

Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy. By David F. Burton. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999. Pp. xv + 233.

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An oft-quoted Buddhist adage urges the practitioner to test Buddhist teachings with analytic reasoning. The teachings should not be accepted dogmatically, many Buddhist traditions emphasize, but tested as gold is analyzed to determine its true value. In his carefully argued book *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nāgārjuna's Philosophy*, David Burton, who informs the reader that he is undertaking his study as a Buddhist seeking to understand the tradition to which he is committed, has sought to put Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) to the test of critical reason. The result, according to Burton, is a resounding failure: Nāgārjuna's arguments, he claims, are generally fallacious, and their most significant conclusions philosophically untenable.

Burton describes his project as twofold: the "ascertainment" and "appraisal" of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of *śūnyatā*. By giving a thorough exposition of Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* Burton ambitiously hopes to resolve debates between the many competing interpretations of Nāgārjuna's thought. Although his arguments are based on close readings of the texts and occasionally draw on Indian and Tibetan sources, Burton is not primarily interested in philological questions or tracing the various commentarial traditions. The central concern of this text is philosophical, an inquiry into the epistemological and ontological consequences of Nāgārjuna's philosophical use of *śūnyatā*. In the first part of the book Burton addresses three questions: What is the status of Nāgārjuna's knowledge claims, and more specifically, is Nāgārjuna a skeptic? How is Nāgārjuna's claim that ultimate knowledge is nonconceptual to be understood? And, does Nāgārjuna's account of *śūnyatā* entail nihilism? The second part of the book is concerned with the motivation and philosophical success of Nāgārjuna's critiques of Nyāya epistemology.

Nāgārjuna famously claims to hold no view, and, further, that those who hold *śūnyatā* as a view are incurable. For this reason Matilal, Hayes, and numerous other scholars have characterized Nāgārjuna as a skeptic. What, then, Burton asks, is the status of Nāgārjuna's knowledge claims that all entities lack an essence, or own-nature (*svabhāva*)? To answer this question Burton gives an account of both Academic and Pyrrhonian Skepticism, and shows that Nāgārjuna is not a skeptic in either of these two classical senses. That is, Nāgārjuna does not argue that knowledge of things as they are is impossible, nor does he argue that there is no legitimate rational adjudication between views. Instead, Nāgārjuna claims that he does have knowledge of how things are, most prominently the knowledge that all entities lack *svabhāva*, and thus he cannot be considered a skeptic.

The knowledge claim that all entities lack *svabhāva* leads, according to Burton, to a paradox in Nāgārjuna's thought. For Nāgārjuna also claims that reality is ultimately nonconceptual and inexpressible. If reality is ultimately beyond concept and expression, how can Nāgārjuna conceive of and express the ultimate nature of

things as *śūnyatā*? Burton suggests two possible responses: either Nāgārjuna is equivocating in his use of the word “reality,” or he is using language imprecisely and really does not intend to characterize the knowledge of ultimate reality as beyond concept or expression, but is instead describing the meditative experience of knowing that reality. Burton considers the latter interpretation to have been Nāgārjuna’s position, but argues that both interpretations are philosophically and spiritually barren.

According to Burton, once Nāgārjuna has made the distinction between un-conceptualizable ultimate truth and conventional truth that can be conceptualized, it will be impossible to understand how the two levels of truth and reality can relate to each other. Moreover, according to Burton, there can be no *śūnyatā* of entities as objects for meditative knowledge because Nāgārjuna is a nihilist whose philosophy entails that there are no entities at all.

Burton’s interpretation differs from Thomas Wood’s reading of Nāgārjuna as a nihilist. Unlike Wood and most other contemporary commentators who interpret Mādhyamaka as a form of nihilism, Burton believes that Nāgārjuna was an unwitting nihilist. That is, Burton agrees with Nāgārjuna’s Buddhist and Hindu opponents, who argued that despite his claims to navigate a middle path between eternalism and nihilism, Nāgārjuna misunderstood the consequences of his own position. It is therefore a misnomer to call Nāgārjuna’s thought a philosophy of the Middle Way, according to Burton, for, as the Buddhist opponents insisted, Mādhyamaka nihilism destroys the Buddhist path.

Nāgārjuna considered dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and *śūnyatā* to be inextricable. This was not the case, Burton emphasizes, for certain Abhidharmikas, who regarded the atomic parts (*dharmas*) of conceptually constructed things as subject to *pratītyasamutpāda* and yet possessing *svabhāva*. *Dharmas* are free of causes and conditions only in the particular sense of not being conditioned by parts, which by definition they lack. Otherwise, according to some traditions of Abhidharma philosophy, *dharmas*, because they are subject to birth, duration, and decay, are subject to *pratītyasamutpāda*. Burton argues that after linking *pratītyasamutpāda* and *śūnyatā* Nāgārjuna was compelled to deny *svabhāva* to all entities in order to maintain the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda*. The conditions for the possibility of a conceptually constructed entity, according to Burton, include at least something or someone who does the constructing, and a material, such as the *dharmas*, out of which the entity is to be constructed. It is nonsensical, he claims, for a conceptually constructed subject to conceptually construct the world, for this leads to an infinite regress. And without unconstructed material that is given there can be no conceptual construction. Burton concludes that contrary to Nāgārjuna’s own intentions, the claim that all entities lack *svabhāva* entails nihilism.

Nāgārjuna’s rejection of realist ontology is accompanied by sustained critiques of realist epistemology. Burton devotes the second part of his study to an exposition and critical analysis of these critiques as Nāgārjuna articulates them in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* and the *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*. Beginning with an account of the Nyāya theory of valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), Burton systematically treats Nāgār-

juna's diverse arguments against Nyāya realist epistemology. It should come as no surprise that Burton finds all Nāgārjuna's arguments to be invalid. According to Burton, these arguments are unable to demonstrate that there are no entities independent of conceptual construction, and, furthermore, they fail to show that we cannot have valid knowledge of entities. As the first part of his study constituted a defense of Nāgārjuna's Abhidarmika opponents, so here Burton defends Nyāya realism from Nāgārjuna's attacks.

Any reader familiar with Nāgārjuna's Buddhist commentators or recent Mādhyamaka scholarship will recognize Burton's analyses as controversial and provocative. Each of Burton's major conclusions, for example, is contrary to Jay Garfield's dGe-lugs-pa-inspired interpretation, arguably the most philosophically compelling account of Nāgārjuna by a Western scholar. According to Garfield's interpretation, Nāgārjuna is not making claims concerning ultimate reality but is instead arguing against the very possibility of making ontological claims about what lies behind the dependently arisen conventional world. Moreover, Garfield offers a persuasive account of how one can make sense of conventionally constructed entities without presupposing ultimate entities that somehow "stand behind" them. Garfield is not alone in giving a sympathetic and philosophically coherent interpretation of Nāgārjuna; there is a significant body of literature devoted precisely to the question of how Nāgārjuna's account of *śūnyatā*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, and the two truths (*satyadvaya*) account for the existence and knowledge of the intersubjective, phenomenal world. One of the weaknesses of Burton's study is his failure to address these interpretations that differ so significantly from his own.

In Burton's defense it should be remembered that he is not primarily interested in philological or historical investigations, or in extensive explication of the work of other scholars, but in addressing particular philosophical problems and pursuing them to their conclusions. This study often seems to be a work of Anglo-American analytic philosophy that happens to be treating issues raised by Nāgārjuna's epistemology and ontology. Burton repeatedly demonstrates deft philosophical reasoning and patience in following his arguments. But his interpretation occasionally suffers from the limitations of his particular philosophical framework. For example, Burton's rejection of the possibility of nonconceptual discrimination is significant for his argument, yet he disregards the many persuasive phenomenological accounts of nonconceptual discrimination.¹ His realist critique of the notion that conceptually constructed entities do not require further entities from which they are constructed ("it is implausible and unintelligible") seems philosophically unimaginative. The history of philosophy in the East and the West has plenty of subtle arguments for one variety or another of this position.²

The occasional limitations of Burton's philosophical framework raise the thorny issue of interpretation. The terse and often obscure verses in works attributed to Nāgārjuna have led to an extraordinary diversity of interpretation in Buddhist traditions and Western scholarship. For this reason many contemporary Western translators and interpreters of Mādhyamaka philosophy make at least a nod to Gadamerian hermeneutics in an attempt to understand how the text can justify such an

abundance of diverse meaning. In contrast, Burton argues that a trans-cultural and trans-historical rationality can bridge the interpretive challenges of time, tradition, and language between contemporary Western scholars and Nāgārjuna, despite the obscurity of the texts, themselves veiled under millennia of accumulated commentarial traditions. This is not to say that Burton believes there is always one definitive meaning of a particular verse, but he considers the possibilities of legitimate interpretation to be limited, and a reasonable and systematic exegesis ought to be able to interpret and critique each one. He therefore rejects Andrew Tuck's claim that as interpreters we are limited by our own cultural horizons, a claim for which Burton's own Anglo-American philosophical limitations seem to provide evidence.

Burton's final evaluation is that although philosophically untenable, Nāgārjuna's thought deserves to be studied because it raises deep philosophical issues. Some readers will read Burton's careful arguments and close textual analysis and consider it admirably intrepid scholarship; others will regard his unsympathetic interpretation as naïvely brash. There is no doubt, however, that Burton's exposition and appraisal raise important philosophical and interpretive questions for the study of Mādhyamaka.

Notes

- 1 – Curiously, Burton cites Heidegger's notion of *Zuhandenheit* as an example of implicit conceptualization, although Heidegger emphasizes that it is precisely not a cognitive process.
- 2 – Again, Burton makes a strange choice in citing Husserl to support his own argument. Burton claims to agree with Husserl that the structure of consciousness is intentional; in other words, consciousness is always consciousness *of*. Because consciousness always requires a subject pole and an object pole, Burton argues that if consciousness is to exist, then there must be an entity at the object pole. But Husserl, who was often understood to be an idealist by his contemporaries, especially following the publication of *Ideas I* and *Cartesian Meditations*, occasionally argues for a position that bears some similarity to the one Burton is attacking. Moreover, a philosophical defense of Nāgārjuna could draw on the Husserlian understanding of *hyle*.

Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School. By James W. Heisig. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. Pp. xii + 380.

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Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School by James W. Heisig is the first major work in English to offer such a complete introduction to the thought of the Kyoto School. It analyzes the School's three core figures, Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji, whom Heisig, using Takeuchi Yoshinori's terminology (p. 176), has elsewhere referred to as the "triangulation" around which the School is