But their soteriologies are astoundingly similar in aim and, up to a point, in method. Adorno, unlike Nagarjuna, is operating in a philosophical context in which metaphysics is all but universally agreed to be moribund. Hegelian metaphysics is exhausted. Various positivist and pragmatic approaches have taken its place to underwrite the activities of a society progressively losing the ability to distinguish between instrumental action oriented by self-preservation and power, and liberated experience. Such a culture expresses a thoroughly perverse unity of samsara and nirvana, or in Adorno's terms, of myth and enlightenment. The dominant, and in Adorno's eyes, utterly reactionary response to the rise of scientific philosophy is Heidegger's fundamental ontology, in which sentient beings are reduced to the role of facilitators of the anonymous and veiled utterances of unfeeling Being. In this context, unlike Nagarjuna, Adorno will not aim simply to undercut metaphysics, but to draw from it a hope that can be further secularized. His sympathy for and solidarity with metaphysics "at the time of its fall" also includes the acknowledgment that the uncompromising drive to identity in idealist metaphysics carried with it the sense of contradiction between the actual and the real lost in positivism. Thus, in *Negative Dialectics*, his principal interlocutors are Kant and Hegel. Nagarjuna was facing many viable metaphysical positions. In the administered society, where "satisfactions" and the needs that sustain them are induced and doled out to promote and intensify activities whose overriding purpose is a quiescent and willing contribution to the endless expansion of the reproduction of capital, to samsara in extremis, it is at least very difficult to take to heart the Buddha's first and second noble truths, that life is *dukkha* and that its cause is the craving that gives rise to renewed existence (*samsara*). Nagarjuna's audience probably did not need much urging on this point. He could concentrate on the third and fourth truths. Negative dialectics,³⁸ however, must aim

first at bringing its audience back to an unhappy consciousness, to an experience of “reduced experience.”

Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, much like Nagarjuna, begins by rejecting the notion that dialectics implies a view. “It does not begin by taking a standpoint.”³⁹ It is not the march of Reason through history, realizing the ultimate identity of identity with non-identity, unifying all partial views in the Absolute, in Reason. “The crux is what happens in it, not a thesis or a position.”⁴⁰ It is, in this sense, thoroughly anti-metaphysical, not aiming to name the real, even negatively, a *via negativa* but not a negative theology. Instead, it is unending critique to the *n*th degree, a “meta-critical turn against *prima philosophia*,”⁴¹ meta-critical because, unlike Kant, it does not ground any ultimate categories transcendently.

Negative dialectics, Adorno announces, “is not a program of knowledge”⁴² but a protest against the mechanism of thought’s conceptuality.⁴³ He recognizes and even intends that it will offend – and it certainly does offend the pretensions of thought to finality and unity, certainty and primacy. It will be experienced as vertigo and denounced as bottomless and even nihilist by the bureaucratic mentality, which is the inheritor of dogmatic metaphysics.⁴⁴ But it is not nihilist, at least inasmuch as it aims beyond and “eschews” relativism⁴⁵ and renders “binding statements without a system,”⁴⁶ truths that are “suspended and frail” because of their “temporal substance.” To say that the *substance* of truth is frail and temporal is to imply, as Nagarjuna implies, that neither identity nor difference qualifies the real, and also that there is a distinction to be made between the conventional and the ultimate truth. The latter distinction appears not only in the use of the concepts of the philosophical tradition, but in Adorno’s constant recursion to the limited and temporal truth-value of the positions subjected to dialectical scrutiny, to what Critical Theory calls determinate negation.⁴⁷ *Negative Dialectics* begins to assume the lineaments of the middle path, neither nihilist nor eternalist. Such adherence is also visible in its relation to systematic thought, especially idealist systematics. Although negative dialectics identifies the system, the aim to reduce all possible experience to the smallest number of universal and necessary propositions, as “belly turned mind,” as a “paranoid zeal to tolerate nothing else” and detects that “rage is the mark of each and every idealism,”⁴⁸ he insists that negative dialectics is not the flight into the opposite of systems, since it aims to perceive the individual moment in its immanent connection with others.⁴⁹ This is its inheritance from systematic

metaphysics, in parallel, as we shall see, with Nagarjuna's adherence to conditions rather than causes.

Thus a "possible definition" of negative dialectics, which Nagarjuna might have appreciated, is "a thinking against thought."⁵⁰ This is not a blanket rejection, neither complete silence nor meaningless babble; it recognizes the need to use the conventional truths and concepts as vehicles to transcend the delusions that the concept brings with it. But it still traffics in the currency of thought and does not lead to its "vanishing."⁵¹ Yet it aims to "transcend the natural context and its delusion without imposing its rule on this context." And because of this it is like a raft. It will pass like the antagonistic society of which it is the frail and temporal truth.⁵² It must even turn against itself, "in the very negation of the negation that will not become a positing"; its "form of hope" is that "it will not come to rest in itself as though it were total."⁵³

It is *against thought* – not simply these or those thoughts, or against ideologies, although this is crucial, but against the delusions that follow from the traps set by the concept, by identity thinking, even though "one cannot think without identifying."⁵⁴ "To think is to identify," while dialectics is "the consistent sense of non-identity."⁵⁵ Negative dialectics is thus not a new form or system of positive thought, although it contains moments of critical positivity. The primary delusion in identity is that it "depreciates a thing to a sample of its species."⁵⁶ Identity grasps after what transcends conditioned existence, proclaims itself and to an extent whatever falls under it, to have inherent existence, thus maintaining the delusive duality of subject and object,⁵⁷ which in its turn orchestrates the possibilities of a purely instrumental action underlying the development of social domination. And domination ends up in the endless social-systemic repetition of a self-enforced self-preservation that can persist only by denying the difference that defines it, the domination of so-called nature. In the administered society, domination becomes the samsara it always was, and vice versa. As Nagarjuna put it, "Action and misery come from conceptual thought. / This comes from mental fabrication."⁵⁸ Unfortunately for Adorno, and for the rest of us, he was able to witness the *reductio ad absurdum* of identity or inherent existence beyond anything Nagarjuna could have imagined. This *reductio* was made visible at Auschwitz, where it was "no longer the individual who died, but a specimen."⁵⁹ "Genocide is the absolute integration ... Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death."⁶⁰

The identity required by thought is anything but innocent or neutral. But where Nagarjuna conquers identity with its own weapons, by

way of the dilemma of identity and difference, Adorno approaches what he terms “the disenchantment of the concept”⁶¹ by a different yet compatible route. From Adorno’s perspective, what Nagarjuna is doing makes eminently good sense, because contradiction indicates the untruth of identity, “the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.” In dialectics, contradiction is necessary because “the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form.” But since the total identity towards which thought strives “is structured to accord with logic ... whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever differs in quality comes to be designated as contradiction. *Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity.*”⁶² And it is true that Nagarjuna cannot achieve the thoroughgoing destruction of identity (including the identity of nihility) without a sometimes tacit appeal to aspects or qualities of experience that do not fit with inherent existence, but do fit with emptiness. The emptiness of inherent existence, the non-identity screened by identity, is not found a priori, without experience.⁶³ For Adorno, to say that “objects do not go into their concept without leaving a remainder”⁶⁴ is tacitly to assert the emptiness, in Nagarjuna’s sense, of the concept. Thus both no longer exclude the middle between identity and difference.

But Adorno divagates by appealing directly to the experience that escapes the concept. In part this is because metaphysics already has in the modern West many critics and quite a bad name, but also because he is concerned with powerful political and philosophical ideologies, including orthodox Marxisms, that propagate and/or are limited by identity-thinking. Ideology is not defined by its content but by the subsumption of something primary, something independent and substantial, permanent and inherently existent.⁶⁵ But for Adorno, the concept also tacitly reaches beyond its own identifying function. It is not only identification, for it presupposes contact with realities that call for their formulation. To be able to be rid of “conceptual fetishism”⁶⁶ is to postulate an already existent “capacity to experience the object,”⁶⁷ which shows up in sensibility as the ability to discriminate.⁶⁸ In the construction of identities, the discrimination of qualities that takes place at the perceptual level is transformed into the negative difference, the logic of mutual exclusion, through which the delusion of unity and permanence, or inherent existence, can be established.

This thinking against thought, which recognizes both the dependence of thought on sensibility and thought’s own recoil against the passivity of sensibility into the purity and independence of essence, does not,

like the tradition, aim at unity.⁶⁹ To aim at unity already presupposes a duality to be united, while pursuing identity is exactly the production of that reduced experience, which production is for *Negative Dialectics*, as it is for Nagarjuna, the root delusion. Negative dialectics instead has as its goal not to take identity for the goal,⁷⁰ to cancel the aim of capturing the infinite in the finite.⁷¹ This end requires the thoroughgoing disenchantment of the concept. Rather than offer direct analyses of the incoherence of assumptions of inherent existence, which Nagarjuna develops, however, Adorno thinks that the central shift required is a second Copernican turn beyond the Kantian. This would mean the initiation of a subject-object dialectic⁷² but one unlike the Hegelian, which left the subject's primacy over the object unchallenged.⁷³ Primacy for the object does not mean granting inherent existence to either subject or object, or both.⁷⁴ But it does entail recourse to what Adorno calls the object's "preponderance." The concept opens itself dialectically to this reversal and this preponderance out of the very striving for identity inherent in it: what Adorno appropriates from Hegel's dialectic is not the goal of identity, or the demonstration of its attainment, or the logic of categorial contradiction and synthesis, but the supposition and procedure from the *Phenomenology* (primarily from its preface) that "because the subject does not make the object, it can really only 'look on,' and the cognitive maxim is to assist in that process."⁷⁵ For Adorno, a "cognition that is to bear fruit" would mean the subject, in relinquishing its goals of identity and identification, "will throw itself to the objects *a fond perdu*."⁷⁶ It means that "if the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye."⁷⁷ Not that their ultimate identification would be made. The importance of aesthetics to Adorno lies primarily in art's all-but-self-conscious practice of failing at identification while looking on and speaking for things, often enough for their agony. Adorno's analysis often ironically mimics the Hegelian dialectic, but only up to a point, the point at which the object, such as "enlightenment," turns into its "opposite," "myth," which turns out to have already been what it seemed to negate: already "enlightenment." It is the consistent practice of identification that thus ends up working against itself, producing its own apparent difference. The tactic of negative dialectic is to reflect on and reflect the self-positing and eventual self-destruction of identification, and this tactic follows from the consistent practice of "only looking on," from the consistent sense of non-identity. The result is not any form of positive knowledge of the object, but the

bare “emptiness” (not non-existence) of the concepts and phenomena it subjects to scrutiny.

The experience of non-adequation in the concept, and thus the failure of reconciliation, is the motor of its potential disenchantment.⁷⁸ Such disenchantment *may* open the concept and the knower to the radical insufficiency of identity – to its own emptiness, to its non-difference from difference. The object’s preponderance does *not* mean the positing of a transcendent Reality making possible our experience, like the Kantian noumenon; nor does it mean access to an immediate experience of objectivity.⁷⁹ A minimum of the thing outside the subject’s categories is sufficient to spoil identity as a whole, and this minimum is not beyond, but already in the realm of *possible* experience.⁸⁰ Disenchantment requires no unknowable but necessary ground for the empirical world. It does imply, however, the relinquishment by the subject of its claim to constitute the world. The categorial schemata through which a de facto constitution takes place are themselves relative and determined, themselves conventional, *historical* phenomena with a *relative* truth-value to be ascertained in reflection. As with Nagarjuna, the ultimate truth is not a truth about a transcendent reality beyond the realm of illusion, but a truth about the emptiness of conventional categories. Thus Adorno notes that Kant’s categories of subjective experience are not cognitive ultimates, but that with progressive experience cognition can break through them.⁸¹ The aim of thinking against thought is a “knowledge of the absolute which is not an absolute knowledge.”⁸² This would mean that in the insight into the emptiness of the categories, what is recovered is suchness. The recovery of such suchness is also a function of the aesthetic recourse to “semblance,” which Adorno strictly differentiates from illusion.⁸³ The preponderance of the object follows from the meta-critical turn Adorno gives to Kant’s Copernican revolution, and vice versa. Adorno relativizes and makes conventional both the Kantian categories of possible experience and the transcendental subject correlative with those categories. As with Hegel, the subject and the categories of subjectivity have a history. Unlike Hegel, that history is the non-teleological, material, and pragmatic “natural-history” of “a society unaware of itself,”⁸⁴ one that is “samsarically” imprisoned in its own survival mechanism⁸⁵ and repeats in ever more technically sophisticated but destructive forms the paroxysm of identification, which is its primordial form of attachment to its world.⁸⁶ The transcendental subject so closely linked to bourgeois society as its apparently substantial source is empty because it is a function of this history. The supposedly

spontaneous and constitutive I turns out to be more of a thing than its own psychological content, which, from the Kantian perspective, is seen as naturalistic and reified.⁸⁷ Metaphysical freedom turns out to be a function of its constitution with and by a society driven by identity taking the form of the rule of equivalence required and propagated by the capitalist mode of production. It is not true that the object is a subject, but it is true that the subject is an object;⁸⁸ that is, true that the subject has no inherently existent essence, that it is empty. It is an object in the sense that it is its otherness.⁸⁹

As with Nagarjuna's, Adorno's thinking against thought remains a thinking. For the former, the destruction of inherent existence not only leaves open the realm of conventional truths but affirms the dependent origination of all things. The distinction between causes and conditions that follows allows for the explanatory, aetiological, and soteriological employment of the twelve links of dependent origination.⁹⁰ Yet none of these links can be taken any longer as inherently existent, as ultimate or prior. The suffering subject cannot be finally reduced to any one or even a set of them. Adorno's echo is in the notion of thinking in constellations, which, following from the preponderance of the object is, among other things, meant to replace the metaphysical bent of the many forms of Marxian reductionism. Thinking in constellations involves the retention of concepts, but concepts used as if without identity in themselves and referring themselves to the non-identical. The *explanandum* of the constellation, as with Nagarjuna's "conditions," cannot even be easily separated from the *explanans*; both are moments of a process that cannot be reified in a logic. "Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object. As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the object it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers."⁹¹ The box, it must be understood, is ultimately "empty." As a product of natural-historic activity it originates dependent upon the very forces of identification now aimed at unsealing it. None of the categories of negative dialectics are ultimate, prior, or final.

III

As with Nagarjuna, the root delusion of identification is for Adorno a function of the grasping that is a part of embodied, samsaric existence. Nagarjuna: "Conditioned by feeling is craving. / Craving arises

because of feeling. / When it appears there is grasping.”⁹² For Adorno there are no facts of consciousness not mixed with pain and pleasure, desire and aversion – feeling and craving. All mental things are modifications of physical impulse, and both body and mind are abstractions of their experience.⁹³ The root delusion of identity in the concept is, for him, a function of the *mimetic* impulse, similar to what Nagarjuna calls, in very traditional Buddhist terms, “grasping.” However, with the concept of mimesis, Adorno begins not so much to part company with Nagarjuna, but perhaps to supplement him in a way that could indicate to Mahayanists a possible extension of their soteriology into history.

Mimesis is misunderstood as being simply the urge to imitate, copy, represent, or take on the characteristics of something other on the part of a self or subject. It is, “primordially” one might say, the desire to be what there is contact with before there is a self to make contact. But even this formulation too much separates subject and object, for in the mimetic relation the desire of being is granted once and for all. “One” is “the object.” And that is all there is. There could be nothing more powerful, more seemingly permanent, more seemingly inherently existent. In negative dialectics, it is the mimetic impulse that stands behind and inside all historically differentiated and developed forms of identification, be they cognitive, psychological, or practical. And mimesis is understood not simply as a condition of individual existence, but as internally mediated by the social forms that mediate the mimetizing individuals who embody and, in perception, cognition, and action, reproduce those forms along with all of their tensions and contradictions. According to Nagarjuna, and fundamental to all of Buddhism, is the notion that the tendency to reify is innate and is one of the root delusions, a “primal ignorance” that is separate from mere social convention⁹⁴ and underpins the fundamental “defilements” of greed, hatred, and confusion. The insight into emptiness, in eliminating the fabrication of essence, undoes this delusion and liberates the enlightened being from compulsive reification. To reify, to think that things either exist inherently or fail to exist, will be to overvalue oneself, one’s possessions, achievements, performances.⁹⁵ Adorno’s “mimesis” is also arguably innate. But it is, as dependently originating and empty, more than that as well, and he would find the Madhyamika treatment of it to be one-sided. The social institutions of domination require, in passing historical forms, the very subjects of the root delusion, who in turn adapt to, adopt and repeat those institutions as “natural,” as inherently

existent. Mimesis may be innate but it is never pure. Can Nagarjuna accept this? Yes, because reification itself would have to be seen as empty of inherent existence, otherwise full liberation would be impossible. To borrow from Marcuse, Adorno's colleague in negative dialectics, there is the need to differentiate, albeit conventionally, between a basic and a surplus mimesis. For Adorno, the mimetic is even essential to undoing the identification of which it is the root. Both poison and (at least part of the) cure. This is because the concept must refer back to the contact and perceptual discrimination of infinite qualitative differences of which it is the abstraction. Thus even, perhaps especially, the most identifying of theories already carries with it the guilty knowledge that as it identifies it fails in identification.

For Buddhism it is possible for some, perhaps a relatively very few, to cut through the surplus and the basic delusion and, with the aid of a teacher, "on their own." But the root delusion is both constituted and modulated in a social reproduction that takes place earlier than and over the heads even of bodhisattvas. Nagarjuna's distinction between the conventional and the ultimate truth would be both accepted by Adorno and found wanting. The ultimate truth needs to be put to use not only to enlighten individuals, whole nations of individuals one at a time, but to destroy the ideologies that sustain the institutions of domination that produce the individuals who cannot but reify – and thereby those institutions themselves. There are much, much better and much, much worse conventions and conventional truths. Not all conventional truths are merely conventional truths. Some conventional truths are moments of ideologies of domination. Negative dialectics in general needs to move beyond the categories and assumptions of metaphysics into the critique of the ideologies of domination, and in such a way as to preserve the emptiness of the truths with which the ideological is perceived *as* ideological. This is what Adorno does.

Buddhism has developed myriad forms of teaching, of community and of social engagement. But it does not seem to have addressed the socio-historical sources (and a source is not a cause in Nagarjuna's sense) of the root delusion. Nothing should stop it from doing so, from becoming historico-soteriological. In doing so it would find Adorno and Critical Theory a valuable ally. There are small signs that as part of the process of the absorption of Buddhism in the West the notion of a Marxian-Buddhist alignment is possible. One recent exhortation to effect such an alignment argues that Buddhism and Marx are compatible and that the former addresses the sources of internal suffering, while

the latter addresses the sources of external suffering.⁹⁶ This way of approaching the issue tends to reify “internal” and “external.” But Adorno’s negative dialectics goes a step beyond in addressing the internal sources of external suffering and the external sources of internal suffering without reifying either. If either positive knowledge or instrumental action is the criterion of success, then Adorno will have failed. But if emptiness and liberation from identity-thinking are to be the criteria, then it is only through the conventions of a hyper-samsaric existence that Adorno’s glass is seen as failed, as empty.

NOTES

- 1 Jay L. Garfield, “Epoche and Sunyata: Skepticism East and West,” *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 3 (July 1990): 285–307; Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); G.C. Nayak, “The Madhyamika Attack on Essentialism: A Critical Appraisal,” *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 4 (October 1979): 477–90.
- 2 Jay McDaniel, “Mahayana Enlightenment in Process Perspective,” in *Buddhism and American Thinkers*, ed. Kenneth K. Inada and Nolan P. Jacobsen, 50–60 (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1984); Robert C. Neville, “Buddhism and Process Philosophy,” in Inada and Jacobsen, *Buddhism and American Thinkers*, 120–42.
- 3 Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1984); Magliola, “In No Wise Is Healing Holistic: A Deconstructive Alternative to Masao Abe’s ‘Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata,’” in *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Deconstruction*, ed. David Loy, 99–117 (Atlanta: Scholar’s, 1996); David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1988); Loy, “Dead Words, Living Words and Healing Words: The Disseminations of Dogen and Eckhart,” in Loy, *Healing Deconstruction*, 33–51.
- 4 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 94–5; T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of Madhyamika System* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2006), 40, 49, 75, 121–2, 124, 140.
- 5 Murti, *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 40.
- 6 Dan Lusthaus, “Nagarjuna,” Yogacara Buddhism Research Association, <http://www.acmuller.net/yogacara/thinkers/nagarjuna-bio.html>.
- 7 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 275.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 132.

- 9 Lusthaus, "Nagarjuna."
- 10 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 194; see also 111–12, 118, 179, 218. Garfield sums it up succinctly: "The only way that difference or the identity of a different thing as different could be shown to exist inherently would be for that difference to be present independently of the existence of another different thing. But that is not so. The only alternative would be to argue that difference is present independently in single things. But this ignores the relational character of difference" (218).
- 11 Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, 22.11.
- 12 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 213, 280.
- 13 See *ibid.*, 91–2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 308.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 16 Murti, *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 73.
- 17 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 198n.
- 18 Nayak, "Madhyamika Attack on Essentialism," 485.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 479.
- 20 In this regard it should be noted that Nagarjuna is also not reducing things to their relations, as though the relations were as inherently existent underlying the things they constituted. See Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, chaps. 14, 20, and 21.
- 21 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 305.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 200n.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 101–2.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 103–5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 26 Nayak, "Madhyamika Attack on Essentialism," 486.
- 27 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 291.
- 28 Lusthaus, "Nagarjuna."
- 29 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 322–8.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 341. In this connection, see in particular Hershock, who gives a very novel view of the dramatic quality of sentient impermanence beyond "the processive nature of things." Peter D. Hershock, *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1996), 46. In this interpretation of Ch'an Buddhism, what is key is the realization of emptiness in "ready responsiveness" within the world.
- 31 Nayak, "Madhyamika Attack on Essentialism," 489.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 487.
- 33 Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, 26.10.

- 34 Ibid., 18.5.
- 35 Nayak, "Madhyamika Attack on Essentialism," 489.
- 36 Gad Horowitz, "emmanuel, Robert," *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 14 (Winter 2001): 83–91.
- 37 Ibid., 87.
- 38 Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is far from the only instance of his negative dialectics. The work, which was published near the end of his life, can be seen as, among other things, a retrospective meta-theoretical exploration of the methods, epistemological postulates, and some of the consequences of the negatively dialectical works of his earlier career, primarily with respect to his co-authorship with Horkheimer of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and to *Minima Moralia* as well.
- 39 Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1979), 5.
- 40 Ibid., 33.
- 41 Ibid., 13.
- 42 Ibid., 160.
- 43 Ibid., 153.
- 44 Ibid., 31.
- 45 Ibid., 34.
- 46 Ibid., 29.
- 47 Ibid., 34.
- 48 Ibid., 22–3.
- 49 Ibid., 25–6.
- 50 Ibid., 140.
- 51 Ibid., 149.
- 52 Ibid., 141.
- 53 Ibid., 406.
- 54 Ibid., 149.
- 55 Ibid., 5.
- 56 Ibid., 145.
- 57 Ibid., 174–5.
- 58 Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, 18.5.
- 59 Ibid., 362.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., 13.
- 62 Ibid., 5; emphasis added.
- 63 This dependence on object-experience is something that Yogacara Buddhism and the Buddha-nature theory that follows from it seem to have incorporated into their critiques and/or critical extensions of Madhyamika

philosophy. See Sallie B. King, *Buddha Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1991), 9; and Lusthaus, "Nagarjuna."

64 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

65 *Ibid.*, 40.

66 *Ibid.*, 12.

67 *Ibid.*, 45.

68 *Ibid.*, 43.

69 *Ibid.*, 20.

70 *Ibid.*, 149.

71 *Ibid.*, 13.

72 *Ibid.*, 174.

73 *Ibid.*, 38.

74 *Ibid.*, 174–5.

75 *Ibid.*, 188.

76 *Ibid.*, 33.

77 *Ibid.*, 28.

78 *Ibid.*, 186.

79 *Ibid.*, 184.

80 *Ibid.*, 183.

81 *Ibid.*, 187.

82 *Ibid.*, 405.

83 See *ibid.*, 373, 393, 404.

84 *Ibid.*, 177.

85 *Ibid.*, 180.

86 Keiji Nishitani, one of the most prominent of the Kyoto school's Zen philosophers, in considering the question of whether Buddhism is ahistorical, has produced a trenchant critique of the self-centredness at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian West's philosophies of history. In these religio-philosophical histories, meaning for the unique events of a rectilinear history is inevitably tied up with the preservation of self-centredness, a self-centredness from which escape is not possible by means of self-denial. From the viewpoint of *sunyata*, the self tied up in a rectilinear *project* (whether God's or humankind's or, as with Hegel's, "both") of historical conciliation of self and other would be still wrapped up in and reproduce karmic unfreedom and *avidya*. Nishitani maintains that the Buddhist conception of time is, however, both rectilinear *and* circular and that the standpoint of *sunyata* internally related to such a conception would be the logical and radical conclusion of historical self-consciousness. Such an enlightenment would correspond to the emergence of a realm of play and ethical compassion beyond "autotelic" self-sufficiency. See Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and*

Nothingness, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), chaps. 5, 6. It would unfortunately go far beyond the framework and confines of this chapter to pursue the parallels and possible interplay between Nishitani's Mahayanist notion of historicity, with its great debt to Nagarjuna, and Adorno's understanding and critique of "natural-history."

87 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 177. This theme is pursued in somewhat greater detail in Adorno's "On Subject and Object," in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, 245–58 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

88 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 179.

89 *Ibid.*, 161.

90 See Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, chap. 26.

91 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 163.

92 Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamikakarikas*, 26.6.

93 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

94 Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom*, 299n, 314n.

95 *Ibid.*, 152.

96 See Kevin M. Brien, *Marx, Reason and the Art of Freedom*. 2nd ed. (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2006), appendix.